

MONTHLY COLUMN FOR SOAP, PERFUMERY & COSMETICS

MARCH 1999

Anthony C. Dweck
Consultant

The Doctrine of Signatures

Philipp Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim (born in 1493) proposed a philosophy known as the "Doctrine of Signatures". For those with speech impediments or a propensity to stutter he was mercifully better known to us as Paracelsus.

"The mind need not concern itself with the physical constitution of the plants and roots. It recognises their powers and virtues intuitively thanks to the signatures they carry".

Viper's Bugloss (*Echium vulgare*)

The brown stem pustules looked rather like a snake's skin, with seed shaped like a viper's head. It was regarded as a cure for the bites of snakes. The presence of allantoin, might give some anti-inflammatory effects.

Ker-Gawl Liverwort (*Hepatica americana*)

The name liverwort originated from the liver-shaped leaves of the European herb and was used for liver ailments. A close relative Liver-Leaf or Hepatica (*Hepatica nobilis*), had been similarly categorised. In fact, it is poisonous and can only be used externally under strict supervision.

Lungwort (*Pulmonaria officinalis*)

It was considered that the pale blotches on the surface of the lung-shaped leaves of this plant pointed to its use for lung diseases and was used until recently as a treatment for chest complaints. The distilled water is used as wash for tired eyes.

Selfheal (*Prunella vulgaris*)

16th century adherents to the Doctrine saw the throat in the shape of the flower and introduced it to treat the diseases of the throat. The corolla in profile resembles a little bill-hook, which gained it a reputation as a healer of wounds made by scythes, sickles and other sharp instruments. Carpenters certainly made use of the herb as a vulnerary, and gave it the names carpenter's herb, sicklewort, hookweed and hook-heal.

Lesser Celandine (*Ranunculus ficaria*)

Earlier herbalists considered the fig-like shape of the swollen tubers to resemble piles and by association successfully used them in the treatment of haemorrhoids.

Devil's Bit Scabious (*Succisa pratensis* or *Scabiosa succisa*)

The herb's common name refers to its use in the treatment of scabies and similar skin conditions in which scratching is a characteristic. It may have been because the seed heads are very scratchy that this plant would be an antidote. It does have antipruritic properties.

Lady's Slipper (*Cypripedium pubescens*)

Orchids often have swollen, ball-shaped tubers suggesting testicles; thus these roots were widely regarded as aphrodisiac. The plant is used as a sedative.

Mace or Nutmeg (*Myristica fragrans*)

Nutmeg was used as a remedy for all mental ailments due to its resemblance to the human brain. This was not an unreasonable proposal since oil of nutmeg was used as an opiate.

Queen's Delight (*Stillingia sylvatica*)

Its leaves are often marked with chancre-like spots - which suggested its use for syphilis.

Love-Lies-Bleeding (*Amaranthus spinosa*)

The bright red colour led to the belief that the plant stopped all kinds of bleeding. The dried flowering herb is used as an astringent and used externally as a wash for ulcers, in cases of eczema, and to reduce tissue swelling. It does not appear to have haemostatic properties.

Cockscomb (*Celosia argentea*)

In southeast Asia the flowers are considered medicinal for conditions for whose symptoms include discharge of blood, e.g. dysentery, haemophythisis and menstruation. It is perhaps the red-flowered forms that apply.

Eyebright (*Euphrasia officinale*)

It has two-lipped red or purple and white flowers, spotted with yellow and streaked with black, which give it the appearance of a bloodshot eye and so indicated its use as a cure for eye disease, and so was also known as *Ocularis* and *Ophthalmica*. It is still traditionally used for a number of eye conditions, but the use has not been clinically verified.

Greater Celandine (*Chelidonium majus*)

The whole plant exudes a bright yellow (bile like) juice and so was frequently used by country people to help in the cure of bilious attacks and jaundice. It is also used on stubborn eczema, difficult skin complaints and as a cure for warts.

Heartsease or Wild Pansy (*Viola tricolor*)

The lower leaves of this herb, being heart shaped suggested its use for heart related disorders. It is a fortifier of the heart, is a strong anti-convulsive and possesses marked sedative properties.

Strawberry (*Fragaria vesca*)

The shape and the colour of the fruit caused it to be classified as a cure for heart disease. Lotions and gargles were prescribed for mouth, throat and eyes, and to fasten loose teeth.

Walnut (*Juglans regia*)

The nut looks like a brain, and was considered good for headaches and conditions of the brain. This is hard to justify, unless one considers the high manganese content to be of value in the transfer of synaptic messages.

Carrot (*Daucus carota*)

There is an old Ukrainian belief that carrot will increase the sexual capacity of a man, and they have an old saying: *If your husband is old and weak you must have him to drink juice from two big carrots and one celery.*

Fenugreek (*Trigonella foenum-graecum*)

The pods of fenugreek resemble goat's antlers and consequently they were regarded as a remedy for impotence, and included in the earliest lists of Chinese medical plants. They contain steroidal saponins, which can be hydrolysed to diosgenin (a starting material for the production of some sex hormones).

Cuipo (*Cavanillesia platanifolia*)

The Canasas Cuna believe that this pot-bellied tree is a cure for underweight. For sixteen days, the patient bathes in an infusion of the bark, after which they are supposed to start fattening up. I have found more enjoyable ways to achieve the same end.

Ginseng (*Panax ginseng*)

Ginseng root's man-shaped figure (shen-seng means "man-root") led to the belief that the root could strengthen any part of the body. It does have proven tonic benefits.

Conclusions

Though the Doctrine of Signatures does not work every time, it certainly has more successes than failures and so should not be dismissed out of hand.