Franz Synders, *Wild Boar Hunt*

"A wild boar from the forest"[1]
Martin Luther as a Model of Rebellion, 1520-1525

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[1]Leo X. *Exsurge Domine*. Papal Encyclicals Online.

In 1525, peasants, serfs, artisans, and townsmen throughout Germany revolted as they had many times before. The stripping of rights and communal autonomy, imposition of new duties and taxes, and restrictions on mobility and marriage had for three-quarters of a century slowly degraded quality of life for commoners. In this revolt, the Peasants' War of 1525, the rebels mistakenly believed they had an ally in Martin Luther. Rather, he would prove an enemy, whose call to crush the revolt would lead to the deaths of 100,000 peasants.[2] Luther asserted that rebellion was a sin against God because it rejected the temporal authorities God had placed in power. Insurrection was robbery not solely through plunder but through the serfs' removal of themselves from their lords. A serf was the property of his lord, and so to leave was to steal the lord's property. Despite Luther's stance that revolt against temporal authority was a sin, he unwittingly encouraged resistance through his preaching, writing, and personal example. As a virile, rebellious German, Luther was a model for the rebellion he rejected. In spite of his views, the peasants believed he would support them for three reasons. First, they received comparatively little of Luther's writing against rebellion because much of his clearest writing on this topic was in Latin and therefore not widely read outside the university trained classes. Second, in the five years leading up to the Peasants' Revolt of 1525, Luther had said a great deal in support of peasant causes, and spoke with vehemence in their defense against temporal and clerical nobility. Third, through his actions and language, Luther had, himself, acquired a rebel image. For the most part, his was a

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[2]Peter Blicke, *The Revolution of 1525: The German Peasants' War from a New Perspective,* tran. Thomas A. Brady Jr., and H. C. Erik Midelfort (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 165.

positive image, that of a robust, heroic, and manly success against great odds. Such a picture offered peasants a hopeful means of recovering lost rights and status.

HISTORIOGRAPHICAL SURVEY

In the historiography of the Peasants' War, with the caveat that it was not Luther's intention to serve as an example for the 1525 revolt, and that his theology was only incompletely both available to and understood by those who believed it justified revolt, it is not without precedent to say that Martin Luther's own rebellion encouraged the very defiance he rejected in others. Viewing Luther as an example of rebellion are Keith Moxey and Julius Ruff.[3] Ruff observes, "While Luther certainly condemned the revolution of 1525, the example of his defiance of Rome could only have enhanced peasant willingness to challenge authority of every sort."[4] While Neelak Tjernagel does not comment directly on Luther in the Peasants' War, he studies Luther's insolence to Henry VIII, which, while not directed at Luther's emperor Charles V, was directed against a temporal authority who was sufficiently offended to appeal to Luther's prince to reprimand the theologian.[5] Luther's impudence toward the English monarch was printed and widely enjoyed in the German-speaking world and can be seen as having fed the image of Luther as rebellious.

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[3]Moxey sees Luther as having been in revolt, "Luther's early writings, composed during the period of his own revolt against Rome..." Keith Moxey, *Peasants, Warriors, and Wives: Popular Imagery in the Reformation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 13.

[4]Julius R. Ruff, *Violence in Early Modern Europe: 1500-1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 208.

[5]Neelak Tjernagel, *Henry VIII and the Lutherans: A Study in Anglo-Lutheran Relations from 1521-1547*. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing, 1965), 18. No reprimand occurred.

Some historians see Luther as a model for non-violent resistance. Martin Brecht sees the Reformer as an example and as paving the way for the initial non-violent stages of the 1525 insurrection marked by a refusal to pay the tithe.[6] James Stayer goes so far as to argue that the peasants, following Luther's non-physical example, never intended for violence to break out.[7] For Stayer, "The bloody war that began in April 1525 came not from the commoners but from the mercenary armies of the princes."[8] While it is accurate that the peasants began peacefully, such a stance perhaps gives too little weight to the tradition of revolt in late medieval Germany. Stayer does go further, however, and explores a fascinating idea. Viewing Luther as a model of specifically linguistic rebellion through his German Bible and many publications in German, he characterizes the Peasants' War as being in part a war of language and culture merged with class conflict, "Now the revolt of German against Latin merged with a revolt of the commoners against the clergy and aristocracy."[9] Indeed, a form of aristocratic proto-nationalism ran high in this period, and Luther was misunderstood by imperial German nobles as well as by commoners.

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[6]Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther, His Road to Reformation: 1483-1521,* tran. James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 358.

[7]James M. Stayer, *German Peasants' War and Anabaptist Community of Goods* (Montreal: McGill Queen's University Press, 1994), 6.

[8]Ibid.

[9]James Stayer, "The Anabaptist Revolt and Political and Religious Power," in Benjamin W. Redekop and Calvin W. Redekop eds., *Power, Authority, and the Anabaptist Tradition. (*Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 52.

Amid the plethora of approaches to Luther's impact on the revolt of 1525 is the pursuit of the extent to which Luther was personally responsible for the revolt. Seeing Luther as bearing great responsibility for the rebellion through his example, theology, and language is Erik Erikson. He quotes Luther before the revolution expressing disgust with bishops and priests, "What do they better deserve than a strong uprising which will sweep them from the earth? And we would smile did it happen."[10] Also blaming Luther for the revolution is Hartmann Grisar, "Amongst the circumstances which influenced Luther, one was his tardy recognition of the fact that the course he had first started on, with the noisy proclamation of freedom of thought and action in the sphere of religion, could lead to no other goal than that of universal anarchy and the destruction of both religion and morality."[11] Crediting rather than blaming Luther is Friedrich Engels who finds Luther's "preaching of Christian freedom," to have sparked the revolution, "The lightning thrust by Luther caused a conflagration."[12] Taking a more objective stance than crediting or blaming, Heiko Oberman holds Luther aloof from those who drew on his theology, for while they logically saw Luther's views as supporting their own, they were wrong.[13]

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[10]Erik Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1958), 228.

[11]Hartmann Grisar, *Luther,* vol. 3, ed. Luigi Cappadelta, tran. E.M. Lamond (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1913), 4.

[12]Friedrich Engels, *The German Revolutions: The Peasant War in Germany and Germany: Revolution and Counter-Revolution,* ed. Leonard Krieger (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 39-40.

[13]Oberman acknowledges that Luther sympathized with the peasants' plight and tried to mediate in the Peasants' War, a mediation that will be discussed later. Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil,* tran. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New York: Image, 1989), 45.

Not all historians view Luther as a cause of unrest. Some assert, as does Peter Blickle, that Luther was an extension of his culture's tradition of rebellion, an extension who created neither the movement nor its religious justification:

> The popular movement reached far back into the fifteenth century and Luther created neither the demand for change nor even its religious expression. He did offer the movement two things. First, his own biblicism strengthened the popular doctrine of 'godly law' as the norm for a Christian social order. Second, much more influential than his theology was his personal example as a rebel against the two great authorities of Christendom, the pope and the Holy Roman emperor.[14]

Sharing Blickle's view that Luther only added to that which was already an extant tradition of rebellion is Hans-Christoph Rublack. Rublack argues that the presentation of lists of grievances and the use of unrest if a formal presentation did not achieve the desired results, were nothing new. What Luther added was biblicism that strengthened the common man's argument and created a great tinderbox of plurality in scriptural interpretation. Rublack views the Peasants' Revolt as part of the process of controlling religious discourse and bringing it to heel.[15]

Commenting too on Luther as neither a cause nor a model but as part of the whole is Robert Scribner who explores the imagery of the pre-revolt period wherein Luther was portrayed as a saint, a national hero, a heroic monk with a club, and as a champion of the peasants.[16] The Reformer was not always consulted before being placarded in one camp or another, and Kurt Stadtwald notes that both peasants and nationalists "attempted to co-

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[14]Blicke, *The Revolution of 1525,* xxiii.

[15]Rublack, 102-120.

