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Cultural Exchange between European Nations during the Renaissance

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Edward Denny in 1580 asked his younger friend Philip Sidney to suggest a recommended program of studies. In his written reply Sidney placed great emphasis on the study of history and proposed that Denny read a broad range of works, from the Greek and Roman classics to European chronicles. Denny’s first choice, however, Sidney intimated, should not be Herodotos or Livy but a near contemporary: “You should begin with Phillip Melanthons Chronology.” Melanchthon’s *Chronicon* was an appropriate beginning, since in one broad sweep it covered the whole of history, from creation to recent times. Yet Sidney’s choice of Melanchthon is also indicative of a more fundamental debt: the Lutheran reformer and humanist had for decades stood in the forefront of educational reform both on the Continent and in England. Indeed, Melanchthon’s influence in northern Europe—both directly through his writings and indirectly through the schools and the scholars he molded—was second only to that of Erasmus. While everybody today rightly recognizes the Erasmian stamp on northern humanism, Melanchthon is largely forgotten. My paper is a small attempt to rectify this omission by highlighting Melanchthon’s presence in Tudor England, especially in the writings of Sir Philip Sidney.

I

In 1518 Philip Melanchthon, the precocious grand-nephew of Johannes Reuchlin, became at the age of 21 the first professor of Greek at the University of Wittenberg. Indebted to Erasmus, the young lecturer immediately set his stamp

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on the university with an inaugural address that blazoned the new learning and placed rhetoric at the center of a humanist curriculum. He remained faithful to Wittenberg, yet by the time of his death in 1560 he was not simply the reformer of his own university but the "Praeceptor Germaniae," the "Teacher of Germany." By then he had taught over 150 courses and written influential textbooks in almost every subject of the curriculum. He had also helped to reorganize a number of German universities and secondary schools along humanistic lines. Yet all of that was only one side of his mission.

Immediately upon his arrival at Wittenberg he became involved with one of the other professors, Martin Luther, who was then only beginning to formulate his critique of the status quo in religion. In Melanchthon, Luther found a worthy co-worker that in the years to come was to complement his own hot-tempered enthusiasm with calm scholarship and an ecumenical and irenic spirit. While Luther was the born leader and wrote the trail-blazing tracts that spread the Reformation all over northern Europe, Melanchthon consolidated and systematized the new doctrine through his more scholarly writings. What we now know as Lutheranism was indeed to a large extent documented not by Luther himself but by Melanchthon. In 1521 came the first of many editions of his Erasmian exercise in theology, the Locis communis, in which "commonplaces" such as "God, Unity, Trinity, Predestination, Sin, Law, Grace," etc. were explicated. And in 1530 it was Melanchthon who penned the first draft of what was to become the central doctrinal document of Lutheranism, the Augsburg Confession. Both of these works were to play a crucial part in the continued spread of Protestantism, not just in Germany and not just among the Lutherans. Melanchthon was a long-time friend of Martin Bucer, who was to become a major Zwinglian influence in England, and he remained on friendly terms with John Calvin even after cracks developed in the relationship between


3 During his forty-eight years of teaching, Melanchthon offered at least 159 courses, writes Lowell C. Green: "of these 46 were in theology, with the remaining 113 courses distributed as follows: Greek authors, 51 courses, including at least 11 dealing specifically with Aristotle. 42 in Latin authors, of which at least 11 were liberal arts courses in Dialectic or Rhetoric, 11 in natural science, and 8 in history, including world history" ("The Reformation and Education in the Sixteenth Century," Bulletin of Appalachian State University 67 (1970): 37). I shall return to Melanchthon's writings below.

4 See Luther and Melanchthon in the History and Theology of the Reformation, ed. Vilma Vaja (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1961), and Lowell C. Green, How Melanchthon Helped Luther Discover the Gospel (Fallbrook, CA: Verdict, 1980).

5 Erasmus's Ratio seu Methodus had provided the theory: "You should make up for yourself [from the Bible] some kind of theological "loci" or accept those already handed down by someone else. Into these you can collect, as in nests, all that you read" (as cited in Timothy J. Wengert, Philip Melanchthon's "Annotations in Johanneum" in Relation to its Predecessors and Contemporaries, Travaux d'Humanisme et Renaissance, vol. 220 (Geneva: Droz, 1887) 133).

Wittenberg and Geneva. But what about Melanchthon and England? What role did he have to play in the religious and intellectual development of the insular kingdom?

