



MADE-UP WOMAN: EXAMINING
LITERARY SOURCES AND
MATERIAL COSMETIC CULTURE IN
FIRST-CENTURY POMPEII

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Non tamen expositas mensa deprendat amator pyxidas: ars faciem dissimulate iuvat. Quem non offendat toto faex inlita vultu, cum fluit in tepidos pondere lapsa sinus? (*Ars.* 3.209-212, Loeb translation)

Yet let no lover find the boxes set out upon the table; your looks are aided by dissembled art. **Who would not be offended by paint smeared all over the face**, when by its weight it glides and falls into your warm bosom?

— OVID





Tum quoque, compositis cum collinet ora venenis, ad dominae vultus (nec pudor obstet) eas. Pyxidas invenies et rerum mille colores, et fluere in petidos oesypa lapsa sinus, non semel hinc stomacho nausea facta meo est (*Rem.*, 351-56, Loeb translation)

Then too, when she is **painting her cheeks with concoctions of dyes**, go (let not shame hinder you) and see your mistress' face. Boxes you will find, and **a thousand colours**, and **juices that melt and drip into her warm bosom**...not once only has **my stomach grown queasy** at them

— OVID





Frivolum videatur, non tamen omittendum propter desideria mulierum, talum candidi iuveni XL diebus noctibusque... candorem cutisque erugationem praestare. Fimo taurino malas rubescere aiunt, non ut crocodileam inlini melius sit (NH 28.184, Loeb translation)

The following recipe might seem [**frivolous**], but to **satisfy the women I must not omit it**: the pastern bone of a white-bull calf, boiled for forty days and nights...gives whiteness to the skin and smooths away wrinkles. They say **bull's dung brings a rosy colour to the cheeks**, though **it is better to rub them with crocodilea**

— PLINY





Discite quae faciem commendet cura, puellae, et quo sit vobis
forma tuenda modo... (*Med.* 1-2)

Learn, girls, what diligence **protects your face**, and in what
way you should **maintain your beauty**

— OVID, AGAIN





LITERATURE KEY OBSERVATIONS

- Not incredibly numerous, but overwhelmingly negative
- Beauty communicates important information
- Emphasis on youth, clear skin, and association with purity
- *Cultus* & nature
- *Munditia*, health, & hygiene
 - *Kosmetikon* and *kommotikon*
- *Ars* & secrecy
 - Is this secrecy reflective of reality?





FACT-CHECKING THE NARRATIVE

Men are laying down the beauty standard, but women are the ones required to practice it. How can we re-create *women's* understanding of beauty culture and practice?





ROMAN CONTEXT



DOVE

Cosmetics container

Pompeii, inv. 10455

Photo Source: Abigail
Reytblat



Casa della Venere in Bikini

I.11.6,7

Photo Source: Abigail
Reytblat



UNGUENTARIA

Cosmetic/Ointment Vessels

Pompeii, I.11.17

Photo Source: Abigail
Reytblat





ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

- Practicality
 - What contents could each vessel hold?
 - What tools were necessary to extract contents?
 - What stoppers, stands, and storage were needed?
- Building the women's world
 - Mass-produced vessels and commerciality
 - Mapping cosmetic use onto the streets of Pompeii
 - No *mundus muliebris* in the home



Glass unguentaria, Casa della Venere. Inv. 10794 A-L.
Photo source: Abigail Reytblat





EXAMPLES OF BIOARCHEOLOGICAL APPROACHES

- 1) Start from the recipes, and consider their potential efficacy
- 2) Start from residue analysis, and match to an ancient text

Primary Observations

- 1) Ovid's recipes contain useful skincare ingredients
- 2) Residues reveal both organic and inorganic components



Source: Welcomme et al.



Source: Evershed et al.



CONCLUSIONS

- Sensory archaeological approaches allows for unique observations
 - Lets us consider physical practicalities of using these beautification materials
 - Cosmetics were part of the economic fabric of Pompeii, and are found in public-facing contexts – and therefore, likely not so secret
- Archaeology recontextualizes male-authored literature
 - Male texts, instead of creating + dictating standards for women, are interacting with women's actual cosmetic practices
- Putting fields of research into dialogue creates more nuanced understanding of cosmetic practices
 - Allows us to consider the limitations + benefits of using ancient texts as historical evidence
 - “Responsible imagination” makes the ancient world seem more intimate, lived in, and even familiar



UNDERSTANDING OUR ROLE AS CLASSICISTS

- Preserving is a deliberate action
 - Historically, preservation bodies have not valued preserving women's perspectives
- Classicists preserve + make relevant a culture that no longer exists
- We cannot resurrect women's voices, but we can re-consider them



Glass pyxis,
Pompeii (1.14)



Glass pyxis, Pompeii,
inv. 109634



Dove unguentarium,
Pompeii, inv. 10235 B



Dove unguentarium,
Rome, inv. 17.194.133



Ivory pyxis, Naples, inv.
77569



CITATIONS & FURTHER READING

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THANK YOU!

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