

Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl on Rural Fiction and Real Peasants (1851)

Abstract

In the following excerpt, folklorist Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl (1832–1897) discusses what he saw as a conspicuous preoccupation with peasants in German novels and asks whether bourgeois writers from educated circles were actually capable of describing the culture and lifestyle of rural peasants. Like Gustav Freytag, who insisted on firsthand observation, Riehl takes issue with the proliferation of sentimental and romanticized accounts of rural life.

Source

[...]

In recent times, the German peasant has become something of a fashion item in *belles-lettres*. Two things might be inferred from this. An inkling of the importance of future political power often announced itself prophetically in literature before practical statesmen understood its value. Thus, one might say that peasants are now knocking about in novels and village stories because the time is approaching when the full weight of their political influence will make itself felt in reality. On the other hand, one could conclude that the gulf separating the educated classes from the peasantry must have become tremendously wide, since the peculiarities of peasant life appear so strangely new that they are used to spice up an already over-seasoned literature. In these village stories (and I include here Berthold Auerbach's), there is a fundamentally false understanding of peasants' emotional life. The peasant is far removed from every sort of modern sentimentality and romanticism. He is made of material much too rough for that; in affairs of the heart he is often quite crude. Family is sacred to the peasant, but one searches in vain to find among the peasantry the sort of delicate love for parents, siblings, and between spouses that we take for granted in the educated classes. Sadly, in the country it is all too rational that, for example, grown children are often impious towards their aging parents, namely when parents reach the age at which they turn over all of their possessions to their children in exchange for the duty of "upkeep," which means care and feeding until death. The reality of this "upkeep" is expressed by the saying, "Better not to get undressed until you are ready to go to sleep." This impiety arises more from emotional simplicity than from corrupted morals.

[...]

Source: Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl, *Die bürgerliche Gesellschaft*. Stuttgart und Tübingen: Verlag der J. G. Cotta'schen Buchhandlung, 1851, pp. 51–52. Available online at:
<https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/en/view/bsb10770513?page=6,7>

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