
Did Sixteenth-century Lutheran Women Have a Reformation?

Joy A. Schroeder

Professor of Church History

Trinity Lutheran Seminary at Capital University

In 2017, Christians throughout the world commemorated the 500-year anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation. In the wake of these commemorations, an essay about women of the Lutheran reformation seems fitting for a *Festschrift* honoring Professor Walter Taylor. During the nineteen years I have known him as a faculty colleague and friend, I have appreciated the ways he has been a consistent advocate for the fair and just treatment of women students, staff, and faculty in the seminary and the wider church. Furthermore, he is an accomplished scholar, outstanding teacher, and faithful preacher of the gospel. I offer this essay with thanksgiving for Walter Taylor's service.

Did Lutheran women have a reformation?

In 1977, historian Joan Kelly-Gadol published her groundbreaking article, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" She challenged prevailing conceptualizations of historical periodization, observing that the impact of historical events and movements was often very different for women than it was for men: "To take the emancipation of women as a vantage point is to discover that events that further the historical development of men, liberating them from natural, social, or ideological constraints, have quite different, even opposite, effects upon women."¹

The provocative title of my essay intentionally echoes Kelly-Gadol's query. Did sixteenth-century Lutheran women, in fact, have a reformation? If by this question we mean, "Did women in Lutheran congregations hear the gospel proclaimed in a Lutheran key, with emphasis on justification by grace through faith?" then, of course, they had a reformation. Lutheran women received communion by partaking of the cup as well as the host. They sang (and sometimes composed) the newly written vernacular hymns.²

1. Joan Kelly-Gadol, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, eds. Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), 137.

2. Polish-born noblewoman Elisabeth von Meseritz Cruciger, a former nun who fled to Wittenberg, wrote texts for three hymns, including "The Only Son from Heaven" (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* #309), which was later credited to a man, Andreas Knoepken. See Mary Jane Haemig, "Elisabeth Cruciger (1500?–1535): The Case of the Disappearing Hymn Writer," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 32 (2001): 21–44. Another case of a "disappearing hymn writer" occurred when Luther and his colleague Joseph Klug failed to acknowledge Queen

[Kelly-Gadol] challenged prevailing conceptualizations of historical periodization, observing that the impact of historical events and movements was often very different for women than it was for men.

Women in German-speaking territories had opportunities to listen to—and, in some cases, read for *themselves*—scripture translated by Luther directly from Hebrew and Greek rather than the medieval German Bibles that were translations of the Latin Vulgate. Indeed, thousands of sixteenth-century women voluntarily embraced Lutheran teachings, sometimes at great personal cost and struggle, including opposition from husbands and families who remained loyal to the Roman church.³

Nevertheless, with the closing of most convents in Lutheran territories, women of privilege (from the nobility and patrician class, and others with status or means) lost access to the institutions that were the primary vehicles for female education. Also lost were the major religious "careers" for women, such as nun and abbess.⁴ Furthermore, though a Lutheran noblewoman, Argula von Grumbach, was the first-known woman to employ the printing press to circulate pamphlets, religious writings by Lutheran women in the 1500s are scarce, especially compared to those authored by women in Roman Catholicism, the Anglican tradition, and the Reformed branch of the Protestant reformation.

Mary of Hungary's authorship of "Mag ich Unglück nicht widerstand" ("I cannot fight against misfortune"), published in the songbook Luther commissioned in 1529, *Geistliche lieder auffß new gebessert zu Wittemberg*. Albrecht Classen, *Late-Medieval German Women's Poetry: Secular and Religious Songs* (Rochester, N.Y.: D. S. Brewer, 2004), 133.

3. Dagmar Freist, "One Body, Two Confessions: Mixed Marriages in Germany," in *Gender in Early Modern German History*, ed. Ulinka Rublack (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 275–304.

4. Kirsi Stjerna, *Women and the Reformation* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2009), 23–24.

There are many angles from which to examine the question of a “women’s reformation.” One approach is to note the impact of Reformation ideals on households, societies, and women’s agency. Numerous social historians have suggested that Protestant values intensified the patriarchal character of European societies, as women’s public roles and legal standing contracted in the sixteenth century.⁵ Merry Wiesner astutely observed that “the Protestant elevation of marriage is not the same as, and may in fact directly contradict, an elevation of women *as women*.”⁶ Others argued that the Reformation was not the cause of the increased patriarchal conservatism but, rather, a product of the patriarchy and economic conditions in which Protestantism arose.⁷

This essay explores various facets of the Lutheran reformation’s impact upon sixteenth-century women’s lives, agency, and religious leadership.⁸ I begin with an overview of Martin Luther’s views about women, continue with an assessment of women’s literacy, literary output, and public roles, and conclude with an examination of two women—Lutheran and Roman Catholic—whose writings engaged Lutheranism as each woman followed her conscience.⁹

Martin Luther: conservative reformer

With respect to his views on women and gender, Martin Luther was, simply put, a man of the sixteenth century. Numerous studies have shown how Luther’s views on marriage and women’s confinement to the domestic sphere were indisputably patriarchal.¹⁰ Like most of his theological predecessors, Luther regarded woman as inferior to man at the moment of human creation. In the midst of profuse praise of Eve’s qualities, Luther articulated her secondary status: “Although Eve was a most extraordinary creature—similar to Adam so far as the image of God is concerned, that is, in justice, wisdom, and happiness—she was nevertheless a woman. For as the sun is more excellent than the moon (although the moon, too, is a very excellent body), so the woman, although she was

Religious writings by Lutheran women in the 1500s are scarce, especially compared to those authored by women in Roman Catholicism, the Anglican tradition, and the Reformed branch of the Protestant reformation.

a most beautiful work of God, nevertheless was not equal of the male in glory and prestige.”¹¹ Had there been no lapse into sin in the garden, there still would have been the gendered division of responsibility that Luther observed in his own world. Adam and his sons would have occupied themselves with light gardening and hunting, while Eve and her daughters performed “similar activities in the home.”¹² Regarding daily duties, “the management would have been equally divided,” but Adam was nevertheless “head of the household.”¹³ After the first couple ate from the forbidden tree, the woman’s punishment included subjection to her husband and a more severe restriction to the domestic sphere:

The rule remains with the husband, and the wife is compelled to obey him by God’s command. He rules the home and the state, wages wars, defends his possessions, tills the soil, builds, plants, etc. The woman, on the other hand, is like a nail driven into the wall. She sits at home, and for this reason Paul, in Titus 2:5, calls her an *oikourgos*. The pagans have depicted Venus as standing on a seashell; for just as the snail carries its house with it, so the wife should stay at home and look after the affairs of the household, as one who has been deprived of the ability of administering those affairs that are outside and that concern the state. She does not go beyond her most personal duties.¹⁴

Pastors in subsequent generations shared Luther’s views on women’s confinement to the domestic sphere. In the homiletic imagination of Christoph Vischer (1518–1598), the Virgin Mary remained constantly at home. At the Annunciation (Luke 1:26–27), the angel found Mary praying in her chamber rather than gadding about with young men in a beer garden!¹⁵

In 1531 sermonic reflections on Joel 2:28 (“Your sons and your daughters will prophesy”), Luther asserted that women’s prophecy and biblical interpretation applied only to instruction within the

5. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, women’s legal rights and agency contracted in inheritance laws, property rights, and ability to enter into contracts. Husbands gained more control over their wives’ property and jointly owned property. Merry E. Wiesner, *Gender, Church, and State in Early Modern Germany* (New York: Longman, 1998), 87.

6. Merry E. Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe, New Approaches to European History 20* (New York: University of Cambridge Press, 2000), 28.

