

Article

Struggling to Maintain the Gender System and to Gain Domination: Martin Luther's Correspondence Regarding "The Hornung Case" 1528–1530

Sini Mikkola 

School of Theology, University of Eastern Finland, 80101 Joensuu, Finland; sini.mikkola@uef.fi

Abstract: In this article, a case study is utilized to determine how personal relations and individual life events were used as tools in religious politics in the sixteenth century. The correspondence of sixteenth-century reformer Martin Luther is examined between 1528–1530 regarding Wolf and Katharina Hornung's marriage and the role of Luther's opponent, Joachim I Nestor, Elector of Brandenburg (1484–1535), in their case. By investigating Luther's representation of this marital strife, the relationship between personal and political is examined to determine if and how he used the case as means of religious–political influencing. The main method used is careful close reading. At the explicit level, Luther's aim in the case was to restore the Hornung marriage by bringing Wolf and Katharina back together. His letters suggest there was competition for Katharina between Wolf and Joachim, which actually, in his rhetoric, turned out to be a competition of two men representing different religious views: an evangelical one and a Catholic one. I will argue that in Luther's efforts to maintain the marriage and the prevailing gender system, the underlying goal was to gain power over an opposing religious–political figure and to prove one's own supremacy.

Keywords: Martin Luther; Elector Joachim I Nestor; Wolf and Katharina Hornung; sixteenth century; gender norms; gender system; power; dominion; honor; religious politics



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1. Introduction

The personal is political. This thought gained popularity in the feminist movement at the turn of the 1960s and 70s, particularly after the publication of Carol Hanisch's essay of the same name, and it has been popular as a slogan ever since. Hanisch's key idea—that all women had political potential and that their personal experiences were closely connected to their position in structural power relationships (Hanisch 1970)—has been an inspiration to the investigations made in this article. My starting point is, however, that the experiences and actions of both women and men of the sixteenth century were heavily influenced by their place in the system of power relationships.

In this article, I examine sixteenth-century reformer Martin Luther's correspondence between 1528–1530 regarding Wolf and Katharina Hornung's marriage and the role of the Elector of Brandenburg, Joachim I Nestor (1484–1535), in their case. By investigating how Luther treated this marital case, the relationship between personal and political is examined to determine if and how he used the case as means of religious–political influencing. Thereby, this case study presents a micro-historical perspective into the intersection of theology, religious–political motives, and power relations in the sixteenth century.

Little is known about Wolf and Katharina Hornung. Katharina Hornung was the daughter of Margarethe Blankenfeld and Thomas Blankenfeld, Berlin's mayor. Wolf Hornung was a burgher from Köln an der Spree, which was the sister town of Berlin. Both towns, Berlin and Köln, were located in the Margraviate of Brandenburg, which was ruled by Elector Joachim I Nestor. Wolf and Katharina were married and had a daughter in 1524. Soon after, Katharina and Joachim fostered a relationship. Wolf discovered this and

attempted to stab Katharina in March 1525. Katharina fled to Joachim, and Wolf was made to drop all the claims he had to his wife and to leave the Brandenburg area (Clemen 1933, p. 292; Hendrix 2015, p. 235; Roper 2016, p. 298).

Apparently, Wolf fled to Saxony, where public opinion had already set against Elector Joachim, who, as a devout Catholic, was against the evangelical movement. In fact, in July 1525, Joachim constituted an alliance with other opponents of the evangelical movement, namely Duke George of Saxony, his own brother Albert of Mainz, and Henry of Braunschweig, in order to suppress the teachings of the evangelicals. Katharina was willing to return to Wolf, but Joachim forbade her. After failing to return to her husband, Katharina turned to Luther for help. Luther convinced Wolf to write to his wife, and sent Wolf's letter himself to Katharina's mother, Margarethe, who acted as an intermediary (Clemen 1933, pp. 292–93, 512). This likely occurred sometime during the second half of 1527, as Margarethe wrote an answer to Luther in December 1527. In her reply, she assured him that her daughter was willing to return to her husband (WA BR 4, no. 1179, p. 293). Joachim soon became aware of the ongoing correspondence between Margarethe, Katharina, Luther, and Wolf, and forbade any contact between them (Clemen 1933, p. 345). However, Luther approached Katharina and Margarethe by letter in January 1528. Both letters were sent back, unopened (Clemen 1933, pp. 345–46). Hence, it seems probable that by then, Katharina's correspondence was under supervision (cf. Clemen 1933, p. 512; Ebeling 1997, p. 146).¹

Katharina's situation was complicated—it seems that she had had at least one child with Joachim by August 1528 (see WA BR 4, no. 1304b, p. 515). In June 1529, Wolf attended parliament in Speyer where his and Joachim's case was heard (Bebermeyer 1934a, pp. 99–100; Ebeling 1997, p. 152). Apparently, the issues were not legally solved, at least not in Wolf's favor, because by June 1530 Wolf had left for Augsburg to expedite his case against Joachim (cf. WA BR 5, no. 1607, p. 402, fn.1). When Luther's final comment on the case was published in the spring of 1530, Katharina was still with Joachim, most probably against her will (see WA BR 5, no. 1526b).

