

Syphilis in art: an entertainment in four parts. Part 3

R S Morton

The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

One character only has been selected to represent the portraits of known or suspected syphilitics. In the chosen instance the diagnosis of congenital syphilis is clear in two self portraits and in a third painting by the ever-realistic Rembrandt (figs 27, 28, 29).

Gérard de Lairesse (1641-1711) was born at Liège and worked mainly in Holland. He was brought up to culture, painting and music and by the age of 15 was already an established portrait painter.³³ His style, popular in his day, was cold and classical in contrast to the baroque of Rubens and the dark dramatic of Rembrandt. Lairesse's son published his father's views on art and these proved of importance to fellow artists throughout the 18th century. Lairesse's self-portraits can be seen, one in the Musée Bonnat, Bayonne, in the Basque area of France (fig 27) and the other in the Pitti Palace in Florence. The Florence painting (fig 28) is of Lairesse as a young man. It is the more dramatic of the two. The broad, flattened bridge of the nose set in the typical congenital syphilitic "dish face" puts the diagnosis beyond doubt.

Rembrandt's painting (fig 29), executed when Gérard was 15, is of a sickly boy against a sobering dark background. It emanates an arresting sense of sympathy in spite of its candour. One is left to wonder if the artist in some way identified with the boy and his family. Rembrandt had a much loved son and in his "Rembrandt within Rembrandt" we find Janos Plesch examining the admittedly hypothetical history of Rembrandt's own syphilitic infection.³⁴

The 17th century has not proved a fruitful source of artistic comment on syphilis. By 1610 the morbus gallicus had passed through four well documented phases of clinical presentation to become the "morbus venereus" we know today.³⁵ The frightening epidemic was over. In socio-political terms the 17th century in Europe was very much dominated by despotic rulers using religion as a measure of the corporate good. In France, Louis XIV commanded l'age d'or and his minister Richelieu denied the Protestants political power by refusing them access



Fig 27 Gérard de Lairesse (sic) Self Portrait. Canvas 120 × 100 cms. 1695. Courtesy Musée Bonnat, Ville de Bayonne.

to religious freedom. In England doom and gloom prevailed in the rigidity of Cromwell's commonwealth. Indeed we must wait till nearly halfway through the 18th century when urbanisation and prosperity determine more liberal attitudes, both socially and sexually, and behaviour patterns, reminiscent of the wildest Tudor times, are again in order.

This is not to say that sexual infections did not exist in the 17th century, only that they existed at some regular modest level. They were subject to minor fluctuations which occasioned no comment in societies which found disfavour with all manifestations likely to disturb the even tenor of their ways. To verbalise them was akin to accepting them and that was too distasteful.

So overt representations of syphilis in the 17th century were virtually confined to medical books and then to title pages or frontispieces. An example of



Fig 28 *Gérard de Lairesse. Self Portrait. Oil on canvas. c. 1675. Courtesy Ministero per i Beni Culturali Ambientali: Firenze.*



Fig 29 Rembrandt, Hermensz van Rijn. Portrait of Gérard de Lairese (sic). Oil on canvas, 112 × 87 cms. c. 1656. Courtesy Robert Lehman Collection 1975 (1975.1.140).



Fig 30 The Pox: Treatment by inunction and inhalation. Frontispiece to Stephen Blankaart's *Venus belegert en Ontset*, Amsterdam, 1685.

each will suffice. The first illustrates the mercury treatment of syphilis by inunction and by inhalation (fig 30). It is the title page of Stephen Blankaart's *Venus belegert en Ontset* published in Amsterdam in 1685. It shows a patient, left foreground, with his jar of mercury ointment. Mercury "rubs" or "frictions" were prescribed daily for 15 to 30 days. The absorbed mercury made the patient salivate profusely and the saliva was measured. Hence the larger jar, probably of pewter, beside our reclining patient. The optimum daily saliva called for was three pints (1.7 litres). Also illustrated is the methodology underlying inhalation or fumigation. Mercury sulphide was the basic preparation commonly used for vaporisation.

