



CULPEPER'S MEDICINE

A PRACTICE OF WESTERN HOLISTIC MEDICINE

NEW EDITION

SINGING
DRAGON 

GRAEME TOBYN

Culpeper's Medicine

of related interest

Principles of Chinese Herbal Medicine

What it is, how it works, and what it can do for you

John Hicks

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A Practice of Western
Holistic Medicine

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Notice

The practical information in this book on dietary and herbal approaches to the treatment of disease is intended for the interested herbalist or other medical practitioner. In addition to any such practical application, I hope that the topics discussed will be of much interest to the general reader.

It is not at all the purpose of this book to replace the guidance of medical practitioners and anyone who believes he or she is ill should seek their professional advice. The use of any information presented in this book should be undertaken only with their cooperation.

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This book is dedicated to my parents, Bill and Margaret.



NICHOLAS CULPEPER.

*View in this face, whom Heaven snatcht from hence,
Our Physicall and Starrie Influence;
Had not Great Culpeper such order tooke,
In spight of Fate to Live still in this Booke.*

PART III

As Above, So Below Astrology, Medicine and Hermetic Philosophy

The application of astrology to medicine to which Culpeper was heir arose from a co-operation of Greek and Egyptian scientific minds in Hellenistic Egypt after the time of Alexander the Great. It is true that astrological lore had been transmitted from its birthplace in ancient Babylon to Greece around the end of the 5th century BC, for ‘Berosus was said to have settled on the island of Cos, the home of Hippocratic medicine, and astrology early found its way into the Hippocratic corpus of medical writings.’¹ But the full development of astrological medicine took place in Egypt. It was called *Iatromathematica* by the Greeks.

Many early works form a compendium of this astrological medicine, supposedly written by a priest named Petosiris for a fictitious King Nechepso² with divine guidance from Asclepius, the Greek god of medicine.³ In reverence for the greatness and antiquity of Egyptian medicine, Asclepius was identified with the Egyptian pharaoh-priest Imhotep of the 4th millennium BC.⁴ However, the principal text in

antiquity on the subject of astrological medicine was attributed to that other divine source of revelation, the Egyptian Hermes Trismegistos or 'thrice-greatest' Hermes. He, an all-wise Egyptian priest, philosopher and law-giver (the three aspects of his greatness⁵), was also the Egyptian god Thoth (the god of mental disciplines) in another guise. The text bearing his name was the *Iatromathematica of Hermes Trismegistos to Ammon the Egyptian* of the 2nd century BC.⁶ The fact that a version of this short text was included in the second edition of Culpeper's *Astrological Judgement of Diseases* in 1655, and that Lilly published a version of his own in his *Christian Astrology* eight years before this, indicates the close and unbroken connection between 17th-century medical astrology and the first development of iatromathematica.

The Greeks believed that the Babylonians worshipped the Sun, Moon and planets, and took from them the notion that the movements of the heavenly bodies bore a relation to human existence. They adopted, conceptualized and rationalized the art of astrology and incorporated it into their science and philosophy. This was especially true of the Stoics who believed that the course of human existence followed and was determined by the movements of the heavenly bodies in the cosmos. In Hellenistic Egypt in the first centuries AD, when disaffection with rational Greek philosophy became apparent, and when mystery cults of all sorts, including Christian gnosticism, began to flourish in the Roman Empire, a new philosophy started to emerge, a consensus of Greek strands of thought but with a religious aspect. Plato's philosophy had taught that the human being possessed an immortal soul within the physical body and that the mundane world this body inhabited was but a shadow of the real nature of the cosmos found in the metaphysical realm of images and ideas of which the soul had knowledge. This transcendent reality, coupled to late Stoic philosophy with its emphasis on the relationship between human life and the stars, and in Egypt to the indigenous religious and magical beliefs, thus produced there a doctrine supposedly drawn from the ancient teachings and wisdom of Hermes Trismegistos.

