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LUCAS CRANACH'S CUPID AS HONEY THIEF PAINTINGS: ALLEGORIES OF SYPHILIS?

Mark W. Eberle*

Between 1527 and approximately 1537, Lucas Cranach the Elder and his bustling workshop in Wittenberg produced eleven paintings¹ illustrating an ancient Greek epigram:

A cruel bee once stung the thievish Love-god as he was
stealing honey from the hives, and pricked all his fingertips.
And he was hurt, and blew upon his hand, and stamped and

* I would like to acknowledge the helpful suggestions given me by my friends Bill Marks, Lois Nagamine and John Brittnacher in the writing of this paper.

¹ The following list gives the title, date of completion, location and a reference for each of Cranach's honey thief paintings. In each case the reference is the source of information.

- 1) *Venus and Cupid as Honeythief* (1527) Landesmuseum, Schwerin. Heinrich Lilienfein, *Lukas Cranach und Seine Zeit* (Bielefeld: Velhagen und Klasing, 1942), pl. 102.
- 2) *Venus and Cupid as Honeythief* (1531) Galleria Borghese, Rome. Lilienfein, pl. 103.
- 3) *Venus and Cupid Stealing Honey* (1530) Robert Lehman Collection, New York. Pierre Descargues, *Cranach* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1961), p. 59.
- 4) *Venus with Cupid Stung by a Bee* (ca. 1530) Baron de Rothschild Collection, Paris. Descargues, p. 54.
- 5) *Cupid Complaining to Venus* (ca. 1530) National Gallery, London. Michael Levey, *The Nude* (London: The National Gallery, 1972), pl. 15. This painting is reproduced below, p. 23.
- 6) *Venus with Cupid as Honeythief* (1531) Private Collection, Frankfurt a.M. H. Kuenzel, *Lucas Cranach der Ältere* (Munich: Sudwest Verlag, 1968), p. 40.
- 7) *Venus* (n.d.) Kunsthistorisches Museum, Genf. Kuenzel, p. 37.
- 8) *Venus with Cupid as Honeythief* (1530) Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen. Max J. Friedländer and Jakob Rosenberg, *Die Gemälde von Lucas Cranach* (Berlin: Deutscher Verein für Kunstwissenschaft, 1932), pl. 202.
- 9) *Venus with Cupid as Honeythief* (after 1537) Kaiser Friedrich Museum, Berlin. Friedländer and Rosenberg, pl. 319.
- 10) *Venus with Cupid as Honeythief* (after 1537) Kröller Collection, Den Haag. Friedländer and Rosenberg, pl. 320.
- 11) *Venus with Cupid as Honeythief* (after 1537) Frau v. Cranach Collection, Berlin. Friedländer and Rosenberg, pl. 321.

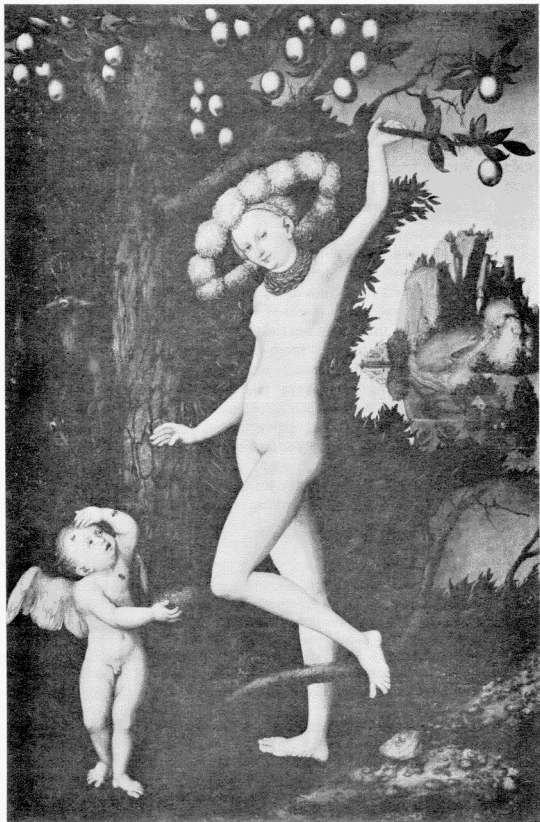
danced. And to Aphrodite he showed the wound, and made complaint that so small a creature as a bee should deal so cruel a wound. And his mother answered laughing, "Art not thou like the bees, that are so small yet dealest wounds so cruel?"²

