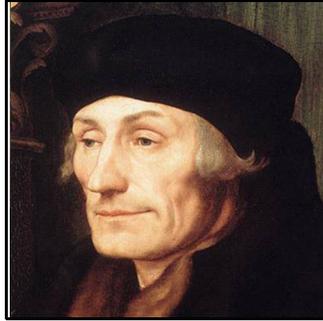


PRAISE OF FOLLY

by Desiderius Erasmus



THE AUTHOR

Desiderius Erasmus (1469-1536) is generally considered to have been the greatest humanist of the Northern Renaissance. Both the date and place of his birth are uncertain, though most scholars believe he was born in Rotterdam in the Netherlands. His father was a Catholic priest for whom his mother may have kept house; he always considered his illegitimate birth a matter of shame. Both of his parents died of the plague in 1483. Erasmus received his early education in a school run by the Brethren of the Common Life, through which he came into contact with the *devotio moderna* with its emphasis on simplicity and godly living. *The Imitation of Christ*, by Thomas á Kempis, did much to shape his view of Christian piety.

Erasmus took monastic orders in 1492 and was ordained as a Catholic priest a few years later, though he disliked monastic life except as it gave him the freedom to study and write and never formally served in the priesthood. In fact, not long after his ordination he was given a special dispensation excusing him from his religious vows, which was eventually made permanent by Pope Leo X. His experiences of the religious life, however, provided the basis for the critiques of the monastic system that are found in many of his later writings. He also, like Luther, was disillusioned by a visit to Rome, where he observed firsthand both the laxity of the religious practices of the lords of the church, but was also disgusted by the open warfare in which Pope Julius II engaged with other Italian city states.

In 1495 Erasmus began studies at the University of Paris, the center of Scholastic thought in the fifteenth century. Here he again found a target for his later works of criticism; though he never accused the Schoolmen of debating how many angels could stand on the head of a pin, his scorn for the great thinkers of the Middle Ages of all stripes knew no bounds. In 1499 he was invited to England, where he made many friends, including John Colet, who encouraged Erasmus to pursue his Greek studies (this led eventually to his publication of a Greek New Testament), John Fisher, and, most importantly, Thomas More. During several stays in England he taught at Cambridge University, though for most of his life he was an itinerant, refusing to be bound to anyone place or occupation, preferring to maintain his independence as he traveled from France to England to Italy (where he was influenced by the work of Pico della Mirandola and the Christian Neoplatonists) to Switzerland (where in Basel he found a publisher for his works), taking up one brief assignment after another.

During much of this time he was absorbed in his linguistic work, polishing his Latin and Greek and compiling manuscripts of the New Testament with the intention of making corrections in the Vulgate translated by Jerome in the fifth century and preparing a new critical Greek text based on the few available manuscripts. His Greek New Testament was published in 1516 (revised in 1519) and caused quite a stir, not only because it presumed to correct the Vulgate, but also because it encouraged scholars to go back to the original languages of Scripture rather than depending on the Latin; ironically, the work was dedicated to Pope Leo X, whom Erasmus considered to be a great humanist. This Greek edition of the New Testament later served as a foundation for Luther's translation of the New Testament into German and Tyndale's New Testament, the Geneva Bible, and the Authorised (King James) Version of the Bible in English. It also became the basis for the widely-accepted Greek text known as the *Textus Receptus*.

By the time the Reformation began in 1517, Erasmus was already considered one of the great writers of the age, having published works such as the *Enchiridion (Handbook of the Christian Knight, 1503)*, *Praise of Folly* (a satire dedicated to his friend Thomas More, written in 1509 and first published in 1511), and *The Education of a Christian Prince* (dedicated to Charles V of Spain and serving as a response to Machiavelli's *The Prince, 1516*). He thus could not avoid being drawn into the leading religious controversy of the age. While his fidelity to the Catholic Church pleased one side and his critiques of the church's abuses delighted the other, he frustrated both camps by planting himself firmly in the middle. He openly ridiculed the church, particularly the hierarchy, the monastic system, and Scholastic theology, but never showed any interest in throwing in his lot with the Protestants. In fact, he maintained an important theological disagreement with the Reformers centered on his belief in the absolute freedom of man's will, contrary to the Reformation emphasis on divine predestination. This disagreement was made public when, in 1524, Erasmus published *The Freedom of the Will*, to which Luther responded a year later with *On the Bondage of the Will*. The central issue, of course, was whether salvation was by grace alone through faith alone, or whether man by his unaided will could choose to obey God and could move toward moral perfection. Erasmus' view led him to the controversial opinion that salvation of moral pagans was possible outside of Christ. Thus the claim that Erasmus "laid the egg that Luther hatched" is valid for the role played by his edition of the Greek New Testament, but for little else. In his later years, Erasmus enjoyed the support and patronage of powerful figures such as Pope Leo X, Charles V of Spain, Henry VIII, and Francis I of France. Despite his professed fidelity to the Catholic Church, all of his works, including his New Testament, were placed on the Index of Prohibited Books by the Council of Trent in 1559 (and not removed until 1930). Erasmus died after a brief illness in Basel in 1536.

