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MARTIN LUTHER AND WOMEN¹

Martim Lutero e mulheres

Sarah Hinlicky Wilson²

ABSTRACT

This essay offers an overview of Martin Luther's view of women with special attention to his illegal will in favor of his wife and his discussion of men and women in the late Genesis commentary. It then considers three women who responded to Luther's reforms and lived out their Christian faith accordingly: Katharina von Bora, Elisabeth Cruciger, and Argula von Grumbach, tracing in particular their private or public roles in expressing their faith.

Keywords: Martin Luther. Women. Katharina von Bora. Elisabeth Cruciger. Argula von Grumbach.

RESUMO

Este ensaio oferece uma visão panorâmica da visão de Martim Luther sobre as mulheres, com especial atenção em sua vontade ilegal em favor de sua esposa, e sua discussão sobre homens e mulheres no comentário tardio de Gênesis. Em seguida, considera três mulheres

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que responderam às reformas de Lutero e viveram sua fé cristã em conformidade com a mesma: Catarina von Bora, Elisabeth Cruciger e Argula von Grumbach, rastreando, em particular, seus papéis privados ou públicos na expressão da fé.

Palavras-chave: Martim Lutero. Mulheres. Catarina von Bora. Elisabeth Crugiger. Argula von Grumbach.

“I, Martin Luther, doctor, etc., acknowledge with this my own handwriting that I have given to my beloved and faithful housewife Katherine as an endowment (or whatever one can call it) for her lifetime, which she will be at liberty to manage according to *her* pleasure and to *her* best interest, and give it to her by the authority of this document on this very present day,

[...] the little holding at Zülsdorf; [...] secondly, as a dwelling the house of Bruno; [...] thirdly, beakers and valuables, such as rings, necklaces, gratuities, gold and silver, which should be worth about a thousand gulden.

I do this because, in the first place, as a pious and faithful spouse she has at all times held me dear, worthy, and fine and through God’s rich blessings gave birth to and reared for me five living children [...] for this reason, that I do not want her to have to look to the children for a handout, but rather the children should be obligated to her, honor her, and be subject to her as God has commanded [...]

I also ask all my good friends to be witnesses for my dear Katie and to help defend her, when some idle gossips want to trouble or defame her... I ask this for this reason, that the devil, since he can come no closer to me, shall no doubt persecute my Katie in all sorts of ways for this reason alone that she was, and (God be praised) still is, the espoused housewife of the man Dr. Martin [...]”³

As you have no doubt inferred by now, this is an excerpt of Luther’s will. And as of course you know, wills come into effect at the moment of the testator’s death. Which means that Luther’s final, dying act was to break the law in favor of a woman.

That’s right: Luther’s will was illegal. According to Saxon law, women were not allowed to inherit. The most they could hope for was the right to live on their husband’s property for the duration of their lives. Property passed to sons; lacking sons, to the nearest living male relatives. Luther thought this was, in short, hogwash. His will deliberately eschewed legalese – though he did have the good sense to get three witnesses to countersign it – but he stated plainly enough that every last bit of his property was to go to his beloved wife.

³ LUTHER, Martin. **Luther’s Works**. Eds. J. Pelikan and H. Lehmann. 82 vols. St. Louis; Philadelphia: Concordia; Fortress, 1955ff [= LW], here: vol. 34, p. 295–297. My italics.

I deliberately start my remarks on Luther and women with the end of his life rather than the beginning. The Reformation was not, on the whole, *about* women, or women and men, though it certainly had *implications* for both sexes and their relationships with one another. So it is somewhat misleading to look to Luther to find the kinds of opinions that now, five centuries later, we find to be acceptable and progressive. And yet I think we see in this last act of his a kind of portent of the changes to come in half-millennium following his death.

Broadly speaking, Luther's attitude towards women throughout his reforming career points in this direction, that is, toward a significantly changed attitude toward women. He reports how, as a child, he'd been led to believe that marriage and married sexuality was disgusting, certainly not holy. Those concerned for their eternal salvation avoided marriage and women whenever possible in favor of the superior road of monastic celibacy.

