

CURTAIN UP FOR THE WONDERS OF “THEATRUM BOTANICUM”

by John Parkinson (1567-1650)

With the help of the Internet and a set of basic bookbinding tools, I managed two years ago to mend our grandfather’s rather cheap (but still very beautiful) copy¹ of the first edition of John Parkinson’s ‘Theatrum Botanicum’. The front board had come away; I was happy with what I had done, but experts said it would have been better to leave it. Now the back board has



come away and I will have to do the same job again, because what the experts hadn’t factored in was that I was not hoping to sell it but rather to read it!

Of all the great British botany books, this is *the* most wonderful, in the full meaning of the word ‘wonder’. There is a sense of childlike joy attached to Parkinson’s compendious knowledge, as well as to his interest in the explorations of the rapidly expanding world of Nature (he financed a plant-gathering exploration of Spain and North Africa in 1607-8). You can feel his exultation in the intriguing puzzles of ‘Nature’ within this excitingly new as well as classically ancient world of ours.

Take just the frontispiece of his first great work, “Paradisi in Sole Paradisus Terrestris” (1629). This was Parkinson’s little joke on his name;



¹ A letter to him from the Botanical Library dated 16th Feb 1916 reads : Dear Mr Salmon, Parkinson’s Theatrum 1640 with engraved title-page is quite rare but I think you will do better by waiting rather than by accepting Quaritch’s copy, even at the reduced figure of £4 / 4 shillings - after all a rather stiff price compared with Gregory’s, Yours sincerely, A.G.Wiltshire (I think C.E. Salmon typically went for Gregory’s cheaper copy!)

‘Paradise in the Sun’ is another way of seeing his surname Park-in-Son (-sun)! The book is, besides, an odd reversal of expectations, for this is now reckoned to be one of the very first great ‘Flora’, a catalogue of *botanical* flowers and plants as well as a guide to horticulture. It sets itself apart from the tradition of the great ‘Herbals’ which grouped and listed plants mainly according to their medicinal uses. Here, proclaims Parkinson proudly, *you* can find Heaven on Earth, a terrestrial paradise attainable by *everyone*, in our very own gardens and plantings. The book is also *not* in Latin but accessible *English*; this paradise is open to all...

We can see Adam and Eve, of course, busily exploring plants in the nude (which is, of course, *perfectly* good fun - but are there no *nettles* in this Garden?). Adam is... apparently grafting or pruning (?) an apple tree (does God *need* him to do this?) while Eve is tending or picking flowers... near some *pineapples*, it seems! Well, why not? There’s more to come about these pineapples later in the story. But look again. What is that strange animal above and beyond Adam, seemingly perched on or *in* a tree? No, you would *never* guess...! It is, in fact the ‘Vegetable Lamb of Scythia,’ or the ‘Lamb of Tartary’, a mythical plant/animal, believed for several centuries to be a magical fern-like miracle (Thomas Browne’s ‘Pseudodoxia Epidemica’ of 1658 named it as the Boramez) that produced a ‘wool as soft as lambswool or silk’ - yet this ‘plant’ actually had *a body, legs and a head* - a veritable ‘Living Lamb Plant’!? Parkinson had no grounds *not* to believe this weird story, which was well documented by credulous explorers in the Far East. As late as 1781, even Erasmus Darwin (Charles’ grandfather) was including this ‘marvel’ in his great poem ‘The Botanic Garden’:

*“E’en round the Pole the flames of love aspire,
And icy bosoms feel the secret fire,
Cradled in snow, and fanned by Arctic air,
Shines, gentle Borametz, thy golden hair;
Rooted in earth, each cloven foot descends,
And round and round her flexile neck she bends,
Crops the grey coral moss, and hoary thyme,
Or laps with rosy tongue the melting rime;
Eyes with mute tenderness her distant dam,
And seems to bleat--a ‘vegetable lamb.’”*

We have to wait until 1887 for Henry Lee to set the record straight:

*The plant that set all Europe talking of the lambs that grew in fruits
and on stalks of plants somewhere in Scythia was one of far higher
importance and value to mankind than the childish knick-knacks made for
amusement out of the creeping root-stocks of ferns. These and the
curly-fleeced progeny of the poor ewes of Astrachan were lambs that
crossed the track of the first, lost lamb, and led those searching for*

it into the mistake of following their respective trails, whilst the original “Scythian Lamb” escaped from sight.

