



The Humoral Herbal
A practical guide to the Western Energetic system
of health, lifestyle and herbs
Stephen Taylor

A central circular emblem with a dark blue background. It features five symbols: a yellow sun with a black dot in the center at the top; a red and orange planet with a black number '2' in the middle left; a grey moon with a black female symbol (♀) in the middle center; a golden planet with a black number '7' in the middle right; and a white crescent moon with a black number '3' in the bottom center.

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AEON

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CREDITS

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Picture 7. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Rogers fund. 1955.

Picture 10. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The Cesnola Collection, Purchased by subscription, 1874–76.

Picture 21. Archaeological museum, Iraklion.

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Stephen Taylor.

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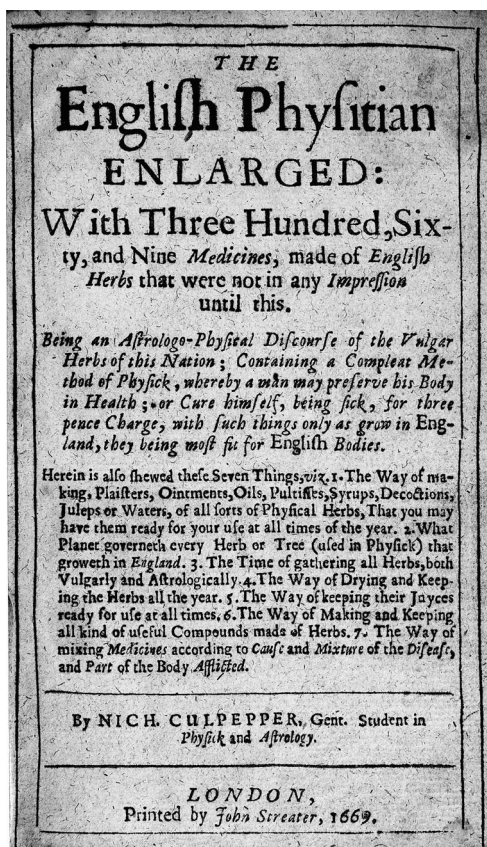
Finally I must acknowledge all the many ancestors who stand behind me and speak through me, and for the wisdom they have passed down the ages which made this book possible. May they remain in our hearts, speak to us in our dreams, protect us from suffering, and guide us all to a place of wisdom.

INTRODUCTION

The inspiration for this book originated during a visit to the ancient healing temple known as the Asklepion on the Greek island of Kos. At that time, I already had a vague understanding of what the humours were, and that the medical tradition of which they were a part had first been formalised and written about by early Greek physicians and philosophers. I also knew that Nicholas Culpeper, the most widely known English herbalist had used humoral physiology as the basis for his medical practice.

I had been inspired to delve deeper into the writings of Nicholas Culpeper after going to a lecture at a herbal student support group in London some years before. The lecturer, Dylan Warren-Davis, an already experienced herbalist and astrologer, had opened my eyes to the possibility of using the astrological characteristics of the planets as a symbolic language. He had demonstrated how they are able to seamlessly tie together all the disparate aspects of diseases, herbs, healing, and patients. He explained how Nicholas Culpeper had given each plant a planetary ruler and an elemental quality so that we could understand how the herb would influence and change the humours in the body. I remember travelling home afterwards with my mind buzzing, full of all the possibilities that this new way of looking at herbs could provide. However, since then I had not had a real opportunity to spend time exploring this approach further.

It was some years later while holidaying with my family on the Greek island of Kos that I finally had the opportunity to really get under the skin of humoral philosophy. I had taken with me a copy of Nicholas Culpeper's 'The Compleat Herbal and English Physician Enlarged' hoping that I might be able to take advantage of some free time to get a better understanding of his approach to healing. It so



Frontispiece 'The Compleat Herbal'.

Nicholas Culpeper.

happened that while swimming in the sea I had cut my ankle, which had unfortunately become infected, meaning that I was unable to enjoy the beach or the pool, but would be confined to a sun lounger where my leg could be elevated to stop it throbbing. This meant that I now had many hours to do little else but read and study Culpeper's book. The initial excitement that I had felt all those years before was confirmed, the more that I studied the humoral system. It struck me that this truly was a system of medicine that was clear and practical, as complete and as comprehensive as any of the ancient traditional medical systems that had recently become so popular, such as traditional Chinese medicine and Indian Ayurvedic medicine. It seemed an amazing coincidence that my exploration of this ancient system was happening while actually staying on the island where the most famous of the humoral physicians, Hippocrates, had both studied and practiced. I was now exploring this ancient system for myself amongst the hills and bays in one of the places in which it evolved and had been perfected.



Kos Asklepius.

There are already a multitude of books on herbal medicine available, many are very well researched and written, many of them are very inspiring. There are also those that a wise teacher of mine once referred to as “that herbal book that keeps being written”, a repetition of all that was written in an earlier book, just by a new author. There are even books on Culpeper and medieval medicine, many of them academic and erudite, but what it seems that we are lacking is a truly contemporary and practical exposition of the Western tradition of energetic herbal healing.

