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THE AUTHORSHIP OF THE *SECRETS OF ALEXIS OF PIEDMONT* (VENICE, 1555)



Figure 1. Title page of the first edition of the *Secrets of Alexis of Piedmont* (Venice, Sigismondo Bordogna, 1555)

In the case of the *Secrets of Alexis of Piedmont* the belief has perpetuated that the author of this famous Italian set of recipes for medicines, cosmetics, fragrances, and the things needed in crafts art is the Italian writer Girolamo Ruscelli, and that Alexis of Piedmont is just a nickname coined by Ruscelli. There are numerous examples of this belief, all easy to find: from a wide range of different dictionaries and bibliographies¹, through library catalogues², online resources such as Google Books³, auction information⁴, Wikipedia pages⁵, to scholarly essays of varying degrees of insight, such as *The Accademia Segreta of Girolamo Ruscelli* by Eamon and Paheau [3] (“Ironically, none of the works printed under Ruscelli’s own name were even remotely as popular as the one he published under the pseudonym of Alexis of Piedmont.”). However, when it comes to

library catalogues – for example to the catalogue of National Library of France – there also happen to appear those, where in the context of *Secretes*, Alexis of Piedmont is referred to as the author of the book as well as the real person that did exist.

It is true that an author named Alexis of Piedmont (*It. Alessio Piemontese* or *Lat. Alexius Pedemontanus*⁶) was not, in fact, noted by such authors like Rossotto [5] (*Syllabus of Piedmont writers*), or Bersano [6] (*Sixteenth century authors of Piedmont*). Although other authors do provide some information about Alexis, their sources are not historical documents, but the preface to *Secrets*, entitled *A i lettori donno Alessio Piemontese* (English translation [7]: *Don Alexis to the reader* – see figure 8 at the end of this article). Additionally, while some authors, like Mazzuchelli [8], note that their information originates from this preface, others make no mention of it yet use it as a basis for writing “biographical notes”, stylistically analogous to biographical notes based on historical sources. For example, Kestner [9] writes: “Alexis, nicknamed Pedemontanus, medic. Born to a noble family, he spent 57 years travelling, picking up practical medical knowledge along the way...” Similarly, according to *Biographie médicale* [10], “Alexis, widely known as Alexis of Piedmont, Italian medic, came from a 16th-century noble Piedmont family... He spent 57 years travelling, accumulating a wealth of recipes during his journeys, such as those for medicines known as empirical.”

The fact remains that none of the authors using the preface to *Secrets* as their source of information on its author, critique the text in terms of its credibility, even though there are a number of reasons for such a critical assessment. For example, the story does not match the book’s general character: in order to compile a number formulations for medicines, cosmetics, dyes etc. – recipes, let us not forget, available from a number of different sources – was it really necessary for the author (see Appendix) to spend as long as fifty-seven years travelling, including “three times into the Levant”, or knowing a number of exotic languages, the death of a man, a crisis of morals of an 83-year-old man (!), or staying at a hermitage near Milan? Another example is the contradictions in the book: in one place the author writes that he reveals all his “secrets” within, while in another he claims that he mentions just some of them with more to follow; he starts by convincing readers that the reason he is revealing these “secrets” is that he is suffering from a guilty conscience after refusing medical help to an ailing artisan, but then implies that it is all the fault of the physician who approached Alexis imploring him to help the sick man. If the latter is in fact the case, where does the guilty conscience fit in? On one hand he talks at length about his supposedly Christian conscience, yet on the other he constantly displays pride typical of a pagan background.⁷

However, the key reason why the preface to *Secrets* should not be regarded as a credible source of information about its author is the fact that its individual components can be found in numerous medical treatises, from antiquity to as far as the 17th century. The preface of *Secrets* states that the author “has learned many goodlye secretes, not alonely of men of great knowledge and profound learning, and noblemen, but also of poore women, artificers, peysantes, and all sortes of men”; this can be juxtaposed with the following sentence written by Galen [12], which likely marked the beginning of using similar declarations: “Empiricists claim that all medicines can

be invented through experimentation, yet I believe that some can be found with experiments, while others with one's mind".⁸ Alexander of Tralles, the Byzantine author of the medical compendium *Therapeuticon* (6th century AD) is described, according to Thorndike [14], as having spent many long years travelling, and that when advanced age meant he could no longer practice as a physician, he started work on his *opus magnum*, describing his full medical knowledge. Similarly, the author of the preface of *Secrets* writes that at the end of 57 years of travel, he finally settled near Milan at the grand age of 83 to compile all his "secrets". Ferguson (*The Secrets...* p. 235) indicates another similarity: "In the account of his studies, journeys and acquisition of knowledge from the humblest source, there is such a curious resemblance to what Paracelsus tells about himself that one may be struck at least by the coincidence even if one grant that it may be fortuitous, and that Alexis independently followed the same methods, and did not simply copy Paracelsus' statement."

The statement of the author of the preface, that "from his first youth" he has got "the knowledge of the Latin, Greke, Ebrue, Caldei⁹, and Arabic tonge", can be compared with the legend according to which the medical school in Salerno was founded by four masters: the Jewish Helinus, the Greek Pontus, the Arab Adela, and the Latin Salernus¹⁰; the legend is widely interpreted by historians of medicine, like Garrison [16], as a metaphor of Eastern and Greco-Latin medical traditions, and the school's multicultural character as a whole, hardly surprising given the geographical location of the Italian city.¹¹ According to his biographer¹², Petrus Diaconus [17], one of the leading representatives of the school, Constantine the African¹³, gained his medical knowledge not just from "Chaldeans, Arabs, Persians and Saracens", but also in Egypt, India and Ethiopia, and that his journeys lasted "39 or 40 years".

Several books published by the Swiss author Leonhart Thurneisser (1531–1596) state that the author travelled widely in countries of the East, as well as containing numerous titles and whole paragraphs printed in Hebrew, Greek, Arabic and other languages; according to Partington [18], this was to encourage rich snobs and ignoramuses to buy the books. The introduction to *A New Dispensatory of Fourty Physicall Receipts*, published in London in 1649 by a "Salvator Winter of Naples, an expert operator", states that during his numerous journeys across Europe, Asia and Africa, the author has uncovered many secrets "profitable for the human body", and includes forty of the most important and tested of them. Winter closes his introduction with the word *Farewell*.¹⁴ We find the same word at the end of the introduction of the first English [7] and first French [20] edition of *Secrets of Alexis of Piedmont (Farewell and Adieu)* – which suggests that the authors of the translations readily associated Alexis' preface with a certain tradition or convention, including the previously discussed motifs and rhetoric, and bearing with this distinctive ending.¹⁵

Simply put, the preface to *Secrets* is a compilation of traditional motifs used in medical treatises, seasoned with a clumsy anecdote about a craftsman suffering from

kidney stones; the story is not even original, since it is inspired by the *Secrets* author's digression in one of the recipes for eliminating kidney stones.¹⁶ In light of this, it would be difficult to regard such a text as a reliable source of information about the author of *Secrets*. It also indicates that the preface was written not by the original author, but rather it was created *ex post* and without an understanding of the subject matter, as collections of this type were not generally prefaced; even if they were, they were in a different style, and certainly did not contain traditional motifs as described above.¹⁷

Before we can answer the question why *Secrets* is generally attributed to Girolamo (or Jeronimo) Ruscelli, let us ponder for a while who this gentleman really was.

He was born in Viterbo. Although some sources are silent on his date of birth¹⁸, the majority state broadly that it was “near the beginning of the century”¹⁹, with a few giving the year as 1520.²⁰ Considering that in Papadopoulos' [31] view Ruscelli died too early (in 1566), the birth year of 1520 seems the most likely. Although his family was not affluent²¹, he was accepted to the court of Cardinal Marino Grimani in Utini, where he received a classical education; according to Jöcher [34] he continued his education at the University of Padua, with the cardinal continuing to bear the costs. He then moved to Rome, where – according to Maylender [35] – together with Tommaso Spiga (or Spica) he founded the literary guild known as Accademia dello Sdegno (Academy of Indignance) or Accademia degli Sdegnati (Academy of the Indignant).²² The date of the foundation of the Academy is unknown; what is known is that it was active in early 1541 (Maylender, *Storia...*).

