

# The Architecture of Sexuality

## The Customs of the Polish Nobility and its Influence on Architecture During the Early Modern Period

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**Abstract** *This article is dedicated to the question of sexuality and family relations among nobility in Early Modern Poland and their expression in architecture. The author analyses old architectural treatises to find some information about representing the role of men and women, the interpretation of love and customs connected with sexuality in Polish manor houses. The family model in Early Modern Poland differed significantly from the traditional one.*

Sexuality in the old Polish culture, especially of the nobility is still an interesting topic, not only for research. Family patterns have changed, but they are constantly inspiring, because it is an issue close to everyone. It is easy to identify with members of old families, one can understand their needs, emotions, ambitions. A closer look at past families also allows to better define your own position and better understand the relationships between family members in today's world. Importantly – the family, and its most intimate spheres, such as sex and reproduction, were and still are connected to the home, the place where they are present, which creates a safe space for them. It is therefore worth taking a look at how these two concepts – architecture and sexuality – were related to each other in early modern Poland.

Polish architectural writing of this period is quite extensive. Interestingly, these are often practical guides, which were intended to help landowners not so much in erecting a house themselves, but in seeing to its construction, in deciding where to build it, in planning its rooms. Many times these treatises have

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already been described in terms of their architectural achievements, new ideas and construction techniques.<sup>2</sup> What is missing, however, is a look at the house as a living space. Its layout is the realization of the relationships that prevailed in the family, the role that women and men played in the society in the old Polish culture. Already in this period, between the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the 18<sup>th</sup> century, we can observe clear changes in architecture resulting from the transformation of these relationships.

Therefore, the question should be asked, to what extent was the architecture of the Polish manor a reflection of the stereotype of certain sexual behaviors? How were intimate spaces created, above all the common bedroom of the spouses, built far from the main representative rooms. Where were the children's and parents' rooms located, and in what relationships did they remain?

However, in order to properly interpret the meaning of the rooms, it is worth first looking at the concept of love in old Polish Commonwealth culture. Understand how spiritual intimacy was interpreted, on what principles marital relationships were built. The love in early modern times in Poland is an unusual mixture of casual enough customs, vitality and joy of the body, with imposed, resulting from Christian morality, strictures. Unique to Polish culture in the context of Europe at the time was the rather strong intimacy of spouses and the distinct social position of women, especially widows.

## Concept of Love

Sensuality in the Polish Commonwealth is a concept that developed in a state of tension and internal conflict. Catholic teachings exhorted purity, abstinence, and the denial of earthly desires. This approach was not commended solely in Church teachings and sermons, but was also present in lay literature, whose intent to offer clear ethical stances. The culture of 'Sarmatism' was an opposing force, characterized by vitality and expressive displays of emotion and dynamism. Sarmatism viewed traits such as virility, sexual availability and hot temperament as highly positive.

The concept of love in the cultural world of early modern Poland was multifaceted. Many renaissance writers, including the famous Polish poet, '*poeta doctus*' Jan Kochanowski, understood it to mean a strong passion, a 'burning heart', which was distinct and removed from human reason and will, and which was in

2 Małkiewicz, *Architektury*, 1976, p. 13. Cf. Mieszkowski, *Traktatach*, 1970.

itself ground for various choices and attitudes. The Italian ideal of love, which was introduced through poetry and references to the rhetoric of Petrarch, was based on excessive displays of admiration for the other sex; this approach did not take hold in the culture of early modern Poland.

Emotional attachment was described in Old Polish in other terms. It was interpreted to be a feeling more akin to sentimentalism, 'love of the heart', which was tender and affectionate and stemmed from human closeness. It could only exist within the framework of marriage and it could be achieved solely through sacrament.

The word 'miłość', literally meaning 'love', was understood mostly in terms of a sensual experience, Veneris' play or erotic love. The Polish Dictionary of Bogumił Linde written in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century recommends describing other desires as forms of love, for example the love of money, to emphasize a desiring nature.<sup>3</sup> There was widespread agreement that love could take a negative, condemnable shape and could lead to the rejection of social norms.<sup>4</sup> According to Sebastian Klonowicz, a Polish Renaissance poet, love is connected to desire and shameless frenzy which changes into lust and can lead to madness.<sup>5</sup> Early modern Polish culture was filled with impulses and innuendos. Conversation and jokes at the time tended to be much less restrained than they would be in later centuries, and often involved sexual themes. The sharing of lewd pictures and linguistic jokes full of sexual symbolism were common amusements.

