New World Encounters: The Impact of Syphilis on Aspects of Western Culture

Daniel R. Reedy
University of Kentucky

"Thirty-three days after my departure . . . I discovered many islands, thickly peopled, of which I took possession without resistance in the name of our most illustrious Monarch. . . . In that island . . . [which] we named Española, there are mountains of very great size and beauty, vast plains, groves, and very fruitful trees. . . . The inhabitants of both sexes in this island . . . go always naked as they were born, with the exception of some of the women, who use the covering of a leaf, or some bough, or an apron of cotton which they prepare for that purpose. . . . [T]hey are naturally timid and fearful. . . . As soon however as they see they are safe, and have laid aside all fear, they are very simple and honest, and exceedingly liberal with all they have. . . . They exhibit great love towards all others in preference to themselves: they also give objects of great value for trifles, and content themselves with very little or nothing in return. . . . It even happened that a sailor received for a leather strap as much gold as was worth three golden nobles . . ." (Columbus 5-8). And the writer concludes his letter with the promise " . . .that with a little assistance afforded me by our most invencible sovereigns, I will procure them as much gold as they need, as great a quantity of spices, of cotton, and of mastic . . ., and as many men for the service of the navy as their majesties may require" (Columbus, 15). Thus did Christopher Columbus notify Lord Rafael Sánchez, Royal Treasurer of the Spanish Court, of his first views of the lands and peoples of the New World, writing most probably from the Azores in February, 1493, and sent from Lisbon in March of that same year.

This first trip and the two which followed in 1493 and 1498 mark the beginning of the process of the Discovery, Exploration and Conquest of the New World. Although Columbus' descriptions suggest an edenic environment in which the natives were innocent savages, the establishment of Spanish dominion resulted in the subjugation of the Indians as an object of economic exploitation by the Crown on the one hand and of evangelization by the Church on the other. It was the beginning of the Black Legend.

Motivated by ambition, desire for personal riches, the spirit of the Holy

Crusades, the hope of honor and fame, and a sense of service to the Monarchs, the Conquest went apace rapidly during the 16th century throughout the Caribbean, into Florida in 1512, Mexico in 1519 and south along the Mar del Sur (South Sea) through Ecuador, Peru, Chile, and into the River Plate region by 1538. Thus, in a period of little more than four decades, the Spanish Empire's institutions were well established in the New World.

The bloody nature of the conquests of Mexico, Central America, Peru, Chile and other regions is well documented. The unfortunate facts are that in less than a half-century, a population of inhabitants which may have totalled between 90 and 112 million people had been subjugated (Lucena Salmoral 15). Yet the death and destruction faced by the Indians came not only from Spanish lances, swords, and mastiffs (as we know from various firsthand accounts, in particular from Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas' *Brief History of the Destruction of the Indies*, 1552) [*Brevísima relación de la destrucción de Las Indias*], but from forced enslavement as part of the *encomienda* system, and by the series of epidemics of EuroAfrican origin which plagued the New World. They were diseases completely unknown to the natives who had no natural antibodies to them, and so they died by the tens of thousands, even millions in the conquered territories, perishing from the effects of small pox, measles, typhus, influenza and the common cold (Esteve Barba, 763-770). By 1570, the mortality rate among Indians had produced a population decline of 60 or 70% by some estimates, ranging from a high of 90% in Central Mexico to 57% in Colombia. By the end of the 16th century, the indigenous population likely numbered no more than 20 to 27 million inhabitants (Lucena Salmoral 15).

Sovereignty over the lands and peoples of the New World was always declared in the name of God and King. Thus, civil dominion over the Indians was the territory of the Spanish government, whereas concern for their humane treatment, their health, and assimilation into the civilized world was generally the domain of religious orders. Chief among the advocates of their humane treatment was Bartolomé de Las Casas who argued for loving care of the Indians, for a process of evangelization without Conquest. His entreaties led to Carlos V's assuming the title of Protector of the Indians. Other religious figures and chroniclers such as Bernardino de Sahagún, Pedro de Gante and Guamán Poma de Ayala were directly involved in efforts to improve the situation of Indians in their territories or in making overt gestures to bring their plight to the attention of the King.

During the last quarter of the 16th century, a Franciscan friar of Basque origin, Gerónimo de Mendieta (1525-1604), having arrived in New Spain in 1554, recorded many of his views about the treatment of Indians in his *Ecclesiastical History of the Indies, 1585* [*Historia eclesiástica indiana*]. In the latter portion of his chronicle, Mendieta reviews the devastating effects of "pestilences" which had been brought to the New World with the Conquest and colonizing efforts. He ascribes, for example, to a black slave who accompanied Pánfilo de Narváez on his expedition, the first epidemic of small pox in the New World. He says, "And as this black man set out on land, he went about spreading the disease to the Indians from village to village, and this pestilence spread in such a manner that it left not a single corner untouched in all of this New Spain. In some provinces half of the people died, and in others only slightly less" (Mendieta 97, translation is ours). Mendieta obviously saw these decimating plagues as a kind of unjust punishment of innocent people, because he goes on to remark: "Our Europe was repaid for this by the New World (if one can call it payment), for from here they took buboes (a natural disease of the Indians and over there never before known), and in payment Europe sent measles and small pox, very common there but here never before known to the Indians" (Mendieta 98). In the mind of this Franciscan there was a sense of just payment for the pernicious consequences of measles, influenza, and small pox. Thus the New World was only "paying back" the Old with an illness known as buboes (*bubas*) which had not yet received its European name of syphilis.

