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Comment le mal vient aux hommes

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«As catching as the plague, though not all so general» : Syphilis in Tudor and Stuart literature

In this paper I shall address the theme *Comment le mal vient aux hommes ?* in what might seem an unorthodox manner. Rather than consider any primarily metaphysical or theological issues involving *le mal*, I shall be pondering the rather more material, physical, or corporal issues affecting the theme, and its repercussions for Anglo-French relations in and around the work of Shakespeare.

For this approach, I take my cue from Michel Foucault who, throughout his *Folie et déraison* (1961), but also elsewhere, plays on the ambiguity of the French word «mal». The meaning of the word thus includes both (moral) «evil» (or «evil» in ethical terms), and «disease» in physical or mental terms. Since the association of «evil» with «madness» or «mental illness» has been sufficiently discussed — Foucault himself deals with the madness of Lady Macbeth and that of Lear — I shall focus on ethics, in relation to physical illness. In particular, I shall study the disease, relatively new to the early-moderns, known as syphilis, a topic on which Foucault has surprisingly little to say in his *History of Sexuality*, except, of course, by implication [1].

Much has been written on the subject of syphilis during the early-modern period. To the more recent contributions belong G.W. Bentley's *Shakespeare and the New Disease* (New York : Peter Lang, 1989), which concentrates on syphilis and satire in *Troilus and Cressida*, *Measure for Measure*, and *Timon of Athens* ; Stanislav Andreski's rather speculative but nevertheless intriguing study entitled *Syphilis, Puritanism and Witch Hunts*

which suggests a connection between the spread of syphilis during the early-modern period on the one hand, and the rise of Puritanism as well as the witch hunts on the other[2] ; and Johan Fabricius's *Syphilis in Shakespeare's England*. Fabricius discusses a vast range of English Renaissance examples, but he is also acutely aware of the immediate European context. In the final analysis, the greatest merit of Fabricius's study is its encyclopedic scope ; its only flaw an unnecessary attempt to establish that Shakespeare was a syphilitic himself[3].

Given the vast amount of critical attention already devoted to the disease, it is not my intention here to rewrite the history of «syphilisation» in England, to use a rather playful term generally thought to derive from James Joyce's *Ulysses* although it more likely derives from Lord Byron's *Don Juan*[4]. Instead, I wish to study how the phenomenon known as syphilis affected the Englishman's image of the French as the former first tried to come to terms with the new disease in the sixteenth century. In doing so, I do not wish to establish that stereotyping took place, but how. I wish to study the unfavourable image formation, or stereotyping that accompanied the arrival of the new disease in England by looking at the intellectual origins of this tendency to stereotype, as well as the intertextual network of allusions it produced in the writings of the period.

Before discussing the impact of syphilis on Tudor and Stuart literature, it seems worth noting that it was not the only new early-modern type of disease to vie with the more traditional plague. Also, once the infection spread, and the individual's immunity system was affected and resistance impaired, other diseases had a chance to assert themselves. As a consequence, historians and literary critics would have us believe that it is not always easy to distinguish syphilis from the other ailments. In his 1985 study of the bubonic plague, Paul Slack discusses the connections between the established epidemic and the so-called new diseases in early-modern society, and notes that :

> Faced with [...] a bewildering array of epidemic diseases, contemporaries [i.e., the early moderns] naturally had some difficulty in distinguishing between them. There was little appreciation that individual diseases were separable entities before 1600.[5]

Slack may not be altogether wrong, but he overstates the case. Among other things, this is indicated by Thomas Dekker's statement about syphilis, which I have made the title of this paper. Syphilis, Dekker stated in *Westward Ho !*, a play that was first produced in 1604, a play produced just after the exacting plague that even postponed the coronation of King James, is «As catching as the plague, though not all so general»[6]. A similar ability to distinguish

clearly may be noted in Thomas Middleton's *A Mad World My Masters*. Here Sir Bounteous Progress wants to know from the assumed doctor Penitent what the illness is that the Courtesan may be suffering from :

> *Sir Bounteous*. Hist, master doctor, a word, sir : hark, 'tis not the plague, is't ?
> *Penitent*. The plague, sir ? No.
> *Sir Bounteous*. Good.
> *Penitent*. [aside] He ne'er asks whether it be the pox or no, and of the twain that had been more likely. [7]

Slack's view about the indiscriminate appreciation of early-modern epidemics seems to rear its head also in the critical discourse on Renaissance drama. Here the purported difficulty of identification is certainly recognized [8]. On occasion, however, this obstacle would also seem to authorize the critic to conflate early-modern illnesses where convenient. As a result, existing historical distinctions are disregarded, and contemporary rhetorical traditions or habits are neglected in favour of, for example, a new poetics of the body. I am especially thinking here of a recent paper by Keir Elam, entitled «Reading Shakespeare's Bodies». In this contribution to *Alternative Shakespeares 2*, Elam discusses the Puritan opposition to the stage in terms of the pestilence discourse which may be discerned both in the Puritans' anti-theatrical writings and in Shakespeare's own work [9]. To conclude his argument, in which he has, up to that point, consistently drawn on clear-cut examples of the plague, Elam employs the assumed affiliation of the plague with syphilis, essentially to enable him to incorporate into his argument about pestilential poetics the famous syphilis speech of *Timon of Athens*. After wishing the prostitutes Phrynia and Timandra «A pox of wrinkles», Timon proceeds :

