THE SAGE AND THE FOOL: ANTITHESIS, PARADOXY, AND RECONCILIATION IN A DIALECTICAL POETIC OF "MORIASOPHIA"

by

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Abstract

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While Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* has long been regarded a masterpiece of rhetoric and satire, little has been written about the philosophical and theological merits of the work, which arise not only from the author's moral concerns but from the essential dialectic of folly and wisdom. The antithesis constitutes a theoretical axis on which turn Folly's many arguments and demonstrations, including the nature of illusion and reality, pleasure, happiness, human nature, religious devotion, and spiritual transcendence. The genius of the work lies in its persuasive half-truths and charming misdirection, a web of brilliant sophistry which destabilizes accepted conventions and provokes a reader's reassessment of fundamental assumptions and common opinions. While the obvious paradox of credible self-praise distances Erasmus from Folly's social and moral criticism, a "Platonic" aspect is also revealed in the deeper paradox of Folly's various self-representations, her manifestations in word and image, which affirm, negate, and symbolize fundamental principles and religious doctrines. At issue is whether there is a role for literary representation in an art of reason, and whether the breach between dialectical and rhetorical methods may be reconciled by Folly, as she demonstrates a transformative leap from the wonder of paradoxy into likenesses of transcendent virtue.

The present study places the text and method of *The Praise of Folly* in a European context of folly-and-wisdom discourse, called here "moriasophia." Moriasophia is a perennial theme with literary-historical origins, often depicted as two opposing figures in debate, or as a

single, free-thinking individual confronting the dominant social, moral, and political order, or as a literary author writing in the ironic mode of truth-in-fiction. This study analyzes the literary trope on a theoretical level, demonstrating how a bivalent discourse of jest and earnest functions rhetorically and dialectically to explore and verify metaphysical, moral, and epistemological inferences. Thematic continuity is shown in ancient through early modern literature as well as a synthesis of popular culture with aspects of Platonism and Christianity. The discussion emphasizes the seminal figures of Socrates, Diogenes, St. Paul, and Dionysius the Areopagite, with particular attention paid to Plato's *Parmenides*, Petrarch's *On his own Ignorance*, and Nicholas of Cusa's *On Learned Ignorance* and *Idiota on Wisdom*. *The Praise of Folly* represents a cultural high point for moriasophia not only because of its command of precedents, literary creativity, and rhetorical sophistication, but because Erasmus invents novel ways of engaging the reader in substantial questions about language, knowledge, and faith. The result is a new generic blueprint, a dialectical poetic which invites theoretical speculation even as it provokes an affective response to human experience.

μακάριοι οἱ πεινῶντες νῦν, ὅτι χορτασθήσεσθε
μακάριοι οἱ κλαίοντες νῦν, ὅτι γελάσετε.
Λουκᾶς 6:21

In Memoriam

Mary R. Pilsner
1973-1999

Rev. James F. Pilsner
1969-2005

Fred J. Nichols
1939-2003

Frederick Purnell
1945-2005

This work is dedicated to my dialectical partner in moriasophia,
Connie, whose support and companionship I am eternally grateful for.

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Introduction

Our subject is the literary representation of a folly-wisdom dialectic, which we call moriasophia, with Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* (*Encomium Moriae*) at the center.[1] The *Moria* is often cited as a watershed moment in Western literature on account of its ironic mode, but exactly what the ironic mode consists of and whether the achievement of Erasmus may be epitomized by rhetorical paradoxy is still a matter open to debate. The purpose of this study is to recontextualize the critical conversation on Erasmus' literary theme and method by focusing on representations of moriasophia prior to and leading up to Erasmus' masterpiece. While the origin of moriasophia is ancient and its theme perennial, the dialectic relationship is manifested in different ways. The most obvious instance of moriasophia is the dialogue or debate between a figure of wisdom, recognizable by social role or status, and another who is not a member of a learned class and who also appears to be rationally deficient and perhaps socially deviant. One such model of moriasophia is an exchange between a king and his fool. The "debate" between the illustrious King Solomon and the coarse peasant Marcolf was a popular book during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, revived and nuanced in the figures like Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. But the model lends itself to other settings, such as the university and the monastery.

Other representations of moriasophia focus more acutely on the extremes of folly and wisdom within a single character, the so-called "wise fool." A complex figure with contrasting qualities of intelligence and deviance always had a place in ancient literature, from manic proph-

---

[1]Please note the following conventions: First, in defining our subject – a discourse and dialectic of folly and wisdom, or moriasophia – we give pride of place to folly. Folly is the preeminent catalyst in the European literary tradi-

ets and Odyssean tricksters to the cunning domestic servants of the Roman drama. But the fool of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance inherited these qualities and more, despite a diminished social status; an increase in popularity was accompanied by an increase in the fool's manifold abilities, adding satirical commentary and verbal wit to philosophical and theological insight. It is no accident that this ascendancy of the fool in Western culture is contemporaneous with the expansion of humanism.

A third model of moriasophia illustrates the folly-wisdom dialectic in the persona of the author. An author who writes *serio ludere*, who "jests in earnest" with irony and in alternating tones of sincerity and facetiousness, assumes the place of the wise fool for a literary audience. The moriasophic persona functions as a distancing device, introducing interpretive complexity, ambiguity, and moments of aporia. The inconsistencies in the author's persona force a reader to question whether literary personae are agents of an author's wit or the victims of an author's prank. For example, the subdued Morean persona of the *Utopia* so dissociates the author from the radical idealism of his principal character that a reader is forced to decide for himself or herself whether the book's manifold proposals have any real merit or whether they are little more than an elaborate joke.

While the first chapter of this study takes these three modes or expressions of moriasophia into consideration, our main purpose is not the illustration of various models but rather how the moriasophic dialectic introduces questions of philosophical and theological value to ordinary readers or non-specialists. Thus our critical method owes more to philosophy than literature, focusing on the nature of the moriasophic dialectic. What does it mean to juxtapose folly and wisdom in a dialectical or mimetic discourse and how do such concepts define one another? What is

tion which we aim to define. Second, we will refer hereafter to the *Moriae Encomium* as either the *Praise of Folly* or simply the *Moria*, Erasmus's own short-title for the work.

an author's purpose in representing models of contrast and interaction? And what does moriasophia expect or require of its reader? As we survey moriasophia over the centuries before and including Erasmus' experiment, we discover that such questions provoke an audience to a level of speculative thought and interpretation. What happens when we examine a dialectic of folly and wisdom alongside other fundamental opposites like ignorance and knowledge, finite and infinite, rationality and mystery, sin and grace? Plato and St. Paul alike perceived the connections, and their thoughts had a considerable influence on the literature and culture of the West.

Therefore the present work looks to philosophy and theology for its critical framework, by defining three principal ways folly and wisdom are contrasted and compared in a general theory of dialectical opposition. The first of these ways is the most obvious, antithesis, or folly and wisdom as mutually exclusive and contradictory concepts. The second chapter discusses the origin of ideas about folly and wisdom in ancient Greek philosophy and the Bible, two of the most important resources for understanding these two abstract concepts in Western thought through the Renaissance. The antithesis model is especially prevalent in the literature of proverbs, where wisdom is rectitude according to ethical principle and moral law, and folly is a self-centered, reckless disregard for higher knowledge, good example, and divine power. At the same time, it is also important to note that a literature of antithesis often introduces liminal or borderline behaviors, which participate partly in folly, partly in wisdom. The quality of cleverness so often associated with folly may be morally or intellectually ambiguous and therefore not opposed to wisdom per se.

The third and fourth chapters examine a dialectic of folly and wisdom in paradoxy. Beyond the ambiguities of individual behaviors, moriasophia is paradoxical when the representations of folly and wisdom simultaneously exemplify and contradict an ordinary understanding of

logical categories, to the extent that folly seems wise and wisdom appears foolish. Paradoxy, of course, involves a logical statement which somehow violates the rules and definitions which make logic possible; but paradoxy also has a rhetorical dimension, when semantic confusion and multivalence effect reversals in definitions and premises. We begin with the literary-philosophical genre of sayings and proverbs, highly-compressed statements intended to stimulate thought; whether they are instances of folly or wisdom depend on interpretation or the unraveling of allusion and suggestion. Erasmus' penchant for the paradoxy of *adagia* is compared to moriasophia in Dionysius the Areopagite and Nicholas of Cusa, who employ a paradox of folly and wisdom as one aspect of the dialectic method in a theology of God. The fourth chapter examines the most important philosophical resource for moriasophic dialectical discourse, Plato's *Parmenides*. In Plato, folly and wisdom relate to the affirmative and negative premises employed to investigate the paradoxy of one-and-many.

The third aspect of moriasophia treated in the fifth chapter is resolution, total identification, or "coincidentia," i.e., folly and wisdom as two terms signifying a single, transcendent reality. This kind of conceptual, metaphysical resolution is not within the realm of the human senses or intellect but is still related to it, as the convergence lines or orthoganals of artistic perspective merge in an unseen horizon. Folly and wisdom, in so far as these concepts represent the opposing principles of a Christian-Platonist dialectic, are like two wings carrying the human agent on a spiritual journey, through and beyond the affirmations and negations of the intellect to an intuitive, mystical encounter with the first principle or infinite God. In this endeavor, moriasophia attempts to heal the rift between the speculative disciplines of philosophy and theology, which, through specialization, threaten to detach the pursuit of knowledge and virtue from ordinary human experience.

Though a contemplative-spiritual objective for a literature of moriasophia is exceptional, a clear and undeniable trajectory in the history of ideas links Plato, St. Paul, and Dionysius to Petrarch, Nicholas of Cusa, and Erasmus. The sixth through ninth chapters take up this argument for continuity and tradition. The sixth chapter explores a humanist ideal of wisdom in the Renaissance, which forms the intellectual and cultural context for a moriasophic dialectical method. The seventh chapter examines the moriasophic persona as a figure of reform. The seminal themes of Pauline folly are compared to Socratic ignorance, while attributes of both merge in the medieval figure of the idiota. The eighth chapter treats Petrarch's *On His Own Ignorance* and Cusa's *Idiota on Wisdom* as two exceptional models of humanist moriasophia. In a confrontation with scholastics, Petrarch appropriates the ironic profession of ignorance in order to neutralize his opponents, to reground metaphysical and theological questions in a common language, and to temper the ambitions of reason with the certitude of faith. Cusa portrays the same essential dynamic in an imagined dialogue between an unnamed Orator and a straw man called Idiota. While enhancing the symbolic setting and elevating the philosophical discourse (wisdom is depicted as reason's reflection upon our innate foretaste of the infinite), he forfeits the immediacy and passion of Petrarch's invective tone. The ninth chapter demonstrates significant transitions in the representation of moriasophia during the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. Experiments in the dialogue form, the satirist's "jesting in earnest," and the emblematic appropriation of the fool-figure are among the contributions of humanism to the literary representation of moriasophia.

The tenth and final chapter examines Erasmus' *Moria* in its historical context. In this *tour de force* of rhetoric and dialectic, Erasmus demonstrates his mastery of the moriasophic tradition, including St. Paul, Socrates, the medieval idiota, and the *speculum stultorum*. We argue

that the three principal parts of the *Moria*'s literary structure are derived from the author's "philosophy of Christ" and that the oration's progression from ignorant hedonism and malicious fraud to contemplative ecstasy may be understood as a dialectical process of apophasis in poetic form.

Chapter 1

Toward a Dialectical Poetics of Moriasophia in the Sixteenth Century

In this chapter, we treat the literary theme of folly and wisdom in Western literature as a dialectic, and we place Erasmus' *The Praise of Folly* at the center of our inquiry. A dynamic relationship between folly and wisdom in literary figures and in the fluctuations of an author's tone is a topic closely related to the literary tradition of *serio ludere*, "to jest in earnest." After establishing our theme and rooting our critical terminology in Erasmus' own language, we examine five main areas of *Moria* criticism. In this way we will be able to distinguish our approach to a monumental text of the early modern era. For example, it is incumbent on us to examine the wisdom of the fool, the text's rhetorical strategy, and the relationship between text and reader; our emphasis, however, is on the conceptual concurrence rather than character, and we suggest specific philosophical and theological interests of humanism which enrich a heuristic view of the text.

1.1 A Discourse of Folly and Wisdom

> Proinde istos, cum sint *morotatoi* re, caeterum sophi ac Thaletes videri velint, nonne iure optimo *morosophous* illos appellabimus?
>
> (Erasmus, *Moria* 74)[2]

---

[2]Latin quotations are taken from Miller's 1979 Amsterdam edition. Greek characters are transcribed here and throughout in accordance with the standards of the Library of Congress and the American Library Association.

> They're complete fools in fact, and yet each of them would like to pass for a Wise man and a Thales; so wouldn't the best name for them all be *morosophoi* or foolishwise?
>
> (Erasmus, *Praise of Folly* 88)[3]
>
> nempe quod morosophis visum est, in eo sitam esse publicam salutem, si in promptu semper adsit validum, firmumque praesidium maxime veteranorum.
>
> (More, *Utopia* 60)[4]
>
> Wise fools think that the public safety depends on having ready a strong army, preferably of veteran soldiers.
>
> (More 61)

The Greek compound and oxymoron *morosophos* epitomizes the juxtaposition of wisdom and folly and the *jocoseria* tone and rhetorical style of Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* (*Moriae Encomium*), a work which exerted a profound influence on literature in the sixteenth century and which continues to inspire discerning readers in our own day. Even the term "oxymoron" owes something to Erasmus' *morosophos*: derived from "oxy-" ("sharp" or "acute") and "moros" (fool), it debuts in Western literary critical vocabulary only in the seventeenth century. Wherever wisdom and folly are related, juxtaposed, contrasted, conjoined, or "yoked by violence together,"[5] a particular theme reminiscent of Erasmus, More, and Rabelais comes to mind, setting a trend which culminates in the wise fools of Shakespeare and in Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. But it is also a theme which trans-

---

[3]The translation is that of Betty Radice for the *Collected Works of Erasmus* (*CWE*).
[4]The Latin text and translation of *Utopia* is that of George Logan, Robert Adams, and Clarence Miller.
[5]Samuel Johnson's famous commentary on the metaphors of the Metaphysical poets is appropos: "But Wit, abstracted from its effects upon the hearer, may be more rigorously and philosophically considered as a kind of *disconcordia concors*; a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike[...] The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions; their learning instructs, and their subtilty surprises[...]" Life of Cowley 20.

cends the figure of the fool. Thomas More, whose *Utopia* expands the Erasmian theme in new literary forms and rhetorical situations, interjects an authorial persona into the dialogue of Book I as a counterpoint to Raphael, the wise-fool figure. When More's persona describes the scene of Raphael at Cardinal Morton's court as a *tragicomoediam*, he calls attention to larger, generic repercussions of a folly-wisdom dynamic. His term (which he appears to have coined) has further echoes in the literary experiments of Giovanni Battista Guarini.[6]

The collision (or collusion) of wisdom and folly evokes the names of Voltaire, Swift, Pope, Stern, Shaw and numerous others. Indeed, modern literature pays its homage to Erasmian *morosophia* as well, and not always in the same spirit or with the same intentions or results. For example, Poe's "Hop-Frog" is a tale about a king who loves jesting and a court fool who is anything but humorous; abused by a sinister king, he retaliates with a calculated and deadly prank. In *The Good Soldier Švejk*, Jaroslav Hašek, considered a "modern day Cervantes" by some, depicts a disillusioned yet clever Czek soldier who does anything he can, including feigning madness, to escape conscription in the Austro-Hungarian army. And in *Liber aleph vel CXI: the Book of Wisdom or Folly*, the infamous occultist Aleister Crowley proclaims Rabelais a gnostic saint, the rule of the Abbey of Thélème ("Do What You Will") the one and only universal law, and he himself the mystical embodiment of wisdom and folly combined.[7]

---

[6]More's persona compares Raphael to a Senecan character from the Roman play *Octavia*, thrusting a philosopher's speech into the midst of a low-comic scene from Plautus. While Morton's courtiers are debased in a comparison with household slaves (*vernulae*), the association of Raphael with the long-winded Senecan persona satirizes the philosopher's lack of social skills. The point is that, in *Utopia*, the folly-wisdom dynamic reverberates in the opposition of several characters and situations. See More 94–97.

Although no specific connection has been demonstrated between More's example of tragicomedy and Guarini's ground-breaking *Pastor Fido* (and his elaborate defense of the new genre), neither has More received due credit for inventing the term some seventy years in advance. See also Weinberg 656–62.

[7]See, for example, Crowley 56, 75–77, 96, 132.

Modern criticism continues to pay tribute to the Erasmian blueprint as well. For example, in his chapter entitled "The Wisdom of Holy Fools in Post-Modernity," theologian Peter Phan argues that only "holy folly" (or "crazy wisdom," or "foolish wisdom," or "holy madness"), exemplified in the *Moria*, can provide a model of self-giving love and overcome postmodernity's rejection of wisdom as *mythos* and *logos* (that is, as metanarrative and philosophic rationalism) (Phan 3–22). Psychologist and comparatist Brian Spillane argues that modern psychotherapy and "depth psychologies" embody the wise folly of the humanist fool; the psychotherapist and fool have much in common as "educative figures whose concerns are the mysterious, and who operate under a system of repression, making sensible the nonsensible" (Spillane).

What these works have in common is a fascination not only with the intersection of wisdom and folly but with Erasmus' eccentric experiment in modes of human reasoning and in the combination of logic/conventionality and irrationality/mystery which exemplifies our true-to-life mental associations, rhetorical assertions, and personal allegiances. The literary form – a "paradoxical encomium" in the classical vein – is as much a part of this experiment as the content and is in fact inseparable from Erasmus' rhetorical flourish and his ironical voice, at once coaxing and vexing, engaging and distancing the reader. The figure of Folly, the embodiment of an idea in the flux of sense and nonsense, agreement and contradiction, consistent in its inconsistency, remains elusive, unstable, complex. There had never been anything quite like the *Moria* in European history, which accounts at least in part for its controversial reception in the sixteenth century, with humanists and theologians lining up to add insults to injuries. For one as irenic in his principles as Erasmus, he certainly knew how to keep an argument going. Erasmus

not only held fast to his work, defending it repeatedly, but he reprinted it several times through 1532, expanding the text in those parts where it was the most harshly critical (Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly* xiii).

1.2 Translations and Origins: From Morosophia to Moriasophia

Who are the *morosophoi* for Erasmus and More? The term has not always proved an easy matter for translators. "Fool" and "wise man" do not compound neatly in most European languages, and the difficulty of capturing the Erasmian sense is evident. In recent English editions of the *Moria*, Betty Radice sets the modifier "foolish-wise" in apposition with the original Greek, while Miller opts for Chaloner's neologism of 1549, "foolosophers." Translators of the *Utopia* are somewhat less consistent. Hexter and Surtz employ the word "wiseacres," which is accurate only in its antiquated sense and obscures that half of the Greek compound belonging to folly. More recently, Adams and Logan render *morosophoi* as "wise fools." Though this epithet strives for fidelity to the original, it transposes the two stems and reverses the sense with the order. The question of language is almost always a significant one for Erasmus and More, for whom Greek was a rite of initiation. For the serious humanist scholar, devoutly Christian and passionately classicist, the Greek language was a key to the elegant and sophisticated Hellenistic civilization as well as a gateway to the mysteries of sacred Scripture and the faith of so many learned Fathers of the early Church.[8]

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[8]Nineteenth-century translators shy away from the Greek compound. For example, Erasmian scholar Désiré Nisard continues the comparison between fools and apes (cited in *Adagia* 610) rather than translating *morosophous*, also omitting Erasmus's reference to Thales: "Archifous, dans toute la force du mot, et empruntant les dehors de la Sagesse, en sont-ils autre chose que les singes?" Erasmus, *Éloge de la Folie* 188. Similarly, C.B. de Panable uses the substitute "Maîtres fous!" Erasmus, *L'Éloge de la Folie* 46. The more scholarly translations of recent times tend to maintain the novelty and integrity of the original, supplemented by notation. Eugenio Garin, for example, opts for the hyphenated *moro-sofi* in his Italian translation Erasmo da Rotterdam 14. Tomás Pérez renders it *monosabios*,

Although Erasmus did not invent the term *morosophos*, its occurrence is rare. Only a single example survives in Greek manuscripts, and that in Lucian's *Alexandros*, the story of an ingenious charlatan who impersonates a divine oracle for his own profit. In Lucian's narrative, the *morosophoi* are those who bicker over trivial or inane questions (in this instance, whether a prophet's golden thigh implies that he merely reflects or actually shares the soul of Pythagoras). Erasmus translated the *Alexandros* and six other dialogues (along with five translated by Thomas More) and sent them to his friend Josse Bade for publication in November of 1506 (Erasmus, *Opera Omnia*).

There is little doubt that *morosophos* has resonances for Erasmus, who uses the term on two other occasions, roughly during the same period as the composition of the *Moria*. In the introduction to the *Adagia*, a collection of ancient sayings and proverbs first published in 1500 and hugely expanded in Aldus' edition of 1508, Erasmus cites the example of a proverb which "puts together opposite words." He writes: "This opposition sometimes happens in compound words, like *morosophos*, foolishly wise, and *glukuprikros*, bitter-sweet" (Erasmus, *Adages* 72). Either for aesthetic reasons or on account of classical precedent, Erasmus recalls the Greek neologism rather than the Latin translation, *stulte sapiens*, in *The Double Abundance of Words and Things* (*De duplici copia verborum ac rerum*), a grammatical textbook compiled during the early 1500s and first published in 1511. *Morosophos* appears among *Novata* or "new words" to illustrate a "judicious mingling of Greek forms with the Latin." Here Erasmus offers a clear definition: "a man who is a fool but thinks himself wise."[9]

drawing on a Spanish term associated with monkeys which also happens to sound similar (*moro* - *mono*), but then includes a more literal translation in a footnote ("necios-sabios") Erasmo de Rotterdam 77.

[9]Erasmus, *CWE* 24: 317.

These echoes have been duly noted by scholars, particularly Clarence Miller, editor of the *Moria* for the Amsterdam *Opera*. Miller also points out – and others follow – that Thomas More's *Utopia* echoes Erasmus.[10] While Miller suggests that Erasmus' oxymoron "pinpoints much of the irony of the work," he and others do not make much of the fact that the term is presented to the reader as a smear, that is, a denigration of self-important intellectuals in Erasmus' day, rather than the distinguishing mark of a certain kind of fool. Erasmus' Folly considers the *morosophoi* on par with "an ape in king's clothes" or "an ass in lion's skin." Taking up the Erasmian oxymoron quite deliberately in the *Utopia*, More (through Raphael) says that those who think foreign mercenary soldiers are necessary even in peacetime are *morosophoi*. Description turns into illustration in Raphael's vivid account of the proud and well-adorned Anemolian ambassadors.

Both a term and concept of *morosophos* are important if we are to understand critically the oxymoronic heroism of Erasmus' and More's protagonists as well as the sense of conflict and paradox in the authors' literary structures and rhetorical styles. The foolish-sage types indicated by *morosophoi* are clearly, in some sense, the descendants of St. Paul's Corinthian rivals, whose self-importance the Apostle describes in metaphors of inflatedness, that "knowledge" which "puffs up" (*The Bible with Apocrypha* 1 Cor. 8:1). How, then, shall we describe Erasmus' Folly and More's Raphael, who appear similarly "puffed up" with language, and not always in the sense of "empty-headed" (from the late Latin *follem* or *follis*)?[11] In his dedicatory letter, Erasmus writes: "unless I am completely deceived by self-love, my praise of Folly is not altogether foolish" (Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly* 4). This authorial display of folly-in-contradiction, a combination of pro-

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[10](Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly* 13, n. 8).

fessed uncertainty and perspicacious intimation, paralleled in the figure of folly, provides the inverse image of the *morosophoi*: a self-evident, self-conscious fool, whose poise, cleverness, and wit reveal (to the discerning reader) a covert intelligence and ability. Such is the "wise fool" of modern translation and criticism, a term which describes, aptly, a long trajectory of jester types, from the historical Chicot, Scocola, and Will Somers to the fictive Eulenspiegel, Bertoldo, Gonella, and Touchstone[12]

And yet, for some reason, neither Erasmus nor More committed to print the appropriate inverse of *morosophos*, which would be *sophomoros*.[13] Why not? For one, they may have been avoiding confusion with the common terms for students and logical problems, *sophistes* and *sophisma* (or *sophismata*), which did not imply that students were "wise" but rather that they practiced the art of reasoning. More importantly, *sophomoros* as "wise fool" does not convey the full range of creativity or flexibility of character which Erasmus and More were aiming at. If the fool is wise, does that mean he is not really foolish?[14] How can we properly distinguish between court jesters (for whom "fool" is both a role and a profession) and fools who are not so easily identified? Can we say definitively that Raphael Hythloday, Friar John Mincemeat, and Don Quixote are fools or wise men? Therefore, to capture the artistry of the complex characters as well as

[11]The Latin word for air in a bag, *follis*, was also used for an inflated ball and a money bag (Lewis and Short). See also "fool" in OED.

[12]A more recent (and comprehensive) discussion of court fools may be found in Otto, but see also the classic studies of Doran, Swain, and Welsford. Additional sources are mentioned in the notes of the following section.

[13]There is at least one precedent for this conjunction in late ancient literature. Epictetus, a moral philosopher of the late first and early second century who would become a favorite of Erasmus, describes a *sophon moron* in the second chapter of his *Discourses*. But while Erasmus read the *Enchiridion* of Epictetus (it was translated by Poliziano in 1479 and printed soon after), the *Discourses* were not yet known. See Tracy, *Erasmus, the Growth of a Mind* 85. In addition, Epictetus intends the term in essentially the same way Erasmus and More intend *morosophos*, i.e., a fool who thinks himself wise (specifically, one who is head-strong or stubborn) .

[14]Although there is clear evidence that some women were reputed fools, the vast majority from ancient times through the sixteenth century were men. For convenience we therefore adopt the convention of masculinity when referring to the fool.

the literary techniques developed by the authors of folly and wisdom, we have chosen for our critical lens the neologism "moriasophia" - a less weighted (if not entirely unbiased) compounding of the two terms and concepts. Embracing the "foolish sage" as well as the "wise fool," moriasophia acknowledges the dialectical and rhetorical potential of a dynamic interaction between folly and wisdom, so that these two modes of being, thinking, reasoning, speaking, and experiencing are illuminated and contrasted as fully and clearly as possible.[15] If Shakespeare's Falstaff, Feste, and Touchstone follow in the footsteps of Erasmus' *Moria*, it is important to ask how dramatic roles some eighty or more years later reconstitute the folly and wisdom of the quick-witted sophist.

Nevertheless, the present study looks to the moriasophic roots before examining its branches. Moriasophia straddles centuries as it does character types, combining the pagan with the Christian, the proverbial with the erudite, and the base prankster with the more refined technician of verbal wit and irony. Any theory of moriasophia in Erasmus and More must, for this reason, consider the playful jester and the learned rhetorician as collaborators with St. Paul and Lucian in a grand resistance movement against conventionality. Furthermore, we must also ask why the sixteenth century was the cultural moment for the Erasmian innovation, why humanism found an ample and effective spokesperson in the fool, and why a divided European readership responded with both enthusiasm and vitriol.

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[15]We have opted not to italicize moriasophia here and throughout in order to emphasize its universality as a literary-dialectical theme and strategy rather than its Greek derivation.

It is also worth noting that the English word "sophomore" does not derive from the combination of the Greek *sophos* and *moron*, but rather from *sophistes* together with the English/French suffix for the agent noun, "-o(u)r." The "m" is carried over from "sophism," and a "sophister" (or more rarely, "sophumer") identifies the medieval student as one who learns the art of reasoning and of solving logical problems (*sophisma* or *sophismata*). This derivation made it convenient for humanists, influenced by their reading of Plato, to resurrect "sophist" as a term of derogation. Yet the slight is ironic when one considers that the majority of humanists were rhetoricians and

1.3 Aspects of the *Moria* and its Criticism

Although the genres of folly are performing less frequently in the classrooms of today's academies, the *Moria*'s design and achievement is paid due homage in the annals of modern criticism. Treated in several dozen books and hundreds, if not thousands, of scholarly articles, one might say that, despite the neglect of present times, we have given Folly an entirely new category of adherents to expound upon. Many of us critics have admittedly fallen under Folly's spell and dote upon her after the fashion of those in her train, i.e., with drunkards, seniors, nobles, monks, friars, philosophers, madmen, *et alii*, *ad infinitem*. Of course this laughter at the self is precisely what the literature invites and what Erasmus intends. It is a most natural and (often) less painful form of humility.

Still, the critical preoccupation is not mere folly, for the laughter soon mellows into rational inquiry, literary analysis, and general thoughtfulness, as we attempt to interpret the coherencies and discrepancies of the jest and the earnest, of the significance of subjective and objective genitive and of the paradox and its potential resolutions.[16] Studies have illuminated the intellectual and literary context in which Erasmus lived and worked, his employment of classical figures and tropes, particularly irony, and the resonances of significant intertexts, such as the letters of St. Paul to the Corinthians and Lucian's satiric dialogues and declamations. Furthermore – and quite importantly – the *Moria*

teachers of rhetoric and therefore more closely associated with the antique *sophistes* by profession. See OED Lewis, et al., and Rey, Tomi, Hordé, et al.

[16]William Kaiser is frequently credited for identifying Erasmus's paradoxical conjunction of subjective and objective genitive. That is, Folly is both the subject praising (*Folly's* praise of Folly) and the object being praised (Folly's praise *of Folly*). See Kaiser, W. J. 36. The device was not, however, invented by Erasmus. As we point out in Chapter 3.3, Nicholas of Cusa takes advantage of the same subject-object ambiguity some fifty years earlier in his work entitled *On the vision of God*. It is likely that the device was known to the Latin-speaking ancients, but examples still need to be identified.

has been evaluated alongside Erasmus' other works in order to demonstrate continuity and development in thought and rhetorical style.[17]

Thus any new study bears the burden of distinction, if indeed there is anything "new under the sun" (to allude to one of Folly's own authorities). We take for our departure the standpoint that the genius of the *Moria* lies in its moriasophia, a term which will assist us in coordinating much of what has already been said about the work and about the trend in literature which looks back – or rather which causes us to look back – to Erasmus as its herald. On its surface, moriasophia represents a logical contradiction, like oxymorons, for some psychological or artistic effect. We also propose, however, that moriasophia reaches beyond literary themes and devices, provoking more formal questions which arise from concepts in dialectical opposition.

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Before venturing further into the outlines of moriasophia, it may be helpful to offer a descriptive summary of several aspects of the *Moria* which have received the lion's share of critical attention.[18]

1. Erasmus' figure of Folly in relation to the European tradition of fools, both actual and fictional, natural and artificial.

Personification, association, allusion, and self-description identify Folly with European fools. Although Erasmus introduces the Greek term *morion*, Folly also goes by the Latin name Stultitia, which personifies the most common term for a fool in medieval and early-modern parlance, *stultus*. She allies herself to "those who wander the forums" (a plausible reference to Ital-

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[17]Michael Screech, in his introduction to Reeve, emphasizes the significant parallels between Erasmus's *Moria* and his *New Testament*, as if the two works represent two modes of speech expressing the same profound reality. Though separated in their initial publication by some seven years, Erasmus kept both projects close to him throughout his life, revising them numerous times as he advanced in learning, experience, and taste.

ian mountebanks, according to Lister) and to the *scurrae*, or idler-buffoons, often a kind of parasite at the tables of the wealthy.[19] A visual connection to the medieval-Renaissance court jester appears only with the marginal drawings of Hans Holbein for the Froben 1515 edition, where Folly is shown in motley, cap and bells, together with an audience of adherents similarly caparisoned.[20]

Criticism which places the *Moria* within the historical and literary tradition of fools, such as the early twentieth-century studies of Enid Welsford and Barbara Swain, demonstrate the wide-ranging cultural context out of which Erasmus' text arises. Folly (Stultitia) intersects with an immense and unwieldy history – both real and imagined – of parasites, buffoons, jesters, dwarfs, clowns, simpletons, *commedia* roles, et al., exhibited in courts as well as private homes, on public stages, and in the open spaces of urban feasts and folk festivals. Erasmus' personification is at the center of a popular-cultural fascination with the fool-figure, one which he perpetuated as much as embraced. In a recent comparative study of the fool in both East and West, Beatrice Otto finds an unparalleled escalation of folly in the Europe of the sixteenth century, which she describes as "a tsunami-scale wave of medieval and Renaissance fool mania that engulfed the Continent" (Otto 256–58, 31–32). Bakhtin, who identified the *Moria* as "one of the greatest creations of carnival laughter in world literature," shifted critical attention to the several *festae stultorum* as an alter-reality, a temporal dimension where "official" license was given to the aberrant impulses of unacceptable behaviors in order to provide a controlled release from ordinary strictures, one which would ultimately undergird the rule of law rather than undermine it.[21]

[18]For a thorough survey on modern criticism of Erasmus and the *Moria*, see Mansfield.
[19]"sed quas fori circulatoribus, scurris ac morionibus consueuistis arrigere" Erasmus, *Moria* 72.
[20]Erasmus, *Erasmi Roterodami Encomium moriae, i.e. Stultitiae laus*. See especially the cover illustrations. Here and in the marginal drawings, cap and bells are consistent with the woodcuts made for Sebastian Brant's *Ship of Fools*.
[21]Bakhtin 9–10 and passim, and also Krystyna Pomorska's introduction (ix-x). D.G. Watson (*Spirit of Carnival)* links Bakhtin's analysis of folk culture and carnival to *The Praise of Folly*, determining that Folly's general

Nevertheless, the *Moria* evokes and symbolizes rather than exemplifies this extensive tradition of fools and their games or exploits. While claiming to embrace all forms of folly, the figure of Stultitia does not herself dramatize or imitate every sort of foolish behavior but rather directs the reader to seek the images and forms of folly in her many disciples. For example, Folly does not indulge her readers in the profanity and obscenity of mock-religion, gluttony, defecation, and sexuality - fundamental manifestations of most festival fools (Bakhtin's "grotesque realism"). She remains an impression simultaneously replete and hollow – a faceless voice, a multi-faceted disposition, and a literary lens with which to survey the world, a world which the reader re-makes in his or her own image, imagination, and experience. This figure would not have functioned so effectively had there not been a concrete frame of reference in life as in literature, that is, had there not been an iconic fool. Erasmus thus echoes the folly-types portrayed in Brant's *Ship of Fools* (*Narrenschiff*) but provides a single, unifying, "authorial" voice for its myriad, disparate forms.

2. The *Moria* as a product of Erasmian humanism, demonstrating the author's extraordinary learning and commitment to reform

progression "from Nature to society to the individual" relates carnival to the paschal season; see especially 351-53. On the feast of fools in France, see also Heers. For additional studies on aspects of carnival and the carnivalesque, see Billington, *A Social History of the Fool* and Billington, *Mock Kings in Medieval Society and Renaissance Drama*, and Eisenbichler and Hüsken. Salid Ingvild Gilhus argues persuasively against Bakhtin's "release of tension" thesis.

The ubiquitous figure of the fool has occasioned a large body of scholarship. While several earlier studies such as Doran Welsford, and Swain concentrate on historical-anecdotal evidence, bringing to light those accounts of fools and festival roles obscured by time, modern studies are often focused on understanding the fool as a pan-cultural phenomenon. In her introduction, Janik (who refers to Erasmus's Folly as "one of the most famous fools in Western culture" and "the most significant fool in modern culture") provides a useful eight-fold classification: the four categories of wise fool, dupe or victim, trickster or evildoer, innocent or holy fool, each subdivided according to the fool's awareness of self alone and/or others (somewhat analogous to the distinction between "natural" and "artificial," which Janik acknowledges elsewhere) (2–4). William Willeford also offers a thorough description of the fool's characteristics and contexts, adding the insights of a psychologist's point of view. There has also been a growing interest in comparative studies of the fool, as exemplified by Phan and Otto. Other helpful studies of fools and the folly tradition are Lever, Lefebvre, Williams, A., and several excellent articles in Janik and Williams, P. V. A.

It is difficult for us to imagine a world in which literature[22] molds a person as much as (or, at times, more than) one's friends, associates, and professional roles, and yet such is the bibliophilic era in which Erasmus lived. Reading, writing, manuscripts, and books dominated his interests and habits to a degree most of us today would consider unhealthy and obsessive. This milieu goes a long way toward explaining why so much of the criticism of early modern humanism is concerned with early modern print culture and publication history. (The poignant comparison to the Internet of modern times has already become clichéd.) To get closer to the author and his work therefore necessitates a familiarity with the period's texts as kindred - or adversarial - spirits, as instruments of education, agents of civic activism, and mirrors for the self and the world.

At the historical moment of the *Moria*'s composition and first publication, the breadth and depth of Erasmus' reading was considerable. A middle-aged man in his early forties, he had since his youth dedicated himself to the study of classical literature and the Latin language, and, after 1500, Greek, with the express purpose of better understanding the Scriptures and the Fathers of the Church. To this end, and in order to earn a living through benefice, patronage, and publication, he traveled widely throughout Europe. Though raised in the Netherlands and trained in the monastery, he began the life of a wandering scholar at about the age of twenty-five, commencing a career as a Latin secretary to the Bishop of Cambrai, Henrik Von Bergin, but then seeking an education and his fortunes in Paris, during three trips across the channel to England, on several excursions in his native Netherlands, in Italy for several months, and finally settling (if one may call it that) in the German Rhineland cities of Basel and Freiburg.[23] Whether living in the monastery, in an ecclesiastical or secular court, at a university, or in the home of a patron

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[22]The term "literature" here refers not just to representation and fiction but to the culture of the book and its wide range of cultural and intellectual subjects and discourses.

(or, later, of his own), Erasmus was eager to make friends, to acquire manuscripts, and to apply himself toward another project of educational and spiritual import.

Erasmus' extant correspondence as well as his several publications through the early part of the sixteenth century provide a window into his immense appetite for literature and learning. In a letter to a fellow Augustinian living in a monastery of the Windesheim congregation, Cornelius Gerard, he writes in 1489, "My authorities in poetry are Virgil, Horace, Ovid, Juvenal, Statius, Martial, Claudian, Persius, Lucan, Tibullus, and Propertius; in prose, Cicero, Quintilian, Sallust, and Terence." And he continues with reverence: "I must admit it: I should not dare to make use of any phrase not employed by these authors, while, if you would include any others, I shall by no means hold it against you" (CWE 1:31). This enthusiasm for the ancient writers is tempered a few years later, in a letter to Bishop Henrik Van Bergen, when he contrasts the ancients to Hebrew and Christian authors: "I tend to be indignant from time to time with the poets of modern times (even Christian poets) because in choosing models they prefer to set before themselves Catullus, Tibullus, Propertius, and Ovid, rather than St. Ambrose or Paulinus of Nola or Prudentius or Iuvencus or Moses or David or Solomon, as though their Christianity were forced and not spontaneous" (CWE 1:103).

Compelled by an ardent desire to understand St. Paul, the gospels, the apostolic letters, and the Septuagint Old Testament in the ancient Greek, he embarked upon the greatest ambition of his life, the study and mastery of the Greek language. The massive expansion of his *Adagia* between the years 1500 and 1508 – from a slender volume of 818 adages to 3,260, and from a predominantly Latin idiom to a full complement of Greek and Latin, the former eventually outnumbering the latter – indicates the remarkable progress of his studies, especially when Greek tutors and primers were hard to come by (Schoeck, R. J., *Erasmus* 74–85). Expertise in Greek

[23]As of 1501, the city of Basel was designated a "Canton."

opened the door not only to the sacred Scriptures but to the extraordinary number of literary, philosophical, and theological works newly recovered in Italy during the previous century and continuing through Erasmus' own time. Erasmus' preferences for classical and early Christian texts are reflected in his program of liberal studies, set forth in such works as *On the Double Abundance, On the Method of Studies* (*De ratione studii*) and *A Method and Compendium of True Theology* (*Ratio seu compendium verae theologiae*).

Thus some modern criticism emphasizes the *Moria*'s erudition and its didactic, polemical purpose. Erasmus himself encourages such a view in his Letter to Dorp, when he writes rather provocatively: "In the Folly, I had no other aim than I had in my other writings, but my method was different."[24]

3. The *Moria* as satire, written in the literary form of the paradoxical encomium.

For Erasmus, genres are inherently concerned with precedent. In his prefatory letter to Thomas More, a citation of several classical precedents demonstrates the breadth of Erasmus' literary learning while answering to the inevitable criticism that he had praised a universal vice. His examples illustrate, rather, the farcical spirit of the paradoxical encomium: "So too Polycrates wrote encomia of Busiris; Glauco praised injustice; Favorinus, the quartan fever; Synesuis, baldness; Lucian the fly." When the attacks came – and they came with a vengeance – Erasmus amplified the generic defense in the edition of 1514. The revised letter to More included the

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[24]Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly Letter to Martin Dorp*, 142. The extensive notes to Miller's Amsterdam edition of the *Moria* will convince any skeptic of Erasmus's immense learning and stylistic mastery. Many helpful introductions to the *Moria* have been written in recent years by scholars, including the late R.J. Schoek, original editor of the CWE project in Toronto, who dedicates a chapter to the *Moria* in his two volume biography 95–108. Other notable historians of Erasmus' intellectual background include Margaret Mann Phillips Tracy, *Erasmus, the Growth of a Mind*, and Tracy, *Erasmus of the Low Countries* Margolin, *Érasme par Lui-Même*, and Margolin, *Érasme: Précepteur de l'Europe* Rummel, E., and Levi, *Erasmus*. For Erasmus's life-long involvement with the Church Fathers, see den Boeft. Erasmus's debt to the Fathers in the *Moria* is demonstrated in extraordinary detail by Michael Schreech, in Screech. For Erasmus's grammatical and rhetorical learning, see Chomarat. For his accomplishments in the Greek language, applied to Scriptural translation and commentary, see Rummel, E., *Erasmus as a Translator of the Classics*.

pseudo-Homeric *Battle of the Frogs and Mice*, the pseudo-Virgilian encomia on the gnat and the country salad, the pseudo-Ovidian encomium on the walnut tree, Favorinus' praise of Thersites (whom Homer regarded the ugliest Greek at the battle of Troy), Lucian's treatise on the parasite, Seneca's "pumpkinification" of the Emperor Claudius, Plutarch's dialogue between Gryllus and Ulysses (where Gryllus argues it is better to remain one of Circe's pigs), Apuleius' *Golden Ass*, Lucian's *Lucius, the Ass*, and the last will and testament of Grunnius Corocotta (a piglet).[25] These precedents are reinforced in Listrius' lengthy commentary, to which Erasmus contributed, and in the defensive Letter to Dorp, both written in 1515.[26]

Sister Geraldine Thompson made it a hallmark of her study, *Under Pretext of Praise* that Erasmus wrote the *Praise of Folly* "in the satiric mode," yet with such an emphasis on his use of irony that she might well have said (as later critics indeed have) that he wrote it "in the ironic mode."[27] Indeed Erasmus' own list of antecedents begs the question of exactly how the *Moria*'s form is related to satire, at least as a classical genre. It is generally agreed among scholars that the *Moria* owes its greatest debt to Lucian rather than the verses of Juvenal and Horace or the Menippean "medley" of poetry and prose.[28] In Lucian, *serio ludere* is not just a device but a continuum: the ambiguity of the authorial perspective is a duplicity which leads one to question any *prima facie* representation or interpretation. Folly's self-praise is similarly suspect and ambiguous. Thus, at times, the *Moria* demonstrates the didactic purpose of the Roman models – a censuring of "human folly and vices" – but it also reveals, more broadly, the Lucianic stylistic freedom and detachment from any single purpose.

[25]Erasmus, *Moria* 68–69. On the paradoxical encomium, see Colie and Thompson, S. G.. Marc Van der Poel remarks on the genre's heterogeneity in Antiquity and its continued adaptation to contemporary issues van der Poel 131–33.
[26]Erasmus, *Erasmi Roterodami Encomium moriae, i.e. Stultitiae laus*; Gavin and Walsh.
[27]Thompson's attention to irony is taken up by many, notably Kaiser, W. J. and Pavlovskis.
[28]See "satire" in Preminger, Warnke and Hardison.

A treatment of the *Moria* as satire also involves the reception of the text, since those who perceived themselves ridiculed (Martin van Dorp, Noël Béda, Edward Lee, Alberto Pio, et al)[29] led the charge of counter-attacks against the humanist author. The detractors took Folly quite seriously, and Erasmus' substantial additions to the 1514 edition – most of which concern Folly's present-day disciples – only reinforced the connection between the *Moria*'s thinly-veiled criticism and that of other humanist satires, such as the *Letters of Obscure Men*. Nevertheless, instead of hiding behind his whimsical and impulsive literary persona, Erasmus continued to defend Folly's statements as if they were his own. This fact thwarts the expectations of a modern audience, as many critics are quick to point out the advantages of Erasmus' folly-pretense without mentioning his reluctance to absolve himself in the polemical correspondence. Did Erasmus spoil his own game? Was his unwillingness to distance himself further from his Folly persona a sign that the abuses were all too real for him?

4. The *Moria* as a masterpiece of rhetoric.

The complete title, *Moriae Encomium i.e. stultitiae laus Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami declamatio*, proposes that the literary form is at once an encomium and a declamation. This fact is interesting in itself, since the two genres are not always identical. The encomium (*egkomion*; *laus* or *laudatio* in the Roman tradition) may be defined either as a subdivision of the ceremonial branch of oratory or as an exercise in rhetorical pedagogy (*progymnasmata*) - in both cases, a speech in praise of some person or collective achievement. But the declamation is a much broader, hybrid genre. On par with the Greek *meletē*, which arises out of the rhetorical schools in the fifth century B.C., the declamation requires a student to go beyond advancing or defending a position on a given topic (the *stasis*, a preliminary exercise) and to exhort a person or audience

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[29]Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly* xii; Screech; Rummel, E., *Erasmus and His Catholic Critics*. The reception of the *Moria* is discussed in Chapter 7.

toward a particular course of action, based on either an abstract supposition (*thesis* / *quaestio*) or a question involving a specific situation or person (*hypothesis* /*causa*). To this deliberative purpose a stylistic aspect was added, the speaker adopting the method and tone of a renowned orator. Persuasion and imitation developed in different ways over time and depending on the context. It became common practice, for example, for the orator to take on the persona of an historical or mythological figure (*ethopoeia* / *prosopopoeia*) and to exhort some fictional counterpart toward a specific course of action. In the Roman schools, the deliberative declamation was called a *suasoria* and distinguished from speeches tailored for the law courts, *controversia*, which were argued as if presented to a jury.[30] Some rhetoricians with advanced training performed their declamations for a public audience, enhancing their arguments with ingenuity, character, emotive force, and stylistic virtuosity.[31]

Erasmus became more intimately familiar with the declamation when he translated three declamations of Libanius between 1501 and 1503, his first effort at rendering a complete Greek text into Latin.[32] Although he praises Libanius for his skill in the portrayal of character, his choice probably reflected the availability of manuscripts at the time.[33] But he returns to the dec-

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[30]As Connolly points out, the suasoria in Rome grew out of the two potential trajectories of deliberative oratory, which are to dissuade or to exhort, *logos protreptikos* and *logos epotreptikon* 153. Roberts speculates that the *controversia* developed during the Hellenistic period in Greece in "Declamation". In the Roman schools, *controversia* were in use in the rhetorical schools during the period after Cicero's death. See Fordyce 317.

[31]Although many complained about the sensationalization and corruption of a serious deliberative and forensic exercise, the practice of performing declamations continued to grow by popular demand. See Fordyce.

[32]The three declamations of Libanius which Erasmus translated were: Menelaus demanding Helen's release, Medea contemplating her childrens' murder, and Andromache addressing Hector's corpse. See George 128–31 and Rummel, E. 27–48. See Erasmus's advice-form of argument in *Declamatio in genere suasoria de laude matrimonii*, which title became known as *Encomium matrimonii*, demonstrating the flexibility of certain oratorical terms. Marc van der Poel points out the "highly committed" nature of declamations throughout Erasmus' career, on moral, pedagogical and political matters. He argues that, like Valla, the adaptation of the declamation to contemporary situations revived the genre. Declamations are therefore "most classical precisely in that they are most modern" 131. W.E. Campbell reminds us that More's translation of Lucian's *Tyrannicide* and declamatory response was written while he was "smarting under the royal displeasure" of Henry VII 40. For a compelling view of declamation as the construction of self-identity with earnestness, art, and humor, see Gunderson. Relevant to Erasmus, Gunderson's introduction is entitled "A praise of folly" 1-28.

[33]In his dedication to Nicolas Ruistre, Bishop of Arras and Chancellor of the University of Louvain, Erasmus praises Libanius' rhetorical skill. See Erika Rummel 21–22.

lamation a few years later, in his friendly competition with Thomas More in 1505, when they each decided to write (and publish) an original *suasoria* in response to Lucian's *Tyrannicide.*[34] This declamation exercise in epideictic overtones is preceded by another work of youthful *progymnasmata*, a *Declamation in Praise of Medicine* (*Declamatio in laudem artis medicae*) (Ebels-Hoving and Ebels 133–34). Here, then, lies Erasmus' foundation for equating the encomium with the declamation, delivered by a fictional persona. As for the juxtaposition of the serious and comic in the declamation and the encomium, Erasmus must also have known Valla's *Praise of Saint Thomas* (*Encomion S. Thomae*), delivered to an assembly of Dominicans to commemorate the birthday of Thomas Aquinas. This work was at once a sincere tribute to the saint's great learning and also a critique of scholastic method, partly veiled and partly open, in a rhetoric of digressions and asides.[35]

Given Erasmus' grammatical and rhetorical expertise, his knowledge of ancient rhetorical practices and his composition of instructional texts, the *Moria* as *encomium-declamatio* offers the scholar of rhetoric an opportunity for examining the classical form and its devices. In the 1940s, Hoyt Hudson anatomized the whole of Folly's speech according to the criteria of classical oratory, but subsequent critics have felt we do not need to straight-jacket the text's structure, emphasizing instead a division between three distinct parts.[36] Here too a great deal of attention

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[34]Thompson, C. R. 866–68. The declamations were published together with their translations of eleven of Lucian's dialogues for the Badius edition of 1506 edition. See also Thompson, C. R.. Erasmus soon sent Badius an additional twenty-one works of Lucian to add for another edition. See Marsh, *Lucian and the Latins: Humor and Humanism in the Early Renaissance* 168.

[35]Although Valla's work has been described frequenly as a "mock encomium," it differs considerably from those examples in the classical tradition cited by Erasmus in the dedicatory letter. The irony of the *Encomion of St. Thomas* is careful and subtle, and its irony deserves a separate study. For example, Valla's argument that only God deserves praise, combined with his de facto praise of the *Doctor Angelicus*, diminishes his subject by analogy but without ridicule. Valla also excludes Aquinas from his direct criticism of scholastic method, which is attributed rather to his "followers." It is significant that the "patchwork" quality of Valla's *Encomion*, with its digressions, asides, and invocations is likewise characteristic of Folly's oration. Indeed, at least one observer of the oration described Valla as "insane." See also Paul Blum 83–93.

[36]For Hudson's oratorical outline, see 129–42. For the three-part structure of the *Moria*, see e.g Miller, C.., and Rebhorn.

is paid to the work's pervasive irony. Even while Folly's arguments are charming and alluring, her inconsistencies and paradoxes, it seems, are more interesting fodder. Which arguments are cogent, which fallacious? What are the covert implications and purposes of Folly's self-praise? Many have also seen in Folly's triumph an argument for humanist rhetoric over the logic of the scholastics. If the speech is a *suasoria*, we should ask what course of action the reader of the *Moria* is encouraged to take; on the other hand, if the speech is a *controversia*, we should decide whether Folly has vindicated herself from the judgment of academics and intellectuals in the court of public opinion.[37]

5. The *Moria* as a sophisticated game played between author, text, and reader.

This most recent critical trend emphasizes the need for interpretive strategies in the absence of authorial didacticism and of allegorical and figurative patterns. Every word of Folly's self-praise is tainted by the underlying uncertainty of her truth claim, imitating the paradox of the Cretan liar. This fundamental ambiguity, sustained throughout, is generally considered the "ironic mode" of discourse, with Erasmus as its chief architect for the modern age. Folly's eventual self-revelation as a "fool for Christ" in the mold of St. Paul reflects back on that image of she who is the source of flattery, delusion, and self-love in such a way that a reader is left to ponder how one sort of folly transitions to another.

Imitation, direct address, character, argument, image, myth, anecdote, proverb – all these formal and stylistic aspects of the text resonate with allusions to literature and history, both sacred and secular as well as ancient and early modern. What, if anything, lies behind its rational instability and equivocation, its seething condemnation and its triumphant self-justification and self-absorption in languages? Erasmus, at one remove from his character, exercises a wide de-

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[37]Some of those who have explored the rhetorical aspects of the *Moria* include Colie Schoeck, R. J., *Erasmus* 95–108 Miller, C. H. 53, and Kinney, *Continental Humanist Poetics*.

gree of rhetorical and polemical freedom; he can be identified with Folly or dissociated from her, as he pleases. The author plays the provocateur, drawing the reader in with Folly's persuasive charm, but frustrating facile associations and conclusions. Thus the text appears to emphasize *potential* rather than *intentional* meaning, significance which relies not on the objective signs of convention as much as a reader's subjective interpretation.[38]

The array of interpretive possibilities in a multiplicity of intertexts and signifiers may be thought of as the author's challenge to engage a discerning reader. We might think of this author-reader relationship in terms of Thomas Greene's theory of heuristic and dialectical imitation, the two most sophisticated levels of Renaissance intertextuality.[39] Greene defines the heuristic imitation as writing which calls attention to a particular subtext while distancing itself, and dialectical imitation as a sustained conflict between text and subtexts.[40] But to the text-subtext relationship must be added that of the compelling persona in dialogue with the reader, so that imitation serves a critical role as the equipment of a game with heuristic and aporetic aspects.

By no means exhaustive, these five, general aspects of the *Moria* and its criticism contribute a great deal to our understanding of the background, context, purpose, style, and effect of a uniquely seminal text in the West. While this study does not attempt to address every aspect of previous scholarship, it proposes that a clearer and more comprehensive view of Erasmus' theory and method in this remarkable text may yet be attained through a selective study of those con-

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[38]In an article about Rabelais' *Tiers Livre*, "Signs Gone Wild: The Dismantling of Allegory," Michel Jeanneret reflects on the abandonment of a medieval semiotic system, in which conventional signs are detached from their referents, at times reversing the conventional meaning. He offers the example of the "Virgilian lots," a revered practice of random association with the text, which Panurge abuses in ways which suit his desires and compulsions Jeanneret.

[39]Four kinds of imitation are outlined by Greene. Besides the two mentioned above, there are: 1) "reproductive" or "sacramental" imitation, a literal rendering of a "hallowed text" as a model and without critical perspective, and 2) "eclectic" or "exploitative" imitation, a text which, by means of "allusions, echoes, phrases, and images," juxtaposes numerous subtexts indifferently Greene 38–39..

texts – historical, intellectual, and literary – which similarly exploit a theme of folly-versus-wisdom in order to address a serious imbalance in the cultural-intellectual fabric of society.

[40]As Greene puts it: “a struggle between texts and between eras which cannot easily be resolved[...]a struggle between two rhetorical or semiotic systems that are vulnerable to one another and whose conflict cannot easily be resolved” 45–6.

Chapter 2

The Antithesis of Folly and Wisdom

This chapter considers general concepts of folly and wisdom as a shared cultural inheritance, beginning with ancient Greek philosophy and the Bible. There are many kinds of dispositions and behaviors which are associated with folly, and distinctions based on mental capacity (natural/artificial), place of origin or activity (city/country), and expertise (verbal wit/physical ruse) are useful. We think less often about variety in a concept of wisdom, which may be described according to origin (learning/experience), object or application (speculation/practice), and context (contemplation/debate). Such qualities or derivatives of folly and wisdom are illuminating by contrast.

There is one conceptual area, however, which is borderline or liminal, belonging at once to folly and wisdom: the mental dexterity we call cleverness or ingenuity. Ancient traditions associated cleverness with wisdom as a special kind of applied knowledge, such as decorum, inculturation, experience, and expertise. The craftsmen of the Ark of the Covenant, for example, are described as clever. As philosophers and prophets associated wisdom with abstract realities, first principles, and deities, the native ability for shrewdness, wit, or "quick thinking" became of less value in the learned sphere. For Plato, cleverness in argument was an attribute of the sophists and distinct from "true knowledge." This chapter discusses how a tradition of folly plays upon the ambiguity of cleverness, a quality poised between practical wisdom and self-

interested exploitation. Moriasophia tends to close the gap, setting up a rivalry between conventional forms of wisdom and the alter-wisdom of creativity.

2.1 Wisdom's Legacy

Most critical studies of the European folly tradition approach it through the figure of the fool. And small wonder it is, most fools being performers by nature, profession or genre; they command our attention. Fools have appeared in most cultures around the globe since ancient times, though with varying functions, from companion, mascot, and fertility shaman, to prophet, entertainer, trickster, poetaster and easy victim.[41] It is the figure of the fool, whose charismatic, whimsical, humorous, and theatrical nature captures the attention and imagination of an audience, including that of scholars, who put the fool's origins, activities, and social or literary function at the center of their analysis. For example, the recent collection of articles edited by Viki Janik and entitled *Fools and Jesters in Literature, Art, and History: a Bio-bibliographical Sourcebook* is organized solely on the study of individual fools and fool-types. While many excellent surveys and histories of the fool have been written, it is our main task to identify those characteristics which best pertain to Erasmus' moriasophia.

Instead of approaching the subject of "wise fools" as a study of individual performers and tricksters who convey some facet of wisdom, this study will consider the broader implications of the conceptual opposites, juxtaposed and interdependent. While genres and character types perdure, our specific definition of folly is relative to our notion of wisdom in any given period and is therefore dependent upon it. It is a simple point of logic but one important enough for Plato to make it a foundation of Socratic dialectic, along with those similarities and

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[41]One might argue that the modern concept of a single "fool" type is misleading because it consolidates such a broad array of diverse social roles and behaviors. See, for example, Otto's first chapter, "Facets of the Fool" 1–45.

differences which define concepts and concrete instances of concepts ("instantiations"). Definition and refinement of concepts in the abstract is the work of philosophy and it is never easy. For it is one thing to proclaim a fool wise, and quite another to say just what sort of wisdom a fool possesses and how wisdom and folly interact in a particular historical context and relative to a rational sciences and literary methods.

As Walter Kaiser observes in "The Wisdom of the Fool":

The idea of the wisdom (*sapientia*) of the fool always stands in contrast to the knowledge (*scientia*) of the learned or the "wisdom" of the worldly (*sapientia mundana*). In this respect, the oxymoron, "wise fool," is inherently reversible; for whenever it is acknowledged that the fool is wise, it is also suggested, expressly or tacitly, that the wise are foolish (516).

Here Kaiser identifies the very heart of our matter, which is not the fool per se but a dynamic reciprocity between characters, concepts, and world-views, symbolized in the figures of "fool" and "sage" but also representating a perennial conflict between a complacent establishment and a force of provocation, or in Kaiser's words, "the most sophisticated and far-reaching of those primitivistic ideas with which man has questioned his own potentialities and achievements" (515).[42] Part-genius and part clown, the provocateur-fool is a stranger or outsider uniquely equipped to question and assess a society's intellectual and cultural mores with the insights of common sense and experience. The nature of the exchange may be described as contrapuntal, dialogical, and dialectical, so that the literary expression elicits an analysis and interpretation suited to the interlocutors and the chosen mode of discourse.

How do we distinguish folly from wisdom? In language as in life, folly appears at first to be the more diverse concept. Across the boundaries of cultures and countries, the number of

words describing modes of unpredictable, aberrant, and risible behavior far exceed those designating the facets of learning, knowledge, and experience associated with wisdom. And yet this is somehow what we might expect. If wisdom in its broadest sense seeks out or embraces rarified and sublime truths, scarcely or incompletely comprehended in language, folly represents the many facets of raw physicality and ordinary experience which men and women express in everyday language. Most people would less hesitatingly confess a frequent foolishness than boast of an intimate familiarity with profound truth. To put it simply, there are fewer people pouring into academies and monasteries than we find at festivals, entertainments, and taverns. It seems folly is always among us, while wisdom is elusive, the possession of an elite few and never quite fully attained in this life.

If the attempt to define folly is impeded by its ubiquity, a similar problem results from wisdom's scarcity. In the fourth century, B.C., Greek philosophers put their claims on the summit of knowledge, although they were not the only wise men in Athens. The *sophistei* were master craftsmen, until the professional teachers of rhetoric arrived in the Athens of the fifth century.[43] The term *sophos* was also applied to the wealthy citizen and politician, by virtue of his social status (Liddel, Scott and Jones). Plato sought to wrest the concept of *sophia* from the social title and wed it to a more rigorous rational system, expressed as *logoi* and *dialektikē*. He also appropriated other familiar terms for philosophical discourse, like *aristos* ("the best," also a class designation), *technē* ("craft"), and *aretē* ("excellence") in order to make his rational method the cultural standard for obtaining the highest kind of human knowledge, *epistēmē* (comprehensive

[42]It is noteworthy that Kaiser dedicates more time to wisdom as a character attribute of the fool rather than a particular, identifiable approach to the subject of highest knowledge. More will be said about Walter Kaiser's landmark study, *Praisers of Folly*, in Chapter 2.
[43]From Syracuse, as some speculate Enos 189–90.

or systematic knowledge).[44] While Plato held that wisdom in the soul is the individual's participation in the unity of virtues or Forms, he also emphasized the significance of memory and formal inferential procedures, as a means of distinguishing between virtues per se and concepts of virtue in the sensible world. For Socrates, all the virtues are practical in the sense that true knowledge will by necessity turn a philosopher away from the distortions of appearances and toward their perfections. Thus we might say that Plato, without being explicit, conceives wisdom as twofold: eternal and temporal, or supernatural (ideal) and human, the former represented in the Forms themselves, the latter in the philosopher's soul, aided by knowledge and rational method and reflected in moral virtue.

Although Aristotle rejects the "realism" of Plato's Forms, that is, their separate and independent existence, his notion of wisdom is not entirely adverse to Plato's. As Plato posited a transcendent *sophia*, Aristotle reaches, on the basis of rational argument, the *nous noesis* of an Unmoved Mover, that perfectly self-sufficient mind which thinks itself and provides the first efficient cause of the universe. This ultimate object of speculation in the *Metaphysics* and *On the soul*, however, is not thoroughly integrated with the description of human wisdom in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, a theory of virtues as ordered to the fulfillment (*eudaimonia*) of the individual. Here Aristotle refines the Platonic terminology, distinguishing between five intellectual virtues related to the concept of wisdom: *theoria* (theory), *epistēmē*, *nous* (pure reason or intuition), *phronesis* (practical knowledge), and *technē* (*N. Ethics* 6.8). *Phronesis*, Aristotle explains, is the key "thinking" virtue, necessary for the discovery and practice of every other virtue. The intellectual virtues are so closely bound up with Aristotle's description of the philosopher's contem-

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[44]For Plato's terminology, which is by no means fixed, see Ast (the standard) as well as Brandwood.

plative fulfillment in Book 10 that they are often defined by scholars as aspects of *sophia*.[45] (Translations of Plato often blur the distinction between the practical and the theoretical, when both *phronesis* and *sophia* are rendered "wisdom.") Similar to Plato, Aristotle affirms that the intellectual virtues, which represent the highest activity of the mind, must be congruous with the moral virtues (Hopkins, J., *Nicholas of Cusa on Wisdom and Knowledge* 4).

The concept of wisdom in the Hebrew Scriptures is also varied, having been composed over some fifteen hundred years by numerous authors. Reminiscent of Plato's analogies, the earliest representation is of expertise in craftsmanship.[46] During the period of the prophets, there are clashes between classes and professions, not altogether unlike the conflict between ancient sophists and philosophers in Athens. The prophets, inspired individuals with claims to a greater knowledge, rise up against Hebrew "sages," or the learned establishment. By the post-exilic period, the concept of wisdom undergoes its most radical transformation: the wisdom (*chokmah*) of the Psalms, Proverbs, and Job is a transcendent and cosmic principle, a divine attribute or "name" for God, related to his omniscience, providence, and creative power and eulogized in the Books of Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes), Ben Sira (Jesus, son of Sira, or Ecclesiasticus) and Wisdom. The latter two show clear evidence of commerce between Jews and Greeks and at least some rivalry between theological and philosophical ideal. For example, Wisdom (also called "The Wisdom of Solomon"), a book written in Greek for Jews in Hellenistic Alexandria dated from the

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[45]Thus *phronesis* is defined frequently as "practical wisdom," *theoria* as "theoretical wisdom," *nous* as "intellectual wisdom."

[46]Said of Bezalel and Oholoiab, the makers of the tabernacle for the Ark of the Covenant in the desert, the time of Moses (Ex 31:1-11; 35:30-36:1).

