Syphilis

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HEN MIKHAIL BAKHTIN speaks of Rabelais’s frequent evocation of the codpiece and of references to lovemaking, procreation, and venereal disease (his favored “vérolez” or “goutteux”), the Russian critic either does so in relation to the grotesque—the desire to show the body in “the act of becoming” (a body that “is never finished, never completed,” one that “is continually built, created, builds and creates another body”)—or in relation to the opposition between official or church culture and popular culture as represented by the marketplace and popular farce. There is another reason, based in the history of the times, that explains why Rabelais would have given primacy to his “vérolez.” Since the outbreak of syphilis in 1497, the cities of Europe were filled with patients who suffered the most visible ravages of the disease. From the time in which Rabelais embarked upon the publication of the tales of his giants Pantagruel and Gargantua in the period between 1532 and 1552, he had witnessed the spread of the pandemic across Europe. The French invasion of Italy served as a catalyst for the rapid growth of the disease from the returning sailors who had accompanied Columbus to the New World to the soldiers of Spanish, Italian, French, Swiss, and German origins who then returned to every corner in Europe to infect the inhabitants of their hometowns and cities: wives, wet
nurses, babies, domestics, merchants, clergy, and nobility. It was well known even in the sixteenth century that wet nurses and nursing mothers were at risk for passing the disease to the babies they nursed. No social class was exempt. Evidence of the presence of “grosse vérole” or syphilis exists in Paris, Besançon, and Lyon in the edicts discovered by medical scholars of the disease, one being an Arrêt de Parlement de Paris dated as early as March 6, 1497, warning of the presence of persons suffering from the “grosse vérole” and of the dangers of contact with the diseased.

Faced with the rapid spread of the morbus gallicus or the mal français, as it became known because of the coincidence of the presence of French soldiers in Italy at the time of the outbreak of the disease, Rabelais weaves the presence of those suffering from the disease throughout his work and gives them primacy by devoting his prologues to the “goutteux” and “vérolez”—those who enjoy life to the fullest through their drinking and sexual relations but also suffer the illnesses brought on by their sexual and gastronomical habits. As Bakhtin comments, gout and syphilis are in fact “joyeuses maladies” or happy diseases resulting from immoderate abuses of food and sexual pleasure (Bakhtin, 164/161). Such joyous flaunting of what Bakhtin calls the lower stratum or “bas corporel” is set in direct opposition to the drab hypocrisy and mournful demeanor of the priests and monks who spent more time fasting than attending to the needs of the poor. Jean Fernel, a contemporary of Rabelais and physician to Henri II and, by extension, to Diane de Poitiers, states very plainly that the disease is spread only through sexual intercourse or other impure contact (“il se contracte seulement par le coït ou par quelque autre impur”).

While, as Bakhtin suggests, Rabelais may have been moved by the metaphorical interpretations of “la grosse vérole,” the historic dimensions of the disease and the social changes in medical treatment, fashion, and social interaction caused by the ubiquitous presence of the disease is part of the fabric of Rabelais’s work. What is of interest here is how his views of the disease, of its symptoms, treatment, and changes in dress necessitated by the disease, reflect ways in which the populace, physicians, artists, and writers dealt with the disease. Rabelais’s evocation of syphilis goes well beyond what Bakhtin terms “la maladie à la mode” (Bakhtin, 164). As writer and physician, Rabelais probed the profound impact that the disease had on the way of life in the sixteenth century, and his work records this impact in ways that will be documented in this book.

If I begin with Pantagruel, first published in 1532, it is necessary to look only as far as the prologue, not yet dedicated to the “vérolez” but to the “Tresilllustres et Treschevaleureux champions” [Most illustrious and
most valorous champions] to find a vivid portrait of the syphilitic covered in the therapeutic ointment that brought some relief and suffering from the symptoms brought on by the disease.⁶

Mais que diray-je des pauvres vérolez et goutteux? O quantes foys nous les avons veu, à l’heure que ilz estoyent bien oingts et engressez à pointc, et le visage leur reluysoit comme la claveure d’un charnier, et les dentz les tressailloyent comme font les marchettes d’un clavier d’orgues ou d’espinette quand on joue dessus et que le gosier leur escumoit comme à un verrat que les vautres ont aculé entre les toilles! (Pantagruel, prologue, 215/134)

But what am I to say of the poor poxies and gouties? How many times have we seen them, at the moment when they were well greased and duly anointed, as their face shone like the lock-plate of a larder, and their teeth were chattering like organ or spinet keys when someone plays on them, and their throat was frothing like a wild boar’s that the dogs have run down into the toils!

The image of the ointment causing the syphilitic’s face to shine would be taken up by other satirists, including in the Satyres chrestiennes de la cuisiné papale (1560), whose author is widely believed to be Théodore de Bèze. The narrator describes “Nos Maistres sorbonniers / aussi luisans qu’une lanterne” [Our Sorbonne professors / As shiny as a lantern].⁷ Chief among the “maistres sorbonniers” was a former president of the Parlement de Paris, abbé of Saint-Victor, and author of Adversum pseudoevangelicam haeresim, Pierre Lizet (1482–1554), mentioned later in the same work, who had banned many reform-minded theologians for heresy, including Bèze (Satyres chrestiennes, 160 n. 668).