Praise of Folly was written, supposedly during a period of one week, while Erasmus was staying at the home of his friend Thomas More; the Latin title of the book (*Moriae Encomium*) is a pun on his name. It is modeled on satiric declamations by Lucian and is placed in the mouth of the goddess Folly, who is giving a sort of after-dinner speech (an *encomium*) in praise of herself. The work shares many ideas with More's *Utopia* and repeats criticisms found in earlier works such the *Enchiridion*. The criticisms in the book are wide-ranging, covering not only the church, which may be considered its central focus, but also the educational system, kings and princes, and the social class divisions that dominated sixteenth-century Europe. To be fair, Erasmus also mocks himself, occasionally by name. Critics have noted that the author had difficulty maintaining a consistent voice, sometimes having Folly praise what the author is trying to mock and at other times openly ridiculing it.

SUMMARY

The work begins with a cover letter addressed to Thomas More, to whom the book was dedicated and at whose home it was written. He refers to his dear friend as “getting on well with all men at any time” (the phrase in Greek was translated by others as “a man for all seasons,” which in turn became the title of Robert Bolt’s play about More) and trusts that he will enjoy this simple effort at humor. Erasmus fears that some will not appreciate his humorous treatment of serious matters or his critical spirit and asks More to defend the work against its detractors. He then gives a long list of classical authors who had written satirical works, including Lucian, whose work became the model for the mock encomiums of the Renaissance. He defends himself by insisting that he names no names, ridicules his own weaknesses as well as those of others, and somewhat ingenuously reminds his critics that anyone of whom Folly speaks ill must be a wise man indeed.

The main body of the book is presented as an *encomium*, or speech of praise, presented by the goddess Folly. Her purpose is to praise herself and her amazing accomplishments. The setting is an after-dinner speech meant to entertain the audience. She begins by justifying this act of self-praise by noting that she knows herself better than anyone else, and besides, she must praise herself if she can’t find anyone else to do it. She insists that her speech is given extemporaneously, unlike those professional orators who spend decades preparing an address which is largely plagiarized anyway. She has no intention to deceive, but straightforwardly presents herself as she really is, unlike those who falsely claim to be wise and use her name as an insult when in reality they are her most devoted followers, which she considers the proper manner of life. Folly also ridicules those who sprinkle Greek phrases throughout their Latin orations - something she has done throughout this introduction to the encomium.

Folly then gives a description of her ancestry. She claims to be the daughter of Plutus, the god of riches; he is obviously the most important of the gods, given the overwhelming influence he exercises in human affairs. Her mother is Freshness (Hebe), the youthful daughter of Zeus and Hera, who was impregnated by Plutus without benefit of marriage during a wild night of drunken abandon and born smiling, not crying, on the idyllic Islands of the Blest, where she was suckled by the nymphs Drunkenness and Ignorance. Her companions and servants are Self-Love, Flattery, Forgetfulness, Idleness, Pleasure, Madness, Sensuality, Revelry, and Sound Sleep.

She then goes on to speak of the advantages she brings to the world. In fact, she argues that she is the font of life itself, since the gods, in order to propagate, had to disguise themselves in foolish ways, and the wise Stoics had to abandon their obsession with the spirit and indulge the foolish flesh, and a disreputable part of the body at that, in order to generate new life. Not only that, but all the genuine pleasures of life come from folly. Infancy is the most pleasurable stage of life, and babies are loved for their folly, as are adolescents, those foolish beings that everyone desires to help. In fact, the more one matures, and thus removes himself from folly, the less enjoyable life becomes - that is, until Folly endows the elderly with the blessed forgetfulness of “second childhood,” thus providing the much-sought Fountain of Youth. Not only that, but the gods benefit from Folly as well. The most popular gods are young and happy, such as Bacchus, Cupid, Venus, and Flora, while the old ones like Jupiter, among others, are constantly getting drunk and engaging in foolish behavior such as love affairs with mortals.

Returning to the realm of human experience, Folly next argues that human reason plays a relatively small role in man’s actions (Erasmus claims a ratio of one to twenty-four), but that he is instead dominated by the irrational drives of anger and lust, for which mankind has her to thank.

Even man's slight rational qualities are moderated by the presence of women, who according to Folly have no reasoning abilities at all. She quickly makes clear that she intends no insult to women, being a woman herself, since women's beauty, their sole obsession, enables them to manipulate and control men, and is thus more powerful than men's reason.

