

Desiderius Erasmus

(Geert Geerts? Gerhard Gerhards? Gerrit Gerritsz?, ca.1467-1536)

Letter by Desiderius Erasmus to his friend Thomas More (1509) Prefatory To *The Praise Of Folly*

During my recent journey back from Italy to England, not wishing to waste all the time I was obliged to be on horseback on 'idle gossip' and small talk, I preferred to spend some of it thinking over some topic connected with our common interests or else enjoying the recollection of the friends, as learned as they are delightful, whom I left here. Among these you, my More, came first in my mind, whose memory, though absent yourself, gives me such delight in my absence, as when present with you I ever found in your company; than which, let me perish if in all my life I ever met with anything more delectable. And therefore, being satisfied that something was to be done, and that that time was no wise proper for any serious matter, I resolved to make some sport with the *praise of folly*. What sort of a goddess Athene put that notion into your head, you may well ask. In the first place, it was your own family name of More, which is as near to the Greek word for folly, *moria*, as you are far from it in fact, and everyone agrees that you couldn't be farther removed. Then I had an idea that no one would think so well of this *jeu d'esprit* of mine as you, because you always take such delight in jokes of this kind, that is, if I don't flatter myself, jokes which aren't lacking in learning and wit. In fact you like to play the part of a Democritus in the mortal life we all share. Your intelligence is too penetrating and original for you not to hold opinions very different from those of the ordinary man, but your manners are so friendly and pleasant that you have the rare gift of getting on well with all men at any time, and enjoying it. I am sure then that you will gladly accept this little declamation of mine as a 'memento' of your friend and will also undertake to defend it. It is dedicated to you, so henceforth it is yours, not mine.

There may well be plenty of critical folk rushing in to slander it, some saying that my bit of nonsense is too frivolous for a theologian and others that it has a sarcastic bite which ill becomes Christian decorum. They will clamour that I'm reviving Old Comedy or Lucian, carping and complaining about everything. Well, those who are offended by frivolity and fun in a thesis may kindly consider that mine is not the first example of this; the same thing has often been done by famous authors in the past. Homer amused himself ages ago with his *Battle of Frogs and Mice*, Virgil with his *Gnat* and *Garlic Salad*, Ovid with his *Nut*, Polycrates wrote a mock eulogy of the tyrant Busiris and so did his critic Isocrates, Glauco spoke in favour of injustice and Favorinus of Thersites and the quartan fever; Synesius praised baldness and Lucian the fly and the parasite. Seneca was joking in his *Apotheosis* of the Emperor Claudius, as Plutarch was in his dialogue between Gryllus and Ulysses. Lucian and Apuleius both wrote in fun about an ass, and someone whose name escapes me about the last will and testament of the piglet Grunnius Corocotta: this is mentioned by St Jerome.

If they want they can imagine I've been amusing myself all this time with a game of draughts, or riding my stick if they like that better. How unjust it is to allow every other walk of life its relaxations but none at all to learning, especially when trifling

may lead to something more serious! Jokes can be handled in such a way that any reader who is not altogether lacking in discernment can scent something far more rewarding in them than in the crabbed and specious arguments of some people we know — when, for example, one of them endlessly sings the praises of rhetoric or philosophy in a botched-up oration, another eulogizes some prince, and a third sets out to stir up war against the Turks. Another man foretells the future, and yet another invents a new set of silly points for discussion about goat's wool. Nothing is so trivial as treating serious subjects in a trivial manner; and similarly, nothing is more entertaining than treating trivialities in such a way as to make it clear you are doing anything but trifle with them. The world will pass its own judgement on me, but unless my 'self-love' entirely deceives me, my praise of folly has not been altogether foolish.

