

A Prelude to The Praise of Folly

FOREWORD TO THE PRINCETON CLASSICS EDITION

THE PRAISE OF FOLLY began as an elaborate joke, to be shared with a close friend. According to an old story, in 1499, when Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam first came to England, he met a brilliant young man at the table of the Lord Mayor of London. The two of them argued: cut followed thrust, learned joke capped learned joke. Finally, Erasmus said, “Either you are More, or no one.” Erasmus was right, and Thomas More, his dinner companion, replied, in the same spirit: “You are either Erasmus, or the devil.” In fact, Erasmus and More were properly introduced. But that was pretty much the only proper thing about their friendship—which grew, as the story suggests, from a shared sense of humor. In 1505, when Erasmus returned to England, they worked together on translations from Greek into Latin. Their author, Lucian, was a satirist—like them, a learned joker.

In 1509, as Erasmus rode back over the Alps from a triumphant tour of Italy, he decided that it would be fun to devote his learning and style to an ingenious paradox. He began to think about composing a paradox—a work in praise of folly. The connection to his friendship with More was evident from the start. Erasmus gave his text the Greek title Μωρίας Ἐγκώμιον (*Morias Encomion*)—a praise of folly, but

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also a punning praise of More. Once he arrived in London, he found himself confined by ill health to More's house. So he drafted the text. By the summer of 1510, he had finished the text and written a letter of dedication to More. It came out in 1511.

Erasmus's little book announced from the start that it belonged to an ancient genre of pedantic humor. Since antiquity, orators had practiced, as one of their standard exercises, the writing of speeches in praise of people, buildings, and cities. And since antiquity, satirists had made fun of these speeches by writing parodies of them. They pretended to praise, as Erasmus put it, "Busirises, Phalarises, quartan fevers, flies, baldness, and pests of that sort" [9]. In praising Folly, Erasmus made clear he worked within the classical tradition in literature—a point he went on to underline by casting his work in elaborate, demanding Latin and by stuffing it with allusions, not only to Lucian but also to other favorite writers, from the Roman poet (and satirist) Horace to Plato.

Yet the finished book was too long, too serious, and too challenging to be nothing more than an ingenious paradox. Erasmus not only invoked the conventions of ancient rhetoric; he then broke with them. Instead of writing in his own voice or creating the character of an orator to speak in his place, he portrayed Folly herself as speaking to an assembly of the learned, dressed in cap and bells and attended by servants named Philautia (self-love), Kolakia (flattery), Lethe (forgetfulness) and Misoponia (hatred of work). And instead of confining himself to gentle mockery, he produced

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a complex, puzzling and often-polemical discourse on contemporary society and religion.

The text starts without pyrotechnics. Folly claims credit for the existence of the human race, since “that foolish, even silly, part, which cannot be named without laughter, is the propagator of the human race.” When she goes on to point out that the pleasantest times of life are childhood and old age, and to argue that what men like best in women is their folly, she remains within the bounds of literary irony. But then she adds new colors to her self-portrait. Folly is not just the engine of procreation and the source of fun at banquets. She is the source of illusions. And only illusions make life possible. Folly tricks everyone into seeing nonexistent good qualities in themselves and others. Her magic enables husbands to tolerate wives, wives to tolerate husbands, and teachers to tolerate students. Without Folly, no one could bear his companions, to say nothing of himself: “were you to bar me out, each man would be so incapable of getting along with any other that he would become a stench in his own nostrils, his possessions would be filthy rags, and he would be hateful to himself” [28]. Human society, as Folly presents it, is not a cheerful array of old men and women playing with babies, but a hideous parade of the ugly and the infirm, the stupid and the cowardly, none of them able to see themselves, or one another, as they are—a procession scarier than that of the flagellants in Ingmar Bergman’s *The Seventh Seal*. Only the delusions that Folly creates enable these monstrous creatures to make stable relationships with one another and to form a larger society.

