

~~must acquiesce in her ways. If you are trying to stop her wheel from turning,<sup>1</sup> you are of all men the most obtuse. For if it once begins to stop, it will no longer be the wheel of chance.~~

Vanua white

'With domineering hand she moves the turning wheel,  
Like currents in a treacherous bay swept to and fro:  
Her ruthless will has just deposed once fearful kings  
While trustless still, from low she lifts a conquered head;  
No cries of misery she hears, no tears she heeds,  
But steely hearted laughs at groans her deeds have wrung.  
Such is the game she plays, and so she tests her strength;  
Of mighty power she makes parade when one short hour  
Sees happiness from utter desolation grow.'

## II

'I would like to continue our discussion a while by using Fortune's own arguments, and I would like you to consider whether her demands are just. "Why do you burden me each day, mortal man," she asks, "with your querulous accusations? What harm have I done you? What possessions of yours have I stolen? Choose any judge you like and sue me for possession of wealth and rank, and if you can show that any part of these belongs by right to any mortal man, I will willingly concede that what you are seeking to regain really did belong to you. When nature brought you forth from your mother's womb I

1. Though not original – the wheel of Fortune was a favourite expression of Cicero for instance – this is one of the most striking images in the *Consolation* and is the source of the many medieval allusions to Fortune and her wheel: cf. *Romance of the Rose*, 4807 ff.; Dante, *Hell*, VII, 61 ff.; Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, IV, 1 ff. There is a fine thirteenth-century painting of the Wheel of Fortune in the choir of Rochester Cathedral. Cf. A. B. Cook, *Zeus, Jupiter and the Oak*, *The Classical Review*, XVII, 1903, p. 421; D. M. Robinson, *The Wheel of Fortune*, *Classical Philology*, XLI, 1946, pp. 207 ff. For the Middle Ages: Italo Siciliano, *François Villon et les thèmes poétiques du moyen âge*, Paris, 1934, pp. 291 ff.; Emile Mâle, *The Gothic Image* translated by Dora Hussey, Fontana Library ed., pp. 94 ff.; H. R. Patch, *The Goddess Fortuna in Medieval Literature*, Cambridge, Mass., 1927.

received you naked and devoid of everything and fed you from my own resources. I was inclined to favour you, and I brought you up – and this is what makes you lose patience with me – with a measure of indulgence, surrounding you with all the splendour and affluence at my command. Now I have decided to withdraw my hand. You have been receiving a favour as one who has had the use of another's possessions, and you have no right to complain as if what you have lost was fully your own. You have no cause to begin groaning at me: I have done you no violence. Wealth, honours and the like are all under my jurisdiction. They are my servants and know their mistress. When I come, they come with me, and when I go, they leave as well. I can say with confidence that if the things whose loss you are bemoaning were really yours, you could never have lost them. Surely I am not the only one to be denied the exercise of my rights? The heavens are allowed to bring forth the bright daylight and lay it to rest in the darkness of night: the year is allowed alternately to deck the face of the earth with fruit and flowers and to disfigure it with cloud and cold. The sea is allowed either to be calm and inviting or to rage with storm-driven breakers. Shall man's insatiable greed bind me to a constancy which is alien to my ways? Inconstancy is my very essence; it is the game I never cease to play as I turn my wheel in its ever changing circle, filled with joy as I bring the top to the bottom and the bottom to the top. Yes, rise up on my wheel if you like, but don't count it an injury when by the same token you begin to fall, as the rules of the game will require. You must surely have been aware of my ways. You must have heard of Croesus, king of Lydia, who was once able to terrorize his enemy Cyrus, only to be reduced to misery and be condemned to be burnt alive: only a shower of rain saved him.<sup>2</sup> And you must have heard of Aemilius Paulus and how he wept tears of pity at all the disasters that had overwhelmed

2. Herodotus, I, 75 ff.

his prisoner, Perses, the last king of Macedonia.<sup>3</sup> Isn't this what tragedy commemorates with its tears and tumult – the overthrow of happy realms by the random strokes of Fortune? When you were a little boy you must have heard Homer's story of the two jars standing in God's house, the one full of **evil and the other of good.**<sup>4</sup> Now, you have had more than your share of the good, but have I completely deserted you? Indeed, my very mutability gives you just cause to hope for better things. So you should not wear yourself out by setting your heart on living according to a law of your own in a world that is shared by everyone.

“If Plenty from her well-stocked horn  
With generous hand should distribute  
As many gifts as grains of sand  
The sea churns up when strong winds blow,  
Or stars that shine on starlit nights,  
The human race would still repeat  
Its querulous complaints.  
Though God should gratify their prayers  
With open-handed gifts of gold  
And furbish greed with pride of rank,  
All that God gave would seem as naught.  
Rapacious greed soon swallows all  
And opens other gaping mouths;  
No reins will serve to hold in check  
The headlong course of appetite  
Once such largess has fanned the flames  
Of lust to have and hold:  
No man is rich who shakes and groans  
Convinced that he needs more.”

## III

‘If Fortune herself had been speaking, she would have left you without a single syllable you could utter by way of reply. But if there is some argument which you can offer as a just

3. Livy, XLV, 7 ff.

4. *Iliad*, 24, 527 ff. Penguin translation, p. 451.

defence for your complaints, you must put it forward and we will give you a hearing.’

And so I had my turn.

‘All that you have said,’ I began, ‘is certainly plausible and well sugared with the sweet honey of rhetoric and music. But it is only while one is actually listening that one is filled with pleasure, and for the wretched, the pain of their suffering goes deeper. So as soon as your words stop sounding in our ears, the mind is weighed down again by its deep seated melancholy.’

‘It is true,’ she rejoined, ‘for none of this is meant to be a cure for your condition, but simply a kind of application to help soothe a grief still resistant to treatment. When the time comes, I will apply something calculated to penetrate deep inside. In the meantime stop thinking of yourself as plunged in misery. Have you forgotten how fortunate you have been in many ways? I will not dwell on it, but when you were orphaned you were taken up into the care of men of the highest rank and chosen to marry into families which boasted the state's most distinguished citizens. Even before you became their kinsman, you had begun to win their love, and that is the most precious kind of kinship of all. There was no one who would not have called you the luckiest man in the world, considering the glory reflected from your new connexions, the modesty of your wife, and the blessings your two sons proved to be. I have no desire to waste time on ordinary matters, so I will pass over the various dignities you received while still a young man, dignities which are denied the majority of men at any age. I want to come straight to the outstanding culmination of your fortune. If the enjoyment of any earthly blessing brings with it any measure of happiness, the memory of that splendid day can never be destroyed by the burden however great of growing evil. I mean the day that you saw your two sons amid the crowding senators and the rapture of the people carried forth from your house to be