

An Analysis of the Historical
Accuracy and Discrepancy of
John Osborne's play, Luther

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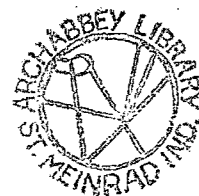


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PREFACE

During several years of studying history and the theater, I became interested in the effect that plays and literature have on our knowledge of history. I became interested in the question: Can accurate historical knowledge be conveyed through drama? In an effort to understand history and the theater more clearly, I decided to investigate historical accuracy and discrepancy in theatrical productions. Being interested in Reformation history, in particular, the study of Martin Luther and his effects on the world, I wanted to know how this man who changed the course of Western Civilization appears to the twentieth-century playwright. It was this interest which lead me to investigate John Osborne's dramatic work, Luther. The production of Luther has gained worldwide respect as one of the most provocative plays of our time. The question which arises is: "Does the Luther portrayed in this play accord with and do justice to the Luther of history?" I feel that this question is answered quite accurately in this thesis. I have separated it into three chapters, each covering one of the acts in the play. I have also shown that Osborne's work is accurate historically. There are only a few minor discrepancies in this play, and the reason behind those discrepancies are explained in the following chapters. In each chapter I have taken the historical event, place, time and actual quotations of speeches which Osborne uses to achieve his dramatic statement and I have shown these to be accurate historically according to leading historians of Martin Luther and the

Reformation.

In the first chapter, I give a brief introduction of Luther, so that the reader may fully understand the events in Luther's later life which were stimulated by his childhood. Chapter two and three cover all the events Osborne presents to his reader. Chapter two discusses the market place in Juterbog, where Tetzel is selling his indulgences in 1517, and the steps of the castle church where Luther nailed up his ninety-five theses. This chapter also deals with the climax of his break with Rome - the burning of the canon law books at the Elster Gate in Wittenberg, 1520. Chapter three is mostly concerned with the Diet of Worms, 1521. It also deals briefly with the remaining years of Luther's life. The years that dealt with his writings, etc., are not dramatized by Osborne. Concerning the many events in Luther's life which are not covered by Osborne, I mention only those events which pertain to, and give background knowledge of, the events which Osborne describes to his reader.

It is hoped that this thesis will show to its reader how Martin Luther is portrayed in a play, and how this portrayal accords with and does justice to the Luther of History.

CHAPTER I

John Osborne begins his controversial play, Luther, at the Cloister Chapel of the Eremites of St. Augustine - Martin Luther is being received into their order in 1505. As the play opens, the reader is left with a sense of not knowing who this man Martin Luther really was at this time. To understand the emotional achievement that John Osborne is creating in this play, a brief historical sketch of Luther's life is necessary.

Martin Luther was born late at night, more towards midnight, on 10 November 1483. The birth took place in a small village called Eisleben in Saxony, on the outskirts of the Thuringian Forest. Martin Luther was the second son of Hans and Margaret Luder. Hans Luder was a man who has faced poverty all of his life. He was still experiencing the dreadful hand of poverty at Martin's birth. At this time he decided to try his luck as a copper miner.

...Martin's father moved to the town of Mansfeld and, it is thought, worked for a time as an employed miner in one of the coppermines. This was not certain. But we do know that within seven years, not later than 1491, Hans had taken a lease of one of the foundries, along with a partner, the capital for this having been advanced by a local copper merchant. Hans was also by then a shareholder in one of the small firms founded to mine copper.

Mining was the backbone of Saxony. These German communities were the heart of a growing industry. This industry could bring a man from rags to riches. Mining, with the right man involved in its financial operations, enabled the local community to be solely independent from the Elector of Saxony in government

offices. Thus the owners and operators of mines become the influential men of Germany. This is what Hans Luder became for Mansfeld. To all of Saxony, Hans Luder was known as the man who owned the land he mined. "He had a large house in the main street, where his coat of arms still adorns the front door."²

Martin Luther's primary education was that of any child in Mansfeld, attending the local Latin School. At the age of fourteen, young Martin set out for a school in the city of Magdeburg. This school was conducted by the Brethren of the Common Life. After spending a year in this school, Martin set out to the Academy at Eisenach.³ The interesting aspect of Martin's primary education was the fact that he only attended schools whose tuitions and living expenses demanded more from one's father than just bare minimum wages. These were schools that enabled the students to live as well as one's father was living.⁴

Spending most of his school years away from home, Martin developed a strained relationship with his mother and father. Osborne shows this bitterness between Martin and his parents near the end of Act One. He points out to the reader the overwhelming sense of insecurity that Martin had during his childhood and continued to have till his death. A noted historian attributes this insecurity to an incident in Luther's life when his mother beat him brutally for stealing a nut. She beat him so brutally that she drew blood. This same historian refers to a beating, given by Martin's father, for which Martin held a grudge against his father until "his father managed to accustom me to him again."⁵

Biographers of Luther refer to the fact that he experienced a sense of injustice being done to him constantly throughout his life, even while in the monastery. It is quite evident that Luther was constantly undergoing, and suffering from, the struggles and pains of obedience and injustice stemming from his parental relationships.

Hans Luder in all his more basic characteristics belonged to the narrow, suspicious, primitive religious, catastrophie-minded people. He was determined to join the growing class of burghers, masters, and town fathers. But there is always a lag in education. Hans beat into Martin what was characteristic of his own past, even while he meant to prepare him for a future better than his own present. This conflictedness of Martin's early education, which was in and between him when he entered the world of school and college, corresponded to the conflicts inherent in the ideological historical universe which lay around and ahead of him. The Theological problems which he tackled as a young adult of course reflected the peculiarly tenacious problem of the domestic relationship to his own father.