II

Melanchthon never sat foot on the British Isles, yet that was not for lack of trying. Already in 1516, before the young prodigy moved to Wittenberg, Erasmus recommended him for a teaching position at Cambridge to John Fisher, the university chancellor. While nothing came of it, the efforts to bring him to England were renewed more than once by Henry VIII himself in the 1530s. At that point it was the German princes who would not let Melanchthon go. And finally, when Melanchthon's old friend Martin Bucer died in his post as Professor of Theology at Cambridge in 1553, Edward VI personally selected and invited Melanchthon to fill the vacancy. Yet that also was not to be. Within a few months the king was dead, and Mary Tudor preempted any Protestant post. It is anyway doubtful whether Melanchthon, who himself had only a few more years to live, would have responded to Edward's call.

But if he did not make it to England in person, Melanchthon's intellectual presence was felt to a large degree. When Henry in 1531 needed support for his contemplated divorce from Katherine of Aragon, Melanchthon was one of the Continental experts consulted. While the king could not have been too pleased with the answer—Melanchthon advocated bigamy rather than divorce—that did not prevent him from strengthening the ties with the Lutherans after his break with Rome a few years later. A delegation was sent to Wittenberg to discuss the matter with Melanchthon, and Henry and Thomas Cranmer both invited the reformer to England. Unable to come, Melanchthon responded by dedicating a new 1535 edition of the Locis communis to the English king, who in turn rewarded Melanchthon financially. In the same year the Royal Injunctions for Cambridge University prescribes Melanchthon's humanist textbooks (together with those of Aristotle, Rudolph Agricola, and Trapezuntius) instead of the "frivolous questions and obscure glosses" of the medieval schoolmen. The following year the rapprochement between Germany and England increased as theologians from both countries agreed on the "Wittenberg Articles," which in

6 Melanchthon's ecumenical spirit led hard-core Lutherans to accuse him of selling out Luther's original vision.


turn influenced Henry's own cautiously reformist *Ten Articles*. To further strengthen the ties, *The Augsburg Confession* was translated into English. Yet Henry got cold feet, and the last decade of his reign was characterized by a return to a more Catholic theology. The *Thirteen Articles of 1538*, written by Melanchthon and accepted by Henry’s commissioners, were rejected by the king, who instead went on to establish the conservative *Six Articles* the following year. Melanchthon responded by writing a long letter to the king in which he pleaded continued reform.11

With the accession of Edward VI the contacts with Wittenberg were renewed. Cramer in particular had been on good terms with Melanchthon even during Henry’s reign; and when asked to put together the new Anglican formularies, the Wittenberg reformer and humanist contributed significant parts. "Melanchthonian formulas" can be detected in the Edwardian and Elizabethan *Articles of Religion* as well as in the homilies. Furthermore, an Order for the Cologne church, drawn up by Melanchthon and Bucer in 1543, was used by Cramer when he put together the *Book of Common Prayer*. In particular, Melanchthon's teaching on the *adiaphora*, the gray area of religious non-essentials such as the use of ceremonies or of bishops, became a cornerstone of Anglican defense against Puritan radicals. Melanchthonian doctrine was also spread to a larger public with the English translation of the *Loci communes*.13

The most important reader of the *Loci*, however, was a young lady that could read the original Latin: Princess Elizabeth. Roger Ascham, Elizabeth’s tutor and an admirer of Melanchthon, in 1550 wrote Johannes Strum (himself a former student and close associate of the Wittenberg reformer) about the princess’s education: "To these [classical authors] I added Saint Cyprian and Melanchthon’s *Common Places*, &c., as best suited, after the Holy Scriptures, to teach her the foundations of religion, together with elegant language and sound doctrine.14 As a consequence of Ascham’s choice of reading, Elizabeth, according to Carl Meyer, became “a Melanchthonian in theology and in political science.”15 She was later to tell the Spanish ambassador that she would have liked the *Augsburg Confession*, or something like it, to be adopted for her country.