Two reasons for Cranach's decision to use this epigram as a theme immediately come to mind: it afforded him an opportunity to paint more of the graceful nudes of which he and his patrons were so fond, and it was fashionably antique. A possible third reason, somewhat less obvious, is that the epigram could serve as an allegory of syphilis—if syphilis was considered one of the "wounds so cruel" dealt by Cupid. This advantage was significant during the Renaissance because syphilis had become the most troublesome disease of the age. This paper will present some circumstantial evidence suggesting that the epigram's potential as an allegory of syphilis was not lost on Cranach. The evidence consists of 1) comments from Cranach's contemporaries asserting the seriousness of syphilis, 2) a folk belief that bees will sting the sexually active, 3) three details from the paintings themselves that imply a disastrous consequence of lust, and 4) evidence that syphilis was recognized as a primarily venereal disease by the time Cranach began painting his honey thief paintings.

The seriousness of syphilis is very clear in the writings of Cranach's contemporaries. Albrecht Dürer sent the following request to his friend Willibald Pirckheimer in 1506: "Give my compliments to our Prior and tell him to pray to God for my protection, particularly from the French disease [syphilis]; I know of nothing of which I am more badly afraid right now. Nearly everybody has it, and many people are quite eaten up by it so that they die."³ Erasmus considered syphilis the worst of all diseases, as he explained to Schiedlowitz, chancellor of Poland, in a letter dated 1525: "What sickness has ever traversed every part of Europe, Africa and Asia with equal speed? What clings more tenaciously, what repels more vigorously the art and care of physicians? What passes more easily by

² "Τὸν κλέπτειν πὸτ' Ἐρωτὰ κακὰ κέντασε μέλισσα κηρίον ἐκ σίμβλων συλεύμειον, ἄκρα δὲ χειρῶν δάκτυλα πάνθ' ὑπένυξεν. ὁ δ' ἄλγος καὶ χέρ' ἐφύση καὶ τὰν γὰν ἐπάταξε καὶ ἄλατο, τᾶ δ' Ἀφροδίτᾳ δέειξεν τὰν ὀδύνην καὶ μέμφετο, ὅτι γε τυτθὸν θηρίον ἐστὶ μέλισσα καὶ ἀλικά τραύματα ποιεῖ. χά μᾶτηρ γελάσασα τί δ'; οὐκ ἕως ἐσσι μέλισσαι; ὡς τυτθὸς μὲν ἔφυσ, τὰ δὲ τραύματα χάλικα ποιεῖς." H. A. Metcalf, *The Idylls and Epigrams of Theocritus, Bion and Moschus*, 2 vols. (Boston: Bibliophile Society, 1905), 2:66. Translation: A. S. F. Gow, *The Greek Bucolic Poets* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1935), p. 74. G. Bauch has suggested that Philip Melancthon brought the epigram to Cranach's attention; see his "Zur Cranachforschung," *Repertorium für Kunstwissenschaft* 17 (1894):434-35.

³ Erwin Panofsky, "Homage to Fracastoro in a Germano-Flemish Composition of about 1590?" *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 12 (1961):1-33, n. 22.



