

THE NEW STAR, THE NEW NOSE: TYCHO BRAHE'S NASAL PROSTHESIS



A Nosepiece for Peter*

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Tycho Brahe's loss of part of his nose in a duel has become an important part of his afterlife. The exact nature of his nasal prosthesis—of brass, gold, or silver—remains an enigma, not even solved at his exhumation in 2010. This essay discusses the materiality of Brahe's new nose and contextualizes it within cutting-edge sixteenth-century rhinoplasty. The shiny nose, given fetish status by Freud in 1927, became an object of ridicule in seventeenth-century satire, but only Brahe knew how to link the microcosmic and the macrocosmic, the heavenly and the earthly stars.

I conclude, therefore, that this star is not some kind of comet or a fiery meteor [...] but that it is a star shining in the firmament itself—one that has never previously been seen before our time, in any age since the beginning of the world.

Tycho Brahe, *De Nova et Nullius Aevi Memoria Prius Visa Stella* (1573)

On 29 December 1566, shortly after his twentieth birthday, Tycho Brahe famously lost part of his nose in a duel with the Danish nobleman Manderup Parsbjerg in the town of Rostock. Brahe had been warned by the lunar eclipse he had observed on 28 October that something was amiss, but while he believed it foretold the death of the Turkish Sultan, it may well have been a prediction of his own nasal eclipse just two months later; indeed, the two events are often juxtaposed in Brahe's biographies.¹ Whether a quarrel over

* I am grateful to Minna Skafte Jensen for assisting me with my translations from the Latin in notes 3 and 10.

¹ See Dreyer 1890, 26; Thoren 1990, 22.

mathematical or astrological ideas provoked the confrontation, remains uncertain,² but the nasal stigma pursued Brahe till after his death to the extent that it was even mentioned in Johannes Jessendi's funeral oration in 1601.³ Was Brahe's loss of nose accidental? Did Parsbjerg deliberately strive to inflict corporal punishment and public degradation on his fellow nobleman, or was he trophy-hunting when he cut off Tycho's nose to spite his face? The afterlives of nasal aggressors are tainted by their misdeeds; in the popular mind, the sculptor Pietro Torrigiano has primarily gone down in history as the fellow apprentice who broke Michelangelo's nose.⁴ Offended by Jessendi's reference to the events on that dark night in Rostock and convinced that his mature reputation had been damaged irreparably, Parsbjerg made the Danish King intervene on his behalf and demand an apology from Brahe's funeral orator.⁵ For the victim, however, the loss of nose not infrequently became a gain of character. Michelangelo's rebranding of himself as Socratic silene became an inseparable part of his personal and artistic myth, and Federico da Montefeltro's many profile portraits, with damaged nasal bridge and a sharply discerning left eye above a scarred cheek, allow us to contemplate the epitome of a ruthless Renaissance *condottiere*.⁶ Brahe's new frontispiece in mixed media became a recurrent feature in many of the

² See Dreyer 1890, 26–27; Thoren 1990, 22–23.

³ D. Johan. Jessenii, “De vita, et morte Dⁿ. Tychonis Brahei, &c. Oratio”: “His animi dotibus TYCHO noster præditus, cum viveret; quibus etiam nunc in animis bonorum vivit, & victurus perpetuò est. Has exornarunt fortunæ bona, quæ hæreditate consequutus fuerat amplissima, veluti insuper sperare poterat olim majora. Neque etiam corporis hunc destituit honor, atque decus: erecta statua; firma, & virilia latera; facies decora, & aperta, quam ante annos triginta Rostochii quidam noctu, ausu prorsus sicario, læsit, vestigio ad mortem usque semper conspicuo. Valetudine antehac usus fuit prosperrima, & inoffensa, quam deinceps loci mutatio, & ipsam paulatim immutavit, nutantemque reddidit; unde & ipse brevioris vitæ conjecturam desumpsit.” (Our Tycho was invested with such spiritual gifts while alive, with which he now lives and will forever live in the thoughts of good men. Fortune had adorned him with them as blessings granted him in abundance, so that he might even hope for yet greater gifts with the coming of time. Nor did the distinction and ornament of the body fail him: his stature was erect, his limbs strong and manly, his face handsome and open. Thirty years ago in Rostock some one did, however, molest it at night in a completely rascally attack, the traces of which remained visible right until death. His health had previously been excellent and had given him no problems, but his moving abroad gradually changed it and made it feeble, whence he himself also surmised that a relatively brief life was left him.) Gassendi 1655 (1727), 224–235, 233 (425).

