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Fortunately Erasmus himself has given us some detailed information about the genesis, composition, and publication of his masterpiece (see below, p. 1). In the summer of 1509 he was on his way to England from Italy, where he had been stimulated by his contact with Italian humanism, disgusted by secular and ecclesiastical corruption, and exhausted by his prodigious labors on the \textit{Adagia}, an enormous, profusely annotated collection of Greek and Latin proverbs published by Aldus at Venice in 1508. Riding on horseback over an Alpine pass, he conceived the notion of writing a mock-encomium on folly—Folly’s oration in praise of herself—partly because he was thinking of his friends in England, particularly of his closest friend there Thomas More, whose family name resembles the Greek word for folly. After a journey of about two months, he arrived at More’s house in London, the Old Barge in Bucklersbury, where he was confined for a while with a kidney ailment. Whether he was delivered of a kidney stone we do not know, but he did bring Folly into the world, smiling and eloquent from her first breath. When he had written part of Folly’s speech, he showed it to his English friends to let them share the fun, or (as we can easily imagine) he read them what he had written, taking on the role of Folly himself. Thoroughly delighted, they urged him to go on with it. Within about a week, Folly, though not quite full grown, was es-
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sentially complete and ready to begin her brilliant career as one of the most popular and controversial prima donnas of Western literature.

From somewhere in the English countryside, probably in June of 1510, Erasmus wrote a letter dedicating his Moria (as he usually called the work) to More. This preface is an integral part of the work and was always printed with it during Erasmus' lifetime. Erasmus said he did not originally intend to publish the Moria; but since the explanations and defenses in the preface are clearly intended for a general audience, we can safely assume that by the time the preface was written he was no longer unwilling to see the work printed, even under his own name and not (like his daring attack on Pope Julius II) anonymously. Nevertheless, when it was first printed at Paris, almost certainly in 1511 and certainly before August of that year, it was seen through the press and corrected (very badly) not by Erasmus, though he happened to be in Paris at the time, but by a young English scholar, Richard Croke. This shabby first edition was twice reprinted (in Strassburg and Antwerp) before the first authorized edition was issued on 26 July 1512 by the Ascensian press at Paris.

That Folly was conceived on the great watershed of Europe, poised between the urbanity of the Italian Renaissance and the earnestness of Northern Humanism, has seemed significant to some critics in moments of lofty speculation. That it was written in More's house and dedicated to him may suggest affinities with the genial wit of the author of Utopia, but it should also serve to remind us that during an earlier stay in London in 1505 and 1506 More and Erasmus had collaborated and competed in translating from Greek to Latin some dialogues of Lucian, whose caustic and brilliant satire provided one important model for the Folly. That it was composed in England also has a broader significance in that it was only after his first visit to England in 1499 that Erasmus finally fixed his sights firmly on the great goal of his life: to edit, translate, and annotate the Greek New Testament—a work which he largely executed in England, especially during his five years at Cambridge (1509–14), and which finally appeared in print at Basel in 1516. Finally, that
the *Folly* was first printed in Paris may seem fitting, since the Sorbonne was the very stronghold of the reactionary theologians whose hairsplitting arrogance and exegetical ineptitude are so often the butts of Folly's wit.

In fact, no other brief, integral work of Erasmus condenses the humanists' program for educational, religious, and theological reform better than the *Folly*, especially if we read it in conjunction with Erasmus' defensive letter to Dorp and More's even longer, more profound defense of the *Folly* and Erasmus' projected Greek New Testament (both composed in 1515). During the three centuries before Erasmus wrote, logic had gained a commanding position in the university arts curriculum, casting the pale survivals of grammar and rhetoric, the dominant studies during classical antiquity, into the shade. The enormous and intricate structure of scholastic philosophy and theology rested on the revival (about 1200) of Aristotle's logical works, the *Organon* or great "instrument" of human learning, and on the subtle, dazzling (not to say dizzying) refinements of them made by medieval logicians, especially Peter of Spain (about 1250). The humanist revival, which gained increasing momentum during the fifteenth century, especially in Italy, might be simplistically described as an attempt to regain and restore the rightful roles of grammar and rhetoric. Grammar was no longer to be the mere mastery of the ordinary rules of Latin syntax but the establishment and explication of sound texts through linguistic and historical studies, a movement which culminated in nineteenth-century classical philology. Grammar in this larger sense was made possible and necessary because of the rediscovery of many works by ancient Greek and Latin writers. Rhetoric was no longer to be lists of ornamental figures of speech, the medieval flowers and "colors" of rhetoric, but the art of speaking and writing Latin persuasively, with coherence and fluency, articulation and copiousness. The new rhetoric was based largely on the rediscovered rhetorical works of Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian—especially the last two. We should remember that the new grammar had as its province not merely what we think of as literature, but also philosophy (especially Plato, Cicero, and Seneca), history, politics, medicine, law,
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geography, astronomy, architecture, and even military strategy. And the new rhetoric was not merely an academic pursuit or the elegant entertainment of a leisured elite, but the key to many important ecclesiastical, governmental, and diplomatic posts.

