

The Body as Medicine: Human Ingredients in Seventeenth Century England

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Introduction & Background

- The use of human ingredients in medicinal remedies has a long history, but has been largely erased
- It has been referred to as 'medical cannibalism' or 'corpse medicine' but many of the ingredients came from living donors
- Much attention has been on the practice and recommendations of trained physicians but little study on the theories motivating the use of human ingredients
- Along with humoral theory, it was also understood that vital spirits were present the body and essential for maintaining good health
- These vital spirits could be harnessed and transferred from one person to another to restore health and vitality
- The human ingredients used included skull, mummy, blood, breast milk, urine, spittle, placenta, sweat, fat, and many more
- Each human ingredient had its own properties and uses in medicinal remedies
- Human ingredients were used by trained practitioners and lay people to try and restore good health

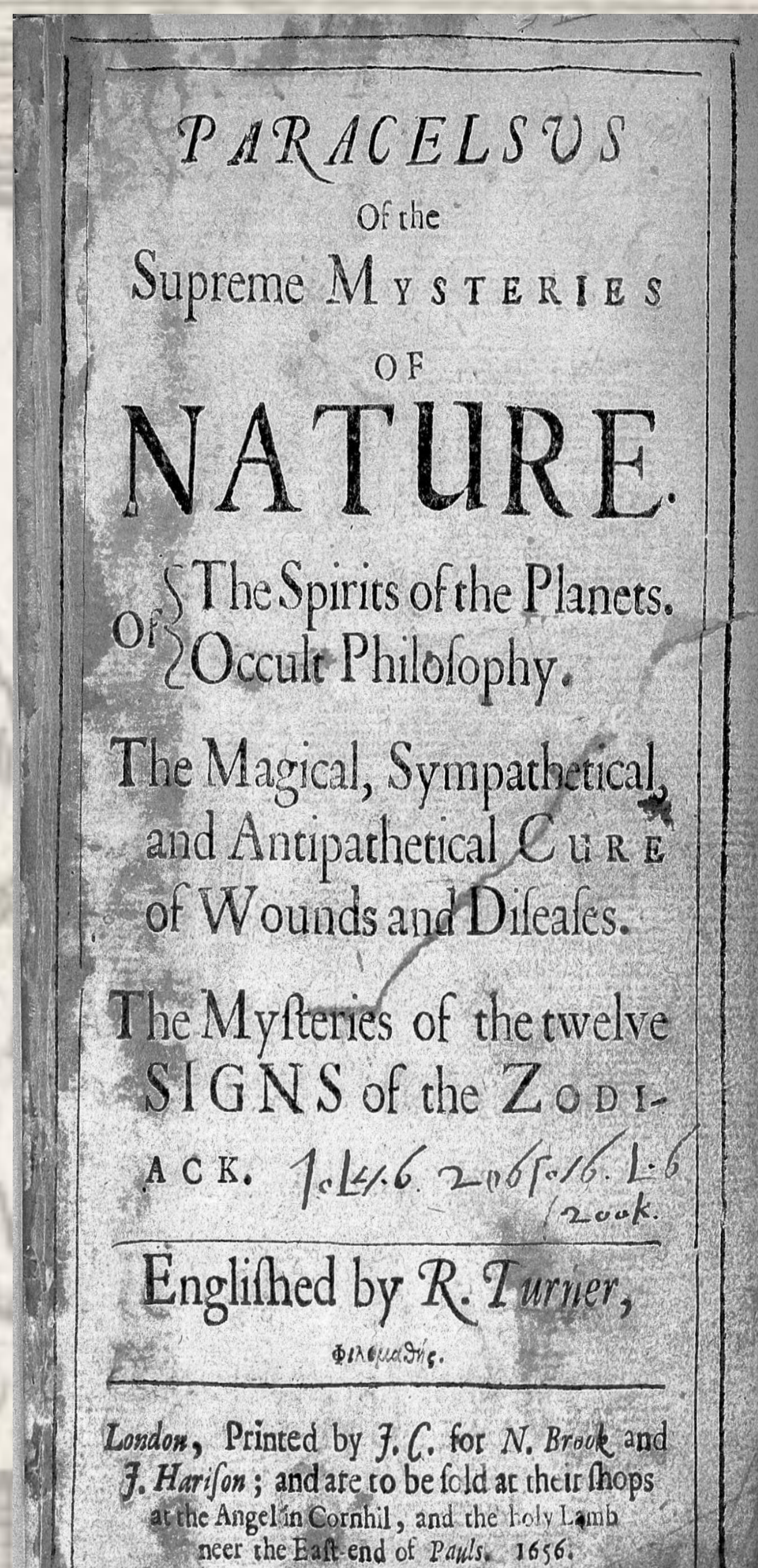


Figure 1. Paracelsus Of the Supreme Mysteries of Nature. Of The Spirits of the Planets. [Of] Occult Philosophy. The Magical, Sympathetical, and Antipathetical Cure of Wounds and Diseases. The Mysteries of the twelve Signs of the Zodiac / Englished by R. Turner

Manuscript Collections

Ingredient	Occurrence in Recipes	Percentage of Total Human Ingredients
Urine	60	30.00%
Breast Milk	59	29.50%
Skull	26	13.00%
Mummy	10	5.00%
Spittle	10	5.00%
Placenta	8	4.00%
Blood	5	2.50%
Hair	4	2.00%
Bones (not skull)	3	1.50%
Usnea	3	1.50%
Umbilical Cord	1	0.50%
Sweat	1	0.50%
Magentic	1	0.50%

Table 2: This table shows the number of times each individual ingredient was listed in the recipes, as well as the percentage of each individual type ingredient was used of the total human ingredients from the manuscript collections



Figure 2. Basilica chymica, continens philosophicam propria laborum experientia confirmatam descriptionem et usum remediocorum chymicorum selectissimorum & lumine gratiae & naturae desumptorum. In fine additus est ejusdem autoris tractatus novus de signaturis rerum internis / [Oswald Croll]