Tracing the growth and transition of this story of the lamb-plant from a truthful rumour of a curious fact into a detailed history of an absurd fiction, I have no doubt whatever that it originated in early descriptions of the cotton plant, and the introduction of cotton from India into Western Asia and the adjoining parts of Eastern Europe.

Herodotus, writing (B.C. 445) of the usages of the people of India, says (lib. iii. cap. 106) of this cotton:-- “Certain trees bear for their fruit fleeces surpassing those of sheep in beauty and excellence, and the natives clothe themselves in cloths made therefrom.”

In the 47th chapter of the same book, Herodotus describes a corselet sent by Ahmose (or Amasis) II, King of Egypt, to Sparta as having been “ornamented with gold and fleeces from the trees” - padded with cotton, in fact.

(from The Vegetable Lamb of Tartary: A Curious Fable of the Cotton Plant. by Henry Lee 1887)

So, the plant is the cotton plant. *Not* unimportant, but unknown to Parkinson!

Where ‘Paradisi In Sole’ is more of a ‘Flora’ and the *first* of this sort of index of plants and how to grow them, Parkinson’s *last* great work, ‘Theatrum Botanicum’ (1640) is considered to be the *last* of the great ‘Herbals’. Those encyclopaedic tomes include Leonhard



Fuchs’² ‘New Kreuterbuch’ (1543) in German, Rembert Dodoens’ ‘A Neuwwe Herball’ (translated into English by Henry Lyte in 1578), and John Gerard’s great ‘Herball’ of 1597. You might have thought that Parkinson would have finished his own ‘Herbal’ first (the last in a distinguished line) before introducing the more modern concept of a gardening book devoted less to the medicinal properties of plants generally, and more to their cultivation.

For the truth is that botany during Parkinson’s own lifetime was undergoing a seismic shift (traced in Rohde’s book - see below³) and he greatly contributed to this

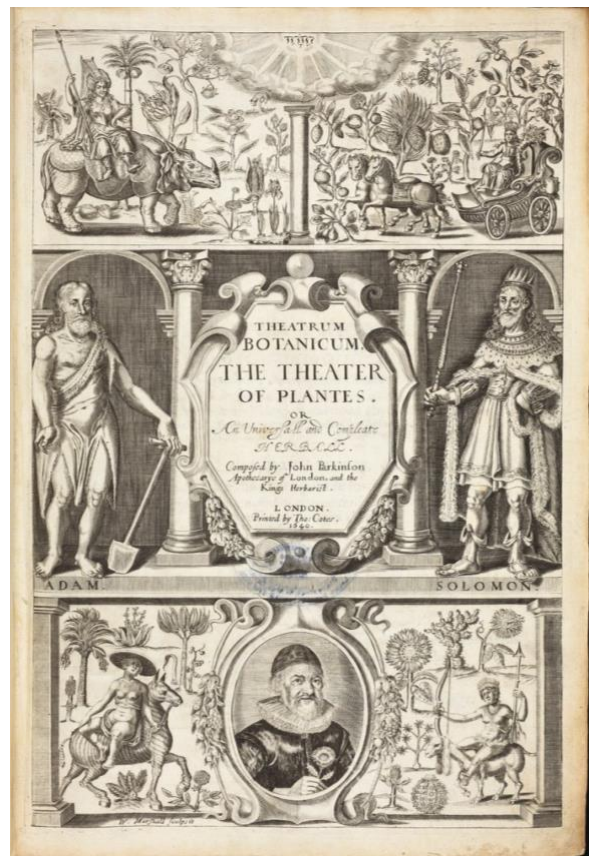
² He gave us the fuchsia. His book had the most fabulous, engraved drawings done by 3 artists (see appendix) - they were so exceptionally good that most botanists filched their drawings for their own later herbals - this includes Gerard and Parkinson. Copyright was somewhat loose in those days !

