DEATH AND LIFE AFTER DEATH IN MARTIN LUTHER'S LATIN ELEGIES

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For the most part, scholars who are familiar with Martin Luther's Latin poems have dismissed them as of only marginal significance.¹ Johannes Schilling mentions the nearly thirty Latin verse compositions of Luther that appear in the Weimar edition of his works only “as a side note” and describes them as “modest in scope and significance.”² The Latin poems receive no more than a passing reference in Martin Brecht's otherwise thoroughgoing treatment of Luther and his writings.³ By contrast, Luther's German verse compositions, most notably his chorales, while also relatively few in number, have been the subject of extensive scholarly attention.⁴ This is understandable, given the German hymns' wide spread use and enduring popularity. A recent study estimates that approximately 2,000 editions of Lutheran hymnals, containing many of his hymns, were produced in the sixteenth century.⁵ There was no similarly wide audience for Luther's Latin poetry and there is still no modern critical edition of his Latin poems.⁶

¹ The most recent study of Luther's Latin poetry, by Udo Frings, Martinus Lutherus – Poeta Latinus = Orientierung: Schriftenreihe zur Lehrerfortbildung 10 (Aachen, 1983), is disappointingly brief (46 pages) and fairly uncritical. Helpful for questions of dating, although by no means complete either, is O. Albrecht's discussion of Luther's Latin verse in WA 35, 596–606. Georg Bäsecke, Luther als Dichter = Hallische Universitätsreden 65 (Halle, 1935), concentrates almost entirely on Luther's German poetry.
³ Martin Brecht observes that "we should note at least parenthetically" that Luther wrote Latin poetry, in the second volume, Shaping and Defining the Reformation, 1521–1532, of his magisterial biography of Luther in three volumes (Minneapolis, 1985–1993), 135.
⁶ Luther himself credited much of his success in writing his German hymns to his stylistic master, the Latin poet Virgil: Der Poet Virgilius hat mir solches gelehret, der also seine Carmina und Wort auf die Geschichte, die er beschreibt, so künstlich applicieren kann (WA 19, 50).
Even for highly proficient Latin poets like Virgil, it could take a very long time indeed to write and rewrite just a few dactylic hexameters, a meter that was developed originally for the Greek language. So, why did this highly successful German author spend any of his valuable time, especially in later life, writing Latin verse? The usual scholarly assumption seems to be that Luther wrote Latin verse compositions in order to demonstrate his mastery of this difficult process, not because of his burning desire to communicate a significant truth. He simply relished the literary challenge. There is certainly something to be said for this explanation. Several of Luther’s compositions clearly participate in the agonistic poetics so popular with his humanist contemporaries. In his response to the slanderous Latin verse of Simon Lemnius, for instance, Luther uses variations of the word merda twelve times in a ten-line poem. The poem is a scatological tour de force. In a similar vein, Luther’s elegant paraphrase of the first seven lines of the Aeneid, directed against his old foe, Johannes Cochlaeus, is a miniature anti-epic written to make fun of an anti-hero.7 One could well argue that these poems of Luther do indeed have little substance or significance.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that all of Luther’s Latin poems lack seriousness. In fact, it seems clear that he intended many of them to be far more than rhetorical exercises or casual efforts at light verse. And we know that Luther himself believed that there was more to being a poet than simply mastering the formal elements of the medium. One of the most stinging insults in his poetic riposte to the humanist Lemnius is that he was a “shitty” poet (merdosus poeta). Even though Lemnius knew the “quantity of the syllables,” Luther felt that the insulting and disgusting content of his poetry vitiated other aspects of his verse.8 “He is a shit poet. He is not able to be a poet who just knows the quantity of the syllables. He is a fool and it cannot go well for him.”

In what follows I will argue that it was not just his fascination with the literary challenge that drew Luther to the composition of Latin verse, but that he found this particular literary medium exceptionally well suited to one of the most profound of all possible poetic themes, namely, death and life after death. The contemplation of death and the transitory nature of