> Consumptions sow
> In hollow bones of man, strike their sharp shins,
> And mar men's spurring. Crack the lawyer's voice,
> That he may never more false title plead
> Nor sound his quillets shrilly. Hoar the flamen
> That scolds against the quality of flesh
> And not believes himself. Down with the nose,
> Down with it flat ; take the bridge quite away
> Of him that his particular to foresee
> Smells from the general weal. Make curledpate ruffians bald,
> And let the unscarred braggarts of the war
> Derive some pain from you. Plague all,
> That your activity may defeat and quell
> The source of all erection. [10]

Although the speech describes the various stages of syphilis from the onset of venereal disease to the moment of impotence, Shakespeare, to quote Elam, «like many of his contemporaries, including the Puritans [...] uses 'plague' here as a synonym for another deadly contagious disease, the pox» (158). A number of objections could be raised here. First, it is curious that a verb should be synonymous with a noun. More important, though, is the fact that, as early as 1600, a very accurate distinction was already being drawn between «pestilence» with its multitudes of «plagues» as they were called on the one hand, and, the «plague», or bubonic plague, on the other. As it reads in an anonymous sermon of 1600 :

> Pestilence meaneth [...] all manner of afflictions or calamities which cut and cancel the life of man, whether it be either in the deprivation of health for the weakening of the body, or in the loss of friends for the vexation of the mind, whether it be sword, fire, or famine, or whatsoever, all are the plagues of God. [...] Yet privately, for the particular understanding thereof, we do universally understand and comprehend by this word plague, a common and sudden mortality of men, and [...] a special disease, manifestly differing from all other diseases, not only for the speediness thereof in death, but also for the outrage thereof in those that feel the same.[11]

This anonymous sermon enables one to see that Elam equates «*the* plague» and «*a* plague». It may certainly be useful for the purpose of constructing a new poetics of the body to read Timon's use of the word «plague» to refer to «syphilis», but the procedure bypasses certain historical realities, as well as the semantic evidence within Shakespeare's own work. Shakespeare tends to avoid the conflation himself. «The plague» and «syphilis», when mentioned together in the plays, are, with near consistency, part of a rhetorical strategy, a strategy of profiling one disease against the other. This applies not only to the combination of the plague and syphilis, but also to the collocation of other diseases. In this context, one may recall that great syphilitic Falstaff in Shakespeare's proto-AIDS play entitled *HIV*. In a cursing mood that foreshadows the outburst of Timon, Falstaff exclaims : «A pox of this gout ! — or a gout of this pox !» (*2 Henry IV*, I.2.246). We find a comparable, parallel coupling of the bubonic plague and syphilis in Shakespeare, as in the opening scene of *The Tempest* in the Boatswain's insult of the royal party below deck with the words «A plague upon this howling !» (*The Tempest*, I.1.35). This immediately meets with Sebastian's : «A pox o' your throat,

you bawling, blasphemous, incharitable dog !» (*The Tempest*, I.1.39-40). Another example may be found in *Twelfth Night*. Here Sir Toby's introduction of the fencing rival to Sir Andrew, first leads to the latter's reply : «Pox on't, I'll not meddle with him» (*Twelfth Night*, III.4.372). But when Sir Toby informs him that the fencer will not be pacified, Sir Andrew wishes the other disease on his rival : «Plague on't, an I thought he had been valiant and so cunning in fence I'd have seen him damned ere I'd have challenged him» (III.4.275-77).

Especially in these last two examples, it is the essential dissimilarity (or «dissimilitude» to use Hobbes's term) which enables the rhetorical coupling of the plague and syphilis to be effected, not the difficulty in distinguishing between them. And to be inattentive to the mechanism at work here inevitably precludes our insight into what may well be one of the more important historical experiences to have shaped this rhetorical figure in Shakespeare. I am alluding to the curious, though all too real contemporary assumption that syphilis gave immunity from the bubonic plague. As Johannes Fabricius in his *Shakespeare and Syphilis* puts it :

> The most extraordinary misconception of syphilitic infection, shared by laymen and physicians alike, was the notion that syphilis rendered an infected person immune from the bubonic plague. The basic medical idea underlying this belief was that two diseased actions could not take place in the same constitution, not in the same individual at one time. Since diseased actions were incompatible with each other, two fevers, for example, could not together afflict one individual, nor could the pox and the plague be manifest in the same part at once. (138)

Thomas Middleton distinctly subscribes to this traditional belief in *The Blacke Booke* (1604). And we find something similar in *Newes from Gravesend* (1604), where Thomas Dekker records how syphilitic prostitutes and panders are unafraid of the plague, protected as they are with what he calls «French Amulets» (Fabricius, 139). Against the background of this popular belief, one might begin to see Shakespeare's rhetorical coupling of the diseases not as a case of semantic identification, but precisely as an articulation of «the mutual antagonism of bubonic plague and syphilis» (Fabricius, 138). The collocation of the plague and syphilis in Shakespeare captures the very difference between the diseases. It serves to profile the quarrel between the Boatswain and Sebastian in *The Tempest* : «A plague upon this howling !» — «A pox o' your throat». Or, alternatively, it

highlights the despair of Sir Andrew Aguecheeck who, on finding that to wish his opponent one disease does not stay the danger, reverts to the other type of malediction in the hope that it may prove more effective, or destructive. Like Sir Andrew in *Twelfth Night*, Timon at the end of his harangue reverts to the other disease — «Plague all» — in order to guarantee the success of his curses.

