

Carl P. E. Springer. *Luther's Aesop*.

Early Modern Studies 8. Kirksville: Truman State University Press, 2011. xiv + 250 pp. \$39.95. ISBN: 978-1-612480-00-8.

Few early modern thinkers have had their thoughts analyzed and categorized as closely as Martin Luther. Even contemporaries remarked on how feverishly scholars dissected his ideas, a point neatly symbolized in a sixteenth-century engraving entitled *Anatomia Lutheri*, in which the Reformer's corpse is portrayed on the operating table ready for an autopsy. With this history in mind, Carl P. E. Springer's study of Luther's views on Aesop is a notable achievement for (at least) two reasons. First, it sheds light on an aspect of his thinking that has often been overlooked by historians, namely the prominent place of Aesop's fables in Luther's mind as he prepared his theology for a reading public, particularly when it came to issues of Christian ethics. As Springer writes, "there was no other single body of traditional fictional narratives with moral points that had such a profound influence on Luther and his own literary work as Aesop's fables" (180). Second, Springer's careful reconstruction of Luther's preoccupation with the fables also sheds important light on broader questions relating to the Reformer's views on the relationship between

theology and the classics and indeed the place of pagan thought in Reformation thought *tout court*.

The general consensus of many commentators, from Gottfried Arnold to Friedrich Nietzsche, has been that Luther was an opponent of Greek and Roman authors, a point that had been easy to support by citing his opinion on Aristotle or Epicurus. In truth, however, if kept within its proper province — which for Luther meant the province of pedagogy (that is, the teaching of rhetoric, grammar, logic, etc.) — he believed that classical literature had much to offer the cautious Christian intellectual. Luther himself often drew on classical authors to argue a point, from Cicero to Ovid, but his favorite pagan author by far, as Springer makes clear, was Aesop. Throughout his lifetime he remained “unstinting in his praise” (35) of the fables and the moral compass they could provide the attentive reader. Luther’s devotion to the works was so marked that at one stage, while waiting in Coburg in 1530 as Philipp Melancthon and the other newly minted Protestants met with Emperor Charles V in Augsburg, he began to prepare his own edition. Although it was never finished, the projected edition was nevertheless a register of his estimation of Aesop; and yet even without this work it is possible to trace the influence of the fables on his thinking throughout his career, from sermons and pastoral works to biblical commentaries. As Springer demonstrates, the Reformer’s writings were peppered with Aesopian examples, from the dog who dropped the meat while looking at his reflection (Luther’s favorite), to asses on a lyre, puffed up frogs, roosters and pearls, and apes and fisherman.

But *Luther’s Aesop* does more than just retrace Luther’s literary steps or point out where he made the occasional allusion. Springer’s careful reading of Luther’s use of Aesop, both in his religious works and the unfinished autograph edition of the Coburg collection, reveals how the fables influenced his thinking and acted on his mind. Luther thought they were the best examples of what he termed “worldly pagan wisdom” (58) and, subject to the proper tweaking for the “chaste, pious” reader, remained powerful examples of moral wisdom. The fables were thus of great use for the teaching of ancient moral truths, a conviction only further confirmed by Luther’s belief that they were the final product of many authors rather than just one. But they were more than just a curiosity that might be put to pedagogical use. Luther used the fables in order to articulate the essentials of his theology, first in their role as a “catalogue of the vices” (97) with a similar function to the Law, but also as a symbolic method of relating a religious truth, a vehicle for a social message, a witness to the truths of the Gospel (for on occasion the pagan and the Christian crossed paths), or a simple story that could relate a basic Christian message. Indeed, Springer concludes the volume with a chapter devoted to Luther the Aesopian fabulist, an author who was himself often willing to play the fool, evoke the seemingly impossible, or tell a simple story in order to relate an uncomfortable truth. It is an interesting final chapter to an interesting book, an example of how careful scholarship, even when its subject is as well worked as Luther, can always shed new light on the past.

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