³ ‘The Early English Herbals’ by Eleanor Sinclair Rohde - 1922 (you can find a copy here https://books.google.es/books/about/The_Old_English_Herbals.html?id=dNE-AAAAYAAJ&redir_esc=y)

gentle revolution. This was from mediaeval herbalism (medicine in those days was *all* about herbs and herbal cures) towards the descriptive and analytical ‘science’ that we think of today as Botany. In spite of the Tartary Lamb, Parkinson was a relatively empirical collector and cataloguer of plants, and this his magnum opus, produced towards the end of his long life, was a huge work in every sense: besides its sheer weight (this one weigh in at 5 kilos!), it has 1,755 pages and lists over 3,800 plants, nearly twice as many as Gerard’s ‘Herball’, the highly distinguished work in whose footsteps he followed and whom he aimed to surpass. Many of these plants had never been catalogued before.

He had once been James I’s Apothecary and a founding father of the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries (1617) but now he had been appointed by Charles I as his chief ‘Herbarist’ (his conferred position was ‘*Botanicus Regis Primarius*’⁴), and the carefully chosen title for his herbal, ‘Theatrum Botanicum’, has this new ‘science’ of Botany well in its sights; it is all about the exposition of, the drama of, the *names* and classifications of plants and their medical uses: all the old well-known ones, as well as the new plants arriving from all over the world.

The busy frontispiece of his all-encompassing herbal (lacking from our own *cheap* copy!) has four goddesses from the four corners of the globe surrounded by their appropriate plants: Europa (dressed) is driving a two-horsed carriage, Asia (also dressed) is riding a rhinoceros, Africa is seated (*undressed*) on a zebra, whilst America (also *en déshabillé*) is perched, oddly, on a long-eared sheep or goat. Adam (Labourer) and Solomon (Intellectual) are the ‘stage managers’, while



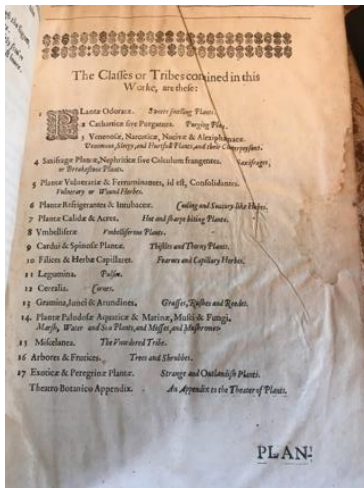
Parkinson appears at the bottom (the audience?) pondering proudly over these extraordinary ‘scenes’ of his.

He, himself, cared for his own extensive botanical garden in Long Acre, Covent Garden, which we think of now as deep in the busy heart of London, but which was then a

⁴ OED has the first use of the word ‘botanist’ as 1647 with William Petty a natural philosopher and administrator in Ireland. The Latin ‘botanicus’ is almost there... !

leafy suburb *outside* the city walls proper. His garden of 2 acres was walled, and 484 different types of plant were recorded there! Parkinson drew on this garden and a lifetime's knowledge and work for his encyclopaedic herbal, which has some of the latest finds being made in the furthest reaches of the world. And Parkinson was in touch with the 'actors' who were making these discoveries: explorers or botany specialists working abroad.

With no Linnaean taxologies and only rudimentary ideas about the links between

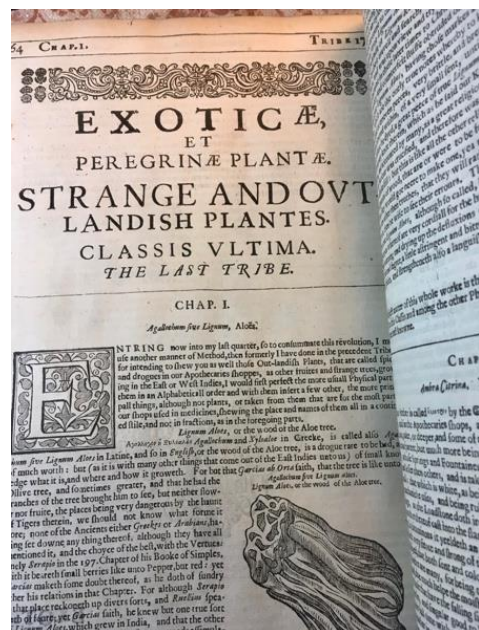


species and families - but with LOTS of beautiful local, as well as Latin, nomenclatures to play around with, Parkinson decided to sort the plant kingdom (of all the four corners of the Earth!) into 17 classes or *Tribes*.

