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Syphilis: The History of an Eponym

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In the late fifteenth century, a hideous contagious disease, never previously seen or heard of, swept across Europe. It was "so cruel, so distressing, so appalling," said Joseph Grünpeck (1473–1532), "that until now nothing more terrible or disgusting has ever been known on this earth". The "never previously seen or heard of" disease was syphilis. When it first appeared, physicians and lay people had no term for it and invented various names to describe its causes and symptoms. The present essay is an ontological typology of many of those common names, before syphilis, an eponym named after a mythological figure, became the standard name for this sexually transmitted disease. Although syphilis is a common name rather than the kind of proper names generally discussed in *Names*, its eponymous character lends itself to some of the same ontological and epistemological analyses used to examine proper names.

KEYWORDS syphilis, disease, pox, *Lues Venerea*

Introduction

The first outbreak of the disease occurred in 1492 following France's King Charles VIII's invasion of Italy, which he planned to use as a base from which to launch a Crusade to the Holy Land. In the wake of the invasion, parts of Italy and especially Naples were suddenly overcome by the "new and unheard of disease" in territories occupied by Charles' 50,000-man army. Following Charles' eventual defeat at the battle of Fornova in July 1495, possibly because the disease weakened so many of his soldiers they were unable to fight, he disbanded his army of mainly mercenaries and the hundreds of prostitutes traveling with them. Jobless, the soldiers and prostitutes dispersed across the Continent and beyond (Robinson 1943). A year later in 1496, Italian bishop Agostino Giustiniani (1470–1536) wrote in despair that "a kind of disease has spread, which was not known by the present people, and which was not previously named, without any remembrance by the living, and without any inkling from the ancestors" (Tagarelli et al. 2011c, 229).[1,2]

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A cruel pestilence

Italian physicians of the time were the first to describe and treat the new disease. Since they had no clinical name for it, they simply called it *peste cruelle*, "cruel pestilence", and *ignota pestis*, "unknown pestilence" (Tagarelli et al. 2011c, 232). Calling the disease a pestilence explained why it affected everyone, including the Pope and cardinals. Coradinus Gilinus, an Italian physician, explained that it was the will of God. "The Creator on high, being angered with us at this time for our impious deeds, is afflicting us with this most terrible distemper that is raging not only in Italy but throughout the whole of Christendom" (as quoted in Amundsen 1996, 327). The disease was a *flagitium Dei*, "a scourge of God," sent to punish mankind as a whole, not individuals for their sins.

German chaplain Joseph Grünpeck disagreed. Since innocent children acquired the disease during birth, he maintained the pestilence was not a Divinely sent punishment. Although God allowed the disease to occur, Grünpeck traced its physical cause to a *conjunctum corpora superiora*, the "conjunction of superior bodies," that occurred in 1494 when Jupiter, Saturn, and Mars, three of the highest ranking heavenly bodies, lined up in a row. The rare event was considered portentous. Ten years earlier, an astrologer had prophesied a new and horrible disease would erupt in the wake of the upcoming alignment of these planets (Williams 1994, 1565). Shakespeare alluded to this explanation when he invoked a "planetary plague" for its appearance in Athens (*Timon of Athens*, 4.3.117). Physicians preferred a more mundane and more proximate source. They named it *nuova malattia degli eserciti*, the "new disease of the armies" (Tagarelli et al. 2011c, 232).

Eponymic naming

Based on the Aristotelian idea that disorders are inherent in all members of a group (Pearce 2011), "new disease of the armies" was more appealing to physicians because it gave the disease an identifiable source based on recent historical events. That reasoning was made even more specific by giving it an eponym that attributed it to the French. Since the outbreak coincided with the French invasion of Italy (Lancereaux 1868, iv), *mal Francese* and *male de Franczo*, "the French evil", rapidly became its colloquial eponymous name. To formalize it, physicians Latinized it as *morbus Gallicus* in their medical treatises (Sudhoff, Singer, and Sigerist 1925, 123). William Clowes, the first physician in England to write about syphilis in the late sixteenth century, commented that at St Bartholomew's hospital in the last nine or ten years on average, every other patient appearing at the hospital had *morbus Gallicus* (Fabricius 1994). In England, syphilis was colloquially called the "Frenchman" as early as 1503; those infected with the disease were "frenchified" (Williams 1994, 548) or suffered from "the French" (Williams 1994, 542). Neapolitan also had some currency in England. A "Neapolitan" was someone infected with the "Neapolitan consolation" or "Neapolitan favor" (Williams 1994, 940).

