

A SERPENT'S STING: FEMALE TRANSGRESSIVE
SEXUALITY AND METAPHORS OF SYPHILIS IN
ELIZABETHAN AND JACOBEOAN ENGLAND

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2011

Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate College of the
Oklahoma State University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS
December, 2011

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION TO AND HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF SYPHILIS

“And with the Lovers Dart, the serpent’s sting / ...The Sheppard Syphilis cursed the heavens when his herds and / King’s lands were burned in a fire. / He thus is cursed with the disease” (Fracostoro 41, 74-76): The previous lines from Girolamo Fracostoro’s poem, written in 1539, likens the disease of syphilis to a snake that slithers through the body, poisoning all that it touches. Syphilis seems like a hidden disease that struck without prejudice and this simile also helps to sum up the connection between sex and syphilis. Syphilis was an intimate disease, and lovers contracted from illicit dalliances that caused extraordinary pain and suffering; it poisoned whatever it touched causing -- doctors, writers, artists, and laypeople-- to see it as a scourge sent from Heaven, a belief that impacted women and female sexuality. Indeed some early modern writers, Fracostoro and Shakespeare for example, describe the disease as a serpent in an allusion to the Edenic snake that not only led Eve away from God but also caused Adam to stray.

The Edenic snake, not only a poisonous creature, but also as a phallic one, seduced Eve in the garden. In most Christian doctrine, and in the minds of many early modern thinkers, Eve then ultimately becomes the seductress and the reason for the fall of humankind. Syphilis, as serpent, illustrates the way many early modern men viewed the disease, a corruption stemming from women who transgressed social norms; the female body hid corruption and the unsuspecting male fell victim to the duplicitous

seductions of the erring female. Thus men tended to vilify women who chose to step outside social and sexual norms.

The focus of this project is twofold: firstly, this thesis will establish an understanding of the history, the medical and psychological impact that syphilis had on women as well as why writers like William Shakespeare and John Webster found this disease so intriguing. And secondly, this study will analyze the way in which Elizabethan and Jacobean writers used metaphors of the new disease to punish their female characters metaphorically. For example, diseased male characters may be corrupt and punish the female. The female characters discussed in the following plays transgress by ignoring the prescribed roles that the Elizabethan and Jacobean societies expected women to follow. Women corrupted men through their diseased bodies and characters; metaphors of syphilis allowed dramatists to show this corruption through a vehicle their audience would have understood.

Generally writers focused on seven controversies surrounding the disease. One theory of the disease focused on the moral failings of people who contracted the disease, but also whether or not the disease was old or new, whether it originated from divine or natural causes, whether it originated on the continent or in America, whether it was a disease itself or a complication stemming from another disease such as leprosy, whether various treatments were effective or ineffective, and whether the nature of syphilis or any other disease was physiological or ontological (Bentley, Shakespeare and the New Disease 10). Greg Bentley suggests that “by the 1580s when Shakespeare began writing, most medical writers agreed that Syphilis resulted from an imbalance of humors, and that having contracted the disease clearly indicated that it was physically and morally a

taint” (15). The disease worked its way throughout the European continent before it became an obvious problem in England.

Physicians began to understand just how syphilis was transmitted when many of Charles VIII’s soldiers returned from Italy in 1495 having contracted the disease (Quetel 10). Charles VIII’s army “was an army of loose morals and loose discipline which made its way towards Naples on January 28th closely followed by a troop of beggars and prostitutes, and, at a more respectful distance, those enemy troops reluctant to do battle” (Quetel 10). The first Italian war brought subjects of all nationalities into contact with one another. Charles VIII’s mercenaries who were demobilized during the summer of 1495 spread the new disease when they returned to their respective countries (22). This was another way in which the “enemy” or the other might be held responsible for the disease; countries blamed their neighbors.

Syphilis was a new disease, and it largely changed the way in which the body and disease were understood to work. Suzanne and James Hatty argue that, “syphilis has the distinction of being the first major disease from the pre-modern period to have been observed and documented from its initial appearance....One of the frequently used metaphors characterized syphilis as the serpentine disease” (204). In Fracastoro’s poem, Syphilis, the serpent metaphor is first used in his account of the disease. The “serpent disease syphilis,” he declared, “attacked the body through the actions of ‘the fine seeds of the invisible contagion, and to treat it, one had to burn out the nasty seed and slay the crawling serpent plague’” (qtd in Hatty and Hatty 205). Although germ theory had not yet emerged, Fracastoro’s poem is, for its time, quite advanced and helped to establish

the connection between syphilis and sexual intercourse in that the disease spread from person to person contact.

However, the way many early modern people viewed the disease was far from advanced or scientific. People feared syphilis, which caused extensive suffering:

The horrors associated with “serpentine disease” became deeply imprinted in community consciousness everywhere. Like leprosy which had preceded it, syphilis became a dreaded and reviled disease. These two scourges became, according to Sontag, ‘The first illnesses to be consistently described as repulsive.’

The overwhelming response of universal revulsion stemmed from the fact that syphilis transformed the body into something shameful and revolting, into something quite alienating. This community reaction led to a resurgence of the perception that the human body was vile and disgusting, a thing to be denied and hidden. (Hatty and Hatty 207)

As with many diseases such as the plague and leprosy, the focus of people’s concern centered on the notion that, “the body’s gross physicality could ensure the endless enslavement of the soul to corporeal existence, defined, in the soul’s terms, as punishment” (Sawday 16). Disgust for the human body, specifically the female body, resulted in the quarantine and banishment of those suffering from syphilis.

Because syphilis is a disfiguring disease, it would often “cut its sufferers off from normal social lives: the civic reaction to the disease was as much about clearing the streets of victims who were disgusting to look at as about the medical help. There is a parallel with leprosy. Indeed many medical men at first argued that it was a form of

leprosy--and it carried a similar social stigma” (French and Arrizabalaga, “Coping with the French Disease” 248). Not only were the victims of syphilis exiled and shunned from much of society, they were considered to wear a sign of sin and shame on their bodies: “The divine origin of the disease was fundamental to perceptions and reactions to it. The doctors had a professional reason for declaring that their own business was only with secondary causes, but nothing they wrote could be construed as denying the reality of the first cause” (French and Arrizabalaga 249). This in turn made it difficult for some people, mostly the poor and lower class, to receive medical attention.

Further reinforcing the idea that syphilis came from divine origin, the disease was often considered to be the disease of Job. According to French and Arrizabalaga, “the cult of Job was strong towards the end of the fifteenth century. The model of Job’s afflictions allowed a double interpretation of the French Disease. On the one hand it could be argued that the disease had been sent by God to innocent people as a test of their faith. On the other hand the disease was soon perceived as connected with sin” (250). Both arguments worked to control women and the masses from questioning the monarch and other authority figures in early modern English society.

Because the disease conveyed such a stigma, many of its victims refused to acknowledge that they contracted it. However in 1539, Ulrich Von Hutten wrote about his experience with the disease; he was one of the first victims of the disease to write about his own personal experiences including symptoms and various cures that he tried (Allen 41). Also he theorized that syphilis was contracted through sexual intercourse: “There persists, within the private parts of women, lesions which remain virulent for a long time” (qtd in Ross 335). Ulrich Von Hutten, having visited prostitutes, depicted

what it was like to have this disease, and he began to make connections as to its transmission: "...Von Hutten noticed that men in their sexually active years were much more susceptible to the French disease than boys or elderly men; by 1504 syphilis was well on its way to becoming a mark of public shame-just accusing someone could bring about a lawsuit" (Allen 45). Hutten's pamphlet, "was among the earliest works to attribute the pox to sexual intercourse; thereafter the attribution became commonplace" (Quetel 8). Once the cause of the disease became known, it provided men with another way to control female sexuality. Women faced ruined reputations and blame. Men did not face the same amount of blame that women faced and men's reputations remained intact.

Before Ulrich Von Hutten wrote about his experiences, doctors, as early as 1500, blamed prostitutes for the spread of the disease. However, the idea that the disease resided specifically in the genitals was not yet a widespread belief among doctors or laypeople. Doctors thought that syphilis was spread through close contact such as kissing, interacting in close quarters, or even sharing a glass of drinking water (Siena, Foul Wards 66). Once Von Hutten made the connection between syphilis and sexual intercourse, prostitutes were blamed even more and they were punished: "If found infected, the latter [prostitutes] were consigned to a place designated by the parish or the lord of the manor for treatment, and detained until they were fully recovered" (Quetel 66). They were shunned and in London they were often locked up in what used to be lazar hospitals.

With a context established for the disease, the significance of the pox becomes readily apparent; the disease developed through licentious actions, and men easily blamed prostitutes for spreading the disease. The first English writer to study and explain the

disease fully was William Clowes in 1560. He argued that the disease was an epidemic on the scale of the plague. His tract, "A Dreadful Warning," describes the pox in London:

First, I say, the disease itself was never in my opinion more rife among the Indians, Neapolitans, yea, in Italy, France or Spain, than it is at this day in the Realm of England. I pray God quickly deliver us from it, and to remove from us that filthy sin that breeds, nurses, and disperses it...The Causes whereof I see none so great as the licentious and beastly disorder of a great number of rogues and vagabonds, the filthy life of many lewd and idle persons, both men and women, about the City of London, and the great number of lewd Alehouses, which are the nests and harbors of such filthy creatures, which houses were invented...and other houses about the City wherein an infinite multitude are daily in cure. (Clowes 74)

These comments illustrate the prevailing understanding of syphilis during the early modern period. Prostitutes, panderers, and pimps frequented the alehouses of London. The lower classes of English society spread the disease; it was still a disease of the poor, and it was primarily a moral disease. As Clowes' text indicates, the disease was, by this time, understood as a sexually transmitted disease by most, and although Clowes includes men in his tract, people saw the villains as the "Other,"--women were thought to carry the disease rather than men. This ideology vilified women especially those who did not fit the early modern understanding of female roles;--those who worked in brothels or who dared to enjoy sex outside of the strict confines of marriage.