7. Heide Wunder, *He is the Sun, She is the Moon: Women in Early Modern Germany*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).

8. For several decades historians have explicitly or implicitly asked, “Was the Reformation good for women?” See a survey of various historians’ views in Wiesner, *Gender, Church, and State*, 200–203.

9. As shorthand, this essay uses “Lutheran” to refer to individuals, congregations, and territories aligned with the teachings of the Wittenberg reformers (who preferred the term *evangelisch*). Also anachronistic is my shorthand usage of “Roman Catholic” for individuals and institutions in communion with the bishop of Rome.

10. For instance, Susan C. Karant-Nunn and Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Luther on Women: A Sourcebook* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

11. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis 1:27*, LW 1:69.

12. Luther, *Lectures on Genesis 2:23*, LW 1:138.

13. LW 1:137.

14. Luther, *Lectures on Genesis 3:16*, LW 1:202–203.

15. Beth Kreitzer, *Reforming Mary: Changing Images of the Virgin Mary in Lutheran Sermons of the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 43.

household and private acts of offering Christian consolation:

The four daughters of Philip were prophetesses. A woman can do this. Not preach in public, but console people and teach. A woman can do this just as much as a man. There are certainly women and girls who are able to comfort others and teach true words, that is, who can explain Scripture or teach or console other people so that they will be well. This all counts as prophesying, not preaching. In the same way, a mother should teach her children and family, because she has been given the true words of the Holy Spirit and understands.¹⁶

Though Luther was certainly patriarchal, the term “misogynist” probably could not be applied to him justly. To his credit, Luther rejected philosophers who used Aristotle’s biological theories to call women “misbegotten males,” “maimed males,” or “monsters.” Lecturing on Genesis 1, he announced to his students: “But let them themselves be monsters and sons of monsters—these men who make malicious statements and ridicule a creature of God in which God Himself took delight as in a most excellent work, moreover, one which we see created by a special counsel.”¹⁷ Other Lutheran pastors followed suit, praising women’s bodies as “life giving and nurturing,” rejecting medieval notions of the female body as “dangerous and polluting.”¹⁸ Furthermore, there are cases of Luther defending women in tangible ways. In 1524 he gave testimony on behalf of Margareta Mollwitz, a woman severely battered by her husband, the cobbler Michael Hanck. Luther described the woman’s injuries and the man’s violence, petitioning court officials to grant her a divorce and imprison the batterer.¹⁹ When commenting on biblical accounts of sexual violence, he differed from most of his predecessors and contemporaries by showing compassion for victims, avoiding the tendency found in male commentators to “blame the victim.”²⁰ Indeed, when inquiring about possible misogyny by Luther, one should note that, in his reading of Genesis 3:15, about the enmity placed between the woman and the serpent, Luther regarded the devil as the ultimate misogynist—pathetically fearful of females and raging against women ever since the time of Eve.²¹

No assessment of the reformer’s views on women would be complete without discussing the most significant woman in Luther’s life, his spouse and partner Katharina von Bora (1499–

1552). Many are familiar with the story of her escape from the Marienthron convent in Nimbschen, in Roman Catholic ducal Saxony. Von Bora, born of impoverished minor nobility, was sent to a convent at the age of 5, transferred to another convent at the age of 11, and compelled to take vows as a nun. After her legendary escape, hiding in a wagon beneath a tarp (*not* in a barrel), she and eight other women arrived in Wittenberg during Easter week, 1523. Von Bora married Luther in 1525 and proceeded to turn his former monastery, the Black Cloister, into an income-generating boarding house for students. Other enterprises included her brewery, orchards, gardens, and farm.

Luther and von Bora’s relationship was immortalized by Luther’s letters to his spouse, whom he affectionately addressed as “Lord Katie” and “a doctor and preacher in Wittenberg.”²² Ever since ancient Roman times, great men kept copies of the letters they sent (and letters received by significant personages), to circulate as collections. Luther was no different. Despite the fact that Luther’s correspondence comprises eleven volumes in the Weimar edition, the letters von Bora sent to Luther were not preserved. However, eight letters that she dispatched after Luther’s death (several of them asking patrons for financial assistance) are extant.²³

Von Bora was frequently recast as the model nineteenth- or twentieth-century “minister’s wife,” characterized as quieter and meeker than the actual woman.²⁴ In fact, she was a determined, authoritative business manager of several ambitious money-making enterprises. In this, she was not unlike the numerous hard-working women of early modern Germany who, in addition to supervising busy households, undertook multiple commercial ventures to generate income for their families.²⁵ Recent assessments have positively valued von Bora’s assertiveness, intelligence, and competence. Many twenty-first century admirers now recognize in Katharina von Bora the numerous strengths that Luther himself appreciated in his spouse.

Convents, education, and women’s public religious roles

Modern apologists have sometimes characterized Luther as a champion of female education since he said that girls, like boys, should attend school. However, noting that Luther’s expectations for girls’ instruction were far lower than for boys, social historians have challenged this view.²⁶ In his 1524 treatise *To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany that they Establish and Maintain*

16. Martin Luther, “Sermon on Joel 2:28,” WA 34:482; translated in Karant-Nunn and Wiesner-Hanks, *Luther on Women*, 61.

17. Luther, *Lectures on Genesis* 1:27, LW 1:70.

18. Kathleen M. Crowther, *Adam and Eve in the Protestant Reformation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 141.

19. Timothy J. Wengert, “Martin Luther on Spousal Abuse,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 21 (2007): 337–339.

20. Joy A. Schroeder, *Dinah’s Lament: The Biblical Legacy of Sexual Violence in Christian Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 33–40.

21. Luther, *Lectures on Genesis* 3:15, LW 1:193–196. In this passage, however, Luther employs conventional rhetoric about gender, shame, and honor, by shaming the male devil, mocking him as weakly fearful of women.

22. Martin Luther, Letter 196 “To Mrs. Martin Luther,” LW 49: 236.

23. Rudolf K. Markwald and Marilynn Morris Markwald, *Katharina von Bora: A Reformation Life* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2002), 190.

24. Jeanette C. Smith, “Katharina von Bora through Five Centuries: A Historiography,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 30 (1999): 763.

25. Wunder, *He is the Sun*, 68–78.

26. Susan C. Karant-Nunn criticized “the hackneyed claim that the Lutheran Reformation produced the widespread education of girls”; “Alas, a Lack: Trends in the Historiography of Pre-University Education in Early Modern Germany,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 43 (1990):791.

Christian Schools, Luther recommended that boys destined for trades should spend one or two hours a day in publicly supported schools. Other boys, “the exceptional pupils, who give promise of becoming teachers, preachers, or holders of other ecclesiastical positions,” should receive a more robust education.²⁷ Girls were mentioned in conjunction with boys who received an hour or two of instruction: “In like manner, a girl can surely find time enough to attend school for an hour a day, and still take care of her duties at home. She spends much more time than that anyway in sleeping, dancing, and playing.”²⁸ An examination of school orders, such as the one adopted in the Lutheran city of Mecklenburg in 1552, reveals that girls’ education focused on memorizing the catechism and scripture verses “so they might grow up to be Christian and praiseworthy matrons and housekeepers.”²⁹

