The Praise of Folly

DESIDERIUS ERASMUS
1466–1536

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Moriae encomium

Translated from the Latin with AI (Claude) and edited



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INTRODUCTION

Erasmus of Rotterdam, the most famous scholar of his age, wrote *The Praise of Folly* in 1509 at Thomas More's house in London, after a journey back from Italy; by his own account he wrote it in a few days. The title is a pun on More's name (Greek *moria*, "folly"), and the book is dedicated to him. It was printed in Paris in 1511 and became one of the best-sellers of the century.

The speaker is Folly herself, a goddess, who mounts the platform to deliver a formal oration in her own honor. She shows that life, love, friendship, marriage and society would be impossible without her, and that the happiest people are those who know least. Then her voice sharpens: she runs through the learned and the powerful, grammarians, lawyers, philosophers, theologians, monks, princes, bishops and popes, and finds them all her devoted servants. At the end the joke turns serious, and she claims for herself the "folly of the Cross" and the ecstasy of the saints.

The book delighted readers and alarmed churchmen; Erasmus spent years defending it. This edition includes his dedicatory letter to More. The chapter numbers are the conventional ones; the Latin text is the Leipzig edition of 1828.

Letter to Thomas More

Why a book in praise of Folly, why it is dedicated to More, and why a joke may be serious and a satire name no names.

Ep.1 A few days ago, as I was making my way back from Italy to England, I did not want all the time I had to spend in the saddle to be wasted on ἀμούσοις [tasteless] and unlettered small talk. So, now and then, I chose instead either to turn over in my mind something to do with the studies we share, or to enjoy remembering the friends I had left behind here, friends as delightful as they are learned. Among them, my dear More, you came to mind first of all. Absent as I was, I used to enjoy the memory of you in your absence just as I had enjoyed your company in person when we were together, and may I perish if anything sweeter has ever happened to me in my life. Since I felt I had to do something, and the time hardly seemed suited to serious thought, I decided to amuse myself with an encomium of Moria. "What Pallas put that into your head?" you will ask. First, I was prompted by your family name, More, which comes as close to the word Moria as you yourself are far from the thing.[1] And by everyone's vote you are as far from it as anyone could be. Next, I suspected that this game of my wits would win your approval above all. You take enormous pleasure in jokes of this kind, jokes that are not unlearned, unless I am mistaken, and not altogether witless. And in the ordinary life of mortals you generally play a sort of Democritus. Yet although the singular sharpness of your mind usually sets you far apart from the crowd, the incred-

1 Moria (Greek μωρία, "folly") is Folly's Greek name. Erasmus puns on the name of his friend Thomas More (1478–1535), the future author of Utopia.

ible sweetness and ease of your manners mean that you can be, and are glad to be, a man for all hours with everyone. So you will not only welcome this little declamation gladly, as a μνημόσυνον [keepsake] from your companion, but also take on its defense, since it is dedicated to you and is now yours, not mine.[2] For perhaps there will be no shortage of quibblers to slander it. Some will say that these trifles are too frivolous to befit a theologian, others that they bite too hard to suit Christian restraint. They will keep shouting that I am reviving the Old Comedy or playing some sort of Lucian, and sinking my teeth into everything. But I would ask those who are offended by the lightness and playfulness of the subject to consider that the precedent is not mine: great authors did the same long ago. So many centuries back, Homer amused himself with the Βατραχομυομαχία [Battle of Frogs and Mice], Virgil with the Gnat and the Moretum, Ovid with the Nut. Polycrates praised Busiris, and so did Isocrates, who took him to task for it. Glaucon praised Injustice, Favorinus Thersites and the quartan fever, Synesius Baldness, Lucian the Fly and the Parasite's Art. Seneca made fun of Claudius's ἀποθέωσιν [deification], Plutarch wrote the dialogue of Gryllus with Ulysses, Lucian and Apuleius wrote the Ass, and someone or other wrote the Will of the piglet Grunnius Corocotta, which even St. Jerome mentions.[3] So, if they like, let them imagine that I was passing the time with a board game to relax, or, if they prefer, riding a long cane like a hobby-horse. For how unfair is it to allow every walk of life its own amusements but permit learning none at all? Especially when trifles lead to serious things, and jests are handled in such a way that a reader whose nose is not completely dull gets rather more profit from them than from some people's grim and showy treatises.

2 Democritus of Abdera (5th century BC) was the "laughing philosopher," said to laugh at human folly. "A man for all hours" is a proverb in Erasmus's Adages and the source of "a man for all seasons."

3 The Old Comedy of Athens (Aristophanes) was notorious for attacking people by name, and Lucian of Samosata (2nd century AD), the Greek satirist whom Erasmus and More translated, was its heir. The works listed are classical mock encomia and jests, some only attributed to the authors named.

One man, for instance, praises rhetoric or philosophy in a speech long stitched together; another writes up the praises of some prince; another urges us to make war on the Turks; another foretells the future; another dreams up new little quibbles over goat's wool. For just as nothing is more trifling than to treat serious things triflingly, so nothing is more delightful than to treat trifles in such a way that you seem to have been doing anything but trifling.[4]

IN DEFENSE OF A BITING JOKE

Erasmus argues that satire naming no names teaches rather than wounds, and that Folly must speak in character.

As for me, others will be the judges. Still, unless φιλαυτία [self-love] utterly deceives me, I have praised Folly, but not altogether foolishly. Now, to answer the carping about my biting tone: wits have always been allowed this freedom, to make fun of the common life of mankind with impunity, provided their license did not turn into rabid fury. So I am all the more amazed at how delicate ears are these days: they can bear almost nothing now but formal titles. You can even see some people so perversely pious that they would sooner put up with the gravest insults against Christ than see a pope or a prince sprinkled with the lightest joke—especially if it touches πρὸς τὰ ἄλφιτα [their bread and butter]. But when someone censures human lives without grazing anyone at all by name, does he seem, I ask you, to bite, or rather to teach and admonish? Besides, on how many counts, I beg you, do I censure myself? Moreover, a writer who passes over no class of people seems angry not at any individual but at every vice. So if anyone comes forward shouting that he has been wounded, he will betray either his guilty conscience or at least his fear. St. Jerome played this game far more freely and bitingly, at times not even sparing names. I, besides refraining from names altogether, have also tempered my pen so that a

4 To argue "about goat's wool" (a phrase from Horace) is proverbial for squabbling over nothing.

sensible reader will easily see I was after pleasure rather than a bite. Nowhere have I followed Juvenal's example and stirred up that hidden cesspool of crimes; I have tried to review what is laughable rather than what is foul. Then, if there is anyone whom even this cannot appease, let him at least remember that it is a fine thing to be abused by Folly. And since I made her the speaker, I had to keep to what suits her character.[5] But why am I telling all this to you, an advocate so exceptional that you can defend even not-so-good cases superbly? Farewell, most eloquent More, and defend your Moria vigorously. From the country, 9 June 1508.[6]

5 Juvenal (c. AD 60–130), the Roman satirist, was famous for his savage indignation at vice.

6 The year is printed thus; the book was in fact written in 1509, in More's house, and first published in 1511.

Folly Takes the Stage

Chapters 1–9
Folly announces her own encomium, describes herself, and names her father Plutus, her nurses and her companions.

CHAPTER 1

[1] Whatever mortals commonly say of me (and I know very well how badly Folly is spoken of, even among the biggest fools), I am the one—yes, I tell you, the only one—whose divine power brings cheer to gods and men. And here is ample proof: the moment I stepped forward to speak to this packed assembly, all your faces suddenly lit up with a new and unaccustomed gaiety. At once you smoothed your brows and applauded with such happy, friendly laughter that all of you I see around me look, I swear, as if you were tipsy on the nectar of Homer's gods, laced with nepenthe. And yet a moment ago you were sitting there gloomy and anxious, as if you had just come back from the cave of Trophonius.[1] It is just as it usually is when the sun first shows the earth that lovely golden face of his, or when, after a harsh winter, the new spring breathes with gentle west winds: at once everything takes on a new face and a new color, and a kind of youth returns. In the same way, as soon as you caught sight of me, you all wore a different look. And so what great orators can scarcely achieve with a long and long-rehearsed speech—

1 Nepenthe was the drug of forgetfulness that Helen gives in Homer's Odyssey. Those who consulted the oracle in Trophonius's cave in Boeotia came back so gloomy that it became proverbial.

namely, to dispel troublesome cares from the mind—I accomplished instantly, just by being seen.

AN ENCOMIUM OF HERSELF

Folly explains her costume and announces she will play the sophist and praise herself.

[2] Why I have come out today in this unusual get-up, you will hear presently, provided you don't mind lending me your ears. Not, of course, the ears you prick up for preachers, but the ones you usually prick up for street-corner quacks, buffoons and jesters, the ears that our friend Midas once lent to Pan. For I have taken a fancy to play the sophist before you for a little while. Not the kind who nowadays drum anxious trifles into schoolboys and teach them to wrangle with a more than mulish stubbornness. No, I will imitate those ancient ones who, to avoid the ill-famed title of Sophoi, "wise men," preferred to be called sophists. Their business was to celebrate the praises of gods and heroes in encomia. So you are about to hear an encomium—not of Hercules, nor of Solon, but of me myself, that is, of Folly.[2]

WHY PRAISE HERSELF

Folly argues that self-praise is more honest than hiring flatterers, since no one else has praised her.

[3] Now, I don't care a straw for those wise men who proclaim that it is the height of folly and arrogance to sing your own praises. Let it be as foolish as they like, so long as they admit it is fitting. For what could be more apt than for Moria herself to trumpet her own praises, and αὐτὴ ἑαυτὴν αὐλῇ [play her own pipe]? Who could portray me better than I myself? Unless perhaps someone knows me better than I know myself. Besides, I consider this a good deal more modest than what the common run of nobles and wise men do. Out of some perverse sense of

2 King Midas judged Pan's piping superior to Apollo's lyre, and Apollo gave him a donkey's ears for it.

shame, they usually suborn some fawning orator or windbag poet and pay him a fee to hear their own praises from him—that is, pure lies. And all the while our bashful friend spreads his feathers like a peacock and raises his crest, as the shameless flatterer makes this good-for-nothing the equal of the gods and holds him up as the perfect model of every virtue, though the man knows he is more than δὶς διὰ πασῶν [two full octaves] away from it. The flatterer dresses the little crow in borrowed feathers, Αἰθίοπα λευκαίνει [washes the Ethiopian white], and in short ἐκ μύας ἐλέφαντα ποιεῖ [makes an elephant out of a fly]. Finally, I am following that well-worn popular proverb which says a man does right to praise himself when no one else has turned up to praise him. Here, though, I can't help wondering at the ingratitude—or should I say laziness?—of mortals. They all worship me devotedly and gladly enjoy my kindness, yet in all these centuries no one has ever come forward to celebrate the praises of Folly in a speech of thanks. And this when there have been people who extolled Busirises, Phalarises, quartan fevers, flies, baldness and pests of that sort in carefully crafted eulogies, worked up by lamplight at great cost of oil and sleep. From me you will hear a speech that is off-the-cuff, I admit, and unpolished, but all the more truthful for that.[3]

NO DEFINITION, NO DIVISION

Folly refuses to define or divide herself, since everyone can see her standing there.

[4] And I wouldn't want you to think I am making this up to show off my talent, as the common run of orators do. For they, as you know, deliver a speech they have labored over for a full thirty years—sometimes one that isn't even theirs—and still swear they wrote it in three days, as if for fun, or even dictated it. As for me, I have always liked best to say ὅττι κεν ἐπ' ἀκαιρίμαν γλῶτταν

3 Busiris, a mythical Egyptian king who sacrificed strangers, and Phalaris, a Sicilian tyrant who roasted his victims in a bronze bull, had both received mock praise from Isocrates and Lucian.

ἔλθῃ [whatever comes to the tip of my tongue]. But let no one expect me, in the manner of your run-of-the-mill rhetoricians, to explain myself by a definition, much less divide myself into parts. Either would be a bad omen: to hem in with limits one whose divine power reaches so far, or to cut up one in whose worship the whole of creation is so united. Besides, what is the point of presenting a mere shadow and image of me in a definition, when you are here in person, looking at me here in person with your own eyes? For I am, as you see, that true giver of ἐάων [good things] whom the Latins call Stultitia and the Greeks μωρίαν [Moria].

A FACE THAT CANNOT LIE

Folly cannot be disguised, and those who claim wisdom betray themselves as fools, like Midas by his ears.

5 But why did I even need to say that? As if my very face and brow, as they say, did not show clearly enough who I am! Or as if anyone who claimed I was Minerva or Sophia could not be refuted at a single glance, even without speech, that least deceptive mirror of the mind. With me there is no room for make-up. I don't put on one thing in my face and keep another hidden in my heart. I am entirely like myself all over, so much so that I cannot be disguised even by those who most loudly lay claim to the mask and title of Wisdom, and go strutting about καὶ ἐν τῇ πορφύρᾳ πίθηκοι, καὶ ἐν τῇ λεοντῇ ὄνοι [both apes in purple and asses in a lion's skin]. However hard they pretend, their ears stick out somewhere and give away the Midas. An ungrateful breed of men, too, by Hercules! Though they belong to my party more than anyone, in public they are so ashamed of my name that they fling it at others everywhere as a great insult. So, since these people are μωρότατοι [utter fools] but want to pass for sages and Thaleses, shall we not have every right to call them μωροσώφους [foolosophers]?[4]

4 Thales of Miletus (6th century BC) was counted among the Seven Sages. The Greek word μωρόσοφος, "foolishly wise," is found in Lucian.

APING THE RHETORICIANS

Folly mocks orators who stud their Latin with Greek words and obscure archaisms to impress.

[6] I decided to imitate the rhetoricians of our day in this respect too. They think themselves positively gods if they show themselves two-tongued like leeches, and they consider it a splendid feat to weave a few little Greek words into their Latin speeches every so often, like inlays in a mosaic, even when this was not the place for them. And if they run short of foreign words, they dig four or five archaic ones out of moldering manuscripts to cloud the reader in darkness. The point, of course, is that those who understand may be more and more pleased with themselves, while those who don't may admire all the more the less they understand. For this, too, is one of my people's not inelegant pleasures: to look up most to whatever is most foreign. And if some are a little more pretentious, they still smile and applaud and, like the donkey, τὰ ὦτα κινῶσι [twitch their ears], so as to seem to the others to understand perfectly. Καὶ ταῦτα δὴ μὲν ταῦτα [So much for that]. Now back to my subject.[5]

HER FATHER, WEALTH

Folly names her father as Plutus, god of wealth, who governs all human affairs.

[7] So you have my name, gentlemen. What epithet shall I add for you? What else but "most foolish"? For by what more honorable title could the goddess Folly address her initiates? But since not so many know my parentage, I shall now try to explain it, with the kind help of the Muses. My father was not Chaos, nor Orcus, nor Saturn, nor Iapetus, nor any other of those outdated, moldy gods. It was Πλοῦτος [Plutus, Wealth], he alone—whatever Hesiod and Homer and even Jupiter himself may think—πατὴρ

5 Leeches were thought to have a forked tongue; the Latin bilinguis means both "two-tongued" and "bilingual."

ἀνδρῶν τε θεῶν τε [father of men and gods]. At his nod alone, now as in the past, everything sacred and profane is turned upside down. By his decision wars, peace, empires, counsels, judgments, elections, marriages, contracts, treaties, laws, arts, amusements, serious matters—I'm running out of breath—in short, all the public and private business of mortals is managed. Without his help that whole tribe of poets' deities—I'll go further—even the select gods themselves would either not exist at all or would live οἰκόσιτοι [on home fare], and very meagerly at that. Whoever has him angry will get no real help even from Pallas; whoever has him on his side can tell even Jupiter on high, thunderbolt and all, to go hang himself. τούτου πατρὸς εὔχομαι εἶναι [This is the father I boast of].[6] And he begot me not from his own brain, the way Jupiter produced that grim, glowering Pallas, but on the nymph Neotes, by far the loveliest and merriest of them all. Nor was he bound to her in gloomy wedlock, the way that lame smith was born, but—something rather sweeter—ἐν φιλότητι μιχθείς [mingling in love], as our Homer puts it. And make no mistake: the one who fathered me was not Aristophanes' Plutus, already with one foot in the grave and stone-blind, but Plutus as he once was, still sound and hot with youth—and not only with youth, but far more with nectar, which he happened to have drunk rather freely, and neat, at a banquet of the gods.[7]

BORN IN THE ISLES OF THE BLESSED

Folly describes her birthplace and her two nurses, Drunkenness and Lack of Education.

[8] And if you also want to know my birthplace (since nowadays people think it matters above all for nobility where you uttered your first wails), I was born neither on wandering Delos, nor in

6 Plutus is the Greek god of wealth. The "select gods" were the twenty principal deities in the scholar Varro's classification.

7 Neotes is Greek for "Youth." The lame smith is Vulcan, lawful son of Jupiter and Juno; in Aristophanes' comedy Plutus (388 BC) Wealth is an old blind man.

the billowing sea, nor ἐν σπέσσι γλαφυροῖσι [in hollow caves], but in the very Isles of the Blessed, where everything grows ἄσπαρτα καὶ ἀνήροτα [unsown and unplowed]. There is no toil there, no old age, no sickness of any kind. Nowhere in the fields do you see asphodel, mallow, squill, lupines, beans or any rubbish of that sort; instead, on every side, moly, panacea, nepenthe, marjoram, ambrosia, lotus, rose, violet, hyacinth and gardens of Adonis charm the eyes and the nose together. Born amid these delights, I did not begin my life by crying, but at once gave my mother a sweet smile.[8] Nor do I envy ἐν ὑπάτῳ Κρονίωνι [the most high son of Cronus] his nanny goat, since two most charming nymphs nursed me at their breasts: Methe, daughter of Bacchus, and Apaedia, daughter of Pan. You can see them here too, among the rest of my companions and attendants. If you want to know these ladies' names, by Hercules, you will hear them from me only in Greek.[9]

FOLLY'S COMPANIONS

Folly introduces her attendants: Self-Love, Flattery, Forgetfulness, Laziness, Pleasure, Madness, Wantonness, Revelry and Sound Sleep.

[9] This one, of course, whom you see with her eyebrows raised, is Φιλαυτία [Self-Love]. The one you see with smiling eyes, as it were, clapping her hands, is named Κολακία [Flattery]. This one, half asleep and looking drowsy, is called Λήθη [Forgetfulness]. This one, propped on both elbows with her hands folded, is called Μισοπονία [Laziness]. This one, crowned with a garland of roses and dripping with perfumes all over, is Ἡδονή [Pleasure]. This one, with slippery eyes that wander this way and that, is called Ἄνοια [Madness]. This one, with glossy skin and a well-fattened body, goes by the name Τρυφή [Wantonness]. You also see two gods among the girls: one they call Κῶμον [Revelry], the

8 Apollo and Diana were born on the floating island of Delos, and Venus rose from the sea. The Isles of the Blessed were a mythical paradise in the far western ocean.
9 Methe means "Drunkenness" and Apaedia "Lack of Education." Jupiter, son of Cronus, was suckled on Crete by the goat Amalthea.

other νήγρετον Ὕπνον [Sound Sleep]. With the faithful help of this household, I tell you, I bring the whole world under my sway, and give orders even to emperors.[10]

10 Self-Love (Philautia) is one of Folly's chief allies and returns again and again in her speech.

What Life Owes to Folly

Chapters 10–30
Birth, childhood, old age, the gods, pleasure, friendship, marriage, war and the arts: nothing pleasant or great happens without her.

CHAPTER 10

10 You have heard of my birth, my upbringing and my companions. Now, so that no one thinks I claim the title of goddess without reason, prick up your ears and hear how many benefits I bestow on gods and men alike, and how far my divine power extends. If someone wrote, not unwisely, that this is what it means to be a god—to help mortals—and if those who showed mortals wine, or grain, or some single benefit of that kind were rightly admitted to the senate of the gods, why should I not rightly be called and considered the ἄλφα [alpha] of all the gods, I who alone lavish everything on everyone?[1]

THE SOURCE OF LIFE

Folly claims that every human being, even the Stoic wise man's child, owes his birth to her.

11 To begin with, what can be sweeter or more precious than life itself? And to whom should its beginning be credited, if not to me? For it is not the spear of ὀβριμοπάτρης [mighty-fathered] Pallas or the aegis of νεφεληγερέτου [cloud-gathering] Jupiter

1 The saying that to be a god is to help mortals comes from Pliny the Elder's Natural History (2.18).

that begets or propagates the human race. Why, the father of gods and king of men himself, who shakes all Olympus with his nod, has to lay down that three-forked thunderbolt of his and that Titanic scowl with which he terrifies all the gods whenever he pleases. Like an actor, the poor fellow has to put on someone else's mask whenever he wants to do what he is forever doing, that is, παιδοποιεῖν [to make children]. Now, the Stoics claim that they come closest to the gods. But give me a Stoic three or four times over—or six hundred times, if you like—and even he will have to lay aside, if not his beard, the badge of wisdom (though goats have one too), then at least his frown. He will have to smooth his brow, throw away those adamantine doctrines, and play the fool and rave for a while. In short, me—me, I tell you—that wise man must call upon if he ever wants to be a father. And why shouldn't I chat with you more frankly, as is my way? Tell me, does the head, the face, the breast, the hand or the ear—the parts considered respectable—beget gods or men? I think not. No, it is that part, so foolish and so ridiculous that it cannot even be named without a laugh, that propagates the human race. That is the sacred spring from which all things draw life, more truly than from that Pythagorean tetrad.[2] Come now, what man, I ask you, would offer his face to the halter of matrimony if, as those wise men usually do, he first weighed up the drawbacks of that life? Or what woman would ever let a man near her if she knew, or stopped to think about, the dangerous labor of childbirth and the trouble of bringing up children? So if you owe your life to marriage, and marriage to my attendant Ἀνοία [Madness], you can see what you owe to me. And what woman who has been through all this once would want to do it again, unless the divinity of Λήθης [Forgetfulness] stood by her? Venus herself, whatever Lucretius may protest, would never deny that without the addition of my divine power her own force is maimed and

2 The Pythagoreans revered the tetractys, the numbers 1 to 4 adding up to the perfect number 10, as the source of all nature.

ineffective.[3] So from that tipsy and ridiculous game of mine come haughty philosophers (whose place has now been taken by those the common people call monks), kings in purple, pious priests and thrice-most-holy popes—and finally that whole assembly of the poets' gods, so numerous that Olympus itself, spacious as it is, can scarcely hold the crowd.

LIFE WITHOUT PLEASURE

Folly argues that life would not be worth living without pleasure, the seasoning of folly.

12 But it would hardly be enough to show that I am the seedbed and source of life unless I also showed that every good thing in the whole of life is my gift as well. Well, then: would this life seem to deserve the name of life at all, if you took pleasure away? You applaud! I knew that none of you was so wise—or rather so foolish—no, so wise after all—as to hold that view. In fact, not even those Stoics despise pleasure, though they carefully pretend to, and tear it to shreds with a thousand insults in public—no doubt so that, once the others are scared off, they can enjoy it more lavishly themselves. But let them tell me, by Jove: what part of life is not gloomy, dull, graceless, tasteless and tiresome, unless you add pleasure, that is, the seasoning of folly? That never sufficiently praised Sophocles could serve as quite an adequate witness to this; we still have his beautiful tribute to me: Ἐν τῷ φρονεῖν γὰρ μηδὲν, ἥδιστος βίος [For the sweetest life lies in knowing nothing]. Still, come, let us lay out the whole matter point by point.[4]

3 Lucretius's poem On the Nature of Things opens with a hymn to Venus as the creative power of all nature.

4 The line is from Sophocles' tragedy Ajax (554).

CHILDHOOD AND SECOND CHILDHOOD

Folly credits herself with the charm of children and the contentment of doting old age.

