



Dollhopf

600 Years in the Baking

Dollhopf Women

ADULT THEMES: This is the sixth essay in a series addressing the life and times of our Dollhopf grandmothers.

Sex and Sexuality

Did our grandparents have sex?

Well, I guess so. It doesn't say so in the church books, but we're here.

There has been much written about the intimate details of sex in the Middle Ages, especially among the nobility. You can search online for salacious details.¹

But what was sex and sexuality like for our *peasant* grandmothers?

As described previously, sexuality was defined by the Church – and therefore, frankly, men. Women were considered the “daughters of Eve” – temptresses, far more sexually eager than men. So, men had to put rules in place to curb women's sexual appetites.

Ahem. What was really happening of course was male transference. Which, of course, in many cultures, including our own, continues to this day.

A survey of sermons from the Middle Ages revealed that “women's sexual immorality, their love of extravagant dress, and their petulant nature were common themes.”²



*Franconian **tracht** (“costume,” or “that which is worn”) from Ochsenfurt in 1960. Extravagant costumes and hair, rather than physical beauty, defined a women's sexuality. Photo from <https://angiesweb.com/franconia-tracht>.*

Seen through our 21st century lens, going to church must have been a degrading experience for women. They were not allowed to enter the church until all the men had entered, and then had to sit in silence – only the men were allowed to sing – and on top of that they had to listen to sermons decrying how evil they were.

¹ <https://rosaliegilbert.com/sex.html>

² Joyce E. Salisbury, ed., *Sex in the Middle Ages: A Book of Essays* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1991), 7

In addition to one's clothes – as will be described in the next essay – hair was a marker of beauty. You'll note that nearly all the peasant women in the pictures on this blog appear with head scarves or some other sort of head covering. Revealing one's hair was overtly sexual.

Women displayed their availability for marriage through their hair, which was a great symbol of sexuality in the Middle Ages, as it was kept hidden. Medieval women allowed their hair to grow throughout their lives. Married women would have kept their long hair tied up in braids beneath a head covering of some sort. Single women would allow their hair to fall freely over their bodies signaling that they were available for marriage.³

Our grandmothers in Mistelbach, as in all of Franconia, were especially known for their *flechtschleifenfrisur* ("braided bow hairstyle") – elaborate hair braiding. So celebrated was this fashion that a type of Franconian pastry, known as *hefezopf* ("yeast braid"), is named for these braids.

Beauty and physical attraction, however, rarely entered into the equation for marriage:

Sexuality for the medieval woman began before marriage as a young virgin. It was not necessary for her to be beautiful to be married off because marriage was traditionally based on politics, material wealth, and social status. It would have been intensely disapproved of for a man and woman to marry based on physical attraction or love. When a family made a match for the daughter, choosing a mate based on sexual attraction was never considered. It was very rare to find references to love and beauty in the



A thing of beauty: *flechtschleifenfrisur*, a Franconian "braided bow hairstyle." Photo from <https://angiesweb.com/franconia-tracht>



Hummelbauernzopf ("Hummelgau peasant farmer braided bread") was a specialty of our great grandmothers. It is a yeast bread braided like their hair. Image source: Bakery Lang, Bayreuth.

³ Ibid.

negotiations for marriage between two families.⁴

Physical attraction may not have played a role in marriage, but perhaps it did outside of marriage. Extramarital sex was forbidden, but mostly overlooked. Adultery was officially taboo, but if caught, women were punished, men rarely, a not unexpected double standard. Men wrote the rules.

The act of adultery was considered by far the worst of sexual sins, but it is noteworthy that usually only women would be punished for it. A husband would be forbidden to murder his adulterous wife, but if he did, the courts were reluctant to punish him. Although adultery was a severe sin, a woman had another option and that was of separation from her husband. While divorce did not exist with regards to its forbidden status within the Church, a woman could file for a separation from her husband on the grounds of ill treatment and in many cases was granted the separation.⁵

None of our great grandmothers were divorced, and to my knowledge this occurred rarely, if ever, in Mistelbach. The pressures of serfdom and subsistence farming, not to mention strong religious prohibitions, kept couples together.

Even prostitution was tolerated, although, again, it would be highly unlikely in a small rural village like Mistelbach. It was considered a necessary evil because it was thought that it prevented men from committing greater sins – like defiling reputable women and causing *them* to commit adultery. Or it prevented them from committing sodomy.

Sodomy was defined as *any* type of sex other than the missionary position.