This "payment" from the New World to the Old was to change Western World society and culture in ways which would be discernible until well into the 20th century when medical science discovered adequate forms of treatment. Syphilis developed its own history—sometimes in historical sources, others through apochryphal myths, via incorporation into literary texts and plastic representation, in concepts of characterization, particularly in the case of women, and in other more profound changes in the European psyche for a period of some 500 years. Our intent, then, is to show how selected texts and authors became inextricably linked with this historic encounter. In essence, the event has become embued with popular myth; it is recorded as history from a personal perspective with certain embellishments; it becomes the product of continuing human experience; it is incorporated as a thematic, integral part of literary texts; and it ultimately becomes a general metaphor removed from its original context with a broader significance for society in general.

If we accept Michel Foucault's assertion that the theme of madness replaced death in the 15th century (*Madness and Civilization*), then one can posit the argument that syphilis played a comparably significant role in the 16th century, since this virulent disease was to find its way into the plastic and literary forms of the time in both illustration and commentary. In her provocative essay entitled *Illness As Metaphor* (1978), Susan Sontag has observed that three diseases (all the diseases of individuals) have

most often been used as metaphors for evil—tuberculosis, cancer and syphilis. To this list she has subsequently added AIDS. She explains, "Any important disease whose causality is murky, and for which treatment is ineffectual, tends to be awash in significance. First the subjects of deepest dread (corruption, decay, pollution, anomie, weakness) are identified with the disease. The disease itself becomes a metaphor. Then, in the name of the disease . . . the horror is imposed on other things. The disease becomes adjetival" (Sontag 58). Sontag goes on to observe that "In its role as scourge, syphilis implied a moral judgment (about off-limits sex, about prostitution) but not a psychological one (Sontag 39). She adds that "Syphilis was thought to be not only a horrible disease but a demeaning, vulgar one. . . . In the sense of an infection that corrupts morally and debilitates physically, syphilis was to become a standard trope" (Sontag 58-59).

Some fifty years before Sontag's essay, novelist D. H. Lawrence also penned a brief commentary on this subject which he entitled "Puritanism and the Arts" (1929). Lawrence saw syphilis as the source of an accentuated morbidity in society growing out of the realization and shock of the consequences of the disease. He notes that by the end of the 16th century in England, its ravages were obvious and the shock penetrated the imaginative consciousness, not to mention that it had infected as well the Royal families of England and Scotland (Lawrence 54). In contrast with Sontag's views, Lawrence avers that "[T]he terror-horror element [of syphilis] led to the crippling of the consciousness of man" (58), thereby making the awareness of one person to another an affair of judgment rather than an instinctive and instinctual attraction (58). As a result of this impact, "[M]odern morality has its roots in hatred, a deep, evil hate of the instinctive, intuitional, procreative body. This hatred is made more virulent by fear, and an extra poison is added to the fear by unconscious horror of syphilis" (Lawrence 61). It goes without saying that Lawrence was writing at an early point in the 20th century before medical breakthroughs had made possible reliable treatments for this plague.

From its appearance in the late 15th century until early in the 20th, syphilis was the subject of wide-spread hypothesis as to its origins. As suggested above, ideas about the disease have often been shrouded in myth, superstition or ignorance, with speculation about its theological significance, its prophylaxis and treatment. A recent article by Baker and Armelagos in *Current Anthropology* (December 1988) provides a succinct overview of the disease's verifiable origins and its antiquity. The authors point out that the most prevalent theory is that syphilis was contracted by Columbus' sailors in the Americas in 1492 who were responsible for its spread into Europe after their return in 1493. Others argue that there was

evidence of venereal syphilis in Europe prior to Columbus' voyage and that it was simply not distinguished as a separate disease from leprosy. A third theory posits that syphilis was present in human populations in the New World and Old at the time of Columbus' discovery, and that pinta, yaws, endemic or non-venereal syphilis, and venereal syphilis are but four syndromes of treponematosis . . . , a single disease which evolved simultaneously with human populations (Baker-Armelagos 704). What seems certain is that a virulent strain of the disease was indigenous to the New World and that it spread rapidly throughout Europe at the end of the 15th century and during early decades of the 16th.

A Portuguese surgeon, one Rodrigo [Ruy] Díaz de Isla, reports that he noted symptoms of an unknown disease among Columbus' crew in 1493, although his ideas on the subject were not published until 1539 after he had spent more than 20 years of work with syphilitic patients in a Lisbon hospital. His observations entitled *Treatise on The Serpentine Illness: Which is Commonly Called Buboes in Spain* [*Tractado contra el mal serpentino: que vulgarmente en España es llamado bubas*] refers to the disease by an invented name: "The Serpentine Disease of the Island of Hispaniola". Although others dispute the New World origins of the disease and question the reliability of Díaz de Isla's views (Richard C. Holcomb, Who Gave the World Syphilis? The Haitian Myth), there seems credible evidence that syphilis was fairly wide-spread in Europe by the end of the decade of the 1490s.