Martin Luther thus grew up and led the religious life his parents had formulated for him from their past, one of rigid Catholicism. This included Mass as often as possible, never missing on Sundays and Holydays, weekly confession, regular reception of communion, private prayer and devotions, and so forth. This forced religious life and particular events in his later growing years, shaped and molded Martin Luther's theological thinking during his years of rebellion.

The events in Luther's formative years that shaped his "avant garde" teachings and beliefs were his frightening experiences and devoted belief in the teaching of rewards and punishment after death. This was based solely on a good and/or bad.

life on earth.⁷ Nevertheless young man Luther lead the typical life of any Catholic; happily celebrating Christmas, Easter, days of the saints and always combining the human aspects of festivals along with the memory of a past religious event.

The belief in devils and demons was a most contributing influence on Luther's behavior and beliefs. In Luther's words:

Many regions are inhabited by devils. Prussia is full of them, and Lapland of witches. In my native country on the top of a high mountain called the Pubelsberg is a lake into which if a stone is thrown a tempest will arise over the whole region because the waters are the abode of captive demons.⁸

In addition to his strong belief in superstition, young man Luther was deeply influenced by the Augustine theology which basically is; to believe is to understand and to understand is to believe. The contrary teaching of the time was that of Thomas Aquinas who taught that understanding was one of argument, counter-argument, then a conclusion or solution to the question. Luther found trouble in accepting the Thomist theology.

He found himself opposed to the Thomist school on its loss of the Augustinian doctrine of sin and grace...on its teaching of the doctrine of transubstantiation based not on biblical categories but on a heathen philosophy of substance and accidents, and also on its papalism.⁹

This is undoubtedly Luther's misinterpretation of Catholic doctrine of the time. A misinterpretation based solely on his study of Occamism, thus leading Luther to his formulation of the "work-righteousness" concept of salvation in his later life.

Martin Luther matriculated at the University of Erfurt at the age of eighteen. Looking back over his university years,

Luther saw himself among the favored few, a man who was cheerful and funloving to his peers, hard working and deeply religious to his superiors. He saw himself as a very disciplined and controlled individual throughout those years (1501-1505) conscientiously forming himself into a strong and dedicated student. In this way he was unconsciously preparing himself to eventually be a dedicated student of theology. In the year 1505, Martin Luther received his Bachelor of Arts degree in Trivium--grammar, rhetoric and dialectic.¹⁰

Martin Luther with all the past and present influences of society, parents, education and religious fever of the time upon him, saw his only escape, only release from all of this to be his joining a religious order--the Augustinian order. This order was well respected as being a fine organization and with strong commitment to a religious way of life. Most of all, it was among the least corrupted organization in the Church in the middle ages.

It is now feasible to study Luther according to John Osborne. Luther is being received into the order of the Eremites of St. Augustine. Luther is kneeling in front of the Prior of the order in the presence of the whole house. Osborne sets the scene by having the prior call Luther forth, asking him to choose between two ways of life--one of the world, or one of the religious. Then the prior very seriously goes over to Luther and begins to invest him and presents him with the garb of the order. Martin, kneeling before the prior with his hands on the statute

of the order, swears his oath to God and the priory.

The happenings in these pages of Osborne's text are extremely accurate historically, almost to the extent of having the exact wording of the prior's prayer and Luther's vow. Joseph Lortz, with whom most historians are in agreement as to the wording of the vow and the pronouncement made by the prior, shows that there is no major difference in Osborne's text.¹¹

After the vow is taken by Luther, Osborne introduces two men, Hans and Lucas, a companion of Hans. These two men are attending the ceremony. They watch as Martin marches in procession out of the chapel. The conversation between these two men gives sufficient information to inform the reader that Hans is the father of Luther and does not approve of his son entering into a monastery. Historically there is no evidence of this event. The conversation is merely a literary technique to convey to the reader historically correct thoughts and attitudes of extreme bitterness and regrets that are felt by Hans Luder. Historians agree that the first recognition of Martin's being in the monastery by his father was on July 18th or 19th, 1505: "A day or two later came an angry letter came from Luther's father cutting him off from all paternal grace and favour."¹²

Osborne provides various settings which may or may not be historically accurate. The thoughts and ideas that are expressed in the play are accurate in so far as the message they give to the reader concerning Luther's attitudes. The following are examples of such events. The occurrence is dinner time, and there

is table reading throughout the entire meal. (This is a practice common to most monasteries even today.) Martin and a fellow brother are stacking the dishes on the tables. Then all the monks prostrate themselves and begin a communal confession. The monks are confessing the usual run of trivia, such as coming late to Night Office, making mistakes in the Oratory, etc. Osborne now has Martin begin to reveal himself to the world. Osborne is expressing to the reader, in Luther's confessions, his problem of sexual frustration. Luther is confessing dreams of being naked and riding on goats, and the goats drinking of his blood. In another dream he saw himself with a group of men and women all laying on top of each other. Osborne points out, in yet another confession of Luther's, his strong belief that these dreams are sinful. He has Martin confessing to a dream in which he was doing penance by cleaning the latrines.¹³

In confession for example, he was so meticulous in the attempt to be truthful that he spelled out every intention as well as every deed; he splintered relatively acceptable purities into smaller and smaller impurities; he reported temptations in historical sequence, starting back in childhood, and after having confessed for hours, would ask for special⁴ appointments in order to correct previous statements.

