"For the Protection of Those Who Have Both Shop and Home in this City"

Relations Between Italian Charlatans and Apothecaries

by David Gentilcore*

A pothecaries and charlatans were the twin pillars of the commercial pharmaceutical sector in early modern Italy. "Charlatans" have so often been contrasted with physicians in early modern Europe that it is easy to lose sight of the fact that it was the apothecaries who stood to lose the most from their competition. The apothecaries of Milan went so far as to petition the state's medical tribunal, the Protomedicato for greater rigor in the licensing of charlatans. "For those [apothecaries] who have established in this city both a shop and a home with family," they declared, it was difficult "to co-exist with and practice alongside a charlatan who has nothing [no possessions] of his own and might depart from one day to the next, without the relevant fines and punishments being applied." This was typical of the attitudes of the town towards peddlers in general: they were seen on the one hand as sources of revenue (via license fees and town tolls), and on the other hand as itinerant interlopers upsetting the tightly-knit world of the local shopkeeper. But apothecaries and charlatans did not inhabit separate worlds. Given that they both functioned primarily as sellers of drugs, it is obvious that they must have come into frequent contact. What was the nature of this contact? How did the two groups co-exist in practice? What place did they occupy in the commodification of medical remedies during the early modern period? These are the questions this article sets out to answer.

The history of medicine as a discipline seems to have a fairly clear idea about the functions and nature of apothecaries during the early modern period, even if this is clearly in need of revision. The term "charlatan" has always proved more problematic. Yet, at least as far as the early modern Italian medical authorities were concerned—the Protomedicato tribunals, the Colleges of Physicians and the Health Offices—charlatani constituted a specific and recognized category of practitioner within the "medical arts." The elites may have derided the charlatans' abilities and ridiculed the claims made for their medicines, but they licensed both the charlatans and their remedies throughout the period. The licenses constitute the "Charlatans Database" which provides the framework for this study. With 1,596 licenses issued to 1,075 different charlatans (and a few other categories of practitioner)—over the length and breadth of Italy for a period of two and a half

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centuries—it comes as close as it is possible to get in our attempt to understand charlatans and charlatanism "from the inside." As for the apothecaries, physicians depended on them for the preparation of their prescriptions while also overseeing their activities. The supervision of both apothecaries and charlatans depended on the authority granted to various medical bodies to license the manufacture and sale of medicines in their towns or states and to compile a state's official pharmacopoeia.  

From a statutory point of view, apothecaries and charlatans should have been at odds with one another. Apothecaries, more than physicians, were wary of charlatans as potential competitors. Guild statutes clearly defined the relationship. In Bologna licensed charlatans were required to pay an annual monetary tribute to the Company of Apothecaries (as were a wide range of other trades; it must be said, from olive-sellers to regnema). And it was not just the charlatans apothecaries had to fear. Competition came from a wide range of wholesalers, retailers, and grocers. Italian apothecaries, like their German counterparts, used the language of corporatism to wage war on the competition. They made use of the lists of products each guild could make and sell in order to delineate market boundaries. They produced lists of trades dependent on the apothecaries' guild. The relationship of these trades to the apothecaries was sometimes tenuous, as was the list of products. These lists quickly became outdated, as new products arrived on the scene. The Rome College of Apothecaries claimed the authority to issue licenses to "apothecaries, grocers, confectioners, perfumers, chamberlains, honey-sellers, [and] bakers who sell spices, sugars, waxes, spiced cakes [panpepati] or other things pertaining to the apothecary's trade." In the first place, this meant grocers. Ongoing disputes between the two trades were widespread throughout Italy, beginning in the late middle ages and never satisfactorily resolved. The licensing of perfumers "to be able to distil all perfumed waters and quintessences" was the apothecaries' prerogative, it claimed. Claims extended to wholesalers and retailers in general. In its 1551 statutes the Sienese guild of apothecaries moved to prevent anyone from selling medicinal ingredients or drugs without their authorization. One victim of this legislation was a Jewish merchant in the town, Abramo Mercado. In 1654 Mercado was found guilty of selling six pounds of anise to a local baker, despite having been previously warned against such trade, and was fined sixteen denari by the Corte dei Regolarori.  

In the long term, however, the apothecaries could not beat their competitors—so they joined them instead. They too became eager participants in the commodification of medicine. Various apothecaries appear in the Charlatans

An Italian apothecary is shown at work weighing out the ingredients with a hand scale in his shop. (From the 18th-century copper plate shown on the cover, one in a series depicting the "Arti" or trades in Italy.)
Database as the originators (or inheritors) and sellers of new medicines. In 1760 the Venetian apothecary Ruggier Mandricardi Vezzali petitioned to sell his “natural caustic,” which he claimed had been in the family for over a hundred years. Girolamo Zaniuchelli boasted that his shop had possessed a patent for its Pilulci del Giovano “from time immemorial.” The apothecary Livio Danelli claimed that his stomach elixir had been left to him by “a benefactor.”

There is evidence that apothecaries managed to sell their remedies, or to have others sell them on their behalf, outside the confines of their shops. By 1788 the Venetian apothecary Giambattista Gregori had a city-wide distribution network for his Polvere della Comare (“Godmother’s powder”). This included agents Angelo Zannini, at SS. Apostoli, Gaetano Paglirini, at S. Felice, and Lorenzo Dismat, at S. Marcellian. Some apothecaries sold their wares in different towns. In 1656 the Venetian apothecary Hieronimo de Conti was licensed to sell a range of medicines in Mantua; and in 1740 the apothecary Giovanni Pietro de Abbiati of Verona (near Alessandria) was licensed to sell his Spirito filosofico throughout the entire kingdom of Sardinia. Finally, there is evidence of apothecaries selling proprietary remedies for their own gain. Two Roman apothecaries were caught selling Giovan Domenico Toscani’s Balsamo Sanitario without his permission.