Given the fact that, without minimizing the difficulties, a fair distinction may be observed between the plague and syphilis, and that conflation on the grounds of analogy may mean gain as well as loss, I shall proceed to take a closer look at the latter disease and devote attention to the countless ways in which the early-moderns tried to identify it, its inherent qualities as well as its difference from other diseases. In other words, I shall be concentrating on the various ways in which Shakespeare and his contemporaries, distinguishing between «a bewildering array of epidemic diseases», tried to classify syphilis, and accommodated the disease by granting it a local habitation and a name.

Anyone who has looked into the topic of Renaissance syphilis will know that the disease was a thoroughly international affair. It was international not just because of its gigantic spread on either side of the Atlantic, but also in the various conjectures about its true origin. The Spanish physician Ruy Diaz de Isla (1462-1542), for example, saw Haiti as the true place of origin [12]. Ruy Diaz also explains how the French defined syphilis as the Pox of Naples, whereas the Italians and Neapolitans termed it the French disease, while in Portugal it was called the Castilian disease. We witness the beginning of a list here which would only grow in the course of the years. The natives of Portuguese India called syphilis the Portuguese disease, as did the Japanese, while the Turks labelled it the Christian or the French disease, and the Russians the Polish disease [13]. Curiously, no nation ever thought of calling syphilis «the English disease». This left an obvious vacancy in the international slander list of sexual perversions which, as we know, was only filled with the notion of «le vice Anglais» several centuries later.

One may indeed be flippant about the international scope of the syphilitic discourse, but there is a deeper, and also more serious logic beyond this rather innocent patriotic, pre-nationalist concern over purity and cleanliness, and the consequent gesture of projection. Thinking or speaking about illness and health, as Susan Sontag has noted, brings with it a strong tendency to employ the vocabulary of topography. And speaking of illness in particular often brings with it a practice of geographical displacement. Insightful in this respect is the opening section of Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor*, which is really a conceit of her own. In this opening section, Sontag speaks of the «kingdom of the well» and the «kingdom of the sick» [14]. And everyone, Sontag notes, holds «dual citizenship». «Although we all

prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place». In the course of our lives, Sontag suggests, we identify and recognize the stranger to ourselves, to modify the title of Julia Kristeva's study of the foreigner[15]. Finally, extending the geographical analogy to allow for the individual's perception of his or her illness, Sontag remarks that talking of such perceptions she will, by the same analogy, be dealing «not [with] real geography, but [with] stereotypes of national character» (3). In my discussion of the Englishman's geographical manipulation of the serpentine disease, of what John Hale calls the pervasive «displacement of responsibility» (*Civilization of Europe*, 556), my interest will be in how it affected stereotypes and the representation of the assumed national character of the French in English literature and Shakespeare in particular[16].

For that purpose, it is useful briefly to return to the catalogue of those nationalities branded as the harbinger of syphilis. A list like the one provided by Ruy Diaz might suggest that there was a clear-cut international attribution of origins. Nothing seems further from the truth. In early-modern English literature, the Neapolitans and the French are both listed as assumed culprits. Even in the work of single authors do we find multiple attributions. A typical example may be found in Thomas Middleton's *Anything for a Quiet Life*, where Ralph dislikes the plain term «pox» for being «no word of art», and instead proposes «*morbus Gallicus* or *Neapolitanus*» ; and in Thomas Heywood's Marseilles-based comedy *The Captives* it is actually noted how the disease of Naples has turned French[17]. But what can one expect when a shipload of prostitutes from Italy is shipwrecked on the French Mediterranean coast ?

Shakespeare, too, is one of the authors who traces syphilis to various different locations. In *Othello* (III.1.4) and in *Troilus and Cressida* (II.3.17), the disease is associated with Italy, and with Naples in particular. On other occasions, Shakespeare follows the newly revived climate theory. He avoids explicit reference to any specific nation, and attributes the venereal disease to the assumed meteorological conditions of the south, at least from the perspective of the English. In *Troilus and Cressida*, Thersites speaks of «the rotten diseases of the south» (V.1.17-18). Coriolanus wishes the «contagion of the south» on the Volsces (*Coriolanus*, I.5.1), and also elsewhere (II.3.28-32) the arrival of the disease is attributed to the climate :

> *2nd Citizen*. Which way do you judge my wit would fly ?
> *3rd Citizen*. Nay, your wit will not so soon out as another man's will, 'tis strongly wedged up in a blockhead. But if it were at liberty, 'twould sure southward.

