Metrodora: A physician of late Byzantium on femininity

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Metrodora is the author of a treatise entitled "Περί των γυναικείων παθών της μήτρας" (On the feminine diseases of the uterus). The manuscript exists in the Greek Codex 75 of the Laurentian Library in Florence. The manuscript is dated in the 12th century.

The existence of Metrodora's manuscript has been known since the 19th century but the full text was first presented by Aristotele Kousis at the Academy of Athens in 1945. The text with an Italian translation was published by Giorgio Del Guerra in 1953 at Milan and there has also been a more recent translation in French.

The era the treatise was written is a matter of speculation. A systematic comparison of the text with other medical works from late antiquity and Byzantium may point to the sources of Metrodora’s book. Scarborough, a distinguished historian of medicine in Byzantium, suggested that the treatise was perhaps a 'handbook', one of those compiled in the first half of the 10th century during the reign of Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus and that this handbook was similar to Trotula’s treatise of the Latin tradition.

Metrodora’s name is compound of two words μήτρα (uterus) or μήτηρ (mother) and δώρα (gifts) and may be considered a nickname for a compiler who had drawn from books of medical authors of earlier times. The grammar of the text with the use of past participle in masculine forms e.g. λειώσας, ζέσας, τρίψας etc., instead of λειώσασα, ζέσασα, τρίψασα etc., suggests that Metrodora was either a female author who did not adjust the text to fit a female author or that the author was male who invented a female name to make the book acceptable to women.

Trotula was a legendary physician from Salerno to whom a treatise on the diseases of women and the care of children was attributed. Under ‘Trotula’ the writings of women physicians and midwives were widely circulated in medieval Europe. Trotula’s manuscript contains two prescriptions with objectives similar to two by Metrodora presented in this paper. One is about sexuality, the other is about beauty. Trotula’s prescription 35 ‘On the manner of tightening the vulva so that even a woman who has been seduced may appear a virgin’ addresses the same problem as Metrodora’s prescription λδ’. Trotula’s prescription is elaborate in comparison to Metrodora’s. Substances used in the two prescriptions are not similar although the methods of application are the same. The second prescription, 61 ‘On adornment and whitening of the face ’has similar objectives to prescription νς’ by Metrodora ‘To make the face white and smooth’. Here...
again the methods of application are similar but the sub-
stances used are different.

λδ’ For a woman to appear virgin while she is not
Apply crushed symphytum plant* or douche with
alum boiled with bay leaves
*symphytum officinale, comfrey

λε’ To find out if a woman is a virgin
Have the woman urinate in a pot where you have
put fresh lentils, if the lentils disperse she is a virgin, if
not she not a virgin
Other. Burn lignite stone and if she urinates in her
pants she is not a virgin. If she does not, she is a virgin

λζ’ For a woman not to commit adultery
Apply on your male organ bile of the fish called
kavros* and have sexual intercourse with her and she
will never commit adultery with anyone
Try this. Crack eggs of yraskon and apply on your
organ and have intercourse with her, if you also use that
of kavros there will never be a man who will sleep with her
*γαύρος

λζ’ To disclose those she has committed adultery
with
Give her drink crushed magnate stone in pure wine
and on that day she should not take a bath and in the
evening when she goes to bed give her this to drink and
she should not eat anything else. In the night sleep with
her and she will disclose whom she has slept with.
Other. Place on her heart, while she is sleeping, the
two-headed bone of orripsios the emeros and she will
reveal whom she desires and who she has slept with.
Alyssum plant* can have the same result.
*alyssum clypeatum

μα’ How to maintain small breasts
Apply plaster of crushed Melissa plant* on the breast
carefully and not beyond its boundaries, or plaster of
hemlock for three days, or saddle the breast for three
days with plaster made of crushed poppy seeds baked
with rain water.
*melissa officinalis

μβ’ How to restore drooping breasts
Cover [the breast] with fuller’s earth*, one part, and
spray with a little honey, or apply white lead paste mixed
with hyoschiamos pap and thinned, as needed, with oil
of the shrub schinos.
*A mixture used by fullers to soften clothes.

μδ’ How keep the breasts small and upright
Take root of psillium, while the moon is waning, and
apply to the breasts and bandage them together. To test
[the remedy] apply psillium to the area where the horns
of a young ram or calf are situated and if the horns have
already sprouted they will not grow longer. If the horns
had not spouted they will not come out. Melissa plant
produces the same results.
Other. Mix crushed hemlock with two parts of scrap-
ings of alum, two parts of sour grape juice, together with
dry wine to form the texture of ointment, then spread on
the breast in circles. Over it apply samian soil* and chalk
or white lead.
*From Samos

με’ How to make the breasts smooth and beautiful
Apply [crushed leaves] of bitter vetch dissolved in
fragrant wine, or fenugreek boiled in wine and dissolved,
or similarly dissolved linseeds or barley pap or semolina
with wine, or similarly prepared starch or wine lead
paste and litharge*dissolved with wine.
*red crystalline lead monoxide

νς’ To make the face white and smooth
Apply and wash, late in the evening and in the
morning, aluminum white dissolved in water, or chian
soil* or chalk or soda or litharge in equal parts dissolved
in vinegar in vinegar.
*From Chios

νζ’ To make the face radiant
This was used by Veronike the Queen of Egypt
who was also called Cleopatra. She put deerhorn in
empty pot, baked in oven and when she took it out she
found it all white. She dissolved in milk and applied it.
Other. Apply melanthyum and fenugreek and lin-
seeds in fragrant wine.

νθ’ To make the face smooth
Apply starch, ervum and emolina with the white of
the egg, or oats pap, or barley pap with honey.
References

2. Kousis A.P. Metrodora’s work ‘on the feminine diseases of the womb’ according to the Greek codex 75.3 of the Laurentian Librari. Proceedings of the Academy of Athens, 20, 46-68, 1945
5. Scarborough J. Personal communication, 1996