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## **Durer's Mock Blazon of a Nuremberger**

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# Durer's Mock Blazon of a Nuremberger

In memory of my friend Willibald Sauerländer.

Colin Eisler

The artist's birthdate of 1471 came close to that of Europe's first catastrophic Syphilitic epidemic which swept Northward from Italy, causing millions of deaths, devastating popes, kings, and innumerable others. Employed by Nuremberg's medical community, one of Durer's very first woodcuts of ca. 1496 depicts a syphilitic *Landsknecht*, | Fig. 1 | a Northern mercenary responsible for diffusing the disease, then known as *Morbus Gallicus* (Catalogue no. 103, 1496, in: Rainer Schoch, Matthias Mende, and Anna Scher-

baum (eds.), *Albrecht Dürer. Das druckgraphische Werk*, vol. 2, Munich 2002; see also Colin Eisler, Who Is Dürer's "Syphilitic Man", in: *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 52/1, 2009, 48–60.). The young artist's image accompanies a long poem on syphilis written by the great Dutch physician Ulsenius, summoned to advise Nuremberg's Town Council in 1495–98 concerning the best ways to combat the disease's local epidemic (Catharina Geertruida Santing, *Geneeskunde en humanisme. Een intellectuele biografie van Theodericus Ulsenius [c. 1460–1508]*, PhD Diss., Groningen 1992).

Durer, among all his community's many artists, was uniquely close to the leading members of that city's medical profession, many of whose humanistic studies took place in Bologna, Padua, or Pavia. He benefited from consulting their books, manuscripts, prints and drawings as well as anatomical studies and dissection records. These were especially accessible to him in the library of his friend Doctor Hartmann Schedel, who was also the editor of the famous Nuremberg Chronicles, printed by the artist's godfather Anton Koberger in 1493. These learned local medical men comprised the "faculty" of that brilliantly, uniquely self-educated young artist's "university".

A still earlier Durer woodcut may also be devoted to a syphilitic scene. Illustrating a verse from Sebastian Brandt's *Ship of Fools* of 1494 | Fig. 2 | (Schoch/Mende/Scherbaum 2004, vol. 3, 91, image 266.6), it shows a seductive, magnificently winged person wearing a bath house attendant's turban. She probably personifies Venus as Genius of Syphilis. Under her wing is a skeleton symbolizing the fatal consequences of bath house workers' professionally amorous services. A Cleric and a Fool are in the winged woman's thrall, each tied to one of her arms



| Fig. 1 | Albrecht Dürer, The Syphilitic (Der Syphilitiker), 1496. Coloured Woodcut, 40,6 × 29,3 cm (Sheet size). Berlin, Staatl. Museen zu Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett, Ident. Nr. 131-1900 / Jörg P. Anders. Public Domain Mark 1.0



**Fig. 2** | Albrecht Dürer (attr.), Von Buolschafft, from: Sebastian Brant, *Das Narrenschiff*, fol. C1v., cap. 13, Basel 1494. Rainer Schoch, Matthias Mende, and Anna Scherbaum (eds.), *Albrecht Dürer. Das druckgraphische Werk*, vol. 3, Munich 2004, p. 91, fig. 266.6

Cupid, shown below, shoots arrows with his bow, signifying the fatal consequences of venereal disease. Brant's accompanying verse warns his readers of the health hazards of frequenting bathhouses whose attendant prostitutes are harbingers of disease:

Dame Venus I, with rump of straw,  
Fools do regard me oft with awe,  
I draw them toward me with a thrill  
And make a fool of whom I will,  
My clients, who could name them all?  
Whoever's heard of Circe's stall,  
Calypso, famous sirens' bower,  
He knows my skill and knows my power.  
Whoever thinks he's very shrewd |  
In idiot's broth will soon be stewed,  
Whom I decide to wound by stealth  
Through herbs will not regain his health.  
My little son stark blind is he  
Since love-sick swains can never see;  
My son's a child, he never grew,  
For lovers act like children too.  
They seldom speak a serious word,  
Their speech like children's is absurd.  
My son goes naked every day,

Love can't be hid and tucked away;  
Since evil loves are flighty things  
My offspring wears a pair of wings;  
Amours are changeful, fickle e'er,  
There's naught more fitful anywhere;  
And Cupid brings along his bow,  
While round his waist two quivers show.  
In one, barbed arrows he doth bear,  
To shoot the fools who have no care.  
Whom once these sharp gilt barbs do hit,  
Deprived are they of sense and wit,  
They dance about like fools insane.  
The other pouch doth bolts contain,  
They're dull and leaded, hardly light,  
One causes wounds, the other flight.  
Whom Cupid strikes, Amor ignites,  
So that the fire his vitals bites  
And he cannot put out the flame...

[After this line, Brant provides classical and Biblical examples of fatal fruitless love as in Dido, Medea, Theseus, Pasiphae, Nessus, David, Samson, etc.]

