

Classical Pseudonyms in Europe at the Time of the Reformation*

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WHEN LATIN WAS THE LANGUAGE OF CULTURE in Europe, English, French, Dutch, even Italian, were considered barbarous. It was natural for scholars to bear names such as Albertus Magnus and Duns Scotus and to sign them to their literary productions. Dante established the vernacular in his country (writing, in Latin of course, *De vulgari eloquentia*) and Luther made German a respectable literary vehicle (and burned the Latin papal bull, *Exsurge Domine*). But Latin had a tenacious hold. Saint Bede wrote his history of the English peoples in Latin in the Eighth Century and Saint Thomas More his *Utopia* in Latin in the Sixteenth. It was not until Frederick the Great, King of Prussia (1740–1786), that the Germans ceased to write their important works in Latin and Greek, and other European peoples were more or less comparable in their gradual abandonment of Latin as the international language.

It was fashionable for authors who wrote in Latin, especially the Dutch and the Germans, to adopt Latin names to grace their title-pages. The tradition was an old and respectable one: Malchus (233–c. 334) had changed his Syriac name (meaning *king*) to Porphyry (the Greek word for *purple*, suggesting *imperial*), the name under which he wrote the lives of Pythagoras and Plotinus, edited the *Enneads* of Plotinus, and wrote his *Eisagoge*, an introduction to Aristotelian logic.

The Renaissance was full of classical pseudonyms. Three men, for example, called themselves Agricola. Georg Agricola was really Georg Bauer (1490?–1555), author of *De re metallica* (1556), a famous treatise which made him “The Father of Mineralogy.” Johannes Agricola was surnamed Schnitter (originally Schneider, *tailor*), so he should have Latinized it Sartor, not with the Latin word for *farmer*. He was one of the leaders of the Reformation and

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(until 1536) an associate of Martin Luther. He lived 1492–1566 and, from his birthplace (Eisleben), was sometimes called *Magister Islebius*, for people still continued to bestow such titles, long after the time when such as Saint Thomas Aquinas (Ital. *Aquino*) were called *Angelicus Doctor*, etc. The third Agricola was Rudolphus Agricola, in reality a Dutchman called Roelof Huysman (1443–1485), another “German” humanist.

Other Renaissance humanists included the Alsatian Beatus Rhenanus (1485–1547), the biographer of the great Erasmus, and Andreas Osiander (1498–1552), the theologian who debated so violently the mystical interpretation of justification by faith. Osiander’s name was originally Hosemann (or, say some, Heligmann), for he was a German. So was Wolfgang Fabricius Capito (1479–1541), who brought Erasmus and Luther together, and who fostered a sort of ecumenical movement among the Evangelical churches of Germany, France, and Switzerland. For such international work Latin must have been very useful. His own origins were German and his surname had been Köpfel.

One can hardly blame Martin Kubhorn (1491–1551), another figure in the German Reformation (and later tutor to the Latin-loving Edward VI of England, who also studied Greek with Cheke), for translating his German name (meaning *cowhorn*) into Greek. He became Martin Bucer. Another German name to be so transformed was that of Philip Schwarzerd (*black earth*) which was Grecianized into Melancthon. As Philip Melancthon (1497–1560) he was one of the best known leaders of the Reformation and at one time was considered by Luther as his best possible successor. It is clear that the use of classical-sounding names was in no way thought of as connecting the bearers with the Roman Catholic Church, whose official language has always been Latin, for most of that church’s bitterest opponents in this period seem to have borne classical pseudonyms.

The Reformation in Switzerland was partly the work of one Johann Hausschein (1482–1531), who called himself Johannes Oecolampadius. People apparently had less trouble with a classical name, however difficult, than with those in current European languages. Of all the things Oecolampadius was called as he defended Zwingli’s teaching against Luther (Zwingli was busying himself debating Melancthon) the German “Hausschein” was not among them.

Classical pseudonyms were used by scientists as well as by theologians, of course. We cannot begin to list them all, but we cannot omit mention of Nicholas Copernicus (the Pole Mikolaj Kopernik, 1473–1543) and Michael Servetus (the Spaniard Miguel Serveto, 1511–1553), both of them involved in theological as well as scientific revolutions. (Servetus, having discovered the circulation of the blood, was burned at the stake by Calvin.) Copernicus' heliocentric theory was first given currency in print by his pupil George Rheticus (1514–1576), professor of mathematics at Wittenberg; another cosmographer was Gemma Frisius (1508–1555), professor of mathematics at Louvain and Cosmographer Royal to the Emperor Charles V. To list, for example, other anatomists besides Servetus, we have the Flemish Andreas Vesalius (1514–1564), one of the founders of modern medicine; Realdus Columbus (1516–1559), professor of anatomy at Padua; Hieronymus Fabricius (1537–1619), an Italian (Geronimo Fabrizio) who discovered the valves in the veins that keep blood flowing in one direction, to the heart; and Fallopius (1523–1562), the Italian (Gabriello Fallopio) for whom the fallopian tubes, connecting the ovaries to the uterus, are named. These are only a few of the scientists who, to give their discoveries international currency, published in Latin and signed their *magna opera* with classical names.

We cannot leave this group of scientists without adding the names of two geographers: Christopher Columbus (in Spanish Cristobál Colón, in his native Italian Cristoforo Columbo) whose life (1451?–1506) was capped by his arrival in America; and Amerigo Vespucci (1454–1512), the discoverer of the Amazon, whose name (appearing, of course, in Latinized form in Martin Waldseemüller's *Cosmographiae Introductio*, 1507) was given to two great continents.

Sometimes men took Latin names from their place of birth. A list of them would be long, but one example is Johann Müller, the German astronomer and mathematician born at Königsberg in 1436. He translated the Franconian *Königsberg* into the Latin for "royal mount" and became Johannes Regiomontanus. With this grandiose appellation he died in Rome, where he had gone at the command of Sixtus IV (a Latin name of a different sort) to assist in reforming the calendar, in 1476. One Bugenhagen called himself Pomeranus. Of course, naming oneself from a place is one of the

commonest origins of surnames, and many of the cities of Europe had Latin as well as native names in common use. Thus, Sir Francis Bacon (1561–1626) could take two titles from the same place and was created Baron Verulam and Viscount St. Albans, for St. Albans (in Hertfordshire) was the site of the Roman city of Verulamium (on the Ver river).

Often the Latin and Greek names contained even more interesting details. Take for instance that assumed by Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim (1493?–1541), the Swiss alchemist and physician. “For even as Avicenna was the best physician of the Arabs, and Galen of the men of Pergamum,” declared our alchemist with his characteristic lack of modesty, “so also most fortunate Germany has chosen me as her indispensable physician.” This man considered himself even greater than Aurelius Cornelius Celsus (*fl.* A.D. 14), an encyclopaedist whose *De re medicina* had been rediscovered by Pope Nicholas V and published about a generation before Hohenheim came on the scene. But Hohenheim was *beyond* Celsus. So he called himself Phillipus Aureolus Paracelsus.

We could multiply instances. Among the Italians, Pontano became Jovianus Pontanus, Enea Sylvio de’ Piccolomini became Aeneas Sylvias. Among the French the best known examples include Pierre de la Ramee (Petrus Ramus) and Nostradame (Nostradamus). But the prize example was the Dutch humanist Desiderius Erasmus (1469?–1536), born in Rotterdam as plain Gheraerd Gheraerd, who simply translated his forename into Latin and his surname into Greek.

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