When Nahum Tate published *Syphilis: or, A Poetical History of the French Disease*, this 1686 publication was the first translation among more than twenty-five editions of Girolamo Fracastoro’s famous Neolatin poem. Within the next decades Jacob Tonson and John Dryden included the work four times in their *Poetical Miscellanies*, and for over two centuries this translation remained the most widely read English version of *Syphilis sive Morbus Gallicus*. Modern prose translations have since displaced the usefulness of Tate’s editions, but they have not diminished the significance of his achievement. Though the 1400 lines of verse may no longer merit the prominence they long enjoyed, Tate’s initial decision to translate the poem, as well as the translation itself, offers valuable literary and medical insight into the seventeenth-century understanding of the arts of poetry and medicine.

Tate’s dedicatory poem to the surgeon Thomas Hobbs establishes these arts initially in terms of an opposition between the physician and the poet. His address to the man who had rapidly risen from the position of surgeon in the king’s Horse Guards to an appointment as surgeon to the Household of James II compliments this ‘great Son of Art’ by stressing ‘Physick’s growth and Poetry’s decay’.

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2 Tate’s translation appeared in the 1693 (two issues), 1716 and 1727 editions of *Poetical Miscellanies*. Baumgartner and Fulton claim ‘English readers have learned to know the poem almost entirely through’ this ‘best-known translation into English’ (92).

3 Fracastoro’s poem was translated into English prose in the late nineteenth century and once into poetry in the first part of the twentieth century. H. Wynne-Finch published a significant prose edition, *Fracastor: Syphilis or the French Disease* (London: William Heinemann), in 1935. F.J. Nichols included a prose translation of Book III in *An Anthology of Neo-Latin Poetry* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1979); and G. Eatough published a scholarly edition, *Fracastoro’s Syphilis*, in *Classical and Medieval Texts, Papers and Monographs*, 12 (1984), which he characterizes as a translation ‘literal to the point of awkwardness’. All three translations have been compared; Eatough’s will be cited in the text.

Tate plays down his own modest poetic talent as he praises the accomplishments of both Hobbs and Fracastoro. The king's surgeon appears to him proof that in the century and a half since the 1530 publication of Fracastoro's poem significant progress had been made in conquering venereal disease; at the same time he contends that the Neolatin poem further illustrates how rare great poetry had become. His sense of history, however, is questionable. Hobbs may have gained some prominence for his 'Success' in confronting the ravages of syphilis, and Fracastoro was certainly still recognized as a significant poet, but the advances in the art of healing the disease hardly suggest a 'happy Conquest'. The translation in fact implicitly denies a simple opposition between the progress of medicine and the progress of poetry: Fracastoro warranted attention in the seventeenth century because he was still very relevant as both a physician and a poet.

Contemporary medical and literary interests may together have prompted the translation of his poem. While statistical evidence has yet to determine the extent of seventeenth-century venereal disease, the period was increasingly aware of *morbus Gallicus* or the pox. Writers insisted 'This evil, instead of declining, assumeth a new growth even now in our days', infecting more in a day than were afflicted a century ago in a month; and they frequently alluded to the 'disease a la mode' in poems, plays and pamphlets. Among the exhaustive lists of medical works compiled by Jean Astruc and others in the eighteenth century, the number of texts on syphilis by English writers also increased strikingly after the Restoration. At the same time as substantial works by Gideon Harvey and Richard Wiseman went through numerous editions, dubious claims, placed repeatedly in the *Athenian Gazette*, advertised the shilling boxes of pills and quarts of elixir with which Thomas Kirleus 'hath cured many hundreds in this City'. By the turn of the century a successful treatise on venereal disease complained that cures for the pox overwhelmed Londoners: 'a Man shall hardly pass the Streets any day of the Week, but a printed Bill of their Bombast and Nonsense is offer'd to your acceptance'. 'Others there are that only adorn Pissing-Places, Posts and Doors,

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7 G. Harvey's *Little Venus Unmask'd* went through seven editions from 1670 to 1702; R. Wiseman's *Several Chirurgical Treatises* went through four editions from 1676 to 1705. See among many issues *The Athenian Gazette*, Tues. 27 Dec. 1692, ix, no. 5.
Corner houses, Thorow-fairs, &c.' Not surprisingly, a translation of Fracastoro might well have enjoyed considerable acceptance.

