[Fortune Verses] (c.1504)

by

St. Thomas More

Edited and modernized by Carle Mock

with

A translation of the French stanzas by Andrea Frank

The Prologue

As often as I consider these old noble clerks, (Poets, Orators, and Philosophers, sects three) How wonderful they were; in all their works How eloquent, how inventive in every degree; Half amazed I am, and as a dead tree Stand still, over-rude for to bring forth Any fruit or sentence that is ought worth.

Nevertheless, though rude I be in all contriving Of matters, yet somewhat to make, I need not to care; I see many a one occupied in the same thing. Lo, unlearned men nowadays will not spare To write, to babble, their minds to declare, Trowynge themselves gay fantasies to draw, When all their cunning is not worth a straw.

Some in French chronicles gladly do presume. Some in English blindly wade and wander. Another in Latin blows forth a dark fume, As wise as a great-headed Ass of Alexander. Some in philosophy, like a gaggling gander, Begin lustily the brows to set up, And at the last conclude in the good ale cup.

End Prologue.
Said T. M.

[The Words of T. M. to Fortune (25-40) and to the People (41-50)] [Section 1]

Perverse Fortune,
Who turn the world
All at your whim,
You never cease,
Full of cunning;
And you take pleasure in it.

*I have not been able to precisely ascertain the meaning of this strange reference, but it seems intended to disparage Alexander the Great.
Through you come ills
And mortal wars,
All disadvantages;
Over mountains and valleys
And in the hospitals
So many people die.

Fortune, O mighty and variable,
What rule you claim, with your cruel power!
Good folk you destroy, and love reprobable [folk].
You may not warrant your gifts for one hour.
Fortune unworthy men sets in honor.
Through Fortune, the innocent [man] in woe and sorrow shrieks.
The just man she spoils, and the unjust enriches.

Young men she kills, and lets old men live,
Unrighteously dividing time and season.
That good men lose, to wicked does she give.
She has no difference, but judges all good reason:
Inconstant, slippery, frail, and full of treason,
Neither forever cherish whom she takes,
Nor forever oppressing whom she forsakes.

End. Said T. M.

The Words of Fortune to the People [Section 2]

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

Without my favor, there is nothing won.
Many a matter have I brought at last
To good conclusion, that fondely was begun.
And many a purpose, bound sure and fast
With wise provision, I have over cast.
Without good hap, there may no wit suffice:
Better is [it] to be fortunate than [to be] wise.

And, therefore, have [there] some men been or this
My deadly foes, and written many a book
To my disparage; and other cause there nys,
But for me lyste not friendly on them [to] look.
Thus, like the fox they fare, that once forsook
The pleasant grapes, and began for to defy them,
Because he leapt and leapt, and could not come by them.*

But let them write; the labor is in vain.
For well ye wote:° mirth, honor, and riches
Better is than shame, penury and pain.
The needy wretch, that lingers in distress,
Without my help, is ever comfortless:
A weary burden, odious and loath[some]17
To all the world and to himself, both.

But, he that by my favor may ascend
To mighty power and excellent degree,°
A commonweal to govern and defend,
O in how blessed condition stands he!
Himself in honor and felicity,
And over that, may further and increase
A whole region in joy, rest, and peace.

Now in this point there is no more to say:
Each man has of himself the governance.
Let every wight° then take his own way.
And he, that out of poverty and mischance
Lyste° for to live, and will himself enhance
In wealth and riches, come forth and wait on me;
And he that will be a beggar, let him be.

To Them That Trust in Fortune  [Section 3]  

You that are proud of honor, shape° or kin,
That heap up this wretched world’s treasure,
(Your fingers shined with gold, your tawny skin
With fresh apparel garnished °out of measure°)
And weneste° to have Fortune always at your pleasure,
Cast up your eye; and look how slippery Chance
Eludes her men with change and variance.

Sometimes, she looks as lovely, fair, and bright
As goodly Venus, mother of Cupid;
She beckketh° and smiles upon every wight.°
But this feigned cheer may not abide;
There comes a cloud, and farewell all our pride.
Like any serpent, she begins to swell,

*Aesop’s fable: One hot summer’s day a Fox was strolling through an orchard till he came to a bunch of grapes just ripening on a vine which had been trained over a lofty branch. “Just the thing to quench my thirst,” he said. Drawing back a few paces, he took a run and a jump, and just missed the bunch. Turning round again with a One, Two, Three, he jumped up, but with no greater success. Again and again he tried after the tempting morsel, but at last had to give it up, and walked away with his nose in the air, saying: “I am sure they are sour.”