Needless to say, the pillars of the educational and ecclesiastical establishment, especially the old-fashioned theologians and monks, were not very eager to be reformed. It is hard for us to conceive of a time when anyone could deny that the New Testament should be studied in the original Greek and explicated in the light of the Greek and Latin fathers. But Erasmus' *New Testament* was repeatedly and bitterly attacked, and so was his *Folly*, especially after the Lutheran outburst dashed the hopes of moderate reformers and Erasmus found himself caught between Scylla and Charybdis, between the protestant revolt and the catholic reaction. As Erasmus' prefatory letter shows, he fully expected the *Folly* to be attacked. In the preface, in his letter to Dorp, and in three of his letters written in 1517 and 1518, he defended the *Folly* on primarily grammatical or literary grounds: the nature of the genre, its predecessors, the scope of the subject matter, the moderation of tone. The long commentary which was added to the *Folly* in 1515 by Gerard Listrius (but which was partly written by Erasmus himself) tries to elucidate the ironical genre to which the *Folly* belongs, the paradoxical encomium, and to defend daring passages, often by appeals to literary decorum. Most of Erasmus' additions to the commentary after 1515 are also defensive. Later assailants of the *Folly*—Edward Lee (1518), Diego López Zúñiga (1522), Pierre Cousturier (1526), and Alberto Pio (1529 and 1531)—ignored the literary character of the work entirely. They picked various sentences out of their context and labelled them blasphemous or heretical. A flagrant example is Cousturier's contention that Erasmus was blasphemous because he made Folly claim that the invention of sciences was due to her: "for God is the lord of sciences, but Erasmus attributes the invention of them to Folly, therefore he has blasphemed against God." With increasing weariness, Erasmus answered point by point, over and over again. But his chief difficulty was that too often he tacitly seemed to agree with his opponents' assumption that Folly
expressed Erasmus' own opinions; he denied it occasionally, but he implicitly granted it by defending Folly's remarks because of their precision and restraint. In 1543 the Sorbonne officially condemned the Folly. From then until the end of the century it was included in at least fourteen indices of forbidden books, in France, Spain, and Italy. The opprobrium heaped on the Folly by Erasmus' enemies shows that they took it anything but lightly.

Erasmus, of course, knew that the Folly was a glorious *jeu d'esprit* and that his opponents were racking a butterfly on a wheel. But his continuous revisions show that he also considered it a serious and important book: not merely foolish, not merely wise, but foolishly wise (*morosophos*). During his lifetime it appeared in thirty-six editions from the presses of twenty-one printers in eleven cities, including Paris, Lyons, Strassburg, Venice, Florence, Basel, Cologne, Deventer, and Antwerp. He augmented and revised it in seven major editions: 1512 (Paris), 1514 (Strassburg), 1515, 1516, 1521, 1522, and 1532 (all in Basel). All but one of the long additions were first printed in 1514; together with the passage added in 1516, they make the work about eighteen percent longer than the first edition. The passages added in 1514 clearly heighten the religious dimension of the work. Two were added to the satirical expose of theologians and monks in Folly's long survey of her followers. Others add new citations and arguments to Folly's virtuoso attempt to show that Christianity as it is revealed in the Scriptures is based on Folly. With prickling particularity, they illustrate the quibbling questions debated by theologians, the stupid fascination of the monks with ceremonies and superstitious practices, the outrageously irrelevant introductions to the friars' sermons, and the scholastic theologians' citation of Scriptural tags taken out of context and wrenched to serve some dialectical subtlety or paradox. They ridicule some of the same follies exposed in Erasmus' and More's letters to Dorp: a refusal to go beyond the Vulgate to the Greek of the New Testament, and a false stress on hypersubtle dialectic to the neglect of the new "grammar" as a way of advancing theology by a richer understanding of Scripture and the fathers. In later revisions, apart from many smaller stylistic improvements, Erasmus corrected a few
places where he had lapsed into speaking in his own person rather than under the persona of Folly. He also qualified and mitigated the sweeping condemnations of certain groups in the earlier editions and added a few words to make the paradox of Christian folly more guarded and less open to the charge of blasphemy.

