

A Widower's Lament: The Pious Meditations of Johann Christoph Oelhafen. Translated by Ronald K. Rittgers. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2021. 318 pp.

“O living God and consoler of all the sad-hearted, I have lost my most beloved treasure on earth, for you have torn away a piece of my heart” (57). With these heart-wrenching words, Johann Christoph Oelhafen (1574-1631) begins his *Pious Meditations*, a personal journal of lament recording his year-long journey (1619-1620) through the grief and anguish caused by the death of Anna Maria, his beloved wife of eighteen years and the mother of his eight children. The loss of “my dear AMICO” (122) – the pet name he gave his wife, made up of their joint initials – left him “a sad and miserable widower” (57) and his children as “poor orphans” (59).

History books often speak broadly of trends, controversies, and developments. Stories of individuals, if they are included, are often told from a distance. That is not the case here. Here one encounters in first person rhetoric a man from four hundred years ago from Nuremberg revealing his heart with haunting candor as he cries out to God in prayerful sorrow, despair, repentance, faith, and hope. The entries vary widely. Some appear measured, while others are obviously marked by raw emotion. Johann Christoph was a rather skillful song writer and several entries are hymns composed of multiple verses addressing God. In one poignant entry, on the day of their wedding anniversary, he composed a song with the verses arranged in the form of a dialogue with his precious AMICO in heaven: “[Verse 1:] AMICO, beloved darling, where have you gone? ...Speak or cry out, and help me lessen my heart's sorrow. [Verse 2:] In this world, ICO, you shall not find me...for I am, praise God, without pain, in the hall of joy; so now let your worry completely pass away.” (124)

Rittgers' translation of Johann Christoph's *Pious Meditations* is much more than a mere devotional for those today confronted by personal tragedy and sorrow. Indeed, it is rare to find a book like this that can be used for personal devotions (as this reviewer did), while at the same time serving as an invaluable primary source for academic research into early modern lay

spirituality in the midst of suffering. In this regard, it is an important complement to Rittgers' earlier work *The Reformation of Suffering: Pastoral Theology and Lay Piety in Late Medieval and Early Modern Germany* (Oxford University Press, 2012). This is no mere translation. Yes, Rittgers has prepared a fluent translation that maintains the flow and rhythm (and color!) of the original text. But he has also prefaced it with a well-researched introduction including copious annotations situating the work within the wider context of current research on early modern "piety theology" (*Frömmigkeitstheologie*), consolation literature, the *ars moriendi*, evangelical lament literature, Lutheran funeral sermons, the Protestant duty of self-consolation, the place of self-narratives in historiography, an intriguing possible connection to the *Unio Christiana* brotherhood (an evangelical revival group found in surrounding cities), and much more. Useful translation notes are located conveniently at the end of each journal entry, including specific dates, biblical references, translation conundrums, possible interpretations, and connections and allusions to existing hymns, songs, poems, and liturgical ordinances.

While studies of seventeenth-century Lutheranism have grown in recent years, a dire need persists for "micro-historical narratives" to clarify, adjust, and augment the existing and, at times, less than accurate "macro-historical narrative" of this time. This book does precisely that. It is an exceedingly rare and valuable find precisely because it allows a glimpse into lay spirituality. Although surely not a common villager, Johann Christoph was also not an academic theologian, like Johann Gerhard, who wrote copious volumes of *loci theologici*, nor was he a pastor, like Johann Arndt, exhorting his parishioners toward pious faithfulness. His is a lay perspective, and yet his *Pious Meditations* are exceedingly rich with Reformation theology, deeply rooted in Luther's evangelical re-discovery, and closely connected to the sacraments. This challenges any notion of a wide separation or discrepancy between academic theology and

pastoral exhortation, on the one hand, and lay spirituality, on the other. They were more closely aligned than we might imagine.

Rittgers has made accessible a document that serves as an invitation to explore further the relation between seventeenth-century academic theology, pastoral care, lay spirituality, personal faith, and Christian lament and, perhaps, to discover that these enduring questions are just as relevant today as they were four centuries ago.

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