

Echoes of Alterity in Fracastoro's *Syphilis*

Alexandra de Brito Mariano
University of Algarve
amariano@ualg.pt

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Review article

Girolamo Fracastoro (Verona, 1478 – Affi, 1553) was a prominent Italian humanist physician notable for having published a poem about a rather un-poetic subject: syphilitic disease. It happened in mid-sixteenth century, in the context of a mysterious epidemic that was raging throughout the European continent. Right from publication in 1530 Verona, his *Syphilis* poem became highly popular and its reputation and merit never waned. In the first book, Fracastoro describes the arrival of the disease in America and its diffusion in the New World, and it is from this poem that the disease receives the name by which it is known today. Not neglecting Fracastoro indisputable contribution to the field of medicine or other scientific aspects, we intend here to recall his most famous didactic-epic mainly as literary specimen. Book 3, in particular, gets a deserved highlight amidst the literary corpus of America's discovery—for quite some time it was the only original poetic treatment of Columbus' first voyage—it also displays some attention to native Indians conveying images of alterity as perceived by European explorers.

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Syphilis, sive morbus Gallicus libri III by acclaimed physician and poet Girolamo Fracastoro (1478-1553) is one of the most famous Renaissance poems written in Latin.¹ If in the first place we could say that a disease, an illness in particular such as syphilis, would be a very unlikely theme not appropriated at all to be sung in verse, the truth is that this work, since its publication in Verona in 1530, became

* All URLs accessed May 2018. I will follow the Latin text and its translation from Eatough's edition, repeated references to the same author will be abridged. I am particularly grateful to my anonymous reviewers for their useful suggestions.

¹ René Rapin (1674, 31) considers "L'ouvrage le plus beau qui se soit fait de ces derniers siècles, en Vers Latins dans l'Italie, & qui est écrit à l'imitation des *Georgiques* de Virgile." Fracastoro published two more books on syphilis, and his *magnum opus De contagione et contagiosis morbis et curatione* (1546) where he defined the contamination as the cause of infections and where he classified the disease according to three transmission methods: by direct contact, by fomites or by distance. A year before his death, he published three philosophical dialogues: *Naugerius sive de Poetica*; *Turrius sive de Intellectione* and *Fracastorius sive de Anima*; a poem about hunting dogs was for a long time attributed to Fracastoro but is in fact due to Annibale Croce's (see Santiago Martínez, M. 2018, 591-604).

very popular and its merit and reputation never diminished since—there are 270 known editions up to 2015, and it is translated into several languages.²

Devoted to the disease, as mentioned ‘French disease’ (*morbus Gallicus*),³ which spread through Italy and the rest of Europe from 1495, the poem—with 1,346 dactylic hexameters—describes its origin, symptoms as well as suggested treatment to this venereal disease.

Fracastoro was an important thinker and scientist of his time namely the Venetian Renaissance, a period of intense voyages of discovery, the ascendancy of gunpowder, invasions and battles ravaging an Italy then divided into powerful city-states.⁴ The same era saw the diffusion of the printed book, the renewal of interest in classical past and sources as well as significant advances in science and technical fields. We can say the Veronese physician accompanied and actively engaged in some of the most stimulating and decisive exchanges of his time. Although medicine was his passion, this nobleman educated at the University of Padua was a true humanist whose interest extended to various subjects such as mathematics, astronomy, physics, geography, botany and geology; Copernicus, the renowned astronomer and mathematician, was in fact one of his friends. As a physician Fracastoro is currently considered as one of the founders of modern medicine. He was a precursor in proposing that micro-organisms were responsible for transmission of diseases by way of a scientific hypothesis of small particles he called “spores” three hundred years prior to germ theory being made popular by Pasteur and Koch in the 19th century.⁵

Without neglecting Fracastoro's contribution to medicine or in the area of geography,⁶ we should recall this famous epic, an outstanding example of humanist rhetorical conventions, displaying discernible echoes of alterity, specifically in

² Still useful although no longer updated bibliography: Baumgartner and Fulton 1935, 11. Latest data available through: WorldCat catalog <<https://worldcat.org/identities/lccn-n82-27929/>> *Syphilis* was extensively read; it was included in a Neo-Latin anthology edited by Alexander Pope (*Selecta Poemata Italorum*. London: 1740, vol. 2).