The Neolatin work's serious and detailed exploration of disease has a decidedly Virgilian tenor especially suited, moreover, to the literary interests of the 1680s and 1690s. During these decades poets were increasingly drawn to translations, where they displayed an 'unusual diversity and experimentation'. Dryden had sharply focused many of the issues in his preface to the 1680 edition of Ovid's *Epistles*, and the 'Several Hands' who contributed to this and the later *Miscellanies* sustained the interest in translation. For at least one of them, Fracastoro’s poem seemed a worthwhile challenge. All recognized that 'The greatest flights of Latin Poetry are in some certain excellent places of Virgil's *Georgics*, and everywhere in his *Aeneid*'; some further concurred that Fracastoro approached the majesty of Virgil’s *Georgics* in 'the most excellent Poem in Latin Verse that these Ages has produc’d in Italy'. Although Tate specifically acknowledges only the poem’s ‘elegance’ (p. 333), the weighty details reminiscent of the *Georgics* and the epic reverberations of the *Aeneid* undoubtedly appealed to the translator’s poetic sensibilities. The mythic vision of the physician-poet is certainly also remarkable.

Fracastoro describes an archetypal pattern of myth in the epidemic that suddenly erupted in the 1490s. From his perspective in the first decades of the next century, the devastating outbreak commonly associated with Charles VIII’s invasion of Naples appeared to have a celestial origin. While the poem concedes the 'seeds' or *semina* of the malady came to Naples from France in 1495 and then spread rapidly throughout Europe as Charles’s numerous mercenary soldiers disband­ed, *Syphilis* sees the heavenly forces of destiny at work. At the outset it challenges the belief, still very common in the late seventeenth century, that the Italian campaign introduced on a large scale a deadly virus first brought to Europe from the new world by Columbus’s sailors. The Columbian origin of the disease among the first explorers of the Americas strikes Fracastoro as too limited in scope to explain the rapid, widespread contagion; and he attributes the epi-

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11 In *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London*, 30 (1718), 839–47; and 31 (1720), 47–65, William Beckett argued for an origin earlier than the late fifteenth century; but almost all of Tate’s contemporaries agreed the disease probably came from the New World. A notable exception, Thomas Sydenham, believed that the disease came from 'Blacks upon the borders of Guinea', was brought to the New World, and then returned with the Spaniards (T. Sydenham, *The Entire Works*, ed. J. Swan, 4th edn. [London, 1763], 335–6). Modern studies have not conclusively proved the disease originated either in the New World from contact with the natives or in the Old World from a particularly severe variation of treponematosis.
demic to the air that envelopes all living bodies. Others had earlier stressed an ominous conjunction of the planets on 25 November 1484; Fracastoro imaginatively depicts the corruption of air that might have followed such an unusual meeting of celestial bodies. When Cancer opens the double doors of Olympus to unfold the meeting between Jupiter, Saturn and Mars, the ill-fated destiny of Europe is inescapable. The poem never explains why Olympus must shake and the air become contaminated with the terrible disease, and a subsequent recollection of a handsome, promising youth from Cenomani ravaged by the disease blames his wretched death only tentatively on a morose Saturn and a vengeful Mars. The seeds engendered in the heavens at first appear merely part of an inscrutable cycle of fate that destiny has decreed. Variations of the mythic origin, however, suggest the possibility of divine retribution.

Originally Fracastoro's depiction of the disease's origin and cure balanced the divine meeting in the heavens with Ilceus's journey into the earth. The two parts begun presumably around 1510 conclude with a long digression on the mercury treatment then believed to offer the best remedy for the new plague. Fracastoro adapts Virgil's account of Aeneas's descent into the underworld to laud the wondrous healing properties of the liquid silver found within the golden caves, and he echoes classical myth in his explanation of the journey's purpose. Unlike the earlier and much briefer lament for the Cenomanian youth struck down by the fatal furies, the narrative of Ilceus's misfortune acknowledges his responsibility. Within the rhythm of transgression, retribution and forgiveness Ilceus must suffer cruelly because he has killed one of Diana's sacred deer and has incurred unwittingly the wrath of her brother Apollo. When the goddess Callirhoe responds to the hunter's prayers for relief and takes him out of the sun's influence into the darkness of earth, the narrative ends the original poem on a note of hope. However inexplicable the origins of venereal disease first appeared, Fracastoro seems to conclude that human beings are not the hapless playthings of destiny. The pattern of loss and redemption gives still greater purpose to human existence in the myths that structure the third part of *Syphilis* written in the 1520s.