So this is not just another book repeating the same herbal information in an updated or more marketable format, nor is it an academic text book written for a small number of herbal academics, historians, and professionals. This book is an exploration of Western herbal healing as an art, as a practice, and as a science. It is aimed at everyone with an interest in herbs and healing, from the novice to the professional therapist. It is based on my attempts during my development as a herbalist to make sense of my practice, and comes from my desire to identify the strategies that will best help those who come for help from herbs and natural medicine.

Even though the traditional ancient art of healing as originally practiced throughout Europe has all but disappeared, its world vision and its perception of life are still resonating in our language and culture. When we use phrases such as “let’s look at this with a cool head”, “I feel in low spirits”, or “how easily he loses his temper!” we are using concepts that come from the humoral world view. It begins with the basic premise that all things in nature are underpinned by an order that we can see, feel,

touch, and interpret, as we too are part of that natural order. Therefore, the world is not something that can only be explored by experts, scientists and specialists.

When we start drawing on these inherited prescientific concepts to interpret our experiences as herbalists and healers, straight away we find that a template for interpreting these descriptions is already embedded in our language and culture. The Western energetic 'Humoral' model is as precise, subtle, and enlightening of the healing processes taking place as any that I have come across from distant cultures. The advantage is that when we use our own cultural standpoint as a starting point, we don't have to grapple with a foreign language or culture to get going.

Perhaps the greatest challenge for us to overcome when attempting to re-energise this cultural legacy is that it was taught, transmitted, and practiced within a largely non-literate society. We have learnt to conceptualise, record, and explore our world from the standpoint of literate, lineal thinkers and have become dependent on the written word to store and communicate our knowledge. The ancient mystic systems were part of an oral tradition, they were not passed down as a written dogma, but communicated by a teacher to their apprentices in small lineage-based schools. They were an oral and experiential tradition, passed on through myth, story, anecdote, and by watching its application. Remembering the uses of plants was achieved by absorbing stories and myths about them, often poetic in nature, and by connecting them with symbols, which themselves provided a multitude of connections to other aspects of the cosmos. The very essence of these ancient energetic systems is that they are not fixed, they evolve with each healing encounter, with each person who practices them, and with each person who teaches them.

Unlike a written book of rules and laws, oral traditions change each time they are passed on, with the speaker adding a little of their own experience, wisdom and inspiration to the narrative each time they recount it. In this way, traditional systems adapt to the varying needs of new situations and to the differences experienced by the inhabitants of the many places where the tradition is practiced, evolving with the community of which they are a part.

This dynamic evolving nature of traditional knowledge is balanced by it having a foundation of core stories, symbols, myths, and themes that remain constant. These core concepts guide us to look at the world in a particular way, providing an informative, intuitive, and adaptable description. In this way, we become aware of what it is we need to look for and the meaning of what it is we are looking at, enabling us to interpret signs and patterns in the world around us, and to respond to them most effectively.

In the ancient traditional system of education, one learns about things directly, rather than by memorising descriptions of their characteristics. I once heard a Tibetan trained herbalist speak about the first lesson his herbal tutor gave him when he was only four years old; the teacher emptied a sack of plants on the floor and asked the new student to identify a particular plant from the heap. The student couldn't ask a direct question such as "is this the plant, or is it that one?" he had to deduce which one it was by asking questions such as "Are its leaves round or pointed, does it have hairy stems, has it many petals or few petals, has it a strong smell or a subtle smell?" Eventually in this way he found the correct plant by a process of deduction and sensory exploration,

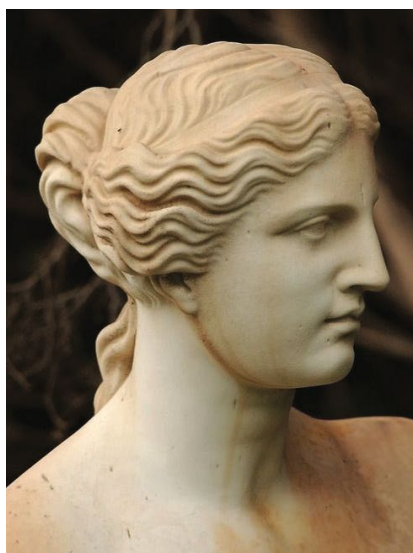
and therefore through that process really understood the plants' essential characteristics to enable future identification. When we learn in this way through seeing, tasting, smelling, touching, and using plants, we become competent in knowing them for ourselves and can still identify the plant and its close relatives even if they are in a different location or season, and are looking very different to how we last encountered them.

