

0160-0220 – Tertullianus – Sodoma [Incertus]

A Strain of Sodom

(Author Uncertain.)

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2. A Strain of Sodom.

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Already had Almighty God wiped off
By vengeful flood (with waters all conjoined
Which heaven discharged on earth and the sea's plain¹²¹⁴
Outspued) the times of the primeval age:
5 Had pledged Himself, while nether air should bring
The winters in their course, ne'er to decree,
By *liquid* ruin, retribution's due;
And had assigned, to curb the rains, the bow
Of many hues, sealing the clouds with band
10 Of purple and of green, Iris its name,
The rain-clouds' proper baldric.¹²¹⁵

But alike

With mankind's second race impiety
Revives, and a new age of ill once more
Shoots forth; allotted now no more to *showers*
15 For ruin, but to *fires*: thus did the land
Of SODOM earn to be by glowing dews
Upburnt, and typically thus portend
The future end.¹²¹⁶ There wild voluptuousness
(Modesty's foe) stood in the room of law;
20 Which prescient guest would shun, and sooner choose
At Scythian or Busirian altar's foot
'Mid sacred rites to die, and, slaughtered, pour
His blood to Bebryx, or to satiate
Libyan palæstras, or assume new forms;
25 By virtue of Circæan cups, than lose
His outraged sex in Sodom. At heaven's gate
There knocked for vengeance marriages commit
With equal incest common 'mong a race

¹²¹⁴ Maris æquor.

¹²¹⁵ See Gen. ix. 21, 22; x. 8-17.

¹²¹⁶ Comp. 2 Pet. iii. 5-14.

By nature rebels 'gainst themselves;¹²¹⁷ and hurts
30 Done to man's name and person equally.
But God, forewatching all things, at fix'd time
Doth judge the unjust; with patience tarrying
The hour when crime's ripe age—not any force
Of wrath impetuous—shall have circumscribed
35 The space for waiting.¹²¹⁸

Now at length the day
Of vengeance was at hand. Sent from the host
Angelical, two, youths in form, who both
Were ministering spirits,¹²¹⁹ carrying
The Lord's divine commissions, come beneath
40 The walls of Sodom. There was dwelling Lot
A transplantation from a pious stock;
Wise, and a practicer of righteousness,
He was the only one to think on God:
As oft a fruitful tree is wont to lurk,
45 Guest-like, in forests wild. He, sitting then
Before the gate (for the celestials scarce
Had reached the ramparts), though he knew not them
Divine,¹²²⁰ accosts them unsolicited,
Invites, and with ancestral honour greets;
50 And offers them, preparing to abide
Abroad, a hospice. By repeated prayers
He wins them; and then ranges studiously



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¹²¹⁷ The expression, "sinners against their own souls," in Num. xvi. 38—where, however, the LXX. have a very different version—may be compared with this; as likewise Prov. viii. 36.

¹²¹⁸ Whether the above be the sense of this most obscure triplet I will not presume to determine. It is at least (I hope) *intelligible* sense. But that the reader may judge for himself whether he can offer any better, I subjoin the lines, which form a sentence alone, and therefore can be judged of without their context:—

“Tempore sed certo Deus omnia prospectulatus,
Judicat injustos, patiens ubi criminis ætas
Cessandi spatium vis nulla coëgerit iræ.”

¹²¹⁹ Comp. Heb. i. 14. It may be as well here to inform the reader once for all that prosody as well as syntax is repeatedly set at defiance in these metrical fragments; and hence, of course, arise some of the chief difficulties in dealing with them.

¹²²⁰ “Divinos;” i.e., apparently “superhuman,” as everything *heavenly* is.

The sacred pledges¹²²¹ on his board,¹²²² and quits¹²²³
His friends with courteous offices. The night
55 Had brought repose: alternate¹²²⁴ dawn had chased
The night, and Sodom with her shameful law
Makes uproar at the doors. Lot, suppliant wise,
Withstands: “Young men, let not your new fed lust
Enkindle you to violate this youth!”¹²²⁵
60 Whither is passion’s seed inviting you?
To what vain end your lust? For such an end
No creatures wed: not such as haunt the fens;
Not stall-fed cattle; not the gaping brood
Subaqueous; nor they which, modulant
65 On pinions, hang suspended near the clouds;
Nor they which with forth-stretched body creep
Over earth’s face. To conjugal delight
Each kind its kind doth owe: but female still
To all is wife; nor is there one that has
70 A mother save a female one. Yet now,
If youthful vigour holds it right¹²²⁶ to waste
The flower of modesty, I have within
Two daughters of a nuptial age, in whom
Virginitie is swelling in its bloom,
75 Already ripe for harvest—a desire
Worthy of men—which let your pleasure reap!
Myself their sire, I yield them; and will pay
For my guests’ sake, the forfeit of my grief!”
Answered the mob insane: “And who art thou?”

