

THE

Volume XLVIII, No. 1

Spring 2017

SIXTEENTH CENTURY JOURNAL

The Journal of Early Modern Studies



0361-0160(201721)48:1;1-0

Irreverent Reading: Martin Luther as Annotator of Erasmus

Arnoud Visser
Universiteit Utrecht

“Erasmus laid the egg, Luther hatched it.” Already in the early Reformation this popular quip suggested a direct, causal link between humanism and the Protestant Reformation. Yet Luther’s precise debt to Erasmus has remained an elusive problem. This article reconsiders the issue by investigating how Luther read Erasmus’s scholarship, focusing on two remarkable, little-studied examples: Erasmus’s edition of Jerome and his Annotations to the New Testament. Luther’s annotated copies reveal a deep ambivalence toward the humanist and a distinctly uncharitable reading style. Although Luther diligently collected welcome information, he excoriated what he regarded as Erasmus’s desacralizing philological perspective and his malicious use of humor. Luther’s perception of Erasmian humor in fact operated as an interpretative tool that enabled him to project his suspicions about Erasmus’s skepticism and unbelief into the text. Documenting Luther’s continued preoccupation with Erasmus, this article offers a reevaluation of Erasmus’s intellectual significance for Luther’s theological development.

THE INFLUENCE OF ERASMUS OF ROTTERDAM on Martin Luther has been a classic problem in the intellectual history of the Reformation. Indeed, the subject even fascinated Erasmus’s and Luther’s contemporaries. When, at the Heidelberg disputation of 1518, a young Martin Bucer first heard Luther speak, he found Luther’s views to be “in complete agreement” with what he had read in Erasmus, the main difference being a matter of communicative style. “What Erasmus merely implies, Luther teaches openly and freely.”¹ A few years later, when Luther was excommunicated by the pope and declared an outlaw by the emperor, such claims of influence would take on more sinister implications. The popular catchphrase “Erasmus laid the egg, Luther hatched it,” for example, quoted by Erasmus himself in 1524, encapsulated the view that Erasmus was a seminal force driving the Reformation.²

Erasmus quickly realized the danger of his association with Luther. He even felt compelled to deny accusations that he had written Luther’s works “for the

¹Bucer to Beatus Rhenanus, *Correspondance de Martin Bucer*, ed. Jean Rott (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 1:59–72, at 61. “Cum Erasmo illi conveniunt omnia, quin uno hoc praestare videtur, quod quae ille duntaxat insinuat, hic aperte docet et libere.” Unless otherwise noted, all translations are the author’s.

²“Ego peperit ouum, Lutherus exclusit.” Erasmus to John Caesarius, 16 December 1524, *Opus epistolarum Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami*, ed. P. S. Allen et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1910), Ep. 1528, line 11. For early associations of humanism and reformation, see Erika Rummel, *The Confessionalization of Humanism in Reformation Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 9–29.

most part” himself. For Erasmus, such claims pointed to a malicious strategy adopted by clerical spin doctors to discredit humanist learning.

They have long resented the new blossoming of the humanities and the ancient tongues, and the revival of the authors of Antiquity, who up to now were wormeaten and deep in dust, so that the world is now recalled to the fountain-head. They are afraid for their own shortcomings, they do not wish it to be thought that there is anything that they do not know, and they fear that their own prestige may suffer.... When Luther's books had appeared, as though this gave them a handle they began to tie up the ancient tongues and the humanities and Reuchlin and Luther and even myself in the same parcel, their distinctions being as much at sea as their deductions. To begin with, what can liberal studies have in common with a question of religious faith? And then what have I in common with Reuchlin or with Luther? But they have cunningly confused all these things, to lay on all who follow the humanities a load of ill will which all share.³

Cleverly reducing the claims of his possible influence on Luther to bizarre accusations and an antihumanist conspiracy, Erasmus directed attention away from obvious parallels, such as the anticlerical criticism that both men engaged in, as well as effects beyond his control, such as the impact of his scholarship on his readership.

This article will address the venerable question of Erasmus's significance for Luther in a new way, by examining Luther's reading practices. It will focus on two key examples: Erasmus's edition of Jerome's complete works (Basel, 1516) and his *Annotations to the New Testament* (Basel, 1527).⁴ Both editions were scholarly landmarks, reflecting Erasmus's agenda of putting humanism's new philological and historical methods in the service of theology. The copies Luther owned of both these editions have been preserved. What is more, they include numerous annotations in his hand.

Never intended for publication, jotted down in the (semi-)private setting of Luther's study, these marginal notes offer unique evidence of how Luther read and responded to Erasmus in these works. Although the annotations in both

³Erasmus to Albert of Brandenburg, 19 October 1519, *Collected Works of Erasmus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987) (hereafter CWE) 7, Ep. 1033, lines 215–20 and 224–31; Allen, *Opus epistolarum*, Ep. 1033, lines 97–99, 196–211.

⁴Luther's marginal annotations to both editions have been published in Martin Brecht and Christian Peters, eds., *Annotierungen zu den Werken des Hieronymus* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2000). For the New Testament, see *D. Martin Luther's Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau Nachfolger, 1980) (hereafter WA), 60:193–228. See also C. P. Hofstede de Groot's extensive description of the marginalia in “Luther in seiner Studierstube (Über ein Handexemplar Luthers von Erasmus' Neuem Testament),” *Theologische Studien und Kritiken* 56 (1884): 325–59, and J. Kingma, *De Groningse Luther-Bijbel: Tentoonstelling rond Luthers exemplaar van Erasmus' Nieuwe Testament, Basel 1527* (Groningen: Universiteitsbibliotheek & Universiteitsmuseum, 1983).

works have been published in critical editions, the notes have received little scholarly attention and have never been assessed as evidence of Luther's approach to Erasmus. But if regarded in the context of Luther's life and works, these annotated books reveal his deep ambivalence toward humanist scholarship. Although he diligently absorbed many welcome pieces of information, Luther also sharply criticized what he regarded as the desecralizing impact of Erasmus's historical perspective and his malicious use of humor. Considerations of humor, in fact, allowed Luther to read between the lines, enabling him to project his suspicions about Erasmus's skepticism and unbelief into the text.

HUMANISM AND REFORMATION

Modern scholarship is in general agreement that humanism was instrumental to the formation and spread of a new religious climate, famously summarized by the Göttingen church historian Bernd Moeller: "without humanism, no Reformation."⁵ The past two generations of scholars have identified in particular the seminal role of philology in emancipating theology from the scholastic tradition. By restoring the source-texts of the early church and by attacking scholastic methods, humanists helped create the intellectual conditions for the emergence and development of the Reformation.⁶

Measuring the influence more precisely, however, has proved problematic for conceptual and methodological reasons. Cornelis Augustijn and Erika Rummel each have warned, for example, against conflating Erasmus with the general concept of humanism, identifying biblical humanism as a more precise analytical category. Similarly, they have put in perspective the significance of doctrinal controversies, such as the polemic between Erasmus and Luther over human free will, for assessing the relationship between humanism and the Reformation. Humanist approaches and ideas, they have argued, did not always reveal their origins, and could leave an imprint or provoke thought implicitly among those exposed to them. For this reason, Brian Cummings has resisted the quest for a

⁵Bernd Moeller, "Die Deutschen Humanisten und die Anfänge der Reformation," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 70 (1959): 46–61, at 59: "Ohne Humanismus keine Reformation." For an English version, see Moeller, "The German Humanists and the Beginnings of the Reformation," in *Imperial Cities and the Reformation: Three Essays*, ed. and trans. H. C. Erik Midelfort and Mark U. Edwards Jr. (1972; repr., Durham, NC: Labyrinth Press, 1982), 19–38.

⁶Moeller, "Die Deutschen Humanisten"; Albert Rabil Jr., *Erasmus and the New Testament: The Mind of a Christian Humanist* (Langham: University Press of America, 1972); Jerry H. Bentley, *Humanists and Holy Writ: New Testament Scholarship in the Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983); Cornelis Augustijn, "Die Stellung der Humanisten zur Glaubensspaltung 1518–1530," in Augustijn, *Erasmus: Der Humanist als Theologe und Kirchenreformer* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 141–53; Lewis Spitz, *Luther and German Humanism* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1996); and Timothy P. Dost, *Renaissance Humanism in Support of the Gospel in Luther's Early Correspondence: Taking All Things Captive* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001).

causal link altogether, instead viewing the two developments as dynamic, inter-related forces in a broader “cultural crisis.”⁷

We can overcome these problems by shifting attention from authorial “influence” to the reader’s use of a given text. Such an approach has already proved very helpful in other areas of cultural history, in particular in invalidating modern expectations about the transmission of ideas. Historians of reading have delineated a wide variety of early modern reading styles.⁸ The same texts could be read in different and in unpredictable ways, ranging in scope and intensity as well as the very forms of the act of reading (silent or aloud, alone or in company). Although the text as well as the medium determined reading to some extent, individual readers had considerable freedom in the handling of their books. They could vary their reading to suit different purposes.