Lucas Cranach, *Cupid Complaining to Venus*. Reproduced by Courtesy of the Trustees, The National Gallery, London.

contagion to another? What brings more cruel tortures?"⁴ Martin Luther declared of syphilis in his *Chronica deudsch* (1553): "It is one of the great signs of the Day of Judgement"—no mean estimation.⁵

Equally serious were the treatments. In one standard course, patients were repeatedly rubbed with a mixture of mercury and lard while sitting naked in a tub (the origin of the seemingly innocent nursery rhyme "Rub a dub dub, Three men in a tub").⁶ This treatment did not cure; it poisoned. Three symptoms of acute iatrogenic mercury poisoning—salivation, loosening and eventual loss of teeth, and oral ulcers—are described by the knight-poet Ulrich von Hutten, who died of syphilis at the age of thirty-five after a desperate and fruitless search for a cure, in his *De Guaici Medicina* (1519):

Hardly had he [the syphilitic] been annointed [with mercury] than he commenced to grow languid, and, marvelous to relate, such was the action of the ointment, that it forced into the stomach whatever diseased humors were lodged in the outer parts of the body, next causing the corrupt humors to flow insidiously to the brain and hence to the mouth, attacking it with such violence that the teeth fell out unless most painstaking care were taken of the mouth. Their throats, tongues and palates ulcerated, their gums swelled, their teeth became loose, saliva flowed ceaselessly with an incredible foulness and so contagious, that whatever came in contact with its stench was corrupted, and polluted, wherefore the lips touched by it became ulcerated as did the cheeks within. The whole dwelling stank.⁷

Albrecht Dürer's fright is understandable.

⁴ "Quae lues vnquam pari celeritate percurrit singulas Europae, Africae, Asiaeque partes? Quae penitius sese inserit vaenis ac visceribus? Quae tenacius haeret, aut peruiacius repugnat arti curaeque medicorum? Quae faciliore contagio transilit in alterum? Quae crudeliores habet cruciatus?" Desiderius Erasmus, *Opus Epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterdami*, eds. P. S. Allen and H. M. Allen, 12 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1906), 6:137. Translation: Charles Creighton, *A History of Epidemics in Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1894; reprint ed., London: Frank Cass, 1965), p. 421.

⁵ "Eine neue kranckheit, die Frantzosen, von etlichen aber die Hispanische seuch genant, komet auff. Vnd wie sagt, sie ist aus den newgefundenen Insulen in Occidente in Europam gebracht. Ist eins von den grossen Zeichen vor dem Jüngsten Tage." Martin Luther, *Chronica des ehrwürdigen Hern D. Mart. Luth. Deudsch* (Witeberg: H. Luft, 1553), quoted in Panofsky, nn. 4, 11.

⁶ Leonard Goldwater, *Mercury: A History of Quicksilver* (New York: New York Press, 1972), p. 237.

⁷ "Ille vix iterum accepto unguento coepit languescere, mirum in modum: tanta

Were Cranach and his patrons personally involved with syphilis? The published literature on Cranach and several of his patrons (among the holdings of the University of California at Davis) reveals no hint of syphilis. However, Martin Luther's "Warning against Prostitutes," posted in 1543 for the benefit of Wittenberg's misbehaving university students, does place the disease in Cranach's community:

Through special enemies of our faith the devil has sent some whores here to ruin our poor young men. As an old and faithful preacher I ask you in fatherly fashion, dear children, that you believe assuredly that the evil spirit sent these whores here and that they are dreadful, shabby, stinking, loathsome, and syphilitic, as daily experience unfortunately demonstrates. Let every good student warn his fellows. Such a syphilitic whore can give her disease to ten, twenty, thirty and more good people, and so she is to be accounted a murderer, as worse than a poisoner. In this foul business let everyone offer faithful advice and warning to his brother, even as you would that others should do unto you.⁸

The warning concludes with some thoughtful advice: "In short, beware of

unguenti vis erat effectus, ut intra stomachum quod in summo corpore morbi fuisset compelleret; unde sursum ad cerebrum, unde per gulam et os defluebat morbus, tanta, tam violenta iniuria, ut dentes deciderent, qui non accurate ori intendissent; omnibus certe exulcerabantur fauces, lingua et palatum, intumebant gingivae, dentes vacillabant, sputum per ora sine intermissione profluebat, omni protinus foetore olentius, tanto contagio, ut quicquid alluisset, statim inquinaret ac pollueret; unde et labia sic contacta ulcus trahebant, et intus buccae vulnerabantur. Foetabat omnis circa habitatio." Vlrichi Hutteni, *Opera*, ed. Eduard Böcking, 5 vols. (Aalen: Otto Zeller, 1963), 5:408-09. Translation: Ernest L. Zimmermann, "The French Pox of that Great Clerke of Almayne, Ulrich Hutten, Knyght," *Janus* 36 (1932):245-46.

