

THE GERMAN SOCIETY OF
PENNSYLVANIA
Friday Film Fest Series



Luther and I

Directed by Julia von Heinz

November 18 2022

• 6:30 PM •

Film, Food & Discussion

The German Society of Pennsylvania

611 Spring Garden St.

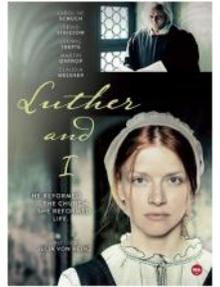
Philadelphia, PA 19123

Support provided in part by the
Philadelphia Cultural Fund.



Luther and I (2017)

Director: Julia von Heinz
Script: Christian Schnalke
Producer: Jana Brandt, Martin Choroba,
Christine Strobl
Music: Gert Wilden
Cinematography: Daniela Knapp
Release Date: February 2017
Spieldauer: 105 minutes
Cast: Karoline Schuch—Katherina von Bora
Louis Christiansen—Martin Luther
Claudia Messner—Barbara Cranach
Martin Ontrop—Lucas Cranach
Ludwig Trepte—Philipp Melancthon
Mala Emda—Ave von Schonfeld



Commentary by A. Krumm

Katie and Marty were lovers

Marriage as a formal institution has been going through a rough patch recently. Since maybe the early 2000s, or say the sixties, or the twenties, or the Victorian era, or maybe since the Enlightenment? Actually maybe it all started going downhill in the wake of Frankie and Johnny, although that storied couple never made it to the altar due to Johnny's untimely demise. On further reflection, just maybe the rough patch is the norm rather than the exception. The institution certainly seemed to be in a funk in the early 16th century. That is when Martin Luther divorced the Pope and married Katherina von Bora. Given the times and the circumstances, their marriage was as lovely as it was unlikely.

Scott Hendrix, an American Luther scholar, aptly puts Luther and his exegetical proclivities into proper perspective: "For a man who did not marry until he was 41, Martin Luther had a lot to say about matrimony." Luther had a lot to say about everything, and since marriage, like everything else, was intertwined with theology, he predictably wrote a lot about marriage. *Vom ehelichen Leben* was published in 1522.

A key proposition set forth by Luther in this treatise is that marriage

is a part of the natural order rather than a part of God's redemptive order. Thus marriage is not a sacrament as the Church had taught for centuries. Neither celibacy nor marriage would get you one skosh closer to heaven. Nonetheless marriage was an estate that was to be revered, and the estate that God intended for most people. For Luther, everything was all about faith, and he described the state of marriage as a covenant of fidelity between a man and a woman, enforced and empowered by faith in God.



Such theological ruminations are well and good, but one still wants to ask, how did it come about that *this* ex-monk and *this* ex-nun got married? On the positive side of the ledger, biology must have performed its due diligence, and the remarkable traits of the personalities involved certainly played a powerful role, but one has to factor in an immense array of countervailing forces: centuries of tradition, social structures, cultural conventions, church doctrine, and many other stubborn factors best filed under the rubric of "that is just the ways things are done." Their marriage was unlikely in the extreme, and in proportion to that unlikeliness (multiplied by Luther's towering stature), fraught with significance for future generations.



The lovely yet unlikely story has remarkable staying power, having been retold countless times. Katharina von Bora, the daughter of an impoverished minor nobleman, was deposited (perhaps the operative word should be dumped) in a cloister school at the age of six, and later at the age of ten, sent to the cloister of Marienthron at Nimb-schen. At sixteen, Katharina took the customary vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Seven years later, in an astounding volte-face, considering the trajectory of her life up to that point, on Easter Sunday of 1523 she fled the cloister along with eleven other nuns. The poverty and chastity were ostensibly still in play, but the obedience thing had disintegrated due in no small part to the writings of Martin Luther.

These ladies had one key skill which was exceedingly relevant and exceedingly rare for women (and for that matter men) in that era:

they were literate. So although there is no direct account by Katharina or the other nuns about how and when they read Luther, it is evident that they did. Moreover, prior to the night in which they voted with their feet, the nuns had written a letter to Luther requesting his assistance ("*...an den hochgelehrten Dr. Martinus Luther zu Wittenberg, einen Klage-Brief und elende Schrift, gaben ihm ihr Gemüt zu erkennen und begeherten von ihm Trost, Rat und Hülfe*"). This letter was transported to Luther by one Leonard Koppe, a merchant who knew Luther.

