



Albrecht Dürer's 'Venereal Disease', 1496.
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Shak



William Shakespeare 1564-1616.
Credit: Leemage

Shakespearean syphilis

An aggressive disease in evolution

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In him we find all arts and sciences...without knowing that he ever studied them. Not only are there allusions...to every craft, business, and pursuit, but those following them have the thoughts and language proper to their station.

—John Dryden (1631-1700)¹

In contrast to tuberculosis, anthropological evidence suggests that syphilis may not have been a disease of antiquity. Thousands of pre-Columbian, European skeletons have betrayed no signs of the *spirochete's* presence (either as periostitis or gummas). However, pre-Columbian, Dominican Republic remains have demonstrated unmistakable stigmata of syphilitic periostitis.³

In the early 16th Century, Philippus Broaldus declared syphilis was a new disease—unknown to the ancients—with the most characteristic symptom being bone pain. A list of prominent 16th Century Spanish Historians—Oveido, Las Casas, de Sahagun—agreed, alleging Native Americans were the source of syphilis.⁴

As early as 1493, long before Broaldus, Ruy Diaz de Isla of Barcelona proclaimed, “in Castile they called it bubas, but I call it the serpentine malady of the isle of Hispaniola. One cannot find a more horrible comparison, for as this animal [snake] is hideous, dangerous, and terrible so the malady is hideous, dangerous, and terrible.”⁵

The first European generations to experience the post-Columbian variety of this malady not only recognized its distinctive physical signs, but left no doubt as to its method of spread. Erasmus (1466-1526) wrote of the future wife of a syphilitic husband, “luckless bride, she should clap her hands before her mouth whenever her husband offers to kiss her and should put on armour when she goes to bed with him.”⁴



Portrait of Girolamo Fracastoro by Titian, circa 1528. Fracastoro was the first to name the disease syphilis. National Gallery Images.

The name syphilis was first given in 1530, when Fracastoro, a physician of Verona, wrote the poem “Syphilis” in which he attributed the disease to a punishment inflicted by the god Apollo on Syphilis, who angered him.⁷

Fracastoro’s horizons extended to the clinical signs, and rapid spread of syphilis:

He first wore buboes dreadful to the sight.
Felt strange pains, and sleepless passed the night.
From him the malady received its name.
The neighboring shepherds catch’d the spreading flame.⁶

A writer in the time of Shakespeare and Erasmus observed:

It happened in the House of Sir Bartholomew whilst I served there...that among every twenty diseased persons that were taken in ten of them had the pockes [syphilis]...I speak nothing of St. Thomas hospital...wherein an infinite number are daily in cure.”⁶

Syphilis would also earn an unsavory literary reputation from the pen of William Shakespeare, who mentioned it in 55 lines in “Measure for Measure,” 61 lines in “Troilus and Cressida,” and 67 lines in “Timon of Athens.”⁶ However, it warranted merely six lines in seven plays by Christopher Marlowe, Shakespeare’s contemporary.⁶

The Bard revisited syphilis in “Sonnet 55” (the “canker”), and in “Sonnet 129”:

The expense of spirit in a waste of shame/is lust in action;
and still action.⁶

Shakespeare’s works—juxtaposed with a variety of writings from his era—provide reflections from the European-American history of syphilis. His words accurately portrayed the disease in the broadest historical and medical contexts—in many ways a disease strikingly dissimilar to the infection encountered today.



Gabriel Fallopius explaining one of his discoveries to the Cardinal Duke of Ferrara. Oil painting by Francis James Barraud. Wellcome Library, London

A historical survey of syphilis by Shakespeare and his contemporaries

His [Shakespeare's] knowledge of the medicine of his time, his approval of the better part of it, and his reasonableness in praising principally the physiological side of it, is remarkable when we remember that he lived in an age when witchcraft was firmly believed in.⁷

In 1494, Charles VIII of France invaded Naples, Italy. Fallopius (Fallopian tubes) chronicled the defenders of Naples who "drove their harlots and women out of the citadel, especially the beautiful ones, whom they knew to be suffering from [syphilis]...the French, gripped by compassion and bewitched by their beauty, took them in."³ These infected "Trojan Horses" led to Charles' army's downfall, and homeward bound, infected soldiers spread the disease.

