Syphilis

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Published by The Ohio State University Press

Losse, Deborah N.
Syphilis: Medicine, Metaphor, and Religious Conflict in Early Modern France.
The Ohio State University Press, 2015.
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The Franciscan cosmographer André Thevet was indeed pre-scient when he conjectured that the “maladie de pians” in Brazil was none other than the pox (“la belle vérole”) that had spread so rapidly throughout Christianity (“toute la Chrestienté”). He added that it was an illness common to all humans (“un mal commun de tout le monde”) and not originating in Naples or in France, as the nomenclature “mal de Naples” or “morbus gallicus” would suggest. There was ample blame for its spread, although Thevet speculated that it had its roots with those who engaged in relations with the hot-blooded indigenous women (“ces femmes ainsy eschauffees”) of the New World.1 Lewd behavior (“paillardise”) was at its roots, and neither the population of the New World nor of Europe was exempt of responsibility. What the cosmographer understood on his sojourn in Brazil was that what he called the pox, and what he and his fellow Frenchman Jean de Léry heard the Tupinamba call “pians,” was related to the vicious outbreak of the pox or “grosse vérole” in Europe.2

A modern scholar, Francesco Guerra, states that the various strains of what we now call syphilis—pinta (found in America), yaws (found in central Africa and the East and West Indies), endemic syphilis (seen in Africa, Arabia, Siberia, and central Australia), and venereal syphilis (common to

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urban areas)—“are morphologically indistinguishable.”3 That a Franciscan (Thevet) and a Huguenot (Léry) should agree in describing a sexually transmitted disease observed among the Tupinamba in Brazil and yet write competing versions of New World exploration from opposite sides of the religious conflict waging in France speaks to the centrality of the spread of syphilis and to its hold on the French mind. The disease threatened the health of the body, the institution of marriage and the family, as well as the survival of humanity. The Wars of Religion menaced the body politic, civil institutions, and the law. The dual threat—to the individual and to society—moved some of the greatest writers of France and Europe in the sixteenth century, including Erasmus, Rabelais, Montaigne, and Agrippa d’Aubigné, as well as many poets, to view the pox as a metaphor for civic and religious disorder in Europe.

Between the outbreak of syphilis, shortly after the return of Columbus’s men to Europe and the commencement of violence that would characterize the French Wars of Religion, a third element appeared that mediated the link between the first two phenomena. The chroniclers of the New World exploration became increasingly intrigued with the topic of cannibalism. The failure of the indigenous people of the New World to respect the division of species into natural categories, thereby falling into the error of ingesting their own species as food, was proof to many New World chroniclers that these same people lacked the power to reason. As Anthony Pagden states, “Like the two sexual crimes—sodomy and bestiality—of which the Indians were also accused . . . their cannibalism demonstrated that they could not clearly distinguish between the rigid and self-defining categories into which the natural world was divided.”4

In Italy, the controversial surgeon, Leonardo Fioravanti, famed for his unorthodox treatment of victims of syphilis, blamed the outbreak of syphilis on acts of cannibalism when the army cooks in Naples created stews out of human limbs to feed the soldiers. This “unnatural” behavior produced the disease, which then could only be treated by the “expulsion of the same bodily corruption.”5 Sickness, as Eamon states, carried for Fioravanti “moral overtones” as well as physiological symptoms, and for him, the acts of cannibalism at the siege of Naples revealed the bodily and moral laxity exhibited by the butchers and cooks who deceived the soldiers into consuming human flesh (Eamon, 16, 21). Unlike most of his contemporary medical practitioners, chroniclers, and thinkers, he blamed the Europeans for the onset of syphilis in Europe (Eamon, 22). The violent purge, for which Fioravanti was known and criticized, was the only
way to purify the body and ease the patient’s suffering. Hence syphilis and cannibalism were inextricably intertwined in the Renaissance mind. In chapters 3 and 4 I will show how cannibalism and syphilis were linked by such chroniclers as Thevet and Léry.

