In ancient mythology the “Fortunate Islands” were the paradise of the gods, located somewhere in the west beyond the ocean. Later the name was given to the Canary and Madeira Islands as they were discovered by European explorers—and then to points farther west as the discoveries enchanted the European imagination.

In tumultuous sixteenth-century Europe, the image of an edenic land far across the ocean that offered an escape from war and hardship appeared as a literary leitmotif, as in Ronsard’s poem “Les Îles Fortunées.”

Let us sail away, friends, since the wind commands That we unmoor; let us go with vigorous arms, 
Let us push the ship towards the blessed fields, Towards the happy port of the Fortunate Isles, Which the Ocean surrounds with its arms of blue waters, Far away from Europe and far from its wars, For our benefit, my friends.

There, we will live without toil and without suffering. There, there always, always the land is full Of happiness and there the skies Will faithfully appear to our eyes.

There, without hurting our ancestress, as happens here, With the sharp ploughshare, the lavish earth, among the fields, Gives rise on its own to happy forests, Full of the gifts of Ceres [wheat];

There, without pruning, the suckling plant Of good Denys,1 through its slowly entangled vine Willingly ripens its grapes On the neighboring elms.

There, truthfully, the trees carry As much fruit as buds had bloomed; And without fail, thanks to the goodness of the heavens, Hollow oaks produce honey.

Milk always flows in its rivers, And grass is always green along its borders Without ever needing to be mowed, and the fields Are always speckled with thousand of flowers.

Exempt of winds and of high rocks, The fountains always flow with milk.

There, like here, greed has put no limits

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1 St. Denys (third century, also known as Dionysus) is a patron saint of France. In Greek mythology, Dionysus produced the first wine from grapes.
Borné les champs, ni d’un effort de bras
Avec grand bruit les pins on ne renverse
Pour aller voir d’une longue traverse
Quelque autre monde; ains jamais découverts
On ne les voit de leurs ombrages verts.
Par trop de chaud, ou par trop de froidure;
Jamais le loup, pour quêter sa pâture
Hurlant au soir, ne vient effaroucher
Le sûr bétail à l’heure de coucher . . .
Le vent poussé dedans les conques tortes
Ne bruit point là, ni les fières cohortes
De gens armés horriblement ne font
Leurs morions craquer dessus le front.
Là, les enfants n’enterrent point leurs pères,
Et là les soeurs ne lamentent leurs frères,
Et l’épousé ne s’adore pas
De voir mourir sa femme entre ses bras . . .
Car leurs beaux ans entrecassés n’arrivent
A la vieillesse, ains d’âge en âge vivent
Par la bonté de la terre et des cieux
Jeunes et sains comme vivent les Dieux.

On the fields, and the pine trees
Have not been cut with great noise and effort
To allow one to sail far away and see some other world;
Rather they have never been discovered,
And they are known only through their green shade.
Through extreme heat, or through extreme cold:
Never does the wolf, when seeking its food,
Howling in the evening,
Scare the secure livestock at night . . .
Nor does the wind, pushed inside the marine shells
Make noise there, nor do the haughty cohorts
Of armed men horribly make
Their helmets crack over their foreheads. 2
There, children do not bury their fathers,
And there, sisters do not mourn their brothers,
And husbands are not saddened
By seeing their wives dying in their arms . . .
For, their beautiful lives do not reach
Old age; they live from one generation to the next
Thanks to the goodness of the earth and of the skies
Young and healthy as live the Gods.

2 Morions (Fr.): helmets worn by the Spanish army during the Franco-Spanish War of this period (1635-1659).