

DERMATOLOGICAL PREPARATIONS IN THE 17TH CENTURY

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In 1677, the Neapolitan doctor Giuseppe Donzelli, Baron of Dogliola, published his "Teatro Farmaceutico Spagirico", a medical text which was very successful throughout the 17th century¹. It was a text with a clearly personalist hallmark where the formulae are not set out with the weights clearly shown, but it is rich in preparations simple to execute, certainly innocuous and many of which have a certain dermatological interest.

The author shows great interest in the problem of "marks on the face", which he tries to solve by listing a series of remedies, most of which are based on honey; better if Sardinian honey, maintains Donzelli, because there the bees feed on wormwood thus producing a product that can make the "face beautiful" and remove all sorts of marks. For the same purpose he recommends using distilled water of oregano in bloom, cinnamon mixed with honey, costus (*Saussurea sp.*) together with apple water and fenugreek macerated in oil with rhizomes of galin-gale and sweet flag. Lastly, he suggests two balms already used by pharmacies: that of Martino Rolando made with sulphur flowers, camphor and oil of almonds digested in hot ashes, and the famous "citrine unguent of Nicolò" which was obtained by boiling two large citruses in lard

and hen fat to which were added borax, camphor, "asbestos" (chalk) and white lead. This last named ingredient, as well as removing freckles and "blackness caused by the sun", was also capable of removing all sorts of scars and therefore wrinkles as well.

There is no lack of lotions against the loss of hair which use the already experimented revulsant effects of nasturtium, the hyper-

nutritional effects of egg yolk mixed with oil of almonds or the claimed "signaturist" virtues of maidenhair (*Adiantum capillus veneris*). On the other hand, using "the marrow" of the fruit of the colocynth (*Citrullus colocyn-tis*) boiled in oil, there was also the hope, as well as stopping the loss of hair, of dyeing it black, as well as with the juice of siliques of acacia and with galls macerated in vinegar.

The "Teatro" of Donzelli was a source of great prestige for the author and he was invited to draw up the first edition of the Antidotario Napoletano, the first official pharmacopoeia of that state. This was a sign that the preparations for dermatological use were gradually beginning to be taken into consideration by doctors, apothecaries and by the Official Pharmacopoeias.

From the appearance of the first Official Pharmacopoeias, it is possible to see the certain interest shown by these in dermatology; from as early as 1498, the *Ricettario Fiorentino*, to be considered the first official code that regulated the profession and the work of the apothecary, opened with a fair list of unguents and poultices but without reporting any indications at all.

Apothecaries had probably been interested in these preparations for some time but the response of the official bodies was by no

means immediate. It was not until 1678, by which time almost all European countries had their code, that the city of Milan, then rapidly growing and which enjoyed a certain independence, appointed the dean of the College of Doctors Giovanni Onorato Castiglioni to draw up the first Official Pharmacopoeia of that state. The work was entitled "*Prospectus Pharmaceuticus*" and, from certain points of view, was a more complete and interesting code than the others because it was deemed closer to the practical experience of the apothecaries.

The absolute novelty lies in a chapter entitled "*Descriptiones variae nonnullorum*" referring exclusively to the "decoration of the human body and its beauty"². It is only 17 pages long, but rich in contents and prescriptions for topical use, which undoubtedly mark a moment of great importance in the history of cosmetics. The chapter has 63 recipes in Latin with dermatological indications and specific information on weights, but it also has the particularity of enriching each formula with an extensive appendix which explains the *modus operandi* and the directions for the preparation. Each appendix has the title of "composition and use" and is written in the vernacular; this was clearly done to make the operations of manipulation more accessible even to those who had only a smattering of Latin. Clearly then too the request of "clients" who used the preparations suggested by the pharmacopoeia was more inherent to the remedies capable of giving the

Paris was the most important city in the field of the beauty treatments, thanks to Caterina de' Medici and the Italian "school"





Frontispiece of the Universal Pharmacopoeia by Nicola Lemery

facial skin that “noble candour” required by the higher social classes; this is shown by the prevalence given in the recipes to the so-called waters “*ad dealbandam faciem*”. These are waters which we can define as cleansers, about thirty in number, many of which were obtained from distilling rich mixtures of animal and mineral origin. It was in fact already a habit to use for these preparations a large quantities of pork and beef, pigeon and capon flesh, billy-goat’s blood, fresh bones, egg white, goat’s milk, whole snails, bread, citrus fruits, flours of all sorts of legumes and even urine; because everything was then “filtered” on the distiller’s retorts. The author however seems to show a special interest in the more substantial, and perhaps also more effective, “*acquae per ebullitionem*” obtained by boiling and

concentrating salts, resins, citrus fruits and flours, then filtered through cloth and strained into a glass jar to be kept for everyday use. “These are easily used – says the author – by dipping in some cotton wool or a small piece of linen, and then wetting the face three times”.

It is not known whether these waters were used for the announced purpose, but it is certain that they were an extraordinary concentrate of organic and inorganic substances. To lighten the skin of the face, for example, eggshells, egg whites, borax, rock alum and fine sugar were used, “consumed” in boiling water until this was reduced to a third of its volume, and then chopped camphor was introduced. To make it white and red, it was sufficient to use isinglass boiled together with alum and “shavings” of Brazilian wood in the water of “common cabbages”: “it colours the face somewhat red”, maintains the author and not mistakenly he relied on the colouring power of “sappanwood” (*Caesalpinia sp.*), called Brazilian wood. To obtain a more marked red cosmetic, the author says that it was necessary to boil in brandy the well chopped bark of red sandalwood (*Pterocarpus santalinum*), and here too the effect was guaranteed, in view of the particularity of this bark to produce an intense red colouring.

