

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Luther, Martin. The Essential Luther. Ed. and trans., with an intro. by Tryntje Helfferich.

Jess Allen

Volume 43, Number 1, Winter 2020

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1070206ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i1.34126>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Allen, J. (2020). Review of [Luther, Martin. The Essential Luther. Ed. and trans., with an intro. by Tryntje Helfferich.] *Renaissance and Reformation* / *Renaissance et Réforme*, 43(1), 257–259. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i1.34126>

musician reaching out to defend himself against his armed assailant with a musical instrument. Rather, the shining, golden object the protagonist draws with his right hand is plainly the pommel of his sword. Such instances are rare however, and over the course of the biography Titian emerges as philosopher, dialectician, and exquisitely empathic dramatist, whose closest parallel in Loh's account is Shakespeare.

CHRISCINDA HENRY

McGill University

Luther, Martin.

***The Essential Luther*. Ed. and trans., with an intro. by Tryntje Helfferich.**

Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2018. Pp. xlvii, 311. ISBN 978-1-62466-694-0 (paperback) US\$18.

Following the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation, Tryntje Helfferich presents a new compilation of Luther's work that speaks skilfully and compellingly to multiple audiences. From students who are encountering Luther for the first time to scholars of the early modern period, readers are guided through Luther's life via his works, and vice versa. Maintaining the shape and sense of Luther's original writings while rendering, in her English versions, the language more readable and accessible for a modern audience, Helfferich's work provides a readable reference guide to Luther's key texts and ideas. The volume is not exhaustive but instead represents all of Luther's key beliefs and ideas; it constitutes an ideal starting point for undergraduate students and non-specialists. Although some readers might feel the lack of parallel text, preferring to have the opportunity to compare the translations with their sources, the footnotes often include references to Luther's original texts, detailing, for example, mistakes he made in copying references or the meanings of specific terms as he would have used them, thus providing us with some sense of Luther's writing processes.

Two methods of organization shape the collection: the chronological contents page and the overall organization of Luther's works allow readers to see how his life and the events of the Reformation fed into his writings, and how his opinions on key theological topics such as Free Will and the

Sacraments changed over time. Helfferich prefaces each translation with a short introduction, contextualizing each text and summarizing its key points. Although the first text of the volume, "Preface to the Complete Edition of the Latin Writings," is actually the oldest, this decision is deliberate, as Helfferich explains, for therein Luther demonstrates, in his own words, that his writings do not offer a coherent outline of his theological beliefs (1). Helfferich includes subsequent works in chronological order, summarizing clearly how they respond to events such as the publication of the ninety-five theses (21) and the Diet of Worms (95). Particular utility lies in the embedded commentary about Luther's use of the vernacular and his intervention in contemporaneous theological debates, for this provides readers with an accessible starting point into understanding the complexity of his writings. This is enhanced by a list of texts recommended for further reading at the end of the volume.

The examination of Luther's shifting beliefs is evident in the thematic table of contents, the second method of organization. Helfferich has sorted Luther's writings according to the following themes: law and gospel; faith and works; Christian righteousness; the theology of the cross; free will; the nature of God; the sacraments; the holy scripture and how to read it; women and marriage; the papacy and the priesthood; the nature of the church and proper religious practice; political theory, advice to rulers, and the "two kingdoms doctrine"; the use of violence; Jews and Muslims; fanatics, sectarians, and false prophets; the devil and the antichrist; and autobiographical and personal relations. This alone suffices to remind us of the breadth of themes covered by Luther's work; the thematic contents orientate us in terms of both his religious teachings and the related themes that map more directly onto concerns that headline modern university courses, such as gender and inter-religion relations, providing modern students with a gateway into Luther's world. Helfferich ensures that these themes are appropriately contextualized in an attempt to avoid misunderstandings and generalizations on the part of students: for instance, "On Married Life" begins with an explanation of the Augustinian view of celibacy to which Luther reacts in his praise of marriage as a forum for enjoying sexual desire (108). Furthermore, Helfferich takes a moment in the General Introduction to explain her decision to employ the pronoun "he" in the way that Luther did, as opposed to switching to "people" or "he or she" as other modern translators have done, emphasizing her decision to maintain the specificity of Luther's original texts (xlvi). This balance between current

concerns of students and scholars and accurate representation of historical context enhances the teachability of the volume.

Indeed, Helfferich's editorial work constantly reminds readers of the need to view Luther in his own context. Her footnotes provide concise commentary throughout, adding in the relevant Bible passages where these are not specified in the original text and often a short summary of their content, as well as elucidating references to other religions, texts, sources, and historical events. Combined with judicious linguistic and thematic analysis—for example, Helfferich's observations about Luther's frequent use of contradictions (41)—we feel informed but not overwhelmed as we peruse the translations.

A key strength of this volume lies in its use of the narrative of Luther's ever evolving life and thoughts as the driving force behind the creation of, and indeed the decision to include, each text. An argument for the continued study of Luther, *The Essential Luther* also serves as a justification for the study of literature and theological texts as historical sources that teach us not only about events but also about how these events were experienced and ultimately recorded by writers and their peers.

JESS ALLEN

University of Michigan at Ann Arbor

Magnusson, Lynne, with David Schalkwyk, eds.

The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's Language.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Pp. xiii, 293. ISBN 978-1-107-58318-4 (paperback) \$28.95.

This volume of fourteen essays by established Shakespeare scholars provides a seminal guide to Shakespeare's language. Departing from the postmodernist focus on socio-cultural and political contexts, these essays mark a timely return to textual analysis by reconceptualizing what it means to close read Shakespeare's language from a diverse range of perspectives and methodologies. The essays are arranged in four categories that guide the reader through the manifold ways of approaching Shakespeare's language: by attending to the elements that make up traditional literary analysis of Shakespeare's language, such as lexis, style, metre, and rhetorical figures; by attending to early modern social and