A Rueful Lamentation[1]

A rueful lamentation (written by Master Thomas More in his youth) of the death of Queen Elizabeth, mother to King Henry the Eighth, wife to King Henry the Seventh, and eldest daughter to King Edward the fourth, which Queen Elizabeth died in childbed in February in the year of Our Lord 1503, and in the 18th year of the reign of King Henry the Seventh.

O ye that put your trust and confidence,
In worldly joy and frail prosperity,
That so live here as ye should never hence,
Remember death and look here upon me.
Example,[2] I think, there may no better be.[3]
Yourself know[4] well that in this realm was I,
Your queen but late, and lo[5] now here I lie.

Was I not born of old worthy lineage?
Was not my mother queen, my father king?
Was I not a king's wife[6] in marriage?
Had I not plenty of every pleasant thing?
Merciful god this is a strange reckoning:
Riches, honor, wealth, and ancestry
Hath me forsaken and, lo now, here I lie.

If worship[7] might have kept me, I had not gone.
If wit might have me saved, I needed not fear.
If money might have helped,[8] I lacked none.
But, O good God, what avails[9] all this gear?[10]
When death is come, thy mighty messenger,

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[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. Editing and annotations are by Travis Curtright.

[2] Example for "ensaumple."

[3] More typically uses the scheme known as "anastrophe" in which the typical sentence order is re-arranged to correspond with the demands of meter and rhyme. Occasionally, however, the sense of the sentence becomes obscure because of anastrophe. Here commas are inserted to separate out "I think" to show the subject and verb.

[4] Know for "wotte."

[5] According to the OED: "Lo" is a) "an interjection of vague meaning, corresponding approximately to the modern O! or Oh!," or b) used "to direct attention to the presence or approach of something, or to what is about to be said," as in "Look! See! Behold!".

[6] OED defines "a consort, spouse; a husband or wife."

[7] "The condition (in a person) of deserving, or being held in, esteem or repute; honour, distinction, renown; good name or credit. (Common down to the 16th century)" (OED). What the deceased Queen argues, then, is that if praise and high-opinion of others were powerful enough, she never would have died, for she possessed this praise in abundance.

[8] Helped for "holpe."

[9] The actual word is "vaileth" for which Campbell and Reed recommend "availeth."

[10] The original is "gere," which is an obsolete form of "gear." Gear means "apparel, attire, dress, vestments" (OED). Alternatively, "gere" means a "sudden fit of passion" (OED). The former meaning is probably the one intended, although we cannot rule out the possibility that Elizabeth, as fictive speaker of the poem, refers to her own heavy laments.

Obey we must, there is no remedy;
Me hath he summoned, and lo now here I lie;

Yet was I late promised otherwise,[11]
This year to live in wealth and delicacy.[12]
Lo, where to comes thy blandishing[13] promise,
O false astrology and divining,[14]
Of God's[15] secrets making thyself[16] so wise?
How true for this year thy prophecy?
The year yet lasts, and lo now here I lie.[17]

O brittle[18] wealth, ay full of bitterness,
Thy single[19] pleasure doubled is with pain.
Account my sorrow first and my distress,
In sundry ways,[20] and reckon there again
The joy that I have had, and I dare not say,[21]
For all my honor, endured yet have I,
More woe than wealth, and lo now here I lie.

Where are our castles, now where are our Towers?
Goodly Richmond, son art thou gone from me,
At Westminster that costly[22] work of yours,
Mine own dear lord[23] now shall I never see.
Almighty God, vouchsafe to grant that ye,
For you and your children well may edify.
My palace built[24] is, for lo now here I lie.

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[11] "Otherwise" juxtaposes her death with her promised condition, which is described in the next line.
[12] Delicacy for "delice," which probably indicates a life of luxury.
[13] "Softly flattering, soothing, coaxing" (OED).
[14] "Divining" for "devynatrice." Divination is the "foretelling of future events or discovery of what is hidden or obscure by supernatural or magical means; soothsaying, augury, prophecy" (OED). Apparently, the Queen consulted diviners, who promised her a year of abundance, instead of her death.
[15] "God's" for "goddess."
[16] "Thyself" is in reference to the arts of astrology and divining, now personified such that the speaker may address them in apostrophe.
[17] That is, in the midst of the foretold year of blessings, how is it possible for me to die?
[18] Weak.
[19] The Yale editors gloss this as "singular." See *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.
[20] "Sundry wise" is the original, which means "various ways."
[21] "Say not" for "sayne."
[22] "Of great price or value; sumptuous" (OED). In context, Elizabeth means that "dear"—because of the cost and sacrificed involved—work of yours.
[23] "Mine own dear lord" refers to her husband.
[24] "Built" for "builded."

