

323

Paolo Prodi, *The Papal Prince*,
reviewed by Rita Belladonna

325

William Baldwin, *Beware the Cat: The First English Novel*
reviewed by William W. Barker

327

Gérard Defaux, *Marot, Rabelais, Montaigne: l'écriture comme présence*,
compte rendu par Diane Desrosiers-Bonin

330

Rosemary O'Day, *The Debate on the English Reformation*,
reviewed by Thomas F. Mayer

331

Paul R. Sellin, *So Doth, So is Religion. John Donne and Diplomatic
Contexts in the Reformed Netherlands, 1619–1620*

reviewed by Jeanne Shami

333

Christopher R. Armitage, *Sir Walter Raleigh, an Annotated Bibliography*,
and John R. Roberts, *George Herbert, an Annotated Bibliography
of Modern Criticism*

reviewed by E. J. Devereux

336

Sara Heller Mendelson, *The Mental World of Stuart Women. Three Studies*,
reviewed by Lorelei Cederstrom

The Alexandrian Fracastoro: Form and Meaning in the Myth of Syphilis

GILBERT L. GIGLIOTTI

Giromalo Fracastoro, at the conclusion of his poem *Syphilis*, shows a keen awareness of the complexities of Alexandrian narrative technique.¹ As Virgil had done before him, Fracastoro ends his didactic poem with a lengthy and involved *aitton*. Based upon the Aristaeus/Orpheus epyllion on the genesis of *bougonia* in Book IV of the *Georgics*, the Renaissance poet's narrative details the origin of the guaiacum, a tree from which comes a cure for syphilis. Fracastoro, however, utilizes the interplay between the frame — Columbus' discovery of the New World — and the imbedded myth — the curse inflicted upon the shepherd Syphilus — not only to illustrate the beginnings of the disease and the origins of that "Holy Wood," but also to comment upon the seemingly inescapable contradictions of human experience.²

Fracastoro wrote *Syphilis* between 1510 and 1526 and published it in 1530. The work is a Latin hexameter poem in three books on the symptoms, treatment and origins of the "French Disease," which only later became synonymous with the title of the poem (Castiglioni 454; Eatough 12). Julius Caesar Scaliger hailed the work as a "divine poem" (315), and according to the historian Jacobus Augustus Thuanus, even Fracastoro's rivals acclaimed him second only to Virgil (Eatough 214–215). Fracastoro was also an esteemed physician, astronomer and friend of the era's most influential men. He held the position of Physician to the Council of Trent (Castiglioni 467) and dedicated *Syphilis* to Pietro Cardinal Bembo (1.5) and Pope Leo X (II.47). Medical historians have referred to him as the "father of modern pathology" for the insight he displays in such works as his 1546 prose treatise *De Contagione et Contagionis Morbis* (Singer 1). He was indeed a Renaissance man.

Geoffrey Eatough has recently published an excellent critical text, translation, and commentary on *Syphilis*. The time is now ripe for a literary study. For upon close examination, Fracastoro appears as a poet, not merely well-

versed in the Virgilian canon and hexameter (as so many medieval centonists had been). He also displays a complete knowledge of the narrative and poetic techniques that Virgil and other Roman poets in the Alexandrian tradition utilized.

The scholar-poet Callimachus originated the Alexandrian tradition in the third century B.C. to combat the simple perpetuation of Homeric mannerisms in contemporary poetry (Newman 5). In reaction to such early third century poets as Animachus of Colophon and Choerilus of Samos, Callimachus developed a new poetics inspired not by the comprehensive objectivity of Homer but by the personal qualities of the Greek lyric. This Alexandrian poetic emphasized the brevity and allusive quality of carefully chosen details, the musicality of the individual verses, an highly pathetic style and the very active role of the poet in the narrative (Newman 20–21). And it was this definition of poetry and the various techniques practiced by Callimachus which the Roman Alexandrian poets, such as Catullus and Virgil, adopted (Newman 104).

An important Alexandrian technique is the framed narrative. This story-within-a-story, in Latin exemplified by Catullus 64 and Virgil's *Aristaeus epyllion*, presents a detailed and objective Homeric narrative as a frame to an allusive, highly pathetic tale which depicts only the most emotional moments (Ois 190 ff.). The poet thus achieves his poetic and thematic effects in the contrasts and parallels drawn from the styles, situations and outcomes of the two stories. In Catullus 64 and *Georgics IV*, for instance, this narrative technique underscores the vast difference between the Golden Age and contemporary times. Contemporary man is represented in the allusive pathos and unhappy ending of the inset tales, while the Golden Age, that lost age of easy intercourse between gods and men, is manifest in the stately epic style and happy endings of the frames.