Even old men who have little interest in women cannot survive without folly, since their parties are filled with drunkenness and the entertainment of jesters. Others take pleasure in friendship rather than wine. This, too, could not exist apart from the activity of Folly, for how could friendship long survive unless were willing to overlook one another's faults and act as if they did not exist? If this is true of friendship, how much more is it true of marriage, which is nothing more than friendship bound for a lifetime? Is not Cupid blind, after all? Furthermore, the same is true of all human relationships - ruler and subject, master and servant, teacher and pupil, officer and soldier; none could long continue without the delusions provided by Folly. She then digs even deeper, arguing that the self-love that enables one to love others is the greatest folly of all, rooted in perpetual delusions, so much so that Self-Love may be considered Folly's sister goddess.

One of the most obvious manifestations of Folly is war, a useless exercise where wise men are of little use and what is needed are "stout and sturdy fellows with all the daring possible and the minimum of brain." Not only is wisdom useless in war, it is useless in almost every endeavor. Socrates was so wise that he drank poison as a result of his lack of understanding of practical human affairs, while Plato's "philosopher-kings" have been the bane of any nation so unfortunate as to be ruled by one, such as Marcus Aurelius and his reign over Rome. Even in private life, wise men ruin dinner parties, dances, and any other form of public entertainment with their seriousness and solemnity. Unfortunately, common people are even worse. They have no interest in reason or wisdom, but example after example in history shows them being swayed by parables and fables of the silliest sort, after which they honor the fools who swayed their opinions and cast their images in bronze. Folly also claims a major role in the arts, since artists are fools who are driven to produce their works by the thirst for fame.

Having demonstrated that courage and industry are the products of Folly, the goddess now claims to be the source of prudence. She argues that prudence comes from experience. The wise, however, never gain experience because they are too timid and cautious to try anything, but fools jump in where angels fear to tread, make enough mistakes to gain plenty of experience, and eventually learn prudence as a result. If prudence, on the other hand, comes not from experience but by making judgments about life, Folly warns that all of life is nothing but one grand illusion like that produced by actors on a stage - an illusion no one would care to go without.

The goddess next argues that no one can approach what men call wisdom without the assistance of Folly. To begin with, reason is associated with wisdom, while all of the emotions belong to Folly. But is it not true that the emotions drive men to seek wisdom and motivate them to virtuous deeds? Someone lacking in emotions cannot rightly be called a man at all; he is nothing but a stone statue. Who would want him for a ruler, friend, or lover? Folly concludes that the wise man is nothing but a bore.

Folly next speaks of the hardships of life, both those that come from the nature of human experience and those imposed by others. The examples of the wise demonstrate that the appropriate response to such constant misery is to choose to end one's life. But Folly comes to the rescue, bringing pleasures, insignificant though they be, that cause most men to choose to go on living despite life's troubles. In fact, the elderly, who should be miserable and ready to die, will do anything to regain their lost youth, including seeking amorous dalliances with people half their age.

No matter how ridiculous they may appear, they nonetheless are happy in their folly. But isn't living in self-deception misery? Not according to Folly, who argues that such a life is nothing more nor less than being human. Some might argue that learning is the pathway by which man might overcome his folly and his misery, but Folly responds that learning was not necessary in the Golden Age [a classical version of the Garden of Eden from which man declined, but did not fall] where men were in perfect harmony with one another; in fact, learning is simply another source of human misery, a means by which people torment one another. In fact, the most highly-valued disciplines are those most closely associated with folly, namely medicine and law.

Those who are happiest, therefore, according to Folly, are those who live according to Nature and have as little as possible to do with learning. Beasts who have nothing to do with man are happy in their innocence, while those drawn into man's troubles, such as the horse, suffer as a result. Man, in fact, is the most miserable of all creatures because he constantly seeks to transcend the limitations imposed on him by Nature. The proof of this is found in the fact that, among men, simpletons are the happiest - they fear neither death nor the future, have no sense of guilt or pangs of conscience, and their lack of reasoning power even keeps them from the curse of sin [shades of an age of accountability here]. In addition, fools are the favorites of kings because they give them so much pleasure; the same may be said of women. So-called wise men, on the other hand, waste their youth in acquiring learning and never have one bit of fun. They are poor, thrifty, unpopular, and grow old before their time. Such a man, argues Folly makes no difference when he dies because he has never really lived [this paragraph is thought by many to come very close to self-parody on the part of Erasmus].

What of those who deplore folly as a form of madness? The goddess argues that two forms of madness exist: the madness that produces evil deeds and the madness that brings pleasure that makes a man set aside all his anxieties. The former comes from the Furies, but the latter is all to the credit of Folly. Self-deception, of course, takes many forms - the cuckold who swears his wife is faithful, the noble hunter who thinks others take pleasure in watching him dismember a poor beast, insatiable builders whose constant need to remodel their domiciles drives them to poverty, explorers and alchemists who swear that their efforts to discover or isolate the "fifth essence" (*quintessence*) will soon come to fruition, and gamblers, confident that the big score is sure to come at the next roll of the dice (though sadly, most of these wind up in the hands of the Furies).

