

The Praise of Folly Study Guide

The Praise of Folly by Desiderius Erasmus

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Plot Summary

The Praise of Folly was written by Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466 - 1536), a classical scholar and one of the foremost members of the "humanist" movement of the 16th century. Erasmus widely criticized the Roman Catholic Church of his day but remained a member and often debated with early Protestant Reformers. Erasmus wrote The Praise of Folly in 1509 during a trip from Italy to visit his friend Thomas More, a great English humanist who was beheaded by Henry VIII for refusing to recognize the King as the supreme head of the Christian Church in England.

The Praise of Folly lambasts many popular Catholic practices and Catholic theologians, monks, cardinals, bishops, popes and priests and was one of the principle documents leading to the Protestant Reformation, despite the fact that Erasmus remained a Catholic.

The book opens with a brief letter by Erasmus explaining the origins and purpose of The Praise of Folly to Thomas More, and informing More that the book was dedicated to him, but in the main body of the book, the only speaker is Folly, the personification of foolishness herself. She speaks extemporaneously and extravagantly at great length in order to establish the simple proposition that Folly deserves the praise of all. It is not clear where she is speaking, but her audience appears to be all of European society.

In order to make her argument, she proceeds in several parts. She begins with an exhortation and introduction, which is followed by an explanation of why she should praise herself and how she will give her speech. She declines to divide herself and holds that all people recognize her.

The heart of the book is the confirmation, or main line of argument. To defend the fact that she deserves the praise of all men, Folly first points out that she is descended from a noble lineage and has ample claim to divine status. She argues that any great action taken requires her power, along with her close companions. Folly is involved in true prudence and in the acquisition of wisdom. She argues at length that foolishness is a happy rather than an unhappy state and denies that it is wretched to be foolish or crazy. She then claims that she is the greatest of the Roman pantheon of Gods.

Folly spends more of her time arguing that all people are her followers. This is where the main line of critique appears. Those that she argues are her followers are clearly those Erasmus wants most clearly to lambast. She argues that her worshipers include grammarians, authors, men of the learned professions, theologians, monks, kings and courtiers, bishops, cardinals, popes, and priests. She focuses on Catholic theologians and monks for particular criticism for being dishonest, fraudulent, tyrannical, and so on. Folly follows these claims with arguments that fortune is on the side of the fools and that many great authorities exalt her. She ends with the claim that Christianity bears important similarities to her and ends by refusing to summarize her speech and exhorting her listeners to continue about their folly as they did before.

Preface

Preface Summary and Analysis

The Preface to *The Praise of Folly* is a letter that the author, Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam, wrote to his friend, the English bishop, Thomas More. He opens by describing his ride from Italy to England and claims he thought of More often. He enjoyed More's company greatly. Because traveling was no time for seriousness, he decided to write *The Praise of Folly* for fun. He suggests he was inspired by More's family name, which is close to meaning folly. Further, More enjoys jokes and likes to dissent from mass opinion. The book was written as a keepsake for More and is dedicated to him. Erasmus anticipates criticism but cites many great figures in history who wrote satire and spoke of nonsense.

Erasmus argues that people recognize the value of comedy in other forms of life than studying, and so comedy should be allowed within academic work as well. This is so for no other reason than that some simply deserve ridicule. He claims that he praises folly not foolishly but to a purpose and hopes that those who read his criticism will learn to take a joke. Erasmus will be careful, though, and not mention names out of politeness.



Chapter 1 - 4

Chapter 1 - 4 Summary and Analysis

Folly introduces herself, proclaiming that her influence makes men and gods rejoice. This is evidenced by her speech to the crowd, that everyone appears cheerful. She is dressed in unrecognized clothes because she aims to reflect the Sophists, the old philosophers who gave eulogies for great men; she is speaking to give a eulogy for herself.

Some people denigrate Folly, but this is foolish. She compliments herself because she knows her own true nature; it is not arrogant for her to do so anyway, since it is right and more decent than what many others do. It is better for her to do this than to hire someone else to do it, as many have, and she believes she needs to praise herself since those who should praise her fail to do so. Finally, speakers often praise things far inferior to Folly herself, so what she does could not be so bad. Folly claims she will speak extemporaneously, saying "whatever pops into my head."

Folly refuses to give herself a definition or split herself, as other orators are wont to do for their own topics. She does not need limits because she is universal; there would be no purpose to a definition because you know Folly when you see her. She claims she is unadorned and uncostumed; there is nothing fake about her when one looks at her directly. She will be recognized in any event, even by those who attempt to avoid appearing tied to her or of hiding her. Folly digresses by insulting rhetoricians for poorly practicing their art and pretending to be greater than they are.