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Yet exposing these ugly truths is only the beginning of Folly's project. Suddenly we find that she has stopped describing the shared follies of the human race and begun describing the various orders of society, starting with obsessive hunters and builders of new buildings, alchemists, and gamblers. The ironic encomium has become a different kind of text entirely—as Folly herself finally confesses, when she breaks off “for fear I should seem to compose a satire rather than pronounce a eulogy” [103]. And Folly has more important targets in view than wealthy sufferers from the Edifice Complex. Her satire takes in most social estates, but concentrates on powerful and problematic sets of clerics: theologians who confuse their obsessive concern with tiny distinctions between abstract concepts with the study of God; priests, bishops, and popes who mistake their titles and finery, their pursuit of titles and money, for the proper occupation of Christian priests; and monks who confound their maniacal efforts to follow pedantic, meaningless rules with true piety. Folly has turned on those who supposedly embody wisdom and piety, and exposed the hollowness of their claims.

Still, she is not done. In the third and shortest part of her speech, Folly pivots again—this time to the teachings of Christianity and philosophy. What looks to humans like wisdom, she argues, is really madness—as the prophets, Jesus and Paul all proclaimed, in passages that she deftly cites. True Christianity, Folly argues, yields none of the things that ordinary, prudent men and women seek: not wealth, not power, not fame. Instead, it offers “the foolishness of the

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cross,” by which Jesus brought healing to sinful humanity. Happily, Christianity is not the only subversive force at work, in a world that needs all the subversion it can get. True philosophy, she argues, is not a pursuit of useless knowledge or sophisticated logical tricks, but “a study of death,” in Plato’s words, “because it leads the mind away from visible and bodily things, and certainly death does the same.” True Christianity and true philosophy converge. Both teach those who embrace them to be fools to this world, “rapt away in the contemplation of things unseen” [120]. Existing schools and universities, popular theological schools and doctrines, which fail to teach these follies, are the pillars of a world that has turned itself upside down, mistaking death for life. By contrast, the experience of true religion is “*Moriae pars*”—“the portion of Folly,” [124] but also “the portion of *More*,” and—according to a variant that appears in some editions of the text—“*Mariae pars*,” “the portion of Mary,” the lot of the contemplative sister of the busy Martha in the Gospel of Luke. Folly has taught a deeply serious lesson.

This complicated book, with its edgy movements from one plane of discourse to another, astonished and amused some readers but enraged many others. Scandal helped to make it a bestseller: before Erasmus died in 1536, twenty-one printers in eleven different cities issued thirty-six editions of it. As Erasmus revised the text, he deliberately lengthened and sharpened some of the passages that most infuriated conservatives—such as his discussions of theologians and monks, and of Christian folly. And he succeeded in provoking reactions. In September 1514, the Louvain professor Martin

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van Dorp—who had been and would later be his friend—told him how harshly the theologians in his influential faculty rejected what they saw as Erasmus’s deliberate effort to annoy: “Only a few approved of the text in all respects. What’s going on?, they asked. Even if what he has written is the truth, what sort of madness is it to wear oneself out in order to be hated?...What good does it do to flagellate the order of theologians so savagely?...And can pious ears bear to hear the idea that Christ and the blessed life are folly...For it’s not just that this is false and scandalous: it could be the ruin of weaker brethren.”

Yet Erasmus showed no embarrassment. He denied that he had slandered anyone, since he had named no names. And he not only stood by his text, but also continued to work on it, in the hope of enhancing its impact. In 1515 a friend, Gerald Listrius, submerged Erasmus’s original text in a long commentary set in smaller type, much of which Erasmus himself dictated. Normally, only ancient texts enjoyed the privilege of receiving a formal gloss. In essence, Listrius and Erasmus were claiming the status of a classic for Erasmus’s brilliantly defiant speech. Erasmus himself made clear again and again that he saw a direct connection between *The Praise of Folly* and his more formal projects in scholarship and theology. This little, informal book did more than any of Erasmus’s larger, weightier works to define his career as thinker and writer. And in many ways, that was only right.

By the time *The Praise of Folly* came out, Erasmus had already accomplished an extraordinary amount. Born in the later 1460s, the illegitimate son of a well-educated priest, he grew

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up in the Low Countries and entered the religious order of the Augustinian Canons. Later he would claim that like many other novices, he had taken his vows while too young to make a proper decision. In school and in his convent, he was exposed to a particular strain of late medieval piety. The Modern Devotion, a movement founded by Geert Groot in the later fourteenth century, was not a radical movement. But those who joined it believed that Christians should lead simple lives, and concentrate on improving their souls by meditation. This movement produced some classics of contemplative writing—notably *The Imitation of Christ*. Erasmus never lost the conviction that the core of Christianity consisted in the pursuit of inward piety, not in the grand rituals of the prelates or the ascetic practices of monks and friars.

