

Erasmus' *The Praise of Folly* Printed Five Centuries Ago

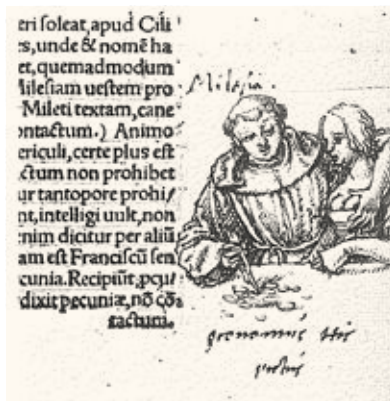
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Quinten Massys, *Erasmus*,
1517. Oil on panel, 50 x 45
cm. Galleria Nazionale d'Arte
Antica, Palazzo Barberini,
Rome.

'In absolutely every activity of life, the pious man flees from whatever is related to the body and is carried away in the pursuit of the eternal and invisible things of the spirit.' We could employ a term that is often misused and call this an expression of 'spirituality'. Is it a quote from a mystical work? No, it comes from the conclusion of *The Praise of Folly*, the first edition of which was published in Paris in 1511. The words may sound surprising and appear difficult to place in a book that is generally seen as witty and ironic, sometimes cutting and most certainly irreverent. A few years ago, a brochure from the Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft (not just any old publisher) described the *Folly* as a 'cheerfully ironic settling of scores with the Church and morality, and at the same time a personal plea for liberation from dependence'. These words sound as though they might come from a declaration of principles during the Enlightenment. And *The Praise of Folly* is usually still understood in this enlightened spirit, although there has been a change of opinion since 1980, mainly as a result of Michael Screech's book *Ecstasy and The Praise of Folly*. Since then, more attention has been devoted to the religious conclusion of the *Folly*; sometimes this long-neglected section of the book seemed to become the main issue, even the climax of the book. But this shift in opinion was limited to the world of Erasmus scholars, one of whom went so far as to call the *Folly* a 'religious pamphlet'. However, for the general public, the book is still first and foremost an entertaining satire that denounces wrongs within society and particularly in the Church. The conclusion of the *Folly* still receives the least attention. Have countless readers got it wrong for centuries? Or was Erasmus simply asking for trouble and was the conclusion not in fact meant as seriously as many Erasmus experts believe? Is it the climax or simply an added extra?

Whatever the case, the *Folly* is famous throughout the world; new translations are published all the time in many different places. In the Dutch-speaking countries, no fewer than three modern translations are in circulation and sales figures are good. In addition, three older translations are widely available from antiquarian book dealers. The book is on many people's shelves and it is reasonable to assume that they also pick it up and read it once in a while. In 1930, the now-forgotten Dutch author Jan Walch published his book *Boeken die men niet meer leest* (Books We No Longer Read), one of the chapters of which was



Monk and woman.
Pen drawing by Hans Holbein in a copy of *Moriae Encomium*, Basle, 1515.

Copper engraving by Caspar Merian after Hans Holbein, in *Moriae Encomium*, Basle, 1676 (first edition with Holbein's illustrations).



The monk refuses to touch the money but does touch the woman.



Once the woman is gone the monk touches the money.

devoted to *The Praise of Folly*. Times have changed. This is thanks in part to the revival of interest in Erasmus since 1936, the year when Europe commemorated the 400th anniversary of his death, when he had once again become relevant for many people as an example of tolerance and moderation, in contrast to the totalitarian powers of fascism and communism. Interest in Erasmus has only increased since then. Exhibitions, international conferences and a rapidly growing number of publications are evidence of this change.