[13] First of all, who doesn't know that the earliest stage of human life is by far the happiest and by far the most delightful to everyone? What is it about babies that makes us kiss them, hug them and cuddle them so, so that even an enemy would help a child of that age, if not the allure of folly? Wise Nature has deliberately given it to the newborn so that, with a kind of wage of pleasure, they can sweeten the labors of those who raise them and coax goodwill from those who look after them. Then comes youth. How popular it is with everyone! How sincerely all favor it, how eagerly they help it get ahead, how dutifully they hold out helping hands! But where, I ask you, does that charm of youth come from? Where, if not from me? Thanks to me, youth has as little wisdom as possible, and therefore as little sourness as possible. Call me a liar if, as soon as they grow older and through experience and education begin to have some grown-up wisdom, the bloom of their beauty does not fade at once, their liveliness flag, their charm cool and their vigor give way. The further one is drawn away from me, the less and less one lives, until τὸ χαλεπὸν γῆρας [harsh old age] arrives—that is, irksome old age—hateful now not only to others but even to itself. No mortal could stand it at all if I did not take pity on such great hardships and once again lend a helping hand. Just as the poets' gods usually rescue the dying with some metamorphosis, so I bring those who already have one foot in the grave back to childhood again, as far as I can. That is why people quite rightly call them παλίμπαιδας [children a second time]. And if anyone asks how I transform them, I won't hide that either. I lead them to the spring of my Lethe—for it rises in the Isles of the Blessed, while in the underworld it flows only as a thin little stream—so that, as soon as they have drunk long drafts of forgetfulness there, their cares gradually wash away and they grow young again. "But

they are already going senile," people say, "already losing their wits." Granted—but that is exactly what becoming a child again means. Or is being a child anything other than being silly and witless? Isn't what delights us most at that age precisely that it knows nothing? Who would not hate and loathe as a monster a boy with a grown man's wisdom? The popular proverb agrees: *I hate a little boy with wisdom before his time*. And who could bear to deal or keep company with an old man who had joined to his long experience of the world an equal vigor of mind and sharpness of judgment?[5] So the old man goes doddering, thanks to my gift. But meanwhile this dotard of mine is free of those wretched cares that torment the wise man. Meanwhile he is quite good company over a drink. He doesn't feel the weariness of life, which a sturdier age can hardly bear. Sometimes, like the old man in Plautus, he goes back to those three letters—and he would be the unhappiest of men if he had any sense. But meanwhile, thanks to me, he is happy, dear to his friends, and not even a dull companion at a party. After all, in Homer too, speech sweeter than honey flows from Nestor's mouth, while Achilles' is rather bitter; and in the same poet, the old men sitting on the walls send forth a voice τὴν λειριόεσσαν [delicate as lilies]. On this count they even outdo childhood itself, which is sweet, to be sure, but tongue-tied, and lacks life's chief delight—chatter, I mean. Add to this that old people take especially great joy in children, and children in turn delight in the old: Ὡς αἰεὶ τὸν ὅμοιον ἄγει θεὸς ὡς τὸν ὅμοιον [So God always brings like to like].[6] What is there, after all, that they do not share, except that one is more wrinkled and counts more birthdays? Otherwise the white hair, the toothless mouth, the smaller body, the craving for milk, the stammering, the chatter, the silliness, the forgetfulness, the thoughtlessness: in short, everything else matches. And the nearer they come to old age, the closer they return to

5 Lethe, "forgetfulness," is both Folly's companion and the river of the underworld whose water made the dead forget their past.

6 In Plautus's Merchant an old man falls in love; the "three letters" spell amo, "I love."

the likeness of childhood, until at last, like children, without weariness of life and without any sense of death, they pass out of life.

PERPETUAL YOUTH

Folly says fools never grow old, unlike scholars and philosophers worn out by their cares.

14 Now let anyone who likes go and compare this kindness of mine with the metamorphoses worked by the other gods. What they do when they are angry I would rather not mention. But those they favor most they usually turn into a tree, a bird, a cicada, or even a snake. As if becoming something else were not itself a way of perishing! I, on the other hand, restore the very same person to the best and happiest part of life. And if mortals would keep entirely clear of any dealings with wisdom and spend their whole lives with me, there would not even be such a thing as old age. They would be happy and enjoy perpetual youth. Don't you see how those gloomy types, given over either to the study of philosophy or to serious and difficult business, have mostly grown old before they are fully young? It is, of course, their cares and the constant, sharp churning of their thoughts that gradually drain away their spirits and that vital sap.[7] My fools, by contrast, are plump and sleek, with well-tended skin, regular χοῖροι Ἀκαρνάνιοι [Acarnanian hogs], as the saying goes. They would never feel any of the discomforts of old age at all, unless, as happens, they caught a little infection from contact with the wise. So true is it that human life allows nothing to be happy in every respect. Add to this the weighty testimony of a common proverb, which has it that Folly is the one thing that both holds back youth, otherwise so fleeting, and keeps wretched old age far away. So it is not without reason that people commonly say of the Brabanters that, while age usually brings other men good sense, they grow more and more foolish

7 In myth Tithonus became a cicada and Cadmus a snake; Daphne was turned into a laurel tree.

the closer they come to old age. And yet no other people is more cheerful in the ordinary business of life, or less aware of the gloom of old age.[8] Next to these, in way of life as in location, are my Hollanders. Why shouldn't I call them mine, when they worship me so devotedly that they have earned a popular nickname from it? And they are so far from being ashamed of it that they boast of it above all else. Let the most foolish of mortals go now and look for Medeas, Circes, Venuses, Auroras, and some fountain or other to restore their youth, when I alone can do it, and regularly do. I have that marvelous juice with which the daughter of Memnon prolonged the youth of her grandfather Tithonus. I am that Venus by whose favor Phaon grew young again, so that Sappho fell desperately in love with him. Mine are the herbs, if there are any; mine the spells; mine that fountain which not only brings back lost youth but, what is more desirable, preserves it for ever.[9] So if you all subscribe to the view that nothing is better than youth and nothing more hateful than old age, you can see, I think, how much you owe me, since I keep so great a good and shut out so great an evil.

FOLLY AMONG THE GODS

Folly shows that the most delightful gods, Bacchus, Cupid and Venus, are the most foolish.

15 But why am I still talking about mortals? Search the whole of heaven, and anyone who likes may fling my name in my face if he finds a single god who is not disagreeable and contemptible unless my divine power recommends him. Why, after all, is Bacchus always a long-haired youth? Plainly because he is witless and tipsy, spends his whole life in feasts, dances, choruses and games, and has not the slightest dealings with Pallas. In fact he is so far from claiming to be thought wise that he delights in

8 Acarnania, in western Greece, was proverbial for its fat pigs. Brabant is a duchy of the Low Countries, around Brussels and Antwerp.

9 In the usual myth Aurora (the Dawn) was Tithonus's wife and Memnon's mother. Phaon, an aged ferryman, was made young and beautiful by Venus.

being worshipped with pranks and jokes. Nor is he offended by the proverb that gives him the nickname of fool, which runs: Μορύχου μωρότερος [More foolish than Morychus]. They gave him the name Morychus because the country folk, in their high spirits, used to smear him with new wine and fresh figs as he sat before the doors of his temple. And then what gibes does Old Comedy not hurl at him? "O stupid god," they say, "fit to be born from a groin!"[10] But who would not rather be this foolish, stupid god, always merry, always young, always bringing everyone fun and pleasure, than that ἀγκυλομήτης [crooked-counseling] Jupiter, whom everyone fears? Or Pan, who blights everything with the gloom of his panics? Or Vulcan, covered in ashes and always grimy from the labors of his forge? Or even Pallas herself, terrifying with her Gorgon and her spear, καὶ ἀεὶ ἑνορῶσα δριμύ [and forever glaring fiercely]? Why is Cupid always a boy? Why? Because he is a trifler, καὶ μηδὲν ὑγιὲς [and nothing sound] does he either do or think. Why is golden Venus's beauty always in its springtime? Clearly because she is related to me. That is why her face has my father's color, and for that reason Homer calls her χρυσῆ Ἀφροδίτη [golden Aphrodite]. Besides, she is always smiling, if we are to believe the poets at all, or their rivals the sculptors. What deity did the Romans ever worship more devoutly than Flora, mother of all pleasures?[11] And yet if anyone looks more closely, in Homer and the other poets, into the lives of even the stern gods, he will find everything full of folly. Why bother recounting the deeds of the rest, when you know perfectly well the love affairs and frolics of Jupiter the Thunderer himself? When that severe Diana, forgetting her sex, does nothing but hunt, while all the time dying of love for Endymion? But I would rather they heard about their misdeeds from Momus, from whom they used to hear about them quite often in the old days. Recently, though, in a fit of anger, they

10 Bacchus was born from the thigh of Jupiter, into which he had been sewn after his mother Semele's death.

11 Flora was the Roman goddess of flowers, whose festival, the Floralia, was notorious for its license.

hurled him headlong down to earth together with Ate, because with his wisdom he kept rudely interrupting the gods' happiness. And no mortal deigns to give the exile shelter, still less is there room for him in the courts of princes, where my Κολακία [Flattery] holds first place, and she gets on with Momus no better than wolves with a lamb.[12] So with him out of the way the gods now fool about far more freely and pleasantly, truly ῥᾷον ἄγοντες [taking life easy], as Homer says, with no censor, of course. What jokes that fig-wood Priapus provides! What sport Mercury puts on with his thefts and conjuring tricks! Vulcan himself regularly plays the γελωτοποιὸν [jester] at the gods' banquets, cheering up the drinking party now with his limp, now with his teasing, now with his comic sayings. Then there is that amorous old Silenus, who dances τὸν κόρδακα [the cordax], with Polyphemus dancing τὴν θρεττανελό [the threttanelo], while the Nymphs dance τὴν γυμνοποδίαν [the barefoot dance]. The half-goat Satyrs perform Atellan farces. Pan sets everyone laughing with some silly little song, and they would rather hear him than the Muses themselves, especially once they have begun to get soaked in nectar. And why should I now mention what the gods get up to after the banquet, when they are well and truly drunk? Things so foolish, by Hercules, that sometimes even I can't help laughing.[13] But in such matters it is better to remember Harpocrates, in case some Corycaean god should be eavesdropping on us as we tell things that not even Momus got away with saying.[14]

REASON AGAINST THE PASSIONS

Folly explains that Jupiter gave humans far more passion than reason, to keep life from being grim.

16 But it is time now to follow Homer's example: to leave the heavenly ones and come down in our turn to earth. There, too,

12 Momus was the god of fault-finding; Ate, the goddess of ruinous folly, was thrown out of heaven by Jupiter (Homer, Iliad 19).
13 The cordax was a lewd comic dance; "threttanelo" imitates the twang of the Cyclops' lyre in Aristophanes' Wealth. Atellan farces were rustic Roman comedies.

we shall find nothing happy or fortunate except by my gift. First of all, you see with what foresight Nature, the parent and maker of the human race, made sure that the seasoning of folly should never be lacking anywhere. By the Stoics' definitions, wisdom is nothing other than being guided by reason, and folly, on the contrary, is being swayed by the whim of the passions. So, to keep human life from being utterly sad and grim, Jupiter put in how much more passion than reason! About as much as a pound to half an ounce. Besides, he banished reason to a cramped corner of the head and left all the rest of the body to the disturbances. Then against this one he set two most violent tyrants, as it were: anger, which holds the citadel of the breast and so the very fountain of life, the heart; and lust, which extends its empire far and wide, right down to the groin. How much reason can do against these twin forces, ordinary human life shows clearly enough. Reason does the one thing it can: it shouts back till it is hoarse and dictates the rules of virtue. But the passions tell their king to go and hang himself, and raise a far more obnoxious din, until at last, worn out, reason gives way of its own accord and surrenders.

THE GIFT OF WOMAN

Folly mockingly claims to have advised Jupiter to give man a foolish, charming woman as companion.

17 However, since man, born to manage affairs, had to be sprinkled with a little more than his tiny ounce of reason, Jupiter, to provide for him too as best he could, called me in for advice, as he does in everything else. And I promptly gave advice worthy of myself: that he should give man a woman. She is a foolish and silly creature, to be sure, but amusing and sweet, and by sharing his home she could season and sweeten the gloom of the male temperament with her folly. For when Plato seems unsure which class to put woman in, rational animals or

14 Harpocrates was the god of silence, shown with a finger to his lips; the people of Corycus were proverbial eavesdroppers.

brutes, he simply meant to point out the remarkable folly of her sex. And if any woman happens to want to be thought wise, all she achieves is being doubly a fool, just as if someone were to lead an ox to the wrestling ring, against the will and resistance of Minerva, as the saying goes. For whoever puts a coat of virtue on something against its nature, and bends its character in another direction, doubles the fault. Just as, according to the Greek proverb, an ape is always an ape, even if dressed in purple, so a woman is always a woman, that is, a fool, whatever mask she puts on. But I don't think the female sex is so foolish as to be angry with me for attributing folly to them, when I am both a woman myself and Folly. For if they think the matter through properly, they have Folly to thank for being better off than men on many counts. First, they owe her the grace of beauty, which they rightly prize above everything else, and with whose help they lord it over even tyrants themselves. Otherwise where does that rough appearance come from, the bristly skin and forest of beard, something plainly elderly in a man, if not from the vice of good sense? Women's cheeks, by contrast, are always smooth, their voices always light, their skin soft, as if they were imitating a kind of perpetual youth. Next, what else do they want in this life than to please men as much as possible? Isn't that the aim of all the finery, all the make-up, all the baths, the hairdos, the ointments, the perfumes, all the arts of arranging, painting and shaping the face, the eyes and the skin? And is there any other title that recommends them to men more than folly? For what is there that men won't allow women? And for what wages, pray, if not pleasure? But women give delight by nothing other than their folly. No one will deny this who considers what nonsense a man talks with a woman, and what silliness he gets up to, whenever he has made up his mind to enjoy a woman's pleasures.

So there you have the source from which life's first and chief delight springs.

BANQUETS AND DRINKING PARTIES

Folly argues that no banquet is enjoyable without jesters, games and foolish entertainment.

[18] But there are some, old men above all, more given to the bottle than to women, who place the height of pleasure in drinking parties. Whether there can be any fine banquet without a woman present, let others decide. This much is certain: without the seasoning of folly no banquet is pleasant at all. So much so that, if there is no one present to raise a laugh with folly, real or put on, they send for some γελωτοποιὸν [jester], even a hired one, or bring in some ridiculous parasite to dispel the silence and gloom of the drinking with laughable, that is, foolish, quips. For what was the point of loading the belly with so many sweets, so many delicacies, so many dainties, unless the eyes and ears as well, unless the whole mind, were fed on laughter, jokes and wit? But of that kind of dessert I am the one and only architect. Indeed, the very rituals now usual at banquets—drawing lots for a king with knucklebones, playing at dice, drinking toasts, competing συμπεριφοραῖς [in rounds round the table], singing over the myrtle, dancing, miming—were invented not by the Seven Sages of Greece but by us, for the salvation of the human race. Yet the nature of all such things is that the more folly they contain, the more they contribute to the life of mortals. And a sad life hardly seems to deserve the name of life at all. Sad it is bound to turn out, though, unless you wipe away its inborn boredom with amusements of this kind.[15]

FRIENDSHIP NEEDS ILLUSION

Folly argues that friends stay friends only by overlooking, or even admiring, each other's faults.

[19] But perhaps there will be some who scorn this kind of pleasure too, and find their contentment in the affection and com-

pany of friends. They keep saying that friendship alone is to be preferred to everything else: a thing so necessary that neither air nor fire nor water is more so; so delightful that whoever takes it away takes away the sun; and finally so honorable (if that has anything to do with it) that even the philosophers themselves do not hesitate to list it among the chief goods. But what if I show that of this great good, too, I am both stern and prow? And I shall show it not with crocodilites or sorites or ceratines or other such quibbles of the logicians. No, with plain homespun wits, as they say, I shall practically point to it with my finger. Come now: to wink at your friends' faults, to slip, to be blind to them, to be deceived by them, even to love and admire certain glaring faults as virtues—doesn't that look close kin to folly? And what about this?[16] When one man kisses a mole on his mistress, another is charmed by Agna's nasal polyp, and a father calls his squint-eyed son "his little blinker": what, I ask, is this but pure folly? Let them cry three and four times over that it is folly. Yet this one thing, *folly, both makes friends and keeps them friends*. I am speaking of mortals, of whom *no one is born without faults; the best is he who is burdened with the least*. Meanwhile, among those wise men who are gods, either friendship does not take root at all, or some grim and disagreeable kind exists, and that only with very few—for to say "with none" would be sacrilege. This is because the greater part of mankind is foolish; indeed there is no one who is not mad in many ways, and close bonds hold only between like and like.[17] And if mutual goodwill does ever spring up between those severe types, it is certainly far from stable and will not last long. Naturally so, among men who are peevish and sharper-eyed than they should be, who see their friends' faults as keenly *as an eagle or the Epidaurian serpent*. But how bleary-eyed they are about their own faults, and how they fail to see the bag hanging on their back! Human nature,

15 At Greek banquets a myrtle branch was passed round, and whoever held it had to sing.

16 The Crocodile, the Heap (sorites) and the Horned Man (ceratine) were classic logical puzzles of ancient dialecticians.

17 The examples and the second quotation come from Horace, Satires 1.3.

then, is such that no character can be found that is not subject to great faults. Add the vast difference of minds and interests, all the slips, all the errors, all the mishaps of mortal life. How will the pleasure of friendship last even an hour among those Arguses, unless there is added what the Greeks, with a wonderful word, call εὐήθειαν [good-natured simplicity]? You may translate it as either folly or easy temper, as you please. And what of this?[18] Isn't Cupid, the author and parent of every bond, completely blind? To him τὰ μὲν καλὰ καλὰ πέφανται [what is not fair appears fair], and in the same way he brings it about among you, too, that each finds his own beautiful, so that the old man dotes on his old woman just as a little boy dotes on his little girl. These things happen everywhere and are laughed at everywhere; and yet these absurdities are what glue and bind together the pleasant fellowship of life.[19]

MARRIAGE AND ITS BLIND SPOTS

Folly claims that marriages last only because spouses flatter, deceive and ignore each other.

[20] Now what has been said of friendship applies far more to marriage, which is nothing other than an inseparable union for life. Immortal God, what divorces, or worse than divorces, would be happening everywhere, if the home life of man and woman were not propped up and nourished by flattery, by joking, by easygoingness, by illusion, by pretense—my retinue, in other words! My word, how few marriages would be made if the bridegroom wisely inquired what games that dainty (as she seems) and modest little maiden had been playing long before the wedding! And how many fewer, once made, would hold together, if most of the wives' doings did not escape notice through the husband's carelessness or dullness! These things, it is true, are rightly put down to folly; but meanwhile it is folly that makes

18 In Aesop's fable each person carries two bags, others' faults in front and his own behind. Argus was the hundred-eyed watchman of myth.
19 Theocritus, Idylls 6.19.

the wife pleasing to the husband and the husband to the wife, keeps the household peaceful, and preserves the family tie. The husband is laughed at and called a cuckoo, a hedge-sparrow and who knows what, when he kisses away the tears of his unfaithful wife.[20] But how much happier to be deceived like that than to wear yourself out with jealous vigilance and turn everything upside down with tragic scenes!

SOCIETY HELD TOGETHER

Folly says no human bond, from prince and people to master and servant, lasts without her.

[21] In short, no society, no union in life can be either pleasant or lasting without me. So much so that the people would not put up with their prince for long, nor the master with his servant, nor the mistress with her maid, nor the teacher with his pupil, nor friend with friend, nor wife with husband, nor landlord with tenant, nor comrade with comrade, nor housemate with housemate, unless they took turns to deceive each other, to flatter each other, to wink sensibly at things, to soothe each other with some honey of folly. Now I know this seems very great; but you will hear greater things.

SELF-LOVE

Folly argues that people must first please themselves before they can please anyone else.

[22] Tell me, will anyone love another who hates himself? Will anyone get on with another who is at odds with himself? Will anyone give pleasure to another who is a burden and a nuisance to himself? No one would say so, I think, unless he were more foolish than Folly herself. Yet if you shut me out, so far will anyone be from bearing another that each will stink in his own nostrils, find everything of his own squalid, and be hateful to himself.

20 Both birds stood for the deceived husband: the hedge-sparrow raises the cuckoo's chicks as its own.

For Nature, in many things more a stepmother than a mother, has planted this evil in the minds of mortals, especially those with a little more sense: that each is dissatisfied with himself and admires what belongs to others. The result is that all gifts, all the elegance and grace of life, are spoiled and destroyed. For what use will beauty be, the chief gift of the immortal gods, if it is tainted by the vice of disgust? What use youth, if it is soured by the leaven of an old man's gloom? In short, what will you do with any propriety in any duty of life, whether alone or among others (for not only in art but in every action the main thing is that what you do should be fitting), unless this kindly Self-Love is at hand? She quite rightly takes the place of a sister to me, so energetically does she play my part everywhere. Yet what is as foolish as pleasing yourself? As admiring yourself? But then again, what will there be graceful, charming, or anything but unbecoming in what you do, if you are displeased with yourself? Take away this seasoning of life, and at once the orator will be left cold, delivery and all; the musician will please no one, rhythms and all; the actor will be hissed off, gestures and all; the poet will be laughed at, Muses and all; the painter will be despised, art and all; the doctor will go hungry, drugs and all. In the end you will seem Thersites instead of Nireus, Nestor instead of Phaon, a sow instead of Minerva, tongue-tied instead of eloquent, a bumpkin instead of a man of wit.[21] So necessary is it that each should flatter himself and win his own approval with a little self-flattery before he can win the approval of others. Finally, since the chief part of happiness is *to wish to be what you are*, my Self-Love supplies all this at a stroke. No one regrets his looks, no one his talents, no one his family, no one his station, no one his way of life, no one his country. So much so that the Irishman would not want to change places with the Italian, nor the Thracian with the Athenian, nor the Scythian with the Isles of the Blessed. And oh, the remarkable care of Nature, how in such variety she has made everything equal! Where she has held

21 Nireus was the handsomest Greek at Troy and Thersites the ugliest; Nestor was the oldest.

back a little on her gifts, there she usually adds a bit more self-love—though that was a foolish thing of me to say, since this is itself the greatest gift of all.[22]

Not to mention, for now, that no notable deed has ever been undertaken except at my prompting, and no notable arts invented except on my initiative.

WAR AND WISE MEN

Folly calls war the source of famous deeds and shows that wise men are useless in battle.

