Kevin Siena (ed.), *Sins of the flesh: responding to sexual disease in early modern Europe*, Toronto, Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2005, pp. 292, Canadian $35.00, US $28.00 (paperback 0-7727-2029-0).

In 2005 a member of the House of Commons described the fact that politicians were no longer respected or trusted by the public as ''a pox on all our houses''. Nowadays people using the phrase usually have no idea about the medical historical background of this English saying. When someone wished ''a pox upon someone'' in early modern Europe, he knew what he was talking about. The pox, traditionally thought to be syphilis, was considered a dreadful and most frightening disease, infecting men, women and children alike. But, most important, this disease was interpreted as an outward sign of internal moral failure or, more precisely, a sign of the ''sins of the flesh'' (hence the lyrical title of a collected volume of essays dealing with the history of an epidemic known in England also under the popular name ''French disease'').

In recent years scholars have become reluctant to equate the ''French disease'' or the ''pox'' with syphilis, as medical historians are now more aware of the problems of retrospective diagnosis. Nevertheless, at least one author in the volume, which was edited by a young Canadian social historian, prefers ''syphilis'' to the historicist ''pox'', because this term reflects in his opinion the ''multi-layered textuality of pathology''. Jonathan Gil Harris claims that such ''patho-texts'' are comparable to medieval palimpsests in which older knowledge is constantly reworked, making anachronisms unavoidable. The only weak ''spot'' in his fascinating reading of an early modern text is not making cross-references to other essays in this volume, for example, avoiding reference to the scholarly article by Darin Hayton on Joseph Grünpeck, one of the first authors to write about the ''new'' disease.

The lucid introduction to this volume by the editor Kevin Siena is highly readable. One gets a good overview of recent research on the ''French disease'', although books and articles not written in English hardly appear in the bibliography. Siena offers in his introduction a ''red thread'' which enables the reader to read the essays in a different order to that of the table of contents.

The volume is divided into three sections. The first part deals with the scientific and medical responses. Two authors, Jon Arrizabalaga and Darin Hayton, study early modern tracts on the ''French disease'', while David Gentilcore shows that ''charlatans'' did not play a great role in the treatment of the pox in Italy, in contrast to other countries such as England. The second part, which holds the largest number of essays, looks into literary and metaphoric responses. Jonathan Gil Harris provides a close reading of the ''spots'' mentioned in the little known Elizabethan play, *The three ladies of London*. Roze Hentschell shows how the discourse around the pox contributed to the formation of the early modern English nation. Diane Cady explores the use of foreign language in early modern England as a kind of sexual disease. Domenico Zanrè looks into the representations of the ''*mal francese*'' in sixteenth-century Italian literature. The third part contains three essays dealing with institutional and policing responses. Laura J McGough explains why the Venetian authorities locked up beautiful women. Studying the hunting down of ''sodomites'' in late-Renaissance Lucca, Mary Hewlett discovers a ''French connection'' between syphilis and sodomy. Kevin Siena presents the quintessence of his recent monograph about the treatment of poor syphilitics in London hospitals in the period 1550 to 1700.

Reading these essays is highly rewarding, even if one still feels the need for more comparative studies in this field.

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Sheila Sweetinburgh, *The role of the hospital in medieval England: gift-giving and the spiritual economy*, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2004, pp. 286, illus., £55.00, €65.00 (hardback 1-85182-794-3).