Coexistence of Apothecaries and Charlatans

Despite the competition between the two groups, charlatans and apothecaries co-existed and dealt with one another at a range of levels. They both relied on the emporium that was Venice for obtaining their supplies. The city, with its overseas empire and trade connections, offered a rich store of ingredients, in addition to a cultural predisposition to novelty and luxury that both groups could exploit. Moreover, charlatans and apothecaries supplied one another with drugs, both simple and compound, acting as both wholesalers and retailers. Apothecaries might number charlatans among their suppliers, such as the Bolognese apothecaries who bought nepenthe from Cornelio Balbiani, or the Venetian apothecaries supplied with various herb simples by Leone Tartaglini. Tartaglini (“L’Herbolario” or “L’Herbolato”) is one of the earliest examples of a charlatan being issued a patent for his medicine, coralline powder for worms. Sea coralline is a moss or alga, which was reduced to a powder and used against intestinal worms. Its use was as old as Dioscorides, but something in Tartaglini’s preparation of it must have convinced the Venetian authorities to issue the patent. He was first licensed to sell the remedy in August of 1563, a month after he had been appointed overseer for the licensing of charlatans. A year and a half later, on 8 December 1564, he was issued a ten-year privilegio for the remedy. Tartaglini kept his own small botanic garden on the island of Murano. It was from this garden that Tartaglini supplied plants to some of the city’s apothecaries, as well as to the patrician Pietro Antonio Michiel (+1576), author of an illustrated manuscript herbal. It is somehow appropriate then that the rights to Tartaglini’s remedy were inherited by an apothecary, “maestro Angelo at the sign of Abramo,” to be the sole seller of the drug in the city in 1576. His only obligation in return for the privilege was to supply it to the city’s hospitals and other charitable institutions free of charge.

At the same time, charlatans frequently bought from apothecaries, with whom they established a working relationship. Charlatans made use of apothecaries to support their license petitions. When Giovan Battista Ruzante petitioned the Paduan Health Office for a license to sell his balm for pains and fluxions he enlisted the support of an apprentice apothecary, Domenico Mori, whom he had known for two years. Charlatans might elect apothecaries as agents for their medicines. In 1738 the Bohemian Cavalier Arabane Zorziembeni Polesi was permitted to have an apothecary in every town in the Venetian Republic sell his water for eyes. Sometimes charlatans had no choice but to buy wholesale from apothecaries. In a series of moves between 1613 and 1618, the duke of Mantua granted increased powers over charlatans to the city’s College of Physicians. The latter sought to have charlatans prepare their medicines in apothecaries’ shops, under a physician’s supervision. Tristano Martinelli, famous comic actor of the commedia dell’arte and fee-collector for charlatans’ licenses, described this move as
“a knife-blows" in a letter to the duke. The charlatans could no longer make a living, Martinelli complained in a letter of 1618, “because the [apothecaries’] wares cost four times more as in Venice" (where charlatans usually obtained their supplies). In addition, the charlatans “have to grease the palms of the protophysician and the notaries, which was not the case before.”

Charlatans and Apothecaries: Public vs. Private?

One distinction between charlatans and apothecaries might be that of public versus private: while charlatans inhabited the very public world of squares and fairs, apothecaries functioned in the more private world of shops. However, the contrast is not as clear-cut as it might appear. First of all, shops were not very private places; they were generally a combination of house, workshop, and retail outlet. Indeed, they could be quite public places, as any reader of Carlo Goldoni’s play *La finta ammalata* (first performed 1751) will quickly realize. The apothecary in the play, Agapito, is obsessed with newspapers and the exchange of the latest bit of news, however trivial, leaving his practice to a young and inexperienced assistant. Early modern apothecaries’ shops were places of socialization. By the eighteenth century they fulfilled the same role as clubs and coffee-houses; news could be discussed and often purchased. They even inspired the creation of imagined communities of oral communication. Such was a short-lived weekly news-sheet called *La Spezieria di Sondrio*, the pretense of which was that its contents were based on the conversations of four friends who met each evening in an apothecary’s shop—"a place where things are clearly seen"—to debate and digest the contents of other newspapers. The conversations were led by the apothecary himself, “mad about being the first

*A vignette on the titlepage of the Recetario de Galiano (Venice 1516) shows the inside of a pharmacy. (Photograph from the National Library of Medicine.)*
to relay all news,” reminiscent of Goldoni’s apothecary.22

Second, apothecaries, like the charlatans, could have direct dealings with their clientele. This grew out of the standard practice of self-medication (a still vastly understudied area of medical practice). Thus in 1712, a Sienese dropy sufferer bought sambuca (elder) roots, took them to his local apothecary, and had him press them for the juice which the sufferer wished to take as a purge. “And I took [the remedy],” the sufferer later recounted, “and it had an optimal effect on me, such that I attribute my health to it.”23 Apothecaries could quite legitimately sell certain “off-the-counter” remedies to the sick who came into their shops, without the mediating role of a physician. Sufferers got a consultation or advice from the apothecary for free, and they were able to maintain a greater say in their own treatment, whereas, under normal circumstances, they would have had to pay for a physician’s advice. In 1600 the Bolognese Protomedicato published a brief index of the simples apothecaries could sell without a doctor’s prescription. These included two prepared wines, three prepared honeys, four different syrups, five plasters, and all unguents, simple oils, distilled waters and common enemas, as well as “all the herbs, flowers, fruits, seeds and roots [which are] neither lenitive nor solutive.”24 This is in fact quite a vast array of medicines, the plant elements alone going far into the hundreds—even when we eliminate those with pain-relieving or laxative effects, whose use, as far as the physicians were concerned, required special expertise. To these we must add the many spices used in a culinary context, as well as things like wax, honey, and sugar, all sold by grocers without a doctor’s prescription. The same went for the scents sold by perfumers. This is to say nothing of “certain small stalls in the city which under the guise of wine”—presumably with the addition herbs or spices—actually sold medicines, according to a complaint made by Bolognese apothecaries.25

