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Performing Reform: Erasmus's Moriae Encomium *and the Politics of Religion in Sixteenth-Century England and Europe*

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"Folly and Politics" in sixteenth-century theatre is a wide and conceptually challenging theme. Folly itself has multiple meanings, ranging from a want of good sense to derangement of mind, from error to mischief, from lewdness to insanity. There are multiple theatrical examples of these differing kinds of folly throughout the Tudor period. The narratives within which they occur are equally varied. A popular version of political folly centres upon tyrannical behaviours in which a ruler foolishly abuses the power with which he or she is endowed. But the personal is also seen as political within the framework of the family, the community or the state. Nor can the role of an actual clownish person, identified by costume and disposition as a fool, and whether natural or artificial, be ignored. Tudor playwrights sought to tease out the implications of each and all of these personifications of folly in their own contexts and discover the effects of the foolish actions wrought upon the commonwealth of the people. It was a deep and continuing concern.

On this occasion, however, I have chosen, somewhat uncharacteristically, to shift attention from the theatre itself and matters of theatrical performance to embark on a more oblique approach to the theme of Folly and Politics. I wish to broaden the topic to

include the notion of the "performative" as applied to texts that operate within a culture and which produce sometimes incidental and sometimes intended effects. For this I will begin with an assertion regarding the novelty of print in the early sixteenth century. At the time it produced a kind of publishing fervour. It was suddenly possible to achieve a distribution of ideas to a wide range of people in a relatively short time. In a way rather similar to our own experience of the expansion of public exchange through the internet, the impact of printing on a manuscript world produced a flurry of monographs and pamphlets, as well as books, that flooded the market and were read widely and avidly. This was particularly the case in matters of reform and change in religion, subjects that often carried with them criticism of monarchy and the exercise of power.

One of the genres that was thought to be effective within this environment was that of the dialogue. While it is true that some plays of the period contained what was in effect a dialogue—notably, for instance, Henry Medwall's *Fulgens and Lucres*, with its debate around the politically controversial issue of Gentleness and Nobility—nevertheless, the formal dialogue, rooted in a Socratic or, rather, a Platonic method, was recognised and practised and published in many cases with a direct political aim. Such dialogues were presented in quasi-dramatic form, of course, and often given a fictional location, as they took on the characteristics of a forensic exploration of contemporary issues. Sir Thomas Elyot's *Of the Knowledge which Maketh a Wise Man* and Thomas Starkey's *Dialogue Between Cardinal Pole and Thomas Lupset* are two eminent examples. Elyot's work is specifically aimed at the king and contains some outspoken advice on good monarchy, while Starkey's is more generally directed at the correction of abuses in government and the development of good and just policy with regard to the commonwealth. While neither dialogue was intended for performance, they can, nevertheless, in two ways be described as performative. In the one sense, and straightforwardly, they may be said to mimic a dramatic action, with two, sometimes more, people talking to each other. But in another and more significant way, their function was to provoke a response in their target readership, either the king himself or his councillors. Although it may be difficult to measure any response at this distance from events, the dialogue can be seen, nevertheless, as both a public display and a provocation within the context of the contemporary culture. It may have had, or failed to have, an effect, much as one might expect a play or any other similar event—a sermon, for instance—to have had.

With these considerations in mind, I have chosen not a dialogue but a monologue as exemplar of the performative nature of texts other than plays. Erasmus's *Moriae Encomium*, written in the first instance as an entertainment for his friend Thomas More but later achieving a kind of cult status, is the subject of my discussion of Folly and Politics.[1] What I shall endeavour to demonstrate in this paper is how this text was in its own time and in every sense a performance that made as significant an impact on the culture of its day as any comparable theatrical event may have done.

Erasmus's pen was prolific and, as is well understood, his exploitation of the possibilities of publication through print was skilful, wide-ranging and thorough. He made translations from the Greek, especially Euripides and the satirical dialogues of Lucian. He published more than one edition of his *Copia*, a kind of handbook on style, and his *Adagia*, a series of *bons mots* from classical authors. Both of these derived from his early experience of teaching, as did his *Colloquia*, a series of dialogues prepared for student use to assist in the learning of Latin. Each of these volumes ran through several editions, and as the readership expanded, each subsequent edition was modified and developed to include more material. The *Colloquia* in particular offered an opportunity for Erasmus to create dialogues on the subject of religion and reform, dialogues that, as the more and later expanded editions came into circulation, began to cause concern and offence in high places in the Church. Their message was always the same. The present religious organisation and practice was a betrayal of the original simplicity and integrity of the early Christian church.

