

BOAZ ADHENGU



MANDRAKE

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P r e f a c e

As am walking, curiosity strikes me in glimpses; surprised that within the streets of Nairobi, religion has grown to be part of livelihoods and this twines utmost with herbs; some of which are considered food while others seen as part of a general fertility exercise. Curiously observant of a woman chewing Mkombelo (*other people call it Mkovelo*), some sort of a root plant commonly found in the western plains of Kenya, perhaps closer to *Budalangi*. In more civilised language, they classify it botanically and has an English pronunciation, it is to be identified as Mandrake.

With still a persisting curiosity, I get into quest to understand this mythology that has been justified in the language of science but equivalently termed as love related and of important, fertile in results. That it is an aid to finding our purpose of being fruitful in multiplying as humanity.

Nevertheless, those who have used it are laudable of the blessings it brings. Herein is an elaborate know; for us to gain and reflect upon the origins.

Antiquity

A decorative graphic consisting of a thick grey L-shaped bar. The horizontal part of the bar is positioned above the text 'Antiquity' and 'Chapter One', and the vertical part is positioned to the left of 'Chapter One'.

Chapter One

Tender and fragrant, acrid and indestructible, the parsley and onions we use every day were also used daily by the Greeks and the Romans. Our senses can respond to the past directly, not only through art but also through herbs. The same basil, garlic, rosemary and thyme that grew two thousand years ago at the *Villa dei Papiri* in *Herculaneum* can be seen and smelled, touched and tasted in the evocative herb gardens of Adhengo's garden in *Kapiyo-Bondo*.

In ancient Greece and Rome herbs were eaten, imbibed, and applied to wounds. Olive, laurel, parsley, and pine were bound into wreaths to crown the winners of the Greek games. Fragrant herbs honoured the gods, embalmed the dead, and purified disease-ridden rooms. Hundreds of medicinal herbs were used and catalogued by Greek and Roman physicians. Fresh herbs for all these purposes could be gathered wild in the countryside, bought at local markets, or grown at home in kitchen gardens.

Herbs in the ancient world are closely linked to the prowess of the Greek and Roman gods, the whims and wisdom of emperors, and the innovations of physicians and philosophers. Prometheus carried the gift of fire in a hollow fennel stalk, Nero kicked Poppaea to death and then used a year's supply of Rome's cinnamon to bury her, and Hippocrates stressed herbal cures when he drafted the ground rules for modern medicine. Our primary sources of information are the works of ancient artists, authors, and scientists - as well as the mounting archaeological evidence.

An herb is usually defined as a plant that dies back to the ground after flowering. Unlike trees or shrubs, most herbs develop no permanent woody structure. As a living form, the herb from earliest

times was not only a real but a symbolic force both in religion and in healing.

Herbs had a potent value for the ancient Greeks and Romans. Not only were they used to alleviate illness and enhance food, as they still are today, but they were sources of power over the environment. They were intimately associated with ritual, magic and especially religion, all of which controlled and shaped the lives of the Greek and the Romans much as science and engineering shape ours today. The religions of these two ancient Mediterranean cultures are expressed in the Greek myths and the Roman rituals.

The forms of religious worship as well as the beliefs of the ancient Greeks and Romans were closely tied to the world of nature. Garlands of herbs sacred to the gods were offered on household and public altars, placed on the bodies and graves of the dead, and worn by the initiates at cult rituals.

The mandrake is one of the plants which still grow widely in the Middle East, and which has claimed magical associations from a very remote period. It is generally assigned the botanical name of *Mandragora officinarum* and is a perennial of the order *Solanaceae*. It claims affinity with the potato and eggplant, and is closely allied to the *Atropa belladonna* with which it is not infrequently confused by some writers. The modern Arab knows it by a number of names, including *Tuffah el Majanin* (Madmen's Apple) and *Beid el Jinn* (Eggs of the Jinn), apparently a reference to the ability of the plant to invigorate and stimulate the senses even to the point of mental imbalance.

