The Magic of the Mandrake

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Abstract
Nothing surpasses the mandrake as history's most magical plant. Latin name *Mandragora,* its powerful reputation in the fields of both medicine and magic has inspired an equal measure of fear and reverence throughout history, giving rise to the formidable and enduring mythology which has followed it to the present day. This article takes the form of a historiographic essay exploring some of the legends of the mandrake in England and Western Europe. It will reveal its power, both perceived and proven, in medicine and in magic, and look at the ways in which it was used, revealing not only the myth but also the science behind mandrake beliefs, and suggesting how the effects of the chemical make-up of the plant may have contributed to its mystical reputation. It will explore the history of this plant and show how the belief that it was, or that it housed, a powerful spirit, led to it being featured in many medieval and early modern charms and medicinal recipes. This article will contribute to a deeper understanding not only of the sources of the beliefs that surrounded the mandrake plant, but what it was that, whilst arousing much anxiety, ensured its inclusion within medieval and early modern magical systems. Considered by some merely as a mythical invention created to inject drama into such fictional stories as Harry Potter, this article will introduce the mandrake as a very real wild plant, with some of its species currently on the critically endangered list, and in doing so will contribute to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of not only its history but also its value as a powerful magical ally.

Keywords
Mandrake, Magic, Medicine, Mythology, Myth, Plant, Root, Charm

Introduction

'What with loathsome smells,
And shrieks like mandrakes torn out of the earth,
That living mortals, hearing them run mad…….'

Romeo and Juliet Act IV, Sc.
(Dafni et al. 2021, 2; Carter 2003, 146).

Such is the unrivalled mythical legacy of the mandrake plant that it holds the singular distinction of being the subject of numerous works, including several books, solely dedicated to it. At a time when the distinction between medicine and magic was less clear than today this plant perfectly straddled that ill-defined divide and its history speaks to the commonalities that existed between these two supposedly extraneous fields. It is in this way that this historiography situates the mandrake firmly within the contextual framework of a bygone era where even university-trained medical doctors often employed charms and astrology as part of their daily practice (S.H. Wright and F. Klassen 2002, 104). Popular remedies both to cure illness and to protect from evil, often harnessed the magical virtues of plants and incorporated such considerations as planetary hours and lunar phases to govern their harvest.

Professor Owen Davies, a leading historian known for his expertise in the history of magic, witchcraft and popular medicine in England, further developed the study of magic to include the magical uses of herbs and plants. His research built on previous studies by taking a closer look at the finer details and methods of popular magic, and exploring the magic offered by service magicians including the use of herbs and other plants, chosen for their astrological aspects as medicinal cures or for talismanic protection (Davies 2007). He followed this in 2009 by publishing the first work dedicated to the subject of the instructional books of magic known as grimoires (Davies 2010). His research reveals the practices and beliefs behind these magical systems and explains how the theory developed during the medieval period divided magic between the generally accepted natural magic and theologically condemned demonic magic. Natural magic was defined as that which harnessed the virtues which God has imbued into plants as well as animals and stones. These virtues were activated by cosmic forces which could be exploited by those in possession of the pertinent grimoiric knowledge (Davies 2010, 22). The task of research into the inclusion of mandrakes and other plants within the grimoires became significantly easier in 2023 when David Rankine published his two volume *Encyclopaedia of Grimoires*. This work offers an invaluable resource for any general study of magic, and lists every magical text which contains reference to mandrakes as well as other herbs and plants (Rankine 2023).

Ancient and Classical Traditions

The myths and legends which surrounded the mandrake plant were inspired by influences from remote antiquity, scripture and beyond. One of the earliest examples of mandrake mythology is referred to as King Solomon's ring, an old tradition passed down through writings attributed to Hermes Trismegistus. The legend speaks of a ring which contained mandrake root that was used by the King for protection against demons, hence the Armenian and Arabic name for the plant of 'The Tree of Solomon' (Dafni et al. 2021, 19). Another legend which associating the mandrake with fertility can be traced back to the bible; chapter 30 of the Book of Genesis recounts the tale of Leah being

asked by her childless sister Rachel for the loan of the mandrake roots which her son had gathered from the fields, to help her conceive. This legend endured into the sixteenth century when John Gerard's 1597 *Herball* alluded to the mandrakes presence in the Bible via this Genesis story and its subsequent reputation as an aid to fertility (Gerard 1990, 85-86).

