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THE FRENCH WARS OF RELIGION AND THE DISEASED, DISFIGURED,  
AND MONSTROUS BODY

Agrippa d'Aubigné's epic poem *Les Tragiques* was published in 1616 in Geneva, though d'Aubigné wrote it over a much longer period starting in the late sixteenth century. A militant response to the violence of the French Wars of Religion from a Protestant point of view, *Les Tragiques* is composed of seven books, each with a different focus. One criticizes the nobility, another the French justice system, while others relate tales of Protestant martyrs and massacres committed by Catholics, and the final two books tell of the vengeance and justice of God. This essay focuses primarily on the first book, *Misères*, which is in many ways a response to the court poet Pierre de Ronsard's *Discours des misères de ce temps*, written in 1562 to 1563. Ronsard's *Discours* was written at the beginning of the Wars of Religion, generally accepted to have started with the Massacre at Vassy in March 1562, when the Duc de Guise's forces massacred a large group of Huguenots worshipping in a barn near the church where the Duc de Guise attended Mass. While d'Aubigné's text discusses the same time period as Ronsard's, he was writing later, after the Edict of Nantes was signed and at a temporal remove from many of the visceral events of the Wars of Religion. Despite this distance, d'Aubigné's text retains a vital urgency, and as we shall see, the body—specifically diseased, disfigured, and monstrous bodies—serve as important vehicles for d'Aubigné, Ronsard, and other writers active during the Wars of Religion to express their discontent and the extreme violence of their time.

In "Misères," d'Aubigné describes a hell ["enfer"] in which

Deux esprits, que les cieux formèrent, dépités,  
Des pires excréments, des vapeurs inconnues  
Que l'haleine du bas exhale dans les nues.  
L'essence et le subtil de ces infections  
S'affina par sept fois en exhalations,  
Comme l'on voit dans l'air une masse visqueuse  
Lever premièrement l'humeur contagieuse  
De l'haleine terrestre ; et quand auprès des cieux  
Le choix de ce venin est haussé, vicieux,  
Comme un astre il prend vie, et sa force secrète  
Epouvante chacun du regard d'un comète. (v. 700–710)

[Two spirits, formed by the skies, dejected,  
from the worst excrements, from unknown vapors  
that the breath from below exhales in the clouds.  
The essence and the subtlety of these infections  
Is refined seven times through exhalations,  
As one sees in the air a viscous mass  
Raise first the contagious humor  
Of the earthly breath; and when nearby the skies

The choice of this venom is increased, vicious,  
 Like a star it takes on life, and its secret force  
 Horrifies every one with the look of a comet.]

In this passage d'Aubigné describes two people, “deux esprits,” who are formed from “des pires excréments” [“the worst excrement”] and “des vapeurs inconnues” [“unknown vapors”]. These people are “infections” who take shape from viscous masses and venom, from contagious humors rising from the depths of the earth. These monstrous bodies belong to none other than “une fatale femme” [“a deadly woman”] and a cardinal, as d'Aubigné specifies a few lines later, meaning the queen regent Catherine de Medici and the cardinal Charles de Lorraine, the brother of the Duc de Guise who oversaw the massacre at Vassy (v. 725). Catherine is described in *Misères* as “le venin florentin” [“the Florentine venom”] (v. 745), “pestifère” [“pestiferous”] (v. 746), and even as a sort of vampire or a carnivorous beast whose thirst for blood remains unquenched (“Tu n’as ta soif de sang qu’à demi arrosée,” v. 781). The comet mentioned at the end of the passage signifies the coming of “peste, famine ou guerre” [“plague, famine, or war,” v. 714], an apocalyptic image taken from the Bible, though as Frank Lestringant points out, d'Aubigné was probably also influenced by the actual appearance of a supernova in November 1572, which he describes later in the fourth book of *Les Tragiques*. (And, in any case, France experienced all three of these phenomena during the tumultuous sixteenth century.)

