

LUTHER ON WOMEN

A Sourcebook

EDITED AND TRANSLATED BY

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AND

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Contents

1. Introduction	<i>page</i> 1
2. Eve and the nature of women	15
3. Mary	32
4. Biblical women other than Eve and Mary	58
5. Marriage and the family	88
6. Sexuality	137
7. Childbirth	171
8. Katharina von Bora, Luther's wife	186
9. Luther and other contemporary women	202
10. Witchcraft and magic	228
<i>Further reading</i>	238
<i>Index</i>	242

CHAPTER I

Introduction

It is hard to imagine that any aspect of Martin Luther's ideas or life is understudied. There are countless biographies in many languages, specialized analyses of his ideas about various theological, political, and intellectual topics, and journals and book series devoted completely to him. The five-hundredth anniversary of his birth, in 1983, saw academic conferences and church-sponsored lectures all over the world, and interest in his ideas and the Protestant Reformation that resulted in part from them shows no signs of abating.

It is also hard to imagine, given the last twenty-five years of women's history, that the ideas of a man who wrote so much about women and who was so clearly influential would not have been analyzed to death. Educated men's ideas about women are one of the easiest things to investigate when exploring the experience of women in any culture, as they are more likely to be recorded than women's own ideas. For someone who lived, as Luther did, after the invention of the printing press, they might also be published and thus widely available, not simply found in a single private letter or archival record. The sixteenth century was a period in which men – and a few women – argued often in print about the nature of women, whether they were good or bad, human or not human, whether they had reason or were governed by their passions. These debates – often termed the “debate about women” or in its French version, the *querelle des femmes* – have been very well studied by historians and literary scholars.¹ The writers central to the debate about women, such as Giovanni Boccaccio, Christine de Pizan, Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim, Juan Luis Vives, Desiderius

¹ Joan Kelly, “Early Feminist Theory and the *Querelle des Femmes*, 1400–1789,” in her *Women, History and Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Constance Jordan, *Renaissance Feminism: Literary Texts and Political Models* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990); Pamela Joseph Benson, *The Invention of the Renaissance Woman: The Challenge of Female Independence in the Literature and Thought of Italy and England* (Pittsburgh: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992); Margaret Somerville, *Sex and Subjection: Attitudes to Women in Early-Modern Society* (London: Arnold, 1995); Ian Maclean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

Erasmus, and John Knox, have been analyzed and their works issued in modern editions and translated into English.²

Luther took vigorous part in this debate, and his thoughts about women and related subjects such as marriage, the family, and sexuality emerge in every type of his writings. It is thus very surprising that there continues to be relatively little scholarship on Luther's ideas about women. Calvin's ideas about women have seen two book-length studies in English and a large number of articles, and the ideas of Italian humanists and English Puritans extend to many articles and a number of books.³ Though there are articles on Luther's opinions about women and a few books on his ideas about the family, there is as yet no book-length study of his ideas about women in any language.

We hope that the present book will help to begin to fill this odd gap in the scholarship on both Luther and women, by making available in English translation a good share of Luther's writings and statements on women, marriage, and sexuality to an audience that may not be fluent in New High German or Latin. (Our source citations should also make it easier for specialized scholars to find these passages in their original languages.) It strives to open the floor to wider discussion of the significance for women of the religious and associated institutional changes of the sixteenth century. We acknowledge that this discussion must take place within our modern frame of reference; our perspectives cannot coincide with those of the women involved in the Reformation.

This is a book that we have long hoped someone else would write, for neither of us is a specialist in Luther's ideas, and we are both trained as historians, not theologians. Over the last several decades, we have both explored different aspects of women's lives during the Reformation period,

² Over the last ten years, the works of many continental women writers and men who participated in the debate about women have received excellent editions and translations in the series *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe*, edited by Margaret King and Albert Rabil, Jr., and published by the University of Chicago Press. See also Erika Rummel, ed., *Erasmus on Women* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996); Joan Larsen Klein, ed., *Daughters, Wives and Widows: Writings by Men about Women and Marriage in England, 1500–1640* (Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Susan Gushee O'Malley, ed., *Defences of Women: Jane Anger, Rachel Speght, Ester Sowernam and Constantia Munda*, *The Early Modern Englishwoman: A Facsimile Library of Essential Works* 4.1 (New York: Scholars Press, 1996); Suzanne W. Hull, *Women According to Men: The World of Tudor-Stuart Women* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Altamira Press, 1996); Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, ed., *The Selected Writings of Christine De Pizan: New Translations, Criticism* (Boston: Norton, 2001).