Unless otherwise indicated, Biblical references in Greek are transcribed from Vanderpool and et al.. Latin Vulgate references are taken from Colunga and Turrado. English translations are from the New Revised Standard Version *The Holy Bible: Containing the Old and New Testaments*.

first century B.C.,[47] appears to reconcile the dynamic agency of theological wisdom with the abstract epitome of virtues:

> There is in her a spirit that is intelligent, holy, unique, manifold, subtle, mobile, clear, unpolluted, distinct, invulnerable, loving the good, keen, irresistible, beneficent, humane, steadfast, sure, free from anxiety, all-powerful, overseeing all, and penetrating through all spirits that are intelligent, pure, and altogether subtle. For wisdom is more mobile than any motion; because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things. For she is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty; therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her. For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness. Although she is but one, she can do all things, and while remaining in herself, she renews all things; in every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets; for God loves nothing so much as the person who lives with wisdom. She is more beautiful than the sun, and excels every constellation of the stars. Compared with the light she is found to be superior [. . .][48]

The language of this passage contains both traditional attributes of biblical wisdom (at times indistinguishable from "the Spirit of God") as well as qualities reminiscent of Platonism. The *Sophia* of Wisdom is thus a composite of many virtues, a creative and dynamic power in nature, at once transcendent and immanent, making its abode in the virtuous human soul; yet it is also described as one-and-many (in itself and in things) and beyond motion in its ubiquity, while several metaphors depict Wisdom in a poetic language of abstraction. She is a "vapor" of God's power (*atmîs*, referring to God's breath), a "spotless mirror" (*esoptron akēlidōton*) of God's workings,

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[47]Ben Sira was composed in Hebrew and later translated into Greek. They are regarded by Biblical scholars as either "apocryphal" or "deuterocanonical." Ben Sira and Wisdom exist in all the most ancient Greek manuscripts of the Bible (e.g., Codex Vaticanus, Codex Alexandrinus, Codex Sinaiticus) and were therefore incorporated with some authority.

and an image of God's goodness (*eikēn tēs hagathōtētos*). Abundant light imagery also seems to nod to Platonism – i. e., wisdom is a super-natural, super-sensual, super-numeral "reflection of eternal light," which "streams" (*apōrroia*) from the Almighty's glory,[49] brighter and more beautiful than the sun, more numerous than the stars, etc. As with Platonists, the author sometimes uses *phronesis* to distinguish the human, practical wisdom from the divine and abstract.[50]

In Ben Sira, Wisdom similarly issues from the mouth of God and descends upon the earth; she permeates all of creation, from the abysses to the oceans, finally "passing into holy souls" (Sir. 24ff.; cf. Wis. 7:27). This transcendent Wisdom resembles the "image and likeness" of God in Genesis, except that humans acquire it through faith and fidelity and not by nature. As with the *sophia* of classical Greek philosophy, the one who would be wise must practice moral virtue in accordance with proper intellectual understanding. Pursued and obtained, wisdom becomes the cherished possession of those who "fear the Lord" and possess her many related virtues such as patience, self-control, prudence, equity, fair-dealing, and loyalty to friends (Sir. 1-2, 6ff.; Prov. 1-3ff.).

Hebrew wisdom, therefore, has both contemplative and practical aspects, but it emphasizes wisdom's divine origin and the moral integrity of the disciple. In the earlier wisdom literature of the Bible (e.g., Job, Proverbs) the benefits of wisdom are material as well as psychological and spiritual (Prov. 3:13-26), but the later discourses incline more toward a Platonic notion of eternity and the soul's immortality (Wis. 2:23; 3:1-12). With exhortations to virtuous living, much of the Bible's wisdom discourse contains aspects of Greco-Roman protreptic discourse. Striking, however, is the Bible's omission of human logic and dialectic as a practical method for

[48]Wis. 7:22-29.
[49]Although *apōrroia* is rendered *emanatio* in the Vulgate, it is important to note that this is not *proodos*, the term used by the (Neo)Platonists in Plotinus and subsequent philosophers in this tradition .

seeking wisdom. The emphasis falls on piety, which follows upon a measured observance of the Law and tradition rather than rational inquiry.

The wisdom books of the Old Testament become a basis for Christology and a theology of the Spirit in the New Testament. For example, the doctrine of the Incarnation described in the beginning of John 1:1-18 reflects the summary of teaching in Ben Sira, Chapter 24. The person of Christ and the Father-Son relationship, especially throughout John's Gospel, is the human face (as it were) of transcendent cause and immanent power in philosophy, also expressed as a relationship between a Creator and his Wisdom-agent. St. Paul refers to Christ as the power and the wisdom of God in numerous places, and the Spirit becomes the particular gift of God's presence in the community of the faithful.[51]

Centuries of Christian theology preserved and nuanced the relationship between divine and human wisdom and its theoretical and practical aspects. In the first *quaestiones* of the *Summa Theologica*, Thomas Aquinas argues that the science of theology is identical with wisdom, because its object is not only "the knowledge of divine things" (as the highest cause is known by means of all created things),[52] but also that which "is known to [God] Himself alone and has revealed to others."[53] This concept of wisdom as theology appears again in Aquinas' theory of the virtues, which follows the structure set forth in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Among the intellectual virtues are systematic knowledge (*scientia*), understanding (*intellectus*), and wisdom (*sapientia*), corresponding roughly to Aristotle's *epistēmē*, *nous* and *theoria*. Aquinas borrows

[50]Greek text for The Book of Wisdom is cited from *Sophia Salōmōn: The Book of Wisdom. The Greek Text, the Latin Vulgate and the Authorised English Version*.
[51]See especially Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians as well as the letters to the Ephesians and the Colossians.
[52]Quoting Augustine's *On the Trinity* (xii.14)
[53]The Latin text of Aquinas is cited from *Opera Omnia* I, q.1, art. 5–6. English translation is that of Aquinas, *ST Summa Theologica*. Theological speculation treats God as he is in himself, while pastoral theology treats the eternal life and our means for its attainment. Since the mode of wisdom is defined by inspiration as well as study, Aquinas demonstrates how the science of theology uses two kinds of judgments: that of inclination, according to right habit or virtue (a gift of the Holy Spirit) and that acquired by the study of revealed principles.

from the *Metaphysics* to link the intellectual habit of wisdom to meditation on the Uncaused Cause: *sapientia* therefore "rightly judges all things and sets them in order, because there can be no perfect and universal judgment that is not based on first causes."[54] Aquinas then defines the practical virtues of art (*ars*) and prudence (*prudentia*), which are concerned with human action and located in the "thinking part" of the soul (Aquinas, *ST* I-II, Q. 57, art. 4). *Ars* (corresponding to *technē*) is concerned with doing good work, that is, with the means and the quality of a product (i.e., a particular action). As with Aristotle, prudence (corresponding to *phronesis*, or practical wisdom), receives the greatest attention and is the most difficult to define. It is related to art as the "act of making" is related to the "making" itself and therefore concerned with the larger purpose of an undertaking, the reason for such a work, its advantage, and desired end.[55]

This study, then, will take into account some of the varying illustrations and definitions of folly and wisdom, as these interlocking figures and concepts connect a literary theme of moriasophia to the speculative background. In this way we will be better able to assess not only the functions of character but the theoretical insights of the authors who employ the device as a means of inquiry concerning some of the most highly revered conventions in the history of Western thought. The inquiry of moriasophia is unique not only for its theme or content but in its method, the literary-rhetorical context has a profound affect on the rational discourse and debate introduced by the main protagonists. As in a Platonic dialogue, the logical cannot be separated from literary, as both are part and parcel of the method.

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[54]Aquinas, *ST* I-II, q.57, art. 3. The Greek text of Aristotle is quoted from *Selected Works*. English translation is that of *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*.

[55]Science (*scientia*) is defined as the faculty which considers various subjects and draws conclusions from premises; understanding (*intellectus*) is the habit of perceiving self-evident principles. The distinctions between all the virtues in Aquinas are detailed and refined, but for the purposes of this study, these reductive definitions will have to suffice Aquinas, *ST* I-II, q. 5, art. 4–5.

The debts and achievements of Erasmus' *Moria* come further into focus when a comparative analysis is used to examine the broader context of folly-meets-wisdom in Western thought, including both the ancients, eagerly recovered by humanists in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and the medieval tradition of Erasmus' own childhood and culture. What we find, first of all, is that select authors use the conventions of the unconventional fool to confront the learned culture in their own time. The figure of Socrates in Plato and Xenophon is seminal and of paramount importance, and yet there are many other jesters and outlaws, whose humor, wit, and intelligence act upon a complacent establishment as a kind of "shock-therapy." Without losing cite of this provocateur and his opponents, this examination will focus on the intellectual nature and social consequences of moriasophic opposition, dialectical and rhetorical, illustrated in antitheses and paradoxes but also pointing towards a potential resolution, as octagonals converging at the vanishing point.

2.2 Folly as Wisdom's Anti-type

In the context of these and similar traditions and discourses, which relate a transcendent and/or ethereal reality to human speculation and practical virtue, it is not surprising that folly is most often defined as the categorical opposite and anti-type of wisdom. As early as Homer we have a remarkable description of the proto-type for the fool as "mocker": Thersites, a physically-deformed Greek warrior who (the poet says) aims to elicit laugher by reviling the Achaian kings. Odysseus overhears him taunting Agamemnon and gives Thersites a harsh warning, i.e., if he doesn't cease his fooling (*aphrainonta*), Odysseus will tear the clothes off his back and beat him, naked and shamed, back to the Greek ships. Odysseus then whacks Thersites in the back

with Agammenon's scepter, so hard that the mocker is brought to tears, frightened, in pain and dumbfounded, so that Thersites himself now becomes the butt of the soldiers' laughter.[56]

Thersites' bold and insulting speech (he tells the soldiers they are disgraceful cowards and women if they choose to stay and seek further gain) is the apt counterpart to Odysseus' verbal politics, for which the Ithacan king is considered most wise. Odysseus is distinguished by the critical skill of what to say at the right moment, especially when addressing gods, other kings, hosts, and warriors – an ability also nascent in his son, Telemachus. The punishment for ill speech is fitting, since Odysseus' beating and Thersites reaction of fright, tears, shame, and submission, "feminizes" him.

It is notable that Thersites has the earmarks of a medieval or early modern court fool who has suffered the king's displeasure. While the fool elicits laughter, he also speaks unsavory truths: that Agamemnon is a bully who has driven the Greeks into a quagmire, that Achilles is impotent,[57] and that the soldiers are driven by desire for gain. Thersites' physical deformities – bow-legged, crippled foot, and curved shoulders – remind us of the dwarfed and hunchback fools and jesters of Roman times through the Middles Ages. And yet, in the Homeric context, Thersites does not invite our laughter, nor is he afforded the fool's prerogative of *parrhesia*, or truth-telling, but is rather an anti-type of wisdom.[58]

The anti-type depicted in Homer's epic poetry is also represented in Plato's dialogues. In the *Protagoras*, Socrates argues that both wisdom and temperance are opposites of folly; while in the *Second Alcibiades*, Socrates proposes a nearly identical but inverted argument, naming folly and madness as two opposites of wisdom. If a single quality has two opposites, either that

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[56]The incident of Thersites is told in Homer, *The Illiad, with an English Translation* II.211–77.
[57]Literally, Thersites says that Achilles has no wrath, which means he has lost his foremost heroic attribute (ll. 241-242).
[58]A philological approach to *parrhesia* is explored by Foucault.

quality can have more than one opposite (which does not make logical sense), or the two opposing qualities are really the same thing. Again in the *Laws*, the Athenian stranger (the author's spokesman) equates folly with the "crass ignorance" of the Peloponnesian kings, whose appetites for acquisition were responsible for the Spartan conquest of the fourth century, B.C. The demonstration of Socrates' "dialectical method" in *Protagoras* and *Second Alcibiades* and in the Athenian's discourse in *Laws* make the same point: every virtue is a distinct kind of knowledge, yet all the virtues are also unified in knowledge itself. Folly, on the other hand, is identified with ignorance and virtue's diametrical opposite, a quality which leads to every kind of error and harm.[59]

In one further example from classical philosophy, Xenophon depicts the fool Philippos (literally, a "jokester," *gelōtopoios*) in his *Symposium*. Philippos, a typical parasite, comes to the house of Callias, where he is hosting a banquet for his friend Autolycus. Though uninvited, Philippos pleads his way into the party, since Callias admits, "the guests, though well fed, as you observe, on seriousness, are perhaps rather ill supplied with laughter." (Xenophon 3: I.13) Philippos' jokes, however, fall on deaf ears, and he sinks into depression, laying down and covering his head with his cloak. He complains that if he does not succeed – and if "laughter has perished from the world," he won't be invited to any more dinners and his whole business will be ruined, "For I could no more turn serious than I could become immortal." By his own admission, then, the purpose of Philippos' folly-occupation is to satisfy his physical appetite, and this is the precise opposite of the philosopher's purpose. The symposium-setting establishes a contrast be-

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[59]Though modern scholars since the nineteenth century have expressed doubts concerning the authenticity of *Second Alcibiades*, the dialogue was part of the Canon of Thrasyllus and accepted as Plato's during the early modern period.

tween the needs and allurements of the sensible world and the philosopher's "appetite" for eternal reality and immortality (Xenophon 3: I.14–16).[60]

2.3 Wisdom's Anti-type in the Bible

The Hebrew Bible and the deutero-canonical wisdom books of the Septuagint are even more explicit in their depiction of folly as wisdom's anti-type. The emphasis on wisdom as law, piety, and moral rectitude reflects not only a monotheistic conviction but values which were necessary for self-preservation and prosperity. While a folly of ignorance, in the Platonic tradition, is seen as responsible for the demise of the Athenian Empire, the threat of cultural annihilation, subjugation and enslavement was a harsh reality of life for Jews living in the volatile climate of ancient Palestine and Mesopotamia. As the Jews saw it, dependence on God precedes human intelligence and ingenuity.

The concept of folly in this context is associated with a defiant disregard for the law of God and everything which follows from it. "The fool says in his heart there is no God" writes the Psalmist (i.e., King David) in a well-remembered verse (Ps. 14:1),[61] and this impression of the fool as godless and impious runs throughout the Bible. In the Deuteronomic code, what is perhaps the most ancient term for impious folly describes an unmarried woman caught in the act of adultery and sentenced to be stoned (Deut. 22:21). The heinousness of this crime against the moral law is conveyed in the Hebrew word *nabal*, an act which causes disgrace and dishonor. The term is used again to describe a vicious, fatal gang rape of a Levite's concubine in Gibeah, an infamy which provides the cause for the north-south war of Judah and the Israelites against the Benjaminites (1 Judg. 19:11-30).

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[60]This theme is also central in Plato's work of the same title.
[61]Not all psalms are ascribed to David, as this one is.

The most explicit example of the folly-wisdom antithesis concerns an episode related in the first book of Samuel, in which David, as a nomadic tribal leader, attempts to collect a customary levy from a rich man whose very name personifies impious folly, Nabal.[62] At the shearing of the sheep, David sends his men with a polite request for his rightful share and Nabal rebuffs them with boorishness and arrogance. David resolves to kill Nabal, assembling an army of four hundred soldiers and marching toward his estate However, as Nabal is churlish and wicked, so his wife Abigail is intelligent and beautiful (1 Sam 25:3).[63] Hearing that David is approaching, she (unbeknownst to her husband) intercepts him on the road with a party of her own, bearing sumptuous gifts. She pleads for the lives of the household, telling David that God will reward him if he spares the innocent. Acknowledging her husband's character, she exposes the pun on his name: "For according to his name, thus is he Nabal. His name and his folly [*nabal*] are with him" (1 Sam 25:25).[64] David blesses her and turns back, and Nabal dies by the hand of God ten days later.

The Biblical instances of *nabal* are rendered in the Septuagint as *aphrosune* and thus portray, for a Hellenistic culture, the folly of impiety as wisdom's anti-type. The above accounts demonstrate a defiance of divine law parallel to the *hubris* of the Greek mythological tradition but also suggest a savage brutality reminiscent of the Cyclopes of Homer's *Odyssey*. The former is exemplified by Odysseus' men who are "blindly reckless" (*atasthaliai*), when they eat the lotus and again when they kill the Laistrygonians' sheep, deeds which justify their future demise (Clay 36). The folly of the Cyclopes, on the other hand, is connected with the idea of "lawless-

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[62]The story is narrated in Chapters 25-26.

[63]Abigail is one of earliest figures of feminine wisdom in the Bible. In the Septuagint she is described as "intelligent and exceedingly beautiful to look at" (*agathe sunesei kai kale to eidei sphodra*).

[64]The pun is evident only in the Hebrew. See *Hebrew Interlinear Bible (OT)*. But even for the readers of the Septuagint, Abigail's statement clearly identifies Nabal's behavior as *aphrosune*. David's later marriage to Abigail symbolizes his restoration of the Kingdom of Israel.

ness" (*anomia*); each family is ruled by the male head but there is no social structure nor political body. When Polyphemos therefore smashes Odysseus' men against the wall of his cave and cannibalizes them, he violates the universal law of hospitality and sets himself up for defeat by the "wise" Odysseus (Homer, *The Odyssey* IX.165–570).

With the philosophical developments in a concept of wisdom, new dimensions of folly appear as well, reflected in new terms and illustrations. The Books of Psalms and Proverbs, with their multitude of aphorisms, are especially rich in shades of folly. Some fools are simple-minded (*pthiy*), gullible, and vulnerable to bad example and seduction (Prov. 1:1-4; 7:6-7; 14:15, 22:3). Others are morally deviant and thick-headed (*eviyl*); they stubbornly refuse instruction and are vain talkers (Prov. 1:7, 7:22, 10:14, 10:21, 12:15). Another kind of fool is lazy and appetitive, a seeker of pleasures and wealth (*kciyl*), and is one who could use a good beating (Prov. 1:32, 13:19-20, 19:29). Then there are those, like Theristes, who scorn, mock and ridicule (*luwts*); they create division and discord, but resist any correction (Prov. 9: 7-8, 15:12, 21:11, 22:10). Finally, there is the hardened, impious and lawless fool of the earlier Scriptures, a real villain (*nabal*; Ps. 14:1, Prov. 17:21). Such critical distinctions, nevertheless, are not definitive and can mask the flexibility and interchangeablity of terms, which occurs with the coalescence of local language traditions.

As we might expect, when the notion of wisdom comes into focus, so does the contrast between wisdom and folly. The Book of Proverbs, for example, opens with a personification of Wisdom (*chokmah*) as one who "cries out in the streets" and "public squares," warning the simple-minded, the mockers, and the ignorant that they will "choke themselves" in their errors, while her anti-type (an anonymous female persona, but frequently referenced by biblical editors as "Lady Folly") beckons passers-by from the doors of her house, like a seductress, to drink "sto-

len waters" and to taste "bread…eaten in secret" (9:13-17; the prostitute image is explicit in 7:6-72). Numerous aphorisms develop the antithesis, especially in Chapter 14. For example:

> With laughter a fool [*kciyl*] commits evils,
>
> but wisdom [*chokmah*] bears intelligence in a man (Pr 10:23)
>
> Wisdom [*chokmah*] builds houses,
>
> but folly [*'ivveleth*, same root as *'eviyl*] pulls it down. (14:1)
>
> Pride sprouts in the mouth of a fool [*'eviyl*],
>
> the lips of the wise [*chakam*] keep them safe." (14:3)
>
> In vain the mocker [*luwts*] looks for wisdom [*chokmah*],
>
> knowledge comes easy to the intelligent. (14:6)
>
> The wisdom [*chokmah*] of the astute will realize their ways;
>
> but the folly [*'ivveleth*] of fools [*kciyl*] leads to delusion (14:8)[65]

This structural parallelism – the benefits of wisdom and the *contrapasso* of folly, continues through Qoheleth, Ben Sira, and the Book of Wisdom. Note that the folly which proceeds from the mouth of a fool is the anti-type or inversion of that Wisdom which issues from the mouth of God (Prov. 2; Sir. 24).[66] The deuterocanonical books, however, explore the antithesis discursively and in greater detail as compared to the aphoristic literature of Proverbs and Qoheleth. For example, The Book of Wisdom offers a deeper psychological insight into the character of the fool. Since wisdom bears the promise of immortality here, the fool is given a monologue to illustrate attachment to goods of this world and contempt for those who live otherwise. Fools propose torturing the wise as a test of their patience, reminiscent of Satan's trial of Job (Wis. 1:16-

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[65]The various terms for "fool" in Hebrew are most often translated by *aphron* in the Greek, except for the "mocker" (*luwts*), which is translated with the term *kakois*, "the bad man."

[66]The prophetic or inspired role of some fools conflates this biblical distinction between the word of God and the language of folly, which is thoughtless or senseless babbling.

2:24; cf. Jb 1:6-12, 2:1-7). The folly of idolatry (a theme prominent in the Psalms) becomes the occasion for an extended *midrash*, or moral interpretation, of the Mosaic exodus, in which the plagues and misfortunes of the Egyptians are depicted as the necessary consequence of false worship.

* * *

It is important to consider folly as the anti-type of wisdom and the antithesis model in general before discussing what is means to "praise folly." Indeed, ancient traditions, both sacred and secular, often propose a gulf between the two concepts and their corresponding personae. The antithesis is practically omnipresent in the biblical culture of Erasmus' early sixteenth century. Terms for folly in learned debate and serious polemic literature – *asinus, balatro, fatuus, ridiculus, scurra, stultus,* et al. – were often used to belittle opponents, treating folly as irrational thinking and acting which results from impiety and lawlessness. The bumpkin and outlaw of folk tradition, on the other hand, represents a cultural aberration, its origin owing more to the frivoloties and narratives of local custom, validated obliquely in the Magnificat's "exaltation of the lowly" rather than the folly of St. Paul and the cross.[67] Moral antithesis in the Bible's proverbial wisdom literature helps us to understand the sense of shock and outrage felt throughout the learned community in response to the *Moria*, when Erasmus fuses together, under Folly's single banner, several conflicting images from the literary, philosophical, and theological traditions.

The Biblical representations form an interesting comparison with the ancient and classical Greek: despite the valid distinction between a folly which results from ignorance and one

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[67]The Feast of Fools, enacted on the liturgical feast day of the Circumcision, emphasized the recitation of the Magnificat, a prayer which celebrates the doctrine of divine election. The verse "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly" (Luke 1:52) was a cue for the subdeacons (the lower clergy) to assume position of a higher rank, held for the duration of the feast. See Harris 68.

which is the consequence of impiety and immorality, there is a common appeal to the stablizing force of divine law. Homer's Thersites is swiftly and effectively punished for his mockery – not just because Odysseus is annoyed (the taunts are not even directed at him), but because Thersites represents an insult to the divine favoritism of the Hellenic cause against Troy. In the Biblical literature, when fools are said to make others laugh, they do so to their own demise. In Plato's *Apology,* Socrates' first order of defense against Meletus' charge of impiety is the argument that his philosophical profession of ignorance is divinely mandated.[68] He claims, on numerous occasions, to be inspired by a personal *daemon* or spirit, and we also learn that the virtues sought by Socrates dwell with the gods in the realm of immortality (Plato, *Phaedrus* 246a-e).

But a correlation between wisdom and piety is not consistent or clear in Plato. Human knowledge of transcendent reality is, despite the best inferential methods, a shadow, intelligible in some respects yet elusive and unknowable in itself. This necessity of ignorance in Plato admits at least some ambiguity into the moral sphere. Whether speculative philosophy could be regarded as a pious practice was a contested question in ancient Greece, evinced by Plato's criticism of Homer in the *Republic*. There is no such ambiguity in the Scriptures. For the Hebrews, a wisdom-piety correlation is a doctrinal certainty, with cosmological, moral, and legal dimensions, demonstrated in God's wonders, signs, and word. Folly among the Jews represents rebellion against the commandments and deserves punishment at the hands of an anthropomorphic God. Thus the Greek tradition allows for Socratic irony and for the occasional intervention of trivial and comical folly, such as that observed in Xenophon's Philippos or in Alcibiades' fits of jealous passion in Plato's *Symposium* (213b ff.), while comic laughter is a rarity in the Hebrew and deuterocanonical Scriptures.

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[68]I.e., through through the Oracle at Delphi *Phaedrus* 20b-24e.

The inherent culpability of folly resonates in a particular way in the Greek of the Septuagint, which Erasmus used to edit and revise the Vulgate. The Septuagint's translation limits the Hebrew variations of folly extensively, in many cases reducing a rich vocabulary of fools and folly to the most common Greek words, *aphron* and *aphrosune*. This fact is no doubt due to the difficulties of rendering into a foreign tongue the subtle distinctions of several dialects within a complex language group. Other Greek terms which modify the concept of folly are *akakous* (an inexact translation of *pthiy*), *asunetos*, and *anoetos* (both can mean "unintelligent," "unthinking," or "senseless"), found in Jeremiah's reference to the idolatrous as "foolish [*aphrones*] and unthinking [*anoetoi*]" (10:8), and in Psalm 92, where the poet celebrates creation as "works" of the Lord's hands: "The foolish [*aphrones*] will not know, and the senseless [*asunetos*] will not understand [*sunesei*] these things" (ll. 5-6). There are other terms for folly in Greek, to be sure, such as *mataiotes* (idle talk and vanity) and *moria* (from *moros*, meaning "flat" or "dull," and thus "stupid," used only sparingly in the sacred literature until St. Paul), but the semantic depth of folly was relatively unknown to the West until the time of Erasmus, when voluminous reading and lexical command carried a select few to a linguistic *terra nova*. What is also interesting is that most of the terms for foolish behavior in Greek are defined by negation (*a-phron*, *a-kakos*, *a-sunetos*, *a-noetos*, etc.). This linguistic habit does not work the other way around: there are no specific words in Greek for wisdom as non-folly. Folly as the negation of wisdom will be of great importance in our discussion of the apophatic approach to the divine.

The representation of folly as wisdom's anti-type continues throughout the European Middle Ages. For example, vice figures – the personifications of morality plays, devils, and villains (Bibical or invented, like the thunderous Herod or the sly Mak of the Second Shepherd's Play) – are typical sources of comic laughter in medieval plays. Infamous tricksters of historical

record, remembered in legends and narrative accounts, added a folkloric dimension to Biblical and cultural types. The antithesis model is echoed in Gaunilo, a monk who decided to challenge Anselm of Canterbury's argument for the existence of God. Gaunilo wrote his *Responsio* from the perspective of a fool (thus the invented modern title, "The Reply on Behalf of the Fool") in order to preempt counter-criticism, for his rejection of the "Anselm argument" (*unum argumentum Anselmo*, i.e., "that than which a greater cannot be thought") might easily be interpreted as a rejection of God himself. But the device also afforded Gaunilo the latitude to satirize Anselm's argument in a *reductio ad adsurdam*, through the description of an imaginary island "that than which a greater island cannot be thought."[69]

The medieval Ulysses, elaborating on Vergil's anti-hero, flips Homer's portrait of the "wise" and crafty counselor completely on its head, transforming a Greek virtue of cleverness in the arts of war and survival into a Christian vice of impious folly. In Canto XXVI of *Inferno*, Dante offers an unconventional account of *duplex Ulysses*, as a seducer-seduced, a self-deceived trickster: so absorbed is he in the quest for worldly experience, fame, and knowledge that he embarks on a fatal voyage, a "foolish flight" (*folle volo*) beyond the pillars of Hercules and toward "a world without the sun." Significantly, Ulysses' foolish voyage, an allegory of anti-heroic vanity and hubristic self-determination, parallels and inverts the divinely-santioned journey of the poet, whose advancement in knowledge and wisdom results from his humble submission to the guidance of Vergil and Beatrice.[70]

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[69]Anselm 99–104. It does not appear that the philosophical criticism has addressed the literary-rhetorical origins of Gaunilo's fool device.

[70]For Ulysses's account of his journey, see Dante ll. 85–142. In a vivid parallel, the poet compares his own journey westward to that of Ulysses in *Paradiso* XXVII. When Dante reaches the eighth sphere of heaven, Beatrice suggests he look back upon earth to measure the distance he has traveled. From here he describes "I saw beyond Cadiz the mad flight of Ulysses" *ch'io vedea di là da Gade il varco / folle d'Ulisse*] (ll. 82-3). This moment not only recalls the *varco folle* of Inferno XXVI but contrasts the object and scope of Ulysses's and Dante's vision, the former passing the shores of Spain, Morocco, Sardinia, and other Mediterranean islands as he fixes his vision westward (ll. 103-05), the latter, ascending upward as well as westward (in only six hours) until he is above Cadiz at

Even in Erasmus' and More's own time, Sebastian Brant's enormously popular *Narrenshiff,* or *Ship of Fools*, portrays folly through negative caricatures alone. With virtually no difference between follies and vices, the irony is limited to that of self-incrimination. The personification of Wisdom which appears *deus ex machina* at the end to offer the fools instruction is in accord with the personified *chokmah* of Proverbs and the *sophia* of Ben Sira.

Folly and wisdom are significant intellectual and cultural indicators, used to anchor the epistemology and ethics of a popular culture as well as an intellectual elite. The antithesis touches on numerous categories of opposition related to folly and wisdom, categories so fundamental to the social order that we might refer to their juxtaposition as a cultural dialectic. The opposition may reflect morality (wicked/virtuous, illicit/licit, condemnable/praiseworthy), but also extends to epistemology (ignorant/learned, irrational/rational), decorum or etiquette (improper/proper, vulgar/refined), and metaphysics (sense/nonsense as reality/illusion, being/nothingness). Bakhtin's "dialogism" interprets the cultural dialectic at the level of sociopolitical theory, where social identity and individual consciousness depend entirely on the interaction of a relative, "official" center and an "unofficial" periphery. As Michael Holquist writes, "dialogism shifts the differential between a center and all that is not that center" (Holquist 17).

2.4 Which Wisdom? Moriasophia as Imitation

Such academic definitions are not of course, what usually comes to mind when we think of the history of fools, yet the logical categories of binary opposition are a necessary precondition for considering when, how, and why particular fools assail the domains of wisdom. Indeed if moriasophia accommodates or appropriates aspects of wisdom then it is worth while to ask

ninety degrees from of Jerusalem (or a quarter of the earth's circumference from his starting point), and looking back toward the East and the Phoenician shore 409–10. The Ulysses-Dante contrast is clearly founded on concepts

what is borrowed, that is, what qualities or actions cross the lines, defy the logic, and disturb the categorical or dialectical balance.

While the antithesis model of wisdom and folly dominates the learned and sacred discourses, moriasophia or folly-and-wisdom finds its origin in a very different cultural space, that of the art and artifice of performance. Fools are players, or at least tend towards play, with the intent of provoking a reaction or gaining a response – usually laughter, but not necessarily. Even fools by nature (that is, those with a mental defect) seek attention, whether elicited by others or not, and even tricksters are players, if only to dupe or to steal. This means, first of all, that folly's first steps away from wisdom's anti-type and towards wisdom itself are the kind of self-consciousness and audience-consciousness which are needed for an art of representation. The player takes on attributes not in accord with his nature and uses them to thwart the expectations of others; or, more simply stated, the most basic instruments of play are imitation and deception.

The mimesis of folly relies on the mind's discriminating ability to relate aberrancies, tricks, and diversions to norms and conventions. Deception requires expectation, and laughter requires not only an object but a frame of reference – we laugh *at* someone or something precisely when it does not conform to ordinary, mundane experience. Thus there must be *sense* in the *non-sense*, that is, fragments of knowledge and acts of intellection which are completely necessary for play and laughter to occur. Theories of deception and gaming tell us that the invention, enforcement, transgression, and abrogation of rules in contests and pastimes are indispensable instruments for developing cognitive habits of judgment natural to the individual and the functioning of the social order.[71]

of folly and wisdom. For the Ulysses theme in literature and the *duplex Ulysses* of the Middle Ages, see Stanford.

[71]See Rue and Bell and Whaley. While Rue is highly effective in his demonstration relating kinds of deception to social norms and the social order, his broad-strokes survey of deception in the culture of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance and his consequent rejection of a religious-based ethics is extremely terse and short-cited. He neglects

Folly may arise in the city or in the country, but it will look and sound very differently depending on its origin. Here we treat primarily that form of folly which characterizes a literary persona, a profession, or the game of fiction, and not the familiar act of joking among friends. Fool-figures in history and literature more often come from the country and from among the common people, since in the urban setting, social status and wealth are determined in part by conformism in demeanor and by respectability in reputation. In short, fools are most often poor and so they have little reputation to risk and little wealth to lose. Moreover, the perspective of an "outsider" provides one of the most effective means of commentary on a given establishment and its systems, whether that perspective concerns intellectual assumptions, political structure, ethical norms, or cultural protocols.

The distinction in class plays a very important role when fools come in contact with sages. As most fools originate in the country, so sages more often than not are connected with cities, where there are many conduits for information and ideas, schools of advanced study, and courtly circles. Folly's "art" grows in wisdom in accordance with its object of imitation. In the encounter between fools and sages, the cultural standards of the city, in education, speech and etiquette are confronted by the great store of native wit, superstition, and gut reaction which constitute the uneven norms and customs of rural life. Far from being a deficit, folly uses these qualities to construct another model of wisdom *sui generis*, an alter-wisdom, one which draws from the font of ordinary ingenuity and experience. The fool's "knowledge" is channeled through the fool's rural idiom as if it were a different language, new and yet familiar at the same time.

many areas of culture in which distinctions are blurred and deception is tolerated and accepted, those we connect here with a tradition of folly, such as Socratic ignorance, a history of games, apologies for fiction, or even divinely sanctioned deception as it occurs in the Bible and elsewhere. It can perhaps be argued that the devices of fools and

2.5 Between Theory and Practice: The Moral Ambiguity of Cleverness

Moriasophia's art of performance, with its imitations, pretensions, ingenuity, and experience, can be described in the terms of philosophy and prophecy. Not that fools have modeled themselves on philosophers any more than philosophers and prophets have modeled themselves on the demonstrations of fools. But philosophers and prophets agree that practical wisdom involves a particular kind of rational intelligence, not only that which can logically discern and discourse, but one which commands thought related to action – weighing, considering, and making judgments and decisions in pursuit of various "goods." *Phronesis* is the key term designating this quality of mental activity in classical Greek philosophy. Although Plato does not offer a particular definition, he uses *phronesis* as the etymological opposite of folly and also as political judgment (e.g., the philosopher-king and the Statesman). Aristotle (whom Aquinas follows, though summarily) defines the quality in greater theoretical detail. As we said above, *phronesis* is a *thinking* virtue; it learns about particulars from experience, deliberates about circumstances, forms opinions, and dictates action. This notion is clarified in a comparison Aristotle makes between *phronesis* and the "natural virtue" of *deinotē*s, or native cleverness: the difference between the two lies in the aid of reason, so that what is done shrewdly by nature may be done "rightly" and thus more advantageously.[72] *Phronesis* perfects cleverness and finds the means between extremes for every virtue; where there is *phronesis*, all the virtues are also present, and if there is none, neither can there be any virtue (*N. Ethics* 1144b-1145a).

Phronesis, therefore, can be defined as a native cleverness aided by right reason. Such a quality is particularly suited to the moriasophic fool, whose competitive humor, verbal dexterity,

folly raise the problem of logic and truth and their relation to rhetorical language in a way that anticipates Wittgenstein's skepticism toward the role of logic in philosophy. Cf. Rue 65–68 .

[72]The term *deinōtes* signifies an intensity and forcefulness of nature which lacks self-awareness and civility. See Liddel, et al. and Dahl 66.

and physical agility stem from a natural aptitude for scheming and machination. Yet the fool's practical wisdom of thinking, deliberating, and choosing does not remain in the realm of cognition and is realized in the kinds of conflicts and plots which demonstrate his ability to "manufacture" folly. Disguises, tricks, slights of hand, double entendres, impersonation – performing these activities corresponds to the activity of *technē*: "making things" or "bringing into existence" what previously did not exist (*N. Ethics* 1140a). *Phronesis* and *technē* work hand in hand; art makes a product, and practical wisdom examines the means and the purpose.[73] Moriasophia in a fool is like a perpetual motion machine. As the philosopher uses reason, dialectic, and citation of authorities, the fool uses whatever is at his disposal – proverbs and aphorisms, multivalence and rhetorical techniques, not to mention the more concrete essentials: performance props (like the bauble, the fool's mock-scepter), a naïve bystander, or a means of escape. Homer's epithet "resourceful Odysseus" is pertinent here. The fool's resourceful control over his environment as "folly-making" is his particular excellence or *arete*.

The comparison of theoretical similarities between the sage and the fool in the area of practical wisdom provokes the question of contrasts, such as those we have already examined. What is it that makes moriasophia foolish? Is there something more than humor and mimetic performance? Indeed Aristotle argues that if the natural virtue of cleverness is not properly guided by reason, it can end up doing great harm (*N. Ethics* 1144b). Although he does not provide an example, we can readily imagine a curious child, who learns from observing others how to strike a match or throw a hard object. Moreover, Aristotle says the right means presupposes the correct disposition of appetites and the virtuous end, or aim – cleverness in thievery does not insure the rectitude of the act. Thus Aristotle criticizes Socrates, since he (according to Aristotle) treats every virtue as practical, i.e., "knowing" the good necessitates "doing" the good.

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[73]See also Aquinas' distinction between prudence and art I-II, q. 57, art. 4.

Such extraordinary potential for both the good and the erroneous in the exercise of practical wisdom indicates a striking moral ambiguity in the activity and representation of the moriasophic fool. The fool is a creature of dynamic intelligence and voracious appetite, yet he often leads us to question whether the reason is "right," and whether what is natural is also virtuous. Humor, in moriasophia, is not an end in itself and is more often a by-product of some greater idea or scheme. The ambiguity is inherent in most languages, where words for deceit and trickery are closely related to those for cleverness. This is a two-edged sword. Whether the fool is a kind of countercultural or unconventional hero, like Socrates, or whether he reverts to the self-importance and self-interest of the *rhetor* must be explored in each and every manifestation.

The fool's practical wisdom and the inherent moral ambiguity of his actions reflect back in an interesting way on some of the very literature which defines folly as wisdom's anti-type. Unlike Thersites and Philippos, Socrates demonstrates the cognition and choice of *phronesis* in his questioning of authoritative opinion and in his teaching the virtues, while *technē* is illustrated in his method of dialectical inference. But what about his performative style and his pretense of ignorance? Socrates' irony of understatement and general evasiveness are clearly forms of deception, while his frequent rendition of past conversations (some dialogues are essentially stories, based on the narrative device of recollection) leaves open questions of authenticity in representation. Are these aspects of "Socratic method" justifiable as practical wisdom directed toward virtue or are they morally dubious and contrary to Aristotle's definition? In sum, is Socrates the quintessential sage of tradition or does he cross the line into the domain of the fool? Is there a kernel of truth to the satirical portrait of Aristophanes, the very same which the defendant of the *Apology* refutes?

Similar questions can be asked of the representation of practical wisdom in the Scriptures, an authority which Erasmus and More regarded as the inspired word of God. Many instances throughout the historical books of the Bible demonstrate a moral ambiguity through performance and deception. To site a few examples: Abraham and Isaac, in separate instances, lie to King Abimelech of Gerar, each saying their wife is a sister (Gen. 12:10-20; 26:7-14); Lot's daughters get their father drunk so they can be impregnated without his knowledge (19:30-38); Jacob, with the help of his mother Rachael, tricks his blind father Isaac into giving him the birthright (27:1-45); Laban deceives Jacob into marrying Leah as well as Rachael (29:15-30); Joseph withholds his identity from his brothers and frames his brother Benjamin for theft (Gen. 43-44); the Gibeonites disguise themselves as impoverished foreigners so that Joshua will swear a pact to spare their cities (Jos. 9:3-18); and Michal uses goat's hair and blankets to deceive Saul's men into thinking her husband David is sick in bed (1 Sam 19:11-17). These incidents, representing permissible acts of deception, are sharply contrasted with others, which are clearly condemnable: the serpent tricks Eve into eating the forbidden fruit (Gen. 3); Absolom, the rebel son of David, positions himself at the gate of the city, where he deceives petitioners into joining his own cause (Judg. 15:1-6); Jezebel, wife of King Ahab, uses forgery and false witness to have the innocent Naboth stoned to death so that her husband can possess a desired vineyard (1 Kings 21:1-16); and Saul, in violation of his own law against conjuring, disguises himself so that he may consult with a necromancer of En-Dor (1 Sam. 28:3-25).

The language of deceit in Hebrew and Greek often demonstrates this ambiguity of means by employing the same or similar terms to identify both what is licit and what is illicit. In part this flexibility is made possible by a semantic range which fuses together notions of intelligence and prudence with know-how, technical skill and expertise. The Hebrew *chakam*, the human

embodiment of the transcendent *chokmah*, corresponds very neatly to both *technē* and *phronesis* – the craftsmen who build the Ark of the Covenant and the artisans who design Solomon's Temple are described in these terms; yet *chakam* can also be used sarcastically, as in Hosea's decription of the idolatrous town of Ephraim as a child who refuses to be born (Hos. 13:13; also Deut. 32:6), and pejoratively, such as Jonadab's plan to assist David's son Amnon in the rape of his sister (2 Sam. 13:3). Other terms are even more equivocal, such as *'aram*, which describes both the serpent's deceit in Genesis (3:1) and David's successful evasion of the Saul's soldiers (cf. 1 Sam 23:22).

The same variations exist in the Septuagint, where *sophos* is often used of skill in craftsmanship and *phronesis* may imply devious scheming, even the serpent's guile. One particularly interesting term which crosses the moral divide in the wisdom literature is *panourgia*, an ancient Greek term for a villain, suggesting from its roots in *pan* ("all") and *ergon* ("work") an art of scheming. When compared with the Hebrew text, *panourgia* is used to translate an array of difficult words, that is, words of guile and craftiness, such as *haram*, *daath*, and *horem*, which may have either meritorious or derogatory connotations. While *panourgia* is the much-discussed linguistic origin of Rabelais' famous trickster-fool, Panurge, the moral ambiguity of the term is often neglected. Aristotle, in the course of the above-mentioned discussion of *phronesis* and *deinotēs*, uses *panourgia* to describe a person who does not augment the natural virtue with reason and thus remains merely clever without acquiring practical wisdom (*N. Ethics* 1144a). This quality might help to explain the nature of Panurge's predicament and indecision regarding the question of marriage in the *Tiers Livre*, but it does not speak to the many associations between the practical wisdom of *phronesis* and *panourgia* in the Septuagint, predominantly in the Book

of Proverbs.[74] The moral ambiguity of *panourgia* resonates in such English words as "crafty" (etymologically linked to the wisdom-skill of the craftsman) and "cunning" (OED) which imply a certain intelligence of means while leaving open the question of good or bad intentions (the emphasis usually falling on the latter).

The moral problem of ends-justifies-means comes to a peak in those deceptions which are enacted by God himself. In a common narrative pattern, God permits ignorance or incites further evils so that he can exact a just punishment. The archetype of this pattern occurs when God "hardens Pharaoh's heart," so that his power can be manifested through the several plagues (e.g., Exod. 8:32). In Jeremiah, the prophet says that God's messages of peace were designed to mislead the people of Jerusalem (Jer. 4:10-12), and similarly, the prophet Michaiah tells King Ahab that the prosperity promised him was due to a "lying spirit" which God summoned forth in heaven and then put into the mouth of other prophets (1 Kings 22:21-23). Thus when the warrior Jehu gathers together all the priests and servants of Baal "to offer up a great sacrifice" to the god – and then slaughters them all – his actions follow the pattern of God's retribution on the unsuspecting malefactors (2 Kings 10:19).

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A pre-Erasmian moriasophia comprehends the tradition of wisdom and the theoretical antithesis of folly and wisdom, but it also finds the space between theory and practice which allows for ambiguity. The definition and treatment of wisdom by philosophical and biblical sages demonstrates that practical wisdom, although related to the transcendent ideal, is by no means as simple and singular. What is it, after all, to "make the means right" as Aristotle suggests of *phronesis* (*N. Ethics* 1144a)? Moriasophia, like Aristotle's natural virtue of cleverness holds a

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[74]There is not, as far as I know, any discussion of the term *panourgia* in Rabelais as related to Aristotle and the Septuagint.

middle ground: it can be ennobled by reason or it can be denigrated by knavery. But the examples of literature, including that of the philosophical dialogues, do not adhere in the categories. The very language of wisdom and the examples of wise behavior leave in doubt the perfect dialectical relationship of folly and wisdom and would in fact suggest that some behaviors considered foolish in theory are one and the same with wise practice and precedent. The fact of the matter is that moral norms and cultural conventions are multi-faceted and in flux, while the theory of one particular cultural and intellectual elite cannot always "clean up" the complexities of previous generations.

So far we have treated three principle areas where the thought and activity of folly and wisdom begin to overlap and resemble each other: planning and scheming, the enactment of a deception or trick, and the performance trappings which contextualize and stylize the action. Notice the similarity between these areas of practical wisdom and the "art" of representation to which the traditional actor-fool belongs. Art, like war and love, suspends, disturbs, or displaces normative conventions and expectations, and this in turn has an affect on ethical norms. The ambiguities of moriasophia serve to question those norms or at least the ways in which institutions and societies define and practice them.

The fields of practical wisdom and cleverness are not the whole of moriasophia but that which constitutes its essential core. As figures of action, performers and tricksters do not, for the most part, engage in theoretical speculation, nor in the scientific and systematic knowledge which Plato and Aristotle called *episteme*. They are intellectually-gifted manipulators of persons and fortunes and are focused on more immediate ends. There are, nevertheless, important exceptions to this rule, which have a great bearing on the direction of wisdom and folly in the sixteenth century. If "sage-fool" character types increase their potential for wisdom during this century,

the tendency owes much to Socrates, Lucian, and St. Paul. This will become more apparent as we examine the treatment of moriasophia in literary figures prior to Erasmus and More.

2.6 *Metis* and *Ingenium* in Literature

Although not as precise as the categorizing terminology of the classical philosophers, the representations of moriasophic intelligence and behavior appear in literature as far back as Homer. The same Odysseus who is "wise" in counsel and who punishes the mocker Thersites is himself the "man of many tricks" (*polutropos*), the prototype of the trickster-fool. In one episode after another, he uses his keen intelligence and experience in such devices as physical disguise and rhetorical finesse, as well as strength, courage, and divine partiality to gain advantage over enemies, to win allies, to acquire gifts and, when no gifts are given, to steal. In the *Illiad*, his cleverness is evinced in the strategies of stealth, as he leads a raid of the enemy camp by night, in disguise with Diomedes, slaughtering Trojans as they sleep. Odysseus is also the Greek credited with the idea of building the "Trojan horse," the device which permits him and other warriors to attack the city of Troy from within. This same trait involves the capacity to perform well; for, as he demonstrates at the court of Alkínoös, he is an expert singer/story-teller.

The term which the poet introduces to describe this characteristic of Odysseus is *mētis*. *Mētis* functions much like a conflation of the same intellectual virtues which pertain to the fool, combining the mind's ability to assess difficult and dangerous situations quickly, to devise a plan of action, and to execute such a plan cleverly with the means at one's disposal. This trait of Odysseus is most succinctly and completely manifested in his predicament with the Cyclops, Polyphemus, whose brutality and lawlessness is mentioned above. Odysseus defeats the murderous, one-eyed giant with a simple but poignant verbal ruse: Odysseus tells Polyphemus that

his name is *Outis*, or "no man." Then, Odysseus executes his plan: He urges the Cyclops to drunkeness and puts out his single eye with a sharpened and heated wooden beam. Polyphemus cries out for help ("Nobody is hurting me by force or treachery"), but his calls are rendered utterly futile (9.408). The notion of the hero as a master of deceptive language contrasts sharply with the values of Homer's ancient warrior culture, embodied by Achilles, the man of *mēnis* ("wrath"), a man of brute strength. The man of *mētis* is, like the fool, a kind of alter-hero, his identity a fictional construct, and his sense a kind of nonsense. The point is made yet more explicit in the pun *mē-tis*, an alternative expression for "no one" used throughout the narrative.[75]

The Roman Empire, seeking to distinguish itself from its cultural rival, did not accept the Odyssean *mētis*-figure as a heroic model. But it did not (and perhaps could not) banish the type altogether. Thus we find the trickster grafted onto the fool in the dramatic tradition, the Greek *mētis* paralleled in Roman *ingenium*. In the dramas of Plautus and Terrence, low-comic servants find clever ways of fulfilling their master's desires, especially those of young lovers and courtesans, while parasites, always seeking to fill their empty stomachs, provide comic relief (much like Xenophon's Philippos). While the parasite figures induce easy laughter, the servants function as plot devices, since they are manipulators of fortune through their schemes. The best known fools in the medieval tradition – both those who were historically real and those who were legendary – were those who possessed *ingenium*, e.g., Till Eulenspiegel, Scogin, Robin

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[75]The outstanding ingenuity of this episode (Homer, *The Odyssey* 9.166–566) cannot be addressed here adequately. What is important for the purposes of this study is the connection between the Outis of the Cyclopes episode and the fool, whose title and activity render him similarly anonymous and ephemeral. The linguistic origin of the European fool is the Latin *follis*, essentially a bag of air, wind-bag or bellows. Another term with the same sense is *inanis*, or empty, vain. Like Odysseus-as-Outis, the fool attains his identity through clever speech and action and not through family, inheritance, social standing, or material productivity. See, for example Simpson, whose conclusions about Homer's use of paradox and ambiguity are equally valid for a literature of moriasophia: "The extraordinary implication is not just that language can alter reality, but that descriptions of reality themselves can affect reality so as to make it meaningless. Language, therefore, has the ultimate power to create reality" 24–25. The requisite skill in the telling of the Cyclopes story emphasizes the bonds between the ingenious narrator (most immediately Odysseus but also Homer) and the clever protagonist-hero, another common attribute of moriasophic literature.

Goodfellow, Bertoldo, Gonella, Fra Mariano Felti, et al., and the popular demand for such figures led to a steady increase in the number of professional fools, particularly in the environment of European court-culture, where jesters and other performers entertained those with the highest levels of education.[76] The modern-critical distinction between the "artificial" and the "natural" fool, or the fool of clever intelligence contrasted to the simple-minded, the slow, or the deformed (who might very well perform the same function as entertainers and household jesters) became fashionable in the Elizabethan period and is still helpful. We find such a contrast depicted in three of the tales in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, where the tricksters Buffalmacco and Bruno use their cunning (*ingegno*) to lure and dupe the unsuspecting victim Calandrino. Yet there are some types of folly which do not adhere in these categories, as will be explained below.

Folly and wisdom are not always embodied in the single figure of the fool but are sometimes represented by a fool and a sage in debate. The most ancient story of this kind concerns Solomon, the Biblical archetype of wisdom, and a wandering peasant named Marcolf (or Marculf, or Marolf), a wandering peasant who comes to Solomon's court (from the East, in some versions) to test the King's wisdom.[77] Although there are many versions and in several languages, a tradition dating from at least the twelfth century depicts a dialogue and a battle of wits, where Solomon's dry, learned proverbs and riddles are pitted against those of Marcolf, which are secular, vulgar, and humorous. Marcolf's triumph over Solomon – by way of counter-proverb, counter-saying, deconstructive nit-picking and other forms of obfuscation – constitutes a humorous and ingenious reversal of expectations, since the lowly fool shows himself to be "wiser" (or

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[76]In the courts, fools competed with medieval minstrels, jongleurs, acrobats, and poets and at times combined their skills. Unlike other entertainers, however, fools shared a unique role with monarchs as social commentators and advisors. See Lever.

[77]As several scholars have noted, "ulf" is a variant of the German word for "wolf." See Dobbie lvi-lviii. One cannot help interpreting his Eastern origin as an indication that Marcolf is an anti-type of the three sages ("Magi") of the Bible, who follow the star to Bethlehem.

simply more clever) than the greatest of sages. The scenario, probably inspired by St. Paul's "folly of the cross," was popular in medieval Europe and especially in the Germany of Erasmus' time.[78] When the series of paradoxical encomia called *Epistolae obscurorum virorum* appeared in Germany in 1515 (a collection of letters, probably inspired by Erasmus' *Moria*, which shower ironic praise on Ortwin Gratius, an anti-Reuchlin theologian at the University of Cologne), a version of the Marcolf-Solomon debate was frequently appended to the text.

Despite Solomon's stature as the wisest among the Hebrews, a more explicitly theological and Christian dialogue arose to demonstrate the wisdom of the crucifixion and the folly of those evil intentions which were most responsible for Christ's condemnation. Appearing in the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus, composed as early as the Fourth Century, an episode called the "Harrowing of Hell" depicts the *Anima Christi* or spirit of Christ descending into the dominion of Satan, a kind of "pre-Hell" or place of detention for the souls of the deceased. Since the crucifixion of Christ redeems the souls of the just, the spirit of Christ triumphantly breaks through Hell's gates, and the devils there fly into a state of turmoil and confusion. They do not know who he is nor whence his power originates. Then the "prince of this world" and trickster of souls, Satan, steps forward to claim his right over the prisoners, and the two debate. Satan proffers an argument on the terms of the Old Law (i.e., the consequence of sin is death), yet he is utterly ignorant of the providential plan of salvation, in which Christ, the Son of God, satisfies the debt due to sin. Then *Anima Christi* reveals his identity, asserts his authority over the souls of the just, and banishes Satan to a permanent, deeper Hell. The clashing of wits and the triumph of divine wisdom over human (here demonic) recapitulates the positions of the Solomon – Marcolf debate while inverting the results: God's wisdom is not only more sublime but more clever

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[78]A block-book version was printed by Matthias Hupfuff in Strasburg in 1499, during the same period the ship of fools motif was in vogue. See Ziolkowski and Beecher and Wallis. Although dated, the summary of Charles

than the Devil's. Although this episode is not part of the biblical canon, it was a widely-circulated tradition, and it provided the dramatic climax for "passion plays" and other biblical drama during the Middle Ages.[79]

Many such examples of the folly-wisdom debate or a literary character's cunning are recounted in the modern scholarship on the European fool. At this point, it is enough to say that moriasophic traditions were very much alive in Erasmus' day. The fool's agonistic role in particular is not only a matter of passive entertainment but calls upon the audience or reader to act as arbiter and interpreter of the repartee.

2.7 Models of Moriasophia: Learning and Piety

The representation of moriasophia becomes increasingly paradoxical when fools are figures of learning and piety. By definition those with learning and piety seek some sort of wisdom, distinguished only by the sometimes tenuous boundary between knowledge of this world and that beyond, the natural and the supernatural. Socrates is an outstanding and heroic figure of philosophy most concerned with the pursuit of wisdom, with a vision of the virtues as the objects of wisdom and inferential methods to aid human knowledge and understanding. Folly in a philosopher or theologian would therefore seem to be self-canceling, a contradiction in terms.

Yet Plato's representation of his teacher is designed to exploit such a view, because Plato (and perhaps the historical Socrates) acknowledged unresolved problems in rational thought and experience, especially the problem of the one and the many, but also such questions as the definition and teachability of virtue. What if there is something paradoxical in the idea of wisdom it-

Herford is also useful Herford 253–72.

[79]Izydorczyk. For the Harrowing episode in the York Cycle of biblical plays, which best preserves the confrontation between Christ and Satan as a verbal debate, see Davenport.

self? For Socrates, the path to wisdom is rational but not merely rational; it is something more, something beyond us as well as in us. Wisdom resists human systematization, which is why the philosopher's dialectic cannot be reduced to propositional logic. *Phronesis*, *technē*, and *nous* in Socrates are portrayed in his informal and inquisitive manner, his pretense of ignorance, and his rhetorically masterful refutation of rhetoricians. Wisdom is elusive, and so is Socrates. His "learned folly" offers the reader a verisimilar analogy, through which Plato can tease out the appearances of other fundamental contradictions, in search of a higher rational understanding.

People also thought of Socrates as a kind of fool in his own time. Such is evident in the ancients' portrait: a bald man with long hair, bulging eyes, a flat turned-up nose and large lips; wearing a single cloak for all times of day and night and walking about barefoot in winter as well as summer. His discourse is unseemly too, putting the business of cobblers and cooks next to philosophers and rhetoricians, makes him appear so. This appearance of folly is confirmed, not only in Plato's *Symposium*, when Alcibiades compares Socrates to a statute of Silenus and the satyr Marsyas, but in Xenophon's work of the same title, where Critobulus makes a similar analogy.[80] Socrates is mentioned in four of Erasmus' works, always with great respect, as a precursor of Christ and harbinger of Christianity.[81]

Socrates, nevertheless, is not the only example of a learned fool. Diogenes of Sinope, a pupil of Antisthenes (himself a disciple of Socrates), took to an extreme Socrates' anti-conventionalism and the philosopher's insistence that one should live in accordance with unadulterated moral virtue. Though in Athens, he scorned every kind of human artifice and custom, taking up his residence inside an old tub, eating openly in the marketplace (against the prevailing

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[80]See Luljak. The Silenus metaphor is discussed in detail in Chapter 10.

[81]The contrast between Socrates' unassuming appearance and his philosophic wisdom was of particular interest to Erasmus, as it was to Rabelais after him. Erasmus's 1515 adage "The Sileni of Alcibiades" also mentions the description of Xenophon. See also Christian.

custom and social decorum), and at times walking about naked. His ascetic, self-reliant primitivism earned him the reputation of being "doggish" (*kynikos*, from *kyon*), from which the term "Cynic" is derived. Although none of his texts survive, Diogenes is remembered in the *Lives* of Diogenes Laertius, where he has a prominent place. Numerous hearsay encounters record how the philosopher uses his superior wit to defy the expectations of advice-seekers and to rebuff the taunts of those who mocked him.[82]

Moriasophia is similarly paradoxical in theology. If the wisdom of God is the ultimate end of human wisdom, then the non-believer, the impious, and the heretic, are the theologian's categorical anti-types. But holy folly takes root in the unknown, the great gulf between the infinite God and the limits of human knowledge: since God is so far beyond human understanding, what is divinely inspired may appear to be entirely irrational. Because of this, fools since ancient times have performed a religious function as prophets, seers, and healers, inspired and sometimes possessed by gods.[83] St. Paul undoubtedly played on such ancient roles when he invented the idea of "folly for Christ's sake" in his letters to the Corinthians. Largely on account of St. Paul's endorsement, the theme of folly found a permanent place in hermitic, monastic, and religious life, and the ancient association between the shaman-magus and the fool declined. Like learned folly, holy folly cannot always be distinguished by the categories of "natural" and "artificial." Some holy fools undoubtedly suffered mental illness, even in the context of religious life, while others, in imitation of St. Paul, practiced folly to dissociate their spiritual ideals and the gospel message from the "wisdom of the world," i.e., from normative, secular lifestyles, judgments, and expectations. While holy fools were numerous and often revered in the Eastern Orthodox

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[82]Diogenes Laertius Book 6. The story includes obscene displays of bodily functions. For a recent study of Diogenes of Sinope including the sources of Diogenes Laertius, see Navia.

[83]Studies of the fool's role in religion and spirituality has become a topic of recent interest. Besides Phan and Otto, mentioned above, see Laude.

Church (receiving their own official status as an order of sanctity, *salos* in the Greek tradition, *yurodivi* in the Russian) the West is not lacking in its own examples, especially from Ireland and Italy: St. Moling, Suibne, Mac-dá-Cherda, Blessed Giovanni Colombini (Sienese founder of the Gesuati), Benoît-Joseph Labré, Philip Neri, and the most widely known, St. Francis of Assisi, to name but a few.[84]

2.8 Moriasophia and Madness

A final category which precedes and foreshadows Erasmian moriasophia is what we might call "mad folly." Madness or insanity can frequently be distinguished from folly as a partial or total alienation from tangible reality, what we might call psychosis in today's psychological terminology. Even when folly is natural – i.e., even when a mental defect or disability inclines a person toward foolish behavior as a predominant character trait – the fool is not regarded as "mad." This term is usually reserved for those who experience delusions, distortions of reality, and loss of self-control. And yet, there are some instances where the boundary between madness and folly is porous and the two become intertwined.

Madness intersects folly when it is used as a term of verbal abuse in rhetorical invective. This is not literal madness but a convention: a charge or accusation hurled at those who express ideas considered by others as irrational, bizarre, shocking, or deplorable. Most language groups have several interchangeable terms, where "mad" is virtually indistinguishable from "crazy" or "foolish." We find examples of this in Cicero's speech against Lucius Calpurnius Piso, a speech rank with accusations, since he blames Piso for his exile in 58 B.C.[85] There are also, significant-

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[84]Saward offers several excellent examples of holy folly in the medieval tradition of the West.

[85]Cicero speaks sarcastically of Piso's supposed lack of ambition for foreign conquest, with the reward of a province, by mocking earlier consuls who desired the same: "It is now in the power of Cnaeus Pompeius to act on your plan. For he has made a mistake. He had never had a taste for that philosophy of yours. The foolish man has

ly, several such accusations of madness in the New Testament. John's Gospel records that some of the Jews accused Jesus of an insanity derived from demonic possession (*ex auton daimonion exei kai mainetai*; Jn 10:20). While preaching in Athens near the temple, St. Paul was dismissed as a "seed-pecker" (*spermologos*), which means they perceived him as a monotonous babbler, like a harassing beggar. Others laughed out loud when Paul addressed the assembly of the Areopagus. Porcius Festus, procurator of Judaea during Paul's detention in Caesarea, declared that Paul's great learning had driven him mad **(***maine*; Acts 26:24), and we may deduce similar reactions to the teaching of the other apostles, most of whom were martyred.

Another sort of madness linked to folly is linked to fanaticism and radicalism, folly gone over the edge of propriety and social acceptability. Alterity is essential to the role of the fool, who is at once outside of and at the center of society, but sometimes this anti-conformity and the flouting of convention is taken to another level of hyperbole, giving the impression of madness. In his poverty and renunciation, Diogenes of Sinope (like so many Christian hermits of a later period) demonstrates the paragon of self-control and ethical imperative, yet his disdain for custom and decorum was so extreme and shameless that he appeared to others to be out of his mind. The divergent perspectives on reality are epitomized in Plato's alleged comment (recorded by Diogenes Laertes) that Diogenes the Cynic is "a Socrates gone mad."[86] In another stark example of the medieval period, Till Eulenspiegel answers to a challenge by defecating and proceeding to eat it (Oppenheimer 46).

already triumphed three times. [...]Publius Servilius, Quintus Metellus, Caius Curio, Lucius Africanus, why did not you all become pupils of this learned, of this most wise man, before falling into such blunders as you did? [...]O you foolish Camilli, and Curii, and Fabricii, and Calatini, and Scipios, and Marcelli, and Maximi! O you insane Paullus, you blockhead Marius! Oh how stupid, too, were the fathers of both these consuls; for they, too, celebrated triumphs." Twice Cicero refers to Piso and Gabinus (another personal enemy of Cicero) as "mad and insane" (*furorem et insaniam*) 370.

[86]Diogenes Laertius 6.54.

If the madness of fanatical folly is determined by the eccentricities of a self-conscious nonconformist, a third kind stems from the uncontrolled inspiration of the ecstatic seer or prophet. Of course examples of the ecstatic abound, from ancient oracles and mystery cults to the visionaries and mystical seers of Christianity, but these are not necessarily off-shoots of folly. More appropriate and central to the moriasophia of the West is the folly of St. Paul, who, in the midst of comically boasting to the Corinthians (of his weaknesses, beatings, and hardships) declares "I am talking like one out of his mind" (the key term is *paraphranon*; 2 Cor 11:23). Paul's self-conscious folly then continues with the boast of his "rapture": "I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven" where he "heard words said that cannot and may not be spoken by any human being" (12:2,4).

Socrates combines folly and madness in *Phaedrus*, one of most widely-read and influential dialogues in the Renaissance. Here Socrates begins by ridiculing Lysias and the lyric poets on the obsessions and delusions of love, but changes course after he receives a warning from his personal god (Plato, *Phaedrus* 242c). He then renounces his "foolish" speech (Plato, *Phaedrus* 242d) in order to rehabilitate and reframe the role of folly, madness, and divine possession in the experience of love. To accomplish this end, he distinguishes between two kinds of madness: that which is "bad, pure and simple," and that which offers "the best things…when it is given as a gift of the god" (244b). Socrates demonstrates that the mad folly of the philosopher is superior and wholly good, for the possession of *eros* manifests a divine principle (and not just a incitement or compulsion).[87]

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[87]Though less explicit regarding divine possession, the setting and subject of the *Symposium* suggests a similar interpretation. In the *Second Alcibiades*, Socrates demonstrates that stupidity/folly and madness share some essential quality because each is the opposite of wisdom ("So it looks as if stupidity and madness are one and the

In sum, several aspects traditionally associated with wisdom have crept into the European tradition of folly, rescuing the concept from total condemnation as wisdom's anti-type. The classical terminology indicates that the cleverness or cunning identified as *mētis* or *ingenium* can be compared to the classical virtues of *phronesis* and *technē*, and to some degree can be seen as conflation of them. As we approach the categories of learned, holy, and mad folly, the sense of paradoxy intensifies. The physical conflicts of slapstick, buffoonery, and clowning are muted, as are the traditional occasions for folly in festival and feast day. The uncontrolled and destructive impulses of the "wild man" and the lunatic have no place in moriasophia. The closer the fool comes to the embodiment of wisdom's attributes, the greater the danger that folly itself may dissolve or mutate into something else. The fool must continue to "play the fool," or else the curtain goes down.

