

THE HUSBANDMAN AND DEATH

By Johannes von Tepl, c. 1401

Translated by Michael Haldane (Revised 2026)



THE HUSBANDMAN. Chapter One.

Grim destroyer of every being, cruel pursuant of every creature, fell assassin of every human, Death, you be accursed! God, your Creator, detest you, increasing disaster reside with you, misfortune violently visit you: be wholly dishonoured for ever! Fear, need and misery never leave your side, wherever you wander; grief, distress and sorrow be your companions all over; painful rancour, disgraceful prospects, shameful disdain beset you with vengeance at every step; sky, earth, sun, moon, stars, river, mountain, field, valley, mead, the abyss of Hell and all that has life and breath, be resentful and hostile towards you and curse you for all Eternity! Founder in malice, vanish in ruinous woe, and abide in the severe and irrevocable proscription of God, of all mankind, and the whole of Creation for all future days! Shameless villain, your evil remembrance live and persist without end; fear and terror never part from you, be wherever you will! I and all humanity wring our hands and scream the hue and cry after you!

DEATH. Chapter Two.

Hark, hark, hark at the latest marvel! We are assailed by appalling and incredible complaints. Whence they have come is, in truth, unknown to Us. But threats, curses, screams of hue and cry, hand-wringing, and attacks of every kind have never done Us harm hitherto. However, my son, whoever you are, announce yourself, and make known what wrong has befallen you through Us to lead you to treat Us so unbecomingly, as We are quite unaccustomed to, although We have sent many erudite, noble, beautiful, mighty and eminent people to graze over the edge – causing no shortage of grief to widows and orphans, to countries and people!

You act like a man in earnest, one sorely oppressed by affliction. Your complaint lacks form and lacks rhyme, from which we conclude that you will not handicap your meaning for their sake. But if you are raging, ranting, misty-minded or otherwise apart from your senses, then hang fire, refrain, do not be so hasty to utter such terrible curses. Take care that you not be burdened with remorse. Do not imagine you ever could weaken Our sublime and magnificent power. But name yourself, and do not withhold those matters in which We have met you with such overwhelming violence. We wish to be righteous to you; righteous are Our proceedings. We do not know what crime you are, so rashly, laying to Our name.

THE HUSBANDMAN. Chapter Three.

I am a Husbandman by name, my plough is of plumage,¹ and I live in the land of Bohemia. Always shall I be spiteful, inimical, adversarial to you: most cruelly have you torn my 12th letter, my hoard of joys, out of my

¹ “von vogelwat is mein pflug”: that is, he is a ‘ploughman of the pen’ – a clerk.

alphabet;² deplorably have you have weeded the bright summer flower of my delights out of the meadow of my heart; deceitfully have you stolen from me the mainstay of my happiness, my chosen turtle-dove: you have committed irreparable robbery on me!

Consider for yourself, if I do not rage, storm and cast charges at you with justice: through you I am robbed of a joyous existence, deprived of the days of a good life, and bereaved of all bliss-bringing gain. I used to be light of heart and merry at all times; short and joyful were all my days and nights, the one as rich in delight, as rich in bliss, as the other; my every year was a year of grace. Now I am told: Shove off! Remain on a withered bough with a dismal draught, in sorrow, in darkness, in despair, and howl without ceasing! The wind drives me so wildly, I am swimming the swell of the wild sea, the waves have won the upper hand, my anchor cannot hold fast anywhere. And so I shall scream without end: Death, be accursed!

DEATH. Chapter Four.

We are seized with wonder at so outrageous a challenge, the like of which We have never encountered. If you are a Husbandman, living in the land of Bohemia, then it seems to Us that you do Us a heavy injustice, for it is long since We did any work of moment in that land, other than, recently, in a fortified, handsome town, securely situated on a mountain: four letters of the alphabet – the eighteenth, the first, the third, and the twenty-third³ – weave its name. We performed our act of grace on a respectable, happy young woman there; her letter was the twelfth. She was most virtuous and free from blemish; for We were present at her birth. At that

² The twelfth letter is ‘M’ for Margaretha, ‘J’ not being counted as a separate letter in the Latin alphabet.

³ Sacz, or Saaz: Now Zatec in the Czech Republic.

time, Lady Honour sent her a gusseted mantle and garland of honour in the hands of Lady Happiness. Intact, untorn, and untarnished, she took the mantle and garland with her to the grave. Our witness, and hers, is He who knows all hearts. She was pure of conscience, personable, faithful, honest, and supremely gracious to one and all. –Verily, so constant and gentle a nature has seldom come into Our hands. Lest this be the one you mean, We know of none other.

THE HUSBANDMAN. Chapter Five.

Yes, sir, I was her loving spouse, and she my beloved. You have taken her away, the most delightful feast for my eyes: she is gone, my peace-shield against adversity; my soothsaying divining rod has gone. Gone, gone! Here I stand, poor Husbandman, alone: the shining star of my sky has disappeared; the sun of my salvation has descended to rest: never again will she rise! My lucent morning star will never rise again, her lustre has faded away, I have no sorrow-banisher more: black night is all around before my eyes. I do not believe ought exists that could ever bring me true happiness again, for the proud banner of my joys has sunk, alas, to the dust.

Murder! To arms! be yelled from the bottom of my heart, at the accursed year, at the disastrous day, at the painful hour when my solid and steadfast diamond was shattered, when my true guiding staff was mercilessly ripped out my hands, when the way to my weal-renewing fountain of youth was barred me. Dole without ending, woe without respite, fall everlasting be given to you, Death, to you and yours! Die covered with shame, craving disgrace, shorn of honour, gnashing your teeth, and rot in Hell! God deprive you of your power and scatter you as dust! Have a devilish existence for ever!

DEATH. Chapter Six.

A fox struck a sleeping lion on the cheek, wherefore his hide was torn to shreds; a hare pinched a wolf, wherefore he has no tail to this day; a cat scratched a dog who was wanting to sleep, and so she must bear his enmity always. In like manner will you rub Us the wrong way. However, we believe: the servant remains the servant, the master remains the master. We will prove that We decide justly, judge justly, and act justly in the world: We spare none for their title, have no regard for great knowledge, have no esteem for beauty, and do not value talent, love, sorrow, age, youth or any other quality. We do as the sun, which shines over good and evil: We subject good and evil to Our power. All those necromancers who can compel spirits must surrender and relinquish their spirit to Us; sprites and sorceresses cannot withstand Us, and riding on sticks, riding on goats, avails them nought. The doctors who lengthen the lives of men must fall to our share: roots, herbs, ointments, and all kinds of specifics cannot help them. If we gave account to butterflies and grasshoppers for their families, they would not be satisfied with Our reckoning. Indeed, were we to let people live for enmity or mockery, for love or sorrow, all the Empires of the world would now be Ours; every King would have placed his crown on Our head and surrendered his sceptre to Our hand; the Papal Throne and the three-crowned mitre would now be in Our power. Leave be with your curses; do not bring new tales from Babble Rock; do not hew over your head, or shavings will rain into your eyes!

THE HUSBANDMAN. Chapter Seven.

Could I curse, could I rail, could I revile you to bring the worst of evils down upon you, that would be no more than you have deserved of me for your despicable doings. For bitter complaints must follow bitter grief; it would be inhuman of me not to weep for so praiseworthy a gift from God,

which none but God alone can give. Truly, I shall mourn for evermore: my honourable falcon has flown away, my virtuous wife. I am justified in my complaints, for she was noble of birth, rich in honour, and healthy, and she towered over her boon companions; truthful and demure in speech, chaste of body, good and cheerful in company – I am silent all the more since I am too weak to tell in full of all her honour and virtue, which God Himself instilled in her: Master Death, you know this yourself. I arraign you by rights for such shattering heartache. Truly, were there an iota of good in you, you would feel pity yourself. I shall turn my face from you, speak no good word of you, I shall ever be averse to you with all my might: God's entire Creation shall come to assist me to strive against you; all that be in Heaven, on Earth and in Hell, hate and detest you!

