PHARMACEUTICAL CULTURE IN ITALY INFERRED FROM THE TEXTS OF A PHARMACY IN PIACENZA BETWEEN XVIII AND XIX CENTURIES (Part I)

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Antonio Corvi was the founder of the Corvis dynasty since 1685; his grandson, Antonio Corvi (1748-1796), was an apothecary in Piacenza where in 1788 he established his activity in the same building where it is still today in the centre of the town. He also started to collect all the most scientific and up-to-date works about pharmacy, so laying the foundations of a really enlightened science. In his will made before the notary – his cousin bearing the same name – we can find an outstanding list of texts about pharmacy in the XVIII century that represents a sort of guideline in order to sketch out the evolution of the pharmaceutical science in that period. A science that takes into account the latest discoveries relating to chemistry in the XVIII century.

An important event occurred during this century was the arrival of the French in 1796 which marked a turning point in Italy also in the scientific field, especially in the Northern regions where there were already many enlightened scientists that followed and supported the new progressive ideas. The complete collection of the “Annales de chimie” kept in the Farmacia Corvi Library is an evidence of this trend.

The Italian team representing the so-called “scientific Jacobinism” was composed of about 20 scientists who promoted the spreading of Italian chemistry in Europe through the publication of at least 40 essays published in the Annales during 20 years between the XVIII and the XIX cent. Antoine Laurent Lavoisier, the founder of the magazine “Annales”, was the author of the well-known Traité Elémentaire de Chimie, the first modern text about chemistry that divulged an unified version of the recent theories and contained as well a lucid enunciation of the “law of conservation of matter”. This work was published in Italy in 1791 and received a warm welcome by the scientific audience for two main reasons:
- in Italy a basic chemistry course did not exist yet;
- it had been masterfully translated by Vincenzo Dandolo, a great Italian chemist who had worked hard in order to widespread Lavoisier’s “nouvelle chimie” in Italy.

In the same year another important work was published in Venice: the translation of “Méthode de nomenclature chimique” by the famous Louis Bernard Guyton de Morveau, a member of the scientific group led by Lavoisier that founded the magazine “Annales de Chimie” in 1789. Also this text belongs to the Corvi collection and represents an interesting example of the rational chemical nomenclature utilized when dealing with the “chemical affinity”, a subject born of the alchemists.

Besides, the collection includes a translation of “La chimie expérimentale et raisonnée” by Antoine Baumé, a master apothecary from Paris and a demonstrator in chemistry at the Royal Science Academy who invented the Baumé’s scale and the density measures for the aqueous solutions. Also this book was printed in Venice ten years earlier than the above mentioned text. Baumé’s “experimental chemistry” is not only an interesting work dealing with the glass art, but also a detailed survey about the scientific notion of “phlogiston”.

“Elementa Chemiae” by Herman Boerhaave, even though it was written in 1724, represented nevertheless a guide to chemistry because, thanks to his encyclopedic notions – ranging from medicine to botany, pharmacology and chemistry – the author succeeded in converging physics, medicine and pharmacology on a common field: chemistry. Of course this work, a milestone of chemical science, is part of Corvi Library in an edition printed in Venice in 1737.

The library contains as well the edition dated 1697 of Nicolas Lémery’s “Cours de Chimie”; when he died in 1715 at the age of 70, as many as 13 editions of his best known work had already been
printed: it was a huge volume about applied chemistry published for the first time in 1675 and later on re-printed lots of times.

It was therefore a very useful work for those apothecaries who were approaching experimental pharmacology, a subject that Lémery further developed by means of the publication of a milestone for pharmaceutical science: the “Pharmacopée Universelle” published in Paris in 1697. Obviously our library can boast this work in two editions: the first one in French printed in 1716 and the other one translated into Italian in 1767 and published in Venice.

Twenty years earlier Moyse Charas, a famous French apothecary, banished from his country for religious reasons and forced to emigrate first in Great Britain and then in Holland and Spain, published a weighty volume about medicaments titled “Pharmacopée Royale”. The Latin version of this work, which is part of Corvi Library, was published some years later in Geneva.

At almost the same time as the various editions of Lémery’s pharmacopoeia, another important work circulated throughout Europe: it was the “Conspectus Formularum” by Johan Juncker, a professor at the Royal Frederic University, containing a magistral formulary of the different pharmaceutical preparations of chemical origin for physicians and apothecaries, together with a detailed and complete treatise about the main and newest methods to obtain them. A copy dating back to the XVIII century of this text can be found in our library.

As everybody knows, the pharmaceutical tradition is strictly connected with the official herbs and these are in their turn strictly connected with Dioscorides’ De Materia Medica, a text that could not be missing in our library. But tradition and innovation, which were clearly peculiar to Corvi Pharmacy, required a more modern Dioscorides’ version, or at least one revised from a humanistic point of view: it is exactly what we can find in Corvi Library.

Pharmaceutical botany became little by little a real, lively and dynamic science, subject of ceaseless controls and long debates among scientists; a science supported by the many botanical gardens growing everywhere in Italy, taken into serious consideration by such Universities as Padua and Bologna and widespread thanks to the xylographies in the botanic works and to the herbariums. Linnaeus’ monumental work can be found in our library, which is an evidence of the interest arisen by this new-born science also among pharmacists.

“Historia Botanica Practica” by Giovanni Battista Morandi is perfectly in line with this new vision of the vegetable kingdom and fully meets the modern apothecaries’ requirements thanks to a detailed morphologic description of the medicinal herbs and their therapeutic properties together with an exact iconographic reproduction particularly useful in order to recognize the different species.