The fact that a fool can be both foolish and wise carries one further implication. If the fool represents neither folly nor wisdom, or rather *both* folly *and* wisdom – that is, if there is a wisdom of the fool and a folly of the fool – then the figure belongs to two worlds. The role of the moriasophic fool is as a grand mediator, a negotiator of sense and non-sense, a moderator of sanity and madness, a measure of learning and ignorance. The challenge of moriasophia is to sustain a level of paradoxy without losing the conceptual extremes of the dialectic. It will serve us well, then, to look beyond the anti-type sources and a European folly tradition in order to ask how to better contextualize and explain moriasophia's mediating technique and purpose.

same thing") *Phaedrus* 138c-139d. In the *Ion*, Socrates acknowledges that the poet owes his excellence to the madness of divine possession but he is not willing to equate this gift with true knowledge.

Chapter 3

The Paradoxy of Moriasophia I: Rhetoric and Dialectic

In this chapter, we begin our examination of folly and wisdom in paradoxy. Sayings and proverbs, in which Erasmus steeped himself during the decade preceding the *Moria*, comprise a genre which often collapses the folly-wisdom distinction. Whether a memorable statement is foolish or wise depends not only on its internal logic but on context and interpretation. The ironic persona which Erasmus adopts in the dedication to his first edition emphasizes the ambiguities of the genre and entices the reader's critical sensibilities. We then raise the question of whether the moriasophic paradoxy of the *Moria* and the *Adagia* owes something to Nicholas of Cusa, a philosophical theologian often cited as Erasmus' precursor. This study affirms the connection between moriasophia and learned ignorance while seeking a new basis for comparison in dialectical practices.

3.1 *Adagia* and the Language of the "Middle"

> What, indeed, is so serviceable for adorning a prose discourse with a kind of debonair gaiety, or lightening it with scholarly jests, or seasoning it with sophisticated wit, for setting it off with a few jewels of metaphor, or illuminating it by flashes of epigram, or giving variety to it by employing tiny gems of allegory and allusion, or, finally, garnishing it

> with all the allurements of Antiquity, as to possess an ample supply, a well-stocked storehouse, as it were, of proverbs of this sort?
>
> (Erasmus, Preface to *Adagiorum collecteana*)[88]

The *Adagia* provides an interesting comparison with the *Moria*. Both works were the outgrowth of Erasmus' intense study of classical languages, and as such, they reflect a extraordinary sensitivity to semantics, to variety in expression, and to the remarkable range of ancient Latin and Greek literature. Although Erasmus' attempt to define *proverbi* is not precise and the definition changes with future editions, his scope is in fact much wider, reflecting the broader implications of the term *adagia*,[89] as he appears more concerned with the classical legacy as a whole than he is with technical generic distinctions.[90] The *Adagia* therefore embrace a host of affirmative statements which express some fundamental truth or truism but with accuracy, brevity, clarity – and sometimes cleverness and humor – in order to instruct, strike an impression, and potentially inspire. Aphorism, saying (*dicta*), maxim/motto, axiom, doctrine, and precept are other terms we might use as generic indicators (today's "sound bytes" or "quotables"), although the general nature of the material does not always lend itself to categorization. Proverbs tend to offer moral advice, in contrast to those which instruct a reader with an intellectual insight. Such statements tend to reflect the antithesis model of wisdom, which Erasmus knew all too well.

Proverbs and sayings are the very stuff of the *Adagia*, but they are also a habit of self-expression for the persona of the *Moria*. They provide stimulation and amusement for the read-

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[88]The Preface is addressed to Erasmus' patron William Blount, Lord Montjoy CWE 1: 257.

[89]*Adagia* comes from *aio*, "I say," as opposed to *paroimia*, which, corresponding more narrowly to *proverbi*, implies a hidden meaning. According to Damschen : "First attested in Aesch. Ag. 264, *paroimia*, etymologically related to οι μος (*oîmos*, 'way'; since H. Hom. 4,451 in figurative sense also 'course of the song') (cf. *prooímion*), probably means 'something that stands alongside the course of the story' ([2], undecided [1. 476])."

[90]I will refer to adages as "proverbs and sayings" to denote the widest possible range of aphoristic literature, understanding the former as a special category of the latter. In Erasmus's time, proverbs, like allegories and parables, were thought to convey a profound truth in a non-literal way and therefore require interpretation. For a helpful description of proverbs and epigrams in the urbane setting of early modern London, see Manley 409–30.

er, balanced by instruction, *utile et dulce*. In the *Adagia*, it is a rather straightforward manner, a quotation followed by a commentary, while in the *Moria*, the meaning of the proverb or saying is shaped by a rhetorical context. The didactic emphasis of the two texts increased with Erasmus' revisions. In the *Adagia*, the additions include both new adages and amplified commentary; in the *Moria*, the satirical "middle" section was expanded and marginalia, composed by Lister in collaboration with Erasmus, was also added.[91] The persistent desire for revision and commentary indicate that these two texts are the instruments of a teacher eager to enhance the more rigorous and conventional instruments of language study.

As the prefatory letter to the *Moria* linked that work's genre to a catalogue of ancient models, the preface to the first edition of the *Adagia collecteana* advertises eagerly a panoply of illustrious *auctores* who made ample use of *proverbi*. The rapid-fire survey mentions Quintilian, Cicero, Plautus, Terence, Varro, Catullus, Horace, Pliny the Elder, and Plato, who is given special attention, for interrupting the "splendid philosophy" and "eloquent style" of his serious dialogues with adages. But one may also find (the persona explains) many ancient adages preserved for us in the works of subsequent authors, from the Middle Ages right through "modern times," such as Aulus Gellius, Macrobius, Donatus, Acron, and Porphyrion, the Christian fathers Jerome and Basil, and the near-contemporary Italian humanists Barbaro, Pico, and Poliziano.

The association of the *Adagia* with the wisdom books of the Scriptures can hardly be overlooked, since Erasmus intends his collection as a classical counterpart. "And do not his books, called the Proverbs of Solomon, full as they are of profoundly mysterious utterance, affect any and every reader by their very title? Does not that book called Ecclesiastes, and also that known as Ecclesiasticus, point to the same kind of subject-matter?" Erasmus takes this rela-

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[91]Most of Erasmus's textual additions as well as marginalia were included in the Shürer edition of 1514.

tionship further, so that the Epistles of St. Paul and the very Gospels are shown to contain those segments of wisdom which

> charm by means of a clever and apposite metaphor, or bite with incisive wit; give pleasure by pointed brevity, or delight by brief pointedness; have either age or novelty to recommend it; attract by means of its variety, or else arouse pleasure in one who recognizes the subtle allusion; or, in fine, awaken the nodding reader by its very obscurity. (Erasmus, *CWE* 1: 257)

In the "charm" and "wit" of the persona's own lively voice we perceive, unmistakably, the ironic tone and rhetoric of Folly. What changes is the matter of the argument: as the *Adagia*'s persona endorses proverbs and sayings as incisive, elegant and profound, Folly advocates herself, endeavoring to persuade the reader of her benefits, utility, and profit, her dominion over the powerful and the wise, even her "reasonableness" and piety. Indeed the lively and verbose authorial persona of the preface must have appealed to Rabelais, who both imitates and exaggerates the rhetoric of direct confrontation and shameless self-promotion in the raucous tones of his prologues. Interestingly, the exuberant and witty preface of 1500 (reprinted in 1505) is replaced in 1508 with a rather humorless rationale for a new edition. But why? Perhaps because the tone was starkly at odds with that of the commentary, a tone so serious that Robert Gaguin, the leading Parisian humanist and much-admired literary advisor of Erasmus, described it as "too formal and lifeless" (Schoeck, R. J., *Erasmus* 214). Or perhaps because Erasmus had made his way into a much wider and more sober scholarly community of Hellenists. Whatever the reason, Erasmus put aside the persona of the Preface and its humor.

The showy, boisterous, hawker of proverbs and sayings in the *Adagia*'s first preface is resurrected as Stultitia, or Lady Folly, in the *Moria*. If, as Phillips and Schoeck surmise, the first edition of the *Adagia* was based on a personal commonplace book – a plausible theory – how much more necessary would it have been for Erasmus to have kept a separate list of witty and humorous sayings? How else can we account for the circumstances of its composition, under More's roof and during a period of illness? Even if the *Moria* took longer than seven days to compose,[92] it is hardly likely that Erasmus recalled Folly's aphoristic copia from memory alone. Yet here aphorisms are put to a very different use: that subject matter which constitutes the wisdom of the *Adagia* – proverbs and sayings of the ancients – becomes the very material of folly in the *Moria*. How do we account for such an inversion?

Proverbs and sayings are the natural language of moriasophia; crafted for the very purpose of delineating the wise from the foolish, they rather often problematize those distinctions which they purportedly maintain. The confusion is native to the genre, which itself is hybrid, collecting and binding together a vast array of disparate material under wisdom's banner. On the one hand, the "high culture" philosophy of the Greek traditions were distilled into biographies and epitomes, while pithy quotations, axioms and maxims were extracted from larger texts. The philosophical *vitae* and doxographies reduced and simplified philosophy for a wider audience (e.g., the literate neophyte and non-specialist), analogous to the medieval genres of *sententiae* and *florilegia*, which learned individuals compiled for their own recollection and edification. Moreover, this kind of wisdom literature was widely read, and its texts among the first to be translated into vernacular and set in print in the latter half of the fifteenth century. Among the best-known are: *The Book of Ancient Moral Philosophers,* (*Liber Philosophorum moralium an-*

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[92]In his letter to Martin van Dorp, Erasmus says he spent "about seven days" to complete the *Moria*, a detail which is absent from his earlier dedicatory letter to Thomas More ca. 1510 Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly* 144.

tiquorum, a Latin translation of an eleventh-century Arabic compendium, attributed to Johannes de Procida), the *Distichs of Cato* (*Disticha Catonis*, a third-century compilation of sayings attributed to Cato the Censor), Vincent of Beauvais' *Mirror of History* (*Speculum Historiale*), *The Lives and Habits of Philosophers* (*Liber vita et moribus philosophorum*, pseudo-Walter Burley), Werner Rolewinck's *Fascicle of Times* (*Fasciculus Temporum*), Lucas Brandis' *Handbook for Beginners* (*Rudimentum Novitiorum*), and Hartmann Schedel's *Nuremberg Chronicle* (*Liber chronicarum*).[93]

On the other hand, a more variegated and popular literature, consisting of stories, anecdotes, and the vestiges of oral traditions cross-fertilizes with the above wisdom tradition, which is based chiefly on written material. Aulus Gellius' *Noctes Atticae* is a primary example of the diverse nature of *adversaria*. A wealthy Roman of the second century educated in Athens (as Cicero, Horace, and Ovid), he compiled, completely at random (his title merely indicates that he busied himself at night while staying in Attica one winter), hearsay reports, personal impressions, and contemporary trivia with learned observations, grammatical notes, and citations of numerous authorities, as many as two hundred and seventy-five by name. A work like Gellius' illustrates the many colloquialisms and idioms culled from ancient literature, forming the basis for the kind of "wisdom of the people." And, as Erasmus points out in his dedicatory letter, not only commonplace books like *adversaria* but also serious poems and literary-philosophical dialogues appropriate popular adages.

The multifaceted genre Erasmus was working with for at least eight years prior to the *Moria* sets a precedent for the kind of flexibility in logic and language we call moriasophia. As the number of adages expanded massively from the original 818 to 3,260 (with yet more addi-

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[93]These medieval sources of Greek philosophy and others are described by Curt Bühler in Bühler and, more recently, by Bottin, Santinello and et al. and Cannon 114–15. See also Bühler's edition of the English translation of

tions in 1515 and 1526, climbing to 4,151), the format also broadened to include "a number of remarkable metaphors, witty sayings, noteworthy epigrams, unusually delightful allusions, and poetic allegories" as well as "scriptural allegories, which are found in the famous theologians of early ages" because Erasmus finds them "close in nature to adages." Moreover, the ancillary material illustrates "a rich and attractive style" (Erasmus, *CWE* 2: 140–44). These new additions amplify the bounds of wisdom genres with the subject matter of poetics and rhetoric, giving it an appearance of *florilegia* – a disparate collection of impressions and quotations.[94]

The literary-rhetorical nature of proverbs and sayings increases the potential for complicating the antithesis model of folly and wisdom. Learned maxims may exist side-by-side with the commonsense-logic of rural life, the serious exhortation alongside the humorous quip – both posing as wisdom. Yet it is not always clear in the final analysis whether the inventor of a proverb or saying is sage or fool, nor whether the proverb or saying is itself wise or foolish. To do what is wise entails knowing what is wise, but a perfect wisdom is known by those who are imperfect and in an imperfect way. What does this say about the nature of human wisdom itself? Can wisdom be thus divided, into a wisdom of the learned and a wisdom of the ordinary, the latter based on common sense and experience? And how, then, does the experiential wisdom of Erasmus' *Moria* distinguish itself from folly proper? Here again we have the ambiguity of *deinotēs* and *phronesis* in moriasophia: a practical wisdom which may only partially be in accord with the rules of logical demonstration. Does the insight or advice of the aphorism reveal a non-literal kind of wisdom, or it is mere sophistry and therefore no wisdom at all?

The question for us here is not so much how the *Adagia* is reflected in the *Moria* but how a very different sort of opposition is constructed out of very similar material. Either we have two

Liber de philosophorum (in Mubashshir ibn Fatik), a very important source in England printed by Caxton in 1477 .

kinds of wisdom or we have the opposition between folly and wisdom, and Erasmus' two genres take opposing points of view. The plot thickens, as we examine a language of the "middle" as a means to subverting the rigid categorization of folly-wisdom antithesis model. The compressed, rhetorical language of proverbs and sayings in fact complement, support, and even illustrate the fool's *metis* or *ingenium*. Expertise in the amoral contrivances of language adds much to the exploitation of practical wisdom's gray-matter and of the subtle relations of means to ends. In this chapter we will continue to examine those aspects which contribute to a wisdom literature, inquiring what unifying or coordinating ideas or theories existed in Erasmus' and More's sixteenth century which account for the weakening and transgression of categories, for folly's usurpation, or for wisdom's erosion.

3.2 The *Moria* and Rhetorical Performance

Can the relationship between folly and wisdom in the *Moria* and *Utopia* be explained adequately in terms of language and rhetoric? Rhetorical criticism has been a rich and vibrant field for questions regarding literary structure and method. Rhetoric as a discipline and professional expertise informs Erasmus' and More's general approach to language and to those literary devices which enrich their texts with imagination and argument, such as metaphor, paradox and irony. In the 1490s Erasmus had already begun to compile a substantial amount of material for *On the method of studies* and *On the Double Abundance*, textbook literature which Colet had requested for the foundation of St. Paul's School. Poetics was taught as a branch of rhetoric. As Brian Vickers writes, "Any attempt to define a poetics uninfluenced by rhetoric in this period would be futile" (716). The extraordinary scope of a rhetorical art is evident in the very different kinds of

[94]Margaret Mann Phillips called the 1515 edition of the *Adagia* "Utopian" on account of the themes contiguous with More's text, published just one year later 106–07. See also Olin 127–28.

use to which Erasmus and More applied it: Erasmus, as an independent scholar, teacher, and textual editor, and More, as a lawyer and public servant with a strong aptitude for language and literature. The talents of both were nourished on the ideas and models of the ancients in all their variety, from the florid Ciceronians to the plain-style Atticists. Thus both may be consigned to the broad category of "humanists," which includes both the *humanista* proper and the so-called "civic humanists," i.e., politicians and those in public service who relied on writing for a living.[95]

Reminiscent of the *Adagia*'s first preface, Folly speaks like an orator, that is, a rhetorician in public performance. Erasmus' title invites us to see it this way, and Folly furthermore identifies herself, from the beginning, as a sophist. The first "trick" of ambiguity is its genre, which combines the irony of the paradoxical encomium with the force of the *declamatio* and the elevated mood of the *encomium*. Despite the long list of precedents, Folly's copious and relentless appeals to numerous authorities and proverbs turns a singular argument into clusters and subsets of arguments, which not only "praise folly" but which expound, assert, justify, and defend folly, while also refuting, attacking, censoring and excoriating her imagined opponents. In the end, we have a complex thread of interrelated yet sometimes contradictory propositions, out of which heap Folly emerges triumphant. Similarly, the *Utopia*'s proponent of rhetoric, Raphael, commands the discourse with speeches of great length, admitting little room for a dialogue of inferential procedures – a pattern which reminds us, ironically, of Plato's objection to the speechifying *rhetors* of his day.

Arthur Kinney argues that rhetorical training informs a new development in the poetics of *imitatio* in the sixteenth century. Classical models prepared and conditioned sixteenth-century humanists "to construct narrative situations" which were "probable and therefore verisimilar."

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[95]Kristeller's pioneering definition of humanism and humanists is still valid, e.g *Renaissance Thought* 21–32... To date, the most thorough and complete account of Renaissance rhetoric is provided by Peter Mack in *Renaissance*

Kinney emphasizes three different kinds of imitation connected with rhetorical training: the representation of opposing points of view ("narrative conflict"), the imitation of composite models and patterns from a previous text or texts, and the use of images (Kinney, *Continental Humanist Poetics* 27–28). Several other scholars have argued much the same regarding the prominence of rhetorical structures in the period's narrative fiction. Book I of *Utopia* has been treated as a dialogue and as a model of deliberative rhetoric, whereas the monologue of Book II has been discussed as encomium and demonstrative rhetoric.[96]

Rhetorical-centered criticism has clearly demonstrated the two humanists' absorption in the many forms of argument and in literary style as well as the point-and-counterpoint of debate, the oppositional structure of *pro et contra*, and the standard medieval technique of examination and debate *sic et non*. Recent scholarship has also emphasized the Academic Skepticism of Cicero, which he imbibed at the Athenian school of Arcesilaus and Carneades. Ancient Skepticism held that truth was based on probability rather than certainty, and that probability could only be determined when two sides of any given argument were pursued from premises to conclusions - *ad utramque partem*.[97] This theory is borne out to some extent in Cicero's own dialogues, where three points of view are juxtaposed, a practice adopted by some humanists in the fifteenth century, and not a small number, including Valla, Alberti, and Nicholas of Cusa.[98]

3.3 Moriasophia Beyond Rhetoric

Rhetoric; *Elizabethan Rhetoric* and *A History of Renaissance rhetoric 1380 - 620*.

[96]Logan Schoeck, R. J MacLean.. See also Kinney, "Rhetoric as Poetic".

[97]There are several excellent accounts of the revival of Academic Skepticism in the Renaissance. See, for example Schmitt, C. B., *Cicero Scepticus: A Study of the Influence of the Academica in the Renaissance*; Jardine, L; Franklin 102–30, 195–215 and Popkin 678–84.

[98]Another expression of skepticism, the so-called "Pyrrhonian," in the works of Sextus Empiricus was known to Filelfo (who studied in Constantinople) and Pico, but it was not widely accessible until the Latin edition of 1562 and the Greek edition of 1621. The influence of Pyrrhonian skepticism in the earlier Renaissance is still a matter of debate. See Wright 54–55.

The rhetorical-critical approach to argumentation forms an interesting complement to the models of conceptual opposition we have defined in a folly-wisdom antithesis and the "double-wisdom" of learned and rural adages. The Solomon-Marcolf debate literature mentioned earlier (there are various versions) is an excellent specimen of the antithesis in dialogue, where the assurances of wisdom vacillate in the ambiguity of aphoristic standards and applications. The pattern of wisdom-in-dialogue will be reintroduced in the beginning of the seventeenth century in the figures of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, when a literary and chivalric model of wisdom is juxtaposed to rustic and commonsensical viewpoint, except that for Cervantes, the two divergent perspectives are sometimes complementary.

The consequent question evoked is not only rhetorical-polemical – "Who's wisdom is the wiser?" – but formal and metaphysical – "What is wisdom in itself?" The introduction of this formal question into a discourse of moriasophia compels us to look beyond rhetorical considerations, at least insofar as rhetoric is viewed as a science of persuasion in language. Granted, the exchanges of wisdom and counter-wisdom have a ludic nature through which a reader is compelled to play one opinion off of another and perhaps to take sides, but the seriousness of some implications forces critical judgments of a more introspective kind. In the *Moria*, the rhetorical "trick" of generic mystification and the self-contradiction of Folly's self-praise gives way to satirical commentary, much of which focuses on models of wisdom in society, and from there to the more complicated transformation of Folly into "the fool for Christ." If wisdom were merely a scene in Folly's repertoire, one mask among the many, then Erasmus' continued defense of his persona and his assertion that "Christ and his Apostles are Sileni" in the Letter to Dorp would be as ludicrous as Folly's triumphal universality, and More's Raphael may as well skip the uncom-

fortable analysis of contemporary jurisprudence and courtly politics and report to us directly from the Utopian island.

It is important to draw a critical distinction at this point between method and purpose. There is no question that the rhetoric and poetics of Erasmus and More reveal clearly the concerns of humanism. The techniques of language and argument are inevitably connected to ideas not only about knowledge but also about reforms in piety, ethics, education – preoccupations of the time that have philosophical and theological dimensions. But we will ask, in this study, how the patterns of opposition in rhetoric and dialectic interact and reflect philosophical and theological perspectives on wisdom and knowledge. What happens to the antithesis model and to that wisdom which is a simple and pure abstraction? Is there a right formula for wisdom? Or is human wisdom some sort of combinatory science? The result of an individual's encyclopedic grasp of language in relation to nature? Does the ambiguity of the "middle ground" mean that human, practical wisdom is no longer simple but unstable? If wisdom is related to knowledge, how is folly related to ignorance? These are the broader implications of what it means to praise folly, or to say that folly is wise, or that wisdom is foolish, not just for us but for Erasmus and More in their humanist milieu. A theme of moriasophia is designed to create a bridge from rhetoric and literature to larger issues and to relate theoretical wisdom to practical contexts.

3.4 Nicholas of Cusa and the "Paradoxical Keystones" of the *Moria*

In the pages which follow, we will look at other ways of complicating the folly-wisdom antithesis in the Western tradition. The first is the paradox, a compression device and figure of speech like the adage, usually considered in relation to rhetorical and poetics, but also commonplace in philosophy and theology, and especially in ethics and in mystical theology. The second

approach we will call coincidentia, in lieu of *coincidentia oppositorum* ("coincidence of opposites") or *coincidentia contrarium* ("coincidence of contraries"), terms for the resolution of logical opposition coined by Nicholas of Cusa (henceforth "Cusa") in his philosophical theology.[99] Paradox and coincidentia, though seemingly unrelated, will afford a more complete understanding not only of the context in which Erasmus and More wrote but of ideas which have informed their own concepts of folly and wisdom and the conceptual space between the extremes, either directly or indirectly. They help us to understand why the idea of folly in the *Moria* and *Utopia* cannot be separated from the more comprehensive and serious search for wisdom and why the antithesis model is not just a language game to be exploited through ambiguity but a fundamental metaphysical conflict and an epistemological inquiry.

In his ground-breaking study *Praisers of Folly*, Kaiser argues that the teaching of the Brothers of the Common Life at Deventer is an "ideological" and "philosophical" source for the wisdom-in-folly of Thomas à Kempis, Nicholas of Cusa, and Erasmus, based on the imitation of "the foolishness of Christ." Three "paradoxical" concepts are said to have developed as a result: holy simplicity, learned ignorance, and the notion of the wise fool. While à Kempis' *Imitatio* focuses on the practical concerns of piety, Cusa "laid the philosophical foundations for the concept of the wisdom of folly," which together "gave the medieval world its final theological apologies for the fool" (Kaiser, W. J. 9, 12). Although little more is said of à Kempis, two significant conclusions follow regarding Cusa. Kaiser writes:

> In the two paradoxical keystones of Cusanus' philosophy, *docta ignorantia* and *concidentia oppositorum*, both the philosophical and stylistic characteristics of Erasmus' Stultitia find their first extensive exposition. The questions that Cusanus

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[99]Although "coincidentia" is a Latin term, we will omit the conventional italics, having adopted this term for our critical vocabulary as a special kind or category of resolution.

> poses about the possibility of knowledge, the wisdom derived from the antithesis between the irrational absolute and logical reason, and the rejection of rational theology to which these lead him help to form the philosophical assumptions upon which Erasmus' concept of the fool is based. Similarly, that irony which, as we shall see, is the essential mode of expression for Erasmus' fool is the result of what Cusanus called the 'concidentia scientiae et ignorantiae, seu doctae ignorantiae'. (Kaiser, W. J. 10)

Here and throughout, Kaiser's coordination of sources is as brilliant as his rhetorical style is eloquent. The intellectual thought and piety of the Rhineland must have had a formative impact on Erasmus as a schoolboy and as a young man, as it did on several of his Dutch friends; the decision to enter religious life at the Augustinian monastery of Steyn followed his schooling without a hint of trauma or protracted indecision. Even if he later regretted entering monastic life, Erasmus never said he erred in his religious vocation.[100] Neither did his intellectual appetite abate after changing his desired course of study at the University of Paris. Despite his aversion for scholasticism and his unpleasant experience at the conservative and ascetic Collège de Montaigu, he continued to pursue a theological degree. Of course one did not have to be a monk or a professional theologian to appreciate the Brethren's *Modern Devotion* or Cusa's theology, but the high repute of à Kempis

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[100]We should not interpret Erasmus's later criticism of the monastic life or the Brethren of the Common life as a total condemnation of the monastic vocation and the Brethren's lay association. Erasmus was a very critical person by nature, and his criticism often omits his genuine appreciation for the very thing or person censured. For example, Erasmus offers a rhetorically-rich argument in support of the monastic life in his version of a traditional genre, *On contempt for the world* (*De contemptu mundi*) Erasmus, *On Disdaining the World [*De Contemptu Mundi*]* CWE 66: 129–75. Many have almost excused Erasmus from this early work as a wooden, half-hearted effort; but the text itself points to the contrary. Even if he is conforming his rhetoric to the genre, there is no reason to believe that the Erasmus of the 1480s is insincere in extolling his vocation.

and Cusa in the Netherlands would have made their works highly accessible and hard to avoid.[101]

Half a century later, Kaiser's theory of the *Moria*'s conceptual origins has remained virtually uncontested. Yet this fact is most strange, for the argument is not well-supported. Nowhere does Kaiser define *docta ignorantia*, except to say that it is a kind of paradox and a particular instance of *coincidentia oppositorum*. What is the relationship between *docta ignorantia* and "the antithesis between the irrational absolute and logical reason" and "the rejection of rational theology"? How is does this account of opposition differ from the traditional medieval contrast between an analogical approach of philosophy in *credo ut intellegam* and *fides quaerens scientia* and the intuitive or mystical approach to God? Is human ignorance *de facto* to be identified with "the irrational absolute," where Kaiser presumably refers to God?

And what is the coincidentia? Kaiser does not define this term either, essential as it is to his own theory, but instead refers the reader to the article "Renaissance and Renascences," where Panofsky writes that the *Moria* exemplifies the "ability of reason to question itself and yet emerge with wisdom." This general statement becomes for Kaiser "the informative characteristic of *all* Cusanus' antithetical, paradoxical philosophy [my emphasis]" (Kaiser, W. J. 10). Appended to this evidence is Kaiser's citation of Cassirer on the importance of Cusanus for the study of Renaissance philosophy as "a systematic unity."

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[101]Despite Erasmus' criticism of the Brethren later in life, the extent of the Brethren's influence on him and of Dutch piety in general is still a question of great interest. For example, see Richard Schoeck's thorough and plausible assessment Schoeck, R. J., *Erasmus of Europe* 43–60. See also Levi, *Renaissance and Reformation: The Intellectual Genesis* 133–53, 175–77.

From this point, we will use the term "Brethren" to refer to the entire lay association of the Brethren of the Common Life (*fratres vitae communis*), men and women, as inspired by Geert Groote and organized by Florens Radewijns. We will refer to the male and female branches of the movement as "Brothers" and "Sisters" of the Common Life. The term "modern devotion" (*devotio moderno*) is associated with the Brethren as their particular form of spirituality. The standard scholarly source for this movement for about three decades has been Post, but more recent research, such as that of A. G Weiler., has challenged Post's conclusion that the Brethren had no substantial impact on humanism.

A little further on, Kaiser once more references the *coincidentia oppositorum*, this time as the foundation for Erasmus' "mode of irony":

> Whether those opposites are jest and earnest, praise and censure, or wisdom and folly, it is the coincidentia – the synthesis, the equipoise, the concord – which produces the quality of irony. To be able to perceive such a coincidentia requires a certain type of mind[…] (Kaiser, W. J. 24)

Here coincidentia is defined by the three qualifying terms or synonyms, "synthesis," "equipoise" and "concord," neglecting the significant context of Cusa's thought. The connection between irony and coincidentia is therefore also unclear. Even if we could take coincidentia at face value as an ambiguous theory of harmony, what of the perceived tension in irony between two distinct inferences or meanings? In what sense do two such inferences or meanings coincide?

In effect, Kaiser treats Cusa's speculative terms as paradoxical metaphors, thereby reducing Cusa theory of coincidentia to rhetorical speech. The juxtaposition of opposites mentioned above by Kaiser is not at all what Cusa intends by coincidentia, and neither is Folly's display of sophistication and simplicity, in itself, a representation of "learned ignorance." Unless there is evidence supporting the idea that *Erasmus misunderstood Cusa*, translating the Cardinal's theoretical terms into rhetorical ones, then we must conclude that Kaiser's theory is either incorrect or at least unsubstantiated. The problem of rhetorical reduction is again evident in Kaiser's view of history: "[...]it is not, I think, too fanciful to see that epoch itself as an analogous kind of *coincidentia oppositorum*" (Kaiser, W. J. 24). While such a statement affirms the general taste for

figures of contrariety in the Renaissance, Kaiser at the same time detaches his literary criticism from Cusa's actual theory.[102]

There are at least two reasons why the assessment of Kaiser's *Praisers of Folly* has not been challenged. First, the study of Cusa's works is, for the most part, a special field within philosophy and is not readily accessible to non-specialists, such as those working in the field of literary criticism. Cusa was not writing within a particular tradition but combining medieval-scholasticism with Platonic and Neoplatonic; he is very much an original thinker who invents his own terminology, the meaning of which is often unclear.[103] For the greater part of the Twentieth Century, many scholars relied on Cassirer's account in *Individuum und Kosmos* (1927), a work which opened new doors for the study of Cusa's work in general but which has been surpassed long since. No scholar of Cusa today would argue, without significant exposition and qualification, that the Cardinal's vision of the Absolute is "irrational" or that his view of wisdom constitutes a "rejection of rational theology." Cusa is, on the contrary, interested in developing rational theology and especially with recourse to mathematics; he no more rejects the analogic discourse of philosophy than Erasmus' *Moria* abandons positive doctrine based on Scripture.

A second reason why Kaiser's argument still stands is the inherent attractiveness of the many connections made in *Praisers*. Even without hard evidence (Erasmus makes no mention of Cusa in his own writings), perhaps a case for Erasmus' debt to Cusa can still be made, but on different terms, based on the history of ideas and perhaps on circumstantial evidence. Ronald Levao, like Kaiser, finds in Cusa's metaphysics and epistemology a fertile ground for early mod-

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[102]Here is another example of rhetorical criticism which tends to work against the rational standards of critical analysis: "It was the wisest man of his age, Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam, who created the most foolish fool of all" Kaiser, W. J. 19. Putting aside the exaltation of Erasmus's sagacity, we might ask, if Stultitia is "the most foolish fool," then how can she also be the prototype of "the wise fool"?

[103]The uniqueness and difficulty of Cusa's terminology is universally recognized by scholars in the field. See, for example, the introductory comments of Jasper Hopkins in *A Concise Introduction to the Philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa* i-xii. Hopkins is the most prolific translator of Cusa into English.

ern poetics; but he first strives to define Cusa's "art of conjecture" within the context of Cusa's works before transferring the speculative thought of this deeply contemplative and politically active man of the Church to later literary texts and historical periods. Although Levao's interpretation of Cusa as well as his application of Cusan "conjecture" to early modern poetics has been contested, it represents a significant step toward closing the gap between scholastic speculation and literary theory and practice.[104] Scholarship continues to reveal more about the context of Northern European humanism and the dissemination of ideas, making the discovery of connections between systematic thinkers like Cusa and rhetorician-humanists like Erasmus increasingly plausible.

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[104]Several reviewers have been especially critical of Levao's book. For example, see McH. [pseud forBrian McHale]; Kimbrough and Waddington. The abrasiveness indicates that the task of relating philosophy to artistic method in any given period is not an easy one. Levao's study is valuable for calling attention to the epistemological shift taking place, when a philosophy anchored in the certitude of fixed ideas and procedures is challenged by the relentless imposition of an Absolute, which human understanding can only approximate in degrees of likeness. But how does this philosophico-theological outlook (for Cusa's discourse is always oriented toward theology) impact or interact with the ideas of artists and poetics in the sixteenth century? This study concurs with Levao on one particularly important point, which is that "poetry and poetics function as important speculative instruments in a humanistic culture" (99).

That said, the burden of proof has not been satisfied. First, Levao's summary of watershed moments in the history of Western philosophy leading up to Cusa is astute but not sharply focused, so that we cannot help wondering what the point of it all is. We then learn that the Cusan dialectic underlies or even represents the creative activity of the Renaissance. Levao's account of "conjecture" as Cusa's response to unresolved opposition lacks the guidance of modern scholars in the field (admittedly, there has been a great deal of scholarly work done since 1985), and the "art of conjecture" which Levao imagines seems to reduce the Cusan concept to yet another argument for subjectivism and skepticism linked to a theory of fiction. Despite its emphasis on rational limitation, Cusa's dialectic, affirmative and negative, aim toward a discovery of truth; and to say that conjecture is the basis for "Protean" illusions of self-fashioning ("our only access to reality is through fiction and conjecture" [150]) is to invert Cusa's thought in a way that is reminiscent of Marx's dialectical materialism misappropriating the Hegelian synthesis. The inversion comes about here when a concept like "conjecture" is abstracted from the dialectical context and rhetoricized into a convenient literary-critical metaphor for artistic "invention" - essentially a confusion between different senses of analogy and symbol. And so, despite Levao's deeper immersion in the history of philosophy, he appears to repeat the error of Kaiser.

This study will revisit the problem of relating speculative thought to literary method, but within a particular theme (the dialectic of moriasophia) and with a sense of historical continuity. Rather than rhetoricize dialectic, we will ask how these two educational and inferential methods interact with, compete with, and complement each other. We will also focus on the concept of coincidentia, without which one cannot understand what Cusa means by conjecture. That the notion of *docta ignorantia* challenges the epistemological certainty of the Aristotelian philosophy is clear, but it must be situated in the discourse of faith and reason. For to speak of doubt - especially radical doubt - without faith in the early modern period is (as Brian McHale puts it) anachronistic.

3.5 Opposition in Dialectic: Theories and Practices

What contradictory suppositions does Cusa intend by the oxymoron *docta ignorantia*? And in what sense are the opposites of learning and ignorance understood to "coincide"? To answer these questions, we must first discuss how opposites are employed in a Cusan dialectic – a process of reasoning which is contrary to the dialectical trends of his time – before relating these concepts to the folly-wisdom dialectic inherited by Erasmus and More.

A category of difference, opposition (*oppositio* is literally "a placing against") is as fundamental to rationality and methods of inference as its co-coordinate, identity (*identitas*), and categories of likeness (*similitudo*, *assimulatio*, *propinquus*, *aequalitas*, *analogia*) and classificatory systems consisting of genus, species, and individuals.[105] Prior to and including Cusa's fifteenth century, opposition and all categories of difference were studied, for the most part, within the domain of Aristotelian logic, specifically in the six works known as the *Organon*, the "instrument" or "tool" which a philosopher uses in the search of systematic knowledge of the universe and its principles. The arrangement of Aristotle's works by Andronicus of Rhodes (1st century B.C.) is sequential and systematic: One begins with the study of terms in the *Categories*, then of propositions (which are comprised of terms) in *On Interpretation*, and then of arguments (which are comprised of propositions) in the *Prior Analytics*, which teaches the syllogism. The next three works take the student to the more specialized considerations: the best kind of syllogism for scientific inquiry (according to Aristotle), the "demonstration," is outlined in the *Prior*

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[105]Given the focus of this study on Erasmus and the history of Western thought, Latin terms will be preferred to Greek. Greek terms will be quoted in transliterated form where appropriate.

Analytics; the making of good yet non-demonstrative arguments is discussed in the *Topics*; and various kinds of fallacies are treated in the *Sophistical Refutations*.[106]

In two of these works, Aristotle outlines systematic constructs of opposition. The first model is based on a set of propositions from Chapter 7 of *On Interpretation*; at some unknown point these propositions were arranged into a diagrammatic reference tool and given the title "the square of opposition." Here Aristotle distinguishes between affirmative and negative statements regarding univerals and particulars, finding four main ways in which one proposition differs from (i.e., is opposed to) another. Two propositions are "contradictory" if they cannot both be true nor both be false, "contrary" if they cannot both be true but can both be false, "subcontrary" if they cannot both be false but can both be true, and "subaltern" if one is true, the other must be true; if false, the other must be false. The second system, explicated in the *Topics*, involves the classification of arguments and those terms which are frequently used in drawing conclusions. Opposition in this theory is defined by contraries, contradictories, possession, and privation (such as having sight or being deprived of sight), and relatives (qualitative terms, e.g., large/small). These basic systems of opposition were foundational and taught to every university student in the Middles Ages through the time of Erasmus and More and still today in courses on introductory logic and the history of logic.[107]

It is not our goal to analyze Aristotle's dialectical terminology and structure but merely to call attention to it; for this is what most often comes to mind when we think of opposition in medieval and early modern philosophy. However, the dominance of logical studies in the Northern

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[106]For general studies of Aristotle's logical works, see Spade and Smith. For Aristotle's logical works in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, see Kretzmann, Kenny, Pinborg, et al., sections III-V, and Schmitt, C. B., *Aristotle and the Renaissance*.

[107]For a general summary of the square of opposition from Aristotle through the nineteenth century, see Parsons. For the development of logical thought in Aristotle, see Kneale and Kneale, and especially their examination of Aristotle's theory of opposition (54-67).

schools tends to obscure other approaches to opposition which are more closely related to the antithesis of wisdom and folly in theology and in Cusa's *docta ignorantia*. Grounded in the principle of non-contradition, Aristotelian logic is designed to distinguish between the literally true and false and is therefore inherently at odds with those poetical and rhetorical devices of *fictio* and *fabula*, such as ambiguity and paradox, which disguise intention and complicate instruction.

In Cusa's fifteenth century, new philosophical sources such as Plato's dialogues, the Neoplatonist treatises of Iamblichus and Proclus, and the biographies and doxography of Diogenes Laertius brought back to life a vast world of pre-Socratic philosophy, scarcely known through the fragmented references in the works Aristotle and other ancient writers. In this larger context of philosophers and philosophy, opposition was a most basic and essential principle for Greek Ionians and Italian Eleatics to explore and contemplate the structure of reality and the origins and operations of nature. The Ionian physicists saw nature as a conjunction of opposite tendencies and sought a fundamental principle of unity which could explain continuity and regularity in nature – hot and cold, wet and dry, water and vapor, fire, air, all the prime matter of the elements were tried. This search for a material principle of reality contrasted sharply with the metaphysical concerns of the Eleatics, who divided material from immaterial principles, and from this they distinguished between appearance and truth, positing the existence of a transcedent and therefore superior unifying principle. At the root of the pre-Socratic problem was the need to balance phenomena of change with the stability of abstract concepts and to explain how the two could coexist. Heraclitus, an enigmatic writer who was fond of ambiguity, riddles, and paradoxes, claimed on the one hand that all things are in flux, with fire as the principle of constant strife and

change, and yet "all existing things are harmonized, and made to agree together by opposite tendencies."[108]

Out of the many precursors of Socrates arises the towering figure of Pythagoras, one of Greece's ancient sages, whose name and legend appear in the writings of many ancient philosophers and doxographers. Even the Romans, who were eager to have a philosopher of high repute on their own soil (Pythagoras lived and taught in Greek colony of Kroton in southern Italy circa 570 B.C.), attempted to show that Pythagorean theories contributed to the Republic.[109] Like Socrates, Pythagoras did not leave behind anything in writing, yet the remarkable flourishing of his community, which still existed a hundred years after his death, attests to his achievement. He was remembered first of all for the view that everything is number, that the harmony of musical intervals is the result of numerical ratios, and that the planets are arranged in such a way that they produce music (i.e., the so-called "music of the spheres"). But Pythagoras was also a quasi-religious figure, who purportedly studied with the Persian magi and worked miraculous cures. He believed in the "transmigration of souls," or *metempsychosis*, a type of reincarnation. His community was known for strict ethical and dietary practices. These legends (which Huffman calls a "lionization") made Pythagoras a very attractive figure in the Renaissance; only Socrates rivaled him as a pagan precursor to Christianity. The pseudo-Pythagorean *Golden Verses* was

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[108]See Diogenes Laertius.

[109]Cicero's witness a strong indication of the fame of Pythagoras among the Romans. Carl Huffman writes: "At the beginning of Book IV (1–2) of the *Tusculan Disputations*, Cicero notes that Pythagoras gained his fame in southern Italy at just the same time that L. Brutus freed Rome from the tyranny of the kings and founded the Republic; there is a clear implication that Pythagorean ideas, which reached Rome from southern Italy, had an influence on the early Roman Republic. Cicero goes on to assert explicitly that many Roman usages were derived from the Pythagoreans, although he does not give specifics. According to Cicero, it was admiration for Pythagoras that led Romans to suppose, without noticing the chronological impossibility, that the wisest of the early Roman kings, Numa, who was supposed to have ruled from 715–673 BCE, had been a pupil of Pythagoras. Cicero tells us in *De finibus* that this was true in his own century Huffman, C., "Pythagoreanism". See also Cicero, M. T., *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum* and Huffman, C., "Pythagoras".

one of the most popular Greek texts during the fifteenth century and could also be found in the Greek grammars circulating in the West.[110]

Aristotle recalls several of the basic tenets of a group he labels "so-called Pythagoreans" in the *Metaphysics*, including a "table of opposites" (literally, "according to column," or *kata sustoichian*) in ten pairs:

limit unlimited

odd even

unity plurality

right left

male female

rest motion

straight crooked

light darkness

good bad

square oblong

This table is interesting for several reasons. The categorical opposites which Aristotle ascribes to the Pythagoreans are abstract and belong neither to a logical science nor to an elemental theory; the pairs in fact combine a concern for metaphysics – the principles of reality and being – with the language of mathematics, symmetry, generation, motion, ethics, and geometry. Aristotle commends the Pythagoreans for selecting these pairs thoughtfully, considering number and kind, more carefully than did the physician Alcmaeon of Croton, who seems to have chosen a list of opposites at random. Similar formulae for opposites appear in the works of Plato. In the

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[110]For a recent study of Pythagoras, see Riedweg Kahn, *Pythagoras*. Ficino translated the *Golden Verses* (*aurea dicta*) as well as thirty-nine Pythagorean sayings, called the *symbola*.

Phaedo, for example, Socrates argues that if each thing has an opposite – and it is possible for life to become its very own opposite in the state of death – then it follows that the deceased soul may likely come alive once more.[111] Although this argument does not seem particularly effective by modern standards, it cannot be considered apart from the discrepancy between appearances and reality, i.e., since a living soul cannot arise from non-being, it cannot pass into non-being either (for as Parmenides had argued, being cannot come from non-being). The opposition argument is complemented by a specifically Pythagorean analogy: the body is the musical instrument or "attunement" of the soul; even when the instrument has decayed, the harmony it once produced does not.[112]

Socrates also uses opposites in the *Protagoras* and elsewhere to argue for the unity of the virtues: e.g., if one vice can be the opposite of two virtues, those virtues must be identical in some respect. (This same strategy is used inversely in the *Second Alcibiades*, where madness and folly are both said to be opposites of wisdom.) It is no wonder then that Plato has been seen as borrowing some aspects from the Pythagorean tradition. Aristotle tells us that similar tables of opposites were used in Plato's Academy (*Metaph*. 1093b), and the practice continued in the works of later Platonists and Neoplatonists. Even the Stagirite himself seems to have found a use for such a cataloguing device (*Metaph*. 1004b ff., *Phys*. 201b).

Until the recovery of Plato and Neoplatonism in the fifteenth century, philosophers focused on the patterns of opposition in Aristotle's logical corpus. Yet opposition has a critical

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[111]This particular argument is adapted by Folly in her famous reference to the "Sileni of Alcibiades": "Hence, what appears 'at first blush' (as they say) to be death, will, if you examine it more closely, turn out to be life; conversely, life will turn out to be death; beauty will become ugliness; riches will turn to poverty; notoriety will become fame; learning will be ignorance; strength, weakness; noble birth will be ignoble; joy will become sadness; success, failure; friendship, enmity; what is helpful will seem harmful; in brief, you will find everything suddenly reversed if you open the Silenus" Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly* 43.

[112]It is interesting that the "Seven Sage" tradition in Greece, in which Pythagoras plays a part, is linked to the wisdom literature of *axioma* and *paroimai*, for each sage was said to have had a motto engraved on the walls of the Temple at Delphi.

place in the dialectical practices of the Academy and in all three main branches of philosophy – metaphysics, physics, and ethics. While propositional logic treats the categorical differences between types of affirmative and negative statements, opposition in other fields begins with antitheses, analogies, and comparisons, illustrations of categorical differentiation which are subject to "testing" through various dialectical exercises. One has only to turn to Book 10 of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, where he uses the same four-part scheme as he does in the *Topics* to describe the various kinds of opposition including numerical distinctions (e.g., one, few, and plurality), or the early books of the *Nichomachean Ethics*, where he uses opposing qualities as "extremes" to arrive at virtues conceived as median principles (*Metaph*. 1057a, *N. Ethics* I-V).

For his metaphysical theology, Nicholas of Cusa draws partly from Aristotle but with a renewed emphasis on the kind of dialectic he found in Plato and the Neoplatonists, looking also to the Pythagoreans. Cusa shows very little interest, for example, in rational demonstrations for the existence of God based on causality or motion as observed in the natural world. His tendency is rather to use the evidence of observation and sensation sparingly and to emphasize the various ways in which the incongruity and incomparability of the finite and infinite can be represented, conceived, or merely indicated. Rather than perceiving the Absolute as the cause of many things, each thing manifesting some facet of the divine essence (the tradition of *analogia entis*), the Absolute is uncaused (in relation to itself) at the same time as it is all-causation (in relation to the world). The resulting dialectic is bivalent, not syllogistic.

Dialectical techniques in Platonism use opposites to sharpen definitions of abstract concepts, inferring what a thing is by means of what it is not. This practice is also extended to contrary propositions, best exemplified in the *Parmenides*, the most influential dialogue for the de-

velopment of Western dialectical practices during the late Middle Ages.[113] It is more than a coincidence that Cusa grounds his metaphysics on such distinctions as the created and the uncreated, the "contracted" and the "uncontracted," the finite and the infinite, for this binary or bivalent logic is related to the practices of the Pythagorean Parmenides, who describes reality as a sphere with a limit, and (perhaps more importantly) Philolaus, whose metaphysics is based on a "fitting together" of "unlimiteds" and "limiters."[114] The related Platonic metaphors of image/original, copy/model, and instance/paradigm are instrumental aspects of Cusa's exemplarism, while the Aristotelian concepts of potency and act inform his account of divine creativity.

3.6 Learned Ignorance and the Paradoxical

The antithesis of folly and wisdom in a moriasophic discourse participates in the same dialectical view of reality as that of the philosophers. If we consider, for example, the theological cosmology which much Western thought and literature draws on, we find creation described as a series of bifurcations – light from darkness, day from night, heavens from earth, sea from land, image/likeness from original, woman from man, etc. In the moral sphere as well, the separation of creatures from God in the trespass of sin introduces the oppositional dynamic between good and evil. These doctrines have resonances in Plato's "unwritten doctrine"of "the One and indefinite dyad," the two metaphysical principles (if one may call them so) of the late Academy, according to Aristotle and Speusippus.[115] Metaphysics and a theology of God admit the use of at

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[113]Raymond Klibansky, *Platonic Tradition* led to way to rediscovering the important role of the *Parmenides* in the West for modern scholarship. More recently, Charles Lohr writes of the importance of the *Parmenides* for Nicholas of Cusa and Pico in the *Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy* 563–65, 582–83.

[114]Diogenes Laertius considers them both Pythagoreans. In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle discusses Philolaus but does not place him in a school. See Huffman, C. A. 28–31. Plato was said to have traveled to Italy to meet Philolaus.

[115]The dual-principle approach to a theory of forms is mentioned by Aristotle in the *Metaphysics* (1079a13, 1039a2). This together with the *Sophistical Refutations* (178b36 ff.) and the fragments of Speusippus (Plato's own nephew) represent an attempt to answer a most serious challenge to the theory of Forms. Also important is Proclus's interpretation of the One and indefinite dyad in his commentary on the *Parmenides*, available to the Latin West after

least some poetical license in their treatment of first principles and of being, i.e., of an unseen, immaterial reality and source of unity for all transient beings and their natures. Indeed, Aristotle sometimes referred to metaphysics as a "divine science," a fact which led to no small confusion over the relationship between the theological and philosophical sciences.

What is less obvious, however, is how a paradoxy of folly and wisdom, as it occurs in a rhetorical literature, is related to the paradoxy of ignorance and learning in Nicholas of Cusa. Cusa's learned ignorance is a unique expression of the folly-wisdom dialectic, emphasizing the epistemological aspects of the moriasophic method. In his first major work on this concept, *On Learned Ignorance*, Cusa reinterprets the role of ignorance in the Socratic method. While this work omits Platonic character, *elenchus* (refutation), and mimetic dialogue with the straight-forward style of demonstration (though he employs neither the syllogism nor the *quaestio* pattern of objections and responses, *sic et non*), Cusa takes the "irony" of Socrates very seriously, as a

William of Moerbeke's translation in the thireenth century. (The Greek text was subsequently lost.) Plato's theory attempts to explain how an instantiated form, predicated of any given number of objects (e.g., largeness-in-things) can remain distinct from the ideal Form (Largeness-in-itself), without requiring a third Form (largeness-in-things-*and*-in-itself) to satisfy the principle of non-identity. (I.e., "No form is identical to anything that partakes of it"). That is, if a predicate-form and an ideal Form are separate, there must be a *still more general* principle in which both participate.

The "One and indefinite dyad" is a subject of great interest among Plato scholars today. A brief summary of the much-debated Third Man Argument, as Plato depicts it in the *Parmenides*, can be found in Rickless, S.: "Most commentators agree that the reasoning relies on at least three principles: One-over-Many, Self-Predication, and Non-Identity[...] Allen (Plato's Parmenides [1997, 163] accepts that the reasoning relies on the claim that the large is large—an instance of Self-Predication, but denies that the argument, when generalized to forms other than the large, relies on Self-Predication.) They also agree that the reasoning generates an infinite regress of forms of largeness, and that the argument could be generalized to generate an infinite regress of forms corresponding to any predicate. But commentators differ over why Plato takes the regress to be vicious or problematic and what Plato would have recommended as a way of avoiding the absurdity generated by the reasoning." For a recent interpretation of the One and indefinite dyad, see also Brisson and Dillon, "Speusippus and the Ontological Interpretation of the *Parmenides*".

For us, here, it is important to note the resemblance between the metaphysical principle of "the One and indefinite dyad" and the theological doctrines of creation *ex nihilo*, the Trinity, and Incarnation (aptly called "mysteries"), which also assert a metaphysics of plurality-and-unity, i.e., of Creator-and-creatures, of the divine persons and of the Son of God (one person in two natures), without substantial differentiation.

We later juxtapose the terms "absolute infinity" and "relative infinity" to denote the problem of unity and infinite regress in Plato's *Parmenides*.

real aspect of the human epistemological condition and not as a mere pretext or "posture" for refuting the opinions of others.[116]

For Cusa, the process of knowledge begins when the mind mirrors and reconstitutes the opposition it perceives in the natural world. Then, compelled by the spark or engine of desire, the mind seeks its own origin, i.e., the cause of its existence and experience, which is also the key unifying principle of reality, both the visible and the intellectual. Learning and ignorance are, then, the subjective measure of knowledge as it corresponds to the dialectical tensions and "play" of first principles in metaphysics. If learning and ignorance interpenetrate one another or become inverted in a paradoxical way, the paradoxy is not just perceptual, the result of human limitation, but it is something built into in the very nature of reality. As the rational, immortal mind collapses the boundaries of metaphysical opposition, "enfolded" in its ontological principle, the distinction between learning and ignorance becomes increasingly unstable and ambiguous.

The connection between learned ignorance and moriasophia is evident in Cusa's own definition, stated in the heading's contradiction, "How it is that knowing is not-knowing." Here Cusa introduces the problem of using the inferential methods of *ratio* and *intellectus* to gain knowledge of the Absolute or infinity (and thus God). He posits that, if all our knowledge is obtained by the comparison of the uncertain with the more certain (an explanation which conflates analogical reasoning and deduction), that which is infinite is per se unable to be known, because "it escapes all comparative proportion." This void or impasse between the perfect and the imperfect is essentially the same distinction between Wisdom as divine attribute and creative power of

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[116]Several later works of Cusa are composed in the dialogue form. Those dialogues which feature a Socratic figure called Idiota are discussed in Chapter 8.

an omniscient God and the embodiment of wisdom in human understanding and moral action. The implications are clear in Cusa:

> Both the precise combination in corporeal things and the congruent relating of known to unknown surpass human reason – to such an extent that Socrates seemed to himself to know nothing except that he did not know. And the very wise Solomon maintained that all things are difficult and unexplainable in words. And a certain other man of divine spirit says that wisdom and the seat of understanding are hidden from the eyes of all the living. Even the very profound Aristotle, in his *First Philosophy*, asserts that in things most obvious by nature such difficulty occurs for us as for a night owl which is trying to look at the sun. Therefore, if the foregoing points are true, then since the desire in us is not vain, assuredly we desire to know that we do not know[…] The more he knows that he is unknowing, the more learned he will be.[117]

At the very outset, Cusa seems to give short shrift to those participatory predicates and analogies which formed the bedrock of a medieval theology of God, in such notions as the *analogia entis* and the "divine perfections." Rather, Cusa's illustrations aim immediately at the limits of knowledge. Socrates, Solomon, Aristotle – three "sages" and representatives of the wisdom traditions of the time, Platonic, Hebrew, and Aristotelian – are

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[117]"Praecisio vero combinationum in rebus corporalibus ac adaptatio congrua noti ad ignotum humanam rationem supergreditur, adeo ut Socrati visum sit se nihil scire, nisi quod ignoraret, sapientissimo Salomone asserente cunctas res difficiles et sermone inexplicabiles; et alius quidam divini spiritus vir ait absconditam esse sapientiam et locum intelligentiae ab oculis omnium viventium. Si igitur hoc ita est, ut etiam profundissimus Aristoteles in prima philosophia affirmat in natura manifestissimis talem nobis difficultatem accidere ut nocticoraci solem videre attemptanti, profecto, com appetitus in nobis trustra non sit, desideramus scire nos ignorare[...] et tanto quis doctior erit, quanto se sciverit magis ignorantem." The Latin source consulted is Cusa, *DDI* 1.1. Translation is that of Jasper Hopkins, in Cusa, *LI* 1.1.4. As Hopkins points out, the "Alius quidam divini spiritus vir" in the above quotation refers to the figure of Job (27:1-28).

Cusa's opening resembles that of the Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite in his treatise "On Divine Names." See Pseudo-Dionysius 49–50.

blended together as the figureheads of highest reason and divine revelation, of philosophy and theology, here testifying to the limitations of reason and language. Cusa's own summation, "assuredly we desire to know that we do not know," underscores the famous Socratic dictum, though he also joins to it the *appetitus intellectualis* of the scholastic tradition.[118] Not only do we "know that we do not know" but we *desire* to know our not-knowing, a fitting yet ironic inversion of our natural and "insatiable" (according to Cusa) inclination to seek our most perfect form in the highest objects of knowledge. This seek-ing-to-know-what-cannot-be-known, is the signature of Cusa's discursive method not only in *OLI* but throughout his writings.

The idea of an unknown or "hidden" God is well-established in monotheistic theology of God and it appears frequently in the discourse of mysticism, Western as well as Eastern. Modern scholarship has demonstrated Cusa's debt to Meister Eckhart, a Rhineland mystic whose writings contributed to the spiritual renewal of the fourteenth century in the North, and to a lesser extent, to Ramon Llull, an eclectic Catalan who unified elements of Christian, Neoplatonic, and Islamic mysticism.[119] Like these men, Cusa is not describing an affective experience of the divine or even of illumination but he is rather constructing a kind of rational-theological spirituality, i.e., a method in which all human faculties (reason, will, emotion, etc.) are unfied in the mind's contemplation of the infinite God. To be sure, the journey metaphor in contemplative spirituality is traditional, recalling such works as Bonaventure's *Journey of the Mind into God* (*Itinerarium mentis in Deum*). Cusa's learned-ignorant method, however, introduces a unique approach

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[118]Thomas Aquinas defines the free will as an appetitive power (I-I., q. 83, art. 1-4), following Aristotle, who asserts that we choose what we desire (*Nich. Ethics* 3.3). Scotus differs on this point, arguing that a formal distinction is necessary; if we always choose what we desire as a matter of appetite, then we are not truly free. See Dumont 367–68.

[119]For Meister Eckhart's influence on Cusa, see, for example Duclow, "Nicholas of Cusa in the Margins of Meister Eckhart: Codex Cusanus 21". For mysticism in Ramon Lull, see Anthony Bonner's Introduction to the *Book of the Lover and Beloved* 175–87.

through dialectic and symbolism, inspired by Platonic and Christian-Platonic models, from Plato through Proclus and from Dionysius the Areopagite through John Scotus Eriugena.

Of the Christian Platonists, the greatest debt is owed to Dionysius the Areopagite.[120] In four uniquely influential treatises addressed to a fellow monk,[121] this author – a fifth century writer who assumed the identity of Paul's Athenian convert and disciple (Acts 17:34) – repeatedly emphasizes, as does Cusa, God's transcendence in an epistemological context; he is beyond all language, all "names" or divine attributes (e.g., justice, beauty, wisdom, power). Our affirmative predications are therefore deficient and imprecise (Pseudo-Dionysius *DN* 49–51). Negative or apophatic theology, also known as the *via negativa* and *via remotionis*, of which we will speak in greater depth, is considered by Dionysius as the superior approach to contemplation; for God's infinity so far surpasses our intellectual or conceptual knowledge of him that it is more correct to say that God is *not* any given abstract quality or that he is something *other* than it. In his final section of Book I, Cusa offers his own summary of the Dionysian *via negativa*, extolling its author as "the greatest" (*maximus*) a person of highest authority (Cusa, *DDI* I.26.86–89). This is the only context in *OLI* where Cusa modifies his key term, identifying the apophatic approach as a *sancta ignorantia*. The disparity between a "learned" and a "holy" ignorance suggests some modesty on Cusa's part, a difference between his own rational-philosophical (and therefore propaedeutic) approach and that of Dionysius, which is more strictly theological, sacramental, and liturgical.

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[120]Cusa owned several Latin translations and commentaries. Ambrogio Traversari undertook a new translation in 1430-31, which Nicholas may have used when writing *DDI* . In 1453 Cusa mentions a copy of the *Corpus Dionysium* in Greek in his possession, a manuscript which he himself may have brought over from Constantinople. See Bond 141, 154–56 and Casarella, P. 137–38.

From this point on we will omit the customary "pseudo-" for convenience. Although Cusa was among the first to question the authenticity of the Dionysian author along with Valla, he was not particularly concerned, since a diminished authority did not invalidate the insights of theology. See Froehlich.

[121]Composed, therefore, in the form of the letter, a literary form dear to humanists.

Most critical interpretations of learned ignorance have focused on the ambivalence of the passive participle, which can modify "ignorance" in two senses: as (1) an acquired ("learned") awareness of human limitations, by which one becomes (2) more authentically knowledgeable ("learnèd").[122] However correct and insightful, such an interpretation tends to emphasize one half of the oxymoron – the "knowing" – and does not address adequately the paradoxy of a simultaneous "not-knowing." The more complete understanding of how *docta ignorantia* operates in Cusa's thought must relate the paradoxy of the term to the two contrasting methods of investigating the unlimited or infinite, the affirmative and the negative. The "ignorance" Cusa speaks of is on par with the Christian virtue of *humilitas*, a realization of the limits of "creatureliness" before a Creator. Yet unlike many of his monastic predecessors Cusa attempts to probe the Creator not by studying the order of his creation, nor by appeals to revelation, nor with recourse to metaphysical causality (i.e., as Uncaused Cause or Prime Mover). Rather, Cusa aims to demonstrate how the mind's rational processes, circumscribed by limit and measure, bear within them intimations of the infinite and absolute. At some point, the transition from rational thought to contemplative thought entails the negation of the mind's confines, and this for Cusa is a kind of ignorance.

Affirmative and negative theology, or a theology of affirmation-via-negation,[123] constitute the same basic foundation in paradoxy as moriasophia, where the anti-wisdom of folly becomes – inversely and often ironically – a means of greater perception, higher understanding, and moral dexterity. Cusa is well aware of this connection, and so he subtly unites his own dis-

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[122]Most scholars of Cusanus have called attention to the ambiguity of *docta ignorantia*. E.g Cusa, *LI* 2–3; Casarella, P. J. xxvii.

[123]The juxtaposition of affirmative and negative argument has been called "disjunctive theology" Cusa, *Spiritual Writings* 33.

course of learned ignorance with the language and tradition of folly. In his Dedicatory Prologue to his teacher, Cardinal Julian Cesarini, Cusa writes:

> Your very great and indeed very proven Genius [*probatissimum ingenium*] will rightly wonder what to make of the following fact: viz., that when, quite imprudently, I endeavor to publish my foreigner's-foolishness [*barbaras ineptias*], I select you as a judge…as if you retained some leisure (you, who by virtue of your cardinal's duties at the Holy See are extremely busy with especially important public affairs) and as if, given your most thorough knowledge of all the Latin writers who have hitherto become illustrious (and [your] recent [knowledge] of the Greek writers as well), you could be drawn by the novelty of its title to this presumably very foolish production [*ineptissimum conceptum*] of mine – I, whose quality of intellect [*qualis ingenio*] has long been very well known to you[…][124]

Here modern philosophical scholarship has overlooked a critical and revealing signal from the author. Cusa's language is no mere rhetorical device for modesty, as some translators have suggested. On the contrary, he is using the Prologue to place *docta ignorantia* in the context of a moriasophia tradition. The first key to this connection is the author's stated folly, the *barbaras ineptias* of his work. One could not possibly justify such a term of authorial self-deprecation without a sense of humor. The term *barbara* implies both a lack of civility and of literary refinement; applied to the tribes of non-Roman territories (and thus an allusion to his German nationality), it had long been co-

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[124]"Admirabitur et recte maximum tuum et iam probatissimum igenium, quid sibi hoc velit, quod, dum meas barbaras ineptias incautius pandere attempto, te arbitrum eligo, quasi tibi pro tuo cardinalatus officio apud Apostolicam Sedem in publicis maximis negotiis occupatissimo aliquid otii supersit et post omnium Latinorum scriptorum, qui hactenus claruerunt, supremam notitiam et nunc Graecorum etiam ad meum istum fortassis ineptissimum conceptum tituli novitae trahi possis, qui tibi, qualis ingenio sim, iam dudum notissimus existo." Cusa, *DDI* 1.1.

opted by humanists as an epithet for the scholastics and their awkward conventions and neologisms.[125] *Ineptia*, on the other hand, is clearly a word from the vocabulary of folly; although it may mean "ill-equipped" or "unfitting," it more often than not denotes silliness, clumsiness, or stupidity, and so it is found in tandem with *stultitia* (*OLD*). While Hopkins makes the appropriate connection, H. Lawrence Bond, in his recent English translation of *OLI*, misses the mark, rendering *barbaras ineptias* literally as "barbarous ineptitude" and *ineptissimum conceptum* as "unsuitable work" (Cusa, *Spiritual Writings* 87).

The folly of the author is paralleled in the description of the work, which Cusa says is *ineptissimum conceptum*, (emphatically) "a most foolish notion" – but with the addition of a significant equivocation, *fortassis*, "perhaps." The uncertainty of equivocation is also suggested in Cusa's references to learned ignorance as a "wonder" (*admiratio*), a concept which Cusa derives in part from Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, in part from a theology of creation (which "awes" the observer), but one which he also reinvents for his own purposes. According to Aristotle, wonder arises when the cause of a phenomenon remains unknown through sensation and observation, stimulating the desire to know.[126] This definition suffices for a rational science when the causes are knowable; and Aristotle says that philosophy dispels the *ignorance* of wonder with its investigations [982b]. But Cusa's *admiratio*, seeking the infinite, comes closer to the concept of "miracle" (*miraculum*) which is an emphatic sort of wonder because its cause cannot ever be known; it is, as Aquinas says, "completely hidden from all."[127]

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[125]As in the early work of Erasmus, entitled *Antibarbari*, written as a defense of the humanities against those who would denigrate the study of classical literature or corrupt the ancient Latin language.

