

## IV.20 Village

*Elise M. Dermineur*

In 1688, in his well-known work *Les Caractères*, Jean de La Bruyère (1645–96) labelled rural dwellers ‘wild animals’ (*les animaux farouches*).<sup>1</sup> Peasants have indeed been depicted as violent, backward and incapable of feelings such as compassion, love and other sentiments, their emotions often reduced to simplistic shortcuts, and grossly reduced to bestial savagery. The violent and spectacular peasant uprisings in the Middle Ages and the early modern period, such as the *Jacquerie* (1358), the German Peasants War (1525), the uprisings of the *croquants* and *nu-pieds*, to name a few, widely contributed to the spread of this narrow image of peasant violence, rusticity, bestiality and greed not only in traditional historiography but also in contemporary depictions of rural dwellers, such as that of La Bruyère. Discourses and visual supports of all kinds represented angry and fearless peasants dangerously armed with pitchforks, and insisted on the difference between the ‘wild animals’ with the rest of the civilized strata of society.<sup>2</sup> And yet, peasants’ emotions in the early modern period constituted a set of complex and interrelated feelings, sentiments, gestures and norms that shaped societal relations and regulated everyday life, and which cannot be reduced to the convulsions of the occasional uprisings. The historians of the *Annales* School were pioneers in the examination of peasant mentalities and offered a broader palette of peasant interaction.<sup>3</sup> However, their contributions to the examination of peasant emotions, while important, remains incomplete and did not reveal all the complexities, depth and texture of such feelings. Their approach, both interdisciplinary and conveyed at a micro level, still remains valuable and promising for the study of peasant emotions. But this history largely remained to be written.

In early modern Europe, the village referred to a physical place but also to a group of people living together, often related by blood, most likely knowing each other, and where various layers of social, legal, economic and emotional norms shaped accordingly the behaviour, gestures and rhetoric of rural dwellers, and where individual and collective emotions were nurtured and expressed both within the household but also within the community as a whole. Incidentally, popular culture and peasant emotions were intrinsically linked and both often shared the same codes and beliefs.

The village was not only a place where people lived together but was above all a place where they worked, exchanged, and socialized together in a hermetic and endogenous sphere. Social proximity and social reproduction engendered shared beliefs and norms among the villagers. Within the village itself, places such as local institutions (the local court, the notary’s office for instance), or other social organizations (the church) and gathering places (the wash house, mill, inn, for example) played an important role in the display, emphasis and manipulation of certain emotions as villagers interacted there in the public eye. Peasants adapted certain of their emotions to these places and their specific audience, but also to social norms existing within their community. The significance of agents’ actions in public settings had a strong impact

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on their reputation and honour, valuable and valued qualities for their daily interactions with others. Within the village community, the social hierarchy also bore a set of emotional norms and gestures specific to each group according to their sex, age and to their social position. The household and its organization, whether nuclear, extended, joint or stem families, affected the social status of each member and by extension, its members' social interactions and behaviour.

Religious beliefs shared by the villagers also bore a set of emotional norms, rhetoric and behaviour. The Reformation, in particular, brought important changes regarding shared religious beliefs but also regarding the challenge of traditional rites and religious identities. The emergence of Protestantism in the sixteenth century often divided community members, engendering religious tensions and violence where strong emotions were often displayed.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, the village was also a place where the sacred, the profane and popular culture met and collided, prompting shared beliefs among community members.<sup>5</sup> Close contact with nature, especially, engendered beliefs and superstitions, often founding its roots in a strong and ancient popular culture shared by the whole community and which had its own emotional codes. Alain Cabantous, for instance, has recently shown how the night triggered various myths, legends, fantasies, beliefs and emotions in the early modern period.<sup>6</sup> This was not specific to the early modern period, as emotions triggered by forests or animals, for example, can be found at many times. On the other hand, events such as the witch craze witnessed a dramatic set of violent feelings and emotions and were particular to the early modern period.

Finally, it is important to note that particular attention must be devoted to changes over time. The weight of ancestral traditions has often given an impression of immobility regarding peasant mentalities before the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> But legal and economic changes, such as the state building process or the development of the market economy, among others, not only affected the village structure and administration but also household structures, and by extension the affective responses of the peasants to such changes. This is an area still to be investigated.

Peasants very seldom wrote self-narratives. In order to study peasant emotions, one must turn to other sources. The civil and criminal records in particular prove to be excellent source material, 'pulses of daily life,' as Jean-Michel Boehler labelled them.<sup>8</sup> The judicial testimonies, especially their semantics, reveal the affective rhetoric and the wide range of gestures. These documents cover excesses and misbehaviour and reveal much about anger, resentment, jealousy, envy and honour among other emotions. Love, empathy, fear and the like often also lurk at the surface of those documents. Emotions in rural communities in early modern Europe had social and economic functions and followed rules and norms invented and moulded by the peasants themselves, not imposed from above, and are revealed by the judicial documents. Attention must be paid however to the legal and institutional changes affecting local courts in the second half of the eighteenth century; state building processes could impose new legal norms in which standardization tended to suppress the colourful words of the villagers to replace it with more technical and uniform terminology.<sup>9</sup> The microhistorical approach in the analysis of such sources appears to be the most efficient for examining peasant emotions, but much more work needs to be done regarding the emotions of rural dwellers.

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### Further reading

- Le Roy Ladurie, E., *Montaillou: The Promised Land of Error* (trans.) B. Bray (New York: George Braziller, 2008)  
—masterful survey of a medieval rural community that reveals a host of details regarding aspects of villagers' intimate and daily lives.
- Sabeau, D.W., *Power in the Blood: Popular Culture and Village Discourse in Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988)  
—through the examination of several case studies focusing on rural popular culture, highlights the complexity of peasants' beliefs, behaviours and affective responses.

### Notes

- 1 J. de la Bruyère. *Les Caractères* (1688) (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1976).
- 2 P. Freedman, 'Peasant Anger in the Late Middle Ages', in B.H. Rosenwein (ed.), *Anger's Past: The Social Uses of an Emotion in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 171–90.
- 3 Among the numerous rural monographs, see especially E. Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou, village occitan de 1294 à 1324* (Paris: Folio, 2008)
- 4 N.Z. Davis, 'The rites of violence: religious riot in sixteenth-century France', *Past & Present* 59, 1 (1973), 51–91.
- 5 D.W. Sabeau, *Power in the Blood: Popular Culture and Village Discourse in Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988)
- 6 A. Cabantous, *Histoire de la nuit: XVIIIe – XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2009)
- 7 G. Bouchard, *Le Village Immobile—Sennely En Sologne au XVIIIè siecle* (Paris: Plon, 1971)
- 8 J.-M. Boehler, *Une société rurale en milieu rhénan: la paysannerie de la plaine d'Alsace (1648–1789)* (Strasbourg: Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg, 1995)
- 9 J.C. Scott, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999)

## IV.21 Family and household

*Katie Barclay*

Under Philippe Ariès' now very controversial schema of change in family life over the early modern period, 'the family' was something created through affective ties and particularly through the intimacy and privacy of sharing household space during the eighteenth century.

In the world of sentiments and values, the family didn't count previously as much as lineage . . . [Lineage] extended to the ties of blood without regard to the emotions engendered by cohabitation and intimacy. The line was never gathered together within a common space, around a single courtyard. In contrast, the sentiment of family is tied to the house, to the government of the house, to life in the house.<sup>1</sup>

Previously, he believed people had an investment in 'lineage' – in blood connections and family name – but that the bonds of lineage were looser and demanded less

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