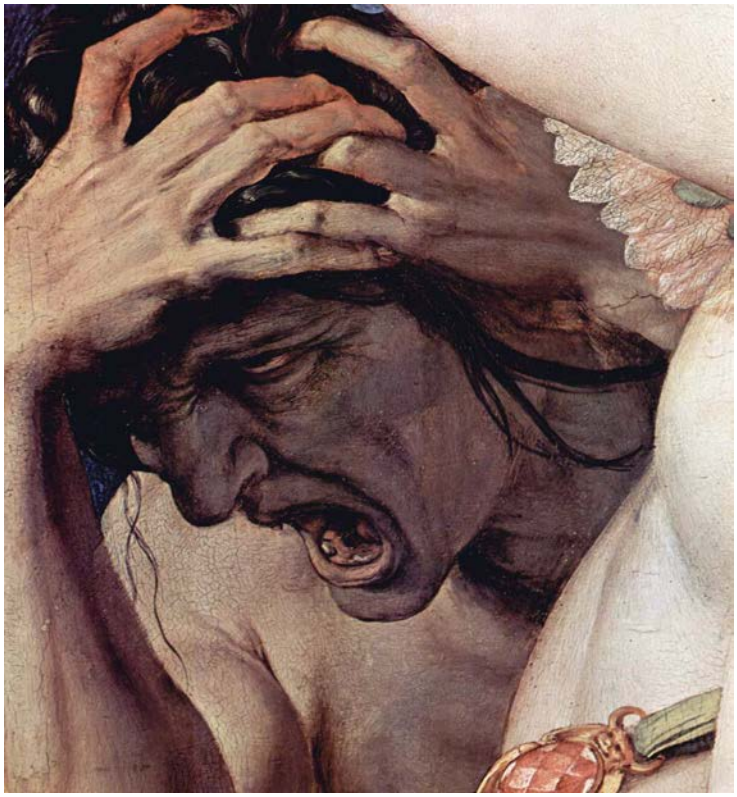
Boils & Sores

The iconography of syphilis and leprosy in a world of prostitutes and noblemen



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Introduction

The piece of art that inspired me to write about syphilis in art was the *London Allegory* by Bronzino, currently in the National Gallery. When looking for a subject for my bachelor thesis I found the article by Margaret Healy that suggested Bronzino depicted the disease on his *Allegory*. After writing about syphilis and the contemporary literary sources that may have inspired Bronzino, I became fascinated by the depiction of syphilis in art and I wrongly assumed the subject would be common in art. After a lot of research I discovered that the disease was actually depicted rarely in the 16th century itself, which prompted me to ask the question *why*. Especially when I read the extensive literary sources surrounding the disease in the 16th century itself and discovered the great contrast with the sparse amount of illustrations. This led me to wonder about the reasons why the disease was depicted so sparingly, which is the aim of chapter four, to speculate about the possible reasons for the discrepancy between the abundance of literature and the lack of images and therefore part of the aim of this thesis.

Syphilis might not be a disease one thinks about very often. Yet syphilis is in fact apparent throughout European and American history from the 15th century onwards. Many historical figures have suffered, or are rumored to have suffered, from this infamous disease. Political figures like Abraham Lincoln, Henry VIII, Lenin and Adolf Hitler and literary figures like Oscar Wilde, Charles Baudelaire and William Shakespeare are just a few of the famous people rumored to have suffered from the disease. The disease is still around today, and while nowadays a simple shot of penicillin will cure the disease quickly, penicillin was not around until 1928 when it was discovered by Alexander Fleming. Before that people had to make due with all kinds of alternative medicine, “slugwater”, mercury and guaiacum are just a few examples of this. While some of these cures might lessen the symptoms, they proved ineffective in the end. This meant that until 1928 the sufferers of syphilis were still aplenty and many references to the disease have been made in art, literature and plays from the 18th century onward.

During the 15th century an epidemic of syphilis had reached Italy and many people suffered from the disease. Back then it was known as the French disease, *Morbus Gallicus* and the Neapolitan disease, among others. Even though 15th century medicine was not as advanced as modern medicine, doctors and apothecaries were already aware of the symptoms of the disease, the way the disease developed and the way the disease is transmitted. Scientists such as Desiderius Erasmus wrote treaties about the disease and warning against the “act of love” and dangerous, loose women, who were thought to be the source of this evil disease. Girolamo Fracastoro (1476/8-1553) wrote his poem *Syphilis sive Morbo Gallico*, the poem that would later give the disease its name,

giving a detailed overview of the transmission, symptoms and cures of the disease.

However, the images that portray syphilis from the 16th century are very different from the vast and detailed works of literature that describe the disease. The images are overly simplistic and portray a single symptom, namely the sores associated with the first stage of the disease. These sores or boils are often indistinguishable from images of other boils, such as those that occur in lepers. The iconography of leprosy has therefore, amongst other reasons, played a big role in the establishment of the iconography of syphilis. The lack of images can perhaps also be ascribed to the Protestant Reform that was happening in the 16th century and the change of the attitude towards sexual relations, especially in those with power, and prostitution.

The aim of this paper is therefore to determine what the iconography of syphilis in the 16th century in European Renaissance art is and how it was influenced by the iconography of leprosy and the attitude towards sex and prostitution in the 16th century. This research question will be divided in four subquestions. Firstly, to explain the effect syphilis had on art, one must look at the literature about the disease from the 16th century. How extensive was the literature on syphilis? To answer this question I have focused on archival research of the contemporary sources, namely G. Fracastoro, J. Grünpeck, Pere Pintor, M. Cumano and U. von Hutten. Where necessary, the archival sources have been complimented with secondary literature.

Secondly, the images of syphilis will be examined to answer the question what the iconography of syphilis was. The images will be divided in subcategories: the illustrations accompanying warning pamphlets on the disease, religious imagery and illustrations included in medical works. The iconography that will submerge from these images will be used to dispute the argument that the *London Allegory* by Bronzino depicts syphilis. This is of importance because the London Allegory is the most common example of syphilis in 16th century art and it gives a wrong sense of the advanced state of images of syphilis of the 16th century. To form the iconography, I have mainly relied on my own visual analysis of the images, and on the literary sources of J. Conway and M. Healy, who have written in detail about the *London Allegory* by Bronzino. Furthermore, E. Panofsky will be discussed, due to his observations of three paintings that may contain references to syphilis and S. Gilman, due to his observations about the iconography of syphilis.

Thirdly, through images a clear picture of leprosy shall arise and therefore answer the question what the iconography of leprosy was? A comparison will be made between the iconography of syphilis and the iconography of leprosy, which was closely linked for a myriad of reasons, amongst them the assumption that leprosy, like syphilis, was a venereal disease. The Bible was the most important source for this chapter, seeing as leprosy is a subject discussed often in the Bible. Furthermore, I have relied on my visual analysis of the images and literary research. M.

Green, L. Jones, E. Pokorny, R. Morton and several medical professionals form the base of this literary research.

Finally, I will speculate why there are so few images of syphilis from the 16th century and why there is a discrepancy between the vast and detailed literature and the overly simplistic images. This discrepancy may be linked to the Protestant Reform, the attitude towards sex and prostitution and the Biblical tradition that allowed the iconography of leprosy to be highly developed and frequently portrayed. These speculations find their basis in literary research, mainly R. Geschwind and N. Baker, but are mostly developed by the author.

The corpus of images has mainly been comprised of the images accompanying articles describing syphilis, leprosy and occasionally the occurrence of these diseases in art. While the literature on the subject of syphilis itself and the epidemic in the 16th century can be found in abundance, articles on syphilis in 16th century art are few and far between, most often published in medical journals and therefore out of the spotlight of the world of art history. Extensive research has unfortunately not yielded any new images of syphilis or leprosy from the 16th century, neither illustrations nor paintings, which proves the sparing manner with which syphilis was depicted.

Leprosy has been depicted more often due to the fact that the subject was much more common owing to the many mentions of the disease in the Bible. Yet, when leprosy is mentioned in an art historical article, the focus is never on the depiction of the disease itself, and as will be illustrated later on, on occasion sores are not even present in the images that represent leprosy. It is also important to note that images of the plague are often actually mislabeled images of leprosy. One must therefore tread carefully when determining if an image shows syphilis, leprosy or the plague, something I have tried to illustrate in chapter three.

The circumstances mentioned above, the Protestant Reform and the attitude towards sex and prostitution amongst others, can help to explain the lack of images of syphilis from an era when the disease was the most common and also offer an explanation as to why such an devastating disease never truly developed a iconography of its own, but simply borrowed from an already existing iconography. The aim of this thesis is therefore a difficult one, namely to prove something that does not exist rather than something that can be proven by literary research or visual analysis.

Chapter 1: the extensive literature in the 16th century on syphilis

Introduction

The most intriguing thing about the early epidemic of syphilis is the discrepancy between the wealth of information that was accessible from 1495 onwards, and the simplicity of the illustrations. As Eugenia Tognotti argues in her article, *The Rise and Fall of Syphilis in Renaissance Europe*, a new disease in Europe had never been researched and analyzed by physicians in such a rapid and effective way before the rise of syphilis. The amount of research about the disease when it first rose to epidemic level has been unparalleled by the amount of research on any other disease in modern times. The contemporary doctors already amassed a great amount of knowledge concerning its symptoms, its venereal characters and its high contagiousness. The clinical signs of the first phase and the second phase were recognized and described in great detail.[1] Due to the mortality rate, the tertiary phase was also described in great detail by Fracastoro, as can be seen below, but later than the first and second phases.

In this chapter, we will explore what the writers already knew about the disease by the second half of the 16th century. Firstly, what the origin of the disease was according to Grünpeck, Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I and an anonymous writer. This is important because it gives us an idea of their prejudice towards the sufferers of syphilis and therefore the judgement that may have seeped into the images of syphilis. Secondly, what writers wrote about the transmission of the disease gives us an idea of the "shameful" association of the disease and to what extent the people, mostly men, blamed women for the introduction of the disease in society. Thirdly, it is imperative for us to know to how much knowledge writers had amassed on the symptoms and the phases because it proves that they knew about many more symptoms than just the sore that will be returning time and again in the illustrations. Lastly, the treatments also return in the illustrations, especially mercury, so it is essential to know how these treatments were applied. This makes it more apparent which treatment is being used in illustrations.

