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978-0-521-08888-6 - Concepts of Cleanliness: Changing Attitudes in France since the Middle Ages

Georges Vigarello

Excerpt

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## Introduction

In the course of recounting the familiar exploits of Don Carlos, mysteriously abducted by masked ruffians, *Le Roman comique* (1651) describes its hero making his toilet. The prisoner is noble and the surroundings are sumptuous. Scarron describes both actions and objects: the attentiveness of the servants, naturally, and the magnificence of certain objects, such as the chandelier of chased silver-gilt, but also the indicators of cleanliness. These, however, defy our understanding; they are at the same time close to, and totally remote from, our own. They may bear some resemblance to certain practices of today, but they are, in fact, far removed from them. Scarron's interest focusses on indications which have today become subsidiary, whilst he pays little attention to others which have become, in contrast, essential. There are things missing and things left vague; it is as if our own most routine actions have yet to be invented, though some, nevertheless, have their equivalents here. In particular, the single act of washing which he mentions is very brief: 'I forgot to tell you that I think he washed his mouth, as I know he took great care of his teeth.'<sup>1</sup> Attention to cleanliness is more explicitly concentrated on linen and clothes. 'The masked dwarf stepped forward to serve him, and had him take the most beautiful linen in the world, the whitest and the most sweet-smelling.'<sup>2</sup>

There is no mention of water at any point in these scenes, except for the water which washed his mouth. Attention to cleanliness was a matter of sight and smell. It existed, with its own requirements, routines and frame of reference, but it served appearance above all. A norm was expressed and visible. The difference from today is that it applied primarily not to the skin but to linen, to what was most immediately visible. This example alone shows that it is foolish to deny the existence of practices of cleanliness in a pre-scientific culture.

1 P. Scarron, *Le Roman comique* (1651) in *Romanciers du XVIIe siècle* (Paris, 1973), p. 560.      <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

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The norms, in this regard, do not start from nothing. They have their basis and their purpose. What we need to examine is how they change and are elaborated, how they are manifested and transformed.

A history of cleanliness should first, therefore, show how new requirements and constraints gradually emerge. It has to retrace a journey in which the scene from *Le Roman comique* constitutes only a stage. Other, less refined, scenes have preceded it, where, for example, changing the shirt did not have the same importance. Linen, in particular, received little attention, and did not serve as a criterion of distinction, in the scenes of royal receptions described two centuries earlier in *Le Roman de Jehan de Paris*.<sup>3</sup>

Cleanliness here reflects the civilising process, in its gradual moulding of bodily sensations, its heightening of their refinement, and its release of their subtlety. It is a history of the refining of behaviour, and of the growth of private space and of self-discipline: the care of oneself for one's own sake, a labour ever more squeezed between the intimate and the social. On a wider plane, it is the history of the progressive pressure of civilisation on the world of direct sensations.<sup>4</sup> It reveals the extension of their range. A cleanliness defined by regular washing of the body supposes, quite simply, a greater sharpness of perception and a stronger self-discipline than a cleanliness which is essentially defined by the changing of linen and its degree of whiteness.

It is essential, before embarking on such a history, to put aside our own frame of reference; cleanliness has to be recognised in behaviour long forgotten. The 'dry' wash of the courtier, for example, who wiped his face with a white cloth rather than wash it, responded to a standard of cleanliness which was altogether rational in the seventeenth century. It was considered and justified, even though it makes little sense today, when feelings and meanings have changed. We have to rediscover this lost sensibility.

It is also necessary to overturn the hierarchy of categories of authority; it was not, for example, hygienists who laid down the criteria of cleanliness in the seventeenth century, but the authors of manuals of etiquette, experts in manners, not scholars. The slow accumulation of constraints was accompanied by the displacement of the knowledge on which they were based.

<sup>3</sup> See below, chapter 4.

<sup>4</sup> The work of Norbert Elias, *La Civilisation des moeurs* (Paris, 1973, 1st ed. in German, 1939, trans. English as *The Civilising Process*, Oxford, 1978) is crucial here.