John Osborne passes through time in Luther's life to a year later at the same convent. The magnificent event of Luther's life occurs in this scene; it is Luther's First Mass. Osborne uses Act One scene two not only to introduce the event of Luther's First Mass, but to introduce a new character concept about this man called Martin Luther. Osborne is explaining to the reader the idea that Luther believed he was being wrathed by

God. Osborne gives to the reader no account of the Mass itself. Historians claim that during the reading of the Gospel, which was about the people who are possessed, Luther shouted "I am the man" and then collapsed. Luther's father, present for this celebration and witnessing this extraordinary event, was even more convinced now that Martins' being a monk was not Martin's real vocation in life.¹⁵

Osborne takes advantage by using the whole scene to describe a non historical event to the reader. This non historical scene begins with a short monologue that Martin has concerning his own childhood, a procession of monks pass his cell. Brother Weinand, Martin's spiritual director, stops in to get Martin. The procession continues, leaving Brother Weinand and Martin behind. This whole scene is based on Martin's sincerity about the sins he confesses. Brother Weinand tries to explain that his brother monks do not believe Martin's confessions, "imaginary sins" as they are referred to. Luther in this conversation is expressing his sudden disturbance at the realization that no one believes that he has committed the sins he confesses. In addition to this unusual problem is the real fact that Luther believes that God is not forgiving his sins, due to the fact that he cannot feel penitence. Brother Weinand spends the rest of the entire scene explaining the validity of the forgiveness of sins as is exemplified in the Apostles' Creed.

Besides the Bible, the young novice joyfully saturated his mind with the writings of St. Bernard and St. Bonaventure, those profound and sympathetic teachers of the Middle Ages. His spiritual director understood how

to comfort and guide the novice, who at times showed a lack of courage. Long afterwards, Luther remembered how the good man spoke to him of the remission of sins and occasionally called his attention to the fact that the articles of faith on the remissiv peccatorum must be set up against all scruples.¹⁶

At the very end of the scene, Osborne has Luther enter carrying a naked child and stand still on stage. This was not an historical event. Osborne makes use of this strictly as a literary and theatrical device, symbolizing Luther's childhood as the baby, and that now he has found himself.

In Act One scene two Osborne presents an unusual trait of Martin Luther, namely a combination of the physical and psychological aspects of the man Martin Luther. Osborne in this scene shows the reader the continual problem of constipation that was unceasingly plaguing Luther. Martin Luther's experience with constipation was his way of expressing some aspect of his childhood and cultured upbringing. Most historians can not explain exactly why Luther had these reoccurring episodes with his bowel movement except that,

This magical ambivalence is much aggravated in some cultures and classes by particular emphasis on bowel and bladder training. Such training obviously reveals magical superstitions about these primitive functions. The horror of the evacuated substance is eventually replaced by anxiety over the possible consequences for an individual's later character and performance should he not achieve early and complete mastery of his sphincters.¹⁷

Act One scene three occurs on the same day as his first Mass. Hans Luther and Lucas are present, chatting with the monks and drinking wine. Osborne reproduces for the reader the actual confrontation of Hans Luther and the superiors of the monastery.

The argument is provoked when Hans asks Brother Weinand what sort of monk Martin is. Hans, wanting to hear some discouraging statements about Martin, was totally frustrated by only hearing praises of his son. Hans, at the point of feeling the influence of wine, begins to attack the universal church and monasteries.

Martin enters the refectory, and Lucas tries to give the impression that Martin's father and the monks have been enjoying themselves immensely. Hans squelches that idea quickly by insinuating that Martin looks sickly, undoubtedly due to monastic life. Hans and Martin carry on a conversation concerning their family life in a very business-like manner. Direct contact begins when Hans insinuates that Martin "flunked" a part during the Mass, the part concerning "Receive, oh Holy Father, almighty and eternal God, this spotless host..."¹⁸. Luther faints and Brother Weinand had to hold him up. The monks at this point have left the refectory. Martin tries to explain the occurrence at Mass by expressing to his father the manner in which the words of that passage moved him emotionally. Martin, quoting scripture back to his father in total defense of his life as a monk, brought only scripture quotes from his father in retaliation: "Thou shalt honour thy mother and thy father." But an historian claims:

After Mass there was a meal, which naturally had a certain festive character to it, and it must have been dominated by the presence of Hans Luder, and his rather numerous companions from the home town...Martin began to talk and turned to the occasion which was the origin of his decision to enter the monastery, his vow at Stotternheim. His father interrupted, 'Let's hope it wasn't an illusion of the devil'--it was typically ham-handed, poking rough and ready German fun at his son... his father had never liked being answered back and was

roused to verbal irritation and pomposity quoting the ten commandments...¹⁹

The conversation from this point on involves Martin and Hans blaming each other for the present condition and circumstances that Martin is involved in and with, namely monastic life.

Martin, wanting to apologize for any disappointments of his past life, expresses his memories of seeing and hearing his father, and the strong feeling of wanting to love his father the best.

"It was always you I wanted: I wanted your love more than anyone's."²⁰ He goes on to explain that he loves him, his father, more than his mother. Osborne has Martin telling his father of the time when his mother beat him for stealing a nut. Luther is trying to use these beatings by his mother as an expression of his greater love for his father, as well as a reason for joining the monastery.²¹ Martin could not really hate his father, while at the same time Hans could not let himself get involved or even close to his own son. "They had a mutual and deep investment in each other which neither of them could or would abandon, although neither of them was able to bring it to any kind of fruition."²²

Presently, Hans Luther departs from the refectory, leaving Martin standing alone holding a glass of wine. From this point forward in his life Luther is left in his own changing world. Luther's life is changing from secular to spiritual. He is ready to give his life to God as a monk and to realize that this life of a religious will be a long and hard struggle. Luther is to find himself "soon indulged in a further contrariness by trying

to be a better monk than the monks."²³

CHAPTER II

Juterborg, 1517. One can hear the loud playing of music, bells ringing, crowds milling in the town square and a procession marching through with banners waving briskly in the wind, thus announcing the arrival of a Dominican, an inquisitor, a vendor of holy indulgences. This is John Tetzel.