[16]R.W. Scribner, *Popular Culture and Movements in Reformation Germany* (London: Hambledon Press, 1987), 332-333.

opt Luther's theology and....viewed in his rebellion an example or a proof that now was the time."[17] Joining these historians in viewing Luther as part of the whole is Lyndal Roper. One of few scholars to examine the Reformer from a gendered perspective, Roper views both the Peasants' War and the Reformation as expressions of virility but does not comment on Luther's role as an example.[18] As a result, yet to be explored is the impact of gender on the question of Luther's example of rebellion, which is the focus of this paper. The free peasants who had lost communal autonomy and subsistence rights, many of whom had been impressed into serfdom, had lost power. For the men among them, this meant emasculation. Luther's model of rebellion taken within a tradition of rebellion emboldened the discontented with an example to follow in asserting themselves.

There are a great many loci of focus in the matter of Luther and the Peasants' Revolt of 1525. Among them are Luther as a model for rebellion and as a model for specifically non-violent and linguistic revolt. As well, historians have focused on Luther's personal culpability and on the Reformer within an extant tradition of insurrection already rooted in religion. There too have been those whose foci have been Luther in imagery, the impact of these images on unrest, and the role of gender in both the Reformation and the Peasants' War. This paper examines Luther as the unwilling model of rebellion as a virile and successful means of finding remedy for grievances.

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[17]Kurt Stadtwald, "Pope Alexander III's Humiliation of Emperor Frederick Barbarossa As An Episode in Sixteenth-Century German History," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 23, no. 4 (Winter 1992): 760.

[18]Lyndal Roper, *Oedipus & the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 45.

BACKGROUND TO THE WAR

As a result of economic growth and development in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, serfdom had disappeared in many parts of Germany.[19] In the mid-fifteenth century, however, an agricultural crisis brought about what Peter Blickle calls a "second serfdom."[20] Blickle describes the experience of many German "free peasants and ecclesiastical yeomen," as a "toboggan ride to serfdom by which [they] were forced by jail sentences, monetary fines, and confiscation of estates 'voluntarily' to accept the abbey's serfdom."[21] Making the reintroduction of serfdom highly objectionable were struggles of subsistence and immobility, the inability of many to marry because of local consanguinity caused by immobility, and the rule of the 'baser hand', which rendered serfs all children produced in a marriage between a free tenant and a serf'.[22] Also making the reintroduction of serfdom highly objectionable were more severe death taxes than those paid by free tenants and a sense of shame and social stigma in being a serf.[23] Humiliating to all and emasculating to men, serfdom was all the more resented for its perceived newness.[24]

Just as the reintroduction of serfdom was objectionable largely for its perceived novelty, so too were the limits on peasant communal autonomy and subsistence rights,

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[19]Blicke, *The Revolution of 1525,*70.

[20]Ibid.*,* 71, 92-93.

[21]Ibid.*,* 53.

[22]Ibid.*,* 53, 69.

[23]Ibid.*,* 53, 69.

[24]Ibid.*,* 54-55.

which also emerged in the mid-fifteenth century from the agrarian crisis.[25] Not recalling these new laws, peasants argued, "Law arises not from innovation but from custom."[26] The model of the New Testament community now readily accessible in Scripture justified the peasants' desire for a return of local autonomy, which had been gradually replaced by the authority of local lords.[27] Loss of autonomy, Peter Blickle asserts, was a primary cause of the Peasants' War.[28] Following historical precedent, the peasants did not use violence as a first resort. Rather they refused to pay tithes and seigniorial dues and expressed their frustration formally to their lords.

There was within the German-speaking lands of the Holy Roman Empire a tradition of rebellion. Revolt was not solely a peasant phenomenon, but while artisans and lesser burghers participated in insurrection, it was often viewed as peasant driven.[29]

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[25]Ibid., 34.

[26]Ibid., 34. Among these new 'innovations' were the extension of the death tax to many who had not been required to pay it, the requirement to pay fees for wood, the loss of the right to collect acorns, the loss of communal rights to pasture land, forests, and streams, as presented in the Twelve Articles presented in 1525 to nobles in areas of unrest: "*The Fifth Article.*—In the fifth place we are aggrieved in the matter of wood-cutting, for the noble folk have appropriated all the woods to themselves alone. If a poor man requires wood he must pay double for it. It is our opinion in regard to a wood which has fallen into the hands of a lord whether spiritual or temporal, that unless it was duly purchased it should revert again to the community." James Harvey Robinson, tran., "The Twelve Articles of the Peasants," in Oliver J. Thatchers, ed. *The Library of Original Sources* (New York: University Research Extension, 1907), 137-138.

[27]Peter Blicke, *Obedient Germans? A Rebuttal: New View of German History,* trans. Thomas A. Brady Jr. (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1981), 51, 83; Blicke, *The Revolution of 1525,* 33.

[28]Local autonomy had been lost among artisans, townsmen, even imperial knights and mayors as well, and this is a primary reason they joined the revolt. Ibid., 77-96, 208-209.

Adding to peasant willingness to revolt was that unrest did not by any means always end in violent suppression; often unrest, the presentation of a list of grievances, or even mere verbal chastisement resulted in improvement for common people.[30] The mark of a successful revolt in Germany was the limited seeking only of the reversal of new impositions. Through negotiation, peasant revolts were often settled in a manner that met at least some demands.[31] Peasants could therefore expect to achieve something more than just vented frustration or violent suppression. Combined with Luther's success in his own rebellion against the papacy, the fact that rebellion had not always ended in crushing military defeat but had historically offered some relief for the complainants, increased the viability of revolt as an option.

In his work, *Obedient Germans? A Rebuttal,* Peter Blickle shows that while the observation of *fin-de-siècle* sociologist Max Weber that "the German [is] the very embodiment of the 'subject,'" was accurate in Weber's period, this observation would not have been true of medieval or Reformation era Germans.[32] (Figure 1) This chart of urban insurrection does not even include agrarian revolts. Blickle notes "scores of revolts before the Peasants' War", and "compared with France or England, one of the empire's peculiarities was the relative infrequence of noble revolts....approximately 250 urban and 130 rural revolts -- far outdistanced the intensity of political resistance in other European

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[29]Ibid., 71.

[30]Blicke, *The Revolution of 1525,* 106; Rublack, 113.

[31]Blicke, *Obedient Germans?* 67.

[32]Ibid., 2.

countries."[33] This leads one to believe that revolt was a German phenomenon, not solely a German peasant phenomenon.

Blickle finds that while Luther did not create revolt and rather superimposes him onto the pre-existing and far more radical social worldview of the revolutionaries, Luther, "did offer the movement two things. First, his own biblicism strengthened the popular doctrine of 'godly law' as the norm for a Christian social order. Second, much more influential than his theology was his personal example as a rebel." Blickle argues that the will to rebel and the notion of a society structured on the egalitarianism of the Gospel was a natural outgrowth of the extant belief among the peasantry in the German communal system of village and city government.[34] The importance of the authority of the community was augmented by Luther's 1523 tract called, *That a Christian Assembly or Commune Has the Right and the Power to Judge All Doctrines and to Call or Dismiss Teachers, along with Justifications from the Bible*. In it he wrote that Paul had approved, "no doctrine or teaching, unless it is tested by the community, to whom it is preached, and found by them to be sound."[35] While limited to the spiritual realm for Luther, peasants saw this as reinforcing the idea of a return to communal independence and authority.

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[33]Ibid., 62, 81.

[34]Blicke, *The Revolution of 1525,* xxiii.

[35]Blicke, *Obedient Germans?*, 88; Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 39, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut T. Lehmann, Hilton C. Oswald (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 306.

