LUTHER AND THE REFORMATION OF PUBLIC DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis traces the link between Martin Luther and the Enlightenment by examining Luther's thought in the context of advances in communication technology. In response to traditional Luther studies, which have tended to be freighted with theological presuppositions and traditional modes of interpretation, I base my study on a close-reading of Luther's *Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen* (On the Freedom of a Christian) and use my reading of this text to argue that the advent of printing caused humans to change the way they see themselves, in that communication via print seems to call for a distinction between public role and private individual. To examine the political implications of this new concept of human identity, I compare *Freiheit eines Christenmenschen* to Immanuel Kant's "Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?" ("An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?") and argue that the roots of the Enlightenment reach back as far as Luther. Finally, using Heinrich von Kleist's novella *Michael Kohlhaas* as a parable of what both Luther and the Enlightenment wrought, I examine the broader consequences of Luther's concept of public discourse and its relationship to Enlightenment thought.
to my parents, Dawn and Bruce Cable
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INTRODUCTION

All who study Martin Luther encounter a nearly un navigable mass of primary and secondary sources, or at least feel compelled to mention it in the introductions to their published studies. The author of a recent biography claims that “more books have been written about Martin Luther than about anyone other than Jesus,” and another scholar refers to Luther as “the man about whom more has been written than any other Western mortal of the modern era.”¹ This is no surprise considering the significance ascribed to this man, not to mention the amount of time that has elapsed since the sixteenth century. The result of this superabundance of material is that scholars now tend to produce sketches of the subject that make reference to as many sources as possible without focusing on any one text. Many studies pepper sweeping commentary with page number citations from the Weimarer Ausgabe of his works, but with minimal in-depth interaction with the texts themselves. In particular, scholars writing during the past thirty years seem to rest on some unwritten consensus when approaching his writings that allows them to avoid detailed interpretation.

The lack of recent detailed analysis of Luther's works can also be attributed to the fact that the scholars who choose Luther as their subject are rarely from the humanities—Luther scholarship is carried out almost exclusively by theologians who are by no means impartial. In his 1999 biography of Luther, Richard Marius discusses the history of partisanship in Luther scholarship:

For centuries devout scholars, evangelical and Catholic, studied Luther to extol or condemn him. Evangelicals made him a colossus and hero who cleansed the gospel and gave light and freedom to the soul. Catholics portrayed him as

demon-possessed, a sex-crazed monk of furious temper, a liar and fraud willing to tumble down the great and beautiful edifice of Catholic Christianity for no better motives than lust and pride.²

Marius goes on to note that, while Luther scholarship is not as partisan as it used to be, there are still not enough disinterested voices;³ eleven years after Marius's observation, this is arguably still the case. The majority of English-language scholarly books on Luther are published by Fortress press, the official publishing house of the Lutheran church in the United States, and most scholarly articles, regardless of language, are published in theology and religious studies journals.⁴ While these sources should not be dismissed wholesale by scholars from other fields, they nonetheless prove to be problematic for the disinterested researcher, because their arguments are usually framed by theological presuppositions. The following passage from a recent collection of essays published by Fortress press demonstrates this problem: “The conviction that all human beings by nature are free, that freedom of the spirit is humanity's very essence, first dawned in Christianity through its faith that in Christ all are redeemed and accepted as God's children.”⁵

Secular scholarship on Luther is often problematic, too. Traditionally, it has tended to mythologize its subject and has elevated the significance of Luther the character over social and historical context. This kind of treatment of the subject can also be found in portrayals of Luther in popular culture. In the 2003 film Luther, the eponymous hero, played by Joseph Fiennes, defiantly delivers his famous lines before the Diet of Worms—“Here I stand. I cannot do

³ Ibid., xii.
⁴ This is evident if one examines the extensive bibliography of international Luther scholarship that the Luther-Gesellschaft, a Wittenberg-based religious organization, publishes every year in its Lutherjahrbuch.
otherwise”—and the Reformation is portrayed as a product of his genius, idealism, and boldness. While this mythologized depiction of Luther can be expected from Hollywood, it seems less at home in scholarly discourse. In a series of articles originally published in the 1970s and 80s, Heiko Oberman discusses the role such caricatures play in Luther scholarship:

The image of Luther the heroic and fearless reformer, the confident advance guard of the “transformation,” evokes not only his performance at the Imperial Diet of Worms (April 1521) and his public refusal to denounce his writing. There is no doubt that “Luther before the Emperor at Worms” became a symbol of reforming courage to confess and defend one's faith that reached many of those who could not read. The reforming “deed” made a deep impression on the people, preparing them for the reforming Word. Even people of letters—right up to our own time—have read Luther's works in the light of this act.⁶

Oberman sees Luther's mythologized act of refusing to denounce his ideas as an event outside of discourse that has nonetheless influenced how Luther is understood. To go against this tendency, Oberman proposes separating Luther's “reforming Word” from his “reforming deed” in order to achieve a more scholarly perspective on the Reformation.⁷

In overemphasizing the importance of “Luther the man,” however, Oberman's approach in countering mythologization often amounts to attempting to reach an understanding of Luther as Luther would have wanted to be understood. For instance, the following question is Marius's starting point for a discussion of the historical context of the Reformation: “How did [Luther]  

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⁷ Ibid.
make sense of his own role?" Further, in the preface to his highly regarded biography, *Luther: Mensch zwischen Gott und Teufel* (*Luther: Man between God and the Devil*), Oberman states the following:

> Den Menschen Luther zu entdecken, verlangt mehr, als Wissenschaft je zu bieten hat. Gefordert ist die Bereitschaft, über die Jahrhunderte des konfessionellen Streits hinweg sein Zeitgenosse zu werden und das eigene Welt- und Lebensbild zurückzulassen. Als die Kirche dem Himmel noch gleich war und der Kaiser die Macht der Welt repräsentierte, da hatte sich dieser Mönch gegen die Mächte von Himmel und Erde erhoben.⁹

Discovering Luther the man demands more than scholarship can ever expect to offer. We must be prepared to leave behind our own view of life and the world: to cross centuries of confessional and intellectual conflict in order to become his contemporary. When the Church was still equated with Heaven, and the Emperor represented the might of the world, a monk named Luther rose up against these powers of Heaven and Earth … ¹⁰

If this passage is any indication, Oberman's answer to mythologized representations of Luther is a quest to discover “den Menschen Luther” (Luther the man). Doing this involves becoming intimate with Luther and his times, which means leaving our contemporary worldview behind.

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The extreme ends of this quest can be found in Oberman's epilogue, which is a short, yet detailed study of Luther's body. Oberman discusses, among other things, Luther's allegedly “intense” eyes, his weight and height, and his battles with constipation.\(^{11}\) Volker Leppin contextualizes Oberman's methodology by stating that he “introduced [a] corrective in not casting Luther as the harbinger of the modern era.… He relativized Luther and his significance for the modern era, and in so doing, he challenged a foundational element in all interpretations of Luther up until that time.”\(^{12}\) Though contextualizing Luther is important, if discovering “den Menschen Luther” requires more than what the available modes of inquiry have to offer, then it might be prudent to discover something else.

In this study, I follow Oberman's suggestion by ignoring the cult of personality that still seems to influence even secular understanding of Luther. Unlike Oberman, however, I wish to allow my understanding of his texts to go beyond considerations of his person. In the absence of such considerations, the focus of my analysis is a close reading of Luther's printed words themselves, which seems to me to be the best way to separate the “reforming Word” from the “reforming deed.” Further, my study differentiates itself from Oberman's and others like it by being intentionally narrow in focus. My analysis revolves primarily around Luther's *Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen* (*On the Freedom of a Christian*) and his accompanying open letter to Pope Leo X (hereafter referred to as *Papstbrief*). I replace the biographical emphasis with a focus on how Luther's thought can be related to advances in communication technology.

The invention of the printing press and the resulting emergence of the mass distribution of ideas, in addition to being widely recognized as crucial to the development of modernity, are also crucial to the understanding of Luther's writings, and *Freiheit eines Christenmenschen* and

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 325-28.

the *Papstbrief* give telling insight into the influence of this technology. Namely, the printing press creates a new sense of the “public,” which is defined vis-á-vis the “private,” and this distinction arguably gives Luther the rhetorical space to question the authority of the Church. In the interest of contributing to the relatively small body of secular scholarship on Luther's texts, the question of how fifteenth- and sixteenth-century advances in communication technology are related to Luther's arguments is a productive one to ask, not only because it offers a new perspective on Luther's texts, but also because it helps reveal their relevance outside of a theological context.

II.

According to Marius, *Freiheit eines Christenmenschen* and the *Papstbrief* that acts as its preface were written after some of Luther’s allies advised him to seek reconciliation with the Roman Church. But, far from the humble letter of apology Luther’s allies allegedly hoped for, the texts are instead documents of Luther’s conviction that his conflict with the Church was insoluble. Some scholars read these texts as Luther’s honest attempt at reconciliation with the Church, but this kind of reading is untenable and prevents productive analysis. For instance, the editors of an English-language collection of Luther’s works published recently by Fortress Press suggest that *Freiheit eines Christenmenschen* “is written in a more conciliatory spirit” than Luther’s other famous polemical works written before his excommunication and that the *Papstbrief* was “written in one of those moments in 1520 when Luther had been persuaded that a peaceful settlement of differences might still be possible.” These are, at best, optimistic readings of Luther’s words. Marius concedes that the *Papstbrief* “looks like satire of the first order, bitterly ironic, howlingly funny,” but speculates that “Luther [was] perhaps so confident

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13 Richard Marius, *Christian between God and Death*, 265. Following Berndt Hamm's lead (“Freiheit vom Papst – Seelsorge am Papst,” *Lutherjahrbuch* 74 [2008], 113-32), I approach the *Papstbrief* and the tract as one “compositional unity.”

14 Timothy Lull, ed., *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 386.
that he meant it”. These texts are indeed “bitterly ironic” and unmistakably critical of the Roman church, but if the only conclusion one draws from this observation is that Luther might just have been crazy enough to mean them, then one risks missing their most compelling implications.