DEATH. Chapter Eight.

God has given Heaven's Throne to the good spirits, the Abyss of Hell to the evil ones, and the terrestrial lands to Our portion. In Heaven, peace and reward for virtue; in Hell, torment and punishment for sin; this lump of Earth and the ocean mains with all they contain was commended Us by the mighty Duke of all the World, with the injunction that We uproot and weed out everything superfluous. Consider, foolish man, examine, and chisel into your reason with a burin, and you will find: if We had not eradicated, ever since the time when the first man was filthily fashioned from clay, the growth and increase of humans on Earth, of beasts and worms in barren wastes and on wild heaths, of scaly and slippery fishes in the waters – then no-one would now exist for gnats, no one would dare venture out for wolves, each man would devour another, each beast another, each living creature another, for they would lack food, and the Earth would be too narrow for them. He is foolish who weeps for mortals.

Desist! The living to the living, the dead to the dead, as it always has been. Consider harder, you fool, your cause for complaint!

THE HUSBANDMAN. Chapter Nine.

Irretrievably have I lost my greatest treasure – should I not be sorrowful and disconsolate? Miserably must I wait for the end of my days, dispossessed of every delight. Merciful God, mighty Lord, avenge me on the wicked sorrow-bringer! You have deprived me of every joy, robbed my life of pleasant days, denuded me of great honour. Great honour was mine when the good, the pure woman played angels with her children, born in a pure nest. Dead is the hen who reared such chicks. Oh God, mighty Lord, how it warmed my heart to behold her walking along with such modest steps, always mindful of decorum, that people cast loving looks at her and said: “May the gentle woman be thanked, praised, and honoured; God grant her and her nestlings a world of good!” If I knew how to rightly thank God for this, in truth, I would do so most properly. What other poor man had he endowed so richly, so soon? Let others say what they will: when God gifts a man a pure, chaste and beautiful wife, this is a real gift, a gift above every earthly, material gift. O almightiest Count of Heaven, what a boon you have conferred on the man you have wedded to a pure and untainted spouse! Rejoice, honest man, to have a pure wife; rejoice, pure woman, to have an honest husband: God give joy to you both! What does the fool know of this, who has never drunk from this fountain of youth? Though overwhelming heartache has befallen me, yet I thank God sincerely, for that I have known the blameless lady. You, evil Death, enemy of mankind, be hateful to God everlastingly!

DEATH. Chapter Ten.

You have not drunk from the fountain of wisdom; I mark that from your words. You have not looked into the workings of Nature; you have not peered into the mixture of worldly things; you have not beheld the interplay of earthly events: you are an ignorant whelp. Mark how the delightful roses, the strongly-scented lilies in the gardens, how the nourishing herbs and the joy-giving flowers in the meadows, how the firm-standing stones and the high-grown trees in the rugged fields, how the strong bears and the powerful lions in eerie wildernesses, how the strong, tall-grown warriors, how the nimble, outstanding, erudite people capable of mastery in all spheres, and how all earthly creatures, however learned, however zestful, however strong they may be, however long they endure, however long they continue – one and all must come to nought and decay. Now when all human generations who have been or are yet to be must pass from being unto non-being, why should the Extolled One you bewep benefit from not being done to as all others are, and all others not being done to as she is? You yourself will not escape Us, however far this be from your thoughts at this moment. “Everyone come after!” each one of you must say. Your plaint is futile; it helps you nought; it issues from a torpid mind.

THE HUSBANDMAN. Chapter Eleven.

I rest my trust in God, who has power over me and you, that He will shield me from you, and take severe revenge on you for the wicked deed you have done to me. You declaim deceptions; you mingle falsehoods with truth, intent to beat the tremendous sorrow of my senses, of my mind, and of my heart, out of sight, out of mind, out of senses. You will not succeed, for I feel the smart of my agonising loss, the which I can never replace. She was tirelessly my healing medicine for all woe and adversity,

servant of God, attendant of my will, carer for my body, and guardian of my honour and her own by day and by night. Whatever was entrusted to her was returned entire, pure, and intact, often increased. Honour, propriety, chastity, generosity, fidelity, moderation, care and modesty always dwelt in her court; delicacy always held the mirror of honour before her eyes; God was her benevolent protector. He was also benevolent and gracious to me for her sake; health, happiness and fortune were mine through her. This she had earned and deserved of God, the pure housewife. May the merciful meed-giver to all faithful followers, most illustrious of lords, give her reward and wages of grace to her! Be gracious to her, more than I could wish for her! Oh, oh, oh! shameless murderer, Master Death, evil blasphemer! the executioner be your judge and tie you with the words “Forgive me!” to the torture cradle!⁴

DEATH. Chapter Twelve.

Could you measure, weigh, reckon and consider correctly, you would not discharge such words from a hollow head. You curse and demand vengeance without cause and without need. What use is such asininity? We have said before how all that is erudite, noble, honourable, healthy, and good, how all that has life, must perish by Our hand. Yet you yap and maintain that all your felicity lay in your pure and virtuous wife. If felicity lies in wives, as you believe, then We shall advise you to remain in felicity. But take care that it not turn to infelicity!

Tell Us: at first, when you took your laudable wife, did you find her excellent, or did you make her excellent? If you found her excellent, then seek sensibly: you will find many more pure and excellent women on Earth, one of whom may become your spouse. If, however, you made

⁴ In many places it was the custom for the torturer/executioner to ask forgiveness of the tortured/condemned.

her excellent, then rejoice: you are the living master who can fashion and educate a wife in excellence.

But I shall tell you something else: the more joy that fell to your share, the more sorrow will befall you. If you had abstained from joy, you would be relieved of sorrow now; the greater the joy you experience, the greater the sorrow of being deprived of joy. Wife, child, riches, and all earthly goods must bring some measure of joy at first, and a greater of sorrow at last. All pleasure on Earth must turn to sorrow; sorrow is love's end, the end of joy is grief, disgust must follow delight, the end of one's desires is repugnance – to such an end all living things must run. Learn a little more, if you wish to cackle with wisdom!

THE HUSBANDMAN. Chapter Thirteen.

After injury comes mockery; those in affliction feel this full well. And in this wise am I, the injured man, served by you. You have unbedded me from joy and wedded me to sorrow; so long as God wills, must I suffer this at your hands. However dull-witted I may be, however little wisdom I have absorbed from scholars, I yet know fine well that you are the robber of my honour, the thief of my joy, the stealer of my good days, the destroyer of my delights, and the devastator of all that procured and guaranteed me a blissful life. What shall I rejoice at now? Where shall I seek solace now? Where shall I have refuge now? Where shall I find a place of healing? Where shall I take trusty counsel? Gone is gone! All my delight has vanished from me before its time; it has slipped away from me too soon; you have torn her away from me all too hastily, the faithful one, the lovely one, when you so ruthlessly made a widower of me and orphans of my children. Miserable, alone, overwhelmed by grief, I remain without compensation from you; not yet have I been able to receive amends for your great misdeed. How about you, Master Death,

breaker of every marriage? No-one may gain any good from you; you will give nobody satisfaction after an evil deed; you will make amends to none. I find: compassion does not dwell inside you; curses are your daily fare; you are merciless without exception. Such benefactions as you confer on man, such mercy as man receives from you, such reward as you give man, such an end as you bring man, may He who has power over life and death send to you! Prince of Heavenly Hosts, make good to me my tremendous loss, my grievous harm, my unspeakable sorrow and deplorable orphanhood! Avenge me on the arch-roguer Death, God, avenger of all evil doing!