The former name may perhaps be a survival of the belief found in oriental folk-lore regarding the magical herb *Baaras*, with which the mandrake is identified by some authorities. According to the legends associated with this plant, it was highly esteemed amongst the ancients on account of its pronounced magical properties. But because of the potency of these attributes it was an extremely hazardous undertaking for anyone to gather the plant, and many who attempted it were supposed to have paid for their daring with sickness and death. Once the herb had been gathered, however, it availed for a number of diseases, and in antiquity it was most reputed for its ability to cure depression and general disorders of the mind. As a result it was frequently sought after by magicians and others who attempted the treatment of insanity in the ancient world, and was probably used most of all in the form of a potion.

The mandrake grew abundantly in Palestine, and was found flourishing in neglected fields and waste land. A thick, forked stubby root produced a short stem on which grew glossy oval leaves attaining a length of anything from six to sixteen inches, depending largely on the fertility of the place where it was to be found growing. The plant bore a flower, whose colour is variously described as bluish, purple, or greenish-white, and in appearance was rather flat and broad, being about two inches in diameter. In the spring season, the blossoms gave way to round, sweetish red berries, which became ripe about the month of May. The young plants had a thick tapering root very much like that of a parsnip, which went down into the ground for a distance of two feet or more. As the plant matured, the root altered its shape, becoming more bulbous, and from it there emerged a number of short brittle outgrowths.

To the imaginative mind, the forked stumpy appearance of the root would suggest a crude human shape, to which many of the ancients were already accustomed in the worship of *Ishtar* and other fertility deities. For centuries it was the custom in the East to manipulate, pinch or carve the mandrake root until it assumed a vaguely human form. After this, it was generally sold as a charm to protect the wearer from the attacks of demons, or to stimulate sexual vigour. It is improbable that the entire plant was utilized in this manner on the person, since the root alone was often more than two feet in length. If the complete mandrake was used superstitiously, it would probably be kept hung up on an inner wall of the house, or in a position just inside the doorway, to ward off any demons that might chance to enter.

The mandrake received attention from early times in folk-lore, legend and magical practice as a love-charm. It was supposed to possess formidable human properties in this and other directions and it is possible that this belief was fostered by the quasi-human appearance suggested by the forked roots of the plant. If such qualities were superstitiously attributed to the mandrake, it is not particularly difficult to see how the credulously-minded could even come to the point of believing that it could stimulate conception. The plant has for centuries been native to many of the Mediterranean countries, including Spain, Crete, Sicily, Syria and North Africa, though apparently not to Egypt. Mandrakes were found in the tomb of King *Tut-ankh-amen*, and must consequently have been imported into the country, no doubt from Syria.

The medicinal virtues of the plant appear to have been discovered at a remote point in the development of ancient culture, and though

much that was magical and superstitious tended to accrue to its use, it seems clear that the narcotic qualities of the mandrake were in evidence through the entire period of its usage. It does not appear to have been employed at all as a purgative or an emetic.

The fruit of the plant was eaten in antiquity as a love-charm, and its narcotic content was such that, taken in excess, it could produce nausea, rigor and general malaise. The root of the *mandragora* was of special potency in inducing narcosis, and in ancient Assyria it was administered as an anodyne. Since there was no means of ensuring a standard strength of the potion, its use was apt to be accompanied by a certain amount of risk. At the present day, the Luhya children in Kenya eat the sweet-smelling *tuffah* sparingly, without any apparent harmful effect especially after the festivities of circumcision and initiation of age-sets witness by cockerels fighting.

Its use in modern times in the herbal practice of Africa and the East of Asia is that of an occasional narcotic and antispasmodic.

The mandrake is mentioned in Genesis 30:14 as an aphrodisiac. Rachel, who up to that time was barren; desired to have some of the plant which Reuben, the son of her sister Leah, had discovered in the fields at the harvesting of wheat, the time when the mandrake ripened. The reference in the Song of Solomon 7:13, is apparently of a twofold nature, recognizing the fragrance of the mandrake flower as well as the familiar aphrodisiac use of the plant. The mandrake's fruit was seen as love apples, which formed on the root. Consumption of the apples led to increased sexual desire.

When analysed in modern terms, it becomes clear that its use as a narcotic, for cramps, against nausea and snakebites as described by the ancient authors is fully justified. It was also effectively used in eye medication and flu-mixes because it is a vasodilator that opens the bronchi, especially in cases of Asthma and to relieve coughs; Mandrake had around 88 different medicinal uses in the ancient world; some of which continue to this day.