The clergy frequented prostitutes for just such reasons as evidenced by the letters of our distant cousin Johann Tolhopf, a priest and canon of the Regensburg Cathedral in the late 1400s, who complained to his friends that he *also(!)* had contracted the “French disease,” otherwise known as syphilis (see *Blog #19: Coat of Arms*).

Frankly, our grandmothers did not have time for sex – missionary, sodomitic, extramarital, or otherwise. The Church, along with social beliefs and custom, placed restrictions on when sex was permitted.

You were not allowed to have sex on:

- Sundays (52 days/year)
- Sometimes Fridays and Wednesdays (average 52 days/year)
- Feast days of the saints (between 40 to 60 per year in the Middle Ages, let’s call it 50)
- Periods of fasting such as Lent (40 days) or Advent (average 32 days)
- During menstruation (when a woman was considered “impure,” let’s say on average 60 days at most)
- During pregnancy (nine months)
- The first 40 days after giving birth
- While breast feeding (one to two years on average)

Excluding years of pregnancy and nursing, this meant that on average a woman was *not* permitted to have sex 286 days a year, assuming the couple did not cheat. She was allowed to have sex 79 days a year – assuming of course

⁴ Joyce E. Salisbury, ed., *Sex in the Middle Ages: A Book of Essays* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1991), 7. Quoted at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Medieval_female_sexuality.

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Medieval_female_sexuality#cite_note-wars-3

she wasn't exhausted from cutting firewood, cooking, cleaning, caring for children, collecting forage for livestock, threshing, and pulling the plow. Jeesh. It's a wonder they had any kids.⁶

But let's assume that they did set aside time for sex.

When a woman did have sex with her husband, there also existed laws in the bedroom. Sex in the missionary position was the only form of sex deemed acceptable and natural. All other positions and sexual acts were considered sodomy; the charge of sodomy was so serious that it would have been tried in the secular court and possibly been subject to a death sentence.⁷

Of course, the court would need some way to discover and verify this infraction. If you remember the movie "Ryan's Daughter" you would know that that any small village was likely full of tattletales.

Did our grandparents commit sodomy? Well, yeah. Here is an excerpt from an 11th century Confessors Manual written by and for priests:

Have you made a tool or device in the shape of a penis and tied it to your private parts and fornicated with other women with it?

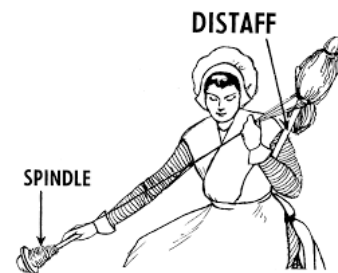
Have you swallowed semen to enhance your husbands desire?⁸

Gee whiz. Should we be surprised at such prurience? Even from the 11th century? This sounds like something a male priest would ask. Not that all of our grandparents were randy, but the fact is, sex that is forbidden is sex that is even more enticing, and our grandparents were human. Of the 15 generations of grandmothers tracked in these essays, at least three committed adultery, conceiving before marriage.⁹ Of course most people today think nothing of premarital sex, but when the church exerted control it was a much bigger deal.

And where was adultery likely to take place? Ahem. Well, some historians report that the church functioned like the back seat of the car. In a small peasant village the church was the only building warm and dry and...no people. Remember, stables were in the house.

Magic and superstition, as one might assume, also found its way into the bedroom. Not having any knowledge of the science of reproduction, peasants adhered to wives' tales.

A famous collection of wives' tales – *Les Evangiles des Quenouilles* ("Gospels of the Distaff") – was published in France in 1480. These so-called gospels, or wives' tales (more like gossip), are shared among a group of women who are "spinning" yarn with spindle and "distaff" – a stick, like a small bat, around which one wraps the unspun fibers before they are fed into the spindle. Although collected and written in France, they were illustrative of peasant superstitions everywhere.¹⁰



Here are some examples of the wives' tales:

⁶ Ruth Evans, ed., *A Cultural History of Sexuality in the Middle Ages* (New York: Berg, 2011), 102.

⁷ Joanne M. Ferraro, *Marriage Wars in Late Renaissance Venice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 91, 85

⁸ <https://rosaliegilbert.com/sex.html>

⁹ There are three that I could verify by matching birth and marriage dates. Before church record keeping it was not possible to verify.

