

*The physician comes from nature, from nature he is born; only he who receives his experiences from nature is a physician, and not he who writes, speaks, and acts with his head.....
The physician is only the servant of nature, not her master. Therefore it behoves medicine to follow the will of nature.*

- Paracelsus

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO MEDEA'S MAGIC



John Waterhouse's Medea from Medea and Jason

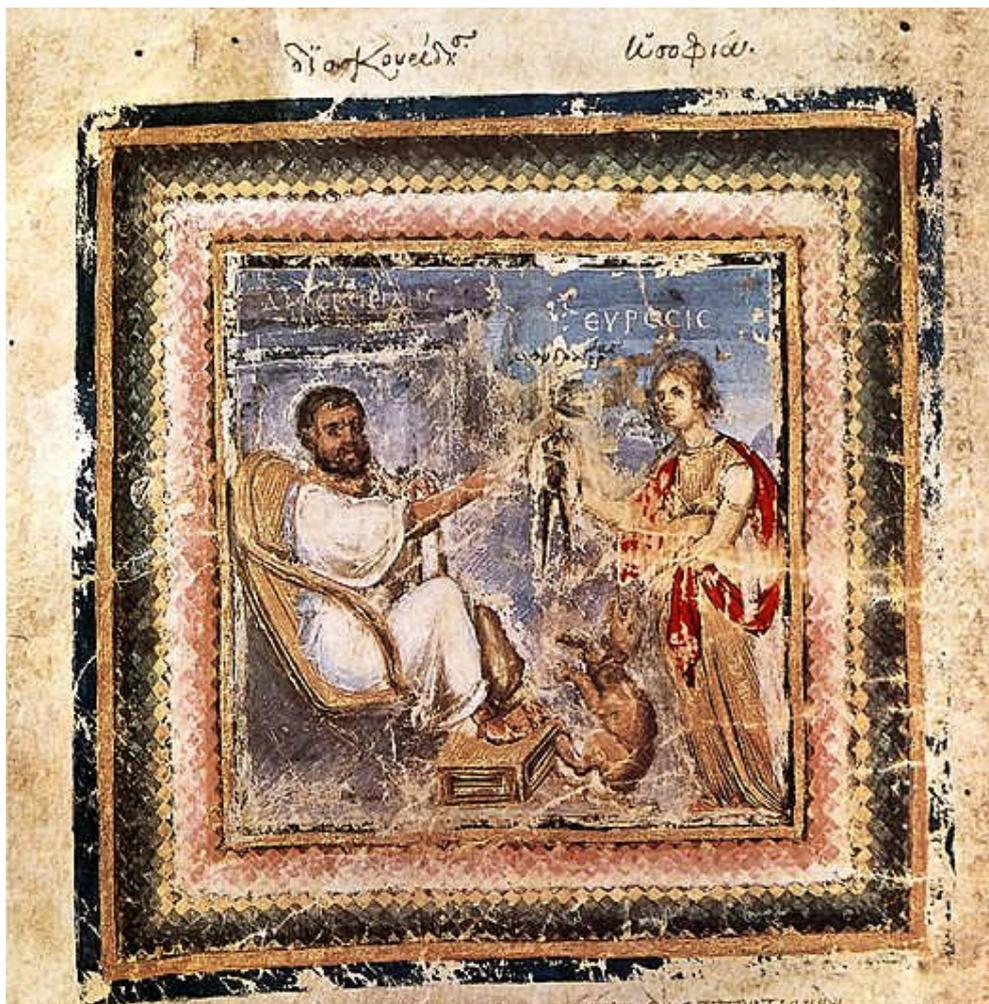
Healing sanctuaries were often divinatory sites as the ancients saw both illness and the process of healing as belonging to supernatural phenomena, where nature and the divine met. Throughout the ancient mythic stories the process of dis-ease and healing was linked to the gods and goddesses; disease was seen as an epiphany from a god, a divine visitation. Illness alerted the individual to the necessity to realign oneself with the realm of the divine; to seek the answer to the dis-ease, to revere the god and ultimately to restore the balance between the body (nature) and the soul (the realm of the gods). This balance was in the hands of Moira, the goddess of fate. Similarly one of the main questions asked throughout antiquity to the oracles was how have I offended the god and what rituals and reparations can be made to align myself to this deity. Petitioners that came to the Asclepian healing sanctuaries, such as the most famous one at Epidaurus, or the sanctuary of the oracle, like the one at Delphi, came for the similar blessings of the gods, to receive the right perspective on their problem or dis-ease.