## Customs and Sexuality

It is possible that the more upfront approach to sexuality was partly influenced by the dietary customs of the Polish nobility in the early modern period. Excessive consumption of animal protein, and the large number of calories consumed every day, likely led to a heightened libido.<sup>6</sup> Openness towards phys-

3 Kuchowicz, *Miłość staropolska*, 1982, p. 17.

4 *Ibid.* p. 19.

5 *Ibid.*

6 Żyromski, *Nawyki żywieniowe*, 2003, p. 102. While a peasant consumed only 3500 calories a day (including as much as 82% carbohydrates), a nobleman already consumed 5300 calories (78% carbohydrates), and a magnate as much as 6300 calories (only 70% of carbohydrates). The low carbohydrate content of the magnats' diet was due to the fact that they consumed a lot more protein through a meat-based diet, which provided calories, but also contributed to the popularity of many diseases, such as gout.

ical pleasures was also aided by alcohol which was consumed with little restraint. Drunkenness was a particularly masculine vice, and often used to embolden men in their contacts with women. Boredom was yet another reason for engaging in the pleasures of the flesh. The life of the land nobility followed a predictable routine; many journals and diaries from the time emphasize the monotony of life in the country and the limited, sometimes complete lack of entertainment.

It is also worth remembering that in the early modern period, people lived under constant threat of death, be it from natural causes, war, disease, or natural calamities. Sexuality provided a way of escaping the everyday fear connected with death. Because death seemed so inevitable, engaging in marriage was also often rushed. Erotic life in the early modern period was characterized by passion but also by harshness, brusqueness and sometimes even brutality. Eroticism had to be vivid in order to find place in a time when the threat of death was constant.

Another reason was the fear of loneliness – solitary life was not widely accepted. Marriages tended to last only 10–15 years, largely due to the high level of mortality during childbirth. After a spouse died, a new marriage was quickly arranged, sometimes within months, often based on personal choice, in contrast to first marriages which were usually arranged by the couple's parents.<sup>7</sup>

Progeniture – or, extending one's bloodline – was one of the most pressing reasons for wedding early. Wives were expected to be fertile. They were supposed to give birth to sons, who would then continue the works of their forebears. Daughters were not considered desirable because they joined other families and had to be provided with a dowry. Dowries were often a serious financial burden on the father or caretaker of the bride.

## Marriage – Love and Sex

Marriage, therefore, offered a solution to numerous issues connected to sex and sexuality. It allowed the teachings and laws of religion to come into being with human nature itself and human sexual desire. Contemporary norms designated the home as the only place for passions of the flesh. Marriage unified the couple, through loyalty, friendship or deeper romantic feelings.<sup>8</sup> It also uni-

7 Lisak, *Miłość staropolska*, 2011, p. 66.

8 Kuchowicz, *Miłość staropolska*, 1982, p. 45.

fied the couple in a physical sense – Christian teachings saw marriage as the only acceptable way of extinguishing the fires of passion and did not consider sex within marriage as sin. However, even within the confines of marriage, the Church preached restraint, including abstinence on the many holy days of the Christian calendar.<sup>9</sup> Sermons often condemned excessive sexual activity. However, sex was also viewed as an important part of a functioning marriage. Sexual activity was the source of pleasure and a way of satisfying desires, and which later allowed for the realization of other goals and aspirations.

Sex was also considered a cure for many different kinds of illnesses, especially in virtue of the medical teachings of the time, which were based on the idea of the balance of the humors. Sexual intercourse was believed to help calm various phlegmatic or melancholic maladies, and to cure faintness.<sup>10</sup> Married life, or rather – sex – served only people of a certain temperament. People who were “bloodthirsty” or “moist”, those in which these fluids, called, according to the interpretation of the writings of the ancient physician Galen – humors, prevailed. Likability was good primarily for sanguinarians, and was particularly harmful to melancholics.<sup>11</sup> Cold, dry and weak natures were not prepared for love and, it was advised, it was better for such to warm themselves by the stove than by the side of a wife.

