Creating the Pocky Woman: Pauline teachings, the French Pox, and gendered disease

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Abstract

The sexually transmitted disease known as "The French Pox," a forerunner of modern syphilis, represented a significant departure from early modern European knowledge of disease. Particularly distinctive was the gendered nature of the disease; females were labeled responsible for the formation of disease and thus associated with the moral corruption of the pox. This article examines the roots of this societal sexism in the Christian Pauline theory, using the binary between male and female to appreciate the development of the pox and the social differentiation that occurred as a result of its contagion.

The struggle in early modern Europe to comprehend and control the influx of diseases was a disruptive force to the fragile social balance of European societies. The development of the French Pox, from a disease that proved incompatible with traditional medical systems, into a sexualized disease implicating the moral inferiority of women, is an opportunity to study the system by which the universal Christian populace formulated blame and applied it to isolate a social sub-group. Men established their superiority through the publication of medical texts, using case studies and origin myths within their publications to implicate women as more easily and thoroughly infected, as well as more prone to transmission of disease than males. Tracing the roots of early modern social misogyny to the first century Christian teachings of Paul, as interpreted by historian and philosopher Daniel Boyarin, provides the hermeneutic key to the assignment of blame to women. Through the reintegration of males and females into Pythagorean binaries, the association of women with dirtiness and men with spirituality and higher consciousness explains the thorough entrapment of female sexuality within the diseased body of the French Pox.

During the late fifteenth century, a virulent disease emerged in Europe that defied traditional systems of classification. The "French Pox," *Morbus Gallicus,* incorporated elements of modern syphilis, gonorrhea, chancre, and urethral-genital complaints. Contemporary scholar Francastoro described "pustules with the shape of an acorn-cup and rotten with thick slime, …. Limbs stripped of their flesh and the bones rough with scales, and mouths eaten away."[1] The absence of descriptions or cures for the pox in classical medical systems created uncertainty in regards to its nature. Without a technical Galenic name, early modern physicians believed that the nature of the disease was unfixed and thus impossible to treat effectively. Jean Astruc's eighteenth century treatise on the pox documented the changing nature of the symptoms, from its emergence, through exotoses and warts, then buboes and alopecia, then auditory hallucinations in the middle period, and finally the appearance of

[1] Francasatoro, *Syphilis*, trans. Geoffrey Eatough, (Liverpool: Francis Cairns, 1984), 55-57.

"crystallines" on the bodies of the infected.[2] Rather than a singular disease, the pox became perceived as a collection of distempers and illnesses.

Modern historian Marie McAllister describes the intellectual reaction to the new disease as a series of three questions: where did this disease come from, why is it here, and how can one escape its effects?[3] The earliest proposed explanations aligned with traditional disease theory, particularly in the Avicennic and Galenic school of medicine. Pox sufferer Ulrich von Hutten reported in the sixteenth century that the pox was first thought to be a miasma, transmitted through "venomous steams" from corrupted lakes and rivers; later developments indicated through astrology that the location of Saturn and Mars caused the natural imbalance. Von Hutten also summarized the presence of ill humours, referencing the physicians who believed black or yellow choler or salt phlegm caused the disease. Finally, von Hutten advanced the theory to which he personally subscribed: causation through the contamination and transmission of corrupted blood.[4] Humoural and natural causes of the pox could simultaneously be affiliated with divine moral judgment. In his research on the origins of the pox, Kevin Siena references the work of Jon Arrizabalaga to demonstrate that the chain of causation. "Divine cause, fatal conjunction of the stars, corruption of the air, pestilence" were uniformly accepted among early physicians interacting with the French Pox.[5] In the fifteenth century, Joseph Grunpeck reminded his readers of causation in the "three cardinal sins: pride, avarice and unchastity," punished by "pestilence, bloodshed, and hunger."[6] Growing perception of the French Pox's transmission through physical contact strengthened its association with unchastity.