Once doctors realized that syphilis spread through sexual contact, they “shared a general reaction of fear and disgust to the French Disease, and they often refused to deal with it when it first appeared...the learned physicians poured rhetorical scorn on the heads of the bath house keepers, barbers, oil massagers, wrestling masters and little old women of the bedside” (French and Arrizabalaga, “Coping with the French Disease” 255). William Clowes refused to treat people that he described as filthy and unrepentant of their sins. These patients were in all likelihood women who were poor, unmarried, or prostitutes. According to Brian Shmaefsky, “treatment for Syphilis varied with much of it associated with the atonement of sin. Patients were often described as loathsome or declared involved in acts of debauchery” (15). Syphilis “was almost universally depicted as a sign of moral depravity. Outward signs of illness stood for internal moral failure. The sufferers bore not just symptoms but symbols. Wishing the pox on someone was more than just wishing the physical torture of syphilis on an individual, but possibly a moral condemnation ridicule, and social scorn...It represented deviance on many levels” (Siena, Sins of the Flesh 8-9). Such was the stigma of the disease that men who became infected needed a scapegoat to blame. According to Siena, “this idea manifested itself in various explanations for syphilis’ origin, including theories about promiscuous women, miscegenation and even bestiality” (Siena, Foul Wards 65).

The widespread interest in syphilis developed from the myths surrounding its origins, and also through the horrific symptoms that manifested themselves on the outside of the body. These factors are what often led to blaming women. The manifestation on syphilis on the outside of the body, particularly on prostitutes, helped to reinforce blame.

Even though female genitals remained hidden and mysterious, men had their “ocular proof” of female transgression.

CHAPTER II

POISON AND PUNISHMENT: FEAR OF THE FEMALE BODY AND THE IMPACT OF SYPHILIS

Once medical practitioners realized that syphilis was transmitted sexually, it became the perfect vehicle for discussions about corruption in society including prostitution. This in turn impacted female sexuality, and the way through which female sexuality was understood. Syphilis became a discourse in which men would condemn what they viewed as female transgressive sexuality.

In Albrecht Durer's untitled woodcut, he depicts a man stricken by the pox (see figure 1). The man appears as a dandy, almost feminine in appearance--also perhaps French, as the French were thought to be overly concerned with appearance, a decidedly feminine trait in the early modern imagination. According to Park,

Images appear of the male as the sufferer from syphilis. Albrecht Durer in 1496 engraved the first broadside that directly represented the syphilitic. What is striking about Durer's figure is that he is dandified. His clothes and hair signify his role as fop. He is covered with the visible signs of his illness....It is the fop who is at risk from this new disease with its evident sexual origin...(57).

As the one who spreads the disease he has been feminized. This woodcut visually depicts a feminized carrier and spreader of the disease; the fop or dandy represents the *other* in nation and gender. Thus he perhaps dabbles in his own transgressive behaviors.

In the frontispiece to Joseph Grunpeck's tract on syphilis (figure 2), men are in the foreground whereas a woman has to wait for possible forgiveness and healing from the baby Christ who is in the arms of the Madonna. While it was rare for a woman who contracted the disease to be seen as a victim, Grunpeck includes a woman who has syphilis, but she must wait for healing and forgiveness behind all of the men. One might suppose that she is the opposite of the Madonna: "Morally ruined women.... were initially singled out for opprobrium in early attempts to control the pox. However, even uninfected women could provide the site for generating the pox: *A New Method for Curing the French Pox* proposes the paradigm of a sound virgin having intercourse with six healthy men and eventually infecting them all" (Quetel 12). Park argues that in "Grunpeck's 1496 frontispiece...the figure of the male sufferer is brought forward and isolated. This visual shift of emphasis creates the illusion that the male represents the exemplary sufferer, central in his suffering to any understanding of the nature of the disease. In this image the male sufferer is portrayed as the primary victim of the disease rather than its harbinger" (250, 252). Often seen in the visual representation of victims of syphilis (as in 1 and 2),

the syphilitic is seen as isolated, visually recognizable by his sign and symptoms, and sexually deviant. The fact that women as well as men suffered from this new epidemic of syphilis is reflected in many of these early images of the sufferer, but always there is a shift that separated the active suffering of the male from the passive suffering of the female. The sense of isolation of the male sufferer can be seen in a reworking of the earliest images of the syphilitic (Park 250)

The male is portrayed as the primary and active sufferer, the one who will be healed first, in both visual and written forms. The female characters not only infect men with their transgressions, but this idea of woman as infecting agent spills over into drama, infecting the kingdom as well as the individual. This idea is especially true in early modern drama, with the exception of Webster's The Duchess of Malfi, which will be discussed later.

Of course there was an abundance of misogynistic literature in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries written about the carriers of the disease: according to Jon Arrizabalaga, one sixteenth century writer, Bernadino Zambotti, states that syphilis, “springs from men who do it with women in their vulva’....The placing of the action in the female external genitals suggests a particular variety of oral sexual practice prohibited by Christian morality as ‘unnatural.’ [it] could refer to a morally ruined woman who would include prostitutes, courtesans and also elegant and flirtatious women” (qtd in Arrizabalaga et al 51). It is clear from the medical discourse of the day that women were the ones blamed and men were treated as poor, naïve victims; their actions, though considered immoral by the largely Christian populace, were mostly winked at, because it was in a man’s nature to have multiple sexual partners. They were not generally blamed for spreading the disease and usually not blamed for infecting women. A prominent Swiss physician, Philippus Paracelsus, writing during the sixteenth century, argued that “the pox arose from a leprous Frenchman having sex with an impudent whore” (qtd in Siena, Foul Wards 66). The disease comes from the “whore”; it originated from her and although a man spreads the disease, he is a Frenchman, still an “other” with loose morals. The word “leprous” implies that he was already morally tainted and the combination of the two corrupt individuals led to the pocky plague.

Syphilis furthered the already blatant disgust for the body, especially the female body. There was a prevailing distaste for the female body in part because of her menses. Syphilis would eventually become linked to menstruation, because it followed the theory of leprosy and menstruating women. Leprosy had long been thought to have been caused by menstruation (Healy 136). Significantly, leprosy had always been linked to sin, especially to sexual sin:

Leprosy had always been linked with aberrant coitus (menstruating women), with high sexual libido levels, and with prostitutes; prostitutes were identified with genital disease. The new infection [syphilis] was associated with all these and male fears about contracting it... Women's inner corruption--her sin--became emblazoned on her body as shameful proof of her infidelity (Hatty and Hatty 136).

While syphilis was not understood at first as being strictly spread sexually, the male population feared that the female spread the disease. Leprosy and syphilis caused some similar symptoms that caused the connection to be made between the two diseases. Syphilis often disfigures its victims in a similar manner to leprosy. This supposed connection was important because it led to the first sexual associations with syphilis. Once the disease was connected to sexuality, it was easier for writers and doctors to connect the disease with intercourse and prostitution.

Of course the blame can even be placed as far back as Eve: "The world Eve bequeathed is fraught with snares and traps set to catch the unsuspecting" (Siena, Foul Wards 160). Thus the blaming of women as a carrier of disease and the division of

women into groups of virgins versus whores has a long literary tradition. Suzanne and James Hatty argue that,

several of these perceptions of Women intersected and reinforced each other in the late fifteenth century. The most general of these was the portrayal of Eve as the archetypal Woman--devious, seductive, and responsible for all of the trials and tribulations of the world. This, of course, was central to Christian theology, and had been instrumental in shaping community discourse on women in general. During the latter part of the Middle Ages this image was strongly reinforced by a revival of interest in the Greek Creation myth. In this myth, Pandora, the first woman, was characterized as being as foolish, mischievous, and idle as she was beautiful--the first in a long line of such women. Like Eve who succumbed to the blandishments of the serpent and partook of the forbidden fruit, Pandora was headstrong and disobedient, She had been entrusted with a precious jar ... recklessly opened the jar and so released upon the world all the ills to which humanity has since been prone...Indeed, like Eve, Pandora was seen as to be the archetypal representation of the sexuality of women, the essentially flawed attraction that undermined men's resolve and exposed them to spiritual and physical peril. (200-01)

In many early modern minds, Eve and Pandora, the original temptresses, caused the world's plagues when they allowed corruption into the world. According to Jacqueline Eales, "the traditional estates literature of the Middle Ages had analyzed men's roles in society according to their estate or social rank, but when medieval and early modern theorists considered women they generally divided them into virgins, wives, and widows

thus placing a central emphasis on the importance of marriage to their social status” (23). In theory, marriage was a way to keep women pure.