For religious literature, such purposes would appear to be more circumscribed. Although religious reading practices have received relatively less attention than other modes of reading, recent studies of biblical reading practices have confirmed the central role of devotion. Early modern Bibles, meant to be preserved within families for generations, were treasured as sacred objects, but marks of users also show the intensity with which they were read.⁹ Alongside per-

⁷Cornelis Augustijn, “Humanisten auf dem Scheideweg zwischen Luther und Erasmus,” in *Erasmus: Der Humanist als Theologe und Kirchenreformer*, 154–67; Erika Rummel, “Humanism and the Reformation: Was the Conflict Between Erasmus and Luther Paradigmatic?” in *Northern Humanism in European Context: From the ‘Adwert Academy’ to Ubbo Emmius, 1469–1625*, ed. F. Akkerman, A. Vanderjagt, and A. H. van der Laan (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 186–97; and Brian Cummings, *The Literary Culture of the Reformation: Grammar and Grace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 57.

⁸There is a rapidly expanding literature in this field. A few key examples in chronological order are Robert Darnton, “What Is the History of Books?,” *Daedalus* 111 (1982): 65–83; Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine, “Studied for Action: How Gabriel Harvey Read His Livy,” *Past & Present* 129 (1990): 30–78; Roger Chartier, *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors and Libraries in Europe Between the Fourteenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994); Lisa Jardine and William Sherman, “Pragmatic Readers: Knowledge Transactions and Scholarly Services in Late Elizabethan England,” in *Religion, Culture and Society in Early Modern Britain: Essays in Honour of Patrick Collinson*, ed. Anthony Fletcher and Peter Roberts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 102–24; James Raven, Helen Small, and Naomi Tadmor, eds., *The Practice and Representation of Reading in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Anthony Grafton, *Commerce with the Classics: Ancient Books and Renaissance Readers* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997); Heidi Brayman Hackel, *Reading Material in Early Modern England: Print, Gender and Literacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Robin Myers, Michael Harris, and Giles Mandlebrote, eds., *Owners, Annotators and the Signs of Reading* (New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press, 2005); and Fred Schurink and Jennifer Richards, “The Textuality and Materiality of Reading in Early Modern England,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 73 (2010): 345–61.

⁹William H. Sherman, *Used Books: Marking Readers in Renaissance England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 71–86 (for Bible reading) and 87–109 (on devotional reading practices); Cummings, *Literary Culture of the Reformation*; Femke Molekamp, *Women and the Bible in Early Modern England: Religious Reading and Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Andrew Cambers, *Godly Reading: Print, Manuscript and Puritanism in England, 1580–1720* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Kate Narveson, *Bible Readers and Lay Writers in*

vasive devotional reading we find other uses for these books: scholarly forms of attention, memory practices (marking ownership and familial identity), polemical notes. The Reformation's protracted religious conflicts had caused many parts of the Bible to be contested, prompting some readers to express their respect for the biblical text via hostile jibes at opponents. In Luther's annotated copies these various contexts come together: they show us the learned scholar and the outspoken reformer, the pious believer and the irascible polemicist.

LUTHER AND HIS BOOKS

The reconstruction of Luther's reading habits through his books is an inherently fragmentary affair in at least two respects.¹⁰ First, it depends on specific copies of books that happen to have survived. Luther's library was dispersed after his death. Only a few of his books have been identified, including some with marginal annotations in his hand.¹¹ So although Luther's copy of the 1527 edition of the *Annotations to the New Testament* is extant, there is no trace of the 1519 edition of the same work, the edition that Luther used extensively for his translation of the New Testament into German (1522), a project undertaken in close collaboration with what he jovially called his "Sanhedrin of experts": his learned colleagues Philip Melancthon, Johannes Bugenhagen, Justus Jonas, Matthäus Aurogallus, and Caspar Cruciger.¹²

Early Modern England: Gender and Self-Definition in an Emergent Writing Culture (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012); Virginia Reinburg, *French Books of Hours: Making an Archive of Prayer, c. 1400–1600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); and Peter Stallybrass, "Books and Scrolls: Navigating the Bible," in *Books and Readers in Early Modern England*, ed. Jennifer Andersen and Elizabeth Sauer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 42–79.

¹⁰Holger Flachmann, *Martin Luther und das Buch* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1996), 30–35, and Cummings, *Literary Culture of the Reformation*, 68–78.

¹¹Seminal is the study of Ernst Thiele, "Die Originalhandschriften Luthers," in *Lutherstudien zur 4. Jahrhundertfeier der Reformation* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau Nachfolger, 1917), 233–60, including a list of extant books from Luther's library at 259–60. For more recent findings, see Oswald Bayer, "Unbekannte Texte des frühen Luther aus dem Besitz des Wittenberger Studenten Johannes Geiling," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 82 (1971): 229–59; Ulrich Bubenheimer, "Unbekannte Luthertexte: Analecta aus der Erforschung der Handschrift im gedruckten Buch," *Luther Jahrbuch* 57 (1990): 220–41; and Richard Charteris, "Newly Identified Music Editions from the Private Library of Martin Luther," *In Monte Artium* 6 (2013): 41–95. Since the completion of the Weimarer Ausgabe, new evidence has been published. Apart from Brecht and Peters's edition of Luther's annotations to Jerome, Jun Matsuura has collected Luther's notes from his days at the Augustinian monastery at Erfurt: *Erfurter Annotationen 1509–1510/11*, Archiv zur Weimarer Ausgabe der Werke Martin Luthers 9 (Cologne: Böhlau, 2009).

¹²See Johannes Mathesius, *Predigten . . . über die Historien von des ehrwürdigen, in Gott seligen, theuren Manns Gottes, Doktor Martin Luthers Anfang, Lehre, Leben Und Sterben . . .*, ed. Ludwig Achim von Arnim (Berlin, 1817), 57. Albert Rabil, Jr., *Erasmus and the New Testament: The Mind of a Christian Humanist* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1993), 160–61. For Erasmus's influence on Luther's biblical exegesis, see also Cornelis Augustijn, "Erasmus von Rotterdam im Galaterkommentar Luthers von 1519," *Luther-Jahrbuch* 49 (1982): 115–32, and Johannes Kunze, *Erasmus und*

The set of Jerome's collected works with annotations in Luther's hand, discovered in the late 1980s by Ulrich Bubenheimer, is kept in Wittenberg as part of the collection of the Evangelisches Predigerseminar.¹³ The work consists of nine books that were bound in five volumes, and contains 435 marginal annotations, along with other marks related to reading, such as underlinings.¹⁴ The set as it is kept today is in fact a compilation of two sets that had been brought together in the early 1520s. Four of the five volumes came from the library of the humanist and theologian Johannes Rhagius Aesticampianus, who had died in 1520 and had left marginal annotations in these books. These are interesting in their own right, as Aesticampianus had lectured on Jerome at the universities of Leipzig and Wittenberg and had published an anthology of the Church Fathers' letters.¹⁵ The provenance of the second volume is not clear, but it includes marginalia that appear to be of an earlier date, possibly from 1516 onwards.¹⁶

Luther's copy of Erasmus's 1527 New Testament edition is now kept in the University Library of Groningen.¹⁷ It probably came into Luther's possession in 1528, the year indicated in one of the medallion portraits on the German blind-tooled binding.¹⁸ Its purchase came after Luther's acrimonious clash with Erasmus, which had begun when Erasmus's *De libero arbitrio diatriba sive collatio* (1524) prompted Luther's response *De servo arbitrio* (1525), which in turn occasioned Erasmus's extensive reply *Hyperaspistes I-II* (1526–27). So this annotated New Testament presents a Luther who was in his mid-forties. Luther probably used his copy of Erasmus's New Testament over a longer stretch of time. His more than two hundred handwritten annotations can thus be placed in the context of Luther's activities in the late 1520s and 1530s.

Luther: Der Einfluss des Erasmus auf die Kommentierung des Galaterbriefes und der Psalmen durch Luther, 1519–1521 (Münster: LIT, 2000). In 1730, Johann Justus von Einem published a series of manuscript notes supposedly made by Luther in a copy of the 1516 edition of Erasmus Annotations: *Duo D. Martini Lutheri fragmenta philologico-exegetica ...* (Helmstedt, 1730). On the basis of the nature of the notes, however, the WA editors do not recognize Luther's authorship. The copy itself has disappeared. See WA 60:199–200.

¹³Evangelisches Predigerseminar, Class mark HTh 665–69 (hereafter Luther's Jerome). See Bubenheimer, "Unbekannte Luthertexte," 226–34. For a full description as part of the edition of Luther's annotations, see Brecht and Peters, "Einleitung," 2–8.

¹⁴Brecht and Peters, "Einleitung," 2.