¹²²¹ Of hospitality—bread and salt, etc.

¹²²² “Mensa;” but perhaps “mensæ” may be suggested—“the sacred pledges of the board.”

¹²²³ “Dispungit,” which is the only verb in the sentence, and refers both to *pia pignora* and to *amicos*. I use “quit” in the sense in which we speak of “quitting a debtor,” i.e., giving him his full due; but the two lines are very hard, and present (as in the case of those before quoted) a jumble of words without grammar; “*pia pignora mensa Officiisque probis studio dispungit amicos;*” which may be somewhat more literally rendered than in our text, thus: “he zealously discharges” (i.e., fulfils) “his sacred pledges” (i.e., the promised hospitality which he had offered them) “with (a generous) board, and discharges” (i.e., fulfils his obligations to) “his friends with honourable courtesies.”

¹²²⁴ Altera = alterna. But the statement differs from Gen. xix. 4.

¹²²⁵ “Istam juventam,” i.e., the two “juvenes” (ver. 31) within.

¹²²⁶ “Fas” = ὄσιον, morally right; distinct from “jus” or “licitum.”

80 And what? and whence? to lord it over us,
And to expound us laws? Shall foreigner
Rule Sodom, and hurl threats? Now, then, thyself
For daughters and for guests shalt sate our greed!
One shall suffice for all!" So said, so done:
85 The frantic mob delays not. As, whene'er
A turbid torrent rolls with wintry tide,
And rushes at one speed through countless streams
Of rivers, if, just where it forks, some tree
Meets the swift waves (not long to stand, save while
90 By her root's force she shall avail to oppose
Her tufty obstacles), when gradually
Her hold upon the undermined soil
Is failing, with her bared stem she hangs,
And, with uncertain heavings to and fro,
95 Defers her certain fall; not otherwise
Lot in the mid-whirl of the dizzy mob
Kept nodding, now almost o'ercome. But power
Divine brings succour: the angelic youths,
Snatching him from the threshold, to his roof
100 Restore him; but upon the spot they mulct
Of sight the mob insane in open day,—
Fit augury of coming penalties!
Then they unlock the just decrees of God:
That penalty condign from heaven will fall
105 On Sodom; that himself had merited
Safety upon the count of righteousness.
"Gird thee, then, up to hasten hence thy flight,
And with thee to lead out what family
Thou hast: already we are bringing on
110 Destruction o'er the city." Lot with speed
Speaks to his sons-in-law; but their hard heart
Scorned to believe the warning, and at fear
Laughed. At what time the light attempts to climb
The darkness, and heaven's face wears double hue
115 From night and day, the youthful visitants
Were instant to outlead from Sodoma



The race Chaldæan,¹²²⁷ and the righteous house
Consign to safety: “Ho! come, Lot! arise,
And take thy yokefellow and daughters twain,
120 And hence, beyond the boundaries be gone,
Preventing¹²²⁸ Sodom’s penalties!” And eke
With friendly hands they lead them trembling forth,
And then their final mandates give: “Save, Lot,
Thy life, lest thou perchance should will to turn
125 Thy retroverted gaze behind, or stay
The step once taken: to the mountain speed!”
Lot feared to creep the heights with tardy step,
Lest the celestial wrath-fires should o’ertake
And whelm him: therefore he essays to crave
130 Some other ports; a city small, to wit,
Which opposite he had espied. “Hereto,”
He said, “I speed my flight: scarce with its walls
’Tis visible; nor is it far, nor great.”
They, favouring his prayer, safety assured
135 To him and to the city; whence the spot
Is known in speech barbaric by the name
Segor.¹²²⁹ Lot enters Segor while the sun
Is rising,¹²³⁰ the last sun, which glowing bears
To Sodom conflagration; for his rays
140 He had armed all with fire: beneath him spreads
An emulous gloom, which seeks to intercept
The light; and clouds combine to interweave
Their smoky globes with the confused sky:
Down pours a novel shower: the ether seethes
145 With sulphur mixt with blazing flames:¹²³¹ the air

1227 i.e., Lot’s race or family, which had come from “Ur of the Chaldees.” See Gen. xi. 26, 27, 28.