Erasmus was also responsible for a number of polemical books, beginning with the *Enchyridion Militis Christiani* (*The Handbook of a Christian Soldier*), a *miles christianus*, in Erasmus's terms, being a soldier for peace. He was himself a convinced pacifist. He also wrote the *Institutio Principis Christiani*, a guide for the Christian education of princes, following his own advice from an earlier adage entitled, *One Ought to Be Born a King or a Fool*. There he wrote: "if anyone is to be a coachman, he learns the art, spends care and practice; but for anyone to be a king we think it enough for him to be born" (trans. Margaret Mann Phillips, Rummel, ed., p. 339). It followed from this statement that "We are not free to choose our king—but we are free to educate him." He also wrote *Querela Pacis* (*A Complaint of Peace*), a

1 All references will be to the 1549 translation (as *The Praise of Folie*) by Sir Thomas Chaloner, ed. Miller.

declamation not dissimilar to *The Praise of Folie*, lamenting humankind's continuing capacity for ignoring the benefits of peace in contrast with the disruptions of war. The *Complaint* pilloried the folly of kings and their courtiers who caused the mayhem of war in pursuit of illusory honour, status and self-respect. War was above all a wholly unchristian activity. Erasmus is also alleged to have written the comically satirical piece *Iulius Exclusus e Coelis* (*Julius Excluded from Heaven*), which plays on the idea that Pope Julius II, because of his venality and warmongering disposition, cannot persuade Peter to let him into heaven. Enduringly inscribed in Erasmus's memory was the image he had of Pope Julius entering Bologna victoriously at the head of his army. He could hardly imagine a more unchristian performance, the epitome of folly in a religious leader, and he never forgave him for it. Although Erasmus never openly acknowledged the authorship of the *Julius Excluded*, it was from the beginning attributed to him.

But Erasmus was also recognised as a Christian humanist scholar, who, through new approaches to the study not only of classical Latin but also of Greek and Hebrew, initiated and enabled new translations of both the Old and New Testaments. As Reginald Bainton suggests:

> The contribution of Erasmus to Biblical Studies lies even now in the questions which he raised, the controversies which he precipitated, and the awareness which he created as to the problems of text, translation and interpretation. (p. 166)

Erasmus's approach seriously challenged the authority of the medieval Schoolmen, especially those of the Sorbonne and of Louvain, who were locked into a tradition of interpretation of the Scriptures based upon St Jerome's Latin Bible, the Vulgate. Erasmus showed that the Vulgate was in part erroneous, especially in its representation of the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles and, perhaps most importantly, St Paul's Epistles. He claimed that his own translations were more accurate, deriving from original documents in either Hebrew or Greek.

So one may perceive that Erasmus was an active campaigner in the process of the Reformation with a particular mission to deploy his writings to a wide reading public through the medium of print. Despite being accused on more than one occasion of intellectual arrogance, he claimed that he was not seeking conflict. He was seeking intellectual agreement with what seemed to him the self-evident truth that the Church had foolishly strayed from its ministry. Some confirmation of Erasmus's moderate position may be found in the fact that, despite being accused by Noel Beda of the Sorbonne of being a Lutheran, he

fell out with Luther. He could not agree to a root-and-branch rejection of the inherited organisation and practices of the Church. He accepted the sacraments, for instance, and especially the pastoral principle upon which Christianity was based. He felt strongly, however, that the Scriptures should be made accessible to the individual Christian even in the vernacular. That, therefore, meant re-translation of the Bible to represent the truths it contained more accurately than in the past. It was just that his challenge to the Catholic Church seemed to strike at its doctrinal orthodoxy and was felt to be as dangerous as that of Luther, even though he had no intention of establishing a new church, only of reforming the existing one.