Apothecaries were quite aware of their rights to sell certain things over the counter. In 1662 a Roman apothecary accused of selling cassia without a doctor’s prescription insisted that he had always obeyed the edicts of the Roman Protomedicato in this regard; its prohibition only applied to “poisonous medicaments, opiates, scarnony purges, solutives and abortives.”26 The tribunal decided in his favor, although what apothecaries could dispense on their own accord varied from state to state. Along the same lines, there was thus much charlatans could sell quite openly, with no special permission required, other than the kind of routine licensing procedure that any kind of peddler would have to undergo. Therefore, when a charlatan like Francesco Sonaglia, “Il Celentano,” appeared before the medical authorities to be licensed to sell his range of unguents, oils, plasters, waters, and roots, the procedure was quite routine.27 It required no special dispensation or examination. There was nothing the authorities could really disapprove.

Third, apothecaries also—quite illicitly—made up their own prescriptions and even visited the sick. In the summer of 1594, a man in the small town of Savona, near Siena, fell sick. To find out what was ailing him, he sent his son with a sample of his urine to the town physician; the boy, finding no trace of the physician in the town, took the sample instead to the town apothecary. The apothecary, Vincenzo Spinelli, examined the urine and decided to prepare a syrup for the sick man, telling the boy that he could save his father the doctor’s fees. The man took the syrup and said later that it did him good. The event seems fairly unremarkable; the apothecary was happy to oblige and the sick man was happy with the remedy. We would not

An assistant in the apothecary shop heats up the retort used for distillation.

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know about it at all if the town physician had not launched a lawsuit with the Siene College of Physicians against the apothecary. The case is a common example of professional rivalry, with the physician accusing the apothecary of practicing physic, by examining and prescribing, and the apothecary defending himself by saying he had acted out of charity, to save the patient. Besides, Spinelli declared, he knew what he was doing, after forty-seven years' experience filling out a wide variety of prescriptions for physicians. He confessed to preparing the syrup—a mixture of theralc, nutmeg, and cumin in wine—"my own way," because there was no doctor. Spinelli also admitted to giving other remedies at the behest of the sick: unguents, juleps, and similar things. The apothecary was found guilty and made to pay a reduced fine. The trial proceedings have the virtue of recording everyday occurrences, reminding us that—in practice—professional roles were shaped by local needs. Given the first-hand knowledge of drugs they acquired through apprenticeship and the filling out of prescriptions for physicians, it is no wonder apothecaries dispensed drugs themselves on occasion, without a doctor's intervention.

As far as the sick were concerned, this form of illicit practice was unlikely to present a problem. Different ideas concerning professional boundaries and credentials applied. The service they offered was cheap and convenient. Moreover, in many cases apothecaries were probably closer in socio-economic background to most of the population than physicians. They may have shared their customers' concepts of health to a greater degree than physicians; at the very least they were able to mediate between popular and learned attitudes. Finally, apothecaries had to please their customers if they were to stay in business. As a result, apothecaries were probably responding to the requests of the sick when they turned to physic, just as barber-surgeons did.

It might be noted of an apothecary that "he dispenses drugs to whomever asks him for them." However, if a death resulted and criminal accusations were made against the apothecary, it was the sort of evidence that would be brought out to incriminate the accused apothecary still further. It was usually the physician of the town who made any accusation before the medical authorities. In 1711 the physician in the town of Corneto in the Papal States denounced the apothecary Desiderio Bernardelli for fixing prices and dispensing medicines without a prescription, resulting in a woman's death. In his defense, Bernardelli wrote to the protophysician, saying that he was well loved for the quality of his medicines. He admitted that, especially in the case of repeat prescriptions, he did not wait for the physician's order but dispensed himself. He believed that this was also normal practice in Rome. Bernardelli concluded by noting that "above all, it seems that some shoots of envy, sister of persecution, always spring up between practitioners." The protophysician's deputy seemed to agree. He found Bernardelli guilty of dispensing medicines of his own accord, but decided that the charges of price fixing and causing death were "a mere and evil imposture."

As far as charlatans are concerned, the licensing records reveal a number of charlatans who ran their own shops, where they produced and sold their own patented remedies. We might call these "merchant-charlatans," in contrast to the more numerous "peddler-charlatans." Peddler-charlatans tended to sell goods they had purchased, from a range of suppliers: grocers, apothecaries, even other charlatans (as when they were agents for a merchant-charlatan's remedy). Merchant-charlatans, by contrast, were more apt to originate new medicines and sell the goods they themselves produced, in a manner not unlike apothecaries. It might seem far-fetched to compare charlatans to merchants and shopkeepers. But let us consider the following example. In 1791 Giovano Domenico Toscani, calling himself "Il Mercantino" (the Little Merchant), petitioned the Rome Protomedicato. Toscani's shop was also his home, from which he sold his Balsamo Samaritano for wounds and sores. "The said shop," his daughter would have occasion to write a few years later, "situated near Piazza Barberini, [has] for a very long time been known and well-thought-of for the sale of the said balm." In fact, Toscani was first licensed to make and sell the balm in 1750. The problem was, he argued, that he prepared his balm on many occasions throughout the year, which meant paying the College each time to
have it inspected. He wondered if he might pay an annual fee instead, to be determined by the College. Toscani was clearly modeling himself after the apothecaries, whose shops were inspected once a year and who paid an annual fee. The College accepted; henceforth he would pay twenty scudi a year, in two installments. His preparation of the balm would still be overseen by the vice-protophysician and his deputy each time, "in the same form in which the apothecaries' shops are inspected." His status as a shopkeeper was explicitly recognized, and it was one he wanted to safeguard and perpetuate. So in 1794 he petitioned the authorities for his nephew to be able to run the business after his death, "keeping the tablet or sign hanging outside the shop under the same name, Gio. Domenico Toscani, as is customary with other shops and mercantile concerns."12