The jabs that Luther takes at the pope and Church doctrine, which are unequivocal for those with knowledge of the historical context, are present in the German editions as well as the Latin editions that many English translations take as their source, including the one used in the Fortress anthology. For example, in what is perhaps one of Luther’s most caustic insults in the Papstbrief, he laments that Leo X has to be pope in such a time of institutional corruption, saying: “O wollte Gott, dass du entledigt der Ehre (wie sie es nennen, deine allerschändlichsten Feinde), etwa von einer Pfründe oder deinem väterlichen Erbe dich erhalten könntest.” (Would that you might discard that which your most profligate enemies boastfully claim to be your glory and might live on a small priestly income of your own or on your family inheritance!) It would be difficult not to read as sarcastic the insinuation that the papacy was Leo’s only possible source of income, considering Leo was a member of the Medici family, one of the wealthiest and most powerful at that time. Further, taking literally Luther’s portrayal of Leo as an innocent victim at odds with the corrupt culture of the Catholic Church—“ein Daniel unter den Löwen” (a Daniel

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16 The Latin versions would have been intended for other theologians and the pope, who did not speak German, and the German versions for mass consumption. According to Birgit Stolt's detailed comparison of the Latin and German versions of the *Papstbrief* (*Studien zu Luthers Freiheitstraktat*, Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1969), Luther's German version follows his Latin version quite closely, except in his passages that seem to be inspired by anger, which he translates more freely (89).
17 Martin Luther, “Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen,” *An den christlichen Adel deutscher Nation, von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen, Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1962), 115. Hereafter, this work will be cited as “FC.”
18 Timothy Lull, *Basic Theological Writings*, 389. Hereafter, this source will be cited as “BTW.” In almost all cases, English translations of *Freiheit eines Christenmenschen*, including *BTW*, take Luther's Latin text as their source. Since the translation of the *Papstbrief* in *BTW* yields in many cases a faithful English version of the German as well, I have chosen to use it when extremely detailed attention to the language is not crucial to my argument. Since, however, translations from Latin of the tract itself deviate too much from Luther's German version, I have provided in most cases my own translations for passages cited from the body of the tract.
19 *FC*, 114.
in the midst of lions\textsuperscript{20)—would be absurd in the light of historical documentation of the time period. According to Reformation historian Carter Lindberg, Leo is said to have opened his reign as pope with the following words: “Now that God has given us the papacy, let us enjoy it.”\textsuperscript{21} Hence, Leo was by no means an innocent outsider; it is unlikely that either Luther’s public or Leo himself would have taken Luther’s above-quoted comments at face value, and it would be counter-productive to do so now.

Why Luther would include such ire against the head of the Catholic Church in texts that were intended by his advisers to be conciliatory in nature has at least two historical explanations. First, as a result of the palpable decline of the Roman Church’s authority, which had begun at least a century before Luther’s time, it is possible that there was less pressure on Luther to placate the pope than some scholars assume. Lindberg explains how the fifteenth-century Church crises, during which there were as many as three popes vying for legitimacy, in tandem with the rise of nationalist movements in Europe, “reduced [the papacy] to one government among many national governments, which bound itself to them in a contractual manner.”\textsuperscript{22} Further, Leo was embattled and by no means popular, which imbues the following comment from the \textit{Papstbrief} with a sense of irony: “Ich bin nicht so närrisch, dass ich allein den angriffe, den jedermann lobet…” (111).\textsuperscript{23} (I am not so foolish as to attack one whom all people praise.)\textsuperscript{24} It seems likely that these political circumstances enabled Luther to include such vitriol in his letter and then, under the protection of Prince Frederick, escape execution.

Second, Luther’s domination of public discourse and the relatively new printing press make his remarks seem less daring. Reformation scholar Mark Edwards characterizes the

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{20} \textit{BTW}, 389. \\
\textsuperscript{21} Lindberg, \textit{The European Reformations} (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 52. \\
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 47. \\
\textsuperscript{23} \textit{FC}, 111. \\
\textsuperscript{24} \textit{BTW}, 388.
\end{flushleft}
German Reformation as “the West's first large-scale media campaign” and through statistical analysis argues that printing technology was utilized most effectively by reformers, whose vernacular publications far outnumbered all publications sponsored by the Catholic establishment. Among reformers, Luther dominated the new medium. Edwards notes that the “lopsided dominance by Evangelicals of the vernacular market for controversial literature strongly suggests that the literate laity supported Protestantism in far greater numbers than they supported Catholicism.” Supported by public sentiment that was tipping away from the Catholic Church, Luther was empowered to attack the foundations of the Church's doctrine.

The existence of the printing press, regardless of whose texts were distributed more widely, could do nothing but subvert Catholic doctrine. Jan-Dirk Müller describes how the printing press necessarily called into question the power structure of the Middle Ages:

> In etwa hundert Jahren vervielfältigte sich der Bestand an schriftlich verfügbarem Wissen wie die Zahl derer, die Zugang zu ihm hatten. Die schriftsprachliche Tradition steht nicht mehr, fragmentiert, nur einzelnen Gruppen und Institutionen zur Verfügung, sondern ist in der Tendenz als ganze und unbegrenzt überschaubar…. / Aktiver und passiver Schriftgebrauch wird immer mehr eine Grundvoraussetzung zur Teilnahme der Gesellschaft…. Domänen der Mündlichkeit werden immer weiter zurückgedrängt…. Die Authorität der alten Institutionen der Schriftkultur wird in Frage gestellt…. Es entsteht zeitweise und

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26 Ibid., 14-40.
27 Ibid., 26.
28 Ibid., 40.
auf bestimmten Sektoren … eine qua Medium Schrift räsonierende Öffentlichkeit.\textsuperscript{29}

In approximately one hundred years, the amount of knowledge available in written form multiplied, as did the number of those who had access to it. The tradition of the written word is no longer fragmented and only accessible to single groups and institutions, but tends to be accessible as a whole and without limitation…. More and more, active and passive use of writing becomes a basic requirement for participation in society…. Oral domains are pushed back further and further…. The authority of the old institutions of writing culture is challenged…. From time to time and in certain sectors … a public emerges that reasons via the medium of writing.\textsuperscript{30}

Mass distribution of ideas in the vernacular meant that rulers no longer had as much control over information, and, as a consequence, did not have as much control over their subjects. Indeed, as Müller suggests, the capacity to participate in the exchange of information via print technology started to become necessary for inclusion in society, which means that print technology created a society that people could be included in. The mere existence of a forum through which Church doctrine could be debated called into question the divine authority of the pope. Even if Catholics had somehow been able to dominate the public sphere, doing so would still have been detrimental to the foundations of the Church's power.


\textsuperscript{30} Translation mine.
There should be no question that *Freiheit eines Christenmenschen* and the *Papstbrief* display Luther’s bitter indictment of the Roman Church and its stewards, and the printing press did not just provide Luther with the tools necessary for such an attack, but created the circumstances under which such an attack was possible. One implication of this conclusion is that, when we impartially consider Luther's “reforming deed” in its historical context, there is much to suggest that it was not only Luther's heroism that won him success. In these texts, Luther, supported by the right political circumstances, benefits greatly from a new medium of communication that allows him not just to attack the Church’s corruption and debauchery and ridicule its leader, but to argue that the Catholic doctrine that allows such corruption and debauchery is fundamentally invalid. Enabled by the printing press, he dismantles the symbolic structure of Catholic authority on which the Medieval worldview was dependent. If we only extract from these texts speculative insight into “Luther the man,” his motives and feelings, then we miss an opportunity to glimpse into how an emerging public forum altered the way humans see themselves.

In the first chapter of this study, I argue that the printing press leads Luther to distinguish between private individual and public role in *Freiheit eines Christenmenschen* and the *Papstbrief*. With this distinction as a foundation, Luther argues, first, that the standards of private discourse are not adequate when exchanging ideas that pertain to public figures and institutions and, second, that recognition of the distinction between private and public is a prerequisite for responsible, productive participation in a society defined by print. Further, this distinction allows Luther to dismantle the symbolic order of the Church's authority when he argues that there is no direct correlation between the pope and Jesus. Although Jürgen Habermas locates the emergence of a public sphere in the eighteenth century, this reading of Luther
suggests that the idea of a public forum had currency in Luther's time, even if it was less
developed and was referred to in other terms.

While one should not project modern notions onto Luther's distinction between private
and public and his subsequent dismantling of the Church's symbolic order, one should also not
neglect to uncover the broader implications of his ideas. In this spirit, my second chapter is a
comparison of the above-mentioned texts and Immanuel Kant's “Beantwortung der Frage: Was
ist Aufklärung?” (“An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?”), in which I argue that
Kant's essay can be read as an extension of Luther's thought. The texts in question by both
Luther and Kant demonstrate the power of the printed word and the political possibilities of the
new conception of human identity created by print technology. Luther, based on the premise that
truth can only be found via the exchange of ideas, calls for a public forum where ideas could be
exchanged openly and without consequence. More than 250 years later, Kant demonstrates how
this kind of open forum necessarily unseats the authority of the absolutist ruler.

To conclude, I use Heinrich von Kleist's Michael Kohlhaas to examine the broader
implications of the relationship between Luther's thought and the Enlightenment. Based on my
reading of Freiheit eines Christenmenschen, I analyze the intertextuality between Kleist's novella
and Luther's tract. In addition to interacting with the character Luther, the protagonist of Kleist's
novella also uses Lutheran concepts to justify his revolt against the entrenched authority of the
ruling class. His relationship to Luther (the historical figure and the character) and the outcome
of his uprising show how Luther's revolt against the Church's claim to authority necessarily calls
into question the general possibility of possessing and maintaining authority.
CHAPTER 1

LUTHER AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

*Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen* and the *Papstbrief* are unmistakably marked by the medium in which they were produced and distributed. As such, they show how Luther’s argumentation reflects changes in the human psyche made possible (and perhaps inevitable) by the printing press. In creating a public space for the exchange of ideas, the printing press arguably makes room for a distinction between private individual and public role. To judge from Luther's texts, one fills a public role when engaging in the exchange of ideas (including ideas that criticize those in power) and in this role inhabits a space completely distinct from one's individual identity and circumstances. This, in effect, creates the possibility for an open public discourse without immediate consequences for one's private person. While we should be careful not to see this distinction between private and public as an early manifestation of modern individuality, this concept can nonetheless be understood as the beginning of a trajectory that leads to the modern concept of individuality.

Perhaps most productive to the study of the public sphere in the time of the Reformation has been Jürgen Habermas’s assumption in his *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* that a public sphere did not emerge until the eighteenth century. He writes that “if the public sphere did not require a name of its own before [the eighteenth century], we may assume that this sphere first emerged and took on its function only at that time.”\(^{31}\) Peter Matheson gives a brief survey of scholars who have countered Habermas and have argued that a public sphere had indeed already emerged and taken on a function in the sixteenth century.\(^{32}\) Further, Eckhard Bernstein shows that a Reformation-era public forum developed in structures prepared by pre-

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\(^{31}\) Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 3. Habermas does, however, note that the distinction between public and private can be traced back past the Middle Ages, but has had widely varying meanings and functions (3-11).

Reformation humanistic discourse. If Matheson's survey and the methodology of his own study are any indication, however, scholars who examine sixteenth-century public discourse tend to focus on pamphlets (Flugschriften). In such studies, pamphlets are examined as social phenomena, and textual analysis does not play the most significant methodological role. In what follows, I attempt to show that evidence of a public sphere can also be found via textual analysis of the ideas contained within Luther's tract and the open letter to the pope that accompanies it, insofar as the existence of a public sphere and the resulting distinction between public and private frame his argumentation. While Luther certainly did not participate in the kind of public discourse that Habermas delineates, he seems nonetheless to recognize the concept of a public and use it to his rhetorical advantage.

