CONTENTS

Preface ix

INTRODUCTION 1

CHAPTER 1. The Luther Cranach Made 11

CHAPTER 2. Luther and Dreams 42

CHAPTER 3. Manhood and Pugilism 64

CHAPTER 4. Names 82

CHAPTER 5. ‘Living I Was Your Plague’ 108

CHAPTER 6. Luther the Anti-Semite 135

CHAPTER 7. Luther Kitsch 169

Acknowledgements 195

Notes 201

Bibliography 255

Index 271
The anniversary of Luther in 2017 was not just an event of local Wittenberg history or even primarily of the Lutheran church. Because Luther has so long been linked with German-ness itself, the event was a secular commemoration as well, an occasion to ask about what being German means today. Even though the country was formally reunited in 1990, the difference between the former East and the former West is still unmistakeable. The East remains noticeably poorer, and thirty years on, its idealism is different too, with an abiding commitment to equality and communitarian values, and an ingrained suspicion of the power of the state. If the anniversary were meant to do anything politically, it was intended to bring East and West together. Yet those formed in the education system of the East approached Luther very differently. They wanted to know about the economic side of the indulgences trade, and the wealth and status of those who supported him, topics which were not really considered during the centenary celebrations. They asked different questions too; scholars from the former East who worked in monument conservation, for instance, undertook the archaeology on Luther’s house and transformed our view of the family’s wealth. But far from uniting East and West, it felt as though the questions and outlook of the former East was often silenced during the anniversary year in favour of a more anodyne commemoration of the reformer as the translator of the Bible and inventor of the German language.

Celebrating Luther has often been politically fraught, and linked to questions of German identity. The first centenary of the 95 Theses was celebrated on the eve of the Thirty Years’ War, the catastrophic conflict that unleashed a generation-long religious and political military
struggle and left much of Germany devastated. In 1917, the posting of the 95 Theses was commemorated in the midst of war and on the brink of revolution and defeat. Now, in a reunited Germany, with the commemoration happening on the territory that had once been that of the former East Germany, celebrating Luther was also an attempt to escape defining Germany’s history solely in terms of Nazism and the holocaust—to find, that is, a ‘usable past’.

How Luther was commemorated was therefore a question of national significance.\(^1\) This difficult hero, with his stodgy determination, his love of beer and pork, his relentless hatreds, his penchant for misogynist quips, and his four-square masculinist stance, has always been a divisive figure. Embracing him would not be easy. It could only be done with self-mockery, and could succeed only if religious divisions proved to be distant enough for denominational identity to be surpassed by a more indulgent attitude towards the colourful characters of the sixteenth century. But the fact that the Göttingen professor of church history Thomas Kaufmann published a book on Luther’s Jews that acknowledged Luther’s anti-Semitism once and for all, and which did not excuse it as a product of his times, meant that this issue in particular became a subject of national debate, the first time it had been confronted head on since the Second World War.\(^2\)

Luther, it seemed, always raises issues of cultural and national identity that reach far beyond his theological legacy. A colossus of the stature of Bismarck, every age seems to appropriate him as its own—erasing him as a historical figure. People either love him or hate him, and even today, he elicits strong emotional reactions. How this anniversary unfolded, and what rituals of remembrance took place, revealed a lot about German culture and politics: here, surely, cultural history had much to say. It could help us examine Luther’s cussed character, his lumpy masculinity, the depth of his appeal, and it could explain the pervasive legacy he has left in German culture, musical, linguistic, material, and visual.

As the commemorative year wore on, I pondered how the biography I had written of Luther had itself become part of the memorial cult, and I often felt uncomfortable. Partly because of my own experience when I spoke from the pulpit in Luther’s church, I realized that I had not done enough to interrogate Luther’s anti-Semitism.
or to ask how far it extended into Lutheran theology. And I sensed that I needed to confront the less comfortable sides of his legacy. Most of all, I needed to look more critically at one of the aspects I loved most about Luther: his rambunctious masculine posturing. Here studies of masculinity didn’t really seem to offer the tools I needed. Years before, I had felt impatient with historians who divided masculinity into ‘good’, responsible house–father masculinity and rough, disruptive male behaviour. Surely you could not have one without the other; the upstanding patriarchs of today were yesterday’s tearaways. Indeed, because state power so evidently relied in the end upon force in the early-modern period, authorities needed their young men to have mastered the use of weapons (towns were defended by citizen militias); and while law-makers might inveigh against drinking to excess, male bonding rituals—then as now—usually involve collective consumption of alcohol. I felt irritated with histories that adopted the authorities’ moralising tones towards the young rowdies of the past, and impatient with those who claimed to be shocked by Luther’s crudeness, or who air-brushed out his aggressive polemics against those he disagreed with. This, to me, was part of Luther’s anarchic attractiveness, his refusal to be a plaster saint. And yet, the commemoration year led me to reconsider my tendency to integrate Luther’s obstreperous qualities into a relatively positive assessment of his personality, and to draw out more the dangers of his habitual aggression.