By 1495, the disease which as yet carried no common name had spread into Italy, France, Germany and Switzerland, to Hungary and Russia by 1499, and to China by 1505 (Pusey 5-9). Most historians agree that a focal point for its spread was the siege of Naples in late 1494 by France's King Charles VIII whose army of mercenaries was ravaged by a plague in 1495, comonly believed to be syphilis, which forced them to scatter throughout Europe (Bankoff 9).

Curiously enough the earliest medical treatise in Spain on the new disease was a dodecasyllabic-verse tract by Francisco López de Villalobos, written in 1498 under the title *On the Contagious and Evil Buboes* [*Sobre las contagiosas y malditas bubas*]. López de Villalobos espoused the idea that boboes was a plague sent to earth from heaven as a source of God's anger, a pestilence to afflict man relentlessly:

> It was a pestilence seen not in any season,
> in meter, in prose, nor in science or history,
> very evil and perverse, cruel without reason,
> very contagious and very foul in great excess,
> very fierce, against which no victory is won,

which makes men ill and somewhat hunched,
which in crippling and pain extremes produced,
which darkens the skin's brightest hue;
it is most vile, and thus has its inception
in the basest part of man that gives conception.
(Dennie 24, translation is ours)

* * *

The first iconographic representations of this new illness to appear in Europe underscore the concepts expressed in López de Villalobos' work, namely that this was a new scourge from God sent to punish Man's blasphemies and persistence in wicked ways. In September of 1496, humanist and satirist Sebastian Brandt (1457-1521) of Strassburg issued a broadside in verse, entitled *De pestilentiali scorra sive mala de Franzos, Eulogium* (Sudhoff XXII), headed by a wood-cut depicting this theological interpretation of the *flagellum Dei* for the cause of the disease. At the center, elevated and enthroned, sits the Virgin with the Child Jesus cradled in her left arm from whose hand barbed shafts rain down on three men—one lying dead on the ground, another kneeling in prayer, with a third standing behind them. At the extreme right, the half-hidden figure of a woman is also represented. All four individuals show the ravages and ulcers of disease caused by divine anger. To the left of the Virgin and Child is the figure of Emperor Maximilian, holding a banner of the Crusaders' Cross with his knights standing behind him, with the Hapsburg shield in the foreground.

Within two months, Joseph Grünpeck of Burckhausen issued a commentary on Brandt's poem (November, 1496) with a reworking of the original illustration and commentaries on the possible astrological origins of the disease, which he believed was influenced by the stars, being the consequence of a conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter which had occurred in 1484 (Sudhoff XXIV). In Grünpeck's rendering of "The Virgin and Child," the male figure of the dead man, no longer identified as a soldier, lies more prominently in the foreground, stripped of clothing with his body covered with ulcers—the primary victim of divine punishment. Also noteworthy among the changes is the fact that the two persons at the right are not soldiers but women—both kneeling in supplication before the Virgin, but clearly afflicted with the disease (Sudhoff 25).

Two other engravings from the same period which present iconographic representations of syphilis are worthy of note. "The Syphilitic", an engraving by famous artist Albrecht Dürer of Nuremberg (1471-1528) was published in a broadside by Theodoricus Ulsenius in 1496. It shows a single male figure standing beneath the signs of the zodiac, thus emphasizing that he is a victim of the influence of planetary alignment in the sign of Scorpio which rules the genitalia (Gilman 248). The man's stance with outstretched arms, palms uplifted, suggests that the figure is possibly a parody of Christ on whom the symptoms of the disease are like the stigmata (Gilman 249). According to Sander Gilman in his book *Disease and Representation* (1988), the man's ragged attire of plumed hat, cloak, and broad-toed shoes is likely a "caricature of the sufferer as a fop, as a Frenchman, as the outsider already associated in German myth with sexual excess and deviancy" (Gilman 250).

In a medical tract by Bartholomaeus Steber (*A Malafranczos, morbo Gallorum. praeservatio ac cura,* Vienna, 1498) (Sudhoff XLII-XLIII & 263), which appeared in Vienna in 1498, the representation of the disease departs from the overriding issue of divine or astrological causes. This depiction is one of the most original of the disease at that time because it shows both a man and woman under treatment. The woman, nude from the waist up, reclines in a bed attended by a physician. The man sits at bedside on a stool with another physician kneeling before him. One of the doctors holds aloft a flask, while the other appears to be applying salves to the tumors on the man's body. Both are clearly afflicted by the disease and they are equal victims of its virulence, but the emphasis is on symptoms and cure and not on origins, nor is there any inference of moral judgment.

It was a disease which no nation wished to claim, and the term 'syphilis' did not acquire common recognition until the 19th century. In Spain the new disease was called "las bubas," "morbus pustularum," or "morbus gallicus". In Naples it was called the French Disease, whereas the French called it the Neapolitan Evil; in Germany and England, it was the French Pox and Bordeaux Evil; in Persia it was the Christian Disease; in Russia the Polish Disease; and in Poland, the German Disease (Fracastoro 1). But Spain's official historian under Charles V, Fernández de Oviedo, accurately referred to it as the "Disease of the Indies" in his *General History.*

Born in Madrid in 1478, Oviedo was a part of Court life from age thirteen when he became an attendant to Prince don Juan, the son of Ferdinand and Isabella. He was present, in fact, at the fall of Granada and there met Genoese sea captain Christopher Columbus prior to the start of his voyage to the New World. Thus, Oviedo had direct acquaintance with many of Columbus' men and he notes frequent contact with two of Columbus' sons and with members of the discovery crew over the years. However, Oviedo, himself, was not to travel to the Indies until 1514 for the first time. The author of several treatises over a period of fifty years, Oviedo did not publish his monumental *General and Natural History of*

the Indies until 1535 (Seville) [*Historia general y natural de las Indias*], following his designation as "Chronicler of the Indies" in 1532.