Folly then wonders aloud how she would describe herself. First, she describes herself as having a noble lineage, being the daughter of Plutus, the greatest of the gods; Youth, the greatest and happiest nymph, was her mother. She was born out of wedlock. Folly was born in the "Fortunate Isles" in a place where life flourishes without work; no one works hard, no one sees old age, and no one becomes sick. She had great caretakers as well, the nymphs, Drunkenness and Ignorance. Finally, she asks the crowd to take note of her many aids, Drunkenness, Ignorance, Self-Love, Flattery, Forgetfulness, Laziness, Pleasure, Madness, Wantonness, Intemperance, and Sleep.



Chapters 5 - 10

Chapters 5 - 10 Summary and Analysis

Folly transitions into describing all the benefits she brings to the world of men. She first emphasizes, however, that because she is the child of gods, she is divine; her divinity gives her great power in that she caused herself to be born and causes the whole human race to multiply. She can cause even the Stoic to talk nonsense and convince men to become married, which is truly a great power.

Folly claims that she is the source of pleasure which is the stuff of life. Everyone loves pleasures, even the Stoics, despite their claims to the contrary. Early life is among the happiest time for men, and it is folly that makes it so, and in adolescence there is great folly as well. Old age could not be tolerated unless folly accompanied it; the elderly become again like children, which is a pleasant change. Throughout life, even in the struggles of middle age, folly makes life bearable. The changes brought by the other gods cannot be compared, as they often involve turning a person into a snake or bird. Wisdom also messes up people.

Folly can influence the other gods as well, not just men. She makes Bacchus young, helps Mrychus to remain the fool, Cupid to remain a boy and Venus to have an eternal spring (Venus and Folly are related), and keeps Diana hunting despite being in love with Endymion. She gives many other examples.

Returning to focus on humanity, Folly claims that no human could be happy without her, and nature has ensured that life never lack Folly. For the Stoic claims that to engage in folly is to be moved by the passions and so many humans are so moved. Being moved by reason is the exception not the rule. Reason alone could never take care of the human race by itself. Furthermore, only men engaged in folly could be convinced to marry women because they themselves (women) engage in folly all the time. Women cannot hope to be wise anyway but appear engaged in folly when they try. Banquets could not exist without folly, either.

Anyone who is made happy by friends or marriage (most people) should praise folly as well because neither friendship nor folly could exist without her. Friends connect with one another over folly, for they ignore each other's flaws, forgive each other easily, tell one another wild stories and so on. When people try to avoid folly as the Stoics do, they do not have close friendships. Marriage requires folly; divorces would be rampant without it. Marriage requires flattery, being flexible, willful ignorance, and many of folly's other "satellites." No human unions could survive without her.

Folly is closely accompanied by her friend Philautia, or love of self. You cannot have one without the other, given how silly humans really are - folly and self-love rise and fall together. No man who despises himself can love others or get along with them. Someone angry and unhappy can't bring happiness to others. The worst of men must



engage in folly to be tolerable to society. Men should never be happy with themselves; only folly can make this possible. Self-love helps men accomplish their goals and staves off discontent and shame, which again, requires folly.



Chapters 11 - 15

Chapters 11 - 15 Summary and Analysis

Great accomplishments and behaviors require Folly and those who accompany her. No great tasks are taken up, no inventions created without folly. War requires folly as well, since war is so very destructive. And military skill and planning requires folly often because those who play in war are fools and have no wisdom. Philosophers themselves are unfit to manage common affairs, which is easily illustrated with Socrates, who while wise, could not manage the people of Athens. They killed him after all.

This includes war, which is foolish in itself and military skill, which needs no philosophical knowledge. Further, philosophers and wisdom seekers are not fit to manage important matters. Socrates and Plato are examples. It is no response to argue that Plato's philosopher-king is fit, for he has not been effective - the Cato's and others weren't effective either. Folly also cites Cicero, who had his own troubles as a ruler, as did Marcus Aurelius. Wise kings are unfortunate; they have bad sons and, Folly claims, that wise men are usually unlucky with regard to children. Finally, philosophers really don't belong in ordinary jobs.

Folly next claims that folly and flattery holds society together. Foolishness is required to keep being getting along, to pretend that their interests are aligned; they must be fooled by good speech. In the end, life is but a foolish game anyway. The arts were the product of folly; only foolish men would stay up all night creating beautiful things just to be famous.