I love his ordering! "1. *Sweet-smelling plants* (let's begin with the Good!) 2. *Purging plants* (nothing like starting with a good purge) 3. *Venomous, sleepy and hurtful plants and their counter-poisons* (we're getting down to business here - serious stuff - to combat and to

cure) 4. *Saxifrages and Breakstone Plants* (OK... Break-stone = rocky, stony...) 5. *Vulnerary and wound plants* (useful for the battlefield), 6. *Cooling and Succory-like Herbs* (sounds like balm for after the heavy fighting), 7. *Hot and sharp-biting Plants* (watch out!), 8. *Umbelliferous Plants* (shady?), 9. *Thistles and Thorny Plants* (nasties), 10. *Ferns and Capillary Herbes* (shady?), 11. *Pulses* (food at last), 12. *Cornes* (cereals, more food), 13. *Grasses, Rushes and Reedes*, 14. *Marsh, Water and Sea Plants, and Mosses and Mushrooms* (quite a Tribe!), 15. *The Unordered Tribe or Miscellanea* (I love this one! I think I might be in the Unordered Tribe somewhere...) 16. *Trees and Shrubs* (this is a BIG Tribe!) 17. *Strange and Outlandish Plants*" (weirdos and whackies from abroad!). We will come to some of these later.

Eleanor Sinclair Rohde, the American researcher and writer of the very beautiful and compelling account of how botany emerged from herbalism in her book, 'The Old English Herbals' (1922), wrote to Charles Salmon - my grandfather - asking if she could come and take a look at his John Parkinson (!) for her research into herbals. In her book she claims that the title



‘Theatrum’ sounds clunky and heavy (“hard and chilling”), whereas ‘Paradiso’ is far more *positive*, and that this title worked *against* the book, accounting for its relative lack of success. She may be right, but I’m drawn to the book particularly *because* it sets out to highlight the drama of botany!

Rohde, whom I wish to quote at some length (sorry!), says, “It is, however, the curious out-of-the-way pieces of information on all sorts of matters which are so interesting in Parkinson’s “Herbal”:

‘He tells us that three several sorts of colours are made from the berries of the purging thorn; that the yellow dye is used by painters, “and also by Bookbinders to colour the edges of Bookes and by leather dressers to colour leather”; that the green dye is “usually put up into great bladders tyed with strong thred at the head and hung up until it is drye, which is dissolved in water or wine, but sacke is the best to preserve the colour from ‘starving’, as they call it, that is from decaying, and to make it hold fresh the longer”; and that the purple dye is made by leaving the berries on the bushes until the end of November, when they are ready to drop off. That the best mushrooms grow under oak trees or fir trees. That spurry leaves bruised and laid to a cut finger will speedily heal it, “whereof the Country people in divers places say they have had good experience”, and that it is also good for causing “the Kine to give more store of milke than ordinary otherwise, so it causeth Pullaine likewise to lay more store of egges.” That the fruit of the bead tree “being drilled and drawne on stringes serves people beyond sea to number their prayers thereon least they forget themselves and give God too many.” That in Warwickshire the female fern was always used “instead of Sope to wash their clothes,” and that it was gathered about Midsummer, “unto good big balls which when they will use them they burne them in the fire until it becomes blewish, which being then layd by will dissolve into powder of itself, like unto Lime : foure of these balles being dissolved in warme water is sufficient to wash a whol bucke full of clothes.” That the burning of lupin seeds drives away gnats, and that half-sodden barley “given to Hennes that hardly or seldome lay egges will cause them to lay both greater and more often.” That country housewives use that common weed horsetail to scour their wooden, pewter and brass vessels, and sometimes boil the young tops of the same weed and eat them like asparagus. That bramble leaves do not fall until all the

sharp frosts are over “whereby the country men do observe that the extremity of Winter is past when they fall off.” That every year sacks of violets are sent from Marseilles to Alexandria and other parts of Egypt, “where they use them boyled in water which only by their religion they are enjoined to drinke.” ...