Folly next goes on to claim as the product of her efforts all sorts of religious superstition, beginning with the veneration of saints and relics. Even worse are those who purchase indulgences in the hope of gaining forgiveness of sins. Other superstitions include repeating certain verses or prayers supposed to guarantee salvation, assigning patron saints to particular professions or problems, and ascribing more powers to the Blessed Mother than to her Son. Folly takes pride in the fact that those who claim the intervention of the saints never do so because they sought deliverance from folly, but only because they sought deliverance from its consequences. Worse yet, priests encourage this sort of foolishness instead of simply telling people that salvation may be gained by doing good and shunning evil, and that a saint will protect you if you emulate his life rather than observing foolish rituals or presenting paltry offerings.

Self-Love also generates a variety of forms of foolishness. Folly cites those who take undue pride in their ancestry, often to the point of tracing it back to mythical figures; furthermore, other people look up to them as something special because of such folly. Others overvalue their own talents, or, worse yet, claim the talents of their forebears as their own. Artists are notorious for their self-love, which causes them not only to be conceited about their abilities, but also to refuse to seek

to improve themselves, since it is the least talented who manage to gain the greatest public acclaim; after all, the majority of the public are fools and therefore save their greatest praise for those most like themselves. Groups as well as individuals are controlled by Self-Love. Cities and nations are notorious for the pride that causes them to think themselves better than others, of which Folly gives numerous examples.

Another sister, Flattery, also contributes to human happiness by oiling the gears of relationships, since by it people are made to think well of themselves whether they deserve it or not. But is not deception a sad thing? According to Folly, people are better off being deceived because happiness is enhanced by unsupported opinions and undermined by facts. A clear example of this is that, when a priest delivers a sermon, the congregation dozes when he speaks of Christ, Peter, or Paul, but immediately comes to attention when he regales them with tales of the saints. Besides, facts take time and labor to acquire while opinions are formed with little effort at all. Folly cites a number of examples, including that of a man who gives his wife a gift of costume jewelry and convinces her that she possesses rare and valuable gems. The result is that both are happy as long as she is none the wiser. The poor souls in Plato's cave are no worse off than the philosopher as long as they don't know what they're missing. Besides, true pleasure must be enjoyed in company with others, and there are far more fools than wise men because Folly extends her benefits to all alike.

Despite all of these benefits, Folly remarks that no one builds temples or offers sacrifices to her. This doesn't really concern her, however, because the highest form of worship she receives is that people all over the world live according to her precepts. Even Mary and the saints don't receive such devout worship. And why would Folly want images and statues erected in her honor when those who have such things quickly find that the worshipers give more devotion to the image than to what it represents?

Folly now moves on to a description of her followers. She begins with the common people, whom she considers her most faithful devotees. According to Folly, they provide endless entertainment for the gods, but she believes much more profit may be gained by considering those of her followers who are reputed wise. She thus turns her attention to schoolmasters. They take pleasure in the strict regimens which they subject their pupils and wear their poverty as a badge of honor. They believe themselves to be wise while all the time they are filling boys' heads with utter nonsense. Their greatest triumphs consist of the discoveries of trivia, which they treat as the greatest of treasures. Among these specialists in trivia are grammarians and rhetoricians, who argue interminably over details about which no one else could possibly care.

Poets, too, are Folly's disciples, regaling their readers with silly stories that they think will ensure their immortality. Writers are no better; those who write for public consumption put out worthless trash, while those who write for the learned few exhaust their minds and bodies producing works that no one will ever read. Happier by far are those writers who put down on paper whatever comes into their heads, knowing that the reading public, consisting largely of fools, will never notice and will be entertained anyway. Even happier are the plagiarists, who expend little labor and, even if they are found out, will have already made a handsome profit from the labors of others and established a reputation which most will never know is unearned. They then enhance their reputations further by writing laudatory reviews of one another's books, thus scratching one another's backs.

Folly next speaks of the lawyers, who pile words upon words, enough to outtalk twenty women, to make themselves seem learned and impressive to others. Despite the folly of their arguments, their self-love keeps them happy. Next come philosophers, who claim to explain the

inexplicable; their folly is demonstrated by the fact that all their ideas are no more than speculations, so that they cannot even come close to agreeing with one another. They know nothing, yet they profess to know everything, even the deepest of mysteries [here Erasmus mocks the medieval Scholastic thinkers, whose debates about the nature and existence of universals he despised].

