Policraticus
Prologue

Although pleasurable in many ways, the pursuit of letters is especially fruitful because it excludes all annoyances stemming from differences of time and place, it draws friends into each other's presence, and it abolishes the situation in which things worth knowing are not experienced. Arts would have perished, laws would have disappeared, faith and all religious duties whatsoever would have shattered, and even the correct use of eloquence would have declined, save that divine compassion granted to mortals the use of letters as a remedy for human infirmity. The examples of our ancestors, which are incitements and inducements to virtue, never would have encouraged and been heeded by everyone, unless, through devotion, care and diligence, writers triumphed over idleness and transmitted these things to posterity.

If indeed the shortness of life and the obtuseness of understanding, the negligence of inactivity and the uselessness of occupation, permit us to know little, then even this is constantly banished and torn from the soul by forgetfulness which deceives knowledge through perpetual hostility and infidelity to its stepmother, memory. Who would know of Alexander or Caesar, or would respect the Stoics or the Peripatetics, unless they had been distinguished by the memorials of writers? Whoever would have followed the footsteps of the cherished apostles and prophets, unless they had been consecrated for posterity in the Holy Scriptures? Triumphant arches advance the glory of illustrious men whenever inscriptions explain for what cause and for whom they have been erected. It is only because of the inscription on a triumphal arch that the onlooker recognises that Constantine (who was of British stock) is proclaimed liberator of his country and founder of peace. No one would ever be illuminated by perpetual glory unless he himself or someone else had written. The reputation of the fool and the emperor is the same after a moderate period of time except where the memory of either is prolonged by the beneficence of writers. How many powerful kings have there been of whom there is nowhere a word or a thought? Therefore, there is no better counsel to those who seek glory than to be worthy of the greatest thanks of men of letters and of scribes. There is nothing to be
gained from the excellence of their conduct, which would be
enveloped in a perpetual darkness unless illuminated by the light of
letters. Whatever favour or commendation is obtained elsewhere, it is
just as when Echo, of whom we hear in fable, captures the applause of
the theatre: the sound begins and ends instantly.

From letters, one may confidently obtain solace from sorrow,
recreation from labour, satisfaction from poverty, and moderation in
prosperity and in pleasure. When a sharp mind is expanded by useful
reading and writing, the soul is set free from vice, and redeemed from
a state of adversity by a sweet and marvellous pleasure. One will never
discover in human affairs a more pleasurable or a more useful
occupation – except, of course, divinely prompted devotion, pursued
either by prayerful conversation with the divine being or by
acceptance, through the broadening of one’s charitable heart, of God
into one’s soul and the meditative examination of the great works
which He has performed. Believe from my experience that all the
sweetness of the world is bitter when compared to this discipline; it is
all the more so when one has refreshed the senses and invigorated the
clear judgment and acumen of one’s incorruptible reason.

You should not, therefore, be amazed that I do not follow your
advice to ascend to some grade upon that scale by means of which one
raises one’s position at present. I do not plunge into the great affairs of
court; let the response to you be the words of Isocrates, who when
questioned by friends about why he did not become engaged in public
affairs, responded, ‘Of the experiences of this place, I know not; of my
experiences this place knows nothing.’1 I despise that which the
courtiers embrace, and what I embrace they despise. It may be greatly
surprising that I do not break off or cut the rope – if it cannot be
otherwise untied – which has in the past held me and even now holds
me in obedient servitude to the frivolities of courtiers. I loathe and
regret that at the moment almost twelve years have been squandered,
despite extensive training for a different life; and as it were, being
suckled at the teat of a more sacred philosophy, it is appropriate that
one should pass into the company of philosophers rather than of
courtiers. I feel that you are also in a disturbed condition, except that
you are more righteous and more prudent in doing what is useful in
order to stand immobile upon the solid foundation of virtue, neither a
lightly swaying reed nor a follower of soft pleasures. Rather, you

1Macrobius, Saturnalia, 7.1.
command the vanity that otherwise commands the world. Thus, where diverse provinces heap well-earned praise upon you, as if they were erecting a triumphal arch, I, a plebeian man, am only capable of honouring you by making a shrill sound upon rustic pipes with the uncultured language of this book, like a pebble tossed onto your piles of honours; while it has none of the elegance that is known to please, at least it cannot displease because it is written out of devotion.

The book concentrates in part on the frivolities of courtiers, and it dwells more upon those frivolities which are more burdensome. The book also busies itself with the footprints of philosophers; it is left to the determination of the wise which footprints should be avoided and which followed in each case. And because there should be no injury to anyone, it is proper to address this work to one in whom frivolity could never be demonstrated, that is, to address you who are the most discriminating man of our times, and to describe what seems to deserve censure in those like myself. Thus, when someone recognizes his own foolishness in what is recited or heard, he should bring to mind the lesson that ‘with a change of name, the story may be told about you’; this connection will be most obviously made because all know that you are occupied with many serious matters. In this way, Seneca taught others while he admonished his Lucilius. Jerome writes to Oceanus and Pammachius, yet he mainly castigates the excesses of others.

