

Excerpts from IN PRAISE OF FOLLY
by Desiderius Erasmus

HOW slightly soever I am esteemed in the common vogue of the world, (for I well know how disingenuously Folly is decried, even by those who are themselves the greatest fools,) yet it is from my influence alone that the whole universe receives her ferment of mirth and jollity: of which this may be urged as a convincing argument, in that as soon as I appeared to speak before this numerous assembly all their countenances were gilded oyer with a lively sparkling pleasantness: you soon welcomed me with so encouraging a look, you spurred me on with so cheerful a hum, that truly in all appearance, you seem now flushed with a good dose of reviving nectar, when as just before you sate drowsy and melancholy, as if you were lately come out of some hermit's cell. But as it is usual, that as soon as the sun peeps from her eastern bed, and draws back the curtains of the darksome night; or as when, after a hard winter, the restorative spring breathes a more enlivening air, nature forthwith changes her apparel, and all things seem to renew their age; so at the first sight of me you all unmask, and appear in more lively colours. That therefore which expert orators can scarce effect by all their little artifice of eloquence, to wit, a raising the attentions of their auditors to a composedness of thought, this a bare look from me has commanded. The reason why I appear in this odd kind of garb, you shall soon be informed of, if for so short a while you will have but the patience to lend me an ear; yet not such a one as you are wont to hearken with to your reverend preachers, but as you listen withal to mountebanks, buffoons, and merry-andrews; in short, such as formerly were fastened to Midas, as a punishment for his affront to the god Pan. For I am now in a humour to act awhile the sophist, yet not of that sort who undertake the drudgery of tyrannizing over school boys, and teach a more than womanish knack of brawling; but in imitation of those ancient ones, who to avoid the scandalous epithet of wise, preferred this title of sophists; the task of these was to celebrate the worth of gods and heroes. Prepare therefore to be entertained with a panegyrick, yet not upon Hercules, Solon, or any other grandee, but on myself, that is, upon Folly.

And here I value not their censure that pretend it is foppish and affected for any person to praise himself: yet let it be as silly as they please, if they will but allow it needful: and indeed what is more befitting than

that Folly should be the trumpet of her own praise, and dance after her own pipe? for who can set me forth better than myself? or who can pretend to be so well acquainted with my condition?

First then, my father was neither the chaos, nor hell, nor Saturn, nor Jupiter, nor any of those old, worn out, grandsire gods, but Plutus, the very same that, maugre Homer, Hesiod, nay, in spite of Jove himself, was the primary father born amongst these delights, I did not, like other infants, come crying into the world, but perked up, and laughed immediately in my mother's face. And there is no reason I should envy Jove for having a she-goat to his nurse, since I was more creditably suckled by two jolly nymphs; the name of the first drunkenness, one of Bacchus's offspring, the other ignorance, the daughter of Pan; both which you may here behold among several others of my train and attendants, whose particular names, if you would fain know, I will give you in short This, who goes with a mincing gait, and holds up her head so high, is Self-Love. She that looks so spruce, and makes such a noise and bustle, is Flattery. That other, which sits hum-drum, as if she were half asleep, is called Forgetfulness. She that leans on her elbow, and sometimes yawningly stretches out her arms, is Laziness. This, that wears a plighted garland of flowers, and smells so perfumed, is Pleasure. The other, which appears in so smooth a skin, and pampered-up flesh, is Sensuality. She that stares so wildly, and rolls about her eyes, is Madness. As to those two gods whom you see playing among the lasses the name of the one is Intemperance, the other Sound Sleep. By the help and service of this retinue I bring all things under the verge of my power, lording it over the greatest kings and potentates.

Come now then as many of you as challenge the respect of being accounted wise, ingenuously confess how many insurrections of rebellious thoughts, and pangs of a labouring mind, ye are perpetually thrown and tortured with; reckon up all those inconveniences that you are unavoidably subject to, and then tell me whether fools, by being exempted from all these embroilments, are not infinitely more free and happy than yourselves? Add to this, that fools do not barely laugh, and sing, and play the good-fellow alone to themselves: but as it is the nature of good to be communicative, so they impart their mirth to others, by making sport for the whole company they are at any time

engaged in, as if providence purposely designed them for an antidote to melancholy: whereby they make all persons so fond of their society, that they are welcomed to all places, hugged, caressed, and defended, a liberty given them of saying or doing anything; so well beloved, that none dares to offer them the least injury; nay, the most ravenous beasts of prey will pass them by untouched, as if by instinct they were warned that such innocence ought to receive no hurt. Farther, their converse is so acceptable in the court of princes, that few kings will banquet, walk, or take any other diversion, without their attendance; nay, and had much rather have their company, than that of their gravest counsellors, whom they maintain more for fashion-sake than good-will; nor is it so strange that these fools should be preferred before graver politicians, since these last, by their harsh, sour advice, and ill-timing the truth, are fit only to put a prince out of the humour, while the others laugh, and talk, and joke, without any danger of disobliging.

It is one farther very commendable property of fools, that they always speak the truth, than which there is nothing more noble and heroical. For so, though Plato relate it as a sentence of Alcibiades, that in the sea of drunkenness truth swims uppermost, and so wine is the only teller of truth, yet this character may more justly be assumed by me, as I can make good from the authority of Euripides, who lays down this as an axiom *uwpa uwpos heyei*. Children and fools always speak the truth. Whatever the fool has in his heart he betrays it in his face; or what is more notifying, discovers it by his words: while the wise man, as Euripides observes, carries a double tongue; the one to speak what may be said, the other what ought to be; the one what truth, the other what the time requires: whereby he can in a trice so alter his judgment, as to prove that to be now white, which he had just before swore to be black; like the satyr at his porridge, blowing hot and cold at the same breath; in his lips professing one thing, when in his heart he means another.