

An Introduction to the Doctrine of Signatures Tamarra S. James

It is unthinkable that any serious student of herbal medicine would be unaware of the existence of a diagnostic system called, "The Doctrine of Signatures". Most people have read of it in passing with little or no explanation. In the historical perspective, it is one of the most important modes of medical thinking to have evolved, and it was expounded in medical texts from the middle of the sixteen hundreds right up to the end of the nineteenth century.

The Doctrine of Signatures is most notable in that it was not originally formulated for the medical profession. It took shape as a spiritual philosophy that had as its base the simple concept that God had marked everything he had created with a sign. This sign was a clear indicator of the item's true purpose as intended by God.

There are allusions to this sort of theory in the writings of Galen A.D. 131-200. But it was not until the publication of Jacob Boehme's Book "Signatura Rerum; The Signature of all Things" was published in the first half of the seventeenth century that it took form as a complete philosophy.

Jacob Boehme was not a learned man, he was in fact, a shoemaker from a poor family just outside Goerlitz, Germany. In 1600, he was visited by a sudden illumination of the mind in which was made clear to him the doctrine he espoused for the remainder of his life. He published his revelations in the book, "Aurora" 1612, and was promptly exiled from his home town by the city council on the advice of the pastor of Goerlitz. The city council reversed the banishment the next day on the condition that he wrote no further books. He was apparently unable to comply with the conditions and left for Prague the next year. He

died in 1624 having authored two books and several treatises on the subject of his visions.

The first person to look on Boehme's theories as something more secularly useful than a method for spiritual meditations was Paracelsus who was writing in the first half of the sixteen hundreds. Paracelsus is considered by modern scholars to be the father of modern chemistry, and he did much in his lifetime to popularise the Doctrine of Signatures in its medical application.

(Put in its simplest terms, the Doctrine states that by careful observation one can learn the uses of a plant from some aspect of its form or place of growing.) The level of signature often got a little far fetched, and it would seem that this was a case of attempting to make the known facts fit the popular theory. In a period where most of the world was still largely illiterate, it is likely that the Doctrine of Signatures was useful as a mnemonic aid for the apprentice who was learning by observation and rote.

I will give here a series of examples from William Cole who was writing in the Seventeenth Century and was greatly influenced by the teachings of Paracelsus. They will give you some idea of the practical application of the Doctrine. These examples are taken from notes that were intended to teach the practices of medicine. His books are titled, "The Art of Simpling" and "Adam in Eden". The distilled water of Hawthorn: "It is found by good experience, that if cloathes and sponges be wet in the said water and applyed to any place whereinto thornes, splinters etc. have entered and be there abiding, it will notably draw forth, so that the thorn gives a medicine for its own prickling." The signature is in the thorn itself in this case.

Lung wort, due to the spots on its leaves was related to

Pulmonary complaints.

Plants with yellow flowers or roots, such as Goldenrod were believed to cure conditions of Jaundice by the signature of colour.

Plants with a red signature were used for blood disorders.

John Gerard states in his herbal when speaking of St. John's Wort, "The leaves, flowers and seeds stamped, and put into a glass with oile olive, and set in the hot sunne for certaine weeks together and then strained from those herbes, and the like quantity of new put in, and sunned in like manner, doth make an oile of the colour of blood, which is a most precious remedy for deep wounds..." In this sort of case, the doctrine goes a little far in demanding that the preparation be made before the signature evidences itself.

The petals of the Iris were commonly used as a poultice for bruising because of the signature of colour, the petals resembling in hue the bruise they were to alleviate.

Beyond the signature of colour was that of form. If a portion of a plant resembled an organ or other part of the Human Anatomy, it was believed to be beneficial to that part, thus, Cole speaks of Lily of the Valley in the following terms, " It cureth apoplexy by Signature; for as that disease is caused by the dropping of humours into the principal ventricles of the brain: so the flowers of this Lily hanging on the plants as if they were drops, are of wonderful use herein."

Poplar or "Quaking Aspen" leaves were used for shaking Palsy, and Byrny root, which, with a little imagination could be said to resemble a swollen human foot, was obviously signed for use in cases of Dropsy which caused swelling of the foot. There are many more examples of similar types, but this will give a sort of general overview to the theory.

The Doctrine of Signatures naturally led to the concept of Astrological influence, and this was developed and put forward by Nicolas Culpeper in his book, "Judgement of Diseases" in the mid sixteen hundreds. This was a sort of scientific version of the Doctrine of Signatures that set itself up in opposition to the simpler folk style we have seen previously. In fact there were a number of vituperative arguments and clashes between Cole and Culpeper over the relative merits of the two systems.

