

*In Praise of Folly* by Desiderius Erasmus

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Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536) was born in Rotterdam, Holland, and joined a monastic order at an early age. He was later sent to study theology in Paris, but focused more on the classic works of Greek and Roman literature. As his reputation as a scholar grew, Erasmus became less involved in church administration and spent more time writing and researching. A contemporary of Martin Luther, Erasmus would later become a major proponent of reform in the Catholic Church, although he bitterly disagreed with the Protestant cause.

From 1498-1499 Erasmus lived in England, where he met Thomas More, the author of *Utopia*. The two men collaborated on a translation of some classical literature, and they became close friends and continued to write to each other even after Erasmus moved to Italy. In 1509, Erasmus returned to England and wrote *Moriae Encomium (In Praise of Folly)* as a gift for More. The title of the work makes an affectionate joke of More's last name, which reminded Erasmus of *moros*, the Greek word for fool. The work was first published in 1511.

*In Praise of Folly* is a speech given by the imaginary goddess Folly, who sets about proving that foolishness is the basis of all human life. Several types of fools and foolishness are described, from drunken old women to powerful rulers. Although the work starts out as a lighthearted satire, it soon becomes a bitter denunciation of clerics, the Pope, and governments in general. Erasmus considered it a minor work and was surprised that it drew so much attention when it was published. Many people took offense at Erasmus' indictments, but others saw the work as amusing.

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The Special Collections Division has several early editions of *In Praise of Folly*, and many are illustrated. The best-known illustrations are copies of drawings by another of Erasmus' friends, the artist Hans Holbein. These designs were included in many editions of *Moriae Encomium* over the next two hundred years. Other illustrators include Charles Eisen, Daniel Chodowiecki, and Lynd Ward. The following quotations and images are just a sampling from our collection. Enjoy!

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"I think nothing more happy than that generation of men we commonly call fools, idiots, lack-wits, and dolts; splendid titles too, as I conceive them."

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"Without folly there would be no union for the procreation of children. What man would put his head in the noose of wedlock if he first, like a wise man, weighed the disadvantages of it? What woman would let a man come near her if she knew or considered in time the dangers of childbirth or the drudgery of bringing up a child?"

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“I remember an exceptionally stupid – I mean lucid – preacher addressing an exalted congregation on the Trinity, anxious to show off his superior learning and gratify the theologians...”

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“[Preachers] must have heard that exclamations are useful to play on the emotions, so after a start in mousy tones all of a sudden they bellow a word furiously, without any apparent reason, so that you are half inclined to send for a doctor.”

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“Next we will consider another very great joy, especially to the old, and that is drinking; for age loves a pot better than any petticoat...a sorry business life would be if its troubles were never to be drowned in a glass.”

IMG\_0150.jpg

“Clergy and laity are much alike in being wide awake on paydays, and in knowing so much of the law as protects their pockets. Neither is anxious to bear a burden that can be shifted onto other shoulders...”

The quotations above are from *Moriae Encomium: or, The Praise of Folly*, trans. Harry Carter (New York: Limited Editions Club, 1953). SPEC RARE PA8514 .E5 1953

The illustrations are from the following editions:

*Moriae Encomium: or, The Praise of Folly*, illustrated by Lynd Ward (New York: Limited Editions Club, 1953). SPEC RARE PA8514 .E5 1953

*L'Eloge de la Folie composé en forme de declamation...*, illustrated with engravings after the designs of Hans Holbein (Leiden, P. vander Aa, 1715). SPEC RARE PA8514 .F8 1715

*L'Eloge de la Folie*, illustrated by Charles Eisen (Paris, n.p., 1757). SPEC RARE PA8514 .F8 1757

*Das Lob der Narrheit aus dem Lateinischen*, illustrated by Daniel Chodowiecki (Berlin: G.J. Decker, 1781). SPEC RARE PA8514 .G3 1781

*Moriae Encomium: or, A Panegyrick Upon Folly*, illustrated with engravings after the designs of Hans Holbein (London, Printed, and sold by J. Woodward, in Threadneedle street, 1709). SPEC RARE PA8514.E5 1709

*L'Eloge de la Folie, traduction nouvelle du Latin d'Erasmus*, illustrator not named (Paris: D. de Maisonneuve, 1789). SPEC RARE PA8514.F8 1789