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EDUCATION AND *THE PRAISE OF FOLLY*

"It is the privilege of fools
that they alone may speak the
truth without offense."

Erasmus

TO MANY the age of the Renaissance is the great age of education and to many the name of Erasmus typifies the Renaissance. Because of this it would appear that a study of Erasmus and his educational ideas might be of value to us. But when we begin to search for the educational writings of the great humanist we discover a curious fact — his only book which is still read by any but the most specialized research historian is *The Praise of Folly*. Erasmus was, according to history, the most prolific writer of his time, the most widely read and the most influential. How then can we explain this gradual elimination of his writings as time passes? How can we explain the fact that Erasmus today is not an author, he is a name, a name that stands for the Renaissance in the minds of people who have never read one word of what he said or wrote? This, alas, is also the case with

others in history who, in their time, stood for their age more adequately than any other; represented the virtues and the faults of their period in history; and, once the age was finished, remained as great names whose work was done but whose words would seldom be read again.

In his day Erasmus was one of the greatest and ablest defenders of Christianity but the Catholic Church in 1640 listed fifty-nine double-columned folio pages of "errors" in his writings and his books were repeatedly burned and banned by various Catholic countries as written by an "impious heretic." Although his vigorous criticisms of the Church led to and influenced greatly the Reformation, Erasmus would have none of the revolt. He aided and abetted with his words the spirit of the Reformation but tried to remain with the old Church; he criticized the old but renounced the new. Denounced by both sides, he continued to criticize but refused to act. In an age of intolerance, violence and fanaticism he continued to act the part of tolerance, kindness and faith in human nature. His doubtful reward, perhaps, is that now both Catholic and Protestant, albeit hesitantly at times, claim him as their own.

In some respects we can say that Erasmus was the herald of a later age — his faith in human nature and in the power of education to make men happier and better anticipates the 18th century. On the other hand, his dismissal of scientific research as "silly discussions" puts him back in his own age. In this he is almost in accord with Luther who condemned science as "That silly little fool, that devil's bride, Dame reason, God's worst enemy." Some have said that Erasmus blended most of the virtues and most of the faults of the Renaissance. His narrow humanism that worshipped Cicero as preferable to the more important Greeks, his active hostility to the slowly developing interest in science, his total lack of interest in all phases of art, his emphasis on protecting and defending the best of the past rather than facing boldly and courageously the future — all of these characteristics united to make of Erasmus the ideal man of the Renaissance.

Zealous in destroying old superstitions and prejudices he had little to offer in their place but a tolerant attitude and a spirit of kindness. Erasmus today, as we stated previously, is a name, not a man. Only one of his numerous books has survived for the average educated reader of the 20th century. *The Praise of Folly*, for better or worse, stands as the sole remaining example of the work of Erasmus.

Let us see then what Erasmus has to tell us about teachers, education, religion, wise men and fools. Folly, personified (and Folly, of necessity, is a woman, says Erasmus), tells, in this book, of her experiences in the affairs of man. She praises herself by describing how the best people follow her and most others worship her albeit at times some people, she says, through perverseness or lack of intelligence or feeling, refuse to acknowledge her leadership. At any rate, what Folly has to say has been useful to the world for more than four hundred years although, as has been stated by various commentators, those who could best profit by Folly's words have failed to do so.

Erasmus, among other things, was a scholar, an educator, a philosopher, a theologian, a writer and a devout Christian. Therefore it is extremely interesting to note his descriptions (and Folly's) of scholars, educators, philosophers, theologians, writers and devout Christians. His purpose, of course, is by pointing out the superstitions, foibles and evils of mankind to promote something better and above all, perhaps, to promote a degree of tolerance that was sadly lacking in the age of the Renaissance. What he wrote on education was not intended to abolish education — what he wrote on Christianity was not intended to rid the world of the Church. He drastically and mercilessly criticized those things in life he valued most.

