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## Rheticus' Poem “Concerning the Beer of Breslau and the Twelve Signs of the Zodiac”

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Jesse Krai

**Abstract.** Georg Joachim Rheticus (1514-1574) was central to the development and popularization of Copernicus' heliocentric theory. He is most well known for the first published account of the theory, the *Narratio Prima*, in 1539, and his persuasion in obtaining Copernicus' manuscript, *De Revolutionibus* (1543), for publication. Rheticus' poem 'Concerning the Beer of Breslau and the Twelve Signs of the Zodiac', written circa 1542, sheds light on two aspects of Rheticus' early involvement with the heliocentric theory. The poem helps us understand the approach to astrology which would prove decisive in Rheticus' acceptance of the heliocentric theory and offers a glimpse into Rheticus' association with Wittenberg's controversial group of young poets. This relationship significantly injured Rheticus' career and the heliocentric theory in turn.

Georg Rheticus' poem 'Concerning the Beer of Breslau and the Twelve Signs of the Zodiac', written around 1542, has never been translated or discussed at any length. Past scholars have dismissed it as unaesthetic and judged it unworthy of further attention.<sup>1</sup> This oblivion is shared by the entire genre of humanistic poetry to which it belonged - even though its popularity flourished on both sides of the religious divide in its own era. Perhaps our problem consists in our inability to swallow the lude style and its violent sexual imagery. This brash style, however, was hardly a humanist invention; it followed an ancient example and Ovid in particular.

A leading exponent of this new genre helped Rheticus put his poem into verse. Kaspar Brusch (1518-1557) achieved notoriety early with his *Progymnasta*, written by the author in his eighteenth year (1538) and became a central member of this group of young poets living in Protestant Germany. The future poeta laureatus published Rheticus' poem in his *Sylvarum* in 1544.<sup>2</sup> The remaining members of the group, Georg Sabinus (1508-1560),<sup>3</sup> Simon Lemnius (1511-1550),<sup>4</sup> Michael Toxites (1514-1581),<sup>5</sup> Johannes Stigel (1515-1562), Melchior Acontius (1515-1569) and Mathias Flacius (1520-1575), were all associated with

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#### 4 Rheticus' Poem Concerning the 'Beer of Breslau'.

Wittenberg and Rheticus in some way. The group only survived under the protection and guidance of Phillip Melanchthon. Rheticus' association with the young poets seems especially natural as Melanchthon was also Rheticus' ardent supporter.

The premise of Rheticus' poem is simple and elegant. The patroness of the harvest of grains, and hence beer, Ceres, is identified and rhymed with the first sign of the Zodiac, Aries. The path of the particularly strong beer of Breslau, to which Ceres personally attends, through the human body is then compared to the chain of events Aries sets into motion. We begin with the rowdiness and belligerence inspired by the war signs Aries, Taurus and Gemini. Yet our drinkers cannot persist indefinitely in such a manner and must be checked. This is achieved through the stern authority of the Crab, the Lion and the Virgin. Here however, at the middle of the Zodiac, things begin to fall apart when the Balance has a spat with his wife Arachne the weaver. Scorpion can't stand such whining nor the tribute which Bacchus and his kin receive. He engages in open revolt!

Matters take a surreal turn for our drinkers in Sagittarius. An ox - where does he come from? - struggles like a tired drinker to make it to his bed, striking his head against the doorposts. Then an adopted pig appears in Capricorn whose bodily contents take an unfortunate direction after she finally prostrates herself on the sought-after couch. The drinkers' final action clearly lies with the water signs Aquarius and Pisces. Beer, in particular the beer of Breslau, was a common source of inspiration for Germany's young humanists. Johannes Mathias Wacker (1550-1619) would later write Concerning the Beer of Breslau.<sup>6</sup> As in Rheticus' poem, the beer is said to be brewed 'with the little dog'. The attribution of the potency of a particular city's beer to the peculiar powers of a certain animal was not uncommon. Rheticus' friend Johannes Stigel wrote an elegy entitled 'The Sheep of Halle' whose beginning lines read:

Waves crash over the city from the blue depths of the Salle  
who takes her name from the salt sources of the Halle.  
There the fawning Ceres is changed into a sheep,  
Who would believe that it happens as I sing it?  
The soft seeds are mixed with the resplendent corn,  
the liquid humour of pure water tempers the mixture.  
A lumpy mass arises; the kneader whirls this into a subject dignified,  
and then he makes little cakes with an experienced hand.  
These then rise with the permeating vapour as if by purpose driven,

as the sweet water swells a spongy coat arises.  
 And as they attain the shape of the prostrate sheep  
 the little darlings take their name from the sheep of Halle.<sup>7</sup>

Yet Rheticus' intentions in composing his poem go beyond a simple fanciful elegy of the peculiar effects of the beer of Breslau. Rheticus was interested in refounding astrology as the concrete mathematical science he believed it had been in Egyptian antiquity. As such, Copernicus' new mathematical description of the universe opened a vast chance for reclaiming those ancient truths. In particular, if a mathematical astrology could be built upon the heliocentric model then Copernicus must have rediscovered an ancient truth. For Rheticus a true mathematical science of the stars stood in stark contrast to the newfangled loose associative images of the European astrology of the Middle Ages. It is this astrology, still pervasive in the sixteenth century, that Rheticus mocks in the poem. It is a facile astrology whose associations grip the imagination with its strange demons and premonitions. In Rheticus' eyes this is a science of obscure truths - much like the truths experienced by our drinkers of the beer of Breslau! Rheticus expresses this condemnation of the new astrologers in the final lines of the poem. The impetuosity of the new astrologers' quest for an easy system and their inebriation is seen in their desire to trump the sun - the center of the universe.<sup>8</sup>

Our poem is composed in elegiac couplets. The rhyme scheme runs:

- -or- \_\_? - - or - \_\_? - - or - \_\_? - - or - \_\_? - - or - \_\_? - -  
 - - or - \_\_? - - or - \_\_? - ?- - or - \_\_? - \_\_? \_

where '-' represents a long syllable and '\_' a short syllable. As an example, the rhyme scheme of the first couplet is:

- \_\_? - \_\_? - - ? - \_\_? - \_\_? - -  
 - \_\_? - \_\_? - ? - \_\_? - \_\_? - -

### I. Latin Text

#### **De XII. Signis Zodiaci ac Cerevisia Vratislaviensi apud Silesios quae dicitur Schoppo iocus doctissimi mathematici Georgii Joachimi Rhetici versu redditus a Bruschio in gratiam et Aurifabri.**

##### I

Nobilis in veteri iacet urbs regione Quadorum,  
Sidere sub gelido, Parrhasis Ursa, tuo.  
Haec quia Sarmaticis paullo est vicinior oris,  
Forte Vratislavio à Principe nomen habet.  
Moenibus ac munita polos tangentibus altos,  
Nulli urbi cedit, Teutonis ora, tuae.  
Illic grata Ceres fieri solet, horrea postquam  
Ac lupulum purae miscuit humor aquae.  
Non est Saxoniae liquor aptior: omnibus horis  
Arctoo quae cum sidere sicca, sitit.  
Ista Ceres, Aries turba appellatur ab omni  
atque aptum a signo principe nomen habet.  
Nam velut ille trahens animalia plurima post se  
Zodiacum in supra conficit arce suum:  
Sic liquor humano solet ille in corpore totum  
Zodiacum recte constituisse suum.  
Nam velut ille lacessitus fecit undique cornu  
Monstrat & adversa praelia fronte minax:  
Primus & in toto signorum hoc ordine secum  
Accipit arbitrio caetera signa suo:  
Sic etiam illa Ceres hominis rapit omnia membra,  
Sauciat atque manus, sauciat atque pedes:  
Atque omnes sensus oculos perstringit & aures,  
Ne faciant munus pesque manusque suum.

##### II

Ac velut hunc sequitur metuendo corpore Taurus,  
Fronte hirsuta Hyades humida signa gerens:  
Sic quos illa Ceres nimis abluit intus, ubique  
In tauros etiam degenerare solent.  
Fronte petunt, veluti duplici fera bestia cornu;  
Et quos contingunt aspiciuntque viros.