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Representing this process as a succession of accretions, or as an accumulation of pressures brought to bear on the body, however, risks giving a false picture. It was not simply a question of the accumulation of constraints. Such a history needs to connect with other histories. Cleanliness is inevitably affected by images of the body, by images, more or less obscure, of the corporeal shell, by even obscurer images of the body's physical composition. It was, for example, because water was seen as capable of penetrating the body, that bathing had a very special significance in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; hot water, in particular, was believed to weaken the organs and leave the pores open to unwholesome air. Thus there existed a set of ideas about the body which had their own history and causes. They, too, affected sensibility, and influenced norms, which could not change in isolation from them. They operated on ground already occupied, and never controlled a passive body. Images of the body had to change before constraints could change. So, too, did latent conceptions of the body, such as those which dictated its functioning and its capabilities.

So a history of bodily cleanliness brings into play a wider and more complex history. All the ideas which gave the body its contours, shaped its appearance and suggested its internal mechanisms had primarily a social terrain. The cleanliness of the seventeenth century, attached essentially to linen and external appearance, and expressed in, for example, the display of objects or the fine points of vestimentary symbols, was obviously very different from the cleanliness which, at a later date, was expressed in the protection of the body's organism, or of whole populations. In the same way, a court society which conformed to the aristocratic criteria of appearance and display, differed from a bourgeois society more concerned with the physical and demographic strength of peoples. A concentration on purely external appearance changed to a more complex attention to physical resources, to strength, and to hidden forces. Thus the history of bodily cleanliness is also social history.

Finally, the word 'cleanliness' is employed here in a wide sense, as applying to the whole body or to the whole collection of objects capable of standing for it.

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Part I *From water for pleasure to  
water as threat*

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## I. *The water that infiltrated*

In 1546, Barcelona, in the grip of the plague, was no longer receiving provisions. Neighbouring towns and villages, fearing contagion, refused all contacts and all trade. Worse, the ships despatched to Majorca in search of supplies by the Council of the Five Hundred were repulsed with cannon fire.<sup>1</sup> Such episodes became common. At the end of the Middle Ages and in the classical period, contact was widely seen as a major risk in times of epidemic. The traditional flight from infected towns became in itself dangerous; it came up against neighbourhoods capable of open violence. Those people who fled from Lyons in 1628 were stoned by the peasantry, and condemned to rove or return to their city.<sup>2</sup> The inhabitants of Digne, compelled in 1629 by a decree of the Parlement of Aix to remain within the town walls, were put under the surveillance of a cordon of armed guards by the neighbouring communities.<sup>3</sup> They threatened to set fire to the town if the cordon was broken. Cities struck by plague became prisons doomed to horror.

Within these communities temporarily shut in on their awful plight, the external constraints accelerated the formulation of internal regulations if only, here too, in the hope of confining the calamity. Mayors, magistrates and provosts of the merchants issued injunctions dealing with social hygiene; social contacts were progressively limited, certain places shut off or condemned. The Salle Légat of the Hôtel-Dieu in Paris, for example, was isolated in 1584 and made ready to receive only victims of the plague.<sup>4</sup> In many towns notaries could not approach stricken houses; wills were dictated at a distance, before witnesses, from upper storeys.<sup>5</sup> The measures also

<sup>1</sup> J.-N. Biraben. *Les Hommes et la Peste en France et dans les pays européens et méditerranéens* (Paris, 1976), vol. 2, p. 98.

<sup>2</sup> J. Guiart, 'La peste à Lyon au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle', *Biologie médicale*, 5 (1929), p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Biraben, *Les Hommes et la Peste*, vol. 2, p. 167.

<sup>4</sup> M. Brièle, *Document pour servir à l'histoire des hôpitaux de Paris* (Paris, 1883), vol. 2, p. 16. <sup>5</sup> Guiart, 'La peste à Lyon', p. 10.