Sources & Methodology

- A sample of 30 popular printed recipe collections from the Seventeenth Century were analysed for how many total medicinal remedies were included and how many of those remedies contained human ingredients
- The percentage of each individual type ingredient used out of the total human ingredients was determined
- The same process was repeated for a sampling of 30 personal manuscript collections from the Seventeenth Century

Human Ingredients found in Popular Printed Collections

Ingredient	Occurrence in Recipes	Percentage of Total Human Ingredients
Breast Milk	127	30.60%
Urine	121	29.16%
Skull	53	12.77%
Mummy	48	11.57%
Spittle	23	5.54%
Blood	8	1.93%
Umbilical Cord	6	1.45%
Bones (not skull)	5	1.20%
Usnea (Skull Moss)	5	1.20%
Placenta/Afterbirth	5	1.20%
Faeces	4	0.96%
Fat	3	0.72%
Menstrual Blood	3	0.72%
Finger Nails	2	0.48%
Snot	2	0.48%
Hair	1	0.24%
Ear Wax	1	0.24%
Gall Stone	1	0.24%

Table 1: This table shows the number of times each individual ingredient was listed in the recipes, as well as the percentage of each individual type ingredient was used of the total human ingredients from popular printed collections



Figure . Credit: Anatomy of Dr Tulp, by Rembrandt. Wellcome Collection.

Conclusions

- The two most commonly used human ingredients based on the analysis of the popular printed recipes books and manuscript collections were breast milk and urine
- This contradicts the emphasis typically placed on the ingredients coming from a deceased donor
- The use of human ingredients in recipe collections published and produced for lay people is further support that early modern people had general understanding of medical theories about how the body worked
- While this practice may seem extreme with our modern understanding of medicine, we only need to look to the Covid19 pandemic to see the measures that people will go to try and prevent and treat disease when faced with unprecedented threats to their health