



“The highest and deepest speculations of the mind”: Venetia Digby and domestic experimentation in early modern England

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Abstract

This project examines the life and experimental/ domestic writing of Lady Venetia Digby (née Stanley; 1600-1633), including the context of her marriage to Sir Kenelm Digby, an original member of the Royal Society. Lady Digby has largely been lost to history beyond her social and familial roles. She is remembered for her beauty and possible adultery, but rarely as a medical practitioner, or as a participant in the developing scientific world of seventeenth-century London. This article will seek to reattribute Wellcome MS. 7391 to Lady Digby, and use that manuscript (in the context of a larger primary archive and social network mapping) to reconstruct her role as an experimenter and medical practitioner. By undertaking this analysis, the study aims to demonstrate that women like Lady Digby were not only present but actively engaged in the scientific, cultural, and institutional networks of seventeenth-century England.

Keywords

experimentation, recipes, women, knowledge, Venetia Digby

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Introduction

This essay aims to examine and recover the life of Lady Venetia Anastasia Digby (née Stanley, 1600-1633) from obscurity, or when recognized at all, opprobrium. While she has traditionally been either ignored or portrayed as ignorant, immoral, and vain, I will argue that Lady Digby was experimenting within her home, practicing medical care within her family and community, and contributing to a broad social and intellectual network that included some of the brightest and most well-known scientific thinkers of her time. I will work to reattribute to her an as-yet anonymous manuscript held by the Wellcome Collection, and examine this text for the insight it can grant us into her practices and interests as a medical practitioner and intellectual of the era. Taking Lady Digby as a microhistorical case study, we can consider how women like Lady Digby, by experimenting within their households, were contributing to the broader intellectual discourse of the period through the transmission and exchange of both culinary and medical recipes.¹

This study will investigate several key texts in pursuit of these goals: Wellcome Collection MS. 7391, which I will argue was primarily owned and compiled by Lady Digby; the posthumously published cookbook of her husband, Sir Kenelm Digby (1603-1665); Sir Kenelm's rather fantastical and fictionalized *Private Memoirs*; and finally, a selection of his personal correspondence. These will be accompanied by a constellation of ancillary materials, including other female-authored recipe books, many of which were authored by members of the Digbys' social and intellectual circles, and various elegies and poems written about Lady Digby after her death (including by contemporary writers like Ben Jonson). First, I will provide a brief overview of the developing scientific community in early seventeenth-century London, and the position of women therein. I will then consider the Digbys, their marriage and partnership, the texts they produced, and the networks in which they participated and contributed the various types of knowledge that they were creating and testing, whether individually or together. Finally, I will show that Lady Digby was a lay practitioner in her own right, actively engaged in testing and experimenting with recipes within the domestic sphere. Moreover, by tracing the ways in which she participated in the circulation and dissemination of knowledge within her social and intellectual networks, this research seeks to reassess her place in the history of seventeenth-century science and intellectual culture.

¹ For this discourse, see for example: *Women, Science, and Medicine, 1500-1700: Mothers and Sisters of the Royal Society*, eds. Lynette Hunter and Sarah Hutton (Thrupp, Stroud, Gloucestershire, UK: Sutton, 1997); Carol Pal, *Republic of Women: Rethinking the Republic of Letters in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Rebecca Laroche, *Medical Authority and Englishwomen's Herbal Texts, 1550-1650* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009); and Elaine Leong, *Recipes and Everyday Knowledge: Medicine, Science, and the Household in Early Modern England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

Seventeenth-century medical and scientific environments

Seventeenth-century England, and particularly London, was a hotbed of complex and interconnected systems of belief and discourses about medicine, science, and the nature of truth. Contemporaries had access to a varied and pluralistic medical marketplace containing many different kinds of practitioners, from experiential female midwives to male, university-educated members of the College of Physicians of London. At the top end, the College had extremely limited membership, and set the standard in London and its environs for elite and learned medicine; on the other end of the spectrum, the marketplace was flooded with an array of what have been termed ‘irregular practitioners.’² Though humoral theory continued to form the basis of much medical thought and treatment, the seventeenth century also saw the rise of Paracelsian, Helmontian, and chemical medicine. Women were both patients and irregular practitioners in their own right, playing a significant part in the medical system in both roles.

Women were often the first line of defense when it came to treating illness or injury within their household or community.³ Domestic medical manuals and recipe books were widespread and filled with recipes for everything from gendered conditions like things relating to childbirth, to more general treatments such as those for a sudden loss of hearing or “to take away Venome” from a wound.⁴ These books displayed a functional level of understanding of dietetics and other practical medical treatment methods. They also provide a picture of the largely female networks of communal healing and nursing in which women were both patient and practitioner to one another within domestic environments. The books themselves were often a communal effort, including recipes compiled from various sources, and even sometimes resulting from the collaborative work of married couples taking responsibility for the health of their household.⁵

Beyond the official institutions were various less-formal circles and intellectual communities, including the Hartlib Circle, the Invisible College, and others. Many of these shared members and contributors between them, and thus represented a kind of collaborative discourse community in which women played a key and central role.⁶ Sir Kenelm

² Margaret Pelling (with Frances White), *Medical Conflicts in Early Modern London: Patronage, Physicians, and Irregular Practitioners, 1550-1640* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 70.

³ Leong, *Recipes and Everyday Knowledge*.

⁴ *English Recipe Book, 17th Century*, Wellcome Collection MS. 7391, f. 3.

⁵ Leong, *Recipes and Everyday Knowledge*, 24; Sara Pennell, “Perfecting Practice? Women, Manuscript Recipes and Knowledge in Early Modern England,” in *Early Modern Women’s Manuscript Writing: Selected Papers from the Trinity/Trent Colloquium*, eds. Victoria E. Burke and Jonathan Gibson (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004): 237-258; Elaine Leong, “Collecting Knowledge for the Family: Recipes, Gender and Practical Knowledge in the Early Modern English Household,” *Centaureus* 55 (2013): 81-103.

⁶ For more on women’s involvement in these intellectual communities, see Pal, *Republic of Wom-*

Digby was actively engaged with a circle of natural philosophers and experimental figures such as Robert Boyle and Henry Oldenburg, as shown by their documented correspondence.⁷ The Digbys' position within this intellectual milieu and her own experimental pursuit of medical and recipe knowledge suggests that Lady Digby might be regarded alongside women like Lady Ranelagh (1615-1691) as a significant female knowledge-producer in this period. Women like the ladies Ranelagh and Digby were, like many of their male family members and peers, testing, authoring, and disseminating recipe knowledge across this network of intellectuals, and according to Michelle DiMeo, "effective recipe trials often relied on a network of female experts. The judgment and domain expertise employed by these women helped create systematic and reproducible knowledge [...] that would later be used to lay the foundations for new methods of experimentation".⁸ There seems to have been a masculinizing language used to describe the women in these knowledge-producing circles or environs. They are described as being in some way exceptional, their feminine bodies possessed by a masculine mind or soul. Lady Digby was described as possessing "a masculine and heroic soul [...] informing the body of a beautiful and fair woman".⁹

Some authors have categorized manuscript recipe books as "one of the 'informal' channels by which patients gathered and evaluated medical information and expertise", but more recent work has argued that this "trivializes their significance in the seemingly ceaseless project of therapeutic and pharmacological 'data retrieval' [...] which sustained medical care".¹⁰ Recipe books were works of a deeply experimental nature. Though a recipe collector might include recipes shared by another member of their social network, this did not mean that they were accepted at face value. Annotations and marginalia in many of these books serve as evidence that the users of these books tested recipes extensively, noted whether they found them to be effective or not, and made changes based on the results of their experiments. In the receipt book attributed to Mary Granville and Anne Granville D'Ewes, for instance, one of the contributors used a '+' sign in the margins next to recipes to indicate that they were tried and tested, as well as adding the latin "*probatum*

en; Evan Bourke, "Female Involvement, Membership, and Centrality: A Social Network Analysis of the Hartlib Circle", *Literature Compass* 14 (2017).

⁷ *Correspondence of Robert Boyle*, eds. Michael Hunter, Antonio Clericuzio, and Lawrence M. Principe, 6 vols (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2001).

⁸ Michelle DiMeo, *Lady Ranelagh: The Incomparable Life of Robert Boyle's Sister* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 78.

⁹ Digby, *Private Memoirs*, 9.