DEATH. Chapter Fourteen.

Idle words! Better to be silent than to chatter like a fool. For foolish words must lead to dispute, dispute to enmity, enmity to unrest, unrest to injury, injury to suffering, and suffering to remorse, for every muddled man. You declare war on Us. You complain that We have caused you sorrow through your oh so beloved wife. Yet she has been served with kindness and mercy. We have taken her into Our grace in joyful youth, in splendid state, in the prime of her life, in the highest esteem, at the best time, with honour inviolate. The philosophers extolled this, they craved this, when they said: "It is best to die when it is best to live." He did not die well who desired death; he has lived too long who calls on Us for death; woe and hardship are his, he who is overloaded with the burden of age: in the midst of his wealth he is poor!

In the year when the way to Heaven was opened, on the Feast Day of Heaven's Doorkeeper's Chains, when 6,599 years were counted since the beginning of the World,⁵ at the birth of a child, We bid the blessed

⁵ The Feast Day of St. Peter's Chains is August 1. The year referred to is 1400, which was intended to be a year of Plenary Indulgences, as 1350 and 1390 had been.

martyr vacate this short-lasting misery, with the intent that she come full of grace to the everlasting joy, eternal life, and endless rest, of God's inheritance, as she had richly deserved. However hostile you be towards Us, We shall wish and be glad that your soul abide with hers in the celestial dwelling-place up there, and your body be united with hers in the terrestrial grave down here. We would stand surety to you that you will benefit from her good deeds. Be silent, restrain yourself! As little as you can take its light away from the sun, its coldness from the moon, its heat from fire, and its wetness from water, so little can you deprive Us of Our power.

THE HUSBANDMAN. Chapter Fifteen.

Truly, a guilty man must utter extenuating evasions. As you are doing. It is your custom to show yourself sweet and sour, gentle and harsh, kind and unkind, to those you intend to deceive. So much is evident with me, however much you exonerate yourself. I know that I must live grief-stricken without the honourable, most beautiful woman because of your wrathful disfavour. I also well know that nobody wields such power save you and God. But I am not tormented thus by God: for if I had trespassed against God, which has, alas, oftentimes happened, He would have taken revenge on me, or the Blameless Lady⁶ would have redeemed me.

You are the malefactor. And so I would like to know who you are, what you are, where you are, whence you are, and what you are good for, that you possess so much power and have declared war on me without warning, laid waste my bliss-covered meadow, undermined and brought down my tower of strength.

Oh God, Comforter of all sorrowful hearts, comfort me and compensate me, this poor, grieving, miserable, lone-sitting man! Send,

⁶ The Virgin Mary.

Lord, plagues; remove, clap in irons and destroy abominable Death, enemy to you and to us all! Lord, in Your creation there is nothing more heinous, nothing more hideous, nothing more harmful, nothing more bitter, nothing more unjust, than Death! He afflicts and disorders Your entire earthly realm; he takes the useful away rather than the useless; the harmful, the old, the infirm, the useless, he often leaves here; the good and the useful, he snatches away, every one. Pass judgement, Lord, pass judgement on the false judge!

DEATH. Chapter Sixteen.

Stupid people name good what is evil, call evil what is good. As you are doing. You accuse Us of passing false judgement; you do Us injustice thereby. We shall enlighten you. You ask who We are: We are God's instrument, Master Death, an honest, active reaper. Our scythe works its way forward. It cuts down white, black, red, violet, green, blue, grey, yellow, and all kinds of lustrous flowers and grasses in its path, paying no heed to their splendour, their strength, their excellences. So the violet's beautiful colour and aromatic scent avail it nought. Behold: that is justice. The Romans and the poets have classified Us among the just, for they knew Us better than you do.

You ask what We are. We are nothing, and yet are something. Nothing, because We have neither life nor being nor substance, and We are not spirit, not visible, not tangible. Something, because We are the end of life, the end of being, the beginning of non-being, a midpoint between the two. We are a something that brings all people down. Huge giants must fall before Us; all that has life must be transformed by Us.

You ask where We are: We are indeterminable. But Our figure was found in a temple in Rome, painted on a wall, as a man with bound

eyes sitting on an ox⁷; this man held a hoe in his right hand and a shovel in his left hand, with which he was fighting on the ox. A great crowd of people was striking him, pelting him, and fighting him, all kinds of people, each one with the tools of his trade; even a nun with her psalter was there. They struck and pelted the man on the ox, he who signified Us; yet Death fought them off and buried them all. Pythagoras compares Us to the appearance of a man with the eyes of a basilisk, which roamed to the ends of the Earth – and every living creature had to die at their glance.

You ask whence We are. We are from the Earthly Paradise. God created Us there and called Us by Our true name when he said: “On the day that thou eatest of this fruit, thou shalt surely die.” And for that reason We call ourself: “We, Death, master and ruler on Earth, in the air, and in the waters of the sea.”

You ask what We are good for. You have heard before that We bring the world more benefit than harm. Now cease, rest content, and thank Us for having done you such a kindness!

THE HUSBANDMAN. Chapter Seventeen.

An old man may freely tell new tales; a learned man, unknown tales; a far-travelled man and one nobody dares gainsay, untruthful tales, for they speak of matters beyond man’s ken and so cannot be called to account. Now, if you are one of those old men, you may well be telling untruths. Although you came into existence in the worldly paradise as a reaper who seeks to be just, your scythe mows unevenly: it uproots splendid flowers and leaves thistles standing; the weeds remain, the good herbs must perish. You say that your scythe cuts straight ahead. How is it, then, that it leaves unscathed more thistles than flowers, more mice than camels,

⁷ Oxen were draught animals for carts which carried corpses in times of plague.

more evil people than good ones? Tell me, point them out to me with your finger: where are the worthy, estimable people of past days? I believe you have snatched them away. My beloved is away with them too; only her ashes remain. Where have they gone, those who lived on Earth and spoke with God, who won grace and favour and justice from His hands? Where have they gone, those who dwelt on Earth, who walked around beneath the stars and characterised the planets? Where have they gone, the thoughtful, the masterly, the righteous, the vigorous men, about whom the chronicles have so much to tell? You have murdered them all, and my darling likewise; the contemptible wretches are still here. Who bears the guilt for that? If you dared acknowledge the truth, Master Death, you would name yourself. You boast that you judge justly and the strokes of your scythe fell one after the other, sparing none. I stood by and saw with my own eyes two immense hosts – each numbered over three thousand men – fighting one another on a green heath. They waded in blood up to their calves. And you were among them, dashing and crashing with great zest all around. You killed quite a few of the army; you let quite a few live. I saw more servants than lords lying dead. You would pick one out from the rest like so many sleepy pears. Is that how to reap justly? Is that how to judge justly? Is that your scythe cutting straight ahead? Come here, dear children, come here! Let us ride out to meet and offer praise and show honour to Death, who judges so justly! God's judgement is hardly so just.



DEATH. Chapter Eighteen.

Who understands nothing of the matter, he can say nothing of the matter. And this has happened unto Us. We did not know that you were so excellent a man. We have known you for a long time; but We had forgotten you.

We were there when Lady Wisdom informed you with wisdom; when Solomon, on his death-bed, bequeathed his wisdom to you;⁸ when God bestowed on you all the power He had bestowed on Moses in Egypt; when you grabbed a lion by the leg and beat it against the wall.⁹ We saw

⁸ An ironic reference to Solomon's son Rehoboam, known for his folly.