[23] Isn't war the seedbed and source of all celebrated deeds? Yet what is more foolish than to take up a contest of this kind for who knows what reasons, when both sides always carry away more harm than good? For of those who fall, as with the Megarians, οὐδεὶς λόγος [no account is taken]. Then, when the iron-clad lines stand facing each other and *the horns have blared their harsh music*, what use, I ask you, are those wise men, worn out by study, barely drawing breath with their thin, cold blood? What is needed is men thick and fat, with as much daring as possible and as little brain as possible. Unless someone would prefer Demosthenes as a soldier: following Archilochus's advice, he threw away his shield and ran the moment he caught sight of the enemy, as cowardly a soldier as he was wise an orator. "But," they say, "counsel counts for most in war."[23] In a general, I grant you; but that is a soldier's counsel, not a philosopher's. Otherwise, so glorious a business is carried on by parasites, pimps, robbers, cutthroats, peasants, dullards, debtors and such dregs of humanity—not by lamplit philosophers.

22 The quotation is from Martial, Epigrams 10.47.

23 The Megarians were proverbially "of no account"; the horn line is from Virgil, Aeneid 8.2. Demosthenes fled at Chaeronea (338 BC); the poet Archilochus boasted of throwing away his shield.

USELESS PHILOSOPHERS

Folly points to Socrates, Plato, Cicero and others as proof that the wise fail in public life.

[24] How useless these are for every practical purpose of life is shown by Socrates himself, the one man judged wise by the oracle of Apollo, though judged none too wisely. He once attempted some public business or other and left amid roars of laughter from everyone. Admittedly the man was not altogether foolish in this: he did not accept the title of wise but referred it back to the god himself; and he held that the wise man should keep out of public affairs. Except that he ought rather to have advised that whoever wants to be counted among men should keep clear of wisdom. And then what drove this same man, once accused, to drink the hemlock, if not wisdom? For while he philosophized about clouds and Ideas, while he measured a flea's feet, while he marveled at the hum of gnats, he never learned the things that belong to ordinary life.[24] But here comes his disciple Plato to help his master, now on trial for his life. An excellent advocate, to be sure: put off by the noise of the crowd, he could barely get through half of that sentence of his. Then what shall I say of Theophrastus? He stepped forward to address an assembly and suddenly fell silent, exactly as if he had suddenly seen a wolf. Isocrates, who could have put heart into a soldier in war, was so timid by temperament that he never dared even to open his mouth. Marcus Tullius, the father of Roman eloquence, always began his speeches with an unseemly trembling, like a sobbing boy; and Fabius takes this as the sign of a sensible orator who understands the danger. But in saying this, isn't he openly admitting that wisdom is an obstacle to getting things done properly? What will these people do when the matter is settled with the sword, if they are frightened to death when the fight is waged with bare words? And after all this, if

24 The flea and the gnats come from Aristophanes' Clouds, which mocks Socrates; he was condemned to drink hemlock in 399 BC.

you please, people celebrate that famous saying of Plato's, that commonwealths would be happy if either philosophers ruled or rulers philosophized.[25] On the contrary, if you consult the historians, you will find that no princes have been more of a plague to the state than when power has fallen to some philosophaster or bookish man. The Catos are proof enough of this, I think. One of them disturbed the peace of the Republic with his mad accusations; the other, while defending the liberty of the Roman people all too wisely, overthrew it completely. Add to these the Brutuses and Cassiuses, the Gracchi, and even Cicero himself, who was no less a plague to the Roman Republic than Demosthenes to the Athenian. Then there is Marcus Antoninus. Granted he was a good emperor (though I could dispute even that, for he was burdensome and hateful to his citizens precisely because he was so much the philosopher—but still, granted he was good), he certainly did the state more harm by leaving behind such a son than he had done it good by his rule.[26] For this sort of person, who has devoted himself to the pursuit of wisdom, is usually most unlucky in everything else, and above all in producing children. Nature, I suppose, is making sure that this evil of wisdom does not spread too widely among mortals. Thus it is well known that Cicero had a degenerate son, and the wise Socrates had children more like their mother than their father, as someone wrote not at all badly—that is, fools.

THE WISE MAN AT DINNER

Folly describes the wise man as clumsy and useless in every ordinary business of life.

[25] Still, it could be borne somehow if they were ὄνοι πρὸς λύραν [asses at the lyre] only in public duties, and not just as clumsy in every other business of life. Invite a wise man to a dinner party:

25 Marcus Tullius is Cicero; Fabius is Quintilian, the Roman teacher of rhetoric. Plato's saying is from the Republic.

26 Cato the Elder was a relentless prosecutor; Cato the Younger defended the Republic against Caesar. Marcus Antoninus (Marcus Aurelius) was succeeded by his son Commodus.

he will spoil it with gloomy silence or with tiresome little questions. Ask him to a dance: you would say a camel was dancing. Drag him to the public games: his face alone will stand in the way of the people's pleasures, and the wise Cato will have to leave the theater, since he cannot put off his frown. Let him stumble into a conversation, and suddenly it is the wolf in the fable. If something has to be bought, or a contract made, or, in short, any of the things done without which our daily life cannot go on, you would call this wise man of yours a log, not a man. So completely useless can he be, to himself, to his country and to his own people, because he knows nothing of ordinary affairs and is far removed from popular opinion and common customs.[27] Hatred is bound to follow from this too, naturally, given so great a difference in their way of life and of thinking. For what is done anywhere among mortals that is not full of folly, done by fools and before fools? If one man alone wants to shout down everyone else, my advice to him would be to follow Timon's example, move off to some wilderness and enjoy his wisdom there by himself.[28]

FABLES THAT FOUNDED CITIES

Folly says peoples have been ruled and reconciled by flattery and childish fables, not philosophy.

[26] But to return to what I had begun: what force brought those stony, oaken, rustic men together into a city, if not flattery? That is all the lyre of Amphion and of Orpheus means. What was it that called the Roman plebs back to civic harmony when it was already contemplating extreme measures? A philosophical speech? Not at all. It was a silly, childish fable made up about the belly and the other parts of the body. A similar fable of Themistocles, about the fox and the hedgehog, worked just as

27 Cato the Younger walked out of the Floralia so that his presence would not stop the customary show. "The wolf in the fable" is the proverb for the sudden hush when an unwelcome person appears.

28 Timon of Athens, the proverbial misanthrope of the 5th century BC.

well. What wise man's speech could have done as much as Sertorius' invented hind, or as much as the laughable invention of that Spartan about the two dogs, or of that same Sertorius about plucking the hairs from a horse's tail? Not to mention Minos and Numa, both of whom ruled the foolish multitude with fabulous inventions. Trifles of this kind are what move that huge and powerful beast, the people.[29]

VAINGLORY AND HEROIC DEEDS

Folly credits the love of glory with the self-sacrifice of heroes and the founding of states.

[27] Then again, what city ever adopted the laws of Plato or Aristotle, or the doctrines of Socrates? And what persuaded the Decii to devote themselves of their own accord to the gods of the underworld? What drew Quintus Curtius into the chasm, if not vainglory, that sweetest of Sirens, though it is astonishing how harshly your wise men condemn her?[30]

"For what is more foolish," they say, "than for a candidate to fawn on the people like a suppliant, to buy their favor with handouts, to hunt for the applause of so many fools, to be pleased with himself at their cheers, to be carried about in a triumph like some image for the people to gape at, to stand in bronze in the forum?" Add to this the taking on of names and surnames. Add divine honors paid to a mere manikin. Add the enrolling among the gods, in public ceremonies, of even the most criminal tyrants. These things are utterly foolish, and one Democritus would not be enough to laugh at them: who denies it? And yet from this spring were born the deeds of brave heroes, praised to the skies in the writings of so many eloquent men. This folly gives birth to cities; on it rest empires, magistra-

29 Menenius Agrippa's fable of the belly reconciled the plebs in 494 BC; Sertorius claimed his white hind brought him messages from Diana. Lycurgus taught the Spartans with a trained and an untrained dog, and Sertorius had soldiers pull out a horse's tail hair by hair to show the power of patience.

30 The Decii, father and son, gave their lives in battle as offerings to the gods below; Curtius leapt armed into a chasm in the Forum in 362 BC to save Rome.

cies, religion, councils, courts of law. Human life is nothing at all but a kind of game of folly.

THE ARTS BORN OF AMBITION

Folly says the thirst for glory spurred the invention of all the arts and disciplines.

[28] Now, to speak of the arts: what was it, after all, that spurred human minds to devise and hand down to posterity so many excellent disciplines, as they think them, if not the thirst for glory? With so many sleepless nights and so much sweat these truly most foolish men thought they had to buy some fame or other, though nothing can be emptier. But meanwhile you owe so many excellent comforts of life to folly; and, what is by far the sweetest thing, you enjoy the fruits of other people's madness.

THE TWO FACES OF THINGS

Folly claims prudence for fools and compares human things to the Sileni of Alcibiades.

[29] So, now that I have claimed the credit for courage and industry, what if I claim prudence as well? "But," someone will say, "you might as well mix fire with water." I think I shall bring this off too, if only you go on favoring me, as you have so far, with your ears and your goodwill. To begin with, if prudence rests on experience of things, which of the two better deserves the honor of the name: the wise man, who out of modesty, partly, and partly out of timidity, attempts nothing; or the fool, whom neither shame, since he has none, nor danger, since he never weighs it, deters from anything? The wise man takes refuge in the books of the ancients and learns nothing from them but verbal hair-splitting. The fool, by tackling things and running risks at close quarters, gathers true prudence, unless I am mistaken. Homer seems to have seen this, blind though he was, when he says ῥεχθὲν δέ τε νήπιος ἔγνω [even a fool knows a

thing once it is done].[31] For there are two chief obstacles to gaining knowledge of things: shame, which clouds the mind with smoke, and fear, which points to the danger and talks us out of bold undertakings. From both, folly frees us splendidly. Few mortals realize how many other advantages also come from never being ashamed and daring anything. But if they prefer to take prudence as the kind that rests on judging things rightly, then listen, I beg you, to how far from it are those who sell themselves under that name. To begin with, it is well known that all human things, like the Sileni of Alcibiades, have two faces, utterly unlike each other. So what is death at first glance, as they say, turns out to be life if you look inside; and, conversely, what is life is death; what is beautiful is ugly; what is rich is poorest of all; what is disgraceful is glorious; what is learned is ignorant; what is strong is feeble; what is noble is base; what is joyful is sad; what is prosperous is adverse; what is friendly is hostile; what is wholesome is harmful. In short, you will find everything suddenly turned upside down if you open the Silenus. If this seems to anyone too philosophically put, come, I will make it plainer, "with a homelier Minerva," as the saying goes. Who does not grant that a king is both rich and a lord? Yet he is furnished with no goods of the mind, and nothing is ever enough for him: so he is plainly the poorest of men. Then his mind is in bondage to a great many vices: so he is a shameful slave.[32]

THE PLAY OF LIFE

Folly likens human life to a play that a wise man would ruin by pulling off the masks.

One could philosophize the same way about everything else, but let this serve as an example. "But where is all this leading?" someone will ask. Listen, and see where I am taking it. If

31 Homer, Iliad 17.32.

32 Sileni were little statues of Silenus that opened to reveal the image of a god; in Plato's Symposium Alcibiades compares Socrates to them.

someone tried to pull the masks off actors performing a play on stage and show the spectators their real, natural faces, would he not ruin the whole play, and be thought to deserve being driven out of the theater with stones by everyone, as a madman? A new appearance of things would suddenly arise: the one who was just now a woman is now a man; the youth is presently an old man; the king of a moment ago is suddenly Dama; the god of a moment ago turns out to be a little man. But to remove that illusion is to throw the whole play into confusion. It is precisely the fiction and the paint that hold the spectators' eyes.[33] And what else is the whole life of mortals but a kind of play, in which each comes on in a different mask and acts his own part until the director leads him off the stage? Often, too, he sends the same actor back in different costume, so that the one who just now played a king in purple now plays a ragged little slave. It is all make-believe, of course; but this play is acted in no other way. Now suppose some wise man, dropped from the sky, were suddenly to rise up here and start shouting that this man, whom everyone looks up to as a god and lord, is not even a man, since he is driven by his passions like a beast; that he is a slave of the lowest rank, since he willingly serves so many and such foul masters. Suppose he told another, who is mourning his dead father, to laugh, since that man has only now begun to live, this life being nothing but a kind of death. Suppose he called another, who boasts of his pedigree, low-born and illegitimate, since he is far from virtue, the only source of nobility, and spoke in the same way about all the rest. What, I ask you, would he achieve, except to seem to everyone out of his mind and raving? Just as nothing is more foolish than wisdom out of place, so nothing is more imprudent than wrong-headed prudence. For a man acts perversely who will not adapt himself to things as they are, will not "use the market," will not even remember that law of the drinking party, ἢ πίθι, ἢ ἄπιθι [drink, or go], and insists that the play should no longer be a play. On the contrary, the truly

33 Dama is a stock slave's name in Horace.

prudent man, since he is mortal, wants to be no wiser than his lot allows, and with the whole multitude of mankind either gladly turns a blind eye or goes wrong in good company. "But that very thing," they say, "is folly." I will not deny it, provided they in turn admit that this is what it means to act in the play of life.[34]

AGAINST THE STOIC WISE MAN

Folly argues that passions lead to virtue, and that the passionless Stoic sage would be a monster.

30 But this next thing, immortal gods! Shall I speak it, or keep silent? And why should I keep silent, when it is truer than truth? Still, in so great a matter it might be best to summon the Muses from Helicon, whom the poets call upon often enough for mere trifles. Be with me, then, for a little while, daughters of Jupiter, while I show that no one gains access to that excellent wisdom and to what they call the citadel of happiness except with folly as guide. First of all, it is agreed that all the passions belong to folly. Indeed, this is the mark by which they tell the wise man from the fool: the fool is ruled by his passions, the wise man by reason. That is why the Stoics remove all disturbances of the mind from the wise man, as if they were diseases. But these passions not only act as tutors to those hurrying toward the harbor of wisdom; in every exercise of virtue they are also there like spurs and goads, urging us on to do good. Here, it is true, Seneca, that doubly Stoic Stoic, protests loudly, taking every last emotion away from the wise man. But in doing so he leaves not even a man; rather he δημιουργεῖ [fashions] a sort of new god who has never existed anywhere and never will. Indeed, to put it more plainly, he sets up a marble statue of a man, senseless and wholly devoid of human feeling. So, if they like, let them enjoy their wise man by themselves, love him without a rival, and live with him in Plato's republic, or, if they prefer, in the

34 "To use the market" is a proverb in Erasmus's Adages for adapting to circumstances; the drinking rule is quoted by Cicero, Tusculan Disputations 5.118.

realm of the Ideas, or in the gardens of Tantalus.[35] For who would not run from such a man and shudder at him as at a monster or a ghost? He has gone deaf to all the feelings of nature; he is moved by no passions, no more touched by love or pity *than if he were hard flint, or stood a Marpesian crag*. Nothing escapes him, he never errs, but like some Lynceus sees through everything, weighs everything by the rule, forgives nothing. He alone is content with himself, alone rich, alone sane, alone king, alone free, in short alone everything, but only in his own judgment. He cares for no friend and is himself no one's friend; he would not hesitate to tell the very gods to go hang themselves; and whatever is done in all of life he condemns and laughs at as insane. Yet that is the kind of animal your perfect wise man is. If it came to a vote, I ask you, what city would want such a magistrate, or what army would wish for such a general?[36] Indeed, what woman would want, or put up with, such a husband? What host such a guest? What servant a master of such character? Who would not rather have any man at all from the thick of the crowd of greatest fools: a fool who can either command fools or obey them; who pleases those like himself, and that means as many as possible; who is kind to his wife, pleasant to his friends, good company at table, easy to live with; and, finally, who thinks nothing human foreign to himself? But I have long been sick of that wise man. So let my speech return to my other benefits.[37]

35 The "gardens of Tantalus" are proverbial in the Adages for things that exist only in the imagination.

36 Virgil, Aeneid 6.471, of Dido unmoved in the underworld; Lynceus the Argonaut could see even through the earth.

37 The last phrase echoes Terence, The Self-Tormentor 77: "I am human; I think nothing human foreign to me."

The Happiness of Fools

Chapters 31–47
Human misery and the illusions that sweeten it: natural fools, happy madness, hunters, builders, gamblers, worshippers of saints, self-love.

CHAPTER 31

[31] Come now, suppose someone were to look around as if from a lofty watchtower, as the poets say Jupiter does, and see how many calamities human life is exposed to: how wretched and squalid our birth, how laborious our upbringing, how many wrongs childhood suffers, how much sweat youth is driven to, how heavy old age, how harsh the necessity of death; then, throughout life, how many armies of diseases beset us, how many accidents threaten, how many troubles fall upon us, how nothing anywhere is not steeped in plenty of gall, not to mention the evils man inflicts on man, such as poverty, prison, disgrace, shame, torture, plots, betrayal, insults, lawsuits, frauds! But now I am plainly setting out τὴν ἄμμον ἀναμετρεῖν [to measure the sand]. As for what crimes men committed to deserve all this, or what angry god forced them to be born into such miseries, it is not lawful for me to speak of that at present. Yet anyone who weighs these things in his mind, will he not approve the example of the Milesian maidens, pitiable as it is? And who are the people who above all have summoned their own fate out of weariness with life? Are they not the neighbors of wisdom? Among them, to say nothing for now of Diogenes, Xenocrates, the Catos, the Cassiuses and the Brutuses, there is Chiron, who, though he could have been immortal, chose death of his own

accord. You see, I think, what would happen if men everywhere were wise: we would need fresh clay and another potter like Prometheus. But I come to the rescue in these great evils, partly through ignorance, partly through thoughtlessness, sometimes through forgetfulness of ills, at times through hope of good things, now and then by sprinkling a little honey of pleasures. And I do it so well that people do not want to leave life even when the thread of the Fates is spun out and life itself has long been leaving them. The less reason they have for staying alive, the more they enjoy living, so far are they from being touched by any weariness of life.[1] It is my doing, of course, that everywhere you see old men of Nestor's age, with not even the look of a human being left to them, stammering, doting, toothless, white-haired, bald, or, to describe them better in Aristophanes' words, ῥυπῶντας, κυφοὺς, ἀθλίους, ῥυσοὺς, μαδῶντας, νωδοὺς καὶ ψωλούς [filthy, bent, wretched, wrinkled, bald, toothless and lecherous], who are nevertheless so delighted with life and so eager νεανίζειν [to play the young man] that one dyes his white hair, another hides his baldness with a wig, another uses teeth borrowed, perhaps, from some pig, and this one is hopelessly in love with some girl and outdoes any youngster in amorous nonsense. As for men ready for the coffin, mere living corpses, marrying some tender young girl, without a dowry, and one who will be of use to others, that is so common that it is almost counted to their credit.[2] But it is far more delightful still to watch old women, long since dead of old age and so corpse-like that they might seem to have come back from the underworld, who still always have on their lips φῶς ἀγαθόν [light is good]. They are still on heat and, as the Greeks say, καπροῦν [rutting like sows]; they hire some Phaon at great expense, constantly plaster their faces with make-up, never leave the mirror, pluck the thicket of their private parts, show off their shriveled, sagging breasts, try to rouse a flagging desire with a quavering whine, drink, mix

1 Plutarch tells of an epidemic of suicide among the girls of Miletus; the centaur Chiron, incurably wounded, gave up his immortality.
2 The Greek list is from Aristophanes, Wealth 266.

with the dances of girls, and write little love letters. Everyone laughs at this as utterly foolish, which it is. But they are pleased with themselves, and meanwhile live in the height of delight, soaking themselves all over in honey, happy, of course, thanks to me. As for those who find all this ridiculous, I would like them to consider whether they think it better to spend a life of pure honey in folly of this kind, or to look for a beam, as they say, to hang themselves from. Further, the fact that these things are commonly thought disgraceful means nothing to my fools, who either do not feel this evil or, if they feel it at all, easily ignore it. If a stone falls on your head, that is truly an evil. But shame, disgrace, reproach and abuse do only as much harm as they are felt. If there is no feeling, they are not even evils. What harm is it if the whole people hisses at you, so long as you applaud yourself? And that this is possible, folly alone guarantees.

IGNORANCE IS NATURAL

Folly argues that being ignorant is no more wretched for humans than lacking grammar is for a horse.

[32] But I seem to hear the philosophers protesting. "But this is just what is wretched," they say: "to be in the grip of folly, to err, to be deceived, to be ignorant." On the contrary, this is what it is to be human. I do not see why they should call it wretched, since you were born so, formed so, made so; it is the common lot of all. Nothing is wretched that is true to its own kind, unless perhaps someone thinks man is to be pitied because he cannot fly with the birds, or go on four feet with the rest of the animals, or is not armed with horns like bulls. But by the same token he will call even the finest horse unhappy because it has not learned grammar and does not eat cakes, and the bull wretched because it is no good at wrestling. So, just as a horse ignorant of grammar is not wretched, neither is a foolish man unhappy, since these things belong to their nature. But the word-spinners press me again. "To man alone," they say, "has been given knowledge

of the disciplines, so that with their help he may make up by intelligence for what nature has stinted." As if there were any likelihood that nature, which kept such careful watch over gnats, and even over plants and little flowers, should have dozed off in the case of man alone, so that he needed disciplines. These were devised by Theuth, that spirit hostile to the human race, for its utter ruin; so far from being useful for happiness, they even hinder the very thing they are said to have been invented for, as that very wise king in Plato elegantly argues about the invention of writing. So the disciplines crept in along with the other plagues of human life, from the same authors from whom all crimes proceed, namely the demons, who even get their name from it, as if you called them δαήμονας [daēmones], that is, "knowing ones." For that simple race of the golden age, armed with no disciplines, lived by the guidance and instinct of nature alone.[3] For what need was there of grammar, when everyone had the same language and nothing more was asked of speech than that people should understand one another? What use was dialectic, where there was no battle of conflicting opinions? What room was there for rhetoric, when nobody made trouble for anyone else? Why should anyone need legal expertise, when there were no bad morals, the undoubted parents of good laws? Besides, they were too religious to pry with impious curiosity into the secrets of nature, the measurements, motions and influences of the stars, the hidden causes of things; they thought it wrong for a mortal to try to know more than his lot allows. As for the madness of asking what lies beyond the heavens, it never even entered their minds. But as the purity of the golden age gradually slipped away, first, as I said, arts were invented by evil spirits, though only a few, and these were taken up by only a few people. Later the superstition of the Chaldeans and the idle frivolity of the Greeks added hundreds more, sheer torments of the mind, so many that grammar alone is quite enough to make life a lifelong torture.

3 In Plato, Phaedrus 274c–275b, King Thamus of Egypt rejects the god Theuth's invention of writing as harmful to memory.

THE ARTS NEAREST FOLLY

Folly says the most valued professions, medicine and law, are those closest to folly.