Another great advantage that Folly claims for herself is that she teaches men to be prudent; prudent action requires one to be rash sometimes, which requires folly. And prudent judgment has disadvantages when the world isn't what it seems. Fate really governs men who individually play only a small part in the world. Furthermore, wise men who knew everything, being able to see through disguises in heaven, might be so exercised as to act imprudently. Finally, only the truly prudent can engage in comedy, which is by nature folly. And so prudence requires folly in this other way as well.

Often wisdom is learned through Folly. Emotions are folly but they can teach a man much. The Stoic lacks much knowledge for purging herself of emotion. The Stoic's wise man is a monster; he would have no sympathy and never be moved by love. This man has no place in the world.

Wisdom would cause men to commit suicide without folly. The gods see man's life as wretched because it is wretched - honestly facing up to human life without foolishness is a simple horror. Further, human life can get worse than it usually is; for instance, old age could not be survived without folly. And shame and infamy cannot be appreciated by the foolish, which is a good thing because humans would suffer it constantly otherwise.



Chapters 16 - 17

Chapters 16 - 17 Summary and Analysis

Chapters 16 and 17 assess a proposed refutation to Folly's previous argument. Some argue that being foolish is an unhappy state, but this argument is mistaken. First, foolishness is man's natural state, and knowing the sciences doesn't make a man happier. There are three general reasons for this: first, many sciences were invented to cause harm to people; second, the peoples of the golden ages didn't have science, yet they lived happily, and third, the silliest of sciences are the ones that men like the most, such as medicine and law, whereas higher sciences like theology and natural science are rejected.

Folly next argues that among the animals, the most foolish are happier than others. Examples include bees, who are both to be admired and happy, horses, which are made worse for working with humans, and cocks, which are naturally happy and silly. Further, in history, we know that foolish men like Gryllus were happier than wise men like Odysseus, and Gryllus ignored nature's counsel. Gryllus preferred to remain in a sty but Odysseus and Ulysses were unhappy.

In Chapter 17, Folly argues that the happiest people of all are those that are born fools. This holds for five reasons. First, natural fools have no fear and no duties. Second, everyone is kind to natural fools. Third, kings like natural fools for their amusement. Fourth, natural fools can say anything they like and people will forgive them. Finally, simply compare their lives with the lives of scholars and anyone can see that natural fools are happier.



Chapters 18 - 23

Chapters 18 - 23 Summary and Analysis

Chapters 18 through 22 handle another potential refutation. Many argue that to be insane or mad means that one is wretched or to be pitied. But, Folly replies, there are many sorts of madness, one sort of which is benevolent. The benevolent sort of madness is noted by men of wisdom like Horace, Cicero and others.

Further, there are benevolent forms of madness that bring pleasure without harm. Examples include those who become crazy in order to hunt or build or engage in alchemy. There are also gamblers who are often insane in a way that harms no one, unless the Furies control them. Third, many crazy people tell horrible stories and listen to them, but this is harmless as well.

Further, many believe in the powers of charms and intercessions to the saints, but that is harmless as well. These people are sometimes immoral and want their offenses to be forgiven and covered for a small sum of money; this is an insane position. Another group are those who are crazy enough to pray for help with pursuing their follies. These people are best left alone because telling them that living a good life would make them more effective would sadden them.

As previous discussed, self-love and folly bear a deep connection to one another, but many people are made happy through loving themselves. Artists are great examples, for they love themselves greatly. Many cities and ethnicities love themselves as well.

Flattery, recall, is folly. It, like self-love, distracts one from the truth. But flattery is often helpful. Flattery is not always deceitful, for pets and other animals engage in flattery, but they are obedient to their masters. And genuine flattery is engaged in out of good motives and further produces mostly good consequences. True flattery helps people feel happier and has resulted in eloquent speech, medicinal discoveries and the writing of poetry.

Folly then wraps up her refutation by arguing that the only true path to happiness is to know the truth and to desire not to be deceived. For one thing, this is unnatural to the mind, which prefers illusion to the truth. For instance, when true doctrine is preached, people are unhappy, whereas stories make the congregation happy. Illusions are also very easy to produce, whereas discerning the truth is hard. Illusion is therefore a pleasure that can be easily acquired. Finally, if one cannot be deceived, then she will inevitably be lonely.

In Chapter 23, Folly has finished with her second refutation and argues that she, Folly, is the greatest of the gods (as she mentioned previously). Folly consoles people, and the way in which she consoles is superior in various ways than the consolation derived from Bacchus, who uses such activities as partying and engaging in sensual pleasures.



Folly is open to everyone and fair, but the gods are partial and play favor. They also change their minds, whereas Folly is reliable.