Although he was often accused of not being a reliable historian, Oviedo based his writings on information gained directly from explorers, conquistadors, other chroniclers, as well as on his own empirical observations. His accounts deal not only with the exploits of the explorers and conquistadors, but with information about the illnesses they suffered and the natural remedies which were available in the Indies among the newly discovered plants. In the First Book of his history (ch. XIII), Oviedo speaks specifically to the disease's New World origins. He remarks:

> These Christians, the first inhabitants of this Island [of Hispaniola] . . . suffered pain and passion from the buboes disease, because their origin is in the Indies, and I say correctly the Indies, because it is the land where this disease is common, as it is among the Indian women of these parts, through whose communication this plague passed to some of the first Spaniards who came with the Admiral to discover these lands, because, as it is terribly contagious, it could be very possible.
>
> (Fernández de Oviedo, Book II, Ch. XIII, 49; translation is ours)

He goes on to say that the disease then was spread to Italy and other parts. In a subsequent chapter (XIV), he remarks that "Many times in Italy I would laugh when I heard the Italians speak about the French Disease and hear the French call it the Disease from Naples, and in truth both the one group and the other would have been right had they called it the Disease of the Indies." His remarks seem to contain a keen tone of nationalistic humor as he hears the disease's origins ascribed to other countries. Oviedo cites as a source for some of his information his acquaintance with two men who accompanied Columbus in the first voyage—mosén Pedro Margarite, and Vicente Yáñez Pinzón who had served as pilot of one of Columbus' ships. His remarks become more personalized, when he describes how in 1496 mosén Pedro Margarite first showed symptoms of the disease (Oviedo 54). One can gather from his observations that the Royal Court was shocked by the fact that a noble of Margarite's stature would be afflicted, since the disease was more often associated with courtesans and people of lower station. To our knowledge, mosén Pedro Margarite is the first person mentioned by name in any source as having suffered the ravages of buboes.

Oviedo also offers information on the treatment and cures which were utilized by Indians and which were emulated in Europe. In particular, he mentions the *palo sancto* (holy wood) which was a source of supposed

value in that process. In a later chapter dealing with flora and fauna, Oviedo identifies the wood as being from the guaiacum (*guayacán*) tree whose splintered wood was boiled to produce a remedy that was ingested each morning for a period of twenty or thirty days while maintaining a rigorously restricted diet. He asserts that he saw persons cured of the disease in this manner if they followed the prescribed treatment before ulcers and sores had erupted on their bodies. For many years "guaiacum was considered the 'miracle drug' of the Renaissance, the sure-cure which swept through Europe in the wake of syphilis" (Bettman 98-99). According to Otto Bettman in his *Pictorial History of Medicine*, German poet-humanist Ulrich von Hutten (1488-1523), a friend of Erasmus, first tried mercury salves and subsequently mercury fumigation chambers to cure himself of the disease, but he later turned to guaiacum juice which he mistakenly hailed as an absolute cure after having ingested the juice for a period of forty days. Hutten had fled monastic life in 1505 and subsequently recorded his observations and his attempted cures with mercury vapors and by drinking a brew of the "holy wood" in his treatise *De guaia medicina et morbo gallico*, published in 1519 (Mainz).

The naming of the disease without direct reference to a national origin fell to an Italian poet and man of science, Giorlamo Fracastoro, whose poem, *The Syphiliad*, also translated with the title of *The Sinister Shepherd* [*Siphilidis sive de Morbo Gallico Libri Tres*], appeared in Latin in Venice in 1530. In his native Verona, Fracastoro was known as a person of encyclopedic knowledge, particularly in medicine, and he was a highly regarded poet. He would likely have been recorded in history for his other poems or for his treatise on venereal diseases in 1546 (*De Contagionibus et Contagiosis Morbis et Earum Curatione Libri Tres*), but his renown is assured by having named the shepherd boy of his poem "Syphilus"—the lad who dared defy the gods and who was thus afflicted with a degenerative disease as punishment for his audacity:

> The sun went pallid for his righteous wrath
> And germinated poisons on our path.
> And he who wrought this outrage was the first
> To feel his body ache, when sore accursed.
> And for his ulcers and their torturing,
> No longer would a tossing, hard couch bring
> Him sleep. With joints apart and flesh erased,
> Thus was the shepherd flailed and thus debased.
> And after him this malady we call
> SYPHILIS, tearing at our city's wall

To bring with it such ruin and such a wrack,
That e'en the king escaped not its attack.