33 Yet among these very disciplines, the ones most prized are those that come nearest to common sense, that is, to folly. Theologians go hungry, natural philosophers are left out in the cold, astrologers are laughed at, dialecticians are ignored. Only ἰατρὸς γὰρ ἀνὴρ πολλῶν ἀντάξιος ἄλλων [a physician is worth many other men]. And within this very profession, the more ignorant, reckless and thoughtless a man is, the more he is valued, even by those princes with their gold chains. Yet medicine, especially as many practice it nowadays, is nothing but a branch of flattery, no less, indeed, than rhetoric. After them the next place goes to the pettifogging lawyers, and I am not sure it is not the first. The philosophers, with great unanimity, usually laugh at their profession as asinine (I would not pronounce on it myself). And yet it is by the decision of these asses that the greatest and the smallest affairs are settled. Their estates grow, while the theologian, having ransacked every coffer of divinity, gnaws on a lupine, waging constant war with bugs and lice.[4] So, just as the happier arts are those most closely related to folly, by far the happiest people are those who have been able to keep entirely clear of dealings with any discipline and follow nature alone as their guide. Nature is lacking in no part of herself, unless perhaps we want to leap over the boundaries of the mortal lot. Nature hates make-up, and what has not been violated by any art thrives far more happily.

HAPPIER ANIMALS

Folly points to bees and birds, guided by nature alone, as happier than learned human beings.

34 Come now, don't you see that in every kind of other living creature, those live most happily which are furthest from the

disciplines and are led by no teacher but nature? What is happier or more wonderful than bees? Yet they do not even have all the bodily senses. What could architecture find to match them in building? What philosopher ever founded such a commonwealth? The horse, on the other hand, because its senses are close to ours and it has moved in to live with men, also shares in human calamities. Often enough, ashamed to be beaten in a race, it runs itself broken-winded; in war, eager for a triumph, it is run through and bites the dust along with its rider. Not to mention for now the spiked bits, the sharp spurs, the prison of the stable, the whips, cudgels, tethers, the rider, in short that whole tragedy of servitude, to which it gave itself up of its own accord when, imitating brave men, it was too eager to take revenge on its enemy.[5] How much more desirable is the life of flies and little birds, which live for the moment and by the sense of nature alone, so far as human snares allow! If they are ever shut up in cages and learn to repeat human speech, it is amazing how they fall away from their native splendor. So much happier in every way is what nature has made than what art has painted over. That is why I can never praise enough that cock who was Pythagoras. Though he had been everything himself, philosopher, man, woman, king, private citizen, fish, horse, frog, even, I think, a sponge, he judged no animal more miserable than man, because all the others were content with the limits of nature, while man alone tried to step beyond the bounds of his lot.[6]

THE HAPPINESS OF NATURAL FOOLS

Folly praises simpletons as free of fear, conscience and care, and beloved by everyone.

35 Again, among human beings he much prefers the unlearned to the learned and great. And Gryllus had a good deal more sense

4 Homer, Iliad 11.514.

5 Horace (Epistles 1.10) tells how the horse, to get revenge on the stag, accepted a rider and a bit, and was never free again.

than πολυμῆτις Ὀδύσσευς [Odysseus of many wiles], since he preferred to grunt in a pigsty rather than be exposed with him to so many miserable mishaps. Homer, the father of trifles, seems to me to agree with them: he often calls all mortals δειλοὺς καὶ μοχθηροὺς [wretched and toiling], and he frequently calls his Ulysses, the model of the wise man, δύστηνον [unhappy], but never Paris, or Ajax, or Achilles. And why is that, after all? Surely because Ulysses, crafty and artful, did everything on Pallas' advice and was too wise by half, straying as far as possible from nature's guidance?[7] So, among mortals, those who devote themselves to wisdom are furthest from happiness, doubly foolish for this very reason: born human, they forget their condition, aspire to the life of the immortal gods, and like the Giants make war on nature with the siege engines of the disciplines. By the same token, those seem least wretched who come closest to the character and folly of the brute beasts and attempt nothing beyond what is human. Come, let us see whether we can prove this too, not with Stoic enthymemes but with some plain, crude example. By the immortal gods, is there anything happier than the sort of people commonly called jesters, fools, simpletons and blockheads, the loveliest of names, in my opinion? What I am about to say may seem foolish and absurd at first sight, but it is by far the truest thing of all. First, they are free from the fear of death, and that, by Jupiter, is no small evil. They are free from the torture of conscience. They are not terrified by tales of the dead. They do not quake at ghosts and goblins; they are not tormented by fear of evils to come, nor stretched on the rack by hope of future goods. In short, they are not torn apart by the thousand cares to which this life is subject. They feel no shame, no fear, no ambition, no envy, no love. And finally, if they come even closer to the senselessness of the brute animals, they do not even sin, on the authority of the theolo-

6 In Lucian's dialogue The Dream, or The Cock, a cock reveals that he is the reincarnated Pythagoras and recounts his former lives.

7 In Plutarch's dialogue Gryllus, one of Odysseus' men turned into a pig by Circe refuses to be changed back.

gians. Now weigh up, I beg you, most foolish wise man, how many anxieties torment your mind from every side, night and day. Pile all the troubles of your life into one heap, and then at last you will understand from how many evils I have rescued my simpletons. Add to this that not only are they themselves always rejoicing, playing, singing and laughing, but wherever they turn they bring pleasure, fun, play and laughter to everyone else, as if the kindness of the gods had given them for this very purpose: to cheer the gloom of human life. So it happens that, while people's feelings toward one another vary, everyone alike acknowledges these as their own, seeks them out, feeds them, cherishes them, embraces them, helps them if anything befalls them, and lets them say or do anything with impunity. So little does anyone wish to harm them that even wild beasts refrain from hurting them, out of some natural sense of their innocence. For they are truly sacred to the gods, and especially to me; and so everyone pays them this honor, and rightly.

FOOLS AT COURT

Folly explains that kings love their jesters because fools alone may tell them the truth.

[36] What's more, they are such favorites even of the greatest kings that some kings cannot dine, or go out, or last even an hour without them. And they prefer these blockheads by a wide margin to those gloomy sages of theirs, some of whom they nonetheless maintain for the sake of prestige. Why they prefer them is, I think, no mystery, nor should it seem surprising. Those wise men usually bring princes nothing but gloom, and, relying on their learning, they are not afraid at times to scrape tender little ears with biting truth; whereas the jesters supply the one thing princes hunt for everywhere and by every means: jokes, laughter, guffaws, amusement. Now hear another gift of fools, not to be despised: they alone are frank and truthful. And what is more praiseworthy than truth? For although the proverb of Alcibiades in Plato assigns truth to wine and to childhood, all

that credit is really owed to me, as Euripides himself testifies in his famous saying about us: μωρὰ γὰρ μωρὸς λέγει [a fool speaks folly]. Whatever the simpleton has in his heart he shows on his face and speaks out in words. Wise men, by contrast, have those two tongues the same Euripides mentions: with one they speak the truth, with the other whatever they judge suits the occasion. It is their way to turn black into white, to blow hot and cold from the same mouth, to keep one thing stored in the heart and fashion another in speech. And so, in all their great good fortune, princes seem to me most unfortunate on this account: they have no one from whom to hear the truth, and are forced to take flatterers for friends.[8] "But princes' ears shrink from the truth," someone will say, "and they avoid those wise men for this very reason: they are afraid that someone may turn out too outspoken and dare to say what is true rather than what is pleasant." That is indeed how things stand: truth is hateful to kings. And yet with my simpletons something remarkable happens. Not only truths but even open insults are heard with pleasure, so that the very same remark which would have been a capital offense from a wise man's mouth gives incredible pleasure coming from a jester. For truth has a certain native power to delight, provided nothing offensive comes with it; but this the gods have given to simpletons alone. For much the same reasons women are especially fond of this sort of person, being by nature more inclined to pleasure and trifles. So whatever they may get up to with people of this kind, even if it is sometimes a little too serious, they interpret it as fun and games; for that sex is ingenious, especially at covering up its own misdeeds.

THE WISE MAN'S WRETCHED LIFE

Folly contrasts the carefree jester with the scholar who wastes his life and dies without having lived.

37 So, to return to the happiness of simpletons: having spent their lives in great merriment, with neither fear nor sense of

8 Plato, Symposium 217e; Euripides, Bacchae 369.

death, they move straight to the Elysian Fields, to delight the pious and idle souls there too with their games. Now let us go and compare any wise man you like with the lot of this jester. Imagine, as his opposite, a model of wisdom: a man who has worn away his whole boyhood and youth mastering the disciplines and lost the sweetest part of life in endless sleepless nights, cares and sweat; who even in all the rest of his life has never tasted a drop of pleasure; always stingy, poor, sad, sour, unfair and harsh to himself, burdensome and hateful to others; worn out by pallor, leanness, ill health, bleary eyes; grown old and gray long before his time, and leaving life before his time. Though what does it matter when such a man dies, who has never lived? There you have that splendid portrait of the wise man.

TWO KINDS OF MADNESS

Folly distinguishes the Furies' destructive madness from her own pleasant delusion, illustrated by the man of Argos.

[38] But here again οἱ ἐκ τῆς στοᾶς βάτραχοι [the frogs of the Stoa] croak at me. *Nothing*, they say, *is more wretched than madness. But conspicuous folly is either next door to madness, or rather is madness itself. For what else is being mad but erring in mind?* But they have wandered off the road entirely. Come, let us demolish this syllogism too, with the Muses' blessing. Clever of them, certainly. But just as Socrates in Plato teaches us to make two Venuses by cutting one in two, and two Cupids by dividing one, so those dialecticians ought to have distinguished madness from madness, if they wanted to seem sane themselves. For not every madness is necessarily a calamity. Otherwise Horace would not have said, *Or is a lovely madness playing with me?* Nor would Plato have counted the frenzy of poets, seers and lovers among the chief blessings of life, nor would the prophetess have called Aeneas' labor insane.[9] In fact there are two kinds of madness. One is sent

9 Plato, Symposium 180d and Phaedrus 244–245; Horace, Odes 3.4.5–6; the Sibyl in Virgil, Aeneid 6.135.

up from the underworld by the avenging Furies whenever they let loose their snakes and drive into human hearts the passion for war, or the insatiable thirst for gold, or shameful and unholy love, or parricide, incest, sacrilege, or some other plague of that kind; or when they hound a guilty, conscience-stricken mind with the torches of fury and terror. The other is very different: it comes from me, and is the most desirable thing of all. It occurs whenever a pleasant delusion of the mind both frees the soul from those anxious cares and steeps it in many kinds of pleasure. This is the delusion that Cicero, writing to Atticus, wishes for as a great gift of the gods, so that he might no longer feel such great evils.[10] Nor was that man of Argos wrong, who was so far gone in madness that he would sit alone in the theater for days on end, laughing, applauding and rejoicing, because he believed marvelous tragedies were being performed there when nothing at all was being performed. In all the other duties of life he behaved properly: *pleasant to his friends, kind to his wife, a man who could forgive his slaves, and not go mad when the seal of a jar was broken.* When his relatives' efforts and doses of medicine had cured him of his illness and he was wholly himself again, he complained to his friends like this: *"By Pollux, you have killed me, friends, not saved me," he said, "wrenching my pleasure from me so and taking away by force my mind's most welcome delusion."* And rightly too; for they were the ones in error, and more in need of hellebore, who thought so happy and pleasant a madness had to be driven out with potions, like some disease.[11] Though I myself have not yet decided whether every error of the senses or of the mind should be called madness. If someone with bleary eyes takes a mule for an ass, or someone admires a clumsy poem as most learned, he will not at once be thought mad. But if someone is deceived not only in his senses but in the judgment of his mind, and that beyond what is usual, and constantly, then at last he will be judged close to madness: for instance, if every time he heard an ass braying he thought he was hearing mar-

10 Cicero, Letters to Atticus 9.11.

11 Horace, Epistles 2.2.128–140; hellebore was the ancient remedy for madness.

velous musicians, or if some poor wretch of the lowest birth believed he was Croesus, king of the Lydians. But this kind of madness, if it tends toward pleasure, as it usually does, brings no small delight both to those who are gripped by it and to those who observe it, though these are not mad in the same way. For this sort of madness extends much more widely than the common run of people realize. But one madman laughs at another in turn, and they supply each other with pleasure. And you will often see the greater madman laughing hardest at the lesser.

HUNTERS, BUILDERS AND ALCHEMISTS

Folly reviews the happy obsessions of huntsmen, compulsive builders, alchemists and gamblers.

[39] Indeed, by Folly's verdict, each person is the happier the more ways he is out of his wits, provided he keeps to the kind of madness that is peculiarly mine. That kind is so widespread that I doubt whether, in the whole sum of mortals, one could find anyone who is wise at all hours and not gripped by some kind of madness. There is only this difference: the man who sees a pumpkin and believes it is a woman is given the name of madman, because this happens to very few. But when a man swears that his wife, whom he shares with many, is more than a Penelope, and congratulates himself enormously, happily mistaken, nobody calls him mad, because they see this happening to husbands everywhere. To this order belong also those who despise everything compared with hunting wild beasts, and declare that they feel incredible delight whenever they hear that ugly blare of horns and the baying of hounds. I even think that when they sniff the dogs' droppings, it smells like cinnamon to them. And then what bliss whenever a beast has to be cut up! Bulls and wethers may be butchered by the common people, but it is sacrilege for game to be carved by anyone but a gentleman. Bareheaded, on bended knee, with a knife reserved for the purpose (for it is not lawful to do it with just any knife), with set gestures he devoutly cuts set limbs in a set order. Meanwhile the

crowd standing round watches in silent wonder, as at some new sacred rite, though they have seen this spectacle more than a thousand times. And whoever gets to taste a bit of the beast is convinced that he has acquired no small share of nobility. So, although by constantly chasing and eating wild animals they achieve nothing except nearly turning into wild animals themselves, they still think they are living like kings. Very like them are those who burn with an insatiable passion for building, now changing round into square, now square into round. There is no end or limit to it until, reduced to utter poverty, they have nowhere left to live and nothing to eat. What of it? In the meantime they have spent a few years in the greatest pleasure. Next to these, it seems to me, come those who strive by new and secret arts to transmute the species of things, and hunt over land and sea for a certain fifth essence.[12] Honeyed hope so beguiles them that they never regret any labor or expense. With wonderful ingenuity they are always devising something new by which to deceive themselves again and play a pleasant trick on themselves, until, having spent everything, they have nothing left even to fit out a little furnace. Still they do not stop dreaming pleasant dreams, encouraging others as best they can to the same happiness. And when they are at last stripped of all hope, one saying remains, an abundantly great consolation: *In great things, even to have wished is enough*. And then they blame the shortness of life for not being equal to the greatness of the task. As for gamblers, I rather doubt whether they should be admitted to our fellowship. Still, it is certainly a foolish and ridiculous sight when we see some so addicted that, as soon as they hear the rattle of dice, their hearts leap and pound.[13] Then, lured on all the while by the hope of winning, they make shipwreck of all their fortunes, their vessel dashed on the rock of dice, a far more fearsome headland than Malea, and they barely come out naked; yet they would rather cheat anyone than the

12 Horace, Epistles 1.1.100; the alchemists sought the "quintessence," a fifth element beyond earth, water, air and fire.
13 Propertius 2.10.6.

winner, for fear, of course, of being thought men of little honor. And what about when, old now and half blind, they go on playing in spectacles? Or when, at last, well-earned gout has crushed their knuckles, and they even hire a substitute to throw the dice into the box for them? A delightful business indeed, except that this game usually turns into rage, and then it belongs to the Furies, not to me.

SAINTS, RELICS AND PARDONS

Folly mocks those who trust in tales of wonders, saints' images, pardons and magic prayers.

[40] But that sort of person is beyond doubt entirely of our making who delights in miracles and monstrous lies, whether hearing or telling them, and can never have enough of such tales when marvels are related about specters, goblins, ghosts, the underworld, and thousands of wonders of that kind. The further these are from the truth, the more readily they are believed and the more pleasantly they tickle the ears. And these things are not only wonderfully good for relieving the tedium of the hours; they also bring profit, especially to priests and preachers. Next to these are those who have talked themselves into a belief that is foolish, certainly, but pleasant: that if they look at a wooden or painted Christopher, as big as Polyphemus, they will not die that day; or that whoever greets a carved Barbara with the prescribed words will come back safe from battle; or that if one calls on Erasmus on certain days, with certain little candles and certain little prayers, he will soon be rich. And now they have even found a Hercules in George, just as they found a second Hippolytus. They all but worship his horse, most devoutly decked out with trappings and studs, and keep winning his favor with some new little gift; to swear by his bronze helmet is thought an oath fit for a king. And what am I to say of those who flatter themselves most sweetly with counterfeit pardons for their crimes, and measure out the time in Purgatory as if by water-clock, calculating centuries, years, months, days and

hours without any error, as if from a mathematical table?[14] Or of those who, relying on certain magic little signs and prayers devised by some pious impostor for fun or for profit, promise themselves everything: wealth, honors, pleasures, plenty, unbroken good health, long life, a green old age, and finally a seat next to Christ among the blessed, though they would rather not get it until very late. That is, when the pleasures of this life have deserted them, unwilling as they are and clinging on with their teeth, then let those heavenly delights take over. Imagine, I pray you, some merchant, or soldier, or judge, who throws down a single coin out of all his plunder and thinks the whole Lerna of his life cleansed once and for all. He supposes that so many perjuries, so many lusts, so many drunken bouts, so many brawls, so many murders, so many frauds, so many breaches of faith, so many betrayals are bought off as if by contract, and bought off in such a way that he may now start a whole new round of crimes afresh.[15] And who is more foolish, or rather, who is happier, than those who promise themselves more than supreme happiness by reciting every day those seven little verses of the sacred Psalms? These magic verses some demon, witty, no doubt, but more frivolous than clever, is believed to have revealed to Saint Bernard; but the poor devil was outwitted. And these things, so foolish that I am almost ashamed of them myself, are nonetheless approved, not only by the common people but even by those who profess the religious life. What next? Isn't it much the same when particular regions each claim some special saint of their own, and when people assign particular tasks to particular saints and attribute to each his own rites of worship? So one helps with toothache, another stands by women in childbirth, another restores stolen goods, this one shines out favorably in a shipwreck, that one protects the flock, and so on with the rest, for to list them all would take far too

14 Saint Christopher was painted as a giant on church walls; Barbara was invoked against sudden death and Erasmus (Elmo) for wealth. George is "another Hippolytus" because, like that hero, he is never without his horse.

15 Lerna, the marsh of the Hydra, was proverbial for a mass of evils.

long.[16] Some saints have power in many areas at once, above all the Virgin Mother of God, to whom the common people attribute almost more than to her Son.

WHAT PEOPLE PRAY FOR

Folly notes that votive offerings thank saints for every rescue except rescue from folly.

41 But what do people ask of these saints, after all, except what has to do with folly? Come now, among all the votive offerings you see crammed over every wall of certain churches, and even the vaulting itself, have you ever seen any for someone who escaped folly, or became a hair's breadth wiser? One man swam to safety. Another was run through by an enemy and lived. Another ran away from the battle while the rest were fighting, no less luckily than bravely. Another, strung up on the gallows, fell down by the favor of some saint who is a friend to thieves, so that he could go on relieving a few of those unhappily overloaded with riches. Another broke out of prison and escaped. Another recovered from a fever, to his doctor's annoyance. For another, a poisoned drink loosened his bowels and proved a cure, not his death, to the displeasure of his wife, who had wasted her effort and expense. Another, when his cart overturned, drove his horses home unharmed. Another was buried under a collapsing building and lived. Another, caught by a husband, slipped away. Nobody gives thanks for being rid of folly. Knowing nothing is such a sweet thing that mortals will pray to be spared anything rather than Moria. But why am I launching out on this ocean of superstitions?

Not if I had a hundred tongues, a hundred mouths, a voice of iron, could I unfold all the forms of simpletons, or run through all the names of folly: so thoroughly does the whole life of all Christians everywhere teem with ravings of this kind. Yet the priests are

16 In the legend, a devil boasted to Saint Bernard that he knew seven Psalm verses that would save anyone who said them daily; Bernard replied that he would recite the whole Psalter.

quite willing to allow and nourish them, knowing well how much profit tends to come of it. If, in the middle of all this, some odious wise man were to rise up and chime in with the plain truth: *You will not die badly if you live well; you redeem your sins if to your coin you add hatred of wrongdoing, then tears, vigils, prayers and fasts, and change your whole way of life; this saint will favor you if you imitate his life*; if, I say, that wise man were to grumble out these and similar things, see from what great happiness into what turmoil he would suddenly drag men's minds back![17] To this fellowship belong those who, while still alive, settle so carefully the funeral procession with which they want to be carried out that they even prescribe by name how many torches, how many mourners in black, how many singers, how many hired actors of grief they want there, as if some sense of the spectacle were going to come back to them, or as if the dead would be ashamed unless their corpse were buried in style. They go about it as eagerly as if they had been elected aediles and were keen to put on games or a public banquet.

PRIDE OF BIRTH AND TALENT

Folly mocks those proud of their pedigree, looks or skills, and the self-love of artists and performers.

42 Though I am in a hurry, I cannot pass over in silence those who, though no different from the lowest cobbler, flatter themselves amazingly on an empty title of nobility. One traces his family back to Aeneas, another to Brutus, another to Arthur. They display carved and painted portraits of their ancestors everywhere; they count up their great-grandfathers and great-great-grandfathers and recite ancient family names, though they themselves are not much different from mute statues, and almost worse than the very images they show off. And yet with this so sweet Self-Love they lead a perfectly happy life; nor is there any lack of people just as foolish who look up to this kind of beast as if they were gods. But why am I talking about one or

17 A parody of Virgil, Aeneid 6.625–627.

two kinds, as if this Self-Love did not everywhere make a great many people wonderfully happy in wonderful ways?[18] Here is one, uglier than any ape, who sees himself as a perfect Nireus; another, as soon as he has drawn three lines with a compass, thinks himself a very Euclid; this one, ὄνος πρὸς λύραν [an ass at the lyre], with a voice worse than the cock's when he pecks his hen, nevertheless believes he is a second Hermogenes. But by far the sweetest kind of madness is the one that makes some people boast of any gift belonging to any of their household just as if it were their own. Such was that doubly blessed rich man in Seneca, who, whenever he was going to tell some little story, kept slaves at hand to prompt him with the names. He would not have hesitated even to enter a boxing match, though he was otherwise so feeble he could barely stay alive, relying on the fact that he had many exceptionally sturdy slaves at home. And what need is there to mention the professors of the arts?[19] Self-Love is the special property of all of them, so much so that you would sooner find a man willing to give up his little family farm than his talent; but above all of actors, singers, orators and poets. The more ignorant each of them is, the more insolently he admires himself, the more he boasts and puffs himself up. And like lips find like lettuce: indeed, the sillier a thing is, the more admirers it wins, just as the worst things always please the most people, because the greater part of mankind, as we said, is subject to Folly. So if the less skilled man is both far more pleasing to himself and admired by more people, why should he prefer true learning, which will first cost him a great deal, then make him more fastidious and more timid, and finally please far fewer?[20]

18 Brutus, a legendary Trojan, was held to be the founder of Britain.
19 Hermogenes Tigellius was a famous singer mentioned by Horace; the rich man is Calvisius Sabinus in Seneca, Letters 27.
20 The proverb (Adages) comes from the donkey eating thistles: everyone finds what suits his taste.

NATIONAL VANITIES

Folly lists the flattering self-images of nations and cities, from the English to the Germans.