¹⁰ *The Distaff Gospels (Les Evangiles des Quenouilles)*, edited by Fouquart de Cambray, Duval Antoine and Jean d'Arras and published at Bruges by Colart Mansion. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Distaff_Gospels

A young woman who wishes to know the name of her future husband should stretch out the first thread which she has spun that day at her door and then find out the name of the first man to pass by – she can be certain that this will be the name of her husband.¹¹

I tell you in conclusion, as true as we are here together, that if a woman wants her husband or lover to love her passionately, he must put a walnut-tree leaf, picked just before *nones* on Midsummer's night¹² in his left shoe, and for sure, he will love her amazingly.

If a woman wants to be in control and not be beaten by her husband, she must take all his shirts and place them under the altar when the priest celebrates the Passion on Friday. Then she must have him wear one on the following Sunday. Be sure that as long as he wears that shirt, he will be gentle and courteous to his wife.

When a woman lies with her husband and wants to have a boy rather than a girl, she must clench her fists while her husband does nature's work, then for sure she will have a son.

Some experienced midwives maintain that to have a son, one should have intercourse in the morning, and, to have a daughter, in the evening and at night.

If you have your husband turn his face towards the east during intercourse, if you conceive a child, it will be a son.

All manner of aphrodisiacs were considered, including onions (milky white juice), leeks (same), asparagus (phallus shaped), nasturtiums (the seeds resemble testicles)...any plant that had juice that reminded one of bodily secretions, or any plant that was shaped like a sex organ, was considered potent.

Attributing properties to foods and plants in the natural world based on things it reminded one of, was called the **Doctrine of Signatures**.¹³ It was understood that since God had created all



The Distaff Gospels, c. 1480: Women spinning yarn and spinning tales about sex (and everything else).

¹¹ This is probably why so many of our male ancestors are named Johann!

¹² According to the Roman calendar, *nones* was the ninth day before the ides of March, May, July, and October, the fifth day before the ides of the other months. *Midsummer* was the summer solstice, June 23rd, so the date described was (likely) the 10th of June.

¹³ "The doctrine of signatures, dating from the time of Dioscorides and Galen, states that herbs resembling various parts of the body can be used by herbalists to treat ailments of those body parts. A theological justification, as

things, both good and ill, health and disease, then he had put the cures for all ills here on earth with us, we only needed to find them. We would find them, it was thought, by seeing similarities in the physical object and what it was needed to cure.

If a bean looked like a kidney, it stood to reason that it would be helpful medicinally for the kidney. So, in this way, nasturtium seeds, which resembles testicles, would be helpful to augment the sperm and coitus.¹⁴

So, let's assume that our great-grandmothers had sex. What was it like to bear children in medieval times?

Dangerous – for both mother and child. Miscarriages were common and many children died in childbirth or infancy.¹⁵

Roughly a quarter of all known Dollhopf babies (those that were entered into the church records) died in infancy or as young children.¹⁶

Historians estimate that one in three women died in their childbearing years. Our Dollhopf grandmothers fared a bit better: we know that at least three out of 15 of them indeed died at a relatively young age (before the age of 30), although we don't know the exact date of death for six of them, so it is hard to draw conclusions.

It is also estimated that peasant women suffered miscarriages in 30% or more of their pregnancies. This was due to the absence of medical care (or medical care that was based on magic or superstition), poor nutrition, poor hygiene, unsafe sex, disease, and physical exhaustion – women were expected to perform hard physical labor up to the time they gave birth.



Burying The Child by Lilian Lucy Davidson (1893-1954) Although this is a depiction of Irish peasants during the potato famine, it conveys the anguish of peasants anywhere as they bury a newborn.

There was no way to determine if the *in utero* baby was in distress, and no such thing as bed rest for pregnant women. Premies – babies born prematurely at six or seven months – almost always died given the lack of neonatal intensive care that exists today in a modern hospital.

Women probably did not know that they were pregnant until the fourth or fifth month, the so-called “quickening” – the time at which the mother felt the first movement of the fetus. They might not have known because women often experienced a lack of menstruation because of poor nutrition and hard labor.

stated by botanists such as William Coles, was that God would have wanted to show men what plants would be useful for.” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doctrine_of_signatures.

¹⁴ <https://rosaliegilbert.com/sex.html>

¹⁵ Infancy was defined as the time up to when a child could talk, around 18 months.

¹⁶ We don't have birth records before 1555, so the actual number of children who died before then is not known.

Peasant women gave birth in the home, assisted by a midwife or, as often the case in poor rural villages, female family members or neighbors. Not only were men not allowed to be present, but male doctors – if there were any to be found in a rural village – considered it beneath them to assist in childbirth. Of course they probably didn't know what to do anyway.

