

Here I Stand, By My Man: An Examination of Women's Influence on the Protestant Reformation

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For decades, many scholars have discounted the vital role women played during the Protestant Reformation in Germany. A closer look at the evidence, however, tells a different story. This evidence supports the claim that without the significant role of women, the major tenets of the Reformation would not have been spread to the masses thus limiting the support of the general population. Without the collaboration of the public, the ideals and beliefs were in danger of dying before the movement ever started. If not for the courageous women who supported these beliefs, the Protestant Reformation may have lacked the fervor needed to sustain long term reform. It is important that the stories of these women and the sacrifices they made are examined closely to ensure that their unique perspectives are preserved.

On the sacred night of Easter Vigil 1523, twelve courageous Catholic nuns escaped their convent in protest of the many corruptions in the Catholic Church (Thigpen, para. 3). Since Martin Luther set Europe ablaze with his cry for a reform of the Roman Catholic Church, Christians had been reconsidering their unwaning devotion to this institution. Over several months, these tenacious nuns hatched an escape plot masterminded by the infamous Martin Luther himself (Stjerna 55). Even though the consequence for breaking their sacred vows was capital punishment, the twelve women believed the worth greater than the risk. One night under the cover of darkness, the women swiftly stole from their cloister. As previously planned, they met a man sympathetic to their cause who would be able to smuggle them to Wittenberg. However, in order to travel unrecognized, the women were required to conceal themselves in a fish wagon (McKee 32). For days, the women traveled in dreadful anticipation of the likelihood of capture. But after an apprehensive journey, Martin Luther had the honor of welcoming the twelve women into Wittenberg. Because the nuns successfully fled their cloister, they were able to begin life anew.

In the years following this harrowing escape, the religious unrest in Europe grew far more turbulent. Soon, daring escapes from the pursuit of the Catholic Church became commonplace. However, the consequences that these women risked are a testament to their faith and devotion to their personal convictions. They were among the earliest to rebel against the Catholic Church's blatant corruption and became respected in society because of these actions.

Shortly ensuing Luther's dramatic stance against the Roman Catholic Church, Argula von Grumbach became a prominent figure in Luther's life. Argula Von Grumbach was born into a noble family and provided with a reasonable education for a woman. At a young age, she was sent to the emperor's court to be a lady in waiting. Here, she was first exposed to the writings of Luther (Stjerna 73). Eventually, Argula married Fredrich, a wealthy nobleman and devout Catholic. According to Argula's own letters, the union was strained at best (Matheson 8-9). Nevertheless, Argula maintained her Protestant convictions and became a public figure through her defense of a young student (Stjerna 73). Argula's composed a series of letters to the highly educated professors at the University at Ingolstadt. (Zitzlsperger 382). In 1523, Arsacius Seehofer testified to his Protestant faith. He was not only banned from the university, but he was also threatened with the possibility of death (Zitzlsperger 381). Argula vehemently supported the student and was able to defend her own faith when challenged by the professors (Zitzlsperger 383). After her approximately 29,000 pamphlets were published, Argula herself was threatened. However, this ordeal increased her fame exponentially and she was noticed by many of the Reformers including Luther (Stjerna 79).

Throughout the rest of her life, Argula published multiple theological pamphlets and had a close relationship with Martin Luther. She was the first influential woman to publish pamphlets, and her works were popular amongst the German community.

Among these brave women was a nun named Katharina Von Bora. She decided to abandon monastic life due to the corruption of the Catholic Church. Seeking religious freedom, she and her sisters contacted Luther in hopes of an escape. Willingly, he obliged and upon their arrival introduced many of the nuns to their future husbands (Thigpen, para. 4). However, Luther struggled to pair Katharina with a suitable husband. After multiple failed relationships, Luther finally wed Katharina himself (Pedersen 193). Eventually, Katharina proved to be the ideal woman for Luther. She was an incredibly intelligent due to her early education as a noble woman and her later monastic training. Therefore, she was able to effectively manage Luther's household (Pedersen 194). She set the precedent of a reformer's wife by ministering to those whom she accepted into her home.