Fracastoro, in the final book of *Syphilis*, seems aware of the grand complexities with which the framed narrative could deal, even if his tale-within-a-tale is not, in the most complete sense, Callimachean. For the imbedded *aiton* of Syphilus is no more allusive or pathetic than the frame. Nor does the Columbus frame possess an epic objectivity lacking in the inner tale. The dichotomy holds on the surface (Columbus is a *hero* and Syphilus but a *pastor* who is nearly sacrificed), but Fracastoro does not exploit the stylistic variation of the tradition. Instead, he focuses completely upon the narrative structure he learned from his Latin Alexandrian models.

In doing so the Renaissance poet creates a tension arising from a different sort of juxtaposition. His pair of stories comment upon one another more

directly. A word or situation, for instance, used in a seemingly neutral manner in one part will reverberate with new connotations in a different context. Likewise, a theme will surface and resurface demanding a new analysis and reintegration by the reader. The stories, in short, continually reinterpret each other even as the involved narrative unfolds.

Fracastoro's aim is not far to seek. For the poet the "French Disease" is not merely a medical problem. It is a symptom of much larger problems on a much larger scale than the individuals or even cities that the disease attacks. The age and its morality are at the root of it. And because of its pervasive, albeit subtle, nature, the disease demands a comprehensive and subtle study not possible in a straightforward didactic poem. The doctor, as it were, has already listed the symptoms and effects of the disease (I.319 ff.) and the various ways to combat it once contracted (II.66–282). At the conclusion of the poem, it was time for the poet to put the disease into a more metaphorical perspective.³

For this he looked to "Holy Virgil" as his guide and found the *Aristaeus* myth a suitable and noble model. He openly reveals his debt by echoing the *Quis deus* at the beginning of that tale in his own poem: "What god revealed these practices to these people?" (III.90) recalls Virgil's "What god, Muses, invented this art for us?" (IV.315).⁴ Indeed, Virgil's entire *aiton* performs a function very similar to Fracastoro's. Virgil in the *epyllion* raises onto a mythical plane the ideas he discusses throughout the first three-and-one-half books concerning the nature of work, the relationship between humanity and nature, as well as the nature of humanity and the nature of the gods.⁵ Fracastoro's *aiton* operates in precisely this way: poetically and mythically not diagnostically.

The basic outline of the *epyllion* is simple. The frame is the journey of Columbus. It begins with his ships at sea, his prayer for direction, and his landing on Ophyre (90–150).⁶ In response to the Europeans' slaughter of the island's sacred birds, one of the birds prophesies hardship, disaster, and disease, which the Europeans will have to suffer (150–192). The natives of Ophyre then approach the white men, make a treaty and celebrate with feasting, drinking and games (182–231). While viewing a religious ritual of the natives, in which the priests treat diseased people with an indigenous plant, Columbus recognizes the disease as the very one foretold by the prophetic bird (232–252). He asks the king of the natives the origin of the rites, and in reply, the king tells the two inset tales. The first is about the gods' destruction of Atlantis, the home of the natives' ancestors (265–281). The second concerns the punishment of another ancestor, the shepherd Syphilus (282–

379). The frame concludes with the shocking discovery by Columbus and his crew, on their arrival home, of the spread of the disease throughout the Old World. They fortunately hold the cure (380–400).

Within the basic framework, Fracastoro has intricately interwoven the parts. He begins with Columbus, “the great-hearted hero” (III.104), entreating the moon, Phoebé, to help him and his crew to find the “long-hoped-for port” (110). They need her aid because they do not know the way and are wandering aimlessly (97). The moon, in the guise of a nymph, tells them that their journey’s end is near. She directs them through many islands and streams to Ophyre which, she says, is theirs. Ophyre, this promised land, will be the “head of an empire” (*imperii* ... *caput*) and is “owed” (*debita*) them as a reward (120–121).

The reader soon discovers that Columbus’ success, his discovery, is not an unmixed blessing however. Fracastoro hints at the daring nature of Columbus’ quest with an allusion to Catullus 64.⁷ Like the Argonauts in that poem (15), Columbus is seeing things (e.g. *monstra* ... *Nereides*) which no man has seen before (98–100). And, perhaps, just as in Catullus 64, this may be the first step in the path toward man’s challenge of the gods, his disrespect towards them, and thus the beginning of the end of the Golden Age. For the allusion invites the reader to reinterpret the curses on the modern world which Fracastoro lists in Book II – war, disease, crime, poverty and famine (16–23) — in light of the conclusion of Catullus 64. There (397–406) Catullus describes a time when man has turned completely away from the gods and lists the results. All these ills result from man overstepping his bounds.