Thus John Osborne very briefly and accurately presents to his reader the real John Tetzel. He devotes the entire Act Two scene one to describing all the characteristics and mannerisms of Tetzel. He has Tetzel in the town square in full ecclesiastical regalia, standing in front of a very interested crowd. The pope's coat of arms is displayed close by. Osborne portrays Tetzel as a fast talking, quick change artist. The sort of man that one finds operating the booths at county fairs and carnivals. This particular setting that Osborne uses to introduce Tetzel may not be an actual historical event, but most historians will not deny that this was probably the manner in which Tetzel conducted his daily business. What is historically questioned is Tetzel's phrase: "As soon as your money rattles in the box and the cash bell rings, the soul flies out of purgatory and sings!"²⁴ For this particular phrase historians agree that,

It cannot be proved that he used the famous saw which has been attributed to him 'As soon as money in the casket rings--The soul its flight from Purgatory wings,' but in substance his words approximated the proverb.²⁵

For Martin Luther, it can be seen that John Tetzel became the straw that broke the camel's back. He stimulated Luther to write about and preach against the selling of indulgences.

In Act Two scene two, Osborne takes the reader into the Eremite cloister in Wittenberg. The setting is out in the garden, and under a pear tree is Johann Von Staupitz, Vicar General of the Augustian Order. Osborne portrays him as a quiet, gentle-voiced man, middle aged, and devoutly contemplative. In this scene Osborne is conveying to the reader Luther's most disturbing thoughts about life and about Tetzel, by expressing them to a man whom he can trust and confide in, Johann Von Staupitz. Once again this event that Osborne has described probably did not occur as he presents it to the reader. Osborne is also presenting Luther's thoughts and beliefs concerning Tetzel to the reader, thus setting the scene for the presentation of his ninety-five theses. In this scene Luther is explaining to Staupitz his difficulty with following the Rule. Here again Osborne is re-emphasizing Luther's problem with spirituality. Luther's use of the Rule as a security blanket is clearly brought out in the conversation between these two men. Luther conveys to Staupitz a concept that later on in Luther's life will be one of his dominant theses: "Work alone doesn't save mankind. Faith comes first." The opening conversation between these two men is Osborne's means of re-emphasizing to the reader what historians consider to be a primary factor in Luther's life:

He was utterly thrown upon himself--struggling without any secondary objective for salvation--alone with his own conscience in the sight of God--driven on until in danger of spiritual annihilation.²⁶

Osborne now has Luther explaining to Staupitz his grave concern over Tetzel, and what Tetzel is doing to the image of the

church. Luther explains to Staupitz that one day a man was brought to him whose wife had died. Luther asked the man if he had a Mass said for the repose of her soul. Naturally the man replied no, because he had purchased a letter of indulgence from Tetzel. If a Mass was necessary, then his wife has been swindled by the pope who issued the indulgence.²⁷

This particular event in history, which Osborne expands greatly upon in a theatrical sense, is what historians record as an event in which,

When preaching in Juterborg, Tetzel was inundated with people from the neighboring town of Wittenberg in the electorate of Saxony where, because of political and fiscal enmity with Brandenburg, the indulgence was not permitted to be preached. Luther came up against the matter in the confessional. He got to know about the instruction summaria. What a contrast he saw to the terrible struggle against sin and hell...²⁸

Also, in the entire scene between Luther and Staupitz, Osborne is conveying to the reader Luther's deep need for a father image, by having Luther say such lines as "That's what my father says" and "How is it you always manage to comfort me".²⁹ Luther, undoubtedly suffering from having what some historians considered to be a lack of a father, was now in his later years looking for a substitute. Staupitz seemed to fill this void for Luther.

Staupitz of course, did not even vaguely anticipate the extent of the holocaust he was helping to kindle; and it is fascinating to speculate why this older man was so specifically reassuring to a younger one whom he did not really understand. It is my impression that Staupitz, like many an all too comfortable German patrician, felt a nostalgia for a creativity which he may have thought he possessed in his own late adolescence, and for potentialities, now bemoaned, which had been sacrificed to the role of church politician and statesman. He may thus have enjoyed fathering something truly religious

in Luther; while Luther, in turn, responded with a complete and tenacious father transference of a positive kind,³⁰ often overestimating the depth of his superior's wit.

In Act Two scene three Osborne presents to the reader Luther's well known historic event--the nailing up of his ninety-five theses. The scene opens at the steps of the Castle Church, Wittenberg, 31 October, 1517. Osborne has a young child, dirty, half-naked sitting on the steps.³¹ Again, as mentioned in chapter one, the reoccurrence of this baby is not an historical event; it is merely Osborne's means of symbolizing Luther's childhood. Martin Luther enters carrying a long roll of paper which is his ninety-five theses. Luther proceeds up the steps, stops, and watches this child. The child, noticing that someone is watching him, slowly gets up and skips away.

Luther walks up to the pulpit and begins reading to the people the Epistle of Paul to the Romans.³² After the reading of the Epistle Osborne has Luther delivering a sermon. This event is not recorded, nor is there any written copy of this sermon.

