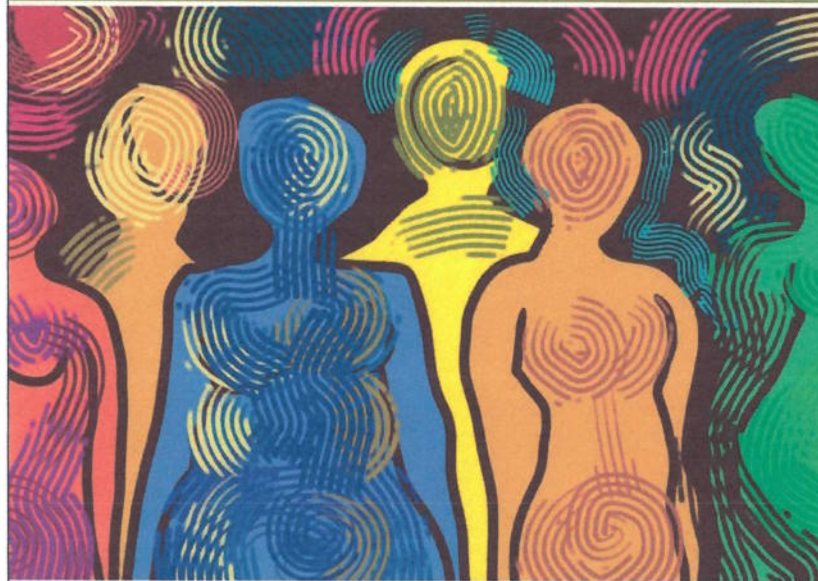
VOICES LONG SILENCED



WOMEN BIBLICAL INTERPRETERS THROUGH THE CENTURIES

Joy A. Schroeder & Marion Ann Taylor

Voices Long Silenced

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3. Not Women's Chitchat but the Word of God
Women in the Reformation Era

In 1523, a Bavarian noblewoman with Lutheran sympathies published a fiery open letter to the theology faculty at the University of Ingolstadt. Her booklet, filled with eighty biblical quotations, challenged the professors to a debate about Scripture and church teachings. Lest the professors suppose that debating a woman is beneath them, she reminded them that Christ himself conversed with Mary Magdalene and the Samaritan woman (John 4:4–26; 20:11–17).[1] As for her right as a woman to interpret the Bible and engage in public discourse, she asserted: "I don't intend to bury my talent, if the Lord gives me grace" (Matt. 25:18).[2]

The author was Argula von Grumbach (ca. 1492–ca. 1554), the first woman to enter Reformation debates using the printing press.[3] Although the professors did not deign to offer a formal reply, her words resonated with a wider audience. Within two months, the pamphlet went into fourteen printings. Not everyone who bought her pamphlet was supportive. On one surviving copy, a reader scribbled: "Born a Lutheran whore and gate of hell."[4] Von Grumbach issued seven more open letters filled with scriptural arguments, most addressed to secular leaders. Over 29,000 copies of her works were in circulation, an impressive number for the time.[5]

Argula von Grumbach (née von Stauff) had owned a German-language Bible since childhood. As in many noble families, her parents encouraged their daughter's education, probably arranging for private tutoring at home. When she was ten, her father presented her with a printed Bible, most likely an ornate illustrated German edition based on the Vulgate.[6] Argula spent part of her youth as a lady-in-waiting at the royal court in Munich, where girls had additional opportunities to study. As an adult, she acquired Martin Luther's German New Testament (1522), based on the original Greek.

Argula married Friedrich von Grumbach (d. 1530), town administrator of Dietfurt, near Ingolstadt, and supervised his household. This included care

1. Argula von Grumbach, *To the University of Ingolstadt*, in *Argula von Grumbach: A Woman's Voice in the Reformation*, ed. and trans. Peter Matheson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 88.
2. Argula von Grumbach, *To the University of Ingolstadt*, 87.
3. Peter Matheson, *Argula von Grumbach (1492–1554/7): A Woman before Her Time* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013), 3.
4. Roland H. Bainton, *Women of the Reformation in Germany and Italy* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1971), 103.
5. Matheson, *Argula von Grumbach: A Woman's Voice*, 53.
6. This was probably the 1483 edition published by Nuremberg printer Anton Koberger; Matheson, *Argula von Grumbach: A Woman's Voice*: , 5.

of four children and managing a small staff.[7] Nevertheless, she found time to study Scripture and read controversial publications churned out by the printing presses. Although living in Bavarian territory aligned with the Roman Church, von Grumbach managed to obtain writings by the notorious reformers from Saxony, Luther (1483–1546) and Philip Melanchthon (1496–1560)—works that the civil authorities tried to suppress.[8] Convinced of the truth of Luther's message, von Grumbach regularly corresponded and met with other notable Lutheran leaders, including George Spalatin (1484–1545) and Andreas Osiander (1498–1552).