However marriage did not always alleviate men’s fears; rather their fears heightened into an obsession with cuckoldry; women who married followed socially constructed roles, but men thought of the female gender as inconstant as well as sexually insatiable. Thus husbands felt that they did not always sexually satisfy their wives. Their mostly unwarranted fears and insecurities made them suspicious of women who did not conduct themselves in recognizable ways. When women ignored the guidelines laid out for them by a male-driven society, they faced male-executed punishments:

On the one hand women who ignored the precepts of religion or lacked the guidance of an effective male relative were potentially a source of disorder and sexual license. They typified shrews, wantons, and even witches. On the other hand women who internalized religious prescriptions and were obedient to the male head of their household were seen as role models for duty and piety, whether they were mythical or historical figures, saints or ordinary women. These two contrasting views of womanhood were common themes not only in the prescriptive literature of the day but also in fiction, ballads, drama, poetry and other forms of popular entertainment. (Eales 23-4)

Often in early modern drama, women from lower social ranks were ridiculed in terms of the pox in order to elicit laughter from the audience. Raymond Anselment argues that, “detachment and disapproval are obvious throughout the century in the aggressive satirical and moral condemnation, and even the seemingly causal acceptance of pox

transmitted some of the fears, the distance of the written word and the stage provided limited refuge from a common threat” (170). In the drama of the day there were usually an abundance of female characters who typified male fears of the female gender. These women also became the subjects of male derision and scorn. For example in The Duchess of Malfi the painted lady is scorned and derided (see chapter 4). Lower class women, those not deemed socially acceptable, did not adhere to society’s strictures. They, like the painted lady, were often unmarried, sexually active, and/or mocked male authority.

Those women that followed early modern societal rules escaped condemnation. Perhaps Erasmus’s writing on the pox is the best example of a woman who followed the rules and escaped blame. In Erasmus’ play, A Marriage in Name Only or an Unequal Match, written in 1536, two guests, Petronius and Gabriel, discuss the horror of the marriage between a virgin and an older knight. The bride, a virgin, is about to be sacrificed to the old syphilitic knight who was chosen by her parents; she is sold for a title. However the female in Erasmus’ text still falls into the whore/virgin dichotomy. Regardless of this stereotype Erasmus used, he still shows another side of syphilis’ infecting agent. Petronius states:

In my opinion, this deed is worthy of Mazentius, who (according to Virgil) tied dead bodies to living ones, fastening hands to hands, mouth to mouth. Though, unless I’m mistaken not even Mazentius was so savage that he would yoke so lovely a girl to a corpse. And there’s no corpse you wouldn’t rather be bound to than such a stinking one, for his breath is sheer poison, his speech a plague, his touch death (Erasmus 405).

In this case the groom is blamed for the spread of contagion and the woman is clearly the victim in this arrangement. She has been forced to marry the walking dead and there is little hope that the marriage will consummated. If it is, then the woman will face all the hardships that come with contracting the disease.

Although young virginal women were not usually blamed for the disease, women who deviated from social precepts often faced accusations of being a poisoner. There were many theories surrounding how women spread the disease or the “poison” to men:

Medical theorists and theologians, who appear to have been greatly concerned with women’s reproductive cycles, declared that menstrual blood contained some kind of poison which ties into the idea that menstrual blood is diseased. In effect they defined woman as a machine capable of producing a certain dose of poison every month. However, women were said to have immunity to this poison, and it was only others who were at risk in contact with them. (Anselment 202)

Women were conveniently considered immune to their own poison. This theory functioned so that men were consistently the victim.

According to physicians’ accounts, women were more dangerous when aroused and when in their menses (Healy 138). Ulrich Von Hutton, wrote, “this thing [the pox] as touching women resteth in their secret places, having in those places little pretty sores full of venom poison, being very dangerous, for those that unknowingly meddle with them. The sickness gotten by such infected women, is so much the more vehement and grievous, how much they be inwardly polluted and corrupted” (qtd in Healy 137). Luce Irigaray argues that “women’s sex organ represents the horror of having nothing to see” (qtd in Healy 137) This horror seems to have intensified by the arrival of syphilis.

Syphilis “heightened the importance of being able to see in order to decipher the marks of its presence on the female body” (Healy 137). The obsession to see inside a woman because of her hidden poisons and desires became an ongoing discourse in early modern England. This theme manifested itself in many early modern writings, most notably in Othello, which revolves around this obsession with seeing inside. Men’s fears did not just focus on the possible poison lurking in a woman’s genitals, but they also concerned the hidden lives, thoughts, and desires of women.

These ideas about the female body and her sex organs played a large role in the understanding of the transmission of syphilis: “The generally held view of medical authorities was that a ‘poison’ was involved. And given the link between the disease and the sexual act, this was not an unlikely association to be perceived by medical men steeped in the classical foundations of humanist education” (Hatty and Hatty 203). This poison that women were thought to transmit caused the disease; they faced severe punishment. Punishments of these “fallen” women were seen as a way to reform them:

The cultural constructions of the disease and its links to sexuality have meant that the issue of the moral reformation of patients has always played an important role in histories of the pox in this period. Indeed, the cause of moral reformation of patients is another theme.... Feminist scholars especially have demonstrated how public health measures to control sexually transmitted diseases often aimed to regulate working class women’s sexuality (Siena, Foul Wards 8).

Working and lower class women were the ones who usually faced the harshest punishments. They were the ones who were locked in the lazar houses whereas noble women could buy discretion by visiting private physicians (Siena, Foul Wards 56-9).

However, noble women depicted in drama face a harsher punishment than that of their foils. Queen Gertrude in Hamlet and the Duchess of Malfi both face punishments that are far worse than the bawds and prostitutes in the plays. Of course in early modern England this was not necessarily the case. Generally promiscuous women were mostly of lower class. The majority of medical discourse often tried to control promiscuity which was considered a mostly lower-class trait. As Rosebury argues:

Early modern medical writing on venereal disease often aimed at regulating behavior, especially female promiscuity. The clearest evidence of this was an influential gendered theory about the disease's production, which located the generation of the pox in the wombs of promiscuous women...In many ways the theory demonstrates how the underlying anxieties toward unfettered female sexuality informed later public health campaigns. (9)

Male anxieties stemmed from the prevailing view that women were sexually insatiable. In many of the medical texts, "women are described as intensely lustful, craving sex at the expense of their male partners' health" (Park 94).

Teachings found in the advice books written during the early modern Period outlined the role(s) of women:

The literature of the household [advice books]...sought to infuse every element in the domestic hierarchy with a moral value; and at the heart of this project was the

distinction between men's morals and women's virtue in terms of silence, obedience, submissiveness, and restraint, that placed the most stress on chastity. Biblical texts and medical theories provided the key to a basic understanding of gender in which women's descent from Eve made them morally weaker than men. Moral frailty was the foundation of female weakness. (Gowing 2-3)

In this understanding of the genders, sexual behavior was vastly different. Laura Gowing argues that men and women's "sexual acts had different contexts, meanings, and results. In or outside marriage women were culpable for illicit sex to a different degree to men...the standards by which both were judged still differentiated in just the same way between women and men" (Gowing 3). These separate standards also impacted the way diseased women and men were portrayed.

The idea of the man always being the victim of syphilis did not just result from an understanding of women as an insatiable Eve, but it also stemmed from the fact that women's genitals were hidden and complex while male genitals were visual and simple. Whereas, "women had secrets; their genitals were hidden...such matters are indeed secret because information about them is hidden inside women's bodies, inaccessible to both men and women, not because such knowledge is withheld by women from men" (Park 93, 95). One of those secrets was disease, and the pocks produced by syphilis. The pock marks were not always visual; often there would be one or two marks hidden from the male gaze: in women's complex genitals. Eventually the pock marks disappeared and no outward signs of infection remained, so men would become infected having not seen any signs of the disease on the bodies of their sexual partners. Men assumed that women

carried the pock marks in their hidden, secret places and knowingly gave the disease to their sexual partners.

Therefore when a woman carried the pox, men had a difficult time seeing it. In contrast, when men contracted it,

the infection destroyed men's members graphically...the images of the corruption of syphilis were particularly powerful, and combined with more general suggestions of decay and degeneration, made women's tails[genitals] grotesque... in a way that men's members never were. Leaky women, those mainstays of early modern physiology, were a powerful image in sexual talk. In the language of insult, men are solid beings with members that appeal to women, who take hold of them or kiss them; women are unstable vessels with dangerous, leaking orifices. (Gowing 81-82)

The slang used to describe women's genitals further supports the argument that men viewed female genitals as disgusting and poisonous: "'Burntarse whore' and 'blackarsed queane' were typical images of the pox's effects on women ...Men's members were never described with such absorbed repulsion: they might be lost, but, as far as defamers were concerned, they were not grossly infected" (Gowing 82). Men did not have to deal with such vehement repulsion when they contracted a "pocky penis":

venereal disease (like childbirth) was imagined as the visible evidence of illicit sex; but unlike pregnancy, it affected both sexes, although in different ways. The potential grotesqueness of whores' bodies allowed defamers to explore the corrupting effects of pox on them in more imaginative detail than they did for

men. Men were called ‘pocky knave,’ with occasional graphic details...(Gowing 89-90)

Syphilis was a major concern for men, and consequently when men contracted the disease, they usually faced less serious and vivid defamations.