¹⁵For Aesticampianus's scholarship on Jerome, see Hilmar M. Pabel, *Herculean Labours: Erasmus and the Editing of St. Jerome's Letters in the Renaissance* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 41–42, and Ulrich Bubenheimer, *Thomas Muntzer: Herkunft und Bildung* (Leiden: Brill, 1989), 153–70.

¹⁶Brecht and Peters, "Einleitung," 6–8.

¹⁷The volume consists of two parts: *Novum Testamentum, ex Erasmi Roterodami recognitione ...* (Basel, 1527) (hereafter Luther's NT 1), and *Des. Erasmi Roterodami in Novum Testamentum annotationes ...* (Basel, 1527) (hereafter Luther's NT 2). Groningen University Library, shelf mark HS 494. The book is fully accessible online on Annotated Books Online, at <http://abo.annotated-booksonline.com/#binding-52-1>.

¹⁸WA 60:193.

Unlike the recently rediscovered copy of Luther's annotated Jerome, this New Testament copy had been continuously treasured by its later owners as a remarkable sample of Luther's biblical studies.¹⁹ One of these owners, the Groningen humanist Regnerus Praedinius (1510–59), added his own extensive marginal notes. Some of these notes were based on independent research, while others were made in response to Luther's remarks (especially to the latter's spirited attacks on Erasmus). These multiple voices surrounding the biblical text make this copy an intriguing document of the tensions and debates surrounding sixteenth-century biblical humanism.

Second, apart from the uneven recovery of Luther's books, the evidence of his reading is also essentially partial and conditioned by certain restrictions. The margins left him little space to engage in extensive commentary, and so there we generally find very concise notes that offer mere snapshots of his responses to the text. On many pages he confined himself to nonverbal marks such as underlining, curly brackets, or a pointing finger. A case in point is Erasmus's famous biography of Jerome, which claims that Jerome is superior to Augustine.²⁰ Although Luther frequently reproved Erasmus for this view, he kept silent in the margins of this text. Indeed, there are no comments in Erasmus's preliminaries to this edition, only underlining and vertical marks.²¹ Such nonverbal marks offer evidence of Luther's attention, but cannot tell us what he thought while reading.

We can say something similar, conversely, about the pages without marginalia: annotations of course prove that Luther read the pages on which they appear, but a lack of annotation does not mean he did not read the corresponding portion of the text. The New Testament text (accompanied by the Vulgate and Erasmus's own Latin translation), for example, shows hardly any marks.²² There is also a remarkable absence of notes in areas one would expect Luther to have read with particular interest. Thus, we find only two minor notes to Erasmus's commentary on Romans. Still, from Luther's *Table Talk* it becomes clear that Luther read at least the preface to this book. "Erasmus's preface to the letter to the Romans," Luther remarked early in 1533, "shocks a Christian's body and soul."²³ Another anecdote recounts how in April 1536 Luther lay ill in bed and spent "practically all day reading Erasmus's prefaces," which made him "very upset." "However slippery this snake is," he declared, "we and our church will condemn him and

¹⁹For the full provenance of the copy, see the Arnoud Visser, "Erasmus, Luther, and the Margins of Biblical Misunderstanding," in *For the Sake of Learning: Essays in Honor of Anthony Grafton*, ed. Ann Blair and Anja Goering (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 235–38.

²⁰Erasmus, *Life of Jerome*, CWE 61, 44–45.

²¹Luther's Jerome, 1:α2r–β8r. For an example of early criticism of Erasmus's preference for Jerome, see Luther's letter to Georg Spalatin, 19 October 1516, WA, Briefwechsel (hereafter WA BR) 1, 70 (Ep. 27).

²²Apart from occasional underlining, there are notes by Luther on three pages regarding Paul's letter to the Ephesians: Luther's NT 1, 404, 408, 413.

²³WA, *Table Talk* (hereafter WA TR) 1, no. 500. "Praefatio Erasmi in epistolam ad Romanos geht eim christen durch leyb und leben."

his writings.”²⁴ Yet despite this indication of Luther’s systematic reading of the prefaces, the margins in this copy remain empty in these places. So, to unlock the possible meaning of individual annotations, it is helpful to place these sources in the wider context of Luther’s views on reading.

LUTHER ON READING

Although Luther was a voracious reader of theological literature, including patristic works and biblical commentaries, he was apprehensive about its sheer volume. Keenly aware of the power of print, he regarded the urge to write as a sign of vanity, despite his own voluminous output, and feared that “the abundance of books and writers” might prevent people from reading the Bible itself.

There will be a boundless flood of books, for any and everybody will be writing a book to feed his pride, while others will increase this evil in quest of gain. So the Bible will be buried under a pile of commentaries about the Bible, and the text itself will be neglected, though the experts in the text are the best men in every discipline. A good disciple of Bartolus is a good lawyer. But today everybody hastens to consult writers.

For Luther, the reading of “writers” (meaning authors of biblical commentaries and theological treatises) is a type of study secondary to the reading of scripture. But, as Luther knows from experience, proper understanding of the Bible requires a much more dedicated style of reading.

As a young man I made myself familiar with the Bible; by reading it again and again I came to know my way about in it. Only then did I consult writers. But finally I had to put them out of my sight and wrestle with the Bible itself. It is better to see with one’s own eyes than with another’s. On this account, because of the bad example, I would wish that all my books were buried. Otherwise everybody will imitate me and try to become famous by writing, as if Christ had died for the sake of our fickle glory and not for the hallowing of his name.²⁵

²⁴Anton Lauterbach and Johannes Aurifaber, eds., *Colloquia oder Tischreden Doctor[is] Martini Lutheri...* (Frankfurt am Main, 1568), 293v. “Am ersten tage Aprilis des 36. Jars, da der Doctor kranck lag, brachte er schier den ganzen Tag zu mit lesen, die Vorreden des Erasmi ubers newe Testament, ward darüber hefftig bewegt, und sprach: Wiewol diese Schlange schlipfferig ist, dass man sie nicht wol ergreifen noch fassen kan, doch wollen wir und unsere Kirche in mit seinen Schrifften und Büchern verdammen.” See also Hofstede de Groot, “Luther in seiner Studierstube,” 335, whose reference to Walch’s edition of Luther’s collected works is erroneous. I could not find this anecdote in WA TR.

²⁵*Luther’s Works* (St. Louis: Concordia, Fortress, and Muhlenberg, 1959–86) (hereafter LW) 54:361; WA TR 4, no. 4691 (1–10 July 1539). “Deplorabat copiam librorum et scribentium, ubi infinitum pelagus librorum futurum sit, nam quilibet pro arrogancia sua componeret librum, alii quaestus studiosi promoverent hoc malum, et ita copia commentariorum biblia sepelitur, et textus negligitur, cum textuales in omni facultate sunt optimi. Nam bonus Bartholista est bonus iurista.

Luther's worries about the "boundless flood" of books extended beyond new or recently published theological works, such as his own. He believed people should read fewer books in general, including patristic works, and focus on the Scriptures. "It is not many books that make men learned, nor even reading," he argued in his *Address to the Nobility of the German Nation* (1520), "[b]ut it is a good book frequently read, no matter how small it is, that makes a man learned in the Scriptures and godly."²⁶ Paradoxically, reading the Church Fathers might even be a trap for the reader. Although they had sought to guide the reader to the Bible, their works now actually seemed to keep current readers *away* from it, "like men who read signposts and never travel the road they indicate." Luther compared the Scriptures to a vineyard "in which we must all labor and toil."²⁷

Note-taking was one of the means for such spiritual exercise. It helped make reading more profitable. As Luther explained in the preface to Wenzeslaus Link's 1543 edition of the Old Testament, reading should be something greater than the mere absorption of a text. "One should have the quill at hand and note down what struck one in particular while reading, so that one can mark and retain it."²⁸ In this, he was fully in line with humanist educationalists, who emphasized that to be really effective, studious reading required writing as well.²⁹ "Whatever you read, have ready a notebook," the humanist teacher Guarino of Verona advised

Nunc se mox ad scribentes conferunt. Ego iuvenis me assuefeci ad bibliam; saepius legendo fiebam localis. Deinde me ad scribentes contuli. Aber ich muste sie zu letzt alle aus den augen stellen vnd mich in der biblia wurgen. Nam potius est videre propriis quam alienis oculis. Ideo optarem omnes meos libros sepultos propter exemplum malum, dan es wil sonsten ein jeder mir nach folgen, et volunt per hoc fieri gloriosi, quasi Christus ideo sit mortuus, pro nostra vanissima gloria, non pro sanctificatione nominis sui." For Luther's first biblical readings, see also WA TR 1, no. 116 (9–30 November 1531). For Luther's own deployment of print at the service of his reform program, see Andrew Pettegree, *Brand Luther: 1517, Printing and the Making of the Reformation* (New York: Penguin, 2015).

