

The Mysterious Malady of Pieter Gillis

In May 1517 Erasmus wrote to Thomas More that their mutual friend Pieter Gillis--More's "charissime Petre Aegidi" of *Utopia* fame--was "seriously ill, even dangerously, from some sickness I know not what" (no. 584/10-11).¹ In July 1517 Erasmus's report to More was full of dark suspicion:

Pieter Gillis is not really fit even now; he suffers frequent relapses and is afraid of something--I know not what but I can guess. I very much hope it will not happen. His wife had a miscarriage ... from anxiety, I suppose, at the danger to her husband (no. 597/23-27).

In his reply, More expressed concern for Gillis and exasperation with Erasmus:

You ... give me to understand that our friend Pieter is not yet really restored to health and has something else hanging over him as well. What sort of thing this is you guess rather than know, and I could wish that whatever it is that you guess you had given me a few oracular hints, for even guesswork is beyond me, and affection being full of fears, I am driven to be afraid of many things which may be worse than the truth (July 1517, no. 601/1-7).

In September 1517 Erasmus notified Johannes Sixtinus that Gillis was suffering from "an unpleasant and prolonged disorder" (*odiosa lentaque valetudine*, no. 655/8).

In October 1517 Erasmus wrote to Gillis himself. The letter begins, "I wish you would overcome your hot temper" (no. 687); evidently Gillis had expressed anger at the incompetence or ineffectuality of his physician. Erasmus continued with a dire warning: "unless you abstain from two things, disorder of the mind and unseasonable sexual relations, I would rather not confess what I fear for you..." (ll. 10-12).

In February 1518 Erasmus wrote to Sixtinus:

About Pieter Gillis' health I spread no rumours, but I did complain in a letter to More; and I only wish the report [*rumor*] was untrue. My dear friend, there is only too much truth in it, and at the sight of the danger he is in, I fear piteously for myself (no. 775/26-29).

In March 1518 Erasmus bluntly told Gillis, "I see no hope, unless first you take a firm grip of yourself and then undertake a journey" to obtain medical assistance (no. 788/5-6). In April 1518 he wrote, "Above all, avoid all strong emotion, excessive joy, unrestrained laughter, too much walking, excessive study, anger especially" (no. 818/9-11).

Is this perhaps the way one addresses a younger friend thought to be on the brink of insanity--struggling to resist "disorder of the mind" (*animi perturbatione*), as the earlier letter (no. 687) put it?

What specific symptoms or circumstances could have caused Erasmus to "fear piteously" for *himself* (no. 775) regarding Gillis's condition and prognosis? Was Erasmus merely projecting onto Gillis his own hypochondriacal worries--thence the hint of levity in More's letter (no. 601) chiding Erasmus for his alarm?

Erasmus's proscription of "strong emotion" and "excessive joy" might be taken as an oblique reference to concupiscence--those "unseasonable sexual relations" (*intempestiuo coitu*) that the earlier letter (no. 687) had warned against. Could Erasmus have suspected a "venereal" disease? The so-called "new disease," syphilis, which the Emperor Maximilian had spoken of at the Diet of Worms in 1495, was not yet understood to be sexual in nature; Ulrich von Hutten (who called it *morbus Gallicus*) was typical in attributing it to "bad air." On the other hand, a sexual disease such as gonorrhea could account for the miscarriage that Gillis's wife suffered in 1517--though between their marriage in 1514 and her death in 1526 she did bear him nine children.² The miscarriage itself (or many other circumstances, including organic ones) might have caused or aggravated a deep depression in Gillis, giving rise to its own manifold and mysterious symptoms.

In any case, Gillis must have recovered. During the ensuing years he was widowed twice (Erasmus wrote an epitaph for each wife), and he fathered a child by his third wife in the early 1530s. He died in 1533, at about 47 years of age.

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NOTES

1. Erasmus's letters will be cited by number. All quoted translations come from *The Correspondence of Erasmus*, tr. R.A.B. Mynors and D.F.S. Thomson, in the *Collected Works of Erasmus*, vols. 1- (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1974-). Latin quotations come from *Opus Epistolarum*, ed. P.S. Allen, 11 vols. + index (Oxford: Clarendon, 1906-1958). Both series employ the same numbering.

2. The limited amount known about Gillis's life is summarized by Marcel Nauwelaerts in *Contemporaries of Erasmus*, ed. Peter Bietenholz, 3 vols. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985-87), 2:99-101.



Erasme et la *Curiositas*

Dans *La Curiosité à la Renaissance*, actes réunis par Jean Céard (Paris: SEDES, 1986), les douze pages d'André Godin sur "Erasme: *Pia/impia curiositas*" suggèrent maints rapprochements avec Thomas More, sur deux points notamment:

1. L'*homo pius* d'Erasme contemple "le magnifique spectacle de ce monde *religiosis ac simplicibus oculis*". Or, pour les Utopiens, l'Artisan de l'Univers a exposé la *machinam huius mundi* au regard de l'homme dans l'espoir de susciter en lui *curiosum ac sollicitum inspectorem, operisque sui admiratorem* (*Utopie*, d'A. Prévost, p. 117; la glose marginale dit *Contemplatio naturae*).

2. L'évocation du péché originel, fruit de la *libido sciendi*, d'un prurit de savoir qui s'origine dans l'orgueil, fait penser à plusieurs pages de More, en particulier dans la rétrospective sur l'Eden qui sert de porche au Traité sur la Passion. Il analyse la psychologie d'Eve durant son entretien avec le serpent, qui lui inocula "the poison of proud curious appetite" (*CW*13, p. 16).