She might have remained content to read Scripture and Lutheran works of biblical interpretation for her own edification if the University of Ingolstadt had not committed an outrage: Arsacius Seehofer, a university student, had been arrested for possessing Lutheran books and discussing them with his classmates. Charged with heresy and threatened with execution, he recanted—swearing to renounce Luther's teachings. From von Grumbach's perspective, Seehofer had been forced to violate his conscience, swearing on the Bible not to teach the Bible; thus the civil authorities were morally obligated to come to his defense.

Women's entry into public discourse was unconventional and, many felt, contrary to biblical teachings that enjoined females to silence on church matters (1 Cor. 14:34; 1 Tim. 2:11–12). Von Grumbach claimed that she had tried to keep silent, but that she recognized this as a moment to confess one's faith publicly in obedience to Christ, who said: "Whoever confesses me before another, I too will confess before my heavenly Father" (Matt. 10:32). These words, quoted in nearly all her public writings, "exclude neither woman nor man."[9] According to von Grumbach: "I suppressed my inclinations; heavy of heart, I did nothing. Because Paul says in 1 Timothy 2: 'The women should keep silence, and should not speak in church.' But now that I cannot see any man who is up to it, who is either willing or able to speak, I am constrained by the saying, 'Whoever confesses me. . . .'"[10] Her letter concluded: "What I have written to you is no woman's chit-chat, but the word of God."[11]

When a critic responded, telling von Grumbach to be silent, attend to needlework, and "listen like the Magdalene" (Luke 10:38–42), she reminded him of Deborah, Jael, and Judith, godly women who bested their wicked male opponents.[12] Her husband, Friedrich, opposed her Lutheran commitments and involvement in public debates; yet he was removed from his post as town administrator for failing to control his wife. Argula's supporters, aware of

7. Matheson, *Argula von Grumbach: A Woman before Her Time*, 22.
8. This chapter uses "Roman Church" and "Roman" rather than Roman Catholic to refer to those who remained loyal to the church and bishop of Rome. Elsie McKee explains: "The 'Roman Catholic' identity as it is now used was shaped by the sixteenth-century conflicts; Luther and others can thus quite comfortably use the word 'catholic' in its original meaning of 'universal.'" "Volume Editor's Introduction," in *Church Mother: The Writings of a Protestant Reformer in Sixteenth-Century Germany*, by Katharina Schütz Zell, ed. and trans. Elsie McKee, OVIEME (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 15 n. 21.
9. Argula von Grumbach, *To the University of Ingolstadt*, 75.
10. Argula von Grumbach, *To the University of Ingolstadt*, 79.
11. Argula von Grumbach, *To the University of Ingolstadt*, 90.
12. Johannes of Lanzhut, "A word about the Stauffen woman and her disputativeness," and Argula von Grumbach, "An Answer in verse to a member of the University of Ingolstadt," both in Matheson, *Argula von Grumbach: A Woman's Voice*, 168, 184–85.

Friedrich's violent tendencies, feared for her physical safety. In an open letter to her cousin, she responded that her husband was "doing far too much to persecute Christ in me." She remained determined to follow her conscience, paraphrasing Jesus' command in Matthew 10:37: "We must forsake father, mother, brother, sister, children, life and limb."[13] She persevered, despite opposition from civil authorities and her husband, and answered her detractors: "I cannot and I will not cease / To speak at home and on the street."[14]

Argula von Grumbach was one of many self-assured women who used the printing press to engage Reformation debates and circulate writings that interpreted Scripture. Some women's writings were polemical; others were devotional. The printing press made vernacular translations widely available, giving greater numbers of Christian and Jewish women access to the biblical text to read and interpret for themselves. Beginning in the mid-1500s, Jewish printing houses, some owned and managed by women, published reading material intended specifically for girls and women. These publications included biblical texts translated into Yiddish, printed with Hebrew letters. This chapter tells the story of these sixteenth-century women who interpreted Scripture, confident that their written words were not mere "women's chitchat," but instead, faithful interpretations of the Word of God.

Female Pamphleteers and the Printing Press

The events that became known as the Protestant Reformation are usually associated with famous men such as Martin Luther, Philip Melanchthon, Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531), John Calvin (1509–64), and John Knox (ca. 1513–72). These men called for wide-ranging reforms in church doctrine and practice. Highlighting Genesis 1:28, the divine command that humans be fruitful and multiply, they argued that God implanted in humanity an impulse toward marriage; thus mandatory celibacy for monks, priests, and nuns was both unbiblical and unrealistic. The Reformers believed that laypeople should worship and hear Scripture in the vernacular, with an educated pastor interpreting Scripture for them through carefully prepared sermons.