My case for bringing Erasmus's *The Praise of Folie* into this discussion rests on three premises. The first is that it is undoubtedly performable. I believe I have demonstrated that fact sufficiently both at Tours in 2004 and earlier at Groningen in 2001.[2] Secondly, in the reading, it is a text that entertains in the manner of a performance. Indeed, Erasmus called it a Declamation, and its opening direction is simply "Folie speaketh". Thirdly, it was also, in its own time, performative in the sense that it was active within the public cultural process I have sketched above. It gives its readers even today an experience that is inescapably similar to that of an audience in a theatre. But more significantly, just like those sixteenth-century plays published on the back of a performance, it was intended through print to reach its influence out into a wider community. For Erasmus, it became an agent in conveying his message to like-minded reforming Christians across Europe.

It was Pirandello who said that for drama to work it is necessary to find a language that is in itself spoken action. *The Praise of Folie* is a supreme example of such *azione parlata*, for, as she enters, Dame Folly not only characterises herself as someone who has the capacity to cheer people up, but also greets and characterises her fictitious and supposedly present audience, an audience whose attitudes and responses she constructs:

> as soone as I came forth to saie my mynd afore this your so notable assemblie, by and by all your lokes began to clere vp: vnbendyng the frounyng of your browes, and laughyng vpon me with so merie a countinaunce, as by my trouth me semeth euin, that all ye (whom I see

2 *An Interlude of Folly* was a solo performance derived substantially from Erasmus's monologue. Bob Godfrey performed it at a Festival of Medieval Drama at the University of Groningen in 2001 to accompany the Xth Colloquium of the SITM (Société Internationale pour l'Étude du Théâtre Médiéval). It was performed a second time in 2004 at the CESR, Tours, in association with the IXth Round Table on Tudor Drama.

> here present) doe fare as if ye were well whitled, and thoroughly moysted with the **Nectar** wine of the Homericall Goddes. (p. 7)[3]

It is worth noting that this trick of constructing the audience's situation is almost identical with the one played by Medwall in the opening gambit of player A on his entry into the fictional world of *Fulgens and Lucres*. Erasmus carries this further, as Folly proceeds with her self-fashioning, so that the marks that link her to the present occasion, the here and now-ness of her address, proliferate:

> For I am here (as ye see) the distributrix and dealer of all felicitee, named Μωρία in Greeke, in Latin **Stultitia**, in Englishe Folie.
>
> But aye, what neded me to vtter thus muche? as if I bare not signes enough in my face, and countinance, what maner person I am. (p. 10)

The whole of this induction is sprinkled with glancing rhetorical questions that give immediacy to her discourse. For instance: "And what (I praie you) maie be more apt or better sittyng, than dame Foly to praise hir selfe, and be hir owne trumpet?" (p. 8); or perhaps: "Ye haue heard my name than (O my friendes) what addicion shall I geue you?" (p. 11). Through such questions, Folly suggests alternatives, keeps the readers—the fictional audience (and the actual audience)—engaged. Similarly, the frequent use that Folly makes of the personal pronouns "I" and "you" both brings her subjectivity into relationship with the consciousness of her audience and personalises the effectiveness of her arguments. Speaking of her lineage, she claims that her father was

> **Plutus** the golden god of riches. … At whose arbitrement, warre, peace, kyngdomes, counsailes, judgementes, assemblees, mariages, couenauntes, leagues, lawes, sciences, games, earnest mattiers (my breath faileth me) to be short, all publike, and priuate doynges of men are administred. … Further, to the ende that ye mistake no thyng, I dooe ye to wite that **Plutus** begatte me not in his olde daies, whan he was blynde, and skarce able to goe for age, and goutinesse, … but in his prime yeres, whan as yet he was sounde, and full of hote bloudde, but muche fuller of **Nectar** drinke, whiche … he had sipped than by chaunce somewhat more than enough. (pp. 11-12)

Thus Erasmus has succeeded in weaving together a network of affective meanings that give flesh and blood to his lady Folly and to the supposed occasion of

3 Citations follow the typographic conventions adopted by Miller for his edition (roman type for the original gothic, bold-face for original roman, italic as in the original).

the *Encomium*. Furthermore, this technique brings the supposed audience into the frame in such a way that the whole declamation has the characteristics of an extempore performance.