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dealt with personal hygiene: to suppress social intercourse was to suppress practices which risked opening up the body to infected air, such as violent labour which heated the limbs, warmth which relaxed the skin, and, above all, bathing. Liquid, by its pressure, or even more by its warmth, could open up the pores and heighten the danger. The fight against plague here reveals ideas which are totally remote from our own; water was capable of penetrating the skin, which had implications for practices of cleanliness.

It was this same fear which led people to cease to frequent schools, churches, steam-baths and bath-houses. Contacts, and thus the possibility of infection, had to be limited. In the case of baths, the dynamic of separation related to the very image of the body and its functioning. Doctors, in times of plague from the fifteenth century on, denounced these establishments, where naked bodies rubbed shoulders. 'People already afflicted with contagious diseases'<sup>6</sup> might be the cause of ill-fated mixing. Disease might spread in consequence. 'Steam-baths and bath-houses, I beg you, flee them or you will die.'<sup>7</sup> These regulations were at first tentative. In the plague of 1450, Des Pars called in vain on the Paris magistrates to prohibit steam-baths, but provoked only the wrath of their owners. Their threats were such that he beat a hasty retreat to Tournai.<sup>8</sup> Regular temporary closure during each epidemic nevertheless gradually established itself within the logic of separations. In the sixteenth century, these closures became official and systematic. An ordinance of the provost of Paris, frequently repeated between the plagues of 1510 and 1561, prohibited anyone 'from going to steam-baths, and steam-bath keepers from heating their baths until after next Christmas, on pain of a summary fine'.<sup>9</sup> A similar resolution was passed in more and more towns. It became general; introduced in Rouen in 1510<sup>10</sup> and in Besançon in 1540,<sup>11</sup> it had existed in Dijon since the end of the fifteenth century.<sup>12</sup> In most epidemics, it was during hot weather, more favourable to outbreaks of plague, that the prohibition was promulgated.

<sup>6</sup> N. de Delamare, *Traité de la police* (Paris, 1722, 1st ed. 1698), vol. 1, p. 628.

<sup>7</sup> G. Bunel, *Oeuvre excellente et à chacun désirant soi de peste préserver* (Paris, 1836, 1st ed. 1513), p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> J. Riolan, *Curieuses Recherches sur les écoles de médecine de Paris et de Montpellier* (Paris, 1651), p. 218.

<sup>9</sup> Delamare, *Traité de la police*, vol. 1, p. 628.

<sup>10</sup> L. Boucher, *La Peste à Rouen aux XVI<sup>e</sup> et XVII<sup>e</sup> siècles* (Paris, 1897), p. 26.

<sup>11</sup> M. Limon, *Les Mesures contre la peste à Besançon au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris, 1906), p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> J. Garnier, *Les Etuves dijonnaises* (Dijon, 1867), pp. 28–9.

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## THE WIDE OPEN SKIN

Why should historical significance be attributed to these prohibitions? Because behind the fear of social contacts lurked a host of other anxieties, amongst them fear of the frailty of the bodily shell. The skin was seen as porous, and countless openings seemed to threaten, since the surfaces were weak and the frontiers uncertain. Behind the simple refusal of proximity lay a very specific image of the body: heat and water created openings, the plague had only to slip through. These images were potent and far-reaching, and their consequences for classical hygiene need to be assessed. It is in this context that the prohibitions we have described assume significance. Baths and steam-baths were dangerous because they opened up the body to the atmosphere. They exercised an almost mechanical action on the pores, temporarily exposing the organs to the elements.

It was no longer touch, or a principle of proximity, which was at issue, but a principle of openness. The body had less resistance to poisons after bathing, because it was more open to them. It was as if the body was permeable; infectious air threatened to flood in from all sides. 'Steam-baths and bath-houses should be forbidden, because when one emerges, the flesh and the whole disposition of the body are softened and the pores open, and as a result, pestiferous vapour can rapidly enter the body and cause sudden death, as has frequently been observed.'<sup>13</sup> Comparing the body to familiar objects only reinforced this image of penetration. The architectural metaphor played a central role, with the body seen as a house invaded and occupied by the plague. You had to know how to shut the doors. But water and heat undid them at will, opened them up and maintained the breach. The plague had only to move in. 'Bath-houses and steam-baths will from now on be deserted, because, the pores and the little air holes in the skin being, as a result of the heat, more easily opened, pestilential air gets in.'<sup>14</sup>

This fear lasted throughout the seventeenth century. The plague, breaking out in one place or another almost annually throughout the period, engendered the same prohibitions: to heat the body 'would be to open the doors to the poisons in the atmosphere and swallow it in

<sup>13</sup> A. Paré, *Oeuvres* (Paris, 1585, 1st ed. 1568), p. 56.

