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English Department/University of Texas, Arlington

"Here begins the good": A Woman on the Edge of Medical Practice

Rebecca Laroche
University of Colorado, Colorado Springs

My hope for my contribution to this volume is that it will serve as both a reflection on what we have done and a view to what lies ahead. When I began the work that brought me to collaborate with the other founding members of EMROC, I was a whirlwind of transcription. During my sabbatical in 2012, my goal was to collect a searchable sample of interesting early modern recipe books so that I could use them in my analysis of Shakespearean plant references. What I was discovering as I transcribed, however, was that each book raised its own set of questions, requiring me to go back to other books that I had previously looked at but had not yet transcribed. The task seemed endless, and halfway through that year, to find six other women who had embraced similar undertakings and who wanted to provide a tool so that future researchers did not find the task so daunting was simply thrilling.[\[1\]](#)

Ten years later, I am amazed and inspired by what we were able to foster and how EMROC has persisted. As the dataset continues to grow, the kinds of questions we can ask multiply. Throughout this process, I keep coming back to a response Michael Witmore gave to a panel on "Early Modern Texts and the Digital Humanities" back in 2012 on the use of DH algorithms in literary analysis. Ultimately, his conclusion even back then was that we cannot let go of close reading.[\[2\]](#) Algorithms can bring us to texts of interest, but they cannot make

meaning for us. My analysis below, therefore, does not engage in search terms or word clouds. Ultimately, my argument is that scholars of recipes cannot abandon the work of transcription, even as we should be proud of the work accomplished and now made searchable through LUNA and FromthePage. New books will always present themselves, and each book brings with it another layer of understanding.

My second point of reflection has to do with what brought me to the work of transcription back in 2012: something Shakespearean. I am not alone among literary scholars in thinking that recipes were a great resource for understanding early modern material culture and thus its "literary" texts. After a decade working with these resources, however, I have come to question the foregrounding of "the literary" at the expense of the recipe books. What I attempt to provide below is a different analysis, one that spotlights the recipe collection and draws on literary resources as a means of understanding the particularities of that book's construction.

In each of the seventeenth-century moments that ground this analysis, a young woman decides to begin medical practice. In her decision, each woman breaks with her previous life path, figuring the time before it as distinct from the time to come. In looking to the past, each young woman must recognize her intergenerational inheritance, and in imagining the future, the three women variously consider the question of marriage. As a result, each of these moments taken from three distinct genres – one in an autobiography, one in a work of dramatic fiction, and the third from a recipe book – differently captures a dynamic sense of the roles of women in seventeenth-century England.

The bulk of my analysis will focus on the last instance, that of the recipe book. Through this emphasis, I hope to reverse the trend that puts recipe books in the service of literature as they are seen to provide a material/practical/intellectual backdrop for more well-known and well-combed texts. Rather I aim to engage the more artistically fashioned texts – Elizabeth Isham's *Booke of Remembrance* [sic] and Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well* – toward better understanding a particular collection of recipes, that held by Dorothy Shirley from 1693/4 to her death in 1721. That is, while *All's Well* is illuminated by the existence of recipe books generally, only a handful of recipes books may be in dialogue with Helena's most famous soliloquy.^[3] While Elizabeth Isham implies and declares several motivations for her decision, only a few of these drives align with Dorothy Shirley's. Both collective and individual, recipe collections record both the dynamism and continuities of the human lives at their intersections.

Two Literary Moments from the Seventeenth Century^[4]

The first example to be examined I have analyzed closely elsewhere but in context of a much different comparison.^[5] Written in 1638/9, when she was in her late twenties, Isham's *Remembrance* records a moment in her mid-twenties. Having chosen not to marry so that she could care for her ailing sister and to run her father's household after the death of her mother, Isham abjures further study in Latin to pursue the medicinal study of herbs:

Now I had a mind to learn latin, which because I could . . . not so well compasse (by reason of [. . .] other accations) Therefore I rather took holde of S. pauls words \ I cor. 8./1. Knowledge puffeth [. . .] up. but love edifieth. I therefore proposed to read of the vertue of those hearbs & flowres which I had wrought, which as they are different in there shapes & coullers so are there vertues: which made me often call to mind *the* 24 verse of *the* 104 psalme. O lord how manifold are thy workes: in wisdom hast though made them all: I found this way might be very beneficiall to my Sister & others. & that I might make *the* best use of those things which [. . .] our garden afforded. which abounded in those things which was cordial for her | as rosmary, roses \ & borage which I made conserues of &c /" [6]

While her reasons for the decision bear extended analysis (again, which I have conducted elsewhere), a sufficient summary of a few of the reasons can be found in this passage in the form of 1) infrequent opportunity and resources for the pursuit of Latin (dependent as she was on the presence of her male cousins), 2). Christian doctrine, 3). more immediate need in the household in the illness of her sister and others, 4). botanical knowledge rooted in aesthetic and meditative endeavors in needlework, and 5) a trust in cordial medicines in relieving pain.

