

Notes to “In Praise of Folly” by Desiderius Erasmus

Richard Walters, December 2017



1. Dedication to Thomas More
 - a. "But I would have them whom the lightness or foolery of the argument may offend to consider that mine is not the first of this kind, but the same thing that has been often practiced even by great authors: when Homer, so many ages since, did the like with the battle of frogs and mice; Virgil, with the gnat and puddings; Ovid, with the nut; when Polycrates and his corrector Isocrates extolled tyranny; Glauco, injustice; Favorinus, deformity and the quartan ague; Synescius, baldness; Lucian, the fly and flattery; when Seneca made such sport with Claudius' canonizations; Plutarch, with his dialogue between Ulysses and Gryllus; Lucian and Apuleius, with the ass; and some other, I know not who, with the hog that made his last will and testament, of which also even St. Jerome makes mention."
 - b. "...you'll meet with some so preposterously religious that they will Sooner endure the broadest scoffs even against Christ himself than hear the Pope or a prince be touched in the least...."
2. Overview
 - a. This text is very well organized, for an oration. As such, I will organize this outline by the focus of each point. And this is convenient, because there are no chapters to break the dialogue.
 - b. It is absolutely vital to understand that the entire text is spoken by the Greek Goddess "Folly." The moment that you forget this, the intended tone is lost. For this reason, I purposefully directed everyone to listen to the audiobook read by Anna Simon. Even though she mispronounces a few words here and there, having the text read by a woman truly completes the illusion Erasmus wishes to convey. And we should forgive Miss Simon for any errors, because there are so many difficult words to pronounce, that anyone should fail at some large percent of them.
 - c. The "point" of this book, if I could summarize it briefly, is to expose foolishness that is being passed as wisdom. The genius of the book is the vehicle for this critique. By choosing essentially a court jester to deliver the critique, Erasmus is able to say things that a normal person would never be able to say.
 - d. Pay attention to the last points Erasmus makes. Once he is done roasting the self-important sages of his time, he manages to turn the world topsy-turvy with the suggestion that all Christians suffer from a type of madness. And, understanding the definition of madness by that time, it seems that he is right.
3. The text starts by convincing the audience that our speaker is none other than the Goddess Folly, herself. She runs through her proofs.
 - a. She has already brought delight and laughter to everyone present
 - i. "And as it usually happens when the sun begins to show his beams, or when after a sharp winter the spring breathes afresh on the earth, all things immediately get a new face, new color, and recover as it were a certain kind of youth again: in like manner by but beholding me you have in an instant gotten another kind of countenance; and so what the otherwise great rhetoricians with their tedious and long-studied orations can hardly effect, to wit, to remove the trouble of the mind, I have done it at once with my single look."
 - b. Her dress
 - i. **"I am no counterfeit, nor do I carry one thing in my looks and an other in my breast. No, I am in every respect so like myself that neither can they dissemble**

me who arrogate to themselves the appearance and title of wise men and walk like asses in scarlet hoods, though after all their hypocrisy Midas' ears will discover their master. A most ungrateful generation of men that, when they are wholly given up to my party, are yet publicly ashamed of the name, as taking it for a reproach; for which cause, since in truth they are morotatoi, fools, and yet would appear to the world to be wise men and Thales, we'll even call them morosophous, wise fools."

- c. Her parentage
 - i. "Yet, mistake me not, 'twas not that blind and decrepit Plutus in Aristophanes that got me, but such as he was in his full strength and pride of youth; and not that only, but at such a time when he had been well heated with nectar, of which he had, at one of the banquets of the gods, taken a dose extraordinary."
- d. The place of her birth because "nowadays that is looked upon as a main point of nobility"
 - i. "...in the Fortunate Islands, where all things grew without plowing or sowing; where neither labor, nor old age, nor disease was ever heard of; and in whose fields neither daffodil, mallows, onions, beans, and such contemptible things would ever grow, but, on the contrary, rue, angelica, bugloss, marjoram, trefoils, roses, violets, lilies, and all the gardens of Adonis invite both your sight and your smelling."
- e. Her companions
 - i. "...this here, which you observe with that proud cast of her eye, is Philautia, **Self-love**; she with the smiling countenance, that is ever and anon clapping her hands, is Kolakia, **Flattery**; she that looks as if she were half asleep is Lethe, **Oblivion**; she that sits leaning on both elbows with her hands clutched together is Misoponia, **Laziness**; she with the garland on her head, and that smells so strong of perfumes, is Hedone, **Pleasure**; she with those staring eyes, moving here and there, is Anoia, **Madness**; she with the smooth skin and full pampered body is Tryphe, **Wantonness**; and, as to the two gods that you see with them, the one is Komos, **Intemperance**, the other Ecgretos hypnos, **Deep Sleep**."
4. Having identified herself, Folly intends to show the extent of her deity, and to wonder why none have yet made written praises to her as they do to the other Gods.
 - a. She argues first that she is the true source of all life.
 - i. "But tell me, I beseech you, what man is that would submit his neck to the noose of wedlock, if, as wise men should, he did but first truly weigh the inconvenience of the thing? Or what woman is there would ever go to it did she seriously consider either the peril of child-bearing or the trouble of bringing them up? So then, if you owe your beings to wedlock, you owe that wedlock to this my follower, Madness"
 - b. She is the source of pleasure
 - i. "But tell me, by Jupiter, what part of man's life is that that is not sad, crabbed, unpleasant, insipid, troublesome, unless it be seasoned with pleasure, that is to say, folly?"
 - c. She gifts the aged with a second childhood, that they can walk into oblivion without care
 - i. She assists the aged "by bringing them back to a second childhood, from whence they are not improperly called twice children. Which, if you ask me how I do it, I shall not be shy in the point. I bring them to our River Lethe (for its springhead rises in the Fortunate Islands, and that other of hell is but a brook in