In fact, Fracastoro presents the greatest glory of the age as almost synonymous with *hubris*. The recent discoveries are great achievements. Fracastoro proudly states that his age “is able to plow the seas with ships, an act denied even to the ancients” (II.25–26).⁸ This is truly a remarkable feat but somewhat mitigated by the allusion to Catullus and the later *exemplum* of Atlantis (Atlantis). As “queen of the land and sea” (III.277), Atlantis “often plowed [the sea] with a thousand ships” (276–277).⁹ It is, however, impossible to express in words the inhabitants’ contempt for the gods (273). The implication is obvious and unavoidable. The boldness of seafaring is incontrovertibly linked with contempt for the gods. For despite a sailor’s due, despite his clear heroic stature (III.104; 258), Columbus may be attempting too much. Fracastoro does not in the end decide. But the tension remains.

The poet even complicates things further. The Europeans were destined for great things. They were supposed “to subdue new lands and people long at peace and free, and to build cities and initiate new practices and rituals”

(III.179–181).¹⁰ But they committed another act of *hubris*: killing the sacred birds of the Sun on Ophyre. The sailors, on their landing, marvelled at them (III.151–154), and immediately picked up Vulcan’s “creation” (159), their guns, “the hollow bronze which shakes with frightening blasts and bullets which imitate the flaming thunderbolt” (156–157).¹¹

Imitating Zeus’ thunderbolt clearly constitutes an act of *hubris*. But it is as sinful when Vulcan himself, the thunderbolt’s inventor, has given “the weapons of Jove” to mortals? The gods’ gifts themselves contribute to the downfall of men. Vulcan gave humanity the thunderbolt but man’s use of it is inherently hubristic. Similarly Ophyre is “due” Columbus but the very act of reaching it verges on sin.

And the Europeans are punished for their sins. In place of governing and converting their new lands and peoples, they must endure “unspeakable ... suffering on land and sea, many wars, death in foreign lands” (III.182–184) and, of course, the “unknown disease” (190).¹²

It is this disease that, in fact, reverses the course the fates had intended. Whereas Columbus and his men were to convert the New World, it is actually the natives, the “race with black faces and hair” (III.200), who introduce guaiacum to the white men. The plant is part of an ancient ritual to Sun the Avenger (III.232–233). Ammerice, the nymph, had revealed it long ago to the people afflicted with the “eternal” disease (343). She explained the reason for the plague: “it is not right for mortals to equate themselves with gods” (340–341),¹³ and outlined the rite of appeasement (347–357), which in turn led to the “Holy Tree,” their salvation. Hearing this history from the natives’ king, Columbus and his men witness the strange ritual (248–249) and finally take it back to the Old World. The Europeans thus import, not export, ritual. And instead of saving the souls of others, they merely cure their own bodies.

The importance of guaiacum is immeasurable for two reasons. First, Columbus and his men discover syphilis already ravaging Europe upon their return (385).¹⁴ The sailors, even though they may have carried the disease back with them on the ships, could not have introduced it to Europe; it is already there. A general contempt for the gods must exist in Europe, but they have as yet no cure for the natural result of that contempt. Guaiacum only comes from the New World.

The tree is doubly important because syphilis is eternal; despite its cure, the gods will never recall it (III.343–344). In fact, whoever is born “on that soil” (344), and now Europe as well, must experience it. History has already proven that. The disease began long ago when the shepherd Syphilus, in anger against what he considered the indifference of the gods, decided to give

sacrifices instead to his visible King Alcithous (III.296–309). Other townspeople followed his example and the king was “overjoyed with the worship usually given to gods” (317).¹⁵ The gods then sent the disease on man.

But even this was not the first case of such crimes and punishment. As the native king tells Columbus in the first inset tale, the ancestors of Alcithous and Syphilus in Atlantia were swallowed up by the Ocean for their evil (III.276). From that time on, in that part of the world, cattle and other great four-footed creatures disappeared (III.278–280). Nevertheless, Syphilus and his countrymen, in the second tale, seem completely oblivious to the highly tenuous nature of their large flocks (301–302). It escapes him that his flock and herd are not indigenous and not necessarily permanent. Ironically it is one of these “foreign victims” (280), the replacements for the animals the gods had destroyed once before, which replaces Syphilus, who was to die for all” (363),¹⁶ in the sacrifice to Juno for the punishment for his crime.