From 1528–1530, Luther wrote four letters to Joachim, and the latter two were printed and published. According to Luther, the need to go public was a result of Joachim's refusal to reply to any of his appeals. However, the public letters to Joachim still did not elicit any response. Luther again attempted to reach Joachim by approaching the three bishops in the Brandenburg area in February 1530. Luther's hope was that the persons in positions of power might influence Joachim. Instead of replying to Luther's letters, Joachim complained to John, the Elector of Saxony, of Luther and Wolf Hornung's harassment towards him (Clemen 1933, p. 576). John had been a faithful supporter of the evangelical movement since his rise to power after his brother Frederick the Wise had died in 1525. Nevertheless, he advised Luther not to interfere further in Joachim's business—advice Luther did not follow (Clemen 1933, p. 577).

At the time of Luther's involvement in the Hornung case in 1528, he was by no means an objective observer. His attitude towards Joachim had been reserved from the beginning of the 1520s as becomes evident by looking at his letters from an earlier period. In 1521, for instance, Luther called Joachim "the other Rehoboam near you [in addition with George of Saxony]" in a letter to Philipp Melanchthon (WA BR 2, no. 407, p. 333, l. 31–32). The comparison of Joachim with the unjust ruler of the Old Testament is undoubtedly related to his and Joachim's differing views over religious issues and shows his attitude towards the elector.

Luther's explicit aim throughout his correspondence was to restore the Hornung marriage by bringing Wolf and Katharina back together (cf. also Roper 2016, p. 298). However, I will argue that in Luther's efforts to maintain the marriage and the prevailing gender system, the question was not, in fact, of the Hornungs or the gender system, *per se*. Rather, Luther used the case as a tool in religious politics, and via his letters, waged a battle against a religious–political enemy, Elector Joachim.

2. Primary Sources and Previous Scholarship

There are altogether nine letters written by Luther to the parties of the Hornung case during the years 1528–1530 which I have analyzed for this article: four letters to Elector Joachim (WA BR 4, no. 1304a; no. 1309; no. 1332; WA BR 5, no. 1523), two to Katharina Hornung (WA BR 4, no. 1206; WA BR 5, no. 1526a), one to her mother Margarethe Blankenfeld (WA BR 4, no. 1205), and one to the bishops of Brandenburg, Havelberg, and Lebus (WA BR 5, no. 1524). One of the texts is, in fact, a preface and commentary to a letter sent in the name of Katharina Blankenfeld, which Luther had published (WA BR 5, no. 1526b; [Bebermeyer 1934b](#), p. 231; [Roper 2016](#), p. 299).² The main method used is careful close reading, with which I refer to an intensive and critical reading of texts that aims at understanding their formal aspects, content, and their textual and historical contexts (cf. [Moya 2016](#), pp. 9–10; [Brummett 2019](#), pp. 8–9).

In order to achieve his goal to bring the Hornung couple back together, Luther used multiple styles of rhetoric, from flattering to persuasion and threats. Due to the codes of letter writing dictated by *ars dictaminis*, the art of letter writing (see, e.g., [Perelman 1991](#)), there can be a certain disparity between the formalities (which were compiled as respectful and flattering) and the factual contents of the letter. In general, it was believed that the correct way to approach the recipient depended on their position: whether they were in a higher, lower, or similar position as the sender. Thereby, letters were a formal reinforcement of social hierarchies. For example, regardless of his attitude towards Joachim, in his letters to him Luther complied with the codes of social hierarchy and *ars dictaminis* in the salutations, signatures, and the overall addressing. The formalities of every letter to Joachim stressed Luther's status as lower in social rank (cf. e.g., WA BR 4, 1304a, p. 513, l. 54).

All in all, letter writing in the sixteenth century was guided by multiple motives and literary strategies ([Boureaux 1997](#)). Letters were semi-public by nature and readily forwarded, and hence, not merely meant to build and maintain bilateral relations but to serve as a communication channel within complex networks. In most cases, letters were intended to be read not only by the designated recipient but also by others. They were read aloud and circulated. As Lyndal Roper has noted, Luther assumed by premise that his letters would be read by a wider circle than the actual recipients. Furthermore, the increasing printing of public letters “enabled Luther to subvert authority, appealing over the head of the apparent addressee to a wider public” ([Roper 2010](#), pp. 284–86).