Origin

Joseph Grünpeck (1473-1532) wrote *Ein Hübscher Tractat von dem ursprung des Bösen Franzos* in 1496, about the new epidemic. He, like Ulsenius later, linked the outbreak with astrological events in 1484 and 1485. Grünpeck looked up the conjunction of the planets Saturn and Jupiter, which happened on the 25th of November 1484. The joining happened on 23rd degree of the sign of the Scorpio. The Scorpio is one of the houses of Mars, according to Grünpeck it is also known as the unlucky planet, and the zodiacal sign of the Scorpio has been linked to the genitalia for centuries. The evil planet Saturn was at the height of his power and suppressed the benevolent power of

1 Tognotti, 100-101

Jupiter. Mars was the lord of this conjunction because it happened in his house. The next year, the 25th of March 1485, there was a solar eclipse, which was fearful and cruel according to Grünpeck. Again a conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter happened, in the 9th degree of the Scorpion, on the 30th of November 1485. These conjunctions and the eclipse led to war, famine and the French Evil (syphilis), according to Grünpeck.[2]

This astrological event was not the only reason the syphilis came to Europe. According to Grünpeck it was also sent as a punishment from heaven. He argues that from three sins: pride, avarice and unchastity, stem all other sins. It is, according to Grünpeck, the same for the three great plagues: pestilence, blood-shed and famine. These punishments have been sent down from heaven by the almighty God for the sins of mankind.[3]

This sentiment was also echoed in the edict that the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I (1459-1519) from the house Hapsburg published on the 7th of august in 1495. The edict states that the disease is a punishment for blasphemy. The edict also states the penalty for swearing, which is death, when the swearing is premeditated and done deliberately. If not, the punishment could be a fine or imprisonment. The rich and noble were usually given a more abated punishment than was given to the poor.[4]

An anonymous author looked for the source of the disease in the Bible, more specifically Genesis 18 and 19, the plague brought upon Sodom and Gomorra, for the sins of the citizens. By using this specific plague from the Bible, the author gives an undeniable connection to the venereal character of the disease.[5]

Transmission

The venereal quality of the disease was clear, even in the Renaissance. But due to the rapid spread of the disease, many authors in the 15th and 16th century suggested that there must be other ways of transmission. Some authors, such as Grünpeck, mention sharing food or drink with a syphilitic. Sitting where a person with syphilis had sat could also be seen as dangerous, as was sharing a room, or even having a conversation with the syphilis patient. Pere Pintor (1420-1503), the personal physician to Pope Alexander VI (1431-1503), was the first to specify that the infection mainly took place through sexual relations and discredited the theory of transmission through superficial contact with someone who had syphilis.[6] Fracastoro is also clear about the venereal quality of the disease: *"Parce tamen Veneri, mollesque ante omnia vita Concubitus, nihil est noccum magis"*.[7] He also

2 Moore & Solomon, 20-21
3 Ibid., 11-12
4 Boehrer, 203-205
5 Gilman, 95
6 Tognotti, 101-103
7 *"Nevertheless, keep away from Venus and above all things avoid the soft pleasures of love making – nothing is more harmful"*. Eatough, 66.

mentions the dangerous consequences of breast-feeding.[8]

Symptoms & phases

Marcello Cumano, a Venetian military surgeon, wrote the first known description of the disease. He noted the soldiers that first got painless skin ulcerations on their genitals. This is commonly recognized as the first sign of syphilis, or Great Pox as Cumano called it. The name was given to the disease to distinguish it from smallpox, which was also very common at the time. The painless skin ulceration is also referred to as a small lesion or a "chancre". Tommaso di Silvestro wrote the first patient account in 1498. He also mentioned the "chancre" on his genitals. So did Ulrich von Hutten (1488-1523), who wrote arguably the most famous personal account of syphilis. Ulrich von Hutten also gave important information on the incubation period. 10 to 90 days post contact, the disease manifests itself with the painless ulceration on the site of inoculation, in men most often on the penis, but around the mouth was also common.[9]

The second stage is also described by Von Hutten. 40 to 60 days after the appearance of the ulcer the second phase began. This phase consisted of generalized symptoms of fever, headache, sore throat, skin lesions, swollen lymph nodes and terrible pains in the bones, arms and legs. This period often ended in death. Fracastoro also described this phase in his second book on syphilis. After the infection was caught, the moon would complete four cycles, which is longer than the 60 days Von Hutten mentions, a moon-cycle is approximately 29,5 days. During these four cycles, the disease does not show itself immediately, but it would be "feeding".[10] Due to the "feeding" the victim would feel sluggish and lethargic. The victim would generally be unhappy and pale. Slowly a caries would emerge on the body's shameful parts[11], that would become uncontrollable, eat areas on either side and even the sexual organ if left untreated. At night the pain in the limbs, joints, arms and calves would be worse for the victim than during the day.[12]

Due to the high mortality after the second phase, early in the epidemic only descriptions of the first and second phase were common. There is, however, a tertiary phase. This occurred as early as a year after the initial infection but could take up to ten years to manifest. The third phase is characterized by soft, tumor-like growths in the skin and mucous membranes, but could occur almost anywhere in the body, often in the skeleton.[13] Fracastoro called these "gummas" after their resemblance to cherry and almond resin. These growths or humours[14] would fill as the contagion spread through the body. The body would want to reject the contagion, which is slow and tenacious,

8 Hudson & Morton, 1496
9 Tognotti, 104
10 Fracastoro does not specify on what the disease would feed, but in the context he gives later on blood-letting, see below, one can assume Fracastoro in fact means feeding on blood and by extension the victim itself.
11 *Foedis pudendis* Eathough, 54
12 Ibid., 53-55
13 Tognotti, 103
14 *Mole humorum* = mass filled with liquid. Eatough, 54

so it clung to the muscles and nerves.This caused uncontrollable pain in the joints. The “matter” in the body had a “lighter” element which made for the skin and extremities which caused unsightly sores to break out. The humours are composed of hard nodules of different sizes, ranging from a lentil to an egg, which would grow at a slow acceleration rate. After some time the ulcerations or pustules would cover with crusts, sometimes starting from the scalp, which were rough and disgusting and would range in color from yellow to red and black. Over time would the pustules would soften, fill with a gummy liquid full of spirochaetes (spiral-shaped bacteria), and then ulcerate with a discharge of mucous and putrid blood which created a nauseous smell. These ulcerations were very difficult to get rid of and even if the ulceration healed on one side, it would start on the other side. Once they would ulcerate the pustules would destroy the tissue surrounding it and would mutate into wide, dirty and corrosive ulcers, according to Fracastoro. The ulcers would spread to the nervous parts and the bones. Limbs would be stripped of flesh, bones were rough with scales, a mucus would solidify all over the body and create ugly scabs. The gnawing of the ulcers would also end in loss of body parts, such as lips, noses, eyes, hands, feet and genitalia. Fracastoro describes a person whose mouth was eaten away into a hideous gape and the throat was only able to make feeble sounds.[15] The disease would eventually reach the brain, the syphilitic would go insane and die.

Treatments

By far the most famous treatment for syphilis is mercury. From this stems the saying: *One night with Venus, a lifetime with Mercury*. Mercury was used in ointments to treat scabies and leprosy before the epidemic of 1495 manifested itself. Syphilis also appears on the skin so the same remedy was applied. The treatment with mercury was intensive. It could last from five days up to thirty days or more. The patient was locked in a extremely hot room which was secured in such a way no fresh air could come in. The inunction was repeated once or several times a day, close to an open fire, after which the patient was made to sweat copiously. Mercury was replaced by guaiacum after a while, because the treatment was intense and only worked, according to some, in people who were strong and the disease was “new”.[16]

Fracastoro briefly mentions the practice of fumigation. A mixture of styrax, red mercuric sulphide, lead oxide, antimony and incense would be burned and the bitter fumes would envelop the patient entirely. This would, supposedly, destroy the disease completely. Fracastoro does warn against the use of this treatment since it is a treacherous remedy because the smoke makes it hard to breathe for the patient. He does suggest that maybe a part of the body could be treated this way, just

15 Eathough, 56-59
16 Temkin, 309-312

not the entire body at once.[17]

As mentioned above, another treatment is guaiacum. The first rumors of the medicinal properties of this tree originate between 1506 and 1516 in Portugal and Spain. Maximilian I sent people to Spain to investigate these claims. One of the people he sent was the physician Nicolaus Pol, who wrote one of the first reports on guaiacum in 1517. Around this time more writings appeared on the miraculous cure that was the holy wood guaiacum from the New World.[18]

The wood was obtained from a tree that grows in the West Indies, the coastal regions of tropical North America, parts of the most northern coast of South America and its adjacent islands. The main exporters are Cuba, Haiti, Jamaica and the Bahama's. The tree itself is an evergreen tree with beautiful flowers and foliage. When it reaches maturity it can grow up to 12 to 18 meters. The wood itself is very heavy, even the smallest chips don't float. The wood is also very hard, it is very difficult to cut.[19] Fracastoro also gives a detailed description of the tree itself. The nut is small and bitter. The wood is hard to master and leaves a sticky resin when it is burnt. The coloring of the tree is complex. The outside is green, the middle is a dark brown and the next layer is pale.[20]

To prepare the medicine, the wood is broken into very small pieces or reduced to sawdust or a powder. One pound of the sawdust or powder is mashed with eight pounds of water for a day and a night and cooked slowly over coals. One should take care that it does not boil. The preferred vessel was made of glass, one-third empty and should be covered well. It would have to cook for approximately six hours until it reduced to half of its original volume. The foam that would float on the surface was taken off and could be dried and applied as a drying powder on the sores. After the mixture is reduced the water is strained and preserved. Then, a second time, eight pounds of water would be added to the remaining wood in the vessel. This would be cooked down again to half its original volume and was given as a drink to quench the thirst of the syphilitic. The stronger water, that was strained the first time, was the medicine proper. It had the color of water with mud and tasted acidic. While Hutten says that it should be taken as the drink, nothing added, there were many other ways guaiacum was administered. To the drink salt, wine and honey could be added. Not only the addition of substances was common but the wood dust could also be administered as a pill and even raspings of the wood were sprinkled on toast and consumed that way.[21]

However, according to Hutten, the drink alone did not suffice. The patient was to be locked in a room that was heated continuously and no air was allowed in. Food supply would be gradually cut down so the patient would get used to hunger. Only a little water and diluted wine were allowed.

17 Eatough, 75
18 Munger, 196-199
19 Ibid., 204-206
20 Eatough, 87- 89
21 Munger, 206-207

Due to this practice guaiacum got the nickname of “diet wood”. While the patient was on a continuous level of starvation, one half pound of the medicine proper was administered in the morning (5 a.m.) and the evening (8 p.m.) daily, for four days. It was to be drunk rapidly without breathing spaces. For the next two hours after drinking the medicine proper, the patient was covered with bed clothes. This would cause the patient to sweat endlessly. No drink was allowed during this time. All of this would be done on an empty stomach. Only after five hours of rest the patient would be allowed a little food, as to avoid starvation. The meal would mostly consist of a small amount of bread and a little of watered down wine. This process was repeated on the fifteenth day, a little more food would be allowed this time. With the food the water that was cooked down for the second time would be given. At the end of the treatment, which would last thirty days in the same airtight, heated room, the process would be repeated for either four or six days. Only after the thirty days the patient would be allowed to slowly venture outside and Hutten advised the patient to avoid sexual contact until the fortieth day after the beginning of the treatment.[22]

This treatment was supposed to wholly remove the syphilis. It was supposed to purify the blood in which the disease lingered, according to Hutten, and to remove the “food”[23] of the disease through urination, sweat and excrement.[24]

Conclusion

What can be stated with certainty is that the knowledge about syphilis in the 16th century was not as limited as we might expect in the 21st century. In modern times, we like to look down on the medical world of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. However, in the case of syphilis we would be mistaken to do so. In all fairness, their idea of remedies might be severely misplaced, yet the detailed descriptions of the symptoms and the immediacy with which they were aware of the venereal spread of the disease border on modern research into new diseases. Perhaps it could even be said that the research on syphilis was more forward in thought, seeing as the research into AIDS in the 20th century was not as developed as it could have been, due to the correlation between the disease and homosexuality and addiction. The “shameful” way of transmission seems not to have slowed down the amount of publications on the disease. This does not mean that these publications were void of judgement, especially towards women, but apparently writing about it was common for physicians. Fracastoro was even awarded for his work on syphilis with a position as physician to pope Paul III.