He also gained access to some of the Latin classics, which became his passion—a passion that he shared with the head of his convent and his friends there. The schools and universities of Northern Europe had concentrated, since the thirteenth century, on the study of formal logic and its application to theology and law. A student's progress on a career—in the university, the church, and even in public life—hinged on his prowess at the cut and thrust of argument. In the fifteenth century, however, so-called humanists—specialists on classical Latin literature—began to open schools and offer university courses, in which they taught the classics in a very different way. The humanists argued that the best way to prepare students for life was to offer them the sort of education that had formed ancient Romans like Cicero: a grounding in the Latin classics, to give them access to the best that had been

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thought and said; study of history and moral philosophy, to form their characters; and a training in rhetoric, to make them effective speakers and writers. To find the path to follow in church or state, they argued, one should simply imitate the examples of good conduct recorded in ancient texts, and the best way to induce others to do this was not to defeat them in argument but to persuade them to agree.

From very early in his life, Erasmus was captivated by the humanists' vision of education and culture. In a youthful polemic, *Against the Barbarians*, he defended the study of the classics and the active, engaged life. Those clerics who refused to study the pagans, one speaker in Erasmus's dialogue declared, resembled Jews, who wrongly thought that they could attain salvation by abstaining from certain foods. Only divine inspiration could explain the excellence of pagan moral thought and the eloquence of classical prose and verse. Erasmus's skill in composing Latin verse won him an appointment as secretary to a bishop and, in time, the chance to move to the University of Paris. Though disgusted by the austerity and bad food at his college, he mastered enough scholastic theology to know that he disapproved of its method, and managed to break into print as a content provider, composing a Latin text to fill an empty space in a book by a more prominent writer.

At the end of the fifteenth century, Erasmus served as tutor to an English nobleman, Lord Mountjoy, whom he accompanied on a visit to England. There and elsewhere he began to be known for his skill at teaching the young how to read and emulate the classics. Erasmus worked hard at mastering the

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tools of the humanist's trade. He took the time to write out an elaborate paraphrase of the Italian humanist Lorenzo Valla's *Elegancies of the Latin Language*, a detailed treatment of Latin prose usage, one of whose prefaces asserted that good Latin is a "sacrament"—an outward sign of inward grace. He created and published textbooks—a set of Latin proverbs, for example, from which schoolboys could gain both good principles and powerful expressions, and model Latin dialogues, from which they could learn how to carry on lively conversations in pure Latin. Above all, he mastered Greek, perhaps inspired by contact with English scholars like William Grocyn, who had studied the language in Italy. Unable to find a competent teacher in Paris or the Low Countries, he taught himself, first to read and then to write classical Greek. Within a few years he knew the Greek language and Greek literature as well as anyone in Western Europe.

For all his sharp-tongued defense of classicism, Erasmus was a Christian first and foremost. Contact with a reforming Franciscan, Jean Vitrier, reinforced his belief that true Christianity was a matter not of ritual and other externals, but of the spirit. He composed what he called an *Enchiridion for the Christian Soldier*: a manual on what Christian piety really required of the layman. Modern readers have sometimes found this book dull and conventional. Erasmus's contemporaries, by contrast, found it astonishing and challenging: a new vision of Christianity, which insisted that pious laymen and laywomen were the spiritual equals of those traditionally called the "religious," the members of orders. Traditionalists saw him as denying the value of central Christian practices,

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such as the formal vows that monks took and the pilgrimages by which so many lay people tried to gain merit. Radicals found him inspiring. One priest, condemned as a heretic in 1543, recalled that when he read Erasmus's book, "he was as if struck by lightning" when he realized that the author "says that there are in reality two ways, a way of salvation and a way of judgment"—and, by implication, no Purgatory and no need to engage in the practices by which so many Christians tried to win time off from it in advance. The *Enchiridion*, which Erasmus later equipped with an inspiring prefatory letter, depicting all of Christian society as a community of the spirit, also became a best seller.

Most important of all, perhaps, was an encounter in a library. Lorenzo Valla had drawn up a commentary on the New Testament, in which he used the Greek text to identify corruptions in the Latin Vulgate and correct them. Erasmus found a manuscript of this text in a library in the Low Countries. He published it, with a powerful preface. And he became determined to follow Valla's example systematically: to use the Greek original texts of the New Testament to provide a new Latin translation, which would be more accurate and more engaging than the standard Vulgate text.

