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«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

This article explores how Katharina Schütz Zell (ca.1498–1562), a first-generation reformer, and Caritas Pirckheimer (1467-1532), a Franciscan abbess and Schütz Zell's contemporary, used biblical texts in their own writings to construct public, female identities during the early years of the Lutheran Reformation.<sup>1</sup> Both women resolutely defended their own participation in the political and theological debate of their day, each using her understanding of female religious authority to do so. Whether defending existing female roles or seeking to construct new public identities for women, Pirckheimer and Schütz Zell made creative use of biblical texts to bolster their case. Especially interesting, and the focus of this article, is their use of gendered language from biblical texts. Their strategic use of gendered, biblical language not only demonstrated the two interpreters' understanding of what it meant to be a Protestant or Catholic woman; it enabled them both to make space for themselves and other women in the public debate.<sup>2</sup>

My main sources are Katharina Schütz Zell's letter from 1524 to the women in the town of Kentzingen and Caritas Pirckheimer's journal from the years 1524-1528. I will present the work of each interpreter in turn. First, however, a few words on the effects of the Reformation events on women in the public

- 1 An earlier version of this article was read at the Society of Biblical Literature annual meeting in Boston, November 2017. I have previously published on Schütz Zell's letter to the Kentzingen women in a Danish context; M. Bundvad: Iklæd jer et mandigt gemyt, der ligner Abrahams. De kvindelige reformatorer's konstruktion af protestantiske kvinderoller, in: Bibelen og Reformationen, Forum for Bibelsk Eksegese 20, edited by G. Buch-Hansen, M. Bundvad et al., Copenhagen 2017, 167-193.
- 2 These two thinkers are also brought together in U. Wiethaus: Female Authority and Religiosity in the Letters of Katharina Zell and Caritas Pirckheimer, *Mystics Quarterly*, 19.3 (1993) 123-135. Wiethaus does not address Pirckheimer and Schütz Zell's use of biblical language, however. Instead, her stated goal is to examine how the two women responded «to the growing pressures of being consigned to the domestic sphere, given that both enjoyed privileged access to the masculine realms of learning and politics» (125). While I am less inclined than Wiethaus to consider the advent of humanism and the Reformation an unequivocal disaster for women's lives, an evaluation of the effects of the Reformation on women's roles is not within the scope of this article (see below in the next section).





*Schütz Zell's Letter to the Women in Kentzingen*

Katharina Schütz Zell, born in 1487 or 1498, was the most prolific of the female first-generation reformer-authors. She came from an artisan family in Strasbourg. In 1523, she married a priest, Matthäus Zell, making her one of the very first women to take this consequence of her Protestant faith. Marrying was a very visible way for both Katharina and Matthäus to bear witness to their new faith. It was brave too: at this early point of the Reformation, the idea that priests might marry was controversial and it occupied a centre-stage position in the debate between Protestant and Catholic theologians.<sup>6</sup> As the wife of a priest, Schütz Zell understood herself as Matthäus' helper, at times even describing herself in language usually reserved for assistant priests.<sup>7</sup>

Schütz Zell published two pamphlets during the first year of her marriage. The first of these was the letter of comfort to the Protestant women in the town of Kentzingen. The second was a passionate defense of her marriage to Matthäus Zell.<sup>8</sup> Both publications testify strongly to Schütz Zell's exegetical ability. Especially noteworthy is her use of gendered images from the Bible to construct new, and often quite daring, roles and identities for Protestant women. The two pamphlets also demonstrate Schütz Zell's attention to the problems of «ordinary people.»<sup>9</sup> This exegetical-theological and empathetic focus is characteristic for Schütz Zell's authorship throughout her written career.

In 1524, the Protestant preacher, Jacob Otter, had to flee the town of Kentzingen as military forces arrived to bring the town back to Catholicism. Some 150 of the town's men accompanied him. Unable to return to Kentzin-

6 In Strasbourg specifically, the issue of married priests was a central point of contention during the earliest years of the Reformation, resulting in crises between episcopate, city council, and the married priests themselves. Lay people, however, often supported the priests' right to marry, considering this a better solution, morally speaking, than the presence of unmarried priests who did not consistently live a celibate life. See E.A. McKee, *Katharina Schütz Zell. Volume 2: The Writings. A Critical Edition*, Leiden 1999, 5-17, and T. Kaufmann: *Pfarrfrau und Publizistin – das reformatorische «Amt» der Katharina Zell*, *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung* 23.2 (1996) 170-174.