Rabelais’s description of the shiny, oily countenance of syphilitics, as well as those portraits by many of his contemporary writers, including Bèze and Erasmus, was accurate, as can be seen in the medications detailed in the works of physicians of the time. Writing one of the seminal works on syphilis, and the epic poem (Syphilis sive morbus gallicus), in which he links the name of the disease to the shepherd Syphile, doctor and poet Girolamo Fracastoro describes the ingredients that produced the oily appearance of the skin of those suffering from the pox. He recommends that should pernicious pain persist in gripping the body with convulsions, it could be calmed with an ointment made of mastic resin (“huile de mastic”), thick good fat (“la graisse d’oie bien épaisse”), and a mucilage made
of various plant seeds, with liquid honey (“miel liquide”) added. The plant seeds as well as saffron (“safran de Coryque”) gave the ointment the orange or yellow color often mentioned by Renaissance writers. Fracastoro mentions, of course, the favored mercury ointment (“Argento melius persoluentes omnia vivo pars maior”; “Pour détruire complètement tous les signes du fléau, la majorité utilise avec plus de succès le vif-argent” [II: 48/49, vv. 270–71] [To completely destroy all the signs of the pestilence, most people use mercury to best effect]).

Rabelais’s portrait of the suffering syphilitic, at once burning and teeth clacking, is reminiscent of Ulrich von Hutten’s description of treatment for syphilis—a treatment he underwent and described with great precision. He observes the patient in an airless room (“une chambre en laquelle il ny aura guerre d’air”) in which a fire will be set in a chimney or, as in Germany, a stove (“en laquelle y ait tousiours un feu ou comme on fait en Germanie en une etuve”). One can imagine that between the fever caused by the disease and the closed, hot room the patient would burn and shiver as fever and treatment ran their course, thus causing the alternation of red face and chattering teeth described by Rabelais. Ambroise Paré, king’s surgeon to Henri II, Charles IX, and Henri III, prescribed an ointment of mercury mixed with lead and boiled in vinegar infused with sage, rosemary, thyme, and chamomile for relieving the discomfort of the open sores of syphilis. Such a treatment would produce the effects of Rabelais’s “vérolez,” “bien oingts et engressez à poinct,” quoted above.

Immediately following his vivid description of his syphilitics, Rabelais observes that the anonymous popular chronicles of Gargantua serve to distract and console those suffering from the “grosse vérole,” much as the Life of Saint Margaret (“la vie de la saincte Marguerite”) does mothers in childbirth (Pantagruel, prologue, 215/134). This juxtaposition of a profane, popular work with a saint’s life suggests a reform-minded Evangelical point of view poking fun at the importance of adoration of the saints in the everyday life of Christians. In fact, Jillings observes that the Protestant Hutten, in his Febris I, or Fever I, was perhaps the first, around 1520, to advance the disease metaphor as a religious polemic against the Catholic Church (Jillings, 1). While Rabelais views his “vérolez” not as villains but as those who approach life with joy and gusto, his literary followers, whether Catholic or Protestant, would accuse their adversaries of lechery (“paillardise”) and being the bearers of the pox which so threatened society’s well-being. However, as can be seen in Rabelais’s good-natured mention of the Life of Saint Margaret, his jest is not yet
the embittered satire that would develop later see as the Wars of Religion reached their height. Rabelais, after Hutten, would expand the metaphor connecting syphilis with religious polemic.

Panurge’s proposal to build the walls of Paris out of the private parts of the women of Paris, lined up with the tallest women first, followed “par bonne syméterye d’architecture” progressively by the shorter women, occasions another reference to the likelihood that when the men approach the women to have sexual relations, an outbreak of the pox will follow: “Et puis, que les couillevrines se y vinsent froter, vous en verriez (par Dieu!) incontinent distiller de ce benoist fruict de grosse vérolle, menu comme pluye, sec au nom des diables!” (Pantagruel, ch. 15, 277/183) [And then if the culverins came and rubbed up against them, you would see (by God!) immediately distilled from them some of that blessed fruit of the pox, as fine as rain, dry in the devil’s name!]. Not only is Rabelais building on the historic prevalence of the pox in Paris and on the steady rivalry between Charles V and François I, but he takes the occasion to pun on the usual means of defense—artillery in the form of couleuvrines and male reproductive organs, couilles to form the word couillevrines. Pox is seen here in its positive light—related to the lusty desires of the men to satisfy their needs. Panurge plays on Pantagruel’s evocation of the Spartan Agesilaus’s statement that the best protective walls of a city are the virtue and discipline of its citizen soldiers.11 In Panurge’s version or inversion of the oft-quoted learned story, the virtue of the citizens is literally turned upside down in the “callibistrys des femmes” [women’s watchamacal-lits]. The opposition of blessed fruit and pox (“benoist fruit” and “grosse vérolle) adds to the delightful juxtaposition of high and low culture, of abstinence and indulgence.

The pox enters through another strategy when Pantagruel invites Panurge to dress in his livery: “Vrayement, dist Pantagruel, tu es gentil compagnon; je te veux habiller de ma livrée” (Pantagruel, 15, 279/186) [“Really,” said Pantagruel, “you’re good company; I want to dress you in my livery”]. We don’t generally think of Rabelais’s works for their attention to changes in fashion. Yet, Panurge seeks a forward-looking style that is evolving:

Et le feist vestir galantement selon la mode du temps qui couroit, excepté que Panurge voulut que la bragouette de ses chausses feust longue de troys pieds et guarrée, non ronde, ce que feust fait. . . . Et disoit souvent que le monde n’avoit encorez congnue l’émolument et utilité qui est de porter grande bragouette; mais le temps leur enseignerot quelque jour, comme
toutes choses ont esté inventées en temps. (*Pantagruel*, 15, 280/186; emphasis added)

And he had him dressed gallantly in the manner of the time it was then, *except that Panurge wanted the codpiece on his breeches to be three feet long and square, not round, which was done*. . . And he often said that people had not yet recognized the advantage and utility there is in wearing a big codpiece; but time would teach them some day, even as in time all things have been invented.