Chief amongst mandrake myths concerned the ceremonies necessary to accompany the harvesting of the root. The mandrake plant serves as an example of the evolution and adaption of earlier beliefs in the virtues of plants in how it came to be seen as actually housing a spirit rather than simply being under the influence of cosmic forces. According to the legend the mandrake spirit would, upon the uprooting of the plant, scream at a volume sufficient to cause immediate death to anyone who heard it. It was therefore recommended that people tie a dog to the root to unearth it. The dog would then die and spare the human harvester (Carter 2003, 145). One of the early sources for this particular myth can be found within translations of the *Pseudo-Apuleius* (*Herbarium Apulei*), a late antique medical text from the fourth century CE (Kinney, 2022, 3). One of these translations includes illustrations of this procedure which are likely to have been copied from manuscripts dating from the first century B.C.E. (see figure 1). The text warns of the perils of the mandrake harvest, recommending "[…] when thou seest its hands and feet, then tie thou it up. Then take the other end and tie it to a dogs neck, so that the hound be hungry; next cast meat before him, so that he may not reach it, except he jerk up the wort with him" (Arber 1912, 36). This aspect of mandrake mythology features in classical history. First century CE Roman-Jewish historian Flavius Josephus recommended this method, adding that the plant would not "yield itself to be taken quietly until the urine of a woman or blood be poured on it." The legend concerning the use of dog emerged again in sixth century Iran (Dafni et al. 2021, 16; Davies and Matteoni 2017, 59; C.J.S 1968, 89). Theophrastus (c. 371- c. 287 BCE), Greek philosopher and successor to Aristotle at the Peripatetic school in Athens, gave details of these ceremonies in his ten volume *History of Plants,* recommending that root diggers should anoint exposed parts of their bodies, ensure the wind was behind them to avoid the odours, dig only by night, and added that they "must make three circles around the plant with a sword and dig looking towards the west. Another person must dance about in a circle and pronounce a great many aphrodisiac formulas" (Randolph 1905, 489).

Figure 1.
Uprooting a mandrake using a dog, Pseudo-Apuleius. Harley MS 1585, folio 57R.
Public domain image, via Picryl (https://picryl.com).

The famous five-volume encyclopaedia of herbal medicine entitled *De Materia Medica* by Greek Physician Pedanius Dioscorides (40-90 AD) became one of the seminal works of medical botany. Widely regarded as 'the father of pharmacognosy,' Dioscorides was the first to use the Greek word *anaesthesia* meaning insensitivity, in relation to mandrake, a term that was not used again until it was reintroduced in the nineteenth-century (Osbaldeston and Wood 2000, xxxiv). His promotion of mandrake's use as an effective anaesthetic has been acknowledged in more recent scholarship. Martha Mion used her article in the 2017 *Journal of Anaesthesia History* to argue its role as *the* anaesthetic of antiquity, pointing out that, despite its potential as a powerful poison, its efficacy as both a pain killer and an aid to sleep meant that the surgeons and physicians of ancient civilizations valued mandrake as an essential ingredient for any narcotic preparation (Mion 2017, 133). The mandrake's fame spread across northern and central Europe, according to H. F. Clark, "on the heels of returning Crusaders" (Clark 1962, 261).

Medieval and Renaissance Traditions

The mandrake's medicinal value had been recognised from an early point in history and had, by the Middle Ages, ensured the plant was a well-respected as a cure-all, and yet its resemblance to human form and the various related myths which surrounded the plant inspired both awe and fear, leading to beliefs which included that of a spirit which resided in the root. Late eleventh-twelfth century Benedictine abbess Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179) wrote in *Physica*, her classic work on health and healing, of her belief that the mandrake's human-like appearance was the result of the influence of the devil (Dafni et al. 2021, 14-15).

The European parallel of the belief in a spirit residing within the mandrake root, and its powers to increase wealth and good fortune is illustrated by the trial records of Joan of Arc. In

January 1431 the possession of such a root was amongst the accusations against her at her trial for heresy carried out by a pro-English church court under the canon law procedure known as inquisition (Hobbins 2005, 13-15). Article 7 accused Joan of sometimes "carrying a mandrake in her bosom, hoping thereby to have good luck with money and temporal possessions, and claiming that mandrake like this has potency and effect." Asked what she had done with her mandrake, Joan claimed that she "does not nor ever did have a mandrake," and that although she had "heard that there is one near her village," that she "had never seen it" and had also "heard that it is a dangerous thing to keep." Asked where this mandrake was, Joan replied that she had "heard that it is near the tree" and that "a hazel grows on top of the mandrake." Asked what she had heard the mandrake was good for, Joan stated that she "has heard that it attracts money," but that she "does not believe it," as her voices had never "told her anything about this" (Hobbins 2005, 146-147). The account serves less as evidence of Joan's possession of a mandrake and more about the authorities attempts to lead her to make self-incriminatory statements, but what it also offers is evidence of the perception and beliefs surrounding mandrake during the early modern period, both by the courts and by general population across Europe.