Years before Luther himself married, he denounced this denunciation of women and marriage. His early treatise "On the Estate of Marriage" from 1522 made a lengthy case for regarding women as honored, beloved creatures of God to be treated with respect, kindness, and love, and it exhorted men to toughen up and deal with diapers. In other early writings on church and worship, he even broached the idea of women preaching, as an outcome of his insistence on the priesthood of all baptized Christians. On the whole he tended followed the pattern of his time and place, which allotted no public space for women whatsoever; as a result, it was simply a contradiction in terms to imagine a woman taking a public role in church. But Luther *could* imagine women preaching in convents or even in families, and he even allowed prophecy to women, on the ground that it was an occasional thing rather than a perduring office of the church. He also advocated for, and helped start, schools for girls, considering education eminently worthwhile even for women restricted to private realms—another significant break from tradition. And Luther and his reforming colleagues saw to the training of female schoolteachers to teach those girls, and made sure that midwives got a rudimentary theological education so that their emergency baptisms and work of consolation at childbirth would be held to the highest standards.

Still, if you scan his writings, you'll find that Luther isn't absolutely consistent in his thinking about women. This isn't surprising, given the number of things on his mind, and the fact that, as I've said, the Reformation was not primarily *about* sex and gender. Luther was trying on the fly to put together in

one coherent whole his own culture's limitations on women's roles, his up-close observations of marriages both successful and tragic, and the widely varying witness of Scripture. If Luther is inconsistent on women, that's probably because Scripture is inconsistent on women, too: some passages exalting and praising them, some constricting and blaming them. And that could be because *some women* are praiseworthy, some are blameworthy, and most are both. For that matter, if we ever bothered to examine Scripture's view of *men*, we'd find much the same mixed report, just as we do in our own lives.

But enough generalization. Let's take a direct look at Luther on women. For the last ten years of his life, Luther undertook a course of commentary on the book of Genesis, which in English translation fills eight volumes. His remarks on the creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2 beautifully illustrate his rather divided mind—divided, but leaning in the direction of honoring women.

His main goal in commenting on these creation stories is to prove the excellence of both male and female, both Adam and Eve, partly to contrast them in paradise with what they will become after sin. So, for example, after recounting at length the pre-sin Adam's superior eyesight, superhuman strength, excellent digestion, and mental acuity, Luther remarks: "Eve had these mental gifts in the same degree as Adam, as Eve's utterance shows when she answered the serpent concerning the tree in the middle of Paradise... her very nature was pure and full of the knowledge of God to such a degree that by herself she knew the Word of God and understood it"⁴.

All right, Luther, well done! You got the memo on the equality of the sexes roughly four centuries ahead of schedule. But then we get this rather more mixed report, commenting on the verse "male and female He created them":

In order not to give the impression that He was excluding the woman from all the glory of the future life, Moses includes each of the two sexes; for the woman appears to be a *somewhat different being* from the man, *having different members* and a *much weaker nature*. Although Eve was a most extraordinary creature—similar to Adam so far as the image of God is concerned, that is, 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 a most beautiful work of God, *nevertheless was not the equal of the male* in glory and prestige. However, here Moses puts the two sexes together and says that God created male and female in order to indicate that Eve, too, was

⁴ LW 1, p. 66–67.

made by God as a partaker of the divine image and of the divine similitude, likewise of the rule over everything. Thus even today the woman is the partaker of the future life... In the household *the woman is a partner* in the management and has a common interest in the children and the property, and *yet there is a great difference* between the sexes... this sex *may not be excluded* from any glory of the human creature, *although it is inferior* to the male sex.⁵

So... which is it? Woman as equal, or woman as inferior? Both opinions seem to be there in equal decree. Yet in the pages to come, Luther will indulge in some of his habitual defamation of Aristotle for judging woman to be “a maimed man.” By contrast, Luther will call woman “a most excellent work, moreover, one which we see created by *a special counsel of God*.” He rejects all “aspersions cast upon the female sex” and by extension on marriage, and he especially attacks male sexual misbehavior. So again, we’re leaning toward the excellence and equality of women.