In short, the two systems weren't that far different from each other, and their evaluations of the uses of herbs were generally the same, the means of arriving at the interpretation was the thing in dispute. Culpeper felt that only astrologers were fit to study medicine, being an astrologer himself did not, I'm sure hinder him in the formation of this bias. Cole was of the "College of Physicians in London" whom Culpeper loudly decried as, " A company of proud, insulting, domineering doctors, whose wits were born about 500 years before themselves." Cole was also the most avid proponent of the Doctrine of Signatures.

They carried on a literary battle for supremacy which was effectively won in 1649 by Culpeper, when he published, " a physicall directory or a translation of the London dispensary made by the College of Physicians in London..." In this book, he had translated the College's main medical text from the Latin, into the vernacular so that the common man could wean himself away from dependance on the Doctors by delving into the mysteries that were formerly known only to the learned physicians. He also added his own commentary on the formulas, and included a healthy dose of his astrological theories, seeming to give them the credence of the College. The College was not amused and proceeded to attack Culpeper in broadsides from this time, and continued unceasingly, even after his death.

The astrological system of diagnosis and treatment was set forth in Culpeper's "complete herbal" in the following way:

1. Consider what planet causeth the disease; that thou mayest find it in my aforesaid "Judgement of Diseases". (His other book).
2. Consider what part of the body is affected by the disease and whether it lies in the flesh or blood or bones or ventricles.
3. Consider by what planet the afflicted part of the body is governed; that my "Judgement of Diseases" will inform you also.
4. You may oppose diseases by herbs of the planet opposite to the planet that causes them; as diseases of the luminaries by the herbs of Saturn and the contrary; diseases of Mars by the herbs of Venus and the contrary.
5. There is a way to cure diseases sometimes by sympathy and so every planet cures its own diseases; as the sun and moon by their herbs cure the eyes, Saturn the spleen, Jupiter the liver, Mars the gall and diseases of the choler, and by Venus diseases in the instruments of generation."

Astrology was consulted for diagnosis, classification of medicinal plants and bodily functions, the preparation of medicines, and the determination of the most favorable time to administer the remedy.

I will briefly set down the basic planetary divisions of the botanic kingdom. One will note how similar the method is to the broader Doctrine of Signatures, in fact, there is little deviation here from the planetary catalogue set down by

Paracelsus.

SUN:

The sun was said to rule the heart, circulation, and the vertebral column. All plants that appeared solar, such as Calendula and Sunflower fell under its influence, as did those plants that followed the sun in their growth such as Heliotrope.

Plants that were heat producing, such as Clove and Pepper, and all those having a tonic effect on the heart were classified under the Sun.

MOON:

The moon was held to influence growth, fertility, the breasts, stomach, womb, and menstrual cycle. It also exerted control over the brain and the memory. All body fluids and secretions were believed to be under the lunar sway. To some extent, the entire plant world was subject to the Moon, as harvesting and planting was performed in accordance with the lunar phases. Most especially lunar were those plants with a diaphoretic action, or with juicy globular fruits. Moisturizing, cooling, or soothing juices fell in here as well.

MERCURY;

Mercury ruled the nervous system, and the organs of speech, hearing, and respiration. Mercuric plants bore finely divided leaves such as fennel, dill, and carrot. The smell was usually sharp and distinctive. The most typical of Mercury's plants had a mood elevating, slightly tonic effect.

VENUS:

Venus ruled the complexion, the sexual organs, and the hidden inner workings of the body cells. Venusian plants almost all bore heavily scented, showy blossoms such as the Damascus Rose or the

Apple Blossom. The medicinal effects were commonly emollient, anti-nephritic, and alterative. Of course, many of the aphrodesiac plants were included under the auspice of Venus as well.

MARS:

Mars ruled the muscles, body vitality, and the libido. It also had influence in the combustion processes of the body and the motor nerves. Its plants generally affected the blood, and were stimulating, and in many cases aphrodesiac. Many were hot and acrid in their nature.

JUPITER:

Jupiter ruled the liver, the abdomen, the spleen, and the kidney. Digestion was governed by this planet as was body growth. Most of Jupiter's plants are edible, many bearing nuts or fruit such as the chestnut and the apricot. Its medicinal traits are antispasmodic, calmative, hepatic, and anthelmintic.

SATURN:

Saturn ruled over aging, the bone structure, teeth, and all hardening processes. Many of its plants are poisonous such as Hemlock and Belladonna. The effects of Saturnian plants are sedative, pain relieving, coagulant, or bone-forming.

Beyond these seven planets, the proponents of this theory had no knowledge of any other heavenly influences.

To many of us, this method seems very arbitrary and unreliable, but one must note, that it was more a system of catalogue than a real formula for discovery. A budding herbalist may know that Mercury has many plants with highly divided leaves like Parsley, but he also knew, that Jupiter had the Hemlock, also with finely

divided leaves, and so he could not trust that all plants with the leaf type would act the same. Most of the herbal apprentices could read little and write less, and the Doctrine of Signatures came to the rescue as a slightly more dignified mnemonic key than the doggerel verse of the village witch-wife.

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