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On Peter P. Good, A Materia Medica Animalia  
For Hidden Treasure

Harriet Ritvo

This is a rare book in several senses. Not only are surviving copies scarce, but there is nothing much like it. Although a search of any serious library will reveal dozens—or even hundreds—of books with “materia medica” in the title, it can be confidently predicted that all of them will focus on substances derived from plants. Good did not set himself to swim completely against this tide; he had edited The Family Flora and Materia Medica Botanica before he turned his attention to the animal kingdom. Materia Medica Animalia is also a kind of hybrid. It combines elements from traditional natural history compendia, including the bestiaries of the medieval period, with elements that reflect the zoology of his time. Good analogously suggests alternative organizations for his material. The introduction offers a brief outline of formal scientific taxonomy and locates each of the twenty-four creatures to be discussed within this system, but that is not the order in which they appear (at least if buyers followed Good’s instructions about how to bind the installments—since each animal appeared in a separate installments, idiosyncratic orderings were theoretically possible). Instead, the table of contents suggests a view of the world as composed of randomly related phenomena: thus the sheep is followed by the oyster and the stag is followed by the blood-sucking leech. The entries all ostensibly follow the same general structure. Headed by the latinate and vernacular names of the creature, they first specify the nature and uses of the medicinal substance it produces, then proceed through sections on scientific analysis, natural history, and chemical and medical properties and uses. Sometimes they offer surprising information. For example, rattlesnake venom is listed as a treatment for alcoholism,

mercury poisoning, erysipelas, fainting fits, and hydrophobia. And despite their shared design, the entries vary greatly in length and in the kind of material they contain; up-to-date zoology rubs elbows with folk wisdom and anecdote. Nor did Good always apply the same standard of relevance. To return to the rattlesnake, most of the long discussion of its “medical properties and uses” details treatments for snakebite; relatively little concerns the palliative qualities of venom. When Good considers farmyard species, most of which find a place in his catalogue, he tends to include digressions about the history and merits of their constituent breeds. The entry on the cochineal insect, on the other hand, fulfills its initial promise completely and efficiently, explaining how the creatures are collected, ground into powder, and then used to cure neuralgia and to color tinctures and ointments. Even the illustrations (one per installment, with buyers admonished to bind them in the correct position) reflect the miscellaneous traditions from which Good has drawn. Some, like that of the cochineal insect, recall an older botanical convention of disaggregation and separation, but most, like that of the cuttlefish, enjoy the richly delineated settings that came to characterize nineteenth-century natural history publishing..