

Folly as wisdom's jacket



The Silenus box is a “ case carved like an ugly Silenus” that can be “ opened to reveal beautiful, precious objects” (Erasmus 43, footnote). This box appears in Erasmus’ *The Praise of Folly* as a metaphor for the central claim in the novel, which is that that which appears to be Folly (ugly) externally, is wise (precious) within. Erasmus reveals this dichotomy on three levels: in the image of the box itself, in his genuine praise of Folly, and in the structure of the novel as a whole. Erasmus, using the female voice of Folly, introduces his reader to the image of the Silenus box early in the text, thereby allowing his reader to carry the image with her for the rest of her time reading (and see its metaphoric nature when appropriate). Folly makes the introduction, saying, “ All human affairs... have two aspects quite different from each other.” She then goes on to explain that this means, according to Plato, that things that “ appear ‘ at first blush’... to be death, will, if you examine [them] more closely, turn out to be life... in brief, you will find everything suddenly reversed if you open the Silenus” (43). In more direct terms, something which on its surface seems one way (the ‘ bad’ way), has opposite (‘ good’) guts. In *The Praise of Folly*, the pair of opposites that Erasmus focuses on is that of folly and wisdom. By including a passage dedicated to the description of the Silenus, Erasmus gives his readers a concrete picture to grasp onto that stands for the novel’s link between this pair of opposites, which is that wisdom comes under the wrapping of folly. The passage allows the reader to understand this central concept more easily. The concept, in its many manifestations, can be brought back to the same single image: the box. Silenus’ box serves as an illustration (a picture book, if you will) for the complicated *Praise of Folly*, thereby making the readers’ task of distinguishing between different narrators, and different textual layers,

easier. Folly, being folly, goes on from her initial description of the box to give the majority of her list backwards (although she begins correctly), claiming that if the list goes in one direction, it must, of course, go in the opposite direction as well (she's a woman — you can't expect her to be reasonable (28)). To do this, she abruptly inserts the word “ conversely” (43), and continues with a long backward list. “ Life will turn out to be death; beauty will become ugliness,” and so on, she says (43). In this backwards list, good outsides cloak bad insides. She then uses this inverted list as a springboard to celebrate wise appearances (although this is the exact opposite of the central message of the book, which is the celebration of foolish appearances). She declares that esteemed members of the community are truly members of her (Folly's) clan, and that all they have of wisdom is its appearance. “ Kings and great courtiers... find suitable pretexts” within which they can steal from their citizens and live in luxury so that “ downright injustice at least has some appearance of justice” (107-8). “ Popes, cardinals and bishops” also behave artificially. They “ play” their “ roles” with “ theatrical pomp” and “ ceremonies,” but as much as they abide by the superficial demands of their positions, inside they are not genuinely pious. These are just a few examples of generally respected authorities regularly acting on the outside as if they are morally impeccable, while inside, they are morally rotten. Folly celebrates their false wisdom, saying, “ To destroy the illusions” by exposing them “ would ruin the whole play” of life (43). Folly defends their false grandeur by claiming that people could not be happy otherwise, for life's “ play” would be ruined. Although this application of the metaphor is an inverted version of the Silenus box, it is interesting as a criticism of esteemed authorities. The reason the Silenus box

metaphor is used in a backwards (foolish) way in this section may be Erasmus' way of distancing himself from his book's criticisms of these powerful people. By having Folly deem them as being wise only externally, Erasmus removes himself from being politically incorrect. If anyone was insulted, he could just point to the text and laugh at them for being insulted by Folly's understanding of them. Finally, at the end of the novel, Erasmus' seemingly true voice is temporarily inserted in place of Folly's. He applies the Silenus box metaphor properly, and makes a singular genuine praise of Folly (who before had only herself to praise her). He brings his reader back to the original (non-inverted) metaphor, saying that what is ugly (foolish) without is beautiful (wise) within. To do this, he states, "Only fools have a license to declare truth without offense" (123). To substantiate his extreme claim, he quotes Paul: "take me for a fool... we are all fools for the sake of Christ," says the wise apostle (127). Likewise, Erasmus appeals to Jeremiah's attribution of "wisdom... to God alone, leaving folly as the lot of all men" (119). Paul and Jeremiah say that those who think themselves wise are actually fools for allotting themselves an attribute that only God has. Erasmus clearly has a similar message in mind in his statement that "only fools have a license to declare truth without offense" because he chooses to quote Jeremiah and Paul to substantiate his statement. Erasmus is praising those who call themselves fools, for they are the ones who exhibit humble modesty under God, thereby declaring truth "without offense". Again, the parallel to the Silenus box is easily drawn. The self-professed (self-carved) "fool" is the ugly exterior, and the wisdom within is the "beautiful, precious object" (43). This specific point echoes the solidly humanist phrase which Erasmus himself reputedly said: "Men are not born, but fashioned." Wise

men must fashion themselves the faces of fools. Erasmus' true compliment to Folly, that she is the shroud for wisdom, is also a compliment to the novel itself. For the novel, Erasmus covers his naturally "reasonable" and "male" (28) writing voice with a humorous and "base" (112) fictional voice. This character voice is itself Folly — a woman ("silly creatures, but nevertheless amusing and pleasant"(28)). Yet, despite the fact that Erasmus gives himself the voice of this Platonic fool, *The Praise of Folly* holds in its pages much wisdom, including the very wisdom that is designed at convincing the reader of its own high status (that that which is foolish without, is wise within). Erasmus is demonstrating his true wisdom by artificially giving himself the tongue of the fool. In other words, he is exhibiting his wisdom by dressing as a woman to cover his reasonable manliness. In this same literary tradition, Rabelais utilizes this peculiar narrative technique in *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, where he too hides the wisdom in his work behind the veil of foolish, and even vulgar, language. Erasmus' inclusion of the passage explaining the Selenus box allows it to be a metaphor for the central concept in the novel. Through its presence, Erasmus gives us, his readers, a tool with which to separate the layers of his text. Without it, we might be stranded (after reading) with the inaccurate belief that Erasmus was a babbling hypocrite, with contradictory ideas sprinkled throughout his work. But, I suppose, we could have just attributed that fault to Folly, who is always more than willing to accept such a title.