[126]In the first section of *Metaphysics*, Aristotle discusses this crucial theory of knowledge (980a25–981b). See also Aquinas on this subject, *ST* I-II, q.3, art. 8; III, q. 30, art. 4, reply to Obj. 1; III, q.15, art.8.

[127]*Miraculum autem dicitur quasi admiratione plenum, quod scilicet habet causam simpliciter et omnibus occultam* (*ST* I-I, Q. 105, Art.8). In theological discourse, one would define the unknowable cause of wonder as "mystery."

Cusa expounds on the positive and negative connotations of a wonder which cannot be known and an ignorance which cannot be remedied. On the one hand, his "new" idea appears outlandish, not only *barbara* but extraordinary and even monstrous (*Rara quidem, et si monstra*), likened to the repulsive feeling one experiences in the stomach before the craving for food or appetite sets in. On the other hand, this very same experience of *admiratio* provides the impetus for philosophizing (*propter quod philosophari*) and the consequent desire for knowing (*sciendi desiderium praevenire*), just as the intellect strives to perfect itself in its eagerness for truth. Such astonishment, Cusa says, will hopefully attract Cesarini's habitually insightful mind to look more deeply into the work (*animum tuum sciendi peravidum spero visendum alliciet*).

The rhetoric of Cusa's Prologue clearly joins his title and concept of *docta ignorantia* to a moriasophic discourse, where a language of folly and wisdom alternate and become inseparable. There is a playful and performative aspect, as *docta ignorantia* partakes of both the high and the low, the refined and the vulgar. The motifs of sublime wonder and sight are complemented by the sensory and carnal metaphor of hunger and appetite. When Cusa says that, with his spectacle of wonder, he will lead Cesarini on and direct his vision toward learned ignorance in an act of boldness (*sed potius qua audacia ad de docta ignorantia tractandum ductus sim*), his language suggests an orator or actor commanding the attention of an audience. Finally, the work is described as the interaction of two opposing *ingenii*: the German author's, which is barbarous and foolish, contrasted to that of his refined Italian patron, which is "most upright" (*probatissimum*). The figure of rhetorical modesty is both personal and ethnic, distinguishing the crude German way of thinking from the learning and eloquence evident in the Italian's knowledge of Latin and Greek letters. More importantly, for our purposes, the concept of "native talent," *ingenium*, is used equivocally and ironically, a cunning folly juxtaposed to learned wisdom.

The concept of *admiratio* serves much the same rhetorical function here as the ancient Greek *paradoxos*: a strong impression in language which bewilders the intellect and disarms reason into a temporary state of passive receptivity, while it simultaneously heightens awareness and appeals to the perceiver's affective nature. The anticipated response links Cusa's philosophy to his rhetoric, since the desire for knowledge is said to be stimulated by this affective, rhetorical principle: that which is extraordinary and monstrous *moves* the intellect (*nos movere solent*). *Admiratio* is thus a rhetorical figure of ambiguity, corresponding precisely to that rational uncertainty which results from the stark absence of a precise measure between the sensible world and the infinite Absolute. The temporary suspension of intellectual reasoning and epistemological judgment required for learned ignorance is quite similar to the arrest of reason caused by the fool's "shocking" intervention upon the normal course of affairs. The fool, "extraordinary and monstrous," is thus a figure of *admiratio*.

Remarkably, Cusa is a century ahead of Italian theorists like Robortelli and Minturno, who develop theories of wonder based upon their reading of Aristotle's *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*, translating Aristotle's *to thaumaston*, "the marvelous," with the Latin word *admiratio*. Before the end of the sixteenth century, *admiratio* would be associated with paradox directly, when the latter is defined as a figure of speech that elicits wonder in a relationship of cause-and-effect.[128] It is important, however, to regard Cusa as an independent predecessor, as he adds to the philosophical tradition of the *Metaphysics* his own rhetorical dimension – perhaps influenced by the

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[128]Aristotle's theory of wonder, extended from metaphysics to rhetoric and poetics, has occasioned a large body of scholarship. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle writes: "The marvellous is certainly required in tragedy. The epic, however, affords more opening for the improbable, the chief factor in the marvellous, because in it the agents are not visibly before one[...] The marvellous[...]is a cause of pleasure, as is shown by the fact that we all tell a story with additions, in the belief that we are giving pleasure to our hearers" (*Poetics* 1460a). Studies of the marvelous have also connected Aristotle to epic tradition, in such epitets as Homer's *thauma idesthai* "marvelous to behold" and Vergil's "Mirabile dictu" See, for example, Douglas Biow 1–11. On Robortello and Castelvetro, see Orgel 54. For a recent literary history of paradox, see Platt 1–20. As we have argued, the theories have neglected the fool as asign, a figure of wonder.

language of the Vulgate Bible and the discourse of mystical theology, but the concept is ubiquitous, appearing in Greek and Roman rhetoricians such as Cicero and Senenca. We might add to this Cusa's reading of Plato's *Parmenides*, a dialogue of paramount importance in the fifteenth century, preserved in William of Moerbeke's translation of Proclus' Commentary. The *Parmenides* not only incorporates paradoxical statements in its dialectical demonstration but the very concept of paradox is a central theme of the dialogue, in ways we will detail below.

Cusa's folly, i.e., his philosophical and rhetorical playfulness, betrays a conscious adaptation of the Dionysian writings, which in several key places unite the theologian's discourse with the folly of St. Paul. The seventh chapter of *On Divine Names* (*De nominibus divinis*), where the monk discusses divine wisdom, foreknowledge and the Logos, draws on Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians extensively:

> 'The foolishness of God is wiser than men.' Those words are true not only because all human thinking is a sort of error when compared with the solid permanence of the perfect divine thoughts but also because it is customary for theologians to apply negative terms to God, but contrary to the usual sense of a deprivation. Scripture, for example, calls the all-apparent light 'invisible'. It says regarding the One of many praises and many names that he is ineffable and nameless. It says of the One who is present in all things and who may be discovered from all things that he is ungraspable and 'inscrutable'. And here the divine apostle is said to be praising God for his 'foolishness', which in itself seems absurd and strange, but uplifts [us] to the ineffable truth which is there before all reasoning. (Pseudo-Dionysius *DN* 105)

Dionysius' connection between the "folly of God" in Paul and apophatic theology is explicit. Under the appearance of the absurd and strange, God's folly is a negative predicate, yet Paul's language and its meaning should be interpreted *inversely*. Folly is therefore an emphatic affirmation of the wisdom of God, that is, an ineffable wisdom which can be neither described nor imitated. Thus, as the author says, the *stultitia* or *moria* of God is not a "deprivation" of wisdom but an unspeakable wisdom beyond any human concept. This passage held a special authority for Cusa (and for medieval theologians in general) because the Dionysian writer here mentions to his disciple "Timothy" that St. Paul is "my teacher and yours…our common instructor."

What is startlingly new with Cusa is the heightened awareness of the human perception and limitation in a rational theology of God. While not-knowing for the Dionysian monk is clearly a human deficiency, for Cusa, it is multivalent, a "double-edged" concept. It is both privative and non-privative; it is limit and it is limitlessness. As limit, ignorance affirms that it does not know literally; but as limitlessness, ignorance is an emphatic statement of human knowledge, just as God's folly affirms his wisdom, or his invisibility affirms his presence – inversely. In this sense, ignorance *symbolizes* a knowledge beyond any affirmative concept of knowledge, corresponding precisely to the negated (but non-privative) qualities of God.

Such an exalted view of human knowledge, one might think, claims for itself the complete embrace of its eternal object, as a private mystical union or esoteric gnostism. But that is not its purpose; for Cusa says repeatedly that we are unable to know the Absolute infinite *in itself*. Ignorance, in Cusa's formula, is not solely attained through apophasis (nor even through *sanctita*s), or it could not be at the same time *docta*. Negations presuppose that which exists, and what exists can be affirmed by the senses and the intellect. Whether viewed as "learned" or

"learnèd," *docta* represents rational cognition in its affirmative, analogical, and comparative expressions. To acknowledge human limits is one thing, but to understand and relate in language in what respects the human is limited and to what extent is quite another. Learning, far from being dispensable, is propaedeutic to this higher form of ignorance, providing the best analogies of the Absolute, as far as the rational mind might follow them. In *On Learned Ignorance*, Cusa focuses on analogies from mathematics, signs which "the wise wisely sought" because abstract numbers, lines and forms provide the most stable concepts possible, an "incorruptible certainty" on which other notions of comparative relation are founded (Cusa, *LI* 1.11.30–32). Cusa credits Pythagoras for this insight – Pythagoras, who was "the first philosopher of all and the glory of Italy and of Greece" and who "deemed all things to be constituted and understood through the power of numbers (Cusa, *LI* 1.7.18, 1.1.3).

As moriasophia takes into its purview the transcendent and the ordinary, the high-minded and the low-cultured, plotting a course of argument or action which combines intellection and practical wisdom with native cleverness (*panourgia*/*ingenium*) – in one regard folly, in another wisdom, and aspects of both – *docta* and *ignorantia* demonstrate two manifestations of the composite human person in complementary inferential methods. The paradoxy of the wise and the foolish, the knowing and the not-knowing, reflects the dialectical structure of reality itself, diverse and opposing forces caused and sustained by a mysteriously infinite principle of unity. A kataphatic (i.e., affirmative) discourse juxtaposed to an apophatic discourse acknowledges the fact that we are material creatures with immaterial souls, images of an eternal God but with limited intellects and mental concepts abstracted from sensible objects. The Dionysian monk also underscores the compatibility of the affirmative and negative methods when he writes of God: "He is not one of the things that are and he cannot be known in any of them. He is all things in

all things and he is no thing among things. He is known to all from all things and he is known to no one from anything" (Pseudo-Dionysius *DN* 109).

But of the two terms in Cusa's oxymoron, *ignorantia*, as the substantive, remains in the stronger semantic position (i.e., it is not a *scientia ignota* or an *eruditio ignotus*), which suggests the *via negativa* is superior to the *via affirmativa*. Inferential systems and analogies will, in the daunting specter of an Absolute, be unsatisfying, the utility of logic and measure exhausted in the lack of precision. The idea of "unknowing" as a means to a higher understanding relates an epistemological theme to the "divine darkness" of the Dionysian *Mystical Theology* (and its later manifestations in the mystical tradition), where the Pauline folly of God is viewed as a sort of holy or mystical ignorance. As the Dionysian writer maintains: "from [this foolish 'Wisdom'] come all knowledge and understanding, and 'in it are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge'" (Pseudo-Dionysius *DN* 106, cf. Col. 2:3).

The "darkness" of the individual's cognitive powers corresponds to that of God's essence in such a way that it demonstrates the relative profundity of the Exemplar's image in the human soul. Indeed such a darkness extends throughout the entire universe, since the exact relation between created things is "hidden" and "incomprehensible" (Cusa, *LI* 1.11). These relations are not humanly known or knowable, just as the perfect oneness or the Good which is diffused in all things in varying degrees and which unites and sustains all things is not humanly known or knowable. When Cusa requests Cesarini to "deem, according to your kindness, that something worthwhile *lies hidden herein*" (my emphasis), he is playfully extending the discourse of ignorance and darkness, of the *via negativa* and the *admiratio*/*miraculum*, to the interpretation of the Prologue.

Cusa's "foreigner's foolishness" – where *barbara* refers not only to his German nationality but to the strangeness and novelty of his rational-mystical discourse – signals a rhetorical dimension of learned ignorance which has not been addressed in the philosophical scholarship. A "language" of ignorance in the investigation of the Absolute will in part be determined by the essence and quality of that which is negated; but it also undulates with the ambiguities of poetic imagery, its ultimate object obscured and open-ended. As the Dionysian author puts it:

> this transcending characteristic must be given to the words we use about God. They must not be given the human sense. We should be taken wholly out of ourselves and become wholly of God…Only when we are with God will the divine gifts be poured out onto us. (106)

What are words without "human sense"? The notion that there is a "spiritual" dimension or mystical significance of interpretation corresponding to "human" words looks back, of course, to the distinction between the "spirit" of the law and the "letter" in the Letter to the Hebrews. But the exegetical tradition also relates to the matter/spirit composition of the universe and of the soul/body in metaphysics, emphasized by Platonists. Long before Paul, Hellenistic philosophers and the Alexandrian scholiasts applied a "spiritualizing hermeneutics" to the Homeric texts, and this tendency resonates in the Bible's deutero-canonical wisdom literature and again in the allegorical exegesis of Clement and Origen.[129] Even in the reforming exegesis of the sixteenth century, scriptural scholars like Erasmus, Lefevre and Luther attempted to simplify centuries of medieval *glossalia*, returning to Pauline-inspired interpretations which sharply distinguish between

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[129]See, for example, the comparison of the pagan and Christian interpretations of the *Odyssey* in Rahner 179–386, as well as Festugière, and Allen, D. C..

interpretations of the "flesh" and those of the "spirit." They did this without knowing or acknowledging that such methods had roots in Platonism.[130]

Dionysius' theory of language in relation to the ineffable applies a Neoplatonist theory of hermeneutics to folly in St. Paul. The best demonstration of this theory is found in Proclus, a pagan Greek philosopher of considerable importance for Cusa. In his *Commentary on the Republic*, Proclus argues that the most sublime form of writing is not discursive-philosophical but literary-poetical; more specifically, it is not a making of images (*eikonasia*), nor imitations (*mimēmata*) of life but rather the making of symbols (*symbola* or *synthēmata*).[131] And since symbols have no mimetic aspect – i.e., there is no natural or tangible connection between the figure and the referent – the symbol may be the very opposite of that which it represents. Thus, the scandalous tryst of Ares and Aphrodite in the *Odyssey* and Hera's deception of Zeus in the *Illiad* are, for Proclus, examples of a poet inspired and enrapt. The proportion between language and meaning in this kind of symbolism is *inverse*, and that which is sublime is the very opposite of the literal sense. In the same way, Dionysius asserts that Paul's folly of God symbolizes the "ungraspable and 'inscrutable' One."

Cusa is fond of using sensuous images in this Neoplatonist framework, as if seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, and tasting each correspond to an inversely-related, sublime "spiritual sense." In the final section of Book Three in *On Learned Ignorance*, Cusa returns to his thematic emphasis on intellectual "desire," which connects knowledge of the Absolute to the love of God, and he also describes the infusion of divine goodness (the spiritual fruits of learned ignorance) as a "spiritual sweetness," a savoring of fragrant incense, an imperishable food which

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[130]On Quadriga in Erasmus and Luther, see McGrath, A. 148–66.

[131]Lamberton 189–90. Proclus Commentary, *Eis tas Politeias Platōnos hypomnēna*, has been translated into French by A.J. Festugière. See Proclus, *Commentarii in Platonem [Commentaire sur la Rèpublique]*. A thorough examination of Proclus' hermeneutics can be found in Sheppard 104–201 and Cardullo.

does not change with consumption, and a *fons vitae* which never ceases to fill the ever-thirsting one (Cusa, *LI* 3.12). These paradoxical images of spiritual sensation, appetite, and satiety are suggested to Cusa in the false etymology of *sapientia* in the word *sapor*, or "taste." Cusa would have found such language not only in Dionysius but throughout the rhetorical and contemplative tradition of Christian theology. Yet for Cusa the rhetoric of the spiritual senses compliments the language and method of the *via negativa*, where the negations of the physical and literal are not explicit but derived hermeneutically.

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Thus a more comprehensive understanding of learned ignorance in the thought of Cusa may be situated in the discourse of folly and wisdom. Dialectical opposition is related to the paradoxy of human experience, which seeks, as a matter of its own nature, a single metaphysical, and specifically ontological, origin. At least as far back as Dionysius, a theory which draws on the folly and wisdom in St. Paul reflects the juxtaposition of affirmative and negative ("disjunctive") techniques in theology, so that Cusa's categories of knowing and not-knowing may be viewed as the subjective, epistemological aspect of metaphysical reality, which is expressed as a Maximum-Minimum principle, with the aid of analogies drawn from mathematics and geometry.

Not only does the human attempt to imitate and embody the transcendent principle admit of some combinatory and oppositional qualities but those very qualities which appear to be most undesirable, folly and ignorance, are employed as a kind of apophatic or negative symbolism, essentially giving these terms an inverse and *super*-natural significance. As the Absolute is predominantly hidden in the metaphysical dialectic, the darkness of not-knowing symbolizes a higher knowledge. The stronger semantic position of *ignorantia* parallels the preeminence often given to folly in moriasophia, in appearance, word, and action. Whenever the fool claims a no-

ble and exalted end, he implies at least the possibility that worldly appetites and subversion of social and legal norms might signify something *other* than what they appear to signify – a superior, alter-wisdom, combining such qualities as practical wisdom (*phronesis*), natural ability (*deinotēs*), and native ingenuity (*igenium*). Nevertheless, Cusa's moriasophia is distinctive in its contemplative-intellectual orientation. It would take specialists in rhetoric and literature, like Erasmus, More, and Rabelais, to apply a theory of divine or symbolic folly to the ordinary lives of contemporaries and institutions.

The superiority of *apophasis* in theology does not, in the end, resolve or dissolve the "wonder" or paradoxes of ignorance/learning and folly/wisdom. Rather, the limits of human perception require that such paradoxes be validated and sustained. Any theory of transcendence implies the ground of a "here" and a "now" as well as a "beyond," and our concepts of learning and wisdom provide that *point de depart*. The perpetual antithesis in terms and modes in *docta ignorantia* leads to an interesting and perhaps unexpected conclusion; a method which seeks to illuminate the uncertain comes full circle, with the results that rational uncertainty is itself verified. The "unknowing" in Cusa's method therefore corresponds to the ambiguity of a folly that is strangely wise amidst nonsense, trickery, and absurdity.

The apparent instability of paradox is exactly what Cusa intends, when he writes in an epistolary epilogue to Cesarini:

> I was led (by, as I believe, a heavenly gift from the Father of lights, from whom comes every excellent gift) to embrace – in learned ignorance and through a transcending of the incorruptible truths which are humanly knowable – incomprehensible things incomprehensibly. (Epilogue 158)[132]

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[132]"[...]credo superno dono a patre luminum, a quo omne datum optimum, ad hoc ductus sum, ut incomprehensibilia incomprehensibiliter amplecterer in docta ignorantia, per transcensum veritatum incorruptibilium humaniter

An example of such "incorruptible truths" mentioned above are mathematical figures and equations, the "certain things" which ground our approach to the "uncertain" (Cusa, *LI* 1.1). But even such concepts as Absolute Maximum and Absolute Minimum, as Cusa says, are "transcended," so that an unknowable Absolute or God can be experienced (as opposed to known) in a manner which is similarly "incomprehensible"[133] One might say, therefore, that the paradoxy of a learned-ignorant method is a necessary corollary to the enduring darkness of the unknowable object, which, "enfolded" in infinity, is itself beyond antithesis and paradoxy. As Cusa says at the end of his first book, "the precise truth shines incomprehensibly within the darkness of our ignorance".[134]

It may seem on the surface that a Cretan liar lurks behind Cusa's certainty of uncertainty. But the divine darkness does not cancel out our certitude of reason and usher in an age of skepticism. Unlike the popular self-contradiction (or "logical paradox," as it is also called), Cusa is instead asserting, like Shakespeare's Hamlet, that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy. Since Western philosophy seeks to know its object by and through means of reason alone, something else is needed to seek that which is beyond reason; for Hamlet, that something else is a direct, supernatural vision, but for Cusa it is an *alter*-rational method anchored in the paradoxy of our thought and existence.

scibilium" (Cusa, *DDI* 98). In the theological tradition of the West, epilogues of this kind were common ways for an author to dedicate the written work to God in a prayer. Here, however, in a gesture of humility, Cusa asks Cesarini to entreat for him (*supplici corde pro me*), a role often reserved for saints.

[133]Here Cusa does not offer a word to describe the subjective experience of the Absolute. (The word "embrace" is added by Hopkins in the translation.) He does not speak of a mystical "union" as do the contemplative writers of the Middle Ages. Metaphysically, it is a spoken of as a "coincidence," as we will discuss in the next chapter, but subjectively the closest we come to a language of personal experience in Cusa is the symbolism of the spiritual senses, mystical silence, and the supereminent way (*via supereminentia*), which we will discuss in the next chapter.

[134](Cusa, *LI* 1.26). "Ex quibus concludimus praecisionum veritatis in tenebris nostrae ignorantiae incomprehensibiliter lucere" (Cusa, *DDI* 34). The emphasis on the paradoxy of human perception is not in Dionysius, and this may explain why Cusa claims he did not receive his key inspiration from them.

3.7 Paradoxy in Philosophy and Rhetoric

Cusa's invention gives us occasion to consider our own critical use of the term paradox to describe learned ignorance or the juxtaposition of folly and wisdom in a literature of moriasophia. In the twentieth century, historians of philosophy and rhetoric such as Quine, Russell, Krippendorf, and Colie have defined the paradox as a statement the premises of which implies two mutually exclusive conclusions, resulting in a logical impossibility and contradiction.[135] In some cases, the contradiction can be overcome or "resolved" by expanding, interpreting, and then redefining the terms of the statement, but in other cases, the opposing senses cannot be eradicated despite valid reasoning. Rhetorical critics have taken an interest primarily in the former kind, used in speeches for rhetorical effect since ancient times, while philosophical critics have taken an interest in the latter, submitting the process of self-contradiction to modern logical analysis. A paradox is therefore said to be "rhetorical" or "logical" (also known as "antimony" since the late sixteenth century) depending on its form and use.

The ancient Greek concept of the paradox, however, differs distinctly from our modern definition. Instead of the terse statement or oxymoron, *paradoxos* denotes the same kind of phenomenon which we have associated with the term *admiratio*: a strong impression made upon human perception when confronted with the unexpected or seemingly impossible. *Paradoxos* is therefore not only a synonym of *thaumaston* but – used of champion athletes, talented musicians, and artists of all kinds – it also represents the spectacle of human excellence, or *aretē*. The later developments and uses of the term paradox should take into consideration this primary meaning, which is lost when *para* and *doxa* are defined as "against" and "opinion" rather than "beyond"

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[135]For Russell, see Chapter 43, "The Philosophy of the Infinite," in *The Principles of Mathematics* 355–68; Quine; Link. See also Krippendorf, Chapter 16, "Parodox and Information" and Sainsbury.

and "expectation," the latter reflecting the prevalent meaning of the term in ancient times (Liddel, et al.).

Paradox's ancient meaning provides insight into the way Cusa and others combine rhetorical and philosophical methods. The concept of wonder harmonizes neatly the two aspects of *logos* which we associate with paradoxy today, i.e., speech and formal demonstration. In rhetoric, the language of the orator, writer, or actor, is capable not only of moving an audience but of shocking and astonishing them. The paradoxical encomium follows upon this appropriation, where the rhetorician's praise of a particular subject (e.g., baldness, a nut, Theristes) contradicts the audience's presumption of the subject's unworthiness. Here is a fundamental contradiction between language and expectation; either the presumption is incorrect, or the praise is unmerited. This rhetorical function, however, is not always perfectly distinguished or distinguishable from certain dialectical practices which we also associate with paradox. The so-called logical paradox also elicits wonder through *logos*, though the focus is shifted away from a speaker and rhetorical technique to the strictly logical problem or conflict between premises and a conclusion. In the "liar paradox," for example (quite possibly the most popular paradox of this kind in the West since ancient times, even mentioned by St. Paul in his letter to Titus),[136] the Cretan Epimenides declares "All Cretans are liars." Either he himself is a liar who tells the truth (contradicting his identity as a Cretan), or a truth-teller who in fact lies (contradicting the statement). In either case, the statement creates wonder by force of its self-canceling terms, its essential irresolvability. It is a "vicious cycle," as Krippendorf has noted, while Colie describes it as "literally speculative, its meanings infinitely mirrored, infinitely reflected, in each other."[137]

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[136]Letter to Titus 1:12.
[137]Colie 6; Krippendorf 279.

Which kind of *admiratio* or paradox is Cusa's *docta ignorantia*, rhetorical or logical? If the formal contradiction between an affirmative and negative method in metaphysics implies a logical cul-de-sac, the rhetoric of the prologue and the concluding precatory letter reminds us that the dialectical opposition of learning and ignorance belongs to the human individual, the "barbarous" author, contrasted with the "learned wisdom" of his teacher. The paradox of learned ignorance and moriasophia, therefore, *integrates rhetoric and logic*, as both disciplines admit affirmative and negative methods. Although the rhetorical dimension appears only as a literary frame in his initial work of 1440, several of Cusa's subsequent works build on the rhetoric of learning and ignorance in the context of the dialogue genre.[138]

This is no small matter; for if the core of paradox is wonder, and wonder is a reaction or response to *logos* in its two primary aspects, then the modern critical notion that paradox itself is *either* rhetorical *or* logical must also be questioned. What might a *mere* rhetorical paradox be? "Exercises of wit designed to amuse an audience sufficiently sophisticated in the arts of language to understand them," as Colie suggests (5)? Is the rhetorical paradox thus grounded in humor and subversive intent? What of paradoxy itself? Is the Pauline paradox of wisdom and folly, a "folly of God" which is "wiser than men's wisdom" (instrumental to Erasmus' *Moria*) a witty, literary embellishment and not a logical self-contradiction? Is the liar paradox *merely* a logical problem, and if so, how then should we categorize Folly's self-praise, a paradox with remarkable similarities (i.e., Folly's argument can be taken literally at face-value and at the same time disbelieved as the idle and senseless talk of a fool)? And yet Folly, posing as orator of the paradoxical encomium, is a self-proclaimed ally of the Sophists (i.e., rhetoricians). In answer to this line of inquiry, Colie adds: "Though it is called a 'rhetorical paradox', the paradoxical encomium raises a question in logic" (5). How can such a "question" be distinct from the fundamental logical

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[138]The three dialogues which feature the Idiota as a philosopher are discussed in Chapter 8.

problem of self-contradiction which defines the so-called "logical paradox"? Cusa's integration of moriasophia and learned ignorance suggests, rather, that paradoxy itself, so long as it is expressed discursively (not mathematically or symbolically, as Russell), will necessarily have both logical and rhetorical aspects.

3.8 Affirmation and Negation in Paradoxy

In a more recent study of paradoxy in *Don Quixote*, Charles Presberg acknowledges, more precisely and thoroughly than Colie, the blending of rhetorical and logical aspects of paradoxy.[139] Besides being a "species of artful discourse" and a "rhetorical strategy," Presberg broadens the definition philosophically, adding that the paradox is "a trope of thought, a structuring principle…that moves freely and playfully across the boundaries that convention assigns to genres, modes, and intellectual disciplines" (2). This "intellectual" aspect – what we refer to in this study as paradoxy's "logical" mode – is considered self-negating and "destructive" (following Colie), an attack which "*systematically* uses the categories of language and logic to question and mock the very categories that undergird language and logic as discursive systems." Presberg also argues that paradoxy's inherent contradictions are "variations on the problem of infinity – infinite regress, infinite series, the vicious cycle, eternity – a problem that is insoluble solely within logical or linguistic *terms* (which invariably strive to *terminate* further discussion)" (Presberg 3). To this intra-textual infinity is added another, extra-textual infinity: a paradox's "generative" tendency to breed more paradoxes, beginning (often) with a reversal of the stated terms.

But Presberg also insists, unlike Colie, that paradoxy affirms through its very denial. "Negative assertions" urge both paradoxists and audiences to reevaluate "untested assumptions"

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[139]Like Presberg, we have elected to use "paradoxy" as the general term for the phenomenon of self-reference or contradiction, to distinguish it from any particular statement or literary device.

as well as the contriver's success in using the system against itself. In other words, paradoxy is a language device precariously situated between a vital discourse and the rules of discourse, whether those rules are grammatical, rhetorical, logical, or poetical. Thus language and logic are validated "in equal measure," while the process by which negations affirm constitutes a *via negativa*.

Presberg's theoretical analysis is determined, to a large extent, by the texts which he considers foundational to a tradition of paradoxy – Plato's *Parmenides*, Cusa's *De docta ignorantia*, and Erasmus' *Encomium Moriae* – texts previously identified by Colie. It is no coincidence that we, too, have considered these texts essential in the formation and development of a tradition of moriasophia. Presberg, in fact, treats as related to paradoxy such diverse generic (and oxymoronic) indicators as *serio ludere*, *via negativa*, *docta ignorantia*, and *disconcordia concors*. We can see the particular influence of Cusa in Presberg's emphasis on the vexed representation the finite and the infinite: the paradox binds a finite mind's unending cycle of thought to an infinite object of truth and knowledge:

> The natural 'end' of paradoxical discourse is to 'resolve' in the ineffable, extrarational domain of mystery – itself a paradoxical combination of what for human intelligence is excessive opacity and excessive light. Hence the need to resort to a language of apparent nonsense. Such an end, however, resists closure, constitutes a fresh beginning, and points toward a potential enlargement of linguistic and logical categories, which may in turn be pushed to an aporetic impasse that requires further reassessment, resolution, and enlargement of discursive categories. Increasingly, 'learned ignorance' and generative openness are paradoxy's natural form of 'closure'. The rhetoric of paradoxy thus pursues truth in the form of a

> continuing, progressive, adventurous quest. It constitutes a rhetorical 'way' that leads to the discovery that the infinite intelligibility of truth is what guarantees its incomprehensibility for the finite mind, but also what guarantees that mind the continued possibility of novel, truthful finding, infinite in number, from a potentially infinite number of perspectives within that mind's temporal sphere of existence. (39)

This is an excellent summary of the way paradoxy functions in much of early modern literature. Presberg "enlarges the discursive categories" of Colie's interdisciplinary criticism, embracing the traditional juxtaposition of wisdom and folly as well as learning and ignorance. Too great an emphasis on the inherent tension and conflict of paradoxy – its contradiction or "antimony" – often neglects the rational "reassessment" of the terms and the presumptions which the destabilizing contradiction seems to provoke. In this way, the rhetorical and logical aspects are not hopelessly or futilely striving against one another but also reflecting the internal harmony of the *logos* arts.

But there are also a few problems which call for clarification. While Presberg is quite right in pointing out an affirming and validating aspect of paradoxes, we might ask precisely what is being affirmed and what are the means by which a ruptured and imperfect discursive system validates itself. Validations of life, nature, and art draw on the concrete assurances of sensual, rational, and affective knowledge rather than the obsfucations of paradoxy, and indeed the paradox often weighs abstract reason and logic against human experience. Thus how can paradoxy oppose knowledge while affirming experience?

We must also be cautious against equating paradoxy with radical skepticism, or doubt in reason's ability to discern authentic knowledge altogether. Many instances of rhetorical and fig-

urative language may be said to grasp at an ineffable reality. But in the history of pre-modern, Western thought this does not mean that all appeals to the infinite and mysterious are "aporetic," inducing "closure," or that a paradoxical language is "apparent nonsense." While the infinite and mysterious in Cusa may be unknowable with precision, apophasis must not be stressed at the expense of kataphasis, *ignorantia* at the expense of *docta*. For Cusa, knowledge of one's ignorance reinvigorates or renews reason so that it may strive yet further in its pursuit, and thus not only mathematics but the rhetoric and poetics of metaphor and dialogue continue to play a vital role in his philosophy as "symbols" of the Absolute. The paradoxy in Cusa's formula is not only learning *through* ignorance (as Presberg suggests) but may also be described as learning *and* ignorance, learning *despite* ignorance, and ignorance *guiding* learning. Much the same can be said for the conceptual relationships in moriasophic literature, where folly serves not only as a dialectical opposite to wisdom but as the "alter-wisdom" and affirming catalyst in wisdom's pursuit.[140]

There is one further point to keep in mind: for those in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the very notion of what is knowable and certain is buoyed by a fundamental confidence in reason and by the assurances of revelation and natural law.[141] "Antimony" paradoxes would have been catalogued alongside other *insoluabilia* and *sophismata*, familiar to university students trained in Aristotle's *Sophistical Refutations*; however, logicians did not target the "problem" of paradoxes specifically until the late nineteenth century. In the classical tradition, paradoxes were common among rhetoricians, explanations of the device appearing in several instructional manuals of rhetoric. Since the twelfth century and the nascent universities of the thirteenth, rhetoric in general played a much smaller role than logic in the Aristotelian-based curriculum. A rhetorical

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[140]The relationship of ignorance to learning is not at all a "rejection of rational thought" which both Kaiser and Colie ascribe to Cusa. As we will discuss in the next chapter, a language of spiritual senses and of "supereminence" evolved specifically as a means of re-affirming the infinite Absolute.

[141]Cusa looks back to the project of Anselm rather than the "eirenic separatism" of Ockham.

philosophy was eclipsed by scholastic writers until the Ciceronian-Platonic revival of the fourteenth century. But theology, on the other hand, had an especially vibrant rhetorical tradition, ranging from the pastoral and exegetical literature of the early Church Fathers, to the writings of Western "spiritual masters," such as Augustine and Bonaventure, and continued in the *ars praedicandi* and the contemplative literature of the Middle and late Middle Ages. The Christian Platonism of Dionysius and John Scotus Eriugena became the primary sources for a rhetorical-philosophical vocabulary, more easily appropriated for seeking God in contemplative spirituality.

Thus a theory of paradoxy which relates logical contradictions and implied or heuristic affirmations to the contemporary philosophical and theological context must per force justify the connections between key terms in different disciplinary discourses. To say, for example, that paradoxy's self-negating tendencies represent a *via negativa*, or that paradoxy has the same ultimate purpose as Cusa's learned ignorance, while lacking a more complete understanding of affirmation and negation in the Dionysian and Cusan literature is tantamount to reducing, once again, philosophical and theological concepts to modern rhetorical criticism. A typical misinterpretation consequent upon the rhetorization of a philosophical term like *coincidentia oppositorum*. Presberg considers, for example, the relationship between an author and a reader to be a kind of coincidentia. Like Kaiser and Colie, he thus regards as coincidentia any stated or implied fusion of contraries or "synthesis," which makes coincidentia a rhetorical variation on paradoxy (perhaps a conflation of it) rather than a literary expression of a metaphysical reality.

A definition which grounds paradoxy in the concepts of "wonder" and "the unexpected" will be of much better assistance in demonstrating how affirmation, negation, and opposition in metaphysics relates to rhetorical methods, in an age when talk about God and the eternal drew freely on both traditions. The experience of wonder – which embraces such concepts as awe,

shock, aenigma, and confusion – relates to a general understanding of opposition and contrariety both in metaphysical and epistemological discourse and in the familiar compressed statement designed to move an audience toward self-examination, thought, and action.

Chapter 4

The Paradoxy of Moriasophia II: Plato's *Parmenides*

This chapter treats Plato's *Parmenides*, a cultural touchstone in dialectical practices, as a formative text for the metaphysics of moriasophia. Plato uses two distinct modes of inference, rhetorical and logical, in his exposition of paradoxy. In the first part of the dialogue, a literary theme of wonder is mingled with manifestations of folly and wisdom, while in the second part, a logical demonstration tests the theory of the Forms in a series of carefully-structured arguments. The juxtaposition of methods demonstrates how the literary complements logic in philosophy, multivalence and aporia mirroring the problem of participation and separation.

4.1 Logical and Rhetorical Paradoxy in Plato's *Parmenides*

While Plato's *Parmenides* receives honorable mention in the literary criticism of paradoxy since Colie, it has been treated superficially, and its contribution to the dialectic and rhetoric of Cusa and early modern writers still not fully known.[142] Yet the *Parmenides* was the *terminus a quo* for Dionysius' nominal theology as well as a life-long philosophical touchstone for Cusa. For the Neoplatonists of the Later Academy, *Parmenides* held an exalted position among Plato's dialogues, representing the philosopher's greatest achievement in applying the dialectical method to ontology and metaphysics. The *Parmenides* was known to Cusa and other philosophers of the Latin West through William of Moerbeke's thirteenth-century translation, the stand-

ard text for the next two centuries. Cusa owned two manuscript copies of it. He transcribed part of the Greek text in his youth, and he quoted from it in a sermon of 1446. While the Moerbeke translation is stiff, literal, and barely comprehensible, Cusa's many annotations, marginalia, and manuscript corrections reveal the depth and scope of his interest. It was not only the *Parmenides* itself that intrigued Cusa and others but Proclus' commentary, in which the Greek text of the dialogue had been imbedded and preserved. Moerbeke's translation insured, therefore, that a Neoplatonist perspective would continue to exert a great authority over the interpretation of the dialogue.[143]

The fifteenth-century philosophers of the Platonic revival similarly esteemed the *Parmenides* as the work of a mature Plato. Cusa himself encouraged George of Trebizond to translate it anew, probably when he moved his residence to Rome in 1458. Despite its dense and puzzling logic, the *Parmenides* and its Proclean commentary appealed to Christian theologians for a number of reasons. The Eleatic was revered as the most important philosopher before Socrates and a crucial link between the Pythagoreans and Plato. As Pythagoras and his followers stressed the formative power of number and a dialectic of metaphysical and natural opposites (such as limit and unlimited, light and darkness, etc.), Parmenides focused more narrowly on One and Being as the exclusive object of philosophy. Bivalence in the thought of Parmenides is strictly ontological (either One is or is not), resonating in sharp epistemological distinctions between truth and falsehood and between knowledge and opinion. Radical monism in Parmenides translates into mono-

[142]A testimony to the lasting impact of Plato's *Parmenides* on philosophical thought in the West, two recent studies have appeared Tallis: and Turner and Kevin Corrigan. The latter is the product of six annual meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature held from 2001 to 2006 and claims to have broken new ground on several fronts.

[143]While Moerbeke's translation does not read well in Latin, it has been indispensible for the recovery of Proclus's commentary. Part of the Greek text is no longer extant, and a literal translation provides far better clues to the original Greek than a rhetorically superior version would have. See Proclus, *Proclus' Commentary on Plato's* Parmenides. Cusa's marginal notes are printed in the second volume of Carlos Steel's edition and translation (into French) of Proclus's commentary (Proclus, *Procli Commentarium in Parmenidem Platonis. Text of William of*

theism for Judeo-Christian theology, and it is no surprise that the Platonic and Judeo-Christian traditions were interwoven in the Middle Platonism of the third through sixth centuries.

What little was known about Parmenides connected the Eleatic to the Western project of "faith seeking reason," since he believed that *logos* or rational argument could provide a path by which the philosopher obtains certitude about transcendental reality. While Aristotle was roundly critical of Parmenides,[144] Christian theologians could not simply dismiss the Parmenidean hypothesis. For them, the One, *Ens entis* and *Primum movens* (or *proton kinun*) were related, the philosophical concepts anticipating a theology of God, in his perfections and as first cause, origin and source of motion, life, generation, etc. Proclus' commentary was alluringly theological.[145]

The central problem of Plato's dialogue reintroduces the medieval preoccupation of how to talk about God. Can one know that the forms exist? How can any one form, by definition whole, perfect "in itself by itself" and in its own cause, exist separately in things at the same time? For the Christian theologian, these central questions of formal "participation" and "separation" in the *Parmenides* echo theories about universals and divine names, but Cusa was among the first to look specifically to the Platonic text for a radically different style and approach. Instead of the propositional logic of *quaestio* and *sententiae,* Plato offers a rich alternation of figurative language and rational discourse, i.e., of rhetoric and logic, as well as a complex integration of affirmative and negative methods. These are the dialectical aspects of the dialogue's par-

Moerbeke's Latin Translation Together with a French Translation.). Cusa's debt to Neoplatonic thinkers is examined in Duclow, *Masters of Learned Ignorance: Eriugena, Eckhart, Cusanus*.

[144]See *Phys*. I.2–3, *Metaph*. I.5, *Meliss*. Aristotle often treats Parmenides together with his disciple Melissus. But the Parmenides of Aristotle is not exactly the same philosopher as the character of Plato's dialogue. Medieval and early modern thinkers would not have acknowledged such a distinction, but they were already well-accustomed to Aristotle's criticism of earlier philosophical positions.

[145]Although it is often pointed out by scholars that Pico della Mirandola's *On Being and the One* challenges Ficino's Platonism on the Aristotelian distinction between Being itself and participated being, Pico's debt to the *Parmenides* is overlooked. See Lohr, "Metaphysics" 583.

adoxy; they not only inform Cusa's central concept of learned ignorance but extend the philosophical argument to a language of wisdom and folly.

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The *Parmenides* begins with a highly artificial narrative device. In contrast to the starkly mimetic setting of most dialogues, a technique of extreme distancing is used to draw a veil over the main discussion. A narrator named Cephalus relates to an anonymous audience how he encountered Adeimantus and Glaucon (the names of Plato's biological brothers) and asked them to escort him to the home of their half-brother, Antiphon, so that he can get an account of a previous conversation, a conversation between a boyish Socrates, a mature Zeno, and a venerable Parmenides of sixty-five years. But Antiphon was not even present. Rather, it is said he had learned about the encounter some years earlier from one Pythodorus, in whose house the encounter supposedly took place. Then, as soon as this complex chain of characters, events, and memories has been recounted, the narration of Antiphon takes over completely and we, the readers of Plato's dialogue, lose all sight of narration, even that of Antiphon. Thus, at four times removed from the time-present of historical accuracy and hearsay reporting (or five, if one considers the authorship of Plato), the reader is "dropped" somewhere between an affirming mimesis and the negating aporia of time and place.

What is the effect of the distancing device? The events of the dialogue and its philosophical discourse are so far removed from the reader's time-present that we might say a cloud of "mystification" has been cast over them. Such artifice is suited the ancient figure of Parmenides, whose only work of philosophy includes a "mystical" narrative introduction. In his

metaphysical and cosmological poem "On Nature" (composed in hexameter, the meter used for epic), a young philosopher describes his journey to the heavens and the palaces of Helios.[146] With the memory of this poem in the background, Plato induces a dream-like "wonder" of a different kind, detaching his narrative from time and place so that it may prefigure and correspond to the interlocutors' discussion of paradoxy in metaphysics.

When the eagerly sought-after conversation finally begins,[147] we come upon Socrates as one among several philosophers who have come to hear Zeno of Elea read a book which refutes the critics of Parmenides. Zeno is the so-called founder of dialectic and the logical paradox (the former ascription was given to Zeno in Plato's and Aristotle's time, the latter in modernity), and we might with good reason consider him a source of learned ignorance as well, since the arguments for which he is well-known posit the impossibility of comparative relations between finite, sensible experience and a concept of the infinite. However, anyone who might expect to hear a recitation of such clever arguments in the *Parmenides* – such as the arrow which can never meet its target, or the ill-fated race between swift-footed Achilles and the tortoise (refutations of plurality and change, divisibility and motion) – will be disappointed; for these and other specific arguments we must turn to Aristotle and to Simplicius' commentary.[148] Through the character of an impulsive and impatient Socrates, Plato passes right by the *reductii ad absurdam* of Zeno. Why Plato short-changes Zeno becomes evident later on.

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[146]See Diogenes Laertius 1.16. According to Palmer: "The poem originally extended to perhaps eight hundred verses, roughly one hundred and sixty of which have survived as "fragments" that vary in length from a single word (fr. 15a: "water-rooted," describing the earth) to the sixty-two verses of fragment 8. That any portion of his poem survives is due entirely to the fact that later ancient authors, beginning with Plato, for one reason or another felt the need to quote some portion of it in the course of their own writings.

[147]Cephalus' difficulty in "locating" the original conversation between Socrates and symbolizes the difficulty of the philosopher in his quest for truth. The point is reinforced later in a metaphor of hunting.

[148]Aristotle discusses Zeno's positions in several places; see, for example *On Indivisible Lines* 968a-969a, *Melissus* 979a-979b, *Metaph*. 1001b, *Soph. Ref*. 172a-173b.

From this point on, a language of paradoxy pervades the dialogue, providing a new context for the rhetoric and poetics of the first part of the dialogue. Paradoxy is described as the most pressing object of Socrates' dialectical inquiry and as an expression of his problem concerning participation and separation. Thus the very theme of the conversation turns on the notion of *thaumaston* and *thaumastos*, "wonder" and "the wonderful," employed in both literary and philosophical contexts.

The Athenian hero, portrayed as both prodigious and naïve, epitomizes Zeno's conclusion thus: if the things that exist are many, then they are both like and unlike; but for any one thing to have opposite or contradictory qualities and to remain *one* thing is a logical impossibility – and therefore things cannot be many. Socrates thinks Zeno's hypothesis can be refuted easily by applying his theory of the separation and participation:

> 'But tell me this: don't you acknowledge that there is a form, itself by itself, of likeness, and another form, opposite to this, which is what unlike is? Don't you and I and the other things we call "many" get a share of those two entities? And don't things that get a share of likeness come to be like in that way and to the extent that they get a share, whereas things that get a share of unlikeness come to be unlike, and things that get a share of both come to be both? And even if all things get a share of both, though they are opposites, and by partaking of them are both like and unlike themselves, what's astonishing [*ti thaumaston*] about that?'[149]

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[149]"hauto eidos ti homoiotētos, kai tōi toioutōi au allo ti enantion, ho estin anomoion: toutoin de duoin ontoin kai eme kai se kai talla ha dē polla kaloumen metalambanein; kai ta men tēs homoiotētos metalambanonta homoia gignesthai tautēi te kai kata tosouton hoson an metalambanēi, ta de tēs anomoiotētos anomoia, ta de amphoterōn amphotera; ei de kai panta enantiōn ontōn amphoterōn metalambanei, kai esti tōi metechein amphoin homoia te kai anomoia auta autoīs, ti thaumaston" Greek text is a transliteration of (Plato, *Parmenides* 129a-b). Translation is that of Mary Louise Gill and Paul Ryan, in (Plato, *Parmenides*). We will observe the convention of using "F" in magiscule to denote absolute Form, and "f" in miniscule to denote the participating form of concrete things.

Plato here summarizes a rather complex theory, but one which has been expounded in numerous dialogues and explained in philosophical scholarship. Participation is a causal principle (e.g., the Form of Beauty "causes" a thing to be beautiful through the power of participation), and separation concerns the properties of things as distinguished from the pure concept (or Form) of that property. Socrates, in the segment above, treats "like" and "unlike" as relative properties rather than universal ones; using a part-to-whole analogy of his body, he says that he himself is both many and one – many in regards to the parts of his body, but one when compared to several other persons (129d). Thus, in response to Zeno, Socrates behaves like one who spoils a magician's trick. Zeno has argued that many are the illusion of one, and Socrates replies – not that Zeno's logic is flawed (as Aristotle argues in *Soph. Ref.* 171b-173a), but rather that the conclusion is shallow and unimpressive. The paradox is only apparent; Socrates says that we don't have "something wonderful" (*ti thaumaston*), i.e., something unexpected and awe-inspiring. Contrary properties simply mean that sensible things are "mixed" or "impure." This impurity contrasts with the perfection of the Form "in itself by itself" – i.e., complete in itself, self-originating, and distinct from every thing which shares in its property.[150]

> A dissatisfied Socrates then expresses to Zeno his desire for that which is lacking:
>
> If someone showed that the likes themselves come to be unlike or the unlikes like – that, I think, would be a marvel [*teras*]; but if he shows that things that partake of both of these have both properties, there seems to me nothing strange about that, Zeno – not even if someone shows that all things are one by partaking of oneness, and that these same things are many by partaking also of multitude. But

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[150]Other dialogues tell us that a Form, for Socrates, is also unique (i.e., there is only one form for each property) and self-predicative (a Form is its own property, e.g., the Good is good) (Rickless, S.).

> if he should demonstrate this thing itself, what one is, to be many, or, conversely, the many to be one – at this I'll be astonished [*thaumasomai*].[151]

Here Socrates opines for "real" paradox, an actual *concord* of the conceptual opposites "many" and "one." Zeno's arguments have, so far, demonstrated only the disharmony of opposites, the essential incompatibility of our experience of plurality and motion with a concept of the unlimited. Socrates resists Zeno's total denial of the concrete world: if the only Forms that exist are those "in themselves by themselves," we therefore have no instantiations of the Forms in things and no framework for a moral epistemology (i.e., no basis for the knowledge of virtue). To express this point in the terms of Socrates' own analogy, a body may have many parts and so be at once "one" and "many," but how can the "form of body" in every individual body be precisely the same as that "Form of Body" which is perfect in itself?

Socrates wants to believe, or to rescue, the idea that forms not only exist in a higher order of reality but also provide the basis for knowledge of things in this world; e.g., the Good is a transcendent reality and not simply an insubstantial abstraction of the goodness in things (as Aristotle later supposes). And so, Socrates says, if someone can show him that a single form is both "many" and "one" simultaneously, defying the principle of non-contradiction, this would be an experience on par with religious ecstasy, a longed-for "portent" (*teras*), which would fill him with "wonder" (*thaumaston*).

Without using the term *paradoxos*, a rhetoric of paradoxy tips the reader off to the fact that the budding philosopher has not yet found a solution to his logical dilemma, anticipating his poor dialectical performance with Parmenides. Indeed Socrates' emphatic desire for "wonder" is

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[151]"ei men gar auta ta homoia tis apephainen anomroia gignomerna ē ta anomoia homoia, teras an oimai ēn: ei de ta toutōn metechonta amphoterōn amphotera apophainei peponthota, ourden emoige, ō Zēnōn, atopon dokei, oude ge ei hen hapanta apophainei tis tōi metechein tou henos kai tauta tauta polla tōi plēthous au metechein. all' ei ho estin hen, auto touto polla apodeixei kai au ta polla dē hen, touto ēdē thaumasomai." (Plato, *Parmenides* 129b-c).

rhetorically signified in his repeated use of the *thaumast-* stem (a total of six times), as a noun, an adjective, and a verb, adding the synonym *teras* and two instances of the verb *agamai*, in a single reply to Zeno (from 129a to 129e). Thus he says (at 129c) "If [someone] could show that the kinds and forms themselves have in themselves these opposite properties, that would astonish me (*thaumazein*)." And again, with purposeful redundancy, "If someone first distinguishes as separate the forms…and then shows that in themselves they can mix together and separate, I would marvel, if I by chance were thus amazed (*agaimēn an egōg', ephē, thaumastōs*)…I would, as I say, marvel exceedingly (*mallon agastheiēn*) if someone were able to display this same difficulty (*aporia*) which you and Parmenides went through in the case of visible things…" (129d-e).

What happens next extends the language of metaphysical paradoxy to the poetics of the dialogue. Socrates thinks the two Eleatic philosophers will disapprove of him, but he receives an "unexpected" response: they exchange glances and smile "as though they marveled at him" (*agamenous ton Sōkratē*; 130a). Plato then has his character Parmenides echo the narrator's description: "worthy are you to marvel, and you urge it on with your argument" (*axios ei agasthai tēs hormēs tēs epi tous logous*; 130a-b). This means we now have two kinds of potential paradoxes or wonders, the dialectical exposition of opposites and the very person of the philosopher, that is, the rational agent who discovers and follows arguments - as Zeno says, with the relentless ambition of a "Spartan puppy" (*Lakainai skulakes*; 128c).

A relatively short but critical examination of Socrates' participation theory indicates where the young Athenian stands in relation to the object of his wonder. The theory of participation and separation cannot be explained as the relationship of wholes-to-parts or parts-to-wholes, nor can forms represent individual thoughts or paradigms in nature which resemble things. A fourth and most serious challenge presented by Parmenides ("the greatest difficulty") posits the

problem in epistemological terms: if pure forms and the forms-in-things are knowable only as they exist *in themselves* (rather than in relation to each other), there is a fatal divide between two kinds or orders of knowledge; rational creatures cannot truly know the world of the Forms, and the gods (with their "most precise knowledge") cannot know the impure, forms-in-things of the human world.[152]

Once again, the language impresses upon the reader Socrates' astonishment. The idea that the gods might not know human affairs is a "fearful" (*deinoteron*) consequence according to Parmenides; and Socrates says the argument is here approaching the marvelous (*thaumastos ho logos, ei tis ton theon aposterēsei tou eidenai*). The situation is so dire, in fact, that the entire project of philosophy is threatened – according to Parmenides. Without an ontological relationship between forms and things, there is a permanent and unbridgeable gap between the eternal and the temporal; one who holds such a position "won't have anywhere to turn his thought," and thus "he will destroy entirely the power of dialectic [or discourse]" (*dialegesthai dunamin pantapasi diaphtherei*; 135b-c). The astonishment of Socrates, a man in wonder, can be met only by "that yet more wonderful man" (*eti de thaumastoterou tou*; 135b) who can discover forms and teach them by a careful arrangement of all the arguments.

What significance did Cusa find in this logical conundrum of forms and a rhetoric of wonder? The consequences are as serious as they might be for Cusa as for Plato. In *Parmenides* it becomes evident that *the forms themselves are paradoxes*, objects of wonder and outright contradictions, insofar as reasoning based on the simplicity of pure concepts is incompatible with the multiple properties of concrete things – what we might refer to in today's language as a distinction between the abstract and the physical in scientific thought. For a medieval theologian dis-

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[152]Each of these arguments has been thoroughly examined in the philosophical criticism. See, for example Plato, *Plato's* Parmenides 50–52. For Aristotle's criticism of Plato's theory of the Forms, see *Metaph*. 1077b-179b.

cussing a theology of God, Plato appeared to recapitulate the problem of analogical reasoning and nominal logic (i.e., a logic based on the "names" or properties of God). What, after all, does it mean to be "made in the image and likeness of God"? How can God be present in creatures (i.e., immanent) and at the same time transcendent, while averting a pantheist position? The problem finds an apt parallel in the discrepancy between transcendent and human wisdom.

This is a problem familiar to theologians. However viewed, concepts which are based on the properties of created things fall short of the pure perfections of God. Nevertheless, if God is self-sufficient (to adapt Socrates' words, "in himself by himself," or Aristotle's, "thought thinking himself"),[153] then how can we understand – not the contrary properties in things – but the contradiction between that simple unity which is God and the contrary properties which result or proceed from that unity? How can God be perfectly "one" in himself, and yet the ontological origin and sustainer of "many" things? Most theologians accepted as necessary the shortcomings of analogical predication in a discourse about God, acknowledging a *via negativa* or *remotionis* but also validating positive philosophical methods. Aquinas followed Dionysius in positing a mode of "supereminence," whereby divine names are taken to a superlative degree (God is "most good," "most just," "most wise," etc.), while Scotus proposed a "univocity of being," the term "infinite being" proposed as the most suitable compound predication for God. Not much later, Ockham, in denying the reality of the universal, advocated a stronger separation of philosophical ideas from the theological doctrine. Thus the question of "how to talk about God" was by no means concluded. The logical problem of the one and the many was still at the heart of the medieval attempt to forge the best possible relationship between faith and reason. In this discourse, Cusa distinguishes himself from others with his own Platonist-inspired emphasis on the paradoxy of the infinite and the finite. This relationship is expressed discursively (not mathematically or

symbolically, as Russell), exploring affirmative and negative approaches in both logical and rhetorical aspects.

4.2 Moriasophia in Philosophical Discourse

Before turning to the Parmenidean demonstration in Plato's dialogue, it is quite significant to point out that Plato's rhetoric, like Cusa, connects the inherent paradoxy of metaphysics to a language of folly and wisdom. The motif is introduced in a light and humorous way, when Socrates accuses Zeno of trying to "fool" or "deceive" (*extapan*) the entire audience of philosophers; for Parmenides says that "the One is all" (*hen phēis einai to pan*), and then Zeno "says it is not many" (*ou polla pheisin einai*; 128a-b).[154] Socrates complains to Parmenides that, because Zeno wants so badly to be intimate with his teacher, all he has managed to write is a cleverly disguised imitation of Parmenides' well-known hyposthesis.

This folly of deception is really a misperception on the part of Socrates' character, but it leads to a second and more serious kind of folly. Zeno explains to Socrates that he has misunderstood the intention even while he "chases" (*metatheis*) and "hunts down" (*ichneueis*) the reasoning of his argument (like a Spartan puppy). His arguments were never intended as a resolution of the Parmenidean thesis, the mark of a great achievement. On the contrary, they were written with the express purpose of refuting Parmenides' critics, who ridicule his main hypothesis – they literally "make it a comedy" (*kōmōidein*) – and argue that, if true, many "laughable things" (*geloia,* translated as *absurdus* in the Latin of Moerbeke and George of Trebizond) and "false accords" (*sumbainei paschein*) follow. He (i.e., Zeno) was simply "paying them back in

[153]"noēsis noēseōs nōesis" *Metaph.* 1074b.
[154]"For he writes along the same lines as you but flipping it around quickly, trying to deceive us by saying something of another sort" (*tauton gar gegraphe tropon tina hoper su, metaballōn de hēmas peiratai exapatan hōs heteron ti legōn*).

kind" by showing how many "more laughable things" (*geloiotera*) would follow as a consequence of the critics' thesis, namely that all are many (128c-e).

This exchange between Zeno and Socrates associates folly with rational or logical error. Zeno demonstrates the folly of a thesis by carrying its argument through its logical consequences, until those consequences become "laughable," or absurd. This very same procedure reappears in the dialectic between Parmenides and Socrates. When Parmenides asks Socrates whether there is a separate Form for "undignified and worthless" objects, such as hair, mud, and dirt, things that "may seem to be laughable" (*geloia doxeien an einai*), the young philosopher is doubtful and insecure. He retreats, saying: "Surely it's too outlandish (*atopon*) to think there is a Form for them." Nevertheless, he admits that he thinks about it now and then and it bothers him, and he finds himself "running away, afraid that [he] may fall into some pit of foolish talk (*phluaria*) and come to harm" (130d).

Not yet learning the lesson of Zeno, the young Socrates assumes contrary positions. On the one hand, he aggressively "chases" and "hunts down" the logical terms of Zeno's argument; at the same time, he admits "running away" (*pheugon*) from the "laughable" consequences of his own. This contradiction adds a different dimension of paradoxy to the "marvelous" character of Socrates. In this instance, Parmenides teaches Socrates that he has to follow the consequences of his theory through to the end, even to the most ordinary objects if he doesn't want the Forms to suffer the same results as the "many" in Zeno's argument.

The follies of deception and logical error shortly give way to a third kind, one which is proper to the true philosopher. Despite his admiration of Socrates' astute and even "divine" ability to "launch an attack on an argument" and to challenge Zeno's oppositional dynamic with a theory of formal participation, Parmenides advises a kind of training which others will not be

able to understand. He says: "But while still young, put some effort into it and train hard by a means which seems useless to others – what the many call idle chatter. Otherwise, the truth will escape you" (135d). Parmenides here suggests that, to most people, the philosopher's discourse appears nonsensical. This folly of a "divided perspective" is remarkably similar to that described by St. Paul in his First Letter to the Corinthians. In St. Paul, an ignominious death on a cross appears like folly to those "wise in this world"; while for Plato's Parmenides, it is philosophical discourse which seems "useless" (*achrēstou*) to the worldly, who regard its special language or *technē* as "foolish babbling" (*adoleschias*).

The theme of folly in this serious dialogue can quite easily be disregarded as some sort of non-philosophical literary framing, narrative technique, or mere embellishment. But Plato's language is highly symbolic in these moments. The rhetoric of folly in the *Parmenides* parallels the folly of logical error: since it is the very nature of serious dialectical discourse to be elusive, deceiving, at times erroneous, alien, or mysterious, folly in philosophy is a kind of paradoxy. The mode of philosophical folly can be divided into two principle aspects: 1) a depth of profundity which appears like folly (to the untrained), or 2) a seemingly rational argument which has ridiculous consequences. Because the "slippery slope" of error lies in close proximity to the path of truth, statements in metaphysics which are not carefully thought out and crafted with meticulous detail may not only *sound* strange or ridiculous to the uninitiated mind, they may indeed cross the thin line from truth into opinion and error and so become *a literal language of folly*. (Thus, is a "Form of mud" profound or foolish?) This instance of the divided perspective constitutes an excellent example of the intersection of rhetoric and logic in a motif which opposes appearance to reality. The authorial self-consciousness and hermeneutic ambiguity injects a sophisticated

dimension of moriasophia into the first major exchange of *Parmenides*, which is as much rhetorical-dialogical as it is dialectical.

The paradoxy of language and perspective underlies the logical problem of the forms and the characterization of Socrates. The *technē* of dialectics is specialized, subtle and high-stakes, and only the philosopher can best distinguish between truth and error, wisdom and folly. In a manner similar to prophetic and poetic inspiration, the heights of philosophical discourse (especially metaphysics) bring the philosopher closer to the gods and distance him from the world of ordinary experience. The notion of a "philosopher's flight to the divine" is taken directly from Parmenides' poem, which juxtaposes a "Way of Truth" to a "Way of Opinion." In the epic style, the philosopher-author depicts himself as a youth (a *kouros*, like Plato's young Socrates), ascending by chariot to the gates of Night and Day, then his passage through Dike ("Right"), and a journey to the palace of an unnamed goddess, from whom the he receives instruction. The only true knowledge, according to the goddess, is that the "One is" and that "it cannot not be." Moreover, the path by which the philosopher will know this truth is the *logos* or rational argument, while the true and real must be sharply distinguished from the path of error, which is human opinion.[155]

Metaphors of hunting and horse racing underscore and compliment the paradoxy of philosophical folly. As mentioned, Socrates is likened to a puppy-dog, who has the scent of his prey and chases after it only to discover through the dialectical method that he cannot find it. Rather, he pounces excitedly and hastily on those things which he knows to be false targets (i.e., Zeno's arguments). Such a scene of perplexity and ineptitude, parodic (perhaps even self-parodic) for Plato, might well be viewed as the historical birth of Socratic ignorance, a revelation of reason's

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[155]On Parmenides and his legacy, see Curd Coxton. demonstrates Parmenides's use of Homeric language in describing the event.

limitations when confronted with the wonder of the inscrutable and unknown. This kind of ignorance is authentic or literal and it is therefore distinct from the so-called "Socratic irony," that is, the *pretense of unknowing* which Socrates uses as a pretext for philosophical inquiry.

Parmenides' serious dread of the higher dialectic represents another instance of this ignorance. When faced with the prospect of such a demonstration, he compares himself humbly to a horse from one of Ibycus' love poems, a champion past prime which is forced against its inclination to compete in the race. As long experience in matters of love feeds the aged poet's anxiety about competing in Love's games, so the elder philosopher "trembles" at the difficult task ahead (136e-137a).

4.3 Affirmation and Negation in the Parmenidean Dialectic

The moriasophia of the first exchange ends abruptly with the dialectical demonstration – a very complicated, long, and seemingly tedious rehearsal of propositions, "a vast and formidable sea of words," as Parmenides says. It is the kind of discourse that drives the modern non-specialist to cherry-pick one or two of its bewildering conclusions and then throw his or her arms up in the air, falling back on the irresolvable nature of paradoxy. But this would not likely have been the reaction of most university students of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, who were reared on the fastidious logic of Aristotle's *Prior* and *Posterior Analytics* and the *Sophistical Refutations*. For them, the *auctores* of classical philosophy and *prisca theologica* were larger than life, and inscrutability in their writings was met with the serious obligation of distinguishing between logical errors from what seemed like riddles with veiled solutions. Besides, they were long accustomed to the perennial problems of manuscript corruption and translation inadequacies. Plato's Parmenideanism offered something recognizable and at the same time innovative to

Cusa and other fifteenth-century thinkers. The significance resides not so much in the fact of its paradoxical conclusions as in its approach to the fundamental problem of rational language in metaphysics and ontology. Whether or not we can have authentic knowledge of first principles – or *the* first principle – relies (for Plato) on the human ability to discourse about the paradoxy of one and many. The implications for a language about God as transcendent and immanent are clear.

It is not necessary to outline all the various arguments of Plato's Eleatic philosopher – unabated scholarly interest in the dialogue has led to a remarkably array of recent editions and commentaries, by Allen, Turnbull, Sayre, Scolincov, Rickless and others.[156] But a few key observations are in order, since there is more to be learned from Parmenides' demonstration than meets the modern eye, particularly for those in literary studies and other related disciplines. Parmenides' demonstration touches on affirmation and negation in paradoxy in a way which is relevant to the dialectical poetics of moriasophia.

Summarizing the dialectical method, Parmenides tells Socrates: "if you want to be trained more thoroughly, you must not only hypothesize, if each thing is, and examine the consequences of that hypothesis; you must also hypothesize, if that same thing is not" (135e). Only after following all the consequences can the philosopher "see the truth clearly" (*diopsesthai to alethes*; 136c). A reading of the eight distinct groups of arguments may indeed lead one to question whether the "clarity in truth" promised by Parmenides is authentic, cryptic, or ironic; however, thanks to the philosophical criticism, we can at least establish that the chains of reasoning (as opposed to the conclusions) are coherent and not intended to self-contradict or self-refute.[157]

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[156]Plato, *Plato's* Parmenides; Turnbull; Sayre; Rickless, S. C; Plato, *Plato's* Parmenides.

[157]Although a sizeable number of editions and a vast body of recent criticism have contributed a great deal to the interpretation of the *Parmenides* in recent years, the following summary is my own.