By 1548, Ruscelli found his way to Venice, where he worked as a lector at the publishing house of Vincenzo Valgrisi²³, renowned for a number of precious publications. He was also active in editorial, literary and publishing circles, wrote and published commentaries and annotations for Boccaccio, Ariosto and Giovo, prepared literary excerpts and anthologies of poetry, and published discourses on the subjects of Italian language and poetry. He also published a history book (*Le imprese illustri*, Venice, 1566), and a dissertation entitled *Precetti della militia moderna (Directions for the contemporary military)*.²⁴



Figure 2 “Portrait” of Ruscelli wearing a Venetian turban, included by Paul Freher in his *Theatrum virorum eruditione clarorum* (Nuremberg 1688, p. 1464)

According to Crescimbeni [36], Mutio [37] and Sansovino [38] “he delighted in alchemical study”. The type of this “alchemical study” is described by Palatino [39]; according to this description, Ruscelli was able to write on glass (for example on wine goblets) in such a way that the words remained invisible until they were treated with a special mixture “whose composition will surely never be discovered”.

Ruscelli died in Venice in the summer of 1566 after suffering from dropsy for eight and a half months.²⁵ He was buried at the Church of St. Luke in Venice – the place of burial of his literary rivals Lodovico Dolce and Donigi Atanagi. A woodcut “portrait” of Ruscelli wearing a Venetian turban was included by Freher (*Theatrum*, p. 1464).

The opinions of contemporary and later writers on Ruscelli were radically various. For example Ghilini [26], presenting a profile of Ruscelli, writes about him in glowing terms: “He was the most perfect of all his contemporaries who were engaged in literature,”; “When he was young, it was clear that he would make a great career and eclipse the fame of his predecessors,”; “His name is famous all over Europe,” and his works “are full of all knowledge” and can be compared “to a real spring²⁶, which provides fresh water all over the earth”; and all Ruscelli’s letters “are clear and perfect” and “everybody, including the aristocracy, considered him a wonderful revelation and treated him with the honour due to him”; Ruscelli was “an ocean of magnificent eloquence” and “his great works are the fruits of a great mind”. Ruscelli was presented in a similar manner by Freher and Papadopulus; the latter stressed Ruscelli’s mastery in Italian both orally and in writing, and added that thanks to Ruscelli Italian had gained glory.

Crescimbeni [36], in turn, says that Ruscelli “enjoyed a reputation as a master in matters of Tuscan language and literature”, but then adds that “Quattromani spoke negatively about the amendments he made to the text of the *Decameron*” and that before Quattromani “Borghesi stated that Ruscelli’s comments are full of errors resulting from false premises”. Finally, Crescimbeni himself, quoting an earlier opinion by Barezzi [33] – that Ruscelli had the best understanding of Italian language matters after Bembo – states that this opinion is not correct, because Ruscelli, although in many cases showed a knowledge of things, in many others was ignorant, and anyone who read his work would encounter numerous errors. And as far as the ancient authors went – Crescimbeni ends – Ruscelli had not a clue about them. Also Zeno [40] in his footnotes to Fontanini (p. 173) reminds us that “Marcantonio Foppa in his introduction to Torquato Tasso (...) expressed no respect for Ruscelli and, assessing his merits, only takes into account the *Rhymes* and a small collection of his notes”. However, Zeno himself writes (p. 200) that the *Decameron* edition prepared by Ruscelli was criticised not only by Lodovico Dolce²⁷, but also Mutio [37] who “showed that Ruscelli made a number of serious mistakes in this edition”.

In a similar vein, the authors of the *Biographie universelle* [32] write about Ruscelli, commenting on his work entitled *Petrarca coretto, con annotazioni, un vocabolario...*

(Venice, 1554): “Ruscelli ensures that he sticks to Aldi’s text²⁸, which seems to him (Ruscelli) to be the most correct. The fact is, however, that he has made changes and adjustments that often overshadow the meaning and spoil the harmony of the poem”. And of Ruscelli’s military treatise (*Precetti della militia moderna*) Luigi Collado (active in the latter half of the 16th c) [41] wrote as follows: “If Girolamo Ruscelli were content with writing about his findings and lessons learned²⁹, without discussing artillery, of which he knew nothing, he would not have written as much nonsense in his treatise that was found by people who have experience in field artillery.”

Over time, the controversy surrounding Ruscelli became less important, probably because his work did not, in fact, have timeless value. From this perspective comes the opinion of Michael McVough [42] on Ruscelli (“a minor literary figure”), which should be taken as the one that is the most fair, sober and consistent with the role and importance of Ruscelli in the longer historical perspective.

Let us return to the case of the author of the *Secrets*. Those who think that the real author of this book was Girolamo Ruscelli, directly or indirectly indicate two sources for their beliefs. Chronologically, the first (1567) is the *New Secrets*³⁰, published by Francesco Sansovino one year after Ruscelli’s death, where he repeated two times that the author of both the *New Secrets*, and the *Secrets of Alexis of Piedmont*, was Jeronimo (= Girolamo) Ruscelli: for the first time on the title page: *Secreti nuovi di maravigliosa virtù dell’ Signor Jeronimo Ruscelli, i quali continovando a quelli di Donno Alessio Piemontese, cognome finto del detto Ruscelli* (The new secrets of Mr. Jerome Ruscelli, a man of splendid virtues, which the book is a continuation of the *Secrets of Alexis of Piedmont*, whose name was a pseudonym of that Ruscelli). And for the second time in Francesco Sansovino’s preface, where among other things he states that Ruscelli, a man of great knowledge, as well as a lover of alchemy, seeing the approaching end of his life, decided to publish some of his medical and alchemical secrets, which he did under the imaginary name (“cognome finto”) Alexis of Piedmont. Seeing how much popularity they gained, he managed to prepare a second volume of his secrets, which, after Ruscelli’s death, the family gave him, that is Sansovino, and he took care of the remaining matters relating to their publication. That Ruscelli was the real author of the *Secrets of Alexis of Piedmont* writes also Ruscelli himself, in his preface to *New Secrets* entitled *Prohemio del Signor Jeronimo Ruscelli*: “Here (i.e. at the Secret Academy), we met and talked about what each of us do in a day, and here, too, I collected all the secrets contained in this book, as well as those which I published a few years ago, under the fictitious name of Alexis of Piedmont. All of them, I say, were invented, tested and recorded in this our Academy.”³¹

The second source referred to by Ruscelli’s supporters, is a book entitled *Battaglie* by Hieronimo Mutio [37]. Mutio (1494–1576), the author of philological and religious books, lived contemporaneously with Ruscelli and perhaps even knew him personally.³² On page 63 of his *Battaglie*, published posthumously in 1582, Mutio is

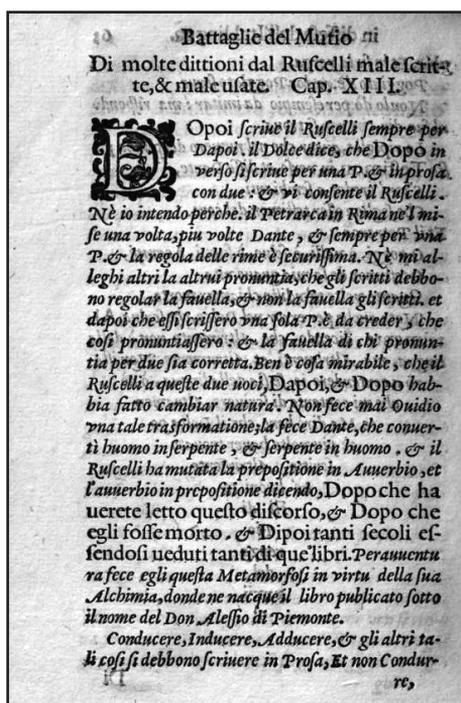


Figure 3. Page 63 of H. Mutio's *Battaglie* (Venice, 1582)

“Ruscelli’s alchemy” was one thing, and that in the *Secrets of Alexis of Piedmont* quite another. We already know that “Ruscelli’s alchemy” included things such as the ability to write on glass (e.g. wine goblets) so that the recorded words were not visible – until they were treated with a special mixture, “the (composition of which) certainly no one will ever discover.”³⁴ In other words, “Ruscelli’s alchemy” was the knowledge of a few tricks, with which Ruscelli probably dazzled his company. And while recipes for such tricks can indeed be found in *Secrets of Alexis of Piedmont*, they are not in the original edition from 1555, but in parts appended by publishers of later editions, known as the second, third and fourth part of *Secrets of Alexis of Piedmont*³⁵ – such recipes as *How to take molten lead in your bare hand*, *How to make fire burn under water*, etc. But these sorts of formulations have nothing in common with alchemical recipes from the first edition of *Secrets* (in the sixth so called book, devoted to craft arts) whose style can be described with the help of the title of the G. Agricola’s booklet *Rechter Gebrauch d’Alchimie* (*Of the Correct Use of Alchemy*, 1531)³⁶ – since the alchemical recipes in *Secrets of Alexis of Piedmont* (1555) include instructions on how *To sublime Quicke Sylver, that is to say, to make common sublyme, that Goldsmithes, Alchemistes, and Gentilwemen do use, and that men use in many thinges concernynge Physycke*³⁷ or *A good and easye waye to make Aqua fortis, better then any other*³⁸.

complaining that in his edition of Petrarca³³ Ruscelli made the words *dapoi* and *dopo* change nature, turning the preposition into an adverb and the adverb into a preposition. He then jokingly comments: “Per auventura fece egli questa Metamorfosi in virtù della sua Alchimia, donde ne nacque il libro publicato sotto il nome del Don Alessio di Piemonte”. That is, “Perhaps he made this metamorphosis through the power of his alchemy, whence was born the book published under the name of Don Alexis of Piedmont.”