As with the other herbs and plants, its presence within medieval grimoires offers primary evidence of the channels by which the mystical reputation of the mandrake plant was perpetuated. The thirteenth century *Picatrix* can be reasonably argued to be one source of much mandrake mythology, as it was included in several of its recipes alongside other ingredients such as cannabis, opium and datura. The principles of astral-magic within the *Picatrix* required all ingredients to be selected with due consideration being given to the governing planet appropriate to the situation being addressed, even warning of a recipe's poisonous nature in order to alert users to its potential use against their foes (Dan Attrell and Porreca 2019, 27-30). The *Picatrix* quoted from the pseudo-Aristotelian *Book of Antimaquis'* recipe for four stones, which were claimed to "have powerful and wonderous effects upon spirits" (Dan Attrell and Porreca 2019, 189). One of these stones was referred to as Helemetiz, said to be useful to ward off rain and snow it included mandrake and chalk amongst its ingredients as well as hellebore and white wolfsbane. Once the stone had been created one simply raised it towards the heavens in the right hand. Although the author warns of the lethally poisonous nature of the recipe, he also helpfully included an antidote, although this surprisingly also contained mandrake seeds (Dan Attrell and Porreca 2019, 190-192). The *Picatrix* also used mandrake seeds in a recipe to "ensure a man has no desire for a woman," (Dan Attrell and Porreca 2019, 191) achieved by filling a wax image with the recipe's mixture. Conversely it also used mandrake seeds in recipes for incense, suggesting combining them with chicken, rabbit, gazelle, leopard, and human blood, and claimed that you would see "great wonders" if you were successful in suffumigating a person with this mixture (Dan Attrell and Porreca 2019, 198-199). The text however, fell short of providing any further detail concerning the nature of these great wonders. In order to put "all of the spirits of the body to sleep," the *Picatrix* recommended seven recipes, whilst also warning that they are "thought to be deadly" (Dan Attrell and Porreca 2019, 192). Amongst these is one which contained mandrake seeds to be given as food or drink (Dan Attrell and Porreca 2019, 202). Among the many other uses that the *Picatrix* ascribed to mandrake was for rendering of a person mute, deaf, or asleep. It recommended mandrake as a suffumigation of Saturn and advised that it could also be used to guard those making the suffumigations from harm. The perception of Saturn as a malefic planet can be traced back to ancient astrological cosmologies and it was this that influenced its assignment as the ruler over such stupefying plants as opium and mandrake (D. Attrell 2020, 192-193). The *Picatrix* also included a secret recipe, "not to be revealed to any wicked man," to

render someone "intoxicated and senseless," and another to enable someone to perform "many wonders" by burying a mandrake root with some watermelon seeds. A further recipe provided details of how to use mandrake make a suffumigation to catch birds sleeping in trees, alongside a helpful tip urging the practitioner to plug his nostrils with silk to prevent him from suffumigating himself (Dan Attrell and Porreca 2019, 208-269). Aside from the *Picatrix* there are a variety of references to mandrakes in other grimoires, many referring to their relationship with animals. The mid-fourteenth century anthology known as the *Book of Secrets of Albertus Magnus* included the juice of mandrake along with wild teasel in its recipe to make a bitch "be great with a young one" (Best, and Brightman, 2004, 47).

Historical herbals also offer a source of evidence for the utilisation of mandrakes as well as other plants, in a magical context occasionally offering insight into the related supernatural influences believed to have imbued them with their powers. Ceremonies and charms associated with the gathering and administering of herbs, although often concealed beneath Christian rites, were argued, by Eleanor Sinclair Rohde, to be traceable back to pre-Christian heathen religions (Sinclair Rohde 1971, 2-3). In her chronological exploration of herbals through the ages Rohde highlighted how some author's belief in the divine source of the virtues of herbs was evident in early texts, and identified the herbals in which the properties and powers of plants were contextualised as mystical, being prescribed for use as protective amulets as well as medicinal cures (Sinclair Rohde 1971,63-73). This theme was further developed by Agnes Arber in 1912, who included a chapter on the ancient astro-magical concept of signatures promoted by philosophers such as Paracelsus (1493-1541) which suggested that God gave all plants divinely imprinted indicators of their use in their physical appearance (Arber 1912,204-220; Carter 2003, 146). The curative virtues of a plant could therefore be inferred from its physical appearance. The mandrake root's anthropomorphic form made it a model representation of this doctrine. It also helps to explain its value in homeopathic and sympathetic magic as well as the enduring belief in its power as a fertility charm (Dafni et al. 2021, 13). Arber made no attempt to conceal her disdain for such 'superstitions' whilst at the same time conceding that the corpus of herbals included many references to such magical philosophy. It is via the above sources alongside various manuscript evidence that the story of the mandrake can be traced.