> *2nd Citizen*. Why that way ?
> *3rd Citizen*. To lose itself in a fog where, being three parts melted away with rotten dews, the fourth would return for conscience' sake, to help to get thee a wife.
> *2nd Citizen*. You are never without your tricks.
>
> (*Coriolanus*, II.3.25-35)

One may wonder what motivates Shakespeare in his choice of location, particularly where the apparently undifferentiated south is concerned. One reason for the references to the south would seem to be the consideration that venereal disease in the Greek and Roman plays could not really be associated with the French because of the blatant anachronism that would be involved. But such considerations were not contemporary. The French would-be assassin named Pedro seems to fit naturally in the Roman setting of Thomas Lodge's *The Wounds of Civil War* (1588), and by a similar logic, syphilis rages as the «Neapolitan bone-ache» during the Trojan War in *Troilus and Cressida* (II.3.17). In *Pericles*, though, the malady is again a typically French phenomenon, personified by the frequenter of brothels named Veroles (after the phrase «Vérole de Naples», recorded as early as 1501) :

> *Boult*. But mistress, do you know the French knight that cowers i' the hams ?
> *Bawd*. Who, Monsieur Veroles ?
> *Boult*. Ay, he. He offered to cut a caper at the proclamation, but he made a groan at it, and swore he would see her tomorrow.
> *Bawd*. Well, well, as for him, he brought his disease hither. Here he does but repair it. I know he will come in our shadow to scatter his crowns of the sun. [18]

As the personification of the disease in the person of Veroles already suggests, in the majority of instances Shakespeare, like his English contemporaries, associates syphilis with the French, thus following at least the title of Girolamo Fracastorio's famous Latin syphilis treatise entitled *Syphilidis, seu Morbi Gallici* (1530) [19].

The role of the climate theory in creating the cluster of associations around France cannot be underestimated, because it is within this Classical discourse of climatological influences that contemporary assumptions about

the French origin of syphilis were first granted pseudo-scientific justification. The theory divided the known world into three climatological zones (hot, cold and temperate) and argued that the nature of the respective inhabitants of these zones might be read as a product of the climatological conditions.[20] For the English, the French belonged to the southern region. This relative South in the European climate theory was, among other things, associated with solar heat and, by extension, with physical heat, excitement, impatience, and anger. It applied to Greek women, but also to other southerners in general. As Jacques Agenas Ferrand put it in his *Erotomania* :

> It is observed, that the Easterne People pursue their desires, without either Moderation, or discretion ; yet in a kinde of base servile way. *Those that inhabit the Southerne parts, love with Impatience, Rage, and Fury* : those that inhabit the Westerne Countries are very industrious in their Love : and the Northern are very slowly moved or touched with Love[21].

In his *Cosmography*, Peter Heyleyn remarked on the «hot and sulphury» kisses of French women as «the prologue to their lusts», being different from the «chaste and innocent kisses» of English women (Zacharasiewicz, 251). Further, it was thought that the «hot and scalding aire» of France would adversely affect women's skin (252). What a difference with the English climate, as described in Jonson's *Masque of Blackness*, where the speaker, Æthiopia, invites the southerners to the shore of Britannia :

> Invite them boldly to the shore,
> Their beauties shall be scorched no more ;
> This sun is temperate, and refines
> All things on which his radiance shines[22].

Essentially, the climate theory was a pseudo-science, but a science nevertheless, and as a science it tried to steer clear of any moral or other value judgements about the respective inhabitants of the zones. As Heyleyn put it in his *Full Relation* :

> The temperature of the soyle and air, together with the influences of the heavenly bodies, occasion that variety of temper and affections in all different Nations, *which can be no reproach unto them, when no corruption of manners, no vice in matter of morality is charged upon them.*

(Zacharasiewicz, 253)

But «reproach» was the rule rather that the exception, and the same may be said about the charges levelled against the various foreign others. The association of the southern climatological heat with the physical and natural heat, and ultimately with the dreaded venereal disease experienced in turn, as heat, was too obvious to miss. In fact, even Heyleyn himself runs the gamut from temperature, via temperament, to censure. Explicitly, though shamelessly generalizing, Heyleyn described the French thus : «their complexion [is] generally hot and moist, which makes them very subject to the heats of lust, and easily inclinable unto those diseases which are concomitants thereof» (Zacharasiewicz, 252). Here we see how the notion of climate (of physical nature) is applied to the idea of the nation, and by extension to the delineation of the nature of that nation's inhabitants (which is believed to manifest itself in sexual heat and venereal disease).

On the basis of these processes one might, with some justification, conclude that if syphilis was a harmful disease to man, the very attempt to give it a local habitation and to lodge it in the assumed character set up of the French was many times more detrimental. It is not through the disease known as syphilis, but through the early-modern process of allocating this particular malady, that the mind is focused on the way in which *le mal vient aux hommes*.

And this is not all. Once the climate theory had laid the foundations, and had pre-scripted the discourse with a French bias, a multitude of associations and explanations proliferated, continually supported by the allegedly scientific tenets of the same climate theory. These associations with the French national character started to pervade the broader Anglo-French discourse, so much so that from our present vantage point it is difficult indeed, if not altogether impossible, to establish where its influence ended.

