

Prohibited Words Literature and AIDS

by John A. Sutherland

CENSORSHIP is evidently universal — like the incest taboo. Despite the promises of the First Amendment of the American Constitution and other declarations of human rights, the ideal of absolutely free speech remains utopian. Only, I think, in the impotent carnivals of the lunatic asylum are inmates entirely free to say what they please, write what they please. Learning what can be said where, to whom, and when is one of the most difficult yet important lessons in social conduct. There are things we say in private that we would not (or cannot) say in public; things permissible with friends that are not permissible with strangers; things that may be said to members of the same sex which are inappropriate in mixed company. In the last stages of a cocktail party, things may be said that would be out of place at a funeral party. And in literary terms, things may be printed under reporting privilege in a newspaper that would provoke immediate libel action if reprinted in a novel.

The list could be extended. But the central element is "prohibition." We are bound by thousands of such situational webs, enforced by law, custom or social code. But if prohibition is one cultural universal, so too is the fact that the targets of prohibition are always changing or shifting in importance. Hence yesterday's prohibited thing becomes today's permitted thing. This is particularly the case with the printed word and the entertainment media. Thus an R-rated movie such as *The Exorcist*, which caused moral panic in

1973, appears in 1987 as family viewing on prime-time network television. In literature, this decensorship can be illustrated by a recent novel, D. M. Thomas's *The White Hotel*. First published in 1981, this has become one of the more acclaimed novels of modern times. Before the liberating Lady Chatterley judgement in 1959, however, it could not have been published without substantial cuts and a century earlier not at all.

This example may suggest that the movement is inexorably towards liberalization. And this bolsters a pervasive myth fondly held by many liberals that historically censorship is always in retreat. The images associated with this myth are well worn: on one side the tide of progressive enlightenment sweeping society ever onward and upward. On the other side, the picture is of floodgates forever opening catastrophically wider, letting in a deluge of filth.

Very simply, this notion of inexorably progressive decensorship is a misapprehension. I would argue that the amount of prohibition, in all its subtle and diffused forms, is probably more or less constant at all periods, assuming one could measure it as a single commodity. What makes this consistency difficult to perceive is that prohibition moves from target to target so quickly and so mutably that it deceives the eye. Take one small topical example to counter the Thomas illustration. In early 1987, the California Bicentennial Committee approved for official distribution a history book which, to

their later dismay, they discovered contained slanderous allegations about black Americans; namely, that in the period before the Civil War their condition of slavery was justified by their being "shiftless and lazy." On investigation, this extraordinarily stupid allegation was found to have originated in an article by F. A. Shannon, an authority on American history who died in 1929. The makers of the 1987 book had simply recycled this earlier work without reading it.

It was a gross lapse, and the offending book was duly withdrawn. But the episode reminds us that in one area, what was sayable in 1927 is not sayable in 1987. There is a vast new network of prohibition that has come into existence since the 1960s. What was a perfectly respectable comment a few decades ago is legally actionable today (or at least, as in the case of Al Campanis, may cost you your job). And tomorrow? Which of our cosy prejudices will be banned? It is hard to say, but I imagine that much of our currently acceptable discourse about gender may become either proscribed or bad form.

On a *quid-pro-quo* reckoning, it seems to me that post-1960s freedoms of discourse on sexual matters are at least equaled and possibly outweighed by post-1960s prohibitions, or inhibitions on racial matters. All things considered, it is a fair trade-off. But having made the paradoxical point that liberation in these matters is something of an illusion, I would concede that in one respect the period 1950-85 has been one of remarkable cultural openness and relaxation. We have not had more freedom as such (when all the gains, losses and diffusions are added up), but we have certainly had an unprecedented quantity of discussion and debate on the question of intellectual and artistic freedom. Put bluntly, Western society has, over the last thirty years, been amazingly talkative on the subject of censorship — never more so. That talk, I believe, is coming to an abrupt end. Why? Or to pose the question another way, what emergency could shut us up on this fascinating topic?