Thinking about masculinity—one of the major growth areas of gender history over the last thirty years—can help us think differently about Luther. You could, for example, write a history of the Reformation through Luther’s facial hair: the tonsured, shaven monk gave way to the shaggy, bearded, mustachioed Luther once he was in hiding in the Wartburg, disguised as a nobleman. The mature Luther adopted a clean-shaven look but the stubble on his jutting jaw is usually visible. The Cranach workshop was at pains to show Luther as a virile, potent man, a figure very different from a diffident monk. Indeed, it could be argued that the Reformation marked a genuine moment of transformation in the history of masculinity, as it rejected the ideal of celibacy, mocked the pope as effeminate, and abolished monks and priests as different models of manhood. Protestant pastors were meant to be patriarchs like the city fathers and stately bureaucrats
who employed them. Instead of a multiplicity of different kinds of masculinity, Lutherans valued only one.

Cultural history of this kind has its seductions, but our story must be more complex, because masculinity is never uniform and individuals craft their sexual identities, albeit in dialogue with social forms. After all, from early on, Luther was paired in portraits with the much less potent-looking Melanchthon. Unlike Luther, the younger man wore a wispy beard; and as Melanchthon never was a monk, he did not have to repudiate celibate masculinity; but both men knew Melanchthon was the better scholar. The reformer’s masculine strutting was of a piece with his bullying antagonism to the Jews. In his final years he ordered German rulers, including his own elector, to take measures against the Jews and he castigated the Brandenburg electors for being too tolerant, using the same polemical, prophetic mode he had developed early on to enable him to speak the truth (as he saw it) to power.

Luther revelled in his masculinity and liked to see himself as the hero of the Reformation. It was part of the way he established his dominance over his younger followers. It had playful aspects—one of Luther’s greatest gifts was his sense of humour—but it also had much less pleasant sides. So, in 1530, when Melanchthon had to conduct
the negotiations over the recognition of the Confession of Augsburg, Luther twitted him for his lack of masculine bravery and for weeping too much, cutting remarks that seemed to reveal less about sixteenth century masculinity than they did about Luther’s penchant for bullying.\textsuperscript{4} Or when, as the Table Talk (the notes Luther’s students took on his dinner conversations) reveals, Luther mocked his wife Katharina von Bora for her failure to understand what ‘rhetoric’ was or pronounced that cleverness was the garment that suited women least, Luther’s jolliness was also a way of shutting women up.\textsuperscript{5} Luther’s masculinist polemical mode, in fact, may have been part of the way he cemented his own position and made it less possible for others to speak. It also contributed to making compromise—with the Catholics or with the Sacramentarians—impossible. In this sense, the history of masculinity has much to offer, because this kind of rough-hewn, bullying manhood may mesmerise even those it grinds down. Why were Luther’s followers, including women, willing to fall into line, at least for much of the time? And what did Luther’s manly displays enable him to do, crossing the lines of what was acceptable, getting away with rudeness, and directing aggression at his greatest enemy, the pope? Luther’s masculinity, it seemed, had its noxious streak.

Luther thought in binaries, and repeatedly split people into friends and foes. His ability to turn the world into an epic moral struggle—to see the Devil at work everywhere, to simplify, and to give names to things—was one of his greatest strengths, but also the source of his greatest weaknesses. This pattern is evident in his theological works as well: his ability to put a ‘name’ on something was key to his devastating polemic, but it was also one of his greatest gifts as a theologian. Looking for repetitive behaviour across all areas of Luther’s activity helps us to understand his theology differently: the Luther who devised brilliant nicknames for his friends, calling the Wittenberg pastor Johannes Bugenhagen ‘Dr Pommer’ (he came from Pomerania and so spoke Low German, and his sermons were too long) and his enemy Johannes Cochlaeus ‘the snail’ (he was always several steps behind Luther), also had the knack of summarising complex theology in a word.\textsuperscript{6} Naming is after all about the relationship of language to reality, a fundamental issue for Luther philosophically as well as theologically. These essays are an attempt to do theological history in a different
way. Instead of treating ideas as independent agents, with their own lineages, this book tries to understand them in relation to the person who produced them, and not to distinguish them from their unconscious and semi-conscious usages. It looks for patterns and habits of mind as much as for explicit statements.

Binaries structured much of Lutheran rhetoric and a good deal of the Reformation's propaganda too. Central to this was its apposition of the pope and Christ, and the movement developed an unrelenting anti-papalism in which Luther was the hero who revealed the Papacy for what it truly was: the Antichrist. Even as Luther died, he repeated the anti-papal prophecy which is also a curse: 'Living I was your plague, O Pope, dead I will be your death'. This bitter aphorism was surprisingly pervasive in Lutheran memorial culture from the sixteenth century on. Nowadays the offensive words have frequently been erased, but even when they are not, it can be easy to overlook their presence in some of the most familiar images of the Reformation. For example, Luther’s binary thinking was mirrored in the image-making which the Cranach workshop invented for the new movement, with clear vertical divisions into good and evil and anti-papal caricatures which at times bordered on being images of hatred. The movement’s obsession with the pope is revealed in the insults his opponents flung at him, both radicals and Catholics. Müntzer dubbed him the Wittenberg Pope, accusing him of ‘play[ing] the hypocrite with the princes’ and ‘set[ting] himself up in place of the pope’. He is ‘Pope of the Elbe’, complained another former supporter.