Moral: It is easy to despise what you cannot get.
And looks as fierce as any fury of hell.

Yet for all that, we brittle men are ffayn,° glad
(So wretched is our nature and so blind)
As soon as Fortune list° to laugh again,
With fair countenance and deceitful mind,
To crouch and kneel and °gape after the wind.°
Not one or twain, but thousands °on a rowt,°
Like swarming bees, come flattering her about.

Then, as a bait, she brings forth her ware:
Silver, gold, rich pearl, and precious stone,
On which the amazed people gaze and stare,
And gape therefore, as dogs for the bone.
Fortune at them laughs; and in her throne,
Amid her treasure and wavering riches,
Proudly she hovers as Lady and Empress.

Fast by her side does weary Labor stand,
Pale Fear also, and Sorrow all bewepte;°
Disdain and Hatred on that other hand;
Eke° restless Watch, from sleep with travail kept,
His eyes drowsy and looking as he slept;
Before her stand Danger and Envy,
Flattery, Deceit, Mischief, and Tyranny.

About her comes all the world to beg:
He asks [for]° land; and he to pass° would bring
This toy and that, and all not worth an egg;
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,
Though all the world account him for a knave.

Lo, thus [ye see]° diverse heads, diverse wits.
Fortune alone, as diverse as them all,
Unstable, here and there among them flits;
And °at aventure° down her gifts fall.
Catch who so may; she throws great and small,
Not to all men, as comes sun or dew,°
But, for the most part, all among a few.

And yet, her brittle gifts may not last.
He that she gave them [to] 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 vsith° to give and take, and slyly toss
One man to winning of another’s loss.
And when she robs one, down goes his pride;
He weeps and wails and curses her °full sore.°
But he that receives it, on that other side,
Is glad, and blesses her a thousand 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,
°Ne voyde° her trayne,° till they the harm feel.
About her always busily they press.
But lord [how]° he thinks himself well,
That may set once his hand upon her wheel.
He holds fast, but upward as he stieth,°
She whipps her wheel about, and there he lies.

Thus fell Julius from his mighty power.
Thus fell Darius, the worthy king of Persia.
Thus fell Alexander, the sovereign conqueror.
Thus many more than I may well rehearse.

Thus double° Fortune, when she liste° reverse
Her slippery favor from them that in her trust,
She flies23 her way, and lays them in the dust.

She suddenly enhances them aloft,
And suddenly myscheveth° all the flock.
The head that lately lay easily and soft,
Instead of [on] pillows, lies after on the block.
And yet, alas, the cruel proud mock:°
The dainty mouth, 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 dispight.°
This is her sport; thus proves she her might.

Great boast she makes if one [be],° by her power,
Wealthy and wretched both [with]in° an hour.

Poverty (that of her gifts will nothing take),
With merry cheer, she looks on the prece,°
And sees how Fortune’s household goes to wreck.

Fast by her stands the wise Socrates,
Aristippus, Pythagoras, and many a lese°
Of old philosophers; and eke° against the sun
°Bekith him° poor Diogenes in his tonne.°

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With her is Bias, whose country lacked defense,
And whilom° of their foes [they] stood [so]28 in doubt,
That each man hastily began to carry [his things] thence,
And asked him why he naught° carried out.
“I bear,” quod° he, “all mine with me about.”
Wisdom he meant, no[t] ° once29 Fortune’s brittle ffees;
For naught° he counted his that he might lose.

Heraclitus, eke°, liste° fellowship to keep
With glad Poverty; Democritus also;
Of which the first can never cease but weep
To see how thick° the blind people go
With great labor to purchase care and woe.
That other laughs to see the foolish apes,
How earnestly they walk about their japes.

Of this poor sect,° it is the usage
Only to take that [which]° nature may sustain.
Banishing clean all other surplus,
They be content, and of nothing complain.
No niggard eke° is of his goods so ffayn;°
But they more pleasure have a thousand fold,
The secret drafts° of nature to behold.

Set Fortune’s servants by themselves and° ye will:
That one is free, that other ever thrall;°
That one content, that other never full;°
That one in surety,° that other likely to fall.
Who lyst° 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 liste°
Stately Fortune, or humble Poverty;
That is to say, now lies it in your fist°
To take you to 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 yourself too well at ease.