Folly requires no work to serve her, no sacrifices and worship, whereas pleasing the other gods is work. Folly requires no one to build temples because she already lives within the hearts of everyone. And people worship their follies far more effectively than anyone worships Mary or the Catholic saints. Most people worship themselves despite the fact that they do not practice their principles or the virtues they uphold. And finally, the worship of Folly occurs at all times and in all places.



Chapters 24-33

Chapters 24-33 Summary and Analysis

The purpose of Chapters 24 through 33 is to establish a single thesis, that all people are followers of Folly. The argument proceeds in two brief arguments, and then one very long one. The first argument is that the purpose of humanity is to please the gods. Human history amuses the gods, and therefore the gods are followers of folly because of their toying with the human race. The second argument is that the merchant class is especially committed to folly because of their practices of theft, fraud, lying, greed, etc.

The major argument in support of the core thesis is that even the wise are devoted to folly. Folly argues that nine classes of people are her disciples: grammarians, poets, rhetoricians, authors, men of learned professions, theologians, monks, kings and courtiers, bishops, cardinals and popes (because they imitate kings and courtiers), and priests.

Grammarians would be unhappy save for folly. First the difficulties of being a grammarian is only placated by the pleasure they receive from being the master of the pupils. They pretend to engage in scholarship, which also pleases them. Their poems are folly, but composing them makes them happy. And they are also pleased by the folly of attending to subtle distinctions. Poets follow folly for similar reasons, as do the rhetoricians, because they are foolish enough to convert joking into an art form.

Authors love folly because it keeps them happy. Those authors who are learned are always unhappy. Many authors seek to be popular, and this is due to folly; popularity brings pleasure. Plagiarists are often happy as well, at least until they are discovered. The authors who are popular are the worst of all, however, for they are conceited and increase their pretentiousness through using obscure words and writing with a pseudonym. They love to flatter one another and engage in faux fights to promote excitement in the public.

Men in learned professions are successful only by means of their folly. Lawyers often fake their level of learning and pretend to be well-educated; this is also true of debaters and logicians. Scientists always trade follies; they cannot possibly know what they claim to and have no idea what the truth is since they always are in dispute with one another. Theologians in particular need folly to be happy. Self-love makes them happy. They rely on pointless conceptual distinctions and definitions. Theologians pursue absurd and abstract questions and generate preposterous moral norms.

They obscure reality, unlike the apostles who clarified them, and they always try to build on and criticize the church fathers. Theologians fail to bring heathens to Christ, again unlike the apostles and truly pious men who find theologians disgusting. Theologians foolishly think the church is held up only by them, and they create false representations



of both heaven and hell; they have their own language, which is always pretentious and love to be referred to as "Our Masters."

Monks are made happy by folly as well. They are unpopular but are made happy through their smug self-satisfaction; monks ignore learning, beg and always follow their own rules. The monkish orders love to classify themselves openly and are foolish because they think they are effective due to these things, but Christ will judge them according to a different criterion. They are foolish because people refuse to treat them with open contempt, which is due to the power they wield in confession and preaching.

Furthermore, their preaching is ridiculous for various reasons. First, they are like poets in their use of invocations; they often distract themselves discussing the works and ideas of other preachers. Third, the monks ignore the importance of narrative and give pretentious arguments. Silly stories are widely used in their orations and follow the rules of rhetorical thoughtlessly. Finally, we know the folly of monks through the fact that women and merchants are made happy by their preaching.

Kings and their courtiers worship folly entirely. Folly alone causes people to tolerate the power that kings have; if a king actually complied with the duties of his station, he would be worn out and constantly guilty. Courtiers spend their time with foolish jobs and tasks.

The members of the Church hierarchy do the same, bishops, cardinals and popes. Bishops who took their office seriously would engage in hard labor at all times. Cardinals who did the same would desire to renounce their offices, and popes, knew they anything of what their offices require, could not be happy. Popes are only happy through folly for three reasons: (i) they practice the form but not the substance of the faith, (ii) they only maintain their place in the Petrine line through the use of coercion and (iii) they start wars whenever they like.

Priests are in the same position; they go to war on a small scale for their tithes and rest easy when they simply maintain the form and not the content of right worship. Finally, they delegate their more arduous duties to subordinates.



Chapters 34 - 37

Chapters 34 - 37 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 34 argues that fortune prefers fools to the wise. Folly gives four arguments on behalf of this point. First, various well-known examples and aphorisms testify to the wisdom of fools. Second, being wise does not make one rich. Third, fools are almost always more appealing to women than the wise, and finally being rich usually brings good luck, but wise men do not like wealth.