What I have written is therefore trying in a similar way to suggest a path to get to know things about herbs and healing for ourselves. Hopefully I can encourage an approach that gives us a way of deducing the solutions we need using our own knowledge, wisdom, and intuition when working as healers. I am, therefore, inviting you to explore what you are doing by using a vision that has been seen to be useful to generations of our forebears and former teachers. I ask you not to take this book as the truth, unchangeable and fixed, to be adhered to dogmatically. Rather I suggest it as a pointer as to where we might find the truth that is relevant and appropriate for us at any particular time and situation.

In the ancient traditions of learning, education was seen as a personal journey towards enlightenment. This was never limited to a process of merely memorising information and learning set responses to situations. Education aimed to develop our ability to see each situation as new and unique, to enable us to draw out of ourselves an equally new and unique response. The aim was to become a philosopher; that is a lover (philos) of Sophia, the goddess of Wisdom. The central aspect of this kind of education is focusing on coming from the heart with love, not just from the head with reason alone. During this process we are called to use our feelings, intuition, and divine self to connect with wisdom, rather than just thinking about it. By responding from our heart, the seat of the divine soul, we are enabled to create a spiritually inspired and unique solution for each patient.



Greek Goddesses, The Acropolis, Athens.



unidentified Greek Goddess sculpture.

The Humoral Herbal has three main themes and sections; the mythical (Mythos), the rational (Logos), and the practice (Ars). In such a way, we acknowledge the role of spirit, mind, and body in healing and also bring them together in one whole exposition.

'Mythos' refers to the word or story associated with the unreal or "otherworld", the world outside of reason. It is the place of poetic inspiration, of imagination and dreaming. It is by connecting to this mystical tradition that we can unlock the symbolic wisdom of ancient storytelling, and renew our belief in the underlying connectedness of all things. In this section, we will uncover the wisdom of European folk and fairy stories, unlocking their symbolism and the teachings that can still inspire and guide us today, we can then weave mysticism, knowledge, and practice together in our healing work.

The rational or 'Logos' section aims to give a practical based working knowledge of the traditional Galenic humoral theory of ancient Greece and post-medieval Europe. "Logos" represents the underlying universal divine reason, an eternal and unchanging truth present from the time of creation, available to every individual who seeks it. In this section, we will explore the rational, structured theories of the European humoral tradition, as practised since the time of Hippocrates and described within the medical tradition of Galen. This is my own adaptation of this system and is the reworking that I have found most helpful for practicing as a twenty first century Western European herbalist. It is not an attempt to present an entirely accurate historical model, but rather a vision for today's practitioners inspired by our ancestors and the way that they practiced this ancient art.

The 'Ars' section covers the art, the skill, and the practice of medicine. It includes therapeutic approaches, identifying temperaments and imbalances of humours. It includes instruction on tongue and pulse diagnosis and explores how to use herbs, diet, and lifestyle to correct imbalances. In these sections I have provided citations to all the quoted texts to assist those who wish to research further into the source material. The book is complemented by the materia medica compendium of herbs, placing the herbs in their traditional and historical context and elucidating how they fit into the humoral model we have explored in the book. In this section I have not provided exhaustive citations as I do not want to interrupt the flow of the narrative of the herbs. I frequently quote from Culpeper's *Complete Herbal* (1652),¹ and the references in this section are all taken from this source, the quotations coming from the entry in Culpeper for the particular herb that is being discussed. This is also the case with passages taken from Maude Grieve's *"A Modern Herbal"* (1932).² I hope that readers will appreciate the balance that I have tried to strike in this section between an academic presentation and an accessible read, and apologise to those who would have wished for a more rigorous academic presentation. The bibliography provides full details of the publications I have used. Details of all the texts referred to throughout the book will be found in the bibliography. The herbal section does not provide a description of every possible medicinal plant available, but a core group of some of my favourite herbs, as I hope that each reader will find their own group of best known and loved herbs to use. There is a formulary following this section, which offers practical advice about herbal therapy listed by ailment; this is often the most useful tool when we are

first learning about the practice of herbal medicine. It gives us a practical starting point so we can learn through our own experimentation and exploration.

Each section stands alone and can be read alone. However, by embracing the complete picture presented I hope that it will act as a catalyst to enable you to make your own connections and enhance your own inspiration as a healer.

My aim is to produce a beneficial contribution to the art and practice of healing with herbs, a contribution that comes out of having had the opportunity to spend many years working with plants and patients and discovering their powerful healing potential. I hope that I can successfully communicate all the knowledge and experience I have gained in a straight-forward way that most readers will find easy to absorb and understand. I have attempted to give a practical guide to using herbs, whilst also giving a narrative that will help us to see why the things we do may be effective, so that we can respond equally well when we encounter a similar pattern of imbalance or similar health issue in a subsequent patient. I have also wanted to open up the possibility of us experiencing our work with herbs as something greater than merely the attempt to free ourselves of troubling symptoms alone. By inspiring the regular use of herbs, I hope for us to all deepen our relationship with nature and through that develop a new respect, love, and care for mother Earth.