Now for the charge of biting sarcasm. My answer is that the intelligent have always enjoyed freedom to exercise their wit on the common life of man, and with impunity, provided that they kept their liberty within reasonable limits. This makes me marvel all the more at the sensitivity of present-day ears which can bear to hear practically nothing but honorific titles. Moreover, you can find a good many people whose religious sense is so distorted that they find the most serious blasphemies against Christ more bearable than the slightest joke on pope or prince, especially if it touches their daily bread. And to criticize men's lives without mentioning any names — I ask you, does this look like sarcasm, or rather warning and advice? Again, on how many charges am I not my own self-critic? Furthermore, if every type of man is included, it is clear that all the vices are censured, not any individual. And so anyone who protests that he is injured betrays his own guilty conscience, or at any rate his apprehensions. St Jerome amused himself in this way with far more freedom and sarcasm, sometimes even mentioning names. I have not only refrained from naming anyone but have also moderated my style so that the sensible reader will easily understand that my intention was to give pleasure, not pain. Nowhere have I stirred up the hidden cesspool of crime as Juvenal did; the ridiculous rather than the squalid was what I set out to survey. Finally, if anyone is still unappeased by all I have said, he should at least remember that there is merit in being attacked by Folly, for when I made her the narrator I had to maintain her character in appropriate style. But why do I say all this to you, an advocate without peer for giving your best service to causes even when they are not the best? Farewell, learned More; be a stout champion to your namesake Folly. From the country, 9 June 1508

Janus Secundus

(Jan Everaerts, 1511-1536)

Basium III

*Da mihi suaviolum, dicebam, blanda puella;
libasti labris mox mea labra tuis.
Inde, velut presso qui territus angue resultat,
ora repente meo vellis ab ore procul.
Non hoc suaviolum dare, Lux mea, sed dare tantum
est desiderium flebile suavioli.*

I. *Give me a little kiss, sweet girl, I was saying;
and soon you are tasting my lips with your lips.
But then, like someone jumping back terrified after stepping on a snake,
your mouth you wish suddenly far from my mouth.
This is not to give a little kiss, my light, but to give the desire
and deplorable absence of one.*

II *“One Kiss, enchanting Maid!” (I cry’d;) -
One little Kiss! and then adieu!
Your lips, with luscious crimson dyed,
To mine with trembling rapture flew.*

*But quick those lips my lips forsake,
With wanton, tantalizing jest;
So starts some rustic from the snake
Beneath his heedless footstep prest.*

*Is this to grant the wish’d-for Kiss? -
Ah, no, my Love! – ’tis but to fire
The bosom with a transient bliss,
Inflaming unallay’d desire.*

John Nott (1812)

Ogier Gisleen van Busbeke

(Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, Augerius Gislenius Busbequius ca. 1522 - 1592)

The Turkish Letters, 1555-1562

Busbecq, a Fleming, was the ambassador of the Holy Roman Emperor at the Sublime Porte (the Turkish Sultan's court in Constantinople) from 1555-62. His letters provide important foreign accounts of the Ottoman state.

At Buda I made my first acquaintance with the Janissaries; this is the name by which the Turks call the infantry of the royal guard. The Turkish state has 12,000 of these troops when the corps is at its full strength. They are scattered through every part of the empire, either to garrison the forts against the enemy, or to protect the Christians and Jews from the violence of the mob. There is no district with any considerable amount of population, no borough or city, which has not a detachment of Janissaries to protect the Christians, Jews, and other helpless people from outrage and wrong.

A garrison of Janissaries is always stationed in the citadel of Buda. The dress of these men consists of a robe reaching down to the ankles, while, to cover their heads, they employ a cowl which, by their account, was originally a cloak sleeve, part of which contains the head, while the remainder hangs down and flaps against the neck. On their forehead is placed a silver gilt cone of considerable height, studded with stones of no great value.

These Janissaries generally came to me in pairs. When they were admitted to my dining room they first made a bow, and then came quickly up to me, all but running, and touched my dress or hand, as if they intended to kiss it. After this they would thrust into my hand a nosegay of the hyacinth or narcissus; then they would run back to the door almost as quickly as they came, taking care not to turn their backs, for this, according to their code, would be a serious breach of etiquette. After reaching the door, they would stand respectfully with their arms crossed, and their eyes bent on the ground, looking more like monks than warriors. On receiving a few small coins (which was what they wanted) they bowed again, thanked me in loud tones, and went off blessing me for my kindness. To tell you the truth, if I had not been told beforehand that they were Janissaries, I should, without hesitation, have taken them for members of some order of Turkish monks, or brethren of some Moslem college. Yet these are the famous Janissaries, whose approach inspires terror everywhere.