I have briefly alluded to the names by which syphilis was known in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In her translation and commentary of Girolamo Fracastoro’s *Syphilis sive morbus gallicus*, from which in later centuries the disease took its name, after the rebellious shepherd Syphilus, Jacqueline Vons states that in a Europe ravaged by foreign wars, it is not surprising to find a new disease attributed to the other—to foreigners. To the Italian Fracastoro (1476/78–1553), faced with the invasion of the armies of the French king Charles VIII, it was the *morbus gallicus*; for the German-speaking Joseph Grünpeck (1473–1532), it was the *mala de Franzos*. In writing up his treatment for the disease in 1541, Remacle Fuchs (1510–87) acknowledged three names: *Morbi Hispanici quem allii Gallicum, alii Neapolitanicum appellant*, thus making the Spanish, the French, and the people of Naples responsible for the disease (Fracastor, XIX). Vons also mentions William Cowes shifting the title of his work *A New and Approved Treatise Concerning the Cure of the French Pockes By the Unctions* (1575) to *A Briefe and Necessarie Treatise, Touching the Cure of the Disease Now Usually Called Lues Venerea* (1596), a change that reflects the Latin name by which the disease had become known (Fracastor, XIX). While the term *morbus neapolitanus* was less common, the name indicates that the people took notice that the spread of the disease coincided with the arrival of French and mercenary soldiers in Naples in February 1495 (Fracastor, XX). One appellation for the disease, *gorre des marranes*, reflects a tendency to stigmatize an entire community, in this case, the Jews who migrated from Spain to France upon their forced conversion to Catholicism. Apart from names denoting a foreign origin of the disease, the term *lues venerea*, connecting the pollution or filth (*lues*) to Venus and the sexual act, predominated among Latinist physicians, while the name *grosse vérole* or *grande vérole* prevailed in the French vernacular writing.

I have talked about the onset of syphilis and the link to cannibalism, but before proceeding onwards, let me address the chronology of the French Wars of Religion in which the rhetoric of pox and cannibalism unfolds. The period of religious controversy that spans this book begins with the early years of evangelical humanism at the outset of the sixteenth century. The influence of Guillaume Briçonnet (1472–1536) on Marguerite de Navarre, at the time Duchess of Alençon, and by extension on her
brother François I, has been documented by Henry Heller and, later, by Ehsan Ahmed. Briçonnet’s correspondence with Marguerite between early June 1521 and November 18, 1524, critiques human reason and praises the life that gives itself to the spirit (“espirit vivifiant”)—the Word of Christ (“la semence du Verbe superceleste”). It is through the spirit, not reason, that humans can grasp the Word (Ahmed, 616). Briçonnet’s critique of human reason aims at the Faculty of Theology of Paris, who used reason to attack subversive texts such as the writings of Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples, and “seeks to persuade not only Marguerite but also François I and their mother Louise de Savoie to pursue ‘la restitucion and reformacion de son [i.e., Jesus’] Eglise’” (Briçonnet et Marguerite d’Angoulême, I: 166; Ahmed, 617). This early evangelism, giving primacy to the spirit over reason, informs the works of both François Rabelais and Erasmus, the subjects of chapter 1 and 2 of this book.

Denis Crouzet observes that the early progression of reform, built on the exchange of ideas across Europe, brought a rather slow progression of new doctrine. He points out François I’s hesitation, when his sister Marguerite was corresponding with Briçonnet, and Briçonnet’s hope that the spirit will work through the royal family to preserve the church, then plagued by “orgoeul, lascivitté et avarice” (Briçonnet and Marguerite de Navarre, I: 166; Ahmed, 617). With the placing of statements printed in Neuchâtel opposing the Mass, François I perceived the danger that the reform doctrine posed for the stability of the monarchy. Crouzet remarks that not only did the king engage in a very public eucharistic procession with his children, but six heretics were burned during the rite (“six hérétiques sont brûlés”; 19). In 1540, the Edict of Fontainebleau empowered the parlements to oversee accusations of heresy. Henri II continued the persecution of the Protestant heretics, with 500 heretics sentenced between 1549 and 1551 by the Chambre ardente, a special court set up within the Parlement de Paris (Knecht, 3).

As the number of Calvinist missions grew, so did the number of violent incidents against Calvinists. Yet the Huguenots also began to engage in political intrigue, as evidenced by the Huguenot La Renaudie’s involvement in the Conspiracy of Amboise in 1560 to replace the young king François II with a regent of the reformist Bourbon family. This plot was not supported by Calvin nor by many Huguenot churches and so did not succeed (Knecht, 9).

Rather than being followed by a period of recrimination against the Huguenots, there was a general pardon, known as the Edict of Amboise (1560). All Huguenots except the conspirators were pardoned, provid-
ing that they returned to the Catholic faith. With the death of the François II in the same year, Catherine de Medici became regent. In her desire to restore order and to ease tension between Catholics and Protestants, she convoked the Colloquy of Poissy, where basic differences regarding the Eucharist only intensified disagreements. Were the sacraments the real body and blood of Christ or symbolic of the same? The parlement deputies gathered at Saint-Germain crafted the Edict of Saint-Germain or the Edict of Janvier (January 17, 1562), permitting the Huguenots freedom to worship in the countryside but not in the cities. The ire of the Catholics at this nod toward freedom of conscience—freedom to worship as one wills—propelled the long period of violence that would last until the Edict of Nantes in 1598. A series of eight wars of religion weakened the French state, decimated the people, and threatened the monarchy itself (Knecht, 30–33; Crouzet, 24–25). All pretense at mediation and reconciliation came to an end at the Massacre of Vassy in March 1562, when the troops of François, Duke of Guise, attacked a group of Huguenots who were exercising their right to worship as set out in the Edict of Janvier.