... That writing-ink can be made of the green fruit of alder trees. That the bark of the same tree is useful for making “a backe dye for the courser sorts of things,” and that the leaves put under the bare feet of travellers are “a great refreshing unto them.” That the Rose of Jericho opened the night that our Saviour was born, and that placed in any house it will open when a child is born. That Mouseare if given to any horse “will cause that he shall not be hurt by the Smith that shooeth him.” That Purslane is not only a sovereign remedy for crick in the neck, but also for “blastings by lightening, or planets and for burnings by Gunpowder or otherwise.” That country folk in Kent and Sussex call Sopewort “Gill-run-by-the-streete.” That agrimony leaves will cure cattle suffering from coughs, and that wounded deer use this same herb to heal their hurts. That a decoction made of hemp will draw earthworms out of their holes and that fishermen thus obtain their bait.....

... That Goat’s Rue is good for fattening hens. That Herb True Love taken every day for twenty days will help those that “that by witchcraft (as it is thought) have become half-foolish to become perfectly restored to their former good estate.” That the best starch is made from “the root of Cuckoo-pint, and that in former dayes when the making of our ordinary starch was not knowen or frequent in use; the finest Dames used the rootes hereof to starch their linen, which would so sting, exasperate and choppe the skinne of their servants’ hands that used it, that they could scarce get them smooth and whole with all the anointing they could doe before they should use it againe.” That the root of this same herb, cut small and mixed with a sallet of white endive or lettice, is “an excellent dish to entertain a smell-feast or unbidden unwelcome guest to a man’s table, to make sport with him and derive him from his too much boldness”; or the poudere of the dried roote strawed upon any daintie bit of meate that may be given to him to eate; for either way within a while after the taking of it, it will so burne and pricke his mouthe that he shall not be able either to eate a bit more or scarce to speak for paine and so will abide until there be some new milk or fresh butter given, which by little and little will take

away the heate and pricking and restore him againe.” That another “good jest for a bold, unwelcome guest” is to infuse Nightshade in a little wine for six or seven hours and serve it to the guest, who then “shall not be able to eat any meate for that meale nor untill he drinks some vinegar which will presently dispell that qualitie and cause him to fall to his viands with as good a stomach as he had before.” That sufferers from toothache should rub the bruised root of Crowfoote on to their fingers; by causing “more paine therein than is felt by the toothache it taketh away the pain.” That the juice of Fumitory, if dropped in the eyes, will take away the redness and other defects, although it procure some paine for the present and bringeth forth teares.” That the hunters and shepherds of Austria commend the roots of the supposed wolf’s-bane “against the swimming or turning in the head which is a disease subject to those places rising from the feare and horroure of such steepe downfalls and dangerous places which they doe and must continually passe.” That Scabious, if bruised and applied to “any place wherein any splinter, broken bone, or any such like thing lyeth in the flesh doth in short time loosen it and causeth it to be easily drawen forth.” That Butcher’s Broom was used in olden times to preserve “hanged meate” from being eaten by mice and also for the making of brooms, “but the King’s Chamber is by revolution of time turned to the Butcher’s stall, for that a bundle of the stalkes tied together serveth them to cleanse their stalls and from thence have we our English name of Butcher’s Broom.” That the down of Swallow-wort “doth make a farre softer stuffing for cushions or pillows or the like than Thistle downe which is much used in some places for the like purpose.” That, if ivory is boiled with mandrake root for six hours, the ivory will become so soft “that it will take what form or impression you will give it.” That fresh elder flowers, hung in a vessel of new wine and pressed every evening for seven nights together, “giveth to the wine a very good relish and a smell like Muscadine.” That the Moth Mullein is of no use except that it will attract moths wherever it is laid? That if Pennyroyal is put into “unwholesome and stinking waters that men must drinke (as at sea in long voyages) it maketh them less hurtful.” And to conclude, it is from Parkinson we learn that “Queen Elizabeth of famous memorie did more desire Medowsweet than any other sweete herbe to strew her chambers withal.” ’

Whew! This single paragraph (as long as some of Proust’s...) would have been even longer had I not truncated it. I laboriously copied it out because Rohde, herself, was so keen on Parkinson’s quaint, quirky and encyclopaedic knowledge of botanical lore, and her scholarly enthusiasm is quite infectious.