Although accounts of the Reformation often center on individual male leaders, the men did not act in isolation. They were part of networks that included women who supported or opposed them. High-ranking wealthy women offered financial support and intervened politically on behalf of theologians they favored. Townswomen from merchant and artisan classes participated in local conversations about the sacraments, worship practices, and clergy behavior. Women organized efforts to shelter religious refugees, especially Protestants fleeing persecution from authorities aligned with the Roman Church. They also purchased the writings of reformers; if nonliterate, they listened to pamphlets read aloud.

Reformers harnessed the power of the printing press, publishing affordable vernacular pamphlets for readers and listeners, who had an insatiable appetite

13. Argula von Grumbach, *To the noble and honourable Adam von Thering*, in Matheson, *Argula von Grumbach: A Woman's Voice*, 145.

14. From her lengthy poem published in 1524: Argula von Grumbach, "An Answer in verse," 182.

for publications, especially booklets expressing Protestant perspectives. Major cities and towns typically had numerous publishing houses.

Some printers "would cheerfully publish for both sides" of the religious debate, "or move from one to the other, if it was worth their while."[15] However, many printers only published works aligning with their own commitments. Strasbourg printer Margarethe Prüss (d. 1542) published the writings of Anabaptists, members of a movement that rejected infant baptism. Having inherited her father's printshop, Prüss married another printer, since local regulations restricted women from operating printshops independently.[16] Prüss and her husband, Balthasar Beck (1527–51), printed the revelations dictated by Anabaptist prophet Ursula Jost (active ca. 1524–32, d. 1532/39), a nonliterate woman whose seventy-seven terrifying apocalyptic visions predicted the downfall of the Roman Church. Published anonymously as *Prophetic Visions and Revelations of the Workings of God in these Last Days*, Jost's visions included scenes of fire from heaven, brimstone, trumpet blasts, and darkening of the sun and moon, images inspired by Joel 2:10, Revelation, and other biblical texts.[17]

One of the most prolific female pamphleteers was Katharina Schütz Zell (1498–1562), a reformer in Strasbourg. She and her husband, Matthew Zell (1477–1548), a prominent preacher, were associated with the stream of Protestantism that came to be called "Reformed." They supported more thoroughgoing change than Lutherans did, especially for worship practices and church structure.

Schütz Zell's first publication was her *Letter to the Suffering Women of the Community of Kentzingen, Who Believe in Christ, Sisters with Me in Jesus Christ* (1524), a town near Strasbourg (Strassburg sometimes), where she lived. The open letter, written in German, offered encouragement to women whose husbands had gone into exile in solidarity with the town's Protestant pastor, Jacob Otter, whom the local bishop had banished. Schütz Zell likened the women to Abraham, tested by God with a command to sacrifice his son Isaac (Gen. 22:1–2): "So I beg you, loyal believing women, also to do this: take on you the manly, Abraham-like courage while you too are in distress and while you are abused with all kinds of insult and suffering." Amid growing religious conflict, Schütz Zell could not promise that they or their menfolk would be spared from death as Isaac was, but they should "meditate then on strong Abraham," who, according to Hebrews 11:17–19, believed that God could bring Isaac back to

15. See Andrew Pettegree, *Brand Luther: 1517, Printing, and the Making of the Reformation* (New York: Penguin, 2015).

16. Prüss, widowed twice, married three printers in succession. She also arranged for her daughter's marriage to a printer to keep the publishing house in the family. Kirsi Stjerna, *Women and the Reformation* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2009), 19. Two other sixteenth-century women printers, Mie Roybet and Antoinette Peronet, both from Lyon, similarly "outlived two husbands and married a third, all of them connected to the publishing business"; C. Arnold Snyder and Linda A. Huebert Hecht, eds., *Profiles of Anabaptist Women: Sixteenth-Century Reforming Pioneers* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1996), 260.

17. Ursula Jost, *Prophetische gesicht und Offenbarung der götlichen würckung zu diser letsten zeit*, ed. Melchior Hoffman ([Strasbourg: Prüss-Beck], 1530), unpaginated, visions 67 and 68. Another example of an Anabaptist woman's apocalyptic is the "Trumpet Song" of the martyr Anna Jansz of Rotterdam (ca. 1509–39), who drew on images from the book of Revelation to describe God as avenging the blood of the (Anabaptist) martyrs, who would receive their reward as members of the bride and the new Jerusalem (the church) when Christ returned to judge the earth; Snyder and Hecht, *Profiles of Anabaptist Women*, 340.

life.[18] She also likened God to a nursing mother: "These words are a reminder that He will not abandon you, nor forget you, as He also says in the prophet: 'As little as a mother may forget her suckling child, so little may I forget you'" (Isa. 49:15).[19] Biblical scholar Mette Bundvad observed that Schütz Zell "engages in biblical gender bending[,] presenting God as a nurturing mother and building the women of Kentzingen up in the image of Abraham."[20]

Schütz Zell's readership appreciated her pamphlet, which went into several printings. Though her audience included men as well as women, addressing the letter to *women* may have made its female authorship acceptable. Her next publication, a bold defense of her husband and her marriage, was far more controversial.

