



John Rastell _____ ca. 1518

FOUR ELEMENTS

A New Interlude and a Mery, of the Nature of the Four Elements¹

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.

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

Studious Desire Syr, I understonde that ye have be
In many a straunge countree,
And have had grete fylycyte,
Straunge causes to seke and fynde.

Experience Ryght farr, syr, I have rydden and gone,
And seen straunge thynges many one,
In Affryk, Europe, and Ynde.

Both est and west I have ben farre,
North also, and seen the sowth sterre,
Bothe by see and lande,
And ben in sondry nacyons
With peple of dyvers condycyons,
Marvelous to understonde.

Studious Desire Syr, yf 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

Now, cousin Experience, as I may say,
You are right welcome to this country,
Without any feigning.²

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

Sir, I understand that you have been
In many a strange country,
And have had great felicity,
Strange causes to seek and find.
Right far, sir, I have ridden and gone,
And seen strange things, many [a] one,
In Africa, Europe, and India.

Both east and west I have been far,
North also, and seen the south star,
Both by sea and land,
And been in sundry³ nations
With people of diverse conditions,
Marvelous to understand.⁴

Sir, if a man have such courage
Or devotion in pilgrimage
Jerusalem unto,
For to account the next way⁵
How many miles is it, I you pray

National Humanities Center, 2006: www.nhc.rtp.nc.us/pds/pds.htm. In Richard Axton, ed., *Three Rastell Plays* (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer Ltd. / Totowa, NJ, USA: Rowman & Littlefield, 1979), pp. 47-52. Reproduced by permission of Rowman & Littlefield. Modern English translation by John Wall, Professor of English, North Carolina State University; National Humanities Center Fellow, 1980-1981. Complete image credits at www.nhc.rtp.nc.us/pds/amerbegin/imagecredits.htm.

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?

Experience Syr, 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.

Studious Desire Who thynke you brought here this fygure?
Experience I wot not.

Studious Desire Certes, lorde Nature
Hym selfe not longe agone,
Whiche was here personally
Declarynge hie phylosophy,
And lafte this fygure purposely
For Humanytes instruccyon

Experience Dowtles ryght nobly done.

Studious Desire Syr, this realme ye knew is callid
Englande,
Somtyme Brettayne, I understonde,
Therefore I prey you point with your hande
In what place it shulde lye.

From hence thither to go?

Sir, as for all such questions
Of towns to know the situation,
How far they be asunder,
And other points of cosmography,
You shall never learn⁶ them more surely
Than by that figure⁷ yonder.

For who that figure did first devise,
It seems well he was wise⁸
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 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

Doubtless right nobly done.

Sir, 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

Library of Congress



Caspar Vopell, terrestrial globe, 1543

Jos Martens



Martin Waldseemüller, *Carta Marina navigatoria Portugallen*, 1516

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."



Some men of this contrey went,
By the kynges noble consent,
It for to serche to that entent
And coude not be brought therto.

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 vyage and dyvers other
Suche kaytyffes have destroyed.

O, what a thyng 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 buyldynge and habytacion,
A memory perpetuall!

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

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

For they nother knowe God nor the devell,
Nor never harde tell of hevyn nor hell,
Wrytyng 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.

Buyldynge 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,¹²
By the king's noble consent,
It for to search to that intent¹³
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,¹⁴
Who would take no pain to sail farther
Than their own lust and pleasure.
Wherefore that voyage and diverse others
Such caitiffs¹⁵ 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 possession¹⁶
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,¹⁷
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,¹⁸ and caves small;
No marvel thought is be so,
For they use no manner of iron

Gastaldi, *La Nuova Francia*, 2^d. ed., 1565 (detail)

Yale Univ. Library

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 further 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.



western hemisphere



Nother in tole nor other wepon,
That shulde helpe them therto.
Copper they have, whiche is founde
In dyvers places above the grounde,
Yet they dyg not therfore;
For, as I sayd, the have non yryn,
Wherby they shuld in the yerth myne,
To serche for any wore.

Great haboundaunce of woddys ther be,
Moste parte vyr and pyne aple tre;
Great ryches myght come therby,
Both pyche and tarre and sope asschys,
As they make in the eest landes
By brynnynge therof only.

Fyshe they have so great plente,
That in havyns take and slayne they be
With stavys withouten fayle.
Nowe Frenchemen and other have
founde the trade,
That yerely of fyshe there they lade
Above an hundred sayl.

But in the south parte of that contrey
The people there go nakyd alway,
The lande is of so great hete;
And in the north parte all the clothes
That they were is but bestis skynnes,
They have no nother fete.

But howe the people furst began
In that contrey or whens they cam,
For clerkes it is a questyon.
Other thynges mo I have in store
That I coude tel thereof, but now no more
Tyll another season.

Studios Desire Than at your pleasure shew some
other thinge.

Yt lyketh me so wel your commynge,
Ye can not talke amys.

Experience Then wyl I torne agayne to my matter
Of Cosmogryfy where I was err.
Behold, take hede to this.