Sometime in the decade preceding the poem's publication, perhaps around 1525, Fracastoro complemented the Ilceus episode with the story of Syphilus. Ostensibly the poet was capitalizing upon...
the popularity of a new cure that had been introduced from the West Indies in 1518 and was soon widely known through Ulrich von Hutten’s 1519 treatise in praise of guaiacum. Fracastoro’s celebration of the medicinal decoctions derived from this ‘sacred tree’ extols the marvels in a complex variation of the poem’s earlier myth. Sailors led to the new world by an unnamed fearless leader discover great fortune only to suffer unimagined disease. Like Ilceus they incur Apollo’s wrath when they kill sacred parrots beloved as the sun’s bird. The horrible fate the explorers must soon endure is mirrored in the suffering they discover among the syphilitic inhabitants of the western lands. Natives who pray to the sun god for relief seek purification in a ritual of sacrifice and cleansing deeply rooted in their own mythic past and soon to be of meaningful value to European invaders. Although Fracastoro blurs the outlines of myth within myth, the rhythm is again unmistakable. Those who drink distillates of guaiacum and touch themselves with its branches are the cursed descendants of the lost Atlantis. Their heritage in turn is that of the shepherd Syphilus who had complained against the remorseless heat of the sun, forsaken the worship due this god, and offered rites instead to his king Alcithous. The general revolt against the father sun and the relentless affliction of the blasphemers that followed are once again offset by the intervention of another deity. Sacrifices to the earth ensure that Juno will give the repentant ‘seeds of happiness from on high’ (p. 103) in the groves of guaiacum trees that miraculously appear here and nowhere else on earth. The gift of heaven that offsets the curse from heaven is also destined to be the salvation of Europe when the sailors discover the consequences of their own transgression in the disease that ravages them on board ship and spreads through their homelands. The episode equivocates about the Columbian origins of syphilis, but it has no doubt about the disease’s essential nature and its ultimate cure.

A poem to Tate commending ‘the Writer of the E ensuing Translation’ misses Fracastoro’s fundamental emphasis when it dismisses the stars and Indies and blames ‘the baneful Source of all our Woe’ on ‘That wheedling, charming Sex’ (p. 336). Its bitter misogyny expresses in the extreme the common seventeenth-century belief in the sexual origin of venereal disease. Throughout the period writers...
continued to recognize that the pox was often inherited, was easily spread by nursing, and could be contracted 'by kissing, shaking of hands, trying of gloves, [or] succeeding a pocky comrade upon a close-stoole'.

They also realized, however, that the 'contagious evill' was 'gotten for the most part by use of venery' and that many of the alleged sources of infection were convenient pretexts and ingenious excuses.

Fracastoro, on the other hand, ignores in his poem the possibility of a sexual origin. When he began the work, the sexual nature of the disease was not understood, and perhaps Fracastoro had no reason to suspect its venereal link, but by the time Ulrich von Hutten published his work in 1519 the connection had been established. Later in his major medical treatise De Contagione (1546) Fracastoro emphasizes that morbus Gallicus originates 'mainly from sexual intercourse'; he ignores this source in the final version of the poem.

While the 'seeds' of the contagion remain in Syphilis almost as intangible as the ambient air that nurtures them, the poem nevertheless comes to terms poetically with the inexplicable epidemic. Fracastoro avoids the moralistic stance of those who saw the pox as the flagellum dei and instead offers the consolation of time. Explicitly the poem contends that syphilis appeared and will disappear as part of the pattern nature governs; implicitly the past offers understanding and solace for the future. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century readers need not have associated the killing of Diana’s stag and Apollo’s birds with their Virgilian and Homeric counterparts to understand the fragility of the human link with an alien nature. The assertiveness and the violence symbolized in the huntsman suggest an unmistakable hubris. More culpable than the Cenomanian youth of Book I, who remained in his innocence ‘too self-assured, unaware of these great dangers’ (pp. 56–7), the inhabitants of the new world pridefully succumb to contempt and blasphemy. The sea literally swallows Atlantians in their ‘luxury and pride’ (p. 99) just as an ‘unknown pollution’ (p. 103) figuratively floods the land that listened to the blasphemous Syphilus. But throughout the poem the biblical echoes of Genesis, as well as the traditions of classical literature, further promise, if only tacitly, that the transgressions can be overcome. Aeneas and Odysseus reach their

