

How Luther Became the Mythical “Here I Stand” Hero

by SAMUEL L. YOUNG

On April 18, 1521, Martin Luther made his famous address before Charles V and the Diet of Worms. The earliest reports of the Diet attested that Luther switched to German for his final declaration. An account printed in Strasbourg the following month rendered the line as “GOTT HELF MIR ARMEN. Amen.,” and included a portrait of Luther being anointed by the Holy Spirit.¹ The more standard report on the Diet extended the line to “*Ich kan nicht anderst, hie[r] stehe ich, Gott helff mir, Amen.*”² The definitive rendering of Luther’s declaration, however, would come from the pen of his cobelligerent Philip Melanchthon, who, in his biographical introduction to the Latin edition of Luther’s works, reported that the Reformer had said “*Hie[r] stehe ich / Ich kan nie anders / Gott helff mir / Amen.*”³

This article examines the reception and translation of the words *hier stehe Ich* within the English-speaking world from the Reformation into the nineteenth century. Although scholars still disagree about what exactly Luther said at Worms, “here I stand” has become both the standard English translation and a common shorthand expression encapsulating the significance of Luther’s life and work for the history of the world, and especially for the West.⁴ Roland Bainton immortalized the line in the mid-twentieth century by using it as the title of his classic biography of the Reformer and the event has retained mythic, world-historical status. As one recent popular biography put it, the Diet of Worms was where the “modern world” and “the future itself” was born.⁵

Building on the research of Hartmut Lehmann’s 1988 *Martin Luther in the American Imagination*, several recent studies have explored the utility of Luther biography and commemoration in the construction of post-Reformation Protestant identities. Christine Helmer, Tal Howard, and Peter Marshall have noted that from

the nineteenth century, the memory of Luther was instrumentalized to reinforce the Western liberal order, whether that be democratic or republican forms of government, or even a nationalized German identity.⁶ This article extends this line of analysis to one aspect of Luther's reception in England and the United States and explores the reasons why he became a figure of universal significance in the popular imagination. First, the rise of the "here I stand" translation in the eighteenth and nineteenth-century English-language biographies of Luther corresponded with an emphasis on the Diet of Worms speech as the iconic moment in the Reformer's life. Earlier English biographies of the Reformer had often elided or neglected his speech at Worms, centering on other moments of Luther's life as the most pivotal for the early Reformation. As translations of *hier stehe Ich* became standardized, the event came to the fore as the most significant turning point in Luther's life. Second, this development in Luther biography led to the phrase "here I stand" and the Reformer himself being invested with various kinds of universal meaning. By this, I mean that men and women were convinced that their world would not be what it was without Luther's confession at Worms, that it fundamentally altered the direction of human history. Evangelical and confessional historians elevated the Reformer as a paragon of piety and zealous courage, the stand at Worms confirming the righteousness of Luther's movement. Decidedly secular histories of the Reformation (which until the nineteenth century had almost universally disparaged the Reformer) also made Luther their champion, exalting him as an exemplar of civilization, enlightenment, or liberty writ large. In this sense, Luther and his stand were malleable memories, capable of being employed to defend a host of causes, virtues, and ideals.

The Emergence of "Here I Stand"

Sixteenth- and seventh-century English examinations of the Reformation—if they included the Diet of Worms—did not settle on a uniform translation of Luther's speech. An English version of Melancthon's account appeared in 1561 with the phrase "Here upon I rest, I know not what else I would say, God helpe me. So be it."⁷

The magisterial history of the Reformation written by the Lutheran historian Johannes Sleidan included a long interlude on the Diet of Worms and appeared in an English translation in 1560. Without referring to the *hier stehe Ich*, Sleidan quoted large portions of the rest of Luther’s speech concerning the authority of scripture relative to the fallibility of the “Bishoppe of Rome” and the “Counsels.”⁸ Luther’s place at Worms was most popularized to English audiences by the many editions of John Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs*.⁹ Foxe’s work included an entire chapter on Luther at Worms and copied large amounts of Melanchthon’s account. The fourth edition of the *Acts and Monuments* clarified the English translation of Melanchthon, by rendering the Reformer’s declaration as “Hereupon I stand and rest. I have not what els to say. God have mercy upon me.”¹⁰ Although Luther was not killed for his protest, Foxe’s popularity guaranteed that Luther’s efforts for reformation would continue to resonate within discourses of Protestant martyrdom well into the nineteenth century.¹¹ Seventeenth-century biographies offered their own rendering of Luther’s speech. An English edition of *The Life and Death of Martin Luther* by Silesian Calvinist Melchior Adam, translated by Anglican cleric and schoolmaster Thomas Hayne in 1641, expressed the famous line from Melanchthon’s account as “This will I stand to: vary from this I may not. God Helpe me, Amen.”¹²

It was, however, more common for early modern histories of the Reformation to neglect Worms altogether, or to summarize the events without comment on Luther’s speech. Anglican convert John Bale’s 1554 *Pageant of the Popes* included a long interlude on Luther’s Reformation, but nothing on Worms.¹³ In the seventeenth century, several surveys of church history offered summaries or paraphrases of Luther’s performance at Worms, but no quotations.¹⁴ The Scottish philosopher Gilbert Burnet examined the life and theology of Luther in his voluminous *History of the Reformation of the Church of England*, but without mention of the Diet.¹⁵ The great French encyclopedists—the Catholic Louis Moreri and the Huguenot Pierre Bayle—wrote important biographical articles on Luther for English audiences. Moreri’s account of the Reformer’s life, though mildly critical, briefly included Luther’s appeal to the Emperor, noting that the monk appeared at Worms to “[maintain] the Truth with

an undaunted Resolution.”¹⁶ In his own work, Bayle attempted to vindicate the Reformer from the attacks of his Catholic critics (including Moreri) by examining, quoting, and critiquing many of the existing French and German historical accounts of the Reformation. It was an exhaustive and thorough bibliography of continental works—the first to be translated into English—but did not concern itself with uncontested biographical details like the Diet.¹⁷ Despite the popularity of the accounts from Sleidan, Melancthon, and Foxe, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century histories of the Reformation were just as likely to omit the Diet of Worms as they were to include it.