³ Interestingly the disease was named after the country in which is supposedly originated: in France – Italian disease; in Italy – French disease; in Portugal – Spanish disease; in Arabia, Persia and India – Portuguese disease. See Díaz de Isla, 1542, fl. iii.

⁴ Verona was controlled by the powerful city of Venice. Italy did not yet exist as a nation, and the kingdom of Naples had no formal ties to Venice. But common interests led Verona to stand next to Naples against the invading French forces of Charles VIII, while French pretensions over Italian territory led to almost half a century of war and the creation of great enmity, especially following the occupation of Naples by Carlos VIII (Gould 2000, 40).

⁵ In fact there was no effective treatment for syphilis till 1909 with Paul Ehrlich's 606 (Salvarsan) preparation. More easy and genuine cures became possible only in 1943 with the discovery and development of penicillin (Gould 2000, 48).

⁶ He suggested the use of rectilinear maps, the use of word *poles* for the ends of earth's axis and discusses about the flooding of the Nile, for example.

anthropological sense that scholars like Johannes Fabian (2006) designate as construction of “cultural others” or otherness (Strong 2004, 341-359).

It is commonly assumed that syphilis came to Europe from America, carried by sailors from the first Columbus expedition in 1492, was then incubated in Spain and France and scattered throughout Italy along with the invasion of Charles VIII of France in 1494 and finally reached the rest of Europe as the army of this monarch disbanded. Ruy Díaz de Isla (1462–1542), a Spanish surgeon who worked at Hospital de Todos os Santos in Lisbon and the first known supporter of the New World origin theory, oversaw the care of a few individuals from Columbus' crew, thus providing us with an excellent account of the disease evolution and possible cures, in a twice published work.⁷

Five centuries later the controversy among supporters of the different theories— Columban, pre-Columban and evolutionist—has not been resolved yet even with significant scientific and technical advance in various fields of knowledge (e.g. genetics, biochemistry and archeology). Although unproven, the American origin of syphilis is today the most commonly accepted theory.

As mentioned above, *Syphilis* is comprised of three books. The first two were completed in 1525 and the third book was added in 1530 by the insistence of Cardinal Bembo (to whom the work was dedicated to include the details of a new treatment, a guaiacum based treatment).

Book 1 discusses origins and causes of the disease, Books 2 and 3 are dedicated to cures, and also narrate myths in closely parallel structure, devised to illustrate the two most popular cures: mercury and guaiacum wood tree based treatments.

In the first book, Fracastoro expounds the awfulness of the disease, capable of eating a man alive crawling on his body like a snake. It came in an age of conflict and catastrophes. This scourge was influenced by astral bodies and its ethereal forces. It recalled past plagues such as the Black Death, giving Fracastoro license to evoke distant ages and exotic places. This ailment evolved against the background of cosmic change, its contagion airborne as Lucretian *semina* through the air.

Book 2, the most purely didactic part of the poem, was devoted to cures. Fracastoro begins by dissertating on his time, an era during which catastrophes

⁷ Written in 1510 and published in Seville in 1539, 1542. Díaz de Isla explains: “... according to its ugliness I do not find something to which more naturally I can compare it except the serpent, because just like the serpent is ugly and fearful and frightening so this disease is ugly, fearful and frightening.” See Díaz de Isla 1542, fl. iii. Translation from Spanish of the previous quotation is mine. The first description is of the Venetian military surgeon Marcello Cumano in 1495, see Tognotti 2009, 109, n. 10. Fracastoro on the other hand claims in *De contagione* that the epidemic, which could eat a man alive, creeping like a serpent over his body, could not have come from America and probably did not have a single point of origin.