Like all medication, it was supposed to be used responsibly and without excess, at the right time and in specific health conditions. Otherwise, intercourse could be harmful for the intestines or could lead to an imbalance of the humors. Jakub Kazimierz Haur, author of early modern encyclopaedias and economic guides for the nobility, advised that intercourse should be done in the morning on an empty stomach, or in the evening a few hours after lunch. Otherwise, too much activity could affect the stomach badly and interfere with digestion. Long rest after intercourse was also recommended, especially for women.<sup>12</sup> This concept of engaging in sexual activity for the sake of health and hygiene grew to be even more important in the Polish Commonwealth in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It was believed that sex would lead to conception only if it was pleasurable and full of passion.<sup>13</sup>

9 Lisak, *Miłość staropolska*, 2011, p. 152–154.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 163.

11 Kuchowicz, *Obyczaje staropolski*, 1975, p. 272.

12 Haur, *Oekonomiey ziemianskiej*, 1693, p. 200.

13 Lisak, *Miłość staropolska*, 2011, p. 163.

## The Family Model in Early Modern Poland

The family model in early modern Poland differed significantly from the model propagated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which now is often referred to as 'traditional'. In the early modern period the husband was not necessarily the only source of income for the family, and the role of the wife was not limited to house chores. We have numerous examples of noblewomen who managed landed estates and had their own servants. This was not in contrast to the wishes of their husbands, but rather met with their full approval. Thanks to the energy and economic talents of their wives, noblemen could engage in what they viewed as more worthwhile duties: war and politics.<sup>14</sup>

Young noblewomen were married off in order for them to start a family, not in order to provide a livelihood. We have numerous surviving accounts of women who made their own decisions about who they would marry, rather than leaving the matter to their parents.<sup>15</sup> The betrothal period would typically be rather short, sometimes limited to just a few weeks if the couple was well matched in terms of social and financial status. Women were eager for the independence granted to them by marriage. The worry that a longer time might reveal faults in the lady's looks or character, also motivated short betrothal periods.<sup>16</sup> The betrothal period later began to expand, and in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries it was not uncommon for it to last for years.

Widowed women had the unique position of being quite independent in early modern Poland. They were free to choose the next candidate for marriage and no one could force them into an arrangement they did not want.<sup>17</sup> Only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century did women lose the role of partners to their husbands and were relegated only to the bringing up of children. Eroticism became only an aspect of procreation.

Despite the fact that there was more balance between the sexes in early modern Poland, social expectations for men and women were very different. Noblemen were allowed to maintain sexual relations outside of marriage, as long as this did not harm family relations<sup>18</sup> (for example in terms of children's

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14 Ibid. p. 131–132.

15 Ibid. p. 73.

16 Ibid. p. 60.

17 Ibid. p. 66.

18 Kuchowicz, Miłośń staropolska, 1982, p. 447.

inheritance). Women on the other hand, were expected to be chaste and modest. Women therefore were supposed to behave in a reserved way and exhibit modesty and bashfulness. Mothers did not teach their daughters anything about sex and the 'duties of marriage' that they would come to face,<sup>19</sup> which meant that women would enter marriage ignorant of their own sexuality and the pleasures and dangers connected with it.

## The Manor House as a Place for Love

The backdrop for the noble family in the Polish Commonwealth was the manor house. Its architecture served to express the cultural norms which outlined the roles of men and women and their relations between each other. The manor was usually a one-storey building with a pitched roof. Architectural theory shows that in the latter half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century there was a clear shift in the style of the architecture of the nobles' dwellings. An example of this shift can be seen in an anonymous work (sometimes attributed to Łukasz Opaliński, royal cavalry marshal) on the building of manors, palaces and castles according to the heavens and the Polish custom (*Krótką nauka budownicza ...*), which was published in 1659, and which is considered to be the earliest normative text on architecture written in Poland.<sup>20</sup> The treatise discusses the specifics of various rooms and the gradation of space within the house. The interior of the manor was divided into the official part, which was a large hall, and the representative dining room, which was the heart of every home in early modern Poland. To accommodate the dining room, Polish manors tended to be highest in the central section.

