

Till Eulenspiegel - The Merry Prankster

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Webster's Deluxe Unabridged Dictionary identifies Till Eulenspiegel as a 14th Century Brunswick peasant whose pranks and drollness were the subject of widespread tales and the inspiration for a tone-poem by Richard Strauss. *Encyclopedia Americana* adds: "Reputedly, Till was historical and died in 1350 of the Black Death. His grave near Brunswick is still pointed out. ...The key to Till's popularity lies in his escapades in almost every town in Germany as well as towns in Denmark and Poland. He even traveled to Paris, where he was a schoolmaster at the Sorbonne. He beguiled his employers in almost every occupation: doctor, dentist, smith, cobbler, tailor, tanner, butcher, horse dealer and monk."



Brittanica notes: "The jests and practical jokes, which generally depend on a pun, are broadly farcical, often brutal, sometimes obscene, often scatological; but they have a serious theme. In the figure of Eulenspiegel, the individual gets back at society; the stupid but cunning peasant demonstrates his superiority to the narrow, dishonest, condescending townsman, as well as to the clergy and nobility. ... Eulenspiegel has been the subject of musical and literary works, notably Strauss' Symphonic poem *Till Eulenspiegel's lustige Streiche* (Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks) (1894), and Gerhart Hauptmann's epic poem *Till Eulenspiegel*."

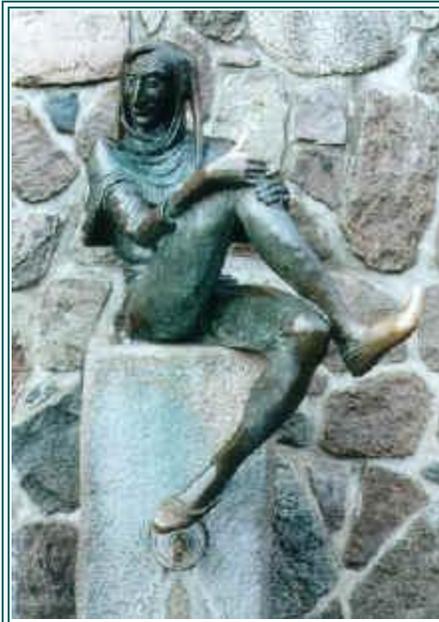
The earliest known complete edition of Eulenspiegel's adventures was written by an unknown author who used the pen name "N." Printed in 1515 by Johannes Grüninger, it was accompanied by woodcuts by Hans Baldung Grien, a friend and assistant to Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528). A number of those woodcuts are seen throughout this article.

World Book reveals that Hans Sachs of Germany wrote plays and songs about Till during the 1500s. Charles de Coster wrote a Flemish epic with Till as the hero in the 1800s. In 1995, Jay Williams published *The Wicked Tricks of Tyl Uilenspiegel* with several stories of Till's escapades in and around Edam in The Netherlands.

Last, but certainly not least, our own Kurt Sommerich's article in *Prosit*, March 1991 — *Reflections on German Folklore* — among other tales wrote that "the enigmatic Till Eulenspiegel was a prankster of the late middle ages whose unforgettable exploits, mostly in Lower Saxony and the Flemish provinces, were first reported in print 200 years after his death." He mentioned the tone-poem by Strauss and included a photo of the Till Eulenspiegel statue in the town of Mölln, north Germany, seen here to the right.

My interest in this prankster was piqued by a set of six steins, each commemorating one of Eulenspiegel's tales. Produced by Rosenthal, a porcelain manufacturer well known for its high quality tableware and figurines, the artwork on the steins is by Bjorn Wiinblad of Copenhagen. Wiinblad is a talented artist who has done much work for Rosenthal. His art is familiar to many collectors who know nothing about

steins, or Eulenspiegel, for that matter. He carried out the Eulenspiegel series with great originality and panache.



The hero of this article perches smugly on a stone pedestal in Mölln, observing the world and biding his time until his next prank.