- comparison), from which, as soon as they have drunk down a long forgetfulness, they wash away by degrees the perplexity of their minds, and so wax young again.”
- ii. “In which respect also they have this advantage of children, in that they want the only pleasure of the others’ life, we’ll suppose it prattling. Add to this that old men are more eagerly delighted with children, and they, again, with old men. “Like to like,” quoted the Devil to the collier. For what difference between them, but that the one has more wrinkles and years upon his head than the other? Otherwise, the brightness of their hair, toothless mouth, weakness of body, love of mild, broken speech, chatting, toying, forgetfulness, inadvertency, and briefly, all other their actions agree in everything. And by how much the nearer they approach to this old age, by so much they grow backward into the likeness of children, until like them they pass from life to death, without any weariness of the one, or sense of the other.”
- d. She frees men of the burden of wisdom
 - i. **“And if men would but refrain from all commerce with wisdom and give up themselves to be governed by me, they should never know what it were to be old, but solace themselves with a perpetual youth. Do but observe our grim philosophers that are perpetually beating their brains on knotty subjects, and for the most part you’ll find them grown old before they are scarcely young.”**
 - ii. “I give them such as is worthy of myself, to wit, that they take to them a wife—a silly thing, God wot, and foolish, yet wanton and pleasant, by which means the roughness of the masculine temper is seasoned and sweetened by her folly.”
 - iii. *Note: There is a section here where Erasmus makes some sexist comments about women that were no doubt ordinary in his time. I am skipping over this, but modern women reading this section will likely take some offense.*
 - e. She is the reason people can stay friends
 - i. “And now tell me if to wink, slip over, be blind at, or deceived in the vices of our friends, nay, to admire and esteem them for virtues, be not at least the next degree to folly? What is it when one kisses his mistress’ freckle neck, another the watt on her nose? When a father shall swear his squint-eyed child is more lovely than Venus? What is this, I say, but mere folly?”
 - ii. “And what has been said of friendship may more reasonably be presumed of matrimony, which in truth is no other than an inseparable conjunction of life. Good God! What divorces, or what not worse than that, would daily happen were not the converse between a man and his wife supported and cherished by flattery, apishness, gentleness, ignorance, dissembling, certain retainers of mine also!”
 - f. She is also the source of self-confidence, which is to her, essentially self-deception
 - i. “... if you should exclude me, there’s no man but would be so far from enduring another that he would stink in his own nostrils, be nauseated with his own actions, and himself become odious to himself; forasmuch as Nature, in too many things rather a step-dame than a parent to us, has imprinted that evil in men, especially such as have least judgment, that everyone repents him of his own condition and admires that of others.”
 - ii. “For what is more foolish than for a man to study nothing else than how to please himself? To make himself the object of his own admiration?”

- iii. “So necessary a thing it is that everyone flatter himself and commend himself to himself before he can be commended by others Lastly, since it is the chief point of happiness “that a man is willing to be what he is,” you have further abridged in this my Self-love, that no man is ashamed of his own face, no man of his own wit, no man of his own parentage, no man of his own house, no man of his manner of living, not any man of his own country; so that a Highlander has no desire to change with an Italian, a Thracian with an Athenian, not a Scythian for the Fortunate Islands.”
- 5. Every point for the rest of the text continues to show how people are beholden to Folly for many of her other gifts. But, at this point she turns to begin her assault on the wise.
 - a. She quotes Plato:
 - i. ““Happy is that commonwealth where a philosopher is prince, or whose prince is addicted to philosophy.”
 - ii. She comments that: “When yet if you consult historians, you’ll find no princes more pestilent to the commonwealth than where the empire has fallen to some smatterer in philosophy or one given to letters.”
 - b. “Invite a wise man to a feast and he’ll spoil the company, either with morose silence or troublesome disputes. Take him out to dance, and you’ll swear “a cow would have done it better.” Bring him to the theatre, and his very looks are enough to spoil all.”
- 6. She asserts that all of society exists on account of her companion Flattery.
 - a. “...what power was it that drew those stony, oaken, and wild people into cities but flattery?”
 - b. “For what is more foolish, say they, than for a suppliant suitor to flatter the people, to buy their favor with gifts, to court the applauses of so many fools, to please himself with their acclamations, to be carried on the people’s shoulders as in triumph, and have a brazen statue in the marketplace?”
- 7. She returns to attacking prudence (wisdom) and showing the advantages of the folly
 - a. “... if prudence depends upon experience, to whom is the honor of that name more proper? To the wise man, who partly out of modesty and partly distrust of himself, attempts nothing; or the fool, whom neither modesty which he never had, nor danger which he never considers, can discourage from anything? The wise man has recourse to the books of the ancients, and from thence picks nothing but subtleties of words. The fool, in undertaking and venturing on the business of the world, gathers, if I mistake not, the true prudence, such as Homer though blind may be said to have seen when he said, “The burnt child dreads the fire.” For there are two main obstacles to the knowledge of things, modesty that casts a mist before the understanding, and fear that, having fancied a danger, dissuades us from the attempt. But from these folly sufficiently frees us, and few there are that rightly understand of what great advantage it is to blush at nothing and attempt everything.”
 - b. “If anyone seeing a player acting his part on a stage should go about to strip him of his disguise and show him to the people in his true native form, would he not, think you, not only spoil the whole design of the play, but deserve himself to be pelted off with stones as a phantastical fool and one out of his wits? But nothing is more common with them than such changes; the same person one while impersonating a woman, and another while a man; now a youngster, and by and by a grim seignior; now a king, and presently a peasant; now a god, and in a trice again an ordinary fellow. But to discover this were to spoil all, it being the only thing that entertains the eyes of the spectators. And what is all this life but a kind of comedy, wherein men walk up and down in one

another's disguises and act their respective parts, till the property-man brings them back to the attiring house. And yet he often orders a different dress, and makes him that came but just now off in the robes of a king put on the rags of a beggar. Thus are all things represented by counterfeit, and yet without this there was no living."