And yet the Cranach workshop did far more than manufacture images of hate. It also created novel Reformation iconographies, in particular, Law and Gospel, which—though they use binary forms—do more than contrast opposites. Both Law and Gospel are needed, for the Christian needs the Law to recognize their sin. The image-form the workshop devised required the viewer to meditate on different sections of the image, to incorporate it into their own devotion, and to follow words and sign so as to ‘get’ the key theological ideas.

There was more, too, to Luther than just the bullying patriarch. Dreams are not normally part of the field of investigation for ecclesiastical historians. But one cannot fail to be haunted by reading Luther’s account in a letter to his confessor, Staupitz, of a dream he
had when he was feeling abandoned by him, in which he wrote that he felt like a child ‘weaned from its mother’. Weaning is a foundational human physical experience, for the mother as for the child, and yet we rarely talk about it. When a child is weaned, he or she gradually separates from the mother and the interdependence of their two digestive systems, which begins at conception, finally comes to an end. For mother and child alike, it means the loss of a deep source of physical connection and pleasure. Both have to find comfort without that oral link, and the child must learn to comfort himself or herself.

Yet while this is a universal human experience, what is revealing is how Luther chose to invoke it, and what this might tell us about a specific historical time. As Luther wrote in the letter, the words were taken from Psalm 131, a psalm which Luther later translated, using words that conveyed more of the child’s experience of being weaned, and that left the agency of the child in the process unclear. And yet in translations by others, the child is content, having reached its own separation from its mother. Mistakes and imprecisions are usually revealing, often more so than we readily realize, as Freud pointed out long ago: Luther ‘remembered’ the psalm as conveying a feeling of abandonment and not the child’s arrival at its own contentment. This profound ambiguity in how Luther recalled what was a very important biblical quotation for him helps us to understand the depth of his attachment to Staupitz. It also suggests that he was groping his way towards independence as he set off on his own theological path, revealing some of the pain and abandonment that parting from the Catholic church entailed.

A conventional psychoanalytic interpretation might attempt to divine Luther’s relationship with his mother through this dream, but that might be a reductive path, narrowing a complex character to problems in weaning and development, about which we know nothing in Luther’s case. So also, a psychoanalytic analysis which derived Luther’s theology from his relationship with his parents would be unsatisfying—though his complicated relationship to his father, against whom he rebelled by becoming an Augustinian friar, gave him unusual insight into the paternal aspect of the Christian’s relation to God, and how that can lead to struggle with God. Psychoanalytic ideas are not much use to historians if they lead them to pathologise an
individual. They serve then merely to cheapen complex inner lives and they do not help us understand their thought over time, organically revealed in all their habits, patterns of mind, conscious and unconscious inclinations, and in their actual relationships with others. As we start to tease these out, we can see how dreams—which raise issues about the nature of divine inspiration and prophecy as opposed to the letter of scripture—were connected to central dilemmas of Luther’s Reformation. By approaching questions at a tangent, by looking at issues that are on the periphery of our scholarly vision, new and unexpected connections often emerge. So, for example, one of the central theological divisions of the Reformation was linked to the status of dreams. The revolutionary firebrand Thomas Müntzer was scathing about Luther’s support of the rich and powerful, and derived his own authority in part from dreams and visions. For his part, Luther was always sceptical about them, preferring to rely on scripture alone—but of course, scripture too features prophetic dreams and visions. Luther could never entirely disavow dreams, and his apparent scepticism masked a fascination with them.

Dreams communicated hopes and fears for people in Luther’s circle, allowing them to talk indirectly about them by arguing over possible interpretations of their dreams. They wondered, for example, if the eagle, who became a cat in one of Melanchthon’s dreams, stood for the emperor. He was the focus of much of their anxieties at this time as they waited to present their confession of faith to him at the Imperial Diet of 1530 at Augsburg, the document that founded their new church. They worried about this while being unable to talk to Luther, who could come no further than the castle of Coburg. Psychoanalytic ideas could therefore help illuminate not just the psychological dilemmas of individuals, but might disclose the richness of relationships between groups of people—and it was these collective dynamics which were crucial to the Reformation’s implementation. They were not just harmonious relationships of co-operation, but often of rivalry for Luther’s attention, and they could on occasion include attacks on each other’s manhood, as in every movement with a charismatic leader. To look at these undersides of the nascent church is not, of course, to belittle what the Wittenbergers accomplished together; it reminds us how important that Wittenberg collective was to the movement’s
self-perception: one of the abiding iconographies of the Reformation, not just within Lutheranism, but copied even within iconophobic Calvinism, was that of the reformers sitting together around a table.

