The Praise of Cultus in Ovid’s Medicamina Faciei Femineae: Ethical and Aesthetic Implications

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the complex relationship between ars and natura in the proem of Ovid’s Medicamina, which celebrates the value of cultus and serves to legitimate the art of self-adornment on the grounds of ethics. Our purpose is to point out the rhetorical and poetical ways by which the praeceptor revises received philosophical and ethical ideas about art and its proper uses in the service of his own art of cosmetics and, more broadly, of his own erotodidaxis.

Keywords

Ovid, Cosmetics, Medicamina, Art, Ethics

Introduction

Artificiality is often a key feature invoked when characterizing Ovidian poetry. Many critics have indeed pointed out the general primacy given to art over nature in Ovid’s writings and have underlined the poet’s highly sophisticated poetics in close affinity with Alexandrian aesthetics. This trait seems particularly relevant when applied to Ovid’s fragmented work dedicated to the art of cosmetics, the Medicamina Faciei Femineae, composed at the turn of the first century AD. By writing a parvus libellus that aims to teach women the art of self-

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2 Ovidian poetry has thus sometimes been depreciated for its artificiality by critics (particularly in the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries), or, conversely, valuated precisely for its sophistication and virtuosity. On this point, see Volk, “Art,” in Ovid, 65–80 (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).
4 The date of composition of the Medicamina is to be inferred from the cross-reference to the parvus libellus contained in Ars 3.205–6, which fixes the terminus ante quem at around 1 AD. Rosati, in his introduction to Ovid’s Medicamina (1996), 1.
adornment, the poet follows his path into the hybrid genre of eroto-didactics to which the notion of *ars* is so central. Indeed, the *praecceptor* of the *Ars*, the *Remedia*, and the *Medicamina* explores the rich meanings of the concept of *ars*, which designates a “teachable knowledge,” a “technique” that is traditionally in alliance with nature (see below) but can also refer to a “deceitful craft” or to an “unnatural artifice.” The ambiguity of the concept is well suited to cosmetics as they constitute both a science (closely affiliated with medicine) and an artificial device. In the *Medicamina*, the artificial feature of the *praecceptor*’s teaching on how to enhance, or even to correct, one’s natural appearance with the use of makeup raises ethical questions regarding the relationship between *ars* and *natura*. In fact, cosmetics aim at covering the physical imperfections or at modifying one’s appearance and tend thus to deceive the other about one’s own nature. Following this perspective, adornment and makeup have been condemned by a long anti-cosmetic tradition across Antiquity, be it by moralists, satirical and comical poets, or legislators, precisely because of their unnatural or superficial character. The

*Medicamina*, suggests that the short treatise may have been composed between the writing of the first two books of the *Ars amatoria* and the third book dedicated to women, that is, between 1 BCE and 1 AD. See Rosati, *Ovidio: I cosmetici delle donne* (Venize: Marsilio Editori, 1985).


Regarding the anti-cosmetic tradition, see the very well documented commentaries of Rosati, *I cosmetici*, and Marguerite Johnson, *Ovid on Cosmetics: “Medicamina Faciei Feminae” and Related Texts* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016); but see also the article on cosmetics by Gabriel Laguna-Mariscal “Cosmeticos,” in *Diccionario de motivos amatorios en la literatura latina* (siglos III a.C.-II d. C.), ed. R. Moreno-Soldevilla (Huelva: Universidad de Huelva, 2011).

The first deprecative connections between cosmetics and artificiality on ethical grounds is to be found in the negative evocation of the adorned Pandora in Hesiod’s *Works and Days* (Op. 76): “πάντα δὲ οἱ χρώμοι τῆς Παλλᾶς Αθηνῆς,” (“and Pallas Athena fitted the whole ornamentation to her body,” trans. G. W. Most, Loeb). The ethical condemnation of cosmetics finds, then, a particular expression in philosophical writings, notably in Plato’s (*Gorgias* 465b), Xenophon’s (*Oec.* 10.2–9), and in the Stoic thought in which *natura* constitutes the referential point (see especially Sen., *Ep.* 86.13; 88.18).

The criticism of the use of adornments and makeup is a recurring theme in diatribes (see Lucr. 4. 1037–91), or in the satirical tradition (Hor. *Sat.* 1.2.80–124; Juv. 6.457–73; Mart. 12.38.3–4), as well as a comic topic in Plautus (*Poem.* 210–32, *Most.* 258–95, *Truc.* 292–95). Even in elegiac poetry, the use of cosmetics is disapproved of in so far as it counterfeits one’s natural beauty and is intimately related to seduction (*Tib.* 1.8 and especially *Prop.* 1.2.7–8: “Crede mihi, non uala tuae est medicina figurae: / nudus Amor formæ non amat artificem,” (“Believe me, there is no improving your appearance: Love is naked, and loves not beauty gained by artifice,” trans. G. P. Goold, Loeb).

Already in the third century BC, the *Lex Oppia sumptuaria* had aimed at limiting the luxury of women’s adornment. Furthermore, the ethical issues on cosmetics, associated in Roman mentalities with oriental delights and corrupting dangers, are of particular interest replaced in the context of the Augustan Principate as they echo the political concern to restore the *mos maiorum*. For subversive aspects towards Augustan ideology in Ovid’s *Medicamina*, see Patricia Watson, “Parody and Subversion in Ovid’s Medicamina Faciei Feminae,” *Mnemosyne*
Ovidian poet thus adopts an original and even quite provocative position in dedicating a poetic treatise to the very artificial art of cosmetics and in celebrating the value of *cultus* in contrast with a raw *natura*.