16 Harvey, Great Venus Unmasked, 23.
17 R. Bayfield, Enchiridion Medicum (London, 1655), 161; J. Graunt, Natural and Political Observations made upon the Bills of Mortality (London, 1662), 23–4; Harvey, Great Venus Unmasked, 83; R. Wiseman, Several Chirurgical Treatises, 2nd edn. (London, 1686), 501.
18 In his monumental study A Treatise of Venereal Diseases, Jean Astruc stresses, ‘When the Venereal Disease first made its Appearance in Europe, it was not known that the Infection was propagated by Coition’ (i, 117). Ulrich von Hutten recognizes its sexual origin in The Remarkable Medicine Guiaacum and the Cure of the Gallic Disease, trans. C.W. Mendell, Archives of Dermatology and Syphilology, 23 (1931), 412. In De Contagione et Contagiosis Morbis et Eorum Curatione, Libri III, ed. W.C. Cave Wright (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1930), Fracastoro acknowledges ‘the contagion had its origin and beginning’ mainly from sexual intercourse' (153).
desired goals despite their own failings, and salvation is offered those who bathe in the fountain of mercury and drink from the sacred tree. Although the poem insists upon neither the sacramental overtones nor their implied Christian resolution, the pattern of fall and redemption is unmistakable. In the end, when the penitent worship the sun once again, the hope that miraculously springs from the ‘seeds’ Juno gives the lost Atlantians counterbalances the despair engendered by the ‘seeds’ Jupiter sowed from Olympus. On a grander scale Tate and his contemporaries would have seen the same pattern in Paradise Lost.

They would also have readily appreciated the immediate value of the Neolatin poem’s medical cures. Even though Tate minimizes in the dedication the significance of the physician Fracastoro and the relevance of his responses to venereal disease, there simply is no evidence that the seventeenth century had made great strides in the conquest of this dreaded affliction. Medicine still relied heavily upon Galen’s view of the four humours; and whether the syphilitic patients were bled, purged, or dieted, the intention was always to correct the humoral imbalance. Thus the regimen of exercise and diet prescribed at length in Book II would not have seemed dated in contemporary medical discussions, and the purgatives Fracastoro describes are not very different from the involved concoctions actually prescribed. Tate’s contemporaries might not have been as enthusiastic about the miraculous effects achieved with either mercury or guaiacum, but they understood their purgative and sudorific powers. Two centuries after Fracastoro published his poem, the ‘Methods and Cures’ for the pox remained much the same: ‘Mercurial Unction, the Fumigation, and the Indian Decoction, I mean that of Guaiacum’. Only the emphasis had changed.

The initial enthusiasm for guaiacum had diminished by the seventeenth century, and unctions of mercury were considered the most effective treatment. Medical authorities were confident that they understood the properties of mercury better than the sixteenth century had, but even its proponents cautioned ‘if it is skilfully managed, it is by far the safest and most effectual Method of all’. Seventeenth-century discussions of venereal disease often prescribed this ‘desperate’ and ‘dreadful Remedy’ with considerable reservation because they feared the devastating effects of mercurial compounds in an amount sufficient to induce the desired salivation of two quarts each day. At its best, in the hands of an eminent and responsible physician such as John Locke, the cure often seemed as destructive as the disease:

19 Turner, Aphrodisiacus, xiii.
20 Astruc, A Treatise of Venereal Diseases, i, 235.
Wed. May 4. The ptyalisme began and she spit pretty much, and complaind of her mouth being sore, and her teeth loose. She had to day about 10 stools but without griping, but they stopd of them selves. She spit pretty much.