Had he not learned love's artistry,  
And more to wisdom's fount would go  
If smitten not with lover's woe.  
Who sees too much of woman's charms  
His morals and his conscience harms;  
He cannot worship God aright  
Who finds in women great delight.  
Clandestine love in every race  
Is foolish, sinful, black disgrace;  
Such love is still more foolish when  
It seizes older wives and men.  
Fool who from love takes inspiration  
And means to practice moderation,  
For wisdom's treasure rich and pure  
Cannot be mingled with amour;  
A lover's oft so blind indeed,  
He thinks no one his loves will heed.  
Such folly I can but deride,  
This dunce cap's pasted to his hide.  
(Sebastian Brant, Verse 13: Of Amours, in: *The Ship of Fools*, trans. Edwin Zeydel, Newburyport 2012, 88–91).





**| Fig. 3 |** Albrecht Dürer, The lion coat of arms with the rooster (*Das Löwenwappen mit dem Hahn*), ca. 1502/03. Engraving, 19,7 × 13,3 cm. Karlsruhe, Staatl. Kunsthalle, Kupferstichkabinett, Inv.nr. I 870 ➔

Though Durer designed many heraldic woodcuts, only two large, engraved blazons came from his hand. (For Durer's heraldic woodcuts, see: Schoch/Mende/Scherbaum 2002, vol. 2. For Durer's heraldic imagery, see Ottfried Neubecker, *Heraldik zwischen Waffenpraxis und Wappengraphik: Wappenkunst bei Dürer und zu Dürers Zeit*, Nuremberg 1971.) One of these, a "generic" design of ca. 1502/3 was devised for ready adaptation by any Nurnberg resident or artisan since it featured the closed helmet characteristic of that city (*Das Löwenwappen mit dem Hahn*, in: Schoch/Mende/Scherbaum 2001, vol. 1, 101). **| Fig. 3 |** The print is accompanied by two symbols of watchfulness and militance, a rooster and a lion, its shield enclosed by a decorative flourish of mantling. A second

engraving, also limited to Nuremberg use, again featuring a closed helmet, shows a Wildman, a Nuremberg maiden in dance dress and a prominent skull (*Das Wappen mit dem Totenkopf*, 1503, engraving, in: Schoch/Mende/Scherbaum 2001, vol. 1, 106).

Now in Rotterdam's Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, a Durer drawing **| Fig. 4 |**, usually dated between the 1490s and 1506, bears obvious resemblances to the format and style of his engraved Nuremberg blazon with rooster and lion, though now humorous and expressive in its spontaneous graphism (*Coat of Arms with a Man by a Stove*, 1493, drawing, in: Walter L. Strauss, *The Complete Drawings of Albrecht Dürer*, vol. 1, 1471–1499, New York 1974, 178). The shield is centered upon a grimacing youth seated alongside a hot tile stove. It is inscribed with two German



**| Fig. 4 |** Albrecht Dürer, Coat of Arms with a Pelican and a Boy Leaning on a Stove, 1490/94. Drawing, Pen and Ink, 230 × 185 mm. Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans van Beuningen ➔



words “Hitze oho!” (“What a heat!”) as if quoting the young man’s pained reaction to receiving the stove’s extreme warmth. Such exposure to heat, often from hot mercury, was a popular therapy for syphilis in Durer’s days (Tanya von Hunnius, *Applying Skeletal. Histological and Molecular Techniques to Syphilitic Skeletal Remains from the Past*, PhD Diss., Hamilton 2004<sup>7</sup>; see also Franjo Gruber, Jasna Lipozenčić, and Tatjana Kehler, History of venereal diseases from antiquity to the renaissance, in: *Acta Dermatovenologica Croatica* 23/1, 2015, 1–11; Hannah Saunders Murphy, *Reforming Medicine in Sixteenth Century Nuremberg*, PhD Diss., Berkeley 2012, chapter 2, 57–87). Since a closed helmet rests on Rotterdam’s blazon, the shield may pertain to a recent Nuremberg epidemic.

Though traditionally associated with piety, fertility and Christian extremes of self-sacrifice, Rotterdam’s “pelican” is monstrously caricatured, all too evidently a vicious bird, no pelican. Perched upon that city’s characteristic closed helmet, it too may herald some dismal local event or epidemic. The city had already built or enlarged its Holy Cross Hospital to accommodate the innumerable syphilis victims streaming into the city among crusaders, soldiers and those infected by them (Karl Sudhoff, Die ersten Maßnahmen der Stadt Nürnberg gegen die Syphilis in den Jahren 1496 und 1497: Aktenstudien, in: *Archiv für Dermatologie und Syphilis* 116/1, 1913, 1–30).

