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**ISABELLA CORTESE—OR THE ALCHEMY OF
PULCHRITUDE. FEMALE BEAUTY IN ITALIAN
TREATISES OF THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY**

“Parmi ben che in lei [donna di palazzo] sia poi piú necessaria la bellezza che nel cortegiano, perché in vero molto manca a quella donna a cui manca la bellezza.” [Me thinke well beawty is more necessarie in her then in the Courtier, for (to saye the truth) there is a great lacke in the woman that wanteth beawtie.] Wrote Baldassare Castiglione in the treatise *Il Cortegiano*.¹ External beauty is shown here not so much as a necessary attribute of a female courtier, but as her duty. All other virtues: nobility, courage, strength of character, education or prudence are defined as *ornamenti*, similarly to dresses and jewels. A woman, moreover, is adorned by good manner, moderation in everything, modesty. Castiglione admits, that a woman should care about her beauty more than a man, but at the same time he warns her, that it should not been done too obtrusively and no one may learn how much effort a woman has put in preparing her outfit. A woman should also be able to recognize her type of beauty and take it into consideration when she prepares to be seen in public.

“Così, essendo un poco piú grassa o piú magra del ragionevole, o bianca o bruna, aiutarsi con gli abiti, ma dissimulatamente piú che sia possibile; e tenendosi delicata e polita, mostrar sempre di non

¹ B. Castiglione, *Il Libro del Cortegiano*, Gerolamo Cavalcaluolo, Venezia 1565, 268. The English translation: B. Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, David Nutt, London, 1900, 149. (Transcribed by R.S. Bear at the University of Oregon during the summer of 1997).

mettervi studio o diligenza alcuna.” [In like maner where she is somewhat fatter or leaner then reasonable sise, or wanner, or browner, to helpe it with garmentes, but feiningly asmuch as she can possible, and keaping herself clenlye and handsome, showe alwaies that she bestoweth no pein nor diligece at all about it.]²

Normative discourse orders a woman to achieve a quantifiable effect in a discreet way, it almost puts contradictory demands on her. Because, how can a goal be achieved without *studio e diligenza*—care and diligence?

Surely Castiglione agreed with these authors who considered attempts to improve one’s beauty: “Has anyone ever thought about improving of works of our master Titian” asks in *Istituzione delle donne* Lodovico Dolce, the author of original treatises on various themes, comparing the work of a painter of whom Venice was proud with the work of God, the Creator.³ Apparently, however, faces of readers of Messer Lodovico sometimes were painted. Trying to dissuade them from this calamitous custom, Lodovico, who was a supporter of education for girls and was against treating them too severely, writes about an incident which was to be a warning for women using make up: when during a ball all the gathered ladies were offered a wet towel to put against their faces, only those whose faces were not covered with any substance held clean linen in their hands. To make the story more realistic, the compromising proposal of the ‘game’ comes from the mouth of a young lady with no make-up, who obviously herself participated in this game.

Who did these ladies, participants in this unfortunate game, want to be similar to? Maybe to Alcina from Ariosto: “con bionda chioma lunga ed annodata”, with cheeks “misto color di rose e di ligustri” and eyes “sotto duo negri e sottilissimi archi / son duo negri occhi, anzi duo chiari soli”. In the translation of William Stewart Rose the appropriate fragment is rendered as: “With long and knotted tresses; to the eye/Not yellow gold with brighter lustre glows./Upon

² Idem., 275. Translation: Idem., 152.

³ L. Dolce, *Dialogo dell’istituzione delle donne*, Venezia, Giolito 1560, f. 26r-v.

her tender cheek the mingled dye./Is scattered, of the lily and the rose./
Like ivory smooth, the forehead gay and round./Fills up the space, and
forms a fitting bound./Two black and slender arches rise above/Two
clear black eyes, say suns of radiant light,/Which ever softly beam
and slowly move.”⁴ Such an aesthetic vision underlines “ethical”
premises of beauty: fair hair and complexion (with traces of a blush,
being indicative of health, but also of bashfulness) are associated with
the white colour, symbolizing, and therefore also showing, innocence,
virginity and modesty.

