

Desiderius Erasmus

1466-1536

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Learning Objectives

- Know the major events in the life of Erasmus
- Know his importance to humanism
- Know his importance to the Reformation
- Know his work with the Greek and Latin New Testaments
- Know the importance of
 - *The Paraphrases*
 - *The Praise of Folly*

Life of Erasmus

- Dutch Humanist
- Born in Rotterdam c. 28 October 1466
- Illegitimate son of a priest named Rogers
- On parents death he was forced to enter a monastery
- Went to Paris after taking priest's orders lived there until 1498
- Upon the accession of Henry VIII – made England his home
- 1514-1517 alternated between Basel and England
- 1517-1521 moved to Louvain
- Spent the remainder of his life (except for 6 yr in Freiburg) in Basel

Erasmus

- Accomplished classical scholar
- Learned in the history of the Church and the writings of its early Fathers
- Devoted to the study of the scriptures, but was also familiar with the scholastics
- Educational reformer in touch with all the major European humanists
- Satirist and a political thinker
- Moralist
- Theologian

Some of his Works

- Greek Testament that was pieced together from various manuscripts and fragments
- Latin New Testament, which was translated from the Greek original
- Greek-Latin New Testament
- *The Paraphrases* - Set of commentaries on the books of the New Testament
- *The Praise of Folly*

Erasmus and the Reformation

- Proponent of translating the bible into common languages
- William Tyndale based his English Translation on Erasmus' Greek/Latin Testament
- Believed that only through the imitation of Christ is one truly Christian
- His writing did much to shape the early reformation movement although he never joined it
- Did much to ensure the Martin Luther was not silenced and put to death
- Never joined the Reformation movement – felt that the reformed church must be one and must be reformed peacefully

Paraphrases

- Written in Latin.
- Attempts to establish an accurate text and to explain the gospels
- One of his chief interests was in controversial passages, which had come to have special doctrinal significance
- Literary Techniques
 - Simple elaboration of the biblical details,
 - Exploration of state of mind of biblical characters
 - Traditional allegorical or typological techniques of exegesis
 - Satire

Paraphrases

- Translated into English in the reign of Henry VIII under the patronage of Queen Catherine Parr
- *Paraphrases* on the Gospels and Acts were part of a national program of Christian education intended to produce a distinctively English church
 - Made the *Paraphrases* an official document of the Church of England
 - Mandated that every parish own the collected *Paraphrases* by Erasmus, the first *Books of Homilies*, *Common Book of Prayer* and the *Great Bible*
 - The *Paraphrases* were to be set up where parishioners could read it

In Praise of Folly

- Written in Latin in 1509
- Dedicated to Sir Thomas More
 - His name is very near the word *Moriae* (Folly) and the title is a pun on his name
 - To amuse him
- Ironic encomium after the manner of the Greek satirist Lucian

The Praise of Folly

- Best known work
 - By his death translated into French, Czechoslovakian and German
 - 36 Latin editions had been printed
- Three main sections
 - Series of orations in which Folly praises herself, self-deception and madness
 - Satirical examination of the abuses of the Catholic doctrine and their corrupt practices
 - Statement of Christian ideas
- Filled with Classical allusions

In Praise of Folly

- Her appearance makes her welcome
- Proper for Folly to praise herself
- Her speech is unprepared but genuine



Folly Speaks

“For who can set me out better than myself,
unless perhaps I could be better known to
another than to myself? Though yet I think it
somewhat more modest than the general
practice of our nobles and wise men who,
throwing away all shame, hire some flattering
orator or lying poet from whose mouth they
may hear their praises, that is to say, mere
lies; . . . ” (Erasmus *The Praise of Folly*)

Folly

- Her ancestry and birth – child of Plutus (wealth) and Youth

“. . .'twas not that blind and decrepit Plutus in Aristophanes that got me, but such as he was in his full strength and pride of youth; and not that only, but at such a time when he had been well heated with nectar, of which he had, at one of the banquets of the gods, taken a dose extraordinary.”