Atque Hyades veluti pluvias inducere largas,  
 Quae sunt in Tauri sidera fronte, solent:  
 Sic etiam tandem pluuias effundit & imbres,  
 Quem taurum semel hic effecit ipse liquor.  
 Cumque ita fronte petit quoscunque vir ebrius ille,  
 Tum facile rixas excitat ille graues.  
 Dum vocat hos asinos, alio illos nomine stultos,  
 Atque alios aliis intonant usque modis.  
 Donec & in barbam crinesque ipsi inuolat alter,  
 Qui quoque non adeo sobrietate valet.  
 Tum sic noster habet post tauri signa furentis

## III

Zodiacus geminos Tyndaridasque suos.  
 Dumque illi duo se per mutua vulnera laedunt;  
 Involvunt avidas crinibus usque manus;  
 Et nunc sese illuc, nunc huc in pulvere versant,  
 et verrunt totis vestibus omne solum:

## IV

Dicere te poteris cancrum vidisse rubentum:  
 Namque ea retrograda est plurima imago ferae.  
 Hos ubi percipit & clamores atque tumultus,  
 Qui Cererem talem vendit in aede sua,  
 Advolat ille citus, vaginaque eripit ensem,  
 Corripit aut avida grandia scamna manu:  
 Hac dirimit lites, animo iubet esse benigno,  
 Irarumque iubet ponere quicquid adest:  
 Potores addit rixosos neutiquam amare  
 Se, sed concordi qui pietate bibant:  
 Se paci ac Cereri non irae odiisve malorum,  
 Vel sua Mavorti tecta sacrasse truci:  
 Hos altercantes qui sic compescuit ambos,  
 Hunc recte Libycam dixeris esse feram.

## V

Haec ferventia erunt Nemecaei signa Leonis;  
 Vicinus quibus Seirius esse solet.  
 Hunc aetate gravem tali & sermone timendum;  
 Iam metuit toto pectore uterque virum.

Ergo silent atque arrectis stant auribus ambo,  
Et redit ad mensas ebria turba suas.  
Pax fit ubique; domum complentque silentia totam:

VI

Paxque haec Astreae virginis ora notat.  
Quae Saturni habitans pacatas tempore terras,  
Coelestes adiit sub Jove pulsa lares:  
Hospitis audita iam duricieque minisque  
Ac sermone gravi pergit uterque domum.  
Dumque per amplarum spatiat strata viarum<sup>17</sup>  
Alter, & augusti per spacia ampla fari,  
Nunc his nunc illis inclanans partibus aedes;  
Nunc has, nunc illas denotat esse suas.  
Si tot haberet & is, quot nutu denotat; esset,  
Roma vetus, Crasso ditior ille tuo.

VII

Hunc igitur Libram si dixeris esse bilancem,  
Iudicium poterit carpere nemo tuum.  
Hic longos ubi post cursus sua tecta subintrat,  
Ac recipit dominum regia parva suum.  
Ingreditur penetrare domus, titubansque subinde  
Fabula fit pueris risus & ille suis.  
Uxor Arachnaeas diducens sedula lanas,  
Hauserat insipidas sobria semper aquas.  
Vix etiam se pane domi bene paverat atro;  
Auxerat & parvae commoda parva domus.  
Haec ubi conspexit temulenti signa mariti,  
Vocibus hunc lacerat protinus illa suis.  
Ac tractat duris nimium sermonibus ipsum;  
Iam taurum, mox & clamitat esse suem.  
Iam furem dicit, modo latronemque procumque  
Nuncque hos nunc illos increpat ore Deos.

VIII

Scorpius hac certe dominatur in ordinis arce,  
Ac, nisi me fallit mens mea, scepra tenet.  
Ille furoris ita impatiens, ut plenus Iacchi  
Ac Cereris donis atque utriusque Dei,

Corripit ex digitis vetulae; quae proxima sedit,  
Lanificae fortem Palladiumque colum,  
Coniugis hanc mox impingit latrantis in ora,  
Concutiens faciem, concutiensque caput.