- c. "Be present then awhile, and assist me, you daughters of Jupiter, while I make it out that there is no way to that so much famed wisdom, nor access to that fortress as they call it of happiness, but under the banner of Folly.
 - d. **Specifically attacking stoics she says: "A man dead to all sense of nature and common affections, and no more moved with love or pity than if he were a flint or rock; whose censure nothing escapes; that commits no errors himself, but has a lynx's eyes upon others; measures everything by an exact line, and forgives nothing; pleases himself with himself only; the only rich, the only wise, the only free man, and only king; in brief, the only man that is everything, but in his own single judgment only; that cares not for the friendship of any man, being himself a friend to no man; makes no doubt to make the gods stoop to him, and condemns and laughs at the whole actions of our life? And yet such a beast is this their perfect wise man."**
8. Without the easement of Folly, life is a misery.
- a. "Suppose a man in some lofty high tower, and that he could look round him, as the poets say Jupiter was now and then wont. To how many misfortunes would he find the life of man subject? How miserable, to say no worse, our birth, how difficult our education; to how many wrongs our childhood exposed, to what pains our youth; how unsupportable our old age, and grievous our unavoidable death? As also what troops of diseases beset us, how many casualties hang over our heads, how many troubles invade us, and how little there is that is not steeped in gall? To say nothing of those evils one man brings upon another, as poverty, imprisonment, infamy, dishonesty, racks, snares, treachery, reproaches, actions, deceits—but I'm got into as endless a work as numbering the sands—for what offenses mankind have deserved these things, or what angry god compelled them to be born into such miseries is not my present business. Yet he that shall diligently examine it with himself, would he not, think you, approve the example of the Milesian virgins and kill himself?"
 - b. "I, partly through ignorance, partly unadvisedness, and sometimes through forgetfulness of evil, do now and then so sprinkle pleasure with the hopes of good and sweeten men up in their greatest misfortunes that they are not willing to leave this life.
 - c. Through the blessings of Folly older men are "... so delighted with life and to be thought young that one dyes his gray hairs; another covers his baldness with a periwig; another gets a set of new teeth; another falls desperately in love with a young wench and keeps more flickering about her than a young man would have been ashamed of. For to see such an old crooked piece with one foot in the grave to marry a plump young wench, and that too without a portion, is so common that men almost expect to be commended for it. But the best sport of all is to see our old women, even dead with age, and such skeletons one would think they had stolen out of their graves, and ever mumbling in their mouths, 'Life is sweet;' and as old as they are, still caterwauling, daily plastering their face, scarce ever from the glass, gossiping, dancing, and writing love letters. These things are laughed at as foolish, as indeed they are; yet they please themselves, live merrily, swim in pleasure, and in a word are happy, by my courtesy."
9. Folly makes some points about human nature. Men are foolish, and to expect them to rise above this condition is to expect a horse to be a grammarian.

- a. "... methinks I hear the philosophers opposing it and saying 'tis a miserable thing for a man to be foolish, to err, mistake, and know nothing truly. Nay rather, this is to be a man. And why they should call it miserable, I see no reason; forasmuch as we are so born, so bred, so instructed, nay such is the common condition of us all. And nothing can be called miserable that suits with its kind, unless perhaps you'll think a man such because he can neither fly with birds, nor walk on all four with beasts, and is not armed with horns as a bull. For by the same reason he would call the warlike horse unfortunate, because he understood not grammar, nor ate cheese-cakes; and the bull miserable, because he'd make so ill a wrestler. And therefore, as a horse that has no skill in grammar is not miserable, no more is man in this respect, for that they agree with his nature."
 - b. "As if this had the least face of truth, that Nature that was so solicitously watchful in the production of gnats, herbs, and flowers should have so slept when she made man, that he should have need to be helped by sciences, which that old devil Theuth, the evil genius of mankind, first invented for his destruction, and are so little conducive to happiness that they rather obstruct it."**
10. Folly takes a moment to attack the sciences. It should be noted here that Erasmus is not attacking science itself, but rather what passes for science in his time. People of our own time hear criticism of science and often get very defensive. Sound science is never touched by this critique. Rather, Folly is shining a light on science that is hardly science at all. It is closer to wild conjecture and pure opinion.
 - a. "Sciences therefore crept into the world with other the pests of mankind, from the same head from whence all other mischiefs spring; we'll suppose it devils, for so the name imports when you call them demons, that is to say, knowing. For that simple people of the golden age, being wholly ignorant of everything called learning, lived only by the guidance and dictates of nature; for what use of grammar, where every man spoke the same language and had no further design than to understand one another? What use of logic, where there was no bickering about the double-meaning words? What need of rhetoric, where there were no lawsuits? Or to what purpose laws, where there were no ill manners? from which without doubt good laws first came. Besides, they were more religious than with an impious curiosity to dive into the secrets of nature, the dimension of stars, the motions, effects, and hidden causes of things; as believing it a crime for any man to attempt to be wise beyond his condition. And as to the inquiry of what was beyond heaven, that madness never came into their heads. But the purity of the golden age declining by degrees, first, as I said before, arts were invented by the evil genii; and yet but few, and those too received by fewer. After that the Chaldean superstition and Greek newfangledness, that had little to do, added I know not how many more; mere torments of wit, and that so great that even grammar alone is work enough for any man for his whole life."
 - b. "Though yet among these sciences those only are in esteem that come nearest to common sense, that is to say, folly. Divines are half starved, naturalists out of heart, astrologers laughed at, and logicians slighted; only the physician is worth all the rest. And among them too, the more unlearned, impudent, or unadvised he is, the more he is esteemed, even among princes."
11. Folly again draws attention to nature's perfection.
 - a. "Nature hates all false coloring and is ever best where she is least adulterated with art."**