Until now, the Hornung case has received little scholarly interest. For example, Gerhard Ebeling discussed Luther's letters to Joachim in his book on Luther's *Seelsorge* ([Ebeling 1997](#), pp. 147–55); he did not, however, analyze them from the viewpoint of masculinity, as is achieved in this study. Lyndal Roper briefly described the Hornung case in her recent biography on Luther, noting that the whole case “became a particular obsession” for him ([Roper 2016](#), pp. 298–99); however, she does not analyze the reasons behind this “obsession”. This study will shed some light on those reasons.

3. Maintaining the Gender System: The Man as the Normative, the Woman as the Subordinate Other

The power of husbands over their wives was a given fact in the societies of the sixteenth century (see, e.g., [Wiesner-Hanks 2011](#), p. 284). Luther's correspondence regarding the Hornung couple reveals a traditional viewpoint of emphasizing the man's rights over the woman to the extent of approving violence.³ In his letters, the approval of violence exercised by Wolf was implicit yet visible. None of the letters, even those written to Katharina and her mother, acknowledged Wolf's usage of violence. Instead, in them, Luther called Wolf “the poor fellow (*der arme geselle*)” (WA BR 4, no. 1205, p. 345, l. 13) or “the good fellow (*der gute geselle*)” (WA BR 4, no. 1206, p. 346, l. 4–5), presenting him as the one who had been improperly treated. This was certainly due to several reasons, yet the most important was the so-called “normal domestic violence”, to which husbands were entitled and which was recognized neither by canon law nor by the evangelicals as an issue ([Roper 1989](#), p. 167;

Harrington 2005, pp. 266–67; Wiesner-Hanks 2010, p. 95). For husbands, violence was the means by which they could maintain their status as *pater familias*.⁴

In the sermon *Marital Estate* a few years earlier, Luther had explicitly considered it improper to represent one's masculinity through violence. When presenting a picture of a married couple as one flesh, Luther advised men in the following way:

So man, too, should not govern women (*die Weiber regieren*) by big batons, bullying, or with a bear knife, but with friendly words and gestures and with all kindness (*sanfftmuth*), so that they will not become frightful, as Saint Peter says in chapter three, and [so that they will not] be startled so that then they do not know what to do. That is why man has to govern women with understanding (*vernunft*) and not with madness (*unvernunft*) and give the feminine sex its honor as the weaker vessel, —. (WA 17¹, p. 24)

The situation with the Hornung couple seems to have been different from Luther's point of view, however. In the midst of his thoughts concerning Wolf and Katharina was, I believe, the question of breaking the marital bond.⁵ Katharina had already betrayed Wolf with Joachim before the attempted stabbing. Thus, since Wolf's status as the husband had been endangered, it was his prerogative to use violence as means of controlling Katharina.

Luther expressed his expectation of Katharina's submission in harshening tones as time went by. When writing to Katharina's mother in 1528, Luther merely noted that Katharina had made a fool of Wolf (*hat lassen mit der nasen furen*) and did not bother to write to inform him of her plans regarding their future (WA BR 4, no. 1205, p. 345). The strict demand of the husband's right to receive proper treatment from his wife was, however, expressed clearly in 1530 when Luther wrote to Katharina herself:

You know that you practice such great and cruel impiousness and misdemeanor towards your husband, practice so much robbery, that you withhold yourself, his child, his house and yard, his goods and honor—I think Wolf Hornung will resign from you as from a public adulterer—. (WA BR 5, no. 1526a, p. 231, l. 13–15, 22–23)

The tendency to treat Katharina as the main culprit in a profoundly active manner can be found, in addition to the quotation above, in Luther's letter to the three bishops, in which he tried to convince them to take a stand on the Hornung case. He presented Wolf to the bishops as "a poor underling (*knecht*)", who had to suffer "in great misery and squalor, in need and want, in concern and sorrow of his soul—" (WA BR 5, no. 1524, p. 228, l. 12–14). Luther continued that Elector Joachim should not stand "the wife's robbery and misdemeanor (*raub und frevel des weibs*)" (WA BR 5, no. 1524, p. 228, l. 16–17). He advised the bishops to interfere and, if warnings and requests were not enough, to judge and expel Katharina (WA BR 5, no. 1524, p. 228, l. 27–28).

The image that Katharina as robbing herself from Wolf (see also WA BR 5, no. 1523, p. 227; no. 1526a, p. 230) points to an understanding of the wife as not only a ward but even property of her husband. Luther made this point by depicting a number of things that belonged to Wolf as the *Hausvater*: his wife and child, house and yard, goods and honor (WA BR 4, no. 1304a, p. 513; no. 1332, p. 579, l. 72; WA BR 5, no. 1523, p. 227, l. 50; no. 1524, p. 228, l. 12; no. 1526a, p. 231, l. 14–15).⁶ The whole of Wolf's family was thus in his possession in quite a similar vein as the material belongings.

