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Book Reviews

Benjamin Breen, *The Age of Intoxication: Origins of the Global Drug Trade*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019.

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This is an ambitious, sweeping overview that locates the origins of the global drug trade, both licit and illicit, at a partnership between the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Portuguese and English empires. Breen's firm commitment to taking in the big picture proves to be both a strength and a limitation, as his desire to not miss a single aspect of the drug trade means that at times the book seems to be skimming over the surface of many different topics, rather than really digging into any one of them in depth. The author has several larger goals in addition to tracing the paths of the Portuguese and English scientists, apothecaries, and explorers who, in his view, founded the international drug trade. These include uncovering the early modern origins of the contemporary suspicion toward intoxicating drugs, pointing out the drug trade's connection to other large historical phenomena like the Scientific Revolution and Atlantic World slavery, and pushing readers of the book today, when thinking about the use of illicit drugs, away from criminalization to compassion.

The book begins with the search for quina in the Brazilian rainforest—the Portuguese were searching for their own local source of the Jesuit's

bark, chinchona, that was brought from Spanish Peru for its fever-quenching properties. But the Portuguese did not exactly know what to look for and could not explain clearly their search to the indigenous peoples whom they relied on for local medicinal plant lore. What did it mean to discover a drug? Chinchona came in several species, and the shamanistic understanding of plants' healing properties was an awkward match for the European medical understanding of drugs. So it was not so much an act of discovery; rather "the interpretive work that went into 'finding' drugs . . . was actually an act of invention" (38). Selling drugs in Europe was also an act of interpretation, as professional apothecaries in Portugal pushed aside the marginal groups like women, conversos, and Africans who contributed to finding and developing tropical healing medicines. By doing so, the apothecaries promoted their own legitimacy in the metropolitan medical marketplace as well as the legitimacy of the drugs they were selling, saving them from the mistrust of foreignness and exoticism that went hand in hand with handling by foreign and exotic peoples. Breen argues that the idea that European professionals took raw materials from non-European sources and then improved and purified them became an important part of creating modern medicine. Breen next turns his attention to *feitiçeiros* in Portuguese West Africa. He makes the case that nothing in the Portuguese empire was clear-cut; a healing bark promoted by the Portuguese cavalry officer in Angola for curing both natural and supernatural injuries was neither African nor Portuguese but a combination of the two, while the African supernatural healing practice called *feitiçaria* was likewise a creole product, incorporating European trafficked drugs like distilled spirits and tobacco into indigenous rituals.

The second part of the book turns away from the Portuguese empire toward England. Breen begins by examining members of the Royal Society in London who depended on Portuguese and indigenous knowledge of drugs from Brazil, Africa, and India while at the same time wanting to conceal their Catholic, non-White roots. One example of this was the "rebranding" of quinine soaked in wine, a mixture probably pioneered by a Portuguese Jew, Fernando Mendes, but labeled "English water" to make it more acceptable. Breen then goes on a brief tour of intoxicating substances in the eighteenth century: cannabis, nitrous oxide, ayahuasca, peyote, psilocybin mushrooms, and opium. Breen closes the book with a longer look at opium and the ingredient that was isolated from it in the early nineteenth century, morphine.

Improving raw opium through modern chemistry into morphine allowed Europeans to contain the suspicious, racialized, enslaving qualities in opium, allowing morphine to break free of its raw materials and become scientific, modern, and medical.

This is not a deep examination of one cache of archival or published resources, nor is it a focused view of just a few early modern drugs. Instead, *The Age of Intoxication* races from one topic and one source to the next, eager to make connections between all the disparate elements that came together to make the early modern drug trade a worldwide enterprise. The book is helped along by a crisp, lively prose, but the pace and the writing style can become frustrating, as the book continually offers hints of big ideas about drugs, medicine, science, and trade in the period but rarely follows through in any kind of sustained way. There will be little here that an expert in the history of early modern drugs and alcohol will find to be new, especially in the last chapters when Portugal fades into the background, and ultimately Breen's points remain more suggestive than conclusive. But Breen's wide view and his zeal to show how the drug trade depended on connections between all different types of people throughout the early modern world make the book a good assignment for introducing undergraduates to the subject. Throughout the book Breen wants to break the bounds of early modernity and discuss nineteenth- and twentieth-century trends, and one of the larger goals of the book is to show the readers the somewhat arbitrary nature of the split between illicit and medicinal drugs; as he puts it, to "push contemporary societies toward tolerance and compassion, and away from an obsolete legacy of criminalization and stigma" (12). By exposing the messy, confusing, and world-spanning process of how modern drugs were invented—from the bewildering richness of the offerings of the Brazilian rainforest and Goa markets, through go-betweens that included shamans, explorers, and people on the margins of religious orthodoxy, to northern European experts who then had to sift through the various lenses through which they could be understood, including science, exoticism, race, addiction, and commerce—Breen certainly demonstrates that there is nothing simple or easy about the origins of our categories for understanding legal and illegal drugs today.