Chapter 6

Hermes, Herbs, Elixirs, and Witches

Truly, whoever knows how to do these things [alchemical preparation] would have the perfect medicine (medicinam), which the philosophers called the elixir.

—Roger Bacon, Opus Minor, 314.

Hermes, the young god who rounded up Apollo’s cattle on his very first day of life, was destined to have a long life, longer and more renowned than most pagan gods or goddesses, even Inanna. Hermes went to Egypt and there morphed into a secret-knowing, slow-releasing-of-information god: he acquired knowledge, a prerequisite many theologians of antiquity would say for divinity. Hermes’s knowledge just was not omniscient knowledge but facts on how to do things. Practical knowledge was a diversion of the intellect according to Plato and many tenets of classical philosophy. In Greek, Hieroglyphs, Hieratic, Latin, Arabic, and the vernacular languages of the Middle Ages, the secrets of Hermes Trimegistus (“Hermes Thrice Great”) stimulated a line of thought that combined with the Chinese concept of an elixir to produce a distinctively Western attitude about drugs. The new way of thinking was substantially different from that of the classical Greeks and Romans. The powers inherent in the pomegranate, mandrake, artemisia, and chastetree plants turned toward a new direction. The course was diverted, because its association with magic caused them to appear as black or evil magic. The herbs sacred to Inanna, Aphrodite, Demeter, Artemis, and Hermes came to be associated with witches and nefarious forces and not with goddesses (and, in Hermes’s case, a god). Remember: the first witch was Lilith, who made a home in the trunk of the pomegranate tree, thereby robbing Inanna of her power. The secret knowledge had to be suppressed and, largely, it was. This chapter explores the three forces that turned the herbs of goddesses into those of the devil. Simultaneously and ironically developments over a long period of time gave us the hope for miraculous cures, divorced from pagan gods or the God of Jews, Christians, and Muslims. The three streams of developments were Hermetic literature, the concept of the elixir, and witchcraft.
Thrice-Great Hermes

Treatises ascribed to Hermes are often referred to as the *Corpus Hermetica*, but “corpus” or “body” is applied to those works only from the classical period. Unlike the Hippocratic Corpus, most of which was written in a little more than a century, the Hermetic works span many centuries ranging from antiquity through the sixteenth century. Conventionally, however, most scholars refer to the *Corpus Hermetica* as those works written in antiquity until the late Roman period.¹ The anonymous and pseudo-anonymous authors of these works had diverse backgrounds and interests, and wrote in various languages. Nevertheless, like the Hippocratic works, there are a few characteristics that underlie virtually all of the works: they have no identifiable religious home, excepting perhaps in obscured ancient Egyptian religion. Pagan, Jew, Christian, and Muslim alike considered the works their own; the writings transcend other religions but have traces of Egyptian and Greek thought with an element of practicality built on philosophical underpinnings; they profess to be “secrets” whose utility must be guarded by their readers, the restricted few. The contents include herbs, stones, animals, sigils (magical signs), alchemy, and astronomy/astrology.

In the Middle Ages, people were clearer about the origins of the Hermetic writings than ancient people who mixed classical and Egyptian sources. According to medieval beliefs, Hermes was the messenger of the gods; he was the conveyer of information. He went to Egypt, married the daughter of the Pharaoh, learned the secrets of the Egyptians, and deposited them in the library, presumably the one in Alexandria. When the library burned, the secrets of Hermes were lost except for a few pieces of text that somehow survived. During the first millennium of our era and through the sixteenth century, these treatises circulated because of their popularity. One who discovers a part of the secrets may divulge the secret therein to a few. Those few must keep the information confidential lest by becoming known to common people (vulgarized), the secrets lose their power.

Ancient Hermetica

The early Hermetic works were in circulation by the first century of our era; from the third century BCE, Hermes was said to be their author. Scholarly study detects that the early treatises’ contents were derived partly from ancient Greek works but predominantly from ancient Egyptian priestly lore. Hermes and his Egyptian counterpart, Thoth, melded into one.² Thoth was the tongue and heart of Ra, the principal Egyptian god, and, as such, stood beside him and was his spokesman, similar to a messenger. Thoth was responsible for writing, magic, the mathematical and grammatical sciences, and was the judge of the dead. He kept the list of each person’s good and evil deeds. Hermes succeeded Thoth, even though the works attributed to Hermes are more Egyptian than Greek, in a way reminiscent of a paraphrase from Horace: “Captive Egypt captured its captive.”³ The Egyptian priesthoods studied geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, and medicine. Two kinds of knowledge are accessible to humans: *epistēmē* (concrete, specific data, sometimes too loosely translated as “science”) and *gnosis* (knowledge derived from *logos* or pure reasoning supplemented by understanding related to faith but not its synonym).⁴ Humans approach God (or the gods) through knowledge. Such Gnostic sentiments were not alien in Hebrew