The loss of communal authority meant a loss of authority for all within the community, and a further subjugation to the lord. Transference of authority impacted expressions of masculinity, for such a transference absconded with authority once held by male leaders of the town. Lyndal Roper views both the Reformation and the Peasants' War as masculine expressions.[36] (Figure 2) Roper describes the embodiment of virility in the sturdy and then-rebelling peasant as exemplified in this typical woodcut from the period:

> For a brief moment in the Peasants' War, the revolutionary movement itself was symbolized by a male figure, a peasant who, with his flail, [in this case, a pronged hoe] confident pose and rough boots, had all the attributes of robust masculinity.[37]

Roper offers an explanation based on legal records and sermons, that masculinity was expressed in unruly behavior and was viewed as something difficult if not impossible to control:

> What first strikes the historian of the early modern town about masculinity is its sheer disruptiveness. Men posed a serious public order problem, young bloods endangering the safety of the streets at night, drunken husbands beating their wives to within an inch of their lives, guilds fostering a male brotherhood which might even foment political unrest."[38]

Certainly rebellion was a form of unruly behavior. Roper notes that:

> the very rituals which were meant to display masculinity were also the events which repeatedly led to disorder and destructive competition within the city....Events in the festive calendar of guild life -- its processions, dances and shooting matches -- had periodically to be banned because they so often ended in fiscticuffs.[39]

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[36]Roper, 45.

[37]Ibid.

[38]Ibid., 107.

[39]Ibid., 109.

Unruly, violent behavior was perceived to be even more common in peasant culture as evidenced in woodcuts of peasant festivals. (Figure 3) Precisely in the middle of the image is a hand that has been cut off in a brawl. Violence, unruliness, drunkenness, and gluttony were the themes in woodcuts of peasant holidays, and while these were far from positive things, violence, unruliness, and drunkenness were arguably masculine.

In villages, the challenges of masculinity were many, particularly as rights were stripped away.[40] Peasants at the top and in the middle resented those nearer the bottom for taking up valued space in the use of common land and in the collection of wood.[41] In addition, Blickle argues that those sons who could not inherit land often had to hire "themselves out as field hands on their brother's farm," or become, "mere cottagers in the village so long as the paternal holding remained undivided."[42] Men could try their hand in cities and towns, but met with difficulty as cities were not as liberal in admission to citizenship as in the past. Roper shows the struggle of these men to be men, not a drain on their communities and families. Often to succeed in any fashion, "such internal family conflicts were resolved only when younger sons decided to choose the uncertainties of mercenary military service rather than suffer a loss of social status within the village community."[43] Luther's example of a successful rebel, one proudly descended from

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[40]Blicke, *The Revolution of 1525,* 52.

[41]Ibid.

[42]Ibid.

[43]Ibid.

peasant stock, must have offered these men hope that they could again be men, not a burden on their families, but men able to marry and able to provide.

Within this context, unrest simmered, and it is clear that the peasants assumed Luther would agree with both their cause and their means or at least not oppose their means, for in two documents written by the rebels of 1525, Luther topped the list of theologians to be asked to sit on a council for the interpretation of divine law.[44] Besides which, the rebels initially followed Luther's example at the Diet of Worms in 1521. As did Luther in his defense, throughout the *Twelve Articles,* the peasants wove Scripture to bolster their claims. They professed a belief in submission to authority, albeit to duly elected authority similar to what they had experienced under the old communal system and to what they found in the New Testament.[45] The peasants of 1525 sound strikingly similar to Luther at the Diet of Worms in 1521. Here is Luther before the emperor, "Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason....I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God."[46] Here are the peasants arguing the same principle in the *Twelve Articles*, "We, therefore, take it for granted that you will release us from serfdom as true Christians, unless it should be shown us from the Gospel that we are serfs."[47] Luther himself notes, if not the similarity to his own statement, at least the correctness of their attitude:

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[44]Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 46, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut T. Lehmann, Hilton C. Oswald (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 7.

[45]Robinson, tran. *The Twelve Articles of the Peasants*, 135-140.

[46]Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 32, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut T. Lehmann, Hilton C. Oswald (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), 111-112.

> The thing about them that pleases me most is that, in the twelfth article, they offer to accept instruction gladly and willingly, if there is need or necessity for it, and are willing to be corrected, to the extent that it can be done by clear, plain, undeniable passages of Scripture.[48]

Clearly, from their naming Luther foremost on their list of theologians and by their imitating Luther's method of argument, the peasants saw something in Luther's words and actions that caused them to believe he would support or at least not oppose them.

With some exceptions, the lords in 1525 did not respond to formal, peaceful complaints, and the peasants resorted to violence in which they destroyed or seized castles, cities, monasteries, and convents.[49] Because the greater part of the imperial forces were occupied in Italy, the peasants had some military success until the emperor's forces returned after Charles V's February victory at the Battle of Pavia. At the encouragement of Martin Luther, the nobility now in full power crushed the rebellion, killing a hundred thousand peasants.[50]

WHAT LUTHER SAID AGAINST REBELLION

The average German below the level academic elite did not have access to a clear message on Luther's view of rebellion. What s/he had was a bewildering set of subtly nuanced if not contradictory statements, often within the same document. Making these statements more prone to misunderstanding was their stridence. Since the outset of unrest, Luther had been trying to quell the fighting through the spoken word but was

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[47]Robinson, tran. *The Twelve Articles of the Peasants,* 135-140.

[48]Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 46, 17.

[49]Ibid., 47-48. Through the presentation of a list of grievances and some unrest, the common people of Nördlingen received some relief from taxation. Rublack, 113, 116.

[50]Ruff, 208-209.

heckled at times and found that his preaching did nothing to stop the uprising.[51] Luther wrote in response to the *Twelve Articles*, a touching and reasonable *Admonition to Peace, A Reply to the Twelve Articles of the Peasants in Swabia* addressed to both peasants and their lords. He was concerned not solely with the misappropriation of his theology but also the inevitability of innocent casualties in areas where fighting would take place if the revolt continued.[52] The *Admonition to Peace,* however, came out too late. It did not reach the public until after the full outbreak of war.[53] Yet this writing is instructive to the modern student, for it demonstrates Luther's central assertion on resistance, "The fact that the rulers are wicked and unjust does not excuse disorder and rebellion, for the punishing of wickedness is not the responsibility of everyone, but of the worldly rulers who bear the sword."[54] For Luther, at times, the wicked were entrusted by God to punish the wicked. This was consistent with his view of society as something ordered by God:

> You assert that no one is to be the serf of anyone else, because Christ has made us all free....Read what St. Paul teaches about servants, who, at that time, were all slaves. This article....proposes robbery, for it suggests that every man should take his body away from his lord, even though his body is the lord's property....This article would make all men equal, and turn the spiritual kingdom of Christ into a worldly, external kingdom; and that is impossible. A worldly kingdom cannot exist without an inequality of persons, some being free, some imprisoned, some lords, some subjects, etc.[55]

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[51]Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 46, 47-48.

[52]Ibid., 42.

[53]Ibid., 47-48.

[54]Ibid., 25.

[55]Ibid., 39.

Baptism did not make men physically free, and Luther disagreed with arguments for New Testament models of a Christian community in his world. And yet, in aggressive language, Luther burdened clerics and nobles with responsibility for the unrest and painted peasants as instruments of God:

> We have no one on earth to thank for this disastrous rebellion, except you princes and lords, and especially you blind bishops and mad priests and monks, whose hearts are hardened, even to the present day.... as temporal rulers you do nothing but cheat and rob the people so that you may lead a life of luxury and extravagance. The poor common people cannot bear it any longer....You must become different men and yield to God's word. If you do not do this amicably and willingly, then you will be compelled to do it by force and destruction. If these peasants do not compel you, others will. Even though you were to defeat them all, they would still not be defeated, for God will raise up others. It is his will to defeat you, and you will be defeated. It is not the peasants, dear lords, who are resisting you; it is God himself, to visit your raging upon you.[56]

Note the association of the peasants with God's judgment in this statement, "If these peasants do not compel you, others will. Even though you were to defeat them all, they would still not be defeated, for God will raise up others." This passage could easily be read as saying that God was against the enemies of the peasants, and that peasants would be used at some point to destroy these enemies of God. Had the *Admonition* gotten out in time, it might for these reasons not have stopped any violence at all but have added fuel to peasant fire. Comfortable with contradiction, Luther sympathized with the peasants' plight using far too gentle language toward them in this and other documents to encourage them not to fight in contrast to the violent language applied to scold nobles. But all this was moot, for neither the peasants nor the nobility saw the *Admonition to Peace* until war was well underway.

