Syphilis

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Several factors in Erasmus’s life make his writing a lens through which to observe the pandemic of syphilis in the early part of the sixteenth century: he travelled widely in Europe to France, Switzerland, Italy, Germany, and the Low Countries; was in correspondence with physicians; and wrote about the spread of the disease he witnessed across the countries he visited. Indeed, the Colloquies return on numerous occasions to the rapid spread of the disease, the danger faced both by those stricken with the disease and those who live in proximity to diseased patient, and, finally, possible ways to stop the spread of the disease. As a relatively young man, Erasmus saw the introduction of the disease in Europe and watched as it reached a period of particular virulence before his death in 1536. Franz Bierlaire comments on the filiation between Erasmus’s Colloquies and the events of his time: “Everything that happens in his daily life goes into the mix.”

While the previous chapter of this book analyzed in detail the treatment that Rabelais gave the disease—both literally and as a metaphor—the present chapter will explore how Erasmus weaves the topic of syphilis into the much broader fabric of the Colloquies. In the process of the analysis, I will relate the topic of syphilis to several other subjects he treats: war and peace, territorial expansion along with the treatment of con-
queried peoples, religious controversy, and the relationship of husbands and wives as well as their roles in the upbringing of their children.

Barbara Cornell focuses her study of the *Colloquies* on those dialogues that present

Erasmus grappling with two important issues and relating them to a mutable text of identity in the early modern civil subject: the dangerous problems of women’s power and the instability of adolescence as the treacherous, limited period when the boy appropriates his sexual identity as the prerequisite to entering the civic realm.²

The topics of courtship and marriage, along with those colloquies that make up what she terms the “marriage group,” are central to the problems posed by the spread of syphilis, as shall be seen in Erasmus’s treatment of syphilis in “A Marriage in Name Only.” So, too, the risks that mothers ran in giving up their newborn infants to wet nurses, a topic of “The New Mother,” were known to Erasmus as well as to competent physicians and surgeons of the period in which syphilis began spreading across Europe.³ His focus on the role of knights and soldiers in spreading syphilis as they travelled from one site of conflict to another leads him to condemn parents who would sacrifice the well-being of their daughters for the sake of acquiring aristocratic titles. Syphilis is a scourge that threatens the family structure and the generation of healthy children, and the *Colloquies* bear witness to sound practices in preparing young people to assume the role of constructive participants in society. Both authors were observers of the rapid spread of the pox in the first part of the sixteenth century, and both explore the literal and figurative impact of the disease on European society.

Erasmus’s choice of the colloquy as a form to treat matters that are both fundamental to civil structure and yet intimate—high in importance but familiar in content—means that he can include within its format topics relating to the individual’s most personal nature: intimate relations, sexually transmitted diseases, bad breath, whoring, hygiene or lack thereof. Scholars of Erasmus agree that the genius of his colloquies is to combine elements of the Ciceronian, Socratic, and Lucianic models to allow the satirical aspect of the Lucianic model to enliven yet not diminish the persuasive elements inherent to the Ciceronian and Socratic models.⁴
As Eva Kushner so ably demonstrates, the *Colloquies* come to life because each participant in the dialogue speaks some truth. Such a strategy prevents the conversations from being a dull, pedagogical exercise. The irony provides a kind of suspense leading only eventually to the key concept against which the persistent antagonist has been arguing: “Grâce à l’ironie, un certain ‘suspense’ y guide le cheminement de l’idée privilégiée à travers l’épaisseur de la résistance de l’antagoniste” (Kushner, 20). If the views of each interlocutor have no ring of truth, then the conversation loses its dynamism.

For the purposes of this study, it is important to note Kushner’s observation that Erasmus views the dialogue, and in particular his *Colloquies*, as the recounting of a conversation leading to a solution, and she credits Rudolf Hirzel with this definition of the dialogue. The discussion of specific colloquies to follow takes into account that Erasmus evokes the disease in order to work out some manner of slowing down its disastrous course through Europe. By approaching the disease and its perils from the diverse points of view of the interlocutors, Erasmus seeks to offer some credible solutions. As Kushner states, he respects the aesthetic necessity of reconciling what is useful with what gives pleasure (Kushner, 21).