Martin Luther's writings inspired another woman who combined both the roles of the reformer and a reformer's wife. Katharina Schutz Zell was born into a relatively wealthy artisan family, and thus, received a respectable education in German (Mckee 73). She also learned the trade of tapestry weaving and supported herself with her own business. Eventually, she became increasingly interested in the religious turmoil in Germany. After reading Luther's writings, she converted to the Protestant faith in 1521 (Mckee 80). Soon after, she met her husband Matthias Zell. Matthias was one of the earliest protestant pastors and actually encouraged Katharina to have a major role in the church. She was a prolific author of Protestant theology, she preached occasionally, and cared deeply for the congregation (Zitzlsperger 383). According to Katharina, their marriage flourished. She and Matthias functioned as a cohesive unit in order to shepherd their congregation. When Katharina began to write her pamphlets, they were intended to defend the Reformation in Germany (Mckee 82). However, as her popularity increased, so too did her boldness. Fearlessly, she generated pamphlets specifically attacking the Catholic Church (Zitzlsperger 384). In spite of her popularity, Katharina, struck with grief after the death of her beloved husband, decreased the frequency of her writings. Although she continued to write, her views lacked the same fervor. However, she was able to live out the remainder of her life serving the Lord as she and her husband once had.

The rapid spread of the Reformation was due to the fact that women had influential roles in the Protestant church. The three primary women in Germany who attempted to further the influence of the Reformation were Katharina von Bora, Argula von Grumbach, and Katharina Zell. All of these women believed that the average German Christian should be able to understand Protestant theology. Therefore, they wrote and taught in the German language which quickly spread the Reformation's influence. Also, the women shared the news of the Reformation through their work in missions. Evangelizing through service was a role unique to women. Lastly, all three women heavily influenced the ideal of a Protestant Christian woman. This ability enabled the message of the Reformation to be circulated into the very homes of Christians.

In addition, the Reformation was successful in part due to the women's ability to present complicated theology that the average German might understand. Katharina Luther, Argula von Grumbach, and Katharina Zell all three strongly supported the teaching of Scripture in German, the vernacular at the time. First of all, Argula von Grumbach composed all of her letters to the University of Ingolstadt in German. She did not believe that theology should be only available to those of an elite social status: "I have no Latin: But you have German, being born and brought up in this tongue" (Matheson 90). Like most women of the time, Argula was not schooled in the classical languages. Consequently, she wrote in the language which any literate German would be able to comprehend. Likewise, Katharina Zell, a woman from a similar social status and education as Argula, also composed her theology in German. In 1531, her protestant hymnal was the first to be published in Germany at the time and remained the only one in Strausburg for many years to come (Mckee 93). Until Katharina's hymnal, Christians had sung meaningless hymns in Latin. However, Katharina's hymnal contributed to the progression from a worship service conducted solely in Latin to one in the common tongue. Because both Zell and Argula were not educated in Latin, they composed their theology in German. On the contrary, Katharina Luther was classically trained in Latin; but she expressed her Protestant views eloquently in German. Martin Luther once expressed in one of his many letters that Katharina was so proficient in the German language that he would benefit from her teachings (Stjerna 63). During many of her infamous theological discussions with Luther and other prominent Protestant figures, Katharina boldly stated her views in German. Even though she was well trained in Latin, she insisted that all theological principals be discussed in German. Overall, these three women contributed to the lasting reform of the movement through their endorsement of the use of the vernacular in theological texts.

The three most significant female contributors to the Reformation not only simplified Protestant theology through their frequent use of the German language, but they also taught Protestant principles so that the less educated might be able to understand their faith. For instance, Katharina Zell's hymnal expressed the Protestant theology in a unique manner. The hymnal was inexpensive and "resonated with Protestant theology" (Stjerna 121). In order to inform the masses of the tenants of the Protestant faith, Katharina creatively expressed the theology through music. Due to this method, many of the poor and destitute Germans were able to quickly absorb the ideals of Protestants. Moreover, after Argula von Grumbach's defense of Arsacius; she became wildly popular. Compelled by injustice, she intelligently argued her case supported with Scriptural evidence; and an estimated 29,000 of her pamphlets were printed and circulated in German (Matheson 53). The pamphlets' popularity was due in part to the understandable nature of Argula's rhetoric. She managed to convey the Protestant theology to thousands of people with only one pamphlet. Because of these women's understandable explanation of Protestant theology, the importance of the Reformation swept quickly around Germany.