This is why it comes as a surprise that the illustrations of the disease are striking in their simplicity and not more detailed illustrations can be found. Perhaps we shall never know the reason

22 Ibid., 207-208
23 Von Hutten is unclear on the definition of this food.
24 Munger, 208

behind this discrepancy, we can however state that it would have made sense to the people in the 16th century and a scholar in the 21th century can only speculate. As has been proven in the case of the bubonic plague, no contemporary images of the plague, namely from the 13th and 14th centuries when the disease reached its peak, can be found. Most of the images we now can say for certain are of the plague, are from later times, the 15th century and beyond. So our 21st century desire to capture the world around us in images is possibly not applicable to the desire in 16th century to capture information.

Chapter 2: The iconography of syphilis in the 16th century

Introduction

As discussed in the introduction, the disease syphilis was probably new to Europe so no iconography had been established for this disease yet. In the first few years after 1495, the year of the first outbreak, the artists portraying syphilis "borrowed" from other diseases that were no longer endemic such as leprosy and this remained this way until for into the 19th century. The iconography of leprosy will be discussed further in chapter three. Leprosy was also a disease of the skin and the leper bore the sign of his disease with him, visible to the world. The syphilitic was forced to bear the same fate. The depicted leper, and later the syphilitic, usually was covered in spots and was shown as isolated from big crowds.

There are several different kinds of illustrations that depict syphilis. First and foremost there are the pamphlets that warned people about this horrific disease and often had a judgmental side, like the texts by Grünpeck and the edict by Maximilian I, discussed in chapter one. Secondly, we have the religious imagery that accompanied prayers. And lastly, there are the medical texts about the disease or the medication used to battle the disease. As we shall see, the function of these texts had no effect whatsoever on the depiction of the disease itself.

Warning Pamphlets

The earliest depiction of syphilis known to us is the woodcut made by Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528). This woodcut accompanied a broadsheet issued to the public on August first, 1496, written by Nuremburg physician Theodorus Ulsenius (1460-1508) (Fig. 1.). In this broadsheet Ulsenius warns about the new disease, mentions its signs and symptoms and also says it cannot be cured. He mentions an astrological event of 1484, which can be seen in the woodcut by Dürer.[25] The syphilitic stands underneath a globe which represents all the astrological signs and on the globe the number 1484 has been written, a clear reference to the astrological event Ulsenius mentions in his text. The syphilitic from the woodcut by Dürer strangely echoes the position of Christ, like a reference to the suffering of man. The victim is an isolated male, dressed rather extravagantly for the German style that was typical of that age. He is wearing a big plumed hat, a draped cape, broad-toed shoes and he has long flowing locks of hair. This was probably a caricature of the Frenchman, the evil bringer of the French disease.[26]

One of the first examples of the syphilitic victim is the illustration by Sebastian Brandt (1457-1521) that accompanied a pamphlet on syphilis from 1496 (Fig. 2.). The syphilis patients, three male and one female, are forced to one side, away from the healthy people, being shot at by

25 Gilman, 92
26 Ibid., 92

Christ with the flagellum dei.[27] This is probably a reference to the sexual nature of the disease and the syphilitic was being punished for his or her "amoral" behavior. According to Gilman, who wrote in October about the iconography of syphilis and AIDS, the arrows that are visible in the illustration signify the martyrdom of the victims and the downfall of Adam and Eve. However, the appearance of Christ might also symbolize the possibility of a cure. This illustration was later reworked to accompany Grünpecks commentary on Brandt and a number of significant differences were incorporated (Fig. 3.). This time the syphilis patients are one male and two females. The two female patients are still being punished by Christ while the male sufferer is isolated in the front of the woodcut. This gives the illusion of the male as sufferer and victim, not as a sexual deviant that deserves to be punished, like the women in the background.[28]

Religious Imagery

In a broadside of a prayer called "on the pox malafranzosa" from 1500, Job makes an appearance (Fig. 4.). Job is a figure from the Bible that was struck by Satan with boils from head to toes, who will also be discussed in chapter three. Due to the boils, it is not unlikely that he would be associated with skin disease and sexually transmitted diseases that present themselves with skin lesions such as syphilis.

A painted woodcut from 1497 by George Stuchs (Fig. 5.) shows the saint with the virgin Mary and child, in the bottom left and bottom right corners small figures with pox are shown looking up at the virgin and saint Denis. Prints like these were usually hung by one's bedside to which one could pray to the saint to alleviate the pain and suffering.[29]

Medical Texts

The anonymous woodcut in Hans von Gersdorff (1455-1529) *Feldtbuch der Wundartzney* from 1532 shows Job, bending over and covered in boils, much like the broadside accompanying the prayer (Fig. 6.). This is a field manual for doctors treating wounds and the illustration accompanies the section of leprosy and sexually transmitted diseases, such as syphilis.[30]

The very first woodcut illustrating the application of mercury to a syphilitic is the image on the titlepage of *A male Franczos, morbum Gallorum, praeservatio e cura*, by Bartolomaeus Steber (d. 1506) from 1497/8 (Fig. 7.). Steber was a professor of medicine at Vienna and gives us our first look at syphilis in a clinical setting. In the background a female patient is lying in bed, covered in boils, and a physician is preforming uroscopy. Uroscopy is the practice of examining the urine for blood, pus and other signs of disease. In the foreground a male patient, again covered in boils, is being treated by another physician, who is applying ointment to the mans legs.

27 The whip of God.
28 Gilman, 93-95
29 Morton, 40
30 Low, 83-86

Iconography

When we study the illustrations that we can state for certain illustrate syphilis, one of the things that leaps out is the fact that the boils are generic. We can find many illustrations that are supposed to portray leprosy, that look exactly the same as the syphilis illustrations. There is nothing specific to distinguish syphilis from the other diseases at first sight, the exact disease only becomes clear when it is looked at in its context, namely a broadside or medical text on syphilis. The function of the images also did not influence the depiction of the boils. The boils are just as indistinct in the medical texts as they are in the religious images. This is something that did not change until the 19th century. In fact, a medical illustration explaining the use of mercury from the 17th century is just as unclear. The woodcut from 1689 shows the process of fumigation, with the syphilis patient in a barrel while a physician lights the fire to keep the room hot (fig. 8.). Another male patient is shown lying on the floor covered in sores and in the back of the room a vomiting patient is being covered by bedclothes, as described in chapter one. The sores are not more advanced than they were in the 16th century and no other symptoms, apart from the vomiting, can be seen. It is therefore mysterious why two scholars, John Conway and Margaret Healy, saw syphilis when looking at the London Allegory by Bronzino. I will subsequently illustrate why they came to this conclusion and why I disagree with their arguments.

The London Allegory

Arguably one of the most famous paintings that has been suggested to portray syphilis is the *London Allegory* (*c*. 1545) by Agnolo di Cosimo (1503-1572), better known as Bronzino (Fig. 9.). It is currently in the National Gallery in London. Not much can be said with certainty about this painting. The identification of the figures, the interpretation of the painting itself, its intended destination and the commissioner are all unclear. Evidently, the painting is a subject of discussion for multiple reasons, however, the aspect we shall focus on is the discussion revolving around the figure in the lower left corner of the painting (Fig. 10.). The two authors who brought up this aspect of the discussion are John Conway and Margaret Healy.

John Conway was the first to write almost exclusively about this figure from the lower left corner in his article 'Syphilis and Bronzino's London Allegory' from 1986. This figure has often been identified as Jealousy, primarily *la Gelosia* by Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) in 1568. Conway disagrees with this identification and takes a very different approach. He objects against the previous assumption that since Jealousy is female, the figure must also be female. He points out an absence of fat that is usually present in adolescent males and mature females in real life. The muscular chest, the strong forearm and swollen biceps would also indicate a male figure, not a female one. Conway reaches the conclusion that if this figure is male, the identification of the figure must also be different. Personifications of Jealousy and other, related concepts are always female,

according to Conway, which gives him an opportunity to explore other identifications.[31]

The man can be seen bend over in a semi-foetal position. This was position was not uncommon in syphilitics, according to Giovanni de Vigo (1450-1525), the private physician to the pope, who wrote about syphilis in his *Practica in Arte de Chirugica Copiosa* from 1514. The syphilitic was forced to bend over due to the severe pain in the limbs, joints and head. The man on the painting also has his mouth opened and the strain on the muscles of the neck would indicate that the man is screaming in distress or pain. He also suffers from syphilitic *rupia*, a dark discoloration of the skin, according to Conway. Further indications of syphilis in the man on the painting are a reddening of the whites of the eyes, nodes on his fingers, bloody discharge on the fingers, possibly from the nodes, the missing teeth and nail and the hair-loss. The missing fingernail on the right index finger could be a sign of syphilitic anonchia, where the nail becomes brittle and eventually falls off. The missing hair could be syphilitic alopecia, which means the hair falls out in patches. These are all symptoms of syphilis or its treatment. Conway concludes that this figure must be the personification of *Il Morbo Gallico*.[32]

Margaret Healy agrees with Conway that the figure must be male. She also agrees with identification of the figure as *Il Morbo Gallico*. However, while Conway proceeds to interpret the painting as an illustration of illicit love that will surely result in syphilis, Healy takes this interpretation to a whole new level. She does not focus on the symptoms of the figure itself but looks to the context of the painting to explain its identification as *Il Morbo Gallico*.

The epidemic of syphilis was often written about in many different shapes and forms. Healy mentions the poem written in 1525 by Jean Lemaire de Belges (1473-1525), called *Trois Contes de Cupido et d'Atropos*[33]. It tells the story of Cupid and Death drinking together and swapping their bow and arrows. As a result, old people began to fall in love and young people were dying. When Volupté, the goddess of pleasure and sensuality, is hit by one of the arrows of death, Venus becomes so enraged that she throws the bow and arrows in the moat surrounding the Castle of Love. Shocked by what she's done, because the arrows are poisoning the river, she tries to sweeten its waters with flowers and honey. Unfortunately, the lovers who drank from this stream still became ill. When Mercury decides to make new bows and arrows for Cupid and Death to solve the problem, he leaves the river as a warning for the ardent lover not to swim in suspicious streams. The suspicious stream in this poem is a euphemism for all of womankind.[34]

She furthermore mentions the text by Ulsenius, poems by Desiderius Erasmus (*c*. 1466-1536), the poem by Girolamo Fracastoro (1476/8-1553), which has been discussed in the

31 Conway, 250-251
32 Ibid., 252-254
33 Three stories of Cupid and destruction
34 Healy, 7

introduction, and the Italian and French madrigals that were popular at the time. These madrigals sung of syphilis in a humorous way, according to Healy. The main theme of these literary sources, while often cautioning, was usually the role of women in the epidemic. The message that women were the instigators, the source of the contamination and that men are the helpless victims is abundantly clear in these poems and songs. Healy reasons that since the theme of syphilis was common to literature in the 16th century, and even spoken about in a light-hearted way, the same must be said about art. She then continues to interpret Bronzino's *London Allegory* in light of these literary sources. Whether Bronzino was actually aware of the aforementioned literary sources on syphilis remains debatable.