Although this is a set, each stein portrays a different fanciful tale of our hero's adventures in a specific town or locale. From left to right, top to bottom, we see the steins from Quedlinburg, Dorf, Erfurt, Anhalt, Saale and Bamberg. (The complete artwork on these steins may be seen in the separate articles which relate the tales on which they are based.) Three of the steins are signed "Wiinblad 75," two are signed without the date, and one is unsigned, but the artwork is unmistakable. The illustration below provides a view of the lid and the base of these steins, revealing what might be considered a cloverleaf or quatrefoil cross-section whose line is artistically continued from the base through the spun pewter lid. All six pieces were purchased at a shop in Frankfurt, Germany on a single day in 1976-77, on the

advice of a Hungarian friend. He insisted that their future value would ZOOM! He may yet be proven right, but currently no one seems to know they exist!



This set is a product of Rosenthal's "*studio-linie*" from the program "*Form ohne Namen*," or "form without name." The steins are marked by a raised circular seal in the center of the base. The top half of the seal is the underlined Rosenthal logo. Below that is "*studio-linie*" and below that the word "GERMANY." Inside the lid there is an impressed stamp with raised letters. Again at the top is the underlined Rosenthal logo, below that the word "GERMANY" and, at the bottom, the signature of Bjorn Wiinblad. If whimsy is your bag, you are in very good company, along with Richard Strauss and Hans Sachs (the Meistersinger). Check out your local library. Five of the tales represented on these steins appear in German in *Hausbuch deutscher Sagen und Schwänke* collected by Josef Guggenmos. The full narrative of Eulenspiegel's adventures, of which there are 95, was translated to English by Paul Oppenheimer and is available in *Till Eulenspiegel, His Adventures*. A brief retelling of the two stories which are celebrated on the steins featured in this article provides amusement and helps us to better understand this character. (The number preceding the title of each of these tales identifies its position within the 95 original episodes published in 1515.)

Click the links below to read each of the six tales of Eulenspiegel's escapades as depicted on this set of steins.

- [3 & 4. How Eulenspiegel learned to walk the tightrope and got even with the townspeople who laughed when he fell in the river.](#)
- [9. How Eulenspiegel crawled into a beehive and how two thieves came and stole the hive.](#)
- [22. How Eulenspiegel hired himself out as Tower Trumpeter for the Count of Anhalt.](#)
- [29. How Eulenspiegel taught a jackass to read an old psalmbook in Erfurt.](#)
- [33. How Eulenspiegel ate for money in Bamberg.](#)
- [36. How Eulenspiegel bought chickens without money and the farmwife let the rooster be used as a deposit in Quedlinburg.](#)

Till Eulenspiegel, An Enigmatic Character

When Col. John Gaustad and I first discussed preparing an article about Till Eulenspiegel, both of us knew him by his common name, "The Merry Prankster," yet neither of us knew much more than that. We embarked upon our research expecting to discover a light-hearted people's hero, a player of practical jokes. The first surprise was to realize that Eulenspiegel was both spectacularly famous and paradoxically unknown.

Eulenspiegel is thought by many to be a real person, born in Saxony, who traveled extensively in Germany, as well as Poland, Denmark and Italy, before dying of the Black Plague in 1350 in Mölln. A gravestone in that town commemorates his death.

Whether real or legend, Eulenspiegel is a complex figure who played a popular role in socio-cultural expression.

He was wildly popular in the Schwank-literatur or "fool's literature" of 16th century, providing a distraction from the burdens of everyday life in the later Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Everyone who could read was ready for a laugh, particularly when it came at someone else's expense. The tales of Eulenspiegel were intended to mock and satirize the pretentiousness of mankind and its institutions, and in them we discover Eulenspiegel in a wide variety of roles - an actor, thief, liar, prankster, devil, saint, sadist, philanthropist and philosopher - and with a special flair for tormenting his victims through the literal interpretation of idiomatic statements or figures of speech. The tales are often vulgar and scatological, both in language and story device. Interestingly, they contain no sexual themes.

