

# **Aby Warburg**

# **The Renewal of**

# **Pagan Antiquity**

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**The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity:  
Contributions to the Cultural History  
of the European Renaissance**

Introduction by Kurt W. Forster

Translation by David Britt

**Texts & Documents**

## Dürer and Italian Antiquity (1905)

In its treasury of old drawings and prints, the Kunsthalle in Hamburg holds two famous representations of the *Death of Orpheus*: a drawing by Albrecht Dürer, dating from 1494 (fig. 97), and the only known copy of the anonymous engraving, from Mantegna's circle, that was Dürer's source (fig. 98). In itself, this accident of ownership would not have been cause enough for me to base this talk on these two images (of which, at the request of the local committee, I have supplied reproductions).<sup>1</sup> My choice of subject springs from the conviction that these two works have yet to be adequately interpreted as documents of the reentry of the ancient world into modern civilization, for they reveal an unnoticed, twofold influence of antiquity on the stylistic evolution of early Renaissance art.

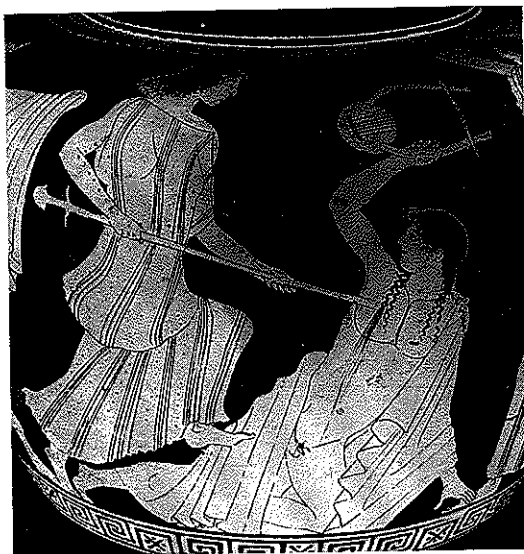
The narrow Neoclassical doctrine of the "tranquil grandeur" of antiquity has long tended to frustrate any adequate scrutiny of this material; it remains to be pointed out that by the latter half of the fifteenth century—as the engraving and the drawing both reveal—Italian artists had seized on the rediscovered antique treasury of forms just as much for its emotive force of gesture as for any tranquil, classic ideal. For the sake of this wider view, it seems to me worth offering an art-historical commentary on the *Death of Orpheus* to a gathering of philologists and educators: those to whom "the influence of antiquity" remains as momentous a question as ever it was in the Renaissance.

In a number of ways, the *Death of Orpheus* serves to clarify this emotive, rhetorical current within the reawakening of antiquity. First, it can be shown—though never remarked on before—that the present engraving depicts the death of Orpheus in an entirely authentic, antique spirit. A comparison with Greek vase paintings (see figs. 99, 100; Roscher, *Mythologisches Lexikon*, "Orpheus," figs. 10, 11) shows beyond doubt that its composition stems from some lost, antique image of the death of Orpheus or Pentheus. Its style is directly informed by the emotive gestural language defined by Greece for this same tragic scene.

This same process can be seen in a drawing in Turin, by an artist close to the Pollaiuoli (fig. 102), to which Professor Robert has drawn my attention. The man with his foot on his prostrate enemy's shoulder, tugging at his arm, clearly stems from the figure of Agave, as she appears on a sarcophagus now in Pisa, rending her own son Pentheus limb from limb in Dionysiac frenzy. A wide variety of other depictions of the death of Orpheus—such as the