The girl in the green dress must be Fraud, according to Healy. Her deceptive sweetness is symbolized in the honeycomb she holds in her hand. Healy suggests that apart from the female face, this girl resembles the most famous personification of Fraud of that time, namely Fraud from Dante Alighieri's *La Divina Commedia* (Fig. 11.). The beast-like underside with a scorpion-esque tail and a mild face is indeed echoed in the girl on Bronzino's painting. According to Healy, Dante's Fraud was also associated with infection. The chubby boy in front of the girl must be identified as Folly, Healy argues, due to Folly's association with the devious Venus, also illustrated in many woodcuts of Venus followed by a train of handicapped or ill men, also referred to as “fools”. Frauds honeycomb and Folly's rose petals could allude to the roses and honey Venus used in the poem by Jean Lemaire de Belges. Healy does however mention that this is a loose interpretation, due to the fact that roses and honey are frequently used as attributes of Love.

The kiss shared by Venus and Cupid could be a sign of illicit love, which is reinforced by the pillow Cupid is leaning on. The pillow was often a symbol of lechery, idleness and luxury and often tied to sexual relations and by extension syphilis. However, Healy is mostly interested in the gesture Cupid makes, where he cups his mothers breast in a way that reminds the viewer of breast-feeding. The same gesture is repeated over and over again in paintings of the Virgin Mary breast-feeding Jesus. It is therefore a strange gesture to make for Cupid, who is too old to still be breast-fed. Healy thinks that this is a reference to the transmission of syphilis through breast-feeding and the painting on the whole references modes of transmission; kissing, intercourse and breast-feeding. She refers to a poem by Erasmus from 1526, called *the New Mother*, in which he encourages mothers to stop using wet nurses and breast-feed their own children instead, due to the poisoning effect of syphilis infested breastmilk.[35]

The *Venus Lactans* motif can be found in three later paintings about syphilis as well, according to Panofsky. He writes about syphilis in his essay 'Homage to Fracastoro in a Germano-Flemish composition of about 1590?' in the *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek*. He first noticed

35 Ibid., 7-9

and was intrigued by the *Venus Lactans* motif on a composition by Otto van Veen (1556-1629), the image of an indiscreet youth (Fig. 12.). This indiscreet youth is the young man in the centre of the composition lying on a pillow and is about to give in to temptation personified by Venus, who rides in on her chariot while she holds her breast in her left hand and presses it, in order to invoke the stream of breastmilk she aims at the youths open mouth. A picture by Luca Giordano (1634-1705), dated 1664 (Fig. 13.), called *Allegory of Syphilis* echoes the theme of Van Veen with the reclining youth tempted by Venus' sweet milk. And lastly, an anonymous copy after an engraving by Johann Sadeler (1550-1600), named *Warning Against Venereal Disease* (Fig. 14.). While not a living, breathing goddess this time, the giving of breastmilk is represented in the fountain statue in the background of the picture, spurting water.[36] It needs to be noted that the images Panofsky refers to are of different times and different media. It does, however, make it more likely that the painters were acquainted with each others work and imitated each other to some extent.

When we return to the London Allegory and Healy's assessment of the painting, the masks at Venus' feet could symbolize Vice or Deceit, a more traditional meaning to the attribute. Yet, it could also be a reference to the masks worn by people in the third stage of syphilis, who had lost parts of their facial features, like their noses, according to Healy. The blue cloth behind the mother and son could reference the River of Love as mentioned in the poem by Jean Lemaire de Belges. Father Time on the upper right corner tries to cover up the scene, or the disease and its associations, with the cloth due to the scandalous nature of the disease.[37]

The figure in the upper left corner is puzzling to Healy. She could explain the figure in a number of more traditional ways, such as Truth, would be a appropriate companion to Time, according to Healy. She mentions this because Truth is the daughter of Time, "*Veritas Filia Temporis*". However, she thinks her new concept of Truth of the Night would be a more fitting explanation of the character. The pains of syphilis worsened considerably at night and so it would be appropriate for the personification to sit directly above the syphilitic. Time conceals the disease for a while, due to the infections latent phases, but unfortunately the truth will out. Healy admits that the conflation of these two concepts would be novel and paradoxical, seeing as Night is associated with concealment and Truth with exposure, yet she thinks that the confusion would have added to the "conceit" and the major riddle of the painting to the original viewers.[38]

Healy is of the opinion that the painting invites speculation and discussion, even in the 16th century. Where in the painting in Budapest (Fig. 15.), the arrow Venus holds points to the bouncing putti and quite possibly references wholesome love, in the London Allegory the arrow points at the

36 Panofsky, 16-22
37 Healy, 9
38 Ibid.

syphilitic and could be a testament to Budapest's possible antithesis, the terrifying result of passion and love, syphilis. The painting asks for sympathy for the syphilitic male, a victim that has fallen prey to the dangerous woman, symbolized by Venus. The attention of the viewer is therefore first attracted to the beautiful Venus. Through her arm, one looks at Cupid and their kiss, the suggestion of impure love. The arrow points at the syphilitic male victim. As such, it references the modes of transmission, kissing, intercourse and breast-feeding, and gives a playful warning about socializing with women.[39]

Conclusion

The indistinct illustrations discussed above originated in the 15th century, when clearly the depiction of the sore was enough for the viewer or reader to understand the reference to syphilis, when seen in its original context. The *London Allegory* was painted 45 years later and it is possible that they were much more precise in depicting symptoms. However, after doing extensive research, this seems to be the only painting from the 16th century that was this subtle in portraying syphilis and that used different symptoms instead of the traditional boil, which strikes as highly unlikely.

According to Conway a reddening of the whites of the eyes can be seen but after studying the painting up close, I have not discovered this, nor the bald spots. According to Conway, the loose strands of hair on the persons cheek and arms could already have fallen out. However, it is more likely that the person had long hair. The hair does not appear to be loose, just wild and unkempt. No patches of skin can be seen on the head itself. This was the case in the syphilitic shepherd identified by Panofsky as Syphilus in the picture by Luca Giordano mentioned above. The appearance of the shepherd is marred by several symptoms of the disease. Part of his hair has fallen out and the rim of his bald spot is affected by boils.[40] This would seem a more realistic portrayal of the bald sports associated with syphilis.

When we return to the figure in Bronzino's Allegory some symptoms are more clear; the boils, or nodes, with the bloody discharge and the missing teeth. However, one can imagine that dental health might not have been all that advanced in 1545 and the missing teeth could have a different explanation, such as the lack of hygiene and toothpaste. Yet, according to Margret Healy, the missing teeth can be explained as a side-effect of the use of mercury to treat the syphilis.

The explanation of syphilis as subject of the London Allegory by Healy makes sense when looking at the literary context and later paintings. The Allegory was painted approximately during the middle of the 16th century. The amount of literature at that point was already overwhelming but the rest of the illustrations that we can see above are not of the same caliber as this painting. Said illustrations have a simplistic style which highlight no other symptoms than the boils that are

39 Ibid., 10
40 Panofsky, 17-22

undistinguishable with other boils that illustrate leprosy. We can not state with certainty that the *London Allegory* does not illustrate syphilis, seeing that the interpretation does make sense when looking at the literary context. However, we can state that the iconography of syphilis up to that point was severely lacking and highly repetitive of the iconography of leprosy, as we shall see in the next chapter. The *London Allegory* would be far ahead of its time with the variety of symptoms, when it comes to the visual arts, it would however be in line with the developments in literature. In my opinion, it is highly unlikely that this painting portrays syphilis and its modes of transmission. Even though the literature may be advanced, the rest of the illustrations of the 16th century are not and it would therefore be exceptional if one painter did portray a varied array of symptoms.

Chapter 3: The Iconography of Leprosy

Introduction

As we have seen in chapter one, the iconography of syphilis borrowed from the iconography of leprosy in the beginning of the epidemic of the 16th century. Below I will attempt to give a clear picture of the iconography of leprosy. Seeing as there is some confusion about the difference between the depictions of the plague, leprosy and syphilis, I will try to only discuss the pictures that are universally recognized as portraying leprosy. In fact, in a recent article by Lori Jones, she pointed out that most of the images we assume portray the plague, actually portray leprosy. One example of this is *Omne Bonum*, from circa 1360-75 (Fig. 16.), which was first correctly identified as a portrayal of leprosy by Monica H. Green, a specialist on the depiction of leprosy and the plague in art, but due to the digitalization of images, the image got recast as a depiction of the plague. This mistake started with the British Library's Images Online webpage in 2006, then through Wikipedia in the same year and later on commercial stock photo websites.[41] This means that we have to be very careful with the identification of images as the plague or leprosy.

Job is a different case, considering that the Bible states that Job suffered from all of the diseases known to mankind, he would not necessarily have suffered from syphilis, which was not a disease known to Europeans at the time the Bible was written. Leprosy however, was mentioned more than once in the Bible, the main example being Lazarus, who was a leper that was brought back to life by Jesus. So it is possible Job did suffer from the boils associated with leprosy and as such illustrations of Job sometimes accompanied texts on skin-diseases, as we have seen in chapter two. Illustrations of Biblical scenes referencing leprosy seem to be common in the art of the Middle Ages and will be discussed below.

The main difficulty of this paper will be the distinction between syphilis and leprosy. As is argued in chapter two, the boils are usually non-distinctive and could be attributed to both diseases. There is much uncertainty amongst scholars about which disease is depicted when the context of the image is unclear. In most decorative art, like we will see below, there is no literary context to rely on, as was done with the images in chapter two. We shall therefore tread carefully when it comes to conclusions about the portrayal of either disease.

Cripples, Beggars and Sinners

Research into the paintings by Jeroen Bosch (*c.*1450-1516) has shown that he repeatedly depicted people with sores on their body, most often on the legs. The exact diagnosis of this disease is unclear, but it has most often been identified as leprosy. According to Virginia Tuttle, the diagnosis of leprosy would indeed be fitting to the character standing in the doorway of a shed in Bosch's

41 Jones & Nevell, 235

Epiphany, currently in the Prado (Fig. 17.). This figure has been identified as the Anti-Christ or the Jewish Messiah, a future Jewish king from the Davidic line. Leprosy would therefore be appropriate, seeing as Medieval legends referred to the Jewish Messiah as a leper. The disease was also associated with the sin of heresy or unbelief in the Middle Ages. The Anti-Christ would of course be the summum of heresy. This might also be based on the one of the curses in Deuteronomy "May the Lord strike thee with a very sore ulcer in the knees and in the legs." spoken to Israel if she failed to uphold Gods commandments.[42]

Lust is a sin even more commonly associated with leprosy than heresy. In the Middle Ages, leprosy was believed to be a venereal disease, just like syphilis, and could be contracted in brothels and taverns, we will look at that more below. The man in the Rotterdam tondo (Fig. 18.) also has a sore on his leg and may have been a loyal customer of the brothel shown behind him, identified as such by the birdcages on the front of the house and reinforced by his missing shoe. The loss of clothing would signify drunkenness and consorting with prostitutes.[43]

Bosch is known for using his art in service of strict mores of the middle-class. His disdain for beggars is evident more than once in his paintings. Unfortunately most of the depictions of cripples and beggars are not by Bosch himself but by imitators, however, based on the depiction of a cripple we do have by Bosch, the imitators clearly followed his negative view on cripples and beggars the like. This picture of the cripple by Bosch is the beggar on the right-hand wing of the *Last Judgment* triptych of about 1505, now in Vienna (Fig. 19.). The cripple has a severed foot in front of him to evoke sympathy, but according to Sebastian Brandt in his *Narrenschiff* (ship of fools), where he classifies most of the beggars as swindlers, the beggar could just as easily have stolen the foot from a corpse. Bosch apparently echoed Brandts thoughts and perhaps chose to portray the foot for that reason. However, the feature of interest of us here is the sore on the mans arm. It is a bleeding sore that has not been identified as either syphilis or leprosy. Similar sores can also be seen on the head of a thief in the *Way of the* Cross (Fig. 20.), the tree-man in the part of *the Garden of Earthly Delights* that possibly represents Hell (Fig. 21.) and the aforementioned man in *Epiphany*.[44] It becomes clear, with either a diagnosis of syphilis or leprosy, that Bosch' opinion of the sufferers from these diseases was not particularly high.

