

Excessive Splendor, Too Much Eating and Drinking: Martin Luther's *Table Talk* (after 1537)

Abstract

Martin Luther's *Table Talk* (1483–1546) is a collection of notes supposedly recorded by guests at the reformers' table. As these notes suggest, Luther opined not only on church and theological matters but also on secular topics as well as German virtues and vices. In the excerpts featured here, Luther criticizes Germans' habits in general, lamenting their penchant for expensive fabrics and clothing, overeating, and drinking alcohol in excess.

Source

On the Constancy and Faith of the Germans

Doctor Martin Luther and Mr. Philip traveled together to Torgau on April 3, 1537, and discussed a variety of topics. Philip praised the chronicle by Cornelius Tacitus, who lived in the age of the Emperor Caligula, in which he describes Germany quite well and praised [the Germans] for their constancy and their faith. For the Germans, [according to Tacitus] were most loyal and faithful, especially regarding marriage, and surpassed all other nations and were exemplary. Yes, said Martin Luther: those ancient people were perhaps admirable indeed, but unfortunately in our day, in more recent times, they have degenerated considerably, have lost this nature, and have become coarse. Before the Flood, that was the best time, and no one doubts it, for the people lived long lives and became very old; they were moderate with food and drink, did not feast, go to war, or fight. They diligently observed God's creatures in the heavens and on land, and found great enjoyment and happiness in these; and a fresh, cool well was sweeter, and tasted better to them, than all the fine wines and malmsey [sweet Madeira wine] do today. But what is to come of such feasting, gluttony, and drunkenness? Germania is a beautiful nation, and I think that H. has turned into G. Germania was once called Hermannia.

Hospitality in the Lands of the German Nation

If I had to travel, I would go through no place more eagerly than Swabia and Bavaria, for the people are friendly and obliging, accommodate strangers, and even approach strangers and travelers, giving people amiable service and good provisions for their money. In Hesse and Meissen, the people do so to some extent, but they do it for their money. The Saxon is totally unfriendly and impolite, offering one neither a pleasant word nor anything to eat, saying: "Dear guest, I don't know what I should give you to eat, my wife is not home, I cannot offer you lodgings."^[1] Here in Wittenberg, you see how unfriendly the people are: they do not ask about honor or politeness, nor about religion. For no citizen allows his son to study, although they have such an example before them, and there are so many foreign students and guests. Oh dear, the land will come to nothing.

German Rubbish

Why do we have so many tin dishes? It is purely superfluous rubbish, rot indeed. The Turks, the Tatars, the Italians, and the French do not need such things except for that which is necessary. We Germans, Bohemians, Poles, etc. are the ones who boast. And thus we use everything up and waste it, and for no purpose at that—for superfluous clothing, silks, and feasting and drinking; the Fuggers and the Frankfurt fairs know full well how we

love our [money] and sling it about us. We are disloyal, and do not believe that there is a God.

Changes in Clothing Styles in Germany

The topic of changes in clothing styles and other embellishment as happens every year was under consideration, and Martin Luther spoke: The changes to clothing will bring with them a change in government and customs, we are striving for it far too much.

The Emperor Charles [V] is supposed to have said: The Germans are learning to steal from the Spanish, and the Spanish are learning gluttony and drunkenness from the Germans.

On the Excessive Pomp, Feasting, and Drinking in Germany

Doctor Martin Luther said: If less velvet and silk, and also fewer spices, were to be had in Germany, it would pose no danger. Germany would be much richer than it is. In addition, it would do very well without barley, and should drink water instead of beer, although the young chaps [*Gesellen*] would have no joy without beer. For gambling does not make merry, which is why they take their drinks with them. This was recently shown at the prince's nuptials [*Beilager*], where it wasn't enough to simply empty one's glass in a few gulps; rather each had to drink to the other by downing an entire stein, and they called this a nice round of drinks. *Sic inventa lege, inventa est & fraus legis*—with the law being invented, the reverse is invented. George Spalatin once said at the Saxon Elector Frederick's court that Cornelius Tacitus wrote that the ancient Germans had the terrible vice of drinking day in and day out. A nobleman overheard this comment and asked how old the text was in which this had been written. When Spalatin answered that it was nearly 1,500 years ago, the nobleman answered, "Dear man, if drunkenness has such old, distinguished origins, don't let us disrupt that now!"

[...]

NOTES

[1] This sentence is noticeably different in the orthography and meant to mimic the Saxon dialect—trans.

Source: Martin Luther, *Tischreden* (after 1537); reprinted in Heinz Ludwig Arnold, ed., *Deutsche über die Deutschen. Auch ein deutsches Lesebuch*. Munich: C. H. Beck, 1972, pp. 10–12.

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