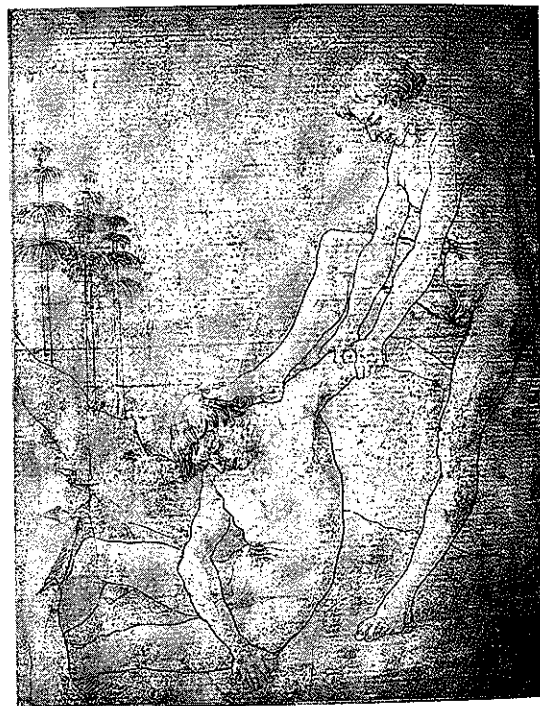


Hamburg, Kunsthalle



**Fig. 99. *Death of Orpheus***  
Detail of vase from Noia. Paris, Louvre (see p. 553)

**Fig. 100. *Death of Orpheus***  
After vase from Chiusi, from *Annali*, 1871 (see p. 553)



**Fig. 101. *Death of Orpheus***  
Woodcut from Ovid, *Metamorphoses* (Venice, 1497)  
(see p. 555)

**Fig. 102. Antonio Pollaiuolo, *Scene of Combat***  
Drawing. Turin, Palazzo Reale (see p. 553)

De la mort de Orpheo Cap. 1



us  
morphoses (Venice, 1497)

olo, Scene of Combat  
eale (see p. 553)

Northern Italian sketchbook in Lord Rosebery's collection, the Orpheus plate in the Correr collection, a plaque in the Berlin Museum, and a drawing (by Giulio Romano?) in the Louvre—supply almost identical proofs of the vigor with which this archaeologically authentic emotive formula (*Pathosformel*), based on an antique Orpheus or Pentheus, had taken root in Renaissance artistic circles.

Most telling of all is a woodcut in the 1497 Venetian edition of Ovid, where it accompanies the poet's vivid account of Orpheus's tragic end (fig. 101). This cut may be directly related to the Northern Italian engraving mentioned above; in any case, it stems from the same antique original—which seems to have been available in a more complete version: see the maenad in frontal view.

The true voice of antiquity, which the Renaissance knew well, chimes with the image. For the death of Orpheus was more than a studio motif of purely formal interest: it stood for the dark mystery play of Dionysian legend, passionately and knowingly experienced in the spirit and through the words of the ancients. Proof of this can be heard in the Ovidian strains of the first Italian drama, Poliziano's *Orfeo*, written in Italian and first performed in Mantua in 1471. The *Death of Orpheus* engraving drew added emphasis from that tragic dance-play, the earliest work of the famous Florentine humanist: for it set Orpheus's sufferings, acted out and vigorously expressed in melodious, native Italian, before the very same Mantuan Renaissance society to which the unnamed engraver showed his image of Orpheus's death. Mantua and Florence here coincide, bringing true, antique formulas of intensified physical or psychic expression into the Renaissance style of depicting life in motion.

The works of Botticelli—and also, in particular, certain bridal *cassoni* by Jacopo del Sellaio (fig. 103), depicting the Orpheus legend after Poliziano—demonstrate how Poliziano influenced the Florentines to adopt a style that was an unresolved composite, joining a realistic observation of nature with an idealizing reliance on familiar antique sources, both artistic and literary. Antonio Pollaiuolo, for his part, continued in the spirit of Donatello, forging his antique sources into a more consistent style through the sheer, exuberant rhetoric of muscle, as manifested by the nude in action. Between the graceful flutterings of Poliziano and the dynamic Mannerism of Pollaiuolo stands the heroic, theatrical, emotive intensity of the antique figures of Mantegna.

For Dürer, the discovery of Mantegna and Pollaiuolo as sources coincided with that of the *Death of Orpheus* engraving. In 1494 he copied both Mantegna's *Bacchanal with Silenus* and his so-called *Battle of Tritons*; and in 1495 he drew two nude figures, of men abducting women, that are undoubtedly copied from a lost original by Pollaiuolo. The emotive rhetoric of these four subjects of 1494–1495 is fundamental to Dürer's understanding of pagan antiquity; from them he derived every detail of the figures in one of his earliest engravings on mythological themes, wrongly identified as a *Hercules* (B. 73).