Other aspects of Luther’s life proved more popular to English readers. Rather than his speech to the Diet, the most repeated Luther anecdote in seventeenth-century print was his initial reaction to being called before the emperor. After receiving his summons, the Reformer’s allies begged him not to go to Worms, certain that it would lead to his martyrdom. According to Melancthon, Luther responded that he was “determined to enter Wormes, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ: yea, although I knew ther were so many Deuils to resist me, as ther are tyles to cover the houses in Wormes.”¹⁸ English ministers repeated this story ad nauseam, convinced that Luther’s bravery to defy the pope, emperor, and the devil himself would inspire similar courage in their parishioners.¹⁹ There was also a different “here I stand” moment in Luther’s life that captured English attention apart from his speech at the Diet of Worms. In 1522, while writing against Henry VIII, Luther affirmed his commitment to scripture over tradition by declaring “*Hic sto, hic sedeo, . . . hic triumpho, hic insulto, Papistis, Thomistis, Henricistis . . . Dei verbum est super omnia* [Here I stand, here I sit, . . . here I triumph, here I insult Papists, Thomists, Henricians . . . God’s word is above all].”²⁰ By the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, this passage was referenced by English Catholics and Protestants alike as a synopsis of Protestant conviction. Compared to the various English translations of *hier stehe Ich*, the Latin *hic sto* offered a much more straight-forward phrase for translators. Across all English references to this passage it was universally translated as “here I stand.”²¹

Although many of the later epitomes and abridgments of Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* would cut the chapter on Worms, one continuation of Foxe was the first to translate Luther's speech as "here I stand." Thomas Mall's 1665 *Sufferers Mirrour* intended to shorten Foxe's narrative and clarify his language for popular readers. In this effort, Foxe's "Hereupon I stand and rest" became the more direct "Here I stand. I have nothing else to say. God be merciful to me."²² There are several possible reasons why Mall chose to clarify Foxe in this rendering. First, it is likely that he connected the *hic sto* against Henry as linguistically equivalent to the *hier stehe Ich* at Worms. A few pages after his description of Worms, he included Luther's diatribe against King Henry, quoting the standard English translation of the *hic sto* paragraph.²³ Apart from maintaining linguistic consistency, Mall's clarification of Foxe also imbued the scene at Worms with a sense of drama, and it is possible he was inspired to make this change by the English stage.

Since the turn of the seventeenth century, "here I stand" became a common dramatic declaration in English plays, particularly in scenes where protagonists faced scrutiny by their superiors or the law.²⁴ Scholars have long found direct and indirect references to Luther in Shakespeare's corpus, including a tongue-in-cheek reference to a "diet" of "politic worms" from *Hamlet* in reference to the death of Polonius.²⁵ The Bard was intimately familiar with Luther's thought, and studies have argued that both *Hamlet* and *Measure for Measure* contain deep critiques of the Protestant Reformer.²⁶ Shakespeare mostly reserved his use of "here I stand" for characters reckoning with their evil actions. In an early edition of *Henry VI*, it is put in the mouth of the nefarious Clifford. When confronted by the Duke of York for his unjust actions, Clifford declares "here I stand and pitch my foot to thine," vowing not to go further until he or his opponent was dead. In a later edition of the play, when Clifford is hunted by Richard for killing women and children, he famously responds "Ay, crookback, here I stand to answer thee, / Or any he the proudest of thy sort."²⁷ A more comedic scene from *Henry IV* inverted the traditional setting of the phrase as a response to impending judgment. Here, the foolish boor Falstaff prepares to impersonate prince

Henry in a raucous scene at the pub. “Here I stand,” he begins, inviting his friends to “judge” his impression.²⁸ While it is unclear if Shakespeare consciously connected his characters’ “here I stand” moments with the Protestant Reformer, his plays popularized the phrase as a dramatic exultation. By the time Thomas Mall clarified Foxe’s prose in 1665, “here I stand” was clearly meant to convey the drama of Luther’s predicament at the Diet of Worms.

Mall’s translation, however, would not catch on in other English accounts of the Reformation, and the trend of excluding or understating the Diet of Worms continued into the eighteenth century. Luther did not fare well with popular historians of this era. Edward Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and David Hume’s *History of England* excoriated the Reformer’s character. Although the Protestant Reformation was “solid and important” in liberating Europe from the clutches of tyrannical Catholicism, they believed Luther to be an unintentional and accidental harbinger of cultural innovation.²⁹ Neither historian cited the speech at Worms as an important episode in the intellectual liberation of Europe. The event did receive more attention from Scottish historian William Robertson in his *History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles V*. In his political analysis of Worms, Robertson reasoned that Charles had to punish Luther in order to appease Pope Leo and thereby win an ally against the French. Robertson duly mentioned and described Luther’s appearance at the Diet, but only as a turning point in the popularity of the Protestant movement.³⁰ These works of Gibbon, Hume, and Robertson constituted the most widely read historical writings in eighteenth-century America and Britain.³¹ None of these authors attributed historical weight to Luther’s speech at Worms, nor did they imbue the Reformer’s actions with any kind of universal meaning. For them, Luther’s Reformation was an important historical fact, but the Reformer himself did not deserve adulation or emulation.