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[56]Ibid., 19-20.

War, once begun, was difficult to stop as noted in this sympathetic song about the Peasant Revolt authored by a Nördlingen weaver:

> The peasants everywhere
> They have become rebellious
> In the German nation
> And made an organization of their own
> Perhaps they will succeed.
>
> What is it that they want
> These good and honorable folk
> A true guiding star now shines
> Showing that now is the time
> It all happens with God's will....
>
> ....the rift has grown so large
> And who can mend it now
> I really don't understand it
> Things will not get in order
> But will get worse and worse.[57]

Sympathetic and insightful, this song conveys the chaos of war, which would rage until it was squelched by one side or the other.

When Luther realized the *Admonition to Peace* was not going to quell the unrest, he penned, *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants,* which urged overwhelming violence to smash the rebellion. In *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes,* Luther's views were finally unambiguous. He wrote to the moment out of fear of all Germany being swallowed up in lawlessness and war. Perhaps also writing out of anger that he had been held responsible for fomenting rebellion from the moment he first challenged the papacy, Luther wrote with ruthless clarity, utterly distancing himself from

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[57]Contz Anahans, "The Song," in Hans-Christoph Rublack, "The Song of Contz Anahans: Communication and Revolt in Nördlingen, 1525," in R. Po-Chia Hsia, ed., *The German People and the Reformation* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1988), 108-110.

this particular rebellion. Through three sins, the peasants, "have abundantly merited death in body and soul."[58] Their sins were breaking the oath, "to be true and faithful, submissive and obedient, to their rulers," because, Christ commands, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s” regardless of potential coercion under which such oaths may have been taken. Romans says, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.”[59] For this first sin, "they have forfeited body and soul, as faithless, perjured, lying, disobedient rascals and scoundrels usually do." [60]

Their second sin was, "violently robbing and plundering monasteries and castles which are not theirs; by this they have doubly deserved death in body and soul as highwaymen and murderers."[61] Luther says immediately following this, "Therefore let everyone who can, smite, slay, and stab, secretly or openly, remembering that nothing can be more poisonous, hurtful, or devilish than a rebel. It is just as when one must kill a mad dog; if you do not strike him, he will strike you, and a whole land with you."[62] Luther feared the spread of rebellion, which he likened to, "a great fire, which attacks and devastates a whole land. Thus rebellion brings with it a land filled with murder and bloodshed; it makes widows and orphans, and turns everything upside down, like the worst disaster." Coming from fear for the innocent, Luther seems unaware that his unreserved call for stabbing and slaying would inevitably descend on the innocent.

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[58]Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 46, 49-51.

[59]Ibid., 50.

[60]Ibid.

[61]Ibid.

[62]Ibid.

The third sin was their misappropriation of the word 'Christian' in calling themselves 'Christian Brethren' and using the Gospel to argue their case, by which, "they become the worst blasphemers of God and slanderers of his holy name. Under the outward appearance of the gospel, they honor and serve the devil, thus deserving death in body and soul ten times over."[63] Such exhortation to violence for the nobles is repeated throughout the open letter. He encouraged:

> Let whoever can stab, smite, slay. If you die in doing it, good for you! A more blessed death can never be yours, for you die while obeying the divine word and commandment in Romans 13, and in loving service of your neighbor, whom you are rescuing from the bonds of hell and of the devil.[64]

The Reformer continued, "These are strange times, when a prince can win heaven with bloodshed better than other men with prayer!"[65] Enemies and friends of Luther alike criticized this writing as far too harsh.[66]

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[63]Ibid., 49-51.

[64]Ibid., 54-55.

[65]Here his words resemble a papal calls to crusade; he was criticized by friends and enemies for blurring the line between grace and works. Ibid., 54.

[66]R.W. Scribner, *For the Sake of Simple Folk: Popular Propaganda for the German Reformation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 6. Luther's brother-in-law Johann Ruehel wrote to him in mid-May, by which time Luther's work had been widely published. Ruehel appealed to Luther, "at the rate the authorities were meting out death penalties, he feared that the entire population would eventually be wiped out." Even Luther's friends criticized him for his harsh language. Later in an open response to his friends' reactions, Luther acknowledged that while the peasants deserved punishment, the lord were harsh and some soldiers among them gave into bloodlust. But he never apologized for this letter; he never acknowledged that perhaps it was his own language which gave license to bloodlust. Rather, he turned on those who suggested he was too harsh, "First of all, then, I must warn those who criticize my book to hold their tongues and to be careful not to make a mistake and lose their own heads; for they are certainly

While *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes* made plain Luther's views, Blickle observes in Luther's theology an impossibility in pinning the Reformer down not solely because his theology emerged slowly but also because Luther was content with contradiction as part of the mystery of faith evidenced in his concepts of simultaneous states of sinfulness and righteousness, "'grace and judgment', 'law and gospel,' 'the letter of Scripture and the spirit of Scripture'."[67] Luther spoke within the moment and to a specific context, often with no thought to what his words could mean to the thousands hungry for more of his work. Whether speaking in favor of peasants or against peasant rebellion, he was equally adamant in his language. In addition to Luther's comfort with contradiction, which invited myriad interpretations, Franz Günther argues that the peasants knew only part of Luther's theology. As Luther's often contradictory writings were laid out before the public, exacerbating the muddle was that not all of Luther's theology was available to the German-speaking population. The finer points were not necessarily clear to the peasant population in part because what they knew came from pamphlets and broadsheets plastered to walls and read aloud in market places rather than from Luther's academic works in Latin.[68] Of greater importance to this paper than what Luther believed at any given moment is what those prone to rebellion thought he believed, for in spite of what Luther said, the rebels believed he would support them.[69]

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rebels at heart..." Luther had always bristled at criticism, and here he turns on his own friends and allies. Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 46, 59-61, 65-85.

[67]Blicke, *The Revolution of 1525,* 157.

[68]Franz Günther, *Der deutsche Bauernkrieg* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1984), 87-88.

[69]Stayer, *German Peasants' War and Anabaptist Community of Goods*, 50.

WHAT THE PEASANTS HEARD AND SAW

Why did the peasants believe Luther would support them? While they received a view of Luther embodying a virile and positive kind of rebellion, they also received a confused, partial, and yet adamant message from Luther. Not all of Luther's sermons and open letters were in German, and those in Latin were the ones most likely to hold this most crucial point of Luther's theology: that while clergy must be allowed to admonish verbally temporal authorities against sin, Christians must submit to temporal authority regardless of its perceived wickedness or unjustness. Much of what was printed in German was what would sell: pro-German and anti-clerical works encouraging rebellion against the papacy. In his popular 1520 *Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian State,* written and published in German, Luther encouraged German nobles to act manfully and resist the papacy.[70] Luther seemed to be against force on the one hand, "We must tackle this job by renouncing trust in physical force and trusting humbly in God."[71] Yet given the balance of the document, the reader could and often did interpret this not as a renunciation of physical force but as a renunciation of *trust* in physical force. Given the many Old Testament examples of those who had trusted in their own might and failed, and of those who had fought with military arms while trusting in *God's* might had succeeded, the ardent proto-nationalist could and did read this document as a call to arms provided that God was leading the army.

Arousing an aristocratic variety of pro-German passions, Luther wrote:

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[70]Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 44, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut T. Lehmann, Hilton C. Oswald (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 165-166, 170-171.

[71]Ibid., 125-126.

> ...let the pope give us back Rome and all that he has gotten from the empire; let him free our land from his intolerable taxing and fleecing; let him give us back our liberty, our rights, our honor, our body and soul...[72]

While this may not have been a threat, it reached back to the early Hohenstaufen emperors, hearkening to cultural and linguistic ties of ethnicity, and did so in a bellicose way. To these nobles with swords, Luther set the Christian nobility of Germany against the pope as an enemy:

> For this reason the Christian nobility should set itself against the pope as against a common enemy and destroyer of Christendom for the salvation of the poor souls who perish because of this tyranny.[73]

He did not ask for war; rather he suggested forbidding benefices and papal bans, but the language is the language of war spoken to men of war.