In 1506, Erasmus took two pupils with him to Italy. He obtained a doctorate in theology by examination in Turin. He watched Pope Julius II celebrate his conquest of Bologna—a spectacle that disgusted him, as it embodied in a single incident everything that bothered him most about the church as an institution, from its engagement in warfare to its materialism. Most important, he made a connection with the

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most brilliant and original Italian printer of the day, Aldus Manutius, a Roman who had settled in Venice. In the winter or spring of 1507–08, Erasmus moved into Aldus’s printing house. There, working with the learned Greeks who edited classical texts for Aldus, he read rare Greek texts and expanded the little collection of proverbs that he had issued in Paris into something much bigger. He assembled 3260 sayings, Greek and Latin, and explicated each of them in a short essay. Aldus published the finished work in September 1508.

The *Adages* established Erasmus as the dominant scholar of his day: a master of ancient literature, who moved easily from Homer to Augustine, and a master Latinist, whose prose was richer and more compelling than that of any of his Italian contemporaries. His essays on individual sayings brilliantly elucidated the proverbs in question, drawing on a vast range of sources in which they appeared and showing students how to use them in their own essays. Anyone who read Erasmus’s book knew that if he needed to urge a friend to finish a task, he should write “Manum de tabula” (take your hand off the picture); if he needed to advise the same friend not to irritate the powerful, he could write “Ne ignem gladio fodias” (don’t poke the fire with a sword); and if he needed to evoke for the friend the host of troubles that could be unleashed by excess curiosity, he must mention “Pandora’s box.” Erasmus made mistakes (in the original Greek of Hesiod, Pandora opened a jar, not a box). But the *Adages* became one of the most successful of Erasmus’s works. Everywhere but in Italy, where Catholic censorship limited the circulation of the text, “Pandora’s box” became a proverbial expression in

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the vernacular language, thanks to writers who had learned the story from the *Adages*. Erasmus even found ways to teach his favorite Christian morals. His conviction, based on the Gospels, that there was no such thing as a “just war” for Christians, found expression in the adage “Dulce bellum inexpertis” (war is very sweet to those who have never tried it), which he explicated in one of his most powerful essays.

On the heels of this triumph, established as both a great teacher and a brilliant author, Erasmus rode his horse over the Alps, thinking about Folly. His satire showed how a creative classicist could address contemporary problems in powerful Latin. It displayed all the resources that Erasmus had assembled in the busy years in which he had made himself a scholar—not least the proverbs that he had compiled in the *Adagia*, and that Folly quotes on many pages, sometimes twisting their wording or meaning. It made clear that study of theology should rest on direct study of the New Testament, ideally in its original Greek, and that the ideal reader of Scripture would ignore, or at least remain independent of, the medieval commentators and theologians. And it revealed that, in Erasmus’s view, the central message of the greatest ancient writers—in this case, Plato—was entirely compatible with the central message of the New Testament.

The Praise of Folly was a manifesto of Christian classicism and biblical study—a pair of pursuits that, for Erasmus, went naturally together. It must have seemed entirely natural to him that Dorp attacked him in one and the same letter both for publishing his satire of theology and for planning a new translation of the New Testament, based on the original Greek.

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He defended both enterprises in a single public letter to Dorp, as did his friend More. In many ways, the pursuits in which he engaged for decades to come, until he died in 1536—from editing and commenting on the Gospels, to fighting for pacifism until he was pressured into abandoning it, to arguing fiercely with both Catholic conservatives and Protestant rebels—were all adumbrated in this single short book.

Hoyt Hudson's elegant translation, first issued by Princeton University Press in 1941, is still one of the best English versions of this demanding text. Hudson, who had a deep training in Greek and Latin as well as English literature, taught public speaking and English at Swarthmore, Princeton, and Stanford. As interested in the history of oratory as in its modern practice, he drew on his mastery of the classical tradition in rhetoric to shed a new light on the complex structure of Erasmus's work. A Quaker, he also felt a deep sympathy for Erasmus's approach to the reform of spirituality and society.