The second woodcut illustration (fig 31) is the frontispiece of Gervais Ucay's *Nouveau Traité de la Maladie Vénérienne*. It was published in Amsterdam in 1699. The frontispiece was not printed with the Toulouse impression of the bookdate 1693. The patient is shown in bed, perhaps with bone pains or the colic that sometimes followed mercury inunc-

tions. An ointment jar is second right on the bedside table with the saliva jar on the extreme left.

William Hogarth (1697–1784) is generally recognised as the father of British painting (fig 32). As a schoolboy he showed a talent for drawing, sensitive perception and a good memory, but appeared to lack an ability for sustained study. He was successfully goldsmith, engraver and draughtsman, so that he was aged 30 before beginning to paint. He promptly showed a gift for portrait painting but it was his so-called narrative pieces or moralities which became his chief mode of expression and for which he is so truly famous.^{36 37}

Each of his satirical moralities, all painted between 1731–51, consist of half a dozen scenes, all suitable for the engraver. Each scene is similar to a stage scene and indeed Hogarth says "... my picture is my stage and men and women my players who by means of



Fig 31 Curing a very dangerous venereal disease. Frontispiece to Gervais Ucay's *Nouveau Traité de la Maladie Vénérienne*, Amsterdam, 1699.



Fig 32 L. F. Roubiliac. Bust of William Hogarth, c. 1741. Courtesy of National Portrait Gallery, London.

certain actions and gestures are to exhibit a dumb show". His compositions, ridiculing the vices of his time, are really original in content, so much so that his masterly techniques of drawing, perspective and brushwork are liable to pass unnoticed. Art that so successfully hides its art must surely be amongst the greatest.

The first series of interest to us is Hogarth's *The Harlot's Progress* painted in 1731/32. All were destroyed by fire in 1755, but engravings have been available since 1732 and it is upon his engravings that Hogarth founded his popularity and his income. Indeed so often were these pirated that he found himself instrumental in having the Copyright Act of 1735 reach the Statute Book.

The first of the material scenes (fig 33) in the life of the harlot shows her, newly come to London by the York wagon. She is outside the Bull Inn in Wood Street, Cheapside, a sweet and innocent 16 year old. While her father is pre-occupied with paying her fare an older woman accosts the girl with an offer of an introduction to the local high life of easy virtue. A couple of lechers, reputed at the time to be two recognisable members of parliament, look on in anticipation.

In the second scene (fig 34) we find the girl established as mistress to a wealthy merchant. He has



Figs 33-38 T. Cook engravings, (30.2 x 37.8 cms. approx.) of William Hogarth's "A Harlot's Progress", 1732. Published by G. G. and J. Robinson, Paternoster Row, London, 1799.

Fig 33 Ensnared by a Procuress.

discovered her with another man, perhaps his butler. There is a row, she is discharged and sets up on her own account. That business is bad is clear from the third picture (fig 35). Her surroundings and dress show that she has slipped down the social scale. The association of prostitution with the criminal classes is revealed in a wig recognisable at the time as having been left behind by John Dalton, a notorious criminal. Her valuables are gone or going. She and her "bunter" or maid servant contemplate pawning a watch, probably stolen from a recent client. The magistrates enter, she is arrested, tried and condemned to a term of hard labour.

Her jail companions (fig 36) are pickpockets, card-sharpers and fellow prostitutes of all ages and ranks. Her time is divided between beating hemp and listening to the admonitions of her jailer. She contemplates home and family. Guilt and remorse depress her. Out of her wretchedness comes resolution. But as the fifth scene shows (fig 37) her resolve proves to be pious and with all hope gone she returns to her old life. Destitution and disease complete her degradation and she expires in abject poverty. The bunter rifles her trunk. Two quacks are in argument as to whose medicine contributed least to her demise. Especially to be noted in this picture is the prescrip-

tion and box of anti-syphilitic pills. We shall meet them again. They are the new century's motif of venereal contamination.

Somewhat to our amazement, Hogarth does not end his story at this point. The lesson, he feels, must be driven home relentlessly. So in a last scene (fig 38) we see the expensive funeral arranged by the harlot's professional sisters; some displaying a passion for ale-bibbing, the easy touch, overt lust for the officiating, father-figure, parson. Crocodile tears remind one of the old (?Scots) saying, "There's none no sanctimonious as a whore at a christening". No satirical nuance escapes our artistic moralist; on the wall is the coat of arms of the profession of prostitution—it shows three spigots and three faucets.

