Geneeskunde en humanisme. Een intellectuele biografie van Theodericus Ulsenius (c. 1460-1508)
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In 1494, Johannes Trithemius (1462-1516) published his *Liber de scriptoribus ecclesiasticis*, a catalogue of scholars that may be regarded as a 'who's who' of the literary world of the Late Middle Ages. One of the entries in this bibliographical dictionary was devoted to the Dutch physician and humanist Theodericus Ulsenius. Trithemius describes him as a 'philosopher, physician, orator and poet, in every sense a very learned man, excelling in prose and poetry alike'.

Theodericus Ulsenius, alias Dirk van Ulsen, has become an almost forgotten name in Dutch history. Yet the fact that he was included in Trithemius' survey implies that he must have been a figure of some significance. Around the year 1500, Ulsenius was a respected character among members of the Dutch and German humanist avant-garde. He was a poet, but he also wrote about medicine, philosophy, religion and astrology. Furthermore, being a genuine humanist, he also edited a number of works by classical authors.

Although Ulsenius' writings are worth studying in their own right, the intention of this biography is not primarily to rescue Ulsenius from oblivion and acknowledge his due role in the intellectual history of the Netherlands; the principle aim of studying this obscure humanist is to help assess the state of learning in that part of the world during the transition period from the Middle Ages to Early Modern times. For this purpose a study was made of how much a non-Italian intellectual like Ulsenius knew around 1500, what he did with his knowledge, how he structured it, how the new (Renaissance) knowledge influenced his thinking, what his psychology was, and what the social structures were in terms of which he thought. In order to shed light on the mental and intellectual tools of the early Dutch humanist, Ulsenius' works are dealt with in the context of his age and environment. In other words, based on his life and works an impression is given of a number of intellectual achievements specific to the period and related to the social context. The fact that Ulsenius became actively involved in several forms of cultural activity makes him a useful instrument with which to gauge whether or not the cultural and intellectual boundaries around the year 1500 shifted.

In order to realize these intentions the material has been arranged in two sections. The first four chapters are largely chronological and subsequently deal with Ulsenius' youth, his first activities in the Netherlands, his periods of residence in the German towns of Nuremberg, Augsburg, Mainz, Freiburg and Cologne, and also his role at the courts of emperor Maximilian of Habsburg and the dukes of Mecklenburg. The second half has been laid out thematically; it begins by discussing Ulsenius' professional activities as a physician and his publications on medicine. His reaction to the syphilis epidemic is discussed separately in a sixth chapter since this subject involves also aspects other than the strictly medical. The last chapter puts Ulsenius' life and works in a wider perspective. Departing from his own concept of the Renaissance *philosophus*, as
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Ulsenius was born around 1460 in Zwolle. Exactly where he studied is unknown, but around 1485 he returned to his native region as a doctor artium et medicinae. The aldermen of the Hanseatic town of Kampen appointed him as town physician in 1487. In an attempt to gain contact with life at the court of David of Burgundy, bishop of Utrecht, he composed an eloquent speech entitled Prognosticon novum. It displayed his extensive knowledge of astrological medicine, but to no avail: no data have been retrieved about any employment contract with the bishop. After living in Deventer for a few years, where he made friends with the teachers Alexander Hegius and Bartholomeus Coloniensis, Ulsenius left his country a disappointed man. In a valedictory poem he referred to his native region, the northern part of the present-day Netherlands as Frisia brutta (boorish Friesland). His prediction that this region would be immortalized by the renown of Ulsenius’ studies has never come true.

Between 1492 and 1501 Ulsenius resided in the prosperous city of Nuremberg. In this imperial city he was soon adopted by the intellectual circle around Konrad Celtis and Sebaldr Schreyer. Through them Ulsenius befriended the doctor/historian Hartmann Schedel and also Albrecht Dürer. Most of the texts of Ulsenius known to us date from the Nuremberg years. Many of them have survived as a result of the efforts of Schedel; the latter used to copy the writings of Ulsenius and his fellow humanists, and he also allowed them to make use of his famous library.

In 1495 Ulsenius was appointed town physician of Nuremberg. Together with his colleagues Ulrich Pynder and Heinricus Rosenzweig he supervised the town’s health care and had the task of suppressing the syphilis epidemic. He also cooperated with Johann Pirckheimer and fellow physician Hieronymus Müntzer in erecting a humanist ‘Poetenschule’.

