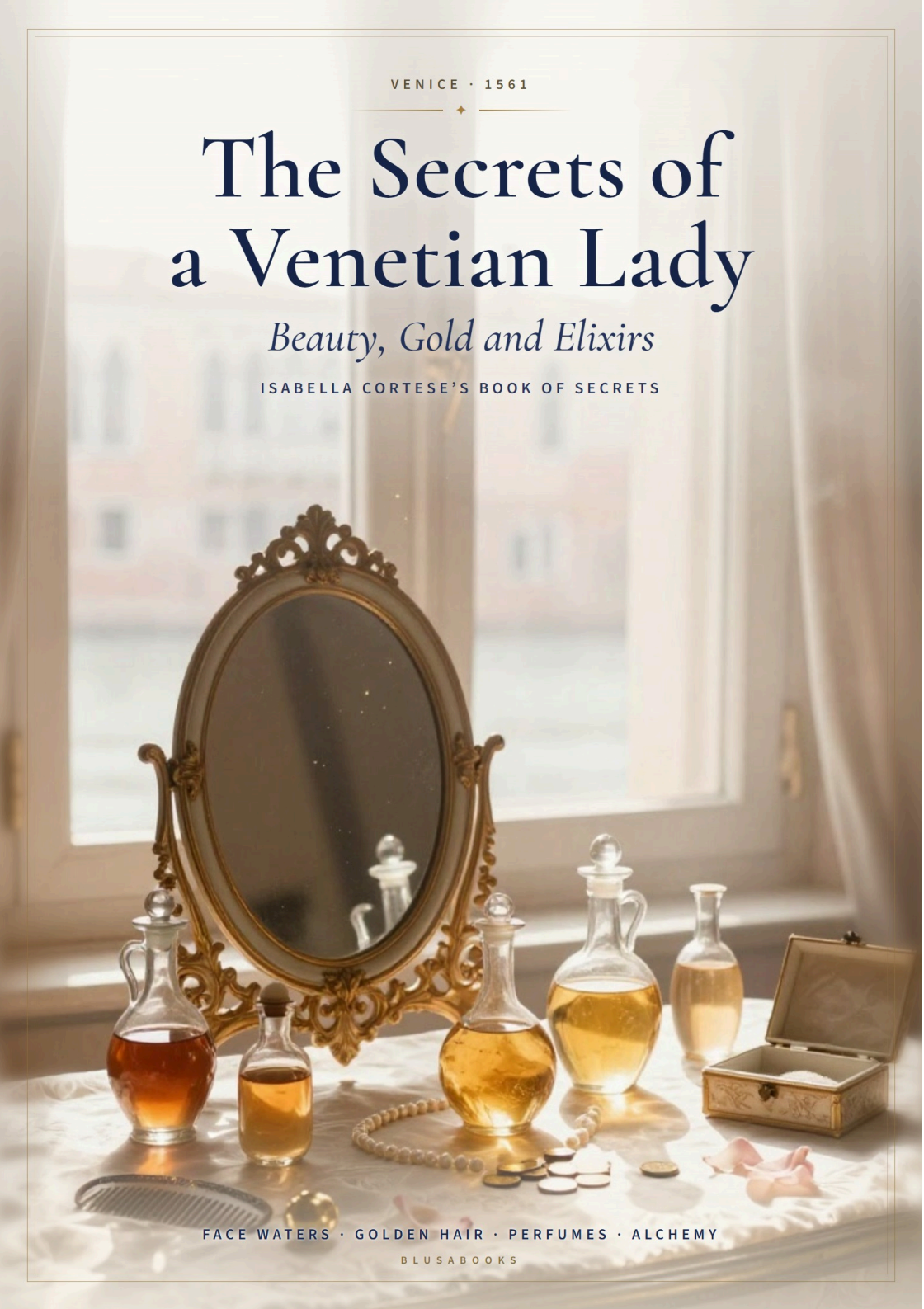
VENICE · 1561

The Secrets of a Venetian Lady

Beauty, Gold and Elixirs

ISABELLA CORTESE'S BOOK OF SECRETS



FACE WATERS · GOLDEN HAIR · PERFUMES · ALCHEMY

BLUSABOOKS

BOOKS OF WISDOM

The Secrets of a Venetian Lady

Beauty, Gold and Elixirs

Isabella Cortese's "Secrets" (Venice, 1561; edition of 1565) — a Renaissance book of secrets for every great lady: face waters and whiteners, golden hair, perfumes and oils, remedies against plague and poison, alchemy, gold and elixirs, and the household arts. The complete translation with the original pages and woodcuts, notes and a commentary: what it did, and should it be done.