Nor is Syphilus the only one who seems unable to escape the effects of crimes already committed. The natives, in the frame, the very ones whom the “Holy Tree” has blessed, whose ancestors the ocean covered, and whom the gods punished terribly for treating a king like a god, treat Columbus similarly. They greet him “in the manner of adoration and with prayers” (III.207).¹⁷ The reader must not overlook either Fracastoro’s use of *rex*, “king,” in describing Columbus (III.208, 218) or that the hero and his men enjoy the attention of the natives as Alcithous had before them (317). “They spent the days joyfully drinking and playing” (231).¹⁸ The web of recurrent sin seems to grow ever denser.

The gods destroyed Atlantia not only for its *hubris* but its luxury as well (271). In light of this, it becomes necessary to reassess Columbus, the hero/king, with his wool inlaid with gold, his glowing armor, his bronze helmet, golden collar and Spanish sword (224–228). Granting that Fracastoro uses the description to reveal the vast differences between the New and Old Worlds as well as to highlight the power of the hero, we note that, despite the differences, both worlds are trapped in the same cycle of sin.

Most damning of all is Fracastoro’s description of the relationship between the Europeans and the natives in a simile reminiscent of the Golden Age. Drinking wine, the natives seemed:

like some mortal admitted to the tables and feasts of the gods with promise of a happy future draining celestial cups of eternal nectar (III.213–215).¹⁹ (Eatough’s translation)

Here is the perfect union of past sins: the *hubris* inherent in treating men like gods, and in accepting divine honors willingly. This generation imitates the sins of their ancestors; their descendants will follow suit.

Everyone will suffer this pestilence. One recalls the noble youth from Cremona who was stricken with syphilis in Book I (382–412). He had everything: horses, the love of maidens, even of goddesses. He was, however, “too confident” (397). Fracastoro is not simply discussing the disease. It is, as the *aition* reveals, human weakness, short-sightedness, arrogance, and the cause of history repeating itself.

Yet these very traits are the source of our successes. In Fracastoro’s time, man has managed what even the ancients could not: the discovery of a new world. While that may have been a proud act, it was still an heroic one. And the hero is essentially good. While he displays a lack of foresight in shooting the sacred birds of the Sun, he is far from evil. Columbus, throughout the frame, devoutly and meticulously gives due honors to each of the appropriate divinities (III.106–111; 128; 144–146; 196–199). He, like all humanity, is simply weak.

Despite human weakness, humanity still survives and succeeds according to Fracastoro, because the gods are always supportive, even when it does not seem so (II.14–15). In the epyllion, no mortal suffers undeserved punishment, or, in the end, is denied salvation, except the inhabitants of unspeakable Atlantia. The gods still allow cattle to survive in the New World, and Juno, in the inset tale, ordered Apollo to replace Syphilus with the “more appropriate” bull at the sacrificial altar (III.367). She also painted the “Holy Tree” which, despite its character as *indomita*, “untamed or unmanageable” (III.40), is, with the proper instruction, the cure for an eternal disease. God the Avenger inevitably becomes merciful to the utmost benefit of man.

The frame and imbedded tales reveal a number of unresolved tensions and contradictions. Heroes are devout yet severely flawed. The gods are swift in their vengeance but equally generous in their mercy. The mistakes made by one generation appear consistently in the next. The very reason for human accomplishment is the cause of its defeat. Fracastoro unites all of these tensions into one complex whole. Manifestly an *aition* of a medicine, the epyllion becomes a rumination on human nature, a study of man’s place in the universe.

Fracastoro admits that the disease is not a worthy subject for a poem (I.23). Beneath the surface, however, is hidden a work “of nature, fate and . . . a grand origin” (I.23).²⁰ One only has to search. Not that one will find the answers or the cure to the world’s ills. The pestilence is not that simple. In fact, medicine

cannot cure it or even describe it. Poetry, for Fracastoro, at least offers an opportunity to examine and challenge. And his use, in the poem's denouement, of the Alexandrian framed narrative reveals the problematic and eternal nature of the questions.