Luther and Koppe, having thus been drafted into the Wittenberg Liberation Front, devised a plan. The members of the cloister were accustomed to Koppe's presence, since he periodically brought supplies to the cloister. Hence it was decided that the insurgent nuns, at the appointed time, would slip outside the cloister walls and hide in the delivery wagon of Koppe and thus ensconced, ride surreptitiously away.

The escape from the cloister was successfully executed, and Luther subsequently praised Koppe as a "blessed robber." The nuns, having eagerly aided and abetted Koppe in this caper, only knew, as they bumped along in the pre-dawn darkness into a distinctly opaque future, that they were moving away from the stifling confines and crippling conventions of the cloister. Whether they were moving toward freedom and fulfillment remained to be seen.

Koppe transported his cargo of nuns first to Torgau on Easter Sunday (where three of the nuns left the group and returned to their families), and the next day on to Wittenberg. Along with the assertion that Luther helped plan their escape, it has been said that the nuns hid inside of the empty herring barrels on the cart. While Luther's involvement is amply verified by the surviving sources, the latter claim is more indicative of the storyteller's overweening need for arresting and evocative detail. But such tidbits, whether real or apocryphal, are gifts to storytellers.

Upon arrival in Wittenberg, Katharina was introduced to Luther. The surviving sources record no incidence of *Colpo di Fulmine* (that thunderbolt signifying Love at First Sight). Luther, at this juncture in his life, was not inclined to marriage for himself, even as he unreservedly recommended it to other ex-monks. The situational coordi-

nates were not good. He had a crushing workload, and he genuinely believed there was a good chance he might sooner or later be cancelled with extreme prejudice by his opponents.

That particular Monday morning in Wittenberg, mundane logistics were in the ascendant. Luther fiercely believed in the freedom of Christians, but finding immediate lodgings and eventual permanent situations for nine freshly liberated nuns had much more to do with necessity than freedom. For their part, Katharina and the other nuns were surely suffering from chronic cases of pre-modern jet lag. Katharina initially boarded for a time in the house of Philipp and Elsa Reichenbach, but her strong personality having provoked some kind of rupture in her relations with them, she subsequently moved into the home of the painter Lucas Cranach and his wife Barbara. Now a Nun Emeritus, she was also one of Wittenberg's more eligible, albeit aging bachelorettes.

The eventual union of Luther and Katharina issued from a somewhat convoluted (and decidedly unromantic) course of events. Initially she set her sights on Jerome Baumgartner, a former student of Luther's. Although Baumgartner appears to have been willing, his prominent family was not. Thus in the end he did not reciprocate. The Lord, via the ministrations of his parents, led him to a younger and richer candidate.

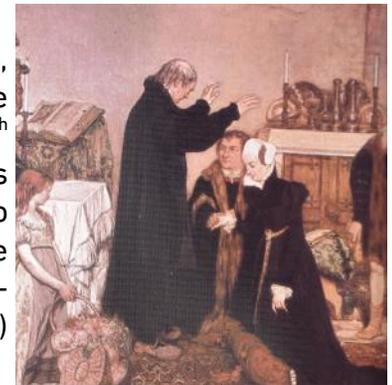
Time passed, and Luther suggested she might marry a pastor named Caspar Glatz. This time Katharina did not reciprocate. It might have worked out except for the minor detail that she was repulsed by Glatz. In fact, she pointedly told Luther's friend and colleague, Nicolas von Amsdorf, that Luther should lay off these irritating matchmaking efforts, and further, that the only remaining eligible bachelors in whom she had any interest were Amsdorf himself, and his well meaning but obtuse friend Dr. Martin Luther.

Perhaps at this juncture her sights were already actually set on Luther *selbst*. After all, these Wittenbergers were all provincials, but Luther was a *Provinzler mit Weltwirkung*. Years later Luther ungalantly remarked that if he had been planning on getting married in 1523, he would have chosen Ave von Schönfeld. The historical consensus is that the courtship phase of this relationship was not on a par with Anthony and Cleopatra or Burton and Taylor.

Although their courtship was not brimming with the high voltage intensity exhibited by the former luminaries, by the late spring of 1525, with all other possibilities having apparently expired, Luther and Katharina decided to marry. From Luther's perspective, it was an essentially pragmatic step. He wanted to stop nasty gossip and he wanted to set a good example. He summarized his decision thusly: "*Indeed, the rumour is true that I was suddenly married to Katharina in order to forestall the unrestrained gossip that commonly swirls around me... Nor did I want to pass up this fresh opportunity to comply with my father's wish for progeny. At the same time, I wanted to confirm what I have taught by practising it...*" Indeed, how could Luther better promulgate his reformist orthodoxy than by indulging in some radical orthopraxy.