Early English herbals record the lore from the very furthest reaches of the ancient past rather than that of the period in which they were written, thereby offering a link back to the pre-modern influences. Herbals offer a rich source of evidence of long entrenched supernatural ideas regarding many herbs including mandrakes (Sinclair Rohde 1971, 2). A reflection of these early ideas survived, according to Eleanour Sinclair Rhode, into the living memory of remote parts of the country. (Sinclair Rohde 1971, 2). It is therefore no surprise to come across evidence for these same ideas in the later herbals. Despite the fact that their writers sometimes dismissed the supernatural beliefs expressed by their contemporaries, this nonetheless demonstrated their awareness of the plant's long and mystical history and is testimony to the power and endurance of the mandrake legend. The anonymous author of a book published in 1737 entitled *A Critical Dissertation on the Mandrake of the Antients; with Some Observations on the Egyptian, Grecian and Roman Literature, Botany and Medicine* indicated that he had been set the task of researching the ancient sources of the mandrake legends, and he stated that "many absurd and ridiculous opinions have been advanced at different times relating to this plant," further adding that little was currently know about the true "nature and species of the plant" (Anonymous 1737, 4-5). With the clear intention of correcting this state of affairs by gathering sufficient related sources to influence an appropriate shift in scholarship, this

writer framed his research findings in the form of a letter to the Fellow of the College of Physicians. He plotted the literary history of the mandrake plant from the earliest written reference in Genesis (30:14) through Theophrastus (AD 371 -287), Dioscorides (AD 40-90) to Pliny (AD 23/24-79) and recognised Dioscorides' *De Materia Medica* as the source that promoted the healing virtues of the mandrake, which was referred to by all subsequent botanical writers (Anonymous 1737, 25).

Early Modern Traditions

Religious turmoil during the fifteenth sixteenth and seventeenth centuries caused fear of the devil to be amplified, and this coincided with the height of the mandrake myth (Clark 1962, 268). The writings of William Shakespeare occasionally alluded to the mandrake plant in plays such as *Romeo and Juliet, Othello, Antony and Cleopatra, Macbeth* and *Henry IV* and *VI* (Dafni et al. 2021, 2). Shakespeare's work shows a high level of accuracy in relation to mandrakes, revealing a depth of knowledge relating to the plant and its associated legends. The presence of the mandrake within his writings illustrates one of the ways in which its mystical reputation was enhanced and perpetuated in early modern society via the exposure to the large audiences of these popular productions. It can therefore be argued that its inclusion within his works reveals not only Shakespeare's own knowledge of the plant's reputation but also his awareness of a level of familiarity amongst his audience, suggesting that such beliefs formed part of the popular common lore of the period.

One story which became imbedded in contemporary folklore concerned the theory that mandrake plants were germinated from the sperm of a hanged man. Eliade (1972, 224) states "The Romanians have no knowledge of the legend that the mandragora springs from the semen of a hanged man (northern and Germanic Europe)" (see also Zarcone 2005, 115-129). This idea had become widespread within the literature of early modern Europe by the seventeenth century (Davies and Matteoni 2017, 59-61). John Gerard (1545-1612) however, who devoted a chapter to the plant in his 1597 *Herball or Generall Historie of Plants*, poured scorn upon such claims, asserting that the plant is "never or very seldom to be found growing naturally but under a gallows where the matter that hath fallen from the dead body hath given it the shape of a man; and the matter of a woman" (Woodward 1990, 85-86). Gerard described such folklore as "ridiculous tales" coming not only from what he labelled as "old wives" but also from "runnagate surgeons or physicke-mongers," accusing them of being "the first broachers of these errors" despite being persons who "sought to make themselves skilful above others." Gerard also claimed personal experience of growing the plant in his London garden (Gerard 1990, 85). Despite his summary dismissal of mandrake mythology, *Gerard's Herbal* is revealing as a source of primary evidence of contemporary lived experience in several ways; confirming not only that mandrakes were being discussed in everyday discourse, but also that they were being actively cultivated in England at the time.