It is likely that through the spread of *Judeo-Christian* and *Muslim* culture that other regions became familiar with mandrake and its mythical knowledge. Especially through Arab culture, which played an important part in transmitting Greek scholarship to medieval Europe, the mandrake and its usage were introduced to regions beyond its indigenous habitat.

Reflections

A thick, dark gray L-shaped graphic element consisting of a vertical bar on the left and a horizontal bar on top, forming an inverted corner.

Chapter Two

Greek and Roman houses and gardens reflected the religious values of their owners. Both houses and gardens had altars to favourite or family gods, and the gardens also provided herbs for the medicine chest and kitchen as well as herbs and flowers for the interior altars or images. The idea of gardens grew from early religion and legend.

The symbolism of flowers has a wealth of meanings, above all female and sexual associations, embedded in its history.¹ Indeed, flowers have always represented female sexuality throughout history, and in almost every area of the world, with the possible exception of Africa, where flowers do not endure and it is *the leaves, bark and roots of trees and plants that are important*. The flower can be used as either a negative or positive symbol, showing either an absence or presence of sexuality. Most negative symbolism uses a flower (*most often a rose or white lily*) or enclosed garden to mean a lack of female sexuality - sexual innocence, virginity, and/or chastity, characteristics which also describe the Western stereotype of the ideal woman, one with the appropriate degree of femininity. Positive uses include drawing parallels between certain flowers and aspects of female sexual anatomy, such as vulvas, labia, vaginas, and wombs, and using flowers to depict and celebrate sexual acts or preferences.

The civilizations of ancient Greece and Rome also used such flower symbolism. The goddess of love and seduction (*Greek: Aphrodite, Roman: Venus*) was symbolically represented with several flowering plants, including the lily, rose, apple, pomegranate, myrtle, quince, opium poppy, and mandrake. Perhaps even more telling of the pairing of flowers and sexuality, however, are the rituals associated with worshipping the minor goddess of flowers

(Greek: *Chloris*, Roman: *Flora*). At first, Flora was believed to look after the flowering of cereals, vines, and fruit trees, acting more as a goddess of harvest. Historically, the ‘flower’ seems first to have been the promise of fruit, not a thing itself. Eventually, she became the goddess of flowers in the full meaning of the word.

From 240 BCE to 173 BCE, the *Floralia*, or floral games, were annually celebrated in her honour; a festival which included an orgy of ritual promiscuity. Indeed, the worship of *Flora* was a very sexual affair, and *a number of sources claim that Flora was a deified prostitute*. The Greeks were also among the first to equate certain floral scents with an increase in sexuality, calling such items aphrodisiacs after their goddess of love and desire. The oil from violet flowers was one such aphrodisiac, and Greek women used it to oil their entire bodies before entering into sexual union. The Romans carried on this tradition, and considered bean flowers sacred due to their alleged powers to arouse and stimulate the emotions.

They prepared a magical amorous drink containing essence of mandrake’s root and wine, which evoked and heightened erotic feelings.

This mandrake is a perennial herb originating in the Southern Mediterranean. It has a large taproot, simple basal leaves and solitary five-lobed bell shaped flowers. Its fruits are yellow, aromatic and poisonous. They are sometimes known as Devil’s apples. The story of the mandrake is a long and turbulent one and involves the Hebrews, the Greeks and other ancient civilisations.

One of the oldest stories in the Bible, from around 4000 BC comes in the book of Genesis (30:14-19). Here, so the story tells, the boy Reuben goes into the field and gathers a plant with yellow berries. He took some of these berries back to his mother Leah. Leah had a sister called Rachel and she, recognising the fruit as that of the mandrake, requested some saying, in the words of the King James Version of the Bible, ‘*Give me I pray of thy son’s mandrakes.*’

Rachel was barren and she sought to correct the ancient severe stigma of childlessness with the mandrake. Leah struck a bargain with Rachel that if she should give her some of the mandrake berries (*or fruits*) then Leah’s husband must sleep with Leah first before sleeping with Rachel. Both women became pregnant; Leah bore her fifth son Issachar and sometime later Rachel gave birth to Joseph who was to play an illustrious part in Jewish history.