Let us turn now to individual colloquies in which Erasmus turns to reference the new epidemic, the French or Spanish pox, *grosse vérole*, or *bubas*, among other names. Barbara Cornell notes that the various colloquies were composed “over decades” from 1496 to 1529—precisely the time that physicians in Europe noted the outbreak of syphilis following the return of Columbus’s sailors to Europe and the crowds of soldiers and mercenaries in Italy at the time of France’s invasion of Italy. In his *Histoire de la syphilis: Son origine, son expansion*, Jeanselme notes that the witness whose testimony carries the most weight (“dont le témoignage a le plus de poids”) was Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés because he followed the outbreak from the Court of Spain, where he was attached to Don Juan, son of the Spanish monarchs, and was in contact with the companions of Admiral Christopher Columbus and then served in the Spanish army in Naples when Charles VIII invaded Naples. He comments that this was the first time that the disease had been observed in Italy. From there he was sent to the New World, where he could observe that the Indians were not as severely affected by *las bubas* or pox as the European soldiers and mercenaries had been in Italy.

In the order in which the various colloquies of Erasmus appear, “The Soldier and the Carthusian” (“*Militis et Cartusiani*)” is the first in which syphilis is mentioned. Erasmus is consistent with the medical and histori-
cal writings of the time in attributing the spread of the pox to the itiner-
ant lives of the soldiers. In her analysis of this particular dialogue, Eva
Kushner credits Erasmus with not immediately giving moral authority to
the Chartreux monk and so respecting at the beginning of the dialogue
the Ciceronian model where both voices stand on equal ground.  
At the outset and until just before the conclusion of the conversation, the Car-
thusian and the soldier argue with equal vehemence about the superior-
ity of their way of life. The Chartreux notes that he has a more pleasant
existence because he serves a good prior, while the soldier is slave to the
whims of a “barbarous officer” (CWE, 39: 333). The soldier finds fault
with the confined life of the Carthusian—an existence that restricts both
where he can go and what he can do. He pities the Carthusian for having
to shave his head, but the latter notes that a shaved head is more hygienic
and more convenient (CWE, 39: 330).

Through this verbal competition, the moral authority of the Carthu-
sian comes to light only toward the end of the colloquy, where he points
out the radically changed physical appearance of his friend, the soldier.
The scars caused by a splinter of a crossbow that hit him in the forehead
only add to the disfiguration caused by the ravages of the pox. “Well, I
notice some sort of ornaments on your chin, too,” observes the Carthu-
sian (CWE, 39: 334). Amidst the soldier’s attempts to discount the red
marks, the Carthusian says that he suspects that the soldier has had the
pox. The soldier admits that it is the third time he has had the disease
and this last time nearly lost his life (CWE, 39: 334). His friend notes his
stooping stature—the result of the joint problems known to be caused
by the pox—an observation confirmed by the soldier: “The disease con-
tracted the joints” (CWE, 39: 334).

Having worn his interlocutor down, the Carthusian brings the conver-
sation back to his friend’s metamorphosis from a horseman to “a creep-
ing creature instead of a centaur” (CWE, 39: 335). Erasmus underscores
the fall from human to subhuman species by the Latin phrase “animal
semi-reptile” (OO, I–3: 318). The Carthusian speculates that the pox has
taken on a fashionable aura because it is so widespread among the nobil-
ity. It is here that the Carthusian exerts his moral authority and where we
observe Erasmus’s opposition to war and the errant life of the soldier pre-
cisely because it places the innocent family of the infected soldier at great
risk. In response to the soldier’s statement that his illness and wounds are
the “chances of war,” the Carthusian responds: “And what prizes do you
bring home to your wife and children? Now you will infect with this dis-
ease those what ought to be most precious to you, and you yourself will
go through life a rotten corpse” (CWE, 39: 335). The monk turns from the physical symptoms of syphilis to the moral attack on the soldier’s soul caused by his wandering, whoring, and other unhealthy activities in the urban centers of Europe. He brings back a putrid, scabied soul to his wife and children. The Latin, rather than Craig Thompson’s translation, captures the metaphor for the scabied or ulcered soul: “Iam animam vero qualem reportas, quanta scabie putrem, quot vulneribus sauciam?” (OO, I–3: 319) [But what kind of soul will you bring back? Rotten with how many diseases? Torn by how many wounds? (CWE, 39: 335)]. Begging his friend to stop chiding him, the soldier requests food, a request granted through the charity of the priory.