1228 I use “preventing” in its now unusual sense of “anticipating the arrival of.”

1229 Σηγώρ in the LXX., “Zoar” in Eng. ver.

1230 “*Simul exoritur sol.*” But both the LXX. and the Eng. ver. say the sun *was risen* when Lot entered the city.

1231 So Oehler and Migne. But perhaps we may alter the pointing slightly, and read:—

“Down pours a novel shower, sulphur mixt
With blazing flames: the ether seethes: the air
Crackles with liquid exust.”

Crackles with liquid heats exust. From hence
The fable has an echo of the truth
Amid its false, that the sun's progeny
Would drive his father's team; but nought availed
150 The giddy boy to curb the haughty steeds
Of fire: so blazed our orb: then lightning reft
The lawless charioteer, and bitter plaint
Transformed his sisters. Let Eridanus
See to it, if one poplar on his banks
155 Whitens, or any bird dons plumage there
Whose note old age makes mellow!¹²³²

Here they mourn

O'er miracles of metamorphosis
Of other sort. For, partner of Lot's flight,
His wife (ah me, for woman! even then¹²³³
160 Intolerant of law!) alone turned back
At the unearthly murmurs of the sky)
Her daring eyes, but bootlessly: not doomed
To utter what she saw! and then and there
Changed into brittle salt, herself her tomb
165 She stood, herself an image of herself,
Keeping an incorporeal form: and still
In her unsheltered station 'neath the heaven
Dures she, by rains unmelted, by decay
And winds unwasted; nay, if some strange hand
170 Deface her form, forthwith from her own store
Her wounds she doth repair. Still is she said
To live, and, 'mid her corporal change, discharge
With wonted blood her sex's monthly dues.
Gone are the men of Sodom; gone the glare
175 Of their unhallowed ramparts; all the house
Inhospitable, with its lords, is gone:

¹²³² The story of Phaëthon and his fate is told in *Ov., Met.*, ii. 1–399, which may be compared with the present piece. His two sisters were transformed into white poplars, according to some; alders, according to others. See *Virg., Æn.*, x. 190 sqq., *Ec.*, vi. 62 sqq. His half-brother (Cycnus or Cygnus) was turned into a swan: and the scene of these transformations is laid by Ovid on the banks of the Eridanus (the Po). But the fable is variously told; and it has been suggested that the groundwork of it is to be found rather in the still-standing of the sun recorded in Joshua.

¹²³³ i.e., as she had been before in the case of Eve. See *Gen.* iii. 1 sqq.

The champaign is one pyre; here embers rough
And black, here ash-heaps with hoar mould, mark out
The conflagration's course: evanished
180 Is all that old fertility¹²³⁴ which Lot,
Seeing outspread before him, . . .
.
No ploughman spends his fruitless toil on glebes
Pitchy with soot: or if some acres there,
But half consumed, still strive to emulate
185 Autumn's glad wealth, pears, peaches, and all fruits
Promise themselves full easely¹²³⁵ to the eye
In fairest bloom, until the plucker's hand
Is on them: then forthwith the seeming fruit
Crumbles to dust 'neath the bewraying touch,
190 And turns to embers vain.

Thus, therefore (sky
And earth entombed alike), not e'en the sea
Lives there: the quiet of that quiet sea
Is death!¹²³⁶—a sea which no wave animates

¹²³⁴ I have hazarded the bold conjecture—which I see others (Pameliuss at all events) had hazarded before me—that “feritas” is used by our author as =“fertilitas.” The word, of course, is very incorrectly formed etymologically; but etymology is not our author’s *forte* apparently. It will also be seen that there is seemingly a gap at this point, or else some enormous mistake, in the MSS. An attempt has been made (see Migne) to correct it, but not a very satisfactory one. For the common reading, which gives two lines,

“Occidit illa prior feritas, quam prospiciens Loth
Nullus arat frustra piceas fuligine glebas,”

which are evidently entirely unconnected with one another, it is proposed to read,

“Occidit illa prior feritas, quam prospiciens Loth,
Deseruisse pii fertur commercia fratris.
Nullas arat,” etc.