J.D. Rolleston, a British infectious disease specialist, observed, "In striking contrast with the absence of any certain reference to the existence of syphilis prior to the

siege of Naples in 1495, an immense amount of literature, lay as well medical...followed the event."⁴

Erasmus, in "Familiar Conversations," connected syphilis to sexual encounters with prostitutes, adding a critical religious tone, "Thou makest thyself a common sewer, into which all the base, nasty, pocky fellows resort, and empty their filthiness."⁴ He also reflected with a more clinical and compassionate animus:

If I were asked which is the most destructive of all diseases...it is that [syphilis] which for some years has been raging with impunity...and so cruelly tortures the patient. What contagion has ever extended so quickly to all the countries of Europe? What contagion does thus invade the whole body? It combines...pain...danger of death.⁴

Erasmus' cause and effect connection of sex with prostitutes to syphilis also found later expression in Shakespeare ("Timon of Athens," IV, iii, 90), "Be a whore still! They love thee not that use the: give them diseases



A syphilitic sits in a fumigation stove. Engraving “For one pleasure a thousand pains; by Jacques Laniet Recueill des Plus. Illustrates proverbs (Paris, 1659-1663). Bettmann / Contributor

leaving with thee their lust.”⁷

Erasmus also observed that syphilis “is a disease in Fashion, and especially among Noblemen.”⁴ Ivan the Terrible, Henry III of France, and Henry VIII of Britain proved him correct.⁹

The French referred to the plague as Neapolitan disease, and their preference, born of national embarrassment, would not be lost on the Bard. From the outset, he recognized the “Martial connections of Syphilis,” writing in “Troilus and Cressida” (II, 3, 16) and “Othello” (III, I, 3), respectively: “After this, the vengeance on the whole camp! Or, rather, the Neapolitan bone-ache! For that, methinks, is the curse depending on those that war for a placket,” and “Why masters, ha’ your instruments been in Naples, that they speak i’ the nose thus.”⁶

In this metaphorical usage, instrument represents genitals, and placket the opening in a petticoat.⁶

The French disease also appeared in “Henry V” (V, 1, 75), “News have I that my Nell is dead i’ th’ spital of malady of France.”¹⁰

The intimate relationship of syphilis, soldiers, and war became so commonplace that the Shakespearean character Pistol returns home from military service, opens a brothel—covering his syphilitic sores—all the while feigning war wounds, (“Henry V,” 1, 79):

Honour is cudgell’d, well, bawd I’ll turn and something lean to cutpurse of quick hand to England will I steal,

and there I’ll steal; and patches will I get unto these cudgell’d scars, and swear I got them in the Gallia wars.⁶

Contemporary infectious disease experts agree with Erasmus’ observation that syphilis was a most destructive disease, and have suggested that the sexually transmitted infection of the time was far more aggressive than the disease is today. A physician quote describes the debilitating course that transpired in the 16th Century:

...all the works which appeared before 1514 agree...[an] ability to spread quickly...the intensity of pains in the head and bones...eating away cavities within them...ulcerate the body extensively, exposing the bones and eating away at the nose, the lips, the palate, the larynx, and the genitals.⁴

In “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” (I, 2, 86) Quince observes, “some of your French crowns have no hair at all.”⁴ In French, this particular sign was called *le chapellet*—syphilitic lesions of the forehead and temples likened to a crown.⁶ It is called alopecia today, but for the Bard’s contemporaries it was a French crown.

Lucio, in “Measure for Measure” (I,2,9) says, “behold, behold, where Madam Mitigation comes! I have purchased as many diseases under her roof as come to...three dollars a year...A French crown more.”¹⁰ Additional mentions of alopecia with connections to syphilis occur in “Comedy of Errors” (I, 1, 83), “Not a man of those but he hath the wit



Curing of Syphilis in the 16th century. Engraving by Galle after Stradanus from *Nova Reperta*. Bettmann / Contributor

to lose his hair,"⁶ and in "Pericles" (IV, 2, 2), "Well, well,... He brought his disease hither...I know he will come in our shadow to scatter his crowns in the sun."¹⁰

Periostitis was also portrayed by Shakespeare in "Timon of Athens" (IV, 3, 150), "Consumption sow in hollow bones of man; strike their sharp shins...and let the unscarred braggarts of the war derive some pain from you."^{8,13}

One could surmise that the manifestations of syphilis were obvious to Shakespeare and his target audience. With French crowns, changes in voice, pain in the shin bones, and hideous nasal deformities, syphilis must have been impossible to hide. The following tirade regarding sexual license and syphilis has been characterized by Harold Bloom as "umatched and unmatchable":¹³

Most mischievous foul sin, in chiding sin; for thou thyself hast been a libertine, as sensual as the brutish sting itself; and all th' embossed sores and headed evils that thou with license of free foot has caught would'st disgorge into the general world.¹³