The name *Eulenspiegel* literally means "owl glass" or "owl mirror". Indeed, the title page of Johannes Grüninger's 1515 edition of Eulenspiegel's adventures features a woodcut by Hans Baldung Grien in which Tyl is depicted holding an owl and a mirror (see *Prosit* September 1998). These devices also appear on Eulenspiegel's gravestone in Mölln in Schleswig Holstein, and in Tale 40 ("How Eulenspiegel forged a blacksmith's hammer, tongs and other tools together") we're told that whenever he performed some mischief in a town or village where he was unknown, Eulenspiegel used chalk or coal to draw an owl and a mirror above a doorway. Metaphorically this name has been interpreted as "wise reflection," as Eulenspiegel was widely understood to be holding up a mirror by which society could judge itself. But the name has a coarser meaning in contemporary hunter's jargon which will not be repeated here, and in medieval time the owl was regarded as the devil's bird, and Eulenspiegel's tales may be seen as object lessons in which the readers are forced to face their own stupidities and failings. Literary scholars have studied and analyzed these tales at great extent, and they differ on their conclusions. However, it is safe to say that Eulenspiegel is a unique, complex and mysterious character, not at all what we infer from the title of Richard Strauss' symphonic poem, "Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks."



The title page woodcut by Hans Baldung Grien from Johannes Grüninger's 1515 edition of Eulenspiegel's adventures. Note the owl and the mirror - *Eulenspiegel*.

The Oppenheimer translation of the original tales of Tyl Eulenspiegel reveals something quite unexpected to a modern reader. 16th century humor, reflecting the social and moral climate of the times, seems harsh, unforgiving, even hurtful. In the 20th century we are amused by a practical joker who embarrasses and discomfits some person or office, or who gives his victims an unexpected but temporary shock with his antics. The victims are sometimes deserving, sometimes simply convenient, but the pranks are harmless, and their effect is soon gone. But Eulenspiegel was able to victimize anyone, innocent or deserving, and was always happy to use his pranks to gain personal benefit. When his artful shrewdness was insufficient, Eulenspiegel readily resorted to lying. He is a mischief maker bent on deceit. While he does trick the dishonest, harsh, cruel, stupid, conceited, obnoxious, boring and pretentious - in short, the deserving - he also preys on the naive, the gullible and the innocent. His tales are often explained as learned reflections on society, religion, education and political systems of the day. By satirizing and making fun of these institutions while taking advantage of their members, his tales were a popular source of

laughter and relief from the uncertainty of everyday life in the 16th century.

Over the centuries Eulenspiegel's tales have been "dumbed down", becoming bland adaptations of satire and scat to acquiesce to prudish standards. His stories still amuse and enchant their readers, and are perhaps best known in current times as a result of their adaptation in children's literature!

The last two tales in Eulenspiegel's life (#94 and 95) concern his burial in 1350. Using ancient custom, his body had been placed in a casket formed by the hollowed out trunk of a tree. As the tree was being lowered on two ropes into his grave, the rope at his feet broke, and the tree fell into the grave, leaving Eulenspiegel standing upright. It was quickly agreed, "Let him stand. As he was odd while he lived, he ought to be odd in death too."

The grave was closed with Till Eulenspiegel standing upright. A specially carved gravestone, showing an owl clutching a mirror and providing his epitaph, was placed on his grave. Till's epitaph reads:



Don't move this stone, let that be clear - Eulenspiegel's buried here.

Acknowledgments:

Hausbuch deutscher Sagen und Schwänke by Josef Guggenmos, published in 1972 by Verlag Carl Ueberreuter, Vienna and Heidelberg, translations by Carolyn Place.

EULENSPIEGEL by Francis Lee Utley, Ohio State University.

Encyclopedia Americana, 1994, Vol. 10. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1988, Vol. 4. *World Book*, 1994, Vol. 6.

Prosit, "Reflections on German Folklore" by Kurt Sommerich, March 1991, p. 2155.

Prosit "All Devotees of Till Eulenspiegel and Owners of V&B #2582", March 1981, p. 771.

Prosit "The Medieval Jester, The Lighter and Darker Side of Humor: Mettlach Stein Number 2582, and Mettlach Steins Number 2035 and 2057" by John Aschenbrenner, December 1994, p. 406.

Till Eulenspiegel, His Adventures, by Paul Oppenheimer, Oxford University Press, 1995.

To Carolyn Place for her translations of these tales.