Luther did speak approvingly of certain women’s houses of learning, particularly imperial canoness houses such as the abbey in Quedlinburg, Saxony. Founded in 936 CE, the Quedlinburg abbey was home to *Stiftsdamen* (canonesses), who technically lived a secular (*weltlich*) lifestyle. Ruled by an abbess, they resided in a convent-like community, much like nuns did, but *Stiftsdamen* could own property and leave the canoness house if they wished. Abbesses of Quedlinburg and several other imperial abbeys (which were exempt from local bishops’ jurisdiction) enjoyed the privilege of being seated at imperial diets.³⁰ Wiesner explains: “Free imperial abbeys were institutions whose only overlord was the emperor; the abbess had jurisdiction not only over the abbey itself, but also over the land and villages belonging to it, which made her a *Landesherr* (territorial ruler).”³¹ Luther imagined that such abbeys perpetuated an ancient Christian tradition of girls’ schools where (as he believed) young women like the fourth-century martyr Agnes received instruction in the faith. From Luther’s perspective, canoness houses preserved this practice while most other convents had devolved into godless institutions where unlucky women were forced to live perpetually celibate lives of works righteousness.³²

The 1536 Wittenberg Articles permitted “certain persons of outstanding character” to remain in convents “so long as their doctrine and worship remain pure.”³³ Several convents did, in fact, accept Lutheran doctrines and were allowed to remain open. In 1539, Anna von Stolberg (1504–1574), abbess of the Quedlinburg canoness house, embraced Lutheranism. Von Stolberg, who

governed two male monasteries, nine churches, and a hospital, required her priests to swear allegiance to the Augsburg Confession. She turned one male monastery into a school for girls and boys.³⁴ Some Lutheran convents became girls’ schools, continuing a tradition of female education that had already been part of these institutions’ mission and social function. Despite Luther’s tolerance of such institutions—and occasional praise of canoness houses—he was lukewarm in his support of Lady Anna von Limburg, abbess of the imperial abbey of Hereford (Westphalia), who wrote to him in 1534 requesting his backing against individuals encroaching on her abbey’s privileges, jurisdiction, and financial rights. Although he expressed sympathy regarding her plight, Luther urged her “to bear with patience the circumstances of these times, and not to seek your rights too sharply.”³⁵

Though tolerant of canoness houses, Luther was less supportive of other convents. Particularly notable was his literary attack upon New Helfta, a prestigious Benedictine convent near Eisleben, Saxony. This monastic house, under the protection of the counts of Mansfield, boasted an impressive heritage of learned women, including thirteenth-century luminaries Gertrude the Great (1256–1302), Mechthild of Magdeburg (ca. 1210–ca. 1282), and Mechthild of Hackeborn (1240–1298).³⁶ Luther made this convent notorious for a very different reason when he published the first-hand account of a noblewoman, Florentina of Upper Weimer (fl. 1524), who escaped the convent after experiencing physical abuse there. Her narrative, published as *How God Rescued an Honorable Nun*, is one of only a tiny handful of Reformation pamphlets authored by women identifying with the Lutheran movement.³⁷ Luther sponsored the publication, using Florentina’s account to condemn the practice of cloistering women. He furnished an introduction, comments printed in the margins, and an epilogue. Thus, Luther’s words quite literally framed Florentina’s own. Florentina’s name is not listed on the title page, where Luther’s name appears as contributing a *Sendbrief* (“open letter”).

Florentina said she published her account to explain why she escaped from the convent and to defend her honor against any slander, especially libel propagated by the abbess (who was also her aunt), Katharina von Watzdorf. Florentina related that her parents had placed her in the convent when she was 6. Without her consent or consultation, she was consecrated as a nun at the age of 11.³⁸ As a teenager, Florentina came to realize she did not have a vocation to religious life. When she shared her dissatisfaction, the nuns in her convent were not supportive. Florentina later gained access to “the writings of the true shepherds whom Christ selected in these perilous times to retrieve his sheep”—works by

27. Martin Luther, *To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany that they Establish and Maintain Christian Schools*, LW 45:371.

28. Luther had a similar assessment of the idleness of boys who spent time “with their pea shooters, ballplaying, racing, and tussling”; LW 45:370.

29. The Mecklenburg *Schulordnung*, translated in Gerald Strauss, “The Social Function of Schools in the Lutheran Reformation in Germany,” *History of Education Quarterly* 28 (1988):197.

30. Duane L. C. M. Gales, “Canonesses and Plainchant,” *Sacred Music* 114/1 (1987), 9–10.

31. Wiesner, *Gender, Church, and State*, 48–49.

32. Martin Luther, *To the Christian Nobility*, LW 44:174.

33. “Wittenberger Artikel, 1536,” translated in Merry Wiesner-Hanks, *Convents Confront the Reformation: Catholic & Protestant Nuns in Germany* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1996), 17.

34. Wiesner-Hanks, *Convents Confront the Reformation*, 17–18.

35. Martin Luther, “Letter to the Abbess of Hevord,” in *Luther’s Letters to Women*, collected by Karl Zimmermann and trans. Georgiana Malcolm (London: Chapman and Hall, 1865), 79.

36. Mary Jeremy Finnegan, *The Women of Helfta: Scholars and Mystics* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1991).

37. Florentina of Upper Weimar and Martin Luther, *How God Rescued an Honorable Nun*, LW 43:81–96.

38. LW 43:89.

Luther and his associates: “In these writings I found what really constitutes a truly Christian and evangelical life. They clearly confirmed to me (what my conscience had told me long ago) that my supposedly religious life would be a straight path to hell for me if I could not change it after I had come to a knowledge of the truth; for I can discern nothing evangelical, nothing spiritual, much less Christian in it.”³⁹ Florentina wrote to Luther, requesting “consolation, help and counsel.”⁴⁰ When this was discovered, Florentina was subjected to confinement in an unheated room, flogging, shackles, and other physical and psychological abuse, including sitting on the floor wearing a crown of straw during meals.⁴¹ Eventually, when a door was left unlocked, Florentina found an opportunity for escape.

In his study of the text of *How God Rescued an Honorable Nun*, David Neville offers a shrewd comparison of the divergent agendas of Florentina and Luther. Her purpose was to defend her honor.⁴² Florentina did not attack convent life *per se*. Rather, she reproached her superiors for failing to follow regulations that granted novices the right to discern a vocation and enter religious life voluntarily. She criticized their “violation of Christian love” when they punished her for corresponding with Luther.⁴³ Despite her mistreatment, Florentina adopted a moderate, forgiving tone toward her persecutors. Luther’s marginalia, on the other hand, attacked the abbess as a “Jezebel” and a “devil.” His epilogue called the nuns “a venomous, evil, galling, false, and lying lot.”⁴⁴ Florentina’s pamphlet, released around the time of the 1524–1525 Peasants Wars, was apparently a reason New Helfta was targeted for violence. Peasant mobs vandalized and ransacked the convent, throwing the library’s books and manuscripts into beer vats.⁴⁵ Thus books owned by a female community were among the casualties of the turbulent events of the time.

One permissible religious (or quasi-religious) role for Lutheran women was schoolteacher for girls.⁴⁶ Another role was midwife. Midwives in Lutheran territories retained a critical sacramental duty, baptism of newborn infants in danger of dying before a pastor could arrive. Unlike the Reformed tradition, which endeavored—often unsuccessfully—to eliminate the practice of midwives baptizing babies in danger of imminent death, Lutherans continued the tradition.⁴⁷ Lutheran midwives received handbooks con-

One permissible religious (or quasi-religious) role for Lutheran women was schoolteacher for girls. Another role was midwife. Midwives in Lutheran territories retained a critical sacramental duty, baptism of newborn infants in danger of dying before a pastor could arrive.

taining the order of service and specific instructions for performing the baptism ritual correctly. They swore a solemn civil oath to use this service.⁴⁸ Other religious roles with public implications included godmother (baptismal sponsor) and financial patron. Luther’s preserved correspondence includes his 1532–1533 letters to Dorothea Jörger regarding her generous donation supporting University of Wittenberg students in financial need. Luther had hoped she would agree to establish an endowment to support students with annual proceeds, but he acquiesced to her wishes that the funds be disbursed immediately.⁴⁹

Women from royal and noble families promoted Lutheran reform in various ways. After John Frederick (1503–1554), Elector of Saxony, was captured in 1547 by Emperor Charles V’s forces during the Schmalkaldic Wars, Electress Sibylle of Cleves (1512–1554), the elector’s wife, supervised the military defenses during the siege of Wittenberg.⁵⁰ Noblewomen with Lutheran sympathies, when married to husbands aligned with the Roman church, endeavored to raise their children in the Lutheran faith and spread reform within their territories. Since local princes determined their territories’ religious affiliation, a son with Lutheran allegiances could change his land’s religious association after coming to power following his father’s death.