⁴ See Barolsky 1990. For an anthology of nose-lore, see de Rijke et al. 2000.

⁵ Thoren 1990, 23ⁿ.

⁶ Federico da Montefeltro had lost his right eye during a jousting tournament in 1450, and it remains uncertain whether the damaged nasal bridge above his crooked nose was the result of the same unfortunate joust, or a deliberate surgical intervention to enlarge the field of vision for his remaining left eye. See Santoni-Rugiu and Massei 1982 and van Tonder et al. 2013.

portraits of him which proliferated in print among his contemporaries. Both Gemperlin's portrait of Brahe (**Fig. 1**) and Falck's much-circulated likeness of the Danish astronomer (**Fig. 2**) depict him with a noticeable nasal prosthesis which, when compared, leave us with some uncertainty as to exactly which part of the nose was lost in 1566. Did Parsbjerg's sword extract a substantial piece of cartilage and flesh from the central part of the nasal bridge, thus in effect chopping the astronomer's nose in two, or did it merely slice off a lump of flesh on the left side of Brahe's nose, as suggested in Gemperlin's portrait? Whatever the exact nature of the wound, it necessitated some form of nosepiece. The conventional belief is that the fashion-conscious Brahe had two prostheses made: one of gold and silver, for festive occasions, and a less precious one, presumably of brass, for everyday wear.⁷ The exhumations of Tycho Brahe in 1901 and 2010 confirm the existence of the astronomer's brazen nose; high contents of zinc and copper in the nasal cavities of the skull suggest brass rather than gold or silver.⁸ Whereas plenty of Brahe's bones and teeth could be identified in his coffin in Prague, his nosepiece, just like the original nose, has gone missing, leaving us all in doubt as to its exact form and materiality.

This essay deals with the problematic materiality of the new nose. Tycho Brahe lost his nose in a century rich in duels, when one of the most salient parts of the human body was often left at the feet of the combatants as a sad testimony to the sharpness of modern swords. While the pox was spreading rapidly, the number of people with collapsed nasal bridges as a result of tertiary-stage syphilis was likewise increasing, and the need for nasal attachments or reconstructions on the rise. The sixteenth century saw major discoveries in the realms of anatomy and surgery, and judging from the words of the Paduan surgeon Gabriele Falloppio, nasal prostheses were a perfectly normal addition to the molested human body. What he described shortly before his death in 1562 would appear to have been common practice: "Others shape noses from *papier maché* or the stuff of which masks are made, or silver, and cover them with some flesh-coloured pigment and attach them with glue or with other sticky substance, and when they go to sleep they remove them; the next morning, however, they put them on again."⁹ The carnivalesque, the metallurgical and the chemical join ranks in the formation of new body parts, attached for public appearance and detached for private rest. The mutilated face was hidden behind a mask, and makeup disguised the

⁷ Thoren 1990, 25 traces this view back to Gassendi 1655, 10, 209.

⁸ See Matiegka 1901, 10–12; <http://muzeum3000.nm.cz/national-museum-news/research-of-the-tomb-and-remains-of-tycho-brahe> consulted on 20 December 2016.

⁹ Gabriele Falloppio, *Opera Omnia*, 3 vols (Venice 1606), 2, 368, chapter 23, *De vulneribus*. Quoted in a translation from Gnudi & Webster 1950, 121.

true materiality of the nosepiece, linked to human flesh by means of a sticky substance. The encounters of paper, metal, glue and skin thus extend our notions of the human; the new hybrid body embraced non-organic material and made it seem part of its own.

“Non haberi sed esse” (Not to seem but to be) was one of Tycho Brahe’s most frequently employed mottos, inscribed at the top of the cartouche framing Falck’s portrait to counterbalance his name at the bottom. In the centre Brahe’s nasal prosthesis is literally thrust in our face, as if to remind us that the sitter is not afraid to be depicted, nosepiece and all, in a characteristic confrontational attitude. The juxtaposition of metal and flesh looks harsh and unpleasant; Willem Janszoon Blaeu, who spent two years with Brahe on the Island of Hven in the mid 1590s, recounted how the astronomer always carried a small box of oil or ointment which he smeared on his nose, perhaps to alleviate the effects of the clashes between skin and metal.¹⁰ As the metal plate compresses the flesh like a sheet of armour, it reminds us of Albrecht Dürer’s engraving of the rhinoceros of Lisbon (**Fig. 3**): armed for battle, the sitter contains and confines his inner energy behind a rigid cover. What remains of the astronomer’s proboscis is protected against further assault; the man with a nose of steel has good reasons to be pugnacious, as he has nothing to lose.