³ See, for example, Jane Dempsey Douglass, *Women, Freedom and Calvin* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985); John Thompson, *John Calvin and the Daughters of Sarah: Women in Regular and Exceptional Roles in the Exegesis of Calvin, His Predecessors and His Contemporaries* (Geneva: Droz, 1992); Margo Todd, *Christian Humanism and the Puritan Social Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

fully expecting these to be joined by analyses of the ideas about women of the most important Protestant Reformer. This has not happened to the extent that it should, and we finally resigned ourselves to choosing, assembling, and translating the words you find here.

THE TEXTS

Luther wrote a huge number of works, some of them published during his lifetime and some of them not; scholars of the Reformation sometimes comment that he seems never to have had an unpublished thought. Many of his works went through multiple editions during his lifetime, some of which Luther approved, but many of which were put out by enterprising printers who simply copied an earlier edition. By the nineteenth century, scholars began several series of what they hoped would be complete and accurate collections of his works, comparing various editions of many works to arrive at the best version. Of these, the fullest and most highly respected is the series *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, published at Weimar from 1883 with a number of different editors; it eventually totalled more than one hundred volumes, and remains the authoritative version used by most scholars today. The publishing house Böhlau is currently issuing a comprehensive reprint that is made up of about 117 volumes. This is the text from which most of the translations in this book have been made; it is identified as WA, which stands for “Weimarer Ausgabe” or in English “Weimar edition.” The edition is subdivided into four parts, the primary and largest of these containing lectures, sermons, and formal writings, the second the German translation of the Bible, the third Luther’s letters (*Briefwechsel* [BR] in German), and the fourth the “table talk” (*Tischreden* [TR] in German) – informal and spontaneous comments made by Luther while sitting at the dinner table or other places for conversation, devoutly recorded by his admiring students, friends, colleagues, and others.

English translations of Luther’s writings also began to appear in the sixteenth century, and, like German and Latin versions, their quality and fidelity to the original varied. The most authoritative English translation of many of his writings is the fifty-five-volume *Luther’s Works*, published from 1955 by Concordia Publishing Company, Muhlenberg Press, Fortress Press, and Augsburg Publishing Company, also with a number of different editors and translators. *Luther’s Works* includes Luther’s major theological and political writings, much of his exposition of the Bible, a selection of his letters and sermons, some of the table talk, and other writings the editors judged to be especially important or interesting. It contains many

works that discuss women, marriage, and sexuality, such as the treatises on marriage and the 1535–45 lectures on Genesis. We have included excerpts from this edition here, identified in the text as LW. (This material has been reprinted with the kind permission of the Augsburg Fortress Publishers and Concordia Publishing House, which now hold the copyright to all of *Luther's Works*.) Many of the works that we excerpt are quite long, and reading them in full in *Luther's Works* will give you an even better understanding of Luther's ideas.

The most difficult decision we had to face in preparing this book was what to include, for, in the same way that Luther's writings in general are very extensive, his writings on women and on topics related to women are voluminous, certainly enough to fill several long volumes. His thoughts on women appear in every genre of his works: Biblical commentary, sermons, polemical tracts, the Bible translation, lectures, letters, and the table talk. They appear in Latin and in German, and in works such as sermons that move from Latin to German and back again several times in a single sentence. Thus we ultimately chose to include a balance of works, favoring those that had never appeared or were not easily available in English, but including some segments from major writings that had previously been translated, because to omit them entirely would have provided an incomplete picture.

Our second decision was how to handle the translations themselves. Luther, like all sixteenth-century writers, did not use paragraphs, sentences or punctuation as modern writers do, but staying with his usage would have made many of the texts very difficult to follow. Thus, like most translators, including the many who prepared *Luther's Works*, we have added punctuation and occasionally repeated words or used paraphrases to allow Luther's points to emerge clearly. We have not included the large critical apparatus about variant editions and other issues that is found in the Weimar edition, and have limited our explanations of disputed or confusing points to those we found absolutely necessary. We have also tried to capture the vibrancy of Luther's language, which in some cases includes blunt, slanderous, anti-Semitic, and scatological terms, as well as irregular spellings.