- b. "What is more prosperous or wonderful than the bee? And though they have not the same judgment of sense as other bodies have, yet wherein has architecture gone beyond their building of houses?"
 - c. "I can never sufficiently praise that Pythagoras in a dunghill cock, who being but one had been yet everything, a philosopher, a man, a woman, a king, a private man, a fish, a horse, a frog, and, I believe too, a sponge; and at last concluded that no creature was more miserable than man, for that all other creatures are content with those bounds that nature set them, only man endeavors to exceed them. And again, among men he gives the precedency not to the learned or the great, but the fool."
 - i. *Note: "dunghill cock" is a reference to the expression: "Every cock is bold on his own dunghill."*
 - d. "... among men they are least happy that study wisdom, as being in this twice fools, that when they are born men, they should yet so far forget their condition as to affect the life of gods; and after the example of the giants, with their philosophical gimcracks make a war upon nature: so they on the other side seem as little miserable as is possible who come nearest to beasts and never attempt anything beyond man."
12. Having again attacked the wise, now she turns to praise those whom people call Fools.
- a. "They are not distracted with the fear of evils to come nor the hopes of future good. In short, they are not disturbed with those thousands of cares to which this life is subject."
 - b. " And now tell me, you wise fool, with how many troublesome cares your mind is continually perplexed; heap together all the discommodities of your life, and then you'll be sensible from how many evils I have delivered my fools."**
 - c. "Whence it is that whereas the world is so differently affected one towards another, that all men indifferently admit them as their companions, desire, feed, cherish, embrace them, take their parts upon all occasions, and permit them without offense to do or say what they like."
 - d. "...whatever a fool has in his heart, he both shows it in his looks and expresses it in his discourse; while the wise men's are those two tongues which the same Euripides mentions, whereof the one speaks truth, the other what they judge most seasonable for the occasion."
 - e. "...even open reproaches are heard with pleasure; so that the same thing which, if it came from a wise man's mouth might prove a capital crime, spoken by a fool is received with delight."**
 - i. *Note: Erasmus knows this all too well. It is the premise supporting this entire satire.*
13. Now that we know the nature of Folly's fortunate fools, she wants to contrast them to wise men.
- a. "Fancy to me now some example of wisdom you'd set up against him; one that had spent his childhood and youth in learning the sciences and lost the sweetest part of his life in watchings, cares, studies, and for the remaining part of it never so much as tasted the least of pleasure; ever sparing, poor, sad, sour, unjust, and rigorous to himself, and troublesome and hateful to others; broken with paleness, leanness, crassness, sore eyes, and an old age and death contracted before their time (though yet, what matter is it, when he die that never lived?); and such is the picture of this great wise man."
14. She digresses a moment to discuss madness and define it more clearly.
- a. "For neither he that having weak eyes should take a mule for an ass, nor he that should admire an insipid poem as excellent would be presently thought mad; but he that not only errs in his senses but is deceived also in his judgment, and that too more than

ordinary and upon all occasions—he, I must confess, would be thought to come very near to it. As if anyone hearing an ass bray should take it for excellent music, or a beggar conceive himself a king. And yet this kind of madness, if, as it commonly happens, it turn to pleasure, it brings a great delight not only to them that are possessed with it but to those also that behold it, though perhaps they may not be altogether so mad as the other, for the species of this madness is much larger than the people take it to be. For one mad man laughs at another, and beget themselves a mutual pleasure.”

- b. “And in this every man is the more happy in how many respects the more he is mad.”
15. And now that Folly has warmed up, it is time to launch into her roast. I am going to call this “round 1,” because in the first pass, she mostly just identifies groups who believe themselves wise, and yet are truly beholden to her – that is to say they are fools.
- a. Pythagoreans or those who spend time “changing rounds into squares, and presently again squares into rounds”
 - i. “...never knowing either measure or end, till at last, reduced to the utmost poverty, there remains not to them so much as a place where they may lay their head, or wherewith to fill their bellies. And why all this? but that they may pass over a few years in feeding their foolish fancies.”
 - b. Alchemists or those who “hunt all about after a certain fifth essence”
 - i. “... men so bewitched with this present hope that it never repents them of their pains or expense, but are ever contriving how they may cheat themselves, till, having spent all, there is not enough left them to provide another furnace. And yet they have not done dreaming these their pleasant dreams but encourage others, as much as in them lies, to the same happiness. And at last, when they are quite lost in all their expectations, they cheer up themselves with this sentence, “In great things the very attempt is enough,” and then complain of the shortness of man’s life that is not sufficient for so great an understanding.”
 - c. Gamesters
 - i. “... ’tis a foolish and ridiculous sight to see some addicted so to it that they can no sooner hear the rattling of the dice but their heart leaps and dances again. And then when time after time they are so far drawn on with the hopes of winning that they have made shipwreck of all, and having split their ship on that rock of dice, no less terrible than the bishop and his clerks, scarce got alive to shore, they choose rather to cheat any man of their just debts than not pay the money they lost, lest otherwise, forsooth, they be thought no men of their words.”
 - d. Lovers of fantasy or fiction
 - i. “...that that kind of men are wholly ours who love to hear or tell feigned miracles and strange lies and are never weary of any tale, though never so long, so it be of ghosts, spirits, goblins, devils, or the like; which the further they are from truth, the more readily they are believed and the more do they tickle their itching ears.”
 - e. Superstitious merchants and others of note in society
 - i. “And now suppose some merchant, soldier, or judge, out of so many rapines, parts with some small piece of money. He straight conceives all that sink of his whole life quite cleansed; so many perjuries, so many lusts, so many debaucheries, so many contentions, so many murders, so many deceits, so many breaches of trusts, so many treacheries bought off, as it were by compact; and so bought off that they may begin upon a new score. But what is more

foolish than those, or rather more happy, who daily reciting those seven verses of the Psalms promise to themselves more than the top of felicity? Which magical verses some devil or other, a merry one without doubt but more a blab of his tongue than crafty, is believed to have discovered to St. Bernard, but not without a trick. And these are so foolish that I am half ashamed of them myself, and yet they are approved, and that not only by the common people but even the professors of religion. “

- ii. “And what, are not they also almost the same where several countries avouch to themselves their peculiar saint, and as everyone of them has his particular gift, so also his particular form of worship? As, one is good for the toothache; another for groaning women; a third, for stolen goods; a fourth, for making a voyage prosperous; and a fifth, to cure sheep of the rot; and so of the rest, for it would be too tedious to run over all. And some there are that are good for more things than one; but chiefly, the Virgin Mother, to whom the common people do in a manner attribute more than to the Son.”
- iii. “All these hang up their tablets, but no one gives thanks for his recovery from folly; so sweet a thing it is not to be wise, that on the contrary men rather pray against anything than folly.”