IX

Semimarisque colum hanc si dixeris esse sagittam  
Herois, puto te dicere vera nimis.  
Tandem ubi pertaesum est rixarum, ultricis & irae,  
Claudicat ad thalum bos penetrabile sui.  
Dumque fores humiles erecta fronte subintrat,  
Incutit aduersis postibus ecce caput.  
Moxque iterum nunc huic lateri, nunc incidit illi;  
Ipsis parietibus praelia saeva movens.  
Et quamquam dudum caput omni parte laboret,  
Cogitur illud adhuc vulnera ferre tamen,  
Idque genus belli gemini post signa tyranni,

X

Zodiaco in nostro sic Capricornus erit.  
Aedem ubi se deinceps sponda propiore locauit,  
Mollibus & plumis sus adoptera iacet  
Epotos crudosque eructans ore liquores;  
Euomit & potus euomit atque cibus:

XI

Udus ita ingentes effundit Aquarius amnes;  
Zodiacus finem sic prope noster habet.  
Fluctibus ille suis toto & circumdatus omne

XII

Iam natat in mediis Piscis avarus aquis.  
Finis adest operi: fesso date vina Poetae;  
Ut solis madidus discat & ille viam.  
Id cupida versato manu noctesque diesque  
Tempore quisquis amat noscere signa breui:  
Sedulus & versato merum, versato Lyaeum,<sup>21</sup>  
Nataque Eleusinas saepius udus aquas.  
Sic ipso fies Hyperione<sup>22</sup> promptior olim,  
Ac celerem hac vinces commoditate Deum.



10 Rheticus' Poem Concerning the 'Beer of Breslau'.

Ille duodenis percurrit mensibus illud  
Immensum spacium, quod Iouis aula capit.  
Tu poteris quocumque die hos implere labores,  
Atque ita Zodiacum constituisse tuum.

## II. Translation

**The Twelve Signs of the Zodiac and the Silesian Beer of Breslau, called schöpps,<sup>9</sup> a farce by the learned mathematician George Joachim Rheticus, brought to verse by Bruschi with the help of Aurifaber.<sup>10</sup>**

I  
The renowned city lies in ancient Quadic lands<sup>11</sup>  
under your cold star, Ursa Major.  
Close to the climes of the Pollocks  
She takes her name from strong prince Vratislav.  
Fortified ramparts bound to high towers  
She yields to no city, the border of the Teutons, yours.<sup>12</sup>  
There the agreeable Ceres tends when the dew of pure water  
brews the little dog into the beer grains.  
There is not a better beer in Saxony: in all hours of the night  
beholden to the dry star doth it thirst.  
This Ceres, by all called wild Aries,  
takes her becoming name from that first sign.  
For just as he creates his Zodiac in its high arc  
by dragging many animals in his wake,  
So too will that liquor its own complete Zodiac  
in the human body create.  
And just as Aries charges with both horns when aroused<sup>13</sup>  
and menacingly points to the onerous battles ahead,  
first in his order grand  
the other signs abide his command:  
So too does that Ceres lay waste to all the limbs of man,  
and wrecks the hands and wrecks the feet,  
she strangles all the senses, the eyes, the ears,  
hands and feet their office cannot complete.

II

And just as the bull follows him with body frightful,  
bearing the humid omens of the shaggy Hyades out in front,  
So too does that Ceres baptize men to their very core,  
and they degenerate everywhere into bulls.  
They charge! Just like wild beasts with two horns;  
And they meet men and stare them down.  
And just as the Hyades will bring forth profuse rains,  
being the omens at the head of the bull,  
So does this liquor finally pour forth rains and showers,  
yielding the bull in his full glory.  
It doesn't matter whom the drunken man charges,  
he easily unleashes a terrible brawl.  
He calls some asses, others fools by an appellation stronger,  
many ways do they have to thunder each other down without pause,  
until he tangles the accosted up to his beard and hair,<sup>14</sup>  
nor does the victim particularly sober seem.  
Following the omens of the furious bull

III

Our Zodiac finds its Gemini and Tyndarids.<sup>15</sup>  
While these two injure one another with mutual wounds  
they entangle themselves with lustful hands up to their beards,  
now hither now thither, they beat one another to bits,  
And brush the entire ground clear in full attire.

IV

You will be able to say that you have seen Cancer red as blood,  
for his image contains many backward beasts.  
Where he perceives those cries and shouts,  
he praises strong Ceres in his house,  
He quickly hastens and rips his sword from his sheath  
violently seizing the grand thrones with eager hand.  
With this he frustrates the fight, he commands the soul to be calm,  
he orders that something fill the place of the rages.  
He adds that the roudy drinkers are not to make love,  
they should rather drink in concord and piety.  
His house is consecrated by peace and Ceres, not by rage  
nor the hatreds of the bad, nor by the savage Mars.  
He who restrains both quarellers

You will thus rightly say to be an African beast.