7 See Methuen: *Your Daughters Shall Prophesy* (n. 5), 105.

8 In this paper, I make use of Elsie Anne McKee's excellent critical edition of Schütz Zell's writings (McKee: *Volume 2: The Writings* [n. 6]). When citing these writings, I refer to the page number of McKee's critical edition. To distinguish between the Kentzingen letter and the marriage apologia, both published in 1524, I refer to the former – and earliest – as Schütz Zell 1524a, and the latter as Schütz Zell 1524b.

9 See further, McKee: *Volume 2: The Writings* (n. 6), viii.











entirely on the women's response to their current crisis. Perhaps Schütz Zell considered her gender a non-issue in this particular, epistolary intervention. In any case, it might have lessened her letter's rhetorical effect, had she brought up awkward questions about her own role and authority. In later publications – where she addresses men as well as women – Schütz Zell repeatedly lays out her understanding of her responsibilities as the wife of a priest and defends her participation in public, theological debates vigorously. In her apologia for her and Matthias's marriage, for example, she uses a range of biblical passages in which women and other «lesser» creatures prophesy, judge the unrighteous, and bless to defend her participation in the ongoing debate about priestly marriages.<sup>23</sup> Throughout her written career, then, Schütz Zell remains committed to finding strategies to make space for women as witnesses of faith, even when they break with common expectation towards gender.<sup>24</sup>

*Caritas Pirckheimer's Journal of the Reformation Years at St. Clare's Convent*

Let us now turn to Caritas Pirckheimer who was born in Eichstatt in 1467 into an influential, patrician family. Pirckheimer's father allowed her to be educated together with her brother and at the age of twelve she was sent to St Clare's convent school in Nürnberg.<sup>25</sup> After completing her novitiate, she became the head of this school, and in 1503 she was elected abbess.

Pirckheimer's journal traces the tumultuous years from 1524-1528 when the Protestant city council in Nürnberg sought to reform and ultimately close down St Clare's convent.<sup>26</sup> Not meant for immediate publication, the journal was written to be preserved as a historical document detailing these events. It is

23 Ibid., 46-47.

24 See also Schütz Zell's speech at her husband's funeral, which, as mentioned above, includes reflections on her role as Matthias's helper in language that would normally be reserved for assistant priests (McKee: Volume 2: The Writings [n. 6], 70-94, and Methuen: Your Daughters Shall Prophesy [n. 5], 105). Perhaps less controversially, Schütz Zell includes multiple examples from women's daily lives in her preface to the edition of the Bohemian Brethren Hymnbook that she published in 1534 (McKee: Volume 2: The Writings [n. 6], 58-64).

25 For a discussion of Pirckheimer's humanist education, see P.S. Datsko Barker: *Caritas Pirckheimer: A Female Humanist Confronts the Reformation*, *Sixteenth Century Journal* XXVI/2 (1995) 259-272.

26 I make use of Paul A. MacKenzie's translation of Pirckheimer's Reformation journal; C. Pirckheimer: *A Journal of the Reformation Years, 1524-1528*, translated by P.A. MacKenzie, Cambridge 2006. The four surviving manuscripts of the journal are currently in the Staatsarchiv Nürnberg.

an immensely rich historical source, containing the written correspondence between city council officials, Protestant theologians, and Pirckheimer herself.<sup>27</sup> Pirckheimer's ongoing account of the events in the convent provides the wider context for the letters, ties together otherwise disparate-seeming events, and describes her in-person interactions with representatives from the city council, family members of her nuns, and Protestant theologians. Theological, practical, and legal concerns intermingle in the journal, and they cannot neatly be separated from each other. Pirckheimer treats them all as part of one, sustained project: the survival of St Clare and cloistered life.<sup>28</sup>

The journal is steeped in gendered concerns. In it, Pirckheimer responds to an increasing list of demands from the Nürnberg city council: the nuns at St Clare must reform their dress, open up the convent, sever their ties to the Franciscan monks, accept Protestant preachers and confessors,<sup>29</sup> and pay higher taxes.<sup>30</sup> They are insistent that Pirckheimer declare her nuns' vows unbinding and that she encourage them to leave the convent. While Pirckheimer agrees that her nuns have the right to leave if they want to, she also refuses to give way on doctrinal matters and she tirelessly defends the right of herself and her nuns to live in accordance with the institutional framework of the convent, should they choose to do so.<sup>31</sup>