The style and manner is one thing, the theme and subject matter of *The Praise of Folie* another. How may it be seen as performative in the per-locutionary sense of having an effect beyond its author's first intentions? To what effect does this monologue play a role in the political arena of the sixteenth century? How might it earn a place as a text able to compete with the drama in that context? A brief reference to the *Narrenschiff* of Sebastian Brant will prove useful here. First published in 1494 and subsequently immensely popular throughout Europe, this extended satire on a wide selection of the failings of humankind gives us a picture of fallen man and woman whose follies are also sins. The poem treats of these failures moralistically in a quite traditional manner: the verses are set in the style of a preacher who exhorts his congregation to better behaviour. Brant deploys the preacher's technique of offering bad *exempla* to his audience in a comic way as a means of persuading them to behave better. The direct correlation between folly and sin is reinforced through the woodcut illustrations that accompany the text. No doubt the popularity of Brant's book rested as much on the numerous woodcuts as upon the entertainment from the *exempla*. The verse that introduces Dame Wisdom illustrates this point:

> Wysdome with voyce replete with grauyte
> Callyth to all people, and sayth o thou mankynde
> Howe longe wylt thou lyue in this enormyte
> Alas howe longe shalt thou thy wyt haue blynde.
> Here my preceptis and rote them in thy mynde
> Nowe is full tyme and season to clere thy syght:
> Harkyn to my wordes, grounde of goodnes and ryght
> Lerne mortall men, stodyenge day and nyght
> To knowe me wysdome, chefe rote of chastyte
> My holy doctryne thy herte shall clere and lyght
> My tunge shall shewe the ryght and equyte
> Chase out thy foly, cause of aduersyte.[4]

4 Identified in EBook No. 20179 under the title, "Of the sermon or erudicion of wysdome bothe to wyse men and folys".

In direct contrast, Erasmus's character subverts this traditional view of folly as sin. The figure of Folly could confront Wisdom with the cry, "Not so! I (Folly) am the most superior cause of happiness and contentment and the whole world is indebted to me for that very fact." For Erasmus's personification makes of Folly the most appealing and personable character. While using many of the tricks of practical preaching, he employs a far more subtle and ingenious approach. His character seems constantly to invite agreement, a kind of conspiracy and collaboration towards happiness, rather than belabouring her audience with injunctions to change their lives. Her talk is celebratory. She is content with a state of affairs in which everyone in the world is in one way or another complicit in folly. However, she identifies two kinds of folly akin to madness: the one deriving from a false understanding of self-importance and which results in misconduct, a fact that she is at pains to suggest is the responsibility of humankind itself; the other, that for which she is proud to be responsible, is an innocent kind of madness, in which the mind takes a holiday from everyday cares. Thus her satire upon human life and behaviour becomes an appeal to her audience to accept that there is a difference between innocent and reprehensible error. It also allows Folly to pillory any or all orders of society equally, despite their assumed or actual status. The fictional audience becomes complicit, therefore, in the satire on all aspects of human behaviour and in making judgements about what is represented.

It is remarkable that Sebastian Brant himself seems to have been one of the first to recognise a difference in objective and potential between his *Narenschiff* and the *Moriae Encomium*. Shortly after the publication of the first edition of the latter in 1511, he wrote:

> Content to have carried vulgar fools in our *Narenschiff*, we allowed the *toga* to go untouched. *Moria* now comes forth, who, censuring the *bryyha*, *the syrmata* and the *fasces*, conveys as well philosophers and druids. (cited Screech, p. 186)

That is, in his view and plain for all to see, the *Moriae Encomium* ventures to censure cardinals, lawyers, the state itself, as well as theologians and the religious, targets that Brant himself largely avoided. Prophetically, Brant concludes, "Alas, what smears of blood she will call forth, arousing anger with wrath" (cited Screech, p. 186).

From this hint it would appear that the *Moriae Encomium* could from its inception be regarded as a dangerous, even a dissident, if not actually hereti-

cal work. Though it began life as an entertainment for Thomas More (the pun on his name in the title was deliberate), once it arrived in the public domain, it was destined to provoke antagonism amongst those churchmen of a more conservative frame of mind. Even Thomas More in his later years turned against it. In *The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*, More claimed that if it was translated into English he would burn it with his own hands (Greenblatt, p. 267, n. 83). And this apparent antagonism is one of the ways in which it is possible to perceive *The Praise of Folie* as a performative text in its own time. It established itself in the cultural consciousness in a way similar to that of polemical plays of the period and, as we shall see, possibly to greater effect.