The mandrake's fame in England reflected its wider European reputation. In 1673 the Spanish royal family's physician Tomas de Murillo Y Velarde (1650-1673) published a treatise entitled: *Tratado de raras y peregrinas yervas* (*Treaty on rare and migrating herbs*), in which he stated mandrake roots "look like two legs" and "resemble humans," describing how the "celebrated, mysterious, fruitful and virile mandrake so resembles and symbolises the legs and thighs of a man which indicates and is a certain signal of the clarity of its potent fecundity," and that "experience, which is the mother of the sciences, says that those plants that symbolise and resemble the parts of the human body have a special virtue and efficacy to cure." Murillo went on to declare the doctrine of signatures as a "natural language" and "the voice of God" (Kuffner 2020, 347). He ignored mandrake's demonic associations by endorsing its use as a cure for infertility, a subject of crucial importance to his employers who

were in desperate need of an heir. His book on medicinal plants published in 1673, devoted 45 out of its 126 pages to the uses of mandrake (Kuffner 2020, 335-336).

As we have already seen, these ancient mandrake myths and legends were not universally accepted or believed. William Coles (1626-1662), herbalist or 'simpler', and friend of Dr. William How, founder of the Botanic Garden at Westminster (Boulger and McConnell 2008), criticised what he referred to as the "learned divines"(Coles 1968, 9) for their inaccurate interpretation of scripture, arguing that the myths which referred to mandrakes being sought as fertility charms as a result of their resemblance to the body of a man, were merely a result of mistranslation, and that the correct translation would have indicated that the plants were instead sought for their sweet-smelling flowers. He even took issue on these latter points asserting that mandrake flowers do not have any such smell or form, further asserting that "everyone that knows them will tell" (Coles 1968, 9-10). As Coles was residing in Putney at the time of writing, this comment indicates his awareness of a level a familiarity with the plant at this time and within this context. From the evidence set out above it is reasonable to argue that the mandrake's use as a treatment for fertility by some early modern physicians such as Murillo was clearly influenced by its use in scripture as well as belief in the principles of the doctrine of signatures.

John Gerard also refers to the avoidance of the mandrake's scream by the use of a dog to harvest the plant in his 1597 *Herball, or Generall Historie of Plantes* (Gerard 1990, 85). The legend of the mandrake scream, whilst likely to have been the initially invented as a deterrent to protect valuable wild plants against opportunist, would-be harvesters, has endured from late antiquity right up until the present day (Carter, 2003, 144-145). It was the associated dangers and difficulties involved in acquiring a mandrake which reinforced the plant's magical reputation and consequential its commercial value. The widespread popularity and scarcity of mandrake roots invariably led to high prices which in turn led to the tradition where the human-like resemblance of mandrake roots was artificially enhanced by fashioning them into 'puppets'. In part two of his influential *New Herball* published in 1562, physician and clergyman Dr. William Turner described how the roots "are counterfeited and made like little puppets and mammets, which come to be sold in England in boxes with hair and such form as a man hath" (Chapman, et al. 1995, 437).These were prized as potent talismans and were believed to house a spirit. Some believed possession of such dolls offered protection, or alternatively that they would act as love charms. They were commonly believed to rid their owner of enemies, bless marriages and double every coin placed beneath them. Common amongst this kind of belief was that they could reveal the location of hidden treasure, a preoccupation of early modern society (Dafni et al. 2021, 16). Both Act I and III. Sq. of Shakespeare's *Henry IV Part Two* contain dialogue referring to mandrake's use as a charm (Carter 2003, 146). The plant became so highly prized that counterfeit versions also began to be produced using white bryony, *Bryonia dioica,* which has a similarly shaped root (Carter 2003, 144-145). This story was reflected across other European countries. The work of Botanist physician Otto Brunfels (1488-1534) bears witness to the practice of selling carved bryony roots by unscrupulous people as a substitute for mandrakes. Further evidence of this practice can be found in the work of Frantz Schmidt, who documented the criminal conviction of a Hans Meller in his sixteenth-century diary, noting the fact that Meller had added the creation of selling fake mandrakes made from coloured turnips and hair to his other crimes of theft and cheating at cards (Davies and Matteoni 2017, 59-61). England's museums hold many talismanic mandrake specimens; although sadly Victorian folklorists' lack of systematic record keeping have resulted in most not bearing detailed provenance or dates, limiting

their value as a primary source. They nonetheless serve to illustrate a survival of an ancient tradition where mandrake roots were carved and valued as magical objects.

Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim (1486-1535) explained in his *Three Books of Occult Philosophy* how the theory of connections and affinities within nature meant that certain animals were possessed of what he referred to as "inbred skill" and "medicinal art," instinctively knowing which natural remedies would cure them, and gave, amongst numerous examples, that of bears which, upon "being hurt with mandrakes, escape the danger by eating of Pismires [ants]" (Agrippa of Nettesheim 1651, 40). Agrippa even claimed to have witnessed 'true' mandrakes being created from a brooding hen on eggs, and claimed that magicians ascribe them with "wonderful virtues" (Agrippa of Nettesheim 1651, 73).