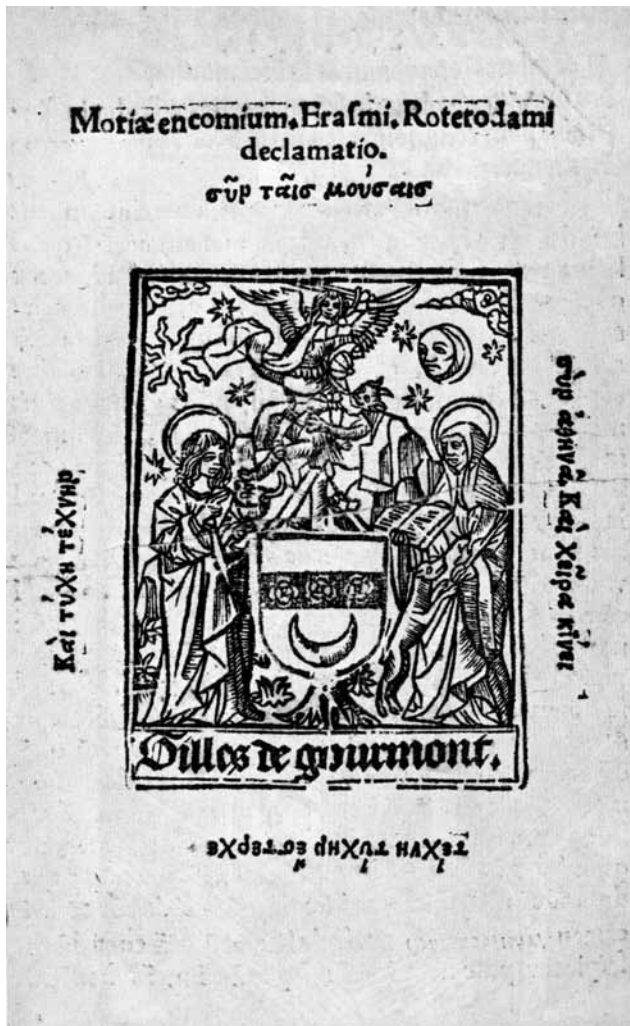
Copper engraving by Jan van Vianen in *Moriae Encomium* (Desiderii Erasmi Opera Omnia, part 4, 1703, Leiden. Expurgated engraving).

Conceived on horseback

The Praise of Folly occupies a very modest position within Erasmus' oeuvre, which consists of around one hundred writings. Most of these are related to the Bible, faith, the Church and theology. Nowadays the *Folly* is seen as Erasmus' most notable work; he is judged on the basis of this book. He would himself have regretted this situation, as he attached much more importance to his text editions of classical writers and Church Fathers, his *Adagia* (over 4000 classical adages with commentary) and his edition of the New Testament (the Greek text with a Latin translation and notes). Erasmus wrote the *Folly* simply for

relaxation. He gave the following explanation of how he came to write the book. He was riding a horse on his way from Italy to England and thinking about the English friends he hoped to see again, particularly Sir Thomas More, a man with a great sense of humour. A few years previously, they had worked together on a translation of the satirical and derisive Lucian (2nd century) from Greek into Latin. The association of the name 'More' and the Greek '*moria*' (foolishness, idiocy) gave Erasmus the idea of writing a eulogy to folly. He would choose the form of a 'paradoxical encomium', based on classical examples, which praised things that did not actually deserve praise. There was, for example, an encomium in praise of baldness, of the three-day fever and the fly. Once he arrived at the home of the hospitable Thomas More, he got down to writing, which helped him to forget the pain of his kidney stones for a while. He finished the book in just over a week.

Erasmus is believed to have written his *Praise of Folly* (in Greek *Morias Eγκomion*, written in the 'Latin style' as *Moriae Encomium*, while the Latin title was *Stultitiae Laus*) in 1509. The text of the *Moria*, as Erasmus preferred to



Moriae Encomium,
first edition, 1511,
Paris (title page).

call it – and we will follow his example from this point on – initially circulated amongst his friends. As previously mentioned, the first printed edition did not come out until 1511. It is not known whether Erasmus made any alterations to the text in the intervening period. Even in his own lifetime, thirty-six editions of the Latin text were published, two of them in the Low Countries: in Antwerp (as early as 1512) and in Deventer (1520). By the middle of the sixteenth century, French, German, English and Italian translations were available and the first Dutch translation came out in 1560.