⁸ "Es hat Teuffel durch unsers glaubens sonderliche feinde etliche hurn hieher geführt, die arme jugent zu vorderben. Dem zu wider ist noch als eines alten, treuen predigers an euch, lieben kinder, mein vetterlich bitt, das ir wolt gar gewislich gleuben, das der böse Geist solche hurn hieher sendet, die da gretzig, schebig, stinckend, garstig und frantzösisch sein, wie sich teglich leider in der erfahrung findet. Das doch ein gut gesell den andern warne! Denn ein solch frantzösische hur 10, 20, 30 etc. fromer leut kinder vorgiffen kan, ist derhalben zurechnen als ein mörderin und erger als ein vorgiffterinne. Helffe doch in solchem giftigen geschmeis einer dem andern mit treuen radten und warnen, wie du wollest dir gethan haben! . . . Summa, hutte dich vor hurn und bitt Gott, der dich geschaffen hat, das er dir ein frum kind zufuge; es wirt doch muh genug haben." Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe (Weimarer Ausgabe) Tischreden*, ed. Hermann Böhlhaus, 6 vols. (Graz: Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt, 1967), 4:552-53. Translation: Martin Luther, *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, ed. and trans. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955), pp. 292-94.

whores and pray God to provide you with pious wives. You will have trouble enough as it is."

More information on syphilis in Renaissance Wittenberg might be found in Cranach's numerous surviving—but mostly unpublished—personal records and papers.⁹ If they exist, records from his own Wittenberg pharmacy might be invaluable. In 1520, the Elector of Saxony granted Cranach a pharmaceutical monopoly in Wittenberg, and Cranach established the pharmacy that was to remain in the hands of his descendants as late as 1878.¹⁰ Renaissance pharmacies did a booming business in mercury and guaiac, the two primary syphilis medications, and the Wittenberg pharmacy probably profited as well.¹¹ If some record of these profits can be found, and if the profits are sizable, we will know that syphilis was a problem in Wittenberg among those who could afford to buy the medicines (a group that included Cranach's patrons as a subset), and that Cranach had a financial reason to be aware of the disease.

Honeybee lore probably enhanced the epigram's aptitude as an allegory of syphilis. For many centuries and throughout Europe, the honeybee enjoyed a reputation as a chaste creature, stingingly intolerant of all who indulged in sexual intercourse. Beekeepers refrained from sexual intercourse a day or two before handling their bees, and unmarried girls strolled through apiaries to prove their virginity by not being stung.¹² Thus the bee sting and syphilis were both regarded as punishments for venery.

Cranach included three details in his honey thief paintings that together imply a disastrous consequence of lust. They are: an abbreviated epigram (in all eleven paintings), a stag (in paintings 1, 5, and 11 of note 1), and an apple tree (in paintings 1, 5, and 8). Painting 5, which includes all three details, is reproduced in the figure on page 23. We will consider each detail in turn.

The abbreviated epigram reads: "When the boy Cupid stole honey from the hollow of the tree, a zealous bee stung the thief's finger. So too the pleasure that we seek, short lived and doomed to perish, harms us, mixed

⁹ H. Ladendorf, "Cranach d. Ä. und Cranach d. J., Schrifttum," in *Lucas Cranach der Ältere, Der Künstler und seine Zeit*, ed. Heinz Lüdecke (Berlin: Henschelverlag, 1953), pp. 178-202. Ladendorf tantalizingly states that many of Cranach's personal records survive, mostly unpublished. In his chapter he gives a sampling of these documents but unfortunately none of them pertain to Cranach's pharmacy.

¹⁰ Pierre Descargues, *Cranach* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1961), p. 77.

¹¹ The profitability of mercury is discussed by Goldwater, *Mercury*, p. 220. The trade in guaiac is discussed by Charles H. Talbot, "America and the European Drug Trade," in *First Images of America*, ed. Fredi Chiappelli, 2 vols. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976) 2:833-44.