In the 1520s, when reform-minded priests first began to marry, some candidates for the role of clergy wife were former nuns, including Katharina von Bora (1499–1552), who escaped from her convent and later married Luther. Others were priests' mistresses or live-in housekeepers, regarded as "concubines," whose marriages "regularized" existing long-term relationships.[21] Katharina Schütz was neither a runaway nun nor a kept woman. Born into the artisan class, she had learned to read German as a child. She occupied herself with devotional reading, church attendance, and tapestry work. Likely she planned to live an unmarried, celibate life in her home, supporting herself with her needlework in a lifestyle similar to the medieval beguines.[22]

Katharina Schütz listened to the sermons of Matthew Zell, a university-educated priest who, like Luther, preached about salvation by grace through faith. She found his preaching persuasive. After internal struggles and riots, city officials formally embraced the Reformation in 1525.[23] During this tempestuous time, priests who had argued in favor of clergy marriage now felt compelled to proffer themselves as real-life examples of pastors entering into holy matrimony. Some citizens of Strasbourg supported clergy marriage, but others were scandalized by Matthew and Katharina's wedding in December 1523. Opponents questioned the marriage's appropriateness, called Schütz Zell a "concubine," and even compared her to a prostitute. The local Roman-leaning bishop placed Matthew Zell under discipline, removing him from his post and forbidding him to preach.[24]

Schütz Zell felt called to speak up, first writing directly to Matthew Zell's bishop, then issuing a pamphlet defending her husband's honor and offering a biblical defense for clergy marriage, explaining: "God implanted marriage in all people in the first creation, and no one is to be excused from it except the three kinds of people named in Matthew, chapter 19 [cf. Gen 2:18, 24; Matt 19:12]. And marriage is also plainly suitable for priests, as Paul says to Timothy and Titus in

18. Schütz Zell, *To the Suffering Women*, in *Church Mother*, 51.
19. Schütz Zell, *To the Suffering Women*, in *Church Mother*, 51.
20. Mette Bundvad, "'Take Upon Yourselves a Manly, Abraham-like Disposition': The Use of Gendered Images from the Bible to Construct Public Female Identities during the Early Lutheran Reformation," *ThZ* 75, no. 1 (2019): 37.
21. McKee, "Volume Editor's Introduction," 16.
22. McKee, "Volume Editor's Introduction," 3. See chap. 2 (above) for discussion of beguines.
23. McKee, "Volume Editor's Introduction," 7.
24. McKee, "Volume Editor's Introduction," 16–17; McKee, introduction to Schütz Zell, *Katharina Schütz's Apologia for Master Matthew Zell, Her Husband, Who Is a Pastor and Servant of the Word of God in Strasbourg, Because of the Great Lies Invented about Him*, in *Church Mother*, 58.

his epistles to them [1 Tim 3:2, 12; Titus 1:6]."[25] When the Strasbourg city council discovered that she planned to print her correspondence to the bishop as an open letter, they instructed Matthew Zell to forbid her from doing so. Schütz Zell reported that her husband asked her to hold her peace, reminding her of Jesus' words, "Blessed are you when people insult and persecute and speak all kinds of evil against you" (Matt. 5:11). But as insults continued, she felt compelled to offer public defense of her husband and their marriage, giving it to the printer without her husband's knowledge.[26] It was published in September 1524. The city council, enraged at her defiance, confiscated most copies.

Matthew Zell seems to have been a good match for her. She later recalled: "He granted and allowed me space and will to read, hear, pray, study, and be active in all good things, early and late, day and night: indeed, he took great joy in that—even when it meant less attention to or neglect in looking after his physical needs and running his household."[27] Matthew Zell supported her publication of Protestant hymnbooks, which included a preface containing her biblical reflections on Moses, David, and Hannah's role as composers.[28] The hymnbooks were published by Margarethe Prüss.

