

Thomas More, "The Book of Fortune."¹
Edited by Travis Curtright

*The words of Fortune to the people:*²

Mine high state, power, and authority,
If ye not know, search and ye shall spy,
That riches, worship, wealth, and dignity,
Joy, rest, and peace, and all things finally,
That any pleasure or profit may come by,
To man's comfort, aide, and sustenance,
Is all at my device and ordinance.

Without my favor there is nothing won.
Many a matter have I brought at last,
To good conclusion, that fondly was begun. 10
And many a purpose, bounden sure and fast
With wise provision, I have overcast.
Without good chance there may no wit suffice,³
Better is to be fortunate than wise.

And therefore hath there some men been or this,
My deadly foes and written many a book,
To my dispraise. And other cause there is not,⁴
But for me, I choose not friendly on them to look,⁵
Thus like the fox they fare that once forsook,
The pleasant grapes, and began to defy them,
Because he leapt and yet could not come by them.⁶ 20

But let them write their labor is in vain,

¹ Source text for modernization comes from *The English Works of Thomas More*, editors W.E. Campbell, A.W. Reed, R.W. Chambers, and W.A.G. Doyle-Davidson, 2 volumes (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode Limited, 1931). Cited as "Campbell and Reed" hereafter. On the time of composition, Anthony S.G. Edwards thinks that this poem was "written by the end of the first decade of the sixteenth century," along with much of More's other verse. See introduction to *The Complete Works of Thomas More*, vol. 1, editors Anthony S.G. Edwards, Katherine Rodgers, Clarence H. Miller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), xxx. Cited as "S. G. Edwards" hereafter.

² All stanzas follow the verse form of *rhyme royal*.

³ The original line reads: "Without good happe there may not wit suffise." "Happe" means "chance" or "chance happening." "Wit" connotes the "faculty of thinking in general" (OED). What Fortune argues may be rendered: "no talent (wit) is sufficient without good luck (happe)."

⁴ "Dispraise" means "censure." Lady Fortune is aware of those poets and philosophers who have condemned her; such an exercise was a medieval commonplace. Both Chaucer (see *On Truth*) and Beothius (see *Consolation of Philosophy*) juxtapose Fortune's gifts to those of wisdom and virtue.

⁵ "List" is an archaic form of "to like" or "to desire" or "to choose" (OED). In context, Lady Fortune chooses not to look friendly upon books that disparage her.

⁶ The fox "defies" the grapes by not seeking them; but he only gives up because he could not leap high enough to snatch them off the vine. By analogy, those who censure fortune could not achieve her rewards, and, out of bitterness over their failure, condemn her.

For well ye know, mirth, honor, and riches,
Much better is than penury and pain.⁷
The needy wretch that lingers in distress,⁸
Without mine help is ever comfortless,
A weary burden odious and loath,
To all the world, and also to himself both.⁹

But he that by my favor may ascend,
To mighty power and excellent degree, 30
A commonwealth to govern and defend,¹⁰
O in how blest condition stands he:
Himself in honor and felicity,
And over that, may further and increase,
A region whole in joyful rest and peace.¹¹

Now in this point there is no more to say,
Each man hath of himself the governance.
Let every person then follow his own way.¹²
And he that out of poverty and mischance,
Chooses for to live, and will himself enhance,¹³ 40
In wealth & riches, come forth and wait on me.
And he that will be a beggar, let him be.

Thomas More to them that trust in Fortune.

Thou that art proud of honor, shape, or kin,
That heap up this wretched world's treasure,
Thy fingers shrined with gold, thy tawny skin,
With fresh apparel garnished out of measure,
And know to have Fortune at thy pleasure,¹⁴
Cast up thine eye, and look how slippery chance,
Illudes her men with change and variance.

Sometime she looks as lovely fair and bright, 50
As goodly Venus mother of Cupid.
She beckons and she smiles on every person.¹⁵

⁷ "Penury" means "poverty."

⁸ I replace "lingers" for the archaic "lingereth."

⁹ "Also" replaces the archaic "eke" here.

¹⁰ "Commonwealth" replaces the archaic "common wele."

¹¹ Interestingly, Fortune's benefits include bestowing kingdoms, which are not lacking in material goods. Fortune may grant a kingdom to her followers, and the honor that a successful reign bestows upon a ruler.

¹² "Person" replaces the archaic "wight".