Here he seems to encourage the nobility to use force against the pope or at least against clergy in their lands:

> Therefore, [the nobility's] work should extend without hindrance to all the members of the whole body to punish and use force whenever guilt deserves or necessity demands, without regard to whether the culprit is pope, bishop, or priest.[74]

And here, Luther placed violence against the person of the pope as a lighter sin than silencing the Word, "It is actually a greater sin to silence or suppress the word and worship of God than if one had strangled twenty popes at one time."[75] Using yet stronger language, Luther continued:

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[72]Ibid., 152.

[73]Ibid., 158.

[74]Ibid., 131-132.

[75]Ibid., 181.

> For thus St. Paul says to all Christians, “Let every soul (I take that to mean the pope’s soul also) be subject to the temporal authority; for it does not bear the sword in vain, but serves God by punishing the wicked and benefiting the good”....If we are right in hanging thieves and beheading robbers, why should we let Roman avarice go free?"[76]

In the torrent of Reformation pamphlets and broadsheets, this was precisely the kind of thing peasants would have read or heard, for those who could read would read aloud in the marketplace for those who could not.[77] It gave Germans hope that money flowing to Rome's coffers each year would stay in German lands. One sees how easily Luther's argument was interpreted as a rally to war by commoners and nobles alike.

Luther did not say these things in a vacuum. His was a violent world wherein he was burned in effigy more than once.[78] In visual illustration of the violence of the period, we have in woodcuts the mercenary *Landsknecht* soldiery striking down the Pope. (Figure 4) This is just one of many depictions of hoped-for acts of violence against the Pope, wherein peasants may or may not have separated themselves from the mercenaries. As many peasants became mercenaries for want of work in their home villages, chances are high that they would not have thought their peasant status precluded violence. German peasants were, after all, notoriously violent amongst themselves and prone to rebellion.

In this same *Address to the Christian Nobility*, Luther spoke of papal "suppression

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[76]Ibid., 130-131, 156.

[77]Scribner, *For the Sake of Simple Folk,* 3, 6.

[78]Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 48, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut T. Lehmann, Hilton C. Oswald (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), 191.

of our liberty,"[79] and continued with regard to the German role of Holy Roman Emperor, "Thus have we Germans been taught our German. While we supposed we were going to be masters, we became in fact slaves of the most deceitful tyrants of all time."[80] His bitterness at "slavery" and the evocation of "liberty" must have resonated with serfs and peasants who had lost so much liberty in a few short generations. Similar sentiment can be found in various writings of Luther including a 1520 reply to a papal foe, Prierias, a reply Luther had printed for the public:

> If the raging madness [of the Roman churchmen] were to continue, it seems to me no better counsel and remedy could be found against it than that kings and princes apply force, arm themselves, attack those evil people who have poisoned the entire world, and once and for all make an end to this game, *with arms, not with words*. [Italics in all quotes are original.] If thieves are being punished with swords, murderers with ropes, and heretics with fire, why do we not seize, with arm in hand, all those evil teachers of perdition, those popes, bishops, cardinals, and the entire crew of Roman Sodom? Why do we not wash our hands in their blood?[81]

Such language is precisely the opposite of his *non vi, sed verbo*, 'not by force but by the Word', expressed in Latin sermons, and therefore not widely read.[82] These were heady times, and it would not have been a leap for any follower of the Reformation to think he should take up the punishment of clerics if the nobles neglected to do so. (Figure 5) Many did take up the punishment of clerics; peasants here are shown torturing an indulgence preacher.

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[79]Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 44, 209.

[80]Ibid., 210.

[81]Brecht, 347.

[82]Donald K. McKim, *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther* (New York: Cambridge, 2003), 13. Luther's *'Non vi, sed verbo'* theology was extant in this period and discussed in a 1522 writing of his. Oberman, 45.

In 1521, Luther witnessed unrest in the months following the Diet of Worms. He saw enough to concern him and wrote *A Sincere Admonition by Martin Luther to All Christians to Guard against Insurrection and Rebellion.* The tone of this document is empathetic with the peasants' anticlerical complaints, which would, for largely the same unresolved reasons, reemerge three years later in the Peasants' Revolt. While he did not encourage violence, the Reformer understood it at this point, and he lay the burden of reconciliation not on the peasants but on the clerical class:

> It seems likely that this may result in an insurrection, and that priests, monks, bishops, and the entire clerical estate may be murdered or driven into exile unless they themselves demonstrate some serious and significant improvement. For the common man seems to be discontented and brooding over the damage he has suffered in property, body, and soul. Apparently they have tried him too far, with utter lack of scruple burdening him beyond all measure. He seems to be neither able nor willing to endure it any longer, and to have good reason to lay about him with flail and cudgel, as *Karsthans* [John Hoe] threatens to do.[83]

Perhaps in recollection of past revolts that had been stopped before they started by lords addressing the demands of their subjects, Luther expressed confidence that there would be no full insurrection.[84] Later in the document, Luther lay the role of corrector solely in the hands of temporal authorities, and clearly rejected revolt:

> I am and always will be on the side of those against whom insurrection is directed, no matter how unjust their cause; I am opposed to those who rise in insurrection, no matter how just their cause, because there can be no insurrection without hurting the innocent and shedding their blood."[85]

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[83]Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 45, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut T. Lehmann, Hilton C. Oswald (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1962), 57.

[84]Ibid., 57-74, specifically 57.

[85]Ibid., 62-63.

With confidence in the peasants, Luther encouraged them if the authorities did not do the right thing, to, "acknowledge your own sins," arguing that it was punishment for sin that had brought the calamity of the papacy on Germany.[86] The wronged were to beseech God, "against the papal regime."[87] Using himself as an example, they were to be model Christians, using only the Word of God: "Have I not, with the mouth alone, without a single stroke of the sword, done more harm to the pope, bishops, priests, and monks than all the emperors, kings, and princes with all their power ever did before?"[88] In this letter, he seems naïve in his in anticipation that the common man will accept the status quo in light of his compassion for them and his antipathy toward the clerical class.[89]

While the Reformer told them what to do in the spirit to replace insurrection and clearly denounced it, he also said the clerical class deserved insurrection and made it an instrument of God, thus elevating it. Throwing fuel on the fire, Luther's harshness toward the clerical class knew no bounds:

> Wrath, as St. Paul says of the Jews, has come upon them at last. God's purposes demand far more than a mere insurrection....these texts have convinced me that the papacy and the clerical estate will not be destroyed by the hand of men, or by insurrection. Their wickedness is so horrible that no punishment is adequate except the wrath of God itself, without any intermediary. For this reason I have never yet let men persuade me to oppose those who threaten to use fist and flail.[90]

In this document, the Reformer both opposed insurrection and claimed not to oppose

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[86]Ibid., 66.

[87]Ibid., 66-67.

[88]Ibid..

[89]Ibid., 57-74.

[90]Ibid., 59, 61-62.

insurrection because it was not a terrible enough punishment for the clerical estate. To the theologically sophisticated the logic is apparent: insurrection will do nothing compared to what God will do. To the less sophisticated and exploited there almost appears to be permission.

Religious works were extremely popular with the masses in the Reformation, and as such, they had great power to foment discord. Hans-Christian Rublack characterizes the period as follows:

> [While] religion served as the general reference for social discourse....there was hardly any room for plurality of religious creed within social systems....because their vulnerability admitted of no complexity that would endanger authority....A large part of the spectrum of religious meaning opened up by Luther's reference to biblical scripture had to be negated or domesticated for the purpose of mere internalization. In order to protect the social system, a stricter control of the word was essential.[91]

Because Luther's message and example were so likely to cause unrest, many rulers began to ban his works, and so the following year, Luther put out an essay entitled, *Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed,* further clarifying his views:[92]

> A Christian should be so disposed that he will suffer every evil and injustice without avenging himself; neither will he seek legal redress in the courts but have utterly no need of temporal authority and law for his own sake. On behalf of others, however, he may and should seek vengeance, justice, protection, and help, and do as much as he can to achieve it. Likewise, the governing authority should, on its own initiative or through the instigation of others, help and protect him too, without any complaint, application, or instigation on his own part. If it fails to do this, he should permit himself to be despoiled and slandered; he should not resist evil, as Christ's words say....let him who takes, take. For the governing authority must not be resisted by force, but only by confession of the truth. If it is influenced by this, well and good; if not, you are excused, you suffer

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[91]Rublack, 105.

