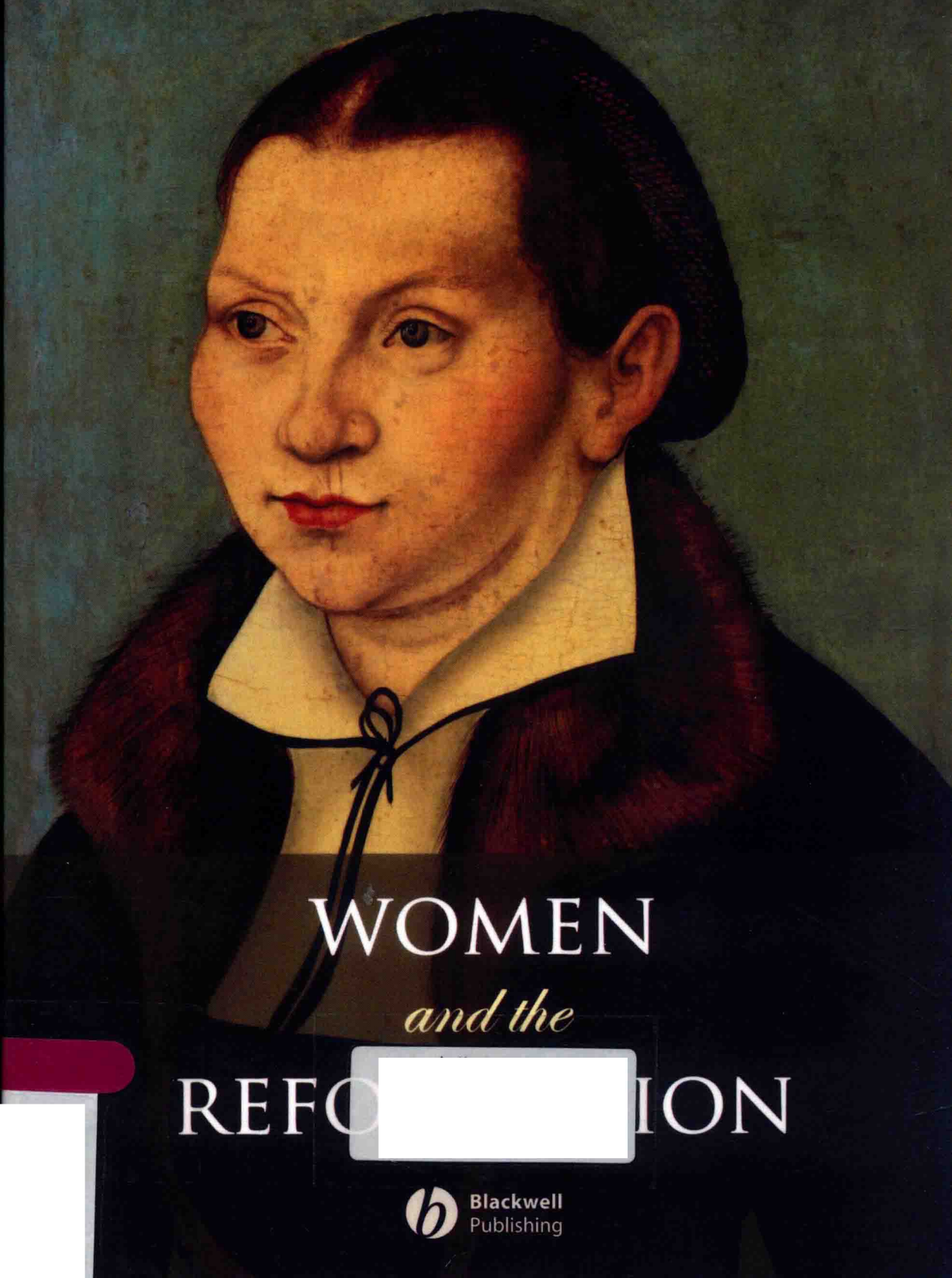


KIRSI STJERNA



WOMEN
and the
REFORMATION



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Women and the Reformation

*I dedicate this book to those most dear to
me – Kaleigh Kirsikka and Kristian, David
and Benjamin, and Brooks.*

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It is very much thanks to my students at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, and their interest in studying the women of the Reformation, that this long-percolating idea has become a reality. Every “Women and the Reformation” class has contributed in many important ways to the project.

From a humble initial vision of preparing a brief textbook, the manuscript has grown thicker with every passing year – just as my children have grown taller, and just as the field keeps expanding and exploding. Enough has been accumulated here for one book, and I hope the stories told within this volume inspire further exploration.