However, the relationship between art and nature in the opening of Ovid’s *Medicamina* appears to be far more complex. If the poet eulogizes the benefits of the civilizing process and that of refinement, Ovid’s *prooemium* has an important rhetorical function aiming at legitimizing the use of cosmetics by presenting it, paradoxically, as a *natural art*. In this rhetorical *tour de force*, the poet thus reverses the traditional philosophical condemnation of artifice based on its unnatural character by introducing self-adornment as a true *ars* in line with the paradigm of *natura*. This reversal, which is undoubtedly ironical, may also hint at a more serious reflection on the status of art. If, in the common philosophical model, utility and conformity with nature are two of the main criteria used to designate the true *ars/technē*, in Ovid’s *Medicamina*, the aesthetic quality of *ars* is valuated by a *natural* sense of pleasure and self-satisfaction and becomes the chief value commanding the ethics of cosmetics. Aesthetics, which is generally subordinated to ethical concerns in ancient philosophical thought, is elevated as the key value that governs the ethical system of the *ars*, which is taught by the *praecceptor amoris*. In this paper, I shall argue that Ovid’s praise of *cultus* in the *Medicamina* operates as a twofold subversion of the traditional paradigmatic relationship between *ars* and *natura*: firstly, ...
in the valorization of culture and refinement over nature and, secondly, in the subtle rhetoric of the *prooemium*, which paradoxically assimilates cosmetics to a natural *ars*.

**Eulogizing Cultus: A Reversal of the Ethical Paradigm of Natura**

The status of *ars/technē* and its relationship with nature constitutes an important question in the ancient philosophical debate. However, it is quite unanimously agreed among philosophical schools that *natura/physis* is the paradigm for any true *ars/technē*. From this perspective, art is often considered as an extension of nature. Following such an understanding, the device of self-adornment is constantly denied the status of art in philosophical discourse in so far as it seems in no way in accordance with nature. In Plato’s *Gorgias*, in which the concept of *technē* is discussed in regard to its ethical implications, Socrates, in his discussion with Polos, alludes to makeup (*kommōtikē*) by interrogating its nature. For the philosopher, it is not a *technē*, but a mere form of flattery (*kolakeia*), which counterfeits the true *technē* of caring for the body, gymnastics:

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τῆ μὲν οὖν ἱατρικῇ, ὡσπερ λέγω, ἢ ὄψοψική κολακεία ὑπόκειται: τῇ δὲ γυμναστικῇ κατὰ τὸν αὐτὸν τρόπον τοῦτον ἢ κομμοτική, κακοδρόγος τε καὶ ἀπατηλή καὶ ἀγεννής καὶ ἀνελευθερος, σχήμασιν καὶ χρώμασιν καὶ λειτήτη καὶ ἔσθησιν ἀπατώσα, ὡστε ποιεῖν ἀλλότριον κάλλος ἐφελκομένους τοῦ οἰκείου τοῦ διὰ τῆς γυμναστικῆς ἀμελείν.
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However, as I put it, cookery is flattery disguised as medicine; and in just the same manner self-adornment personates gymnastic: with its rascally, deceitful, ignoble, and illiberal nature it deceives men by forms and colours, polish and dress, so as to make them, in the effort of assuming an extraneous beauty, neglect the native sort that comes through gymnastic.

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12 In *Ph.* 2.8.199a15–20, Aristotle writes: “ὅλως τε ἡ τέχνη τὰ μὲν ἐπιτελεῖ ἢ ἡ φύσις ἀδύνατε ἀπεργάσασθαι, τὰ δὲ μιμεῖται,” (“as a general proposition, the arts either, on the basis of Nature, carry things further than Nature can, or they imitate Nature,” trans. P. H. Wicksteed and F. M. Cornford, Loeb). The conception of art following *natura* owes much to the Hippocratic idea that nature is the healing force for the art of medicine. On the importance of nature as a model also for the Platonic *technē*, see Anne Balansard, *Technē dans les Dialogues de Platon: L’empreinte de la sophistique* (Sankt-Augustin: Academia Verlag, 2001), 294. In a very different way, nature constitutes the reference point for the Stoics in their understanding of universal reason while *natura* is the principle force in the development of *artes* in Lucretius’ *DRN* (5.1028–1457).

The presentation of makeup given here by Socrates in Plato’s *Gorgias* is interesting in many aspects. First, self-adornment is condemned precisely because of its deceiving effect, as underlined by the polyptoton *apatēlē* and *apatōsa*, which places emphasis on the illusionist power of cosmetics. In so far as makeup aims at covering or altering what is natural, its use is firmly rejected from a moral point of view. We thus note a strong opposition in the passage between the depreciated extraneous beauty (*allotron kallos*) and one’s own natural beauty (*tou oikeiou*). The conformity with nature constitutes a key feature in the Socratic definition of *technē* and parallels the necessity that one act in accordance with nature (*kata phusin*) in medicine (*iatrikē*), which constitutes the archetype art in the discussions of *technē* in Plato’s dialogues. Moreover, according to Socrates’ view, flattery, the purpose of which is to please, is to be clearly distinguished from art, the purpose of which is utility and the highest moral good.14

In philosophical accounts of the development of civilization, cosmetics and perfumes are regularly associated with superfluous artifices in the general degenerative trend that affects the *artes/technai*. In Plato’s second book of the *Republic*, the philosopher links the cause of development of the *technai* with the most basic natural needs of humans. Thus, the birth of farming is justified and legitimated by the natural need (*khreia*) to feed ourselves, weaving by the need to dress ourselves, and building by the need to find accommodation. After a question from Glaucon, Socrates is led to distinguish the early healthy city from the later diseased city, in which grow unnecessary needs and, as a counterpart, their luxurious and superfluous *technai*. Socrates then lists the new professionals appearing among the crowd of imitators, including the “makers of all kinds of products, both for the adornment of women and for other purposes,” σκευῶν τε παντοδαπῶν δημιουργοί, τῶν τε ἄλλων καὶ τῶν περὶ τὸν γυναικεῖον κόσμον.15 In his