One reason why the Folly was persistently misunderstood and attacked was the novelty of its literary form. It was a spectacular revival of a classical genre which had been practically extinct for a thousand years, the paradoxical encomium. Arthur Pease has defined such an encomium as a declamation "in which the legitimate methods of the encomion are applied to persons or objects in themselves obviously unworthy of praise, as being trivial, ugly, useless, ridiculous, dangerous, or vicious."\(^1\) Among the precedents for the Folly cited by Erasmus in his preface (p. 3) are a number which do not strictly belong to the genre. But when Folly herself, with involuted irony, defines the form she is following by dissociating herself from it, she mentions only examples which fit the genre exactly: many orators, she says, "have spent sleepless nights burning the midnight oil to work out elaborate encomia of Busiris, Phalaris, the quartan fever, flies, baldness, and other dangerous nuisances" (p. 12). The form was continuously cultivated in both Greek and Latin from the fifth century B.C. to the fourth century after Christ and included among its practitioners such luminaries as Plato, Isocrates, and Lucian, but very few examples have survived from classical times. Since classical rhetoricians taught that the paradoxical encomium could be "much freer in its arrangement than the more strictly logical forms of eloquence,"\(^2\) we should not be surprised that Hoyt Hudson’s detailed outline of the Folly according to the oratorical structure laid down by Quintilian and Walter Kaiser’s analysis according to the plan of the Aphthonian encomium do not reveal the pattern of Folly’s speech in a fully satisfying way. The third-century rhetorician Menander, one of the most important sources of our knowledge of the rules for eulogies, mentions a kind

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of speech which, though it has no set structural pattern, seems close to the spirit and style of the Folly: λαλεία is a "name given to a style rather than to a topic. It is noticeable for the absence of fixed rules. Several topics of the epideictic circle might be treated in the style of the λαλεία, which was more free and easy, sometimes conversational, yet abounding in sweetness, spirited narrative, pictures, skilful turns, proverbs, quotations. . . . It may be sportive in character, praising or censuring something." 3

Classical sources for the arguments, allusions, sayings, and proverbs in the Folly are numerous indeed, as the footnotes will testify. Few have been able to savor its finer bouquet without the help of notes, to catch the wit on the wing rather than in the taxidermy of annotation. As Sir Thomas Chaloner, the first English translator (1549), remarked, Erasmus turned out his whole scholarly knapsack for the Folly, and it was crammed full in 1509 because he had just finished listing and commenting at length on 4,500 Greek and Latin proverbs and sayings in his Adagia. Tags from Virgil and Homer are sprinkled generously, especially in the first part, to lend a dash of mock-heroic elevation. Horace is frequently cited and quoted throughout to provide a comfortable aura of urbane common sense. Gellius and Pliny are exploited for useful anecdotes or "scientific" evidence. With sophistical ease, Folly often distorts, almost unnoticeably, the classical authorities she cites to support her arguments. At one point she even boasts of her sophistical prowess in distorting evidence (p. 38). Since Plato was among the most important and influential of the Greek writers rediscovered by the humanists, it might be helpful to notice how she uses (and abuses) him.

The major ideas drawn from Plato are: (1) the distinction between two kinds of madness, modelled on Plato's distinction between two kinds of love (p. 57); (2) the Sileni of Alcibiades (p. 43); (3) the myth of the cave (pp. 72–73, 133–34); and (4) the higher kind of love leading from the impermanent world of flux to the stable realm of the one, true, and beautiful (p. 136). The distinction

between the two kinds of madness is structurally important because it allows Folly to describe various beneficent obsessions (hunting, building, gambling, and so on). But her analogy between madness and love, however convenient, is merely superficial and sophistical. She exploits the myth of the cave in two quite inconsistent ways. In the first part, when she is trying to prove that foolish illusions enable us to lead a happy life, she praises the fools who contentedly watch the shadows in the cave and contemptuously dismisses the wiseman who perversely insists on seeing the reality outside. But in the third part, when she claims as her own devout Christians who reject the world and the flesh for the things of the spirit, she praises this same wiseman as an exemplary Christian fool. Moreover, she uses Plato’s image of the Sileni to prove a sceptical or Pyrrhonist viewpoint, quite contrary to Erasmus’ own explication in the *Adagia*. She is certainly not a consistent Platonic philosopher—she even rejects him completely more than once (pp. 37, 40). She uses Platonic ideas with the same inconsistent nonchalance as she exploits quite different philosophies—Aristotelian, Epicurean, Pyrrhonist, even Stoic when it suits her purposes (though the Stoics are usually her favorite straw men).