The magical power attributed to plants originated in beliefs regarding the way they came into existence, their appearance, and their medicinal or poisonous effect. These beliefs originated in Antiquity from China, India, Sumer, Egypt, and later from Greece and Rome. Moreover, the conviction that charms pronounced by initiated persons have magical effects when used in connection with plants, has survived since Antiquity and the Middle Ages. It should be pointed out that many beliefs and medicinal recipes have existed independently in various parts of the world for centuries before they were noted down in written sources.

The great role played by superstition and magical practices in popular culture is evident in people’s explanations of unintelligible (*and thus awe-inspiring*) natural phenomena and their tendency to

ascribe to them occult powers that affect human beings and their surrounding environment. Ignorance of the laws of nature and natural processes as well as man's great dependence on them meant that in the past humanity lived in constant fear that all its achievements could be wiped out at any time by natural disasters or serious disease. Hence, in order to neutralize this menace people created sorcery.

Interestingly, the emphasis amongst the Jews was on the power of the plant to aid the procreation of offspring and there is no mention of its narcotic power. The ancient Greeks sometimes referred to the fruit as the '*apples of love*' whereas the Arabs, by contrast, called them the '*devil's apples*' from their capacity to inflame the passions. In the neighbourhood of Mount Lebanon, some of the Arab tribes called the plant '*Baid-ul-Jinn*' or literally '*the eggs of the Genii*' and this is one of the first references to its so called magical powers.

The Greeks came to the mandrake from a different direction. For as long as they had records of the plant, it was known to have narcotic properties. Hippocrates, the Father of Medicine, asserted around 400 BC that 'a small dose in wine, less than would occasion delirium, will relieve the deepest depression and anxiety.' Aristotle describes the mandrake as a valuable soporific, together with other plants such as the poppy (*Papaver species*) and the darnel (*tars; Lolium temulentum*).

Theophrastus wrote the first Greek treatise on plants in or around 230 BC. In agreement with the polypharmacy of the time, he recommended the mandrake as a sovereign remedy for gout,

erysipelas, sleeplessness and, interestingly, in relation to the Hebraic tradition, as a love potion. He also refers to the fact that the taproot of the plant resembles a diminutive man and it was from such early observations that the bizarre rites and ceremonies surrounding the plant were to emerge in the centuries that followed.

As far as the love potion is concerned, the Greeks also associated the plant with two important mythological figures, *Circe* and *Aphrodite*. Circe was reputed to have attempted to bewitch Odysseus with the mandrake although fortunately he had taken a preventive antidote that could have been the snowdrop (*Galanthus*). Similarly, Aphrodite the goddess of love was sometimes known as *Mandragoritis* or ‘*She of the Mandrake*’.

From 500 BC onwards physicians and philosophers migrated from Greece to Rome and took with them the knowledge that they had acquired from the early disciples of *Asklepios* (including *Theophrastus* and *Dioscorides*). The first Roman author to take up the mandrake appears to be Pliny the Elder. Writing in the first century AD, he commends it for all the usual ailments cited above. He adds the additional indication that it is useful for the condition of inflammation of the eyes. He also concluded that there are two varieties of the Mandrake, *vernalis* (flowering in the spring) and *autumnalis* (flowering in the autumn) but this has not been confirmed by modern studies. The Romans also believed that the plant might be used for military as well as medicinal purposes. Two stories circulated widely amongst the Roman high command. The first related to the Carthaginian general Hannibal who, when his army was fighting African rebels, pretended to retreat. He then left behind on the battlefield a number of jars of wine which had been

fortified with mandrake. The rebels drank the wine, became sleepy and were easily defeated. It was also said that Julius Caesar, when he was captured by Sicilian pirates, employed a similar stratagem to gain his release.

The unusual name of the plant probably derives from the Middle English or Middle Dutch (*mandrage*) and has a twofold meaning; first, the root looks like a phallus, and second, drake is derived from 'dragon', alluding to its magical powers. The Latin form *Mandragora officinarum* has been established at least since the days of Shakespeare, who refers to the mandrake in Othello and more particularly in Romeo and Juliet (Act IV) where he mentions the shrieking of the mandrake when uprooted from the ground and that '*living mortals hearing them run mad.*' In other words, the plant can make you lose your mind!