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Transcription, translation, notes, foreword, the commentary "What it did — and should it be done?" and indexes © 2026 SIA "Blusa Entertainment".

Source: Isabella Cortese, "I secreti de la signora Isabella Cortese", Venice, Giovanni Bariletto, 1565. Images of the original pages and woodcuts: Wellcome Collection, London, Public Domain Mark. Illustrations and cover are modern work.

A historical source, not advice. The recipes are not meant to be made or used; many of their substances are poisonous.

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CONTENTS

Important: please read first 5

Foreword 6

The Title Page and Dedication 11

The First Book. Medicines and Secrets of Healing 18

The Second Book. Alchemy, Gold and Metals 51

The Third Book. Household Arts: Glues, Colours, Mirrors and Leathers 114

The Fourth Book. Beauty: Face Waters, Hair, Perfumes and Oils 161

Indexes 328

IMPORTANT: PLEASE READ FIRST

This book is a HISTORICAL SOURCE, not a manual of beauty, medicine or chemistry. Its recipes were printed in Venice more than 460 years ago, when beauty, health and the metals were understood quite differently from today. We translate them in full and honestly, just as they are, because that is precisely the value of this book.

NO RECIPE IS TO BE MADE, PUT ON THE SKIN OR TAKEN BY MOUTH. The face whiteners of Renaissance ladies contained **sublimate** (mercuric chloride) and **white lead**; the hair removers contained **orpiment** (an arsenic compound) and quicklime; the remedies contained opium and poisonous plants; and the alchemist's workshop used quicksilver, arsenic, aqua fortis and vitriol. These substances can cause severe burns, poison the kidneys, the nervous system and the brain, damage the skin and teeth for life, and even kill. Today compounds of mercury, lead and arsenic are banned from cosmetics in the European Union.

After the recipes and groups of recipes stands our section **"WHAT IT DID — AND SHOULD IT BE DONE?"**. It explains what the recipe promised, what is really in it in modern terms, what modern science knows about it and whether it may be done. Dangerous passages are marked with the sign ⚠. If you have a health or skin problem, please consult a doctor or pharmacist.

FOREWORD

A BOOK OF SECRETS FOR EVERY GREAT LADY

In 1561, in Venice, at the press of Giovanni Bariletto, there appeared a small book with a long and tempting title: "The Secrets of the Lady Isabella Cortese, in which are contained things mineral, medicinal, artificial and alchemical, and much of the art of perfumery, belonging to every great lady". It was written not in Latin for the learned, but in plain Italian, so that any woman who could read might read it. And it promised everything a Renaissance lady could wish for: a white and shining face, golden hair, perfumed hands, remedies against plague and poison, and above all, the secret of making gold.

The book was an immediate success. Four years later, in 1565, Bariletto printed it again, "with other most beautiful secrets added". It is this edition that you hold in translation. More editions followed: at least eleven Italian editions are known up to 1677, and the book was also translated into German.

WHAT WERE THE "BOOKS OF SECRETS"?

Sixteenth-century Venice was the book capital of Europe. Hundreds of presses worked there, and they looked for books that would be bought not only by learned men but by merchants, craftsmen, apothecaries and ladies. So a new and much-wanted genre was born: the **"books of secrets"** (*libri di segreti*). They were collections of recipes in which a remedy for fever stood beside instructions for taking a stain out of silk, for making ink, for washing the hair to make it fair, and for "fixing" quicksilver.