She takes him to task elsewhere, however, for inconsistencies in his discussions on certain plants and herbs - according to her he pours scorn on amulets of herbs to avert evil spirits, while accepting other superstitious accounts of herbal successes. And, for all her enthusiasm she seems a little prissy in not revelling more in the sheer quantity of *new* marvels he pushes on to his ‘stage’, some for the first time ever. This is why I love Tribe 17 the best.

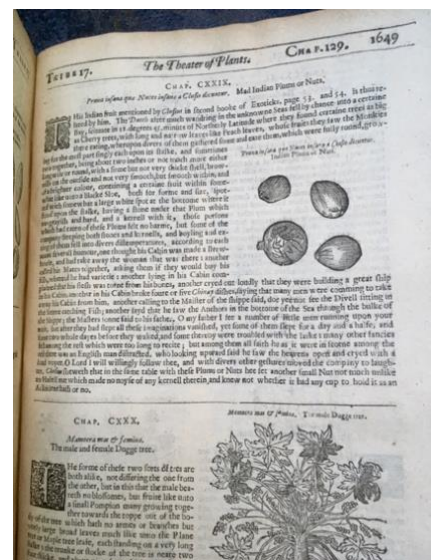


We learn there about the newly discovered Pineapple - how extraordinary to think that Charles I must, in all probability, have eaten pineapples! Parkinson reports that they are “the most excellent and pleasant sweet fruit” and that they taste “as if Wine, Rosewater and Sugar were mixed together”.

Elsewhere, in this Tribe, I enjoy his account of the ‘Mad Indian Plums or Nuts’. According to his Dutch sources, they look like black sloes with a hard plum stone inside.

“Some of the company... fell into diverse distemperatures, according to each man’s

several humour, one thought his Cabin was made a Brewhouse and had to take away his woman that was there: another called his Mates together, asking if they would buy his Fische whereof he had varietie: another lying in his Cabin complained that his flesh was torne from his bones, another cryed out loudly that they were building a great Ship in his Cabin, another in his Cabin broke four or five ‘Chinay’ dishes, saying that many men were coming to take his Cabin from him; another calling to the Master of the Ship said, Do ye not see the Divell



sitting in the Sterne catching Fische; another said he saw the Anchors in the bottom of the sea through the Bulke of the Shippe; the Master's son said to his father, O my father, I see a number of little men running upon your nose, but after they had slept all these imaginations vanished, yet some of them slept for a day and a half and some two whole days before they waked and some thereby were troubled with the taske: many other fancies fell among the reste which were too long to recite..."

Just as well! But then he proceeds to tell you just one more yarn. Parkinson, it seems, is a sucker for a good story - but you do also sense his immense curiosity throughout and a concern to record as much as he can possibly discover. Turn to P1614 if you want to know all about the West Indian herb "Coca" which allows the natives to overcome fatigue. There is plenty also about Cokar Nuts (coconuts), Ginger, Nutmeg, and "the Bastard red Saunders of Candy" whatever they are! There are lots more weird discoveries but I haven't yet come across a banana, tomato or avocado - though he may be calling them something else. (Some of the drawings are not terribly helpful...!)

The Appendices are perhaps almost the most interesting parts of the book, for they are hugely comprehensive and they send you off in all directions. First, the Latin Names - masses of them, including the infamous 'Borametz or Agnus Scythica' on P1618. He reports from "divers good authors" that it lives amongst the "Tartars about Samarcanda", rising from a seed "somewhat bigger and rounder than a melon seed", that it bears a fruit "resembling a small lamb - with "the pulpe or meat underneath which is like the flesh of the Crevisse or Lobster, having, as it is said, blood also in it..." Its head hangs down feeding off the grass around it, "until it hath consumed it and then dyeth, or else will perish if the grass round about it bee cut away...it hath four legs also hanging down: the Wolves much affect to feede on them." Well, poor chap, he couldn't easily go out to Samarkand to see for himself.

Next come lists of ordinary English names, and how resonant they all are! "The Dodder of Time", "The Indian Dreamer", Swines Succory, Gang Flower, Hedgehogge Licoris, Snakes Garlick - and turn to P212 for "The greatest bastard black Hellebore". (It looks inoffensive enough from the illustration, at least.)