Thursd. May 5. She spit this past 24 howers as they said about 1 pint and had at 2 in the afternoon another anoyting just as May 2; but not soe much of the oyntment imploid, not above $\frac{1}{4}$ or $\frac{1}{5}$ of a pot full. Her pulse pretty quick, her tongue and nose sore, and being able to swallow at once not above half a potanger of potage she took it every 3 howers, and 2 egs in 24 howers as before. 22

Understandably some writers by the end of the century denounced this practice of salivation; 23 most advocates cautiously followed the treatment emphasized in Fracastoro’s narrative of Ilceus’s miraculous salvation. Although the internal use of mercury had since been discovered, pills of quicksilver and turpentine were not preferred to the unctions of mercury applied directly to the body. Physicians and surgeons generally shared Fracastoro’s reluctance to expose the afflicted to the dangerous mercurial fumes of heated cinnabar, and they considered leather plasters spread with mercury poultices of limited effectiveness. Patients willing to endure the characteristic stench and painful side effects most commonly submitted to inunctions of mercury mixed with hog fat, wrapped themselves in linens or blankets, and waited expectantly for the ‘filthy liquified excretions of the disease’ that in Fracastoro’s assuring words flow from the lips in a ‘large stream of corrupt matter’ (p. 85).

They no longer expected the same wondrous effects from guaiacum. Medical treatises available in the seventeenth century occasionally praised decoctions of the West Indian tree as a wonderful, even ‘Sovereign remedy’; however, only the most optimistic now believed that ‘if right managed, why should we doubt but that it may avail with us, as it did formerly with the Spaniards, Italians, French and Germans, where it was at one Time made the Asylum for this Distemper’. 24 More temperate evaluations of guaiacum promoted this cure as the ‘only certain Vegetable Antidote,’ while even its harshest critics admitted guaiac remedies could be ‘of Service in local and incipient Venereal Disorders’ or after salivation has been completed. 25 Whether advances in chemistry now enabled physicians, surgeons and apothecaries to extract more completely the ‘Salt and Spirit’ of guaiacum, as the Art of Curing Venereal Diseases claims, essences of this wood were commonly and widely cited among the ingredients listed in a diverse range of works dealing with cures for the pox. 26

25 Harvey, Little Venus Unmask’d, 159; Astruc, A Treatise of Venereal Diseases, 1, 221-2.
26 N. de Blegny, The Art of Curing Venereal Diseases (London, 1707), 225. See, among others, A
Descriptions of the rigorous regimen of sweating and diet Fracastoro relates became less common, and occasionally guaiacum received no more attention than China root or sarsaparilla; nevertheless the gift of the gods exalted in the poem as the ultimate hope against the frightening contagion was not ignored.

Significant advances in the struggle against venereal disease, in fact, would not be made until arsenic, bismuth and finally penicillin replaced the traditional cures Fracastoro celebrates. Other than the modifications made in the use of mercury and guaiacum, there is simply little evidence to indicate that Hobbs and his contemporary practitioners had realized the gains Tate and others proclaimed. Reputable writers constantly scorned the successes advertised on handbills and in newspapers, pointing out that these 'Empyricks and Quacks' at best used mercury and antimony in preparations 'whose most considerable and Sensible Effects, are, that of vitiating the Stomach'. Among the growing number of case histories detailed by respectable physicians and surgeons, the accounts of successful cures also seem suspiciously inflated to sell the authors' skills and their often secret nostrums. Without any medical attention almost half of the syphilitic patients would have got better anyway; others presumably found in harmless cures relief from the excesses of purgation and salivation. All, in any case, would have encountered in the translation of Fracastoro's Neolatin work conservative advice remarkably suited in vision and form to late seventeenth-century needs.

Tate conveys the poetic and medical dimensions of the original work more completely than has often been thought. Although his pentameter couplets cannot approximate to the richness and subtlety of Fracastoro's Latin hexameters, his translation is neither a 'very free rendering' nor 'in keeping with the other productions of one of the worst poets that have occupied the position of laureate'. The work described on its title page as 'Attempted in English' reflects the latitude allowed in contemporary theories of translation. Following the lead of John Denham, Tate attempts to infuse 'vital spirit' by not treading the...
'servile path' and 'tracing word by word, and line by line'.\textsuperscript{31} In terms of the distinctions John Dryden made famous in his 1680 preface to Ovid's \textit{Epistles}, Tate's translation lies somewhere between paraphrase, 'or turning an Author word by word, and Line by Line', and paraphrase, 'where the Author is kept in view by the Translator, so as never to be lost, but his words are not so strictly follow'd as his sense; and that too is admitted to be amplify'd but not alter'd'.\textsuperscript{32} Compared to the three modern prose translations, the amplification is not unduly at odds with their often literal rendering of \textit{Syphilis}.