In January 1548, nearly twenty-five years after publishing her defense of her husband, she stood over his grave and, unbidden, stepped forth and delivered a funeral oration to the crowd of several thousand gathered to honor their beloved pastor. People were surprised to hear a woman give a public address. Schütz Zell asserted that she was not usurping male preaching authority; instead, she was following the example of Mary Magdalene, whom Christian tradition had honored with the title "apostle to the apostles." Schütz Zell declared: "But first I ask you not to take it wrongly and not to be irritated with me for what I am doing, as if I now wanted to place myself in the office of preachers and apostles: not at all! But it is only as the dear Mary Magdalene without any prior thought became an apostle and was charged by the Lord Himself to tell His disciples that the Christ was risen and was ascending to His Father and our Father" (John 20:14–18).[29]

Schütz Zell continued to publish works of biblical interpretation. Her widowed status occasionally prompted her to compare herself with the prophet Anna, who taught others about Christ (Luke 2:36–38).[30] Schütz Zell, whose two children had died in infancy, frequently used motherhood imagery for God and employed the term "church mother" to describe her work as teacher and leader in Strasbourg. Not everyone appreciated her leadership. She became involved in public dispute with Ludwig Rabus (1523–92), Matthew Zell's assistant pastor and later his successor. She believed that Rabus, a Lutheran, did not hold firmly enough to Matthew Zell's teachings. Even though Schütz Zell affectionately referred to "dear Dr. Luther," she held a Reformed perspective on the Lord's Supper, disagreeing with Lutheran teaching about Christ's body and

25. Schütz Zell, *Apologia*, 74.
26. Schütz Zell, *Apologia*, 64.
27. Schütz Zell, *To Sir Caspar Schwenckfeld*, in *Church Mother*, 186.
28. Schütz Zell, *Some Christian and Comforting Songs of Praise*, in *Church Mother*, 93. The hymns were Czech (Bohemian Brethren) songs translated into German by Michael Wiesse (1488–1534).
29. Schütz Zell, *Lament and Exhortation of Katharina Zell to the People at the Grave of Master Matthew Zell*, in *Church Mother*, 104.
30. Schütz Zell, *To Sir Caspar Schwenckfeld*, 196.

blood being present in the bread and wine: "We are not to seek [salvation] stuck in bread, as you do!"[31] Copies of her 1558 open letter criticizing Rabus were confiscated by the city council—as her letter defending her husband had been seized thirty-four years earlier.[32]

Lost are Schütz Zell's handwritten "booklets . . . in which I worked through the whole Psalter with lament, prayer, and praise," but in 1558 she published a devotional commentary on Psalm 51 and included poignant reflections on the Lord's Prayer.[33] The phrase "Our Father" evoked for Schütz Zell the idea of God as mother: "Who would love, treat kindly, and have compassion for helpless children as the true mother can and does? So also with God."[34] Jesus Christ is, similarly, "the true mother," since "he bore us in grace."[35]

Other reform-minded woman also had pamphlets confiscated by Protestant city councils. In 1539, Swiss authorities raided the Geneva printshop owned by Jean Girard (d. 1557) and seized copies of *A Very Useful Epistle*, by Marie Dentière (1495–1561), a former nun who supported the reforms of John Calvin and Guillaume Farel (1489–1565). The offending pamphlet was an open letter to Queen Marguerite of Navarre, sister to the French king François I and consort of King Henry of Navarre.

Dentière, a learned noblewoman and nun, left her Augustinian convent in Tournai (present-day Belgium) after reading Luther and other reformers. Although she resided in Strasbourg for several years, there is no evidence that Dentière interacted with Katharina Schütz Zell, yet they may have known of one another. In 1528, Dentière married Simon Robert, a former priest exiled from Tournai. Like Dentière, Robert had belonged to the Augustinian order. The couple traveled to Geneva and became involved in reform efforts there. They had at least two children. Following Robert's death in 1533, Dentière married Antoine Froment (1508–81), a Reformed minister.[36]

Dentière knew Latin and learned some Hebrew, perhaps from her first husband, an expert in the language.[37] Dentière's daughter also studied Hebrew and, as a child, wrote a short Hebrew grammar in French. Dentière sent this grammar to Marguerite of Navarre, hoping the queen would publish it. Unfortunately, the grammar has been lost.[38] In a discussion of tithing, Dentière