¹³ "Chooses" replaces the archaic "list." The hyperbaton of this stanza may cause confusion. Put simply, the argument is "he that chooses to live out of poverty and bad luck and into wealth and riches should serve Fortune, but he who prefers his poverty and bad luck should remain a beggar."

¹⁴ "Know" replaces the archaic "wenest."

But this cheer feigned, may not long abide.
There comes a cloud, and farewell all our pride.
Like any serpent she begins to swell,
And looks as fierce as any fury of hell.

Yet for all that we weak men are feign,¹⁶
(So wretched is our nature and so blind)
As soon as Fortune desires to laugh again,¹⁷
With fare countenance and deceitful mind, 60
To crouch and kneel and gape after the wind,
Not one or two but thousands in a rout,¹⁸
Like swarming bees come flickering her about.

Then as a bait she brings forth her ware,¹⁹
Silver, gold, rich pearls, and precious stone:
On which the massed people gaze and stare,
And gape therefore, as dogs do for the bone.
Fortune at them laughs, and in her throne
Amid her treasure and wavering riches,
Proudly she hovers as lady and empress.²⁰ 70

Fast by her side doth weary Labor stand,
Pale Fear also, and Sorrow all bewept,
Disdain and Hatred on that other hand,
Also restless watch from sleep with travail kept,
His eyes drowsy and looking as he slept.
Before her stands Danger and Envy,
Flattery, Deceit, Mischief and Tyranny.²¹

About her comes all the world to beg.
He asks land, and he to pass would bring,
This toy and that, and all not worth an egg: 80
He would in love prosper above all things:
He kneels down and would be made a king:
He forces not so he may money have,²²
Though all the world account him for a knave.²³

¹⁵ “Beckons” and “person” replaces the archaic “becketh” and “wight.”

¹⁶ “Weak” replaces “brotle,” which is an archaic form for “brittle.”

¹⁷ “Desires” replaces the archaic “list.”

¹⁸ “Two” replaces the archaic “twayne.”

¹⁹ “Her ware” or her “goods.”

²⁰ “Hovers” replaces “hoveth.” But “hoveth” may also be an abbreviated form of behoove (OED).

²¹ Labor, Flattery, Envy and the like, are allegorical figures that stand in attendance around the throne of Fortune.

²² “Forces” replaces archaic “forceth,” which may mean “to compel.” More draws a contrast between “kneleth” and “forceth not,” or between those who would “kneel” in direct appeal to Fortune, and those who do not worshipfully entreat her.

²³ More uses the archaic form of account, “accompt.” In this stanza, the pronoun “he” refers to different suitors, their

Lo thus ye see diverse heads, diverse brains.
Fortune alone as diverse as them all,²⁴
Unstable here and there among them flies:²⁵
And at a chance down her gifts fall,²⁶
Catch whom she may, but throws great and small²⁷
Not to all men, as comes sun or dew, 90
But for the most part, all among a few.²⁸

And yet her unstable gifts long may not last.²⁹
He that she gave them, looks proud and high.
She whirls about and plucks away as fast,
And gives them to another by and by.
And thus from man to man continually,
She uses to give and take, and slyly toss,
One man to winning at an other's loss.³⁰

And when she robs one, down goes his pride.
He weeps and wails and curses her full sore. 100
But he that receives it, on that other side,
Is glad, and blesses her often times therefore.
But in a while when she loves him no more,
She glides from him, and her gifts too.
And he her curses as other fools do.

Alas the foolish people cannot cease,
Nor avoid her trap,³¹ till they the harm does feel.
About her always, busily they press.³²
But lord how he doth think himself full well.
That may set once his hand upon her wheel.³³ 110
He holds fast: but upward as he flies,
She whips her wheel about, and there he lies.

various requests, and their different manners of imploring Lady Fortune. "All the world" comes to beg, or many different men with different requests.

²⁴ I replace "diverse" for the archaic "divers," "heads" for "heddes," and "brains" for "wittes." After the various men are presented in the previous stanza, the speaker comments upon their great diversity, before punning on the word "diverse" in describing Fortune: she is diverse in the sense of being capricious or variable.

²⁵ "Flies" replaces "flittes."

²⁶ "Chance" replaces the archaic "aventure," which means "that which comes to us, or happens, without design" (OED).

²⁷ The actual line reads: "Catch who so may she throweth great and small."

²⁸ "All among a few" means that all of Fortune's gifts are given to only a few men, who Fortune "catches" at random.