Paradoxically, Tate attempts to capture and amplify Fracastoro's spirit partly through considerable omission of the original. By cutting out blocks of material rather than individual lines, the translation tightens the mythic and medical relationships. Tate lessens the sense of division when he abandons the original format of three books, and he omits much that might detract from the impact of the mercury and guaiacum myths. The bulk of the cuts occur in the poem's middle section, where almost 100 lines of largely herbal lore are omitted. Perhaps Tate thought the detailed and arcane directions for dispelling the malignant humours were too distracting, and he may have suppressed the additional discussion of fumigation because his contemporaries shared Fracastoro's reservations about this method of cure. Whatever the reasons, his translation moves quickly to the fate of Ilceus and the great promise of mercury. Here and in a later redaction involving the discovery of guaiacum economy complements emphasis.

When Tate follows the Neolatin text, as he does for the most part, the constraints of his verse and the desire to amplify do not compromise the accuracy of the translation. His specific description of the guaiacum tree, for example, compares favourably to an avowedly literal prose translation:

Fertile in Gold, but far more blest to be
The Garden of this consecrated Tree:
Its Trunk erect, but on his Top is seen
A spreading Grove with Branches ever Green;
Upon his Boughs a little Nut is found,
But poignant, and with Leaves encompass'd round;
The stubborn Substance toothless makes the Saw,
And scarcely from the Axe receives a flaw;
Dissected, various Colours meet your view,
The outward Bark is of the Laurel hue;
The next like Box, the parts more inward set
Of dusky Grain, but not so dark as Jet,
If to these mixtures you will add the Red,
All Colours of the gaudy Bow are spread. (p. 362)


The land is fertile in gold, but made far richer by one tree – they call this in the sounds of their native speech Guaiacum. The tree itself is smooth and being huge spreads from its high top a huge canopy ever green, tresses of arbute leaves ever in place. Its nut, which is small but bitter, hangs down from the branches and clings to the leaves in great quantities. The tree’s timber is difficult to master, the wood is almost like hard iron; when burnt it exudes a sticky resin. The colour of a dissected piece is complex. On the outside bark it is smooth and green like laurel; the next layer is pale like box; but the middle is dark brown with a hint of black, a cross between walnut and ebony. If it were red next then it could equal the rainbow with its varied colours. (pp. 87–9)

Along with the single detail about the resinous gum, Tate’s translation omits only the native name for the tree. His appellation ‘consecrated Tree’ recalls guaiacum’s familiar Latin name _lignum sanctum_ and anticipates the reverence the poem accords the sacred wood. The additional lines on the ineffective axe and toothless saw embellish the meaning yet remain faithful to the vernacular ‘guayacan’ or ironwood. On occasion Tate falters and mistranslates a passage, but when he deliberately does not follow the ‘servile path’ of literal translation, his amplifications attempt to catch the spirit of the poem.

He senses its epic tenor with uneven effects. Though the original has few epithets, the poem’s fish and birds become ‘well-finn’d Sporters of the Flood’ and ‘well-plum’d Singers of the Wood’ (p. 346), presumably because poetic epithets were in the seventeenth century the expected fare of epic poetry. The search for suitable elegance and magnitude also leads to a heightened metaphoric diction and fanciful descriptions. The wind of destiny blowing the Spanish ships to the new world ‘pregnates ev’ry Sail’, and the explorers are greeted with a honey that in Tate’s interpretation befits the golden world: ‘Hony from each fragrant Tree distill’d, / Which did from Heaven in nightly Dew arrive, / Without the tedious Labours of the Hive’ (p. 367). But epic grandeur is also minimized in an opposite inclination to tighten the narrative. The Spaniards who shoot Apollo’s birds wield in Fracastoro’s account the awesome power of Vulcan:

they kindle the enclosed material, charcoal from willow, sulphur and saltpetre, with a spark preserved in tow. The tinder catches light, the fiery force, hemmed in, suddenly pours out raging and as it quickly bursts through the barrier, simultaneously it drives out the bullet thrust inside. This flies through the air whistling; and winged creatures lay everywhere through the glades, knocked down lifeless. (p. 95)

