

[Fortune Verses] (c.1504)

by

St. Thomas More

Edited and modernized by Carle Mock¹

with

A translation of the French stanzas by Andrea Frank²

The Prologue

As often as I consider these old noble clerks, ^o		o learned men
(Poets, Orators, and Philosophers, sects ^o three)		o kinds of people
How wonderful they were; in all their works		
How eloquent, how inventive in every degree;	5	
Half amazed I am, and as a dead tree		
Stand still, over-rude ^o for to bring forth		o too unlearned ³
Any fruit or sentence that is ought ^o worth.		o anything
Nevertheless, though rude ^o I be in all contriving		o unlearned ⁴
Of matters, yet somewhat ^o to make, I need not to care; ^o	10	o a thing worth regarding ⁵ o trouble myself ⁶
I see many a one occupied in the same thing.		
Lo, unlearned men nowadays will not spare ^o		o refrain ⁷
To write, to babble, their minds to declare,		
Trowynge ^o themselves gay fantasies to draw,		o believing
When all their cunning is not worth a straw.	15	
Some in French chronicles gladly do presume.		
Some in English blindly wade ^o and wander.		o proceed ⁸
Another in Latin blows forth a dark fume,		
As wise as a great-headed Ass of Alexander.*		
Some in philosophy, like a gagging gander,	20	
Begin lustily ^o the brows to set up, ^o		o with vigor ⁹ o to be full of contempt ¹⁰
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]

<i>Perverse Fortune,</i>	25
<i>Who turn the world</i>	
<i>All at your whim,</i>	
<i>You never cease,</i>	
<i>Full of cunning;</i>	
<i>And you take pleasure in it.</i>	30

* 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 ill
 And mortal wars,
 All disadvantages;
 Over mountains and valleys
 And in the hospitals* 35
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^o your gifts for one hour. 40 ^o guarantee
 Fortune unworthy men sets in honor.
 Through Fortune, the innocent [man] in woe and sorrow shrieks.
 The just man she spoils,^o and the unjust enriches. ^o robs¹¹

Young men she kills, and lets old men live,
 Unrighteously dividing time and season. 45
 That^o good men lose, to wicked does she give. ^o what
 She has no difference, but judges all good reason:^o ^o rational conduct
 Inconstant, slippery, frail, and full of treason,
 Neither forever cherishing whom she takes,
 Nor forever oppressing whom she forsakes. 50

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; 55
 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^o and ordinance. ^o will, inclination¹²

Without my favor, there is nothing won. 60
 Many a matter have I brought at last
 To good conclusion, that fondely^o was begun. ^o foolishly
 And many a purpose, bound sure and fast
 With wise provision,^o I have ^oover cast.^o ^o foresight ^{oo} destroyed
 Without good hap^o, there may no wit suffice: 65
 Better is [it] to be fortunate than [to be]¹⁴ wise. ^o luck¹³

And, therefore, have [there]¹⁵ some men been or^o this ^o before
 My deadly foes, and written many a book
 To my dispraise; and other cause there nys,^o ^o isn't
 But for me lyste^o not friendly on them [to] look. 70 ^o it pleases
 Thus, like the fox they fare,^o that once forsook ^o behave¹⁶
 The pleasant grapes, and began for to defy^o them, ^o despise

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 75 ° know

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. 80

But, he that by my favor may ascend

To mighty power and excellent degree,° ° status in society

A commonweal to govern and defend,

O in how blessed condition stands he!

Himself in honor and felicity, 85

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. 90 ° person

And he, that out of poverty and mischance

Lyste° for to live, and will himself enhance ° desires

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] 95

You that are proud of honor, shape° or kin, ° beauty

That heap up this wretched world's treasure,

(Your fingers shined with gold, your tawny skin

With fresh apparel garnished °out of measure°) °° excessively

And weneste° to have Fortune always at your pleasure, 100 ° hope

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 beckett° and smiles upon every wight.° 105 ° curtsies¹⁸ ° person

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,^o 110 ° glad
(So wretched is our nature and so blind)
As soon as Fortune list^o to laugh again, ° desires
With fair countenance and deceitful mind,
To crouch and kneel and °gape after the wind.^o °° desire something insubstantial
Not one or twain, but thousands °on a rowt,^o 115 °° in a crowd
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, 120
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;^o 125 ° tearstained
Disdain and Hatred on that other hand;
Eke^o restless Watch, from sleep with travail kept, ° also
His eyes drowsy and looking as he slept;
Before her stand Danger and Envy, 130
Flattery, Deceit, Mischief, and Tyranny.

