CHAPTER 2

Selling Drugs

Early Modern Apothecaries and the Limits of Commodifcation

I do remember an apothecary,
And hereabouts he dwells, which late I noted
In tatter'd weeds, with overwhelming brows,
Culling of simples; meagre were his looks,
Sharp misery had worn him to the bones.

—William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 1597

A knave apothecary that administers the physic, and makes the medicine, may do infinite harm, by his old obsolete doses, adulterine drugs, [and] bad mixtures.

—Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, 1621

Maria Coelho knew how to make mithridate. She knew how to tell good camphor from bad. She knew every alley and road that ran between her shop and the castle gates. She knew the rabbits (her namesakes) that lived in the fields outside the walls, and the ruins of an ancient city that lay a day's walk beyond that. But one thing she didn't know was what would become of her in the jails of the Portuguese Inquisition.

Maria was born into the business of *drogas*, a daughter and sister of apothecaries, as well as a drug professional in her own right.[1] The records of the Inquisition for the city of Coimbra tell us that Maria Coelho was taken into jail on January 8, 1666, where she was interrogated on charges of *judaísmo*. The inquisitors learned that she was the unmarried daughter of Felipe and Maria, who ran an apothecary shop in Montemor-o-Velho, a village

within the orbit of the ancient university city of Coimbra. She had lived for five years (perhaps as a kind of apprentice apothecary) with a half brother who also ran a *botica*. The matriarch of the family, Maria Pinto, was a forced convert from Judaism. According to the Inquisition records, the family continued to "follow the Law of Moses" and maintained "a back room for Jewish ceremonies."[2] By August 1666, Maria was still being held in jail. It was not until more than three years after her capture, in April 1669, that she was convicted of heresy, excommunicated, and sent to Brazil, penniless.[3] As far as the Inquisition sources are concerned, this "boticaria," or female apothecary, was never heard from again.

During Maria's imprisonment in Coimbra, another apothecary in the city, also bearing the last name Coelho and perhaps a relative of Maria, was writing a manuscript that he called the *Pharmaca of Jozeph Coelho*.[4] In it, we find a drawing of a man and woman facing one another over a stylized representation of an apothecary's chest (Figure 10). They seem to be pointing at it. "Botica[ria]" reads the caption above the woman's head, and "Boticario" above the man's: apothecaress and apothecary. Regardless of whether Jozeph was kin to Maria, the image stands as a mute testimony to the role played by women and other oppressed groups in shaping the early modern drug trade.

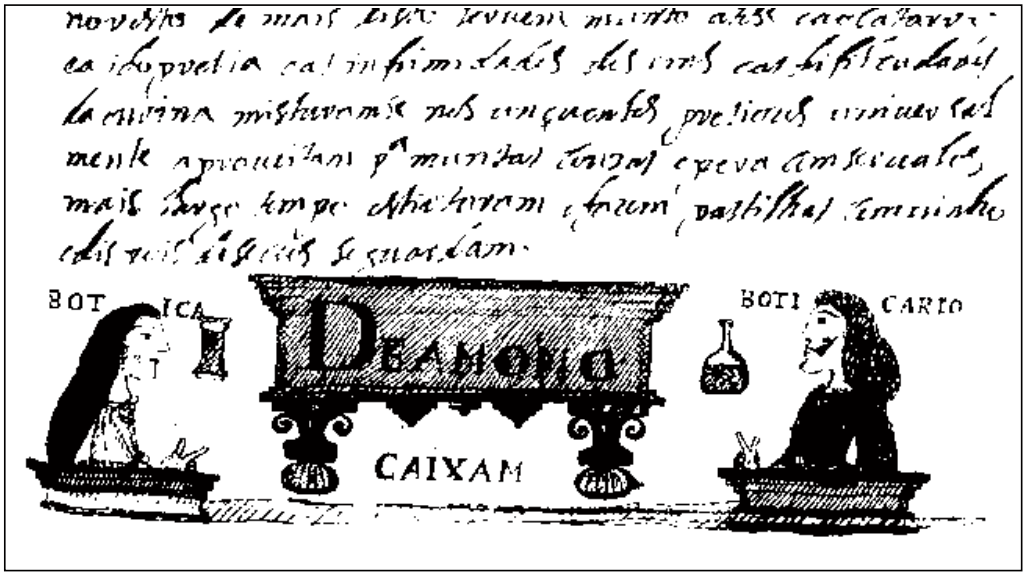

Figure 10. The *boticária* and *boticário* of the Botica da Rua Larga in Coimbra. BNP, Cod. 2259. José [Jozeph] Coelho, *Pharmaca, de Jozeph Coelho que fes sendo boticario no anno de mil e seis sentos e sesenta outo na botica da rua larga* (Coimbra, [1668]), fol. 76r. Courtesy of the Biblioteca Nacional de Portugal.