⁹ The Lion-slayer may be Samson (Judges 14:5-6), but a closer parallel is the late 12th century German poem *König Rother*, in which the giant Asprian, dining at the table of Emperor Constantine, picks up the Emperor's lion by the leg when it tries to eat his food and smashes it against the wall (ll. 1456-1152).

you count the stars, enumerate the grains of sand and fishes in the sea, and tally the raindrops. We saw, with pleasure, you win your race against the hare. In Babylon, We saw you feast with great honour and dignity with the Sultan.¹⁰ When you carried the banner before King Alexander under which he defeated Darius, We looked on and gladly allowed you the honour. When, in Academia¹¹ and in Athens, you disputed marvellous matters with highly erudite masters, who spoke so learnedly about the divine, and you defeated them with knowledge, then We were especially delighted. When you instructed Nero to be righteous and be patient, We listened to you with approval.¹² We were amazed when you bore the Emperor Julius over the raging sea in a ship of reeds,¹³ defying the stormy gale. We saw you in your workshop, weaving a noble garment out of rainbows; angels, birds, animals, fishes, and all kinds of figures – among them the Owl and the Ape – were woven in the woof. We laughed especially hard and extolled you when, in Paris,¹⁴ you sat on the Wheel of Fortune, danced on an ox's hide,¹⁵ wrought Black Magic, and exorcised the Devil into a singularly-shaped glass. When God called you to His council to discuss the Fall of Lady Eve, then, more than ever before, did We become aware of your great wisdom.

If We had known who you were earlier, We would have followed your command; We would have allowed your wife and all mankind to

¹⁰ Possibly a reference to Haman (Esther 3-7) who, wishing the destruction of the Jews, ends up being hung on the high gallows he had intended for Mordecai. (Notes 8-10 are taken from Hilda Swinburne, 'Chapter XVIII of the "Ackermann aus Böhmen," *Modern Language Review* 48:2 (1953), pp. 159-166).

¹¹ Tepl misconstrues Plato's Academy as a town.

¹² The philosopher who taught Nero was the Stoic, Seneca (1 B.C. – A.D. 65).

¹³ Another misunderstanding is the "ship of reeds": the boatman in question, Amyclas, lived in a reed hut.

¹⁴ Paris was the most famous university in mediaeval Europe.

¹⁵ It was believed that sitting on an ox-skin would give insights into the future.

live for ever. And We would have done this to honour you alone: for you are, in truth, a wise ass!

THE HUSBANDMAN. Chapter Nineteen.

Men must often endure mockery and ill-treatment for the sake of the truth. And so is it with me. You credit me with doing impossible things, effecting unheard-of works. You do me exceeding violence, you have treated me most wickedly; and I am sorely grieved. Yet when I speak of this, you are hostile to me and swell with rage. Whoever commits evil and will not bend to accept punishment, but is arrogant and dismissive of all, let him take special care lest enmity befall him!

Take a leaf out of my book! However insufficiently, however excessively, however unkindly, however unjustly you have dealt with me, I show forbearance and do not take vengeance, as I should by rights. Even today I promise amendment: if my behaviour towards you has been improper or impolite in any way, then inform me: I shall gladly and readily make amends. But if this not be the case, then recompense me or instruct me how I can recover from my great heartache. Truly, never before has a man fared so badly. In spite of everything, you shall witness my reasonableness. Either you redress the evil you have done to my sorrow-averter, to me and my children, or you come with me in this matter before God, who is the righteous judge of me, and you, and all the world. You might perhaps move me by your entreaty; I would leave the matter in your hands; I trusted you to recognise your own unjustness and afterwards give me satisfaction for the grievous misdeed. Act with intelligence! Otherwise the hammer must strike the anvil, hardness encounter hardness, come what may!

DEATH. Chapter Twenty.

People are mollified by gentle words, moderation keeps people contented, patience brings people to honour. An angry man cannot judge another man. Had you spoken kindly to Us earlier, We would have kindly instructed you that you may not with good reason lament and bewep the death of your wife. Do you know nothing of the philosopher who wished to die in the bath, have you not read in his books that nobody should lament the death of a mortal?¹⁶ If you know it not, then know it now: as soon as a human is born, so soon does he drink to seal the contract of death. The end is brother to the beginning. He who is sent out is obliged to return. Nobody may set himself against what must come to pass one day. None may speak against what all humans must suffer. A man shall return what he has borrowed. All humans live as strangers on this Earth. They must pass from something to nothing. The life of man runs away on fast feet: this moment, living; in the blink of an eye, dead.

In short: every human owes us the debt of death and has death as his inheritance. If you weep for your wife's youth, you do wrong; as soon as a human comes into life, so soon is he old enough to die. Perhaps you think that old age is a precious treasure? No, it is infirm, laborious, misshapen, cold, and displeasing to all people. It is good for nothing and no use for anything: ripe apples easily fall into manure; ripening pears easily fall into puddles.

If you lament her beauty, you behave like a child: the beauty of each and every human must be destroyed by either old age or death. All rose-coloured little mouths must go ashen; all red little cheeks must turn pale; all bright little eyes must dim. Have you not read where Hermes, the philosopher, teaches that a man should beware of beautiful women, saying: "What is beautiful is difficult to keep, even with daily care, for it

¹⁶ Seneca.

is coveted by all; what is ugly is easy to keep, for it is displeasing to all.”
Let it go! Do not lament a loss you cannot retrieve!

THE HUSBANDMAN. Chapter Twenty-One.

“Accept well-meant admonition with good grace: that is the act of a wise man,” I hear the sages declare. Your admonition is also bearable. Now, if a good admonisher is also a good counsellor, then advise and instruct me how I am to excavate, exterminate and expel such unspeakable pain, such deplorable sorrow, such immeasurable grief from my heart, from my mind and from my senses. By God, unspeakable heartbreak befell me when the chaste, faithful and dependable blessing of my house was so hastily torn away from me. She is dead, I am a widower, and my children are become orphans.

Oh Master Death, all the world raises a cry against you, and so do I. Yet never was there a man so evil that he was not good somehow. Advise me, help me, direct me how I may cast such heavy sorrow from my heart, and how so pure a mother may be replaced for my children! Else must I be always mad with rage and they be sad always. And you need not take this amiss of me; for I see that, even among the unreasoning beasts, an inborn urge drives one spouse to mourn the other’s death.

You owe me help, advice, and redress, for you have done me harm. If this does not happen, then even if God in His omnipotence had nowhere the means for vengeance, it would have to be avenged nonetheless, and should this cause shovel and hoe to be busy once more.

DEATH. Chapter Twenty-Two.

Gack, gack, gack, gabbles the goose; one may preach whatever one wants. And such is the yarn that you spin. We have already explained to you that the death of the dead should not be lamented. Since We are a toll-

collector, to whom every human must pay the tax and toll of their lives, why do you resist? Truly, he who would deceive Us only deceives himself.

Now listen, and let this sink in: life is created for the sake of Death. Were there no life, We would not be, and Our office were nought; nor would the world order exist. Either you are full of sorrow, or unreason is dwelling within you. If you are without reason, then implore God to bestow reason on you! If you are full of sorrow, however, then break off and let go, and hold this in your mind: man's life on Earth is but a breath of wind!

You ask for advice on how to put the grief from your heart. Long ago, Aristotle taught you that joy, sorrow, fear, and hope, these four emotions, worry all the world, especially those who cannot take guard against them. Joy and fear shorten, sorrow and hope lengthen, the duration of time. Whoever does not banish these four completely from his mind must be anxious at all times. After joy, affliction, after pleasure, sorrow: such is the way of this world. Pleasure and sorrow must always be bound together. The end of one is the beginning of the other. Sorrow and pleasure are nothing other than a man holding a thought fast and refusing to let go; likewise, the undemanding can never be poor, and the insatiable can never be rich: for contentment and discontentment are not to be found in possessions, nor in external things, but only in the mind. Whoever will not drive all joy from his heart must bear present sorrow at all times. Drive the remembrance of joy from your heart, from your senses, from your mind, and at once you will be relieved from sorrow. The moment you have lost something you cannot regain, make as if it had never been yours! And your sorrow will leave you that instant.

