3.

Erasmus
from Praise of Folly
reek of smoke, living neglected, inglorious, and disliked. Fools, on the other hand, are rolling in money and are put in charge of affairs of state; they flourish, in short, in every way. For if a man finds his happiness in pleasing princes and spending his time amongst those gilded and bejewelled godlike creatures, he'll learn that wisdom is no use at all to him, and is indeed decried above all by people like this. If he wants to get rich, how much money can he make in business if he lets wisdom be his guide, if he recoils from perjury, blushes if he's caught telling a lie, and takes the slightest notice of those niggling scruples wise men have about thieving and usury? And then if anyone aspires to ecclesiastical wealth or preferment, a donkey or a buffalo would get there faster than a wise man. If you're after pleasure, then women (who play the biggest part in the comedy) are wholeheartedly for the fools, and flee in horror from a wise man as from a scorpion. Finally, all who look for a bit of gaiety and fun in life keep their doors firmly shut against the wise, more than anything – they'll open it to any other living creature first. In short, wherever you turn, to pontiff or prince, judge or official, friend or foe, high or low, you'll find nothing can be achieved without money; and as the wise man despises money, it takes good care to keep out of his way.\(^{130}\)

For my own praises, on the other hand, there's neither measure nor limit. Even so, there has to be a limit sometime to a speech, and I shall come to an end, though first I must show you briefly that there are plenty of great authors who testify to me in their writings and behaviour alike. I don't want to be thought so foolish as to please only myself, or be wrongly accused by the lawyers of having no evidence to produce. So I'll take them as a model for what I cite – which will be 'nothing to the point'.

To start with, everyone accepts the truth of the well-known saying "Where fact is lacking, fiction is best", and so children are properly taught from the start the line "To play the fool in season is the height of wisdom". You can see now for yourselves what a great blessing Folly is when even her deceptive shadow and

\(^{130}\) The 'die is cast' is another proverb discussed in the *Adages*. The reference a few lines later to 'pleasing princes' alludes to Horace (*Epistles*, 1, 17, 35), who thinks there are greater titles to fame.
PRAISE OF FOLLY

semblance win such high praise from learned men. Still more
frankly does the plump, sleek porker from Epicurus' herd tell us
to "Mix folly with counsel", though he's not so clever when he
adds it should be "only for a while". Then he says "It is sweet to
be silly in season", and again, elsewhere, he prefers "to seem
artless and foolish than be wise and short-tempered". In Homer,
too, Telemachus wins the poet's praise in every way, but is now
and then called childish, and the dramatists apply the same
epithet freely, like a good omen, to children and young people.
And what is the subject of that divine poem the Iliad if not the
passions of foolish kings and peoples? Moreover, Cicero's famous
tribute is surely quite unqualified: "The world is full of fools!"
For everyone knows that the more widespread a blessing, the
more effective it is.131

However, it may be that these authorities carry little weight
with Christians, so if you like we'll find further support for my
praises in the evidence of the Holy Scriptures, or give them a
proper foundation as the learned do. Let me begin first by asking
permission from the theologians to make sure they give their
approval. Then, since we're tackling such a difficult subject and
possibly presuming too far in asking the Muses to come down
again from Helicon, a long journey for them, especially for
something which isn't really their concern, maybe while I'm
playing the theologian and treading such a thorny path, I ought

131. Here ends the central section on Folly's followers. Folly now an-
nounces the final section of the declamation, devoted to the wise who have
praised her and, in particular, to Pauline folly.

Since this Christian folly is praised without a trace of irony, the Praise of
Folly ends with a remarkable feat of double irony as it transforms itself from
a mock encomium into a real one.

The introductory paragraph to the final section is still bantering in tone,
as in logic. The line about playing the fool in season comes from one of
Cato's distichs, learned by heart by every grammar-school child in the
middle ages. The 'sleek porker from Epicurus' herd' is an expression Horace
uses of himself (Epistles, 1, 4, 16). His advice to mix folly with counsel is in
Odys, 4, 12, 27-8. The other Horatian reference is to Epistles, 2, 2, 126.
Homer called Telemachus a silly child (Odyssey, 11, 449).
The quotation from Cicero comes from the letters (To his friends, 9,
23, 4).
to call on the spirit of Scotus (which is far thornier than any porcupine or hedgehog) to leave his precious Sorbonne and occupy my breast, but only for a while — it can soon return wherever it likes, 'to the devil' for all I care. I only wish I could change my face and don a theologian's garb!\textsuperscript{132} Still, if I had too many of the trappings of theology I'm afraid someone might take me for a thief and accuse me of secretly pillaging the desks of our masters. But it oughtn't to be so remarkable if I've acquired something from my long-standing association with the theologians, considering how close it has been. Even that figwood god Priapus listened to his master reading and remembered a few Greek words. And the cock in Lucian had no difficulty in understanding human speech simply from having lived with men so long.\textsuperscript{133}