A bit further on, Luther changes tack: now women’s inferiority is not a matter of nature but a matter of sin. He writes:

[...] if the woman had not been deceived by the serpent and had not sinned, she would have been the equal of Adam in all respects. For the punishment, that she is now subjected to the man, was imposed on her after sin and because of sin, just as the other hardships and dangers were: travail, pain, and countless other vexations. Therefore Eve was not like the woman of today; her state was far better and more excellent, and she was in no respect inferior to Adam, whether you count the qualities of the body or those of the mind⁶

And yet, even today, long after sin has been at work in human life, Luther argues: “Whatever the husband has, this the wife has and possesses in its entirety. Their partnership involves not only their means but children, food, bed, and dwelling; their purposes, too, are the same. The result is that *the husband differs from the wife in no other respect than in sex; otherwise the woman is altogether a man*”⁷. That is, no doubt, a rather ambiguous compliment, but what Luther intends is clear; it’s the language of his time and place for expressing equality. Men and women are by nature the same thing, of the same excellences,

⁵ LW 1, p. 68–69. My italics.

⁶ LW 1, p. 115.

⁷ LW 1, p.137. My italics.

and the same defects; the one difference is in the matter of sex.

That difference *does* have an unavoidable impact on human life and experience. Luther in his own way was trying to interpret that difference, to make sense of its meaning and its ethical implications, just like we do. The biological difference between men and women is profoundly and richly meaningful to Luther; in fact, I'd argue that Luther's entire Genesis commentary is a vindication of bodily life. But in the end it's the *biological* fact of difference, rather than the cultural, social, or sinful fact of difference, that is most important and most relevant to him. And the biology is something created by God, and is good. I suspect that more important even than Luther's tiny opening up to the possibility for new roles for women in the public space is his rejection of all hatred of the female body. The body, the *woman's* body, is good, not wicked, not disgusting, not sinful, and not there to be used and abused by men or abandoned when no longer serving male interests. This combination of ideas from Luther began to open up possibilities of change hitherto unforeseen and unexplored, of which Luther's will was a peculiar portent.

But all this is theory. What's even more interesting is actuality. We'll learn more about this budding change on the horizon of history by looking at three women of the Reformation, who they were and what they did, than by debating the merits of Luther's views of women as he committed them to paper. Let's see how women actually heard and responded to the gospel as Luther taught it, and what it meant for their lives.

1 KATHARINA VON BORA

Without question, the most famous woman of the Lutheran Reformation is Katharina von Bora, the former nun who married Martin Luther and thereby became the most world-changing wife in history. But in her case, to be a wife was not simply to be attached to a famous husband. Wife was truly an office, like the office of preacher or teacher or judge: a public role with vast responsibilities demanding faultless acumen. It is hard to imagine that anyone with less resolve, grit, and personality could have pulled off the role as first lady of the Reformation and personal companion to the energetic and irascible Martin Luther.

Though more is known about Katharina than just about any other

woman of her time, that still amounts to precious little. Her mother died early, which may account for why Katharina spent nearly twenty years in the convent. There she learned to read, write, and sing and started on Latin—a remarkable education in an era that considered girls' education to be a luxury at best—as well as the business of running a household economy. No one knows what she thought of convent life except the sheer fact that, in the end, she left it.

Somehow or other Luther's ideas snuck into the Marienthron convent. During the Easter vigil, on the night of April 4, 1523, twelve nuns including Katharina fled Marienthron with the help of Leonhard Koppe, a merchant. The nuns were greeted in Wittenberg on Easter Monday with a public welcome, and Luther—who had helped to arrange the rescue—immediately published a tract entitled “Why Nuns May, in All Godliness, Leave the Convent.”⁸ It was a bold move on both Koppe and Luther's parts: abducting nuns could have earned them the death penalty.

