

Summary of *The Praise of Folly* by Erasmus

From *enotes.com*

The opening is lighthearted as Folly catalogs the boons which she bestows on humans: It is she who allows the human race to procreate, since nobody can be solemn about sex; further, she provides solace for husbands deceived by their wives, since they are usually so foolish that they do not even recognize their wives' adulteries. The tone changes in chapter 31, however, as she lists her other beneficiaries: grotesque old men and women who try to deceive others into believing them still young. From this section on, the tone shifts back and forth between banter and serious--often biting--satire.

About three-fourths of the way through the work, Erasmus turns his satire on theologians and monks whose religious views serve to divide rather than unite Christians. This section of THE PRAISE OF FOLLY was especially controversial when it was published. Finally, the work dwells on the virtues of Christianity, which, according to Folly, look like madness to the world: Even Christ, she says, was a divine fool to sacrifice himself for humanity.

As the work draws to a close, Folly remarks that she has been carried away in her speech and ends with the hope that the audience, followers of Folly, will applaud, live, and drink. This satire had special meaning for a Renaissance audience, especially in its criticisms of specific religious sects and practices, but it appeals to modern readers in its satire of universal human foibles and its scathing indictment of war.

Considered by many to be the founder of modern letters, Desiderius Erasmus spent a lifetime producing some of the most important scholarly works of the early Renaissance. Ironically, *The Praise of Folly*, written as an amusement, became the most enduring of his contributions to Western literature. Erasmus himself never thought highly of this work, yet it is the one for which he is best remembered. He wrote it in approximately seven days in 1509, while he was recovering from an illness at the home of his English friend, Thomas More. It was not until two years after its writing that he had the book secretly

printed in France. More than forty editions of *The Praise of Folly* appeared in the author's lifetime. The work caused Erasmus considerable trouble; his portraits of the clergy did little to endear him to the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church, and for years the volume was banned as anti-Catholic. Nevertheless, the treatise has passed into the canon of Western literature, ranking as one of the premier examples of satiric writing in European letters.

The Praise of Folly makes use of one of the oldest forms of rhetorical discourse: the encomium. In a mock encomium, Erasmus makes use of the satirical devices of one of the world's most influential satirists, Lucian, to poke gentle fun at the tradition of praising great people and great ideas. Putting words of wisdom in the mouth of Folly, Erasmus highlights the paradoxical relationship between conventional wisdom and the religious dimensions of human life. Like all great satirists, Erasmus focuses on specific targets (especially the clergy of his own day), but his general aim is to tell his readers something about universal human nature. Beneath his carefully constructed argument, Erasmus echoes the biblical lesson that, in the eyes of the world, it is truly folly to adopt the Christian lifestyle; in that folly, however, lies real wisdom.

Although written centuries ago, *The Praise of Folly* is still an effective analytic examination of humankind's abilities and vanities. It not only gives the modern reader an idea of the struggle of the Humanists in their effort to rid the world of the conventions and forms of the Middle Ages but also provides insight into continuing problems of life. As the result of this work and several others, Erasmus became one of the most popular men of letters of his time and, consequently, one of the most influential. He was of prime importance in the spread of Humanism through the northern part of Europe and was instrumental in many aspects of both the Reformation and the later phase of the Renaissance. Everything he did was to aid humankind in tearing away the veils of foolish traditions and customs, so that people could find the road back to the true God and their true selves.