This was probably based on some humanistic retelling of the legend of Zeus and Antiope; but its most apposite title is the old one coined by Bartsch: *Jealousy*. In it, Dürer set out above all to create an animated image in the

antique manner, and thus to follow the Italians in acknowledging the supremacy of the antique in all gestural rendering of emotion. Hence the rather contrived animation of one of Dürer's earliest mythological woodcuts, the one that shows the wrath of *Hercules* (B. 127). In a series of large mural canvases, installed in the Palazzo Medici in 1460, the Pollaiuoli had given currency to the figure of Hercules as an idealized symbol of the unfettered superman; and so, in Nuremberg in 1500, a Pollaiuolo *Hercules* found his way into Dürer's own canvas of *Hercules and the Harpies*.

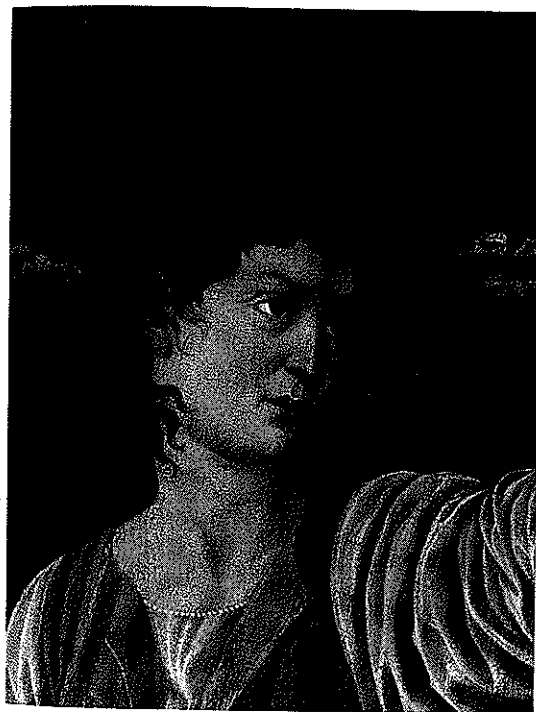
None of the figures in the engraving *Jealousy* is Dürer's own invention, and yet in an overriding sense the work remains his property. Dürer had no time for the modern aesthete's qualms about artistic individuality; no artistic vanity deterred him from taking the heritage of the past and making it his own. Even so, Nuremberger as he was, he instinctively countered the pagan vigor of Southern art with a native coolness that touches his gesticulating antique figures with an overtone, as it were, of robust composure.

Antiquity came to Dürer by way of Italian art, not merely as a Dionysian stimulant but as a source of Apollonian clarity. The Apollo Belvedere was in † his mind's eye when he sought for the ideal measure of the male body, and he related the truth of nature to the proportions of Vitruvius. This Faustian tendency to brood on questions of measure and proportion never left him, and indeed intensified; but he soon lost interest in the antique as a source of agitated mobility in any Baroque or Manneristic sense.

In Venice in 1506, the Italians told him that his work was not "*antikisch Art, und darum sei es nit gut*" (not antique in manner, and therefore not good). To the younger Venetians—in the very year in which Leonardo and Michelangelo, in their equestrian battle pieces, canonized the emotive rhetoric of conflict—a figure like Dürer's so-called *Large Fortune* must have looked like an arid experiment, entirely foreign to the antique spirit as they knew it. Their reaction seems more natural to us now than it must have done to Dürer, who had not only constructed this very figure of *Nemesis* according to the Vitruvian canon of proportion but—an astonishing fact, discovered by Giehlow<sup>2</sup>—had designed it in every last detail as an illustration of a Latin poem by Poliziano.

What the Italians looked for and failed to find in his work—decorative and emotive rhetoric—was the thing that Dürer himself had by then entirely † ceased to want. This no doubt explains the passage in the letter just quoted, in which he wrote: "*Und das Ding, das mir vor eilf Jahren so wol hat gefallen, das gefällt mir itz nüt mehr. Und wenn ichs nich selbs säch, so hätte ichs keim Anderen geglaubt.*" (And the thing that pleased me so well eleven years ago pleases me no longer. And if I had not seen it with my own eyes, I would never have taken another's word for it.) The thing he had liked eleven years before—in my opinion, which I intend to substantiate later—was the group of Italian engravings, in a high-flown, rhetorical, emotive mode, that he had chosen to copy in 1494–1495 in the belief that this was the true grand manner of pagan antiquity.