In the context of these two pieces of evidence, we must also refer to the “Ruscelli’s alchemy” which for these authors (Mutio and Sansovino) seems to be a key argument in the case of the authorship of the *Secrets*, by logic: Ruscelli knew about alchemy, and the *Secrets* also contains alchemical recipes, ergo Ruscelli was the author of the *Secrets*. But the point is that

And so thanks to these two pieces of evidence Girolamo Ruscelli has been accepted by most authors of bibliographies, dictionaries of bibliography, encyclopaedias and works directly or indirectly concerning the *Secrets* as the author of this book. Although it is not very convincing evidence: the first of these (*New secrets*) occurs in a context that does not encourage to be taken seriously (the Secret Academy), and the second (Hieronimo Mutio's *Battaglie*) is simply an uncritical repetition of what Ruscelli himself wrote (in his tale of the Secret Academy) – that he was the true author of *Secrets*, and that Alexis of Piedmont was just a pseudonym of his own invention.

A special place among the matters relating to Ruscelli's alleged authorship is one of the recipes in the *Secrets of Alexis of Piedmont*, which reads in part: "This water was given me at Bologna, the year 1543, of a gentilman called Girolamo Ruscelli, with the which, the same year, he was healed of the same disease, in a short space without letting blood, or using any other medicine, but onlie this water."³⁹ Would Ruscelli as the author of the *Secrets* write this? That Girolamo Ruscelli learned this water's use from Girolamo Ruscelli? An analogous situation occurs in the *Secrets of women* attributed to Albertus Magnus – where the real Albert is cited as the author of one of the recipes – Thorndike commented simply: "Perhaps the best reason for doubting the authenticity of the *Secrets of women* is that Albert seems to be cited in it."⁴⁰

Nevertheless, Girolamo Ruscelli perhaps had something to do with the *Secrets*. For example, the letters G and R, located on both sides of the woodcut ornamentation on the first Italian edition of *Secrets*: I am personally convinced that these are the initials of Girolamo Ruscelli and that Ruscelli instructed that they be put there, just in order to "discreetly" mark "his" authorship of the *Secrets*; if he was the real author, why did he not just publish them under his own name, as did other sixteenth-century authors of such collections?⁴¹ And if so, it might just be that Ruscelli was the one who obtained (whatever that means) the *Secrets* somewhere and brought them to Sigismondo Bordogna to be published?⁴² Perhaps he even obtained them from Alexis himself, whom he must have known, since "this water was given me at Bologna, the year 1543, of a gentilman called Girolamo Russelli"? Or, so to speak, they came into his possession at home, or rather in the palace of Joanna of Aragon?⁴³ The rationale for such speculations are letters D.G.D.A. that appeared in one of later Italian editions of the *Secrets*, in a note preceding the substantive text of the collection. In the first Italian edition the note is: "Et tutto questo è ritratto, & parte di lunghissimo studio, & di moltissime esperienze, che un gran huomo ha fatte in molti anni, a beneficio di una gran Signora." („These secrets are the result of many years of study and experiments which a certain respected person made in the service of a great lady."). And in the Turin edition of 1580 after the words "...una gran Signora" we find the letters: D.G.D.A. – which may mean: donna Giovanna d'Aragona. One of Ruscelli's works, published in Venice in 1554, is entitled: *Il tempio di donna Giovanna d'Aragona* (*Temple of Joanna of Aragon*). It is therefore likely that the author, who com-

piled an anthology of panegyric poems in honour of “Donna Giovanna”, also frequented her salons; the more so that “everyone, including the aristocracy, considered him (i.e. Ruscelli) a wonderful revelation and treated him with due honour”.⁴⁴ It is known that the ladies of the upper classes usually possessed sets of recipes similar to the *Secrets of Alexis of Piedmont*, because using them they engaged in, or perhaps managed, the making of medicines for the home pharmacy, cosmetics, various kinds of conserves, etc. – which skills, as is known, were part of the then education of the so-called ladies from good homes.⁴⁵ So perhaps the *Secrets of Alexis of Piedmont*, before being published in print, were a handwritten set of recipes of “Donna Giovanna”? Laid out, for example, by Alexis of Piedmont? Who, perhaps, was at her court as personal doctor?

Moreover, Ruscelli’s relationship to the *Secrets* could also be such that he wrote notes and the preface to them. As regards the first of these texts, entitled *Dichiaratione di alcuni vocaboli, and quali non sono così communi* (Clarification of certain words that are not commonly used), and taking into account the Bordogna’s wording (in his preface entitled *Sigismondo Bordogna ai lettori – Sigismondo Bordogna to readers*): “... and finding in this book (i.e. the *Secrets*) some words that none of us who have worked

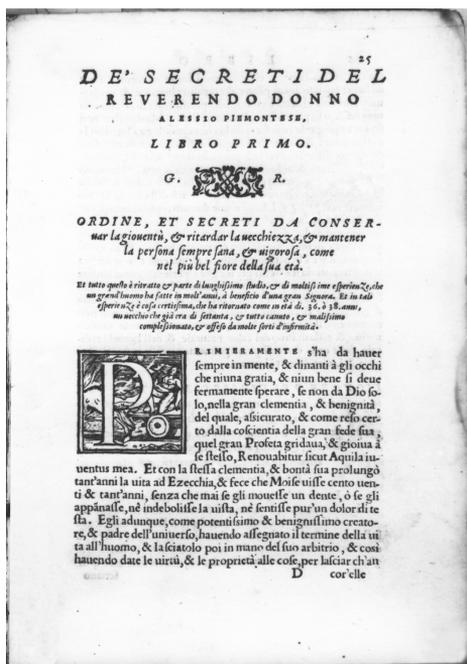


Figure 4. The first page of the first book of the *Secrets of Alexis of Piedmont* (Venice, 1555), with the letters G and R on both sides of the woodcut ornamentation

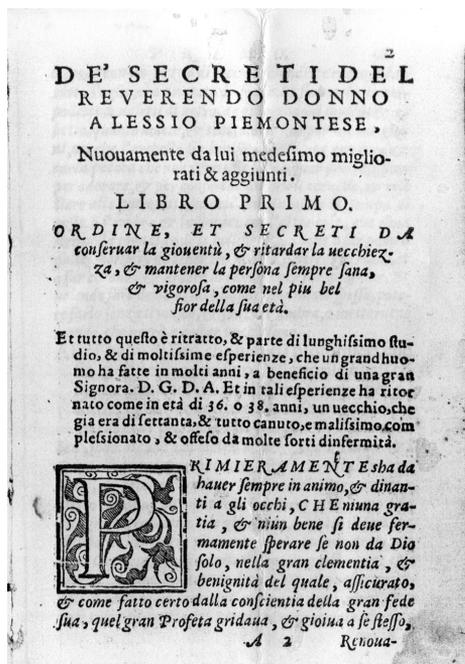


Figure 5. The first page of the first so-called book of the *Secrets of Alexis of Piedmont* (recipes for medicines) in the Turin edition of the book from 1580 – where after the words “d’una gran Signora” (see Figure 4) the publisher added the letters D.G.D.A.

on it understand...”⁴⁶ – it can be assumed that Ruscelli was one of those people who “worked on” the *Secrets*, including writing the aforementioned *Dichiaratione* – where, incidentally, half the space is devoted to arduous definitions of what a funnel is, and an erudite display on two words concerning laundry; which in turn can be correlated with the opinions cited above about Ruscelli’s amendments to the texts of Petrarch and Boccaccio. And also Ruscelli could be the author of the foreword to the *Secrets*, entitled *A i lettori donno Alessio Piemontese*, which would indicate, as described above, its inappropriateness to the nature of the *Secrets* and lack of knowledge of the tradition to which this kind of preface alluded; which in turn can be correlated with the above-cited opinion of Luigi Collado on Ruscelli’s essay on artillery.