Kevin Siena isolates the appearance of this new phase of comprehension in 1530. The perception that God either caused or condoned Morbus Gallicus shifted at this time to a sexualized blame. Preexisting fear of sexual freedom and the degradation of the family unit allowed social groups to apply the contagious nature of the pox to the groups they perceive as threatening to social order. Just as in the initial process of naming, "the several countries of Europe … cast the odium of first producing this foul disease, upon the nation they [hated] most,"[7] renaming the pox the "Spanish" or "French" disease dependent on the location, social movements against prostitution and wet nurses affiliated the French Pox with their enemies in an attempt to physically vilify the opponents to the family unit which served as a foundation for early modern society. The distrust of prostitution predated the appearance of the French Pox, but the obvious connection between a group of sexually active, unmarried women with a sexually transmitted disease made prostitutes the most

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2 Jean Astruc, *De Morbis Veneris* Trans. William Barrowby, *A Treatise of the Venereal Disease* (London: 1737), 1:106–110.

3 Marie McAllister, "Stories of the Origin of Syphilis in Eighteenth-Century England: Science, Myth and Preudice," *Eighteenth Century Life* 24, (Winter 2000), 22.

4 Ulrich von Hutten, *De morbo gallico. A treatise of the French disease, publish'd above 200 years past, by Sir Ulrich Hutten, ... Translated soon after into English, by a Canon of Marten-Abbye. Now again revised and recommended to the press, with a preface to the same, and a letter at the close, to Mr. James Fern, surgeon, ... By Daniel Turner...* (London, 1730), *Eighteenth Century Collections Online.* (Gale Group), 4-5.

5 Kevin P. Siena, "Pollution, Promiscuity, and the Pox: English Venerology and the Early Modern Medical Discourse on Social and Sexual Danger," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 8.4, (April 1998), 556.

6 Joseph Griinpeck von Burkhausen, *Ein Hibscher Tractat von dem Ursprung des Bisen Fran- zos* (Augsburg, 1496), trans. Bruce Boyer in "Early Modern Syphillis," (1990), 201.

7 Foreign Physician, *The Tomb of Venus or, a plan and certain method, by which all people that ever labour'd under any venereal distemper may infallibly know whether they are cured or not… By a foreign physician*, (London, 1710), 1.

popular target for critique of diseased parties. The fear of wet nurses was linked to concerns regarding the disruption of family coherency. Believing that the period of nursing was critical in the formation of a mother's bond with her children, the insertion of a wet-nurse into families also allowed for external morals and diseases to enter and specifically target the most vulnerable member of the family.[8]

The association of women with the disease was established through the publication of new medical treatises. Despite the ambiguity surrounding the nature of the pox in early literature, men successfully diffused the threat of the disease to their social standings through the writing of disease tracts. Without reliance on traditional disease literature, personal experience and interaction with contemporary physicians and patients came into practice; personal publication was indispensable because of the need to consolidate and justify new, specific notions of medical practices.[9] In controlling the informative literature, men presented themselves as authorities on the presentation and cure of the pox. In the sixteenth century, Ulrich von Hutten produced *De morbo gallico. A treatise of the French disease*. The tract was significant because it detailed von Hutten's personal battle with Morbus Gallicus and subsequent cure. Rather than deriving authority through ancient names, von Hutten asked readers to "believe [himself, the author] who has proved many things herein to [his] great hurt."[10] Firsthand experience with the symptoms became the ideal route to authority; being personally cured was what established the author as moving from the isolation of infection back into the realm of social acceptability.

"Universal" healing texts, like William Clowes' *A Short and Profitable Treatise*, were limited in the scope of their knowledge, as evident in their described target audience. Clowes wrote that "great number of rogues, and vagabonds: the… lewd and idell persons" would not benefit from his cure. Rather, abuse of his text would lead to God's wrath and punishment. Clowes continued to narrow the scope of his prospective audience by reminding his readers that women were more prone to overeating and drinking, making them more deserving of illness and thus more difficult to cure. His claim to the masses in theory became a call to upper class males in practice.[11] The change in emphasis from gendered equality in contracting the pox to the increased susceptibility of females was enacted both through descriptions of the moral and physical inferiority of women. Although von Hutten personally attributed Morbus Gallicus to "apostemated, rotten or corrupted blood,"[12] he still emphasized that the "sickness, when contracted from … infected women, [was] so much more the grievous."[13] Thus, although both men and women contracted the disease, women were both more thoroughly corrupted, and more virulent in the transmission of the disease to their partners.