¹⁰ Steven Shapin, "Trusting George Cheyne: Scientific Expertise, Common Sense and Moral Authority in Early Eighteenth-Century Dietetic Medicine", *BHM* 77 (2003), 296; Elaine Leong and Sara Pennell, "Recipe Collections and the Currency of Medical Knowledge in the Early Modern 'Medical Marketplace'", in *Medicine and the Market in England and Its Colonies, c. 1450-c. 1850*, eds. Mark S. R. Jenner and Patrick Wallis (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 137.

est” at the end of the passage in question.¹¹ Many manuscripts show written evidence of such testing, and the processes of ‘testing’ drugs and ‘trying’ cures have been shown to be overlapping and intertwined in the practices of both physicians and ‘outsiders’ such as women and other irregular practitioners.¹²

Because of the manner in which compilers controlled the knowledge within their recipe books, both through the choice to include a recipe and through their experimental testing, scholars have viewed these manuscripts as indicative of a kind of ‘smart consumer’ within the medical marketplace.¹³ Scholars such as Wendy Wall have argued that women’s roles in the compilation and dissemination of manuscript texts was a ‘bid for gentility’, and that these private circulations were a method to combat the more common audience associated with the broader reach of print texts.¹⁴ The experience of creating and testing recipes required a great deal of practical skill that was highly similar to the skills possessed by an alchemist or early chemist: grinding, weighing, distilling, heating, and purifying. Many of the same tools were used in the early modern kitchen as in the laboratory, and some recipe books show a clear knowledge of engagement with chemical medicine, such as the use of ingredients like sulphur and mercury.¹⁵

Sir Kenelm Digby published several philosophical treatises, as well as a cookbook, *The Closet of the Eminently Learned Sir Kenelme Digbie Kt. Opened*, which was printed posthumously with his son’s consent.¹⁶ His recipe and culinary works have been described as “foolish piracies”, by scholars who looked down on this genre of early modern knowledge-making.¹⁷ E.W. Bligh wrote that “Digby has been too closely surrounded in the popular imagination with these stew-pans and syllabubs”, disdainfully suggesting a need to

¹¹ Mary Granville and Anne Granville D’Ewes, *Receipt Book*, Folger Shakespeare Library MS V.a.430. Reproduced in *Preserving on Paper: Seventeenth-Century Englishwomen’s Receipt Books*, ed. Kristine Kowalchuk (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 78. See also Meredith K. Ray, *Daughters of Alchemy: Women and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

¹² Elaine Leong and Alisha Rankin, “Testing Drugs and Trying Cures: Experiment and Medicine in Medieval and Early Modern Europe”, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 91 (2017): 157-182.

¹³ Leong and Pennell, “Recipe Collections”, 143.

¹⁴ Wendy Wall, *The Imprint of Gender: Authorship and Publication in the English Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); Pennell, “Perfecting Practice?”, 239-240.

¹⁵ Lynette Hunter, “Women and Domestic Medicine: Lady Experimenters, 1570-1620”, in *Women, Science, and Medicine, 1500-1700: Mothers and Sisters of the Royal Society*, eds. Lynette Hunter and Sarah Hutton (Thrupp, Stroud, Gloucestershire, UK: Sutton, 1997), 98.

¹⁶ Sir Kenelm Digby, *The Closet of the Eminently Learned Sir Kenelme Digbie Kt. Opened: Whereby is Discovered Several Ways for making of Metheglin, Sider, Cherry-Wine, &c. Together with Excellent Directions for Cookery: As also for Preserving, Conserving, Candyng, &c.* (London: E.C. for H. Brome, 1669). Reproduced with an Introduction by Anne MacDonell (London: Philip Lee Warner, 38 Albemarle Street, W. 1910).

¹⁷ E.W. Bligh, *Sir Kenelm Digby and His Venetia* (London: Sampson Low, Marston & Co., 1932), 16.

reexamine Sir Kenelm's "great life" in order to elevate him from the kitchen to a more appropriately elite status.¹⁸ This disdain is reflective of a long tradition of distinguishing domestic medical and recipe knowledge from that of other, more learned traditions in early modern science and medicine – a division that has mainly served to obscure the rich connections and interwoven nature of both the sources, and the intellectual communities involved in the production of these types of knowledge.

Sir Kenelm has been described by one biographer as "a man who did everything and achieved nothing", yet also as "an epitome of the troubled and poetical seventeenth century".¹⁹ His name recurs constantly in the extant primary material of the century, across genres and in connection with diverse historical figures and intellectual circles. He was a courtier, a diplomat, a staunch Royalist, a natural philosopher and alchemist, and one of the first Fellows of the Royal Society. He has been attributed with discovering that there was "something in the air which is necessary to the life of plants".²⁰ He was, in multiple senses of the phrase, a Renaissance man. As much of the scholarship written to date about the Digbys has focused on Sir Kenelm and his interests or accomplishments, this essay will seek rather to decenter him from their story and to use his writings (both published and manuscript) to learn more about Lady Digby and her intellectual contributions.

"The highest and deepest speculations of the mind"²¹: Reviving Lady Digby

Subject to a whirlwind of rumors of unchaste or immoral behavior (including whispers of illicit affairs with one or more earls), Lady Venetia Digby has been described as wanting formal education, exposed to "attacks of envy and ill-nature", but also as the main character in a life that was "altogether a love-tale".²² She was indeed worshipped by her husband, who wrote extensively about his love for her, especially in his *Private Memoirs*, a fictionalized account of both his travels and their courtship, in which he referred to her as 'Stelliana' and himself as 'Theagenes'. After her death, she was immortalized in poems and elegies by authors like Ben Jonson and Thomas Randolph, and portraits by Anthony van Dyke.²³ One such elegy compared Lady Digby to Helen of Troy, while Jonson dedicated

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

²¹ Sir Kenelm Digby, *Private Memoirs of Sir Kenelm Digby, Gentleman of the Bedchamber to King Charles the First. Written by Himself*, ed. by Sir Harris Nicolas (London: Saunders and Otley, Conduit Street, 1827), 8.

²² Louisa Stuart Costello, *Memoirs of Eminent Englishwomen*, Vol. III (London: Richard Bentley, New Burlington Street, 1844), 1.

²³ British Library, ADD MS. 89136. Additional epitaphs and elegies can be found in the Bodleian Library, Ashmole MSS. 38 (f. 192) and 47 (f. 59v).



Fig. 1 – *Venetia, Lady Digby*, by Sir Anthony van Dyck. Oil on canvas, circa 1633-1634. NPG 5727, National Portrait Gallery, London.

two separate poetic pieces to the adulation of both her mind and body.²⁴ In the (much longer) piece on the lady's mind, Jonson wrote "But that a minde, so rapt so high / So swift, so pure, should yet apply / It selfe to us, and come so nigh / Earth's grossnesse, there's the how and why", complicating the common representation of her as uneducated.²⁵

Modern portrayals have hardly improved on the traditional depiction of Lady Digby as beautiful, poorly educated, and morally corrupt, nor have they attempted a more complex consideration of her person. A novel about the Digbys appeared in 2014, which presented her as a vapid and narcissistic figure, pitiable and "no great reader or writer".²⁶ The manner

²⁴ BL, ADD MS. 89136, ff. 16-20.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, f. 18v.

²⁶ Hermione Eyre, *Viper Wine* (London: Hogarth, 2014), 22. Though this novel is intentionally anachronistic, it nevertheless does Lady Digby a great disservice. The author makes Lady Digby's alleged near-illiteracy a recurring theme of the novel, suggesting that multiple tracts were published under the lady's name which were actually ghost-written by a Catholic priest in the family's employ. Though the author uses several extant primary sources written by Sir Kenelm Digby, Ben Jonson, and other seventeenth-century men, she appears to be uninterested in Lady Digby herself.

in which Sir Kenelm wrote about his wife and partner, on the other hand, especially following her death, can only be described as reverent. His letters to his sons and brother in the months, and even years, after her passing painted her as brilliant, angelic, and morally superior. He waxed poetic about her beauty, certainly, but he spent just as much time and ink expounding upon her intelligence and the capabilities of her mind:

in like manner, in true magnanimity, courage, sweetness of disposition, candor and ingenuity, integrity, constancy, stayedness, discretion, solid judgement and all other virtues of a heroic mind, [...] I dare say I knew her thoroughly; in almost ten years of near conversation I could observe and judge of the motions of her heart; which she could never disguise; especially to him she loved, as she did me. That was a main part of our happiness, that we knew each others thoughts as soon as we conceived them; we knew not how to reserve any thing from the others knowledge.²⁷

Lady Venetia and Sir Kenelm became acquainted as children and “the flame sprung up in infancy which was to increase with years”.²⁸ They were wed only after his return from the series of travels that would be recounted and embellished in his *Private Memoirs*. It was during this absence that her morality and reputation came into question. Anne MacDonell wrote in her introduction to Sir Kenelm’s *Closet Opened* that, “making all allowance for gossip, the truth seems to be that in Sir Kenelm’s absence she had been at least the mistress of Sir Edward Sackville, afterwards the fourth Earl of Dorset”.²⁹ John Aubrey, on the other hand, suggests in his *Brief Lives* that she was “a Miss to Sir Edmund Wyld, who had her picture”, as well as to Richard Sackville (1589-1624), the third Earl of Dorset.³⁰ Aubrey wrote that the third Earl of Dorset was “her greatest gallant, who was extremely enamoured of her. and had one if not more children by her. He settled on her an Annuity of 500li per annum”.³¹ The narrative continues, however, that after the Digby’s marriage, “once a year the Earle of Dorset invited her and Sir Kenelme to dinner, where the Earle would behold her with much passion, and only kisse her hand”.³² Yet, Richard Sackville, Aubrey’s preferred Earl of Dorset, died in 1624, prior to

²⁷ Letter from Kenelm Digby to John Digby, 24 June 1633, in Gabrieli, Vittorio. “A New Digby Letter Book: ‘In Praise of Venetia’”. *The National Library of Wales Journal* 9, no. 2 (1955): 144. *Note that for the purposes of this piece I have standardized the spelling of sources to modern conventions where it makes it easier for the reader and does not impact meaning.