[43] Now I see that nature has implanted in each mortal his own Self-Love, and in each nation, and almost in each city, a sort of shared one. Hence the English claim as especially theirs, among other things, good looks, music and fine dining. The Scots flatter themselves on their nobility and their claim of royal kinship, and on their dialectical subtleties too. The French take good manners for themselves. The Parisians arrogate to themselves, almost to the exclusion of everyone else, the glory of theological learning. The Italians lay claim to good letters and eloquence, and on this score they all flatter themselves most sweetly that they alone of mortals are not barbarians; in this kind of happiness the Romans hold first place, still dreaming most pleasantly of that ancient Rome. The Venetians are happy in their belief in their own nobility. The Greeks, as founders of the disciplines, sell themselves on the old titles of those celebrated heroes. The Turks, and the whole motley crowd of peoples we count as the real barbarians, even claim the glory of religion for themselves, laughing at Christians as superstitious. Sweeter still, the Jews go on steadfastly waiting for their Messiah, and to this day hold on to their Moses with their teeth. The Spaniards yield military glory to no one; the Germans are pleased with themselves for their height and their knowledge of magic.

IN PRAISE OF FLATTERY

Folly defends flattery, Self-Love's sister, as the honey that sweetens all human life.

[44] But, not to go through every case, you see, I think, how much pleasure Self-Love produces everywhere, for mortals one by one and all together. Almost her equal is her sister Flattery. For Self-Love is simply a person stroking himself; do the same to someone else and it becomes κολακία [flattery]. Nowadays, it is

true, flattery is in disrepute, but only among those who are moved more by the names of things than by the things themselves. They think good faith goes badly with flattery; that the opposite is true they could have learned even from the example of brute animals. For what is more fawning than a dog? And yet what is more faithful? What is more caressing than a squirrel? And yet what is friendlier to man? Unless perhaps fierce lions, savage tigers or irritable leopards seem more useful to human life. There is, admittedly, an altogether pernicious kind of flattery, by which some treacherous mockers drive poor wretches to ruin. But mine springs from a kindly nature and a certain candor, and is much closer to virtue than its opposite, harshness, and that moroseness which, as Horace says, is awkward and disagreeable. Mine lifts up downcast spirits, soothes the sad, rouses the sluggish, wakes up the dull, relieves the sick, softens the fierce, brings lovers together and keeps them together. It entices boys to take up the study of letters, cheers up old men, and, under the guise of praise, admonishes and instructs princes without offense. In short, it makes everyone more pleasing and dearer to himself, and that is surely the chief part of happiness. And what is more obliging than mules scratching each other? Not to mention for now that this is a large part of that much-praised eloquence, a larger part of medicine, and the largest of poetry; in short, that it is the honey and seasoning of all human society.[21]

HAPPINESS LIES IN OPINION

Folly argues that happiness depends on illusion, not on things, so being deceived is no misfortune.

45 "But to be deceived," they say, "is wretched." On the contrary: not to be deceived is most wretched of all. For those who think human happiness lies in things themselves are utterly foolish. It depends on opinions. Human affairs are so obscure and so vari-

21 Horace, Epistles 1.18.6; "mules scratch each other" is a proverb in the Adages for mutual flattery.

ous that nothing can be known clearly, as my Academics rightly said, the least arrogant of the philosophers; or, if anything can be known, it not infrequently spoils the pleasure of life. Finally, the human mind is so made that it is caught far more by disguises than by truths.[22]

If anyone wants a ready, obvious proof of this, let him go to sermons and churches. If anything serious is being said, everyone dozes, yawns, feels faintly sick. But if the bawler up there (a slip of the tongue: I meant to say the declaimer) starts on some old wives' tale, as they often do, everyone wakes up, sits up straight and gapes. Likewise, if there is some saint of a more legendary and poetic kind (if you want an example, imagine a George, a Christopher or a Barbara), you will see him worshipped far more devoutly than Peter or Paul, or even Christ himself. But this is not the place for that. Now see how much less this addition to happiness costs! The things themselves sometimes have to be acquired with great effort, even the most trivial, such as grammar. But an opinion is picked up with the greatest ease, and it does just as much for happiness, or even more. Come now: suppose someone feeds on rotten salt fish whose smell another man could not even bear, and yet to him it tastes of ambrosia. What difference, I ask you, does that make to his happiness? Or suppose sturgeon turns someone's stomach: what will that matter to the blessedness of his life? If a man has a wife who is remarkably ugly, but who seems to her husband fit to compete with Venus herself, is it not just the same as if she were really beautiful? If someone gazes up in wonder at a panel badly smeared with red lead and yellow, convinced that it is a painting by Apelles or Zeuxis, will he not be even happier than the man who has paid a fortune for the work of those artists and will perhaps get less pleasure from looking at it? I knew a man of my own name who gave his new bride some fake jewels as a present. Being a fluent joker, he persuaded her that they were

22 The skeptical philosophers of Plato's later Academy, such as Carneades, held that nothing can be known with certainty.

not only real and natural but of rare and priceless value.[23] Tell me, what did it matter to the girl? She feasted her eyes and her mind on glass no less pleasurably, and kept those trinkets stored away at home as if they were some extraordinary treasure. Meanwhile the husband both escaped the expense and enjoyed his wife's mistake, and yet he kept her no less devoted to him than if he had given her costly gifts. Do you think there is any difference between the people in Plato's famous cave, who marvel at the shadows and images of various things (provided they want for nothing and are no less pleased with themselves), and that wise man who has left the cave and looks at the real things? If Lucian's Micyllus had been allowed to dream that rich and golden dream of his forever, he would have had no reason to wish for any other happiness.[24] So either there is no difference, or, if there is any, the condition of fools is actually better. First, their happiness costs them very little: just a scrap of self-persuasion. Second, they enjoy it in common with a great many others.

FOLLY'S GIFTS FOR EVERYONE

Folly contrasts her universal generosity with the selective gifts of the other gods.

46 Besides, no good thing is pleasant to possess without a companion. And who does not know how few wise men there are, if indeed any is to be found at all? Out of all those centuries the Greeks count only seven. And, so help me, if anyone examined them more closely, may I perish if he finds even one half-wise man among them, or even a third of a wise man. Among the many praises of Bacchus, the chief one, and rightly, is that he washes away the cares of the mind, though only for a short time; for as soon as you have slept off your drop of wine, the troubles of the mind come racing straight back, as they say, with a team

23 Folly's Greek name, Moria, echoes More's Latin name, Morus; the anecdote is generally taken to be about Thomas More himself.
24 Plato's allegory of the cave is in the Republic, Book 7. Micyllus is the poor cobbler of the same dialogue of Lucian's, who dreams that he is rich.

of white horses. How much fuller and more immediate, then, is my gift! I fill the mind with joys, delights and dancing in a kind of perpetual drunkenness, and with no trouble at all. Nor do I let a single mortal go without my gift, whereas the gifts of the other gods go some to some and some to others. Not everywhere grows the noble, mellow wine that drives away cares and flows with rich hope. Few have been granted the grace of beauty, the gift of Venus; fewer still eloquence, the gift of Mercury. Not so many have come into wealth with Hercules on their side. The Homeric Jupiter does not grant power to just anyone. Mars often favors neither army. Many go away sad from Apollo's tripod. The son of Saturn often hurls his thunderbolts. Phoebus sometimes sends plague with his arrows. Neptune drowns more people than he saves. I say nothing of those Vejoveses, Plutos, Ates, Punishments, Fevers and the like, who are not gods but executioners. I alone am that Folly who embraces everyone equally with such ready kindness.[25]

NO TEMPLE NEEDED

Folly says she needs no sacrifices or temples, since the whole world worships her in its conduct.

47 I do not wait for vows, nor do I grow angry and demand expiation if some point of ritual has been left out. Nor do I throw heaven and earth into confusion if someone invites the other gods, leaves me at home and does not let me share the savor of the sacrifices. The other gods are so touchy about these things that it is almost more worthwhile, and certainly safer, to neglect them than to worship them; just as some people are so difficult and so quick to take offense that you would do better to keep them as total strangers than as friends. "But nobody," they say, "sacrifices to Folly or builds her a temple." As I said, I am somewhat amazed at this ingratitude myself. But being easy-going, I take this too in good part, though in fact I could not even feel the

25 Vejovis was an archaic Roman god seen as a baleful counterpart of Jupiter; Ate is the Greek goddess of ruinous delusion.

lack of such things. Why should I demand a pinch of incense or a salted cake, a goat or a pig, when all mortals everywhere in the world pay me the kind of worship that even the theologians usually approve most highly? Unless perhaps I ought to envy Diana because she is appeased with human blood. I consider myself most devoutly worshipped when people everywhere, as they all do, embrace me in their hearts, express me in their conduct and represent me in their lives. This kind of worship of the saints is not exactly common among Christians either. What a crowd of people fix a little candle before the Virgin Mother of God, and at midday too, when there is no need! And how few, on the other hand, strive to imitate her in purity of life, modesty and love of heavenly things! Yet that, after all, is true worship, and by far the most pleasing to those in heaven. Besides, why should I want a temple, when this whole world is my temple, and, unless I am mistaken, the most beautiful one there is? Nor do I lack initiates, except where there are no human beings. Nor am I so foolish as to require images of stone daubed with paint, which sometimes get in the way of our worship, when dull, thick-witted people adore the statues instead of the saints themselves. Then the same thing would happen to me as to those who are pushed out by their own deputies. I reckon I have as many statues set up as there are mortals, for every one of them carries a living image of me, even against his will. So I have no reason to envy the other gods if they are worshipped some in one corner of the earth and some in another, and on fixed days at that: Phoebus at Rhodes, Venus in Cyprus, Juno at Argos, Minerva at Athens, Jupiter on Olympus, Neptune at Tarentum, Priapus at Lampsacus. All I ask is that the whole world together should constantly offer me far better victims.

Folly's Followers

Chapters 48–60
The professions and estates: teachers, poets, lawyers, philosophers, theologians, monks, princes, courtiers, bishops, cardinals and popes.

CHAPTER 48

[48] And if anyone thinks that I am saying all this more boldly than truly, come, let us take a brief look at the lives of men themselves. Then it will become plain how much they owe me and how highly they value me, the greatest and the least alike. But we will not review the life of just anybody, for that would take far too long; only those of distinguished people, from whom it will be easy to judge the rest. What is the point of talking about the common crowd and the little people, who are indisputably mine, every one of them? They abound in so many forms of folly on every side, and invent so many new ones every day, that a thousand Democrituses would not be enough for all the laughter; and those Democrituses would in turn need yet another Democritus. It is incredible, in fact, what sport and amusement these little men provide every day for the gods above. The gods give their sober morning hours to quarrelsome deliberations and to hearing prayers. But once they are soaked in nectar and have no wish to do anything serious, they sit down where heaven juts out furthest and lean forward to watch what men are up to. There is no spectacle they enjoy more. Immortal God, what a theater that is! What a varied commotion of fools! For I myself sometimes take my seat among the ranks of the poets' gods. This man is dying of love for some woman, and the

less he is loved in return, the more helplessly he loves. That one marries a dowry, not a wife. That one prostitutes his own bride. Another, in his jealousy, keeps watch like Argus. This one is in mourning, and goodness, what foolish things he says and does! He even hires people, like actors, to play out the drama of grief. That one weeps at his stepmother's grave. This one gives everything he can scrape together from anywhere to his belly, and will soon go bravely hungry. This one thinks nothing happier than sleep and idleness. There are those who bustle about busily in other people's affairs and neglect their own. There is one who thinks himself rich on loans and debts, and will soon go bankrupt. Another thinks nothing happier than to live poor himself and make his heir rich. This one, for a tiny and uncertain profit, flits across every sea, entrusting to waves and winds a life that no money can buy back. That one prefers to seek riches in war rather than spend a safe and leisurely life at home. Some think that the most convenient road to wealth is courting childless old men. Nor are there lacking those who prefer to hunt the same game by making love to rich old women. Both kinds give the gods who watch them particularly fine entertainment when they are cleverly outwitted by the very people they are angling for. The most foolish and the most sordid of all are the merchants, since they handle the most sordid thing of all, and by the most sordid methods. They lie, perjure themselves, steal, cheat and deceive at every turn, and yet they consider themselves the first of all men, because their fingers are ringed with gold. Nor are there lacking flattering friars to admire them and call them "venerable" in public, no doubt so that some little share of their ill-gotten gains may come back to them. Elsewhere you may see certain Pythagoreans, so convinced that all things are held in common that whatever they find unguarded anywhere they calmly carry off, as if it had come to them by inheritance. There are those who are rich only in wishes; they invent pleasant dreams for themselves and think that is enough for happiness. Some delight in being thought rich abroad, while at home they starve industriously. This one hastens to squander

whatever he has, that one heaps up wealth by fair means or foul. This one is a candidate canvassing for public office, that one amuses himself by his own fireside. A good many keep lawsuits going that will never end, and both sides compete eagerly to enrich the judge who keeps adjourning the case and the advocate who is in collusion. This one is eager for revolution, that one is plotting some grand enterprise.[1] There is one who goes off to Jerusalem, Rome or St. James, where he has no business at all, leaving his wife and children at home. In short, if you were to look down from the Moon, as Menippus once did, on the countless commotions of mortals, you would think you were seeing a swarm of flies or gnats, quarreling among themselves, fighting, plotting, robbing, playing, frolicking, being born, falling and dying. It is scarcely to be believed what upheavals, what tragedies so tiny a creature stirs up, and one so soon to perish. For sometimes the storm of even a minor war or plague sweeps away and scatters many thousands at once.[2]

SCHOOLMASTERS

Folly describes grammarians tyrannizing their pupils and quarreling over words, yet happy in their delusions.

49 But I should be the greatest fool of all, and richly deserve Democritus' guffaws, if I went on listing the forms of popular folly and madness. I shall turn to those who have a reputation for wisdom among mortals and go hunting for that golden bough, as they say. Among them the grammarians hold first place: a race of men than whom nothing would be more wretched, more afflicted or more hated by the gods, if I did not soften the hardships of their most miserable profession with a sweet kind of madness. For they are subject not to πέντε κατάραις, that is, to just five curses, as the Greek epigram has it,

1 The Pythagoreans were credited with the saying that among friends all things are held in common.

2 St. James is the pilgrimage shrine of Santiago de Compostela. In Lucian's Icaromenippus the Cynic Menippus flies up to the Moon and looks down on human affairs.

but to six hundred. Always hungry and squalid in those schools of theirs (schools, did I say? rather φροντιστηρίοις [thinking-shops], or better still treadmills and torture chambers), among herds of boys they grow old with toil, go deaf with the noise, and waste away in stench and filth.[3] Yet thanks to me they seem to themselves the foremost of mortals. They are so pleased with themselves as they terrify the frightened crowd with a threatening face and voice, as they cut the poor wretches to pieces with canes, rods and straps, and as they rage in every possible way at their whim, imitating that famous ass of Cumae. Meanwhile their filth seems to them pure elegance, the stench smells of marjoram, and that most wretched servitude is taken for a kingdom; so much so that they would not exchange their tyranny for the rule of Phalaris or Dionysius. But they are far happier still because of a curious conviction of their own learning. For though most of them cram the boys with sheer drivel, yet, good gods, what Palaemon, what Donatus do they not look down on compared with themselves? And by some sort of conjuring trick they marvelously manage to seem to foolish mothers and unlearned fathers exactly what they make themselves out to be.[4] Add to this another kind of pleasure. Whenever one of them discovers in some moldy document the name of Anchises' mother, or some little word unknown to ordinary people (say bubsequa, bovinator or manticulator), or digs up somewhere a fragment of an ancient stone marked with mutilated letters: O Jupiter! What exultation then, what triumphs, what eulogies, as if they had conquered Africa or captured Babylon! And what about when they show off their utterly frigid and insipid little verses everywhere, and there are people to admire them? Then they believe that Virgil's soul has migrated straight into their own breasts. But nothing is sweeter than when they praise and admire one

3 A Greek epigram (by Palladas) jokes that the grammarian's lot is the five curses packed into the opening line of the Iliad; the "thinking-shop" is Socrates' school in Aristophanes' Clouds.

4 The ass of Cumae put on a lion's skin and terrorized the locals until he was found out. Phalaris and Dionysius were notorious Sicilian tyrants; Remmius Palaemon and Aelius Donatus were famous Roman grammarians.

another, returning like for like, and scratch each other's backs in turn. And if someone else slips on a single little word, and one of these sharper-eyed men happens to catch it, Ἡράκλεις [Heracles!], what tragedies at once, what sword fights, what abuse, what invectives! May all the grammarians be against me if I am lying.[5] I know a man who is πολυτεχνότατον [master of very many arts], a Greek scholar, a Latinist, a mathematician, a philosopher, a physician, καὶ ταῦτα βασιλικόν [and a royal one at that], now sixty years old. Leaving everything else aside, he has for more than twenty years been tormenting and torturing himself over grammar. He is convinced that he will be perfectly happy if he lives long enough to settle for certain how the eight parts of speech are to be distinguished, something that no one among the Greeks or the Latins has yet managed to do completely. As if it were a matter to be decided even by war, if someone makes a conjunction of a word that belongs under the jurisdiction of adverbs.[6] And so, since there are as many grammars as there are grammarians, or rather more (my friend Aldus alone has brought out a grammar more than five times), this man passes over none, however barbarously or tediously written, without unrolling and scrutinizing it. He envies anyone who attempts anything in this field, however inept, and is wretchedly afraid that someone may snatch this glory from him first, and the labor of so many years be lost. Would you rather call this madness or folly? It hardly matters to me, so long as you admit that it is my doing that a creature otherwise by far the most wretched of all is raised to such a height of happiness that it would not wish to exchange its lot even with the kings of Persia.[7]

5 Rare archaic Latin words: bubsequa, "cowherd"; bovinator, "wrangler"; manticulator, "pickpocket."

6 Usually identified as Thomas Linacre (c. 1460–1524), royal physician and author of Latin grammars.

7 Aldus Manutius (c. 1450–1515), the Venetian scholar-printer, who published Erasmus's Adages in 1508.

POETS, RHETORICIANS AND AUTHORS

Folly mocks poets, rhetoricians and writers who chase fame, praise one another and plagiarize.

50 The poets owe me less, though they openly belong to my party. They are a free race, as the proverb says, and their whole effort aims at nothing but soothing the ears of fools, and that with sheer trifles and ridiculous tales. And yet, relying on these, marvelous to say, they promise themselves immortality and a life equal to the gods', and promise the same to others as well. This order is on closer terms than any other with Φιλαυτία καὶ Κολακία [Self-Love and Flattery], and no race of mortals worships me more simply or more faithfully. Then the rhetoricians. Although they do play a bit of a double game and collude with the philosophers, they too belong to our party. Many things prove it, but above all the fact that, among their other trifles, they have written so carefully and at such length about the art of joking. Indeed, whoever it was who wrote the art of speaking addressed to Herennius counts folly itself among the kinds of wit; and Quintilian, by far the chief of this order, has a chapter on laughter longer than the Iliad. They attribute so much to folly that what cannot be refuted by any argument is often dodged by a laugh. Unless perhaps someone thinks that raising guffaws with funny sayings, and by art at that, has nothing to do with folly. Of the same stamp are those who hunt for immortal fame by publishing books. They all owe me a great deal, but especially those who smear sheer trifles over their pages.[8] For those who write learnedly for the judgment of a few scholars, and would not refuse even Persius or Laelius as their judge, seem to me more to be pitied than happy, since they torture themselves without end. They add, change, cut, restore, revise, recast, show their work around, keep it back till the ninth year, and are never satisfied with themselves. And a worthless reward, namely

8 The Rhetorica ad Herennium is an anonymous Roman handbook once attributed to Cicero; Quintilian treats laughter in his Training of the Orator 6.3.

praise, and the praise of very few at that, they buy at so high a price: so many sleepless nights, such loss of sleep, the sweetest of all things, so much sweat, so many torments. Add now the damage to their health, the ruin of their looks, bleary eyes or even blindness, poverty, envy, abstinence from pleasure, early old age, premature death, and anything else of that kind. That wise man thinks it worth paying for with such great evils, just to win the approval of one or two bleary-eyed scholars.[9] But my kind of writer: how much more happily he raves! He burns no midnight oil. Just as the fancy takes him, he at once publishes whatever drops from his pen, even his dreams, at no greater cost than a little paper. He knows perfectly well that the more trifling the trifles he writes, the more people will approve of them, that is, all the fools and the unlearned. What trouble is it to disregard those three scholars, if indeed they even read it? And what weight will the vote of so few wise men carry against so vast a crowd shouting the other way? But wiser still are those who publish other people's work as their own, and with mere words transfer to themselves the glory won by someone else's great labor. They rely, of course, on the belief that even if they are convicted of plagiarism, they will meanwhile have enjoyed the profit of it for some time. It is worth seeing how pleased they are with themselves when the crowd praises them, when they are pointed out with a finger in a throng, οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ δεινὸς ἐκεῖνος [that's the famous genius], when they are on display in the booksellers' shops, when on the title page of every book three names can be read, preferably foreign ones that sound like magic spells. And by immortal God, what are they but names? Then, consider how few will even know them, if you look at the vastness of the world; and how many fewer still will praise them, since even the unlearned have differing tastes. What is more, these very names are often made up, or borrowed from the books of the ancients. One delights in calling himself

9 The satirist Lucilius said he did not care to be read by the learned Persius but wanted Laelius as a reader (Cicero, On the Orator 2.25); Horace advises keeping a work back until the ninth year (Art of Poetry 388).

Telemachus, another Sthenelus or Laertes, this one Polycrates, that one Thrasymachus. So it no longer matters whether you put Chameleon or Gourd on your book, or, as the philosophers like to say, alpha or beta. But the most delightful thing of all is when they praise one another in turn with letters, poems and encomiums, fools praising fools and the unlearned the unlearned. This one leaves the field an Alcaeus by that one's vote, and that one a Callimachus by this one's. To this one, that one is superior to Cicero; to that one, this one is more learned than Plato. Sometimes they even look for an opponent, so as to increase their fame by the rivalry. Hence *the fickle crowd is split into opposing factions*, until each leader comes off the victor after a successful campaign, and each celebrates a triumph. The wise laugh at all this as utterly foolish, which it is. Who denies it? But meanwhile, thanks to me, these people lead a pleasant life, and would not exchange their triumphs even for those of the Scipios. And yet the learned too, while they laugh at all this with great delight and enjoy other people's madness, owe me no small debt themselves, and they cannot deny it unless they are the most ungrateful of all men.

LAWYERS AND LOGICIANS

Folly mocks lawyers piling up glosses and dialecticians wrangling over nothing.

[51] Among the learned, the lawyers claim even first place for themselves, and no one else is so pleased with himself. All the while they keep rolling the stone of Sisyphus, stringing together six hundred laws in a single breath, no matter how little to the point; and by heaping glosses on glosses and opinions on opinions they make their study seem the most difficult of all. For whatever is laborious they immediately consider splendid as well. Let us add to them the dialecticians and sophists, a race of men more talkative than any bronze of Dodona, so that any one of them could compete in chatter with twenty picked women. They would be happier, though, if they were merely talkative

and not also quarrelsome; as it is, they fight tooth and nail over goat's wool, and by too much wrangling they generally lose sight of the truth. Still, their self-love makes them blissful, as, armed with three syllogisms, they unhesitatingly dare to cross swords with anyone on any subject. And their obstinacy makes them invincible, even if you set Stentor against them.[10]

NATURAL PHILOSOPHERS

Folly ridicules philosophers who claim to measure the heavens and see quiddities while knowing nothing.