(Fracastoro 72)

The history of Syphilus, the shepherd boy, occupies only the last of three books which comprise the total poem. In the First, Fracastoro provides information about the disease—its origins, descriptions of its pernicious effects, various treatments, and potential cures. Insofar as the origins are concerned, he lays the blame for bringing the epidemic to Europe on Spanish sailors whom he calls "the vanguard of this suffering":

O Muse, reveal to me what seed has grown
This evil that for long remained unknown!
Till Spanish sailors made the west their goal,
And ploughed the seas to find another pole,
Adding to this world a new universe.
Did these men bring to us this latent curse?
In every place beneath a clamorous sky,
There bursts spontaneously this frightful pest.
Few people has it failed to scarify,
Since commerce introduced it from the West.

(Fracastoro 3)

Fracastoro speculates on whether the disease had its origins in heaven or hell, and whether it was the work of the devil or the wrath of God (Fracastoro 7). Being an astrologer, he also espouses the pseudo-scientific view that it was the product of a congress of Saturn and Mars in the sign of Cancer (Fracastoro 13), and that the planets under the rule of the Sun were but interpreting the heavens' wishes (Fracastoro 8).

One aspect of Fracastoro's descriptive ability, which we will see later in examples from 17th-century poetry, is the graphic detail with which he presents the symptoms and the effects of the disease which eats first into the privates before taking full possession of the body:

Soon is the body ulcerous and vile.
The face becomes within a little while
A mask of running pustules small and great.
A horny shell will glands well imitate.
Breaking and emptying an acrid humor.
From pus-corroded skin, pours every tumor,
And bloody ulcers deeply dig away,
Gnawing the tissues that they make their prey.

Then is man stripped until his piteous moans
Come from a skeleton of putrid bones.
The lips are torn to shreds for this vile ill,
And, ere the voice dies, it is harsh and shrill.

(Fracastoro 20-21)

In the second book of his poem, Fracastoro provides advice on the best dietary habits to follow and methods of treatment to pursue when the disease has been contracted. His suggestions of mercury poltices, fumigations with mercury vapors, and unguents of quicksilver and hog's lard with turpentine, were to continue as common mercury-based treatments for more than three centuries, and they were to become commonplace in both literary texts and pictorial representations. He, too, was familiar with the "lignum sanctum" which he extols by entreating:

Bring us this sacred tree that all adore,
Yea, show to us, and soon, this tree of trees
That gives rise to such wondrous prodigies,
This tree that Europe never saw before.

(Fracastoro 56)

Taken as a whole, Fracastoro's poem is both medical treatise and poetic text, containing as it does guidance for appropriate prophylaxis, providing detailed commentaries on symptoms and stages of the disease's development, and offering speculation on its origins in the New World while fabricating for the reader a history of the shepherd boy, Syphilus, and the circumstances which led to his being afflicted with such a dire pestilence. It continues to be cited after more than four centuries as a classic model of its genre.

In myth and scientific hypothesis, there has often been a suggestion of bestial origins of syphilis which has conveyed, by extension, the suggestion of some act of sexual perversion, usually of bestiality as the likely form of transmittal from animal to human being. The inference has been drawn, for example, that the shepherd boy Syphilus' fatal affront of the gods was a crime against nature with his sheep. One legend has it that the llamas of South America carry syphilitic Spirochaeta which can be transferred to man, and that there was reputedly a prohibition against permitting young herdsmen from travelling with their flock of llamas without being accompanied by a female companion (Dennie 68). A recent article on prehistoric evidence of syphilis in the New World finds treponemal infection in a Pleistocene bear and draws conclusions of possible transmittal to pre-Columbian Indians (Rothschild and Turnbull 61-62). Such ideas find

their corollary today in the suggestion that the supposed African origins of AIDS are somehow linked to monkies or apes.

After the fall of the last Moorish stronghold of Granada, the Catholic Kings promulgated the Edict of Expulsion from Spain in 1492. One of the immediate results was that Jews and many families of recent converts to Catholicism became part of the exodous to other countries around the Mediterranean. Among those expatriates, in all likelihood, was a cleric by name of Francisco Delicado who made his way to Rome—the City which he was later to call "Rome, the Harlot" because of its decadent society (Damiani 40). Little is known about Delicado's life except for what he reveals in his novel *Portrait of Lozana. The Lusty Andalusian Woman* [*La Lozana Andaluza*], published in Venice in 1528 under anonymous authorship. Delicado apparently lived in Rome until 1527 when the City was saqued, and he spent his last days in Venice where he wrote a treatise entitled *On the Manner of Using the Wood from The Indies* (1529) [*El Modo de Adoperare el Legno de India*, in which he dealt with the medicinal effects of the guaiacum tree, the Holy Wood, whose miraculous powers Delicado alleges cured him of the French Disease.

We recall that the Black Death of 1348 was the frame which encapsulates the tales of Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* set in Florence. In Delicado's *Lozana*, Rome is the setting, but the plague which permeates this novel as a primary theme is the French Disease. Written in dialogue form, the work belongs to the picaresque tradition of the *Celestina*, revealing as it does the world of go-betweens, ruffians, and harlots in Rome during 1524. The principal character is a woman born in Cordoba who has experienced the viscissitudes of life in various parts of the world before settling in Rome where she uses her wiles and the allure of her body to make her livelihood and to cope with the corrupt society she finds there. Lozana's life style is not unique, according to one of the characters who declares that Rome is a city filled with whores. He says,

> There are passionate whores and polished whores, painted whores and illustrious whores, whores of reputation and those who have been condemned. . . . There are late night whores . . ., whores from Anjou, . . . and whores who have boils and the pox. . . . There are bishop's whores; and whores who procure, be they elegant, destitute, or celebrated; good whores; bad whores; and evil whores." (Damiani 90-91)

This, then, is the environment in which Lozana, a person devoted to pleasure, makes her way by ingeniously outwitting others in order to support herself and her retinue.