Our third decision was how to arrange the material, and we chose to do this by topic rather than by chronology or type of text, as this seemed the best way to see the range of Luther's thoughts on an issue. As you are reading various selections, however, it is important to pay attention to when a piece was written or a sermon delivered, as Luther's ideas at the end of his life on some issues may have been quite different than they were when he was beginning his career as a reformer. It is also important to think

about the audience for a particular work, as the way he expresses things in a formal lecture in Latin delivered to his students and colleagues – all of them male – may be quite different from the way he expresses them in a letter written to a noblewoman or to his wife, and different again when he is talking informally to his dinner companions. This attention to the setting and the audience is especially important when you are reading the table talk; the comments they record were often made after people in the Luther household had all been drinking the excellent (in Luther's opinion) beer brewed by his wife, and were chatting about current events or gossip they had heard. Some of Luther's most colorful statements about women or sex appear in the table talk, but these may not reflect his most considered opinions.

WOMEN IN THE SCHOLARSHIP ON LUTHER

As we have noted, Luther specialists have been slow to take up the subject of Luther's relations with and attitudes toward women. That is, Luther biographers have lightened the heft of their theological analyses and their accounts of the Reformation as apocalypse-laden conflict with the Roman Church with depictions of the Reformer's marriage and ultimate wedded bliss. For the most part, such treatments have been interludes, structurally placed between the crises of the early Reformation years culminating in the Peasants' War and Luther's decade of theological maturation and elaboration. Katharina von Bora could hardly be omitted from the story. A biographic segment on Luther's domesticity moved Roland Bainton to write in the 1940s, "The Luther who got married in order to testify to his faith actually founded a home and did more than any other person to determine the tone of German domestic relations for the next four centuries."⁴ Ewald Plass proclaimed a decade later, "Martin Luther's influence on marriage was profound and permanent."⁵ These assertions remained to be proved.

The 1983 quincentenary of Luther's birth witnessed an outpouring of books and articles. Martin Brecht's three-volume biography uses Luther's marriage and home-life in much the same way as earlier scholars had: as an episode revealing devotion to principle and simultaneously the great man's humanity. At the end of nine pages dedicated to this subject, Brecht remarks, "That Luther was able to concentrate on his manifold tasks in

⁴ R. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: New American Library, 1950), p. 233.

⁵ E. Plass, comp., *What Luther Says: An Anthology*, vol. 11 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing Company, 1959), p. 884.

such an atmosphere deserves our respect.”⁶ A prominent account from the still-separate realm of East German (Marxist) scholarship took very much the same approach, as did the charming diversion of a Catholic scholar.⁷ A two-volume set of essays, edited within the ranks of East German Christian historians and purporting to include every salient facet of Luther’s career, gives no attention to Katharina von Bora, much less to any other woman.⁸

Heiko Oberman’s biography, which is psychological as well as theological, brings the findings of Ian Siggins concerning the bourgeois provenance of Luther’s mother to bear on her son’s mentality. Margarete’s expectations that sons should be educated, accompanied by the means and connections to achieve this, were as telling as father Hans’s post-peasant ambitions. Both parents were strict, and to each of them Luther later attributed thrashings when he misbehaved.⁹

None of the major biographical studies has assessed Luther’s attitudes toward women or considered what effects either his teachings or his life might have had upon social conventions. Researchers touched by the feminist currents that swelled from the late 1960s quickly perceived the possible value in considering whether Luther, whose religious and political consequences were alleged to have been dramatic and enduring, had also influenced the relations between women and men. Roland Bainton’s and Ewald Plass’s throwaway assertions begged for scrutiny. Steven Ozment affirmed the principle that, in the wake of the Reformation, women’s dignity and place in society rose. Those of his sources that are pertinent to this discussion were Luther’s treatises in favor of marriage and against vows of celibacy.¹⁰ However, several women experts on the Reformation took a more inclusive look at Luther’s numerous utterances, of both pen and mouth, concerning women and presented in articles a more differentiated – which is to say in part a negative – picture.¹¹

⁶ M. Brecht, *Martin Luther: Shaping and Defining the Reformation 1521–1532*, trans. James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), p. 204.

