

The Practical Herbalist -- Witches

Modern medicine owes some thanks to the wise women healers of old. Many of these women belonged to the wiccan religion, many did not. Often these European women were the only medical care in many villages. Educated and trained physicians often only treated people of the upper classes. The peasants had to turn to the folk remedies of the local wise woman. These women had a very tough history. Many were assumed to be using magic and shunned from the community, and yet these women were the first people that were called upon when there was illness, a birth, or if someone wanted to buy a love charm or put a hex on someone. It is these women, set apart from their communities, feared and misunderstood, that gave rise to the popular image of a witch.

These wise women relied on herbal knowledge passed down from others and also they learned from the world around them. They observed how eating various plants affected people and animals. During the middle ages they were more scientific in their approach to medicine than the medical science of their time.

The medical establishment in Europe often was under the control of the christian churches. It was particularly embarrassing when the people received better care from the heathen wise women than the educated church sanctioned physicians. The wise women healers had a distinct advantages over their male educated competition. The women tended to let people rest and heal and use mild herbs to comfort a patient rather than the often toxic or heroic measures of the physicians. More importantly in the times before the understanding of germ theory, wise women tended to wash their hands between patients, as part of the routine of preparing foods and medicines. Physicians regularly did post mortem exams of their patients, and had no reason to wash between patients. Unknowingly these physicians often transmitted more disease than they cured.

The herbal knowledge of the wise women is fractured and much of it is lost. The customs of the day were that women, especially peasant women were not allowed to learn to read and write. As these women were hunted down and killed. Their oral knowledge was lost at an alarming rate. During the time of the 14th through the 17th century, thousands of women were executed as witches. The charge was often a simple matter of healing a patient, which meant since she wasn't a trained physician she therefore did not have the knowledge to heal and she therefore must have used magic and is therefore a witch.

Some of the knowledge did survive. A German priest, and scientist by the name of Hieronymus Bock (1498-1554) (I am not sure if I am related) was one of a few educated men who systematically wrote down and preserved what herbal knowledge he could get from the wise women of his day. Some of our modern medicines are derived from various plants that were known to the wise women. These medications are used for essentially the same things that the wise women were using them for hundreds of years ago. In many cases the modern physicians are using the tools of a medical system that was oppressed, but fortunately not totally destroyed.

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