If you will not do this, then further grief awaits you. For heartache will befall you after the death of each child, and heartache all of them

after your death; heartache for you and for them, when the time comes to part from one another. You want their mother to be replaced. If you can bring back years passed, words spoken and maidenhood lost, then you will bring their mother back to your children. I have counselled you enough. Can you understand, Bluntaxe?

THE HUSBANDMAN. Chapter Twenty-Three.

In time, one gains awareness of such truth as this: the more you have learned, the more you understand. Your words are sweet and pleasant, as I am now beginning to perceive. But if joy, love, delight and amusement were banished from the world, then the world would be in a bad way. I shall call the Romans to witness. They taught their children to follow their example and hold joy in honour, to tourney, joust, dance, race, jump, and pursue all kinds of respectable diversions in their leisure time, to the intent that this would keep them from doing evil. For the thoughts of man's mind cannot be idle. The mind must be thinking good or evil at all times; not even in sleep may it rest. If good thoughts were taken away from the mind, evil ones would enter. Good out, evil in; evil out, good in; and this exchange must last until the end of the world. Ever since joy, propriety, modesty, and other good manners have been driven from the world, the world has overflowed with malice, infamy, faithlessness, mockery and betrayal; as you may see every day.

Now, if I were to drive the memory of my dearly beloved from my mind, a bad memory would return to my head: all the more reason for keeping my dearly beloved in constant remembrance. When great, heartfelt affection is transformed into great, heartfelt affliction, who can forget that so soon? That is what wicked people do. Good friends think constantly of one another; distant roads, long years, do not separate close friends. Though she be dead to me in the flesh, she is ever alive in my

memory. Master Death, you must advise more honestly, if your counsel is to bring any benefit; or else you must, Master Bat, bear as hitherto the enmity of birds!

DEATH. Chapter Twenty-Four.

Joy, but none too great, sorrow, but none too deep, should the wise man keep to during gain or loss. You are not following this. He who asks for advice but will not follow the counsel given cannot be advised. Our well-meant advice is lost on you. Now whether you like it or loathe it, We shall bring the truth to light for you: listen who will.

Your short understanding, your deficient mind, your hollow heart, would make more of people than they have the power to be. Make of a man what you will, yet he cannot be more than what I shall say to you, begging the leave of all pure women: a human is conceived in sin, nourished in his mother's womb with unclean, unspeakable feculence, he is born naked, he is a besmeared beehive; an object of utter disgust, a creature of unclean instincts, a manure-barrel, food for worms, a stinkhouse, a sickening swill-bucket, a rancid carcass, a mildewed crate, a bottomless sack, a perforated pocket, a bellows, a gluttonous maw, a reeking clay-crucible, a malodorous pail of slops, a deceptive death's face, a loamy robber's den, an insatiable water-bucket, a painted phantom. Hearken who will: every completely created human has nine holes in his body; out of all these there flows such repellent and loathsome filth that nothing could be more disgusting. Never have you seen so handsome a human that, had you the eyes of a lynx, and your gaze could penetrate to his insides, you would not shudder at the sight. Strip and take away the dressmaker's finery from a lovely lady, and you will see a deplorable puppet, a swiftly withering flower, an illusion of little durance and a soon decomposing clod of earth! Show me a handful of beauty of all the belles

who lived a hundred years ago, excluding those painted on walls, and you shall have the Kaiser's crown! Let love pass away, let grief pass away! Let the Rhine run its course like other waters, you wise lad from Assville!

THE HUSBANDMAN. Chapter Twenty-Five.

Fie to you, you evil sack of shame! How you belittle, maltreat, and dishonour noble mankind, God's most beloved creature, thereby detracting from the deity! Only now do I see that you are mendacious and were not created in Paradise as you claimed. Had you come into existence in Paradise, you would know that God created man and all other things, and created in perfection; He set man above them all, entrusted him with dominion over them all, and placed them beneath his feet, so that man should rule over the beasts of the land, the birds of the air, the fishes of the waters, and all fruits of the soil; as, indeed, he does. Now if man were as despicable, evil and unclean as you say, then truly, God would have been bad and futile in His working. Had God's almighty and perfect Hand created so unclean and ordurous a human as you say, He would be a culpable and tainted Creator. It would not then be true that God had created all things, and man over them all, in perfection.

Master Death, give up your pointless yapping! You sully God's most exquisite work. Angels, devils, sprites, and wailers,¹⁷ all these are spirits who exist under the absolute governance of God; man is the most worthy, the most skilful, and the most free, of all God's works. God formed him in His own image, as He Himself said at the dawn of Creation.

Where has a master-builder ever created so skilled and versatile, so artful and small, a sphere as the human head? Inside it there are marvellous powers, hidden from all spirits. In the eyeball is the sense of

¹⁷ "klagemuter" – similar to banshees.

sight, the most reliable of witnesses, masterfully fashioned in the form of a mirror; it penetrates as far as the clear circle of the heavens. In the ears is the far-reaching sense of hearing, insurpassably covered with a thin membrane to perceive and distinguish many kinds of sweet sounds. In the nose is the sense of smell, entering and leaving through two holes, cleverly furnished for the pleasant enjoyment of all sweet and delightful scents; that is nourishment for the soul. In the mouth are teeth, baggers which devour the body's aliment every day; also, the tongue's thin blade to bring people's thoughts clearly to others; and the sense of taste, pleasurably testing every kind of food. Besides, in the head, are the thoughts coming from the depths of the heart, through which mankind rapidly reaches as far as he wills; with his thoughts, man climbs hand over hand towards, and even beyond, the divine. Man alone possesses reason, that noble treasure. He alone has the consummate form whose like none but God is able to fashion, in which all masterly accomplishments, all aptitudes and skills, are wisely set in motion. Give up, Master Death! you are the enemy of man: and so you speak no good of him.

DEATH. Chapter Twenty-Six.

Rebukes, curses, and imprecations, no matter how many, can fill no sack, no matter how small. Moreover: one will get nowhere contending with words against garrulous people. Be it as it may with your claim that man is brimful of knowledge, beauty and dignity: he must, notwithstanding, fall into Our net; he must be drawn into Our snare.¹⁸ Grammar, the fundament of all proper speech, will not help him with her precise and carefully selected locutions. Rhetoric, the flowery foundation of eloquence, will not help him with her ornate and neatly-embellished

¹⁸ Cf. Ecclesiastes 9:12.

phrases. Logic, the subtle arbitrator of truth and untruth, will not help him with her subliminal distortion, with the crooked ways that bend truth out of shape. Geometry, the ascertainer, assessor, and surveyor of the Earth, will not help him with her unerring measurements, or with her accurate plumb-level. Arithmetic, skilled balancer of numbers, will not help him with her calculation, with her reckoning, with her dexterous ciphers. Astronomy, Mistress of the Heavenly Bodies, will not help him with her astral power, with the influence of the planets. Music, the handy arranger of song and voice, will not help him with her sweet melodies, with her harmonious voices. Philosophy, field of wisdom, tilled and sown, and grown ripe, for cognition of Nature and the creation of ethical living; Physic, with her various salutary draughts; Geomancy, skilful respondent to all kinds of questions from the configuration of the planets and the signs of the zodiac; Pyromancy, creator of swift and truthful prophecies from fire; Hydromancy, designer of the future by dint of the movements of water; Astrology, expositor of earthly events through the course of the Heavens; Chiromancy, splendid soothsayer from the hand and the lines of the palm; Necromancy, mighty power which compels spirits through sacrifices and rings and seals; Alchemy, with the marvellous transformation of metals; the *Ars Notoria*,¹⁹ with its sweet prayers, with its strong incantations; the Augur, versed in the language of birds and so the true prophet of future events; the *Haruspex*,²⁰ interpreting the future from the smoke of the altar-sacrifice; *Paedomancy*,²¹ sorceress with children's intestines, and *Ornithomancy*, sorceress with a black hen's guts; the lawyer, the unscrupulous Christian, will not help him with his just and unjust pleadings or with his crooked judgements. These arts

¹⁹ A 13th-century Latin book of magic.

