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MARTIN LUTHER;

HIS CHARACTER AND LITERARY INFLUENCE,

BY

REBA G. WHARTON.

FOR THE DEGREE OF A. B. IN THE COLLEGE OF LITERATURE AND ARTS.

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An acquaintance with Martin Luther is important to every student of German not only on account of his prominence in the history of human progress but also because of the unique position he holds in relation to the German language and literature. But it is even more than this, for he embodied the national character so well that to know him is to become acquainted with many important elements in the character of the German people.

It is not only as the leader of the Reformation that the German nation has cause to honor his memory. He was really the founder of German patriotism and without him the United German Empire of to-day would have been impossible. His spirit ruled the movement of the Reformation not only in his own country but in all other Protestant lands. The power our English Bible has exerted on the progress and prosperity of the Anglo-Saxon race in language and literature is due in great part to Tyndale's translation of the Scriptures. But Tyndale was indebted to Luther.

Not in name only does his glory shine forth after
the lapse of centuries but in deed and word, character and influence. In many cases the private life of a great man is distinct from his public career but in Luther's life the two are a unit which manifests a sincere and generous heart—a true man.

It was altogether suitable to his function in life that he was born poor and brought up among the poorest of men. He had to beg from door to door as the school-children did in those times, singing for alms and bread. Carlyle says "Among things and not among the show of things he had to grow. It was his task to get acquainted with realities and to keep acquainted with them throughout his whole life. His task was to bring the world back to reality."

Being the son of a peasant and yet a man of education and practical wisdom, when he came to act the part of a reformer he occupied a central ground, the point where extremes meet and opposite influences tend to neutralize each other. Had he written for the learned alone his words would have slumbered on the book-shelves.

Since he was of no sect or party he was a man of and for the people and never ceased to be a man of men. His common speech has a rugged, idiomatic nobleness but gleams however with beautiful poetic tints and sparkles with sense
and wit. His illustrations are often drawn from common and low life yet they have such force that they have been called "living creatures" and their author has been styled "The tongue and sword of his time." Truly he was a man of the people knowing all their thoughts and feelings and employing all their words and expressions in his magnificent yet rude eloquence.

He was less subtle, less learned than Erasmus but in mother-wit, in force, and in imaginative power, he was as able a man as ever lived.

From his display of temper and his fierce defiance we might be led to suppose that he possessed none of those gentle qualities which make us love great men rather than admire them. But when we see him at the death-bed of his little Magdalene and read his sweet and affectionate letter to his little Johnnie we think that no mother-heart could have been more tender and loving. Could he have been such a lover of music and of nature if there had been a lack of gentleness in his heart?

It is true that angry invectives rushed from his lips with great vehemence as is shown in his reply to Henry VIII. and in many other of his controversial writings. Hallam has said that he had no superior in scornful irony.
Luther's life was a model of simplicity. Born poor he remained poor although he might have had wealth. The greater part of what he did possess was given away in charities. He was sociable, cheerful and fond of innocent amusements. Being one of the most copious of talkers, he enabled his friends to preserve the most extraordinary monuments of his intellectual vigor. On reading his table-talks one ceases to wonder how this "single man could change the face of Europe."

It has been said that one of the strongest proofs of Luther's greatness is the fact that none of the wars and bloodshed of the Revolution began as long as he continued living. Seldom do we find a man that has aroused such commotion who does not perish in it. To remain master of the situation in such troublesome times shows a master-mind possessed of moderation and a clear judgement.

His firmness of character was perhaps best shown at the Diet of Worms where he answered with firmness and modesty and concluded with those famous words: "It is neither safe nor prudent to do aught against conscience. Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen."

Thus did he in those stormy times, whatever might be thought of the violence of his utterances, take up his
position clearly and resolutely from the first and maintain it to the end — sure of his cause and safe against the new attacks which he saw the devil was making; unyielding and defiant against his Papal enemies. And in this frame of mind he took, at that critical time, a step calculated to sharpen all the tongues of slander; but a step in which he saw the fulfillment of his calling — it was his marriage with Catherine Bora. He thought the enforcement of celibacy on the clergy was iniquitous and productive of immorality and as he could not tell others that they should marry unless he led the way, he married first. It was not characteristic of him to preach what he did not practise.

On the day of the burning of the Papal Bull he was excited and the next day in the lecture-room he uttered wild words, declaring that those who took delight in the Pope's religion must be lost forever. Grand as is the figure of Luther on the page of history as December, 1520, he dared to make himself the mouthpiece of Germany, demanding reform and threatening revolution if reform could not be had, it must be admitted that he was "playing with fire." Friends urged moderation but instead came still fiercer defiance. Now he wrote "Christ lives and we will enter Worms in spite of all the Gates of Hell and the powers of the air." After-
wards he said "The Devil saw in my heart that even had I
known that there would be as many devils at Worms as tiles
upon the house-roofs still I should have joyfully plunged
in among them." Such enthusiasm grew out of what was true
heroism. The noise, the worship of the crowd, the danger
and excitement would have turned the head of any mere enthusi­
ast.