The vilification of women in origin myths focused on the corruptive combination of their humoural dispositions and reproductive organs. Consistently, it was through female sexual indiscretion that the pox was created. For the unknown author of *A New Method of Curing the French Pox*, after having "conversation with many men, the mixture of so many Seeds does

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[8] Siena, "Pollution, Promiscuity, and the Pox," 161.
[9] Bruce Thomas Boehrer, "Early Modern Syphilis," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 1.2, (October, 1990) pp. 209.
[10] von Hutten, *De morbo gallico,* 75.
[11] Boehrer, "Early Modern Syphilis," 199.
[12] von Hutten, *De morbo gallico,* 5.
[13] von Hutten, *De morbo gallico*, 7.

occasion such a Corruption of the Passage of the Matrix that it degenerates into a proper virulent Ferment."[14] It was the looseness of the women that occasions the unnatural combination of seed that lead to fermentation and disease. Nicholas de Blegny similarly wrote in the seventeenth century that the pox emerged "from the mixture and corruption of the seeds of divers[e] persons received and contained in the wombs of publick women."[15] In the eighteenth century, Richard Boulton additionally described a woman who "admits of too frequent congress with different persons." Through her lasciviousness, "the course of nature is quite perverted."[16] Implied is the connection between moral misbehavior and physical pollution. Women who developed the disease deserved the punishment for their lewd behavior, and men who contracted it from their partners were guilty only of engaging in a union with morally corrupt women.

The oppressive nature of the putrefication theory was further emphasized when it was combined with medieval humoural theory. Women who were "dull, sluggish, and of a phlegmatique, gross, cold constitution"[17] were less likely to transmit the disease; the most dangerous union was that of a woman with a partner she was attracted to, as "her phansie [had] the command of her uterus,"[18] linking attraction with corruptibility. Counter to social norms, the physician Gideon Harvey argued for the safeness of prostitution on the grounds of comparative bodily heat, arguing that prostitutes were "frigid" by nature, and thus less capable of transmitting the disease to their partners. It was not, then, women who embody the feminine ideal of chastity, quiet, obedience and calm who could contract and transmit the "French Pox;" only women who acted unnaturally and allowed themselves to be controlled by their passions were a threat.

Accompanying the *Morbus Gallicus* creation theories were case studies that examined the actions of women who knowingly transmitted their disease to their male partners. The propensity for those infected by Morbus Gallicus to spread the disease developed in tandem with its origin stories; perception of the French Disease as a divine punishment for sinfulness lead to a belief that infection was accompanied by a moral hatred and delight in spreading the disease further.[19] Gendered narratives presented women as deceptive agents, concealing their own infection and passing it to innocent male partners. Clowe offered a narrative in which a man goes "to mistris honestie his sweet heart… [and tells her] that he [was] infected," at which point the woman weeps and swears for her purity. Clowe concludes

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[14] Anonymous, *A New Method of Curing the French Pox*, (1684), 505.

[15] Nicholas de Blegny, *New and Curious Observations concerning the art of Curing the Venereal Disease, and the accidents it produces ... Explicated by Natural and Mechanical principles with Motions, Actions and Effects of Mercury,* trans. Walter Harris (London, 1676), 3.

[16] Richard Boulton, *Physico-chirurgigal treatise of the gout, the king's evil, and the lues venereal*, (London, 1714), 252.

[17] L. S., Profulacticon*: Or Some Considerations of a Notable Expedient To root out the French Pox From the English Nation. With Excellent Defensive Remedies to Preserve Mankind from the Infection of Pocky Women,* (London, 1673), 44-6.

[18] Gideon Harvey, *Great Venus Unmasked: Or a more exact Discovery of the Veneral Evil or French Disease, comprising the Opinions of most Ancient and Modern Physicians, with the particular sentiment of the Author touching the Rise, Nature, Subject, Causes, Kinds, Progress, Changes, Signs, and Prognosticks of the said Evil. Together with luculent Problems, Pregnant Observations, and the most Practical cures of the Disease, and Virulent Gonorrhea, or Running of the Reigns. Likewise a Tract of general Principles of Physick, with discoveries of the Scurvy, Manginess, and Plague*, second edition, (London, 1672), 62-63.