This text can be found in our library: it is the first edition dated 1744, a wonderful in folio volume with 164 pages and 58 extremely detailed coloured full-page plates illustrating all the described species.

The library can also boast a valuable copy of Charles Bonnet’s “Contemplazione della Natura” translated and commented by Spallanzani.

We can also find a fully exhaustive booklet about “Fisica Animale e Vegetale” published by Spallanzani in 1782.

In addition, there is a copy of the “Antidotarium Bononiense” (Bolognese Pharmacopeia) evidently utilized also in Piacenza; Bologna, in fact, had had its own official pharmacopoeia from the time of Pope Gregory XIII, but the following editions were so clear and scientifically precise that they were adopted by many other nearby towns.

The Antidotario Milanese (Milanese Pharmacopeia) was another very important code that exerted a great influence on the pharmaceutical culture of Northern Italy: its first edition was published in Milan in 1668 and titled “Prospectus Pharmaceuticus seu Antidotarium Mediolanense”; it became immediately official as a State Pharmacopoeia and was distributed in the relevant territory as well as in the surrounding areas, in fact a copy of it can be found in our library.

Moreover, Corvi Library includes another modern, practical and exhaustive work: the Ricettario Sanese. It is a text divided into two volumes with a total of 630 pages: in the first volume we can
find a record of pharmaceutical rules and laws as well as a descriptive list of galenic medicaments, while the second volume deals with the chemical elements and contains a descriptive list of chemical medicaments.

Towards the end of the XVIII century, the political and cultural trends of the Duchy underwent a sudden shift after the marriage between Ferdinand I and Mary Amalia from Austria, Maria Theresa’s daughter, which brought about the removal of the enlightened minister Leon Guillaume du Tillot and, as a result, a stronger Austrian influence to the detriment of the French one. Evidently the Austrian control spread out also on the medicine and pharmacy fields: in fact in our pharmacy we can find a decidedly official Austrian pharmacopeia.

Among the various books kept in the library, there is a copy of Calestani’s work printed in Venice in 1580. It is a quite meticulous list of curious animal drugs which, at any rate, gives an idea of the chemist’s job that consisted in getting the medicaments, checking their authenticity, purifying and drying them up and finally putting them in the proper pot in alphabetic order.

We can also find Giuseppe Donzelli’s “Teatro Dogmatico e Spagirico”, published towards the end of the XVII century; its author was a physician and chemist from Naples, very well known in the scientific circles of his time, who wrote among other things the Antidotario Napoletano (Neapolitan Pharmacopeia) in 1642. His treatise was very famous and highly thought of until the middle of the XVIII century.

Another valuable text is the “Farmacopea Riformata”, the masterpiece of Joseph Duchesne, also known as Quercetanus, who can be considered as the forerunner of chemistry applied to pharmacy; its translation was published in 1684 in Venice, a town that had always been a real mine of pharmacopeias both official and independant. The Reformed Pharmacopeia, an octavo volume with 264 pages, circulating throughout Italy at the end of the XVII century, really emphasized chemistry, though still a rudimentary subject at that time, and explained it carefully, with particular regard to calcination, digestion, distillation and sublimation.

The official Pharmacopeias, because of evident legal reasons, did not at all deal with the therapeutic aspects of medicaments and preparations and focused on formulae; on the contrary, the independent pharmacopeias, not tied to legal obligations and therefore closer to apothecaries’ requirements, became little by little real practical reference handbooks containing any kind of information about medicaments and pharmaceutical preparations. The “Farmacia Chirurgica” (Surgical Pharmacy) by Joseph Plenck, that can be found in our library, represents a typical example of practical handbook concerning this particular aspect of material medica.

During the XVIII century this kind of practical medical treatises had a really large circulation; the “Lessico Farmaceutico Chimico” by Giovanbattista Capello, who owned the pharmacy “Tre Monti” – Campo Sant’Apollinare – in Venice, was an analogous text characterized by the same popular style and contained as well a full and detailed description of every drug used in pharmacy. So, this is an outline of all the scientific works that Antonio Corvi, apothecary in Piacenza during the XVIII century, bequeathed his descendants, who – by the way – continued to enlarge their legacy with other important texts that can still be found in the library of Corvi pharmacy.
ABSTRACT

Antonio Corvi was the founder of the Corvis dynasty since 1685; his grandson, Antonio Corvi (1748-1796), was an apothecary in Piacenza where, in 1768, he established his activity in the same building where it is still today in the centre of the town. He also started to collect all the most scientific and up-to-date works about pharmacy, so laying the foundations of a really enlightened science. In his will made before the notary – his cousin bearing the same name – we can find an outstanding list of texts about pharmacy in the XVIII century that represents a sort of guideline in order to sketch out the evolution of the pharmaceutical science in that period. A science that takes into account the latest discoveries about chemistry in the XVIII century (Lavoisier, Boerhaave, Morveau, Baumé and the Annales de Chimie from 1789 to 1813), the pharmaceutical knowledge both national and international (Antidotario Bolognese, Farmacopea Senese, Antidotarium Mediolanense, Phar. Un.by Lemery, Phar. Regia by Charas) and natural sciences (Bonnet, Spallanzani, Linne', Morandi). Such pharmaceutical heritage was handed down through eight generations of chemists and gave rise to that rich library that today identifies Antonio Corvi's pharmacy in Piacenza.