²⁶LW 44: 205, and WA 6:461. "Die Theologische bucher must man auch wenigern und erlesen die besten, dan viel bucher machen nit geleret, vil leszen auch nit, szondern gut ding unnd oft leszen, wie wenig sein ist, das macht geleret in der schrift und frum datzu...."

²⁷LW 44:205, and WA 6:461. "Ja es solen aller heyiligen vetter schrift nur ein zeyt lang werden gelezenn, da durch in die schrift kummen, szo leszen wir sie nur, das wir darinnen bleyben und nymmer in die schrift kummen, damit wir gleich denen seyn, die die wege zeychenn ansehen, unnd wandeln denn weg dennoch nymmer. Die liebenn vetter haben uns wollen in die schrift furen mit yhrem schreyben, szo furen wir uns damit erausz, szo doch allein die schrift unszer weyngart ist, darynnen wir all solten uns uben und erbeyttenn." For a similar thought, see WA TR 4, no. 4567 (7 May 1539). "Qui autem se a biblia ad commentaria patrum applicaverit, illius studium erit infinitum."

²⁸WA 54:3. "Nun kan sollich forschen und lesen nit gschehen, man muß mit der feder da sein und auffzeychnen, was jm under dem lesen und studieren sunderlich eyngeden ist, das ers mercken und behalten künde."

²⁹On the prominence of annotating see Ann Blair, "The Rise of Note-Taking in Early Modern Europe," *Intellectual History Review* 20 (2010): 303–16.

one of his pupils in 1435.³⁰ Erasmus similarly recommended that the studious reader indicate an important passage first “by some appropriate mark,” then copy it in a commonplace book, preferably one that was thematically arranged.³¹ In Luther’s case, however, this intensive reading practice went beyond erudition and scholarship and was put in the service of a more profound religious understanding. This religious drive left a clear imprint on his annotations to Jerome and Erasmus, which reveals a highly critical reader who possessed a strong emotional connection to the text and had little patience for intellectual approaches that differed from his own.

“I’M NOT A KIND READER”:
LUTHER AS AN EVALUATIVE ANNOTATOR

Luther’s annotations to both the Jerome and the New Testament editions include a striking amount of evaluative comments. In his quest for a pure, genuine understanding of the Scriptures, Luther frequently uses the margins to offer his opinion, to support or correct what he had read, or even to let off steam. Some of these notes express appreciation for biblical interpretations. For instance, in Jerome’s commentary to Matthew 28:2, describing the signs surrounding Christ’s resurrection (an earthquake, an angel removing the stone from the tomb, etc.), the Church Father emphasized how these events demonstrated Christ’s divine nature. Luther marked the passage as “beautiful.”³²

Likewise, he strongly approves a passage in Erasmus’s lengthy commentary to 1 Corinthians (7:39), arguing against the strict church laws on divorce. Rather than condemning divorce altogether, it would be better to invest in prevention, Erasmus argued, for instance by introducing parental consent. Luther’s approval was triggered in particular by Erasmus’s anticlerical comment that such consent would be equally useful for children joining the Benedictines and Dominicans, so that “they could perhaps live more freely, unrestrained, but not more religiously.”³³ Other notes of approval read as direct, personal responses, as when Luther reacts to Erasmus’s comment on the word “episcopatum” (Acts 1:20). Erasmus here mentions that a Jew had told him that in Hebrew the word could also mean “an especially beloved wife,” distinctive not “because of the children she gave, but for her character.” “Oh yes,” Luther wrote next to the passage.³⁴

³⁰Cited by Anthony Grafton, “The Humanist as Reader,” in *A History of Reading in the West*, ed. Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 196–97.

³¹Erasmus, *On the Method of Study*, CWE 24, 670.

³²Luther’s Jerome, 9:42v.

³³Luther’s NT 2, 431, “pulcherrime.”

³⁴Erasmus’s comment to Acts 1:20 (“For it is written in the book of Psalms: Let their habitation become desolate, and let there be none to dwell therein. And his bishopric let another take.”) Luther’s NT 2, 263, “Ach ia”. According to Hofstede de Groot, Luther’s comment expresses his recognition as

Much more often than noting assent, however, Luther records his displeasure, frequently at Erasmus, but sometimes at Jerome as well. These adversarial notes take various forms. There are many brief rejections of arguments (“no,”; “not at all”; “nothing”).³⁵ But frequently Luther responds in a more personal, emotional style, for example with cynical jibes at Erasmus (“Wie giftig” [How poisonous]; “Hilfft dich nicht” [It does not help you])³⁶ or indignant outbursts directed toward Jerome (“Ey Ey Ey, sol man so reden de fide” [Hey, hey, hey: must one talk like that about faith]). In some cases Luther could not contain his anger and angrily swears at Erasmus (“Du bist ein bube” [You’re a scoundrel] or “Das dich der ritt schutt” [May fever shake you through]).³⁷ We can presume that Luther sometimes closed the book immediately after writing such comments, as the not-yet-dry ink has left marks on the pages opposite.³⁸

Clearly, then, Luther was not a charitable reader of Erasmus and Jerome. He did not patiently try to understand their arguments and come to the most convincing interpretations. Instead, he read their works from his own critical perspective, often against the grain. Luther was aware of this. “I am not a kind reader,” he noted next to a passage where Erasmus politely asked the reader’s forbearance, “and you are not a kind writer.”³⁹

With their strong emotional register, these critical marginal comments also illuminate Luther’s relationship to Erasmus’s biblical humanism. They record precisely, as a kind of intellectual Geiger counter, where Luther objected to Erasmus’s scholarship and to the humanist’s favorite patristic author, Jerome. A more detailed look at his criticism reveals that soon after Erasmus published his first edition of Jerome, Luther was already consistently apprehensive about what he regarded as the harmful impact of philological and historical approaches to the sacred text. Another recurring source of irritation was Erasmus’s playful rhetoric and phrasing. Luther read these stylistic gestures as a malicious type of humor that covertly represented the humanist’s skeptical outlook.

RESERVATIONS TOWARD HUMANIST METHODS

Luther did not reject Erasmus’s textual scholarship as a matter of principle. He appreciated and used it as a purely practical instrument, but disapproved when

a husband, “Luther in seiner Studierstube,” 334 and 344. But it could also signal Luther’s recognition of the possible sense of the word in this context.

³⁵E.g., Luther’s Jerome, 3:150r, 156r; 4:32r, 96v; 5:279r; 6:23r; Luther’s NT 2, 90, 153, 157, 164, 429, 528.

³⁶Luther’s Jerome, 3:1v; Luther’s NT 2, 213.

³⁷Luther’s Jerome, 3:65r. For Luther’s use of the term “Bube,” see Luther’s NT 2, 138, 157, 213, and 594. For “Das dich der Ritt schutt,” see Luther’s NT 2, 228.

³⁸E.g., Luther’s NT 2, 138, note to Mark 15:44, “Das dich, du Bube. Sic non esset mortuus” and 157, note to Luke 2:23, “Du bube.” In both cases the closing of the book left ink traces on the facing pages. First pointed out by Hofstede de Groot, “Luther in seiner Studierstube,” 339, 341.

³⁹Luther’s NT 2, 156. “Ego non sum Candidus Lector, Nec tu candidus scriptor.”

(in his view) philological comments interfered with theology. These reservations about humanist studies should be situated in the context of the prevailing confusion between humanism and the Reformation in the 1510s and 1520s.⁴⁰ Luther's instrumental approach is well illustrated by his philological exposition of the concept of penitence in the preface to his commentary on the Ninety-Five Theses, based on Erasmus's Greek scholarship, and by his early reservations about Erasmus's theological interpretation of the concept of righteousness.⁴¹ Reflecting on Erasmus's editions of the New Testament later in life, in the 1540s, Luther suggested that the humanist's prime virtue was his knowledge of Greek. "Nowadays almost everyone knows Greek," Luther noted. "At first it was a good book, although he is often devious in it." Yet ultimately, precisely this linguistic skill is what perverted Erasmus's religious understanding. "The more he advanced grammar, the more he corrupted the Gospel... If I were young, I would want to learn the Greek language fully, so as to master it, and I would want to add other annotations to it."⁴²

The same tension between philology and theology is visible in Luther's marginal notes. Luther regarded many of Erasmus's comments on grammar, manuscripts, and semantics as superfluous at best. "What use is such rubbish?" snapped Luther while reading Erasmus's consideration of the pronoun "my" in the rendering of Christ's words on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34).⁴³ In some Greek manuscripts, the first "my" was lacking, while the Aramaic word "eloi" was repeated. Erasmus's observation clearly made Luther impatient. Elsewhere, he simply noted "not necessary," rendering an entire note about textual variants irrelevant with a curly bracket.⁴⁴ And when Erasmus corrects a reading of Jerome for grammatical reasons ("I ask you not to be weakened by my tribulations on your behalf; for this is your glory"), Luther again regards this as an unnecessary philological triviality ("for such is your foolishness, as it is, you are wasting much time").⁴⁵

To Luther, these philological details suggested that Erasmus was primarily interested in secular knowledge. He already had this impression years before his clash with the humanist. Early in 1517, his reading of Erasmus's *Annotations to the New Testament* prompted him to complain, in a letter to the Erfurt reformer Johannes Lang, about "disliking" Erasmus more and more, since "human things

⁴⁰Rummel, *Confessionalization of Humanism*, 9–49.