But how was it that this personable and jokey goddess, accompanied as she was by an emblematic array of companions such as Selflove, Adulation, Belly-cheer, and Soundsleep, and who claimed to hold the secret of all human happiness and even to influence the behaviour of Jupiter and the immortal gods, could come to be such an enemy of the Church and its reactionary defenders? The effect is achieved by a subtle sleight of hand. "For *if wisedome … is naught els*," she argues, "*than to be ruled by reason: and folie, to be ledde as affection will*: Consider now (I praie you) how muche more **Affection**, than **Reason**, **Iupiter** hath put in men" (p. 23). She deals deftly with petty and entertaining foolishness—the childishness of old age, for instance: the foolishness of old men pursuing young girls or the image of old women pursuing young men. She insists that whatever pleasure such individuals derive from these behaviours, it is all to be put down to her. But through a trick of irony, Folly's approval is subverted, and that is at the heart of the serious message of the work. While such follies are presented as a positive example of her powers over humankind, they are, at the same time, so displayed as to make the actors in their folly utterly discredited. For instance, Erasmus allows his female protagonist to give a searing account of these old women who are so carcase-like and yet play the wantons, still tupping when they have the chance, daubing their cheeks, displaying their breasts—"theyr flaggie and pendant dugges" (p. 42)—writing love letters, dancing and so on. But, having set up a picture of utter ridicule, Folly concludes:

> But yet dooe these my oldgurles not a little lyke theim selues herein, takyng it for a singuler and onely delight, as if they swamme vp to the chinnes in a sea of hony, wherin who but I doeth vphold them? (p. 43)

This ambivalent ridiculing style, which focuses on the folly and blindness of self-love, is the true signature of *The Praise of Folie*. It serves Erasmus's purpose most eloquently as Folly draws attention to the failings of the Church. The middle section of her declamation dealing with the follies of religion begins with a brief satire on the gullible public who accept stupid superstitions that are fed and exploited for their own profit by priests, pardoners and friars. She ridicules those who worship the images of saints, for instance, but who fail in their lives to emulate their examples of good living. She remarks upon the stupidity of many superstitious practices, such as "set[ting] tapers afore the virgin mother of god: and that at noone daies whan lest nede is?" (p. 67).

Similarly, Folly shows little tolerance when describing one of the Church's most profitable sidelines, the selling of indulgences, by which a subscriber was enabled to redeem time to be spent in Purgatory. The attack here is sustained, and its terminology leaves little room for doubt that Folly is being used by Erasmus directly to pillory what he regards as an indefensible practice:

> For what speake I of others, who with feigned **Perdones**, and remissions of sinnes dooe pleasantly flattre theim selues, takyng vpon theim to measure the space and continuance of soules abode in **Purgatorie**, as it were by **houreglasses**, settyng out, bothe the yeres, the monthes, the daies, the houres, and the lest minutes, without missyng, as if they had cast it by **Algrysme**? (p. 56)

And she persists with a diatribe against "some vsurer, or man of warre, or corrupte iudge" (p. 57), those in positions of trust and authority who seek to buy forgiveness for a life of sin, only to return to and continue in those sins, unrepentant. Folly concludes with a blanket accusation that in all such cases people are assisted by priests who seek to make money out of the business and who "know well enough on whiche side theyr breade is buttred" (p. 59). The attack on such corruption is made even more pointed when Folly introduces, with heavy irony, the instance "if some one of those cumbrous wyse-men shoulde ryse vp, and saie (and saie truely) *thou shalt neuer die ill, as longe as thou liuest well*" (p. 59), but goes on to point out how such an admirable moral idea and the man who offers it will be condemned by most people as exhibiting the height of folly. From the evidence of his other writings, it is clear that this whole section on religious follies and abuses occupies a central position in Erasmus's personal criticism of the established Church and its essential deception of its congregations. He believed that it was necessary to discard all the trappings of superstition and ceremony,

all the overweighted hierarchical machinery of church government, and return to a simpler "Imitation of Christ". And it is clear also that he held priests and bishops and cardinals and popes as equally responsible for the fostering of these abuses. There is an extended and vituperative attack on the Religious too, belittling their observances in the monasteries as the chants of the ignorant and the illiterate; Folly likens the friars preaching to the acts of Italian Mountebanks and describes them all as "counterfeictours of holinesse" (p.92). Doctors of Divinity fare little better. Folly is equally unforgiving in her attack on the Princes of the Church for the manner in which they mimic the pride and magnificence of secular princes. But when she arrives at popes, her words appear as pure invective:

> For as for Christ, he (thei thynke) maie easily enough be pleased, so long as thei shew them selues like popes in their **Misticall Pontificalibus**, bolstred vp with **ceremonies**, and titles of **blissednes**, **reuerendnes**, and **sanctitee**, to blisse and curse whom thei liste: what for the rest, it is stale with theim, and out of vse at these daies to doe myracles: peynefull, to teache the people: scholerlyke, to expounde scripture: to ydle a thyng, to praie: farre more milkesoplyke and womannisshe, to cast foorth teares: vile, to be nedie: dishonourable, to be ouercome, and most vnsittyng for theim who scantly will admitte kynges and emperours to the kyssyng of theyr feete: Finally it is an vnsauoury thyng, to die: and as reprocheable, to be hanged on the crosse: So that refusyng to stande to any of these harde condicions, thei rest onely vpon feates of armes, with also those sugred and doulcet **benedictions** of theirs, … with a thousande wherof I wene they woulde parte more liberally, than with one pennie. (p. 99)

It is possible to see from this that *The Praise of Folie*, as it develops, has turned into something else. It grows into a critique of the *status quo* in religion, as regards both its practice and its theology. Erasmus clearly speaks out against what he sees as behaviour contrary to the Christian belief to which he aspires and for which he pleads most earnestly. The mood of lightness and fun has changed radically to a mood of frustration, even anger, at what Erasmus sees as perversions of the Christian faith. *The Praise of Folie* has turned from being an entertainment for a friend into a direct attack on what the author regarded as the abuses of the Church.

It is this latter emphasis to which Martin Dorp referred especially in the letter he purportedly wrote to Erasmus following his reading of *The Praise of Folie* some time between 1512 and 1515. His letter began by congratulating Erasmus on his work on commentaries on the New Testament, though he warned that the corrections made to the standard text, the Vulgate, might be suspect theologically. He then went on to criticise *The Praise of Folie* on two major grounds.

One was that the subject matter and style of *The Praise of Folie* was trivial and that it reflected badly on Erasmus and his reputation. The second was that he had raised some sensitive issues relating to Church practice. Furthermore Dorp warned that certain figures in the Church regarded themselves as direct targets for Erasmus's satire and would be moved to take action against him.

In an extensive written reply to Martin Dorp, Erasmus sought to defend *The Praise of Folie*, beginning with the assertion that he himself regarded it as a slight piece hardly worthy of serious intention. He went further, invoking both Plato and Horace in defence of his method of using humour to tell the truth. He wrote, "the charge of having gone clumsily to work I won't dispute; that of excessive bitterness I certainly do. We all know how many things could be said about bad popes, scandalous bishops and priests, corrupt princes—if, like Juvenal, I had not been ashamed to write down what many are not ashamed to act out" (Letter, p. 233). If people wished to identify themselves by what he had said, then that was their business, not his. He went on to say that "I wanted to mock, not to attack; to benefit, not to wound; to comment on men's manners, not to denounce them" (p. 231)

He also insisted that although he had raised questions about the failings of churchmen, he had mentioned nobody by name. But in defending *The Praise of Folie*, Erasmus included a most stinging rebuke for certain Doctors of Divinity, a tactic through which he might appear to be aiming at a number of those within the Louvain faculty whom he believed were behind Dorp's criticism:

> It's an admitted fact that among theologians there are some so deficient in wit and judgement that they're unfit for study of any sort, let alone theology. … these are the ones who despise Greek, Hebrew and even Latin literature and who, though they are more stupid than swine and don't even have ordinary common sense, fancy themselves the defenders of the fortress of learning. … these fellows are engaged in a great conspiracy against humane letters because they want to cut a figure in the assembly of theologians and they are afraid that if polite learning flourishes and the world gets a little wiser they will be recognised as ignoramuses, though before they wanted to appear before the world as know-it-alls. … Folly displeases them because they don't understand her. (Letter, p. 236)

And much more of the same.