The question then was what these liberated women were to *do*. Employment opportunities for women were, of course, very limited, but Luther pulled it off in a few cases. Most of the nuns ended up marrying, and some managed to secure settlements from the state to provide for them.

Two years later, Katharina alone was left unemployed and unclaimed though happily settled in as a member of the Lucas Cranach household. She had hoped to marry one Hieronymous Baumgartner, but despite the mutual affection, his wealthy family suppressed the match and left her disappointed. Luther actually intervened with him on her behalf, but to no avail. Luther then tried to match Katharina up with another man, but she outright refused and informed Luther's friend Nicholas von Amsdorf that she would have only him—or Luther. Amsdorf promptly saw to it that she married Luther, and himself remained a bachelor till his dying day.

We don't know how the matter was finally settled, aside from Amsdorf's relaying of the message. There was clearly regard on both sides of the match, but not what we would call romance. Katharina and Martin's quiet wedding on June 13, 1525 – followed by a public celebration two weeks later – was, in the end, a calling. But what didn't start out with romance did in fact turn into love, rather soon, and quite profound.

⁸ **Luther's Werke:** Kritische Gesamtausgabe: Schriften, 73 vols. Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–2009, here: vol. 11, p. 394–400 [WA 11,394–400].

Despite the Reformation message about marriage, the biblical certainty of the good of marriage took some getting used to in everyday life. A wife was not just a theory but a person with emotions, predilections, and opinions. Women were suddenly invading an eternally male sphere. The Table Talk reveals the resistance that many of Luther's guests put up to her presence and participation in the general conversation, not to mention their disapproval that Luther did nothing to rein her in.

And if it was hard for Luther's sympathizers, how much more for his slanderers! Katharina's remarkable and powerful character is revealed in how unfailingly she went about the business of pioneering the holy life of a pastor's wife with so much vitriole spilling on all sides and disgusting accusations against her character. Unabashed, Luther announced that he used the worst of these reports, by a certain Joachim von Heyden, in the only suitable manner: as toilet paper. The naysayers were startled indeed when the first Luther baby arrived a full year after the marriage – healthy, whole, and showing no signs of being the Antichrist, which was the expected fruit of a nun and monk's marriage.

Katharina quickly discovered that housekeeping for Luther was no small task. Friends report her saying, "I have to accustom the Doctor to a different set of habits, so that he does things the way I want." She took over the household, demanded payment for Luther's books, managed the livestock, tended the gardens, and brewed locally praised beer. She took their profits to buy more gardens and even that farm in Zülsdorf Luther's will mentions. By the end of the 1520s their position was financially secure, but the wealth was not an end in itself. Only the Melanchthons outstripped them in generosity.

Baby Hans, healthy and normal, was followed by five more pregnancies, one of which miscarried. The first daughter, Elisabeth, died at less than a year old, a bitter pill for the parents, but the death of twelve-year-old Magdalena much later nearly destroyed them. In the end three sons and the youngest daughter survived to adulthood. In addition to these children, the Luthers took in a number of nieces and nephews and other young relatives to raise as their foster children.

People have often wondered to what extent Katharina may have contributed to Luther's theological work. She was the one to encourage him to write a response to Erasmus, which became *The Bondage of the Will*, the treatise that Luther later valued as his most important work. The Table Talk records a debate between them about whether God really wanted Abraham to sacrifice

Isaac. In his letters to her, Luther often conveys details of theological debate, for instance from the Marburg Colloquy with Zwingli in 1529.

But in the end, Katharina's task was more to *live* Reformation theology than to *write* it. When Luther offered her fifty gulden to read through the Bible again, she retorted that she'd read enough of it and now wished to live it! Katharina's intelligence and responsiveness are probably best indicated by the many nicknames her doting husband gave her: not only *Carissima* (dearest), *Herzliebe* (heart's love), and Morning Star of Wittenberg, but also Lord Kate, Doctorissa, Herr Doktor, Preacher, Judge, and Most Holy Mrs. Doctor. And, conversely, he called the Epistle to the Galatians his "Käthe von Bora."