Codpieces had undergone a radical transformation from the simple “round” (note Rabelais’s text) to square, box-like shapes in a fashion change that roughly coincides with the outbreak and dissemination of syphilis in the years between the end of the fifteenth century and the first half of the sixteenth century. And what is more, it was a change that began with the soldiers and hired soldiers and even *gondolieri* in Italy and spread to the nobility—one of the rare instances, as Grace Q. Vicary notes, in which a radical change in fashion began with a lower class and was adopted by the highest rank—nobility: “The soft, triangular flap codpiece of the 15th century developed into a protruding, contorted, decorated enlarged, padded penis sheath that often matched the decorative forms displayed by the fashionably dressed men . . . of that time.”

Vicary goes on to say that the earlier codpiece—worn in the fifteenth century—had a triangular, rounded flap “attached to the hose with laces and made of the same material as the hose, presumably washable. Next came stiffened, padded, protruding codpieces worn as additions matching either the hose or other clothing” (Vicary, 8). This last was worn in the sixteenth century and often curved backwards. Vicary provides portraits of the major kings of this time illustrating the padded, curved codpieces: Charles V, by Titian (1532); Henry VIII, presumably by Holbein (1537); and François I, by Clouet (1540). According to Vicary, the layers of woven cloth, made stiff with stays and padding, “formed a roomy box [so that] the genitals could rest inside, well protected from friction, bumps or knocks from the various daggers, purses, tools, whisks, pomanders, or swords which Renaissance men hung from their belts” (Vicary, 8).

Vicary suggests that the new codpiece contained both enough room for bandages and for the ointments that Rabelais’s narrator mentions above. It concealed the male organ so that sores were not visible—providing a kind of a “camouflage from persecution” as well as a protection for other people in the crowded stores and streets so that they would
not come into contact with the infected area (Vicary, 14). So, when Pan-
urge specifies “la braguette de ses chausses feust longue de troys piedz et
quarrée, non ronde [emphasis added],” he distinguishes the old style of
codpiece from the new and asserts its practicality, which people would
eventually come to understand (280/186). While adopting his prince’s liv-
ery shows his fealty to Pantagruel, Panurge still asserts his right to fol-
low fashion, particularly if in time one learns the usefulness of the new
invention.

Panurge is never far from the pox, as is seen in chapter 16 of Pan-
tagruel, in which he concocts a tart “Borbonnoise” made of excrement
and pus from syphilis-infected pustules (“sanie de bosses chancreuses”) to
serve to passersby on a street (La rue de Fouarre) known to be frequented
by master of arts students at the Sorbonne (Pantagruel, 16, 281, see also
note 2, Pantagruel, 10, 256). The unsuspecting Parisians who feast on the
tarts die of plague, leprosy, gout, and the greatest number from the pox.

We next see Panurge decked out in his new livery and codpiece at the
debate with maistre Thaumaste (Pantagruel, ch. 18). Although Vicary
could have looked elsewhere in Rabelais to support her ideas on the evo-
lution of the codpiece, she limits her treatment of Rabelais to this one
episode—but does a great service in resolving the issue of why Panurge
should have an orange in his codpiece:

Or notez que Panurge avoit mis au bout de sa longue braguette un beau
floc de soye rouge, blanche, verte et bleue, et dedans avoit mis une belle
pomme d’orange. (Pantagruel, ch. 18, 294/197)

Now note that Panurge had put on the end of his long codpiece a lovely
lock of silk, red, white, green, and blue, and inside it had put a fine
orange.

Vicary disagrees with the English translation—a literal orange—and pos-
its that the author was referring to a pomme d’ambre, pomander: “The
original pomme d’ambre may have actually been carved from a ball of the
harder resin, amber, which significantly, is dark-yellow in color. Second,
Rabelais did not say une belle orange but une belle pomme d’orange (a
beautiful head of an orange).” Her conclusion is that Rabelais was referr-
ing to the male sex organ as a head, colored orange—a reference to the
mercury mixed with animal grease, a common treatment for syphilis.
Remember the mercury mixed with vinegar and herbs mentioned by Paré,
referenced above. “Thus, mercury salts combined with unrefined yel-
lowish animal grease and used to treat syphilis would undoubtedly have
turned the skin of the penis, orange, and any bandages used to dress the
penis, orange” (Vicary, 17).

Vicary does not proceed to the next pertinent passage, in which Pan-
urge takes the “pomme d’orange” and throws it seven times with his right
hand, catching it on the eighth time, all the while extending his codpiece
and shaking it with his left hand. This would suggest that the “pomme
d’orange” is indeed a pomander—used for its fragrance based on aromatic
herbs and spice in counterbalancing unpleasant smells, smells that could
emanate from infection within the codpiece. Elizabeth Rodini advises us
that it was thought that the strong scents from the pomander “had protec-
tive medicinal values: they would have warded off plague and disease, and
sanitized the air.”