The most famous was the book of secrets of "Alessio Piemontese" (Venice, 1555), likewise under an invented name, behind which, it is thought, stood the writer Girolamo Ruscelli. Its success was enormous, and dozens of similar collections

soon followed. The historian William Eamon (*Science and the Secrets of Nature*, 1994) sees these books as one of the paths by which the idea spread through Renaissance Europe that nature could be known by trial, and not only by reading the ancient authors. Recipes often end with the words "and it is proven" — that was their chief promise.

Cortese's book was special within the genre: it was **ONE OF THE VERY FEW SAID TO BE WRITTEN BY A WOMAN**, and it was addressed to women.

THE MYSTERY: DID ISABELLA CORTESE EVER LIVE?

We know almost nothing about Isabella Cortese. There is no date of birth or death, no letters, no documents in the Venetian archives. Everything we know of her is in this book.

The book opens with a dedication "to the very Reverend Monsignor Mario Chaboga", Archdeacon of Ragusa (today's Dubrovnik). The author writes in the feminine — "most affectionate", "I shall remain most obliged" — and mentions the secrets the Archdeacon "brought with him from Hungary". The Second Book opens with a famous letter to a "dear brother". Its writer tells how for more than thirty years he read the books of the alchemists — Geber, Raymond Lull and Arnald of Villanova — and found in them nothing but fables, riddles and empty talk that waste time and money. Then he gives his "commandments", and the eighth of them runs: "Teach this art to no one, for revealing secrets makes them lose their power." In many modern encyclopedias and articles these words are attributed to Isabella herself. Yet in our edition of 1565 they stand under the heading "The particular of Chiricus, Abbot of Cologne", and the writer speaks in a man's voice. So even the most famous words of "Isabella" may not be hers at all.

Did Isabella exist at all? Historians doubt it. No trace of her has been found outside the book. Some think that "Isabella Cortese" is a name invented by the publisher or by a man — like "Alessio Piemontese" — because a lady's name gave beauty recipes credibility in the eyes of women. The word *cortese* means "courtly" or "courteous" in Italian, and some scholars have even seen in it a play on the word

OUR EDITION

We translated from the **1565 EDITION** held in London by the **Wellcome Collection** (once in the collection of Ernst Darmstaedter). The library has published it as a public-domain work (*Public Domain Mark*), so in this book we can also show the original pages: the title page with the lady holding a mirror, the dedication, the opening pages of the books, and the woodcuts.

- The text is our own transcription from the scanned pages and a **complete translation**: every chapter, every substance and dose. We have neither softened nor modernised the words and ideas of the age. Explanations are given only in the notes, on the page where a word first appears.
- Beneath the title of each recipe, in smaller letters, stands its **original Italian title**.
- After groups of recipes follows our section **"What it did — and should it be done?"**, with references to modern sources (the World Health Organization, the US toxicology agency ATSDR, the EU Cosmetics Regulation, the European Medicines Agency and others).
- At the end of the book are **indexes**: every recipe by theme (beauty, gold and alchemy, medicines, household arts) and a separate list of the recipes that contain dangerous substances.
- The original book also has a table of chapters and a register of gatherings; we have not translated these, as our indexes replace them.