Loo, estwarde beyonde the great occyan
Here entereth the see callyd

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 apple tree;
Great riches might come thereby,
Both pitch and tar and soap ashes,¹⁹
As they make in the east lands
By burning thereof only.²⁰

Fish they have so great plenty,
That in havens take and slain 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.²¹

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.²²

But how the people first began
In that country or whence they came,
For clerics²³ it is a question.
Other things more I have in store
That I could tell thereof, but now no more
Till 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 sea called

Waldseemüller,
*Universalis
cosmographia*,
1507 (details)

Library of Congress

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.

Mediterran,
Of two thousand myle of lengthe.
The Soudans contrey lyeth here by,
The great Turke on the north syde doth ly,
A man of merveyulous strengthe.



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



Loo, Jherusalem 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 prynce there is that rulyth wyde,
Callyd the Cane of Catowe.

And this is called the great eest see,
Which goth all alonge this wey
Towardes 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 new landis men may
sayle playne
Estwarde, and com to Englande againe,
Where we began ere whyle.

Lo, all this parte of the yerth whiche I
Have here discryvyd openly
The north parte we do it call.
But the south parte on the other syde

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 ruleth 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
sail plain
Eastward, and come to England again,
Where we began erewhile.²⁸

Lo, all this part of the earth which I
Have here described openly
The north part we do it call.
But the south part on the other side

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."

²⁷ *Prester John*. In a popular medieval fantasy, Pres[by]ter John led an edenic Christian kingdom in the "Three Indies" in the Muslim lands of west Asia and, later in the fable's evolution, northeast Africa.

²⁸ I.e., "a while ago."

Ys as large as this full, and as wyde,
 Whiche we knowe nothyng at all.
 Nor whether the moste parte be lande or see,
 Nor whether the people that there be
 Be bestyall or connyng,
 Nor whether they knowe God or no,
 Nor howe they beleve nor what they do,
 Of this we knowe nothyng.

Is as large as this full, and as wide,
 Which we know nothing at all.²⁹
 Nor whether the most part be land or sea,
 Nor whether the people that there be
 Be bestial or cunning,
 Nor whether they know God or no,
 Nor how they believe nor what they do,
 Of this we know nothing.

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

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

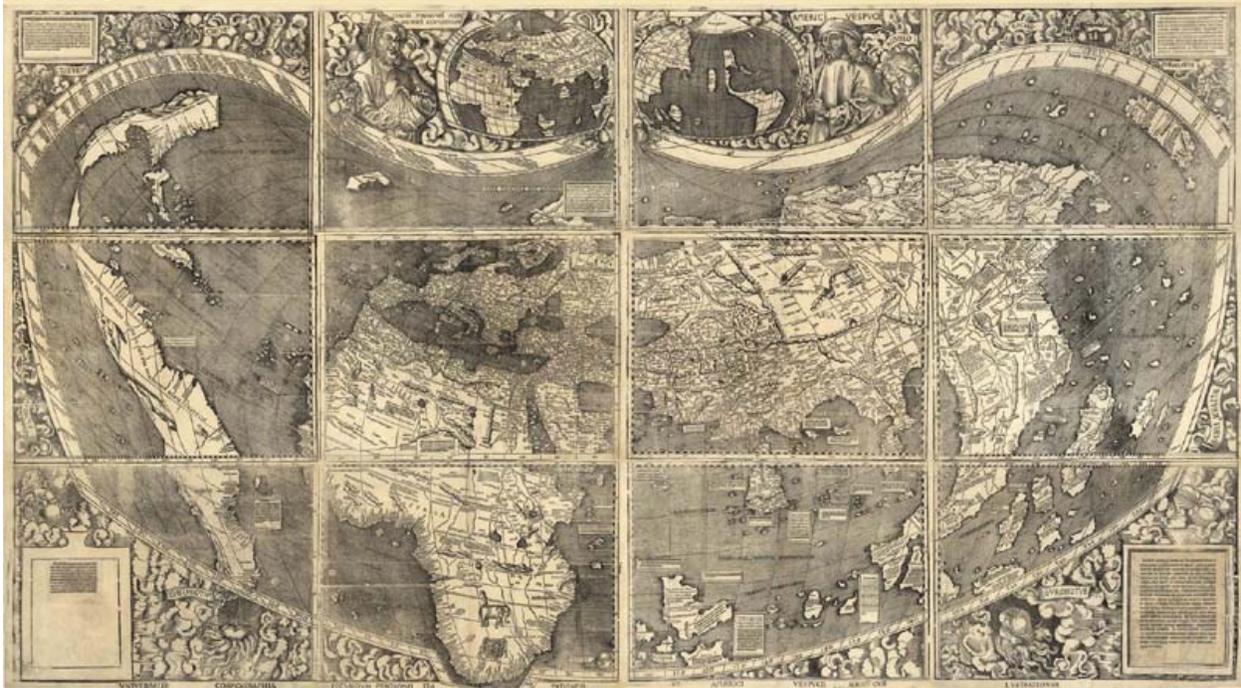
Studious Desire Pese, syr, no more of this matter!
 Beholde where Humanyte commeth here.

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

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

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

Library of Congress



Martin Waldseemüller, *Universalis cosmographia secundum Ptholomaei traditionem et Americi Vespucii alioru[m]que lustrationes*, 1507; printed on twelve sheets of paper, each approx. 18" x 24"

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