²⁸ Costello, *Memoirs*, 3.

²⁹ Digby, *Closet Opened*, xviii.

³⁰ John Aubrey, *Brief Lives, with An Apparatus for the Lives of our English Mathematical Writers*, Vol. 1: Text, ed. Kate Bennett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 332.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 331.

³² *Ibid.*, 332; also noted in Kenelm’s entry on 327.

the Digbys' wedding. There is clearly some confusion among scholars, and even in the historical record, but for the purposes of this essay, the truth behind the rumors and scandal are of little importance. Sir Kenelm himself seemed to give the rumors little credence, and even described multiple attempts he himself made upon Lady Venetia's chastity before their marriage, which he insists were rebuffed by "the chastest woman and the most scrupulous".³³

Upon his return to England, the Digbys were married and according to the narrative of his memoirs and correspondence, it seems to have been a marriage of great love and passion, which resulted in the birth of six sons (including stillborn twins and an infant son who died soon after birth) and a daughter before Lady Digby's untimely demise at age 33.³⁴ Though all of their sons appear at least passingly in the archival record, the Digbys' daughter Margery is a specter, almost impossible to trace. Though multiple secondary sources refer to her briefly, Sir Kenelm never mentions her in his letters, nor does she appear in MS. 7391 by name (though this is not to say she played no role in its ownership or compilation).³⁵ The introduction to Sir Kenelm's *Private Memoirs* lists Margery among their children, and notes that she "married Edward Dudley of Clopton in Northamptonshire, Esq".³⁶ This Edward Dudley is also poorly documented, but appears to have died in 1641, according to records relating to his younger brother William, who was created Baronet in 1660.³⁷ Given the date of Edward Dudley's death in 1641, and the likely date of the Digbys' marriage in January 1625, Margery Digby would either have to have been married at an extremely young age, or to have been born before her parents' marriage is commonly thought to have taken place. It is possible that Margery is the child that Lady Digby was rumored to have borne to Richard Sackville, for which he allegedly settled an annuity upon her. Aubrey's *Brief Lives* reports that Sir Kenelm sued the Earl for this annuity after their marriage, which, if true, might have been in exchange for the taking on the official parentage and care of Sackville's illegitimate daughter.³⁸ This is just one possibility, however. Sir Kenelm and Lady Venetia were married in secret, to avoid the ire of his disapproving mother, and appear to have kept their union private until after the birth of their second son

³³ Letter from Kenelm Digby to Kenelme, John, and George Digby, 18 May 1633, "New Digby Letter Book", 124.

³⁴ Letter from Kenelm Digby to John Digby, 24 May 1633, "New Digby Letter Book", 121.

³⁵ Dictionary of National Biography; [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Dictionary_of_National_Biography_1885-1900/Digby,_Kenelm_\(1603-1665\)](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Dictionary_of_National_Biography_1885-1900/Digby,_Kenelm_(1603-1665)). Accessed February 28, 2025.

³⁶ Digby, *Private Memoirs*, LXXXIV.

³⁷ George E. Cokayne, *Complete Baronetage*, Vol. III: *English, Irish and Scottish, 1649-1664* (Exeter: W. Pollard & Co., Ltd., 1900), 100.

³⁸ Aubrey, *Brief Lives*, 326. Aubrey wrote of the annuity, "which after Sir Kenelm Digby married was unpaid by the Earle", and crossed out underneath, "and for which Annuity Sir Kenelm sued the Earle after marriage, and recovered it".

in 1627 (their first having been born in 1625, ten months after the earliest estimate date of the marriage in January 1625).

Regardless of what came before, after their marriage Lady Digby appeared to all as a paragon of wifely and religious virtue. Even Aubrey allowed that, according to the reports of other women, “after her marriage, she redeemed her Honour by her strick’t living”.³⁹ The Digbys were Catholic during a period of religious strife in England, and though Sir Kenelm converted to Protestantism in late 1630 (motivated by political ambitions), Lady Digby remained firm in her faith. Sir Kenelm also returned to the old faith following his wife’s death and kept it until the end of his life.⁴⁰ He wrote treatises on religion, including *A Conference with a Lady about choice of a Religion* (1638), in which he argued that the Catholic Church was the one true church.⁴¹ In 1660, five years prior to his death, Sir Kenelm drafted a petition to the newly restored Charles II on behalf of Roman Catholics.⁴² During the journey he took after their marriage, from late 1627 to early 1629, Lady Digby withdrew from the world, isolated herself and her children at home, and established a routine revolving around prayer, meditation, and the reading of spiritual books. “She often mortified her selfe with disciplining and wearing a shirt of haire; [...] so farre she was from vanity and ostentation”.⁴³ She was devout, pious, and “exceeding carefull and vigilant over the domestike affaires of her family, and ordered them very wisely”.⁴⁴ She was known to gamble with other ladies of London society, then to take her winnings and donate them to religious causes both domestically and overseas (once up to £100 in a single donation), and thus gained authority and clout through her piety and modesty.⁴⁵

Lady Digby’s death on May 1, 1633 was sudden, dramatic, and prompted a new set of rumors about the woman who had for years been inspiring poets and painters. Though she had previously been known for her “perfect healthy constitution”, with a complexion “neither too hott nor too pale”, she died so suddenly in her bed that many suspected poison.⁴⁶ This suspicion was intense enough to justify the rare performance of an autopsy, and “when her head was opened there was found but little brain, which her husband imputed to her drinking of viper-wine; but spitefull woemen would say ‘twas a viper-husband who

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 332.

⁴⁰ Joe Moshenska, *A Stain in the Blood: The Remarkable Voyage of Sir Kenelm Digby* (London: Windmill Books, 2016), 351.

⁴¹ Kenelm Digby, *A Conference with a Lady about choice of a Religion* (Printed at Paris: Widow of J. Blagaert, 1638).

⁴² BL, ADD MS. 41846, ff. 76r-79v.

⁴³ Letter from Kenelm Digby to Kenelme, John, and George Digby, 18 May 1633, “New Digby Letter Book”, 132.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁴⁶ Aubrey, *Brief Lives*, 331-332.

was jealous of her.”⁴⁷ This report of an anatomically small or decayed brain after her death stands in contrast to the portrait of her intellect offered enthusiastically by Sir Kenelm in both his *Private Memoirs* and his private correspondence, where he wrote that “truly she had one of the best composed brains for the faculties of understanding and discretion that I ever knew in a womans head.”⁴⁸ He addressed the issue of “the brain much putrefied and corrupted”, saying that, though the doctors believed this decay to be the work of some years, “all the faculties of her brain she exercised, even to the last night wherein she died, as vigorously as ever she had done”.⁴⁹

Following her death, Sir Kenelm spoke at length about the qualities of true friendship between men as being based in equal understanding and wit, not found in women except in the rarest circumstances: “I thinke there never was a perfecter and stronger friendship between any two than between my wife and me. Almost infinite circumstances must concur to make such a one”.⁵⁰ He considered them to be intellectual equals, and true partners and friends in all things, “thy Friend, Companion, and Copartner too”.⁵¹ He wrote in a letter to his sons following her death:

I must confesse that her excellent temper in judging and great discretion in directing all affaires that was fitt for me to consult with her (and I kept non from her that concerned my selfe) was the greatest guide and stay that I had in all my businesses. When upon any particular occasion I have thought some course best, upon consulting it with her she hath often turned my resolutions an other way, and hath mastered me with reason.⁵²

She managed the domestic matters of her household with a steady hand, consulted on her husband’s business affairs, and, as I will show below, produced recipe knowledge and provided medical care within her community and social network.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 332. Many recipes at the time used some form of distilled venom, or other elements that we would likely consider poisonous today. It is probably not useful to speculate on whether viper wine in fact shrunk Venetia Digby’s brain.

⁴⁸ Letter from Kenelm Digby to Kenelme, John, and George Digby, 18 May 1633, “New Digby Letter Book”, 123.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 134-135.

⁵⁰ Letter from Kenelm Digby to John Digby, 24 June 1633, “New Digby Letter Book”, 144.

⁵¹ BL, ADD MS. 89136, f. 9v.

⁵² Letter from Kenelm Digby to Kenelme, John, and George Digby, 18 May 1633, “New Digby Letter Book”, 123-124.