These sanctuaries provided a *temenos* or sacred place for the pilgrim to express their spiritual yearnings. These sacred sites of healing and oracles served the ancient's

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psychological life by tending to these needs within a framework of ritual, mystery and reverence. The ancient Greeks used their psychological skills to address the god when the divinity appeared in their life as a disease or a numinous event. The 'right' questions that the ancient asked, 'who is there', 'what divinity have I offended' and 'how can I repair my relationship to this deity?' The healer and the diviner were involved in this process as the conduit of the god's will, being the interpreter of the divine and the intermediary between the divinity and the illness. The disease that awoke the patient was considered to be a divine voice, a sign that the god was near and the prompt to engage in the mysteries associated with this supernatural being.

Jung reminded us that the religious instinct is archetypal, that the respect for the gods is part of the human soul. This instinctual impetus drives the quest for meaning and enhances the order and coherence in our daily lives. Our innate religious nature connects us to something larger and absorbs us into the world of the divine. Religion constellates mystery, humility, and piety; in the ancient world it permeated daily life and was an integral part of the ancient lifestyle. As an essential part of daily life, the ancient religious traditions are an essential aspect of the healing exchange. Medicine and healing have been traditionally associated with the gods as early as the 6th C CE. By the 1st Century AD, herbalist and doctor, Dioscorides continues the tradition of the healing plants and deities.



Dioscorides Receives a Mandrake Root from Euresis

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This reverence for the supernatural extended to nature. Groves and forests were sacred to particular gods and goddesses while the plant kingdom of fruit trees, crops, herbs, flowers, medicinal plants were linked with certain gods or mythic beings. Today their names still honour their patron god, goddess or hero through their etymological root. Narcissus was named for the beautiful youth who died because he came to know himself; Centaury is named for the Centaur, possibly Chiron the gentlest and wisest of the centaurs, a herbalist, homeopath and mentor/healer; Iris, for the goddess of the rainbow and the messenger of the Gods; Daphne for the nymph who prayed to be released from Apollo's pursuit; the peony, for Paeon the great healer of Olympus who even healed the wounds of the gods Hades and Ares; Dionysus associated with the ivy and the grape vine; Hades and Persephone, the poppy. Plants, herbs, roots, trees were all associated with the mythic realm, a realm that clinical medicine came to know as a realm of superstition, at best a myth or fantasy; at worst, irrational and dangerous.

*Often the doctor is in much the same position as the alchemist who no longer knew whether he was meeting the mysterious amalgam in the crucible or whether he was the salamander glowing in the fire. Psychological induction inevitably causes the two parties to get involved in the transformation of the third (the constellating healer archetype of the Self) and to be themselves transformed in the process, and all the time **the doctor's knowledge is the dim light in the darkness.***