To begin with, in the wake of defining the syphilitic disease as of French origin, a host of other traditional symptoms, presumably because these could assert themselves in the case of a higher immune deficiency level, were «Frenchified» accordingly. As by an epidemic, the literature became impregnated with phrases including «French pocks», «French scabs», «French itches», «French measles», «the French canker», and the «French consumption». Of course, we are also witnessing here a special process of euphemization. Not medical, but no less euphemistic were expressions for the disease such as «the French — *O justus justa justum !*» and «the French *et cetera*»[23].

However, the disease was also grafted onto the stereotypical view of the French as a nation given to manners, etiquette, and good breeding. Thus, in the early anonymous broadsheet entitled *A Mirror for Magistrates of Cities*

(1584), syphilis is referred to as the «French welcome» [24]. On one level, of course, the idea of alluding to the much-dreaded disease as a kind of welcome or salutation was ironic. But the phrase also served to describe the syphilitic's tendency to bend over forward for obvious reasons, like Shakespeare's Monsieur Veroles in *Pericles* [25]. A similar connection occurs in *Romeo and Juliet* where Mercutio, corrupting the linguistic purity of the English language, greets the Italian «Signor» Romeo in French to comment on the latter's foreign-style breeches : «Signor Romeo, bonjour. There's a French salutation to your French slop». Via a slight detour, the allusion to the French language, the greeting in French, and French sartorial manners, the dialogue leads to the wordplay on venereal disease :

> *Merc*. Signor Romeo, bonjour. There's a French salutation to your French slop. You gave us the counterfeit fairly last night.
> *Rom*. Good morrow to you both. What counterfeit did I give you ?
> *Merc*. The slip, sir, the slip. Can you not conceive ?
> *Rom*. Pardon, good Mercutio. My business was great, and in such a case as mine a man may strain courtesy.
> *Merc*. That's as much as to say such a case as yours constrains a man to bow in the hams.
> *Rom*. Meaning to curtsy.
> *Merc*. Thou hast most kindly hit it.
> *Rom*. A most courteous exposition.
> *Merc*. Nay, I am the very pink of courtesy.
>
> (*Romeo and Juliet*, II.3.41-54)

There is an unmistakable connection here with Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher's *The Double Marriage* where the disease is called the «French cringe» [26].

On another level, the idea of referring simultaneously to the disease and to forms of courtesy (like the stereotypical «French salutation» [27]) sprang from the common fear that the disease might be contracted through kissing. This explains why Biancha in Thomas Middleton's *Women Beware Women* speaks of the disease in connection with the «French courtesy» [28]. And it would appear that Ben Jonson in *The Magnetick Lady* alludes to this very association when he ambiguously notes that France is «The very seed-plot of all courtesies» [29].

But the disease was not just seen in conjunction with manners and etiquette. Also the beastly lack of manners and etiquette was associated with the disease. This is how we ought to assess animal allusions, as in the notion of the «French fly» leaving marks on the skin, and in the phrase «French mole», referring to the disease that heaved up the sufferer's hair in the way the blind animal ruins cricket grounds. It was only one step towards calling syphilis the «French cannibal» (in John Cooke, *Greene's Tu Quoque*), an epithet that may derive its origin from the belief, also found in Francis Bacon, that at the siege of Naples in the 1490s a number of sinful merchants had sold the flesh of people killed in Barbary, thus causing, among others, the besieging French to be infected with the disease (Fabricius, 15).

With this broad network of allusions, with everyday intercourse (ranging from etiquette and manners to cannibalism) thus soiled by the French disease (and I have not yet touched on the use of French expressions or French loan words in English as an act of undermining English linguistic purity [30]), it is extremely difficult to establish where such collective associations ended. Anyone acquainted with English Renaissance literature will be familiar with the notion of the «French crown». It is generally said to refer to a coin, but also to the head without hair — marking the second stage of syphilis, also known as *alopecia* — or the head covered with tubercles about the forehead and temples and behind the ears, in the form of a crown, that other mark of the second stage of the disease known as *le chapelet*. But given this triple pun on the coin, what may we infer about the situation in Shakespeare's history plays where English kings desire the crown of France ? When soldier Pistol, after the bloody Battle of Agincourt, plans to return home to England where «Nell» has died «I' th' spital of a malady of France» (V.1.77-78), we are entitled, I believe, to read a degree of irony into that observation. The audience have just been made to sympathize with the battlefield dead, and still have the *Te Deum* and *Laudamus* ringing in their ears. At this juncture it is difficult indeed to empathize with the unheroic consequences of a lethal case of syphilis. But are we supposed to discern a note of irony too in *The First Part of Henry VI* when Joan of Arc makes the Duke of Burgundy acknowledge the havoc that has been wrought on their country with the words : «See, see, the pining malady of France» (III.7.49) ?