52 After them come the philosophers, venerable for their beards and cloaks, who proclaim that they alone are wise and that all other mortals are flitting shadows. How delightfully they rave when they build countless worlds, when they measure the sun, the moon, the stars and the spheres as if with thumb and thread, when they give the causes of thunderbolts, winds, eclipses and other inexplicable things, never hesitating for a moment! It is as though they had been private secretaries to Nature, the architect of the universe, or had come to us straight from the council of the gods. Meanwhile Nature has a grand laugh at them and their conjectures. For that they have nothing certain is proved well enough by this alone: on every single question there is endless strife among them. Though they know nothing at all, they claim to know everything. Though they do not know themselves, and sometimes cannot see a ditch or a stone in their path (either because most of them are bleary-eyed or because their minds are wandering), yet they proclaim that they see ideas, universals, separate forms, prime matters, quiddities, haecceities, [formalities, instants]: things so fine that not even Lynceus, I think, could make them out. They look down on the profane crowd most of all when they pour darkness over the less expert with their triangles, squares and circles and such mathematical figures, drawn one on top of another and jumbled into the shape

10 A proverb from Erasmus's Adages: the bronze vessels at the oracle of Dodona rang on endlessly. Stentor is the loud-voiced herald of the Iliad.

of a labyrinth, and with letters too, drawn up as if in battle array and repeated over and over in different orders. Nor are there lacking some of this kind who also foretell the future by consulting the stars, and promise marvels beyond magic; and they find lucky people who believe this too.

THE THEOLOGIANS

Folly turns warily to the theologians and their absurd scholastic questions about God and the sacraments.

53 As for the theologians, it might be better to pass them over in silence, καὶ ταύτην Καμαρίναν μὴ κινεῖν [and not stir up this Camarina], and not to touch this stinking weed. They are a remarkably haughty and touchy race of men, and they might attack me in squadrons with six hundred conclusions and force me to recant; and if I refused, they would at once shout "Heretic!" For this is the thunderbolt they usually terrify people with when they are not well disposed toward them.[11] Now although no one is less willing to acknowledge my kindness to them, these men too are bound to me by no small debts. Happy in their self-love, as if they themselves dwelt in the third heaven, they look down from on high on all other mortals as on cattle crawling on the ground, and almost pity them. They are fenced about by such an army of magisterial definitions, conclusions, corollaries, and explicit and implicit propositions; they abound in so many κρησφυγέτοις [bolt-holes] that not even Vulcan's chains could ensnare them so tightly that they would not slip out by means of distinctions. With these they cut through every knot so easily that the axe of Tenedos could not do it better. And they teem with so many newly devised terms and monstrous words![12] Then too, they explain hidden mysteries as they please: by what plan the world was created and set in order; through

11 Two proverbs from the Adages: draining the marsh of Camarina brought disaster on the town, and the anagyris is a shrub that stinks all the worse when touched.

12 Vulcan trapped Mars and Venus in an unbreakable net; the "axe of Tenedos," a proverb from the Adages, stands for summary decisiveness.

what channels the stain of sin has been passed down to posterity; by what means, in what measure and in how short a time Christ was completed in the Virgin's womb; how in the Eucharist accidents subsist without a dwelling place. But these are commonplaces. What they consider worthy of great and "illuminated" theologians, as they call them, and what wakes them up if ever it comes up, is this: Is there any instant in the divine generation? Are there several filiations in Christ? Is the proposition "God the Father hates the Son" possible? Could God have taken the person of a woman, or of the Devil, or of an ass, or of a gourd, or of a flint? And then, how would the gourd have preached, worked miracles and been nailed to the cross? And what would Peter have consecrated if he had consecrated at the time when Christ's body was hanging on the cross? and whether at that same time Christ could have been called a man; and whether after the resurrection we shall be allowed to eat and drink, as they take precautions against hunger and thirst already now? There are countless λεπτολεσχίαι [subtle hair-splittings] subtler still than these, about notions, relations, formalities, quiddities and haecceities, which nobody could follow with his eyes unless he were such a Lynceus that he could see, through the deepest darkness, even things that exist nowhere. Add to these their γνώμας [maxims], so παραδόξους [paradoxical] that the Stoic oracles called paradoxes seem utterly crude and commonplace beside them. For example: that it is a lighter offense to murder a thousand men than to stitch a poor man's shoe once on the Lord's Day; and that one should rather let the whole world perish, with its food and clothing, as they say, than tell a single little lie, however slight.

COULD THE APOSTLES PASS THE EXAM?

Folly imagines the apostles failing the scholastic theologians' tests on faith, grace and the sacraments.

These most subtle subtleties are made subtler still by the many ways of the scholastics, so that you could sooner find your way

out of a labyrinth than out of the tangles of the Realists, Nominalists, Thomists, Albertists, Occamists and Scotists; and I have not named all the sects, only the main ones. In all of them there is so much learning and so much difficulty that I think the apostles themselves would need another spirit if they were forced to engage this new breed of theologians on these questions. Paul could display faith; but when he says, *Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the proof of things not seen*, his definition was hardly magisterial. And though he practiced charity superbly, he divides and defines it with little dialectical skill in the First Epistle to the Corinthians, chapter thirteen.[13] They consecrated the Eucharist devoutly, to be sure. But suppose they had been asked about the terminus a quo and the terminus ad quem; about transubstantiation; about how the same body can be in different places; about the difference between the way Christ's body is in heaven, the way it was on the cross and the way it is in the sacrament of the Eucharist; about the point at which transubstantiation takes place, given that the words by which it takes place, being a discrete quantity, are in flux. They would not, I think, have answered with the same acuteness with which the Scotists discuss and define these things. They knew the mother of Jesus; but which of them demonstrated as philosophically as our theologians how she was preserved from the stain of Adam? Peter received the keys, and received them from one who would not entrust them to an unworthy man; and yet whether he understood, I do not know. Certainly he never touched on the subtle question of how even a man who does not have knowledge can have the key of knowledge. They baptized everywhere, and yet they never taught what the formal, material, efficient and final causes of baptism are, nor do they ever mention the delible and indelible character. They worshipped, indeed, but in spirit, following nothing but that saying of the Gospel: *God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in*

13 The followers of Thomas Aquinas, Albert the Great, William of Ockham and Duns Scotus; Realists and Nominalists disputed whether universals really exist. The definition of faith is from Hebrews 11:1, then ascribed to Paul.

spirit and truth. But it does not appear to have been revealed to them at the time that one and the same adoration is to be paid to a little image sketched in charcoal on a wall and to Christ himself, provided it has two fingers raised, uncut hair, and three rays in the halo stuck to the back of its head. For who could grasp these things unless he had spent thirty-six whole years on the physics and metaphysics of Aristotle and Scotus? The apostles drive home grace again and again; yet they never distinguish between grace freely given and grace that makes acceptable. They urge good works, but they do not distinguish between opus operans and opus operatum. They constantly drive home charity, but do not separate infused charity from acquired, nor explain whether it is an accident or a substance, a created or an uncreated thing. They detest sin; but may I die if they could define scientifically what it is that we call sin, unless perhaps they had been taught by the spirit of the Scotists. For I cannot be brought to believe that Paul, from whose learning alone we may judge all the rest, would so often have condemned questions, disputes, genealogies and what he himself calls λογομαχίας [battles of words], if he had been well versed in these subtleties; especially since all the disputes and fights of that time were rustic and crude compared with the more-than-Chrysippean subtleties of our masters.[14] Yet these most modest men, if anything happens to have been written by the apostles rather roughly and unmagisterially, do not condemn it, but interpret it kindly, paying this honor partly to antiquity and partly to the apostolic name. And, by Hercules, it would hardly have been fair to demand such great matters of the apostles, when they had never heard a single word about them from their teacher. If the same thing happens in Chrysostom, Basil or Jerome, the theologians are content to write in the margin: "Not binding." Those Fathers did refute the pagan philosophers and the Jews, who are by nature most obstinate; but they did it by their lives and miracles rather than by syllogisms, and they

14 Chrysippus was the hair-splitting Stoic logician. "Our masters" (magistri nostri) was the formal title of doctors of theology.

refuted men none of whom would have had the wit to grasp even a single Quodlibet of Scotus.[15] Now what pagan, what heretic would not give way at once to so many exquisitely fine subtleties? Unless he is so dense that he cannot follow them, or so impudent that he hisses them off the stage, or armed with the same snares, so that the fight is evenly matched, as if you pitted a giant against a giant, or as if a man with a charmed sword fought another whose sword was charmed too. For then it would be nothing but Penelope's web, woven and unwoven. In my judgment the Christians would be wise, instead of those fat troops of soldiers with whom they have long been waging war with uncertain fortune, to send against the Turks and Saracens the most clamorous Scotists, the most obstinate Occamists and the invincible Albertists, together with the whole band of sophists. They would witness, I think, the most delightful battle ever fought and a victory never seen before. Who is so cold that these men's subtleties would not set him on fire? Who so dull that such stings would not rouse him? Who so sharp-sighted that they would not plunge him into the thickest darkness? But you think I am saying all this half in jest. And no wonder, since even among the theologians themselves there are men educated in better letters who are sickened by what they consider the trivial quibbles of the theologians. There are some who curse it as a kind of sacrilege and consider it the height of impiety to speak with such unwashed mouths about things so hidden, things to be adored rather than explained; to dispute about them with the profane quibbles of the pagans, to define them so arrogantly, and to defile the majesty of divine theology with such cold, indeed sordid, words and ideas. But meanwhile the theologians are blissfully pleased with themselves, and even applaud themselves; and they are so busy with these delightful trifles night and day that they have not the least bit of leisure left to open the Gospel or the epistles of Paul even once.

15 A Quodlibet was a scholastic disputation on any question whatever; Scotus's Quodlibetal Questions were notoriously difficult.

GUARDIANS OF ORTHODOXY

Folly mocks theologians who reshape Scripture, judge heresies and dispute bad Latin as matters of faith.

And while they play these games in the schools, they believe they are propping up the whole Church, which would otherwise collapse, with the props of their syllogisms, just as Atlas holds up the sky on his shoulders in the poets. Now think how much happiness this brings them. They shape and reshape the sacred Scriptures as they please, as if they were made of wax. They demand that their conclusions, once a few scholastics have signed them, should count for more than the laws of Solon and be preferred even to papal decrees. Like censors of the world, they force a recantation of anything anywhere that does not square exactly with their explicit and implicit conclusions, and pronounce as if from an oracle: "This proposition is scandalous; this one insufficiently reverential; this smells of heresy; this has a bad ring." So now neither baptism nor the Gospel, neither Paul nor Peter, neither St. Jerome nor Augustine, not even Thomas himself, Ἀριστοτελικώτατος [the most Aristotelian], can make a man a Christian unless the bachelors' vote is added. So great is their subtlety in judging! Who would have realized that a man was no Christian if he said that these two expressions, *matula putes* and *matula putet*, and likewise *ollam fervere* and *ollam fervere*, are equally correct, if those wise men had not taught us? Who would have freed the Church from such darkness of error, errors that nobody would ever even have read about if these men had not published them under great seals? Are they not supremely happy while they do these things? And when they describe everything in hell so precisely, as if they had spent many years in that commonwealth? And when they fabricate new spheres at will, adding at last that broadest and most beautiful one, so that the blessed souls should not lack a place where they can comfortably stroll, or hold banquets, or even play ball?

16 With these and two thousand other trifles of the kind their heads are so stretched and stuffed that I doubt whether even Jupiter's brain was so pregnant when, in labor with Pallas, he begged for Vulcan's axe. So do not be surprised if you see their heads so carefully bound up with so many bands at public disputations; otherwise they would simply burst. I myself sometimes laugh at this too: the theologians think themselves at their very best when they speak most barbarously and foully; and when they stammer so badly that no one but a stammerer can understand them, they call it acuteness, because the common herd cannot follow it. For they say it is beneath the dignity of sacred letters to be forced to obey the laws of the grammarians. What a wonderful majesty the theologians have, if they alone are allowed to speak incorrectly! Though they share this very privilege with plenty of cobblers. Finally, they consider themselves next to the gods whenever they are greeted, almost reverently, as "Our Masters." They think this title contains something like the τετραγράμματον [the four-letter name of God] among the Jews. So they say it is sacrilege to write Magister Noster in anything but capital letters. And if anyone were to say it backwards, Noster Magister, he would at a stroke overturn the whole majesty of the theological title.

MONKS AND FRIARS

Folly describes monks who glory in ignorance, rules, habits and names rather than in charity.

54 Closest to the happiness of these men come those who commonly call themselves members of religious orders and monks, though both names are utterly false: a good part of them are as far as possible from religion, and no one is more often met with everywhere. I do not see what could be more wretched than they are, if I did not come to their aid in many ways. For though

16 Matula putes, "chamber pot, you stink," versus matula putet, "the chamber pot stinks"; the second pair, "the pot boils," differs only in vowel quantity (fervēre / fervĕre), which the print does not show.

everyone so detests this kind of man that even meeting one by chance is thought to bring bad luck, they flatter themselves magnificently. First, they consider it the height of piety to have had so little to do with letters that they cannot even read. Next, when they bray out their psalms in church with asses' voices, counting them, to be sure, but not understanding them, they think they are soothing the ears of the saints with great delight. And there are some among them who sell their squalor and beggary at a high price, and bellow for bread before people's doors; indeed, in[17] every inn, carriage and ship they make a nuisance of themselves, to the no small loss, surely, of the other beggars. In this way these most charming men, with their filth, ignorance, boorishness and shamelessness, recreate the apostles for us (as they say). And what is more delightful than the way they do everything by rule, as if following mathematical calculations that it would be a sin to depart from? How many knots the shoe should have, what color the girdle, how many variations on the habit, of what material and how many straws wide the belt, of what shape and how many bushels' capacity the cowl, how many fingers wide the tonsure, how many hours of sleep. Yet who does not see how unequal this equality is, given such variety of bodies and minds? And over these trifles they not only think others worthless compared with themselves, but despise one another; and men who profess apostolic charity throw everything into an extraordinary uproar over a habit belted differently or a color a little darker. Among them you may see some so rigidly religious that they wear nothing but haircloth on top and fine Milesian wool underneath; others, on the contrary, who are linen outside and wool inside; others again who shrink from touching money as if it were aconite, while not refraining from wine, or from touching women. In short, they all take wonderful pains that nothing in their way of life should agree. Their aim is not to be like Christ, but to be unlike one another. And a large part of their happiness lies in their names. Some delight in being called Cord-wearers, and among these

17 Monachus, "monk," comes from Greek monos, "alone."

some are Colettines, others Minors, others Minims, others Bullists. Then some are Benedictines, others Bernardines, these Bridgettines, those Augustinians, these Williamites, those Jacobins, as though it were not enough to be called Christians.[18] A great many of them rely so heavily on their ceremonies and petty human traditions that they think a single heaven hardly a worthy reward for such great merits. It never occurs to them that Christ will scorn all this and demand his own commandment, the commandment of charity. One will show off his paunch, stuffed with every kind of fish. Another will pour out a hundred bushels of psalms. Another will count up myriads of fasts, and claim credit for a belly that a single meal a day has so often nearly burst. Another will produce such a heap of ceremonies that seven merchant ships could hardly carry them. Another will boast that for sixty years he never touched money except with his fingers protected by two pairs of gloves. Another will thrust forward a cowl so filthy and coarse that no sailor would think it fit to wear. Another will relate that for more than fifty-five years he has lived the life of a sponge, always fixed to the same spot. Another will bring a voice gone hoarse from constant chanting, another a lethargy contracted in solitude, another a tongue numbed by unbroken silence.

CHRIST'S VERDICT ON THE MONKS

Folly imagines Christ at the judgment rejecting the monks' boasts and asking only about charity.

But Christ will interrupt these boasts, which would otherwise never end, and say: "Where does this new race of Jews come from? I recognize only one law as truly mine, and of that alone I hear nothing. Long ago, openly and with no veil of parables, I promised my Father's inheritance not to cowls, little prayers or fasts, but to works of charity. Nor do I acknowledge those who acknowledge their own deeds too well. Let these men, who want

18 The "Cord-wearers" are the Franciscans and related orders, which wore a knotted cord; the Jacobins were the Dominicans of Paris.

to seem holier even than I am, take over the heavens of the Abraxasians, if they like, or order a new heaven to be built for them by those whose petty traditions they have preferred to my commandments." When they hear this, and see sailors and carters preferred to themselves, with what faces, do you think, will they look at one another? But meanwhile they are happy in their hope, and not without my help.[19]

THE PREACHING FRIARS

Folly parodies the friars' sermons, their absurd openings, grammar lessons on the Trinity and theatrical delivery.

Yet no one dares to despise these men, cut off as they are from public life, and especially the mendicants, because they hold everyone's secrets through what they call confessions. They consider it a sin to reveal these, of course, except now and then when they have been drinking and want to amuse themselves with some livelier stories; but even then they only hint at the matter by conjecture and keep the names quiet. And if anyone stirs up these hornets, they take thorough revenge in their public sermons, and brand their enemy with oblique remarks, so covertly that everyone understands except those who understand nothing. Nor do they stop barking until you throw a sop into their mouths. Come now, what comic actor, what mountebank would you rather watch than these men speechifying in their sermons, quite ridiculously and yet most delightfully, as they imitate what the rhetoricians have taught about the art of speaking? Immortal God, how they gesticulate, how aptly they change their voices, how they sing-song, how they toss themselves about, how they put on one face after another, how they throw everything into confusion with their shouting! And this art of preaching is handed down from friar to friar like some secret mystery. Though it is not lawful for me to know it, I shall nevertheless follow it as best I can by guesswork. First they

19 The Gnostic Basilides taught that there were 365 heavens, whose ruler he called Abraxas.

make an invocation, which they have borrowed from the poets. Next, if they are going to speak about charity, they begin with the Nile, the river of Egypt; or, if they are going to expound the mystery of the Cross, they make a happy start with Bel, the dragon of Babylon; or, if they are going to discourse on fasting, they begin with the twelve signs of the zodiac; or, if they are to speak on faith, they hold forth at length on squaring the circle. I myself heard one exceptionally foolish man (a slip: I meant to say learned) who was to explain the mystery of the Holy Trinity in a very crowded sermon. To show off his uncommon learning and satisfy theological ears, he set off on an entirely new road. He started from letters, syllables and the sentence, and then from the agreement of noun and verb, and of adjective and substantive. Most of the audience were already marveling, and some were muttering to themselves that line of Horace: What is all this stale stuff driving at? At last he brought the matter round to showing that the image of the whole Trinity is expressed in the rudiments of grammar more clearly than any mathematician could draw it in the sand. That θεολογότατος [most theological] man had sweated over this sermon for eight whole months, so that today he is blinder than a mole, no doubt because the whole sharpness of his eyesight was drawn off into the point of his wit. But the man does not regret his blindness, and thinks that glory cheaply bought. We heard another, a man of eighty, so thoroughly a theologian that you would think Scotus himself reborn in him. He was to explain the mystery of the name of Jesus, and demonstrated with marvelous subtlety that whatever can be said of him lies hidden in the very letters. For the fact that it is declined in only three cases is a clear image of the divine Trinity. Then the fact that the first form, Jesus, ends in s, the second, Jesum, in m, and the third, Jesu, in u, conceals an ἄῤῥητον [ineffable] mystery: the three little letters show that he is summum, medium and ultimum, the highest, the middle and the last. There remained a mystery hidden even deeper than these, by mathematical reasoning. He divided Jesus into

two equal portions, so that a penthemimeris was left in the middle.[20]

Next he taught that this letter among the Hebrews is ש, which they call Syn; and syn, in the language of the Scots, I believe, means sin. From this, he said, it is plainly declared that Jesus is the one who takes away the sins of the world. Everyone gaped in admiration at this so novel opening, especially the theologians, so that they very nearly suffered the fate of Niobe long ago, while I very nearly suffered that of the fig-wood Priapus who, to his great misfortune, watched the nocturnal rites of Canidia and Sagana. And not without reason: when did the Greek Demosthenes or the Latin Cicero ever devise a similar ἔφοδον [approach]? They regarded an introduction as faulty if it was too remote from the subject; as if swineherds did not begin in just this way, with nature as their teacher, of course.[21] But these learned men think that their preamble (as they call it) will be outstandingly rhetorical only if it has nothing anywhere that borders on the rest of the argument, so that the listener, marveling all the while, mutters to himself: *where is he dashing off to now?* In the third place, by way of narration, they expound a little of the Gospel, but hastily and in passing, when that alone should have been their business. In the fourth place, now taking on a new character, they raise some theological question, often οὔτε γῆς, οὔτε οὐρανοῦ ἁπτόμενον [touching neither earth nor heaven]. And this too they think belongs to the art. Here at last they raise the theological eyebrow and drum magnificent names into people's ears: solemn doctors, subtle doctors, most subtle doctors, seraphic doctors, [cherubic doctors,] holy doctors, irrefutable doctors. Then they toss about before the unlearned crowd syllogisms, majors and minors, conclusions, corollaries, utterly frigid suppositions and more than scholastic trifles. There remains the fifth act, in which one ought to show supreme

20 Penthemimeris, "two and a half," is a metrical term; here it means the middle letter s of the five-letter IESUS.

21 Niobe was turned to stone. In Horace (Satires 1.8) a fig-wood statue of Priapus, watching the witches Canidia and Sagana, splits with a loud crack and sends them fleeing.

artistry.[22] Here they bring out some foolish, ignorant tale, from the Mirror of History, I think, or the Deeds of the Romans, and interpret it allegorically, tropologically and anagogically. And so they complete their Chimaera, a monster such as not even Horace could ever achieve when he wrote: *To a human head* etc. But they have heard from someone or other that the beginning of a speech should be calm and not at all noisy. So they begin so softly that they cannot even hear their own voices, as though there were any point in saying what nobody can understand. They have heard that exclamations should sometimes be used to stir the emotions. So, though otherwise speaking low, every now and then they suddenly raise their voices in a downright frenzied shout, even when there is no need for it. You would swear the man needed hellebore, as if it made no difference where you shout.[23] Moreover, since they have heard that a speech should warm up as it goes along, in each section they recite the opening somehow or other and then strain their voices amazingly, even if the matter is utterly cold, and end up so that you would think them completely out of breath. Lastly, they have learned that the rhetoricians mention laughter, so they too take pains to sprinkle in a few jokes. ὦ φίλη Ἀφροδίτη [O dear Aphrodite]! How full of grace they are, and how apt to the occasion! You would call it a perfect case of ὄνον πρὸς τὴν λύραν [an ass at the lyre]. Sometimes they bite as well, but in such a way that they tickle rather than wound. And they never flatter more truly than when they are most eager to be seen παῤῥησιάζεσθαι [to speak their minds freely]. In short, their whole delivery is such that you would swear they had learned it from the mountebanks in the marketplace, who are far better at it. And yet the two are so alike that no one doubts that either these learned their rhetoric from those, or those from these. And yet these men too, thanks

22 Honorific titles of scholastic theologians: Henry of Ghent was the "solemn," Duns Scotus the "subtle," Bonaventure the "seraphic" and Alexander of Hales the "irrefutable" doctor.