## Rooms and Apartments

The intimate sphere of the house was composed of specialized rooms and apartments belonging to the Lord and Lady of the house. Their spatial location was supposed to help prevent non-marital sexual relations. The *Krótką nauka budownicza* as well as the appendix from the *Oekonomika*, an economic guide

19 Lisak, Miłośń staropolska, 2011, p. 107.

20 N.N., Dworów, 1659.

written by Jakub Kazimierz Haur in 1679,<sup>21</sup> discuss separate apartments for the different sexes. These were composed of three or four interconnected rooms. The 'antechamber' was a semi-formal room for the reception of guests, came first. This room was also accessible by the servants. Next was the main room, where most social activities took place. Last was the bedroom (the 'retirata'), which functioned as a private room for resting during the day.

This spatial arrangement began to appear quite late in early modern Poland. In Europe it was popular since the Renaissance, but in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth it became a feature of rich households around the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>22</sup> This setup made clear that direction of movement within the house should begin in the ornamental rooms and more towards the more private sections of the house.

The day rooms of the Lady of the house were located near her husband's; the reason for this was, according to a number of treatises, to limit the danger of infidelity. A wife's infidelity was not followed by as dire consequences as in most of Europe, where, betrayed husbands had to duel with lovers or tried other methods of revenge – confiscation of property, public insult. On the other hand, men who had been cheated on by their wives (cuckold husbands) were subjected to widespread ridicule and tended to be the butt of many jokes and humorous poems.

The architecture and layout of noble dwellings made the infidelity of husbands easier. Late-baroque and rococo hunting palaces were usually constructed on a central plan which was referred to as 'molino da vento'. The origin of the word was connected to windmills because the layout resembled the four arms of a windmill. Such palaces were often the sites of romantic rendezvous, with each wing of the palace having a separate alcove. Hunting was considered a pastime appropriate only for men. The hunters, most of whom would have been married, were expected to keep each other's infidelities secret from wives and female companions, though the immodest behaviour of men during such trips was something of an open secret. Because of the cultural norms of this era, women did not treat their husband's romantic exploits seriously.

Another place commonly used for romantic escapades were public baths. We find discussion of the immoral behaviours in bathhouses already in medieval documents, which recommended the separation of the sexes in the baths. However, by the 18<sup>th</sup> century mixed bathhouses were common and were

21 Haur, *Generalna Oekonomika*, 1679.

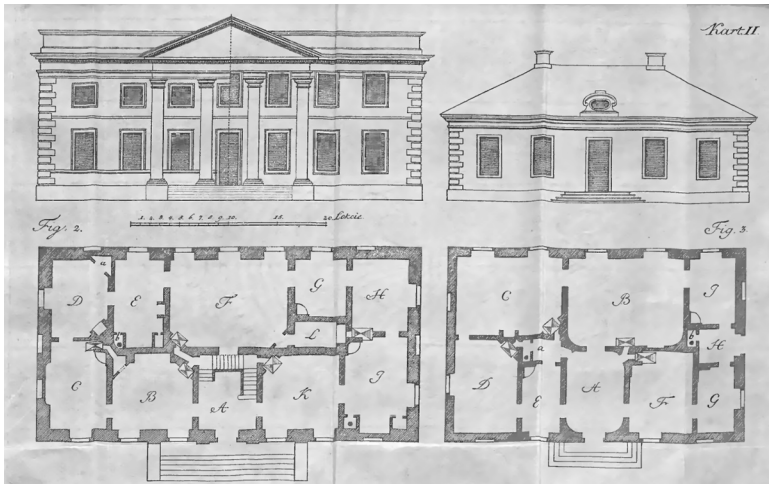
22 Miłobędzki (ed.), *Dworów*, 1957, p. 63–64.



not considered anything out of the ordinary. Their architecture catered to the need for privacy; bathhouses in Warsaw, for example, boasted numerous separate rooms which provided convenient, and intimate, spaces for romantic adventures.<sup>23</sup>

## Together or Separate?

*Fig. 1: Architectural design of two manors, Piotr Świtkowski, Budowanie Wieyskie: Dziedzicom Dobr Y Possessorom toż wszystkim iakążkolwiek zwierzchność po wsiach i miasteczkach mającym Do Uwagi Y Praktyki Podane. Z Figurami, publischer: Michał Gröll, Lwów, Warszawa 1782.*