¹² Austin E. Fife, "The Concept of the Sacredness of Bees, Honey and Wax in Christian Popular Tradition" (Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 1939), pp. 278-82.

as it is with pain."¹³ The nature of the "pleasure that we seek" is made clear by the nude Venus while "harms us, mixed as it is with pain" suggests physical damage worse than a broken heart.

The stag, a symbol of venery, confirms the sexual nature of the intended pleasure.¹⁴ Also, the stag was widely thought to suffer an alarming consequence of its sexual excesses, as described by Sir Thomas Browne in his *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (1646):

Concerning Deer there also passeth another opinion, that the Males thereof do yearly lose their pizzel. Now the ground hereof was surely the observation of this part in Deer after immoderate venery, and about the end of their Rut, which sometimes becomes so relaxed and pendulous, it cannot be quite retracted; and being often beset with flies, it is conceived to rot, and at last to fall from the body.¹⁵

By analogy, this woodlore might have disquieted some of Cranach's more sporting patrons.

The apple tree, as the symbol of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in Genesis 3, was laden with a connotation of disaster as a consequence of lust, a result of St. Augustine's views on the Fall. St. Augustine believed that 1) Adam was a vastly superior being until he ate the forbidden fruit; 2) the fruit contained a potent aphrodisiac that unbalanced Adam's perfect nature with uncontrollable lust; 3) as a consequence, Adam lost all his superior characteristics, including his immortality; 4) Adam's loss became the loss of his descendents, because all are conceived in lust ("born in sin"), and are deformed by it.¹⁶ Reformation artists depicted Adam lasciviously fondling Eve, and substituted skeletal death figures for the Tree of Knowledge to emphasize

¹³ Dum puer alveolo furatur mella Cupido
Furanti digitum cuspide fixit apis.
Sic etiam nobis brevis et peritura voluptas
Quam petimus tristi mixta dolore nocet.

Curiously, one of the paintings (no. 4 of note 1) has a slightly different version:

Dum puer alveolo furatur mella Cupido
Furanti digitum sedula punxit apis.
Sic etiam nobis brevis et moritura voluptas
Quam petimus tristi mixta dolore nocet.

¹⁴ Guy de Tervarent, *Attributs et Symboles dans l'Art Profane, 1450-1600* (Geneva: E. Droz, 1958), pp. 66-67.

¹⁵ Thomas Browne, *The Works of Sir Thomas Browne*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes, 4 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 2:185-86.

¹⁶ Norman Powell Williams, *The Ideas of the Fall and of Original Sin* (London: Longmans, Green, 1927), pp. 360-69, 423-37.

the grimmest consequence of Adam's lust.¹⁷ Though Cranach contented himself with the apple tree, and though his Adams and Eves behave with decorum, he was quite aware of the tree's connotation. He cleverly used it in his paintings *Judith at the Table of Holofernes* (1531) and *Samson and Delilah* (1529).¹⁸ In both paintings, the apple tree shades the unsuspecting victim and his nemesis, informing the viewer that Adam's lust is about to claim another victim. Presumably, the apple trees in the honey thief paintings also imply a disastrous consequence of lust, though the victim is not a specified individual but the suitors of Venus in general. The interesting question is: what consequence of lust do the suitors of Venus have to fear?

It is tempting to believe that Cranach intended syphilis to be the answer to this question. Together, the three details that he included in his honey thief paintings imply a disastrous consequence of lust, which syphilis was. This is speculation, however, and Cranach could as easily have meant the traditional consequence of lust as posited by St. Augustine: the loss to mankind of bodily immortality, of divine intellect, of emotional tranquility—losses keenly felt during the Reformation.¹⁹

Surprisingly, syphilis was not considered a primarily venereal disease for a number of years after the initial epidemic of 1495.²⁰ Like its close tropical relative, yaws, syphilis can spread through nonvenereal skin contact involving open, infectious sores. These sores are rare today, thanks to antibiotics, but during the Renaissance they were common, and nonvenereal transmission was also common.²¹ Consequently, syphilis' venereal nature was obscured from the public, and syphilis enjoyed a unique period of respectability.²² This period apparently extended through 1506, the year Dürer asked his prior to pray that he not get syphilis. Otherwise, the request would have been unseemly. Syphilis' respectability ended when nonvenereal transmission subsided (for reasons that are not understood), leaving venereal transmission in stark public view.