That Alexis of Piedmont was a real character, wrote Colomessio [45] and Mazzuchelli [8]. The first one stated categorically: “Fatis concessit annum circa 1550, octogenario maior” (“He died in 1550 at the age of eighty.”). While Mazzuchelli wrote that Ruscelli was considered by some to be the true author of the *Secrets of Alexis of Piedmont*, but that he believed that Alexis was a real character.

Additional evidence that Alexis was a real character may be stored in the Wellcome Historical Medical Library, London, in a manuscript treatise entitled *Sublimatio secondo donno Alessio Piemontese (On sublimation by Alexis of Piedmont)*. This treatise forms part of the manuscript codex of Joannes Baptista Montanus. Information about the three-volume codex from the 16th century from the Moorat’s *Catalogue* [46] is as follows: “Joannes Baptista, Frater. Collection of short alchemical works and extracts in Latin. With a few entries in Italian and Spanish.”⁴⁷ Alexis’ treatise is in the third volume, pp. 128–133 of the codex, containing treatises or parts of works by mediaeval alchemists such as Arnald de Villanova⁴⁸, Johannes de Rupescissa⁴⁹ and Raimundus Lullus⁵⁰, as well as recipes for medicines, chemicals, etc. (among them, on pp. 67–72, there is also an anonymous treatise *De auro potabile [On drinkable gold]*, which is very similar to the recipe *À dissolver’ oro in liquor potabile (Secreti, 1555, p 35)*.⁵¹ However, the treatise *De sublimationibus* includes “descriptions of the processes of sublimation by Alexis Pedemontanus, Pantheus and several oth-

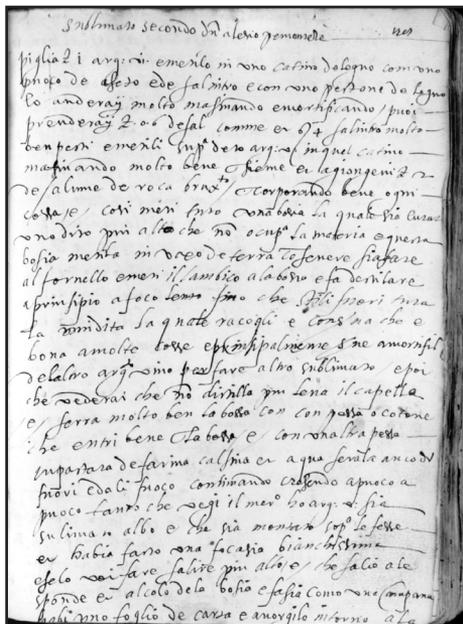


Figure 6. The first page of the Alexis of Piedmont treatise on sublimation (*Sublimatio secondo donno Alessio Piemontese*) part of the handwritten codex of Joannes Baptista Montanus. Wellcome Institute Library, London

er mediaeval authors of alchemical works”.⁵² It can thus be reasonably assumed that if Alexis’ treatise was in the Montanus codex alongside such famous names as Arnald de Villanova, Joannes de Rupescissa and Raimundus Lullus, it means that, at least in Montanus’ eyes, Alexis was someone if not as prominent as them, in any event, as important for the science of his time.

And so, if Alexis was indeed a real character, it would perhaps be simpler – and more logical – to assume that it was he and not Ruscelli who authored the book entitled *Secrets of Alexis of Piedmont*. In this case, the autobiographical digressions in certain recipes for medicines would also be more apposite to Alexis than Ruscelli, since they concern events dated 1504, 1514, 1518, 1521 and 1523;⁵³ it follows that they could not have really been written in the first person by someone who lived between 1520 and 1566 (Ruscelli), but could have been by someone who lived between 1470 and 1550 (Alexis). Additionally, the digressions – and not the preface – suggest that the author of *Secrets* was a medic (which cannot be said of Ruscelli), and that he undertook several voyages East, for example to Syria and Jerusalem (not noted in any biography of Ruscelli). It is also more likely that it was not Ruscelli but Alexis who wrote, “The making of this water was taught to me by...”; it is also worth considering whether it would have been logical for Ruscelli to choose as his own pseudonym the name of a man he personally met in 1543. The fact that Alexis (and not Ruscelli) was a medic as well as an alchemist is supported by the fact that the combination of these two professions was typical of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance; the previously mentioned Arnald de Villanova, Johannes de Rupescissa, Raimundus Lullus and Johannes Baptista Montanus⁵⁴ all worked as both alchemists and medics (and the style of Ruscelli’s “alchemy” was also discussed earlier). And, just like them, Alexis may well have been a man of the cloth (also something that cannot be said of Ruscelli) – which, in turn, would be in agreement with the epithet *reverendo* on the title page of the first edition of *Secrets*⁵⁵.

Postscript

Only a couple of days ago, I found that Chiesa [4] in his *Catalogue of all Piedmont writers* records Alessio Piemontese as the author of the secrets (see Figure 7).

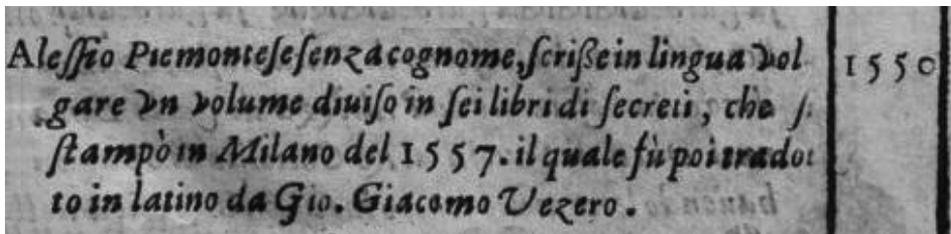


Figure 7. Fragment of page 5 in *Catalogo di tutti li scrittori piemontese* by Francesco Agostino della Chiesa (Torino, 1614): “Alex of Piedmont, without nickname, wrote in ‘vulgar’ (i.e. Italian) a volume of secrets, divided in six books, which was printed in Milan in 1557 and then translated into Latin by Gio. Giacomo Vezero.”

APPENDIX

Don Alexis unto the reader

They that have knowne me in time paste, or to speake plaine, haue used me familiarly all my life time, can peradventure, tell how God by his great goodnesse, hath made me to be borne of a noble house (according to the common, I will not saye vain, persuasion of them, that stablish nobilitie more in the merits of another man, than in our own) and that besides I have alwaies had my pleasures, and great plentie of riches, yea, far passing the smalnesse of my deserts., I will say yet more (not to boast or to aduance my selfe, but to the end to reforme the gentle Reader, and to giue thanks to God) that there be many which know, how I being giuen euen from my first youth unto studie, have gotten not onlie the knowledge of the Latine, Greek, Hebrue, Caldei, and Arabic tongues, and also of diuers other nations and countries: but aboute all things having by a naturall inclination, taken a singular pleasure in philosophie, and in the secrets of Nature, haue wandered and trauelled abroad in the world, the space of seuen and twentie yeares, to the intent to acquaint my selfe with all sortes of learned and discrete men. By the which diligence and curiositie, I have learned many Secretes, not alonely of men of great knowledge and profound learning, and Noblemen, but also of poore women Artificers, Pesants, and all sorts of men. Moreover I haue beene three times at Levant, and sundrie times haue trauailed almost all other parts of the worlde, without resting or sojourning at anie time in one place aboute fiue moneths. Now this my studie and desire of knowledge, aswel of the uniuersall sciences, as of particular secrets, and although it was giuen me by nature, as to the moste part of men (for euerie man by an instinct of nature desireth to know thinges) yet haue I always been nuseled up by a certeine ambition and vainglorie, to know, that which another should be ignoraunt of : which thinge hath grafted in me, a continuall nigardnesse or sparing, to distribute or communicate any of my secretes, yea unto my most singular friendes that I had saying: that if the secretes were knowne to everie man, they shoulde no more be called secrets, but publike and common.