Two factors are of primary interest in this work as we compare it to

other texts already examined. First, syphilis is a primary theme which permeates the entire text, and secondly, the female personage is now seen as the central focus of the action of the work rather than as a secondary figure, lurking somewhere in the background. Despite this emphasis, however, Lozana is never presented as a victim, per se; rather, she is the dominant force in the novel and she is always the conqueror, never the conquered.

The fact that Lozana has the pox is visibly marked on her face. One character remarks, "Did you ever see such a beautiful skin and such a beautiful face? If only the pox hadn't eaten away part of her nose. She couldn't wear glasses if she wanted to! But I imagine that if she takes the cure she'll come out all right" (Damiani 23). Another character who debates whether or not to seek Lozana's favors acknowledges to a friend that he knows she has the disease, but he says with resignation, "When you think about it, the women destroy the men, and they are destroyed in turn by the pox. So let's go in together and see what she's about, for my sins drive me to her also, she who promises each day what she never fulfills" (Damiani 135).

Lozana herself never compains about the disease; in fact, she alleges that the marks on her face were self-inflicted, but she does offer philosophical and medical advice to women and men who suffer from its ill effects. A washerwoman remarks, for example, that with the arrival of the scourge, she was ruined and kept from a good marriage, having now to wash other people's clothes, being left with only the dream of becoming an honorable matron (Damiani 42). Another character, Divicia, describes the disease apocalyptically as "the plague that the sixth angel spread over almost half of the earth" (Damiani 232). She informs Lozana that the plagues ". . . began in Naples because the wine and the water had been infected. . . . Many died, and since it first appeared and spread there, the people who later came from Spain called it the Neapolitan Disease." She concludes by observing that "They've already begun treating it with aloe wood from the West Indies" (Damiani 232).

Yet, true to the tradition to which this work belongs, Lozana is ever the realist and survivor. In conversation with a physician, for example, she rebuffs his ridicule of her abilities, saying, "My dear gentleman, I see now that you want to ridicule me. My art of healing includes: if it works, it's right and I look at their hands like someone who knows what he's doing. Gentlemen, I concluded that learned people make use of the physician and his medical treatment, but there's no physician as asinine as the one who wants to cure the pox since God made man have the disease" (Damiani 251-52).

The portrait of Lozana, which Delicado presents, is that of a self-

reliant woman who lives by her wit, her body, and her gift of gab. By the end of the novel, "Lozana emerges as a mature individual ready to retire from a life of intense activity" (Foley 28-29). Despite the fact that she has the French Disease, Lozana never seems to be its victim as do other women in the novel. For her, love and interaction with men are a natural course of things and she revels in life fully until she makes her decision to retire. At that point, she changes her name to Vellida and makes plans to leave for the island of Lipari where she will live with her former servant Ramplin. Her lust for life is true to the end as she declares that she wants to go to Paradise, and she's willing to enter whichever of the three gates she finds open (Damiani 276).

Lozana is a novel whose values are both sociological and historical, and whose purpose may well have been moralistic, but what dominates through its focus on the protagonist is the view of a woman who survives in the sensual and licentious corruption of Roman society. It also shifts the focus away from the figure of men such as the shepherd boy Syphilus and emphasizes the figure of the female as harlot, an image which was to be perpetuated in later centuries.

According to Baker and Armelagos in their history of "The Origin and Antiquity of Syphilis" (707), the initial virulent nature of syphilis resulted in the publication of some fifty-eight identifiable medical tracts and books on the subject by 1566. The social and health consequences of the disease were such in some countries that edicts were issued to ostracize persons who had become infected; in other places, public baths barred syphilitics; and some persons were expelled from cities or exiled to remote spots or islands (708). In England, for example, a London surgeon, William Clowes, recorded his observations on the effects of the disease in *A Short and profitable Treatise touching the Cure of the Disease called (Morbus Gallicus) by Vnctions*, published in 1579. He calls it "the pestilent infection of filthy lust . . . a sicknes very lothsome, odious, troublesome, and dangerous. A notable testimonye of the iust wrath of God agaynst that filthy sinne, which at this day not onely infecteth Naples, and Fraunce . . . But increasing yet dayle, spreadeth it selfe throughout all England, and ouerfloweth as I thinke the whole world . . ." (iv). He goes on to declare, "But 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, than it is in this day in the realme of England: I pray God quickly deliuer us from it, and to remoue from us that filthy sinne that breedeth it, that nurseth it, that disperseth it. . . . It is wonderfull to consider, how huge multitudes there be of such as be infected with it, and that dayly increase, to the great daunger of the common wealth, and the stayne of the whole nation: the cause whereof, I see none so great as the licentious, and beastly disorder of

a great number of rogues, and vagabondes: The filthye lyfe of many lewd and idell persons, both men, and women , about the citye of London . . ." (1v-2r). Given the environmental context which Clowes describes, there is little wonder that critics have noted the dramatic function of syphilis in certain of William Shakespeare's works (Bentley). Yet there is also evidence that the virulence of the disease had begun to wane by the end of the 16th century. And despite Clowes' comments that the disease was an example of God's wrath, there is some evidence that it had begun to lose its aura of divine punishment for sins and was becoming viewed as a social disease, as a kind of overt social stigma, or as a general metaphor for the decline of society.