Pirckheimer emphasizes that she reads the Bible and reflects on it herself.<sup>32</sup> This activity is not a Lutheran preserve. She is not dependent on the

27 The journal also contains two narrative voices. While most of it has been written in the voice of Pirckheimer herself, the journal switches to a third-person account towards the end (chapters 56-69, Pirckheimer: *A Journal* [n. 26], 153-180. Pirckheimer may have dictated these final chapters of the journal, which describe the convent's financial problems due to taxation, as well as the troublesome presence of a nun with Lutheran sympathies in the convent. Matters are complicated further by the fact that, in the manuscripts of the journal that survive, four different hands have been identified. A fifth hand, MacKenzie suggests, may be Pirckheimer's own, as «it appears in marginal notes, corrections and additions»; MacKenzie's introduction to Pirckheimer: *A Journal* (n. 26), 10.

28 The project ultimately fails: St. Clare is forbidden from accepting new novices, and when the last nun in the convent dies in 1596, St Clare is closed down.

29 See for example Pirckheimer: *A Journal* (n. 26), 35-37, 41-57, 62-65.

30 See *ibid.*, 158-172.

31 *Ibid.*, 31-34.

32 «We have the Old and New Testament here within these walls just as you do outside these walls. We read it day and night in the choir, at table, in Latin and German, in common and each on her own as she will»; Pirckheimer: *A Journal* (n. 26), 16.

convent's confessors or the Protestant city council to understand the biblical texts. Her journal is saturated with quotes from and references to biblical texts. As did also Schütz Zell, Pirckheimer makes effective rhetorical use of gendered references from the Bible. In addition to her use of the biblical texts, Pirckheimer relies heavily on the framework of the convent to defend her identity and faith as a Christian woman. Her entire journal is a defense of this institution, from which her own identity and authority come. The paradoxical freedom of the physically imprisoned, cloistered life is a central theme in the journal. Pirckheimer uses this theme to great effect, vacillating between emphasizing the simplicity and remoteness of her life on the one hand and underlining her strong authority and responsibility as the leader of the convent community on the other. This creates an ongoing, productive tension between the private and the public, the withdrawn and the engaged.<sup>33</sup> Two examples from the journal will demonstrate these rhetorical strategies at play in Pirckheimer's correspondence with the city council and with Protestant theologians.

Pirckheimer was in regular correspondence with Kaspar Nützel, the convent's superintendent, who oversaw the communication between the convent and the city council. In the early years of the journal, one of the main issues in these letters is the convent's attachment to the Franciscan order. The council has demanded that this attachment be severed and Pirckheimer approve confessors chosen by the council instead. She will not accept this, and, writing to the council through Nützel, she uses her identity as a cloistered woman with authority to object:

Your honors know well that in temporal matters we have always been subordinate and willingly obedient. But ... do not force us in matters concerning our conscience. It would be a terrible, pitiful affair if we, in addition to the physical enclosure to which we have willingly submitted, would also be imprisoned in our conscience at a time in which the freedom of the Gospel is being preached.<sup>34</sup>

33 The tension between the withdrawn and the engaged was the focal point of *Solitudes*, a recent research centre at Copenhagen University. While they did not study Pirckheimer's writings, their publications on this productive tension are insightful in the context of St Clare too. See especially *Journal of Early Modern Christianity* 1.2 (2014), a *Solitudes* theme issue.

34 Pirckheimer: *A Journal* (n. 26), 44.

Casting herself and her nuns in the role of Susanna from the book of Daniel, Pirckheimer rejects rumours that anything indecent has been going on between the Franciscan monks and the nuns at St. Clare: «we are perhaps speaking with St. Susanna: From all sides we are full of fear, yet it is better to fall into the anger of men, than into the hands of the Living God.»<sup>35</sup> She insists that the conscience of the nuns is clear and must remain free. Should the city council decide to take their confessors away from them – in part because of fabricated rumours – the nuns will bear it, but they will not accept so-called «worldly priests» as replacement confessors. Instead, they will confess to nobody at all, trusting only in God's mercy.

Pirckheimer does not pull her punches. In the story of Susanna, it is the men who have assaulted her who are disingenuously laying the blame for their crime at her feet. Applying the story as an analogy to what is happening at St. Clare's, Pirckheimer casts not only the anonymous gossipers, but also, indirectly, the members of city council in the role of the criminal elders from the tale of Susanna.

