

Landscape as Mirror: Conrad Celtis, Oratio in Gymnasio in Ingelstadio publice recitata (1492)

Abstract

In this address to students at the *Gymnasium* in Ingolstadt, humanist Conrad Celtis (1459–1508) argued that the Germans, who now possessed the Roman Empire, needed to assimilate classical learning and culture, much as the Romans had assimilated Greek culture, in order to banish the stereotype of the wild and uncultivated German. Celtis connected the roughness of the people with that of the land, and he emphasized that the land itself had undergone significant change in recent years. With the draining of marshes and the clearing of vast forests, the climate had become more hospitable, and new cities had emerged as a result. This text depicts a mythical and historical past while juxtaposing wild and uncultivated Germans with the more docile and cultured southerners, particularly Italians.

Source

[...]

But I now direct my speech to you, distinguished men and well-born youths, to whom by virtue of the courage of your ancestors and the unconquerable strength of Germany the Italian empire has passed, who throng this university in preference to all others in this Germany of ours, enrich it, and do it great honour and credit. I urge you to direct your studies to those things first and foremost which will ripen and improve the mind and call you away from the habits of the common herd to devote yourselves to higher pursuits. Keep before your eyes true nobility of spirit, considering that you bring not honour but dishonor to our empire if you neglect the study of literature only to rear horses and dogs and pursue ecclesiastical preferment. Consider how to add distinction to your dignified office by your virtue, and to increase your fame by learning, so that men may think you worthy of those dignities and may follow after you instead of your following them, like fowlers after a flock of birds. Emulate, noble men, the ancient nobility of Rome, which after taking over the empire of the Greeks, assimilated all their wisdom and eloquence, so much so that it is hard to decide whether it has equaled all the Greek discoveries and equipment of learning or surpassed them. In the same way you who have taken over the empire of the Italians should cast off repulsive barbarism and seek to acquire Roman culture. Do away with that old disrepute of Germans in Greek, Latin and Hebrew writers, who ascribe to us drunkenness, cruelty, savagery and other vice bordering on bestiality and excess. Consider it a great disgrace to be ignorant of the histories of the Greeks and Latins, and the height of shame to know nothing about the topography, the climate, the rivers, the mountains, the antiquities and the peoples of our region and our own country, in short all those facts which foreigners have so cleverly collected concerning us. I am greatly astonished to reflect on the painstaking exactitude and subtle learning with which the Greeks and Romans have surveyed our country, which is, to use their own words, the greatest part of Europe, and though it seems rough and wild, I imagine, in comparison with their own climate, they have expressed our customs, our emotional make-up and our spirits as graphically as a painter might delineate our bodies. Cast away, noble gentlemen, cast away and wipe out those acts of robbery which those authorities declare to have been held as proofs of courage amongst us! It is astonishing that that hereditary disease should have persisted still in certain parts of Germany for some fifteen hundred years, for even now when, after the draining of

marshes and the cutting down of vast forests, our climate is more cheerful and our land populated with famous cities, we still fail to dislodge the leaders of that robber crew. So difficult is it to correct what has become a habit, what has lasted for centuries and is now a general practice. And so it has become about that the neighbouring countries vent their spleen upon us and pursue our name with a kind of eternal hatred and calumny, maintaining that with the empire we have acquired many of the vices of foreign peoples. To them our characters are always suspect and dangerous. Let us be ashamed, noble gentleman, that certain modern historians (who, publishing new Decads, boast that they have equaled the ancient Roman Empire) should speak of our most famous leaders merely as "the barbarians" and suppress their proper native title, in order to belabor and bitterly disparage the reputation of us Germans. Such has been the power of that long-standing and irreconcilable hatred between us and of that ancient strife between the protecting deities of our two nations, which would, in view of the hostile spirit on both sides, inevitably have led to mutual slaughter, had not prudent Nature separated us by the Alps and by rocks towering to the stars. Let us be ashamed, I pray, that although we have waged and won many memorable wars in Hungary, France, and Italy, and against that cruel tyrant of Asia who wallows in Christian blood, not one of you should be found to-day to hand down to posterity the deeds performed by German courage. Yet many foreigners will be found who in their historical works, contrary to all historical truth, will hiss like vipers against our courage with all the pretentious cajolery of their style and seeks with falsifications and lying inventions) with which that sort of men is most prodigal for the purpose of singing their own praises) to belittle our glorious achievements. And I am quite at a loss to say whether it is due to our wisdom or our carelessness that lately of our own accord we have surrendered the insignia of authors and their companion, the imperial laurel, to Rome – an unhappy omen, as it were, for our empire, this abdication to others of the right to confer the laurel, foreshadowing that in the end, not a single privilege of empire will remain in our possession.