What is not captured in this passage but recorded in the previous pages is the presence of two female medical practitioners (her great-grandmother and her aunt) in her paternal line. Also relevant from her early history is her mother's ongoing illness, which precipitated a distrust of physicians and their invasive – sometimes violent – regimens of physic.

Significant in understanding Isham's decision, moreover, is the crafting of it. It is important to acknowledge that in writing her autobiographical account, Isham can make this decision seem inevitable. Thus her resolution becomes co-extensive with her decision to remain unmarried in her father's significant household, caring for her sister and subsequently for her brother's children after the death of his wife. Exhibiting good health in contrast to the ailments of sister and her mother, her life choices become an extension of her paternal inheritance, and, as such, becomes essential to her writing itself, to be gifted to her brother's children as a record of what and whom they could not otherwise know. Her place in the family as caregiver is made one with her position as witness.

In our second even more well-known example taken from Shakespeare's *All's Well*, left without family and with meager inheritance, Shakespeare's heroine cuts a different cloth in embracing the role of female practitioner. In deciding to leave the Countess's household to cure the king, Helena resolves to leave behind a disempowered past in order to elevate her social ranking:

Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie
Which we ascribe to heaven. The fated sky
Gives us free scope, only doth backward pull
Our slow designs when we ourselves are dull.
What power is it which mounts my love so high,
That makes me see, and cannot feed mine eye?

The mightiest space in fortune nature brings
To join like likes and kiss like native things.
Impossible be strange attempts to those
That weigh their pains in sense and do suppose
What hath been cannot be. Who ever strove
To show her merit that did miss her love?
The King's disease—my project may deceive me,
But my intents are fixed and will not leave me. (1.1.222–35)

Unlike the meditative crafting of Isham's memoir, Shakespeare's text dramatically captures the moment of breaking through that represents decision-making. Its progression of pronouns, starting with a philosophical "we," then inserting the interrogative "I" of her imagined assent, subsequently answering in the "they" of "those / that weigh their pains in sense and do suppose / What hath been cannot be," a "they" that in splitting from "what hath been" becomes the singular female "her," and ultimately progressing to the full ownership of "my project" and "my intents." In imagining her future with Bertram, Helena's speech scripts a different story than what society would have written for her.

It is significant then that the knowledge of remedies she inherits is not from a mother but rather from a physician father. Whereas Elizabeth Isham embraces the female models from her patrilineal line, Helena's project is only made possible through what she inherits directly from her father (an inheritance made impossible for Isham in the existence of her brother). In this gendered disjunct, Helena's decision reflects a more dramatic break with the past than rather a congruent dependency on it. A mother's recipe collection, a record of maternal past practice, could also signify to a future self, but not one that would break so radically from her current trajectory as Helena's desires do. In juxtaposing Helena to Isham, we can see that while medical practice can come to a woman through either patrilineal or matrilineal inheritance, the playwright's depiction makes Helena's choices discordantly gendered and therefore revolutionary.

