



**GOTTHOLD
EPHRAIM
LESSING**

***NATHAN
THE WISE;
A DRAMATIC
POEM IN FIVE
ACTS***



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Gotthold Ephraim Lessing

Nathan the Wise; a dramatic poem in five acts

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INTRODUCTION

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GOTTHOLD EPHRAIM LESSING was born on the 22nd of January, 1729, eldest of ten sons of a pious and learned minister of Camenz in the Oberlausitz, who had two daughters also. As a child Lessing delighted in books, and had knowledge beyond his years when he went to school, in Meissen, at the age of twelve. As a school-boy he read much Greek and Latin that formed no part of the school course; read also the German poets of his time, wrote a "History of Ancient Mathematics," and began a poem of his own on the "Plurality of Worlds."

In 1746, at the age of seventeen, Lessing was sent to the University of Leipsic. There he studied with energy, and was attracted strongly by the theatre. His artistic interest in the drama caused him to be put on the free list of the theatre, in exchange for some translations of French pieces. Then he produced, also for the Leipsic stage, many slight pieces of his own, and he had serious thought of turning actor, which excited alarm in the parsonage at Camenz and caused his recall home in January, 1747. It was found, however, that although he could not be trained to follow his father's profession, he had been studying to such good purpose, and developing, in purity of life, such worth of character, that after Easter he was sent back to Leipsic, with leave to transfer his studies from theology to medicine.

Lessing went back, continued to work hard, but still also gave all his leisure to the players. For the debts of some of them he had incautiously become surety, and when the

company removed to Vienna, there were left behind them unpaid debts for which young Lessing was answerable. The creditors pressed, and Lessing moved to Wittenberg; but he fell ill, and was made so miserable by pressure for impossible payments, that he resolved to break off his studies, go to Berlin, and begin earning by his pen, his first earnings being for the satisfaction of these Leipsic creditors. Lessing went first to Berlin to seek his fortune in December, 1748, when he was nineteen years old. He was without money, without decent clothes, and with but one friend in Berlin, Mylius, who was then editing a small journal, the *Rudigersche Zeitung*. Much correspondence brought him a little money from the overburdened home, and with addition of some small earning from translations, this enabled him to obtain a suit of clothes, in which he might venture to present himself to strangers in his search for fortune. A new venture with Mylius, a quarterly record of the history of the theatre, was not successful; but having charge committed to him of the library part of Mylius's journal, Lessing had an opportunity of showing his great critical power. Gottsched, at Leipsic, was then leader of the war on behalf of classicism in German literature. Lessing fought on the National side, and opposed also the beginning of a new French influence then rising, which was to have its chief apostle in Rousseau.

In 1752 Lessing went back to Wittenberg for another year, that he might complete the work for graduation; graduated in December of that year as Master of Arts, and then returned to his work in Berlin. He worked industriously, not only as critic, but also in translation from the classics, from French, English, and Italian; and he was soon able to

send help towards providing education for the youngest of the household of twelve children in the Camenz parsonage. In 1753 he gave himself eight weeks of withdrawal from other work to write, in a garden-house at Potsdam, his tragedy of "Miss Sarah Sampson." It was produced with great success at Frankfort on the Oder, and Lessing's ruling passion for dramatic literature became the stronger for this first experience of what he might be able to achieve. In literature, Frederick the Great cared only for what was French. A National drama, therefore, could not live in Berlin. In the autumn of 1755, Lessing suddenly moved to Leipsic, where an actor whom he had befriended was establishing a theatre. Here he was again abandoning himself to the cause of a National drama, when a rich young gentleman of Leipsic invited his companionship upon a tour in Europe. Terms were settled, and they set out together. They saw much of Holland, and were passing into England, when King Frederick's attack on Saxony recalled the young Leipsiger, and caused breach of what had been a contract for a three years' travelling companionship. In May, 1758, Lessing, aged twenty-nine, returned to his old work in Berlin. Again he translated, edited, criticised. He wrote a tragedy, "Philotas," and began a "Faust." He especially employed his critical power in "Letters upon the Latest Literature," known as his *Literatur briefe*. Dissertations upon fable, led also to Lessing's "Fables," produced in this period of his life.