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description of the progress of civilization, Socrates points out that the development of refined and sophisticated technai, including the art of cosmetics, resulted in the moral decay of the city. Interestingly, unnecessary technai are condemned, here again, on the grounds of ethics in so far as they do not respond to natural needs. Though much later, and in a very different context, we find a similar account in Seneca’s Epistulae 90, which focuses on the development of artes and their corruptive effects in his contemporary society. The Stoic philosopher formulates a pessimistic view of human history and civilization: “Sufficit ad id natura quod poscit. A natura luxuria descuitt, quae cotidie se ipsa incitat et tot saeculis crescit et ingenio adiuvat vitia. Primo supercuacua coepit consupiscere, inde contraria.”

Nature being, once again, the referential point for legitimating the virtuous and true arts (a natura luxuria descuitt). The development of artificial and superficial crafts, distant from natural uses, takes part in a degenerative conception of civilization.

The brief overview given above seeks to emphasize that cosmetics, from an ethical perspective, were a matter of great concern in the main philosophical discourse of the period, which Ovid could not be fully unaware of when writing a poetic treatise on makeup. Two major points can be drawn from this detour: firstly, that cosmetics are denied the status of art in so far as they do not follow nature and, secondly, that the craft of self-adornment is perceived as being part of the superfluous artifices that appear in the degenerative process of civilization. On these two points, Ovid reverses in a playful, though meaningful, twist the common ethical perception of cosmetics.

In the Medicamina, cosmetics are elevated to the rank of a teachable ars that demands care and expertise: “discite quae faciem commendet cura, puellae, / et quo sit vobis forma

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16 “Nature suffices for what she demands. Luxury has turned her back upon nature; each day she expands herself, in all the ages she has been gathering strength, and by her wit promoting the vices. At first, luxury began to lust for what nature regarded as superfluous, then for that which was contrary to nature” (trans. R. M. Gummere, Loeb).

17 We find a similar view in Lucretius’ account of the development of artes in the fifth book of the DRN: the myth of the golden age is rejected by the poet as much as the glorification of progress since human discoveries and technical improvement have rather been harmful to human beings.
“Learn, ladies, what treatment can improve your appearance and the means by which to preserve your beauty.”\(^\text{18}\) The second person plural imperative, *discite*, immediately affiliates the poem with the didactic tradition whose subject matter, here, cosmetics, is presented as scientific. In the *prooemium* of Ovid’s *Medicamina*, self-adornment is thus evoked on the same level as agriculture (2–6), architecture (7–8), and weaving (13–14)—that is, on the same level as paradigmatic *artes* recognized as such by the tradition. Through this device, the poet seems willing to equate cosmetics with a true *ars*, in an amusing reversal of the philosophical disparagement of the art of makeup.

In particular, the theme of the development of *artes* in the civilizing process is reworked in a new light by Ovid in the praise of *cultus* and is celebrated in the opening of the *Medicamina*:

\begin{quote}
Forsitan antiquae Tatio sub rege Sabinae
maluerint, quam se, rura paterna coli:
cum matrona, premens altum rubicunda sedile,
assiduo durum pollice nebat opus,
ipsaque claudebat quos filia paverat agnos,
ipsa dabat virgas caesaque ligna foco.
At vestrae matres teneras peperere puellas.
Vultis inaurata corpora veste tegi,
vultis odoratos positu variare capillos,
conspicuam gemmis vultis habere manum.
\end{quote}

Perhaps, under the reign of Tatius, the antique Sabine women would have preferred to cultivate their paternal fields rather than themselves, when the ruddy matron, sitting on her high seat, spun assiduously her tough work with her hands, and she, herself, enclosed the lambs her daughter had pastured and, herself, put the twigs as well as the chopped firewood into the hearth. But your mothers gave birth to delicate girls. You want your bodies to be covered with golden cloth, you want to vary the hairstyle of your perfumed locks, you want to have hands admired for their gems.\(^\text{19}\)

This passage finds close parallels in other Ovidian works, where we find the recurring claim that refinement is worth more than rudeness.\(^\text{20}\) The extract has been read as being at odds

\(^{18}\) *Med*. 1–2. All translations from Ovid’s *Medicamina* are mine; the Latin text is the one established by E. J. Kenney (Oxford Classical Texts, 1961).