Tate exaggerates the carnage yet loses the impact: ‘The dire Ingredients with a sudden Spark / Enflam’d, discharge with rage the

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31 Robert Munger, ‘Guaiacum, the Holy Wood from the New World’, 204.
32 Compare, e.g. Tate’s description of Phoebe’s disguise (364) with the modern prose translations.
33 J. F. Ziolkowski recognizes Fracastoro’s use of epithets; see ‘Epic Conventions in Fracastor’s Poem _Syphilis_’, in _Altro Polo_ ed. A. Reynolds (Sydney: U.P., 1984), 57–73. Other discussions of style include the introductions to the editions of Eatough (26–7) and Wynne-Finch (46–9) as well as their notes.
whizzing Ball, / The unsuspecting Birds by hundreds fall’ (p. 366). Similarly his description of Alceus’s journey into the earth misses some of the awe and majesty of the underworld. He is more successful in developing a sustained sense of epic conflict.

In his translation the struggle against venereal disease assumes martial significance. At the outset of Book III Fracastoro self-consciously backs away from the heroic strains of struggle and conquest that might be sung by an inspired poet who celebrates the opening of the new world. Here and in the previous books Fracastoro self-effacingly pursues the less exalted flight of the muse Urania. But the heroic world of Virgil and the epic are never forgotten in the poem’s recognition that the smallest things often reveal the great plan of nature and the vast force of fate. The unknowable ‘seeds’ of destruction encompass both the heavens and the earth, involving the divine and the human in a mortal conflict of fearful magnitude. Fracastoro envisions an invasive disease that literally consumes the unfortunate victims: ‘Slowly a caries, born amid squalor in the body’s shameful parts, became uncontrollable and began to eat the areas on either side and even the sexual organ’ (p. 55). Implicit in the sustained notion of consumption and struggle is a martial strain befitting the deadly confrontation. Traditionally military metaphors are commonly associated with illness, for as Susan Sontag argues, the metaphoric bellum contra morbum ‘implements the way particularly dreaded diseases are envisaged as an alien “other”’. By imposing this metaphor upon the text, Tate moves away from literal translation toward the heroic spirit of the poem.

None of the modern prose translations captures in similar fashion the tyranny and conquest of venereal disease. The invader whose ‘Tyrant’s Seat’ and ‘Magazine’ are in the air appears a ‘proud Destroyer’ equal to the vainest ‘Son of Slaughter’. Before its marshalled detachments display their dreaded ensigns and begin their march,

... ere he can the fierce Assault begin,  
Factions of Humours rake his Part within;  
The strongest Holds of Nature thus he gains,  
Quart’ring his cruel Troops throughout the Veins,  
While some more noble Seat the Tyrant’s Throne contains. (p. 346)

Once the body’s resistance ‘sounds Retreat’ and abandons the figurative outworks, the devastation approximates to the unchecked ravages of victorious forces:

Yet oft the Foe would turn his Forces back,  
The Brawn and inmost Muscles to attack,

36 On p. 114 of his edition, Eatough cites a number of references to consuming.  
FRACASTORO'S SYPHILIS 117

And pierce so deep, that the bare Bones have been
Betwixt the dreadful fleshy Breaches seen;
When on the vocal Parts his Rage was spent,
Imperfect Sounds, for tuneful Speech was sent. (p. 348)

 Appropriately the struggle to cure the disease is further translated in
terms of counter-attack and conquest. The invaded must quickly
'engage' and 'vanquish' the enemy before the assaults of the violent foe
have made inroads upon the battered body (p. 347). Tate's verse
accordingly assumes a strident note when a triplet exhorts the
endangered to guard against the initial approach: 'Rouze, rouze, shake
off your fond Desire of Ease, / For Sleep foments and feeds the foul
Disease, / 'Tis then th' Invader do's the Vitals seize' (p. 354). And
when the wondrous force of mercury promises ultimate victory, its
strength is seen 'Conqu'ring the raging Humours in their Seat, / . . .
All Quarters of the Foe to seize, / And burn the very Seeds of the
Disease' (p. 356).