And [at] first, upon you lovely shall she smile,
And friendly on you cast her wandering eyes,
Embrace you in her arms, and, for a while,
Put you into a fool’s paradise.
And forthwith, all what so you liste° devise,°
She will [to] you grant it liberally, perhaps.
But for all that, beware of after-claps.°

Reckon you never of her favor sure:
Ye may in the clouds as easily trace\textdegree a hare,\nOr in dry land cause fishes to endure,\nAnd make the burning fire his heat to spare,\nAnd all this world encompass to forfare.\textdegree As her to make (by craft of engyne\textdegree) stable,\nThat of her nature is ever variable.

Serve her day and night as reverently\nUpon your knees as \{any\}\textdegree servant may,\nAnd in conclusion, that\textdegree you shall win thereby\nShall not be worth your service, I dare say.\nAnd look yet: what she gives you today,\nWith labor won, she shall haply\textdegree tomorrow\nPluck it out of your hand with sorrow.

Wherefore, if you in surety\textdegree liste\textdegree to stand,\nTake Poverty\textquotesingle s part and let proud Fortune go.\nReceive nothing that comes from her hand.\nLove manner\textdegree and virtue; for \{they be only\}\textdegree those \{things\}\textdegree moderation \{they alone are\} inconstant \{from you\}
Which double\textdegree Fortune may never take \{you from\}\textdegree
Then may you boldly defy her, turning Chance.  \{security\} \{desire\}
She can you neither hinder nor advance.

But and\textdegree you will nedes\textdegree meddle with her treasure,\nTrust not therein, and spend it liberally.\n\{Bear you not proud,\textdegree nor take not \{out of measure\}\textdegree excessively\}
Build not your house high up in the sky.\nNone falls far, but he that climbs high.\nRemember, nature sent you hither bare;\nThe gifts of Fortune, count them \{as\}\textdegree borrowed ware.

To Them that Seek Fortune [Section 4]

Whoso delights to prove and assay\Of wavering Fortune the full uncertain lot,\If that the answer please you not always,\Blame not me: for I command you not\Fortune to trust; and eke\textdegree full well ye wot,\textdegree I have of her no bridle in my fist.\textdegree She runs loose, and turns where she lyste.\textdegree

The rolling dice, in whom your luck does stand,\(With whose unhappy chance ye be so wroth\textdegree)\nYe know yourself came never in my hand.\Lo, in this pond be fish and frogs both.\Cast in your net; but be you leve\textdegree or loath,\textdegree Hold you content as Fortune liste\textdegree assign,\[For]\textdegree it is your own fishing, and not mine.

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And, though in one chance Fortune you offend,
Grudge not thereat, but bear a merry face;
In many another she shall it amend.
There is no man so far out of her grace,
But he sometimes has comfort and solace;
Nay none again so far forth in her favor,
That fully satisfied is with her behavior.

Fortune is stately, solemn, proud, and high,
And riches gives, to have service therefore.
The needy beggar catches a halfpenny;
Some man a thousand pounds, some less, some more.
But for all that, she keeps ever in store
From every man some parcel of his will,
That he may pray therefore, and serve her still.

Some man has goods, but children has he none.
Some man has both, but he can get no health.
Some [man] has all three, but up to honor’s throne
Can he not creep, by no manner of stealth.
To some [man] she sends children, riches, wealth,
Honor, worship, and reverence all his life;
But yet she plucks him with a shrewed wife.

Then (forasmuch as it is Fortune’s gyse
To grant no man all things that he will ask,
But as herself liste order and devise)
Does every man his part divide and tax.
I counsel you: either truss up your packs,
And take nothing at all; or be content
With such reward as Fortune has you sent.

All things in this book that ye shall read,
Do as ye liste; there shall no man bind
Them to believe as surely as your creed.
But, notwithstanding, certes in my mind
I durst well swear: as true shall ye them find
In every point, each answer by and by,
As are the judgments of astronomy.

Here Finishes Lady Fortune [Epilogue]

Fortune Speaks

Fortune, where is David, and Solomon;
Methuselah, Joshua, Maccabeus
Holofernes, Alexander, and Sampson;
Julius Caesar, Hector, also Pompey?
Where is Ulysses and his great renown;
Arthur the king, Godfrey, Charlemagne,
Darius the great, Hercules, Ptolemy?
They have all died; this world is a futile thing.