The sanctity of the family and the welfare of the children are at the core of Erasmus’s colloquy. His words suggest that the soldier’s pox is not only transmittable to the wife through sexual relations but to the children, unborn or through nursing. I will later reflect on the dangers of sending out infants to be nursed by unhealthy wet nurses by exploring the dialogue “The New Mother.” Civil and religious strife and the ambition of monarchs give rise to the need for mercenary soldiers, and this message comes through in the colloquy above. The immediate implied solution is to put an end to war so that soldiers will not wander, and in so doing, infect their families with this new disease. As the Carthusian suggests, war reduces soldiers to animals (semi-reptiles) by transforming both body and soul to rot. The solution here is implicit rather than explicit. Franz Bierlaire comments on the increasing force with which Erasmus had been sounding the alarm in his works since the resumption of hostilities between Charles V and Francis I. In other colloquies, the message will be more direct and turns around the social structures.

If war leads to itinerant soldiers, the need for inns becomes all the more present. In the dialogue “Inns” (“Diversoria”), suggestions are made to indicate that inns are indeed a breeding place for the pox because of the familiar exchanges among guests in cramped quarters. “Laughing, jolly, sporting girls everywhere” (CWE, 39: 370) [puellae ridentes, lascivantes, lusitantes (OO, I–3: 334)] interact with the male guests at the inn. Erasmus uses the adjective “lascivantes” to describe the young women’s sporting behavior rather than Thompson’s less suggestive “jolly.” The innkeeper’s wives and daughters take liberties with their guests in talking with them “not as strangers” but “as with old familiar friends” (CWE 39: 370). The common air, with many people crowded in a single place, is conducive to contagion, and in particular, to passing on the pox. William, in talking with Bertulph, expounds on the dangers:
But nothing seems to be more dangerous than for so many persons to breathe the same warm air, especially when their bodies are relaxed and they’ve eaten together and stayed in the same place a good many hours. Quite apart from the belching of garlic, the breaking of wind, the stinking breaths, many persons suffer from hidden diseases, and every disease is contagious. Undoubtedly many have the Spanish or, as some call it, French pox, though it’s common to all countries. (CWE, 39: 372)

The solution here seems to be to avoid such common places and at the very least, change the sheets with greater frequency:

**BERTULPH:** Then everyone is shown to his nest. Actually a mere cubicle, since it contains only beds and nothing else you could use or steal.

**WILLIAM:** Is it clean?

**BERTULPH:** Like dinner: the linen washed perhaps six months before.

(CWE, 39: 375)

The mobile citizenry breaks down the social structure, with both mixing of socioeconomic classes and confusion of social behavior: strangers being treated as intimates, wanton behavior taking place between young women and guests whom they had just met at the inn. This confusion is added to by the mix of ethnic customs: German, French, Italian, and English (a hybrid of French and German customs, comments William; CWE, 39: 375).

“**The Young Man and the Harlot**” (“Adolescentis et Scorti”) sets in play a dialogue, somewhat like that of “**The Soldier and the Carthusian,**” in which Lucretia the harlot and Sophronius the young man converse on the price that Lucretia has paid for abandoning her real family—“father, mother, brothers, sisters, paternal and maternal aunts”—for life in the brothel, a place that would bring shame on her family (CWE, 39: 383). She counters his logic by stating: “Oh, no, I have exchanged my loved ones, to my profit, for instead of a few I now have many—of whom you are one. I’ve always looked upon you as a brother” (CWE, 39: 384). Sophronius entreats her to pay heed to Christ’s redemption and to save herself before the pox takes her: “And if you haven’t yet caught the new contagion called the Spanish pox [scabiem Hispanicam] you can’t long escape it” (CWE, 39: 384/OO, I–3: 341). He reasons that she has exchanged one form of servitude—to her family—for another: “You used to think obeying your mother burdensome, now you’re at the beck and call of an utterly repulsive bawd” (CWE, 39: 384). Recall the Carthusian’s similar
reproach to the soldier, when the former mentioned that the soldier must obey “a barbarous officer” while the monk follows the lead of a “good” prior (CWE, 39: 333).