Chapters 35 through 37 contain Folly's argument that many great authorities speak on her behalf. Folly gives seven arguments on behalf of this thesis and one digression. First, she argues that even the Proverbs themselves defend imitating folly. Further, the classic writers Cicero, Homer and Horace sometimes refer to it favorably through allusion. Next, many Biblical writers praise folly, such as Solomon, Jeremiah, Ecclesiasticus and Paul. Interpreters have to struggle to reinterpret the text in order to avoid this meaning. Folly digresses briefly on this point, arguing that interpreters of Scripture make many mistakes, especially Nicholas Lyra and a few others. Finally, Christ praises His own foolishness in the Gospels. In a digression, Folly argues that God finds fools acceptable.

Next Folly argues that Christ praises fools over the wise often because they are fools. In fact, there are four such cases. Christ often calls his followers sheep and He describes Himself as the Lamb of God. Further, the very fact of the incarnation suggests that God does not mind lowering himself to a lower dignity, which is folly itself. Finally, Jesus sometimes recommends that His followers speak without studying.

Folly's next point is that the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden holds that wisdom is not something man should desire and that it leads to sin. Her final argument that great authorities embrace folly is that the Scripture holds that folly can make sin more pardonable. She then illustrates the point with three cases. Aaron, Saul and David all uses their folly as a reason for their sins to be excused. Christ Himself pleaded on behalf of His persecutors on the grounds that they didn't know what they were doing. Finally, Paul achieves mercy from God, he argues, because he did not know He was persecuting the people of God.



Chapters 38 - 40

Chapters 38 - 40 Summary and Analysis

Chapters 38 and 39 have Folly argue that Christianity itself is like her. She gives three brief arguments for this point and a longer fourth argument which comprises Chapter 39. First, Christianity draws all children, women, elderly and fools, and in this way is like Folly because folly draws them as well. Next, the founders of Christianity were hostile to earthly wisdom. Thirdly, the most serious and zealous Christians are clearly fools, doing all sorts of crazy things like giving away their assets, forgiving injuries over and over again, and so on, all against common sense.

The fourth argument, the argument that Chapter 39 covers, is that Christianity is like folly because the happiness that Christians seek is a kind of insanity. For this point, Folly makes three arguments. First, the nature of Christian happiness is such that preparing for it in this life involves a kind of craziness. The soul should not be uneasy in the body, and many non-Christians view Christian aims and contemplations as crazy. Many great Christian holy men lose common sense functions, like their perception, appetite and affection. The most serious Christians heed only invisible matters, and the best Christians bear an important similarity to Plato's lovers because they are not at home within themselves but instead focus on others.

Second, Folly argues that the Christian understanding of the experience of heaven is the same as the common sense definition of insanity. In Christian heaven, each person's soul conquers and destroys its body, and the soul loses its identity within the Mind of God.

Finally, the experiences of Christian mystics are partly crazy. First, these experiences remove the soul from the body; the experiences are often described incoherently at the time and following the vision, the mystic typically cannot account for or remember it; instead, he is only aware he was happy.

In Chapter 40, Folly ends. She claims that she can't summarize her points because she spoke extemporaneously and so can't recollect her arguments. And then she exhorts her listeners to go on pursuing Folly as they have always done.



Characters

Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam

Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam lived from 1466 to 1536. He was one of the great scholars of classical antiquity in the 16th century and a renowned Christian humanist and church reformer. Erasmus was a learned man of letters and created new translations of the Bible. He also promoted classical learning and criticized the practices of the Catholic Church, which was widely regarded as corrupt at that time. Erasmus rejected many of the popular practices of Catholic laity, which he regarded as mere superstition and criticized the behavior of Catholic theologians, monks and members of the Catholic hierarchy.

The Praise of Folly is in many ways a criticism of many segments of the Catholic Church in the year 1509 and before. And it is one of the principle popular documents behind the Reformation. Erasmus is not a character in most of the book but does describe his thoughts and actions in the preface, which is a letter to his friend and renowned British humanist Thomas More. He writes on his way from Italy to England to visit Thomas More and argues in the letter that scholarly writing cannot be suitably produced while traveling, so Erasmus turned his thoughts to something lighter, to satire. He informs More that the book is dedicated to him on behalf of their friendship and many wonderful conversations. While Erasmus is no longer featured in the book after the Preface, his ideas, opinions and criticisms of the present-day political and cultural practices of Europe drive Folly's soliloquy.