Images were central to Lutheranism and museum exhibitions featured prominently in the celebrations of 2017. Perhaps the most inspiring was ‘Luther und die Avantgarde’, held in the nineteenth-century former jail in Wittenberg, with each artist given a prison cell as a canvas on which to develop their ideas about Luther. Containing a ramshackle series of installations, videos, mixed media artworks, and sculptures, the crumbling building was as much a part of the show as the exhibits, for it juxtaposed the architectural legacies of state institutions with Western cutting-edge art (having been a prison in the Third Reich and in the DDR, the building had lately become a depot for storing official records). Not all of it worked. Some artists seemed to think that Luther was an iconoclast who wanted to destroy all religious images—he was no such thing—while others thought he stood for the freedom of the individual. But some of the displays conveyed aspects of Luther that scholarship had been unable to deal with. In particular I was struck by Erwin Wurm’s orange fist that greeted the visitor on arrival at the exhibition, which conveyed that masculine aggression so much part of Luther’s style (see figure 1.19). Another was a dizzying prison of clear plastic tubes in a cage-like structure by the Chinese artist Song Dong, filled with sweets and placed on top of a mirror that filled the floor space—it somehow managed to recreate the self-referential quality of Luther’s thought, conveying how such a liberating theology could yet turn inwards on itself, repeating its key concepts to infinity. Above all, the sheer creativity and inventiveness of this exhibition showed that Lutheranism is far from being confined to museums, and can inspire extraordinary art.

As it did from its inception. There is no other Protestant sect which could have hosted such an amazing number of exhibitions, because none fostered such a rich material and visual legacy. Most other protestant sects shared iconoclastic instincts, mistrusting sumptuous altar-pieces that might seduce the senses, and favouring white-washed walls or simple words from scripture. Not so Luther: from the outset, he remained closer to the Catholicism he had left, and though Lutherans remodelled their churches to include didactic art, with paintings of
Christ blessing the children that underlined the importance of infant baptism, or of Law and Gospel, they decorated their places of worship with appealing and fashionable mannerist designs. They also furnished their churches with images of the reformer himself. The artist Lucas Cranach was one of Luther’s oldest friends and earliest supporters, and as the Lutherjahr demonstrated, he did more than any other artist to shape the remarkable churches of Saxony and Thuringia, to make Luther’s face well known, and to stamp the ‘look’ of early modern Lutheran print.\textsuperscript{13} Lutheranism was as much a visual and material culture as it was a musical one. And if we think that we can ‘know’ Luther as an individual, that is largely because we are so familiar with the Luther the Cranach workshop made, the man with the deep-set, far-seeing eyes, the confident four-square stance, and the wayward curl, poking out irreverently from underneath the doctor’s hat. If this book can occasionally seem critical of Luther, or point to less comfortable features of Lutheranism’s legacy, I hope that this will be taken in the spirit of Lutheranism I so admire: its profound anti-authoritarianism, its political engagement, and its insistence on argument, discussion, and critical appraisal of its own history.

0.3. Portrait of Martin Luther. Cranach the Elder, 1528. Kunstsammlungen der Veste Coburg.
INDEX

Adrianus, Mathias, 140
Agricola, Johannes, 52, 54; *Eyn kurtze anred zu allen mißgüstigen Doctor Luthers und der Christenlichen freyheit*, 95
Albrecht of Mainz, 39, 65–67, 75, 80, 94, 106
Albrecht of Saxony, 151–52
Aldegrever, Heinrich, portraits of Melanchthon and Luther, 28, 29
*Allegorie auf Gesetz und Gnade*, 56
Altdorfer, Albrecht, 18
Amsdorf (Wittenberg clergy), 105
Anabaptists, 104
Anfechtungen (temptations), 56–58, 105, 113, 215–14
Anonymous: *Prophecy of the Reverend Mr Doctor Martin Luther, 112; Incombustible Luther, 109*
Antichrist: Luther as, 98–99; pope as, 98–99, 120–21, 133, 229–150
anti-papalism: Antichrist identified with the pope, 98–99, 120–21, 133, 229–150; in English Reformation, 115; Karlstadt and, 119; in Lutheran culture, 115–16; Luther’s, 6, 96–99, 108–15, 120, 123–26, 130, 133–34, 138–39, 229–150; Melanchthon’s, 96, 124–25; Protestant Reformation characterized by, 118–21
anti-Semitism: Charles V’s counter-policy to, 148; circumcision and, 148–49; critics of, 158; disgust as component of, 138, 143, 158, 160–62, 164; explanations of, in Lutheran tradition, x, 136, 138–39, 143; identification with Jews as contrast to, 160, 164–65; instances of, ix, x, xi, 4, 136–37, 139–41, 149–52, 156–57, 158–64; Judensau sculpture, ix, x, xi, 142–43, 145, 159–60; Lutheranism and, x, 135–36, 167–68; Luther’s, x, xi, 2–4, 39, 135–68; Luther’s avoidance of certain types of, 143–44; Luther’s dealings with Jews, 138–44; Marianism and, 144–47, 156, 161; masculinity linked to, 4, 157, 164; sources of, 137–38, 143, 147, 164
Aquila, Caspar, 53, 54
Aristotelianism, 103
Arnoldi, Franciscus, 71
Asisi, Yadegar, Wittenberg Panorama, 186–89
assassination, alleged plots against Luther, 141–42
Auerswald, Fabian von, *Ringerkunst (The Art of Wrestling)*, 38

Note: Page numbers in italic type indicate illustrations.