were being compensated for by faraway journeys of exploration, bringing with them a seemingly endless wealth of prevention and curing resources. Some medicines, such as laxatives, were handled in hushed tones because they were considered unsuitable themes for worthy poetry. The writer also pulls the shades on the disease's sexual origin. Imitating Virgil's Aristaeus epyllion—the finale and the climax of the *Georgics* (4.315-558)—Book 2 closes with the myth of Ilceus and the hazardous mercurial treatment.⁸

We shall look more closely at Book 3 which is relevant among the body of works devoted to America's discovery. The scene takes place at an island in the West Indies called Ophyre that can be identified as the fictional equivalent of Hispaniola. After a long voyage the Spanish Armada reach the island, the men refresh themselves and go for hunting birds in the forest. They kill several birds, but one of these birds warns them that a disease will come upon them because they killed birds sacred to the Sun God and that they must seek remedy in the forest. After a while, Columbus and his entourage meet an Indian king and indigenous people and are witnesses to an unknown religious ceremony with a weird ritual. The king of the island explains it to his guests. He tells them the tale of Syphilus the shepherd who (like the hunter Ilceus in the myth introduced in Book 2) had allowed himself to succumb to arrogance (the hubris). By blaspheming against the Sun God he became the first victim of a new disease sent by the avenging God. Only through Juno's and Tellus' intercession did the Sun God spare Syphilus from death, accepting a bullock as scapegoat. Nonetheless, the disease was to remain endemic on the island afterwards. The malady became known as syphilis after Syphilus' name and what the Spanish had just seen was a yearly sacrifice in expiation and memory of Syphilus' sacrilegious sin and the Sun God's ultimate compassion. The newcomers also learn that a forest of guaiacum trees, from whose wood and bark remedies for the disease can be extracted, was made to grow by the Sun God. This is when Columbus realizes that the prophecy bird was announcing the Syphilus disease and the healing power of those trees.

Back to Europe, the Spanish discover that the disease of Syphilus arrived there first, leaving the people defenseless against its raging spreading. Therefore, in the second voyage, they bring back some wood of the guaiacum tree that goes

⁸ Ilceus killed a stag prized by Diana. Seeking revenge, Diana persuades Apollo to inflict a dreadful disease on him. Afflicted by this disease, Ilceus prays to Callirhoe for the cure and she tells him that he must go down to the Underworld to search for it. After getting there, he baths in a sacred river whose waters carry sulphur and mercury, which heals him. Afterwards, he must show respect to Diana, the national gods and the powers of friendly sources (see *Syphilis*, 2.283-423). For an analysis of epyllion, see e.g. Hardie 1998, 44-52, and Korenjak 2012, 519-536. There are close resemblances in Aristaeus and Ilceus' myths: sin against the gods through the killing of their creatures, punishment by syphilis, expiation by sacrifices and finally salvation. See Fracastoro 1984, 22.

on to prove its healing powers also in the Old World.⁹ In the famous *recusatio* at the beginning of Book 3, the poet states that he will not write an epic about the Spanish expedition. Paradoxically, *Syphilis* is the first Neo-Latin poem to integrate within an epic the story of Columbus' first voyage in 1492/3, and for a longtime, the only serious and original poetic analysis of the theme (Frank 2003, 526; Fracastoro 1984, 20; Hofmann 1994, 421-656). "As a matter of fact", as Hofmann writes (1994, p. 426), "in Fracastoro's poem Columbus discoveries are narrated not to replace traditional geographic lore with new maps of the Earth, but mainly in order to provide the historical setting for the myth of the origin of syphilis."¹⁰

In fact, it cannot be said that the commander's voyage along with his crew are the main theme of the epic that Fracastoro presents in Book 3, since the poet turns this journey to the New World and its exploration into a device for the display of the disease origin and the guaiacum remedy that was then becoming popular. On this assumption, the depiction of the island's indigenous inhabitants and their customs is also not the poet's main intention, although the third book displays native Indians, drawing a favorable image of the natives that differs strongly from the more usual European approach.

