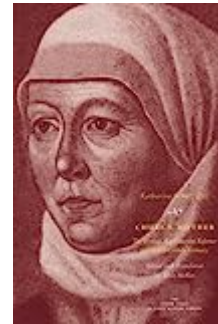




Katharina SchÖtz Zell. *Church Mother: The Writings of a Protestant Reformer in Sixteenth-Century Germany.* Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006. xxix + 267 pp. \$22.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-97967-0.



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Unflinching

Like a pop-up children's book, this volume takes one straight away into three dimensions. Where else would you find such a deeply moving, clearly authentic depiction of a loved one gradually dying in his partner's arms (pp. 110-111) or a no-holds-barred challenge by an old woman to an Imperial city, Strasbourg, to reflect on its reforming origins and destiny and change its ways?

Outside the charmed circle of church historians, the name of Katharina SchÖtz Zell (1498-1562) is not that well known. Yet she is one of a handful of women writers in sixteenth-century Germany who became well known through their publications, in her case over three decades. In her own words, she was held in "great love, honor, and fear" throughout the civic community (p. 226). Intellectually, socially and culturally she broke countless taboos. Hermeneutically, she continues to pose huge problems to any modern interpreter. What does one make of her intolerably prolix confession of sin, for example, or her fierce antipathy to the papacy? Historically, she offers us a treasure trove of information about the early Reformation and beyond. On a personal level, this is certainly no fairy story with a happy ending. By

the end of her life she felt isolated, impoverished, misunderstood. Times had moved on and left her stranded. She remained, however, confident that what she stood for would ultimately prevail. And what she managed to achieve in her life was truly remarkable.

Seven years ago Brill published Elsie McKee's two formidable and pioneering tomes: *Katharina SchÖtz Zell: The Life and Thought of a Sixteenth-Century Reformer* and *The Writings: A Critical Edition* (1999). This new book offers, in a quarter of the compass of these volumes, the gist of McKee's outstanding scholarship, plus an English translation of the reformer's key writings. As a result, a much wider audience can now grapple with the life and thought of this remarkable woman. The series in which it appears already includes some 120 titles by early modern women writers on its list, with a preponderance of French, Italian and Spanish ones.

SchÖtz Zell's writings range from the devotional to the polemical. Accordingly, McKee has divided the book into two sections. The first, extensive one deals with her activities as a lay reformer, teacher and pastor: the brief "Letter to the Suffering Women of the Community of

Kentzingen" (1524); the spirited defense of her husband, the "Apologia for Master Matthew Zell" (1524); her introduction to a hymnal, "Some Christian and Comforting Songs of Praise about Jesus Christ Our Savior" (1534); and then, the extraordinary eulogy to her husband, "Lament and Exhortation of Katharina Zell to the People at the Grave of Master Matthew Zell" (1548), followed by her exposition of the *Miserere* Psalm (1558). The second section, which is much shorter, contains autobiographical and polemical material: the little-known letter to the unorthodox theologian, Caspar Schwenckfeld, whom she befriended and defended (1553), and her robust "Letter to the Whole Citizenship of the City of Strasbourg from Katharina Zell ... concerning Mr. Ludwig Rabus" (1557). Understandably, much of the correspondence has had to be omitted, but the selection presented here is a judicious one.

Sch  tz Zell was a first-generation reformer, and much of the interest she generates comes from the fact that she stood, at the end of her life, very much on the cusp of the later, confessional period. The death of her much-loved husband, a fiery, popular preacher, coincided with the introduction of the Interim to Strasbourg, with its death-knell to the old Protestant r  gime, and her raking grief at her husband's death is inseparable from her lament at the loss of the "good old days" and the old teachers and mentors who pioneered the Strasbourg Reformation.

In the brief, characteristically lucid, introduction to the writings as a whole, McKee underlines that Sch  tz Zell's life and work provide evidence "for the ability of a woman from an artisan background with only a vernacular education to become a remarkably informed, articulate, and coherent voice for comprehensive religious reform" (p. 30). Marrying Zell, a priest, in December 1523 was itself, of course, a revolutionary act, but she went on—through her hospitality to asylum seekers, her pastoral counseling, her care of the needy and her engagement as a writer—to become an equal (or more than equal) partner in his ministry.

