D. S. Brewer

John Rastell ca. 1518

**FOUR ELEMENTS**

A New Interlude and a Mery, of the Nature of the Four Elements

declaring many proper points of natural philosophy, and of diverse strange lands, and of diverse strange effects and causes . . . [excerpts]

The players’ names: The Messenger, Nature, Humanity, Studious Desire, Sensual Appetite, Taverner, Experience, Ignorance, Singers & Dancers

---

**Studious Desire**

Now, cosyn Experyens, as I may say, Ye are ryght welcom to this contrey, Without any fayning.

Sir, I understand that ye have be In many a straunge countree, And have had grete fyllycyte, Straunge causes to seke and fynde.

Both est and west I have ben farre, Bothe by see and lande, And ben in sondry nacyons With peple of dyvers condycyons, Marvelous to understande.

Sir, if a man have suche corage Or devocyon in pylgrymage Jheruzalem unto, For to accompt the nexte way How many myle is it I you pray

---

**Experience**

Syr, I thanke you therof hertely, And I am as glad of your company As any man lyvynge.

Syr, I thank you thereof heartily, And I am as glad of your company As any man living.

Syr, I understand that you have been In many a strange country, And have had great felicity, Strange causes to seek and find.

Both east and west I have been far, Both by sea and land, And been in sundry nations With people of diverse conditions, Marvelous to understand.

Sir, if a man have such courage Or devotion in pilgrimage Jerusalem unto, For to account the next way How many miles is it, I you pray

---

1 *Four elements*: earth, air, fire, and water; in Greek philosophy, the four components of matter.

2 Without dissembling, deceitfulness; i.e., “you are truly and sincerely welcome to this country.”

3 *Sundry*: various, assorted.

4 Understand, in the sense of “to have knowledge of” or “to behold.”

5 The shortest, most convenient, or most direct way; i.e., “If a man had the courage or desire to [make] a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, how many miles is it to go there from here?”

---

From hens theder to goo?  
From hence thither to go?

Experience
Sir, as for all suche questyons
Of townes to know the sytuacyon,  
How ferre they be asunder,  
And other poyntes of cosmogryfy,  
Ye shall never lerne then more surely  
Then by that fygure yonder.

For who that fygure dyd fyrst devyse,  
It semeth well he was wyse  
And perfyte in this scyens,  
For bothe the se and lande also  
Lye trew and just as the sholde do,  
I know by experyens.

Syr, as for all suche questyons  
Of towns to know the situation,  
How far they be asunder,  
And other points of cosmography,  
You shall never learn\(^6\) them more surely  
Than by that figure\(^7\) yonder.

For who that figure did first devise,  
It seems well he was wise\(^8\)  
And perfect in this science,  
For both the sea and land also  
Lie true and just as they should do,  
I know by experience.

Who thynek you brought hery this fygure?  
I wot not.

Certes, lorde Nature  
Hym selfe not longe agone,  
Whiche was here personally  
Declarynge hye phylosophy,  
And lafte this fygure purposely  
For Humanaytes instruccyon

Who think you brought here this figure?  
I know not.

Certainly, lord Nature  
Himself, not long gone,  
Who was here personally,  
Declaring his philosophy,  
And left this figure purposely  
For Humanity’s instruction

Syr, this realme ye knew is callid  
England,  
Somtyme Bretaynay, I understande,  
Therfore I prey you point with your hande  
In what place it shulde lye.

Dowtles ryght nobly done.

Syr, this realm you know is called  
England,  
Sometimes Britain, I understand,  
Therefore I pray you point with your hand  
In what place it should lie.\(^9\)

\(^6\) I.e., "find out the answer to [your questions about geography]."
\(^7\) Probably a terrestrial globe (see photograph above). Earlier in the play the character Nature presents a geography lesson with a “figure.” Axton concludes that Rastell likely based the geographic information in Four Elements on the 1516 map Carta Marina by Waldseemüller (above), in addition to other maps and globes, Rastell’s own voyage (see note 12), and others’ reports and writings. [Axton, p. 131]
\(^8\) I.e., "It seems appropriate to think of him as being wise."
\(^9\) I.e., "to the place it is located."
Syr, this is Ynglande lyenge here,  
And this is Skotlande that joyneth hym nere,  
Compassyd aboute every where  
With the occian see rownde  
And next from them westwardly  
Here by hymselfe alone doth ly  
Irelande, that holsome grounde.