The opening paragraph of the Papstbrief contains Luther’s statement of purpose, which shows how the public forum created by the printing press frames his argumentation:


gesucht habe. Wahr ist es, dass ich die, so bisher mit der Höhe und Größe deines Namens und Gewalt zu drohen sich bemüht haben, gar sehr zu verachten und zu überwinden mir vorgenommen habe. Aber etwas liegt nun vor, welchs ich nicht wage zu verachten … und das ist nämlich, dass ich merke, wie ich verdächtigt und mir übel ausgelegt wird, dass ich soll auch deiner Person nicht verschonenet haben.\textsuperscript{34}

My dealings and conflicts with a number of rakish human beings, now entering their third year, compel me to turn to you from time to time. Indeed, as long as it is generally held that you are the only reason for this conflict, then I cannot help but turn to you without pause. For, although I have been urged by a number of your unchristian flatterers, who have been harassing me without any reason at all, to seek counsel from your see in my matters, my intentions were nonetheless never so estranged from you that I have not at all times and with all my power wished you and your see the best and diligently and sincerely prayed to God for you to the best of my ability. It is true that I have gone to great lengths to disparage and surmount those who have attempted to use the authority and might of your name to their own menacing ends. But there is something that I do not dare disparage, which is also the reason that I write you once again. Namely, I have noticed that I am being viciously accused of attacking your person, too.\textsuperscript{35}

Starting in the first sentence, it is apparent that “public opinion” and the pressures of a public forum are central for Luther's argument. Even though we cannot understand this sentence in a

\textsuperscript{34} FC, 111.
\textsuperscript{35} Translation mine.
strictly literal way—i.e., he was *forced or coerced* by social circumstances to respond—the sentence nonetheless suggests the demands of being a member of the developing “qua Medium Schrift räsonierende Öffentlichkeit” (public that reasons via the medium of writing) that Müller identifies.³⁶ Luther explains how his “dealings and conflicts with rakish human beings” forces him to write an open letter to the pope—namely, he notices “wie ich verdächtigt und mir übel ausgelegt wird” (that I am being viciously accused), presumably by the same unscrupulous individuals he has been dealing with, and he must, then, defend himself via writing. In Marius's words, “the immediate purpose of the treatise was to counter the Catholic slander that Luther's teaching meant that Christians could believe the propositions of the gospels and live like the devil and still be certain of salvation.”³⁷ This shows the significance of the public exchange of ideas for Luther, who must contend with competing representations of the truth. Thus, the mass distribution of ideas creates a scenario in which Luther has to work to shape a public perception of his actions.

Even the syntax of these opening sentences reveals the significance of the public exchange of ideas for this text. In several instances, Luther refers to the abstract entity of the collective interpretation of events. With the statement, “die weil es dafür gehalten wird, du seiest die einzige Hauptsach dieses Streites …” (as long as it is generally held that you are the only reason for this conflict), he is putting into words the phenomenon of a group of people reaching a consensus on a certain interpretation of events. The passive voice and general subject “es” give expression to this nebulous concept. Of course, the opinions of those in power and those who are participating in the written debate (the “rakish human beings”) would be of most immediate significance for Luther—that is to say, he would not likely be engaged in a battle over the

opinions of the masses. It is nonetheless clear that Luther is engaged in a battle over a public record.

Because of our televised debates, partisan news networks, and public apologies, “setting the record straight” is a well-known concept from a twenty-first-century perspective, but, as this introductory passage of the *Papstbrief* demonstrates, battling competing narratives was a new phenomenon in the sixteenth century. In this passage, Luther identifies as the most important point of conflict the accusation that the pope was targeted in his assaults on the Church. To counter this claim, Luther insists that his attacks are aimed at the institution of the church, not the persons who serve functions within that institution (though, in practice, he aims plenty of attacks at individuals, too). Hence, he claims not to want to attack Leo the person, only the institutional function he fills. Later, his idea of institutional criticism expands to include teachings: “Ich habe wohl scharf angegriffen, doch im allgemeinen etliche unchristliche Lehren, und bin gegen meine Widersacher bissig gewesen nicht um ihres bösen Lebens, sondern um ihrer unchristlichen Lehre und Beschützens willen …”38 (I have, to be sure, sharply attacked ungodly doctrines in general, and I have snapped at my opponents, not because of their bad morals, but because of their ungodliness39). As Luther would have it, institutions and ideas are under attack, not the people who run the institutions and support the ideas. To judge by this line of reasoning, the public discourse that Luther participates in calls for a distinct form of communication that correlates to the public roles individuals assume; traditional, private communication, which correlates to the part of a human not responsible for playing a role in society, is inadequate.40

38 *FC*, 112.
39 *BTW*, 388.
40 Berndt Hamm (“Freiheit vom Papst – Seelsorge am Papst,” *Lutherjahrbuch* 74 [2008], 113-32”) views what I identify as a distinction between public and private as a distinction between “personal” and “trans-personal” levels of expression (“persönliche und transpersonelle Aussageebenen”). Our differences are more than just terminological. For Hamm, on the personal level of expression, Luther, out of Christian “brotherly love,” does not wish to offend Leo the person, but on the trans-personal level of expression has no choice but to “attack undiplomatically and uncompromisingly” (mit undiplomatischer Kompromisslosigkeit) out of a duty to divine truth (120-21). In my judgment, Hamm's argument is predicated on his willingness to take Luther at his word when he...
In the tract that follows the *Papstbrief*, Luther discusses concepts that work as a useful point of comparison to the public/private split. The often-cited central thesis of *Freiheit eines Christenmenschen*, that “[e]in Christenmensch ist ein freier Herr über alle Ding und niemand untertan,” but also “ein dienstbarer Knecht aller Ding und jedermann untertan”\(^{41}\) (A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none; A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all\(^{42}\)) reveals the theoretical and theological foundation of the split human identity Luther calls for in the *Papstbrief*\(^{43}\). In this concept, the side of an individual that is “perfectly free lord of all, subject to none” corresponds to the inner spirit, while the side that is “a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all” corresponds to the outer body. From this split follows that the inner spirit is the region of legitimacy and authenticity:

So hilft es der Seele nichts, wenn der Leib heilige Kleider anlegt, wie die Priester und Geistlichen tun, auch nicht, wenn er in den Kirchen und heiligen Stätten ist, auch nicht, wenn er mit heiligen Dingen umgeht, auch nicht, wenn er leiblich betet, fastet, wallfahret und alle guten Werke tut, die immer durch und in dem Leibe geschehen können. Es muss noch ganz etwas anderes sein, das der Seele bringe und gebe Frommsein und Freiheit.\(^{44}\)

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\(^{41}\) *FC*, 125.

\(^{42}\) *BTW*, 393.

\(^{43}\) Hamm (“Freiheit vom Papst – Seelsorge am Papst”) notes that Luther's purpose in writing the tract was allegedly to justify the contents of the *Papstbrief*, which he wrote first (117); hence, it makes sense also from a biographical/historical perspective to see the tract as providing a theoretical and theological foundation for the *Papstbrief*.

\(^{44}\) *FC*, 126.
Thus, it does no good for the soul when the body dons sacred vestments, as priests and clergymen do, or when it is in churches and holy places, or when it concerns itself with holy things, or when it prays, fasts, goes on pilgrimages, and does all the good works that can only happen in and through the body. That which endows the soul with piety and freedom must truly be something entirely different.\textsuperscript{45}

The supremacy of the inner human illegitimizes the material representations of the outward human. The actions and characteristics associated with the outward human—which are composed of all that was at the center of Luther’s conflict with the Church—have no significance for the soul. This theological foundation of Luther’s concept of split identity adds depth to our understanding of the difference between public and private; Luther is attacking the material, external side of Leo.

Luther’s separation between internal and external allows him to call into question the symbolic foundation of the pope’s power:

\begin{quote}
Siehe, wie ungleich sind Christus und seine Statthalter, obgleich sie doch alle wollen seine Statthalter sein und ich fühwahr fürcht, sie seien allzu wahrhaftig seine Statthalter. Denn ein Statthalter ist in Abwesenheit seines Herrn ein Statthalter. Wenn denn ein Papst in Abwesenheit Christi, der nicht in seinem Herzen wohnet, regiert, ist derselbe nicht allzuwahrhaftig Christi Statthalter?
Was kann aber denn ein solcher Haufe anders sein denn eine Versammlung ohne Christus? Was kann aber auch denn ein solcher Papst sein denn ein Antichrist
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{45} Translation mine.
See how different Christ is from his successors, although they all would wish to be his vicars. I fear that most of them have been too literally his vicars. A man is a vicar only when his superior is absent. If the pope rules, while Christ is absent and does not dwell in his heart, what else is he but a vicar of Christ? What is the church under such a vicar but a mass of people without Christ? Indeed, what is such a vicar but an antichrist and an idol? How much more properly did the apostles call themselves servants of the present Christ and not vicars of an absent Christ?

In this passage, Luther attacks the heart of the Church by suggesting that there is no direct relationship between Christ and Church leaders, which has to be read as a truly revolutionary idea and one that goes strongly against the Medieval worldview. We can contextualize Luther's attack using Andreas Gailus's discussion of Giorgio Agamben's concept of sovereignty:

A sovereign who has the power legally to suspend all existing laws in order to preserve the state and its law is the purest embodiment of the extralegal violence that sustains all legal orders. For like the sovereign's words, which carry direct authority and in this sense are law, the legal apparatus as a whole does not rest on

46 FC, 122.
47 Literally, “vicar” means “placeholder,” which meaning is more readily apparent in the German “Statthalter.”
48 BTW, 392.
some substantive metanorm but is grounded ultimately in the force of its
tautological self-assertion: the law is the law.\textsuperscript{49}

Luther breaks the pope's tautological claim to sovereignty by suggesting that he is only a sign of
the absence of divine authority. Hence, he dismantles the medieval power structure by
dismantling how signs and signifiers were assumed to work. We can read this as being
predicated on the effects of the printing press on human discourse and, in turn, human identity.
The possibility of freely exchanging ideas via print causes the direct relationship between words
and actions to be diminished. Before the printing press, the Church could maintain a monopoly
on divine authority, because it controlled the means of communication. But, with the advent of
printing, the possibilities for the creation of meaning exploded, nullifying the Church's claim to
divine authority and complicating humans' relationship to information and, in turn, to
themselves. This is why Luther insists that his words are not meant to insult Leo the individual.
The public space created by the printing press, in nullifying the divine authority of the pope, also
nullifies the traditional concept of human identity that is dependent on having the sense of the
universe decreed by the Church—Luther's words are not meant to insult Leo the individual, but
instead to criticize his societal role.

Although Luther's distinction between internal and external and his subsequent critique of
the foundation of the Church's authority surely represent a shift away from a Medieval
worldview, it should not be mistaken for modern concepts, such as individuality and subjectivity.
Lisa Freinkel explains how such modern notions have been projected onto Luther's words:

\textsuperscript{49}Andreas Gailus, \textit{Passions of the Sign} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP), 116. This discussion is taken from a chapter
on Kleist's \textit{Michael Kohlhaas}, which will be revisited in my conclusion.
According to this modern bias, Martin Luther's emphasis on a doctrine of justification by faith alone (solafideism) is fundamentally an individualistic one, reconfiguring Christian spiritual life around the inner man. For such readers, Luther inaugurates a new subjectivism that privileges the inner life at the expense of the merely external…. / According to such a view, Luther's solafideism dispenses with the corporate emphasis of the medieval church and its objective forms of worship in favor of a religious practice grounded in individual conscience.50

Freinkel traces this reading of Luther back to Hegel's *Philosophy of History* and contends that it has shaped Luther scholarship ever since. For instance, Freinkel argues that for Roland Bainton, author of one of the most influential Luther biographies, *Here I Stand* (1950), “Luther's declaration ('Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise') marks a new Christian piety, one that can only be articulated in terms of the stand one takes over and against a largely hostile external world.”51 In this way, we can see how the temptation to project modern notions onto Luther is related to abundant mythologization in Luther studies. Freinkel goes on to note that, “while there is no question that the dichotomies of inner and outer are essential to Luther’s solafideism, such views mistakenly identify Luther’s focus on inwardness with the stand-alone integrity and autonomy that our culture ascribes to the modern individual.”52 Even though Luther identifies a public/private and inward/outward dichotomy, it is important not to take our understanding of it too far or in the wrong direction.