Attribution of Wellcome MS. 7391

Wellcome MS. 7391 has, until now, been anonymous and unattributed. I believe that we can make a strong argument that this recipe book was not only owned by Lady Venetia Digby (the Wellcome Collection has loosely associated the book with her, due to a recipe attribution early in the text), but that it also reflects her personal practice, as well as her engagement with a wider social and scientific network. MS. 7391 is a vellum-covered folio volume comprised of three sections written in three distinct hands. The first section is brief, spanning only the first fourteen pages, in a cramped hand. This section contains a recipe attributed to ‘Venetia Stanley’; given the use of her maiden name, the recipe seems to pre-date her marriage to Sir Kenelm, originating therefore sometime before 1625.⁵³ The third section is the only one to include dates, which clearly set it in the late nineteenth century.

The second section makes up the vast majority of the volume, and is written mainly in a single, calligraphic hand, described by one scholar as “evidently that of a professional scribe”.⁵⁴ This section does not, in my opinion, appear to have been written all at the same time, as it would if it were made as a clean copy of a previously written manuscript recipe book. For one thing, there are several additions made in a larger, more looping hand, which may represent the interventions of the compiler/ user rather than the scribe or clerk used to write out the main body of the text. Additionally, there are several places where notes are added immediately after or below the recipe title (or in the margin) in a more cramped script with a different weight, as though using a different ink at another time than the main entries, with less consistency to the writing than one might expect were a scribe copying out a manuscript in full.

The volume contains no distinguishable organizational method, nor does it contain a table of contents or index. It is, however, comprised exclusively of medical and cosmetic recipes. As was common in family recipe books of the period, there are a few sections throughout where a specific type of condition or treatment is prioritized, and several recipes in a row are listed to address the same ailment, as in the case of recipes for the stone, and eye cures (which seem to have been for the use of the compiler herself). These groupings may represent periods of illness for the user or members of her family, during which multiple recipes were tried in her efforts to treat the condition. I agree with previous scholarship by Richard Aspin, who claims that the user of MS. 7391 was almost certainly female, and a lay medical practitioner who was practicing and testing her recipes, as well as putting them to use both within her household, and her larger community.⁵⁵

⁵³ WC, MS. 7391, f. 4.

⁵⁴ Richard Aspin, “Illustrations from the Wellcome Library: Who was Elizabeth Okeover?”, *Medical History* 44 (2000), 534.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 535.

Michelle DiMeo's seminal work on the attribution of authorship for manuscript recipe books urges caution in the mapping of social networks based on these manuscript texts, and advocates for the careful contextualizing of such manuscripts within larger archival bodies, in order to glean a more comprehensive understanding of the medical and social interactions depicted therein.⁵⁶ These methods are absolutely correct and advisable, but I would like to suggest that it is also possible to use the tracking of social networks as a methodological tool through which to more precisely determine, if not authorship, then at least ownership of recipe books like Wellcome MS. 7391. Sara Pennell has argued that the compilation of a manuscript recipe text was a sociological process, with the text as an artifact.⁵⁷ Aspin has made some use of this approach in his aforementioned article, and it is my intention here to both place MS. 7391 in conversation with other archival materials to contextualize the medical and empirical practice of Lady Digby, but also to use the social network mapping to establish a more precise temporal and geographic framework for this manuscript.

In his fascinating examination of a manuscript belonging to an Elizabeth Okeover, Aspin showed that much of that book was copied over directly from the manuscript that I examine here.⁵⁸ Aspin's tracing of the Okeover family begins with an Elizabeth Okeover, aunt to Elizabeth Adderley (née Okeover), the elder of which was born in 1629. There was, however, another Elizabeth Okeover in the generation preceding, sister to one Humphrey Okeover (patriarch of Aspin's Okeover family tree), who married an Edward Phillips in 1583.⁵⁹ Though I cannot trace either of their death dates, it is notable that while Elizabeth Okeover is indeed cited in MS. 7391, a "Master Phillips" is also referenced in Sir Kenelm's *Closet Opened*.⁶⁰ It is therefore possible that it is this older generation interacting with the Digbys in this recipe exchange, though it is also possible that MS. 7391 passed to the Digbys' daughter or a son after Lady Digby's death and that the references to Okeover were added later (they appear close at the end of the seventeenth-century entries). Aspin argues that "MS. 7391 [...] was certainly compiled therefore no later than the 1680s, and probably considerably earlier."⁶¹ I believe we can trace the central section of the manuscript to the early decades of the seventeenth century.

We can trace some of the attributions within the main distinct section of the recipe book to people that we know were members of the Digbys' social and intellectual circles, including

⁵⁶ Michelle DiMeo, "Authorship and medical networks: reading attributions in early modern manuscript recipe books", in *Reading and writing recipe books, 1550-1800*, eds. Michelle DiMeo and Sara Pennell (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013): 25-46.

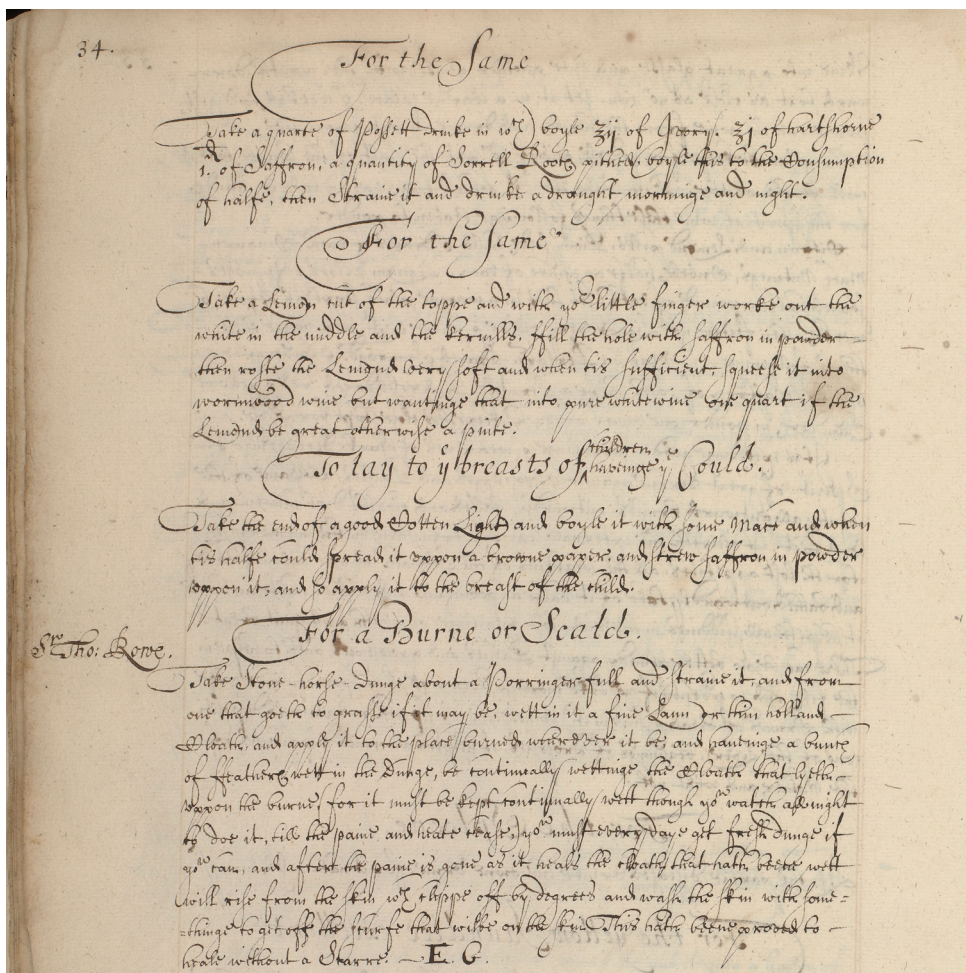
⁵⁷ Pennell, "Perfecting Practice?", 250.

⁵⁸ Aspin, "Illustrations", 533.

⁵⁹ Robert Glover and Richard Flower, *Visitation of Staffordshire, 1583*, ed. H. Sydney Grazebrook, Esq. (London: Mitchell and Hughes, 1883), 122.

⁶⁰ Digby, *Closet Opened*, 224.

⁶¹ Aspin, "Illustrations", 534.

Fig. 2 – Wellcome Collection MS. 7391, English Recipe Book, 17th Century, f. 34.

both Lord and Lady Arundel; the Earl of Huntington; and ‘Sir Gerard of Dorney’ (likely Sir John Garrard of Dorney, 1546-1625), who lived in Buckinghamshire, in the immediate vicinity of the Digbys’ estate at Gayhurst, and served as Mayor of London.⁶² The Digbys may have known and socialized with Gerard in both Buckinghamshire and London. Four recipes are marked with the initials ‘E.G.’ in two distinct hands, both different from that of the main scribe. The use of initials may indicate a close relationship of the donor to the owner of the manuscript. The recipe on folio 34 that is attributed to Sr. Thomas Rowe has the initials ‘E.G.’ added at the end, indicating that E.G. donated the recipe to the compiler of the book, but that the original ‘authorship’ or credit for the recipe was maintained with a reference in the margins. This is reflective of the processes described by Elaine Leong and others, in which men participated in the creation and recording of household and domestic knowledge, including with the intent of passing information down to their daughters.⁶³ I therefore believe this is one of two Elizabeth Garrards: 1) Elizabeth (Rowe) Garrard (d. 1624 in Buckinghamshire), who was married to one William Garrard and daughter of Sir Thomas Rowe; or her daughter-in-law Elizabeth (Swallow) Garrard (1598-before 1645), who married George Garrard (1579-1655) in London in 1625.⁶⁴ These two women were both temporally and geographically positioned for having potentially known and interacted with Lady Digby during her lifetime, and certainly help us to date MS. 7391 more definitively in the early part of the seventeenth century. In this case, an Elizabeth Garrard appears to have passed her father or grandfather’s recipe to the compiler of the manuscript, while keeping his name attached to the knowledge.

