

More's Fortune Poems of 1535 -- Modernized

LEWIS THE LOST LOVER (c. 1535)¹

Eye²-flattering fortune, look thou never so fair,³
Nor never so pleasantly begin to smile,
As though thou would my ruin all repair,
During my life thou shalt me not beguile.
Trust shall I God, to enter in a while, 5
His haven of heaven ever sure and uniform:
Ever after thy calm, look I for a storm.

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, vol. 1 (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode Limited, 1931). Cited as “Campbell and Reed” hereafter. William Roper includes this poem in his biography of Thomas More. Roper writes that shortly after the [May 4, 1535] execution of four monks, Secretary Cromwell visited More in his prison cell. Cromwell said he came to “comfort” More with a message that “the King’s Highness was his good and gracious lord and minded not with any matter, wherein he [More] should have any cause of scruple, from henceforth to trouble his conscience.” Immediately after this visit, according to Roper, More wrote this poem and, according to S.G. Edwards, probably “Davy the Dicer” as well. On dating the poems, 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), xxxii. Cited as “S.G. Edwards” hereafter.

² The “Ey” of the original, Sylvester suggests to be “Ah.” See *Thomas More: The History of Richard III and Selections from the English and Latin Poems*, ed. Richard Sylvester (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976); hereafter cited as “Sylvester.”

³ *Fair* – beautiful

DAVY THE DICER (c. 1535)⁴

Long was I, lady luck,⁵ your serving man,⁶
And now have I lost again all that I got,⁷
Wherefore when I think on you now and then,
And in my mind remember this and that,
You may not blame me though I beshrew⁸ your cat,⁹ 5
But in faith I bless you again a thousand times,¹⁰
For lending me now some leisure¹¹ to make rhymes.

⁴ S.G. Edwards observes that dice was used for answering questions about the future; such determinations were made by the correspondence of the numbers thrown to their assigned fates in the “book of fortune” (xxx). So it is that the speaker comments on this kind of dicing from the *Book of Fortune*: “The rolling dice in which your luck doth stand / With whose unhappy chance ye be so wroth, / Ye know yourself came never in mine hand” (*Book of Fortune*, Center for Thomas More Studies Website, lines 218-220).

⁵ According to the *OED*, this is the first time that luck is personified as a lady in English.

⁶ The poem represents a dialogue between the speaker and a personified figure of luck in which we hear only the response of the speaker. Accordingly, we separate “lady luck” with commas to show the poem’s addressee.

⁷ “Got” used for the original “gate.”

⁸ “Beshrew” probably means one of the following: “treat evilly, use ill, abuse,” or “to wish all that is bad,” or as an “imprecatory expression” (a curse) such as “evil befall thee” (*OED*). All three senses give More room to play: He may be cursing lady luck for cursing him with bad luck, or he may be wishing her ill as she caused ill to befall him, or he may mean to evilly use her as she evilly used his devotion.

⁹ Sylvester notes that ‘to turn the cat’ was a term used in dicing, which meant “to reverse the order of things so dexterously as to make them appear the opposite of what they really were”; according to how “beshrew” is taken, then, More means to curse fortune’s reversals, to wish ill towards fortune’s reversals, or to evilly use fortune’s reversals in his verse. As the language indicates, the point remains that More’s speaker now controls fortune, or lady luck.

¹⁰ Note the ambiguity involved in the word “faith” and “bless.” In Christian “faith,” More may now “bless” lady luck because he is free from superstition, or “in faith” he simply thanks lady luck for sending him “leisure”—a blessing.

¹¹ Leisure used here for the original “laisour.” Leisure means either “having time at one’s own disposal” or “freedom or opportunity to do something specified” (*OED*). If More did compose “Davy” while in prison, note the irony involved in using the word.