51 Ibid., 226.
52 Ibid., 226.
Though it is important not to project modern notions onto Luther’s words, we can still locate Luther at the beginning of a process that leads to modernity. Further, it is also important not to neglect implications of his texts due to fear of taking too many liberties. *Freiheit eines Christenmenschen* and the *Papstbrief* illustrate how the emergence of a print culture changes humans’ perception of themselves. In both texts, Luther works to influence public perception of him and his reform campaign, and in order to do this, he lays the theoretical foundation for a more nuanced understanding of human identity that, in the absence of a legitimate divine ruling authority, must be determined by reasoning subjects for themselves. In the next section of this chapter, I will examine how the public/private split creates a set of responsibilities for those engaging in the public exchange of ideas.

II.

The differentiation between public and private, which, as I have argued, is encouraged by fifteenth- and sixteenth-century developments in communication technology, plays an important role in Luther's argument in *Freiheit eines Christenmenschen* and the *Papstbrief*. In addition to using the distinction between public and private to defend his actions, as we have seen in the first section of this chapter, Luther also uses it to attack his opponents, whom he portrays as out of step with the obligations of the public forum and, in turn, Christianity. Luther's use of the split between public and private in discrediting his enemies reveals some of the practical implications of the emerging public forum for the relationship between Rome and the various factions that had started vying for power. When we analyze this public forum in the context of parts of Norbert Elias's theory of the “civilizing process,” we can gain better insight into the significance and the historical context of Luther's outline of public responsibility.

In the *Papstbrief*, Luther elaborates on his claim that he is “forced” by the public exchange of ideas to defend himself. Namely, in addition to being forced to participate in a
battle to shape the public record and defend his reputation, he also claims to be forced by a perceived obligation to speak out for what he holds to be right and alert the public to dangers posed by the Roman church. Luther explains why he has aired his criticism of the Church as follows:

Ist's nicht wahr, dass unter dem weiten Himmel nichts Ärgeres, Vergifteteres, Hassenswerteres ist denn der Römische Hof; denn er überschreitet der Türken Untugend weit, so dass es wahr ist, Rom sei vorzeiten gewesen eine Pforte des Himmels und ist jetzt ein weit aufgesperreter Rachen der Hölle und leider ein solcher Rachen, den durch Gottes Zorn niemand kann zusperren; und kein Rat mehr übrig ist, als dass wir etliche warnen und bewahren könnten, dass sie von dem römischen Rachen nicht verschlungen werden.

Is it not true that under the vast expanse of heaven there is nothing more corrupt, more pestilential, more offensive than the Roman Curia? It surpasses beyond all comparison the godlessness of the Turks so that, indeed, although it was once a gate of heaven, it is now [the gaping jaws of hell, such that they] cannot be shut because of the wrath of God. Only one thing can we try to do, as I have said: we may be able to call back a few from [those gaping jaws of Rome] and save them.

First, this passage further demonstrates the extent to which Luther did not see a chance for reconciliation with the Roman Church. With vivid language, he portrays the Church not just as a

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53 *FC*, 111.
54 Ibid., 115.
55 *BTW*, 389 [with modifications].
corrupt institution that is unwilling to submit to reform, but as a threat to all of Christendom. Stating that the Roman Church is more of a threat than the Turks would have been especially resonant, considering that the ruthless expansion of the Ottoman Empire was seen as one of the most serious threats to Christian Europe (already) at that time. Also, calling the Catholic Church more godless than non-Christians who had no chance for salvation from a Christian perspective would likely have been an even stronger and more shocking claim. In the last sentence of this passage, Luther claims that, in the face of such a threat, the only course of action left is to warn potential victims, since correcting the institution (closing “the gaping jaws of hell”) is impossible. Although these words can be read as bitterly critical (one of the many instances of Luther getting carried away by his anger, as scholars like to read this kind of language in his texts), they also propose a definition for the role of public discourse. Namely, spreading information about the threat has the power to prevent people from being “swallowed by the gaping jaws of Rome.” This means that, by knowing the “true” nature of the Church, souls can avoid being devoured by the powers of hell. The Catholic institution is corrupt and depraved beyond repair, and Luther sees it as his duty not to attempt a repair, but to warn the people who could be consumed by the depravity.

Following this positioning of public discourse, one has the obligation to disseminate information that could thwart the threat of corruption. In the following passage, Luther explains why Leo should not see the fulfilling of this obligation as a threat:

Siehe da, mein Heiliger Vater, das ist die Ursach und der Beweggrund, warum ich so hart wider diesen pestilentischen Stuhl gestoßen habe. Denn ich habe mir so wenig vorgenommen, wider deine Person zu wüten, dass ich auch gehoffet habe, ich würd' bei dir Gnad und Dank verdienen und es würde als zu deinem Besten
gehandelt erkannt werden, wenn ich solchen deinen Kerker, ja deine Hölle, nur frisch und scharf angriffe; denn ich erachte, es wäre dir und vielen anderen gut und selig, alles, was alle vernünftigen und gelehrten Männer wider die allerwüsteste Unordnung deines unchristlichen Hofs vermochten aufzubringen. Sie tun fürwahr ein Werk, das du solltest tun – alle, die solchem Hof nur alles Leid und alles Übel tun; sie ehren Christum, alles, die den Hof aufs allermeist zuschanden machen. Kurz: sie sind alle guten Christen, die böse Römische sind.56

Now you see, my Father Leo, how and why I have so violently attacked that pestilential see. So far have I been from raving against your person that I even hoped I might gain your favor and save you if I should make a strong and stinging assault upon that prison, that veritable hell of yours. For you and your salvation and the salvation of many others with you will be served by everything that men of ability can do against the confusion of this wicked Curia. They serve your office who do every harm to the Curia; they glorify Christ who in every way curse it. [In short, all those who are bad Romans are good Christians.]57

Luther insists that his attacks on the Church are in Leo's best interest, and he goes so far as to suggest that he deserves gratitude for what he has done. Those who criticize the external entity of the Roman Church work to the benefit of the internal, private, authentic concept of Christianity. In this sense, being aware of the split between public and private is a precondition for behaving responsibly in the public forum. When we consider that Leo would not likely have

56 FC, 116.
57 BTW, 389 [with modifications].
compared his position to prison or hell (“Now that God has given us the papacy, let us enjoy it.”)\(^{58}\), we add a further dimension to Luther's rhetoric. Assuming Leo does not recognize Luther's distinction between public and private, and, in turn, the distinction between lambasting Leo the person and lambasting the societal role he plays, then we can read Luther's attack as being even more potent. Since Leo does not separate his public role from his person, Luther's justification—I do not want to offend you; I just want to topple the institution that is the source of your power—would not have had a mitigating effect. In fact, Luther puts Leo in a bind by forcing him either to accept his concept of the distinction between public and private or accept personal responsibility.

After establishing the obligation of those who engage in public discourse, Luther catalogs his public enemies—those who do not fulfill the obligation and whom Luther claims should also be regarded as Leo's “true enemies.”\(^{59}\) Their common, negative trait is an attachment to the external world, and according to Luther's portrayal, they are responsible for the escalation of the conflict between him and the Church. In reference to a cardinal who had once questioned him, Luther says, “ich wollte der Sachen ein End lassen sein und stille schweigen, wenn meine Widersacher auch still stünden, welches er leicht mit einem Wort hätte können ausrichten. Da juckte ihn der Kitzel zeitlichen Ruhms zu sehr…. So ist's geschehen durch seinen mutwilligen Frevel, dass die Sache ist seither viel ärger geworden …”\(^{60}\) (I promised to keep silent and to end the controversy, provided my opponents were ordered to do likewise. [But he was a man who itched too much with the thrill of fleeting glory…] When matters went fairly well, he with his churlish arbitrariness made them far worse.\(^{61}\) Contrasted with Luther's definition of the responsibility of one who engages in public discourse, this adversary is someone who does not

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\(^{58}\) See footnote 21.
\(^{59}\) FC, 117.
\(^{60}\) FC, 118.
\(^{61}\) BTW, 390 [with modifications].
recognize the distinction between public and private, and, in turn, is led by external forces and desires ("the thrill of fleeting glory"). Describing the cardinal's actions as "mutwilligen Frevel" (churlish arbitrariness) suggests that someone who is led exclusively by the pull of transitory externality is unsteady and destructive.

In addition to reading Luther's criticism of his adversaries in the context of a distinction between public and private, we can also, using parts of Elias's theory of the "civilizing process," read it in the context of a theory of broader social change. Elias's description of how a new power structure in the late Middle Ages changes the way people interact is helpful in our reading of Luther, because it suggests that Luther's critique engages the new circumstances of the relationship between rulers and subjects. Elias explains this change as follows:


Translation mine.
In Elias's model, the centralization of power that began to take place in the Middle Ages brought about a more nuanced form of social conduct whereby subjects had to restrain their affects and communicate in a more indirect way in order to be successful, since being successful necessarily meant finding favor with the ruler.

These concepts are especially useful when reading Luther's remarks on Johannes Eck, whom Oberman refers to as Luther's “first and lifelong German adversary.” At this point in his argument, Luther is giving his version of the series of events that led to the publication of his polemical treatises, in all cases placing the blame on others. As with the cardinal, Luther blames Eck for the escalation of his confrontations with the pope and the Church:

Da warf sich auf der große ruhmredige Held, sprühet und schnaubt, als hätt’ er mich schon gefangen, gab vor, er wolle zu Ehren Gottes und Preis der Heiligen Römischen Kirche alle Dinge wagen und ausführen, blies sich auf und maßte sich deine Gewalt an, welche er dazu gebrauchen wollte, dass er zum obersten Theologus in der Welt berufen würde, was ihm gewiss mehr am Herzen liegt als das Papsttum …

Then that boastful braggart, frothing and gnashing his teeth, declared that he would risk everything for the glory of God and the honor of the Apolistic See. Puffed up with the prospect of abusing your authority, he looked forward with great confidence to a victory over me. He was concerned not so much with

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64 Heiko Oberman, *Man between God and the Devil*, 22.
65 *FC*, 117.
establishing the primacy of Peter as he was with demonstrating his own
leadership among the theologians of our time.\textsuperscript{66}

Similar to the cardinal, Eck is portrayed as someone who is overcome by what is valued in the external world. In the context of Elias's theory, calling Eck a “Held” with animalistic traits associates him with a distinctly pre-courtly way of behaving. But, Luther's reading of Eck's motives also places him distinctly in the court. Though on the surface he claims to glorify the pope and the Roman Church, he is really using the things he claims to glorify as a vehicle to win glory for himself. In short, Eck is after “Ruhm und nicht die Wahrheit”\textsuperscript{67} (glory, not the truth), and his model of interaction functions to exploit the favor of the ruler in order to glorify himself.