²⁰ A religious official in ancient Rome who divined the future from examining the entrails of sacrificed animals.

²¹ Here: foretelling the future from inspecting the entrails of murdered small boys.

here described, and all those related, all avail nought: every man must be undone by Us one day, fullled in Our fulling-trough and scoured in Our cleaning-barrel. Believe it, you haughty plough-jobber!

THE HUSBANDMAN. Chapter Twenty-Seven.

One should not recompense evil for evil;²² man should practise patience, as the teachings of virtue prescribe. I shall tread this path; perchance this will turn your impatience to patience.

I gather from your speech: you believe that you have advised me most truly. Now if truthfulness dwells in you, advise me truly, as though bound by oath: what direction shall my life take now? Previously I lived in dear and happy wedlock; whither should I turn now? To the secular or the spiritual order? Both stand open to me. In my mind, I considered all kinds of human existence, then examined and assessed them with care: I found them to be imperfect, frail and somewhat sinful. I am in doubt where to turn: every human station is tainted with defects. Master Death, advise, advice is of the essence! In my thoughts I find, imagine and believe, that never again will any soul know so pure and divine a home and existence. I declare: if I could know that I would thrive in marriage as I formerly did, I would live in that state for as long as my life lasted. Blissful, joyful, merry and cheerful is the man with a respectable wife, wherever he may be. It is a pleasure for such a man to struggle and strive for his bread; it is also a pleasure for him to requite honour with honour, fidelity with fidelity, and blessing with blessing. He does not need to watch over her; the best watch is that which a chaste wife imposes on herself. He who cannot believe and trust his wife must live perpetually caught in care.

²² Romans 12:17.

Lord of the Heavenly Lands, Prince of the Many Mansions,²³ happy the man you endow with so pure a bedfellow! He should look up to Heaven and thank you with upraised hands every day.

Do what is best, Master Death, multipotent lord!

DEATH. Chapter Twenty-Eight.

To praise without end, to revile without purpose, that is the custom of many whatever they undertake. Praise and abuse should be meet and measured, so they be ready at hand when the need for either arises.

You praise married life beyond measure. But We shall inform you about the conjugal state, not wishing to offend all pure women. As soon as a man takes a wife, so soon does he and his other enter Our prison. All at once a man has an obligation, a dependent, a pull-sledge, a yoke, a harness, a burden, a heavy load, a nagging shrew, a daily rasp, which he cannot rightly rid himself of unless We grant him Our grace. A married man has thunder and hailstorms, foxes and snakes, in his house every day. A wife strives all her days to become the master. If he pulls up, she pulls down; if he wants it this wise, she wants it otherwise; if he wants to go here, she wants to go there – he will grow weary of this game and suffer defeat every day. She can deceive, hoodwink, flatter, intrigue, caress, grouch, laugh and weep in the twinkling of an eye; all this is innate to her. Sick for work, but healthy for lust; and tame or wild, as suits her purpose. She needs no adviser to give contrary replies. At all times she endeavours not to do what she is bidden, and to do what is forbidden. This is too sweet for her, and that is too sour; this is too much, and that is too little; now it is too early, now it is too late – in this way, everything is denigrated. If she ever praises anything, it must be turned on a lathe with reproach; and then the praise will be larded with mockery. No remedy

²³ Cf. John 14:2.

can help a man living in wedlock: if he is too kind, if he is too harsh, he is punished either way. Being kind and severe, half and half, is also no remedy: it will always incur harm or blame. Every day, a new imposition or bickering; every week, displeasing demands or sulks; every month, new pollution or terrors; every year, new clothes or wrangling day after day: all these must a married man endure, do whatever he may. We shall draw a veil over the shortcomings of the night, for Our age fills Us with shame. Did We not wish to spare the decent women, we could sing and say much more about the indecent ones. Consider what you are praising: you cannot tell gold from lead!

THE HUSBANDMAN. Chapter Twenty-Nine.

“Those who disparage women are perforce disparaged themselves,” say the masters of truth. How does it fare with you now, Master Death? Your irrational reviling of women, though it be done with their leave, truly brings infamy upon you and ignominy upon them. In the writings of many a wise master, one finds that, without a woman at the helm, no man may be steered to happiness; having a wife and child is not the slightest part of earthly joy. With this truth did Philosophy, the wise Mistress, bring peace to the mind of Boethius, the consolation-giving Roman. Every outstanding and reasonable man will bear me witness: no male virtue can continue to exist unless it be directed by female virtue. Let people say what they will: a respectable, beautiful, chaste woman without a trace of dishonour is the finest feast for the eyes in this world. I never yet saw a man so manly and spirited that he did not take courage from a woman’s guiding encouragement. Wherever the virtuous gather, one sees every day: in all open spaces, at every court, in every tournament, with every army on the march, women always bring out what is best. Whoever is in a lady’s service must refrain from every misdeed. Worthy

ladies teach proper behaviour and respectability in their school. Women hold earthly delight in their power; they cause all courtly deeds and diversions on Earth to be done in their honour. A pure lady's wagging finger exhorts and chastises a good man more than any weapon. Without rhetorical embellishment, and in few words: noble ladies are the support, the security, and the increase of all the world.

Now, there must be lead among gold, corncockles among wheat, counterfeits among all kinds of coins, and wenchies among women. But the good should not suffer for the bad. Mark my words, Captain of Conflict!

DEATH. Chapter Thirty.

A fool takes a cob for a nugget of gold, a knuckle for topaz, a pebble for a ruby; the idiot calls a barn a haystack, the Danube the Sea, a buzzard a falcon. Just so do you praise what delights the eyes, while paying no thought to causes. For you do not know that everything in the world is either the desire of the flesh, or the desire of the eyes, or the arrogance of life. The desire of the flesh is inclined to lust; the desire of the eyes to possessions or estate; and the arrogance of life to honour. Possessions bring avarice and greed, lust leads to lewdness and lechery, and honour brings ambition and vanity. Fear and audacity must always grow from possessions, malice and sin from lust, vanity from honour. Could you comprehend this, you would find frivolity all over the world; and should joy or sorrow then befall you, you would suffer it in patience and leave Us unreproached.

As well as an ass can play the lyre, so well do you grasp the truth. That is why you give us so much trouble. When We parted the youth Pyramus from the maiden Thisbe, who were one heart and one soul; when we deprived King Alexander of world dominion; when we

destroyed Paris of Troy and Helen of Greece: we were not rebuked so severely as we are now by you. We did not meet with such vexation for Emperor Charlemagne, Markgrave William, Dietrich von Bern, Boppe the Strong, or horn-skinned Siegfried.²⁴ Many lament Aristotle and Avicenna to this day; yet We have remained unimpeached. When David, the patient King, and Solomon, the Shrine of Wisdom, died, We were thanked more than cursed. Those who were in days of yore have all gone; you and all who are now or are yet to be, must follow them. Yet We, Death, remain, the master here!

THE HUSBANDMAN. Chapter Thirty-One.