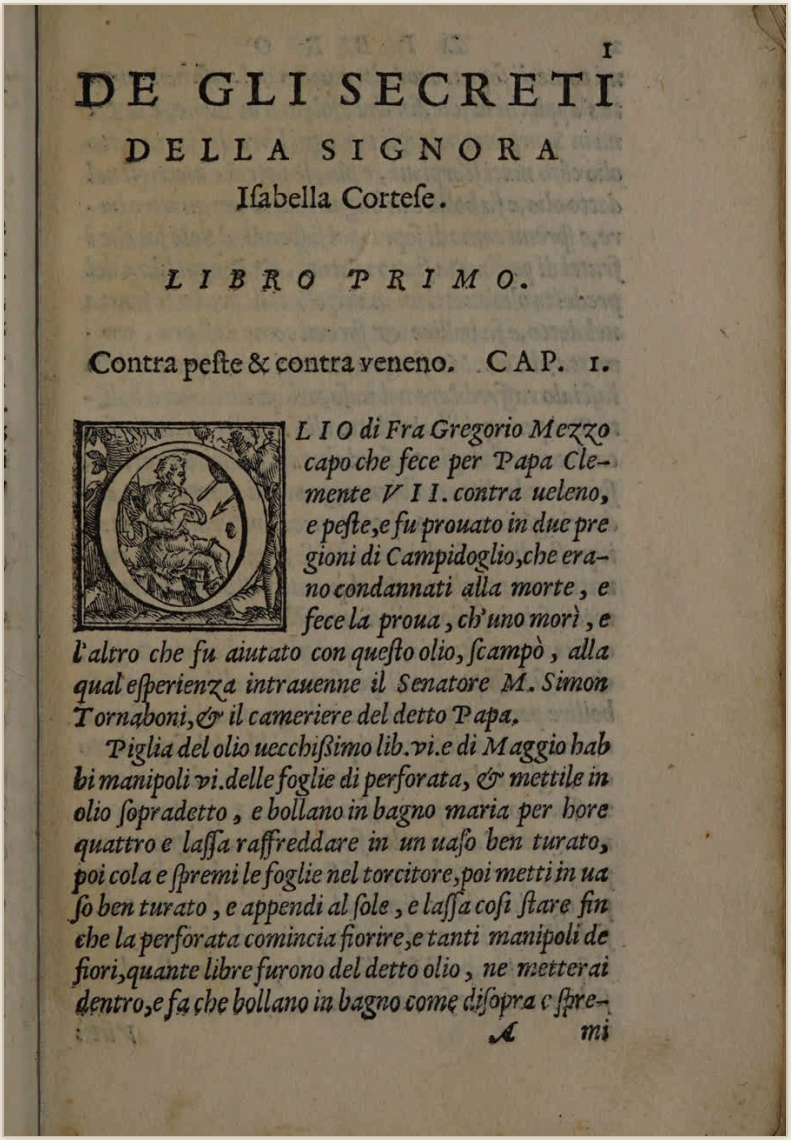
We have kept the measures of the original — ounces, drams, pounds, *boccali*. The approximate modern weight is given in a note at the first appearance. In the print the signs for the ounce (℥) and the dram (ʒ) look very alike; where they were hard to tell apart, we followed the shape of the sign and the sense of the recipe. A few names of rare substances (such as "angelot" and "mugia") are not securely known; we have left them as in the original and explained in a note what they most probably mean.

THE FIRST BOOK. MEDICINES AND SECRETS OF HEALING



A Venetian apothecary's shop around 1560 (illustration)

The First Book opens with remedies against plague and poison, oils for wounds and cures for every ailment a Venetian household might meet, from gout to toothache. ⚠ Many recipes contain mercury, sublimate, arsenic and opium.



1

DE GLI SECRETI
DELLA SIGNORA
Iſabella Corteſe.

LIBRO PRIMO.

Contra peſte & contra veneno. CAP. 1.

OLIO di Fra Gregorio Mezzocapo che fece per Papa Clemente VII. contra ueleno, e peſte, e fu prouato in due pregioni di Campidoglio, che erano condannati alla morte, e fece la proua, ch'uno morì, e l'altro che fu aiutato con queſto olio, ſcampò, alla qual eſperienza intrauenne il Senatore M. Simon Tornaboni, & il cameriere del detto Papa.

Piglia del olio uecchiſſimo lib. vi. e di Maggio hab bi manipoli vi. delle foglie di perforata, & mettile in olio ſopradetto, e bollano in bagno maria per hore quattro e laſſa raffreddare in un uaſo ben turato, poi cola e ſpremi le foglie nel torcitore, poi metti in ua ſo ben turato, e appendi al ſole, e laſſa coſi ſtare fin che la perforata comincia fiorire, e tanti manipoli de fiori, quante libre furono del detto olio, ne metterai dentro, e fa che bollano in bagno come diſopra e ſpremi

A mi

A page of the 1565 edition (Wellcome Collection, Public Domain Mark)

Against the plague and against poison

Contra peste & contra veneno

The oil of Fra Gregorio Mezzocapo, which he made for Pope Clement VII[1] against poison and plague; and it was proved upon two prisoners of the Campidoglio[2] who were condemned to death. He made the trial: the one died, and the other, who was helped with this oil, escaped; and present at this experiment were the Senator Messer Simon Tornaboni and the chamberlain of the said Pope.