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INDEX

Augsburg Confession. See Confession of Faith
Augustine, 181
Augustinianism, 18, 46, 104
Augustinian Order, 7, 12, 13, 44, 45, 46, 68, 86
Aurogallus, Matthaeus, 140

Baldung Grien, Hans, 17, 18, 58
baptism, 104–6
Battle of Frankenhausen, 93
Bemal, Sebald, 18
Benedictine Order, 46
Berliner Dom Luther statue, 170, 171
Beyer, Leonhard, 70
Bible, Luther's translation of, 1, 31, 140, 154, 156–66, 170, 181–82, 239n13
bigamy, 76–77
Bismarck, Otto von, 170
body and bodily functions, Luther's attitude and references concerning, 48, 68, 74, 96–98, 124, 126–34, 137, 156–57, 160–62, 190
Boeschenstein, Johannes, 140
Bora, Katharina von, 5, 22–23, 23, 24, 25–26, 30, 35, 36, 43, 54, 57, 70, 89, 107, 162, 177–78, 184, 215n38
Brosamer, Hans: portraits of Luther and Katharina, 23, 24; portraits of Luther and Melanchthon, 27, 29
Brück, Georg, 71, 73, 74–75, 75, 79
Bruengel, Pieter, 188
Buc, Philippe, 169, 184
Bucer, Martin, 92, 102
Bugenhagen, Johannes, 5, 86, 92, 107, 108, 110, 161, 178, 181
Burnett, Amy, 102

Cajetan, Cardinal, 173, 174
Calvin, John, 29, 35, 92
Calvinism, 9, 63, 157, 190
Catholicism: anti-Luther sentiment in, 57, 63; and Diet of Augsburg, 50–54; images' significance for, 9; Luther's abandonment of, 7, 9, 66, 74, 84, 94, 125; Luther's characterization of, as Jews, 138; Luther's criticisms of, 100; present-day relations with Protestantism, 102; satires on Luther, 26, 27, 35, 111, 177–78
Charles V, Emperor, 50–51, 124, 148, 173
church services, commemorating Luther, 185
circumcision, 148–50, 152, 157
class and status, 70–71, 86
Coburg castle, 8, 51, 92, 94
Coelius, Michael, 108
Colloquy of Marburg, 173, 174
comic books, format of Reformation propaganda likened to that of, 119, 123
Confession of Faith (Confessio Augustana), 5, 51, 54, 71, 82, 92, 102, 115, 148, 170
council conversion, 140–42, 155
council of Constance (1415), 45
council of Mantua (1537), 95
council of Trent, 108–10, 123–25
Cranach, Hans, 12
Cranach, Lucas, the Elder, and workshop: Altar of the Sacraments (Wittenberg Altarpiece), 106–7, 107 (details of verso); contribution of, to Reformation, 6, 11, 36, 42; as court painter, xi, 11; crucifixion, from title page of Martin Luther's Complete Works, 68, 69, 80; double portraits of Luther and Katharina by, 22–23, 23, 25, 36; images of Luther by, 3, 10–13, 10, 15–21, 16, 18, 20, 29–34, 36–41, 68, 69; Karlstadt and, 116; Karlstadt's Fuhrwagen, 116, 117, 118–21, 126; kitsch modeled on works of, 186; Last Supper, 36; Law and Gospel, 121, 122, 123; Luther's friendship with, xi, 10, 11–12, 70, 105; Martin Luther
INDEX

on his deathbed with motto, 111, 114; Melancholia, 58, 60; Melancholy, 58, 59; in modern panoramas, 188; and Myconius’s dream, 215n34; The Origins of the Antichrist, 130, 131, 133–34; The Origins of the Monks, 130, 132, 134; output of, 13; The Papal Belvedere, 128, 129; Passional Christi und Antichristi (with Melanchthon and Schwertfeger), 98, 99, 120–21, 126; place of, in German art, 12–13; portrait of Philip Melanchthon, 28; printing press of, 12, 17
Cranach, Lucas, the Younger, 11, 13; Martin Luther and the Wittenberg Reformers, 81; Portrait of Martin Luther on his deathbed, 33; portraits of Martin Luther, 31, 32, 32, 165
Cruciger, Caspar, 86

Devil: Jews linked to, 140, 160–61; Luther’s struggles with, 57–58; pope likened to, 115; as source of dreams, 55–57; as source of temptations, 57–58
Diet of Augsburg (1530), 8, 30, 50–52, 71, 92, 95, 115, 148
Diet of Regensburg (1546), 148
Diet of Speyer (1526), 93
Diet of Speyer (1544), 148
Diet of Worms (1521), 12, 17, 21, 47, 68–70, 120–21, 156, 170, 173, 174
Dietrich, Veit, 51
disputations, 13, 68
The Dream of Frederick the Wise, 61–63, 61, 177
dreams, 42–63; cat in a sack dream, 52–54; as communication vehicle, 52; Devil as source of, 55–58; of Frederick the Wise, 61–63; interpretation of, 52; Luther’s, 6–7, 43–47, 55–57; Luther’s attitude toward, 8, 42–43, 47, 48–49, 54, 57–58, 63; Melanchthon and, 52–53; Müntzer and, 47–49; Reformation attitudes toward, 8, 42, 44, 62–63, 214n30, 215n34; role of, in Lutheranism, 61–63; value of studying, 43–44; as vehicle for God and Spirit, 47–49; weaning as subject of (Staupitz dream), 7, 44–47, 213n21
Dürer, Albrecht, 12–13, 34, 38, 58, 188