The manuscript took shape in many inspiring places and with the assistance of many individuals.

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Introduction

The Vision and the Scope of the Book

Teaching courses on the Reformation is no longer feasible without the inclusion of women as subjects in the story of the Reformation and its evaluation. The lack of easily accessible sources has complicated this necessary broadening of the scope of study in the classroom. The vision for this book arose from the need to have a portable introduction in English, and it was hoped that by presenting the best material available the exploration of the lives, thoughts, and contributions of women in different Reformation contexts would be facilitated, broadening the understanding of the Reformation from the perspectives of both genders, and, last but not least, inspiring theological inquiry informed by feminist scholarship.

The initial vision proved ambitious, as a delightful abundance of materials surfaced – and continue to surface. Several principles have shaped the work: First of all, the primary goal is to present stories of several women in varied visible leadership roles in different Reformation contexts. The term “leadership” is given broad meaning, including leadership exercised in politics, religious matters, and households, in writing and teaching and speaking, or in “hosting” and “partnering.” Second, the selected women’s lives, contributions, and challenges are interpreted in light of the reformers’ teachings about women’s place in the Church and society as well as in light of the emancipatory potential

imbedded in the gospel proclamation that so attracted these women. Third, the chapters rely on the important studies already available (references for which are provided at the end of the book), in addition to leading the reader to the original sources. Only occasional references will be made to the grand pool of Reformation sources in general. It is assumed that the reader has a basic familiarity with Reformation history.

The biographical introductions, which synthesize and interpret information scholars have already made available in different languages, present women in different vocations and examine their different self-understandings, evolutions, and contributions as Protestant believers. Basic feminist-oriented questions organize the biographical material: Who was this woman? What kind of a Reformer was she? How did she understand herself as a woman and as a reformer? What did she write or do about the issues that mattered to her? How did others receive her? What were her options? What role did her gender have in her life? Why is she important in the larger scope of Protestant history (histories) and theology (theologies)? What has been her place in scholarship, and what, with Luther, Calvin and other “great” reformers, can she teach us? In terms of the bigger picture of women and the Reformation in general, we continue to pursue with Natalie Zemon Davis (1975, 66) the questions she posed in 1975 (Davis 1975, 66) of whether the Reformation had a distinctive appeal to women (and if so to what kind of women) and how so, and what Protestant women did to bring about religious change and what impact the Reformation had on their lives and vice versa.

The lives of the women featured in this book shed light on these issues and on women’s involvement in religious affairs in general. Their stories call for a reexamination of Reformation history and theology and for a consideration of the actual benefits and losses generated by the Reformation for women in particular. The tragedy and the humor, the sustained suppression, and the occasional freedom from constraints, the costs and the rewards of individual women’s faith commitments provide many, perhaps unanticipated, touching points with the lives and struggles of people today. The voices of the women who “mothered” the Reformation for later generations offer an important reality check for the, at times, one-sidedly celebratory appraisals of Reformation theologies and complement the male experiences and perspectives that have so far been the dominant study in the field.

The women in this book come from different geographic, cultural, linguistic, and social contexts. Their leadership roles have differed, but most of them have left a written or otherwise tangible legacy: Katharina von Bora Luther, Elisabeth von Brandenburg and Elisabeth von Braunschweig, Argula von Grumbach, Marie Dentière, Katharina Schütz Zell, Ursula Jost, Marguerite de Navarre, Jeanne d’Albret, Renée de France, and Olimpia Morata are highlighted as exemplary matriarchs of the Reformation who, each in her own way, responded to Protestant teachings, exercised religious leadership, and lived out her religious conviction with a significant effect on the individuals and communities around her. They demonstrate women’s instrumental role in the life of the Church, instrumental regardless of and in response to the dominant patriarchal values and norms. Their insights and experiences promise to complement as well as challenge the (predominantly male) perspectives that have shaped Protestant theologies and spiritualities. Understanding women’s choices, passions, and vocations in light of the varied factors that shaped women’s religious lives allows for a holistic and critical grasp of the Reformation as a whole.

The Term “Reformation” and Inclusivity Concerns

The singular term “Reformation” does not do justice to the different reforming movements of the sixteenth century, as has been demonstrated by Carter Lindberg (1996). With its forerunners and proponents, the Reformation was in many respects catapulted from Martin Luther’s vocal and well-published reaction to the institution and practices of the late medieval Catholic church that he perceived to be ailing and incapable of meeting the spiritual needs of the people. He most famously voiced his concerns in his *Ninety-Five Theses* in 1517 and his reformatory writings of the 1520s, and soon enough he was joined by others on a similar mission.

