LAMBENT IRONIES AND LAUGHING PRAISE IN ERASMUS' *PRAISE OF FOLLY*

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IN THE WAKE OF HIS RECENT DEATH, I have been re-reading some of Northrop Frye's work, together with essays being written in tribute to him.[1] Frye's discussion of comedy, especially, illuminated anew for me one of my favourite works — Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* — and challenged me to re-read that essay of his — actually a mock oration — with the lamp of Northrop Frye shining over my shoulder. What specific references I shall make about Frye's insights on comedy as they illuminate *Praise of Folly* will appear at the conclusion of my essay. Let me say at this point, however, that Erasmus' work provides a particularly beguiling challenge to the workability and soundness of Frye's classification. But the center of Frye's definition does hold, and his taxonomy accounts for the work. And if the *Praise of Folly*, in all of its complexity and and waywardness can sustain such scrutiny, it can be regarded as a particular triumph for Frye's analysis of comedy and a vindication of it.

Readers of the *Praise of Folly* know well the richness, the wit, the mental dexterity, the ingenuity of this *tour de force.* Despite sources and analogues, traditions and precedents of various kinds with which Erasmus was acquainted in both the classical and the Christian world, Erasmus used some very new and daring strategies in this work.

Some reminders about how Erasmus proceeds may be in order. The work is in the form of an address to an assumed audience of people with enough intellectual interest to wish to be talked to. The oration leads off with the phrase "Stultitia loquitur," "Folly speaks," and they are important words. Folly is being given her day in court. She makes this case for herself, that, although she has no temple or shrine or altar dedicated to her, she is nevertheless a goddess. In a wide-ranging exposé of human follies she contends that the world can and does function only through her force and presence; if even but a modicum of Wisdom should ever enter the world, our universe would be turned upside down and she would be dethroned.

Erasmus wrote what he called "this silly piece" at the home of his friend Thomas More in 1510 while recovering from lumbago, and while waiting for some books to arrive. The title, *Moriae Encomium*, is of course a pun on More's name — "Moriae" means folly; hence the praise of folly is both objective and subjective genitive. The work is a fast-paced indictment of just about every category of people under the sun, from lawyers to doctors, from monks to the Pope, from priests to authors, and from nobility to the rhetoricians. Never mind that the people so lampooned are early sixteenth-century versions of the embodiments of folly: the categories have not changed all that much. The last part, however, Part IV, takes a very different direction: here Folly, however awkwardly, relates her folly directly to the Biblical teaching about the foolishness of the wise and the wisdom of the foolish.

Folly's praise of herself provides a good place to introduce the notion of "lambent ironies" or paradoxes in the work. Many examples occur in literature of wise people lampooning folly — from the sidelines. It is all rather priggish comedy, and its tactic is shame. In the battle of the intelligentsia against the dunces, it was supposed, the enlightened ones must continually keep civilization from falling off the cliff. Social order cannot be taken for granted. It needs to be shored up, and threats from vanity and selflessness need always to be exposed. Even in Sebastian Brant's *Ship of Fools* (which Erasmus knew), in which the artist catalogues 112 types of folly, the assumption is that the wise must expose the foolish.

But who would ever think of having Folly herself making a speech, and a speech in her own behalf? Reflect on all the interactions, the "lambent ironies" going on here. The author in control of the piece wishes to speak seriously and wisely, but does so through a mouthpiece representing herself as just the opposite of wisdom, in fact placing wisdom on the defensive. It is no wonder that some early readers (flatfooted literalists, lacking the mental dexterity to follow all these twists and turns) accused Erasmus of impiety and many other vices besides. The first paradox therefore consists in the device of letting the Fool address the wise to acclaim her status as a goddess.

As for the second paradox, what format should Folly select? Rhymed doggerel? Disconnected rantings and railings about this and that, disorganized bits and pieces of whatever comes to an undisciplined mind? What more than babble can we expect from the mouth of Folly? No, Erasmus says: we must dress her in an academic gown. We must make her familiar with nothing less than the classical tradition of oratory, of the nine-part division of the formal declamation. She must exhibit her training in the classroom of Cicero and Quintilian, and must display the discipline she has been taught in organizing and oration. She must begin with the exordium, continue with the narration, the proposition, followed by the partition, confirmation, reprehension, digression, and conclude with the peroration.

