

Erasmus – The Praise of Folly

Erasmus - Introduction

Erasmus was born in Rotterdam in 1466 and he died in 1536 in Brussels. He was considered as one of the first and one of the most important humanist writers. He lived during the Renaissance period that was the cultural bridge between the Middle Ages and modern history. Humanism, is a movement that shows a real faith in Human Nature, it is the intellectual basis of Renaissance. He was thus called "the crowning glory of the Christian humanists".

Actually, he was a Catholic priest, a social critic, a teacher, and a theologian.

And he had many friends and intellectual counterparts who were the leaders of thought. People like the british Sir Thomas More who wrote *Utopia* or John Colet who was teaching the Bible in a different way than what was considered the normal way. Erasmus really liked that new approach to religion.

This prompted him, upon his return from England, to master the Greek language, which would enable him to study theology on a more profound level and to prepare a new edition of the Bible's translation. He succeeded in learning Greek by an intensive, day-and-night study of three years.

After that, he wrote the translations of the New Testament in Latin and in Greek, because he wanted to be sure of the original text of the Bible.

Actually he wrote many books, mainly in Latin because that was the language mainly used in Europe at the time and it is by this language that all the elites were sharing their ideas around Europe.

To understand how well-know Erasmus was, it is important to say, that by the 1530s, the writings of Erasmus accounted for 10 to 20 percent of all book sales in Europe, which is really significant.

It is also important to say that Erasmus preferred to live the life of an independent scholar and made a conscious effort to avoid any actions or formal ties that might inhibit his freedom of intellect and literary expression. Throughout his life, he was offered many positions of honor and profit throughout the academic world but he declined them all. He was thus a free intellectual man.

The Praise of Folly

The latin title for *The Praise of Folly* is *Stultitiae Laus* or *Moriae Encomium* that can be also translated as *In Praise of More*. Actually, the book was written to amuse Thomas More and the preface is a letter from Erasmus to More. He writes that he was on the road from Italy to England and, rather than wasting his time, he preferred to occupy his time writing this book. This idea was

suggested to him by the similarity of the name "More" and "Moria," which is the Greek word for "folly".

It is a short book of 150 pages divided in 3 sections even if there is no official separation of these sections. It is narrated by Folly herself, a female personification of folly (madness, craziness), who stands before a crowd speaking.

The book is actually a satirical attack on superstitions and traditions of European society as well as on the Church. Even if the subject was touchy, Erasmus in fact conceived it as a minor work and was surprised at the controversy that began after the publication.

Many theologians criticized the book but it was still circulating throughout Europe and even the Pope, Pope Leo X, was highly amused by it. Actually the real controversy, the real tensions, started with the Protestant Reformation led by Martin Luther and that led to the decline of Erasmus's reputation because he would not fully throw his support behind the Catholic Church. And 20 years after his death, *The Praise of Folly* was placed on the Roman Index of prohibited books and his name remained on the Roman Index until 1930, when it was finally removed. It was in reality rediscovered during the Enlightenment, and today it is widely read and on every 1st of April, the city of Rotterdam celebrates the publication. We will now see the main topics of the book.

Topic 1 : Folly of theologians

First of all, Folly, the main character, explains that theologians protect themselves with "academic definitions, logical argumentations, inferential corollaries, explicit and implicit propositions" but are in reality arrogant, confusing, and misled. They prefer their own interpretations to the scriptures, the real biblical texts, and they mold, change and interpret these texts to fit their theses. For Folly, and therefore for Erasmus, Christ's message of simplicity is lost to these men who live in luxury. We thus see the harsh tone that Folly has and what vision Erasmus had of theologians, even if he is himself a theologian. One of his famous quotes is "It's the generally accepted privilege of theologians to stretch the heavens, that is the Scriptures, like tanners with a hide."

Topic 2 : Folly and Christianity

Most of us might assume that Christianity is more dedicated to wise men than to fools, but Erasmus writes that "the entire Christian religion seems to bear a certain natural affinity to folly, and relate far less clearly to wisdom".

Christ himself is the biggest fool of all because he took all the sins of mankind and became a sin itself. His word was carried throughout the world by his "ignorant, sottish disciples" and his lesson was "nothing but folly and avoidance of wisdom".

For Erasmus, happiness in Christ is close to madness, thus revealing the essential thesis of the author : Christianity welcomes, and is made for the fools and the ignorants. These arguments are very much responsible for what made Erasmus's work so controversial upon its publication.

Topic 3 : The necessity of folly for love, marriage, and friendship

Folly is necessary for all relationships on earth, particularly marriage and friendship. There would be so many more divorces if marriage was not made easier by "flattery, jokes, yielding dispositions, mutual misunderstandings, dissimulations". Husbands and wives are able to overlook each other's flaws and conceive of their spouse as their ideal thanks to the help of Folly.

Friendship also benefits from her, for friends have to convince themselves that their friends' shortcomings, gaps, are insignificant and their vices are their virtues.

The fact that any human can find pleasure in another human's company, despite that human's great flaws and vices, is due to Folly.

Topic 4 : Self-love and flattery

Both are commonly regarded in a negative light, but Folly demonstrates how they are beneficial to society. If a man does not love himself, he will not be able to do anything that is "agreeable, gracious, [and] not in bad taste". He has to flatter himself a bit before he can be esteemed by others. The character of Folly tells that pure honesty and truth can be dangerous and that flattery is helpful and even virtuous. Thus, both self-love and flattery help mankind live their lives, forget about their problems, and achieve great things. And so by default, Folly is responsible for encouraging those great things.

Topic 5 : Delusion/Ignorance

Folly pleads her case that she make mankind happier than wisdom can. Her argument is that a man is happier when he does not realize the ugly truth of the world. The philosophers, who claim to know the mysteries of existence, are very sad men. Wisdom does not bring contentment, whereas the happiest people on earth are the fools and the simple men who are ignorant. Ignorant of fear, anger, depression, and death. So Folly counsels her listeners to embrace ignorance.

Conclusion

So what is important to remember about *The Praise of Folly*, is that Folly can be found everywhere, in every topic of life. Therefore, paradoxically, in order to live a saintly life it seems necessary to have Folly in us.