In 1760 Lessing was tempted by scarcity of income to serve as a Government secretary at Breslau. He held that office for five years, and then again returned to his old work in Berlin. During the five years in Breslau, Lessing had

completed his play of "Minna von Barnhelm," and the greatest of his critical works, "Laocoon," a treatise on the "Boundary Lines of Painting and Poetry." All that he might then have saved from his earnings went to the buying of books and to the relief of the burdens in the Camenz parsonage. At Berlin the office of Royal Librarian became vacant. The claims of Lessing were urged, but Frederick appointed an insignificant Frenchman. In 1767 Lessing was called to aid an unsuccessful attempt to establish a National Theatre in Hamburg.

Other troubles followed. Lessing gave his heart to a widow, Eva König, and was betrothed to her. But the involvements of her worldly affairs, and of his, delayed the marriage for six years. To secure fixed income he took a poor office as Librarian at Wolfenbüttel. In his first year at Wolfenbüttel, he wrote his play of "Emilia Galotti." Then came a long-desired journey to Italy; but it came in inconvenient form, for it had to be made with Prince Leopold, of Brunswick, hurriedly, for the sake of money, at the time when Lessing was at last able to marry.

The wife, long waited for, and deeply loved, died at the birth of her first child. This was in January, 1778, when Lessing's age was 49. Very soon afterwards he was attacked by a Pastor Goeze, in Hamburg, and other narrow theologians, for having edited papers that contained an attack on Christianity, which Lessing himself had said that he wished to see answered before he died. The uncharitable bitterness of these attacks, felt by a mind that had been touched to the quick by the deepest of sorrows, helped to the shaping of Lessing's calm, beautiful lesson of charity,

this noblest of his plays—"Nathan the Wise." But Lessing's health was shattered, and he survived his wife only three years. He died in 1781, leaving imperishable influence for good upon the minds of men, but so poor in what the world calls wealth, that his funeral had to be paid for by a Duke of Brunswick.

William Taylor, the translator of Lessing's "Nathan the Wise;" was born in 1765, the son of a rich merchant at Norwich, from whose business he was drawn away by his strong bent towards literature. His father yielded to his wishes, after long visits to France and to Germany, in days astir with the new movements of thought, that preceded and followed the French Revolution. He formed a close friendship with Southey, edited for a little time a "Norwich Iris," and in his later years became known especially for his *Historic Survey of German Poetry*, which included his translations, and among them this of "Nathan the Wise." It was published in 1830, Taylor died in 1836. Thomas Carlyle, in reviewing William Taylor's *Survey of German Poetry*, said of the author's own translations in it "compared with the average of British translations, they may be pronounced of almost ideal excellence; compared with the best translations extant, for example, the German Shakespeare, Homer, Calderon, they may still be called better than indifferent. One great merit Mr. Taylor has: rigorous adherence to his original; he endeavours at least to copy with all possible fidelity the term of praise, the tone, the very metre, whatever stands written for him."

H. M.

NATHAN THE WISE.

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“Introite nam et heic Dii sunt!”—APUD GELLIUM.

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ.

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SALADIN, *the Sultan.*

SITTAH, *his Sister.*

NATHAN, *a rich Jew.*

RECHA, *his adopted Daughter.*

DAYA, *a Christian Woman dwelling with the Jew a companion to Recha.*

CONRADE, *a young Templar.*

HAFI, *a Dervis.*

ATHANASIOS, *the Patriarch of Palestine.*

BONAFIDES, *a Friar.*

An Emir, sundry Mamalukes, Slaves, &c.

The Scene is at Jerusalem.

ACT I.

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SCENE.—A Hall in Nathan’s House.

NATHAN, *in a travelling dress, DAYA meeting him.*

DAYA.

’Tis he, ’tis Nathan! Thanks to the Almighty,
That you’re at last returned.

NATHAN.

Yes, Daya, thanks,
That I have reached Jerusalem in safety.
But wherefore this *at last*? Did I intend,
Or was it possible to come back sooner?
As I was forced to travel, out and in,
'Tis a long hundred leagues to Babylon;
And to get in one's debts is no employment,
That speeds a traveller.

DAYA.

O Nathan, Nathan,
How miserable you had nigh become
During this little absence; for your house—

NATHAN.

Well, 'twas on fire; I have already heard it.
God grant I may have heard the whole, that chanced!

DAYA.

'Twas on the point of burning to the ground.

NATHAN.

Then we'd have built another, and a better.

DAYA.

True!—But thy Recha too was on the point
Of perishing amid the flames.

NATHAN.

Of perishing?