- C. G. Jung

Medea was a princess of Colchis. Colchis, which gives its name to Colchicum, the meadow saffron, was a kingdom on the Eastern shores of the Black Sea, a foreign, barbarian land when viewed through the eyes of a civilising Greece. Her father Aeetes was the king of Colchis, brother of Paisaphae and Circe. Circe was a sorceress, a magician, herbalist, and a healer. We know her as the seductress that changed Odysseus's men to swine with one of her potions. In our terms she knew the herbal magic that touched the primitive state, the power to regress the human to a primal state. Odysseus with the help of the god Hermes used molly as an antidote to Circe's potion. Ingesting the herb allowed him to shake off the regressive spell of being transformed to a pig and so was able to confront the sorceress and gain power over her. Circe had trained Medea as a young woman in the arts of sorcery, magic, herbalism, how to mix potions, rearrange matter and most of all revere her patron goddess Hecate. Medea was a priestess in the temple of Hecate, honouring the goddess of the dark night and the goddess whom later became associated with magic, which by then had become associated with evil. Hesiod in *Theogony* (8th C) reminds us that Hecate is honoured by all, even the immortal gods. We must respect her greatly and offer her great sacrifices. Hesiod was a contemporary of Homer, but unlike Homer kept the mystery and the paganism of the ancient order alive. However, through latter antiquity Hecate along with other witches, herbalists and root cutters had become aligned with non-rational folk remedies and seen as dangerous to the new paradigm of rational medicine.

Medea did not have the power to withstand the unholy alliance of the Olympian goddesses Hera and Athene who petitioned Aphrodite to conspire with them. Under Aphrodite's magic charm Medea was enchanted by Eros and fell in love with the Greek hero, Jason who had

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come to Colchis to retrieve the Golden Fleece. Medea helped him to achieve this impossible task with the help of special ointments, incantations and timing. Medea enabled Jason, her now heroic/lover, to succeed at the trials set before him. But by falling under Aphrodite's spell, she betrayed her family and city by helping Jason steal the prized family possession of the Golden Fleece.

On their flight from Colchis Medea visits her aunt Circe who absolves her of her betrayal and eventually Medea arrived at Jason's birthplace, Iocolus, in Thessaly. Thessaly was and still is known as the land of the witches. Here herbs abound and the traditions of healing, magic and herb lore were continually practiced. The great centaur-teacher Chiron, the wounded healer and mentor to the solar heroes, had his cave on Mount Pelion, the great mountain which rises above the port of Iocolus, modern day Volos. To this cave all the heroes came to be trained in the shamanistic arts including Jason and Asclepius, the later-day Greek god of healing. To this area also came the great healers, philosophers and pilgrims of the time. Pythagoras and Hippocrates ventured here and I can only surmise this was to also visit the allegorical precinct of healing magic. This area of Greece was influenced by the shamanistic tribes from the north and by this northern route many of the shamanistic and magical rites associated with healing found their way into Greece. No wonder Medea was brought here. Medea is the carrier of the herbal and magic lore from the East into the West.

Here Medea also shows her great skill at the arts of magic and herbs. The common myth tells of Medea rejuvenating an old ram after she dismembers him, and places him in a pot of herbs and drugs. Another variant on this myth suggested it was Jason's father that she rejuvenated. In order to prepare for this procedure Medea disappeared for nine days or one third of the Moon's cycle. In these days she had no contact with mortals but spent her time collecting the special drugs and herbs that Hecate guided her to. After the nine days of the Moon's cycle she returned to Iolcus and sacrificed to her goddess Hecate. Using drugs she helped Aeson, Jason's father, fall into a deep sleep. She then cut his throat to let the aged blood run out, dismembered him and then put the pieces in a cauldron with the liquid herbs she had prepared. Jason's father emerged from the cauldron rejuvenated, forty years younger.

Medea's spell captured the imagination of the daughters of Pelias, the wicked uncle of Jason who had usurped the throne. The daughters wished to rejuvenate their father and asked Medea to perform the magical task once again. The daughters prepared their father by dismembering him; however, this time Medea did not put the herbs in the cauldron and their father never emerged.

Medea is usually remembered, not as the skilled healer, but as a revengeful and spurned lover, a woman caught in the spell of a goddess she had no antidote for: the goddess of passion and love, Aphrodite. However, I would like to represent Medea more as a reminder of the great respect and knowledge of healing, herbs and magic that was brought to the West and then subtly ignored and eventually demonised. Interestingly her story is immortalised in tragedy by Euripides who portrays her as a revengeful murderess. When betrayed by Jason

she becomes murderously enraged and a new motif enters into the Medea narrative. Perhaps more interesting in the story of Medea and Jason is that it is Jason whose is named 'healer' by the centaur Chiron. Yet the fragments of myth that remain clearly illustrate that it is Medea who carried the herbal lineage of healing westward.