Luther’s *hier stehe Ich* did remain significant for evangelical and confessional historians, who understood the Reformer’s experience as a great universal victory for true religion. The Lutheran historian Johann Mosheim constructed his multi-volume history of the Reformation around the life of Luther, noting especially the Reformer’s

bravery and courage at the Diet as confirmation of his piety and the Lord's favor.³² Mosheim's Scottish translator and editor, Archibald Maclaine, went further in his laudatory description of Luther at Worms. The Reformer, according to Maclaine, was the paragon of patience, virtue, "rational zeal, generous probity, and Christian fortitude." He was the ideal Christian, quietly and firmly appealing to the truth of scripture against the forces of sin, superstition, and tyranny.³³ Although not quoting *hier stehe Ich* directly, Maclaine's translation of Mosheim would prove incredibly popular in Britain and the United States, confirming for readers the historical significance of Luther's speech at Worms.

From Wesley to 1817

Mosheim's biographical emphases would be mirrored by none other than a seventy-five-year-old John Wesley. In 1778, Wesley translated and excerpted portions of Johann Daniel Herrnschmidt's 1742 *Life of Luther* for his new magazine, *The Arminian*. Luther, of course, had played a conspicuous part in Wesley's conversion. Famously, his heart was "strangely warmed" after hearing a group of Moravians read the Reformer's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. Herrnschmidt was a Halle pietist and his depiction of Luther fit Wesley's vision of Methodist devotion. In his translation, Wesley harked back to Thomas Mall's rendering, writing both the German and the English for his magazine's readers: "*Hier stehe ich: Ich kan nicht anders: Gott helfe mir! Amen,*" That is, 'Here I stand: I can do no otherwise: God help me! Amen.'³⁴ Wesley's translation was repeated in the early nineteenth century in the prolific church histories from evangelical Anglicans Joseph and Isaac Milner. In the volume on the Reformation (finished by Isaac after Joseph's death), Luther's Worms speech is recorded in full, punctuated with the German and English translation of the final line: "*Hie[r] stehe ich / Ich kan nicht anders / Gott helff mir / Amen.* Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. May God help me. Amen."³⁵ Other accounts of Luther from the early nineteenth century tried their hand at translating the German declaration of the Reformer. American Lutheran Ernest Hazelius's short biography of Luther in 1813 rendered the phrase as "here I am,

I can do no otherwise.” The famed Unitarian Joseph Priestley, in his *General History of the Christian Church*, translated it as “This is my final resolution, I shall take no other.”³⁶ Despite these variations, the many works that replicated the Milners’ “here I stand” gloss disclose the translation’s staying power and popularity. The Scotsman Alexander Bower included it in his 1813 biography of Luther, as did the various adaptations of both Milner’s *Church History* and Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* that were published in the 1810s.³⁷

As “here I stand” became more popular as a translation, so did the attribution of religious and historical weight to the Diet of Worms. Rebecca Eaton, a Massachusetts school teacher who adapted Milner’s *Church History* for children, remarked that at Worms Luther spoke “with the eloquence of Cicero, the humility of a Christian, and amazing depth of understanding.”³⁸ For Eaton, the Diet of Worms marked a turning point in human history, where the great warrior for truth and piety fought against the forces of evil and emerged unscathed. In her hagiography of the Reformer, Eaton intimated that Luther’s example ought to be emulated by the children who would read her book. Luther’s life represented the struggle of faith for all Christians, young and old, male and female. Through the efforts of these evangelical and confessional readings of Reformation history, Luther’s appearance at Worms became more than a piece of biographical data, and began to be invested with universal meaning—an event that had fundamentally determined the shape of the contemporary world.

The full extent of this development can be seen in the Reformation Jubilee celebrations that took place on October 31, 1817, throughout the United States. Although the celebrations were to commemorate the posting of the 95 Theses, the most popular and well-attended commemoration focused instead on the Reformer’s stand at Worms. 5,000 attendees participated in the New York City Jubilee commemoration, which included selections from Handel’s *Messiah* and a sermon from a promising young Lutheran minister, Frederick Christian Schaeffer. Relying especially on Mosheim, the sermon was part biography and part exhortation. After the minister recited the Worms speech in full (“*Here I stand; I cannot act*

otherwise: so help me God. Amen!"), he paused to declare that "no one can withhold his admiration of so noble a reply,—so extraordinary and laudable a resolution,— such invincible integrity and zeal, in so just a cause."³⁹ Luther's piety and example ought to inspire and encourage all Americans, Schaeffer reasoned, because it was his actions that became the basis of American political virtues.⁴⁰ After exhorting his listeners to mark their lives with pious gratitude to the Lord, the minister ended his sermon with a return to Luther at Worms.

In our endeavours to "overcome evil with good," in defence of the truth, in defiance of opposition, in the conscientious discharge of our duties as Christians, as *enlightened Christians*, let us prove that we are actuated by a well founded faith, that our motives are pure; that our principles are strictly evangelical. And relying upon that God who strengthened and protected Luther, let us say with him, in our whole conduct:

HERE I STAND; I CANNOT ACT OTHERWISE: SO HELP ME GOD!
AMEN!⁴¹

When this sermon was published the following year, Schaeffer included a commissioned frontispiece depicting Luther at the Diet of Worms, captioned with the original German and the "here I stand" translation. In his review of the sermon, Yale theologian Ezra Stiles noted that the artwork was "well done" and would not "fail to impress the memory of young people with the heroic declaration of Luther . . . before the diet of Worms, on pain of death."⁴² The translation also appeared in many of the other published Jubilee sermons from that year (including a sermon given by F.C. Schaeffer's older brother David), and was further utilized in the Luther biographies published the following spring.⁴³ Roman Catholic critics of the Jubilee noted this emphasis on Worms, and tailored their critiques accordingly. In one satirical response to the sermons of Frederick and David Schaeffer, the Jesuit priest John William Beschter resurrected the dead Luther to scold his present-day defenders. Parodying the frontispiece of F.C. Schaeffer's published sermon, Luther declares in German and English:

Hier stehe ich, (*gegen euch, Herren Schoefffer,*) ich kann nicht anders:
Gott helfe mir! Amen!