Now it chaunced these fewe daies past, being in Milan: in the sower score and two yeare, and seven monethes of mine age, that a poore artificer was maruellous tormented with the stone, and had bin two daies without making his urine. The Chirurgian that dressed him, knowing wel that I had many secretes, and singularie for the stone, came unto me, and requested me that I would teach him the receipt, or at the least to giue him the medecine composed and readie made, for the health of the patient. But I perceiuing that he would use other mens things for his own profit and honour, refused to give it him, but willed him to bring me to the sicke man, and that I my self would minister the medecine unto him gratis. The phisitian, either fearing blame if it should be knowne, that he had recourse to the aide of another man, hauing peradventure bosted that he had the secrete hymselfe, or els in the meane time, still to

make his profite in dissembling the matter, and diferring it yet twoe daies more: with diuerse excuses and colours, til he brought me to the patient, whom at my comming I founde so nighe his end, that after he had a little lifted up his eyes, casting them pitiouslie towards me, passed from this into a better life: Not hauing any need, neyther of my secrete nor anie other receipt to recover his health.

With this case I was moued to such a compassion and sorrow, that not onelie I wished my self euill, but also I desired to die: seing my ambition and vainglorie to haue been the cause that this poor man was not succored, with the remedie, and gifte that God the Father, and Lorde of us all had giuen me. Wherefore, so great was the remorse of conscience in me, that, desiring to sequestrate my self from the world, and not finding my self of such a disposition of minde that I could liue in a monasterie among religious men, better edified then I, I was at the last fullie resolued with my self, to chuse a place separate from any towne, where I haue a little land, some Bookes, and a studie, for to auoide idlenesse. Here I liue a life, which I call a monkes life, with one seruant, whiche goeth to the towne, not to beg, but to buie my prouision, and other things necessarie: for to sustrain his poore life and mine, as long as it shall please God.

But yet not hauing the power to put out of my fantasie, but that I was a verie homicide and murderer, for refusing to give the phisition the receipt and remedie, for the healing of this poore man, I haue determined to communicate and publish to the world all that I haue, being assured that few other men haue so many as I. And minding to set forth none, but such as are most true and proued, I haue these daies paste (taken partlie out of my bookes, and partlie out of my memorie, all those that came to hand) made a collection of such as I am certaine to be true and experimented, not caring if some of them be written or printed in any other books. For of this my collection the reader, as touching those, may at the least take this profit, that whereas before he might haue doubted, whether such remedies set forth by an other man, were true or not, he shall be now assured, under the affirmance of my faith: for truelie, I would not set my selfe (being in the age and disposition, both of bodie and mind, that I am nawe in) to write fables or lies, that should continue alwaies. But of one point I wil aduertise the reader, and that is, that he do the things with good diligence, and that with medecines concerning mans bodie, he use the ayde and helpe of Phisitions: although indeede many of them, moued with a certaine rusticke, and evill grounded envie, with a passion of galousie, are want to blame and contemne things that come not of themselues. Wherefore, as wel in this, as in everie other point, if he that will use these, should perchance find, that the thing woulde not take effect according to his contentation, let him take beed that he abuse not himself in the confection of them, and to begin againe with more diligence. Assuring himselfe, that (as I haue said) there is nothing in this Book but is true and experimented: and giuing alwaies glorie and praise unto God onelie for all, haue a good hope, that by meane of his diuine grace, I wil consequentlie make you a present of the rest of all that I haue gotten in so many trauailes, voiages, costs, and diligent studie. Farewell.

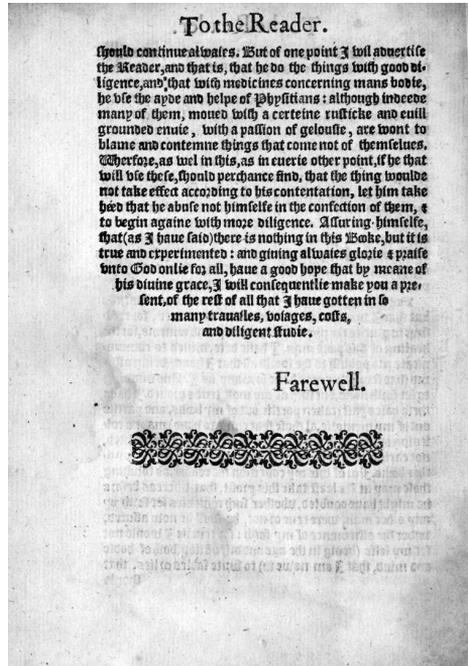
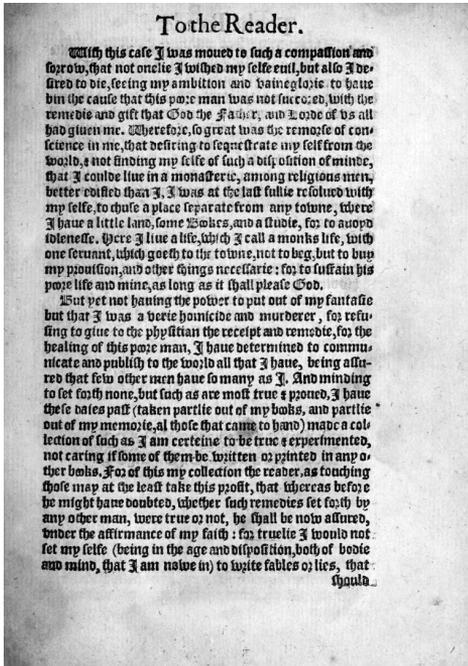
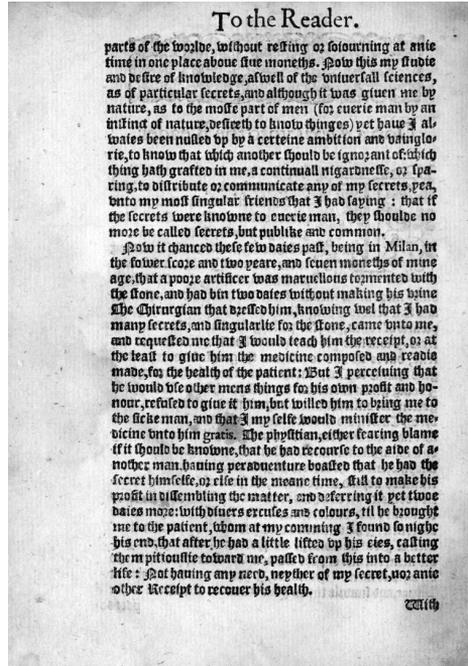
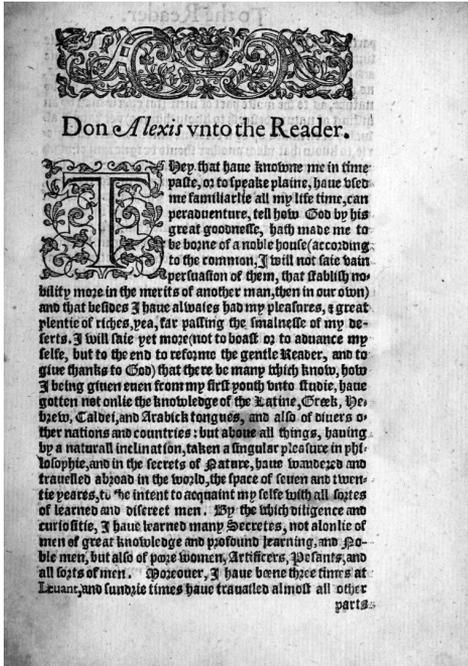


Figure 8. The preface to the English edition of *Secrets of Alexis of Piedmont*

Endnotes

¹ Ciaconius [1]: “Horum librorum Hieronymus Ruscellius est auctor, quod sub conficto nomine Alexii Pedemontani evulgavit.” (“Hieronymus Ruscellius is the author [of the *Secrets*] and he published it under the pseudonym of Alexius Pedemontanus.” Palau [2]: “El autor usa el seudónimo. Era italiano y se llamada Girolamo Ruscelli.” (“The author [of the *Secrets*] uses a pseudonym. He was Italian and his name was Girolamo Ruscelli”).

² Where the author of the *Secrets* is listed as Girolami Ruscelli or, if Alexis of Piedmont, it is usually with an annotation that this is Ruscelli’s pseudonym.

