

ERASMIAN FOLLY AND SHAKESPEARE'S *KING LEAR* : A STUDY IN HUMANIST INTERTEXTUALITY¹

In his learned study *King Lear and the Gods*, William R. Elton writes that "The Renaissance secularization of folly increasingly transformed it from a context of sinfulness to one of imprudence."² If Elton had taken into account the sermons and moral handbooks of Tudor England, he would have been compelled to make some important exceptions. He should also have noted the older emphasis in the works of the most celebrated writers of the age, including Shakespeare, Sidney, Spenser, Donne, Herbert, and Milton.

The transition which Elton speaks of was extensive and significant, of course. It is best illustrated by comparing Sebastian Brant's *Ship of Fools* (1494) with Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* (1511, 1517). The former marks the end of the medieval representation of folly as sinful rejection of God's grace and truth ; the latter marks the beginning of the humanist representation of folly as cap-and-bells stupidity.

Nevertheless, there is a substantial remnant of Scriptural morality in the *Moriae Encomium*. The last part of Erasmus' text rests largely on the wisdom / folly antithesis which underlies much of the gospels and which is definitively enunciated in St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians :

The language of the cross may be illogical to those not on the way to salvation, but those of us who are on the way see it as God's power to save. As scripture says, *I shall destroy the wisdom of the wise and bring to nothing all the learning of the learned ... Do you not see how God has shown up the foolishness of human wisdom ?* (1 Cor 1:18-21).

The theme recurs powerfully in *King Lear*, undoubtedly because Shakespeare was as susceptible as the other great humanists of the Renaissance to the influence of Erasmus' brilliant satire and because as a child of his generation he had been trained not only to explore an important text and evaluate it, but also to make it a part of his cultural inventory from which to draw the original topoi imaginatively refashioned but still

recognizable. Intertextuality of this kind is easily detectable in *The Praise of Folly*, not only in Erasmus' numerous quotations from the Bible but also in his substantial appropriations from Plato's *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*.³

The presence of the folly theme in the play no doubt explains in large part why some modern scholars insist that *King Lear* "is a Christian play about a pagan world."⁴ Consistent with the interests of the time and his own inclinations, Shakespeare used both the secular and the Christian folly themes: the former more obvious in the beginning of the play -- the destructive folly of self-love, pride, and anger -- and the latter at the end, after Lear has traversed the dark kingdom of madness and found new life in the redemptive folly of Cordelia.

Over twenty years ago, Walter Kaiser remarked in his *Praisers of Folly* that Shakespeare's indebtedness to Erasmus "may well have been enormous."⁵ Yet neither he nor anyone else has examined the theme of Christian folly in *King Lear*. Northrop Frye recognizes that "The word 'fool' is in course of time applied to practically every decent character in the play," but he does not press on a great deal further with this insight, although it is certainly implicit in his valuable commentary on *Lear*.⁶ Inattentiveness to the theme puts us at a critical disadvantage, because it is a primary subtext of the play. Until we give the folly theme its due, we will not fully understand the motivations, objectives, and behavior of the major characters, nor the statement the play makes about the priorities of love, loyalty, truth, honor, and self-sacrifice. As Erasmus and Shakespeare well understood, these are the fundamental virtues which define authentic Christianity.

It will be impossible to measure the influence of *The Praise of Folly* on *King Lear*, especially on the allegorical dimensions of Cordelia, without first deciding how much of the last part (concerning Christian folly) is voiced by Erasmus and how much by Dame Folly. A precise determination is unlikely, but it is possible to take some fairly accurate soundings.

One should understand that the last section of *The Praise of Folly* is not a reorchestration of Erasmus' earlier *de contemptu mundi* work. In *Erasmus: the Growth of a Mind*, James D. Tracy demonstrates convincingly that the emphases in Erasmus' writing after 1495 differ in many respects from what one finds in preceding texts, which are obviously the products of a mind not fully mature. Even as a young man living in the midst of the Reformed Augustinian Canons and the Brethren of the Common Life, Erasmus was not attracted to the *devotio moderna* spirituality

of radical self-renunciation.⁷ Most of his writing, in accord with the main themes of Renaissance humanism, insisted that one can have "a burning devotion to Christian piety" without being "completely taken up with the contemplation of invisible things." (PF 132, 134)⁸

Renunciation of the world, Erasmus knew, can be a cowardly flight from spiritual warfare and the basic responsibilities we have to one another as human beings. He did not hesitate to involve himself in the works of the world. Yet, like More, he did not underestimate this world's dangers. Both men put first things first, combining action with contemplation, not forgetting that the way of Christ is the way of the Cross.

Sixteenth century humanists understood that Christianity does not negate the world (which God so loved that he sent his only son to redeem it), but they knew that faith must relentlessly oppose all propositions which defy the will of God or give the world more than its due. As a modern theologian reminds us, "Those who say Jesus is Lord must at the same time say that neither Caesar nor anyone else is Lord."⁹ More's decision to see wisdom in this kind of thinking and to act on his convictions cost him his life. Was he a "foolish wise man or a wise foolish man"? Edward Hall was never able to answer this question. Like modern revisionist biographers he had a rather hefty axe to grind, of course. More's humanist contemporaries were far less perplexed.

