

The Doctrine of Signatures

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Up to the end of the 16th century, ‘resemblance’ played a constructive role in the knowledge and symbolism of Western culture [1]. The Doctrine of Signatures was applied historically to try to predict which of many herbal remedies might be efficacious in human illnesses. Referring to the common fern *Asplenium scolopendrium*, history showed that the *sori* on its fronds were shaped like (*resembled*) a spleen, which caused the ancients to think it would be useful for treating ailments of the spleen.

In the 1500s, Paracelsus von Hohenheim (1493–1541) expanded an older Christian European idea as the Doctrine of Signatures. He and many others believed that the shape, colour, taste, smell and other attributes of a plant indicated its use in healing. For instance, he observed that the leaf of *Hepatica acutiloba* used to treat liver disorders was in fact shaped like the liver. The leaf of the *Cyclamen persicum* superficially looks like the ear, and was therefore used to treat earache. Paracelsus noticed that the Christmas rose (*Helleborus niger*) flowered in winter, and concluded that it had rejuvenating powers; he introduced it into the pharmacopoeia and recommended it for people over 50.

Another example was *Eupatorium perfoliatum*, a perfoliate meadow plant whose stems perforate the leaves. This was believed to indicate a sort of splint effect that might promote the healing of broken bones, and so it was called ‘Boneset’ and used for fractures.

William Coles (1626–1662), in his *The Art of Simpling and Adam in Eden*, found walnuts were good for curing head ailments because ‘they Have the perfect Signatures of the Head’. Not surprisingly, he found that walnuts (*Juglans regia*) were a perfect signature of the head:

‘The Kernel hath the very figure of the Brain, and therefore it is very profitable for the Brain, and resists poysons; for if the Kernel be bruised, and moystned with quintessence of Wine, and laid upon a Crown of the Head, it comforts the brain and head mightily.’

The lily of the valley (*Convallaria majalis*) ‘cureth apoplexy by Signature; for as that disease is caused by a drooping 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.’

Hypericum calcynum had

‘little holes whereof the leaves of Saint Johns 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.’

‘The Doctrine of Signatures’ started with the idea that God has marked everything he created with a sign (signature). The sign showed the purpose for the creation of the item. The ‘Doctrine of Signatures’ was promulgated by the writings of Jakob Böhme (1575–1624), a shoemaker in Görlitz, Germany, who had a profound mystical vision in which he saw a relationship between God and man that caused him to write *Signatura Rerum* (*The Sig-*

nature of all Things) [2]. His idea was soon applied to medical treatments.

The famous *Culpeper's Complete Herbal* assumes much of the doctrine of signatures which also figured in many medical textbooks until the 19th century, and still persists in certain tracts on homeopathic medicine.

So, if you find the pockets or bags of your headache clinic patients stuffed with walnuts or their shells, you will understand why. Many herbal products are valued for proven therapeutic effects. Modern botanists reject

the Doctrine of Signatures on the basis of more scientifically controlled data. Mercifully for our patients, nowadays, physicians too have no place for the application of this ancient but charming story.

References

- 1 Foucault M: *The Order of Things: an Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York, Pantheon Books, 1970.
- 2 Boehme J: *The Signature of All Things*. Cambridge, Clarke, 1969.