The ironical complexity of the *Folly* becomes more evident if we compare her shifting use of Platonism with Erasmus’ own straightforward use of it in the *Enchiridion*. Erasmus himself invited such a comparison in his letter to Dorp: “In the ‘Folly’ I had no other aim than I had in my other writings, but my method was different. In the ‘Enchiridion’ I propounded the character of a Christian life in a straightforward way. . . . And in the ‘Folly,’ under the appearance of a joke, my purpose is just the same as in the ‘Enchiridion’” (pp. 142–43). The same general purpose, well and good. But the different method, the appearance of a joke, in a word, the irony of the *Folly* makes all the difference. In the *Enchiridion*, the analogy of the Sileni is used in a straightforward way to highlight the spiritual sense of Scripture and to divide it rather sharply from the crude literal sense. Plato’s myth of the cave is used only in the second of Folly’s ways,

and Platonic notions of love from the *Phaedo* are cited to make a sharp division between body and soul, matter and spirit, which Erasmus himself accepts and propounds. But when Folly uses similar ideas of Platonic love to describe and praise the Christian fool, her inconsistent and contradictory use of Plato should remind us that we are not justified in accepting Folly’s view as identical with Erasmus’ even though it closely resembles what Erasmus says in the *Enchiridion*. From start to finish Folly is simplistic and sophisti­cal. Folly, but not necessarily Erasmus, defines Christianity narrowly as the irrational pursuit of mystical ecstasy and the utter repudiation of the material world. The last part of Folly’s speech is completely inconsistent with the first part, but it is equally ironical. When she argues that folly is the only source of comfort, joy, and happiness, our first reaction is “certainly not,” but we are gradually forced to admit “yes, too often.” When she argues that the true Christian must act like a fool in the eyes of the world, we are forced to admit “yes, certainly,” but we find ourselves continually wishing to interject “no, there’s more to it than that.” The experience of the book is to play off one irony against the other, not to imagine that Erasmus is simply propounding straightforward Platonism.

Two ancient mock-encomia ought to be mentioned because they are the only classical examples of a decisive feature of the *Folly*, that the subject of the speech is also its speaker. In Aristophanes’ *Plutus* (lines 507–610) Poverty delivers an encomium of herself, and in the first of Lucian’s paradoxical encomia of Phalaris, the tyrant speaks his own praises. But Erasmus’ most brilliant stroke has no classical precedent: he chose a topic which makes his encomium both self-affirming and self-negating. As Walter Kaiser has pointed out, “Erasmus’ great originality, then, was to make Stultitia both the author and the subject of her encomium, to conceive of ‘Moriae’ as being simultaneously both objective and subjective genitive.”

Folly’s praising Folly leads into a maze like that of the Cretan liar: Folly is being praised and therefore is praiseworthy, but what Folly praises can hardly be praiseworthy. What is said often seems right,

but if we consider the source, we know it must be wrong. The precedents for making Folly speak as a dramatic character and for the dual conception of the fool as either an irresponsible sinner or a victor over the supposed wisdom of the world are to be found not in classical sources but in the literary and social heritage of the middle ages.

Sebastian Brant's *Ship of Fools* (1494), which is too often mentioned as a forerunner of the *Folly*, is actually pervaded by a single-minded notion of the fool as sinner. On the other hand, in the widespread Latin dialogue *Marcolf and Solomon*, the folk-fool Marcolf defeats the worldly wisdom of Solomon himself. Both roles were combined in the licensed court fool, to whom Folly lays special claim (pp. 55–56). Among the many licensed fools Erasmus must have encountered in his travels were those kept by Henry VII, Henry VIII, and Thomas More. Some of the most famous, especially in Italy, were women, and some were noted for their parody of ecclesiastical men and manners. In his Colloquy "The Well-to-do Beggars," Erasmus presented the licensed fool as an irresponsible sinner whose peculiar garb protects him from the consequences of his rash words and deeds, but he also suggested that such fools may be wiser than some theologians and princes. The most famous literary embodiment is the fool in *King Lear*. In defending the *Folly*, Erasmus often appealed to the tradition of the licensed fool in ancient and modern times.