This opinion was later echoed in the drawing of *cripples and beggars* after Jeroen Bosch, now in Albertina, which depicts thirty cripples and one fool (Fig. 22.). The great variety of diseases the cripples and beggars suffered from include ergot poisoning, syphilis and leprosy. What Virginia Tuttle has tried to illustrate is that the main reason why people were crippled was neither leprosy

42 Tuttle, 94
43 Ibid.
44 Pokorny, 293-294

nor syphilis.

The authors, all medical professionals, of the article 'De processie van kreupelen naar Jeroen Bosch (ca. 1450-1516): een historische analyse' have systematically gone through the thirty-one cripples and beggars on the drawing and diagnosed each and every one. There were four cases of beggars who were faking leprosy, because they wanted to enjoy the “benefits” of the lepers. These benefits were the opportunity to beg in churches and big houses in the city and they were given shelter in one of the leprosy houses. Once someone was diagnosed with leprosy, even though this diagnosis may not have been accurate, he or she was forced to live in a leprosy house, also known as a Lazarus house, and was under strict supervision of church and state. Faking leprosy was therefore a good way to get sympathy from people, begging was probably easier than working for some and it provided shelter.

A very worrying disease that was epidemic in Medieval Europe was ergot poisoning. A person could get ergot poisoning from bread that was made from flour that had been infected by a fungus, the *fungus claviceps purpurea*. This poisoning led to spasms of the blood-vessels, which as a result could lead to necrosis in the extremities and lower-legs. The drawing shows three cases of ergot poisoning whose lower-legs were amputated and in one case also a toe and a finger (Fig. 23.). Most of the other cases suffered from congenital defects, judicial punishment or amputation due to recent conflict. The use of fire weapons was still relatively new and so wounds due to arrows or swords were more common and often got infected quickly. Amputation was necessary in most cases to save the victims life.

A diagnosis of leprosy can be made in only three cases of the thirty-one. This can be seen in the loss of function of a member due to necrosis and deformities of the nose, lips, and face. In one case the face is hidden behind a mask (Fig. 24.). In only one case a diagnosis of syphilis can be made. This is based on an abnormality in the joint and deficient coordination of the muscles. The recent amputation might be due to an infection of the bone which was common to tertiary syphilis or an ulceration of the sole of the foot. The disorganization of the left knee joint could be a result of a disturbance of the bone-marrow (Fig. 25.).[45]

A distinction must be mentioned when discussing cripples and beggars. Not all beggars were lepers, in fact, all lepers were beggars but only a small amount of beggars were actually lepers. A cripple, identified by a crutch or a missing limb, is also not necessarily a leper. As we have seen and shall see, spots alone are by far not enough to identify a leper, since spots can be sign of many other diseases. The only attributes that indicate leprosy with great certainty are the leper warning horn, a bell and a clapper. The leper was forced to announce his presence with either the bell, the horn or

45 Dequecker, Fabry & Vanopdenbosch, 140-153

the clapper.[46]

We can not state for certain whether Jeroen Bosch portrayed syphilis or leprosy in his paintings. After looking at images of syphilitic sores and leprosy sores, the disk-like and bloody quality of the sores could be attributed to both diseases. Syphilis was of course called the Great Pretender or Imitator and is therefore by nature difficult to distinguish from other skin-diseases such as leprosy. However, one interesting detail was mentioned by Pokorny, the hollow bone on the bottom of the cane wielded by the bird-like man in the *Last Judgment* (Fig. 26.). Two scholars, Morton and Panofsky, have linked bones to syphilis. They both refer to the bone in the mouth of the shepherd in the painting by Luca Giordano that we have seen in chapter two. Morton believes it might refer to the bone pain that was prominent in the early years of the epidemic. Panofsky believes the bone alludes to the caries of the bones, which were a symptom of the third stage of syphilis.[47] However, the Last Judgment was painted considerably early in the syphilis epidemic and one has to be careful when attempting to diagnose a single sore.

Leprosy and the Bible

We first find leprosy in Leviticus *13*, which serves as a kind of public health announcement mentioning the symptoms and advising the public to separate the victims from healthy people. In Numbers *12*, Miriam is punished with leprosy for her sins, but after showing remorse, the leprosy was cured after seven days. This event has been depicted in an English Psalter from the 14th century which shows Miriam with a few spots on hands and face (Fig. 27.).[48]

II Kings *5* tells the story of Elisha who cures Naaman, the Syrian army captain who had also contracted leprosy. Naaman had to be cleansed in the river Jordan seven times and was then cured of his leprosy. Here again the leprosy is illustrated by a few simple spots strewed over the body of the leper, Naaman in this case. This is evident in an English Bible illustration from the 15th century (Fig. 28.). The spots are no more than circles drawn to indicate the sores or spots. A 15th century German woodcut shows Namaan with slightly different spots, these are black and more evenly spread over his entire body (Fig. 29.).[49]

The last story about leprosy in the Old Testament can be found in II Chronicles *26*. Uzziah, the king of Israel, made the mistake of entering the Temple and attempting to light incense. Lighting incense was a right reserved for the Priests and such he was violating the segregation between church and state. He also displayed Pride, the worst of the seven deadly sins, therefore God punished Uzziah with leprosy. However, the separation of church and state was not a common subject in the Middle Ages and as such there are very few images of this story and none that could

46 Ober, 50
47 Morton, 121 & Panofsky, 20
48 Ober, 43-44
49 Ibid., 45-47

be found actually displayed the spots of leprosy.[50]

The New Testament provides us with many stories of leprosy that were popular in the visual arts, namely the stories of Christ healing lepers, in Matthew *8*:2-4, Mark *I*:40-44, Luke *5*:12-14 and Luke *17*:12-19. In the latter Christ heals ten lepers as is depicted in this drawing from the late 14th century (Fig. 30.).[51] Here the spots look more like black swivels on the lepers and still keeps that overly simplistic character of other depictions of that time. Another depiction of Christ healing the ten lepers that is striking is the drawing by Parmigianino (1503-1540) (Fig. 31.) and the woodcut by Niccolò Vicentino (1510-1540) after Parmigianino (Fig. 32.). Here the sores seemed to have been an afterthought almost and it is only one leper that suffers from the sores in the group. In my opinion this can be explained by the fact that people were so acquainted with the story of Christ healing the ten lepers that they did not need the actual sores to clarify which story Vicentino and Parmigianino were illustrating. In fact, I would like to speculate that for many stories about leprosy, the sores did not need to be illustrated often, due to the direct connection between the Bible and leprosy and its obviousness for the viewer. The viewer did not need spots to know the story contained lepers.

Ober argues that the disease Lazarus suffered from was not leprosy but a different affliction with sores as chief symptom. He is unfortunately unclear on what kind of disease it could be.[52] Lazarus is also depicted with spots, usually very similar to the spots of the leper. Lazarus ties in with both the beggar imagery surrounding leprosy and the Biblical aspect. Even though Lazarus might not have suffered from leprosy, he was a symbol for the disease in the 16th century. This is evidenced in a painting by Bonifacio de'Pitati, *Dives and Lazarus* (Fig. 33.). In the early decades of the 16th century, poverty, vagrancy and the spread of infection was a problem in Venice. This seemed to apply the most to infected beggars, who stood in doorways of places like the San Marco square and the Rialto bridge and contaminated the people attempting to pass them, according to the Venetian Board of Health in 1522. Lepers were subsequently put in poor houses and quarantine hospitals in an attempt to contain the spread of the infection. Lazarus is wearing the grey uniform of the leper and the bowl, bread-knife and water-bottle that hang on his belt also point to his identification as leper in this painting. However, Cottrell does mention that the disease Lazarus suffered from could be confused with a number of others, besides leprosy, such as syphilis and the bubonic plague, based on the boils on paintings with Lazarus.[53]

Even before syphilis, probably only a very small amount of the people diagnosed with leprosy actually suffered from the disease. Other skin-diseases such as psoriasis, eczema and other

50 Ibid., 47-48
51 Ibid., 48
52 Ibid.
53 Cottrell, 136-138

dermatoses were mislabeled as leprosy and forced the victim into a life of loneliness and isolation. The original Hebrew word *tzara'ath*, later translated as leprosy, actually refers to a ritual uncleanliness and not a specific disease. Some scholars actually say that leprosy did not come to Europe until the fourth century B.C. and that it was probably not a common disease at the time the Bible was written. *Tzara'ath* describes a number of marks, blemishes and spots and could also be used to refer to leather, walls and cloth.[54] It is therefore perhaps not strange that the depictions of leprosy we have are not that specific. If doctors couldn't even tell what should be diagnosed as leprosy, how could the artists draw the disease accurately?

Job and Leprosy?

Job has often been mistaken for a sufferer of leprosy, syphilis and many other skin-diseases. To understand why, we must first look at his "symptoms". For seven days and night he suffered from severe pain in his bones, which worsened at night and woke him up. Skin lesions spread from the soles of his feet to the top of his head, which progressively ulcerated. (Job *I*:7 & *I*:13). The skin ulcers were so itchy that he took to scratching himself with slivers of broken glass. He had pain in his back and loins. He was vomiting large quantities of, occasionally bloody, bile. Job looked like he was wasting away with protruding bones, wrinkled, gray and balding. (Job *II*:8, *VII*:5, *XVI*:8, *XVI*:13, *XVI*:16, *XVI*:18 & *XIX*:20) He trembled with speaking, his pulse was rapid but strong, his eyes were deathly in color and his breath stank. (*XXI*:6, *XVI*:16 & *XIX*:17) The painful ulcerations all over his body were purulent or have crusted. The skin had cracked in some places and in others it turned black. (Job *VII*:5 & *XXX*:30).

A group of doctors in 2007 have taken these symptoms and attempted to diagnose them as they would do for any patient in modern times. They have ruled out leprosy, due to the painlessness of the sores. In the Biblical sense, leprosy is described as a swelling of the skin, a whitish patch with crusts, whose severity is directly related to the depth of the skin affected. According to doctors Appelboom, Cogan and Klastersky that is not the case here. They prefer a diagnosis of parasitic infection due to scabies.[55]

Bruno Simini also believes that leprosy is not the right diagnosis because Job states that his flesh is clothed with worms (Job *VII*:5). We find this illustrated in an anonymous painting from 1613 of st. Job in the Santa Maria Assunta in Tereglio, according to Simini. This shows a worm or larva crawling out of each of Jobs sores and a worm or larva is lying at his feet.[56] However, the picture is unfortunately not that clear and it is hard to see (Fig. 34.). Simini also does not give a different diagnosis, he just argues that leprosy would not be fitting to this statement of the worms in

54 Ober, 48
55 Appelboom, Cogan & Klastersky, 36-39
56 Simini, 1895

the Book of Job. Leprosy indeed does not have sores that are purulent. It is important to note in their attempts to diagnose the specific disease, considering that Job was struck with all the diseases and misfortunes of the world and that his disease remains unspecified in the Bible itself.