Folly

Folly is the main character of The Praise of Folly. She is literally the personification of folly itself and speaks on her own behalf. Folly is the only speaker in The Praise of Folly; in fact the entire book is one extended oration and argument that Folly makes on her own behalf. Her main argument is intended to establish a single proposition: that Folly deserves the praise of all men. Folly opens with an exhortation to her audience, that she is welcome and that her dress is appropriate for the occasion. It is not clear who her audience is or what the occasion is, however. She next defends the fact that she will give a speech in her own defense and that she will speak extemporaneously. Then she defends her authenticity, claiming she cannot be divided and is as her audience sees her.

The heart of the book is Folly's confirmation, which she begins with a defense of her authority; she believes her authority is due not only to her noble lineage but that she has a claim to being divine. She argues that she produces true prudence and moves men to great action and wisdom. She denies at great length that being foolish leads to unhappiness and claims that she is the greatest of all the gods. Her longest argument is that all people are her disciples and follows this claim up with an argument that many



great authorities praise her. She ends with the claim that the Christian religion bears important similarities to her and closes with a refusal to summarize herself and an exhortation that her listeners continue their folly as before.

Thomas More

The great British humanist who was a dear friend of Erasmus's. The Praise of Folly is dedicated to him and was written on the way to visit him.

The Classical Writers

Writers like Plato, Horace, and Homer from classical antiquity are used as authorities and illustrations of points in Folly's argument.

Classical Rulers

Ancient classical rulers like Marcus Aurelius and Cicero are also used as authorities and illustrations in Folly's argument.

The Apostles

The original followers of Jesus come into play in Folly's argument in her condemnation of the theologians and her argument that authorities praise folly.

Christ

Jesus Christ plays a role in Folly's argument when she cites authorities who praise folly.

Mary and the Saints

Erasmus uses Folly to criticize many popular devotions to Mary and the Saints, rather than Jesus.

Popes, Bishops, Cardinals, Priests

These members of the hierarchy of the Catholic Church come under scathing criticism for resembling secular rulers and engaging in frivolous pursuits.



Monks

Catholic monks are fiercely criticized by Erasmus through Folly's argument that they are made happy by folly.

Theologians

Theologians are criticized as fiercely as monks are.

Kings and Courtiers

Kings and Courtiers are not the main target of Erasmus's criticisms but do come under some scrutiny for frivolous pursuits.

The Foolish

Folly repeatedly argues that the foolish are happier than the wise.

The Wise

Folly repeatedly argues that the wise exalt wisdom when in fact wisdom brings nothing but unhappiness.

Philautia

The incarnation of self-love, who is Folly's constant companion. Self-love is only possible through folly.

Women, Children and the Elderly

The common fools of society.



Objects/Places

The Road from Italy to England

The path from Italy to England is where Erasmus wrote The Praise of Folly.

Folly's Platform

The unnamed place where Folly makes her speech.

The Fortunate Isles

Folly's birthplace where she was raised by her parents and attendants.

Pleasure

What foolishness brings and wisdom destroys.

Divinity

Folly is divine because she makes good things possible and is worshiped by all, whether they realize it or not.

Wisdom

The source of unhappiness, it is knowledge that men cannot and should not have.

Folly

It isn't entirely clear all the things folly is found in, but it seems to include all manner of frivolous, foolish and deceitful and sinful activities.

Happiness

What foolishness brings and wisdom destroys.

Deception

Deception is made possible through folly, which in turn makes self-love possible.



The Sciences

The sciences do not make men happy and are only pursued in order to destroy happiness.

Self-Love

No one would love themselves if they would face the truth about who they are. Folly makes self-love possible.

Insanity

Folly produces insanity, but this is not always bad.

The Worship of Folly

Folly claims that all people worship her.

The Bible

The Bible is often cited on behalf of Folly's claims.

Classical Texts

Many classical Greek and Roman texts are cited on behalf of Folly's claims.

Themes

Folly Deserves the Praise of All

The main argument of *The Praise of Folly* is that Folly deserves the praise of all. But what does this mean? Folly argues that she deserves the praise of all because she makes many of life's good things possible and brings about happiness to many who could not otherwise have it. She is also worshiped by everyone already and is exalted by many great authorities. Further, she bears important similarities to Christianity, which adds to her status.

The main argument is only buttressed by Folly's claims to divinity, noble lineage, and that human happiness, prudence and wisdom depend on her. The most important supporting points of the argument are: (i) that all people worship Folly, (ii) that great authorities exalt her, and that the Christian religion bears important similarities to her. In (i) Folly reviews nine social groups that she claims worship her and then gives detailed reasons for most of her claims. She singles out theologians, monks, bishops, cardinals and popes for particular scrutiny.