But now if the auspices are good, let's get back to our subject. Ecclesiastes wrote in his first chapter that "the number of fools is infinite", (and in making the number infinite doesn't he appear to embrace all mankind, apart from a handful of individuals whom I doubt if anyone has ever met? Jeremiah is even more explicit in his chapter 10, when he says that "every man is made a fool by his own wisdom." To God alone he allowed wisdom, leaving folly to all mankind. A little earlier he says: "Man should not glory in his own wisdom." Now why don't you want man to glory in his own wisdom, my dear Jeremiah? The answer's simple: because man has no wisdom.) But to return to Ecclesiastes. When he cries Vanity of vanities, all is vanity,- what else do you suppose he means except what I've said, that the life of man is nothing but a sport of folly? And thereby he casts his vote for Cicero's tribute: (in which the

\textsuperscript{132} Folly is about to embark on the serious panegyric of Pauline folly. The reference to her apparel is a last mock disclaimer that what she says is intended seriously.

\textsuperscript{133} Folly has already once invoked the Muses from Helicon, remembering the \textit{Aeneid} (7, 641). The Sorbonne was the seat of the Paris faculty of theology, not especially Scotist in its views but reactionary and sharing with Scotist theology the presuppositions about the extrinsic nature of human perfection which Erasmus most disliked.

The reference to Priapus recalls Horace (\textit{Satires}, I, 8, 1).
words I quoted above are rightly celebrated: “The world is full of fools.” Again, when the great sage (Ecclesiastus) said “The fool changes as the moon, but the wise man is steadfast like the sun,” what he was suggesting was surely that the entire mortal race is foolish and the epithet of wise applies to God alone. By moon they understand human nature, by the sun the source of all light, that is, God. This is confirmed by what Christ himself says in the Gospel, that no one is to be called good save one, that is, God. Then if whoever is good is wise, as the stoics say, and anyone who is not wise is a fool, it must follow that all men are fools. Again, Solomon says in Proverbs chapter 15 “Folly is joy to the fool” which is clearly an admission that nothing in life is enjoyable without folly. There is a similar reference in the text “He who increases knowledge increases sorrow, and in much understanding is much grievance.” Surely too the famous preacher has openly expressed the same idea in his chapter 7: “The heart of the wise is the home of sadness, and the heart of the foolish is the home of joy.” That is why he thought that full knowledge of wisdom was still incomplete without understanding of me as well. If you doubt me, here are his own words, which he wrote in chapter 1: “And I gave my heart to know wisdom and learning, and also madness and folly.” Note that when Ecclesiastes wrote this he named folly last, and intended it as a tribute, for this, as you know, is the order followed by the church, where the person who comes first in status takes the last place, in this point at least in accordance with the evangelist’s teaching.

Indeed, Ecclesiasticus, whoever he was, makes it quite clear in his chapter 44 that folly is better than wisdom, though I’m not going to quote his words until you’ll help with the ‘development of the argument’ with suitable replies, like those who join in discussions with Socrates do in the dialogues of Plato. Now, which is it better to hide away, things which are rare and valuable or those which are common and cheap? Have you nothing to say? Even if you pretend ignorance, there’s a Greek proverb to answer for you – ‘the water-pot is left lying on the doorstep’ – and in case anyone doesn’t accept that with proper respect, let me tell you it’s quoted by
PRAISE OF FOLLY

Aristotle, the god of our teachers. Are any of you so foolish as to leave gold and jewels lying in the road? I'm sure you're not. You hide them away in the innermost room of your house, you do more, you secrete them in the furthest corners of your best-locked chest. It's the mud that you leave lying in the street. So if what is precious is hidden, and what is worthless is left exposed to view, isn't it obvious that the wisdom which Ecclesiasticus forbids to be hidden is worth less than the folly he orders to be kept concealed? Hear the evidence of his own words: "Better is a man who hides his folly than a man who hides his wisdom."