But Melanchthon’s influence was far from restricted to the religious sphere. The true gauge of his impact in Tudor England is the extent to which he combined his efforts as a Reformer with his humanist mission. And it has finally become possible to measure that impact in a more objective way. I am thinking of the 1986 publication of E. S. Leedham-Green’s *Books in Cambridge Inventories*.16 By documenting the two hundred inventories of people who died between 1535 and 1760 while being attached to Cambridge University, Leedham-Green has opened up a gold-mine of information about the reading habits at the university. By studying these lists (made random by death), we get a fairly good picture of what authors were actually owned (and presumably read) by students, teachers, and in a few cases, book-sellers. Of the 200 inventories, I have selected the 176 that were made in the sixteenth century. With this statistical material I have simply calculated how many of these 176 persons owned at least one book by any particular author. The results can be seen in the appendix, which lists the fifty or so most common authors in the form of columns, ranging from 20 to almost 100% (see below pp. 94–95). This means that all the authors selected were widely read, since even the least on the list was owned by one out of five people. After the Bible, which is in a category by itself, we find nothing surprising in the next three names: Erasmus (73%), Cicero (69%), and Aristotle (60%). But I think some will raise their eyebrows about the next author, who makes a strong runner-up. Half the academic population of Cambridge it seems, if this statistical material is anywhere near the truth, owned at least one book by Melanchthon. Together with Erasmus this places him way ahead of any other Renaissance author. And if we break down this figure into separate titles, we find that Melanchthon is read both as a religious and a humanist writer. Most widely owned are the *Loci communes* (17%), which makes it more common than Calvin’s *Institutes*, at 14%), followed by the *Dialectics* (15%) and the *Chronicles*—the ones recommended by Sidney (14%). Other common works include his *Commentaries on Romans* and other

10 Thomas Cromwell ordered Richard Tavener, the translator of Erasmus, to translate Melanchthon’s work. It appeared in English as *The confesstion of the faith of the Germaynes* (London, 1536). STC 17788.

11 Melanchthon’s letter was surreptitiously translated into English almost at once, but no copies of this first edition are extant. It was, however, reprinted in 1547 as *The epistle of the famous and great clerke Philip Melancon made vnto kyng Henry the eight, for the reuoyking of the six articles, trans. J.C.* (Antwerp, 1547). STC 17789. On Melanchthon’s part in the Henrician reformation, see James H. Pragman, "The Augsburg Confession in the English Reformation: Richard Tavener’s Contribution," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 11/3 (1980): 75–85. Henry’s infatuation with Wittenberg, while cooling down, did not freeze completely. In 1538, for example, the king had Richard Tavener translate Socrates’ *Commonplaces of Scripture*, a rewrite of Melanchthon’s *Loci* for a less learned audience.


13 John Rogers, one of the Marian martyrs, translated the whole of the *Loci*, yet no copies are extant. An except, however, translated by N. Lose, was published as *The justification of man by faith only: An apologie or defence of the worde of God* (London, 1546). STC 17792.

14 As cited in Baldwin 1: 259.


16 I owe (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986). No such work has been published on Oxford University, and would anyway not be as useful since the inventory-makers there worked with less care (especially after 1586), often lumping books together under one undifferentiated post (see vol. 3 of *The History of the University of Oxford* 470–71). Yet the Oxford inventories, as far as Melanchthon is concerned, does not seem to differ substantially from those at Cambridge. See Mark H. Curtis, "Library Catalogues and Tudor Oxford and Cambridge," *Studies in the Renaissance* 5 (1958): 111–21, and *Oxford and Cambridge in Transition*, 1558–1642 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1959) 162.
bibilical commentaries, as well as university textbooks in Grammar, Syntax, Rhetoric, Ethics, an Introduction to Physics, and a study in psychology, On the Soul. The common denominator of these textbooks is their strong neo-Aristotelian emphasis. Aristotle, as glossed by Melanchthon, seems to have been common fare at the university.

III

Although Philip Sidney studied at Oxford rather than at Cambridge, we can be pretty certain he had met several of these Melanchthonian textbooks. But we do not have to base our surmisements on Sidney’s interest in Melanchthon on such general hypotheses. Although the Wittenberg reformer died soon after Sidney’s birth, a bridge was established via two of Melanchthon’s pupils: Sidney’s cherished mentor Hubert Languet, and Johannes Sturm, at whose famous Academy in Strasbourg Sidney spent several months in 1572. That Sidney’s interest in Melanchthon remained after his return to England is seen not only in the letter to Denny, but also in his support of the translation of Melanchthon into English. Richard Robinson, who translated two Melanchthonian works in the late 1570s, dedicated one of them to Sidney. He later looked back on the generous support he had received over a period of time from both Philip and his father: “Philip Sidney” gave me for his book [i.e., the book dedicated to him] 4 angels, and his honourable father gave me for his book ten shillings. These two honourable personages many times benevolent unto my poor study.” But to be absolutely certain we are not reading Melanchthon into Sidney’s writings, I shall restrict myself to the one work we are sure Sidney had: the Chronicon he recommended to Denny about the same time as he was writing both The Defence of Poesie and the Arcadia.