There are, I think, two surefire ways of foreclosing open-mindedness about censor-

ship: war and epidemic. We do not (thank God) face imminent war, but the fear of plague is again with us. The fear is somewhat unfamiliar. It is our good fortune as a generation in the West to have become virtual strangers to plague. I can remember, rather dimly now, the polio outbreaks of the 1940s and the unreasoning terror they brought with them — together with mysterious prohibitions as to visiting swimming pools and cinemas or even, in some summer months, any public place. My parents can just remember the Spanish Influenza of 1919. But even this pandemic, which in a year killed more than the Great War in four, pales beside the recurrent devastation brought by the Black Death in the 14th century; the bubonic plagues that ravaged England from the 14th to the 17th century; the mysterious "sweating sickness" of the early 16th century; smallpox in the 18th century; the cholera and typhus epidemics of 19th-century Europe or the yellow fever outbreaks in the U.S. at the same period.

For those in the past whose books we most revere as literature and whose painting as art, plagues and epidemics were as familiar features of the calendar as winter or bad harvests. So out of practice are we that it requires some imaginative effort to recall what plague mentality entails. Typically, one may say, the plague comes quite suddenly and mysteriously from somewhere else. It is a visitation that sharply defines a here and a there. Hence the well-known fact that from its first appearance in the late 15th century syphilis was for each nation another nation's disease. The French called it the Neapolitan Boneache. The Italians called it the Spanish Disease. The English called it the French Pox. The Moslem Turks called it the Disease of the Christians. The Spanish called it the Haitian Disease. And for the whole of the Old World, syphilis was a gift from the New World, via Columbus's crew.

The xenophobic aspect of plague mentality fosters a reflexive herd consciousness and what zoologists call startle reactions (that phenomenon whereby, when one bird suddenly takes off, the whole flock instantane-

ously and unthinkingly joins it in flight). In terms of human society, epidemics lead routinely to panic, hysteria, mass irrationalisms. For obvious reasons, they are bad times in which to be a foreigner. In 1497, for instance, an order of the Paris Parliament commanded that all "foreigners suffering from syphilis" (a disease for which there was as yet no definite name) should leave the capital within 24 hours on pain of summary hanging — a wonderfully efficient way of spreading the disease beyond the city walls.

Only gradually are plagues seen as domestic social problems that can be solved by human agency. Routinely in the past, epidemics were conceived to be inscrutable acts of a punitive God — that category of disaster against which one can never insure. The favored scientific causation theory before the medical revolutions of the 17th century was astrological. Comets or unusual conjunctions of the planets were thus intimately connected in the public mind with dreaded outbreaks of plague.

There were, however, some epidemic diseases whose causes were more comprehensible to the medieval mind and not simply to be put down to unlucky constellations — diseases, that is, which were acts of God where the Maker's purpose might be clearly discerned. Principal among these rational ailments was leprosy, a disease whose stigmata

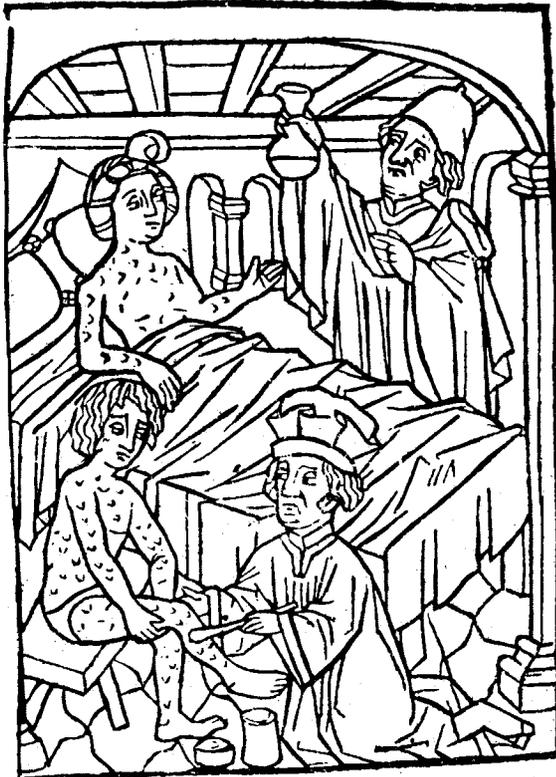
(as indicated by Biblical writ) were taken as a sign physical of spiritual uncleanness or defilement. Leprosy demonstrated God's displeasure, and as a disease it was very effectively handled by further punishing the victim whom God had already punished. The system was elaborately legalistic, as it was formulated in 12th-14th century Europe. But essentially, the official treatment for leprosy was moral and penological: punish the victim and cast him out, with a righteous sense that by so doing one was going along with God's prescription.