The occurrence of Katharina and Wolf's names in Luther's letters reveal his view on the man as the normative and the woman as the other. He mentioned Katharina's name 13 times in the correspondence, whilst Wolf's name appears 37 times. In one particular letter to Joachim, Luther used Wolf's name 14 times and did not use Katharina's once (WA BR 4, no. 1332, pp. 577–80). The few mentions of Katharina's name compared to Wolf's suggests that naming of a woman was not necessary but the emphasis was on her position as a wife of a certain man (cf. Mikkola 2017, p. 186).

Luther's depiction of Katharina's position is in line with the contemporary legal custom, which took the patriarchal continuum and the husband's guardianship as a given.

The woman was in the dominion of her father until her marriage, which, in turn, shifted the guardianship from father to husband (See, e.g., [Roper 1989](#), p. 72; [SM 1999](#), pp. 79, 127). In this system, an honorable woman retained her chastity as a virgin or a devoted wife ([Wiesner 2002](#), pp. 155–56; [Karras 2003](#), p. 60; [Wiesner-Hanks 2011](#), p. 65), a feature she was expected to make every effort to maintain ([Rublack 1998](#), p. 259), thereby remaining in control of the men she was to obey. In other words, female honor was especially connected to proper sexual behavior in the sixteenth century. Luther clearly shared this view.

A woman's social status as either unmarried or married hence dictated the proper sexual behavior expected from her. Social norms did not, of course, treat merely the question of whether a woman was entitled to sexual relations or not: the question of proper sexual behavior within marriage was complex and it had been the worry of pastors well before Luther, as medieval penitentials, for instance, prove.⁷ However, the threat towards Katharina of becoming deserted by her husband as a public adulterer, which would have resulted in losing her honor, was not a judgment lightly made but after years of trying to reunite her with Wolf. The stigma would have made Katharina, as Luther put it, “even worthless”, indeed a social outcast.⁸ This fate was more than probable in a society where the man's right to his wife's body was self-evident (see, e.g., [Roper 1989](#), p. 72).

Luther also referred to Katharina's impiousness in the letter to the bishops (WA BR 5, no. 1524, p. 228, 35), calling for the need for their pastoral, masculine intervention. He appealed to the bishops to act as examples of masculine virtue. According to Luther, these virtues were “seriousness and courage, strength and resourcefulness (*ernst und mut, stercke und rat, zu thun—*)” (WA BR 5, no. 1524, p. 229, 42), which were defined by the example of Jesus himself in the Scripture, and which the bishops were to use in evaluating the case of the Hornungs. All of the virtues mentioned by Luther imply an understanding of masculinity as reason, control, and order, which was in line with the medieval view of male characteristics compared with female irrationality, lust, and disorder (for the dichotomies, see, e.g., [Bynum 2012](#), pp. 151–79). By arguing that Katharina was impious, Luther implied that she was a threat both to the social order and the gender system. This was a hint to the bishops to take actions to put her to her proper place, that is, back to her husband towards whom she had the highest obligation to be obedient.

Luther further emphasized the significance of the bishops' masculine role by admitting his own inferiority and humility in front of them, their status, and their knowledge (WA BR 5, no 1524, p. 228, l. 32–34). The common motive of letter writing to flatter the recipient and emphasize the writer's humbleness in order to affect the recipient's conduct is clear in Luther's letter to the bishops, especially in his choice of rhetoric (cf. e.g., [Perelman 1991](#), p. 112).

4. Luther's Depiction of a Struggle of Honor and Domination

Luther sought to reinforce Wolf's status and rights as a husband and treated Katharina as a less important party. One part of his strategy in emphasizing Wolf's rights and status was to illustrate Joachim not only as an unjust ruler but also as unmanly. There are two levels of discourse in Luther's letters concerning Joachim. The first level is an explicit one, which can be read from the letters addressed to Joachim himself. The other level is implicit, found in the letter Luther wrote to Katharina in 1530 and in the preface to her letter in the same year. In those texts, he targeted his criticism at Joachim, as I will demonstrate in the following section. The two levels are somewhat different from each other—what Luther could not say in a letter to Joachim due to his electoral position and privileges, he could say to him indirectly in a text that was explicitly written to or about Katharina.

The unequal positions of Joachim and Wolf were mentioned in every letter Luther wrote to Joachim. Similar to his wordings to other recipients, Luther presented Wolf as “a poor fellow” (WA BR 4, no. 1304a, p. 513, l. 12, 21, 44–45), “a poor, wounded fellow” (WA BR 4, no. 1332, p. 578, l. 47–48), and “a poor, innocent Hornung” (WA BR 5, no. 1523, p. 227, l. 44) in his letters to Joachim. This rhetoric concerning Wolf was most probably twofold: first, by representing Wolf as the innocent party and pitiful victim, Luther could validate

the claim for Katharina's return and indicate Joachim and Katharina's guilt without having to explain it; second, Luther's intention may have been to bring forward the power Joachim had over Wolf by reason of his position as a ruler, and Wolf's ineptitude as a target of that power. Both aspects of Luther's rhetoric aimed at building public support for Wolf in the public letters.