Rotterdam’s drawing was most recently published by Thomas Schauerte as a caricatural blazon (*Waffen-capriccio*) of ca. 1497, depicting the Leipzig humanist printer Konrad Kachelofen. Schauerte’s identification was based upon that author’s name signifying “Tile Oven.” (For a consideration of the role of tile-ovens in Nuremberg and their relationship to medical treatments, see Sasha Handley, Perilous possessions: Kachelöfen in Renaissance Nuremberg, in: Edward H. Wouk and Jennifer Spinks (eds.), *Albrecht Dürer’s Material World*, Manchester 2023, 23f.) Kachelofen was the great German humanist Conrad Celtis’ earliest publisher (see Schauerte, Prolog – Hinter dem Ofen, in: Id., *Dürer & Celtis. Die Nürnberger Poeten-*

*schulen im Aufbruch*, Munich 2015, 24, 25, 29 for his identification of the drawing’s subject with the Leipzig humanist and publisher Kachelofen, who, though predominantly publishing theological texts, issued Celtis’ *Ars versificandi et carminum* of 1486). Schauerte found Durer’s drawing to represent a vital tribute “zum deutschen Humanismus in seiner Hochblüte und zu deren Leitfigur, dem gekrönten Dichter und allen gegenwärtigen Kulturpolitiker Konrad Celtis” [to German humanism in its Golden Age, and to its leading figure, the poet laureate and contemporary cultural-leader Celtis]. (Schauerte 2015, 20) The German scholar’s recent identification of the blazon central figure as Kachelofen is open to question since the drawing caricatures a young Nuremberg (as indi-



**Fig. 5 |** Albrecht Dürer, *The Dream of the Doctor* (*Der Traum des Doktors*), ca. 1498. Engraving, 18,9 × 11,9 cm. New York, Metropolitan Museum, Nr. 19.73.87<sup>8</sup>



**| Fig. 6 |** Albrecht Dürer, Self-portrait as a nude (Selbstbildnis als Akt), 1520 (?). Pen and brush in black, heightened in white, 29,5 × 15,5 cm. Weimar, Schlossmuseum, Inv.nr. KK 106 [↗](#)

cated by the shield's closed helmet) syphilitic in the throes of extremely painful yet common therapy for his disease. Employment of that mineral for skin afflictions was already prescribed in Antiquity.

Despite Schauerte's mistaken linkage of the Durer page to Kachelofen, it does have an indirect association with Celtis. That great scholar and Neo-Latin poet was also one of his nation's best-known syphilitics along with Germany's hero, the knight Ulrich von Hutten and Maximilian's poet and physician specializing in syphilis, Joseph Grunpeck. Both the latter and von Hutten published optimistic accounts of treatments for that venereal disease. Since syphilis was a sign of social superiority, not sin (as noted by Erasmus, himself its victim) there was seldom any stigma attached to the disease unless accompanied by poverty, sterility, or disfigurement.

The same reference to syphilis' therapy and its painful cure found in the Dutch drawing is also made in Durer's engraving mistakenly entitled *The Doctor's*

*Dream* of circa 1498. **| Fig. 5 |** Here an upper-class, well-dressed man seated alongside a stove is seen curing his syphilis while dreaming of the beautiful nude (Venus Fortuna?) shown in the foreground, she his ailment's cause. Her son Cupid, to the left, on stilts, plays near an orb – among Fortune's symbols. A devil's bellows inflate the sleeping man with Venus Fortuna's tempting image.

Thanks to his impressive familiarity with the literary correspondence of Nuremberg's humanists, the prominent German (later American) art historian Oskar Hagen (1888–1957) recognized Durer's engraving as depicting Renaissance syphilis therapy as described in a letter of September 8, 1506 by Martin Behaim, the great Nuremberg cartographer, a fellow sufferer from that disease who commissioned his own blazon from Durer (Oskar Hagen, *Eine literarische Parallele zu Dürers Traum des Doktors* (B. 37), in: *Kunstchronik* N.F. 28/39, 1916–17, 453–456; William M. Ivins, *Notes on Three Dürer Woodblocks*, in: *Metropolitan Museum Studies* 2/1, 1929, 102–111).

Unfortunately, Hagen's insight led him to a mistaken conclusion, that the *Doctor's Dream* portrayed none other than Willibald Pirckheimer. Though both a syphilitic and Durer's closest friend and lover, there is no physiognomic resemblance whatever between the man in the print and Pirckheimer's many images. Since the Boijmans blazon depicts a diseased man, it need also be noted that this subject was painfully close to its artist. Durer also contracted syphilis, purchasing costly medication for its treatment in Antwerp in 1520 (Martin W. Conway, *Durer's Visit to the Netherlands*, in: *Fortnightly* 62/369, 1897, 358–367). Its symptoms are displayed in an unsparingly candid self-portrait of that year, found in one of his finest works (Weimar, Schlossmuseum). **| Fig. 6 |** It was on the basis of this drawing that Reinhard F. Timken-Zinkann diagnosed Durer with suffering from syphilis (Medical aspects of the art and life of Albrecht Dürer [1471–1528], in: *Proceedings of the XXIII<sup>rd</sup> international congress of the history of medicine*, vol. 2, London 1972, 870–875). Durer was to die of that ailment in 1528, aged fifty-seven.