One thing all of Luther's enemies have in common is that they are branded with the epithet “Schmeichler” (flatterer). In Luther's usage, a \textit{Schmeichler} is someone who advances in the power structure exclusively by lavishing praise on those in power. Luther argues that such people are detrimental to Christendom, because their actions are based on external drives, not on an internal sense of what is right or true. In reference to Eck, Luther says, “aus seinem Exempel allein kann jedermann lernen, dass es keinen schändlicheren Feind gibt als einen Schmeichler.”\textsuperscript{68} (From his example alone we can learn that no enemy is more pernicious than a flatterer.)\textsuperscript{69} Although it might appear to the pope that those who are obedient to him and work to win his favor are his allies, they are really his enemies, insofar as they seek to use his power and authority for their own ends. Luther warns Leo,

\textsuperscript{66} \textit{BTW}, 390.
\textsuperscript{67} \textit{FC}, 119.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{69} \textit{BTW}, 391.
wolle niemals anhören deine süßen Ohrensinger, die da sagen, du seiest nicht ein
bloßer Mensch, sondern vermischt mit Gott.… Lass dich nicht betrügen durch
die, die dir vorlügen und -heucheln, du seist ein Herr der Welt.… sie sind deine
Feinde und suchen deine Seele zu verderben. Wie Jesaias (3,12) sagt: “Mein
liebes Volk: welche dich loben und erheben, die betrügen dich.”

do not listen to those sirens who pretend that you are no mere man but a demigod
so that you may command and require whatever you wish…. Be not deceived by
those who pretend that you are lord of the world…. These men are your enemies
who seek to destroy your soul, as Isaiah says: “O my people, they that call thee
blessed, the same deceive thee.”

This warning suggests that the depravity of the Church is predicated on the work of Schmeichler,
who reinforce the faulty symbolic order of the Church, which stipulates that the pope is in direct
lineage to God. Luther laments this culture of flattery and insists that it should not be assumed to
be beneficial to those in power: “…zu unseren Zeiten sind unsere Ohren so zart und weich
geworden durch die Menge der schändlichen Schmeichler, dass wir, sobald wir nicht in allen
Dingen gelobt werden, schreien, man sei bissig.” (Nowadays … we are made so sensitive by
the raving crowd of flatterers that we cry out that we are stung as soon as we meet with
disapproval.) Luther argues that dissent and criticism play a productive role, and rulers who
only surround themselves with Schmeichler are not utilizing the possibilities of a public
exchange of ideas. Hence, Luther gives contour to the function of the public sphere.

70 FC, 121.
71 BTW, 391.
72 FC, 112.
73 BTW, 388.
Anthony J. LaVopa’s study of the role of a related epithet in German discourse offers a useful context from which to approach Luther’s use of the term *Schmeichler*. Luther often referred to the more radical breed of reformers that followed him, such as Thomas Muentzer, as “Schwärmer.” For Luther, *Schwärmer*, “under Satan’s manipulations … mistook the seductions of the Flesh for the inner 'voice' or 'light' of the Holy Spirit.”

This term “evoked bees swarming around the hive; a flock of birds zigzagging across a field; a pack of hounds straying off the scent.” According to LaVolpa, it helped Luther portray his opponents as unqualified to engage in public discourse. Instead of promoting what was right or true, they engage in frivolous, counter-productive discourse. Similarly, Luther uses the term *Schmeichler* to exclude his Catholic opponents from the public forum. Instead of promoting what was right or true, they focus solely on overwhelming the ruler with praise.

Because of a more centralized power structure, subjects had to resort to more indirect behavior in order to advance in society. Luther's description of his adversaries invokes a similar constellation—they compete for the favor of the pope with flattery. Luther offers an alternative to the model of communication by which participants do nothing but flatter the master. Namely, he argues that subjects should be permitted to participate freely in an open public forum, even if in the process they air ideas that are perceived to be unflattering or dangerous to those in power. This alternative model of communication is predicated on the disruption of the Church's claim to divine authority, which is made possible by the printing press. In the next chapter, in which I argue that there is a continuum of public discourse between Luther and the Enlightenment, I will investigate the political implications of Luther's concept of split human identity and the alternative model of communication that he proposes.

75 Ibid.
CHAPTER 2
PUBLIC DISCOURSE AND POLITICAL DISSENT

Luther uses the distinction between public and private to argue for the existence of a kind of public realm in which subjects can debate without fear of punishment from the ruler. The distinction between the private and public along these lines becomes a central element of Enlightenment thought. Most famously, it is Immanuel Kant who, more than 250 years after Luther's texts were printed, outlines a similar concept of a public forum in his response to the question, “What is Enlightenment?” He reasons that subjects should have the freedom to participate in public discourse in their “public” roles, but have the obligation in their “private” roles to obey. Both Luther's and Kant's texts are marked by the media in which they were printed and the power structures of the times during which they were written. I propose that we read Kant's “Was ist Aufklärung?” as an extension of the arguments and distinctions drawn by Luther in Freiheit eines Christenmenschen and the Papstbrief, which, in turn, allows us to see the Reformation and the Enlightenment as stations in a gradual continuum of the concept of a public sphere.

Of course, the differences between Kant's and Luther's circumstances cannot be ignored. Most notably, the public forum that Kant participated in was much more evolved than Luther's (or, as Habermas would have it, it existed in the first place). Jane Curran notes that a revolution in reading habits … occurred during the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, largely as a result of improvements in printing techniques and methods of dissemination. Technical advances in text reproduction meant that works were more readily available, and, among both men and women, the habit of regular reading spread through all levels of society…. the improved
communication granted by this social change led to a new level of self-consciousness; people became conscious of themselves as a body, the 'public.'

Thus, Kant had access to a highly organized system of public communication. In his 1984 essay “What is Enlightenment?” Michel Foucault also comments on the nature of the public forum Kant participated in: “Today when a periodical asks its readers a question, it does so in order to collect opinions on some subject about which everyone has an opinion already; there is not much likelihood of learning anything new. In the eighteenth century, editors preferred to question the public on problems that did not yet have solutions.” Kant was writing at a time when, in Foucault's estimation, ideas were actively exchanged. Luther predates newspapers and publications that solicit participation from their readership. Even though, as argued in the first chapter of this study, a public forum existed in the sixteenth century, and Luther recognized and used the distinctions it created, the kind of developed and extensive public forum that Kant had access to did not develop until the eighteenth century.

Luther and Kant also had different relationships with their audiences. Kant's essay is addressed to the sovereign power of Prussia, whereas Luther's open letter is addressed to the more distant, centralized power of the pope. For Luther, the rough equivalent of Frederick II would have been Frederick III, prince elector of Saxony (i.e. someone who had direct power over his person and someone on whom he relied for his livelihood). But, by Kant's time, the authority of the Catholic empire had become even more compromised than it was during Luther's time, and the sovereign powers that competed with the Catholic empire were more powerful than at

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Luther's time—absolutist monarchies had emerged. Even Kant's and Luther's respective styles suggest that they had different relationships with the ruling powers. Luther writes as though he has nothing to lose, whereas Kant is much more careful. In spite of these very different circumstances, the similarities between Kant's and Luther's arguments are unavoidable and useful, because comparing them demonstrates how we can trace a line between Luther and “modernity” without projecting modern notions of individuality onto Luther's works.

II.

For Luther, the importance of having the freedom to engage in public debate stems from the unavoidability of the truth, which is revealed solely through interaction with the “word of God”: “In allen Dingen will ich jedermann gern weichen, das Wort Gottes will und kann ich nicht verlassen noch verleugnen.”

Though Luther insists that there is one truth, his words still suggest that ideas must openly be exchanged in order for that truth to be revealed. Further, though there is one truth, those who read the word have an individual relationship with it: "[Das Wort Gottes] ist nichts anderes als die Predigt, von Christo geschehen, wie sie das Evangelium enthält. Welche so beschaffen sein soll und ist, dass du hörest deinen Gott zu dir reden, wie all dein Leben und Werk nichts sind vor Gott, sondern du mit allem, das in dir ist, ewiglich verderben müssest." ([The word of God] is nothing more than the sermon, brought about by Christ, as it is contained in the gospel. And it should and does function in such a way that you hear your God speak to you, saying that your whole life and work are nothing before God and that you must instead decay for all eternity with everything that is in you.)

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79 FC, 113.
80 BTW, 388.
81 FC, 127.
82 Translation mine.
A series of personal pronouns and possessive adjectives in this passage ("you hear your God speak to you") highlights the individual nature of the relationship between the word and those who read it. This is arguably an illustration of Jürgen Habermas's point that “the status of the Church changed as a result of the Reformation; the anchoring in divine authority that it represented—that is, religion—became a private matter.”

The idea of individualized communication between humans and God would be inconceivable without the mass availability of the printed word. Reading the word of God (translated into the vernacular) and the words of theologians that seek to interpret the word of God is necessarily an individualized activity, whereas sitting in a cathedral and listening to a sermon (in Latin) is a communal event that does not highlight the role of those who are present. Conversely, reading the printed word requires input from the reader and brings with it the possibility and responsibility of interpretation.

Since discovering the truth requires an open public forum, Luther portrays as indispensable the ability to participate in that forum by publishing his interpretation of the word.

In the following passage from the Papstbrief, Luther explains the importance of the written word:

Dass ich sollt' widerrufen meine Lehre, da wird nichts draus, es darf sich dies auch niemand vornehmen, er wolle denn die Sache noch mehr verwirren; darüber hinaus kann ich nicht dulden Regel oder Maß, die Schrift auszulegen, dieweil das Wort Gottes, das alle Freiheit lehret, nicht soll noch muss gefangen sein. Wenn mir diese zwei Stücke bleiben, so soll's für mich keine Auflage geben, die ich nicht mit allem Willen tun und dulden will. Ich bin dem Hader feind, will

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83 *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 11.
niemand anregen noch reizen, ich will aber auch ungereizt sein; werd ich aber gereizet, will ich, wenn Gott will, nicht sprachlos noch schriftlos sein.\textsuperscript{84}

Let no person imagine that I will recant unless he prefer to involve the whole question in even greater turmoil. Furthermore, I acknowledge no fixed rules for the interpretation of the Word of God, since the Word of God, which teaches freedom in all other matters, must not be bound. If these two points are granted, there is nothing that I could not or would not most willingly do or endure. I detest contentions. I will challenge no one. On the other hand, I do not want others to challenge me. If they do, as Christ is my teacher, I will not be speechless [or without written words].\textsuperscript{85}

Here, Luther steadfastly refuses to adjust his behavior (in the first sentence, he eliminates the faintest possibility of recanting anything he has written), but thinly disguises his refusal as a reasonable compromise—do whatever you want, but let me write. Since, however, the exchange of ideas via the printing press is at the core of the threat to the Roman Church's authority, the pope would have no use for such a “compromise.” Indeed, as argued in the introduction of this study, the crux of the Church's conflict with reformers is the mere possibility of (the alleged supreme authority of) their interpretation of the word of God being open for discussion. Further, Luther's power lies firmly in being able to have his ideas printed and distributed. It is telling that Luther even notes the distinction between the spoken word and the written word (“I will not be speechless [or without written words]”), and the language in this passage suggests that printed words have taken on a life of their own (there can be “no fixed rules” when interpreting the word

\textsuperscript{84} FC, 121.
\textsuperscript{85} BTW, 391 [with modifications].
of God since it “must not be bound”). The supreme authority of the pope has been unseated by the supreme authority of the printed word.