31. Schütz Zell, *To Sir Caspar Schwenckfeld*, 199.
32. McKee, introduction to *A Letter to the Whole Citizenship of the City of Strasbourg*, in *Church Mother*, by Schütz Zell, 221–22. Some Reformed theologians followed Zwingli's view that Jesus spoke symbolically when he said that the bread and wine were his body and blood. Others, such as Calvin, spoke of spiritual participation in Christ's body and blood (1 Cor. 10:16).
33. Schütz Zell, *The Miserere Psalm Meditated, Prayed, and Paraphrased with King David, . . . Together with the Our Father with Its Explanation*, in *Church Mother*, 133. See the discussion in Glen Taylor, "Katharina Schütz Zell (ca. 1498–1562) on a Hermeneutic Controversy about Whether or Not to Interpret the Penitential Psalms Christologically," *ThZ* 75, no. 1 (2019): 40–67.
34. Schütz Zell, *Miserere*, 152.
35. Schütz Zell, *Miserere*, 153. This imagery, strikingly similar to the language of Jesus' motherhood found in Julian of Norwich (whom Schütz Zell probably never read), can be found in various medieval male writers. See Carol Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).
36. Stjerna, *Women and the Reformation*, 133–47; "Volume Editor's Introduction," in Marie Dentière, *Epistle to Marguerite de Navarre and Preface to a Sermon by John Calvin*, ed. and trans. Mary B. McKinley, OVIEME (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 2–9.
37. Stjerna, *Women and the Reformation*, 145.
38. William Kemp and Diane Desrosiers-Bonin, "Marie d'Ennetières et la petite grammaire hébraïque de sa fille d'après la dédicace de l'*Épistre* à Marguerite de Navarre," *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance* 60, no. 1 (1998): 117–34.

alluded to the Christian idea that Jews' minds were "hardened" and had a "veil over their minds" when they read Scripture (2 Cor. 3:14–15). Dentière asserted: "Since the Jews require more ample declaration, I leave it for the present to those who have worked more thoroughly than I on their language."[39] European anti-Judaism was pervasive, and appreciation for the Hebrew Scriptures rarely led to appreciation for Jewish communities.[40] The full title of Dentière's pamphlet expressed similar sentiments: *A Very Useful Epistle made and composed by a Christian Woman of Tournai sent to the Queen of Navarre Sister of the King of France, Against the Turks, Jews, Infidels, False Christians, Anabaptists, and Lutherans.*

Dentière's inflammatory epistle, written in French, was primarily a denunciation of the Roman Church and its clergy but also criticized Geneva's city council for expelling Calvin and Farel following a dispute over whether the city council had authority to make decisions regarding worship practices. Calvin and Farel maintained that this was solely the purview of the clergy. Although Dentière framed her pamphlet as a letter to Marguerite of Navarre and the "poor little women" (*femelettes*) of France suffering religious persecution for their Protestant faith, she knew that, as a woman, she would need additional warrant and therefore included examples of biblical women:

> Not only will certain slanderers and adversaries of truth try to accuse us of excessive audacity and temerity, but so will certain of the faithful, saying that it is too bold for women to write to one another about matters of scripture. We may answer them by saying that all those women who have written and have been named in holy scripture should not be considered too bold. Several women are named and praised in holy scripture as much for their good conduct, actions, demeanor, and example as for their faith and teaching: Sarah and Rebecca, for example, and first among the others in the Old Testament; the mother of Moses, who, in spite of the king's edict, dared to keep her son from death and saw that he was cared for in the Pharaoh's house, as is amply declared in Exodus 2, and Deborah, who judged the people of Israel in the time of the Judges, is not to be scorned.[41]

Dentière's list also included the queen of Sheba, "whom Jesus dared to name among the other sages" (Matt. 12:42); the Samaritan woman, whom she called a great "preacher" (*prescheresse*); and Mary Magdalene, whom Christ commissioned through his angel "to tell, preach [*prescher*], and declare" his resurrection to others.[42] She observed: "No woman ever sold or betrayed Jesus, but only a man named Judas"; and "Never was a woman found to be a false prophet, but women have been misled by them."[43] Dentière concluded her defense using the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:18):

> Therefore, if God has given grace to some good women, revealing to them by his holy scriptures something holy and good, should they hesitate to write, speak, and declare it to one another because of the defamers of truth? Ah, it

39. Dentière, *Epistle*, 71.
40. Jerome Friedman, *The Most Ancient Testimony: Sixteenth-Century Christian-Hebraica in the Age of Renaissance Nostalgia* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1983).
41. Dentière, *Epistle*, 54.
42. Dentière, *Epistle*, 54–55.
43. Dentière, *Epistle*, 56. Dentière did not mention the women deemed to be false prophets in Neh. 6:14 and Rev. 2:20.

would be too bold to try to stop them, and it would be too foolish for us to hide the talent that God has given us[;] God will give us the grace to persevere to the end. Amen.[44]

Unfortunately, the Geneva city councilmen disagreed, although they were probably most offended by her public disapproval of their expulsion of Calvin and Farel. Some critics suspected that Froment had ghostwritten and published it in his wife's name, but even mentioning female authorship on the title page was grounds for its suppression. A pastor from Lausanne expressed doubt that Dentière wrote the work, but, nevertheless, a woman "has no business prophesying in the Church."[45] Froment unsuccessfully filed suit against the city council for return of the pamphlets. He rescued about 450 copies (from a substantial print run of 1,500) before the raid on the printshop.[46] Thus some of them circulated, and two copies have survived.[47]