In any case, it seems that either Panurge was infected with the disease
or was doing his best to ward off the disease. His advances toward the
“haulte dame de Paris” would suggest the former rather than the latter.
His victory over maistre Thaumaste raises his reputation among the Pari-
sians such that he adds additional decoration to his codpiece:

Panurge commença estre en réputation en la ville de Paris par ceste dis-
putation que il obtint contre l’Angloys, et faisoit dès lors bien valoir sa
braguette, et le feist au dessus esmoucheter de broderie à la romanicque.
(Pantagruel, 21, 300/203)

Panurge began to get a reputation around the town of Paris for this
disputation he maintained against the Englishman, and from then on
put his codpiece to good use, and had it decorated with Roman style
embroidery.

We tend to imagine that intellectual capacity rather than virility leads to
victory in disputation, but in Panurge’s case he is emboldened to go above
his social rank to throw his affections upon a married woman of high
social rank. While he had argued with signs with Thaumaste, he is less
successful in verbally making his case with the “haulte dame de Paris,”
particularly because his rhetoric betrays both his more humble origins and
his lusty desires. Addressing himself to the lady, he says:

Or (dist-il), ce me seroit bien tout un d’avoir bras et jambes coupez, en
condition que nous fissions, vous et moy, un ranson de chère lie, jouans
des manequins à basses marches, car (monstrant sa longue braguette)
voicy Maistre Jean Jeudy qui vous sonneroit une antiquaille dont vous sentirez jusques à la moelle des os. (Pantagruel, 21, 300/203)

Well, now, he said, it would be all the same to me to have my arms and legs cut off, on condition that you and I should have a nice roll in the hay together, playing the stiff lowdown in-and-out game; for (showing his long codpiece) here is Master Johnny Jumpup [Maistre Jean Jeudy], who will sound you an antic dance that you’ll feel to the marrow of your bones.

Panurge’s speech reveals the lowly milieu in which he generally seeks to satisfy his desires. Lust and not the talent to create a true partnership with a woman leads Panurge to the fruitless quest for a wife in the Tiers Livre, or Third Book. But it is Rabelais’s narrator who first presents the model of marriage based on a true give-and-take in Gargantua, in which the woman is capable of both taking pleasure in sexual relations and regretting those activities when faced with the pain of childbirth.

It is indeed fitting that a narrative that will lead to the birth and playful childhood of the giant Gargantua should be dedicated to the “Beuveurs tres illustres, et vous Vérolez très précieux (car à vous, et non à aultres, sont dédiez mes escriptz)” (Gargantua, prologue, 38/3) [Most illustrious topers, and you, most precious poxies—for to you, not the others, my writings are dedicated]. The playful lovemaking, presumably focused on procreation, is the setting for the birth of Gargantua:

En son eage virile, [Grandgousier] espousa Gargamelle, fille du roy de Parpaillons, belle gouge et de bonne troigne, et faisoient eux deux souvent ensemble la beste à deux dos, joyeusement se frotans leur lard, tant qu’ elle engroissa d’un beau filz et le porta jusques à la unziesme moys. (Gargantua, 3, 47/12)

In his prime, he married Gargamelle, daughter of the king of the Parpaillons, a good looking wench, and these two together often played the two-backed beat, so that she became pregnant with a handsome son and carried him until the eleventh month.

The subject of livery returns when it is time to dress the young Gargantua. Here again, the narrator mentions a change in sartorial style that would accommodate the more elaborate codpiece: “Pour son pourpoinct furent levées huyt cens treize aulnes de satin blanc, et pour les agueillettes
quinte cens neuf peaulx et demye de chiens. *Lors commença le monde attacher les chausses au pourpoinct, et non le pourpoinct aux chausses*” ([Gargantua, 60/22, emphasis added] [For his doublet were taken up eight hundred and thirteen ells of white satin, and for the points fifteen hundred and nine and a half dogskins. *Then people began to attach the hose to the doublet, and not the doublet to the hose*]. Gargantua, like Panurge, wears the more elaborate codpiece and doublet of the sixteenth century—where the protruding codpiece and hose underneath are attached to the doublet so that the codpiece can be removed for urination. Vicary remarks on this change: “Study of paintings and drawings indicate there was a major change in form of the padded, protruding codpiece. The first shape, found in Italian-Spanish portraits, was made of two oval pieces joined at center front which became an elongated padded flap attached to the long hose (1495, 1500, 1532 . . .)” (Vicary 9). Rabelais was clearly aware of changes in fashion brought about by the need to create larger, more elaborate codpieces, and he chose to comment on these changes repeatedly in his works. Rabelais’s narrator continues to advance the novelty of the protruding codpiece:

Pour la braguette feurent levées seize aulnes un quartier d’icelluy mesmes drap. Et fut la forme d’icelle comme d’un arc-boutant, bien estachée joyeusement à deux belles boucles d’or, que prenoient deux crochetz d’esmail, en un chascun desquelz estyoit enchassée un grosse esmeraude de la grosseur d’une pomme d’orange. ([Gargantua, 8, 60/22–23; emphasis added])

For the codpiece were taken up sixteen and a quarter ells of this same cloth. And the form of it was like a flying buttress, most merrily fastened with two beautiful gold buckles, caught up by two enamel hooks, in each of which was set a big emerald the size of an orange.