If, as Father Marc'hadour points out, "More as a spiritual author differs, not only from Thomas à Kempis or from Martin Luther, but also from his friends, Colet, Fisher and Erasmus," they nevertheless shared the theology of the Cross and the wish to put God at the center of desire.¹⁰

In *The Praise of Folly*, the center of Erasmus' desire is undoubtedly the love of God, best expressed by the eradication of the vices which the text ridicules. In general, the targets of Erasmus' satire are clear enough. Less clear is what we find in the peroration. M.A. Screech's conclusion that it elaborates "a fully Christian form of ecstasy," which for Erasmus "is the highest manifestation of Christian folly" has encountered strong -- and, I think, objectionable -- resistance from Jean-Claude Margolin, Peter Rudnitsky, Jacques Chomarat, and Clarence H. Miller, all of whom contend that the last part of Folly's declamation is as ambiguous as the rest.¹¹ Miller warns against a one-dimensional reading of *The Praise of Folly* in an article charging that Screech treats the last movement of the satire "as if it were an independent essay like the *Enchiridion*, making no allowances for any discrepancies between the beliefs of Folly and those of Erasmus."¹²

Obviously, *The Praise of Folly* resonates with playfulness, satire, and irony. Erasmus took great delight in making Dame Folly's declamation a comic model of rhetorical *arete*, putting the critical doctrines of Cicero, Quintilian, and Seneca Rhetor into a new context that simultaneously burlesques and honors its origins. We should remember, however, that the humanist proclivity toward antilogy (the ability to argue both sides of a question with comparable skill) did not carry over into theology. In saying that "Rhetorical man is trained not to discover reality but manipulate it," Richard Lanham is right, but only up to a point in the instance of sixteenth century humanists.¹³ It could well be that Erasmus illuminates that point near the end of the *Moria*. As Arthur F. Kinney reminds us, humanist poetics is "a poetics that directs thoughts, always, towards abstractions; it leads away from the circumstances and confinements of a mundane world toward more universal conceptualizations which from the start appealed to the humanist temperament."¹⁴ *The Praise of Folly*, he argues, "deals centrally with the nature and power of love both to cement society and to lead to mystical unity with God" -- in other words, to the ecstasy that Screech argues for.¹⁵

The last section of the book certainly calls for vigilance and commonsense. We can never afford to forget that Erasmus' Folly reincarnates the Folly of Scripture, a woman who "is inane and knows nothing." (Prov 9:13) At the end of her declamation, as elsewhere, Dame Folly does not hesitate to twist as much Scripture as she can to fit her purpose. However, our attentiveness to Folly's sleight of hand and the ludic complexity of the text should not make us forget Erasmus' purposes. As he himself said in his letter to Dorp, there is no fundamental difference between the real concerns of his great satire and those articulated in the *Enchiridion*: "... in the 'Folly,' under the appearance of a joke, my purpose is just the same as in 'The Enchiridion.' I intended to admonish, not to sting; to help, not to hurt; to promote morality, not to hinder it."¹⁶ Moreover, Holbein's woodcuts show that he believed Erasmus was speaking for himself -- and for all who understand the gospel aright -- in the last section of the *Folly*. A telling example is Plate 78 of the 1515 Basel edition which shows, according to a modern art historian,

a figure in tattered clothing distributing alms from a sack (which appears to be a foolscap) to poor and crippled beggars at his feet. Because of the profile format of his head and his long hair, he has a Christ-like appearance reminiscent of the *Blessing Christ* in drawing number 44.¹⁷

Those who argue that Screech hears too much of Erasmus' voice in the

words of Folly might themselves hear too little. In dismissing Screech's analysis, Chomarat and Miller make much of Folly's contention that true Christians allow no distinction between friend and foe. Any such statement, they insist, "... is a gross distortion of Christian charity which Erasmus could hardly accept."¹⁸ Yet Erasmus certainly accepted Christ's insistence that an enemy has as much claim on our charity and forgiveness as a friend. Surely, it is Erasmus speaking when Folly declares that "Christ's whole teaching stresses nothing so much as gentleness, tolerance, contemptus mundi" (PF 125), contempt, that is, for whatever deconstructs or defies the word of God as it is made known to mankind.

A comparison of the two books shows that "evil" in the *Enchiridion* equals "the world" in *The Praise of Folly*. "Life" in both texts is spiritual life, the kingdom within where it is possible to experience the ecstatic love of God while being transformed into the spirit alone (PF 136); that is, being in this world but not of it. It is not unlikely that this is what Erasmus' primary audience heard when Dame Folly spoke of Christians who take Christ at his word, trying to liberate their mind and spirit from the prison house of the body in order to anticipate the joys of heaven, when "the spirit, stronger at last and victorious, will absorb the body." (PF 133, 136)

Like More, Sidney, Shakespeare, and Donne, Erasmus was expressing what almost every sixteenth century Christian had been taught about their priorities and prospects. Catholic or Protestant, English clergy preached the folly of holding this world other than lightly.¹⁹

The wisdom/folly antithesis which is implicit in this kind of thinking runs through the structure of English and continental thought from Brant's *Ship of Fools* to Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Wisdom was shown in renouncing the deceptive allurements of this world, folly in pursuing them "like the frantick Farmer spoken of in the Gospel." [Luke 12:16-20]²⁰ Existing collections of Tudor sermons indicate that somewhere in England there was always a parish that was being exhorted to "Buy terms divine in selling hours of dross."

A word count of Shakespeare's plays shows that *fool* appears approximately 400 times; *folly*, approximately 80 times; *foolish*, 75 times; *fond*, 60 times; *wisdom*, 110 times; *wise*, 125 times; *wisely*, 30 times; *wise man*, 25 times. (In the Bible, *fool* occurs only 105 times; *folly*, only 30 times; *foolish*, 50 times; *wisdom*, 180 times; *wise*, 175 times; *wisely*, 15 times.)

The vices that loom largest in *King Lear* are the ones that have

priority of place in Dame Folly's court: *Philautia* (Self-love), *Kolakia* (Flattery), *Anoia* (Madness), and *Comos* (Rowdiness, if we can believe Oswald, as we probably should in this instance). With the exception of flattery in *King Lear*, none of the sources of Shakespeare's tragedy play up the vices which stand out in *The Praise of Folly*. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that Shakespeare was substantially indebted to Erasmus for the clustered follies that drive Lear to madness and death.

