
MEDIEVAL ATTITUDES TOWARD LIFE ON EARTH

Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.

And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life;

Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field:

In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.

Genesis iii. 16–19

The words with which the Lord God cursed Adam and Eve after their transgression formed, for many articulate men in the Middle Ages, an accurate image of human life: something which was wretched because the Creator had made it so. Such thinkers believed that man had to acknowledge the wretchedness of his life and feel contempt for the world in which he lived in order to attain spiritual salvation. Christianity, by teaching that eternal life in heaven is the reward for right behavior on earth, exalts the values of the future life over those of the present. Many medieval men, characteristically extremist, tended to make of the relative an absolute: if the life to come is perfectly good, then it seemed logical to suppose that the present life must be perfectly bad, so that even what seems good about it must, in fact, be evil. Had not Christ promised the Kingdom of Heaven to those who were most wretched on earth, and warned that a rich man would have great difficulty getting into heaven? Therefore it seemed to many a fair inference that those who were not miserable forfeited the Kingdom of Heaven. Thus by the Old Testament and the New, wretchedness seemed confirmed as the inevitable and proper condition for mankind.

But even in an era when life was—from the modern point of view—wretched for most men in fact as well as in theory, the average man was reluctant to stop pursuing whatever apparent goods life had to offer. It thus became the responsibility of his spiritual and moral mentors to try to persuade him to scorn the present while making sure of the future. The title of a late 12th-century tract by Pope Innocent III—*Contempt for the World; or, The Wretchedness of the Human Condition*—would serve to describe a very large amount of medieval writing designed to give the reader a correct set of values. Characteristic literary expressions of this doctrine, as well as modifications and contradictions of it, are given in the selections below.

Contempt for the World The noblest statement of the proposition that life's goods are unreal fails to invoke the Christian doctrine of a life to come in order to validate its argument, although its author seems to have been a Christian: this is Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, composed about 523 while the writer, an eminent Roman citizen, was in prison awaiting execution for "crimes against the state"—actually for having upheld older Roman political ideals against the reigning emperor, Theodoric the Ostrogoth. According to Boethius' stoic teaching, the man who refuses to commit himself to life's seeming goods makes himself spiritually invulnerable to

its ills. Although this triumph over the world is a spiritual one, it takes place while man is alive and in the world. Boethius envisages neither future reward nor future punishment. More orthodox Christian writers could, of course, stress the surpassing importance of the world to come in their disparagement of this world. Yet a surprising number of them chose not to do so, but instead took a gloomy satisfaction in reminding the reader that he is dust, that all his pleasures are dusty, and that he will return to dust. If there is any mention of a life to come, it is apt to take the form of a threat of eternal damnation. The very frequent expression of such obstinate defeatism probably helped to popularize Boethius, who does offer positive aid to the suffering spirit. Thus in literature Boethius's ideas are often restated as a kind of general consolation for the ills of life: by reminding us that all men must suffer woe and must die, the writer hopes to comfort us for our specific griefs and losses. Even in this watered-down Boethianism there is a wholesome perspective that is lacking to those monitory poems which can see only man's earthiness.

BOETHIUS: *From* The Consolation of Philosophy¹

[TRIUMPH OVER THE WORLD]

Whoever is unstained of virtue, constant and well-ordered of life, who has put proud chance under foot and looks upright upon either kind of Fortune, may keep his countenance undisturbed. Neither the rage of the sea nor its threats, as it stirs upward the swell from its depths, shall move that man. Neither the unstable mountain that is called Vesuvius, which writhes out smoking fires through its broken chimneys, nor the track of the thunderbolt that is wont to smite high towers shall move that man. Wherefore then, O wretches, do you dread tyrants who, villainous and mad, are without any strength? Hope for no thing, and dread nought; and so shall you disarm the wrath of the impotent tyrant. But whoever quaking dreads or desires a thing that is not constant in its own right, that man has cast away his shield and is moved from his place, and entangles himself in the chain with which he may be dragged.

The Last Journey²

If man him bithoughte,	
Innerliche° and ofte,	<i>deeply</i>
How hard is the fore°	<i>journey</i>
Fro bedde to floore,	
5 How rueful is the flitte°	<i>passage</i>
Fro floore to pitte,°	<i>grave</i>
Fro pitte to pine°	<i>torment</i>
That nevere shal fine,°	<i>end</i>
I weene° that no sinne	<i>think</i>
10 Sholde his herte winne.	

1. Based on Chaucer's Middle English rendering (Book I, Meter 4).

2. This and the next poem are of the 13th century.

A Change in Perspective

Whan the turf is thy towr,
And thy pit^o is thy bowr,^o *grave / bedroom*
Thy weel^o and thy white throte *welfare*
Shulen wormes to note:³
5 What helpeth thee thenne
Al the worldes wenne?^o *pleasure*

3. I.e., shall become business for worms.