

Argula von Grumbach, Marie Dentière, and Katherine Parr:
Female Writers of the Reformation

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I. Introduction

The written word is powerful, and during the Protestant Reformation during the 1500's this proved true. Through the writings of men like Luther, Zwingli, and many others, the Protestant reformation swept across the world, challenging the Catholic church and encouraging people to read the Bible for themselves. The writings of women also contributed to the Reformation's influence, and this paper will examine three female writers of the reformations in Germany, France, and England. Argula von Grumbach, Marie Dentiere, and Katherine Parr, though all in different countries, each wrote extensively in favor of the protestant reformation in their respective countries. To this day, each of these women is remembered and celebrated for their bravery and their contributions to the Reformation through their letters, pamphlets, and books.

I. Argula von Grumbach

Argula von Grumach was a prominent female writer during the Protestant Reformation, and she is most famous for her letters and for her refusal to shy away from public conflict. Though she was born to Barvarian Nobility, Argula's family endured poverty because of wars between nobles and dukes, so her family sent her to train as the maidservant of Kunigunde, the sister of Emperor Maximilian. During her training, Argula learned German and improved her writing skills, which she would later use as a strong supporter of the German reformation.¹

While Argula supported Martin Luther, he defended her as well. He highly respected her, even dedicating a copy of his *Little Book of Prayers* to her.² They were such good friends, in

¹ Roland Bainton, *Women of the Reformation in Germany and Italy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1971), 101.

² Peter Matheson, "Our First Woman Reformer," Christian History Institute, last modified in 2019, <https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/our-first-woman-reformer>.

fact, that evidence exists which indicates that Argula called upon and possibly persuaded Luther to marry because she did not believe Luther to be rendering his fullest witness.³ Luther eventually did marry Katherine Von Bora. Argula also wrote an open letter to the people of Regensburg in 1524, encouraging them not to enforce the imperial edict against Luther after the Diet of Worms.⁴ However, Argula did not define herself with her support of Luther. In fact, in a letter that she addressed in 1523 to her cousin Adam von Thering, she wrote, “I am called a follower of Luther, but I am not. I was baptized in the name of Christ; it is Him I confess, and not Luther.”⁵

Argula’s writing reflected her support for Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon’s teachings and her desire to publicly debate the Catholic church as a lay woman. Argula was the first Protestant woman, and possibly the first woman ever, to harness the influence that the printing press, printing eight different letters-turned-pamphlets about Scripture interpretation and challenges to the church and universities.⁶

Argula’s most famous work was a letter written to the University of Ingoslادت. Both concerned a young professor named Aracius Seehofer, who was a professor at the University of Ingoslادت accused of Lutheran teaching. She wrote the letter to the university on September 20, 1523, and two months later the letter had been edited into a pamphlet with fourteen different editions and circulated throughout the country.⁷

³ Bainton, 106.

⁴ Peter Matheson, *Argula Von Grumbach: A Woman’s Voice in the Reformation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 150.

⁵ Kirsi Stjerna, *Women and the Reformation* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), Chapter 6, Google Books.

⁶ Matheson, *A Woman’s Voice in the Reformation*, 3.

Her letter to the University is a defense of Lutheran teachings and a defense of her speaking out because normally a woman would not publicly make a statement as strong as Argula's about an issue like this. Argula wrote that the failure of men to do the right thing compelled her to write this letter appealing for Seehofer.⁸ In fact, she did go to a man first, Andreas Osiander, an evangelical minister, to get justice for Seehofer, but when Osiander did nothing, Argula took matters into her own hands.⁹ In this letter, Argula wrote that if the university wanted to destroy Luther's teachings, they would have to destroy the whole New Testament. She reprimanded the university and reminded them that their authority came from God, not their own power, urging them not to think that they had power over the Word of God.¹⁰

Argula also sent a copy of this letter to Duke Wilhelm with another letter included to serve as a sort of "cover letter." Argula and the Duke grew up as friends, and this letter is more compassionate than the one to the university, though the harsh university letter was included as well. She begged the Duke not to encroach in God's realm by harming Seehofer for Lutheran teaching because ultimately the issue was not Luther's teaching but the restriction of God's Word.¹¹

Neither the Duke nor the University of Ingoslادت responded to Argula. Instead, they actively sought to punish her, convincing her husband, Friedrich von Grumbach, and her four children to mistreat her.¹² Argula thought she would get the opportunity to defend herself when

⁷ Ibid, 56.