Fracastoro begins Book 3 with a description of guaiacum,¹¹ the sacred tree solely capable of granting relief from the sufferance inflicted by the disease (3.6-7): *Sancta arbos, quae sola... / ... finem dedit aerumnis*), and also closes his tale by reiterating its superb virtues (3.405-419). Saying that the Spaniards were the first to receive the favour from the Gods and marveling from the help at hand (3.401-402: *Munera vos Divum primi accepistis Iberi, / Praesens mirati auxilium*), they will be the first to make the tree known to Europe. Meanwhile, the description of guaiacum "turns into an epyllion of Columbus's voyage to the West Indies", as Eatough suggests (1984, 23), the paradisiac Americas and its exotic settlers.¹²

In fact, Neo-Latin literature was a fertile ground for the development of epyllion, i.e. a short mythological hexameter narrative, either as a poem on its own or as a part of a longer poem, as is the case of *Syphilis*.¹³

⁹ See Hofmann 1994, 427.

¹⁰ See Hofmann 1994, 425-426. Only in Giovanni Pontano's book *De hortis Hesperidum* (1.346-363), published posthumously in Venice in 1505, there is mention to the following expedition to the west, referring in this case the poet to the trip of Vasco da Gama in 1497/9 until Calicut.

¹¹ First he quickly places his narrative in a land far away (3.1-3). Specific information about *Guaiacum officinale* (Linn.) available at: <<http://www.wood-database.com/lignum-vitae/>>

¹² On the Columbus "epyllion", see Fracastoro 1984, 23ff, 169ff.

¹³ Korenjak 2012, 519-520 states: "... the epic genre was very popular and flourished in many different varieties: encomiastic, biblical, hagiographic, burlesque, didactic epics, and so on were written in huge quantities. On the other hand the would-be author of a short mythological epic had at his disposal a vast array of models" since "The better part of the pertinent texts from antiquity known to us today circulated in early modern times."

As a literate man of the Italian Renaissance, Fracastoro was surely familiar with the classics and their interpretations at the time. He must have been in contact with a substantial body of Latin text—Vergil and Ovid probably have figured prominently in his early education—and he must have been acquainted as well with interpretations of classical stories through writing and fine arts works of contemporary artists of the time.¹⁴

In addition to classical themes, the Veronese poet must have also benefited from historical sources and accounts. Fernández de Oviedo (1478–1557) and Peter Martyr d'Anghiera (1457–1526) were his close friends and regular correspondents and are two major sources of our knowledge of Columbus' discoveries. Anghiera, in particular, describes the first contacts of Europeans with American Natives in his *Decades*, collected in a posthumous work entitled *De orbe novo* (1530).

Both historians shared a romanticized vision of the New World as a paradise of sorts, a view gathered from the testimonies of Columbus himself, an opinion which is also manifest in Fracastoro. Our poet is well within the epic tradition where reality and precise historical fact are much less important than literary tradition, thus otherness—alterity, the new and radically different character of the New World—is illustrated through contrast and analogy with the well-known traditions of antiquity (Hofmann 1994, 652).

Let's have a look at a few examples of Columbus' epyllion in Book 3 (v. 102ff.), starting with the fleet crossing the ocean. The commander, the great-hearted hero (3. 104: *magnanimus... heros*), whom scholars identify as a fictional equivalent of Columbus, prays to Diana to help his men in finding *terra firma*. Like Aeneas reaching Italy he aimed to found new cities and give names to a new land.¹⁵ The goddess listens to his prayer and takes him immediately to a large island, Ophir (3. 121: *Ophyre*), fictional equivalent of Hispaniola in the West Indies, as previously mentioned (Fracastoro 1984, 104-105; 178).

The representations of Paradise bring in vast rivers, beautiful landscapes, innocent naked people and birds. All these attributes abound in the New World; the natives are also good herbalists who lived in forest, unlike corrupted Europeans who inhabited cities. Fracastoro stressed their bliss and harmony. He recognized Columbus' mission to urbanize America, but stays on the side of the Indians and the natural man.