Life was good for Katharina while Luther lived. It ceased to be good after he died. The remaining six years of her life were marked by multiple flights from Wittenberg due to war or the plague or financial woes. The last of her flights took her to the neighboring city of Torgau. On the way, she fell and broke her hip. She died shortly thereafter and was buried and remains buried in Torgau, with a monument to her displayed prominently in the Lutheran church. Her final words prove how deeply she had made Luther's theology her own: "I will stick to Christ as a burr to a top coat"⁹.

2 ELISABETH CRUCIGER

As we've noted, Katharina's role was as a very public wife, but not as a public leader or public figure in her own right. The other two Reformation women we'll look at, however, moved into the public realm. The first of these, Elisabeth Cruciger, took a modest and halting step in that direction. The other, Argula von Grumbach, bounded right in and staked out her own space.

So, to Elisabeth. In her early life, she was educated and took vows as a canoness in the city of Treptow. Like Katharina von Bora and many other nuns, Elisabeth fled her abbey in early 1522. She made her way to Wittenberg, where she lodged with the Bugenhagen family until in 1524 she married Caspar Cruciger, a reformer, teacher at the school in Magdeburg, and friend of Luther's. Elisabeth and Caspar had two children: a daughter named Elisabeth who eventually married

⁹ Cited in STJERNA, Kirsi. **Women and the Reformation**. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), p. 67.

Luther's son Hans, and a son named Caspar. The elder Elisabeth died quite young in May of 1535.

And that is the sum total of what we know of her life, except her one long-standing contribution to Reformation music, the hymn "Lord Christ, the Only Son of God." As the story goes, one night Elisabeth dreamt that she preached in the Wittenberg church. Caspar her husband, amused by the dream, took it to mean that the hymns she customarily sang at home, and had presumably composed herself, would someday find a place in public worship. It was not such a strange idea to interpret hymnwritting as preaching. Luther himself had put out a call for new church music by evangelical poets for use in worship. Inspired by the happy concurrence of private dream and public need, Elisabeth wrote down her one extant hymn.

"Lord Christ, the Only Son of God" is a beautiful exemplar of the new Lutheran movement's hymnody. Luther liked the hymn so much that he put it in one of the first Lutheran hymnals, the 1524 *Erfurter Enchiridion*, and encouraged its singing in worship—exactly as Elisabeth dreamed and Caspar interpreted. It has continued to appear in Lutheran hymnals ever since.

Elisabeth's hymn also enjoyed a brief fame in the British Isles. Miles Coverdale, an Englishman sympathetic to the continental Reformation, published in 1535 his own translation of German evangelical hymns, entitled *Goostly Psalms and Spirituall Songes*. Though his translations were often rather loose, in this case he kept close to Elisabeth's original, retaining her choice of tune as well. Unfortunately, Coverdale's hymnal was condemned in 1546, at the end of the reign of King Henry VIII, while Coverdale himself was in exile in Germany.

German Lutherans kept Elisabeth's memory and work alive—for a time. In the late sixteenth century, Elisabeth's hymn and Elisabeth herself as hymnwriter were taken as evidence of the living activity of the Holy Spirit in the church. For instance, in his book-length interpretation of German hymns published in 1588, Simon Pauli asserted that Elisabeth was "driven by the Holy Spirit" to write her hymn, citing Joel 2.28–29 and Peter's sermon (which quotes Joel) in Acts 2.17–18 as evidence. This passage reads: "And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit"¹⁰.

¹⁰ HAEMIG, Mary Jane. Elisabeth Cruciger (1500?-1535): The Case of the Disappearing

Starting in the seventeenth century, however, historians and hymn-compilers started to doubt whether Elisabeth had *really* written the hymn, and attributed it to Andreas Knoepken, the reformer of Riga, instead. Maybe that's because after her death Elisabeth's husband and son acquired a tarnished reputation in Lutheran circles, or maybe because of later incredulity at the possibility of a woman, and a young one at that, writing such a sophisticated hymn. It wasn't until the nineteenth century that scholarship unearthed the source of the error and established Elisabeth as the hymn's rightful author once more.