In addition to women facing slander for a disease--that in reality they most likely caught from men, women faced another slander that they could exert control over men with their sexuality. Prostitutes faced the most severe charges in this area. Men thought that women would attempt to injure a man due to a fiendish desire to first of all harm men, and secondly they desired to satisfy their sexual needs no matter their partners’ needs. Sex was all they thought about and their needs could never be quite quenched. According to Park, some authors claimed that

a piece of iron placed in the vagina at the time of the new moon caused serious injury to the penis. ... Women were loathe to communicate this kind of knowledge except to other women, since it represented one of the most important ways they had to gratify their inordinate sexual appetites, exercise sexual autonomy, and exert their power over men in their lives. (84)

Another way for women to cause men pain included sleeping with men when women knew they would infect their sexual partners.

An issue that worried sixteenth- century and seventeenth- century English society was how to know the thoughts and heart of someone. How did one know the villain? Who was the traitor? One way in which writers portrayed the villain, or the character with a corrupted heart and soul, was through disease metaphors. The disease used most

often to describe rot within a person's heart was syphilis. Jonathon Gil Harris states, "The Pox was seen both as a metaphor for and an indicator of a larger breakdown of morals, a symptom of the deadly sins that infected the nation with increased contact with the French, through both martial conflict and travel" (134). Because of the moral values that framed the understanding of syphilis, early modern writers and thinkers stepped easily into a discussion on syphilis and witchcraft.

CHAPTER III

SYPHILIS AND THE FEAR OF THE WITCH

Many early modern people, particularly those in rural areas, viewed witchcraft as stemming from lust and from women that were never sexually satisfied. Writers described them as “women [who] satisfy their filthy lusts not only in themselves, but even in the mighty ones of the age...causing by all sorts of witchcraft the death of their souls through the excessive infatuation of carnal love, in such a way that for no shame or persuasion can they desist from such acts” (qtd in Andreski 51-52). Witches were a constant threat and worry; to men, witches were particularly sexually deviant. They were thought to give into their most depraved desires during a time when sexual acts, other than those pursuing procreation or vaginal penetration, were considered sodomy. Women, especially in rural areas, had to worry about the accusation of witchcraft.

According to Marianne Hester, because women were sexually insatiable they were “prone therefore to sinful and deviant behavior...during the period of witch hunts the patriarchal ideal for women was that they should be quiet (not scolds) and subservient to their husbands (not cuckolding the latter) ... Women were also placed in the role of moral gate keepers who socially control other women” (294, 300). Thus it was not just men who accused women of witchcraft, but many times women who accused other women.

Since women played the role of moral gatekeepers, they had a little power, at least, over other women. When they saw a neighbor who was a “loose” woman or who lived near and argued with another woman who gave birth to a child with syphilis, often the “morally upright” women would accuse and slander her. They would also accuse women of having syphilis, and though this accusation was considered a form of slander, women did not stop accusing their enemies (Hester 300). Once witchcraft became linked to syphilis, slander became an even more important issue: because of the “importance of women’s sexual reputation, it is certainly true that women felt the stigma of venereal disease even more acutely than early modern men” (Siena, Foul Wards 54). Also it was commonly thought that the more women “sinned” the more that they deteriorated physically as well as morally. Thus the witch not only carried syphilis but also caused an unborn child to contract the pox. This idea, of course, helped strengthen the connection between witchcraft and syphilis.

There was not a connection, however, between syphilis and witchcraft at first. This idea developed as syphilis advanced into its final stages (Ross 334-335). And because women were thought to be mysteries themselves, women were mostly the ones who were labeled witches; because of the hiddenness of female genitals, there was added another layer of mystery to an already mysterious and terrifying disease. Another popular theory held that witches cursed their offspring and the offspring their enemies with syphilis. Congenital syphilis most likely played a role in this idea:

the threat women held had another special dimension. When a pregnant woman was infected, even if she showed no obvious outward signs of the disease, the risk of her offspring’s contracting it was fairly high. In an age in which misogynist

tendencies would have been exacerbated by syphilis and witchcraft fears intensified by inexplicable threats to fertility and infant survival, the likelihood that women would have borne the brunt of witchcraft accusations increased enormously. (Andreski 61)

Not only was the connection between syphilis and witchcraft made because of its hereditary nature, but also because in the late stages of the disease the victim often lost her/his sense of reality¹. In effect, the bacteria had begun to eat away at the victim's brain, and would lead to insanity during the final stage. Those who reached the final stages of syphilis would exhibit strange, unexplained behaviors. These behaviors might have caused some early modern people to interpret them as signs of witchcraft. According to Stanislav Andreski, "often there were disturbances of mind in the victims. Later stages of syphilis will cause mental decline and behavioral changes which might coincide with the victim seeming like a witch" (61). In addition, "the Witch mania must also have been stimulated by the impact of the psychoses caused by syphilis: general paresis or dementia paralytica, tabes dorsalis, and cerebral syphilis" (Andreski 61). These notions fueled a genuine fear of an unknown disease that literally destroyed people on the inside as well as the outside. This fear was hard to dispel by a society that accepted the Christian concept of Satan and eternal damnation. Thus churches also did not help alleviate the fear; in fact they often helped to fuel it. Stanislav Andreski argues that, "Given the desire of the churches to supply and monopolize medical care...their inability to stop the spread of the disease might sow doubt about its teaching and even undermine the loyalty of the flock. By attributing the ills to an increased activity of Satan and a

¹ Brian Shmaesky in Deadly Diseases and Epidemics: Syphilis discusses the bacteria that causes syphilis and he also outlines the stages of the disease.

proliferation of witches, the churchmen not only staved off doubt and defection but actually raised the demand for their services and the dependence of the flock on them” (69).

The disease was such a devastating one that it defied previous medical and disease explanations. The easiest way for people to explain it was in demonic terms. This was especially true in rural areas. Not only were churches, popular lore, and inevitable dementia creating a connection between the pox and witchcraft, but so were the “cures” used, in particular mercury: “like cerebral syphilis, mercury poisoning must have reinforced the obsessive fear of witches by producing a crop of sufferings which would be interpreted as signs of bewitchment” (Andreski 76). However not everyone thought that witchcraft and syphilis were connected, even though the symptoms of the disease and its cures seemed to support this interpretation. Andreski discusses, “the Dutch physician Johannes Weyer who condemned the hunts and stated ‘that ignorant and unskillful physicians relegate all the incurable diseases, or all the diseases the remedy for which they overlook, to witchcraft. When they do this, they are talking about disease as a blind man talks about colour’” (qtd in Andreski 60). Some physicians saw the need of changing medical practice; for example, Johannes Weyer argued that diseases should not be attributed to supernatural causes just because people did not understand the diseases. However, throughout many physicians’ writings, there is a focus on the female body as the infecting and demonic agent.

The idea of witchcraft developed due to fear: fear of disease, witches, and the female body. Men discussed the mysteries of the female body through the lens of witchcraft. Whether old, young, or a mother, women were susceptible to the label of

witch; witches could be any woman no matter social status, age, or marital status. Men often focused on not only women's hidden genitalia, but also their breasts, particularly, their breasts after childbirth:

Not only do witches resemble lactating mothers, but thanks to the witch-hunters' fetishistic attention to the witches' teat, lactating mothers come to resemble witches. It is a resemblance that rests upon the identification of any female body as grotesque but the maternal body as particularly so. The maternal teat on the witch's body was systematically re-zoned downward, from above to below the waist, from the breast, where suckling would be visible, to the privy parts, deep within the enveloping darkness and privacy of the witch's skirts. (Paster 249)

This hiddenness of genitals and marks of the devil required an inspection be made of the suspected witches: "even before the imposition of any judicial pronouncement of guilt or innocence, the presence on her body of these demonic warts and nipples worked to class the witch with other kinds of deviant women, particularly sexually deviant ones: these marks 'which honest women have not'... sexual honesty or dishonesty in woman was thought to be a faculty of her will--to obey or transgress patriarchal strictures on female chastity before, during, and after marriage" (Paster 250). One might assume that some of these marks could be pock marks or scars from syphilis lesions.

These marks represented the witch's mortal transgressions, which fed into the belief that these women were thought to be only sexually sated by the devil. According to Ross,

one of the most distinctive features of the witchcraft complex during the course of the sixteenth century, one which descended from earlier beliefs but took on an entirely new and dramatic intensity--was the belief that witches had had sexual relations with the devil and that this was the source of many of the evils attributed to their sorcery (in particular, their power to cause infertility). (334)

Not only was the mother seen as allowing the devil to drink from her breast, but also some women were thought to desire the devil. The devil was often perceived as an excellent lover. He was perhaps the only being that would satiate these women's desires, and consequently "a good deal of attention was given to the large size of the Devil's penis...or the witch's manner of kissing him on the anus" (Ross 59). These women who desired the devil were not simply hags. They were portrayed as such on one hand and on the other they were temptresses. The sexual nature of witches is seen in many of Shakespeare's and Webster's dramas as well as in some visual art (see figure 3). In Albrecht Durer's The Four Witches, four women pose while the devil looks on from a corner. The witches are supple, and they exude sexuality. They display themselves for the devil while a skull rests against the foot of one of the witches. This woodcut exemplifies the sexual nature of the witch while still establishing a sinister surrounding. Ultimately the woodcut presents female sexuality as something to be feared. These themes reoccur in Macbeth.