Elisabeth von Brandenburg (1485–1555), a Danish princess married to Joachim I, Elector of Brandenburg (1505–1571), publicly supported Lutheranism and went into exile for defying her husband, who was loyal to the Roman church. In danger of

intheans 14:40), Calvinist Geneva required baptisms to be performed by ordained ministers. Repeated ordinances against midwives baptizing suggests that efforts to suppress this practice were not successful. Karen E. Spierling, *Infant Baptism in Reformation Geneva: The Shaping of a Community, 1536–1564* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 72–73.

48. *Ibid.*, 69.

49. Zimmermann and Malcolm, *Luther’s Letters to Women*, 68–70, 73–77.

50. Henrich Theodor Flathe, “Sibylle, Kurfürstin von Sachsen,” in *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie*, Vol. 34 (Munich: Historischen Kommission bei der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1892), 141.

39. LW 43:91.

40. LW 43:92.

41. LW 43:92–93.

42. David O. Neville, “Divergent Interpretations of Women’s Agency and Luther’s Political Agenda,” in *Conquering Women: Women and War in the German Cultural Imagination*, eds. Hilary Collier Sy-Quia and Susanne Baackmann (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 177–198.

43. LW 43:92.

44. LW 43:93–96.

45. Finnegan, *Women of Helfta*, 5.

46. See Luther’s 1527 invitation to an unmarried woman to come to Wittenberg to serve as instructor for girls; “Letter to Else von Kanitz,” in Zimmermann and Malcolm, *Luther’s Letters to Women*, 23–24.

47. With concern to do all things “decently and in order” (1 Cor-

physical abuse and imprisonment for persisting in her Lutheran beliefs, she fled to Saxony to the protection of her uncle John the Steadfast.⁵¹ Elisabeth's last will and testament included a statement of faith and an exhortation for her children to accept the Augsburg Confession: "For the benefit of the salvation of their own souls, they should accept the holy and divine word and gospel of Jesus Christ, the only one who brings us salvation, as it comes to us by means of the Augsburg Confession and shines through God's special grace in this part of Germany, they should accept it in true and unfaltering faith, with their heart, and should keep it dear till the end."⁵² After Elisabeth von Brandenburg's death, her sons enacted Lutheran reforms throughout Brandenburg lands.⁵³

Her daughter, Duchess Elisabeth von Braunschweig-Lüneburg (1510–1558), experienced similar marital disagreements regarding religious affiliation. Following her husband Erich's death in 1540, she became regent for their 12-year-old son, using the opportunity to enforce Lutheran reforms, including visitations and new church orders, in the territory of Braunschweig-Calenberg.⁵⁴ The duchess wrote a seventy-two-page *Sendbrief* to her subjects, published in 1545, exhorting them to live godly Christian lives.⁵⁵ She also authored devotional poetry and a political and religious instructional manual for her son, with whom she had a conflicted relationship.⁵⁶

Lutheran women as authors of religious works: accounting for absence

When pondering the question, "Did Lutheran women have a reformation?" an important consideration is the matter of authorship and publication. Only a handful of sixteenth-century Lutheran women published religious writings. Among these are three women mentioned above: Argula von Grumbach, Florentina of Upper Weimar, and Elisabeth von Braunschweig-Lüneburg. In addition, a letter from Ursula of Münsterberg (ca. 1491–after 1534) to her cousins Dukes George and Heinrich of Saxony, printed in 1528 and reprinted later with an afterward from Luther, is filled with biblical support for her departure from the Freiberg convent of Mary Magdalene the Penitent.⁵⁷ Another female contributor to the Lutheran cause was Ursula Weyda, spouse of the tax collector in Eisenberg, Saxony. Weyda lodged a literary attack against a Benedictine abbot with her treatise *Against the Unchristian, Slandering Work of the Abbot of Pegau* (1524).⁵⁸ She argued that the church's

In contrast to Lutherans, women writers identifying with the Reformed and Anglican traditions were (at least somewhat) more numerous and productive. Their writings went into greater biblical and theological depth than works by their Lutheran counterparts.

authority rested on scripture and faith alone rather than popes, bishops, and councils. With earthy, polemical language, characteristic of pamphlets of the time, she vituperated her opponent: "You stupid, ignorant abbot: you know as much about scriptures as a sow about harvesting a field of beets!... You know less about scripture than a cow about dancing!"⁵⁹ Six decades later, Justitia Sengers of Braunschweig (fl. 1585) published *A Little Book of Comfort, On Psalm 69* (a lengthy devotional commentary, despite its title), in which she reflected on Christ's suffering in light of her own experience as someone who had been born blind. Sengers's book arguably represents the most sustained work of scriptural interpretation written by a sixteenth-century Lutheran woman.⁶⁰

In contrast to Lutherans, women writers identifying with the Reformed and Anglican traditions were (at least somewhat) more numerous and productive. Their writings went into greater biblical and theological depth than works by their Lutheran counterparts. Identifying with the Reformed tradition, the prodigiously learned Olympia Morata (ca. 1526–1555) wrote dialogues defending women's education. Proficient in ancient languages, she tutored students in Greek at the University of Heidelberg, wrote Greek poetry expressing Reformed theological viewpoints about Christ's atonement, and composed classical Greek metrical paraphrases of psalms.⁶¹ Marguerite of Navarre (1492–1549), queen of Navarre and sister of French king Francis I, sheltered reformers, corresponded with John Calvin, protected victims of

51. Stjerna, *Women and the Reformation*, 89–95.

52. Translated in Stjerna, *Women and the Reformation*, 95.

53. Stjerna, *Women and the Reformation*, 95.

54. *Ibid.*, 99.

55. *Ibid.*, 100.

56. Elisabeth von Braunschweig spent three years in exile when her son, for political reasons, rejected his mother's Lutheran faith and enforced Roman Catholic practices in his territories. *Ibid.*, 101–103. For translations of Elisabeth's devotional poetry, see Classen, *Late-Medieval German Women's Poetry*, 85–92.

57. Ursula of Münsterberg, *The enlightened and highborn lady Ursula, Countess of Münsterberg, etc., Duchess of Glatz, etc., [gives] Christian reasons for abandoning the convent of Freiberg*, translated in Wiesner-Hanks, *Convents Confront the Reformation*, 39–63.

58. Earlier that year Simon Plick, abbot of Pegau, had penned

The Horrible Destruction of Land and People in Possessions, Person, and Honor and their future Salvation at the hands of Luther and his Friends; Paul A. Russell, *Lay Theology in the Reformation: Popular Pamphleteers in Southwest Germany 1521–1525* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 202.

59. Ursula Weyda, *Wider das unchristliche Schreiben des Abts zu Pegau*, translated in Russell, *Lay Theology*, 202.

60. Justitia Sengers, *Trostbüchlein, uber den Neun und Sechzigsten Psalm* (Magdeburg: Donat, 1586). See Isa Hauser and Marion Ann Taylor, "Justitia Sengers," in *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters*, eds. Marion Ann Taylor and Agnes Choi (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012) 445–448.

