

## Section of the History of Medicine

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### Trotula and the Ladies of Salerno : A Contribution to the Knowledge of the Transition between Ancient and Mediæval Physick

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[ABRIDGED]

THE first incentive to this essay came from *Bibliotheca Oseriana* (1929), where, referring to the salernitan gynæcological treatise, entitled *De passionibus mulierum, ante, in & post partum*, usually attributed to Trotula, it is said :

The first woman professor has been deprived of more than her chair by the unchivalrous mythoclasts of the school of Sudhoff. The Good-wife Trotula passed long ago into the fairy-tales as " Dame Trot " . . . Alas ! she too had no real existence.



Medal struck in Naples early in the nineteenth century to commemorate Trotula. The inscription says FLORUIT ANN. XI. ; the eleventh century is meant. (Photo by kind courtesy of the Boston Medical Library, U.S.A.)

This ruthless destroyer of charming legends was Charles Singer, who jointly with Dorothea Singer, in the *Sudhoff Festschrift*, 1924, attempted a literary reconstruction of the medical school of Salerno, the first University. The Authors suggested that the fragmentary compilations attributed to a Trotula of Salerno were in reality by a man, Trottus, but had been ascribed to a woman, because of the "peeping Tom" nature of the observations they contained, and concluded :

The situation is not devoid of humour and thus fades into nothingness the first woman professor whose life a learned medical historian once essayed to write.

This opinion appeared in later writings, was quoted by Thorndike (1929), and then by Powicke and Emden, editors of Rashdall's *The Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages* (1936) and others besides.

Such a sharp break with cherished tradition could not remain unchallenged ; Kate Hurd Mead (1930 and 1938) argued with spirit and a wealth of quotations, that during five centuries after Trotula's death, numerous authors had accepted her existence, quoted her by name, praised her ability and that moreover her writings had been highly prized, enjoyed a wide distribution and during all this time from no source had there arisen any doubt as to her identity.

It is an invidious task to decide between these contrasting opinions, for it cannot be easy, if at all possible, to prove that a woman named Trotula practised gynæcology at Salerno ; and what is even more difficult, to obtain evidence that she wrote, or dictated, or inspired the compilation of the original text from which are derived the many extant MSS. listed under her name. What has been found feasible and is historically more essential, was to obtain an unambiguous conception of the importance and significance of *De passionibus* against the background of medical knowledge and practice of the twelfth to thirteenth centuries in Southern Italy and its consequent influence across time and land in relation to medicine.

#### AVAILABLE "TROTULA" MSS. ; COPIES, EXCERPTS AND IMITATIONS

The earliest Trotula MSS. date from the time when in Italy and France the practice of medicine first appeared as a learned profession and universities began to train physicians and surgeons in the manner we see nearly everywhere to-day. This change in status was connected with the writings and example of the Salernitan Masters, who in their turn were influenced by personal contact with Eastern physicians. This important subject will be discussed in a later essay, but here it can be recalled that among Salernitan writings those known as *Trotula* certainly deserve particular notice. The much-quoted *Regimen Salernitanum* was, in its original form, a brief popular exposition of hygienic rules ; therapeutic medical matter was added in the fourteenth to fifteenth centuries, by authors unconnected with Salerno, for by then its glory had departed.

Trotula's treatise has been the subject of a Leipzig Dissertation by Spitzner (1921), who listed twenty-one MS. copies in various German, Belgian and French Libraries ; Cambridge and Oxford are credited each with a copy. I can enlarge this list, since four Trotula MSS. are available in Cambridge, fourteen in the Bodleian and various Colleges at Oxford, and about eight or nine are in the British Museum, while two are listed in the Hunterian Library at Glasgow. It can be assumed that some of the MS. copies originate from the Libraries at Canterbury, the Catalogue of which has been published by M. R. James (1902). A Trotula writing was also listed in the Library of Tichfield Abbey, see R. M. Wilson (1940). The many MSS. copies, numerous allusions in literature and repeated printings, all concur in showing that the gynæcological treatise connected with the name of Trotula was widely accepted as a guide

during four or five centuries. Moreover it can be said that it is the first writing in the Christian era which considered obstetrics from the standpoint of the medical practitioner.

Thus the preliminary examination of the MSS. available in England enabled me to express an opinion on some controversial subjects in relation to Trotula, the Ladies of Salerno and their position in the famous *Civitas Hippocratica*.

Authors discussing Trotula have usually relied on the text of printed editions, expecting that it corresponded to some early original MS. Even a cursory examination of the MSS. in England revealed that those listed under Trotula differed considerably in extent, wording, and even content. Some are brief treatises relating to gynæcological matters; others are cosmetic formularies under the title *De ornatu mulierum*; some consist of a combination of both. The Trotula in the University Library, Cambridge, is a copy of the gynæcological section of the *Thesaurus pauperum* attributed to Petrus Hispanus, a Portuguese theologian, who taught medicine at Siena, c. 1250, and became Pope John XXI (1276-7).