About her comes all the world to beg:
He asks [for]¹⁹ land; and he to pass^o would bring ° surpass
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; 135
He °forces not,^o so he may money have, °° doesn't care
Though all the world account him for a knave.

Lo, thus [ye see]²⁰ diverse heads, diverse wits.
Fortune alone, as diverse as them all,
Unstable, here and there among them flits; 140
And °at aventure^o down her gifts fall. °° at random
Catch who so may; she throws great and small,
Not to all men, as comes sun or dew,^o ° rain
But, for the most part, all among a few.

And yet, her brittle gifts may not last. 145
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^o to give and take, and slyly toss 150 ° enjoys
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. 155 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.	°° bitterly	
Alas, the foolish people cannot cease, °Ne voyde° her trayne,° till they the harm feel. 160 About her always busily they press. But lord [how] ²² he thinks himself well, That may set once his hand upon her wheel. He holds fast, but upward as he stieth,° She whips her wheel about, and there he lies. 165	°° nor leave	° trap; also “train” in the sense of “entourage” ²¹
	° rises up	
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 170 Her slippery favor from them that in her trust, She flies ²³ her way, and lays them in the dust.	° inconstant	° desires to
She suddenly enhances them aloft, And suddenly myscheveth° all the flock. The head that lately lay easily and soft, 175 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.	° harms	
	° mockery	
	°° perhaps ²⁴	
Thus when she changes her uncertain course, 180 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], ²⁵ by her power, 185 Wealthy and wretched both [with]in ²⁶ an hour.	° springs	
	° contempt	
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, 190 Aristippus, Pythagoras, and many a lese° Of old philosophers; and eke° against the sun °Bekith him° poor Diogenes in his tonne.°	° throng	
	° group of three	
	° also	
	°° warms himself	° barrel or cask ²⁷

<p>With her is Bias, whose country lacked defense, And whilom° of their foes [they] stood [so]²⁸ in doubt, 195 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]³¹ Fortune’s brittle ffees;° For naught° he counted his that he might lose. 200</p>	<p>° once²⁹ ° nothing³⁰ ° said ° goods ° nothing³²</p>
<p>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. 205 That other laughs to see the foolish apes, How earnestly they walk about their japes.°</p>	<p>° also ° desires ° numerous ° foolish acts</p>
<p>Of this poor sect,° it is the usage Only to take that [which]³³ nature may sustain. Banishing clean all other surplus, 210 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.</p>	<p>° group ° also ° glad ° plans</p>
<p>Set Fortune’s servants by themselves and° ye will: 215 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 220 Betwixt wretchedness and felicity.</p>	<p>° if ° enslaved ° satisfied ° security ° desires</p>
<p>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. 225 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.</p>	<p>° desire ° power ° if</p>
<p>And [at] first, upon you lovely shall she smile, And friendly on you cast her wandering eyes, 230 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.° 235</p>	<p>° desire to ° imagine ° unexpected events</p>
<p>Reckon you never of her favor sure:</p>	

Ye may in the clouds as easily trace° a hare, ° pursue
 Or in dry land cause fishes to endure,
 And make the burning fire his heat to spare,
 And all this world encompass to forfare,° 240 ° destroy
 As her to make (by craft of engyne°) stable, ° ingenuity³⁴
 That of her nature is ever variable.

Serve her day and night as reverently
 Upon your knees as [any]³⁵ servant may,
 And in conclusion, that° you shall win thereby 245 ° what
 Shall not be worth your service, I dare say.
 And look yet: what she gives you today,
 With labor won, she shall haply° tomorrow ° perhaps
 Pluck it out of your hand with sorrow.