Contrasting Organizational Structures

Another obvious difference between charlatans and apothecaries is the corporative structure of the latter. Since charlatanry had no guild structure, there were no requirements regarding training and preparation (such as apprenticeship). By contrast, apprenticeship was a requirement for apothecaries, barber, and other manual trades. As a result, entry into Charlatan could take place via a range of different channels. Specialists like snake-charmers and norcino surgeons (itinerant empirical surgeons from the area near Norcia) were frequently "born" into their occupation, the technical knowledge being passed from one generation to the next. Tooth-drawers, by contrast, constituted a much more eclectic group, similar to remedy-selling charlatans in the wide variety of their origins. People chose from the opportunities open to them: like Giovanni Angelo Varese Meda, of Milan, who sold an oil sometimes dispensed by his grandfather, the midwife Antonia Ciocca. The medicine Meda sold gives a good idea of the sorts of complaints midwives might treat, for it could be rubbed on the hips for mal di madre (pseudopelvis of the uterus), on the mouth to aid digestion, on the stomach, tempes, and nostrils for intestinal worms, and to treat stitches (pleurisy), sciatica, and "cold humors."14

Charlatans sometimes gravitated towards this particular kind of activity by chance. Charlatanism could be but a stage in a person's life strategy, giving way to other activities according to need and opportunity. Giovanni Battista Ruzante, of Stanghella (near Padua), was a cowherd by occupation. He also had a sideline, which consisted of making and selling a balm for pains and fluxions. "When he has nothing else to do," a longstanding acquaintance reported, "he goes now to one place, now to another, selling the balm."15 The Venetian Domenico del Campo was both charlatan and a barge-man, according to his Turinese license of 1763.16 Marco Guidi, resident near Trajan's column in Rome, referred to himself as a guild, "but around a month ago I was practising as a charlatan [facevo il ciarlatano]," he testified. His role, according to another witness, was as jester (buffone) for another charlatan.17

Relationships of this sort do suggest a rudimentary form of apprenticeship system among charlatans. One way of gaining the experience and confidence necessary to practice the trade on one's own was to serve under an established charlatan. Iazzaro Tambi, "Il Dottore," treated people and was a school master (in his words), before being invited to peddle remedies alongside Giuseppe Dangeli. According to Tambi, Dangeli wrote to him from Grosseto, offering to "try" him for one month. Tambi referred to Dangeli as "my master, because this is not my occupation; I am with him because I am a good talker; nor do I do anything else besides."18 The profession must have agreed with Tambi, since his son Giovano Domenico Tambi also took it up, surfacing in the records of the Rome Protomedicato as "tooth-drawer and charlatan under the name of il Contadino Idiota [the Unlearned Peasant]."19

Charlatans made the most of their edge over apothecaries in not being constrained by guild policies and restrictions. This will become more apparent in the final section, which examines the remedies sold by both groups. Charlatans' strategies were fully fledged commercial ventures. Like modern advertisers, charlatans exaggerated their claims. They had to be reigned in by the medical authorities from time to time. At the same time, exaggerated claims were a feature of all branches of the healing arts, and not unique to charlatans. The treatises of physicians
abounded with hyperbole about their own procedures and their own favorite medicines. Epifanio Ferdinando, town physician in Messagne (near Brindisi) and known to medical historians for his detailed discussion of tarantism, was quick to reveal his own creations. He proposed two of his own remedies for the tarantula’s poison, a distilled “vital water” and an electuary. The former, he claims, was even effective against “pestilence.” In part the invention and use of original “magisterial medicines,” as they were known, was regarded as the natural expression of the physician’s learning and expertise. Of course, it was tempting to take the logical step towards commercialization. And by the middle of the eighteenth century a wide range of medical practitioners were advertising their goods and services in newspapers, side by side. Elite physicians and practically-minded surgeons, as well as the traditional sellers of medicine, like apothecaries, monasteries and convents, and charlatans all made use of newspapers to boost custom.

Charlatans could be more flexible than apothecaries in their setting of prices. They could vary their prices according to the relative wealth of their customers, as well as other factors. When Giuseppe Panelli sold his medicines “in the square” (in Rome) in the early eighteenth century, he charged one doppio per jar; when he sold them outside Rome, the sometimes charged one doppio, sometimes two, and sometimes ten scudi more or less, depending on how much he could. Charlatans’ prices were not so cheap as to undercut apothecaries; otherwise the Milanese apothecaries quoted earlier would surely have mentioned this, too. Like apothecaries, they were expected to participate in the moral economy, which meant distributing goods either free of more cheaply to the poor. At the same time, at least some of the Italian charlatans’ remedies were no doubt intended as cheaper versions of established medicines. Even the charlatans’ remedies could not come close to matching the sixty-four ingredients contained in classical theriac. Their product was probably cheaper. Even so, the apothecaries of Bologna were not to be outdone by the competition. In 1726 the Bolognese Protomedico sent instructions to the city’s apothecaries on how to make a simple “theriac water,” intended for the poor.