In the Dollhopf family, home births continued well into the 20th century. Our great grandmother Elizabeth Bender gave birth to 12 babies at home, three of whom died within days or weeks after birth, the last in 1901 when she was 44 years old.

Our grandmother Susan Born gave birth to five at home, the last, LaVerne, in 1931. Susan's older sister Callie Born died as a result of a childbirth in August of 1906. Modern healthcare has made tremendous strides just in the last century.

Midwives had no formal obstetric training. A midwife came prepared with scissors, linens, trays, baskets, and a birthing stool. That's it. Not much to be done in a difficult birth.

A midwife or experienced birther *might* be able to suggest a different position for the mother, either squatting or cradled from behind, and she might have knowledge about how to turn a child if it was not in the right position for delivery, using various oils to be able to manipulate the baby.¹⁷ But other than that, the role of those assisting the mother was to provide comfort and reassurance – and most importantly, prayers.

Imagine – no drugs, no epidurals, no C sections, no Lamaze. Just prayers.

The pain associated with labor and childbirth was thought to be due to Eve's fall in the Garden of Eden. Her original sin meant that all women were to suffer great pain and, without the pain killers that we have available today, many women turned to religion to provide them with the support and relief they greatly desired. There was also the strong possibility that a mother in labor could die, so religion and faith played a hugely important role within the role of childbirth.

Women often clutched holy relics or recited religious prayers and chants to help them throughout the birthing process. Amulets and amber could also be placed upon the mother's stomach, or prayer rolls could be read or even wrapped around the stomach to help with the pain of labor and to aid safe delivery of a baby. Some mothers even clutched pieces of tin or cheese or butter which had charms engraved upon them. The church would have approved of these as they called upon God and that which He had created. Many women called upon St. Margaret, the patron saint of pregnant women and childbirth. St. Margaret was eaten by a dragon but spat out again due to the crucifix she had been holding. It was hoped that babies would be delivered as easily as St. Margaret had come out of the dragon. Although physically



Medieval birthing stool, woodcut from *Der schwangeren Frawen und Hebammen Rosengarte*, ("The Rose Garden of Pregnant Women and Midwives") by the German physician Eucharius Rösslin. First published in 1513 it became a standard midwives manual in Germany. <https://thereader.mitpress>.

¹⁷ Childbirth in Medieval and Tudor Times by Sarah Bryson, The Tudor Society, <https://www.tudorsociety.com/childbirth-in-medieval-and-tudor-times-by-sarah-bryson/>

these things could not have assisted in the birth, the faith and belief that women had in them would have helped them psychologically and could have helped them deal with their fear and worries over childbirth.¹⁸

To medieval peasants, the mysteries of birth were just that. Mysteries. Miscarriages and other complications that could not be explained were blamed on witchcraft and evil hexes. The folklore and beliefs surrounding childbirth – and all other human ailments for that matter – were especially rich in the Mistelbach area, but varied from region to region.

Following are more wives' tales from the Distaff Gospels.¹⁹

When a woman is carrying a child and she wishes to know whether she is carrying a boy or a girl, you should sprinkle salt on her head while she is sleeping, so gently that she is unaware of it. When she wakes, note what name she says first. If she says a man's name it will be a boy and if she says a woman's name it will be a girl.

Young women should never be given hare's heads [rabbit, a common food] to eat for fear they might think about it later, once they are married, especially while they are pregnant; in that case, for sure, their children would have split lips [harelips].

Pregnant women should not be given fish heads to eat for fear that, as a result of their imagination, their children will be born with mouths more turned up and pointed than normal.

To be cured of continuous fever, you must write the first three words of the Our Father on a sage leaf, locally grown, and eat it in the morning. Do this for three days and then you will be cured.



From the Distaff Gospels: if strawberries, cherries, or red wine are thrown in the face of a pregnant woman, the child will have red marks.

Marks on the body of a baby can also result if cherries, strawberries, or red wine are thrown in the face of a pregnant woman.

If it happens that a man beats his pregnant wife or tramples her with his feet, she will deliver with great difficulty, and often she is at risk of losing her life... there is no remedy except that she must get one of the shoes with which the husband trampled on her and drink from that shoe. If she does that, be sure that she will deliver easily.

When a child is born, be careful not to hold or carry it on your left arm first before the baptism or, for certain, the child will be left-handed all his life.