My Recha, saidst thou? She? I heard not that.
I then should not have needed any house.
Upon the point of perishing—perchance
She's gone?—Speak out then—out—torment me not
With this suspense.—Come, tell me, tell me all.

DAYA.

Were she no more, from me you would not hear it.

NATHAN.

Why then alarm me?—Recha, O my Recha!

DAYA.

Your Recha? Yours?

NATHAN.

What if I ever were

Doomed to unlearn to call this child, *my* child,

DAYA.

Is all you own yours by an equal title?

NATHAN.

Nought by a better. What I else enjoy

Nature and Fortune gave—this treasure, Virtue.

DAYA.

How dear you make me pay for all your goodness!—

If goodness, exercised with such a view,

Deserves the name.—

NATHAN.

With such a view? With what?

DAYA.

My conscience—

NATHAN.

Daya, let me tell you first—

DAYA.

I say, my conscience—

NATHAN.

What a charming silk

I bought for you in Babylon! 'Tis rich,

Yet elegantly rich. I almost doubt

If I have brought a prettier for Recha.

DAYA.

And what of that—I tell you that my conscience
Will no be longer hushed.

NATHAN.

And I have bracelets,
And earrings, and a necklace, which will charm you.
I chose them at Damascus.

DAYA.

That's your way:—
If you can but make presents—but make presents.—

NATHAN.

Take you as freely as I give—and cease.

DAYA.

And cease?—Who questions, Nathan, but that you are
Honour and generosity in person;—
Yet—

NATHAN.

Yet I'm but a Jew.—That was your meaning.

DAYA.

You better know what was my meaning, Nathan.

NATHAN.

Well, well, no more of this,

DAYA.

I shall be silent;
But what of sinful in the eye of heaven
Springs out of it—not I, not I could help;
It falls upon thy head.

NATHAN.

So let it, Daya.

Where is she then? What stays her? Surely, surely,

You're not amusing me—And does she know
That I'm arrived?

DAYA.

That you yourself must speak to,
Terror still vibrates in her every nerve.
Her fancy mingles fire with all she thinks of.
Asleep, her soul seems busy; but awake,
Absent: now less than brute, now more than angel.

NATHAN.

Poor thing! What are we mortals—

DAYA.

As she lay
This morning sleeping, all at once she started
And cried: "list, list! there come my father's camels!"
And then she drooped again upon her pillow
And I withdrew—when, lo! you really came.
Her thoughts have only been with you—and him.

NATHAN.

And *him*? What him?

DAYA.

With him, who from the fire
Preserved her life,

NATHAN.

Who was it? Where is he,
That saved my Recha for me?

DAYA.

A young templar,
Brought hither captive a few days ago,
And pardoned by the Sultan.

NATHAN.

How, a *templar*
Dismissed with life by Saladin. In truth,
Not a less miracle was to preserve her,
God!—God!—

DAYA.

Without this man, who risked afresh
The Sultan's unexpected boon, we'd lost her.

NATHAN.

Where is he, Daya, where's this noble youth?
Do, lead me to his feet. Sure, sure you gave him
What treasures I had left you—gave him all,
Promised him more—much more?

DAYA.

How could we?

NATHAN.

Not?

DAYA.

He came, he went, we know not whence, or whither.
Quite unacquainted with the house, unguided
But by his ear, he prest through smoke and flame,
His mantle spread before him, to the room
Whence pierced the shrieks for help; and we began
To think him lost—and her; when, all at once,
Bursting from flame and smoke, he stood before us,
She in his arm upheld. Cold and unmoved
By our loud warmth of thanks, he left his booty,
Struggled into the crowd, and disappeared.

NATHAN.

But not for ever, Daya, I would hope.

DAYA.

For some days after, underneath you palms,
That shade his grave who rose again from death,
We saw him wandering up and down. I went,
With transport went to thank him. I conjured,
Intreated him to visit once again
The dear sweet girl he saved, who longed to shed
At her preserver's feet the grateful tear—

NATHAN.

Well?

DAYA.

But in vain. Deaf to our warmest prayers,
On me he flung such bitter mockery—

NATHAN.

That hence rebuffed—

DAYA.

Oh, no, oh, no, indeed not,
Daily I forced myself upon him, daily
Afresh encountered his dry taunting speeches.
Much I have borne, and would have borne much more:
But he of late forbears his lonely walk
Under the scattered palms, which stand about
Our holy sepulchre: nor have I learnt
Where he now is. You seem astonished—thoughtful—

NATHAN.