Not only did the prominent women in the Reformation compose comprehensible theology to spread their message, but they also broadened their influence by evangelizing through acts of service. Both Katharina Luther and Katharina Zell ministered to their community through their selfless treatment of the helpless. After one monastery near Wittenberg was abandoned, Katharina converted the space into a house to serve the poor and called it the Black Cloister. Often, people of the community would occupy all forty rooms and; Katharina provided meals for all of them (Stjerna 61). Difficult as this task may be, Katharina managed the Black Cloister with efficiency but more importantly in the name of Christ. Through her servitude, her faith was evident. Therefore, she was able to witness to many people about Christ and the necessary reforms of the Catholic Church. Her contemporary Katharina Zell implemented a similar method of mission work. She and her husband's parsonage had an open door policy and ministered to those who sought relief: "She would argue cordially with those who had not yet come to understand the absoluteness of Christ and faith alone" (Mckee 50). Katharina not only served the impoverished out of her own home, but she also openly ministered to them. Katharina Zell served a variety of people including beggars, invalids, theologians, and soldiers (Mckee 140). The sheer number of people that she served is a testament to her faith, but the variety of people demonstrates her accepting nature. She was prepared to welcome anyone into her home and serve them in the name of Christ. This type of ministry was unique to the women of the Reformation and it enabled them to rapidly spread the influence of change. Because of the women's willingness to serve, people were more inclined to believe their call for change. The pastor's wife was a novel position in the church, and because of Zell and Luther's commitment; the position became respected. Therefore, the appeal for women to accept the Protestant faith also increased because of the more inclusive roles for them in the church.

Although mission work was a means by which women were able to nurture the beliefs of the Reformation, the three most significant women expanded the influence of the Reformation by setting a tangible example. Because of the high profile of each woman, she became a model for other women in the community. Katharina von Bora exhibited the role in which most women participated; that of a wife and mother. She demonstrated an example of a Protestant matriarch who supported her husband. While Luther was performing his responsibilities as a Reformer, Katharina was managing a household. Regularly, she cared for dozens of children even though only six were her biological offspring (Stjerna 55). Also, Katharina renovated an abandoned Augustinian monastery that she might feed and house the poor of the community (Stjerna 61). Feeding and housing substantial amounts of people consistently was an ambitious undertaking, yet Katharina performed her duties exceptionally. Katharina oversaw the monotonous yet necessary chores that were required to sustain successful domestic life. Because of her efficiency, Luther was freed from domestic chores. Therefore, his concentration remained solely on the Reformation of the Catholic Church; and he performed his responsibilities to the maximum efficiency. Katharina demonstrated that a Reformer's wife should support her husband so that the influence of the Reformation might expand. Also, Katharina proclaimed herself to be an example of a woman who was "most concerned about living the faith, not writing about it" (Stjerna 58). She served as an attainable example of a woman who lived by faith. She truly demonstrated the fruits of her faith through her treatment of the poor and orphaned. Many women modeled their own lives as a wife of a Reformer after Katharina's example of a conscientious matriarch. Through Katharina's example, the Reformation spread to the families that inspired to mimic her acts of servitude to the community and her own family. She enabled the ideas of the Reformation to enter the private lives of many Germans. Only Katharina was able to complete such a feat.