⁷ Gerhard Brendler, *Martin Luther: Theology and Revolution*, trans. Claude R. Foster, Jr. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 302–10; John M. Todd, *Luther, a Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), pp. 260–67.

⁸ Helmar Junghans, ed., *Leben und Werk Martin Luthers von 1526 bis 1546: Festgabe zu seinem 500. Geburtstag*, 2 vols. (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1983).

⁹ H. Oberman, *Luther, Man between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 86–94; Ian Siggins, *Luther and His Mother* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981); Erik H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Norton, 1962), p. 64.

¹⁰ S. Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled: Family Life in Reformation Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), especially pp. 3–25, and *idem*, *Protestants: The Birth of a Revolution* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 153–64.

¹¹ Merry E. Wiesner, “Luther and Women: The Death of Two Marys,” in Jim Obelkevich, Lyndal Roper, and Raphael Samuel, eds., *Disciplines of Faith: Studies in Religion, Politics and Patriarchy*

LUTHER IN THE SCHOLARSHIP ON WOMEN

Most considerations of women and the Reformation go off in one of two directions. The first explores women's actions in support of or in opposition to the Protestant and Catholic Reformations and looks more broadly at women's spiritual practices during this period. The second focuses on the ideas of the reformers and the effects of the Reformations on women and on structures that are important to women, such as the family.¹²

Analyses of Luther's ideas about women, marriage, and sexuality have been part of this second direction, and they, too, have tended to divide into two groups. As noted above, older studies of Luther's and other Protestant thinkers' ideas about marriage and the family, often written from a clear confessional viewpoint, frequently describe Luther as rescuing marriage (and by extension women) from the depths of dishonor created by the medieval Catholic championing of virginity. These studies are joined in their largely positive evaluation of the effects of Luther's ideas on women by newer works written primarily by church historians trained in Germany, who also emphasize the honor accorded the role of wife and mother in Luther's thinking; because the vast majority of women in early modern Europe *were* wives and mothers, this respect worked to improve their status and heighten their social role.¹³ Luther took great care, they note, to highlight the important role women played in both the Old and New Testaments, and specifically and vociferously attacked the scholastic denigration of women. For Luther, women were created by God and could be saved by faith; spiritually men and women were largely equal.

A second group of scholars, most of them social historians and literary scholars trained outside Germany, have viewed Luther's ideas about women and their impact more negatively. They point out that elevating marriage is not the same thing as elevating women, and that, by emphasizing the centrality of marriage, Luther and other Protestants contributed to growing negative opinions of the 10–15 percent of the population who never married,

(London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), pp. 295–308, and the works listed in note 14 below.

¹² For larger bibliographies on women and the Reformation, see Merry E. Wiesner, "Studies of Women, the Family and Gender," in William S. Maltby, ed., *Reformation Europe: A Guide to Research II* (St. Louis: Center for Reformation Research, 1992), pp. 159–87, and the bibliographies in Merry E. Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (2nd edition; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

¹³ Gerta Scharffenorth, "'Im Geiste Freunde werden': Mann und Frau im Glauben Martin Luthers," in Heide Wunder and Christina Vanja, eds., *Wandel der Geschlechterbeziehungen zu Beginn der Neuzeit* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991), pp. 97–109; and Luise Schorn-Schütte, "'Gefährtin' und 'Mitregentin': Zur Sozialgeschichte der evangelischen Pfarrfrau in der Frühen Neuzeit," in Wunder and Vanja, eds., *Wandel*, pp. 109–153.

and restricted women's proper sphere of influence to the household. They note that though Luther denounced the ideas of Aristotle on many things, he accepted the Greek philosopher's idea that women's weaker nature was inherent in their very being; this inferiority was deepened by Eve's actions and God's words in the Garden of Eden, but was there from Creation. Women's faith and spiritual equality were not to have social or political consequences, and the Biblical examples of women's preaching or teaching were not to be taken as authorizing such actions among contemporary women.¹⁴

As you will see in the texts included here, there is plenty of ammunition in Luther's words for both sides of this debate, often expressed in the strong language that he favored; he is self-contradictory, but never ambiguous. Because churches today – both Protestant and Catholic, as well as Jewish, Muslim and other religions – are still wrestling with the balance between men's and women's spiritual equality and social difference, his words, like those of other authoritative religious writers, are not simply matters of historical interest. The contradictions found in Luther's writings are also found in the central books underlying the world's religions, of course – Hebrew Scripture, the New Testament, the Qur'an, Buddhist and Hindu spiritual texts – so that these, too, are easily mined for statements supporting nearly every opinion that could be held about the relative worth of and proper roles for women and men.