In the first scene of the play, the action leaps with fiery quickness from one folly to another. Everything is put in motion by the appeal of flattery to the self-love of one who "hath ever but slenderly known himself." (I,i,292-293).²¹ "When power to flattery bowes" so completely, Kent must conclude that Lear is mad. (I,i,147-149) Here, however, it is the "madness" of folly (as in Ecclesiastes 7:26) not the insanity we witness on the heath. When Lear curses and disinherits Cordelia for disappointing his royal expectations, we have an example of composite folly – pride, self-love, anger, and vindictiveness – rarely equalled in our literature. It boils over into everything Lear says and does, but it is most searing in his dismissal of the daughter for whom he had reserved the choicest part of his kingdom :

Better thou
Hadst not been born than not t'have pleased me better.
(I,i,234-235)

At some points of convergence, Erasmus' text seems to provide some of Shakespeare's most important insinuations. In language which could easily be a commentary on the first scene of *King Lear*, Dame Folly proclaims that "*Kolakia* has the greatest influence in the courts of princes" and "anger ... occupies the citadel and very fountainhead of life, the heart." (PF 26, 28). In the same part of the book, Folly describes the corresponding ages of man in terms that look ahead to Goneril's "Old fools are babes again."²² "After all," Folly asks, "what difference is there between them, except that an old man has more wrinkles and has had more birthdays? Otherwise they agree exactly [and] resemble each other in every respect." (PF 22)

Goneril and Regan understand how unrealistic and foolish their father is to expect that he can give away the burdens and power of office and still "retain / The name and all th' addition to a king." (I,i,136-137) Wise in the ways of the world and, doubtless, of Lear's court, they skillfully exploit Lear's weaknesses, giving stage life to Dame Folly's Machiavellian distinction between good morals and good sense :

[W]isemen have ... two tongues, also mentioned by Euripides : with one they speak the truth, with the other whatever they think convenient for the moment. They are the ones who turn black into white, who blow hot and cold in one breath, who profess to believe one thing in their speech but conceal quite another in their hearts. (PF 56)

Even more villainously, Goneril and Regan embody what Dame Folly refers to as "a certain kind of flattery which is altogether destructive, the kind employed by some unprincipled cynics to ruin their wretched victims." (PF 70) Folly's emblems for the lethal power of such flattery, "fierce lions ... cruel tigers ... treacherous panthers," might well account for Albany's description of the two sisters as "Tigers, not daughters." (Q1: 16,2146)

Edmund is made of the self-same metal as the sisters. Being the thing he is, Edmund has no more intention than they of struggling under the burden of "foolish honesty," so his practices ride easy on one and all until at the end the wheel comes full circle. (Here, as in *Othello*, *honesty* means integrity as well as truthfulness.) Edmund is the malicious epitome of the worldly wisdom that Christ, Paul, and Erasmus condemn because it leads away from God into the dominion of evil. When the point is made in *The Praise of Folly*, Erasmus and Folly are in all probability speaking as one : "Paul openly condemns knowledge as dangerous because it puffs men up. St. Bernard, I imagine, was following Paul when he interpreted the mountain on which Lucifer established his throne as the mountain of knowledge." (PF 130-131) Erasmus, the mark and glass of Humanist scholarship, had no intention of repudiating knowledge as such. His target here is not learning. It is intellectual arrogance and cunning – the guileful wisdom realistically acknowledged a few years later in Machiavelli's *Prince* and embraced as Edmund's guiding principle :

Let me, if not by birth, have lands by wit :
All with me's meet that I can fashion fit.
(I,ii,482-483)

By design self-serving, the wisdom of the world eventually proves foolish and self-subversive. In Edmund's case, it is tragically so because it leads him deeper and deeper into villainy and finally destroys him. Not accidentally, it would seem, Shakespeare made Edmund a striking example of Biblical folly recklessly serving false gods and what Erasmus calls the "grossest" human passions (PF 134-135), which he identifies as pride, envy, anger, and lust – precisely the passions which motivate Edmund's

malignity and the real subject of his apostrophe when he appears alone on stage for the first time :

Thou, Nature, art my Goddess ; to thy law
My seruices are bound. (I,ii,309-310)

Ironically, what he really binds himself to is the law of inevitability foretold by Dame Wisdom in the Book of Proverbs (the main Biblical text which Erasmus so cleverly put into a new key) :

The wicked man is caught in his own iniquities,
and held fast in the toils of his own sin ;
he will perish for want of discipline,
wrapped in the shroud of his boundless folly.
(Proverbs 5:22-23)

Unfortunately, integrity and the paradoxical folly of the New Testament also have their liabilities and dangers. As Adam warns Orlando in *As You Like It* (II,iii,683), virtues can be “sanctified and holy traitors” disposing us to do good and think no evil in a world where the wisdom that prevails is self-interested and often ruthless. Thus, like Orlando, Edgar is easily deceived because his good nature and “foolish” integrity put him “so farre from doing harmes / That he suspects none.” (I,ii,479-480) Virtue is not mindless. Edgar’s Poor Tom disguise bespeaks a shrewdness highly touted by Dame Folly : “To pretend to be foolish when the case requires it is the highest wisdom.” (PF 117) Only in his disguise, however, is Edgar guided by the wisdom of the world. In all other instances, his virtue and nobility are strikingly evident and make him, like the other figures of virtue in the play, a dramatic embodiment of Erasmus’ “pious folly.” Although Edmund’s treachery and Gloucester’s disloyalty give him every reason to better their instruction, thoughts of revenge never enter Edgar’s mind. Like Cordelia, he chooses to “play Foole” to his father’s sorrow (IV,i,2039), insisting with the gospel and the last of Shakespeare’s great protagonists that “the rarer Action is / In virtue then in vengeance.” (*The Tempest* V,i,1746-1747)

Though older and wiser in the ways of the world and of Lear’s court, Kent, too, embraces folly as readily as Edmund embraces “wisdom.” Well aware of his master’s volatile personality, Kent must have known that Lear would turn on him no less quickly than he turned on his favorite daughter. Like Cordelia, however, Kent believed that he had no alternative because