In Macbeth, the weird sisters are transgressive and unattractive women. When Macbeth and Banquo wander upon the witches, Banquo describes them in unflattering terms: "So withered and so wild in their attire... You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret/ That you are so" (1.3.40, 45-47). The weird sisters are

described as ugly and androgynous. They are the stereotypical hag idea of the witch. Their unnatural appearance not only portrays them as transgressive in androgynous, almost masculine, terms but also in terms of disease. Obviously their souls are seen as diseased and their humanity gone, but so is their physical body. In Act 1 scene 2 line 44, they are described as having “chappy fingers,” meaning full of gaps, cleft, gaping and open, which lends itself visually to open, gaping sores found on the body of a person who contracted syphilis. They are unnatural in appearance and in actions; they have transgressed too far, and they have become witch-hags.

Even though the weird sisters are hags, they transgress sexually. According to Biggins, “there is a demonic aspect to the weird sisters but their powers are too limited for them to be seen as full fledged demons. Their claims to sexual malpractices are standard evidences of witchcraft with the demonologists” (260). The same is true in Macbeth when the weird sisters decide that a rude woman must be punished: “Her husband’s to Aleppo gone, master o’th’ *Tiger*; / But in a sieve I’ll thither sail, / And like a rat without a tail / I’ll do, I’ll do, and I’ll do...I’ll drain him dry as hay” (1.3.7-10, 18). The witches are going to interfere with the sexual relations between a husband and a wife which was called “tying the points” (Biggins 263). The sailor will be unable to perform sexually when he returns to his wife, having been completely drained of his sexual fluids.

In addition to their ambiguous sexuality, and their use of sex to enact revenge, the use of animal shapes indicates the presence of a witch: “demons could assume animal shapes for the purpose of copulation. The lack of a tail, in this case a rat, is another way a witch is discovered” (Biggins 265). The use of a rat without a tail further supports the

transgressive nature of a woman turned into a witch; this rat is unnatural and sexual in nature.

The same construction of “witch” is also metaphorically used in Macbeth. Lady Macbeth is never described as ugly but exhibits some signs of the witch. She is masculine in character:

Come you spirits

That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here. And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full

Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood; Stop up th’access and passage to remorse...

Come to my breasts

And take my milk for gall, you murd’ring ministers,

Wherever in your sightless substances.

You wait on nature’s mischief. (1.5.40-44, 47-50)

Lady Macbeth reverses roles, a transgression similar to the weird sisters. Also she has dealings with spirits in order to lose feminine virtues of empathy. Most of Lady Macbeth’s actions during the play are transgressive in nature. She wants power, and she would dash her child’s head on rocks to achieve it. There are, in addition to her witch-like qualities, allusions to disease in that her eventual guilt causes her to go mad. Another way in which to view her madness and guilt is that her transgressive behavior led to a diseased mind, a common symptom in the witch and in a victim of the pox.

Syphilis and witchcraft were very real fears during the early modern period. These fears were especially widespread in rural England and Scotland. James I had a special interest in witchcraft, and it was, in part, because of his interest that Shakespeare wrote Macbeth. Macbeth exemplifies the early modern connection between witchcraft and syphilis. Shakespeare seemed fascinated with disease, and how, particularly syphilis, could be used as a vehicle for larger didactic ideas and concepts. It became a way to explain men's fears of women and witches. In addition, the disease was also a vehicle to discuss larger corruptions found in early modern English society while still using this disease to police and punish female sexuality in drama. John Webster would later take the idea of the witch and use it to describe one of his heroines, the Duchess of Malfi. She and Lady Macbeth are both metaphorical witches, although the Duchess has many more sympathetic characteristics. She exemplifies an innocent heroine who transgresses Jacobean codes of sexual conduct.

CHAPTER IV

THE POLICING OF FEMALE SEXUALITY IN JOHN WEBSTER'S THE DUCHESS OF MALFI

The leveling of female social roles is seen in much of the drama written during the Jacobean era. For example in John Webster's The Duchess of Malfi the noble women are vilified in the same way as the women from lower social ranks. In The Duchess of Malfi, "The Duchess is an inbetween woman. She is neither whore nor chaste maid" (Jankowski 240). She is perhaps the most "real" woman that will be encountered in any of these plays. She loves too much and not well; her greatest "sin" is that she dabbles in her own transgressive sexuality. Unlike Lady Macbeth, the duchess does not have witch-like traits; rather she marries against the wishes of her brothers, Ferdinand and the Cardinal; she does not have an entirely legal marriage, and she marries beneath her station.

Because of the Duchess' actions, her brothers consider her a fallen woman, and label her a witch and later punish her. According to Rafik Darragi, "Eve's responsibility in the Fall assigned to women a totally negative role and presented the human body and carnal pleasures in a changed light. For Saint Paul, a corrupt woman is the incarnation of evil" (216). The Duchess's brothers view her as their property, and consequently they try to control her choices in marriage; she dies in the end because of her sexuality.

The Duchess is not only fighting for her own desires, but she is also fighting off the desires of her incestuous twin brother Ferdinand. She is not the one with the actual disease in the play her brothers and their court, are infected she comes to be metaphorically punished by their diseases. The court is described in terms of disease at the outset of the play. Antonio states that in, "Considering duly that a prince's court / Is like a common fountain, whence should flow / Pure silver drops in general; but if't chance / some cursed example poison't near the head, / Death, and diseases through the whole land spread" (1.1.11-15). The word "poison," along with the word "deformity," is used to describe disease spreading, and both words allude to syphilis.

Syphilis was often described as a poison but also the fountain from which spread the brothers' poison throughout their kingdoms, similar to the poison poxes spread. The malcontent, Bosola, states that "Man stands amazed to see his deformity / In any other creature but himself. / But in our own flesh, though we bear diseases. Which have their true names only ta'en from beasts... As the most ulcerous wolf... A rotten and dead body, we delight / To hide it in rich tissue... you two couple, and get you / To the wells at Lucca, to recover your aches" (2.1.45-50, 53-4, 56-7). The word "wolf" was often used to describe a person who was lecherous; the words "wolf" and "ulcerous" combined conjure the image of syphilis. Ulcerous describes the symptoms of the disease while the image of the wolf further reinforces the idea that sex is a corrupting influence in this kingdom. Another way in which the above quote references syphilis is through reference to the baths at Lucca. To recover from their syphilitic aches "at Lucca" refers to aching bones (a common symptom of syphilis), and the need to visit healing waters, thought to cure the disease. Victims often visited baths in a futile attempt to heal themselves.

Though it is in reality the court and the brothers that have become pocky and decayed, this decay of morality and consequently disease is projected onto the Duchess by her brothers, particularly Ferdinand: “You live in a rank pasture here, I’th court; / There is a kind of honey-dew that’s deadly: / ‘Twill poison your fame; look to’t; be not cunning, / For they whose faces do belie their hearts (1.1.297-300). In this speech Ferdinand uses overtly sexual imagery in order to frighten his sister, the duchess, from marrying. He uses words such as “honey-dew” and “poison” on a metaphorical level to warn his sister that if she gives into the temptation of moist, sweet sex, she will inevitably poison her reputation as well as poison her body with disease. The use of the word “poison” is significant in that women not only faced being poisoned, but they were also thought to be the poisoners.

In the case of the Duchess of Malfi, she seems to reinforce the idea that women are lusty and actually crave sex. When discussing with Ferdinand the possibility that she might remarry, she seems to allude to her desires through the use of a diamond metaphor that implies she wants to sleep with more than one man. She states that “Diamonds are of most value, / They say, that have passed through most jewelers’ hands.” Ferdinand counters with, “Whores, by that rule, are precious” (1.1.290-92). He has told his sister that she is nothing more than a whore, a diseased woman, if she follows her own desires. This is an example of how men tried to control women’s sexual appetites. Women were not allowed their own desires. They were punished when they sought their own needs and actualization.

This idea of “unfettered female sexuality” extended to the marital bed where men were not only afraid of what their wives might do to them, but they were also afraid that

they were becoming cuckolds. In the Duchess of Malfi's case, it is not the husband who fears cuckoldry, but her brother, Ferdinand. However, like Ferdinand, "husbands cannot admit to being cuckolded; ...whore is a word of vague yet telling power against women with no equivalent against men; and... marriage is perceived as a continuous economic and sexual exchange of goods which women's unchastity disrupts" (Gowing 1). These ideas extended to the literature of the period including advice books and literary texts.

This warning against female sexual transgression is further reinforced by references to witches and "giving the devil suck." As Ferdinand tells the Duchess, when he warns her to control her sexual desires, he says that those women who are "loose in the hilts," "Are witches, ere they arrive at twenty years; / Ay, and give the devil suck" (1.1.297-302). If she were to follow her sexual desires and become pregnant out of wedlock, her child would be a bastard, a devil from an unholy union. This idea is clearly seen in Ferdinand's speech to the Duchess of Malfi. He is concerned with what she may do as a result of her insatiable lust. He is not simply worried about her reputation or her possible contraction of disease as he would have her believe. He wants to see inside her, not just her genitals, but into her innermost thoughts and desires. Since he is unable to see inside of her, he likens her to the unknowable witch.

