

The Making of a Reformation Man: Martin Luther and the Construction of Masculinity. By David M. Whitford. London and New York: Routledge, 2025. 258 pp.

With his attacks on monastic life and clerical celibacy, and his elevation of the married estate, Martin Luther initiated a renegotiation and reformation of norms and ideals surrounding masculinity; at the same time, he himself had to live into new modes of masculinity, and his theology and teaching were shaped profoundly by his “triumphs and tragedies, his passions and insecurities” (xviii) as he struggled to do just that. David M. Whitford writes, “Over time, I have become convinced that it is Luther, the individual, and not Luther, the theologian, that is the most important thing to understand about him and his theology. Luther the person guided Luther, the theologian, and not the other way around” (144; see also 14, 199). These lines encapsulate much of what makes Whitford’s approach refreshing. He follows Luther’s experiences, both of the momentous ecclesial-political clashes he unleashed and of his monastic and domestic life, attending along the way to Luther’s personal feelings of guilt and shame, joy and grief, fear and vulnerability, and more. Also highlighted are Luther’s relationships to a host of characters: from John Eck, the distinguished theologian whose dismissive rebuke of his Ninety-five Theses cut Luther deeply, to his mother, wife, children, friends, and colleagues. Whitford paints a complex picture in which Luther learned to think, feel, and act differently—and taught others to do the same—while also remaining more bound to inherited paradigms for understanding and expressing masculinity than his reputation as a renegade might lead one to expect. Whitford’s book commands the attention of scholars: his study of Luther should pave the way for a wider examination of constructions and reconstructions of masculinity across confessions and contexts in the early modern era. At the same time, its accessible style should attract broad readership among both clergy and laity amid today’s consequential debates regarding the expression of masculinity, femininity, and sexuality.

Whitford explains that his study began with a personal question about how his own father had “learn[ed] new habits [of fathering] that were not modeled for him . . . [and] unlearn[ed] many things that were modeled for him” (xvii). Whitford’s personal question spurred an academic question: how did “first-generation reformers learn how to be husbands and fathers” after having been “monks and priests for over twenty years?” (xviii). Whitford summarizes in his preface that “the Reformation contributed to a reshaping of what it meant to be a godly man. Luther’s theology and personal practices redefined masculinity, moving away from ideals of celibacy and renunciation and instead toward a new vision centered on family and the responsibility to model godliness at home and in the community” (xviii).

While this summary highlights the significance of the (understudied) reconstruction of masculinity in the Reformation era, the ensuing chapters reveal how often Luther himself took two steps forward and one back, struggling, for instance, to “inhabit” the masculine images of him presented to the public via woodcuts (14).

Chapter 2 argues convincingly that the furious debate over Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses was propelled less by theology than by “gender and emotion” (21); the temperature was raised by insults and the need of academic men to defend “vocational and professional honor” (30). Chapter 3 follows Luther’s gradual “journey from shock and embarrassment to a begrudging acknowledgment of his sexual nature to a final embrace of human sexuality;” nevertheless, Whitford notes, Luther never fully escaped Augustine’s view of sexual desire as “selfish and debased” (72–73).

Luther’s relationship to Katharina von Bora is revealed as two-sided in Chapter 4: privately, Luther usually was “comfortable with and supportive of von Bora as a strong-willed, successful businesswoman, wife, and mother” (80), which Luther truly needed her to be if he was “to remain the leading figure of the reform movement . . . and be a father and husband” (104). Publicly, however, Luther sometimes would “shame and belittle” von Bora (80). Like John Calvin, Luther saw gender hierarchy as essential to the preservation of familial and BOOK REVIEWS 321 LUTHERAN QUARTERLY Volume 40 (2026): 321–323 © 2026 Johns Hopkins University Press and Lutheran Quarterly, Inc. social order (88). Thus, von Bora—like other women—was criticized for the very work and competence that made her husband’s social and professional ambitions achievable (106).

Whitford’s book is remarkable for delving into such complexities and contradictions through close, contextual reading of sources. Luther, he argues, learned in marriage to empathize with wives and mothers, but “fatherhood and marriage” simultaneously “perpetuated and reinforced patriarchy when it came to unwed women and daughters” (174). Similarly, although the loss of children opened Luther to new experiences and ways of grieving, Whitford asserts that Luther never left behind the Christianized Stoicism he inherited, which coded grief as feminine and associated masculinity with rational control.

Whitford’s last chapter examines Luther’s resort to “sodomy as slander,” showing that he did not use the charge as a matter of course against varied opponents; rather, he leveled the charge when he felt genuinely vulnerable—in his person or his legacy—to a more powerful enemy (194).

Whitford does not describe a Luther who aligns simply with one side or the other in contemporary debates about masculinity, femininity, and sexuality; anyone who looks to Luther in these debates will have to reckon with a reformer who lived and taught in between

change and the status quo. Above all, Whitford gives insight into the power of “formation” and into the challenges and possibilities of living into new paradigms.

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