The construction of these two bodies from excrement and contagious vapors described in this passage is only one of numerous descriptions of diseased, disfigured, and monstrous bodies throughout *Les Tragiques*. Starting in the preface, “L’Auteur à son livre,” he mentions the “poison” (v. 372) infecting the reason of his compatriots. He describes, at various points, “des corps morts rassasiés et las” [“dead, full, and tired bodies,” v. 476], “nos os blanchissantes” [“our whitening bones,” v. 477], and “des puantes entrailles” [“stinking entrails,” v. 490]. He sketches brutal images of bodies being dismembered, bleeding, and burning, as when he mentions the “intestins brûlant par les tressauts du sang” [“intestines burning with spurts of blood,” v. 507] or a body “auquel on tranche tous les jours” [“that is sliced every day,” v. 627]. These colorful references to bodily decomposition and dismemberment pepper the text. In quantifying the recurrence of these terms, we have noted that “peste” appears 32 times, “venin” (or its derivatives “venimeux” and “envenimer”) 25 times, and “poison” (also “empoisonner” and “empoisonné”) 27 times. The ubiquitous “sang” appears 255 times, “corps” at 170 instances, “infect” 22 times, and “maladie” 14 times. The preponderance of these words attests to the centrality of “bodily” discourse in d'Aubigné’s project.

D'Aubigné was not alone in using this type of rhetoric. In his *Discours des misères de ce temps*, Ronsard criticizes the “contagion” (58) of Protestantism and the “miel empoisonné” [“poisoned honey”] of their Protestant “breuvage” [“concoction,” 57]. He adds that the Huguenots are “odieux comme peste”

["hateful like the plague," 58] and compares them to the locusts of the Apocalypse (15) as well as beasts, wolves, proud scorpions (15, 16), and vipers (16) that kill their own mothers through an act of self-abortion and destruction of the womb:

Vous ressemblés encor à ces jeunes viperes,  
 Qui ouvrent en naissant le ventre de leurs meres,  
 Ainsi en avortant vous avez fait mourir  
 La France vostre mere, en lieu de la nourrir. (16)  
 [You resemble still these young vipers  
 Who open their mothers' wombs in birth,  
 Thus in aborting you have made perish  
 France your mother, instead of nourishing her.]

The authors of anonymous polemical pamphlets published during the Wars of Religion also made use of this language. In the *Discours contre les huguenotz, auquel est contenue et déclarée la source de leur damnable religion* (1573), the author describes the "peste stigienne" ["Stygian plague," 8] and "vénin dangéreux" ["dangerous venom," 7] infecting the country. Likewise, in the *Coq-à-l'Asne et chanson sur ce qui s'est passé en France puis la mort d'Henry de Valois, jusques aux nouvelles deffaictes* (1590), the anonymous author also makes use of the same terms, warning Catholics that they should remove the infected ewes that are empoisoning their flocks and their water:

Ostez ostez Catholiques les brebis  
 Dont le puant amarris  
 Infecte votre troupeau.  
 Puisque deja des pasteurs le grand Pasteur  
 A preveu la puanteur  
 Qui veut empoisonner l'eau.  
 Ne vous y fiez  
 A ces Chrestiens reniez  
 Qui vont eseumant leur rage  
 Garde le venin  
 Qu'ils versent par le chemin. (10)  
 [Catholics, remove, remove the ewes  
 whose stinking wombs  
 infect your flock,  
 since already the great Shepherd of the shepherds  
 has warned of the stench  
 that wants to poison the water,  
 don't rely on  
 these recanted Christians  
 who are going to froth with their rage  
 Look out for the venom  
 That they pour on the path.]

In these texts and in *Les Tragiques*, the descriptions of blood, breath, vapors, smoke, and contagious or infected air recall both Galenic, or humoral theory, as well as miasma theory, what those in the sixteenth century and earlier periods generally believed to be the main vectors of disease. Miasma

theory held that “bad air” was a source of contagion that could infect the body and spirit.<sup>1</sup> Humoral theory held that disease was caused by an imbalance in the four humors—blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile, and that the exact nature of the disease was thus highly specific to the individual.<sup>2</sup> However, the sheer mass of people afflicted with the Black Death in the medieval and early modern period challenged this model of pathology.<sup>3</sup> Historians have estimated that between 30–60% of Europe’s population died during the major outbreak in the mid-fourteenth century (1347–1353), and between 1550 and 1770 there was not a single year that France did not experience at least one outbreak of the Black Death.<sup>4</sup> By the 1500s both humoral theory and miasma theory had been around for over a millennium; Hippocrates in 400 BC was credited with first applying humoral theory to medicine, and Galen further popularized it during his lifetime in the second century AD. But in the medieval period and the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, other theories challenged them for dominance. In 1543 the Flemish physician and anatomist Andreas Vesalius (1514–1564) published his anatomy textbook *De humani corporis fabrica*, or *On the Fabric of the Human Body*, which subtly corrected some of Galen’s anatomical mistakes while still supporting many of his main ideas and led to the development of the notion of the general circulation of the blood.<sup>5</sup> Another influential thinker, the philosopher and physician Paracelsus (born Philip von Hohenheim), also challenged Galenic theory. Though he lived from 1493 to 1541 and was often discredited during his lifetime, his works were reprinted many times in the 1600s. Like the Neo-Platonists of the Renaissance, Paracelsus argued that the body was a microcosm. As J. N. Hays explains in *The Burdens of Disease*, “Events in the ‘macrocosm’—the greater world of astronomical phenomena—affected or even mirrored events in the ‘microcosm’—the individual.”<sup>6</sup>