These themes appear again in the body of the tract in Luther's discussion of the relationship between external works and internal beliefs. The essence of his argument is that good human beings do good works; good works do not make human beings good. He uses a quotation from Matthew to illustrate his point (“Ein böser Baum trägt keine gute Frucht. Ein guter Baum trägt keine böse Frucht”) [a bad tree does not bear good fruit; a good tree does not bear bad fruit.86] and includes the following commentary: “Nun ist's offenbar, dass die Früchte nicht tragen den Baum, ebenso wachsen auch die Bäume nicht auf den Früchten…. so muss der Mensch in der Person zuvor fromm oder böse sein, ehe er gute oder böse Werke tut.”87 (Of course, it is obvious that fruit does not bear trees, just as trees do not grow on fruit…. thus, someone must already be good or bad in his person, before he does good or bad works.88) This distinction correlates to the distinction between public and private and has implications for the relationship between a public forum and those in power:

ein freier Christ spricht so: Ich will fasten, beten, dies und das tun, was geboten ist, nicht, dass ich dessen bedürfte oder dadurch wollte fromm oder selig werden, sondern ich will's dem Papst, Bischof, der Gemeinde oder meinem Mitbruder, Herrn zu willen, Exempel und Dienst zu tun leiden, gleich wie mir Christus viel größere Dinge zu wille getan und gelitten hat, was ihm viel weniger not war. Und obschon die Tyrannen unrecht tun, solches zu fordern, so schadet's doch nicht, solange es nicht wider Gott ist.89

86 Translation mine.
87 FC, 142
88 Translation mine.
89 FC, 149.
a free Christian speaks thus: I will fast, pray, do this and that which is commanded, not because I have need of these things or would want to attain blessedness or piety through them, but instead because I want to suffer at the will of the pope, bishop, the parish, or my brother, master, as an example and in order to fulfill a duty, just as Christ suffered through and submitted himself to much greater things, which he was much less obligated to do. And though the tyrants are wrong to make such demands, it does no harm, as long as it does not go against God.  

This seems at first problematic, since it outlines a theological justification for inaction in the face of unjust tyrants. But we can read this as being just as subversive as the above-discussed “compromise.” Luther in effect illegitimizes the authority of the Church and the “tyrants” in charge by suggesting that the level on which they control the actions of their subjects is irrelevant. And this suggestion is plausible when we consider again the damage done to the Church’s authority by the printing press. Moreover, comparing the Christian who obeys the orders of the tyrant to Christ suggests that those who are subject to the authority of the Church are martyrs to a much more important cause. Luther’s distinction between public and private creates a space where those who are powerless in a material sense can feel internal, immaterial power, which, as the German Reformation arguably demonstrates, creates the possibility for material power, too.

III.

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90 Translation mine.
In “Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?”, originally printed in 1783 in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, Kant outlines a concept of public discourse that is similar to Luther's when he argues that a free exchange of ideas is essential to the process of enlightenment:

Zu dieser Aufklärung ... wird nichts erfordert als *Freiheit*; und zwar die unschändlichste unter allem, was nur Freiheit heißen mag, nämlich die: von seiner Vernunft in allen Stücken *öffentlichen Gebrauch* zu machen.... der *öffentliche Gebrauch* seiner Vernunft muss jederzeit frei sein, und der allein kann Aufklärung unter Menschen zustande bringen; der Privatgebrauch derselben aber darf öfters sehr enge eingeschränkt sein, ohne doch darum den Fortschritt der Aufklärung sonderlich zu hindern. Ich verstehe aber unter dem öffentlichen Gebrauche seiner eigenen Vernunft denjenigen, den jemand als *Gelehrter* von ihr vor dem ganzen Publikum der *Leserwelt* macht. Den Privatgebrauch nenne ich denjenigen, den er in einem gewissen ihm anvertrauten *bürgerlichen Posten* oder Amte von seiner Vernunft machen darf.\(^{91}\)

For this enlightenment ... nothing more is required than *freedom*; and indeed the most harmless form of all the things that may be called freedom: namely, the freedom to make a *public use* of one's reason in all matters.... the *public* use of reason must at all times be free, and it alone can bring about enlightenment among men; the *private* use of reason, however, may often be very narrowly restricted without the / progress of enlightenment being particularly hindered. I understand, however, under the public use of his own reason, that use which

\(^{91}\) Kant, “Was ist Aufklärung?”, 11.
anyone makes of it *as a scholar* before the entire public of the *reading world*.

The private use I designate as that use which one makes of his reason in a certain *civil post* or office which is entrusted to him.⁹²

The distinction between public and private helps Kant portray “the freedom to make a *public use* of one's reason in all matters” as “the most harmless form of all things that may be called freedom.” By submitting that there is a “private” realm that can (and sometimes even should) be regulated, Kant softens the idea of an open exchange of ideas. As long as subjects obey their ruler's commands in their “civil posts,” why not let them exchange ideas in a public forum? In this sense, he argues for the existence of a kind of discourse that is separated from the concrete world, where one should be able to communicate without consequences. As Jane Curran succinctly puts it, Kant argues that “freedom to exercise individual reason and judgment can be granted and nurtured only in a state where such a condition does not constitute a threat.”⁹³ But, similar to the public forum and public/private split Luther calls for, Kant's concept of public discourse is by no means as harmless as he claims.

Kant's distinction between public and private is key to understanding the subversive qualities of his text. Many scholars have raised the issue of Kant's counter-intuitive definitions of the terms “public” and “private.” Foucault notes that Kant introduces a distinction “between the private and public uses of reason. But he adds at once that reason must be free in its public use, and must be submissive in its private use. Which is, term for term, the opposite of what is ordinarily called freedom of conscience.”⁹⁴ Though Foucault identifies the irregularity, he stops short of drawing significance from it. John Laursen, on the other hand, argues that Kant's

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⁹⁴ Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?”, 36.
unusual word choice should be read as subversive, because the reversal in terms represents a “wholesale rejection” of the terms' usage in eighteenth-century legal discourse, in which the term “public” was synonymous with “belonging to the prince.” For instance, Laursen notes that in 1762 a jurist “wrote that *res publicae*, including everything from rivers, forests, and salt licks to light and water, belong to the prince. They were 'public' not because they were out in the open or of general use but because the prince claimed to own them.” For Kant, then, to suggest that all educated men should be allowed a “public” role through which they would be free to criticize the prince without consequences represents a subversion of the authority of the absolutist ruler. In redefining the “public” as the realm in which educated people can exchange ideas, Kant rhetorically takes power from the prince and gives it a group of reasoning subjects.

Recognizing this subversive element in Kant's essay helps us approach another problematic point in the text. After arguing that it is the ruler's best interest to let its citizens publicly use their reason, Kant concedes that society as a whole is not ready or able to be completely enlightened. Instead, Kant seems to suggest that subjects depend on the goodwill of an enlightened absolutist ruler:

> … nur derjenige, der, selbst aufgeklärt, sich nicht vor Schatten fürchtet, zugleich aber ein wohldiszipliniertes Heer zum Bürgen der öffentlichen Ruhe zur Hand hat – kann das sagen, was ein Freistaat nicht wagen darf: *räsoniert, soviel ihr wollt und worüber ihr wollt; nur gehorcht*.

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96 Ibid., 586.
97 Kant, “Was ist Aufklärung?”, 17.
… only a ruler who, himself enlightened, does not himself fear shadows, and at the same time has at hand a large, well-disciplined army as a guarantee of public peace, can say what a republic cannot dare: argue, as much as you want and about whatever you want, only obey.98

On the surface, this passage shows Kant's recognition that his ability to publicly use his reason rests on the goodwill of Frederick II. Indeed, the last few paragraphs of Kant's essay seem to be pure flattery. But, the distinction he has already made between private and public renders irrelevant the distinction he makes now between the freedom to publicly reason and the obligation to obey. Foucault calls Kant's proposal “the contract of rational despotism with free reason” and defines it as follows: “the public and free use of autonomous reason will be the best guarantee of obedience, on condition, however, that the political principle that must be obeyed itself be in conformity with universal reason.”99 In this sense, Kant's contract with Frederick reveals itself to be a trap. In agreeing to let his subjects publicly reason, the despot gives away his ability to control them in the most meaningful way. For Kant, the enlightenment of the public is “nearly inevitable, if only it is granted freedom.”100 If people are allowed to reason publicly, then they are sure to become “more than a machine,” and the reverence Kant pays to Frederick II can be read as disguising the truly radical claim that the public exchange of ideas is more powerful than any ruler.

Both Luther and Kant use the distinction between private and public to argue for the existence of a forum in which thoughts can be exchanged without consequence. For Luther, the distinction stems from his assertion that the internal side of humans is the seat of authenticity, the

98 Schmidt, What is Enlightenment?, 63.
99 Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?”, 37.
100 Schmidt, What is Enlightenment?, 59.
realm in which one interacts with God. By insisting that humans can (and must) have “unmediated” interaction with God, he calls into question the foundation of the Church's authority. The argument that it is acceptable for Christians to follow the orders and participate in the external rituals of the Church as long as they are permitted to criticize it in print, further subverts the power of the Church by suggesting that the authority of the printed word replaces the authority of the Church. For Kant, the distinction between public and private helps him reappropriate the realm of the absolutist ruler for people who otherwise have no power. Whereas in Luther's texts, the printed word unseats God, in Kant's texts, the printed word unseats the God-like absolutist ruler.
CONCLUSION

SIGNS AND AUTHORITY

In order to examine the political implications of Luther's conception of the authority of the printed word and the extension of his thought that can be identified in Kant, I propose to read Heinrich von Kleist's Michael Kohlhaas as a parable of what Luther's conception of public discourse and human identity wrought. The novella, published in 1811, takes place “toward the middle of the sixteenth century,” at a time when, we learn in the course of the narrative, Luther's reformation has achieved such success that the former heretic has been elevated to the position of the most respected authority in the land. In the main narrative strand, the eponymous protagonist of Kohlhaas, a prosperous horse dealer, strengthened by what he perceives to be divine authorization, tries to secure justice on his own terms after enduring injustice at the hands of the state. He puts everything he has at stake and, with a steadily growing army of followers at his command, wreaks havoc across Saxony, including killing women and children and overseeing multiple burnings of Wittenberg. Only public disapproval from Martin Luther causes him to give up his destructive “business of revenge” that has visibly called the authority and capacity of the state into question. By examining the relationship between the characters of Luther and Kohlhaas in this text, we can put into focus the broader implications of Luther's thought, as represented by Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen.