Katharina obviously had a perspective as well, about which historians have speculated ever since Luther's time. Doubtless she saw the marriage to Luther as a pragmatic and prudent step, but also, in accord with Luther, as a vocation. In the event, by leaving the cloister and going to Wittenberg and marrying Luther, Katharina set the stage for an extremely impactful social inflection point: marriage regarded as a positively affirmed and normative estate for both clergy and laymen.

They were married on June 13, 1525, and Katharina took a big leap onto the historical stage. How many other 16th century ex-nuns can you name? Lucas and Barbara Cranach (who were said to know how to party) were among the small company of guests. Phillip Melancthon (who did not know how to party) was not.



Some of Luther's friends were overjoyed, but many were not. Among the latter were Melancthon (perhaps still miffed about being left off the guest list), who feared it would provoke turmoil among the adherents of the evangelical movement, and Jerome Schurf, who predicted the marriage would destroy all that Luther had accomplished so far in the Reformation. Melancthon's fears were justified to a degree, as there was some turmoil in the wake of the marriage, but Schurf was dead wrong. Far from destroying the work of

the reformation, Luther's marriage was a significant factor in propelling the movement forward.

They brought themselves and little else into the marriage. Neither of them was a Calvinist, but they must have jointly formulated a doctrine of perseverance of the pair, because for an ex-monk and an ex-nun, they did okay. Unlike Frankie and Johnny, they made it work. Luther seemed to revel in his newfound role of husband and father; he would have laughingly acceded to the appellation of *Hausmann* (apropos his famous quip that "...*When a father goes ahead and washes diapers or performs some other menial task for his child, and someone ridicules him as an effeminate fool...God with all his angles and creatures is smiling.*") Katharina was the managing director of the enterprise, deftly handling everything from domestic logistics to finances.

They had six children, three of whom lived into adulthood. It was by all accounts a happy household. When Luther died, it was discovered that he had done something unheard of in the 16th century: he had made Katharina his sole heir. Of Katharina, Luther said: "*Ich wolt mein Ketha nit umb Frankreich noch umb Venedig dazu geben...*" Of Luther, Katharina said: "If I had owned a principality or an empire I would not have felt so badly, had I lost it, as I did when our Lord God took from me – and not only from me but from the whole world – this dear and worthy man."



Such lovely words from such an unlikely pair echo an obviously shared conviction that marriage, like everything else in this ceaselessly sinful world, had to be lived under "the law of love." Eros will burn out, friendship and affection may fail, but God's love does not fail. Ever the brutal realist, Luther

asserted that marriage without the law of love would likely be "a truly pitiable, horrible, and dangerous condition." Marriage within the law of love could be a "noble, important, and blessed condition..." In light of this, we can say with certitude that Katie and Marty were lovers.

Upcoming Events

- Nov. 19** Wandern at the Willows, 11am
- Nov. 19** Library Treasure Tour: "The Mysteries [Secrets] of Philadelphia," 2pm
- Nov. 20** "Wister & More" presents Joyce Chen & Shelby Yamin, 3pm
- Dec. 3** Christkindlmarkt, 12pm
- Dec. 4** Gentle Yoga, 11am
- Dec. 9** Tucker's Tales Puppet Theatre presents Aesop's Fables, 6pm
- Dec. 10** Buchclub, *Hiob* by Joseph Roth, 1:30pm
- Dec. 11** "Wister & More" presents Pyxis Piano Trio, 3pm
- Dec. 16** Winter Spirits, 7pm
- Dec. 17** Wandern at the Willows, 11am
- Dec 17** Library Treasure Tour: "Archiving German Americana: Oswald Seidensticker and the German Society Library," 2pm
- Jan. 1** Gentle Yoga, 11am
- Jan. 8** Jewish Brewing Workshop, 10am
- Jan. 14** Buchclub, 1:30pm
- Jan. 19** 1700 Years of Jewish Life in Germany - Exhibit Opening and Reception, 7pm
- Jan. 20** Friday Film Fest: *Contra*, 6:30pm
- Jan. 21** Wandern at the Willows, 11am