It is important to note that the network depicted here expands beyond a singular neighborhood or county, as it would have done for a couple like the Digbys, who lived for periods of time in London, as well as at their estate in Buckinghamshire. Their connections would have been geographically varied, and if recipe knowledge was being exchanged among the other couples in the London court sphere, this may have resulted in the acquisition of recipe knowledge with attributions to laypeople and practitioners with an even broader geographic spread (if a lady at court shared a recipe from her own recipe book, it might continue to carry the attribution of the previous donor, across diverse geographic areas).⁶⁵

⁶² WC, MS. 7391, f. 41; Likely Henry Hastings, the 5th Earl of Huntington (1586-1643), who was married to Elizabeth Stanley, a cousin of Venetia’s paternal side of the family.

⁶³ Leong and Pennell, “Recipe Collections”; Helen Cox, “‘A Most Precious and Excellent Balm’: The Theory and Practice of Medicine in the Papers of Lady Grace Mildmay 1552-1620”, *Midland History* 43, no. 1 (2018), 24.

⁶⁴ London Metropolitan Archives, P69/MTN2/A/001/MS04784, *London, England, Baptisms, Marriages and Burials, 1538-1812*.

⁶⁵ Sara Pennell has suggested that “the wide variety of donor names might reflect the geographical position and diverse social networks of the compiler, reinforcing that domestic knowledge of various subjects travelled freely across socio-economic and gender barriers”. DiMeo, “Authorship”, 26; Pennell, “Perfecting Practice?”, 243-245.

It is perhaps generative to note that Sir Kenelm's attributions of recipes to female sources are almost always to a 'Lady', whereas in other recipe and cookbooks, one might see attributions to a 'Goody', or 'Mistress', indicating contributions from across a broader social scale. Indeed, MS. 7391 is more socially inclusive in this way, the vast majority of its references being to either a 'Mr' or 'Mistress', rather than a Lord or Lady. These may have been people in the compiler's immediate neighborhood or community, as well as her broader social and intellectual circles. Several attributions very early in the main section of in MS. 7391 are to a Mrs. Kettlebey, while several others refer to a Mr. Cresset. Both of these are family names relating to Shropshire, the county where Lady Digby was born and raised. These references may indicate connections from the earlier period of her life, and knowledge gained before she became more centrally located in Buckinghamshire and London.

In establishing the origin of the main part of this manuscript to the earlier part of the seventeenth century, we can also reopen some of the ways that knowledge may have transitioned between various recipe books, whether manuscript or print, over the course of the century.⁶⁶ Aspin argues that "Lady Dacre's medicine for stone in MS. 7391 is the same as that attributed to her in *The Queens closet opened*, an anonymous work purportedly based on the recipe collection of Queen Henrietta Maria, from which the compiler may have gleaned it".⁶⁷ That text attributed to the Queen, however, was not published until 1655, raising questions as to whether the recipe originated there, or perhaps ended up there after circulating through various manuscript texts first. After all, the Lady Dacre here mentioned most likely refers to the Lady Anne (1554-1630), Countess of Arundel prior to Alethea Howard, née Talbot (who also appears as a donor in MS. 7391). These women were all connected either individually or through family ties to the developing scientific community in early modern London, as well as played a role at court in the inner circle of Queen Henrietta Maria, for whom Sir Kenelm served as chancellor.⁶⁸

Both Sir Kenelm and Lady Venetia listed recipes that they attributed to various 'Doctors', but the former had only four of these, two of whom were a "Doctor Harvey" and a "Doctor Bacon".⁶⁹ Lady Digby referred to over a dozen doctors, and for some recipes listed multiple doctors' names in the margins. She cited a "Dr. Atkins" multiple times, most likely Henry Atkins (1558-1635). Atkins was a fellow of the Royal Society of Physicians and one of the principal physicians of James I. He lived in London, and his wife was reportedly from Buckinghamshire.⁷⁰ Lady Digby also referenced a Dr. Turner, likely the author of a widely

⁶⁶ The first section of MS. 7391 cites Venetia Stanley under her maiden name, therefore placing that section before 1625 but likely not more than 10 years before, due to her youth.

⁶⁷ Aspin, "Illustrations", 538.

⁶⁸ Erin Griffey, "'The Rose and Lily Queen': Henrietta Maria's fair face and the power of beauty at the Stuart court", *Renaissance Studies* 35, no. 5 (2021), 826-827.

⁶⁹ Digby, *Closet Opened*, 103, 257-261.

⁷⁰ *Munk's Roll*, "Henry Atkins 1558-1635", <https://history.rcp.ac.uk/inspiring-physicians/henry-atkins>.

available printed herbal text that most gentlewomen would have had relatively easy access to.⁷¹ She attributed several recipes, as well, to a “Mr. Atwood the Oculist”, who, though not given the authority of the title ‘Dr’ seems to have provided several eye recipes in a row. This was almost certainly Mr. Atwood of Worcestershire (b. 1575), who was known to travel to treat patients, as he reportedly treated a Mr. Alsop of Derbyshire in 1655.⁷² In some cases, these may have been recipes received after consulting with a doctor about their own ill health, or that of a family member or neighbor, but these may also have been collected from these practitioners, or from their communities secondhand, to add to their collections for possible later use. Lady Digby would have been likely to collect recipes to try out during her husband’s next recurring case of the stone, for instance, from which he long suffered.⁷³

Eye cures recur throughout the text, and indeed seem to be the area in which the user is most interested for the sake of their own health. A recipe for “A proved water for all evils in the Eyes” is marked with the name “Sir Gascoine”, which can only be William Gascoigne (1612-1644), an astronomer and staunch Royalist who corresponded with several members of the developing scientific community of the moment, including Sir Kenelm.⁷⁴ Near the end of the manuscript, several recipes occur in row, with attributions to multiple donors, that together describe a period of ill-health and personal experience. She listed in quick succession: “The pills that I tooke for my Eyes when very sore” (Mr. Bracegirle); “The Electuary that I tooke of him to strengthen my Sight”; “A diet drinke prescribed mee for my Eyes” (Mr. Atwood the Oculist); “The water prescribed by him to wash my Eyes with”; “The Pills” (Mr. Atwood); “The ointment for the Eyes” (Mr. Atwood).⁷⁵ These are not the first recipes for eye treatments in the manuscript, suggesting that the user had been experiencing ongoing stress or ill-health in this area over a long period of time. This eye trouble could have been one reason to engage scribal assistance in the physical writing of the manuscript.

We can also trace within the manuscript references to family members that might provide us some insight into the relationships and priorities of its owner. MS. 7391 includes a recipe for “The drink prescribed to my sister in her violent flux after her miscarriage”, while Sir Kenelm’s *Closet Opened* contains a recipe attributed to a Sir John Fortescue, who married Lady

⁷¹ Jennifer Wynne Hellwarth, “‘Be unto me as a precious ointment’: Lady Grace Mildmay, Sixteenth-Century Female Practitioner”, *DYNAMIS* 19 (1999), 107.

⁷² Christopher T. Leffler and Stephen G. Schwartz, “A Family of Early English Oculists (1600-1751), With a Reappraisal of John Thomas Woolhouse (1664-1733/1734)”, *Ophthalmology and Eye Diseases* 9 (2017), 1.

⁷³ WC, MS. 7391, throughout but examples on ff. 88, 94, 100, 135-136.

⁷⁴ WC, MS. 7391, f. 121; David Sellers, “A Letter from William Gascoigne to Sir Kenelm Digby”, *Journal for the History of Astronomy* 37, no. 4 (2006): 405-416.

⁷⁵ WC, MS. 7391, ff. 140-141. Treatments for the eyes were fairly common in recipe books for the period, often involving ingredients like belladonna for their aesthetic effects on the pupils. This manuscript does not prescribe belladonna, but rather prioritizes ingredients like bettony, eyebright, sage, and “the water that comes from rotten apples”.

Digby's sister Frances Fortescue (né Stanley). In the context of familial sharing or production of recipe knowledge, it is striking that MacDonell, in her introduction to Sir Kenelm's cookbook, states that "though the elder Lady Digby contributed something to *The Closet Opened*, there is no suggestion that it owes a single receipt to the younger".⁷⁶ Indeed, this reference to Sir Kenelm's mother is a fascinating and revealing one, as it refers not to a specific recipe, but rather a method of "the boiling the same things in a close flagon in *bulliente Balneo*, as my Lady Kent, and My Mother used".⁷⁷ The method reportedly preferred by these two women differed from that recorded as part of the recipe preceding the reference, and indicates that they tested multiple approaches and determined that the 'boiling bath' was superior.

