

LUTHER – “Schlagt sie tot!”

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ACT I

Opening - experiencing the glory of the old catholic faith, soon to be lost

The story opens with the sensuous and emotional experience of the catholic world of masses, relics, candles, prayers and images, soon to be lost, while at the same time introducing some of the main characters:

The little audacious *Landgrave Philip of Hesse*, 14 years of age, is by the secretary *Spalatin* introduced to the Saxon Elector's famous collection of relics. Philip does not yet know, that the political and military defence of the reformation will be his life and fate.

The Elector Frederick the Wise of Saxony has taken on to coach and mentor his little new colleague. He also secures Luther's activities, as this controversial doctor and preacher gives fame to his brand new university of Wittenberg. And, who knows? This Luther might be a true prophet. The humanist Spalatin, who dutifully performs as Frederick's secretary and contact between Elector and Luther, is himself deeply attracted to the enigmatic reformer.

Luther meeting and connecting to his lifelong closest companions

Spalatin's next duty is, on behalf of the Elector, to welcome the new professor in Greek, Philip Schwarzerd, called *Melanchthon*, recommended by the famous Erasmus himself.

They all exit from the church to enter the crowded sunlit square.

Melanchthon is escorted by Luther's colleague in theology *Doctor Andreas Karlstadt*.

The arrival of the Wunderkind and humanist Melanchthon thrills Wittenberg. Despite his boyish looks he is just as brilliant as expected. The excited students at the square now want him to meet their other great hero; *Martin Luther*. And so Melanchthon and Luther meet as on a stage, surrounded by enthusiasm. In a golden moment they connect in a bondage and dependence that will shape their lives. Luther insistence on only one truth has a magic attraction, but the inner antagonism between the ideals of humanism and Luther's theology of human depravity is not easily solved.

Spalatin continues to the workshops of *Lucas Cranach*, a wonder world of light and shade, of erotic nudes, madonnas, and luxury portraits mixed with technical wonders as modern printing presses.

Martin Luther is now in the center of events, and the Elector wants from his court painter Cranach a portrait, to be distributed all over Europe. He also wants Luther's pamphlets to be printed by Cranach, stressing Wittenberg's importance.

When entering the Cranach workshop Luther is overwhelmed by the stunning mixture of carnal and religious imagery, but in the next moment feels an all special peace and security in the company of Lucas and *Barbara Cranach*. Lucas has found Luther's sermons a comfort. And as Luther's conflicts with the pope are stuck in a hopeless state, Luther is now prepared to stop negotiating and to attack.

While Cranach draws the first Luther portrait – “a strong and defiant monk!” – they form the unique partnership of propaganda, that with pamphlets, satires and portraits will brand and shape the image of Luther all over Europe.

Luther setting the agenda in Europe, his modes of revolt challenging both sides

In the aftermath of the election of Charles V as emperor, the dignitaries of the empire meet in Cologne. Late at night Frederick the Wise calls for *Erasmus of Rotterdam*, to get some advice how to handle the “Luther problem”. Erasmus supports many of Luther’s views, but finds his aggressive behaviour risky, as it might trigger unrest and “tumultus”. His advice is, that a non-provocative hearing of Luther be arranged at the next diet in Worms.

Parallel to this Luther, alone by a candle in his cell in Wittenberg, in great excitement writes to Pope Leo in Rome. There is a mixture of excuses, servility and attacks. He also encloses his latest pamphlet, “On Christian freedom”, instructing the Pope how to live a true Christian life

The two locations – with a dialogue between two intelligent and pragmatic persons in Cologne, and the letter-monologue of the irrational and exited Luther in Wittenberg, is contrasted by a third location, showing the luxury and license of Rome.

Violent verbal attacks and rebellious actions - soon meeting criticism.

In response to the burning of Luther’s writings in Leuven and Cologne and to the papal bull, a gathering and burning of books and the bull is announced in Wittenberg. In a rebellious and well staged event the Canon law and finally the bull itself is thrown into the flames. This is followed by an aggressive and satirical pageant, where radical students mock the Pope as Antichrist, and put on stage the same themes and satires as on the famous flyers: Luther’s enemies as wolves and goats, sex and luxury of the curia etc. Melanchthon experiences for the first time the uneasiness of lost control.