The Chronicon, in two separate volumes, was published under Melanchthon’s own name only at the end of the reformer’s life, and he died while revising a third volume. Melanchthon’s interest in world history, however, was of long standing. Indeed, the work had been on the market in different German, French, Italian, English, and Latin editions since 1532, but ascribed to a different author: it had been Carion’s Chronicle. Yet John Carion, a student of Melanchthon’s, had only had a smaller part in the making of the book, while Melanchthon all along had been its real, if hidden, author. This applies in particular to the preface of the work, “The vse of readeynge hystories,” which Melanchthon kept revising until the end of his life. The title of the preface is pure Melanchthon, yet it also harks back to a classical precedent: Plutarch’s influential essay, “How the Young Man Should Study Poetry.” As Plutarch, in Sidney’s words, “teacheth the use to be gathered of [the poets]” (Defence, p. 109), so Melanchthon wants to teach his readers how to rightly read both sacred and secular historiographers. And as Sidney turns Plutarch’s precepts around, by writing rather than reading poetry right, so he uses Melanchthon’s advice in writing his own political and historical romance, the Arcadia. But we also find unmediated echoes of Melanchthon’s preface in The Defence of Poesie.

Melanchthon begins by telling the rulers what they have to learn from history, and then he turns to the “examples” the ordinary subject can learn from. When Sidney came to write the Arcadia he places great weight on the same “examples” as those found in Melanchthon’s preface:

The magistrate must be obeyed. They, which rebelled against the higher powers, were never unpunished, as Absalom, Catalina, Brutus, Cassius and such like that were therefore punished [cf. the judgement scene in the old Arcadia, and the mob scene in the new]. Of faithfulness of frendes, as Jonathas, which saved the life of David [cf. Musidorus and Pyrocles]. Of the punishment for aduorty and suche like wicked deeds, as it appeareth by the example of David [cf. Musidorus and Pyrocles’ affairs with the young princesses]. (Chronicles, sig. * iii3)

22 Philip Melanchthon, Chronicon Carionis (Wittenberg, 1558), and Secundum parvus Chronic Carionis (Wittenberg, 1560). The third part was finished by Caspar Peucer and published in 1562 (together with reprints of the first two parts). A fourth part was published by Peucer in 1565, while a one-volume folio edition of the complete work came out in 1572 (in addition to competing editions that were on the market soon after the Wittenberg imprint). For bibliographical information about these editions, and the numerous earlier printings published in Carion’s name, see Philip Melanchthon, Opera quae supersunt omnia, ed. Carolus Gottlieb Bretschneider, Corpus Reformatorum, vol 12 (Halle, 1844) 707–10.

23 I am quoting the title of the preface from the Edwardian translation of the German edition: Carion’s Chronicle: The three bookes of Chronicles, trans. Gwalter Lynne (London, 1550), STC 4626. References to the English translation, abbreviated Chronicles, will be given in the text. The title of the original 1532 German preface was “Wozu Historien zu lesen nützlich ist,” later translated into Latin as “De usu lectionis historiarum.” The title was retained until the 1558 Wittenberg edition, when Melanchthon’s revised preface (to be read in conjunction with a new dedicatory letter to Archbishop Sigismund) omitted the heading. See Peter Frenkel, Testimonia Patrum (Genova: Droz, 1961) 53–54, on Melanchthon’s contribution to the Chronicles, and on the similarities between the 1532 and the 1558 versions of the preface.

24 The debt is not surprising since Melanchthon had edited Plutarch; see Wengert 28.
In the continuation we recognize both the theory of the Defence and the practice of the Arcadia:

So are in histories set forth & painted examples of all kind of vertues. Yee and in examples and thines committed is more evidently seen the worthiness of vertues, yee & also of what vnclenesse and dishonesty vertues are, then in preceptes or doctrines: Because that examples being set before vs images, do not only teach openly, but do also admonish, sturr, and inflame the myndes that are honestly brought vp, that they may be kindled toward vertues and honesty with a certain pleasur and love.