Let us return to the issue of the noble manor house – despite the relatively relaxed attitude towards husbands' infidelities, a married couple's love-life was considered very important. In early modern Poland it was usual for the husband and wife to share a bedroom, something very unusual in most of Western Europe.<sup>24</sup> The married couple's bedroom would be decorated either using romantic symbolism, or with depiction of naked couples in erotic scenes. Mytho-

23 Lisak, *Miłość staropolska*, 2011, p. 220.

24 Świtała-Cheda, *Pomieszczeń*, 2013, p. 160. Cf. Handley, *Sleep*, 2016.

logical figures such as Venus and Cupid were also common themes seen in decoration. The moral shift following the counter-Reformation forced many a landowner to remove such decorations from their bedroom.<sup>25</sup> Separate bedrooms for the spouses were considered to signal problems within the marriage.

The already-mentioned architectural treatise *Krótką nauka budownicza...* was intended, as the preface announces, to contain illustrations that would help in understanding all the instructions presented there. Unfortunately, these have not survived or were never actually drawn. In contrast, another early modern treatise features plans not only of manors, but also of farm buildings. Piotr Świtkowski's treatise published in 1782 is titled *Budowanie Wieyskie...* (Rural Building) and is intended for heirs and landowners.<sup>26</sup> Plate II shows the facades of two manors – a wealthier one on the left and a poorer one on the right (Fig. 1). On pages 105 to 107 the author of the treatise gives a detailed explanation of the letters that are on the plan. Let's start with the wealthier house. It represents the classic three-tract layout. The main axis is the vestibule (letter A) and the ballroom and dining room (letter F). The left side was designated for the rooms mainly of the lady of the house, but not only. There you can see the common bedroom for the couple – master and lady of the house (letter C) and the wife's daily room with a dressing room and small pharmacy (letter D). From it one could go to the children's room (letter E). On the other side of the axis are the rooms intended for the master of the house. There he has his additional bedroom (letter I), his study with a library (letter H), which, as Świtkowski writes, had to be away from the hustle and bustle, and his living room (letter G). The room marked with the letter K was also the couple's shared bedroom, but a winter one. It was undoubtedly better heated, as evidenced by the stove drawn on the plan.

The layout of the rooms in the poorer manor, depicted by Świtkowski more to the right of the illustration, is different. And in this case, the three-tract layout has been preserved, although not entirely symmetrical. The central part consists of a vestibule (letter A) and the so-called hall – a room for holding ceremonies and a parade dining room (letter B). Of course, it is much smaller than the one in the richer manor. To the right of these are the private rooms of the owners of the manor. They are connected by a common bedroom (letter G). From it you can go to one side to the lady of the house's room (letter F), and

25 Lisak, Miłość staropolska, 2011, p. 161.

26 Świtkowski, *Budowanie Wieyskie*, 1782.

to the other, through the dressing room (letter H), to the master of the house's study (letter I). The children live on the other side of the house (letter D). Their room is adjacent to the big room shared by all, a kind of living room and play-room (letter C), and on the other side to the dressing room and medicine cabinet – small pharmacy (letter E).

As can be seen from both of these plans, the architecture of the manor reinforced the previously described model of family relationships and dependencies in early modern culture in Poland. Also the model related to sexuality and physical contact. The couple used to spend the night together, but were separated by their daily duties and activities. If the house was more opulent, this separation was even more apparent – they both stayed in completely different parts of the house and their daily lives were concentrated there. Women were associated with children, music, play, a dressing room was necessary for them, as well as a medicine cabinet, home pharmacy – a room for storing and making various types of medicines. They dried herbs and cooked infusions there. The men's world, on the other hand, during the day was associated with intellectual work in the library, writing correspondence, managing property, compiling inventory books and records.