Eponyms such as *morbus Gallicus* and Neapolitan consolation are common nouns derived from proper nouns, the names of people or places, real or imaginary. In medicine, the names of real people or places often appear in adjectival form in the names of diseases, parts of anatomy, procedures, etc. In those instances, the eponymous part of the common name is capitalized, e.g. Down syndrome, Lyme disease (Abel 2014). In instances in which the adjectival part of a term is derived from a literary proper name,

those terms are typically spelled with a lowercase letter, e.g. faustian bargain, utopian community. The name syphilis belongs to the latter category. Syphilis is an eponym derived from a mythological figure (see below). As such it is spelled in lowercase except when it heads a sentence. Although it is a common name rather than the kind of proper names generally discussed in *Names*, its proper name derivative lends itself to some of the same ontological and epistemological analyses.

Eponymously naming syphilis after an enemy nation quickly became a universal trope after its initial appearance. As the disease spread throughout Europe and abroad, eponymous labels became a way for every nation to blame its enemies for originating or spreading it. Unwilling to accept responsibility for its origin, the French named it *mal de Napoli*, *mal Napolitain*, and *morbus Napolitainus*, the "*Neapolitan evil*" (Sudhoff, Singer, and Sigerist 1925, xix, 123). The Poles in turn called it the "German disease." In Russia, it was the "Polish disease." Among the Portuguese, it was called the "Castilian disease." In North Africa, the Moors called it the "Spanish evil," after their nearest European neighbor. In Turkey, Christians were blamed for bringing the "evil of the Christian god" into their country. In India, where the Portuguese arrived in 1498, locals called it the "Portuguese evil" (Lancereaux 1868, iv) and the "foreigner's disease" (Penzer 1952, 65). In Japan, where the first recorded outbreak occurred in 1512, it was called the "Tang sore" (because the Chinese were known as the "men of Tang"), "Chinese ulcer," and the "Chinese pleasure disease" (Kohn 2008, 224). These chauvinistic denigrations were metaphors for the body politic. The French term *mal*, "evil", and its cognates implied not just physical or mental evil, but a moral evil as well (Hale 1995, 556). The eponym implied that the designated nation itself was evil.[3]

Despite its various national and local attributions, the "French disease" remained one of the most common names for the disease into the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. German writer Ulrich von Hutten explained that the reason he used the name *morbo Gallico*, "French disease", in his book was solely to conform to a usage that had become prevalent across Europe. Had he used some other name, he said he feared he would not be sufficiently understood (Buret 1891, 29).

Symptomatic naming

Although jingoistic eponymic names for syphilis upheld nationalistic honor, they soon fell out of favor for the same reason that eponymic naming is now discouraged in medicine (Abel 2014). As von Hutten noted, different names for the same disease in different countries created confusion and precluded a clear and consistent concept of what was being discussed (Abel 2014). To create standardization, physicians and lay writers gradually replaced the vague terms "evil" and "disease" with more descriptive symptom-related names. Syphilis, for instance, was named after its most obvious symptom – the disfiguring pustules called "pox," a name derived from an older Anglo-Saxon word *poc*, or *pocca*, referring to sacks, bags, pustules, or pouches. Although "French" and "Spanish" continued to be used in conjunction with pox as late as the early twentieth century (*Oxford English Dictionary*), those eponymic adjectives were also gradually jettisoned. Since the pustules resembled those caused by smallpox, syphilis' larger, deeper, asymmetrical, and more disfiguring pustules were called the "great pox;" the other pox's smaller, shallower, symmetrical pustules were called the "small pocks."

By Shakespeare's time (late sixteen–early seventeenth century) the "great" prefix had been dropped. Pockes or pox simply meant syphilis, and pocky or pockified were terms for those affected by the disease. Shakespeare also uses the term idiomatically in curses such as a "pox on 't" (*Twelfth Night*, 3.4.372), "a pox on both your houses" (*Romeo and Juliet*, 3.1.88), and "a pox o' your throat" (*The Tempest*, 1.1.39–40).[4]

In France, where smallpox had previously been called *La Vérole*, smallpox was redubbed, *La Petite Vérole*, "the small veriole," to contrast it with syphilis, *La Grande Vérole*, "the great veriole," and as in England, simply *Vérole*. There is little doubt in what Shakespeare intended in naming a frequent brothel customer Monsieur Verollus in *Pericles*. In Germany, the disease was called *Pösen Plattern*, "bad pox" (Tagarelli et al. 2011c, 228).

