

# The Doctrine of Signatures

## Rob Cole

Historically, the Doctrine of Signatures is one of the most important modes of medical thinking to have evolved, and was written about in medical texts from the middle of the sixteen hundreds right up to the end of the nineteenth century.

The Doctrine of Signatures was not originally formulated for the medical profession, but took shape as a spiritual philosophy that had as its basis the simple concept that the Creator had marked everything he had created with a sign as to its true purpose. The idea that the shape of natural objects has significance is a very old one, and is not confined to Western thought.

Although its beginning probably dates back into antiquity, the Doctrine of Signatures was made popular during the European Renaissance by Paracelsus (Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, 1493-1541), a Swiss alchemist, physician, and astronomer who wrote about the Doctrine's virtues. He also believed that plants tended to grow where they were most needed; for example, dock leaves useful in treating the sting from nettle, grew near nettles. Jacob Boehme (1575-1624) of Georlitz, Germany is also credited with invigorating the Doctrine's popularity when he wrote the first published book on the subject, called *Signatura Rerum*, "The Signature of All Things." The book had a strong religious/spiritual base and eventually became widely accepted and valued for its medical contribution.

The use of plants formed the backbone of early medicine, and the Doctrine of Signatures was used by early herbalists to determine which plants should be used to treat which ailments. From simple observation, the 'signature' of the Creator would give a clue as to the plant's medicinal qualities. Hollow stemmed herbs were signed as cleansers of the hollow tubes in the body, blood, intestines, and respiratory systems.

Plants with thorns were signed as helping with sharp pains, and so on.

This belief was often reflected in the common names given to many plants whose shapes or colours were reminiscent of the parts of the body where they might be used for healing. For example, Spleenwort (*Asplenium*) was thought to be useful in treating the spleen, Liverwort (*Marchantiophyta*) useful in treating the liver, and Toothwort (*Dentaria*) useful in treating tooth ailments.

The 'signature' related not only to the general appearance of a plant, but also to its specific colour, shape, taste, texture, odour, or the environment or site in which the plant grew. It was believed that yellow flowers were signed for use against jaundice, that the spotted leaves of *Pulmonaria* (Lungwort) resembled diseased lungs and could be used in their treatment, and that plants which grew in stony ground would help in breaking kidney stones. The 17th-century botanist and herbalist William Coles stated that walnuts were good for curing head ailments because "they Have the perfect Signatures of the Head". Of *Hypericum*, he wrote, "the little holes whereof the leaves of Saint John's wort are full, doe resemble all the pores of the skin and therefore it is profitable for all hurts and wounds that can happen thereunto."

Of Lily of the Valley, it was written that "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 Bryony 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.

The Latin name *Paris* is derived from the Latin word *par*, which means 'equal'. The symmetry of the plant's parts was noted by early herbalists and 'signed' the plant against the disorderly behaviour of witches and epileptics. 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. The levels of signature often got a little far-fetched, and seem nowadays to be attempting to make the known facts fit the popular theory.

Scientists now generally interpret the Doctrine of Signatures as mere superstition. Others, however, point out that there may, in some cases, be rational explanations for the apparent success of the Doctrine of Signatures in predicting the medical properties of certain plants. But in a period where most of the world was still largely illiterate, it is also likely that the Doctrine of Signatures was useful as a mnemonic aid for apprentices, learning by observation and rote.

We will probably never know the truth.