The lambent ironies lurk everywhere. Of course there was the tradition of the classical oration (Paul knew its conventions, too, and employed them in his various confrontations). But there was also the tradition of the mock-oration — here in the form of a mock encomium or mock tribute. So we have a mock encomium, organized technically along the lines of the classical oration — a genre, incidentally, which Erasmus criticizes elsewhere as being "heavy with borrowed learning." He had seen people listen to these lectures in the forums of various cities, and is thus inflicting jibes against the pomposity of these very serious, earnest speakers and against their audiences. So Erasmus establishes a tension between the expectations of a formal address on the one hand, and the speaker (and her subject) on the other.

Let us turn to the third paradox. This I shall call the tension between topical and more universal satire. Again, Erasmus could and did draw from a vast storehouse of satire against a teeming multitude of follies: from the spendthrift to the miser, from garrulous and gossip to the speechless rustic, from jealous husbands to coquettish wives, and from the superstitious to the boring. But this discourse is not just one more addition to the literary legacy of the lampooning of specific human weaknesses. Erasmus adds a new dimension

to his commentary about humanity. He uses satire not as a dagger, or a scourge, but as a mirror. Although he roughs up all sorts of pretenders in unmistakable rebuke, he also points out that folly is not merely selective, limited to certain categories, but is universal. He even includes himself by name from time to time, as a friend of Folly. He compels us to ask,What is wisdom? What is folly? Can one always know for sure? Erasmus raised the art of raillery to a new level. Erasmus asks: "Would life without pleasure be life at all? You applaud! I was sure that you were not so wise, or rather so foolish —, no, so wise, as to think otherwise."

The work, thus, is difficult to classify. It is too simple just to call it a satire. The essay is also a broad, comprehensive statement about the limitations of human knowledge. What and how can we know? This questioning does not yet make him a skeptic, but he did find it necessary in later years to elaborate on these questions in his defense against critics of the essay.

With a wide array of subtle thrusts, through a combination of truth and falsehood, in which he exposes ambiguities, Erasmus challenges any sort of notion that prudence, wisdom, virtue are monolithic, to be clearly recognized on sight. The grammarian living down the street, torturing words as he tries to classify parts of speech: why does he not give up this vexing art, these fruitless efforts, and permit some happiness into his life? Why are all philosophers gloomy? Give me a chance, says Dame Folly, and I will turn gloom into pleasure. Look at that woman with her lovely jewels: they are fake, though she herself doesn't know it. She is happy, and her husband has saved money and earned her gratitude and respect. Thus, with an enigmatic smile, Folly questions the rigidities of the distinctions between wisdom and folly.

There are also paradoxes between what is said and what is ultimately intended. Sometimes Erasmus uses straightforward argument, as in his severe criticism of the Stoics. "The Stoics," he writes, "would purge the wise man of all strong emotions, as if they were diseases; yet these emotions serve not only as a guide and teacher to those who are hastening towards the portal of wisdom, but also as a stimulus in all virtuous actions, as exhorters to good deeds ... he [the Stoic] makes a marble imitation of a man, stupid, altogether alien to every human being." One finds it difficult to suppose that he means something other than what these words plainly signify.

But what about the following example? Erasmus is defending flattery against the charge of insincerity:

> What is more fawning than a dog? And yet, what is more faithful and a better friend to man? Of course there is a harmful kind of flattery ... but my kind springs from kindliness and candor. It is much closer to virtue than is its opposite, surliness — or what Horace calls a heavy and awkward rudeness. It raises the spirits and dispels grief; it stimulates the faint, enlivens the dull, and eases the suffering. Disguised as praise, it warns and instructs princes without offence. In short, flattery makes everyone more pleased with himself — which is the chief part of happiness ... it is a great part of medicine, and it is a still greater part of poetry. It is nothing less than the sugar and spice of all human intercourse.