Sophronius explains that he followed the advice of his confessor in Rome, who advised him: “Son, if you truly repent and change your way of life, I don’t care much about penance. But if you persist, lust itself will exact more than enough penance from you, even if the priest does not impose it. Look at me: blear-eyed, palsied, stooped” (CWE, 39: 385–86). The confessor assesses the damage done by the pox to the young man. The efficacy of the cure lies not in the pilgrimage to Rome but in the sincerity of the repentance and the depth of belief.

Impressed by the transformation of the young man from debauched to chastened and faithful, converted upon his visit to a confessor in Rome, Lucretia accepts his offer to support her while she chooses a more chaste path—either marriage or sacred vows or employment with “the family of some respectable housewife” (CWE, 39: 386). As in the outcome of “The Soldier and the Carthusian,” it takes a well-meaning act of charity to convince Lucretia to mend her wanton ways. By pointing out that there was more than one way—prostitution—to provide for herself, Sophronius offers a palette of choices that provide an honest way to survive. Youthful desire to escape the yoke of the family has led Lucretia to make a bad choice, one that will shorten her life and corrupt her soul. It takes but a modest and sincere act of charity to open her to more honest options.

Earlier in this chapter, I noted that Erasmus reacted harshly to wars of expansion and to the rapid spread of the pox that the frequent movement of military troops and the growth of military camps have caused. He denounced the damage done by the absence of the fathers and sons from their families and the subsequent infection brought back to the families by the soldiers. Marriage and family lie at the heart of Christian society for Erasmus in terms of forming children to assume their rightful place in the civil structure. As noted in the discussion of “The Soldier and the Carthusian,” the risks of disease and disability that come from war put the ones who are dearest to the soldier at greatest peril—in terms of both health and income (CWE, 39: 335). Erasmus begins the colloquy “The New Mother” with Eutrapelus congratulating Fabulla on the birth of her son, but he follows his congratulations by a long harangue on world conflict, covering the imprisonment of François I, the expansionism of Charles V, the hunger inflicted on the populations of Europe by the military strife, factionalism in religious orders, and controversy over the Eucharist (CWE, 39: 592).
World conflict between rulers and church figures is mirrored by conflict in the microcosm of the family—the role played by the mother in nursing her child or in giving her child to the wet nurse. Fabulla yields to the advice of friends “because they thought a person as young as I am should not be nursing” and so gives the baby to be suckled by a wet nurse (CWE, 39: 595). Eutrapelus argues in favor of nature: “But if nature gave you strength to conceive, undoubtedly it gave you strength to nurse, too” (CWE, 39: 595). He takes a line of logic that asks Fabulla if she would consent to have another called the mother of her child. She responds, “Not for the world!” Eutrapelus continues: “Then why are you willing to transfer more than half of the name of mother to some other woman?” (CWE, 9: 595). Eutrapelus points out that nature has all mothers care for their young—whether owls, lions, or vipers. To her reply that she is indeed her son’s sole mother, her interlocutor replies: “No, Fabulla, nature herself contradicts you on that score” (CWE, 39: 595).

It becomes clear that it is not only for reasons of nurturing but for reasons of health—wholesomeness—that Eutrapelus urges Fabulla to nurse her child herself rather than summon a wet nurse.

Or isn’t it a kind of exposure to hand over the tender infant, still red from its mother, drawing breath from its mother, crying for its mother’s care—a sound said to move even wild beasts—to a woman who perhaps has neither good health or good morals and who, finally, may be much more concerned about a bit of money than about your whole baby? (CWE, 39: 595–96)

To Fabulla’s response that “the woman chosen is of sound health,” Eutrapelus lets her know that the doctors think otherwise. The most wholesome and natural thing is for the child to drink its mother’s milk—what is familiar—related in blood and upbringing: “But assume that she’s equal to you in this respect, or better, if you like. Do you suppose it makes no difference whether a delicate infant drinks in congenial and familiar nourishment and is cherished by the now familiar warmth or is forced to get used to somebody else’s?” (CWE, 39: 596). The humanist plays on the contrast between “familiar” and “alien”/“strange” (“famiariem” as opposed to “alienis”; OO, I–3: 458).