16. In turning to talk about professors, Folly takes time to highlight the contribution of her companion “Self Love.” This is a little bit of a return to the earlier theme that men are granted confidence through a deception of self-importance, or flattery.

- a. “...to what purpose is it I should mind you of our professors of arts? Forasmuch as this self-love is so natural to them all that they had rather part with their father’s land than their foolish opinions; but chiefly players, fiddlers, orators, and poets, of which the more ignorant each of them is, the more insolently he pleases himself, that is to say vaunts and spreads out his plumes.”
- b. **“And therefore if the more foolish a man is, the more he pleases himself and is admired by others, to what purpose should he beat his brains about true knowledge, which first will cost him dear, and next render him the more troublesome and less confident, and lastly, please only a few?”**
- c. “I conceive, how much satisfaction this Self-love, who has a sister also not unlike herself called Flattery, begets everywhere; for self-love is no more than the soothing of a man’s self, which, done to another, is Flattery.”

17. Folly steps up on a soapbox and makes the following philosophical point.

- a. **“... they are quite beside the mark that place the happiness of men in things themselves, since it only depends upon opinion. For so great is the obscurity and variety of human affairs that nothing can be clearly known, as it is truly said by our academics, the least insolent of all the philosophers; or if it could, it would but obstruct the pleasure of life. Lastly, the mind of man is so framed that it is rather taken with the false colors than truth; of which if anyone has a mind to make the experiment, let him go to church and hear sermons, in which if there be anything serious delivered, the audience is either asleep, yawning, or weary of it; but if the preacher—pardon my mistake, I would have said declaimer—as too often it happens, fall but into an old wives’ story, they’re presently awake, prick up their ears and gape after it. In like manner, if there be any poetical saint, or one of whom there goes more stories than ordinary, as for example, a George, a Christopher, or a Barbara, you shall see him more religiously worshipped than Peter, Paul, or even Christ himself. But these things are not for this place.”**

18. She then makes the observation that happiness is a relative thing. Further, she is the author of happiness as well.
- a. "And now at how cheap a rate is this happiness purchased! ... For suppose a man were eating rotten stockfish, the very smell of which would choke another, and yet believed it a dish for the gods, what difference is there as to his happiness?"
 - b. "But how much larger and more present is the benefit you receive by me, since, as it were with a perpetual drunkenness I fill your minds with mirth, fancies, and jollities, and that too without any trouble?"
19. And finally Folly is ready for "round 2" of her roast. She starts out slowly talking about common people; how lovers, gold-diggers, gluttons, layabouts, brokers, and thieves. The list goes on and on with quick examples (p.29).
20. Of all of the foolish people, Folly wants to put the Grammarians at the top of the list. She goes on at length about them.
- a. "...the grammarians hold the first place, a generation of men than whom nothing would be more miserable, nothing more perplexed, nothing more hated of the gods, did not I allay the troubles of that pitiful profession with a certain kind of pleasant madness."
 - b. "And yet by my courtesy it is that they think themselves the most excellent of all men, so greatly do they please themselves in frightening a company of fearful boys with a thundering voice and big looks, tormenting them with ferules, rods, and whips; and, laying about them without fear or wit, imitate the ass in the lion's skin. In the meantime all that nastiness seems absolute spruceness, that stench a perfume, and that miserable slavery a kingdom, and such too as they would not change their tyranny for Phalaris' or Dionysius' empire. Nor are they less happy in that new opinion they have taken up of being learned; for whereas most of them beat into boys, heads nothing but foolish toys, yet, you good gods!"
 - c. "...if any of them happen to find out who was Anchises' mother, or pick out of some worm-eaten manuscript a word not commonly known—as suppose it bubsequa for a cowherd, bovinator for a wrangler, manticulator for a cutputse—or dig up the ruins of some ancient monument with the letters half eaten out; O Jupiter! what towerings! what triumphs! what commendations! as if they had conquered Africa or taken in Babylon."
 - d. "But how much happier is this my writer's dotage who never studies for anything but puts in writing whatever he pleases or what comes first in his head, though it be but his dreams; and all this with small waste of paper, as well knowing that the vainer those trifles are, the higher esteem they will have with the greater number, that is to say all the fools and unlearned."
21. Next to the roast are the Logicians and Sophists
- a. "...a generation of men more prattling than an echo and the worst of them able to outchat a hundred of the best picked gossips. And yet their condition would be much better were they only full of words and not so given to scolding that they most obstinately hack and hew one another about a matter of nothing and make such a sputter about terms and words till they have quite lost the sense."
22. The philosophers are carved up next.
- a. **"And next these come our philosophers, so much revered for their furred gowns and starched beards that they look upon themselves as the only wise men and all others as shadows. And yet how pleasantly do they dote while they frame in their heads innumerable worlds; measure out the sun, the moon, the stars, nay and heaven itself, as it were, with a pair of compasses; lay down the causes of lightning, winds,**

eclipses, and other the like inexplicable matters; and all this too without the least doubting, as if they were Nature's secretaries, or dropped down among us from the council of the gods; while in the meantime Nature laughs at them and all their blind conjectures. For that they know nothing, even this is a sufficient argument, that they don't agree among themselves and so are incomprehensible touching every particular. These, though they have not the least degree of knowledge, profess yet that they have mastered all; nay, though they neither know themselves, nor perceive a ditch or block that lies in their way, for that perhaps most of them are half blind, or their wits a wool-gathering, yet give out that they have discovered ideas, universalities, separated forms, first matters, quiddities, haecceities, formalities, and the like stuff; things so thin and bodiless that I believe even Lynceus himself was not able to perceive them. But then chiefly do they disdain the unhallowed crowd as often as with their triangles, quadrangles, circles, and the like mathematical devices, more confounded than a labyrinth, and letters disposed one against the other, as it were in battle array, they cast a mist before the eyes of the ignorant. Nor is there wanting of this kind some that pretend to foretell things by the stars and make promises of miracles beyond all things of soothsaying, and are so fortunate as to meet with people that believe them."