<sup>14</sup> N. Houel, *Traité de la peste* (Paris, 1573), p. 16.

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great gulps'.<sup>15</sup> Invariably, such an 'encounter of air and poison'<sup>16</sup> with heated flesh suggested an almost inevitable result. It transformed danger into destiny.

The first concerted actions against the plague, especially from the sixteenth century, thus conjured up a frightening picture of a body with a permeable exterior. Its surface could be penetrated by water and by air, a frontier rendered even more uncertain in the face of an evil whose material basis was invisible. Perhaps the pores were even weak in themselves, independently of being heated. They needed permanent protection from attack. This, for example, rendered the shape and nature of clothing in time of plague all-important: smooth fabrics, dense weave and close fit. Infected air should slide over with no possibility of entry. The ideal of being enclosed varied only in its manifestations. 'One should wear clothes of satin, taffeta, camlet, tabby and the like, with hardly any pile, and which are so smooth and dense that it is difficult for unwholesome air or any sort of infection to enter or take hold, especially if one changes frequently.'<sup>17</sup> Clothing in times of plague confirms this image, dominant throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, of a body which was completely porous, and which necessitated quite specific strategies: the avoidance of wool or cotton, materials which were too permeable, and of furs, whose deep pile offered a haven to unhealthy air. Men and women alike longed to have smooth and hermetically sealed clothes enclosing their weak bodies. And if taffeta and tabby were too grand, the poor could resort to 'sacking and oil-cloth'.<sup>18</sup>

Practices of hygiene and, in particular, practices of cleanliness could not be considered without reference to these assumptions. If water could penetrate the skin, it needed to be handled with care. It could seep in and disturb. In certain cases, as in hydrotherapy, the mechanism might be beneficial. Immersing themselves in the pools of Spa, Pougues or Forges, sixteenth-century bathers confidently expected an amelioration of their diseases. A bath of warm thermal water, like a bath in 'ordinary' water, could, for example, dissolve stone; this was how Montaigne treated his kidney stones.<sup>19</sup> It could

<sup>15</sup> D. Jouysse, *Bref Discours de la préservation et de la cure de la peste* (Amiens, 1668), p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> C. de Rebecque, *Le Médecin français charitable* (Lyon, 1683), p. 608.

<sup>17</sup> F. Citoys, *Avis sur la nature de la peste* (Paris, 1623), p. 20.

<sup>18</sup> J.-J. Manget, *Traité de la peste et des moyens de s'en préserver* (Lyons, 1722), p. 199.

<sup>19</sup> M. de Montaigne, *Journal de voyage en Italie* (Paris, 1974, 1st ed. 1774), pp. 377–8.



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also restore some substance to systems which were 'too dry'. It was employed by Rivière for 'emaciated and wasted bodies'.<sup>20</sup> It also acted on the colour of jaundice, and soothed certain congestions.<sup>21</sup> In these cases, liquids mingled. And lastly, the penetration of the water might even correct certain sour or vicious humours. This treatment 'refreshed far more than any other medicine'.<sup>22</sup>