To plainnesse honour’s bound

When Maiesty falls to folly. (I,i,149-150)

From Dame Folly’s perspective, Kent undoubtedly deserves the coxcomb which the Fool offers him (I,iv,598), iconographically rehearsing Folly’s contention that kings shun wise men because “they hate the truth.” (PF 56) Honesty like Kent’s, she insists, is “peculiar to fools : they alone speak the plain, unvarnished truth.” (PF 55) Self-preservation and advancement point in another direction, cynically but accurately enunciated in Machiavelli’s warning to the Kents of his or any age :

... there is such a difference between the way men live and the way they ought to live, that anybody who abandons what is for what ought to be will learn something that will ruin rather than preserve him. ²³

To continue serving a master like Lear would be unthinkable for most people. To do him “seruice improper for a slaue” goes against nature. ²⁴ It is surpassing folly, to reason most absurd. Yet it is an image of the play at large, dramatizing the opposition between those who make nature their goddess and those extraordinary people who do not, preferring, in Dame Folly’s words, to “conflict in their entire life-style with the whole company of mortals.” (PF 133)

The conflict between wise folly and Machiavellian wisdom asserts itself conspicuously in the changing relationship between Albany and Goneril. Initially, Goneril merely displays uneasiness about her husband’s moral inclinations, apparently worried that he might be too full of the milk of human kindness to do the work her ambition has cut out for him :

This milky gentlesse and course of yours,
Though I condemne not, yet vnder pardon,
You are much more attaskt for want of wisdom
Than prais’d for harmefull mildnesse. (I,iv,828-829)

By the time they go to battle against Cordelia’s French expedition, Goneril’s annoyance has become undisguised loathing, and Albany can no longer tolerate her wickedness :

O Goneril,
You are not worth the dust which the rude wind
Blowes in your face ! I fear your disposition
She that her selfe will sliuer and disbranch
From her materiall sap perforce must wither
And come to deadly vse. (IV,ii,2104-2106) ²⁵

The Biblical undertext of Albany's words, Jesus' vine and branch analogy with its apocalyptic implications (John 15:1-6), tells us that Albany has looked into Goneril's soul and seen the darkness there, finally realizing that she is irredeemably evil, forever cut off from grace – a devil, a monster, and a fiend. (IV,ii,2107-2110)

Echoing Lady Macbeth once again, Goneril throws the Bible back into Albany's face, ridiculing his masculinity and intelligence, scornfully concluding that he is a "milke-liuer'd man / That bear'st a cheek for blowes a moral foole Oh vain fool." (IV,ii,2105-2110) In all, she uses the word *fool* four times in thirty-three lines, *foolish* once. In addition, there is a play on the familiar Greek word for *fool*, *moros*, which is wholly consistent with the cynical cunning that underlies everything she does: "No more! The text is foolish." ²⁶ Hers is the malicious wisdom of the Genesis serpent as Shakespeare's imagery reminds us on at least two occasions; first, when Lear tells Regan that Goneril "stroocke me with her Tongue / Most Serpent-like" (II,ii,1347-1348) and, second, when Edmund comments with no little satisfaction that both sisters desire him and are as "jealous of the other, as the stung are of the Adder." (V,i,2616-2617)

Obviously Cordelia is the dramatic and moral antithesis of her sisters, the representation of everything that St. Paul and Erasmus meant by pious folly. It is just this that makes her for many modern readers as intolerable as Isabella, who also refused to betray her moral principles for what seemed to be the best of reasons. The litany of disapproval is as uncompromising as Cordelia's "Nothing, my lord." Some feminist critics have been especially scathing. Cordelia's superficial gentleness, we are told, never quite conceals her "iron stubbornness," which makes her as proud and destructive in her own way as her father is in his. ²⁷ From the perspective of feminist new historicism, Cordelia is "a static, almost inanimate daughter of sorrows ... an emblem of dutiful pity" and of unenlightened virtue inspired and manipulated by the patriarchal establishment of the age. ²⁸ Given the explicit political agenda of neo-Marxist critics, it is inevitable that they find Cordelia's virtue offensive, as "rancid" and irrational as Isabella's.

To be sure, one need not be a Marxist to see "madness" in Cordelia's behavior. Taking his cue from Edgar (IV,vi,173), Kenneth Muir, the Arden editor, maintains that the whole play is built upon the double paradox of "Reason in madness" and "vision in blindness." ²⁹ Muir's thesis is correct but incomplete because it fails to account for the Christian elements in the play, a serious oversight repeated by Arthur Kirsch

in his essay on "The Emotional Landscape of *King Lear*," published recently in *Shakespeare Quarterly*.³⁰ Kirsch rightly stresses the importance of Ecclesiastian folly, but he ignores altogether Corinthian folly, which is just as prevalent. Inevitably, therefore, he concludes that the play is unrelievedly tragic, grotesque, and desolating. The final section of *The Praise of Folly* supplies terms which point in another direction – toward a mixed response which is more consistent with the mixture of pagan and Christian thought in the tragedy.

After comparing the rival gospels of the material world and the kingdom of God, Dame Folly's "pious people" choose the latter, well aware that their decision might cause considerable distress. Unlike ordinary people, they struggle to root out not only gross desires but also



Hans Holbein's woodcut of almsgiving as a form of Christian "folly." Figure 44 from *Moriae Encomium: OR, A Panegyric upon FOLLY*. Written in Latin by *Desiderius Erasmus*. Done into English [by Bp. White Kennet], Illustrated with Above Fifty Curious Cuts Designed and Drawn by *Hans Holbein*. London: F. Woodward, 1709. This is the first illustrated English translation. Cf. p. 6.

intermediate feelings, which are in a sense natural, such as patriotism [and] love of parents ... so that a father is no longer loved simply as a father (for what did he beget except the body? — though even that too is owing to God, the father of all), but as a good man whose personality projects a shining image of that highest mind of all, to which alone they give the name “highest good” and apart from which they teach that nothing is to be loved or sought. (PF 135)

The moral substance and temperature of Erasmus’ text correspond almost exactly with Cordelia’s response when Lear offers her the choicest part of his kingdom.