We must ask if syphilis' fig leaf was removed by the time Cranach

¹⁷ Samuel S. Chew, *The Pilgrimage of Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), figs. 1-12; also *Symbols in Transformation: Iconographic Themes at the Time of the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), figs. 2-8.

¹⁸ Friedlander and Rosenberg, *Die Gemälde von Lucas Cranach*, pls. 176, 177.

¹⁹ Williams, *Ideas of the Fall*, p. 427.

²⁰ Oswei Temkin, "On the History of 'Morality and Syphilis,'" in *The Double Face of Janus and Other Essays in the History of Medicine* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), pp. 472-84.

²¹ For a contemporary description of the skin symptoms of Renaissance syphilis, see Hieronymi Fracastorii, *De Contagione et Contagiosis Morbis et Eorum Curatione*, ed. and trans. Wilmer Cave Wright (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1930), pp. 136-41.

²² Alfred Martin, "The Patron Saints of Syphilis and the Pilgrimage of Syphilitics," *The Urologic and Cutaneous Review* 27 (1923):69-75.

painted the first of his honey thief paintings, in 1527. Some evidence that it was is available from the history of the English Reformation. In the early 1520s, the campaign to discredit Roman Catholicism in England adopted the tactic of publicly accusing priests, monks and friars of spreading syphilis through sexual intercourse.²³ One such accusation was read to Henry VIII in 1524 and published soon after:

These [priests] be they that have made an hundred thousande ydel hores in your realme, which wold have gotten theyr lyvinge honestly in the swete of their faces had not there superfluous riches illected them to uncleane lust and ydelnesse. These be they that corrupte the hole generation of mankynd in your realme, that catch the pockes of one woman and bear it to another, ye some of them will boste amonge his fellows that he hath medled with an hundreth wymen.²⁴

If by 1524 syphilis had not been widely recognized in England as a venereal disease, there would have been little propaganda value in these scurrilous accusations. It seems reasonable to assume that public opinion had reached a similar point in Germany by this time. We should also note that in 1527 syphilis was called a venereal disease in the title of a book for the first time: Jacques de Béthencourt's *Nova penitentialis Quadragesima nec non purgatorium in morbum Gallicum sive venereum*.²⁵

Did the epigram's potential as an allegory of syphilis, then, influence Cranach's decision to paint it? Unfortunately, this question cannot yet be answered. The evidence presented in this paper opens the possibility that syphilis was an influence, but nothing more. Nevertheless, the possibility is an intriguing one, for two reasons. First, if Cranach's honey thief paintings are allegories of syphilis, they probably are the first works by a major artist to portray syphilis as a venereal disease. Earlier works about syphilis are from the prevenereal period and treat the disease as a *flagellum dei*, like plague.²⁶ Second, what better example could there be of Cranach's astuteness at choosing themes? The honey thief epigram, if Cranach interpreted it as a syphilis allegory, offered no fewer than three advantages: it allowed him to paint the nudes of which he and his patrons were so fond; it was classical, and therefore in vogue;²⁷ and it was topical, because of

²³ Creighton, *History of Epidemics*, pp. 414-15.

²⁴ Simon Fish, *A Supplicacyon for the Beggars* (London: n. p., 1524), quoted by Creighton, *History of Epidemics*, p. 421.

²⁵ Panofsky, "Homage to Fracastoro," p. 10.

²⁶ Martin, "Patron Saints of Syphilis," gives several examples of prevenereal syphilis art.

²⁷ Classical epigrams were the basis of the wildly popular emblems used during the Renaissance to decorate everything from livery to cutlery. See Mario Praz, *Studies in Seventeenth-Century Imagery* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1964).

syphilis. The first two advantages alone are sufficient to explain his choice, but no doubt he was aware of the third.

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