Erasmus was more vehement than some in his belief that women should nurse their own children. He shared the opinion of surgeons who practiced in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries who recorded problems that came from using wet nurses whose health was in question. These
surgeons wrote in the vernacular and “had contact with young children in the course of their work, unlike physicians who tended at this time to lack experience with infants and left their care to midwives and surgeons.” Nicholas Terpstra comments, “Among children, the greatest dangers were to nursing infants, who could pick up the infection as they suckled.” It was the surgeons who most often treated cases of syphilis, and so they would have witnessed the communication of syphilis to the babies suckled by wet nurses infected with the disease. It was also true that returning soldiers, knights, or well-off urban professionals could infect their wives with the disease, and so these mothers would in turn infect their babies, who would then infect an innocent wet nurse with the pox. Eutrapelus seeks to counsel Fabulla to follow nature’s way in imparting her presumed healthy constitution to her newborn child—since any change from the accustomed presence of his mother may harm his well-being.

Eutrapelus suggests as well that the child absorbs the moral character as well as the wholesome body of the mother: “He needs that now familiar, recognized fluid which he has absorbed in her body and by which he grew strong. And for my part, I’m convinced that children’s characters are injured by the nature of the milk just as in fruits or plants the moisture of the soil changes the quality which it nourishes” (CWE, 39: 605; emphasis added). The virtuous presence of the mother will shape the honest character of the child in its early years. Valerie Fildes notes: “The belief that babies ingested the mental and physical characteristics of the woman or animal who fed them was still very strong, and was one reason for avoiding animal milks, except in an emergency” (Fildes, 73). This is a belief that persists a half century later, and is mentioned in Montaigne’s Essais, book 2, chapter 8, where he recounts seeing goats recognize the cry of the child they have suckled or the child refuse the milk of any but the goat who has suckled it.

In her treatment of the colloquy of “The New Mother,” Barbara Cornell comments on the established role of the mother in “her moulding duties, gently nurturing the child as is appropriate for the first years of life” (Cornell, 255). Erasmus’s condemnation, through the persona of Eutrapelus, of the practice of sending well-bred children to the wet nurse on the basis of hygiene as well as on the basis of wholesome and honest upbringing leads one to think of his contemporary, François Rabelais, a physician himself. When Gargamelle gives birth to Gargantua, the narrator suggests that because of his large size and healthy thirst, 17,913 cows were ordered from fertile villages in proximity to the author’s home in Chinon to provide him milk (“dix et sept mille neuf cents treze vaches de
Pautille et de Brehemond pour l’alaicter ordinairement”).

Given what has been said above about the preference for the mother’s nursing of the child and the reluctance to give animal milk to children lest they be deprived of the mother’s nurturing, why does Rabelais suggest that Gargantua was not nursed by his mother? Rabelais hedges his bets, perhaps a nod to the learned Erasmus, giving an alternative story that would have Gargamelle nurse her own child:

For it was impossible to find an adequate wet nurse in the whole countryside, considering the great quantity of milk required to feed him, although certain Scotist doctors have asserted that his mother nursed him and that she could draw from her breasts fourteen hundred and two casks and nine pipes of milk each time, which is not likely, and the proposition was declared mammalogically scandalous, offensive to pious ears, and smacking from afar of heresy.

The reader is left with the possibility that the prince was nursed by his mother, but knows that because of his large size and appetite, it is highly unlikely that Gargamelle actually had the capacity attributed to her. We might imagine the author—along with the readers—delighting in the grotesque imagery of Gargamelle’s enormous breasts and the prospect of the learned and censoring educators at the Sorbonne being themselves accused of heresy for inventing such a tall tale. After all, it was Noël Béda and his fellow theologians at the Sorbonne who condemned Erasmus’s Colloquies on May 16, 1526, a prelude to their attacks on Rabelais’s works in the next decade.