Next Folly addresses the theologians, though with some reluctance, since they have a nasty habit of charging anyone they dislike with heresy. This does not prevent her from spending almost twenty pages in her description of the ways in which they follow her precepts. She begins by crediting them with an abundance of self-love because they consider themselves superior to other people. Not only that, but they twist the mysteries of the faith for their own benefit, endlessly discussing pointless and unanswerable questions (though some of the questions she mentions were of real theological and practical significance). Her real target here is the Schoolmen, and she is an equal-opportunity mocker, ridiculing all branches of medieval Scholasticism. In fact, she insists that the apostles themselves would have been at a loss to answer the questions with which the theologians of the Middle Ages occupied themselves. She ironically points out that the apostle Paul “condemned questions, arguments, genealogies, and what he himself called ‘battles of words’” when such matters seem to occupy all the time and attention of the Schoolmen. The apostles themselves, when confronting unbelief, did so not with syllogisms, but with miracles and godly lives. The Schoolmen, on the other hand, would accomplish more good if they went off to fight the Turks in place of the dim-witted soldiers who currently do so; perhaps they could talk them to death. Instead, however, they never even bother to read the Bible, but distort its teachings beyond all recognition, while they claim the ability to describe the circles of Hell and the spheres of Heaven in great detail. In addition, they use bad grammar and mumble when they speak.

Next after the theologians come the “religious” or “monks.” Folly argues that both terms are misnomers, since those who bear the titles often show little interest in religion at all and live lives that are anything but solitary. Like the theologians, they overflow with self-love, proud of their piety, which in most cases is displayed by an aversion to learning; most are so illiterate that they don’t even understand the few psalms they have committed to memory. In addition, their begging is a public nuisance and interferes with the livelihood of genuine beggars. The rules they follow are utterly preposterous, both in their strictness and in the way they use them to differentiate themselves, both from common people and from other monastic orders, thus feeding their own pride. The names of their monastic orders serve the same purpose, becoming more sources of pride than the name “Christian” to them. Mendicants are no better, hearing confessions, assigning penances, then violating the sanctity of the confessional in spirit if not in letter by speaking of the sins of others, while drunk in the tavern or inspired in the pulpit, in a way that enables even the densest to comprehend the one whose sins are being described. Their sermons are also dreadful abuses of the art of rhetoric, so wrapped up in technical niceties that the point of the message is lost altogether; they seem to think that the introduction to a sermon is excellent only to the extent that it has nothing to do with the main subject.

Folly next speaks of the extent to which kings and courtiers are indebted to her. After all, who except those immersed in folly would seek political power, given that one who exercises it must put the welfare of others before his own, will be held to higher standards of integrity than anyone else, is responsible for the honesty of all the officials under him, is subject to intense scrutiny by his subjects, and must know that the slightest deviation from absolute probity on his part will have drastic consequences for his people. The sovereign also is beset by many temptations hard to resist and knows that he will one day face the true King who will hold him accountable for his actions in

proportion to the authority he has wielded. Fortunately, Folly delivers princes from all such concerns; they seek their own comfort, surround themselves with lackeys who tell them what they want to hear, sell offices and collect taxes to line their own pockets, and have no interest either in understanding or in observing their nations' laws. Courtiers are even worse, groveling before the king only to maintain the opulent and self-absorbed lifestyles to which they have become accustomed.

Popes, cardinals, and bishops benefit from the blandishments of Folly as well, having long ago adopted the trappings and practices of royalty and nobility. Like kings and princes, their manner of living contradicts the symbolic meanings of the clothing they so proudly wear. If popes took their position seriously, who would seek to purchase it only to have to protect it by poison or sword? If they possessed the wisdom of Christ, what would become of their wealth, their dispensations and indulgences, their honors and pleasures? Would they not devote themselves to study, teaching, serving the poor, and self-sacrifice? But because of Folly, they need not consider such questions. Instead they wield the sword of war [a clear swipe at Pope Julius II, who spent ten years waging war against other Italian city-states, even allying with the Turks in order to do so] and that of excommunication against any fellow Christians who would dare to challenge their power or seek to reduce their earthly lands and possessions. Priests, sadly, follow the examples of pontiffs, seeking to multiply tithes and live in luxury while practically ignoring their spiritual duties, rattling off masses and prayers with no thought whatever to their significance [this was one of Luther's chief complaints after his visit to Rome in 1510] while passing on priestly responsibilities to whatever ecclesiastical figures may be available at the time.

In general, those who pursue folly tend to be rich and powerful, while those who concern themselves with genuine wisdom find themselves mired in poverty, receiving no approbation from their fellows. After all, what use has one for wisdom who spends his time among kings and nobles, and how can anyone expect to become rich if he scruples about such matters as theft and perjury? Wisdom is also a detriment if one desires ecclesiastical office or even the company of women. Folly then quotes a series of classical authors to support the idea that she is essential for every man.

