

Natural History which treats of the medicinal virtues of plants, he says,<sup>6</sup> "Antiquity was so much struck with the properties of herbs, that it affirmed things incredible. Xanthus, the historian, says, that a man killed by a dragon, will be restored to life by an herb which he calls *balin*; and that Thylo, when killed by a dragon, was recovered by the same plant. Democritus asserted, and Theophrastus believed, that there was an herb, at the touch of which, the wedge which the woodman had driven into a tree would leap out again. Though we cannot credit these stories, most persons believe that almost anything might be effected by means of herbs, if their virtues were fully known." How far from a reasonable estimate of the reality of such virtues were the persons who entertained this belief, we may judge from the many superstitious observances which they associated with the gathering and using of medicinal plants. Theophrastus speaks of these;<sup>7</sup> "The drug-sellers and the rhizotomists (root-cutters) tell us," he says, "some things which may be true, but other things which are merely solemn quackery;"<sup>8</sup> thus they direct us to gather some plants, standing from the wind, and with our bodies anointed; some by night, some by day, some before the sun falls on them. So far there may be something in their rules. But others are too fantastical and far fetched. It is, perhaps, not absurd to use a prayer in plucking a plant; but they go further than this. We are to draw a sword three times round the mandragora, and to cut it looking to the west: again, to dance round it, and to use obscene language, as they say those who sow cumin should utter blasphemies. Again, we are to draw a line round the black hellebore, standing to the east and praying; and to avoid an eagle either on the right or on the left; for, say they, 'if an eagle be near, the cutter will die in a year.'

This extract may serve to show the extent to which these imaginations were prevalent, and the manner in which they were looked upon by Theophrastus, our first great botanical author. And we may now consider that we have given sufficient attention to these fables and superstitions, which have no place in the history of the progress of real knowledge, except to show the strange chaos of wild fancies and legends out of which it had to emerge. We proceed to trace the history of the knowledge of plants.

<sup>6</sup> Lib. xxv. 5.

<sup>7</sup> *De Plantis*, ix. 9.

<sup>8</sup> Επιτραγωδοῦντες.