In fact, Webster relies on several assumptions about women, particularly the painted lady. She is the prototypical version of a bawd and witch. It is the painted lady that, according to Bosola, exhibits the most witch-like qualities, and implicit in her name is "Implicit in the comment on the side effects of painting and cosmetics is the image of woman as harlot" (Darragi 216). Bosola describes the lady as so ugly that she needs her paintings:

from your scurvy face-physic. To behold thee not
painted inclines somewhat near a miracle. These, in thy face here,
were deep ruts and foul sloughs the last progress.

There was a lady in France that, having had the smallpox,
flayed the skin off her face, to make more level; and
whereas before she looked like a nutmeg-grater, after she
resembled an abortive hedgehog” (2.1.21-27).

Of course the painted lady is not literally a witch, but she is described as such because she is likely a bawd, and it is likely that the pock marks on her face were a result of contracting syphilis. Cosmetics were used to hide faces ravaged by the pox, and these diseased faces were often aligned with witchcraft and sexually promiscuous women as well as older unmarried women. The assumptions at the time were that women needed to hide not just their pock marks, but also their witch marks such as warts or extra nipples. (Paster 250)

Not only is this woman old, a harlot, and using paint to cover her past sins, she keeps in her “closet,” according to Bosola, many devilish devices for her face: “One would suspect it for a shop of witchcraft, to find in it / the fat of serpents, spawn of snakes, Jews’ spittle, and their young children’s / ordures, and all these for the face. I would sooner eat a / dead pigeon, taken from the soles of the feet of one sick of the / plague, than kiss one of you fasting” (2.1.32-35). These lines indicate a clear connection between disease, female sexuality, and witchcraft. Bosola’s reference to her foul breath

reminds the audience that her corruption is on the inside as well as the outside. Also these lines tie into the idea of the female as poisoner. Darragi argues that, “Bosola’s reference to the shop of witchcraft exteriorizes another assumption related to the use of cosmetics by women, namely the relationship between poison, female coquetry, and the various more or less toxic cosmetics” (216).

Not only did paintings or cosmetics add to a woman’s coquetry, but as Siena states, cosmetics hid the disfiguring effects of syphilis:

The extreme disfiguring capabilities of this disease [syphilis] contributed greatly to the personal effects of the disease, which went well beyond the physical and scarred on a more intimate level. This was especially the case considering how the ideal of the polite body came increasingly to be symbolized in this period by clean expanses of white skin, which the propertied classes strove to obtain through even more application of powder and cosmetics. With pustules, ulcers, and scabs, the pox stood as the antithesis to this unblemished ideal. (Foul Wards 34-35)

Women of the upper as well as lower classes did their best to hide their disfigurements. Their desire to hide behind cosmetics as well as their hidden parts caused them to be labeled witches and liars, as Ambrose Pare states “there are...wicked, cunning, dissimulating magicians and wizards who poison people, and they do their dirty work in pact with demons, who are their slaves and vassals” (qtd by Darragi 224).

Women carried a poison and when the symptoms were displayed on their face, they used cosmetics to hide their pocked complexions as a way to seem more attractive to men while luring unsuspecting men to their arms, consequently poisoning them.

However not all witches were perceived as old and ugly women needing cosmetics to hide pocked faces and poisoned interiors. There was also the temptress. The Duchess is a beautiful woman; she was married, and she has several admirers including her brother, Ferdinand, who uses overtly sexual metaphors to discuss her choices in love. Ferdinand is jealous and angry when he states, “Would I could be one, / That I might toss her palace ‘bout her ears, / Root up her goodly forests, blast her meads, / And lay her general territory to waste / As she hath done her honours” (2.5.17-20). He consistently uses sexual terms when speaking of his sister. He clearly erotizes her, and he desires to see her hidden parts. Ferdinand describes her “goodly forest” which implies her beauty and his desire; later he damns her, because of her body or appearance.

In another instance Ferdinand unashamedly details how his sister has become a whore: “a sister damned; she’s loose I’th hilts, / Grown a notorious strumpet” (2.5.2-3). According to Ferdinand, the duchess has become so sexually promiscuous that she is known by her subjects as a whore. He also details her sexual proclivities while using veiled threats against her life:

You are my sister,

This was my father’s poniard: do you see?

I’d be loth to see’t look rusty,

‘cause’ twas his.

I would have you to give o’er these chargeable reveals;

A visor and a mask are whispering-rooms

That were ne'er built for goodness: fare ye well—

And women like that part which, like the lamprey,

Hath ne'er a bone in't" (1.1.322-26).

Ferdinand's misogynistic rant against women in general and the duchess in particular is clearly phallic; he assumes that women love a male's member. The use of the phallic poniard and then the lamprey both imply a preoccupation with penetrating his sister and destroying her because she did not follow the patriarchal rules laid out by him. He even more explicitly in Act 4 blames her sexuality and beauty for his and her downfall: "Damn her! That body of hers" (4.1.122). His preoccupation with her body, and consequently her sexuality, leads him to understand her desires in terms of witchcraft. He has turned her into a witch as a way to explain his sense of her betrayal with Antonio. This is seen earlier in Act 1, scene 1, lines 297-302. Her witch status allows Ferdinand to punish her beyond measure.

Even though Ferdinand tries to blame the Duchess' sexual choices on witchcraft, he still desires her, and he sees her as a bewitching temptress. There are also numerous artistic representations of the beautiful temptress and witch (see figure 3). She is young, lusty, and a temptation to men, thus removing most of the blame from men and placing it on women just as Ferdinand blames the Duchess. We see this in Durer's engraving (figure 3). The four naked women are obviously enjoying themselves without a man in the picture. However in the left hand corner lurks a devil. He illustrates the sinful nature of the witch, and that she has been tempted by him; she has transgressed with him. She is another Eve as seen through her brother's eyes. She is the Duchess of Malfi.

CHAPTER V

NOBLEWOMEN, PURIFICATION, AND THE POX IN THE PLAYS OF SHAKESPEARE, TOURNEUR, AND WEBSTER

The male protagonists in The Revenger's Tragedy by Cyril Tourneur, The White Devil by John Webster, Hamlet and Troilus and Cressida by William Shakespeare, are similar to the previously discussed male protagonist, Ferdinand. They are each acting as policing agents to control female sexuality. They are, however in many ways, different from Ferdinand; for example, they seek revenge for cruel murders whereas Ferdinand seeks revenge out of incestuous desires for his sister as well as his need to control her sexuality. Webster, and especially Shakespeare, are able to enter disease discourse with a complete understanding of the pox's symptoms and treatments that allowed them to use the disease as an effective teaching tool.

It is obvious that Shakespeare must have known a great deal about the disease by the overwhelming number of times he alludes to it. He entered easily into the medical discourse of the day even using common slang terminology for the disease in his play Troilus and Cressida. For example, syphilis was often referred to as the "Winchester goose." Of course there were many other slang terms for syphilis in early modern plays such as references to baldness and the pox.

In addition to the above terms for syphilis, in Hamlet, Shakespeare alludes to the common and slang description of syphilis as the serpent disease to show the change in the kingdom once the king has been murdered. Not only does the “serpent” disease corrupt the physical body with ulcers and lesions, it corrupts the soul. This serpent metaphor appears in the garden scene of Hamlet when a snake supposedly kills the king.

However, the snake in the garden was actually Claudius, the king’s brother: “Tis’ given out that, sleeping in my orchard, / A serpent stung me... / The serpent that did sting thy [Hamlet’s] father’s life / Now wears his crown” (1.3.35-40). Johannes Fabricius argues that the snake in Hamlet represents the lechery of Claudius, the king’s brother and represents a metaphorical allusion to syphilis (236). However, this account of the snake in the garden represents more than simply the lechery of the brother. The garden was an Edenic world. The queen, Gertrude remained untainted until the poisoning or the pseudo-snake bite occurred. She is thereafter portrayed as an Eve, a whore.

The snake in Eden, as the serpent syphilis, has corrupted an otherwise ideal world. The snake is not just a corruption of the macrocosm, but it also represents the corruption of the microcosm in that syphilis acts as a corrupting poison on the individual. Later in the dialogue between the ghost of Hamlet’s father and Hamlet, syphilis as a poison is alluded to:²“The leprous distilment, whose effect / Holds such enmity with blood of man / That swift as quicksilver it courses though / the natural gates and alleys of the body... / Most lazar-like, with vile and loathsome crust, / All my smooth body” (1.5.64-68, 73-74).

² A helpful discussion of syphilis as a poison is found in Fabricius’ Syphilis in Shakespeare’s England, pp. 44

The crust that covered the king's body could be the cankers and blisters that often cover the bodies of the syphilitics.

Gertrude becomes a rotted and rank individual, a pseudo-strumpet through her amorous activities with Claudius. Hamlet describes Claudius' and the queen's bed as rank: it is "stewed" in corruption (3.4.95). Brothels often took the slang name of stew; Hamlet has just described Gertrude and Claudius' bed as a brothel, thus making Gertrude the whore and Claudius the diseased lecher. As previously noted, during Shakespeare's day prostitutes were considered the primary carriers of syphilis. Gertrude, having become the metaphorical prostitute, further supports the view of Claudius as the corrupt sufferer of syphilis. However, Gertrude does not fit in the usual Renaissance understanding of prostitutes as vectors.³ Hamlet only alludes to her as such before she has a change of heart, therefore cleansing her of her rotten interior. This passage in Hamlet is a reversal of roles, in the sense that Claudius has actually spread the infection.