The corruption in clerical offices culminating in the self-serving interests of the renaissance popes, and the grossly abused sale of the indulgences (letters of pardon for acts of penance and satisfaction and for time in purgatory) in particular became a common starting point for many calls for reform and movements towards reforming the Church, theology, and people’s religious practices – reforms that materialized differently in different contexts in Europe. Eventually this turmoil resulted in the formation of distinct denominational traditions (in the Lutheran, Anglican, Reformed, Anabaptist, and/or Mennonite churches), each shaped by distinct visions for the role of the Church and ministry in the world, the purposes and uses of the sacraments, and the interpretation and preaching of the Scripture among other things. This fragmenting of the one catholic church coincided with reforms within the Roman Catholic church, especially a renewed emphasis on its spiritual traditions and resources, sacramental practices, and moral values.

In each Reformation, the importance of education, literature, catechetical materials, sacramental practices, and understanding of vocation were central, as were the Confessions. Lutherans were the first to set themselves officially apart with their united Augsburg Confession of 1530. The word “Protestant” – encompassing the different Reformation traditions, from Lutherans and Calvinists to Anglicans and Anabaptists – derives from a historic moment at the 1529 Diet of Speyer when the evangelical princes, theologians, and clergy “protested” against the proposed reinforcement of the 1521 Edict of Worms, which would have forced evangelicals to return to the Catholic faith. While Germany and Scandinavia experienced a predominantly Lutheran Reformation, elsewhere in Europe, especially in the French-speaking world, Calvin’s teachings had more far reaching effects. In England, Reformation theology and practices found their own unique “middle way.” Everywhere in Europe the Anabaptists and other charismatic Protestant groups (those practicing believer’s baptism in particular) were persecuted.

Regardless of what was originally a shared vision of re-Christianizing Europe and a shared conviction of the primary authority of the Scripture, the questions and strategies about what reforms to make and how to make them varied, leading to the formation of different confessions and confessional groups (as argued by Scott Hendrix [2004a]). Apart from the geographical, cultural, political, and confessional differences, the Reformation took root and shaped lives in different ways for men from women, for clergy and the learned from the laity, for the city people from the country folk and peasants. The Reformation story and its evaluation thus have many versions and there are many perspectives to consider. The very question of “was the Reformation a success or a

failure?” is impossible to answer as such due to the plurality of the phenomenon. For instance, just as the Protestants “failed” to reform the Catholic church according to their visions, the Catholic church became invigorated through its own reform but failed to draw the Protestants back. And, although both the Catholic and Protestant Reformation “failed” to bring forth equal benefits for men and women, laity and clergy, they have successfully attracted both men and women. It is thus most appropriate to conceive the Reformation as plural, even if in the text it is the singular term which is mostly used. (See Lindberg 1996; Hendrix 2004a.)

Addressing the roles of particular women in the Reformation movements, this book adds yet one more plural to the term: The Reformation for women was not necessarily in every regard the same as it was for men. The “good news” proclaimed about the gospel and the structures built around it were not necessarily equally good for women and men. At the same time, hasty conclusions about gendered roles, views, and experiences in the Reformation movements are not warranted. For instance, it is not true that men were always active or leaders and women always passive bystanders or receivers, or that women adopted the gendered world with its gender-biased options and parameters without scrutiny. The truth is much more complex.

This book does not claim to present “the truth,” but a perspective, and an attempt to interpret under-utilized material. Let it be stated about the perspectives offered in this book that the author’s intentional and unintentional biases derive from experiences as a European Lutheran clergywoman teaching in a North American seminary setting. The focus on Protestant women in sixteenth-century Europe is not intended to imply that the Protestant, or more specifically the Lutheran, reforms were superior to the other reforms: had the scope of the book allowed it, Catholic reforming women would have been included.