\(^{20}\) On passages similarly celebrating the virtues of progress and refinement in Ovid’s works, see especially *Ars* 3.113–29 and *Am*. 1.8.39. The preference for what is tiny and polished compared to what is vast but raw is also a very elegiac theme inherited from Callimachean poetics.
with Augustan ideology, to the extent that it constitutes a reversal of the ethical model in which
natural simplicity is highly valued. However, at first, one could read this extract as partly satirical
in so far as the repetition of *vultis* may hint at a well-known elegiac critic of the corrupt and gold-
digging woman, but the conclusion of the passage reverses the expected condemnation: *nec tamen
indignum: sit vobis cura placendi* (23). Here, in contrast with the negative conception of technical
progress from the traditional moral perspective, the poet develops a form of history that one could
qualify as optimistic in so far as the notion of *cultus* constitutes the driving force of human
progress. The passage compares the depiction of the primitive *matrona* during the early age of
Rome, under the reign of Tatius (v. 11–16), the Sabine king contemporary of Romulus,21 with
the depiction of the refined woman of the Augustan period, in the second part of the passage. This
opposition enables the poet to emphasize the positive role of *cultus* in the civilizing process of
Rome. In the mocking portrait of the Sabine woman, the poet evokes primitive activities, such as
farming, weaving, and animal breeding. The *matrona* is then qualified as ruddy (*rubicunda*, v.
13) and depicted as doing a tough work (*durum*, 14). The adjective *durum* is directly opposed to
that of *teneras* (17), qualifying the *puellae* as being delicate. The conjunction *at*, in the beginning
of line 17, underlines the gap between the state of nature and the one of culture. The preeminence
of dental consonants that characterize the portrait of the *matrona* (13–14: “*cum matrona, premens
altum rubicunda sedīle / assiduo durum pollice nebat opus*”) contrasts with the great number of
labial consonants in the passage dedicated to the delicate young girl (“*puellas,“* “*vultis,“* “*veste,“* “*vultis,“* “*variare,“* “*vultis*”). The stylistic refinement here mimics the cultural
refinement of the poet’s conception of contemporary Rome. The diptych presenting the antique
*matrona* and the modern *puella* side-by-side tends to create a gap between the rough, primitive
*natura* and state of *cultus* celebrating artificiality and refinement. We find a similar claim in

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21 The poet does not speak of the antique Roman women simply because the city was lacking women at that
time and the Sabine women were about to become Roman after Romulus’ rapt (see *Ars* 1.101–32). The Sabine *matrona*
was also an ethical model promoted by the imperial ideology of Augustan Rome (see Virgil, *G.* 2.532–35 and,
Ovid’s third book of *Ars amatoria* as the *praeeceptor* prepares to give advice in order to help women hide their imperfections:

> Gratulor; haec aetas moribus apta meis,
> […]
> Sed quia cultus adest, nec nostros mansit in annos
> rusticitas priscis illa superstes avis.

I am delighted: this age fits well my mores […] (but) since we live in a cultivated age, this rusticity surviving our old-fashioned ancestors shall not find its place in our days.\(^\text{22}\)

The passage quoted above offers an innovative celebration of the present time contrasting with the common attempt to restore past mores. From this perspective, the use of the word *mos* in *haec aetas moribus apta meis* seems quite provocative regarding the *mos maiorum* that is here disregarded. The eulogy of *cultus* and the superiority attributed to culture and refinement over that which is raw, gross, and unpolished constitutes a reversal of the ethical paradigm at the core of which the concept of *natura-physis* plays a referential role.\(^\text{23}\)

**Cosmetics: A Natural Art**

So far, by briefly exploring the former moral treatment of cosmetics in philosophical discourses, I hope to have pointed out the originality of Ovid’s position in the proem of the *Medicamina* through the poet’s eulogy of the development of refined techniques and the primacy given to the substantial improvement of nature by art. I will now focus on a second aspect of Ovid’s subversive reversal of the condemnation of cosmetics in ethical discourse: the idea that the art of self-adornment is actually *natural*, and therefore legitimate. I shall demonstrate that, through

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\(^{22}\) Ov. *Ars* 3. 122–27.

\(^{23}\) Hardie, *Ovid’s Poetics*, notes, commenting on this passage from *Ars* 3, that the praise of *cultus* has implications both in terms of ethics and of poetics: “To live in the present is firmly to relegate to the past the ‘unpolished simplicity’ of a former age […] fully present is a quality central to Ovid’s conception of both a lifestyle and a poetics, *cultus*, ‘adornment,’ ‘refinement,’ ‘elegance,’ the opposite of the lack of polish and sophistication denoted by *rudis*” (4). The revalorization of present time is also to be linked with the attempt from Latin elegiacs to elevate novelty, which is constantly depreciated among Roman values.
this reversal, Ovid uses the same ethical criterion as in philosophical discourse to define *ars* but reaches the opposite conclusion in presenting cosmetics as a natural art.

The prooemium of the Medicamina begins with a hymn dedicated to *cultus* through the farming analogy:

*Cultus humum sterilum Cerealia pendere iussit munera; mordaces interiere rubi.
Cultus et in pomis sucos emendat acerbos, fissaque adoptivas accipit arbor opes.
Culta placet.*

Cultivation bid the barren land to render Ceres’ products while the prickly brambles disappeared. Cultivation also corrects the bitter juice of fruit, and the cleft tree receives adopted richness. Things cultivated give pleasure.\(^\text{24}\)

The triple anaphora (*Cultus...Cultus...Culta*) at the beginning of each hexameter produces a ceremonial effect and gives the prooemium the appearance of a hymn to cultivation.\(^\text{25}\) The notion of *cultus* here is to be understood in its first meaning as cultivation. In the Roman collective imagination, cultivation constitutes the paradigm of *ars* as a tool to domesticate *natura*.\(^\text{26}\) The poet successively evokes the activities of seeding, arboriculture, and grafting. In these examples, *ars* appears to be a human technique aiming at rendering *natura* fruitful. Far from being strictly opposed, *ars* and *natura* complement one another in the context of cultivation. By opening his treatise dedicated to cosmetics with an analogy of agricultural cultivation, the poet seeks to legitimate his own art of self-adornment, pointing out that cosmetics, in the same way as cultivation, are the art of improving nature. As many critics have shown,\(^\text{27}\) this passage echoes, in a way that has sometimes been interpreted as parodical,\(^\text{28}\) Virgil’s *Georgics*, which celebrates the value of *labor* in harmony with *natura*. However, one