Wherefore, if you in surety° liste° to stand, 250 ° security ° desire
 Take Poverty's part and let proud Fortune go.
 Receive nothing that comes from her hand.
 Love manner° and virtue; for °they be only° those [things]³⁶ ° moderation °° they alone are
 Which double° Fortune may never take °you from;° ° inconstant °° from you
 Then may you boldly defy her, turning Chance. 255
 She can you neither hinder nor advance.

But and° you will nedes° meddle with her treasure, ° if ° necessarily
 Trust not therein, and spend it liberally. °° do not behave proudly³⁷ °°
 °Bear you not proud,° nor take not °out of measure.°
 excessively
 Build not your house high up in the sky. 260
 None falls far, but he that climbs high.
 Remember, nature sent you hither bare;
 The gifts of Fortune, count them [as]³⁸ borrowed ware.

To Them that Seek Fortune [Section 4]

Whoso delights to prove and assay 265
 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° full well ye wot,° ° also ° know
 I have of her no bridle in my fist. 270
 She runs loose, and turns where she lyste.° ° desires

The rolling dice, in whom your luck does stand,
 (With whose unhappy chance ye be so wroth°) ° angry
 Ye know yourself came never in my hand.
 Lo, in this pond be fish and frogs both. 275
 Cast in your net; but be you leve° or loath,° ° glad ° reluctant
 Hold you content as Fortune liste° assign, ° desires to
 [For]³⁹ it is your own fishing, and not mine.

And, though in one chance Fortune you offend,
 Grudge^o not thereat, but bear a merry face; 280 ^o grumble, complain⁴⁰
 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. 285

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 290
 From every man some parcel^o of his will,^o ^o portion ^o that which one desires⁴¹
 That he may pray^o therefore, and serve her still. ^o beg, crave⁴²

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 295
 Can he not creep, by no manner [of]⁴³ stealth.
 To some [man] she sends children, riches, wealth,
 Honor, worship, and reverence all his life;
 But yet she plucks^o him with a shrewed^o wife. ^o afflicts ^o ill-disposed

Then (forasmuch as it is Fortune's gyse^o 300 ^o practice, custom
 To grant no man all things that he will ask,
 But as herself liste^o order and devise)
 Does every man his part^o divide and tax.^o ^o desires to
 I counsel you: either truss up your packs, ^o duty⁴⁴ ^o burden
 And take nothing at all; or be content 305
 With such reward as Fortune has you sent.

All things in this book that ye shall read,
 Do as ye liste;^o there shall no man ^oyou bind ^o desire
 Them to believe^o as surely as your creed. ^{oo} bind you to believe them
 But, notwithstanding, certes^o in my mind 310 ^o certainly
 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 315

*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; 320
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; 325
Aristotle, Hippocrates, and Plato;
Judith, Esther, Boethius, Penelope,
Queen Dido, Pallas, Juno, Medea,
Guinevere, and the very noble Helen;
Palamides, Tristan with his sword? 330
They have all died; this world is a futile thing.

¹ I have used my critical edition of the Fortune Verses, which appears as Appendix A (pp. 97-116) to my article “The Structure, Design, and Argument of Thomas More’s Fortune Verses” (*Moreana*, Vol. 48, No. 185-186, Dec. 2011, pp. 69-120) as the basis for this modernization. Within these notes, the following abbreviations are used: *CW I* refers to *The Yale Edition of the Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, vol. 1, ed. Anthony S. G. Edwards, Katherine Gardiner Rodgers, and Clarence H. Miller (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1997). *O*, 1556, and 1557 refer to an early manuscript and the two earliest printed editions of this poem, respectively (For more information, see *CW I*, p. cxv & my critical edition). *GL* refers to another early, but much more recently discovered manuscript (See A. S. G. Edwards & M. T. W. Payne, “A New Manuscript of Thomas More’s ‘Fortune Verses,’” *Review of English Studies*, Sep 2009, Vol. 60 Issue 246, pp. 578-587).