Here I stand, (*Against you Messerss Schoefffers,*) I cannot act otherwise:
so help me God! Amen!

*M. Luther before the diet of Worms*⁴⁴

After refuting every aspect of the Schaeffers' sermons, the resurrected Luther returns to the grave weighed down by his iniquity, sin, and rebelliousness, declaring "Here I yield; I cannot act otherwise: so help me God! Amen!"⁴⁵

In summary, building on the popularization of Mosheim, Wesley, and Milner, the pan-Protestant Jubilee celebrations of 1817 gave even greater weight to Luther's declaration at Worms, interpreting his "here I stand" as the decisive victory of Christian liberty over Catholic tyranny.

The Universal Meaning of Luther

As "here I stand" became the accepted English translation, the event and the Reformer both were invested with greater weight and meaning. Evangelicals continued to interpret Luther as the great champion of Protestant truth and individual conscience, while others began investing the Reformer's stand with non-religious meaning, even crediting him with the genesis of the modern world itself.

J.H. Merle d'Aubigné, a Swiss Protestant, furthered the evangelical strain of this development in his immensely popular *History of the Reformation*, which went through dozens of nineteenth-century editions in the United States and Britain.⁴⁶ For Merle, Luther was the paragon of emotional and spiritual confidence. The historian compared the Reformer's entrance at Worms with the triumphal entry of Christ at Jerusalem. Just as Christ prayed in the garden before his trial and crucifixion, so Luther—ever balanced and brave—prayed and weighed his words before his testimony. Composed before his accusers, Merle's Luther confidently faces the Diet and refuses to

recant: "Behold, here I stand, and I fear it is impossible for me to do otherwise; may God help me! Amen."⁴⁷ For Merle and his readers, Luther's speech at Worms exemplified an idealized evangelicalism: pious, Christ-like, measured words, undergirded with a firm commitment to the gospel and the liberty of conscience. Later editions of the work confirmed the immense weight accorded to the event and to the "here I stand" translation by Merle. When the first American edition was printed in 1842, translator Henry White changed the line to "I stand here," and included the German original in a footnote.⁴⁸ Subsequent editions of the White translations were "carefully revised" by Merle, and the Worms line was changed back to "here I stand."⁴⁹ This edition also began including William Holl's engraving of a stately Luther, gazing upward and holding the Bible, with the caption "MARTIN LUTHER BEFORE THE DIET OF WORMS," even though the image is based on the 1530s full-body portraits from Lucas Cranach the Elder, which were not originally intended to portray the Reformer at Worms. The image underscored the notion that Worms was the central event of the Reformation, with Luther the great evangelical defender of scripture making his stand. Merle's description of Luther's speech is indicative of the kind of universal and historical meaning that had been absent fifty years previous.

Luther, constrained to obey his faith, led by his conscience to death, impelled by the noblest necessity, the slave of his belief, and under this slavery still supremely free, like the ship tossed by a violent tempest, and which, to save that which is more precious than itself, runs and is dashed upon the rocks, thus uttered these sublime words which still thrill our hearts at an interval of three centuries . . . This is the weakness of God, which is stronger than man. The empire and the Church on the one hand, this obscure man on the other, had met. God had brought together these kings and these prelates publicly to confound their wisdom. The battle is lost, and the consequences of this defeat of the great ones of the earth will be felt among every nation and in every age to the end of time.⁵⁰

Multiple printings of Merle's *History of the Reformation* by the American Tract Society guaranteed that this vision of the Reformer as a champion for piety and a shaker of worlds would proliferate widely.⁵¹

Evangelicals saw Luther as *their* Reformer, his stand at Worms confirming the victory of their faith in the history of the world.

Evangelicals were not the only ones to claim Luther as their champion and Worms as a turning point in world history. Intellectuals, romantics, and free-thinkers also found in Luther a champion for their vision of an elevated humanity, and his stand at Worms was essential to this conception of the Reformer. The Scottish intellectual and deist Thomas Carlyle exalted Luther to the status of one of the “great men” in human history, and indeed, the progenitor of the modern world. In a speech given in 1840, Carlyle argued that Luther’s appearance at the Diet of Worms ought to “be considered the greatest scene in Modern European History,” the origin point “from which the whole subsequent history of civilisation takes its rise.” The fate of all humanity rested on this Augustinian monk; thankfully, “Luther did not desert us.” Luther’s significance was not based on extravagant living, but on a quiet, simple, and abiding greatness.

I will call this Luther a true Great Man; great in intellect, in courage, affection and integrity; one of our most loveable and precious men. Great, not as a hewn obelisk; but as an Alpine mountain,—so simple, honest, spontaneous, not setting-up to be great at all; there fore quite another purpose than being great! Ah yes, unsubduable granite, piercing far and wide into the Heavens; yet in the clefts of it fountains, green beautiful valleys with flowers! A right Spiritual Hero and Prophet; once more, a true Son of Nature and Fact, for whom these centuries, and many that are to come yet, will be thankful to Heaven.⁵²

Not content with portraying Luther as a mere champion of piety, Carlyle understood the Reformer to have inaugurated a higher form of human society. Democracy itself—the American and French Revolutions “lay there” in the Diet of Worms “in germ.”⁵³ In this way, Luther was the first, and therefore the archetypal, modern man.