- Born in the Fortunate Isles – nursed by Drunkenness and Ignorance

The Praise of Folly

- Faithful companions
 - Philautia (self-love)
 - Kolakia (flattery)
 - Lethe (oblivion)
 - Misoponia (laziness)
 - Hedone (pleasure)
 - Anoia (madness)
 - Tryphe (wantonness)
 - Two gods Komos (intemperance) and Eegretos Hypnos (dead sleep)

Folly's Power over Humanity

- Owe your existence (birth) to her – what man would want the inconvenience/what woman would face the peril of childbirth without Folly and Madness
- Infancy is the merriest part of life – we cherish their folly
- Brings the old back to a second childhood

"Add to this that old men are more eagerly delighted with children, and they, again, with old men. "Like to like," quoted the Devil to the collier. For what difference between them, but that the one has more wrinkles and years upon his head than the other? Otherwise, the brightness of their hair, toothless mouth, weakness of body, love of mild, broken speech, chatting, toying, forgetfulness, inadvertency, and briefly, all other their actions agree in everything." (Erasmus *The Praise of Folly* Kindle Edition)

Folly's Power over Humanity

- Marriage
 - A wife is foolish, yet warm and pleasant “which means the roughness of the masculine temper is seasoned and sweetened by her folly”
- Friendship
 - Most people foolish and friendships are made among equals

“Is not the author and parent of all our love, Cupid, as blind as a beetle? And as with him all colors agree, so from him is it that everyone likes his own sweeter-kin best, though never so ugly, and "that an old man dotes on his old wife, and a boy on his girl." These things are not only done everywhere but laughed at too; yet as ridiculous as they are, they make society pleasant, and, as it were, glue it together.” (Erasmus *The Praise of Folly* Kindle Edition)

Folly and Society

- War is dependent on Folly – both parties are sure to lose more than they get
- Civil society – society is not run by philosophers (“run by parasites, panders, thieves, cut-throats, plowmen, sots, spendthrifts, and other dregs of mankind”)
- Arts founded on foolishness – men are seeking fame

Folly

- Gives true prudence
 - Real prudence is rash behavior
 - The fool in undertaking and venturing on the business of the world gathers the true prudence
 - Quotes Homer “The burnt child dreads the fire”
- Brings true wisdom – without folly, wisdom would lead to suicide
- To be foolish is to be happy
 - Knowledge of science does not increase happiness
 - Fools are not afraid o death
 - They are merry, play, sing, and laugh

Folly

- To be mad or deluded in not necessarily bad – one might be quite happy with their delusion
- Folly is greater than the other gods because she bestows her gifts on all
 - Men embrace here with there minds
 - Express her in their manners

Folly

- Christianity is folly
 - If one see a wooden or painted Polypheme Christopher – they shall not die
 - Salute a carved Barbara (St. Barbara) – he shall return safe from battle
 - Buying forgiveness from sin
 - Reciting Psalms

But perhaps I had better pass over our divines in silence and not stir this pool or touch this fair but unsavory plant, as a kind of men that are supercilious beyond comparison, and to that too, implacable; lest setting them about my ears, they attack me by troops and force me to a recantation sermon, which if I refuse, they straight pronounce me a heretic. For this is the thunderbolt with which they fright those whom they are resolved not to favor. (Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*. Kindle Edition.)

Folly – Divines (Theologians)

- Pronounce heresy on people who are not in their favor
- Use new-found world and prodigious terms
- Explain the most hidden mysteries according to their own fancy
- Try to express things better than the Apostles - fail
- Rules of ethics that they do not explain

Folly – Divines (Theologians)

- They correct and criticize the apostles
- They try to convert unbelievers with their logic rather than their lives.
- The learned pious men are disgusted by them
- They believe they uphold the church
- They make-up their own pictures of hell and heaven
- They don't follow the proper use of grammar and use a language of their own
- They glory in the title of "Our Masters"

And next these come those that commonly call themselves the religious and monks, most false in both titles, when both a great part of them are farthest from religion, and no men swarm thicker in all places than themselves. (Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*. Kindle Edition.)

Summary

- Accomplished classical scholar, learned in the history of the Church
- Famous humanist
- Reformation
 - Proponent of translating the Bible into common languages
 - His writing did much to shape the early reformation movement although he never joined it

Summary

- *Paraphrases*

- Attempts to establish an accurate text and to explain the gospels in such a way that the Christ of the apostles and evangelists might be heard clearly and plainly
- Translated into English under the patronage of Catherine Parr
- *Paraphrases* on the Gospels and Acts were part of a national program of Christian education intended to produce a distinctively English church

Summary

- *Praise of Folly*
 - Series of orations in which Folly praises herself, self-deception and madness
 - Satirical examination of the abuses of the Catholic doctrine and their corrupt practices
 - Statement of Christian ideas