Eck, Johannes, 69, 85, 118–19
Elijah, Luther likened to, 102, 157, 164, 165, 182
emotion, Luther’s denigration of, 102
Erasmus, Desiderius, 76, 84–85, 86
Eucharist. See Real Presence exhibitions. See museum exhibitions
Ferdinand, Archduke, 146
Flacius, Matthias, “Sauritt,” Erklerung der Schendlichen Sünde, 97
Frederick the Wise, xi, 11, 12, 21, 44, 61–63, 69, 73, 119, 170
freedom: Luther associated with, 9, 53, 82, 84, 100; peasants’ desire for, 49, 100
Freud, Sigmund, 7, 52, 152, 167; The Interpretation of Dreams, 52
Friedeburg, Robert von, 79
Fuggers, 65
Furtenagel, Lukas, 33

Gelassenheit (relaxedness), 46, 47–49, 102, 118–20
George, Duke of Saxony, 69–76, 80, 106
German Historical Museum Nuremberg, 21
Germany: contemporary European role of, 169, 193; contemporary politics of, 169; East vs. West, 1, 169–70, 193; Lutheranism in, 172, 182–83; Luther identified with, 1–2, 41, 165, 170, 172, 192
godparents, 105
INDEX

Hasenberg, Johannes, 177–78
Hebrew language, 139–40, 154
Heinrich of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel, 67–68, 72, 78–79, 94, 106
Hilten, Johannes, 102, 182, 250n25
Holbein, Hans, 121
Holocaust, 136, 167
Hopfer, Daniel, 18
Hörl, Otto, 190–91; “Martin Luther—Hier Stehe Ich,” 168; plastic figure of Martin Luther, 166–67, 167
Hornung, Wolf, 66
Hus, Jan, 45, 62
Hutten, Ulrich von, 15
iconoclasm, 9
image-text relationship, 116, 118–21, 126
insults, 94–98
Jerome, St, 34
Jews, Luther’s dealings with, 138–44
Joachim of Brandenburg, 66, 80
Johann I, the Constant, Elector of Saxony, 71, 73, 93
John, Duke, 12, 47
John Ernest, Duke, 105
John Frederick, Elector of Saxony, 67–68, 74–75, 82
John George I, Elector, 189
Jonas, Justus, 85–86, 105, 108, 177; Jonah and the Whale, 86, 87
Jörg, Junker (Luther disguised as), 20, 20, 34, 70, 78
Josel, Rabbi, 139, 148, 149
Judensau (Jewish sow image), ix, x, xi, 142–43, 145, 159–60, 163, 167
Kaiser, Leo, 91
Kampf, Arthur, Luther posting his Theses in Wittenberg, 180
Karlstadt, Andreas: absence of images of, 29, 187; Cranach the Elder and,
Kaufmann, Thomas, 2, 136, 139, 140, 151, 192
kitsch. See Luther kitsch
Klein, Melanie, 147, 152
Korsch, Dietrich, 225n4
Korteweg, Neel, Luther as an Anti-Semite, 39, 40
Kronberg, Hartmut von, 141
Kuhr, Joachim, 27
Law and Gospel, 121, 122, 123, 138, 139, 234n33
Leipzig debate (1519), 13, 44, 69, 85, 118
Leo X, Pope, 119
Liber vagatorum, 150
Loeser, Hans, 105
Luder, Hans (father), 87–89
Luder, Jacob (Jacuff) [brother], 89
Lufft, Hans, 86, 166
Luther, Elisabeth (daughter), 89
Luther, Hans (son), 89–90, 105
Luther, Margarethe (daughter), 89–90
Luther, Martin: aggression as characteristic of, 3, 9, 38, 64, 71, 74–75, 77–80, 94–98; attacks on enemies undertaken by, 5, 57, 65–80, 94–102; binary thinking of, 5–6, 100; biographies of, 2, 11, 26, 63, 64, 76, 91–92, 115, 142, 173–74, 177–78; Catholicism abandoned by, 7, 9; character and personality of, 2, 5–6, 12, 18, 29, 50, 106 (see also humour of in this entry);
INDEX


Luther, Paul (son), 89–90

Lutheranism: anti-papalism of, 6; anti-Semitic in, x, 135–36, 167–68; characteristics of, xi, 10, 185; commemorations of Luther in 2017 and, 172, 181–82, 193; divisions in, 29, 35, 47, 49, 50–51, 92, 125; founding doctrines of, 51, 115; Frederick the Wise’s dream and, 61–63, 177; in Germany, 172, 182–83; global distribution of, 172; images’ significance for, 9–10, 30–33, 41, 62, 116, 118, 126, 189–90; Lutherans as Chosen People, 150, 152, 154, 157, 164–65, 167–68; and Luther Bible, 181–82; Luther’s role and status in, 6, 13, 21, 26, 36, 40–41,