A man is often condemned by his own words, especially he who says now one thing, now something else. You stated earlier that you were something and yet not a spirit, but you were the end of life and all those on Earth were entrusted to you. But now you say that we must all be no more and you, Master Death, remain the master here. Two contradictory statements cannot both be true. If all of us are to depart this life, and if all life on earth is to have an end, and you are, as you say, the end of life, then I deduce: when there is life no longer, there will be dying and death no longer – So where will you go then, Master Death? You may not dwell in Heaven, it is kept only for good spirits, and you, according to your own words, are no spirit. Now when you have nothing more to do

²⁴ Markgrave William, the hero of Wolfram von Eschenbach's poem *Willehalm* (ca.1215-18), is Saint William of Gellone (c.755-812/814), Count of Toulouse, who fought the Saracens in the south of France. Dietrich von Bern, based on misty reminiscences of the Ostrogothic King of Italy Theodoric the Great (reigned 493-526), is the hero of the first cycle of poems in *Das Heldenbuch*, a collection of metrical romances of the 13th century. Boppe the Strong is an often named but elusive hero. Horn-skinned Siegfried is 'Der gehörnte Siegfried', the hero of an ultimately disappointing *Volksbuch* and, originally, of an ancient poem, 'Das Lied vom Hürnen Seyfrid' ('The Lay of Horn-skinned Siegfried'), which presents a more positive image of the hero Siegfried than is found in the *Nibelungenlied*.

on Earth, and Earth exists no more, then you must straight to Hell; and there you must groan without end. There, both the quick and the dead will be avenged on you. No-one can shape his course by your flighty words.

Have all earthly beings really been created and fashioned so evil, wretched and useless? That accusation has never been levelled against the eternal Creator since the dawn of the world. God has loved virtue, hated evil, and noticed and punished sin hitherto. I believe He will continue to do so henceforth. Ever since the days of my youth, I have heard it read and have learnt how God created everything. You say that all earthly creatures must have an end. Plato and other philosophers teach that: in all things, the destruction of one is the birth of another; all things are founded upon eternity; and the whole course of events in the heavens and on Earth is creation through transmutation from the one to the other everlastingly. With your wavering words on which nobody may depend, you would frighten me from my complaint. So I appeal to God, my Redeemer, to appear with you, Master Death, my undoer! God give you a dire Amen!

DEATH. Chapter Thirty-Two.

Often a man, having launched into speech, believes he cannot cease unless he be interrupted. And you are cut from this cloth. We have said and We say it still – and let this be the end of it –: the Earth, and all it contains, is founded upon inconstancy. In this age, she has become changeable, for all things are turned upside-down: the back has moved to the front, and the front to the back; depths have shifted to mountains, and heights to valleys; wrong has been made right: all through the agency of the great multitude of mankind. I have thrust the whole human race into fire's lasting flame. The chance of finding a good, true, and constant

friend is almost as slight on this Earth as that of grasping a beam of light. All humans are more inclined to evil than to good. When someone does any good nowadays, he is acting out of fear of Us. All people, with all their works, are nought but vanity today. Their bodies, their wives, their children, their honour, their possessions, and all their powers, all fly away; they disappear in a moment; they dissipate in the wind, neither shine nor shadow can remain. Look, see, observe and note, what the children of men are doing on this Earth: how they search through hill and vale, wood and field, mountain and wilderness, the bottom of the sea, the bowels of the Earth, for the sake of earthly goods, in rain, winds, thunder, showers, and in every foul weather; how they drive straight shafts and deep tunnels and mines down into the earth, bore through Earth's veins, seek glittering ores, which they love before all things on account of their rarity; how they fell trees in forests, weave garments, paste houses together like swallows, plant and graft orchards, till the earth, grow vines, build mills, increase tithes, practise fishing, venery and hunting, drive large herds of cattle, keep a great many maids and manservants, ride high on horseback, possess chests and houses full of gold, silver, precious stones, costly garments and all kinds of other goods, indulge in lust and pleasure, which they pursue and strive after day and night – what is all this? All is vanity and a harming of the soul, as transitory as the yesterday that has gone. They gain this through war and rapine; the more that is possessed, the more that is robbed. They bequeath it to further disputes and discord. Oh, mortal man is constantly in anxiety, in affliction, in sorrow, in care, in fear, in horror, in suffering, in sickness, in distress, in mourning, in sadness, in grief, in misery, and in all kinds of reverses; and the more worldly wealth a man has, the more reverses he meets. But the worst of all is that a human cannot know when, where or how We shall suddenly pounce upon him and drive him down the way of

all flesh. This burden must be borne by masters and servants, husbands and wives, rich and poor, good and evil, young and old. O painful prospect, and how little heed the witless pay you; when it is too late, then they would all be virtuous. It is all vanity over vanity and troubling of the soul.

So have done with your plaint! Enter whichever estate you will, you will find failings and vanity! Now depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and hold to it with constancy;²⁵ love a pure and clean conscience above all earthly things! And to prove that we have advised you correctly, We shall accompany you to God, the Eternal, the Great, and the Mighty.

THE JUDGEMENT OF GOD. Chapter Thirty-Three.

Springtide, summer, autumn and winter, the four revivers and supporters of the year, fell into disaccord and fiery dispute. Every one of them boasted of the beneficence in their workings, and every one would be the best.

Spring said that he revives all fruit and makes it luscious. Summer said that he ripens and readies all fruit for harvest. Autumn said that he gathers and brings all fruit into barns, cellars and houses. Winter said that he consumes and expends all fruit and drives all poisonous vermin away. They boasted and quarrelled with vehemence. But they had forgotten that they were boasting of delegated powers.

And this is exactly what both of you are now doing. The plaintiff laments his loss, as though it were his rightful heritage; he does not consider that it was granted him by Us. Death boasts of mighty dominion,

²⁵ “kere von dem bosen vnd tue das gute; suche den fride vnd tue in stete.” Cf. Luther’s Bible, Psalm 34:15: “Laß ab vom Bösen und tu Gutes; suche Frieden und jage him nach!” In the Authorised Version, this is line 14: ‘Depart from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it’.

which he has only received in fief from Us. This one laments the loss of what does not belong to him, that one boasts of a power that does not come from himself. However, the quarrel is not entirely without reason, and you have both contested well: the one is compelled by his sorrow to bring his plaint, the other by the plaintiff's contestation to tell the truth. So plaintiff, yours is the honour; Death, yours is the victory! Every man is obliged to deliver his life to Death, his body to the earth, and his soul to Us.

Chapter Thirty-Four. THE HUSBANDMAN'S PRAYER FOR THE SOUL OF HIS WIFE.

²⁶Ever-watchful Watchman over the world, God of gods, wonderful Lord of lords, almighty Spirit of spirits, Prince of all principdoms, fountain from which all goodness flows, Saint of saints, Crowner and Crown, Rewarder and Reward, Elector in whose electorate lies all electoral privilege: happy the man who has Thee as his liege lord! Joy and Delight of angels, Impresser of the highest forms, Greyhead and Fresh-Faced Youth: hear my prayer!

O Light, which receives none other light; Light, which dims and darkens all external light; Radiance, by which all other radiance is occulted; Radiance, compared with which all lights are as darkness; Light, in which every shadow shines bright; Light, which spake in the Beginning: "Let there be light!"; Fire, which burns forever, unextinguished; Beginning and End: hear my prayer!

Salvation and Bliss over all salvation and bliss; Path without pitfalls to life everlasting; Best, without which there is no better; Life, for

²⁶ In the German, the first letter of every paragraph forms an acrostic of the author's name: either Johan, or Johannes, or Johannes MA, depending on the editor. The MA may stand for Margaretha or *magister artium* (Master of Arts).

which all things live; Truth of all truths; Wisdom, which comprises all wisdom; Ruler of all potentates; right and just Hand; Watcher over and healer of all infirmities; Disposer of every power; Warrantor, whom all good things approach and hold fast to, like bees to their queen; Cause of all things: hear my prayer!