Dürer thus assumed his rightful place among the opponents of the Baroque



**Fig. 103.** Jacopo del Sellaio, *Orpheus*  
Cassone. Vienna, Lanckoronsky Collection (see p. 555)

**Figs. 104a,b.** Andrea del Castagno, *David*  
Leather shield. Philadelphia, Widener Collection  
(see p. 558)

language of gesture, toward which Italian art had been moving since the mid-fifteenth century. For it is quite wrong to date the Roman grand style from † the unearthing of the *Laocoön* in 1506. That event was an outward symptom of an inward, historical process; it marked the climax, not the birth, of the "Baroque aberration." It was a revelation of something that Italians had long sought—and therefore found—in the art of the ancient world: extremes of gestural and physiognomic expression, stylized in tragic sublimity.

To take just one unknown and surprising example: Antonio Pollaiuolo derived his animated figure of *David* (on the painted leather shield at Locko † Park [fig. 104]) from an authentic antique image, that of the pedagogue to the children of Niobe, right down to the detail of its accessory forms in motion. And in 1488, when a small replica of the *Laocoön* group was found during nocturnal excavation work in Rome,<sup>3</sup> the discoverers, even before they recognized the mythological subject, were fired with spontaneous artistic enthusiasm by the striking expressiveness of the suffering figures and by "*certi gesti mirabili*" (certain wonderful gestures). This was the Vulgar Latin of emotive gesture: an international, indeed a universal language that went straight to the hearts of all those who chafed at medieval expressive constraints.

These "Plates to Illustrate the *Death of Orpheus*" are thus a record of some initial excavations along the route of the long migration that brought antique superlatives of gesture from Athens, by way of Rome, Mantua, and Florence, to Nuremberg and into the mind of Albrecht Dürer. Dürer's response to this migrant rhetoric varied at different times. For the psychology of style is not the kind of issue that can be forcibly brought to a head by imposing the categories of military and political history, "winners" and "losers." Some such rough conclusion may suit hero-worshipping dilettantism, may spare it the minute labor of pursuing the work of great individuals to its sources, but this obscures a question of style that is far wider, though hitherto barely formulated: the interchange of artistic culture, in the fifteenth century, between past and present, and between North and South. Not only does this process afford a clearer understanding of the early Renaissance as a universal category of European civilization: it lays bare certain phenomena, hitherto unnoticed, that cast a more general light on the circulation and exchange of expressive forms in art.

#### Notes

1. Der "*Tod des Orpheus*": Bilder zu dem Vortrag über Dürer und die italienische Antike. Den Mitgliedern der archäologischen Sektion... überreicht von A. Warburg. 3 plates, large folio. (*The Death of Orpheus: Plates to Illustrate the Lecture on Dürer and Italian Antiquity. Presented by A. Warburg... to the members of the Archaeological Section*). In expanded form, this lecture will form part of a forthcoming book on the beginnings of autonomous secular painting in the Quattrocento.

2. ["Politian und Dürer;"] *Mitteilungen der Gesellschaft für vervielfältigende Kunst* (1902), 25 ff.