With the thought that it might be interesting to educators to see how one of the greatest figures of the Renaissance looked at the educators and the education of that time, I have selected from *The Praise of Folly* those passages which relate above all to the problems and concerns of education. Obviously the criticisms Erasmus makes of the ideas, practices and institutions

of his time have nothing to do with our own advanced and enlightened age. *Or have they?*

Early in the book Erasmus begins by characterizing a rhetorician (a teacher engaged in teaching the art of speaking and writing) as:

One of the tribe of those who nowadays cram certain pedantic trifles into the heads of schoolboys, and teach a more than womanish obstinacy in disputing.¹

As for philosophers (he calls them "foolosophers"), he says:

It has seemed well, you note to imitate the rhetoricians of our time, who believe themselves absolutely to be gods if they can show themselves bilingual (like a horse-leech), and account it a famous feat if they can weave a few Greekish words, like inlay work, ever and anon into their Latin orations, even if at the moment there is no place for them. Then if they want exotic touches, they dig four or five obsolete words out of decaying manuscripts, by which they spread darkness over the reader; with the idea, I warrant you, that those who understand will be vastly pleased with themselves, and those who do not understand will admire the more — and all the more the less they understand. The fact is that there is a rather elegant species of enjoyment among our sect, to fall into special love with what is specially imported. Some who are a little more ambitious laugh and applaud, and, by example of the ass, shake their ears, so that in the eyes of the rest they will seem to comprehend: "Quite so, quite so."²

Erasmus is always ready to criticize the so-called wise men and he is always ready to show that fools are preferable (remember Folly is talking.) And so:

¹ Desiderius Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, translated from the Latin, with an Essay and Commentary, by Hoyt Hopewell Hudson (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1941), p. 8.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

The wise man runs to books of the ancients and learns from them a merely verbal shrewdness. The fool arrives at a true prudence, if I am not deceived, by addressing himself at once to the business and taking his chances.³

But let us go on to the grammarians and teachers, who, in their "knowledge-factories" do their wretched work among the "herds of boys."

Let me turn to those who maintain among mortals an appearance of wisdom and, as the saying is, seek for the golden bough. Among these the grammarians hold first place. Nothing could be more calamity-stricken, nothing more afflicted, than this generation of men, nothing so hated of God, if I were not at hand to mitigate the pains of their wretched profession by a certain sweet infusion of madness. For they are not only liable to the five curses which the Greek epigram calls attention to in Homer, but indeed to six hundred curses; as being hunger-starved and dirty in their schools — I said "their schools," but it were better said "their knowledge-factories" or "their mills" or even "their shambles" — among herds of boys. There they grow old with their labors, they are deafened by the noise, they sicken by reason of the stench and nastiness. Yet thanks to me, they see themselves as first among men; so greatly do they please themselves when they terrify the timorous band by a menacing look and tone; when they beat the little wretches with ferrules, rods, or straps; and when, imitating the ass in Aesop, they storm fiercely in all directions, as whim may dictate...

But nowadays they are especially happy in their new illusion of being learned. Of course they cram their pupils with utter nonsense, but, good Lord, . . . I do not know by what sleight of hand they work it so well, but to the foolish mothers and adlepatated fathers of their pupils they seem to be just what they make themselves out to be. On top of this they have another pleasure. When one of them can drag out of some worm-eaten manuscript such a fact as the name of Anchises' mother or some

³ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

word not generally known...; or if one can dig up somewhere a fragment of an ancient tombstone with an inscription badly worn away — O Jupiter! what exulting then, what triumphs, what panegyrics, as if they had conquered Africa or captured Babylon.

As for those stilted, insipid verses they display on all occasions (and there are those to admire them), obviously the writer believes that the soul of Virgil has transmigrated into his own breast. But the funniest sight of all is to see them admiring and praising each other, trading compliment for compliment... Yet if one commits a lapse in a single word, and another more quick-sighted by happy chance lights on it, O Hercules, what a stir presently, what scufflings, what insults, what invectives!... Do you prefer to call this madness or folly? It is no great matter to me; only confess that it is done with my assistance; so that a creature otherwise by far the most wretched of all is raised to such happiness that he would not wish to exchange his lot for that of the kings of Persia.⁴