What has become of Pharaoh, the felon king;
Job the courteous, Tobias, and their lineages;
Aristotle, Hippocrates, and Plato;
Judith, Esther, Boethius, Penelope,
Queen Dido, Pallas, Juno, Medea,
Guinevere, and the very noble Helen;
Palamides, Tristan with his sword?
They have all died; this world is a futile thing.
This is a word-for-word rendering of the Fortune Verses into modern English spelling. I have, however, sometimes combined two or more words into one modern word, such as “nothing,” “forever,” “nowadays,” etc, or split one of More’s words into two (line 42, e.g). I have added and removed prefixes and suffixes as required by modern usage. All ampersands have been expanded. I have always modernized the endings on 2nd and 3rd person verbs, even in More’s words into two (line 42, e.g.). I have added and removed prefixes and suffixes as required by modern sometimes combined two or more words into one modern word, such as “nothing,” “forever,” “nowadays,” etc, or split one of More’s words into two (line 42, e.g.). I have added and removed prefixes and suffixes as required by modern usage. All ampersands have been expanded. I have always modernized the endings on 2nd and 3rd person verbs, even when it alters the number of syllables on a line (the different texts are not themselves consistent in this regard; cf. e.g. lines 112 and 170 in O and GL), and always replaced archaic forms of the 2nd person singular pronoun with “you.” When the modern word with similar spelling and/or pronunciation differs substantially in meaning from More’s word, and whenever I thought it helpful to clarify More’s usage of certain words, I have provided a marginal gloss on the same line. Those glosses which are not otherwise cited are from the glossary of CW 1. In cases where I judged that modernization of a word was impossible or unhelpful, I have preserved the spelling of my critical edition, while providing the appropriate gloss. I have maintained the capitalization of the initial letter of each line, but in all other cases, I have added or removed capitalization to both accord with modern practice and provide consistency. Of particular note, I have consistently capitalized Fortune and Poverty, as personifications, when CW 1 and GL usually (but not always) render these words with lower case. So, too, I have (with 1557) personified Fortune’s attendants in lines 124-130; see however CW 1, cxvii for why that editor did not. In two instances (lines 101 & 255), I have also capitalized Chance where the word seems to refer to Fortune by that name. I have modernized the punctuation to make the poem more intelligible to modern readers.

Since my intention in this modernization is different than that of a critical edition, I have sometimes added words here from textual variants which I rejected in my critical edition. Such additions are bracketed and referenced. My critical edition reflects my best judgment as to how the poem was originally written by More. This modernization tries to make this poem more accessible, especially to undergraduate students and other non-specialists, by expressing its meaning clearly to contemporary ears. The CW 1 editor notes some cases where the print versions are trying to make More’s English more clear (CW 1, 204, on line 154; CW 1, 206 on line 206), or modernizing (CW 1, 206 on line 239). I am continuing their work in this respect, and thus in some cases I have added words of my own to clarify the meaning. These words are bracketed with no references. More very often uses a word order that is different from modern standard usage. I have never altered the word order in the poem, but in a few cases where I thought the original word order made the meaning difficult to grasp, I have provided a rearrangement as a marginal gloss in order to clarify. I inserted the notes marked with asterisks as reading aids. The bracketed section numbers (which are used as shorthand references in my article mentioned above) and the title of Section 1 are also mine.


As in note 3 above.

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OED, “lustily,” IX.120.2.

CW glossary has “supercilious” (p. 393).

OED, “spoil,” XVI.295.8a.

OED, “device,” IV.567.3.

OED, “hap,” VI.1094.1. CW glossary has “chance” (p. 398).

From GL (Edwards & Payne, 584).

From 1556 and 1557 (CW I, 33).

OED, “fare,” V.730.4.

From CW glossary (p. 400).

OED, “beck,” II.42.3.

See note on “asketh;” CW I, 203.

From 1557 (CW I, 36).

OED, “train,” XVIII.368.11.

From 1557 (CW I, 37).

It is not clear to me if we should understand that Fortune “flies” or “flees.” GL has “flyeth,” O has “fleith,” 1556 has “flyeth,” and 1557 has “fleeth” (CW I, 37; Edwards & Payne, 586). The sense seems the same either way.

OED, “case,” II.933.2b.

From 1556 and 1557 (CW I, 38).

From 1557 (CW I, 38).


From 1556 and 1557 (CW I, 38).

“At some past time.” OED, “whilom,” XX.234.2.


From 1556 and 1557 (CW I, 38).

See note 30 above.

See note for line 209; CW I, 206.

OED, “engine,” V.250.2a.

From 1556 and 1557 (CW I, 40). See also note on CW I, 206.

From CW glossary (p. 406).

See CW I, 392 on “bere” and p. 402 on “prowde.”

From 1556 (CW I, 41).

From 1557 (CW I, 41).

OED, “grudge,” VI.901.1.

OED, “will,” XX.341.3a.

OED, “pray,” XII.291.3a.

From 1556 and 1557 (CW I, 42).

OED, “part,” XI.259.8.