The Catholic University of America

Notes

- 1 I have used the following texts in preparing this paper: Geoffrey Eatough, *Fracastoro's Syphilis: ARCA Classical and Medieval Texts, Papers and Monographs* 12 (Liverpool: Francis Cairns, 1984); E. T. Merrill, *Canilius*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951); R.A.B. Mynors, *Georgics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969). Translations are my own except where noted.
- 2 Eatough, in his introduction to the poem, briefly offers a possible interpretation of the myth as a commentary on the religious struggles of the time (25-26). While not discounting that interpretation, this paper will only focus upon Fracastoro's use of Alexandrian narrative technique.
- 3 The doctor had already tried his hand at mythmaking in the poem. At the end of Book II, Fracastoro presents the myth of Ilceus and the so-called mercury cure (283-423). Despite its also being a framed narrative, it possesses a very simplistic diagnosis-prescription/cure structure. Ilceus sins. The gods inflict him with the disease. He seeks the aid of his nymph-mother. He follows her instructions precisely and, consequently, is healed. Bembo had wanted Fracastoro to remove this myth since too many of its details were taken from Virgil and because it was not a worthy subject (Eatough 21). Dr. Fracastoro would later feel the need to greatly expand upon the medical facts in *De Contagione* (Eatough 16).
- 4 Quis deus hos illic populus monstraverit usus?
Quis deus hanc Musae, quis nobis extudit artem?
- 5 For recent studies see: G.B. Miles, *Vergil's Georgics: A New Interpretation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980, 252ff.); Michael Putnam, *Vergil's Poem of the Earth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979, 276ff); Charles Segal, "Ophneus and the Fourth *Georgic*," *Vergil, Nature and Civilization: American Journal of Philology*, 87 (1966): 307-328.
- 6 Ophne is the Ophir from which Solomon's navy sought gold in *I Kings* IX.26-28. See Eatough's note on III.120.
- 7 *Canilius* 64 begins with the Argonauts setting sail towards Colchis. The Nereids, curious about the ship, appear. While the human crew and the divine nymphs marvel at each other, Theis and Peleus fall in love (1-30). The next 350 lines detail their wedding day, gifts and *epithalamion*, all surrounding and extensive *ecphrasis* describing the covert of Theis' wedding couch, on which is embroidered the sad story of Ariadne. The poem ends with a passage (384-408) contrasting the Golden Age when gods mixed freely with men and the evil contemporary times when such intercourse no longer happens. In *Canilius* 64, the journey of the Argo is the beginning of the end of that Golden Age. By striving beyond their limits, Jason and other heroes open the way toward the *hubris* which will cause the gods to cease mingling with men.

- 8 ... haec aetas (quod facta negarunt
aniquis) totum potuit sulcare carinis
id pelagi
- 9 ... oceano, quem mille carinis/sulcavit toties
- 10 ... novas ... summittere terras
et longa populos in libertate quietos
molirique urbes, ritusque ac sacra novare
- 11 continuo cava terrific horrentia bombis
aera, et flammiferum tormenta imitantia fulmen
- 12 infandos ... pelagi terraque labores
... diversa ... praelia ...
morta in extrema ... corpora terra
- 13 nulli fas est se aequare Deorum/mortalem
- 14 For a summary of the medical and historical articles for and against the American origin of syphilis, see Eatough 11-15.
- 15 divum exhibitio gavisus honore
- 16 Fracastoro's use of Christian allusion, such as this one or the "Holy Wood," is best understood in light of the satirical dimension of the epyllion directed at contemporary religious figures (Eatough 24-26).
- 17 adorantum ritu, precibus salutant.
- 18 Laetitia ludisque dies per pocula ducunt.
- 19 Non aliter, quam si mensis, dapibusque Deorum
mortalis quisquam adscitus, foelixque futurus,
hauriat aeternum, coelestia pocula, nectar.
- 20 Naturae, fatigue ... et grandis origo.

Works Cited

- Castiglioni, Arturo. *A History of Medicine*. Trans. E.B. Krumphaar. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1941.
- Eatough, Geoffrey. *Fracastoro's Syphilis*. Liverpool: Francis Cairns, 1984.
- Mynors, R.A.B. *P. Vergili Maronis Opera*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969.
- Newman, John Kevin. *The Classical Epic Tradition*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986.
- Otis, B. *Virgil: A Study in Civilized Poetry*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963.
- Scaliger, Julius Caesar. *Poetices Libri Septem (1561 Faksimile)*. Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Friedrich Fromm, 1964.
- Singer, C. and D. "The Scientific Position of Giromalo Fracastoro." *Annals of Medical History* 1.1 (1917): 1-34.