The number of editions demonstrates that the *Moria* was well received. Contrary to prevailing opinion, its popularity was not a result of Holbein's famous illustrations. The sixteenth-century editions look fairly unappealing by modern standards: the *Moria* takes the form of a continuous text without paragraphs and without the familiar division into 68 chapters, which in fact dates from the 18th century. The 82 illustrations that Holbein created for one copy of the *Moria* (which is still preserved in Basle) were known only to a few enthusiasts. It was not until 1676 that they appeared as engravings in a printed edition. This example was widely imitated and since then everyone has associated Erasmus' text with Holbein's illustrations. Many later artists drew inspiration from Erasmus' words, particularly in bibliophilic editions. Some continued in Holbein's footsteps, while others, such as the Belgian artist Frans Masereel, who died in 1972, struck out on their own.

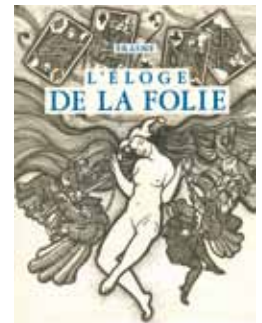
Erasmus was more a man of letters, an essayist, even a journalist, than a philosopher or theologian in the traditional sense. His writings are deliberately not constructed in a systematic way and this is certainly true of the *Moria*. For this reason, A.E. Douglas found the *Moria* a 'brilliant but artless and uneven improvisation', but such expressions of negativity are rare. Other scholars have continued to attempt to find a particular scheme in the text, but without a great deal of success.

The title *The Praise of Folly* is intentionally ambiguous, because it refers to praise both of and by Folly: it is Folly who is speaking and she is therefore praising herself. With a little effort, we can distinguish roughly three parts in the work.

In the first part, where Dame Folly introduces herself and her companions, who include Self-love and Flattery, she declares herself to be a source of life, festivity and mirth. Without her, everything becomes bleak and colourless. Without her, friendship and love cannot exist, for if one becomes too wise and critical, all human relationships soon run aground. A certain kind of flattery is benevolent and innocent and 'the honey and spice of all human intercourse'; it is in any case preferable to dullness and a wagging finger.

In the middle section of the *Moria*, Folly's mockery is aimed at targets including elderly people who behave like lovelorn fools, hunters, architects, alchemists, dice players, schoolmasters, poets, orators, lawyers, philosophers, theologians, monks, sovereigns, courtiers, popes, cardinals and bishops. Theologians and monks have the most criticism vented upon them, particularly in Erasmus' extended edition of 1514. In these passages, Folly's tone is often sharp. She frequently slips out of the role she is playing and then we hear Erasmus himself, the critical voice that we know from the rest of his work. Is this a weak point in the composition? Quite the contrary. Erasmus knew exactly what he was doing. If we automatically had to assume the opposite of everything that Folly praises, the *Moria* would become rather monotonous.

L'Eloge de la Folie, translated by Pierre de Nolhac, illustrated by René de Pauw, 1945, Brussels (cover).



Moriae Encomium or The Praise of Folly, translated by Harry Carter, illustrated by Frans Masereel, 1954, Haarlem (frontispiece).



The final part concerns the Christian faith, which is presented as a form of elevated and divine folly. This was in response to Biblical texts such as 'Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men' (1 Corinthians, 1:25).

Offended Theologians

Not all readers were enthusiastic. However, no criticism was forthcoming from Rome. Erasmus was pleased to report that the art-loving Pope Leo X (Giovanni de' Medici) had appreciated the *Moria*, even though it dealt harshly with the papacy in particular. But there were serious objections to the book among the professional theologians attached to the universities of Paris, Cologne and Louvain, bastions of conservatism and orthodoxy.