Luther emphasized Wolf's pitiful position by remarking that he was about to lose his honor as a man and a husband. This he did by presenting a series of Wolf's belongings, including honor, which the man had lost (WA BR 4, no. 1332, p. 579, l. 72; WA BR 5, no. 1523, p. 227, l. 50; no. 1526a, p. 231, l. 14–15). It is worth noting that both letters wherein Luther mentioned Wolf's honor are public, and in the two private letters there is no indication of this theme. As Ruth Mazo Karras has pointed out, male honor and domination were not equivalent in late medieval Europe. A man could obtain honor without taking it from another man. Thereby both the winner and the loser of a battle, for instance, could maintain or acquire honor. The matter was of brave, manly behavior. In other cases, however, a man could lose his honor to another man. The case usually involved women. By gaining the love of a woman, the man won a battle—either a metaphorical or a real battle—and thereby gained honor at the other man's expense, “either by preventing him [the other man] from winning her or by taking her from him.” Losing one's honor and the threat of becoming considered as unmanly in the eyes of other people were two intertwined phenomena (Karras 2003, pp. 60–61).

In this latter case, where honor is gained by taking it from another, the meanings of honor and dominance are more closely related. It seems that the question was an understanding of a limited amount of honor, as it were, which was inevitably taken away from one when acquired by another. In the first case, where several men could gain honor even simultaneously, the idea seems to be of an unlimited amount of honor, free to be pursued by any man. Male honor seems thereby to have been a slightly more complex concept than the female one, which had mostly to do with the woman's correct sexual behavior, as noted previously.

The way Luther treated Wolf as a poor victim of circumstances and the malice of both his wife and Joachim is best understood through honor (also Roper 2016, p. 298 shares this interpretation). There was certainly present the understanding of a limited amount of honor—if Joachim achieved it, Wolf unavoidably lost it, and vice versa. Thereby the possession of Katharina was the key factor in gaining male honor. Wolf's attempt to stab Katharina could be understood by society, and certainly by Luther, as the ultimate way of trying to maintain his honor as her husband. Thus, for Wolf, the struggle for Katharina was, as Luther presented it, a struggle to regain his honor as well as maintain his reputation as a husband and a man.

Outer signs of stability and honor were crucial, and these were indeed the things that Wolf had to give up. Thus, Luther's view of male honor (as his view of female honor) had everything to do with social codes and gender ideals. This becomes particularly evident by the fact that when writing to Joachim, Luther only mentioned Wolf's honor in the public, printed letters. A request to restore Wolf to his honor was a public request for Joachim to maintain the gender system. In other words, Luther held Joachim responsible for maintaining the order that was created by God himself (cf. Mikkola 2017, pp. 68–74).

In what way did Luther treat Joachim, especially his way of being a man? First of all, he appealed to Joachim's position and its obligations. Luther illuminated Joachim's power as first and foremost that from God. The power and authority Joachim possessed was a loan from God, as Luther noted: “—Jesus Christ, from whom Your Electoral Princely Grace has been given his power—” (WA BR 4, no. 1332, p. 580, l. 107). God was understood to be the source of the hierarchical system of the day. Thus, both hierarchy and inequality were unquestionable parts of the societal system (Parsons 2011, pp. 80–81; Kolb 2014, p. 168). In this hierarchy, the ruler was considered to receive and maintain his power and authority through God, although leadership was by premise also a naturally ordained position for Luther's contemporaries (Nederman and Bejczy 2007, p. 1; Tang 2007, p. 102). The power

of the elector was thus more accurately ministerium than dominium (cf. e.g., [Verweij 2007](#), pp. 58, 62; [Strack 2007](#), p. 269). By remarking that God would not allow such misery for Wolf for long but would interfere in the situation to Wolf's advantage (WA BR 4, no. 1304a, p. 513, l. 44–48), Luther indicated that Joachim had heavily misused his ministerium.