**Inspection and Licensing Procedures**

The various medical bodies had a hand in setting prices for both apothecaries and charlatans. What does the view from above tell us about the two groups? I have in mind the attitudes of the medical elites, chiefly the bodies responsible for licensing and inspections. Their main business, in fact, was apothecaries. The medical authorities sought to keep a tight rein on what medicines were sold, within the albeit limited realms of medical policing and public health as it was then practiced and enforced. Financial interests coincided with the desire to uphold the moral order. The inspections of apothecaries’ shops—to ensure they had the drugs listed in the official pharmacopoeias, in the proper condition and at the proper price—were important sources of income for the medical authorities. Penalties for fraud could even extend to confiscation of the entire shop, one-third of the proceeds going to the accuser. It is no surprise, then, that one unlicensed apothecary left a message “that he wasn’t at home, that he had nothing to do with prothephysicians, and didn’t want to receive inspections.” He was typical in having inherited the shop from a relation, in this case his father, and wanted to continue trading for the income it attracted.

The medical authorities were also charged with investigating certain offenses apothecaries might commit. The first area of offense concerned the selling of adulterated medicines. The trial records of the Protomedico tribunals show that apothecaries were not always paragons of virtue. According to the Roman protophysician Lorenzo Garzoni, apothecaries practiced various subterfuges, like writing the prescription themselves and forging a physician’s initials. Indeed Tommaso Garzoni, in his 1585 description of “all the world’s professions,” poured equal scorn on apothecaries and charlatans. If charlatans were guilty of pretense and fraud, the same might be said of apothecaries. The pretense derived from the apothecaries’ “wooden pots (bussolotti),” those ceramic jars, and those boxes (scatole), which with great capital letters allude at times to a thousand unguents or confections or precious aromatics, and which are nevertheless empty inside. The fraud occurred because apothecaries were not concerned about the quality of their wares, “whether they
are falsified, adulterated, rejected, whether suff-  
focated inside a ship or drowned in the sea,  
whether spilt by great age or not gathered at  
the right time and place." The two groups might  
even collude in deceiving the public. Charlatans  
specializing in the sale of electuaries against poi-  
son would pretend to take arsenic or some other  
poison as part of their stage act, Garzoni wrote.  
They would arrange a deceit with a nearby  
apothekey beforehand, replacing the dose of ar-  
senic with "a mixture of candied sugar, starch  
and other things." The charlatan would then  
send for this tablet during the course of his act.  
He would then feign the symptoms of poisoning  
until he was supposedly returned to health by  
his remedy.46  
The second area of offense by apothecaries  
concerns the temptation to exceed the bound-  
aries of their profession. Charlatans were just as  
guilty. For example, of the twenty-five people  
denounced for illicit medical practice in the  
years 1716-17 before the Rome Protomedicato,  
four were charlatans and four were apothecaries.  
The medical authorities approached charla-  
tary in much the same way as they dealt with  
apothecaries, at least in theory. Charlatans had  
to supply a list of the ingredients they used in  
the remedies they intended to sell, as part of  
their license petitions. Was the submission of in-  
gredients by would-be charlatans a mere formal-  
ity? The Roman protophysician Lorenzo  
Garzonio certainly thought so. In 1619, in the  
context of a broad denunciation of "disorders in  
medicine," he noted the problems arising with  
regard to "empirics and charlatans." They might  
be licensed, and they might be observed in the  
preparation of their medicines, but there was  
nothing to prevent them from adulterating them  
after that. "Because [their medicines] are in the  
hands of vile and mendacious people," Garzonio  
denounced, "they adulterate them all the time,  
so that one cannot ascertain if what they sell is  
the same as that for which they were licensed."  
The problem was that they could not be regu-  
larly inspected like apothecaries.47  

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What about the remedies themselves?  
Surely this more than any thing else ought to  
serve to differentiate apothecaries from charla-  
tans. But, in fact, the closer we look at the char-  
latans' remedies, the more they come to re-
semble those of the Hippocratic-Galenic tradi- 
tion, as used by physicians and surgeons and  
prepared and dispensed by apothecaries. Char-  
latans were, broadly speaking, part of this world.  
Their chances of having a medicine approved  
and licensed increased when that medicine re-
sembled the remedies of the pharmacopoeias or  
the ingredients they contained. Charlatans  
stressed novelty and wonder in their dealings  
with the wider public while highlighting their re-
liability and learning when before the medical  
authorities. In their license requests, charlatans  
invariably listed the ingredients by grouping  
them into the same classes used in the civic  
pharmacopoeias: leaves, berries, roots, etc.  
Charlatans sought to present themselves to the  
medical authorities as "itinerant apothecaries,"  
with the same knowledge about simple and  
compound remedies, including effects and dos-
ages. In public, however, they stressed their own  
virtuosity, and this meant downplaying their  
links with the guild-bound apothecaries. While  
charlatans often chose stage names for them-
theselves, only twice—out of the 165 different stage  
names recorded in the Charlatans Database—  
did they refer to the apothecaries' trade. The  
earliest was Girolamo Sciamana from Fano, who  
called himself the "Aromatario Fanese," a seller  
of an electuary against poisons and other rem-
edies (the Elettuario bezoardo) and active  
from the 1660s to the 1680s. He was also the au-
thor of an undated collection of secrets, which  
included remedies for diseases in animals.48 The  
second was Domenico Lazzarini from Padua,  
who called himself the "Aromatario Padoano."  
Lazzarini was a self-styled "surgeon-oculist" and  
heir to Sciamana.  

