



AP European History

Erasmus – The Praise of Folly

Name:

Section:

Directions: Read the excerpts of Erasmus' "The Praise of Folly" (1509) and annotate (either on the side or an additional piece of paper) the problems that Erasmus has with each group of people.

Erasmus "The Praise of Folly"

The merchants are the biggest fool of all. They carry on the most sordid business and by the most corrupt methods. Whenever it is necessary, they will lie, perjure themselves, steal, cheat, and mislead the public. Nevertheless, they are highly respected because of their money. There is no lack of flattering friars to kowtow to them, and call them Right Honorable in public. The motive of the friars is clear: they are after some of the loot. . . .

. . . After the lawyers come the philosophers, who are revered for their beards and the fur on their gowns. They announce that they alone are wise and that the rest of men are only passing shadows. . . . The fact that they can never explain why they constantly disagree with each other is sufficient proof that they do not know the truth about anything. They know nothing at all, yet profess to know everything. They are ignorant even of themselves, and are often too absent-minded or near-sighted to see the ditch or stone in front of them. . . .

. . . Perhaps it would be wise to pass over the theologians in silence. That short-tempered and supercilious crew is unpleasant to deal with. . . . They will proclaim me a heretic. With this thunderbolt they terrify the people they don't like. Their opinion of themselves is so great that they behave as if they were already in heaven; they look down pityingly on other men as so many worms. A wall of imposing definitions, conclusions, corollaries, and explicit and implicit propositions protects them. They are full of big words and newly-invented terms. . . .

. . . Next to the theologians in happiness are those who commonly call themselves the religious and monks. Both are complete misnomers, since most of them stay as far away from religion as possible, and no people are seen more often in public. They are so detested that it is considered bad luck if one crosses your path, and yet they are highly pleased with themselves. They cannot read, and so they consider it the height of piety to have no contact with literature. . . . Most of them capitalize on their dirt and poverty by whining for food from door to door. . . . These smooth fellows simply explain that by their very filth, ignorance, boorishness, and insolence they enact the lives of the apostles for us. It is amusing to see how they do everything by rule, almost mathematically. Any slip is sacrilege. Each shoe string must have so many knots and must be of a certain color. . . . They even condemn each other, these professors of apostolic charity, making an extraordinary stir if a habit is belted incorrectly or if its color is a shade too dark. . . . The monks of certain orders recoil in horror from money, as if it were poison, but not from wine or women. They take extreme pains, not in order to be like Christ, but to be unlike each other. Most of them consider one heaven an inadequate reward for their devotion to ceremony and traditional details. They forget that Christ will condemn all of this and will call for a reckoning of that which He has prescribed, namely, charity.

The History Guide: Lectures on Modern European Intellectual History, "Desiderius Erasmus, 1466-1536,"

Retrieved December 8th, 2011, <http://www.historyguide.org/intellect/erasmus.html>