MYTHOPOEIA AND MEDICINE: DECODING FRACASTORO’S SYPHILIS SIVE MORBUS GALLICUS

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The life and works of Girolamo Fracastoro have most often been relegated to the periphery of mainstream literary and academic discourse. Despite this, there is little doubt that Fracastoro was very much a credit to early-modern science. Margaret Healy calls him “a distinguished Renaissance scholar” and an “early scientist in the Baconian mold” who was “simultaneously a mathematician, geographer, scientist, botanist, physician and poet”.¹ Similarly, in the opening of his discussion on the pox, Peter Lewis Allen provides an indication of Fracastoro’s prestige as an early-modern medical expert, whose observations are taken at face value even to this day:

Girolamo Fracastoro, a professor at the University of Padua, described the onward march of symptoms: syphilis pustules developed into ulcers that dissolved skin, muscle, bone, palate, and tonsils – even lips, noses, eyes and genital organs. Rubbery tumours, filled with a white, sticky mucus, grew to the sizes of rolls of bread. Violent pains tormented the afflicted, who were exhausted but could not sleep, and suffered starvations without feeling hunger. Many of them died.²

In particular, Fracastoro’s Syphilis sive Morbus Gallicus and De Contagione clearly display evidence of an astute thinker predisposed to vigorous empirical observation. Nevertheless, Fracastoro’s reputation today is based rather upon accident than on his many real accomplishments.

Fracastoro has been erroneously touted as nothing less than an early proponent of germ theory. More equitable scholars have “credited [him] with having put modern exopathic and ontological theories of contagion on the medical map”. This assertion is derived from Fracastoro’s writings – for he, like Paracelsus, believed that invisible, or microscopic, seeds spread contagion. This idea diverged from mainstream medical thought, which was based on Galen’s humoral theory and stressed the endogenous nature of illness. Since the advent of germ theory, several medical historians have identified Paracelsus’ and Fracastoro’s postulates as the ideological precursors of our modern understanding of disease. This signification is erroneous: their theories have far more to do with the ancient construction of illness as poison, such as Fracastoro’s description of infectious, astrologically created miasmas, than any particularly forward-thinking understanding of the microscopic world of bacteria and viruses, which was – at that time and for the next two centuries – completely unknown.

A more fitting tribute to this accomplished individual might be the acknowledgement of his masterly manipulation of myth in Syphilis. In his treatment of the Great Pox, Fracastoro demonstrates, not only an astute knowledge of a new disease garnered through meticulous observation, but also a refined understanding of how his contemporaries constructed and disseminated knowledge. In doing so, he left for posterity a testament to those Renaissance virtues that were so greatly to influence the future of scientific thought: that is to say, the earnest quest for knowledge and the construction of an empirical understanding of the world. In order to comprehend the extent of Fracastoro’s accomplishment, one must first look at the psycho-social forces behind late medieval and early-modern disease origin and creation myths before examining Syphilis and the rare discursive role of Fracastoro’s myths.

A short history of Pox Mythopoeia
Naming and creating a mythological framework to contextualize syphilis was the first step in understanding what was, at the time,

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3 For a thoughtful presentation of this argument, see Vivian Nutton, “The Reception of Fracastoro’s Theory of Contagion: The Seed that Fell Among Thorns?”, Osiris, II/6 (1990), 196-234.
4 Healy, “Anxious and Fatal Contacts”, 35.