Osborne, by having Luther deliver a sermon, is expressing to the reader the sentiments that are in Luther, that which stimulated his writing of the ninety-five theses. John Osborne uses this event to display a sense of fanfare, hero making and so forth. Historians contend just the opposite had occurred on the eve of All Saints,

Luther's reaction was to produce his well-known ninety-five theses in Latin 'on the power of indulgences'. Following the custom of the age, he fixed these to the door of the castle chapel, and challenged the scholars to a disputation. Without any dramatic design on Luther's

part this took place on 31 October, the vigil of the patronal feast³³ of the collegiate church of All Saints in Wittenberg.

The Fugger Palace in Augsburg is the setting for Act Two scene four. In this scene Osborne expresses quite accurately Luther's confrontation with Thomas De Vio, known as Cajetan, Cardinal of San Sisto, General of the Dominican Order, as well as being papal legate, and Rome's representative in Germany. The scene opens with Tetzel talking to Cajetan. If this conversation actually occurred before the meeting of Luther and Cajetan, historians have no record of its occurrence. Osborne develops this meeting to express to the reader the unfavorable sentiments of the Dominicans towards Martin Luther. "Meanwhile the Dominicans were by no means idle. They exalted Tetzel by giving him a doctorate, and espoused his cause, at the same time pressing the charges against Luther in Rome."³⁴ In the meeting of Luther and Cajetan, Osborne portrays Luther as a brilliant young man with an innocent spirit within him. Cajetan being the very cold, hard, ruler, the man from the political machine in Rome. This scene is accurate historically in what Cajetan was asking Luther to do-- retract only two of his theses, the one denying merits that can be gained by Christ, and the other concerning the "Resolutionist".³⁵

The only known discrepancy in this scene is the portrayal of characters. Historians believe that Cajetan was not totally an unkind and cold man.

Despite all his kindness and determined earnestness, Cardinal Cajetan's efforts proved futile. Luther

manifested arrogance and offensive obstinacy. Dismissed with the threat of excommunication, he announced to the Cardinal that he would appeal from his tribunal to the Pope, who would be more correctly informed.³⁶

In Act Two scene five Osborne extravagantly informs the reader of the misconceptions the Pope has about Luther. It is unknown to historians whether or not this scene actually occurred in a hunting lodge at Magliana in Northern Italy during the year 1519. What is historically correct in this scene is the fact that the Pope had pressed hard to prove Luther heretical, and that Miltitz was trying desperately to reach some sort of compromise. Historians all agree that "Miltitz was kind of 'reductio ad absurdum' of compromise and intrigue, for even promoting meetings and agreements by persuading one party that the other had decided to agree."³⁷

A bonfire is blazing on the outside of the Elster Gate in Wittenberg, 1520. So opens Act Two scene six. Osborne is presenting to the reader perhaps one of the most significant events in Luther's life--the burning of Luther's canon law book along with papal constitutions and other works of scholastic theology. Osborne has the scene set with many professors and students taking part of the festivities. Luther stands before his faithful following and addresses a short speech justifying his actions.

Historians are in agreement with Osborne's interpretation of that memorial night at ten o'clock on the tenth of December when the burning took place.³⁸ The only discrepancy among historians and Osborne lies in Luther's justification speech. Historians claim that Luther said:

Since they have burned my books, I burn theirs. The canon law was included because it makes the pope a god on earth. So far I have merely fooled with this business of the pope. All my articles condemned by Antichrist are Christians. Seldom has the pope overcome anyone with Scripture and with reason.⁵⁹

Thus the symbolic break away from merit-theology and of institutionalism was now complete. The Reformation was fully under way.

CHAPTER III

The Diet of Worms, 18 April 1521. A fanfare of massed trumpets blare loudly. The Diet members enter, preceded by a herald. There is the Emperor Charles the Fifth; Aleander, the Papal Nuncio; Ulrich Von Hutten, Knight; the Archbishop of Trier and his secretary, John Von Eck. Luther is seated behind a table upon which are his written works. So opens Act Three scene one in John Osborne's Luther. This is the trial of Luther at the Diet of Worms.

The Diet of Worms can easily be divided historically into five stages. The first stage was a speech against Luther given by Cardinal Aleander, on 18 January 1521, announcing the charges against Luther. The second was a discussion by the princes and the Emperor concerning Luther's attack upon the political and social conditions of Germany. The third part was the appearance of Luther on 18 April, when he was asked to denounce his works. At that point Luther asked for a day to think things over. The fourth stage was the next day, 19 April, when Luther delivered his explanation for his works and presented a most elegant defense of his writing. The fifth stage was the general outcome of the trial; the long and tedious meetings of the hierarchy at Worms about what to do with Luther.⁴⁰

John Osborne presents to the reader only the fourth stage of the trial. Accurately presenting this stage to the reader, Osborne leaves all of the proceeding and subsequent events totally to the reader's imagination. Osborne does aid the reader's

imagination in the following scene (Act III sc. 2) by having a fictitious character reminisce over the trial happenings. But to fully understand and appreciate Osborne's account of the trial, one must have a knowledge of the first three stages of the Diet of Worms.

The excitement of the trial really began on the day Luther arrived in Worms. Surprisingly Osborne makes no mention of this, considering that it was quite a gala fanfare event. One might even compare it to Christ on Palm Sunday.