Nevertheless, Erasmus is definite in his admonition against using a wet nurse. He, as well as his correspondent Rabelais, would have been only too aware of the dangers of transmission of the pox through breast milk. The outbreak of syphilis in Europe posed a threat to the foundational social structure represented by the family. For this reason, Eutrapelus urges Fabulla to safeguard the health and well-being of her child by nursing him herself and giving up the practice of the wet nurse. To her justification that giving the child to a wet nurse is “common practice” (“vulgo fit”; OO, I–3: 417), her interlocutor reasons, “You name the worst authority on good behavior, Fabulla; sinning is common, gambling is common, visiting brothels is common; cheating, boozing, folly are common” (CWE, 39: 595). The solution to keeping a healthy baby—unless the mother herself is infected with the pox—is for the birth mother to nurse the child. Eutrapelus is unequivocal on the topic.
This brings me to a related colloquy, “A Marriage in Name Only” (“Ἀγαμός γάμος sive Coniugium Impar”). The two interlocutors, Petronius and Gabriel, vent their anger against the parents of Iphigenia, described as in the flower of youth, who has been wed to Pompilius Blenus, known for two things, “lies, and the pox that doesn’t yet have an exclusive name, since it goes by such a variety of them” (CWE, 40: 845). To accentuate the injustice of the marriage, Gabriel describes the contrast between the “lovely” bride: “My clever Petronius, you have said she was some goddess: altogether lovely” and her ill-suited bridegroom: “Meanwhile, enter our handsome groom: nose broke, one foot dragging after the other (but less gracefully than the Swiss fashion would be), scurvy hands, a breath that would knock you over, lifeless eyes, head bound up, bloody matter exuding from nose and ears” (CWE, 40: 845). What Gabriel describes are the classic symptoms of syphilis: the pain in the joints causing the leg to drag, the rashes, foul breath, dazed eyes, and pus oozing from nose and ears. An anonymous poem of the sixteenth century refers to pieces of the nose falling off as a result of the disease. The reader feels the anger of the two interlocutors against the parents for ignoring the well-being of their daughter for the sake of having a knight in the family.

**Gabriel:** To my way of thinking this treatment is more cruel than flinging her naked to the bears, or lions, or crocodiles. (CWE, 40: 845)

**Petronius:** If I had a one-eyed daughter who was lame in the bargain and as deformed as Homer’s Thersites was, and dowerless to boot, I would refuse a son-in-law of that sort. (CWE, 40: 846)

Gabriel goes on to describe the stages of syphilis: “Yet this plague is both more hideous and more harmful than every kind of leprosy for it progresses quickly, recurs over and over again, and often kills, while leprosy sometimes allows a man to live to a ripe old age” (CWE, 40: 846). Having dismissed as false the excuse that her parents were ignorant of the bridegroom’s infection, Gabriel runs down the list of the man’s vices: gaming, drinking, prodigality, lying. Setting up Gabriel to divulge the true reason for the parents’ pursuing the marriage, Petronius asks innocently: “Still, there must be something to recommend him to her parents.” Gabriel replies ironically: “Only the glorious title of knight” (CWE, 40: 846). Petronius points out the contradiction in that a knight is meant for the saddle, but this knight’s pox “scarcely allows him to sit in the saddle” (846).
The fault lies not with the girl but with the parents, whose responsibility it is to sanction a harmonious union. Like Rabelais and Marguerite de Navarre, Erasmus expounds through his interlocutors that the parents must pursue a suitable union for their children. Rabelais's Gargantua accepts his role in ensuring that his son, the prince Pantagruel, find a suitable mate; Marguerite de Navarre’s narrator Parlamente, as well as the protagonist of the twenty-first tale of the *Heptaméron* herself, Rolandine, blame both her father and the queen (in the mother’s absence) for failing to pursue a suitable marriage for Rolandine.  

Renier Leushuis comments that Erasmus viewed marriage not as *mysterium* but as *sacramentum*—as a “symbolic representation of the divine mysteries” (Leushuis, 1285). Since it is a symbolic representation of the *mysterium* and not a mystery itself, it is dissoluble (Leushuis, 1286). For Erasmus, “the sacrament was foremost a sign of *amicitia*, and the marital bond a mystical joining of two souls in one reminiscent of the classical male *philia*, an aspect that no theologian before him had stressed so aggressively” (1286). This bond of “harmonious friendship” is far from the image of Iphigenia’s unfortunate union with the pox-ridden knight.

