

VERSES AGAINST THE RICH<sup>1</sup>

ST. GREGORY NAZIANZEN (c. 325—c. 389).

Though myriad ills on evil folk attend,  
 Senseless of hurt, they shun the means to mend.  
 Words, reason, thought of God might else avail,  
 But these in sickness vaunt themselves for hale.  
 So dreaming madmen, strengthless and alone,  
 Win pleas or contests, riches or a throne,  
 Sail upon shore and fancied foemen cow,  
 Fly without wings, and without oxen plough.  
 Counsel them physic, set them health in view,  
 You waste the endeavour, and perhaps may rue.  
 Men lightly stricken heed a helper's call;  
 Men that think virtue mad, are deaf to all.

You, rich in acres, count those acres vain  
 If one poor holding fringes your domain.  
 'Monstrous! On my fair scene a neighbour spies?  
 The thing's a knife-thrust in my very eyes!'  
 Would you spoke truly! Blindness could not breed  
 What sight does now, rash and resistless greed.  
 Onward you rush like plague or flood or fire,  
 Joyless in having, fevered in desire.

Fraud seconds force. You lend to one distressed,  
 Then claim in quittance all he e'er possessed.  
 Menaced with gaol and rack, he cedes perforce;  
 Or, if that fail, you find some fresh resource—  
 Feign he has left a civic task undone,  
 Or knows the thief and pirate Such-a-one.  
 'Your ox affronts my cattle—lows too loud  
 For any poor man's beast, he's got so proud;  
 Shows fight, and wins.—Trees from your orchard there  
 Droop over, and rob mine of light and air.—  
 Your boy's a trespasser.' Lest worse befall,  
 Ox, orchard, boy, the poor man forfeits all.

Others with means less gross the poor beguile—  
 Shield them from mischief, and enslave the while.  
 A lion, thus, drives off the encroaching beasts,

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<sup>1</sup> *Moral Poems*, XXVIII. Text in Migne, P.G., 37, cols. 856-884.

Then on the rescued one at leisure feasts.

Far better with your own to rest content  
Than all this toil on endless gaining spent—  
Lies, tricks and lawsuits, strife and gloomy cares;  
Who seeks fresh riches, fresh affliction bears.

A greedy guest that shames the common board,  
Snatching at all, is everywhere abhorred.  
Such loathing does the greed for gain inspire  
In all save you, whose wits are sunk in mire.  
Having and lusting, passion ever new  
Works at your breast, and finds its panders too.

Wealth is your god. Your clothing's hid away  
Deep under ground, where none but moths can prey.  
Open and shut your barns by turns appear,  
Mid brief rejoicings there, long groaning here.  
The lean ill seasons which afflict the poor  
Smile on your traffic, and your gain secure.  
In others' woes you find a fertile earth,  
And reap new harvest of a people's dearth.  
Yet what are you? Whence come you? Whence presume?  
This night may summon forth your soul to doom.

Others with joy their lives and substance give  
To God the all-giver; you for gaining live.  
For gaining what? A table overfraught,  
One palate's pleasure (goal of all your thought),  
A glutton's paunch, ill health from surfeits bred,  
Half-useless houses half-untenanted,  
Resplendent pictures, ceilings touched with gold,  
Attendant boys, like women to behold,  
Wine and loud music in voluptuous shade,  
Bouts which unmake the image God has made,  
A blustering carriage and a haughty look,  
Such pomp and power as envy will not brook  
(For pride stirs pride to counter and outreach,  
Like serpents' scales, each overlapping each).

This for yourself; then for your womankind  
Gold knacks and jewels, single or entwined,  
Bracelets and anklets, whence a man is lured  
To beauty that's unbeauteously procured.  
What else? A fortune for your sons and heirs,  
With hope that all your grandeurs may be theirs.  
But hopes are treacherous; no man knows his end,  
Or to what bourne his ill-got riches tend.

Vain is your toil, your broodings day and night,  
 Your thoughts of gold where care outruns delight;  
 Vain the vast hoard usuriously begot  
 And kept for those who shall possess it not.  
 Strangers may handle it, or, worse than those,  
 Men who to you and all your pride are foes—  
 Wretches who once in tears before you pled  
 For what you would not spare, a crust of bread.  
 One such as this may batten on your cheer,  
 Live on your labours, strut like chanticleer,  
 Carp at your grand designs, and never spare  
 A crust of bread for your imagined heir.

