

Shaping the Narrative and the Dinner Table: Nineteenth-Century Children's Recipes for Friends and Family

Identifying the author of the manuscript cookbook of Mrs. E.H. Savery of Philadelphia, (1844-1851) is tricky. Like similar works of its day, Savery's cookbook is a comprehensive family guidebook, providing instructions for a range of domestic activities, from recipes for Federal cake and cured ham, to solutions for bilious cholic and instructions for making silver polish. The years of experience required to accumulate such a range of knowledge points to Savery as the author of her own cookbook, but the title page declares it was "written mostly by her son Thomas Savery Jr." However, Thomas is not the only son credited as copyist; a note on the back cover dated 1851 declares the book was written by W.P. Savery, even though he was "sick at the time with indisposition." This note further refers to a younger sister who declared her brother's work "miserably" done. The work contains at least two sets of handwriting, both of which take editorial liberties. For example, a recipe titled "a cure for the cholera," declares "thousands have been served by this simple remedy," while a second hand writes "I don't believe it" in the margin. Though Mrs. Savery's name is on the cover, her cookbook's contents are so shaped by these insertions, she clearly shares attribution with her sons.

Folklorist Janet Theophano explains that manuscript cookbooks were frequently used as literacy instruction for children. Such a conclusion, however, does not suffice for the Savery boys, whose penmanship is confident, and whose contributions to the book's content are more pronounced. These children understood cookbooks as visible texts, works that speak across generations and distances and both preserve and alter history and practice. When they wrote in the family cookbook, they proudly inserted their voice into an arena where they knew it would be heard and where they could contend openly with other points of view. This conference paper will examine older children's writings in the archive (found in manuscript cookbooks, letters, and loose recipes) and explore these authors' use of recipe writing to record their own knowledge, presence, and perspective in one of the places where their ideas were most likely to be noticed and preserved.