Thus at Worms single-handed he had to fight the
battle of Germany against the Pope. Surely he was a true pa­
triot who would risk his life for the sake of his country
and who expressed his love in such words as these, "I must
help poor Germany, miserable, forsaken, betrayed and sold.
To whom indeed I wish no harm but everything that is good,
as my duty to my dear Fatherland commands me."

But he fought a battle at Worms not only for Ger­
many but for Christendom, not only against the Pope but
against all powers who seek to lay claims upon the human
mind and to enthrall the free beliefs of the people. Against
all powers he asserted the right of freedom of conscience.

It is probably true that some great spiritual com­
motion would have shaken Europe at this time but it might
have lasted a great many years and the results might have
been far different. That the Reformation succeeded in the
form it assumed was due to the fact that there existed at the crisis a single person, in whose words the bravest and truest men saw their own thoughts expressed — a great individual who could model the history of mankind and model it entirely for good.

The appearance of Luther before the Diet of Worms is one of the finest if not the finest scene in human history. Many a man has encountered death bravely for a cause which he knows to be just, when he is sustained by thousands of sympathizing friends of whom he is for the moment the champion and the representative. But it is one thing to suffer and another to encounter face to face and single-handed the array of spiritual and temporal authorities which are ruling supreme.

We see him as a theologian standing up alone before principalities to protest against spiritual lies; we see him in the home-circle, tender and loving. His mind was literally world-wide. His eyes were constantly observant of what was around him. At a time when science was hardly out of its shell he had carefully observed Nature; he studied human nature as a dramatist. His memory was a museum of historical information, of anecdotes of great men, of old German literature and songs. Scarcely a subject could be
mentioned on which he had not thought and about which he had not something remarkable to say.

What a blessed discovery was that of an old Latin Bible found in the Erfurt library in which Luther learned that fast and vigils would not save his soul and that religion did not consist in ceremonies but was a thing of the heart and true worship in spirit and in truth!

In his religious discussions, especially in his breach with Rome, we see a mighty natural power breaking out but always regulated by the humblest devotion to the work his conscience imposed upon him. Even in his most vehement outbursts we never fail to catch the tender expressions of a Christian warmth and fervor of the heart.

Luther's merit in literary history is so great that Heine has said "He created the German language." His dialect became the language of all writings, although many of his works were written hastily and without regard for literary form.

Among his earliest literary productions are lectures on the Psalms in which he employed simple yet powerful eloquence. The earnest instructive contents of popular tracts and short pamphlets met the needs of both educated and uneducated classes in a manner never done by any previ-
ous religious writings and served to stimulate their appetite for more. The two pamphlets, "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation" and "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," were rightly called war-trumpets. In these, the reformer who at first merely wished to point out the right way of salvation, now stepped boldly forward and with determination demanded the abolition of all unlawful and unchristian ordinances of the Church, and called upon the temporal powers to help him if need be with material force.

He begins his dedication, "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation," with these words: "The time of silence is past and the time of speaking is come." Then he tells us that he has several points concerning the improvement of the Christian condition that he wishes to present to the Christian Nobility of Germany, and that perhaps God would help his Church through the laity since the clergy had become so careless.

The needs and troubles of Christendom forced him to cry to God that he would send someone to help the suffering nation. He then discusses what he calls the three walls of the Roman Church: the first was that the temporal power had no right over the spiritual but the spiritual was over the temporal; the second, that the Scriptures could only be
expounded by the Pope; and the third, that no one but the Pope could summon a Council.

He assaulted these walls with Scripture in a very clear and forcible manner. He protests, especially on behalf of the German Empire, against the overbearing behavior of the Pope, who demands power over the Emperor and allows the latter to kiss his foot and hold his stirrup. But the most important demand advanced by Luther was the abolition of the celibacy of the clergy. He did not wish to see the convents and cloisters closed but turned into Christian schools where men might learn the Scriptures and be trained to preach. He laments the gross immoralities of the priesthood and complains that marriage is avoided because of its responsibilities and its restraints.

He wishes to forbid all begging among Christians for he wanted each town to provide for its own poor and not admit strange beggars. He believed also that each state should be principally governed by its own laws and that every town should be provided with a school.

He refers briefly to the evils of social and worldly life, especially to luxury in dress and food and the practice of taking interest. He wants all fasts abolished because they were opposed to the freedom of the Bible. He
wishes also to do away with the numerous holidays and the pilgrimages to Rome.