The selection of works to be examined in this book reflects what was happening on the political and religious front. The rhetoric of paradox, wordplay, and parody found in the works of Erasmus, Rabelais, and Du Fail gave way to a more aggressive language of attack aimed against Catholics by Léry, Théodore de Bèze, or Agrippa d’Aubigné or against Protestants by Artus Désiré and Pierre de Ronsard in the second half of the sixteenth century. Montaigne would denounce the abuses on both sides. The literary timeline follows roughly the period of intensifying violence in the political and religious spheres. As for the chronology of the pandemic, I follow the slow and steady rise in the earliest years of the outbreak of the pox, followed by the increasing virulence between 1515 and 1540 and the gradual steadying of outbreaks and recognition that the cases were not quite as intense in the years 1550 to 1600. Francisco López de Gómara confirmed the reduction in vigor and violence of the disease around mid-century when he published his Historia general de las Indias (1553).

The topic of syphilis spans literary genres. Because of the attention Rabelais paid to his “goutteux” (gouty) and “verolez” (poxed), one might think that syphilis was the unique purview of satirical narrative, the subject of chapter 1. As I shall show in chapter 2, Erasmus devoted several colloquies to exploring the impact of syphilis on social institutions, particularly on the institution of marriage and the family. Chapter 3 explores how satirical verse attributes licentious behavior and the consequent
physical deformities brought on by syphilis to both Catholic and Protestant clergy. Travel literature written by the cosmographer Thevet and the ethnographer Léry explores the conjunction of cannibalism and syphilis among the Tupi people. Siege literature, whether in the form of memoirs, such as Léry’s *Histoire mémorable du siège de Sancerre*, or in poetic form, such as d’Aubigné’s *Les Tragiques*, weaves the threads of cannibalism and wanton behavior into a tapestry of lapsed morals that threatened French society in the time of the wars of religion. The first work is discussed in chapter 4 and was written immediately after the collapse of Sancerre, when it was besieged by the royal armies. The second work, the subject of chapter 6, was the result of d’Aubigné’s long reflection on the suffering caused by Catholic extremists to the Huguenots, but the author is clear that it is the kingdom of France, its people, and its institutions that have suffered insurmountable damage. This view was shared by Ronsard and Montaigne as well and reflected the growing violence and disrespect for the law.

While siege literature seems inspired by the need to bear witness to human suffering, so in fact is the essay, as will be evident in chapter 5 of this book. Montaigne expanded the scope of the essay to bear witness to his family’s flight from his estate during an outbreak of the plague as well as an outbreak in violence in nearby Castillon. These events, along with personal encounters with Catholic and Protestant forces in and around Montaigne, led the essayist to depart from the more succinct form of the essay that had characterized the first and parts of the second book of his *Essais* to return with increasing regularity to self-portraiture. It is in the context of discussing how children resemble parents that he brings up medicine, referring to the family-inherited ailment, kidney stones, and the family distrust of the practice of medicine. From there, he associates the exotic remedies brought back from the New World, such as guaiac for the treatment of syphilis, with the names of the medical practitioners who espouse extreme and novel cures along with the use of such rare plants: Paracelsus, Fioravanti, and Argentier (“Paracelse, Fioravanti et Argenterius”). For Montaigne, this was all at the expense of the “pauvre patient” (the long-suffering patient), for whom such violent purgatives only increased pain and suffering. The new form he developed—the essay—was the latest genre to apply medical analogies to the civil disorder and religious conflicts occurring in France.

The two phenomena, the epidemic of syphilis in the Old World and the violent religious and civil strife, converged as the physical patients in Europe gave way to a metaphorical patient—France itself, ravaged by
competing factions: Catholics, Huguenots, and the extreme Catholic party known as the *Ligue*. Montaigne would refer to “nostre mort publique, ses symptomes et sa forme” (III: 12, 1046/800) [our public death, its symptoms and its form]. D’Aubigné describes France as “une mère affligée”: “Je veux peindre la France une mere affligée” [I want to paint France as an suffering mother]. She is bloodied by her two sons, Esau (Catholics) and Jacob (Protestants), fighting over her breasts, and leaving only blood instead of milk to feed them. She grieves: “Je n’ay plus que du sang pour vostre nourriture” (Les Tragiques, I: 269, v. 130) [I have only blood for your food]. Physical decline becomes a moral decline; an individual illness gives way to a moribund body politic no longer able to defend itself from internal and external threats.