Let us ask whether ways of approaching this ideal exist. Were they
written down? Have they survived to our times?

Dolce, with his dirty and clean towels, has already put us on the right
track. The question about the ways in which female readers of Ariosto
did it will be answered by treatises and collections of cosmetic
instructions which at that time were published by printing shops
in Venice. Today, we know of half a dozen works which are devoted
to cosmetology; and about ten devoted exclusively to the distillation
of scents and the manufacture of perfumes. They must have been
popular as they were reprinted several times.

They all follow the scheme of *ricettario* (receipt list), which was not
to be read at one go, but chosen receipts were to be consulted; they are
located at the border of pharmacology, medicine and alchemy, and
they equally often rely on ‘high’ learning as on folk wisdom. Such
a formula, even if a text was written in a monotonous and shallow way,
and was riddled with technical terms, was a guarantee of commercial
success.

Some of these works are anonymous, like *Le malicie de le Donne
Narra(n)do tutti li lor belletti, & acque stilate (...) che usano per farse
belle* (*Clever Ways of Women Telling About All Cosmetics and Fragrant
Waters They Use to be Beautiful*), or *Opera nuova intitolata Dificio di*

⁴ L. Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, canto VII, Vincenzo Valgrisi, Venezia 1556, 62.
The English Translation: William Stewart Rose <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/615/pg615-images.html>.

Ricette... (New Work Entitled the List of Recipies) which was published twelve times from the 1520s to the 1540s.⁵

In this time a new version of an earlier work of Eustachio Celebrino, a doctor and an engraver, was popular: *Opera nuova piacevole la quale insegna di far varie compositioni odorife-re... ,Intitulata Venusta*. (New and Nice Work Which Shows How to Make Fragrances, Entitled Venusta). It consists of about one hundred various recipes from such disciplines as cosmetology, home medicine, household management, and hygiene (dealing with flies, lice and fleas). Let us concentrate now on recipes on cosmetology which comprise the major part of the book. We find here cosmetic creams (*ungento*), foundations for make-up, tooth washing powders, hair dyes (which allowed women to get the blonde colour fashionable at that time in Italy, or to cover grey hair), depilatory products, and products to cover pigmentation spots. A lot of attention was devoted to fragrances: fragrant waters (similar to tonics) used when we today use cosmetic creams. Perfumed waters were eagerly used to cleanse faces, and to soak different objects, clothes or bed linen. Body lotion made of sweet and bitter almonds was used most often, as well as rose and lavender waters, lemon and apple juice, camphor, barley flower, and nettle leaves.

Celebrino wrote in the introduction in an octave, that he cannot, or that he is not allowed to, share all the knowledge he had:

Et perche son secreti assai
diversi Non posso dir vi il
tutto in questi versi

[And because these secrets are so varied,
I cannot put all of them in these lines.]⁶

⁵ Cf. D. Menjot, *Les soins de beauté. Moyen Age, Temps Modernes*, Nice, 1985, P. Turrini, *Bellezza di ieri...rivisitata oggi. Con un libretto di "segreti" di cosmetica del seicento*, Università degli studi di Siena: scuola di specializzazione in scienza e tecnologia cosmetiche, Siena 6-7 luglio 2000.

⁶ Quoted in G. Corelli, *Ricettario di bellezza di Eustachio Celebrino*, Firenze, 1960, 137-150.

A small book with the same word in the title—*secret*—was written by a woman—Isabella Cortese. We do not even know where she came from, but her work was to shake the dichotomous picture of writings about women's beauty.⁷

The book, with the title which could be translated as: *Secrets of Madam Isabella Cortesa About Things Such as Minerals, Medicine and Alchemy and a Lot From the Art of Making Perfumes; Appropriate to Each Great Lady with Other Exquisite Secrets Provided*, remained popular for a surprisingly long time, because one hundred and sixteen years separate the first edition from 1561 and the last one in 1677.⁸ The life of a book did not end with its last edition, and a text may have been read for quite a while after. The little book still circulated among numerous, quite affluent and quite 'educated' readers. The two facts supporting such a claim are the small size (all editions *were in octavo*) and the diligent editing, which included also contents list.