Syphilis was another rational plague in which God's purpose was manifest. It was, as anyone could understand, a punishment for sexual delinquency. Hence it was called venereal, pertaining to Venus, goddess of love. Women were often singled out for punitive medical treatment since syphilis was clearly another infliction by the daughters of Eve on the sons of Adam.

Unlike most epidemics, particularly early epidemics, we have a plausibly precise starting date and source for the European origin of syphilis. Most commentators entertain it as a strong possibility that the ailment returned with Columbus's crew and found its way to Naples in the early 1490s. Following Charles VIII's taking of that city, and the sexual orgy that followed, there was a fearful outbreak of the new disease. The epidemic was terrifying enough to demobilize the army. And the deadly contagion was (it is suggested) disseminated by the homecoming mercenaries throughout Europe. There are those who think this scenario is too neat; and various pre-Columbian or non-Columbian theories have been advanced. But all commentators agree that syphilis broke out with a series of extraordinarily virulent waves of epidemic in the early 16th century. In these ravages (whose ferocity has never been equaled since) the second and most visible stage of the disease was far more destructive than it became in later centuries.

The link between syphilis and gross sexual incontinence was immediately apparent. One awkward early name for the malady was the "lecher's ailment," which puts the epidemiological case clearly enough. Jerome Frascator, a poet-cum-physician writing in 1530 bestowed on the *morbus gallicus* the name that has stuck most closely to it during its subsequent career: syphilis. Frascator's was, as it happens, one of the more flagrant misnomers of medical history. In his poetic-disquisition

In the first waves of the syphilis epidemic in the early 16th century, the secondary stage with its visible skin lesions was more ravaging than it was in later centuries.



Syphilis is a shepherd swain (traditionally a figure symbolizing careless love) who provokes the anger of Apollo and is consequently afflicted with a mysterious new disease. Frascator's poem (although written in Latin) was very popular, possibly because it ascribed no national origin to the disease; possibly too because it offered useful Galen-derived therapies and a magic bullet, mercury.

As a sexual paying-out, syphilis immediately recruited all the stigma and mythology previously attaching to leprosy, the traditional disease of the unclean. (Leprosy, oddly enough, seems to have largely died back in Europe about the time syphilis arrived.) Job, the patron saint of leprosy, promptly became re-employed as the patron saint of syphilis.

I want to skip forward here to the point at which our serious educational study of English literature normally begins: namely Shakespeare. By the late 16th century, syphilis as a disease had clearly lost some of its early ferocity. It was still frightening and widespread, but it could be lived with. Panic, flight, prayer, self flagellation and sadistic scapegoating were not the only recourses. There were even remedies. Mercury was in general use as a curative agent and despite toxic overprescription was moderately efficacious. (Hence the rueful witticism: "one night of Venus, a lifetime of Mercury.")

In the age of Shakespeare, syphilis was highly unpleasant but essentially a disfiguring and long-term degenerative disease, not a sudden killer. Many of its remote tertiary consequences were largely unregarded. And at a period when life expectancy was low it represented just one life-shortening hazard among many. But it had a blighting or corrosive effect on intercourse generally and sexual intercourse in particular. Shakespeare, like his fellow dramatists, was morbidly aware of the Neapolitan Boneache. It figures centrally as a motif in *Timon* and in *Measure for Measure*. And there are numerous passing references in many of the plays (if only in the expletive "Pox on it!"). *Henry IV* pt. 2 opens with Falstaff anxiously having his urine tested. It emerges that he may have the gout or the pox (gout from drinking, pox from wenching). He's not sure, and remains unsure throughout the play. His diseased condition we understand is a microcosm of a larger illness in England's body politic.

By the end of the 17th century there had emerged two distinct literary strategies for dealing with syphilis; one of which I'll call



aestheticization and the other silence. Aestheticization in this context does not mean using the cosmetic resources of literature to make the disease beautiful, but finding a central place for it within the domain of art. To aestheticize it in this sense is to domicile or domesticate it as a fact of life.