This idea of the individual’s body as a microcosm being affected by the macrocosm of broader and even astronomical events goes hand-in-hand with what was called the “providential” explanation of disease—the scale of the plague was so vast that only God’s will, or God’s wrath, could explain it.<sup>7</sup> It is important to remember that the French word for plague, “la peste,” was used not only to refer to the actual Bubonic plague but was also “attributed to any extreme form of pestilence, epidemiological disaster, noxious prodigy or human catastrophe,” to quote historian Colin Jones.<sup>8</sup> *La peste*, then, was the perfect metaphor for Agrippa d’Aubigné, Pierre de Ronsard, and other writers to use to describe the convulsions of French society during the Wars of Religion, especially given the very corporeal nature of one of the main points of contention between the Catholics and the Protestants—the nature of the body of Christ.

As Susan K. Silver explains, the question of the Eucharist was “one of the clearest boundary markers between Catholic and Protestant writers.”<sup>9</sup> The interpretation, literal or figurative, of consuming the body of Christ violently divided the two factions. In his “Remonstrance au peuple françois,” part of

the *Discours des misères de ce temps*, Ronsard also makes reference to this debate, writing,

Ils nous veulent monstrier par raison naturelle  
 Que ton corps n'est jamais qu'à la dextre éternelle.  
 Ils nous veulent prouver par la Philosophie  
 Qu'un corps n'est en deux lieux, aussi je ne leur nye,  
 Car ton corps n'a qu'un lieu. (54)

[They want us to show by natural reason  
 that your body is always at our right hand.  
 They want us to prove by philosophy  
 That a body is in two places, though I too don't deny  
 That your body has only one place.]

The Protestants characterized the Catholics as cannibals literally eating the body of Christ, as d'Aubigné does in *Les Tragiques*, while the Catholics, who perceived their community as a “body” from which the Protestants were “severed,” portrayed the Protestants as a “disease corrupting religious and social bonds.”<sup>10</sup> The body of the French Catholic community could only be saved by “amputating” the gangrenous parts—the Protestants. This metaphoric extension of the body to the larger religious community was also repeated at a national level. In d'Aubigné's and Ronsard's texts, this metaphor appears in two forms: in personifications of France as a woman and mother, and in descriptions of the king and his role in relation to his subjects.

The image of France as a woman and mother haunts *Les Tragiques*, particularly in the first book, *Misères*, and also in *Fers*, the fourth book, which describes the massacres at Vassy and Tours, among other events. This image first appears in the speech of Melpomène, the muse who inspires the narrator in *Misères*. Melpomène declaims:

O France désolée ! O terre sanguinaire !  
 Non pas terre, mais cendre ; ô mère ! si c'est mère  
 Que trahir ses enfants aux douceurs de son sein,  
 Et quand on les meurtrit les serrer de sa main :  
 Tu leur donnes la vie, et dessous ta mamelle  
 S'émeut des obstinés la sanglante querelle ;  
 Sur ton pis blanchissant ta race se débat,  
 Là le fruit de ton flanc fait le champ du combat. (v. 89–96)

[Oh miserable France! Oh bloodthirsty earth!  
 Not earth, but ash: oh mother! If it's a mother  
 Who betrays her children the softness of her breast,  
 And when they are murdered, grips them by the hand:  
 You give them life, and under your teat  
 Bursts forth the bloody quarrel of the obstinate ones:  
 On your whitening teats your race fights itself,  
 Here the fruit of your loins makes the field of combat.]