Luther's emphasis on doing right as a ruler is a penetrable theme in his letters. It was also a part of a common understanding of leadership. As noted in former research,

—the authority of princes of all sorts rested for medieval people largely upon the personal qualities that they manifested in the conduct of their government as well as in their private behaviour. That is, princes enjoyed a claim on the obedience, respect, and love of their subjects only to the extent that they demonstrated spiritual and moral goodness and hence exercised forms of virtue. ([Nederman and Bejczy 2007](#), pp. 2–3)

The virtues of the male ruler thus became important in claiming Wolf's rights. This was a logical part of Luther's rhetoric since the relationship between the ruler and the ruled was based on a mutual agreement of the rights and the obligations that a certain status created. Joachim should therefore show his rightfulness in the case of the Hornungs, as Luther explained in the second letter to him (WA BR 4, no. 1309, p. 539, l. 4–5). In the published letters this claim was made even more clearly:

Because we have no superiority or power over Your Electoral Princely Grace—we hold on to the dear duty (*Liebe Pflicht*), and firstly remind and beg for the sake of God's will that Wolf Hornung would be let to follow his wife and child, and everything that is his—she herself, the wife, has often wished and prayed [for it also]—. (WA BR 4, no. 1332, p. 579, l. 97–103)

The bringing together of the married couple was Joachim's obligation as “the electoral superior” (WA BR 4, no. 1332, p. 579, l. 90–91), as Luther explained, and both of his subjects, Wolf and Katharina, waited for Joachim to do his “dear duty” as a ruler. In the fourth and last letter to Joachim, Luther explicated the difference between the ideal ruler and the factual situation by noting that Joachim should help the married couple to reunite, which was his electoral duty, and not to keep Wolf's belongings to himself by injustice and unfairness, which factually was the case (WA BR 5, no. 1523, p. 226, l. 8–11; see also [Ebeling 1997](#), p. 151).

The depredation of the subjects (in other words, greed) was considered as one of the vices of a ruler ([Verweij 2007](#), p. 68). Luther related his request to this tradition by asking Joachim to refrain from vice and realize virtue. Joachim's behavior as a ruler was thus against the expected virtues of male leader, namely piety, wisdom, and temperance (on virtues, see [Nederman and Bejczy 2007](#), pp. 20–21; [Strack 2007](#)). Luther depicted Katharina as the main culprit in some of his letters; however, in the letters to Joachim himself, Luther placed the guilt of robbing of Wolf upon him (WA BR 5, no. 1523, p. 227). Thereby, Luther presented not only Wolf but also Katharina as victims, with Joachim being the only one accused.

Luther represented himself as a man of good will and intentions, especially in the letters that were published. In the first published letter to Joachim, Luther assured that Wolf's matter should not be dealt with in violence or letters of slander, but one had “—to pray God, our Father diligently against Your Electoral Princely Grace, that He pardons the prisoner of conscience [Wolf] and leads the Elector of Brandenburg to justice” (WA BR 4, no. 1332, p. 580, l. 122–125). Luther assured his readers to “pray that God the Almighty wants to clarify and move Your Electoral Princely Grace to do, what is right, amen” (WA BR 4, no. 1332, p. 580, l. 138–139). In this way, Luther used a classical means of supplicating, that is, persuading, the recipient(s). This was often used when the sender, for one reason or another, had no influence over the recipient of the letter and their actions. ([Perelman 1991](#), p. 112). In other words, Luther admitted to having no domination or power over Joachim, even though gaining it seems to have been his goal.

Yet another way to attack an opposing male ruler was to regard him as a knave (*ein Bube*). In general, Luther used the concept in at least three contexts: when deciphering young men, or a man of whatever age before God and God's righteousness, or when attacking his male opponents (Mikkola 2017, pp. 132–34). The word was brought up in three letters to Joachim. In August 1528 in his second letter to Joachim, Luther threatened that he should eventually begin to speak of whores and knaves (*hurn vnd buben malen*) if the situation did not improve (WA BR 4, no. 1309, p. 540, l. 15). In the published letter in 1530 he repeated the threat: Elector Joachim should be treated like a *Bube* (*solt E. K. F. G. yhn drumb gestrafft haben als einen buben*) if he did not mend his ways (WA BR 5, no. 1523, p. 226, l. 34–35). In the preface from 1530, Luther concluded his text by noting: "Bah and bah, what a disgraceful, unashamed thing it is with whores and knaves! (*Pfu und aber pfu, welch ein schendlich, unverschampt ding ists umb hurn und buben!*)" (WA BR 5, no. 1526b, p. 232, l. 23–24). Joachim was thus treated in the second and third meaning of the concept: as an opponent of Luther, and as a wicked man before God's righteousness. Hence, Luther attempted to present Joachim as morally and politically dubious.

Joachim was, as Luther put it, guilty not only of acting unjustly as a ruler but also guilty of acting unmanly. Luther's ridicule towards Joachim was based on his conviction that Joachim acted in Katharina's name. Luther noted in his second letter to Joachim that the letters from Katharina looked as if they were dictated by Joachim himself (WA BR 4, no. 1309, p. 539, l. 11–13). In his 1530 preface to Katharina's letter, Luther stated that "[In the letter] She is called lady Katharina Blankenfeld, and yet Luther had written to Katharina Hornung" (WA BR 5, no. 1526b, p. 232, l. 16–17). By this, he signaled his belief that Joachim had dictated this letter, not Katharina.

