

Praise of Folly



“Erasmus searched for reconciliation between Faith and Reason, refusing not only the dogmas of Faith, but the dogmas of Reason as well.”

Carlos Fuentes

“*Praise of Folly*, still a masterpiece of slyly subversive wit, was in a sense the first best-seller, read covertly under desks and sniggered over by countless trainee monks and priests.”

Nicholas Lezard, The Guardian

“I am well aware that what I have had to say on the problem of peace is not essentially new. It is my profound conviction that the solution lies in our rejecting war for an ethical reason; namely, that war makes us guilty of the crime of inhumanity. Erasmus of Rotterdam and several others after him have already proclaimed this as the truth around which we should rally.”

Albert Schweitzer in his 1952 Nobel Peace Prize lecture

“From the terrible hate storm of his age Erasmus has salvaged this intellectual gem, his faith in humanity, and on this small burning wick Spinoza, Lessing and Voltaire – and all Europeans past and present – could light their torch.”

Stefan Zweig

ONEWORLD CLASSICS

Praise of Folly

and

Pope Julius Barred from Heaven

Desiderius Erasmus

Translated by Roger Clarke



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Μωρίας Ἐγκώμιον
An Encomium of Mōria
or
Praise of Folly

An address composed by Erasmus
of Rotterdam

Dedicatory Letter

Erasmus of Rotterdam, to his friend Thomas More,* greetings:

When I was returning to England recently from Italy, I had to spend a lot of time on horseback, and I didn't want to waste it all on chatter that was trite and (as the Greeks would say) devoid of the Muses. I preferred sometimes to turn over in my mind subjects of common interest to us both, or to enjoy the memory of the friends that I had left behind here – friends whose great learning is matched only by their great charm. And among these friends it was you, my dear More, that were regularly in the forefront of my thoughts. The constant enjoyment I found in remembering you while we were apart matched the joy I'd just as constantly found in your company when we were together. In fact I'll be damned if anything else has ever given me such happiness in all my life! Anyhow, I felt that I absolutely had to occupy myself with something, and as the circumstances seemed little suited to serious endeavour, I decided to amuse myself with an encomium of *Mōria*,* a “praise of Folly”.

“But what in Wisdom's name put that into your head?” you'll ask. Well, first, your family name More suggested it to me, because it's as close to the word “*Mōria*” as you are remote from its meaning – indeed, by universal assent you couldn't be remoter. Then I had a suspicion that this intellectual game of mine would appeal particularly to you, for the reason that you always get a great deal of pleasure from jests of this kind that contain both learning (if I'm not mistaken) and, here and there, some wit; you're always, too, playing the role of a “laughing philosopher”* in everyday human life. Your exceptional mental discernment, it's true, sets you utterly apart from the common run of humanity, but at the same time the legendary charm and good nature of your personality mean that you're able, indeed delighted, to be for everyone “a man for all seasons”.* So please be willing not just

to accept this little dissertation as a “memento of your pal”,* but also to take up its defence: it’s dedicated to you, and no longer mine now but yours.

I ask this because there’ll surely be detractors who’ll allege that these tomfooleries are either too frivolous to befit a theologian or have too sharp a sting to accord with Christian humility. They’ll loudly accuse us of reviving the old-style comedy of Athens* or composing satires like a latter-day Lucian* – of sinking our teeth into everything, that is, without discrimination.

People that are upset by the flippancy and playfulness of my subject matter will bear in mind, I hope, that I’m not the first in this field: what I’m doing is identical to what was done time and again by the great authors of the past. Think how many centuries ago Homer had fun with his ‘Battle of Frogs and Mice’,* Virgil with his ‘Gnat’ and his ‘Garlic Salad’,* Ovid with his ‘Nut Tree’.* Think how both Polycrates and his critic Isocrates composed eulogies of Busiris;* how Glaucon* praised injustice; Favorinus,* Thersites and malaria; Synesius,* baldness; and Lucian, a fly and a sponger.* Think how Seneca* amused himself with the *apothēōsis* of Claudius, Plutarch* with his dialogue between Gryllus and Odysseus, Lucian and Apuleius with their asses,* and someone-or-other with their testament of Grunnius Corocotta the piglet* (which even St Jerome recalls).

