"In Praise of Folly"

by Desiderius Erasmus

1509

Squashed version edited by Glyn Hughes © 2011


"Fortune favours the fool."
INTRODUCTION TO In Praise of Folly

Gerrit Gerritzoons was born in Gouda (near Rotterdam), probably in October 1466. After both his parents died in the plague of 1483, he followed his father's profession and became a priest. Quick-witted and witty, he was befriended by the Bishop of Cambrai and sent to Paris to study. But he soon came to despise the nit-picking 'scholastic' teachings, acquired the pseudonym of Desiderius Erasmus and took to instructing the sons of nobles, wandering Europe and earning the friendship of the continent's leading scholars. His first visit to England in brought him into contact with Thomas More, John Colet, Henry VIII and the new rational anti-clericalism of which he is now considered the leading light.

ABOUT THIS SQUASHED EDITION

This condensed edition of 2,800 words is paraphrased and adapted from the original 36,800 words of the 1668 translation by John Wilson. ERASMUS OF ROTTERDAM to his friend THOMAS MORE, health: As I was coming awhile since out of Italy for England, that I might not waste all that time on horseback in foolish and illiterate fables, I took me to composing of this:
IN PRAISE OF FOLLY

An invented oration, spoken by Folly in her own person

IN whatever manner I, the Goddess of Folly, may be generally spoken of by mortals (for I well know what ill reports are given of me), yet I assert emphatically that it is from me, Stultitia, and from my influence only, that gods and men derive all mirth and cheerfulness. You laugh, I see. Well, even that is a telling argument in my favour. Actually now, in this most numerous assembly, as soon as ever I have opened my mouth, the countenances of all have instantly brightened up with fresh hilarity, whereas but a few moments ago you were all looking woebegone.

On my very brow my name is written. No one would take me, Stultitia, for Minerva. No one would contend that I am the Goddess of Wisdom. The mere expression of my countenance tells its own tale. Not only am I incapable of deceit, but even those who are under my sway are incapable of deceit likewise. From my illustrious sire, Plutus [Wealth] I glory to be sprung, for he, and no other, was the great progenitor of gods and men, and I care not what Hesiod, or Homer, or even Jupiter himself may maintain to the contrary. Everything, I affirm, is subjected to the control of Plutus. War, peace, empires, designs, judicial decisions, weddings, treaties, alliances, laws, arts, things ludicrous and things serious, are all administered under his sovereign will.

Now notice the admirable foresight which nature exercises in order to ensure that men shall never be destitute of folly as the principal ingredient in their constitution. Wisdom, as your divines and moralists put it, consists in men being guided by their reason; and folly, in their being actuated by their passions. See then here what Jupiter has done. In order to prevent the life of man from being utterly intolerable, he has endowed him with reason in singularly small proportion to his passions- only, so to speak, as a half-ounce is to a pound. And whereas he has dispersed his passions over every portion of his body, he has confined his reason to a narrow little crevice in his skull.

And yet, of these silly human beings, the male sex is born under the necessity of transacting the business of the world. When Jupiter was taking counsel with me I advised him to add a woman to the man- a creature foolish and frivolous, but full of laughter and sweetness, who would season and sweeten by her folly the sadness of his manly intelligence. When Plato doubted whether or not he should place women in the class of rational animals, he really only wished to indicate the remarkable silliness of that sex. Yet women will not be so absolutely senseless as to be offended if I, a woman myself, the goddess Stultitia, tell them thus plainly that they are fools. They will, if they look at the matter aright, be flattered by it. For they are by many degrees more favoured than men. They have beauty, and what a gift is that! By its power they rule the rulers of the world.

The supreme wish of women is to win the admiration of men, and they have no more effectual means to this end than folly. Men, no doubt, will contend that it is the pleasure they have in
women's society, and not their folly, that attracts them.

I answer that their pleasure, is folly, and nothing but folly, in which they delight. You see, then, from what fountain is derived the highest and most exquisite enjoyment that falls to man's lot in life.

But there are some men (they are waning old crones, most of them), who love their glasses better than the lasses, and place their chief delight in tippling. Others love to make fools of themselves to raise a laugh at a feast, and I beg to say that of laughter, fun and pleasantry, I- Folly- am the sole purveyor.

So much for the notion that wisdom is of any use in the pleasures of life. The next thing that our gods of wisdom will assert is that wisdom is necessary for affairs of state. Says Plato. "Those states will prosper whose rulers are guided by the spirit of philosophy." With this opinion I totally disagree. Consult history, and it will tell you that the two Catos, Brutus, Cassius, the Gracchi, Cicero and Marcus Antoninus all disturbed the tranquillity of the state and brought down on them by their philosophy the disgust and disfavour of the citizens. And who are the men who are most prone, from weariness of life, to seek to put an end to it? Why, men of reputed wisdom. Not to mention Diogenes, the Catos, the Cassii and the Bruti, there is the remarkable case of Chiron, who, though he actually had immortality conferred on him, voluntarily preferred death.