Papacy, A Creature of the Devil, 96–98, 124–26, 130, 137, 138; Against the Sabbatarians, 149, 151; An die Radherrn aller stedte deutsches lands, 83; Appeal to the Christian Nobility, 15; Commentary on Galatians, 45, 46, 212n14; Complete Works, 69; Ermanunage zum frude auff die zwelff artickel der Bawrschaft, 19; Exhortation to All Clergy Assembled at Augsburg, 52, 115; The Freedom of a Christian, 100; Gloss on “antichristian so-called imperial edict”), 71; Invocavit sermons, 21; Lectures on Genesis, 149, 151, 154; On the Babylonian Captivity, 16, 17, 18, 98, 100; On the Jews and Their Lies, 140, 149–51, 154, 155, 158–61; On the Sabbatarians, 141; Eyn Sermon von dem Wucher, 153; “Testament,” 126–34; That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew, 144–47, 159; Von Schem Hamphoras, 136–37, 140–41, 150, 155, 156, 158–64, 167; Von den Conciliis und Kirchen, 88; Warning to His Dear Germans, 71; Wider der Bapstum zu Rom vom Teuffel gestift, 127. See also 95 Theses

Luther, Martin (son), 89–90, 105

Luther, Martin, works by: Against Hanswurst, 67–68, 96, 137; Against the Meuchler of Dresden, 71–73; Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants, 50, 101; Against the Roman

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INDEX

Lutheranism (continued)
63, 91–93, 101–2, 107, 147–48, 152, 178, 218n61; material culture of, 62–63, 189–90, 253n45 (see also Luther kitsch); mottos and slogans of, 93; naming of, 92–93; and politics, 64; Sacramentarians vs., 51. See also Reformation
Lutherhalle Wittenberg, 176
Luther kitsch, 185–93; ducks, 186, 191; history of, 189; meaning of, 190–91, 193, 253n48; pasta, 186; Playmobil figure, 135, 135, 165–67, 172–73, 186, 190, 191, 193; ubiquity of, 185–86; varieties of, 34, 185–86, 186, 189–90; Wittenberg Panorama, 186–89
Luther oaks, 250n29
“Luther und die Avantgarde” (exhibition, 2017), 9

Margaritha, Anton, 149, 154
Marriage: Luther’s, 22, 25–26, 36, 66, 70, 90, 177–78; Luther’s defence of, 115, 134
Martinists, 85, 91
Martin Luther Gedächtniskirche, Mariendorf, Berlin, 170, 171
martyrdom, 44, 70, 90–91, 213n24
Mary and Marianism, 144–47, 156, 161
masculinity, 64–80; anti-Semitism linked to, 4, 157, 164; effects of, 5; in images of Luther, 3, 22, 29, 39; Luther’s, 2, 3–5, 9, 68, 74, 79, 116; Luther’s attacks on others, 5, 65, 68, 72–76, 94; quills associated with, 61–62, 64, 67, 77; Reformation and, 3–4, 78–80; scholarship on, 3
Mathesius, Johannes, 64, 76, 78, 91, 115, 141–42, 158, 159, 177
Matthew 16, 125
medallion relief, 110, 111
Medici, Cosimo de’, 25 melancholy, 58
Melanchthon, Philip: anti-papalism of, 96, 124–25; at Diet of Augsburg, 51–54, 92, 102, 115; and dreams, 8, 42–43, 52–53, 55; images of, 26, 28, 29, 36; and Lutheran divisions, 29, 125; Luther’s relationship to, 26, 29, 42, 55, 92, 105, 111, 157, 178, 179, 182; masculinity of, 4–5; name of, 85; as notable Wittenberg Reformer, 86, 92, 107; Passional Christi und Antichristi (with Schwertfeger and Cranach the Elder), 98, 99, 120–21; sketch of Luther in notebook of, 111, 113; Ziegler and, 154
Merkel, Angela, 169
Miltitz, Carl, 94
Mueller, Caspar, 105
Muenster, Sebastian, 140
Münsterberg, Ursula von, 70
Müntzer, Thomas: absence of images of, 29; critical of Luther, 6, 8, 47–48; and dreams, 8, 47–49, 58; East German honouring of, 37; execution of, 50; and Gelassenheit, 47–49; Luther’s criticisms of, 49, 101–2, 177, 187; in modern panoramas, 187–88; motto of, 93; and Peasants’ War, 49–50, 173, 174; Peasants’ War, 187–88; Sermon before the Princes, 47–48
museum exhibitions, commemorating Luther, 183–85
Myconius, Friedrich, 101–2, 215n34
Mylen, Gertrude von, 70
names, 82–107; humanists’ adopting of, 84–86; as insults, 94–98; Luther’s, 82, 84–86, 89–90; of Luther’s children, 89; new Reform movement’s naming, 91–93; nicknames devised by Luther, 5, 84; and theology, 103–6
Nas, Johannes, 35, 105, 231n68
Nazism, 64, 167, 168, 169, 170
Nestorianism, 92

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INDEX

95 Theses: Albrecht as addressee of, 94; binary thinking in, 100; commemorations of, 1–2, 61–62, 158, 169–70, 181–93; Frederick the Wise’s dream about, 61–62; language as subject of, 99; Leipzig debate over, 118; Luther’s posting of, 65, 79, 82, 177, 180
Nirenberg, David, 138