Parmenides proposes to test the hypothesis for which he is known, by following the consequences "if one is or is not one" (*eite hen estin eite mē hen*; 137b); but this is also a device for Plato to explore the separation and participation of the forms, since any line of argument about the one can apply just as well to any particular form. The first premise, "the one is," demonstrates the transcendence of forms. The one, "in itself by itself," cannot have parts, cannot be contained, cannot be in motion or at rest, etc. In other words, the consequences of the premise result in no valid affirmations; the one, if it is, cannot admit predication other than its self-identity. The one, as one, is conceptually pure, distinct and separate from all other things. Any property other than "oneness" would imply impurity and the one would no longer be perfectly one. Quite a few of Parmenides' deductions drive the point home. In conclusion, the first affirmation of the one "in itself by itself" (i.e., not-participating) is achieved by the negation of several predicates: if the one is, "no name belongs to it, nor is there an account or any knowledge or perception or opinion of it…it is not named or spoken of, nor is it the object of opinion or knowledge, nor does anything that is perceive it" (142a).

But that is the easy part. Up to this point, Parmenides has offered little more than the Zeno hypothesis, which states that change or motion is fundamentally incompatible with the notion of absolute infinity. How, then, can a perfect form subsist in some other thing (or property), or how can some *separate* thing (or property) at the same time *participate* in a perfect form? Just as it appears that the project must fail, Parmenides repeats the premise in order to arrive at a different result. This time around, however, he reinterprets "the one is," shifting the emphasis from the one's self-identity (i.e., the one's *oneness*) to the one's *existence or modality of being*. That is to say, instead of focusing on the grammatical subject, such that "the one is *one*," he now proposes to focus on the verb, "the one *is*." From here Parmenides effects a crucial, first division

between the one itself and the being of the one: If the one *possesses* being (because being "belongs to" it), then the one's being in turn *includes* oneness. Being serves as the conceptual bridge between form and thing, in a similar way to the theological doctrines of divine *Logos* and Incarnation, which connect the transcendent nature of God to his immanent and sustaining presence in the world.

This interpretation of the premise renders being a kind of predication, as if oneness and being represent two distinct metaphysical entities. On this basis we now have the participation of two interacting forms or concepts, and Parmenides can devise to multiply the predicates. He posits "difference" as a third entity, which comes about with any distinction between two things, and in a similar way, he applies likeness, unlikeness, and similarity. Then number, too, arises as a result of the trinity of oneness, being, and difference. If every number *is* or has being, then every number must also have oneness (insofar as being partakes of oneness, and one is the origin of all number). In this manner, the one is affirmed to be many. (Parmenides continues to establish participation with similar deductions, with such considerations as age, time, and motion or change.)

The second half of the demonstration, arguing the consequences "if the one is not," is much shorter, but no less important. Just as the one in itself is affirmed absolutely through negations, the absolute negation of the "not-one in itself" is affirmed by rational inquiry. The reason for the latter is clear: if the one's existence is negated *purely* and *perfectly*, there is no knowledge of it and no language which can describe it. "Otherwise, when someone said that one is not, it would not even be known what he meant" (160d) and "we shouldn't even utter a sound" (161a). We might think of this negation of one as a sort of "transcendent negation" or "negative

ineffability," an inversion of the one beyond predication. If not-one is to be spoken of at all, Parmenides suggests, it must be *known in some intelligible way*.

Parmenides heads straightaway for the more difficult argument: that "not-one" is *neither* a separate *nor* a participating form.[158] In this argument, Plato once again has recourse to the indefinite dyad, treating being as a distinct property of oneness. But this time, Parmenides extends the property *inversely* to the *non*-being of other things. If we are not to be reduced to silence, Parmenides argues, we must distinguish between the non-being of oneness and a non-being of largeness and a non-being of smallness (160c). In this way, the not-one is not only a known thing, distinct from other known things, but its very difference will necessitate a language of reference, i.e., the naming of known properties by which other things differ. Another way of putting this is to say that every intelligible negation *presupposes an affirmation*. It is the affirmation which "fixes" knowledge on its formal object, providing the conceptual basis for comparison, likeness and unlikeness, equality and inequality etc.[159] The affirmation presupposed is the intelligible content ("what is known") behind the negation proposed, in such a way that the negative concepts are validated.[160]

To take just one example, Plato accomplishes this feat of affirming-in-denial with respect to non-being and being. Parmenides says that, taken by itself, the statement "the one is not" appears to deprive the one of being, but if we consider such a statement as a truth-claim or a "speech act" of philosophy (i.e., *logos*), then the premise of the negated value may be affirmed:

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[158]Plato varies his terminology here. Instead of speaking of an individual thing *participating* (*metexsis*) in a form, he uses *phaino* to denote an "appearance" of the form in an individual thing. The distinction is important.

[159]This same point was observed by Duns Scotus in the early fourteenth century. See item 4 in William Mann's summary of Scotus's refutation of "negative knowledge" of God in Maimonides (240–42). Scotus's distinction between negative terms which are "substantive" and those which are "predicative" are roughly analogous to those dmonstrated by Plato in *Parmenides*. We have instead opted for a distinction based on two kinds of predication, "absolute" and "relative," which are better suited to an argument grounded in "one" and "many."

[160]E.g., Non-oneness can participate in twoness, for example; or, conversely, twoness can be affirmed as a "kind" of non-oneness.

"it *is* the one that is not." The conclusion, according to Parmenides, is that the non-being of the non-one *must perforce participate in being*; or else, the non-one would have to surrender its non-being for being (i.e., the non-one would not *be* a non-being, the double negative resulting in a positive, "the non-one is not a non-being and is therefore a being") (161e-162b).[161]

Plato's metaphysical negations anticipate and counteract the argument that the problem of the one and the many can be resolved by a simple denial of the form's real existence, which is exactly what Aristotle does. But here too we have a negation as a kind of radical affirmation. For what else is "uncaused cause," "prime mover," or "being of beings" but an unknown and unknowable entity, paradoxical in relation to causes, motion and being?[162] Aristotle does not discuss these implications; but in the Parmenidean logic, if the one is negated absolutely, the logical consequences indicate (as with the affirmative arguments) that the many must be denied as well. Thus the final statement of paradox:

> "So if the one is not, none of the others is conceived to be one or many, since, without oneness, it is impossible to conceive of many […] if the one is not, nothing is." (166b-c)

and

> "[…] as it seems, whether one is or is not, it and the other things both are and are not, and both appear and do not appear all things in all ways, both in relation to themselves and in relation to each other." (166c)

This seemingly inscrutable and abrupt conclusion to the dialogue is made somewhat more comprehensible when, in the final sentence, "is or is not" is understood as "has being or has non-being" (and "are and are not" is understood as "have being and have non-being"), while "appear

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[161]The division of non-being and non-One qualifies absolute negation in the same way that the division of being and One qualifies absolute affirmation. In both cases, the ineffability of self-identity is frustrated or limited.

and do not appear" is understood as "are instantiated in or are not instantiated in."[163] As earlier, being indicates *either*

A) a pure and distinct identity, beyond affirmation, or

B) a universal predicate and nexus between forms and all other things, the gateway to every other kind of predication.

When the forms are affirmed in their being, being is shown to be present (*phainetai*, or "made to appear") in all other things. Conversely – and here is Plato's seemingly *un*-Parmenidean counter-argument – *if* the forms are negated, or have non-being, what follows as a result is the unordered instability of all "other things" (*allos*, *talla*) and self-contradiction.[164] Predications about "others" considered in themselves (i.e. as *separate* from oneness, non-forms) demonstrate *either*

A) that "others" (i.e., formless, individual things) must be in flux between non-being and being and thus without a stable identity, *or*

B) that "others" have no motion or change and thus no identity whatsoever.

Considered in relation to other things (i.e., formless individual things *participating* in other formless individual things – in other words, unique similarities which apply to nothing else), "others" will lead to *either*

A) an infinite "heaping up" (*onkon*) of different multitudes (*plethei*) without

[162]*Ens entis* as a "name" for God is, of course, a medieval invention.

[163]"[...]hōs eoiken, hen eit' estin eite mē estin, auto te kai talla kai pros hauta kai pros allēla panta pantōs esti te kai ouk esti kai phainetai te kai ou phainetai." That is (with suggested clarification): "[…]as it seems, whether One has being or has non-being, it and the other things both have being and have non-being, and both are instantiated in or are not instantiated in all things in all ways, both in relation to themselves and in relation to each other."

[164]The best analogy is number. Plato is asking, for example, how we can relate any two numbers greater than one without the idea of the unit. It is, of course, impossible, since every number greater than one is a multiple of the single unit. This argument is unParmenidean insofar as the historical Parmenides does not appear to have followed the consequences from the self-evident premise of the One's non-being to the non-being of individual things.

classification, size, or place (a version of Zeno's argument), *or*

B) a purely tangential and contingent existence.

In this way, properties and predicates are demonstrated to be completely dependent on the one, i.e., on the singularity and unity of formal concepts.[165]

This condensed summary of the principal arguments of Plato's Parmenides character, while in no way intended to convey the dialogue in its full subtlety and scope, must suffice to establish the technique and pattern of Plato's Parmenidean logic. The *Parmenides* has been and is still most often described as aporetic and inconclusive, pointing to Plato's obvious weakening of the principle of non-contradiction. Aristotle provides a solid basis for Plato's inconsistent or equivocal use of terms, criticizing Plato's position as a "two kinds of being" argument.[166] Indeed an argument can be made for Plato's skepticism toward philosophical language, which comes to a grinding halt in the discussion of absolute being and absolute non-being (validating Parmenides' claim that, if a rational person denies forms, he "won't have anywhere to turn his thought," and "he will destroy the power of dialectic entirely"; 135b).

While the *Parmenides* offers no re-contextualization of the dialectical demonstration, nor a reduction of its several hypotheses and conclusions to some ultimate statement, that does not mean that a conflict of *logos* and *aporia* is eternally irresolvable in Plato's eyes. Such an impasse could occur only if the laws of bivalence (a proposition is either true or false) and of the excluded middle (either a proposition or its opposite must be true) lead *only* to self-contradictions, and this is clearly not the case.[167] The interpretations and commentaries of subsequent Neoplatonists, especially Syrianus and Proclus, blended the philosophy with theology,

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[165]Parmenides's poem quite simply says "the One cannot not be" i.e., it is impossible for the One not to be, without further consequences.

[166]I.e., in *Phys.* and *On Meliss.*

transforming Plato's metaphysics into a constructive system with a mystical gaze. The *Parmenides* and the *Timaeus* were regarded as the summit of Plato's thought during the Middle and Late period of Platonism. Proclus prescribes the reading of ten other dialogues as an ascent to these two greatest, a notion which greatly influenced the way Plato was read in the fifteenth century of Cusa, Bessarion, and Ficino.[168]

Reflection on the earlier part of the dialogue leads us to conclude that the Parmenides' demonstration is a response to Socrates' desire for a dialectical explication of metaphysical paradox. We, the readers, are invited to draw connections between the *kouros* of Parmenides' poem and the youthful Socrates, and again between the same two philosophers in maturity. Walking along Parmenides' "Way of Truth" (*Aletheia*), Plato uses a method of affirmations and negations to demonstrate the logical necessity of the one and indefinite dyad, expressed in the two different states or modalities of separation and participation. These together constitute Plato's metaphysical and epistemological *archai*, the essential foundation for all philosophical concepts and rational discourse.

In this context, Socrates' Pyrrhic victory over Zeno makes better sense. Rather than a philosopher of negation and a skeptic, as Aristotle and others would make him appear, Zeno represents one facet of a larger dialectical method, a method which should be juxtaposed against Parmenidean monism and then woven together into a single garment. Such a view is consistent with the testimony of Simplicius, who writes:

> It was natural that Zeno, who, as if for the sake of exercise, *argued both sides of a case (so that he is called double-tongued)*, should utter such statements raising

[167]On the contrary, the recent criticism has shown a remarkable consistency in logic, based on that which is self-evident, true by definition, and consequential.

[168]See Proclus, *Proclus' Commentary on Plato's* Parmenides xxxvii. Following the Neoplatonists Ficino, places *Parmenides* at the center of his *Platonic theology* .

> difficulties about the one; but in his book which has many arguments in regard to each point, he shows that a man who affirms multiplicity naturally falls into contradictions…These things Zeno says, not denying the one[…] [my emphasis] (Fairbanks 114)

Thus Plato's dialogue distinguishes not only between the youthful Socrates and the mature Zeno but between the youthful Zeno and the mature Zeno, at a time when the character qualifies and (to an extent) repudiates the very arguments for which he is best known; they are the immature "competitive spirit" of a "young man," intended only as a refutation of Parmenides' critics (128d). It is therefore Parmenides' demonstration which represents, most competently and completely, the full range and compatibility of affirmative and negative approaches. Thus many modern scholars have proposed that Plato was more interested in the role and exercise of the dialectical method than he was in constructing a positive theory.

Whether the terms in a bivalent logic affirm or negate the premises depends on the method and process of dialectic. What we have observed is that affirmative premises may conclude in negations, and that negative premises may yield positive knowledge. The truth of any given statement is not determined by the method or process itself; rather *the more profound truth comes about when affirmations and negations work in tandem to arrive at one and the same valid conclusion*. This final point can hardly be emphasized enough; for it means that a discourse which integrates *both* learning *and* ignorance, wisdom *and* folly, can indeed (in the thought of Middle and Later Platonism) achieve the most complete understanding of reality – what is beyond reason and language, in relation to our sensual and experiential knowledge.

* * *

The Parmenidean dialectical method of this dialogue may seem unique, but it materializes in other, less direct ways. The very irony of Socrates is a kind of negation, in as much as the denial of knowledge and refutation (*elenchus*) are prerequisite to the doctrine of the Forms. Despite Dionysius' preference for negative theology, a *via negativa* does not play a large role in the medieval systems of faith and reason. For Aquinas, negative predication does not allow adequate room for reason and philosophy, while for Scotus, a negative method does not tell us about the object of our greatest love (Mann, W. E. 241, 260). Thus these two giants of theology preferred the Dionysian "way of supereminence," or *via supereminentia*, the method whereby analogical predications about God are taken to the highest possible degree of perfection. To follow this path of reasoning, one must simply prefix predicates like good, wisdom and beauty with *hyper* or *super*, to signify a perfection beyond human understanding, which (according to the Aristotelian tradition) is derived from the senses alone. This notion of a divine perfection, however, shares some similarities and weaknesses with Plato's theory of Forms.

For his own approach, Cusa decided to return to the Platonist method of affirmation-negation, and affirmation-via-negation, which he found in the ancient sources. Exactly how much he owes to any one Platonist philosopher is still an subject of modern critical debate; nevertheless, from the evidence of his library, Cusa also read with assiduous care the *Periphyseon* of John Scotus Eriugena, a contemplative theologian of the nineth century who possessed (for his time) a rare facility in the Greek language. Although recent philosophical critics are skeptical that Eriugena knew the original texts of pagan Neoplatonists, he did know – and translate – the Dionysian corpus and the mystical works of Gregory of Nyssa and St. Maximus of Constantinople. Whether from reflection upon the Christian writers or upon other sources, Eriugena developed a method which, similar to the Parmenidean dialectic, draws on a balance of affirmative

and negative discourses. In the language of learned ignorance, he writes: "For what the Holy Fathers, I mean Augustine and Dionysius, most truly say about God – Augustine says that He is better known by not knowing, Dionysius that His ignorance is true wisdom – should, in my opinion, be understood."[169]

The impact of Plato's *Parmenides* on a theology of God in particular and on Western thought in general needs to be reconsidered in the light of much recent criticism. The dialogue was a vital philosophical resource for theories of universal harmony and cosmology, resembling the *omnia connexa sunt* of ancient Stoic tradition. Long before the medieval synthesis of faith and reason in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, Proclus had posited the existence of the forms or Exemplars in the mind of the One, or God. In the latter part of the thirteenth century, his ideas were rapidly disseminated throughout the West in Moerbeke's translations, especially that of the *Elements of Theology*, around 1268.[170] Aquinas, who knew and encouraged Moerbeke, used the *Elements* in his commentary on the Arabic *Book of Causes*.[171] The universal extension of being in the *Parmenides* may have played a role – if not directly through Moerbeke's translations then through Dionysius, *The Book of Causes*, and Avicenna – in Scotus' and Eckhart's arguments for univocity (the former of being, the latter of causality), while the emphasis on negations and the limits of rational language may be echoed in Ockham's "irenic separatism."[172]

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[169]*Periphyseon* II, 597D, quoted in Rorem 214. See also Otten; Moran, *The Philosophy of John Scottus Eriugena: A Study of Idealism in the Middle Ages* 58–80; Moran, "John Scottus Eriugena". Eriugena's definition of God as "one, self-identical and unmoveable," *unum et idipsum immobile*, clearly demonstrates a Neoplatonic collapse of difference in the notion of a transcendent One.

[170]Jayne et al. cite 1286 incorrectly 68.

[171]The *Book on the Pure Good* (known as *The Book of Causes* or *Liber de causis* in Latin), was a highly influential source of Neoplatonism in the Middle Ages and was thought to be written by Aristotle. Aquinas identified it as the work of Proclus.

[172]See Hankey. For Eckhart's univocity of causality, see Mojsich's definition of "univocal correlationality" 70–75. "Irenic separatism" in Ockham means that philosophy can tell us nothing about theology. Ockham was pessimistic about the use of *philosophical* language in speaking about God. See Freddoso 345–46. As mentioned earlier,

Fifteenth-century philosophers were drawn once again to the original Platonic text and Proclean commentary during an age of renewal and rediscovery. For Cusa, the dialogue offered a new approach to familiar problems in theology, such as divine predication and the relationship of formal concepts to divine essence. Most importantly, the paradox of learned ignorance is a re-conceiving of the interactivity of affirmative and negative postulates in a Platonist dialectic. The affirmation of the Forms' transcendence through the denial or impossibility of rational language is a discourse which Raoul Mortley has justly termed "positive negation" (97–118). The intuitive or mystical knowing suggested by Proclus requires, however, a negating of every term and all language, or "the negation of a negation which takes us into the appropriate silence" (116). (We refer to this later as "transcendent negation.") The Neoplatonic ascent to silence is an *aporia* and privation of *logos*, but it is quite the opposite of the "destruction of dialectic" spoken of by Plato's Parmenidean character. The experience of the ineffable principle of reality is ecstatic rather than skeptic or nihilistic.

The silence beyond language in affirmative and negative methods can also be understood as two kinds of infinity. First, we have the "positive infinity" of affirmed self-identity, the unlimited Absolute, which is the unity of pure perfections and exceeds predication. Closely related is Plato's univocal being, an arche-principle of all likenesses which extends through the finite universe like numbers in an eternal generation. Secondly, we have the "negative infinity" of absolute non-being, the absence of all knowledge the destruction of dialectic, about which "we shouldn't even utter a sound" (161a). The negation of oneness also leads to two kinds of infinite succession – the non-being of all things in the state of difference (unlikeness) and the endless

Scotus largely rejected the *via negativa*. Of Eckhart Klibansky writes: "the mode of thinking expressed in Proclus' commentary is unmistakably imprinted on the dialectical speculation of the German mystic" 287.

heaps and divisions of the multiple "others," an "infinite regress" resulting from the absence of unifying principles.

The philosophical foundations of moriasophia – a dialectical juxtaposition of folly and wisdom - may be found in the *Parmenides*. When a sublime, theological Wisdom is treated as a principle of divine agency (God's "Word" or *Logos*), a metaphysical shift takes place from the unity of divine simplicity to the multiplicity of divine creativity. Folly has a part in this as well: first, as the anti-wisdom principle, a negation of wisdom which affirms wisdom's attributes, but second, as an alter-wisdom principle which plays on the boundaries of simplicity and multiplicity. For this reason, moriasophia in rhetoric is paralleled in Cusa's dialectical categories of Maximum and Minimum in *On Learned Ignorance*. These concepts of "most" and "least," complexity and simplicity, correspond to the aspects of the Parmenidean exercise, such as the "one" beyond predication (minimum) and the "one" as generative principle of "other" (maximum). Folly is nevertheless an equivocal and flexible concept in representation, and there are several other possibilities. As a source of paradox, folly's ability to use mind (*ingenium*) over nature and to complicate events and relationships with the "unexpected" is a kind of hyper-*logos* creativity, imitating the immanent powers of the divine mind. At other times, the innumerable examples folly manifests Plato's "heaps" and endless "divisions," which result from the multiplicity of appearances without the unitary principle.[173]

Cusa's dialectical categories avoid the Platonic problem of "two kinds of being" by juxtaposing instead two kinds of infinity and bridging the quantitative and the qualitative.[174] Continuing along the path of mathematical analogy and symbol, Cusa proposes a notion of the infi-

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[173]Erasmus' Folly rests her argument for superiority on her universality among men, e.g., "Is anything at all done among mortals that is not full of folly? Isn't everything done by fools, among fools?" 39. The Biblical source for the universality argument is, of course, Eccl. 1:15, "the number of fools is infinite." *Moria* 119.

[174]"For maximum is a superlative just as minimum is a superlative" Cusa, *LI* 1.4.11.

nite Absolute as a total collapse of quantitative distinctions. In a direct reference to categories referenced in *Parmenides,* Cusa writes: "if you free maximum and minimum from quantity – by mentally removing large and small – you will see clearly that maximum and minimum coincide."[175] We shall have more to say about the coincidentia below. But here Cusa is simply using quantity in a similar way to names and predicates, the abstraction of number paralleling Plato's negation of rational and discursive language. Note that, in *OLI*, a consideration of negative number is absent, and likewise, a negative absolute. That is a territory which will be explored in Cusa's later works.[176] But at this point it is vital to acknowledge the comparison of moriasophia and the Parmenidean dialectic as internal to Plato and Cusa and not imposed as a matter of rhetorical criticism. Though their rhetorical strengths are not equal (Cusa giving rhetoric less attention, especially in *OLI*), both authors clearly integrate rhetoric and logic as two expressions of the same metaphysical paradoxy.

4.4 Dialectic and Equivocal Language in Learned Ignorance and Moriasophia

It has been shown that the antithetical or opposing concepts of knowledge/ignorance and wisdom/folly may signify – literally as forms but also rhetorically and poetically as themes with figurative or symbolic potential – the two-fold dialectical method or process in affirmation and negation. Any easy formula associating knowledge with wisdom and ignorance with folly, however, is immediately challenged by Plato's complex use of terms, either as absolutes or as relative to others. Affirmative and negative methods may represent *premises*, hypothetical statements to be questioned and explored, or the finality of *conclusions*. Meanwhile, the equivocal

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[175]Cusa, *LI* 1.4.11. "Absolve igitur a quantitate maximum et minimum – subtrahendo intellectualiter magnum et parvum – et clare conspicis maximum et minimum coincidere" Cusa, *DDI* 8.
[176]E.g., *On the Hidden God* (*De Deo abscondita*) of 1444*; On the Not-Other* (*De non aliud*) of 1462. See Watanabe 70–74.

use of "being" (*eimi*), destabilizes the *logos* just enough to create a conceptual and logical bridge between two modes of signification and, consequently, transcendent and immanent worlds of reality. Whether a term is universal or equivocal makes a vast difference in the consequences of logical argumentation, as is borne out in the dialectic.

At this point it may be helpful to offer a summary sketch of the four principal dialectical processes which we have discussed and which have a direct bearing on the use of positive and privative terms:

Absolute predication (the form in relation to itself)

- radical affirmation: leads to infinite negation of predicates (ineffability)
- radical negation: leads to infinite silence (negative ineffability)

Relative predication (the form in relation to other things)

- qualified affirmation (participation): leads to infinite instantiations
- qualified negation (participation presupposed): leads to infinite regress

The simplicity of conceptual antitheses will no longer hold up in the Platonic-Parmeniden system, which is not only bivalent but *paradoxical*, a system in which predicates are considered as absolute (i.e., separate) *as well as* relational entities (i.e., participating). As we have seen, the strata of logical arguments, with affirmative and negative processes and consequences, breathes a new and expansive *logos* into positive and privative terms. Learning (or knowledge)/ignorance and wisdom/folly, have a special place in a nominal and bivalent logic, precisely because of the close relationship these terms have to the Parmenidean-Platonic distinction between true knowledge and opinion.

Wisdom and knowledge are forms in the Platonic view. Wisdom represents the summit and perfection of all rational learning. As with other forms, absolute predication (or radical af-

firmation) means that wisdom and knowledge, considered in themselves, cannot be contained or set apart, same or different, like or unlike, in motion or at rest, etc. (137c-142a). Nevertheless, through the equivocation of being, Plato makes the already wide semantic range of wisdom and knowledge ever wider, both in the logical sense of the truth-signification and in the linguistic sense of the variety of meaning in terms and their referents. Through a qualified affirmation, a being of wisdom and a being of knowledge exist wherever they are found "to appear" in things, and in varying degrees, according to their participating potential in the absolute forms. Accordingly, it may be said that there are many *kinds* of knowledge and wisdom in this world. It is worth repeating here that Plato's attempt to breech the gap between pure form and impure instantiation is directly related to the medieval question of God's transcendence and immanence.

One aspect which makes this system so much more unique and interesting is Plato's emphasis on negative terms and processes. On the most fundamental level of opposition, the terms ignorance and folly represent the imperfection and absence of knowledge and wisdom. As Parmenides argues, absolute negatives (which would include ignorance and folly) cannot be spoken of and thus lead to a silencing of the *logos*. However, deriving positive knowledge from negations and qualified negations requires the rather gymnastic reversal of premises in conclusions.

To be clear, a "reversal" of radical affirmation occurs when all positive terms are surrendered and all names, knowledge, perception, and opinion are denied (142a). Thus affirmed in negation, the dialectical method indeed leads to the conclusion that ignorance and folly (i.e., non-knowledge and non-wisdom), used in the absolute sense, represent a higher order of reality beyond the reach of *logos*. This is precisely how Proclus reads and understands radical affirmation in Plato's *Parmenides*. Even though it is not explicit in the Platonic text, Proclus argues for a *mystical* knowledge and understanding which supersedes all rational knowledge:

> But we must attend to the fact that when he [i.e., Plato, in the persona of Parmenides] says that the One is not known, by 'knowledge' he means 'rational knowledge'. […]if there is a divinely inspired knowledge that is better than rational knowledge and which leads the One in ourselves towards that One, obviously the argument did not eliminate this, and learning it is the "final discipline," as Socrates rightly says (*Rep*. VI, 505a), because it is discipline in the final knowledge. But this final knowledge is not science, but is higher than science (Proclus, *Proclus' Commentary on Plato's* Parmenides 62K, 23–34)

The similarity between this Neoplatonic position and that of Christian doctrine – whose Creator God transcends forms, logical categories, and predicates – indicates the ease with which a Proclean metaphysics might be adapted to Western theological uses. The notion of a "final knowledge," which is "higher than science," was transmitted through the most authoritative of sources when it became the foundation for Dionysius' *Mystical Theology*. Here it is written that, in a "truly mysterious darkness of unknowing," the contemplative is "supremely united with the unknown [God] by an inactivity of all knowledge, and knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing" (Pseudo-Dionysius 137; Rorem 214).

A second kind of affirming negation involves ignorance and folly as relational entities. Unlike the absolute negation which leads to silence, much can be said of qualified negation, even when the arguments result in self-contradictions and infinite regress. That is because, as Plato's Eleatic suggests, our understanding of qualified negations presupposes some kind of affirmation, or else "we shouldn't even utter a sound" (161a). It is precisely on account of these affirmations, linked together by a common property of non-being, that non-knowledge and non-wisdom can *partake* of contrary properties (i.e., without partaking of their own non-identity). Thus conjec-

tured, non-knowledge and non-wisdom needs must include the negation of all "known" *kinds* of ignorance and folly, and such kinds will necessarily differ from one another, as in a "great" and "small." Indeed there is a *being* of ignorance and a *being* of folly (e.g., "Folly is not-wisdom" is the same as saying "wisdom *is* a non-being"; cf. 162a). Through the affirmation of a being of non-knowledge and non-wisdom, ignorance and folly can be said to "come to be" and "cease to be," or to exist both "in motion" and "at rest," etc. (cf. 162a-163b). And finally, the comparisons between the many kinds of ignorance and folly, bereft of the unifying principle of wisdom, lead to an infinite "heaping up" of ignorance/folly instantiations, divisions, and relations.

The Parmenidean dialectic has a significant effect on these and similar positive and privative terms. It confuses and explodes categories, overturns expectations and exploits contradictions – all of which are aspects of the discourse's paradoxy. Equivocation in the predication of being extends to every term which is united with it by means of its own being, and *thus the precise meaning of knowledge, ignorance, wisdom and folly is not self-evident*. Ignorance and folly may affirm absolute opposites *qua* opposition, or they may affirm knowledge and wisdom in a mode of transcendent negation. Or yet again, ignorance and folly may appear in any number of things of this world, divisible without end, a principle of pure potentiality or unformed materiality, in Cusa's words, an Absolute Minimum.

Thus there is already in the time of Plato a tension inherent in language, since many of the terms philosophy uses categorically and abstractly have wider cultural and literary origins and contexts. The concept of folly, represented in such terms as *geloia, adoleschias, phluaria, atopos* had already crossed the line into the terrain of wisdom long before (and long after) Plato, who can be said to have done much the same with regards to the *agnosia* or ignorance of Socrates. As we have mentioned, the impetus for Zeno's book is described as a conflict with other

philosophers over which arguments are the more "laughable" in their consequences. And that folly which is logical error contrasts sharply with the sublimity of Parmenides' dialectical discourse, one which is perceived as foolish in the perspective or "opinion" of ordinary persons.

Some familiar aspects of a more literary folly come to the surface in the Parmenidean dialectic. Folly is associated with such notions as instability, relativity, multiplicity, fragmentation and self-contradiction. But these are not always conceived negatively; in fact they frequently have positive or affirmative connotations. When predicated of individuals, "folly" and "opinion" are not absolute nor wholly void of their affirmative counterparts. Folly presupposes many sorts of behaviors and actions, while opinion presupposes competing assertions and truth-claims. Indeed, definitions of "mad folly" and "holy folly" stem from notions of divine inspiration and a "knowing" which is somehow above and beyond the rational and which is often expressed in the ambiguous language of riddles and prophetic utterances.

The resulting terminological, conceptual, and metaphysical instability relates to the kind of equivocation we have observed in the representation of wisdom and folly since ancient times. While Cusa's philosophical theology demonstrates the dependency of epistemology on metaphysics, the discourse of wisdom and folly in secular and sacred traditions most often illustrates, or at least suggests, the theoretical foundations of moral philosophy: "doing the good" relies on *knowing* what the good *is*. Equivocal terms in the senses we have outlined correspond to the "crossing-over" of folly into the domains of wisdom, either as a form of alter-wisdom, or wisdom's failure to arrive at *practical* conclusions by means of logic or theoretical reasoning. Moreover, as Plato indicates, either one may be mistaken for the other as a matter of perspective.

But equivocation does not only affect the reversal of terms conceived at opposite ends of a bivalent spectrum or at the "extremes." In affirmations and negations which are qualifiable,

there are degrees of participation, things "more like" and "less like," or "less unlike" and "more unlike." The impurity of forms in our world signifies that contrary properties, such as knowledge and ignorance, exist in one and the same thing. Furthermore, if one compares (or confuses) relative with absolute predication, it may indeed appear that an individual thing is inevitably positioned in a flux between two extremes. Such a one is Plato's Socrates, who, though acute in his evaluation of Zeno's argument, fails so completely in explaining his theory of formal participation that he is reduced to silence for the latter two-thirds of the dialogue.

Notice, too, how the moral character of the young Socrates corresponds to the weakness in his epistemology. He is wise, in the moral sense, in his relentless desire for the truth and even in his honesty regarding his own ignorance; but he is also foolish because he acts rashly and judges harshly, picking a fight he cannot win. His folly is reflected neatly and humorously in the puppy metaphor. These qualities of intellectual cleverness characterize the learned folly of moriasophia which we discussed in the first chapter. As we have demonstrated in the case of clever, mad, and holy fools, Socrates is a character of the indeterminate, conceptual "middle." The ambiguity and relativity of his knowledge and wisdom is reflected in Plato's language in a way which should remind us of the equivocal terms for folly: the Greek *panourgia,* the Roman *ingenium,* and the English "cunning" are all semantically poised somewhere between deception (*dolos*) and practical wisdom (*phronesis*). Even Socrates' philosophical theory is poised amidst extremes, i.e., between forms and things, while Parmenides' dialectic is a careful balance between affirmation and negation.[177]

This application of the dialectical method and processes to ignorance and folly may sound peculiar, but the themes and concepts are part and parcel of Plato's style and lend them-

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[177]Note that Plato's Eleatic does not argue (as does the historical Parmenides), that "only the one exists," while change and motion are mere illusions.

selves quite easily to examination within the system. Cusa, of course, discovered this fact through a long line of commentators and imitators in the two-fold tradition of Neoplatonic and Christian-Neoplatonic schools. In his reading of Proclus' commentary and *Elements of Theology*, Cusa found a full-blown philosophical system, the summation of Athenian Neoplatonism and the inspiration for Dionysius.[178] Since Dionysius incorporated only facets of Proclus, Cusa turned back to the pagan Neoplatonist for the more complete and systematic approach, especially the rigorous treatment of negation. Had he better translations, Cusa might have realized more clearly the pseudonymity of the Dionysian corpus, which reiterates whole passages from the *Elements*.

Dionysius' style, on the other hand, looks back towards the Platonic original, juxtaposing rational and literary methods. He readily employs poetic language, Scripture, Christian liturgy, and liturgical symbols in a philosophical theology of God, sacrament, and Church. Thus Dionysius is preeminent among Christian theologians for relating the Platonic themes of knowledge/ignorance and wisdom/folly to the themes and language of St. Paul in his letters to the Corinthians.

4.5 Language and Literature in Philosophical Discourse

Ambiguity in literary language and the necessity of interpretation reveals one of the most important distinctions between Plato and Aristotle. While Aristotle builds his philosophy on consistent terms, definitions, and categories (creating new distinctions and sub-terms when conflict arises in any given category), Plato is self-conscious and cautionary about the terms themselves. On the one hand, he makes it clear that *logos* – the language we use to classify, inquire,

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[178]George of Trebizond's translation of *Parmenides* was followed closely by Balbus' translation of Proclus' *Elements* (1461). Both were dedicated to Cusa.

rationalize, and hypothesize – is limited in its ability to express reality. Discussed in greater detail in the *Phaedrus,* Plato's reservations about language (and *written* language in particular) represents, for many critics, evidence of skepticism (Plato, "Phaedrus" 274d ff.). On the other hand, in his qualified affirmations and negations, Plato also demonstrates that *logos* has an infinity proper to itself, co-eternal with the extension of being. As long as there is being, there is something for philosophers to fix their thoughts on and to talk about.

How, then, should we regard Plato's language and his use of literary conventions? Until the end of the twentieth century, critics simply did not pay much attention to Plato's mimesis, let alone his style of writing, his metaphors, and his appropriation of literary conventions. But in more recent scholarship, this question has been reevaluated. Gerald Press, Bernard Freydberg, Charles Kahn, and Andrea Nightingale are among those scholars who have emphasized Plato's self-conscious literary artistry, including characterization, indirection, allusiveness to literary personages and types, and generic form.[179] Plato's use of language taps into its potential in a more inclusive and comprehensive way, balancing modes of discourse and using literary methods not only to compliment but even to off-set and challenge rational conclusions.

The literary aspects of the *Parmenides* extend in many directions. Folly and ignorance should not be taken for granted as the window-dressing of mimesis, either in the contextualization of Zeno's *logoi* or in the complex paradoxy of Socrates and Parmenides. The young Socrates recapitulates, in an unconventional way, the heavenly ascent of the *kouros* in Parmenides' poem *On nature,* even if we must wait until the *Phaedrus* for a Platonic fulfillment of the Par-

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[179]"Since the 1950s, however, a new Plato scholarship has been developing – a new kind of Platonism – that is defined by sharing in varying combinations and to varying degrees two nontraditional orientations: suspicion of the dogmatic approach to the dialogues, and belief that literary and dramatic matter are important (even essential) to proper understanding of the dialogues and Plato's philosophy as found in them" Press, G. A. 1–14. See also Freydberg; Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue: The Philosophical Use of a Literary Form*; Nightingale; Press, G. A., *Plato: A Guide for the Perplexed*; Press, G. A., "The State of the Question".

menidean imagery.[180] Meanwhile, the technique of literary distancing in the opening pages, situating the main conversation remotely in time as well as place, relates the "wonder" of its philosophical subject to its mimetic setting: the notoriously dark and crowded potters' quarter of Athens (called the Kerameikos, after the Greek word for clay, *keramos*, and potter, *kerameis*). This section of the city was itself located in the "outer" Kerameikos, outside the northwest walls of the city, and included the cemetery (where many war heroes were buried), the public burial monument where Pericles delivered his famous oration of 431 BC, and most importantly, the *Iera Odos*, or "Sacred Way" of the Eleusian Mysteries, secret rites which united worshippers with gods and assured mortals of divine powers in the afterlife.[181] The literary allusiveness of the narrative frame and rhetorical style of the subsequent dialogue (126a-137c) is so sharply divided from the Parmenidean demonstration (137c-166c) that scholars have come to speak of the work in two parts, *Parmenides I* and *Parmenides II*.

The use of literary conventions in philosophy returns us to the question of the logical and rhetorical-poetical aspects of paradoxy. While rational discourse seeks consistency and accuracy in its definition and application of terms, rhetorical and poetical language reflect the artificiality of customary practices, ordinary speech, and literary conventions. The alternation of affirmation and negation in the Parmenidean demonstration indicates that even logical discourse is not stripped of rhetorical aspects and is subject to similar limitations. Modalities of being (*eimi*) have a profound affect on the significance of key terms like "the one" (*to hen*), "many" (*plethei*), "the others" (*talla/alloi*). The resulting *aporia* and inversions in the affirmative-negative method suggest the kind of instability, ambiguity, and multivalence which philosophers routinely consid-

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[180]The contrast of the Socratic persona in the *Parmenides* and the *Phaedrus*, the impetuous youth as opposed to the self-controlled elder, signifies that philosophical ascent requires much training and maturity.

er proof of rhetoric's inferior ability to capture and relate objective knowledge. Add to this the fundamental similarity between ancient dialectical method and rhetorical practice: argument on two sides of a question, *ad utramque partem*.

What we have therefore is a conflict regarding the role of language in the arts and sciences from ancient times through the early modern period. In the thirteenth century of Aquinas, the difference was explained as one of activity (*ars*) compared to the systematic contemplation of principles (*scientia*).[182] Such a boundary was by no means held universally and tends to disguise the epistemological battle over methods in teaching and learning. In the Aristotelian view of the Middle Ages, the chief "instrument" (*organon*) of the sciences is the "art" of propositional logic, which necessitates correct terms in order to arrive at the highest kind of theoretical knowledge. The rhetorical discipline, on the other hand, was depicted as an inferior art, directed toward moral exhortation, instruction, and persuasion. In practice, rhetoric puts the conclusions of scientific knowledge to good use in political and social situations but is not the stuff of inferential systems. Another way of putting this is to say that, for medieval thinkers, philosophical language strives for uniformity and univocity in language, while rhetoric and poetics exploit, for their own affective and demonstrative purposes, the culturally-accrued ambiguities and equivocation in language.

The distinction between a uniform discourse of philosophy and an equivocal or figurative discourse of rhetoric and literature resurfaces in the philosophy-rhetoric debates of the late medieval and early modern periods. Since the time of Petrarch, Plato's works began to gain the attention of rhetoricians seeking new avenues of agreement between ancients and moderns, especially

[181]The Kerameikos is a sizeable area, located partly within and partly outside the ancient city walls, on both sides of the Dipylon Gate and near the banks of the River Eridanos. For a description, see Freely 150–55. For Pericles' famous speech in the Kermeikos, see Thucydides 90–96.
[182]See Lohr, "Aristotelian 'Scientia,' the 'Artes,' and English Philosophy in the 14th Century".

those which might ground faith and reason in ordinary experience and not solely in metaphysical speculation. However, the retranslation of Platonic texts in the fifteenth century and the rediscovery of Plato's literary aspect reintroduced the idea that logic and rhetoric might enjoy a peculiar, even paradoxical rapport. Despite Plato's aggressive campaign against the pseudo-knowledge of rhetoricians and his ejection of the poets from the Republic, he himself is a master of literary language. His evident display of mimesis, analogy, and allegory only added fuel to the Renaissance humanist's claim that not only terms but proper perspective and affective disposition mattered, that wisdom is somehow made more perfect even as it is made more human, that rhetoric at the very least makes theoretical knowledge teachable, and that without it, philosophy and theology would be (and indeed had become) incomprehensible or even "laughable."[183]

The connections between the philosophical and rhetorical uses of language in *Parmenides I* and *II* deserve greater critical attention. The "breaking" or "weakening" of the law of non-contradiction in *Parmenides II*, in order to allow for an ontological relation between the one and the indefinite dyad, amounts to a fissure in the wall of disciplinary conventions which separate the two essential aspects of dialogue and dialectic. Representation and poetic analogy or metaphor also imitate the two-fold structure of reality in a way which parallels the bivalent logic, dividing a single thing – whether an actual event or personal experience – into a "one" and an "other." The "other" participates through a "likeness" to or imitation of the "original one," and yet the separation necessitates "difference." This literary *poesis* of multiplication and relation parallels the logical distinction and bridge between the forms' conceptual purity and instantiations. Thus it is the very nature of *logos*, we might say, to reflect reality in these two very different ways. Both aspects must admit to a degree of impurity and equivocation if language is to tell

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[183]The humanist's argument for the importance of rhetoric in relation to philosophy and the union of wisdom and eloquence is explored by Seigel.

us anything at all about what "is." One might go as far to say that a revived Plato validates and liberates literary technique – e.g., mimesis, characterization, allegory, metaphor, etc. – from the medieval view of affective and poetic language as epistemologically inferior.[184]

Plato's blending of rhetorical-poetical and philosophical methods, while not unique, served as the generic exemplar. Yet it took many centuries for the literary aspects of Plato to be appreciated, let alone acknowledged as such. The interest can be gauged, at least in part, by the number of imitators. Few philosophers wrote in dialogues through the medieval period, and the few who did assumed the Academic style of Cicero. After all, the only Platonic texts available in the Latin West from late antiquity through the Middle Ages were the *Timaeus* and the *Phaedo*, and the translations were poor, hardly a reflection of Plato's genious.[185] By comparison, the number of philosophical dialogues increased dramatically in the fifteenth century, especially in Italy, with the renewed interest in Cicero and Plato.

Plato offers us a point of convergence for traditional ideas about knowledge and ignorance and about wisdom and folly, as they are incorporated thematically and rhetorically into a metaphysical discourse. This is not to say that philosophical questions and rhetorical themes involving these concepts were ignored by other thinkers and literary writers apart from Plato and Neoplatonists, or that Plato's ideas somehow dominated the cultural discourse. Rather, we aim here to indicate a cultural moment when a growing uncertainty over medieval solutions to the problem of faith and reason compelled some thinkers to look to ancient texts for new approaches and new language. Dionysius had always been held in high esteem, in the West as well as the

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[184]Fredborg demonstrates how rhetorical education and practice were appropriated by scholastics in the service of the scholastic method .

[185]The *Timaeus* was widely known, having been preserved in Calcidius' fourth-century commentary (Cicero's partial translation having a much smaller circulation). The *Phaedo* and the *Meno* were translated by Archdeacon Henricus Aristippus during the cultural boom that arose out of the Norman King William's twelfth-century court in Palermo. But the latter two dialogues were hardly known in the West until after 1300 Gersh. provides a more detailed account of Plato in the Middle Ages.

East (Aquinas had written extensive commentaries on the four treatises), but it was not until the recovery of Plato and a Neoplatonic corpus that one could conceive of a *rational system* into which Dionysius' theological discourse might be assimilated and better understood. While few Christian philosophers adapted the Neoplatonist world-view in its entirety, many aspects seemed to resound with the authenticity of those early Church Fathers, who in turn drew from Platonic and Neoplatonic discourses.

The themes of learned ignorance and moriasophia were native to Platonism, itself a genre in flux between literature and philosophy. A discourse of metaphysical paradoxy continued to take shape in a Neoplatonic context. The discourse appealed to those seekingnew sources of religious inspiration in an age of reform. With an increased literacy among the faithful, some tastes were quite educated, as demonstrated by Cusa's *De visione dei*, a treatise written for the monks of Tegernsee Monastery. Aristotelian methods had long infiltrated theology – too deeply, many thought – with cumbersome terminology, irrelevant complexity, and a subjection of sacred doctrine to the litmus tests of propositional logic. A blend of rhetorical technique with a traditional theology of God provided a refreshing alternative to the adamantine orthodoxy of scholastic method.

4.6 Likeness or Illusion? Paradoxy as True and False Appearances.

The wonder of paradoxy is a momentary embrace of the seemingly impossible yet integral relationship between eternity and time. In the Platonic-Parmenidean paradigm, both dimensions are unlimited, each in their own mode of existence. This is the reason why there is no "final solution" to what we might call the paradoxy of metaphysics or, from the perspective of the philosopher, a paradoxy of mind. The human person stands between two worlds, perceiving and

learning the natures of things because the properties of those natures are shared with the mind itself. But the rational mind cannot un-create things as far as their ontological source and still be a rational mind. Paradoxy is therefore *in* the mind.

But paradoxy also *is* the mind, insofar as mind is revealed in its expression as *logos*. Paradoxy is the result of reason's reflections on its own operations, in a way that resembles Aristotle's description of God: "thought thinking thought," *noesis noeseos noesis*. Despite Aristotle's reliance on sense perception, this definition of a self-sufficient, causal principle resembles Plato's self-identifying, self-predicating form. A *logos* which reflects the one and indefinite dyad (for Aristotle, "the all," or *to pan*) is consistent with a Pythagorean analogy between the soul and the universe, an analogy which underlies the notion of the human microcosm. The consequent fusion (or confusion) of being and knowing in Plato's philosophy is (to borrow a term from Cusa) an "enfolding" of epistemology in ontology and metaphysics.[186]

This also means there will be no *philosophical* solution to the paradoxy of wisdom and folly, inasmuch as they are properties belonging to this world and to us. They are mutually-validating entities, reciprocally dependent. Wisdom validates folly, and folly confirms wisdom. Each is potentially absolute and transcendent, when self-predicated and understood as a sign of the ineffable; but each is also potentially relative and immanent in things. Whether they oppose or complement each other, whether wisdom is embodied in one who is perceived as wise or foolish, or whether folly behaves foolishly or wisely – such situations and representations demonstrate a destabilization of their formal "states" of being.

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[186]The form-thing distinction is causal, not in the Aristotelian sense, but as a form is self-caused or causes its own appearance in something else. This emphasis on the *ontologically* prior is retained by the Neoplatonists, and by Christian thinkers like Dionysius and Cusa, who take little or no pains to demonstrate the existence of God by the evidence of his effects, a *quia* argument, which reasons prior causes from sensible experience. Cf. (Cross 13–14). The evidence of paradoxy is, rather, the *logos*, the "rules" or structural operations of the mind.

A Platonic-Parmenidean paradoxy imbedded in the irresolvable structure of the real and of *logos* is not really all that different from some contemporary notions of the compressed statement with self-refuting premises and conclusion. William Poundstone, for example, speculates on the unchanging nature of some paradoxical statements: "Are paradoxes 'all in our heads' or are they built into the univeral structure of logic?" (19). Saul Smilansky finds another kind of fixed or permanent paradox in the field of moral philosophy, which he calls "existential." In his definition, "the conclusion appears absurd even after due reflection, but it needs to be simply accepted as true, in spite of its absurdity…the paradoxical result is a revelation of how things are" (4–5). Thus the notion of paradoxy as a static-dynamic dialectic of reality has resurfaced in the recent criticism of the modern era.

And yet a critical discourse on paradoxy does not end here. To classify paradoxy as an essentially unstable and irresolvable condition would be to ignore the simple fact that another class of paradoxy has also been widely acknowledged, where self-refuting statements are indeed *resolvable*. Consider how potential resolutions are accounted for in the definitions of Quine and Sainsbury:

> May we say in general, then, that a paradox is just any conclusion that at first sounds absurd but that has an argument to sustain it (Quine 1)?
>
> This is what I understand by a paradox: an apparently unacceptable conclusion derived by apparently acceptable reasoning, from apparently acceptable premises. (Sainsbury 1)

The language is revealing. First, Quine's definition exemplifies the long-standing association between the absurd and the paradoxical, as a way to refer to the human experience or "wonder" of contradiction. Early modern Platonism contributes to this modern associ-

ation of terms, since the Latin term *absurdus* was often used to translate the Greek *geloia*, thereby connecting a metaphor of jarring disharmony and incongruity to arguments with "laughable" consequences. In Plato, such arguments are either logically erroneous, too difficult for the ordinary person to comprehend, or simply difficult to accept. Secondly, both Quine and Sainsbury describe the paradoxical disjunct between premises and conclusion as "appearances." ("at first sounds…but" in Quine; more explicitly in Sainsbury's qualifier "apparently"). The uncertainty of appearances is a prominent theme throughout the Platonic dialogues.

We cannot logically speak of "appearances" unless there is also some kind of hypothetical "reality" or certitude. If appearances are not distinct from reality, the appearances *are* the reality and there is nothing more to discover or to explore, no essential or semantic layers, no underlying causes or reasons for things, and (in Plato's words) no power in rational discourse. This is the case in the so-called "antimony" paradoxes, like the Cretan liar, where the affirmative statement *is* the negation. There is nothing more to re-examine and no new variable to admit into the system. The acknowledgement of appearances in paradoxy, on the contrary, admits to at least a *possibility* of resolution.

Thus the Platonic contrast between the apparent and the real join the paradoxy of metaphysics and epistemology to truth and falsity in premises and conclusions. But what is the place of appearances in Plato, if paradoxy is the state of reality? Appearances can be viewed in two ways, either as affirmations or as negations of the real. Up to this point we have treated appearances as the affirmative presence of forms inhering (i.e. "appearing," *phaino*) in things; and in this capacity, appearances are "likenesses" (*eikones*) of forms. But appearances may also be "false appearances" (*phantasmata*), all that "seems" to be true to the world of the senses, includ-

ing the illusions of a limited perspective, mutable materiality, and anything else which disguises true forms in the admixture of "unlikenesses."[187] Plato's analogy of the shadow is well-suited to this distinction: the shadow represents a likeness in *chiaroscuro* and silhouette, but insofar as it is void of color and detail and distorts the size and shape of the object it outlines, the shadow is dissimilar, deceptive and ambiguous.

The resolvable paradox refers to appearances in their illusory capacity; they mislead and throw a veil over contexts, circumstances, persons and objects. When a logical re-examination of terms and premises takes place, it is not that contradictory appearances *disappear* as much as they are *transformed*. We might therefore say that there is a movement from "false appearance" to "true appearance," a distinction which is the metaphysical equivalent of "opinion" and "true knowledge" in Plato's epistemology. Here again we find a role for the philosopher, which is not merely to acknowledge the paradoxy of reality's one-and-indefinite-dyad structure but to perceive eternal forms within the muddled properties of things and to distinguish between one kind of appearance and another. The constructive role for philosophy demonstrates a limited kind of resolution. Thus Parmenides and Socrates make the right formal "connections," they clarify the rational order of the universe, and in so doing, they act on our behalf as the interpreters of reality itself.[188]

Appearances in paradoxical statements function in a similar way to a system of linguistic signification. Any equivocation or instability in the terms of the premises, or any variable which bears on the relationship of *verba* to *res* may alter the reasoning process completely – such that an "unacceptable conclusion" is rendered "acceptable." A paradox may therefore be *re*solved, in a sense, by being *dis*solved. The fixed or *real* paradox no longer "exists," and the terms of the

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[187]The seminal text is the *Phaedrus Sophist* 235c-236c.

original statement are replaced by the *apparent* paradox. Quine calls such paradoxes "veridical," since a "truth" results from an apparently false statement. He distinguishes between this sort and a "falsidical" paradox, which reverses the expectations: the premises at first appear to be true, but upon further examination, are demonstrated to be false. The falsidical may be dissolved no less than the veridical; in the end, with the premises and potential variables considered, we are left with a true or a false statement.

For the purposes of this study, we will use a two-fold system: paradoxes are either *apparent* or *real*, resolvable or irresolvable, finite or infinite. If the Cretan liar represents the irresolvable paradox as a compressed statement, the paradoxical statements of the Gospels (a source of paramount importance for Cusa and Erasmus) follow the pattern of the apparent and resolvable kind. For instance, in what might be called the eschatological paradoxes, "the exaltation of the humble" and "losing one's life to save one's life" are contradictions in the literal sense; yet the reinterpretation of equivocal terms in the premises, "exaltation" and "life," reverses completely the signification. In the scales of divine judgment, the self-exaltation of the proud is rebuked and the self-sacrifice of the faithful is rewarded. Thus the contradiction based on the literal sense of words is relegated to the realm of appearances, while a figurative sense harmonizes with a more stable concept of reality. The rational and hermeneutic process of resolution has a strong rhetorical effect, emphasizing divided perspectives.

Despite the elucidations of formal analysis, Plato's *Parmenides* offers no finality or closure in resolving the paradoxy of the forms' appearances. The philosopher can indeed approximate the higher reality – as an ambitious and determined polity might approximate the model Republic – but the limitations of *logos* are the limitations of the philosopher. A rational solution

[188]This role for the philosopher is remarkably similar to that of the poet. Both are makers of images; but the philosopher guides the interpretation with dialectic.

is never complete in itself because, for Plato, we humans are too much a part of the impure material and carnal and have forgotten the ideal realm whence we came. If there is some way not only to clarify but to resolve the problem of the one and the many, it must be through a human *transcendence of the logos*, and this possibility is only hinted at, e.g., in the literary love-allegory of the *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*.

The conflict between appearance and reality, the "seems" and the "is," reflects yet another expression of the intimate connection between a Platonic philosophy and literary representation. Literature, it may be argued, imitates not only nature in the sense of *physis* and in the "actions" of human beings (as Aristotle would have it) but the world of ideas and of dialectical discourses. Plato is well aware that his own art of representation parallels, imitates, and at times parodies the structure of metaphysics which he seeks to elucidate. As the forms "appear" in concrete things, so the "lesser reality" of historical persons, events, and discourses likewise "appear" in the philosophical dialogues. In accordance with the twofold understanding of appearances, mimetic literature tends both *to illuminate* and *to falsify* its subjects, so that they are "like and unlike," that is, recognizable and distorted, evoked in silhouette and clouded with idealization, imagination, and ambiguity. That Plato makes this connection is undeniable; exactly *why* he did so is still a matter for conjecture.

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The terms and language of metaphysical paradoxy in Plato, along with the related themes of knowledge-ignorance and wisdom-folly, were taken up with enthusiasm and at times urgency by those of later generations. Indeed, Cusa stands at the end of a very long line of Platonists who wanted to complete and perfect the project of reconciling the transcendent first principle with the cosmos and with the rational powers of the mind. That there was a transcendent first principle

was hardly in question; but it was debated whether it could be known through reason alone, or to what extent reason could aid theological convictions, as revealed or simply believed. The question of origins was of great importance because, in many respects, it holds the key to the end of knowledge and the destinies of mortals. Can anything be known about the essence of the ontological *arche*? What can nature tell us? To what degree can a transcendent cause be known in its effects? What language, discourse, or method is the best approach? These issues touched both Platonism and Christianity profoundly, as philosophy and religion alike were returning "to the fonts" (*ad fontes*) of ancient knowledge, in the analysis of primary texts and languages, and in the systematization of positions and doctrines.

In what other ways did the re-reading of Plato and Platonists in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries impact the antithesis and paradox of folly and wisdom? How did the theological moriasophia of St. Paul interact with ancient models? What were moriasophia's transitional moments? These questions will be addressed in greater detail. For now, it is important to acknowledge that the imitation of the Socratic persona in Erasmus' figure of Folly and the avowed Platonism of More's Raphael are conspicuous and unavoidable signals to the reader. Never before had ideas so topical and controverted been represented with such frivolity and artistic license, a seriousness authenticated and belied by the truth-claims of a fictitious medium. Why were the "appearances" of rhetoric and poetics so deliberately and pointedly confused with a reality of experience, ordinary as well as educated; to what end was the wisdom of the ages and of the moment confounded in a declaration of ignorance and an ostentatious show of the ridiculous?

Chapter 5

Moriasophia and the Resolution Ideal in Metaphysics, Poetics, and Theology

This chapter argues that a moriasophic discourse intersects with the dialectical methods of later Platonism and Christian theology, specifically the *via affirmativa, negativa,* and *supereminentia*. A precedent is set in the Corinthian letters of St. Paul and the treatises of Dionysius the Areopagite, linking a folly and wisdom of God to images and metaphors of divine assimilation, such as the mirror, the veil, and the riddle. Nicholas of Cusa develops the Pauline and Dionysian themes in a theory of coincidentia. Metaphysical resolution or coincidentia is not a synthesis of the "image" with the "original" nor a human experience but an intuited reality, a projection of true likenesses to an infinite degree. The human position vis-à-vis infinity is likened to a "wall of absurdity" between reason and the sublime, unknowable "Paradise," a no-place where all opposites are incommensurable. The metaphysical dialectic of Cusa is paralleled in the Christian-Platonist hermeneutic, where contemplative insight is the result of extracting the mystical "spirit" of a sacred text from its "letter."

5.1 Resolution and the Platonic Tradition

Thusfar we have considered the theme of wisdom and folly as an exercise in antithesis, contrast and opposition, illustrated in character, plot, and circumstance, and we have observed the circumnavigation, slippage, and violation, of conceptual boundaries. We have also considered wisdom and folly in paradoxy, a "wonder" in rhetorical and logical contexts, arising from

irony, divided perspectives, and from the metaphysical flux of intellectual absolutes and the uncertainties of human experience. A third representation of the moriasophia follows upon the first two models.

What is suggested but not stated in the Platonic-Parmenidean dialectic of "the one and the many" is the singular purpose of the "disjunctive" method of affirmations and negations: to demonstrate how rational inference may lead the human subject to the threshold of transcendent reality. Although the philosopher does not – indeed cannot – cross this threshold, he discovers, as it were, the best place from which to view the eternal and immortal first-principle, or *arche*. Like the biblical Moses leading the Israelites to the threshold of the Promised Land, the ancient philosopher proposes an active and constructive path to divine contemplation.[189] But it is the Platonist in particular who anticipates a resolution of antithetical opposition as well as paradoxy. In essence, the philosopher intuits the unity of forms and virtues, while the "appearances" (*phainai*) arising paradoxically from dialectical opposites increase in "likeness" and decrease in "unlikeness." Thus a discourse negating the One entails paradoxical likenesses between One and not-one, to the extent that a negative premise will yield a similar silence beyond predication. Similarly, some representations of folly will approach wisdom as certain likenesses become apparent. The thought experiment may be compared to an artist's linear perspective, where two parallel lines in the foreground appear to converge in the distance (orthogonals). Just as the viewer *intuits* rather than *experiences* the absolute infinity of the vanishing point, so the philoso-

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[189]The disposition of the philosopher in Plato is, of course, paralleled in Aristotle, e.g., in the well-known description of the philosophical life in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In Book VII (1152b-1154b), Aristotle says that philosophical contemplation (*theoria*) is the greatest pleasure, while in Book X (1177a-1179a), he says that the philosopher enjoys a life of greatest well-being or happiness (*eudaimonia*). The key difference for Western theology is that Plato anticipates the possibility of a greater fulfillment beyond this life, while Aristotle considers happiness only in regards to time present.

pher understands metaphysical principles in relation to intellectual experience, or absolute infinity in relation to continuity.[190]

Linear perspective was re-discovered and demonstrated mathematically by Brunelleschi and others in the early fifteenth century, and Cusa was drawn to analogies based on vision and perspective. He compares the oblique angles and perspectives of human vision to an "all-seeing icon" in *On the Vision of God* (1453),[191] he describes the mind as a "living mirror" which "paints" objects dynamically as if breathing life into them in *Idiota On Mind*, and he examines the effects of looking into convex and concave lenses in *On Beryl* (1458).[192] In each instance, the metaphor is no static comparison but is intended to move the human mind from paradoxical "appearances" of infinity to absolute infinity. The progression from "thinking infinity" to actual infinity demonstrates Cusa's more subtle version of the Anselmian argument, a conceptual "leap" from separation to participation, thought to experience, and reason to faith. More specifically, from a philosophy of natural law, metaphysics, and epistemology to natural theology and a theology of God. Humanists would tend to view this transition historically, culturally, and prov-

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[190]Or, as some would say, *potential* infinity as compared to *actual* infinity. See Zellini.

[191]Cusa contemplates in this work the etymology of *theoria* from the Greek word for seeing, *theorein*, as well as the false derivation of *theorein* from *theos*. Although the idea can be found in the Epicurean philosopher Philodemus (*De musica*, 23) and Plutarch (*De musica* , 27), Cusa would have read the connection between the gods and the faculty of sight in Alexander of Aphrodias, the last and best commentator of Aristotle, known throughout the Middle Ages as "the commentator": "It is clear from its very nature that theorising is concerned with the sight and knowledge of what is divine; for it means seeing what is divine" 3.20. Significantly, Alexander also explains that the philosopher becomes most like a god when he is engaged in theory: "Now, for the gods, theorising about truth is continuous and uninterrupted. But for men it is not possible to be continuously active in this way – for many of the conditions of life which were alloted to them lead them away from things of higher value. Yet if a man emerges, as far as he can, from the emotions and conditions of human life, he may see the things of highest value and be active in a theorising which is divine and worthy of its name. Now when he is active with this faculty of his soul and exercises activities like those of the gods, then he will become like the gods. Thus if becoming like God is the greatest Good for men, and if this is attained by the theory and knowledge of what is true, and if the knowledge of what is true comes by way of demonstration, then demonstration will rightly be held most valuable and worthy of most study" 6.1–14, also cited in van Kooten 139–40.

[192]Cusa is the first known person to suggest the use of eyeglasses, i.e., concave and convex lenses for the correction of natural vision.

identially from a Greco-Roman civilization to a Christian one, from a city of man to a city of God.[193]

The roots of opposites-in-identity are as ancient as the other models of wisdom and folly, although the types and representations are found more commonly in religion rather than philosophy. As we pointed out earlier in our descriptions of mad and holy folly, the influence of a god or divine possession induces aberrant and eccentric behavior in the prophet, the seer, and some fools, while the inspired utterance represents the divine mandate or message. In a manner which is "mysterious" (*mysterion* denotes the "secrets" of religious cults and rites), the ecstatic state binds together the mortal with the immortal and the human with the divine.

Plato's references to divine possession in dialogues like the *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, and *Symposium* exploit the mystical associations so that philosophy compares favorably and competes with religious experience, as a superior kind of cult with its own initiation into the divine realms. The connection between the philosophical endeavor and the spirit-world is alluded to time and again, for example: in the doctrine of the soul's pre-existence, recollection (*anamnesis*), and transmigration (*metempsychosis*), in allegories like that of the Pamphylian Er at the end of the *Republic*, in the personal god of Socrates (which, Socrates claims, instructs him in ways known only to the philosopher), and in Socrates' staunch confidence and complacent resignation throughout his trial. As we have also said, the experience of the divine is also implied in the *Parmenides* through the journey of the Eleatic's *kouros* and in the dialogue's setting, near the *Iera Odos*. But the suggestion of a communion between gods and philosophers in Plato's works remains allusive and ambiguous in the dialogues. Was Plato really all that *serious* about divine

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[193]Although no evidence has confirmed an association between Cusa and Alberti, circumstantial evidence often puts the two in the same locations and moving in the same circles of friends. Cusa owned a copy of Alberti's *Elements of Painting*. Both men were close friends of the mathematician Paolo Toscanelli, who frequented Cusa's residence

possession? Or is the idea simply a literary convention, a metaphor for the activity of the intellect, which can on occasion wax playfully into full-blown "allegory"?

There is something in the ecstatic that doesn't quite fit the Platonic mold. As the cultural type of the ecstatic dictates, there is a pronounced disjunct between the appearance of the possessed and the reality of a god's presence, and there seems to be little or no pains taken by Plato to reconcile, logically, the irrational force of possession with philosophy's dialectical methods, as if religion and philosophy represented two distinct paths to the same mystical destination. While the prophet or mystic is a passive channel or a mouth-piece for an inhabiting divine power, the philosopher directs a human energy – call it the motive power of divine eros, intellectual appetite, or will – toward the metaphysical origin as far as the rational nature allows.[194]

If Plato's Parmenides does not ascend to the heavens like the Charioteer-soul of the *Phaedrus* or the Eros-principle of the wise Diotima, Platonists of subsequent generations, beginning with Speusippus and Xenocrates (Plato's immediate successors), followed the implications. They carried the torch of metaphysical paradoxy while taking up the unfinished business of Socrates in the *Parmenides*, seeking a more perfect resolution of its affirmative and negative method in the so-called "unwritten doctrines" of Plato, teachings of the later Academy which are known today only through secondary sources. These doctrines show a gradual but marked shift in the metaphysical discourse, augmenting and amplifying the spirit-world of forms and *mythos* with the abstractions of mathematics.

in Rome. Giovanni Santinello, *Leon Battista Alberti: Una Visione Estetica del Mondo e Della Vita*, and more recently Karsten Harries, discuss Cusa and Alberti.