The bubonic plague has also been associated with Job. At some point he even became the patron saint of the epidemic, together with Saint Roch and Saint Sebastian. Saint Roch is an interesting case because of the clarity with which artists depicted his boils. He was particularly known for helping victims of a plague and contracting the disease himself. He was then cared for by a dog and was miraculously cured. It is unsure if this plague was the Black Death, since saint Roch has also been linked to syphilis.[57] Yet, saint Roch was most likely born at the end of the 13th century, or early 14th century, which rules out syphilis that did not see its introduction in Western Europe until the end of the 15th century. The bubonic plague makes the most sense, especially when we look at the boil on his leg. Later images of the bubonic plague also show this specific boil on a specific place.[58]

Saint Roch is almost always portrayed holding up his clothes to show the boil on his upper thigh. He can be recognized by his pilgrims clothes, staff, dog, angel and boil. The pilgrims robes and staff are also attributes of other saints and the dog and angel are sometimes left out of images of Saint Roch. The boil on his thigh is therefore the most important attribute of Saint Roch. The appearance of the boil remains the same, for most of the time, yet some of the time the boil has been moved to a more discreet place on a lower part of his leg or a bandage has been put around the boil (Fig. 35 and 36). The earliest images are from the late 14th or early 15th century, which is some time after the heaviest spikes in the plague epidemic.[59] This corroborates with the late depiction of syphilis, which was also after the peak of the epidemic.

What is also important to note is that plague sores are very different from the sores associated with leprosy and syphilis. Leprosy and syphilis sores are plural and spread out all over the body and do not seem to have a specific preference for location. A plague sore is always singular, also called a bubo, a swollen lymph note close to where they were bitten by the flea carrying the disease. While it is not to say the plague victims were unharmed by the disease physically, they were sweating and their bodies were breaking down from the inside, it is not something that would show up in an illustration.

As said before, there are no contemporary images of the plague from the 14th century, and if artists did decide to illustrate the chaos of the epidemic, it would not be about the disease or its symptoms, but rather the devastating effect. One image from the 1340s shows people carrying

57 Maatouk & Moutran, 307
58 Vaslef, 157
59 Vaslef, 158-161

coffins with plague victims, yet there is not a boil in sight (Fig. 37.). It would make sense that artists did not show the plague itself, probably due to fear of catching the disease themselves. People in the 14th century were actually quite aware of the contagiousness of the disease and how to avoid contactual contamination. The use of quarantine was not uncommon and there were even cases of contact tracing, where doctors would examine who were most likely to have been in contact with victims and isolate them to avoid further spread of the disease. Around the 1490s the depiction of the symptoms started slowly. This painting shows Saint Sebastian praying on behalf of the victims (Fig. 38.). The man on the ground has a single bubo on his neck, the only sign that he is a plague victim.[60]

As we can see from this bubo illustrated in this painting and bubo's on the paintings with Saint Roch, they are distinctly different from the sores that are used to illustrate leprosy and syphilis. It can therefore be stated with certainty that the iconography of syphilis did not look at the iconography of the plague, but most definitely leprosy.

Diseases, especially epidemics, were often explained by people as a sign from God. The big punishments were war, famine and disease, as we have seen earlier in the story by Grünpeck. Terrible diseases never came alone and were usually tied to other horrible events that were supposedly sent to mankind to punish those in the wrong and scare the survivors into a life of righteousness. The main example of this would be of course Job. An innocent man afflicted with this terrible disease, but no matter what horrors the Devil could throw at him, Job always kept his faith.[61] That this story would become an ray of hope for people in times of disease and uncertainty is no wonder. Perhaps they thought that they too could be saved if they kept their belief.

One could argue that the exact diagnosis is not of importance here. The fact remains that Job was commonly associated with skin-diseases and therefore falls in the realm of the iconography of skin-diseases, including but not limited to the plague and leprosy. It is striking that with the wealth of symptoms, as can be seen above, many artists chose to only portray the sores and a pose that is reminiscent of melancholy. The pose is used most often in portrayals of Job on the dunghill as we can see in image 10.

Leprosy & Society

Leprosy has been around for centuries. Like syphilis, the disease remains a problem in todays society and has in fact been epidemic in several parts of the world at some point throughout history. In medieval times, not much was known about the disease and the fear of contracting the disease was great, to which the healthy population responded with isolation and separation of lepers, as

60 https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2017/08/18/542435991/those-iconic-images-of-the-plague-thats-not-the-plague?t=1551701958477 visited on the 26th of June, 2019.

61 Barker, 10

described below. Because the knowledge about the disease was limited, people feared they might contract the disease by simply standing downwind from a leper. It must also be stressed that while there are several forms of leprosy and some symptoms might add up to a diagnosis of leprosy, the fear of leprosy in medieval times made people see leprosy everywhere, even in cases where a different, innocent skin-disease might be the cause.[62] Hence the confusion between syphilis and leprosy. What also must be taken into account is what implication having leprosy could have on the lepers moral character. Like syphilis, the disease was seen as a punishment from God and therefore spoke to the moral corruption of the patients character.

When a person feared he or she might have contracted leprosy, the victim should have gone to the church and submitted him or herself for examination, usually performed by lepers, priests, doctors and surgeons. This was, however, often not the case because a diagnosis of leprosy would mean a forced separation from society and the possible leprosy victim was mostly outed due to public accusation by neighbors. This was most likely due to the dual nature of the attitude towards leprosy which differed from one village to the next. In some cases the leper was sympathized with and taken care of but in other the leper would be shunned, condemned to live life on the outskirts of society or in the extreme even burned. This is also due to the moral implications of leprosy and character. Once the leper was diagnosed with leprosy, a ceremony could be performed, depending on what part of Europe one was in, that was not unlike a ceremony for the dead, seeing as a leper was no longer regarded as one of the living.[63]

After a ceremony, the leper was no longer allowed to enter public places and was forced to wear uniform clothing with a signal that signified their disease, also known as a leprosy costume, their hair and beard must be shaved off and they would be buried in special places. The signal was often an instrument, such as a bell or rattle. This signal would later also be used for prostitutes in the time of the syphilis epidemic in the 16th century, see chapter four for more information. This signal was therefore not only implemented for the sake of the protection of the healthy population but also in correlation with the association of sinfulness with leprosy. A leper would be regarded as "unclean" and is denied the privileges of a normal life and should therefore not be able to defile holy sanctuary. However, this state of uncleanliness is not an judgement of the lepers moral character and can in fact be declared clean by a priest. Yet, in several texts of the Bible, like the ones about Miriam and Uzziah, as described above, there is a direct implication between leprosy and sin. And in Leviticus a lists of sins that are attached to leprosy is given, in particular blasphemy, a sin that would later be connected to syphilis as well, see chapter one.[64]

62 Brody, 21-24
63 Ibid., 60-65
64 Ibid., 107-116

What is even more significant to the connection between syphilis and leprosy is that the sin often associated with leprosy is lust. Leprosy was commonly assumed to be a venereal disease. When medical writers described a leper, they would make sure to mention that they threaten society in multiple ways, namely also through corrupt behavior, emphasizing their burning desire for intercourse. The disease was supposedly marked by strong venereal desires and could be a punishment for unchastity and some even speculated that the disease could be contracted by coitus or as a venereal infection from intercourse with a menstruating woman. Many ways of transmission have been appointed to leprosy, yet (illicit) intercourse seemed to be the most "popular" in Medieval times as explanation.

Conclusion

The images we have seen do give a good idea of why the artists have chosen to follow the iconography of leprosy. There is an overlap in the spots we have seen in the images of leprosy and the images of syphilis. Here again we see the simplicity in displaying the spots. No other symptoms have been displayed as far as we can tell. However, that leprosy and syphilis would be linked in the eyes of 16th century artists and even doctors is no surprise when taking into account that leprosy was once regarded as a venereal disease. Even Fracastoro, the leading expert on syphilis of the 16th century, sometimes had difficulty in separating syphilis and *elephantia*, the type of leprosy most commonly linked to venereal contact.

The connection between leprosy, intercourse and moral impurity made the association with syphilis an easy one and as we will see later in this thesis the way people treated syphilitics was not far removed from the way lepers were treated. The only difference I have seen so far is that more people from the elite seem to have suffered from syphilis than from leprosy. Perhaps this is due to the separation of lepers from the healthy population and even if they were allowed in public spaces, such as the marketplace, these were not places most likely frequented by members of the elite. The frequency with which leprosy was depicted in contrast with the lack of images of syphilis is probably due to the fact that leprosy was mentioned in the Bible often and Biblical images remained popular subjects all through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. If syphilis had been mentioned in the Bible perhaps the amount of images would have been larger.

Chapter 4: The discrepancy between the literature and art and the possible explanatory circumstances for this discrepancy.

Introduction

As we have seen in the first chapter, the amount of literature that was accessible to people on syphilis was enormous. However, the illustrations of the disease do not reflect this wealth of information. First I shall make a comparison between the literature and the illustration by Dürer. Then I will speculate on further discrepancies such as the Protestant Reform, the attitude towards sexuality and the attitude towards prostitution. To understand the attitude towards intercourse, I will take the example of Alessandro de'Medici and Cosimo de'Medici and how their sexual reputations directly tied in to their reputation as leaders. I will also look at the attitude towards prostitution in Italy, namely Rome, Florence and Venice. Lastly, I will expand more on the Biblical context of leprosy images as opposed to the judgmental context of syphilitic images.

Comparison

The best way to illustrate the discrepancy between the literature and images is to look at the images in comparison to the literature. The image we will be looking at is the drawing by Dürer, one of the very first illustrations of the disease. The skin lesions appear in the second stage, spread out all over the body, are symmetrical and can bleed easily. We can see that this is described in Von Hutten so the image in the case of Dürer is following the literature, however, the other images of the disease all follow the exact same pattern. There are lesions, only in the case of Dürer are they bleeding, and they are spread out over the bodies of the victims. These are symptoms of the second stage so in the beginning of the epidemic, it would have made sense that only a few of the symptoms would be illustrated. However, later in the 16th century more information came to light on the disease and mainly the tertiary stage that came with more and varied symptoms than just the skin lesions, yet the artists still did not portray more symptoms.

One possible explanation for this is that people simply had no desire to come close to syphilitics to study and sketch the other symptoms to give a more accurate, detailed picture. Like leprosy, people were scared of catching the same frightful disease if they came too close to patients. Another explanation, one that Monica Green and Lori Jones of the Lancet used to explain the lack of illustrations of the bubonic plague, is that people in the 16th century were very much aware of what the disease looked like and they did not need more than just the spots to understand which disease was portrayed. Perhaps this can be likened to the reason why people in modern times don't make paintings of people suffering from chickenpox or the common cold, we know what it looks like and have no desire to see this in an artistic form. We do, however, have medical literature on

chickenpox and its treatments, just like people from the 16th century had on syphilis.