Yet puzzles remain. Though it seems clear that *The Praise of Folly* summed up much of Erasmus's intellectual and spiritual development, readers in his own time and since have never been certain exactly how to evaluate the text as a whole. Are its parts to be taken equally seriously? Does Erasmus really believe in the argument of the first part of the text, with its vision of humans caught, as inextricably as the people in *The Matrix*, in a web of delusions, without which they would see themselves and others as they are and shrink in horror? Does he really want us to accept the argument of the third part, with its vision of true Christianity as a flight, as radical as that of Plato's philosopher

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leaving the cave, from the apparent reality in which we live to a higher one? Does he really stand by the sharp satire of the second part, which seems to condemn the very institutions and individuals whose support enabled Erasmus to carry out his work, as gospel truth? Folly herself, after all, calls her whole enterprise into question in her conclusion. She ends her speech with an apology: “If anything I have said shall seem too saucy or too glib, stop and think: ‘tis Folly, and a woman, that has spoken” [125]. She even insists that she can’t remember a word that she has said. Yet she also reminds her hearers of a Greek proverb, ‘Even a foolish man will often speak a word in season,’ unless, perhaps, you assume that this does not extend to women” [125]. What, exactly, does Erasmus want us to do with his book?

In the years after 1516, when his edition of the New Testament appeared, Erasmus issued paraphrases of its books: long, eloquent retellings and interpretations of the Gospels and Epistles. His paraphrase of Paul’s letter to the Romans begins with an explanation. Paul, he says, keeps shifting registers in the letter, because he keeps shifting audiences as well, and an effective letter must above all speak to its intended readers:

He considers now the Jews, now the Gentiles, now both: sometimes he addresses believers, sometimes doubters; at one point he assumes the role of a weak man, at another of a strong: sometimes that of a godly man, sometimes of an ungodly man. The result of all this is that the reader, wandering about as though in some kind of confusing labyrinth or winding maze, does not see very well whence he has entered or how he may leave.

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The reader must imagine himself in many forms, and sometimes as “two men in one,” a carnal man and a spiritual one, in order to follow Paul and take away the multiple lessons that he means to teach.

Erasmus’s description of Paul’s reader, wandering, baffled, along the twisting paths of his epistle, fits the experience of many readers of *The Praise of Folly*. It shows that Erasmus did not see apparent contradictions in a text, or problems in how to apply its teachings, as evidence that it was not deeply meaningful. In fact, it suggests that the apparent contradictions and difficulties may have been part of the lesson of the text. In later years, when Martin Luther broke with the Catholic church and challenged Erasmus for his failure to do the same, Erasmus argued that humans could not attain as much certainty as Luther claimed to have about the central doctrines of Christianity. While seeing the faults in the old church, accordingly, he thought it more sensible to stay with it than to join a new one, whose claims he could not, as a mere human, adjudicate. *The Praise of Folly* seems to undermine every certainty to which Erasmus’s contemporaries could cling. But it also undermines itself and the morals that it seems to teach. In the words of the modern novelist and philosopher J.M. Coetzee, “the power of the text lies in its weakness...just as its weakness lies in its power to grow, to propagate itself, to beget Erasmians.”

One reader—perhaps the ideal one—seems to have read the text exactly in this way: as a work both deeply serious, and designed to provoke thought rather than to put forward firm conclusions. In 1516 Thomas More published his own

great flight of fancy, *Utopia*—another book with a Greek title (in Greek, Utopia literally means no place). This dazzling Latin book begins with a sharp critique of English society and an impressive but inconclusive debate about whether a wise man could take part in political life without becoming corrupt. In Book II, Raphael Hythloday, the character who offers social criticism in Book I, describes a very different society, one without private property (or Christianity). At the very end of the book, More, who claims that he has transcribed Hythloday's words, reappears. Speaking in his own voice, he warns the reader that private property can never be eliminated without destroying all order in society. Is Utopia, the state portrayed in Book II, an ideal society? Is England as corrupt as More's spokesman argues in Book I? What does More want the reader to take away? Erasmus, who loved the book, took charge of its reception. He prepared editions in which his marginal notes brought out the text's critical lessons. No wonder he felt such enthusiasm: More, whom he had long seen as a kindred spirit, crafted his own complex, self-questioning satire on the last that Erasmus had created.

In the end, the pressures of the Reformation would pull Erasmus and More apart, and force both of them to change their stances on central issues. But *Utopia* and *The Praise of Folly* remain, as challenging and as baffling as ever: monuments to a deep meeting of minds, at a time when scholars hoped that they could change the world.

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