At the conclusion Luther says "I am well aware that I have pitched my note high and that I have proposed many things which will be regarded as impossible. I am bound to add that if I could, I would not only talk but act; I would rather the world were angry with me than God. I know another little song of Rome and if her ear itches for it, I will sing it to her and pitch the notes at their highest.

God give us all a Christian understanding, and to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation, especially, a true spiritual courage to do their best for the poor Church. Amen."

His work, "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," takes as its subject the Christian Sacraments. He insists upon the idea that it is not the external ceremony — the act of the priest in administering — that makes the receiver a sharer in blessedness. This depends upon faith in the Divine promise, "He who believes enjoys the benefit of the sacrament even though its outward administration should be denied him.

Ordination of priests consists only of this, that
out of a community one is chosen for the particular work of administering God's word. He warns men not to strive for that outward anointing unless they are intent upon the true service of the gospel.

Confession, he said, had been changed into an act of compulsion and torture. Instead of leading the tempted brother to trust in God's mercy he was made to perform acts of penance which did not give satisfaction to God but only satisfied the avarice of the priests.

Among his works published at this time are "Why the books of the Pope were burned by Dr. Martin Luther," "On Monastic Vows," "On the Abuse of Masses" and "On Papal Power at Rome." He gave them a new and, for the Christian people of Germany, a most important character by writing them in German, although many of them were first printed in Latin.

But the most important task that Luther undertook and in which he persevered with steadfast devotion during his stay at the Wartburg was one of a peaceful character, the most beautiful fruit of his seclusion, the noblest gift that he hath bequeathed to mankind. This was the translation of the Bible. Prior to this time it had been translated into German but the idiom was clumsy and sounded foreign to the people. Unlike Luther's version, it was not from the
original text but from the Latin translation used in the Churches. Luther declared that no one could speak German of that outlandish kind. "But," he said, "One has to ask the mother in her home; the children in the streets; the common-man in the market-place and look at their mouths to see how they speak and thence to interpret it to oneself and so make them understand it."

None the less strictly did he adhere to the spirit of the text and where necessary even to the letter itself. Such an interpretation required a truly devout Christian. Permeated himself with the substance and spirit of the Scriptures, he understood how to express them in such a manner as to deeply impress others. In powerful and thoroughly popular language, Luther sought to bring home to the people who filled his Church, the supreme truth he had newly gained; here in particular he employed his own powerful German as he also did in many of his writings.

The invention of the printing press made it possible to multiply the New testament in a most wonderful way; so that even the lowest classes read it greedily as the source of all truth. While it was still in the press Luther set to work upon a translation of the Old. Here he encountered more difficulties on account of the language but
with the help of some Hebrew friends he made an excellent translation.

No other writer of the time displayed like Luther the full tone of a powerful, often uncouth, but very tender, popular ballad or German legend. While seeking to compose and re-arrange hymns for congregational uses in the Church, he busied himself with the Psalter, paraphrasing its contents in an evangelical spirit and in German meter. Thus in 1524 there appeared at Wittenberg the first German hymn-book, consisting at first of only eight hymns about half of them original compositions and the other half adapted from the Psalms. These were soon followed by many others; among them was that grand one, "Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott."

These new hymns went forth to town and country, to churches and houses throughout the land. Often they brought home to ears and hearts the words of truth far more than any sermon could have done. They became weapons of war as well as means of edification and comfort.

Luther introduced a complete church service in Germany. The people had the Word of God read aloud to them and joined in the singing of German hymns. His compilation of the catechism suitable for the people met the demands of simple minds and of a Christian's ordinary daily life. Its
contents were confined to the highest and most practical truths of Christian teaching. Next to the Bible, this Catechism, with its pithy, popular language, was most influential in leading to an apprehension and confirmation of the teachings of the Gospel. How excellently its originality and clearness responded to the wants not only of his own time but of after generations has been proved by its having remained in use for centuries among so many different ranks of life and such various degree of culture.

In his "War with the Turks" he spoke to his fellow-Germanis with clearness and decision derived from his own convictions and in the fullness of his strength as a Christian, a citizen and a patriot.

We possess thirteen of Aesop's fables adapted for youth by Luther. They are rendered in the simplest popular language and expressed the morals of many appropriate German proverbs.

His literary influence did not only extend to his writings for he established several schools from which have gone out some of the most accomplished classical scholars in the world. In Eisleben there still exists in a flourishing condition the very gymnasium which was established by Luther as the last act of his life.
It was through his influence that the celebrated school of Pforta was established and that the Luther Monastery was changed into a learned school.

"Four potentates ruled the mind of Europe in the Reformation --- the Emperor, Erasmus, the Pope and Luther. The Pope wanes, Erasmus is little, the Emperor is nothing but Luther abides as a power for all time. His image casts itself upon the current of ages as the mountain mirrors itself in the river that winds at its foot --- the mighty fixing itself immutably on the changing."