

German Characteristics from a French Perspective: Charles Patin, *Travels thro' Germany, Bohemia, Swisserland, Holland, and other parts of Europe* (1674/1696)

Abstract

In the late seventeenth century, the French physician Charles Patin (1633–1693) described his travels through Central Europe in a French-language text aimed at select German princes. He focused on aspects of culture and lifestyle that he observed during his stays in Austria and Bavaria. Patin's understanding of humoral makeup was important to his interpretation of behavioral characteristics. This became particularly clear when he arrived in Tirol and struggled to describe Tiroleans' dispositions, a challenge that he attributed to their seemingly contradictory qualities—a mixture inherited from both their German and Italian ancestors. Patin's text also offers an outsider's view of what "German" could mean as it pertained to bodies. His account was first published in Lyon in 1674 as *Relations historiques et curieuses de voyages, en Allemagne, Angleterre, Hollande, Bohême, Suisse, etc.* The following excerpt is from an English translation published in London in 1696.

Source

[...]

The *Germans* take much delight in good chear, as 'tis generally reported and believ'd; their Voluptuousness in this kind consists rather in the divertisement of the Feast, then the rarity and magnificence of the Provisions: In these Entertainments they chiefly seek for Mirth, and those charming transports to which they are excited by Wine: There for a while they insensibly lose that dulness, which is as it were natural to 'em, and their Wits being refin'd by the subtil and hot Vapours, introduce various sorts of Humours, which during the whole continuance of the Debauch afford as many Pastimes that are usually terminated in fervent Protestations, extraordinary flights and Passionate expressions of Friendship: Others grow furious when an Inflammation succeeds the Heat, and hence arise the *German* Quarrels. But I wou'd be understood here to speak only of the ordinary sort of People, that are born and animated with the *Genius* of the Country; and by no means of those generous Souls, who are the pure Workmanship of Heaven, from whence they derive their Original, much rather than from the gross Earth. Durst I presume to cite your Highness as a Witness to this Truth? Can it be declar'd to what Nation you belong, since you have the defects of none? Or rather, of what Nation may your Highness not be said to be a Member, in regard that you are endow'd with all the good qualities and all the advantages that are natural to every particular one?

Upon the whole, the Entertainments of the Table among the *Germans*, are not confin'd as every where else, to a certain Place, and to certain Opportunities, but they are us'd upon all occasions, they always begin and end with 'em; and it may be avouch'd that in the whole course of their Life and Conversation, they are the first Matter, of which the rest of their Actions and Affairs is the Form. I know not how to desist, (my Lord) this faculty of the Mouth is the vicious part of their natural Inclination. But what Nation is there in the World that is free from all manner of Faults? A *German* Ambassador made a smart Repartee to a certain *French* Man, who let loose the reins

of his Ralilery somewhat to far; *It is true* (said he) *the Germans are only Fools in there Cups, but the French are always so*: It must also be granted that this depraved disposition has less Advantage than all others: For it shortens Life, over-loads the Stomach and Waste, makes Giants in breadth and thickness, and finally its most malignant Quality is, that it can scarce be judg'd whether it be a sort of Folly that has its lucid Intervals; or whether it be a kind of Discretion, subject to Weaknesses and Periodical transports, or to speak more politely to your Highness, whether it be an intermitting Folly or Prudence. However, it does not otherwise corrupt the manners of the *Germans*; for certainly they are the best natur'd People in the World, provided some of 'em be excepted that are not so: They are endu'd with Probity, Generosity, Courteousness and a temper entirely addicted to Equity. These excellent endowments, are as it were natural to 'em, and to be found eve among those that have no advantage of Education. Perhaps this is the Reason why they are below'd of all Nations, altho they do not take any considerable Measures to Court 'em at home, and they have no regard to 'em, but proportionably as they conform themselves to their manner of Living.

[...]

These Images are also represented upon Brass Cuts and illustrated, with an Historical Description, so that they may well deserve a place in a Prince's Repository: If your Highness be of this opinion, I shall take it as an Honour to be permitted to augment your Library with a Set of 'em, which I have in my Possession.

It is very difficult to give a good description of the *Genius* or natural Disposition of the *Tirolians*; who are neither *Italians* nor *Germans*, but both together. There may be some variety of Matter, with which to entertain your Highness, concerning the Judgment that ought to be made with respect to these People, who equally partake of the Qualities of two very different Nations that border upon 'em. For a Question has been propounded long ago, whether contrary Temperaments are brought to Perfection, or spoil'd in the Mixture: Some Persons affirm that the Quickness and Subtily of *Italy* is meliorated by being somewhat allay'd with the Phlegmatick Temper of *Germany*, and that this Phlegm likewise stands in need of Vivacity to animate it: Others are of opinion, that this subtil Spirit beyond the Mountains, has its tincture of Melancholy, which serves to set it off, that a mixture of a grosser sort of Blood wou'd diminish its lustre, and that the slowness of the *Germans* has a Solidity, which cannot be refin'd without weakning it. Your Highness is a much more competent Judge than I, what Party 'tis requisite to follow, but if you shou'd enjoin me to declare my opinion as to this matter, I wou'd entreat you to permit me to do it only to your self in private.

[...]

Source of English translation: Charles Patin, *Travels thro' Germany, Bohemia, Swisserland, Holland, and other parts of Europe*; made English and illustrated with copper cuts and a map. London: Printed for A. Swall and T. Child, 1696, pp. 47–50, 95–96. Available online through Early English Books Online:

http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_id=xri:eebo:citation:9024946

Source of original French text: Charles Patin, *Relations historiques et curieuses de voyages, en Allemagne, Angleterre, Hollande, Bohême, Suisse, etc.* Lyon, 1676, pp. 38–41, 77–78. Available online at:

<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k111891n>

Recommended Citation: German Characteristics from a French Perspective: Charles Patin, Travels thro' Germany, Bohemia, Swisserland, Holland, and other parts of Europe (1674/1696), published in: German History Intersections, <<https://germanhistory-intersections.org/en/germanness/ghis:document-272>> [July 15, 2025].