In Spain, Portugal, and Italy, colloquial names for the disease were variants of *bubos*, "boils." Variations in Spanish included *Las Bubas*, *Bua*, *Buas*, *Buuos*, *Boas*, *Buba*, *Bubas*, *Boboas*, and *Buvas*. Portuguese variations appeared as *Os Bouba* or *Boubas*. Italians named it *Il bozzole* and *bolle* (Hudson 1961, 46). Common names for syphilis' pustules included *male pustulae*, *malos pusulos*, *pustolae malae*, "evil pustules," and *grandi pustule*, "great pustules." In northern Italy, the colloquial name was *Il Tavelle*, "the tiles" (Tagaralli et al. 2011b, 229).

Pox saints

Beginning in the sixteenth century, syphilis acquired a new type of eponym associated with the names of saints believed to have had the disease and been miraculously cured. Typically, the saint's name was preceded with *mal* or *morbus*. *Le mal de Saint Mein*, "the saint Mein evil," was named after St Maen. Born in the sixth century CE in Wales, St Maen journeyed to various places including Brittany, where he founded the abbey of St Méen. Initially his name was linked to and invoked for healing skin diseases, especially those affecting the hands, owing to the name's similarity to *le main*, the French word for "hand," and became more specifically associated with syphilis. In Germany, where the same saint is called Sant Menus, syphilis is still familiarly called the Mevian Disease (Williams 1994, 43).

Le mal de Saint Job, "the evil of S. Job," is of course named after the biblical Job who stoically suffered the terrible skin sores sent by God to test his faith. The sores were initially regarded as leprosy. After the outbreak of syphilis in the late fifteenth century, they came to be regarded as symptomatic of syphilis (Tagarelli et al. 2011a, 1202). Other saints whose names appear as synonyms for syphilis include St Roch, known by many related names throughout Europe, such as Saint Rocco in Italy and Saint Rochus in Germany (Bloch 1901–1911, 299; Whitwell 1940, 11), and St Evagrus/Evagrius (Lancereaux 1868, iv). St Euphemie was one of the few female saints to have her persona used as a name for syphilis (Buret 1895, 18).

Venereal connection

While "the great pox" gave syphilis a symptomatically related name, some physicians recognized that the genitals were the first part of the body to be affected. Although syphilis' primary stage genital symptom (a chancre sore) does not appear until a week

and sometimes a month after sexual contact, many physicians were aware that sexual intercourse was an element in the disease's etiology. Some of the early colloquial names referring to its sexual origins and effects were *mentulagra*, "malady of the virile membrane" (Buret 1895, 15); and Pope Alexander VI's Spanish physician, Gaspar Torella, named it *pudendagra*, "disease of shameful parts" (Buret, 1895: 150). Jacques de Bethencourt (1527) was the first to give it a mythologically derived eponym, venereal disease, naming it after Venus, the Roman goddess of love (Acton 1841, 1). *Lues Venerea*, "venereal plague," coined by Giulio Cesare Vanni (1585–1619), was shortened to *lues* and continued to be used up to the end of the nineteenth century, often with another eponymic appellation, Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, e.g. *lues Aphrodisiac*, *Aphrodisiaca lue*, "aphrodisiac plague" (Tagarelli et al. 2011b, 1316).

Syphilis

Syphilis' present name comes from a poem, *Syphilis Sive Morbus Gallicus*, "Syphilis or The French Disease" (Wynne-Finch 1935), written in 1530 by Italian physician Girolamo Fracastoro (1478–1553). Penned as a Greek mythological epic, Syphilis is a shepherd whom the god Apollo punished for some transgression with "foul sores in his own body," and "limbs racked with pain … And from him, the first to suffer it, the disease took its name and was called Syphilis" (3.33–334). Syphilis, however, did not become the most common name for the disease in the medical community until around 1850 (Castliglioni 1941). The reason for its widespread adoption was that that name had none of the pejorative national associations and none of the moral connotations associated with the more than 400 other names and its variants in different languages (Bloch 1901–1911).

Despite its disentanglement from national identities, the name remained firmly associated with moral transgression. People in the nineteenth century studiously avoided saying the word in polite discussion and physicians disguised it in their medical jargon. In the approximately 30,000 novels published in England between 1820 and 1880, none directly alludes to venereal disease (Sutherland 1987, 25). The silence continued in public discourse into the early twentieth century in America. When the New York State Legislature debated a bill dealing with controlling the spread of syphilis, the bill was denounced by one of the legislators because the word syphilis would "corrupt the innocence of children, and would create a shudder in every decent woman and man" (Sherk 2004, 148). To avoid the taboo against the spoken or written name, newspapers relied on euphemisms such as "blood poison," "bad blood," and "blood disease." Physicians relied on circumlocutions such as "paresis," "tabes dorsalis," and "paralytic dementia," and omitted the diagnosis on death certificates (Hayden 2003, 63–64).