Luther has through Spalatin asked the famous Erasmus for support, but the answer is instead critical. Erasmus wants Luther to cool down his violent verbal attacks. For the humanists Spalatin and Melanchthon, Erasmus is an authority to be listened to. But Luther, on the other hand, gets furious, and insists on the word of God as war, fight and provocation. His fury soon turns into a passionate defence of his faith and views, this including God commanding himself to teach and judge in Germany - with sword and blood if necessary. Himself filled and inspired by his own words, he leaves Spalatin and Melanchthon confounded and partly appalled.

Preparing and surviving the DIET OF WORMS

In a street in Wittenberg Karlstadt monitors a wagon transport of piled up altars, statues and paintings, all torn down to make old beliefs and ceremonies impossible. Barbara Cranach, herself monitoring the loading of pamphlets and flyers, confronts Karlstadt and complains to Luther. Lucas Cranach, just arriving, also insists on the utility of art and images. He shows Luther the new and less rebellious portrait of the augustiner Martin: “The soft, mild monk” – to be sold at the diet of Worms, the upcoming event that Luther so much fears.

Intermezzo: At his triumphant tour to Worms, Luther preaches to the crowds and drinks and plays the lute as an Orpheus at the inns.

The night before appearing for the diet, in a moonlit cell in Worms, he prays in fright and despair.

The next morning, in the overwhelming setting of the diet, Luther is asked to confirm his authorship of the huge pile of books in front of him, and to recant its content. He refuses, and criticizes in his talk a false pope and a degenerate church. He also emphasizes that he talks for the ordinary Germans, and that only Scripture itself is infallible and unerring – not councils, not popes.

In the following extravagant mingling of delegates and emperor - including women - the impressive, for others disgusting, appearance of Luther is discussed.

Luther's protector Frederick the Wise and the upcoming supporter of the reformation, Philip of Hesse, are both present. While even cardinals are aware of the Roman moral collapse, the view upon Luther himself ranges from admiration to horror. And in the streets people are kissing his portrait. Who does now dare, to judge and burn this Luther as a heretic?

While the event is closed with the pompous exit of the emperor, on behalf of the his master Frederick the Wise, Spalatin takes care of the now broken down Luther, shivering in his cell.

Lost control and radical change

Luther's talk of freedom, the priesthood of all believers and opening up for all to interpret the Bible, and not least his rejection of rationality and logic and his own verbal attacks on the clergy, has opened the box of Pandora. The world is turned upside down in the longing for change and righteousness. Even the great Erasmus has to flee - his students overturning his lectern. Religious movements sprawl and clash, and the feeling of having been fooled make people attack and ridicule saints and humiliate clergy. Some go even further, breaking their tools and tearing off their clothes, transferring themselves to the mercy of God. But where is Luther?

By the singing and heavenly inspired Zwickau Prophets, the stage is slowly transferred to Wittenberg Castle Church, where similar radical change unfolds in a more calm setting:

Here Andreas Karlstadt has now taken the lead to fight old rituals. In the church, in company with Melanchthon, he monitors the removal of statues and paintings, accompanied by the Zwickau Prophets, in divine contact with the Holy Ghost. Ladders, hammers and pieces of what used to be altars and holy objects are scattered all over the place.

Suddenly Luther appears at the doors escorted by Spalatin - returning from the secured custody at the Wartburg, as rumours of Karlstadt's radical activities has reached him. With Luther humiliating him and claiming himself the sole leader of the reformation, Karlstadt gets enough, announcing his leaving Wittenberg. In a final blow he pours out his contempt for Luther as a pumped "wannabe" pope and prophet.

Reformation victory and personal authority at stake - triumphs and non-triumphs...

While by glowing preaching and more moderate action again taking command in Wittenberg, Luther is frustrated by all problems and disappointments, though finding peace with the Cranach's, and delighting in the huge sales of his new German bible.

When Barbara Cranach announces the arrival of 12 fleeing nuns - inspired by him to leave their convent, he is definitely cheered up, already planning for possible husbands.

