CHAPTER FOUR

SOME LUTHERAN READINGS OF GREEK TEXTS

After observing the role Greek itself played in a Melanchthonian view of universal history, we now turn to a consideration of a small corpus of commentaries and other forms of interpretation of Greek texts. As with the previous chapter, the prism through which these texts are scrutinised is that of the nature and role of Greek antiquity in Melanchthonian understanding of the past. Here too important philological aspects of these commentaries are not treated, unless they bear relevance to the question at hand. As revealing as programmatic orations are, the commentaries themselves are a good indicator of the prevalence of the historical outlooks discussed above in Lutheran pedagogy itself, rather than pedagogical thought. In other words, what the discussion of these commentaries attempts to demonstrate is the importance of a contingent sixteenth century context to understanding how Homer, Hesiod, and other ‘Classics’ were read and taught. While this does not tell the whole story, it does set at centre stage a crucial aspect of the Classics’ sixteenth century pedagogical reception often ignored.

Melanchthon on Hesiod and Theognis

In the Chronicon Carionis Melanchthon posits five ancient sages as the founding figures of Greek letters: Atlas, Linus, Orpheus, Homer, and Hesiod.¹ It was only for the latter two that he had any real interest. The first edition of his commentary on Hesiod’s Works and Days appeared in 1532.² In a lengthy prolegomenon he stresses the pedagogical need for intensive rather than extensive reading, quoting Pliny the Younger’s maxim: Multum enim legendum est, non multa.³ A shallow

¹ CR xii, 787f.
² Philippi Melanthonis Enarratio Hesiodi Poematis inscripti Opera et Dies (1532), CR xviii, 158–270.
acquaintance with a plethora of writings is of no benefit to those seeking enlightenment. It is far better, he admonished his students, to concentrate on a few select writings, and to study them well.

It is on the authority of the wisest men of antiquity, Melanchthon continues, that Hesiod is to be considered as one of those authors whose work merits repeated study. Hesiod’s exceptional status owes both to his model eloquence as well as to the profundity of his work. Both Virgil and Ovid imitate him and often offer close renderings of some of his verses. Parallel verses from Virgil and Ovid to lines in Hesiod are repeatedly referred to throughout the commentary. Though the point is not made here explicitly, this last argument suggests that a thorough acquaintance with Hesiod is a prerequisite for a true understanding of Virgil and Ovid, with whom Melanchthon’s students would have been well acquainted.

The crux of the Hesiod introduction tackles a cultural and theological dilemma: Melanchthon is aware of the common objection to drawing moral precepts from pagan authors. His outright, even scornful, refutation of this objection pivots on his understanding of the Protestant distinction between lex and evangelium. Melanchthon does not attempt to Christianise Hesiod in any way. Though he is clearly concerned with adapting him for Christian pedagogy, there nowhere appears the suggestion that his ideas were somehow derived from earlier Judeo-Christian sources or that he possessed an anima naturaliter christiana. Furthermore, he studiously avoids any allegorisation of pagan writings which may suggest that while they wrote about the Olympian gods or the Trojan War, it was the Trinity and Christian salvation that was really on their minds. This outright rejection of a long Christian tradition of allegorising the ancients is made poignantly clear in his commentary on Virgil’s Eclogues, where in his brief notes on the fourth Eclogue, a locus classicus for a christianising interpreta-

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4 Ibid. 176.
5 Ibid. 178.
6 Perhaps the most important example Melanchthon chooses not to follow is Erasmus’ understanding of Socrates. Following the development of Erasmus’ treatment of Socrates in the Enchiridion, Praise of Folly, Adagia, and Colloquies, Lynda Christian has argued that Socrates was not only understood by Erasmus as innately Christian, but that the changes in the way Erasmus understood him were linked to the humanist’s understanding of the nature of Christ and Christian teaching. In a sense Socrates became for Erasmus, in later years, a prototype of Christ. See L. G. Christian, “The Figure of Socrates in Erasmus’ Work” Sixteenth Century Journal 3(2) (1972), pp. 1–10. This is a path consciously avoided by Melanchthon.