At ten o'clock on the morning of 16 April, 1521, Luther entered Worms. Excitement grew in the city. Luther's followers were suspicious. Was the fate of Christ himself to be re-enacted in Luther? Luther was to appear in the Reichstag the next afternoon. The crowds were so great that he had to be brought by a detour.⁴¹

For the people of Worms, these days of trial were to be another Mardi Gras, an excuse for a few days of wayward living. Luther, a very devout and sincere man in his beliefs, with enough personal conviction in his own writings, was willing to stand trial and be accused of heresy. No one really felt that what was to come would lead to a real breakaway from the Church. So on 16 April the Mardi Gras began.

It was a humanist who described Worms during the Diet in these words: 'It goes on here quite as in Rome, with murdering, stealing; all the streets are full of whores; there is no Lent here, but jousting, whoring, eating of meat, mutton, pigeons, eggs, milk and cheese, and there are such doings as in the mountain of Dame Venus.'⁴²

With such happenings going on, it is evident that Aleander had a difficult time convincing the people that Luther was guilty of heresy. Aleander did everything in his power to have Luther

known to the world as a heretic before the trial, thus assuring that what had been prejudged as heresy would be officially consummated as heresy through the trial. To ensure such sentiments in the minds of the people, a decree was issued by Aleander to the people of Saxony:

...for the promulgation of a general edict throughout the cities and land of Germany to hand over this same Martin and other heretics supporting him as well as those who further and harbour him and those who follow such perversity, to those punishments decreed against them in our missives, unless they recant. They are to be punished by ordering the rulers of the cities and the governors of thy provinces and all other public servants and officials under punishment which seem to thee appropriate, that it be declared and made known by public proclamation that they would take proceedings against these condemned heretics, his supporters, and all who favour and further the cause, according to the express command of our instructions.⁴³

It is quite clear what Aleander was trying to say to the world by issuing such a warning to the Emperor and the people. Aleander was merely clearing the way for the spiritual, political and social revolution that Europe was to view. On 17 April Luther heard a confession from a knight who was dying. During this confession Luther received word that he was to appear before the Diet at four o'clock.⁴⁴

During the second stage of the trial, the electors, princes and men of the Estates wanted the Emperor to consider the serious abuses that they thought Luther was inflicting upon the Empire. They felt that the blame should also be placed upon Rome. These men felt that Luther's preaching was stirring up serious questions in peoples' minds concerning their spiritual and social conscience. Many of these electors and princes held fast to the

old saying: What the people don't know, won't hurt them. Luther was helping them to know. The Estates, insisting that the Emperor fully understand their position, issued a document stating their position. A segment of that document reads as follows:

The estates of the empire bring all this to the further attention and pleasure of your Imperial Majesty. In doing so we make one final request, in loyalty and obedience: that your Imperial Majesty will of his graciousness bear in mind the nature of the grievances and scandals which now lie upon the Empire and which very largely stem from Rome. And in bearing them in mind, graciously investigate these affairs so that the scandals be taken from us and matters set to rights.⁴⁵

As Luther entered into the trial, it became quite evident that this was going to be a trial of Luther versus the Emperor.

In the third stage of the trial, Luther was granted a hearing. By giving Luther a hearing before the actual trial began, most historians believe that in the minds of these rulers there was doubt whether Luther should end up as most heretics do, and what the effects upon Germany would be if any action were taken upon him.

The most significant thing about the proceedings at Worms was the mere fact that it happened at all, that the empire did not simply take action against the solemnly condemned heretic, but ventilated the question whether action should be taken against him or not, and then gave him a hearing.⁴⁶

It seems that the Diet really had no practical choice but to give Luther a hearing. For they knew that if he wasn't granted a hearing, the people would be aroused to their great annoyance. This was the era when people began expressing themselves publicly about the rights of human beings. Their thoughts could be found

in every intellectual circle throughout Europe. These same thoughts were now emerging into the sphere of the Church.⁴⁷

In his first appearance before the Diet, Luther admitted that he was the author of the books and articles which the Diet presented to him. Johann Von Eck, who presided at the Diet, asked Luther to recant what was written in those books. Luther, probably being prompted by his lawyer, asked the Diet to allow him a day to reconsider. This request for the extra day was probably a way to study the general feelings and temper of the men of the Diet.⁴⁸

The fourth and most significant stage of the trial occurred on 18 April, 1521. The meeting was originally scheduled to begin at 4:00 P.M., but it did not get started until 6:00 P.M.⁴⁹

Osborne has Eck rising and telling Luther that the time has arrived for him to recant his works, that he has had ample time to gather his thoughts and formulate a statement. Osborne presents Luther's reply in a most accurate manner, almost as if Osborne was there to hear the actual speech. In his speech, Luther divides his books into three segments, the first dealing with faith and morality, the second concerning the power and doctrine of the papacy, and the third against certain individuals.⁵⁰

Most historians agree:

In making his reply he divided his books into three groups. The real point at issue was contained in the second group--the books which attacked the power and the doctrine of the papacy. And here, for all his carefully weighed thoughts, Luther became abusive. No other process, no other declaration of the period shows so impressively how far hatred of Rome had gone in Germany, and how much it had become almost officially

taken for granted, as does this section of Luther's address, in which a condemned heretic could dare to speak with such lack of restraint in front of representatives of the whole empire, the secular counterpart of the Church--the emperor and all of the princes, spiritual and temporal.⁵¹

In comparing the text of Luther's speech before the Emperor and the princes at Worms as found in James Atkinson's The Trial of Luther (pp. 153-157) and John Osborne's presentation in Luther (pp. 100-102), the only noticeable difference in the texts is that of slight rewording done by Osborne. This was presumably done for the sake of brevity in the play. But anyone reading these two texts could say the difference was due to the use of various translations, thus only affirming that Osborne's account was historically accurate. When Luther finished his speech, the Emperor and his advisers withdrew for consultation. Upon their return, Eck presents to Luther his official condemnation as a heretic, giving him a last chance to retract his books and the errors found in them. Here again Osborne is in total agreement with the texts as found in James Atkinson's book (pp. 159-161).