\(^{26}\) Note also that Romans were fundamentally a rural people that greatly valued agriculture, considered as the paradigmatic art, in their ethical system.
\(^{27}\) On this point, see Johnson, *Ovid on Cosmetics*, 25–27.
\(^{28}\) See, notably, Watson, “Parody and Subversion,” 467.
can also argue that the farming analogy in the opening of Ovid’s *prooemium* is also inscribed in a subtle interplay with the fifth book of Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura*, where the epicurean poet speaks about the birth of agriculture in his account of the development of *artes*:

> At specimen sationis et insitionis origo
> ipsa fuit rerum primum natura creatrix,
> arboribus quoniam baca glandesque caducae
> tempestiva dabant pullorum examina suptet;
> unde etiam libitumst stirpis committere ramis
> et nova defodere in terram virgulta per agros.
> Inde aliam atque aliam culturam dulcis agelli
> temptabant fructusque feros mansuescere terra
> cernebant indulgendo blandeque coiendo.
> Inque dies magis in montem succedere silvas
> cogeant infraque locum concedere cultis,
> prata lacus rivos segetes vinetaque laeta
> collibus et campis ut haberent, atque olearum
> caeruleus distinguent inter plaga currere posset
> per tumulos et convallis camposque profusa;
> ut nunc esse vides vario distincta lepore
> omnia, quae pomis intersita dulcibus ornant
> arbusisque tenent felicibus opsita circum.

But the pattern of sowing and the beginning of grafting first came from *nature herself the maker* of all things, since berries and acorns falling from trees in due time produced swarms of seedlings underneath; and this also gave them the fancy to insert shoots in the branches and to plant new slips in the earth all over the fields. Next one after another they tried ways of cultivating the little plot they loved, and saw wild fruits *grow tame* in the ground with kind treatment and friendly tillage. Day by day they made the forests climb higher up the mountains and yield the place below to their tilth, that they might have meadows, pools and streams, crops and luxuriant vineyards on hill and plain, and that a grey-green belt of olives might run between to mark the boundaries, stretching forth over hills and dales and plains; just as now you see the whole place mapped out with charming variety, laid out and intersected with *sweet fruit-trees* and set about with fertile plantations.\(^{29}\)

In the cross-reading of Lucretius’ passage with Ovid’s text quoted above, it appears that the two poets evoke agriculture to illustrate the development of techniques by alluding to the same farming methods highly emblematic of human intervention in nature: field crops—the technique of sowing (*satio*) is mentioned in Lucretius (5.1361), whereas the cultivation of land introduces the development of *cultus* in Ovid’s *Medicamina* (3–4)—and grafting, which is

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\(^{29}\) Lucr. 5.1361–78, trans. W. H. D. Rouse, Loeb.
designated by the term *insitio* in Lucretius (5.1361) and alluded to in Ovid’s *Medicamina* (5–6). Furthermore, in both texts, human cultivation of land permits the domestication of nature by making its fruit sweeter: “fructusque feros mansuescere,” and “pomis...dulcibus” in the Lucretian text, and “Cultus et in pomis sucos emendat acerbos” in Ovid’s. Yet, the sweetening effect of grafting is also developed in Virgil’s *Georgics* 2.35–36 in an implicit reference to Lucretius: “Quare agite, o, proprios generatim dicite *cul tus*, / agricolae, fructusque feros mollite *co lendo*.“31 The echoes in Ovid’s passage of both Lucretius’ and Virgil’s texts signal an interesting dialogue on the relationship between *natura* and *ars*. Following his predecessors, Ovid claims that art, through the process of *cultus*, aims at improving nature by making it less crude and bitter.

However, in a way similar to Virgil’s *Georgics*, Ovid’s *Medicamina* may appear at odds with the philosophical demonstration exposed in Lucretius’ *DRN*. In fact, in his argument, Lucretius seeks to demonstrate that *natura* herself is the origin of the development of *artes*. *Natura* is thus qualified as a *natura creatrix* (5.1362). Humans discover the art of *agricultura* only by imitating nature and its generative process. Due to the main role played by nature in the Lucretian intertext, and to some extent in Virgil’s *Georgics*, the opening of Ovid’s *Medicamina* on cultivation can be read as an attempt to naturalize the art of self-adornment that will be exposed in the couplets that follow. Nevertheless, the intertextuality with the Lucretian text can also be read as ironic. If Lucretius’ *natura creatrix* is at the origin of the progress of agriculture, it is *cultus* in the Ovidian text that becomes the agent of improvement. If we examine the opening lines of the *Medicamina* (3–5), we observe that *cultus* takes the place of the Lucretian *natura creatrix* and is personified as being the subject of action verbs.

31 “Up, therefore, husbandmen, learn the culture proper to each after its kind; your wild fruits tame by tillage” (trans. H. Rushton Fairclough and revised by G. P. Goold, Loeb). Cf. the Virgilian formula *Pomaque degenerant succos oblita priores* (*G*. 2.59) with Ovid’s text *Cultus et in pomis sucos emendat acerbos* (*Med*. 5).
Furthermore, this action of cultus over nature is presented as a dominating one, as demonstrated by the use of strong terms such as iussit and pendere,\textsuperscript{32} whose meanings suggest a balance of power. The verbs interiere and emendat also express a form of violence in the action of cultus over nature.\textsuperscript{33} The violence of Ovid’s text contrasts strongly with the sweetness that characterizes the art of farming in Lucretius. In book five of the De Rerum Natura, men take care of nature, indulgendo blandeque colendo, “with kind treatment and friendly tillage.” We can conclude from the confrontation of the two passages that the Ovidian poet aims at naturalizing his art of cosmetics by opening his poem on a eulogy of cultivation with strong Lucretian echoes while, at the same time, reversing the relationship between ars and natura such that art, not natura, becomes the agent of refinement and improvement in Ovid’s text. This exemplifies the complex link that ties art with nature, the former being at times considered as the enhancement of the latter in a harmonious continuity, and at times considered as an aggressive opponent with which the latter is in conflict.