In the poem, according to Hofmann (1994, p. 427), natives and Europeans will mingle easily, but not without introducing violence to the island in the first

¹⁴ For a recent and comprehensive study of Fracastoro's *Morbus Gallicus* reception of Vergil, Ovid, Catullus, and finally, Lucretius, see Vaananen 2017.

¹⁵ Hofmann highlights a *Georgics*' centric view of the poem; nonetheless argues that Aeneas is Fracastoro model to his Columbus figure. See Hofmann 1994, 428 and also Hardie 2004.

place. As soon as the ship comes ashore, the sailors go hunting for birds in the forest and shoot a number of parrots; one of the birds warns them that they will be struck by a terrible disease because they have killed birds sacred to the Sun God, and that they must seek remedy for their crime from the forest itself:

... nec sera manet vos
 Illa dies, foedi ignoto quum corpora morbo
 Auxilium sylva miseri poscetis ab ista,
 Donec poeniteat scelerum. (*Syphilis*, 3.189-191)¹⁶

(... you should all expect / a day will come, very soon, when your bodies succumb to an unknown disease, / and in your wretchedness you will beg the help of this forest / until you repent of your crimes.)

The frightened sailors ask the sun god for forgiveness, honoring him with sacrifices. The poet leaves the Spaniards struggling with fear and doubt. Birds do in fact play a significant role in Columbus story. He relied on them for navigation purposes, he heard a nightingale while he was nearing land, and like everyone else, he was awestruck at the sheer number of parrots, and these innocent birds could be easily grabbed. Conversely, on this Edenic disruption (*Syphilis*, 3.151ff.) Fracastoro is clearly inspired by Virgil (*Aeneid*, 3.219ff.)¹⁷ Moreover, the violence inflicted on such innocent beasts appears to mirror the violence that would befall the Indians themselves.

Later in the poem Columbus and the Spaniards meet an Indian king and his people. Fracastoro story emphasizes the pacific and friendly character of the natives. Indians greet the sailors cordially and offer them food, grain and gold. Sailors and natives immediately exchange gifts, the leaders shake hands and seal a peace treaty. The native chief presents himself dressed in a native outfit:

Alter gossipio tenui pectusque femurque
 Praecinctus, viridi limbum pingente smaragdo,
 Ora niger: jaculo armatur cui dextera acuto,
 Squamosi spoliolum sustentat laeva draconis.¹⁸

¹⁶ Quint (1993) asserts that Fracastoro's parrot is the model for Camões' Adamastor (a personification of the Cabo das Tormentas, later Cape of Good Hope). Hardie supports Quint's assertions that the parrot, like Adamastor in the *Os Lusíadas* (V, stanzas 37-60), is an expression of "imperialist bad conscience about the suppression of native resistance" (Hardie 2004, 229).

¹⁷ See Vaananen 2017, 14-48, especially p. 27.

¹⁸ *Syphilis*, 3.220-223: "One was girded about his thighs and chest by a light cotton dress, its border picked out in green emerald, his face black; his right hand was armed with a sharp javelin, his left supported the armour stripped from a scaly reptile." Fracastoro is referring probably to an iguana or armadillo which Columbus mistook for a crocodile. See Fracastoro 1984, 188.

On the other hand the Spanish captain was:

Alter at intexto laenam circumdatus auro,
Quam subter rutila arma micant, capiti aerea cassis
Insidet, et pictae volitant in vertice cristae:
Fulgenti ex auro torques cui candida colla
Cingunt, atque ensis lateri dependet Iberus.¹⁹

The woolen garments of the Spanish commander contrasted strongly with the cotton outfit, a native plant, of the Indian king. Fracastoro describes the native king in a manner that evokes the Arcadian king Evander (Vaananen 2017, 150). The native leader's garb was rather classical but instead of the purple strip of a Roman magistrate the border is picked out with green emeralds. Columbus on the other hand is thoroughly adorned with gold. His *candida colla* (white neck) contrasting with *ora niger* (black face) of the native king.²⁰