Some Trotula texts appear to have been listed under the title of *De secretis mulierum* which rightly belongs to the writing attributed to Albert Magnus (1193-1280); it contains astrology and Aristotelian disquisitions, which would not be accepted in the medical text of Trotula. No copy of Albert's *De secretis* contains a section on cosmetics, which would be foreign to the monkish trend of this writing.

#### THE SCHOOL OF SUDHOFF AND TROTULA

In a Leipzig Dissertation, Hiersemann (1921) assumed that the "Trot" MS. in the Breslau *De aegritudinum curatione* was an excerpt from a—suppositious—*Practica* by one Trottus, whose name does not appear in any Salernitan document. Though the scribe's marks such as "Trot"—tt— &c. can be variously interpreted, as a further deduction it has been concluded that this imaginary Trottus was the author of *De passionibus mulierum*. A clear distinction must be made between the author or authoress of this Salernitan treatise, who is uncertain or unknown, and the matron Trotula who: *vocata fuit quasi magistra operis*, according to most MS. This is a definite person and may even have been the matron, who, it is stated in the introduction, inspired the writing of the gynæcological treatise.

It was hoped to obtain some hint as to the authorship of the text by an examination of MSS. copies; but the one at Caius, at the point where the printed version says *compulsa*, instead employed the impersonal *me impellit*. The MS. in St. John ends with: *Factus a muliere Salernitana quae Trotula vocatur* in the same handwriting as the text. This thirteenth century view can be accepted till evidence to the contrary is forthcoming.

The attribution of the text to Eros, a freedman of the Empress Julia in the second century, appeared in the printing of 1566; it is not quite clear why this gratuitous assertion was made. Most MS. copies admit the authorship of Trotula by inference. The example of the so-called Cleopatra writing shows that dedication and authorship were not always kept separate; moreover, the Salernitan writings of Copho were often attributed to Galen.

The gynæcology and obstetrics of Trotula show some progress on contemporary practice, because of the recommendation of support of the perineum in childbirth and the primary suture of lacerations.

The professional outlook displayed in the text in relation to abortion and cognate matters is superior to that noticeable in printed copies of *Thesaurus pauperum*, the MS. of which would be approximately contemporary with Trotula. Like other

Salernitan writings, Trotula recommends numerous ineffective means and repulsive excrements, but can definitely be said to ignore magic and astrology.

The sections dealing with cosmetics have been neglected by medico-historians, but they reveal a different authorship and are especially feminine in sentiment and sensibility. It has been overlooked that here the author mentioned in the first person the prescription of a Saracen woman. There are, moreover, allusions to *Mulieres Salernitanae* who prepared aids to beauty and *Nobiles Salernitanae* who used them. All this suggests that a Trotula of Salerno could have provided material for the text of *De passionibus*.

#### *The Women and the Ladies of Salerno*

De Renzi's oft-quoted assertion that the *Mulieres Salernitanae* taught medicine in the School of Salerno seems based on Mazza (1681) who, writing some four or five centuries after the apogee of the *Civitas Hippocratica*, rather confused the authorship or the alleged authorship of medical writings with the position of an academic teacher. Moreover, De Renzi accepted the reference to a wise matron of Salerno by Orderic Vitalis as a definite mention of Trotula; a somewhat light-hearted assumption. The existence of the School or College of Salerno in the eleventh century is uncertain; the activity of the Masters was apparently restricted to medical practice and the issuing of medical excerpts, and if it could be proved that Trotula was the author of *De passionibus mulierum*, then she might well rank as a teacher or instructress; it is, however, difficult to accept her as the first Woman Professor. Instead there is documentary proof that Constanza Calenda of Salerno lectured on medicine *ex cathedra* some time during the reign of Giovanna I of Anjou (1326-82) in the University of Naples.

The reference to Trotula in the Prologue to the *Wife of Bath* tale may be connected with the existence of several copies of Trotula which were present in the Library at Canterbury in the fourteenth century; these were probably known to Chaucer only by their title, which may have given an erroneous conception of their serious medical contents.

