

## Some notes on astrology and plants: astrological botany

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## Some notes on astrology and plants : astrological botany {for beginners (like me)}

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In this article I try to introduce the readers with astrological botany... If you have further information, I'd be pleased to hear from you. Here is a little insight of the knowledge I have of this discipline:



*The Zodiac Man* a diagram of a human body and astrological symbols with instructions explaining the importance of astrology from a medical perspective. From a 15th-century Welsh manuscript, Gutun Owain – National Library of Wales – public domain – wikipedia

Yesterday, Thursday 4 June, I took part in an informal conversation « Virtual Casebooks Therapy » *via* Zoom with History Professor Lauren Kassell and her team, who worked on the very interesting **Casebooks Project** (click on the link here to see more, & their twitter page is here. ). I had questions on how to read the cases. I measure the chance I had to ask questions to them as long-distance tools made those discussions possible. & I wanted to write a blog post about astrology and plants, which is a very new subject for me.

During the year of writing my master's dissertation on William Turner's *New Herball* (see more here), I came across a very intriguing subject on how to cultivate plants, grow plants and how

to pick flowers, mushrooms and herbs at the right moment for the best efficiency as parts of the *pharmacopoeia*. Herbalism during the Renaissance was much inspired by the traditions of Antiquity and the Middle Ages (see Jerry Stannard's books). Bodies, souls and their connection with earth formed a cycle which we could understand *via* two approaches: rational approach and magical approach. In 2018, I found many information reading the books by **Paola Zambelli** « *Astrology and magic from the Medieval Latin and Islamic World to Renaissance Europe: theories and approaches* », and by **A. Delatte** « *Herbarius, Recherches sur le cérémonial usité chez les anciens pour la cueillette des simples et des plantes magiques* » (see the document here).



Dessin de la scala naturæ par Didacus Valades, *Rhetorica Christiana* (1579). Didacus Valades (Diego Valades) — *Rhetorica Christiana*, via Getty Research . It is taken from *Retorica Christiana*, published by Diego Valdes (signed as F. Didacus in the bottom left) in 1579. Public domain, Wikipedia

### Picking a plant

Picking a plant in an outdoor situation was both a practical and a cultural gesture corresponding to several parameters which were often defined as such:

- Picking a plant according to the weather forecast AND seasonal conditions
- Picking a plant according to its value in the *scala naturæ* and its symbolic meaning and/or sympathies with body parts

- Extraction or removal (french: *extirpation*) of the plant were subjected to religious auspices<sup>1</sup>
- The action of taking a plant from the earth where it grew should be in accordance with cultural & ritual manifestations. Both cult and ritual were different phases of a same belief.
- The plant was subjected to both earth influence and celestial influences. Magical practices were then appropriate to interfere in this system to shape the natural forces (french: *forces naturelles*), with the uses of verbal actions, incantations, ritual chanting, cantillation, ritual observances and sacrifices, circles drawn on the ground, fumigations, summoning, etc.<sup>2</sup>
- Plants were related to the earth and the human beings through various conceptions and beliefs, forming the ancient and traditional natural philosophy: plants were part of a circle of sympathy/antipathy with celestial heavenly bodies, stars, spheres, orbs, of the cosmological world.
- Choosing the right moment to pick a plant was very important (see the different criterias above).
- Picking a plant according to its correspondence with a body part and in this case, in sympathy with the related heavenly bodies and zodiac signs.

### **Astrological botany**

**Astrological botany** developed in tradition & in continuity or in contradiction and discontinuity with the old astrology practice. Rituals evolved from the twilight of polytheist beliefs, to the dawn of monotheist cults such as Christianity. However, something never changed: **astrological botany was maintained for one purpose, a medicinal purpose.** This “*utilitarian*” value of plants kept the discipline under the Aristotelian natural philosophy paradigm until it was replaced by a Christian worldview of natural beings. **For astrologers and natural philosophers, plants carried a symbolic meaning which they took for natural traits of the plants.** Plants were influenced by the positions of celestial heavenly bodies such as planets, the sun, the moon and stars. Astrological botany was linked to a broader use of astrology applied to our bodies: medical astrology or astrological medicine. England was the place where this knowledge developed and was most renown. As a matter of fact, Nicholas Culpeper was one of the most famous astrological and medical practitioners in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The links between herbalism, medicine and astrology were far more intrinsically woven and intertwined than one could think.

### **Nowadays**

Nowadays, in our society, beliefs remain strong in the astrological domain. I stumbled upon a picture on Facebook, naming the **zodiac signs** according to plants : *Garden of Twelve Zodiac Signs* (find it here). This mix of the signatures doctrine, paracelsian doctrine, of magical superstitions, of old traditions and rituals from the Buddhist and Hinduist religions and of the western astrological zodiac signs patterns, **provide evidence of the strength and potency « in act » of those practices.**



©Photo. R.M.N. / R.-G. Ojž da – The anatomical-astrological human – Limbourg brothers – public domain, wikipedia

To see more about the harmonious world thought and intellectualized by Renaissance practitioners, physicians, mathematicians, astrologers or naturalists you can read this website « Botanical Mind ». It provides information on the *“intrinsic connection between geometry, music and the earthly and astral realms”*<sup>3</sup>.

I found various sources linked to astrological botany. One of them is **Bartholomew Carrichter's Herbal (Kreutterbuch)** (Germany, 1673) where plants are arranged according to zodiac signs, to hours of the day, and to planetary positions.

Looking at the Casebooks Project, I found the **NOTE 10253**<sup>4</sup>, which Professor Lauren Kassell and her team kindly explained to me. English (mixed with latin) manuscript notes of Napier seem very hard to decipher and to read for me, as my mother tongue is the french language.

*« Forman and Napier privileged a form of astrology that depended on the moment of the encounter, known as horary astrology. They duly noted the date and time of most of their consultations. »*<sup>5</sup>

**The question is: how can we explain the link between astrology, medicine and herbalism ?** Many historians have tried to suggest very good hypotheses (see books by G. Debus, or *Natural Particulars* by A. Grafton and Nancy G. Siraisi for examples) ; and « holistic » medicine is one of the answers to understand the Renaissance practitioners. As this question is an old debate, planting its roots in the Ancient texts, I am trying **to consider the problem through the plant as an object of knowledge (object of know-how, of expertise, conveying**

**information on social behaviors, cultural appropriations, food consumption and medical use).**

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