

A Nobleman Transformed by Education and Travel—Ulrich von Hutten (1518)

Abstract

Perhaps the most famously atypical Imperial knight of his generation, Ulrich von Hutten attended universities in the Holy Roman Empire and Italy, served the emperor in the Italian wars and later as the elector of Mainz, composed many anti-Roman and anticlerical diatribes, and took part in the Knights' Revolt of 1522–23. In this letter to the Nuremberg patrician Willibald Pirckheimer (1470–1530), Hutten complains bitterly about being forced to live in a rural castle—a perfectly normal residence for a Franconian nobleman of his class.

Source

You city people can not only lead peaceful lives but also, if you wish, comfortable ones. Do you believe, however, that I can ever find peace among my fellow knights? And have you forgotten what dangers and provocations men of our estate are subjected to? Don't believe it and don't compare your life with mine! The situation here is such that I would have no peace, even if I possessed the most splendid heritage and could live on my own means. Our days are spent in the fields, in the woods, and in fortified strongholds. We are supported by starveling peasants who barely manage to scratch a living from the fields, vineyards, meadows, and woods they lease from us. Measured against the effort, the yield is meager; and yet we strive and push ourselves to increase it, for we must be very careful managers.

Most of us, moreover, have to put ourselves in a position of dependence on some prince, from whom we hope for protection. If I didn't do this, then everyone would think he could do whatever he wished to me. But when I do do this, this hope [for protection] is linked with danger and fear on a daily basis. For instance, whenever I leave my house I must fear that I will meet people with whom the prince, however important he may be, is in feud or at war, and who would, on account of him, attack me and drag me away. And if my luck is bad, then I lose half my patrimony in ransom, and so I actually end up being threatened by attack when I had only hoped for aid. No wonder we must spend large sums on horses and arms and employ retainers at great expense to ourselves. I cannot travel a mile from my home without putting on armor. I cannot show myself unarmed in any village; I dare not even go hunting or fishing except clad in iron. In addition, frequent disputes or altercations erupt among our tenants, and no day passes without a quarrel that we have to settle with the greatest possible caution. For as soon as I am too aggressive in demanding what is mine or pursuing injustice, there is war. But when I give in too meekly or give away something that is mine, I may find myself at the mercy of everyone else's breaches of the law, for everyone wants to be paid for his injuries out of the possessions of others. And between whom does this happen? Not between strangers, my friend, no, but among neighbors, kinsmen, and dependents, yes, even between brothers. Those are the joys of rural life! This is our peace and quiet.

The castle itself, whether it sits upon a hill or on the plain, is built as a fortress, not as a pleasant dwelling. It is surrounded by walls and ditches, while inside it is narrowed by stalls for livestock and horses. Next to them are dark chambers stuffed with guns, pitch, sulfur, and accessories for weapons and war. The stench of gun powder is everywhere; and then there are the dogs and their shit; that—I have to say—is also a pleasant odor! Knights and retainers come and go, among them thieves and highway robbers, for our houses are open to almost all, for we don't know what sorts of fellows they are, or we don't care to ask. There is a constant din of sheep bleating, cows lowing, dogs barking, the calls of men working in the fields, and the squeaks and creakings of carts and wagons. Even howling of wolves can be heard in our

house, since it lies near the woods.

Each day brings anxiety and nuisance, constant unrest, and continuous activity from morning till night. Fields must be plowed and turned, vineyards tended, trees planted, and meadows watered; one must harrow, sow, manure, and thresh. Now it is harvest time, now grape-picking time. But when there is a bad harvest, as often happens in this poor region, then we have horrible distress and poverty; then there is no end to the anxiety and grinding work. This is the kind of life you call on me to choose over the worthless life at court—as though this life were conducive to studies.

Source of original German text: Ulrich von Hutten to the Nuremberg patrician Willibald Pirckheimer (October 25, 1518), in Arno Borst, ed., *Lebensformen im Mittelalter*. Frankfurt am Main: Propyläen, 1973, pp. 173–75.

Translation: Thomas A. Brady Jr.

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