Consider too how the Holy Scriptures attribute honesty of mind also to the fool, while the wise man believes that no one is his equal. For this is how I interpret what Ecclesiastes wrote in chapter 10. "But a fool walking along the road, since he is foolish, thinks all men are fools." Now don't you think it indicative of exceptional honesty to think every man your equal, and in a world given to self-aggrandizement to share your merits with all? And so the great king was not ashamed of being named like this when he said in chapter 30, "I am the most foolish of men." Nor was Paul, the great teacher of the heathen, reluctant (in his Epistle to the Corinthians) to accept the name of fool. "I speak as a fool, I am more," he said, just as if it were a disgrace to be outdone in folly. 134

134. Erasmus quotes scripture from memory and is frequently inaccurate. The long catena of scriptural quotations begins in these three paragraphs with the following: Ecclesiastes i, 17; Jeremiah x, 14; x, 7; Jeremiah ix, 23; Ecclesiastes i, 2; Ecclesiasticus xxvii, 12; Matthew xix, 17; Proverbs xv, 21; Ecclesiastes i, 18; Ecclesiastes vii, 4; Ecclesiastes i, 17. The reference to Ecclesiasticus xliv is wrong. It should be xlii, 18. Ecclesiasticus xx, 33; Ecclesiastes x, 3; Proverbs xxx, 2; 2 Corinthians xi, 23. There follows at this point another reference to Erasmus by Folly.

The reference to Aristotle is to the Rhetoric i, 6, 23. The proverb is discussed in the Adages.
friend Erasmus, whom I mention by name from time to time by way of a compliment. What a foolish thing to quote, they cry, just what you’d expect from Folly! The Apostle’s meaning is quite different from what you imagine. He didn’t intend by these words that he should be thought more foolish than anyone else, but when he said “They are ministers of Christ; so am I,” as if he had made a boast of putting himself on a level with the others in this, he went on to correct himself by adding “I am more,” aware that he was not only the equal of the other apostles in his ministry for the Gospel but to a large extent their superior. He wanted this to carry conviction without his words sounding arrogant and offensive, so he made folly his pretext to forestall objections, writing “I speak as a fool” because it is the privilege of fools to speak the truth without giving offence.

But what Paul had in mind when he wrote this, I leave to the pedants to dispute. For my part I follow the large, fat, stupid, and popularly most highly thought of theologians with whom the majority of scholars would rather be in the wrong, ‘by Zeus,’ than hold a correct view along with your experts in three tongues. Not one of these thinks of your Greek pedants as more than jackdaws, especially since a certain renowned theologian (renowned perhaps in his own eyes?) whose name I have the sense to suppress, lest some of our jackdaws are quick off the mark with the Greek taunt of the ‘ass playing the lyre’, has expounded this passage in masterly theological style. Starting from the words “I speak as a fool, I am more” he opens a new chapter such as could only be possible by calling on the full forces of dialectic, and makes a new subdivision, with the following interpretation (I’ll quote his argument exactly, his actual words as well as their substance): “I speak as a fool, that is, if I seem to you a fool in making myself the equal of false apostles, I shall seem even more of a fool in your eyes by setting myself above them.” However, a little later he appears to forget himself and slips into a different interpretation.135

135. The experts in the three tongues (Latin, Greek and Hebrew) were the humanists who insisted that a knowledge of the ancient tongues was the
PRAISE OF FOLLY

But I don’t know why I bother to defend myself with a single example, seeing that it’s the generally accepted privilege of theologians to stretch the heavens, that is, the Scriptures, like tanners with a hide. According to St Paul, there are words which can do battle for Holy Scripture, though in their context they don’t do so, if we are to trust Jerome, that ‘master of five tongues’. Paul once happened to see an inscription on an altar in Athens and twisted its meaning into an argument for the Christian faith. He left out all the words which would have damaged his case and selected only the last two, ignoto deo “to the unknown god”. Even in this he made some alteration, since the complete inscription read “to the gods of Asia, Europe, and Africa, the unknown and foreign gods”. His, I believe, is the precedent our present-day ‘sons of theology’ follow when they pick out four or five words from different contexts, and if necessary even distort their meaning to suit their purpose, though those which come before and after may be either totally irrelevant or actually contradictory. This they do with such carefree impudence that theologians are often the envy of the legal experts.136

indispensable tool for theological studies in furtherance of an evangelically based religion. Trilingual foundations were made notably at Cologne, Louvain and Alcala, while the ideal that inspired them also inspired foundations elsewhere, as at Oxford. François I put out feelers to Erasmus with a view to his making such a foundation in France, but nothing came of the project until the institution of the royal lectureships from 1530 onwards.

The theologian referred to and barely disguised in the reference to the ass and the lyre was Nicholas of Lyra who died in 1349. It was said in the sixteenth century, that if Lyra had not played his lyre, Luther would not have danced (Si Lyra non lyrasset, Luther non saltasset). He wrote a series of Postillae Liternales on the Old and New Testaments, carefully distinguishing between literal and mystical senses of the text. They were immensely influential and were the first commentary on the Bible to be printed (1471–2). Folly is of course making clear in her reference to Erasmus and trilingual pedantry that she is conferring only an ironic compliment on Nicholas of Lyra by embracing his view.