[19] Louis Qualtiere and William W.E. Slights, "Contagion and Blame in Early Modern England: The Case of the French Pox," *Literature and Medicine* 22.1, (Spring, 2003), 13.

that "the gentleman [was] wiser than to satisfie the bloody minde of a harlot,"[20] implying that he both perceived her deception and dismissed her defense. The narrative of a pure man who was deceived and infected by an overbearing and passionate woman was reinforced in John Marten's reference to a man who chose to lodge a traveling woman in his house. She "lay with his son, a harmless and silly lad, [and she became] lecherously moved by the spirit of the flesh …. [and] in the night [drew] the child several times to the place of her husband."[21] The kindness and generosity of the father, the complete innocence of the son, and the utter depravity of the women contributed to the perception of the innocence of male partners and the consumption of women by their passions.

In the seventeenth century, Daniel Sennert and Thomas Needham discussed the threat from sexual contact with women to physical proximity to infected females. Needham warned that when "people wantonly have been exercising each others privates, though somewhat distant from Carnal Contact… that the Pocky Steams of the diseased women do often evidently imprint their malignity on the genitals of the healthy playfellow."[22] Physical contact ceased to be the mode of transmission; the arousal of female passions, and through them the heating of her body and secretion of malign gasses, infected those who remained near in proximity to her. Sennert also capitalized on the theme of noxious gasses, saying that "vapours are raised from malignant humours in the womb, which are suck't in by the man's Yard."[23] The unnatural process of heating in women, who by the humoural system were perceived as cold and moist, rendered the contagion increased in severity and virulence. The theory of gaseous infection completely removed men from participation in the sexual act; a man who came near to an impassioned woman might have preserved his chastity while still being infected by her disease.

The consistency of the putrefication origin myth after the publications of the anonymous author and de Blegny is indicative of the appeal of the theory to European readers. The absence of chastity and proper behavior was a unifying feature; the bearers of pox were invariably "publick," lascivious, or wanton and it was this excess of passion and sexual energy that lead to the inception of the disease. Kevin Siena argues that the sexual nature of the pox allows for the medieval audience to immediately connect its effects to feminine sexuality, capitalizing on popular themes of female baseness and inferiority.[24] The origins of this tradition date back to first-century Christian theology. Pauline doctrine provides a key to understanding the balance of power between early modern men and women, disease in the body, and the process of female sinfulness.

Paul argued in 1 Corinthians 11, "For man did not originate from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman's sake, but woman for man."[25] Adherents to the Christian tradition thus trusted that a natural gender hierarchy with masculine superiority and feminine subservience was righteous. However, the imposition of this hierarchy seems to contradict Paul's universal claim that "there is no male and female." In *A Radical Jew*, Daniel

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[20] William Clowes, *A Short and profitable Treatise touching on the cure of the disease now called Morbus Gallicus*, (London, 1676), 195.

[21] John Marten, *A Treatise of all the Degrees and Symptoms of the Venereal Disease*, 6th ed.(London, 1708), 37-8.

[22] Thomas Needham, A Treatise of a Consumption and the Venereal Disease: the signs or symptoms of the Venereal Infection with various methods of cure (London, 1700), 6.

[23] Daniel Sennert, Two Treatises: The first on the Venereal Pox, trans. Nicholas Culpepper (London, 1673), 45.

[24] Siena, "Pollution, Promiscuity, and the Pox," 557.

[25] 1 Corinthians 11:7-9.

Boyarin reapplies the differentiation between soul and body evident in Paul's teachings to clarify the apostle's position, arguing that spiritual parity is possible between males and females only on terms of physical renunciation. In physical forms, women are inherently weaker due to their physical and sexual difference, but there is a spiritual unity that can be obtained through physical renunciation. For women, entrance into this state meant that sexuality and maternity must be sacrificed; Philo argues that women without marital and parental relationships are not women, but resume a supposed primal spiritual androgyny.[26] When Paul spoke of universal equality by utilizing the belief that the body is the limited physical encasement of the soul, Boyarin claims, Paul was offering this ideal on a spiritual level. Bodily divisions remain on the physical plane, and when followers of Paul are within their mortal bodies, they remain subject to the gendered hierarchy.