In terms of language and the spelling of names, whenever it has been reasonable and possible to do so without obscuring a figure’s historical identity, the original form of personal names has been used; in some cases, after extensive consideration, it has seemed preferable to use the name by which someone is most widely known than their birth name. Inclusivity is at the very premise of writing this book. When quoting the primary sources or studies about them, however, the text is included as it appears in the source without any attempt at making the language more ideologically correct to the modern reader. Apart from the fact that the inclusive use of pronouns is, to a degree, a language-specific issue, it is not one which concerned our sixteenth-century writers. At the same time, the writers’ use of masculine pronouns for the third person singular, according to the conventions of their language, or their references to God nearly exclusively as “He,” “Lord,” and “Father,” and often with masculine images, does not necessarily imply that maleness was understood as superior to femaleness or that God was seen as “more” male than female or neutral. This said, it seems fair to conclude that the centuries of *Wirkungsgeschichte*, or “history of influences,” of androcentric assumptions in Christian expressions of faith and theology, so manifest in language, obviously shaped our women’s thinking and articulation about God and spiritual matters. In that regard, any attempt on the part of women writers to envision God in other terms than “He” and “Lord” should be noted as extremely bold and modern and be cheered!

Visionary Studies on Women and the Reformation

Much more has been written about the wars, the Diets, and the reformers' assorted treatises than about how the Reformation was experienced and transferred by women. Surprisingly few book-length studies have been published on the subject of women in the lives and theologies of the reformers or assessing their theologies from gender perspectives.

Whereas theological inquiry with a gender perspective has been slow to unfold in Reformation studies, the opposite is true in social studies. Since the 1960s, there has been an "explosion" of research. "Historians have searched for new sources which reveal the historical experience of women, and used traditional sources in innovative ways" (Wiesner 2000a, 1–8 at 1). It has become clear that the socially and theologically constructed limitations on women's options for expressing their faith have to be taken into account when assessing the successes as well as the failures of the Reformation from the perspectives of both genders. In a continuous reappropriation of a historic faith tradition in new times and situations, gender studies promise both continuity and the discovery of renewed "meanings" that can make a particular faith tradition theologically and spiritually sustaining through changing times.

In recent decades scholars have unfolded materials that have identified women in different roles and thus diversified the group of participants and factors in Reformation history. Historians have discovered a variety of rich sources coming from women. The editing and translating of these works has begun, promising an exciting exploration of women's theologies from their own writings. With identities discovered and first-hand sources made available the new challenges in Reformation scholarship will be, first, to formulate a more realistic and inclusive story of the Reformation by placing equal value on the roles and experiences of both sexes, and, second, to let the women writers' theological contributions inform the ongoing critical reevaluation of Reformation theologies and their impact. Simply gathering and adding missing material with old premises will not be sufficient. Just as women's perspectives through the centuries are more than a footnote, so too the women of this period are part of the main text of our history.

The unfolding of the stories of the sixteenth-century reforming women has already brought to light the importance of the role of gender in how, in its different forms, the Protestant Reformation was preached, implemented, received, or rejected. Gender views and norms were also a factor in "what" was being preached and implemented. The recognition of the permeating, inevitable role of gender in human life and history has led to a significant acknowledgment that no history or theology can ever be gender blind or neutral – just as no theology or history can be non-contextual or without a human face. This recognition calls for a new level of inquiry that is inclusive in terms of "who names the reality" and "whose experience and perspective counts" and "what are the important questions to ask." An inclusive approach to the materials will naturally help to correct the gender biases and class biases, as well as race biases and other prejudices that have dominated the interpretations of Reformation history and theology.

Joan Kelly, in her 1977 essay "Did Women Have a Renaissance," was among those setting the course for gender-aware historical scholarship. She called into question the entire periodization and definition of the Renaissance with her observation about the

so-far insufficiently recognized role of gender in evaluating history and human experience and culture: "To take the emancipation of women as a vantage point is to discover that events that further the historical development of men . . . have quite different, even opposite, effects upon women. The Renaissance is a good case in point" (Kelly-Gadol 1977, 176). To continue Kelly's theses, we can ask the same question about the Reformation: Was there a Reformation for women, and if so, what was it? For instance, inasmuch as history is about changes and their interpretation, and as relatively moderate, indirect changes occurred in women's lives and in attitudes towards women in the Renaissance and Reformation periods, we can hardly talk about "history" in respect to women of the period with the same meanings as when we talk about the his-story of men. Approaches that only recognize "exceptional" women or fail to recognize the impact of the different forms of subjection on women's history across the board, that are not informed by the realities and experiences of women of the period in question, are based on skewed premises of what constituted normalcy or progress for women (see Sommerville 1995, 8, 39–78, 250).