Folly defends (ii) by misrepresenting classical and Biblical figures, which Erasmus probably uses to indicate that many will use these figures to their own purposes. And finally, when Folly claims that Christianity is like her, Erasmus is probably trying to argue that the portrayal of the Christian religion that Folly gives is the one that is foolish, not Christianity *per se*.

Nonetheless, Folly's main line of argument is that she deserves the praise of all because of her deep connection to and presence within society. And this is the heart of Erasmus's wide-ranging critique of the society of his day.

Satire

Erasmus wrote *The Praise of Folly* on his way from Italy to England. He tells Thomas More in the preface letter that serious writing could not be done while traveling, and so he proposes to focus on something lighter - satire. *The Praise of Folly* is widely regarded as one of the classic works of satire in Western history. It lambastes the political, social, religious and cultural practices across society, occupation and class in early 16th century Europe.

The satire is located primarily in the claim that all aspects of 16th century European society love foolishness or folly. This means, more or less, that they are fools and are fair game for serious criticism. Folly makes many claims that Erasmus clearly rejects, such as that it is better to be a fool than wise, but he must set-up Folly's defense of herself by pointing out the ways in which people justify pursuing their follies to themselves.



The primary satire occurs in Chapters 24 through 33, where Folly argues that different social groups worship her. These include grammarians, poets, rhetoricians, men of learned professions, authors, especially popular ones, and kings and courtiers. But the groups most subject to satirical portrayal are theologians, monks, bishops, cardinals, popes and priests. He believes that they have been corrupted by their social power, prefer to be worshiped, and have too much authority and are capable of profound acts of self-deception.

Social Criticism

The point of Erasmus's satire in *The Praise of Folly* is to mock various injustices, evils and absurdities that he sees in 16th century European society, particularly within the primary and most influential concentration of power in his day, the Roman Catholic Church. Europe was on the verge of a social revolution, the Protestant Reformation, which would so rock the social and political fabric of Europe that it would be involved in wars of religion for the next two hundred years.

Erasmus is primarily a reformer, not a revolutionary. Despite attacks on his criticisms and exhortations from Protestants to join their cause, Erasmus remains a member of the church and presses for reforms from within the Catholic Church's power structure. However, this does not mean that he goes easy on his church, to the contrary. *The Praise of Folly* is widely regarded as one of the greatest pieces of satire in history for a reason—it lambasts many elements of the Roman Catholic Church's power structure, especially monks and theologians, who Erasmus regards with particular contempt.

The Praise of Folly mostly serves to point out and mock the social problems of the early 16th century; it does not offer solutions, only caricature and implicit criticism. Theologians are portrayed as the enemies of true religion, engaging in wasteful and pointless debates, authoritarian, dogmatic, suspicious, and so on. Erasmus attacks monks for living by begging, inventing pointless rules for themselves, and preaching absurd doctrines.



Style

Perspective

The perspective of *The Praise of Folly* is two-fold. The first is that of Erasmus, the book's author, and the second is that of Folly, the book's main character. The relationship between the opinions and ideas of Erasmus and Folly is complex, for it is not always clear how much of Folly's opinions he believes himself. He is a Christian and so cannot believe that the Christian religion as such is akin to Folly, as she claims that it is. On the other hand, he was one of the great critics of Roman Catholic practice of his day, and so he and Folly must agree at least to some extent about the equation of the practices and attitudes of theologians and monks with Folly.

In any event, the major aspect of the perspective relevant for the reader to understand is that it is written during a time when Europe is on the cusp of a major social revolution that will usher in modernity and close the door forever on the Middle Ages. The Catholic Church has centralized power for centuries, and this centralization of power has, in Erasmus's eyes, led to the corruption of popular piety and the centers of power across Europe. Erasmus is one of the Church's foremost critics, lambasting many elements of European society, which includes the masses, royalty, scholars, but most of all the authorities within the current church, popes, cardinals, bishops, priests, theologians, and monks.

Tone

The tone of *The Praise of Folly* is clearly satirical, since it is one of the most famous pieces of satire in Western literature. Folly is silly, wild, extravagant and inclined to hyperbole; however, she is also learned, powerful, and a clear-headed reasoner. It is her behavior and speech that sets the tone of the book. Because the book is satirical, Folly must have some element of silliness. She begins her oration by justifying the fact that she will praise herself to the skies, and defends her apparently bizarre dress to her audience. Her purpose is to praise herself, and so her garb is supposed to illustrate this fact. She claims that her very appearance makes her welcome and speaks off the cuff, extemporaneously. At the end of her oration, she refuses to summarize herself, because she claims she cannot remember her arguments.

