

Discussion questions: Erasmus, “The Praise of Folly”

1. What two objections to “Folly” did Erasmus anticipate in the preface? How did he respond to them?
2. For what audience did Erasmus write? What kind of reader did he have in mind for “Folly”?
3. What ethos did Erasmus create for himself in the preface? (“Ethos” is a rhetorical term that refers to the character of a speaker. In other words: What kind of person did Erasmus want the reader to think that he is?)
4. What ethos did Erasmus create for Folly? Focus on pp. 6-11 and 87, at least to begin with. How does Folly’s ethos compare with Erasmus’s in the preface? Is Folly really so foolish? How does her ethos help Erasmus in his literary aims?
5. How did Erasmus use classical quotations and allusions? Did he explain them carefully, or did he expect that his readers—some of them at least—will be familiar with them? What can you infer about humanism from his use of classical references?
6. What accusations did Erasmus make against theologians? Against preachers? Against popes, cardinals, and bishops? Is Folly convincing when she claims not to be delivering a satire (p. 73)?
7. How did Erasmus contrast the theologians of his day with the apostles? What is the point of his contrast? What virtues were possessed by the apostles but not by theologians?
8. According to Erasmus, the theologians of his day misinterpreted Scripture (pp. 78-80). Why did they do so? What are the implications of Erasmus’s criticism for the correct understanding of Scripture?
9. Christians, too, are fools, according to Erasmus; the last part of “Folly” explores the theme of Christian foolishness (80-87). How does Christian foolishness compare with the forms of folly that Erasmus has lampooned earlier in the oration? What is the serious point to Christian folly?
10. Is “Folly” funny? Does it make you smile or laugh? Why or why not?

Discussion questions: Erasmus, “Letter to Martin Dorp”

1. What ethos did Erasmus adopt in the letter to Dorp? What was his intended audience—Dorp alone, or others?
2. How did Erasmus characterize his critics? Did they have any right to criticize his portrayal of vice? What do their criticisms imply about their character?
3. How did Erasmus defend his decision to call Christian behavior a kind of folly? How did he use the ethos of Folly to protect himself? Do you think he was being honest?
4. Why did Erasmus think that Greek and Hebrew should be studied? What arguments did Dorp make against their study, and how did Erasmus respond?