In the same vein, Gerda Lerner argues that women's long subjection to the other sex is the history of implicit beliefs shaping social structures and constraints and giving the force of law and custom to what were mere assumptions. She names patriarchy as the culprit for the development of different forms of dominance and hierarchical relationships (in reproduction, economics, and human relations). "In the course of the establishment of patriarchy and constantly reinforced as the result of it, the major idea systems which explain and order Western civilization incorporated a set of unstated assumptions about gender, which powerfully affected the development of history and of human thought." Distinguishing between history and his-story is part of coming to terms with the observation that "it is in recorded history that women have been obliterated or marginalized." According to Lerner, it is because of being deprived of cultural fostering through dialogue and encounter with educated peers that women have for long lacked the essential prerequisites for participating in the constructive recording and interpretation of the history of which they have been part (Lerner 1993, 3–5, also 12–13).

With a growing awareness of the complexity of human life, "we stand at the beginning of a new epoch in the history of humankind's thought, as we recognize that sex is irrelevant to thought, that gender is a social construct and that woman, like man, makes and defines history" (Lerner 1993, 283). Merry Wiesner-Hanks offers an insightful metaphor for the interdisciplinary work in progress: in the study of history, the structure we call "history" is very much a City of Men (or Some Men), and, in order to break holes into this millennia-old structure and to build a sturdy new structure for a City of Women, all immigrants are welcomed to the task in which "we may build high towers, but we need open gates" (Wiesner-Hanks 2001, 16).

In this book women are introduced as history makers and as subjects of their own history. In inviting the ongoing interpretation of religious history and theological understandings to take shape from women's varied experiences, there is hope for more inclusive history writing and theologizing.

This book builds on and draws from the substantial and visionary work of scholars who have been pioneers in detecting the footsteps of sixteenth-century women and who have provided both biographical studies and critical editions and translations of the women's works. The 1885 work by Mrs Annie Wittenmyer deserves special mention as the predecessor to this present book as an early attempt to provide biographies of several

of the women of the Reformation. The work benefits also from the rich studies on late medieval women's religiosity and from feminist scholars who have prepared the way for understanding the role of gender in history and theology. Their work is reflected in the bibliography.

Critical works on individual women and their writings and theologies are still coming. Just a few women, such as Marguerite de Navarre, have already attracted remarkable amounts of scholarship in different disciplines. Just a few, such as Argula von Grumbach and Katharina Schütz Zell, have stimulated a variety of recent articles and book-length studies. The English women of the Renaissance and Reformation have enjoyed substantial scholarly attention elsewhere, Queen Elizabeth and her father Henry VIII's wives in particular, and, as the primary goal has been to provide a good representation of women of the period in diverse roles, they are not subject to special attention in this study (see Levin, Carney, Barrett-Graves 2003, 1988). Women who were partners with famous reformers, such as Katharina von Bora Luther, have drawn miscellaneous interest, both hagiographical and polemical – as have the humanist noble ladies who sponsored reform from within the Catholic church, such as Vittoria Colonna, Giulia Gonzaga, Caterina Cibo, and Isabella Bresegna. The Anabaptist and “radical” women, for instance, Elisabeth van Leeuwarden and Ursula Jost, remain almost unknown, as do the Scandinavian women, among whom the Lutheran queen Dorothea of Denmark stands out. Theologically oriented women with a public voice, such as Katharina Schütz Zell, Argula von Grumbach, Marie Dentièrre, Olimpia Morata, and also prominent noblewomen such as Jeanne d'Albret and Renée de France, inspired some book-length treatises as early as the nineteenth century, and even greater interest has been shown in them recently, but mostly what has been written has been in languages other than English.

In English in particular, full critical biographies of many of the Reformation women are still to come. The same is true of critical editions and translations of women's texts, and of in-depth analysis of women's theologies in particular. This work highlights the works of those scholars who have already translated precious pieces into English. When quoting from these sources, the honor thus goes to the original translators and editors, whose works are detailed in the bibliography.

A word about referencing: In the final editing process, it was decided to exclude the heavy references accumulated in the course of the work, to ensure the clarity and the flow of the text. Only when quoting in detail or when a particular scholar offers an especially valuable or distinct interpretation or addresses a specific issue are authors and works cited in the text as well as in the bibliography. Otherwise, the reader is advised to turn to the end of the book and consult each chapter's bibliography where the works of most importance and those which are mostly used are listed, in addition to references for further reading.

Women in this Book

This book introduces women as receivers, agents, and implementers of the Protestant faith in sixteenth-century Europe. The focus is on women who, in writing or in other positions of leadership, publicly confessed their faith, lived out their vocations as Protestant women, and tangibly contributed to the cause of the Reformation in their time and place.