The hymn does indeed preach. The first two verses declare who this "only son of God" is: "God and man natural," "the morning star," who "hath hell's gates broken" and heaven "made open." But it's not enough for these to remain mere facts: they must kindle in our hearts a true and living faith. So the prayer and plea of the last three verses is to "let us increase in love... and in knowledge also" of God so that "we in our hearts may savor thy mercy and thy favor." "Turn thou our hearts unto thee," Elisabeth prays, and enlighten them, awaken them, give us the Holy Spirit, and teach us to "always thank thee."¹¹ The whole of Reformation theology in a mere five verses: even Luther couldn't express himself so well!

3 ARGULA VON GRUMBACH

And now we turn to Argula von Grumbach, though the story doesn't start with her, but with eighteen-year-old Arsacius Seehofer. He had just gotten a gig as a university tutor in Ingolstadt, Bavaria, after a stint studying in Wittenberg, and he was eager to proclaim what he'd learned there. But those who had ears to hear knew what they were hearing. Arsacius was spouting Lutheran ideas, which had already been denounced by local preacher Georg Hauer two years previously. The ducal government was actively suppressing nascent Lutheranism by means of censorship, the seizure of Lutheran books, and the arrest of participants in private discussion groups on Reformation themes.

Hymn Writer. In: **The Sixteenth Century Journal**. Kirksville MO, vol. 32, n. 1, spring/2001, p. 35.

¹¹ Quoted in WHITE, Micheline. Women's Hymns in Mid-Sixteenth-Century England: Elisabeth Cruciger, Miles Coverdale, and Lady Elizabeth Tyrwhit,. In: **ANQ.** Philadelphia PA, vol. 24, n. 1–2, 2011, p. 21–32.

Therefore, no theologically intoxicated youth was going to be allowed to flout the law without consequences. In August of 1523, Arsacius's rooms were searched and his possessions seized. On September 7, he was forced to recant before the entire university in words prepared for him, which concluded, "I have no desire to read or spread Lutheran ideas. May God almighty help me!".

No man came to Arsacius's defense; it was much too dangerous. But a woman did!

She was Argula von Grumbach, a noblewoman of the von Stauff line. She held no authority in matters legal or juridical. She was literate, but she'd received no formal education. She was a wife, a mother of four, and a busy household manager. And she was the only and one person in Ingolstadt to come to Arsacius's defense.

Such an unlikely champion as Argula was given her first impulse toward being a confessor of the gospel at the tender age of ten, when her affectionate father gave to her—and surprisingly, not to any of her brothers—a beautiful, costly, and impressively illustrated Koberger Bible, one of the German translations that pre-dated Luther's.

Argula's involvement in the Reformation came early on. One of her brothers attended the Diet of Worms that condemned Luther in 1521, but the next year he hired an evangelical preacher who served Holy Communion in both kinds. Three of their cousins, daughters of the beheaded uncle, fled their convents like Katharina von Bora and Elisabeth Cruciger. Argula was always an avid reader and she devoured Luther's writings whenever they could be smuggled into Bavaria.

But what propelled her into action was the Seehofer affair. Another brother of hers at the University of Ingolstadt related his eyewitness account of Arsacius's show trial. This was only two months after the first martyrdom of Lutheran believers. Argula saw a dark night descending upon Bavaria. So just days after Arsacius's forced recantation, Argula wrote a public letter to the University of Ingolstadt defending Arsacius, Luther, and Melanchthon, challenging the professors to a public debate on the contested matters, and defying the ordinance against religious dissent in Bavaria. "All this fuss, too, about an eighteen-year-old child!" she wrote in disgust. "Even the righteous person falls seven times a day. Much good may yet come of this youth."¹²

¹² MATHESON, Peter. **Argula von Grumbach:** A Woman's Voice in the Reformation. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995, p. 102.