Tate's amplification of the text is further apparent in the conclud­
ing narrative, which subordinates the tyranny and conquest of the
disease to the discovery and miracle of guaiacum. The unnamed leader
of the Spanish explorers is not merely a great heart or soul; he is
according to Tate 'The bravest Youth that ever stemm'd the Main' (p.
364). Fracastoro does not say that the men who admire or wonder at
the gold-laden streams 'seize the shining Oar with greedy Hand' (p.
365) or that the natives 'only prized' gold 'because it shone' (p. 367).
And the astonished men who hear Apollo's punishment for the killing
of his birds fall 'prostrate on the Ground' (p. 366) only in Tate's
account. The tendency to be heavy-handed if not melodramatic is also
unmistakable in the Syphilus episode. Tate wants his readers to be
certain that the people who follow the shepherd's rebellion are
'impious Wretches'; King Alcithous accepts the homage reserved for
Apollo because as the translation makes painfully obvious he is an
'aspiring Prince' and an 'ambitious Monarch'. Their rebellion pro­
vokes an 'incens'd' Apollo who appears the 'offended' rather than
simply the avenging deity of the original. His is the 'just Revenge'
exacted in the terrible disease that torments Syphilus and his country-
men. Without violating the spirit of the poem Tate insists upon the
pride and punishment mirrored in a timeless image of fall and
suffering.

He also stresses the importance of sacrificial atonement, though
here his translation of ceremonial expiation varies curiously from the
narrative. Fracastoro traces the native custom of annually sacrificing a
white bullock and sprinkling its blood on a shepherd to its origin in the
priestly ritual designed to appease the deity Syphilus had first
offended. When the lot had fallen to the shepherd Syphilus, and he
stood in sacrifice for all the other offenders, Apollo took pity and
accepted instead the offering of a bullock. Tate's translation of the
ritualistic sacrifice and purification substitutes a heifer for the bullock slain in place of Syphilus and offered in the yearly rite. He more significantly departs from the original when he describes the custom of choosing a surrogate shepherd to re-enact symbolically the ancient sacrifice:

This made our grateful Ancestors enjoin,
When first these annual Rites they did assign,
That to the Altar bound a Swine each time
Should stand, to witness Syphilus his Crime. (p. 372)

Perhaps the pen of the translator or the hand of the printer inadvertently transformed ‘swain’ into ‘swine’. Conceivably, however, the association of Syphilus and swine either consciously or unconsciously reflects the early and still common suggestion that the two words are etymologically linked: by the later part of the sixteenth century scholars proposed that the name Fracastoro gave to venereal disease may have been derived from the Greek sys-philos, 'dear to or fit for swine'. Earlier Tate also had departed from the poem to include swine among the heifers Syphilus and his followers burned in offering to King Alcithous. Whatever his reasons, neither change alters the poem’s implicitly Christian faith that in the mysterious workings of fate the taint of original sin can be overcome.

In the end the redemption of the afflicted and the triumph of Apollo are unmistakable in the first translation of the Neolatin celebration. Although Tate does not always hear the tonal nuances of Fracastoro’s voice or convey the widely admired elegance of the language, his translation is true to the power of Apollo’s reign. Albeit with diminished splendour, the god of both poetry and medicine shines in the 1,400 lines of verse written in testimony to the wondrous healing powers of nature and language. Tate’s contemporaries at times disputed Fracastoro’s notion of a contagious air, and they no longer unreservedly accepted the miraculous powers of the liquid silver and the holy wood; nevertheless medical and literary authorities alike recognized the sixteenth-century physician and poet had written an ‘excellent Poem in which he expatiates very elegantly’. Within a decade of its reappearance in the Poetical Miscellanies, Tate’s translation as well as its dedicatory poems was quoted extensively in the many editions of the popular Treatise of all the Degrees and Symptoms of the Venereal Disease. Until twentieth-century advances in medicine and new translations challenged its significance, the late seventeenth-century tribute to Fracastoro remained quite deservedly an important source for the understanding of the realms Apollo ruled.

38 ‘Swine’ occurs in the 1686 first edition and in the editions of the Miscellanies.
40 Astruc, A Treatise of Venereal Diseases, ii, 162.