Here than is the narowe seey,  
To Calyce and Boleyne the next wey,  
And Flandres in this parte.  
Here lyeth Fraunce next hym joynynge,  
And Spaynn, southwarde from them standynge,  
And Portyngale in this quart.  
This contrey is callyd Italye–  
Beholde where Rome in the myddys doth ly,  
And Naples here beyonde;  
Is callyd the Gulfe of Venys,  
And here Venys doth stonde.

As for Almayne lyeth this way,  
Here lyeth Denmarke and Norway,  
And northwarde on this syde  
There lyeth Iselonde, where men do fyshe,  
But beyonde that so colde it is,  
No man may there abyde.

This See is called the great Occyan,  
So great it is that never man Coude tell it sith the worlde began,  
Tyll nowe, within this twenty yere,  
Westwarde be founde new landes  
That we never harde tell of before this By wrytyng nor other meanys,  
Yet many nowe have ben there.

And that contrey is so large of rome,  
Muche lenger than all cristen dome,  
Without fable or gyle;  
For dyvers maryners haue it tryed  
And sayled streyght by the coste syde Above fve thousand myle.  
But what commodityes be within,  
No man can tell nor well imagin.  
But yet not longe ago

Sir, this is England lying here,  
And this is Scotland that joins him near,  
Compassed about everywhere  
With the ocean sea round  
And next from them westwardly  
Here by himself, along doth lie Ireland, that wholesome land.

Here then is the narrow sea,  
To Calais and Boulogne the next way,  
And Flanders in this part.  
Here lieth France next him joining,  
And Spain, southward from them standing,  
And Portugal in this quarter.  
This country is called Italy–  
Behold where Rome in the middle does lie,  
And Naples here beyond;  
Is called the Gulf of Venice,  
And here Venice doth stand.

As for Almayne lieth this way,  
Here lieth Denmark and Norway,  
And northward on this side  
There lieth Iceland, where men do fish,  
But beyond that so cold it is,  
No man may there abide.

This sea is called the great Ocean,  
So great it is that never man Could tell it since the world began,  
Till now, within this twenty years,  
Westward be found new lands  
That we never heard tell of before this By writing nor other means,  
Yet many now have been there.

And that country is so large of room,  
Much longer than all Christendom,  
Without fable or guile;  
For diverse mariners have it tried  
And sailed straight by the coast side,  
Above five thousand miles.  
But what commodities be within,  
No man can tell nor well imagine.  
But yet not long ago

10 *Calais and Boulogne*: French coastal towns on the Strait of Dover (the "narrow sea").
11 *Almayne*: region of present-day Germany.
Some men of this countrey went,
By the kynges noble consent,
It for to serche to that entent
And coude not be brought thereto.

But they that were the venteres
Have cause to curse their maryners,
Fals of promys and dissemblers,
That falsly them betrayed,
Whiche wolde take no paine to saile farther
Than their owne lyst and pleasure.
Wherefore that voyage and dyvers other
Suche kayttyffes have distroyed.

O, what a thynge had be than,
Yf that they that be englyshe men
Myght have ben the furst of all
That there shulde have take possessyon
And made furst buyllynghe and habytacion,
A memory perpetuall!

And also what an honorable thynge,
Bothe to the realme and to the kyng,  
To have had his domynyon extendyng 
There into so farre a ground,
Whiche the noble kyng of late memory,  
The moste wyse prynce the seventh Harry, 
Causyd furst for to be founde.

