

Lutheranism and Anti-Ciceronianism

Despite all the glowing accolades received by Cicero from Renaissance and Reformation humanists (including Luther), the criticisms of his style that had been expressed already in antiquity continued apace in the early modern period. By the end of the sixteenth century, a strong anti-Ciceronian movement was well underway. In the nineteenth century, thanks to the Romantics, German philhellenists, and Theodor Mommsen, Cicero's personal reputation sank lower than ever before. The Italian word *Cicerone* is used today to describe a talkative guide, not a philosopher or statesman.¹ Directly and indirectly, in his own lifetime, and thereafter through the considerable influence he continued to exert on his religious followers and admirers, Martin Luther must surely have helped to contribute to the depreciation of Cicero's value to the cultural tradition of Europe and America.

There is almost as much that is negative as there is positive that can be discerned in what Luther has to say about Cicero and his Latinity. Indeed, the Reformation he helped to inaugurate has long been (not without reason) associated with the ultimate demise of the Latin language, not the resurgence of Cicero or Latin prose. Erasmus went so far as to complain that "Lutheranism" had ruined literature (CWE 14,129). His charge has been reiterated often since, and there is at least a germ of truth in the accusation.²

In this final chapter we retrace our steps, returning to the early modern period, as we explore the nature and extent of Luther's anti-Ciceronianism and its possible influence on subsequent generations, paying special attention to the role his disciple Matthias Flacius may have played in this connection and taking a close look at the Latinity of one of the best known Lutheran exegetes of the seventeenth century, Johann Albrecht Bengel. How shall we reconcile Luther's indifference or even hostility to Cicero with the highly favorable estimations of the Roman rhetor he so frequently expressed? How influential were Luther's negative views? Did they affect anti-Ciceronian tendencies of the later sixteenth century? Does the impact of Luther's negative views on Cicero

1 First documented, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd ed., vol. 3, 212), in Joseph Addison's *Dialogue on Medals* of 1726.

2 Markos, *From Achilles to Christ*, 11, claims without a great deal of elaboration or evidence that "much Christian (especially evangelical) suspicion surrounding the study of the Greeks and Romans can be traced back to the father of Reformed theology: Martin Luther."

extend, at least indirectly, as far as the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and even the present, not only in Europe but also in the United States? These are questions that will be raised, if not always answered, in this last chapter.

The Vernacular Reformation

Not all reformers by any means were as enthusiastic in their endorsement of the Latin language as Luther and Melanchthon. Already in the late medieval and early modern periods a groundswell of sentiment against Latin had arisen, especially among followers of reforming movements such as the Lollards. Vernacular languages had a special appeal to many of the reformers because they could be used for religious communication with the common people. During the sixteenth century, popular instructional materials written in the vernacular began to appear with greater and greater frequency. If the reformers had restricted themselves to Latin, it is most unlikely that the Reformation would have had anything like the impact that it did. For instance, Argula von Grumbach (a Bavarian noblewoman), who knew no Latin, became an ardent supporter of the Reformation, but only after she had become familiar with German translations of the works of Luther.³

It would be hard to overestimate the importance of the printing revolution in this regard. Beginning in the middle of the fifteenth century, the printing press had convincingly demonstrated its ability to facilitate the dissemination of texts that would normally have circulated much more slowly and less widely. Theological tracts which would formerly have been written exclusively in Latin were now beginning to be written in (or translated into) the vernacular. When produced in printed editions rather than in the traditional manuscript format, writings such as Luther's theological treatises in the German language were instrumental in fanning the flames of the Reformation movements.⁴

Also critical for the eventual undermining of the venerable *lingua franca* of Europe was the role played by Luther's German Bible. There had been a series of attempts to translate the Bible into German and other vernacular tongues before Luther's, but his was one of the most influential. It was intended to speak not only to the well educated but also to "the mother in the house, the

3 See Matheson, *Argula von Grumbach*.

4 On the central role of the printing press for the progress of the Reformation, see Eisenstein, *Printing Press as Agent of Change*. But see also the thoughtful qualifications of Grafton, "Importance of Being Printed," 265–286.