Would my critics rather imagine me to have amused myself by playing draughts from time to time, or, if they prefer, by “galloping around on a long stick”?* For it really is quite unreasonable to grant every other of life’s professions its opportunities for fun, but to allow no fun at all to scholars. What if the jokes bring with them some serious ideas? What if the absurdities are handled in such a way that the not altogether indiscriminating reader gains rather more benefit from them than from some people’s forbiddingly elaborate treatises? I’m thinking of the sort that spend long hours stitching together a discourse in praise of public speaking or philosophy; or who compose a eulogy of some head of state; or a speech urging war against the Turks; or a prophecy of future events; or a discussion of every last argument about goat’s wool.* Nothing’s more futile than to treat serious subjects in a frivolous way – but at the same time nothing’s more entertaining than to treat frivolities in such a way that you come across to others as the opposite of frivolous. The verdict on me is for others to deliver;

nevertheless, (unless self-love* is duping me completely) though it's Folly we've praised, it's not altogether foolishly we've done it.

I'll deal now with the taunt about sting. Intelligent critics have always been allowed the liberty of using irony to make fun of our shared humanity without fear of consequences, provided only that the freedom doesn't express itself in rage. That's why I'm so surprised at the tenderness of modern ears, which can barely now tolerate anything beyond conventional compliments: you'll find some people so religiously correct, in a back-to-front way, that they're readier to stomach the most harshly offensive language against Christ than to have a pope or head of state sullied by the gentlest of jokes, especially if it touches on what Aristophanes terms "pay and rations".* Anyhow, if one censures the way people live their lives without criticizing a single person by name, I question whether that should be regarded as administering a sting so much as offering information and advice. Or try totting up the counts on which I'm censuring myself. Besides, if critics exempt no class of people from reproof, then they're not displaying animosity against any individual but against human shortcomings in general. So, if anyone should come forwards to complain that they've been libelled, they'll be betraying their guilty conscience, or at least their unease. St Jerome* indulged in the same kind of ridicule as I have with much more bluntness and sting, often exposing identities. As for us, not only have we refrained completely from naming names; we've also regulated our manner of writing to ensure that the perceptive reader can readily comprehend that our aim is to entertain rather than to sting. Unlike Juvenal,* we've left unstirred the hidden cesspool of wickedness; we've made it our business to identify what's laughable rather than what's loathsome. If there are some that can't be won round even by these arguments, let them at least remember this: to be rebuked by Folly is a compliment; since we've made Folly the speaker, it's only right that she be true to character.

But why do *I* go on like this to *you*? Outstanding advocate that you are, it's in upholding cases less than strong that you show your strength. So fare you well, my eloquent More, and defend your *Mōria* with vigour!

From the country, 9th June*

Goddess Folly is the Speaker

Folly Introduces Herself

HUMANS MAY TALK ABOUT ME in public as they like – *First Impressions*
I realize how bad a name Folly has even among the biggest fools. But I'm the one, I tell you, yes the only one, to use my divine power to bring good cheer to all, gods and humankind alike. I've more than ample proof of it too: as soon as I stepped forwards to address this packed congregation, all your faces at once beamed out with a new and unaccustomed cheerfulness; you suddenly lost your frowns; you showed your delight; you gave me a friendly laugh and clapped your hands. As I look round at you on every side, you really seem, all of you, to be merry on the nectar that Homer's gods drank, nectar laced with nepenthe¹ to banish sorrow. Yet only just now you were sitting there glum and worried, just as if you'd freshly emerged from Trophonius's cave.*

To put it another way, you know how it is when that beautiful golden sun first rises on the earth, or when after a harsh winter the new spring makes the balmy west winds blow: everything immediately takes on a new aspect again, a new colour, a new youth even. That's the way your faces changed as soon as you caught sight of me. To dispel cares that vex the soul – that's something great preachers can hardly manage with a lengthy, long-rehearsed sermon; but that's what I've achieved in an instant, just by my appearance.

Why is it, though, that I've come before you today *Why I've Come* in such a bizarre costume? You'll hear soon enough, provided you can bear to lend me your ears as I talk – I don't mean the ears that you normally lend to those that rant at you here in church, but the ears you prick up for charlatans, jesters and fools outside – the donkeys'

ears that long ago our friend Midas* sprouted for Pan's sake. The fact is, I've decided I want to spend a little time giving you the benefit of my doctorate – not, I hasten to add, a doctorate of the sort held by teachers that these days stuff schoolboys with unsettling nonsense and give them an argumentativeness worse than a woman's. No: my model will be those clever men of long ago who, to avoid the discredited title of “doctor of philosophy”, preferred to be known as “spin doctors”.* It was these “doctors” who busied themselves composing encomiums in praise of gods and mighty men. And it's an encomium you're now going to hear, not one of some demigod like Hercules or lawgiver like Solon,* but my encomium of myself, Folly.