Rabelais appears to refer to codpieces “shaped into an upward and backward curved tube (similar to the mechanical French Curve),” a style popular in Germany, France, and England (Vicary, 9). Titian’s portrait of Charles V, Holbein’s portrait of Henry VIII, and Clouet’s portrait of François I all exhibit the codpiece with the backward curve. While there is some evidence that all three monarchs, Charles V, Henry VIII, and François I, suffered from syphilis, Gargantua seems to have escaped the disease, but fashion had already dictated the style for codpieces to
be worn by those who could afford the expense. Such is the narrator’s interest in the precise details of the codpiece, including the opening of the codpiece in blue damask, gold embroidery, diamonds, rubies, turquoises, and emeralds, that it suggests a cornucopia—“une corne d’abondance.” This symbol of fecundity amidst such abundant details on the codpiece leads the narrator to promise to write another book, *De la dignité des braguettes*, a book he claims in the prologue to *Gargantua* (38/3) to already have written (*Gargantua*, 8, 61/23). Where livery is concerned, either for Panurge or Gargantua, the codpiece takes center stage.

Similarly, the absence of a codpiece becomes a preoccupation in the *Tiers Livre*, when Panurge gives up his codpiece to wear a monk-like robe at the very time he sets out on his marriage quest. Panurge maintains that the codpiece is primarily a mark of military dress—to protect the soldier in battle. This point of view coincides with the idea that the new fashion in codpieces had originated with the soldiers: “By 1500, when Italian soldiers were depicted in oval padded codpieces that were not yet worn by noblemen, and 1535 when the larger, backward-curved, padded codpieces appear in portraits of noblemen, extreme padded, protruding codpieces were depicted in drawings of Germanic mercenary soldiers (1525)” (Vicary, 10). Pantagruel takes exception to Panurge’s assertion that the codpiece is the most essential piece of military wear: “Voulez-vous (dit Pantagruel) maintenir que la braguette est pièce première de harnois militaire? C’est doctrine moult paradoxe et nouvelle” (*Gargantua*, 8, 397) [“Do you mean,” said Pantagruel, “to maintain that the codpiece is the first piece of military harness? That’s a very paradoxical and novel doctrine”]. Pantagruel goes on to say that he thought spurs were more essential.

Panurge continues to advance his thesis on the necessity of the codpiece in protecting human sperm and thus the propagation of the human species, much as nature has provided protection for the reproductive organs of plants and animals. Returning to his thesis concerning the primacy of the codpiece in military wear, he cites verses from the *Chiabrena des pucelles* (1534) as the wife bids her husband not to forget to wear his codpiece to battle:

*Celle qui veid son mary tout armé,*
*Fors la braguette, aller à l’escarmouche,*
*Luy dist: “Amy, de paour qu’on ne vous touche,*
*Armez cela, qui est le plus aymé.”* (*Le Tiers Livre*, 8, 399/281)
Seeing her husband armed from tip to toe,
Save for the codpiece, heading for the fray,
One woman said: “To keep you safe today,
My love, protect the part I cherish so.”

For Pantagruel, it is Panurge’s failure to follow “commun usaige,” well-established custom, that displeases him: “Seulement me desplaist la nouvelleté et mespris du commun usaige” (Le Tiers Livre, 7, 395/278) [Only I don’t like novelty and disdain for common usage]. Pantagruel views his friend’s behavior as an aberration, an unexpected and disquieting change in behavior. For someone so fixed on maintaining his virility, Panurge abandons his “belle et magnifique braguette” for a dress or a monk’s robe—both of which suggest a lack of sexual staying power. Pantagruel has become accustomed to Panurge’s ornate codpiece, “en laquelle il souloit comme en l’ancre sacré constituer son dernier refuge contre tous naufrages d’adversité” (394/277) [in which, as a holy anchor, he was wont to constitute his last refuge against all shipwrecks of adversity]. Its absence marks what will be the exchange of predictable behavior for a period of disturbing disequilibrium of long duration as Panurge weighs marriage and fatherhood against his fear of being cuckolded. The codpiece is a talisman of the friendship that is based on generosity, goodwill, and affection. In removing it along with the livery that was given him by Pantagruel and that was a measure of Panurge’s fealty to his prince, he rejects this act of caritas—a gesture that Pantagruel finds disconcerting.

Elsewhere in Gargantua, as if to illustrate the ubiquity of the outbreak of syphilis in the general population, Rabelais’s narrator recounts Gargantua’s ingestion of the pilgrim, staff and all, with a leaf of salad. The pilgrim, in an attempt to test the unfamiliar geography of Gargantua’s mouth, taps a nerve under one of the giant’s teeth—causing great pain. Gargantua explores the painful area with a toothpick, with which he punctures a syphilitic chancre (“une bosse chancreuse”; Gargantua, ch. 38, 156/89) under the pilgrim’s codpiece. The episode proves providential for the pilgrim, since he had been suffering from the pain of the tumor since “they had passed Ancenis” (“depuis le temps qu’iz eurent passé Ancenys”; 156/89).