But for the most part, baths threatened to disturb an equilibrium. They invaded, damaged, and above all, exposed the body to many more dangers than pestilential air. The very earliest observations on steam-baths and the transmission of plague already referred to more obscure dangers. 'Bath-houses and steam-baths and their after-effects, which heat the body and the humours, which debilitate the constitution and open the pores, cause death and sickness.'<sup>23</sup> Disease, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, was spreading, even proliferating. People had disquieting visions of contagious communication, as with syphilis,<sup>24</sup> or visions of the most miscellaneous penetrations, such as steam-bath pregnancies resulting from the impregnation of female sexual organs by sperm floating in the tepid water. 'A woman can conceive through using baths in which men have spent some time.'<sup>25</sup> The risks multiplied. Once infiltrated, the skin was not only wide open to pestilence, but also to unwholesome air, to cold, and to nameless ills. The weakness was diffused, and all the more global and imprecise since it was through the pores that humours and thus strength escaped. The openings worked both ways. It was as if internal substances threatened to flee; thus the 'bath debilitated'.<sup>26</sup> It provoked 'feebleness'.<sup>27</sup> It 'diminished hugely strength and vigour'.<sup>28</sup> The risks were no longer confined simply to contagion. And this picture had sufficient success to spread beyond the discourse of doctors. It was absorbed into thinking to the extent of becoming a commonplace. It was all-pervasive. It became impossible to contemplate a bath without surrounding it with imperative constraints: rest, staying in bed, protective clothing. The

<sup>20</sup> L. Rivière, *Les Pratiques de la médecine* (Lyons, 1682), p. 10.

<sup>21</sup> Rebecque, *Le Médecin français*, p. 419.

<sup>22</sup> Rivière, *Les Pratiques de la médecine*, p. 10.

<sup>23</sup> T. Le Forestier, *Régime contre épidémie et pestilence* (Paris, 1495), p. 102.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. G. Barraud, *L'Humanisme et la Médecine aux XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Brussels, 1942), p. 83.

<sup>25</sup> R. de Graff, *Histoire anatomique des parties génitales de l'homme et de la femme* (Basle, 1699, 1st ed. 1678).

<sup>26</sup> H. de Monteux, *Conservation de santé et Prolongation de la vie* (Paris, 1572), p. 96.

<sup>27</sup> Paré, *Oeuvres*, p. 1154. <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

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practice could not fail to be a source of anxiety. The accumulated precautions and the impossible protections turned it into something both complicated and rare.

When, one May morning in 1610, an emissary from the Louvre found Sully taking a bath in his house at the Arsenal, complications ensued; a series of obstacles prevented Sully, for the sake of his body, from attending on the king, who required his presence. The minister's own entourage, even the emissary himself, adjured him not to brave the outside air. 'Having found you in the bath, and observing that you wished to get out to do as the king ordered, he said to you (because we were nearby): Monsieur, do not quit your bath, since I fear that the king cares so much for your health, and so depends on it, that if he had known that you were in such a situation, he would have come here himself.'<sup>29</sup> Henri IV's envoy proposed to return to the Louvre, he would explain to the sovereign and return with his orders. Not one of the witnesses was surprised to see such a situation disrupt relations between the king and his minister. On the contrary, everyone insisted that Sully should not expose himself. And Henri IV's reply justified the precautions taken. 'Monsieur, the king commands you to complete your bath, and forbids you to go out today, since M. Du Laurens has advised him that this would endanger your health.'<sup>30</sup> So there had been consultation. Advice had been sought and offered. The recourse to Du Laurens, the royal doctor, reveals the nature of the concern. The episode assumed all the aspects of an 'affair'. It immediately involved numerous people, and it was protracted, as the risks lasted several days. 'He orders you to expect him tomorrow in your nightshirt, your leggings, your slippers and your night-cap, so that you come to no harm as a result of your recent bath.'<sup>31</sup> So it was the liquid experienced in this manner which could be harmful. It was the consequences of the bath as such which were at issue.

This commotion over a bathtub was not mere idle tittle-tattle; it emphasises the strength in the seventeenth century of the association between water and the penetration of the body, and it confirms the dominant image of an exterior which was easily permeable. It emphasises also, paradoxically by its very intensity, the rarity of the practice of bathing.

Half a century later, when Louis XIV's doctors decided to bath him,

<sup>29</sup> M. de Sully, *Mémoires* (Paris, 1662), vol. 6, p. 427.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 428.