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As this book attempts to bridge disciplines, I have been fortunate to receive advice and assistance from a variety of people from different backgrounds. More than a decade ago, I became interested in a convent for “repentant prostitutes” (few of whom were actually prostitutes, as it turns out) and how gender, sexuality, and religion intersected in this institution. The convent originated in a hospital for “French disease” (commonly but problematically translated as syphilis) patients. Later I was intrigued by how and why this institution formed part of a response to disease. In order to answer this question, I sought help from within and beyond the field of history: from physicians, epidemiologists, literary scholars, and art historians. Eventually, my interest in disease itself and its relationship to the larger society as it becomes endemic overtook some of my earlier interests.

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