And what a great meritoryouse dede
It were to have the people instructed
To lyve more vertuously,
And also to knowe God theyr maker,
Whiche as yet lyve all beastly.

For they nether knowe God nor the devell,
Nor never harde tell of hevyn nor hell,
Wrytynge nor other scripture.
But yet, in the stede of God almyght,
The[y] honour the sone for his great lyght,
For that doth them great pleasure.

Buyllynghe nor house they have non at all,
But wodes, cotes, and cavys small;
No merveyle though it be so,
For they use no maner of yron

Some men of this country went,  
By the king’s noble consent,
It for to search to that intent  
And could not be brought thereto.

But they that were the venturers
Have cause to curse their mariners,
False of promise and dissemblers,
That falsely them betrayed,
Who would take no pain to sail farther
Than their own lust and pleasure.
Wherefore that voyage and diverse others
Suche caitiffs have destroyed.

Oh, what a thing had be then,
If that they that be Englishmen
Might have been the first of all
That they should have taken possession
And made first building and habitation,
A memory perpetual!

And also what an honorable thing,
Both to the realm and to the king,
To have had his dominion extending
There into so far a ground,
Which the noble king of late memory,
The most wise prince the seventh Harry,
Caused first for to be found.

And what a great meritorious deed
It were to have the people instructed
To live more virtuously,
And to learn to know of men the manner,
And also to know God their maker,
Who as yet live all beastly.

For they neither know God nor the devil,
Nor never heard tell of heaven nor hell,
Writing nor other scripture.
But yet, in the stead of God almighty,
They honor the son for his great light,
For that does them great pleasure.

Building nor house they have none at all,
But woods, cotes, and caves small;
No marvelous thought is be so,
For they use no manner of iron

---

12 In 1517 Rastell organized a voyage to Newfoundland, but after purposeful delays and conniving by the two ships’ captains (including urging Rastell to turn pirate), the voyage was aborted, having reached no farther than Cork, Ireland. Rastell sued the captains for his losses, but probably never received enough to cover his financial outlay. [Axton, pp. 5-6]
13 I.e., “for that purpose.”
14 See note 12.
15 Caitiff: A base, mean, villainous person.
16 I.e., “Oh what a great thing it would have been had the first to take possession of these places been Englishmen.”
17 I.e., land.
18 Cotes: Small houses or shelters, as in sheep-cote.
Neither in tool nor other weapon,  
That should help them thereto.

Copper they have, which is found 
In diverse places above the ground,  
Yet they dig not therefore;  
For, as I said, they have no iron,  
Whereby they should in the earth mine,  
To search for any more.

Great abundance of woods there be,  
Most part tar and pine tree apple;  
Great riches might come thereby,  
Both pitch and tar and soap ashes,  
As they make in the east lands  
By burning thereof only.

Fish they have so great plenty,  
That in havens take and slayn they be  
With staves without fail.  
Now Frenchmen and others have  
found the trade,  
That yearly of fish there they laid  
Above an hundred sail.  

But in the south part of that country  
The people there go naked always,  
The land is of so great heat;  
And in the north part all the clothes  
That they wear is but beasts’ skins,  
They have no other fit.  

But how the people first began  
In that country or whence they came,  
For clerics it is a question.  
Other things more I have in store  
That I could tel thereof, but now no more  
Tyll another season.

Then at your pleasure show some  
other thing.

It liketh me so well your coming,  
You cannot talk amiss.  
Then while I turn again to my matter  
Of Cosmography where I was e’er.  
Behold, take heed to this.