Inspired by Carlyle’s portrayal of Luther, the American transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson imagined the Reformer as the “Poet Prophet” who brought forth a new world. In this romantic vision, Emerson completely discounted Luther’s theology (altogether “Jewish” and pre-modern, in his view). Instead, he emphasized the

Reformer's imagination, spirit, and character. Conscience and conviction, according to Emerson, required Luther to face the Diet of Worms.⁵⁴ The genius of the Reformer led to a new "spiritual revolution by spiritual arms alone." This fact by itself would make Luther historically significant, but Emerson perceived a deeper import to the Reformer's worldview. Luther commanded a "perfect self-reliance . . . fearless in the face of enemies," tempered by soundness in both "head and heart." This unique combination of intellectual ferocity with love for family and neighbor made him "a sort of Adam, one of that class of standard men in which the unsophisticated humanity seems ever and anon to be reproduced in its first simplicity, as model and leader of new generations."⁵⁵ Luther was a "fountain of strength," with no hint of self-division between his convictions and actions. In an "earnest age," he was "the most earnest man." He was an enraged and noble Poet "who did not write his visions in sonnets, but believed them, spoke them, and acted them, persuaded vast multitudes and many nations of their truth; and by the force of private thoughts (with an impulse that is yet far from being exhausted), he shook to the centre, not only the Ecclesiastical empire, but, as all religious Revolutions must, the whole fabric of tyranny in the world."⁵⁶ Although Emerson thought Luther to be entirely misguided in his theological convictions, he credited him and his actions with recreating human society with these impulses of self-reliance and human affection. As Carlyle and Emerson show, the weight of the "here I stand" moment was by no means exclusive to evangelical interpretations as a victory of the Protestant gospel over Catholic impiety.

Emerson's Luther found further literary expression in Hannah Farnham Lee's *Life and Times of Martin Luther* (1839). Lee was a Unitarian author, whose several books on the Reformation intimately connected the plight of early Protestants to a contemporary vision of the United States as a Protestant republic.⁵⁷ Like Emerson, Lee highlighted the non-doctrinal contributions of the Reformer. Although sometimes touted as the first American biography of Luther, *Life and Times* was more anti-Catholic novel than historical account. In her telling, Luther's epochal greatness was evident to all around him. He was the universal man, perfectly balanced in his intellect and

affections, wisdom and piety. This perfection made Worms a tragic affair. The great man Luther, like Christ before him, was going to his certain death. As the poor monk shuffled through the crowds to face his judges, the throngs surround him in awe of his bravery, wisdom, and courage: "Never was there a human being more defenceless and unprotected . . . Never was a man who had warmer friends and more bitter enemies . . . History records no event more remarkable than this, that a poor, excommunicated monk should be thus received." Confident in his conviction, the monk declares "Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise, may God help me! amen." When his friends hear of the Emperor's plot to kill him (and the Reformer's subsequent kidnapping), "the streets and houses of Wittenberg were filled with wailing."⁵⁸ Even if Lee's Luther is religious (and very anti-Catholic), his universal appeal lies in his quiet and firm demeanor, capable of the greatest emotional bonds and intellectual pursuits. She portrays Wittenberg as an intellectual and egalitarian paradise. Luther is the paragon of romanticism: thoughtful, sublime, kind, and good-humored. As these examples from Lee, Emerson, and Carlyle show, the skeptical descendants of Gibbon and Hume had found their champion and a kind of genesis for the modern world at Worms.

Conclusion

By no means ubiquitous, the "here I stand" translation dominated writings on Luther in the British and American press after 1840.⁵⁹ "Here I stand" became a compelling aspect of the Reformer's biography precisely because its implications could be adapted for various kinds of universal meanings. Disregarding the actual historical circumstances of the Diet, Luther could simultaneously be touted as the champion of democracy, evangelical religion, human rights, individualism, free thought, progress, and modernity. As the archetypical warrior against religious, political, and intellectual tyranny of any kind, Luther's appearance at Worms proved a malleable rhetorical weapon.

Although "here I stand" historical narratives could be employed toward different ends, all of these readings served to reinforce a

larger historiography to which both Protestants and free-thinkers could subscribe. In all these narratives, Luther was interpreted as a figure of deep discontinuity with the medieval past. His piety, character, eloquence, and genius are in stark contrast to his Catholic context, making his stand that much more dramatic and poignant. Pinpointing the Diet of Worms as the beginning of modernity or a renewed biblical piety assumes an anti-Catholic notion of progress and historical development. Recent studies from John Lardas Modern and Joan Wallach Scott have underscored the symbiotic relationship between Protestantism and secularism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and a similar dynamic marks the development of “here I stand” historiography.⁶⁰ While differing in the specifics of meaning, the evangelical and secular narratives of “here I stand” mutually reinforced each other’s understanding of the fundamental shape of history, which bent toward an expansion of freedom, conscience, and civilization. In short, once the “here I stand” moment was understood as a generalized genesis of freedom from tyranny, it could then be employed as the beginning of any institution or movement in the English-speaking world. Luther could now take his role as the universal man embodying the ideals of contemporary piety, politics, manners, and virtues. This new meaning for *hier stehe Ich*—reinforced through repetition and largely divorced from the original impulses and motivations of the Reformer—bolstered the myth of Luther as a proto-American or proto-liberal. The “here I stand” translation was instrumental in this process of English-speakers conceiving of a Luther in their own image.

NOTES

1. *Acta et res gestae, D. Martini Lutheri* ([Strasbourg]: Johann Schott, 1521), 12–13.
2. “Acta comparationis Lutheri in Diaeta Wormatiensi,” in *D. Martin Luthers Werke*, Kritische Gesamtausgabe, 57 vols. Eds. J.F.K. Knaake et al. (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883ff.), 7:838.9.
3. Phillipp Melanchthon, *Historia de vita et actis reueren dissimmi uiri D. Martini Lutheri* ([Frankfurt am Main]: Dauiduem Zephelium, 1562), 50.
4. For a recent consideration of Luther’s appearance at Worms, see Theodor Dieter, “Another Quincentennial: The Diet and Edict of Worms (1521),” *Lutheran Quarterly* 35 (2021): 1–17.

5. Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1978); Eric Metaxas, *Martin Luther: The Man Who Rediscovered God and Changed the World* (New York: Penguin, 2017), 218.

6. Hartmut Lehmann, *Martin Luther in the American Imagination*, American Studies, A Monograph Series 63 (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1988); Christine Helmer, *How Luther Became the Reformer* (Louisville, Kent.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019); Thomas Albert Howard, *Remembering the Reformation: An Inquiry into the Meanings of Protestantism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Peter Marshall, *1517: Martin Luther and the Invention of the Reformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

7. Philipp Melanchthon, *A Famous and Godly History* (London: John Awdely, 1561), 66.

8. Johannes Sleidan, *A Famouse Cronicle of oure time, Called Sleidan's Commentaries concerning the state of religion and common wealth, during the raigne of the Emperour Charles the fift*, trans. Ihon Daus (London: Ihon Daye, 1560), 30.

9. On Foxe's reception of Luther, see Lehmann, *American Imagination*, 23.

10. John Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, 4th ed. (London: John Day, 1583), 851.

11. On Foxe's reception in early America, see Heike Jablonski, *John Foxe in America: Discourses of Martyrdom in the Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century United States* (Paderborn: Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh, 2018).

12. Melchior Adam, *The Life and Death of Dr. Martin Luther*, trans. Thomas Hayne (London: I.L. for John Stafford, 1641), 37–38.

13. John Bale, *The Pageant of the Popes*, trans. J. Studley (London, 1574).

14. Patrick Simon, *The Historie of the Church* (London: John Dawson for John Bellamie, 1624), 173; Samuel Clarke, *The Marrow of Ecclesiastical History* (London: T.V., 1654), 234–36; Alexander Petrie, *A Compendious History of the Catholick Church*, vol. 2 (The Hague: Adrian Vlack, 1657), 71; Christopher Ness, *A Compleat and Compendious Church-History* (London: T.H., 1680), 470; Pierre Jurieu, *The History of the Council of Trent* (London: J. Heptinstall, 1684), 8–9.

15. Gilbert Burnet, *History of the Reformation of the Church of England*, vol. 1 (London: T.H. for Richard Chiswell, 1679), 30–32.

16. Entry for “Martin (Luther)” in Louis Moreri, *The Great Historical, Geographical, and Poetical Dictionary* (London: 1694).

17. Peter Bayle, *The Dictionary Historical and Critical of Mr. Peter Bayle* (London: J. Bettenham, 1735), 934–54.

18. Melanchthon, *A Famous and Godly History*, 52.

19. Alec Ryrie has noted that the story was so popular that it became a “mere cliché” in English homiletics. See his “The Afterlife of Lutheran England,” in *Sister Reformations: The Reformation in Germany and In England*, ed. Dorothea Wendebourg (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 217–19. For a representative sample of sermons appealing to this story, see Sampson Price, *Londons Warning by Laodicea's Luke-Warmnesse* (London: T. Snodham, 1613), 31; Robert Bolton, *Instructions for a Right Comforting . . .* (London: Felix Kyngston, 1631), 17; Zachary Boyd, *The Sword of the Lord and of Gideon* (Glasgow: George Anderson, 1643), 64–65; John Sheffield, *The Hypocrites Ladder, or Looking-Glasse* (London: R. I. For Thomas Newberry, 1657), 260; Samuel Willard, *The Child's Portion, or, The Unseen Glory of the Children of God* (Boston: Samuel Green, 1684), 223; A Minister of Christ, *God's Voice to Christendom, or, Alarum to Europe by the Remarkable Earthquakes* (Edinburgh, 1693), 17.

20. Martin Luther, *Contra Henricum Regem Angliae* (Wittenberg, 1522), 39.

21. See William Rainolds, *A Refutation of Sundry Reprehensions . . .* (Paris: 1583), 42; Matthew Kellison, *A Survey of the New Religion* (Rheims: Laurence Kellam, 1603), 67–68; Edward Maihew, *A Treatise of the Groundes of the Old and Newe Religion* (England, 1608), 36; Humphrey Leech, *Dutifull and Respective Considerations upon Foure Severall Heads of Prooffe and Triall in Matters of Religion* (Saint-Omer, UK: English College Press, 1609), 77–78; Lawrence Anderton, *The Progenie of Catholics and Protestants* (Rouen: The Widow of Nicholas Courant, 1633), 5; William Collins, *Missa Triumphans* (Leuven, 1675), 310–11.

22. Thomas Mall, *A Cloud of Witnesses, or, The Sufferers Mirrour . . .* (London: Robert Boulter, 1665), 141.

23. Mall, *Sufferers Mirrour*, 150.

24. See Francis Beaumont, *The Maides Tragedy* (London: Nicholas Okes, 1619), 75; Francis Beaumont, *Phylaster* (London: Thomas Walkley, 1620), 42; J.D. Gent, *The Strange Discovery: A Tragi-Comedy* (London: Edward Griffen, 1640), 86; J.D. Gent, *The Knave in Graine* (London: John Oakes, 1640), 89; Francis Beaumont, *Comedies and Tragedies* (London: Humphrey Robinson, 1647), 8, 43; Leonard Willan, *Astræa, or True Love's Mirror: A Pastoral* (London: R. White, 1651), 7; Henry Killigrew, *Pallantus and Eudroa: A Tragedy* (London: John Hardestry, 1653), 41; Philip Massinger, *Three New Playes* (London: Humphrey Moseley, 1655), 43.