Adieu, mine own dear spouse, my worthy lord,
The faithful love that did us both combine,
In marriage and peaceable concord,
Into your hands here I clean resign,
To be bestowed upon your children and mine.
Before[25] were you father, and now must ye supply,
The mother's part also, for lo now here I lie.

Farewell, my daughter, lady Margaret;
God knows[26] how often it has grieved my mind,[27]
That ye should go where we should seldom meet.
Now am I gone, and have left you behind.
O mortal folk, that we be very blind,
That we least fear, how often it is most near,[28]
From you depart I first, and lo now here I lie.

Farewell, Madam, my lord's worthy mother,
Comfort your son, and be ye of good cheer.
Take all a worth,[29] for it will be no other.[30]
Farewell, my daughter Katherine, late the wife[31]
To prince Arthur, mine own child so dear
It remedies[32] not for me to weep and cry;
Pray for my soul, for now lo here I lie.

Adieu, Lord Henry, my loving son, Adieu.
Our Lord increase your honor and estate;
Adieu, my daughter Mary, bright of hue.[33]
God make you virtuous, wise, and fortunate.
Adieu, sweet heart, my little daughter Kate;

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[25] Before for the original "erst."
[26] "Knows" for "wotte."
[27] "God wotte full oft it grieved hath my mind" is the original line. Full means "having within limits all it will hold" (OED), and I take "oft" for "often." Hence, "God knows how often it hath grieved my mind."
[28] "full oft it is most nye" is the original. "Nye" is an obsolete form of "nigh," which means "near."
[29] "a worth" probably means "in good worth" here—"a" being an preposition that attaches to "worth" to make an obsolete word form, "aworth." From the OED: "To take at, of, or to worth; to take (accept, bear, have) in worth, or in good worth; to take (or bear) well in worth: to take (something) at its true or proper value; to take in good part; to be content with." See the following note for interpretation.
[30] "No nother" is the original. "Nother," as a pronoun, means "none other" or "an other" (OED). Interpretation of the line depends on what one thinks "it" refers to—the son, or life in general. Hence, Elizabeth may tell her mother-in-law: Be content with [take all a worth] your son, or take him at his proper value, for there will be no other (new) child for you. Alternatively, Elizabeth could be referring to life generally: Accept everything according to its true value in life [take all a worth], for there will be no second chance at living [it will be non nother]." Without ruling out second option as a possibility, the reference to "your son" indicates the former suggestion as most likely.
[31] Wife for "fere."
[32] "Remedies" for "booteth."
[33] "Hue" means "form, shape, figure; appearance, aspect" or "external appearance of the face and skin, complexion" (OED).

Thou shalt, sweet babe,[34] such is thy destiny,
Thy mother never know, for lo now here I lie.

Lady Cecily, Anne, and Katherine,
Farewell, my well-beloved sisters three,
O Lady Briget, other sister mine,
Lo[35] here the end of worldly vanity.
Now well are ye that earthly folly flee,
And heavenly things love and magnify,
Farewell and pray for me, for lo now here I lie.

Adieu, my lords, adieu my ladies all;
Adieu, my faithful servants every one;[36]
Adieu, my commons whom I never shall
See in this world, wherefore to thee alone,
Immortal God, verily[37] three and one,
I commend me to thy infinite mercy,[38]
Show it to thy servant,[39] for lo now here I lie.

[34] I.e., thou shalt die as well.
[35] "Lo" means "Look! See! Behold!" Hence, Elizabeth tells Briget: Look here at my death, the end of worldly vanity."
[36] "Every chone" is the original for which Campbell and Reed suggest "every one."
[37] "In truth of verity; as a matter of fact; in deed, fact, or reality; really, truly" (OED).
[38] The original line reads: "I me commend thy infinite mercy."
[39] I insert "it" in reference to mercy. The original reads: "Show to thy servant, for lo now here I lie."