protect the project from the threat of what has become known in
the field as “graceful degradation,” or the gradual degradation of a
system that, although it does not entirely fail, continues operating
at a significantly reduced level. Graceful degradation is a problem
that even the largest, most dynamic digital resources, including the
Orlando project, must address, and the VWWP may have found a
creative, as well as productive, intervention.

Overall, the VWWP is a valuable resource for students, scholars,
and librarians interested in Victorian literature written by women.
By offering full-text versions of this literature, the site opens up
possibilities for study both in and outside the classroom.

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Richard J. Wolfe. *Jacob Bigelow’s American Medical Botany 1817–1821.*
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Jacob Bigelow (1786–1879) graduated from Harvard University
in 1806; four years later he earned an MD from the University of
Pennsylvania. For the next sixty years, Bigelow practised medicine in
Boston, while also lecturing on botany and *materia medica* (botanical
pharmacy and drugs) at Harvard Medical School. In October 1816,
the *New England Journal of Medicine* announced that commencing
the following summer Bigelow planned to release the “first Number
of a work on Medicinal Plants of the United States, with colored
engravings” (411–12). This work was designed for the physician and
apothecary for whom “it must afford a great security against error
and imposition;” the book was also to be of use for the “lover of
botany.” A prospectus was to be issued, but specimens of the plates
could be viewed at Cummings & Hilliard’s Bookstore, Boston. The
project would eventually run from 1817–21 and become *American
Medical Botany.* While Bigelow’s work is important for the history
of American medicine, pharmacy, and botany, the actual volumes as
artefacts (three in all) became significant for bibliographers and book/
print culture historians because it was held that they were the first in
the United States to have the plates not hand-coloured; rather, they
were mechanically printed in colour – and this before the widespread
use of chromolithography several decades later.
The subtitle of Richard J. Wolfe’s book on Bigelow’s *American Medical Botany* explains his objectives and plan, for it is an “examination of the origin, printing, binding and distribution of America’s first color plate book. With special emphasis on the manner of making and printing its colored plates.” It is that, but it is also much more because this book about the history of a book also has its own book history. When Wolfe was curator of rare books and manuscripts in the Francis A. Countway Library of Medicine at Harvard University and the Joseph Garland Librarian of the Boston Medical Library, he had stewardship of the Jacob Bigelow manuscript collection; he also had access to numerous other Bigelow documents stored around Harvard’s campus. From his historical analysis of these collections came the first edition of Wolfe’s *Jacob Bigelow’s American Medical Botany 1817–1821*. This work was printed and published in 1979 by Henry Morris, founder of the artisanal Bird & Bull Press located in Pennsylvania (the records, papers, and assorted printers’ artefacts of which are now held at the University of Delaware). Within a few months of the appearance of the Bird & Bull books, as Wolfe explains in the preface to this second edition, an “enterprising American antiquarian bookseller” snapped up more than half of the three-hundred numbered copies, which were then unsold, and then resold them all for twice the initial price. Over three decades later, Wolfe negotiated with Oak Knoll Press to reissue his book with corrections, additions, and an index. This latter volume is not a facsimile edition *per se*, but it has been produced to resemble closely the 1979 work (and it has a similarly limited press run with 245 copies for sale of the 260 printed). It is certainly more affordable than the current price commanded for an original edition (at the time of writing this review, Oak Knoll Press was selling one for US $600).

Wolfe’s study of *American Medical Botany* identifies many of the major way stations along what would later become known as the “communications circuit” as devised by Robert Darnton. Through Wolfe’s careful analysis of Bigelow’s and his publishers’ account books, billing practices, receipts, lists of subscribers, along with other critical archival documentary materials, we learn much about the making, distribution, and reception of *American Medical Botany*. In short, the history of this book affords an excellent window on the enterprise of academic and commercial publishing in early nineteenth-century America; indeed, one can trace the beginnings of Harvard University Press to this era and this project. Also revealed is a gendered aspect of the book trade inasmuch as all twenty-two artists contracted
in 1817 to hand-colour the original plates of botanical specimens were women. Wolfe’s fine-grained bibliographical scholarship demonstrates changed technology in the production of the illustrations after this time, resulting in two states of the first number of American Medical Botany. With the realization that the tens of thousands of coloured illustrations that were required would be prohibitively expensive, a decision was made to experiment with an aqua tinta (acid) and stone process – in effect, colour lithography – which was faster and cheaper. This process was used for later printings of the first number of American Medical Botany and all subsequent ones. Delightfully, this less expensive second edition of Wolfe’s book, like the first, contains two of the original but never used engraved plates tipped in at the front of the book; they are of Coptis trifolia, one hand-coloured and the other uncoloured. Details of the binding processes and of book sales through booksellers and itinerant salesmen are also supplied in this account. An appendix of over three hundred known subscribers and purchasers demonstrates the broad appeal of the work, including physicians as might be expected, but also names of notables such as James Monroe, Andrew Jackson, and John Quincy Adams. Although gentlemen subscribers were predominant, there were also names of several women subscribers because botany was considered to be genteel as well as practical.

The Oak Knoll version of Wolfe’s study, as noted, is corrected from the 1979 edition, yet some readers may still be frustrated to see regrettable typographical errors: on the contents page “Prefaced to the Second Edition;” the title to chapter 2, “Printing and Publicaation;” and on page 114 “correlary.” More problematical is the missed opportunity to update this work by including recent scholarship concerning the raison d’être of the book. For example, I could find no reference to the work of Philip J. Weimerskirch who challenges the claim that American Medical Botany pioneered colour lithography in America. (See Georgia Brady Barnhill, Bibliography on American Prints of the Seventeenth through the Nineteenth Centuries, Oak Knoll Press and the American Historical Print Collectors Society, 2006.) Book historians and bibliographers should be prepared to complement their reading of Wolfe’s otherwise informative and useful study with current research.

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