The series *Marriage à la Mode* (1743) is the supreme example of how Hogarth set about ridiculing one of the excesses of his age. Here he scathingly indicts the loveless, luckless marriages so commonly arranged between the money-hungry aristocracy and the title-hungry bourgeoisie. Hogarth delineates the main characters with originality and realism. Each painting is full of telling detail and each is set down with draughtsman-like perspective, combined with commanding technical skill. Separately or together, they are unique in the world of painting. The work,



Fig 34 *Quarrels with her Protector.*



Fig 35 Apprehended by a Magistrate.



Fig 36 Scene in Bridewell.



Fig 37 Expires while doctors are disputing.



*Fig 38 The Funeral.
Engravings in author's possession*



Figs 39–44 William Hogarth. “Marriage à la Mode”. Oil on canvas. 60.6 × 88.9 cms. c. 1743.

Fig 39 The Marriage Contract.

like the title, is delicately appropriate without any hint of impropriety.

The first scene (fig 39) shows the signing and sealing of the marriage bargain. The alderman is paying the stipulated fortune to the gouty Earl with his extensive estates and property, including many paintings. The young couple, the victims, appear to be getting acquainted.

The second picture (fig 40) shows that the marriage is not a happy one. The young Viscount, now an Earl since he has inherited all on the death of his father, has returned home at midday showing the result of an excess of alcohol; a piece of lady’s underwear is hanging from his pocket. The young wife, now a Countess, is neglected and distraught. The old retainer, burdened with a bundle of unpaid bills, is driven to distraction.

The third picture (fig 41) entitled *The Luetic Viscount visits the Quack Doctor, Monsieur de la Pilule* leaves us in no doubt that a life of debauchery has led inevitably, to disease. Monsieur de la Pilule has around him all the paraphernalia of the surgeon, naturalist, physician and apothecary. The book,

foreground right, tells us that he has invented a machine to set dislocated collar bones and another to uncork bottles, both inventions inspected and approved by the Royal Academy of Paris. His most likely background would be in barbering. Hogarth misses no opportunity for a rapier-like satirical thrust at the quack. Is the quack’s face and nose not suggestive of hereditary syphilis? And, for doubters, has he not made the diagnosis clear by giving the poor wretch the sabre-shaped tibiae resulting from earlier congenital syphilitic periostitis.

Who the two female figures are is a matter of dispute. The tearful young woman is probably the source of the Viscount’s infection and the indignant older woman, the Madame of the brothel concerned. The Viscount does not appear unhappy, perhaps because he has had a convincing promise of cure. Note the three symbolic boxes of mercury pills.

The fourth picture (fig 42) shows the relentless decline of the marriage. The wife seeks consolation in the arms of a lover. In the custom of the times she is entertaining him and other friends while she makes fashionable preparations for the evening. She does



Fig 40 Shortly after Marriage.



Fig 41 The Visit to the Quack Doctor.



Fig 42 The Countess's Levée.



Fig 43 The Killing of the Earl.



Fig 44 *The Suicide of the Countess.*
Courtesy Trustees National Gallery, London.

not appear to lack eager suitors.

The fifth scene in the series (fig 43) reveals the beginning of the end. The husband discovers his wife and her lover in flagranti delicto, perhaps even at a moment of boisterous delight. A duel ensues, the husband is mortally wounded and the lover hastily departs by leaping out of the bedroom window. (Which floor was he on, one wonders?). No doubt he is apprehended, tried and executed. For the Countess, despair like disaster is the shadow of coming events.

So to the last scene of all (fig 44). The lonely, miserably depressed and deeply repentant wife is in extremis. The ring-pinching apothecary seems unwilling to help. The physician remonstrates with the servant whom he accuses of purchasing the laudenum used for the suicide attempt, then, as now it seems, recognised as a manifestation of medico-social pathology closely associated with sexual infection in young women. The woman's servant makes a last despairing effort to revive the pale, expiring wife by appealing to the mother in her—alas, in vain. Has her despair been aggravated perhaps indirectly by the husband's syphilis? What do *you* think of the bridge of the baby's nose? Whatever your answer, there can be no doubt about Hogarth's social comment. It is sympathetic but beautifully barbed and makes his satire both sophisticated and savage.

