CHAPTER SEVEN

THE AFTERLIFE OF HIPPOCRATIC RECIPES

Introduction

The Hippocratic collections of gynaecological recipes and the *PhARMakitides* mentioned in *Affections* were among the first extended recipe compilations written in Greek, inaugurating a vigorous tradition of medical recipe writing. Most medical writers active in the centuries following Hippocrates’ death are known to have composed pharmacological treatises: Diocles, Dieuches, Praxagoras, Herophilus, to name only a few. Unfortunately, none of their treatises survives in full; we know them only through quotations in medical authors such as Celsus, Pliny, Galen and Soranus. The first recipe book preserved in full, after a gap of at least four centuries, is Scribonius Largus’ *Composite Drugs* (time of the Emperor Claudius).¹

The recipes recorded by Scribonius, and by many of his successors, differ from the Hippocratic remedies in several ways. First, whereas Hippocratic recipes rarely included more than six ingredients, the recipes recorded by Scribonius rarely have less than seven. Some of Scribonius’ recipes have well in excess of twenty ingredients; this is particularly the case for recipes for antidotes, i.e. panaceas designed to cure all ailments.² For instance, the antidote of the physician Marcianus has forty ingredients, many of which are exotic and/or rare:

Antidote of the physician Marcianus, which is called *telea* (that is perfect) in Greek, because it lacks nothing. This single <antidote> works against all <ills> against which all the best antidotes <work>. This <antidote> used to be compounded for Augustus Caesar: 8 *denarii* of cinnamon, 6 *denarii* of amomum, 25 *denarii* of black cassia, 16 *denarii* of saffron, 5 *denarii* of rush, 5 *denarii* of frankincense, 2 *denarii* of white pepper, 10 *denarii* of myrrh, 10 *denarii* of long pepper, 10 and a half *denarii* of Indian spikenard, 16 *denarii* of Celtic nard, 6 *denarii* of dried rose, 2 *denarii* of white

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¹ Recipes are also preserved in books V and XI of Celsus’ *De medicina* (time of the Emperor Tiberius).
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costus, 4 denarii of opobalsamum, half a denarius of Cyrenaic silphium, or one denarius of Syrian <silphium>, 6 denarii of cassidony, 5 denarii of gentian, 4 denarii of the root of sharp clover, or 3 denarii of the seed of this plant, 12 denarii of scordium, 5 denarii of germander, 2 denarii of hazelwort, 3 denarii of sweet flag, 32 denarii of valerian, 2 denarii of copper ore, 12 denarii of dittany, 3 denarii of drops of ammoniacum, two times a semis of agaricum <sc. a fungus>, 20 drops of balsam, 6 denarii and a half of parsley, three times a semis of wild rue, three times a semis of fennel seeds, 4 denarii of Cretan daucus, 2 denarii of anise, 2 denarii of Ethiopian cumin, 5 and a half denarii of turnip seeds, 3 denarii of wild mustard seeds, 2 denarii of fresh blood of female duck, 3 denarii of dried blood of male duck, 3 denarii of dried blood of male kid, 6 denarii and a half of dried blood of turtle, 3 denarii of dried blood of male goose, and a sufficient amount of Attic honey. It works against everything.³

I have argued that the Hippocratic recipes were the reflection of a Haute Médecine, based on luxury and exotic ingredients; however, compared to this type of antidotes, they seem terribly cheap. The spread of the Hellenistic and Roman Empires, and the impact this spread had on the price and availability of ingredients, certainly contributed to the multiplication of ingredients in pharmaceutical recipes. Internal pressures were also at work. A ‘trickle-down’ effect is often observable in the history of luxury goods: social emulation leads to a higher demand for a good, which then slowly loses its prestige.

In the recipe for Marcianus’ antidote, exact quantities are given for each ingredient. Most recipes listed by Scribonius and his successors specify amounts. This is in stark contrast with the Hippocratic recipes which often left quantities to the readers’ discretion.⁴

The antidote in our example is attributed to the physician Marcianus. Other recipes collected by Scribonius are attributed to Mithridates (Comp. 170), Ambrosius the physician of Puteoli (Comp. 152), or the surgeon Aristus (Comp. 209), to name only a few. In addition, Scribonius gives the recipe for a toothpaste regularly used by the princess Messalina (Comp. 60). Attributions of recipes to people, famous or not, are an important characteristic of recipe books produced from the first century AD—and this may already have been the case for recipe books composed in the Hellenistic period. With the multiplication of written recipe collections, it became increasingly important for compilers to prove that the remedies they compiled were efficacious: attaching a name

³ Scribonius, Comp. 177.
⁴ On the importance given by Galen to accurate quantities in recipes, see von Staden (1997) 68–71.