Hold then at will your grasping anxious course,  
 Stretch to the full your malice, wits and force;  
 From depths of earth and ocean take your toll;  
 Crop, as the proverb runs, a dead man's poll;<sup>2</sup>  
 Make sacrifice to your enclosing net,  
 Worship the hand which could such riches get.  
 Let all subserve your profit, foe and friend,  
 In your Charybdis all men's cargoes end.  
 The swallowed prize must up again be cast,  
 And your possessions be spewed forth at last.  
 A little waiting; vengeance dogs you still;  
 Best if it find you soon, but find it will.

Happier the poor, in humble virtue bowed,  
 Than the mad rich, in their own vices proud.  
 Remember Midas of the golden touch,  
 And how his wish came true, but overmuch.  
 Remember too the dire Egyptian snake  
 Whose bite brings drouth which it is death to slake.  
 Men rush to water, stoop and drink and burst,  
 Nor without quenching life can quench their thirst.  
 Again, when Israel through the desert trod,  
 Bread rained from heaven, the bounteous gift of God;  
 But when some gathered it beyond the need,  
 The manna rotted to rebuke their greed.  
 Might but such judgment go with goods ill-got—  
 To crave and burst, or with one's pelf to rot!

Since all you ask and all you heed is gold,  
 'Tis strange you leave some rags of shame unsold,  
 Keep no marauding bands that call you head,

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<sup>2</sup> 'Get blood from a stone'; for the next line, *c.f.* Habacuc I : 16.

Rife no houses and despoil no dead.  
 All else has bounds—music and dance and race,  
 Discourse and toil, the body's force and grace.  
 These know their measure, do not stretch beyond;  
 Wealth, wealth alone admits no bound or bond.  
 Yet wealth will pass to aliens, though possessed  
 Through honest labour or through fair bequest;  
 And they in turn but for a breath will own,  
 With half their goods unreckoned and unknown.

Could you from all the world all wealth procure,  
 More would remain, whose lack would leave you poor.  
 Still would you toil, still tread the fruitless way?  
 Or would you cease at last? Cease then to-day.  
 Like fire on brambles, greed burns out a void,  
 And discontent poisons the good enjoyed.  
 Brine helps not thirst and gazing cures not love;  
 So will no gain the lust for gain remove.  
 Else might the poor, or those who look for ease,  
 By tithe or tribute wealthy knaves appease.  
 (So pagans to their gods libations pour,  
 And sops to bandogs save the loss of more.)  
 The needy still might keep their little all,  
 Nor quake to see a rich man's shadow fall.  
 Ah! For all else comes remedy at last—  
 For hunger, food; for surfeiting, a fast;  
 Purging for dropsy; shade for weary eyes;  
 For sorrow, time, or friendship with the wise;  
 Beacon or harbour for the tempest-tossed;  
 On evil men all remedies are lost.  
 True, there's the justice and the scourge of God,  
 But such as these scarce mark the avenging rod.  
 Their wits are darkened by redemption's foe,  
 Their backs, like anvils, steeled against the blow.  
 They search the page that tells of ancient times  
 And there find patterns for their darling crimes.

Lord, canst thou bear it, that some good man's fall  
 For evil ways should be a cloak and pall?  
 To good things adamant, the vicious will  
 Like wax can mould itself to aught that's ill,  
 Spurn the long years of constant innocence  
 To find one flaw, and take example thence.  
 'Am I unchaste? This wise man was the same.  
 Guilty of slaughter? These have equal blame.

Have wealth ill-got? Another, so I read,  
 Subdued whole tribes and cities to his greed.  
 Take oaths?<sup>3</sup> To break them is a grosser sin'—  
 And here some hoary tale is foisted in.  
 To meet such quirks I leave the graver style;  
 Here is a fable; hearken for a while.

The owl was mocked at; but with nimble wit  
 Countered each gibe, and found an answer fit,  
 'Your head's too large.—Of Zeus they say as much.—  
 Your eyes a-stare.—Are not Athena's such?—  
 Harsh is your voice.—More harshly cries the jay.—  
 Puny your feet.—What of the starling's, pray?'  
 Thus well and deftly was the gauntlet run;  
 Then came one thrust, and there she was undone.  
 'You in yourself unite what they divide—  
 Shrunk-footed, hoarse, top-heavy, glaring-eyed.'

Abashed at length, away the creature flew,  
 Proving in this at least more wise than you.  
 You in one person harbour every vice,  
 And that's your charge, not falling once or twice.  
 Much goes by impulse, and the flesh is frail;  
 Only in God can virtue never fail.  
 But to sin deep and oft, with full intent,  
 By scorn unshamed, unschooled by chastisement,  
 Headlong to rush where the soul's danger lies—  
 That's the disease whereof the sinner dies.