V

The glowing omens will be those of the Nemean<sup>16</sup> Lion  
near to which Sirius will tend.

His weighty manhood and deep voice call forth dread,  
the entire breast of both men now pants with fear.  
Both fall silent and stand with ears attentive,  
and the bedrunk madness returns to their tables.  
Peace rings forth in every quarter and silence fills the house.

VI

And this peace distinguishes itself in the region of the virgin Astraea<sup>18</sup>  
who lived in peaceful lands in the time of Saturn.  
But the Heavens swayed under Jupiter and she was beaten down to a  
household god.

The rumours of the hostess are now hard and foreboding.  
But both proceed through the house amidst its grave speech,  
and whilst one walks through spacious cobbled roads,  
Does the other ambulate through the open space of the august mew  
yelling 'home!' to one place then 'home!' to another.  
Stalking these parts, then those as his very own.  
Were he to have everything and that which he claims at a nod  
then, old Rome, he would be more wealthy than your Crassus!

VII

Thus if you call the balance Libra  
no one will be able to doubt your judgment.  
Here, where after long journeys he steals into his abode,  
and the little court receives its master,  
he comes to the heart of the house, staggering and stammering  
he tells a tale to his boys and laughs.  
His wife Arachne assiduously spins wool,  
sober, she always drinks tasteless waters.  
And as he feasted well on bread in the dark house  
the small house and its little creature comforts grew.  
Perceiving these tokens of her drunken husband's presence  
she gives him an incessant tongue-lashing,  
and talks him down with her hard speeches.  
Once a bull, he now yells that he is a pig.

He says he is a thief, that he is only a bandit and a wooer.  
His lips reproach now these gods, now those.

VIII

Scorpio reigns strong over this arc of the order,  
and, if my mind does not falter, he bears a sceptre.  
Bursting with fury and madness, the bounty  
of gifts Bacchus, Ceres and their friends receive!  
He seizes the strong distaff<sup>19</sup> and the Palladium<sup>20</sup> from the fingers  
of the old lady, the old weaver sitting nigh!  
He now slugs the woman with the ranting husband in the mouth,  
smashing the face, and smashing the head.

X

And if you say that the arrow of the hero  
is the distaff of the manhorse, I believe you speak very truly.  
Finally, when the brawls, the venging and the rage grow old  
the ox will stumble back to his innermost chamber.  
And as he steals through its humble doors with an erect back  
Lo! His head slams against the opposing posts.  
And now again! His head slams against this side, then that,  
engaging in fierce battles with his own walls.  
And although his head has labored long with every part of the home  
does he only now realize that it can indeed injure.  
And as the origin of the war, the Gemini, follows upon the omens of a  
tyrant,

X

so does Capricorn now arise in our Zodiac.  
She brought herself to the house to be close to the couch,  
and the little adopted pig throws herself upon its soft feathers,  
spewing forth crude drinks and fluids,  
she vomits the drinks and she vomits the fare.

XI

Wet, Aquarius lets loose great streams,  
our Zodiac is nearing its end.  
Completely and utterly engulfed in his flowings,

## XII

covetous Pisces swims amidst the waters.  
The work has reached its end, give the tired poet wine!  
So that he too might learn the path of the sun wet.  
You likewise desire to learn the signs, the days and the nights  
in a short period of time with a keen lustful hand.  
Seated twisting in wine, twisting in Bacchus,  
Wet, Eleusian waters are often born.  
And so you shall now be more prepared for the Sun  
and you will conquer the swift God in this proportion:  
He runs through that immense space in twelve months  
which embraces the palace of Jupiter,  
You will be able to fulfill these labours on whatever day,  
And thus is thine Zodiac to be constituted.

