6. V.D. and the ARTS

6.1 LITERATURE

References to VD are found in Western literature from the Renaissance unto the present.

Francois Rabelais (1494-1553) in Book II of his PANTAGRUEL tells of the syphilis of Pope Sixtus IV,

... and begins his GARGANTUA
Most illustrious Drinkers, and
you most precious Syphilitics,

... and continues in Chapter 14 with a tribute to Francis I of France:

And he died in the year 1420
of syphilis which he had aplenty.

Miguel Cervantes (1547-1616) in DON QUIXOTE:

Vergilius forgot to tell us who was the first man in the world to have a cold in the head or to take inunctions for the French disease.
Henrik Ibsen’s play *Ghosts*, written in 1881 and dedicated to Fournier, deals explicitly with syphilis.

Guy de Maupassant’s novel *LE LiT 29* takes place in Rouen, France during the Franco-Prussian War. The heroine is raped by a Prussian soldier and infected with syphilis. She takes her revenge by infecting as many of the invading Prussians as possible. Her husband returns after the war to find her dying in the hospital in Rouen - in bed #29.

Perhaps de Maupassant was writing from experience - since he also was syphilitic!

The fundamental theme in *Doctor Faustus* by Thomas Mann is syphilis - which he studied in the affected Nietzsche!

Although James Joyce suffered from gonorrhea, the major theme in *Ulysses* is syphilis.

Syphilis is a common theme in several works by the French authors Barbey d’Aurevilly and Andre Gide.
6.1 LITERATURE

By Shakespeare's time, syphilis had become common in Europe. The subject was ready for him and he made the most of it.

HENRY V

Henry (II,i) *pow'dring tub of infancy...* 
i.e., mercury baths for syphilis.
Henry (V,i) *... of malady of France...* 
i.e., the French pox or syphilis.

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

Quince (I,ii) *...French crowns which have no hair at all...* 
i.e., syphilitic alopecia or baldness.

HAMLET

Hamlet (V,i) in the exchange with the gravedigger, 
*...we have many pocky corpses nowadays...* 
i.e., many syphilitic corpses.

Visit Shakespeare's town and hear Falstaff in II Henry IV, I,ii -

... *A man can no more separate age and coventousness tha 'a can part young limbs and lechery... and the pox pinches the other. *
... *A pox on this goat! Or a goat on this pox!*

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6.2 GRAPHIC ARTS

Visual works depicting VD, outside of medical texts, are scarce. However ...

Albrecht Dürer's woodcut *The Syphilitic* (ca. 1524) illustrated the first printed article on the disease, a broadsheet by Diedrich Ulsen, town physician of Nurnberg.

Ulrich von Hutten's drawings & writings accurately document his own case of syphilis.

Diego Rivera's mural on the 3rd floor of the Palace of Fine Arts in Mexico City shows unmistakable spirochetes and gonococci.
WHAT HAPPENS TO OUR KIDS WHEN THEY GO 'ON THE TOWN'?

The night is young, the road is smooth, the tank is full...

Youth is at the wheel and untold adventure lies ahead...

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6.3 OPERA

Musical references to V.D. are quite unusual. However...

Alban Berg’s unfinished opera *Lulu* features the sad syphilitic Lulu, her infected husband Alwa, and her lesbian lover, Countess Geschwitz.

Igor Stravinsky’s *The Rake’s Progress* contains numerous subtle references to syphilis, especially in the brothel scene with the Whores and the Roaring Boys.

Pangloss, in Bernstein’s *Candide*, based on Voltaire’s text, suffers from the ravages of syphilis.

The sexual and sinful nature of the unhealing wound suffered by Amfortas in Wagner’s *Parsifal* and its relation to syphilis, the scourge of God, was obvious to any mid-nineteenth century opera lover.

The evasion and embarrassment Gurnemanz betrays when questioned about Amfortas’s wound and its source are typical of the silence and shame surrounding venereal diseases right through to the middle of the twentieth century.
Venereal disease has rarely been a favorite topic for popular music. However, ...

... in the 1940's, Woody Guthrie sang such tunes as -
VD Blues, VD Gunner's Blues, VD Seaman's Last Letter, and the VD Waltz.

... and in the 1960's, Wolfman Jack sang FREE SHOTS for CAVDA Records.

CAVDA - Citizens Alliance for VD Awareness.

For those viewers not over 40, this is a 45 rpm record. This is how we once listened to music.

Approx. 4 min. of music per side.