As mentioned above, mandrake was commonly included in grimoires as a suffumigation ingredient. Agrippa stated that "certain fumigations are also suitable for many of the stars, inasmuch as air and spirit can exceedingly affect [things] by grasping appropriate celestial gifts under the rays of the stars" (Agrippa of Nettesheim, *1533, E. Purdue* tran. 142). He went on to include an incense recipe which lists mandrake alongside seeds of black poppy, henbane, loadstone and myrrh, to be mixed with the brain of a cat or the blood of a bat (Agrippa of Nettesheim 1651, 73-88). The sixteenth century collection Manuscript V.b 26 at the Folger Shakespear Library in Washington, now referred to as *The Book of Oberon,* also mentions mandrake within a list of suffumigation ingredients, quoting what it claims to be the words of Hermes claiming that it "gathereth together wind and spirits" when mixed with the other herbs "dragnutia" and "capillis dezoara" (Harms, Clark, and Peterson 2021, 157). This same text also included both the powdered root and the oil of the leaves of mandrake within its recipe to enable a person to see and overcome angels, spirits and demons (Harms, Clark, and Peterson 2021, 364). The blatant copying of the work of others that was inherent within the grimoiric tradition is widely recognised by historians, the multiple repetition of identical mandrake recipes in different texts serves as an illustration of this practice. An example is provided in the manuscript Sloane MS 3851, now more commonly referred to as *The Grimoire of Arthur Gauntlet,* likely to have been created between the 1620s and the early 1630s. The manuscript contains a recipe for what it refers to as a perfume, created out of black poppy and hoyseami seeds, mandrake root, Lapis Lazuli stone and the brains or blood of a bat, in a practically identical recipe to the one mentioned above which appeared in the *Three Books of Occult Philosophy* (Rankine (ed.) 2018, 285).

The theory and practice of astrology was to decipher, analyse and manage celestial forces emanating from the stars. Each planet represented a specific sort of energy or 'signification,' and its movements through, and position in the cosmos would shape experiences upon the earth in distinctive ways (Cummins 2021, 15-18). Plants and herbs were considered to exist under the rulership of specific stars, and their position in the cosmos was understood to govern harvest timings which, if correctly adhered to, would maximise the plants magical 'virtues' (Cummins 2021, 20). God's governance was conveyed via angels, and matters on earth were linked to specific angels who required adherence to explicit observances. Nicholas Culpeper conveyed an excellent explanation of the philosophy as the Epistle to the Reader of his publication of 1653:

> "If you do but consider the whol universe as one united body, and man the epitomy of this body, it will seem strange to none but mad men and fools that the stars should have influence upon the body of man, considering he being an epitomy of the creation must needs have a celestial world within himself; by which he searcheth out the motion and course of the celestial bodies, and what their influence is upon the elements, and elementary bodies; he that

> denies this, let him also deny that the world was made for man that so the world may see what he is; it is palpable to those that fear God, and are conversant either in his word or in his works, that every inferior world is governed by its superior, and receives influence from it. God himself the only First-being, the maker and the disposer of all things governs the celestial world by the intellectual, namely the Angels" (Culpeper 1653, C).

Although Culpeper only refers to the medicinal value of mandrakes, his 1652 *Complete Herbal* carried an echo of the ancient belief that the stars imparted the power of herbs. Throughout his book, Culpeper affirmed this connection asserting that the very nature of disease itself varied under the influence of the motions of the stars, maintaining that the disease must be treated with a herb which is governed by a different planet from that that which governs the disease, and that the herbs themselves should be picked with regard given to which planet is currently in the ascendant (Sinclair Rohde 1971, 163-165). One of the numerous codices of the fifteenth century Monacensis Gr. 70, held at the Bavarian Regional Library in Munich, is entitled *The Magical Treatise of Solomon* and is also known as the *Hygromantia.* The text contains a section attributing twelve herbs to signs of the zodiac and describing their magical as well as their medicinal virtues ascribes mandrake to the zodiac sign of Cancer and therefore recommends using it when the sign of Cancer rules, claiming that it will cure both a headache and the barrenness of a woman (Marathakis 2017, 246).