[92]Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 45, 77.

> wrong for God's sake.[93]

Interesting however, is Luther's clarification according to rank:

> If, however, the antagonist is your equal, your inferior, or of a foreign government, you should first offer him justice and peace, as Moses taught the children of Israel. If he refuses, then—mindful of what is best for you—defend yourself against force by force, as Moses so well describes it in Deuteronomy 20. But in doing this you must not consider your personal interests and how you may remain lord, but those of your subjects to whom you owe help and protection, that such action may proceed in love."[94]

In dealing with equals, it was acceptable to use force and to do so being, "mindful of what is best for you," however, "you must not consider your personal interests....but those of your subjects." With subtleties like this throughout his works, people often mistook his meaning. In this particular essay, Luther argued that a Christian should "permit himself to be despoiled and slandered," and yet Luther's personal example did not bear this out. While Luther was willing to lay down his life, he did not have to do so because of the intervention of his prince. So, while he was willing to lay down his life and suffer, he did not actually do it, nor did he allow himself to be slandered. For, when academic argument failed, Luther had no compunction about defending himself with scatalogical name-calling excessive even in his own era.[95]

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[93]Ibid., 124-125.

[94]Ibid., 124-125.

[95]Joseph Schmidt with Mary Simon, "Holy and Unholy Shit: The Pragmatic Context of Scatological Curses in Early German Reformation Satire," in *Fecal Matters in Early Modern Literature and Art: Studies in Scatology,* ed. Jeff Persels and Russell Ganim (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2004), 112; Danielle Skjelver, "German Hercules: The Impact of Scatology on the Definition of Martin Luther as a Man, 1483-1546," *Pittsburgh Undergraduate Review,*14, no. 1 (Summer 2009), 30-78.

The contradiction in Luther's writings was exacerbated both by Luther's personal example and by the fact that many of Luther's writings never made it into the German-speaking population's hands. According to Paul Russell, many lay pamphleteers did not possess education in Latin.[96] This lack and a desire to produce what sold unintentionally kept some of Luther's more sophisticated theology out of the hands of laymen. From her study of the printed works in the period 1520-1528, Miriam Chrisman illustrates that while Luther's theology was not completely clear in pamphlets, his voice was the loudest in that it was printed the most often.[97] Adding to the flurry of Luther's pamphlets were those of many other men drawing from Luther's works, especially those promoting social commandments from the Gospel. These were the very commandments on which the Peasants' Revolt was based. James Stayer names among these other men, "Such different figures as Hans Sachs, the Lutheran shoemaker [and artist] from Nuremberg, Haug Marschalck, the imperial army paymaster from Augsburg, and Sebastian Lotzer, the journeyman furrier of Memmingen and the primary author of the Twelve Articles."[98] Ulrich Zwingli agreed in large part with the peasants' goals and that a ruler's Christian goodness or lack thereof was not irrelevant to his legitimacy as a secular ruler.[99] Erasmus of Rotterdam decried the second serfdom, "by nature all men are born free, and serfdom

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[96]Stayer, *German Peasants' War and Anabaptist Community of Goods*, 45.

[97]Miriam U. Chrisman, "Printing and the Evolution of Lay Culture in Strasbourg, 1480-1599," in R. Po-Chia Hsia, ed., *The German People and the Reformation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 84.

[98]Stayer, *German Peasants' War and Anabaptist Community of Goods*, 45.

[99]Blicke, *The Revolution of 1525,* 92-93, 158-159, 160-161.

has been set up against nature."[100] Albrecht Dürer too is believed to have been among the peasants' sympathizers, for he made biting commentary on the rulers' crushing of the revolt. (Figure 6) He proposed this as a monument to the peasants slain. Note the sword in the peasant's back.[101] At war's end, they had been betrayed, and many believed they had been betrayed by Luther, in whom they thought they had an ally.

That Luther's bellicose language was interspersed with pamphlets on the social Gospel by other men further added to the idea that Luther would support the peasants' cause. Illustrating the limited degree to which the peasants were informed of Luther's views, James Stayer writes that the authors of the League Ordinance named in their document fourteen doctors upon whose teaching they relied. At the top of this list was Dr. Martin Luther.[102] Before *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes*, Luther had never set forth his views without ambiguity. Combined with his example as a rebel, it is little wonder the peasants thought he was on their side. His first clear statement on rebellion against authority that was widely known among peasants came in the midst of war in the form of an exhortation to the nobles to destroy the rebellion without mercy.

Peasants also saw and heard, according to Steven Ozment, a Lutheran romanticization of peasants.[103] This expanded on a trend throughout the middle ages

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[100]Ibid., 71.

[101]Steven Ozment, *A Mighty Fortress: A New History of the German People* (New York: Perennial, 2005), 101-102.

[102]Stayer, *German Peasants' War and Anabaptist Community of Goods*, 50.

[103]Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform, 1250-1550: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 277.

wherein the peasant was portrayed in art and literature both positively and negatively, but according to Peter Blickle, "...the general tendency was unambiguously toward a higher appreciation of the peasant's worth."[104] Blickle cites among several examples that, "the Nuremberg mastersinger and gunsmith Hans Rosenplüt (1400?-1470?) placed at the pinnacle of creation the peasant, whom the emperor must strive to equal, and to whom God will grant the crown."[105] The peasants in Luther's period seem to have understood the implications of Scripture on their status, for as far back as the fourteenth century, socioeconomic protestors began to justify their demands not only "on the basis of ancient or customary law and natural human right," but increasingly on the basis of "egalitarian ideals of the Bible."[106] Within the Lutheran romanticization, Luther was portrayed as a champion of peasants (Figure 7).[107] Here we see the peasant as what Keith Moxey describes as, "the symbol of the common man or the personification of the audience at which the reformed message was directed."[108] The artist, Sebald Beham, places right next to Luther a peasant with a flail following Luther, his leader, in defense of the Gospel. One night during the Diet of Worms, when Luther humbly and boldly defended himself against the charge of heresy, there appeared posted on the doors of prominent buildings broadsheets bearing the *Bundschuh,* calling to mind the *Bundschuh* peasant revolts of

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[104]Blicke, *Obedient Germans?,* 82.

[105]Ibid.

[106]Ozment, *The Age of Reform,* 277.

[107]Scribner, *Popular Culture and Movements in Reformation Germany*, 335.

[108]Moxey, 58.

recent decades.[109] The meaning was clear: if the imperial decision went against Luther, peasant rebellion would follow.[110]

While Lutheran idealization of peasants did not include a notion that Biblical equality before God had anything to do with equality before one's temporal lord, many had no idea this distinction existed. In fact, Luther's Catholic foe, Thomas Mürner, accused Luther of inciting "*Karsthans"* to rebellion. (Figure 2) *Karsthans* was a fictional figure featured in woodcuts characterizing the peasant in a positive light. Contrary to depictions of peasants as stupid, unruly, and dangerous, *Karsthans* was depicted as well-versed in the Bible, intelligent, and a defender of God's truth against its enemies.[111] Any examination of Luther's pre-1525 German publications would lend merit Mürner's accusation.

Peasants saw and heard too that Luther both self-identified and was identified as a peasant.[112] Rather uncharacteristically for a leader of peasant rebels, Thomas Müntzer in a letter to Count Albert von Mansfeld described Luther as, "that Martinian peasant filth..."[113] Luther extolled peasants as an example of God's grace, for in honest physical work, they were humble and often poor, and therefore among God's most favored

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[109]Bainton, 146.

[110]Brecht, 463.

[111]Ozment, *The Age of Reform,* 277.

[112]Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 54, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut T. Lehmann, Hilton C. Oswald (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 458.