I was imagining what strange impressions
This conduct makes on such a mind as Recha's.
Disdained by one whom she must feel compelled
To venerate and to esteem so highly.
At once attracted and repelled—the combat
Between her head and heart must yet endure,

Regret, Resentment, in unusual struggle.
Neither, perhaps, obtains the upper hand,
And busy fancy, meddling in the fray,
Weaves wild enthusiasms to her dazzled spirit,
Now clothing Passion in the garb of Reason,
And Reason now in Passion's—do I err?

This last is Recha's fate—Romantic notions—

DAYA.

Aye; but such pious, lovely, sweet, illusions.

NATHAN.

Illusions though.

DAYA.

Yes: and the one, her bosom

Clings to most fondly, is, that the brave templar
Was but a transient inmate of the earth,
A guardian angel, such as from her childhood
She loved to fancy kindly hovering round her,
Who from his veiling cloud amid the fire
Stepped forth in her preserver's form. You smile—
Who knows? At least beware of banishing
So pleasing an illusion—if deceitful
Christian, Jew, Mussulman, agree to own it,
And 'tis—at least to her—a dear illusion.

NATHAN.

Also to me. Go, my good Daya, go,
See what she's after. Can't I speak with her?
Then I'll find out our untamed guardian angel,
Bring him to sojourn here awhile among us—
We'll pinion his wild wing, when once he's taken.

DAYA.

You undertake too much.

NATHAN.

And when, my Daya,

This sweet illusion yields to sweeter truth,
(For to a man a man is ever dearer
Than any angel) you must not be angry
To see our loved enthusiast exercised.

DAYA.

You are so good—and yet so sly. I'll seek her,
But listen,—yes! she's coming of herself.

NATHAN, DAYA, *and* RECHA.

RECHA.

And you are here, your very self, my father,
I thought you'd only sent your voice before you.
Where are you then? What mountains, deserts, torrents,
Divide us now? You see me, face to face,
And do not hasten to embrace your Recha.
Poor Recha! she was almost burnt alive,
But only—only—almost. Do not shudder!
O 'tis a horrid end to die in fire!

NATHAN (*embracing her*).

My child, my darling child!

RECHA.

You had to cross

The Jordan, Tigris, and Euphrates, and
Who knows what rivers else. I used to tremble
And quake for you, till the fire came so nigh me;
Since then, methinks 'twere comfort, balm, refreshment,
To die by water. But you are not drowned—
I am not burnt alive.—We will rejoice—

We will praise God—the kind good God, who bore thee,
Upon the buoyant wings of *unseen* angels,
Across the treacherous stream—the God who bade
My angel *visibly* on his white wing
Athwart the roaring flame—

NATHAN (*aside*).

White wing?—oh, aye
The broad white fluttering mantle of the templar.

RECHA.

Yes, visibly he bore me through the fire,
O'ershadowed by his pinions.—Face to face
I've seen an angel, father, my own angel.

NATHAN.

Recha deserves it, and would see in him
No fairer form than he beheld in her,

RECHA.

Whom are you flattering, father—tell me now—
The angel, or yourself?

NATHAN.

Yet had a man,
A man of those whom Nature daily fashions,
Done you this service, he to you had seemed,
Had been an angel.

RECHA.

No, not such a one.
Indeed it was a true and real angel.
And have not you yourself instructed me
How possible it is there may be angels;
That God for those who love him can work miracles—
And I do love him, father—

NATHAN.

And he thee;

And both for thee, and all like thee, my child,
Works daily wonders, from eternity
Has wrought them for you.

RECHA.

That I like to hear.

NATHAN.

Well, and although it sounds quite natural,
An every day event, a simple story,
That you was by a real templar saved,
Is it the less a miracle? The greatest
Of all is this, that true and real wonders
Should happen so perpetually, so daily.
Without this universal miracle
A thinking man had scarcely called those such,
Which only children, Recha, ought to name so,
Who love to gape and stare at the unusual
And hunt for novelty—

DAYA.

Why will you then

With such vain subtleties, confuse her brain
Already overheated?

NATHAN.

Let me manage.—

And is it not enough then for my Recha
To owe her preservation to a man,
Whom no small miracle preserved himself.
For whoe'er heard before that Saladin
Let go a templar; that a templar wished it,