One Recipe Book, Newly Transcribed

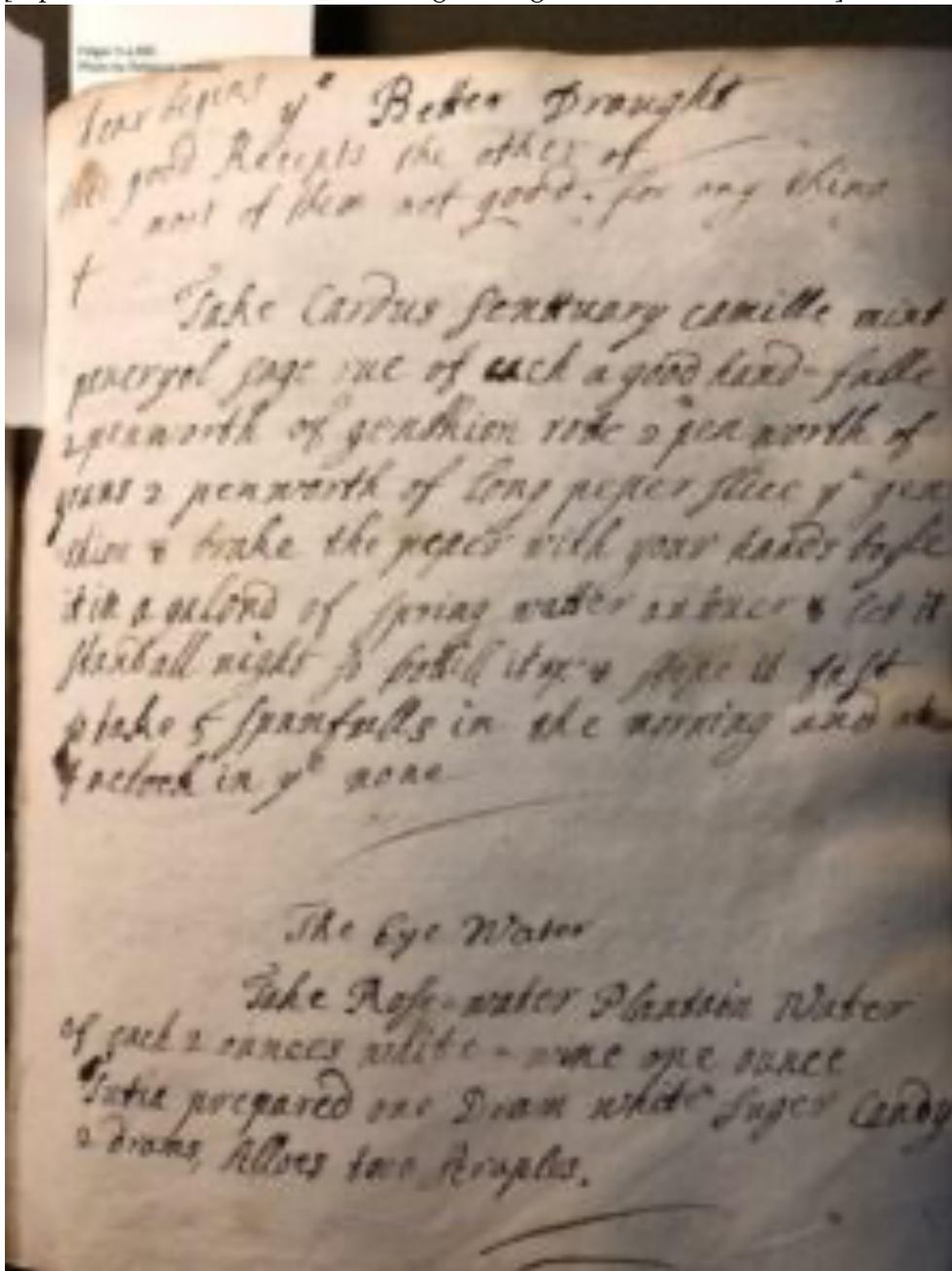
A less radical break but one equally dramatic can be seen in a late seventeenth-century collection acquired at the Folger Shakespeare library in 2018 and transcribed by myself during my residency as a Before "Farm-to-Table" Fellow in 2019. The collection, with ownership inscriptions of four women, is mostly written in the hand of Dorothy Shirley, fourth daughter of Robert Shirley, Lord Ferrers (1650–1717).^[8] The page of interest (pictured below) occurs forty leaves from the back of the tête-bêche volume. Around the title of a recipe for "A Better Draft," Dorothy has written "here begins thee good Receipts the other of most of them not good for any thing."^[9] Both the recipe title (no recipe for a draft appears on the previous page) and the commentary would seem to point to a break with the earlier entries and the significance of this new direction is uncovered upon further examination. My time spent with the collection and surrounding analysis revealed that, in this moment, the teenage Dorothy accomplishes all of the following: 1) She turns away from her childhood endeavors (having acquired the book when ten), 2) begins a series of medical recipes following the

culinary recipes she acquired from previous generations, 3) records a new focus in a household beset with tragic loss due to contagion, and, 4) on the verge of her own marriage, looks forward to the maintenance of the health of her future family.

