

Ludwig Senfl, “The Women with the Fleas” (1530s)

Abstract

This version of the peasant song “The Women with the Fleas” begins as a parody on quarrelsome peasant women and ends with a mockery of the pope. Earlier printed versions of this song date to 1530 but did not include the reference to the pope. Ludwig Senfl (ca. 1490-1543), a Swiss composer and singer, joined the court orchestra of the Habsburg king and future Emperor Maximilian I in 1498 at the age of eight. His mentor was court composer Heinrich Isaac. When the court orchestra was dissolved after Maximilian’s death in 1519, Senfl had to find a new position and in 1523 became court composer for Duke Wilhelm IV of Bavaria in Munich. Around the same time, he began a correspondence with leaders of the Protestant Reformation, including Martin Luther. Although Senfl never became a Protestant, this version of “The Women with the Fleas” may be an expression of his sympathies for the Protestant Reformation.

Source

The women with the fleas
are constantly at war.
They love to threaten life,
would love to slay them all.
That none should nigh escape,
that was the women's plan,
so that they could have peace when spinning,
and in the kitchen be at ease.
The war starts in the morning,
and lasts into the night.
The women do not falter,
and start a mighty fight.
And as the fight progresses,
they would throw off their garb,
at war they stand quite naked,
since they have got to win.
And if I were to hold a golden coin in hand
for every time a woman would reach underneath her garb,
I'd be quite rich a fellow
from oh, such precious toll.
Of golden coins I soon would have
a great big chest brim full.
The Pope, he cannot banish
the monstrous number of fleas,
his ban will never be strong enough
against their hellish fire.
But could he ban those wicked fleas
so they wold stop vexing,
then he could draw a wealth of gold
all from the female sex.

Source: Ludwig Senfl, “Die weyber mit den floehen,” 1530s. Recording: *Hugues Cuenod Sings German Songs of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*. Westminster (XWN 18848), 1959. Internet Archive https://archive.org/details/lp_german-songs-of-the-middle-ages-and-the_hugues-cuenod-hermann-lee_b

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