As Sidney was to phrase it, poetry "is that feigning notable images of vertues, vices, or what else" (Defence, p. 81). Sidney of course places the poet higher than both the philosopher and the historiographer, "the one giveth the precept and the other the example, ... whereas the peeress poet perform both" (Defence, pp. 84–85), yet that does not prevent him from appropriating Melanchthon's views on the power of the image: the poet "giveth a perfect picture," says Sidney, "for he yieldeth to the powers of the mind an image of that whereof the philosophers bestoweth but a wordish description, which doth neither strike, pierce, nor possess the sight of the soul so much as that other doth" (Defence, p. 85).

Sidney's use of Aristotle in the Defence (novel in its day) was in line with the revitalization of Aristotelianism that to a large extent had been brought about through Melanchthon's efforts. Yet both Melanchthon and Sidney limit Aristotle's influence to the sphere of reason. This has repercussions on their views on politics, ethics, esthetics, and history. In accordance with the Protestant tendency to separate the categories of faith and reason into separate yet complementary spheres, Melanchthon distinguishes in the Chronicon between secular and sacred history; the latter, contained in the Bible, "doth not only treat of politike matters, but do chefly shadowe and declare vnto vs Gods kingdom, that God gueouth his words, that frely and of mercye he will saue: the which thing the histories of the Gentiles can not speake of" (Chronicles, sig. *v²). Yet that does not mean that a Christian cannot draw benefit from secular history: "And through the historyes of the Gentyls do not teach vs that God careth for vs, or that God worketh wyth vs: a godlye harte neverthelesse shall marke thiss...

namelye, how commune welthies are kept and preserued in the worlde from heaven" (Chronicles, sig. *v²). It is evident that Sidney took this advice to heart in his poetic recreation of historical events. Being a "right" poet, as defined in The Defence of Pooste, he did not presume to enter the religious sphere that was cut out for scriptural poets like David. The Arcadia is therefore set in Greece, and no overtly Christian material is introduced. Yet that does not mean that Sidney, in Melanchthon's words, is not interested in showing "how commune welthies are kept and preserued in the worlde from heaven." As S. K. Heninger has recently shown, the oracle that figures prominently in the old Arcadia and is still present in the revised version, is Sidney's principal means of achieving this oblique, non-scriptural reference to divine providence.

On the face of it Sidney seems to have little faith in the efficacy of secular history. History, "being captived to the truth of a foolish world," he complains in the Defence, "is many times a terror from well-doing, and an encouragement to unbridled wickedness" (p. 90). Yet the disagreement with Melanchthon is more apparent than real. Unwittingly or not, they both followed St Augustine and prefurged Hayden White. According to R. A. Markus, it had been Augustine, in his City of God and the Literal Meaning of Genesis, that first had understood history "not as a series of events but as statements about the past, recording events. 'History,' in this sense, tells of what happened; it is not what happened, but its record." For Augustine, the unmediated "facts" of history are therefore of limited value. The same holds true for Melanchthon and Sidney. It takes eyes "cleared by faith" (Defence, p. 77) to reinscribe history as a didactic medium: for Melanchthon, through teaching "the vse of readynge hystories" as an introduction to his own carefully sifted world history; for Sidney, by means of "right" poetry. And that is of course why Sidney places the Chronicon first on his list to Denny. Seen through the spectacles of faith, provided by Melanchthon, Denny can then go on and draw the necessary benefit also from other non-Christian historiographers.

26 Except by way of paraphrase, in his Psalms of David.
27 For the distinction between faith and reason as applied to Sidney, see my "Reason in Luther, Calvin, and Sidney," Sixteenth Century-Journal 23/1 (1992): 115–27.
29 R. A. Markus, Sacrum: History and Society in the Thought of St Augustine (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1970) 14. For the City of God, as for the Chronicon, "the meaning and structure of history derive from sacred history" (Markus 19). Melanchthon, certainly, was familiar with Augustine's views on history. The whole conceptual scheme of the Chronicon—"the four ages" presented in the preface as "the sayenge of Helias house" (Chronicles, sig. *v²)—is Augustinian (see, e.g., The Enchiridion 118). On Melanchthon's historical writings, see Franken 52 ff.
Appendix

The following graph is drawn from E. S. Leedham-Green, *Books in Cambridge Inventories*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986). Based on 176 sixteenth-century inventories it brings together the fifty most commonly owned authors by calculating how many of these inventories contain at least one book by each author. Under “Bible” I include the whole or any individual part of the Scriptures, whether in the original language, translated or paraphrased. Under “Melanchthon” I also include the entries under *Carion’s Chronicle*. 