136. The incident of St Paul and the inscription at Athens is recounted in Acts xvii, 23. What Folly says is narrated by Jerome in his commentary. Jerome’s ‘five tongues’ were Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Chaldean and Dalmatian.
PRAISE OF FOLL

They can go to any lengths now that the great — I nearly blurted out his name but that Greek saying stopped me again — has extracted a meaning from some words of Luke which is as compatible with the spirit of Christ as fire with water. For as the hour of the supreme peril approached, a time when loyal servants would rally round their master and ‘fight his fight’ with all the resources they could muster, Christ’s intention was to remove from the hearts of his disciples any reliance on defences of this kind, and so he asked them whether they had lacked anything when he had sent them out so unprovided, with neither shoes to protect their feet against injury from thorns and stones nor purse as a guard against hunger. When they replied that they had lacked nothing, he went on: “But now, he who has a bag, let him take it, and likewise a purse; and he who has no sword must sell his coat and buy one.”

Since the whole of Christ’s teaching is directed towards instilling gentleness, patience, and contempt of life, the meaning of this passage should be clear to all. Christ wanted to disarm his emissaries still further, so that they would not only spurn shoes and purse but also cast off their coats in order to set out on their mission of the Gospel naked and unencumbered, providing themselves with nothing but a sword — not the sword which serves robbers and murderers, but the sword of the spirit which penetrates into the innermost depths of the bosom and cuts out every passion with a single stroke, so that nothing remains in the heart but piety.

Now, pray, see how our renowned theologian distorts this. He interprets the sword as a defence against persecution, the bag as an adequate supply of provisions, just as if Christ had reversed his beliefs and recanted his former teaching when his emissaries appeared to be setting out insufficiently equipped ‘in royal style.’ Or he seems to have forgotten that he said they would be blessed when afflicted with insults, revilement, and persecution, and forbade them to resist evil since only the meek are blessed, not the pugnacious; forgotten that he had called on them to consider the example of the sparrows and the lilies, so that he is now so reluctant to see them go out without a sword that he even bids them sell their coat to buy
PRAISE OF FOLLY

one, preferring them to go naked rather than unarmed. Moreover, just as anything which serves to repel violence comes under the head of "sword", "pouch" covers any of the necessities of life. And so this interpreter of the divine mind fits out the apostles with spears, crossbows, slings, and catapults, and leads them forth to preach the crucified. He also loads them up with coffers and trunks and packs — as if they'll always have to move on from an inn on an empty stomach. He isn't even disturbed by the fact that though Christ once ordered a sword to be bought, he soon afterwards sharply ordered one to be sheathed; nor has anyone heard it said that the apostles used swords and shields against attack from the heathen, which they would have done had Christ intended what our interpreter says he did.137

There's another of them, whom with due respect I won't name, though his reputation stands high, who has taken Habakkuk's words about tents ("The hides of the land of Midian shall be taken") to refer to the flayed skin of Bartholomew. And I was recently present myself (as I often am) at a theological debate where someone asked what authority there was in the Scriptures for ordering heretics to be burnt instead of refuted in argument. A grim old man, whose arrogance made it clear he was a theologian, answered in some irritation that the apostle Paul had laid down this rule saying, 'A man who is a heretic, after the first and second admonition, reject [devita],', and he went on thundering out this quotation again and again while most of those present wondered what had happened to the man. At last he explained that the heretic was to be removed from life [de vita]. Some laughed, though there were plenty of others who found this fabrication sound theology; but when several expressed their disagreement, our 'lawyer from Tenedos', as they say, our irrefutable authority continued thus: 'Pay attention. It is written that thou shalt not


The texts about swords to which Folly refers are presumably Matthew xxvi, 52 and John xviii, 11, but nowhere does Christ order a sword to be bought.
let the evildoer [maleficus] live. Every heretic is an evildoer; therefore,' etc. The entire audience marvelled at the man's reasoning power and came over to his way of thinking, hotfoot. It occurred to no one that this law applied only to sorcerers, wizards, and magicians, whom the Hebrews call mekashephim in their own tongue, a word we translate as malefici. Otherwise the death penalty would have to be applied to fornicators and drunkards.  