The encomium now changes both direction and tone, for Folly next tries to prove that the Scriptures approve of her works. She first points out that, according to the Bible, folly is universal among men, and that even human wisdom is in reality foolishness, though her interpretation of the verses she cites is sometimes less than sound, as Erasmus admits. Theologians always twist the Scriptures; even the apostle Paul distorted the meaning of the inscription on the Athenian idol for his own purposes. She then cites examples of misinterpretation, including Jesus' instruction to His disciples to buy swords and a passage used to defend the burning of heretics.

Scripture advocates another kind of folly, however. Paul often describes himself as a fool for Christ's sake and even goes so far as to attribute folly to God, saying that the foolishness of God is better than man's wisdom. Furthermore, God chooses the foolish of this world to shame the wise and saves the world through the foolishness of preaching while rejecting the wisdom of the wise. Christ Himself castigated the wisdom of the scribes and Pharisees while praising the simplicity of children and described His followers as sheep, the dumbest of all animals. Would one stretch the truth too much to suggest that, in the same way Christ was made sin for sinners, so He became folly for human fools? How often in the Bible do sinners plead for forgiveness on the basis of ignorance?

In the end, the Christian religion has much in common with folly and little in common with wisdom. The very young, the very old, and the very simple demonstrate the greatest faith and the most sincere love for Christ. The life lived by the truly pious, which involves constant self-denial,

the subjection of the body for the good of the soul, and the contemplation of things that are unseen, is clearly the height of folly. Finally, is not intense love the greatest form of madness, completely sublimating the self in devotion to the one who is loved? And is this not, in the end, the description of heaven? Is this not the experience of the mystics, who have enjoyed a mere foretaste of the indescribable glory to come?

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Folly - The goddess in whose mouth Erasmus places his encomium.

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“You can find a good many people whose religious sense is so distorted that they find the most serious blasphemies against Christ more bearable than the slightest joke on pope or prince, especially if it touches their daily bread.” (Prefatory Letter, p.7; note that all page numbers are from the Penguin edition translated by Betty Radice)

“If a man annoys Plutus not even Pallas Athene herself can save him. But anyone who wins his approval can tell mighty Jupiter to go hang himself, thunderbolt and all.” (p.15-16)

“Just tell me, please, what man would be willing to offer his neck to the halter of matrimony if he applied the usual practice of the wise man and first weighed up its disadvantages as a way of life? Or what woman would ever agree to take a husband if she knew or thought about the pains and dangers of childbirth and the trouble of bringing up children?” (p.20)

“It is folly, and the same folly, which alone makes friendships and keeps friends together.” (p.33)

“Now what else is the whole life of man but a sort of play? Actors come on wearing their different masks and all play their parts until the producer orders them off the stage, and he can often tell the same man to appear in different costume, so that now he plays a king in purple and now a humble slave in rags. It’s all a sort of pretense, but it’s the only way to act out this farce.” (p.44)

“The wise man’s a bore.” (p.47)

“Now I believe I can hear the philosophers protesting that it can only be misery to live in folly, illusion, deception, and ignorance. But it isn’t - it’s human.” (p.50)

“Take for example some merchant, soldier, or judge who believes he has only to give up a single tiny coin from his pile of plunder to purify once and for all the entire Lernean morass he has made of his life. All his perjury, lust, drunkenness, quarrels, killings, frauds, perfidy, and treachery he believes can somehow be paid off by agreement, and paid off in such a way that he’s now free to start afresh on a new round of sin.” (p.64)

“Not one of them gives thanks for being rid of folly, and it’s so pleasant not to be wise that mortals would prefer to pray for deliverance from anything rather than from me.” (p.66)

“What difference is there, do you think, between those in Plato’s cave who can only marvel at the shadows and images of various objects, provided they are content and don’t know what they miss, and the philosopher who has emerged from the cave and see the real things?” (p.72)

“They [the monks] aren’t interested in being like Christ but in being unlike each other.” (p.97)

“I do not acknowledge men who acknowledge their own deeds so noisily. Those who want to appear holier than I am can . . . give orders for a new heaven to be built for them by the men whose foolish teaching they have set above my own commands.” (Christ, as Folly imagines Him speaking, p.98-99)

“No one would think power worth gaining . . . if he seriously considered the burden that has to be shouldered by the man who wants to exercise true sovereignty.” (p.104)

“Similarly, the cardinals might consider how they are the successors of the apostles and are expected to follow the example of their predecessors, and that they are not the lords but the stewards of the spiritual riches for every penny of which they will soon have to render an exact account.” (p.108)

“For [popes] it’s out of date and outmoded to perform miracles; teaching the people is too like hard work, interpreting the Holy Scriptures is for schoolmen, and praying is waste of time; to shed tears is weak and womanish, to be needy is degrading; to suffer defeat is a disgrace and hardly fitting for one who scarcely permits the greatest of kings to kiss his sacred feet; and finally, death is an unattractive prospect, and dying on a cross would be an ignominious end.” (p.109)