I love your majesty
According to my bond ; nor more nor less....
You have begot me, bred me, loved me : I
Return those duties back as are right fit,
Obey you, love you, and most honour you.
Why have my sisters husbands, if they say
They love you all? (I,i,93-94; 9)

In Lear’s eyes, this response is “untender.” In Cordelia’s, it is “true” ; that is, honorable. Cordelia refuses to accept her designated role and heave her heart into her mouth because like Erasmus and every other Renaissance humanist she would play neither the flatterer nor the fool. It is not only the paradoxical wisdom of the New Testament that she represents here, but also the perceptive human intelligence of the Old : “The heart of fools is in their mouth : but the mouth of the wise is in their heart.” (Ecclesiasticus 21:26) Most important, Cordelia sees in her father’s conduct no image of the goodness Erasmus proposes, and she will not yield her integrity to Lear’s ravenous pride. She could have lied, but she chose not to. Why should she be condemned for that ? Surely, Cordelia ought to be allowed the same rights over her destiny that modern women claim for themselves. No different from Erasmus’ and Shakespeare’s contemporaries, Cordelia believed that honor and honesty were interchangeable. The Latin word *honestas* signified worth, virtue, honorable character, probity. ³¹ Jacques Hurault’s *Politicke, Moral and Military Discourses* (1595) went so far as to claim that a person who lost his reputation for honesty “hath no more to lose, because the whole welfare and honour of a man depended thereupon.” ³² For Cordelia, honor is not merely “a word ... air,” the useless illusion of Falstaff’s revisionist catechism. (1 Henry IV, V,i,2630-2631) Honor is the soul’s main tender, abso-

lutely essential for what Folly, or more likely, Erasmus refers to as the perfection of life. (PF 137) Her simple “Nothing” speaks volumes to those who have ears to hear.

Cordelia does not hesitate to speak the truth and mar her fortunes because, as France rightly observes, “She is herself a dowry” (I,i,242) and can draw from within herself riches that this world cannot give, riches acclaimed in *The Praise of Folly* as the eternal and invisible things of the spirit which unite the faithful to “that Highest Good which gathers all things to Himself.” (PF 137) Like Erasmus and More, the Jacobean audience would have realized the folly of putting that prospect at risk to gain the whole world. But for one third of Britain, when the rest was ruled by her grasping sisters ? Hardly a promising venture.

As numerous scholars have noted, what is to be seen in Cordelia is an image of Christ, who himself “became somehow foolish in order to relieve the folly of mortals when he took on human nature in order to heal sins through the folly of the cross.” (PF 130) We cannot be sure why Shakespeare made Cordelia a figure of Christ in a pre-Christian world, but we must acknowledge that he did. Perhaps he acted on the realization that grace penetrates history wherever God wills, as the Jewish bible and the writings of the Buddha demonstrate on many occasions. ³³ What we do know for sure is that Cordelia embodies, more than anyone else in the play or, for that matter, anyone in the whole of Shakespeare’s works, the Christian folly described by St. Paul and Erasmus.

If Cordelia cannot save her father from his folly and its terrible consequences, she can redeem him, even if in the process she loses her own life, just as Christ did, “pleased to save the world through folly because it could not be redeemed by wisdom.” (1 Cor. 1:21,27 ; PF 129) The similarities between Cordelia’s foolish conduct and Christ’s are unmistakable, particularly when one sees the imagery refracted through *The Praise of Folly*. She forgives Lear when she has abundant reason to hate and condemn him, as he well knows :

If you haue poyson for me, I will drink it.
I know you do not loue me ; for your sisters
Haue (as I do remember) done me wrong.
You haue some cause, they haue not. (IV,vi,2557-2560)

Cordelia’s reply, “No cause, no cause,” negates Lear’s anxieties and her own earlier “Nothing, my lord” for it shows conclusively how much she loves him. Her response also reflects the “openminded generosity” which characterizes the pious fool (PF 122) and the foolish mercy of God, who

had full cause to condemn mankind but chose to redeem us instead.

The case for Cordelia as an image of Christ can be made with a single sentence: "O deere father, / It is thy businesse that I go about." (IV,iii,2160-2161) Cordelia's words come straight out of the Geneva Bible, where Jesus explains his absence to Mary and Joseph: "Knewe ye not that I must go about my father's business?" (Luke 2:49)³⁴ Not a few commentators have remarked that redemption in *King Lear* is a cruel business from beginning to end. So was the business of the cross. Redemption is rarely easy; never for those who, like Lear, insist on making the process as difficult as possible. If we read *King Lear* with the priorities of the Renaissance in mind – recognizing, that is, what Shakespeare's contemporaries considered to be wisdom and folly, gain and loss – it is easier to understand that only by means of Cordelia's integrity and his own suffering could Lear discover the truth that would take him outside himself and free him from his folly.³⁵

When Lear asks, "Who is it that can tell me who I am?" the Fool is right to answer, "Lear's shadow," (I,iv,718), perhaps an echo of *The Praise of Folly*, where Dame Folly borrows from Plato while discussing the differences between things as we think they must be ("wretched shadows") and things as they might be. (PF 133-134) To escape the darkness within himself, Lear had to experience alienation, suffering, exposure, madness, "sovereign shame," and all that wretches feel. To become "every inch a man," he had first to lose his kingdom, his children, his pomp, his home, and – most anguishing – his identity. It was a devastating process and it drove the old king mad, but it saved him from the wretched end of those such as Macbeth, who allow themselves to be "quite unmann'd in folly" and fall further and further into the darkness. (*Macbeth* III,iv,1096)³⁶