In Melpomène's address to France the country is both a “terre sanguinaire” [“bloodthirsty earth”] and “mère” [“mother”], and her terrestrial body becomes the site of battle, “le champ du combat” [“the field of combat”], where the fruit of her loins that her body has nourished fight and kill each

other. The image of France as a female body being consumed by her offspring appears and reappears in the text. More explicitly, d'Aubigné writes that he wants to show France as a "mère affligée" ["distressed mother," v. 97] caught between two dueling children:

Le plus fort, orgueilleux, empoigne les deux bouts  
 Des tétins nourriciers ; puis à force de coups  
 D'ongles, de poings, de pieds, il brise le partage  
 Dont nature donnait à son besson l'usage ;  
 Ce voleur acharné, cet Esau malheureux  
 Fait dégât du doux lait qui doit nourrir les deux,  
 Si que, pour arracher à son frère la vie,  
 Il méprise la sienne et n'en a plus d'envie.  
 Mais son Jacob, pressé d'avoir jeûné meshui  
 Ayant dompté longtemps en son cœur son ennui,  
 A la fin se défend, et sa juste colère  
 Rend à l'autre un combat dont le champ est la mère. (v. 99–110)

[The stronger one, prideful, stabs the two ends  
 of her nourishing teats; then through striking  
 with nails, fists, and feet, he breaks the sharing  
 of which nature gave his twin the use;  
 this relentless thief, this unfortunate Esau  
 wasted the sweet milk meant to nourish them both,  
 so that, to rip his brother's life from him,  
 he scorns his own and no longer wants it.  
 But his Jacob, pressured by having fasted,  
 Having long doubted in his heart his ennui,  
 Finally defends himself, and his just anger  
 Brings the other a combat whose field is the mother.]

France is depicted as soaked in blood and milk, where "le doux lait" ["the sweet milk"] contrasts with the violent image of the child grabbing the mother's breasts, her "tétins nourriciers" ["nourishing teats"] and the scratches, punches, and kicks with which he assaults his mother and his brother. Here d'Aubigné makes use of the Biblical story of the brothers Esau and Jacob, repeating the image of a civil, internal conflict acted out on the literal body of the mother. Ronsard makes use of a similar image, where he describes how the monster Opinion arms sons against their fathers, brothers against brothers, sisters against sisters, cousins against cousins, uncle against nephew, wife against husband, all soaking their hands in blood (10). Though they both describe violent civil conflict, d'Aubigné goes further than Ronsard to describe the body of France as "mi-vivante, mi-morte" ["half-living, half-dead"], a phrase that recurs throughout the text (v. 118). France's children have torn and violated her body. Though she tried to save the one that has "le droit et la juste querelle" ["the right and just quarrel"], the fighting continues until she has nothing left to offer them but blood:

Adonc se perd le lait, le suc de sa poitrine ;  
 Puis, aux derniers abois de sa proche ruine,  
 Elle dit : « Vous avez, félons, ensanglanté

Le sein qui vous nourrit et qui vous a porté ;  
 Or vivez de venin, sanglante géniture,  
 Je n'ai plus que du sang pour votre nourriture. » (v. 117–30)  
 [Thus she loses the milk, the juice of her breast;  
 Then, to the last cries of her approaching ruin,  
 She says: “You have, criminals, bloodied  
 The breast that nourished you and bore you;  
 So, live on venom, bloody children,  
 I have nothing left but blood to feed you.”]

Later in the text, these same images return, and the poet describes dried bodies losing their limbs [“membres retranchés,” 607], exhibiting a “pouls faible, inégal” [“a weak, uneven pulse,” 611]. The body of France is losing its limbs, its “membres retranchés, which are cut off and dying, drying out into an empty husk. Her pulse is weak, and she hangs on only in a state of living death, in agony.

But d'Aubigné does not only depict France as a dying maternal body. He also equates it to a giant monster with a huge body and a tiny head: it is “géant” [“giant,” v. 147] and all-devouring, with a stomach into which “tout entre” [“everything enters,” v. 150]. The brain is likened to a “champignon pourri” [“rotted mushroom”] nourished by a “chime venimeux” [“venomous chyme”] (v. 156), and its arms are “faibles” [“weak”] and “déjà secs, déjà morts” [“already dry, already dead”] (v. 159). The description of this monster has much in common with other disfigured bodies in the text: the body is infected and dispenses excrement, decaying and falling apart from within. Its humors, its blood and phlegm, are out of balance. Its bones are empty of marrow, its limbs are dry and dead, and its brain is rotting like a putrescent mushroom. It is failing and consuming itself from within: everything enters its grotesquely swollen stomach. What is different in this image, however, is the link between this gigantic body with its “petite tête” [“small head”] and the “body” of the French society, headed, literally, by the king.