Had Tycho Brahe been a man of a more secretive nature, he could have chosen to cover his entire nose, thus leaving the exact nature of his nasal defamation in the dark. The leading French military surgeon Ambroise Paré, Royal surgeon to Henri II, François II, Henri III and Catherine de Medici, developed many sophisticated prostheses for lost limbs and body parts in a century when France was constantly at war. In his *Oeuvres*, first published in 1575, Paré proudly presented his many inventions to replace lost hands, arms and legs, explaining both graphically and in accessible French how his mechanisms worked. Advertising his nasal prostheses, he let the new nose assume centre stage. Under the heading *Portrait de nez* Paré proudly presented his noses (all strings attached) with and without moustaches (**Fig. 4**):

one who has lost his nose must have another made artificially, either of gold or silver, or from paper and pieces of cloth glued together, of the

¹⁰ “Retulit etiam mihi olim Guillelmus Iansonius, qui toto biennio cum Tychone commoratus fuerat, solere illum semper circumgestare pyxidulam, nesciebat unguento an glutine repletam, e qua satis frequenter aliquid illineret naso.” (Wilhelm Ianson, who spent two entire years with Tycho, once told me that he used to walk about with a small jar—whether it contained some unction or glue he did not know—from which he would quite frequently smear his nose with something or other.) Gassendi, quoted in Vinilandicus 2009, 160.

same shape and color as his own: this will be tied and attached by certain strings behind the occipital region, or to a cap. And furthermore, if it should happen (as it often does) that a part or all of the upper lips should be carried away with the nose, I have wished to show you the drawings: if the patient wore a beard, this could be arranged in whatever manner is necessary, so as to aid the improvement of his appearance.¹¹

The desire to “get back to normal” transpires from Paré’s presentation of his products; the colour of the prosthesis had to match the bearer’s own skin tone, and if a moustache used to be part of his image, that could also be provided. Paré was eager to distinguish himself from the Italian school of nose reconstructions, practiced since the fifteenth century in Sicily and Calabria, and moving further north to the medical school of Bologna in the last decades of the sixteenth century. With his publication in 1597 of the well-illustrated *De curtorum chirurgia per insitionem* Gaspare Tagliacozzi made famous the grafting techniques of the south, probably originally derived from India via the Arabic world.¹² A new nose could be grafted from the skin of the upper part of the patient’s arm onto his forehead, through a lengthy grafting process which required the recipient to remain in the same position for up to forty days, until the skin from the arm had settled between the eyes. Only then would the final strip be cut loose from the patient’s upper arm. With such procedures described in all their painful detail, both graphic (**Fig. 5**) and verbal, no reader can doubt the multiple meaning of the word “patient”. Paré described a case study of such an Italian nose reconstruction but concluded, with his French sense for aesthetics, that “this flesh is not of the same quality nor similar to that of the nose, and even when agglutinated and reformed it can never be of the same shape and color as that which was formerly in the place of the lost nose: likewise the openings of the nostrils can never be as they were originally.”¹³

Tagliacozzi dedicated his treatise to Vincenzo Gonzaga, head of a notoriously belligerent family, and argued that “those who follow camps and practice arms frequently meet with this kind of misfortune, thus a treatise which regards Mars and succors martial ills may fittingly be dedicated to martial men.”¹⁴ Tagliacozzi befriended the tutor of Vincenzo Gonzaga’s sons, the astronomer Giovanni Antonio Magini, professor of astrology, astronomy and mathematics at the University of Bologna.¹⁵ From the early 1590s Tycho

¹¹ Quoted in the translation found in Gnudi & Webster 1950, 124.

¹² See Gnudi & Webster 1950, 105–128. Tagliacozzi’s English afterlife is discussed in Cock 2015.

¹³ Gnudi & Webster 1950, 124.

¹⁴ Gnudi & Webster 1950, 126.

¹⁵ Gnudi & Webster 1950, 180.

Brahe and Magini corresponded on astronomy, and Magini's admiration for Brahe found expression in his dedication of his *Tabula Tetragonica* to the Danish astronomer in 1598.¹⁶ Magini forms a feeble human and professional link between the shining lights of Danish astronomy and Italian surgery; could one imagine that the reason why there was no nose-piece to be found in Brahe's coffin was quite simply that it had been replaced by the very latest Italian fashion in prosthetics: an autograft nose, replacing cold and sharp metal with soft and malleable skin?