²⁹ "Unstable" replaces the archaic "brotell," which can carry the sense of "brittle" or "weak" or "abandoned" in addition (OED).

³⁰ "At" replaces "of."

³¹ The actual word is "trayne," which literally means a "foxes burrow," and figuratively can be associated with evil (OED).

³² The actual line reads: "besely they preace."

³³ See Chaucer's line on Fortune from "Truth": "trusteth not in hir that turneth as a bal."

Thus fell Julius from his mighty power.³⁴
Thus fell Darius the worthy king of Persia.³⁵
Thus fell Alexander the great conqueror.³⁶
Thus many more than I may well rehearse.
Thus double fortune, when she chooses reverse
Her slippery favor from them that in her trust,
She flees her way and lays them in the dust.

She suddenly enhances them aloft. 120
And suddenly does mischief to the flock.³⁷
The head that late lay easily and full soft,
Instead of pillows lies after on the block.³⁸
And yet alas the most cruel proud mock:
The dainty mouths that ladies kissed have,
She brings in the case to kiss a knave.

Thus when she changes her uncertain course,
Up starts a knave, and down there falls a knight,
The beggar rich, and the rich man poor is.
Hatred is turned to love, love to despite. 130
This is her sport, thus proves she her might.
Great boast she makes if one be by her power,
Wealthy and wretched both within an hour.

Poverty that of her gifts will nothing take,
With merry cheer, looks upon the press,³⁹
And sees how Fortune's household goes to wreck.⁴⁰
Fast by her stands the wise Socrates,⁴¹
Aristippus,⁴² Pythagoras,⁴³ and many a less

³⁴ Gaius Julius Caesar was born around 100 B.C. He effectively destroyed the Roman Republic by consolidating power in the hands of a few Romans. Between Caesar, Pompey, and Crassus, the first Triumvirate of Rome was formed. After Crassus' death, Caesar defeated Pompey for complete rule. Caesar was named dictator for life in 45 B.C., and in the following year, on the Ides of March, he was stabbed to death by a group of conspirators in the Roman Senate.

³⁵ Darius the Great was the Persian Emperor from 521 to 485 B.C. He is commemorated in the Western tradition especially for his defeat at the battle of Marathon in 490, where the Athenian army defeated him.

³⁶ Alexander the Great (356-323 B.C.) was King of Macedon before he conquered all of Greece and Persia. He died at the age of thirty-two—shortly after his conquests.

³⁷ "Does mischief" replaces "mischeveth."

³⁸ This refers to the "block" upon which criminals were beheaded.

³⁹ More's "prece"—or "press"—means "crowds."

⁴⁰ "Wreck" replaces "wrake," which can mean "mischief" or "revenge" (OED).

⁴¹ Socrates (470-399 B.C.) was an Athenian philosopher, who is best known through the dialogues of Plato. In addition to his willingness to die for the sake of philosophy, Socrates is also famous for his abstemious ways and continual interest in defining a virtuous way of life.

⁴² Aristippus (c. 435-356 B.C.) was a student of Socrates, and later became the founder of the Cyrenaic school of philosophy, which taught skepticism and the pursuit of pleasure.

⁴³ Mathematician and philosopher, Pythagoras was born about 569 B.C., dying around 475 B.C. He is most famous

Of old Philosophers. And also against the sun
Beckons him poor Diogenes in his tunnel.⁴⁴ 140

With her⁴⁵ is Bias,⁴⁶ whose country lacked defense,
And formerly of their foes stood so in doubt,⁴⁷
That each man hastily began to carry thence,
And asked him why he not carried out.
I bear said he all mine with me about:
Wisdom he meant,⁴⁸ not fortunes fickle fees.⁴⁹
For nothing he counted his that he might lose.

Heraclitus also, chooses fellowship to keep⁵⁰
With glad Poverty, Democritus also:⁵¹ 150
Of which the first can never cease but weep,
To see how thick the blinded people go,
With labor great to purchase care and woe.
That other laughs to see the foolish apes,
How earnestly they walk about their japes.⁵²

Of this poor sect, it is common usage,⁵³

for introducing the Pythagorean theorem to Greek thought.

⁴⁴ The last couplet here is difficult to render: “sonne” and “tonne” are the actual words at the end of each line. Tonne might be an archaic form for “tongue,” or for “tunnel” or “tomb.” The imagery suggests the story of Alexander’s visit to Diogenes: the philosopher would not leave his hole in the ground to see even the mighty Alexander. As Plutarch relates the story, when Alexander stoops to look into Diogenes’ hole, the philosopher tells him to get out of the sunlight’s way.