While it is quite common to refer to the switch in demonising herbalists as an evolutionary movement from the matriarchal period to the patriarchal period, I am more inclined to frame this in another way. Our terms of masculine and feminine, patriarchal and matriarchal are now losing their symbolic meaning and becoming fixed and confused with gender. The shift for me seems to be the movement from an older order that embraced fate, participated in what was mysterious and uncontrollable, honoured the domain of the gods; an order that put the deity at the centre of their lives and therefore had a constant place for ritual and worship. Healing was within the precinct of the gods. This order also prized the familial bloodline, a kinship order. This slowly gave way to a new order that saw the human, not as fated, but as one who designed his own course; the individual was in charge and responsible for his destiny by the choices he makes. The gods were now farther removed from the affairs of the human. This order began to prize the marriage or relational bond above the familial bond. This change gradually evolved. A seminal change took place as writing began to replace oral tradition. Philosophical explanation of nature began replacing mythological ones encouraging the rise of a rational and logical world view. Man became more mobile and by the 5th century BCE it was evident that rational approaches and science were replacing the gods. During this century the traditions of philosophy, science, theatre, and medicine were established.

Hippocrates was the father of medicine born in the 5th Century BCE on the island of Kos. Part of his tradition centred on liberating medicine from mythological concepts and the worship of gods. His tradition began the documentation of the properties and use of medicinal herbs and a new order began to encroach on ancient medicine. Helios, Medea's grandfather, was the Sun god of the old order, a Titan's son. Now Apollo was worshipped as the Sun God and the father of Asclepius, the God of Healing, from whom Hippocrates takes his lineage. The cult of Asclepius became popular in the 5th Century and the mysterious rites of the Asclepian sanctuaries, which belonged to the old order, remained for some time alongside the new order emerging.

However, botany progressed from the gathering of herbs and digging of roots of the pastoral communities to empirical and detailed research. Pharmaceuticals were now manufactured, and the purification ceremony of the *pharmakos*, where the name derives from, was forgotten. A new order of gods led by Apollo and Athene championed the new administration. Subtly or perhaps not so subtly connections to the more instinctual, chthonic, natural ways of healing were left behind. Homer, our epic and mythological father, barely mentions the centaur Chiron as the mentor to the heroes, replacing him with another tutor, more akin to the new order. Chiron who taught the shamanistic tradition of music, the ability to cross over into the plant and spirit kingdom as well as the arts of herbalism and astrology is written out of the Homeric texts. Traces in the Western tradition of mysticism and magic, ritual and shamanism start to disappear.

The gods too retreated from the processes of healing. No longer was it the illness that called the petitioner to the temple. Illness became aligned with a problem that the human was to champion; therefore the gods vacated the plants and herbs leaving only measurable quantities of medicinal properties. No longer do we journey to the healing sanctuaries and await the dream for the visitation of the god. Where is the sacred and mysterious place that evokes the healing power of the ancient gods and goddesses?

What happened to Medea's magic, Chiron's cave, the Asclepian sanctuaries and the deities that resonated with the plant kingdom? How do we provide a temenos for the petitioner or patient or pilgrim who journeys to you for advice? How do you listen for the god's voice in the illness? The gods of the new order are potent and magical, bright and innovative but can the charismatic champions of the new rational order of medicine engage us in transformative processes. Apollo is ultimately unsuccessful at constellating the other and Athene is heroic but armoured. How can the soul still be engaged and honoured in the new medical paradigm?

Perhaps we start by preparing a temenos, a sacred place, for this process to begin. Perhaps we might wonder whatever happened to Medea's magic.



A sick child brought into the temple of Asclepius. John William Waterhouse, 1877

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