The Turkish monarch going to war takes with him over 400 camels and nearly as many baggage mules, of which a great part are loaded with rice and other kinds of grain. These mules and camels also serve to carry tents and armour, and likewise tools and munitions for the campaign. . . . The invading army carefully abstains from encroaching on its magazines at the outset; as they are well aware that when the season for campaigning draws to a close, they will have to retreat over districts wasted by the enemy, or scraped bare by countless hordes of men and droves of hungry animals, as if they had been devastated by locusts; accordingly they reserve their stores as much as possible for this emergency. Then the Sultan's magazines are opened, and a ration just sufficient to sustain life is daily weighed out to the Janissaries

and other troops of the royal household. The rest of the army is badly off, unless they have provided some supplies at their own expense. . . . On such occasions they take out a few spoonfuls of flour and put them into water, adding some butter, and seasoning the mess with salt and spices; these ingredients are boiled, and a large bowl of gruel is thus obtained. Of this they eat once or twice a day, according to the quantity they have, without any bread, unless they have brought some biscuit with them.... Sometimes they have recourse to horseflesh; dead horses are of course plentiful in their great hosts, and such beasts as are in good condition when they die furnish a meal not to be despised by famished soldiers.

From this you will see that it is the patience, self-denial and thrift of the Turkish soldier that enable him to face the most trying circumstances and come safely out of' the dangers that surround him. What a contrast to our men! Christian soldiers on a campaign refuse to put up with their ordinary food, and call for thrushes, becaficos [a small bird esteemed a dainty, as it feeds on figs and grapes], and suchlike dainty dishes! ... It makes me shudder to think of what the result of a struggle between such different systems must be; one of us must prevail and the other be destroyed, at any rate we cannot both exist]in safety. On their side is the vast wealth of their empire, unimpaired resources, experience and practice in arms, a veteran soldiery, an uninterrupted series of victories, readiness to endure hardships, union, order, discipline, thrift and watchfulness. On ours are found an empty exchequer, luxurious habits, exhausted resources, broken spirits, a raw and insubordinate soldiery, and greedy quarrels; there is no regard for discipline, license runs riot, the men indulge in drunkenness and debauchery, and worst of all, the enemy are accustomed to victory, we to defeat. Can we doubt what the result must be? The only obstacle is Persia, whose position on his rear forces the invader to take precautions. The fear of Persia gives us a respite, but it is only for a time.

No distinction is attached to birth among the Turks; the deference to be paid to a man is measured by the position he holds in the public service. There is no fighting for precedence; a man's place is marked out by the duties he discharges. In making his appointments the Sultan pays no regard to any pretensions on the score of wealth or rank, nor does he take into consideration recommendations or popularity, he considers each case on its own merits, and examines carefully into the character, ability, and disposition of the man whose promotion is in question. It is by merit that men rise in the service, a system which ensures that posts should only be assigned to the competent. Each man in Turkey carries in his own hand his ancestry and his position in life, which he may make or mar as he will. Those who receive the highest offices from the Sultan are for the most part the sons of shepherds or herdsmen, and so far from being ashamed of their parentage, they actually glory in it, and consider it a matter of boasting that they owe nothing to the accident of birth; for they do not believe that high qualities are either natural or hereditary, nor do they think that they can be handed down from father to son, but that they are partly the gift of God, and partly the result of good training, great industry, and unwearied zeal; arguing that high qualities do not descend from a father to his son or heir, any more than a talent for music, mathematics, or the like; and that the mind does not derive its origin from the father, so that the son should necessarily be like the father in character, our emanates from heaven, and is thence infused into the human body. Among the Turks, therefore, honours, high posts, and judgeships are the rewards of great ability and good service. If a man be dishonest, or lazy, or careless, he remains at the bottom of the ladder, an object of contempt; for such qualities there are no honours in Turkey!

This is the reason that they are successful in their undertakings, that they lord it over others, and are daily extending the bounds of their empire. These are not our ideas, with us there is no opening left for merit; birth is the standard for everything; the prestige of birth is the sole key to advancement in the public service.