It is clear that Kohlhaas uses Lutheran concepts to justify his revolt, even if he takes them to an extreme. After his second encounter with the Junker von Tronka, when Kohlhaas learns that the horses he was unjustly forced to leave behind have been abused and neglected, his assistant chased away from the Junker's premises, he is pulled by two opposing feelings:

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101 This complicates the standard interpretation that Kohlhaas anachronistically draws on Rousseau to justify his actions.
ein richtiges, mit der gebrechlichen Einrichtung der Welt schon bekanntes Gefühl machte ihn, trotz der erlittenen Beleidungen, geneigt, falls nur wirklich dem Knecht, wie der Schlossvogt behauptete, eine Art von Schuld beizumessen sei, den Verlust der Pferde, als eine gerechte Folge davon, zu verschmerzen. Dagegen sagte ihm ein ebenso vortreffliches Gefühl, und dies Gefühl fasste tiefere und tiefere Wurzeln, in dem Maße, als er weiter ritt, und überall, wo er einkehrte, von den Ungerechtigkeiten hörte, die täglich auf der Tronkenburg gegen die Reisenden verübt wurden: dass wenn der ganze Vorfall, wie es allen Anschein habe, bloß abgekartet sein sollte, er mit seinen Kräften der Welt in der Pflicht verfallen sei, sich Genugtuung für die erlittene Kränkung, und Sicherheit für zukünftige seinen Mitbürgern zu verschaffen.102

in spite of the humiliations he had suffered, a correct feeling, based on what he already knew about the imperfect state of the world, made him inclined, in case the groom were at all guilty, as the castellan claimed, to put up with the loss of his horses as being after all a just consequence. But this was disputed by an equally commendable feeling, which took deeper and deeper root the farther he rode and the more he heard at every stop about the injustices perpetrated daily against travelers at Tronka Castle, that, if the whole incident proved to have been premeditated, as seemed probable, it was his duty to the world to do everything in his power to get satisfaction for himself for the wrong done to him, and a guarantee against future ones for his fellow citizens.103

The passage shows that Kohlhaas's "business of revenge," which follows shortly after this scene, is motivated at least in part by a perceived sense of having fallen into a "duty to the world" as a result of the potential systematic injustice revealed to him by his interaction with Tronka. That is to say, he commits to choosing his individual actions based on a perceived responsibility to all of humanity. This idea reappears at several points in the text, for instance, when, after being reassured by his assistant's version of the story that he had indeed suffered an injustice, Kohlhaas tells his wife that he plans to seek "öffentliche Gerechtigkeit" (public justice). She responds favorably to his intentions, saying that stopping such "Unordnungen" (disorder) would be "ein Werk Gottes" (God's work), considering many more people could suffer under it in the future.\textsuperscript{104}

Kohlhaas's desire to seek his own justice assumes the interpretive right of a free Christian as well as the subsequent duty to uphold what is deemed right, as established by the historical Luther. (Again, Kohlhaas does not just draw on Rousseau.) It is notable that Kohlhaas's feelings are strengthened in the above-cited passage by the public opinion of Junker Tronka, as it is circulated in all the stops he makes during his ride. Familiarity with a kind of public record of the Junker's transgressions, combined with confidence in his interpretation of the injustices he has suffered, gives Kohlhaas a feeling of obligation to act. Since, as Luther argues (as discussed in Chapter one), the ruler is only a placeholder for the absence of divine authority and truth, it is the task of those who participate in a public exchange of ideas to find the truth and act in a way that defends it. Though the character initially indicates that the actions Kohlhaas takes are not in-line with his thought (similar to how the historical Luther reprimands those who incited the peasants' wars), Kohlhaas is nonetheless enabled by Luther's concept of interpretive freedom and public responsibility.

\textsuperscript{104} MK, 20. The usage of "Unordnungen" echoes Luther's word choice in the \textit{Papstbrief} when he argues that it is one's duty to call into question the authority of the Church—see pp. 25-26 of this thesis.
Where Kohlhaas goes astray in his application of Lutheran (and, in turn, Kantian) ideas is his failure to utilize the difference between private individual and public role, or the lack of an adequate public outlet through which to productively use a public role. Already notable in the above-cited passage is a confusion in terms of what Kohlhaas's personal agenda is and what benefit it will be to humanity: he sees it as “his duty to the world to do everything in his power to get satisfaction for himself for the wrong done to him and a guarantee against future ones for his fellow citizens.” His equation of personal satisfaction with the good of humanity ultimately leads him to become drunk with the power he has won for himself. Before Kohlhaas is aware of Luther's open letter condemning his actions, we see him at home in the kingdom he has established for himself while some of his men decide how to inform him about the letter:

Kohlhaas wälzte eben, auf dem Schlosse zu Lützen, einen neuen Plan, Leipzig einzuäschern, in seiner zerrissenen Brust herum…. finster und in sich gekehrt, in der Abendstunde erschien er zwar, aber bloß um seine kurzen Befehle zu geben, und sah nichts: dergestalt, dass sie an einem Morgen, da er ein paar Knechte, die in der Gegend, wider seinen Willen, geplündert hatten, aufknüpfen lassen wollte, den Entschluss fassten, ihn darauf aufmerksam zu machen. Eben kam er, während das Volk von beiden Seiten schüchtern auswich, in dem Aufzuge, der ihm, seit seinem letzten Mandat, gewöhnlich war, von dem Richtplatz zurück: ein großes Cherubsschwert, auf einem rotledernen Kissen, mit Quasten von Gold verziert, ward ihm vorangetragen, und zwölf Knechte, mit brennenden Fackeln folgten ihm …

105 MK, 43-44.
At the castle in Lützen, Kohlhaas was just turning over in his distraught mind a new plan for burning Leipzig…. but though he came out in the evening, it was only to give a few brief commands, he was too gloomy and preoccupied to notice anything, until finally on a morning when two of his men were to hang for violating orders against looting in the neighborhood, they decided to draw it to his attention. He was just returning from the place of execution, with the pomp that he had adopted since the proclamation of his latest manifesto—a large angelic sword was borne before him on a red leather cushion ornamented with gold tassels, while twelve men with burning torches followed after ….\textsuperscript{106}

Kohlhaas has allowed his revolt to escalate to the point that he has claimed both divine and political authority for himself. In Andreas Gailus's reading of this passage, “Kohlhaas conceives of himself not simply as a rebel fighting the existing political-legal order but also, and above all, as the ruler of a 'provisional world government,' subject only to God's authority…. Lacking a state to rule, however, Kohlhaas seeks to install the legal-political order in his own person, becoming, as it were, his own city-state.”\textsuperscript{107} It is arguably Kohlhaas's incapability of recognizing the difference between public and private—after he falls victim to a system that itself refuses to distinguish between these concepts—that leads him in this direction. To apply here Luther's ideas, as discussed in chapter two of this study, the level on which Kohlhaas is wronged by the state is irrelevant if he can endure the material injustice of his loss. Kant's extension of Luther's thought in “Was ist Aufklärung?” shows further that the material power of the ruler will diminish if reasoning individuals have the means to participate in an open exchange of ideas. Kohlhaas, as evidenced by the mandates that he publishes and distributes, has, to a certain extent, access to

\textsuperscript{106} MK/E, 69-70.
\textsuperscript{107} Passions of the Sign (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2006), 126.
a means of public discourse that has the capability of dislodging the petrified, nepotistic political order that holds him back. But, instead of utilizing the possibilities of public discourse, he cannot keep his private ends from interfering, causing his project to tilt from global justice toward personal revenge. Indeed, with this conflict, Kleist seems to suggest that the radical separation of private and public is ultimately impossible. For this reason, when Kohlhaas is publicly executed at the end and authority restored to the state, he can succeed to a certain extent in his business of revenge (swallowing the piece of paper that the elector desires), but at the cost of his own person.

The connection between Kohlhaas's actions and his (mis-)interpretation of Lutheran thought is reinforced by the proximity of the above-cited most extreme example of his illegitimate self-conception to the text of Luther's open letter and Kohlhaas's subsequent awareness of it (the above-cited passage follows immediately after Luther's letter in the text). The content of Luther's letter confirms Kohlhaas's misinterpretation of Lutheran thought:

Kohlhaas, der du dich gesandt zu sein vorgibst, das Schwert der Gerechtigkeit zu handhaben, was unterfängst du dich, Vermesser, im Wahnsinn stockblinder Leidenschaft, du, den Ungerechtigkeit selbst, vom Wirbel bis zur Sohle erfüllt?
Weil der Landesherr dir, dem du untertan bist, dein Recht verweigert hat, dein Recht in dem Streit um ein nichts ges Gut, erhebest du dich, Heilloser, mit Feuer und Schwert, und brichst … in die friedliche Gemeinheit, die er beschirmt. Du, der die Menschen mit dieser Angabe, voll Unwahrhaftigkeit und Arglist, verführt: meinst du, Sünder, vor Gott dereinst, an dem Tage, der in die Falten aller Herzen scheinen wird, damit auszukommen? Wie kannst du sagen, dass dir dein Recht...  

108 Though it is not clear how effective these mandates would be without the accompanying terror that manipulates public opinion in his favor.
verweigert worden ist, du, dessen grimmige Brust, vom Kitzel schnöder
Selbstrache gereizt, nach den ersten, leichtfertigen Versuchen, die dir gescheitert,
die Bemühung gänzlich aufgegeben hat, es dir zu verschaffen? … Und muss ich
dir sagen, Gottvergessener, dass deine Obrigkeit von deiner Sache nichts weiß –
was sag ich? dass der Landesherr, gegen den du dich auflehnst, auch deinen
Namen nicht kennt, dergestalt, dass wenn dereinst du vor Gottes Thron trittst, in
der Meinung, ihn anzuklagen, er, heiteren Antlitzes, wird sprechen können:
diesem Mann, Herr, tat ich kein Unrecht, denn sein Dasein ist meiner Seele
fremd? … ein Rebell bist du und kein Krieger des gerechten Gottes, und dein Ziel
auf Erden ist Rad und Galgen, und jenseits die Verdammnis, die über die
Missetate und die Gottlosigkeit verhängt ist.109

Kohlhaas, you who say you are sent to wield the sword of justice, what are you
doing, presumptuous man, in the madness of your blind fury, you who are
yourself filled with injustice from head to foot? Because the sovereign to whom
you owe obedience has denied you your rights, rights in a quarrel over a
miserable possession, you rise up, God-forsaken wretch, with fire and sword and
… descend on the peaceful community he protects. You who lead men astray
with this declaration full of untruthfulness and cunning: sinner, do you think that
it will avail you anything before God on that day whose light shall beam into the
recesses of every heart? How can you say that your rights have been denied you,
whose savage breast, lusting for a base private revenge, gave up all attempts to
find justice after your first thoughtless efforts came to nothing? … And need I tell

109 MK, 42-43.
you, impious man, that your sovereign knows nothing about your case: what am I saying? – the sovereign you are rebelling against does not even know your name, so that one day when you come before the throne of God thinking to accuse him, he will be able to say with a serene face, “I have done this man no wrong, Lord, for my soul is a stranger to his existence.” … you are a rebel and no soldier of the just God, and your goal on earth is the wheel and the gallows, and in the hereafter, the doom that is decreed for crime and godlessness. 110

In this passage, Luther's condemnation of Kohlhaas encompasses both a critique of the theological justification of his actions and an assessment of their lack of practical effectiveness. First, Luther's condemnation is grounded in the argument that the private nature of Kohlhaas's quarrel with the state assures that it will not find favor with God. Luther describes Kohlhaas as being “vom Kitzel schnöder Selbstrache gereizt” (lusting for a base private revenge), which echoes in word choice the historical Luther's critique of his adversaries in Freiheit eines Christenmenschen, who, according to Luther, itch with the “Kitzel zeitlichen Ruhms” (the thrill of fleeting glory). 111 That is to say, Luther criticizes Kohlhaas, in a sense, for not recognizing the distinctions public/private, external/internal, and, in turn, for being led astray by baseless externality. Second, Luther ridicules Kohlhaas for his lack of political acumen when he points out that those whom he is fighting do not even know his name. Indeed, toward the end of the novella, Luther's prophecy comes true when Tronka, along with a string of other backhanded tactics, denies ever having known anything about Kohlhaas. Kohlhaas's lack of awareness of the

110 MK/E, 69.
111 See pp. 27-8 of this thesis. Cf. Rolf King, “The Figure of Luther in Kleist's Michael Kohlhaas,” Germanic Review IX (1934), 18-25, for a comparison between the historical Luther's letter to the historical Kohlhase, Kleist's version, and other texts by Luther. To my knowledge, no one has compared Kleist's version of Luther's letter to Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen.
distinction between public and private, together with his lack of political acumen, causes Luther
to brand him a “rebel,” someone who is not engaging in a justified or productive battle against
tyrants, but who is instead serving his own selfish ends.