To feel what Folly calls the madness of love (PF 136), Lear had to go out of his mind because in his mind there was no love. The process could have begun only with Cordelia, "our Ioy, / Although our last, and least" (I,i,83-84), because Lear would not have been transported to such extremes of rage and folly if the other daughters failed him. After Cordelia's banishment, it becomes the Fool's task to carry on what she unwillingly began. He assumes the importance that he has in the play because, as Dame Folly reminds her audience, "only fools have a license to declare the truth without offense." (PF 123) The Fool, however, could not take Lear as far as he had to go. Undeniably, he has far more dramatic substance than the natural or the counterfeit fool-jesters familiar to Shakespeare's audience. No one can mistake the implications of

his barbs, least of all Lear: "Dost thou call me fool, boy?" (Q1:4,638). Moreover, as an earlier commentator on Shakespeare's wise fools realized, by abandoning prudence to follow his sick king out of doors to contend with the fretful elements, the Fool becomes an embodiment of Christian folly.³⁷ But his contributions end there. "All-licens'd" he might have been, as Goneril complained, but all-sufficient he was not. Only Cordelia, Lear's other fool, could convey him from human folly to divine folly and redemption.³⁸ Accordingly, the Fool goes to bed at noon, while Lear's madness is still at its most intense. (III,vi,1890)

The process of redemption is painfully long. Late in the action Lear still thinks himself "The Naturall Foole of Fortune" (IV,v,2395), retaining in his madness the conviction that the causes of his misery lie outside himself. At this point he runs off stage, to be absent from the play for a time, as Hamlet and Macbeth, before entering a new stage of development.³⁹ When we see Lear again, reunited with Cordelia, the process is over and he is capable of admitting that the blame lies within: "I am a very foolish fond old man." (IV,vi,2545)

Soon after Lear divided the kingdom, the Fool tells him that "thou mad'st thy Daughters thy Mothers" by abdicating authority to them. (I,iv,658-659) In another sense, Cordelia, also, is her father's mother – in a metaphysical sense, the absent mother of the play. Through her, he gained new life by a process and of a kind compellingly described near the end of Dame Folly's commentary on the supreme happiness of religious folly: "[W]hat is re-enacted is the death of Christ, which mortals ought to express by taming, extinguishing, and burying (as it were) bodily passions so that they may rise up into renewed life and can be one with him and also one among themselves." (PF 135) What else but renewed life could be signified by the first words Lear speaks when he awakens from his madness in the presence of Cordelia: "You do me wrong to take me out o'th' grave" ? (IV,vi,2530) What else except the burial and redemption of bodily passions could be meant by Lear's ecstatic expression of love, humility, and happiness after the defeat of Cordelia's army when he has every reason to think himself the most abject of men:

Come, let's away to prison.
We two alone will sing like Birds i' th' Cage:
When thou dost ask me blessing, Ile kneel down
And ask of thee forgiveness. So wee'l liue,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
At gilded Butterflies, and heere poor Rogues
Talk of Court newes; and wee'l talke with them too,

Who looses and who wins; who's in, who's out;
And take vpon's the mystery of things,
As if we were God's spies (V,iii,2648-2657)

For many readers, the mystery of things is that Lear can say what he does after the torment he suffered. However, Shakespeare's audience might have reacted differently. They understood the nature and paradox of redemption better than we and were prepared to recognize freedom in captivity, joy in affliction, wisdom in folly, and life in death. For them, the substance and symbolism of Lear's words would attest to his new birth and to his complete detachment from his old way of life. That his new life was cut short so quickly and so cruelly would seem to them, as to us, almost unbearably tragic, yet not unmitigatedly so because both Lear and Cordelia had recovered what they most wanted before they died. From Erasmus' and Shakespeare's point of view, the play would have been much more tragic if Cordelia had flattered her father and avoided all that came from her "Nothing." At most, Lear would have had a few more years of folly and she a lifetime of shame and self-loathing. Clearly, this would have been more waste than gain from the perspective of Renaissance humanism, and as contemporary playwrights seemed to know, the essence of tragedy is waste.

The Globe audience might not have registered every mention of wisdom and folly. However, they would have heard enough to realize that the familiar theme was a vital part of the play. At the destined end, they would have felt the great tragedy of Lear's and Cordelia's deaths, but these deaths would not have been so devastating for them as they are for modern readers who see love restored only to be cruelly snatched away, leaving nothing behind except a dark void where new life should have begun. They would have grieved just as we do, but they would have seen more than death and loss at the end of the play. Because they brought to the theater a dual mode of vision (the result of sixteenth-century educational strategies), they were prepared to entertain opposing contexts and possibilities. The result was a fuller vision of truth, sought not in any single scene but rather in the total action of the drama.⁴⁰ Not far distant in time from what Paul Tillich called the "theonomous" era of their Christian ancestors, Shakespeare and his contemporaries were schooled to detect "the ultimate meaning of existence [which] shines through all finite forms and actions."⁴¹ They were therefore ready to see more than death and loss when they saw Cordelia dead in Lear's arms. What they would have recognized was a dramatic refiguring of the *Pietà*

scene, the definitive image of victory in defeat and the epitome of all the Biblical imagery systematically crafted into the text to remind the onlooker that on this great stage of fools there is infinitely more to life and death than Lear's pre-Christian world dreamt of.⁴² They would have understood that unlike Goneril, Regan, Cornwall and Edmund, who lived for themselves according to the wisdom of the world, Lear and Cordelia died for one another objectifying what Erasmus called "the doctrine of the cross" (PF 128), which, he insisted in his letter to Dorp, transforms and perfects life while seeming to take it away.⁴³ To borrow from the language of the play one last time, this is not "altogether fool."⁴⁴ Nor altogether tragic.