Hermetic philosophy, as Culpeper explained it,⁷ posited three connected worlds, the elementary, celestial and intellectual, within the unity of the cosmos. The elementary world is that of mundane existence, occupied by objects and life forms which are composed of the four elements in their varying proportions. This is the 'sublunary'

world comprising everything on Earth beneath the orbit of the Moon. Above the elementary world lies the celestial world of the Sun, Moon, planets and stars. This realm was said to rule over the lower elementary realm, its planetary bodies representing active and ever-changing forces operating on passive matter to form, shape and alter it. Culpeper explains it thus:

Consider that all time is measured out by motion and that the original of all motion is in the heavens, for it is the motion of the Sun which causeth day and night, Summer, Winter, Spring and Harvest. From which conversation of times and years all changes proceed, both heat and cold, dryness and moisture. By which four is caused life and death, generation and putrefaction, increase and decrease of elementary things... The Sun gives a vital seed and stirs up all to motion and action, quickens and defends what it hath quickened. The Moon subministers moisture to preserve what the Sun hath generated from the scorching heat which is caused by motion. Both Sun and Moon make use of the other five planets [even as the Heart and Brain make use of the liver, spleen, gall &c in the Body of Man] for the effecting and varying things below, and tempering them diverse ways according to their several motions, else all the things generated in the elementary world would be of one nature and quality and then the world could not subsist. For Man, having all qualities in him, cannot subsist without any one of them.⁸

The celestial bodies, existing externally because they are formed not from the four elements but from a fifth element, which Aristotle called Aether, alter by their constant movement and interaction in the heavens the elementary bodies below, like 'a carpenter, when he hews a timber log, the timber log must needs change form according as 'tis hewed, but the carpenter himself changeth not'.⁹ This close affinity of the elementary and celestial worlds furnishes what Culpeper called the 'excellent and true' motto of Hermes Trismegistos, namely 'as above, so below',¹⁰ and constitutes the cosmic sympathy between human beings and the stars which the art of astrology makes known.

The third realm, the intellectual world, contains the higher truths and knowledge of the oneness of all creation. It is the realm of Plato's Ideas and Images and of the Christian God. The rational human soul

has an inkling of this world but the faculty must be developed. As Culpeper says in his Christian interpretation, Man is:

capable of the intellectual world, as having an epitomy of that in himself, whereby he knows that there is a God and that God made this world and governeth it now he hath made it; that there are angels, and that he hath an immortal spirit in himself, which causeth him to hope and expect immortality.¹¹

As the celestial world is a cause of effects in the elementary world over which it rules, so the intellectual world governs the celestial by having its higher truths mirrored in the 'harmony of the spheres'. Consequently the human rational soul, not by necessity subject to the same celestial effects as the elements which compose the human body, is free to act with or resist them when it has crossed from ignorance to wisdom for 'the influence of the stars reacheth not to the mind or rational part of man, because it is an epitome of the intellectual world which is superior to them'.¹² Thus it is said that wise persons rule their stars (because they are aware of higher truths) while the fool (who is unenlightened and remains in ignorance) obeys them. In this sense, the right use of astrology is dependent on the spiritual awareness of the practitioner and a knowledge of the intellectual world is something a human must aspire to and work diligently towards over the years, and 'happy, yea, thrice happy, is he that attains it'. In pursuit of this aspiration, the spiritual purpose of right living, in order to extend the lifespan, is to gain a true understanding of the intellectual world and to 'attain the divine mysteries in philosophy'. Moreover, the attainment of wisdom by contemplation would necessarily be bound together with 'a quiet, serene body in respect of health'. On the other hand, says Culpeper:

intemperancy not only causeth both a short and sickly life here, but also by crudities chokes the intellectual and angelical part of man, whereby his brains are made so muddy, that he is pro tempore made incapable of the understanding of what Great things God...hath left for him to know and study after.¹³

The three worlds of Hermetic philosophy thus form one undivided whole. Culpeper speaks of a 'trinity in the deity' (the Father, Son and Holy Spirit) and of a 'unity in the godhead' in his works, meaning a unity of the three worlds 'and a dependency between them, and not that God

made the Creation to hang together like ropes of sand'. He felt that God, as the first cause of things, set in motion the planets to act as natural second causes of things below in the elementary world. 'The most high Creator of all things has given commission to Nature to be princess both over the celestial and terrestrial worlds.'¹⁴ He sees the number 3 as 'a most powerful number, a number of perfection' and states that everything in the vegetable and mineral world consists of 3 principles, namely sulphur, mercury and salt. A similar trinity is found in the 3 essences of body, soul and spirit which compose the human being.¹⁵

The human body is thus composed of the four elements, it contains a microcosmic Sun, Moon and planets which respond to their celestial counterparts, and it houses a rational soul that is nurtured by contemplation of the intellectual world. The human being is thus the epitome in miniature (or microcosm) of a fully alive cosmos (or macrocosm).