Doctor healing every sickness; Master of Masters; only Father of all Creation; Overseer always and everywhere present; autonomous Guide from the mother's womb into the earthly grave; Shaper of every form; Fundament of all good works; Lover of cleanliness, Hater of filthiness, Rewarder of all good deeds; the only just Judge; the One, from whose Beginning nothing is ever lost in eternity: hear my prayer!

Helper in every anxiety; firm Knot, which none can untie; perfect Being, potent in every perfection; true Knower of all secret matters hidden from all; Dispenser of eternal joys, Disturber of earthly delights; Host, Retainer, and Household Companion of all good people; Hunter, to whom every trail is visible; choice Infusion of all minds; Ruler and central point who holds all spheres together; gracious Harkener to all who cry to You: hear my prayer!

Helper at hand for all those in need; Releaser from mourning for all who hope in You; Replenisher of the hungry; Refreshment of the needy; Seal of the very highest Majesty; Maintainer of the harmony of Heaven; only Knower of all human thoughts, incomparable Creator of all dissimilar human faces; sovereign Planet of planets; all-powerful Influence over the stars; mighty and winsome Steward of the Heavenly Court; Law, through which all heavenly order may never move out of its eternal hinges; resplendent Sun: hear my prayer!

Eternal Lamp, eternal everlight; true-steering Skipper, your cog never founders; Standard-bearer, beneath whose banner nobody knows defeat; Founder of Hell, Creator of Earth; Restrainer of the sea,

Compounder of the changeful breezes; Fanner of fire's heat; Creator of every element; only Master-smith of thunder, lightning, mist, hail, snow, rain, rainbow, mildew, wind, frost, and all their actions; mighty Duke of the whole heavenly host; Emperor, whose command none can disobey; gentlest, strongest, most merciful Creator: take pity and hear my prayer!

Treasure, from which all treasures issue forth; Source, from which all pure springs flow; Guide, with whom none can go astray; only Creator with power to make something from nothing and nothing from something; omnipotent Invigorator, Preserver, and Annihilator of all ephemeral beings, limited-life beings, and everlasting beings, whose Being, in its immanence, none can ascertain, outline, design or depict; highest Good over all goods; most perfect eternal Lord Jesus: receive with grace the spirit, receive in mercy the soul of my dearly beloved wife! Grant her eternal rest, refresh her with the dew of Your grace, take her into care under the shadow of Your wings, take her, Lord, into perfect contentment, where the lowest find content as do the greatest! Let her live, Lord, whence she had come, in Your kingdom with the eternal and blessed spirits!

I ache for Margaretha, my chosen wife. Grant her, gracious Lord, that she eternally behold, contemplate, and take delight in herself in the mirror of Your Almighty, Eternal Divinity, in which all choirs of angels find their light!

All that belongs beneath the Eternal Standard-Bearer's banner, whatever kind of creature it be, help me in saying blissfully and devoutly, from the bottom of my heart: Amen!



DEDICATORY EPISTLE

Letter to Peter Rother, burgher of Prague, accompanying the recently composed opusculum *Husbandman*.

The predisposed to the well-disposed, the dedicated to the devoted, the companion to the compeer, Johannes von Tepl to Peter von Tepl, the burgher of Saaz to the burgher of Prague, sends friendly and brotherly love.

Love, which united us in the days of our blossoming youth, admonishes and compels me to seek consolation in reminiscences of you, and since you recently requested to receive novelties of and from the field of rhetorical sweetness – in which I, having missed the harvest, am gleaning some ears – I herewith proffer you this rough and rustic aggregation, pieced together from the German language, which comes fresh from the anvil. Yet in it you will find, by means of the uncouth matter aforementioned, an invective against the ineluctable destiny of Death in which the main forms of rhetoric find expression. Here a long subject is abridged, here a short one is protracted; at the same time, praise of things, even now and then of one and the same thing, is combined with

censure. Here can be found complete periods, balanced expressions, ambiguity together with synonymity. Here is a rushing stream of phrases, clauses, and periods in novel forms. There, jest plays in the same place with reticent earnestness. Metaphor is of service, Declamation rails and is assuaged, Irony smiles, and decorative words and sentences do their duty together with rhetorical tropes. Furthermore, many other, and so to speak all, the peaks of eloquence that are possible in this clumsy language of ours, even though uncultivated, are here in lively motion, as the attentive listener will discover. Finally, I wish to delight you with smooth Latin ears from my unfruitful field. For the rest, I commend the bringer of this, Nicholas Johlinni, my beloved pupil, to that faithful and enduring benevolence you have always shown to me. May all else be as it was, unless it has changed for the better.

Given under the authorisation of my notarial seal on the Eve of Saint Bartholomew²⁷ in the year 14(28).²⁸



²⁷ August 23rd.

²⁸ This letter dates from 1404 at the latest; 1428 is a scribal error.

About the Revised Translation (2026)

Recently, I chanced upon Keith Spalding's edition of the *Ackermann* (Oxford, 1950). I thereupon re-read my old translation and found it wanting in certain respects. Of course, no translation can be perfect, any more than its source material can be, and the translator's task, which already involves making thousands of small choices, is rendered more challenging when there is no established original text. Sixteen manuscripts (divided into four groups) and seventeen early printed sources of Tepl's *Ackermann* exist, and they all differ, with the earliest MS. dating from 1449, or nearly half a century after the original. Nevertheless, there were mistakes to be corrected, undeniable, glaring, head-against-wall-banging mistakes, and variant – often, more convincing – readings to be embraced. Furthermore, stylistic considerations made it desirable to retouch some (well, many) sentences.

Having based my original translation on the Reclam edition I used as an undergraduate at St. Andrews (ed. Wolfgang Mieder, 1984), and relied too heavily on Felix Genzmer's modern German translation, I also consulted the more recent Reclam edition (ed. and trans. Christian Kiening, 2000) in making this revised translation, as well as Ernest Kirrman's 1958 translation, *Death and the Plowman*, which errs on the side of archaic conjugations (-est, -eth) but is often excellent in the choice of word. It also has the merit of being available online! Unfortunately, I have not been able to access the editions of the *Ackermann* by Maurice O'Connell Walshe (London, 1951; Hull, 1982) or the translations by K.W. Maurer, *Death and the Ploughman: An Argument and a Consolation from the Year 1400* (London, 1947); by Alexander Henderson and Elizabeth Henderson, *The Plowman from Bohemia* (New York, 1966); or by Rosalind Hibbins, *Death and the Ploughman: A Confrontation between Man and Death, Resolved by the Judgement of God* (Oxford, 2000).

Critics have debated three main issues: which of the early sources is closest to Tepl's original text, whether the *Ackermann* is mediaeval or humanist in its outlook, and whether this work was a heartfelt lament or a rhetorical exercise. With regard to the last point, it is established that Tepl was survived by a wife called Clara, but it is not known if she was his second wife. Whatever the facts and actual motivation may be, it is ultimately Tepl's treatment of his subject which matters. The fact that much of the final prayer for the wife's soul is a paraphrase of Johann von Neumarkt's (1310-1380) *Buch der Liebkosung* ('Book of Adoration,' 1355), a translation of the pseudo-Augustinian 13th century *Soliloquiae animae ad deum* ('Soliloquies of the soul to God'), does not make it any less moving. If it was Tepl's intent to demonstrate the affective power of rhetoric, the ability of language to either sublimate or simulate strong emotion, he achieved his aim with striking success. He treats a theme which has haunted the thoughts of mankind since primordial times – the human confrontation with death – in a linguistic tour-de-force which does justice to the profundity and majesty of the subject-matter, and this masterful prose has ensured that *Der Ackermann*, extremely popular at first, with seventeen printed editions between c.1460 and 1547, and rediscovered several times, in the 18th century, in 1877, and in 1917, has become as timeless as its theme.