There is a wild and extravagant element to Folly as well; she claims she is the greatest of the gods, that she has a claim to divinity and believes herself to be worshiped by all. She hurls insults, digresses into odd points and refuses to summarize herself. This also illustrates her inclination to hyperbole.

Yet the tone of the book has another side, as Folly's argument is well-organized, forceful and learned. The argument proceeds in terms of arguments on behalf of a clear thesis and these arguments are in turn defended by sub-arguments and sometimes sub-sub-



arguments. Thus, the argument has a clear profession, despite its wild and silly aspect. Further, the book contains many references, indicated that Folly is a divinity of great learning.

Structure

For a work of satire, *The Praise of Folly* has a well-organized, almost philosophical form of organization. The first part of the book is the letter Erasmus wrote to Thomas More about why and when he wrote the book and that he dedicated the book to More. But this only sets the stage for the main book. The book then divides by section or chapter, depending on how one counts. It can be divided into five parts, the exordium, narration, partition, confirmation and peroration, where the confirmation comprises the vast majority of the work.

The entire body of the work following the preface is Folly's oration, and so the five parts represent different aspects of a single speech. The parts of the book are organized hierarchical in terms of how they support the main point of the book—Folly deserves the praise of all. The main points are argued for by sub-points, which in many cases contain their own sub-points.

The Exhortation introduces Folly; she justifies her appearance and why she is welcome to speak in the first place. In the Narration, Folly argues that it is fitting that she should praise herself and that she will speak extemporaneously. In the Partition, Folly claims that she is authentic but declines to define herself.

The confirmation defends several main claims: that Folly has a noble and divine lineage, that great actions depend on her, that she produces true prudence and allows the acquisition of wisdom. She argues that the foolish man is happy and that being insane is not unhappy. Folly claims she is the greatest of the gods and that all people follow her, including authors, theologians, monks, popes and kings. Fortune favors her and many great authorities praise her. Finally Christianity is similar to her in various respects. The peroration closes with Folly refusing to summarize her points and encouraging her audience to participate in folly as they did before.



Quotes

"For what an injustice it is, when we allow to each way of life its own recreations, that none should be permitted to studies!" (3)

"I am she—the only she, I may say—whose divine influence makes gods and men rejoice." (7)

"Why am not I of right named and venerated as the alpha of all gods, who single-handed bestow all things on all men?" (14)

"Folly is the one thing that makes fleeting youth linger and keeps ugly old age away." (19)

"In sum, no society, no union in life, could be either pleasant or lasting without me." (28)

"Nor is human life in general anything but a kind of fool's game." (35)

"... no creature is more miserable than man; for all the others are satisfied with their natural limitations, but many alone strives to go beyond the bounds proper to his station." (46-47)

"For if I had a hundred tongues, a hundred mouths, a voice of brass, I could not set forth all the shapes of fools or run over all the names of folly." (58)

"But it is a sad thing, they say, to be deceived. No; the saddest thing is not to be deceived." (63)

"Perhaps it were better to pass over the theologians in silence, and not to move such a Lake Camarina, or to handle such an herb Anagyris foetida, as that marvelously supercilious and irascible race. For they may attack me with six hundred arguments, in squadrons, and drive me to make a recantation; which if I refuse, they will straight-way proclaim me an heretic." (77)

"Coming nearest to these in felicity are the men who generally call themselves 'the religious' and 'monks' - utterly false names both, since most of them keep as far away as they can from religion and no people are more in evidence in every sort of place." (85)

"For how else could it be, when Fortune herself, the directrix of human affairs, is so thoroughly of a mind with me that she always has been most hostile to the wise?" (103)

"The Christian religion on the whole seems to have a kinship with some sort of folly, while it has no alliance whatever with wisdom." (118)

"This will become clearer if I briefly demonstrate, as I promised to do, that their summum bonum itself is no other than a kind of insanity." (123)



"I hate a hearer that remembers anything." (125)

"And so farewell ... Applaud ... live ... drink ... O most distinguished initiates of Folly!"
(125)



Topics for Discussion

In what practices does folly consist? What exactly is folly?

Who do you think Erasmus is most interested in criticizing in *The Praise of Folly*?

List three of the groups Erasmus criticizes most and explain two of his criticisms of each.

What is the main argument of *The Praise of Folly*?

Folly claims that all people follow her. What do you think of her arguments?

Folly argues that many great authorities exalt her. What do you think of her arguments?

Folly likens Christianity to herself. What do you think of her arguments?

Describe Erasmus's implicit criticisms of Monks, Theologians, and members of the Church Hierarchy (Popes, Cardinals, Bishops, Priests).