25. William Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” in *The Complete Works*, 2nd ed., eds. Stanley Wells, Gary Taylor, John Jowett, William Montgomery (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 4.3.15–25.

26. Steve Sohmer, “Certain Speculations on *Hamlet*, the Calendar, and Martin Luther,” *Early Modern Literary Studies* 2, no. 1 (1996): 1–51; Tibor Fabiny, “The ‘Strange Acts of God’: The Hermeneutics of Concealment and Revelation in Luther and Shakespeare,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 45, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 44–54; Risto Saarinen, “Luther the Urban Legend,” in *The Global Luther: A Theologian for Modern Times*, ed. Christine Helmer (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 18–22; Edward T. Oakes, SJ, “*Hamlet* and the Reformation: The Prince of Denmark as ‘Young Man Luther,’” *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 13, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 53–78; Eamon Duffy, *Saints, Sacrilege and Sediton: Religion and Conflict in the Tudor Reformations* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), 233–53; Brigid Brady, “Allusions to Wittenberg, the Four Last Things, and the Character of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark,” in *Literature of Luther: Reception of the Reformer*, ed. A. Edward Wesley and J. Christopher Edwards (Eugene, Oreg.: Pickwick, 2014), 174–81; Lee Oser, “Free Will in *Hamlet*?: Shakespeare’s Struggle with the Issues of the Great Debate between Erasmus and Luther,” *Christianity & Literature* 67, no. 2 (March 2018): 253–67.

27. William Shakespeare, “The First Part of the Contention of the Two Famous Houses of York and Lancaster,” in *Complete Works*, 5.3.24–27; Shakespeare, “The True Tragedy of Richard Duke of York and the Good King Henry the Sixth,” in *Complete Works*, 2.2.95–97.

28. Shakespeare, “1 Henry IV,” in *Complete Works*, 2.5.442–44. For an interpretation of Falstaff as a focal point for Shakespeare’s reckoning with the fall of British Catholicism, see Joshua Avery, “Falstaff’s Conscience and Protestant Thought in Shakespeare’s second Henriad,” *Renaissance: Essays on Values in Literature* 65, no. 2 (March 2018): 253–67.

29. Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. 5 (London: W. Strahan, 1781), 536–40. Hume was much less willing to give Luther any credit in the shaping of the modern world, regarding the Reformer as a narcissistic firebrand, hungry for religious authority over his followers. Both the man and his movement were

marked by “vehemence, declamation and a rude eloquence,” rather than with “reason and reflection.” David Hume, *The History of England, From the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688*, vol. 4 (London: T. Cadwell, 1770), 39–42.

30. William Robertson, *History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles V*, vol. 2 (London: W. and W. Strahan, 1769), 121–23.

31. Mark Towsey, *Reading History in Britain and America, c. 1750–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

32. John Lawrence Mosheim, *An Ecclesiastical History, Ancient and Modern*, vol. 4, trans. Archibald Maclaine (London: T. Cadwell, 1790), 55–56.

33. See Maclaine’s footnote in Mosheim, *Ecclesiastical History*, vol. 4, 57–58; on Mosheim’s veneration of Luther, see Lehmann, *American Imagination*, 94–98.

34. “The Life of Martin Luther,” *The Arminian Magazine* 1, no. 4 (April 1778): 173. Replicated and paraphrased in “The Life of Philip Melancthon,” *Magazine of the Wesleyan Methodist Church* 20 (1797): 504. “He concluded by pronouncing these memorable words: ‘Here I stand: I can do no otherwise: God help me! Amen.’ Persisting in this answer, he withdrew. How wonderful are the energies of the human mind when under the powerful influence of the Holy Spirit!”

35. Joseph and Isaac Milner, *The History of the Church of Christ*, vol. 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1809), 540. On the importance of Milner’s *History* for American readings of Luther, see Lehmann, *American Imagination*, 44–46.

36. Ernest Lewis Hazelius, *Life of Dr. Martin Luther: Together with Extracts of His Writings on Several Religious Subjects* (New York: James Oram, 1813), 68–69; Joseph Priestley, *A General History of the Christian Church, From the Fall of the Western Empire to the Present Time*, vol. 2 (Northumberland, Penn.: Andrew Kennedy, 1802), 204–19.

37. “Here I stand, it is impossible for me to act otherwise.” Alexander Bower, *The Life of Luther, With an Account of the Early Progress of the Reformation* (London: P. Baldwin, 1813), 166; “He added these German words, ‘Hier stene [sic] ich; ich kan nicht anders: Gott helfe mir! Amen.’ That is, Here I stand: I can do no otherwise: God help me! Amen.” Richard Reece, *Compendius Martyrology*, vol. 2 (London: Thomas Cordeux, 1813), 20; “Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. May God help me. Amen.” Joseph and Isaac Milner, *The History of the Church of Christ, from the Days of the Apostles, to the year 1551*, ed. Jesse Townsend (Utica, N.Y.: Camp, Merrell & Camp, 1816), 529. For the enduring popularity of Milner, see Paul Gutacker, “Joseph Milner and His Editors: Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Evangelicals and the Christian Past,” *Ecclesiastical History* 69, no. 1 (2018): 86–124.

38. Rebecca Eaton, *An Abridgment of Milner’s Church History for the Use of Schools and Private Families* (Andover, Mass.: Flagg and Gould, 1817), 250–52.

39. Frederick Christian Schaffer, “*The Blessed Reformation*”: *A Sermon Preached in St. Paul’s Church, In the City of New York, On the 31st of October, 1817* (New York: Kirk & Mercier, 1817), 25. Emphasis in original. For the Reformation Jubilee in America, see Lehmann, *American Imagination*, 78–81; Howard, *Remembering the Reformation*, 56–57.