She wrote her theology from the kitchen table. Occupied with domestic duties during the day, she either wrote at night, or amidst continual interruptions. Her letter to Schwenckfeld, she claims, was interrupted thirty times. A good place for today's students to initiate an engagement with her work might be the last writing in the second selection, written in 1557 to the city of Strasbourg. She emerges here as a tough-minded advocate of inclusiveness who respected good teaching but held

a sturdy confidence in her own good judgment, which was solidly based on her independent study of Scripture. She even claims that from the age of ten she already figured as a "mother of the church" (p. 226)! She is, in some ways, very much a child of her age, not least in her attribution of suffering to human sinfulness. On the other hand, the duty to suffer, she insists, quite definitely does not involve a responsibility to keep silent. On the contrary, although a laywoman, she insists on her right and responsibility to speak out—whether against the corruptions of the papacy, the arrogance of a new generation of young Protestant theologians like Rabus or the intolerant demands of those on different sides of the theological fence.

McKee offers brief introductions and extensive annotation to all the writings. These are uniformly helpful, and take into account contemporary students' limited knowledge of the cultural and religious context. This is, then, a very fine edition. In my view, however, the translation is not completely satisfactory. Overall, the dense and very difficult German is well translated, and the massive sentences broken up into more manageable units. The lively metaphors deployed by Sch  tz Zell come across well. Some things, of course, are matters of taste: I would translate *arschwisch* for example, as "bum-wiper," rather than "filthy rag" (p. 211). However, some words, such as *dapfer* and *sanft* are given, without explanation, quite unusual renderings: "eminent" instead of "bravely," "healthy" instead of "gentle"; *hab nit wil zu schriben* is taken to mean "I do not want to write," although *wil* here, as elsewhere, means time: "I have no time (*Weile*) to write" (pp. 215, 188). Some understandable slips are made, as where *also* is rendered by its English cognate, "too," instead of "therefore" (p. 51). Unfortunately, however, on a number of occasions the whole sense of the original is misread. On p. 188, for example, a reference to plowing, sowing and joyfully gathering in the sheaves at the harvest is rendered as being vexed, comforted and bringing in "my robe with joy," which is quite meaningless. Shortly after, *so verlosse ich sy u  siner lehr* is translated as "I will gather an answer out of [Schwenckfeld's] teaching" (p.195), when the actual meaning appears to be that Sch  tz Zell is being accused of abandoning the preaching and sacraments of the Strasbourg church because of her allegiance to Schwenckfeld's teaching.

The Reformation, of course, spawned considerable lively reflection on the nature of translation, and this debate continues today. There are quite legitimate differences about how literal a rendering should be. To my

ears this translation can be rather too literal; “upright little sheep” (p. 114), for example, sounds bizarre to a New Zealander. When the word order and idioms of the original are followed too literally, Germanisms or archaisms creep in. At times I had reservations, too, about the translator’s bracketed explanations within the text, as they offer interpretations that might be better relegated to footnotes.

This volume will, therefore, be a revelation and a delight to many. Because all her writings were composed in German, Schutz Zell’s “other voice” has so far scarcely reached beyond Germany. Now this can change and, as this edition demonstrates, this voice is a formidable one, radical in thought, language and action, as well as in the coherence of all three. Sch  tz Zell’s empowerment of

women and lay people, not to mention her pastoral care of them, strikes one straight away. But her concept of the church and her theology, as McKee has shown, is equally inclusive and fascinating: Christ is poignantly described as giving us “drink from His breast and side with water and blood, as a mother nurses her child, ” and what we might call the femininity of God is explained from the perspective of a woman who has “felt the pain of birth” (pp. 152-153). Hopefully this book will also encourage many to dig deeper and explore the fuller treatment in the volumes which came out in 1999.

The last word should go to Katharina Sch  tz Zell: “For it is sufficient that we Christians suffer injustice, we should not say that injustice is justice. To keep silence is not patience, to suffer is patience” (p. 66).

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