

ERASMUS' *PRAISE OF FOLLY*: A RENAISSANCE WORK

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The Renaissance (1375-1550) was a period of rebirth and new ideas. One new idea that became popular was that, in order to improve, one had to recognize the mistakes and corruptions that had been accepted as truth. This reformist spirit led people such as Lorenzo Valla, Martin Luther, and Desiderius Erasmus to write critiques about the errors they saw around them. The last author, Erasmus, wrote a particularly vehement satire called *The Praise of Folly*. In this document, the narrator, Folly, declares the action of many different types of people to be foolish and congratulates them for it. Folly calls wisdom foolish and fools, wise. Erasmus' satire achieved much popularity at the time. Mary Giles believes it to be his best work. She says, "Its popularity in his time and the fact that in the large corpus of Erasman writings it is the only text that has survived with its appeal intact secures for it first place."¹ Erasmus displays his Renaissance talents for satirical wit and honest analysis of wrongs in *Praise of Folly*, a piece of writing that can still be applied today.

Desiderius Erasmus was born in the Netherlands in 1466. Early in his life, after his father's death, he went to live in a monastery. Erasmus became a priest in 1492, but did not remain long in the monastery. Through the rest of his life, he traveled Europe with the support of patrons. Erasmus authored many writings that displayed his humanist leanings. *Handbook of the Christian Soldier*, *Praise of Folly*, *Julius Excluded*, and the translation *New Testament in Greek* are some of his works. He also published Lorenzo Valla's *Annotations of the New Testament*. As a northern humanist, Erasmus emphasized church reform and rebirth. The works cited above all concern religion and the church. Erasmus' personal "Philosophy of Christ" or *Philosophia Christi* led him to comment on how the life of the average Christian ought to be lived.

The Praise of Folly is a good example of Erasmus' technique in diagnosing society's moral and religious state. In it, he took on the character of "Folly", a Greek goddess begat by Plutus and Youth. With this narrative voice established, Erasmus sets a tone of humor and sarcasm. In his analysis of this work, Donald Watson says:

The fiction of a speech to an assembly of happy, carefree, pleasantly inebriated listeners helps to establish the specific tone of comic discourse and draws the reader into that conviviality, thereby making him, through his identification with the fictional audience, represent all mankind, since all men are fools.²

In common with Renaissance writers overall, Erasmus uses classical examples, folk wisdom and biblical quotations to support his premise of the benefits of folly. He divides his work into four parts, labeled: "Folly Herself", "The Powers and Pleasures of Folly", "The Followers of Folly", and "The Christian Fool." In each section, Folly shifts focuses. She names herself as the cause of all folly, then lists the foolish people, and ends by contrasting these fools with the Christian fool (a concept derived from Paul especially in 1 Corinthians 1: 18-25).

I. Folly Herself

In the first chapter, "Folly Herself", the narrator identifies herself. Folly declares that in this writing she will imitate the Sophists and praise herself, as no one else will. She asserts, "I do not mask my heart with a false face. I am so completely myself,"³ unlike philosophers who ought to be called "foolosophers."⁴ Folly promises that this speech is extemporaneous and explains her birth from Plutus and Youth. She was born laughing; suckled by nymphs; and accompanied by gods such as Self-love, Madness, Intemperance, and Sound Sleep.

II. The Powers and Pleasure of Folly

The second chapter, “The Powers and Pleasures of Folly”, explains Folly’s role in this world. She claims to be the originator of all foolishness but does not receive the gratitude she deserves. “Why am I not justly called the Alpha of gods, I who have all alone given all things to all men?”⁵ She causes life to continue because men must become silly fools to do it, for marriage itself is her work, along with Madness and Forgetfulness. Without her, couples would not join in the inconvenience of marriage, and women would not repeat childbirth. Without the pleasure Folly gives to life, it would not be worth living. Although the Stoics might disagree, Folly accuses them of attempting to keep all the pleasure for themselves when instructing others to avoid it.

Folly expands on this claim by using childhood and old age as examples. Everyone adores children because they are foolish. When youth comes, each one “knows little and worries less.”⁶ Age and experience only diminish their beauty and charm, bringing troubles. Thus, old age comes, and Folly grants the elderly foolishness and a second childhood to be free from these worries. The elderly act silly and senile to enjoy life. They are much more enjoyable to be around than if they were wise. Folly mentions that philosophers “grow old before they are ever young.”⁷ To truly convince her audience, Folly uses a folk saying as evidence of her goodness: “Folly is the one thing that holds fast to fleeting youth and wards off hateful old age.”⁸ She also defends foolishness by naming it the prerogative of gods as well, such as Bacchus and Vulcan.