But it's foolish of me to continue with these examples so numberless that the volumes of Chrysippus and Didymus could never hold them all. I only wanted to remind you of the licence granted those saintly scholars, so that you would show me the same indulgence as a 'blockhead theologian' if my quotations aren't always quite accurate. Now let me get back to Paul. ‘You suffer fools gladly’, he says, speaking of himself. ‘And again, “Receive me as a fool,”’ and ‘I do not speak according to God but as if I were foolish,’ and elsewhere too he says, ‘We are fools for Christ's sake.’ This is high tribute to folly from a great authority. Moreover, he is an open advocate of folly (as a prime necessity and a great benefit). ‘Whoever among you thinks himself wise must become a fool to be truly wise.’ (And according to Luke, Jesus addressed the two disciples whom he joined on the road to Emmaus as fools.) Should we be surprised at this, seeing that that (godlike) Paul attributes...
PRAISE OF FOLLY

some folly even to God? "God's foolishness", he says, "is wiser than men." Origen subsequently objected in his commentary that we cannot really explain this folly by reference to the views held by men, as we can in the passage "The doctrine of the cross is folly to those that are perishing." 139

(But there is no need to worry about producing all this evidence to prove my point when Christ openly says to his Father in the sacred Psalms 'Thou knowest my foolishness.') It is also significant that fools have always given great pleasure to God, and this, I fancy, is the reason. Great princes eye men who are too clever with hostility and suspicion, as Julius Caesar did Brutus and Cassius, though he had no fear of drunken Antony, and as Nero did Seneca and Dionysius did Plato, though they delighted in men of duller and simpler wits. In the same way, Christ always loathes and condemns those 'wiseacres' who put their trust in their own intelligence; as Paul bears witness in no uncertain words when he says "God has chosen the foolish things of the world," and again "God chose to save the world through folly," since it could not be redeemed by wisdom. God himself makes this clear enough when he proclaims through the mouth of the prophet "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and reject the intelligence of the intelligent." So does Christ, when he gives thanks because the mystery of salvation had been hidden from the wise but revealed to little children, that is, to fools. (The

139. Chrysippus is said to have written more than seven hundred works. Didymus, the Greek contemporary of Augustus, is said to have written 3,500 or 4,000, of which none has survived.

The texts of St Paul referred to in this paragraph are 2 Corinthians xi, 19; xi, 17 and 1 Corinthians iv, 10; iii, 18; i, 25; i, 18.

The reference to Luke is to xxiv, 25.

Origen, the third-century Greek Father whose understanding of Christian dogma within a neoplatonist framework later caused his work to be condemned, was a very important figure for the evangelical humanists. Pico della Mirandola had defended him (in a thesis which in turn was condemned), and the early sixteenth century saw a real attempt to replace the authority of the anti-Pelagian Augustine with that of a rehabilitated Origen, whose doctrine clearly harmonized more easily with the humanist determination to understand Christian perfection in terms of moral fulfilment. Erasmus was notably favourable to Origen.
PRAISE OF FOLLY

Greek word for a child, νήπιος means “foolish”, and is the opposite of σοφός “wise”). There are also some relevant passages in the Gospel where Christ attacks Pharisees and scribes and teachers of the Law while giving his unsparing protection to the ignorant multitude. (What else can “Woe unto you, Scribes and Pharisees” mean but “Woe unto you who are wise”?) 

But Christ seems to have taken special delight in little children, women, and fishermen, while the dumb animals who gave him the greatest pleasure were those furthest removed from cleverness and cunning. So he preferred to ride a donkey, though had he chosen he could safely have been mounted on a lion; and the Holy Spirit descended in the form of a dove, (not of an eagle or a hawk,) while throughout the Scriptures there is frequent mention of harts, young mules, and lambs. Moreover, he calls those who are destined for eternal life his sheep, though there is no animal so stupid: witness the proverbial expression in Aristotle, ‘sheeplike character’, which he tells us is derived from the slow-wittedness of the animal and is commonly used as a taunt against dull and stupid men. Yet Christ declares himself the shepherd of this flock, and even takes pleasure himself in the name of Lamb, as when John reveals him in the words ‘Behold the Lamb of God.’ The same expression often appears in the Apocalypse.

All this surely points to the same thing: that all mortals are fools, even the pious. Christ too, though he is the wisdom of the

140. See psalm lxviii, 6 (R.S.V. lxix, 5)

141. Tacitus says that Nero distrusted his former tutor Seneca (Annales, 15, 62 ff.). The tyrant Dionysius of Syracuse sent Plato away in disgrace.

The scriptural quotations in this section are 1 Corinthians i, 27 and 21, Isaiah xxix, 14 (but Folly confuses this text with 1 Corinthians i, 19) and Matthew xxiii, 13–15 and 23–7.