As discussed above, some writers placed the mandrake under the power of Saturn. Agrippa, for example, ascribed mandrakes as Saturnine and as ruled by the fixed stars of Spica, Goat Star and the Tail of Capricorn (Agrippa of Nettesheim 1651, 43-47). Seventeenth century astrologer William Lilly's 1647 *Christian Astrology* instructed its wide readership in, amongst many other things, the use of astrology to ascertain the cause of disease as well as the likelihood of recovery. Lilly developed the earlier theories about the influence of the celestial bodies by providing details of the assignment of planets as the 'rulers' of each plant or herb and expanding upon what this would mean (Lilly 1999, 117-142). Lilly named the ruling planet of mandrake as Saturn, adding significations including a nature that was "cold and dry, melancholic, earthly, masculine, the greater infortune, author of solitariness and malevolence" (Lilly 1999, 34). He also observed that it resided under the influence of the moon which governed characteristics such as appearance, taste and habit (Lilly 1999, 34).

Astrologer-occultist John Heydon's 1644 *Theomagia* provided a slightly different approach by detailing seven planetary spirits which rule the earth, one of which he identified as the angel Zazel, and it is under his governance where he placed the mandrake alongside herbs such as 'Bears-Foot', 'Tar-wort', 'Wolf-bane', 'Hemlock' , 'Ferne', 'Hellobor', 'white and black Henbane', 'Cereratch' or 'Finger fern', 'Clorbur' or 'Burdock', 'Parsnip', 'Dragon', 'Pulse', and 'Vervain', many of which have magical associations of their own. Heydon declared that the angel Zazel "delighteth in the east quarter of heaven, and at the time of gathering any plant belonging to him, you must turn your face towards the east in his hour" (Heydon, 1664, 17-18). He also lists mandrake under the herbs plants and trees which are subject to Zazel's enemy, the angel Hasmodai, and the plants under her governance have specific characteristics including "round, shady and great spreading leaves" (Heydon, 1664, 44).

Analysis of the work of these early modern writers in relation to mandrakes demonstrates not only how the plant fitted into the worldview inherited from the early influential thinkers, but also how astrological theories became central to notions of the interrelated mechanics of the cosmos, offering an explanation for the way that the energies generated by the aspects, position and movement of celestial bodies affected and influenced mundane matters on earth, and how in turn those energies could be manipulated by human agency. Accounts of mandrakes from an astrological

perspective act as an explanation of causation for the mandrake's medicinal efficacy which are distinctly different from the mythological stories which surround the plant.

The fabled power of this plant to achieve these effects upon patients, as well as its reputation as being possessed of magical powers, demonic or divine, followed this plant throughout its history. Examples can be found in Shakespeare's writing: Act 1, Sc.5 of *Antony and Cleopatra*, Act lll, Sc. 3 of *Othello* and Act I, Sc.3 of *Macbeth,* all of which alludes to the use of mandragora as an aid to sleep or sedative (Carter 2003, 146). Some early modern physicians combined medicine with what would be seen today as 'magic' despite risking accusations of summoning demonic forces. Physician Georg Pictorius Villinganus (c. 1500-1569), for example, clearly accepted the healing potential of charms, maintaining that their effectiveness was further enhanced when the patient and physician had faith in their powers (Agrippa of Nettesheim, ed. Tyson 2019, 305).

Mandrake continued to be used in a medical–magical context throughout the early modern period. The medical case records of Simon Forman and Richard Napier which make frequent reference to the plant as a remedy for such ailments as 'frenzy', 'grief', 'distracted in the brain' and other related conditions, suggest their acknowledgment of mandrake's calming properties. Case 19702 'For 'frenzy' included: "syrup of poppy 2 ounces, water of poppy 1 ounce, diasc. 3 drams, laudanum of paracelsus 10 ounces, ointment of mandrake, syrup of cowslip and water of cowslip 1 quarter each, sim. 3 ounces" (N. Kaoukji, L. Kassell 2018, 19702). Another case record which uses this mandrake / poppy combination is Case 19849, which recommends "syrup of poppy, water of poppy 3 ounces, and ointment of mandrake - for grief" (N. Kaoukji, L. Kassell 2018, 19849). Case 23753 prescribed the seeds of mandrake alongside the letting of blood for a patient who was suffering from being 'distracted in the brain.' The recipe included "1. - Electuary of roses alh.[alhandal] 5 drams [diascordium], garlic 1 scruple, decoction 4 ounces, jeralog 1 scruple, a small handful. 2. From the saphenous vein six ounces. 3. Extract 3 quarters, diasc. 1 dram, syrup of poppy 1 ounce, water of violets 1 ounce, and fleawort" (N. Kaoukji, L. Kassell 2018, 23753). Mandrake is also prescribed as a remedy for a patient whose senses are defined as being 'gone by fit', in connection with a miscarriage. Case 40432 records the giving of mandrake and adds the note "Child dead born" (N. Kaoukji, L. Kassell 2018, 40432). Mandrake and Jeralog were used in Case 31853 to relieve someone who claimed to be bewitched, noted also as "In Love" (N. Kaoukji, L. Kassell 2018, 31853).