The moment of Dorothy's acquisition of the book and evidence that she held the book through to her adult life is well recorded in the collection's pages. A series of names at the front of the book – "E. Cotes," "E. Ferrers her Book," "Anne Shirley," and "Dorothy Shirley her Book / 1693/4" record the transmission of the book as it moved from the hands of Elizabeth (Piggot) Ferrers mother of Anne, who would wed Robert Shirley, eldest son of Lord Robert Shirley.^[10] Anne gave the book to her young sister-in-law upon the death of Dorothy's mother, Elizabeth Washington Shirley, in 1693 when Dorothy was only ten, perhaps as a sign of Anne's new female head-of-household role. "E. Cotes" is likely the signature of one of Dorothy's daughters, as Dorothy Shirley was to marry Thomas Cotes.

Yet missing from this timeline is the critical event that precipitates the turn to "the good receipts," that is, medicinal recipes, as the starter book inherited from Elizabeth Ferrers contains largely recipes for pies and meat preparations and the early recipes in childish scrawl added to it are more of the same. In 1697, Anne Shirley, the oldest woman in the Shirley household, dies of smallpox. In 1698, her husband Robert and heir apparent to the family title would die of the same disease. While it remains a surmise to posit that Dorothy's decision to start to collect medical recipes was precipitated by these deaths, the language that marks the shift implies dramatic causes. Moreover, within the book, Dorothy has placed one other date besides the one denoting its gifting: eleven pages after the stated change, she has placed the date 1699, indicating that the shift from culinary to medicinal was made around that year minus eleven pages of recipe acquisition. And in between "The Better Draft" (itself listing as its first ingredient *carduus benedictus*, known as a prophylactic) and this date, Dorothy has copied two recipes used against the smallpox and other "pestylentyall diseaseses" (fol. 48r–48v).

[caption id="attachment_719" align="aligncenter" width="370"]



Folger MS V.a.681

fol. 48r[/caption]

Thus Dorothy revises her family inheritance due to current circumstances. Even then, however, given her mother's death in childbirth, she may also be preparing for her future life. After the younger Robert's death, in 1699, Dorothy's father would marry a young woman not much older than Dorothy. And while this remarriage may have been reason for the date of record, it may have also marked Dorothy's betrothal, as she would wed at the age of seventeen in 1700. The recipe collection records this transition to married life as well when she signs her name "DoCotes" sixteen leaves after the 1699 date.[\[11\]](#) Having witnessed

untimely deaths, including those of many infants, Dorothy seems to have made a concerted effort in collecting remedies before her marriage, looking to break from the past as she moved to a different household. Given her own twelve children and the lesser affluence of her husband, Dorothy would have much caregiving in the years ahead of her.

What Literature and Transcription have to Offer Recipe Work

The juxtaposition of the two more literary instances with Dorothy Shirley's recipe collection surround her decision to pursue medical caregiving with a range of circumstances having to do with economic aspirations and exigencies, trust (or mistrust) of physicians, religious belief, material and intellectual inheritance, and familial health. Any one of these moments taken in isolation would provide a limited view of such a decision. For example, if we were to examine only the fictional example provided through Helena, we would conceive the main motivation as being one of material gain and social ascendance. In contrast, Elizabeth Isham's social position remains the same after her shift in focus, and Dorothy Shirley moves from an aristocratic to middling household. If we are to consider women's lives only by these social markers, however, we lose a sense of the inner dynamism recorded in both nonfictional accounts. Elizabeth Isham records a moment in which her life gains a new intellectual focus, one that informs her daily reading and gardening practices and pries her away from the aesthetic attainments she pursued in her embroidery. Dorothy Shirley's entry in her recipe book marks the occasion when she ceased to be a mere mimic of the women overseeing grand households before her and expressed a more immediate, "better" purpose for her recipe collecting and continued with an eye to the household she would come to run. Ultimately, all three young women see the decision as a significant one in their path toward adulthood, choosing from their inheritance and carrying it forward with them, and Isham's and Shakespeare's texts help to underline this significance in a text from a genre that is rarely seen to have emotional weight.[\[12\]](#)

My second key point is that this moment could have been overlooked if I had not undertaken the task of transcription. Perhaps someone looking for draught recipes would have stumbled upon it once it was entered into the data set, but the collection's catalog description did not previously record this moment. The list of recipes in the catalog include culinary and medicinal as so many others, but unlike other collections, medicinal and culinary are not separated by back to front organization or with section headings. The original book that came from Dorothy's sister-in-law seems to have started from both front and back, containing all culinary examples, so the medicinal recipes exist in the middle leaves. Dorothy's role as medical practitioner would thus seem to be secondary if only cataloged by recipe title. In such a catalog, a draught is but a drink, but upon closer examination, it becomes an earlier version of a written life waiting for revision.