61. Olympia Morata, *The Complete Writings of an Italian Heretic*, trans. Holt N. Parker, *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

clergy sexual violence, and wrote numerous works with theological themes.⁶² Geneva reformer and former nun Marie Dentièrre (1495–1561) published *A Very Useful Epistle* (1539) defending clergy marriage and offering theological exposition on the Lord's Supper. (Geneva's city council confiscated most of the copies because—though councilmen believed Marie Dentièrre's husband had written it—the pamphlet claimed female authorship.) She also published a preface to Calvin's sermon on women's dress, a preface in which she “assumes the paradoxical position of teaching about a biblical passage [1 Corinthians 14:34] that expressly forbade her to do so.”⁶³ Strasbourg reformer Katherina Schütz Zell (1498–1562) composed commentaries on the Lord's Prayer and psalms. Her works articulated a Reformed understanding of the Lord's Supper. Three times she was censured by the Lutheran authorities of Strasbourg for preaching in funeral settings.⁶⁴ In the sixteenth century, the Reformed tradition was no less patriarchal than Lutheranism.⁶⁵ However, despite opposition from Protestant leaders, these Reformed women engaged in public discourse about biblical and theological topics.

In the Anglican tradition, Katherine Parr (1512–1548), surviving spouse of Henry VIII, published devotional works.⁶⁶ Elizabeth Tudor (1533–1603), who reigned over England from 1558 until her death, published religious poems and prayers that illustrated her devotional life and offered a public presentation of her fitness to rule as monarch.⁶⁷ In the seventeenth century, a host of Englishwomen published books, pamphlets, treatises, and poetry, often using Elizabeth Tudor's example as warrant for their authorial endeavors.⁶⁸

On the Roman Catholic side of the debate, Dutch schoolmaster Anna Bijns (1493–1575) published polemical poetry against Luther, who “through his error kills your soul” and “poison[s]

In the seventeenth century, a host of Englishwomen published books, pamphlets, treatises, and poetry, often using Elizabeth Tudor's example as warrant for their authorial endeavors.

our Christian lands” with “venom,” leading people astray to their eternal damnation.⁶⁹ Her 1548 poem, “Those Covet Happy Nights and Lose their Happy Days,” claims that nuns who left their convents—to marry and satisfy carnal lusts—exchanged the security and pleasant life of the convent for poverty, squalor, and a household full of “snotty brats, in a batch of six at least... with all those shitty diapers to wash.”⁷⁰ Roman Catholic nuns of the sixteenth century, like their medieval forerunners, authored devotional and visionary works. The best-known of these is Spanish mystic and reformer of the Carmelite order, Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582), who wrote prolifically.⁷¹

One way to account for the general absence of sixteenth-century Lutheran women's publications could be to posit that there were geographical considerations—that perhaps, compared to other parts of Europe, German-speaking lands did not offer fertile soil for women's intellectual and theological work to flourish. Such an argument could be countered, however, by noting the intellectual achievements of medieval women living in lands that later embraced the Lutheran reformation. There was a rich tradition of medieval women's religious writings in Latin and German. Their contributions often took the form of visionary literature authored by nuns and other devout women who reported divinely inspired messages.⁷² Though women composed only a small fraction of theological literature produced in German-speaking lands in the

62. Joy A. Schroeder, “Marguerite of Navarre Breaks Silence about Sixteenth-Century Clergy Sexual Violence,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 7 (1993): 171–190.

63. Introduction to Marie Dentièrre, *Epistle to Marguerite de Navarre* and *Preface to a Sermon by John Calvin*, ed. and trans. Mary B. McKinley, *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 31.

64. Katharina Schütz Zell, *Church Mother: The Writings of a Protestant Reformer in Sixteenth-Century Germany*, ed. and trans. Elsie McKee, *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

65. Sixteenth-century Reformed theologians articulated a strong sense of women's subjection due to the “the orders of creation” (Eve's subjection to her husband even prior to the fall), yet Reformed women managed to produce a richer corpus of women's writings. For Reformed women's contributions in a sixteenth-century context, see E. Jane Dempsey Douglass, *Women, Freedom, and Calvin* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985).

66. Katherine Parr, *Complete Works and Correspondence*, ed. Janel Mueller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

67. Elizabeth I, *Collected Works*, eds. Leah S. Marcus, Janel Mueller, and Mary Beth Rose (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). For other examples of Englishwomen, see Paul F. M. Zahl, *Five Women of the English Reformation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001).

68. Joy A. Schroeder, *Deborah's Daughters: Gender Politics and Biblical Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 106–113.

69. Anna Bijns, “Yet, When Compared, Martin Rossum Comes Out Best,” translated by Kristiaan P. G. Aercke, in *Women Writers of the Renaissance and Reformation*, ed. Katharina M. Wilson (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 384–386.

70. Bijns, “Those Covet Happy Nights and Lose Their Happy Days,” in Wilson, *Women Writers*, 388.

71. Teresa of Ávila, *Collected Works*, Volumes 1–3, trans. Otilia Rodriguez and Kieran Kavanaugh (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Carmelite Studies Publications, 1976–1985). Recognized since 1970 as a Doctor of the Church, Teresa is now widely respected. During her own time she experienced opposition that was exacerbated by Counter Reformation suspicion of vernacular and lay theology. Thus, the Protestant Reformation arguably had a chilling effect on theological expression by Roman Catholic women. See Gillian T. W. Ahlgren, *Teresa of Ávila and the Politics of Sanctity* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), 19–20.

72. Notable authors included Hrotswitha of Gandersheim (935–1002), Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), Elisabeth of Schönau (1128/9–1164), Gertrude of Helfta, Mechthild of Hackeborn, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Margaret Ebner (1291–1351), and Birgitta of Sweden (1303–1373).

Though women composed only a small fraction of theological literature produced in German-speaking lands in the Middle Ages, nevertheless their output was impressive, especially when contrasted with the scarcity of writings by Lutheran women in the sixteenth century.

Middle Ages, nevertheless their output was impressive, especially when contrasted with the scarcity of writings by Lutheran women in the sixteenth century. Kirsi Stjerna observed that “the apparent disappearance of women writers coincides with the Protestants’ dismissal of the mystics.”⁷³

Despite commonly held assumptions that Reformation-era Lutheran leaders hoped laypeople would read and interpret the Bible for themselves, there is evidence that pastors in the sixteenth-century did not promote independent individual Bible reading for women. Safer for women’s souls was the memorization of the catechism and selected psalms. Kathleen Crowther asserts that “Lutherans were generally reluctant to encourage children and less well educated lay men and women” to read the Bible for themselves, for there was danger that “they would interpret it incorrectly and be led into heresy.” Instead, ministers regarded “rote memorization of the catechism as the most suitable means of instilling the Lutheran faith.”⁷⁴ This did not mean that no Lutheran women in the 1500s read and interpreted scripture for themselves; however, their reflective, independent theological thought was not widely encouraged.⁷⁵ Furthermore, Ulrike