In the 17th century, the disease was often utilized by iconographers and satirists as a device to poke fun and ridicule at its victims. In a book of French proverbs (*Recueil des plus ilustres proverbes*) by Jacques Lagniet (1620-1672), published in Paris between 1659-1663 (Pusey 35), we find, for example, an engraving of a mercury chamber which was used for the fumigation treatment of syphilis. The engraving shows a man's head and shoulders in the opening of a beehive-shaped chamber with another man kneeling at the side before a small door to the chamber where he is stoking the fire with additional wood. To the right is a third male figure heating compresses before a fireplace which are to be wrapped around the man to make him sweat out the evil humors. The proverb appearing on the side of the chamber states, "For one pleasure a thousand pains" [Pour un plaisir mil douleur il suela verolle]. At the base of the engraving is another proverb which reads, "It is better to have a flux from the purse than from the mouth." [Il vaut mieux avoir flus de bource que de bouche]. The speaker of French will also note the pun in Lagniet's proverb which suggests the double meaning of "bource" as both "purse" and "scrotum".

In the poetry of a satirist from 17th-century Peru, Juan del Valle y Caviedes (1645-1697?), there are several references to the "mal francés". Two poems in particular deal with the disease at length; I refer to the *romances* entitled "To A Lady Who Landed in the Charity Hospital" ("A una dama que paró en el Hospital de la Caridad") (Valle y Caviedes 157-161) and "To A Lady Who, For Being One, Ended Up in the Charity Hospital" ("A una dama que por serlo paró en la Caridad") (Valle y Caviedes 187-190). In the first of these, Caviedes describes the pernicious effects of the French Disease on a woman named Anarda who is being treated in the Charity Hospital in Lima. He says:

> For all the charity she did give,
> in the Charity Hospital she landed,

for to no supplicant of love
did she ever deny an alms.
(verses 49-52, translation is ours)

Caviedes does not dwell excessively on the moralistic aspects of the disease, although he does point out the relationship between Anarda's illness, the act of love making, and payment for sin:

In the hospital for her faults,
Anarda was purging her shame,
because these sins in life
and in death must be purged. (verses 1-4)

He also alludes to the fact that she is a prostitute and that her acts of promiscuity (having given so much charity) have resulted in her being hospitalized in the Charity Hospital.

Despite the fact that Caviedes never uses the word "syphilis", there are two references to the supposed French origins of the disease. In the first of these poems, the poet refers to the "mal francés" which is at war within Anarda, an apt metaphor when one considers that soldiers were the persons most responsible for the initial spread of the disease because of the presence of camp followers in most military establishments. He compares Anarda to a city under siege by a French Illness which has surrounded her, has penetrated her "outskirts" and is threatening the downfall of her "plaza," an obvious reference to the genitalia. In a subsequent verse he identifies the disease as being from Picardy, which was the likely version of most Spanish Americans who were unlikely to want to ascribe its origins to their own country.

The humor with which the poet approaches this subject is sarcastic and full of puns. In one of the early sections of the poem, Caviedes' comments are reminiscent of the French proverb "For one pleasure a thousand pains." He says,

Love collects its dues in pain
what it lent in passionate shivers,
thus she pays with mournful wail
the debt contracted with a smile. (verses 24-28)

He also puns on the roles which Venus and Mercury play in causing her current ills: What she caught under the sign of Venus (love), she cannot get rid of with Mercury, the chief treatment for syphilitic symptoms.

In the second poem written to Belisa, the degree of detail which the

poet uses to describe her condition is much more heightened. At the beginning of the text, he notes that she has gummatous lesions which he compares to the coagulated sap of a plum tree. And from her mouth, filled with sores, spittle streams like strands of silk spun by a silkworm. While his poem is definitely jocular in tone, the poet is much more clinical in his description of the treatments which Belisa is undergoing: poultices are placed on her body; ingestion of mercury causes her to salivate and to purge herself of poisons; purgatives cleanse her entrails; and quicksilver is rubbed on her body to relieve the external aspects of her affliction.

Although Sander Gilman asserts that it took "over two hundred years for the image of the syphilitic to shift from the male victim of the disease to its female 'source'," there is ample evidence in literary texts that this change occurred quite early. We can agree, however, with his general assertion that "The female is seen [not only] as the source of pollution, but also as the outsider, the prostitute, the socially deviant individual" (Gilman 256). In Caviedes' two texts, on the other hand, the poet is not particularly condemnatory of these women because they are prostitutes, nor does he seem intent at censoring their moral conduct. His attitude is one of an empirical observer of these women, their symptoms and treatment, combined with the jocularity of one who recounts an off-color joke. Such humor is often scatological and obscene with little or no regard for personalizing the objects of satire, themselves. What becomes a point of fascination in these texts is the accuracy with which the poet describes the symptoms and treatment of the disease. The clinical writings of Sir Thomas Sydenham, the father of modern British medicine and a contemporary of Caviedes, present the symptomology and treatment of the disease in more scientific language but with details no more realistic than those of Caviedes. As one might expect, in Sydenham there is a decidedly scientific, non-moralistic response to persons who see the disease as a "scourge of the lecherous and punishment of the fornicator", as a friend suggested to him in a letter in 1679. Sydenham replies, "If we reject all cases of affliction which the improvidence of human beings has brought upon themselves, there will be but little left for the exercise of mutual love and charity. God alone punishes. . . . Neither must we be too curious in respect to causes and motives, nor too vexatious in our censorship" (Sydenham 32-33).