Assume, O men of Germany, that ancient spirit of yours, with which you so often confounded and terrified the Romans, and turn your eyes to the frontiers of Germany; collect together her torn and broken territories. Let us be ashamed, ashamed, I say, to have placed upon our nation the yoke of slavery, and to be paying tributes and taxes to foreign and barbarian kings. O free and powerful people, O noble and valiant race, plainly worthy of the Roman empire, our famous harbor is held by the Pole and the gateway of our ocean by the Dane! In the east also powerful peoples live in slavery, the Bohemians, the Moravians, the Slovaks, and the Silesians who all live as it were separated from the body of Germany. And may I add the Transylvanian Saxons who also use our racial culture and speak our native language. In the west is France, which is so friendly and bountiful towards us by reason of the immortal virtue and incredible wisdom of Philip, Palatine of the Rhine, who rules both banks of the famous river and will ever rule them with fair-omened sway.

While the pole wheels the stars, while winds smite the shores.

But from the south we are oppressed by a sort of distinguished slavery, and under the impulse of greed, that old and accursed aid to the acquirement of comfort and luxury, new commercial ventures are continually established, by which our country is drained of its wonderful natural wealth while we pay to others what we need for ourselves. So persistent is fortune or destiny in persecuting and wiping out the Germans, the last survivors of the Roman Empire. But I fear that I have advanced more freely than I intended in expressing my impatience with my Germany, in thinking of the precious store of books collected from the Greeks and the Italians and preserved by the hands of our emperors, books which we have left as it were shut up in prison, covered with dust, untouched and scarcely safe from rain, and despise them for being spoils of war.

I return to you, young men of good family, and urge you above all things to call to mind, before you approach the study of the law, that you require a wide and varied knowledge, because legal training can teach you nothing

beyond mere opinion. Moreover, considering that the philosophers and the first theological poets – if we are to believe antiquity – summoned mankind, at that time vagrants and nomads, away from the dens and caves of animals into cities and social dwellings, softened their crude minds by oratory, taught them religion and the fear and worship of the gods, and afterwards governed them by laws and institutions, which of you, distinguished fathers, will doubt that before studying the law, it is well to give much attention to true philosophy and above all to those things by which one may acquire eloquence, which you will agree to be very necessary for this purpose. Therefore you will also think that those persons are greatly misguided and responsible for many misfortunes who, neglecting all philosophy (except the twopenny-halfpenny brand), set themselves up as leaders in law and religion, without considering what sort of men the lawgivers of former ages were, who were busy throughout the day with legislation and military affairs and spent all their nights in the study of philosophy. For philosophy indeed is like a school which teaches most liberally the knowledge of matters human and divine and their respective spheres. Who, without drinking of philosophy, can think that he can deal competently with those two things? I will now quote you as examples the Greeks, Solon, Plato, Alcibiades, Themistocles or Philip the father of Alexander the Great. [...]

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Recommended Citation: Landscape as Mirror: Conrad Celtis, Oratio in Gymnasio in Ingelstadio publice recitata (1492), published in: German History Intersections, <<https://germanhistory-intersections.org/en/germanness/ghis:document-276>> [July 12, 2025].