⁴¹Prefatory letter to Johann von Staupitz in *Resolutiones disputationum de indulgentiarum virtute*, 30 May 1518, WA 1:525–527. For his reservations about Erasmus's interpretation of righteousness, see Luther to Spalatin, 19 October 1516, WA BR 1, 70–71, Ep. 17.

⁴²WA TR 4, no. 5120. "Es können nun schier alle Grekisch. Erstlich was es ein gutt buch, wie woll er offit drinnen durch den zaun sticht." WA TR 5, no. 5670. "Quantum promovit grammaticam, tantum nocuit Evangelio... Wenn ich jung were, so wolt ich Graecam linguam perfecte studirn, so das ichs kundte, und wolte andere annotationes drein machen."

⁴³Luther's NT 2, 138. "Was darffs solchs gewessch?"

⁴⁴Luther's NT 2, 534, to Ephesians 2:5.

⁴⁵Luther's NT 2, 539, to Ephesians 3:13. "Quae est stultitia tua (quae ut est), horas male perdis, etc."

weigh more with him than the divine.” In the following decades Luther would consistently associate him with a “cold,” even “icy” method, an approach that lacked spiritual fire. Although he recognized that Erasmus was impressively eloquent, in theology his style was “cold, stolid, and leaden.”⁴⁶

In Luther’s eyes, Erasmus’s philological perspective frequently revealed arrogance and a lack of respect for theological authorities, whether the Apostles or the Church Fathers. “Look how Erasmus, the Lucian and Lucianist, is making fun of Jerome,” he angrily noted beside a heading to St. Jerome’s letter to Fabiola (Ep. 64). Here Erasmus had copied the non-classical phrasing at the start of Jerome’s letter (“usque hodie”) to refer to his own comments (“usque hodie scholia”). Elsewhere in the same letter, Erasmus’s learned comment about the name of an ancient gemstone triggers Luther’s irritation. “Again he laughs at Jerome, as if he were an ass.”⁴⁷ Although both these marginal notes are from the older Luther, according to the editors Brecht and Peters, probably dating to the 1530s, similar notes from the younger Luther in the Jerome edition indicate that Luther’s response did not essentially change over the years.⁴⁸

The same pattern can be seen in the *Annotations to the New Testament*. Although modern research suggests that Erasmus in the later versions of his commentary on Paul grew closer to Luther’s views, Luther remained consistently hostile of the humanist’s approach.⁴⁹ When Erasmus identified a stylistic error in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, Luther sarcastically decoded what he thinks Erasmus had actually meant to say about the apostle. “That is: such a barbarian ass does not say or do anything right.” For Luther the grammatical correction betrayed a sense of superiority typical of humanist intellectuals. “He seems to have laughed at such phrasings in Italy with his intellectual friends.”⁵⁰ Similarly, when Erasmus points out that Augustine overlooked a passage in which Christ is called the “son of man” (Matthew 8:20), Luther reproached him directly: “You have no respect.”⁵¹ Luther was also annoyed by Erasmus’s discussion of recent scholarship, such as Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples’s commentary to Paul’s letters.

⁴⁶Luther to Johannes Lang, 1 March 1517, LW 48:40, and WA BR 1, 90 (Ep. 35). “humana praevalent in eo plus quam divina”; WA TR 2, no. 1319; *Praelectio in Psalmum 45*, WA 40.2:509. “Sicut Erasmus alias eloquentissimus, in Theologia tamen ita frigide, stupide et plumbee scribit, ut appareat eum nihil serio agere, das es weder haft noch klappet, es trifft noch wundet nicht, non ferit, non relinquit stimulos in animis lectorum.”

⁴⁷Luther’s Jerome, 4:27v. “Vide ut rideat Erasmus Lucianus & Lucianista Sanctum Hieronymum, quia Epistolam incepit his verbis. Usque Hodie, quasi barbarissimus.” 28r, “Ridet iterum Hieronymum ceu asinum.”

⁴⁸The precise dating of the marginal notes is problematic. See Brecht and Peters, “Einleitung,” 5–7. For an earlier example of Luther’s critical responses to Erasmus’s emendations and lexical interpretations, see Luther’s Jerome, 4:5v.

⁴⁹Greta Grace Kroeker, *Erasmus in the Footsteps of Paul: A Pauline Theologian* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011).

⁵⁰Luther’s NT 2, 540, to Ephesians 4:1. “idest: Nihil recte dicit, nec facit tam barbarus asinus. In Italia cum suis Eruditibus videtur risisse tales formas dicendi.”

⁵¹Luther’s NT 2, 39, to Matthew 8:20, “du bist nicht from.”

When Erasmus notes that he “cannot support the man” in his explanation of Ephesians 4:14, Luther again detects arrogance: “So that you alone may boast.”⁵²

Luther may have reproached Erasmus for his lack of respect, but he was not averse to censuring Jerome himself. He did so partly because of Jerome’s aggressive judgments, which Luther associated with “any other Barefoot Friar.”⁵³ A good illustration is the Church Father’s polemical letter to Augustine (Ep. 112) about the validity of Jewish laws for converted Jews. Jerome here suggests that Augustine viewed these laws as binding, whereas Augustine had in fact merely argued that the first generations of converted Jews were not prohibited from observing Jewish laws. “Note that St. Jerome here imposes falsehood on Augustine!” Luther wrote indignantly in the margin, “For Augustine does not say that Jews must, but may observe the law.”⁵⁴ In subsequent notes Luther criticized Jerome for “false reasoning” and even accused him of foisting heresy upon Augustine.⁵⁵

Luther also had problems with the Church Father’s theological perspective. Allegorical interpretations mostly elicited curt rejections. “Vain babblings,” he noted, for instance, next to Jerome’s exposition of the figurative sense of Solomon’s judgment.⁵⁶ Equally brief was his verdict on Jerome’s interpretation of Ezekiel’s vision of the four creatures (Ezek. 1:4–14) who each had the faces of a man, a lion, an ox, and an eagle. Making reference to Greek philosophers, Jerome identified these faces as standing for rationality, the emotions, desires, and conscience. Luther rejected the whole argument as “vanity.”⁵⁷

Another area where Luther did not accept Jerome’s authority was sexuality, a prominent theme in the Church Father’s oeuvre. In Luther’s eyes, Jerome’s views were seriously muddled by his obsession with abstinence. “I wish he had had a wife,” he later remarked with an expert’s insight in one of his dinner conversations, “for then he would have written many things differently.”⁵⁸ Correspondingly, when Jerome’s biblical exegesis touched on sexual matters, Luther became impatient. A case in point is Jerome’s comment on a passage in Genesis about the patriarch Jacob’s sly scheme for cattle-breeding (Gen. 30:41). Jerome elucidates the Hebrew verbal form denoting rutting cattle as signifying “the ultimate heat in sexual intercourse, by which the whole body is shaken....” It prompted

⁵²Luther’s NT 2, 541, to Ephesians 4:14. “ut solus glorieris.” For Erasmus’s discussion of Lefèvre’s interpretation, see also M. L. van Poll-van de Lisdonk’s commentary in (*Opera Omnia Desiderii Erasmi*, Leiden: Brill, 2009) (hereafter ASD) VI, 9, 223–25.

⁵³WA TR 1, 130, no. 316, and LW 54:44.

⁵⁴Luther’s Jerome, 3:154r. “Nota quod Divus Hieronymus hic falsum imponit Augustino! Non enim Augustinus dicit, Judeos debere sed licere eis servare legem. Ergo non intellexit Augustinum. Dum infert Judeos debitores legis esse.”

⁵⁵Luther’s Jerome, 3:155r, “Falsa illatio omnino”; “Vide imponit haeresim Augustino.”

⁵⁶Luther’s Jerome, 4:32r, “Inaniloquia.” Cf. 2 Tim. 2:16.

⁵⁷Luther’s Jerome, 5:177v, “Vanitas.”

⁵⁸LW 54:72, and WA TR 1, 194, no. 445 (early 1533). “Darumb wilt ich yhm gonnem, das er ein weyb het gehabt; sol vil ding anders geschriben haben.”

a sarcastic response from Luther, “How do *you* know this?”⁵⁹ More aggressive is his response to Jerome’s reference to homosexual attraction in the Old Testament. In his commentary to Genesis 37:36, Jerome cites rabbinic sources claiming that Potiphar had bought the enslaved Joseph “on account of his exceeding beauty.” Yet before Potiphar could fulfill his desire, these sources related, he was rendered impotent by God. According to Luther, this was “a fairy-tale of Jewish swine and the rabbis of Lucianism.”⁶⁰ Such philological and historical knowledge was an unwelcome distraction from the theological message that Luther sought to retrieve from the Scriptures.