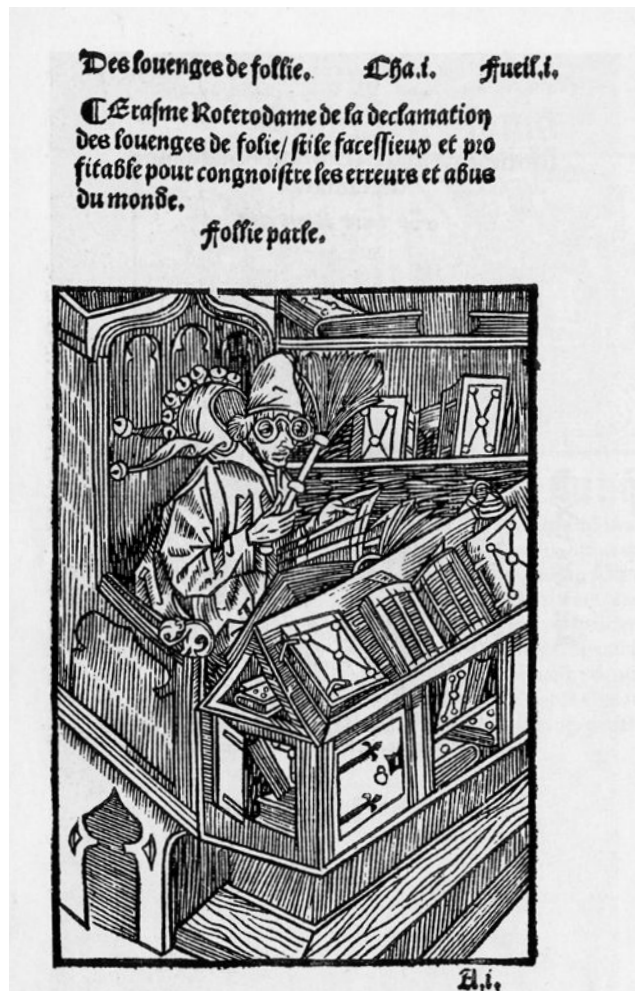
The first theologian to enter into discussion with Erasmus was Maarten van Dorp from the University of Louvain, generally known as Dorpius. This Dutchman, born in Naaldwijk and twenty years younger than Erasmus, had a humanist education and was an admirer of Erasmus. However, he found his criticism of theologians too harsh and felt that the last part of the *Moria* in particular mocked religion. He gave Erasmus the well-meaning advice that he should now write a Praise of Wisdom, to avoid any possible misunderstanding.

Dorpius' criticism, which he set down in a long letter in 1514, actually suited Erasmus rather well, because it gave him an opportunity to compose a comprehensive response. This apologia was such a success that it was soon published together with the *Moria*, for the first time in the 1516 Basle edition. He draws attention to the striking fact that only the theologians had openly taken offence; the other groups examined in the *Moria* had not protested, because they understood that the satire applied only to those among their number who were no good. Erasmus responded to Dorpius' reproach that some passages at the end of the *Moria* sounded 'godless' by saying that the folly in this context was obviously no ordinary foolishness, just like the 'foolishness of the cross' mentioned by the Apostle Paul. He therefore deliberately employed formulations such as

'a kind of folly' or 'a certain foolishness' in the *Moria*. Erasmus did not intend to write a Praise of Wisdom. If he had to take all sorts of stupid theologians into account, he'd never put pen to paper again. Let those gentlemen first learn Greek properly, said Erasmus, so that they could read the New Testament in the original language. This theme also played an important part in the discussion between Dorpius and Erasmus.

Dorpius was convinced by Erasmus – and also by a detailed letter from Thomas More – and their relationship remained good. However, Dorpius' reaction was followed by attacks from theologians who were distinctly hostile; the Sorbonne held a particularly strong grudge against the *Moria*. In 1559, the book finally ended up in the Index, the Church's list of banned books. As recently as 1913, the then authoritative *Catholic Encyclopedia* assessed the *Moria* as follows: 'It is a cold-blooded, deliberate attempt to discredit the Church, and its satire and stinging comment on ecclesiastical conditions are not intended as a healing medicine but a deadly poison.'