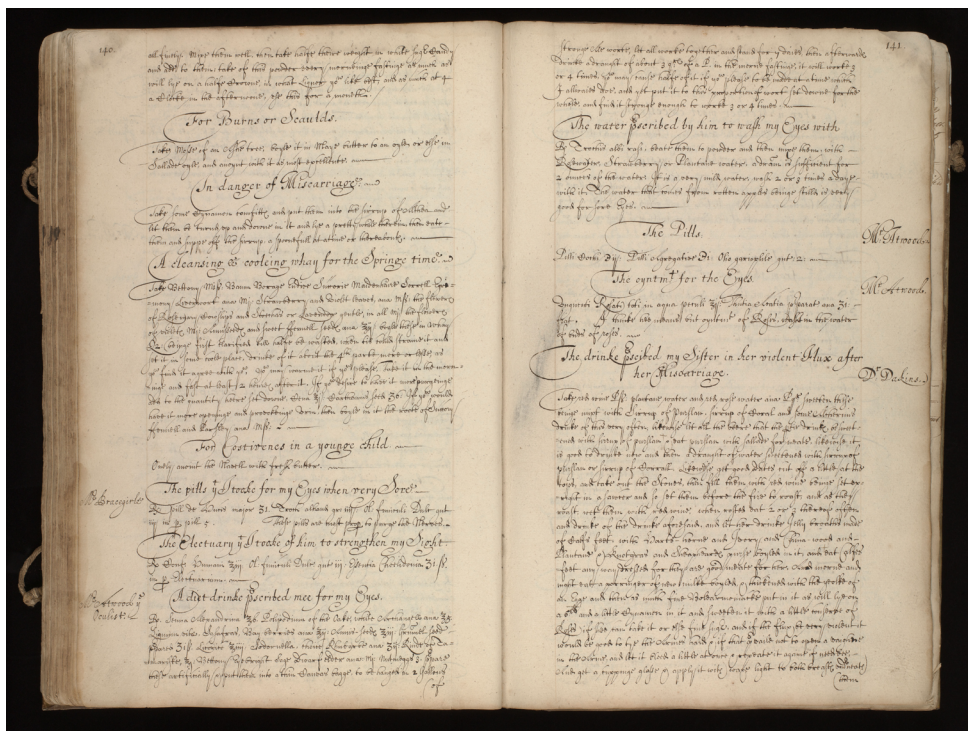


Figure 3 – Wellcome Collection MS. 7391, *English Recipe Book*, 17th Century, ff. 140-141.

⁷⁶ Digby, *Closet Opened*, xiv.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 141. Lady Kent was also the attributed author of a published recipe book, albeit printed after her death: Elizabeth Grey, Countess of Kent, *A choice manual of rare and select secrets in physick and chyrurgery collected and practised by the Right Honorable, the Countesse of Kent, late deceased; as also most exquisite ways of preserving, conserving, candying, &c.; published by W.I. Gent.* (London: Printed by G. D. and are to be sold by William Shears, at the Sign of the Bible in S^t. Pauls Church-yard, 1653).

Both MS. 7391 and Sir Kenelm's published cookbook show a pattern of collecting recipes and contributions from other married couples: Sir Kenelm cited both Sir Thomas Gower and Lady Gower, and the Lord and Lady of Portland, while Lady Digby referenced (in individual entries) a Mr. and Mistress Talbot(t), a Mr. and Mistress Wheat(e), a Dr. and Mistress Turner, and a Mr. and Mistress Williams. She also made reference to a "Mis. Sackvill", which may be Mary Curzon, wife of Edward Sackville, 4th Earl of Dorset, with whom we know Lady Digby was rumored to have a history, and with whom she and Kenelm were reported to have had an ongoing social relationship after their marriage.⁷⁸ Sir Kenelm also cited the Countess of Dorset in his book.⁷⁹ Mary Sackville (néé Curzon) died in 1632, the year prior to Lady Venetia's own demise, which could help us to definitively date the recipe book to the latter's lifetime. I argue that the social networks shown here, in addition to the insights into practice and specific foci of the recipes that I will show below, indicate that the primary owner and user of Wellcome MS. 7391 was Lady Venetia Digby, and that she was testing recipes and practicing medicine within her household and community.

The practice and priorities of Lady Digby

Beyond the social networks that we can trace through both of these texts, we can examine how the owner used the recipes, and what types of practice she tended to prioritize. Several specific health conditions receive an excess of attention, as well as quite a few beauty cures or cosmetic recipes. It is worth noting the sheer number of recipes in Lady Digby's book for both gout and stone, with which Sir Kenelm Digby was known to struggle throughout his life.⁸⁰ Additionally, the recipe attributed to Venetia Stanley early in the manuscript is "A water to cleare hands & face", which is then followed in the rest of the book by a variety of other beauty and skincare-related entries without additional credit added in the margins.⁸¹ Given that Lady Digby had this interest in beauty treatments prior to her marriage, this may represent an early indication as to what she found interesting and important to pursue in her later scientific and medical practices.

The principal part of this manuscript includes a variety of what we might consider cosmetic treatments, whether for preventative care of the skin or hair, or to treat the after-effects of an illness like smallpox. The compiler listed several recipes for "an approved scarecloth", or "a Scarecloth to take away the Red spots that come by the Small Pox", and these tended to share at least a couple of key ingredients, such as 'the whitest virgin's

⁷⁸ WC, MS. 7391, f. 64.

⁷⁹ Digby, *Closet Opened*, 62.

⁸⁰ WC, MS. 7391, for example f. 67 for gout, "tis dayly proved" and f. 94 for the stone, marked both "proved" and "pro.est".

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, f. 4.

wax' and oil of roses or rose water.⁸² These scarcloths involved the making of an ointment or other topical, which was then applied to a very fine cloth and laid over the skin. The process for using these might be more or less intensive, and indeed one required the patient to wear a mask of the scarcloth day and night for six weeks.⁸³ Several recipes are purely cosmetic, as in the cases of pomatums for hair health and growth, brightening the eyes, and washing the face. The skin treatments, as noted above, almost always include roses as central ingredients, but other flowers make appearances, as well. Lily blossoms and roots appear in recipes for face washes and pomatum.⁸⁴ Erin Griffey has shown that roses and lilies were extremely popular ingredients in beauty treatments, as can be seen in the practice of Queen Henrietta Maria, whose fair face and complexion were indicators of not only her inner health, but also of class, status, and fertility.⁸⁵ One beauty practice not seen in MS. 7391 is face painting; the compiler focuses on what Edith Snook has called "beautifying physic", rather than on temporary or purely aesthetic applications of cosmetics.⁸⁶ Snook describes the circle of mostly women around Henrietta Maria as being interested in the collection, compilation, and sometimes publication of medical recipe knowledge, thus indicating the queen's interest in natural philosophy and patronage of scientific pursuits.

Lady Digby was known for her piety and devout Catholicism, and MS. 7391 contains a recipe for "Vatican Pills", made by an Apothecary Smith, who acquired the recipe from the Vatican Library.⁸⁷ This entry includes the recipe given in Latin, followed by the English translation, indicating a familiarity with Latin and a comfort with connection to the papacy that would not have been ubiquitous in early seventeenth-century England. Digby's participation in the court circle of Queen Henrietta Maria, as noted above, placed her within a coterie of recusancy within the heart of the English court that rippled outward through both the intellectual work and political exploits of its members. Henrietta Maria was known for her "active, visible Catholicism", and for the many conversions she enacted within court circles.⁸⁸ While the Digbys came to court already Catholic, Sir Kenelm's faith did shift to Protestantism and back in the course of his political machinations. As a result of his renewed dedication to Catholicism, he spent a significant part of his later life

⁸² *Ibid.*, f. 85.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, f. 43.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, f. 4, f. 143.

⁸⁵ Griffey, "The Rose and Lily Queen", 812-814.

⁸⁶ Edith Snook, "'The Beautifying Part of Physic': Women's Cosmetic Practices in Early Modern England", *Journal of Women's History* 20, no. 3 (2008): 10-33.

⁸⁷ WC, MS. 7391, ff. 40-41.