Gabriel represents the Erasmian viewpoint that an unjust marriage can be annulled: “But if she married the baneful pest when he misrepresented himself as sound—if I were pope I’d annul this marriage even if it had been made with a thousand marriage contracts” (CWE, 40: 851). Petronius echoes the orthodox Catholic view: “On what pretext, since a marriage lawfully contracted cannot be annulled by mortal man?” (851). Gabriel responds with the example of legal annulment where a slave marries a maid under the pretext that he is a freeman (851). The issue is the survival of the marriage structure and the ability of the couple to procreate. Sexual relations between the syphilitic husband and Iphigenia would threaten both her health and the health of any unborn child. The only suitable remedy for her dilemma is to annul the marriage, a solution that partially repairs the injustice done her by the knight and her parents. In the immediate future, she is best to “cover her mouth with her hand when her husband kisses her and [to] sleep with him armed” (CWE, 40: 854). The long-term solution for the epidemic itself is to quarantine those infected by the pox. There follows a discussion of sacrificing the happiness of a few for the common good—something done in Italy during outbreaks of the plague (853). Both interlocutors have an awareness that the pox is more dangerous than the plague:
Yet how much less is the peril from plague than from the pox! Rarely does the plague affect close relatives; as a rule it spares the aged; and those it does attack it either releases quickly or returns to health stronger than ever. This disease is simply slow but sure death, or rather burial. Victims are wrapped like corpses in cloths and unguents. (CWE, 40: 853)

The colloquy ends with one of several ironic comments, one that underscores the Erasmian use of Lucian’s dialogical model and yet stresses the fatal blow dealt by the pox to the family structure. Petronius had been dispatched to write an epithalamium for the couple but will instead compose an epitaph for them. The ironic conclusion of the colloquy alerts the reader to the very serious threat posed by the epidemic in a time when religious and military conflict demands the mobilization of Europe’s population. With families willing to trade the health and happiness of their daughters for the acquisition of titles, the Erasmian concept of marriage as an affectionate and holy joining of minds and bodies, as he expounds in *The Praise of Marriage*, is imperiled: “For what is sweeter than living with a woman with whom you are most intimately joined not merely by the bonds of affection but by physical union as well.”22 In the colloquy “Coniugium” (“Marriage”), Eulalia states “a wife must take every precaution to be pleasing to her husband in sexual relations, in order that married love may be rekindled and renewed and any annoyance or boredom driven out of mind” (CWE, 39: 318). It is clear that both the mind and body are engaged in the marriage enterprise.

While the integrity of marriage is first and foremost the subject of this colloquy, Petronius and Gabriel come up with a few ways to try to fend off the pox. First, they suggest that only one’s personal barber should shave an individual; second, that one should wear the sort of mask worn by alchemists—with glasses to block the eyes and an opening over the mouth and nostrils to limit the intake of noxious air; third, that no one shall be both a barber and a surgeon; fourth, that only husbands and wives sleep in the same bed; and finally, back to the topic of inns mentioned earlier, that sheets be changed between guests (CWE, 40: 853). These are simple remedies that if adopted would greatly improve the standards of hygiene.

Discussion of the pox embraces a larger world picture than personal and communal hygiene. It is connected throughout the *Colloquies* with a broader picture of conflict in Europe and beyond. Erasmus and his interlocutors seem to acknowledge Charles V’s responsibility for expansionism and provocation of his neighbors, as will be recalled from Eutrapelus’s
comment that “Charles is preparing to extend the boundaries of his realm” (“The New Mother,” CWE, 39: 592). There seems to be sympathy for François I, detained in Spain by the Spanish, and hope that the rulers of Europe will come to a truce. Yet a second source of conflict comes from the churches and the parishioners in their care: “The peasants raise dangerous riots and are not swayed from their purpose, despite so many massacres. The commons are bent on anarchy; the church is shaken to its very foundations by menacing factions. On every side the seamless coat of Jesus is torn to shreds” (CWE, 39: 592). This comment, made so early in the evangelical reform, was echoed by Protestants and Catholics alike throughout the century as the atrocities committed in the name of religion multiplied.

