Preface and Acknowledgments

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The topic of this study grew out of an invitation from Philippe Desan, editor of Montaigne Studies, to return to a subject on which I had written earlier, Montaigne and the New World, and to contribute an article to a forthcoming volume on Montaigne et le nouveau monde XX, 1–2 (2010). In the course of research, it became apparent to me that Montaigne’s fascination with cannibalism, the inhabitants of the New World, and those inhabitants’ cultural practices was linked to his interest in the plants and remedies that were being imported to the Old World. Guaiacum was a case in point, a South American plant from which the indigenous inhabitants of the New World and the physicians and surgeons of the Old World prepared decoctions judged helpful in the treatment of the pox. Montaigne’s interest in the exotic plants brought back from the New World is set within a negative context of the cachet that exotic provenance and expense brings to remedies: “Si les nations desquelles nous retirons le gayac, la salseepe- rille et le bois desquine, ont des medecins, combien pensons nous, par cette mesme recommendation de l’estrangeté, la rareté et la cherté, qu’ils facent feste de nos choux et de nostre persil: car qui oseroit mespriser les choses recherchées de si loing, au hasard d’une si longue peregrination et si perilleuse?” (II: 37, 772A/585–86) [If the countries from which we get...
guaiacum, sarsaparilla, and chinaroot have doctors, how much, we may imagine, through this same recommendation of strangeness, rarity, and costliness, must they prize our cabbages and our parsley! For who would dare despise things sought out at a distance, at the risk of such a long and perilous voyage?"

The essayist goes on to attack the sudden changes in treatment that trouble the habits and routines of the patients. He singles out his contemporary physicians Paracelsus, Fioravanti, and Argenterius for criticism: "Car ils ne changent pas seulement une recepте, mais, à ce qu’on me dict, toute la contexture et police du corps de la medicine" (II: 37, 772A/586) [For they change not merely one prescription, but, so they tell me, the whole contexture and order of the study of medicine].

Fioravanti attracted clients with his drastic and controversial treatments for syphilis but remained a strong advocate for the efficacy of guaiacum for his patients suffering from the pox. The above passage from Montaigne and his further adoption of sickness, including syphilis, as a metaphor for what was ailing France at the time of the civil and religious conflicts during the Wars of Religion encouraged me to look at other authors living in sixteenth-century France. How widespread was the confluence of the topics of cannibalism, syphilis, and the ravages of the Wars of Religion? It will become obvious from the chapters to follow that the spread of the pox from the New World to the Old, following the return of the men who had accompanied Columbus to the Americas, had seized the imagination of the inhabitants of Europe because they witnessed the spread of the disease as well as the destruction it brought to the family and social structures.

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