Later in Ovid’s prooeidium, we find another example of the use of cultivation as a rhetorical means to legitimate cosmetics ethically:

\begin{quote}
Prima sit in vobis morum tutela, puellae: 
in genio facies conciliante placet.  
Certus amor morum est: formam populabitur aetas,  
et placitus rugis vultus aratus erit.  
Tempus erit, quo vos speculum vidisse pigebit  
et veniet rugis altera causa dolor;  
sufficit et longum probitas perdurat in aevum.
\end{quote}

Ladies, may your first concern be the protection of your moral values. When in harmony with character, the appearance pleases. The love of mores is an assured one: old age will ravage beauty, a pleasing face will be ploughed by wrinkles. There will be a time when you will feel irked looking in the mirror and grief will become another cause of wrinkles. Virtue is sufficient and lasts for a long time.\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{32} OLD, s.v. 3b “to pay, render (duties, services, etc.).”
\textsuperscript{34} Ov. Med. 43–49.
The verb *aro*, here in the passive form of the future (*aratus erit*), conveys the very concrete meaning of ploughing. Getting old, a natural phenomenon, is thus compared to cultivation, a form of art in alliance with nature. Yet, the agricultural comparison in the verse (*Med. 46*) strongly echoes the opening lines of the *prooemium* (3–6), where *cultus* is celebrated through the example of agriculture to which cosmetics, generally perceived as an artificial practice, were compared. The poet thus deconstructs the traditional antithesis between *ars* and *natura* in the *prooemium* of the *Medicamina* and introduces the art of cosmetics in a blurred and hybrid space. The analogy therefore contributes to naturalizing cosmetics in order to legitimate them from a moral point of view. Ethics is indeed at the core of the passage, predominantly in the *praecceptor’s* caution for his female audience to cultivate their minds as much as their appearances. The extract is then full of moral terms: the word *morum*, a form of *mos*, is repeated twice in the first two hexameters, the word *ingenio* opens the first pentameter, and the very strong notion of *probitas* (“uprightness,” “virtue”) is placed at the caesura of the last hexameter. If we look at the first pentameter, *ingenio facies conciliante placet*, we notice that, far from being opposed, the face (*facies*) and the mind (*ingenio*) work together and both require cultivation.\(^{35}\) In this sense, we should recall that *ingenium* refers to innate qualities or natural dispositions and is here put into balance with the sophisticated beauty of the *facies*, product of *ars*. The allegation that cosmetics are immoral is dispelled by the idea that the enhancement of one’s beauty does not contradict the preservation, even the improvement, of natural qualities in one’s character. The traditional opposition between *ars* and *ingenium*, *ars* and *natura*, is therefore neutralized as the two concepts are not contradictory.

Throughout the *prooemium* of the *Medicamina*, the poet intends to show that art is not against nature in a rhetorical strategy to legitimate the use of cosmetics. In accordance with the

\(^{35}\) The teaching of the *praecceptor amoris* in his treatises is not only about physical appearance, but also about character traits, behaviors, and mores. See, in particular, *Ars* 2.107; 117–22, and also *Her. 6.94* (*moribus et forma conciliandus amor*).
philosophical and scientific discourses, Ovid introduces the art of cosmetics as an art following nature. Galen, writing in the second century AD, distinguishes kosmētikon, which is a part of medicine with the aim of preserving natural beauty, from kommōtikon, an artificial craft with the purpose of creating extraneous beauty. If, in the Galenic conception, kosmētikon is a legitimate scientific matter, the material of kommōtikon is, conversely, not worthy of the physician’s attention. Thus, in introducing his reader to the subject matter of the Medicamina, the poet carefully compares his art to kosmētikē technē rather than kommōtikē technē:

Discite quae faciem commendet cura, puellae,
et quo sit vobis forma tuenda modo.

Learn, ladies, what treatment can improve your appearance and the means by which to preserve your beauty.

The verbal adjective tuenda (2), “to be preserved, to be protected,” here applied to beauty (forma), has a strong implication in so far as the art of self-adornment is introduced as a way to conserve natural beauty. Nevertheless, the formula of the first interrogative proposition, quae faciem commendet cura, is more ambiguous regarding the nature of the efforts (cura) to enhance beauty. Are such efforts meant simply to enrich and enhance one’s natural appearance, or do they aim at creating a form of artificial beauty? Choosing the second option, G. Rosati interprets the first hexameter of the poem as having “una funzione ‘inventiva,’ creativa, per arricchire la bellezza del viso.”

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36 See Gal. 12.434, Kühn 1826.
37 Similarly, Véronique Boudon-Millot notes that Galen, to the extent that it matters to the protection of natural beauty, gives recipes for anti-wrinkle cream or treatments to cure skin disorders or problems linked to complexion. She explains that « si le médecin antique a bien été amené à s’aventurer dans le domaine de la cosmétique (qu’il nommait commôtique), il ne l’a jamais fait sans réticence ni tentative de légitimation. De ce point de vue, le statut mal défini d’un grand nombre de taches cutanées ainsi que l’importance accordée par la médecine antique à la couleur du teint dans l’établissement du diagnostic expliquent sans doute la profonde ambivalence de nombreux remèdes dermatologiques à visée à la fois thérapeutique et cosmétique » (27). Boudon-Millot, “Souffrir pour être belle (ou beau): Thérapeutique et cosmétique dans l’Antiquité,” in Le teint de Phryné: Thérapeutique et cosmétique dans l’Antiquité, ed. V. Boudon-Millot and M. Pardon-Labonnelie (Paris: Éditions de Boccard, 2018).
38 Rosati, I cosmetici, 63. Rosati then makes an interesting parallel between the structure of the first two books of the Ars (that teach, for one, the art of getting a puella and, for the other, the art of keeping her) and the hypothetical dual purposes of the Medicamina: to acquire an artificial beauty and/or to preserve one’s own natural beauty. The parallel is attractive but is highly uncertain given the fragmentary state of the poem.
what is intended by the general phrasing of the verse, it may be precisely because the difference between natural and artificial beauty is more tenuous than believed. At what point does cultivation, as in the agricultural analogy, stop being a mere improvement of nature and become an artificial process? In the proem of the *Medicamina* the poet appears to play at blurring the border between natural and artificial in his attempt to legitimate cosmetics.