Before Gertrude is redeemed, she must learn of Claudius' rotten interior and acknowledge her own mistakes. When Hamlet persuades his mother away from Claudius he tells her: "Such an act/...Calls virtue a hypocrite, takes off the rose/ From the fair forehead of an innocent love / And sets a blister there" (3.4.42-45). Hamlet's use of the word "blister" is a likely allusion to syphilis further describing Gertrude as a prostitute. According to Paster, "Hamlet's relation to and recognition of power and authority, in part represented his mother's body, which is both demonstrably maternal and highly eroticized mother and not-mother" (230). She is clearly a sexual object for her son just as

³ In Berman's article, "Shakespeare and the Law," he argues that prostitutes were seen as evil spirits out to destroy men. He discusses this concept in terms of Measure for Measure. Another source that discusses women and syphilis is Ross's article "Syphilis, Misogyny, and Witchcraft in sixteenth-century Europe."

the Duchess was a sexual object for her brother; underlying incestuous desires, disease, and syphilis connect The Duchess of Malfi, and Hamlet.

Another woman partially blamed for the problems of a kingdom and for murder, is Vittoria in The White Devil; she is blamed because of her sexual sin. In John Webster's The White Devil, the female protagonist has not done anything overtly wrong, or murderous, other than sin sexually with a married man, and yet she is the one who faces the most severe punishment for the murders of her husband and her lover's wife, Isabella. Vittoria not only faces the harsh all-male courts, but even her former lover turns on her: "Ud's death, I'll cut her into atomies / And let th'irregular north-wind sweep her up / And blow her int' his nostrils. Where's this whore...Prevent cursed disease she'll bring me to, / And tear my hair off. Where's this changeable stuff" (4.2.41-43, 45-46). And "Thy loose thoughts / scatter like quicksilver. I was bewitched, / For all the world speaks ill of thee (4.2.97-98). The disease mentioned above alludes to syphilis in that it is a cursed disease that a "whore" gives a man; this is further supported by the next lines in which quicksilver or mercury is referenced.

Vittoria replies to these accusations with her own allusions to disease: "go, go brag / How many ladies you have undone, like me. / Fare you well sir; let me hear no more of you. / I had a limb corrupted to an ulcer, / But I have cut it off; and now I'll go / Weeping to heaven on crutches" (4.2.114-120). She describes her love for him as a diseased limb, a limb with an ulcer, which hints at syphilis. Such descriptions capture their love perfectly for Jacobean audiences; it is a diseased love that needs to be cut off to be removed. There is no place in the kingdom for their transgressive love, which leads to disease, moral corruption, and ultimately murder. Although Vittoria is blamed for

corrupting and bewitching him, she responds with strength, and she does not allow her lover and the courts to destroy her. She, like Gertrude, is seen as corrupted due to her sexuality, although she does play a more active role in the murders than Gertrude, who seemingly had no idea that Claudius was going to murder her husband.

While Vittoria does tell her lover a story that seems to imply that he should murder their spouses, she does not actually physically harm her husband and Isabella. However, like Gertrude, she is vilified due to her perceived corrupted interior. She is called a whore, and not just a whore, but a diseased one:

I'll give their (whores) perfect character. They are first,

Sweet-meats which rot the eater; in man's nostrils poisoned

Perfumes. They are cozening alchemy,

Shipwrecks in calmest weather! What are whores?

Cold Russian winters, that appear so barren,

as if nature had forgot the spring.

They are the true material fire of hell...Ay even man's perdition, his sin...What's a whore?

She's like the guilty counterfeited coin

Which whosoe'er first stamps it, brings in trouble

All that receive it. (3.2.80-85, 87, 98-100)

The court's character of a whore is described in terms of a poisoner, not just to men's souls, but also as disease that rots men inside and out. "Rot" and "poison" along with "material of hell's fire" allude to syphilis and the way that it destroys a man's interior and exterior. Also these lines showcase the fear of women as changeable who hide their dark secrets and still seem beautiful and good. Men fall victim to her outward "seeming," but she is the corruption of true women and she destroys those who touch her. The male court paints this portrait of Vittoria. Not only is she described as a whore, but also she is described as the devil in the title of the play. Vittoria is a temptress, another Eve:

What goodly fruit she seems;

Yet like those apples travelers report

To grow where Sodom and Gomorrah stood,

I will but touch her and you shall straight see

She'll fall to ashes...

Were there a second paradise to lose

This devil would betray it. (3.2.62-66, 68-69)

Similarly to the Duchess of Malfi and Gertrude, Vittoria corrupts men and the kingdom; she is described in terms of rot and disease. However while Gertrude and the Duchess undergo types of reformation, Vittoria never does. She remains the same and does not seem to acknowledge her actions as sins, further infuriating the men.

Conversely in The Revenger's Tragedy, Vindice's mother must undergo the same type of purification as Gertrude. She became a bawd by trying to give her daughter's chastity to the Duke's son. Vindice and his brother, Hippolito, must remove this disease from her. They describe her actions in terms of sores and lesions:

O you of easy wax, do but imagine,

Now the disease has left you, how leprously

That office would have clinged unto your forehead

...At your foul name

Green-coloured maids would have turned red with shame. (4.4.62-66)

The mother's sin had to do with sexuality and greed. Her desire for greed infected her just as syphilis would have physically affected a person. She tried to destroy her virgin or "green-coloured" daughter's honor. The use of the word "leprously" conjures images of pock marks and rotting flesh. Another way in which this line can be understood as a syphilis metaphor is that sin and disease are inevitably tied together in the Elizabethan mind. In these lines there is the juxtaposition of the virginal, "green-coloured" girls, and the sexually corrupt, foul named, mother. Thus syphilis, as a disease describing her actions, is apropos.

Like in Hamlet, Troilus and Cressida uses allusions of syphilis to critique the society in which the characters live. It is a dark problem play, and according to Bentley:

The abundant images of syphilis support the notion that [*Troilus and Cressida*] is primarily a satire. Images of disease, primarily venereal disease, while not the

only figurative device nor the exclusive property of satire, are indeed important weapons of the dramatic satirist. The Elizabethan age was literally or metaphorically associated with sexual license, slander, and usury. Shakespeare satirizes the physical, moral and spiritual degeneration of English society. (20)

Because Troilus and Cressida is more of a satire, it is a departure from the previous plays in that it does not focus on underlying incestuous tensions nor are there many allusions to witchcraft. However, it does focus on the corruption of kingdoms, which is partly blamed on female actions and the actions of bawds. This play emphasizes the way syphilis not only corrupts the female protagonist for transgressive sexuality, but because of Helen's transgression the entire kingdom is corrupted and thrown into battle over a "placket": "Mercury loose all the serpentine...After this, the vengeance on the whole camp! Or/ rather, the Neapolitan bone-ache! For that, me thinks, / is the curse dependent on those that war for a placket" (2.3.11, 17-19). And according to Greg Bentley, the use of the themes of war and love work well together to critique a society that was too licentious. Bentley argues that

decadent behavior, whoring and flesh trading were common business in Elizabethan England, particularly London, a business that caught the imagination of writers including Shakespeare. The whorishness of the lower classes was notorious. Also the promiscuity of the court did not escape direct censure. Even Helen and Cleopatra are associated with Bankside Prostitutes in literature. (Shakespeare and the New Disease 47)

Many of Shakespeare's plays including Troilus and Cressida deal with the flesh trade and utilize the concept of whore versus Madonna in order to critique society while at the same time establishing a scapegoat for the spread of the new disease, the "whores" or women who did not fit into their accepted role. However Shakespeare also attacks the go-betweens or bawds that were seen as one cause for the degeneration of Elizabethan England. According to Bentley,

Shakespeare attacks the real and pervasive problem of sexual license.

Shakespeare satirizes society's heedless pursuit of the popular commercialism of the day--the trade of human flesh; that he ridicules a burgeoning class of agents and brokers represented by Pandarus, the real villain of the play. Shakespeare also develops the topics of love and war or love and the noble warrior to represent society's romantic ideals, ideals which he contrasts with a single underlying theme: the degeneration of love, marriage, and fidelity into lust and promiscuity.

(44)

Troilus and Cressida's characters are not able to create and maintain healthy and lasting relationships. They are the one couple who first seems to have a chance at the ideal, but they are quickly corrupted due in part to Cressida's actions. Troilus and Cressida is similar to Hamlet and the previous plays that have been discussed earlier; they all critique female sexuality through venereal disease imagery as well as trying to control transgressive sexuality. While people were condemning the licentiousness in society, they were still patronizing prostitutes, brothels, and bawds. Greg Bentley argues that "*Troilus and Cressida* mirrored society's general sexual license by exhibiting their impudent behavior. People from all classes were buying, selling, or trading human flesh.

Shakespeare satirizes this flesh trading by employing many references to commerce and syphilis” (51-52). These references help the play act as a mirror in which English society saw what needed to change in itself and what needed to change in the kingdom as a whole. The punishment for a licentious society was disease.