This use of “fratris” in a wide sense may be justified from Gen. xiii. 8 (to which passage, with its immediate context, there seems to be a reference, whether we adopt the proposed correction or no), and similar passages in Holy Writ. But the transition is still abrupt to the “nullus arat,” etc.; and I prefer to leave the passage as it is, without attempting to supply the hiatus.

¹²³⁵ This use of “easily” as a dissyllable is justifiable from Spenser.

¹²³⁶ This seems to be the sense, but the Latin is somewhat strange: “mors est maris illa quieti,” i.e., illa (quies) maris quieti mors est. The opening lines of “Jonah” (above) should be compared with this passage and its context.



Through its anhealant volumes; which beneath
195 Its native Auster sighs not anywhere;
Which cannot from its depths one scaly race,
Or with smooth skin or cork-like fence encased,
Produce, or curled shell in single valve
Or double fold enclosed. Bitumen there
200 (The sooty reek of sea exust) alone,
With its own crop, a spurious harvest yields;
Which 'neath the stagnant surface vivid heat
From seething mass of sulphur and of brine
Maturing tempers, making earth cohere
205 Into a pitch marine.¹²³⁷ At season due
The heated water's fatty ooze is borne
Up to the surface; and with foamy flakes
Over the level top a tawny skin
Is woven. They whose function is to catch
210 That ware put to, tilting their smooth skin down
With balance of their sides, to teach the film,
Once o'er the gunnel, to float in: for, lo!
Raising itself spontaneous, it will swim
Up to the edge of the unmoving craft;
215 And will, when pressed,¹²³⁸ for guerdon large, ensure
Immunity from the defiling touch
Of weft which female monthly efflux clothes.
Behold another portent notable,
Fruit of that sea's disaster: all things cast
220 Therein do swim: gone is its native power
For sinking bodies: if, in fine, you launch
A torch's lightsome¹²³⁹ hull (where spirit serves
For fire) therein, the apex of the flame
Will act as sail; put out the flame, and 'neath
225 The waters will the light's wrecks ruin go!
Such Sodom's and Gomorrah's penalties,
For ages sealed as signs before the eyes
Of unjust nations, whose obdurate hearts

1237 Inque picem dat terræ hæerere marinam.

1238 "Pressum" (Oehler); "pretium" (Migne): "it will yield a prize, namely, that," etc.

1239 Luciferam.

God's fear have quite forsaken,¹²⁴⁰ will them teach
230 To reverence heaven-sanctioned rights,¹²⁴¹ and lift
Their gaze unto one only Lord of all.

3. Genesis.

(Author Uncertain.)

In the beginning did the Lord create
The heaven and earth:¹²⁴² for formless was the land,¹²⁴³
And hidden by the wave, and God immense¹²⁴⁴
O'er the vast watery plains was hovering,
5 While chaos and black darkness shrouded all:
Which darkness, when God bade be from the pole¹²⁴⁵
Disjoined, He speaks, "Let there be light;" and all
In the clear world¹²⁴⁶ was bright. Then, when the Lord
The first day's work had finished, He formed
10 Heaven's axis white with nascent clouds: the deep
Immense receives its wandering¹²⁴⁷ shores, and draws
The rivers manifold with mighty trains.
The third dun light unveiled earth's¹²⁴⁸ face, and soon
(Its name assigned¹²⁴⁹) the dry land's story 'gins:

1240 Oehler's pointing is disregarded.

1241 "De cælo jura tueri;" possibly "to look for laws from heaven."

1242 Terram.

1243 Tellus.

1244 Immensus. See note on the word in the fragment "Concerning the Cursing of the Heathen's Gods."

1245 Cardine.

1246 Mundo.

1247 "Errantia;" so called, probably, either because they appear to move as ships pass them, or because they may be said to "wander" by reason of the constant change which they undergo from the action of the sea, and because of the shifting nature of their sands.

1248 Terrarum.

1249 "God called the dry land Earth:" Gen. i. 10.