From the 17th century to the 20th, syphilis continued to influence the works of major European writers: Agustin Moreto, Tirso de Molina and Quevedo in Spain; Voltaire, Diderot, du Maupassant, and Baudelaire in France; Shelley and Joyce in England and Ireland; Henrik Ibsen in the *Ghosts*; and Thomas Mann in his famous *Doctor Faustus*, just to mention a few. Susan Sontag has aptly observed that "syphilis was to become a

standard trope in late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century [literature]," owing to its inherent sense of being "an infection that corrupts morally and debilitates physically" (Sontag 59).

Little could Gerónimo de Mendieta have comprehended the impact that the New World's "payment" to the Old World would have as a kind of enduring retribution. For almost four and one-half centuries it was a plague which captured the attention of men of science and historians; it infiltrated the arts and letters of Europe and the New World, permeating the artistic consciousness of novelists, playwrites, and poets, and appearing in various guises in engravings, paintings, and sculpture. Its omnipresence was manifested as a recurrent motif, a comon theme, or a frequent subject of such works. During its long history, syphilis never lost its social and moral stigma as a disease connected to sexuality —the product of lasciviousness, immoral conduct, or licentious behavior. This fact leads us to the conclusion that D. H. Lawrence was correct when he asserted that syphilis impregnated the conscious behavior and artistic sensibility of Western Civilization from the 15th century to the 20th.

Penicillin has now virtually erased this plague from our conscious minds and it seems to have vanished from the creative products of our imagination. Yet the world's third great plague is rapidly being replaced by a fourth—Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. Susan Sontag has masterfully captured the significance of this new scourge in her 1988 publication of *AIDS and Its Metaphors*. In little more than a decade, AIDS has become the subject of iconographic representation, the topic of novels, poems, theatre and the cinema, the recurrent theme of personal memoirs from its victims, of official public admonitions pasted to bathroom walls, of scientific research, of exhortations from the pulpit that the last days are at hand, of newsworthy journalism, and of quilts pieced from the personal recollections of those already dead.

As we approach the quincentennial year of 1992, we find some chilling parallels to be drawn between the social, moral, theological, and artistic consequences which we have observed in brief during the 16th century and beyond. Anthropologists have replaced the chroniclers of five centuries ago, yet they ponder virtually the same questions: What are the origins of the disease? Was it spread from Haiti (the Isle of Hispaniola)? Did it start in Africa, transmitted somehow from simians to Man? Was its origin in a Maryland CIA laboratory specializing in germ warfare? Can we discern much difference between the theological pronouncements and popular beliefs of the 16th century that such diseases were the product of God's wrath—the punishment for some blasphemy against God, or for inordinate lasciviousness—from the admonitions today of fundamentalist arguments that AIDS is a punishment for acts against nature? Has so little

time passed since Oviedo identified mosén Pedro Margarite as the first Spanish noble in court with syphilis? Or for the young scholar in Cervantes' *Quixote* to ponder in erudite manner the identity of the first person to use ointments to cure himself of the French Disease (Cervantes 610)? Is there not a parallel to be drawn to journalist Randy Shilts' exhaustive research in his book *And the Band Played On* (1987) to identify Patient O, Gaetan Dugas, as the first identifiable transmitter of AIDS in the United States?

In sixteenth-century Europe, caught up in the religious and political throes of the Reformation and Counter Reformation, there were obvious constraints on ideas and some kinds of artistic expression. In Spain, codes of acceptable conduct, self-expression, or permission to publish certain materials fell under the perview of the Inquisition. Today, the New Puritainism is having comparable effects on the public conscience with renewed challenges to anything that, in the wisdom of some, smacks of appeal to prurient interests—when a government seeks to control artistic expression, when a Robert Mapplethorpe art exhibit is raided in Cincinnati, or when the National Endowment for the Arts requires prior signed intent from an artist that the artistic product will meet certain measures of aesthetic taste before it will be funded?

Like syphilis, AIDS is a disease of individuals, a personalized scourge, and despite its greater virulence and the virtual certainty of death as its culmination, it will likely not become a generalized metaphor, if it follows an evolution similar to that of syphilis. Disease has always been a literary trope, but syphilis—the New World's 'payment' to the Old—has now virtually lost its literary and artistic value, annihilated by a scientific discovery. Our hope, of course, is that AIDS will never have the opportunity to become a standard trope of historical duration. We can hope that in these very days, in someone's laboratory the end of the Fourth Plague is contained in a test tube. Perhaps the corollary, as we have drawn it, with events which began some 500 years ago can be avoided. Perhaps the new cycle which seems to be unfolding will become little more than a brief moment to be footnoted in the histories of Arts and Letters yet to be written.

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