

Heinrich Heine, “The Silesian Weavers” (1844)

Abstract

Heinrich Heine (1797-1856) was one of the most important German poets and journalists of the nineteenth century. By the beginning of the 1830s, Heine had established a reputation as a successful poet both within the German states and throughout the rest of Europe. Nonetheless, he was also regarded as an outsider on account of his Jewish heritage and his criticism of the policies of the German Confederation, and many viewed him with hostility. His political views, and above all the strict censorship of his works, prompted him to leave Germany in 1831 and settle in Paris, where he turned increasingly to journalistic writing. In 1835, what began as emigration ended as exile, when his works were banned in the German Confederation. Heine's ballad “The Silesian Weavers,” which responds to the Weavers’ Revolt of 1844 and describes the social misery of the weavers, is considered an exemplary text for the political poetry of the *Vormärz* period.

Source

In sad eyes there sheds no tear,
They sit at the loom and grind their teeth:
Germany, we weave your shroud;
And into it we weave a threefold curse—
—We weave; we weave.

One curse upon the God to whom we prayed
In Winter's chill and hunger's despair;
In vain did we hope and persevere,
He mocked, hoaxed and ridiculed us—
—We weave; we weave.

A curse upon the king, the rich man's king
Who did naught to soften our misery,
Who pried the last penny from our hands
And had us shot like dogs—
—We weave; we weave.

A curse upon the false fatherland,
Where nothing thrives but disgrace and shame,
Where every flower buckles before its day,
Where rot and mold hasten the worm's work—
—We weave; we weave.

The shuttle flies, the loom creaks,
Assiduously we weave day and night—
Old Germany, we weave your shroud,
We weave into it a three-fold curse,

–We weave; we weave!

Source of the original German text: Heinrich Heine, “Die schlesischen Weber,” in *Album. Originalpoesien*, edited by H. Püttman. Borna: Reiche Verlag, 1847, pp. 145–46.

Source of English translation: Scott Horton, Heine’s ‘Silesian Weavers’, Harper’s Magazine, December 5, 2007, <https://harpers.org/2007/12/heines-silesian-weavers/>

Translation: Scott Horton

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