23. She calls out the "divines" next.

- a. *Note: The title "divines" as it is used in this text seems to refer to theologians, or religious scholars. The word can also be used to mean any member of the clergy, but I don't think that is what Erasmus meant in 1500. I believe this because he makes specific reference to other members of the clergy outside of his criticism of the divines.*
- b. "... perhaps I had better pass over our divines in silence and not stir this pool or touch this fair but unsavory plant, as a kind of men that are supercilious beyond comparison, and to that too, implacable; lest setting them about my ears, they attack me by troops and force me to a recantation sermon, which if I refuse, they straight pronounce me a heretic. For this is the thunderbolt with which they fright those whom they are resolved not to favor."
- c. "...being happy in their own opinion, and as if they dwelt in the third heaven, they look with haughtiness on all others as poor creeping things and could almost find in their hearts to pity them; while hedged in with so many magisterial definitions, conclusions, corollaries, propositions explicit and implicit, they abound with so many starting-holes that Vulcan's net cannot hold them so fast, but they'll slip through with their distinctions, with which they so easily cut all knots asunder that a hatchet could not have done it better, so plentiful are they in their new-found words and prodigious terms. Besides, while they explicate the most hidden mysteries according to their own fancy—as how the world was first made; how original sin is derived to posterity; in what manner, how much room, and how long time Christ lay in the Virgin's womb; how accidents subsist in the Eucharist without their subject."

24. Further, Folly mercilessly mocks the Divines for other supercilious behavior and ridiculous ideas. This is heavily sarcastic.

- a. "...these are worthy of our great and illuminated divines ... whether it be a possible proposition that God the Father hates the Son; or whether it was possible that Christ could have taken upon Him the likeness of a woman, or of the devil, or of an ass, or of a stone, or of a gourd; and then how that gourd should have preached, wrought miracles, or been hung on the cross; and what Peter had consecrated if he had administered the Sacrament at what time the body of Christ hung upon the cross; or whether at the same

time he might be said to be man; whether after the Resurrection there will be any eating and drinking, since we are so much afraid of hunger and thirst in this world.”

- b. “...’tis a lesser crime to kill a thousand men than to set a stitch on a poor man’s shoe on the Sabbath day; and that a man should rather choose that the whole world with all food and raiment, as they say, should perish, than tell a lie, though never so inconsiderable.”
 - c. **“Paul knew what faith was, and yet when he said, “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, and the evidence of things not seen,” he did not define it doctor-like. And as he understood charity well himself, so he did as illogically divide and define it to others in his first Epistle to the Corinthians, Chapter the thirteenth. And devoutly, no doubt, did the apostles consecrate the Eucharist; yet, had they been asked the question touching the “terminus a quo,” and the “terminus ad quem” of transubstantiation; of the manner how the same body can be in several places at one and the same time; of the difference the body of Christ has in heaven from that of the cross, or this in the Sacrament; in what point of time transubstantiation is, whereas prayer, by means of which it is, as being a discrete quantity, is transient; they would not, I conceive, have answered with the same subtlety as the Scotists dispute and define it. They knew the mother of Jesus, but which of them has so philosophically demonstrated how she was preserved from original sin as have done our divines? Peter received the keys, and from Him too that would not have trusted them with a person unworthy; yet whether he had understanding or no, I know not, for certainly he never attained to that subtlety to determine how he could have the key of knowledge that had no knowledge himself. They baptized far and near, and yet taught nowhere what was the formal, material, efficient, and final cause of baptism, nor made the least mention of delible and indelible characters. They worshipped, ’tis true, but in spirit, following herein no other than that of the Gospel, “God is a Spirit, and they that worship, must worship him in spirit and truth;” yet it does not appear it was at that time revealed to them that an image sketched on the wall with a coal was to be worshipped with the same worship as Christ Himself, if at least the two forefingers be stretched out, the hair long and uncut, and have three rays about the crown of the head. For who can conceive these things, unless he has spent at least six and thirty years in the philosophical and supercelestial whims of Aristotle and the Schoolmen?”**
 - d. **“Although yet the gentlemen are so modest that if they meet with anything written by the apostles not so smooth and even as might be expected from a master, they do not presently condemn it but handsomely bend it to their own purpose, so great respect and honor do they give, partly to antiquity and partly to the name of apostle. And truly ’twas a kind of injustice to require so great things of them that never heard the least word from their masters concerning it.”**
25. Folly isn’t done with the Divines yet. Next she identifies a group who “have learned better,” and who take up the job of censors. And they err to the other extreme, preventing anyone from providing any new interpretation of the scriptures. And, above all, they maintain their sense of superiority over their charges.
- a. “... as censors of the world, they force everyone to a recantation that differs but a hair’s breadth from the least of their explicit or implicit determinations. And those too they pronounce like oracles. This proposition is scandalous; this irreverent; this has a smack of heresy; this no very good sound: so that neither baptism, nor the Gospel, nor Paul, nor Peter, nor St. Jerome, nor St. Augustine, no nor most Aristotelian Thomas himself

can make a man a Christian, without these bachelors too be pleased to give him his grace.”

