

Abstract

John Gerard (1545-1612) would not be remembered except for the fact that he wrote *the* Elizabethan book on plants: *The Herball or Generall History of Plantes. Gathered by John Gerarde of London Master of Chirurgerie* (London: John Norton, 1597). Although there are few documentary records about this barber surgeon and supervisor of the gardens of William Cecil, Lord Burghley, Gerard's *Herball* (1597) is itself a rich source of information about his activities and ambitions. Drawing on this material as well as the two catalogues Gerard published about his own garden of medicinal, indigenous, and exotic plants, I reconstruct five roles Gerard took on over the course of his life: surgeon, gardener, client, author, and herbarist. Applying the models of Renaissance self-fashioning and Renaissance scientist-courtier offered by Stephen J. Greenblatt and Mario Biagioli to this member of the minor gentry and London guild community allows us to see Gerard in a new light. I argue that he consciously and energetically shaped his career by finding a powerful patron and a place among the newly emerging community of early modern naturalists. This allows us to see the *Herball* (1597) in the context of his own expectations and the assumptions of Renaissance book culture and to give Gerard more credit for his accomplishment than previous historians have generally done.