In Chapter 1, we saw how the work of making a drug global was an act of creative destruction, built upon misinformation, rumor, and the gaps between differing epistemologies of drugs and nature. Here we will see what happened when drugs *did* commodify: namely, how the drug trade relied on self-assertions of purity that sought to separate the "good" drugs (and drug sellers) from the "bad."

An early division between *licit* and *illicit* began to emerge from the posturing and punishment of early modern individuals involved in the marketing and sale of drugs. Some drug professionals reaped enormous profits from the increasing popularity of novel drugs. Others, like Maria Coelho, were excluded, falling prey to claims of corruption, counterfeiting, or membership in groups (Jews, women, non-Europeans) that the trade's networks of sociability and credit refused to accept. To establish the necessary social capital to sell controversial drugs, apothecaries and merchants needed to carefully weed out competitors who were in danger of appearing suspicious or fraudulent to consumers. That process resulted in the increasing commercialization of "Indies drugs" in the seventeenth century. It also led to the erasure of the women, Jews, and other subaltern groups who helped make the trade possible.

Historians of medicine have documented how seventeenth-century European cities witnessed a crisis in medical authority.[5] In the continent's commercial centers, it has been argued, a new "medical marketplace" emerged in the mid- to late seventeenth century that gave ordinary consumers access to a greatly expanded field of treatment options, thus reducing the centrality of traditional medical authorities.[6] Economic historians have, likewise, documented a major increase in the value and diversity of medicinal drugs available to consumers in the second half of the seventeenth century.[7] These changes allowed the ancient profession of the apothecary to move up in the world. Apothecaries increasingly began working as independent healers in their own right, rather than as adjuncts to licensed physicians.

In this regard, apothecaries and drug merchants can be seen as pioneers of global capitalism. In cities like Madrid, Paris, and Lisbon, the most ambitious were soon branching out into auxiliary ventures like publishing medical manuals and seeking lucrative court appointments and sinecures. Some apothecaries, like Jacob de Castro Sarmento in Portugal and William Salmon in England, became successful participants in the realm of print

culture, producing vernacular books with eye-catching titles like *A New Mystery in Physick Discovered* (1681) that ran into multiple editions and translations.[8] But their rise was accompanied by a proportionate increase in the suspicion and condemnation directed at the most "foreign" and otherwise vulnerable participants in the trade.

The apothecary Pierre Pomet, who wrote perhaps the most famous early modern drug manual of all (*Histoire Générale des Drogues*), was representative of the professional class that benefited from the commodification of exotic drugs.[9] Pomet boasted that he "kept up a trade in letters with the Indies of the East and West to have true accounts [*relations fidèles*] of Drugs which are not yet known in Europe." In addition to being an author and an apothecary who sold his own wares out of his shop on the Rue des Lombards at "the sign of the Golden Beard," Pomet became the superintendent of the *materia medica* in the gardens of Louis XIV and a correspondent with both the Royal Society of London and the Académie des Sciences in Paris.[10] He died rich, convinced that he had pursued his vocation "with all the good faith and duty that ought to attend a man of honor." As Pomet put it, "The knowledge of Drugs that are used in Medicine" had grown into "a commerce that is not only the greatest in the Kingdom, but also the most useful and important to the life of men."[11]

So it went for the apothecary elite in Paris. By contrast, stories like those of Mario Coelho are, for historians of medicine, something akin to the "missing" dark energy that bedevils contemporary physics. We know that figures like crypto-Jewish, female, and African healers existed in the early modern medical marketplace, and we know they were important. But they tend to elude the reach of our observations. When Maria Coelho left Portugal for Brazil, she disappeared into an archival event horizon.[12] The processes of invention, and then commodification, that brought tropical drugs from Brazil to Europe, or tobacco and sugar cane rum from Brazil to Africa, were a reversal of the pathways of people like Maria Coelho. Exotic drugs flowed into the mainstream of commercial and social success; some of those who sold them moved on an opposite trajectory.

Seventeenth-century texts relating to the drug trade are rich with epithets and slanders directed at the supposed deceitfulness of the members of what we might call this "drug underground": empirics, cunning women, African healers, crypto-Jews. It is in this push and pull over the respectability, trustworthiness, and "purity" of the drug seller that some of the first signs of a division between illicit and licit drugs begins to appear.