3. See Jacob Burckhardt, *Beiträge*, 351 [in *Gesamtausgabe* 12:349 f.].

## Addenda to Volume 2

### Dürer and Italian Antiquity

- 553 Published as "Dürer und die italienische Antike," in *Verhandlungen der achtundvierzigsten Versammlung deutscher Philologen und Schulmänner in Hamburg vom 3. bis 6. Oktober 1905* (Leipzig, 1906), 55-60.
- 553 Albrecht Dürer's drawing the *Death of Orpheus*, Lippmann no. 159; H. Tietze and E. Tietze-Conrat, *Der junge Dürer* (Augsburg, 1928), 13, no. 50.  
The Northern Italian engraving, the *Death of Orpheus*, Pass. 5:47, no. 120, was first reproduced by Eugène Müntz, *Histoire de l'art pendant la Renaissance* 1 (1889): 252.  
On this engraving as a direct or indirect source for Dürer, see Joseph Meder, "Neue Beiträge (zur) Dürerforschung," *Jahrbuch der Kunstsammlungen des Allerhöchsten Kaiserhauses* 30 (1911-12): 213; Tietze, 13, 306 f.
- 553 Other ancient sources for the *Death of Orpheus* cited by Meder, *Jahrbuch der Kunstsammlungen des Allerhöchsten Kaiserhauses* 30 (1911-12): 219 ff., figs. 25-33; and Erwin Panofsky, "Dürers Stellung zur Antike," *Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* 1 (15) (1921-22; Vienna, 1923): 46, no. 10; Carl Robert, *Sarkophag-Reliefs* 2:96 f. and pl. 33. See also the addendum to Warburg's paper on the *Battle of Constantine* fresco, page 492.
- 553 The Pollaiuolo drawing in Turin discussed by Luigi Dami, "Due nuove opere pollaiuolesche," *Dedalo* 4 (1924): 706. Pentheus sarcophagus in Pisa: Roscher, *Mythologisches Lexikon*, s. v. "Pentheus," fig. 5; Hans Dütschke, *Die antiken Bildwerke des Campo Santo in Pisa* (Leipzig, 1874), 40 f., no. 52. The Orpheus pose in the engraving *Hercules and the Giants*, School of Antonio Pollaiuolo, repr. van Marle, 11:354, fig. 225.  
Campbell Dodgson, *A Book of Drawings Formerly Ascribed to Mantegna* [Earl of Rosebery] (1923), pl. 21, and also—as pointed out by Meder, *Jahrbuch der Kunstsammlungen des Allerhöchsten Kaiserhauses* 30 (1911-12): 221—fig. 32, pl. 8. Orpheus plate, School of Francia, Correr collection, Venice, photograph Anderson 14057.  
Plaque in Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum, Berlin, ascribed to Bertoldo by Bode, *Bertoldo und Lorenzo dei Medici* (Freiburg, 1925), 39 (illus.), 40.  
Giulio Romano's drawing in the Louvre, photograph Braun 293: see E. Habich,



“Handzeichnungen italienischer Meister in photographischen Aufnahmen von Braun & Co., kritisch gesichtet von Giovanni Morelli,” *Kunstchronik*, n.s., 3 (1891–92): 374; also mentioned by Meder, 221.

- 555 The Venetian Ovid edition of 1497: *Metamorphoses* translated into Italian (with allegorical interpretations) by Giovanni da Buonsignori, around 1370–80 (Venice: Zoane Rosso, 1497), 11.1, woodcut fol. 92<sup>v</sup>. On reprints and copies of this edition, see M. D. Henkel, “Illustrierte Ausgaben von Ovids Metamorphosen,” in *Vorträge der Bibliothek Warburg 1926–27* (Leipzig and Berlin, 1930), 65 ff. The same motif: 13.23, fol. 110<sup>v</sup> (Polymnestor slain by Hecuba and her women) and 11.13, fol. 94<sup>v</sup> (Pelus and the serpent).

Other examples in Meder, *Jahrbuch der Kunstsammlungen des Allerhöchsten Kaiserhauses* 30 (1911–12): 219 ff., and in Panofsky, “Dürers Stellung zur Antike,” *Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* 1 (15) (1921–22; Vienna, 1923): 77, n. 132.

- 555 Wedding chests by Jacopo del Sellaio in Paul Schubring, *Cassoni* (Leipzig, 1915), 304 f., pl. 85. On the relation between the *cassone* and the Mantuan premiere of Poliziano’s *Orfeo*, see the addendum to “The Birth of Venus,” p. 416, and d’Ancona, *Origini del teatro*, 2d ed., 2:363, where the letter mentioning the planned inclusion of centaurs in the 1491 performance is printed in full.

- 555 Copies of Mantegna: *Bacchanal*, L. 455, 454; Tietze 63, 64. Abduction scene, L. 347; Tietze 85.

The engraving B. 73 interpreted by Panofsky, *Herkules am Scheidewege* (Leipzig, 1930), 168 ff.; the woodcut B. 127, *ibid.*, 181 ff.

On the significance of Pollaiuolo’s pictures of Hercules at the Palazzo Medici, see Luigi Dami, *Dedalo* 4 (1924): 706; Maud Cruttwell, *Antonio Pollaiuolo* (London, 1907), 66 ff.; van Marle, 11:364 ff. Pollaiuolo’s *Hercules and Nessus*, formerly in the Jarves Collection, New Haven, now Fogg Art Museum, Harvard, was first connected with Dürer’s *Hercules and the Stymphalian Birds* (Nuremberg, Germanisches Nationalmuseum) by Werner Weisbach, *Der junge Dürer* (1906), 50; see Tietze, *Der junge Dürer* (Augsburg, 1928), 51 (no. 165) and 327.