Seven years after Dentière defended Calvin in *A Very Useful Epistle*, she compared Calvin and his associates—who wore black academic gowns—with the proud scribes "who like to walk about in long robes," criticized by Jesus in Luke 20:46. In a 1546 letter to Farel, Calvin complained: "In all the taverns, at almost all the street corners, she began to harangue against long garments."[48] Nonetheless, Calvin enlisted Dentière to write a preface to his 1561 *Sermon on women and the modesty of their dress*, a homily on 1 Timothy 2:8–12 instructing women to dress modestly, remain silent, and refrain from teaching. Dentière's preface, itself a sermonic work, urged women to avoid makeup and extravagant attire. As Mary McKinley observes: "In her preface, Marie Dentière assumes the paradoxical proposition of teaching about a biblical passage that expressly forbade her to do so."[49]

Some men sponsored women's publications to promote their own political and religious causes. Sponsorship by famous men ensured publication and a wider readership for women's words; however, not content to let female voices speak for themselves and endeavoring to make women's writings more acceptable to readers, men often added words of explanation. Luther published a firsthand account written by the noblewoman Florentina of Upper Weimar (fl. 1524), who escaped from a convent after becoming convinced that Luther and his associates were "true shepherds whom Christ selected in these perilous times to retrieve his sheep."[50] Florentina's name was not printed on the title page. Instead, Luther's name appeared in the title, which stated he had contributed an "open letter" to the pamphlet. He furnished an introduction, numerous marginal comments, and an epilogue. Luther's words literally framed Florentina's own.

Similarly, John Bale (1495–1563), an English Protestant polemicist, inserted extensive commentary when he published the *Examinations* of Anne Askew (ca. 1521–46), a Lincolnshire gentlewoman martyred for Reformed beliefs during

44. Dentière, *Epistle*, 56.
45. Letter from Beatus Comte to the city councilors of Berne, translated in McKinley, "Volume Editor's Introduction," in Dentière's *Epistle*, 15. No modern scholars doubt Dentière's authorship.
46. Stjerna, *Women and the Reformation*, 142.
47. McKinley, "Volume Editor's Introduction," 15–16.
48. McKinley, "Volume Editor's Introduction," 9.
49. McKinley, "Volume Editor's Introduction," 30.
50. Florentina of Upper Weimar and Martin Luther, *How God Rescued an Honorable Nun*, in Martin Luther, *Devotional Writings II*, ed. Gustav K. Wiencke, LW 43 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968), 91.

the reign of Henry VIII. The *Examinations* were Askew's verbatim record of interrogations: her personal recollections of church and secular examiners' questions and her responses. Askew frustrated her interrogators with her wit and knowledge of Scripture as she quoted Bible verses to explain why she refused to answer questions intended to trap her. When her examiner "asked me why I had so few words," she responded ironically to the men who had repeatedly accused her of disobeying Paul's injunction about women's silence: "Solomon says that a woman of few words is a gift of God, Proverbs 19."[51] Although Bale highly praised Askew's courage, he apparently shared the sentiment about women of few words. When he published her *Examinations* in 1546 and 1547, he interrupted each short section of her narrative with his own lengthy comments. Bale's words in his interpolations, prefaces, and concluding sections outnumbered Askew's more than four to one.

Lay Roman pamphleteers—male or female—were less numerous, yet some women did express their opposition to Protestantism. The most vocal of these was Anna Bijns (1493–1573), a poet from Antwerp. Franciscan priests sponsored publication of her best-selling poetry collections, enlisting Bijns in their battles against the Lutheran "heresy" that broke out in the Low Countries in the 1520s.[52] Bijns composed Dutch poetry on a variety of secular and religious themes, sometimes using polemical, earthy language to attack *Lutherije* (Lutherie), a term she may have coined for Lutheranism and related movements, used in Dutch-speaking areas.[53]

Anna Bijns's father was a tailor and shop owner. Anna's parents arranged for Franciscan priests to tutor their daughter. She became a teacher at the school her brother Maarten ran. After his death, Bijns opened her own private school and earned a modest income by teaching forty boys and girls. She resided alone, choosing not to marry.[54]

When Bijns was in her mid-twenties, turmoil arose in Antwerp between Protestant and Roman factions. In 1528, Bijns entered into Antwerp's Reformation debates, publishing a volume of polemical poetry criticizing Lutherans for their false teaching and disobedience to the pope. She especially disapproved of Lutherans' rejection of the traditional seven sacraments, their failure to offer proper honor to the Virgin Mary, and their support of clerical marriage. In response to the Lutheran message of "justification by faith apart from works of the law" (Rom. 3:28), Bijns countered with the biblical claim that "faith without works is dead" (Jas. 2:17, 26); "works" included obedience to God's commandments, charity to others, and remorse for sins.[55]