One of the most prolific writers of books in all history, Erasmus turns his attention to ridiculing those who “blacken paper” with words, words, and more words. He says:

Of the same brand also are those who pursue fame by turning out books. All of them are highly indebted to me, but especially those who blacken paper with sheer triviality. For the ones who write learnedly for the verdict of a few scholars, not ruling out even a Persius or a Laelius as judge, seem to me more pitiable than happy, since they continuously torture themselves: they add, they alter, blot something out, they put it back in, they do their work over, they recast it, they show it to friends, they keep it for nine years; yet they never satisfy themselves. At such a price they buy an empty reward, namely praise — and that the praise of a handful. They buy it with such an expense of long hours, so much loss of that sweetest of all things, sleep, so much sweat, so many vexations. Add also the loss of health, the wreck of their good looks, weakness of eyes or even blindness, poverty, malice, denial of pleasures, premature

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 70-72.

old age, and early death — and if there are other thing like these, add them. The scholar considers himself compensated for such ills when he wins the approbation of one or two other weak-eyed scholars. But my author is crazy in a far happier way, since without any prolonged thought he quickly puts in writing whatever has come into his head or chanced to his pen, even his dreams; and all this with little waste of paper, knowing that if the trifles he has written are trivial enough the greater number of readers—that is, the fools and ignoramuses—will approve. Of what consequence is it to ignore the two or three scholars, even if they chance to read the work? Or what weight will the censure of a few learned men have, as against the great multitude of those who will shout acclaim?

But the wiser writers are those who put out the work of others as their own. By a few strokes of the pen they transfer to their own account the glory which was the fruit of much toil on another's part, drawing comfort from the thought that even if it should happen that they are publicly convicted of plagiarism, meanwhile they shall have enjoyed for a period the emoluments of authorship. It is worth one's while to see how pleased authors are with themselves when they are popular, and pointed out in a crowd—"There is a celebrity!" Their work is on display in bookseller's shops, with three cryptic words in large type on the title-page, preferably foreign words, something like a magician's spell. Ye Gods! What are all these things but words, after all?..⁵

Now for the theologians — "that marvellously supercilious and irascible race." Nowhere is Erasmus more bitter than when talking of the scholastic theologians. As he says:

Perhaps it were better to pass over the theologians in silence, ... that marvellously supercilious and irascible race. For they may attack me with six hundred arguments, in squadrons, and drive me to make a recantation; which if I refuse, they will straightway proclaim me an heretic. By this thunderbolt they are wont to terrify any toward whom they are ill-disposed. No other

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 73-75.

people are to loth so acknowledge my favors to them; yet the divines are bound to me by no ordinary obligations. They are happy in their self-love, and as if they already inhabited the third heaven they look down from a height on all other mortal men as on creatures that crawl on the ground, and they come near to pitying them. They are protected by a wall of scholastic definitions, arguments, corollaries, implicit and explicit propositions; they have so many hideaways that they could not be caught even by the net of Vulcan; . . . and they abound with newly-invented terms and prodigious vocables. Furthermore, they explain as pleases them the most arcane matters, such as by what method the world was founded and set in order, through what conduits original sin has been passed down along the generations, by what means, in what measure, and how long the perfect Christ was in the Virgin's womb, and how accidents subsist in the Eucharist without their subject. . .

In my poor judgment Christians would be wiser if instead of their gross unwieldy battalions of soldiers, with which for some time now they have been warring without any particular favor from Mars, they would send against the Turks and Saracens these brawling Scotists and stubborn Occamists and invincible Albertists, along with the whole band of Sophists. Then, I am bold to think, they would witness a battle which would be the merriest ever fought, and a victory such as was never seen before. Who is so phlegmatic that the shrewdness of these fighters would not excite him? Who so stupid that such sophistries would not excite him? Who so quicksighted that they would not throw a mist before his eyes? ⁶

Finally the Christian religion comes in for its share of criticism. As Erasmus (or rather Folly — or perhaps both) sees it:

Although war is so cruel a business that it befits beasts and not men, so frantic that poets feign it is sent with evil purpose by the Furies, so pestilential that it brings with it a general blight

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 77-78, 82-83.

upon morals, so iniquitous that it is usually conducted by the worst bandits, so impious that it has no accord with Christ, yet our popes, neglecting all their other concerns, make it their only task... Learned sycophants will be found who will give to this manifest madness the names of zeal, piety, and fortitude, devising a way whereby it is possible for a man to whip out his sword, stick it into the guts of his brother, and nonetheless dwell in that supreme charity which, according to Christ's precept, a Christian owes to his neighbor...