In the colloquy “Ὑποδομονή” (“A Fish Diet”), there is a call from the Salt-Fishmonger for a truce. Peace is, in fact, according to Bierlaire, a major theme of not just this colloquy but of the Colloquies in general. Erasmus was obsessed with the theme of peace throughout his life: “Le thème de la paix, qui a hanté la conscience d’Érasme durant toute sa vie, est un des thèmes majeurs des Colloques, œuvre de sa vie” (Bierlaire, Les Colloques, 181). If the fishmonger were emperor, he would call for “agreement without delay with the king of France.” Were he emperor, he would try to create peace with the king of France and give him his liberty: “I grant you life and liberty. I accept you as an ally instead of an enemy” (CWE, 40: 688). The clemency would win over more friends than all the battles and conquests that have taken place.23 The butcher agrees: “Certainly France, nay the whole world, might thus be bound in friendship” (CWE, 40: 689). It is at this point that the butcher uses a metaphor that will become commonplace in the second half of the sixteenth century—the use of the syphilitic sore or ulcer, this new pandemic, as a metaphor for the civil and religious conflict plaguing Europe and spilling over into the New World. The butcher adds: “For if this sore is covered up by bad terms rather than truly healed, I fear that when the wound is opened on some occasion soon afterwards, the old poison may burst out with more harm than ever” (CWE, 40: 689).24 Remember that the Carthusian had accused the soldier of bringing back an ulcerated soul to his wife and family as a result of his frequenting prostitutes while away at war (CWE, 39:335). This ulcer threatens Europe’s body and soul.

In an oblique fashion, the interlocutors associate the subjects of peace and health. By pursuing peace for the people’s and Christ’s sake and by treating enemies with clemency, both Charles V and the Pope would create a model for the Christian world: “This would truly cure the prejudice
against the papal name and bring real and lasting glory” (CWE, 40: 689). The people of the world would no longer suffer at the hands of ambitious political and religious leaders. If religious leaders acted only for the “glory of Christ and the salvation of mankind,” world order would be restored, for there would be no need for factions nor for personal or national ambition (689). “The Fish Diet” targets laws having to do with diet and health, such as those mandating days of fasting and feasting, arguing that it is best to follow nature’s law—the same law that mothers should follow when caring for their babies. Conflict over dietary laws is among the laws likely to cause conflict and factionalism—especially regarding the interdiction of certain game and seafood. In the words of the fish monger: “Therefore I should think that the law which Nature herself also gave, and which is perpetual and inviolable, ought to be held more authoritative than the one that did not always exist and was later to be abrogated” (CWE, 40: 684). Nature trumps dietary laws imposed by religious sects, which are subject to change and human error.

Toward the end of the dialogue, the fishmonger expands the notion of nature to include the oversight of the health of mind and body: “Whatever Christ ordained, he ordained for the health of body and mind. Nor does any pope arrogate so much power to himself that by his regulations he would force anyone to risk his life; for example, by evening fasting a man gets insomnia and the insomnia causes delirium, he is a self-murderer, contrary both to the intention of the church and to the will of God” (CWE, 40: 712). Franz Bierlaire suggests that Erasmus engages civic-minded people to seek moderation that protects both liberty and the public good. Such moderation is to everyone’s advantage and favors not just those in power—whether princes or men of the cloth (Bierlaire, Érasme et ses Colloques, 90).

Christ looks to maintaining people’s physical and mental health, and so moderation in the observation of such laws should be encouraged to preserve the health of humankind.25 The excesses of war and expansionism—the first a consequence of the second—have led to the outbreak of the pox and to the spread of the dreaded disease. As Marjorie O’Rourke Boyle has pointed out, Erasmus makes a clear analogy between the human body and the body politic. She cites Erasmus’s letter to Henry VIII, on dedicating his Peraphrases in evangelium Lucae to the British monarch. In advising Henry VIII to abandon his alliance with Charles V against Francis I, Erasmus states: “The republic is a kind of body . . . Its pestilences and diseases are evil mores.”26 War was a “scourge to the already broken body of the Christian nations” (Boyle, 163). Although the disease has
already been unleashed in Europe, at least peace and clemency can restore Europe to its earlier order, where young men can resume their rightful place with their families rather than roaming across the countryside of Europe, where they pillage, plunder, and spread the pox. The social structure that is at the base of civic life—the family—will be restored and maintained so that the health of young men and their wives and children will not be threatened. That the recipe to restore world order issues from the mouths of a fishmonger and a butcher demonstrates Erasmus’s faith in the resilience of the human spirit and his Evangelical belief that common sense is not the product of erudition.27