A letter like this was unheard of, scandalous—a woman interjecting herself into religion and politics alike. She was well aware of it. At first “I suppressed my inclinations,” she wrote in her letter; “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’” “before men, I also will [confess] before my Father who is in heaven,” which is a citation from Matthew 10.32. This verse was the charter of her Christian discipleship. Her baptismal vow was as serious as any priest or monk’s vow, and obligated her to speak.

Her letter was an overnight bestseller. It was printed as a pamphlet and went through fourteen editions in the next two months. Almost thirty thousand copies of this and her next six letters ended up in print, making her one of the top-selling pamphleteers of the sixteenth century.

The Ingolstadt theologians were beside themselves. Georg Hauer preached against the “wretched children of Eve” and leveled accusations against “you female desperado,” “you wretched and pathetic daughter of Eve,” “you arrogant devil,” “you arrogant fool,” “you heretical bitch,” and “you shameless whore”¹³. Chancellor Leonhard von Eck insisted that this “female devil”¹⁴ be punished. But since all she’d done was write letters, and since as a woman she had no official power, the best Eck could do was to get her husband Friedrich dismissed from his post, throwing the family into a spiral of debt and litigation from which they never escaped. Some of the Bavarian authorities also suggested, none too subtly, that Friedrich ought to shut Argula up by any means necessary, and no one would blame him for it.

If the Ingolstadt theologians thought that such measures would silence Argula, they were profoundly mistaken. Late in October of the same year, she wrote another open letter, this time to the Ingolstadt city council. The councillors waited nine months to read it, and when they finally did, they elected to ignore it. In November, she traveled at her own expense to Nuremberg to attend the meeting of all the princes and electors in the Holy Roman Empire, to try and persuade them in favor of the Reformation cause. She continued to publish her “private” letters: one to Duke Johann of Simmern and another to Elector Frederick the Wise,

¹³ MATHESON, 1995, p. 19.

¹⁴ MATHESON, 1995, p. 18.

commending them to fortitude on behalf of the gospel, as well as a response to her mother's cousin, Adam von Thering, who had deplored her unwomanly behavior.

"I hear that some are so angry with me that they do not know how best to speed my passage from life into death," she wrote¹⁵. Despite the threats, Argula's support network remained strong. Luther himself asked his friends to greet her and wrote letters to her for years after; he sent her a signed copy of his Personal Prayer Book; and he wrote his own defense of Arsacius. Argula, for her part, appears to have been the first person to encourage him to get married!

The ordinary Christians were certainly on Argula's side. Rumors even circulated that she'd committed the entire Bible to memory! A woodcut gracing a compilation of her writings vividly illustrated this belief: Argula, Bible in hand, faces off with a whole court of university theologians, whose textbooks have fallen to the ground as if dead. Argula herself believed that if her opponents inflicted martyrdom upon her, "a hundred women would emerge to write against them." Being a woman or a layperson or even a duke was no excuse for being "as well informed about the Bible as a cow is about chess." For "all Christians do have a responsibility to know the word of God." She certainly did: her handful of letters boast around three hundred biblical citations in all¹⁶.

Argula's publishing career was short-lived. Her last letter in June 1524 was an appeal to the city of Regensburg—ignored like every other letter she wrote—objecting to the clamp-down on evangelical activities. "The word of God must be our weapon," she insisted. "We must not hit out with weapons, but love our neighbor, and keep peace with one another"¹⁷.

Her last published work was not a letter but a poem, in fact a response to another poem entitled, "A Word about the Stauffen woman and her disputatiousness"¹⁸: a coarse, vulgar, and scurrilous attack on her character. Quoting no Scripture other than a few verses from I and II Timothy, the sole purpose of the poem's pseudonymous author was to discredit Argula as a promiscuous wild animal who had brazenly abandoned her spindle and thread. Undaunted, she reprinted the original poem along with her own withering response, calling out the coward to meet her in public debate instead of hiding behind an assumed

¹⁵ MATHESON, 1995, p. 119.

¹⁶ MATHESON, 1995, p. 28.

¹⁷ MATHESON, 1995, p. 158.