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NOTES

1. Richard J. Schoeck provides an admirably comprehensive and discriminating essay on intertextuality in his *Intertextuality and Renaissance Texts* (Bamberg : H. Kaiser Verlag, 1982). Noting that our word *text* comes from the Latin *textus* by way of Old French and Middle English *texte*, all meaning "a woven thing" or a web (12), Schoeck helps one to realize that the great works of any age are webs spun out of a single mind influenced by many other minds which compose culture or history (*metahistory* might be the better term) which subsumes many dynamic forces such as intersecting "economies" (as Derrida uses the word), art forms, genres, layered myths, legends, parables, allegories, recurrent themes and images, *topoi*, authorial revisions, contesting interpretations, misreadings, and translations – everything inevitably subject to "Times trans-shifting."

In some cases, certain texts loom larger than the rest in the complex web of relationships and influences detectable in a single work. A recognizable primary text is invited to give extensive conceptual direction to a work in progress. Often the first text exerts pressure on the other not only at the point of intersection but also for the entire length of the new work. For example, at the beginning of *As You Like It*, Shakespeare appropriates two well-known biblical stories – Cain and Abel and the Prodigal Son – to sum up the desperate condition of Orlando and the unnatural behavior of his brother Oliver. Narrative ontology immediately expands : English comedy becomes divine comedy. Seen in this context, the conversions at the end appear to be less far-fetched. The influence of *The Praise of Folly* on *King Lear* is, as I shall argue, even more persistent.

2. William R. Elton, *King Lear and the Gods* (San Marino, California : The Huntington Library, 1966) 303-304. For the prominence of the fool in Tudor England, see Sandra Billington, *A Social History of the Fool* (New York : St. Martin's P, 1984), especially Ch. 3, "The Rise of the Fool."

3. See Arthur E. Kinney, *Humanist Poetics. Thought, Rhetoric, and Fiction*

in *Sixteenth Century England* (Amherst : U. of Massachusetts Press, 1986) 51-54.

4. J.C. Maxwell, "The Technique of Invocation in *King Lear*," *Modern Language Review* (Apr 1950) 142 ; quoted without dissent by Kenneth Muir in the Arden ed. of *King Lear* (London : Methuen, 1972) 1.

5. Walter Kaiser, *Praisers of Folly : Erasmus, Rabelais, Shakespeare* (London : Gollancz, 1964) 99.

6. Northrop Frye, *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare*, ed. Robert Sandler (New Haven and London : Yale UP, 1986) 110. Enid Welsford did not discuss religious folly in her study of *King Lear*. She explored the wisdom / folly theme in wholly secular terms, concentrating on fellow-feeling ("capacity for sympathetic love") and its antithesis. *The Fool. His Social and Literary History* (New York : Doubleday, 1961), 257-270. She noted the presence of "the wilder paradoxes of the Gospels and of St. Paul" but insisted that their consolations are absent from *Lear*. (268) Another strand of the folly theme in *King Lear* might have come from Ariosto. See Carlo Ossola, "Métaphore et Inventaire de la Folie dans la Littérature Italienne du XVIe Siècle," in *Folie et Déraison à la Renaissance* (Bruxelles : Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1976) 172.

7. James D. Tracy, *Erasmus : the Growth of a Mind* (Geneva : Droz, 1972) 51.

8. Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, ed. Clarence H. Miller (New Haven and London : Yale UP, 1979). All my references to *The Praise of Folly* (PF) refer to this edition, unless otherwise stated.

9. Richard John Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment* (San Francisco, Cambridge : Harper & Row, 1987) 18.

10. Abbé Germain Marc'hadour, "Thomas More's Spirituality," in *St. Thomas More : Action and Contemplation* (New Haven : Yale UP for St. John's University, 1972) 126.

11. See Clarence H. Miller, "Styles and Mixed Genres in Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*," in *Acta Conventus Neo-Latini Guelpherbytani. Proceedings of the Sixth International Congress of Neo-Latin Studies* ed. Stella P. Revard, Fidel Radle, Mario di Cesare (Binghamton, N.Y. : Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1988) 278-280 ; M.A. Sreech, *Ecstasy and the Praise of Folly* (London : Duckworth, 1980).

12. Miller, "Styles," 278.

13. Richard A. Lanham, *The Motives of Eloquence : Literary Rhetoric in the Renaissance* (New Haven : Yale UP, 1976) 4.

14. *Humanist Poetics*, 35.

15. *Humanist Poetics*, 52.

16. See Erasmus' letter to Martin Dorp in Miller's ed. of *The Praise of Folly*, 143.

17. Erika Betty Goodman Michael, *The Drawings by Hans Holbein the Younger for Erasmus' Praise of Folly* (New York and London : Garland, 1986) 164. Michael's commentary refers to the plates in the Basel edition (Froben). The plate is here reproduced on p. 13.

18. Miller, "Styles," 279.

19. Compare Shakespeare's Sonnet 146 ("Poor soul, the centre of my sinful earth"), Donne's Holy Sonnet XIV ("Batter my heart, three-person'd God"), and Sir Philip Sidney's comment on the final end of knowledge : "... to lead and draw us to as high a perfection as our degenerate souls, made worse by their clayey lodgings, can be capable of [and] to lift up the mind from the dungeon of the body to the enjoying of his divine essence." *The Defence of Poetry*, ed. J.A. Van Dorsten (Oxford : Oxford UP, 1966) 28. This renunciation theme stood out in More's Tower Writings : "I assure thee, on my faith ... if it had not been for my wife and you that be my children, whom I accompt the chief part of my charge, I would not have failed long ere this to have closed myself in as strait a room - and straiter, too." William Roper, *Two Early Tudor Lives. The Life of Sir Thomas More*, ed. Richard S. Sylvester (New Haven : Yale UP, 1962) 239.

20. Samuel Gardner, *A Pearl of Price or the Best Purchase : For which the Spiritual Marchant selleth all his Temporalls* (London : Thomas Bushell, 1600) 173. Gardner was one of the most popular preachers of the age.

