

Traveling through Germany after Twelve Years in Paris: Heinrich Heine, *Germany: A Winter's Tale* (1844)

Abstract

Heinrich Heine (1797–1856) was one of the most important German poets of the nineteenth century. Still, many refused to consider him a German writer because of his Jewish origin. After he had welcomed France's July Revolution of 1830, he was banned from publishing in the German Federation, and he lived in Paris from 1831 on. His sarcastic commentary on Nikolaus Becker's *Rheinlied* ("You shall not have him, the free German Rhine") stood in firm opposition to nationalist pathos during the so-called Rhine Crisis of 1840, when the French government reclaimed the left bank of the Rhine, which had been ceded to Prussia at the Congress of Vienna.

Source

Chapter 5

And when I came to the long Rhine bridge
right up to the harbor's brink,
I saw the waters of Father Rhine
in the moonlight glitter and blink.

Greetings, greetings, my Father Rhine,
how have you fared these years?
How often, how often I've thought of you
with longing and with tears.

I scarcely had spoken, when far below
emerged an angry groaning,
quite like an old man, clearing his throat,
a grumbling, a weak sort of moaning:

"Welcome, my son, I'm glad to hear
That I haven't been forgotten.
I haven't seen you for thirteen years
And for me those years have been rotten.

"By Biebrich I swallowed stones.
I ask you, what could taste worse?
But heavier in my stomach lies
Nicholas Becker's verse.

"He celebrates me as if I were
a virgin with dew upon her,
who won't allow a man alive

to take her precious honor.

“Whenever I hear it, the stupid song,
I tear my beard and I quiver
for shame and rage, I feel the urge
to drown myself in my river.

“That I’m no virgin, the French know well,
no pure immaculate daughter,
since often into my current, you know,
they’ve poured their victorious water.

“That stupid song and that stupid man!
He’s disgraced me, not idolized.
And, so to speak, to a certain extent
I’m politically compromised.

“For if the French should now come back,
My surface with shame would redden,
I, who so often for their return
Have tearfully prayed to Heaven.

“They’ve always been so dear to me,
The lovable sons of France. —
Do they caper still and sing as of yore?
Do they still wear those white pants?

“I’d really like to see them again,
but their persiflage is too clever.
They’ll rib me about that accursed song
and say I’m disgraced forever.

“And Alfred de Musset, that urchin-bard,
will come at the head of the foe
as a drummer boy, and drum, no doubt,
all of his worst *bons mots*.”

And thus did Father Rhine complain
and it was sad to hear it.
I spoke full many a heartening word
to raise his broken spirit.

Oh never fear, good Father Rhine,
the caustic humor of France.
The French are not the French any more.
They even wear different pants.

Their pants are red, instead of white,

with buttons of new design.
They caper no more nor sing as of yore.
They lower their heads and opine.

They all philosophize and talk
of Hegel, of Fichte, and Kant.
They smoke tobacco, they all drink beer.
Like us, they bowl nine-pins and rant.

They're all Philistines now, like us,
in fact they go farther, for fair;
they're eager to follow Hengstenberg,
they've quite forgotten Voltaire.

Of course, de Musset, that's quite true,
is still an urchin-bard.
But never fear, we'll take his tongue
and fetter it fast and hard.

And if he drum you a bad *bon mot*,
we'll whistle him one out of Hades.
We'll whistle aloud what happened to him
among the lovely ladies.

So be at peace, dear Father Rhine,
from thoughts of bad songs, refrain.
A different, better song you'll hear.
Farewell and *Aufwiedersehen*.

Source of English translation: Heinrich Heine, *Germany. A Winter's Tale*, translated by Herman Salinger. New York: L.B. Fischer, 1944, pp. 22–26.

Source of original German text: Heinrich Heine, *Deutschland. Ein Wintermärchen*. Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1844, pp. 298–303. Available online at:
<https://gutenberg.spiegel.de/buch/deutschland-ein-wintermarchen-383/6>

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