The Christian religion on the whole seems to have a kinship with some sort of folly, while it has no alliance whatever with wisdom. If you want proofs of this statement, observe first of all how children, old people, women, and fools find pleasure beyond other folk in holy and religious things, and to that end are ever nearest the altars, led no doubt solely by an impulse of nature. Then you will notice that the original founders of religion, admirably laying hold of pure simplicity, were the bitterest foes of literary learning. Lastly, no fools seem to act more foolishly than do the people whom zeal for Christian piety has got possession of; for they pour out their wealth, they overlook wrongs, allow themselves to be cheated, make no distinction between friends and enemies, shun pleasure, glut themselves with hunger, wakefulness, tears, toils, and reproaches; they disdain life and dearly prefer death; in short, they seem to have grown utterly numb to ordinary sensations, quite as if their souls lived elsewhere and not in their bodies. What is this, forsooth, but to be mad?⁷

This then is the praise of Folly. These are some of the criticisms which Erasmus levels at the age of which he is, perhaps, the greatest representative.

He wrote of the Greeks, "When I read certain passages of these great men I can hardly refrain from saying, 'St. Socrates, pray for me'." He tried to combine his love for Christ with his love for the ancient Greeks and Romans. In the words of Randall, "He sought to wean men away from the mysteries

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 100-101, 118.

of faith and attach their piety to the sureties of a civilized culture. For him the gospel and the Greeks merged into a single undogmatic religion of simple morality.”⁸

The world applauded when Erasmus reduced to absurdity, through Folly's criticisms, the behavior of the scholars, the scholastics and the monks. But the applause did not mean that men were as wise, tolerant and kindly as Erasmus. Men but discarded their old superstitions and took on new ones. They battled for their new superstitions with all the fanaticism, dogmatism and cruelty of the old. It took a Voltaire, more than two hundred years later, to carry on where Erasmus left off; and Voltaire succeeded where Erasmus failed because by that time science was his ally and was contributing to the struggle against dogmatism, fanaticism and cruelty. Erasmus, in his rejection of science, lost perhaps the best ally he could have had. His tolerance, love of and faith in humanity, his kindness, his love of scholarship — all of these were not quite adequate in an age of violence and dogma.

We will remember Erasmus. Not, perhaps, for what he wrote (with the exception of *The Praise of Folly*) but because to a great degree he exemplified the spirit of tolerance and love and because he also exemplified the attempt to combine the ethical with the rational (than which nothing is more important to our twentieth century civilization.) We still have need of listening when the voice of tolerance, kindness and reason speaks to us about the superstitions, foibles and evils of man.

Perhaps we can best leave Erasmus, having him speak to us, giving us advice as to the good life.

Avoid late and unseasonable studies, for they murder Wit, and are very prejudicial to Health. The Muses love the Morning, and that is a fit Time for Study. After you have din'd, either divert yourself at some Exercise, or take a Walk, and discourse merrily, and Study between whiles. As for Diet, eat only as much

⁸ John Herman Randall, Jr., *The Making of the Modern Mind*, revised edition (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1940), p. 134.

as shall be sufficient to preserve Health, and not as much or more than the Appetite may crave. Before Supper, take a little Walk, and do the same after Supper. A little before you go to sleep read something that is exquisite, and worth remembering; and contemplate upon it till you fall asleep; and when you awake in the Morning, call yourself to an Account for it.

May I perhaps recommend, as “something that is exquisite, and worth remembering” to read some evening before you go to sleep, *The Praise of Folly*? May many of you read it, “contemplate upon it,” and in the morning “call yourself to an Account for it.”