Another precedent for the topsy-turvy values of Folly was the Feast of Fools, which flourished, in spite of ecclesiastical prohibitions, from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries. At Christmastime the lower clergy at many cathedrals and other principal churches chose a bishop, or abbot, or even pope of fools to lead a rowdy parody of the hierarchical and liturgical pomp of the ecclesiastical establishment. The celebration varied from place to place, but it sometimes included a burlesque sermon. Thomas More mentioned "an abbote of mysrule in a Christemases game that were prykked in

blankettes, and then sholde stande vp and preche vppon a stole and make a mowynge sermon.”

Erasmus must have been familiar with the foolery of Fasching and carnival in Germany and the Low Countries, but even closer to the subject and manner of the *Folly* were the dramatic performances produced by the *sociétés joyeuses* in France, especially in Paris and Dijon, from the end of the fifteenth century to the middle of the seventeenth. Under the leadership of a “Prince of Fools” or “Mother Folly,” they presented such satiric skits as the *sottie* and the *sermon joyeux*. The *sottie* was a sort of roll-call of fools recited before a performance to attract spectators and usually followed by a sermon, a morality play, and a farce. In its simplest form (before 1500), two or three fools met and exchanged nonsense with each other. The costume was the fool’s cap with ass’s ears and the fool’s scepter; Mother Folly herself appears in many of them. The principal theme was that everyone from the highest to the lowest obeys the lordship of Folly. The motto of the *société joyeuse* at Dijon was “The number of fools is infinite,” a text cited by Folly herself (p. 119) and one of her main points. In his letter to Dorp, Erasmus was probably thinking of the *sotties* when he claimed for the *Folly* “the same freedom which the uneducated allow in popular comedies. In them how frequent and free are the insults hurled at kings and priests and monks and wives and husbands—indeed who is safe? But yet, because no one is attacked by name, everyone laughs and either frankly admits to his fault or prudently dissembles it” (pp. 148–49).

The *sermon joyeux* was a brief mock-sermon delivered before a serious sermon, morality play, or saint’s life. They were in praise of a whole host of saints such as Saint Herring, Saint Onion, or Saint Chitterling, but they also preached on women, drunkards, and various other more or less disreputable subjects. The form


flourished in the late fifteenth century, when Erasmus was in France, though few early examples have survived. Only a few have been preserved which have fools as their subject matter, but the headings under which Emile Picot lists the corpus of sermons joyeux suggests affinities with the Folly: (1) the lives of various “saints” or humorous persons; (2) love, women, and marriage; (3) drinkers and taverns; (4) various subjects; and (5) sermons of fools. Both the sottie and the sermon joyeux were preludes to serious plays or sermons—an arrangement which may have suggested Folly’s startling shift to religious folly in the last part of her “sermon.” In the preface to his translation (1549), Sir Thomas Chaloner, who had traveled in France, remarked that Erasmus imagines that Folly speaks “before all kyndes of men assembled as to a sermon.”

This enormous mélange of foolery, classical and medieval, was available to other writers besides Erasmus (though few had his imperial command of the ancients). But he was the first to shape it into a literary masterpiece. We do not have to read very far into Brant’s Ship of Fools to recognize that Erasmus’ superiority springs from his dramatic persona and the literary form of her speech. What we still lack for a full appreciation of Folly as a persona is a stylistic analysis of the very texture of her language. But the introduction to a translation is hardly the place to make even a beginning of this difficult task. Suffice it to say that she is not only a splendid entertainer—coy and urbane, modest and boastful, suave and outrageous—but also a consummate sophist. She uses the weapons of the logicians against them, and much of her argumentation could be analyzed according to the Aristotelian categories of sophistical argumentation which had been refined for centuries and were regularly taught in the universities. At one point she deliberately displays her sleight of hand by enveloping a scriptural quotation in an obviously false syllogism:


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What should be concealed is more valuable than what is left exposed and unguarded. (Hence the Aristotelian proverb “The waterjug is left lying in the doorway.”) Folly should be concealed whereas wisdom should be openly displayed (Ecclesiasticus 20:33).