Oberman, Heiko, 136

Paraclete, 156

Pax, 96, 124–26
Paul, Saint, 48, 89, 181, 217n46
Paul III, Pope, 96, 124–25, 134
Peasants’ War, 12, 18, 49–50, 101, 173, 174, 182, 187–88
Pelagianism, 92
Pfister, Ulrich, Tischgespräch mit Luther (Table talk with Luther), 37–38, 37
Philip of Hesse, 64, 76–77, 78, 80, 93, 170
Pietists, 102
pigs, insults involving, ix, 133, 137, 143, 159–60
Playmobil Luther figure, 135, 135, 165–67, 172–73, 186, 190, 191, 193
Porcellus, 160
Posen, Michel von, 142
propaganda: anti-papal, 96, 115, 119, 121, 124–25; binary thinking of, 9, 9, 123; electors’ use of, 21, 23, 25; Lutheran, 93; Reform, 116, 118–21, 123–25
Psalm 131, 7
Rabir, Luther’s dispute with, 155–56
Rabus, Ludwig, Historien, 174, 174, 175, 177
race, 136, 149–50, 162
Ratzinger, Alois, 108–10
Real Presence, 49, 92, 103, 162, 190
Reformation: binary thinking of, 5–6, 98, 121, 123; Cranach’s role in, 6, 11, 36, 41; Frederick the Wise’s dream and, 61–63, 177; key principles of, 121; Luther’s role and status in, 4, 6, 15, 25, 26, 34, 42–44, 50, 52, 56, 63, 65, 76, 91–93, 102, 218n61; masculinity and, 3–4, 78–80; Müntzer’s role in, 93; naming of the new movement, 91–93; Peasants’ War’s significance for, 49–50, 101; princes’ role in, 50, 64–65, 80; role of dreams and visions in, 8, 42, 44, 62–63, 214n30, 215n34; symbolism of Luther–Melanchthon combination in, 26, 29; Wittenberg Panorama’s representation of, 186–88. See also Lutheranism
Reutter, Ambroius, 142
Romans, Book of, 179
rose, as symbol of Luther, 13, 30, 82–83, 86, 170, 225n4
roundel scenes of Luther’s life, 176
Rubin, Miri, 145
Rublack, Ulrich, 106
Rühel, Johann, 65
Saale, Margarethe von der, 77
Sabbatarians, 149
Sacramentarians, 49, 51, 55, 92, 102, 103
Schmalkaldic League, 67, 93
Schmalkaldic War (1546–47), 93
Schön, Erhard, Luther with the dove of the Holy Spirit, 15, 15
Schorlemmer, Friedrich, x
Schwertfeger, Johann, Passional Christi und Antichristi (with Melanchthon and Cranach the Elder), 98, 99, 120–21
Scribner, Bob, 115
INDEX

scripture: controversies over, 47, 48, 125; Luther’s adherence to, 47, 104, 125, 154, 156

secular authority, Luther and, 8, 64–65, 74, 79, 105–6, 187
Selnecker, Nikolas, 156, 158
sexuality, Luther’s attitude toward, 48, 164, 178, 190
Sickingen, Franz von, 15
Siggins, Ian, 89
Sleidan, Johannes, 68
social class. See class and status
Song Dong, 9
Spalatin, Georg, 54, 85, 115, 177
Spangenberg, Cyriakus, 91–92
Spangenberg, Gustav, Luther playing the lute to his family, 178, 179

Der Spiegel (magazine), 169
status. See class and status
Staupitz, Johann von, 6–7, 44–47, 56, 102
Steiger, Johann Anselm, Gedächtnisorte der Reformation, 248n2
Stöckel, Wolfgang, woodcut of Martin Luther, 13, 14
Stübner, Wolfgang, 34
swan, as symbol of Luther, 62, 110, 189
Sylvius, Petrus, 99

Table Talk (notes on Luther’s dinner conversations), 5, 12, 34–38, 35, 63, 72, 92, 138, 140, 155, 158, 179
Tauler, Johannes, 46
temptation. See Anfechtungen
text-image relationship. See image-text relationship

Theologia Deutsch, 46, 102
theology, names and, 103–6
Thiem, Veit, Luther Shrine triptych, 4, 34
Thirty Years’ War, 1, 79
tombstone, of Luther, 110
Trott, Eva von, 67
Tübke, Werner, Peasant War Panorama, 188–89
Two Kingdoms, 79

Walther, Georg, 158
Wartburg castle, 3, 12, 20–21, 70
weaning, 7
will, 118–19. See also Gelassenheit
witch craze, 137, 147

Wittenberg: contemporary religious demographics of, 172; Cranach the Elder in, 11–13; and Diet of Augsburg, 51–54; Jews in, 138, 141–42; Luther commemoration in (2017), 170, 182–83, 185–93; Luther’s home in, 1, 12, 20–21, 43, 56; Reform movement and members of, 8–9, 21, 34, 35, 87, 86, 91–93, 105–7, 157; statue of Martin Luther in, 135, 165–66, 166
Wittenberg Panorama, 186–89
Witzel, Georg, 92
Wurm, Erwin, Boxing Glove Sculpture, 9, 38, 38

Die Zeit (magazine), 169
Ziegler, Bernhard, 154
Zutphen, Heinrich von, 91
Zwingli, Huldrych, 29, 35, 49, 78, 103