[113]Peter Matheson, ed., *Collected Works of Thomas Müntzer* (New York: T&T Clark, 1994), 157.

people.[114] So idealized were peasants by Lutheran apologists that many in Germany, not only the peasants, misunderstood Luther's views as elevating peasants not solely as a spiritual metaphor but also as endorsing temporal liberty for all Christians.[115] Indeed, Luther's addressing of social ills, especially those that pressed down on peasants and artisans, comprised a large part of his popularity in the period leading up to the Peasant's War.[116]

As Ozment puts it, Lutheran publicists "transformed the peasant into the main representative and spokesman for all ranks of Christian laity."[117] In Luther's 1520 *Treatise on Good Works*, he cried for justice*:*

> ...we must offer resistance to all wrong, wherever truth or righteousness are violated and abused. We dare make no distinction of persons, as do some who fight most actively and busily against the wrong which is done to the rich, the mighty, or their own friends, but who are quite quiet and patient when wrong is done to the poor, or to those of low estate, or to their own enemy.[118]

He may have meant fighting verbally, but there was much physical fighting in this period. Why wouldn't the peasants have seen him as on their side or have seen themselves as included among those who must offer resistance to wrong? Luther argued that someone should fight for them, yet German peasants were known for taking matters into their own hands as in their treatment of disliked clerics in this period. (Figure 5) Again this is the

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[114]Ozment, *The Age of Reform,* 277.

[115]Ibid., 277-279.

[116]Scribner, *Popular Culture and Movements in Reformation Germany,* 141.

[117]Ozment, *The Age of Reform,* 277.

[118]Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 44, 50.

woodcut of peasants dealing with an indulgence preacher. Why would they not assume they could assist in their own defense and fight for themselves rather than letting others fight for them?

LANGUAGE AS A WEAPON

In his world of academia, Luther did not let others fight for him. He fought his own battles, and Luther's linguistic style lent both virility and defiance to his identity. Luther's language was often aggressive, and such was part and parcel of the male academic's success. Luther's was a period of strengthening gender definitions. (Figure 8) Men were trying to regain a perceived loss of authority as evidenced by the many woodcuts and engravings depicting wives beating their husbands and trying to take their husband's pants. Women in roles of authority were seen as a threat, potentially a demonic threat; note the flying demon in this woodcut. A masculine image was crucial in this period to a man's credibility, and the academic's language was a primary means of achieving the perception of virility. For men, being virile required fitting into a mold of current and local definitions of masculinity; these definitions hinged on the mastery of a set of skills specific to one's field.[119] For Luther as a monk, this meant mastery of language. Words were his weapons.[120] A man who could defeat another in academic discourse had a means of expressing his masculinity even if he were not a soldier or miner or peasant or any other physically masculine occupation. Just as Luther used

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[119]Jeffrey D. Glasco, "The Seaman feels Him-self a Man," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 66 (Fall 2004), 45.

[120]Carl P.E. Springer, "Arms and the Theologian: Martin Luther's *Adversus Armatum Virum Cochlaeum,*" *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 10, no.1 (Summer 2003): 47.

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"come forth to battle" in his exchange with England's Henry VIII, Luther's enemy Cochlaeus referred to books as "reserve troops" and used phrases like, "…meet him in battle."[121] In his writing and preaching against the papacy, Luther was free with violent and visceral terms like 'attack', 'drive out', 'tyranny', 'theft', 'endanger', and 'ravening wolves'.[122]

Luther used aggressive language not only against his academic peers but against authorities, and not all of Luther's vitriol was directed at the papal authority. Published in both Latin and German and "enjoying wide-circulation" according to Neelak Tjernagel, was a 1522-1523 exchange between Luther and Henry VIII of England, then still an ardent defender of the Church and ally of the Pope.[123] Tjernagel's work elucidates the dynamic relationship between these two men from 1521 until Luther's death in 1546.

Having been trained for the church, Henry was an able theologian.[124] In response to Luther's *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Henry had personally penned a book in which he called for Luther's burning if he would not recant.[125] In Luther's reply to Henry's book, the Reformer called the king, "Henry the liar," and a "wretched scribbler".

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[121]Johannes Cochlaeus, "The Deeds and Writings of Dr. Martin Luther from the Year of the Lord 1517 to the Year 1546 Related Chronologically to All Posterity," in *Luther's Lives: Two Contemporary Accounts of Martin Luther,* trans. Elizabeth Vandiver and Thomas D. Frazel (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2002), 67.

[122]Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 21, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut T. Lehmann, Hilton C. Oswald (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1956), 3. Such terms appear throughout the *Address.* Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 44, 127, 148, 193, 198, 199.

[123]Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 35, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut T. Lehmann, Hilton C. Oswald (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), 128; Tjernagel, 22.

[124]Tjernagel, 27.

[125]According to Tjernagel, there is no reason to doubt Henry's authorship, albeit with the aid of Thomas More among others. Ibid.

Luther was merciless in his mockery of both the king's intellect and his claim to have written the book himself: [126]

> The King of England after the same fashion in his book blabbers much... You would think that this book had been written by the dearest enemy of the King to disgrace the King eternally. But not to seem to treat with contempt the name of so great a King, and to answer a fool according to his folly, I will show his foolishness in a short treatise....Nor does the fact that scarcely any one believes that this is the King's own book move me in the least degree. I am willing to grant that it is the King's, as its title declares it is, and to turn my attack against the fool-King....Then let not King Henry impute it to me but to himself if he meets with rough and harsh treatment at my hands. He does not come forth to battle with a royal mind, or with any drop of royal blood, but with a slavish and impudent and strumpet-like insolence and silliness..."[127]

Directed against a foreign ruler, this does not model rebellion, but it does model defiant and bellicose language. He swaggers and speaks of "rough treatment at my hands" as though words were fists. While Henry was a king, Luther's insolence to this particular king ought to be seen in part as insolence to one who was acting as a fellow theologian.

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[126]Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 35, 128.

[127]Henry was "scandalized" according to Tjernagel. It is not every day that a king receives such language from a monk. Henry was quite concerned when he complained to Luther's prince, Frederick the Wise that Luther would undermine secular authority as well as spiritual if left unchecked. The king wrote, "The poison is producing dissension in the church, weakening the power of the laws and of the magistrates, exciting the laity against the clergy, and both against the Pope, and has no other end than to instigate the people to make war on the nobles while the enemies of Christ look on with laughter." Henry, like the emperor Charles V, believed that Luther's promotion of the priesthood of all believers would cause authority to degenerate. Frederick the Wise did nothing to reprimand Luther, but eventually in 1525, at the prompting of Christian II of Denmark, Luther made an apology of sorts, in which he eschewed responsibility. According to Tjernagel, "Luther disowned his first reply to the point of saying that it had been prompted by men who did not think well of the king and that it had been sent to the press hastily and indiscreetly....Luther felt that his letter was submissive and humble and that it came out of an honest and upright heart." There was never any real stepping back from this, and as far as the peasants knew, Luther's belittling of the English king stood. Tjernagel, 22, 23, 25-27.

Henry had composed a theological book, and Luther treated him precisely as he treated any theological peers with whom he disagreed. In practice, childish name calling was par for the course among disputing academics and clerics, frequently referring to one another as 'liars', 'asses', 'goats', and 'snot-noses'.[128] Undignified as this may sound, masculinity for clerics was demonstrated primarily through intellectual prowess and force of character, both of which manifested linguistically.

LUTHER VIEWED AS A MASCULINE REBEL

Luther's brand of virility was brash and full of bravado. It was rebellious, and his enemies reinforced Luther as an example of rebellion and as a masculine threat. Like the rebels of 1525, Luther was not to be contained. His enemy Johannes Cochlaeus frequently characterized Luther as a rebel.[129] In his history of Luther's life, Cochlaeus wrote,"...his heart was always filled with sharpness, pride, and rebellion..."[130] Cochlaeus was not alone in this view. It is worthy of note that Luther as a threat was always masculine and unruly, quite like the male peasant. Like male peasants who, even when depicted negatively as unruly, stupid, or coarse, were not portrayed as effeminate, neither was Luther. (Figure 9) Commissioned by Luther's enemy Cochlaeus, this woodcut depicted the many faces of Dr. Martin Luther, all of them maleficent. Note the thick neck, the brawny chest, and the musculature in the exposed chest and shoulders. The last

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[128]Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 39, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut T. Lehmann, Hilton C. Oswald (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 129-130; Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 41, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut T. Lehmann, Hilton C. Oswald (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 150, 189, 190, 191; Matheson, ed., *Collected Works of Thomas Müntzer*, 158, 334-335.