Osborne ends his scene with Luther's final reply of his firm stand resting in the Scriptures with the closing phrase: "Here I stand, God help me; I can do no more. Amen."⁵² Whether or not he actually said these words is unknown; they were inserted from an earlier recording of the Wittenberg Account of 1521.⁵³

The events that followed the trial were many. People were in jubilation and in confusion. The Emperor and princes were fearful of rebellion. The Edict of Worms was signed, but it had little effect on Luther or the world. Time was on Luther's side

as the "new world was staring the old world in the face."⁵⁴

John Osborne opens Act Three scene two in Wittenberg, 1525. Four years have passed from the last scene, passing over many crucial and terrifying moments in Luther's life. Osborne makes no mention of the events which occurred in these past 4 years. Thus four years of turmoil had evolved in Europe. Osborne now describes a fictitious event and gives the reader some knowledge of these past few years. The year might be 1525, but Osborne has a knight informing the reader that war was raging over the continent--the Peasant's War.

The knight is alone on the stage, the only reminiscence of life is the bloody remains of a peasant. Osborne uses this knight to represent the conscience of the world. He stands reminiscing about the trial in Worms, the excitement the people felt during those days, and their great love and respect for Luther.⁵⁵

Martin enters on stage and the conversation between the knight and Luther represents the feelings of the people of Germany, and of the world, toward Luther. Osborne uses these two men to express very briefly the sentiments behind the Peasants Revolt and Luther's attitudes towards this movement of the masses. The attitudes and feelings that are being created by Osborne are of historical accuracy, despite the brevity of this scene describing a four year span.

Concerning Osborne's portrayal of the peasants which the knight addresses his opening speech to, it can be said:

They spoke with simplicity and dignity: 'seeing that Christ has redeemed and brought us all with the precious

shedding of his blood, the lowly as well as the great,' they promised each other to retreat only 'if this is explained to us with arguments from the Scripture'-- the divine, the only, constitution...Luther had previously warned of such violence, and did so again in An Earnest Exhortation for all Christians Warning Them Against Insurrection and Rebellion. He emphasized, in measured tones, that 'no insurrection is ever right no matter what the cause...my sympathies are and always will be with those against whom insurrection is made.'⁵⁶

Also Osborne in this scene has Luther revealing his thoughts that Scriptures supports serfdom, that this is God's will, and the people must accept this solely as God's will. This thought and belief of Luther which is revealed to the knight is rejected by the knight, only to become a cause of bewilderment for Protestantism.

He objected to the concept of political and economic freedom; spiritual freedom, he said was quite consistent with serfdom, and serfdom with the Scriptures. This, of course, corresponded to his medieval notions of the estate to which the individual is born; he wished to reform man's prayerful relation to God, not change his earthy estate.⁵⁷

Osborne in this same scene presents to the reader a new and important character--Katherine Von Bora, Luther's bride. The only information Osborne presents to the reader concerning Katherine is given by the knight. The knight informs the reader that she is a nun, and that he does not approve. "All right my friend, stay with your nun then, Marry and stew with your nun. Most of the others have. Stew with her, like a shuddering infant in her bed..."⁵⁸ Since the knight represents the conscience of the world, it doubtful whether he really would have made the above statements. Some historians hold that,

Astonishing changes were smiled on. After Luther had

married, the Archbishop of Mainz sent his wife a present of twenty guldens as a contribution towards the household budget. People recognized that Luther was no mere run-away friar, but an intensely serious and powerful reformer. The manner and timing of his marriage in 1525 was not such as to escape from his vow of celibacy, for the simple purpose of giving rein to sexual impulses; he had been free of ecclesiastical authority for four and a half years.⁵⁹

Osborne ends this scene with the wedding between Luther and Katherine, as the knight stands there and smashes his banner and throws it upon the altar in a sign of rebellion and disapproval.

In the final scene of the play Luther, Osborne brings the reader up to the year 1530 in Wittenberg at the Eremite Cloister.⁶⁰ Luther returns to his starting point. The house which served as the nesting grounds for the thoughts and writing which led to the Reformation is now serving as the fortress of the renewed Christianity, the home of Europe's foremost crusader. Osborne presents to the reader a summation of historical knowledge of Luther after the beginning of the Reformation.

Osborne describes to his reader the pleasant family life Luther shares with Katherine and his first son Hans. In this scene Staupitz is visiting Luther, and the conversation between these two men concerns Luther and his present position in life. Staupitz is questioning Luther as to whether or not he is happy; was he really happy when he lived in the monastery. Staupitz is trying to have Luther admit that he is still torn apart in his beliefs, his principles, that doubt still hangs over his head like a heavy thunder cloud.