Both apothecaries and charlatans partici-
pated in the proliferation of goods and their ex-
change during the period. The demand for novel  
medicines was a feature of the early modern pe-
riod. The range of commodities everywhere in-
creased, as did the suppliers of these commodi-
ties. From the seventy-one distinct apothecaries'  
shops represented in Venice's guild of apoth-
ecaries in 1565, the number had risen to over  
one hundred by 1617—at a time of notable popu-
lation decline.49  

To what extent did apothecaries and char-

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Pharmacy in History  

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Illustrative of the charlatan-apothecary crossover, this handbill was printed in 1714 by the Dominican friars of Borgo Val di Taro (near Parma) to advertise their "theriac electuary or orvietan." It was an exact imitation of a charlatan's handbill—just as their remedy was a copy of a charlatan's, which was, in turn, an imitation of actual theriac. In a further twist, the same handbill was then adapted to a Modenese apothecary, Francesco Antonio Rondoni, who simply crossed out the shop's name and location and wrote in his own over it. The final irony is that Rondoni was no doubt selling actual theriac in his establishment as well.

Charlatans differ what they offered for sale? Let us begin with the simples. Most of the simples stocked by Italian apothecaries at the beginning of our period—something in the range of around 75 to 80%—were vegetable, the rest animal and mineral. Most apothecaries however stocked only a fraction of the total number of simples available for use (usually less than a half), according to Jean-Pierre Bénézet's quantitative study of late-medieval pharmacopoeias and apothecaries' inventories. It is easy to underestimate the numbers of simple drugs sold by charlatans, since the bizarrely named compounds have tended to attract the imagination of historians. But in fact charlatans sold a wide range of simple drugs. Several charlatans specialized in selling herb simples. Zuanne di Patroni, a charlatan from Monfalcone licensed by the Venetian health board (the Sanità) in 1590, sold thirty-two different simples. These were mostly herbal, such as angelica, hellebore, and gentian; but also included rock oil (petroleum) and several "earths." These were the sorts of items that apothecaries could sell directly to the general public, without the need for a doctor's prescription. Simples average 13.7% of charlatans' medicines licensed for the period 1550 to 1800. In the decades before 1620, over one-quarter (27.8%) of charlatans' licensed remedies were simples. This then fell sharply to 7.3% in the decades from 1620 to 1710. One could hypothesize a relationship between what the charlatans were selling and changing fashions in society at large.

When simple medicines are combined with preparations based on one main ingredient their proportion rises to almost one-fifth (19.5%) of charlatans' drug totals. It makes
sense to consider them together. For instance, viper's fat and viper's oil—the former a simple, the latter a compound—had similar uses in combating poison, and a lengthy list of diseases. Even so, charlatans managed to make use of but a tiny proportion of the simples available. This was analogous to the way apothecaries of the time stocked only a fraction of the goods listed and discussed in the official literature—what constituted the major medicines of the time.58

The most substantial difference between the sorts of medicines apothecaries and charlatans sold concerns dosage forms. Bénézet’s study suggests that roughly two-thirds (66.7%) of compound medicines stocked by apothecaries were oral preparations. The rest were not ingested, but absorbed, for the most part via the skin.59 There is little reason to believe that this proportion changed substantially over the early modern period. The Charlatans Database reveals that, as far as charlatans were concerned, the proportions were reversed. Oral compound remedies constituted, on average, 24.4% of charlatans’ remedies, non-oral remedies the rest. In part this was due to repeated injunctions against charlatans from selling oral medicines. According to a Bolognese edict, these included “purgatives, abortives, somnifers, arsenicals, mercurials and febrifuges,” off limits to all but physicians. Their sale was a serious threat to public health, the edict argued.60

When Andrea Polli, “called l’Indiano, who mounts a bank as charlatan in the Piazza dei Mercanti in this city,” was caught selling purgative pills in Milan, he was denounced by the syndics of the city’s College of Apothecaries. They used medical language to bolster their case. Polli, the apothecaries accused, distributed the purgatives to all and sundry, regardless of the size, complexion or illness of the buyer, “something truly contrary in every way to both the practice and theory of physicians.”61 The apothecaries’ appeal to the physicians’ sense of professional propriety is worth noting. And of course the fact that the denunciation was made by the apothecaries speaks volumes about the often troubled relations they had with charlatans.

The peddling of oral medicines by charlatans may have been the real reason the Italian medical authorities started to intervene in their activities. The fact that one-quarter of charlatans’ licensed remedies were nevertheless oral suggests that the edicts were either not obeyed or not enforced to the letter. Rather these served as broad guidelines whose intent was to make the selling of oral medicines more difficult. Charlatans would have to work harder to justify their sale on behalf of the public good.

Of the oral medicines offered by charlatans, soft oral medicines constituted the largest group by far, accounting for just over half (52.3%). These consisted of conserves and electuaries (primarily the latter). According to the Charlatans Database, electuaries experienced a 150-year-long boom, beginning in the second decade of the seventeenth century. Indeed, writing in 1619, the Roman protophysician Lorenzo Garzonio noted that “in the past few years [charlatans] have started dispensing electuaries against poisons, petitioning the College for licenses to sell it.” The College was too hasty in issuing licenses, complained Garzonio, being unduly influenced by the presence of licenses from other authorities, without ensuring that each preparation was “good and useful.”62 With electuaries, charlatans took an established medical term and made it their own.