Some of them get an intermediary housing at the Cranach place, among them the spokeswoman, *Katharina/Käthe von Bora*. Melanchthon, arriving with a script, is somewhat surprised, and Luther boasts what a triumph these fleeing nuns are for the new faith.

Left alone Melanchthon reminds Luther of the less triumphant events and problems facing the reformation - as the peasant pointing at Luther when revolting, and Luther now losing his followers among the learned. He thus lifts the fresh script, Luther's magnum attack on Erasmus, rejecting the freedom of the will.

And now, for the first time, Melanchthon dares to criticize Luther, who, after a first wildly aggressive attack on his closest companion, suddenly recedes. He praises his "little Griechlein's" unique talents, even promising to follow his advice to use his authority to calm down both sides in the exploding peasants war, that has now reached Luther's own home town - Eisleben.

Collapse of the hero - Luther in the ruins of Helfta - *First act finale.*

In Eisleben the famous convent of Helfta, the “crown of Mysticism”, is burnt down by the peasants, and in the ruins the crying, dirty and abused nuns are lingering. An odd lunatic recognizes the son of the town, Martin *Luder*, and accuses him of spreading hatred and thus igniting the fire.

When the nuns understand they have the living Luther standing there, they do in despair accuse him of putting the life, faith and learning of women to ashes.

The accelerating schizophrenia of the situation gets even worse, when the youngster Landgrave Philip of Hesse turns up as commander, commenting on Luther’s guilt, – but ignoring Luther’s own assurances, that this was not what he had meant or wanted.

This is too much. Standing alone as a scapegoat in the waste and ruins of war, Luther is filled by an overwhelming fear, despair and rage. With the words of the famous pamphlet he calls for that the peasants be stopped, stabbed and slaughtered: Me, Martin Luther says: Kill them!

ACT II:

Bottom reached, *break down* - and the power of Music facing evil

Frederick the Wise is dead. His coffin is on display in the Castle Church, where Luther too in despair is hiding, praying in a corner. He is looked after and supported by his loyal Melanchthon, who tries to raise the question of responsibility for the upheaval. But the distressed Luther stubbornly blames Müntzer, and the fact that ordinary people are too stupid to read the bible. Spalatin finds his friends in the church, and tells the terrible news of the slaughter of Mühlhaus, where Philip of Hesse has defeated the peasants in what is basically a massacre.

The news makes Luther wake up from his depressed inactivity. To the horror of his friends he with blank eyes and weak voice claims he is the man who killed all the peasants, as he was the man who commanded this be done. Spalatin, whose wise master is now dead, has had enough, and leaves the church and Wittenberg, while Melanchthon stays to support his disturbed companion.

Intermezzo: Luther is praying all night, in confusion and anguish.

As the morning comes he is still fighting his demons, his devils, attacking and haunting him. Melanchthon is in vain promoting a withdrawal of the controversial pamphlet against the peasants, trying to re-establish his reputation and mental state.

A sloppy group of singers arrives to rehearse, and Luther commands them to sing, to fight the evil.

By the power of music, everyday life is now filled and transformed. For Luther the divine movement of music is God’s vehicle on earth to influence, affect and control our feelings and thereby the rest. Polyphony is the true image on earth of the divine.

Rising from hell, with a new life to be an everyday family life (*Marriage and reactions*)

In his crisis of life Luther seeks the company of Cranach, who advises him to cheer up with his own recommended devices, as good company - including women. Once Barbara changed his own life! Luther explodes in hatred against the false celibacy, interrupted by Barbara who has arranged her three nuns from Nimbschen to soothe his soul with music. Käthe von Bora takes the possibility to tell she is dissatisfied with her planned husband, and announces she might return to the convent. Lucas Cranach advises Luther to take her as wife, to prevent such a PR catastrophe, but also because the audacity in her statements also means she has the strength to handle him and his deranged life.

Intermezzo: Singing students are returning to Wittenberg, in love and happiness reconciling with their girls, but also hearing shocking news of Luther marrying. And that Melanchthon is furious, because it was all done without telling him or inviting him!