As my experience with Dorothy Shirley's recipe book makes clear, transcription is a form of close reading. No ingenious algorithm or extensive tagging would have highlighted this moment that is so central to the collection's evolution. As EMROC continues to expand the data set, its members and other recipe historians should continue to transcribe in order to be able to find these unanticipated, unprecedented moments and to thus perform the close

readings that the likes of Shakespeare and Isham receive automatically. In continuing to share our transcriptions and our findings, [13] we diversify the kinds of questions we may bring to these rich and diverse texts.

[1] The first steering committee was constituted by Michelle DiMeo, Elaine Leong, Jennifer Munroe, Hillary Nunn, Lisa Smith, Amy Tigner, and myself.

[2] Michael Witmore, "Early Modern Texts and the Digital Humanities", Renaissance Society of America, 24 March 2012, Washington, DC.

[3] For other readings of *All's Well* in light of recipe books, see Catherine Field, "'Sweet Practicer, Thy Physic I Will Try': Helena and her 'Good Receipt' in *All's Well That Ends Well*," in Gary Waller, ed. *All's Well That Ends Well: New Critical Essays* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 194–208; Wendy Wall, *Recipes for Thought* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015); and Rebecca Laroche and Jennifer Munroe, *Shakespeare and Ecofeminist Theory* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

[4] My thanks to seminar organizer Rebecca Totaro, respondent Mary Trull, and other colleagues who read my contribution to the seminar "Keeping Care in Shakespeare's England," for the Shakespeare Association of America, held virtually in spring 2020.

[5] Rebecca Laroche, *Medical Authority and Englishwomen's Herbal Texts, 1550–1650* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), 121–35. In that analysis, I consider Isham's autobiography in juxtaposition to Margaret Hoby's diary and Grace Mildmay's memoir, recognizing there that not all elite women chose to practice medicine for the same reasons.

[6] Elizabeth Isham, "Autobiography, ca. 1640s," Robert H. Taylor Collection, Princeton University Library, RTC01 no. 62, fol. 28r. Edition followed Constructing Elizabeth Isham Project, Alice Eardley transcription, <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/ren/researchcurrent/isham/>. See also Isaac Stephens, *The Gentlewoman's Remembrance: Patriarchy, Piety, and Singlehood in Early Stuart England* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2016).

[7] Edition used, William Shakespeare, *All's Well That Ends Well*, edited by Barbara A Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Washington Square Press, 2001).

[8] I have shared some of the background I examine below in a blogpost for the Folger site: <https://collation.folger.edu/2019/04/three-households/>, April 23, 2019.

[9] Dorothy Shirley, "Recipe Book," Folger Manuscript V.a.681, fol. 40.

[10] Shirley, front flyleaf. For genealogical information, see Evelyn Philip Shirley, *Stemmata Shirleiana*, 1873, 186–200 (Online). <https://archive.org/details/cu31924029787250/page/n185>. Print text (Westminster, 1841), pages 125–59. I thank Erin Blake at the Folger for finding E. Ferrers for me, in John

Burke, *Genealogical and Heraldic History of the Commoners of Great Britain and Ireland*, 1836, vol. 3, 129

[11] Shirley, fol. 67r.

[12] For early and ground-breaking analysis of women's recipe collection as a kind of autobiography, see Catherine Field, "'Many Hands Hands': Writing the Self in Early Modern Women's Recipe Books," in Michelle M. Dowd and Julie A. Eckerle, eds, *Genre and the Development of Women's Life Writing in Early Modern England*, 49–63.

[13] My draft transcription of Folger MS V.a.681 can be found in PDF format in Folgerpedia, https://folgerpedia.folger.edu/Recipe_books_at_the_Folger_Shakespeare_Library (Accessed April 1, 2022). As the manuscript was acquired right before the Folger renovations began and the continuing disruption of COVID, the manuscript has yet to be digitized.