142. The ass is mentioned in Matthew xxii, 2 and the dove in Matthew iii, 16. The parable of the good shepherd is in John xi. Aristotle’s proverb is discussed in the Adages. The expression ‘the Lamb of God’ appears in John i, 29 and 36 and throughout the Apocalypse (Revelation).
PRAISE OF FOLLY

Father, was made something of a fool himself in order to help the folly of mankind) when he assumed the nature of man and was seen in man's form, just as he was made sin so that he could redeem sinners. Nor did he wish them to be redeemed in any other way save by the folly of the cross and through his simple, ignorant apostles, to whom he unfailingly preached folly. He taught them to shun wisdom, and made his appeal through the example of children, lilies, mustard-seed, and humble sparrows, all foolish, senseless things, which live their lives by natural instinct alone, free from care or purpose. And then when he forbade his disciples to worry about how they should answer the charges of the governors and told them not to seek to know times and seasons, it was surely because he wanted them not to rely on their own intelligence but be wholly dependent on him. This also explains why God the creator of the world forbade man to eat of the tree of knowledge, as if knowledge was poisonous to happiness. So Paul openly condemns knowledge for building up conceit and doing harm, and I believe St Bernard had him in mind when he interpreted the mountain on which Lucifer set up his seat as the mount of knowledge.

<Then perhaps we shouldn't overlook the argument that Folly finds favour in heaven because she alone is granted forgiveness of sins, whereas the wise man receives no pardon. So when men pray for forgiveness, though they may have sinned in full awareness, they make folly their excuse and defence. If I remember rightly, that is how Aaron in the Book of Numbers intercedes against the punishment of his sister: "I beseech you, master, do not charge us with this sin, which we committed foolishly." Saul uses the same words in praying David to forgive his fault: "For it is clear that I acted foolishly." And again, David himself tries to placate the Lord by saying," "I beseech thee, O Lord, take away the iniquity of thy servant, for I have acted foolishly," as if he could only win forgiveness by pleading folly and ignorance. Still more forceful is the argument that when Christ prayed on the cross for his enemies, "Father, forgive them", he made no other excuses for them but their ignorance: "For they know not what they do." Paul writes to Timothy in the
same vein, “But I was granted God’s mercy because I acted ignorantly, in unbelief.” What else is acting ignorantly but acting foolishly, with no evil intent? And when Paul speaks of being granted mercy, he clearly implies that he would not have been granted it had he not had folly to plead in his defence. The sacred psalmist, whom I forgot to quote in his proper place, also speaks for us all when he says, “Remember not the sins of my youth and my ignorances,” and you will have marked that his two excuses are youth, which finds in me a constant companion, and ignorances which are numbered as plural so that we may appreciate the full power of folly.>142

142. The remarkable animation of this passage in its plea for learned or spiritual ignorance derives from the tradition of unlettered piety which Erasmus absorbed from the devotio moderna and the Brethren of the Common Life, and which it was his personal achievement to integrate with Christian humanism.

In this final section of the Praise of Folly Erasmus takes advantage of the ironic form to put his ideal with total seriousness into the sort of paradoxes in which the evangelists recount the moral teaching of Christ. However, what Folly says here does not exclude the need for learning, required to justify this reading of the Christian message, which Erasmus thought should itself be instantly accessible to everyone.

The references here are to: 1 Corinthians i, 18 and 24 (Christ’s folly the wisdom of God); Philippians ii, 7 (assuming the form of man); 2 Corinthians v, 21 (made sin); 1 Corinthians i, 21 (the folly of the Cross).

Children are mentioned for instance in Matthew xviii, 3; lilies for instance in Matthew vi, 28; mustard seed in Matthew xiii, 31; sparrows in Matthew x, 20; governors in Matthew x, 18; times and seasons in Acts i, 7; the tree of knowledge in Genesis ii, 17. St Paul’s association of knowledge with conceit is in 1 Corinthians viii, 1. St Bernard’s identification of Lucifer’s sin with a desire for knowledge is in his commentary on Isaiah xiv, 12. The reference to Numbers is to xii, 11, to Saul 1 Samuel xxvi, 21 and to David 2 Samuel xxiv, 10. Christ’s prayer for those who crucified him is in Luke xxiii, 34, and the reference to Timothy comes from 1 Timothy i, 13. The Psalm quoted is xxiv, 7 (Vulgate; R.S.V. xxxv, 7).