LUTHER ON WOMEN

An excursion into the Wittenberg nightingale's opinion of women must include his intellectual analyses as well as his correspondence and the table talk. Luther's periodic sermons and commentaries on Genesis, and especially on the first three chapters of what he usually called "The First Book of Moses," yield much on the establishment of marriage as the first estate ordained by God, on the innate qualities of women (and men), and on

¹⁴ Lyndal Roper, "The Common Man,' 'the Common Good,' 'Common Women': Reflections on Gender and Meaning in the Reformation German Commune," *Social History* 12 (1987): 1–21 and *The Holy Household: Women and Morals in Reformation Augsburg* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989); Susan C. Karant-Nunn, "Continuity and Change: Some Effects of the Reformation on the Women of Zwickau," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 13 (1982): 17–42; *idem*, "The Transmission of Luther's Teachings on Women and Matrimony: The Case of Zwickau," *Archive for Reformation History* 77 (1986): 31–46; *idem*, "The Reformation of Women," in Renate Bridenthal, Susan Mosher Stuard, and Merry E. Wiesner, eds., *Becoming Visible: Women in European History* (3rd edition; Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1998), pp. 175–202; Sigrid Brauner, *Fearless Wives and Frightened Shrews: The Construction of the Witch in Early Modern Germany* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994).

the proper relations between the sexes. Luther tends to accept Eve's primary blame for the Fall of humankind, yet he does not ignore the grave responsibility of Adam, too, as the one who was more rational and who personally received and understood God's commands. Adam ought to have rejected Eve's offer of the apple. Eve's punishment was, he thinks, properly more severe, but he praises God for a quality of mercy that left the possibility of salvation open to both sinners. The consequences for both were drastic and explain prominent aspects of women's lives: they had to suffer in childbirth, and they were to be obedient to their husbands in all things. Notwithstanding, husband and wife were to love and console one another.

We need to measure the degree of Luther's commitment to these penalties as binding characteristics of life in the world by examining not just other treatises – which themselves bear witness to the Reformer's ongoing theoretical persuasion – but also evidence of his efforts to enforce these abstract precepts in his own life. Here is where his relationships with his Katharina von Bora, his mother, his daughters, his friends' wives, and many other women from the expanding circle of his acquaintances and unknown devotees take on greater importance than they possess in simply revealing the celebrity's humanity. Actions speak as loudly as words. In his loving and flexible deeds Luther may gain a certain redemption in the eyes of modern and independent women who from their twenty-first-century milieu react viscerally against this man's insistence upon Everywoman as the totally subordinate housewife. In the abstract, Luther envisioned each woman's and girl's confinement to the home, where, in pious mood, she labored efficiently and frugally. He regarded even the domestic sphere as under the direction of the paterfamilias, who, if he trusted her sufficiently, could, *saving only his right*, delegate to his wife the day-to-day authority over the household. When we shift our gaze to Luther's own experience, we see him closely bound to, and dependent upon, his Käthe. Indeed, he admits his subject status, even as he engages in word play and flirtation, when he addresses her as his lord, as *Herr Käthe*. Because of his need, he has wittingly exchanged the masculine role for the feminine. Nevertheless, to his way of thinking, the decision to do so lay with him and not her.

We ought to assess Luther from the dual perspective of theory and practice. We are fortunate in having considerable access to his practice. John Calvin, by contrast, was thoroughly reticent. Although a book-length study remains to be written, we can offer a summation of Luther's conservation and innovation. The German Reformer preserved and transmitted many of the tendencies of high- and late-medieval thought. He regarded females

as lower than males in the hierarchy that made up the universe. They were less rational than males in a scheme within which rational equated with better; they were more inclined toward emotion. Like Eve, they could be more easily led astray than men. Their reasoning faculties were less engaged than men's and were less capable of high development – although women could occasionally render good advice. Little girls did not require and could hardly master higher learning, and their limited schooling should train them in piety, housekeeping, and upright motherhood. Nonetheless, for these practical purposes girls' schools should exist. Certain Biblical figures, such as Anna the prophetess and Mary Magdalene the preacher, were extraordinary, but their like did not exist in Luther's time, when women were firmly enjoined not to prophesy or preach. Luther heartily supported this prohibition. He objected to his wife's loquacity in the dining room and admonished her to be silent. All women, in his view, were inclined toward gregariousness and chatter, from which their husbands and fathers should dissuade them.