Following the outlandish description of Kohlhaas's circumstances at Lützen, we
read about Kohlhaas's reaction after his men make him aware of Luther's letter:

Aber wer beschreibt, was in seiner Seele vorging, als er das Blatt, dessen Inhalt
ihn der Ungerechtigkeit zieh, daran erblickte: unterzeichnet von dem teuersten
und verehrungswürdigsten Namen, den er kannte, von dem Namen Martin
Luthers! Eine dunkle Röte stieg in sein Antlitz empor; er durchlas es, indem er
den Helm abnahm, zweimal von Anfang bis zu Ende; wandte sich, mit
ungewissen Blicken, mitten unter die Knechte zurück, als ob er etwas sagen
wollte, und sagte nichts; löste das Blatt von der Wand los, durchlas es noch
einmal; und rief: Waldmann! lass mir mein Pferd satteln! sodann: Sternbald! folge
mir ins Schloß! und verschwand. Mehr als dieser wenigen Worte bedurfte es
nicht, um ihn, in der ganzen Verderblichkeit, in der er dastand, plötzlich zu
entwaffnen.112

But who can describe what went on in his soul when he saw there the paper that
accused him of injustice: signed by the dearest and most revered name he knew,
the name of Martin Luther! [A dark red arose to his face]. Taking off his helmet,
he read the notice twice over from beginning to end; turned back among his men
with an uncertain look as if he were about to say something, [and] said nothing;

112 MK, 44.
took down the sheet from the pillar; read it through again; cried, “Waldmann, saddle my horse!” then, “Sternbald, follow me to the castle!” and disappeared inside. It needed no more than these few words to disarm him instantly, amid all the [ruinousness] in which he stood.\textsuperscript{113} 

Luther's letter literally and figuratively disarms Kohlhaas in that it instantly nullifies the grounds on which he had justified his revolt to himself. Further, Luther's letter, a publicly displayed interpretation of Kohlhaas's revolt, for the first time forces Kohlhaas to see himself through the lens of a public sphere, determined by the assessment of another. This passage makes clear that Kohlhaas's sudden awareness of his public identity constitutes a loss of innocence—“a dark red” arises in his face after reading the letter. Contrasted with the red leather cushion that is “borne before him” at his castle, a sign of the excess of his innocent selfishness, this red, itself the product of an uncontrollable biological function, signifies the realization that he has no control over how he is received in the public sphere and that his interpretation of his own intentions does not match the one he is confronted with. This realization is powerful enough to make Kohlhaas immediately give up his revolt and, after acquiring amnesty with the help of Luther, seek justice anew through the legitimate channels of the state. At the end of the novella, he achieves the public justice that correlates to his new-found obedience to the state (the restoration of his horses, the sentencing of Tronka, etc.). In Gailus's words, the ending, in which Kohlhaas is executed and order is restored, “shows how the state can marshal the popular passions aroused by Kohlhaas's revolt, and translate the subversive ferment of dissatisfaction into a spectacle that reinforces, rather than challenges, existing political hierarchies.”\textsuperscript{114} Further, the justice that

\textsuperscript{113} MK/E, 70 [with modifications].

\textsuperscript{114} Passions of the Sign, 142.
Kohlhaas wins, which works to reinstate the state's power, along with any satisfaction that comes along private revenge, comes at the cost of his own life.

Gailus considers the turn of events that results in Kohlhaas's immediate surrender in the context of Kleist's interpretation of the French Revolution “as the historical manifestation of a new form of subjectivity whose divided and unstable nature reverberates within the foundations of symbolic life.” This new form of unstable subjectivity inspires Kleist, Gailus argues, to try to use writing in a way that harnesses the “impersonal energy within language.” The use of language Kleist desires aims to be eventful in that it produces changes outside itself, but it produces these changes only to the extent that it opens itself up to its internal outside, the extraverbal force of passion. Yet since passion draws its intensity from the encounter with an other and thus transcends the boundaries of the self, to give oneself over to it is to deliver oneself to a collective energy that threatens the integrity of language and subjectivity.

Gailus cites Kleist's “Über der allmählichen Verfertigung der Gedanken beim Reden” as an illustrative example of his effort to develop a way to use the powers of language to do something new. Kleist's character Kohlhaas, alternatively, attempts to harness this “impersonal energy,” but “cannot control the warrant for the campaign of justice he himself issued, because in invoking the law, he invokes an extrasubjective entity that can be taken up and invoked by everyone.” Hence, this “impersonal energy”—which we might call the public use of language—is difficult

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115 Ibid., xiv.
116 Ibid., 11.
117 Ibid., 130.
to control since it can, by nature, be harnessed by anyone. Kohlhaas's interaction with the
character of Luther suggests that one step in controlling it is knowing how to productively take
advantage of the possibilities of the public sphere.

Although Gailus traces Kleist's awareness of the possibility of harnessing language to his
interpretation of the French Revolution, with this thesis I seek to demonstrate that we can and
should draw the line further back to Luther. A discussion of one further allusion to Luther's *Von
der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen* in *Kohlhaas* can help us outline and summarize the
significance of this connection. The turning point for Kohlhaas after he gives up his revolt is the
attempt of Nagelschmidt, one of his former followers, to start the revolt anew. He claims to be a
"Statthaler des Kohlhaas" (Kohlhaas's lieutenant [literally: placeholder]), and he and his
reconstituted band of men act, according to the narrator, “keineswegs zur Ehre Gottes, noch aus
Anhänglichkeit an den Kohlhaas, dessen Schicksal ihnen völlig gleichgültig war, sondern um
unter dem Schutz solcher Vorspiegelungen desto ungestrafter und bequemer zu sengen und zu
plündern.” (not at all for the glory of God nor out of attachment to Kohlhaas, whose fate the
outlaws did not care a straw about, but to enable them to burn and plunder … greater
impunity and ease.\(^\text{118}\)) This reappropriation of Kohlhaas's abandoned revolt mirrors Luther's
inability to control his message, which resulted in the radicalization of the Reformation. Further,
the word choice in this passage draws our attention back to Luther's *Freiheit eines
Christenmenschen*. First, the use of the word *Statthaler* echoes Luther's dismantling of the
authority of the pope, whom he calls the mere *Statthaler* of an absent Christ.\(^\text{119}\) Second, the
narrator's claim that Nagelschmidt and his gang acted “not at all for the glory of God … but to
enable them to burn and plunder …” echoes Luther's words when he condemns Johannes Eck,

\(^{118}\) *MK/E*, 89

\(^{119}\) See pp. 19-21 of this thesis.
who, according to Luther, claims to be working for the “glory of God” but in reality is only serving his own vain ends.  

Gailus shows how this passage demonstrates the reason for the partial failure of Kohlhaas's rebellion. Using his comments as a starting point, we can show that Kohlhaas, Kleist, and Luther are bound by the same attempts to use language in a public way. Gailus writes that this passage

...dramatizes the logical impossibility of the conception of justice Kohlhaas seeks to embody. The crux of this idea is encapsulated in the word *Statthalter*, which points to the double void on which Kohlhaas's rebellion so precariously rests: the lack of legal, official justice, and the evacuation of his own personhood and, therefore, of any claim to legitimacy. As for the first, we have already seen how Kohlhaas, in assuming the prerogatives of sovereignty, positions himself as God's *Statthalter*, thereby substituting himself for the elector. The Nagelschmidt episode brings out the weakness of Kohlhaas's performative self-authorization. Since his sovereignty is merely the product of the manifesto, it is enough to duplicate the manifesto to duplicate its effects. The lack of institutional support, in other words, makes him dependent upon a convention that can be appropriated by anyone who wishes to."

Kohlhaas's substitution of himself for God and the elector recalls Luther's argument that the pope is merely a substitution for Christ, and Nagelschmidt's substitution of himself for Kohlhaas recalls Luther's radical offspring who substituted themselves for him. Kohlhaas's “performative

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120 See pp. 29-30 of this thesis.
121 *Passions of the Sign*, 131-32.
self-authorization” that breeds the offspring he cannot control is the action that all reasoning subjects necessarily take when they determine themselves in the public sphere. This string of substitutions is an instance of the chain of “gleitende Signifikanten” (sliding signifiers) that Helga Gallas, using Lacan, identifies in her reading of Michael Kohlhaas. Gallas describes the existence of chains of sliding signifiers as follows: “Das Subjekt ist gezwungen, etwas anderes zu begehren, als das, was es ursprünglich begehrte, das Objekt ist also ein verlorenes Objekt: Mit jedem neuen Substitut ist das Subjekt gleich nah und fern von eigentlichen Objekt des Begehrens.”122 (The subject is forced to desire something other than what it originally desired; the object is thus a lost object: with every new substitute, the subject is equally close and far away from the actual object of desire.123) In spite of the resistance of the character Luther and the historical Luther, their conceptions of human identity and human capability breed the forces that take their thought to the extremes they had not imagined, because the truth that they thought to have attained was nothing more than a substitution for another substitution. As we have seen, it is Luther's assertion that the pope is nothing but a Statthalter representing the absence of Jesus that creates the possibility for these sliding signifiers. Thus, to Gaillus's reading of Michael Kohlhaas that sees it as a product of Kleist's interpretation of the French Revolution, we can add the presence of Luther. Enabled by the printing press, Luther dismantles the symbolic order of the Church's authority and with it the political order of the Medieval worldview by revealing that what was supposed to be divine truth was nothing but a placeholder. Later, Kant extends Luther's thought when he demonstrates that the power of the absolutist ruler is at the mercy of the public sphere. The catch, as Kleist shows us, is that the authority Luther and Kant win for their own worldviews is defined by the same conditions.

123 Translation mine.
Bibliography