23 Vincent of Beauvais's Speculum historiale and the Gesta Romanorum were popular medieval story collections. Horace's Art of Poetry opens with a painter joining a human head to a horse's neck.

to me of course, find people who, when they hear them, think they are listening to veritable Demostheneses and Ciceros. These are chiefly merchants and simple women, and it is their ears that the preachers are especially eager to please. The merchants, if they have been properly flattered, usually hand out some small share of their ill-gotten loot. The women favor this order for many other reasons, but especially because they like to pour into the friars' bosoms whatever grievances they have against their husbands. You see, I think, how much this kind of man owes me, since with their petty ceremonies, ridiculous trifles and shouting they wield a kind of tyranny among mortals, and believe themselves to be Pauls and Anthonys.[24]

KINGS AND PRINCES

Folly describes the true burdens of a prince and how real princes ignore them for pleasure.

55 But I gladly leave these play-actors, who are as ungrateful in concealing my favors as they are shameless in faking piety. For I have long wanted to say a little about kings and courtly princes, who worship me with complete sincerity, and to speak frankly, as is only right, of such frank and open-hearted people. If they had even half an ounce of good sense, what life would be gloomier than theirs, or more to be avoided? No one would think a throne worth winning even by perjury and the murder of his own kin, if he weighed how vast a burden rests on the shoulders of anyone who wants to play the prince in earnest. He would reflect that whoever has taken the helm of affairs conducts public business, not private; that he must think of nothing but the common good; that he must not depart a finger's breadth from the laws of which he is both author and enforcer; that he must answer for the integrity of every official and magistrate; that he alone is set before the eyes of all, and can either, like a beneficent star, bring the greatest blessing to human affairs by the

24 St. Anthony of Egypt (died AD 356), the founding figure of Christian monasticism.

blamelessness of his life, or, like a deadly comet, bring the utmost ruin; that the vices of other men are neither felt so much nor spread so widely, whereas a prince stands in such a place that if he swerves even slightly from what is right, a grievous plague on life at once creeps out to a great many people; then, that a prince's fortune brings with it many things that tend to lead a man off the straight path, such as pleasures, freedom, flattery and luxury, so that he must strive all the harder and keep watch all the more anxiously, lest he be deceived and somewhere fail in his duty; and finally, to say nothing of plots, hatreds and all the other dangers and fears, that over his head hangs that true King who will soon call him to account for even the smallest offense, and all the more severely the more powerful the rule he held. If a prince weighed these things, I say, and many more like them, and he would weigh them if he were wise, he could not, I think, enjoy either his sleep or his food. But as it is, thanks to my gift, they leave all these cares to the gods and take tender care of themselves. They admit no one to their ear except those who know how to say pleasant things, so that no anxiety may spring up in their minds. They believe they have amply fulfilled every part of a prince's role if they hunt constantly, keep fine horses, sell magistracies and governorships to their own profit, and every day think up new schemes for draining the citizens' wealth and sweeping it into their own treasury. They do this, though, under aptly invented titles, so that even the most unjust measure wears some show of fairness. They deliberately add a little flattery as well, to bind the people's hearts to themselves one way or another. Now picture for me a man such as princes sometimes are: ignorant of the laws, almost an enemy of the public good, intent on his private advantage, given over to pleasures, a hater of learning, a hater of freedom and truth, thinking of nothing less than the welfare of the state, and measuring everything by his own desire and his own profit. Then put on him a golden chain, which signifies the harmony of all the virtues linked together; then a crown studded with gems, to remind him that he must surpass all others in every heroic

virtue; besides that, a scepter, symbol of justice and of a heart uncorrupted on every side; and lastly the purple, a sign of an extraordinary love for the commonwealth. If a prince compared these trappings with his own life, I truly think he would be thoroughly ashamed of his finery, and would fear that some sharp-nosed interpreter might turn this whole tragic costume into laughter and a joke.

COURTIERS

Folly mocks noble courtiers whose days pass in sleep, feasting, gambling and display.

[56] Now what shall I say of the nobles of the court? Though most of them are as servile, slavish, witless and abject as anything could be, they still want to seem first in everything. In one respect, however, they are the most modest of men: content to carry about on their bodies gold, gems, purple and the other emblems of virtue and wisdom, they leave all concern for the things themselves to others. They think themselves abundantly happy that they may call the king "master," that they have learned to greet him in three words, that they know how to keep dropping the courtly titles, "Serenity," "Lordship" and "Magnificence," that they have rubbed every trace of shame from their faces, and that they flatter charmingly. For these are the arts that befit a true nobleman and courtier. But if you look more closely at their whole way of life, you will find nothing but Phaeacians, suitors of Penelope; you know the rest of the poem, which Echo will repeat for you better than I can.[25] They sleep till midday. There a hired priestling stands ready at the bedside to rattle through Mass for them while they are still practically lying down. Then off to breakfast; hardly is that over when lunch is calling. After it come dice, chess, lots, jesters, fools, prostitutes, games and crude jokes. Meanwhile a snack or two.

25 Horace, *Epistles* 1.2.27–29: "we are mere numbers, born to eat up the crops, suitors of Penelope, good-for-nothings, courtiers of Alcinous" (king of the pleasure-loving Phaeacians).

Then supper again; after it, drinking bouts, and not just one, by Jupiter. And in this way, without the slightest weariness of life, hours, days, months, years and ages slip away. I myself sometimes go away quite fattened when I have watched these people μεγαλοῤῥοῦντας [putting on grand airs]: the ladies, each of whom thinks herself the nearer to the gods the longer the train she drags; the nobles, elbowing one another aside to seem closer to Jupiter; and each man the more pleased with himself the heavier the chain he carries round his neck, so as to show off his strength as well as his wealth.

BISHOPS

Folly contrasts the meaning of bishops' vestments with their real concern for money.

[57] Popes, cardinals and bishops have long been busily imitating the ways of princes, and they nearly outdo them. Suppose someone considered what the linen vestment, conspicuous for its snowy whiteness, signifies: a life blameless in every respect. What the two-horned miter means, both its peaks held by the same knot: a perfect knowledge of the New and Old Testaments alike. What the gloved hands signify: an administration of the sacraments pure and untouched by any contagion of human affairs. What the crozier means: the most watchful care of the flock entrusted to them. What the cross carried before them means: victory over all human passions. If anyone considered these and many such things, I say, would he not lead a gloomy and anxious life? As it is, they do very nicely, feeding themselves. As for the care of the sheep, they either leave it to Christ himself or shift it onto those they call Brothers, and onto vicars. They do not even remember their own title, or what the word "bishop" means, namely labor, care and solicitude. But when it comes to netting money, they really do play the bishop, οὐδ' ἀλαοσκοπίη [and keep no blind watch].[26]

26 Greek *episkopos* means "overseer"; the Greek tag is Homer's phrase for keeping a sharp lookout.

CARDINALS

Folly imagines cardinals reflecting on what their robes signify, and concludes none would want the office.

58 In the same way, suppose the cardinals considered that they have succeeded to the place of the apostles, and that the same things are required of them as the apostles performed; and then that they are not lords but stewards of spiritual gifts, for all of which they will very soon have to render the strictest account. Or suppose they did even a little philosophizing about their dress, and reasoned with themselves like this: "What does the whiteness of this garment mean? Is it not the highest and most outstanding purity of life? What does the purple underneath mean? Is it not the most burning love of God? And what of the outer robe, flowing out in such ample folds that it covers even the whole mule of His Most Reverend Lordship, though it would be enough by itself to cover a camel? Does it not mean charity, spreading itself as widely as possible to help everyone: that is, to teach, exhort, console, rebuke, admonish, settle wars, resist wicked princes, and gladly spend for the Christian flock even their blood, and not just their wealth? Though what use is wealth at all to those who stand in the place of the poor apostles?" If they weighed these things, I say, they would not canvass for that position, and would gladly give it up; or at least they would lead a thoroughly laborious and anxious life, such as those apostles of old lived.

POPES

Folly describes how wisdom would strip popes of wealth, and condemns popes who wage war.

59 Now the popes, who stand in Christ's place: if they tried to imitate his life, that is, his poverty, labors, teaching, cross and contempt for life, if they thought about the name "pope," which means "father," or about the title "Most Holy," what would be more afflicted on earth? Who would buy that position with his

whole fortune, or, once he had bought it, defend it with sword, poison and every kind of violence? How many comforts it would take from them, if Wisdom once laid hold of them! Wisdom, did I say? No, even a single grain of that salt Christ speaks of. It would take away all that wealth, all those honors, all that dominion, all those victories, so many offices, so many dispensations, so many taxes, so many indulgences, so many horses, mules and guards, so many pleasures. You see what markets, what a harvest, what an ocean of good things I have packed into a few words. In their place it would bring in vigils, fasts, tears, prayers, sermons, studies, sighs and a thousand wretched labors of that kind. Nor should we overlook the fact that so many scribes, copyists, notaries, advocates, promoters, secretaries, muleteers, grooms, bankers and pimps (I almost added something "softer," but I fear it might be too hard on your ears), in short, that whole vast crowd of people who load (a slip; I meant "laud") the Roman see, would be driven to starvation. That would indeed be an inhuman and abominable deed. But far more detestable would be to call the very highest princes of the Church, the true lights of the world, back to the wallet and the staff. As things are, whatever labor there is they mostly leave to Peter and Paul, who have plenty of leisure; whatever splendor or pleasure there is, they take for themselves. And so it comes about, by my doing, that hardly any class of people lives more softly or with fewer cares. For they think they have abundantly satisfied Christ if they play the bishop with mystical and almost theatrical finery, with ceremonies, with titles of Beatitude, Reverence and Holiness, with blessings and curses. To work miracles is old-fashioned and obsolete, not at all suited to these times; to teach the people is laborious; to interpret Holy Scripture is scholastic; to pray is a waste of time; to shed tears is wretched and soft; to be poor is sordid; to be defeated is shameful, and hardly worthy of one who scarcely admits even the greatest kings to kiss his blessed feet; and, finally, to die is unattractive, and to be raised on a cross disgraceful. All that remains are weapons and those sweet blessings Paul mentions; and of

these they are generous indeed: interdicts, suspensions, aggravations, re-aggravations, anathemas, avenging pictures, and that terrifying thunderbolt with which, by a mere nod, they send the souls of mortals even beyond Tartarus.[27] And yet these most holy fathers in Christ and vicars of Christ hurl that thunderbolt at no one more fiercely than at those who, at the devil's prompting, try to diminish and nibble away the patrimony of Peter. Though Peter's words in the Gospel are *We have left everything and followed you*, they still call his patrimony lands, towns, taxes, tolls and dominions. While they fight for these with fire and sword, ablaze with zeal for Christ, and not without great loss of Christian blood, they believe they are defending the Church, the bride of Christ, in true apostolic fashion, having bravely routed the "enemies," as they call them. As if the Church had any enemies more pernicious than impious popes, who let Christ fade away through their silence, bind him with money-making laws, adulterate him with forced interpretations, and slaughter him with their pestilent lives! Moreover, though the Christian Church was founded on blood, strengthened by blood and enlarged by blood, now they conduct its business with the sword, as if Christ had perished, who protects his own in his own way. War is a thing so monstrous that it befits wild beasts, not men; so mad that the poets even imagine it is sent by the Furies; so pestilential that it brings with it a general plague on morals; so unjust that it is usually best conducted by the worst of brigands; so impious that it has nothing in common with Christ. Yet they neglect everything else and do this alone. Here you may see even decrepit old men showing the vigor of youth, undeterred by expense, unwearied by toil, frightened of nothing, even if they turn laws, religion, peace and all human affairs upside down. Nor is there any lack of learned flatterers to call this manifest madness zeal, piety and fortitude. They have devised a way by which a man can draw his deadly sword and plunge it into his brother's vitals while still keeping that

27 Romans 16:18 warns against those who "by sweet words and blessings deceive the hearts of the simple."

supreme charity which, by Christ's command, a Christian owes his neighbor.

WARRIOR BISHOPS AND PRIESTS

Folly mocks German prince-bishops and priests who fight for tithes and pass every duty on to others.

60 For my part I am still not sure whether certain German bishops set the example for all this or rather took it from here. These men, more straightforwardly, drop even the vestments, the blessings and other such ceremonies and simply play the satrap, so much so that they think it almost cowardly and unbecoming for a bishop to give back his brave soul to God anywhere but on the battlefield. Now the common run of priests think it a sin to fall short of their prelates' holiness. Bravo! How soldierly they wage war for their right to tithes, with swords, javelins, stones and every kind of armed force! How sharp-eyed they are here, if they can squeeze something out of the writings of the ancients to frighten the poor common folk and prove that more than tithes are owed! But meanwhile it never occurs to them how much is to be read everywhere about the duty that they, in turn, owe the people. Not even their shaven crown reminds them that a priest ought to be free of all the desires of this world and think of nothing but heavenly things. But these charming men say they have duly discharged their office if they have mumbled through those little prayers of theirs somehow. And I am amazed, by Hercules, if any god either hears or understands them, since they themselves hardly hear or understand them even while they are making a din of them with their mouths. Yet priests have this in common with the laity: they are all wide awake when it comes to the harvest of profit, and no one is ignorant of the laws on that point. But if there is any burden, they prudently shift it onto other people's shoulders, and pass it from hand to hand like a ball. For just as lay princes delegate parts of the government of their realms to deputies, and each deputy hands it on to another, so they leave all the pursuit of

piety to the common people, out of modesty. The common people push it onto those they call ecclesiastics, as if they themselves had nothing whatever to do with the Church, as if their baptismal vows had accomplished nothing at all. The priests who call themselves secular, as though they were consecrated to the world and not to Christ, roll the burden onto the regulars; the regulars onto the monks; the laxer monks onto the stricter; all of them together onto the mendicants; the mendicants onto the Carthusians, among whom alone piety lies buried, and so deeply buried that it can hardly ever be seen. Likewise the popes, most diligent in the harvest of money, consign those all-too-apostolic labors to the bishops, the bishops to the parish priests, the parish priests to their vicars, the vicars to the mendicant friars. And these in turn shove them back onto those who shear the sheep's wool.[28] But it is not my purpose here to scrutinize the lives of popes and priests, in case anyone should think I am weaving a satire rather than delivering an encomium, or suppose that I am censuring good princes while praising bad ones. I have touched on these matters briefly only to make it plain that no mortal can live pleasantly unless he is initiated into my rites and has me on his side.

28 The Carthusians were a strictly enclosed order of monks living as hermits in near-total silence.

Folly and Christ

Chapters 61–68
Folly cites her authorities, classical and scriptural, and ends with the folly of the Cross and the ecstasy of the blessed.

CHAPTER 61

61 For how could it be otherwise, when even the Rhamnusian herself, who dispenses human fortunes, agrees with me so completely that she has always been bitterly hostile to these wise men, while she brings every good thing to fools even in their sleep? You know that Timotheus, who earned from this both a nickname and a proverb: ἡ εὕδοντος κύρτος αἱρεῖ [the sleeper's net makes the catch]. And another: γλαῦξ ἵπταται [the owl is flying]. The wise, on the other hand, are fitted by sayings like ἐν τετράδι γεννηθέντες [born on the fourth day], "he has the horse of Seius," and "gold of Toulouse." But I will stop παροιμιάζεσθαι [spouting proverbs], or I shall seem to have pilfered my Erasmus's commentaries. So, to the point. Fortune loves the not-too-sensible; she loves the bolder sort, and those who like the motto πᾶς ἐῤῥίφθω κύβος [let every die be thrown]. Wisdom, though, makes men timid. And so you commonly see these wise men wrestling with poverty, hunger and smoke, living neglected, inglorious and disliked, while fools roll in money, are put at the helm of the state, and, in short, flourish in every way.[1] Indeed, if anyone thinks it bliss to have pleased great princes

1 Rhamnusia is Nemesis, here Fortune; Timotheus, an Athenian general, was painted asleep while Fortune netted cities for him, while Seius's horse and the gold of Toulouse brought ruin to everyone who owned them.

and to move among those jeweled gods of mine, what is more useless than wisdom? What, indeed, is more condemned among that sort of people? If riches are to be made, what profit will a merchant ever turn if, following wisdom, he balks at perjury, blushes when caught in a lie, or cares a jot for those anxious scruples of the wise about theft and usury? Again, if anyone is after ecclesiastical honors and wealth, an ass or a buffalo will get there sooner than a wise man. If pleasure is what draws you, the girls, who are the greatest part of this play, are devoted heart and soul to fools, and they shudder at a wise man and flee him just as they would a scorpion. In short, whoever sets out to live a little more merrily and cheerfully shuts out the wise man first of all, and would sooner let in any animal. In short, wherever you turn, among popes, princes, judges, magistrates, friends and enemies, the greatest and the least, everything is bought with ready cash. And just as the wise man despises cash, cash has made a habit of carefully avoiding him. But although there is no limit or end to my praises, a speech must nevertheless end some time. So I will stop speaking, but only after I have briefly shown that there is no lack of great authors who have made me famous by their writings as well as their deeds. Otherwise someone might think I am foolishly pleased with myself alone, or the pettifogging lawyers might object that I cite no authorities. So, following their example, we will cite, that is, οὐδὲν πρὸς ἔπος [nothing to the point].

THE CLASSICAL AUTHORITIES

Folly cites Horace, Homer and Cicero, who says the world is full of fools.

62 To begin with, everyone is convinced by a very well-known proverb that where the thing itself is lacking, pretense is best. That is why this line is rightly taught to boys straight away: *To feign folly at the right moment is the height of wisdom.* Now judge for yourselves how great a good Folly is, when even her deceptive shadow and mere imitation earn such praise from the

learned. But that plump, sleek hog from Epicurus' herd puts it much more candidly: he bids us mix folly with our plans, though he added the word *brief*, not very cleverly. Again elsewhere: *It is sweet to play the fool at the right moment.* And in yet another place he would rather *seem silly and useless than be wise and fret.* Then in Homer, Telemachus, whom the poet praises in every way, is repeatedly called νήπιος [childish, foolish], and the tragedians readily give boys and youths the same epithet, as if it were a happy omen.[2] And what does the sacred song of the *Iliad* contain, but the angry passions of foolish kings and peoples? And how complete is Cicero's praise: *The world is full of fools!* For who does not know that every good thing is the more excellent the more widely it extends?[3]

THE TESTIMONY OF SCRIPTURE

Folly turns to Ecclesiastes, Jeremiah, Solomon and Paul to show that all men are fools.

63 But perhaps among Christians these authorities carry little weight. So, if you please, let us prop up our praises, or, as the learned say, found them, on the testimony of Holy Scripture as well, first asking the theologians' leave to make this lawful for us. Next, since we are taking on an arduous task, and it might be too much to call the Muses down from Helicon yet again for so long a journey, especially when the subject is rather foreign to them, it may be more fitting to pray that, while I play the theologian and pick my way through these thorns, the soul of Scotus, pricklier than any porcupine or hedgehog, might move for a while from his Sorbonne into my breast, and then go back wherever it likes, or ἐς κόρακας [to the crows, that is, to perdition]. If only I could also put on a different face, and had theological robes to hand! But meanwhile I am afraid someone may

2 The first line is from the *Distichs of Cato*, a school text; the "hog from Epicurus' herd" is Horace, who so described himself (*Epistles* 1.4.16), and the quotations come from his *Odes* 4.12 and *Epistles* 2.2.

3 Cicero, *Letters to Friends* 9.22.

accuse me of theft, as if I had secretly ransacked the desks of our masters, since I know so much theology.[4] But it should not seem so surprising if I have picked up a little from my long and very close intimacy with the theologians. After all, even that fig-wood god Priapus noted down and remembered some Greek words while his master was reading aloud, and Lucian's cock, from living a long time among men, became fluent in human speech. But now to the matter, and may the omens be good. Ecclesiastes wrote in his first chapter: *The number of fools is infinite.* When he declares their number infinite, does he not seem to include all mortals, except a very few, whom I doubt anyone has ever had the luck to see? But Jeremiah confesses it more frankly in his tenth chapter: *Every man*, he says, *is made a fool by his own wisdom.* He attributes wisdom to God alone and leaves folly to all men. And again, a little earlier: *Let not man glory in his wisdom.* Why do you not want a man to glory in his own wisdom, good Jeremiah?[5] "Clearly," he will say, "because he has no wisdom." But I return to Ecclesiastes. When he cries, *Vanity of vanities, and all is vanity*, what else do you think he meant than what we said: that human life is nothing but a game of Folly? He was adding his white pebble, of course, to Cicero's praise, and Cicero's saying, which we quoted just now, is celebrated with every right: *The world is full of fools.* Again, that wise man Ecclesiasticus, who said, *The fool changes like the moon, the wise man abides like the sun*: what else does he hint at, but that the whole mortal race is foolish, and the name of wise belongs to God alone? For they interpret the moon as human nature, and the sun, the source of all light, as God. In agreement with this, Christ himself in the Gospel denies that anyone should be called good but God alone.[6] Moreover, if whoever is not wise is a fool, and whoever is good is

4 John Duns Scotus (c. 1266–1308) taught at Paris, whose theology faculty was the Sorbonne.

5 Priapus, a garden god whose statues were often carved from fig wood, picks up Greek in the Latin *Priapea*; the cock is the talking rooster of Lucian's dialogue mentioned earlier.

6 Ancient voters cast a white pebble to signal approval; Ecclesiasticus (the Wisdom of Sirach) is a different book from Ecclesiastes.

also wise, as the Stoics hold, then Folly must embrace all mortals. Again, Solomon in his fifteenth chapter: *Folly*, he says, *is joy to the fool*, plainly admitting that without folly nothing in life is sweet. To the same point is this too: *He who increases knowledge increases sorrow, and in much understanding is much indignation.* And does not that excellent preacher openly confess the same thing in his seventh chapter? *The heart of the wise is where sadness is, and the heart of fools where there is mirth.* That is why he was not content to master wisdom until he had added knowledge of me as well. If you do not trust me, take his own words, written in his first chapter: *And I gave my heart to know prudence and learning, and errors and folly.* Here it should be noticed that it redounds to the praise of folly that he put it last. Ecclesiastes wrote it, and you know the ecclesiastical order: whoever is first in rank holds the last place, mindful at least here, no doubt, of the Gospel precept. But that folly is more excellent than wisdom is plainly attested by that Ecclesiasticus too, whoever he was, in his forty-fourth chapter. By Hercules, I will not bring out his words until you have helped my εἰσαγωγήν [introduction] along with a suitable answer, as Socrates' partners in Plato's dialogues do. Which is it more fitting to hide away: things that are rare and precious, or things common and cheap? Why are you silent? Even if you pretend not to know, the Greek proverb answers for you, τὴν ἐπὶ θύραις ὑδρίαν [the water jar at the door]; and lest anyone impiously reject it, Aristotle, the god of our masters, quotes it. Is any of you so foolish as to leave gems and gold lying in the road? Not by Hercules, I think.[7] You put such things away in the most hidden inner rooms, and, not content with that, in the most secret corners of the best-secured chests, while you leave mud out in the open. So if what is more precious is hidden away and what is cheaper is left exposed, is it not obvious that wisdom, which he forbids us to hide, is cheaper than folly, which he bids us hide away? Now hear the words of the testimony itself: *Better is the man who hides his folly than the man who*

7 The proverb denotes something worthless, left by the door where anyone could take it; Aristotle cites it in the *Rhetoric*.

hides his wisdom. And what of the fact that Holy Scripture also credits the fool with candor of heart, while the wise man thinks no one is like himself? That is how I understand what Ecclesiastes writes in his tenth chapter: *But the fool walking along the road, being foolish himself, thinks everyone a fool.* Is it not a mark of remarkable candor to treat everyone as your equal, and, though nobody fails to think highly of himself, still to share your own praises with all? So that great king was not ashamed of this title either, when he said in his thirtieth chapter: *I am the most foolish of men.* Nor does Paul, that great teacher of the Gentiles, writing to the Corinthians, accept the title of fool reluctantly. *I speak as a fool*, he says: *I am more*, as if it were shameful to be outdone in folly. But meanwhile certain Greeklings are shouting me down. They are bent on piercing the eyes of so many theologians of our day, like crows' eyes, while they blow their annotations like smoke into other people's faces; and of that flock, if not the Alpha, then certainly the Beta is my Erasmus, whom I mention rather often, out of respect. "Oh, what a truly foolish citation," they say, "worthy of Moria herself! The Apostle meant something quite different from what you are dreaming."[8] For his aim in these words is not to be thought more foolish than the rest. Rather, after he had said, *They are ministers of Christ; so am I*, and, as if boasting, had made himself equal to the others in this respect too, he added by way of correction, *I am more*. He meant that he was not only equal to the other apostles in the ministry of the Gospel, but somewhat superior to them. And since he wanted this to seem true, yet did not want it to offend ears as too arrogant a statement, he forestalled that with the pretext of folly, *I speak as one less wise*, because he knew it is the privilege of fools alone to speak the truth without giving offense. But what Paul meant when he wrote this I leave to them to argue about. I follow the great, fat, thick theologians, approved by the crowd, with whom most of the learned would rather err, νὴ τὸν Δία [by

8 To "pierce the crows' eyes" is a proverb for outwitting those who think themselves sharpest; the "Greeklings" are humanist scholars who, like Erasmus, corrected the Latin Bible from the Greek.

