‘The Baneful Source of all our Woe’:
Women and the Pox

The French pox was a dreaded disease in seventeenth-century England, it was associated with illicit sexual behavior and was considered shameful. The pox also stigmatized its victims with distressing physical symptoms. Sufferers were compelled to seek medical assistance for the disease, although many did not enlist the aid of a university-educated physician, opting instead for a lay or empiric healer. As the previous chapter demonstrated, physicians utilized remedies that were largely empiric in origin, but they argued that their education and the wisdom it afforded enabled them to offer their patients the safest and most efficacious course of treatment. They made few claims about successfully curbing the spread of the disease, but they theorized about the disease and brought it into their realm of knowledge.

Constructing knowledge about the disease proved helpful to their professional status in that they chose to use the threat of the pox to support prescriptive attitudes towards certain segments of the population that were deemed threatening to the social order. Specifically, physicians chose to stress promiscuous women in general, and prostitutes in particular, as the vector of infection, theorizing that their bodies were designed to spread the disease to men who were unable to resist them. Physicians’ theories about prostitution and the pox contributed to the attitudes toward and treatment of those infected, particularly indigent sufferers reliant on charitable care. Physicians’ willingness to write in English, coupled with their decision to withhold in-
formation from the public that could lead to immoral decisions while simultaneously elevating themselves as moral authorities, provided physicians with another avenue to become experts in a disease in which the public mind so clearly linked sin and divine retribution.

English physicians’ writing on the subject of the French pox stressed the disease’s association with divine retribution for the sin of lust and its link with prostitution. These treatises, which are primarily health guides written for lay readers, demonstrate that physicians were fashioning a new, more inclusive role for themselves as moral guides. Because they focused on prostitution to explain the spread of the pox, physicians’ tracts on the disease were brimming with moral platitudes about avoiding the terrors of the pox by avoiding the sin of fornication, and they were equally adamant that lifestyle choices contributed both to the infection and to its severity once contracted. Moralizing about venereal disease by the medical community was not a forgone conclusion, as evidenced by the reaction of other countries’ medical professions. In his comparative study of syphilis in European countries, Winfried Schleiner reached the conclusion that ‘Continental perceptions of morality [were] less pronounced and narrow than those in England.’ He noted a lesser degree of moral conviction evident in Italian syphilographers who willingly shared prophylactic measures in comparison with English surgeons and physicians writing on the subject, who were ‘imbued with values that make them view almost every aspect of the disease through a moral lens.’ Why did English physicians focus on this particular aspect of the disease, to the point where they chose not to include common preventative measures readily available in European medical works?

The decisions by medical men to concentrate on the sinful activities that led to venereal disease were part of the drive to control the behavior of the public, particularly the lower orders. Not surprisingly, the pox became an important factor in moral reform initiatives ranging from the eradication of prostitution to anti-wet nursing campaigns. Medical opinions on ways in which the pox was spread and the means by which it could be prevented became part of the campaigns and exerted an influence on targeting and curbing society’s vices.

Physicians overwhelmingly stressed sexual transmission and identified prostitutes as the most common vector of infection when explaining the French disease. In fact, the one major advancement in the study of the pox in the seventeenth century was the discovery of the venereal link. As the physician Jean Astruc explained, ‘When the Venereal Disease made its first