



TRADITIONAL
WESTERN
HERBAL
MEDICINE

AS ABOVE SO BELOW

ELISABETH BROOKE

TRADITIONAL WESTERN
HERBAL MEDICINE

TRADITIONAL WESTERN
HERBAL MEDICINE
As Above So Below

Elisabeth Brooke

AEON

First published in 2019 by
Aeon Books Ltd
12 New College Parade
Finchley Road
London NW3 5EP

Copyright © 2019 by Elisabeth Brooke

The right of Elisabeth Brooke to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with §§ 77 and 78 of the Copyright Design and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A C.I.P. for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN-13: 978-1-91159-720-9

Typeset by Medlar Publishing Solutions Pvt Ltd, India
Printed in Great Britain

www.aeonbooks.co.uk

*For
Magical Herbalists
everywhere*

As above
So below
As within
So without
As the Universe
So the Soul

The laws of physic are agreeable to the laws of nature. Physic imitates nature. Its design is, to preserve the body in health, to defend it from infirmity, to strengthen and invigorate the weak, and to raise the dejected. (Culpeper, 1798, p. xiii)

The vegetable world, with its occult virtues and power, is, of all others, the sublimist subject for the exertion of genius and afford the highest gratification to a benevolent mind: since there are no infirmities incident to our fallen nature that it does not enable us to alleviate or remove. (Culpeper, 1798, p. xiv)

CONTENTS

| | |
|----------------------------|------|
| <i>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</i> | xiii |
| <i>INTRODUCTION</i> | xv |
| PART ONE: THEORY | |
| Fire | 3 |
| Earth | 15 |
| Water | 29 |
| Air | 43 |
| Temporary conditions | 57 |
| The seven natural things | 61 |
| Herbs and the planets | 65 |
| Choosing a remedy | 151 |
| A little bit of philosophy | 155 |

| | |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----|
| Astrological medicine: background and history | 167 |
| Decumbiture | 171 |
| Dramatis personae | 175 |

PART TWO: THE PRACTICE

| | |
|------------------------|-----|
| The decumbiture method | 197 |
| Temperament | 243 |
| <i>AFTERWORD</i> | 279 |
| <i>APPENDIX 1</i> | 287 |
| <i>APPENDIX 2</i> | 297 |
| <i>REFERENCES</i> | 301 |
| <i>INDEX</i> | 305 |

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, thanks to Melinda McDougall and Oliver Rathbone for asking me to write this book and publishing my backlist. To the women of the Magical Herbalism and Astrology and Medicine workshops. Particular thanks to Joanna Watters and the participants of the Astrology and Herbs intensive in Lefkas, Greece, who worked through my ideas on Temperaments and Herbs and gave me many valuable insights and very helpful feedback. To Maggie Hyde and Geoffrey Cornelius of the Company of Astrologers, where I learned and later taught Traditional Astrology and Decumbiture. To the librarians of The Classical Association Library, The Wellcome Library for the History of Medicine and the British Library for their help in sourcing the material and to the libraries themselves for being there; what an extraordinary resource they are, and how lucky we are to have them. To Duncan Barford for his meticulous editing and Cecily Blench of Aeon Books for her help.

INTRODUCTION

This book traces the parallel history of astrology and medicine from Ancient Greece, through the Renaissance to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Astrology was a companion to medicine for the ancients. It was obvious that the seasons affected health, overheating in summer, phlegm and chills in winter. The phases of the moon would also be seen to affect people, emotions were heightened at the full moon, and wounds were inclined to bleed more, while fevers peaked.

On the island of Cos, in the fourth century BCE, the medical school of Hippocrates was close to the astrological school of Berosus and we can imagine there was contact and discourse between the schools. In the first century CE, Galen the physician and Ptolemy the astrologer were contemporaries of equal renown. Eclipsed in Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire, both writers' works were preserved and commented on by Arab and Byzantine scholars, until they were returned to Europe in the fourteenth century after the fall of the Byzantine Empire. Taken up by the new universities, medicine and astrology once more became inseparable.

This culminated in the high point of astrological medicine, in the seventeenth century with the work of William Lilly and Nicholas Culpeper, another pair of friends. Both men practiced the astrology of

divination, *katarche* and herbal medicine. They used their arts to promote the Parliamentary cause during the Civil War. Lilly was better connected than Culpeper, who was more radical. Culpeper championed the cause of popular medicine and unleashed a Pandora's box of hostility from the College of Physicians.

After the enlightenment discoveries of Hooke, Harvey et al. astrological medicine slipped from view never to recover its former place at the heart of healing and instead became an object of derision and ridicule. Medicine remained herbal until the development of modern chemistry in the twentieth century, at least in the cities of Europe; in the countryside herbal medicine continued until the development of the National Health Service.

