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Kelli Conley  
*University of Puget Sound*

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Kelli Conley

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Katherine Smith

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Between A Rock and A Hard Place: Marriage Implications for Women in the Reformation

At first glance, the changing trends concerning marriage during the Reformation appear to embody a fundamental shift toward a partnership model of more equal religious status between men and women. Martin Luther, for example, argues in *The Estate of Marriage* that marriage was not spiritually inferior to celibacy; rather, it was an admirable pursuit that was pleasing to God by its own merit.<sup>1</sup> As participants in the marital bond, then, Protestant women would seemingly be elevated in importance relative to their Catholic counterparts. However, primary source evidence indicates that these effects were not so clearly defined. As scholar Susan Karant-Nunn argues, the reformers' "positive estimation of marriage on one hand" conflicted with their "ongoing mistrust of women on the other."<sup>2</sup> This opposing set of attitudes manifested itself in a variety of ways that ultimately yielded only moderate advances for women through the legitimization of marriage. Through an ongoing condemnation of female sexuality, a deliberately hierarchical structure between husband and wife, and an express lack of faith in wives' contributions to matrimony, the reformers ultimately reinforced the view that women were spiritually inferior to men.

Although the reformers emphasized the various goods of marriage in its own right, they nevertheless maintained the Catholic idea that marriage was also a necessary vehicle of

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, "The Estate of Marriage," in *The European Reforms Sourcebook*, ed. Carter Lindberg (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 56.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Karant-Nunn, "Reformation Society, Women and the Family," in *The Reformation World*, ed. Andrew Pettegree (Routledge, 2002), 440.

containment for sexual concupiscence. “[E]xperience amply demonstrated,” Karant-Nunn remarks, “that the sex-drive was so powerful that most people could not abstain and required the outlet of a sanctioned relationship in order to prevent fornication.”<sup>3</sup> Their concern over this potential for sexual corruption, however, was largely weighted toward females. To Luther, male chastity was a rarity; female chastity, an impossibility.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the reformers’ efforts to uphold marriage as both a spiritually beneficial institution and a legitimate outlet for sexual desire led to an increasingly stringent backlash against those who indulged their lust in any other way.

This transition had a profound effect on perceptions of female sexuality, particularly as it pertained to prostitution. Under Catholic rule, brothels in towns such as Augsburg had been socially permissible venues in which men could act on their physical desires and avoid the “greater evil” that would result from excessive sexual repression while they waited to marry. Under the Reformation, however, in which “[p]iety began to merge with sexually orthodox behavior,” prostitution became an unacceptable practice worthy of the strictest censure for its extramarital nature.<sup>5</sup> Despite the fact that men created the demand for these services, the onus of sexual sin was placed almost entirely on the women who worked as prostitutes. The reformers viewed these women as sources of temptation and disease; the clientele, by contrast, were portrayed as “good people” violated and victimized by the prostitutes without any regard for the sexual motivations and personal accountability behind their visits to the brothels in the first place. Furthermore, prostitutes were not punished for their profession, but rather for the specific sexual transgressions they committed: fornication and adultery. By employing this framework of

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<sup>3</sup> Karant-Nunn, “Reformation Society, Women and the Family,” 436.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 441.

<sup>5</sup> Lyndal Roper, “Discipline and Respectability: Prostitution and the Reformation in Augsburg,” *History Workshop Journal* 19 (1985): 19.

prosecution, the reformers ignored the very institution that had fostered these acts. In so doing, the prosecutors assigned the prostitutes in question a false sexual agency that rendered the women more culpable for their actions and thereby justified the reformers' resulting generalizations concerning proclivities toward sexual sin among single and married women alike. Thus, the institution of marriage that would have granted female sexuality more legitimacy ironically gave rise to an even greater suspicion of female concupiscence that underscored women's seeming moral inadequacy.

This questionability of women's religious integrity in sex and other matters became the basis for a hierarchical structure of marriage that would further disenfranchise women throughout the Reformation. Aside from any sins that women committed during their own lifetimes, they were daughters of Eve and therefore inherited the burden of blame for the Fall of Man. As such, religious authorities stressed that women should subordinate themselves to their husbands; the first woman had been tested and failed in matters of serving God, so man was, by default, a more reliable source of spiritual authority. According to Reformation preachers, "Eve had always been the weaker vessel."<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the Fall of Man became a model of circular logic for gender relations: the idea of female inferiority was used both to blame women as the cause of the Fall and to justify male religious authority after the Fall. Thus, the subjugation of women within the context of the Reformation reinforced the very justifications by which it established its validity. Because of this logic, Luther's theoretical model of a marriage as one of mutual esteem and respect between husband and wife became a more explicitly delineated relationship of unequal power that required a wife's obedience to her husband. These values were reinforced in a variety of media. For a reading audience, household manuals for patriarchs addressed relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children, and masters and

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<sup>6</sup> Karant-Nunn, "Reformation Society, Women and the Family," 442.

servants.<sup>7</sup> By juxtaposing the spousal relationship with two other relationships of unequal power, the author draws an analogy between all three and implies that the interaction between husband and wife likewise relies on a hierarchical structure. The same idea was expressed more openly in sermons, which publicly and emphatically “impressed upon women their almost complete subordination to their husbands.”<sup>8</sup> Even the rhetoric of wedding liturgies reminded the candidates for marriage at the very inception of their joining that they had different obligations to one another. One liturgy, drawn from a wedding that John Calvin performed in Geneva, implores the husband to “protect, lov[e] and maintain” his wife, and the wife in turn to “obey, serv[e], and [be] subject to” her husband.<sup>9</sup> Not only is the entirety of the wife’s duty based on answering to her husband’s will, but her vows mention nothing of “love” as the husband’s do. Thus, one may conclude that Luther’s definition of marital love does not apply here; the fact that only the husband is called to love undermines the principle of mutuality that characterizes Luther’s idea of spousal esteem.