Jacob's Wives



Chapter Three

The Holy Land, an area between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea that also includes the Eastern Bank of the Jordan, is synonymous with the biblical land of Israel and Palestine. This was an ancient botanical crossroad, enjoying an active trade in spices, incense and medicines from Egypt to Mesopotamia and beyond. Its flora includes about 2,700 species, some of medical value.

Among the early written records of plants in this region are Egyptian medical papyri. *Ebers' papyrus* (1550 BC) contains 700 magical formulas and prescriptions, including the medical uses of plants. In the ruins of Assyrian Nineveh (*Mesopotamia*), thousands of cuneiform documents (*cuneiform is a writing system invented in ancient Mesopotamia that is recognisable by its wedge-shaped marks on clay tablets*) from earlier than 500 BC were found that mention over a thousand plant species.

Fertility was the basis of primitive man's economy. It is therefore not surprising to find that various facets of fertility and reproduction are mentioned and commented upon in connection to religious based texts from the period. The stories related to fertility and reproduction in these religious text compliment comments from other contemporary texts and archaeology to give an indication of the prevalent thoughts and beliefs of that age. The Torah serves as a compilation of Jewish historical religious oriented folk-tales predating the Iron Age. Its stories reflect the developing relationship and increasing dependence for survival between the Jewish people and Yahweh - a dependence inherently linked to fertility of the settled land to provide sustenance and of the people to provide for an increase in the population and communal strength.

Fertility was a central theme of many Neolithic cultures prevalent around the Mediterranean basin. It served also as the basis of the extended family's economy. Fertility was particularly directed towards the agricultural and husbandry gifts of the so-called fertility deity that enable the survival of the community. In the Semitic mythology, the Semitic mother goddess refers to *Asherah* (Hebrew: אֲשֵׁרָה).

It appears the Hebrews continued to worship *Asherah* even after their supposed adoption of monotheism, and 'the worship of Baal and *Asherah* persisted among the Israelites for over seven centuries, from the period after the conquest and settlement of Canaan, which most biblical scholars place at around 1400 BC, to the time of the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar and the exile of the Israelites in Babylon in the 6th century BC'.

The abrogation of the cult of *Asherah* was strongly advocated in the Torah books. Exodus 34:13 states: '*But ye shall destroy their altars, break their images, and cut down their groves*' [referring to the *Asherah* poles]; while Deuteronomy 16:21-22 states '*Thou shalt not plant thee a grove [Asherah pole] of any trees near unto the altar of the LORD thy God, which thou shalt make thee. Neither shalt thou set thee up any image; which the LORD thy God hateth.*' The term 'groves' in the King James Version refers to the *Asherah* pole, a sacred tree or pole that stood near the Canaanite religious locations to honour *Asherah*. In the *dholuo* speaking tribe of Lake Victoria, this tree is identified as "*Siala*" and is common within the homesteads, it grows straight without branches.

Asherah was considered to be the deity with responsibility for fertility and infertile Hebrew women may have resorted to this deity to overcome their problem. The previously infertile Rachel is known to have taken the pagan household deity images from her father's house sited in Haran and 'put them in the camel's furniture, and sat upon them. And Laban searched the entire tent, but found them not'. *Haran* is almost universally identified with *Harran*, an Assyrian city in Upper Mesopotamia whose ruins lie within present-day Turkey. The Assyrians followed the polytheistic Assyro-Babylonian religion. Their pantheon included Ishtar, equated with the *Ugarit Asherah*, who was the goddess of fertility, war, love, and sex.

Fertility throughout a woman's reproductive life, without the facility of contraception, would have been controlled by the prolonged lactation period and delayed infant weaning common in earlier practices even though wet-nursing was apparently practiced especially in the higher social strata. Thus when the Pharaoh's daughter discovered Moses in the basket among the reeds, the first thought was of finding a wet nurse to care for the child. '*Then said his sister to Pharaoh's daughter, Shall I go and call to thee a nurse of the Hebrew women, that she may nurse the child for thee?*' The wet nurse became an important feature of the child's eventual life accompanying the child in adulthood so that '*they sent away Rebekah their sister, and her nurse, and Abraham's servant, and his men*'.