Moving on to Panurge’s dilemma in the Tiers Livre—his indecision as to whether he will marry—it can be seen that the fear of being cuckolded is linked to catching the pox. As he says, he has nothing against cuckolds but doesn’t want to be one: “J’ayme bien les coquz, et me semble gens de bien . . . mais pour mourir je ne le voudroys estre” (Le Tiers
Livre, 9, 400/282) [I like cuckolds perfectly well, and they seem like fine people to me . . . but for the life of me I wouldn’t want to be one]. At this point in the debate over whether to marry or not, Panurge suggests that he marry an honest woman—not one who might beat him or worse, give him the pox: “N’est-ce le mieux que je me associe quelque honneste et preude femme, qu’ainsi changer de jour en jour avecques continuel dangier de quelque coup de baston, ou de la vérolle pour le pire? (401/283) [Isn’t it better for me to take on with some good worthy woman, rather than change from day to day with continual danger of a beating or at the worst the pox?]. Yet he is the first to admit that he hasn’t pursued or desired virtuous women—and even these might beat him or cuckold him, “car femme de bien oncques ne me feut rien” (401/283) [for no decent women ever meant anything to me]. Panurge is stuck in his habits of pursuing women who are most likely to deceive him and hence, in the present climate, give him the pox.

It is the Quart Livre that is the most focused on medicine: the demeanor of the doctor, the doctor’s ability to tend to his own health, and the image of Christ, as reflected in Saint Luke, chapter 4:23, as the Christus medicus.\textsuperscript{18} The tone is set from the letter to Odet de Coligny, a letter that appears in the edition of 1552, but not in the first partial edition of 1548, in which Rabelais asked for his protection against the “calumniateurs” who attacked his works. In the letter, he describes the role of the physician as one member in a farce, where the sickness and the patient are the other two players (letter to Monseigneur Odet, cardinal de Chastillon, Le Quart Livre, 562). He cites Johannes Alexandrinus’s commentary on Hippocrates on the importance of the physician’s dressing so as not to offend or disturb the patient: “mais pour le gré du malade duquel je visite, auquel seul je veulx enièrement complaire, en rien ne l’offenser ne fascher” (563/422) [but for the taste of the patient I am visiting, whom alone I want to please entirely, not offend or vex him in any way]. Hippocrates, Rabelais states, extolled the virtue of bringing a cheerful face to the bedside of the sick person rather than a sad or severe mien. The expression of the physician will either upset or reassure the patient, and Rabelais credits Plato and Averrois with this opinion. The words of the physician to the patient must have a single goal: “c’est le resjouir sans offense de Dieu et ne le contrister en façon quelconques” (564/422) [that is to gladden him without offense to God and not to sadden him in any way whatever].\textsuperscript{19}

This letter prepares the way for Rabelais’s view of the physician’s role in the midst of a medical crisis—a philosophy that he describes in
the 1552 prologue to the *Quart Livre, Pantagruélisme:* “Vous entendez que c’est certaine gayeté d’esprit conficte en mespris des choses fortuites” ("Prologue de l’Auteur," 368/425) [You understand that that’s a certain gayety of spirit confected in disdain for fortuitous things]. The prologue opens with an address not to the “Beuveurs très illustres & Goutteux très précieux” of the prologue of the 1548 short edition of the *Quart Livre,* Gargantua and the *Tiers Livre,* but to the “Gens de bien, Dieu vous sauve et guard!” (568/425) [Good people, God save and guard you!]. The narrator puts off reference to chancres and syphilitics until much farther along in the prologue in order to inquire about the health of his readers. In turn, he maintains that he, thanks to his philosophy of *Pantagruélisme,* is “sain et dégourt, prest à boire” (568/425) [healthy, and sprightly, ready to drink].

The narrator’s own state of health—and here most readers would make the extra-textual connection between the narrator and Rabelais as physician—leads him into a citation that has both biblical and medical connections. He cites Saint Luke 4:23: “Médecin, o guériz toy-mesmes” (568/425) [Physician, heal thyself]. Not content to leave the authority to just the Bible, he cites the concordance between Saint Luke and other authorities: Euripides cited by Galen, Erasmus, and Tiraqueau: “Médecin est des aultres en effect; / Toutesfois est d’ulcères tout infect” (569/426) [Although he treats others to good effect, / His running sores attest his self-neglect]. For the sixteenth-century reader, the running sores of course evoke the pox. Rabelais cites the renowned physician of the second century bce, Asclepiades, to reinforce the previous authorities: “que médecin réputé ne feust, si malade avoit esté depuys le temps qu’il commença practiquer l’art jusques sa derniere vieillesse” (569/426) [that he should be reputed no doctor if he had ever been sick from the time he began to practice his craft until his final old age].

It is at this moment, having grounded his point of view in classical authorities, that he evokes the Augustinian concept of the Christus medicus in healing the faithful. Marjorie O’Rourke Boyle reminds us that this was also a treasured image of Erasmus, who when writing to Henry VIII to discourage him from an alliance with Charles V against France, advises Henry to favor the health of the body politic in seeking peace rather than war. Continuing to follow Erasmus’s thought, she remarks: “The Lord Jesus was a physician who by speaking expelled atrocious and inveterate diseases, even resurrecting the dead.”20 Embedded in this concept is the idea that Christ’s power surpasses all human craft and knowledge:
Si, par quelque désastre, s’est Santé de vos seigneuries émancipée, quelque part, dessus, dessoubz, davant, darière, à dextre, à senestre, dedans, dehors, loing ou près vos territoires qu’elle soit, la puissiez-vous incontinent avecques l’ayde du benoist Servateur rencontrer! (569/426)

If by some disaster Health has emancipated herself from your lordships, above, beneath, to the right, to the left, within, without, far from your territories or near them, wherever she may be, may you, with the help of the blessed Savior, promptly come upon her!