I am aware that a detailed description of the imaginative and verbal effects of the disease that was new to Europe might create a rather gloomy impression. To counter the gloom, one could argue that instances occur in the literature of authors who openly criticize their contemporaries' blatant tendency to heap the blame on the country across the Channel. They do so in an attempt to implicate the English and to accuse the nation of projecting its own licentiousness onto the French. Fabricius discusses this issue at some length, and has a considerable number of examples. According to Robert

Greene the disease «lepte from *Naples* into *Fraunce* and from *Fraunce* into the bowels of *Englande*». Greene, himself a fatal syphilitic, is also one of the earliest authors to question the stereotype if not the role of France as a participant in the game : «they say the Poxe came from *Naples*, some from *Spaine*, some from *France*, but whersoeuer it first grew, it is surely now rooted in *England*». He argues that «*Morbus Anglicus*» might be a more accurate phrase than «*Morbus Gallicus*» (232). Ben Jonson in *Every Man out of His Humour* follows suit when Carlo Buffone responds to the phrase «French pox» with the words : «The *French* poxe ! our poxe. S'blood we haue 'hem in as good forme as they, man : what ?» [31]. Similarly, in *A Prooved Practice for All Young Chirurgians* (1588), William Clowes noted : «This I will say that the disease it selfe was neuer in mine opinion more ryfe among the *Indians*, *Neapolitans*, or in *Fraunce*, or *Spayne*, then it is at this day in the realme of *England*» (Fabricius, 108). Utterances such as these certainly seem to bring a welcome touch of self-criticism to the English discourse of syphilis, but anyone familiar with Renaissance stereotyping must acknowledge that what we are witnessing is a satirical strategy of inversion that had few if any long-term consequences. These are short-lived surprise tactics : polarity is maintained, but inverted, and any sense of continuity between the two facile extremes is illusory. These remarks capture a flicker of discontent, but they are too brief truly to shed light on the structure of stereotypes, or effectively to dislodge them. Does not a closer look at these examples reveal that in none of the cases where England and the English are the butt of the attack, is France ever entirely exonerated ? These examples signal the English act of distortion and misrepresentation, but they also sustain it. France remains the place from where *le mal vient aux hommes et aux femmes*.

It is a strategy that more stereotypes, also for other nationals, undergo in the course of the years, like Dutch dipsomania which was climatologically considered to be the vice which characterized the inhabitants of the east and the north, a vice which distinguished them from that appertaining to the inhabitants of the south and west, from the lust that induces syphilis. As we read in Goodall's *Tryall of Travell* :

> The west, and southern soyles to lust runn madd,
> The East, and north, in drunkenness as bad.
>
> (Zacharasiewicz, 186)

Although the Germanic races were considered to be dipsomaniacs — and the dramatic literature of the period provides ample material to support this view — Dekker on several occasions noted that «drunkennes, which was once the

Dutchmans head-ake, is now become the Englishmans»[32]. Stephen Gosson, too, belongs to this tradition. In his *Schoole of Abuse*, for example, he argued that the English had «robbed [...] Dutchland of quaffing»[33]. In a sense, the strategy that we see at work seems enlightened, but in reality it is a facile one, as becomes clear when in the same section of *The Schoole of Abuse* we find Gosson, turning a rhetorical gesture into a habit, accusing the English of robbing «Greece of Gluttony, Italy of wantonnesse, Spaine of Pride» as well as «Fraunce of deceite»[34].

To the present day, the medical world is still divided over the true origin of syphilis (Fabricius, 5). The emergence of the disease in 1493, a year after the discovery of America, strongly suggests a transatlantic origin, supportive of the so-called New World Theory. But there is also the Unitarian or African theory which holds that it originated in Africa, in ancient times, only to mutate and become particularly virulent around the turn of the fifteenth century. Against the background of this continuing debate, the early-modern English myth-making may be excused, but only to an extent. After all, the English response was not the only one, and others were more considerate and charitable. The Germans, for example, who also believed that the French had brought the disease across the Alps from Naples, had printed plague prayers to the French martyr St. Denis. The French martyr was adopted as the protector of German syphilitics because it was assumed that he had already saved so many believing Frenchmen (18). So there were obvious alternatives to the English strategy of projection.

If, to speak with Falstaff, I may be accused today of having turned diseases to commodity, I hope I have also demonstrated that despite the benefit that may be gained from conflating early-modern diseases, one runs the risk of (temporarily) effacing distinctions that are no less consequential for our appreciation of the literature of our period. In the final analysis, it would appear, there will always be a tug of war between the new poetics that Elam outlines with such distinction, and the historicizing objective that he himself simultaneously strives to meet.

By concentrating on the early-modern English response to syphilis, I have tried to outline an independent discourse characterized by the associative formation of interrelations into a web of assumptions that seem internally to cohere, although its relation to the world that triggered them is tenuous at best. Defined in this way, the rather harmless pre-nationalist syphilitic discourse of the early-modern period may fruitfully be seen not only as an obsession with pollution and purity of the type that was to assume such terrifying proportions in the nationalist and fascist agendas of later centuries, but also as the embryonic form of a preoccupation that currently features as AIDS in the party programme of the extreme right[35]. Today still, it is not the

disease that counts so much as the ideas about that disease, ideas which may cohere into an imaginative model that looks particularly convincing, and therefore holds a rather dangerous appeal.

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NOTES

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[1] See especially Michel Foucault, «The Cultivation of the Self», in *«The Care of the Self» : The History of Sexuality*, Volume 3, translated from the French by Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth : Penguin Books, 1986), 39-68.