Analysis of the above case records reveal mandrake as being prescribed for the treatment of ailments which are related to forms of mental disturbance, and whereas a soporific remedy would seem appropriate, it is however also interesting to note that the names of Forman and Napier were listed as past owners of the *Picatrix.* Foreman is also recorded as buying a copy of Agrippa's *Three books of Occult Philosophy* (Peterson, n.d). A comparison between their case records and the magically focused recipes of the *Picatrix* reveals that the use of mandrake, particularly combined with poppy, is common to both. Every ingredient in a *Picatrix* recipe was selected in accordance with the sympathetic correspondences within its cosmology, between the herb and the planet appropriate for the situation (Dan Attrell and Porreca 2019, 27). Mandrake appears in numerous *Picatrix* recipes such as the following for the inducing of sleep:

> "A soporific mixture. Take 4 oz. each of datura, red arsenic, mandrake seed or husk, and black poppy; 6 oz. of saffron; and 2 oz. of henbane seed. Mix everything together and put it away for three days to rot. Once this time has passed, remove it, and give ½ oz. mixed with wine to drink to whomever you wish.

> For the same. Take equal parts of opium, mandrake husk, lettuce seed, branches of datura, sap of arcole, black hellebore, and black poppy seeds. Grind everything up, mix together, and blend with a quantity of well- aged wine to the weight of all of the above combined. Put this aside to rot for seven days. Afterward, remove it, and give ½ oz. in food to whomever you wish.
>
> For the same. Take equal parts of sap from henbane, mandrake, green coriander, lettuce, datura, and white henbane; and a tenth part of all the said ingredients of opium [...] Do not give any more than ¼ oz. of this mixture as a dose on account of its excessive strength from the spirits in its ingredients" (Dan Attrell and Porreca 2019, 209).

Similarly, Agrippa's *Three Books of Occult Philosophy* also recommended the use of the mandrake/poppy combination as ingredients for suffumigation for Saturn, along with henbane, loadstone and myrrh, the recipe involved mixing these ingredients with the brain of a cat or the blood of a bat (Peterson, n.d.) As has been shown, there is much evidence of magical practice within Forman and Napier's case records, it is not, therefore, unreasonable to suggest that magical texts which included the *Picatrix* and the *Three Books of Occult Philosophy* were likely to have been influential in their inclusion of mandrake for their medical-magical armoury. Many physicians and their patients still understood medicine as working via prayer and the will of God and maintained faith that the power of the ingredients came from divine sources.

Modern Interpretations and Interdisciplinary Scholarship

Mandrake comes from the nightshade *solanaceous* family which includes henbane and datura (thorn apple or devil's snare) and is recognised by modern science to contain the powerful hallucinogenic alkaloid *hyoscine* which can induce delirium, and out-of-body experiences, or illusions of night-flights, if ingested in sufficient quantities (Dan Attrell and Porreca 2019, 30). It was the presence of these active components that was, according to Anthony John Carter, likely to have been at least partly responsible for the plant's magical associations, and he argued that it was this, along with the root's distinctive anthropomorphic form, which has resulted in the myths and superstitions which have surrounded it through history (Carter 2003, 144).

To summarise, by looking at the historiography of the mandrake, this article has identified the scholars and practitioners who have explored the magical and medical history of the mandrake alongside other plants. It has traced the ways in which knowledge and mythology concerning mandrakes were disseminated from late antiquity to the present day by means of an examination of early herbals, extant manuscripts and grimoires. By illuminating these sources, this article has traced the development of the mandrake's notoriety and identified the means by which such stories survived. This study has firmly situated the mandrake within an early cosmology in which the plant's anthropomorphic form suggested its accordance with principles such as the doctrine of signatures and influenced belief in its power as an aid to fertility. It has also been seen how these beliefs were further supported by the additional provenance of earlier reference within scripture. Along with its reputation for proven medical properties, these facts support an argument which identifies the mandrake as a plant which perfectly exemplifies both a continuity of pre-modern cosmologies, whilst highlighting the fluidity of the nebulous division which existed between medicine and magic. The history and mythology of the mandrake has been shown to embody much of the early cosmologies concerning the governorship of planets. A suggested scientific explanation of the mandrake's powers has been explored, and the legend of the mandrake from Solomon to

Shakespeare, from Scripture to Joan of Arc, has served as evidence of how society has widely recognised the powerful and enduring legend of the mandrake.

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