“According to the definitions of the Stoics, wisdom is no other than to be governed by reason, while folly is to be swayed by the power of the passions,”⁹ Folly says. She agrees with this interpretation, but says that there is more passion than reason,

so folly is almost logical. For example, she told man to take to himself a woman, a foolish creature. Women are fools but better off than men who become ugly from wisdom. Females have beauty from lack of wisdom, and that is what draws men to them.

Friendship is foolishness itself because one ignores or even changes to virtues the flaws of one's friends. This brings Folly to marriage, a type of friendship where more such forgetfulness would be beneficial. "What divorces, or worse, would not occur everywhere if married life were not upheld and strengthened by blarney, joking, compromise, infatuation, duplicity – all aspects of me...in short, without me no society or mortal union can be pleasant or lasting."¹⁰

Folly announces next that self-love is necessary for people to like a person. However, she does not follow up on that statement immediately. First, she mentions how she influences war and philosophers. The latter, who cannot even speak well, disturb the peace of kingdoms, contrary to Plato's statement that says philosophers benefit the state. A scholar also, according to Folly, is offensive because "take him to a show and just his appearance will kill the joy of the people."¹¹

After that, Folly praises herself for prudence, since she has such experience from life. Also, modesty and fear prevent this quality, but she does not have these two impediments. Life is full of pretenses, and one must be ready to accept them. "True prudence...consists in not desiring more wisdom than is proper to mortals, and in being willing to wink at the doings of the crowd or to go along with it sociably."¹²

It is important, Folly insists, that one has emotions. Seneca, a Stoic, would remove all emotion and, thus, all happiness. Suicide is a result of such emptiness. "But by a timely mixture of ignorance, thoughtlessness, forgetfulness of evil, hope of good, and a

dash of delight, I bring relief from troubles.”¹³ The elderly love life because of foolishness, and fools are happy because they are true to themselves. In early times, people did not have to know everything and so lived in a “golden age.”¹⁴

The virtues of fools include: no fear of death, bothersome conscience, worries, vain hopes, or deceit. Folly goes on to defend the madness of fools. “The happiest man is the one who is the most thoroughly deluded,”¹⁵ for he is free from care. She names some madmen such as hunters, builders, alchemists, storytellers, the superstitious, and noblemen. When she moves to nobility, Folly returns to the idea of self-love, which allows noblemen to be happy with empty titles. Races and cities are also complete with self-love, each proud of small characteristics such as good food, lineage, history, and religions.

Folly concludes the second chapter by saying, “The notions that happiness comes from a knowledge of things as they really are is wrong.”¹⁶ For instance, “a man who thinks his extremely ugly wife is another Venus is as well off as if she really were beautiful.”¹⁷ She mentions Plato’s analogy of the cave, where a man who lived his entire life in the light of a fire goes to the surface and sees the world in the light of sun. Folly says that both the people still in the cave and that man are equally content with what they believe is real. This is a good foolishness, one for which Folly is never thanked.

III. The Followers of Folly

In the third chapter, “The Followers of Folly”, the narrator becomes even more specific when naming the foolish behaviors of man. Folly takes only the prominent people, since it would take too long to name everyone. She begins with merchants, “the

biggest fools of all,”¹⁸ who lie, cheat, and steal but still maintain a respectable reputation. Folly moves on to grammarians with a certain amount of sincere disgust. The schools they open are filthy and useless. They teach worthless information, yet feel self-important. Folly mentions a scholar as an example: “All he wanted from life was to decide conclusively how the eight parts of speech should be defined...He reached the state where he would fight if someone tried to make a conjunction out of a word he had labeled an adverb.”¹⁹

Folly continues to name groups of fools. Poets and rhetoricians are named for their jobs, which are seemingly senseless. Authors of books revise and revise, losing sleep and beauty over ridiculous subject matter. Lawyers “confuse tediousness with brilliance.”²⁰ Philosophers declare that only they themselves are wise, but they are too blind to see what is in front of them.

The narrator’s particular target is the clergy, beginning with theologians, even though “they may attack me with an army of six hundred syllogisms; and if I do not recant, they will proclaim me a heretic.”²¹ These fools explain the mysteries of life and the Bible to suit themselves. They create subtleties in doctrine that even the apostles would not understand. “The apostles knew the mother of Jesus, but who among them has demonstrated philosophically how she was kept free from the sin of Adam, as our theologians have done?”²² Folly asserts, humorously, that they describe “hell in minute detail, just as if they had lived there for years.”²³ Only other theologians can understand their rules.