[194]The contrast is demonstrated amply in the *Phaedrus*, in the distinction between Socrates' "eros-inspired" rhetorical speech (his head covered in a cloth) and the allegory of the charioteer-soul, which ascends to the heavens through love of wisdom (philosophy). The terms "intellectual appetite" and even "will" are admittedly anachronistic here. Unlike the Romans, the Greeks did not have a specific term for "free will" but instead spoke of responsibility and things which "depend on us." See "Aristotle on Choice without a Will" in Frede, M. 19–30.

A comparison of Plato's later dialogues, such as the *Timaeus* and *Laws*, with Aristotle's comments and criticism (the latter of which must be taken with a grain of salt) indicates that an elder Plato had turned his attention back towards the theories of the Pythagoreans, who viewed numbers as the first principles of the order, operations, and harmony of the universe. Numbers are produced from the being of the one, much as described in the *Parmenides*, only it appears at this point the term *dyad* is introduced to denote the principle of opposition unlimited-in-itself, which the one acts upon in order to achieve a harmonic balance in proportions and measures (*Metaph*. 987a). According to Aristotle, Plato even identified the forms with numbers, certainly one through four (the *tetraktys*) but perhaps including five through ten (the Stagirite is uncertain here; see 1073a). Mathematical theory is the most important link between Plato's metaphysics and the areas of cosmology and cosmogony, a major preoccupation of Platonists from this point forward.[195]

A mathematical universe may not sound like a concern with the spirit-world, but this connection unfolds with the *Timaeus*, corroborated by the account of soul in *Laws* X. In the *Timaeus*, the Pythagorean philosopher of Locri says that the universe is created through a spiritual agency, a "Demiurge" or craftsman (*demiourgos*), whose model is the unchanging reality and whose work is a perfect image of eternity in a universe of becoming or time. Mind (*nous*) and necessity (*anankes*) are the immediate "causes" of the universe, both of its matter and its form, which Timaeus speaks of as a body with a soul. (This human-cosmos analogy is the cosmological complement of the city-soul analogy of the *Republic*, which discourse is referenced in the opening pages of the *Timaeus*.) The "mixtures" of opposites which the Demiurge puts into the World-soul parallel the forms generated from the predicate of being in the *Parmenides*, except

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[195]See Dillon, *Middle Platonists: A Study of Platonism 80 B.C. to A.D. 220*; Dillon, "Speusippus and the Ontological Interpretation of the *Parmenides*".

that in the *Timaeus*, mathematics is used as the bridge from being to material reality, imposing formal distinctions on matter and providing a principle of measure, order and structure to the universe.

There is a logic in the progression from Plato's metaphysical dialectic toward a greater sense of resolution in cosmology and cosmogony. A dialectical approach to first principles leads the philosopher "upwards" from the sensible particulars to the realm of intellect and formal purity, as far as the ineffable One, but the inquiry is abstract and procedural, based on the self-evidence of terms, logical division, and consequential reasoning. Although the dialectic comprehends epistemology, the "prescriptive" aspect of philosophy is absent, i.e., the ethics which relate metaphysical causes to psychological motivation, joining the laws of heaven to the personal conduct of those of earth. The *Apology* is a powerful if early statement regarding how knowledge "informs" the life and actions of the philosopher, while the *Republic* and *Laws* extends the metaphysical discourse on the individual soul to human society and government. Cosmology and cosmogony continue to widen the scope of this inquiry, following first principles not only "upwards" to formal concepts but also "downwards," in effects and generative powers, through the divisions of the indefinite dyad and the arrangement of the universe as a whole.[196]

There was, nevertheless, another side of the Pythagorean revival which brought Plato and Platonism closer to religious belief and practices. Pythagoreans also believed in some form of spiritual mediation which connects the world of abstract mathematical harmonies to the world of

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[196]In some respects the mathematical emphasis of the later Plato is a move towards "science" as we understand it, where theory is joined to application in the study of planetary motion and of chemical and atomic composition. Of course Plato does not appear to have progressed much beyond the use of mathematics and geometry as metaphorical analogies for metaphysical necessities. For instance (and again reported by Aristotle), Plato adds a geometrical aspect to the idea of numerical ratios in the souls of the cosmos and the human person, the *tektraktys* corresponding to four spatial dimensions of reality, such that one represents a point, two a line, three a plane, and four, a solid. The mathematical revival of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries looks back to the *Timaeus* tradition for inspiration, when the "golden mean" and the Platonic solids have a significant influence on composition and proportion in art and architecture.

physis and bodies. That Plato concurs in this perspective is demonstrated in the *Laws*, when the Athenian stranger (the dialogue's main philosophical authority) argues that "the gods exist and care for mankind" (905d). In a section which discusses the soul as the first cause of bodies, such as the sun, he says:

> Now consider all the stars and the moon and the years and the months and all the seasons: what can we do except repeat the same story? A soul or souls – and perfectly virtuous souls at that – have been shown to be the cause of all these phenomena, and whether it is by their living presence in matter that they direct all the heavens, or by some other means, we shall insist that these souls are gods. Can anybody admit all this and still put up with people who deny that 'everything is full of gods?' (a saying attributed to Thales). (Plato, "Laws" 899b)

This natural theology of the "later" Plato has been called a "rational animism," in contrast to the "mechanical physicalism" of Plato's time, which considered the heavenly bodies as fire-stones thrust in a necessary motion (Frede, D. 90). Gods portrayed as active and providential powers demonstrates a purposeful order and harmony, which is instrumental if the cosmos is to serve as an analogy of the soul and its three levels of being.[197] The soul of the cosmos (the "world-soul") resembles the human soul such that we can speak of a correspondence between them, but this relationship is analogical rather than sympathetic. Plato does not use the terms micro- and macrocosm; rather, he speaks of the human soul as an *eikon* of the cosmos. Thus Plato distinguishes between the terms *theos* and *daimones*, the former being the movers of the heavens and the latter the lesser deities of nature who motivate and guide individuals in their choices and perspectives (in the *Timaeus*, the *daimones* are said to attend to physical creation). What is most important is the integral and dynamic metaphysical structure particular to each. Plato therefore worked to-

wards a greater resolution in philosophy by fusing it with theology, a fact reflected in the model societies of the *Republic* and *Laws*, which retain many of Greece's traditional religious rites and rituals.

The divine immanence of cosmos and soul leaves little room for ecstatic possession, a transcendence described or alluded to in the dialogues. Even as metaphor, divine inspiration is expressed rationally and intellectually in a Platonic theology. But an experiential aspect of resolution in philosophy belonged to Pythagoreanism and would appear again in Platonism within a short span, as Plato's legacy continued to spread throughout the Hellenistic territories of the Mediterranean, such as the Greek communities of Southern Italy and the cosmopolitan city of Alexandria. During this "Middle" period (from the first century B.C. to the third century A.D.), which responded to the need for systematization of doctrine, philosophical and theological speculation became increasingly eclectic. The three main schools of philosophy – Platonism, Peripateticism, and Stoicism – interacted in interesting ways, and there were repeated attempts to reconcile the three.[198] Moreover, there was a resurgence in Pythagorean and Neopythagorean ideas, reflected in some ninety works by fifty different authors written during the late second and early first centuries, B.C. (most of which survives only in the excerpts of anthologists). These treatises, which vastly enhance the mythical portrait of Pythagoras, were extremely influential because of their status as the "lost originals" on which Plato and Aristotle supposedly drew; they were widely accepted from antiquity and late antiquity right through the Renaissance.[199] They also

[197]This is another so-called "unwritten doctrine" of the elder Plato Syrianus 33.
[198]See, for example, Allen, J. Examining the relationship between Platonists and Peripatetics, George Karamanolis finds that Platonists used Aristotle to aid them in reconstructing Platonic doctrine but were highly critical of Peripatetic positions which conflicted with Plato's. See also Karamanolis 1–43.
[199]On the reputation and legacy of Pythagoras, see Huffman, C., "Pythagoras"; Huffman, C., "Pythagoreanism" . Plato was seen as a follower of Pythagoras throughout antiquity Kahn, *Pythagoras* 71.

tend to syncretize, combining such notions as Platonism's eternity of the world with the Stoic doctrine of conflagration and reconstitution.

What is important for our purposes is the ways in which philosophers, particularly those of the Platonic tradition, proposed new resolutions to the problems of opposition, identity, and paradoxy in reality. We will consider two such resolutions of the Middle Platonic period. First, with an unshakeable confidence in texts and traditions, many philosophers anticipated a more perfect mediation between higher and lower levels of being. Mediational forces provide a "chain of being" linking the world of materiality and multiplicity more directly and intimately with causal principles. The resulting emphasis on universal harmony softens the edges of dualism in the one-many, just as the predication of being in the *Parmenides* interconnects all of reality. There is also a metaphysical dynamism in a systematic Platonism, with active powers that "flow" from the One to various levels of being, and (by the time of Plotinus' third century A.D.) from the many back again to the One.

The origins of this mediational development are both cosmological and metaphysical. In cosmology, the role of *daimones*, animating spirits which attach themselves to individuals in Plato, become agents of a sympathetic interaction, "crossing the threshold" between human experience and the heavenly realm. Appearing in NeoPythagorean texts contemporary with Plato, this particular function of the *daimones* bonds the thoughts and actions of individual souls with the dynamism of the world-soul. A second development which increased the means for mediation between the human and divine worlds concerns the incremental addition of metaphysical entities. Plato had already proposed the world-soul as a cosmic link between the Demiurge (perhaps a metaphor for "mind"?) and matter. The forms in world-soul are transformed into mathematicals as they "spread" across the material universe. As Dillon writes: "Plainly the Soul is designed as

the supreme mediating entity, receiving influences from the intelligible realm and passing them on, in modified form – that is to say, 'extended' and 'diversified' to bring about the creation of the sensible realm" (6). But the notion of a separate and independent principle of mind is also a kind of medium, a realm of pure, formal activity corresponding to the human intellect. This notion comes about through the objectification of the Demiurge but is also reminiscent of the way "being" functions in Plato's Parmenidean dialectic. As active principles, mind is often conflated with the world-soul, until the latter takes on the attributes of a passive entity.

While new forms of mediation contribute to a "rational" resolution, bringing the world of immanent, divine powers and activity closer to human cognition, a second approach, undoubtedly influenced by religious practices, proposes the philosopher's contemplative transcendence to the higher levels of being. The idea of an upward journey of the soul takes us back to the Eleatic school of Parmenides and to the "mystifying" literary conventions of his poem. This ascent, however, as developed by Albinus and Plotinus, is no metaphor but a literal transitioning of the soul's state or position. The description should remind us of the ecstatic experience of the inspired and prophetic, except that the "possession" in this variant of Platonism is the result of an internal and meditative process rather than the workings of an external force on a passive recipient. A Platonic mysticism begins with a rational understanding of the human soul in relation to the operative powers of the universe, but the soul then leaves the body behind in order to unify itself with the higher being of forms and oneness. This kind of contemplation is therefore a purely intellectual vision as compared to an affective and irrational experience.

5.2 Resolution in Christian Theology

The above account is necessarily a vast over-simplification of complex and diverse theo-philosophical systems in the period of Middle Platonism. It is our intent in this study to emphasize those aspects which attempt to resolve the main metaphysical problem of opposition-identity and paradoxy, since these systems affect significantly the portrayal of wisdom and folly from ancient times through the Renaissance. While a concept of wisdom retains an unrefined distinction between the practical and the theoretical (reflected to some extent in the terms *phronesis* and *sophia* and in the descriptions of wisdom-activity in metaphysics and ethics), it turns sharply towards theology, such that Dillon can hypothesize "a strong commitment (after Antiochus, at least) to a transcendent supreme principle, and a non-material, intelligible world above and beyond this one, which stands as a paradigm for it" (51).

This theology is also eclectic.[200] In the attempt to reconcile differences among the philosophical traditions, several philosophers identify Plato's one with Aristotle's prime mover, while a cosmogonic *logos* (originally Heraclitan but appropriated by Aetius as the intelligent designing fire) seeps into Platonism, where it plays a prominent role in the metaphysics of Antiochus of Ascalon, pseudo-Timaeus, Philo, and Plutarch.[201] There is also a dramatic change in the methods of Platonism, as the literary mimesis and verbal dialectic give way to the systematization and interpretation of scholia. Such a shift in direction is already implied in the *Timaeus* and *Laws*, where we find longer, discursive expositions favored over the playful, witty and agonistic repartees of earlier dialogues.

As in the *Parmenides*, a formal view of folly (i.e., as anti-wisdom) is consistent with a privation of being and form, down to the lowest level of material principle. But the shift in phil-

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[200]Karamanolis reminds us that, when speaking of philosophy in Late Antiquity, we should use the term "eclecticism" with caution. Platonists were doctrinaire to the extent that some argued Stoics and Peripatetics stole their doctrines from Plato (evidence cited from Clement of Alexandria) 22–27.

[201]For a general description of the philosophers of the "Middle" period, see Moore; Baltzly.

osophical method severs the Platonic marriage of dialectic and rhetoric, so that folly as intellectual blunder and false perspective is confined to ethics. Gone is the literary artistry, with its lively mimesis, rivalry, allusiveness, symbolism, and playful humor. Perhaps nowhere is the loss of this artistry more evident than in the decline of the philosophical dialogue; and where the genre did survive, it tended to be was a mere outline of positions, as we find in the dialogues of Cicero and the Stoics. Commenting on the changing conception of philosophy after Plato, Mittelstrass writes: "In the course of the history of philosophy the danger of shifting from dialogically or dialectically *systematic thinking* to monological *thinking in systems* beings to overshadow the original Platonic idea of the philosophical acquisition of knowledge. Platonism overtakes Plato."[202]

Yet for all that is lost, a Platonic ecstasy invents a new space for conceptual synthesis: in the mystical vision of oneness, wisdom *co-exists* or *coincides* with folly and madness. The fact that this juxtaposition is not simply theoretical but also experiential demonstrates the extent to which philosophy became theological. The One in Plotinus is a *dynamic power*, with an "inner act" and an "outer act" (similar to the dialectic of existence in relation to itself and to others), which of necessity radiates its being in a "procession" or emanation (*prohodos*), thus engendering images of itself in forms and in matter, according to degrees of ontological proximity and envisioned hierarchically. It is hard not to read the dynamic power anthropomorphically, since "the One" and "God" (or "the god") are used interchangeably, as is "the Mind" and "Demiurge." The philosopher, whose soul constitutes one such image of the divine power, also has an inner

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[202]Jurgen Mittelstrass explains this shift in emphasis: "Against the background of his experience with Socratic dialogue, Plato made the idea of philosophical dialogue the essence of philosophy. But as he did so he gradually began to make philosophical inquiry independent of the form of life of which, in its Socratic form, it is a part. Besides passing on the Socratic dialogue experience, there is also the constitution of philosophical knowledge, which to an increasing degree masks its place in a life form, although still retaining cooperative perspectives. The Socratic unity of the philosophical orientation now moves into the background." 142.

and outer act; and it is through the soul's identification with the world-soul that it can follow being (synonymous with mind in Plotinus) to its ontological origin, in the so-called process of "reversion" or return (*epistrophe*).[203] Thus, with Plotinus, we can truly say the highest object of the philosophical enterprise has shifted from rational understanding to transcendent experience, although the latter is consequent and dependent upon the former. Since the One is an actualizing of pure potentiality, the transition to ecstasy necessarily involves both the generation and conflation of all opposites.

A reading of the Middle Platonists reveals, all too easily, multifarious echoes of Judeo-Christian theological terms and concepts. The One's procession is reflected in the *chokmah* of the Hebrew Bible's wisdom literature and also the *Sophia* of the Septuagint's Book of Wisdom and Ben Sirah, which we discussed in the first chapter. Philo of Alexandria (also known as Philo Judaeus), an immensely important Biblical exegete in the earlier half of the first century A.D., demonstrates that an exchange of ideas had become acceptable. He adapted the Platonic cosmos to the account of creation in Genesis, describing God as eternal and changeless, his creation an overflowing of his love. He also made use of such doctrines as the Platonic eternity of creation, the cosmos as an image of the world of forms, and the spiritual agency of *daimones* (which Philo equates with angels and devils). The concept of a cosmic and cosmogonic *logos*, which was interpreted differently by Platonists, NeoPythagoreans, and Stoics, was used by Philo to describe the power through which God brings forth being from non-being and gives form to matter; he calls them "rational seeds" (*logoi spermatikoi*).[204]

In the following century, a mutual interpenetration of Platonic and Christian ideas is evident in the works of Clement of Alexandria and Origen. Their explanations of the Trinity of Fa-

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[203]It is helpful to think of emanation and return as a kind of divine respiration upon the cosmos.
[204]See David Runia's chapter on "Philo and the Interpretive Tradition of the *Timaeus*" 476–520.

ther, Son, and Holy Spirit reveal a strong Platonic influence, although, like Philo, they adhere to the doctrine of God's self-willed creation. For Clement and Origen, the Trinity is hierarchically ordered, in a way which mirrors the Platonic (still pre-Plotinian) structure of One, Mind, and World-Soul. The key development for Christian theology concerns, of course, the *logos*. In the Scriptures, *logos* provides a theoretical and hermeneutical link between Old and New Testaments, incorporating a Christological principle from St. John's Gospel into the established cosmological view of the world's creation. In his commentary on St. John, Origen explains that Christ has two "titles" (*epinoia*):

> "God created me the beginning of His ways, for His works," so that the Word might be in an arche, namely, in wisdom. Considered in relation to the structure of contemplation and thoughts about the whole of things, it is regarded as wisdom; but in relation to that side of the objects of thought, in which reasonable beings apprehend them, it is considered as the Word. (Origen of Alexandria I.22)

There is an unmistakable similarity here to the Platonic concept of mind with its internal and external activity, as it exists "in relation to itself" and "in relation to other things." The *logos*, says Origen, is in Wisdom as in a first principle, an *arche*. Yet Christ, as *Logos*, is also an *arche*, an "ensouled wisdom" who provides the structures and forms of created things, "as a house or a ship is built and fashioned in accordance with the sketches of the builder or designer." We can discern here the outlines of the Platonic Demiurge, a term which Origen uses repeatedly. Christ contains "the models of the system present in [God's] thoughts" (I.22). In this way Origen reconciles the Wisdom model of the Old Testament with Christ as the operative power of creation. Wisdom and Word function like Plato's indefinite dyad, with Wisdom as the formal, absolute principle and Word as the ontological, generative principle.

There is no need to rehearse, in greater detail, the correspondences between Middle Platonism and the emerging theologies of Jews and Christians – that is a field already well-plowed. It is, nevertheless, important to note certain transformations in the approach to the resolution of metaphysical paradoxy. The divine *Logos* in Christian thought becomes the chief principle of mediation through the Incarnation or "word made flesh." This doctrine provides the connecting link in the cosmic chain of being – not only between immanent appearances and transcendent realities but between the world of matter ("the flesh") and the world of spirit. The individual soul's likeness to the world-soul is realized not only as the Holy Spirit's in-dwelling but also as the community of believers in the doctrine of Christ's "mystical body." Moreover, a Christian form of mediation has a practical and moral dimension, recalling the Pythagorean and Platonic emphasis on philosophy as a guiding spirit (manifested in the *daimon*) and way of life. One of the best remembered dicta of Middle Platonism was Socrates' exhortation to escape the duality of good and evil (the latter not being possible to destroy) and fly to heaven through "likeness to god as far as possible" (*homoiōsis theō kata to dunaton*).[205] The salvation offered to Christians, though not an escape from present evils, resolves the opposition between law and intuitive or inspired understanding ("letter" and "spirit"), sin and grace, and life and death.

This theological mediation does not mean that Platonism's contemplative intellectualism has no correspondence in Jewish and Christian theology. The Alexandrine synthesis of philosophy and theology was followed by the wide-spread movement to abandon worldly affairs and to seek God in the seclusion of desert monasteries, caves, and primitive hermitages. This direct approach to God through contemplative prayer aimed similarly to limit and suppress the world of transient sensuality and pleasures, which are often said to be in a "spiritual battle" with the vir-

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[205](Plato, "Theaetetus" 176b)

tues, epitomized as flesh (*sarx*) warring against spirit (*pneuma*).[206] Although the mystical ascent does not rely on any systematic-philosophical knowledge, as it does in Platonism, sacred Scripture and initiation in doctrine provide a firm basis for Judeo-Christian inspiration.

But is also worth noting that not all Platonic mysticism is purely intellectual, as is the case with Plontinus. A number of the later Platonists were initiated into the Eleusian mysteries. According to Henri Saffrey, "la vie spirituelle de ces philosophes est devenue une prière et une liturgie continuelles" (217). The late Athenian Academy tended to regard Plato as a theologian, and philosophy was considered a study of divine nature, its hierarchies and theogonies. In the prooemium to *Platonic Theology*, the pagan philosopher Proclus places the Platonic tradition on par with the Eleusinian mysteries, while "later Platonists like Plotinus, Amelius, Porphyrius, Iamblichus, and Theodore of Asine had later been sent by the gods to explain the Platonic revelations" (van den Berg 29). Proclus himself was initiated into the Euleusinian mysteries by his teacher Syrianus, who placed him in the choir which sings the divine truth; he also composed several hymns to the gods. In this religious milieu, Syrianus and Proclus interpreted Plato's *Parmenides* and *Timaeus* as hymns composed for the Greater and Lesser Panathenaea (van den Berg 28).

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The theo-philosophical resolutions of metaphysical paradoxy in mediation and mysticism constitute an essential backdrop for the synthesis of wisdom and folly. The idea that God, in his most simple nature, could unite folly with wisdom might certainly have sounded bizarre and scandalous at the time that St. Paul introduced it, but hardly more so than the notion that the supreme and eternal God chose to enter the world of the flesh through the person of his Son. Bod-

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[206]Cf. Paul's Letter to the Galatians 5:17: "For the flesh has desires against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; because these are opposite the one to the other; so that you may not do the things which you have a mind to

ies and matter in general were to be ignored, escaped, and transcended; or, in the more extreme view of "gnostic" cults (which sprang up alongside eclectic Platonists in Egypt and Palestine), regarded as an opposing principle of evil, (as matter actively resisting being and form). But if God can become human flesh then why not the folly of God and of the cross?

Paul's terms are, no doubt, ironic and critical, as his strategy is rhetorical. The first two chapters of the First Letter to the Corinthians hammer away at the unspecified "wisdom" of the Greeks, which Paul seems to equates with sophism – "lofty speech" – rather than philosophy. In fact, the very tendency to draw attention to divided perspectives in this way is reminiscent of a tension faced by the Mediterranean Platonist or theo-philosopher of Paul's own time. Despite the growth of philosophy as a discipline and a profession, the actual number of educated philosophers must have been small (as it would be for any population), and the language of metaphysics and cosmology would have been just as alien to the ordinary person in Paul's day as it was in Plato's. Yet it is to the common person that Paul most often directs his preaching, a fact which imperils him on numerous occasions. On the Areopagus (whether speaking with individuals or before the entire Council) Paul's very mention of Christ's resurrection incites his audience to laughter and indifference (Acts 17:16-34). Thus a language of theology, no less than one of philosophy, can easily be a catalyst for distinctions between "opinion" and "true knowledge."

Since it is against a model of Greek rationalism that Paul develops his idea of a foolish God, he is not entirely adverse to contemporary theo-philosophical language. The same Christ who dies in folly is portrayed as "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor 1:24). Power (*dynamis*) and wisdom (*sophia*) are, of course, two attributes associated with the cosmic life-principle, as *logos* in a Platonist cosmology. Spirit (*pneuma*) is also a widely-used concept; for the Stoics it is a "sustaining cause" (*synektikon aition*) of the universe, while for Philo, it is the

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power by which God imparts the *logos* to individual souls (Fatehi 125; Runia 341–42). In Paul's letters, Christ becomes the "life-giving spirit" of the afterlife, which can also be experienced in the believer in the present (Fatehi 282–83).

Paul's Christology also extends to contemporary religious terminology, which philosophers had likewise appropriated. Paul frequently refers to Christ as a "mystery" (or "secret," *mysterion*) which God kept "hidden" (*apokrupto*) until the appropriate time; it was therefore "not known in other ages" but revealed to Paul and the other apostles and prophets "by the Spirit" (2 Cor. 2:7-10; Eph. 3:4-6). The community of believers, the Church, becomes for Paul a "mystical body," of which Christ is the head. The idea of a divine secret (i.e., secret *because* it was hidden by God in text and prophecy) was already a well-established aspect of what we might call hermeneutical Platonism. During the period of Middle Platonism, commentary or scholia on canonical Greek texts became increasingly focused on the hidden meaning contained therein. The resulting "allegoresis" of Homer as well as Plato demonstrated how poetic images and figures conceal intelligible realities.[207] But the Incarnation affords Paul a definitive point of departure from other mystery religions and traditions: Christ is not a mere allegory concealed in ancient prophetic texts or a theo-philosophical idea but a historical person, teacher, wonder-worker, healer, and sacrificial victim. His disciples are the living witnesses. Always at the center of Paul's doctrine, Christ is the perfect form of mediation as well as the transcendent reality to which the believer aspires. Christ is the highest object for philosophy and theology, the paradox of God-and-matter resolved.

We should exercise caution in describing Paul's Christology as Platonic, yet the terminology and concepts he uses are like so many seeds which germinate in the theology of Dionysi-

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[207]Several excellent studies demonstrate the allegorical hermeneutics of the Platonists. See Lamberton; Allen, D. C; Coulter; Cardullo.

us. On account of Dionysius' obvious background in Athenian Platonism, especially in Syrianus and/or Proclus, and his thorough knowledge of Christian doctrine, the Areopagite is adept at weaving together both philosophical and theological discourses. *The Divine Names* and *The Mystical Theology* represent the affirmative and negative approaches to God in his essence, while *The Celestial Hierarchies* and *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchies* impose a Neoplatonic metaphysical structure on Judeo-Christian revelation and on the Church's organization, traditions, sacraments and liturgical rites. Dionysius mixes with ease Scriptural themes and Platonic terminology: God the Father is the One, from whom there is a "procession" of light; this light, bearing a power of unity, uplifts the soul to "return" to the oneness and simplicity of the Father, who "deifies" all things (Pseudo-Dionysius 145).

Dionysius is the first to perceive the metaphysical implications of Paul's wisdom and folly discourse. He interprets God's folly as negative theology in Paul, as mentioned above, corresponding to his own predominant theme of ignorance. When it comes to God in his essence, an acknowledgment of ignorance (i.e., *agnosia*, or "unknowing") is a higher form of knowledge, while the metaphor of divine darkness portrays with greater accuracy the reality of divine presence. This *via negativa,* where words are inversely significant from their referents ("They must not be given the human sense") is completed only in the final stage, when the very terms of the negations are themselves negated:

> Again, as we climb higher we say this[…] [the Cause] is not wisdom. It is neither one nor oneness, divinity nor goodness. Nor is it a spirit, in the sense in which we understand that term. It is not sonship or fatherhood and it is nothing known to us or to any other being. It falls neither within the predicate of nonbeing nor of being. Existing beings do not know it as it actually is and it does not know them as

> they are. There is no speaking of it, nor name nor knowledge of it. Darkness and light, error and truth – it is none of these. It is beyond assertion and denial. We make assertions and denials of what is next to it, but never of it, for it is both beyond every assertion, being the perfect and unique cause of all things, and, by virtue of its preeminently simple and absolute nature, free of every limitation, beyond every limitation; it is also beyond every denial. (*Mystical Theology* 141)

Dionysius here reveals his profound debt to Plato's metaphysical dialectic. His list of negated properties includes quite a few considered in the Parmenides: number, greatness and smallness, equality and inequality, likeness and unlikeness, motion and rest, eternity and time, nonbeing and being, error and truth. Although Dionysius does not mention folly alongside wisdom in this final statement of mystical ignorance, the result of his logic is clear. In Paul's Letter to the Corinthians, God is both wisdom and folly; here he is *neither* wisdom *nor* folly. Once again, the method turns on affirmation and negation in tandem. While wisdom and folly are usually conceived of as negating each other, here, in the *Mystical Theology*, they can be affirmed or denied together in a resolution, as the absolute perfection of terms or the absolute absence of terms.

Reflecting Proclus' Commentary on the *Parmenides*, Dionysius finds the *via negativa* superior not only to the *via affirmationis* but to the *via supereminentia*. In *The Divine Names*, he writes: "let us supremely praise this foolish 'Wisdom', which has neither reason nor intelligence" (106). This approach is what we have called transcendent negation, or negative ineffability, which we identified as the inversion of the supereminent One. But where the Parmenidean persona finds the silence of a cul-de-sac, the death of the philosopher's *logos*, Dionysius finds a silence of faith, the most profound and pure available to finite humanity.

5.3 Paradox and Coincidentia in Theology

As with his Christian-Platonist predecessors, Nicholas of Cusa articulated a resolution for the problem of paradoxy which includes both the idea of mystical ascent and a more perfect form of mediation. As a result of his personal revelation (the "gift from above" [*superno dono*] described in his Prefatory Letter to Cesarini), Cusa arrived at a theo-philosophical term and concept which accounts for God's transcendence as well as the mediation of the Incarnate *logos*:

> But he who would attempt all these profound matters by the power of our human ingenuity, should raise himself to that simplicity where contradictories coincide [*ubi contradictoria coincidunt*][…][208]

The "coinciding of contraries" (hereafter simplified as "coincidentia")[209] marks Cusa's assessment of affirmative and negative methods and their value for theology in something of a compression and epitome. True, his learned ignorance begins with the acknowledgment of "incommensurability" between human and divine, and this position implies the denial of analogical reasoning. But his negation of calculation and measurement (*ratio*) was not intended to replace or supplant the *via affirmativa* altogether. The comparative brevity of Dionysius' *Mystical Theology* in relation to his other three major treatises makes the point. Rather, the kataphatic is complemented by the apophatic, while both are superseded in the *via supereminentia*, the mode which comprehends affirmation and denial in a declaration of God's superfluity of any and every property. God is simply "above" or "beyond" (*hyper*/*super*) any and every predication to a degree which is unlimited. As Dionysius writes, "He [God] precedes essence, being and eternity…He has every shape and structure, and yet is formless and beautyless, for in his incompre-

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[208](my translation) "Debet autem in hiis profundis omnis nostri humani ingenii conatus esse, ut ad illam se elevet simplicitatem, ubi contradictoria coincidunt; in quo laborat prioris libelli conceptus." Cusa, *DDI* 98.

[209]Cusa does not distinguish between *coincidentia contradictoriae* and *coincidentia oppositorum* (though opposition is a stronger category of difference than contrariety), thus "coincidentia" will suffice for either expression.

hensible priority and transcendence he contains the sources, mean terms, and ends of all things and he undefiledly enlightens Being for them in one undifferentiated cause" (*DN* 101). To the extent that supereminence constitutes a speech act, it affirms, but the infinite capacity of God also implies the denial of the named property, since a property without limits is completely "unknowable" to us. Thus as Dionysius says, God is "the assertion of all things, the denial of all things, that which is beyond every assertion and denial, and finally, if one may put it so, the abiding and foudnation of the divine persons who are the source of oneness as a unity which is totally undifferentiated and transcendent."[210]

Cusa was an astute student of Dionysius and Eriugena. Validated by the doctrine of the Incarnation, i.e., by the affirmative (and physically real) presence of a perfect Mediator of Absolute Maximum and Absolute Minimum and of all dialectical opposition, he himself uses a language of supereminence. In the theology of *OLI*'s third book, Christ is "always blessed" (*semper benedictum*) as well as "super-blessed" (*Iesu superbenedictio*). The Virgin Mary is "most holy and superblessed" (*sanctissima et superbenedicta*); the Incarnation is the "height of incomparable abundance" (*summae plenitudines incomparabiles*) (Cusa, *LI* 3.5.212, Epilogue). Despite such freedom given to affirmative predication, Cusa settled upon the term and idea of "coincidentia" rather than *supereminentia* (or *superessentialis*) to describe the transcendent and unknowable unity of God. Consistent with his use of nuanced terms in general, Cusa does not offer a specific definition but would rather have coincidentia manifested in logical and linguistic – and to some extent rhetorical – contexts. The word coincidentia is derived from the Roman classical

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[210]Pseudo-Dionysius *DN* 61. "omnium positio, omnium ablatio, super omnem positionem et ablationem inter se invicem" (Eriugena's translation, PL CXXII 1121 c-d, quoted in Moran, "John Scottus Eriugena"). This assertion is essentially the same as quoted above in the conclusion of the *Mystical Theology*. In *On the Not-Other*, Cusa echoes: "Ineffabile quoque multis vocibus praedicatur, ignoratio, quod per cuncta intelligitur, omnium positio, omnium ablatio, quod positionem omnem ablationemque transcendit; divina sola participatione noscuntur." Cusa, *Nicholas of Cusa on God as not-Other: A Translation and an Appraisal of* De Li Non Aliud 88.

word for "falling into or upon," but it only appears with the prefix "co-" in the medieval Latin of the thirteenth century, where it implies "things which happen together" (hence our modern notion of "coincide"). But Cusa's coincidentia ignores the law of the excluded middle and binds bivalent values together, suggesting a logical impossibility. Thus we find, in Cusa's works, coincidentia joined oxymoronically with "opposites," "contraries" or "contradictories," a paradoxy which resembles the one-many and the method of learned ignorance.

In the Introduction to his recent selection and translation of Cusa's spiritual writings, Lawrence Bond makes the important point that coincidentia, for Cusa, is never a fusion or merging or even a synthesis of contrary properties, because it rather implies the total absence of contrariety or accumulated value in God.[211] Coincidentia does not describe or define God in his essence (Cusa does not say "God *is* the coincidence of opposites") but rather denotes a unity which is present *in* the divine. It does this indirectly, or metaphorically (as Bond also points out), since God is perfectly simple and can have no literal properties, not even coinciding ones. In this respect the concept of coincidentia is similar to the *via supereminentia*, an ideal resolution to the problem of paradoxy which coalesces or comprehends both affirmations and negations. But while the *super* is a term of abundance, engendering its impression of the infinite through a property or position (e.g., God is "beyond wisdom," in the sense we understand the concept "wisdom") coincidentia functions in a radically different manner, suggesting the annihilation of opposition and indeed of all categories of difference in a kind of temporal simultaneity (i.e., things "happening together"). We might say that, if a supereminent term evokes the image of overflow, the notion of concepts in coincidentia reverses it, like a black hole into which the

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[211]Bond writes: "It is not a question of seeing unity where there is no real contrariety, nor is it a question of forcing harmony by synthesizing resistant parties. Coincidence as a method issues from coincidence as a fact or condition of opposition that is resolved in and by infinity. From that basis we may speak of coincidence as (1) the method of logically setting opposites into a harmony and (2) the principle of viewing opposites as reconciled" 22.

world's contrariety can be vacuumed and consequently disappear into a source of pure and invisible energy.

The beauty and genius of Cusa's term is that it implies, with greater clarity, the consummation or end result of affirmative and negative terms and dialectical methods. Ultimately, the two sides of a bivalent property (a property which is affirmed and denied, such as "just" and "not just," expressed in logic as "P & ˜P") oppose each other in the same manner as two contrary properties (such as light and darkness or heat and cold). Yet for all the critical attention coincidence – and especially "coincidence of opposites" – has received, it is not employed by Cusa exclusive of other terms for the transcendent divine. Lest Cusa's monism sound nihilistic, he contrasts negative terms like "*ab*solute" and "*in*finity" to affirmative terms like "maximum" and "minimum."

The important departure from Dionysian and Eriugenian Neoplatonism represented in coincidentia stands in contrast with learned ignorance, a theme which appears with some frequency in the works of Cusa's predecessors. What exactly is it about the coincidentia that appealed to Cusa? Rather than a mere desire for originality (he almost assuredly borrowed the idea from Eckhart), coincidentia links the thought of Cusa more intimately with the pagan Platonism which he was pouring over and attempting to incorporate in a unity of philosophical and theological discourses. The affinity between Plato and Proclus with Dionysius and Eriugena was obvious, although Cusa was still unaware of the extensive debt the latter two owed to the former. In such concepts as the one-and-indefinite-dyad, a NeoPythagorean-Platonist monism likewise wrestled with the contradiction of a unity which is an originating principle of a multiplicity. The doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* by God's volition distinguished Christian thought from Platonism's unexplained extension of being and principle of necessity; but this assertion only explains "why"

the universe came about without addressing "how." There were still many useful aspects of Platonism for demonstrating the relationship between God and creatures, i.e., how the transcendent unity and originating principle sustains and resolves the multitude in such a way that the return of the ontologically deprived is possible. Platonism had to face this challenge in order to overcome the threat of dualism, the idea that a material principle has a power and will of its own which resists the unifying principle.

It is a mark of Cusa's humanism that he turned with a studious intensity to the Platonic dialogues which were most concerned with the Platonist one-many paradox. If the *Timaeus* is at the center of Platonism's predilection for mathematical speculation and analogy, then the *Parmenides* is the touchstone for Platonizing dialectic. Cusa made the concerns of Middle and Later Platonism his own. Thus the triangle in Plato, the most simple of all "regular solids," conceived as the primary building block of nature, is adapted by Cusa to a demonstration of the Trinity. The symbolic thrust of *OLI*'s Book I is based on the argument that an infinite line is both a triangle and a circle, and that these geometrical "forms" correspond to God as both one-and-three – the former an image of transcendence, the latter of immanence. Even as he upholds the doctrine of a willed creation, he also adopts (at least in this early stage of his thought) the Platonic theory of the eternal procession (Cusa, *LI* 2.2).

Other dialectical demonstrations clearly show the influence of the *Parmenides,* considered the Platonic dialogue *par excellence* by Syrianus and Proclus. Time and again Cusa discusses the problem of transcendence and immanence in terms of the one and the many; his exposition on affirmative and negative theology includes a list of pagan names related to creation (Cusa, *LI* 1.24–26). He recapitulates the argument of formal participation and he describes the participation of Christ in creation as a whole which exists, undiminished, in parts (Cusa, *LI* 3.4;

Cusa, *OVG* 9.34–37). Perhaps there is no greater statement of Cusa's life-long preoccupation with the *Parmenides* than his acquisition of Greek, apparently at an advanced age; this fact is deduced from his thoughtful revisions to the text of George of Trebizond's translation.[212]

Of course Cusa's Platonist borrowings are ubiquitous. One can hardly turn a page without reflecting on some aspect of the one-many problem, frequently expressed in a discourse of shadows and appearances in contrast to the light of truth or of God. But what is significant is Cusa's attempt, at a very early moment in the Platonic revival, to distinguish for himself between Plato's ideas, Platonist theory/commentary, and similar themes in a Christian philosophical theology. A number of Cusa's ideas are the result of reading Plato through Augustine, Boethius, or Proclus; the "enfolding" and "unfolding" (*complicatio-explicatio*) of God in the universe, for example, is closely related to the Later Platonist paradigm of emanation and return (Cusa himself does not hesitate to use the term *emanatio*). Yet Cusa also illustrates a persistent and profound interest in reevaluating Plato in the original text, and the coincidence in some respects recalls his own "return" *ad fontes*. His intention is not to offer a commentary on the past but rather to find the agreement, or *concordia*, between the ancients and the Christian, in the common "hunt for wisdom" (the title of a later treatise), i.e., faith and reason joined together in a quest for the highest understanding possible in this life.

The language of coincidentia, then, is a highly compressed and metaphoric expression of paradoxy's resolution. Resembling the one-and-indefinite-dyad, coincidentia suggests the absence of particular identity and force (contrariety, opposition, and contradiction) when such is viewed through the lens of ontological priority, a complex universe "enfolded" in its simple and undifferentiated origin, God. What appears to be an irreconcilable duality from the human perspective is, in itself, a metaphysical impossibility from the standpoint of the monist ideal. This

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[212]See Monfasani, "Nicholas of Cusa".

does not mean that we can "see" God, as the One, any more than it means the sensory world of the many is a pure illusion (as in Eastern thought); rather, by the evidence of the intelligible world, we can discern the paradoxy of a participated reality and hypothesize or "conjecture" the necessity for coincidentia in God. To the degree that we are able to accomplish this mental activity of conceptual focus and subtraction, we will intuit something *real* about God in his essence or nature.

How this notion of coincidentia complements learned ignorance is also quite significant. First, both are devices of paradoxy or wonder, stimulated by logical contradiction and implied resolution. Second, both call attention to a sharp division between the known and the unknowable, the natural result of formal thinking in Platonism, the distinction between formal unity, pure forms, and the appearances of forms in things. They therefore express the epistemological limitations of defining and ordering metaphysical entities. Third, both are conceptual aids and methodological principles for a contemplative, metaphysical ascent to first principles.

But despite their very similar orientation to mystical speculation, coincidentia and learned ignorance function differently. Learned ignorance – always two terms and concepts in relation to each other – represents a dynamic, whether purely conceptual or in a process of affirmations and negations. Learning affirms what is known, by calculation, measurement, and logic, and ignorance subjects the distinctions of *ratio* to the test of metaphysical prioritization, driving the inquiry toward considerations of infinity and thus questioning and challenging the presumptions upon which knowledge is based. Coincidentia, on the other hand, is a metaphysical rather than epistemological device. In a pre-Kierkegaardian "leap" of faith (Cusa uses the Latin word *transilire*),[213] the theoretical object of learned ignorance is posited as a metaphysical necessity. In-

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[213]Cusa's language is significant. In Book II, Cusa emphasizes the limitations of reason and therefore the impossibility of a "leap" beyond opposites ("Now, our intellect, which cannot leap [*transilire*] beyond

finity qua maximum, for example, cannot be any different than infinity qua minimum; both are infinitely infinite. The omnipresent center of the divine sphere must be identical with the boundless circumference.[214] What makes the coincidentia so hard to define in terms of epistemology is Cusa's distinction between the *ratio* principle of non-contradiction and a kind of speculative certainty, for which he has no name other than "faith." This latter kind of knowing is usually described as intuitive experience; but for Cusa, following the Platonist monism, it is a principle of necessity carried over from philosophy to theology. If learned ignorance concerns the human gaze on God – an incessant yet limited "seeing" – the coincidentia concerns the mystical "place" of God's own gaze, a locus humanly unknowable and unseeable.

While most accounts of Cusa's philosophical theology are concerned with the way his guiding concepts and cognitive processes approach the transcendent reality, they often neglect the principle of mediation. This is because Cusa's thought has attracted far more philosophers than theologians, and thus the critical accounts tend to obscure what he himself would consider the primary focus of his work, i.e., the doctrines of the Christian faith, especially the Trinity and the Incarnation. Cusa's theological treatment is not only important in itself but it can assist us in understanding the key theoretical concepts which he uses to frame philosophical problems.

In Cusa's thought, the person of Christ replaces the Platonic world-soul and the principle of mind (*nous*) as the crucial link between the physical and intelligible worlds or between the

contradictories, does not attain to the being of the creation either by means of division or of composition, although it knows that created being derives only from the being of the Maximum. Therefore, derived being is not understandable, because the Being from which [it derives] is not understandable" 2.2.

In Book III, in a section entitled "The Mysteries of Faith," the "leap" is achieved through faith, described as a process of metaphysical regress, where God is contemplated in perfect simplicity. In a metaphor reminiscent of Mount Sinai, and in a language of spiritual senses, he describes a Christ-mountain, where God may be seen by the "intellectual eye" [*oculo intellectuali*] and heard by the "inward ear" [*auditu interiori*] in a "mist" [*caliginem*]. He then describes this "clearer" vision-in-obscurity as a "leap" beyond the paradox: "Thereupon the believers, who continue to ascend with more ardent desire, are caught up unto simple intellectuality; and leaping [*transilientes*] beyond all perceptible things, they pass as if from sleeping to waking, from hearing to seeing" 3.11.

individual soul and God.[215] Cusa criticizes the Platonists for treating a principle of mind as inferior to "begetting mind" (i.e., the One) and as the result of necessity's "unfolding" (i.e., *prohodos*); rather "an infinite form of forms" and "essence of essences" cannot be unequal to the Absolute Cause. This argument, while concurring with the idea that the forms are in God's mind, also shows a reversion to the simplicity of Plato's Parmenidean model, in which formal archetypes are generated from a principle of one (thus Cusa: "in God, difference is identity"). Christ, as the Biblical *Verbum* (or *Logos*) and *Esse* is a "contracted maximum," meaning that he consummates all that the Absolute Maximum can possibly be within the limitations of forms (Cusa, *DDI* 3.1–4). Christ contains within himself the highest degree of perfection of every created nature, throughout the hierarchy of being, so that the being of each and every thing is perfectly equal in his "contracted" form (i.e., he is *aequalitas omnia essendi*, which is equality in substanial being, rather than accidental) (Cusa, *DDI* 3.6). The perfection of Christ in his humanity is therefore a maximum-minimum principle, not in the abstract (as the metaphor of the point-circle-sphere of Book One) but as the *essential* unity of the physical universe.

This principle of maximum-minimum in Christ is analogous to the doctrine of the two hypostases, according to which he is both fully human and fully divine. Christ is therefore the metaphor of coincidentia embodied in a physical form and person. As with the Eastern Fathers, an Incarnate Christ – who is the eternal wisdom of the Hebrew and Septuagint Scriptures as well as the divine *logos* of the philosophers – simplifies several aspects of the Platonic system. Purpose and will are given to the demiurgic function, while the "Spirit of Christ" provides the means by which the human image of God may discover identity with its divine origin. Christ is the One

[214]Cusa draws on a medieval metaphor with pseudo-Hermetic roots: God is an intelligible sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere 2.12.
[215]Cusa offers a comparison at 2.9.

which exists, immanent, in the many. To "unite with Christ" is therefore another expression for the spiritual experience of coincidentia.

For Cusa, the logical necessity of a coincident Christ provides a rational facet of the certitude of faith. We may never understand how the two natures are united in Christ but Cusa offers us a metaphysics whose principles of unity and mediation nonetheless frame the Christological resolution. The late-Platonist world-view accomodates coincident Christ in a way which parallels the Hebrew Scripture's messianism, where a divinely-ordained figure reconciles the ancient traditions of prophesy, law, and kingship. While Cusa's logically impossibile necessity is – and can only be – a "mystery," the concept of learned ignorance represents the means and process by which one may ascend the ladder of dyads and formal appearances in a return to the metaphysical and mystical source. In some respects (and in spite of many differences) Cusa does for Christian speculative thought what Plotinus and Proclus had done for the theologically-minded Platonists of the third through fifth centuries: with a eye fixed on the highest metaphysical principle, assess an immense, diverse, and eclectic tradition; systematize and harmonize its most important theories and principles; and chart a contemplative course through which one might attain a temporal *eudaimonia* or "beatific vision," the ecstatic union with the *arche* of all reality. With this in view, Cusa takes an Ockham's razor to both Christian and pagan predecessors, eliminating much of the discourse on hierarchies of essences, the agency of *daimones* or angels, and liturgical symbolism to focus specifically on metaphysical paradoxy and its resolution in a rational process which "leaps," from the springboard of the intellect into the realm of faith, i.e., into an intuitive experience of divine reality.

5.4 The Coincidentia of Wisdom and Folly

The metaphysics and Christology of coincidentia represent a culturally significant moment in fifteenth-century theology and philosophy, one which resonates with the various discourses of wisdom and folly. St. Paul was likewise aware of Biblical affinities with Platonism when he wrote the Letters to the Corinthians, since his own account of Christ connects the cosmic and creative *chokmah* and *sophia* of Hebrew and Septuagint Scripture with authoritative teaching, testimony, and miraculous works of a messianic Savior. But because of the in-fighting among Jewish and Greek factions (perhaps the Greeks were trying to reconcile metaphysical traditions with Christology), Paul, in his rhetorically-charged language, emphasizes the intellectual conflicts rather than the continuities. As Plato does in relation to "true philosophy," Paul depicts revelation as a rarified and particular knowledge at odds with the opinions of a popular rationalism. The historical events of Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection are no more intellectually comfortable or palatable than Plato's dialectic of formal participation in being and non-being. Thus the "folly of God" and the folly of the cross constitute, in Paul's First Letter, devices for distancing a rationalist or reductionist view of wisdom from a Christological dyad, a principle-in-person, which is not only wisdom but universal mediation, a "mystery of the ages hidden in God" (Eph. 3:9).

Therefore it is not difficult to extract from Paul's theology the basic elements of a *concidentia*. The transcendent God and the Incarnate Christ are the summit of wisdom *and* of folly – i.e., not *every appearance* of wisdom and folly, but those pure, formal concepts which pertain to metaphysical and soteriological ideals. In Paul's ambivalent treatment of wisdom, folly, and God's providence, we find a fitting parallel to the mystical ecstasy of prophets and Platonists alike – an appearance of irrationality and paradoxy which disguises the singular and incomprehensible experience of divine presence and activity.

But in the context of Cusa's Platonism, what is chiefly rhetorical in Paul finds a profound, corresponding philosophical and theological significance. Wisdom and folly (described in Paul's letters as *sophia* and *moria*) are compatible aspects of learned ignorance and are quite often synonymous with its terms. As Paul's moriasophia looks beyond conflicting human perspectives to the unity of God, Scripture, gospel, and church, so learning and ignorance in Cusa are both fulfilled and nullified in the beatific coincidentia.

Little more needs to be posited about a coincidence of wisdom and folly in God (which, as with other conceptual opposites and contraries, is beyond all understanding and therefore beyond language), but much can still be said about the way in which a coincident philosophy and theology relates to the *human experience* of wisdom and folly. If coincidentia represents a finality for the mystic's contemplation, wisdom and folly, like learned ignorance, can function as a studied means and method of predication for the dynamic human agent. This role for moriasophia is not at all obvious from a cursory reading of *OLI,* where the venerable ancients, pagan and Christian, are described as *sapiens* and where mathematics represents the highest constructs of knowledge ("in mathematicals, the wise wisely sought illustrations of things that were to be searched out by the intellect") (Cusa, *DDI* 1.11). Nowhere does Cusa mention a folly of God or of Christ.

And yet Cusa is perhaps the first philosopher since Plato and the first theologian since Paul and Dionysius to reintroduce, explicitly, a concept of folly into the dialectic and rhetoric of metaphysical paradoxy. He does this in *OLI* not only in the "sacred ignorance" of the *via negativa* but in the striking rhetoric of his Prologue. That Cusa's language is signficant and not incidental is revealed in his later works.

When the Benedictine monks of Tergensee asked Cusa to expound further on learned ignorance, Cusa responded with *On the Vision of God,* a work which explores the boundaries between dialectical opposition and coincidentia in the literary form of direct address, confession-style. Here a clear note of folly finds a new metaphor[216] for coincidentia: the "wall of Paradise." This wall portrays the metaphysical boundary between rational dialectic and the Absolute: humanity and the distinctions of reason and time are located outside the wall, and Paradise represents the state of spiritual contemplation without difference or opposition. The image is an effective rhetorical illustration of coincidentia as a "threshold," and not as infinity itself. In fact, Cusa emphasizes that Paradise is a place of no names or roles at all, a place of "invisible vision" where even the distinctions between a Creator and creation must be rejected. In ontological terms, and in a manner reminiscent of Plato's "two kinds of being," God's "creating is [his] being" (Cusa, *OVG* 12.50). The concept of folly is introduced when Cusa substitutes for "Paradise" the term "absurdity." The "wall of Paradise" *is* a "wall of absurdity (*murus absurditatis*)" (Cusa, *OVG* 12.50). But why would Cusa refer to concidentia in this way? And how does it represent folly?

One might easily assume that Cusa is using the Latin word *absurditas* in the literal sense, as a "wall of discord." But then one would also have to explain why the same wall belongs, at the same time, to "Paradise." The context elucidates Cusa's intention. In Chapter XIII, just after Cusa introduces the "wall of absurdity," he embarks on a Socratic discourse of ignorance, expanding on the famous pseudo-Socratic dictum "I know one thing, that I know nothing":[217]

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[216]New metaphors which Cusa introduces for the affirmative and negative dialectic include the "all-seeing" icon (God's simultaneous and universal vision, discussed earlier), the nut tree/its seed (divine cause and potency), and the "living mirror" (the eternity of the universe as God's self-reflection).

[217]Cusa was obviously attracted to this saying, having quoted it in *On Learned Ignorance* as well. The dictum is pseudo-Socratic because the origin of it is obscure. Although Plato records similar statements (especially in the *Apology*), the quotation does not appear in this form until Cicero. Gail Fine examines the dictum in great detail as well as some of the variants and how it might be interpreted in a Platonic context. She does not, however, mention

> O Lord God, Helper of those who seek You, I see You in the garden of Paradise, and I do not know what I see, because I see no visible thing. I know only this, since I know that I do not know what I see and can never know. Moreover, I do not know how to name You, because I do not know what You are. And if someone tells me that You are named by this or that name, then by the very fact that he names, I know that this is not your name. (Cusa, *OVG* 13.52)

This declaration of ignorance is not a pretense but a serious perplexity regarding divine participation. Seeing and naming – two important figures for theoretical understanding and rational language – must be completely surrendered or annulled in the Paradise of God's absolute oneness. Thus in one sense, "absurdity" is indeed a kind of "discord" because it defines coincidentia *from the human side* of the wall, the perspective of reason, which measures all things, including infinity, by means of comparison and difference. But there is also an appearance of folly and perhaps humor in the redundancies of Cusa's rhetoric, a fact which has not been treated in the philosophical criticism. As Plato pointed out, the language of dialectic (here emphasized in the redundancies of learned ignorant paradoxy) appears like nonsense to the uninitiated. Furthermore, "absurdity" links metaphysical paradoxy to the literary device of *irony*. A "wall of absurdity" is ironic because

Nicholas of Cusa, who emphasizes Socrates' admission of "unknowing" (*ignorare*) rather than any terse, definive statement of "knowing nothing" (*nihil scire*). As Cusa recalls the dictum in *OLI*: "ut Socrati visum sit se nihil scire, nisi quod ignoraret" 5. The difference, of course, is one of self-knowledge (a knowledge of one's own ignorance, relative to one's knowledge) as opposed to ignorance *per se* (absolute ignorance, or knowing nothing *at all*). Cf. Cicero: "Hic in omnibus fere sermonibus, qui ab iis qui illum audierunt perscripti varie *et* copiose sunt, ita disputat ut nihil adfirmet ipse, refellat alios: nihil se scire dicat nisi id ipsum, eoque praestare ceteris, quod illi quae nesciant scire se putent, ipse se nihil scire, id unum sciat, ob eamque rem se arbitrari ab Apolline omnium sapientissimum esse dictum, quod haec esset una omnis sapientia non arbitrari sese scire quod nesciat. Quae cum diceret constanter et in ea sententia permaneret[...]itaque Arcesilas negabat esse quicquam quod sciri posset, ne illud quidem ipsum quod Socrates sibi reliquisset, ut nihil scire se sciret" Cicero, *De Natura Deorum; Academica* I.16, 44–45.

A different version of Socratic ignorance does, nevertheless, appear in Plato's *Apology*: "So I withdrew and thought to myself: 'I am wiser than this man [one of those reputed wise]; it is likely that neither of us knows anything worthwhile, but he thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do I

it encloses no place: As the One who "lives" in Paradise cannot be "named," neither can the dwelling itself be "de-scribed." Paradise is a literal *ou-topia*, where the invisible is seen without sight.

This instance of ironic language complements the more pervasive irony of learned ignorance, i.e., only through ignorance can a greater epistemological certitude in the incomprehensible be achieved.[218] Irony, therefore, intersects with paradoxy as a device of wonder and expectation, occasioned by two truths yoked together in contradiction. Though the "second truth" of irony requires interpretation, it functions much like a bivalent logic of affirmation and negation, albeit subversively, in a rhetorical or literary context. Cusa's Paradise is a place, *and* it is no place. Whichever truth is affirmed, the other is denied; and when both truths are affirmed and negated at once, it is a paradox. The methodological question which Cusa begs is: What has happened to the distinction between logic and rhetoric? Cusa's dialectic intentionally blurs the boundaries, juxtaposing difference and opposition in terms and categories against multivalence, which unifies, condenses, or collapses multiplicty in signification.

Vision is one of the critical metaphors of Middle and Later Platonism and is also reflected in the Christian theology of a "beatific vision" (*visio beatifica*). Cusa uses vision as the principal and guiding metaphor of *OVG*, enriching the rhetoric of his discourse in the (false) derivation of the Greek word for "god," *theos*, from the verb "to see," *theorein*.[219] As "the One who sees," or rather as "sight itself," God is portrayed through the metaphor of an icon capable of gazing upon any observer from any angle – and upon all viewers at the same time (Cusa had an

think I know; so I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know'" Plato, "Apology" 21d.

[218]Cusa uses the word "absurd" in one other place, to describe the senselessness of a prayer which seeks to "hold" God in full view, face-to-face, when God is "all in all": "Nam quid absurdius quam petere, ut tu te dones mihi, qui es omnia in omnibus" 7.26.

actual icon painted for the monks to illustrate this phenomenon). The act of "seeing," however, is reciprocally performed by the human subject, gazing back upon the Creator, though in a limited way. It is likened to one looking into a "living mirror" which reflects the eternity of the universe. God's sight and human sight are interconnected by Cusa in the etymological origin of *theos*, which captures the faculty of vision as well as the object of vision (*theoria* means "that which is seen"). This notion conforms to Platonist optical theory, which considered the subject and object of vision, a knower and a known, united in the mind or intellect of viewer.

In a clever way, Cusa works the two perspectives into his title: "On the vision of God" may be interpreted either as *God's vision of us* or as *our vision of God*.[220] The resultant combining and confounding of objective and subjective genitive is recapitulated with acute similarly in Erasmus' "Praise of Folly" (*Encomium moriae*). But while many have noticed the intentional ambiguity of Cusa's and Erasmus' title-devices individually, it appears no one has commented on the similarities between the two. At any rate, *theos* is for Cusa an appropriately multivalent – and coincident – "name" of God (Cf. 5.18, 8.33), which he also justifies ontologically, when he says, "God's seeing is his being."

The passage from *OVG* is a brief but significant reminder that faith for Cusa does not have a definition except as a human coincidentia, and that such a resolution embraces both wisdom and folly. The surety of faith (*summa certitudo*) comes not from the hierarchical system of Dionysius (in which "sacred ignorance" is uncontestedly superior to divine names) but from that "absurd" demonstration and rejection of terms which a conjectured Absolute-infinite elicits. Thus Cusa can say in *OLI* that a believer, when united to the coincidentia of the God-man Christ,

[219]Cusa introduces this derivation as early as 1442, in a short dialogue entitled *On the hidden God* (*De deo abscondito*): "'*Deus*' is derived from [the Greek verb] '*theoro*', that is, 'I see'. For as sight is to the realm of color, so God is to our realm" Hopkins, J., *A Miscellany on Nicholas of Cusa* 304.
[220]The double-meaning is explained by Hopkins (17).

experiences “a powerful faith which is so maximal that it is also minimal, so that it embraces all the things which are believable with regard to Him who is Truth” (3.11).

5.5 A Semiotics of Transcendence

Because the present work is concerned with a humanist aspect of Cusa’s thought – and therefore his impact on humanists of subsequent generations – it is important to consider the effect learned ignorance and coincidentia have on the language arts. As we have observed, the coincidentia represents a culmination of a learned-ignorant dialectical process, and this is what we might call Cusa’s signature method. In its simplest form, the method involves the interpolation of a notional absolute or infinity into a series of analogies, such that the analogies are both validated and invalidated. One cannot measure a polygon with infinite sides, but a polygon with an infinite number of sides would necessarily be one with a circle (Cusa, *LI* 1.15). But what, exactly is the ontological status of such analogies? Of what significance are analogies when there is no rational “proportion,” i.e., no means of measuring one reality against another?

Cusa is very clear on this point. Beginning his section on demonstrations drawn from mathematics, he writes:

> All our wisest and most divine teachers agree that visible things are truly images of invisible things and that from created things the Creator can be knowably seen as in a mirror and in a riddle. Spiritual matters, nevertheless, unattainabile in themselves for us, are investigated symbolically and have a foundation in those things said earlier, since all things for us have, in relation to each other, a propor-

> tion which is hidden and incomprehensible, so that from all things one universe arises and all things are in one maximum the one itself.[221]

Cusa's language here is more striking than it appears. At first, he reiterates the medieval principle that God can be known through his effects; but the power of such affirmative knowledge is immediately tempered by a dose of Pauline skepticism. In one of the best-remembered verses of his First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul offers two distinct metaphors for the imperfect knowledge of this world as compared to the perfection of the next: "Now we look in a mirror as in a riddle, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just I am known" (1 Cor. 13:12).[222] Cusa echoes Paul's assessment on the distortions of our present human knowledge: *quasi in speculo et in aenigmate*. Here, in brief, we find two guiding metaphors of Cusa's mystical theology, both of which relate to sight in its objective and subjective capacity: the mirror, which implies the dialectic of image/original, and the enigma, which suggests multivalence in language. While most modern translations blend the two metaphors together, treating *in aenigmate* as an adverbial phrase, "For now we see in a mirror, dimly" (NRSV), "through a glass, darkly" (KJV),[223] Cusa adds *in* and *et* to the biblical text, emphasizing the independence of the two metaphors. The "riddle" or *aenigma* – a word carried over from the Greek (*ainigma*) into the Latin language – is a fitting complement to (if not a synonym for) the paradox and is often connected with the wisdom of fools. Like the paradox, the *aenigma* implies a reality or truth "hidden" in ordinary or poetic language, an unknown cause or logical problem which may or may not be resolvable. Metaphysics and epistemology ("seeing" and "knowing") are related in the difference between image and "face to face" encounter.

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[221]Cusa, *LI* 1.11. My translation.
[222]My translation, for reasons given below. "Videmus nunc per speculum in aenigmate: tunc autem facie ad faciem. Nunc conosco ex parte: tunc autem cognoscam sicut et cognitus sum."
[223]*The New Jerusalem Bible* comes closest to the literal: "Now we see only reflections in a mirror, mere riddles."

Following Paul, Cusa acknowledges that some human knowledge of spiritual matters is possible *ex parte,* and he expresses this as a "hidden and incomprehensible" proportion between invisible, spiritual realities and objects of the sensible world. But what good is a proportion without comparative value? This is the problem of precision (*praecisio*), which Cusa interprets as the root of Socratic ignorance, the proclamation that nothing can be known (1.1). Cusa's answer rescues human language from complete obsolescence and futility: analogies between sensible experience, intelligible worlds, and spiritual realities, are still possible without precision, *symbolically* (*symbolice*).

Our modern semiology aside, it is difficult to discern what exactly Cusa means. The term *symbolice* is post-classical and probably has as much in common with the idea of "a share" as it does a figuration of an eternal reality. At least one definition of *symbolum* which was adopted by the Romans is a portion or contribution to a feast, carried into the medieval period as the *symbolum animae*, an ecclesiastical dues (Baxter, Johnson and Abrahams). But "a share" also implies comparison *ex parte*, and this meaning appears as early as Eriugena's ninth century (and perhaps even as a result of his Greek translations). Simply put, the *symbolum* implies comparison through participation in a "greater" and indeed infinite whole, and the comparisons of figurative language require no precision in order to convey this effectively.

Cusa's language reflects his reliance on Plato's *Parmenides* and its argument of formal participation. Through participation, *every* word and *every* sensible object reflects intelligible reality in some way, as the instantiated form (i.e., the *appearances* of form) shares in the absolute, and as absolute forms share in a single reality in the one. This debt becomes even more obvious a little further on: "Now when we conduct an inquiry on the basis of an image, it is necessary that there be no doubt regarding the image, by means of whose *participating proportion* the

unknown is examined [emphasis added]" (Cusa, *LI* 1.11). Cusa's intention here is easily obscured through translation. Hopkins renders Cusa's *transsumptiva proportione* [sic] as "symbolical comparative relation," while Bond opts for the literal "transumptive proportion." What has been lost is the technical sense of *transumptio* in the philosophical context of the *Parmenides*. Meaning "carried over," "adopted," or "taking one thing for another," *transumptio* was defined since classical times as the substitution of one poetic device for another;[224] but it was also the Latin term used to translate *metalepsis*, the Greek philosophical word for "participation" (Liddel, et al.). Moerbeke uses *transumptio* to translate *metalepsis*. George of Trebizond would later use *partecipare*.