Foremost among these were the remedies of two Neapolitans, Martino Grimaldi’s elecutary and Girolamo Ferranti’s ovietan.63 The very fact that they, and other charlatans like them, were licensed to sell these elaborate concoctions against poison suggests that the remedies were consistent with what was acceptable to the medical authorities. In terms of composition, form, and function they were close enough to what was already sold by apothecaries not to pose a threat. When the electuary of the charlatan Matteo di Berti, “il Toscano,” was confiscated by the Bolognese Protomedicato in 1683, it was not destroyed, but donated to the hospital of St. Ursula.64 (Ever in need of ready cash, the Protomedicato sold the actual jars it came in.) And the ovietan euctuary itself was admitted into the city’s pharmacopoeia, grouped together with the theriacs and described as effective against plague and poisonous bites.65

Turning to non-oral medicines, the most common were the liquid medicinal oils. These were made from the maceration of plants or of plant juices in olive oil and represented 22.8% of
apothecaries’ non-oral remedies. For charlatans they were even more important, representing just under one third (30.5%) of non-oral compound medicines. Such remedies conjure up charlatans at their most basic, selling wares identified either by their primary ingredient or by the complaint they were supposed to treat. Unguents and plasters tended to be more solid in consistency, but even here the terms were frequently interchangeable with oil and balm. Unguents could be used to treat a wide variety of illnesses, hence their high level of appearances: 31.4% of the apothecaries’ non-oral medicines. As far as charlatans were concerned, unguents were less pervasive than oils, averaging 13.7% of licensed remedies. Until the middle of the seventeenth century they generally had no special names. This shift begins in the 1670s but is particularly noticeable in the 1710s in the case of unguents and the 1730s in the case of oils. What had been previously called simply a “compound oil,” an “oil for rheums” or an “unguent for scabies,” was increasingly being called something attention-getting like Balsamo Imperiale, Balsamo della Porta Ottomana (referring to the Sublime Porte or the sultan’s palace), or Balsamo Vitale dell’Elboeo fatto Cristiano. This is the case even if the largely herbal ingredients which went into them were basically unchanged. These were artificial balms, prepared to imitate, perhaps even improve upon, the naturally occurring resinous balsams. At first “balm” was simply used as a synonym for “oil” or “unguent”; it eventually replaced these terms altogether in the named remedies.

The Charlatans Database records the existence of seventy-three different artificial balms. Why so many? Naturally-occurring resinous balms were one of the most prized medicines of the Middle Ages. Until around 1600, when the Dutch and English broke the Spanish monopoly, the so-called balm of Peru was among the most expensive and the most commercialized drugs in Europe. When we understand this, the proliferation of artificial balms developed and marketed by charlatans begins to make sense. The charlatans’ artificial balms were also the most elaborate of the non-oral medicines, analogous to the electuaries among oral medicines. If anti-poison electuaries like Mastro Martino’s and Girolamo Ferranti’s abounded in ingredients (forty-seven and forty-five, respectively), Balsasar Moretti’s Balsamo dell’Armata, for the usual sores, wounds, and cold humors, boasted forty-one. Many of these ingredients were reputed vulnerary simples (used in healing wounds), like resins, fats, and plant simples; but the remedy also abounded in quintessences and elixirs, as well as other balms, both natural (like balm of Peru) and artificial (like the Balsamo Innocezniano). Indeed the latter, apparently named after Pope Innocent IX, was already a part of Italian pharmacopelias. Thus even in the superabundance of artificial balms, charlatans did not depart substantially from the pharmacopelias.

Charlatans were even closer to the mainstream in the manufacture and sale of plasters and ceroeloths. These had similar therapeutic functions, being used in the treatment of hernias (like the many cerutti per rotture), cold humors, stomach complaints, bruises, ulcers, and burns. Typical was Lorenzo Sabbatini’s Cerotto per humori freddi, made of virgin wax, olive oil, camphor, and minium (red lead), and licensed in Siena in 1729. This was very similar to the ingredients in the “Nuremberg plaster,” sold by both apothecaries and charlatans, and used to treat nerve complaints, cankers, and sores. Plasters and ceroeloths represented 21.2% of the apothecaries’ non-oral compound remedies, while their proportion among charlatans was slightly lower at 12.9%.

While charlatans led the way in the commodification of materia medica—developing products to restore or maintain health—other branches of the medical arts were not far behind. The medical elites produced theriacl for European consumption and apothecaries developed and marketed their own medicines, as we have seen. All of this presupposes a demand for those goods and services. I have suggested that this demand could be articulated in similar ways in the public’s dealings with both apothecaries and charlatans. Moreover the responses of the two types of practitioners were more or less analogous.

Conclusion

In medical anthropology a common distinction is that between formal and informal
medical provision. The formal health sector consists of all that is operated or authorized by the state, the informal all the rest. Often, the informal sector fills the vacuum left by the perceived inadequacies of the formal sector.\textsuperscript{4,5} The articulation of the two can be quite complex, with channels, activities and personnel overlapping or flowing into one another. It would be all too easy to slot early modern Italian charlatans into the informal sector and apothecaries into the formal sector, but the fit is less than perfect. Although charlatans were not regulated to anything like the same degree as apothecaries, they did have formal recognition, through licensing. And apothecaries might operate in an "informal" manner, serving the public directly, without the mediation of physicians. They were at once health care specialists providing advice and expertise and retailers who had to turn a profit. Indeed it may be that apothecaries were even more at the mercy of the whims of the buying public than charlatans; apothecaries had regular customers they needed to please, whereas charlatans tended to come and go to a much greater degree. For these reasons, it is more useful to see both charlatans and apothecaries as bridges or brokers between different sectors of the health care system in early modern Italy, learned and popular, formal and informal.

Notes and References

* I should like to thank the British Academy for an overseas conference grant to attend the annual meeting of the Renaissance Society of America (Toronto, 2005), where a draft of this paper was presented. My thanks also to Greg Highy and to an anonymous reader for this journal for their suggestions.

1. "Prooffiscicato" was simply Milan's way of saying "Procomediato." These tribunals existed in many Italian states, and throughout the Spanish dominions, to oversee the practice of medicine, and were headed by a "first physician," the protomediato. See David Gentilcore, "All that pertain to medicine: protomediato and protomediato in Early Modern Italy," Medical History, 38 (1994): 121-42.