Students are often taken in by this specious line of reasoning. It does seem superficially convincing. But why doesn't Erasmus call the positive nuances of these expressions *magnanimity*, and thus elevate such attitudes to the level of genuine virtue? Flattery remains flattery, as Dante insisted when he relegated such sinners to punishment with an assortment of deceivers and falsifiers, and sentenced them to the horrible fate of forever having to swim in a pool of excrement. The words we hear Folly say must pass through the prism of the ironic for the author's true purpose to become clear. We obviously have the paradox of words not quite meaning what they say; and that form of expression invites us to go about the task of discriminating between reality and appearance — the real purpose of the author. Luther chided Erasmus for his strategy: "When Erasmus wrote his *Folly*, he begat a daughter like himself. He turns, twists, and bites like an awl, but he, as a fool, has written true folly." This, however, is too harsh a judgment, recording perhaps Luther's own annoyance at the effort required to read Erasmus correctly, rather than an accurate description of the piece.

Permit me to digress at this point —the classical oration permits digressions, after all — to raise the question of strategy in one's fulminations against 'the times and the mores.' How should you and I go about cleansing the world of its folly? There are various options, of course. There is the direct approach: we write in journals or letters, and we write books to inform, persuade, enlighten. Through logic and statement we have our say about the questions concerning public life. But one can also work indirectly — through art, through the imagination, as Erasmus does. He creates a fictional character, and thus a ready defense against anyone who supposes that he is advancing his own thought in the words he assigns to this character.[2] All this is true as well of the novel, of drama, the short story, the poem etc.

But having chosen the route of the imagination, one needs to make a further decision. Do you provide a blueprint of a good, just, well-ordered world? Do you outline a utopia, as More did? That is the way of Dante, of Shakespeare, Spencer, and Milton, to name the great ones. These writers provide a positive vision which we are invited to emulate and to strive to bring about. But we can do this also negatively, through satire or irony, so that the reader must adjust or translate what he reads to that which he supposes the author intends. If one chooses to work in this way, one will need to decide further what tone to employ. Swift and Pope in the eighteenth century were so disillusioned with the Hanoverian dynasty and other evils that they used the tone of savage indignation: satire with personal, biting invective. Addison, a decade or so earlier, had used a lighter touch, from genial raillery to gentle banter. His way was in fact more effective, though he dealt perhaps too gently with evils that require the knife. Erasmus's tone is somewhere in between these two. He, too, is disillusioned at the pervasiveness of humanity's grotesque pursuit of phantoms in place of reality, of its contentment with baubles when higher pleasures await those who are more probing in their search for truth, and who live with disciplined commitment flowing out of the ethical norms they have adopted and which lodge at their heart's deep core.

Let us return to the paradoxes. The fifth paradox involves Erasmus's views about learning. Here we must depend on some of his other works to guide us. Erasmus deeply

believed, for example, that all clergymen should know Greek and the literature of the classical world. To advance the cause of classical learning was one of the central aims of his life — almost as important as translating the Bible and writing commentaries. To advance the cause of true learning, he attacked pseudo-learning in a variety of ways. And that target constitutes a substantial part of the *Praise of Folly*. But Erasmus has Dame Folly not only engage in self-criticism, but has her rail against the pains of study. She gives her opinion as follows:

> The people of the golden age lived without the advantages of learning, being guided by instinct and nature alone. What was the need of grammar when all spoke the same language, and spoke only to be understood? What use for dialectic when there was no conflict of opinion? What place for rhetoric when no one wished to get the better of another? What need for legal skill before the time of those evil acts which called forth our good laws? Furthermore, they were then too religious to pry impiously into nature's secrets, to measure the size, motion, and influence of the stars, or to seek the hidden causes of things. They considered it a sacrilege for man to know more than he should. [All] this was a needless vexation of the spirit, when one considers that a single grammatical system is perfectly adequate for a lifetime of torture.

This is indeed a learned diatribe against learning. An inexperienced student might of course take it all at face value.