You see, then, that if men were universally wise the world would be depopulated, and there would be need of a new creation. But, since the world generally is under the influence of folly and not of wisdom, the case is, happily, different. I, Folly, by inspiring men with hopes of good things they will never get, so charm away their woes, that they are far from wishing to die. Nay, the less cause there is for them to desire to live, the more, nevertheless, do they love life. It is of my bounty that you see everywhere men of the Nestorean longevity, mumbling, without brains, without teeth, whose hair is white, whose heads are bald, so enamoured of life, so eager to look youthful, that they use dyes, wigs and other disguises, and take to wife some frisky heifer of a creature; while aged and cadaverous-looking women are everywhere seen caterwauling, and, as the Greeks express it, behaving goatishly in order to induce some beauteous Phaon to pay court to them.

As to the wisdom of the learned professions, the more empty-headed and the more reckless any member of any one of them is, the more he will be thought of. The physician is always in request, and yet medicine, as it is now frequently practised, is nothing but a system of pure humbug. Next in repute to the physicians stand the pettifogging lawyers, who are, according to the philosophers, a set of asses. And asses, I grant you that, they are. Nevertheless, it is by the will and pleasure of these asses that the business of the world is transacted, and they make for themselves fortunes while the poor theologians starve.

By the immortal gods, I solemnly swear to you that the happiest men are those whom the world
calls fools, simpletons and blockheads. For they are entirely devoid of the fear of death. They have no accusing consciences to make them fear it. They are, happily, without the experience of the thousands of cares that lacerate the minds of other men. They feel no shame, no solicitude, no ambition, no envy, no love. And, according to the theologians, they are free from any imputation of the guilt of sin! Ah, ye besotted men of wisdom, you need no further evidence than the ills you have gone through, to convince you from what a mass of calamities I have delivered my idiotic favourites.

To be deceived, people say, is wretched. But I hold that what is most wretched is not to be deceived. They are in great error who imagine that a man's happiness consists in things as they are. No; it consists entirely in his opinion of what they are. Man is so constituted that falsehood is far more agreeable to him than truth. Does anyone need proof of this? Let him visit the churches, and assuredly he will find it. If solemn truth is dwelt on, the listeners at once become weary, yawn and sleep; but if the orator begins some silly tale, they are all attention. And the saints they prefer to appeal to are those whose histories are made up in the main of fable and romance. Though to be deceived adds much more to your happiness than not to be deceived, it yet costs you much less trouble.

And now to pass to another argument in my favour. Among all the praises of Bacchus this is the chief, that he drives away care; but he does it only for a short time, and then all your care comes again. How much more complete are the benefits mankind derive from me! I also afford them intoxication, but an intoxication whose influence is perennial, and all, too, without cost to them. And my favours I deny to nobody. Mars, Apollo, Saturn, Phoebus and Neptune are more chary of their bounties and dole them out to their favourites only, but I confine my favours to none.

OF all the men whose things I have witnessed, the most sordid are men of trade, and appropriately so, for they handle money, a very sordid thing indeed. Merchants are the biggest fools of all. Whenever it is necessary, they will lie, perjure themselves, steal, cheat, and mislead the public. Nevertheless, they are highly respected because of their money. There is no lack of flattering friars to kowtow to them, and call them Right Honorable in public. The motive of the friars is clear: they are after some of the loot.

But as I look round among the various classes of men, I specially note those who are esteemed to possess more than ordinary sagacity. Among these a foremost place is occupied by the schoolmasters. How miserable would these be were it not that I, Folly, of my benevolence, ameliorate their wretchedness and render them insanely happy in the midst of their drudgery. Their lot is one of semi-starvation and of debasing slavery. In the schools, those bride-wells of uproar and confusion, they grow prematurely old and broken down. Yet, thanks to my good services, they know not their own misery. For in their own estimation they are mighty fine fellows, strutting about and striking terror into the hearts of trembling urchins, half scarifying the little wretches with straps, canes and birches. In fact, their own most wretched servitude is to them a kingdom of felicity.
The poets owe less to me. Yet they, too, are enthusiastic devotees of mine, for their entire business consists in tickling the ears of fools with silly ditties and ridiculously romantic tales. Of the services of my attendants Philautia [Self-approbation] and Kolakia [Flattery], they never fail to avail themselves, and really I do not know any class of men who are more devoted and constant followers. Moreover, there are the rhetoricians. Quintilian, the prince of them all, has written an immense chapter on no more serious subject than how to excite a laugh. Those, again, who hunt after immortal fame in the domain of literature unquestionably belong to my fraternity. Poor fellows! They pass a wretched existence poring over their manuscripts, and for what reward? For the praise of the very, very limited few who are capable of appreciating their erudition.