D'Aubigné returns to this association of the body of the nation, with its king at its head, in the second book of *Les Tragiques*, titled *Princes*. In this part of the poem, d'Aubigné emphasizes the metaphor of the body politic:

Le peuple étant le corps et les membres du Roi,  
 Le Roi est le chef du peuple, et c'est aussi pourquoi  
 La tête est frénétique et pleine de manie  
 Qui ne garde son sang pour conserver la vie,  
 Et le chef n'est plus chef quand il prend ses ébats  
 A couper de son corps les jambes et les bras. (v. 467–72)  
 [The people being the body and limbs of the King,  
 The King is the head of the people, and this is also why  
 The head is frenetic and filled with mania  
 That does not store its blood to preserve its life,  
 And the leader is no longer a leader when he frolics outside,  
 Cutting the arms and legs from his body.]

The king is the “chef du peuple” [“leader of the people”], described as the head or the brain by playing on the rich double meaning of “chef” in French (as both “head” and “leader”), while the people form the body and the limbs of the ruler. If a king does not rule well, he becomes “frénétique et pleine de manie” [“frenetic and filled with mania”] and the body of the nation suffers. Though kings were often seen in the medieval period and even throughout the 1600s and the reign of Louis XIV as having a “healing touch” that could cure certain ailments like scrofula or leprosy, the king in this image does more harm than healing.<sup>11</sup> In his *Discours*, Ronsard references this same idea of the king’s link to his people, encouraging the Queen Regent to raise the young Prince well and exhorting the Prince to become a just leader. “Telz que furent les Roys, telz furent leurs subjects” [“Such were the Kings, such were their subjects”], he writes, underlining the reciprocal relationship between the bodies of the individual, the king, and the nation—relationships that recall, perhaps, the idea of the microcosm/macrocosm popular in Neo-Platonic and Paracelsian theory (5). These relationships also figure prominently in a text published by the humanist scholar Erasmus in 1519 titled *Institutio Principis Christiani*, written to secure himself a position as the tutor for the young Habsburg prince at the time. In this text Erasmus discusses natural and celestial imbalances that have repercussions for mankind, and he stresses what Gwenda Echard calls the “organic relationship between a prince and his kingdom.”<sup>12</sup> Erasmus also emphasizes that “the state is a single body” of which the king is the head and the people are the members, echoing in part Thomas Aquinas, Plutarch, and later John of Salisbury. This theory of the double body of the king “establishes a distinction between the monarch as a private individual and as a ‘persona ficta,’ an incarnation of the State.”<sup>13</sup> If the king creates an imbalance in the natural order of things by behaving dishonorably, his actions will affect the rest of the body politic, as d’Aubigné shows with his monster.

Throughout the Wars of Religion, both Protestant and Catholic writers made use of images of diseased, disfigured, and monstrous bodies to express the horrific violence of the civil wars, but a study of the larger intellectual, scientific, and political implications of this corporeal rhetoric helps us to understand its broader significance.

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1. Cole, “Of Mice and Moisture,” 69.

2. Persels, “The Sorbonnic Trots,” 1094.

3. Gilman, “The Subject of the Plague,” 27.

4. Hays, *The Burdens of Disease*, 37; Jones, “Plague and Its Metaphors in Early Modern France,” 99.

5. Jones, 91.

6. Jones, 96.

7. Jones, 78.

8. Jones, “Plague and Its Metaphors in Early Modern France,” 98. Lucinda Cole also discusses the flexibility of the term in her article “Of Mice and Moisture,” p. 78.

9. Silver, “And the Word Became Flesh...,” 45.

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10. Leonardo, "Cut Off This Rotten Member," 252.
  11. Hays, *The Burdens of Disease*, 33. Hays explains that the idea of the "healing touch" lost credit in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to some degree, but Louis XIV was a "master" of such rituals, though his successor was not.
  12. Echard, "The Erasmian Ideal of Kingship," 29.
  13. Apostolidès, *Le roi machine*, 11. My translation.

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