Others with an artistic bent were deploying their energies in similar fashion but in the new and more light-hearted medium of caricature. The best of them had something to say about syphilis.

Richard Newton's effort (fig 45) was produced in 1795. It shows an alarmed repentant, dressed in the style of a country gentleman of the time, holding a prescription for the famous Dr Leake's pills, patented by Walter Leake in 1753 as *pilula salutaria*.³⁸ Leake's pills were said to be highly efficacious in all chronic skin diseases and had a particular place in the treatment of syphilis. They contained mercury in the form of calomel (mercurous chloride), as well as sulphur of antimony and prepared steel, all bound into a pill by a balsam.³⁹

Of the most famous caricaturists of the late 18th century, Cruikshanks, Gillray and Rowlandson, the last two drew the public's attention to the dangers, ravages and widespread nature of syphilis. James Gillray (1757–1815) displayed a full, broad humour to castigate social follies. His blows were often brutal but they did influence public opinion.⁴⁰ The date of the example of his work (fig 46) is 1779. Note that again we have syphilis represented symbolically in a prescription and box of pills.

Many of the original 18th century caricatures inspected at the British Museum were, to my surprise and delight, painted in water colour by the artists.



Fig 45 Richard Newton. *Dr. Leake's Pills. Caricature.* 1779. Courtesy Société des Gens de Lettres de France. Paris.



Fig 46 James Gillray. *The Whore's Last Shift. Caricature,* 1779. By permission of the British Library.



Fig 47 Thomas Rowlandson. *Syphilis. Caricature with water colours,* 1799. By permission of the British Library.

One such (fig 47) is by the most outstanding of the three caricaturists, Thomas Rowlandson (1756–1827). It was painted and produced as an engraving with nationwide distribution in 1799. Rowlandson was originally trained as a draughtsman and this shows in his treatment of perspective. The work also shows his great zest for life; it is packed with lively action and detail. Rowlandson rightly has a high and lasting place in humorous art.⁴¹ His piece shows French generals being retired from active service on account of poor health after the Battle of the Nile on 1st August 1798. Napoleon's brilliant medical director, Dominique Larrey is himself presiding. His index of suspicion for syphilis is high. Note the Leake's pills again and the memo on his desk referring to the disease. The supremely telling touch, however, is that whereas no general has more than one sabre, Dr Larrey is given two—the two sabre tibiae of a congenital syphilitic.

Rowlandson produced many ribald drawings.⁴² His satire in these is almost entirely directed at men. He treats his women very kindly.

- 33 Anonymous. Le nez de Gérard de Lairesse. *Aesculape*, 1936;26:239.
- 34 Plesch J. *Rembrandt within Rembrandt*. London: Holbein Simpkins, 1953.
- 35 Astruc J. *A Treatise of the Venereal diseases*. Trans. by Barrowby. London: Innys & Richardson, 1754.
- 36 Gowing L, Paulson R. *Hogarth*. Published by the trustees, The Tate Gallery, London for Exhibition of Hogarth works. Dec 1971–Feb 1972.
- 37 Jarrett D. *The Ingenious Mr Hogarth*. London: Joseph, 1976.
- 38 *The Patent Commissioners—Abridgements of Specifications relating to medicine . . . 1620–1866*. London: 1872, Entry No 677.
- 39 Avalon J. Les pilules du Docteur Leake. *Aesculape*. 1951;32:193–216.
- 40 Wright T. *The Life and Times of James Gillray*. 2nd ed. London: 1873.
- 41 Oppe AP. *Thomas Rowlandson: his drawings and watercolours*. London: The Studio Ltd, 1923.
- 42 Smith WG. *The Amorous Illustrations of Thomas Rowlandson*. London: Bibliophile Books, 1983.

Accepted for publication: 10 October 1989

Address for reprints: 9 Cartworth Rd, Sheffield S11 9LN, UK