What is atypical, however, is that a scholastic-trained theologian (as opposed to a pre-scholastic, like Dionysius, or a poet-humanist, like Dante) should adapt terms from poetics and place literary figuration on an equal par with philosophical analogy. Through his discussion of *symbolum* and *transumptio*, Cusa intends no comparison of literal qualities but non-literal figures, images and metaphors. Even Cusa's term *proportio*, which for us is most often interpreted mathematically (e.g., "proportion" as a ratio), designates "a share" in a more general way; used of analogy, harmony, balance, and symmetry, a "proportion" is no less a literary concept. When Cusa therefore proposes the mathematical analogy of the finite and infinite line, the analogy is no more accurate or significant than the images of an all-seeing icon and a mirror of the eternal. Indeed many of Cusa's works unfold or develop from analogies which double as literary metaphors, such as a top spinning at infinite speed (*Trialogue on Being-Possible-Is*) a set of figurative

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[224]Quintillian offers the example of substituting "Hessen" for the centaur named "Ch*eiron*," since both terms mean "inferior" Quintilian 8.6.37. Cf. Lewis, et al.; Liddel, et al.. Dante uses *transumptio* in this classical sense in his Letter to Can Grande della Scala 10.9. Further study needs to be done on the term *transumptio* to determine at what point it entered into the philosophical vocabulary of the West.

eyeglasses for the mind, shaped to perceive the maximum-minimum (*On Beryl Stone*), or an oddly creative game played by throwing balls in circular patterns (*On a Ball Game*).[225]

It is indeed interesting that Cusa carefully avoids the words *significatio* or *allegoria*, but with good reason. The former is the medieval Latin standard for the conventional and literal representation of things through words, while the latter echoes an immense and unwieldy hermeneutic tradition. Cusa is proposing a kind of "sacred thinking" as opposed to sacred reading, interpretation, and passive contemplation. But it is also important to note that Cusa avoids the Moerbekean term for the "appearances" of form, *species*, since that had become indicative of the intelligible form in Aristotelian and Thomistic epistemology. Rather, Cusa prefers to speak of figurative representations as "images" and "likenesses" (*imagines* and *similitudines*), which recall the creation terminology of Genesis 1:26 ("We will make man in our image and likeness")[226] as well as Cusa's Platonist sources. *Similia* and *similitudo* translate *homoia* and *homoiotēs* for both Moerbeke and George of Trebizond, while *imago* evokes the role of the *eikon* in Platonist contemplation, i.e., the copy of the eternal Mind as it exists in the human soul.

Cusa is not the first to suggest that all language-signification for the divine must necessarily be symbolic. Plato's analogies and extended metaphors of the soul's ascent and judgment are so elaborate that they are typically regarded as allegories. Though he produces no *theory* of figurative language, dialogues like *Phaedrus, Symposium* and *Republic* set the mold for subsequent Platonists. It is somewhat odd that so few disciples attempted to imitate the master's literary method. For the Christian Dionysius, the spiritual realities are conveyed in liturgy, where words pertaining to God are not "given the human sense." (*DN* 106). Indeed the Platonist metaphysics became so entrenched in Mediterranean literary culture that thinkers such as the Philo

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[225]The Latin titles for these works of Cusa are: *De possest* (an untranslatable neologism from "posse" [to be able] and "est" [is]), *De beryllo, De ludo globi*.

and Proclus read the sacred books of their respective traditions, the Bible and Homeric epic, as grand symbolic systems reflecting metaphysical and cosmological truths. Among these, Cusa is exceptional for reconnecting his contemporary philosophical terminology and dialectic with literary language, confirming the idea that neither approach is superior and that both may function together as symbolic representations of divine truth.

5.6 Dialectical and Hermeneutical Paradoxy in Theology

It is somewhat difficult for us today to appreciate the radical nature of validating figurative language in a late medieval *speculative* discourse on God and divine truths. That Cusa does so is indicative of certain changes and fluctuations in the fifteenth-century view of the arts and sciences, of methods in the disciplines, and of literary language and forms. A vital part of this background concerns contending arguments about the pursuit of knowledge – what is, in short, not only a quest for wisdom but a dynamic struggle over definitions and approaches to wisdom, e.g., which authorities and principles one should emphasize, how exactly one should emulate or follow them, and by what criteria and methods one should organize and pursue knowledge. In the last few decades, this subject has been discussed in great detail, especially the antagonisms between scholastics and humanists, when educational perspectives clashed and competed for primacy within and among academic institutions. The attitudes toward literary language are closely bound up with such disputes, which involved the relative importance of rhetoric and poetic in the "higher" theoretical sciences of philosophy and theology as well as the proper domain

[226]In the Vulgate translation: "Faciamus hominem ad imaginem et similitudinem nostram."

and function of poetics. Therefore it is now important to sketch out, in a little further detail, the conceptions of these disciplines as they were understood in Cusa's fifteenth century.[227]

Earlier in the medieval period, the influx of Aristotelian logical texts led to the establishment of logic as the primary method of scientific inquiry (indeed, the "art of arts" according to Aquinas) in the universities, and, following the Arab commentators, as a science of thought in its own right (a *logica utens* is thus distinguished from a *logica docens*). Though the precise object of logic was continually debated, it was generally agreed that logic was the chief instrument (hence *organon*) for the ascertainment of theoretical truth, through dialectical procedures and especially in the forms of syllogism and *quaestio* (Ashworth 33 ff.). Rhetoric and poetry, in this scholastic view, could provide useful stylistic embellishments for teaching, pleasing, and moving (the Ciceronian ends of rhetoric), but inferior for the "scientific" pursuit of truth. Under the influence of logic, rhetoric in the schools became "scholastified," i.e., rhetoric was perceived more like a set of technical tools in the service of logic, even admitting logical categories like division and amplification.

Historical criticism of the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries has greatly advanced our understanding of the ascendancy of the *studia humanitatis*, which came about through the sporadic but continual rediscovery and appropriation of classical texts, art and artifacts. Rhetoric not only recovered some of the luster it had enjoyed in antiquity but it also strengthened its claim on poetry and absorbed new areas of interest such as history and geography. One might well argue that the massive unearthing of a classical literature and culture, on the whole, benefited the

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[227]For the following account of university faculties, I have consulted Rashdall; Grendler, *Schooling in Renaissance Italy: Literacy and Learning, 1300–1600*; Grendler, *Books and Schools in the Italian Renaissance*; Grendler, *The Universities of the Italian Renaissance*; Kretzmann, et al.; *CHRP*; Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages: A History of Rhetorical Theory from Saint Augustine to the Renaissance*; Murphy, *Latin Rhetoric and Education in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*; Kennedy. For the differences and tensions between scholastics and humanists, see Rummel, E., *The Humanist-Scholastic Debate in the Renaissance & Reformation*; Fredborg.

cause of rhetoricians in a way which parallels the effects newly translated logical texts had on the scope and development of logic from the nineth through the eleventh centuries. In both cases, a wealth of new material fostered the expansion of a subject's range and its claims to proficiency.

Throughout the Middle Ages, poetry was a separate discipline, but it had a role to play in each of the trivium arts and therefore grammar, rhetoric, and logic each staked a claim on it: Was it a foundation for the study of the mechanics of language and the variety of styles of writing? Or did it consist of examples of affective, eloquent and persuasive speech? Or a set of formal techniques and figures for argumentation? How can the parts of poetry be classified and studied? What is the role of imitation and how should the "lying" of poets be explained and justified? Questions like these lingered throughout the early modern period, adding fuel to the fires of disciplinary rivalry. The lack of consensus regarding the nature and function of poetry is indicative of the unsettled and ambivalent attitude toward figurative expression in general.[228]

But rather than rehearse what has already been covered elsewhere, we are interested here in the relationship of the arts and figurative language to the theoretical disciplines and logical demonstration. A critical approach which polarizes humanists and scholastics may tend at times to mask the complexity and depth of ideas which arise from no particular discipline but from the interaction of new and old methods. Indeed, one main reason for the intensity of the contention between logicians and rhetoricians was the considerable overlap between their disciplines. The trivium arts each had claims to organizing the "thought" of authorities, in such forms as *sententiae*, *glossae*, *commentaria* and *florilegia*; each was concerned with the details of language and argument, treating aspects of grammar and the distinction between signs and things; each sought to define meaning in a particular context. Notwithstanding the agreed upon distinctions (such as logic's preoccupation with literal truth, rhetoric's concern for persuasion, and poetry's mastery

of figures and tropes), the trivium arts fought to establish their aptitude within those very sciences which, at the summit of learning, dictate the very principles of each art. Thus, in philosophy and theology, the ideas and methods of other arts and sciences come together and interact.

In the Aristotelian philosophy of the scholastics, words or terms are the signs of things. Since our conceptual reality relies on the empirical data of the senses, words are generally trusted to represent the phenomenal world. The certitude of truth and falsity in propositions relies on the most exacting and thus literal terms and predications. For this reason, a language of literary representation and figurative language, while pleasing to the senses, only distances one further from the highest objects of wisdom and knowledge, which are found in the study of metaphysics and theology. Ambiguity and multivalence lead to uncertainty.

Plato's writings, in this context, send diverging signals. On the one hand, forms are the highest order of reality and the proper domain of philosophy; on the other hand, appearances are not always deceptive. The Platonic skepticism toward the deceptive and shadowy world of the sensible is therefore counterbalanced, quite vividly, in the mimesis of the dialogue, the symbolic setting, and in his occasional recourse to analogies and extended metaphors or allegories.

The contrasting views toward literary representation and figuration in the pursuit of knowledge had significant consequences for theology in Cusa's century. An Aristotelian, rationalist view of language supports a rational theological science. But theology in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance was far more diverse and complex than the explication of dogmas and embraced the more ancient traditions of Scriptural exegesis and moral exhortation. Even before doctrinal disputes led to the development of terminology and the systematization of Christian precepts, the reading and interpretation of the Scriptures formed the bedrock and foundation of theological practice as well as community life. One of the first and most important challenges of

[228]On poetics in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, see Hardison, Preminger, Kerrane, et al.; Greenfield.

Christian theology was to reread and reinterpret the whole of the Hebrew Bible in light of Christ's life, including his teachings, his cruel death and his triumphant resurrection. This task called for hermeneutical skill and insight, requiring the harmonization of a vast collation of narrative and poetic texts, with historical, legal, social, political, and moral significance. Thus Biblical theology, which was chiefly concerned with making good theological sense out of a diverse literature, and pastoral theology, concerned with doctrinal conformity and personal integrity, coexisted with a *ratio*-based, dogmatic theology, even as the two contrasted sharply in their approaches and methods.

The difference between theology as a demonstrative science and theology as an interpretive science put the two branches on a collision course long before Erasmus, Lefevre and Luther. The shifting boundaries between rhetoric and logic and the lack of consensus on the place of poetics was in fact rooted here, in theology, as much as it was in those respective disciplines. And it is of great importance that Biblical theology has far more in common with Plato and Platonism than it does with the Aristotelian criteria for scientific truth. Simply put, the interpreters of the Bible faced very similar circumstances to those who made a science of interpreting Homer and Plato: a balance had to be struck between the literal and figurative significance of words. If a reading is too literal, the figures are inscrutable and the logical conflicts within and between texts have no resolution; however, if multivalence is pressed too intensely, contradictory interpretations endanger the coherence of the very doctrinal systems the interpreter is trying to establish. In the history of Biblical exegesis and hermeneutics, the Antioch school showed a general thrust toward a more literal understanding of the text, whereas the Alexandrian school (influenced by Platonism) tended toward a "spiritual sense" or allegorism. The model of Biblical interpretation

adopted in the West from the Middle Ages through the Reformation was the *quadria* or "four-fold" interpretation of John Cassian.[229]

It cannot be emphasized enough that the narratives, types, devices, and figures of the Bible were viewed as the inspired Word of God, a reality of "divine writing" which corresponds to the *logos*-principle in cosmology. Just as he created the universe, God "authored" the texts; as the material product of God's work is "good," so the Bible is without error or blemish. Thus the significant question arises: How can God's inspired teaching be at odds with human scientific learning? How can the very language through which God reveals himself be considered invalid for an inquiry of God? A theologian who clings too greatly to a rational theology is faced with two contradictory valuations of poetic: on the one hand, one must hold that the representation of the Bible is revealing and truthful of God, but on the other hand, one must also assert that the figures contained therein are, in any other context, an inferior method for scientific inquiry.

A strongly didactic view of the Bible and of literary language in general quietly ignored the challenges of a medieval scholastic methodology. According to Augustine, whose view generally held sway throughout the medieval period, the "signs" and allegories of the Bible strike vivid impressions upon the memory and give greater delight to a reader in the act of interpretative discovery (1.2, 2.1–6). Literary and rhetorical devices therefore represent instances of God's good pedagogy. This didactic notion of Scripture parallels the explicit example of Christ's instruction through parables and miracles. The parables use analogies, images, narrative, basic character relationships, and plot to illuminate aspects of divine identity (e.g., God's love, forgiveness), human responses (e.g., faith in providence, love/neglect of neighbor), and a criteria for individual judgment (i.e., rewards and punishments). The miracles are also signs in

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[229]One can find the four-fold system of John Cassian in Dante 10 and Thomas Aquinas I-I, q.1, art. 10. See also de Lubac.

this vein: a physical healing or demonic exorcism reveals the identity of the Son of Man as Messiah and only Son of the Father. The clear and definitive meaning of the parables and miracles, therefore, instruct the people of the Gospels in a way similar to the Scriptures as a whole, which use historical events, objects and persons for the instruction of the Church.

A didactic theory of Scriptural literature is echoed in rhetorical theory of the medieval period, which typically begins with the *ars inveniendi*, or the method of "finding an argument." The figures and tropes are stylistic aspects of *elocutio*, a means of communicating *sententiae* so that they are better and more pleasantly recalled and especially for those who are less educated. But in Biblical hermeneutics, a purely didactic view is exceedingly reductionist, confining all literary language to evident and demonstrable moral purposes. This does little more than graft a hermeneutic habit of mind onto Horatian and Ciceronian precepts.

What about the many "problematic" moments and inscrutable passages contained in the Scriptures, including other kinds of teachings about God, his relationship to humanity, and the world? For this Augustine has a second theory, which opens up the philosophical and theological possibilities for literary language:

> But many and varied obscurities and ambiguities deceive those who read casually, understanding one thing instead of another; indeed, in certain places they can not even find anything to interpret incorrectly, so obscurely covered are certain sayings with a most dense mist. I do not doubt that this situation was provided by God to conquer pride by work and to combat disdain in our minds, to which those things which are easily discovered seem frequently to becomes worthless[…] Those who do not find what they seek directly stated labor in hunger; those who do not seek because they have what they wish at once frequently become indolent

> in disdain. In either of these situations indifference is an evil. Thus the Holy Spirit has magnificently and wholesomely modulated the Holy Scriptures so that the more open places present themselves to hunger and the more obscure places may deter a disdainful attitude." (2.6)

Here Augustine's hermeneutic theory of Scripture, drawing on Matthew 11:25,[230] comes much closer to the practices of Homeric and Platonist exegetes, a fact which has been examined in great detail since Henri de Lubac's landmark *Exégèse médiévale*. The Platonists called it *hyponoia*, or the art of finding the "underlying knowledge," by means of which the mind is elevated from sensible things to the intelligible realm. Clement of Alexandria, perhaps the first Christian to adopt the Platonic practice, uses the term *hypose-meiosis*, putting the emphasis on the "signs" which are hidden as opposed to a kind of esoteric-intuitive knowledge (Irvine 250–52). Culling truth from the literary texts of a sacred tradition requires a mind well-trained in the arts of language and in all doctrinal aspects of that tradition. For Augustine, the "obscurities and ambiguities" of the Biblical text protect profound spiritual realities, which, if stated literally, would be regarded by some as "worthless" and deserving of "disdain."[231] As a demonstration of one such hidden truth, Augustine treats a verse from the Deuterocanonical Song of Songs, beginning "Thy teeth are as flocks of sheep, that are shorn" and, ignoring the obvious analogy of color, says he contemplates "more pleasantly" when he envisions "the teeth of the Church, cutting off men from their errors[…]" (2.6). The example indicates that literary

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[230]"I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants."

[231]The notion of allegorical concealment may also be rooted in the Gospels, in the idea that sacred doctrines should not be exposed indiscriminately and therefore subject to ridicule: "Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you" (Mt 7:6).

interpretation for Augustine manifests not only an objective system of theological doctrine but also personal truths or what we might call "in-sight."

For pagans as well as Christians, the metaphor of the veil is central to this idea of *hyponoia*. Saint Paul compares the inscrutability of the Scriptures to the veil worn by Moses, after his face had been illumined by the encounter with God on Mount Sinai. There are many who read the Law still wearing veils, Paul says, blind to the light of its true meaning, but Christ has taken the veil away, so that our "unveiled faces" can "mirror the brightness of the Lord" (2 Cor 3:12-4:6).

But here we come upon the key problem of paradoxy in hermeneutics. The notion of Biblical *hyponoia* – later known as *allegoria* – is necessarily in conflict with the didactic theory of delightful impressions, for a theory which regards literary figuration as a means for *concealing* truth rather than *revealing* it undermines the very concept of the Scriptures as a "revelation," that which God has made known to humankind. In this sense Biblical allegorism is anti-parabolic and anti-didactic; a reader cannot "take pleasure" in what cannot be understood. Even the Gospel narratives do not ignore this dilemma; for in sharp contrast to the obvious clarity of most parables, the evangelists of the synopic gospels insist that those who ignored the signs and persisted in unbelief were not able to understand them.[232] They contain "secrets (*mysteria*) of the kingdom of heaven," revealed only to the twelve Apostles (Cf. Mt 13:10; Mk 4:10; Lk 8:9).

The hermeneutic problem faced by Augustine is essentially the same encountered by Homerists and Platonists centuries earlier, for it is here that the paradoxy of hermeneutics and the paradoxy of reality converge. The language of revealing and concealing is, after all, another way of conceiving the "share" which appearances have in formal purity. Indeed the extension

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[232]The prototype of the "closed" mind is the Pharoah of the Exodus, with his "hardened heart" (Exod. 7:3, 13-14, 22-23; 8: 15,19,32; 9:24, 34; etc.)

from metaphysics to hermeneutics is quite logical: if a written work is an imitation of the cohesive and unified structure of reality, there must necessarily be, in addition, some kind of "metaphysics of the text," a participation of literary images and figures in an extra-textual macrocosm. Thus the partial apprehension of forms in the sense objects of this world is transferred to the sensible impressions of the written signs. This connection is emphasized in Augustine's analogies between physical creation and textual composition. As with the written Word of God, created things also veil and unveil spiritual realities. In their materiality and their temporality, the physical objects conceal the supernatural dimension; but as signs, the order and beauty of created things serve as one collective sign of the higher realm.[233]

The main obstacle to literary correspondence, the ontological weakness which Plato ascribes to the *eikoni* of painting (*Republic* 595a-598d), is already surmounted in Plato's own literary *mimesis* and allegory, while the Middle and Later Platonist emphasis on contemplation and "insight" further challenges a hard-line approach to the deficiencies of artistic production. If figurations of sensible impressions are also considered as the "appearances" of formal purity, they may also be catalysts in the ascent to the intelligible realm. So perhaps the contemplation of literary impressions is not simply inferior and secondary. The age-old practice of reading and explicating Homer and Plato stands as testimony that, in rare instances, the written word may open the path to the higher reality, just as some objects and rites function in the theurgy of mystery cults.

While Christians, Homerists and Platonists were much in agreement about *hyponoia* and an exegetical-hermeneutical method, there was nevertheless a critical difference of emphasis re-

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[233]A figurative correspondence between the physical world and a textual metaphysics occurs in Augustine's metaphor of the Scriptures as a protective "skin" (*pellis*) covering all humanity, as compared to the firmament "stretched out" (*extendi*) over the earth. While Adam and Eve, in their shame, covered their mortality in skins, the

garding the notion of knowledge. For Platonists in particular, knowledge is both the ascent and the summit, with contemplative ecstasy at one with intellective perfection; for Christians, on the other hand, knowledge is subordinate to faith, the assent to a truth beyond the intellect and hence a "mystery." Thus when Augustine defines a program of training for the Biblical exegete, his criteria emphasize spiritual and moral faculties rather than dialectical and intellectual. In accord with Paul's description of "spiritual things" and "graces" (*pneumatika*/*charismata* or *spiritualia/gratiae*), Augustine outlines a seven-level process of spiritual perfection on which the exegete's interpretative abilities depend: fear of God, piety, knowledge (i.e., of religious doctrine and Scripture), fortitude, merciful counsel, a cleansed "inner eye," and wisdom (2.7.9–11, cf. 1 Cor. 12–14).

Augustine's theory, his references to St. Paul, and his very language in this particular section of *On Christian Doctrine* attracted the attention of Cusa; for it is here that Augustine, in his "sixth step," develops the notion that reading rightly comes about from "seeing God clearly." The inspired reader, he says, "cleanses that eye through which God may be seen, in so far as He can be seen by those who die to the world as much as they are able" (2.7.11). Augustine relates this description of limited "insight" (a reference to his "illumination theory") to Paul's metaphor from First Corinthians: through the Bible, "the Trinity begins to appear more certainly" but in such a way that it is still "in a mirror as in a riddle" (*per speculum in aenigmate*; 1 Cor 13:12).[234] In this passage and elsewhere, the Scriptures function for Augustine in the same manner as Cusa's icon in *OVG*: sacred text and devotional object, quasi-sacramental, become two-way mirrors through which God "sees" the *image* of all humanity and individuals can in turn "see" (with difficulty, indirectly, and with "learned ignorance") the *original* Mind of God. For both, Paul's

Scriptures, in their divine authority, grant a kind of compensatory immortality to the first parents by spreading their renown over all of humanity *Confessions* 13.15.16.

"lifting of the veil" represents intensified stages of "clarification" in the dynamic reading/looking process: "With our unveiled faces mirroring the glory of the Lord, we are turned into that very same image, from splendor to splendor…" (2 Cor. 3:18).[235]

There are preconditions for this "vision" as well as limits. Cusa takes up Augustine's theme of a "hunger and thirst" for spiritual things, which motivate the reader to cleanse the "eye of the heart" in order to see that which is "pure and simple." Cusa also agrees that such a "seeing" is not literal. Quoting St. Paul again, Augustine says "We walk by faith and not by sight" (cf. 2 Cor. 5:7). Faith, for Cusa, propels us beyond language and metaphor, i.e., beyond the wall of absurdity.

Augustine's appropriation of the key Pauline metaphors of the mirror and the veil (and sight in general) demonstrate just how closely hermeneutical theory is related to contemplative spirituality. Both share aspects with Platonism. The epistemology is complex, for Augustine says that not only does one learn about God from the human experience of reading but one learns about reading from the human experience of God. Like Cusa, his reasoning can be circular and paradoxical; Augustine does not explain precisely how or where one can acquire the spiritual "graces" for proper interpretation, when these are, to a large extent, fruits of knowing the Scriptures. But the assessment goes hand-in-hand with God's literary techniques of revealing and concealing: Paul's direct experience of the living Christ (i.e., the "Spirit of the Lord"), symbolized by lifting the veil from the Old Covenant,[236] becomes, for Augustine *a hermeneutic principle* for the whole of Scripture, applied to all its literary forms (narrative, poetry, law, prophecy, gospel, letter, etc.). Such, of course, makes sense in Western theology, since the earliest Latin translators stressed the linguistic aspect of the *logos*-principle, translating it as *verbum* instead of

[234]For the Latin text of On Christian Doctrine, see Augustine, *DDC*.
[235]"*revelata facie gloriam Domini speculantes, in eandem imaginem transformamur a claritate in claritatem*."

a philosophical term like *ordo* or *ratio*.[237] Although this was done to assert the role of divine will in creation, the metaphorical significance of divine activity as utterance and text left its mark on Augustine.

Cusa, especially in *OVG*, is indebted to these metaphors and to the way they are developed by Paul and Augustine. Indeed, one might say the mirror, the riddle, and the veil are as much at the core of Cusa's philosophy and theology of mind as the one-many dialectic; for the bivalency and opposition implied in these images are illustrations of the dialectic itself, grounded in "sight" rather than in Plato's metaphysical-logical categories of being, likeness, and number. "Veiling" and "unveiling" involve God's chosen manner of self-manifestation (theophany) as well as the abilities and limits of human knowledge. Thus we can "see" God to the extent that God has revealed himself *and* to the extent that our own "sight" is clear and unobstructed. Similarly, the mirror and the riddle reveal and obscure at the same time.

Cusa's remarkable synthesis builds on Augustine, as he enriches the theological discourse of spiritual gifts and beatific vision with aspects of Platonism. The language of spiritual ascent in Augustine and the *spiritualia* and *gratiae* of Saint Paul have been given an internal and contemplative dimension, much as the *eikones* or "images" of the intelligible world lead the philosopher to the exemplar of Mind in Plotinus. Cusa moves one step closer to Platonism when he speaks of the *gratiae* as "spirits of understanding" (*intellectuales spiritus*), by which he means the pure forms or intellectual perfections. By means of this special grace, the "Word of God" is "unveiled" within the human mind. As Paul's "looking at the Spirit" perfects the "image of Christ" in the individual, so the believer in *OVG* "is made progressively more capable of receiving the Word and progressively more conformed, and similar, to the Word" (24.108).

[236]Recall that there is no known written gospel circulating at this time during Paul's ministry.
[237]VL 2: Codex Palatinus, Folio 44r (John 1:1-9) *Vetus Latina Johannes.*

In his re-working of the veil and mirror metaphors, Cusa develops Augustine's stages of spiritual perfection while changing the focus. While Augustine's version of the "graces" are intended as a directive for interpreting the hidden signs of the Biblical text, Cusa emphasizes the discovery of God in a metaphysical and ontological way. For Cusa, Paul's transformation *a claritate in claritatem* constitutes a Christian *theosis* (a "becoming-god") in contemplation and beatific vision; the spiritual graces are *infused* and appear in the soul as *intellective* "likenesses" of God. As manifestations of an internal Word of God, they are Scriptures of the heart and a personal *logos* to which the mind must turn and conform itself. Cusa uses the term *deiformis*, "God-formed" in the sense of "Godlike," another Platonist-inspired term of the ninth century, along with *symbolum*, *deificus*, and *deigerus* (24.108; Baxter, et al.). Just as Christ is at once veiled and unveiled (i.e., concealed and revealed) in the writings of the Old and New Testaments, so for Cusa an individual's infused-intellectual perfections have "secrets" which they "reveal" to one another, increasing their desire for God, "inflamed by the joy of their sweetness," until they are fulfilled in the "ultimate and most perfect non-multiple likeness of God" (25.112), which is the Image of Christ, the visible paradigm of the invisible God.

There is still much to be said for Cusa's synthesis, which develops Pauline and Augustinian thought with Aristotelian Thomism as well Platonism. For example, Cusa follows the Aristotelian view that intelligible species are rooted in the senses and the Thomistic notion that the vision of God requires the supernatural assistance of infused gifts or virtues. But our concern here is rather Cusa's exploitation of figurative language in a speculative discourse. The veil, the mirror, the riddle, and the paradox become, in *OVG*, dialectical instruments corresponding to the function of mathematics in *OLI*. If *OLI* expresses the relation between epistemology and metaphysics as a learned-ignorant approach to relative and absolute infinity, *OVG* re-casts the dialec-

tical structure with an appeal to the most important metaphors of the Biblical and hermeneutical tradition. The Spirit of Christ, the archetypal "understanding Spirit" and Image of images, mediates and unifies all spiritual graces, revealing what is hidden in the internal Word of God.

The stylistic variations on Cusa's new approaches in theology highlight the significance of bringing together preaching and systematic doctrine, which had become distanced, if not disconnected, during the age of scholasticism. Cusa's *OVG* revives the rhetorical aspect of theology as an Augustinian confession, a "dialogue" between human and divine authors. Exegesis and hermeneutics also constitute vital and indispensable aspects of the *ars praedicandi*, and these are sciences (in the medieval sense) rather than arts. If God can not be described in language or understood by analogy, his "book" of creation provides us with non-textual signs to be "interpreted." While Augustine emphasizes the relationship between literary signs and created things, Cusa stresses the internal and cognitive dimension of Biblical figures. Cusa's is a hermeneutics of mind or a "dialectical hermeneutics," where the text is the human heart and soul, and the method of interpretation reveals the inner Word which is hidden in the cognitive processes of "understanding spirits." Through a careful analysis of Plato and Platonism, Cusa adds a Christological and intellectual-contemplative dimension to the paradoxy of reality. The appearances of the one in many forms are related not only to the appearances of Christ in the prophecies of the Old Covenant and in the dense and difficult moments of the Scriptures but in the manifestations of Christ the Word in the mind or soul of the individual.

A dialectical hermeneutics relies also on a special understanding of metaphor in philosophy and theology. The veil and the mirror illustrate Cusa's notion of "participating proportion" much in the same way as mathematics, where meaning is "carried over" (*transumptiva*) from symbolic objects to rational entities, and from a particular biblical and hermeneutical context to a

theo-philosophical system. This transference of significance, portrayed by Cusa as "symbolical" and "transumptive," is essentially the same as the theory of metaphor in poetics, as indicated by its etymology.[238] In this respect, philosophical dialectic validates metaphorical predication in a way which parallels humanist apologies for poetry, which similarly appealed to the Bible. Cusa's application of metaphor to metaphysics and spirituality is in fact characteristic of the Western "mystical" tradition, especially that of the Rhineland during the thirteenth and fourteenth century. But while the writing of many mystical writers uses literary language to convey a personal experience of the divine, Cusa is speculative and systematic, relating veil and mirror to a Christian theory of *imagines*. This theory relates the "true likenesses" of metaphysical entities in Plato to Paul's Spirit of Christ as an *arche-eikon*.

In a further and final demonstration of metaphorical predication, Cusa embellishes on the Scriptures with an image of his own, the Creator as a divine painter:

> You, O Lord, who work all things for Your own sake, created this whole world on account of the intellectual nature – as if you were a painter who mixes different colors in order, at length, to be able to paint Himself, to the end that He may have

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[238]In the *Poetics*, Aristotle offers a clear definition of metaphor as a figure of transference: "Metaphor consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else; the transference being either from genus to species, or from species to genus, or from species to species, or on grounds of analogy" (1457b). See also Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, where he draws an explicit comparison between metaphor in literature and analogy in philosophy: "Metaphors must be drawn, as has been said already, from things that are related to the original thing, and yet not obviously so related – just as in philosophy also an acute mind will perceive resemblances even in things far apart. Thus Archytas said that an arbitrator and an altar were the same, since the injured fly to both for refuge. Or you might say that an anchor and an overhead hook were the same, since both are in a way the same, only the one secures things from below adn the other from above."

Aristotle continues by comparing the metaphor to the enigma as well: "Well-constructed riddles [*ainigmena*] are attractive for the same reason; a new idea is conveyed, and there is metaphorical expression. So with the 'novelties' of Theodorus. In these the thought is startling, and, as Theodorus puts it, does not fit in with the ideas you already have. They are like the burlesque words that one finds in the comic writers. The effect is produced even by jokes depending upon changes of the letters of a word; this too is a surprise" (1412a). Aristotle's description of metaphor as a "lively" and "taking" (i.e., memorable) device, capable of "deceiving expectations" (*pros exepatân*) with the sensation of "the opposite," is very similar to, if not the same phenomenon as, that "wonder" (*thauma*) which stimulates philosophical thinking in the *Metaphysics* (982b), or the "wonder" of paradox in Plato's *Parmenides*.

> an image (*imaginem*) of Himself wherein He Himself may take delight and His artistry may find rest. Although the one itself is non-multiple (*immultiplicabilis*), it may at least be made multiple in some way, multiplied as the closest likeness (*propinquissima similitudine*). However, he makes many figures (*figuras*) since the likeness of his infinite power can be unfolded in the most perfect way only by means of the many. (25.111)

Cusa must have been impressed with the art of the Eastern churches which he visited as a member of Pope Eugene IV's delegation to Constantinople in 1437; his metaphors of icon and painter demonstrates a keen appreciation of the iconographical tradition. The influence of the one-many Parmenidean dialectic is strikingly evident, as is Plato's "architect," the Demiurge. Cusa's painter works with colors as a mathematician might work with numbers and lines. Introduced at the end of *OVG*, this new metaphor brings out an aspect of Platonic terminology, since *eikones* are indeed the products of artists. It reminds us that God is the summation of artistry as well as science, which is why the metaphoric language of *OVG* is no less truthful or accurate or than the mathematical and philosophical language of *OLI*. Moreover, *figura* and *imago* correspond to the Greek *phantasma* and *eikon* as two kinds of appearances. While both are used in the context of artistic conception and production, *imago* (like *eikon*) carries the significance of "exact likeness" or "copy" (used of sculpture, busts, etc.) more so than *figura*, which tends to imply the less precise and interpretive "artist's rendering."

Christ is the masterpiece of this divine artistry, which is directed toward a superlative image of God in the "colors" of creation. He is the measure of all true likenesses, "the ultimate and most perfect likeness (*ultima et perfectissima similitudo*) of the non-multiple God," a "mediating spirit of all spirits of understanding," as well as "the ultimate perfected Image of God" (*ultimi-*

tate perfectionis imaginis dei). One can say, therefore, that Christ is this self-portrait of God. The perfections of all other likenesses, *similitudines* and *figuras,* are perfect to the extent that they resemble the Image of God in Christ (25.112).

This discourse of copy and similitude is the direct result of Cusa's theory of symbolic language and metaphorical predication. The "transumptive" of metaphor infers the comparison of one likeness to another and is thus a distinct discourse from that of dialectical opposition, with its many categories of difference, contrast and contrariety. Metaphysical paradoxy, for the moment, is muted, as the emphasis falls on likeness to a greater or lesser degree. Metaphorical predication constitutes, for Cusa, a new kind of supereminent language, as evidenced by the repetition of superlative expressions. Individual likenesses culminate in the necessary "one supreme" (*una suprema*) likeness, the Image of God in Christ or the Spirit of Christ. God is therefore the super- or infinite artist in a way which parallels the Dionysian-scholastic theology of divine names or attributes, where God is *super*-being or *infinite* truth. Such is possible when the inferior *imagines* (the *phantasmata* in Plato), the figurative images of rhetoric and poetry, are "stretched" to infinity in the same way as literal predications. The human painter is therefore nothing at all like the divine painter, except when "the image of painter itself" (like "justice itself" or "beauty itself") is raised to the highest degree of infinity. This extensive development of the figurative and metaphorical in philosophical discourse demonstrates that Cusa was not merely interested in incorporating Platonist *concepts* but in posing a challenge to traditional *methods* in the speculative disciplines.

In Cusa we have a genre of speculative spirituality which unites discourses and approaches, even as it attempts to resolve, in a Christian theology of spiritual gifts and beatific vision, the philosophical problem of metaphysical paradoxy. Dialectic and metaphor in his work

innovate a traditional discourse of "mystical" ascent or ecstatic experience, synthesizing the language and techniques of a studied and reinvigorated Platonism together with a medieval, Aristotelian-scholastic account of epistemology and metaphysics. In doing so, Cusa's thought demonstrates continuity in a rhetorical as well as rational theology, one designed to explore and contemplate God's revelation and transcendent mystery, his intervention in human history, and the individual's encounter with divine essence.

All of the above factors are instrumental for describing what sort of impact Cusa's speculative thought might have had on the classicism, moralism and philological savvy of Erasmus and More. But in order to take the critical argument further, it is necessary to reexamine the interaction of a humanist movement with practices in philosophy and theology, those sciences which in theory coordinate and unify the approach to knowledge and lead the studious devotee to the heights of wisdom. The term "humanism" represents, most immediately, teachers and students of the humanities (*umanistas*), but in modern criticism it has also come to define a general program of study and set of ideals which evolved through the centuries-long process of recovering and reassessing the entire heritage of ancient Greek and Roman literature and culture. This wider definition of humanism is necessary for understanding how a humanist approach to learning redefines the relationship of of the language arts to theology and philosophy and why certain distinctions made between the disciplines in a humanist-scholastic polemic can be overstated.

Despite the academic-traditional and disciplinary variances between speculative thinkers and moralists, humanism constitutes a common thread in the period's cultural and educational shift. It is through the perspectives of humanism that a Cusan method and discourse of knowledge, ignorance and coincidence develop and become attractive for future generations, while undergoing certain modifications and semantic changes. Many of these changes reflect the

differences in professional training, occupation, and personal tastes. A language of wisdom, folly and reconciliation (conceived as *coincidentia* or *concordia*) was better suited to the sixteenth-century venues, audiences, and humanistic purposes of Erasmus and More. Nevertheless, such differences should not deter us from a comparative analysis and from seeking the common facets in a humanist understanding of reality, of the world, and of the remedies for its divisions and conflicts.

Chapter 6

A Contentious Wisdom: Knowledge and Mystery in Renaissance Thought

This chapter considers theories of wisdom and systematic knowledge related to the moriasophic dialectic of Renaissance humanists. A Platonist model emphasizes the mystical destination of human knowledge without losing sight of wisdom's practical dimension, i.e., a necessary correspondence between *theoria* and *bios*, or metaphysics and ethics. A culturally significant text like Cicero's *On Duties* interprets the Platonist model of theoretical and practical wisdom as the individual's participation in the public good. In this view of "living wisdom," literature and rhetoric are as important as logic, because the language arts are necessary for facilitating civic harmony and signifying transcendent reality. Finally, through the study of ancient languages, the goals of humanism are united more closely to the Bible, the most treasured source of divine wisdom in the Christian West. The concerns, values, and ideals expressed by humanists in a theory of wisdom form the intellectual and cultural context for a moriasophic dialectical method.

6.1 Cusa and Erasmus: Theoretical Connections

The dialectical, rhetorical, and figurative aspects of Cusa's theology provide one kind of evidence that the humanism of rhetoricians and poets in the sixteenth century is grounded not only in disciplinary rivalry but in a shared discourse of spirituality. Indeed the further recovery of Platonic sources could only reinforce the connections between philosophy, theology, and her-

meneutics established since the time of the early Church fathers through Augustine. What is important is not so much that philosophical and theological conclusions can be abstracted from reading and interpretation of Homer, the Platonic corpus, and the Bible; that has been emphasized time and again in allegorical criticism.[239] Rather, a hermeneutic method and indeed science goes well beyond textual analysis, representing an alternative yet complementary approach to the paradoxy of reality, which, in the Christian tradition, is epitomized in God's transcendence and immanence and in Christ's two natures.

It is worth repeating that Cusa's appropriation of figurative language joins him to the ranks of religious and contemplative writers, many to whom he was indebted. Besides Dionysius, Eriugena, Augustine, and Eckhart, one might also mention Bonaventure, Bernard of Clairvaux, Hugh and Richard of Saint Victor, Ramon Llull, Nicholas of Lyra, Jan van Ruysbroeck, Jean Gerson, and Henry of Ghent. Some of their spiritual writings reflect the art of preaching and are rhetorically-charged, but other works clearly adopt a language of poetry in figures and metaphors. The *Confessions* of Augustine, for example, is a stylistic model for the rhetoric of direct address in *OVG* as much as Bonaventure's *Journey to the Mind of God* stands behind Cusa's description of the spiritual ascent, of motivating love, and of intellectual perfection.[240]

The logic-laden methods of scholastics had drifted away from this unbroken and popular tradition, where figurative language is used in the service of spirituality. Cusa sought to recon-

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[239]See Seznec; Allen, D. C; Lamberton.

[240]For example, when Cusa writes in his epilogue, "I was led (by, as I believe, a heavenly gift from the Father of lights, from whom comes every excellent gift) to embrace - in learned ignorance[...]incomprehensible things incomprehensibly" he is not only quoting the Letter of James 1:17 ("Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.") but he is following a prominent, Platonist theme, e.g., in Dionysius *CH* 145, and in Bonaventure *Journey of the Mind to God* 1. Cusa himself finds the origins of his final work *On the Summit of Contemplative Vision* (*De apice theoriae*) in his short treatise *On the Gift of the Father of Lights* (*De dato patris luminum*). See Bond 70. In Bonaventure's *Journey*, the metaphor of the mirror occurs throughout. In *Sermons on the Six Days of Creation*, Bonaventure writes, "And so it is clear that the whole world is as a single mirror filled with illuminations reflecting the divine wisdom[...]" (2.27) 45.

cile approaches, practices, and methods in theology much in the same way as he attempted to resolve the apparent contradictions in Christian "mysteries" and in social-political divisions within the Catholic Church. Through his intense study of Platonist texts, Cusa is able to add new dimensions to traditional themes and metaphors and to provide fresh insight into the Platonic roots of Christianity. By reconnecting metaphysics and epistemology to Biblical hermeneutics, he presages a liberation of figurative language and literary styles in the theological discourse of subsequent generations. *Imago* and *figura*, in the vocabulary of painting and sculpture, may also represent literary portraiture in "figures of speech." Even if construed as ontologically inferior impressions of the mind, the *figurae* of Cusa's divine painter in *OVG* are not deceptive and illusionary *phantasmata*.

The view of literary figure as divine likeness is not an abandonment of the *via negativa*, the darkness of God, and the appeal to human ignorance; on the contrary, the *via negativa* is still an essential and valid aspect of Cusa's dialectic in *OVG*. Divine concealment is compatible with revelation as *apophasis* is compatible with *kataphasis*. In Cusa's theory of language predication, metaphors are doubled-sided, transumptive, "carrying over" meaning from figures to objects, yet also obscure the differences, the *aporia* between correspondences. That is why a dialectical hermeneutics of mirror, riddle, and veil is needed: to measure the potentiality of a language of comparative relation as well as its limitation.

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Cusa's integration of techniques and methods from various disciplines and genres cannot be taken for granted. While Italian humanists since Salutati argued for the harmony of wisdom and eloquence, Cusa's synthesis of rhetoric with theology and philosophy reflected, uniquely, the intellectual environment north of the Alps. This environment included Northern scholasticism

as well as the piety and mysticism of the Rhineland, to which Cusa adds a knowledge of Scripture, the Church Fathers, Plato, and Platonism. While he does not seem concerned with rhetorical theory per se, Cusa combines rhetorical devices and literary language with dialectical demonstration, liberating analogical thinking from its inferior rank in a medieval education. It is also clear that Cusa wants his philosophical theology to move its readers. He does this with sensual metaphors of hunger, taste, smell, vision, and ingestion, which represent aspects of intellectual desire and spiritual experience.

In this chapter, we will revisit the thematic connection between Cusa's learned ignorance and the juxtaposition of wisdom and folly in Erasmus – what we have called moriasophia – providing further justification for a comparison of the two authors and asking in greater detail how, through a transmission of ideas, a Cusan dialectical metaphysics contributes to a sixteenth-century satirical literature. Such a connection must necessarily take into account the differences between the German cardinal and the independent Dutch scholar, beginning with the vast discrepancies in their intellectual inclinations, their individual roles in the social and political life of Europe, their objects and directions of study, their purposes for writing, the audiences whom they addressed and the reasons they addressed them, and the nature of their literary works. Indeed, there is a general consensus among modern scholars that, if Erasmus read the works of Cusa, he would have been uninterested or unenthused.[241]

Nevertheless, relationships of an intellectual and cultural nature do not rely only on personal affinity and direct imitation but also on similarities in concepts, purposes, and techniques,

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[241]In his review of CWE 66, *Spiritualia: Enchiridion, De Contemptu Mundi, De Vidua Christiana*, Archibald Young writes, "It is true that Erasmus frequently touched on themes and subjects found in the integrative work of Cusanus, but generally he was unwilling and, to that extent, unable to think as his theological predecessor had thought.The most obvious evidence of this lies in Erastnus' deep hostility to scholastic theology, an hostility which, early in his career, led him away from any extensive study of the subject. His contemporaries would therefore be surprised to learn that Erasmus had, as O'Malley put it, 'a decent.. .knowledge of the scholastics'. But Erasmus' antipathy was

and it is in this latter respect that we approach a comparative analysis of Cusa and Erasmus. Despite their personal and intellectual differences, their atypical representation of knowledge and wisdom in relation to ignorance and folly – a relation we have categorized as antithesis, paradoxy, and coincidence – deserves more thorough attention than it has received thus far. But before we focus the argument on this theoretical relationship specifically and on the Erasmian dialectic of opposing and interacting concepts, we must discuss two significant contextual issues. First, we must address the profound changes in the notion of wisdom brought about by a humanist movement. These changes were at the heart of the perspectival shift – cultural, intellectual, and spiritual (what we might call a "paradigm shift" in the now familiar words of Thomas Kuhn) – which sets a tone as well as an agenda for future generations, thus validating the epochal distinctions of modern scholarship. As with Cusa, ideas about wisdom, knowledge, and learning form a solid foundation for Erasmus, not only in his more serious and straightforward moments but also as the background for classical and European conventions of folly. Then we will proceed to examine some of the historical and biographical circumstances which provide further reason for linking Cusa to Erasmus.

6.2 Humanism and the Changing Nature of Wisdom in the Renaissance

While some scholars have approached the concept of wisdom in the Renaissance with reference to particular definitions,[242] the question cannot be adequately distinguished from the study of philosophy, the very concept of the discipline a professed "love of wisdom." Our notions of philosophy in this period come from at least two main resources, the activities of those engaged as professional philosophers in the arts faculties of universities and those writings of the

almost certainly based on another and more important feature of thought that distinguished his intellect from Cusanus', namely, a distaste for almost any form of abstract or systematic thought" 1033.

period which, by our modern standards, address philosophical questions. Both areas were neglected in the scholarship of the Renaissance and in the history of philosophy until the first quarter of the previous century, when Ernst Cassirer broke new ground with *The Individual and the Cosmos in the Philosophy of the Renaissance*. In a way that had not been done before, Cassirer gave credit to speculative thinkers in the Renaissance for making original contributions to traditional philosophical issues and provided a critical view of the transition from Renaissance thought to modern problems (such as subjectivity) as well as experimental science. This thesis contrasted starkly the prevailing analysis of Jacob Burckhardt, which viewed the period and its humanism as a decisive break with the past and a turn toward secular individualism.

Cassirer's book was followed by numerous studies of an intellectual-historical nature in the middle of the last century, which blossomed into a scholarship of "Renaissance philosophy": Paul Oskar Kristeller, Eugenio Garin, John Herman Randall, Jr., Raymond Klibansky, and Charles Trinkaus were among those who offered a critical framework for the emphases and conflicts brought about during an age of humanist enthusiasm for the ancient learning of Greece and Rome.[243] A central preoccupation of this scholarship was the assessment and classification of humanist themes in terms of their origins and their influences, and in doing so, to account for both the revival of ancient ideas as well as the continuity and development of a medieval intellectual tradition. What is striking about so much of this criticism is its inherent interdisciplinarity, necessitated by the nature of intellectual and scholarly discourse in the period, a discourse which was generated not only in university schools and monasteries but in courts, civic admin-

[242]See, for example Rice and Hopkins, J., *Nicholas of Cusa on Wisdom and Knowledge* 3–84 .
[243]For example, see Kristeller, P. O., *Renaissance Thought and Its Sources*; Garin, *La Cultura del Rinascimento: Profilo Storico [Die Kultur der Renaissance]*; Klibansky, *Platonic Tradition*; Garin, *Medioevo e Rinascimento: Studi e Ricerche*; Klibansky, *Plato's* Parmenides *in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*; Trinkaus, *Image and Likeness*; Trinkaus, *Renaissance Transformations of Late Medieval Thought*.

istrations, and even private villas and libraries – indeed wherever active thinkers found a forum, either in person or via manuscript and printed text.

This aspect of Renaissance scholarship might not sound unusual at first, but we are speaking of a time when academic preparations, authorities, textual resources, and literary conventions, techniques and practices were, in a Latinate culture, nearly pan-European. Thus pressing intellectual questions – such as whether the immortality of the soul can be known through reason alone, which philosophers and learned traditions are superior to the others and why, what is the highest good in a life of moral virtue, how philosophy can be best adapted to the needs of the state, to what extent truth or wisdom depends upon eloquence, etc. – referenced a common body of knowledge and a tradition which could be discussed and debated outside the schools and without a specialist's jargon. The very accessibility of ethical thought opened the cultural discourse to a much larger number of individuals, engaged in a variety of occupations.

What we encounter in humanist discourse, therefore, is a culturally distinct yet non-uniform blend of approaches to several common intellectual concerns. These concerns skirt around many of the metaphysical and logical questions prevalent among university faculties of philosophy, but this does not mean that their concerns were a-philosophical. Rather, as many scholars have pointed out, humanists staked a particularly strong claim on philosophy via the study of ethics or moral philosophy, one of the three traditional branches since ancient times along with natural philosophy and logic. Familiar to us are the many arguments humanists put forward concerning the urgent need for a revitalization of practical virtue and an educated, moral response to current social and political ills. Some did this by emphasizing the renewed study of well-known ethical works, such as the *Nichomachean Ethics* of Aristotle, or the moral epistles and treatises of Cicero and Seneca, adding those authors of a Greco-Roman Silver Age, such as

Marcus Aurelius, Dio Chrysostom, Epictetus, and Plutarch. Others called attention to the political theory of Plato and Aristotle and to the histories of imperial Greece and Rome. Still others continued to expand the horizons of literature with new models of heroic virtue in the ancient genre of *vita* (or *bios*) and the great variety of historical *exempla*. The thought and culture of the antique world seemed like a fathomless resource of ancient doctrines and arguments concerning the good and happy life. Properly applied, the traditional solutions to ancient problems might be reevaluated and sensible remedies discovered for the present conflicts.

Can this humanist preoccupation with moral issues, actions, and examples be considered a distinct kind of philosophy, in contrast with a traditional, academic philosophy of the schools? In recent years, the terms "humanist philosophy" and "philosophical humanism" have made their way into the scholarship of the period and (so it seems) without contention. For example, writing about the distinctiveness of the humanist approach to philosophy, James Hankins writes:

> Whatever the deeper resemblances between Petrarchan humanism and 'Averroism' as forms of culture, it is nevertheless clear that the humanist movement called for a radical change in the conception of what philosophy was and what it was for. For humanists philosophy was demoted to the position of one branch of literature among several. The emphasis was placed on moral philosophy, the only part of philosophy deemed useful to human life. Metaphysics, psychology and natural philosophy were neglected when not openly mocked for their obscurity and triviality. Logic was subordinated to rhetoric and reshaped to serve the purposes of persuasion. Ancient moral philosophers were preferred to scholastic contemporaries as presumptively wiser and more eloquent. The dialogic, open-ended exploration of different positions, modeled on Cicero, was preferred to systematic

> exposition or analysis. The study of philosophy began to include philological study of the text in order to come closer to the philosopher's thought and language. ("Humanism, Scholasticism, and Renaissance Philosophy" 45)

This invaluable observation concerning the direction of philosophy in an age of humanism may overstate the case: while humanists' attitudes towards certain medieval traditions in education were often reactionary, the "radical change" in a *definition* of philosophy did not constitute a repudiation of the discipline's traditional division into three branches nor the place of metaphysics per se but was a matter of preferences and priorities. Rather than replace the Aristotelian-based university curriculum, bound to the same texts for centuries and laden with technical terminology and *explanationes* (even in the field of ethics), humanists sought to carve out a greater share of philosophy's territorial domain, and they did this with the help of an enormous cache of ancient moral writing, spectacular in the freshly re-minted forms of translation and printed edition.

Moreover, to label the moral philosophy of humanists as a "humanist philosophy" raises the vexed question of how it is related to a definition of rhetoric in the Renaissance.[244] As if to distinguish between two kinds of humanist thought, the terms "humanist rhetoric" and "rhetorical humanism" have also entered our critical discourse, set in apposition to the philosophical counterpart. For many (especially those in the field of rhetorical studies), this is a convenient way of separating the speculative thought of Cusa, Lefèvre, Ficino, and Pico from the practical, moral thought of the greater number of humanists, from Petrarch, Boccaccio, and Salutati

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[244]Hankins uses the term "humanist philosophy" on pp. 31 and 45. He is careful to distinguish between this and a "philosophical humanism," which he defines "a Romantic phenomenon, which emerged in response to the dechristianization of a large portion of the educated classes in Europe and North America in the wake of the Enlightenment." See 575–76. Other have adopted the term "philosophical humanism" to describe the philosophical interests of humanists, e.g Cassirer 88; McInerny 39; Carter 28–29. Perhaps with less controversy, the term "rhetorical humanism" has been adopted; see Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance* 584, 612; Arnold 7. The question remains whether to divide humanism into two or more species, or whether to draw our distinction from different different disciplines, or (as suggested in this study) whether to identify speculative and practical tendencies

through Valla, Agricola, Budé, Erasmus, and Vives? Yet this is not what Hankins and others (in philosophical or intellectual-historical criticism) intend by "humanist philosophy." Hankins, on the contrary, lays the foundation for his definition in Petrarch's *On his own ignorance* and, following Kristeller, sets Ficino apart from others as "a professional philosopher rather than a humanist." (Hankins, "Renaissance Philosophy" 48, n. 45). But what exactly, then, is the relationship of Petrarch's philosophical writing to his humanism? Are we to think of Petrarch as the "proto-philosophical humanist" *and* a traditional, "rhetorical humanist"? And if Petrarch's philosophy is to be distinguished from Ficino's, what should we say about the latter's humanist-like devotion to ancient authority and the rhetorical flourish which pervades his prefaces and letters? A critical distinction within the humanism movement along disciplinary lines may not be the most effective, given the complex interaction of certain philosophical ideas and rhetorical practices.

The problem of classifying intellectual discourse in the Renaissance is thought-provoking. The very concepts of disciplines and their attendant conventions had been shaped by a medieval educational and institutional context. Throughout the Middle Ages, a science of philosophy was regarded as a culmination of the seven liberal arts rather than a separate or contributing branch of the project of knowledge. A philosopher was a master of the system of learning and one who applied the methods of rational science – mainly represented in the arts of logic and language until the age of scientific experimentation – to the important questions of the day. Humanists, in so far as they were teachers of the *studia humanitatis*, were also defined and shaped by that institutional setting. In general they did not oppose the medieval *system* of learning, nor its organization into separate schools and student "nations." Their concerns with literature, ex-

of particular authors or texts or subjects, while acknowledging the deep-rootedness of speculative-practical relationships in ancient thought.

emplary behavior, and the incitement to virtue were likewise deeply-rooted in the medieval tradition. If they had not vied so contentiously with professional philosophers for their sphere of competence in the past, not even in ethics, then what was so different about the moral philosophy of humanists in the Renaissance? Are the new currents in moral philosophy better served by labeling them distinctly "humanist"? Or is there some better way to describe the trends in moral philosophy itself?

This point may seem academic and unnecessary. However, if we are to regard humanists as teachers and enthusiasts of moral philosophy, then there can be no clear and effective critical distinction between a "humanist philosopher" and a "humanist rhetorician." An instructor of the language arts was a teacher of moral philosophy by profession, and others who were not educators (but whom we call Renaissance humanists today) followed the inclinations, habits and perspectives in which they had been schooled. Jurists, civil administrators, and independent scholars received the training of the *humanista* in schools and universities and similarly viewed rhetoric and moral philosophy as part of the same educational and cultural fabric.

When humanists read the authors of late antiquity, they were astounded at the portrait of the philosopher and his role in society, so greatly did it approximate the ideals they had imbibed and imitated, directly and obliquely, in Cicero and Seneca. While teacher-philosophers like Musonius Rufus and Epictetus demonstrated a Cynic's severity, insisting on the moral integrity of the philosopher-teacher and disciple, others like Marcus Aurelius and Plutarch brought a Stoic's moral principles to bear on matters that involved the social, political, and religious life of the state. Unlike the detached rationalism and technical subtlety of Aristotle and the Peripatetics, these men connected morality to psychology, addressing concerns which permeate everyday life, such as persevering in difficulties, foregoing base pleasures, observing duties to the self, the fam-

ily and the state, conducting oneself honorably at all times, and trusting in divine providence. Known widely as "physicians of the soul," theirs was a living, breathing philosophy-in-action, not just for academies and academics but for all self-conscious and literate persons.[245]

But what appealed to humanists as much as the moral content of these philosophers' discourses was the rhetoric with which their moral themes were expounded. Cicero's insistence that philosophy must be written in good rhetorical style became the foundation stone of a Renaissance theme.[246] But now there were more authorities to substantiate that claim from a variety of viewpoints. A doxographical literature and collecteana not only organized philosophical ideas into schools of thought but often recaptured the vitality of an oral tradition. The biographies of Diogenes Laertius, Philostratus, Stobaeus, and Plutarch include substantial selections of dialogue, instruction, oration, and poetry. Valerius Pollio and Flavius Arrianus recorded the sayings of Musonius Rufus and Epictetus just as Plato had done for Socrates, though in the form of dictation rather than a dialogue. Notwithstanding Dio Chrysostom's "conversion" to a life of philosophy from one of rhetoric, his many orations continued to show no less rhetorical skill and flourish. These instances and others demonstrate that the moral philosophers and rhetoricians of antiquity were often indistinguishable. The representatives of both professions spoke the language of ordinary people, inspiring and exhorting their audiences to live virtuously in orations and spirited lectures.

The broader scope of evidence from antiquity verified and legitimated the humanist stake in philosophy. Why should those who teach grammar, rhetoric, poetry, and practical ethics be considered philosophical inferiors? Why should a literature of the humanities and the study of virtue be of less concern in an advanced philosophical program and profession? A philosophical

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[245]James Hankins writes: "Ficino calls Plato the *medicus animorum*, the doctor of souls, who uses philosohpy to heal the diseases of the soul as an ordinary doctor uses medicine for the ills of the body" 326.

discipline did not belong to Aristotelian metaphysicians and logicians by virtue of a medieval tradition, a tradition darkened and corrupted by inaccurate and often misleading translations, in some cases relied upon for centuries. Thus the humanist attack on scholasticism was not so much a battle between two faculties and disciplines but a contention over territory within a philosophical (and later, theological) science and over the role of language in intellectual discourse.

This does not mean, of course, that there were no disciplinary rivalries. The quarrel between rhetoricians and philosophers is as old as Plato and never disappeared completely from the academies and universities. The famous polemical exchange of Giovanni Pico and Ermolao Barbaro not only repeats the convention but raises it to the level of public performance. Differences in scope and method continued to be shaped by professional considerations. In a language-based culture, rhetoric was a necessary academic fixture, from basic literacy skills in primary-level education through the study of composing official documentation (*ars dictaminis* and *ars dictandi*). During the Renaissance, rhetoric continued to be essential for careers in political assemblies, law courts, administrations, and diplomacy. Philosophy, on the other hand, had always been something of a specialization, with professional practice most often limited to learned circles and academic institutions. Plato's philosopher-king may have achieved a proverbial status in Renaissance courts, but the prescription remained unfulfilled.

Despite such differences between the practical ends of rhetorians and philosophical specialization, the two disciplines did coincide in certain areas of professional life. Political and legal theory relied on the stabilizing concept of a hierarchical cosmic order, while formal literary conventions and forensic training were important aspects of the administrative and legal bodies of the Church. A theory connecting philosophy to rhetoric may be found in one of the best known Latin texts of the Middle Ages, Cicero's *On Duties*:

[246]For a succinct description of Cicero's rhetorical theory, see Colish 79–89.

> Now chief of all the virtues is the wisdom (*sapientia*) which the Greeks call *sophia*; we mean something rather different by prudence (*prudentia*), which the Greeks call *phronesis*, namely, knowledge of things to be sought and things to be avoided. This wisdom which I have called the chief virtue is knowledge of things divine and human, in which is contained that which gods and men share in common and the fellowship between them. So then if wisdom is the greatest virtue, as it undoubtedly is, then the obligation [*officius*] stemming from the sense of community must undoubtedly be the greatest. Indeed, knowledge and contemplation of the world of nature would be feeble and unfulfilled if no practical action were to flow from it. The action which does follow is seen to best advantage when it protects men's interests and is therefore concerned with the fellowship of the human race. It must accordingly be ranked higher than that from knowledge. (1.43.153) [247]

To understand the impact of Cicero's definition of wisdom on humanists, it needs to be examined in context. *On Duties* is something like an ethics manual for those engaged in politics and public life. Following the philosophers, Cicero begins with *sapientia* (*sophia*) as the highest of the virtues. Yet the Roman pays almost no attention to abstract theory; rather his purpose is to demonstrate an ideal of justice as wisdom-in-action. In order to achieve this transition more perfectly, he uses the concept of *prudentia* (*phronesis*) throughout, as a connecting bridge from theory to practice. Like *sapientia*, *prudentia* implies a quest for truth, but it represents the abstract

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[247]"Princepsque omnium virtutum illa sapientia, quam *sophian* Graeci vocant – prudentiam enim, quam Graeci *phronesin* dicunt, aliam quandam intellegimus, quae est rerum expetendarum fugiendarumque scientia; illa autem sapientia, quam principem dixi, rerum est divinarum et humanarum scientia, in qua continetur deorum et hominum communitas et societas inter ipsos; ea si maxima est, ut est certe, necesse est, quod a communitate ductur officium, id esse maximum. Etenum cognitio contemplatioque naturae manca quodam modo atque inchoata sit, si nulla actio rerum consequatur. Ea autem actio in hominum commodis tuendis maxime cernitur; pertinet igitur ad societatem

ideal in concrete actions and circumstances. Although Cicero probably acquired his *sophia*/*phronesis* distinction from Aristotle, he clearly presents it as an extrapolation on Plato's thought.

Second, Cicero provides, in one stroke, metaphysical, epistemological, and moral foundations for rhetoric when he defines wisdom as communal rather than the intellectual, abstract, and individual. Harkening back to Plato's ideal of "likeness to the gods as far as possible," Cicero says wisdom is something humans "share in common" in fellowship with the gods (*qua continetur deorum et hominum communitas et societas inter ipsos*). Cicero's language suggests – and none too subtly – a political dimension of knowledge, for it makes civic responsibility the direct reflection or consequence of theoretical knowledge. In fact, he says that theoretical knowledge is lacking (*manca*) and incomplete (*incohata*) without *action*. Such action, for Cicero, constitutes the virtue of justice; and justice is accomplished through rhetoric, its chief instrument in the public forums, law courts, and governing assemblies.

But it is also important to note a deeper level of correspondence between Cicero's ideal triumvirate (*sapientia-prudentia-justitia*) and Plato's political theory. The community between gods and humans suggested by Cicero reverses the focus of Plato's famous city-soul analogy in the *Republic*. While Plato outlines an ideal state for the express purpose of examining the soul more clearly and vividly, Cicero invokes the harmony of intellectual virtues (here synonymous with the idea of "the gods") in order to accentuate the duties (or practical virtues) of the state. Cicero's correlation of theoretical to practical wisdom as *communitas* relates the human to the divine by way of *participation*. Indeed, Cicero takes this one step further, not only imitating the metaphysical-ethical harmony in Plato but reinterpreting the notion of intellectual participation

generis humani; ergo haec cognitioni anteponenda est." Cicero, M. T., *De Officiis*. See also Cicero, *On Obligations [De Officiis]* II.2.5; Cicero, *Cicero on the Emotions: Tusculan Disputations 3 and 4* IV.26.57

as political activity among humans. Rhetoric, properly and nobly employed, *enacts* divine harmony on earth.

More than any Christian source, *On Duties* affords credibility and nobility to the art of public speaking, counteracting the scholastic view of rhetoric as affective, ornamental, and inferior to logic. Several of Coluccio Salutati's works develop this theme of Cicero's, emphasizing the idea that wisdom is incomplete without eloquence. Salutati follows Cicero in making of rhetorical speech a virtue in itself rather than a mere means to the good, since eloquence-in-action comprehends such important civic virtues as dignity (*dignitas*) and propriety (*decorum*). Given this definition of wisdom, it is not difficult to see why Plato's *Republic* received such ample (and disproportionate) attention during the recovery of Platonic texts. An influential source for Cicero, the *Republic* was the first Platonic text during Italy's Greek revival to be retranslated in its entirety, and twice in a short period of time, by Manuel Chrysoloras, with Uberto Decembrio, and again by Uberto's son, Pier Candido.[248] Although scholars have offered many practical reasons for these early efforts, humanists and statesmen alike anticipated something more from Cicero's model – such as a rich, philosophical argument on behalf of rhetoric and a paramount demonstration of eloquent speech.

Humanists' appeal to moral philosophy initiated a distinct change in patterns of education without substantially altering the basic philosophical principles underlying the pagan-Christian entent of the medieval tradition. The educational change can be summed up in the three areas of *sources*, *priorities*, and *methods*. In none of these areas did humanists reject the logic, physics, and metaphysics which dominated the academic profession of philosophy. But their insistence

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[248]According to Sears Jayne, Chrysoloras used extensive quotations from the works of Plato while teaching the Greek language. Chrysoloras began translating the *Republic* for Giangaleazzo Visconti of Milan as early as 1401; it was completed in late 1402. In 1439, Pier Candido Decembrio, the son of Chrysoloras' collaborator Uberto

that ethics be restored to the prominent place it enjoyed in ancient times subverted the philosophical establishment by challenging the matter or object of philosophy. Not only were old and new sources of ethics gaining currency, but new editions of and commentaries on Aristotelian texts translated by humanists (like Bruni, Argyropulos, Acciaiuoli, and Maffei) competed with the continuing flow of scholastic literature on the *Nicomachean Ethics*.[249] For the first time since antiquity, humanists reintroduced the notion that philosophy is for every educated person and not restricted to specialists; it is a personal guide to right living which affects statecraft and public policy. This view constitutes a radical shift in perspective, from philosophy as speculation, a "handmaid" to and preparation for theology, to a model for personal excellence and political action, in effect, the *intellego ut credam* of Augustine ethically augmented – "I understand that I may believe *and act*."