Lo, eastward beyond the great ocean  
Here entereth the see called

---

19 Ashes of certain kinds of wood used in forming a lye in soap-making.
20 Referring to the process by which one produces tar, pitch, and lye soap by burning wood.
21 "The Grand Bank fisheries [off Newfoundland] were very early exploited by English, Portuguese, and French (especially Norman) fishermen, and the vast amounts of new world fish soon upset the domestic markets. . . . By 1542 sixty vessels might sail for the Grand Banks in one day. Rastell’s grumble suggests that English fishermen felt the pinch by 1517 and resented competition.” [Axton, pp. 133-134]
22 Fete: fitting; i.e., “they have nothing else appropriate to wear.”
23 Clerics: priests.
Mediterranean, Of two thousand myle of lengthe.
The Soudans contrey lyeth here by,
The great Turk on the north syde doth ly,
A man of merevellous strengthe.

This sayde north parte is callyd Europa,
And this south parte callyd Afrika,
This eest parte is callyd Ynde,
But this newe landys founde lately
Ben callyd America by cause only
Americus dyd fyrst them fynde.

Lo, Jerusalem lyeth in this contrey,
And this beyonde is the Red See,
That Moyses maketh of mencyon.
This quarter is India Minor
And this quarter India Maior,
The lande of Prester Johnn.

But northwarde this way, as ye se,
Many other straunge regions ther be
And people that we not knowe.
But est warde on the see syde,
A prync e there is that rulyth wyde,
Callyd the Cane of Catowe.

And this is called the great eest see,
Which goth all alonge this way
Towards the newe landis agayne;
But whether that see go thyther dyrectly
Or if any wyldernes bytwene them do ly,
No man knoweth for certeyne.

But these newe landis, by all cosmografye,
Frome the Cane of Catous lande
can not lye
Lytell paste a thousande myle;
But from those newe landis men may
sayle playne
Eastwarde, and com to Englantye againe,
Where we began ere whyle.

Mediterranean, Of two thousand miles of length.
The Sudan country lieth hereby,
The great Turk on the north side doth lie,
A man of marvelous strength.

This said north part is called Europe,
And this south part called Africa,
This east part is called India.24
But these new lands found lately
Been called America because only
Americus did first them find.25

Lo, Jerusalem lieth in this country,
And this beyond is the Red Sea,
That Moses maketh of mention.26
This quarter is India [Asia] Minor
And this quarter India [Asia] Major,
The land of Prester John.27

But northward this way, as you see,
Many other strange regions there be
And people that we not know.
But eastward on the sea side,
A prince there is that rulth wide,
Called the Khan of Cathay.

And this is called the great east sea,
Which goeth all along this way
Towards the new lands again;
But whether that sea go thither directly
Or if any wilderness between them do lie,
No man knoweth for certain.

But these new lands, by all cosmography,
From the Khan of Cathay’s land
can not lie
Little past a thousand miles;
But from those new lands men may
sayle plain
Eastward, and come to England again,
Where we began erewhile.28

Waldseemüller,
Universalis cosmographia,
1507 (details)
Library of Congress

24 Referring to Asia.
25 Americus. Americus (or Amerigo) Vespucci was among the handful of Europeans who sailed to the New World in the 1490s, and the first to publicize the notion, through his widely read “Novus Mundus” (“New World”), that the newly discovered land was not Asia but a separate continent (in this case, South America). Later the mapmaker Martin Waldseemüller immortalized him by assigning the name “America” to the southern continent of the western hemisphere in his 1507 world map Universalis cosmographia (see above left).
26 I.e., “maketh mention of.”
28 I.e., “a while ago.”
YS as large as this full, and as wyde,  
Which we knowe nothyng at all.

Nor whether the moste parte be lande or see,  
Nor whether the people that there be
Be bestyall or connynge,  
Nor whether they knowe God or no,
Nor howe they beleve nor what they do,
Of this we knowe nothyng.

Lo, is not this a thynge wonderfull,  
How that –

Studious Desire  
Pese, syr, no more of this matter!
Beholde where Humanyte commeth here.

[Studious Desire and Experience withdraw.  
Re-enter Humanity and Sensual Appetite.]

Lo, is not this a thing wonderful,  
How that –

Please, sir, no more of this matter!
Behold where Humanity comes here.

29 I.e., “[Of] which we know nothing at all.”