⁴⁵ “Her” refers to the allegorical figure of Poverty.

⁴⁶ Bias of Priene in Ionia was one of the seven sages of Greece, known for giving good political advice. Campbell and Reed think that More alludes to Cicero’s *Paradoxa Stoicorum* (1.1.8): “Yet all that list of things [material riches] we see to be of such a nature that even wicked men possess them and that virtuous men derive harm from them. On that account though anyone who likes is at liberty to laugh at me, yet with me true reason will carry more weight than the opinion of the common herd, and I for my part shall never say that anybody who has lost cattle or furniture has suffered a loss of goods, and moreover I shall often praise that wise man, Bias I think it was, who is reckoned as one of the Seven, who, when his native Priene had been taken by the enemy and the rest of the people although flying were carrying away many of their chattels with them, met somebody’s suggestion that he himself should do the same with the reply, ‘But I am doing so, for I carry all my belongings with me.’ Bias refused to think of these toys of fortune, which we actually call goods, as even among his belongings.” See Cicero’s *Paradoxa Stoicorum* in *Cicero: De Oratore, Book III, De Fato, Paradoxa Stoicorum, De Partitione Oratoria*, trans. H. Rackham, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press for The Loeb Classical Library, 1960).

⁴⁷ “Formerly” replaces “whylom” (Oxford’s *A Chaucer Glossary*).

⁴⁸ “He” refers to Bias.

⁴⁹ “Fickle” used for “brotle.”

⁵⁰ Heraclitus (c. 535-475 B.C.) was one of the first philosophers to consider nature in light of “logos” instead of material realities. He was also known for his belief that the masses of men do not possess wisdom. More shows Heraclitus weeping over those pursuing Fortune gifts, indicating that the majority of men are not wise enough to avoid Fortune’s temptations.

⁵¹ Democritus (c. 460-370 B.C.) was one of the first philosophers to speculate that human beings and the world were composed of atoms. Seneca records that Democritus was known as the “laughing philosopher” because whenever he was in public he laughed to express his disdain for all the human follies he witnessed. Accordingly, Democritus laughs at those who choose Fortune’s gifts.

⁵² “Japes” means “jokes” or “tricks,” which may be foolish or deceitful or both (Oxford’s *A Chaucer Glossary*).

Only to take what nature may sustain,
Banishing clean all other surplus,⁵⁴
They be content, and of nothing complain.
No hoarding of nature's good do they so feign,⁵⁵
Because they more pleasure have a thousand fold, 160
The secret draughts of nature to behold.

Set Fortune's servants by them and ye will,
That one is free, that other ever a thrall,⁵⁶
That one content, that other never full.
That one in surety, that other like to fall.
Who likes to advise them both, perceive he shall,
As great difference between them as we see,
Betwixt wretchedness and felicity.

Now have I shown you both: choose which ye list,⁵⁷
Stately Fortune, or humble Poverty: 170
That is to say, now lies it in your fist,
To take here bondage, or free liberty.
But in this point and ye do after me,
Draw you to Fortune, and labor her to please,
If that ye think your self too well at ease.

And first, upon thee lovely shall she smile,
And friendly on thee cast her wandering eyes,
Embrace thee in her arms, and for a while,
Put thee and keep thee in a fools' paradise:
And forth withal what so thou desires devise, 180
She will thee grant it liberally perhaps:
But for all that beware of after claps.⁵⁸

Reckon you never of her favor sure:
Ye may in clouds as easily trace a hare,
Or in dry land cause fishes to endure,

⁵³ "Poor" makes for an ironic pun; the philosophers live in poverty, but they are rich in wisdom.

⁵⁴ Avarice and fortune are compared to moderation and nature. As a result, nature provides not only material goods, but also a moral standard.

⁵⁵ The actual line reads: "No nygarde eke is of his good so fayne." In contrast to those lovers of Fortune, the philosophers need not "niggard" their goods in fear of losing them; their good comes from nature's bounty, and from the wisdom that comes from studying nature herself. Although wisdom is rare, it may be more easily shared than material wealth.

⁵⁶ More actually uses "thrall" as a verb here, in the sense of being enthralled or enslaved. A man is "ever thrall" to Fortune, or ever enslaved.

⁵⁷ "Like" could replace the archaic "lyst."