The German archhumanist Konrad Celtis was a close friend of Ulsenius. Seventeen letters from Ulsenius were included in the collected letters of Celtis. Among other things they mention Celtis as referring patients to him, yet it was predominantly a question of Ulsenius endorsing his friend. He advised Ulsenius on his wedding plans and tried to extract money from the town council in exchange for Celts’ Norimberga. Through Konrad Celtis and the imperial secretary Petrus Bonomus, Ulsenius was introduced to the humanist court circles around emperor Maximilian of Habsburg. Later he called himself caesareus architius, but information about any such official has not been found. Neither do we know when Ulsenius’ crowning as poeta laureatus took place. What we do know for certain is that he took part in the staging of Ludus Dianae, a play performed on Schrove Tuesday 1501 at the castle at Linz before the imperial couple. It has always been assumed that Konrad Celtis was the playwright, but it appears from clm 1851 of the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek Munich, that Ulsenius himself wrote the lines of the part he played, that of Silvanus, a faun. Ulsenius’ original draft of this soliloquy has been included in the present book as Appen-
dix I. Later, when the play was published, Celtis apparently revised the entire text. Finally, anthologies of poetry for Johannes Fuchsmagen and Blasius Holzl serve to illustrate Ulsenius' close acquaintance with these imperial senior servants and art patrons.

The merchant Konrad Barchanter used to invest the money of the well-to-do Nuremberg citizens. These investments did not prove to be reliable, for at the beginning of 1501 it appeared that he had squandered all of the Nurembergers' money. Among the victims was Theodericus Ulsenius, who decided to leave Nuremberg after his bankruptcy. On March 27 1502 he was appointed professor of medicine at the university of Mainz. His sojourn in this town proved to be brief. He subsequently was awarded a similar position in Freiburg which appeared to be of equally short duration. In Mainz Ulsenius made friends with the father and son Gresenmund. Through these scholars he became involved in humanist circles in Mainz, Freiburg, Strasbourg and Basel, meeting with scholars like Jacob Wimpeling, Gregorius Reisch, Ulrich Zasius and Johannes Eckius.

In the summer of 1505 Ulsenius attended the diet in Cologne. On this occasion his friend Georgius Sibutus was crowned as poet. He also visited Johannes Trithemius, who had moved to Cologne. After the festivities Ulsenius set off for northern Germany. He started a medical practice in Lübeck and began to work as a court physician for the dukes of Mecklenburg. By the end of 1507 Ulsenius returned to his native country, where he shortly thereafter died. In January 1508 he was buried at St. John's cathedral at Bois-le-Duc.

Theodericus Ulsenius was primarily a physician. As a consequence, this book describes his activities as a doctor and his efforts to elevate the social status of physicians. Ulsenius was also taken up by the scientific side of his profession. In his Nuremberg period he compiled a new edition of Hippocrates' Aphorisms, in which the old classification by Galen was abandoned. Ulsenius rearranged the statements to make better use of them in the university medical curriculum. Appendix II contains the contents of Ulsenius' edition. Moreover Galen's accompanying commentary was replaced with a medical didactic poem from Ulsenius' hand, entitled Clinicus pharmacandi modus.

In the speech which Ulsenius wrote upon his assumption of duties as town physician of Nuremberg, he pointed out that the physician is in no way inferior to other intellectuals. Like them, a physician was a philosophus and as such committed to the well-being of the whole of society. Obviously, a doctor should set an ethical and intellectual example for society. These elevated ethics implied that a doctor should at all times avoid the pursuit of personal advantage. In ancient times the sacred twin doctors, SS. Cosmas and Damianus, commemorated in verse by Ulsenius, had already set the right standard with their free medical care. With respect to the question of the social status of physicians - which was not particularly high in the Middle Ages - Ulsenius also explored the history of his profession. From Justinian's Codex civilis he gathered that a town doctor should always be referred to as archiater.

Being the town physician, Ulsenius was confronted with the syphilis epidemic that reached Germany by 1496. Very few concrete actions were taken to stop the disease; doctors collectively advised the town council to take the precautionary
measures that were normally reserved for times of pestilence. As early as August of the same year Ulsenius published a poem called *Vaticinium in epidemicam saeculi*, which has become well known as a consequence of Dürrer accompanying woodcut. In the poem the god Apollo appears before Ulsenius in a dream and connects the emergence of the disease to a conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn. Appendix III consists of the (annotated) Latin text plus a Dutch translation of this specimen of astrological medicine. The *Vaticinium* was aimed at a literary audience of fellow humanists. In his *Cura mali francisci* Ulsenius addressed his medical colleagues. The work consists of fifty maxims on syphilis, discussing the disease from both the medical and astrological points of view.