To highlight his disapproval, Luther used a metaphor from the Scripture: "The man should not wear women's clothing (*Ein man solle nicht weibskleider tragen*)" (WA BR 5, no. 1526b, p. 232, l. 19; cf. Deut. 22:5). Hence, Luther transformed the biblical prohibition of concrete cross-dressing into an allegory that prohibited a man to present himself as a woman, and to hide himself behind the figure of a woman. This metaphor served Luther to allude to not only Joachim's dishonesty, but also to his unmanliness, even effeminacy, in dealing with things under a cover offered by a double-subordinate, as it were: a subject, who was a woman. The notion of Joachim's unmanliness becomes evident in Luther's judgment on the letter he was answering. It was, in his words, "a very female composition (*ein seer weibisch getichte*)" (WA BR 5, no. 1526b, p. 232, l. 13).

As Ruth Mazo Karras has maintained, "men demonstrate their rank as well as personal qualities through their deeds, whereas women have only their clothing to signify it" (Karras 2003, p. 47). The metaphor of women's clothing can thus be interpreted as a conscious choice on Luther's part to highlight Joachim's unmanliness when considered from the point of view of the late medieval understanding of gender codes. In other words, from Luther's point of view, Joachim did not demonstrate his rank or personal qualities by virtuous behavior proper to a male ruler but chose metaphorically to wear female clothing and thereby deserved to be called effeminate.

Luther connected the discursive feminization of Joachim to his bodiliness and sexuality. Temperance as a *virtus specialis* was connected to the (male) ruler's sexuality (Strack 2007, p. 276). The demand of sexual self-control becomes explicit in Luther's preface, wherein he wished that every man would guard his wife from Joachim. Nevertheless, Luther noted this by speaking explicitly of Katharina:

And may God shelter every man's wife from this lady Katharina Blankenfeld [in other words, from Joachim], unless a good pig doctor has come to her [him] in advance with a sharp knife and made a castrate of it, that she [he] does not have to make vain Katharina Blankenfelds of them [other married women]" (WA BR 5, no. 1526b, p. 232, l. 19–23)

The dichotomy of the masculine as self-controlling and feminine as lustful can be detected in Luther's treating of Joachim, his femininity, and sexual appetites. Thus, Luther

painted a picture of Joachim as both an unjust ruler and a feminine man, whose lack of temperance, especially in the field of sexuality, was a risk to all women.

A reference to the need to castrate Joachim seems to be Luther's way of emphasizing Joachim's lust but also humiliating him, that is, to discursively reduce his honor as a male (see also [Roper 2016](#), p. 298). Namely, the capability to act as a husband and to beget offspring were essential in being an adult man (see, e.g., [Karras 2003](#), pp. 16–17), whereas Luther understood castration as feminization of the man. Generally, it was held that when a man lacked the male sexual organs, he did not have a socially acknowledged gender either ([Ferroul 2000](#), pp. 139–140; [Irvine 2000](#), pp. 87, 93–94).

The German word for a castrate that Luther used was *borgel*, which refers to porcus castratus, a castrated pig (WA BR 5, no. 1526b, p. 232, l. 22). Thereby, “a pig doctor” (*sewheyleyler*) was needed to operate on Joachim. The metaphor of a pig was a conscious choice on Luther's part to emphasize the degradation of Joachim. Not only were pigs despised animals in the Old Testament, which Luther knew, the image of a pig was also actively used for mockery in his own day. The pig motif was widely exploited to denigrate and to laugh at a religious enemy, the Jews, in late medieval and early modern Germany. Similar to how the pig was used with regard to Jews, Luther also used the concept of the pig for humiliation and ridiculing (for the pig motif vis-à-vis Jews, see, e.g., [Classen 2010](#), pp. 100–1).

In his correspondence, Luther presented that despite the formal power relations between himself and Joachim, he was entitled to judge Joachim as a knave due to Joachim's malpractices that his position did not allow. Luther had demonstrated this tendency previously, when he had judged the pope as a knave (see, e.g., WA 7, p. 645). The malpractices of religious–political opponents validated this kind of rhetorical attack (see, e.g., WA 7, pp. 625, 647–48). Furthermore, whereas Luther was trying to reinforce Wolf's honor and his status and rights as a husband, he made efforts to illustrate Joachim not only as an unjust ruler but also as unmanly. In other words, the way Luther depicted the tragicomic characteristics of Joachim (his improper lust, the need to have a castration, and his effeminacy) served Luther not only to battle against him in the case of the Hornungs but also, more broadly and importantly, to strengthen his argument in the religious–political battle in support of the evangelical movement. The discursive feminization of Joachim, as well as the questioning of his morals as a ruler, also emphasized Luther's own way of being and that of his evangelical allies, as Joachim's opposite: masculine, righteous, and trustworthy.