For Luther, women's anatomy bespoke their destiny as mothers rather than thinkers. He describes women's broad hips as suited to giving birth, and their narrow shoulders as symbolic of their lack of weight in the upper quarters, that is, in their heads. Women ought to nurse their infants. Here he shares medieval and humanistic opinion concerning the transmission of traits of character through breast milk. Wet-nursing was not as widespread in Germany as in Italy or France, however. Luther adheres to the persistent view that women's experiences – including unpleasant scenes that they happen upon – will misshape their fetuses.

Luther's advocacy of marriage for all women has sometimes been taken as progressive, particularly by scholars who share the Reformer's bias against the monastic life. It is true that throughout Europe, children far too young to consent were placed in convents and monasteries; and we regularly hear of those, like Erasmus and Katharina von Bora, who were discontented there. It is essential to bear in mind, however, that nuns as a group were more adamant than monks in refusing to violate their commitments, leave their orders, and marry. Many women preferred their lot, whether it had been freely chosen or initially imposed by relatives. Late-medieval women from the pertinent social echelons *did* have a choice between marriage and monasticism; and others, despite stereotypes to the contrary, were able to remain single, in the world, and respectable. Luther's insistent promotion of marriage together with the abolition of monastic houses in lands that became Evangelical are rightly seen as narrowing the choices of women. In combination with the stern articulation in wedding sermons to broader

audiences of women's inborn inferiority, marriage could be seen as a means of shielding society from the deleterious effects of Eve's vices.

However, we must not overlook another dimension of this message: the reciprocal love and forbearance that preachers also advocated more intensively than before. The Reformation in many respects is most novel in its selection, combination, and intense dissemination of ideas that were available earlier. Among themselves and for the reinforcement of their own vows of celibacy and chastity, Catholic clergymen had written and spoken harshly against the corrupting influence of women. Among the laity for whom they carried out the cure of souls, they regularly held forth in tones of praise in support of marriage, including the consolation that spouses were to afford one another. Late-medieval lay society was clearly grounded in marriage. Luther rejected the clerical mode, and even made St. Jerome the target of harsh criticism; he retained and stressed the lay mode. In addition – and this is crucial – he was so lacking in restraint within his own wedded bond that he became a living, and later a dead, exemplum of loving mutuality and appreciation. This is so, even if neither his ideology concerning Eve and her “daughters” nor his condescension toward Käthe appeals to us. He was a man of his day and yet a creative one.

Martin Luther's theories of sexuality were quite close to what we are able to divine of his practice, and certainly to what he recommended to others (with the main exception of Landgrave Philip of Hesse) about practice. He retained the clerical prejudice against lustful demonstration as sinful. The sex act was of course sinful outside marriage, but it continued to be so even within the “unspotted” marriage bed. Adults married as a “remedy against sin,” as Luther saw it, but after reading his commentaries on Genesis, we see the need to insert the word *worse*: marital sex is a remedy against *worse* sin. Spouses engaged in intercourse cannot think about God. They behave as though they were having an epileptic seizure. This is the unhappy result of the Fall. In His mercy, God covers over the passionate embraces of the Christian pair so that He Himself cannot see them. For the sake of His Creation and the continuation of humanity, He chooses not to count these as sin. This position is quite in keeping with Luther's doctrine of justification by faith.

In order for marital sex to be an effective antidote, it ought not to be overly circumscribed lest during prohibited periods partners vent their desire in some non-condoned way. Married people could now engage in sex during pregnancy, menstruation, and Lent – no clergyman was peeking even figuratively into the bedchamber. Nevertheless, Luther thought that pious couples should exercise restraint. They should not disrobe for sex,

they should not try to arouse one another unduly, they should not turn the marriage bed into “a manure heap and a sow bath” by resorting to unusual techniques and positions. Once again, we see in the Reformer a combination of the old-fashioned and the liberating.