“It’s the generally accepted privilege of theologians to stretch the heavens, that is the Scriptures, like tanners with a hide.” (p.120)

“To sum up . . . , it is quite clear that the Christian religion has a kind of kinship with folly . . . , though it has none at all with wisdom.” (p.128)

“Finally, the biggest fools of all appear to be those who have once been wholly possessed by zeal for Christian piety. They squander their possessions, ignore insults, submit to being cheated, make no distinction between friends and enemies, shun pleasure, sustain themselves on fasting, vigils, tears, toil, and humiliation, scorn life, and desire only death - in short, they seem to be dead to any normal feelings, as if their spirit dwelt elsewhere than in their body. What else can that be but madness?” (p.128)

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. Desiderius Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* is an exercise in inversion in which the author praises what is foolish, though admittedly Erasmus struggled to maintain the inverted view of human experience with which he began his encomium. A similar inversion is found in C.S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters*, in which evil is praised and good is described as baneful. Which of the two carries off the inversion more effectively, and is thus a more powerful critique of the negative aspects of human thought and behavior? Why do you think so? Be sure to make use of quotations from both books to support your arguments.
2. In Desiderius Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*, the goddess argues that man is not really a rational being, but instead is driven by anger and lust. This is an assessment with which Sigmund Freud would have agreed, since these (self-preservation and propagation) are the chief components of the id. Does Erasmus concur with Folly's (and Freud's) conclusion or is he speaking ironically? Support your arguments with specifics from the book.
3. In Desiderius Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*, the goddess argues that self-love is a necessary precondition for loving others. Is this what Jesus meant when He said, "Love your neighbor as you love yourself"? Why or why not? Be sure that, in answering the question, you interact with Folly's arguments on the subject.
4. In Desiderius Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*, Folly, and through her the author, denies the idea of original sin and advocates human perfectibility. This is clearly a subject on which Erasmus and the Protestant Reformers disagreed. Evaluate Folly's arguments on this issue on the basis of Scripture, being sure to cite both specific passages in the book and specific Bible verses.
5. In Desiderius Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*, he refers to one Argive, described by Horace as a man who sat all day in the theater, laughing and applauding, despite the fact that no one was on stage. Otherwise, he was "Pleasant to his friends, kind to his wife, a man who could forgive his slaves, and at a bottle's broken seal not mad with rage." Compare the madness of Argive with that of the protagonist in Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. Is such madness, as Erasmus argued, the source of true happiness, especially since the men in both stories were saddened when their illusions were shattered by well-meaning friends? Support your arguments with specifics from both books.
6. Desiderius Erasmus and Martin Luther agreed on many of their critiques of the Catholic Church of their day. Among their areas of agreement were their rejection of the veneration of saints and relics and the sale of indulgences. Analyze the criticisms of these practices found in Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*. Does he oppose these things for the same reasons Luther and the other Reformers did? Why or why not?

7. Perhaps the chief area of disagreement between Desiderius Erasmus and Martin Luther was on the question of free will. Erasmus, who leaned toward Pelagianism, wrote *The Freedom of the Will in 1524*; Luther responded with *On the Bondage of the Will* in the following year, defending predestination and salvation by grace alone. How does Erasmus' view of the role of the human will in salvation appear in *Praise of Folly*? Assess his arguments from a biblical perspective.
8. In Desiderius Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*, the goddess counters people's love of superstition by what she calls a statement of the true facts: "You won't do badly when you die if you've been good in your lifetime. You'll redeem your sins only by adding hatred for wrong-doing, tears, vigils, prayers, fasts, and change in your whole way of living to the small sum you've already paid. The saint will protect you if you try to imitate his life." Why did Reformers like Luther and Zwingli oppose such a view of Christianity every bit as much as the superstitions associated with saints, relics, and indulgences? In what way does this summary of the way of salvation show that Erasmus was a true son of the Catholic Church despite his criticisms of its abuses?
9. In Desiderius Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*, the goddess ridicules Scholastic theologians for arguing that it is "better to let the whole world perish . . . than to tell a single tiny insignificant lie." Who is right here, Folly or the theologians? Is lying sometimes the right thing to do? Does the end ever justify the means? Be sure to justify your argument from Scripture.
10. In Desiderius Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*, the goddess draws a parallel between Christians, who see by faith what is unseen to mortal eyes, and the philosophers in Plato's allegory of the cave in *The Republic*. To what extent is this analogy legitimate? Is the knowledge of the truth by faith the same as that obtained by the philosophers in Plato's work? Why or why not? Support your arguments with specifics from both works and quotations from Scripture.
11. Evaluate the contrast between body and soul and its application to the Christian faith at the end of Desiderius Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*. Is the author's dichotomy biblical? Why or why not? Support your conclusions from Scripture, making specific references to Folly's arguments as you do so.
12. Compare and contrast the criticisms of the organized church found in Desiderius Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* and Thomas More's *Utopia*. What ideas do the two friends have in common? Are there any significant issues over which they differ? Whose criticism do you think is more valid or more powerful? Why? Support your conclusions with specifics from both books.
13. In Desiderius Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*, the goddess insists that she is the foundation of happiness and human relationships of all sorts because such could not exist without people deluding one another and themselves. Is she right? Evaluate her arguments, both from Scripture and from human experience.