Not all these quotations bear the weight which Folly puts on them. In particular it is difficult to read Genesis as condemning knowledge. But Erasmus deliberately attaches Folly to a tradition of exegesis with which the Brethren of the Common Life had made him familiar. The wisdom Folly goes on to attack is conventional and worldly rather than spiritual, but she does renew Christ’s insistence that his wisdom is folly to the world.
To sum up (or I shall be pursuing the infinite), it is quite clear that the Christian religion has a kind of kinship with folly (in some form), though it has none at all with wisdom. If you want proofs of this, first consider the fact that the very young and the very old, women and simpletons are the people who take the greatest delight in sacred and holy things, and are therefore always found nearest the altars, led there doubtless solely by their natural instinct. Secondly, you can see how the first founders of the faith were great lovers of simplicity and bitter enemies of learning. 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 humiliations, 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? And so we should not be surprised if the apostles were thought to be drunk on new wine, and Festus judged Paul to be mad.\footnote{The qualification 'in some form' was added in 1523. The apostles were thought to be drunk in Acts ii, 13 and Festus' reaction to St Paul is in Acts, xxvi, 24. 'Donning the lionskin' means undertaking a great task and is a proverb discussed in the Adages.}

But now that I have donned the 'lion skin', let me tell you another thing. The happiness which Christians seek with so many labours is nothing other than a certain kind of madness and folly. Don't be put off by the words, but consider the reality. In the first place, Christians come very near to agreeing with the Platonists that the soul is stifled and bound down by the fetters of the body, which by its gross matter prevents the soul from being able to contemplate and enjoy things as they truly are. Next, Plato defines philosophy as a preparation for death because it leads the mind from visible and bodily things, just as death does. And so as long as the mind makes proper use of the organs of the body it is called sane and healthy, but once it begins to break its bonds and tries to win freedom, as if it were planning an escape from prison, men call it insane. If this happens...
through disease or some organic defect, by general consent it is called insanity. Even so, we see this type of person foretelling the future, showing a knowledge of languages and literature they had never previously learned, and giving clear indication of something divine. Undoubtedly this happens because the mind is beginning to free itself from contamination by the body and exercise its true natural power. I think this also explains why those who are struggling at the hour of death often have a somewhat similar experience, so that they speak wonders as if inspired.

Again, if this happens through pious fervour, it may not be quite the same kind of insanity, but is so like it that most people make no distinction, especially as the number of folk who differ in their whole way of life from the general run of mankind is very small. And so we have a situation which I think is not unlike the one in the myth in Plato, where those who were chained in a cave marvelled at shadows, whereas the man who had escaped and then returned to the cavern told them that he had seen real things, and they were much mistaken in their belief that nothing existed but their wretched shadows. This man who has gained understanding pities his companions and deplores their insanity, which confines them to such an illusion, but they in their turn laugh at him as if he were crazy and turn him out. In the same way, the common herd of men feels admiration only for the things of the body and believes that these alone exist, whereas the pious scorn whatever concerns the body and are wholly uplifted towards the contemplation of invisible things. The ordinary man gives first place to wealth, the second to bodily comforts, and leaves the last to the soul — which anyway most people believe doesn't exist because it is invisible to the eye. By contrast, the pious direct their entire endeavour towards God, who is absolute purity, and after him towards what is closest to him, the soul. They have no thought for the body, despise wealth and avoid it like trash, and if they are obliged to deal with such matters they do so with reluctance and distaste, having as if they did not have, possessing as if they did not possess.144

144. Folly makes it clear that neoplatonist, and especially Plotinian, systems can serve as a substructure to explain and understand the Christian
PRAISE OF FOLLY

There are moreover in each of these things widely differing degrees. To begin with, though all the senses have some kinship with the body, some of them are grosser, such as touch, hearing, sight, smell, and taste, while other faculties are less physical, for instance, memory, intellect, and will. The power of the soul depends on its inclinations. Since, then, all the power of the pious soul is directed towards what is furthest removed from the grosser senses, these become blunted and benumbed. The vulgar crowd of course does the opposite, develops them very much and more spiritual faculties very little. That explains what we have heard happened to several saints, who drank oil by mistake for wine.

Again, take the affections of the soul. Some have more traffic with the grossness of the body, such as lust, desire for food and sleep, anger, pride, and envy, and on these the pious wage unceasing war, while the crowd thinks life impossible without them. Then there are what we could call intermediate affections, which are quasi-natural to all, like love for one's country, and affection for children, parents, and friends. The crowd sets great store by these, yet the pious strive to root them too from their soul, or at least to sublimate them to the highest region of the soul. They wish to love their father not as a father, for he begot nothing but the body, and this too is owed to God the Father, but as a good man and one in whom is reflected the image of the supreme mind, which alone they call the summum hominis and beyond which they declare nothing is to be loved or sought.¹⁴⁵

revelation. Folly's Platonism remains notable however for the reference to prophetic insanity, one of the four sorts of divine fury discussed by Ficino in his commentary on Plato's Symposium which stimulate the process by which the soul is reunified and, progressively weaned from dependence on matter, reunited to God. The idea that philosophy is a preparation for death is also discussed by Cicero, the source from whom Montaigne took the title of his famous essay Que philosophe, c'est apprendre à mourir. Erasmus in the Enchiridion takes it from Socrates in the Phaedo.