⁵⁸ The actual word is "clappes," which is probably punning upon several archaic forms of the word. "Clappes" can mean a loud sound, to impose upon by authority, or to lay hands upon (OED). We might render the couplet into the following possibilities: After Fortune is kind to her servant, she will thunder (make a loud sound), or she will imprison her servant (to impose or lay hands upon).

And make the burning fire his heat to spare,
And all this world measure to despair.⁵⁹
As her to make by craft or ingenuity stable,⁶⁰
That of her nature is ever variable.

Serve her day and night as reverently, 190
Upon thy knees as any servant may,
And in conclusion, what thou shalt win thereby
Shall not be worth thy service I dare say.
And look yet what she gives thee today,⁶¹
With labor won she shall happily tomorrow
Pluck it again out of thine hand with sorrow.

Wherefore if thou in surety like to stand,
Take Poverty's part and let proud Fortune go,
Receive nothing that comes from her hand:
Love decorum and virtue: they be only those⁶² 200
Which double Fortune may not take thee from.
Then may thou boldly defy her turning chance:
She can thee neither hinder nor advance.⁶³

But and thou wilt needs meddle with her treasure,
Trust not therein, and spend it liberally.
Bear thee not proud, nor take not out of measure.
Build not thine house on height up in the sky⁶⁴
None falls far, but he that climbs high,
Remember nature sent the hither bare,
The gifts of Fortune count them borrowed ware. 210

Thomas More to them that seek Fortune.

Whoever delights in being tested and assayed,⁶⁵
By wavering Fortune the uncertain lot,
If that the answer please you not always,
Blame ye not me: for I command you not,

⁵⁹ The actual line is "And all thys world in compace to forfare." "In compace" is probably an archaic form of "encompass" and "forfare" means to "decay" or "to perish" (OED). I substitute "despair" for the more literal "perish" in order to keep the intended rhyme scheme.

⁶⁰ I supply "ingenuity" for "engine," which would have meant "native talent" or "natural disposition" (OED).

⁶¹ The actual line uses "that" for "what;" which is common throughout the poem.

⁶² The actual line reads: "Love maner and vertue: they be onely tho." The word "maner," however, connotes appropriate behavior according to morality – the word "decorum" best fits as a result (OED).

⁶³ "hynder or avauance" is the actual ending. "Avauance" is the obsolete form of advance (OED).

⁶⁴ The actual word is "heyth," which is an obsolete form of "height" and "heath;" the latter term may connote a wasteland or wilderness (OED). More could be punning on the word to show that ambition (figuratively expressed as height) is an ultimate heath or wasteland.

⁶⁵ "Being tested" and "assayed" replace "proven" and "assay." The figure plays with the same verb—to test—by turning it into nouns: "Proven" would be the participle turned into a noun, and "to assay" is a gerund.

Then for as much as it is Fortune's guise,
To grant no man all things that he will ask,
But as herself desires to order and devise,
Doth every man his part divide and tax,
I counsel you each one bundle up your packs,⁷³ 250
And take no thing at all, or be content,
With such reward as Fortune hath you sent.

All things in this book that ye shall read,
Do as ye wish, there shall no man you bind⁷⁴
Them to believe, as surely as your creed.
But that notwithstanding, assuredly in my mind,⁷⁵
I durst well swear, as true ye shall them find,
In every point each answer by and by,
As are the judgements of Astronomy.⁷⁶

*Thus endeth the preface to the
Book of Fortune.*

all three.

⁷³ "Trusse up your packes" is the original phrase.

⁷⁴ "Do as ye lyst" is the actual phrase.

⁷⁵ I insert "that" and the comma in order to show that More means to give a disclaimer to the readers about his "Book of Fortune," a text for which this poem was meant to be a prologue. Identity of "The Book of Fortune" remains unclear, some claiming that it was a translation of Lorenzo Spirito's *Libro della ventura, o vero Libro delle sorti*. For discussion of this and other alternatives, see S.G. Edwards, xxviii-xxxii.

⁷⁶ The comparison to astronomy was probably not made in self-deprecation. Galileo would not emerge until the seventeenth century, and before him, Cicero's *The Dream of Scipio*, or Chaucer's treatment of the celestial spheres, exerted a strong influence upon the early modern belief that the stars were part of the powers belonging the Divine. The same "wisdom" that governs the spheres, therefore, could also govern the moral advice on how to treat Fortune.