⁸⁸ Erin Griffey, "Picturing Confessional Politics at the Stuart Court: Henrietta Maria and Catherine of Braganza", *Journal of Religious History* 44, no. 4 (2020), 483.

in exile in Paris, where his alchemical experimentation reached new heights.⁸⁹ For many gentlewomen in this period, Protestants and Catholics alike, their piety and medical practice were entwined with one another. Though Lady Digby did not leave behind a vast record of devotional materials against which to read her manuscript recipe text, we can see in her reported piety and devout behavior following her marriage a reflection of the kind of religious and intellectual practice that scholars have examined in the case of some gentlewomen, who practiced “medical activities which extended beyond their families to the poor of the estate and neighborhood.”⁹⁰

The user of the manuscript refers to the acquisition of ingredients from an apothecary in a cosmetic recipe to remove freckles, in which same recipe ‘mercurie sublimatum’ is listed as a main ingredient.⁹¹ The Latin recipe mentioned above, for ‘Vatican Pills’, also describes the transmission of knowledge or ingredients from an Apothecary (Smith). The practitioner was in contact with other participants in the broader medical marketplace, outside of her immediate neighborhood or household community. Although processes such as distillation would have been commonly used by practicing laywomen, the use of alchemical ingredients like mercury may indicate that the user’s knowledge expanded beyond the basic herbal or humoral standard that one might expect to see from a domestic practitioner.⁹² Indeed, one receipt is explicitly named “Paracelsus his Plaister”, and attributed to one Lady Darcie, while another is composed of a mixture of brimstone and fresh butter, with instructions for the patient to use it every night to “cure a red & Car-bunckled Face.”⁹³ These entries show the practice of a lay medical practitioner familiar with alchemical and Paracelsian approaches to treatment, as well as humoral theory and the dietetic and herbal cures associated with that system. It is unlikely that a female practitioner, even a noble one, would have been explicitly educated in these areas of medical practice, even had she been brought up with a Humanist attention to education that some noble parents provided their daughters in this period.⁹⁴ A woman might have learned a great deal, however, from her social circle, her intellectual community, and her husband’s friends.

The user also lists rare and expensive ingredients that would not have been widely accessible to all domestic practitioners and which show a level of status and wealth suggesting gentility. As Jennifer Hellwarth has shown, landed ladies had greater access to herbs

⁸⁹ Lawrence M. Principe, “Sir Kenelm Digby and His Alchemical Circle in 1650s Paris: Newly Discovered Manuscripts”, *Ambix* 60, no. 1 (2013), 5.

⁹⁰ Cox, “A Most Precious and Excellent Balm”, 27.

⁹¹ WC, MS. 7391, f. 93.

⁹² *Ibid.*, Distillation is referenced on f. 6 and f. 20, for instance, in the receipts “To make Haire grow” and “For the Stone” (Dr. Sheldon).

⁹³ *Ibid.*, f. 71, f. 59.

⁹⁴ Hellwarth, “Be unto me as a precious ointment”, 102.

and chemicals, and therefore would have produced remedies and treatments surpassing those without such access.⁹⁵ These ingredients might include things like unicorn horn or, in the case of MS. 7391, dragon's blood in the concocting of "a most excellent balsome".⁹⁶ Unicorn horn and dragon's blood, like some of the chemical ingredients discussed above (mercury, sulphur, and others), would have required the user to acquire them from limited and far-flung sources (namely London apothecaries). Many basic herbal ingredients could be grown in the kitchen garden, but women did not always choose to do so, engaging instead with the medical market. "This engagement went beyond the purchasing of 'exotic' imported ingredients: it extended to common herbs, and to simple distilled waters to be used both on their own and as ingredients for the further compounding of drugs".⁹⁷ Scholars have argued that the pursuit of 'beautifying physic', like pomatums and face treatments, indicated a sense of class identity tied to both monetary wealth and place in a hierarchical social order; the female knowledge-producer "could also enhance and highlight her class position by transforming her body in culturally significant ways".⁹⁸

Almost every page of MS. 7391 contains some indication of recipes being tested, applied, amended, and "proved". In addition to variations on the Latin *prob*, *probat*, *prob. est.*, the reader can find comments like "this was prob: lately", or "this hath beene often proved and found very good".⁹⁹ Some of the recipes include the word 'approved' in their title, perhaps indicating that this approval came with the donation, having been previously tested before being added to this manuscript. Others have comments like those noted above added at the end of the recipe, and some also bear checks or tick-marks in the margin, suggesting that the user had marked them after testing them herself. Occasional comments and amendments were added in a cramped hand in the margins, showing the user adjusting her practice based on prior results. Next to a recipe for a 'Purgeing Ale', the user wrote in a cramped hand "Halfe the quantity of these ingredients is sufficient for this quantity of Ale – unless it have a strong body to worke on".¹⁰⁰ She thus indicated an understanding of the need to try cures upon different bodies and to adjust them on a case-by-case basis.

Lady Digby's involvement both as a domestic and community medical practitioner, and as a participant in her husband's personal and business affairs, is confirmed in other sources, beyond his personal writings. Sir Kenelm had long had a relationship with Richard Napier (1559-1634), an astrologer-physician and Cambridge-educated theologian who lived and practiced in Buckinghamshire, not far from the Digbys' own estate in that

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁹⁶ WC, MS. 7391, f. 115.

⁹⁷ Elaine Leong, "Making Medicines in the Early Modern Household", *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 82 (2008), 161.

⁹⁸ Snook, "'The Beautifying Part of Physic'", 24.

⁹⁹ WC, MS. 7391, f. 27, f. 97.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, f. 62.

same county. Napier was a mentor to Sir Kenelm from a young age, as their lengthy correspondence indicates.¹⁰¹ Napier's medical practice drew patients from great distances, particularly women who had in many cases already made attempts at their own treatment, or consulted various other irregular practitioners.¹⁰² Recommendations from other female patients could confer some degree of trust in a practitioner, to the extent that women would travel sometimes great distances to consult with them, as in the case of Mrs. Hanger, a patient of Richard Napier's who saw another physician in Cambridge, then decided to travel to consult him.¹⁰³ Astrological medicine was quite popular in early modern England, and typically involved a process of patient inquiries and practitioner response. The interaction would begin with a brief personal narrative and a specific question posed to the physician. An astrological figure would be cast using the patient's name, age, question, and the time that the question was asked, and the practitioner would interpret the results.¹⁰⁴

The Digbys appear in Napier's casebooks as both patients and querents. In two cases, Sir Kenelm approached Napier to inquire about Lady Digby, on her behalf; in the first case, Sir Kenelm inquired about her health in the case of a severe illness, and in the second, he asked after her cause of death.¹⁰⁵ The latter took place approximately one month following her death and reported autopsy. It seems that the sudden loss of his wife remained unfathomable, and it is possible that the rumors that Sir Kenelm himself was responsible for her death continued to follow and haunt him. More intriguing are the cases in which Lady Digby was the querent, of which there were four. Three of these were interrelated questions regarding Sir Kenelm's personal affairs and business in 1628 (while he was traveling abroad), including his general fortune, his social standing, a nativity seeking general predictions, and more specific ones regarding his journey and sea conditions (perhaps

¹⁰¹ Some of this correspondence can be found in the Bodleian Library, Ashmole MS 1730, Correspondence of Richard Napier; there is also a nativity for Kenelm Digby done by Richard Napier, accompanied by a list of accidents he experienced prior to his knighthood, in Bod. MS. Ashmole 174, ff. 75-79.

¹⁰² For more on these practitioners, see Lauren Kassell, *Medicine and Magic in Elizabethan London: Simon Forman, Astrologer, Alchemist, and Physician* (Oxford: Oxford University Press); also Ofer Hadass, *Medicine, Religion, and Magic in Early Stuart England: Richard Napier's Medical Practice* (University Park, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

¹⁰³ Casebooks, MS. Ashmole 222, f. 153r-v, Case 55480. For the full digital Casebooks Project: Lauren Kassell, Michael Hawkins, Robert Ralley, John Young, Joanne Edge, Janet Yvonne Martin-Portugues, and Natalie Kaoukji, eds., *The casebooks of Simon Forman and Richard Napier, 1596–1634: a digital edition*, <https://casebooks.lib.cam.ac.uk>.

¹⁰⁴ Lauren Kassell, "Casebooks in Early Modern England: Medicine, Astrology, and Written Records," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 88 (2014), 598. This kind of proxy was quite common, especially with one family member representing another who was too ill to travel.

¹⁰⁵ Casebooks, MS. Ashmole 410, f. 49r, case 65128; Casebooks, MS. Ashmole 211, p. 200, case 77489.

indicating anxiety about her husband's wellbeing in his absence).¹⁰⁶ The fourth shows the Lady Digby asking a question on behalf of another woman, a Lady Farmer, who was in poor health and needed "to take physick".¹⁰⁷ This indicates Lady Digby's participation in a wider female care network, and that women in that network trusted her to speak and seek treatment on their behalf, to negotiate with male practitioners. More intimately, it may suggest that this Lady Farmer was one for whom she had already provided direct care through one of the tried and tested recipes in her own book, and whose health and treatment she remained committed to even if her own approach had failed. Failure itself, followed by adjustments and repetition, is a fundamental part of the experimental process.