The Attitude towards Sex and Power in the 16th century

The best way to illustrate the attitude towards sex is the attitude towards the two leaders of Florence, Alessandro and Cosimo. The sexual and political reputations of both the dukes will be looked at and dissected. In 1531 Alessandro was instated as "head" of the Republic. After some constitutional changes Alessandro was given the title *duca della Reppublica Fiorentina*. However, Alessandro soon proved himself to be a tyrant obsessed with becoming ever more powerful. The dissatisfaction of the people grew greater and he was eventually murdered in 1537 by his cousin Lorenzo de'Medici, also known as Lorenzino.[65]

However, the accounts of the writers of the 16th century which claim that he was a tyrant have to be taken with a grain of salt. Some of the writers were exiled by Alessandro, understandably they were angry about this, and so the things they wrote were negative about the ruler. Jacopo Nardi wrote that Alessandro prowled the streets after dark with his henchmen and would attack anyone he would encounter. Luigi Alamanni speculated that Alessandro stole money from the treasury to satiate his "swollen appetite". Yet the people that were not exiled spoke very differently about him. Luigi Guicciardini wrote that he was patient and understanding. Yet Guicciardini depended on patronage of the Medici's so his accounts can also not be trusted. However, in general, the opinion of Alessandro was not very high, especially when it came to his sexual appetite and the way he treated women. Some writers even went as far as to say that the nuns who had remained a virgin to honor God or wives of other men were not safe near Alessandro. Alessandro's reputation stands in stark contrast with that of his cousin, Cosimo.[66]

In 1537 Cosimo came to power. He was very young at that point, only 18. He took great care to be the opposite of his predecessor Alessandro. He married Eleonora of Toledo, the daughter of the vice-king of Napels, in 1539. He wrestled his way away from the influence of the pope and the emperor of Habsburg. His rule meant the regaining of power and status by the Medici family as it had been before. He was often praised for his dedication to the matters of state and his devotion to justice. When it came to his sexual reputation, praise also came to him there. His marriage in particular, which was seemingly monogamous, an exception in a period where extra-marital affairs were tolerated, and his general respect for women. Cosimo I was written to by women to ask for his aid with procuring a husband or help with a dowry, a request he indulged on several occasions. He also made several legislative changes in favor of women, instituting new and more strict penalties for crimes of violence committed against women and sodomy. He replaced the relatively light

65 Van Veen, 15-16
66 Baker, 437-438

punishments of fines with much harsher ones, namely service in the galleys or even execution.[67]

What the general opinion of the public was about these two rulers is unclear. Requests for dowries were also made to Alessandro and also indulged. However, that the general public also held the sexual honor of women in high regard is illustrated by a rape case in Orgiano. A series of rapes was committed by a local nobleman, Paolo Orgiano. Over one hundred witnesses testified against him, showing that sexual virtue and honor mattered just as much to the lower classes.[68]

The cases of Alessandro and Cosimo I showed that the respect for women and a mans sexual reputation played a big role in the respect for a ruler and how his or her rule would be remembered. Another example of the correlation between a rulers sexual reputation and their reputation as a ruler is Queen Elizabeth I. The "virgin" queen had a reputation for illicit sexual behavior and remarks and attacks were made about her alleged affairs. Cardinal William Allen compared the queen in 1588 with Nero, the archetype of tyranny and made comments about her refusal to be married, saying that marriage would curb her sexual appetite. He called her lacking in self-control and rationality and therefore unfit to rule. A likeness in these comments can also be seen in the comments made about Alessandro, who allegedly cared more about fulfilling his sexual desires than a devotion to state affairs.[69]

The Attitude towards Prostitution in the 16th century in the light of the Protestant Reform

In Venice, the attitude towards prostitution in the 14th century was a very modern one. The government policy was that prostitution was entirely necessary to the state. Venice was an important center of trade and that included sexual commodities. Rome had also attracted many courtesans due to its overwhelming amount of rich, single men. Pope Alexander VI had a mistress, which was a common fact even before his election as pope. So even for men that were supposed to be celibate, the association with courtesans and mistresses was accepted. This attitude of toleration started with Saint Augustine (354-430) who had observed that the availability of prostitutes was required for a healthy sexual relationship and that to tolerate prostitution would be better than to face the consequences if prostitution were to be outlawed. Some would even say that prostitution was necessary for the "public good". However, prostitution remained a point of discussion in theological circles and the English cardinal Robert of Coursson (d. 1219) even went as far as to say that prostitutes should be kept apart from the general population, like was the custom for lepers.[70]

During the end of the 14th century, municipal brothels and red-light districts emerged, but little control was exercised over the activities of prostitutes by the Roman and Venetian governments until the mid 16th century. In the Italian Renaissance, the emergence of cultured courts,

67 Ibid., 443-444
68 Ibid., 441
69 Ibid., 454
70 Geschwind, 34

like in Florence, also meant the introduction of the courtesans. The word prostitute usually referred to the more common “street whore” whereas the courtesan can be likened to todays escort. They would have to be beautiful and in the possession of a talent, such as singing, playing musical instruments or reciting poetry. Prostitutes and courtesans alike were often used a scapegoats, seen as the sources of many different problems including illnesses, war and poor harvests.[71]

With the Protestant Reform and the epidemic of syphilis in the 16th century, the attitude towards prostitution changed quite radically. In 1517 Martin Luther started the Protestant Reform and in the early years the interest in prostitution reform grew substantially. Luther accused prostitutes and catholic priests for having blame-worthy lifestyles but after some time the prostitutes took most of the blame. Criminalization of prostitution was attempted but remained largely ineffective and other solutions were thought of, including legislation, the establishment of charitable institutions and attempts to converse and rehabilitate prostitutes in the name of religion. Brothels were shut and marriage became one of the focal points Protestant Christian society. While this schism of the church was happening prostitution in Rome was still striving and became part of the smear campaign of Catholicism. Protestants portrayed Rome as the new Babylon and the Pope and as the whore.[72]

In Florence, prostitutes were forced to wears bells, typically a sign of the leper, on their hoods or shawls. The Council of Ten in Venice wrote a decree in 1539 stating that prostitutes that had moved to Venice in the two previous years were to be expelled and the remaining prostitutes were forbidden to go to church. Physical indicators were also implemented, red and yellow were the colors assigned to prostitutes and Jews, who were also found to blame for the rise of syphilis and poverty in the 16th century. The attitude shifted from a toleration of prostitution to the setting apart of prostitutes, visibly and audibly, not unlike lepers, to keep them separate from the general “good” and healthy population.[73]

Biblical Context and Other Explanations

One very important factor that must not be forgotten while comparing leprosy images and syphilis-illustrations, is that leprosy was a Biblical subject. Biblical and mythological scenes gave artists the option to explore subjects that were not allowed otherwise, such as nudity and sensuality. Women were only depicted nude when they were divine, such as Venus in *the Birth of Venus* by Botticelli (fig. 39.) or when it was necessary in the Biblical context, such as Susanna in Susanna and the Elders (fig. 40.). Diseases were not an acceptable subject for art either, as shown by the lack of images of syphilis and the plague, unless the disease was mentioned in the Bible, like leprosy. This

71 Ibid., 23
72 Ibid., 42-43
73 Ibid., 48

explains the vast collection of images of leprosy as opposed to the very few images of syphilis.

Something that must also not be forgotten about the lack of images of syphilis is that time is unkind on paper illustrations. There may have been more images of syphilis in the 16th that have not survived to us today. However, if more images had been around, it is likely that the images had been more of the same, generic and unspecific. Unfortunately, we shall never know this for sure, yet that is the consequence of studying art history from the 16th century.

Conclusion

As we can see, the situation was not as black and white as we may have thought before. The artists had access to literature that was filled with detailed descriptions of the disease. However, it seemed that the accuracy was not the most important feature of these illustrations by far. The literature had a more significant role. Perhaps the attitude towards sexual relations and prostitution was also a factor in the lack of images. At the end of the 15th century, mistresses, affairs and prostitutes were reasonably accepted but when the epidemic hit in 1495, the attitude shifted rather quickly. The connection between intercourse and the disease made people harbor a fear of sexual relationships and prostitution. Perhaps this is also the reason why the artists did not wish to spend too much time on illustrations that would invoke that fear.

Conclusion

The iconography of syphilis is complicated. Not many images and illustrations of the disease are known from the 16th century. Surely some images can be speculated to refer to syphilis, such as the *London Allegory* or the paintings Panofsky discusses in his paper on the *Venus Lactans* motive, yet images that we can state for certain portray syphilis are severely limited. We have some examples of images that accompany texts on syphilis, but other than that, our knowledge of syphilis-illustrations is lacking. Some illustrations may have gotten lost somewhere in the past 500 years, yet when comparing the amount of images of syphilis to the amount of images of the plague, which is also very limited, it seems the most logical explanation that syphilis simply was not portrayed all that often. Moreover, when syphilis was depicted, it has been done with a striking simplicity and a preference for only a single symptom, namely the sores.

Reasons for this are legion, yet to truly understand the situation we must go back to the beginning of the epidemic in 1495. Syphilis was most likely new to Europe and so people instinctively reacted to syphilis the way they would have reacted with any other skin disease. At first, they chose to treat the symptoms with mercury as they had done before. When they discovered the disease was venereal they also reacted the way they had done before with leprosy. The comparisons with leprosy are not only visible in art but also in the way people treated syphilitics and the hysteria surrounding the disease. This includes the fear that people had about both syphilis and leprosy, that a healthy person could get the disease by simply standing near, downwind from or seated on the same chair as the person who suffered from either of the terrible inflictions.

Apart from the fear that a healthy person might contract the disease by socializing with syphilitics and lepers, there is also the moral implication that comes with the suffering from syphilis and leprosy. Both the diseases were seen as punishments from God for several reasons, but chiefly the sins of lust and blasphemy. The fact that people in the Middle Ages assumed that leprosy was a venereal disease, makes the instinctive decision of the artists to illustrate syphilis the same way they would have portrayed leprosy a very logical one. Perhaps they simply viewed syphilis as the latest in a series of terrible diseases that they already had to deal with, such as the plague and leprosy. However, the comparisons between syphilis and leprosy do not end here. The signal the leper had to wear to warn others of his of her condition can be likened to the bells prostitutes were later forced to wear in Florence because prostitution was directly linked to sexual intercourse and therefore the chance of contracting syphilis. Some people even attempted to segregate the syphilitics and prostitutes from society, as they did to lepers.

Yet, when we assume that the iconography of syphilis and leprosy are very similar because the way people treated lepers and syphilitics was similar, the question why syphilis was written about so much, but not portrayed often in illustrations has not been answered yet. The answer why

leprosy was depicted so much, when it was also associated with venereal diseases and illicit sexual behavior, might be a very simple one. Leprosy may have been accepted in images more, because of the direct link between leprosy and the Bible. Perhaps people reasoned that if it was acceptable to mention the disease in the Bible it must therefore be acceptable to illustrate the disease as well. Syphilis was of course too recent of a disease to have been mentioned in the Bible. Yet when the disease became epidemic, there was a simultaneous rise in curiosity in people for the world around them and also for the human body. An example of this are the highly detailed anatomical drawings by Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo. Perhaps the interest in anatomy simply did not stretch to diseases yet or perhaps people were afraid to come close to the sufferers of the disease to study the symptoms and portray them accurately. However, people did study the symptoms enough to write them down in abundance.