By the mid seventeenth century Tagliacozzi's grafting technique had become the laughing stock for Royalist poets like Samuel Butler, who imagined the dangers of the allograft nose, with the skin of a lower-class person grafted onto the forehead of a nobleman. In Butler's satirical long poem *Hudibras* (1662–63), low and high, bottom and front, constitute polar opposites with the tragic result of nasal decadence:

So learned Taliacotius from
The brawny part of porter's bum,
Cut supplemental noses which
Would last as long as parent breech,
But when the date of nock was out,
Off dropped the sympathetic snout.¹⁷

Tycho Brahe was fortunate to die before his nose entered too far into the seventeenth century when nasal jokes became both pointed and malicious. "Nasal jokes often depend on substitution, decay or absence",¹⁸ and the satires on the syphilitic nose of the poet laureate William Davenant were both witty and vitriolic. Linking his name to the myth of Daphne, famously transformed into a laurel tree in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Davenant's enemies associated him with that very Ovidius Naso who—although apparently not ridiculed for his surname in Augustan Rome—now became the target of endless nasal jokes.¹⁹ Not merely a political and military war, the Civil War in England was also a verbal one. The large, shining nose of Oliver Cromwell became a favourite object of derision. The idealized body of the martyred King Charles I was supplemented "by its semiotic other: the carnivalized body of the mocking, Oliver Cromwell. And the grotesque body was epitomized in satire on Cromwell's ruby and oversized nose."²⁰ After the Royalist defeat at the Battle of Naseby on 14 June 1645, verbal combat became proboscidean. *A Case for*

¹⁶ See Thoren 1990, 254, 273, 405–406, 448.

¹⁷ Butler 1973, I, 1, 279–284.

¹⁸ Kerrigan 1994, 256.

¹⁹ Kerrigan 1994, 256–258.

²⁰ Knoppers 2000, 21.

Nol Cromwells Nose and the Cure of Tom Fairfax's Gout (1648) asked provocatively:

Is Cromwell Dead, durst Death his eyes to close,
Did he not tremble, to behold his nose,
Whose radiant splendour, (if Fame) doth not lie,
Shone brighter, than a Comet in the Skie.²¹

Cromwell's grotesque, shiny nose reflects both his domestic copper brewing pots and his lower-class origins, while shining more brightly than a comet. Another satire, of August 1660, *The Blazing-Star, or Nolls Nose Newly Revived* "compressed Cromwell's entire biography into a tale of the disembodied nose/phallus,"²² which, in its aggressive invasive politics left the battlefield with more flat-nosed victims than syphilis spread by the prostitutes.

Thy Nose it is a Slashing Nose,
Where ere it comes it still gives blowes,
More Noses it hath made to bleed,
Than did th'old Rams and Tom fooles Head,
This Nose, hath more flat Noses made
Than Ladies of Pleasure with their Trade.²³

The shine, the *Glanz* of the fetishized nose, which Freud would write about in his 1927 essay on Fetishism,²⁴ already was a stock feature of the public cult of the exceptional nose in the seventeenth century. The shining comet and the shining nose linked the macrocosmic and the microcosmic, but English fashion only reflected what had been cutting-edge science in Denmark a century previously. When on 11 November 1572 Tycho Brahe caught sight of the supernova, the new star, which he proudly publicized in *De Nova et Nullius Aevi Memoria Prius Visa Stella* (1573), he saw the star reflected and magnified in his own metallic nose and established a direct link between them, little knowing, of course, that to the popular mind these two shining objects would constitute the most famous components of his afterlife. His

²¹ Knoppers 2000, 23.

²² Knoppers 2000, 36.

²³ Knoppers 2000, 37.

²⁴ "The case of a young man who had exalted a certain kind of 'shine on the nose' into a fetishistic condition seemed most extraordinary. The very surprising explanation of this was that the patient had been brought up in an English nursery and had later gone to Germany, where he almost completely forgot his mother-tongue. The fetish, which derived from his earliest childhood, had to be deciphered into English, not German; the *Glanz auf der Nase* [shine on the nose] was really a 'glance at the nose'; the nose was thus the fetish, which, by the way, he endowed when he wished with the necessary special brilliance, which other people could not perceive." Freud 1950, 198.

profound affinity with Ovid has already been pointed out by leading scholars in connection with his love poetry,²⁵ but with his nasal prosthesis he literally erected a monument more permanent than brass.²⁶

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²⁵ "He obviously felt a kinship with Ovid, a nobleman who became a poet against his family's wishes. Brahe surely realized the irony when, many years later, after his departure from Denmark, he was forced to write poetry 'in exile'—as did Ovid." Zeeberg 2004, 107. See also Zeeberg 1994.