73. Stjerna, *Women and the Reformation*, 13.

74. Crowther, *Adam and Eve*, 13.

75. In the 1600s, under the influence of Pietism, greater numbers of Lutheran women studied the Bible. Aemilie Juliane (1637–1706), Catherina Regina von Greiffenberg (1633–1694), and Margaretha Susanna von Kuntsch (1651–1717) published theologically rich devotional books. Though literary production by seventeenth-century Lutheran women was much less extensive than the virtual explosion of women’s publications in other Protestant lands, especially England, these women’s examples demonstrate that—when provided with education and opportunities to study scripture—women from the Lutheran tradition were able to make robust and original contributions to theology and biblical interpretation in the century after the Reformation. See Judith P. Aiken, “Gendered Theologies of Childbirth in Early Modern Germany” and the “Devotional Handbook for Pregnant Women” by Aemilie Juliane, Countess of Schwarzburg-Rudolstadt, *Journal of Women’s History* 15/2 (2003): 42–46; Joy A. Schroeder, “The Prenatal Theology of Catharina Regina von Greiffenberg,” *Lutheran Forum* 46/3 (2012): 50–56; and Anna Carrdus, “Margaretha Susanna von Kuntsch,” in *Landmarks in German Women’s Writing*, ed. Hilary Brown, *British and Irish Studies in German Language and Literature*

Zitzlsperger’s study of German women pamphleteers finds that the handful of female authors who ventured into public discourse found it necessary to stave off criticism by presenting themselves as occupying conventional female roles, taking “great care to assure their readers and listeners that they knew their place: as wife, as mother, as widow.”⁷⁶

Consciences captive to the Word of God: Caritas Pirckheimer and nuns who remained in the convent

In 1521, at the Diet of Worms, Martin Luther was shown stacks of his books piled on a table and was ordered to recant his writings. Most people familiar with the story remember the phrase, “Here I stand. I can do no other.” That famous and quintessentially Lutheran sentence, “Here I stand,” is almost certainly apocryphal; however, the rest of Luther’s recorded speech likely reflects his response to the officials gathered at the Diet:

Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. May God help me. Amen.⁷⁷

Throughout Luther’s writings, a prominent theme is that of following one’s (biblically informed) *conscience*. Luther opposed human-made church regulations that burdened people’s consciences by declaring sinful the things that were not sin, such as eating meat during designated periods of fasting. In his treatises on liturgical reforms, he resisted setting forth rules in a manner that would bind or afflict consciences in matters which were “free” (such as vestments and certain traditional chants), for “liberty must prevail in these matters and Christian consciences must not be bound by laws and ordinances.”⁷⁸

Concern for conscience is found in Luther’s counsel regarding women’s monasticism. In his 1524 preface to Florentina of Upper

39 (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 25–42. For studies of the numerous Englishwomen who wrote and published in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, see Louise Schleiner, *Tudor and Stuart Women Writers* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1994); Margaret P. Hanay, ed., *Silent But For the Word: Tudor Women as Patrons, Translators, and Writers of Religious Works* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1985); and Anne M. Haselkorn and Betty S. Travitsky, *The Renaissance Englishwoman in Print: Counterbalancing the Canon* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990).

76. Ulrike Zitzlsperger, “Mother, Martyr and Mary Magdalene: German Female Pamphleteers and their Self-Images,” *History* 88 (2003): 387.

77. Quoted in Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation, 1483–1521*, trans. James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 460.

78. Martin Luther, *An Order of Mass and Communion for the Church at Wittenberg* (1523), LW 53:37.

Weimar's narrative, Luther urged the noblemen in his audience to "permit each nun's own conscience to guide her and give her free choice either to leave or to remain in the convent."⁷⁹ Florentina's conscience had caused her to flee. A year after Florentina published her account, more than fifty Franciscan nuns in Nuremberg, led by their abbess Caritas Pirkheimer, searched their consciences and came to a different conclusion regarding their religious vocations.

Caritas (née Barbara) Pirkheimer (1467–1532), abbess of the convent of St. Clare in Nuremberg, was known for her exceptional learning and Latin proficiency. Sister to renaissance humanist Willibald Pirkheimer (1470–1530), Barbara began her studies as a child at home. She continued her education at the convent school. She became a nun at the age of 16, taking the name Caritas ("Love"). Pirkheimer served as abbess from 1503 until her death.

The convent of St. Clare was an eminent institution. Only women from the wealthy patrician class, whose men served on Nuremberg's city council, were allowed to enter this convent, which required a significant dowry. When the city council formally voted to adopt Lutheran reforms in 1524, council members—who had expended considerable financial resources to install their daughters in the convent—now found themselves compelled by conscience or honor to remove their female relatives.⁸⁰ Councilmen in Strasbourg, Geneva, and other Protestant cities undertook similar efforts. Brought to the convent as children, many of the nuns had known no other life. Unsurprising, most wanted to stay, especially given limited options outside the convent. Several nuns chronicled their struggles to remain faithful to their vows and to the Roman church while living in lands hostile to their way of life.⁸¹ At the Dominican convent of Saint Margaret in Strasbourg, nuns found creative ways to resist listening to Protestant sermons forced upon them. The sisters, who worshipped in the chapel enclosed behind a grille screen, dressed statues in nuns' habits so the preacher saw the silhouette of nuns. A few elderly sisters were present, making occasional rustling noises, to create the impression of full attendance at the sermons.⁸²

Caritas Pirkheimer chronicled events that occurred between 1524 and 1528. Readers receive a riveting description of patrician families and Lutheran preachers trying to impose their will on nuns who did not want to leave. Pirkheimer cataloged the indignities they endured. The nuns were involuntarily subjected to 111 sermons by Lutheran preachers exhorting them to depart. This included an uncharitable four-hour harangue from theologian Andreas Osiander (1498–1552).⁸³ Pirkheimer protested that it

When the city council formally voted to adopt Lutheran reforms in 1524, council members—who had expended considerable financial resources to install their daughters in the convent—now found themselves compelled by conscience or honor to remove their female relatives.

was beyond the city council's jurisdiction to send preachers into the convent, "For you are not our pastors."⁸⁴

Countering claims that the nuns relied on their own good works for their salvation, Pirkheimer contended: "Although some people have claimed that we rely on our own works and hope to be saved by them alone, by the Grace of God we fully realize—whatever people may say—that no [person] as St. Paul says, can be justified by works alone, but by faith in our Lord Jesus Christ."⁸⁵ She continued: "Hence we are unjustly accused of boasting of our good works. Our boast is solely in the spurned and crucified Christ who tells us to take up his cross and follow Him."⁸⁶ Against those who said that "the clear bright word of God is concealed" among them, she countered that the nuns regularly studied the Bible in Latin and German: "Therefore, by God's grace we have no lack of the Holy Gospel and of St. Paul's writings."⁸⁷

The abbess asserted that no nun wishing to leave voluntarily would be restrained.⁸⁸ One nun, Anna Schwarz, did depart.⁸⁹ Pirkheimer pleaded that the sisters be permitted to follow their own consciences and remain, if they felt so called. Writing to the councilmen, she appealed to the principle of conscience and Christian liberty: "But if the spirit and conscience are to be free, we beg your honors as humbly as if we lay at your feet for the sake of the Love of Jesus, who cleansed our conscience from dead works with His precious blood, do not force us in matters concerning our conscience."⁹⁰

The city council made life difficult for the sisters, levying new taxes on them, exerting various financial pressures, and denying them access to priests to celebrate mass. Pirkheimer chronicled the physical violence that some nuns' families inflicted upon the women. During an attempt to forcibly remove several younger nuns, the mother of Sister Katharina Ebner seriously injured her

79. Luther, *How God Rescued an Honorable Nun*, LW 43:87.

80. Amy Leonard, *Nails in the Wall: Catholic Nuns in Reformation Germany* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 8–9.