Light spears made of sharpened canes and an armor stripped from some scaly reptile, possibly an iguana, armadillo, or even a crocodile, were the American king (the Cacique) weapons while a Spanish sword (*ensis... Iberus*) and a bronze helm completed the description of European commander (Columbus), also a king (*Syphilis*, 3. 218), underscoring the difference between Old and New World leaders and emphasizing the disproportion of forces and power of the Spanish in contrast to the Native.²¹

In conclusion, it should be restated that the third book of Fracastoro's *Syphilis* is still the most successful epic-didactic poem on Columbus and an important mark in the history of medicine. It is also the sole Latin epic-didactic example of Columbus theme and, as pointed out by Heinz Hofmann, it draws a thoroughly positive picture of the New World and its inhabitants, seen neither as cruel cannibals, nor warlike Amazons, as mentioned by others; the religious customs and culture of the Indians are not ridiculed nor commented upon with derogatory remarks, and the Europeans make no attempts to convert the Indians to Christianity or to lay claim to their territories, reducing them to the status

¹⁹ *Syphilis*, 3.224-228: "But the other was wrapped in wool, inwoven with gold, beneath which red glowing armour flashed, on his head there rested a helmet of bronze, on its crest colored plumes flew. His white neck was enclosed in a twisted collar of shining gold, and from his side hung a Spanish sword."

²⁰ In fact, natives were not black as the poet points out contradicting the testimony put forth by Columbus in his journey's diary in 1492 (where he states that the Indians were "not black... tanned by the sun, but this does not affect them much"), but probably of a light color like the Canary Islanders, the Guanches. See Fracastoro 1984, 198.

²¹ For a list of studies that approach the view of the New World by Europeans in the framework of ancient literary, historical and mythological tradition, see Hoffmann 1994, 652, n. 704.

of common Spanish subjects or, worse, mere slaves.²² Much to the contrary, there is indigenous issued knowledge to be carried across the ocean, and shared, benefiting the Old World with its kind gift.

In finishing, the third book closes as it began (v. 35ff.) with a solemn invocation to guaiacum, accompanied with praise for the New World:

Salve magna Deum manibus sata semine sacro,
Pulchra comis, spectata novis virtutibus arbor:
Spes hominum, externi decus, et nova gloria mundi.²³

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²² See Hofmann 1994, 654.

²³ Syphilis 3.405-407: "Hail great tree, issued from a sacred seed sown by the hand of the Gods, with beautiful tresses, esteemed by your virtues: hope of humanity, pride and glory from a foreign new world."

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ODJECI „DRUGIH” U FRACASTOROVOJ *SYPHILIS*

SAŽETAK

Girolamo Fracastoro (Verona, 1478. – Affi, 1553.) bio je istaknuti talijanski liječnik humanist poznat po tome što je objavio pjesmu o jednoj prilično nepjesničkoj temi – o sifilisu – sredinom šesnaestoga stoljeća u kontekstu tajanstvene epidemije koja je harala europskim kontinentom. Čim je objavljena u Veroni 1530. godine, njegova je pjesma *Syphilis* postala vrlo popularna, a njezina reputacija i vrijednost nije nikad izbljedila. U prvoj knjizi Fracastoro opisuje dolazak bolesti u Ameriku i njezino širenje u Novome svijetu, i upravo je po ovoj pjesmi bolest dobila ime po kojemu je danas poznata. Ne zanemarujući Fracastorov neosporni doprinos na području medicine ili u nekom drugom znanstvenom pogledu, naša je namjera ovdje prikazati njegov najslavniji didaktički ep uglavnom kao književni uradak. Osobito treća knjiga zauzima s pravom istaknuto mjesto unutar književnoga korpusa o otkriću Amerike – dugo vremena to je bila jedina pjesnička obrada Kolumbova prvog putovanja – a također posvećuje određenu pažnju domorodačkim Indijancima prikazujući ih u slici „drugih” iz percepcije europskih istraživača.

Ključne riječi: neolatinski, didaktičko epski, sifilis, povijest medicine, otkrića, Indijanci, Novi svijet