Martin left us fleeting glimpses of his and Katharina’s bedroom. He observed how strange it was, in the early months of marriage, to find a pair of braids on the mattress beside him. Within the hearing of his dinner guests, he told his wife how pleased he was with her gravid condition; she underwent pregnancy, he said, to honor him. Martin may well have expressed this feeling to Katharina in their times of intimacy. Most direct of all, he wrote to her on his final journey, a week and a half before his death, concerning his impotence. He knew that his inability to make love to her would be hard for her to bear; he would love her if only he could. He advised her to consult Philip Melanchthon, who would know what to say, perhaps partly on the basis of his personal experience. We can infer here that until nearly the end, sex had been a regular, binding part of the Luther’s marriage, one presumably not curtailed by the ecclesiastical calendar. We gain a sense of the Luthers’ living out the Reformer’s convictions concerning marital sexuality.

We see, too, in his life as in his writings, his understanding of the equal need of both sexes for gratification of the flesh. Although he does not argue against the widespread clerical view that women were more highly sexed than men and were often responsible for men’s falling into sin, Luther implicitly redistributes the onus of desire until it is borne proportionally by both genders. From our perspective, this accords more nearly with reality than the former and persistent stance, still echoed in the stereotyped witch-images of the century after Luther’s demise, that women were “carnally insatiable” and formed pacts with the devil partly in the hope of sexual gratification.¹⁵

We today are justified in regarding the great Reformer as a force for tradition rather than an innovator. He may have thought that he was a partisan of women, but some of us cannot entirely share his view. His condemnation of witches reverberates in our minds, and his denigration of women’s nature and capacities repeatedly presents itself to our gaze. At the same time, we should not overlook the positions he took, such as the reduction of marriage to a civil transaction with its concomitant possibility of divorce, that generations after his career was finished might

¹⁵ Heinrich Krämer and Jacob Sprenger, “The *Malleus Maleficarum*,” in Alan C. Kors and Edward Peters, eds., *Witchcraft in Europe 1100–1700: A Documentary History*, p. 127: “All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women insatiable.”

find a liberating resonance with that new era. In his own day, regardless of his opinion, marriage went on being sacred and very nearly indissoluble. Although he disapproved of wife-beating, he did not categorically condemn it if no other means of discipline sufficed. Women were to be pious, quiet, and submissive. Luther shifted monastic values into the domestic sphere and strove to inculcate them in the whole of society. The household was the little convent – but in it heartfelt affection was to mitigate the monastic rule. The domestic community was to be immune to the misogynist rantings of ancient and contemporary seers as collected by Sebastian Franck.

Actual practice seems invariably to depart from norms that are prescribed from the pulpit, in the courtroom, and by the book. It is impossible to judge in any verifiable way the extent to which the exertions of Luther, his followers in the pastorate, princes, and magistrates affected women's (and men's) lives. We are left with generalizations that cannot be proved. The leaders of the Reformation sustained the old notion of the inferiority and domestic destiny of women. Through their use of the media, including the now ubiquitous sermon, they constructed a model of women and men that virtually every person encountered. By this means, the concept of the ideal mother and housekeeper gradually became available to every socioeconomic class.¹⁶ It is probable that generations subjected to this indoctrination accepted the general outlines of the “good wife” and the “good husband.”

Ideology and stereotype were broken up in the mortar and pestle of daily exigency. Because of this, Heide Wunder is justified in characterizing women's and men's relations in the early modern period as “partnership.”¹⁷ No matter what Luther taught, no matter what Katharina accepted, when the need arose Käthe took to the streets and marketplace, spoke out, doled out money to Martin, and ruled her household with as iron a fist as order demanded. Faced with crises of his own such as imperial diet or illness, Martin, the self-perceived lord of his family, tolerated in Käthe, and probably appreciated, the wielding of power. Prolonged necessity, whether collective as in the face of war or persecution, or uniquely individual, presented opportunities that may have stimulated thoughtful women to reassess their prescribed place in the universe. But in times of routine, people may fall back upon the generalities provided by their culture. Martin Luther renewed many venerable generalities and contributed them to a definition of women as weak and subordinate that helped to inform ideals of proper domestic relations

¹⁶ H. Wunder, *He Is the Son, She Is the Moon: Women in Early Modern Germany*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 83. This is our answer to the question Wunder poses there about how this ideal spread.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, *passim*.

down to the twentieth century. Yet he added the powerful leavening of love, and he left us his beneficent example.

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