³ E.g. http://books.google.com.au/books/about/Les_secrets_de_reuerend_signeur_Alexis_P.html?id=bX3AawOd800C

⁴ For example, Christie’s auction house webpage: “RUSCELLI, Girolamo (1500–1566). ALEXIS OF PIEDMONT (pseud.?). *Secreti del reverendo donno Alessio Piemontese*. Venice: Sigismondo Bordogna, 1555. Price Realized: \$4,000. Rare first edition. http://www.christies.com/LotFinder/lot_details.aspx?intObjectID=4959873

⁵ “It is generally assumed that Alessio Piemontese was a pseudonym of Girolamo Ruscelli.”

⁶ *Pedemontanus* is the Latin form of the Italian *Piemontese* (from Piedmont). The old Italian name for Piedmont is Piedemonte (*pie*de = foot; *monte* = mountain; *Piedemonte* [mod. *Piemonte*] – land lying at the foot of the Alps).

⁷ This contradiction was pointed out by Ferguson [11]: “He feels the responsibility of the patient’s death, but the remorse is enhaloed with a certain pride, that he, if any man, had the secret that would have effected the required cure.” Then, in the text of the *Secrets*, we find four ways to get rid of kidney stones, among them goldenrod (*Solidago virga aurea* L.), well-known since deepest antiquity as a treatment for stones.

⁸ Of the medical doctors’ sect known as the empiricists, Pliny [13] writes (XXIX, 4): “Alia facta se ab experimentis cognominans empiricem coepit in Sicilia, Acrone Agragantino Empedoclis physici auctoritate commendato.” (“Another sect again, known as that of the Empirics – because it based its rules upon the results of experiment – took its rise in Sicily, having for its founder Acron of Agrigentum, a man recommended by the high authority of Empedocles the physician.” The empiricists believed that the treatment was not about the cause, but a means by which it was removed, and therefore they rejected medical theories, characteristic of the doctors called Dogmatics, and their methods towards disease, which were confined to the observation of the effects of medicines, especially those that had worked in the past – which also entailed respect for folk medicine, the knowledge of the elders, and the practice of magic. The emergence of the sect of Empiricists was assisted by Greece’s economic decline and social decay in the third and second century BC, and the related changes in philosophical and scientific views (scepticism, loss of confidence in reason, especially in its cognitive abilities). The Empiricists rejected any attempt to justify scientific medicine; they were not interested in the cause of disease. They claimed that “the disease is treated not with eloquence, but with medicine,” and that disease was to be understood only as a set of symptoms, each of which required a separate medicine, so all of their medical activities were directed to the search for effective medicines, with no interest in whether they were rational (scientific), folk, or magic. What mattered was positive experience in the past, hence the name Empiricists.

⁹ I.e. Chaldean. “In the Middle Ages, Chaldean meant Syriac or Aramaic.” (Thorndike, III, 17)

¹⁰ On this school and the medical texts that were created there, see Salvatore de Renzi [15], and in particular the chapter titled *Fu la Scuola di Salerno contemporaneamente fondata da un Arabo, un Ebreo da, da un Greco e da un Latino?*

¹¹ Salerno is located on the Tyrrhenian coast, south of Naples. Southern Italy and Sicily were in the Middle Ages, a place where the cultural traditions of Great Greece and Byzantium mixed together, Latin culture, centres of Jewish culture in Palermo, Messina, Rome and Genoa, and finally Arab culture.

¹² Petrus Diaconus (b. c. 1107), librarian of the monastery at Monte Cassino, where Constantinus Africanus settled after his arrival from Carthage (North Africa).

¹³ Constantinus Africanus (c. 1015–1087), Christianised Arab from Carthage (North Africa), associated with the School of Medicine in Salerno, the first European translator of medical and medicinal works from Greek and Arabic (including the works of Hippocrates and Galen) into Latin.

¹⁴ “In my manifold Travels through Europe, Asia and Affrica I have observed and learned many secrets, yea there is scarce anything profitable for mans body, but I have knowledge thereof. Here I do freely present unto you forty, most necessary Receipts... whereof I have oftentimes made good prooffe; and as you shall have occasion make use thereof. So Farewell.” (Citation from Ferguson [19]).

¹⁵ This type of conventional preface is a phenomenon that is not only European. Typical motifs (Gr. *topoi*, ‘fixed places’) in the “autobiographies” of Chinese scholars, published in prefaces to their treatises, as well as in the histories of Chinese dynasties, were described by Herbert Franke [21]. Of the 29 biographies or autobiographies of Chinese scholars he studied, thirteen rejected the proposal of appointment to high office, thirteen lived a very long time, and five achieved immortality. This kind of preface, according to Twitchett [22], served a moralistic (parenetic) purpose.

¹⁶ This is the recipe *Altro rimedio perfettissimo alla pietra, et alla renella* (in English from 1558: *The last, and the moste excellent remedie of all, agaynst the stone, be it in the reignes, or in the bladder, of what qualite or quantite, so ever it be.*). That digression is as follows: “I caused once a gentilman of Millan, to take of it by the space of XII daies, whome the Phisitons esteemed as dead, & woulde have cut him, but I made come out of him so many stones, that all together came to the quantite of an Egge. I made him make his water thorow (through – ZB) a linnen cloth, laied over the Urinall, to the intente, to take up the stones together. And the thirde mornynge, he woulde take the glass, a litle more than halfe full; and shortlie after, being about to make water, he began to crie out, for the great paine he felte in his yarde: after this payne was paste (passed – ZB), lookyng in the linnen cloth, he founde the stone as longe and as bigge, as a Bene, somewhat pointed at one of the sides, which paraduanture, in passing thorow his yard, caused him to haue all that payne.” (*The Secrets*... fol. 27 recto)

¹⁷ For example, the preface to the *Secrets* by Isabella Cortese [23] we read that man should not settle for imitating nature (“to ape nature”), but should aim to do what Nature cannot create. And to this end are the recipes in this book presented („...di fare quello, che alla natura è impossibile, & che ciò siavero, si puo cavare da’Secreti, che tutto il giorno si odono & veggono mettere inXX effecutione.”).

¹⁸ E.g. Coretini [24], Freher [25], Ghilini [26].

¹⁹ E.g. *Enciclopedia Italiana* [27], *Biographie Universelle* [32], *La Grande Enciclopedie* [28].

²⁰ E.g. *Dizionario di Cultura Universale* [29] and *Larousse du XXe siècle* [30].

²¹ Cf. *Biographie universelle* [32] and Barezzi’s [33] note preceding Ruscelli’s poems in the anthology.

²² The strange name of this academy does not stand out in any particular way from other strange names of 16th-century Italian academies.

²³ *Biographie universelle*, p. 333.

²⁴ Venice 1572.

²⁵ Giusto Fontanini, Apostolo Zeno [40]. In his information on the circumstances and the date of death of Ruscelli, A. Zeno used the story of one of Ruscelli's close friends, Luigi Groto, appearing in one of his letters, which were published in Venice in 1606. Therefore, the information from other authors who claim a date other than 1566 for Ruscelli's date of death should be rejected – e.g. 1569 (Papadopolus). Francesco Sansovino also writes (in his foreword to the *New Secrets*,) that in 1567, i.e. in the year in which the *New Secrets* appeared, Ruscelli was already dead.

²⁶ It. *ruscello* – spring

²⁷ These criticisms were answered by Ruscelli in an essay titled *Tre discorsi à Lodovico Dolce* (*Three speeches against Lodovico Dolce*), in which – as Zeno said – “using offensive words he abuses and destroys his opponent, but still Ruscelli is called a Catholic writer and worthy of respect”.

²⁸ This is the Venetian edition of Petrarch of 1501.

²⁹ This is probably an allusion to the *New Secrets* by Girolamo Ruscelli (see below).

³⁰ The *New Secrets* are divided into two parts (*Parte prima* and *Parte seconda*), a division which has no substantive justification because the two parts contain recipes of the same or similar nature – i.e. mainly medical, and some cosmetic and alchemical. This division, purely mechanical, was probably dictated by the volume of the book, which has a total of 624 pages. Neither in the first part nor the second can any thought of ordering be discerned. For example, the recipes for medicines for the eyes can be found in different parts of the book several times. Contrary to the nature of this type of book, it includes descriptions of several medicinal plants – which information is appropriate to a completely different kind of literature (i.e. herbariums, hortuses, hortuluses, etc.). Not all of the *New Secrets* are new: among them can be found recipes that were later added to the primary (original) set (Venice, 1555). These additions, as they increased, have been named the second, then the third and finally the fourth part of the *Secrets of Alexis of Piedmont*.