²⁶ See Horace, *Odes*, 3.30.

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Illustrations



Fig. 1. T. Gemperlin, *Tycho Brahe* (1586), engraving, Wellcome Institute, London.



Fig. 2. J. Falck, Tycho Brahe, engraving, Royal Library, Copenhagen.

Nach Christus gepurt. 1513. Jar. 28. i. May. Hat man den großmichtigen König von Portugal Emanuel den Königin pracht auf India ein sollich lebendig Thier. Das nennen sie Rhinoceros. Das ist by mit aller seiner gestalt also dardet. Es hat ein fard wie ein gepackter Schildkrot. Und ist vs dicken Schalen überlegt fast fitt. Und ist in der groß alder Schande aber nyberrechter von paynen/ vnd fast wehaffig. Es hat ein schars stark horn vorn auff der nase. Das seynde es alweg zu wegen wo es sey steyen ist. Das do sig Thier ist des selb fang tobt seynde. Der Schande furcht es fast vbel/ dann wo es In ankunde/ so laufft In das Thier mit dem kopff zwischen dyc forden pavn vnd reyst den Schande vnden am pauch auff vñ erwingt In/ des mag er sich nit erwehen. Dann das Thier ist also gewapent/ das In der Schande nichts kan thun. Sie sagen auch das der Rhinoceros Schnell/ fraydig vnd Listig sey.

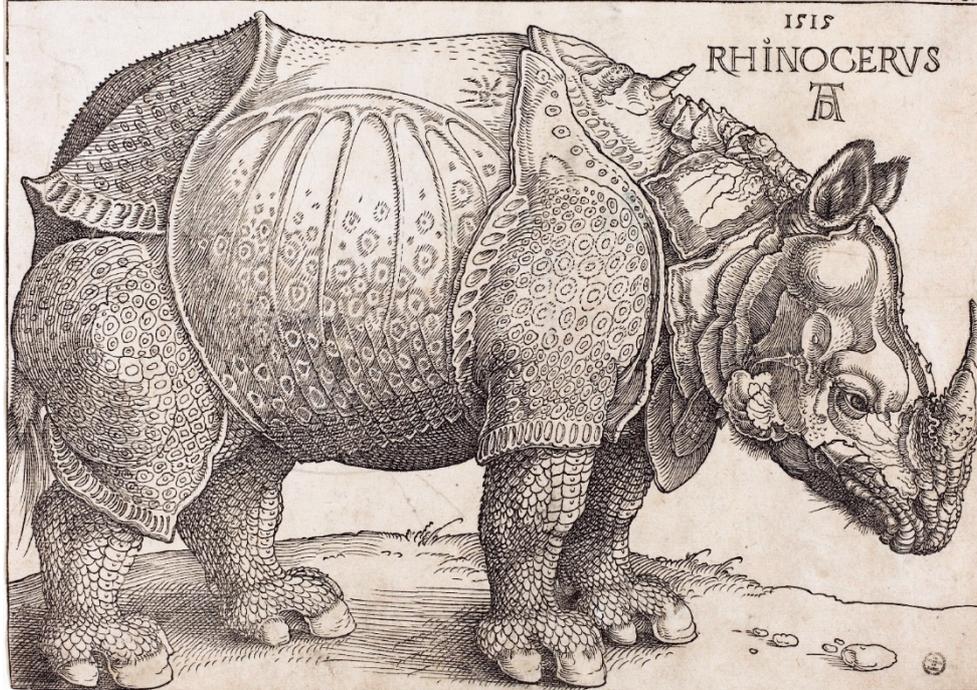


Fig. 3. Albrecht Dürer, *Rhinoceros* (1515), engraving.



Fig. 4. *Portraits de nez* from Ambroise Paré, *Oeuvres* (1575), engraving.



Fig. 5. *The engrafting of a new nose* from Gaspare Tagliacozzi, *De curtorum chirurgia per insitionem* (1597), engraving.