In some instances, we can observe the couple collaboratively practicing medical care, as when Elaine Leong refers to "Sir Kenelm Digby's recipe to hasten labor", which was sent by letter to a friend, who noted "if I mistake not the Lady Digby sent my wife some of this in some extremitie and she had present speed".¹⁰⁸ Lady Digby appears to have prepared the recipe for the recipient, and sent it along separately from her husband's correspondence, yet Sir Kenelm is a collaborative party in at least the social aspect or communication process for this childbirth recipe. From his writings, we do know that Sir Kenelm (unlike most seventeenth-century men) was present at the births of his children because "she would never permitt me to be absent att those times".¹⁰⁹ The couple approached their labors, both physical and experimental, as shared tasks that required both of their strength and council.

Both Digbys actively engaged in the practice of testing out recipes, and are known to have sent some of these to friends and intellectual peers.¹¹⁰ Lady Ranelagh's recipe book contains several recipes that she attributed to Sir Kenelm, including "For Deaffnesse", "For a Consumption", and "For a Cough", all of which are labelled "Sir K. Dighby" between the title and the recipe instructions.¹¹¹ The collaborative nature of the recipe networks that we can see carried out in both Digby recipe books was ongoing after Lady Digby's death in 1633, and Sir Kenelm maintained scientific relationships with other women in their community until the end of his life. Certain aspects of experimentation, such as repetition and witnessing, were important to official circles like the Royal Society, and to the informal intellectual networks where women worked. Recipes, like Royal Society experiments, had to be tried and tested, and the transmission of manuscript recipes was itself a kind of wit-

¹⁰⁶ Casebooks, MS. Ashmole 405, f. 21r, cases 66027, 66028, 66029.

¹⁰⁷ Casebooks, MS. Ashmole 410, f. 189v, case 65904.

¹⁰⁸ Leong, *Recipes and Everyday Knowledge*, 86; BL, MS. Stowe 1077, fol. 53r.

¹⁰⁹ Letter from Kenelm Digby to Kenelme, John, and George Digby, 18 May 1633, "New Digby Letter Book", 126.

¹¹⁰ BL, Stowe MS. 1077.

¹¹¹ BL, Sloane MS. 1367, ff. 19v-20r.

nessing.¹¹² Pennell thus refers to the attribution of names to recipes as “a register of witness and circulation”, representing a kind of conditional testimony.¹¹³

Sir Kenelm’s *Closet Opened* was had a significant focus on culinary recipes. It can be extremely difficult to distinguish between types of recipes in the early modern period, thanks to the prevalence of dietetics and humoral theory. A useful example, perhaps, are the copious recipes for mead (or ‘metheglin’) in Sir Kenelm’s cookbook, which may to a lay reader look like a delightful alcoholic hobby on the part of the author, while in reality these were used as medicinal beverages (both preventative and curative) to treat a range of ailments from a cold to a ‘consumption.’¹¹⁴ Many of his named sources were women, as in the case of “My Lady of Portland’s Minced Pyes”, or “My Lady Lusson makes thus her plain tosts of kidney of Veal”.¹¹⁵ He even briefly refers to “My Lady Fanshaw”, the rather famous memoirist and cookery author who is thought to have created the earliest recipe for ice cream in Europe.¹¹⁶ While this lady is given credit for only one recipe in Digby’s *Closet Opened*, Fanshawe’s manuscript recipe book contains seven recipes attributed to him, suggesting an relationship of exchange between them over some time.¹¹⁷

Though he made reference to his mother, Sir Kenelm did not explicitly mention Lady Digby within his text. I would argue that while there are no recipes explicitly attributed to her, if one reads *The Closet Opened* alongside MS. 7391, one will find suggestive parallels that may reflect a true partnership. In a broad view, where Sir Kenelm’s text has many recipes for what he called “metheglin”, Lady Digby’s correspondingly has many recipes for what she called “A Consumption Drink”, or “A Cordiall for a Consumption”, or “To Prevent Consumptions & strengthen the stomach”.¹¹⁸ Given Sir Kenelm’s assertion that the metheglins were effective against everything from colds to consumption, these appear to be parallel types of remedies. They also follow similar preparation processes, with a boiling and distilling of different combinations of herbs, liquors, and water (and very often different kinds of honey). Both Digbys referenced distillation frequently in their texts, and by 1648 Sir Kenelm was in possession of relevant equipment in his laboratory at

¹¹² Lynette Hunter, “Sisters of the Royal Society: The Circle of Katherine Jones, Lady Ranelagh”, in *Women, Science, and Medicine, 1500-1700: Mothers and Sisters of the Royal Society*, eds. Lynette Hunter and Sarah Hutton (Thrupp, Stroud, Gloucestershire, UK: Sutton, 1997), 189.

¹¹³ Pennell, “Perfecting Practice?”, 250.

¹¹⁴ Digby, *Closet Opened*. Note that the word ‘consumption’ had a very broad meaning in early modern England, often involving fever and cough; it does not here carry the associations with tuberculosis that it would acquire. Venetia’s book also had many recipes for coughs or consumption, for example in WC, MS. 7391, ff. 108-109.

¹¹⁵ Digby, *Closet Opened*, 155 and 193.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 229.

¹¹⁷ Lucy Moore, *Lady Fanshawe’s Receipt Book: An Englishwoman’s Life During the Civil War* (London: Atlantic Books, 2018).

¹¹⁸ WC, MS. 7391, references throughout.

Gresham College, almost all of which would have been standard for a wealthy household (providing some context for the tools that would have been available to his wife during her lifetime).¹¹⁹

The two books are certainly by no means the same; indeed, Lady Digby's text appears to be more medical than her husband's, which is more culinary in focus. They often have recipes treating the same conditions, as in the case of kidney stones, that are utterly different from one another. Lady Digby has several, but the most intensive begins with a gallon of white wine and progresses forward with a mixture of herbs, while Sir Kenelm's is a beer based on water, hops, and malt.¹²⁰ She annotates and corrects some of these recipes, as in the case of "For the Stone" (Dr. Sheldon), which includes a marginal notation amending the recipes by adding additional ingredients and stating that "this cured one that had beene exceedingly troubled with the Stone 30 yeares".¹²¹

There are several instances, however, where there seems to be a distinct parallel between the two texts. Lady Digby's recipe "For the Stone & Strangolion" contains the same ingredients and follows roughly the same procedure as Kenelm's recipe for "Conserve of Red Roses", which he described as "besides being good for Colds and Coughs, and for the Lungen, is exceeding good for sharpness and heat of Urine, and soreness of the bladder".¹²² The main ingredients for both were distilled water of "Mallows", "Plantaines", red rose petals (called 'leaves' in his, and 'flowers' in hers, but by both descriptions it is clear that they both picked the petals separate from the rest of the rose), and new milk. Each has a note suggesting that they consulted with a medical practitioner about the recipe. Sir Kenelm referred to a "Doctor Glisson", and Lady Digby provided the names of two doctors in the margins near the recipe: Dr. Turner & Dr. Atkins.¹²³ This may suggest that in the process of perfecting this recipe, they both sought input from medical sources (whether elite or irregular), and then combined this knowledge and kept what they found to be useful. The final product of this experimental practice found its way into both of their textual collections.

Conclusions

This study has pursued a necessary revision of the life and work of Lady Venetia Digby, and argued for a reattribution of Wellcome MS. 7391 to indicate that this lady was the primary owner and compiler. Lady Digby was a gentlewoman practitioner in early seven-

¹¹⁹ Hunter, "Sisters of the Royal Society", 184-185.

¹²⁰ WC, MS. 7391, f. 23; Digby, *Closet Opened*, 105.

¹²¹ WC, MS. 7391, f. 20.

¹²² WC, MS. 7391, ff. 93-94; Digby, *Closet Opened*, 257-259.

¹²³ Dr. Glisson is likely Francis Glisson, later an original member of the Royal Society alongside Sir Kenelm.

teenth-century England who practiced both herbal and chemical medicines and focused largely on testing and treating conditions that were relevant to her own health and wellness, and that of her family. Her manuscript recipe book prioritized recipes for the stone, gout, eye conditions, and gynecological and women's recipes. Lady Digby was married to an active member of the scientific community of the time, and both were involved in intellectual and scientific circles, particularly where these overlapped with their religious affiliations (that is, recusant Catholicism in the court of Queen Henrietta Maria).

Lady Digby was in several ways less than ideal as a medical authority or knowledge-producer. She suffered from a widely-known poor reputation prior to her marriage, which created conflicts between her gender and class positions; she was openly Catholic in a time and place where this would have complicated her engagement with both her own social circles and a wider intellectual public sphere; and though her shifting geographic position (between court and country) may have allowed her more diverse access to recipe knowledge and its transmission, it may have also kept her from being fully invested or settled in any one community. Lady Digby did not have the respect offered to other, more Protestant gentlewomen based purely on the expression of their faith, though after her marriage she was increasingly seen as pious, chaste, and charitable. Famous for her beauty, she seems to have taken a great interest in beauty cures and treatments, though focusing on the medical side of this, rather than the purely cosmetic. She used chemical techniques and ingredients, including sulphur and mercury, and served as a practitioner to other women within her community. Although often neglected, Lady Digby's contributions point to her involvement in the wider network of early modern women who played a role in producing and circulating scientific knowledge.

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BL = British Library

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