81. For an eyewitness account by a nun from the convent of St. Clare in Geneva, see Jeanne de Jussie, *The Short Chronicle*, ed. and trans. Carrie F. Klaus, *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

82. Leonard, *Nails in the Wall*, 80.

83. Caritas Pirkheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years 1524–1528*, trans. and introduced by Paul A. MacKenzie (Rochester, N.Y.: Boydell & Brewer, 2006), 112.

84. *Ibid.*, 17.

85. *Ibid.*, 20.

86. *Ibid.*, 20–21.

87. *Ibid.*, 16.

88. *Ibid.*, 21.

89. Frank P. Lane, "'We have No Abiding City': Caritas Pirkheimer," *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 6/2 (1999): 93.

90. Pirkheimer, *Journal*, 44.

daughter, striking her on the mouth so sharply that she drew blood. In the scuffle, the nun's foot was seriously wounded.⁹¹ Pirckheimer testified to Ebner's articulate biblical defense of her determination to remain in monastic life: "Katharina Ebner spoke very courageously and constantly supported all her words with the Holy Scriptures."⁹² The abbess recorded Ebner's concluding speech that voiced her refusal to leave voluntarily: "Here I stand and will not yield. No one shall be able to force me out. If I am removed by force, however, it shall never be by my will in eternity."⁹³ In the end, the nuns were permitted to remain at St. Clare, but no additional women were allowed to join. The convent closed in 1596 (sixty-four years after Pirckheimer's death in 1532) when the last nun died.

Most historians agree that Luther never uttered the words, "Here I stand." Ironically, these very words were spoken by a nun facing a hostile Lutheran family as she asserted her conscience-bound determination to hold fast to her convictions. Stories of Caritas Pirckheimer, Katharina Ebner, and a host of other Roman Catholic women who suffered in order to remain faithful to their principles can appropriately add complexity to assessments about the Reformation's impact upon women and female agency. Accounts of women who remained in convents, at great personal cost, should be told alongside the stories of nuns who fled.

Argula von Grumbach, Lutheran reformer

In 1523, a Bavarian noblewoman with Lutheran sympathies published a fiery pamphlet, an open letter to the faculty of the University of Ingolstadt, protesting the persecution and curtailment of Christian liberty of a young instructor. Within two months, the pamphlet went into fourteen printings. She went on to publish seven more open letters, so that more than 29,000 copies of her works circulated in German-speaking territories—an impressive number for those times.⁹⁴ The woman was Argula von Grumbach (1492–ca. 1568), a member of the noble von Stauff family, and wife of the town administrator of Dietfurt.

Taught to read German as a child, von Grumbach studied devotional literature and had read one of the German Bibles available prior to Luther's translations. Living in Bavaria, in territory aligned with the Roman church, von Grumbach managed to obtain Lutheran writings. She became convinced of the truth of Luther's words regarding justification by grace.

Argula von Grumbach was the first woman ever to enter public debate by using the printing press to disseminate her message. The woodcut illustration on the title page of her first pamphlet depicts her holding a Bible, facing off against the faculty of the University of Ingolstadt. The printer gave the pamphlet a lengthy title, characteristic of the time: "The Account of a Christian Woman of the Bavarian Nobility whose open letter, with arguments

Most historians agree that Luther never uttered the words, "Here I stand." Ironically, these very words were spoken by a nun facing a hostile Lutheran family as she asserted her conscience-bound determination to hold fast to her convictions.

based on divine Scripture, criticizes the University of Ingolstadt for compelling a young follower of the gospel to contradict the word of God."⁹⁵

The event that drew von Grumbach into the public forum was the violation of the freedom of conscience of a young academic, Arsacius Seehofer (1503–1545), a student at the University of Ingolstadt, a university firmly committed to the Roman church and to suppressing illicit Lutheran teachings. In 1522, 18-year-old Seehofer spent time in Wittenberg, attending lectures there and returning to Ingolstadt "with the writings of Luther and Melancthon in his pack and in his heart."⁹⁶ When Seehofer lectured on St. Paul, interpreting New Testament writings through a Lutheran lens, his unauthorized views came to the attention of authorities, who searched his quarters and confiscated his books. Seehofer was arrested, imprisoned, and accused of seventeen specific heretical teachings, such as "faith alone is sufficient for our justification."⁹⁷ Hearing the accusations read aloud to him, and threatened with execution, a fearful, weeping Seehofer held the New Testament in his hand and recanted his Lutheran views.⁹⁸

Von Grumbach, aged 31 and mother of four children, learned of the outrage. An ardent reader of scripture—including Luther's recently published New Testament translation—von Grumbach was appalled that no men had stepped forward to defend Seehofer. From her perspective, the young student had been forced to swear on the Bible that he would not teach the Bible.

Von Grumbach was connected to Lutheran reformers by a network of relationships. Her conversation partners and correspondents included Andreas Osiander, Georg Spalatin (1484–1545), and Frederick the Wise (1463–1525).⁹⁹ Von Grumbach corresponded with Luther, who praised her courage and expressed concern for her safety as she dwelt in hostile territory, residing with a physically abusive husband.¹⁰⁰ She attended the 1530 Diet of Augsburg, encouraging the Lutheran princes and theologians to

95. Ibid., 72.

96. Ibid., 15.

97. Ibid., 91–92.

98. Ibid., 16.

99. Stjerna, *Women and the Reformation*, 74.

100. Luther's letter to Spalatin in 1528 expressed concern over "what this most pious woman has to put up with and suffer," *WA Br* 4:605, translated in Matheson, *Argula von Grumbach*, 23.

91. Ibid., 93.

92. Ibid., 91.

93. Ibid., 92.

94. Peter Matheson, *Argula von Grumbach: A Woman's Voice in the Reformation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995), 53–54.

remain firm in confessing their faith. Her letter to Spalatin about the events at Augsburg echoed Psalm 121, “Have no anxiety; God is in control. He knows how things are and will preserve us; he who protects Israel slumbers not. It is all in his hand; he will calm the troubles and bring matters to a good conclusion.”¹⁰¹ She also visited Luther who, as an outlaw of the empire, had been sidelined at the Coburg castle during the diet.¹⁰²

Von Grumbach’s 1523 open letter to the University of Ingolstadt quoted more than eighty Bible verses. She had searched the scriptures and found that Jesus’ words called her from female silence into the public sphere:

I find there is a text in Matthew 10 which runs: “Whoever confesses me before another I too will confess before my heavenly father.” And Luke 9: “Whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, I too will be ashamed of when I come in my majesty,” etc. Words like these, coming from the very mouth of God are always before my eyes. For they exclude neither woman nor man.¹⁰³

Her letter protested the violence committed against Seehofer and his conscience. She noted the irony of requiring someone “to hold the holy Gospel in their hands for the very purpose of denying it.”¹⁰⁴ She defended the teachings of Luther and Melancthon, asserting: “You condemn them without having refuted them.”¹⁰⁵

Von Grumbach knew she needed to address the scriptures that enjoined women to silence. She reported that she had initially kept out of the debate, precisely because of the injunction by the apostle Paul (whom sixteenth-century Christians assumed was the author of 1 Timothy), but necessity drove her into the public debate:

However I suppressed my inclinations; heavy of heart, I did nothing. Because Paul says in 1 Timothy 2: “The women should keep silence, and should not speak in church.” But now that I cannot see any man who is up to it, who is either willing or able to speak, I am constrained by the saying: “Whoever confesses me”, as I said above. And I claim for myself Isaiah 3: “I will send children to be their princes; and women, or those who are womanish shall rule over them.”¹⁰⁶

She challenged the university to debate the Seehofer matter as well as Lutheran interpretation of scripture. If they found it beneath them to discuss religious topics with a woman, the professors should remember that Christ himself conversed with Mary Magdalene (John 20:11–18) and the Samaritan woman (John 4:7–30).¹⁰⁷ Von Grumbach concluded her pamphlet, boldly