There is no shortage of dyes to colour the hair made from the usual lye, quicklime and barley water mixed with litharge and lead oxides until a soft liniment is obtained which was to be kept on

the hair all night. On the other hand, the emulsion of oil and honey, also containing burnt flies and bees and even leeches, to make the hair grow is bizarre.

Naturally there are also some toilet soaps, only three in fact, made from common soap blended with all the perfumed essences then available and a discreet repertory of powders based on powdered marble, starch powder, eggshells and exotic essences.

To remove marks from the face, on the other hand, there were the so-called “*Liquor quae vulgo pane appellatur*” made from tartar dressed with lime (potassium carbonate) dissolved in vinegar and then “wetting with this the rust-coloured blotches and other similar marks that are sometimes discovered on the face and hands”, and if this was not sufficient there was always the “paste of cantharides and honey” which – strangely to say – was capable, after a few days of inevitable redness, of making the face “very clean”. But to eliminate from the face and hands any redness and “burning and roasting” caused by the sun, there was always the famous “*Lac virginale*” made from litharge of gold, rock salt and wine vinegar. A powerful topical lotion with an energetic astringent action exercised by the high concentration of *lead acetate* it contained; this is the preparation which today is commonly defined “plant-mineral water” and which is used for far more therapeutic purposes.

The pages devoted to the so-called “*linimenta*”, genuine dermal creams to soothe scars and correct the wrinkles of the facial

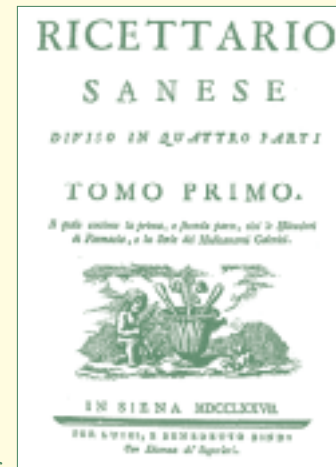
skin, are also interesting. The “*Linimentum*” par excellence was made from pork fat, rosewater and carnation oil: “it will be excellent – says the author – to keep hands and face from the damage of the sun in the summer and, in the winter from the rigours of the cold and winds and the term “pomade” appears in this collection, perhaps for the first time in the history of Official Pharmacopoeias; it is a sort of greasy emulsion obtained by putting the pork fat to dissolve in rosewater together with four segments of apple and then thickened in a mortar with oil of almonds and perfume of musk, amber and cloves. Probably it was precisely the use, in these preparations, of the so-called “*pomi appii*” – small sweet apples bright red in colour (*Pirus malus*) – that gave rise to the term “pomade”.

This term was taken up more extensively, but much later, by the pharmacopoeia of the state of Sienna, the *Ricettario Sanese*³, which prescribes a pomade against “cracked lips and rough skin” made from sweet apples cut into slices, pork fat, fresh sheep’s tallow, pulverized beards of lilies and rosewater. “Cook in a bain-marie until the moisture has been consumed – says the recipe book – keep the unguent and wash it with rosewater each time it is used”.

The same *Ricettario* also contains an extraordinary “*pomade in cream*” which is astonishingly up to date: “take an ounce of oil of almonds, in it liquefy half an ounce of white beeswax and half of

spermaceti and then add 6 drams of rosewater. By shaking continuously a very white mixture is obtained, like a cream, used to soften the skin and the cracks on the hands”. This is an authentic evanescent emulsion obtained by saponification of the fatty acids of the oil of almonds, thickened by the cerotic acids of the beeswax and perfectly emulsified in the water by that marvellous product of nature that was the so-called “whale’s sperm” or spermaceti. It is the solid part that is separated by cooling of the fatty oil extracted from the sperm whale (*Physiter macrocephalus*) formed by cetylstearyl alcohols, compounds of a hydro-lipophile nature capable of forming a stable non-ionic emulsion in water. The “pomade in cream” of the *Ricettario Sanese*

can therefore be considered the forerunner of the modern day creams. Nevertheless, the art of preparing creams, pomades and unguents was still considered a sort of “gallantry”, the recipes of which, widely vulgarized by the treatises on “courtly love” were not always recognised by the official texts of the pharmacists. Even the famous Universal Pharmacopoeia by Nicola Lemery, the official text approved by the King of France and amongst the most advanced and open to new discoveries, did not include any discipline relative to that subject⁴. Save for some sparks of brilliance in Venice in the eighteenth century, the centre of world elegance had already moved to Paris, the city which now held the primacy in the art of perfumery and cosmetics, a primacy also conquered with the help of the Italian “school” that had established itself there following Catherine Medici. Catherine – as is known – became Queen of France and moved the best perfumers of Florence to Paris and they soon transformed their shops into real centres of frivolity and elegance. The Tradition was then continued by Maria dei Medici, the bride of Henry IV, and lastly considerably emphasized by the beautiful Anne of Austria, the wife of Louis XIII. It was a time when appearing was synonymous with existing, the time of false beauty spots, powdered hair and the most extravagant hairstyles and most sumptuous and flamboyant make-up that also involved the male personality.



Frontispiece of the Ricettario Sanese.