51. Anne Askew, *The Examinations of Anne Askew*, ed. Elaine V. Beilin, Women Writers in English 1350–1850 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 51. We have modernized the spelling and punctuation. She refers to the "prudent/discreet wife" in Prov. 19:14.
52. Judith Pollmann, "'Each Should Tend His Own Garden': Anna Bijns and the Catholic Polemic against the Reformation," *Church History and Religious Culture* 87, no. 1 (2007): 29–45.
53. Kristiaan P. G. Aercke, "Germanic Sappho: Anna Bijns," in *Women Writers of the Renaissance and Reformation*, ed. Katharina M. Wilson (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 366–67.
54. In a poem urging women to remain single, Bijns recounted the brutal physical violence that many women suffered from her husbands: "But if she wants to get in a word or two / She gets to taste his fist." Anna Bijns, "Unyoked Is Best! Happy the Woman without a Man," trans. Kristiaan P. G. Aercke, in Wilson, *Women Writers*, 382.
55. Pollmann, "Each Should Tend," 39.

Bijns received support from local Franciscan priests eager to have a fiery vernacular pamphleteer on the side of Rome. The slim volume of twenty-three poems was a best seller and went into multiple printings, including a Latin translation extending her audience beyond Dutch speakers. High-ranking Franciscans sponsored her next two publications: another collection of polemical poems (1548) and a volume of devotional verses (1567), with Henrick Pippinck, head of the Franciscans in the Low Countries, writing the preface.

In one poem, Bijns argued that nuns who left their convents were not motivated by biblical faithfulness, but carnal lust. Their marriages to former monks resulted in poverty, squalor, and a household full of "snotty brats, in a batch of six at least, . . . with all those shitty diapers to wash."[56] Another criticism was that Lutheran laypeople, including women, impudently interpreted Scripture for themselves. Employing Jesus' parable about the enemy who sowed weeds among the wheat (Matt. 13:24–30), Bijns lamented that a "shrewd spirit has been unleashed," inciting the laity "to meddle with the scripture / and rave as they please." Renegade monks lead "loony women" astray with their false teaching. She exclaimed: "Oh Lord, will you cut down these useless weeds / Whose fruits send many souls to hell's torment?"[57] (Bijns did not consider her criticism of lay biblical interpreters to be inconsistent with her own use of numerous scriptural citations in the margins of her published poetry.) She reminded readers of Jesus' warning to beware of false prophets (Matt. 7:15): "More ferocious wolves never roamed in sheep's clothing."[58] To the laity she wrote: "Note humbly your shepherds' admonitions / And you, too, will be counted among Christ's flock." Addressing the priests: "But you shepherds especially: don't fall asleep / It's your job to keep the wolf out of the pen" (John 10:1–13).[59]

Regardless of what side they took on the Reformation debates, publications by female writers needed to be justified. In his preface to Bijns's 1567 collection, Pippinck described Bijns as "a godly, wise, Catholic virgin." Thus Pippinck emphasized her respectability by connecting her to the Virgin Mary and the virgin saints of Christian legends.[60] Pippinck added: "Even though a virgin wrote this, do not condemn it. Learned men have read it and approved of it. Moreover, the Spirit was promised to everyone, as Joel [2:28–29] says: 'Your sons and your daughters will prophesy, and in those days I will pour my spirit out over my servants and maids.'"[61] When inspired by God, a woman's words (when vetted by the appropriate church authorities) could be, as historian Judith Kessler asserts, a powerful "weapon in the war against Luther."[62]

56. Anna Bijns, "Those Covet Happy Nights and Lose Their Happy Days," trans. Kristiaan Aercke, in Wilson, *Women Writers*, 388.

57. Anna Bijns, "Oh Lord, Enlighten the Blind in This New Year," trans. Kristiaan Aercke in *Women's Writing from the Low Countries, 1200–1875: A Bilingual Anthology*, ed. Lia van Gemert et al., Amsterdam Anthologies (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 165.

58. Bijns, "Oh Lord, Enlighten the Blind," 165.

59. Bijns, "Oh Lord, Enlighten the Blind," 165.

60. Judith Kessler, "'Please Do Not Mind the Crudeness of Its Weave': Literature, Gender, and the Polemic Authority of Anna Bijns," in *Literary Cultures and Public Opinion in the Low Countries, 1450–1650*, ed. Jan Bloemendal, Arjan van Dixhoorn, and Elsa Strietman, 55–89. BSIH 197 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 84.

61. Kessler, "Please Do Not Mind," 77.

62. Kessler, "Please Do Not Mind," 51.