However, in the *Moria*, as in his other works, Erasmus only ever speaks out against wrongs, superstition and hypocrisy, never against the Church, let alone



Bespectacled fool amongst his books, in *De la declamation des louenges de folie*, 1520, Paris (illustrations in this edition are borrowed from Sebastian Brant's *Ship of Fools*).

the faith itself. He feels compelled to point this out repeatedly to his conservative Catholic opponents. However, what he ridiculed as superstition was for many people sacred. University theologians viewed him as a threat, particularly after Luther's actions in 1517, when Erasmus' criticism appeared to support the cause of the Reformation. This fear was not unfounded, because supporters of the Reformation were able to put certain statements by Erasmus to good use in their pamphlets and polemics, both during his lifetime and after his death. In the fiercely anti-Catholic *Byencorf der Heilige Roomsche Kercke* (Beehive of the Romish Church), written by the Calvinist Marnix van St. Aldegonde and published in 1569, the *Moria* is quoted to demonstrate the absurdity of Roman-Catholic theology. Erasmus was well aware that, with the rise of Luther and his followers, his satire had become potentially dangerous. If he had seen it coming, he might not have published his book, he stated in January 1518. But we shouldn't take this assertion too seriously, because Erasmus actively continued to work on new editions of his *Moria* up until 1532. He had been living in Catholic Freiburg for a few years by that point, because Basle had chosen to follow the Reformation.

The *Moria* also proved useful to the anti-ecclesiastical polemic of the Enlightenment. The book was attractive to scholars like Nicolas Gueudeville, a former French Benedictine monk who had taken refuge in the Netherlands. In 1713 he published a French translation of the *Moria* in Leiden, with Holbein's illustrations. This free translation saw many reprints and was intended not only for export, but also for the Dutch elite who could read French, the language that was starting to replace Latin as the international medium of communication. Gueudeville also published translations of Erasmus' *Colloquia* and Thomas More's *Utopia* in Leiden.

Witty and erudite

The impression may have arisen that the *Moria* was employed only as a weapon in the fight against everything that was wrong in the Church, state and society. But for most readers the book was first and foremost a source of relaxation and pleasure. That was indeed Erasmus's aim in writing the book. The Greek words that he had sprinkled throughout the text and the many references to classical authors, sayings and mythological figures were no barrier to his friends; on the contrary, if hidden allusions were involved, so much the better. They were able to appreciate the value of this erudite game. Contemporary readers have greater difficulty, but they need not feel ashamed - an edition with a commentary was already deemed necessary in 1515. This edition is attributed to Dutch doctor and scholar of Latin, Greek and Hebrew Gerard Lister (Listrius), but an unknown percentage of the commentary was written by Erasmus himself; the many apologetic remarks are certainly his work. This commentary was used by various scholars, including the first Dutch translator in 1560 and Gueudeville for his *Eloge de la Folie*, and it forms the basis of all modern commentaries. 'Nothing requires greater talent than being witty in an erudite way,' Listrius remarked. However, not all readers are as erudite as Erasmus and his friends and they could do with some help. Sometimes, however, we feel that the commentator is too helpful. When Folly remarks that priests like to leave the practice of devotion to the people and that they do so 'in their modesty', the note reads: 'this is ironic' - but we already knew that much.

When Folly ridicules the cloistered quibbling and pretentious jargon of the medieval scholastic theologians, she appears most dated, but the opposite is in fact the case. Their successors are amongst us: philosophers, theologians and literature experts whose prose may be erudite, but is mainly depressing and maybe even unreadable. At such times, it is good to be able to escape for a moment to Erasmus and his *Moria*. Because as soon as Dame Folly appears on stage with her fool's cap and begins her speech, everything changes. 'Hence it is that as soon as I came out to speak to this numerous gathering, the faces of all of you immediately brightened up with a strange, new expression of joy.' ■

Translated by Laura Watkinson

NOTE

The quotes from the *Moria* are taken from Clarence H. Miller's translation: *The Praise of Folly*, New Haven/London, 1979.