Cease then to wrench the words of holy writ;  
 Search your own soul, and learn what's bidden it.  
 Remember too that those beneath the law  
 Had not the light which dimly they foresaw.  
 Faith was scarce born, and like a babe was fed;  
 By slow degrees its infant steps were led.  
 Hence those that fell might readier pardon find  
 Than you, whom Christian ordinances bind.  
 Christ for your guilt was slain; his justice heeds,  
 And will requite, your past and present deeds.  
 Of death and doom I speak not; while you live,  
 What hostages to chastisement you give!  
 Home, wife, and children, all you think most dear  
 (If there at least your goodness persevere),

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<sup>3</sup> All taking of oaths was commonly suspect among Christians; St. Gregory has a whole poem on the subject (*Moral Poems*, XXIV).

Wealth, pride, and body, to complete the tale—  
 With these aboard, be watchful how you sail.  
 ‘But on yourself these threatened evils press—  
 Disease, misfortune, want and homelessness.’  
 Idly you taunt me with my seeming woes;  
 Pains are not mended by another’s throes.  
 And you and I speak with a different voice;  
 Much that you call my suffering is my choice—  
 To lack all riches, here and there to roam,  
 To have no ties and seek no earthly home.  
 If in such things you spy affliction’s shape,  
 You judge the lion’s measure from the ape.  
 As for the rest—some irk me, I confess;  
 My mortal clay still shrinks from clay’s distress.  
 Yet with good will I take the pangs I feel,  
 And count my woe more blessed than your weal.  
 Suffering with you rewards a life of sin—  
 So speaks the voice that pricks you from within.  
 Suffering with me the Christian metal tries;  
 It spurs the wrestler to achieve the prize;  
 Or, if that seem presumptuous, let me say  
 It washes clean the smirches of the way.

‘What serves all this?’, you ask me. I reply:  
 Slight not the healer, lest unhealed you die.  
 Two ills there are—at God’s decrees to flout,  
 And, sunk in guilt, to live with hope cast out.  
 Be ruled by me; those equal ills eschew;  
 God is your Judge; God is your Father too.  
 Dread is his justice, but his mercy deep;  
 Confess, implore, and for your errors weep.

Give to the poor; they before God can plead,  
 And win, and richly give, the grace we need.  
 Give of your own; use not a pilfered hoard  
 To clothe the needy or to deck your board.  
 Honour in him God’s handiwork expressed;  
 Reverence in it the rites that serve a guest;  
 Nor seek with theft (lest heavier wrath you feel)  
 To bribe the Judge who bids you *not to steal*.

That way lies virtue; if it daunt you still—  
 For evil men ’tis much to rest from ill.  
 Let very weariness amend your ways;  
 Cease from oppression; you shall have some praise.

But if this too your stubborn pride oppose,

Think of the tomb, where all men's journeys close,  
 Though after Hercules your steps you bend,  
 Outsail his Pillars, or through Taurus wend.  
 Nor in the tomb hope long in peace to rest;  
 How many a neighbour have you dispossessed!  
 One who has learned your crooked ways too well  
 From that last home your ashes may expel.  
 Think, beyond that, of reckoning dread and dire,  
 The day of darkness, agonies and fire.  
 These in long torment lay the sinner waste,  
 Seeking God's image which his crime effaced.  
 Thither the crafty serpent lures his own;  
 Thus for his tasted pleasure they atone.

As for myself, who seek from vice to flee,  
 What depths can hide me thence, what wings can free?  
 Will distance friend me, or a veiling cloud,  
 Or prayers to heaven with supplication loud?  
 Where'er I tread, three things enclose me in—  
 Time, place, and close companionship of sin.  
 Mine be the law which once the Apostles heard:  
*Flee from the city which rejects the word.*  
 Thus will I roam to earth's remotest end,  
 And flee the wicked till their doom descend.  
 They shall not vex the city builded sure,  
 Nor from the heavenly mansions drive the poor—  
 Rather shall crave, in fiery torment wrung,  
 A drop of water that might cool their tongue.  
 So Dives pleads, who once in wealth and pride  
 To stricken Lazarus his wants denied;  
 While he who bore what others bear from you  
 Enjoys in heaven his meed and honour due.

One grave last word. Though bad men everywhere  
 For evil deeds the name of evil bear,  
 The name *idolater* for him remains  
 Whose only knowledge is to count his gains—  
 Who if the occasion served, for lucre's sake  
 Would loathly Chemos for his patron take.<sup>4</sup>  
 Let Christians then all idols overthrow  
 And serve the one true God, whose name they know.

*Translated by* WALTER SHEWRING.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Judges 11: 24. Chemos or Chamos was a Moabite god, here taken as patron of riches, in *Paradise Lost* as patron of lust (I, 406 sqq.).