[129]Cochlaeus, 64, 65, 72, 78, 104, 160, 165, 262, 267, 301, 53-351.

[130]Cochlaeus, 64.

head on the right is that of Barabbas. Next to this head is a club designed to portray Luther as a wild man. Coupled with the club, these images implied brute force.

In the June 1520 Bull, Pope Leo X blasted Luther as a grave threat, "Arise, O Lord, and judge your own cause....The wild boar from the forest seeks to destroy it and every wild beast feeds upon it."[131] To understand what it meant in Luther's world to be a wild boar, we have Luther's own words describing the dreaded Turk as a wild boar. Luther's description of the Turk when he used the term in expounding on Old Testament prophecy illustrates what the Pope added to Luther's image:

> ...this 'wild boar'....the Turk, came and laid it waste again. And I believe the prophet is speaking in this sense, for the Turk is rightly the "wild boar," because he is wanton and fierce at the same time; he teaches and permits wantonness, and he compels all to adopt his faith by the force of arms.[132]

A wild boar was a thing to be feared. Wild, brutal, wanton, and savage was the boar in imagery. The Pope in using the boar, while intending to convey the threat of Luther's heresy and wantonness, certainly achieved this among papal followers, but he also lent something more to Luther, something quite useful to the Reformer and his followers. For as fierce and brutal, the Reformer was a distinctly masculine creature not to be taken lightly.

The Pope lent this gravity to Luther, and in turn to the German people. The Pope clearly feared Luther; and as Luther was identified as a robust German, this must have transferred some latent pride to Luther's followers. The Pope feared a German, one of

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[131]Leo X, *Exsurge Domine.*

[132]Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 11, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut T. Lehmann, and Hilton C. Oswald (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 98.

their countrymen. To be feared by the very figure Luther's followers had so long resented for corruption and foreign dominance, and had feared for excommunication, must have held some large satisfaction! In a perverse way, this imagery of the boar must have reinforced a sense of pride in being of German stock.

Luther was also portrayed as a German imperial nationalist of sorts (Figure 10). After his *Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, Luther was viewed as an ethnic hero for his perceived urging toward rebellion against the papacy. In 1521 Luther was paired without being consulted, with Ulrich von Hutten, a leader of the aristocratic proto-nationalist movement.[133] According to Kurt Stadtwald, Luther's theology and personal rebellion were proof for Hutten that now was the time for Germany to act to free itself from Rome.[134] This image comes from the title page of a 1521 work by Hutten. The inscription under Luther says, "I sing the truth," while Hutten's says, "We shall conquer, we shall conquer!"[135] Note that God himself is engaged in battle at top, and the bottom portion shows soldiers attacking the unarmed papal curia under the words, "I hate the church of wicked."[136] In his chapter, "A German Event," Heiko Oberman finds that Luther did create expectations of an imperial liberation as Ulrich von

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[133]Scribner, *For the Sake of Simple Folk,* 34-35.

[134]Stadtwald, 760.

[135]David's inscription is from Psalm 92:4: "Arise, O judge of the earth, render to the proud their deserts." Scribner, *For the Sake of Simple Folk,* 34-35.

[136]Ibid.

Hutten said, "The liberation of the Germans is in Luther's hands!" [137] Hutten's response to the papal Bull condemning Luther is stridently proto-nationalistic:

> Here, you Germans, is the Bull of Leo X....He wants to restrict and stay our freedom, so that it cannot recover and be revived in all its strength....Pluck up your courage and you will achieve it! After all, it is not a question of Luther but of everyone; the sword is not raised against this one man alone, we are all of us under attack.[138]

There was no sword on the part of the papacy in this instance. The Bull did indeed condemn Luther, but the sword was an image of war not of the death of a heretic to be burned at the stake. Hutten evoked images of war believing as did many that Luther had called for war in his *Address to the German Nobility*. Luther as a proto-nationalist was yet another misunderstanding of Luther's theology. Oberman describes as "innumerable" those who misunderstood the Reformer as politically or revolutionarily motivated.[139] For Hutten and for the peasants, the Bible must now be allowed to lead the way. For Hutten this meant through freedom from Rome. For the peasants, it meant better lives, and if possible, the implementation of a new and revolutionary communal system, overthrowing the status quo.

Further appealing to imperial and ethnic yearnings for independence from Rome, Luther was here portrayed as a distinctly successful rebel, the *German Hercules*. (Figure 11) Here the hanged Pope dangled from a rope clenched in Luther's teeth as he slew the enemies of the Gospel. As in this woodcut of Luther as *German Hercules* and in images

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[137]Oberman, 44, 45.

[138]Ulrich von Hutten, *Ulrichs von Hutten Schriften,* ed. Edvard Böcking, vol. 5 (Leipzig, 1861), 302. This text is translated in Oberman, 45.

[139]Oberman, 45.

with Hutten, Luther was often portrayed as larger, if only slightly, than other figures in the same woodcuts. This illustrates that pro-Luther artists either viewed Luther as virile; or, from a desire to see him successfully champion their cause, they deliberately created a robust and manly Luther. What set of princes would rally around the image of a skeletal cleric, which at this point he still was? Those who wanted Luther to win needed him to be viewed as a dominant male. Luther is violent in this image, an image peasants saw, an image making it clear how others imagined him regardless of his self-view.

Even in his enemies' verbal and visual portrayals of him, Luther was never effeminate though the Lutheran camp made visual attacks on papal virility. But Luther was ever masculine, ever a threat, and ever a rebel. He embodied revolt. He was seen as a successful rebel, for his cause was not lost, and he was allowed to live and remain its champion. In *German Hercules,* he is an uncontainable force larger than life, not at all unlike the very things he feared about rebellion. Insurrection was uncontainable; it was wild and threatened society as he knew it. And so was Luther. He would not be contained, and he threatened society as it was known. From the safety of his prince's protection, he lashed out at his enemies and called for their overthrow. He ignored his own excommunication, continuing to write and preach against the papacy, with both deadly seriousness and mockery. From this example, despite his urgings against insurrection, the peasantry drew a natural and successful model for their own rebellion.

CONCLUSION

For half a millennium, Martin Luther has fascinated historians, admirers and disdainers. Such longevity owes itself in part to the enigma that is Luther. At once merciless and empathetic, clear and contradictory, Luther is a moving target even after

five hundred years of study. This paper has addressed one such contradiction: despite the Reformer's stance that revolt against temporal authority was a sin, he unwittingly encouraged resistance through his preaching, writing, and personal example. Luther argued that rebellion was wrong because it was rejection of God through rejection of the authorities He had put in place, because of the harm done to innocents through insurrection, and because Luther believed it was robbery for a serf to remove himself from his lord's service. And yet pastors needed the right verbally to reprove temporal authority. But the peasants did not have a complete picture of Luther's anti-insurrection theology until *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes* appeared to call for their destruction. For the five years leading up to the revolt, peasants believed Luther would approve because what they did see of his theology largely supported peasant causes and often aggressively denounced their lords. Equally important as his seemingly supportive language to the peasants' impression of Luther as their ally was Luther's image as a rebel. Though he certainly did not court this image, his actions and language invited it from friend and foe alike. His was a largely positive image, that of a robust, heroic, and masculine success against great odds. Such a picture offered peasants a hopeful means of recovering lost rights and status as well as building Gospel-based communities. It is little wonder the insurrectionists of 1525 expected Luther to support them, for despite his assertions against the validity of rebellion, he was seen as its very embodiment.

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