Very naturally, the barristers merit our attention next. Talk of feminine garrulity! Why, I would back any one of them to win a prize for chattering against any twenty of the most talkative women that you could pick out. And well indeed would it be if they had no worse fault than that. I am bound to say that they are not only loquacious, but astoundingly pugnacious.

After these come the philosophers, who are reverenced for their beards and the fur on their gowns. They announce that they alone are wise and that the rest of men are only passing shadows. The fact that they can never explain why they constantly disagree with each other is sufficient proof that they do not know the truth about anything. They are ignorant even of themselves, and are often too absent-minded or near-sighted to see the ditch or stone in front of them. Their insane self-deception is very delightful. They beguile their time with computing the magnitude of the sun, moon and stars, and they assign causes for all the phenomena of the universe, as if nature had initiated them into all her secrets. In reality they know nothing, but profess to know everything.

Perhaps it would be wise to pass over the theologians in silence. That short-tempered and supercilious crew is unpleasant to deal with. They will proclaim me a heretic, a thunderbolt they use to terrify the people they don't like. Their opinion of themselves is so great that they behave as if they were already in heaven; they look down pityingly on other men as so many worms. A wall of imposing definitions, conclusions, corollaries, and explicit and implicit propositions protects them. They are full of big words and newly-invented nonsense.

Then there are those who commonly call themselves the religious and monks. Both are complete misnomers, since most of them stay as far away from religion as possible. They are so detested that it is considered bad luck if one crosses your path, and yet they are highly pleased with themselves. They cannot read, and capitalize on their dirt and poverty by whining for food from door to door. These smooth fellows simply explain that by their very filth, ignorance, boorishness, and insolence they enact the lives of the apostles for us. It is amusing to see how they do everything by rule, almost mathematically. Any slip is sacrilege. Each shoe string must have so many knots and must be of a certain color. They even condemn each other, these professors of apostolic charity, making an extraordinary stir if a habit is belted incorrectly or if its color is...
Condensed “In Praise of Folly” by Desiderius Erasmus

a shade too dark. The monks of certain orders recoil in horror from money, as if it were poison, but not from wine or women. They take extreme pains, not in order to be like Christ, but to be unlike each other. Most of them consider one heaven an inadequate reward for their devotion to ceremony and traditional details. They forget that Christ will condemn all of this and will call for a reckoning of that which He has prescribed, namely, charity.

IT is high time that I should say a few words to you about kings and the royal princes belonging to their courts. Very different are they from those whom I have just been describing, who pretend to be wise when they are the reverse, for these high personages frankly and openly live a life of folly, and it is just that I should give them their due, and frankly and openly tell them so. They seem to regard it to be the duty of a king to caress by every means in his power the vulgar populace, in order to win their good graces, and to make them the subservient tools of his tyrannical behests.

As for the grandees of the court, a more servile, insipid, empty-headed set than the generality of them you will fail to find anywhere. Yet they wish to be regarded as the greatest personalities on earth. Not a very modest wish, and yet, in one respect, they are modest enough. They wish to be bedecked with gold and gems and purple, and other external symbols of worth and wisdom, but nothing further do they require. These courtiers, however, are superlatively happy in the belief that they are perfectly virtuous. They lie in bed till 'till noon. Then they summon their chaplain to their bedside to offer up the sacrifice of the mass, and as the hireling priest goes through his solemn farce, with perfunctory rapidity, they, meanwhile, have all but dropped off again into a comfortable condition of slumber. After this they betake themselves to breakfast; and that is scarcely over when dinner supervenes. And then come their pastimes- their dice, their cards and their gambling- their merriment with jesters and buffoons, and their gallantries with the court favourites.

Next let us turn our attention to popes, cardinals and bishops. If bishops did but bear in mind that a pastoral staff is an emblem of pastoral duties, and that the cross solemnly carried before them is a reminder of the earnestness with which they should strive to crucify the flesh, their lot would be one replete with sadness and solicitude. As things are, a right bonny time do they spend, providing abundant pasturage for themselves, and leaving their flocks to the negligent charge of so-called friars and vicars.

Fortune favours the fool. We colloquially speak of him and such as him as a 'lucky bird,' while, when we speak of a wise man, we proverbially describe him as one who has been 'born under an evil star' and as one whose horse will never carry him to the front. If you wish to get a wife, mind, above all things, that you beware of wisdom; for the girls, without exception, are heart and soul so devoted to fools that you may rely on it a man who has any wisdom in him they will shun as they would a vampire.

And now, to sum up much in a few words, go among what classes of men you will, go among popes, princes, cardinals, judges, magistrates, friends, foes, great men, little men, and you will
not fail to find that a man with plenty of money at his command has it in his power to obtain everything that he sets his heart upon. A wise man, however, despises money. And what is the consequence? Everyone despises him!

Wherefore farewell, clap your hands, live and drink lustily, my most excellent disciples of Folly!

Desiderius Erasmus
1466-1536
Erasmus' tomb in Basle Cathedral.