Aestheticization of venereal disease is prominent in Restoration Comedy and the most improper of that improper genre, William Wycherley's *The Country Wife* (1672). Wycherley's hero Horner (i.e., cuckold) hits on one of the witty stratagems that are the essence of the form. He has it put out that a particularly severe dose of VD has rendered him impotent. The news makes him a laughing stock. But more to his purpose, it means that gentlemen entrust their wives to him, as a kind of upper-class eunuch. Horner takes

Treatment of syphilis in the 17th century consisted of infusing mercury into the patient's body in a fumigation tub (foreground). Mercury applied as ointment caused excessive salivation, as the background patient graphically demonstrates.

William Hogarth's series of drawings of *The Rake's Progress* (1735) describes the "progress" from high living to syphilitic madness. Plate 5 (left) depicts a "Tavern Scene" and Plate 8 (right) the "Scene at Bedlam."



full advantage of his privileged intimacy, and notoriously the comic climax of the action is the so-called China scene, in which a foolish husband is cuckolded on stage by his treacherous wife and Horner behind a drawing room screen. Summary cannot do justice to Wycherley's wit and ingenuity. But what I would stress here is its central idea: the syphilitic or pseudo-syphilitic hero. Whatever else, the play indicates an extraordinary willingness to confront a painful social fact and laugh at it.

Aestheticization is similarly apparent in Hogarth's *The Rake's Progress* (1735). Hogarth's narrative series of eight plates tells the story of a young man of mode who runs through several fortunes in dissipation and luxurious living, descending finally into the open ward of Bedlam, where he expires a penniless madman. It is, of course, less a progress than a fall, like Adam's. In the two plates reproduced here the harlots around the rake have so called beauty spots prominently visible on their faces. These are social camouflage, a cosmetic covering of sores. What is a mark of mortal illness is converted by the application of pounce to a coquettish

sign of beauty. Compare with the secondary cutaneous lesions of syphilis in the medieval drawing on the previous page. On his part, under his askew wig the befuddled rake is bald. His head is probably shaven. And the 18th-century fashion of the wig (and a bare pate underneath) was probably another social camouflage to hide alopecia, the hair loss associated with secondary syphilis.

In the last plate, the rake is naked. He goes out of the world as he came in. And he is clearly melancholy mad (unlike his raving fellow Bedlamites) and as clearly syphilitic mad. There are visible the telltale lesions on his stripped body. It is a very moralistic conclusion but even in this terrible degradation Hogarth renders his degenerate, disease-raddled hero strangely noble by allusion to conventional and heroic poses.

The effect of Hogarth's series is complex. It evokes pity, terror, scorn, and admiration, allowing none to predominate. The rake is morally contemptible — a wantonly self-destroyed fool, yet strangely heroic. He assumes the image of humanity crucified by temptations and a disease whose afflictions far exceed the just deserts of averagely sinful



mankind. The complex force of Hogarth's design is evident if one compares the last plate with the graphic depiction of a late 17th-century syphilis hospital on the previous page. (Note the fumigation tub, by which mercury was infused into the patient's body. In the far right of the picture another patient is expectorating. One of the side effects of mercury in ointment form was gross expectoration, up to three pints of saliva a day being considered tonic, although the fetid stench of the patient's breath was often unbearable to himself and his attendants.) This anonymous picture is terrible, but wholly inartistic. Its purely documentary effect is as low-keyed as a surgeon general's health warning.

For a number of reasons (many of them to do with the Puritan strain in British ideology) the head-on approach to syphilis practiced by Shakespeare, Wycherley, or Hogarth gave way to the other, less aggressive strategy: artistic silence. Look for venereal disease in the great works of English literature from 1750 to 1880 and you will have a fruitless time of it. There is simply a hole. Venereal disease nevertheless remained a dominant fact

of lived life, shortening the span of many of the authors who studiously never mention it publicly. Mention is confined to such secret texts as Boswell's journals, the dirty joke, or, most frequently, the jargonized discourses of medicine.

How was this prohibition enforced? It seems to have been the outcome of a consensual conspiracy of tact, discretion, and good form. The social disease was something one simply did not bring up in society. The conspiracy of decent reticence held firm throughout all the upheavals that otherwise turned the world upside down. Most paradoxically, as literature became self-consciously "realistic" in the 19th century with the rise to dominance of the novel, the silence actually deepens. Between 1820 and 1880 there were probably some 30,000 novels published in England. Not one of them, as far as I know, alludes directly to venereal disease.