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 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 I*. 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 I* 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 I*, 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 I* editor notes some cases where the print versions are trying to make More’s English more clear (*CW I*, 204, on line 154; *CW I*, 206 on line 206), or modernizing (*CW I*, 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.

² The four stanzas that appear in 1556 in French are here translated into English. This translation is based on the work done by Andrea Frank. I have made slight changes to Frank’s translation based on my comparison of her rendition with the translations by Dr. Stephen Maddux and Dr. Robert Dupree; and the partial translations provided by Sister Mary Edith Willow in *An Analysis of the English Poems of St. Thomas More* (Nieuwkoop: B. De Graaf, 1974), p. 185; A. W. Reed in *The English Works of Sir Thomas More, Volume One*, ed. W. E. Campbell, with introductions and philological notes by A. W. Reed (New York: Lincoln Mac Veagh, The Dial Press, 1931), pp. 226-227; and Alistair Fox in *Thomas More: History & Providence* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1983), p. 19. All translations are italicized.

³ *Oxford English Dictionary*, Second Edition, s.v. “rude,” Vol. XIV, p. 209, definition 1a. Subsequent references to this dictionary will be abbreviated in the following manner: *OED*, “rude,” XIV.209.1a.

⁴ As in note 3 above.

⁵ *OED*, “somewhat,” XV.997.4a.

⁶ *OED*, “care,” II.894.4.

⁷ *OED*, “spare,” XVI.115.6d.

⁸ *OED*, “wade,” XIX.794.2a.

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- ⁹ *OED*, “lustily,” IX.120.2.
- ¹⁰ *CW I* glossary has “supercilious” (p. 393).
- ¹¹ *OED*, “spoil,” XVI.295.8a.
- ¹² *OED*, “device,” IV.567.3.
- ¹³ *OED*, “hap,” VI.1094.1. *CW I* glossary has “chance” (p. 398).
- ¹⁴ From *GL* (Edwards & Payne, 584).
- ¹⁵ From 1556 and 1557 (*CW I*, 33).
- ¹⁶ *OED*, “fare,” V.730.4.
- ¹⁷ From *CW I* glossary (p. 400).
- ¹⁸ *OED*, “beck,” II.42.3.
- ¹⁹ See note on “asketh;” *CW I*, 203.
- ²⁰ From 1557 (*CW I*, 36).
- ²¹ *OED*, “train,” XVIII.368.11.
- ²² From 1557 (*CW I*, 37).
- ²³ It is not clear to me if we should understand that Fortune “flies” or “flees.” *GL* has “flyeth,” *O* has “ffleith,” 1556 has “flyeth,” and 1557 has “fleeth” (*CW I*, 37; Edwards & Payne, 586). The sense seems the same either way.
- ²⁴ *OED*, “case,” II.933.2b.
- ²⁵ From 1556 and 1557 (*CW I*, 38).
- ²⁶ From 1557 (*CW I*, 38).
- ²⁷ *OED*, “tun,” XVIII.667.1. Cf. Willow, p. 214, note 120.
- ²⁸ From 1556 and 1557 (*CW I*, 38).
- ²⁹ “At some past time.” *OED*, “whilom,” XX.234.2.
- ³⁰ *OED*, “naught,” X.251.A1.
- ³¹ From 1556 and 1557 (*CW I*, 38).
- ³² See note 30 above.
- ³³ See note for line 209; *CW I*, 206.
- ³⁴ *OED*, “engine,” V.250.2a.
- ³⁵ From 1556 and 1557 (*CW I*, 40). See also note on *CW I*, 206.
- ³⁶ From *CW I* glossary (p. 406).
- ³⁷ See *CW I*, 392 on “bere” and p. 402 on “prowde.”
- ³⁸ From 1556 (*CW I*, 41).
- ³⁹ From 1557 (*CW I*, 41).
- ⁴⁰ *OED*, “grudge,” VI.901.1.
- ⁴¹ *OED*, “will,” XX.341.3a.
- ⁴² *OED*, “pray,” XII.291.3a.
- ⁴³ From 1556 and 1557 (*CW I*, 42).
- ⁴⁴ *OED*, “part,” XI.259.8.