When a child is just born, if it is a boy, he must be brought to his father and his feet placed on his father's chest, then for sure the child will never have a bad death. When a woman has just given birth to a girl, she must be seated on her mother's chest with these words: "May God make you an honorable woman," and then her body will never disgrace her.

¹⁸ Ibid. <https://www.tudorsociety.com/childbirth-in-medieval-and-tudor-times-by-sarah-bryson/>

¹⁹ Advice Concerning Pregnancy and Health in Late Medieval Europe: Peasant Women's Wisdom in The Distaff Gospels Kathleen Garay Madeleine Jeay; <https://www.utpjournals.press/doi/pdf/10.3138/cbmh.24.2.423>

If a pregnant woman wants to know the gender of the child she is bearing, listen to her and she will reveal it herself. When she asks: 'What do you think I am carrying?,' if you say: 'A lovely boy,' and she does not blush, you should know for sure that she will have a girl." If a pregnant woman walks with her right foot first and not the left, she certainly carries a boy – if she does the opposite, she will have a girl.

If a woman wants her husband to love all the children beyond measure, he must take all the children's clear, clean urine and, without his knowledge, have him wash his face and hands in it for nine days: without fail, he will love them beyond measure.

If a pregnant woman steps over the shaft of a cart, if she carries a boy, he will have a very big and stiff member, and if it is a girl, she will have very thick and red lips, below as well as above.²⁰

Given that up to a third of pregnancies ended in a miscarriage or the death of the infant, it is not surprising that a baby had to be baptized immediately, lest it go to hell.

In the village as in castle and city, babies were born at home, their birth attended by midwives. Men were excluded from the lying-in chamber. Literary evidence suggests that the woman in labor assumed a sitting or crouching position. Childbirth was dangerous for both mother and child. The newborn infant was immediately prepared for baptism, lest it die in a state of original sin.

If a priest could not be located in time, someone else must perform the ceremony, a contingency for which water must be kept ready. If the baptizer did not know the formula in Latin, he or she must say it in English or French: "I christen thee in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost. Amen." The words must be said in the right order. If the baptizer said, "In the name of the Son and the Father and the Holy Ghost," the sacrament was invalid. Robert Manning told the story of a midwife who said the wrong words:

"She held it on her lap before,
And when she saw that it would die,
She began loud for to cry."²¹

This, sadly, was a common occurrence – remember, a quarter of our grandmother's babies died within a short period of time after birth.

While abortion was prohibited by the church, it did indeed occur, especially in desperate times of famine. As was noted in an earlier essay, a horrific theme in some fairy tales was infant cannibalism – Hansel and Gretel were placed in the oven to be baked for consumption.

Since a woman "redeemed" herself by procreation, it was not necessarily in her best interest to abort. But desperate times required desperate measures. In the history of Mistelbach we know that there were stretches of *years* when our ancestors had little to eat and famine caused many to perish.

²⁰ There are more wives' tales at <https://www.utpjournals.press/doi/pdf/10.3138/cbmh.24.2.423>

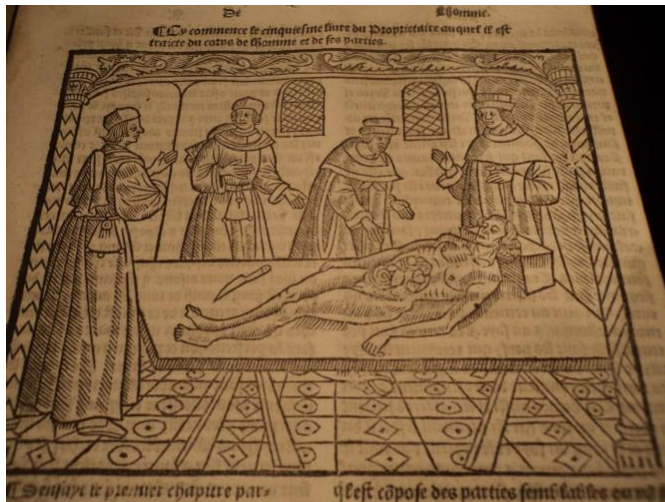
²¹ Life in a Medieval Village (Medieval Life) by Frances Gies, Joseph Gies <http://a.co/16YWyJg>

For similar reason, contraception was practiced, although it is well documented that poor peasant women had relatively few periods because of serial childbirth, breast feeding, poor nutrition, and hard physical labor. Again, there were many wives' tales that covered the subject:

One contraceptive measure recorded by medieval German women is using beeswax and rags to form a physical block. Other popular herbal compounds used rosemary and balsam with or without parsley.