Lastly, we have the excitingly medical "Table of Vertues" - 78 references alone for "Shortnesse of Breath"; where to go for "Stones in the Bladder" or "Stones in the Reins or Kydneys"; "How to increase breast milk in women", cures for lots of Eye problems - 14 references for "wormes in the Eyes", over 40 references for how to "take skins or films off Eyes", even more for "bloodshot Eyes", and just one to "take away the superfluous hairs of

Eye brows". Looking under "F" - we have remedies "For sweating and stinking Feete"; "To catch Fische"; "To help diseased Fische"; lots of purges for "Flegmes"; "To drive away Flies, Wasps etc" (12 entries); 4 for killing and driving away Fleas; "To kill Foxes" (just one); but then masses of references "To stay the bloody Flix" and more "To stay the Flux of the belly or humours"; "To helpe Forgetfulness"; "To helpe Frantick persons or the Frenzy" (x20 references); "For the French pox, vide great pox"; and x2 "For the Frets in children" ... (I could have done with those...)

Let's stop there, as it all gets far too *exciting*. We will soon be in need of his herbs "to temper or cool the Blood" (17 references). There are so many cures it seems for Everything Bodily And Mentally Imaginable - not just in Britain, but now *worldwide*.

What is particularly gripping in Eleanour Rohde's book (I love *Eleanour!*) is that she traces how herbals - involved in the amassing of almost witchlike potions for all of the ailments under the sun, based on the theory of humours, astrology and other stuff that we now scorn (I hope!) - slowly became more scientific in their approach. Botany was moving towards collecting, researching, comparing, classifying, indexing, inventing taxonomies, and spreading all this knowledge through accessible books in English, German, French, rather than in Latin (Fuchs' book was in Latin first but was speedily translated into German before it went 'viral' throughout Europe). This led, of course, to the *same* scientific approach being applied to medicine, diseases, surgery, physics and chemistry. But botany was first in there.

It's a riveting history and "Theatrum Botanicum" played an important role in setting out ('staging') the latest knowledge and discoveries, in a form that was supposed to 'invite' everyone to *share* all of this, rather than (as Culpeper later accused the College of Physicians of doing) letting the apothecaries hang on to their esoteric knowledge, keeping it in-house, in Latin, and charging high fees for monopolised skills.

Parkinson was a Catholic, at a time when it was not safe to be one. One of the surprises for me is that we know so little about his personal history, but as the King's declared 'Herbarist', the Civil War was always going to make Parkinson's life difficult, and he obviously kept his head down, so low that he was almost invisible and not in anyone's gunsights.

One of the great ironies of history is that Parkinson's "Theatrum" was *the* herbal that defined the next hundred years, but it was not widely accessible, nor was it as well-known as Gerard's far less comprehensive work. It was finally Nicholas Culpeper (see 'The Bad Lad of Botany?' coming up next), having *plundered* Parkinson's work for his own herbal, 'The

English Physician Enlarged’, a small, almost ‘Reader’s Digest’ sort of self-help guide to herbs, who eventually achieved best-seller status (certainly in the United States) and, in a quite literal sense, *stole the show!*⁵

APPENDIX

The plant illustrations which helped make Fuchs’ herbal famous were drawn by Albert Meyer under the supervision of Fuchs. Heinrich Füllmaurer transferred the drawings to wood blocks, and the Strasbourg wood engraver Veyt Rudolf Speckle made the printing plates.

*I have only just realised how helpful **these** two internet links (below) are. Still not totally searchable, but you can find indexes and pages by sliding the cursor at the top along before enlarging and flipping pages. Brilliant!*



Theatrum Botanicum

https://archive.org/details/qri_33125008297760/mode/2up

Paradisi in Sole

<https://archive.org/details/paradisiinsolepa00parkrich/paradisiinsolepa00parkrich/mode/2u>

[p](#)

⁵ Cf Julie Bruton and Matthew Seal <https://www.herbalhistory.org/home/sources-for-a-study-of-the-herbalist-and-gardener-john-parkinson-1567-1650/>