The importance of maintaining and propagating the family line occasionally led to drastic measures to achieve impregnation by the head of the family. Tamar eventually resorted to subterfuge to

achieve a pregnancy. Disguising herself as a prostitute, she enticed her father-in-law to impregnate her to become pregnant with twins. Similarly Lot's daughters resorted to incest getting themselves impregnated by their father after getting him drunk to '*preserve seed of our father*'. Both daughters thus became pregnant by their father. The use of a hand-maid or slave-girl as a form of surrogacy was also resorted to. In the light of her apparent infertility, Rachel offered her spouse Jacob her maid Bilhah to serve as an alternative surrogate spouse to carry a child stating 'Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees that I may also have children by her'. Similarly Sarah offered the Egyptian slave girl Hagar for the same purpose telling Abram 'Behold now, the LORD hath restrained me from bearing: I pray thee, go in unto my maid; it may be that I may obtain children by her. And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai'

Infertility was considered a punishment from Yahweh who closed the wombs of women considered sterile. Thus Jacob's rejoinder to his sterile wife's plea to impregnate her was "*Am I in Yahweh's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb?*" Rachel possibly had an obesity-related subfertility since we are told that '*Leah was tender eyed; but Rachel was beautiful and well favoured*'. In Semitic mentality, "*well favoured*" could very well have referred to generously endowed pelvic proportions as depicted in the pagan deity Asherah.

All the wives of the sisters Leah and Rachel, given in marriage by their father Laban to their Uncle Jacob, had to be summoned to overcome the reproach of Rachel's barrenness; there had already been some strange attempt at deception at the very beginning of the

story, when Jacob, who thought he had been married to the beautiful younger Rachel, found the elder and less attractive Leah in his nuptial bed the next morning. (*He does not seem to have noticed it sooner!*) His cousin Laban, father of both the bride and of her sister, readily explained this flagrant substitution by saying that it would not have been right for the younger Rachel to have been married first.

Underhand as this deceitful complicity may have been, (*though one must admire Laban's insouciance*) one cannot help feeling that Jacob himself must have been both a little insensitive - and either careless or *undiscerning* - in his belated failure to recognise his bed-mate. Perhaps he had been working too hard on completing the seven year contract, which had been insisted upon by his brother as the price for his chosen bride, and so had possibly retired exhausted on the wedding night.

'No matter', said Laban, *'just promise to do another seven years labour, sign here and I'll let you have my other daughter Rachel as well,'* - adding rather generously - *'after you've put in the first week's work'*.

It will occasion the reader no surprise to learn, after this inauspicious beginning, that Jacob did not spend all his nights with Leah, once the well-favoured Rachel also joined to him in lawful wedlock and in the marriage bed. But he was not a man to bear a grudge and he did spend enough time with Leah to beget Reuben, Simeon and Levi. Meanwhile Rachel herself remained barren despite, most probably, Jacob's best endeavours.

Rachel, herself, after a while, seems to have developed a guilt complex over this deficiency. Seeing the hand of God in the fertility distinction made between her sister and herself, she thought the matter might be resolved by yet more cunning. She planned to conceal her barrenness by the marriage of her hand maid *Bilha* to her husband Jacob: the ingenuous suggestion being that *Bilha* should, in due course, become pregnant and at full term deliver her progeny upon Rachel's knees. This simple subterfuge by proxy seemed, at first, to have satisfied the emotional needs of Rachel 'that I may also have children by her'. It was optimistic to believe it could save the honour of her marriage. Meanwhile, Leah - now possibly ranking third in favour - found that her fertility fortunes too had changed. She no longer became pregnant. She decided therefore it was best that she followed suit, and like her sister, married off her handmaid *Zilpah* to Jacob.

But such conception by proxy could not and did not satisfy the once fecund Leah. Her thoughts turned to mandrakes. The Magic of Mandrakes could be the answer. And so it came to pass that 'in the time of the wheat-harvest Reuben went out and found mandrakes in the field, and brought them to his mother Leah'. *Genesis 30:14*

For some reason or another, possibly because she did not have her sister Leah's worldly wisdom, the idea of mandrakes had not occurred to Rachel. So when Rachel heard of this love therapy, she boldly asked Leah to give her some of her son Reuben's mandrakes, not wishing her sister to continue gaining an unfair advantage in fertility. But Leah would have none of it, and replied is it a small matter that you have taken away my husband? Would you take away my son's mandrakes also? Rachel promptly responded: 'Then

he may lie with you tonight for your son's mandrakes'. Genesis 30:15

This sisterly concession greatly pleased Leah. Indeed, she hurried out to meet Jacob as he returned home from the fields in the evening, anxious to give him the news that he was to sleep with her that night, for I have hired you with my son's mandrakes'. So that night he slept with her and God heard Leah's prayer and she conceived and bore a fifth son. Then God, who is merciful, thought of poor Rachel, whose plans had been foiled once again; and hearing her prayer gave her a child.