Monks and the “religious” also invent rules to be kept with almost mathematical precision. However, they do not keep these laws. They will detest money but have the

vices of wine and women. When they are angry, they start lecturing, so emotionally that it can be likened to a stage performance. Folly then names an example of a theologian who explained the riddle of Jesus' name by dissecting it letter by letter. In these sermons, Folly maintains, the speakers "take some tiny bit from the Gospel and interpret it on the run, almost as an after-thought, when really it should be the chief thing."²⁴ Folly explains how the orators follow a set pattern of loudness from beginning to end, no matter the issue. These orators start speaking at a normal volume and continually raise it until the end, even when lecturing on minutiae. They use their religious authority to tyrannize.

Folly continues with those in even higher authority. Kings and princes have heavy burdens so heavy that if they truly thought about them, they would not be able to sleep. Instead, with Folly's help, they sell titles and fritter away their lives on useless pursuits. Courtiers are "corrupt, servile, stupid, and cringing, and yet they wish to appear superior to all others."²⁵ On the religious side of this authority are the popes, cardinals, bishops, and priests. Folly reveals that if popes and cardinals considered how they were to live their lives as the apostles, in poverty and purity, they would give up their positions. However, the popes are free with the tools of discipline such as excommunications and interdictions. Bishops look only after themselves. Priests "very modestly leave all concern about piety to the common people."²⁶ Folly ends this section with the statement that "fools, on the contrary, are rich and powerful; they flourish in every respect."²⁷

IV. The Christian Fool

In the fourth and last chapter, "The Christian Fool", Erasmus as Folly illustrates how the Christian appears foolish at first, yet actually possesses true wisdom. Folly quotes from the Bible repeatedly to emphasize her point. First, she mentions sayings by

classical authorities such as Epicurus, Homer and Cicero that favor foolishness. For instance, Epicurus says, “It is better to be silly and thought a fool, than to be wise and discontented.”²⁸ Next, Folly expands on how foolishness is good by using Bible passages. Some examples are Ecclesiastes 1: 18: *He that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow, and in much wisdom is much grief*, and Ecclesiastes 7:4: *Sorrow is in the heart of the wise, happiness in the heart of the fool*. She quotes the Apostle Paul several times, in 1 Corinthians 1:25: *The foolishness of God is wiser than men*, 1 Corinthians 3: 18: *Let him that seems to be wise among you become a fool, that he may be wise*, and 1 Corinthians 4:10: *We are fools for Christ*. With these passages and more, Folly says that the biblical writers, ironically, esteemed “fools” more than “wise” men.

The goddess of foolishness continues by saying that the apostle Paul once left out some words of an inscription when arguing for the Christian faith, as he only quoted the words “To the Unknown God” (Acts 17:23). Erasmus, as Folly, got this information from St. Jerome’s writings which said the original inscription read: “To the Gods of Asia, Europe, and Africa, to the Unknown Gods, and Foreign Gods.”²⁹ Folly says that perhaps because of this modern theologians have felt free to twist words as well. For instance, when Jesus sends out the disciples without a sword and with little baggage, theologians have changed the meaning. Now, “this interpreter of the divine mind, therefore, sends the apostles on their way armed with lances, crossbows, slings, and muskets to preach Christ crucified. He loads them down, also, with satchels, suitcases, and knapsacks, as if they would always be put out of their inn before they had eaten.”³⁰ Folly says that the Christian fool is to be completely different from this type of “wisdom.”

The Christian fool is to depend on Jesus, the Good Shepherd, not on his own wisdom. For we are as foolish as sheep. God forbid the first couple to eat of the Tree of Knowledge, but they disobeyed. So knowledge is the “destroyer of happiness.”³¹ Folly gives a complete description of Christian fools. She says:

They give away whatever is theirs; they overlook injuries, allow themselves to be cheated, make no distinction between friends and enemies, shun pleasure, and feast on hunger, vigils, tears, labors, and scorn. They disdain life, and utterly prefer death; in short, they seem to have become altogether indifferent to ordinary interests, quite as if their souls lived elsewhere and not in their bodies. What is this, if not to be mad?³²

Christians are truly pious, a thing close to madness. They feel the same love for their parents as for complete strangers, for everyone was made in God’s image. These madmen are drawn to the spiritual and the eternal and barely live in this world at all. Folly then ends her discourse somewhat abruptly with a Greek proverb: “Even a foolish man will often speak a word in season.”³³