UNCOVERING UNBELIEF

Luther’s criticism of Jerome shows that his problem with Erasmus was not purely a matter of authority. In fact, many of his objections to the Church Father paralleled his views of Erasmus. For all its deep learning, Luther considered most of Jerome’s theology “cold,” just like that of Erasmus. “Jerome can be read for the sake of history,” he explained, “but he has nothing at all to say about faith and the teaching of true religion.” Already in 1517, he contrasted his judgment to that of Erasmus.

I see that not everyone is a truly wise Christian just because he knows Greek and Hebrew. St. Jerome with his five languages cannot be compared with Augustine, who knew only one language. Erasmus, however, is of an absolutely different opinion on this. But the discernment of one who attributes weight to man’s will is different from that of him who knows of nothing else but grace.⁶¹

Indeed, Luther resented the Church Father’s works because they were distractions from what he considered to be valuable learning. “I know no doctor whom I hate so much,” he concluded. “Surely there is more learning in Aesop than in all of Jerome. If only Jerome had encouraged the works of faith and the fruits of the gospel!”⁶²

In Erasmus’s case, Luther’s objections went beyond resentment. He suspected Erasmus of heterodox, even un-Christian views. One problem was the

⁵⁹Luther’s Jerome, 4:99v. “Unde tu istud nosti?” I am grateful to Bob Becking for his helpful comment about the Hebrew verbal form (“*iehamenna*”).

⁶⁰Luther’s Jerome, 4:101r. “*Fabula Judaicorum porcorum et Lucianismi Rabinorum.*”

⁶¹Luther to Johannes Lang, 1 March 1517, WA BR 1, Ep. 35. “*Tempora enim sunt periculosa hodie, et video, quod non ideo quispiam sit christianus vere sapiens, quia Graecus sit et Hebraeus, quando et Beatus Hieronymus quinque linguis monoglosson Augustinum non adaequarit, licet Erasmo aliter sit longe visum. Sed aliud est iudicium eius, qui arbitrio hominis nonnihil tribuit, aliud eius, qui praeter gratiam nihil novit.*”

⁶²LW 54:33, and WA TR 1, no. 252. “*Hieronymus potest legi propter historias, nam de fide et doctrina verae religionis ne verbum quidem habet.*” LW 54:72, and WA TR, no. 445. “*Ergo nullum doctorem scio, quem aequae oderim, cum tamen ardentissime eum amaverim et legerim. In Aesopo*

humanist's lack of understanding about grace. Well before the issue of free will became the focus of such a violent debate between the two men, Luther sensed a Pelagian attitude in Erasmus, in which human freedom took precedence over divine grace. When Erasmus criticized Jerome, for example, about his strict views on human sinfulness, arguing that people who had sinned once need not remain sinners their entire lives, Luther saw his suspicions confirmed. "You see that Erasmus does not understand anything of the nature of grace," he noted in an early gloss, "and that he is more favorable to Pelagius than to Jerome."⁶³ Conversely, he identified the Pelagians vehemently criticized by Jerome in his letter to Ctesiphon with "evil rogues, clearly Erasmians," thus skillfully driving a wedge between Erasmus and his ideal theologian Jerome.⁶⁴

Another problem that Luther detected, to his alarm, in the humanist's scholarship was covert skepticism. Erasmus's approach deliberately undermined the stability of the biblical message, according to Luther. "Make it all uncertain," he bitingly threw at Erasmus, for example, when the humanist used Greek manuscripts to cast doubt on the correctness of an observation by Jerome, followed slightly later by "Let nothing be good," when Erasmus comments on the connotations of individual words used in the Vulgate.⁶⁵ When Erasmus placed ancient history in a Christian perspective, Luther saw his suspicions confirmed. Thus when Erasmus wondered why Jerome dismissed a skeptical approach to the emotions (an approach that Erasmus considered fully Christian) Luther believed he understood Erasmus's sentiment perfectly well. "Of course you are surprised, since you are an Epicurean being."⁶⁶ In Ephesians, Erasmus's suggestion that some pagans may also in some way have hoped for salvation, "even though they did not yet know Christ," prompted a sharp curse: "May God punish you, Satan."⁶⁷

Luther was convinced that beneath Erasmus's skepticism lurked an unbeliever's mind. For Luther, the humanist's critical investigation of the scriptural text revealed that he did not actually believe what the Bible had to say. Especially in the eyes of the older Luther, this secret conviction made Erasmus dangerous for his readers. In his *Table Talk*, he spoke in increasingly categorical, even violent terms about the humanist. He labeled Erasmus an "Epicurean" or

certe plus est eruditiois quam in toto Hieronymo. Si tamen urgeret opera fidei et fructus euangelii; tantum dicit de ieiuniis etc."

⁶³Luther's Jerome, 3:117v (Erasmus's scholia to Jerome's letter to Ctesiphon). "Vides quod Erasmus nihil intelligat gratiae proprietatem et faventior sit Pelagio quam Hieronymo." On Luther's image of Erasmus, see also Augustijn, "'Vir duplex': Deutsche Interpretationen von Erasmus," in *Der Humanist als Theologe und Kirchenreformer*, 311–21.

⁶⁴Luther's Jerome, 3:116r. "Iusta indignatio. Wie böse buben sind das gewesen plane Erasmici."

⁶⁵Luther's NT 2, 539, to Ephesians 3:14, "Machs alles ungewis" and 540, to Ephesians 4:2, "Las nichts gut sein."

⁶⁶Luther's Jerome, 3:117v (Erasmus's scholia to Jerome's letter to Ctesiphon), "recte demiraris Epicureus existens õv."

⁶⁷Luther's NT 2, 531, to Ephesians 1:13, "Das dich Gott straffe, Satan."

“Christ’s chief enemy in a thousand years,” and compared him to a bug to be squashed, alluding to the poisonous “eggs of the basilisk” from Isaiah (59:5–6).⁶⁸ Luther’s marginal annotations show that his reading of Erasmus’s commentaries frequently confirmed his suspicions. Thus he could see a grammatical comment of Erasmus (about the distinction in meaning between middle or passive voice of the Greek verbal form *πληρουμένων*) as an attempt to destabilize scripture. “And therefore one should not believe anything of Paul and the entire Gospel,” he noted. “What else does Epicurus say, who does not know Christ, indeed, who considers it a fairy tale?”⁶⁹

This quest to uncover Erasmus’s hidden meanings shaped Luther’s reading style. It sometimes made him disregard what Erasmus actually wrote. In these instances Luther’s expectations stimulated misreading and misunderstanding. When, for instance, Erasmus expressed doubt whether the church can ever be free of errors, Luther sniffed out the unbeliever. “Erasmus is a skeptic,” he noted, “and he always has doubts about everything.”⁷⁰ In fact, however, in the same passage Erasmus had also identified a stable core of faith, concluding that it “suffices to be free of error to such an extent that the sum of religion and faith stands firm.” In another example from Ephesians (6:24), Erasmus commented that Ambrose did not read “amen” here and it was impossible to reconstruct what he did read. Luther read this observation as a deliberate attempt to undermine Paul’s argument. “And, consequently, we do not know what it is,” he indignantly translated in the margin, “and thus we do not know what to read.”⁷¹ In this way Luther repeatedly read skeptical tendencies into the text, based less on Erasmus’s argument than on his own suspicions. In this sort of reading practice the idea of irreverence plays a crucial role. And to understand how this idea affected his interpretation, we have to look into Luther’s conception of humor as an interpretative tool.

⁶⁸WA TR 1, no. 352, no. 837. “Hoc relinquo post me testamentum et vos eius rei voco testes, quod Erasmum habeam pro summo hoste Christi, qualis in mille annis non fuit.” WA TR 3, no. 3010. “Hoc audiet etc., licet hoc verum, quod is, qui premit Erasmus, camicem premit. Ego citabo locum de ovo basilisci ex Esaia, qui locus apposite de ipso est.” For the term “Epicurean;” see also Marjorie O’Rourke Boyle, *Christening Pagan Mysteries: Erasmus in Pursuit of Wisdom* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 63–95.

⁶⁹Luther’s NT 2, 533, to Ephesians 1:23. “Ideo nihil est credendum Paulo et toti Evangelio. Quid Epicurus aliud diceret, qui Christum nescit, imo pro fabula habet.”

⁷⁰Luther’s NT 2, 423, to an extensive comment on 1 Corinthians 7:39. “Erasmus scepticus est et dubitat semper et in omnibus.” Erasmus had commented, “Nullus, opinor, ecclesiam Christi, quae constat hominum consortio, sic omni prorsus errore liberat, ut nihil ignoret. Satis est hactenus vacare errore, ut religionis ac fidei summa constet.”