So the story ended happily with the barrenness lifted from the beautiful Rachel. As all good Biblical scholars know, she became the mother of Joseph, he of the coat of many colours.

High fertility was thus strongly desired being viewed as an enrichment of the extended family group in both nomadic and farming societies. The birth of a child, particularly a son, was considered to be a gift from Yahweh reflecting his benevolence on the woman and family or simply in compensation. *'And God blessed them, and God said unto them, be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.'*...*'And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain, and said, I have gotten a man from the LORD.'*.. *'And when the LORD saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb...'*

Fertile women were honoured while the barren were to be pitted. Thus *'And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die.*

It has been said that the word used in the original Hebrew was *dudafm* from *dudim*, meaning the pleasure of love; which etymology could have given the mandrake or mandrake apples of the Septuagint and Vulgate a symbolic significance. But mandrake is the word which the translators of the [Cambridge Annotated Study Bible](#) have chosen to be the most suited to the sense of the passage. And it makes a fine story.

The Greeks had already given the mandrake a place in the mechanics of parturition before the Greek Fathers of the Christian Church, in their turn, became concerned with the nature of its properties.

Its use as a soporific, to relieve pain, was probably the desirable quality sought during parturition, and which gave the mandrake its place in mediaeval medicine. It could well have been that this tranquillising property of the mandrake, which Leah used to assuage her anxiety, improved her love-making; and perhaps she gave it to Jacob to improve his. There is a known similarity in its effect to that of alcohol, which may account for its aphrodisiac reputation.

Anaesthetics

A thick, dark grey L-shaped graphic element. The horizontal bar extends to the right, underlining the word "Anaesthetics".

Chapter Four

Hallucinogens are substances that provoke false sensations or distort perception of the environment (*creating illusions*) without causing loss of consciousness when taken in normal, non-toxic doses. They are also known as *entheogens* (*substances that stimulate mysticism or divine communication*). This word comes from the Greek roots *en* (full of), *theo* (god), and *gen* (create). Numerous cultures have used these substances throughout history, and at present, many different ethnic groups still take part in rituals associated with the use of entheogenic plants. Medicine mingled with magic both early and late in ancient Greece.

In Greek mythology, Asclepius was revered as the god of medicine; the son of Apollo and the mortal woman Coronis. Asclepius possessed the gift of healing.

According to Pindar (6th century BCE), Apollo made love to Coronis, daughter of the King of Thessaly. When he departed for Delphi, he left her guarded by a white crow. Sometime later, the crow informed Apollo that Coronis had taken a new lover, the mortal man *Ischys*, to whom she was now betrothed. Apollo then cursed the crow, which has had black feathers ever since, and murdered Coronis. Before burning her body on a funeral pyre, Apollo snatched his son Asclepius from her womb.

Asclepius was raised and educated by the centaur Chiron, who taught him the art of medicine, the use of medicinal plants, and *pharmaka*. But Zeus, envious of his healing powers and ability to resuscitate the dead, ended his life. After death, Asclepius rose to the heavens and became the constellation known as Ophiuchus, the serpent bearer; his symbol is a serpent entwined around a staff.

Ancient medicine was based on mythological beliefs and the idea that human beings were inferior to a divine power. Sickness was interpreted as punishment by the gods, and such punishment could either be collective or individual. Some sick people might be possessed by a malignant spirit or *daimon*, or as in cases of epilepsy, suffer from the effects of a curse. Theurgic medicine in ancient Greece was magical in nature and concerned with both prognosis and prevention; it also made use of a number of rituals. The Greeks practiced apotropaic magic and obtained the gods' favours through ritual sacrifices. Rites of propitiation and atonement were used in an attempt to ward off sickness.