In much the same way, the term *medicamina* contained in the title to designate the subject matter of the *praecceptor’s* teaching conveys a similar semantic ambiguity. Indeed, if the word can be used to refer directly to cosmetics and artificial makeup, it also refers to remedies and drugs in a purely medical sense. Thus, the cosmetics of the *Medicamina* are presented as remedies to deficient beauty in the third book of the *Ars* by the *magister amoris*:

*Est mihi, quo dixi vestrae medicamina formae,*  
*parvus, sed cura grande, libellus, opus;*  
*hinc quoque praesidium laesae petitote figurae:*  
*non est pro vestris ars mea rebus iners.*

There is one book of mine, a short one, but an object of a great care, in which I have presented remedies for your beauty; from this poem seek also the means by which to protect a damaged appearance: my art is in no way powerless regarding your own matters.39

The medical metaphor developed in this passage is of particular interest in the cross-reference to the *Medicamina faciei femineae*. In that context, the term *medicamina*, usually translated as “paints,” may be better rendered as “treatments” or “remedies” to highlight its therapeutic implications. Similarly, the word *praesidium* is found in Pliny (22.90; 28.35) to designate remedy, and the mention of the female’s injured looks (*laesae …figurae*) also have clear medical resonances. If there is an obvious parodical aspect in conceiving the female’s damaged face as part of a body that demands healing from the expert physician, the association of cosmetics with the art of medicine also contributes to attenuating the artificial character of

self-adornment. It thus serves the *praecceptor* to introduce the art of makeup as a preservation (which is also the meaning of *praesidium* in *Ars* 3.207) of one’s natural beauty.

The legitimization of the art of self-adornment is eventually carried by a philosophical argument. Indeed, according to the poet, the care to please oneself is a natural need:

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\begin{align*}
Rure \ lan\text{-}t\text{-}t\text{-}n & \text{-}t\text{-}n\text{ f}i\text{-}n\text{-}g\text{-}u\text{\text{-}t\text{-}n\text{-}q}e\text{\text{-}t\text{-}q}e\text{\text{-}u}\text{-}s\text{\text{-}c}o\text{\text{-}m}\text{\text{-}as}\text{;}\text{ l}i\text{\text{-}c}e\text{t\text{-}a}r\text{\text{-}d}u\text{\text{-}u}\text{-}s\text{\text{-}i}l\text{\text{-}l}a\text{\text{-}s} \\
\text{c}e\text{-}l\text{-}e\text{-}t\text{\text{-}a}\text{\text{-}t\text{-}h\text{\text{-}o}\text{\text{-}s}\text{;}\text{ c}u\text{l}t\text{-}a}s\text{ a}l\text{\text{-}t}u\text{-}s\text{ h}a\text{\text{-}b}e\text{\text{-}b}i\text{-}t\text{-}a\text{-}t\text{-}h\text{-}o\text{\text{-}s}.
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{E}t\text{ e}t\text{-}i\text{-}a\text{-}m \text{ p}l\text{a}c\text{-}u\text{-}s\text{-}s\text{-}e\text{\text{-}s\text{-}i}b\text{-}i \text{ q}u\text{-}a\text{e\text{-}c}u\text{m}\text{-}q\text{-}ue\text{ \text{-}v}o\text{\text{-}l}u\text{\text{-}u}\text{p\text{-}t\text{-}a}s; \text{ u}i\text{\text{-}g}\text{\text{-}i}n\text{\text{-}i}b\text{\text{-}u}s\text{ c}o\text{\text{-}r}d\text{\text{-}i} \text{\text{-}g}\text{\text{-}r}a\text{\text{-}t}a\text{-}q\text{\text{-}e} \text{\text{-}f}o\text{\text{-}r}m\text{\text{-}a} \\text{-}s\text{\text{-}u} \text{\text{-}e}\text{\text{-}s\text{-}t}.
\end{align*}
\]

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\begin{align*}
\text{L}a\text{\text{-}d}a\text{\text{-}t}a\text{\text{-}s}\text{ h}o\text{\text{-}m}i\text{\text{-}n}\text{\text{-}i} \text{\text{-}v}o\text{\text{-}l}u\text{\text{-}c}r\text{\text{-}i}s\text{ I}u\text{\text{-}n}o\text{\text{-}n}\text{a}\text{ penn\text{-}a}s \\
\text{e}x\text{\text{-}p}i\text{\text{-}c}i\text{\text{-}a}t, \text{ e}t \text{\text{-}f}o\text{\text{-}r}m\text{\text{-}a} \text{\text{-}\text{-}m}u\text{-}\text{-}t\text{\text{-}a} \text{\text{-}s\text{-}u\text{\text{-}p\text{-}\text{-}e\text{\text{-}r\text{-}b}i\text{-}t\text{\text{-}t\text{-}a\text{-}v}i\text{-}\text{\text{-}s.} ^{40}
\end{align*}
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Women are concealed in the countryside and, yet, they create hairstyles; although lofty Athos hides them, high Athos will be the land of refined girls. To please oneself is also a form of delight; their beauty is dear to the heart of maidens. Juno’s bird spreads out its feathers praised by man and, mute, the bird is proud of its own beauty.