In addition to the deliberate establishment and enforcement of unequal power between husband and wife, contemporary sources reveal a lack of faith in a woman’s ability to make useful contributions to marriage. In John Calvin’s “Letter Concerning a Pious Woman,” for example, the Reformation leader instructs a woman to sway her husband to the Reformed faith through her submissiveness; her meekness is all she has to bring as a wife and a follower of God.<sup>10</sup> The Reformation-era woodcut *Allegory of the Wise Woman* gives another such example of this dubiousness regarding a woman’s role as a Christian. The woodcut, which is supposed to

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 444.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 442.

<sup>9</sup> “Wedding Liturgy,” in *Sex, Marriage, and Family in John Calvin’s Geneva, Vol. 1: Courtship, Engagement, and Marriage*, ed. John Witte and Robert M. Kingdom (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> John Calvin, “Letter Concerning a Pious Woman,” in *A Reformation Reader*, ed. and trans. Denis Janz (Fortress Press, 1999), 218.

exemplify proper female behavior, depicts a woman with eyes that watch for sin, ears that listen for God, a mouth locked shut, a faithful breast, a waist girded with serpents, a mirror that reflects Christ, a jug of charity, and steady hooved feet.<sup>11</sup> The serpents at her waist, as the most restrictive aspect of the image, speak to the previously mentioned disdain for female sexuality. However, even the less negative aspects of the picture offer at best halfhearted praise of female assets. First, the fact that she has a mirror to reflect Christ suggests that she can not access him directly; in an image reminiscent of 1 Corinthians 13:12, she can see him “in a mirror, dimly,” but not “face to face.”<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the images of her locked mouth and her watching eyes indicate passivity: she can not contribute anything constructive or generative in a religious sense, but only wait to report the wrongdoings of others. Even her charity, which might serve as the one counterexample to this point, is embodied in a jug, suggesting that this aspect of herself is finite and limited. Finally, the faithfulness she espouses is that to her husband as a “companion in prayer;” her status as a spiritual implement is directly dependent upon her relationship to a man. Thus, the ideal woman’s religious usefulness ironically relies on the marriage to which she can bring relatively little.

Furthermore, the conflicting demands that Reformation-era marriage placed on women provided a rubric for performance that was impossible to uphold. The first of these obstacles arose from the nature of marriage itself. As previously discussed, women were expected to obey their husbands; the one exception was “when an ungodly spouse commanded them to do something that was patently hateful to God.”<sup>13</sup> As Calvin explained, “she must not offend God for the sake of pleasing [her husband].”<sup>14</sup> However, this imperative is self-contradictory in the

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<sup>11</sup> Karant-Nunn, “Reformation Society, Women, and the Family,” 446.

<sup>12</sup> 1 Cor. 13:12 (New Revised Standard Version).

<sup>13</sup> Karant-Nunn, “Reformation Society, Women and the Family,” 442.

<sup>14</sup> Calvin, “Letter Concerning a Pious Woman,” 219.

capacity for judgment it exacts from the wives involved: the very women who supposedly submitted to their husbands because of their own spiritual inadequacy were nonetheless expected to possess the religious discernment to determine whether or not their husbands' wishes were pleasing to God. Therefore, simultaneously balancing direct service to God with service to God through the husband was not always feasible. Likewise, wives' calling to motherhood similarly presented them with an unrealistic standard to meet. In a world that believed in the "malleability of both the child and society," women were responsible for raising their children as responsible members of the emerging Reformed society.<sup>15</sup> However, even though a woman's "full-time occupation was caring for and educating her children," her natural tendencies toward nurturing made her an ineffective disciplinarian and thereby necessitated the intervention of her husband to properly raise a morally upstanding child.<sup>16</sup> Overall, marriage served not only as reminder of a woman's religious inferiority through subordination to their husbands, but also as another potential set of circumstances to highlight her failures and reiterate her lower spiritual status.

The Reformation was a period of great flux for a variety of social institutions, particularly that of marriage. As a model for companionate religious support within a newly emerging schema that stressed the mutual obligations of a Christian community, marriage gained new stature under the religious reform movements. This heightened regard for the practice itself, however, did not necessarily entail an accompanying increase in esteem for those who undertook it. The spiritual benefits that marriage brought to women were tempered by its insistence upon female weakness in comparison to men. In bringing women a new religious agency, marriage actually made women more vulnerable to criticism within the church community and further impeded their potential to contribute meaningfully to the society that was taking shape.

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<sup>15</sup> Roper, "Discipline and Respectability," 20.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