⁸ Ibid, 64.

⁹ Bainton, 101.

¹⁰ Ibid, 98.

¹¹ Matheson, *A Woman's Voice in the Reformation*, 97.

Count Palatine invited her to the diet of the Empire at Nürnberg. She thought it would be her chance to “speak freely whatever was on her mind.”¹³ She even wrote a letter to Frederick the wise to celebrate that God gave her this opportunity to preach the Gospel.¹⁴ However, Argula came away disappointed because despite her best efforts people seemed to only laugh at her.¹⁵

After 1524 and her eight letters, Argula remained mostly out of the public sphere. After her first husband died, she re-married Count Poppo von Schlick, who was more sympathetic for the Protestant cause.¹⁶ The year of her death is unknown. However, in 1563, the Duke of Baravia wrote to the town council about “the old Staufferin” who was circulating Protestant books, causing people to rebel, hosting services in her home, and performing graveside funerals.¹⁷ Therefore, it is reasonable to assume she lived past 1563.

Argula was certainly a strong woman who was unafraid of conflict. She stood firm on the Word of God and defended the Protestant Reformation in her writing. She demonstrated that women could be theologians and interpret Scripture alongside men, and she did so eloquently through each of her letters. She came to Seehofer’s aid when no one else would, and despite the ridicule and mistreatment she faced, she never wavered on her commitment to God and His Word. Her time of public writing was short, but her impact was strong, earning even the respect of reformers like Martin Luther.

¹² Bainton, 105.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Matheson, *A Woman’s Voice in the Reformation*, 131.

¹⁵ Bainton, 105.

¹⁶ Stierna, Chapter 6.

¹⁷ Ibid.

II. Marie Dentière

While Argula was writing letters in Germany, another female reformer named Marie Dentière wrote letters in France. Marie was born in 1495 in Tournai, France and grew up in an Augustinian convent, where she took her vows in 1508.¹⁸ After hearing the teachings of Martin Luther, Marie left the convent and traveled to Strasbourg, where she met her first husband Simon Robert, a former priest from Tournai.¹⁹

While in Strasbourg, Marie and Simon met reformer Guillaume Farel, who invited them to move with him to Aigle, Switzerland, but they had to return because Marie fell ill.²⁰ However, two years later, Marie and Simon moved back to Switzerland, this time to Bex, where Simon was a pastor until his death.²¹ After Simon died, Marie married Antoine Froment in 1533, and together they had five children. Marie moved to Geneva with Antoine in 1535, and while she was in Geneva, she wrote two strong works which influenced the reformation: *The War for and Deliverance of the City of Geneva, Faithfully Prepared and Written Down by a Merchant Living in That City* and *A Most Beneficial Letter, Prepared and Written Down by a Christian Woman of Tournai, and Sent to the Queen of Navarre, Sister of the King of France, Against the Turks, the Jews, the Infidels, the False Christians, the Anabaptists, and the Lutherans.*²²

¹⁸ Diana Maury Robin, Anne R. Larsen, and Carole Levin, “D’Ennetières, Marie (Dentières; 1495-1561),” in *Encyclopedia of Women in the Renaissance* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO Inc, 2007), 113. Google Books.

¹⁹ Katharina M. Wilson, *Women Writers of the Renaissance and Reformation* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 261.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ “Marie Dentière, or d’Enntières (c.1495-1561),” Musée Virtual du Protstantisme, <https://museeprotestant.org/en/notice/marie-dentiere-ou-dennetieres-1495-1561/>.

²² Wilson, 261.