Although Pauline teaching indicated that celibate females can become unsexed to achieve equal status with men, the process entailed equality in terms of mythic or spiritual selves, not physical sameness. The cultural preoccupation in early modern Europe with the marital hierarchy lessened the possibility for female parity, with independent and educated women serving as the exception rather than the norm within the Christian community. Kevin Siena argues that "Pandora's Pox" targeted the fear of undomesticated sexuality precisely because of its threat to the monogamous family institution.[27] Society empowered the chaste maiden and wife through creation of associations between unchastity and diseased bodies. The origins of vilified sexuality are again apparent in Pauline theory. Boyarin observes that Paul never actively approved of either sex or reproduction in his teachings. Instead, he claimed that "it is better to marry than to burn [with desire];"[28] sex in marriage was permissible only to those men who struggle with the challenge of celibacy, while childbirth was seen as inferior to the process of devotion to faith, preaching, and revelation.[29] Women engaged in sexual practices outside of marriage were thus removed from righteousness simultaneously by nature of their inferior gender and inappropriateness of their actions.

Historians Qualtiere and Slights emphasize the connection in historical documents between spiritual impurity and illness, using the early modern contemporary author Boehrer's discussion of the significance of confession and penance in the curing of the pox. If it was lewd behavior and socially unacceptable sexual practices that led to contraction of the disease in publications, then the punishment of the physical disfigurement of the pox would be divine censure. By the time that femininity became intrinsically linked with the pox, then, the system of segregation and blame was already established. Transposing the cycle of desire, ridicule and retribution for immoral behavior from social commentary to gender critique did not require theoretical modification of the theory, only evidence that women were more prone to the behavior than men. Christian doctrine's emphasis on the guiding role of men as fathers, created in God's image and placed above women who were created in men's image, assumed that women, more than their male partners, were more prone to weakness and thus to sin.

The transposition of fear into the theme that females contaminate their male partners has its roots in the Pythagorean binary. As described by Boyarin, the binary creates a form that can

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[26] Boyarin, *A Radical Jew,* 189.
[27] Siena, "Pollution, Promiscuity, and the Pox," 567-8.
[28] 1 Corinthians 7:9.
[29] Boyarin, *A Radical Jew*, 177.

be summarized as man being to woman as active is to passive, substance is to accident, form is to matter, the soul is to the body, meaning is to language, and univocity is to division.[30] Boyarin describes the system as applied by Pauline theory to create the Christian worldview, including supplementary elements that specify that men is to women as faith is to works, revelation is to traditional teaching, and literal is to figurative speech.[31] By intrinsically linking women with what was physical, with the connotations of baseness and filth, adherents to the Pauline school naturally viewed females as more susceptible to diseases of both spiritual and physical natures.

The philosopher Philo's interpretation of the Genesis story applied the binary of the mind and sense-perception to the creation of Adam and Eve. He stated that the mind "abandons both God the Father of the universe, and God's excellence and wisdom… and cleaves to and becomes one with sense-perception… so that the two become one flesh and one experience." This unity degraded the mind to the level of sense-perception, sacrificing its purity and divinity within the union.[32] When the metaphor is translated back into the image of man and women, the implication becomes that man lowered himself through his relationship with woman. It is through their union that man became susceptible to passion, sin and physical illness; man in his status in the binary as active, the soul, and meaningfulness, was thus incorruptible except through his relationship with women.

The significance of women transmitting the French Pox to men becomes immediate. Through their union, the corruption of the body and its binary associate, the woman is transmitted to the soul and its binary equivalent, the man. Implications that women were literally more physically consumed than men were prominent in von Hutten's work, where the disease contracted from a woman is "so much the more grievous, by how much they are inwardly corrupted and polluted."[33] The French Pox was seen to penetrate women more deeply and thoroughly, while it remains an external threat for male sufferers characterized primarily by skin lesions. Thus, while not all female sufferers of the French Pox were whores, Pauline and binary theory allow that each woman was capable of seriously contacting the disease by nature of her association with bodily life.