21. Quotations come from *William Shakespeare. The Complete Works*, ed. Stanley Wells, Gary Taylor, John Jowett, and William Montgomery (Oxford : The Clarendon Press, 1986). This edition contains separate editions of the First Folio *King Lear* and the First Quarto version. With noted exceptions, I use F1, which omits some instances of the folly theme found in Q1.

22. In Q1 only: 3,488.

23. *Machiavelli : The Prince and Other Works*, tr. Allan H. Gilbert (Chicago, 1941) 141.

24. In Q1 only: 24,3000-3001.

25. "I fear...vse" in Q1 only: 16,2737-2742.

26. The word-play and "moral foole" appear in Q1 only: 16,2142;2163. For a discussion of another play on *more/moros*, see John X. Evans, "Utopia on Prospero's Island," *Moreana* XVIII, 69 (1981) 81-83.

27. Clara Clairborne Park, "As We Like It. How a Girl Can Be Smart and Still Popular," in *The Woman's Part*, ed. Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene, and Carol Thomas Neely (Urbana : U. of Illinois Press, 1980) 102.

28. Kathleen McLuskie, "The patriarchal bard : feminist criticism and Shakespeare : *King Lear* and *Measure for Measure*," in *Political Shakespeare : New Essays in Cultural Materialism*, ed. Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (Manchester : U. of Manchester Press, 1985) 101.

29. See Muir's introduction to the Arden ed. of *Lear*, liv.
30. Arthur Kirsch, "The Emotional Landscape of *King Lear*," SQ 39 (Summer, 1988) 169.
31. Curtis Brown Watson, *Shakespeare and the Renaissance Concept of Honor* (Princeton : Princeton UP, 1960) 97.
32. Jacques Hurault, *Politique, Moral, and Military Discourses*, tr. Arthur Golding (London, 1595) 93. See Watson, 97.
33. For example, "A fool who thinks that he is a fool is for that very reason a wise man. The fool who thinks that he is wise is called a fool indeed." *The Teaching of Buddha* (Tokyo : Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai, 1966), Dhammapada 63.
34. Consider also the words spoken by one of Lear's anonymous sympathizers just before the king and Cordelia are reunited :
- Thou hast a Daughter
Who redeemes Nature from the generall curse
Which twaine haue brought her to. (IV,vi,2408-2410)
35. I use *free* in the conventional sense as defined by St. Paul and understood by the English Church in the sixteenth century : freedom is the condition of having the right to do what we should do, not merely what we want to do.
36. Replying to his wife's taunts before the murder of Duncan, Macbeth boasts that "I dare do all that may become a man." (I,vii,442) After the murder, his humanity disintegrates and he is a devil (IV,iii,1604 ; 1665), a "Hell-Kite" (IV,iii,1765), a "Fiend" (IV,iii,1782), and a "hellhound." (V,x,3).
37. R.H. Goldsmith, *Wise Fools in Shakespeare* (East Lansing, MI : Michigan State UP, 1955) vii.
38. For a summary of the debate over the identity of the fool whom Lear refers to at V,iii,2921, see Muir, Arden ed. 205. He concludes that Lear meant Cordelia.
39. See Maynard Mack, *Tragic Themes in Western Literature*, ed. Cleanth Brooks (New Haven : Yale UP, 1955) 54.
40. Joel Altman, *The Tudor Play of Mind : Rhetorical Inquiry and the Development of Elizabethan Drama* (Berkeley : University of California P, 1978) 6, 39.
41. Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, tr. James Luther Adams (Chicago : U of Chicago P, 1948) xvi.
42. Dame Helen Gardner identified the crucifixion iconology in *King Lear* (London : Athlone P, 1967) 28.

43. See Erasmus' letter to Dorp in Miller's ed. of *The Praise of Folly*, 159.
44. As a final instance of intertextuality, I propose Kent's "this is not altogether Fool, my Lord" (Q1: 4,640) and Erasmus' comment that "my praise of Folly is not altogether foolish." ("Erasmus' Prefatory Letter to Thomas More," in Miller's ed. of *The Praise of Folly*, 4.)

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Précis

The wisdom/folly antithesis was a prevailing theme throughout the late Renaissance. Gaining initial momentum in Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*, this antithesis appears in some of the greatest works of the age, including several of Shakespeare's plays and Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

This essay proposes to demonstrate not only that Shakespeare borrowed freely from *The Praise of Folly* when composing *King Lear* but also that he made the wisdom/folly antithesis a crucial subtext which invites the audience to see more than death and loss at the end of his greatest tragedy.

Résumé

L'opposition entre la sagesse et la folie était un thème favori de la Renaissance tardive. Prenant un élan initial dans *L'Eloge de la Folie* d'Erasmus, cette opposition apparaît dans quelques-unes des plus grandes oeuvres de l'époque, y compris plusieurs des pièces de Shakespeare et le *Paradis Perdu* de Milton.

Cet essai se donne pour tâche de montrer non seulement que Shakespeare emprunta librement à *L'Eloge de la Folie* lorsqu'il composa *Le Roi Lear*, mais aussi qu'il fit de l'opposition sagesse/folie un sous-texte crucial qui invite le public à voir autre chose que la mort et la perte à la fin de cette tragédie, la plus grande de Shakespeare.

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• Le volume XXIII des *Arquivos do Centro Cultural Português* (Lisbonne et Paris : Fondation C. Gulbenkian, 1987) est un "Hommage à Paul Tessler" : d'où la place de choix qu'y occupe Gil Vicente. More y figure surtout grâce à l'article de J.V. de Pina Martins sur "Ce qui est vivant dans la tradition de l'humanisme" (333-49). En voici un échantillon : "Quant à l'auteur de *Utopie*, ne fixe-t-il pas à six heures par jour l'horaire de travail des habitants de cette île perdue dans les mers d'Orient ? Qu'on ne nous fasse pas dire que l'Humanisme de la Renaissance est à l'origine du progrès social actuel, mais il en a donné un premier modèle" (p. 340).