Her first work, *The War for and Deliverance of the City of Geneva*, was an interpretation of the struggle between the Catholic Duke of Savoy and the Protestant citizens of Geneva from the years 1524-1536.²³ Her goal with this document was to influence public opinion, so she wrote under the guise of a man, “a merchant living in that city,” thinking that the City representatives, called the Council of Two Hundred, would respond better to her harsh words if they thought a man wrote them.²⁴ Marie wrote about the protestants’ victory as compared to the Israelite victory over Egypt and Jericho, and she described the battle not over cities and land but over peoples’ souls.²⁵

The second document which Marie wrote was a letter entitled *The Letter to the Queen of Navarre* (also called *A Very Useful Epistle Composed by a Christian Woman of Tournai*), and she addressed it to Marguerite, Queen of Navarre who was sympathetic to the protestant cause.²⁶ Marie wrote this letter in 1539, right in the middle of fragmentation amidst the protestants in Geneva. She appealed to the Queen on behalf of reformers exiled from Geneva, including John Calvin, by attacking Catholic and Lutheran theology. She described the Council of Two Hundred, who she had previously appealed to in her first work, as “cockroaches” who exiled the

²³ Katharina M. Wilson, Paul Schlueter, and June Schlueter, “Marie Dentièrre” in *Women Writers of Great Britain and Europe: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 115. Google Books.

²⁴ Wilson, *Women Writers of the Renaissance*, 262.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 261.

²⁶ Mary B. McKinley, “A Very Useful Epistle: Marie Dentièrre,” *Christian History Institute*, last modified in 2019, <https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/dentiere-a-very-useful-epistle>.

true preachers of the Gospel.²⁷ This letter was mostly confiscated, and only two copies survived.²⁸

However, Marie's letter did not only defend those exiled. In the second portion of her letter, Marie also defended the rights of women to interpret and preach Scripture. Marie wrote about example of women in the Bible, rebuked the idea that women are of a weaker nature, and insisted that women are able and called to interpret and teach Scripture to each other.²⁹

Marie was passionate about the rights of women as well as promoting Protestant theology in the reformation, and her writing reflected both. She showed that the two did not have to contradict one another. Her passion for Scripture and her desire for reform, especially in the realm of women's rights, made her a strong player during the Reformation. She was such an influential figure that in 2002, Marie became and continues to be the only woman with her name on the Wall of Reformers in Geneva.³⁰

III. Katherine Parr

Around the same time that Argula wrote pamphlets in Germany and Marie penned letters in France, Katherine Parr was authoring books in England. Katherine's parents were Sir Thomas Parr and Maud Greene Parr, and both of them served in King Henry VIII's court. Henry was quite fond of Thomas, and Maud was Queen Catherine of Aragon's lady in waiting.³¹ Katherine

²⁷ Wilson, *Women Writers of the Renaissance*, 265.

²⁸ McKinley, Christian History Institute.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Adrien Segal, "The First Lady in France," *Desiring God*, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-first-lady-in-france>.

³¹ Katherine Parr, *Katherine Parr: Complete Works and Correspondence*, ed. Janel Mueller (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2011), 5.

herself also became part in Henry VIII's life as his sixth and final wife. Katherine's ability to sooth Henry's harsh temper kept her in his good graces, and though many believe it was her motherly tendencies that pleased Henry, evidence suggests that she cleverly used her maturity and intelligence to talk her way out of many potentially troublesome situations with Henry.³²

Because of Katherine's upbringing and marriage to Henry VIII, she had access to excellent education. By the end of her life, she was true polyglot, speaking Latin, Greek, French, and Italian in addition to English.³³ She was an intelligent woman and an eloquent writer, and she used her talents to defend and support the Reformation in England. In fact, writers after her nicknamed her "Nursing Mother of the Reformation" because she was such an important proponent of the theology of the Reformation.³⁴ Katherine completed four books in her lifetime, *Psalms or Prayers*, *Prayers or Meditations*, *The Lamentation of a Sinner*, and *Queen Katherine's Personal Prayer Book*.

Katherine's first book, *Psalms or Prayers*, is actually an English translation of John Fisher, an English Catholic Bishop of Rochester's, work. Therefore, it was not her own original work, but it did demonstrate her detailed understanding of language.³⁵ Her final book, *Queen Katherine's Personal Prayer Book*, is exactly as it sounds: Katherine's personal journal of prayers. Katherine's intent to publish this work is unknown. Janel Mueller argues that Katherine passed this journal to Lady Jane Grey, as Katherine was on her deathbed after the birth of her

³² Paul Zahl, *Five Women of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2001), 42.

³³ Ibid, 41.

³⁴ Ibid, 42.

³⁵ Parr, 280.

daughter, Mary.³⁶ The complete history of the *Prayer Book* is not fully known, but nonetheless, readers get a glimpse into Katherine's devotion and love for God and His church as they read through her journal.