Part IV involves us in the sixth and final paradox of the work. Put another way, Part IV resolves the earlier paradoxes, though now and then introducing new, if lesser ones. Note the title of his concluding section: "The Christian Fool." Once again we face ambivalences. Dame Folly never gets anything quite right. She starts with wrong observations: "Little children, women, and fishermen seem to delight Him most." Though she is not altogether wrong, her observation is obviously deficient. Again, Folly tells her audience: "The Christian religion on the whole seems to have some kinship with folly, while it has *none at all* (italics mine) with wisdom." Again she overstates matters, producing a distortion which needs to be set right. And again: "You will notice that the founders of religion have prized simplicity exceedingly, and have been the bitterest foes of learning." This is not quite correct either. But in a more accurate vein, she reports:

> no people seem to act more foolishly than those who have been truly possessed with Christian piety. they give away whatever is theirs; they overlook injuries, allow themselves to be cheated, make no distinction between friends and enemies, shun pleasures, and feast on hunger, vigils, tears, labours, and scorn. They disdain life, and utterly prefer death; in short, they seem to have become altogether indifferent to ordinary interests, quite as if their souls lived elsewhere and not in their bodies. What is this, if not to be mad?

But these over-statements and distortions do not succeed ultimately in masking the very serious point Erasmus wishes to make: true believers are to become, in an important way, Christ's fools, fools for Christ. Erasmus is at this point following the very language of the Bible. He also introduces the language of ecstasy here, as he did in the previous

quotation. He speaks of people whose minds seem to go into other people's bodies — a form of madness, to be sure. Is this a parody of the genuine experience of the soul seeking its true resting place? " ... he [the Christian] shall have some ineffable portion of that supreme good which draws all things unto itself." Erasmus continues:

> This is only a drop, of course, in comparison with the fountain of eternal happiness, but it far surpasses all physical pleasures, even all mortal delights rolled into one. By so much does the spiritual exceed the bodily, the invisible exceed the visible [...] This surely is what the prophet has promised: 'Eye hath not seen, or ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him.' And this is that portion of folly which will not be taken away by the transformation of life, but will be perfected.

However muddled and confused Folly is, she maintains a residue of Biblical wisdom — that the wisdom of this world falls short of true piety and acceptability to God. True wisdom has other origins. One might think of the Pauline passages which support this; Erasmus works with these passages in his commentaries as well. He writes in one of these studies: "If there be any among you who appears to himself to be wise, let him follow Paul's advice and become a fool with Christ, the Prince of this world, so that he may be truly wise." Such themes are consistent with Erasmus's strong desire, which he defines in other places as well, to lead the Church back to the simplicity of the early Christian milieu, an era of integrity, unity, and commonness of purpose. However Folly misconstrues and muddles matters, and however tenuous is her grip on this truth, and despite a flippant farewell, she manages to say, stumblingly and haltingly, that the folly of Christian faith and devotion is the true wisdom.

In Northrop Frye's work on comedy, comedic literature is positioned on a spectrum of variations in relationship to the "comic norm," which is the coming of age and establishment of a new society. The early phases, anticipating that new society, are the ironic or infancy of the new society, and the quixotic or adolescence of that emerging society. Were it not for Erasmus's conclusions, *Praise of Folly* would not go beyond these early stages or the norm itself. But the conclusion invites us to peer beyond the fully realized society to the next stage, the Green world, or the Arcadian phase, the maturity and triumph of that society, the ordered world to which we should aspire. To be sure, Erasmus merely hints and, to maintain the unity of the essay, wisely refrains from developing that probing beyond the here and now. The reader of the *Praise of Folly*, therefore, may not think of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* or Christopher Fry's *A Phoenix Too Frequent*, two usual candidates for the category of the Arcadian world. Nevertheless, Erasmus, in his unexpected but revealing turn contends that the best wisdom this world has to offer cannot establish the truly viable community. That requires wisdom from a transcendental source. And that insight is a deep conviction of Northrop Frye as well, when he observes that the Bible is literature which goes beyond literature. This convergence of insights makes both members of that distinguished society of Christian humanists which has served the human society so well.

NOTES

[1] The Spring 1992 issue of *Christianity and Literature* is devoted to Frye's career and work.
[2] Erasmus uses this device very effectively in his colloquies as well.

REFERENCES

Erasmus, Desiderius. "The Praise of Folly." *The Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces*. Fifth Ed. , New York n.d., 1020-1043.