5. Conclusions

In this article, I examined Luther's representation of a marital case that involved not only the couple itself but also Luther's religious–political opponent. Luther's discursive representation of the proper gender system, as well as the power relations between himself, Elector Joachim, and the Hornung couple, offer a valuable insight not only into his views of femininity and masculinity, but also and especially into his rhetoric concerning the intersection of one's social position, religious conviction, and gender, and thus the relationship between personal and political. I have shown that Luther used this marital strife as a religious–political weapon to serve his own goals.

At the explicit level, Luther's aim in the case was to restore the Hornung marriage by bringing Wolf and Katharina back together. To enable this, he used several discursive methods within his letters, which varied according to the recipient and also within time. Luther aimed to maintain the proper gender system by emphasizing the husband's rights over his wife and the wife's position as the property of the husband. This rhetoric highlighted the normativity of the man and the woman's role as the subordinate other.

Luther's letters reveal a traditional viewpoint of emphasizing the man's rights over the woman. The view that Luther continuously repeated and justified during the correspondence was that the husband was the only man with the right to claim power over his wife. This becomes particularly evident in Luther's discussion of Wolf's property, which

included his wife, child, house, and yard. All in all, Luther not only supported the common view of the significance of the gender difference that created different social and familial positions for women and men, but he also reproduced and maintained these positions through his own verbal actions.

Luther reinforced the predominant gender system; however, societal hierarchies were questioned in his discussions on Joachim and his qualities as a ruler and a man. Luther's letters suggest that there was a competition for Katharina between Wolf and Joachim, which actually was a competition of two men with differing religious views: an evangelical one and a Catholic one. Katharina Hornung was but the subordinate, the medium of male honor, which was implicitly tied to a question of religious supremacy. The competition was, as Luther drew it, a competition of possessing male honor and religious–political credibility in which violence was a *sine qua non*.

The question of the Hornung marriage was, hence, heavily colored by Luther's religious–political ambitions. I argue that this correspondence ultimately concerns Luther's own struggle for domination and power over Elector Joachim. This interpretation is supported by Lyndal Roper's (2016, p. 298) former notion: "it is hard to imagine any campaign more uncompromisingly aimed at destroying someone's reputation." It seems that in this discursive struggle, the most masculine and honorable party was the one that had the most religious–political credibility. In this discursive struggle, fought by Luther through his letters, the means of ridiculing, pressuring, and threatening Joachim both as a male and as a ruler were at use. In effect, the competition between differing religious views put both of the Hornungs mainly in a secondary role. The Hornung marriage served Luther as a rhetorical weapon against an opposing religious–political figure in the question of who had the authority to define the conduct of others.

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- ¹ The situation between Katharina, Wolf, and Joachim is even more interesting from the viewpoint of Joachim's simultaneous conflict with his own wife, Elisabeth von Brandenburg (1485–1555), who had been influenced by Luther's theological views since 1523. After long-term differences of opinion with Joachim over religious convictions, Elisabeth fled to electoral Saxony in 1528 (Stjerna 2009, pp. 89–92; Mikkola and Räisänen-Schröder 2022, pp. 63–66). According to Gustav Clemen, Joachim's strict prohibition concerning the correspondence between the Hornungs and Luther was due to his indignation at his wife's evangelical conviction and, hence, at Luther (Clemen 1933, p. 345).
- ² The Hornungs are mentioned a few times in Luther's other correspondence, e.g., Luther's letters to his colleagues (WA BR 5, no. 1437; no. 1625). However, they are not analyzed here as they do not provide any additional information in regard to the central questions of this article.
- ³ So also with Wolf Hornung, whose letter explicated his dominance as the husband: "—I say that I have been her husband and she has been my wife, [in] which [relationship] I [was] the ruling [one], thereby I had reason and right to discipline her; —" WA BR 4, no. 1304b, p. 514.
- ⁴ For marital violence in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, see Lidman (2008).
- ⁵ The remark is supported by WA BR 5, no. 1523, pp. 226–27, l. 35–42. The passage is noted also in (Ebeling 1997, p. 153). For marital bonds and adultery in Luther's theological writings, see, e.g., WA 10II, pp. 286–90; WA 30III, pp. 241–42.
- ⁶ The wife as property in Calvin's view, see (Parsons 2011, esp. p. 285).
- ⁷ James Brundage, for instance, has distilled the amount of regulations in medieval penitentials humorously yet truthfully in his table "The sexual decision-making process according to the penitentials." (Brundage 1987, p. 162). See also Wiesner-Hanks (2011, p. 61).
- ⁸ It seems, thus, that Luther represented the medieval German understanding of honor as a social concept, and used honor codes in a regulative sense. Cf. Stopa (2021, pp. 67–70).

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