Dissatisfaction with chemical medicine has meant renewed interest herbal medicine. Astrology also is more mainstream these days; however, the re-uniting of the two has been resisted strongly. This is especially odd as both Traditional Chinese Medicine and Ayurvedic medicine have their parallel astrological systems, which are accepted or tolerated. The English tradition is not viewed so leniently. "Oriental systems" might have philosophies as exotic as they wished, because they were "other" and not expected to be rational. This, I believe, is an expression of what Edward Said (1978) called "orientalism", the practice of both patronising and culturally appropriating "exotic" belief systems, which are "indigestible" in some way in Western culture. By exoticizing medical astrology, it becomes "other" and therefore neutralized and acceptable within Western culture.

There is a lack of confidence in Western herbalism, let alone herbalism and astrology, that dark corner of divination. Many herbalists wishing for a philosophical framework to pin their practice on, choose one of these "oriental" disciplines to give them structure and authority, while the English tradition of Culpeper and Lilly remains hidden and forgotten. Why is the practice of astrology so unacceptable, when *shen* or *gui* or *qi* or *prana* are not controversial?¹

I suspect the reason is a cultural memory we have in Britain of the consequences of practising the magical and esoteric, the witch panics of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The common view of witches was that they were crazy old hags, illiterate and credulous. The reality was different; many were healers, midwives, astrologers, hedge

¹*Shen*, *gui* and *qi* are from Traditional Chinese Medicine, and *prana* is from Ayurveda.

witches, and cunning folk, denounced by the emboldened College of Physicians and Protestant church who wished to regularise and control lay people, especially women, and prevent them from encroaching into their sphere of influence (Brooke, 1993, pp. 83–92).

Although, England and Scotland did not kill “witches” on a scale comparable to other European countries, the *fear* of witchcraft became embedded in our psyche as the ultimate sanction for radicality. Culpeper was charged with this crime because he was both translating medical texts into English, which undermined the power and incomes of the College of Physicians, and ridiculing their medical skill and greed (speaking truth to power).

As British herbalists we enjoy a freedom to practice unknown in most Western countries. I believe in response we have signed a Faustian pact to be “scientific” and reject half of our European Tradition so as to “not rock the boat” by using anything which smacks of witchery and revolution. Most British herbalists, including myself, trained in a tradition founded in Physiomedicalism, introduced from the USA in the nineteenth century. Physiomedicalism was a Protestant tradition which incorporated settler medicine and Native American herbalism, with the Protestant doctrines predominating. This system has latterly fallen out of favour and science-based medicine has replaced it. This leaves the British practice adrift, without a philosophical framework. However, for many this is a preferable situation than embracing the English tradition and being seen as a “wizard”.²

Those of us who have put our heads above the parapet³ have been barely tolerated and generally marginalized. It is twenty-six years since I published *A Woman’s Book of Herbs* (Brooke, 2018), and a lot has changed in the world of herbal medicine. “Energetics” (a term borrowed from Traditional Chinese Medicine) has become acceptable. It is a term that sanitizes the magical nature of herbs, and provides a language which does not offend or confront. Even so, that the message of the deep, wide, wisdom of nature is spreading wider and gaining traction among biologists as well as herbalists can only be good news for ourselves as users of herbal medicine and for the planet, for never has it been more

²My personal experience in general practice was that about fifty per cent of patients, were relieved I did not have a cauldron bubbling in the corner and a broomstick by the door, and fifty per cent were disappointed I did not.

³Graeme Tobyn, Dylan Warren-Davis.

urgent that we recognize, value, cherish, and protect our natural world. (See Macfarlane, 2016.)

The dark forces of greed, big pharma and ignorance remain powerful and, through a corrupt media, continue to attack natural medicine on spurious grounds.⁴ It was the same in Culpeper's day. His translation of the *London Pharmacopoeia* into a language accessible to non-professionals was met by furious opposition, including a false charge of witchcraft against him. The penalty for witchcraft was a grisly death, by fire or drowning, so the College of Physicians, perhaps like today's big Pharma, anxious to maintain their monopoly over medical treatment and indifferent to the fate of those whose could not afford their fees, was prepared to kill rather than share their knowledge. History was on Culpeper's side; his book, the *New English Physician* has never been out of print.

Despite opposition, ridicule and threats, herbal medicine enjoys continued and growing support. In recent years there have been programmes to bring herbal medicine to people who are marginalised (refugees, the homeless, and those on low incomes) and to question the power imbalance inherent in the practitioner-patient relationship, exploring new ways to offer healing. These include: Radical Herbalism, Herbalists Without Borders, and Grass Roots Remedies.

In the section on planets and herbs I cover herbs not discussed in *A Woman's Book of Herbs* (Brooke, 2018). There are many old favourites, beloved herbs that I have worked with for over forty years, others are new friends that I am getting to know. The breadth and depth of plant life means no one can fully learn all the plants available. We all self-select those remedies which appeal to us, those we can pick and prepare easily, or those introduced to us by colleagues and friends.