The phrase 'possessing as if they did not possess' is a reminiscence of St Paul, 1 Corinthians vii, 29–30.

¹⁴⁵. It is recounted of St Bernard that, meditating on scripture, he drank oil without noticing that it was not water.

Folly is presenting a modified neoplatonist psychological system, drawing on Origen's commentary on St Paul and the seventh chapter of the
PRAISE OF FOLLY

This is the rule whereby they regulate all the remainder of life’s duties, so that anything visible, if it is not wholly to be despised, is still valued far less than what cannot be seen. They also say that even in the sacraments and the actual observances of their religion, both body and spirit are involved. For example, they think little of fasting if it means no more than abstaining from meat and a meal – which for the common man is the essential of a fast. It must at the same time reduce the passions, permitting less anger or pride than usual, so that the spirit can feel less burdened by the matter of the body and can aim at tasting and enjoying the blessings of heaven. It is the same with the Eucharist: the ritual with which it is celebrated should not be rejected, they say, but in itself it serves no useful purpose or can be positively harmful if it lacks the spiritual element represented by those visible symbols. It represents the death of Christ, which men must express through the mastery and extinction of their bodily passions, laying them in the tomb, as it were, in order to rise again to a new life wherein they can be united with him and with each other. This then is how the pious man acts, and this is his purpose. The crowd, on the other hand, thinks the sacrifice of

*Enchiridion* in which Erasmus expounds Origen’s view. The ascription of passions to the body rather than the soul is Plotinian, although it became common in the neo-stoic moralists of the Renaissance. In Christian authors it normally leads to a trichotomist psychological system, based on 1 Thessalonians v. 23, and distinguishes body, soul and spirit. For Folly, as for Pico della Mirandola, the soul can determine itself either to achieve spiritual and angelic status or to remain immersed in the material world.

Folly carefully distinguishes the passions, belonging to the senses in which the ‘vulgar crowd’ is enmeshed, from the higher affections, however hesitant she may remain about these. They are ‘intermediate’, ‘quasi’-natural, capable of being transferred to the highest point of the soul. The uncertainty is transferred from the *Enchiridion*, where some of the affections come near to being virtuous. Erasmus, far too empirically minded to systematize his teaching, does in fact move towards a greater sympathy with these ‘intermediary’ affections. The identification of the *summum bonum* with the divine mind is expressed in terms reminiscent of Ficino’s commentary on the *Symposium*.

Erasmus changed ‘love for one’s father’ to ‘love for one’s country’ in 1532.
madness. And this is only the merest taste of the happiness to come.147

But I've long been forgetting who I am, and I've 'overshot the mark'. If anything I've said seems rather impudent or garrulous, you must remember it's Folly and a woman who's been speaking. At the same time, don't forget the Greek proverb 'Often a foolish man speaks a word in season', though of course you may think this doesn't apply to women.

I can see you're all waiting for a peroration, but it's silly of you to suppose I can remember what I've said when I've been spouting such a hotchpotch of words. There's an old saying, 'I hate a fellow-drinker with a memory', and here's a new one to put alongside it: 'I hate an audience which won't forget.'

And so I'll say goodbye. Clap your hands, live well, and drink, distinguished initiates of FOLLY.148

The End

147. Plato speaks of the madness of lovers in the Phaedrus (245b). Love was another of the four Platonist jorum which stimulated the soul's ascent to beatitude. The idea of living in the object of one's love is Platonist too although also a commonplace of Christian tradition. The promise starting 'eye has not seen' comes from I Corinthians ii, 9. The reference to the 'good part' of Folly (Moriae) is a deliberate allusion to the 'best part' of Mary (Mariae) which Christ said should not be taken from her in spite of Martha's plea (Luke x, 42). The folly being praised by Folly has become religious fulfilment and, as such, totally serious. The last paragraph derives from St Paul's account of his own ecstasy at the beginning of 2 Corinthians xii.

148. The last paragraph begins with a quotation from Lucian's The Dream or the Cock. The ironic mask is resumed and Folly remembers she is a garrulous woman, even if she can speak 'a word in season' (a proverb discussed in the Adages). A last adage is mentioned about a fellow-drinker with a memory. The final reference to drink recalls the earlier serious Bacchus before, in Holbein's wood-cuts, Folly finally leaves her pulpit. 'Clap your hands' is the conventional Ending to a Roman comedy. 'The End' is in Greek.