¹⁸ Cf. MATHESON, 1995, p. 163-168.

name. Her poem assembled a much more impressive range of Scripture, from God speaking through Balaam's ass in Numbers 22; to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all flesh, male and female alike, in Joel 3; to the stories of biblical and apocryphal heroines, especially the warrior women Deborah, Jael, and Judith.

Even after the end of her writing career, Argula remained active in the Reformation cause. In 1530, she traveled to the Diet of Augsburg, where Philip Melanchthon and others presented the Augsburg Confession to the emperor, dukes, and princes. It is no surprise that she published nothing this time around: Emperor Charles V had sent her a personal note warning her to keep quiet! Her involvement in the Seehofer affair had not been forgotten, apparently.

But Argula found her own ways to make a difference. She journeyed to Coburg Castle where Luther was being forced to hide due to the price on his head. There they met in person for the first time after nearly a decade's correspondence. She brought him news of the Diet's progress and offered advice on weaning infants, which he dutifully reported in a letter to Katharina.

Argula and two other Luther-sympathizers also arranged a meeting between Melanchthon, as a representative of Wittenberg, and Martin Bucer, as a representative of the south Germans, hoping they could come to some kind of agreement about the Lord's Supper after the failed Marburg Colloquy with Zwingli the year before. Miraculously enough, it worked. This time Argula's intervention in Reformation politics worked, and she was pleased with the outcome.

And Argula turned out to be right about Arsacius Seehofer, too. You'll recall she wrote, "Much good may yet come of this youth"¹⁹. He'd been sent to the Ettal monastery for his punishment, but he managed to escape and went directly to Wittenberg. During the mid-1530s, he taught at a school in Augsburg and eventually became a pastor. His book of sermons published in 1539 was so influential that it eventually made it into the first rank on the Index of Prohibited Books.

The memory of Argula persisted long after her death. She was included in Ludwig Rabe's 1572 *History of the Martyrs*, the first work of Lutheran hagiography, which anointed her a confessor "especially for the consolation and encouragement of the female sex"²⁰. Bavarian tradition credits her with having started a number of churches before her death in 1554. A plaque in Argula's memory

¹⁹ MATHESON, 1995, p. 102.

²⁰ MATHESON, 1995, p. 47.

can be found to this day in the St. Sigismund Lutheran church in Zeilitzheim, and even the mostly Catholic town of Beratzhausen keeps her memory alive as an early advocate of religious toleration. She was honored by German Pietists in the eighteenth century, venerated in a number of popular hagiographies of rather spurious historical value in the nineteenth century, and finally became the subject of Reformation research in the twentieth century.

All this only takes us through the mid-sixteenth century. Time would fail me to tell of all the other remarkable women who have responded to the gospel as they've heard it through Luther's teaching, but let me name a handful to whet your curiosity: there's Catharina Regina von Greiffenberg, another bestselling author, who was driven into exile from her Austrian homeland in the seventeenth century for her Lutheran convictions, and who wrote countless popular devotional poems about Christ; Aster Ganno, an Ethiopian evangelist who translated the Bible and other Christian writings into her native Oromo language; Mathilde Wrede, a Finnish pioneer of prison ministry; Anna Sarah Kugler, one of the first women doctors in America who spent her life founding and serving at a women's hospital in India; Elisabeth Fedde, a Norwegian deaconess who cared for immigrants and sailors in New York for twenty years before returning home to marry her childhood sweetheart; Sophie Scholl, a young German woman who with her brother and friends agitated against the Nazis and as a result was executed by the Third Reich; Rosa Young, a black American woman who brought schools and churches to her people in rural Alabama; and Nenilava, the prophetess of Madagascar whose ministry of healing and exorcism brought hundreds of thousands if not millions of people to faith in Jesus Christ. And in addition to these remarkable women whose stories are known and remembered, there are countless now known only to God, whose lives of faith shed light on those around them. Public or private, famous or forgotten, thanks be to God for these women who heard, believed, and proclaimed the gospel.

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