*An Encomium
of Myself?*

Now I don't care a finger snap for those educated people who call it the height of foolishness and bad taste for someone to boast of their own merits: it can be as foolish as they want, but let them at least admit that it's fitting. What's more apt than for *Mōria* herself to blow her own trumpet – “pipe herself on the flute”,* as the Greeks say? Who can talk about me better than I can? – unless there's anyone who knows me better than I know myself!

Actually I consider praising myself a good deal less pretentious than what the well-bred, well-educated crowd do all the time: through a twisted sense of modesty they prevail on some ingratiating speechwriter or windbag of a poet (and pay them, what's more) to tell them how good they are – and it's all lies, pure lies! Yet the bashful subject lifts his tail like a peacock and raises the feathers of his crest, while his bare-faced flatterer equates a paltry human being with the gods: he declares the man perfectly attuned to every virtue, though the fellow knows himself to be more than “two octaves distant”* (as the Greeks express it); he dresses the pathetic crow in another bird's plumage; and (more Greek sayings) he “whitens the African” and “makes an elephant out of a fly”.* Well, I go along with this

well-worn proverb: “you can fairly praise yourself if there’s no one else to praise you”.

How extraordinary, by the way, is human ingratitude – or should I call it inertia? Humans all worship me devotedly; they all gladly acknowledge the good I do them; but not one has come forwards in all these centuries to celebrate Folly’s merits in an appreciative speech. And yet there’s never been a shortage of people to extol tyrants like Busiris and Phalaris, malarial fevers, flies, bald heads* and similar afflictions in eulogies crafted late at night at great cost of oil and sleep.

This speech of mine you’re about to hear will be *My Manner of* impromptu and unworked, but truer for all that. I *Speaking* wouldn’t want you to think it’s been put together to show off my cleverness, as happens with the mass of public speakers. They, as you know, publish a speech they’ve worked on for all of thirty years – or may sometimes have borrowed from someone else – and then swear on oath that they’ve written it, or even dictated it, in three days for fun. As for me, I’ve always taken the greatest pleasure in speaking (as the Greeks say) “whatever comes to my unready tongue”.*

No one, what’s more, should now expect me to proceed, as those run-of-the-mill public speakers of yours do, by subjecting myself to definition or – still less – to analysis.* Drawing a boundary round someone whose divine power is so vast, or dissecting someone whose worship unites the universe – either would invite heaven’s disfavour. In any case, what possible point is there in presenting a shadow or outline of myself by way of definition, when you and I are here together in the same place and you can behold me for myself.

So I am, as you see, the great dispenser of blessings* *Who I Am* that they call in Latin “Stultitia” and in Greek “*Mōria*” – that is, “Folly”. Why did I need say even this, though? Don’t I display who I am adequately on my person – “on countenance and brow”, as they say? If anyone claimed I was the incarnation of Wisdom, whether pagan or

Christian, wouldn't they be set right at once just by the sight of me, even without my giving voice (that least deceptive mirror* of the personality)? Rouging cheeks* is not for me: I don't profess one thing on my face and hide another deep within. I resemble myself exactly from every angle – so much so that I can't be mistaken even in people who are the keenest to claim for themselves the mask and title of Wisdom and who parade about, as in those Greek fables, like “baboons in fine robes” and “donkeys in lion skins”.* But, for all their careful pretences, the long ears sprouting from somewhere or other betray the foolish Midas. Oh, the ingratitude of people like this: they're leading members of our troupe, but are so ashamed of our name in public that they use it as a major insult to throw indiscriminately in other people's faces. These people, who are in reality the greatest morons but want to be regarded as intellectuals and philosophers* – surely we've an excellent right to call them “morosophers”.*

I Can Speak You see, we've decided to copy today's public speakers
Greek in one respect: they evidently consider themselves gods if they show themselves two-tongued, like leeches,* and they think it a splendid achievement if they can keep embroidering a few little decorative Greek-sounding words onto their Latin speeches, even if out of place. What's more, if foreign material fails, they dig four or five archaic words out of some mouldering manuscript to darken the reader's mind. The purpose, of course, is this: those who understand become more and more pleased with themselves and those who don't are the more impressed the less they understand. It's really rather charming, the pleasure our people find in looking up to things the more foreign they are. It allows the vainer sort to laugh and applaud, and (as in the Greek saying) “twitch their ears like donkeys”,* to show the company how excellently they comprehend.

Well, καὶ ταῦτα δὴ μὲν ταῦτα* (as the Greeks say!). Now I'll return to my theme.