The popularity of the text is testified to not only by the seventeen Venetian editions mentioned above, but also two translations into German (published three times: in Hamburg in 1592 and 1596, and in Frankfurt in 1596), as well as numerous quotations and references which can be found in the seventeenth-century, mostly French alchemist literature. There are no references to this book after the 1680s, and the name of the author was totally forgotten.

What may appear to be a collection of practical advice turns out to be the fruit, as the author writes in the dedication letter

⁷ The information about Isabella Cortese is taken mostly from: M. Marra, *Introduzione Ai Secreti di Isabella Cortese*, www.levity.com/alchemy/isabella.html. As to P. Burke, *La Renaissance en Italie : art, culture, société*, Paris, 1991, Women were responsible for 158 literary texts and 38 defined as 'scientific'. This was just a few percent of the publishing "output", which is estimated at c.a. 6000 editions in the first half of the century and 7420 in the second. 556 of them were contemporary works.

⁸ I. Cortese, *Secreti...*, Venezia, Giovanni Bariletto 1561 and Antonio Tivanni, Venezia, 1677. More on this in: Ewa Bartochowska, *Księga czarownicy, czyli kilka uwag o "I Secreti de la Signora Isabella Cortese"*, *Roczniki Biblioteczne*, 2007. (51), 127-144.

to an archdeacon of Ragusa (today: Dubrovnik) of hard work which had taken a long time, and included 'extracting' wisdom from nature. Cortese was convinced of the necessity of revealing the secrets of nature. Her discourse was a part of the debate on the nature of the spirit and harmony existing between body and soul. She points to the importance of personal cognition of the nature of metals, the necessity to preserve the secret character of this knowledge, and its connections with prayers. The praising of God, and alms should always follow after a session in a laboratory. In the introduction to the second book Cortese includes a collection of advice, given in the form of a Decalogue, directed to all who want to enter the difficult art of alchemy. At the same time Isabella enters, on equal terms, into polemics with such philosophers as Raymond Lullo or Arnold de Villanove. She feels herself to be their partner, and themes of female beauty and on endeavours to improve, in this way become worthy of serious discourse. Historians of alchemy claim that the procedures described by Isabella testify to her considerable knowledge in this discipline, and also to the fact that she herself carried out these experiments.

Let us remind ourselves that alchemy is not magic and is not the predecessor of chemistry. It should not be perceived through the contemporary criteria of experimental sciences: Alchemy searches for the Absolute, understood as the union of what is material and spiritual, and its research is based on the rule of analogy and the belief in the spiritual character of the matter. The whole of Creation: people, planets, stones, plants and animals bear in themselves 'the primary cause of life'. The whole universe is generally unity, and 'concentration' of the Spirit influences the form of the matter. There is less of it in a stone than in a man. Each spiritual particle has the power of creation, and the goal of an alchemist was to repeat this process on the level of the micro-cosmos. This 'creative element'—the Spirit—had to be distilled from the matter, to get hold of a substance pure enough to be able to be totally 'soaked' in the spirit and in this way become its concretization. Therefore, transformation of gold or water in the elixir of youth was not an end in itself, but proof of the existence

of the materialized Spirit. Now the process of creation can be repeated—also through the creation of Beauty. Isabella Cortese, writing about concoctions for female beauty (the whitening of skin or teeth, the dyeing of hair), always observed four phases of an alchemist experiment: decomposition, purification, reduction and conservation. She purifies usually through the use of sunbeams, reduces through squashing or distillation, than cools down or puts to sunbeams again (conserves). The type of vessel in which the substance is put, and its tight sealing is very important. Making beautiful is possible through “purification of blood and ill humours and drying of salty phlegm”, that is through the restoration of equilibrium.

Would a close reading of this text show only that some of these recipes are not to be repeated (today we have problems with deciphering all the measurements given by the author), while others could be successfully used—unless we are discouraged by the long and burdensome procedure of making rose soap or removing oily, greasy spots? Is interest in the little book of Isabella Cortese just removing the dust of an editing curio, funny in some ways, or maybe a chance to notice an important link between philosophy, literary visions of beauty, and practical ways of supporting them. A link which testifies that the world of this period was more unified than we have thought.