But Luther embraces and praises Käthe, and describes how the sinful lust is being transformed to divine creation in marriage. Even if Käthe is called whore and their marriage is attacked, he assures her that she soon will be a model and ideal in the new, true faith. But just thinking of such hatred makes darkness enter his mind again. All these problems and tribulations! Now the landgrave Philip of Hesse will force him to unite with the Swiss reformers, headed by the music-hating "Zwingel"-Zwingli, who dares promote the idea of holy supper being plainly symbolic!

Looking for unity, agreements and peace (*Marburg, Augsburg, Cobourg*)

Philip of Hesse wants the unity of protestants to negotiate with the emperor at the upcoming diet in Augsburg, and he is fed up with Luther's aggressiveness and negativity. He invites all the reformers and top theologians to meet at his castle at Marburg, where an impressive disputation is held. But the meeting fails, due to the discord concerning Christ's presence in bread and wine. Luther's humiliating treatment of his opponent Zwingli shocks the meeting, which Luther himself is carelessly unaware of. The Landgrave Philip announces with annoyance the failure, and points at Melanchthon as speaker for Wittenberg at the Augsburg diet.

Securely placed at the castle of Coburg Luther awaits news from the diet, while inspired and in a carefree mood writing letters to his beloved Käthe and his "little Greek" Melanchthon. He praises and assails at the same time the poor fighting Melanchthon in Augsburg, basically not believing in all these negotiations. Himself he fights with the devils and works hard, but finds pleasure in being in the realm of birds - including the noisy "diet of birds" at his window!

The pompous Authority reigns the table and the close circle:

Back in Wittenberg, Lucas Cranach delivers a new set of portraits of the reformer, now to be branded as "the old authority". But Luther is in the complaining mood, though admitting everything is not totally black - the humiliating deaths of Zwingli and Müntzer proved that God definitely sides with him. The portrait on the wall finally cheers him up and is celebrated with music. The table is now set for dinner and tabletalk.

Presiding as a king at the dinner table Luther is jokingly and carelessly targeting both persons present and his favourite enemies. He is interrupted by Melanchthon announcing Philip von Hesse and an English delegation. Giving also his little Greek some poisonous remarks, he declares those negotiations boring and useless, and for Melanchthon to take care of.

Left with Käthe Melanchthon seeks her support. He admits his jealousy over their wedding, and that he once could not imagine living without Luther. But now he is terrorized and enslaved by the great man's moods. More over he is pressed from all sides to try to influence Luther, but can do nothing. Käthe reminds him that the magic and the bully strength of Luther were once needed. Melanchthon responds, that even prophets have to know when to stop.

Final decline and collapse

Luther enters the Cranach workshop to proudly present his new satirical pamphlet against the papacy, that he wants Cranach to illustrate with new, humiliating and disgusting woodcuts. Cranach comments on the new series of pamphlets now appearing - against the Jews, against the Swiss, and now again against the papacy.

He concludes that he has always done what he is requested to do, but as can be seen in the workshop, what is now on the agenda, is preparing for the expected war. As a friend he suggests Luther to stop – no one is listening anymore. Luther reacts with fury and slams the door.

Barbara has told Käthe about the incident with Master Lucas, and she confronts Luther, who breaks down in a depressive and self-accusing mood – seeing death as the proper solution to rid the world of himself.

Fighting his demons, Käthe desperately tries to support and help him. As in his whole life he is torn between doubt and trust in a merciful God. He ends advising Käthe to do like himself, and to hide behind the screen of Christ - like crawling under the brood hen, to escape the wrath of God.

Finale /Epilogue - TUMULTUS

The final "tumultus" - the war, has come. The emperor besieges Wittenberg, and all is chaos. The Cranachs leave to follow their imprisoned Elector, loaded with paintings. Käthe, trying to secure the Luther death mask, is comforted by Barbara, who stresses the magnitude of what they after all succeeded in, transforming life and society.

Käthe hands the mask to Melanchthon, who, while facing the dead and strangely calm Luther, is stopped by the next prisoner, landgrave Philip of Hesse, who wants to say goodbye. They agree they truly failed - to unite wings, to reconcile with Rome and finally to prevent war. They look at the mask; - Luther himself on the contrary succeeded, and ended as a hero and a prophet! You loved him, didn't you, says the Landgrave, Melanchthon responding: Were we not all seduced?