- b. “I have sometimes laughed myself to see them so tower in their own opinion when they speak most barbarously; and when they humh and hawh so pitifully that none but one of their own tribe can understand them, they call it heights which the vulgar can’t reach; for they say ’tis beneath the dignity of divine mysteries to be cramped and tied up to the narrow rules of grammarians: from whence we may conjecture the great prerogative of divines, if they only have the privilege of speaking corruptly, in which yet every cobbler thinks himself concerned for his share.
26. Finally having finished with the divines (for the moment), she turns her attention next to the monks.
- a. Her first comment is brutal, and prejudicial. She states that “... all men detest them to that height, that they take it for ill luck to meet one of them by chance.”
 - b. “... like pleasant fellows, with all this vileness, ignorance, rudeness, and impudence, they represent to us, for so they call it, the lives of the apostles. Yet what is more pleasant than that they do all things by rule and, as it were, a kind of mathematics, the least swerving from which were a crime beyond forgiveness—as how many knots their shoes must be tied with, of what color everything is, what distinction of habits, of what stuff made, how many straws broad their girdles and of what fashion, how many bushels wide their cowl, how many fingers long their hair, and how many hours sleep.”
 - c. “And yet by reason of these fooleries they not only set slight by others, but each different order, men otherwise professing apostolical charity, despise one another, and for the different wearing of a habit, or that ’tis of darker color, they put all things in combustion.”
 - d. “In a word, ’tis their only care that none of them come near one another in their manner of living, nor do they endeavor how they may be like Christ, but how they may differ among themselves.”
 - e. “And of these, a great part build so much on their ceremonies and petty traditions of men that they think one heaven is too poor a reward for so great merit, little dreaming that the time will come when Christ, not regarding any of these trifles, will call them to account for His precept of charity.”
 - f. **“But Christ, interrupting them in their vanities, which otherwise were endless, will ask them, “Whence this new kind of Jews? I acknowledge one commandment, which is truly mine, of which alone I hear nothing. I promised, ’tis true, my Father’s heritage, and that without parables, not to cowls, odd prayers, and fastings, but to the duties of faith and charity. Nor can I acknowledge them that least acknowledge their faults. They that would seem holier than myself, let them if they like possess to themselves those three hundred sixty-five heavens of Basilides the heretic’s invention, or command them whose foolish traditions they have preferred before my precepts to erect them a new one.” When they shall hear these things and see common ordinary persons preferred before them, with what countenance, think you, will they behold one another? In the meantime they are happy in their hopes, and for this also they are beholding to me.”**
27. Next she exposes the “begging friars”
- a. “... because they are privy to all men’s secrets by means of confessions... if anyone should anger these wasps, they’ll sufficiently revenge themselves in their public sermons.”
28. Folly gives the churchmen a short break next, and turns to revealing the foolishness of Princes

- a. "...though he is but one, all men's eyes are upon him, and in his power it is, either like a good planet to give life and safety to mankind by his harmless influence, or like a fatal comet to send mischief and destruction"
 - b. "...the fortune of princes has many things attending it that are but too apt to train them out of the way, as pleasure, liberty, flattery, excess; for which cause he should the more diligently endeavor and set a watch over himself, lest perhaps he be led aside and fail in his duty."
 - c. "...that True King is over his head, who in a short time will call him to account for every the least trespass, and that so much the more severely by how much more mighty was the empire committed to his charge. These and the like if a prince should duly weigh, and weigh it he would if he were wise, he would neither be able to sleep nor take any hearty repast."
 - d. "They believe they have discharged all the duty of a prince if they hunt every day, keep a stable of fine horses, sell dignities and commanderies, and invent new ways of draining the citizens' purses and bringing it into their own exchequer"
 - e. "And now suppose someone, such as they sometimes are, a man ignorant of laws, little less than an enemy to the public good, and minding nothing but his own, given up to pleasure, a hater of learning, liberty, and justice, studying nothing less than the public safety, but measuring everything by his own will and profit; and then put on him a golden chain that declares the accord of all virtues linked one to another; a crown set with diamonds, that should put him in mind how he ought to excel all others in heroic virtues; besides a scepter, the emblem of justice and an untainted heart; and lastly, a purple robe, a badge of that charity he owes the commonwealth."
29. The court Lords, and nobility are next in line.
- a. "...though there be nothing more indebted, more servile, more witless, more contemptible, yet they would seem as they were the most excellent of all others.... But if you look into their manner of life you'll find them mere sots, as debauched as Penelope's wooers; you know the other part of the verse, which the echo will better tell you than I can. They sleep till noon and have their mercenary Levite come to their bedside, where he chops over his matins before they are half up. Then to breakfast, which is scarce done but dinner stays for them. From thence they go to dice, tables, cards, or entertain themselves with jesters, fools, gambols, and horse tricks. In the meantime they have one or two beverages, and then supper, and after that a banquet, and 'twere well, by Jupiter, there were no more than one. And in this manner do their hours, days, months, years, age slide away without the least irksomeness."
 - b. "everyone of
 - c. "... them pleases himself the more by how much more massive is the chain he swags on his shoulders, as if he meant to show his strength as well as his wealth."
30. Some of Folly's harshest sarcasm yet has been reserved for the Popes, Cardinals and Bishops.
- a. Bishops
 - i. "...they do well enough while they feed themselves only, and for the care of their flock either put it over to Christ or lay it all on their suffragans, as they call them, or some poor vicars. Nor do they so much as remember their name, or what the word bishop signifies, to wit, labor, care, and trouble."
 - b. Cardinals
 - i. "In like manner cardinals, if they thought themselves the successors of the apostles, they would likewise imagine that the same things the other did are

required of them, and that they are not lords but dispensers of spiritual things of which they must shortly give an exact account.”

- c. Popes
 - i. “And for popes, that supply the place of Christ, if they should endeavor to imitate His life, to wit His poverty, labor, doctrine, cross, and contempt of life, or should they consider what the name pope, that is father, or holiness, imports, who would live more disconsolate than themselves? Or who would purchase that chair with all his substance? or defend it, so purchased, with swords, poisons, and all force imaginable?”
 - ii. “To work miracles is old and antiquated, and not in fashion now; to instruct the people, troublesome; to interpret the Scripture, pedantic; to pray, a sign one has little else to do; to shed tears, silly and womanish; to be poor, base; to be vanquished, dishonorable and little becoming him that scarce admits even kings to kiss his slipper; and lastly, to die, uncouth; and to be stretched on a cross, infamous.”
 - iii. “Theirs are only those weapons and sweet blessings which Paul mentions, and of these truly they are bountiful enough: as interdictions, hangings, heavy burdens, reproofs, anathemas, executions in effigy, and that terrible thunderbolt of excommunication, with the very sight of which they sink men’s souls beneath the bottom of hell: which yet these most holy fathers in Christ and His vicars hurl with more fierceness against none than against such as, by the instigation of the devil, attempt to lessen or rob them of Peter’s patrimony.”
31. And finally the Goddess Folly is nearing the end of her exposition. In her final net, she gathers together “the common herd of priests.”
- a. “...if there be anything burdensome, they prudently lay that on other men’s shoulders and shift it from one to the other, as men toss a ball from hand to hand, following herein the example of lay princes who commit the government of their kingdoms to their grand ministers, and they again to others, and leave all study of piety to the common people. In like manner the common people put it over to those they call ecclesiastics, as if themselves were no part of the Church, or that their vow in baptism had lost its obligation. Again, the priests that call themselves secular, as if they were initiated to the world, not to Christ, lay the burden on the regulars; the regulars on the monks; the monks that have more liberty on those that have less; and all of them on the mendicants; the mendicants on the Carthusians, among whom, if anywhere, this piety lies buried, but yet so close that scarce anyone can perceive it. In like manner the popes, the most diligent of all others in gathering in the harvest of money, refer all their apostolical work to the bishops, the bishops to the parsons, the parsons to the vicars, the vicars to their brother mendicants, and they again throw back the care of the flock on those that take the wool.”
32. In a manner of conclusion, Folly concludes her showcase by showing that Fortune is always the enemy of “wise men” and the friend of “fools.”
- a. “In brief, go whither you will, among prelates, princes, judges, magistrates, friends, enemies, from highest to lowest, and you’ll find all things done by money; which, as a wise man condemns it, so it takes a special care not to come near him.”
33. Folly does not wish to leave the stage until she has shown that many great authors have written very fine things about her.
- a. Horace bids us to “mingle our purposes with folly”
 - b. Cicero proclaims that “All things are full of fools.”