[2] Stanislav Andreski, *Syphilis, Puritanism and Witch Hunts : Historical Explanations in the Light of Medicine and Psychoanalysis with a Forecast about Aids* (Houndmills : Macmillan, 1989).

[3] Johannes Fabricius, *Syphilis in Shakespeare's England* (London and Bristol, PA : Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1994). I am heavily indebted to this exhaustive study. Another study of interest is Claude Quetel, *Le mal de Naples : Histoire de la syphilis* (Paris : Éditions Seghers, 1986), translated as *History of Syphilis* by Judith Braddock and Brian Pike (Baltimore : Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990). For a discussion of the theme within the broader context of purity and anxiety, see Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger : An Analysis of the Concept of Pollution and Taboo* (New York : Routledge, 1991) ; Valerie Traub, *Desire and Anxiety : Circulations of Sexuality in Shakespearean Drama* (London and New York : Routledge, 1992), 71-87 ; and *La pureté : Quête d'absolu au péril de l'humain*, ed. Sylvain Matton, Éditions Autrement, Série Morales 13 (Paris : Éditions Autrement, 1993).

[4] See James Joyce, *Ulysses*, ed. Hans Walter Gabler *et al.* (New York : Vintage, 1986), 12.1197 ; and Lord Byron, *Don Juan* :

> 'Tis said the great [pox] came from America ;
> Perhaps it may set out on its return.
> The population there so spreads, they say
> 'Tis grown high time to thin it in its turn
> With war or plague or famine, any way,
> So that civilisation they may learn.
> And which in ravage the more loathsome evil is —
> Their real lues or our pseudosyphilis ?

Lord Byron : Don Juan, eds. T. G. Steffan, E. Steffan, and W. W. Pratt (Harmondsworth : Penguin Books, 1973), Canto I, stanza 131.

[5] Paul Slack, *The Impact of the Plague in Tudor and Stuart England* (London : Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 25.

[6] Thomas Dekker, *The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker*, ed. Fredson Bowers, 4 vols. (Cambridge : Cambridge UP, 1953-1961), II : IV.1.83-84.

[7] *The Selected Plays of Thomas Middleton*, ed. David L. Frost (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1978), III.2.31-36.

[8] An exemplary analysis of the problems is provided in Leeds Barroll, *Politics, Plague, and Shakespeare's Theater : The Stuart Years* (Ithaca, NY, and London : Cornell University Press, 1991), 73-83.

[9] Keir Elam, «'In what chapter of his bosom ?' : Reading Shakespeare's Bodies», in *Alternative Shakespeare*, Volume Two, ed. Terence Hawkes (New York and London : Routledge, 1996), 140-63.

[10] William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*, ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1988), IV.3.151-64. All references to the works of Shakespeare will be to this edition.

[11] *Sermon on Plague*, quoted in Paul Slack, *The Impact of the Plague*, 3. One may recall Gosson's «God is iust, his bow is bent & his arrowe drawen, to send you a plague, if you staye too long»,

in E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, 4 vols. (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1923), IV.219.

[12] In his *Treatise of the Serpentine Disease* (written between 1510 and 1521), however, he also draws the explicit association with his own countrymen, the Spaniards.

[13] Fabricius, 7 ; and John Hale, *The Civilization of Europe in the Renaissance* (1993. Rpt. New York : Atheneum, 1994), 554.

[14] Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (1978. Rpt. New York : Vintage Books, 1979), 3.

[15] Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York : Columbia University Press, 1991).

[16] The «displacement of responsibility» also took place on a smaller, local scale. The early-modern Londoner also had a strategy of shirking the blame, by identifying the disease with the activities on the south bank of the river Thames. With reference to the brothels in the Bankside suburb, under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Winchester, the term Winchester Goose (or a «goose of Winchester» as it is called in *Troilus and Cressida*) gradually came to stand for a syphilitic chancre, or, for a sufferer from the disease, or, for a prostitute carrying it (see E. A. M. Colman, *The Dramatic Use of Bawdy in Shakespeare*, London : Longman, 1974, *sv* «Winchester Goose»). By extension, to contract the disease from a prostitute was to be hit by the Winchester Goose (See Edward A. Armstrong, «The Unsavoury Goose», in his *Shakespeare's Imagination : A Study of the Psychology of Association and Inspiration* (Lincoln : University of Nebraska Press, 1963), 57-65).

The proximity of the brothels and the popular theatres on the South Bank, however, brought the disease back home to the playwrights. It is Jonson who, in connection with the fire at the «the *Globe*, the Glory of the *Banke*», reports on the way in which the Puritans considered that this conflagration was really the material eruption of the syphilitic fire originally ignited by the prostitutes under the Bishop of Winchester, or rather under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Winchester :

> The Brethren, they streight nois'd it out for Newes,
> 'Twas verily some Relique of the Stewes :

And this a Sparkle of that fire let loose
    That was rak'd up in the Winchestrian Goose
Bred on the *Banck*, in time of Poperie,
    When *Venus* there maintain'd the Misterie.

Ben Jonson, «An Execration upon *Vulcan*», in *The Vnderwood*, in *Ben Jonson*, ed. C. H. Herford, and Percy and Evelyn Simpson, 11 vols. (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1925-52), 8 (1947), p. 208-209, lines 132 and 139-44.