In Troilus and Cressida, at the beginning of the play, the stated punishment for the Trojans and the Greeks is syphilis. The disease has infected both camps. The two camps loosely satirize Elizabethan English society. The war began over a woman; Helen is the curse of both camps. However, Shakespeare’s play focuses on Cressida and her “false” affections for Troilus.

Once Cressida is sent back over to the Greeks, it becomes clear that she is not the innocent loving woman that she seems when she is with Troilus. Nestor sees through Cressida’s act when he states that “There is language in her eye, her cheek, her lip, / Nay, her foot speaks; her wanton spirits look out / At every joint and motive of her body” (4.5.56-58). According to Bentley, “Cressida’s knowledge of sexual experience suggests the play’s dominant theme is the emphasis on the corrupting and decaying effects of excess sexuality and promiscuity” (68). She is not the virginal ideal of womanhood that Troilus believed her to be. She slips, without much prodding, into Troilus’ bed.

Cressida is vilified, even though she is sent back and forth between camps becoming something like the soldiers’ chattel, while her uncle Pandarus is the true villain of the play, and he is the cause of much of her misery. However, when one of the high ranking soldiers shows interest in her, she coyly accepts his advances: “Sweet honey Greek, tempt me no more to folly” (5.2.18). She describes her feelings for the Greek as a

“plague, and madness” (5.2.35). The handsome soldier has easily led her away from Troilus, reinforcing male fears that women will turn men into cuckolds to fulfill their insatiable sexual appetites. She compares her desire to a plague and madness, two references to the diseases that she will eventually contract.

Later though when she is alone, she again seems to find the Greek attractive:

One eye looks on thee,

But with my heart the other eye doth see.

Ah poor sex! This fault in us I find:

The error of our eye directs our mind:

What error leads must err. Oh then conclude

Minds swayed by eyes are full of turpitude. (5.2.111-15)

These lines support the masculine idea that women were insatiable and easily tempted by sex. Thus her fickle and inconstant behavior leads to the folly of one love and to the worst punishment of love, syphilis.

Another character who seems to also equate his love for Cressida as a disease is Troilus. He describes his love for her as a wound: “I am mad / In Cressid’s love. Thou answer’st she is fair; / pour’st in the open ulcer of my heart / Her eyes, her hair, her cheek, her gait, her voice” (1.1.53-56). Troilus does not have just any wound, however, but an ulcer, a symptom of syphilis. His love is not described in loving language but rather in terms of disease and corruption. Similar to The White Devil, sexual desires and

deeds are a corruption of pure love; they are a diseased part of the body, which must be removed in order to receive redemption. The word choice foreshadows Cressida's eventual, sexual, betrayal and the fact that their love will not last. These two characters are diseased even if only metaphorically so. As David Bevington states, other representations of Cressid show her as diseased because of her sin. For example, "In Robert Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*, Cressida becomes a leper and beggar...Her name has become synonymous with womanly infidelity" (456).

In addition to Cressida's mistakes and Troilus' heartache, there is her uncle, Pandarus, who acts as a bawd. Pandarus even alludes to this when he says "Let all constant men be Troiluses, all false women Cressids, and all brokers-between Pandars" (3.2.201-03). Pandarus is the character who is most to blame for Cressida's "downfall," he is the one who constantly pushes Troilus and Cressida together. Throughout the play, Pandarus is clearly acting as a bawd rather than as a concerned, protective uncle.

Pandarus often alludes to his own disease: "And I have rheum in / mine eyes, too, and such an ache in my bones that, unless a man were cursed, I cannot tell to think / on't" (5.3.103-06). He appears the bawd for two reasons; first he exhibits the symptoms of syphilis, which signifies his corruptions. He refers to his aching bones or that he has syphilis; he has been corrupted through his dissolute life. Secondly, in further support of his role as bawd, he turns the other way and allows Troilus and Cressida a night to consummate their love. Pandarus negotiates their night together watching over their sexual activity to insure that they are not discovered.

By the end of the play Pandarus is fully enmeshed in his role as bawd which ends in disease:

A goodly medicine for my aching bones! Oh,

... but that my fear is this:

Some galled goose of Winchester would hiss.

Till then I'll sweat and seek about for eases,

And at that time bequeath you my diseases. (5.10.35, 53-55)

In his final monologue, he states that the end result of transgressive sexuality is to contract syphilis from him and his trade; he shows no remorse but rather a desire to pass on his sickness and decay. Greg Bentley explains further that Pandarus' monologue is filled with allusions to syphilis: "His allusion to the bone ache makes it clear that he isn't just listing random diseases... Pandarus reveals that people seek him out, want to ply his trade, until they are virtually destroyed by their sexual license" (Bentley 58, 88). Since Pandarus' monologue is at the end of the play, it is to be understood as one last condemnation of transgressive sexuality and also one last time to place some of the blame on the transgressive female or prostitute.

In conclusion, these plays' female protagonists suffer in excess; they are "more sinned against than sinning." Male characters judge the females' sexual choices, and the women are condemned whether they are truly to blame or not. They must either repent and change, or they will suffer death and the death of those that they loved. These female characters are described in terms of disease, which is a way that they are punished for

transgressing the social, sexual norm. Syphilis was an excellent literary tool for writers to critique society and punish transgressive women. Syphilis had a hold on people's imaginations and people's fears in early modern England. It became a common and devastating disease laying waste to its victims as seen in many medical texts of the day. Clowes writes that,

Unless the Lord be merciful unto us, and that the magistrates do with filthy vice, as also for the reformation of those places above mentioned. And except the people of this places do speedily repent their most ungodly life and leave this odious sin, it cannot be but the whole land will shortly be poisoned with this most noisome sickness... what number of vile creatures that otherwise would infect many good and honest people, seeking with like care to restrain this grievous and beastly sin, and yet the number still increase. It happened in the House of Saint Bartholomew very seldom, whilst I served there for the space of nine or ten years, but that amongst every twenty diseased persons that were taken in, ten of them had the pox. (74)

The pox is described as a new plague that was rampant throughout society; it was a punishment for their sins. Largely attributed to divine punishment, syphilis placed a person's rot on the outside instead of remaining hidden on the inside, allowing people to judge who was morally corrupt. Syphilis metaphors allowed readers and audience members the ability to anatomize metaphorically the female characters in order to see what "bred about their hearts."

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APPENDICES

Pictures referred to in the text



Figure 1: untitled. Albrecht Durer (Karl Sudhoff. The earliest printed literature on syphilis)



Figure 2: Frontispiece to Joesph Grunpeck's tract on syphilis. (Karl Sudhoff. The earliest printed literature on syphilis; being ten tractates from the years 1495-1498, in complete facsimile, with an introduction and other accessory material).

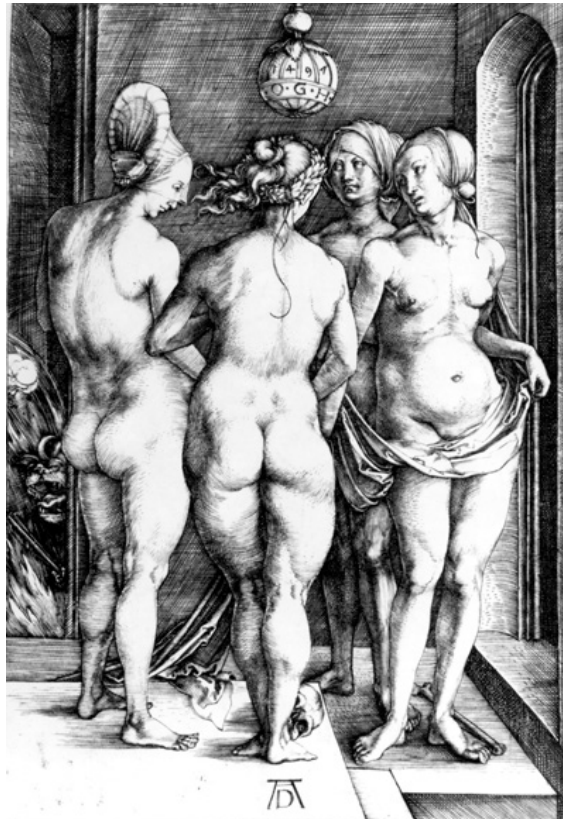


Figure 3 Albrecht Durer, The Four Witches, engraving, 1497. Taken from "The Foul Fowler Found Out: on a Key Motif in Durer's Four Witches."

VITA

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Scope of Study:

The focus of this project is twofold: firstly, this thesis establishes an understanding of the history, the medical and psychological impact that syphilis had on women as well as why writers like William Shakespeare and John Webster found this disease so intriguing. And secondly, this study analyzes the way in which Elizabethan and Jacobean writers used metaphors of the new disease to punish their female characters metaphorically. This thesis also relies on the metaphor of syphilis, as serpent, which illustrates the way many early modern men viewed the disease, a corruption, a poison, stemming from women who transgressed social norms; the female body hid corruption and the unsuspecting male fell victim to the duplicitous seductions of the erring female.

Findings and Conclusions:

The female characters in the included plays transgress by ignoring the prescribed roles that the Elizabethan and Jacobean societies expected women to follow. These women are punished because they step outside of their prescribed role. The imagery of syphilis acts as a punishment whether metaphorical or literal.

ADVISER'S APPROVAL: Dr. Edward Jones