If we consider the first four verses of this passage, we see that the poet reconfigures once again the traditional opposition between *natura* and *ars*. Even, says the poet, in the most remote and rural places, women create sophisticated hairstyles; even on the top of Mount Athos, the uncivilized place *par excellence*, we can find elegant women, for they too wish to please themselves. In the first couplet, Ovid associates two antithetical pairs, combining *rure* with *comas* and then *arduus* with *cultas*. In doing so, the poet points out that rusticity is not in contradiction with a primitive form of self-adornment and thus disrupts the common antagonism between nature and art. The emphasis placed on the hidden location of the women from Mount Athos suggests that they remain invisible to one’s eyes and, consequently, make themselves pretty to please, not the other, but themselves. That is what the next hexameter clearly expresses thereafter:

“*Est etiam placuisse sibi cuicumque voluptas.*”^{41} The adornment is here considered not as a deceiving craft to seduce the other, but as a way of being satisfied with oneself. Thus, the poet

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^{41} The verse strongly echoes the Virgilian expression of the *Eclogues* 2.65: “*trahit sua quemque voluptas.*” *Voluptas* is also the leading force that drives women and men to care for themselves in Ovid’s lines. But there seems to be a play on the use of the term *voluptas*, which is the highest good in epicurean philosophy but also has strong erotic connotations in elegiac poetry.
overturns the common ethical condemnation of cosmetics, according to which makeup constitutes an immoral artifice for seduction, by choosing instead to highlight the natural need for making oneself beautiful. The gnomic phrasing of the sentence tends to conceive one’s desire for pleasing oneself as a universal truth and a natural instinct that is fully legitimate on moral grounds.42

The exemplum of Juno’s bird, the peacock, completes the poet’s argumentation. The bird is said to unfold its adorned feathers in front of men not to seduce them but rather as a mark of pride in its own beauty.43 The spreading of the peacock’s feathers illustrates the idea that appearing beautiful to others’ eyes is part of an innate sense of vanity for the self. Here again, by choosing the example of an animal, the poet dispels any moral accusation against cosmetics: looking good is a desire shared by natural beings. Furthermore, the poet achieves a profound reversal of the traditional antagonism between “being” and “seeming” by blurring their opposition: special care for appearance, that is the realm of cosmetics, is part of the very essence of man and of his nature.

**Conclusion**

It thus appears that the presentation of cosmetics in the prooemium of Ovid’s Medicamina as a natural art, in line with the ethical definition of ars/technē in philosophical and moral discourses, is in part ironical. Through this approach, the poet playfully turns the traditional philosophical argument around and paradoxically legitimizes the art of self-adornment, which he intends to teach on the same grounds as ethics. However, this subversive reversal reveals a more serious reflection on art and on its relationship with nature. The eulogy of cultivation permits the poet to

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42 In The Care of the Self, the third volume of the History of Sexuality, Michel Foucault notes the importance given, during the Hellenistic and Imperial periods, to the care for oneself (cura sui or epimeleia heautou) in the field of ethics. Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité III: Le souci de soi* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1984), 51–85.

disrupt the common dichotomy between *natura* and *ars* by highlighting the continuity between the two through the process of *cultus* and by blurring the distinction between that which is natural and that which is artificial.\(^{44}\) Furthermore, the praise of *cultus* celebrated in Ovid’s *Medicamina* not only legitimizes the use of cosmetics, but it also acts as a significant revalorization of artifice as well as a rehabilitation of appearances and illusion. To this extent, the poet’s hymn to *cultus* has strong metapoetic implications.\(^{45}\) Such a shift may then appear more serious than expected since it constitutes a reversal of the philosophical paradigm that subordinates art to ethical imperatives: the Ovidian ethical system is conversely based on the aesthetic values of pleasure.\(^{46}\)

Delightful are the products of refinement: *culta placet*.

\(^{44}\) The confusion of the natural with the artificial is a somewhat Ovidian trait: if self-adornment is presented as natural in the *Medicamina*, nature’s works in the *Metamorphoses* are said to imitate the effects of art as for Diane’s cave in the episode of Acteon (“*simulaverat artem / ingenio natura suo,*” *Met.* 3.159), or for Thetis’ cave (“*est specus in medio, natura factus an arte / ambiguum, magis arte tamen,*” *Met.* 11.235–36).

\(^{45}\) In so far as they aim at producing illusion through the working of appearances, cosmetics are closely associated with paintings, rhetoric, and poetry since Antiquity. This association has been carefully analyzed by Jaqueline Lichtenstein, “De la toilette platonicienne,” in *La couleur éloquente* (Paris: Flammarion, 1989), 45–63. The proem of the *Medicamina* could thus be read, from a metapoetic perspective, as a defense not only of makeup but also of poetry.

\(^{46}\) We thus note the poet’s strong emphasis on pleasure when characterizing the products of *cultus* in the *Medicamina*: *culta placet* (7); *sit vobis cura placendi* (23); *etiam placuisse sibi quaecumque voluptas* (31); *grataque forma sua est* (32); *ingenio factes conciliante placet* (44); *placitus … vultus* (46). The polyptoton of *placere* recurring five times in Ovid’s proem is highly meaningful: far from being a feature to be condemned, as in philosophical discourses (see Plato, *Gorgias* 465a), aesthetic pleasure is here considered as the referential quality to evaluate art.
Bibliography