Take 6 pounds[3] of very old oil, and in May get 6 handfuls of the leaves of St John's wort[4], and put them in the said oil, and let them boil in a bain-marie[5] for four hours; then let it cool in a well-stoppered vessel, then strain it and press the leaves in the press, then put it in a well-stoppered vessel and hang it in the sun, and let it stand so until the St John's wort begins to flower. And as many handfuls of the flowers as there were pounds of the said oil you shall put therein, and make them boil in the bath as above, and press them as above. And once more, in the well-stoppered vessel, let it be hung in the sun until the Sun is in Leo and the Moon in Scorpio[6]; then take for every pound of the said oil one hundred and twenty scorpions, and more if you can, and put them in the said oil, and boil in the bain-marie for four hours, and press as above; then hang it in the sun until the fruits of the St John's wort are ripe, and into every pound of the said oil put a handful of these fruits, and boil and press as above; then let it be set in the sun. But always, before the oil is pressed, let it cool in the vessel in which it has boiled.

Then for every pound of the said oil take tormentil, carline, round birthwort, red sandalwood, roots of carline, spikenard, white dittany[7], juniper berries —

1 Pope from 1523 to 1534, of the Medici family of Florence.
2 The Capitoline Hill in Rome, seat of the city's court and prison.
3 The Venetian pound was ~300–480 g; the apothecaries' pound ~300 g.
4 Italian "perforata": Hypericum perforatum, whose leaves look pierced when held to the light.
5 Heating in a vessel set in hot water, so the contents do not scorch.
6 The Sun is in Leo from mid-July to mid-August; the Moon passes through Scorpio for a few days each month.
7 Tormentil is Potentilla erecta; carline is the stemless carline thistle; spikenard a fragrant Himalayan root; dittany Dictamnus albus.

half an ounce[1] of each; zedoary and gentian, of each equally[2], 2 drams[3]; centaury and masterwort, of each equally, 1 dram — these last two things put in if you please. And let all of it, finely cut and somewhat pounded in the mortar, be set to steep in very old strong wine, red or white, or in malmsey[4], or in aqua vitae[5], which will be better, and there let it stand for three days; then let it be put in the said oil, and boil it for six or eight hours in the bain-marie, and press and wring as above.

Then for every pound of the said oil take Armenian bole[6], myrrh, choice rhubarb, saffron, hepatic aloes, sandalwood, of each equally, 2 drams; let all be powdered, and once more make it boil in the bain-marie for six or eight hours, and do not press it in the press. Then for every pound take of mithridate and fine theriac[7], of each equally, 2 drams, and boil it together with the said oil for twelve hours, and press it no more; then hang it in the sun for four days in the well-stoppered vessel, and it will be finished.

Virtues of the said oil

Virtù del detto olio

If there be any person who has taken poison by the mouth, let the heart and the pulses be anointed every six hours for two natural days[8], then once a day for up to four days. Whoever suspects he may eat poison in some place where he goes to dine, let him anoint the heart once before he goes there, and once more when he has returned. Whoever would preserve himself from the plague, even while consorting with the infected, let him anoint the heart and the pulses once a day, when he goes to sleep. If anyone be bitten by any venomous beast whatsoever, or

1 The apothecaries' ounce, ~30 g; 12 ounces to the pound.
2 Prescription term: take the same quantity of each ingredient.
3 About 3.9 g, one eighth of an ounce.
4 A sweet strong wine from the Greek islands, shipped by Venice all over Europe.
5 Distilled spirit of wine, the "water of life".
6 A red clay from Armenia, used in medicine and in gilding.
7 Mithridate and theriac: famous ancient compound antidotes containing opium and viper's flesh.
8 Days of twenty-four hours, as against the "artificial" day from sunrise to sunset.