The implications of moral corruption and the connection between the disease and coitus does not seem to have slowed down the rate with which the texts about syphilis were written and published. In fact, a new disease in Europe had never been researched and analyzed by physicians in such a rapid and effective way before the rise of syphilis. This makes it surprising that the illustrations were few and unspecific. The reason for this discrepancy might be found in the attitude towards sexual relations, power and prostitution. When it comes to the past, we can only speculate about the interrelations of men and women. However, some written sources can give a small insight into the general attitude towards the sexual relations of the elite.

When comparing Alessandro I and Cosimo I, we can see clearly that the presumably monogamous, woman-friendly Cosimo I was much preferred over the sex-crazed, insatiable Alessandro I. Not only that, but there seemed to be a direct link in the minds of the people in the 16th century that a person who did not have his or her personal affairs in order, was also unfit to be a head of state. This also counts for queen Elizabeth I, who was deemed unfit to rule due to her many alleged affairs. The common denominator here is the role that women supposedly played in the spread of the disease, as we have seen in most of the literature. That women were immediately held to blame was also visible in the way prostitutes were treated. They were ousted and separated from the healthy population in both audible and visible sense. So in comes as no surprise therefore that in the few illustrations that we do have of syphilis, men are portrayed as the victims and women as the instigators.

Yet, does this answer the question why syphilis was portrayed so little? What we can state for certain is that the general attitude towards prostitutes, noblemen and -women who were sexually insatiable and syphilitics was not particularly high. The disease must have been written about to warn people of the symptoms and advice them about the possible cures but the literature always came with judgement, more often than not about the victims moral corruption. Perhaps artists felt

no desire to portray those who were solely to blame for their disease. Another reason for the lack of images is that, as far as we know, some very highly placed individuals may have suffered from syphilis, including the aforementioned Alessandro. Most artists were under patronage of members of the elite and perhaps those members had no desire that people in the streets, or at least the lower classes, would recognize the symptoms from the illustrations they must have come into contact with.

The reason for the lack of images may also be a combination of all of the above. The shameful association of the disease with coitus, the association with prostitutes in a time that was also marked by a reformation of Catholicism, the refusal of members of the elite to be seen as a syphilitic and the attitude towards the sexual reputation of those in power. And lastly, one from the 21st century must never assume something based on our desire to record everything in images. When looking at the plague and the fact that the first illustrations of the disease were not made until 200 years after the worst epidemic, people from the past perhaps had no desire to depict the horrors that were happening around them until the syphilis epidemic was just a distant memory.

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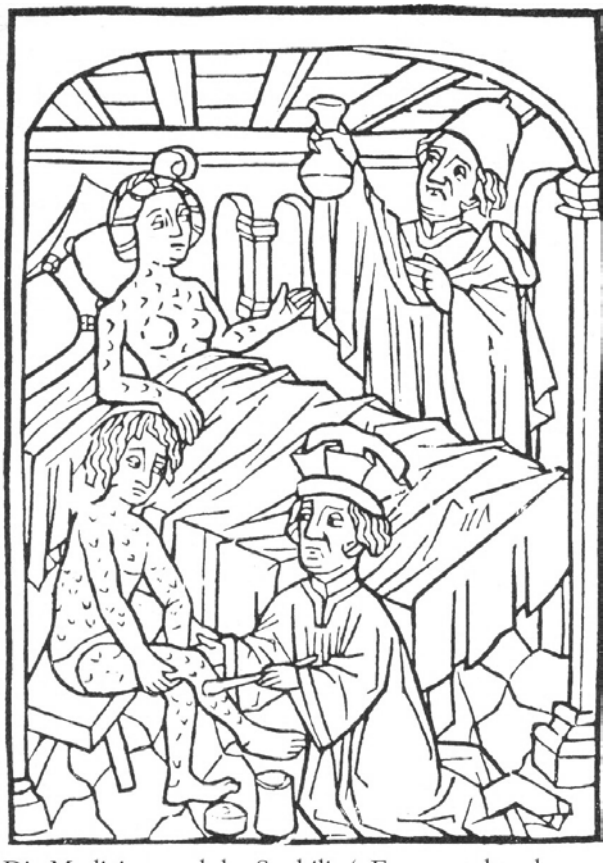

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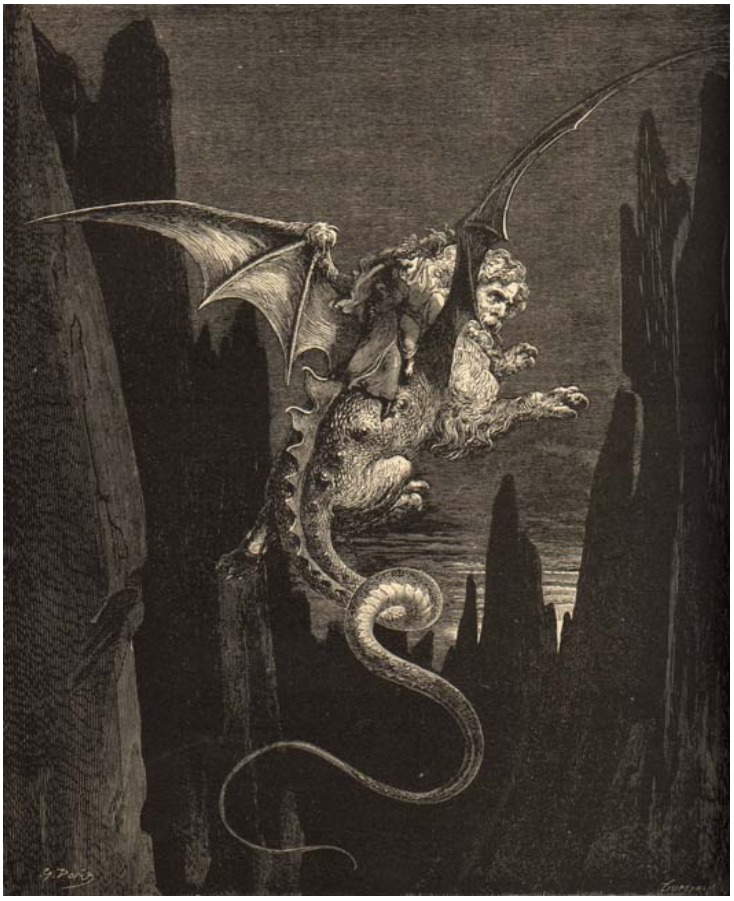

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Image 25: syphilitic, after Jeroen Bosch, *Cripples and Beggars*, first half 16th century

Image 26: detail Jeroen Bosch, *Last Judgement*, 1505, oil on panel, 60 x 167 cm (Vienna, Academy of Fine Arts, inv. nr. GG-579-581)

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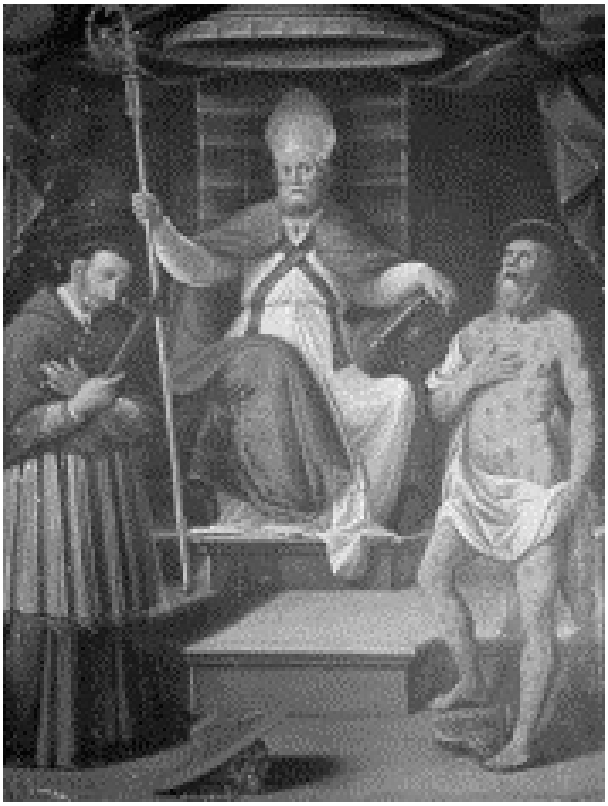

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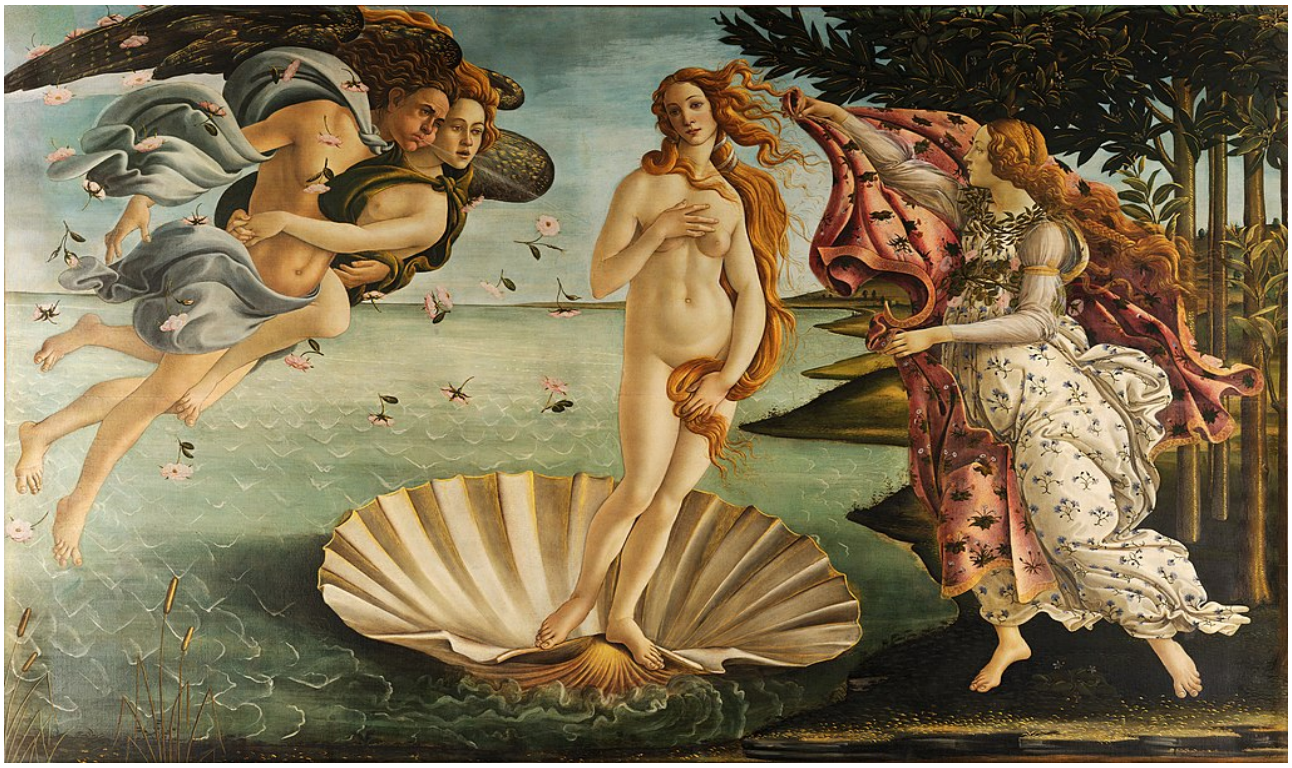

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Image from: Healy, M., Bronzino's London Allegory and the Art of Syphilis, *Oxford Art Journal*, 1997.

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