

## BOOK REVIEW

### **The Apothecary's Wife: The Hidden History of Medicine and How It Became a Commodity by Karen Bloom Gervitz**

Apollo, Paperback, 336 pages  
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This book's main objective is to show how domestic medicine with its free communal system of medication traditionally run by the female head of the family, was replaced over a century (1650-1750) by medical men that commodified medical drugs.

The first and larger part of this book comprises seven chapters that walk the reader through domestic and professional medical care from the 13<sup>th</sup> century to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Each chapter is built around the stories of two central female characters. We learn about the nature of the Recipe book and its important role in providing free health care for families. Then how women's role as the primary medical caregiver was destabilised and their Recipe books replaced by New Science, the so-called scientific revolution, that relied on experimentation, observation and careful recording. Chemical medicine replaced the kitchen with laboratories where men created new drugs, displacing women as healers and demoting diet.

Gervitz provides crucial historical context about apothecaries, their rivalry with physicians and their joint efforts to separate themselves from competitors in the medical marketplace ('quacks'). Examples are given of the fate of women practitioners who attracted their ire. Gervitz argues that as these proto-professions established themselves, they prioritised profit and self-interest over care. This feels like an over generalisation and though amusingly supported by reference to contemporary plays and satirists, ignores the physicians who advocated diet as a first line intervention, demonstrated their concern for the poor by *pro bono* treatment and followed contemporaneous ethical manuals that described good professional behaviour.

The second, shorter part of the book argues that the developments of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century have led to a profit motive, monetising knowledge through patent law, and the loss of the basic human rights of access to health care. The author is very critical about the pharmaceutical industry in the United States so British readers, accustomed to a socialised health care system, may not immediately recognise the picture painted.

She suggests that domestic medicine still has much to offer, arguing the kitchen should return as a place where medicine and food can come together again in a communal setting. She endorses the process of bioprospecting, that is analysing recipes in ancient herbals for 'new' effective medicines and encourages the collaboration between large organisations and local communities to achieve this.

Gervitz's well written stories about an array of characters will keep all readers engaged. This book is well written, accessible and well researched, but its persistent feminist emphasis and polemical tone can distract and at times seem unbalanced. History of medicine scholars will appreciate the extensive bibliography and meticulous research on the evolution and displacement of the Recipe book. The contextual history on the rise of and rivalry between the professions of apothecaries and physicians, should be valued by all readers.

**Lisetta Lovett**  
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