- 556 On Dürer’s studies of proportion based on the Apollo Belvedere, see Panofsky, “Dürers Darstellungen des Apollo und ihr Verhältnis zu Barbari,” *Jahrbuch der Preussischen Kunstsammlungen* 41 (1920): 359 ff.; *idem*, “Dürers Stellung zur Antike,” *Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* 1 (15) (1921–22; Vienna, 1923): 53 ff. Also Tietze, *Der junge Dürer* (Augsburg, 1928), 68 f., nos. 229–32.

- 556 Letter from Dürer to Pirckheimer, 7 February 1506, in K. Lange and F. Fuhse, *Dürers schriftlicher Nachlass* (Halle, 1893), 22; see Hans Rupprich, *Willibald Pirckheimer und die erste Reise Dürers nach Italien* (Vienna, 1930), 62 ff.

- 558 On the discovery of the *Laocoön* group in 1506, see A. Michaelis, “Geschichte des Statuenhofes im vatikanischen Belvedere,” *Jahrbuch des Kaiserlich Deutschen Archäo-*

*logischen Instituts* 5 (1890): 15 f. On the antique remains discovered in 1488, see the addendum to Warburg's essay "The Emergence of the Antique as a Stylistic Ideal," p. 468.

- 558 The *David* painted on a leather shield (now in Philadelphia, Widener Collection) has been ascribed by Friedrich Antal, "Studien zur Gotik im Quattrocento," *Jahrbuch der Preussischen Kunstsammlungen* 46 (1925): 6, to Andrea del Castagno.

The Florentine Niobid group was discovered in 1583, and the Pedagogue (also discovered no earlier than the sixteenth century) was subsequently added to it. The Pedagogue's arms are a later restoration; see K. B. Stark, *Niobe und die Niobiden* (Leipzig, 1863), 10 ff., 217 ff., 236 ff. This figure cannot, therefore, have been a direct source for the *David*. But a similar figure must already have been known, as appears both from a majolica plate from Urbino in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (no. 3578, *Death of the Daughters of Niobe*, sixteenth century) and from the use of the Pedagogue's pose by the artist of the Codex Escorialensis in restoring a figure on the Amazon sarcophagus now in Wilton House: H. Egger, *Codex Escorialensis: Ein Skizzenbuch aus der Werkstatt Domenico Ghirlandaios* (Vienna, 1905-6), fol. 65<sup>v</sup>; text vol., 155 f. The sarcophagus is illustrated by Robert, *Sarkophag-Reliefs* 3:3, pls. 101, 102, where the more accurate drawing in the Codex Pighianus may be compared with that of the Escorialensis (discussed on pp. 383 f.).

An authentically antique formulation of the same expressive gesture is preserved in an eleventh-century manuscript of the *Theriaca* of Nicander (now in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, Ms. Suppl. grec 247), illustrated with miniatures copied from antique originals. There the young man's gesture of alarm (fol. 6) is used to illustrate an account of measures to be taken against snakebite. This manuscript was in Italy in the fourteenth century; see H. Omont, *Miniatures des plus anciens manuscrits grecs de la Bibliothèque Nationale*, 2d ed. (Paris 1929), 35 f., 38, pl. 65,4.

### The Gods of Antiquity and the Early Renaissance

- 559 Published as "Die antike Götterwelt und die Frührenaissance im Süden und im Norden," in *Verein für Hamburgische Geschichte* (1908).

Fuller accounts of the subjects touched upon in this outline may be found as follows:

Descriptions of the gods (Albericus, Berchorius, *Ovide moralisé*): see "Palazzo Schifanoia," pp. 563 ff. and addendum, pp. 732 f.

Planetary deities in Rimini: see "The Birth of Venus," pp. 96 f.

Death of Orpheus: see "Dürer," pp. 553 ff.

*Tarocchi*: see "Theatrical Costumes," p. 358, and addendum, p. 532.

Mercury: see "Low German Almanac," p. 593, and addendum, p. 758.

Dürer's *Jealousy*: see "Dürer," pp. 555 f.

Dürer's *Melencolia I*: see "Dürer," pp. 641 ff., and Panofsky and Saxl, *Dürers Melencolia I*, Studien der Bibliothek Warburg, no. 2 (Leipzig, 1923).

Stephan Arndes: see "Low German Almanac," p. 593.