In another interesting section of the journal, Pirckheimer debates the Protestant theologian, Doctor Linck, about the proper Christian – and especially the Christian female – life. He encourages her to trust in God, not worry about material things, and leave the cloister so that she may do good in the wider community. While he does not quote them directly, Linck is most likely referring to passages like Matthew 6:25-34 and Philippians 4:6 when he argues that «in the Scriptures all needless worry is forbidden.»<sup>36</sup> In her response to his letter, Pirckheimer refutes his arguments with characteristic sarcasm, interpreting the scriptural prohibition against worrying in light of everyday, female life in general and everyday cloistered life especially: «God has forbidden unnecessary worry, but it is also not fitting that one should be completely without worry. If we did not cook anything we would have to wait a long time until the food cooked itself.»<sup>37</sup> At the forefront of Pirckheimer's argument in this part of her letter stands the usefulness of the cloistered life, namely the care and mutual compassion of the nuns:

We know that we should aid and help our neighbours faithfully. We also hope that we and our sisters do that. ... If we all left the cloister right now, then we could not be

35 Ibid., 45.

36 Ibid., 119.

37 Ibid., 120.

of service to anyone because of that. We have, after all, really enough to do with our care and service of one another. For we have many old, sick sisters who are in need of every care and attention. They are also members of Christ, who will accept what is done to them as if it were done to him.<sup>38</sup>

In contrast to Schütz Zell, Pirckheimer does not need to develop new models for Christian womanhood. She also does not need to reinvent what it might mean to be a publicly engaged woman. The perimeters for her public engagement are already clearly laid out by the convent system, and she is protective of them. As such, Pirckheimer aims to defend already existing female roles, rather than crafting new ones. This too requires an effective use of the Bible and its potential to bolster particular female identities.

### *Concluding Remarks*

In this article, I have wanted to showcase different ways in which women in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century used biblical, gendered language to construct public, female identities. Surveying texts written by just two women can obviously not tell us how *all* theologically engaged women navigated issues of gender in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. Instead, the texts by Schütz Zell and Pirckheimer are useful case studies for exploring how *some* Protestant and Catholic women defended, reworked and reimagined the possible roles of women.

In the letter to the Kentzingen women, Schütz Zell seeks to build a resilient Protestant identity not just for herself, but also for other women. Caught in the crisis events of the Reformation, these women need to infuse their self-understanding with a particular kind of manly courage and obedience. 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 and Isaac. While Schütz Zell does not emphasize her own public identity in this letter, her later publications cast her in the role of her husband's helper – empowering her letter-writing to both Christian communities and individual theologians, as well as her publication activities.

Rather than creating new female identities, Pirckheimer aims to preserve a threatened female role, one upon which her own authority as a publicly engaged woman and community leader is based. Emphasising both the withdrawn and the engaged aspects of convent life, Pirckheimer defends

38 Ibid., 122.

the right of herself and her nuns to live cloistered, Christian lives in accordance with their faith. Her interpretation of biblical texts in the context of female life in general and convent life in particular is an essential part of this defense.

There is a sense of urgency in the writings of Schütz Zell and Pirckheimer regarding possible female roles in their rapidly changing political and religious landscape. While Pirckheimer incisively defends certain forms of at-risk female authority, Schütz Zell imaginatively sketches new self-perceptions and public roles for Christian women, closely tied to the theological potential of Lutheranism.

Though Pirckheimer and Schütz Zell are not primarily remembered as exegetes, it is their creative and skillful interpretation of biblical texts that allows them to defend and develop public roles for themselves and other 16<sup>th</sup> century women. They enlist the support of central passages and figures from the Bible to create space for themselves in a shifting political landscape, redefining the perimeters of female engagement in public life and debate.

This article explores how Katharina Schütz Zell, a first-generation reformer, and Caritas Pirckheimer, a Franciscan abbess and Schütz Zell's contemporary, used biblical texts in their own writings to construct public, female identities during the early years of the Lutheran Reformation. While Pirckheimer vigorously defended cloistered life and, with it, certain forms of at-risk female authority, Schütz Zell drew on the theological potential of Lutheranism to sketch new self-perceptions and public roles for Christian women. They both made creative use of biblical texts to bolster their case. Especially interesting, and the focus of this article, is their use of gendered, biblical language to articulate female roles in their rapidly changing political and religious landscape.

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