Contrary to her first and last books, Katherine's second and third books are without a doubt published by her with intention. When she wrote her second book, Katherine was the first woman in England to publish a printed work in English under her own name, and she titled this book *Prayers or Meditations*.³⁷ She published this book on November 6, 1545, and it consisted of portions from various "holy works" of her day, including paraphrases from Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ*.³⁸ Though short, this work served as a precursor for her third and most famous text: *The Lamentation of a Sinner*.

Katherine published *Lamentation* in 1557, a few months after Henry's death and a year before her own.³⁹ This book is Katherine's key text in support of the Reformation because she clearly outlines her own testimony, conversion, and her Reformation convictions.⁴⁰ This book is relatively short, but it is divided into three parts and twelve chapters. In the first part, Katherine writes of her personal testimony. In the second part, she describes what Christ's death implies for all people, and she gives a thorough presentation of the Gospel. In her third part, Katherine

³⁶ Janel Mueller, "Prospecting for Common Ground in Devotion," in *English Women, Religion, and Textual Production 1500-1625*, ed. Micheline White (Abingdon: Ashgate Publishing, 2011), 127

³⁷ Katherine Parr, 1.

³⁸ Zahl, 49.

³⁹ Rhys Lavery, "The Lamentation of a Sinner by Katherine Parr: A Review," The Davenant Institute, July 6, 2021, <https://davenantinstitute.org/the-lamentation-of-a-sinner-review>.

⁴⁰ Zahl, 49.

writes of her husband's influence on the Reformation in England. She compares him to Moses because he led the people out of the captivity of Catholicism.⁴¹ This third part of her book demonstrates strongly the influence that Reformers had on Katherine's theology. John Calvin specifically influenced her because her final three chapters closely reflect Calvin's Institutes.⁴²

Pastor Don Matzat writes that Katherine's *Lamentations of a Sinner* is possibly one of the most important works "to emerge out of the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation," but despite this, the work is not well known.⁴³ Despite this, Katherine's writing both in her previous works and in *Lamentations* shows her interest in supporting the Reformation and her knowledge of the Scriptures. In fact, it is a well-known fact that Katherine would openly debate Henry about theological ideas such as Luther's views of justification by faith.⁴⁴ She respected Henry as the head of the Church of England, but she courageously stood up to him concerning her beliefs and for the teachings of the Reformers like Luther and Calvin.⁴⁵ No one could doubt Katherine's support for the Reformation.

IV. Conclusion

Many voices and pens contributed to the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, and women were no exception. In Germany, France, and England, Argula Von Grumbach, Marie

⁴¹ Katherine Parr, "The Lamentation of a Sinner," New Whitchurch Press, accessed March 31, 2022, <https://newwhitchurch.press/parr/lamentation>.

⁴² Roland Bainton, *Women of the Reformation in France and England* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1973), 169.

⁴³ Donald G. Matzat, "Introduction" in *The Lamentation of a Sinner* (Seattle: Kindle Direct Publishing, 2017), 1.

⁴⁴ Donald Matzat, *Katherine Parr: Opportunist, Queen, Reformer: A Theological Perspective* (Stroud: Amberley Publishing, 2021), Appendix, Google Books.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Dentière, and Katherine Parr wrote letters, pamphlets, and books in support of the Reformation. Each of these women demonstrated the fact that women could interpret the Bible for themselves and defend their faith well in the face of conflict. They may not have known one another, but each of these women worked together to further the Reformation's cause through the power of their words.

Today, the works of these women are still available. The legacies of these women continue to inspire women to have strength and courage when they face challenges to their faith. In addition to the three discussed in this paper, many other women contributed to the Reformation through their writing, including Katharina Zell, Marguerite de Navarre, and Jane Grey, to name a few. As we remember and celebrate the work Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and many other male reformers, may the church not forget the voices of the women who defended and advocated for the Protestant Reformation alongside their brothers.

V. Application Point

As the church celebrates the Reformation and seeks to honor women in today's world, may we teach the history of these brave women who risked their reputations for the sake of the Gospel. Many women (and men) are unaware of the contributions of female Christians in church history, and I believe that teaching the stories of these women will encourage women to be bold in their faith today. Studying the history of women in the church will also remind the men of the church that women have always played a valuable role in the Kingdom of God.

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