³¹ The story, or rather fable, of the Secret Academy is as follows. It was established “in a certain famous city” in the Kingdom of Naples (was there another famous city except for Naples in the Kingdom of Naples?), at the time the author lived there. Its founders and also members were a group of “24 special people” (“XXIII persone particolari”), as well as three “leaders” (“tre Signori & capi nostri”), or the “prince and lord of the land” (“Principe & Signor della terra”), one of his relatives (“un suo parente”) and a minister (“e uno ministro”) – so that in total there were twenty-seven, as that figure, according to the greatest philosophers and wisest theologians, best embodies the perfection of the highest mystery (what a sophisticated reason of forming the management!). Among the 24 founders were seven people “of that city” (they were “educated philosophers”), seven were from other Italian cities, the next seven – from “Transalpine countries”; and besides these there was one Slav, one Greek and one “old Jew from Thessaloniki”, who had travelled several times between the Levant countries and the Christian world (is that only incidental coincidence with the preface to the *Secrets of Alexis* [see the preface at the end of this article]?). The area in which the Academy was founded, was given by “the prince and lord”, the money for the construction and maintenance of the Academy also came from the prince, as well as from those founders of the Academy who were rich enough. The Academy was located in purpose-built palace, which was called: *La Filosofia*. On the basis of the description, which takes two pages, it is rather difficult to imagine this palace (it is known that there were three doors, a spiral staircase and rooms, some equipped with the windows of which some faced the street, and others the courtyard (incredible! there were doors and windows in the palace...), but the author assures us the palace was “beautiful and comfortable.”

The palace also included a laboratory, which was also called *La Filosofia*. In the laboratory there worked two pharmacists, two goldsmiths, two “perfumers” (“profumieri”), four herbalists (“erbolari”) and one painter; all of them doing the work given to them by “those who stood over them” – the abovementioned “special persons” (again it is only incidental coincidence with the subjects of the *Secrets of Alexis*? See the first sentence of this article. By the way: the management – 27 people, laboratory technicians – 11 people. Nice ratio...). *La Filosofia*, the laboratory – writes Ruscelli – was equipped with distillation alembics (only alembics? what about the goldsmiths, herbalists, manufacturers of cosmetics, the painter?). The purpose of the Secret Academy’s ten-year activity was to test – at least three times (sic!) – all (sic!) the “secrets” that humanity had written down from antiquity to contemporary times (counting roughly, some 2,000 years of literature on medicines, cosmetics, fragrances and art crafts in all cultures of the Old World – in China and Japan, India, Persia, Arab countries, and in Europe ... And all this by eleven laboratory technicians!). Among those recipes that passed all the tests, the author of the foreword, “by order of the prince and master” (“per comandamento del nostro Principe”), chose the ones that were the easiest and cheapest to make, and thus resulted the first *Secrets of Alexis of Piedmont*, whose real author was Jerome Ruscelli, and the *New Secrets*, by the same author. And all clear! This inept literary and intellectually work – the history of the Secret Academy – which, in addition, is non-original, as it was “inspired”, firstly, by the Academy of Secrets (Accademia de’Secreti), founded in 1560 in Naples by Giambattista della Porta, and secondly, by the tale according to which the medical school in Salerno founded by Four Masters: an Arab, a Jew, a Greek, and “Latinus” (see footnote 20), was not mentioned, of course, by either Michele Maylender [35] or Minieri-Riccio [43] nor any other expert on the subject. Which did not prevent two American authors (W. E a m o n and F. P a h e a u [3]) from writing a scholarly paper, in which the grotesque story of the Secret Academy is described as historical fact. The fact that no one has ever heard of this Academy is explained by the small number of surviving copies of the *New Secrets*. If the number of copies were greater, would the Secret Academy have become more real?

³² Or at least so thinks Ferguson (*The Secrets of Alexis*, p. 233). It should be borne in mind, however, that the correspondence, which Ferguson writes about, was of a literary nature (see *Lettere del Mutio Iustinopolitano*, Venice, 1551), and so does not necessarily have to imply personal contacts.

³³ *Il Petrarca, nuovamente con la perfetta ortografia della lingua volgare, coretto da Girolamo Ruscelli...* Venice, 1553.

³⁴ Palatino, *Compendio...*

³⁵ Some years after the first edition of *Secrets of Alexis of Piedmont* was published, the book was expanded into a suite described by subsequent publishers as the first, second, third and fourth parts of *Secrets of Alexis of Piedmont*. The four-part suite, which remained in print in Italy until the late 18th century, was described by Albrecht H a l l e r [44] as a “totum opus” (“total works”), and F e r g u s o n [19] as the “standard collection”. The existence of the suite of *Secrets* is a reality that cannot be ignored; it is a publishing fact, supported by over 200 years of history. However, we must also not ignore the facts of the history of the creation of this four-piece suite, which do not support the integral character of this “totum opus”. These are the different form of the first part (recipes comprising the first print run) and fragments of the other parts; the introduction of recipes of a different nature into subsequent “books” and “parts”; different prefaces and a lack of consistency between them; and, finally, the manipulations introduced by the publishers of the subsequent “books” or “parts” in the name of Alexis. After all, the author of the first part of *Secrets of Alexis of Piedmont* – the set of recipes included in the original print, the Venetian edition published by Sigismondo Bordogna in 1555 – was not the same as compilers of the remaining parts.

³⁶ *Rechter Gebrauch d'Alchimie, Mitt vil bissher verborgenen nutzbaren unnd lustigen Künsten, Nit allein den fürwitzigen Alchimisten, Sonder allen kunstbaren Werckleuten, in und ausserhalb feuer. Auch sunst aller menglichen inn vil wege zugebrauchen* (On the correct use of alchemy, which until now was a mystery, with a host of useful and entertaining arts, with and without the use of fire, not only necessary for learned alchemists, but also ordinary craftsmen). The recipes gathered within it cover topics such as gold and silver plating of different metals, paint preparation using “alchemy” (e.g., blue using sal ammoniac, sulphur and mercury), etc. – that is, a range of chemical and metallurgical techniques.

³⁷ *The Secrets...* op. cit. fol. 102 verso. In Italian original (Venice, 1555, p. 193): *À sublimare argento vivo, cioè à fare il solimato commune delle spetierie, che s'adoprano da gli Orefici, da gli Alchimisti, dalle Donne, et in molte cose di Medicina.*

³⁸ *The Secrets...* op. cit. fol. 110 recto. In Italian original (p. 205): *Modo bellissimo di fare acqua forte facilmente, & miglior che l'altra.*

³⁹ This concerns a recipe in the English translation of the *Secrets* (London, 1558, fol. 22 verso), entitled *To make a water, good for the breast or stomake, of the which men use to give them drinke, that be tourmented or greemed with the stiche in the side, or poleuritike Apostumes the which water is of a verie good flavour, and mondifieth mervelous well the breast and stomacke.* In the Italian original (Venice, 1555, p. 63), this recipe is entitled *Acqua pettorale da usarsi di continuo à bere da chi ha mal della punta, la quale è buona di sapore, & mondifica il petto mirabilmente.* However, the sentence of interest to us is the following: “Et questa acqua mi fu data in Bologna, l'anno mille cinquecento quaranta tre, dal Signor Girolamo Ruscelli, con la quale esso quell'anno medesimo havendo havuto il detto mal di punta, si sano in brevissimo tempo senza cavarli sangue, ne' usare altro rimedio al mondo, se non questa acqua sola.”

⁴⁰ Thorndike, *A History...* vol. 2, p. 740.

⁴¹ Among others: *I Secreti de la Signora Isabella Cortese*, Venice 1561; T. Rossello, *Della summa de' secreti universali in ognimateria*, Venice 1559; L. Fioravanti, *Del Compendio de i Secreti Rationali*, Venice, 1563; G.V. Roseto, *Opera nuova piacevole laquale insegna di varie compositioni odoriferi*, Venice 1550.