The fact that writers and thinkers in the sixteenth century should view a protracted civil conflict as a prolonged outbreak of a new disease should not surprise those familiar with Renaissance thought. Michel Foucault reminds us that until the end of the sixteenth century, resemblance or likeness played a foundational role in the ways humanist thinkers, writers, and artists acquired knowledge: “Jusqu’à la fin du XVIe siècle, la ressemblance a joué un rôle bâtisseur dans le savoir de la culture occidentale.” New phenomena were observed and compared to objects with which the observer was familiar. With simile, the two phenomena compared are tied in space and time when the two are evoked together vocally, in writing, or in a painting. Metaphor, what Foucault terms emulation or *aemulatio*, is likeness freed from spatial propinquity and spatial law, “une sorte de convenance, mais qui serait affranchie de la loi du lieu” (Foucault, 34). What we see as metaphor suggests rather than states, and as Foucault remarks, is akin to the play between mirror and reflection (34).

So, when Montaigne mentions epidemics or common diseases (“maladies populaires”) to refer to religious conflicts raging in France, and indeed outside his very estate, he is referring not to a physical illness as much as to violence and fighting among the French people: “En ces maladies populaires, on peut distinguer sur le commencement les sains des malades; mais quand elles viennent à durer, comme la nostre, tout le corps s’en sent” (III: 12, 1041B/796) [In these epidemics one can distinguish at the beginning the well from the sick; but when they come to last, like ours, the whole body is affected]. It is clear he is referring to armed conflict as an illness or epidemic because he goes on to rail against mercenaries or “borrowed soldiers” (“soldats empruntez”; 1042B/7960). He suggests the likeness between epidemic and civil war by enumerating the effects—the infected, stinking body—common to the sickroom and to the
battlefield. Joel Fineman reminds us that describing “political, military, and social facts” in medical terms goes all the way back to Thucydides, who adopted the “semiological language and method of the Hippocratic doctor”: “diagnosis,” “prognosis,” and “natural cause” or “prophasis.”

Like Montaigne, d’Aubigné refers to war-torn France as a patient. In a letter to Marie de Medici, the poet speaks of the necessity of entering into the sick room (“entrer dans la chambre”) with a vial of medicine in hand (“avec la fiole à la main”).

The somewhat hidden nature of the metaphor, a figure that, as Hayden White tells us, “gives direction for finding the set of images that are intended to be associated with the thing,” has advantages in the incendiary atmosphere of Paris in the wake of the Saint Bartholomew Massacre. Sometimes, the pox and the lascivious behavior with which it was associated served both Protestants and Catholics as a means to attack the opposition without engaging in the more risky language of theology. At other times, theology and medicine overlap, as will be seen in the discussion of the work of Léry, where lechery, theology, and cannibalism are intertwined. The metaphor chosen by the historian or poet becomes a way in which the author presents the world and orders the facts (White, 47). For White, the images, in this case the metaphors of cannibalism and syphilis, “provide a system of translation which allows the viewer to link the image [here cannibalism or syphilis] with the thing represented,” the Eucharist or the French Wars of Religion (White, 47).

Beyond the metaphors in which cannibalism points toward the substantive difference between the Catholic and Protestant views of the Host, or in which the metaphor of syphilis is broadened to point to wider corruption in the social fabric, another metaphor, much used in the sermons of Saint Augustine, is that of the “Christus Medicus,” an image that was popular in the writings and iconography of Renaissance Europe. John Henderson mentions the use of the image of Christ touching the wound in his side placed prominently in the lunette leading to the cemetery of Florence’s main hospital, Santa Maria Nuova. He notes that the positioning of the figure of Man of Sorrows, as this figure was called, represents “a door to salvation.” Rudolph Arbesmann tells us that Saint Augustine returned again and again in his sermons to the healing image of Christ, who through a humble action took the form of man to redeem the sins of humankind. Healer of soul and body, unlike earthly physicians, he is the model of humility.