⁷¹Luther’s NT 2, 552. “Et per consequens nescimus, quid sit, ergo nescimus, quid legamus.”

THE HERMENEUTICS OF HUMOR

For Luther, humor could take many different guises, ranging from innocent, joyful cheer to comedic forms that were aggressive, subversive, and scathingly satirical. All of these modes are abundant in his works.⁷² Traditionally, Christian attitudes toward these different types were ambivalent, as M. A. Screech has shown in his seminal study of the subject.⁷³ The Bible offered many instances of humor, but some of these passages included some particularly stark warnings. There is the notorious Old Testament story (2 Kings 2:23–25) of a rowdy group of “little children out of the city” who laughed at Elisha’s baldhead, only to be cursed by the prophet and subsequently torn apart by “two she-bears.” In the New Testament, Paul instructs the Ephesians to refrain from “foolish talking” and “jesting” (Ephesians 5:3–4), which are juxtaposed, significantly, with such vices as fornication, covetousness, and filthiness.

As a theologian, Luther sought to draw a clear line between acceptable and impermissible forms of humor. Laughing about religion was out of bounds. “God has given us apples, pears, and nuts to play with, and we can jest with our wives,” his friends heard him say in 1532, “but he does not allow Himself and His greatness to be mocked.”⁷⁴ Following a tradition of thinking about humor that goes back to Plato and Aristotle, Luther regarded mockery as a hostile act that betrayed a sense of superiority.⁷⁵

Conversely, the use of humor as a weapon was permissible as a Christian defense mechanism, for instance in the fight against the devil. Indeed, the power of faith was such that it could proudly laugh at all forms of misfortune. “Where there is faith, one should laugh,” Luther believed, “and the laughter and mockery of Christians should go beyond that of the devil and should retain their dignity.”⁷⁶ It is in this context that Luther’s satirical humor, with its coarse, grobian-like style and its penchant for scatological jokes, has to be understood.⁷⁷ The explic-

⁷²See Eric W. Gritsch, “Luther on Humor,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 18 (2004): 373–86. On the interpretation of humor in sixteenth-century religious writings, see also Erika Rummel, “Humor in Unexpected Places: Witty Asides in Religious Tracts and Their Significance for the Historian,” *Erasmus of Rotterdam Society Yearbook* 20 (2000): 34–46.

⁷³M. A. Screech, *Laughter at the Foot of the Cross* (London: Allen Lane, 1997).

⁷⁴WA TR 3, no. 3186a. “Gott hatt uns zugeben zu spielen mit epffelin und byrn und nussen, unsern weibern, aber mit yhm und seiner majestet lest er nicht scherzen.”

⁷⁵On the superiority theory of humor, see John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 4–9.

⁷⁶WA TR 1, no. 813. “Fides ridet omnia adversa.... Ubi enim fides est, ibi oportet aliquem ridere. Et licet Satan quoque rideat: Si filius Dei es, descende de cruce etc.; Eliam vocat, tamen christianorum risus et spot mus uber des Teufels spot gehen und mus den trotz behalten.”

⁷⁷See Josef Schmidt, “Luther the Satirist: Strategies and Function of His Satire,” in *The Martin Luther Quincentennial*, ed. Gerhard Dünnhaupt (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1985), 32–47; Heiko Oberman, “Teufelsdreck: Eschatology and Scatology in the ‘Old’ Luther,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 19, no. 3 (1988): 435–50; Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (New Haven: Yale, 1989), esp. 106–10; and Carlos Eire, “Bite This, Satan! The Devil in Luther’s Table

itly vulgar style shocked Erasmus. Comparing Luther to “a wild boar” and placing himself in the role of an unwilling gladiator, Erasmus viewed Luther’s use of coarse humor as a sign of his fanaticism and arrogance.

[I]n the case of Luther I am at a loss to understand how two such different personalities can exist in the same person. Sometimes, when he writes, he seems to breathe the very spirit of an apostle; at other times there is no scurrilous buffoon whom he does not surpass with his sneering, abusive, and sarcastic wit. He has spirit enough to condemn emperors and popes; yet at a mere whisper from some mean and worthless persons he turns his furious temper against anyone he pleases, forgetting the kind of drama in which he is involved and the role he has taken on.⁷⁸

And yet, Luther criticized the same combination of humor and arrogance in Erasmus. For Luther, humor was one of Erasmus’s most prominent characteristics. Although it was different in tone from his own satirical style, Luther regarded Erasmus’s style as expressing a similarly aggressive intent. Typical of Erasmus’s humor was its evasive ambivalence, which Luther regarded as a devious strategy that allowed the humanist to communicate hidden thoughts without stating them openly. Luther had first discovered this after reading Erasmus’s *Paraclesis*, the preface to the New Testament in 1516. “That was the first place that made my mind averse to Erasmus,” he wrote in 1534; “from then on, I began to suspect he was simply a Democritus or Epicurus, a skilled mocker of Christ, who everywhere reveals to his fellow Epicureans his hatred of Christ.” With his oblique style Erasmus had a secret hold over his readers, in Luther’s view, forcing them to take his works literally and sincerely.⁷⁹

In Luther’s eyes, Erasmus was a satirist in the style of the ancient author Lucian, or of Momus, the ancient god of satire, who “ridicules and plays with

Talk,” in *Piety and Family in Early Modern Europe: Essays in Honour of Steven Ozment*, ed. Marc R. Forster and Benjamin J. Kaplan (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 70–93. For the literary contexts of scatological language in the late medieval and early Reformation period, see Josef Schmidt and Mary Simon, “Holy and Unholy Shit: The Pragmatic Context of Scatological Curses in Early German Reformation Satire,” in *Fecal Matters in Early Modern Literature and Art*, ed. Jeff Persels and Russell Ganim (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 109–17, and David Bagchi, “The German Rabelais? Foul Words and the Word in Luther,” *Reformation and Renaissance Review* 7 (2005): 143–62.

⁷⁸Erasmus to Michael Boudet, 13 March 1526, Ep. 1678, CWE 12, 83. For the comparison of Luther to a wild boar, see Erasmus to Thomas Lupset, ca. 4 October 1525, Ep. 1624, CWE 11, 306.

⁷⁹Luther to Nikolaus von Amsdorf, 1534, WA BR 7, Ep. 2093, lines 154–64. “Hic primus locus fuit, qui alienavit animum meum ab Erasmo. Protinus suspicari coepi eum esse simpliciter Democritum seu Epicurum, et versutum irrisorem Christi, qui ubique odium suum in Christum suis Coëpicuris indicat, sed ita figuratis et insidiosis verbis, ut furiosissime debacchari possit in christianos, qui suis obliquis et suspectis verbis offensi, non interpretentur omnia pro Christo eorum, quasi unus Erasmus in orbe regnum possideat liberrimum insidioso et oblique loquendi de rebus maximis, et omnes homines obnoxios habeat in ea servitute, ut cogantur obliquitates et insidias eius recte et sincere interpretari. Cur ipse potius non loquitur recte et aperte? Ut quid delectatur insidiis et figuris istis tam periculosis?”

everything, the entire faith and Christ”; Erasmus thought up “ambiguous and equivocal words day and night, so that his books can even be read by a Turk.”⁸⁰ For Luther, this sort of elusiveness posed a risk to the faith, which required a serious tone and a clear style, especially in a time of religious confusion. Erasmus, however, found striving for such clarity a hopeless ambition and even one that would be dangerously conducive to instability. As became clear in the polemic over free will, the humanist believed that scripture was not straightforward in its meanings but required interpretation and discussion.⁸¹

Because of Erasmus’s use of ambiguous language, Luther famously called him “an eel,” who cannot be grasped “except by Christ.”⁸² Luther became convinced that Erasmus was fundamentally insincere in his theological writings.

If I were to cut open Erasmus’s heart I would find there nothing but mouths laughing about the Trinity, about the Sacrament, etc. Everything is a laughing matter for him. He does not think that God is anything superior to a man or that God can speak beyond man’s ability to understand.... Now, every part of the Holy Scriptures preaches faith. But what would faith be if it consisted only of things of reason? Faith is the daily death of the old Adam; but reason is restless—it tempts us continuously, and the devil has the advantage of striking at this weakness.⁸³

As this graphic, demonic image suggests, Luther feared the subversive impact of Erasmus’s humor on theology. He believed it needed to be exposed. In this way humor became central to his interpretation of Erasmus.

Since Erasmian humor was covert, ambiguous, and indirect, its uncovering required Luther to read between the lines. We saw this, for instance, when Luther suspected Erasmus of mocking Jerome’s language. In other cases it prompted Luther to reverse the meaning of Erasmus’s words. He mistrusted Erasmus’s ostensible modesty, for example, that comes across in his comment on Paul’s

⁸⁰WA TR 1, no. 811. “Erasmus momus. Erasmus verus est momus. Omnia ridet ac ludit, totam religionem ac Christum, atque ut hoc melius praestet, dies noctesque excogitat vocabula amphibola et ambigua, ut eius libri etiam a Turca legi possint.” For the varied reception of the figure of Momus in the sixteenth century, including Erasmus’s perspective, see David Cast, “Marten van Heemskerck’s ‘Momus Criticizing the Works of the Gods’: A Problem of Erasmian Iconography,” *Simiolus* 7 (1974): 22–34, esp. 25–29.