Argula von Grumbach left an inspiring legacy—a corpus of writings by a courageous and outspoken Lutheran woman who followed her conscience and entered into public religious discourse.

asserting: “What I have written to you is no woman’s chit-chat, but the word of God; and (I write) as a member of the Christian Church, against which the gates of hell cannot prevail.”¹⁰⁸

Von Grumbach received no formal response from the university. The debate imaginatively depicted in the pamphlet’s woodcut was never held. Her husband, Friedrich von Grumbach, was, however, deposed from office, for failing to control his wife. Sermons denounced her as a “shameless whore,” “heretical bitch,” and “wretched and pathetic daughter of Eve.”¹⁰⁹ On one extant pamphlet, a reader scribbled next to her name: “Born a Lutheran whore and gate of hell.”¹¹⁰ The most sustained opposition she received was a 130-line poem published in 1524 by a pseudonymous “Johannes of Lanzhut,” a student at Ingolstadt who told her to be silent, “listen like the Magdalene,” and tend to her needlework. He threatened: “For if for this topic again you head / Like all your heretic friends, you’re dead.”¹¹¹ Von Grumbach replied with a poem four times as long, invoking examples of godly biblical women such as Judith, Deborah, and Jael, who overthrew wicked men.¹¹² In response to Johannes’s admonition to be obedient to her husband and attend to household tasks, she says she was “delighted always to obey,” but if her husband should ever forbid her to follow God’s word, she must obey Matthew 10:34–36: “We must turn at once our back / On children, home, and all we have.”¹¹³ With these and similar words, Argula von Grumbach left an inspiring legacy—a corpus of writings by a courageous and outspoken Lutheran woman who followed her conscience and entered into public religious discourse. Even as her words inspire, they also point to lost opportunities for other women. Mentioning Argula von Grumbach alongside Reformed pamphleteer Katharina Schütz Zell, Kirsi Stjerna observes: “Argula was born at the right moment in history, in the window of opportunity for lay pamphlet writing, before such opportunities became more controlled. Argula,

108. Ibid., 79.

109. Matheson, *Argula von Grumbach*, 18.

110. Roland H. Bainton, *Women of the Reformation in Germany and Italy* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1971), 103.

111. Johannes of Lanzhut, *A word about the Stauffen woman and her disputativeness*, translated in Matheson, *Argula von Grumbach*, 168.

112. Argula von Grumbach, *An Answer in verse to a member of the University of Ingolstadt*, translated in Matheson, *Argula von Grumbach*, 183–184.

113. Ibid., 192.

101. Matheson, *Argula von Grumbach*, 24.

102. Ibid.

103. Argula von Grumbach, *To the University of Ingolstadt*, translated in Matheson, *Argula von Grumbach*, 75.

104. Ibid., 76.

105. Ibid.

106. Ibid., 79.

107. Ibid., 88.

and Katharina Schütz Zell, represent what ‘could have been’ for Protestant women in the sixteenth century and more generally.”¹¹⁴

Daughters of the Reformation

In her essay “On Meeting Mother Rome,” liturgical theologian Gail Ramshaw writes: “My father’s name is Martin Luther. My home has been on the whole a good one, but all the rooms, excepting the kitchen, have always been crowded with men: Adam, Jeremiah, Paul, Luther, Melancthon, doktorvaters and pastor-fathers, friends who are men who became pastors, and pastors who are men who became friends, all drinking German beer and preaching loud sermons.”¹¹⁵ As a daughter of the Reformation, and as someone dedicated to retrieving the voices and stories of female forebears, I frequently find myself wishing for a more robust Lutheran women’s tradition of religious and theological writing prior to the twentieth century.¹¹⁶ In the sixteenth century, in every branch of Christianity, public religious authority and theological writings by women were the exception rather than the rule. However, Lutheran women remained or became more marginal to participation in public religious discourse, at least somewhat more so than their counterparts in Catholicism, the Reformed tradition, and the Anabaptists.¹¹⁷

In the wake of the Reformation’s quinquennial, it is appropriate to challenge heroic, triumphalist narratives about Lutheranism. A critical examination of the Reformation’s impact on women suggests that the Lutheran movement reinforced patriarchal ideas and patterns in church, home, and society—or, at best, failed to challenge prevailing gender norms. One can offer such an appraisal without denying the genuine theological and pastoral contributions of Luther, Melancthon, and their male colleagues. In fact, frank acknowledgment of the failings of individuals and institutions is very much in the spirit of the Reformation.

In response to the question, “Did sixteenth-century Lutheran women have a reformation?” the answer is: “Probably not.” However, their labors may yet bear fruit as their contributions are

114. Sterna, *Women and the Reformation*, 84.

115. Gail Ramshaw, *Worship: Searching for Language* (Washington, D.C.: Pastoral Press, 1988), 45.

116. L. DeAne Lagerquist published a history of Lutheran women in America titled *From Our Mother’s Arms: A History of Women in the American Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1987), but there is not yet a comprehensive study of women in the Lutheran tradition. The deaconess movement, begun in the 1800s, provided significant opportunities for women’s religious service. Recent Lutheran women’s theological contributions include Mary J. Streufert, ed., *Transformative Lutheran Theologies: Feminist, Womanist, Mujerista* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010); and Deanna A. Thompson, *Crossing the Divide: Luther, Feminism, and the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004).

117. A woman printer in Strasbourg, Margarethe Prüss (d. 1542), published revelations of Anabaptist prophets Ursula Jost (d. ca. 1530) and Barbara Rebstock. See Stjerna, *Women and the Reformation*, 17–22. For studies of Anabaptist women, see Arnold C. Snyder and Linda A. Huebert Hecht, eds., *Profiles of Anabaptist Women: Sixteenth-Century Reforming Pioneers*, Studies in Women and Religion/Études sur les femmes et la religion 3 (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2002).

A critical examination of the Reformation’s impact on women suggests that the Lutheran movement reinforced patriarchal ideas and patterns in church, home, and society—or, at best, failed to challenge prevailing gender norms.

recovered (at least in part) and their memory honored. Women’s stories are beginning to be integrated into general histories of the Reformation. Seminary students now regularly study the writings of Argula von Grumbach, take courses about Reformation women, and learn how cultural assumptions shaped Reformation views about gender. Women from the Global South and the former Eastern bloc attend seminars in Wittenberg, Germany, on “The Reformation and the Empowerment of Women.”¹¹⁸

Though the names and stories of most sixteenth-century women (and most *men*, for that matter) did not enter the historical record and are now lost to the ages, and though the talents of too many women went unrecognized and undeveloped, we can, nevertheless, treasure the gifts that we *do* have, including the powerful witness of Argula von Grumbach, Florentina of Upper Weimar, and Katharina von Bora. We also honor the writings and experiences of conscience-bound women who, like Katharina Schütz Zell on the Reformed side and Caritas Pirkheimer on the Catholic side, *resisted* Lutheran authorities in various ways. We likewise offer thanksgiving for Lutheran midwives who performed the holy duty of baptizing vulnerable infants, mothers who taught their children the catechism, schoolteachers who increased female literacy, and wives who experienced challenges due to religious conflict with their husbands. Though their names, words, and actions may not be known to us, we can still honor and remember before God the countless women who found comfort and confidence through Lutheran sermons, the catechism, the sacraments, the study of scripture, and the message of justification by grace through faith.

118. Kit Kleinhaus, “Women and the Reformation,” *Living Lutheran*, October 21, 2015, <https://www.livinglutheran.org/2015/10/women-reformation/>.