

OVID'S THE ART OF BEAUTY

MEDICAMINA FACIEI FEMINEAE

Translated by Christopher Kelk

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Girls, learn how care improves your form and face.

Art bade the sterile furrows to replace

The hungry brambles with the gifts Ceres

Made plain, producing on the apple-trees

Sweet fruit, and trees were grafted that they might

Reap other riches. Tilled lands bring delight.

Gold will enhance our roofs. The black earth lies

Beneath the marble, while with Tyrian dyes

Fleeces are treated, and to works of art

Will India cleft ivory impart.

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Perhaps the Sabine women in the reign

Of their King Tatius opted to maintain

Their land and not their beauty. As they sat

On high stools, ruddy matrons laboured at

Their spinning, and, as night approached, they penned

The sheep their daughters would by day attend

And cut logs for the fire. But now they spare

Their precious daughters, wanting them to wear

Gilt vestments, flashy jewels, gemstones found

In eastern countries to be draped around

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Their necks, and earrings too. One mustn't flee

The urge to please, however, for we see

That nowadays men, too, are beautified:

For husbands have determined to abide

By feminine rules – a bride can scarcely be

Much better dressed. She primps assiduously

To win a beau. But such sophistication

Is not a sin. The same consideration

Is spent upon their hair where women hide

In rustic haunts: deep in the countryside,

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Though Athos screens them, Athos nonetheless  
Will make them elegant. Much happiness  
They take in pleasing men; a young girl's mood  
Is raised when she regards her pulchritude;  
And Juno's bird will spread his wings in pride  
When they are praised, and thus he will provide  
The way to love more than a strong potation  
On which a wizard stakes his reputation  
With terrifying art, and don't rely  
On herbs or mingled juices; do not try 40  
The venom of a mare in heat; and you  
Will find a Marsian chant won't cleave in two  
A snake, and rivers will not start to flow  
Back to their source, and you'll see, too, although  
You beat Temesa's brass as much as you may,  
The Moon will never be wrested away  
From her own steeds. First, study niceties:  
With those in place, your face will surely please  
And love will follow. Age will get its hooks  
In you and lay waste to your pretty looks 50  
With wrinkles, and so, as each year will pass,  
You'll be chagrined to look into your glass  
And grief will bring more lines. But probity  
Will help you, proving its tenacity  
As you grow old, and love will yet abide.  
Now when your tender limbs are fortified  
With sleep, I'll tell you how you may impress  
A man by learning how to incandesce  
Your skin. Take off the straw and chaff that hide  
The barley that our ships upon the tide 60

Have brought from Libyan fields to Italy.  
Take two pounds and an equal quantity  
Of vetch soaked in ten eggs. Let it all dry  
And then beneath the millstone that is by  
The patient donkey worked, let it be ground.  
A lusty stag's first horns you then must pound  
In it. One sixth of an as of it then take  
And then of it a pulverized mixture make  
And sieve it thoroughly, and then add in  
Twelve bulbs of narcissi, but you must skin 70  
Them first, then pound the mixture vigorously  
In a marble mortar. This miscellany  
Now needs two ounce of gum and Tuscan wheat,  
Eighteen of honey. Should a woman treat  
Her face with this, that face will surely shine  
More brightly than her mirror. Then combine  
Lupins and beans, then bake them. Take six pound  
Of each and in the mill let them be ground.  
Then add white lead and don't forget the scum  
Of red nitre and the iris which has come 80  
From Illyria, and let young arms be used  
In kneading it; when it is duly bruised,  
One ounce should be the ideal weight. What's best  
For curing spots is what the halcyon's nest  
Is built with. What's the dose? One ounce apply  
In two coequal parts, I'd specify.  
So that you may apply it easily,  
Add honey from the golden Attic bee.  
Though incense soothes angry divinities,  
Don't keep it merely for their litanies. 90

With nitre mix this cure for boils, and see  
You use four ounce of each; add from a tree  
An ounce of gum, a dab of myrrh; a hand-  
-ful of dried rose-leaves should be added and  
Ammoniac gum and incense: coalesce  
Some barley-water till you may assess  
That both the gum and incense weigh the same  
As do the rose-leaves. Very soon you'll claim  
A fair complexion. I once saw someplace  
A woman rub moist poppies on her face.