Other historical syphilitic signatures immortalized by the Bard

In Shakespearean times, the brothels of London were located in the "Winchester Stews" and their prostitutes were called "Winchester Geese."^{4,6}

In the early 16th Century, Robert Fabyan, an alderman,

recorded legal measures undertaken to close the popular Winchester Stews, then totaling 18 establishments,⁴ which were successful business ventures under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Winchester.^{4,6} Their persistence and popularity led to 12 of them reopening after the attempted purge!⁵

The idioms "Winchester" and "Goose" were preserved by the playwright. Doll Terasheet and Mistress Overdone are called "geese."⁶ The drama "Troilus and Cressida" mentions the spread of syphilis by "Winchester Geese," (V, 20, 53).⁶

Alleged nefarious involvement in the sex trade by the Bishop of Winchester is also recounted by Shakespeare in "Henry VII" (2, 35), "That thou giv'st whores indulgences to sin,"⁷ and, "Thee I'll chase hence, thou wolf in sheep's array...Out scarlet hypocrite [the Bishop]!"⁶

Shakespeare also describes the earliest therapy for syphilis—mercury in the form of cinnabar,¹⁰ when Pistol cried, "No; to the spital go, and from the powd'ring tub of infamy fetch forth the lazar kite of Cressid's kind, Doll Tearsheet she by name, and her espouse."⁷ ("Henry V" V, 2, 72).

In "Timon of Athens," (IV, 2, 83) the "therapeutic" tubs of mercury salts are also mentioned:

Be a whore still; they love thee not that use thee. Give them diseases, leaving with thee their lust. Make use of thy salt hours. Season the slaves for tubs and baths; bring down rose-cheek'd youth to the tub-fast and the diet.⁶

That mercury was a medically approved treatment for

syphilis in Shakespeare's era was attested to by the French barber surgeon who Ambrose Pare, who served Henry II, Francis II, Charles IX, and Henry III, "Some have devised a...manner of curing...which is suffitus or fumigates. They put the patient under a tent or canopy made close on every side...and they put unto him a vessel with hot coals, whereupon they plentifully throw cinnabaris (mercury sulfate)." ¹⁰

Certainty and controversy

Many questions raised in regard to syphilis in Shakespeare's era cannot be answered with complete assurance. Nonetheless, selected queries may be verified with some confidence.

Is syphilis a disease of the New World?

Studies that have denied an ancient presence of the disease relied only on evidence for boney involvement. Periostitis has become a rare manifestation of secondary syphilis, and boney involvement may have been absent in pre-Columbian eras. The spirochete's handiwork can masquerade as other diseases, and may have escaped notice under other guises prior to Shakespeare.

Why was Shakespeare so preoccupied with syphilis?

Shakespeare's frequent allusions to syphilis may have been occasioned by his broad knowledge of, and evident respect for, medicine and its practitioners. Shakespeare's son-in-law, John Hall, was a respected physician, held "in great fame for his skill, far and near." ¹⁰ The Bard also frequently penned his respect for the profession of medicine. His works portray eight physicians in seven plays, including Dr. Caius, a French physician in the "Merry Wives of Windsor;" a physician in "King Lear;" English and Scottish physicians in "Macbeth;" Cornelius in "Cymbeline;" Cerimon in "Pericles;" Dr. Butts in "Henry VIII;" and Gerard de Narbon in "All's Well that Ends Well." And, although Dr. de Narbon died prior to the action of the play, his daughter Helena hears from others about his medical wisdom:

This young gentlewoman had a father, whose skill was almost as great as his honesty; had it stretched so far, would have made nature immortal, and death should have play for lack of work. Would for the King's sake he were living! I think it would be the death of the king's disease. ¹⁴

In "Pericles" (iii, 2), Cerimon, the physician, says, "I have made familiar to me...the blest infusions that dwell in vegetables, in metals, stones; and can speak of the disturbances that Nature works, and of her cures which doth give me a more content in course of true delight than to...tie my

treasure up in silken bags." ⁷

Only one of Shakespeare's physicians, Dr. Caius, was a buffoon.

Another theory suggests Shakespeare may have been a victim of the *spirochete* himself. ³ We may never know the truth in this regard, however, it is plausible that personal discomforts caused by the sexually transmitted infection could have motivated the playwright.

No matter how he came by his interest, the Bard added to our knowledge of 16th-Century syphilis. Without him, we would know less of Winchester Geese, the pockes, and the telltale signs of secondary and tertiary syphilis at a time when the malady was remarkably dissimilar to today's syphilitic infections.

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