Take a male weasel and let its testicles be removed and let it be released alive. Let the woman carry these testicles with her in her bosom and let her tie them in goose skin or in another skin, and she will not conceive.²²

Although condom use in the West was not practical until the 19th century, as far back as the 16th century it was recommended that men use linen soaked in chemicals and tied around the penis to prevent syphilis – which of course required access to appropriate linen and chemicals, not likely for our peasant grandfathers.



De Proprietatibus Rerum, 1525, a medical encyclopedia by Bartholomeus Anglicus. Characteristic of the superstitions and misconceptions of the time, he described menstrual blood as bad and corrupt, and if it stays in the body too long it causes paralysis and mental disorders. This text was published in Magdeburg, Saxony, about 200 miles north of Mistelbach.

As noted, women's health issues were clouded in mystery, especially, not surprisingly, menstruation:

Like most male medical authorities, the 13th-century writer Bartholomeus Anglicus included female ailments in his encyclopaedic compilation, *De Proprietatibus Rerum*. Citing the seventh-century authority Isidore of Seville, as well as Galen, Anglicus presents less positive aspects of menstruation in his discussion "Of bad and corrupted blood." He pronounces that the *sanguis menstrualis* (menstrual blood), if it stays in the body longer than usual because of an excess of humidity and lack of heat...is the cause of serious diseases such as paralysis of the spiritual members, mental disorders and other illnesses, since that corrupt blood, if held for too long, is spilled in different parts of the body, as Galen says in his *libro passionarum*.

The best cure is to evacuate the corrupted blood that greatly harms the body and changes and infects other bodies... if crops are touched by menstrual blood, they do not grow but dry and shrivel, herbs die, trees lose their fruit, iron gets rusty, bronze and other metals turn black. If a dog eats some of it, he goes mad. Also a thing called *glutinum aspalti* [cement] which is so hard that neither water nor iron nor anything else can damage it, crumbles easily if it is touched by this matter. Isidore says this blood is produced in women's bodies because of an excess of

²² <https://rosaliegilbert.com/sex.html>

moisture and a lack of heat. In order to protect her health, this matter is collected in the womb, like fish in a water channel.²³

Clearly it was seen as a good thing to clear the corrupted blood, but there was so much superstition and mystery surrounding menstruation. As it was considered impure, women were forbidden to have sex during their period. Cramps were seen as God's punishment for the sins of Eve, and there was no known cure, except "burning a toad and wearing the ashes in a pouch around your waist" – that remedy along with a host of other folk "medicines."

Why did our grandmothers endure such uncertainty, pain, and sorrow? The biological urge to reproduce is irresistible, but there was something else at work. Even though procreation was the sole means by which women could redeem themselves, Martin Luther also recognized the joy of sex:

"Kiss and rekiss your wife," Luther wrote. "Let her love and be loved. You are fortunate in having overcome, by an honorable marriage, that celibacy in which one is a prey to devouring fires and to unclean ideas. That unhappy state of a single person, male or female, reveals to me each hour of the day so many horrors, that nothing sounds in my ear as bad as the name of monk or nun or priest. A married life is a paradise, even where all else is wanting."

Inevitably, he found biblical validation for the sporting that goes on between husband and wife. "We are permitted to laugh and have fun with and embrace our wives, whether they are naked or clothed," just as Isaac fondled his wife in Genesis 26:8. (Later he would refer to sex between spouses as precious and beneficial.) And female companionship was an excellent antidote to a man's melancholy. "When you are assailed by gloom, despair or a troubled conscience, you should eat, drink, and talk with others. If you can find help for yourself by thinking of a girl, do so."²⁴

The ultimate joy of sex and having children transcended pain and sorrow, and I hope that in it our grandmothers found meaning and happiness.

Next in the series on Dollhopf women: Clothing.

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²³ "Advice Concerning Pregnancy and Health in Late Medieval Europe: Peasant Women's Wisdom in The Distaff Gospels," Kathleen Garay Madeleine Jeay, <https://www.utpjournals.press/doi/pdf/10.3138/cbmh.24.2.423>

²⁴ James Reston, Jr.; "Luther's Fortress: Martin Luther and His Reformation Under Siege;" https://www.salon.com/2015/05/30/martin_luthers_pro_sex_shocker_does_the_pope_set_up_laws_let_him_set_them_up_for_himself_and_keep_hands_off_my_liberty/