



# Argula von Grumbach

PETER MATHESON describes the story of Argula von Grumbach, Protestantism's first woman reformer.

**D**on't be put off by the obscure name. Argeluse was one of the noble ladies of King Arthur's Round Table and our Bavarian noblewoman, Argula, was named after her. Argula von Grumbach (1492–ca 1554) grew up in a whirl of chivalric jousting and story-telling in the beautiful rolling countryside around the proud castle of her ancestors, the Ehrenfels, or "rock of honour", now an impressive ruin in the romantic little village of Beratzhausen. I've attended Mass in the lovely baroque church, there. On the western wall is an impressive monument to her grandfather, Johann von Stauff. History is palpable at every corner.

In the Otago University Library there's an illustrated page from the magnificent Koberger Bible, which was presented to Argula as a 10-

year-old by her father, Bernhardin. It reminds us of the skill of early printers, and that German translations of the Bible circulated in Germany long before Luther appeared.

## Early Life

Young Argula's university, so to speak, was the glittering Munich Court, where she learned to hold her own with the high and mighty of her world. Here, too, she became a superb wordsmith, as we will see. She was educated alongside the future princes of Bavaria.

In 1510 she married Fritz (as he was called) von Grumbach, and moved to the tiny village of Lenting, which has just commissioned a statue to her. These were rough, tough times. It wasn't a great match, but her parents had both died of the plague, and after civil war her once prestigious family was in financial toils. Her uncle, Jerome, was even beheaded for alleged treason — a put-up job! But she held her head high.

As a young mother of four she ran the household, got some order into the chaotic finances, and rode side-

saddle around the distant estates of her incompetent husband, organising the spring sowing and the autumn harvest and wine-making. We have fascinating lists of the foods and spices and clothes she ordered for the kitchen and household.

She also built up an impressive network of friends, many of them women. She was to need that support.

## Influenced by Reformers

In the early 1520s she became part of a little group of lay people and nuns who began sharing and reading Luther's pamphlets. Her brothers, too, had links with the Saxon court and with a Lutheran noble Bohemian family. The University of Ingolstadt, on the Danube, was just two hours walk from her little village of Lenting. (I know this, because I've walked there through the grain fields.) Argula knew a young student at the University who had been to Wittenberg. He was arrested by the University authorities for spreading Lutheran ideas and then tried for heresy. Under huge pressure, he recanted. That was nothing very unusual or surprising.

What was utterly surprising was Argula's reaction. She was so outraged at this repression — "shaking in my

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whole body”, as she put it — that she, a mere woman, challenged the Ingolstadt professors to a public debate about the legitimacy of their actions.

“I have no Latin,” she wrote, “but you have German.” Did Jesus go about persecuting those who disagreed with him, she asked? Of course, women at this time had no access at all to universities — and far less the right to debate with learned professors.

### Taking a Courageous Stand

Within a few months her biblically-based protest letter had appeared in print in 17 editions, being reprinted up and down Germany. Uproar resulted. Her husband, a ducal administrator, was dismissed from office. Argula herself was threatened with being walled up in a tower, or having her fingers chopped off — even with death.

But many hailed her as a prophetic figure. “This is scarcely credible,” one supporter wrote, “something very rare for the female sex, and completely unheard of in our times.” Six other writings flowed from her pen within a year, calling for reform not only of the Church, but of the legal system, of education and of the loose sexual mores of the nobility.

### Argula Rediscovered

I got onto Argula by accident. While researching for something different, I stumbled on a poem she wrote to refute lewd attacks on her, and was so fascinated that I dropped everything else and eventually published a translation of all of her writings. Later I produced a critical edition of her works and wrote biographies of her in English and German, based on an usually rich collection of her family papers.

My personal Bible is dotted with marks to show her countless quotations from the prophets and the Gospels. I now read the Scriptures, so to speak, with her eyes.

I guess what fascinated me initially was Argula’s courage. “I am compelled,” she said, *gezwungen*, to speak up. As a baptised Christian she felt she had no choice. She had to confess her faith, whatever the cost. “I cannot and I will not cease to speak at home and in the street.”

But I soon noticed that she read the Bible in a new way, with a woman’s eye, and obviously her insight fascinated the thousands of readers who read her little pamphlets. Her theological mentor, Osiander, also published a writing of the Abbess, Hildegard of Bingen. Argula became a vocal advocate of reform in the German parliaments, or Reichstage, in Nuremberg and then in the famous gathering in Augsburg in 1530.

This was quite extraordinary, of course, at a time when women were supposed to keep to their house and kitchen. Luther himself met Argula and wrote a personal dedication of his little printed book of prayers to her. Finding this copy and holding it in my hands was one of my greatest thrills as a historian.

### Living With Sorrow

Increasingly, though, I became aware of the tragic dimensions in Argula’s life. Her husband, Fritz, died young

and her second husband died shortly after their marriage in Prague. She fought a losing battle against the hard-drinking and violent mores of the German nobility at the time.

Despite getting the best possible teachers for her children, including her daughter, Apollonia, her eldest son got into a feud and died young; her second son was murdered; and Apollonia died early too. There is a moving letter about Apollonia’s lengthy illness. Of her four children only Gottfried survived her.

My wonderful Catholic colleague in Bavaria, Elisabeth Spitzenberger, has discovered recently in the archives heart-rending material about the family quarrels (nothing to do with religion) which forced Argula in her extreme old age, already mortally ill, out of her family home. It was a brutal time.

### Remembering Argula Today

Argula’s, then, is no glossy success story. Yet her memory was preserved by a thin line of witnesses down the centuries, and now schools and hostels are named after her. There is even an Argula von Grumbach bicycle tour around the little villages in which she lived.

She is honoured not only for her courage, but for her critique of censorship and for her biblical insight. As she wrote: “Ah, but what a joy it is when the Spirit of God teaches us and gives us understanding, flitting from one text to the next.” How astonished she would be that she is now remembered in distant New Zealand. ■

Medallion: Argula von Grumbach by Hans Schwarz ([www.heiligenlexikon.de/BiographienA/Argula\\_von\\_Grumbach.html](http://www.heiligenlexikon.de/BiographienA/Argula_von_Grumbach.html)) [Wikimedia]

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