Even had they been legally permitted, Dickens, George Eliot, or Thackeray would probably not have wanted the freedom to introduce syphilis frontally into their novels. It would have been a treachery to the sanctities of the sacred English family. Avoidance

of reference was universal. The famous Ninth Edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, for instance, has long and informative separate entries on Leprosy and Smallpox. Look for Syphilis, and you are obscurely directed to a paragraph in the "Surgery" entry. This morbid fear of direct reference explains the violently scandalized response to Ibsen's *Ghosts* when it was first performed in London in the 1880s. The play deals, discreetly enough, with the horrific effects of tertiary and congenital syphilis (effects that were gradually becoming known in their full horror to medical science). But the play was attacked as more contaminatingly dangerous ("an open sewer") than the disease itself. It strikes us as pure Grundyism — a signal instance of Victorian hypocrisy. But the 19th century's self-willed prohibition on reference to syphilis was, in fact, a strategy. Effectively it controlled the fact by controlling the idea, and it controlled the idea by banishing it, by creating an ideal world in which syphilis had no public existence. If the 18th century covered its sores with beautifying aids and cosmetics, the Victorians covered their uncomfortable thoughts with beautiful myths.

I said earlier that we are sadly out of practice in dealing with epidemics. In our inexperience we instinctively reach back to two options, or strategies, from the historical past. One is medieval: a policy of prohibiting the person (as if he were a leper). The other is Victorian: a policy of prohibiting the word (as if it were dirty). Both strategies are evident in America's current encounter with AIDS.

The Victorian option of willed silence in the face of AIDS explains the extreme reluctance of the TV networks to carry condom ads, despite the fact that condoms are agreed to be useful prophylactics. The pretexts ("inappropriate for a significant proportion of our viewers") boil down to a single sovereign fact: the audience does not want to hear about condoms in their living rooms, even if condoms save lives.

There are other revealing instances of willed silence about AIDS. The refusal, for instance, of Liberace's physician to enter the actual cause of death on the entertainer's death certificate; or the automatic use of Strangelovian euphemisms ("exchange of bodily fluids"); or President Reagan's disinclination until very recently to use the dreaded acronym in any public statement.

If the Victorian strategy is evident, so is the even more frightening medieval practice

of prohibiting not the word but the person. Vestigial remnants of society's leprosarial procedures are recognizable in the demand that universal testing for AIDS be at once inaugurated; presumably as the prelude to forcible separation. It is only too easy to see AIDS sufferers as victims of *flagellum dei*, the scourge of God: are they not clearly sinners — gays, whores, junkies, guilty because ill, ill because guilty? (Hence the bizarre formulation of haemophiliacs or infected new born babes as "innocent victims" of AIDS.) There has been no serious suggestion that those with AIDS lose all their civil rights. But the increasingly urgent wish of medical insurance companies to deny them coverage (as if they were not legitimately "sick") is a step in that direction.

There is, of course, one factor that makes our situation very different from either Victorian society's dealing with syphilis or Medieval Europe's dealing with leprosy — namely, the extraordinary authority and power of the news media. There has been no shortage of press coverage. Indeed, journalism's attention to AIDS may seem obsessive (recalling the entirely phony panic that was whipped up by herpes three years ago). But for all their fearless confrontation with the clinical and epidemiological facts, newspapers do not (as the idiom goes) bring AIDS home to us. And this, surely, is where literature, film and the arts have a part to play. Their great power is to make the strange thing familiar; to give us an intimate inwardness with otherwise unbearable facts. In Hogarth's prints disease, although graphically horrible, is nevertheless domesticated. It is part of the everyday facts and furniture of 18th-century London life — as English as apple pie is American. Is AIDS as American as apple pie? I don't think so.

It is highly unlikely that Hogarth's art cured anyone, any more than W. H. Auden's pre-war poems (as he candidly admitted) saved a single Jew from the gas chamber. Nevertheless, as a species, we are the better for having had Auden and Hogarth. One must beware that most arrogant and Canute-like error of ordering the artist what to do. But one can, I think, enter a fervent plea or hope that in the present AIDS-related emergency artists of Hogarthian stature may emerge. Not to cure or alleviate what may well be a terrible epidemic. But to help us to confront it with some degree of human dignity and charity. □