

Contribution ID: 82

Type: **not specified**

Rembert Dodoens's Construction of an Epistemology of Observational Experience: A Case in Sixteenth-Century Medical Empiricism

Friday 19 September 2025 09:35 (20 minutes)

Many studies have demonstrated the emergence of “observation” as a new epistemic category in sixteenth-century Europe, as well as an increasingly “empiricist” stance taken by European physicians in their knowledge-making. This study aims to offer a more nuanced perspective on this grand shift through an analysis of the works of Flemish physician and botanist Rembert Dodoens (1517–1585). The all-too-natural modern association of “observation” and “experience” breaks down if we notice how Dodoens only worked out a framework that neatly contained both after almost thirty years of medical-botanical study, coalesced into the *Stirpium historiae pemptades sex* (1583). In fact, as revealed in his progressive works starting from 1548, the ideas of “observatio” and “experientia” as ways of knowing came down to him from different intellectual and disciplinary sources, one from cosmography and the other from Galenic medicine. For Dodoens, ultimately, “observatio” obtains the apparent, phenomenal characteristics of natural things (heavens, plants, or patient bodies), while “experientia” provides insight into the “*facultas*” or “properties of essence” which are actually not manifest as opposed to “sensory qualities”. This version of “empiricism” is unique, rooted in the world of sixteenth-century medical learning, and calls for reflection on some traditional narratives about early modern empiricism(s).

Short Biography

Zongbei HUANG is a PhD candidate at the Department of the History of Science, Tsinghua University, China. She received a Bachelor's degree in philosophy (with distinction) from the same university in 2022. Her ongoing doctoral research focuses on the establishment of new forms of “experience”—especially the observational, descriptive, and historical kind—as sources of “scientific” knowledge about the natural world during the sixteenth century, with an emphasis on scholarly practice and historical epistemology. She has published research articles and book reviews in *Journal of Astronomical History and Heritage* and *Tsinghua Journal of History and Philosophy of Science*.

Keywords

Rembert Dodoens, observation, experience (*experientia*), empiricism, epistemology

E-mail

huangzb22@mails.tsinghua.edu.cn

Affiliation

Tsinghua University

Position

PhD student (Department of the History of Science)

Primary author: Zongbei Huang (Department of the History of Science, Tsinghua University)

Presenter: Zongbei Huang (Department of the History of Science, Tsinghua University)

Session Classification: S.4.1. Medical and Natural Knowledge Networks in the Early Modern Ottoman and European Worlds

Track Classification: Individual papers