The magic bullet

At the beginning of the twentieth century the microscopic corkscrew-shaped bacterium *Treponema pallidum* that caused the disease was identified, and a method for accurately detecting it was developed by German bacteriologist August Wasserman, giving rise to the eponymous "Wasserman Test." However, it was not until 1920 that a new and effective treatment was developed by German physician Paul Ehrlich. Ehrlich named it Salvarsan, from the word for "salvation," but it was soon popularized as the "magic

bullet." Prior to Salvarsan, the most common treatment was some form of mercury, which led to the popular expression "an hour with Venus and ten years with Mercury" (Hayden 2003, 237). Although it did cure the disease, Salvarsan contained arsenic. Ironically, repeated treatments eventually resulted in arsenic poisoning. The eventual discovery of penicillin in 1928 finally resulted in a non-lethal treatment for syphilis.

Notes

1. "Disease," the name for a condition of the body or an organ whose functions is disturbed, originated in the fourteenth century. Its present meaning of a "species of disorder or ailment, exhibiting special symptoms or affecting a special organ" dates from the mid-fifteenth century (*Oxford English Dictionary* 1933).
2. Syphilis is a much less virulent disease than when it first appeared. Although still frightening, by the late sixteenth century it was no longer a sudden killer (Sutherland 1987, 23). Syphilis' symptoms are typically divided into three stages. The primary stage refers to the first appearance of symptoms, which occurs about a week to a month after initial exposure, and typically takes the form of a chancre, a one to two centimeter round ulcer with sharp raised edges, that feels hard to the touch, at the point of contact. A short time after its appearance, even if untreated, the chancre disappears without leaving a scar. A few days or weeks later in the untreated condition, a secondary stage of infection occurs, characterized by the appearance of numerous symptoms, the most common of which are copper-colored pustules all over the body. When the pustules break, a disgusting pus leaks out which leaves a crusted disfiguring sore or "crust." Other common effects include pain in the joints, bone degeneration, hair loss, hoarseness due to an ulcerated larynx, and gnarled testicles. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the treatment for the latter was their immersion in boiling oil, which turned the testicles into "potatoes." During the tertiary and final stage, which may not occur until some years later, and occurs only in relatively few cases, blindness, facial disfigurement, paralysis, insanity, and finally death occur. Shakespeare's "down with the nose … take the bridge quite away" in *Timon of Athens* (4.3.157–158) refers to collapse of the nasal bridge. John Aubrey, in his *Brief Lives* (1898 [1669], 206), said William Davenant's sex with a prostitute "cost him his Nose." The reason Erik, in Gaston Leroux's *Phantom of the Opera* (1911, 11), wears a mask is to hide the "two big black holes, as in a dead man's skull," his nasty yellow skin, and the absent nose, "a horrible thing to look at," the vestiges of third-stage syphilis. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde describes how the face of the dissipated Dorian held its beauty while the rest of his body was ravaged by syphilis.
3. The consensus among most historians today is that the disease originated in America and that, on their return, one or more of Columbus' men infected prostitutes who in turn infected the armies marching across Europe at the time. Support for the New World origin hypothesis is based on signs of syphilis in the bones of Native Americans from graveyards dating prior to Columbus, and its absence in skeletons from pre-Columbian Europe (Arrizabalaga, Henderson, and French 1997, 4–19). The archaeological evidence is buttressed by a treatise by a Barcelona physician, Dr Ruy Diaz de Isla (1462–1542), stating that in 1493 he had treated several of Columbus' men who had just returned from the New World for a disease "previously unknown and unheard of" immediately after their return from Haiti. After Columbus' second voyage in 1494, physician Diaz de Isla said he treated many more such cases (Taylor 1895, 19).
4. Various writers on Shakespeare have pointed out that references to syphilis and other sexually transmitted diseases are so pervasive in Shakespeare's plays, e.g. *Troilus and Cressida* has 51 lines and *Timon of Athens* has an even greater 65 lines referring to syphilis (Benley 1989; Fabricius 1994; Ross 2012), he seems to have had a "venereal obsession" (Burgess 1970, 221), possibly because he suffered from the disease himself (Ross 2005, 399–404). Pox and its variants continued to be used as a name for syphilis up to the nineteenth century, e. g. *poxter*: someone afflicted with the disease; *poxologist*: a pox doctor; and *poxology*, the study of syphilis (Farmer and Henley 1902, 278).

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