Daniel Boyarin argues that the binary association of the female with the body "works along magical relations of reciprocity whereby the female becomes restricted to its body, and the male body… becomes, paradoxically, the incorporeal instrument of… freedom."[34] The contrast between male extrication from blame and female entrapment in physicality was demonstrated in the male field of healing treatises. Although the French Pox targeted gender equally, case studies cast the blame on women and the potential for healing on men. Ulrich von Hutten described his own disease and cure, and offered the knowledge that it was through his bodily mortification that he maintained his health after healing from Morbus Gallicus. Abstinence from rich foods, meat, wine and women were key supplements to his medical regime.[35] The association of women with passion indicated that the same cure was more difficult for women to follow due to their susceptibility towards cravings and

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[30] Boyarin, *A Radical Jew*, 18.
[31] Boyarin, *A Radical Jew*, 31.
[32] Boyarin, *A Radical Jew,* 21.
[33] von Hutten, *De morbo gallico*, 7.
[34] Boyarin, *A Radical Jew*, 180.
[35] von Hutten, *De morbo gallico*, 51.

indulgence. As he published his tract, von Hutten implied universality of the cure he had experienced, but by referencing the severity of female infection and the propensity for women to struggle with the regimen of cure, he indicated that male healing was more probable than female. The absence of women authors of similar treatises eliminated their own possibility of validating their disease and cure. Without access to the controlling medium, women were demonized in the conception of the disease and marginalized in its cure.

Examples of firsthand female experience with Morbus Gallicus are rare. In choosing case studies, male authors entangled female infection with sinfulness and male infection with ill luck in their unknowing association with the infected. Because of the popular association of sinfulness with illness, there was no sanctified way for women to admit to their suffering or publicly seek cures. Elisabeth of Roschlitz chose to vehemently deny claims of her contraction of the French Pox in letters to her cousin, explaining the symptoms of scabs on her arms and swollen glands as "such things that disappeared again," rather than a systematic demonstration of her illness. The insistence that "if it were the French Disease, the wounds would not heal" and Elisabeth's deferral of the accusations with humour reflected her dependence on the reinterpretation of signs away from the disease.[36] In the case of Margarita Marcellini, her husband pursued witchcraft trials after her death of the disease to validate the sanctity of their family by removing the tainted implications of Margarita's illness. [37] The posthumous diagnosis and accusations, rather than an attempt to combat and dispel the witch during Margarita's illness, implied her refusal to accept the symptoms as the French Pox during the attempts to cure her. For a woman to confess to her experience with the French Pox was to admit that she had erred morally. The sexual nature of the disease left no way for a married woman, as Marcellini was, or a widow like Elisabeth of Roschlitz to contract the disease without the confession of deviance or accusation of a partner. The removal of power from women created a social system in which reinterpreting symptoms or externalizing blame through witchcraft were the only socially safe methods for women to experience the French Pox.

The sexualization and gendering of Morbus Gallicus was a departure from traditional systems of blame. Instead, the sexualized nature of the pox necessitated an explanation that incorporated the transmission within the closed social society of upper class men who found themselves infected. The potential for universal infection defined the need of early modern society to ascribe it to a particular group. Without an external class or culture to accuse, dominant European men returned to the foundations of feminine subjugation. The socially-engrained Pauline explanation of innate female inferiority and its corresponding binary that associated femininity with the body allowed men to accuse women of creating and spreading the illness without acquiring social consciousness of the roots of their explanations. The need to direct blame at a more vulnerable group led to the reinforcement of female inferiority and the accusation that females were both more susceptible to and capable of transmitting the pox. Through origin stories that simultaneously implicated the sexual morality of females and targeted the womb as the site of putrefication, women became

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[36] Elisabeth of Roschlitz, cited in Alisha Rankin's "Dutchess, Heal Thyself: Elisabeth of Rochlitz and the Patient's Perspective in Early Modern Germany," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 82, (2008), 109-44.

[37] A study of Margarita Marcellini can be found in Guido Ruggiero's "the Strange Death of Margarita Marcellini: Male, Signs, and the Everyday World of Pre-Modern Medicine," *the American Historical Review* 106.4 (October, 2001), 1141-58.

physically and morally linked to the nature of the French Pox. It was the very tenets of Christian society that allowed for the segregation and vilification of women by their male peers.

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