Whoever would seek to justify the foolishness of the flatterer should calculate the trouble and time involved, and (if he is a wise man) judge what is said according to the motive for the statement. If someone imagines that this sounds too harsh, it should not be thought that anything said is directed at him, but rather at me personally and at those like me who desire to improve with me, or at those who, having passed into death, suffer all censure with equanimity. One knows that the failing of Achilles is an annoyance to no one: the present generation shall be corrected while the past shall be reprimanded as it merits. Thus Horace granted his slaves the use of the December liberty in order that he might be corrected:

That sly dog Horace touches every fault
His friend displays, but makes him laugh withal,
And thus admitted plays about his heart.²

²Persius, Satyrus, 1.116–117.
I have helped the case by bringing in pertinent material from diverse authors insofar as they contribute to or support the concerns that have been introduced, occasionally making no mention of the names of the authors, not only because your experience in letters is a sign that you for the most part will recognize the bulk of them, but also so that the ignorant may be incited to more assiduous reading. If anything here departs extensively from true faith I am confident that you shall indulge me, since I am not promising that all which has been written here is true, but that, whether it is true or false, it will serve the reader as useful. I am not so silly as to ascribe truth to the tale that the winged bird was once spoken to by the tortoise or that the country mouse accepted into his poor house the city mouse, and so on; but I do not doubt that these fictions of ours are of service to instruction. For the most part, the material that is utilised comes from elsewhere, except when I make my own that which is said commonly and rightly, so that I sometimes express ideas by means of my own abridgement, while at other times I express them faithfully and authoritatively in the words of others.

And since I have started to reveal all my mental secrets at once, I shall expose my arrogance fully. All whom I encounter who are philosophers in word or deed are judged to be my clients, and what is more, I arrogate them to myself in servitude. This is so to the extent that they in their surrender hurl their speeches on my behalf against detractors. For I name them as authorities. I have seen neither Alexander nor Caesar; I have heard neither Socrates nor Zeno, Plato nor Aristotle disputing; yet from these and others just as unknown much is preserved for the utility of readers. Still one should not appear to take pleasure in contention and it is my obligation to confess to the use of lies. And if the enemy will not otherwise be quiet – since I too have my Cornificius and Lanvinus – I agree that I have told lies, for we know from the Scriptures that 'every man is a liar'. So our Lanvinus shall not be rescued with his immense chest, inflated belly, swollen and reddened face, and readiness to gnaw to bits the character of others rather than correcting his own. I will say who he is unless he restrains himself from injuries, and he will clearly realise that to be aged neither confers full authority nor preserves it unimpaired. Yet should he pursue investigation of the matter, and

\[ Vide Psalms 116:11. \]
should he refute my reason and my fictional authorities, the words of the enemy shall not deter me from making amends. Indeed, I shall call friend whoever may correct my errors.

If it is discovered that what has been written somewhere is other than its author’s words, still one should not maintain that I am being deceptive, since in military affairs I have followed the historians who frequently dissent from one another, and in philosophy I am a devotee of Academic dispute, which measures by reason that which presents itself as more probable. I am not ashamed of the declarations of the Academics, so that I do not recede from their footprints in those matters about which wise men have doubts. Although this school may seem to introduce obscurity into all matters, none is more faithful to the examination of truth and, on the authority of Cicero who in old age took refuge in it, none is on better terms with progress. Therefore, in remarks that are occasionally made about providence, fate, free will and the like, it may be noted that I prefer the Academics, rather than rash assertions about those matters which are still in doubt. Also I have sometimes used the Scriptures, which are well suited to the clarification of thought. Yet nothing will be discovered which is opposed to faith and good morals, and thus, the same unalterable truth gives birth to modern thoughts as to old ones. For it is written that ‘facial features are not identical in everyone, nor yet different, as is proper in sisters’.¹

Everything has been reserved for you to examine, that the greater and more just glory should be yours for criticism than mine for authorship. Differences within the various books are to be ascribed to matters of employment, that is, those affairs of court by which I am distracted to the extent that one is allowed hardly any time to write. While you have besieged Toulouse I have started this work and removed myself for a short while from the frivolities of courtiers, because leisure without letters is the death and burial of every living man. If any like Lanvinus would slander unknown or fictional authors, he must blame the second-hand materials of Plato, Cicero’s ‘Dream of Scipio’, and the philosophers who practise saturnalian rites, or else indulge the fictions of our authors, if they serve the public utility.