Interestingly, it has long been believed that the correspondence between Erasmus and Dorp was a genuine debate about the implications of the satirical content of *The Praise of Folie*, its validity and its power to offend. Lisa Jardine, how-

ever, amongst others, has argued strongly for the idea that Erasmus concocted the debate with Dorp's connivance.[5] Erasmus's decision to publish his reply to Dorp's accusations in the second edition of *The Praise*, issued in 1515, now looks like a calculated piece of provocation. This is supported by the fact that he also wrote additional material as a conclusion to the second edition that outlined his own belief in the innocent pursuit of a simple Christianity. He identified the "fool Christian" as one who endeavours to live according to the model that Jesus has set. He also included in the volume a detailed commentary on *The Praise* in the manner of scholarly commentaries on classical texts. This was allegedly the work of Gerardus Listrius but is thought to be mainly if not wholly the work of Erasmus himself. This commentary offered a machinery for the interpretation of *The Praise*, seeking to place it within the context of other serious academic discourse. In Erasmus's eyes, the popularity and rising notoriety of this book had become an active agent in his larger objective to effect radical change within the Church. He even suggested to Dorp that *The Praise* was simply a humorous version of his earlier piece, *The Handbook for a Christian Soldier*. Evidence of its popularity is not far to seek. Before Erasmus died in 1536, a further thirty-six Latin editions of *The Praise* had been published with all these additional materials. Translations of these editions were made into French, German, Czech and Italian. Erasmus himself said of this phenomenal publishing success that "hardly anything of mine has had such an enthusiastic reception" ("Catalogue", ed. Rummel, p. 34).

In this context, it is perhaps surprising that, even apart from Thomas More's threatening remark, no English translation of the *Encomium* was made until 1549, nearly fifteen years after Erasmus died. On the one hand, of course, when one thinks of Erasmus's English associates and friends of the 1520s and 30s, almost all of those who might have chosen to read it would have been perfectly able to do so in Latin. Certain individuals like Thomas Cranmer, the author of the first Prayer Book in English, and later Matthew Parker, Archbishop of Canterbury and architect of the Elizabethan religious settlement, "the middle way", had extensive libraries of Erasmus's books which it must be assumed included *The Praise*. As has been suggested by A. G. Dickens and Whitney Jones, Erasmus's ideas and teaching may have had significant influence on the evolution of the theology and practices of the sixteenth-century English Church settlement (pp. 196-209 and 212-14). Whatever the case, it remains a fact that the English Reformation took a

5 See Jardine, pp. 111-22 and 180-87, for a detailed and persuasive argument in support of this case.

distinctly different trajectory from that on the Continent. Erasmus's idea of intellectual argument and reasonableness was in direct contrast to Luther's and Calvin's root-and-branch approach, which was only ever supported by a minority in England and hardly at all by the Establishment. The process of reform in England was further complicated by the shifts of allegiance necessitated by the differing preferences of Edward VI, Mary and then Elizabeth.

However, during the 1540s, Catherine Parr and her associates were bent upon a more radical approach to reform than had been the case for Henry VIII. Indeed, she had come close to arrest and death for her persistent attempts to bring Henry along with her. After Henry died in 1547, Queen Catherine initiated work on translations of Erasmus's *New Testament Paraphrases* into English. It was a major project involving a number of individuals, including, rather strangely, the Princess Mary. She was given the paraphrase on St John's Gospel to translate. When the first volume of the *Paraphrases* was published in 1548, Nicholas Udall, the editor, wrote in his preface how Erasmus had shown leadership in reform and, almost echoing the sentiments expressed in *The Praise*, makes clear what he regards as Erasmus's role "in detesting of imagery and corrupt honouring of saints, in opening and defacing the tyranny, the blasphemy, hypocrisy, the ambition, the usurpation of the See of Rome" (cited in Dickens and Jones, p. 205). The significance of this publication of the *Paraphrases* can hardly be exaggerated, since it followed on from a Royal Injunction of July 1547 stipulating that alongside a Bible in English, these translated *Paraphrases* of Erasmus should be in every church in the kingdom (Dickens and Jones, p. 206). Thus it may be inferred that, for the English Church at this moment, the *Paraphrases* of Erasmus were regarded as of the greatest importance to the process of reform. They were perceived as having a major performative role. From a similar point of view, I would argue that, in England, *The Praise of Folie* could have been translated in order to participate in this process.