The three prominent women in the Reformation developed the precedent of the different roles that were available to Protestant women. Through these examples, they were able to hurry the process of reform. Argula von Grumbach was a tenacious pamphleteer who fearlessly proclaimed the necessity for reform. Although this radical role in the church was rarely filled by a female, Argula exemplified the uncommon option for women. When Argula was threatened with capital punishment in response to her pamphlets, she welcomed the possibility of martyrdom: “I am persuaded, too, that if I am given grace to suffer death for his name, many hearts would be awakened” (Matheson 117). Due to her previous popularity as a pamphleteer, Argula was already a public figure. Therefore, when Argula was thus threatened; the information quickly spread. Her response to the likelihood of her death exemplified her unwavering devotion to her cause. Even though she faced death, Argula continued to believe that hearts of many Germans would be awakened to the truth of the Reformation. Furthermore, Argula challenged women to repeat her radical actions: “Yes, and whereas I have written my own, a hundred women would emerge to write against them” (Stjerna 78). If Argula died a martyr, she would call upon the other Protestant women to further her struggle for the Protestant faith. Argula was the ultimate example of a radical Reformer, especially because she was a woman. She published her pamphlets against injustice, accepted martyrdom, and commissioned other women to do the same. Through her actions, women witnessed a female who was not only published but also persecuted for it. Because she was an early female pamphleteer, she set the precedent for radical female Protestants to come. Therefore, through her example, she exemplified a role available to women in future generations.

Although Katharina Luther, Argula von Grumbach, and Katharina Zell contributed significantly to the Reformation efforts, some might argue that their contributions were not necessary for the rapid spread of the Reformation to occur. The efforts that these women put forth were beneficial to the cause but could have easily been performed as effectively without their assistance. For instance, Matthew Zell, Katharina Zell’s husband, encouraged Luther’s reforms in his own church. Originally, Matthew had settled in Strausbourg, Germany, to be a priest of the parish of St. Lorenz. However, after Luther defied the authority of the Roman Catholic Church, Matthew was one of the only preachers in his city to publically promote Luther’s reforms (Stjerna 112). Courageously, Matthew preached against the very institution to which he had devoted his life. In his support of Luther’s reforms, he influenced an entire congregation of Christians to resist the corrupt practices of the church. Many people in his city were drawn to his sermons since he was willing to risk his livelihood on the views of Luther. Because Matthew was able to preach and influence his church, the efforts of his intelligent wife to further reformation were unnecessary.

Even though Matthew’s contribution is seemingly the most impactful because of his position, Katharina Zell’s position as a deaconess enabled her to participate in mission work. Instead of preaching, Katharina personally cared for those in the church who were suffering. Because of her position, she was able to nurse a multitude of plague victims out of her own home and showed “unstinted kindness to anyone who sought her help” (McKee 245). Katharina’s tenacious dedication to the weak amongst the congregation ensured that she was both admired and respected. Her rare position of leadership promoted Luther’s call for reform beyond church walls and into the homes of the congregation. Therefore, when Katharina wrote her pamphlets, her audience valued her opinions because she was willing to advance the reform of the church through personal connections. Since her opinions were respected, her pamphlets were widely distributed among the Christian community and the call for reform rang out even louder than before (Stjerna 116). Even though she might not have preached to the congregation about reform on a regular basis, she communicated the message of reform effectively and rapidly. Through her assortment of theological commentaries, Katharina immortalized her commitment to the reform and influenced a countless number of Christians to defy the sinful customs of the Roman Catholic Church.

Valiantly, twelve nuns escaped from their cloister in the year 1523. Not only did they flee the flagrant corruption of the Roman Catholic Church, but they also abandoned the sacred vows they had previously pledged. Facing the possibility of capital punishment if apprehended, they anxiously completed an arduous journey to Wittenberg. These twelve Protestant women journeyed from their convent to risk domineering husbands and perilous childbirths. Since the Protestant church was not well established, many women had to create roles for themselves in the church. Women such as Katharina Zell and Katharina Luther served the church through tending to the deprived in the society. These women sacrificed much of their effort and even their homes in order to care for those in need. These acts of service enabled the women to personally spread the influence of the Reformation through word and deed. Unlike preaching, serving the poor was available to many women.

Mission work is the method in which women were able to be personally involved with the church. Therefore, these women had unique responsibilities that they were able to spread the Luther's reforms.

Katharina Zell and Katharina Luther touched the lives of hundreds of Christians on a personal level. In order to rapidly circulate the message of reform, the abilities of the three most prominent women were necessary. Without their unique and powerful contributions, the outcry for change would not have been as influential or sustained. Therefore, Katharina Von Bora, Argula Von Grumbach, and Katharina Zell were all able to inspire the message of the Reformation. Without the contributions of these women, the Protestant Reformation would have spread at a less efficient rate.

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