

## **Girolamo Mercuriale** ***De decoratione (On adornment), 1601***

### **Chapter 20: *De varis* (On pimples)**

**Translation by Kathleen Walker-Meikle (2018)**

[f. 29r] Calluses are followed by another not too dissimilar affliction for which the Greeks have two names: ἰονθοσ (ionthos) and ἀχνή (akhne). The Latins call them varos, and those that work with them call them varios. People in Italy tend to call them cossos. ἰονθος (ianthos) are like ὄνθου (onthou) or those that disfigure the face. While ἀχνή (akhne), as Cassius writes (*Problems*, 33) are those little lumps that appear in the vigour of life (i.e. youth). From where you ought to correct the Greek text of Aetius (Book 14, ch. 4) [f. 29v] as where you read ἀχμάς (akhmas), it should really be ἀχνάς (aknas). Galen (*Local Medicines*, 5.3) and Paul of Aegina (Book 3, ch. 15) describe this type of little lump, saying that it is a small hard swelling, that only appears on the face. From this description two worthy questions appear. One is what is the difference between warts and pimples, as from the description there does not appear to be any difference? The other worthy question is why do pimples appear especially on the face? To answer the first question, there is no small difference between warts and pimples, as warts appear all over the body, while pimples only appear on the face. In addition, pimples are sharper than warts and they are also sometimes redder than the rest of the face. We can also add another difference from Aristotle (*History of Animals*, 5.37) when he discusses the way how lice reproduce, saying firstly that they are made just like pimples without pus, which I take to mean that you can find some pus in pimples, and this experiment proves this enough. Regarding the second question, Aristotle (*Problems*, 36.3) says that pimples chiefly arise on the face as the face is a thin and damp place, as hairs and sense show. Two doubts occur to me regarding this answer by Aristotle. The first is that thinness and dampness of the face is not a sufficient cause, because the upper arms,

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armpits and other parts are thin and damp in men, but there are not any pimples there. Furthermore I am unable to see how dampness in the face is produced by the senses, since the greater part of the senses, apart from sight, require dryness rather than wetness.

However I believe that the true cause of why pimples occur chiefly in face is because they are the progeny and the effect of blood, as the blood is borne away, by which many spirits are bought together. A great deal of spirits flows around the face. As we shall prove, it is not only with shame and the red blush of shame that it is possible to testify how so many spirits are carried around the face (under the skin) and blood follows these spirits. What I have said however about spirits, I say also about vapours, which move around the face in great number, and they take blood, which then causes the generation of pimples.

According to Paul of Aegina there two types of pimples. One is rather hard like a callus, while the other one is less hard. And the symptom of this type is a type of condition against nature, and it does not have another effectual cause, because of its expulsive ability. Regarding the material cause, there is no controversy between Aristotle and Galen. Aristotle writes that a pimple is a little abscess, formed from unconcocted humour. Galen (*On Local Medicines*, 5.3) teaches that a pimple is formed from thick blood. But if you carefully examine each of the statements, you will find not contrariness. Because thick blood is made due to the mixing of raw and unconcocted humours. Thus pimples are created by the blood around the face, as the greater part of the blood which is concocted and thin dissipates, while [f. 30r] the thicker and rawer blood remains, creating the little bump. Furthermore, the reason for pimples in the first flourishing of youth, as Julius Pollux says, is because pimples are evidence of τῆς ἀχμῆς (tes akhmes). In addition to a warm and damp complexion, particularly a warm and intemperate liver. Sometimes they are created due to liver diseases and fever. The external causes are the heat of the sun, too much exercise, food that is salty, spicy, or bitter. They especially appear

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due to drinking a great deal of thick good wine. Pimples can be recognised by the sharp tip that for a while appears on the little lumps, if touched they are a bit hard, the top of the lump is briefly red, and if they are squeezed they express a thick watery discharge. But however unpleasant, they are not painful nor itchy because the moisture/juice from which they are made is raw and thick, as Aristotle says, but not salty nor bitter. Cornelius Celsus says that pimples are a very slight affliction, but nevertheless for women and beautiful youths, who cannot cure these pimples on their bodies, go to doctors so that their pimples can be treated and they can be given advice.

So that the ugliness of pimples can leave the face, there are two targets to have before one's eyes. The first is so that the hardness of the little lumps disappears, and for this there are softening remedies, and the second so that the now softened material (in the pimples) is destroyed and dissipates. But because the kindling wood (for the pimples) is being supplied by this evil body perpetually, it is necessary to remove all of it. This can chiefly be achieved by living a straight life, which can do so much, and frequently only one change of lifestyle will end this sickness. It is necessary to avoid the sun, fire, violent movements, and especially those that inflame the head and face. Anger should be avoided, and so should especially fine thick wine, along with spicy, salty, and sweet food. Foods should be eaten that cool and moisten the liver, and these are barley water and all types of chicory. When this new lifestyle is in place, so that blood does not exceed the body, being in plenitude, or light or large, this cure always starts with blood-letting, as there will be thick blood and it is always very useful to let blood.

After this, the body must be purged. First the stomach will be assuaged in this manner: Recipe: three drams each of tamarind pulp, sebesten without scam. (*sic.*) mixed with seven drams of cassia flowers, and made into a lump. Once the stomach is placated, the humours can be prepared in this way: Recipe:

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make a decoction with handful each of scabiosa leaves, endive leaves, hepatica leaves, and lettuce leaves. Recipe: five ounces of the previous decoction mixed with one ounce of oxysaccharum (syrup made of vinegar and sugar). Once the humours have been prepared, they can be then purged in this manner: Recipe: half a dram each of epithymi and senna, two drams of chebulic myrobalan, half an ounce of raisin-wine, about a pinch of heart-flowers, all made into a decoction. Recipe: four ounces of the previous decoction, four scruples of infused and squeezed rhubarb, mixed with three ounces of rose syrup.

[f. 30v] After the body has been gently purged in this way, look and examine the state of the pimples. Galen writes (*Book of Remedies*, ch. 2) to look occasionally for any ichorous pus in the pimples. If there is, it should be removed, by perforating the pimple with either a needle or a finger, squeezing out the pus. When this has been done, the pimples should be wiped clean, soften, and removed. An excellent way of cleansing involves washing the face with a mixture of honey and vinegar (in equal portions). In addition, the follow preparation helps: Recipe: five ounces each of bean flour and sesame flour, two drams of nitre (soda and potash), all mixed together and rubbed on the face. For this aim you can also take bitter almonds, grind them up, and rub the face. In addition and by all means at the same time you can use almond oil (on the face) to soften and get rid of the pimples. In a similar way, you can soften and remove the pimples with the following ointment: Recipe: half an ounce of terebinth that has been washed seven times in barley water, half a dram of lead monoxide (litharge), finely powdered; one dram of soda and potash, powdered; mix them all together.

Now even if pimples are carefully and correctly treated, nevertheless they might remain and harden. For this reason, Galen (*Local Medicines*, 5, when discussing pimples) suggests, following Criton, some medicines which he says are wonderful when treating hard pimples. He especially recommends ammoniac, frankincense, and Gaulish soap.

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What is Gaulish soap? Pliny (Book 28, ch. 12) writes that this soap was invented by the Gauls, and was made from the ashes of beech trees and goat fat. In the letters of Pliny there are different types, and he adds that there are two types of Gaulish soap. One is liquid and the other is hard, of which one was used by the Germans, and is still used now, as I understand. In our times the soap is made from ashes, salt and oil, and has the ability to remove hardened pimples. However Avicenna praised cooked butter, for its ability to soften and dissipate pimples.