As a doctor, Ulsenius emulated (Neo)Platonic ideas and regarded himself as a divinely inspired *poeta orati,* someone who was consequently a theologian and philosopher by nature and vocation. Chapter VII deals with Ulsenius' views on the Renaissance scholar, who, aided by his intellect, is supposed to aspire the highest attainable in morals, religion and ratio, the *sumnum bonum.* It will be evident that, like his great examples Hippocrates, Galen and Avicenna, Ulsenius looked upon doctors as philosophers.

In his *Prognosticon novum,* which has only partly survived, Ulsenius exposed his views on the validity of astrology. He goes back to Thomas Aquinas and Marsilio Ficino, who agreed that natural astrology was acceptable since it only studied the influence of the position and movements of the stars. Shortly after the turn of the century Ulsenius published *Speculator: consiliorum enigmaticus microcosmi protheati torrens.* This poem contains a hundred questions about scientific issues. The poet had selected these questions from the so-called *Questiones phisicales,* a collection of pseudo-Aristotelean *Problematas* originating from Salerno around 1200.

Ulsenius devoted *vitae* to St. Judocus and St. Switbert, saints who were popular in the Low Countries. His *Hymnus de sancto Judoco* was an adaptation in Sapphic stanzas of the poem which Rudolf Agricola had written about this saint. Switbert came to the continent as one of the companions of Willibrord in 690. The *Sequencia sanctissimi Switberti* was based on the Switbert biography by the Dutch historian Dirk Frankensz Pauw. Ulsenius' saints' lives are textbook examples of humanism in that they emphasize the zeal for study and eloquent preaching of Judocus and Switbert, while simultaneously displaying local-patriotic and nationalist traits.

During the Renaissance interest in the nature and actions of man began to increase. There was a flood of publications which, guided by the bible and classical moral philosophy, tackled the question of how man should live his life in order to achieve the highest good. In his *Wallfahr menschlichs elldens* Ulsenius joins a long tradition of *contemptus mundi* literature. Probably written under the influence of Francesco Petrarca's religious writings this poem calls for the abandonment of mundane materialism and incites the reader to set a course for paradise along the path of reflection.

In Augsburg Ulsenius produced an edition of the pseudo-Hippocratic *De insania Democriti,* which recounts the visit of Hippocrates to the philosopher Democritus. Furthermore, Hartmann Schedel copied a prose fragment called
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*Lumen vitae* in which Ulsenius brought out the contrast between the optimistic view on life of Democritus and the pessimism of Heraclitus. Ulsenius devised a compromise of his own. Life on earth was miserable, but there was a remedy: reason. Only the power of *ratio* enabled man to live in virtue and accept death in peace.

Through a study of Ulsenius' works and a reconstruction of the intellectual network of which he was part, one can conclude that (early) humanism in the Netherlands and Germany was sustained by a small avant-garde of intellectuals who were on mutually friendly terms and were clustered in small groups around local or regional pioneers. The poetry of Ulsenius is thoroughly obscure and therefore difficult to interpret. This proclivity for the abstruse may be partly due to a lack of stylistic clarity, yet at the same time it was also clearly intentional. As a Renaissance poet Ulsenius felt that poetry should be as enigmatic as possible since its subject was extremely elevated and should only be discovered after many uphill struggles.

Dutch humanism has often been characterized as Biblical or Christian Humanism. However, the works of Ulsenius and many of his friends show more affinity with the writings of Italian fellow-spirits such as Marsilio Ficino, Cristoforo Landino and Maffeo Vegio. Inspired by Classical Antiquity, Theodericus Ulsenius attempted to shape his life and work as an autonomous intellectual, poet and physician. The Christian religion was an element inherent in this life, but it was not decisive in determining the intellectual attitude. It is probable that Ulsenius' interest in astrology, Neoplatonic philosophy and natural philosophy is more characteristic of the lives and works of a generation of humanists after Rudolf Agricola than is the traditional image of the pious, bible reading Christian Humanist.

* Translation by drs Herman Grimm.