Conclusion

This work of Erasmus as a whole makes a good point; though, there are some techniques and literary issues that weaken the piece. At different times, because of the sarcasm, Erasmus seems to be both praising folly *and* against it. For instance, the narrator, Folly, mentions that she believes people harmlessly deluded are agreeable fools. However, the foolish nature of theologians and grammarians (“a tormented, calamity-ridden, God-forsaken body of men”³⁴) was described with dislike. Although this is probably an attempt to be humorous, the author of this paper saw it as too confusing. Erasmus constructed this diatribe in such a manner that, although it is organized into four parts, there is little structure besides that. He jumps from one subject to another with

slight transitions. Sometimes, he takes up other subjects for several pages before returning to the one he started with, although this may simply be the style of the day.

Another concern is the issue of religion. Folly is a goddess, and she often mentions other gods and myths as if they were real. Yet, the fourth part is about Christian fools. A Greek goddess lecturing about how Christians should act seemed unbelievable and hypocritical to this paper's author. Yet it ought to be remembered that, during the Renaissance, the reference to classical ideas and myths was considered scholarly. This technique might also have been to display how Christianity wins over even the false gods.

"Praise of Folly" has many admirable points, nonetheless. First, Erasmus uses many folk sayings mixed in with his classical references so that the ordinary man might understand better, a trait of Renaissance writers. This shows that Erasmus recognized his audience. Second, the satirical attitude demonstrated throughout his piece, although confusing at times, entertained the audience while causing them to apply these statements to themselves. Thus, the document is more than just an amusement. Third, Erasmus makes many good arguments about human behavior (another Renaissance attribute) that can be applied today. Poets, authors, politicians and others can still be arrogant and self-serving. Religion is full of hypocrites and the devout. So *Praise of Folly* withstands the test of time.

While reading this satire, one is tempted to apply Erasmus' sarcasm to the world today. Many of the same habits of man that Folly calls foolishness are still employed today. For instance, scholars or philosophers can be seen as groups of people too blinded by their own self-importance to see the real problems of the world around them.

Scientists are too interested in the “wisdom” of making discoveries to consider whether these facts should be discovered at all. In the church today, the clergy is also not as changed as one would hope. Corruption and laziness still occur. The laity is often left to its own devices while the church requests money. New religions appear every day and invent new ways to distract the parishioners while taking their money. Theologians are too busy arguing about minute doctrinal details to care about the fading beliefs of the people. Erasmus would label these examples foolishness as well, the type of foolishness that is harmful and disgusting.

In summary, Erasmus’ *The Praise of Folly* is a work full of satirical comedy and classical references. The author criticized moral and religious issues of the day. This document has some literary techniques that take away from its case, such as contradictions and few transitions. However, the document has many good points that have caused it to remain popular up until modern times. Its tone and subject capture the audience and make them ponder their own lives. Folly brings up examples that are still seen today, and the reader can conceive more himself. Erasmus, “the most acclaimed humanist of the day,”³⁵ achieved not only long-lasting fame, but made his point effectively using Renaissance wit and analysis.

¹ Giles, Mary E., “Desiderius Erasmus,” *Great Thinkers of the Western World*, (1992) 130.

² Watson, Donald Gwynn, “Erasmus’ Praise of Folly and the Spirit of Carnival,” *Renaissance Quarterly*, 32 (Winter 1979) 335.

³ Erasmus, Desiderius, “The Praise of Folly,” *Essential Works of Erasmus*, ed. and introduction W. T. H. Jackson, (New York: Bantam Books, 1965) 365.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 366.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 368.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 369.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 371.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 371.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 373.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 376.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 279.

¹² *Ibid.*, 382.

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- ¹³ Ibid., 384.
¹⁴ Ibid., 386.
¹⁵ Ibid., 391.
¹⁶ Ibid., 396.
¹⁷ Ibid., 396.
¹⁸ Ibid., 399.
¹⁹ Ibid., 401.
²⁰ Ibid., 403.
²¹ Ibid., 404.
²² Ibid., 406.
²³ Ibid., 408.
²⁴ Ibid., 412.
²⁵ Ibid., 415.
²⁶ Ibid., 419.
²⁷ Ibid., 420.
²⁸ Ibid., 421.
²⁹ Ibid., 424.
³⁰ Ibid., 425.
³¹ Ibid., 428.
³² Ibid., 429.
³³ Ibid., 433.
³⁴ Ibid., 400.
³⁵ Giles, "Desiderius Erasmus," 132.