14. Evaluate the view of education presented in Desiderius Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*. Consider Folly's comments about philosophers, grammarians, rhetoricians, and others who seek to pass themselves off as the fonts of all knowledge.
15. In Desiderius Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*, the goddess argues that fools are happier than wise men; essentially, she insists that "ignorance is bliss." Do you agree? Evaluate her argument, remembering that Solomon, in Ecclesiastes 1:18, says, "For in much wisdom is much vexation; and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow."
16. In 1559, Desiderius Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*, along with all of his other writings, was placed on the Index of Prohibited Books by the Council of Trent, which considered its criticism of the Church to be dangerous and its reliance on classical authors to be pagan. Others have argued that the book is a profoundly Christian work. Which view would you support, and why? Reinforce your arguments with quotations from the book.
17. In Desiderius Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*, the goddess argues that folly is the source of true wisdom, while the wisdom of the supposedly wise is mere folly. William Shakespeare, writing a century after Erasmus, often made use of the figure of the wise fool in his plays. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is *King Lear*. Compare and contrast the portrayals of the wise fool in the two works. Does the wisdom of the Fool in Shakespeare's play come from the same source as that in Erasmus' encomium?
18. In Desiderius Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*, the goddess argues that, in the end, all people are fools. The concept of the universality of folly is also expounded by William Shakespeare in plays such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. To what extent may Shakespeare's comic masterpiece be viewed as an exposition of Erasmus' description of human experience? Draw connections between the two works as you develop your arguments.
19. Discuss the way in which Jesus Christ is portrayed in Desiderius Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*. What qualities of Christ does Erasmus consider most important? What does this tell you about his understanding of the work of Christ in salvation and how that salvation may be obtained? Be sure to cite specifics from the book to support your arguments.
20. Desiderius Erasmus is widely considered the greatest humanist of the Northern Renaissance. To what extent does his best-known work, *Praise of Folly*, support that assessment? What about the book shows its author to be a humanist? What definition of humanism would one use in order to reach that conclusion?
21. In Desiderius Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*, the goddess claims the credit for marriage and children, arguing, "Just tell me, please, what man would be willing to offer his neck to the halter of matrimony if he applied the usual practice of the wise man and first weighed up its disadvantages as a way of life? Or what woman would ever agree to take a husband if she knew or thought about the pains and dangers of childbirth and the trouble of bringing up children?" How would you respond to Folly's assessment of marriage and family life? Use appropriate Scripture passages in your arguments.

22. In Desiderius Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*, the goddess compares life to a play: "Now what else is the whole life of man but a sort of play? Actors come on wearing their different masks and all play their parts until the producer orders them off the stage, and he can often tell the same man to appear in different costume, so that now he plays a king in purple and now a humble slave in rags. It's all a sort of pretense, but it's the only way to act out this farce." William Shakespeare does the same thing in *As You Like It*, Act II, scene 7, where Jaques says, "All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women merely players. / They have their exits and their entrances, / And one man in his time plays many parts." Compare and contrast the contexts of the two quotations and the points being made by the speakers, both of whom are fools, and the authors.
23. To what extent is Desiderius Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* a product of its time and to what extent is it applicable to modern society? Choose one of the groups of people that the author satirizes and evaluate the contemporary relevance of his critique. Be sure to cite specifics.
24. The fact that Desiderius Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* is a satire indicates that the author understood the power of laughter; the negative reaction of his critics indicates that they did, too. The power of laughter is also a key subject in the climactic dialogue between Jorge of Burgos and William of Baskerville at the end of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*. Write an essay in which you outline the responses of the two combatants in Eco's novel to Erasmus' playful yet serious work of satire. Be sure to cite specifics from both works in developing your arguments.
25. At the end of Desiderius Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*, the goddess draws closer to the author's voice than at any other time in the encomium. When she talks about the Christian fool, she really gives a picture of the kind of church and the kind of Christian that Erasmus himself would prefer. In the centuries following the publication of Erasmus' satire, have any churches approached the kind of religion the old humanist favored? In what church today do you think Erasmus would be most comfortable? Support your conclusion with specifics, both from the book and from the contemporary religious scene.