- c. In Ecclesiastes it is written: “number of fools is infinite.”
 - d. Jerimiah writes “Every man is made a fool through his own wisdom;” attributing wisdom to God alone and leaving folly to all men else, and again, “Let not man glory in his wisdom.”
 - e. Solomon says: “He that increases knowledge, increases grief; and in much understanding there is much indignation.”
 - f. Solomon again says: “A fool walking by the way, being a fool himself, supposes all men to be fools like him.”
 - g. Folly comments on Solomon’s statement to say: “And is it not a sign of great integrity to esteem every man as good as himself, and when there is no one that leans not too much to other way, to be so frank yet as to divide his praises with another? Nor was this great king ashamed of the name when he says of himself that he is more foolish than any man.”
 - h. Christ himself said, speaking to the Father: “Thou knowest my foolishness.”
 - i. Paul said: “God hath chosen the foolish things of this world,” as well knowing it had been impossible to have reformed it by wisdom. Which also he sufficiently declares himself, crying out by the mouth of his prophet, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and cast away the understanding of the prudent.”
34. She makes another general statement:
- a. **“And to the same purpose is it that that great Architect of the World, God, gave man an injunction against his eating of the Tree of Knowledge, as if knowledge were the bane of happiness; according to which also, St. Paul disallows it as puffing up and destructive; whence also St. Bernard seems in my opinion to follow when he interprets that mountain whereon Lucifer had fixed his habitation to be the mountain of knowledge.”**
35. And at the very last, Folly takes a very interesting turn and accuses all Christians of a type of madness, which, of course, is hers to command.
- a. “.. all Christian religion seems to have a kind of alliance with folly and in no respect to have any accord with wisdom. Of which if you expect proofs, consider first that boys, old men, women, and fools are more delighted with religious and sacred things than others, and to that purpose are ever next the altars; and this they do by mere impulse of nature. And in the next place, you see that those first founders of it were plain, simple persons and most bitter enemies of learning. Lastly there are no sort of fools seem more out of the way than are these whom the zeal of Christian religion has once swallowed up; so that they waste their estates, neglect injuries, suffer themselves to be cheated, put no difference between friends and enemies, abhor pleasure, are crammed with poverty, watchings, tears, labors, reproaches, loathe life, and wish death above all things; in short, they seem senseless to common understanding, as if their minds lived elsewhere and not in their own bodies; which, what else is it than to be mad?”
 - b. She states that she will “... show you that this happiness of Christians, which they pursue with so much toil, is nothing else but a kind of madness and folly.”
 - c. “And therefore it fares with them as, according to the fiction of Plato, happens to those that being cooped up in a cave stand gaping with admiration at the shadows of things; and that fugitive who, having broke from them and returning to them again, told them he had seen things truly as they were, and that they were the most mistaken in believing there was nothing but pitiful shadows. For as this wise man pitied and bewailed their palpable madness that were possessed with so gross an error, so they in return laughed at him as a doting fool and cast him out of their company. In like manner

the common sort of men chiefly admire those things that are most corporeal and almost believe there is nothing beyond them. Whereas on the contrary, these devout persons, by how much the nearer anything concerns the body, by so much more they neglect it and are wholly hurried away with the contemplation of things invisible.”

- d. “And by the same rule do they measure all things else, so that they make less account of whatever is visible, unless it be altogether contemptible, than of those things which they cannot see. But they say that in Sacraments and other religious duties there is both body and spirit. As in fasting they count it not enough for a man to abstain from eating, which the common people take for an absolute fast, unless there be also a lessening of his depraved affections: as that he be less angry, less proud, than he was wont, that the spirit, being less clogged with its bodily weight, may be the more intent upon heavenly things.”
 - e. “For which cause there’s so great contrariety of opinion between them, and that too in everything, that each party thinks the other out of their wits; though that character, in my judgment, better agrees with those holy men than the common people: which yet will be more clear if, as I promised, I briefly show you that that great reward they so much fancy is nothing else but a kind of madness.”
36. And Folly exits quoting Plato and giving an apology.
- a. **“And therefore suppose that Plato dreamed of somewhat like it when he called the madness of lovers the most happy condition of all others. For he that’s violently in love lives not in his own body but in the thing he loves; and by how much the farther he runs from himself into another, by so much the greater is his pleasure.”**
 - b. “But I forget myself and run beyond my bounds. Though yet, if I shall seem to have spoken anything more boldly or impertinently than I ought, be pleased to consider that not only Folly but a woman said it; remembering in the meantime that Greek proverb, “Sometimes a fool may speak a word in season,” unless perhaps you expect an epilogue, but give me leave to tell you you are mistaken if you think I remember anything of what I have said, having foolishly bolted out such a hodgepodge of words.”