Whether Thomas Chaloner was commissioned to make the translation or chose to do so himself is not on record. His pedigree for the job is interesting, however, since, after studies at Cambridge in 1538, he was recommended for service in the household of Thomas Cromwell, a posting that would have exposed him in some degree to the forces of reform. From there he seems to have progressed through the ranks of what might be termed the Civil Service, serving on a number of embassies, including one at the court of Charles V. He became a lifelong friend of William Cecil. At a later date, he bore witness in the trials of both

Bishop Bonner in 1549 and Bishop Gardiner in 1550. Both of these bishops were reactionary conservatives opposed to reform, who fell foul of the Protestant authorities in the reign of Edward VI. So at one level Chaloner's Protestant credentials would have made him a good choice for the job. He also had developed a reputation as a writer and poet with a special interest in Latin lyric poetry and in translation. He is mentioned for his literary achievement in George Puttenham's *The Arte of English Poesie* and Francis Meres's *Palladis Tamia*, as well as in Ben Jonson's *Timber, or Discoveries*.

Whatever the case regarding the origins of the move to translate it, not far behind the publication and distribution of the *Paraphrases,* Thomas Chaloner's version of *The Praise of Folie* was published in 1549. It certainly seems like a timely and deliberate addition to the campaign of reform. Erasmus's text was perhaps a salutary as well as an entertaining reminder of what had to be left behind in terms of the abuses and superstitions of Romish practices. The satire on the excesses of the popes was fuel for the reformers, creating a church now freed from that tyranny. In his preface to the reader, Chaloner confirms the view that this book has a force beyond its comic form, in that Erasmus

> openeth all his bowget: So farfoorth as by the iudgement of many learned men, he neuer shewed more arte, nor witte, in any the grauest boke he wrote, than in this his praise of Folie. Whiche the reader hauyng any considerance, shall soone espie, how in euery mattier, yea almost euery clause, is hidden besides the myrth, some deaper sence and purpose. (p. 5)

As further evidence of this deeper sense and purpose, and therefore of the energy underlying its essential performativity, I think I need only make reference to the Council of Trent, where, in 1559, all of Erasmus's works, including *The Praise of Folie*, were placed on the Index of prohibited books. And although some five years later, Pope Pius IV relented and removed the scholarly religious works from the Index, nevertheless Erasmus's *Colloquies*, his *Adagia* and *The Praise of Folie* remained banned by the Church of Rome. Surely a book is not so utterly prohibited unless it is feared that it will have an influence beyond its binding. It must have been genuinely believed that the critique of the Princes of the Church and of superstitious practices would have the power to affect people's thinking and behaviour. Even as Erasmus's text was consigned to the Index, Thomas Chaloner's translation of *The Praise of Folie* was reprinted twice in 1560 and 1577—still performing in England, as it might be said, on behalf of the Elizabethan religious settlement.

And it is just possible that it is still in its own way performing today in the twenty-first century. In 2008, Nicholas Lezard wrote a review for *The Guardian* of a new edition and translation of the book. He admitted his enthusiastic championing of Erasmus's work and asserted that "The modern world begins in a sense with this book … it should be on every civilised bookshelf. … There was a time when it was: it was the must-read of its day, and reverberations from its impact are still being felt." Whether this assessment is true or not, *The Praise of Folly* remains a living testament to the intellect, imagination, sense of fun and powerful faith in an uncorrupted Christianity that are the impulses underpinning Erasmus's achievement. On behalf of Erasmus, then, his great creation, Folie, takes her leave and, as she departs, asks you, her audience, to "clappe your handes in token of gladnesse, liue carelesse, and drinke all out, ye the trustie seruauntes and solemne ministers of Folie" (p. 129).

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