[17] See, respectively, *The Works of Thomas Middleton*, ed. A. H. Bullen (London, 1885-86), V.282 ; and Thomas Heywood, *The Captives*, ed. Arthur Brown, The Malone Society Reprints (Oxford : Oxford UP, 1953), line 2829.

[18] *Pericles*, scene 16, lines 100-108. No less symbolic than the French name «Veroles» for a syphilitic is the ancestry of the diseased knight in Beaumont's *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*. He is, by birth, a Londoner, but his «ancestors / Were Frenchmen all». Part of the image is, therefore, that his bones ache. See Francis Beaumont, *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, ed. John Doebler, Regents Renaissance Drama Series (London : Edward Arnold, 1967), 3.392-403.

[19] See Geoffrey Eatough, *Fracastoro's «Syphilis» : Introduction, Text, Translations and Notes with a Computer-generated Word Index*, Classical and Medieval Texts, Papers and Monographs, 12 (Liverpool : Francis Cairns, 1984). The attribution of the origin of the disease to the French is certainly not as conspicuous in the poem itself as it is in the famous title of the poem.

[20] The standard work on the climate theory and English Renaissance literature continues to be Waldemar Zacharasiewicz, *Die Klimatheorie in der englischen Literatur und Literaturkritik von der Mitte des 16. bis zum frühen 18. Jahrhundert*, Wiener Beiträge zur englischen Philologie, n°77 (Vienna : Wilhelm Braumüller, 1977).

[21] Quoted in Waldemar Zacharasiewicz*op. cit*., 334. See also Louis van Delft, «Caractères des nations et 'mélancolie érotique' : Quatre nations d'Europe devant la 'maladie d'amour'», in

L'Europe : Reflects littéraires, eds. Colette Astier and Claude de Grève (Paris : Klincksieck, 1993), 67-74.

[22] Ben Jonson, *The Masque of Blackness*, in *Court Masques : Jacobean and Caroline Entertainments, 1605-1640*, ed. David Lindley (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1995), lines 233-36.

[23] John Marston, *The Dutch Courtesan*, ed. M. L. Wine, Regents Renaissance Drama Series (London : Edward Arnold, 1965), I.1.118 ; *Englishmen for My Money, or A Woman Will Have Her Will, by William Haughton, 1616*, The Tudor Facsimile Texts (1911. Rpt. New York, 1970), sig. D2^{r}.

[24] Gamini Salgado, *The Elizabethan Underworld* (London : Book Club Associates, 1977), 52.

[25] Also in the anonymous *First Part of Hieronimo*, «bending in the hams» is taken as a combined sign of courtesy and of the allegedly French disease. Thomas Kyd, *[«The Spanish Comedy», or] «The First Part of Hieronimo» and «The Spanish Tragedy» [or «Hieronimo is Mad Again»]*, ed. Andrew S. Cairncross, Regents Renaissance Drama Series (London : Edward Arnold, 1967), scene 6.82-85.

[26] *The Works of Beaumont and Fletcher*, ed. Alexander Dyce, 11 vols. (London, 1843-45), VI.1.2 (p. 324).

[27] *The Faire Maid of the Exchange*, in *The Dramatic Works of Thomas Heywood*, ed. R. H. Shepherd, 6 vols. (1874. Rpt. New York : Russell & Russell, 1964), II.28.

[28] Thomas Middleton, *Women Beware Women*, ed. J. R. Mulryne, The Revels Plays (London : Methuen, 1975), III.2.83.

[29] See Ben Jonson, VI (1954), III.5.27.

[30] A rewarding text is Mercutio's dialogue with Romeo above, or John Taylor's «The Whore», identified by Fabricius in *Syphilis in Shakespeare's England* :

> But leauing *Latine*, eu'ry trading *wench*
> Hath much more understanding of the *French*.
> If shee hath lern'd great P, O Per se O,
> She'le quickly know *De morbo Gallico*.

John Taylor, *The Works of John Taylor the Water Poet Comprised in the Folio Edition of 1630* (London : Scolar Press, 1973), 106.

[31] *Ben Jonson*, edited by C. H. Herford and P. and E. Simpson, 11 vols. (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1925-1952), III (1927), IV.3.78-79.

[32] Thomas Dekker, *Newes from Hell* (London, 1606), STC 6514, sig. D4^r^.

[33] Stephen Gosson, *The Schoole of Abuse and a Short Apologie of the Schoole of Abuse*, ed. Edward Arber (London, 1902), 32.

[34] *Schoole of Abuse*, 32. For a discussion of this inversion strategy see my *Images of Englishmen and Foreigners in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries : A Study of Stage Characters and National Identity in English Renaissance Drama, 1558-1642* (Rutherford, N.J. : Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1992).

[35] On Le Pen and AIDS, see Isabelle Rieusset, «Convivialité ou boucs émissaires : Le devenir des structures épidémiques dans le paysage français à l'horizon européen de 1993», in *France - Europe*, ed. J. Th. Leerssen and M. van Montfrans, Yearbook of European Studies 2 (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA, 1989), 159-79. On the equation of AIDS and syphilis, see also Susan Sontag, *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (New York : Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988).