That he was able to effect such a volte-face without being stricken in his conscience shows that he did not

feel that he was betraying a principle which he felt to be fundamental. The fact is that Luther facing the full consequences of his oratory, stood before a new crisis which -- and here his constitution helped to determine his symptoms -- brought back his sadness in a new and incongruous context.⁶¹

The scene progresses and Staupitz, now a very old man, shuffles off to bed for the night. Katherine enters carrying Hans and gives their son to Luther reluctantly for fear that Hans will catch cold being down in the study. Luther, holding his sleeping son tightly in his arms, softly speaks to him like a prophet speaking to his people. Luther here is speaking to his own past, words that should have been said to him, words of faith and courage. In his talk to his son, Luther expresses that Hans is like himself, not created by his father, but by God. And that we are anyone's son.⁶²

That Luther could speak as he did of human fatherhood is a comment on the extent to which the ideas of spiritual fatherhood had been absent from the Church. Luther's message was not solely the rather austere theology of justification, but a return to the New Testament themes of the Fatherhood of God, the sending of the Son, and the Son's message of forgiveness and love for all men.⁶³

The scene closes with Luther holding his child and slowly walking off stage, contemplating the words of Christ, "A little while, and you shall see me."⁶⁴

CONCLUSION

"Does the Luther portrayed in this play accord with and do justice to the Luther of history?"

This question can now be answered with a definite YES. John Osborne has shown in Luther that a play can be written and dramatized in such a way that, when presented to the public, it conveys the same basic, accurate, historical knowledge that a basic biography of Luther does.

I have taken Osborne's play, act by act, and shown that the events, times, and historical personages are accurate historically. The criteria I used in judging their accuracy was that of the writings of many noted historians on Martin Luther and of Reformation history. In Chapter I, I presented a brief background of Luther's life, in order to give sufficient background knowledge to events that occurred in Luther's life, which can not be explained when presenting a play. It tried to show what type of man Luther was psychologically and socially. It also showed him entering the convent of the Augustinian Order. And the hard and agonizing times Luther suffered in the first few years of his life as a monk. Chapters Two and Three presented the historical accuracy of the many years, events, and personal happenings in Luther's life which lead to and later caused his formal break from Rome.

From this study, it is clear that the realm of historical knowledge is not limited to the archives or libraries. Accurate historical knowledge can be, and is, presented to people in many

various forms. In this case, it is presented in an entertaining and informative dramatic play.

FOOTNOTES

Chapter I:

¹John M. Todd, Martin Luther (New York: Paulist Press, 1964), p. 3.

²James Atkinson, Martin Luther and the Birth of Protestantism (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1968), p. 18.

³V. H. Green, Luther and the Reformation (New York: W.W. Morton Co., 1962), p. 29.

⁴Todd, loc. cit.

⁵Ibid., p. 8.

⁶Erik H. Erikson, Young Man Luther (New York: W.W. Morton Co., 1962), p. 77.

⁷Todd, op. cit., p. 7.

⁸Ibid., p. 8.

⁹Atkinson, op. cit., p. 39.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 32.

¹¹Joseph Lortz, The Reformation in Germany (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), p. 180.

¹²Todd, op. cit., p. 32.

¹³John Osborne, Luther (New York: Signet Books, 1963), pp. 20-22.

¹⁴Erikson, op. cit., p. 155.

¹⁵Lortz, op. cit., p. 182.

¹⁶Hartmann Grisar, Martin Luther His Life and Work (Maryland: The Newman Press, 1955), p. 44.

¹⁷Erikson, op. cit., p. 247.

¹⁸Osborne, op. cit., p. 45.

¹⁹Todd, op. cit., p. 41.

²⁰Osborne, op. cit., p. 52.

²¹Erikson, op. cit., p. 64.

²²Ibid., p. 65.

²³Ibid., p. 129.

Chapter II:

²⁴Osborne, op. cit., p. 60.

²⁵Grisar, op. cit., p. 92.

²⁶Lortz, op. cit., p. 178.

²⁷Osborne, op. cit., p. 70.

²⁸Lortz, op. cit., p. 227.

²⁹Osborne, op. cit., p. 67.

³⁰Erikson, op. cit., p. 167.

³¹Osborne, op. cit., p. 74.

³²Ibid., p. 74.

³³Lortz, op. cit., p. 228.

³⁴Atkinson, op. cit., p. 163.

³⁵Grisar, op. cit., p. 101.

³⁶Ibid., p. 102.

³⁷Todd, op. cit., p. 164.

³⁸Roland Bainton, Here I Stand, A Life of Martin Luther (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1950), p. 165.

³⁹Ibid., p. 166.

Chapter III:

⁴⁰James Atkinson, The Trial of Luther (New York: Stein and Day, 1971), p. 114.

⁴¹Lortz, op. cit., p. 315.

⁴²Atkinson, Martin Luther and the Birth of Protestantism, p. 200.

⁴³Atkinson, The Trial of Luther, p. 125.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 142.

- ⁴⁵Ibid., p. 134.
- ⁴⁶Lortz, op. cit., p. 315.
- ⁴⁷Ibid., p. 316.
- ⁴⁸Todd, op. cit., p. 191.
- ⁴⁹Ibid., p. 191.
- ⁵⁰Osborne, op. cit., pp. 100-102.
- ⁵¹Lortz, op. cit., p. 317.
- ⁵²Osborne, op. cit., p. 103.
- ⁵³Atkinson, The Trial of Luther, p. 162.
- ⁵⁴Lortz, op. cit., p. 318.
- ⁵⁵Osborne, op. cit., p. 104.
- ⁵⁶Erikson, op. cit., p. 235.
- ⁵⁷Ibid., p. 235.
- ⁵⁸Osborne, op. cit., p. 110.
- ⁵⁹Todd, op. cit., p. 218.
- ⁶⁰Osborne, op. cit., p. 113.
- ⁶¹Erikson, op. cit., p. 238.
- ⁶²Osborne, op. cit., p. 125.
- ⁶³Todd, op. cit., p. 276.
- ⁶⁴Osborne, loc. cit.

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