⁴² Two other “borrowings” by Ruscelli are known. He publicly announced that he had decided to write a “full and universal geography of the whole world”, which would probably overshadow the edition of Ptolemy's *Geography* translated and developed by Pietro Andrea Mattioli (Venice, 1548) published six years earlier. Ruscelli's intention was never realised. Instead, he developed a popular version of Ptolemy's *Geography* in his, as he wrote, translation; because according to Giuseppe Rossaccio, the publisher of the 1598 translation of the *Geography*, Ruscelli only translated the first part of his version of the *Geography*, and the remaining seven were by Pietro Andrea Mattioli, only a few sections altered by Ruscelli. It was a similar story with *Letters of the princes*. This book was published for the first time in 1554 in Rome, and the author (i.e. the author of the idea and editorial form) was Dionigi Atanagi, another (after Lodovico Dolce) of Ruscelli's literary competitors. Two years after Atanagi's Roman edition the same set of letters was published in Venice by Ruscelli, inserting on the cover in place of Atanagi's name his own, and informing, in the dedication at the beginning of the book (to Cardinal Carlo Borromeo), that it was he, Ruscelli, who first collected these letters. Although after Ruscelli's death his name was removed from most later editions of the *Letters*, in several others, such as the edition of 1581, it remained.

⁴³ Giovanna d'Aragona (1502–1575), the granddaughter of King Ferrante (Ferdinand I) of Naples (1458–1494).

⁴⁴ Ghilini, *Teatro...* p. 126.

⁴⁵ An example of such “secrets for ladies of the upper classes” is the handwritten collection of recipes for medicines, perfumes, oils, soaps, incense, paints, inks etc. kept at the National Library

in Venice under the number 5221; in the library's Catalogue of Italian Manuscripts (*Catalogo dei Codici Marciani Italiani a cura della direzione della R. Biblioteca Nazionale di S. Marco in Venezia*, Modena, 1909, vol. I, p. 311), it is described as *Ricettario o Libro di Segreti Galanti (Formulary or Book of Elegant Secrets)*, according to the catalogue also "traditionally known as the formulary of Princess Nani". The formulary is written in "elegant, 15th-century minuscule handwriting" in black ink; only the recipe titles and page numbers are rendered in red. There are a total 181 recipes; the first is *A fare acqua Celestiale*, which incidentally is the same as the recipe by Alexis entitled *A heaveye water which hath many goodly and notable virtues* (orig. *Acqua celestiale la quale ha moltissime & notabilissime virtù*). One of the recipes in the collection bears the title *Acqua di frate Giovanni d'Arimini (Water of brother (religious) Giovanni d'Arimini)*. The formulary also shows attempts to organise the material, since the first 50 recipes are just *acque* or waters; however, this does not take into account whether they are "waters" with a cosmetic application, or "waters" for painting (e.g., *Acqua verde da tingere – Green water for painting*). In any case, the intention to create order soon disappears; for example, the formulation for black hair dye is followed by a recipe for *moscardini reali* biscuits, which is in turn followed by a recipe for a tooth-cleaning powder. In another part of the book, the recipe for an ointment treating a diseased womb comes before one for removing corns, followed by a recipe for "scented (i.e. disinfectant) balls" against the plague, then a liquid soap known as Neapolitan, and finally a recipe for quince preserve. Judging by the recipe entitled *Water of brother Giovanni d'Arimini*, we can suppose that the "secrets" of Princess Nani were prepared in a monastery somewhere, albeit not for internal use, but rather that they were commissioned externally; this is suggested by the "elegant, 15th-century minuscule handwriting" and the two colours of ink: red (titles and page numbers) and black (recipe text).

⁴⁶ „...havendovi ritrovate alcune poche parole, che tutti noi che gli siamo stati attorno lavorandolo, non l'intendevano...”

⁴⁷ "Joannes Baptista, brother (religious). A collection of short works and alchemical excerpts in Latin. Some titles in Italian and Spanish." Johannes Baptista Montanus is also mentioned by Haeser [46] as follows: „Joh. Baptista Montanus (1489–1551), prof. zu Padwa... Er besorgte die venetianische Ausgabe des Galen, und schrieb sehr viele Commentarien über die allen Aerzte...”

⁴⁸ Arnold de Villanova (1235–1312), a Catalan, a graduate of the universities of Paris and Montpellier, doctor of theology, law, philosophy and medicine, court physician to several popes, kings and princes, author of many medical and alchemical works inspired by the works of Arab scholars.

⁴⁹ Joannes de Rupescissa (XIV wiek) – Franciscan monk, often imprisoned for criticism of the clergy and the pope and for prophecies about the coming of the Antichrist. According to Georg Matthiae (*Conspectus Historiae Medicorum chronologicus*, 1761, p. 71), Rupescissa, "Celebris Chemicus" died in prison in 1375. The alchemical works attributed to him are *Liber lucis (The Book of Light)*, *De Consideratione quintae essentiae rerum omnium (Reflections on the quintessence of all things)* and the *Liber de confectione veri lapidis philosophorum (How to make a true philosopher's stone)*. On the editions of Rupescissa's works see J. Ferguson: *Bibliotheca Chemica*, Glasgow 1906, vol. II, p. 305.

⁵⁰ Raymundus Lullus (Ramón Lull) from Catalonia, a Franciscan, writer, philosopher and theologian, author of more than 150 treatises in the fields of theology, philosophy, logic, astronomy and mathematics. He is credited with the authorship of numerous medical and alchemical treatises, of which the vast majority, however, he is probably not the author. On Lullus' medical and alchemical works, see J. Ferguson: *Bibliotheca Chemica*. Glasgow, 1906, vol. II, p. 54.

⁵¹ In English (London 1558): *To dissolve and reducte gold into a potable licoure...*

⁵² Moorat, p. 254. Moorat of course “translated” Alexis’ name into Latin (Alexis Pedemontanus), which in Italian is: Alessio Piemontese.

⁵³ The following quotations come from *The Secrets of the reverende maister Alexis of Piemount* (London 1558), fol. 38 verso: “This (receipt agaynst the plague) hath ben proved in Venyse, the yeare 1504.” Fol. 18 recto: “And the said grieffe returning againe foure times at soundrie times (as is aforesayde) the paine came unto hym no moore in the space of three years that we were in Rome together, which was the yere 1514.” Fol. 18 verso: „As I came from Jerusalem In the yere 1518 in a shippe ... we were set upon by five foystes of pirates ... and one of the mariners so attained with the stroke of a gonne that he had his arme brused and broken, and with the same blowe and another hurt in the brest. The phisitions would have cut off the arme. But among other things that I carried abou with me, I found a bore of the said ointment, wherewith I anointed his arme...” Fol. 79 recto and 80 verso: “A marvelous secrete, whiche the great lords of the Moores dooe use, whereby they make that theyr children have no heare under their armes, or other place where they wyll. And this secrete founde I in Syria, the year 1521, by the meanes of a lorde of the country, whose doughter I healed.” Fol. 42 verso: “I sawe a Mylanoys, the yeare 1523, in Aleppo, that hadde the plage, and one soore under the thigh, and another under the lefte arme: and havynge taken of the saied poulder in the mornynge, and againe at night folowinge, be founf the the saied sores brake of them selves, by the virtue of this so excellent a medicine.”

⁵⁴ In the three-volume codex, Montanus’ surname bears the epithet “frater” (brother in a monastic order).

⁵⁵ *Secreti del reverendo donno Alessio Piemontese*. The adjective *reverent* is also found in the title of the Provençal translation of one of the treatises by Arnald de Villanova, entitled *Petit tractat per lo reverent mestre Arnau de Vila nova sopra en temps de pestilencia* (“Little treatise of the reverend Arnald de Villanova on how to proceed in the event of a plague epidemic”). The handwritten “little treatise” is kept at the Vatican Library under the catalogue number 4797. Its Latin title is *Recepta electuarii mirabilis praeservantis ab epidemia et confortantis mineram omnium virtutum* (*Recipe for a miraculous electuary that protects against the plague and amplifies one’s strength*). The treatise opens with the words, “Accipe roris madii collecti de mundissimis herbis...” (“Take some dew collected from the finest of herbs during May...”). The recipe in *Secrets of Alexis of Piedmont*, entitled *Acqua celestiale la quale ha moltissime & notabilissime virtù* (in the English translation from 1558: *To make a precious licoure, and of inestimable vertues...*), opens with, “In the moneth of Maie, at the Sonne rising, thou shalt take up in a pewter dishe, or some vessel of glasse, beynge very cleane, the dewe is fallen upon Rosemarie, Borrage, and other good herbes...”

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THE AUTHORSHIP OF THE *SECRETS OF ALEXIS OF PIEDMONT*
(VENICE, 1555)

The paper aims to question a widespread belief that famous Secrets of Alexis of Piedmont were authored by a minor literary figure Girolamo Ruscelli. It also suggests that Alexis of Piedmont is not Ruscelli's pseudonym, but actually the true name of the author of this work, who, in view of his profession and own scientific interests, appears to fit in this context far better than Ruscelli.