## References

- 1.'The poem isn't exactly aesthetically pleasing': K.H. Burmeister, *Georg Joachim Rheticus*, 1968, vol. I, p. 88; 'This poem is really not very aesthetic. One can confidently consign it to the category of gross humanism - and then forget it as quickly as possible'. J. Hoppman, *Astrologie der Reformationszeit*, 1998, p. 130.
2. Sylvarum Gasparis Bruschi Slaccenvaldensis Liber, in *Lipsensi Schola scriptus & aeditus*. Anno Christi, M.D.XLIII, Leipzig 1544.
3. Son-in-law of Melanchthon, Sabinus was the eldest of the group, the most successful, and in many ways its leader.
4. Rheticus' most problematic association: Lemnius fled Wittenberg in 1538 after publishing two scandalous books of epigrams which poked fun at important Protestant figures. He was then supported by important Catholic figures in his further attacks on Luther and his inner circle. Cf. J. Kraai, *Rheticus' Heliocentric Providence*, dissertation Heidelberg, 2001, p. 71-77.
5. See the excellent biography by C. Schmidt, *Michael Schütz genannt Toxites: Leben eines Humanisten und Arztes aus dem 16. Jahrhundert*, 1888. Toxites was later crowned poeta laureatus.

6. Printed in *Amphitheatrum Sapientiae Socraticae*, 1619, p. 728. Wacker was an advisor to the Bishop of Breslau. The map of Thomas More's Utopia is dedicated to him.

7. The Latin original of Stigel's poem may be found in Caspar Dornavius' *Amphitheatrum Sapientiae Socraticae*, 1619, p. 727.

8. For more concerning Rheticus' appreciation of Copernicus' work see J. Kraai, 'Rheticus' Heliocentric Providence', dissertation Heidelberg 2001.

9..The Grimm Wörterbuch identifies schöpps or scheps as a beer once brewed in Breslau. It was said to be strong, heavy and fatty.

10. Rheticus probably met Andreas Aurifaber (1514-1559) during his trip north to meet Copernicus. At that time Aurifaber worked as the rector of the Latin school St. Maria in Elbing. Aurifaber would move to Wittenberg in 1542 and become heavily involved with Luther and the religious movement of Andreas Osiander. Aurifaber was not a poet. His most likely involvement in the production of the poem would be his knowledge of the beer of his home town Breslau.

11.The Quadi were a Germanic tribe who settled on the Main in 57 B.C. They then moved to the Maehren which is the area referred to in the poem.

12. 'Yours' seems purposefully ambiguous in the Latin. Simply dangling at the end of the pentameter it would mean 'Your German city': also possible, however, is 'she cedes to no city of yours'.

13. The constellation of Aries was said to have horns 'Aries cum cornibus'.

14. 'Barba crinesque' means both 'beards and hair' as well as 'comets and falling stars'.

15. The relation of the gemini, Castor and Pollux, to Tyndareus may be seen in Apollodorus, *Library and Epitome*, 3.10.7: 'But Zeus in the form of a swan consorted with Leda, and on the same night Tyndareus cohabited with her; and she bore Pollux and Helen to Zeus, and Castor and Clytaemnestra to Tyndareus.' (trans. J.G. Frazer).

16. Nemea was an open valley on the northern borders of the Argolid, in the territory of Cleonae. It was the scene of Heracles' encounter with the lion, and of the Nemean Games.

16 Rheticus' Poem Concerning the 'Beer of Breslau'.

17. Both of the 'ia' diphthongs in this line must be pronounced short, suggesting a slurred drunkenness.

18. Goddess of justice who left the earth in the iron age. She was placed among the stars under the name Virgo.

19. A distaff is a cleft stick holding wool or flax wound for spinning by hand. In a metonymical sense, the distaff in our poem could also be read as 'the thread spun'.

20. An ancient sacred image of Pallas (Athena), said to have been sent down from heaven by Zeus to Dardanus, the founder of Troy, or to his descendent Ilus. It was believed that the protection of the city depended on its safe custody. Greek legend told that Diomedes and Odysseus, at the instigation of Calchas or Helenus, carried off the Paladium and thus made the sack of Troy possible.

21. Lyaeus has three interrelated meanings: 1) 'relaxer' or the 'deliverer from care', 2) wine, and 3) Bacchus.

22. A Titan, husband of his sister Theia and father by her of the Sun, Moon, and the Dawn (Hes. Theog. 371ff., cf. 134f.). The name is often used as an epithet for the sun himself, as in *Odyssey* 12. 133.