40. “We revert to a new era, which, three hundred years ago, dawned upon the world. To this day even its effulgence beams, whenever religious light and liberty exist . . . we behold the conquest of the true “Rights of Man” over diabolical intolerance . . . The Spiritual blessings, the moral light, the *religious* and *political liberty* which WE so eminently enjoy . . . may be traced to the day which on this occasion we are assembled to celebrate,—as the harbinger of such great advantages, as the precursor of such inestimable blessings.” Schaeffer, *Blessed Reformation*, 6–8.

41. Schaeffer, *Blessed Reformation*, 35. Emphasis in original.
42. Ezra Stiles, "Article X.," *The Quarterly Theological Review* 1, no. 3 (July 1818): 439.
43. "Here I stand, I cannot act otherwise: so help me God, Amen." David Frederick Schaeffer, *Historical Address Commemorative of the Blessed Reformation, Commenced by Dr. Martin Luther on the 31st October, A. D. 1517* (Fredericktown, Mary.: Wm. B. Burke, 1818), 14; "HERE I STAND, I CANNOT DO OTHERWISE. GOD HELP ME. AMEN." Gottlieb Shober, *A Comprehensive Account of the Rise and Progress of the Blessed Reformation of the Christian Church* (Baltimore, Mary.: Schaeffer & Maund, 1818), 50–51; "Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise, so help me God! Amen!" John Frederick William Tischer, *The Life, Deeds and Opinions of Dr. Martin Luther*, trans. John Kortz (Hudson, N.Y.: Samuel W. Clark, 1818), 34.
44. Title page of John William Beschter, "*The Blessed Reformation*": *Martin Luther, Portrayed by Himself, contrasted with Martin Luther, Portrayed by the Rev. Messrs. Shoeffers* (Philadelphia: Bernard Dornin, 1818).
45. Beschter, *Blessed Reformation*, 94.
46. For an analysis of Merle's contribution to historical study of the Reformation, see John B. Roney, *The Inside of History: Jean Henri Merle d'Aubigné and Romantic Historiography* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996); Lehmann, *American Imagination*, 53.
47. J.H. Merle d'Aubigné, *History of the Great Reformation in the Sixteenth Century* (London: Ward, Lock, & Co., 1835), 441.
48. J.H. Merle d'Aubigné, *History of the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century*, vol. 2, [trans. Henry White] (New York: Robert Carter, 1842), 236.
49. J.H. Merle d'Aubigné, *History of the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century*, vol. 2, trans. Henry White (New York: Robert Carter, 1847), 249. Compare with the "here I stand" translation in the Scottish edition, J.H. Merle d'Aubigne, *History of the Reformation in the Sixteenth Century*, vol. 1, trans. David Dundas Scott (Glasgow: Blackie and Sons, 1846), 623.
50. D'Aubigné, *History of the Reformation*, vol. 2, (New York: Robert Carter, 1847), 249.
51. J.H. Merle d'Aubigné, *History of the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century*, vol. 2, trans. Henry White (New York: American Tract Society, 1850).
52. Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1840), 131.
53. Carlyle, *On Heroes*, 124–25. Carlyle's rendering of "here stand I" is unique and stems from his 1831 article on Luther's hymn *A Mighty Fortress*. Carlyle believed that the hymn had been conceived by the reformer in the midst of Worms, and therefore he took a more lyrical approach in translating Luther's line, making it rhyme: "Here stand I, I cannot otherwise." See Thomas Carlyle, "Luther's Psalm," in *Carlyle's Complete Works: Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, vol. 2, (Boston: Estes and Lauriat, 1885), 109–10.
54. Citing Carlyle's poetic rendering, Emerson translated the end of the speech as "Here stand I, I cannot otherwise." Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Martin Luther," in *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 1, 1833–1836, ed. Stephen E. Whicher and Robert E. Spiller (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959), 125–26. For a consideration of Emerson's reception of Luther, see Lehmann, *American Imagination*, 66–69.
55. Emerson, "Martin Luther," 136–38.
56. Emerson, "Martin Luther," 140–41.
57. On Lee's historical fiction, see Nina Baym, *American Women Writers and the Work of History, 1790–1860* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 55.
58. Hannah Farnham Lee, *The Life and Times of Martin Luther* (Boston: Hilliard, Gray, and Company, 1839), 110–15.

59. See Gustavus Pfizer, *Life of Luther*, trans. T.S. Williams (London: For the Society, 1840), 56; Enoch Pond, *Morning of the Reformation* (Philadelphia: American Sunday-School Union, 1842); Moritz Meurer, *The Life of Martin Luther: Related from Original Authorities* (New York: H. Ludwig & Co., 1848), 200; the frontispiece for Barnas Sears, *Luther: His Mental and Spiritual History* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1842); Reuben Weiser, *Luther by a Lutheran; or, a Full-Length Portrait of Doctor Martin Luther* (Baltimore: Publication Houses, 1848) [Baltimore, Mary.: T. Newton Kurtz, 1853]; John Bachman, *A Defense of Luther and the Reformation* (Charleston, S.C.: William Y. Paxton, 1853), 123, 274; Rev. S. Ritz, *A Dialogue: Luther and the Reformation; the Doctrines and Government; the Origin and Present State of the Lutheran Church in America* (Mansfield, Ohio: Western Branch Book Concern of Wesleyan Methodist Connection of America, 1854), 118; Heinrich Gelzer, *The Life of Martin Luther, and the Reformation in Germany* (Philadelphia: Lindsay & Blakiston, 1854), 29; Charles Hare, *Vindication of Luther against his recent English assailants* (London: John W. Parker and Son, 1855), 128–29.

60. John Lardas Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Joan Wallach Scott, *Sex and Secularism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 43–51.

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