Therefore folly is more valuable than wisdom. (pp. 121-22)

In this syllogism, directed against those infatuated by Aristotelian logic, the use of an Aristotelian proverb to support the major is not without malice aforethought. The syllogism is also a glaring example of one of the standard fallacies discussed by Aristotle: it argues from a proposition which is true only secundum quid (that is, as it applies to personal, portable property) to a conclusion simpliciter. The outrageous and seemingly incredible false division of “devita” into “de vita” (pp. 126-27) is actually an obvious example of one of the less common and less important Aristotelian fallacies “in dictione,” the “fallacia accentus.”

As for the literary structure of Folly’s speech, most critics have begun to take a tripartite plan as their starting point:

(1) Folly provides the illusions necessary to render life in this world tolerable or even pleasant (pp. 1-76).
(2) Folly makes the professional leaders of church and state blind enough to be happy in their vicious irresponsibility (pp. 76-115).
(3) Folly enables the Christian fool to renounce the world in favor of Christian joy in this life and the beatific vision in the next (pp. 115-37).

The second section, a survey of academic and social classes, is adapted from a medieval genre, the satire of estates. Erasmus’ survey is more intellectual than medieval satire of estates usually is, but it displays a similar sense of hierarchical cohesiveness. Society is made up of the body politic and the mystical body, the state and the church, each with distinct and various groups con-

4. On this point I have borrowed a few paragraphs from my article “Some Medieval Elements and Structural Unity in Erasmus’ Praise of Folly,” Renaissance Quarterly, 27 (Winter, 1974), 499-511.
tributing diversely to the harmony of the whole. Folly herself is aware that her survey does not entirely fit the pattern of the encomium, for she brings it to a close by remarking: "But it is no part of my present plan to rummage through the lives of popes and priests, lest I should seem to be composing a satire rather than delivering an encomium. . . ." (p. 115). The mixture of genres is related to a question answered variously by the critics: in the survey does Erasmus abandon his persona and let us hear him directly rather than ironically?

The first and third sections propound seemingly incompatible paradoxes which deal with how individual aspirations toward success and fulfillment are related to the requirements of society at large. The first section is devoted to the ironical thesis that the happiest life is a fool's life. The wise man is not only inept and ineffective in the practical affairs of everyday living, but his harsh truths would also destroy the illusions and deceptions necessary to keep up the stage play of life. Sexual pleasure, the propagation of the human race, the pleasures of the table, friendship and marriage, the glories of warfare, the investigations of science, the inventions of technology, the harmony of civil society all depend on illusions, self-deception, and vainglorious aspirations. Natural fools are among the happiest of men. Even madness, as long as it is not violent, can make people far happier than wisdom. Protected by benevolent euphoria, fanatics of all sorts—hunters, gamblers, alchemists, superstitious worshippers of saints—can maintain the illusion of happiness. Self-love and flattery oil the wheels of society and keep it running smoothly. All life is dual, like the Sileni of Alcibiades—ugly or beautiful according to the viewer's angle of vision. The comedy of life is a play that can be entertaining only so long as its basic illusion is kept up. To strip away disguises ruins the play and leads only to disillusionment, futility, despair, or even suicide. The ironic double vision of this first part has been most frequently analyzed, admired, and related to the outlook of other great writers of the Renaissance, such as Ariosto, Rabelais, Cervantes, or Shakespeare. As in the Utopia the reader is piquantly poised between seemingly contradictory views; with a laugh, or a smile, or a sigh he is forced to admit
that what seems absurd is sometimes, often, very often, almost always true.

The third section is based on a paradox which seems directly opposed to the first part: the folly of Christian fools throws them out of step with society at large. This sort of folly does not integrate men into their social surroundings; it separates them from the world and its values. Such folly may lead to ridiculous eccentricity, mental alienation, a kind of ecstatic madness in which even ordinary sense perceptions may be lost. Indeed, this folly seems to be oriented toward the final, perfect alienation of the beatific vision. Folly caps her argument with a brilliant and daring pun: ecstasy, the alienation of a mind drawn out of itself into union with God, is "Moriae pars," Folly's portion, "which shall not be taken from her by the transformation of life, but shall be perfected" (p. 137).