⁸¹See Cummings, *Literary Culture of the Reformation*, 144–83, and James D. Tracy’s introduction to the debate in *Erasmus and Luther: The Battle over Free Will*, ed. Clarence H. Miller (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2012), ix–xxviii, esp. xxiii–xxvi.

⁸²WA TR 1, no. 131. “Erasmus est anguilla. Niemand kan yhn ergreifen denn Christus allein. Est vir duplex.”

⁸³LW 54:81 (slightly adapted), and WA TR 1, no. 484. “Wenn ich Erasmus hertz solt auffschneyden, so wolt ich eitel lachende meuler finden de trinitate, sacramento etc. Es ist eitel gelechter mit yhm. Non cogitat, das Gott ettwas hoher ist denn ein mensch, das er nit konne hoher reden, denn er verstehn kan.... Iam tota scriptura sancta praedicat fidem; quid autem esset fides, si tantum essent rationabilia? Sed fides ist der teglich todt veteris Aadae, quia ratio, die hat kein ruge; sie versucht vns ymmer, vnd der Teuffel hat das forteyl, quod tentat illam infirmitatem.”

Greek style. When Erasmus changed the wording in Ephesians (1:20) for stylistic reasons, he apologetically added that he provided his translation “not in the way we wanted, but, as they say, in the way we could.” Luther read this as insincere. “Are you making fun of God in this way? O, you most Epicurean man!”⁸⁴ Erasmus’s comment could also be taken as a polite apology for emending the text, but Luther regarded it as an expression of thinly veiled arrogance that was patronizing about the stylistic quality of the biblical text.

Similarly, Luther considered Erasmus’s habit of philological scrutiny to be a sign of mockery. When Paul quotes from the Psalms in Ephesians 4:8, Erasmus points out that the apostle changed one word, which Luther in turn regarded as a satirical, destructive analysis of the sacred text. “Laugh,” he wrote in the margin. To the printed marginal comment, “Paul has changed something from the Hebrew wording,” he added a note to make explicit what he thought Erasmus had actually meant to say: “and therefore he is unreliable.”⁸⁵ To Luther, this presumed attitude was typical of Erasmus’s textual analysis: “if he can joke about just one letter, he will do so.”⁸⁶

Although Luther was frequently a distinctly uncharitable reader of Erasmus, his suspicions were not always unfounded. Erasmus’s irony is palpable in various places. His low esteem for traditional, scholastic theologians is evident, for example, when he warns the speculative theologian without knowledge of Greek not to go “beyond the olives,” that is, not to go too far.⁸⁷ It does not escape Luther that the Greek rendering of this proverbial expression, ironically, excludes the intended reader from understanding the message. In the margin he sarcastically adds, “Laugh, please.”⁸⁸ Similarly, in a reference to the practice of indulgences, Erasmus’s irony was equally plain. Erasmus described this practice as representing “the enormous mercy” of the pope, which even extended to those in purgatory. If only papal clemency extended, he continued, to the innocent, living believers who are tormented by the fear of divine judgment. Yet for Luther this expression of pastoral concern was just empty words. He saw the oblique reference to indulgences as yet another witticism, and scathingly comments in the margins, “Do not laugh yourself to death.”⁸⁹

⁸⁴Luther’s NT 2, 533. “Sic rides Deum? O Epicurissime.” Erasmus tried to avoid repetition in Paul’s wording in Ephesians 1:20. “κατὰ τὴν ἐνέργειαν... Ἦν ἐνήργησεν...” His side-remark refers to a proverb included in his *Adagia*, no. 1.8.43 (743), “Ut possumus, quando ut volumus non licet.”

⁸⁵Luther’s NT 2, 541, “Ride”; “ergo fallax est.”

⁸⁶WA TR 5, no. 5535. “Erasmus, der ist ein gesell! wenn der nur kann ein buchstaben cavillirn, so thut ers.”

⁸⁷Erasmus on Ephesians 1:13, Luther’s NT 2, 532. “Haec adduximus, ut intelligat lector, me non abs re Graecum obsignandi verbum annotasse, neu qui philosophari volet in divinis literis, Graecae literaturae expers ἔξω τῶν ἐλαιῶν, quod dici solet, currat.” For the expression, see also Erasmus’s *Adagia*, no. II.ii.10 (1110), “Extra oleas.”

⁸⁸Luther’s NT 2, 532, Erasmus’s comment to Ephesians 1:13, “Ride q[uae]so.”

⁸⁹Luther’s NT 2, 431, to 1 Corinthians 7:39, “Lache dich nicht zu tod.”

CONCLUSION

In the past three decades historians of reading have rightly emphasized the specificity of early modern reading practices. According William Sherman, this particular characteristic makes the study of marginalia “resistant to grand theories and master narratives.”⁹⁰ And yet, however idiosyncratic, individual examples can provide important evidence of possible responses to a text. They can also reveal influential forms of reading, as in the case of Luther, whose personal response in the margins cannot be separated from his theological program. With their remarkable amount of evaluative notes, Luther’s annotated works of Erasmus show the extent to which his reading was an intellectual, emotional, and spiritual activity.

Rather than gauging the relationship between the two Reformation figureheads by searching for supposedly Erasmian elements in Luther’s thought, therefore, it is more fruitful to take heed of Luther’s deep ambivalence toward Erasmus’s scholarship. On the one hand, he made extensive use of the humanist’s editions of patristic and biblical texts. They provided him with a rich array of resources for his own theological studies. On the other hand, however, Luther was highly critical and often dismissive of Erasmus’s historical perspective and grammatical approach to theology. Still Luther kept turning back to these works, almost obsessively, often responding aggressively to what he regarded as the humanist’s covert skeptical agenda.

From this perspective, then, one might wonder why their contemporaries were not quicker to see the fundamental differences between the two men, if the misunderstanding had not been so useful for many parties in the conflict.⁹¹ Martin Bucer, for one, could not have been aware of Luther’s criticism when he enthusiastically wrote that Luther and Erasmus were in “complete agreement.” Luther at first intentionally kept silent about his reservations toward Erasmus, so as not to strengthen the latter’s enemies.⁹² Bucer was similarly misguided in his impression that Luther had introduced a humanist curriculum in Wittenberg, in which traditional authors had been abolished and “Greek literature, Jerome, Augustine and Paul were openly taught.”⁹³ In the years that followed, however, it

⁹⁰Sherman, *Used Books*, xvi.

⁹¹For the propaganda strategies of those who deliberately promoted confusion between the humanist movement and the early reformers, see Rummel, *Confessionalization of Humanism*, 9–29.

⁹²See Luther’s letter to Lang of 1 March 1517, WA BR 1, Ep. 35. “Ego tamen hoc iudicium vehementer celo, ne consensum aemulorum eius confirmem; dabit ei Dominus intellectum suo forte tempore.” See also his slightly later letter to Georg Spalatin (18 January 1518), WA BR 1, Ep. 57b, lines 18–31.

⁹³Bucer to Rhenanus, 1 May 1518, *Correspondance*, 61. “Is effecit, ut Wittenburgae triviales isti auctores sint ad unum explosi omnes, graecanicae literae, Hieronymus, Augustinus, Paulus publice doceantur.” Luther was in fact puzzled by the fact that his colleague Aesticampianus had wanted to teach Jerome, see WA BR Ep. 181 to Georg Spalatin (1519). For Luther’s ideas on “a good, thorough reformation” of the universities and its implication for the curriculum, see his twenty-fifth point in *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, WA 6:457–62 (LW 44:200–206).

became obvious that Luther, although aided by the tremendous scholarly armory of the humanist, had been far less influenced by Erasmus than many of his enemies would have wished. ♣

CALL FOR REFLECTIONS ON 2017

The Sixteenth Century Journal will be publishing a special issue on Luther as its final issue in volume 48, which will appear in early 2018. As part of this, we are soliciting reviews and short reflective pieces on commemorative events that occurred throughout the year, including exhibits, conferences, plays, concerts, talks, workshops, panel discussions, special church services, student or youth group activities, and any other type of scholarly or public event marking the 500th anniversary. If you participate in, view, or attend an event, please send us a 250–500 word personal reflection on this. We hope these will capture the wide array of commemorations held over the year in many parts of the world, which will enable scholars today and in the future to better understand the Reformation and its memory.

Please send these reflections, and any questions you have about this, to Merry Wiesner-Hanks, at merrywh@uwm.edu. The deadline is 10 November 2017, thus after Reformation Sunday.