I devoutly beg of those who may read or hear this work that they

¹Ovid, Metamorphoses, 2.13-14.
John of Salisbury: Policraticus

might commend me in their prayers to the compassionate Father, and strive to gain forgiveness for my errors which are multiplied beyond number. For I hope to be joined with the all-fearful Lord; with heart and words each in their turn I pray for those in need that the omnipotent and compassionate God may protect our deeds and thoughts; may the Angel of the Great Judgment deem our minds so worthy of enlightenment that those who err will not lead us into the vices.
BOOK I

CHAPTER I

What most harms the fortunate

Among all of those things that important men are used to confronting, none of them may be thought more pernicious than that delightful allurement of fortune which turns one aside from the vision of truth. In so far as the world showers its riches and delights – those which renew and inflame the vicious eagerness for sensuous pleasure – the soul is tricked by a multiplicity of allurements into a captivity in which, alienated from itself, inner goodness decays as the desires are extended to the deceptions of various external things. If indeed virtue is hostile to prosperity, then wealth applauds its own in order to injure them; and this unhappy success follows in the path of fortune, so that in the end catastrophe occurs. Initially they accept a drink at the banquet and, when they have become inebriated, a lethal venom or something worse is intermixed. The more their appearance is illuminated, the denser is the fog that spreads across their stupefied eyes; the prevalence of darkness is therefore the disappearance of truth, and the virtues are cut down at the root, the vices yield a crop, the light of reason is extinguished, and the whole man is carried headlong into miserable misfortune.

In this way the rational creature is rendered brutish; the image of the Creator is distorted into something resembling the character of a beast; and man degenerates from his condition of dignity, acts in a conceited fashion, puffs up because of the honours collected, and by arrogance destroys understanding. Who is to be considered so unworthy as one who condemns the possession of self-knowledge? Who is so unworthy as one who insulpts the Creator by squandering time, that which is handed out in sparing quantities for use in life and which alone cannot be restored – its reclamation requiring someone to pay out, in the currency of life, interest and penalties at an usurious rate? Who is so brutish as one who, because of defective reason and
**John of Salisbury: ‘Policraticus’**

libidinal impulses, forsakes his own proper sphere, attends to unsuitable business, and not merely business, but also is constantly occupied with unsuitable leisure pursuits? . . .

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**CHAPTER 2**

*In what consists devotion to unsuitable ends*

Surely an unsuitable goal [*adieunum*, literally ‘what belongs to another’]is that which is not dictated by natural reason or duty – if, however, it is ever correct for that which is never rightfully conceded to anyone in the first place to be called unsuitable. What is suitable by nature pertains to everyone equally; what is a matter of duty, to individuals. Therefore, the suitability which arises out of duty differs from that deriving from nature, although obligation towards natural law stems from duty. It is a species of parricide to impugn natural law, and it is as bad as sacrilege to cancel the laws of parents and not to confer due honour on the mother of all. That which reason allows on the basis of honourable intent is not an absolutely unsuitable goal. If perhaps moderate pleasure or utility occurs and no one is harmed, this may not in fact be opposed to duty or nature; but if one or the other is impugned, it is immediately and absolutely unsuitable and is completely impermissible to anyone whomsoever. And so such an inappropriate deed is always either an error or a crime.

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**CHAPTER 3**

*The distribution of duties according to the political constitution of the ancients*

Worldly philosophers, forming by principle and practice that justice (which may be called ‘political’) according to which human republics justly exist and flourish, have determined that each one is to be content with his own situation and endeavours, prescribing to urbanite and suburbanite, and also to peasant and rustic, their particular location and endeavours. Each and all will be dutifully devoted to the public utility. Every person will receive the fruits of
nature, labour and industry strictly according to merit. No one will usurp that which is another’s, remaining inclined towards love of all without distinction. The foremost and central urban location is conceded to the Areopagus, from which rightful duties are channelled off, like streams of health and life, into the professions, just as reason weighs each one’s duty so that the most suitable arrangement is established . . .

[John proceeds to claim that the just government advocated by the ancient philosophers necessarily prohibited noble citizens from any activity that involved the pursuit of pleasure for its own sake. Among such activities John counts hunting (chapter 4), gambling (chapter 5), musical performances (chapters 6 and 7), and theatrical amusements (chapter 8). John condemns none of these interests absolutely and without exception, however. He instead insists that when carried out in moderation and at appropriate moments, all such pursuits are permissible as forms of relaxation. Only when someone engages in these pastimes immoderately and without circumspection is it necessary for their practice to be prevented.

The remainder of book I (chapters 9–13), as well as the whole of book II, is concerned with forms of magic including soothsaying, superstitious prophecy, dream interpretation, astrology, fortune-telling and augury. The extent to which John criticises these practices is perhaps reflective of their popularity at twelfth-century courts, whether as forms of amusement or as seriously maintained superstitions. John regards all such occupation with magic to be a token of human presumptuousness, in so far as it suggests man’s effort to acquire a type of knowledge that pertains to God alone.]