The study of MS. copies in England failed to confirm that Trotula of Salerno actually wrote or compiled *De passionibus mulierum*, but since scribes in the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries assumed that she did, one may accept this traditional view, till proof to the contrary becomes available. There is no sound evidence that Salernitan women practised or taught medicine as *Magistræ*; what Gilles de Corbeil described were the manipulations of home treatment of different ailments; it must be remarked that such treatment was given independently of the direction of any *Magister*. Indeed in *De passionibus* it was expressly stated that *Trotula . . . vocata fuit quasi magistra*, just as if she were a Master of Medicine. Writings ascribed to other Salernitan women have not yet been traced, but there are the remarkable literary efforts of St. Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1180), together with the *Hortus deliciarum* of the nun Herrad von Landsperg (d. 1187); thus any writings of Salernitan women that may be discovered would not be unique. Whoever may have been the actual composer of *De passionibus mulierum*, the treatise itself can be considered in the light of a notable achievement at the time, for it taught the professional handling of gynaecological and obstetrical conditions in a manner not only more enlightened than was usual at that time, but as part of a *Magister's* practice. The section dealing with cosmetics may well have been composed by a woman, though physicians from Soranus to Mayerne (d. 1655) have prescribed aids to beauty.

Therefore judged by any criterion or tried by any suitable test, the Trotula text proves to be one of the most significant treatises issued by Salernitans.

THE MASTERS OF SALERNO AND THE ORIGIN OF THE MEDICAL PROFESSION IN  
WESTERN EUROPE.<sup>1</sup>

It is usually accepted that a broad stream of Hippocratic medicine can be traced from classical times to the present. Hippocrates was mainly concerned with the observation of symptoms for the purpose of prognosis; seven centuries later, Galen made diagnosis subservient to therapy. During the following nine centuries, the Hippocratic stream became a mere trickle, just recognizable in the writings of philosophers like Hrabanus. In Western Europe in the ninth century the practitioner of medicine, when not a monk, was a *medicus*, who employed spells and charms and could scarcely read or write. Not so in the East, where physicians and surgeons were trained by learned teachers. At the time of the first Crusade the Masters of Salerno first arose, adopted the title *Magister* like that of expounders of the law, and taught by means of the excerpts and compilations of Moslem and Hebrew writers by Constantine of Monte Cassino—d. ca. 1087. The Salernitans established by example and precept that the practitioner of medicine should be a learned person, not only a skilled craftsman. They concentrated on the treatment of symptoms, made a timid attempt to learn anatomy and, what is particularly remarkable for their time and locality, avoided magical formulæ or miraculous faith-cures. It can be surmised that they modelled themselves on the practice of Moslem and Hebrew physicians. The productive literary activity of the Masters stopped with the sack of Salerno in 1196, but the famous edict of Frederick II regulating the practice of medicine was issued in 1240; by then a "College" had been formed. The *Regimen Salernitanum* in its original form was not particularly medically important; when it became popular, it was altered by several copyists; the significant Salernitan writings are *Copho*, *Antidotarium*, *Trotula*, *Rolandina*, and *De Adventu*. The essential achievement of the Salernitans was the advancement of medical practice on those professional lines it has preserved to the present day.

THE MEDICAL AND ALKEMIKAL WRITINGS ATTRIBUTED TO QUEEN CLEOPATRA.<sup>1</sup>

It can be objected that it does not really matter whether Queen Cleopatra was in any way connected with the writings attributed to her. Since some are palpably pseudo-epigraphic and the general verdict is that all are forgeries, there is little purpose in trying to ascertain how and when these writings were attributed to the glamorous Queen of Egypt.

Still, it may be said that a clear conception of the development of medical knowledge through the centuries cannot be obtained by restricting study to a few acknowledged classical authors without also considering the many minor writings which must have influenced medical practice during the centuries. For example, the excellent medical works of Celsus remained unknown for eleven centuries, whilst many inferior writings enjoyed great popularity, were copied and re-copied times without number, and medical practice followed scarcely recorded doctrines and methods.

For these reasons the origin of the gynæcological writings attributed to Cleopatra has been examined and it has been found that in the form in which they were printed in the *Gynaecia* of Wolf, 1566, they are mainly excerpts from the writings of Soranus, c. A.D. 80-90. The source of the writings of Mustio-Moskion is the same, hence the resemblance with the Cleopatra MSS., though certain differences are noticeable. The Alkemy writings were, in all probability, not composed before the third century, while those in cosmetics may well have originally been contemporary with Queen Cleopatra or even earlier.

It is hoped to publish these essays *in extenso*. Limitation of space precludes me from adding a list of references and works consulted; they can, however, be easily traced by students of the subject. Sarton's *Introduction to the History of Science* (Balt., 1927) contains an up-to-date consideration of Salernitan authors and bibliography of original writings.

I have received kind help in these investigations from many friends, but I may be allowed to mention Dr. Charles Singer, whose advice, criticism, and sustained interest has proved most encouraging.

<sup>1</sup> Abstract of paper read by Dr. Bayon at the meeting of the Section held June 5, 1940.