The magic of the Mandrake grew with the passage of time. Elusive in its origins, where its associations lay with the age-long mysteries of love, its potency lingers on through the medicine of the Middle Ages, then beyond the Renaissance to find an historical mention even in the mid twentieth century physicians' vade mecum, Martindale's Extra Pharmacopoeia.

The soporific and anaesthetic properties of the mandrake had been described by the classical authors over many centuries. Such authorities included Socrates, Demosthenes, Macrobius and Theodoretus.

In particular, Dioscorides outlines the process by which strips of mandrake bark were allowed to be steeped in sweet wine for months. This wine contained the narcotic principle and became known in Roman times as the death wine or '*morion*'. It was given to the victims of torture or crucifixion. Sometimes another bitter anaesthetic was added to the mandrake to potentiate its effects for

example myrrh (*Commiphora myrrha*). The next important step in development was that of the ‘sleeping sponge’ or *spongia somnifera*.

Hugo de Lucca was the chief of a school of surgeons in Tuscany in the fifteenth century. In 1490, he devised this sponge, soaked in a mixture of herbs, which could be used as an inhalational anaesthetic. The preparation contained an infusion of the following plants: opium, mulberry, henbane, hemlock, mandrake and the seeds of lettuce, dock and water hemlock. In other words, at the very least it contained morphine, hyoscyne, and the alkaloids of mandrake. Not surprisingly, sleep could last for up to four hours (*or even longer*). This narcotic sponge was used over several centuries with good effect. One of the most dramatic stories of the use of such a sponge (*containing mandrake*) was in 1782 when Doctor Weiss, Court Surgeon to Augustus, King of Poland, administered such an inhalation to his patron rendering him insensible. He then cut off part of his mortifying foot and the King made a good recovery!

As the nineteenth century dawned, many doctors (*and surgeons*) were very dissatisfied with restraint, alcohol and the soporific sponge, and began to investigate the possibilities of new inhalational anaesthetics.

The movement started with the great chemist Joseph Priestley in 1775 and his six volume series entitled *Experiments and Observations on Different Kinds of Air*. He was the first to isolate nitrous oxide (*laughing gas*) and this stimulated interest eventually in diethyl ether (*sulphuric ether*) and chloroform. These three volatile anaesthetics proved to be much more reliable and definitely

safer than those that had gone before. There is no space here to discuss in detail the early development of effective inhalational anaesthetics, but the reader is referred to the excellent monograph by Stratmann on Chloroform (*The Quest for Oblivion*).

Suffice it to say that by 1850 these new exciting agents had wiped away the soporific sponge (and mandrake) and they had become largely objects of historical curiosity. There is one necessary footnote to the history of mandrake. It had been replaced by ether and chloroform for inhalational anaesthesia but what of its other uses, as an oral analgesic for example?

In 1888, Benjamin Ward Richardson began a series of investigations on the plant. He procured a supply of the *mandragora* root from its native Greece and made a tincture in an alcohol-water mixture for four weeks, thus reproducing the ancient recipe of Dioscorides. He found that this tincture would sedate and anaesthetise animals particularly cats and dogs. He also noted that the pupils dilated and concluded that the extract must contain an alkaloid (*or alkaloids*) similar to hyoscine or atropine (most probably the former). He found also to his surprise that pigeons were much more sensitive to the infusion than rabbits. We now know that rabbit gut (and liver) contain an enzyme called *atropinase* which can destroy *solanaceous* alkaloids and allow this lagomorph to feed on nightshade (*Atropa*) and henbane (*Hyoscyamus*) and presumably also the mandrake with relative impunity.

Finally, Richardson tried small doses of the mandrake infusion on himself and noted the following: *numbness of the tongue; dryness of*

the mouth; confused vision; restlessness and exaggerated sensitivity to sounds. On the basis of these findings he concluded that if the alkaloid could be identified and extracted it might be used as an anaesthetic or possibly supercede atropine as a *mydriatic*. He also foresaw its use in strychnine poisoning and lockjaw (*tetanus*). Richardson's work was the first to apply proper scientific procedures to the mandrake and at the time provoked a great deal of interest. However, it must be remembered that despite this flurry of interest in the chemical constituents of mandrake, it was too late for the development of the plant.

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