There follows a praise of health—and ample praise of André Tiraqueau and Henry II—for the role health plays in life: “Sans santé n’est la vie vivable” (“Without health life is not life, life is not livable”) he says, quoting Aristophanes (969).

The subject of health and moderate wishes eventually leads, after several intervening tales, to the health of the “goutteux” and to the narrator’s affection for them and hope that their health will be restored:

C’est goutteux, sus quoy je fonde mon espérance, et croy fermenten que, s’il plaist au bon Dieu, vous obtiendrez santé, veu que rien plus que santé pour le présent me demandez. Attendez encores un peu, avecques demie once de patience. (581/435)

That, gouties is what I base my hope on, and I firmly believe that, if the good God please, you will obtain health. Wait a little longer, with half an ounce of patience.

The appearance of the gouty ones does not appear without thematic precedent, especially in the double interpretation of “coingnée,” the hatchet lost by the woodcutter. Priapus attests that it has more than one meaning:

Je notay que ceste diction, coingnée, est équivoque à plusieurs choses. Elle signifie un certain instrument par le service duquel est fendu et couppé boys. Signifie aussi ... la femelle bien à pointct et souvent gimbretiltolletée, et veidz que tout bon compaignon appelloit sa guarse fille de joye: ma coingnée. Car, avecques cestuy ferrement (cela disoit exhibant son coingnouoir dodrental) ilz leur coignant. (576/431)

I noted that the term coingnée [modern cognée] is ambiguous, meaning several things. It means ... the female fully ripe and frequently copio-
copulated [gimbretiletolletée]; and I saw what each good fellow called his merry girlfriend 
*ma coignée*. For with this naked steel (this he said exhibiting his half-cubit knocker) they knock [them] up.

This is indeed the popular arena in which the pox is spread. Yet, with the narrator/physician’s hope that the gouty ones recover their health, the healing process can begin with the reading of the tales of the *Quart Livre de Pantagruel*: “Or, en bonne santé toussez un bon coup, beuvez en trois, secouez dehaiat vos aureilles, et vous oyyez dire merveilles du noble et bon Pantagruel” (582/435) [Now, in good health cough one good cough, drink three drinks, give your ears a cheery shake, and you shall hear wonders about the good and noble Pantagruel]. As in the tale of Panurge’s dispute with maistre Thaumaste mentioned earlier (Pantagruel 19/20), where Panurge advances his luck with his codpiece on the basis of his victory in the verbal and mental disputation, Priapus continually substitutes *mentula* for “memory”: “Et me soubvient (car j’ay mentule, voyre diz-je mémoire)” [And I remember (for I have a mentula, or rather I mean memory)]; “ô belle mentule, voire, diz-je mémoire!” [O lovely mentula, or rather memory!] (576–77/431). In Rabelais’s world, as Bakhtin has stated, mind and sex organ are often interchangeable. Reproduction is at the base of the survival of the species. As Panurge expounds in *Le Tiers Livre*, chapter 8: “La teste perdue ne perist que la personne: les couilles perdues périroit toute humaine nature” (399/281) [The head lost, perishes only the person, the balls lost, would perish all human nature]. It is understandable that it should be Priapus who reminds us of the essential nature of fertility in the perpetuation of the human species. Neither Rabelais nor the other physicians of the time were blind to the role that syphilis played in threatening fertility and the power of those infected to reproduce. The struggles of the royal families in Europe to produce healthy heirs was a reminder of the threat disease brought to successful reproduction. In her article “Bronzino’s London Allegory and the Art of Syphilis,” Margaret Healy comments that Erasmus was so concerned about the spread of syphilis and the decrease in fertility that he wrote four dialogues devoted to the topic. He “was calling—through the voices of his protagonists—for active measures to control it.”

It was not merely that a substantial portion of the population was not propagating the species because of vows of celibacy but also that non-celibate individuals who were engaged in wanton sexual practices put the entire population at risk. In a letter to the chancellor of Poland written
in 1525, Erasmus states, as cited by Healy: “What sickness has ever traversed every part of Europe, Africa, and Asia with equal speed? What clings more tenaciously? What repels more vigorously the art and care of physicians? What passes more easily by contagion to another? What brings more cruel tortures?”

Gargantua’s plea near the end of Le Tiers Livre that his son Pantagruel marry seems to reflect, in contrast to Panurge’s combination of unbridled lust and blind fear and indecision at the prospect of marriage, his concern for providing a healthy succession to the kingdom: “Je loue Dieu, filz très cher, qui vous conserve en désirs vertueux, et me plaist très bien que par vous soit le voyage perfait. Mais je vouldroys que pareillement vous vint en vouloir et désir vous marier” (Le Tiers Livre, 48, 537/398) [I praise God, my very dear son, for keeping you in virtuous desires, and I’m very pleased to have you complete this journey. But I’d like to see you too come to the will and desire to marry]. God has kept his son on the path of virtue. He makes it clear, as Pantagruel has done before him, that Panurge’s path is quite different. Panurge suffers from a problem of will: “Panurge s’est assez efforcé rompre les difficultez qui luy pouvoient estre un empeschement.” (538/398) [Panurge has striven enough to break down the difficulties that could have been an obstacle to him]. As I have said elsewhere, Panurge lacks the insight based on faith to put his fate in God’s hands, and to align his will with God’s will so that he is secure in his choice. Gargantua praises Pantagruel for letting divine will guide him. The son cannot imagine another path for him:

Pere très débonnaire (respondit Pantagruel), encore n’y avoyss-je pensé: de tout ce négocé, je m’en deportoyss sus vostre bonne volonté et paternel commendement. Plustost prie Dieu estre à vos piedz roydde mort en vostre desplaisir que, sans vostre plaisir, estre veu vif marié. (Le Tiers Livre, 48, 538/398)

“My very kind father,” replied Pantagruel. “I hadn’t yet given it a thought. I was referring all that business to your goodwill and paternal command. I pray to God rather to be seen stone dead for having displeased you than without your pleasure to be seen alive and married.”