In "Decumbiture" (below, p. 125) I discuss the singularity of the decumbiture chart, as an individual symbolic representation of the therapeutic relationship between client and practitioner, understanding its symbolism as radical for this moment of meeting (or falling sick).

⁴As I write, the *Guardian* newspaper runs a scare story about possible interactions of herbs and pharmaceuticals (Devlin, 2018), and a lecture (Wellcome Collection, 2018), on Ayurvedic remedies by pharmacists, warns of the dangers of "untested" remedies while simultaneously noting the mild side effects found in a study (headache, stomach ache, diarrhoea, etc.) whereas pharmaceuticals for similar conditions caused serious side effects including diabetes! Both examples show the prejudice of science and the group-think we have been fed that science=good, alternative=bad. For this book I tried without success to find the figures for iatrogenic deaths caused by doctors and mainstream medicine, but these were not available.

In a similar way, I believe the plants we chose, the way we use them, and the clients that come to us, are individual and specific to the practitioner, the patient, and the plant. By this I mean that I, as an individual, will be attracted to certain herbs, or to different herbs at different times. I may be thinking a lot about a particular herb and this may attract to me several patients who will benefit from taking that plant.

This happens so often as to be commonplace. The energy I am putting out, by thinking about the plant, draws to me a particular patient who is attracted to my energy, which resonates with something within them that needs what I offer. It is possible that one stage further back the plant calls to me. I notice it for the first time when people in my circle talk about the plant, or events in the news make me think of the plant, or I see pictures of the plant, and this calling is answering a need I have in me to get to know the plant and learn the lesson it has to teach me and to use it with my patients.

Basic information about the plants can be learned, but we need to use our other senses to choose which liver remedy to use, which skin remedy, why Dandelion and not Milk Thistle, Valerian or Lettuce. This requires a subtler understanding of the plant. Long-experienced herbalists I know, will say, “use this remedy, not that one” for a certain condition, but will often not have the language to explain why it should be so. Of course, there is the light of experience, but I contend there is also a deep knowing of the nature of the plant, which may go beyond language to the world of symbols, feelings and intuitions. I discussed this at length in *A Woman’s Book of Herbs* all those years ago.

Because recently in the UK many herbal trainings are conducted in university science departments, the knowledge of the subtle energies in practice risks being lost. There is a danger that by attempting to be “acceptable” to medical science, we lose those very subtleties that make herbal remedies superior to active principles extracted in a lab. The scientific paradigm also has the double negative of removing the practitioner from the equation and reducing plant actions to a tick-box list of active principles.

The mystery of the practitioner-client relationship, the multi-faceted properties of plants and the wonder of healing are lost. Of course, in time, a sensitive practitioner will appreciate the singularity of the practitioner-patient interaction and recognise the subtleties of plant medicine and be drawn to or turned off by particular plants. However, this may take many years. If each neophyte herbalist were to sit with a plant and get to know it, *really* get to know it, they would transform

their understanding of the nature of the plant and of themselves, their learning and healing path.

For the plants give generously. They will reveal layer upon layer of their mysteries and wisdom, which lead us beyond the limits we have placed on our creativity and sensitivity. I began working this way with plants by complete accident. I had trained in the scientific way and indeed had taught pharmacology and pathology and differential diagnosis to herbal students for several years. I had also studied astrology and had done some psychic development work. I ran a small group, mainly comprised of alternative practitioners, which would meet up monthly to talk about plants. One morning I had the idea to see what would happen if we tuned into the plants psychically.

The results were fantastic, and we began meeting regularly, and then another group was formed, and another. Eventually the material was collated into a book and published. My herbal colleagues were appalled and embarrassed and I was basically ostracised by the herbal community for dragging what they were trying to make scientific and acceptable into witchcraft and weirdness.

As I said at the beginning, things have changed over the last twenty-six years and thankfully some parts of the community have embraced a more holistic and sensitive way to practice herbal medicine.

My original book was so large it had to be divided into sections. The first part became *A Woman's Book of Herbs* (Brooke, 2018), the second *Women Healers Through History* (Brooke, 1993). For the third part I could not find a publisher, and it languished in a dusty corner until I was invited to write a book for Aeon Books. I decided to revive and rewrite the final part of my original book, and this is it, the third part of my original vision to show how, as healers, we have a context (our history); deep, spiritual wisdom (our herbs); and a workable philosophy (humoral medicine), which encapsulates the maxim, "as above, so below":

there is indisputably an innate and occult virtue infused in all sub-lunary things, animal, vegetable and mineral by the actions of the heavenly bodies upon the ambient and elementary matter which produces the astonishing variety in Nature which is infinitely beyond our knowledge and comprehension. (Sibly, in Culpeper, 1798, pp. viii–ix)