Placed between these two contradictory paradoxes, the middle section is essential to the impact of the whole work. It agrees with the first part in that both find the establishment quite foolish and even the happier for its folly. Would not grammarians and schoolteachers be among the most miserable of men, tyrannizing futilely over a wretched and filthy pack of cowed schoolboys, if they were not puffed up by arrogant and foolish delusions of grandeur? The almost incredible self-deception of quibbling theologians lets them imagine that by their petty labors they support the whole church, like Atlas holding the world on his shoulders. If a king considered his responsibilities, would he not be most miserable?

But these happy fools in the middle section also differ from the fools in the first part. However beatific folly may be for individual academic and social leaders, it has a disastrous effect on society as a whole. The fools in the first part are not usually presented in responsible roles; they are alchemists, hunters, gamblers, fortune-hunters, lecherous old men and women, thick-skulled soldiers. Even the gods indulge in folly in their off-duty hours, as it were, when they have finished settling quarrels and hearing petitions (p. 76). In the first part the ineptness of wise men in public affairs might be borne (we are told) if they were not such awkward and cantankerous bores at parties, dances, plays (p. 39). One im-
important reason why Folly is able to carry off the ironical paradox of the first part is precisely that she does not sort out people according to their social functions but rather treats private vices or depicts large, indiscriminate swarms of mankind. The fabric of society is presented as essentially unreal, a pageant or a play which can be maintained only by hiding reality and accepting disguises.

But the very wise men who would disrupt the play of life in the first part comprise the intellectual, political, and ecclesiastical leaders included in the survey of the second part. And their individual happiness consists precisely in avoiding the responsibilities of their roles. Thus, in the first part, the robes of a king are only one of the costumes necessary to keep up the illusions of life: "Now the whole life of mortal men, what is it but a sort of play, in which various persons make their entrances in various costumes, and each one plays his own part until the director gives him his cue to leave the stage? Often he also orders one and the same actor to come on in different costumes, so that the actor who just now played the king in royal scarlet now comes on in rags to play a miserable servant. True, all these images are unreal, but this play cannot be performed in any other way" (pp. 43–44). In the second part, however, the trappings of a king are symbols of his responsibilities: "Then put a gold chain around his neck, a sign of the interlocking agreement of all the virtues. Next give him a crown set with precious gems to remind him that he is supposed to excel everyone in the exercise of all the heroic virtues. Give him a scepter to symbolize justice and a heart completely fortified against the assaults of corruption. And finally, give him a scarlet robe to represent an extraordinary love of the commonwealth. If a prince should compare these accouterments with his own way of life, I cannot but think that he would be thoroughly ashamed of his splendid apparel and would be afraid that some clever wit might make a laughing stock of all this lofty costume" (p. 108). Because the medial survey is more direct and less ironical than the other two parts, we are not surprised to discover that the same allegorical significance of the royal costume is presented in a straightforward way in Erasmus' *The Education of a Christian Prince* (1516).5

INTRODUCTION

The medial survey not only leads us out of Folly’s first paradox, but also prepares us for the Christian paradox of the third part. Here, the whole fabric of society is again dissolved. The world and all its ways are rejected by Christian fools. They refuse to love even their country, parents, children, and friends except insofar as they reflect the goodness of God. The survey agrees with this view in that it too rejects the foolish establishment—the academics, politicians, and ecclesiastics who fail to fulfill their functions. Society as it has degenerated under their management is indeed the very world which is rejected by Christian fools. We can accept the final ironic paradox of the Christian who is absurd and foolish in the eyes of the world because that world has already been presented as vitiated by another less basic ironic contrast: the rulers of the world remain happy by ignoring their duty to regulate and purify the world.

The second part, whatever problems it may present about Erasmus’ use of his persona, is clearly a necessary and integral part of the work. Even Folly could not have carried off a direct leap from the first part to the third, and no critical view of the Folly can be adequate if it does not take the medial survey into account. The reader’s (or better, listener’s) task is to remember all of Folly’s speech, to consider it as a whole—a task in which Folly (not Erasmus) does her best to defeat him. Through vivid immediacy she tries to hide her shifting inconsistencies. For her prowess in the world she gives more credit to Self-love and Flattery than to her other handmaidens, but for her own sophistry the prime place must be given to Forgetfulness. At the end of her speech she claims—and we may be allowed to doubt her claim—that she cannot provide an epilogue because she does not remember what she has said. However much Folly may hate him for it, the reader must try to be a “listener with a memory.” Only if he constructs the epilogue which Folly refuses to give can he hope to become not merely an initiate of Folly but an initiate of Erasmus’ Folly.