The reader is pulled into the controversy of priests and monks interfering with the parents’ right to choose suitable spouses for their children. Evangelical reform, opposing views of the family, and the new threat of
an epidemic that puts reproduction and the rights of family succession at risk intersect as themes in the contrast between Pantagruel and Panurge in Rabelais’s work.

One of the early episodes of the *Quart Livre* pits the sheep merchant Dindenault against Panurge. Not tricked by Panurge’s disguise with the codpiece (“sans braguette”) and with his glasses on his bonnet (“avecques ses lunettes attachées au bonnet”), the merchant knows a cuckold when he sees one: “Voyez-là une belle médaille de Coqu” (*Le Quart Livre*, ch. 5, 595/447) [That’s a nice picture of a cuckold]. Panurge’s reply reinforces the lust that drives his thoughts about women; he challenges the merchant to imagine that he found Panurge seducing his wife. The portrait of Panurge “sacksackshakeshookbingbangasspassed” the respectable wife of the merchant is an act of pure bravado on Panurge’s part:

Je te demande (dist Panurge) si, par consentement et convenance de tous les éléments, j’avoys sacksackshakeshookenasspassed ta tant belle, tant advenente, tant honeste, tant preude femme, de mode que le roydde dieu des jardins Priapus, lequel icy habite en liberté, subjection forcluse de braguettes attachées, luy feust on corps demeuré, en tel désastre que jamais n’en sortiroit, éternellement y resteroit, sinon que tu le tirasses avecques les dens, que feroys-tu? (596/448)

“I ask you this,” said Panurge: “if by the consent and agreement of all the elements, I had sacksackshakeshookebangasspassed your ever so beautiful, ever so decent, ever so modest wife, to such effect that that stiff god of the gardens Priapus (who dwells here at liberty, subjection to codpieces being excluded) had remained stuck in her body so disastrously that it would never come out unless you pulled it out with your teeth, what would you do?”

Panurge’s provocation leads to Dindenault’s efforts to pull out his sword, but in an act worthy of farce, it sticks in the scabbard. Nonetheless, Panurge lacks the courage to take him on and runs for cover next to Pantagruel. Frère Jan, ironically the most virile and soldier-like of the company, would have done the merchant in. Panurge’s words do not match his actions on this journey, as evidenced by his taking cover during a major storm that besets the crew in chapter 18: Panurge “restoit acropy sus le tillac, tout affligé, tout meshaigné et à demy mort; invocqua tous les benoistz sainctz et sainctes à son ayde” (*Le Quart Livre*, ch. 18, 633/478)
remained squarring on deck, all upset, all beat, and half dead, invoked all
the blessed saints, men and women to his aid].

Panurge’s earlier adventures with women of unsavory character, and
his thoughts, which reinforce either his past actions or his lusty desires,
make him a figure at risk for contracting syphilis. Whether his abandon-
ment of the codpiece signals a sincere desire to find a suitable wife or a
loss of sexual prowess as a result of past actions, his search for the woman
of “semblable température” in order to produce offspring “dignes de
quelque monarchie transpontine” is unlikely to bear fruit (*Le Tiers Livre*,
ch. 31, 486/354). His friends, Pantagruel, Gargantua, Frère Jan, and Epis-
temon, see only too clearly their friend’s unsuitability for the institution
of marriage. Rabelais, like Erasmus, looks to the guidance that Pantagruel
receives from his father and from his young giant’s spiritual upbringing
to conserve the nobility and the monarchy from the ravages of the pox.
Evangelical humanism places the family in a central position for the social
and spiritual education of the child. For Rabelais, as for Erasmus, the
church plays a role in this regard, but the parents have a responsibility not
to be shirked in guiding the social and spiritual path of the offspring.24

The outbreak of syphilis in Europe at the end of the fifteenth century
affected every aspect of life and demanded changes in hygiene, medi-
cal treatment, clothing, the circulation of people, and the interactions
of the social classes. Rabelais’s work gives periodic glimpses of the ways in
which Europeans adapted to the presence and spread of this disease. As
a physician, Rabelais recorded the impact, but as a storyteller, he realized
the potential that the disease could serve as a metaphor for approaching
life and the treatment of disease. The pox leveled the social hierarchy in
attacking kings and peasants, learned and illiterate individuals alike. In
doing so, the disease took center stage in prompting calls for innovative
responses in every corner of society: on the battlefield, among pilgrims,
among students and learned clerks and professors, and among courtiers,
kings, and princes. The following chapter reveals how Erasmus took up
some of the same themes treated by Rabelais and focused on the impor-
tance of health within the family unit to ensure both the physical and spir-
itual well-being of future generations in Europe.