The devaluation of the significance of marriage began to take place in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The husband and wife became almost strangers, and marriages became focused on material and social gain.<sup>27</sup> This was made evident in architecture as the bedrooms of the husband and wife were kept separate in this period, usually far away from each other. This allowed the husband and wife to pursue their own independent lives, including separate love lives. Intimacy and sexual relations were not considered an important aspect of marriage during the Enlightenment. Until the 18<sup>th</sup> century good relations between the spouses were manifested through harmonious and enduring sexual relations. A lack of physical intimacy was considered the end of the marriage. On the other hand, in the Enlightenment period husbands would often find influential lovers for their wives, hoping to use these relations to advance their own political careers. Also, noblewomen treated romance as an opportunity to exert influence or create lines of dependence, to pursue their own interests. Finally – it was simply fashionable. A refined lady of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century could not fail to have a lover.<sup>28</sup> In extreme cases the spouses would live in separate houses.<sup>29</sup>

27 Ibid. p. 128.

28 Kuchowicz, *Obyczaje staropolskie*, 1975, p. 300.

29 Lisak, *Miłość staropolska*, 2011, p. 128–129.

In some cases, especially in the houses of the royalty and the upper aristocracy, the living apartments included additional rooms fashionable at the time.<sup>30</sup> These were usually located in the corner sections of the buildings. This meant that the plan of the manor house changed. The chambers located out of reach of the guests of the house were all under women's control. Some of these chambers were highly elegant and stylish. The sitting rooms and children's rooms were associated only with women, as in the early modern period the upbringing of children was considered exclusively the domain of women. Similarly, music was considered a feminine activity. Rooms which were intended to be the location of family concerts were small and tended to be decorated in musical motifs. In early modern Poland, women were the ones who sang or played instruments and would meet in music rooms to play music together, while the husbands, brothers, and the rest of the family and guests could come to listen. Men themselves rarely played musical instruments.<sup>31</sup> A musical education was highly prized for young women, and a desired trait for wives. Young noblewomen therefore were often taught to enjoy music, sharpen their hearing, and play an instrument.

The architectural plan of the manor also allowed sole entry to the 'fraczcymer' (from the German *Frauenzimmer*) from the suites belonging to the Lady of the house.<sup>32</sup> The fraczcymer was where the court women of the Lady's house gathered. The women's court was divided hierarchically into the upper and lower 'fraczcymer'. The upper fraczcymer was the place for the guests of honour and the closest female companions of the Lady of the house, who often came from important noble families. It was also the place of education. The courts of rich women were often quasi-academies for girls and young women from the sphere of influence of the noblewoman. In the lower fraczcymer were the ladies who served the upper-class ladies and the Lady of the house.<sup>33</sup>

Another very fashionable set of rooms, this time associated only with men, were cabinets. These were intended as places where a man could pursue his passions: study, reading, letter writing, and collecting of art, weapons or natural artefacts. These were the first museums in early modern Poland.

However, adding too many such fashionable rooms was criticized by the authors of architectural treatises. It was believed that more than three or four

30 Miłobędzki, *Architektura*, 1980, p. 72.

31 Bogucka, *Białogłowa*, 1998, p. 189.

32 Krótka nauka budownicza, 1659 p. 11.

33 More on the fraczcymer in: Targosz, *Sawantki*, 1997, p. 47.

such rooms were superfluous.<sup>34</sup> The proliferation of such specialized rooms stemmed from the desire of the richer nobility to surround themselves in splendour, not from the need for comfort and practicality which were the cornerstones of architectural theory of this period.

The intimate life of people of early modern Poland was shaped by biology and constrained by the social and cultural norms of this time. Marriage was considered a social duty amongst the nobility and was often connected with material concerns. Architectural theory from this period aimed to express the social norms connected to marriage and procreation in the shape and style of the Polish manor house. The treatises outlined how to construct a home which was both comfortable, and in accordance with contemporary social norms. The treatises were written, and read, by men. It was men who were tasked with the creation of the proper topography for sexual and erotic encounters within the family. Men's role in the shaping, and maintaining, such norms was therefore much more dominant. Architecture became a tool for maintaining the permanence of traditions and customs of early modern Poland. The greatest expression of these traditions was the commonality of the married couple's bedchamber. As was pointed out by the mayor of Kazimierz, near Cracow, in his treatise *Stadło małżeńskie* written in 1561, such a union is "joint body, joint will, joint agreement, joint consent, joint concern and sadness, joint happiness, joint and equal freedom, common loss, common gain, common riches and poverty, equal dignity, and a shared bed for intercourse and rest, a commonality of all issues, works and dangers".<sup>35</sup>

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