New epidemics demand new spiritual tools for easing the corporal and spiritual suffering of the indisposed. Christ’s wounded body, with his hand
in the wound, reminds the faithful that through their pain and suffering, they may find redemption. Like the “verollez” of the “Patenostre des Verollez,” those who are exiled, starved, and mutilated may find that God “gard(e) place en Paradis” to deliver them at last from the earthly suffering they have endured. Faced with the rapid spread of the pox, along with periods of plague, the hospitals were crowded; new types of hospitals were established to deal with the incurabili—sufferers from the strange and virulent new disease (Henderson, 71). Physicians such as François Rabelais returned to the Augustinian image—Rabelais in the prologue to his Quart Livre, as he ponders the suffering of the “goutteux” and “verollez.”

That the chronicles describing cannibalism and the occurrence of syphilis in the New World should happen at the very time of the outbreak of violence between Catholics and Protestants fed the rhetoric of the pamphlets distributed by both sides. The Catholic concept of transubstantiation, as the Huguenot Léry states, comes very close to cannibalism: “Ils vouloient neantmoins non seulement grossie rament non seulement grossièrement, plustost que spirituellement, manger la chair de Jesus-Christ, mais qui pis estoit, à la manière des sauvages nommez Ouetacas . . . , ils vouloient mascher et avaler toute crue” [Nevertheless they wanted not only to eat the flesh of Jesus Christ grossly rather than spiritually, but what was worse, like the savages named Ouetaca . . . , they wanted to chew and swallow it raw]. A Protestant satirical poem, Satyres chrestiennes de la cuisine papale, attributed by some to Théodore de Bèze, refers to the Catholics as “Anthropophages” and “Theophages” (“Man-eaters” and “God-eaters”). The Catholic Artus Désiré throws accusations of lust and wantonness at his Protestant counterparts, calling them “charnelz” and “lubriques.” In his verse their heresy is transformed into a stinking, putrid infection—not unlike the open pustules of syphilis: “puante”/“fluante”/“infection.” The common insult on both sides is wantonness or “paillardise.” While not engaging in the rhetoric of the pox in his rebukes against Protestant acts of sedition and self-serving interpretations of the gospels, Ronsard gives a strong rebuttal to the accusation that he himself was infected with the disease. In “Response de Pierre de Ronsard aux injures et calomnies de je ne scay quels predicanteraux et ministreaux de Genéve,” he turns the accusations of the Huguenots against themselves as he shows just who is likely to spread both the pox and injustice through the kingdom of France.

The language of cannibalism and medicine infuses the religious debate and inflames the open sores of civic conflict. It will be clear throughout
this book that writers from Erasmus to d’Aubigné spoke of violence in Europe—whether caused by national rivalries or religious differences—as a danger to the health and well-being of the continent and its peoples. Violence is often framed in terms of an illness; the state subsumes the individual. Restoring the state and the continent to good health should be the aim of all people. Erasmus’s butcher in his colloquy “A Fish Diet” speaks of healing the sores of conflict between Charles V and François I rather than simply applying a topical remedy that merely conceals them.29 As Marjorie O’Rourke Boyle observes, Erasmus viewed the republic as a kind of body subject to illness: “The republic is a kind of body, . . . Its pestilence and disease are evil mores.”30 D’Aubigné makes a similar analogy when he writes to the young Duke of Montmorency: “Le royaume est malade de la subversion de toutes choses.”31 In another letter, this time to the Queen Mother, Marie de Medici, he likens France’s illness to an internal or implicit illness in which a remedy to one member creates open sores in another member.32

As I advance in the analysis of the works of some key writers of prose, poetry, chronicles, and essays in the sixteenth century, it will become obvious that from the beginning, conflict between nations or within a single nation was viewed as hazardous to the health of the states involved. A kingdom reflected the health and welfare of its people—when one suffered, the health of the whole was at risk. The outbreak of syphilis at the end of the fifteenth century, causing a pandemic that struck terror into the hearts of all, seized the imagination of all Europeans and led them to extend the images of cruel and excruciating suffering to the body politic, opened up and ripped apart by interpersonal conflict caused by religious differences, overriding personal ambition, and prejudice. Erasmus, Rabelais, and Montaigne adopted the analogy between the health of the individual and the health of the nation in order to mediate the growing political and religious conflict.33 This should not be surprising given their belief in moderation as a remedy for most things. What should be astonishing is that even the most partisan writers understood that just as surely as syphilis—the unintended consequence of New World expansion—had ravaged the population of Europe, so too external and internal rivalry based on religious differences and personal ambition had destroyed the state’s ability to prosper, to nourish its people, and to extend its cultural, scientific, and intellectual influence. Let me turn first to the works of François Rabelais to see how the virulence of the outbreak of syphilis had captivated the European imagination.