Zeus], than be right with these trilingual fellows. None of them thinks any more of these Greeklings than of jackdaws. This is especially so since a certain glorious theologian, whose name I prudently suppress lest our jackdaws at once fling at him the Greek jibe ὄνος λύρας [an ass at the lyre], expounding this passage magisterially and theologically, begins a new chapter at the words *I speak as one less wise, I am more*, and, which could not be done without the utmost dialectic, adds a new section. He interprets it like this (I shall quote his very words, not only in form but also in matter): *I speak as one less wise; that is, if I seem to you unwise in making myself equal to the false apostles, I shall seem to you still less wise in preferring myself to them.* Though a little later the same man, as if forgetting himself, slides off onto something else.[9]

HOW THEOLOGIANS TWIST SCRIPTURE

Folly shows theologians wrenching texts from context, including Christ's words on the sword and Paul on heretics.

64 But why do I anxiously defend myself with a single example, when it is the common right of theologians to stretch the heavens, that is, Holy Scripture, like a hide? In Saint Paul, words of Holy Scripture contradict one another that do not contradict in their own setting, if we may trust that πενταγλώττῳ [five-tongued] Jerome. And when Paul happened to see the inscription on an altar at Athens, he twisted it into an argument for the Christian faith: leaving out the rest, which would have damaged his case, he plucked out only the last two words, *to the unknown God*, and even altered these a little. For the complete inscription ran: *To the gods of Asia, Europe and Africa, to the unknown and foreign gods.*[10] Following his example, I suppose, οἱ τῶν θεολόγων παῖδες [the sons of the theologians] everywhere now pluck four

9 The Latin plays on *Graeculi* (Greeklings) and *graculi* (jackdaws); the unnamed theologian is Nicholas of Lyra (c. 1270–1349), hence "an ass at the lyre."
10 Psalm 104:2 speaks of God "stretching out the heavens like a hide"; Jerome reports the full Athenian inscription in his commentary on Titus.

or five little words from here and there, distorting them too if need be, and adapt them to their own convenience, even though what comes before and after is either quite irrelevant or actually contradicts them. And they do it with such happy impudence that the lawyers often envy the theologians. For what can they not get away with now, since that great man (I almost blurted out his name, but again I fear the Greek proverb) has squeezed out of Luke's words a meaning as consistent with the mind of Christ as fire is with water? For when the final danger was at hand, at the very time when good clients most stand by their patrons and συμμαχεῖν [fight at their side] with all their strength, Christ, intending to remove from his followers' minds all trust in such defenses, asked them whether they had lacked anything when he had sent them out so unprovided for the journey that he had not even protected them with shoes against the injuries of thorns and stones, nor given them a wallet against hunger. When they said they had lacked nothing, he added: *But now*, he said, *let him who has a purse take it, and likewise a wallet; and let him who has none sell his tunic and buy a sword.* Since the whole teaching of Christ inculcates nothing but gentleness, patience and contempt for life, who can fail to see what he means here? He means, of course, to disarm his envoys still further: they are not only to do without shoes and wallet, but to throw off their tunic as well, and undertake the Gospel mission naked and wholly unencumbered. They are to provide themselves with nothing but a sword: not the kind with which robbers and murderers go about their violence, but the sword of the spirit, which pierces even the inmost recesses of the heart and cuts away all passions at one stroke, so that nothing is dear to them any longer but piety. But look, please, at the way that celebrated theologian twists this. He interprets the sword as defense against persecution, and the purse as a sufficient provision of supplies. It is as if Christ had turned his meaning completely around and, because he seemed to have sent his ambassadors out not βασιλικῶς [royally] enough equipped, were now singing a recantation of his earlier instruction. Or as if he had

forgotten that he had said they would be blessed when they suffered insults, abuse and punishments, forbidding them ever to resist evil, since it is the meek who are blessed, not the fierce; as if he had forgotten that he had pointed them to the example of the sparrows and the lilies, and were now so unwilling for them to set out without a sword that he bids them buy one even if they must sell their tunic, and would rather they went naked than without steel at their side. Moreover, just as he thinks the word "sword" covers everything that serves to repel force, so under the heading "purse" he includes everything that belongs to the necessities of life. And so this interpreter of the divine mind leads the apostles out to preach the Crucified, equipped with lances, crossbows, slings and cannon. He loads them, too, with satchels, trunks and baggage, so that they will never have to leave an inn without their dinner. Nor was the man troubled even by the fact that the sword Christ had so emphatically ordered them to buy, he soon afterward, with a rebuke, orders put back in its sheath; or that no one has ever heard of the apostles using swords or shields against the violence of the pagans, as they certainly would have, if Christ had meant what this man interprets. There is another, whom I do not name out of respect, and by no means of the lowest reputation, who out of the tents mentioned by Habakkuk, *The skins of the land of Midian shall be troubled*, made the skin of the flayed Bartholomew. I was present myself not long ago at a theological disputation, as I often am.[11] There someone asked what authority in Holy Scripture ordered heretics to be overcome by fire rather than refuted by argument. A certain stern old man, a theologian, as even his eyebrows testified, answered very angrily that the Apostle Paul had laid down this law when he said, *A man who is a heretic, after a first and second warning, avoid*, in Latin *devita*. When he had thundered these words again and again, and most people were wondering what had come over the man, he finally explained that the heretic must be removed *de vita*, "from life." Some

11 Habakkuk 3:7 speaks of the tent-curtains ("skins") of Midian; Saint Bartholomew was said to have been flayed alive.

laughed; yet there were those who thought this interpretation thoroughly theological. But since several still objected, there came forward a Τενέδιος συνήγορος [Tenedian advocate], as the saying goes, an authority beyond appeal. "Here is the point," he said. "It is written, *Do not allow an evildoer to live*; every heretic is an evildoer; therefore, etc." Everyone present marveled at the man's ingenuity, and they voted for his opinion with their feet, and booted feet at that.[12] And it occurred to no one that the law concerns sorcerers, enchanters and magicians, whom the Hebrews in their language call מכשפים [sorcerers]. Otherwise fornication and drunkenness would have had to be punished with death.

FOOLS FOR CHRIST

Folly cites Paul and the Gospels to show that God chose the foolish and confounds the wise.

65 But it is foolish of me to pursue these things, which are so countless that not even the volumes of Chrysippus or Didymus could contain them all. I only wanted you to note this: since those divine masters have been allowed such liberties, it is only fair to pardon me too, plainly a συκίνῃ θεολόγῳ [fig-wood theologian], if I do not cite everything with perfect precision. Now at last I return to Paul. *You gladly bear with fools,* he says, speaking of himself. And again: *Receive me as a fool*; and: *I speak not according to God, but as it were in foolishness.* Elsewhere again: *We are fools for Christ's sake.* You have heard what praises of folly, and from what an authority! What is more, he openly prescribes folly as something especially necessary and highly beneficial: *Whoever among you seems to be wise, let him become a fool, that he may be wise.* And in Luke, Jesus calls the two disciples whom he had joined on the road *fools*.[13] I do not know whether it may

12 A "Tenedian advocate," after the axe-wielding justice of King Tenes of Tenedos, was proverbial for a merciless one; the Vulgate's *maleficus* (Exodus 22:18) means "sorcerer," but literally "evildoer."

13 Chrysippus and Didymus, the Alexandrian scholar, were famous for the vast number of their books; "fig-wood" meant worthless, fig being useless timber.

seem surprising that the divine Paul attributes some folly even to God: *The foolishness of God*, he says, *is wiser than men.* Moreover, Origen the interpreter prevents you from referring this folly to human opinion, as in the saying *The word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing.* But why do I fret and go on proving all this with so many testimonies, when in the mystical psalms Christ himself openly says to the Father: *You know my foolishness*? Nor is it without reason that fools have so greatly pleased God. It is, I think, because the greatest princes regard the too-clever with suspicion and dislike, as Julius did Brutus and Cassius while fearing nothing from the drunken Antony, and as Nero did Seneca and Dionysius Plato, while they delight in duller and simpler minds. In the same way Christ always detests and condemns those σοφοὺς [wise men] who rely on their own prudence. Paul testifies to this not at all obscurely when he says, *God has chosen the foolish things of the world*, and when he says *it pleased God to save the world through folly, since it could not be restored through wisdom.* Indeed, he himself makes it plain enough when he cries through the prophet's mouth: *I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the prudence of the prudent I will reject.* And again, when he gives thanks that the mystery of salvation had been hidden from the wise but revealed to little ones, that is, to fools. For in Greek the word for "little ones" is νηπίοις [the childish, the simple], which he set against σοφοῖς [the wise]. Here belongs the fact that throughout the Gospel he attacks the Pharisees, the scribes and the teachers of the law, while he carefully protects the unlearned crowd. For what else is *Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees*, but "woe to you, wise men"? But he seems to have taken most delight in children, women and fishermen. Even among the brute animals, those please Christ most that are furthest removed from the cunning of the fox. That is why he chose to ride an ass, though he could have sat safely on a lion's back had he wished. And the Holy Spirit came down in the form of a dove, not of an eagle or a kite. Besides, deer, fawns and lambs are mentioned again and again throughout Holy Scripture. Add that he calls his own, those destined for eternal life,

sheep; and no animal is more foolish than that, as even Aristotle's proverb προβάτων ἦθος [a sheep's character] testifies, which, he reminds us, is drawn from the stupidity of that beast and is commonly used as an insult against the dull and witless. Yet Christ declares himself the shepherd of this flock; indeed, he himself delighted in the name of lamb, when John pointed him out: *Behold the Lamb of God*. And the lamb is mentioned often in the Apocalypse as well. What do all these things proclaim, but that mortals are fools, even the pious? And that Christ himself, to relieve the folly of mortals, though he was the wisdom of the Father, nevertheless became in a way a fool when he took on human nature and was found in appearance as a man, just as he was also made sin in order to heal sins? Nor did he choose to heal them in any other way than through the folly of the Cross, through unlearned and thick-witted apostles. To them he diligently prescribes folly and warns them away from wisdom, when he urges them to follow the example of children, lilies, mustard seed and sparrows, stupid things without sense, which live by the guidance of nature alone, with no art and no anxiety. He does the same when he forbids them to worry about what speech they would make before governors, and forbids them to search out times and seasons: that is, they were not to rely on their own prudence, but to depend on him with all their hearts. To the same point is the fact that God, the architect of the world, forbade them on pain of death to taste of the tree of knowledge, as if knowledge were the poison of happiness. And Paul openly condemns knowledge as something that puffs up and does harm. Saint Bernard, following him, I think, interprets the mountain on which Lucifer set up his seat as the mountain of knowledge. Perhaps this argument should not be left out either, that folly is in favor with those above: to folly alone is pardon granted for its errors, while the wise man is not forgiven. Hence those who pray for pardon, even if they sinned knowingly, still use folly as their pretext and defense. So Aaron, in the book of Numbers, if I remember rightly, pleads to have his wife's punishment remitted: *I beg you, my lord, do not lay upon us this sin,*

which we have foolishly committed. So too Saul begs David to pardon his fault: *For it is clear*, he says, *that I have acted foolishly.*[14] Again, David himself coaxes the Lord like this: *But I pray, Lord, take away the iniquity of your servant, for we have acted foolishly*, as if he could not obtain pardon unless he pleaded folly and ignorance. But this presses the point harder: when Christ on the cross prayed for his enemies, *Father, forgive them*, he offered no other excuse than their lack of understanding: *For they do not know*, he said, *what they are doing.* In the same way Paul, writing to Timothy: *But I obtained the mercy of God because I acted ignorantly in unbelief.* What does *I acted ignorantly* mean, if not "I acted from folly, not malice"? What does *therefore I obtained mercy* mean, if not that he would not have obtained it unless commended by the plea of folly? That mystical psalmist, too, who did not come to mind in his proper place, is on our side: *Remember not the sins of my youth and my ignorances.* You heard the two things he pleads: his age, whose constant companion I am, and his ignorances, and in the plural at that, so that we might grasp the huge power of folly.

CHRISTIANITY AS A KIND OF FOLLY

Folly argues that devout Christians, like Plato's philosophers, seem mad because they despise bodily things.

66 But not to pursue what has no end, and to put it briefly: the Christian religion as a whole seems to have a kind of kinship with some sort of folly, and to have very little in common with wisdom. If you want proofs of this, notice first that children, old people, women and simpletons take more delight than anyone else in sacred and religious things, and so are always nearest the altars, by the sole impulse of nature, no doubt. Next, you see that the first founders of the religion, wonderfully devoted to simplicity, were the fiercest enemies of letters. Finally, no fools seem more out of their minds than those whom the ardor of Christian piety has once seized completely. They pour out their

14 In Numbers 12:11 Aaron is in fact pleading for his sister Miriam.

possessions, ignore injuries, let themselves be cheated, make no distinction between friends and enemies, shudder at pleasure, and fatten themselves on fasting, vigils, tears, toil and insults. They loathe life and desire death above all things. In short, they seem to have become wholly numb to all common sense, as if their mind lived somewhere else and not in its own body. And what is that, if not madness? So it should seem less surprising that the apostles were thought to be drunk on new wine, and that Paul seemed mad to the judge Festus. But since we have once put on τὴν λεοντήν [the lion's skin], come, let us also show that the happiness of Christians, which they seek with so much toil, is nothing but a kind of madness and folly. Let the words give no offense; weigh the thing itself instead. First, Christians very nearly agree with the Platonists that the soul is sunk in and bound by bodily chains, and that the grossness of the body hinders it from contemplating and enjoying the things that are true. That is why Plato defines philosophy as a meditation on death: it draws the mind away from visible and bodily things, which is exactly what death does.[15] So as long as the soul makes proper use of the body's organs, it is called sane. But when it breaks its bonds and tries to assert its freedom, as if planning its escape from that prison, then people call it madness. If this happens to come about through disease or a defect of the organs, everyone agrees it is madness. And yet we see people of this kind too foretelling the future, knowing languages and literature they had never learned before, and showing something altogether divine. There is no doubt that this happens because the mind, a little freer from contact with the body, begins to exercise its native power. The same cause, I think, explains why something similar commonly happens to those who are struggling with approaching death, so that they speak marvelous things, as if inspired. Again, if this comes about through zeal for piety, perhaps it is not the same kind of madness; but it is so close to it that most people judge it to be pure madness, espe-

15 To put on the lion's skin, that of Hercules, is a proverb for taking on a role beyond one's strength.

cially since a handful of little men disagree with the whole mass of mortals for their entire lives. And so what usually happens to them is, I think, what happens in Plato's fable to those who sit chained in the cave and marvel at the shadows of things, and to that runaway who returns to the cave and declares that he has seen real things, and that they are badly deceived in believing nothing exists but those wretched shadows. This wise man pities and laments the madness of those held fast by such error; they in turn laugh at him as a madman and throw him out. In the same way the mass of people most admire what is most bodily, and think it almost the only thing that exists. The pious, on the contrary, neglect each thing the more, the closer it comes to the body, and are wholly carried away to the contemplation of things invisible. For the others give first place to riches, the next to bodily comforts, and leave the last to the soul, which most of them do not even believe exists, since it cannot be seen with the eyes. The pious, by contrast, strive with their whole being first toward God himself, the simplest of all things; and after him, though still within him, toward what comes nearest to him, namely the soul. They neglect the care of the body, and they utterly scorn and shun money like so much chaff. Or if they are forced to handle anything of this kind, they do it reluctantly and with distaste: they have as though not having, and possess as though not possessing. There are also, in each particular, widely differing degrees between these two kinds of people. First, although all the senses are akin to the body, some of them are grosser, such as touch, hearing, sight, smell and taste, while others are further removed from the body, such as memory, understanding and will. Now wherever the soul has applied itself, there it is strong. The pious, since all the force of their soul strains toward what is furthest from the grosser senses, become as it were brutish and numb in these. The common people, on the contrary, are strongest in these and weakest in the others. That is why we hear that some holy men have drunk oil in place of wine. Again, among the passions of the soul some have more to do with the gross body, such as lust, the craving for food and

sleep, anger, pride and envy. With these the pious wage an irreconcilable war, whereas the common people think there is no life without them. Then there are certain intermediate passions, natural ones, as it were, such as love for one's father and affection for children, parents and friends. To these the common people give some weight. But the pious strive to tear even these out of their souls, except insofar as they rise to that highest part of the soul. So they love a parent not as a parent (for what did he beget but the body? and even that is owed to God the Father), but as a good man, one in whom shines the image of that supreme Mind, which alone they call the highest good, and outside which, they declare, nothing is to be loved or desired. By this same rule they measure all the other duties of life too, so that everywhere what is visible, if not to be despised altogether, they still value far less than what cannot be seen. They say, moreover, that in the sacraments and in the very duties of piety there is both a body and a spirit. In fasting, for instance, they think little of it if someone merely abstains from meat and supper, which the common people consider a complete fast, unless at the same time he also takes something away from his passions, allowing less room than usual to anger and less to pride, so that the spirit, less weighed down by the bulk of the body, may rise up to taste and enjoy the goods of heaven. Similarly in the synaxis, the Communion: although what is done with ceremonies is not to be despised, they say, yet by itself it is of little benefit or even harmful, unless the spiritual element is added, namely what those visible signs represent. And what they represent is the death of Christ, which mortals ought to express by taming, extinguishing and, as it were, burying the passions of the body, so that they may rise again in newness of life and become one with him and one with each other. These, then, are the things the pious man does; these are what he meditates on. The common people, on the other hand, believe the sacrifice is nothing more than being present at the altar, as close as possible, hearing the noise of voices and watching other little ceremonies of that kind. And not only in these matters, which we

have offered merely as examples, but quite simply in the whole of life, the pious man flees from what is akin to the body and is carried away to the eternal, the invisible and the spiritual. So, since the two sides disagree completely about everything, each seems mad to the other. Though in my opinion the word applies more properly to the pious than to the common people.

THE ECSTASY OF THE BLESSED

Folly describes the happiness of heaven as the soul carried out of itself, a foretaste felt by a few.

[67] This will become clearer still if, as I promised, I show briefly that that supreme reward is nothing other than a kind of madness. First, then, consider that Plato was already dreaming of something of this sort when he wrote that the frenzy of lovers is the happiest of all. For one who loves intensely no longer lives in himself but in the one he loves, and the further he departs from himself and moves over into the other, the more and more he rejoices. And when the soul is planning to journey away from the body and does not use its organs properly, you could no doubt rightly call that frenzy. Otherwise, what do people mean by those common sayings, *He is beside himself*, *Come back to yourself*, and *He has come back to himself*? Moreover, the more perfect the love, the greater and happier the frenzy. What, then, will that life of the blessed in heaven be like, for which pious souls sigh so ardently? The spirit will absorb the body, being the victor and the stronger. And it will do this all the more easily, partly because it has long since, in this life, purified and refined the body for such a transformation; and then the spirit itself will be wondrously absorbed by that supreme Mind, which is infinitely more powerful. So the whole man will be outside himself, and he will be happy for no other reason than that, placed outside himself, he will undergo something ineffable from that highest good, which draws all things into itself. Now this happiness comes in its perfection only when souls have recovered their former bodies and are endowed with immortality. Yet

since the life of the pious is nothing but a meditation on that life, and a kind of shadow of it, they sometimes feel a taste or some fragrance of that reward as well. Though this is the tiniest little drop compared with that fountain of eternal happiness, it far surpasses all the pleasures of the body, even if all the delights of all mortals were gathered into one: so far does the spiritual excel the bodily, the invisible the visible. This, surely, is what the prophet promises: *Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man, what God has prepared for those who love him.* And this is the part of Moria which is not taken away by the change of life, but perfected. Those, then, who have been allowed to feel this (and it is granted to very few) undergo something very like madness. They say things that are not quite coherent, not in the human way, but utter sound without sense. Then they keep changing their whole expression, now cheerful, now downcast; now they weep, now laugh, now sigh. In short, they are truly and wholly outside themselves.[16] Then, when they have come back to themselves, they say they do not know where they have been, whether in the body or out of the body, awake or asleep. What they heard, saw, said or did they do not remember, except as through a mist or a dream; they know only this, that they were supremely happy while they were thus out of their minds. So they weep at having come to their senses again, and would want nothing in the world more than to be mad with this kind of madness forever. And this is just a faint little foretaste of the happiness to come.

FOLLY'S FAREWELL

Folly admits she has forgotten her speech and dismisses her audience with a toast.

68 But I have long since forgotten myself, and ὑπὲρ τὰ ἐσκαμμένα πηδῶ [I am jumping beyond the line]. Still, if anything I have said seems too saucy or too talkative, remember that it was both

16 An echo of Luke 10:42, Mary's "better part, which shall not be taken away from her."

Folly and a woman who said it. But remember too, meanwhile, that Greek proverb: πολλάκι τοι καὶ μωρὸς ἀνὴρ κατακαίριον εἶπεν [often even a foolish man has said something to the point], unless perhaps you think it does not apply to women. I see you are waiting for an epilogue; but you are quite out of your minds if you think I still remember what I said, after pouring out such a hodgepodge of words. There is the old saying: μισῶ μνάμονα συμπόταν [I hate a drinking companion with a memory]. Here is a new one: μισῶ μνάμονα ἀκροατήν [I hate a listener with a memory]. So farewell, applaud, live, drink, most illustrious initiates of Folly.[17]

17 An athletes' proverb: to jump beyond the dug-out pit marking a good leap, that is, to go too far.