2. Archivio di Stato, Pavia (ASPV), Universit', 20, undated document of Andrea Poli (but probably 1680s).

3. Recent studies of early modern medicine have not given apothecaries their due. Laurence Brocklesby and Colin Jones point to this shortcoming in their own work, The Medical World of Early Modern France (Oxford: University Press, 1997), 7.


7. Archivio di Stato, Rome (ASR), Università, 5, x, 165-97.


10. Archivio di Stato, Venere (ASV), Santità, 588, 10/9/1760; Santità, 87, 10/9/1701; Santità, 588, 26/9/1791.

11. ASV (n. 10), Santità, 588, 29/5/1793.

12. Archivio di Stato, Mantua (ASAM), Sanitaria, 3, 30/3/1756; Archivio Storico dell'Università di Torino (ASUT), Protomediato, XXXIII, 23/4/1740.

13. ASR (n. 7), Università, 59, "Posizione del spezaiatori del Comitato detto Balsamo Samaritano," they were fined on 24/12/1790 and, after partial payment, absolved on 31/3/1792.

14. ASB (N. 5), Studio, 253, 26/3/1639.

15. ASV (n. 10), Santità, 731, 47 and 48.

16. In his "I cinque libri di piante," Michel refers to a "m. Leone Chiarmatore" as his supplier of the common plant kidney vetch; librari del mondo, et, Pietro Antonio Michel: I cinque libri di piante (Venice, 1645), 364.

17. ASV (n. 10), Santità, 733, 777, 9.


22. The Appendice politico o tutte le Gazette. . . o sia la Sevizia di Sandria, was edited by Giovanni Battista Rastri and printed in Modena. See Ugo Bellacocci, Storia del giornalismo italiano (Bologna: Edison, 1978), V, 77. It lasted only one year, 1790, before being suppressed. An earlier journal, this one published in Milan during the mid-1780s, was set in an imaginary coffee-house. Called Il Caffé, it played an important role in the Italian Enlightenment.


24. ASB (N. 5), Studio, 197, "Nota et indice delle robe che dali speciali medicinali si possono vendere senza ricetta," 16/3/1600.

25. ASB (N. 5), Studio, 214, "Bandi, editi ed altro sopra gli speciali medicinalist."
26. ASR (n. 7), Università, 67, 931v.
27. ASB (n. 23), Studio, 50, 1/12/1611.
28. ASB (n. 23), Studio, 50, 297-369.
30. For an example, see "Processo fatto a Ludovico Montani speziale di Aronne," 15 September 1709, ASR (n. 7), Università, 2, xii.
31. ASR (n. 7), Università, 62, "Ricorso fatto contro Desiderio Bernardelli speziale," 31/1/1711, 1222 and 1240.
32. ASR (n. 7), Università, 59, xiv.
34. ASPV (n. 2), Università, 29, 4/10/1720.
35. ASPV (n. 18), Sinunità, 145, 533.
36. ASUT (n. 12), Pharmaceutica, X85, 25/2/1763.
37. ASR (n. 7), Università, 67, iv. 11/7/1705, 14/6/1716.
38. ASR (n. 23), Studio, 50, "Contratto et NN, vulgarmente detto il Dottorino, pubblico circolatore," 611-612.
41. ASR (n. 7), Università, 67, iv. 11/7/1709. Another witness said the prices charged varied from ten to two testoni. The great range in Pannz's prices—one to a hundred—and seems to have depended on the remedy (since he sold several), the place of sale (town versus country), and whether the exchange was accompanied by medical treatment.
43. ASR (n. 7), Università, 2, xii, "Processo fatto a Ludovico Monnati speziale di Aronne," 15/9/1703, 9.
44. ASR (n. 7), Università, 61, "Discorso di un'inconveniente che nascono nella medicina," 778v.
45. Tommaso Garzoni, La piazza universale di tutte le professioni del mondo, disc. Lecce: P. Cerechi and B. Colmela, eds. (Turin: Einaudi, 1966), 105-65. Their lettering style was particular enough to enter ilmotic language. The expression "lettere di scatola" was defined by John Florio as "such great letters as apothecaries have upon their boxes." Florio, A World of Words, or Most Copious and Exact Dictionarie in Italian and English (London: Blount, 1598), xi.
47. ASR (n. 7), Università, 67, iv. "Processo de'prostas magnum est."
48. ASR (n. 7), Università, 62, "Diario di un’inconveniente che nascono nella medicina."
49. Girolamo Sloman, Componenti di vari segreti appartenenti alla salute con il trattato della fisioterapia dell'uomo. Con aggiunta d'alcuni rimedi de’ molii che vengono a esseri di altri animali brutti (Rome, Brescia, Bologna, Milan: eredi di Giorgio Rolla, 180 date).
52. Bénizet, Pharmacie (n. 51), 505.
53. Bénizet, Pharmacie (n. 51), 551.
55. ASPV (n. 2), Università, 29, undated (but Pelli was licensed in Verona to sell his Filiale arzneiache on 13/9/1766).
56. ASR (n. 7), Università, 61, "Discurso di un'inconveniente che nascono nella medicina." 778v.
58. ASB (n. 5), Studio, 230, 16/9/1763. When it came to Bologne apothecaries, wares found to be bad were dumped into the river Reno, in the presence of witnesses (ASB (n. 5), Studio, 213, "Contra Carantiano Bernardi").
60. Bénizet, Pharmacie (n. 51), 611.
61. Bénizet, Pharmacie (n. 51), 516.
63. ASB (n. 23), Studio, 54, 313.
64. ASB (n. 23), Studio, 52, 25-9.

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The painting "Lo speziale" (The Apothecary) by Pietro Longhi depicts an Italian country pharmacy from the eighteenth century. The physician is seated writing a prescription, while the pharmacist (standing) attends to the patient—applying the remedy prescribed by the physician. (Painting from the Accademia di Belle Arti, Venice.)