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The humanist's appeal to ancient models of wisdom brings us back to a previous question regarding the twentieth-century distinction between "humanist philosophers" and "humanist rhetoricians." While the common interests are evident – a quest for an expansive recovery of ancient learning, a more thorough knowledge of ancient Latin and Greek, a greater fidelity to original texts and languages, and a wider diffusion of ancient literature, etc. – a critical terminology based on professional appointments and disciplines tends to obscure the fundamental change in perspective which humanists since Petrarch were seeking to advance. The recovery of ancient learning called into question the whole project of knowledge as an individual's pursuit of intellectual reality. The versatility of ancient thinkers suggested instead a wisdom ideal which harmonized and balanced practical and intellectual ends. Not only were rhetoricians encouraged to

Decembrio, translated the Republic anew for Humfrey, Duke of Gloucester. The period of time between the first and second translation was short relative to other new translations of any single work 5–8.

involve themselves in philosophical questions, but those best known for the revival of ancient metaphysics and cosmology in the fifteenth century – such as Cusa, Ficino, Pico, and Lefèvre – participated in a culture of letters, reflecting the ancient view of philosophy as a lived experience.[250]

In a period which emphasized the unity of knowledge, a distinction based on the speculative and practical tendencies of specific thinkers may in the end be more effective than one based on professional appointments and disciplinary boundaries. Speculative and practical tendencies also relate to the period's distinction between the contemplative and the active life, a distinction which was familiar to everyone in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. At an earlier stage, speculative thought thrived in monasteries, where religious communities were free from many of the entanglements of private and public life. The universities of the twelfth century and (more rarely) European courts provided a new environment, combining the benefits of secluded study and libraries with a vibrant academic community. There is no small hint of irony in scholasticism's Aristotelian foundations, since Aristotle wrote more about the natural world about than about metaphysical entities.

To be sure, medieval conventions endured and philosophy in the universities continued as a speculative science. But whether the idea of philosophy in a Renaissance context is best served by separating it from rhetoric must withstand the critical scrutiny of the many instances and ways

[249]See Kraye, "Moral Philosophy".

[250]Adequate space cannot be allotted here to respond to the thesis of Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine in *From Humanism to the Humanities: Education and the Liberal Arts in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Europe*. Looking at the actual classroom experience (texts and pedagogy) in relation to the many noble sentiments expressed about the moral education of the youth, Grafton and Jardine conclude that humanists were serving the interests of the elite establishment rather than inculcating universal values. While the authors offer much compelling evidence, more can be said about a theory of moral change or transformation during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. For example, a comparison could be made between different rhetorical contexts, e.g., classroom, public assembly hall, church, and the ways in which one might expect moral change to be manifested. A rhetorician's belief in the power of a secular-heroic moral example might be compared to a preacher's faith in the example of Christ and the hagiographic

philosophy joins and interacts with rhetoric. At least some rhetoricians in the Renaissance were concerned with speculative philosophical questions, just as some philosophers imbibed and practiced the art of rhetoric. For example, while Petrarch is no metaphysician, his treatises written in the *contemptus mundi* genre, such as *On Spiritual Retreat* (*De otio religioso*) and *On the Solitary Life* (*De vita solitaria*), connect a form of psychological speculation to the preference for the contemplative state of life over the active. Over a century later, the young Augustinian monk Erasmus wrote in the traditional vein of worldly renunciation, in *On Contempt for the World* (*De contemptu mundi*). Erasmus' speculative side continues to show itself even after his departure from the monastery, through his reading of and commentary on numerous ancient philosophers and the theology of Latin and Greek Church Fathers, especially Augustine, Jerome, and Origen.[251]

Indeed, we might ask how educated intellectuals of the Renaissance thought of and styled themselves. What was it that made one *orator* (or *rhetor*) and another *philosophus*? If one of the salient aspects of humanism is its insistence on the harmony and unity of the disciplines, we must be willing to consider how the study and practice of philosophy as a whole fits into a broader cultural program. Since humanists were interested in recovering not just rhetorical and literary texts of the ancients but the entire extant record of a lost civilization, they read everything they could get their hands on – in Latin first, and then in Greek, for those who could master it. The biographical scholarship of the period reminds us, time and again, of the rigorous schedules and determined efforts of those who would converse with the ancients in order to put the latter in the service of present arguments and ideals. Whatever differences existed in the ap-

tradition. Humanism depended on Christianity as a moral standard in the same way speculative thinkers depended on theological doctrine for criteria in philosophy.

[251]It is interesting to note that, despite his long-standing criticism of scholastics and "The Philosopher," Erasmus did not shy away from editing the text of Aristotle, producing an *Opera Omnia* in 1531. See Kraye, "Aristotle" 37–38.

proaches of the disciplines were less fixtures than conventions and traditions – and these, humanists avowed, could be effectively challenged. Thus a well-known poet like Angelo Poliziano lectured on Aristotle's logical corpus and even tried his hand at translating Plotinus' writings on dialectic,[252] while a prolific speculative thinker like Charles de Bovelles composed Latin poems to accompany his philosophical treatises and maintained a large circle of personal correspondents.[253] In another striking example, that of the debate between Bessarion and George of Trebizond on the relative merits of Plato and Aristotle, philosopher and rhetorician are opposed atypically: George, the professional rhetorician, sides adamantly with the philosophical *auctoritas* of the scholastic Middle ages, while the theologian Bessarion defends the master of the dialogue and promotes reconciliation and harmony between schools.

A critical method which distinguishes too insistently on separating philosophers from rhetoricians will inevitably overlook some of humanism's outstanding contributions to the unity of disciplines and the experimentation with literary forms. In key respects (and for the purposes of the current study), the changes introduced by humanists were influenced by the Western encounter with an ancient Platonic tradition, which bound together rhetorical and rational methods in the pursuit of wisdom. Wisdom, in Platonism, is not a mere human construct, no matter how great the tower of terms, analysis, and interpretation, nor is it a ratio-cosmic solipsism, as the Aristotelian *noesis noeseos* might imply. Rather, Platonic wisdom is *both* intuitive-mystical *and* rational-discursive, divine *and* human, suggesting a definition of reality as a dynamic contrast and an interactive imaging. This juxtaposition of opposition and identity explains the development of affirmation and negation in Platonic metaphysics as well as the devices of ambiguity,

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[252]Plotinus discusses Platonic dialectic in *Enneads* I.3. For Poliziano, see Wolters.

[253]Charles de Bovelles also composed a sizeable body of poetry in his native Picardian. See Margolin, *Lettres et Poèmes de Charles de Bovelles: Édition Critique, Introduction et Commentaire Du Ms. 1134 de la Bibliothèque de l'Université de Paris*

paradox, and irony, forms of logico-literary contrariety which unite and resolve in a Cusan *coincidentia*.

6.3 Philosophy and Rhetoric in Martianus Capella

A compelling illustration of the complex relationship between dialectic and rhetoric in Later Platonism can be found in the plan of the liberal arts written by Martianus Capella, entitled *Marriage of Mercury and Philology* (*De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii*). This text offers a didactic exposition of each discipline, framed by a brilliant and cryptic allegory. In imitation of Plato, the literary aspect not only introduces the subject but suggests a radically different perspective, attained through representation and interpretation.

In Martianus' allegory, the god Mercury, observing the universal power of Hymen, decides to take a wife. Not able to court Sophia, Psyche, or Mantice (i.e., Wisdom, Soul, and Prophesy), Mercury (accompanied by Virtue), asks advice from his brother, Apollo. Apollo suggests that he marry Philologia, learned daughter of Phronesis. Mercury seeks Jupiter's approval for the betrothal, and, together with a great council of the gods, he finds the match suitable. Juno consents, but also insists that Philologia must be elevated to the divine. After confirming the auspiciousness of the marriage with mathematical calculations, Philologia prepares for her long journey to the heavens. Athanasia (Immortality, daughter of Apotheosis) provides an emetic, resulting in a stream of writings spewing forth from the mouth of Philologia. From these the Muses collect the "disciplines" and "arts" suitable to their own practices. Next, Philology is given the ambrosia of immortality in a cup like a cosmic egg. Now she is ready to be born aloft through the heavenly spheres (with their music), conveyed in Jupiter's palanquin (carried by Labor, Epimelia (Application), Agrypnia (Vigilance), and Periergia (Curiosity). Arriving at the

firmament, the threshold of the heavens, Philologia offers a silent, mystical prayer, before being admitted into the assembly of the gods for the wedding.

The marriage of Mercury and Philology represents a union of human and divine wisdom and a harmony of the speculative and practical arts. Mercury cannot marry Sophia (or Psyche, or Mantice), because such a union would imply that the highest wisdom and knowledge is forever the property of the gods and inaccessible to humans. Philologia, on the other hand, is the virgin daughter of Phronesis, or Practical Wisdom, the pure "theory" of human arts uncorrupted by the distortions of application in a material world. Understood in the wider sense as both language and reason, Philologia is associated with not only with the seven liberal arts of the trivium and quadrivium but the cardinal virtues, who are her handmaids. These are the means by which humanity participates in divine wisdom, so long as studies are directed toward eternal truth, the latter symbolized in the kisses of the mystical three Graces and in Philology's subsequent *apotheosis*.

As Philologia's passage from the human world to the heavenly represents the ascent of rational knowledge to the mystical, her view of the heavens evokes the setting of Parmenides' *On Nature* and other conventions of a heavenly Paradise, from Macrobius to Dante:

> Philology herself leaped down from the palanquin and saw enormous fields of light, the springtime of heavenly peace[...]she beheld the very sphere which contains the outermost periphery, driven on at astonishing speed, and the poles, and the quivering axis which from the highest point of heaven pierces the depth of earth and itself makes the whole mass and fabric of heaven revolve; she was aware that the god who was the father of such a work and so great a system had withdrawn even from the very acquaintance of the gods, for she knew that he had

> passed beyond the felicity that is beyond this world, and he rejoiced in an empyrean realm of pure understanding. On her knees beside the wall of the outer periphery, concentrating the whole attention of her mind, she prayed long in silence, and according to ancient ritual, uttered certain words with her inner voice, words varying in number according to the practice of different peoples, words of unknown sound, made up of alternating combinations of letters. In these words she paid reverence to the presiding deities of the world of pure understanding, and to their ministers, to whom the powers of the sensible world owe veneration, and to the entire universe contained by the depth of the infinite Father; then she invoked those certain three gods and the others who shine on the seventh day and night. She prayed also, according to the mysteries of Plato, to those powers Once and Twice *hapax kai dis epekeina*, to the Maiden of the Source. (2.200–05)[254]

Martianus uses this particular moment of the narrative's allegorical journey to demonstrate a Platonist cosmology. "Those certain three gods" represent the Plotinian trinity of One, Mind, and World-soul, while "those powers Once and Twice *beyond*" (my emphasis; απαχ και δις επεκεινα, the Greek phrase adapts an idiom for "more than once")[255] refer to the unitive and generative principles of monad and indefinite dyad. Several of his images would have been appealing to Christian theologians, and may even have influenced Nicholas of Cusa when writing

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254 "Ipsa quoque Philologia lectica desiliens, quum immensos luminis campos aethereaeque tranquillitatis verna conspiceret[...]videretque praeterea fulgentes crebrorum siderum coërcet, ultimam sphaeram miris raptibus incitatam, polosque et axem ex coeli summitate vibratum profundam transmeare terram, atque ab ipso totam coeli molem machinamque torqueri; tanti operis tantaeque rationis patrem deumque noscens ab ipsa etiam deorum notitia secessisse, quoniam extramundanas latitudines eum transscendisse cognoverat, empyrio quondam intellectualique mundo gaudentem, juxta ipsum extimi ambitus murum annixa genibus ac tota mentis acie coartata diu silentio deprecatur; veterumque ritu vocabula quaedam voce mentis inclamans, secundum dissonas nationes numeris varia, sono ignota jugatis alternatisque literis inspirata, veneraturque verbis intellectualis mundi praesules deos eorumque ministros, sensibilis sphaerae potestatibus venerandos, universumque totum infinibilis patris profunditate coërcitum: poscitque quosdam tres deos, aliosque diei noctisque septimo radiatos. Quandam etiam fontanam Virginem deprecatur; secundum Platonis quoque mysteria *hapax kai dis epikoina* potestates," Capella, *De Nuptiis*.

OVG. Martianus' "infinite Father" (*infinabilis patris*), for example, also called "Unknown Father" (*Ignoti patris*), "Father who transcends the universe" (*Ultramundanum fas est cui cernere patrem*) and "Source of Mind" (*fons mentis*) replaces Plato's Demiurge with an originating principle which is at once cosmological, metaphysical, and anthropomorphic.[256] Martianus' psychic powers, "the presiding deities of the world of pure understanding," and "their ministers" reminds us of *eikonic* intellect in *OVG*, with its "inner Word" and "understanding spirits."[257] Also striking is the correspondence between the "wall of the outer periphery" (*ipsum extimi ambitus murum*), the wall separating the firmament from the heavens (and by which Philologia kneels and prays), and Cusa's "wall of absurdity."

But what does Martianus' Platonist narrative achieve? Why is it necessary for his schema of the liberal arts? The allegory is a cogent reminder for us that the end of knowledge, "pure understanding," is not only the result of rational operations and hermeneutics but also an experience, a *mystical* experience. The literary imagery of cosmology evokes wonder in the soul, and prompts the beholder to religious reverence as well as philosophy. Paradoxy is a fundamental mode of this experience, signified logically and rhetorically. While Martianus represents metaphysical paradoxy in the "three gods" and "the powers once and twice," the paradoxy of the spiritual senses is conveyed in the "silent speech" of Philologia's prayer: an "inner voice" of words with numerical and alphabetic dimensions and also "unknown sound." Note also how Mar-

[255]For an example of the idiom, see St. Paul, 1 Thess. 2:18 Vanderpool, et al.
[256]The Unknown Father of Philologia's prayer-hymn is remarkable for its similarity to the anthropomorphic Creator of the Judeo-Christian tradition:

> Ignota vis celsa patris, vel prima propago,
> Fomes sensificus, mentis fons, lucis origo,
> Regnum naturae, deus atque assertio divum,
> Mundanusque oculus, fulgor splendentis Olympi,
> Ultramundanum fas est cui cernere patrem,
> Et magnum spectare deum; cui circulus Aethrae
> Paret, et immensis moderaris reptibus orbes.
>
> Capella, *De Nuptiis* 2.185

tianus' poetic rendition of the Platonist one-and-indefinite-dyad, "once and twice beyond," is retained in the original Greek as a sacred utterance, comparable to the sacred name of God in the tetragrammaton, "YHWH."[258] Only a poetic experience of *sensus mysticus* is capable of *transporting* the soul of the reader, who is "carried over" to the spiritual world of the text with the same "transsumptive" power ascribed to *eikonasia* in symbol and metaphor.

While a Platonist like Macrobius is content with the literary theme of cosmological ascent, Martianus augments his tale of metaphysical paradoxy and mystical experience with the *admiratio* of moriasophia. Moriasophia enters the discourse through a wider narrative frame: the parallel, and parodic, relationship between the poet, Felix (Martianus),[259] and his muse, Satyra. Satyra dictates the allegorical narrative in the manner of a Platonic revelation, the figurative discourse representing the "higher," divine reality, while the poet's persona (representing historical and physical reality) poses as a passive scribe. But this scenario is subverted, first on account of Satyra's dubious authority (her very identity denoting a genre of mockery) and second, because the poet-scribe is belittled by his Muse as something of a numbskull, whose mind wanders and whose version of the story is fraught with error. This fallibility of the poetic process is Martianus' device for narrative distancing, and it should remind us of Plato's technique in the *Parmenides*, but with the added irony of self-parody.[260]

As a result, any straightforward and confident interpretation of the mythological allegory and any mimetic claims to transcendent truth are intentionally dashed. The association of Satyra with Philologia and of Mercury with the human poet only add to the hermeneutic difficulties,

[257]Cusa, *OVG* 23.99–25.104, 25.111–13.
[258]According to Stahl, "Martianus is here expressing a Chaldaean element in Neoplatonism which ascribes the origin of all things to Hecate (under the title of *Dis epekeina* [...]in numerology these are the monad and the dyad, the numbers one and two, from which all numbers – and therefore all things, according to ancient numerological belief – are derived." Capella, "The Marriage of Mercury and Philology" 61, n. 146.
[259]Martianus complete name was Martianus Minneus Felix Capella Krapinger.
[260]Capella, "The Marriage of Mercury and Philology" 216.

since the feminine figures are depicted as stabilizing and directing the errant desires of men. The irony undermines the narrative in two ways, not only to "apotheosize" wisdom's endeavor above and beyond the mythological figures of tradition, but also to deflate the integrity of the poetic process, with its images of divine perfection and harmony.

Why has Martianus undermined his own narrative? It is through the subversion of the allegory's relationships and the reversal of human and divine roles that a new image of wisdom arises, albeit obliquely. This "true wisdom" is the result of those self-generating hermeneutic questions which are recognizably Platonic: What does the parallel relationship between poet and narrative say about divine and human knowledge? Is this knowledge transmitted from without as a vision, or do we find that revelation within? Why does the author's contrived poetics undermine the greater reality of the fictive marriage, mystically interpreted? The Platonic paradox of reality is thus represented. Appearances in the forms of shadows and likenesses, *phantasmata* and *eikones*, are not resolutions but hints and footprints, indicating higher realities via comparison and transumption. Philosophy, allegory, hermeneutics, and poetics – all modes of *logos* – participate in "true knowledge," a reality which is never complete or precise.

The higher philosophy unfolds less like a science and more like an art, a Platonist literature which contextualizes and transcends the seven branches of learning. In this art, a multi-textured irony functions like a kataphasis and apophasis, affirming and denying the very conventions of discourse on which the allegory of divine realities depends, i.e., traditional mythology, poetic inspiration, and even language. Leupin describes the *Marriage* as "a double mirror" whose "reflections bounce between the fiction of a doctrine and the doctrine of fiction (allegorical framework) that establishes it."[261] Yet we must be careful to understand its ambiguity and its *aporia* as a rare, poignant moment of continuity in the Platonic tradition, a place where philo-

sophical dialectic meets poetic form. The playful interaction of affirmation and negation, which we have observed in the mimesis and dialectic of Plato and Cusa is represented in Martianus' juxtaposition of truth-claim and counterfeit-exposé. This recapitulation of the Platonist dynamic of identity and opposition is particularly evident in Martianus' self-authentication and self-debasement, a common moriasophic device used by St. Paul and Lucian of Samosata.

The fact that Martianus' work was perhaps the most popular school textbook throughout the Middle Ages should give us pause. Here was a pre-scholastic text, imbedded deep in the cultural memory, which underscored the artificiality of language as well as the value of metaphorical predication in leading the reader to metaphysical understanding and mystical experience. Its representation of philosophy is radically different from that of Aristotle and the medieval scholastics, where scientific language must be literal. But for Martianus, logic and syllogistic are relegated to inferior status among the human arts, while a language of wisdom unfolds from the devices of rhetoric and poetry.[262]

6.4 The Comprehensive View of Wisdom in the Liberal Arts and the Encyclopaediae

There is another important sense in which Martianus' text is philosophical. Allegory aside, the exposition of the trivium and quadrivium in the *Marriage* treats human wisdom as a comprehensive and collective mastery of all the branches of knowledge. This view was prevalent in the early Middle Ages, influencing the development of so-called encyclopaedism, the generic term introduced by humanists, either on account of Quintilian (the first Latin we know of to speak of *encyclopaedia*) or via the new translations from the Greek. In a literal sense, *enkyklios paideia* similarly implies a view of wisdom as comprehensive knowledge, the "circle" represent-

[261]Leupin 78.

ing a "complete foundation" to which one often returns. Without an equivalent in Latin, the idea of a education as circular or recurrent knowledge was applied to enormous reference works, catalogues of facts and lore, from the time of Isidore and Rabanus Maurus.

It has often been said that humanists turned back toward an earlier model of education from the pre-scholastic Middle Ages, when rhetoric played a more significant role in the curriculum.[263] This fact is evident in the liberal arts system as well as the encyclopaediae. In both, ordinary experience, language-based inquiry, and hermeneutics are tools for organizing physical and spiritual realities. Both are inherently eclectic, reflecting a tendency in philosophical schools of the Hellenistic period. The generalist approach, however, attempts to remedy the Hellenistic habit of detaching metaphysics from ethics. Therefore a compendia theory of learning proposes a unification of earth and heaven, obtained by searching out the correspondences between those realms. As the proponents of the liberals arts chart a course from language and literature to abstract thought and eternal reality, so the encyclopaedists view the natural world as a multitude of signifiers which, when interpreted correctly, manifest divine causation, immanence and providence and direct the human agent toward moral action.

The schema of the liberal arts superseded the encyclopaediae in an era of humanism. The encyclopaediae were laden with natural history, a legacy of Aristotelian physics and its phenomenal approach to the world of created things. Although an underlying principle of *analogia entis* implies a hierarchical order of the universe, the manner of exposition is horizontal, serendipitous, and given to excessive detail. Like the *florilegia* of the period, the content is often a hodgepodge of empirical observations and historical facts mixed indiscriminately with legend, folklore and hearsay. The catalogues of the encyclopaediae offer little or no grammatical and rhetorical in-

[262]As with other ancient allegories, a large body of medieval commentary interprets the text for a Christian audience. See Wetherbee.

struction. Signification and metaphor are reduced to "scientific" correspondences rather than permitted to flourish as an inventive art of comparative relation. For these reasons, the medieval encyclopaediae provided matter for humanist satire, e.g., in the absurd catalogic potpourri and aetiological accoutns of Rabelais.

Yet it might also be argued that the humanists of the fifteenth and sixteenth century created, if not a new kind of encyclopaedia, a new encylopaedic style. Turning the Aristotelian and medieval penchant for observation and classification of the natural world to language itself, humanists analyzed, dissected, and systematized the language and literature of the ancients with extraordinary attention to detail, grammatical subtlety, and rhetorical sophistication. This motive belonged to the *humanista* proper and was distinct from the intellectual ambitions of the period's philosophers, whose project inclined toward harmonizing ancient philosophical doctrine with Christian theology. As a language specialist, the *humanista* fostered the most comprehensive recovery of ancient literature and began a linguistic analysis which anticipated the monumental dictionaries and lexicons of the nineteenth century. Erasmus was an outstanding representative of this impulse within humanism, an impulse to reform and standardize contemporary language as the basis for educational reform. Grammatical and rhetorical works such as *On the method of education*, *Ciceronianus*, and *On the Double Abundance* may be thought of as encyclopaediae of the Latin language, comparable to the *florilegia*, *glossalia*, and *commentaria* of the medieval period. *On the Double Abundance* in particular is a grammatical-rhetorical warehouse of Latin diction, semantics, phraseology, verbal etiquette, and literary figures.

It is easy to overlook how Erasmus' satirical works fit into these educational ambitions, the schoolteacher's academic approach molded into popular diversions, the moral aims of the Vergilian *stylus gravis* lurking behind a Terencian *stylus levis*. Each of these works puts to use

[263]See Weinberg, "Rhetoric After Plato" 4: 167–73.

an enormous variety of language (mostly in Latin but also in Greek), a fact which accounts for Erasmus' widespread popularity among language-arts students. Erasmus' literary-linguistic encyclopaedia is taken up most notably by Rabelais, whose tales of "deeds and sayings" form an amalgam of high and low vernacular culture, combining a panoply of Gallic language, lore and legend with learned traditions, especially the vocabulary, narrative patterns, and idiomatic style of ancient epic.

The liberal arts tradition thus invokes a notion of wisdom which "marries" the generalist approach of the encyclopaediae to the expertise of metaphysician and dialectician in a Platonist *paideia*. The disciplines are arranged as a vertical and hierarchical progression from the more concrete to the abstract, exemplified in the transition from the trivium to the quadrivium. At the bottom of the hierarchy stands the rudimentary foundation of the written and spoken words as the "signs" of objective realities. Verbal signification leads to signs of a higher order – spatial and mathematical – which in turn reveal the principles governing the operations of the natural world. Thus the metaphysical and cosmological concerns of Middle and Later Platonism (typified by the attention given to the *Parmenides* and *Timaeus*) are clearly acknowledged in the quadrivium subjects and in the "marriage" allegory. The vision is integrated and reflects the marked preference among Platonists for soul or spirit over matter or body. The omission of physics (an aspect of "natural philosophy") in Martianus' plan is particularly telling and suggests that the phenomena of human language and human affairs is more worthy of our studious attention than *flora* and *fauna*.

The formula allows for a greater role for rhetorical language, not only within the trivium but in the literary fiction which frames the entire system of knowledge. This does not mean that Martianus speaks for the many Platonist philosophers of his time or that his scheme of education

was even acknowledged as a distinctly Platonic model in the Middle Ages or the Renaissance. Indeed, the comprehensive approach to knowledge through disciplines tends to underscore those epistemological ambiguities already treated by Plato, the tensions between belief (*pistis*) and true belief (*pistis alethes*), and between illusory appearances (*eikasia*, *phantasma*) and true likenesses (*phainai*), which underlie his own method of rhetorical dialectic. It was, after all, rhetoricians who were faulted by Plato for claiming to speak competently on every subject. What is important here is that humanists, in emphasizing a program of liberal arts, hearkened to a notion of wisdom which affirmed the role of their discipline in an educational program.

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Most philosophical traditions in ancient times staked claims to uniting the wisdom of heaven with the wisdom of the earth, the divine with the human. In medieval Aristotelianism, there is continuity between human and divine wisdom: knowledge begins with the mental impressions of the physical world, enabling the rational specification and classification of nature and providing the intellectual "forms" necessary for abstract understanding. Then, the rational investigation of causes leads one to the summit of wisdom, the "universal science" of metaphysics, also called "first philosophy" and theology.[264] The best method for this progression of wisdom (so it appears from Aristotle's corpus) is logic, which makes inferences based on what is known, or trustworthy premises.

Perhaps Aristotle's logical methods would not have eclipsed the earlier models of education in the Middle Ages had his dialogues also been preserved, but the extant treatises give no countenance to literary-philosophical method of Platonists or to the ethical explication of literary texts. The resurgence of Aristotelian texts from the ninth century onward set a different precedent, further distancing the Stagirite's philosophy from his teacher, when, in late antiquity, the

two schools had actually grown closer together. Scholastic Aristotelians paid little attention to the Platonist origin of an eikonic cosmology, i.e., a concept of universal harmony in which the natural world "mirrors" or corresponds to the spiritual realm.[265] Aristotle's logical philosophy is one of categories and distinctions, poetic language carefully separated from the literal language of rational inference. Thus the arts of persuasion and imitation and the science of the happy life (rhetoric, poetics, and ethics) seemed to have little to do with one another. This fact accounts for an ambivalent attitude among rhetoricians regarding Aristotle's treatment of their special subjects. Petrarch and Erasmus found little in the *Nichomachean Ethics* to interest or stimulate them, while the philosophically-inclined Bruni, Lefevre, and Filelfo were among those who gave Aristotle's ethics works studious attention, producing new translations and commentaries. Similarly, rhetoricians showed little appreciation for Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and *Poetics* until the interest in poetic theory sparked new scrutiny in the mid-sixteenth century.[266]

The Platonist program of education in the liberal arts also represents the relationship between divine and human wisdom, but with a very different view towards the physical world and language. Aristotle, we might say, is a constructive thinker, who builds on the positive doctrine of the verifiable, while Plato is sensitive to the lacuna between sensual and mental knowledge. If, for Aristotle, knowledge of the physical world increases one's potential for abstract understanding, for Plato it is a two-edged sword. Like opinion, sensual knowledge is untrustworthy;

[264]See Aristotle. *Meta*. 982a.
[265]According to theory of identity in Aristotle's *On the soul*, knowledge is the union of a thinker with the object of thought. God achieves this union perfectly in his self-sustaining contemplation of intelligible forms, while we perform the same kind of rational activity but imperfectly. While this theory was an important foundation for epistemology in the Middle Ages, it is not eikonic and has no rhetorical expression.
[266]Paul Grendler, *The Universities of the Italian Renaissance* discusses the place of Aristotle in the curricula of the Renaissance. For the Aristotelian tradition of ethics in the Renaissance, see Lines. For poetics in Aristotelian scholasticism and humanism, see Greenfield.

and because of this one must test assertions with dialectical inquiry and by analogy to the "recollection" of eternal forms. Thus, where Aristotle sees continuity, Plato sees disjunction.[267]

This fundamental difference impacts both the manner of dialectical verification and the very form of philosophy itself. The irreconcilable gap between the phenomenal and the conceptual ideal in a Platonist view calls for demolition and reconstruction; such is the purpose the Socratic ignorance and the negations of the *elenchus*. But another result of the "Socratic turn" away from nature and physics and toward ethics is the central role of language in Platonism. The correspondences in Aristotle between the physical and mental reality is depicted in Plato as disjunctive. Literal and figurative language mirror the problem of discerning deceptive from authentic appearances, similar to the difference between "letter" and "spirit" in St. Paul.[268]

This means, first of all, that language and interpretation are worthy subjects for philosophical instruction. Although the imitation of the master's literary style was rare among later generations of Platonists, the hermeneutical tradition demonstrates the tendency to seek wisdom in figurative interpretations. In a liberal-arts model, language is the first foundation for formal knowledge rather than physics, the letter-signification and *sententiae* preceding mathematical symbols and formulae. And yet figurative language in Platonism has the same power as mathematics to signify divine reality and, as said earlier, to transport the reader experientially. Thus we might argue that human and divine wisdom, paralleled in literal and figurative signification, is essentially theological in its attempt to overcome disjunctive reality and reconcile the reader with the ideal, "likeness to god as far as possible" (Thea. 176b).

Renaissance humanists may not have understood how the integration of speculative and practical philosophy came about, but neither did they have to wait for the full recovery of Plato's

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[267]In Plato's works, the untrusting attitude toward sensual reality is indicated in the famous "Socratic turn" from natural philosophy to ethics, described in the *Phaedo*.

texts in order to have a model of literary philosophy which could stand up to the scholastics' Aristotle. Besides the medieval translations of *Timaeus, Phaedo, Meno* and *Parmenides,* the vestiges of a Platonist literature could be found in such seminal pagan texts as the Hermetic *Asclepius*, Porphyry's *Cave of the Nymphs*, and Macrobius' *Dream of Scipio*; in the Platonist commentary of Vergil's *Aeneid* and Ovid's *Metamorphosis,* and in such Christian literature as Augustine's *Confessions,* Boethius' *Consolation,* and the many influential works of the twelfth-century Chartrian school.[269] The universal role of language in Platonism's metaphysical paradoxy kept alive the vital connections between metaphysics, ethics, rhetoric, and poetry, in a genre designed to rival drama and epic.[270]

Cicero's endorsement of Plato carried weight as well, especially for teachers of rhetoric. His definition of wisdom as a *communitas* of gods and men evokes the same ideal of union of heaven and earth as Martianus' marriage allegory, but with a political emphasis. The dutiful imitation of metaphysical truth in ethics is recalled by Cicero in the *Tusculan Disputations*:

Socrates was the first – he called philosophy down from the heavens, settled her in the cities, and introduced her into its homes; and he forced her to ask questions about life and morals and things good and evil.[271]

Though Socrates' decisive turn from natural philosophy to ethics is stated in the *Phaedo,* it was Cicero's poetic paraphrase which resounded throughout the Renaissance. In a culture which conceives wisdom and knowledge hierarchically, Cicero's Promethean allusion might seem a little out of place, for is it not rather the task of philosopher, in Platonist ethics, to *ascend* to the

[268]"The letter kills, the spirit gives life" (2 Cor. 3:6).
[269]Platonist works in the School of Chartres include William of Conches' dialogues *Philosophia* and *Dragmaticon,* and Bernadus Silvestris' *Cosmographia*. See "Humanism and the School of Chartres" in Southern 61–85.
[270]Andrea Nightingale, argues persuasively that Plato imitates and competes with other genres.
[271]"Socrates autum primus philosophiam devocavit e caelo et in urbibus conlocavit et in domus etiam introduxit et coëgit de vita et moribus rebusque bonis et malis quaerere." Cicero, M. T., *Tusculan Disputations, I, II, V.* 5.4.10–11.

divine and eternal? Such is the tendency in the spiritual systems of Plotinus and Dionysius, in the metaphysics of Aristotle, and in medieval Christian theology. Even in Aristotle's ethics, contemplation eventually eclipses the rationalistic calculus of the *via media* as the representation of earthly fulfillment, or *eudaemonia*. But in the broader tradition of ancient thought, ethics is a mirror of the divine reality and of the dynamic forces at work in the cosmos. Cicero's passage spoke volumes for humanists, who likewise aimed to "call down" wisdom from its heights of speculation, so that it might permeate the active life.

A re-connecting of metaphysics to ethics in humanism does not imply that humanists, on a whole, were self-avowed Platonists or drew extensively or exclusively on evidence from Platonist sources. Rather, as described in the previous chapter, the first principles of the Platonists were thoroughly distilled in a tradition of Christian Platonism, via many Fathers of the early centuries who benefited from an education in Greek philosophy, such as the Alexandrians Clement and Origen, the Cappadocians Basil and Gregory of Nyssa, the Byzantine Maximus of Constantinople, (and exercising great influence in the West) Jerome, and Augustine. In the Patristic authors, Greek and Roman metaphysics were translated into theology, with a personal God as transcendent Creator, an incarnate Savior as divine *Logos*, a pure Spirit as agent of divine presence, and angels as divine messengers and movers. Many of the moral virtues and vices in the Platonist and Homeric traditions were adapted for a Christian morality, over several centuries of monasticism. Perhaps metaphysics and ethics come together most powerfully for humanists in the thought of Augustine, whose journey from teacher of rhetoric to Christian theologian suggested for humanists an ideal of eloquent wisdom. In Augustine's *Confessions*, the problem of

evil is at once an intellectual and a moral concern; it was the Platonists, the author says, which led him to the discovery that evil is privation.[272]

A variety of views and approaches in the Renaissance expressed a wisdom ideal which integrated the speculative and the practical. The notion that all branches of knowledge could be unified and perhaps even mastered by a single individual defied the principle of specialization and the professional class-system which formed the bedrock of institutional organization. A philosophy grounded in a liberal arts program recovered some of its antique diversity and interdisciplinarity, while humanists endeavored to harmonize a language arts approach with that of the systematic sciences. For Lorenzo Valla and Rodolphus Agricola, this ambition led to detaching of dialectic from logical demonstration and restoring it to its ancient role within a general art of argument.[273] Dialectic in a topical system examines and clarifies premises but without any relation to real-life situations.[274] As Peter Mack writes, "The most important thing they share is the aim of reuniting logic and real language" (245, '93). Even if the new "topics" did not have far-reaching consequences, Valla and Agricola regained some of the territory surrendered to logic during the Middle Ages. With renewed confidence in methods of argument, many humanists extended their treatment of literature to philosophical subjects. For exampe, in the Florentine *Studium* of Lorenzo de' Medici, Angelo Poliziano lectured on Aristotle's logical corpus, while

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[272]See Book VII of Augustine, *Confessions* 111–32.

[273]The boundaries of dialectic and rhetoric are argued in Valla's *The Re-ploughing of Dialectic and Philosophy* (*Repastinatio dialectice et philosophie*, 1439) and Agricola's *On Dialectical Invention* (*De inventione dialectica*, 1479).

[274]The definition of dialectic in Valla and Agricola is closer to Cicero than Aristotle. The understanding of dialectic has changed over the course of history. As Marta Spranzi points out, an ancient theory of dialectic was defined by its place in a literature of *topics*, where is it associated with the art of invention, or finding premises for arguments. In this context, thinkers differed as to whether dialectic was principally concerned with practical rules and strategies for discovering arguments, or whether it was associated with the justification of inferences Spranzi 33.

Cristoforo Landino lectured on the philosophical and theological interpretation of Horace, Virgil, and Dante.[275]

Few aspects of humanist thought would reveal a turn toward Platonist literary-philosophical technique more overtly than the resurgence of the dialogue form in the fifteenth century. Some of the best-known authors of dialogues in the Fifteenth Century include Bruni, Poggio Bracciolini, Alberti, Valla, and Pontano in Italy, and Cusa and Lefevre north of the Alps.[276] Although the dialogue had never disappeared from the Western scene, it was employed far more abundantly by Christian spiritual writers, only falling into neglect during the scholastic twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when the *summa* took over as the dominant form of theology. The literary imitation of Cicero by humanists in the Fourteenth Century provided them with what appeared to be a Platonic model prior to the actual recovery of Plato's texts. In a well-known work like *On Oratory*, Cicero writes as one intimate with Socrates and the philosophy of the Academy.[277] When Petrarch took up the dialogue in his *Secret*, he modified the strictly didactic approach of Augustine and Boethius (a question-and-answer format, reminiscent of the teacher-pupil relationship) with a Ciceronian spirit of free inquiry. This combination attempts to break the mold of the Christian consolation genre, since the Franciscus persona seems to have more in common with Academic Skepticism than the historical Augustine would allow for.[278]

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[275]Kallendorf 129–65.

[276]Marsh, *The Quattrocento Dialogue: Classical Tradition and Humanist Innovation*. More study needs to be done on the dialogue form North of the Alps as well as the audiences for whom they were written.

[277]Robert Gorman, in a study of Cicero's Socratism, explains how Cicero "Romanizes" and "tames" the ancient Greek representations of Plato's and Xenophon's teacher so that his character and speech might be more palitable in an elite Roman society (11–84). Though humanists were not under the same constraints as Cicero, many indeed shared the Roman's aim to make Socratic teaching and method appealing to elite audiences. But humanists also had a powerful advantage: they were able to point to the similarities between Socrates, Christ, and Christian moriasophic role models.

[278]See Baron. Precisely because the persona Franciscus resists a number of Augustine's stated positions, especially those pertaining to love and glory, the two "worldly" pursuits which the poet will not surrender to an ascetic view of Christianity Augustine. criticizes open-ended skepticism in *Against the Academics.*

This last point is important, since Cicero was a self-avowed Platonist who received formal training at the Academy in Athens. Those humanists who began a trend of dialogue-writing in the fifteenth-century could only assume that the Cicero was imitating the master faithfully. Their situation can be likened to the unearthing of classical statues in Italy. Roman artists throughout the Imperial era were known to copy Greek statues, and so the discovery of a Roman statue was thought to illustrate faithfully the ancient style of the Greeks. While some traces of the originals are indeed contained in the Roman attempts, later generations would better discern the differences. Thus we find in the Quattrocento dialogue philosophical ideas put forward in the mimetic form, with symbolic settings, personae drawn from the author's contemporary society, a mixed rhetoric of informal speech and eloquent expression and an injection of occasional humor. These were important steps toward rediscovering the role of language in the pursuit of wisdom and in reuniting the speculative questions with practical circumstances and methods.

6.5 Wisdom in Theology

The complex intermingling of philosophy and theology in the Middle Ages and the various reconstructions of ancient philosophical schools over the centuries makes it difficult to speak of philosophy in the Renaissance as a science with a single, unified method. The relationship between a humanist movement and the history of philosophy is likewise complicated. Most whom we call Renaissance humanists today were particularly concerned with moral philosophy or ethics, but their aims and ambitions extended to the whole of education – to its sources, priorities, and methods. The ardent desire for major reforms jettisoned many humanists into areas they were not necessarily primed for, from political science and civil administration to Scriptural theology and metaphysics. If the Burkhardtian myth of "the Renaissance man" conjures images

of a "well-rounded individual," it is not because educated persons in the Renaissance were anthologists, doxologists, and encyclopaedists. Rather, it is because humanists (many of whom were teachers) tended to ransack all the branches of knowledge for remedies to contemporary problems and to advance their solutions with the best scholarly and rhetorical means possible.

Greek and Roman civilization offered a remarkable wealth of resources for revising the structures of knowledge and methods in education, and this fact means that humanism was more than a cultural program or a love-affair with classicism. It was a clarion call to the very origins of philosophy in the all-encompassing "love of wisdom," which included the ancient roots of wisdom theory as well as the Christological wisdom of theological doctrine. Humanists were inspired in this endeavor by the ancients, who discussed a concept of wisdom more freely and broadly than the scholastics. What we refer to today as a philosophical eclecticism of the Hellenistic era and of Late Antiquity concerns, in fact, a great deal of theology, but just not the kind of theology associated with Jewish and Christian doctrine. The term *theologikē* first appears in Plato's *Republic* (II.18) and was used afterwards by Aristotle in several treatises; it refers to a science of unchanging (thus divine) principles, as distinct from the sensory phenomena of experience. For Plato, abstract concepts such as number and being are divine, while for Aristotle, a theological science is "first philosophy," "first science," and also "wisdom."[279] For Aristotle, "all men suppose what is called wisdom to deal with the first causes and the principles of things" (*Metaph*. 981b). But because the ancients believed that such divine principles are rationally accessible (to a degree), a theological wisdom for later Platonists, Peripatetics, and Stoics is not always clearly distinguished from metaphysics and cosmology.

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[279]In time it became apparent that the *metaphysikē* of the scholastics was a corrupt understanding of the Greek *meta ta phusika*, fourteen treatises of Aristotle placed "*after the Physics*" in the Aristotelian corpus, probably by Andronicus of Rhodes.

There is one sense, however, in which a medieval scholastic view of philosophy and theology boundary was similar to that of the ancients: in both, the reality of the temporal was distinguished from that of the eternal, which extends beyond reason. Where they differed concerns the "scriptures" of each culture and their relation to metaphysics, i.e., the origins and causes of unchanging principles. The way in which ancient Platonists harmonized Homeric and Platonic texts with ancient metaphysics is not as dissimilar from a Western understanding as one might suppose. Inspiration, prophesy, divine intervention, divine precept, mystery, and figurative interpretation were central aspects of both pagan and Judeo-Christian tradition. Thus the main difference consisted less in method then in substance, monotheism opposing polytheism, the historical-literal claims of biblical literature contrasting ancient mythopoesis. The rest was a matter of priority. While the "revelation" of the sacred scriptures is regarded as an infallible authority by Jews and Christians (in the words of the famous Anselmian forumula, "faith seeking understanding"), the Platonist philosophers privileged a kind of personal mysticism, whose divine doctrines are more dependent on reason, understanding, and intuition.

One controversy in medieval thought concerns whether the philosophy and theology are separated definitively, as reason from revelation, or whether philosophical truth interpenetrates theology in some rational way. While the emphasis on a division is preferred by the scholastics, others remained determined to discover closer relationship in a "natural" or "rational" theology. Ramon Sibiuda's *Natural Theology* (also known as *The Book of Creatures*), an example of the former, advances the idea that nature can be "read" and interpreted like a material Scripture, that the order of nature (a great chain of being) demonstrates a series of correspondences between physical, intellectual and divine reality. Ramon Llull, another Catalan thinker who may have influenced Sibiuda, took a more "rational" path to theology, arguing that the dynamic properties

of mental constructs (e.g., virtues and universals) resemble patterns in the exposition of doctrine, including mysteries of the Trinity and the Incarnation.[280] It is by exploring the relationships between reason and doctrine that one might discover the theological dimension of ancient wisdom. Literary works like Martianus' *Marriage* and Macrobius' *Dream of Scipio* were already well-suited to the purpose.[281]

6.6 Humanist Wisdom in Speculative Theology

In its relentless and passionate search for models of wisdom, humanism was destined for the domains of theology no less than the philosophical matter of medieval scholastics. This simple but essential fact has been overlooked time and again in scholarship which has focused on the humanist revival of the ancients at the expense of the humanist rationale for doing so. Christian philosophers and theologians had been answering the Tertullian argument – "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" – from its inception, and as the history of Christian doctrine indicates, accomodation and assimilation won out as often as division and isolation. This was not only the case for doctrine but for cultural traditions and norms. Within a generation, Jewish-Christian acceptance of the Gentiles led to the reassessment of circumcision and dietary laws.

Charles Trinkhaus is the modern scholar to whom we are most indebted for outlining and summarizing several important theological objectives and conflicts at the very heart of humanist thought. In his landmark work, *In Our Image and Likeness*, Trinkaus reminds us that a Renaissance anthropology is rooted in the account of creation from the Book of Genesis and a vast tradition of commentary and preaching rather than the world-view of ancient philosophers and rhe-

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[280]Cusa's library contains a copy of Sibiuda's *Natural Theology* and a large number of Llull's works Watanabe 156–60.

toricians.[282] Humanists in no way repudiated the medieval ideas about the relationship of faith and reason. Faith is a gift, offered externally in sacred tradition and internally through the Holy Spirit, a kind of interior light and personal *Logos*. For lack of it, the ancients were found wanting, and thus any claim of prolepsis or foreshadowing had to demonstrate a sound awareness of the differences as well as an *apologesis*, i.e., a justification for pagan learning. Archbishop Stephen Tempier's 219 *Articles* (the so-called "Condemnation of 1277") is one cogent reminder that, well ahead of humanism, medieval Aristotelians had found themselves in a similar position.

Humanism's affirmation of the propaedeutic role of ancient thought clearly stressed continuity. Because the metaphysics and cosmology of newly translated Platonic texts, including Plotinus, Proclus, and the Hermetica, resembled those of the Fathers Clement, Origen, and especially Dionysius, there was fresh excitement that pagan wisdom was even closer to Christian doctrines than had been previously thought, so close in fact that humanists began to regard some ancients as having been granted a sort of unusual grace, an illumination or infused wisdom not known to have existed previously. Perhaps God's plan for a universal truth had even made possible a *reconciliation* of wisdom traditions – Egyptian, Persian, and Greek – so that the most significant presumptions of ancient theology might be of a piece with the pre-Christian wisdom of the Jews.[283] While reading and translating the Hermetic texts, Ficino came to the conclusion that such a connection was necessary: Plato must have derived certain notions directly from the Holy Scriptures.

[281]It may be ironic that the relationship of "handmaid" to "queen" continued to be a popular metaphor for the relationship between philosophy and theology in the scholastic Middle Ages. The language is most likely a borrowing from Martianus, recalling Philologia and her handmaids, the personified liberal arts.
[282]See Trinkaus, *Image and Likeness* and Pelikán.
[283]A reconciliation of wisdom traditions was known as "perrenial philosophy" (*philosophia perrenis*) at least from the time of Agostino Steuco (1497-1548), but Steuco was clearly following a path laid out by Ficino and Pico Schmitt, C..

Comparative accounts of ancient metaphysics and theology shifted the method of a reconciliation project away from propositional logic and toward comparative analysis. A new hope in Platonism's rational and "inspired" theology became the driving force behind humanist speculation and put it on the fast-track toward the exposition of doctrine. Cusa, a scholastic-trained metaphysician, was among the vanguard, using the dialectical technique of the *Parmenides* and the negative theology of Dionysius and Proclus in order to reignite a discourse on the nature of the divine in relation to the human. This discourse explored metaphysical prioritism and absolutism as a way of meditating on God, the Incarnation, and the Trinity.

But why was this intellectual project necessary or important? The reconciliation of ancient and Christian wisdom was the underpinning of humanism's second great theme, the very practical concern of renewal and reform in the present Church and in society in general. Cusa was of course one of the architects of ecclesial unification in the West throughout the stormy papacy of Eugenio IV and the triumphant, humanist papacy of Nicholas V, through the reconciliation of Eastern and Western Churches at the Council of Ferrara-Florence. His role as papal legate for the reform of the clergy throughout the Germany and the Low Countries (with the power to dispense Jubilee indulgences and to censure with the interdict) complements, in ways still unexplored, his dialectical reconciliation theory; nevertheless, we can certainly assume that, for Cusa, a revised intellectual understanding of the wisdom tradition forms the basis for reforms in spirituality and religious practice.[284]

Cusa was succeeded by a small but significant number of philosopher-theologians, especially Ficino and Lefèvre and those who studied with them at the Florentine studium and the College Lemoines. For Ficino, the metaphysical wisdom of the ancients was similarly a "prior the-

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[284]There are many recent, excellent biographical outlines of Nicholas of Cusa. See, for example Duclow, "Life and Works", and Cusa, *Spiritual Writings* 3–84.

ology," *prisca theologia*. Once again, Platonist sources provided the most significant impetus – Plotinus, Hermes Trismegithus, the Chaldean Oracles, and (for the first time) the complete Platonic corpus. Aristotle was not excluded but harmonized with Platonism in the eclectic and syncretistic manner of the ancient schools. Ficino did not question whether later Platonists had deviated from the authentic Platonic teachings but tended to view their tradition as unbroken. A chain of dependence demonstrated the progressive development of theology over the ages and explained the unity of thought – especially in metaphysics and ethics – which appeared across the cultural divides. Ancient philosophy, he assumed, owed its profound wisdom to ancient theology (Ficino called it a *pia philosophia*).[285] Whereas Plato concealed divine mysteries in allegories, and the Pythagoreans in numbers and symbols, Plotinus "unveiled theology" systematically.[286] Ficino's hermeneutic theory is essentially Augustinian: mimesis and allegory protect divine mysteries from those who would regard the truth with contempt.

Lefevre was a Master of Philosophy at the University of Paris, but he had a strong attraction to contemplative, mystical prayer, and the monastic life. Acquiring proficiency in Greek, he began to publish pedagogical literature with the express intent of reconciling Aristotelian *theology* to Christian doctrine with the same kind of enthusiasm Ficino had shown in his Platonic-Christian synthesis. As Eugene Rice writes: "Lefevre considered Aristotle's philosophy true, holy, and in fundamental agreement with Christianity because God, even though Aristotle was a pagan and lived before the incarnation, had made him his priest and prophet and graciously revealed the truth to him."[287] Similar to Augustine, Lefevre describes the harmony between philosophy and theology as a relationship of knowledge (*scientia*) to wisdom (*sapientia*). After

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[285]This concept of pagan-Christian harmony in a speculative wisdom tradition is reevaluated by Erasmus, who simplifies the Platonic model in his notion *philosophia Christi* For *philosophia Christi*, See Chapter 10.
[286]Ficino's Christianizing interpretation of Plotinus is striking. See Saffrey, "Plotinus".
[287]Lefèvre d'Étaples 21.

several years of Aristotelian scholarship, Lefevre concentrated in other areas of theology, publishing early Christian commentaries of the Scriptures, doctrinal treatises of the Church Fathers, and the spiritual writings of several medieval mystics. The entire last part of his long career was dedicated to Biblical translation and commentary, beginning with the Psalms and of the letters of St. Paul.[288]

The examples of Cusa, Ficino and Lefevre demonstrate that the wisdom ideal of those whom we most frequently place under the banner of philosophy, i.e., speculative thinkers with humanist inclinations, was primarily theological. Pico, in his *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, addresses not the philosophers of the universities but the theologians (*Patres*) of Rome when he writes "not only the Mosaic and Christian mysteries but also the theology of the ancients show us the benefits and value of the liberal arts."[289] The notion of a rational or "inspired" ancient theology offered a new level of pagan-Christian *concordia*. Not only was the wisdom of the ancients to be esteemed as a precursor to the revealed truth of the Judeo-Christian Scriptures but their terminology and methods were thought of immediate relevance to contemporary Christian doctrine and Church politics. Renaissance wisdom theory not only blurs the edges of the medieval distinction between philosophy and theology but relocates the pagan-Christian boundary somewhere within a theological science.

The personal lives of Ficino, Lefevre and many of their associates and students bore witness to the intended direction of their pursuits. During an intense period of religious self-examination, in which Ficino worked out his greatest synthesis of Platonism and Christianity (the period of *Platonic Theology* and *On Christian Religion*), the Florentine intellectual undertook holy orders in 1473, at the late age of forty. Pico, at the age of twenty eight, renounced his pat-

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[288]See Hughes.
[289]Pico 233.

rimony and made plans to wander Europe as an evangelist. Lefevre, whose avid interest in medieval spirituality and mysticism reflected his personal attraction to the contemplative life, finally retired to a solitary life, where he translationed the Psalms and New Testament into vernacular French. Similarly his student Charles de Bovelles, after a period of personal conversion to the devout life, became one of the most original and prolific "rational theologians" of the day.[290] Many other examples could be adduced. To label these thinkers "humanist philosophers" belies the prioritization of theological principles and spiritual devotion in their intellectual contemplation as in their scholarly work.

The fact that some speculative thinkers of the fifteenth and sixteenth-century shared in the core humanist project of recovering ancient texts and ideas demonstrates that such a movement cannot be limited to those instructors and students who bore the title *humanista*; and perhaps a distinction between practical and speculative objectives provides better grounds for expressing this major difference among humanists instead of divisions along disciplinary lines. Given the prominence of theology intellectually and culturally in defining the concept of wisdom and in unifying the disciplines accordingly, "practical humanism" (or "moral humanism," as virtue is the chief intention of practice) and "speculative humanism" as critical terms speak to these general aspects of intellectual inquiry without neglecting the period's most fundamental doctrines. Speculative and practical tendencies in humanism reflect the two conventional aspects of wisdom, *sophia* and *phronesis*, reflected in the metaphysics and ethics of the ancients, or in the dogmatic (or systematic) and moral theology of Christianity. Significantly, the emphasis on concord in speculative and practical thought corresponds to the compatibility of dialectical and rhetorical methods.

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[290]Victor 13–16.

6.7 Humanist Wisdom in Scriptural Theology

The speculative wisdom of humanists in systematic philosophy and theology provided theoretical underpinnings for renewal and reform. But the connection is not always clear and straightforward. Certainly, Cusa's theology of reconciliation through the Absolute should be viewed alongside not only his political and ecclesial ideals but also his reform of religious communities and a summoning of monks back to their primary duty of meditation and contemplative prayer. While the new sources of a Renaissance wisdom-theory generated a great deal of interest and excitement among learned circles of philosophers and theologians and in some monastic orders, it was still in many respects a continuation of the medieval-scholastic project of faith seeking reason.

The difference between a speculative and practical emphasis in theology may be epitomized in soteriological terms, i.e., what path of sanctity and spirituality leads to the final reward of beatific vision or salvation. A speculative and contemplative wisdom was well suited to a learned, clerical culture, whose communal lifestyle incorporated intervals throughout the day for prayer as well as time for reading (*lectio*) and writing (*scriptio*). In a Christian theology of grace, the prayers of religious orders were regarded as highly efficacious contributions toward reparation for sin, on behalf of the individual as well as the entire world, in communion with the prayers of the general Church and the saints. The active model of wisdom in a humanist program of language arts, on the other hand, was better suited to the emerging classes among the laity – nobility, gentry, bankers, and merchants – many of whom were seeking a spirituality commensurate with their state of life. Thus civic virtues like fair and honest dealing in business, charity, and benevolence, cannot be separated from the development of active-pious practices among the laity, organized in confraternities, religious solidarities and the formation of hospitals,

orphanages, and *monti di pietà* (in several Italian territories, state funds set aside for disadvantaged members of the community). This "lay spirituality" of the period connected individual salvation to social and political harmony, reflecting a contemporary, urban interpretation of the "City of God."

Indeed, from the soteriological point of view the moral theologian had a certain advantage over the dogmatic theologian engaged in a speculative metaphysics. In the Biblical and hagiographical tradition, sanctity is identified with following the precepts revealed by God rather than the intellectual understanding of whom (or what) God is in his unknowable and mysterious nature. Prophesy, law, gospel (or testimony), and tradition in the New Testament supply whatever "knowledge" is sufficient for salvation, the rest remaining a matter of conformity and practice. This represents the orthodox point of view in Christianity, in contrast with the so-called "gnosticism" of mystery religions. The righteous person should and must *meditate* on God, but is not required to *speculate* beyond what has already been revealed, since intellectual or philosophical knowledge by itself does not guarantee spiritual advancement or grace. Thus moral doctrine is arguably of more immediate value than metaphysics and a speculative theology of God.

This is not to say that there was no speculation in a tradition of moral theology; on the contrary, moral theory sprang forth immediately with the growth of Christian communities and disputes arose from the considerable diversity of new converts. New Testament epistles began the work of systematization, such as St. Paul's definition of love (*agape*; Letter to the Corinthians 13:10) and St. John's three-fold division of sin into "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life" (1 Jn 2:16), later epitomized as the sins of the world, the flesh, and the devil. The monastic movement from the fourth century onward contributed much to moral theory,

in a devotional literature of "mirror" and "ladder," the ubiquitous symbols of introspection and progress in spirituality.[291] Monks also devised elaborate tables or "trees" of virtues and vices, the *arbores bonae* and *arbores malae*, which demonstrated complex relationships between various psychological dispositions.[292]

As in ancient culture, Christian teachers of rhetoric were major contributors to moral theology through the interpretative practices of the language arts curriculum. Locating Christian virtue in pagan works was often a theological enterprise no less than a philosophical one, the result of the long-standing medieval tradition of exegesis and allegoresis. How else might one regard the widely-known and studied medieval commentaries on pagan classics like Vergil's *Aeneid* and Ovid's *Metamorphosis*? Or the Platonic-allegorical *Cosmographia* of Bernardus Silvestris? The primary audience for these works were religious. The rhetorical approach to morality continued uninterrupted even as scholastics worked toward a more sophisticated system. As a result, there was a great deal more diversity in the study of moral theology than in its dogmatic counterpart, in fact, a parallel tradition: moral instruction could take the shape of a theoretical science or a practical art, and these two ends were often combined.

As the speculative-leaning humanists turned to the Dionysian writings as their theological "font" of metaphysical reconciliation between pagan and Christian thinkers (both Lefèvre and Ficino published their own translations), humanists in the rhetorical tradition looked to those sources which reflected their professional interests, disciplinary methods, and encyclopaedic tendencies. In theology, the desire for moral rejuvenation led to an expansive recovery of the Judeo-Christian literary tradition, after the same manner as the recovery of the ancients, in all their diversity and complexity. A pre-scholastic, pre-"medieval" Christianity became the treas-

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[291]For the metaphors of "mirror" and "ladder" in spiritual discourse, see Underhill and Nygren.
[292]For a systematic view of virtue and vice in the Middle Ages, see Katzenellenbogen.

ure trove for moral reformers, representing the source of an ecclesial civilization sorely in need of being unearthed and brought to light (the concept of a *medio aevum* being a humanist invention). The lost heritage of the Greek Fathers of the Church – a key to understanding the spiritual wisdom, moral teaching and pastoral resolutions of the first centuries – held a special place among humanists and was a far greater priority than the pagan sources of wisdom.[293]

Perhaps it was inevitable that the desire for moral renewal and reform led many humanists to the source of moral teaching *par excellence,* the Bible. From the earliest recorded history of Christianity, the Scriptures were regarded as a repository of sacred doctrine and the foundation of a theological wisdom. Unlike the revealed "mysteries" of the Trinity, the Incarnation, and Christ's "hypostatic union," which are based on carefully-wrought interpretations of specific passages, moral teaching abounds throughout the Scriptures, not only in explicit instruction and in the stipulations of divine law but in a varied literature of narratives, historical chronicles, poems, proverbs, hymns, and letters. This fluid medium, along with the testimonial and apologetic style of New Testament narrative and epistolary, set a precedent for a new literary culture of Christianity, which from the very first centuries included a tradition of Biblical exegesis, preaching, liturgy, ritual and meditative prayer (e.g., the canonical "hours" or "divine office"), devotional writing, and a broad stream of erudite and popular hagiography.

While much attention has been paid to the impact of new philological methods on biblical interpretation, it is also important to ask why humanists turned to the Scriptures as the final end of the movement's arguments about wisdom and education. The earlier phase of humanism treats the Bible within the framework of a Christian literary heritage, as the primary source of

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[293]This point cannot be emphasized enough: time and again, the historical evidence reveals that pagan sources were not an end in themselves for humanists but were sought to add to the present project of knowledge in a predominantly Christian world-view and to contextualize early Christianity. In both cases, the acquisition of Greek

personal spirituality, conversion, and reform. For example, while the *Divine Comedy* incorporates a great deal of theological doctrine, Dante's representation of biblical personages and the poet's recollection of biblical events is rhetorical; Dante is not demonstrating theological problems per se but rather inviting his reader to enter into his internal experience of conversion and spiritual progress. When Petrarch ascends Mount Ventoux and selects a passage at random from the *Confessions,* he experiences the Scriptures through an Augustinian filter: his action constitutes a calculated imitation of the garden episode in Book VIII, the moment of Augustine's conversion through the New Testament; and the advice Petrarch receives – to turn his "inner eye" toward himself – is at once compared to Augustine's revelation that he must turn away from the flesh and put on Christ. For Petrarch the experience is a spiritual verification of his moral progress, made possible by God's "immutable wisdom."[294]

But Petrarch also began to turn to the Bible as a scholar, his encounter influenced by the new context of ancient literature. Never before had the personae of the biblical narratives come to life amidst such a vivid cultural backdrop. Never before had there been so much evidence to support the claim that pagan wisdom prepared a path leading to the Christian faith. Ancient Greeks and Romans – the contemporaries of the Hebrews during their resistance to Hellenism and Roman Imperialism, during the birth of the universal Savior and the subsequent apostolic age – could and did exhibit aspects of Christian virtue. With nascent historical consciousness, Petrarch used the biography as an instrument for comparative analysis in *On Famous Men* (*De viris illustribus*), and (like Dante) he juxtaposed biblical and ancient personae in his unfinished spiritual poem *The Triumphs*. Boccaccio followed suit in his expansive *On the Fortunes of Famous Men [and Women]* and *On Famous Women*. These pioneering efforts of humanism were

language was necessary, especially to better learn and understand the writings of the Church Fathers. See Stinger 473–501.

precursor to the revival of the ancient genre of "parallel lives" by Bruni and Manetti. Their biographies of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio helped to shape the concept of the humanist as a poet-theologian (*poeta theologus*),[295] one who employs ancient virtue and literary-rhetorical methods to inspire moral progress. The notion that the Bible is a resource for moral action as well as spiritual contemplation is nothing new, but a poetic refashioning and recontextualization of the Judeo-Christian and the Greco-Roman represented a new kind of interpretation, one which was deeply personal and literary.

While a literary-scholarly use of the Scriptures flowed naturally from the moralizing practices of the grammatical and rhetorical curriculum, it also represented a subtle disciplinary transition from the language arts domain into a professional theologian's territory. In the clerical culture of the Middle Ages, the Church's authority in theology was a given. It was divinely ordained, dispensed by God to prophets, priests, and kings in the Old Testament, extended to the apostles by Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit, and then to the hierarchy of bishops, priests, and lesser clergy. This concept was modified only by the addition of "oecumenical" councils and episcopal synods, which met to decide disputed matters and to confirm the authenticity of doctrines and sacred traditions for communities of the faithful.

One of the understated facts about humanism is that it too was grounded in the idea of authority. The humanist quest for the "sources" (*fontes*) of knowledge and wisdom revealed the same fundamental concern for origins, causes, founders, and ancestors – which were implied in the root *auctor*. The Scriptures, in the canon of texts fixed by the time of Augustine, was a source in several senses: a divine aetiology, relating such metaphysical causes as the universe of space and time, the physical earth and all living creatures, men and women, angels, demons and

[294]Petrarch, "The Ascent of Mont Ventoux".
[295]Witt; Trinkaus, *Image and Likeness* 2: 289–97; Kircher.

evil, the fall from grace; the historical foundations of the Hebrew nation, the Abrahamic covenant, the Mosaic law, the territory of Israel, and the kingdom of Judah; the origins of messianic prophesy, of Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection; and the ecclesial origins of the first Apostolic communities. While speculative thinkers emphasized the common "sources" of metaphysical *archai*, such as the onto-theological prioritism of Cusa's coincidentia, humanists in the rhetorical-moral tradition turned to the Scriptures for an origin of history. How such divine workings, commands, and prophesies were captured in the language of texts could only be explained by a doctrine of "inspiration," the *auctor* of sacred origins conveyed through the *auctoritas* of the human scribe, entrusted to preserve the truth of God's revelation.

The divine status of the Bible and the hidden wisdom it contained was never in question among theologians and humanists of the Renaissance. Humanists in general were firm if not devout believers in the Church's fundamental doctrines, its hierarchy, and its right to impose canon law – at least until the reformers of the sixteenth century. But in the ascendancy of philological scholarship, the authority of ecclesial governance and priestly succession had not yet become clearly distinguished from authority in matters of doctrine and Biblical interpretation. Without opposing the former, humanists attacked the latter. What was of greater use in the elucidation of the Scriptures, Aristotelian logic, or the linguistic tools and interpretive methods of the *studia humanitatis*? Applying the same kind of scrutiny to the Bible as they had to ancient texts, humanists called for a startlingly new understanding of "The Word of God" as a complex work of literature, a medley of genres, styles, and literary devices, integrating the rational with the revealed, the metaphysical with the moral, the prophetic with the historical and political. The collation of manuscripts, divulging numerous inconsistencies and variances in textual traditions, also made the Bible appear more and more like a human product. It was undeniable that issues

of language had a direct bearing on doctrinal matters, calling into question the concept of inspiration and a medieval, Latin tradition of exegesis and commentary.

Scriptural philology marked a new phase in the humanists' claim to wisdom. No longer just a matter of personal spirituality, humanists – many of whom were non-clerics – had grounds for claiming that they were no less theologians than university-bred scholastics. However, instead of focusing on metaphysical and cosmological aspects of doctrine, humanists in the rhetorical tradition used their new biblical learning to foster moral reform, especially of the institutional Church and its traditions. The difference is evident in Cusa's and Erasmus' interpretation of the "Word of God" (*Verbum dei*): while Cusa treats it metaphorically and intellectively in *OVG*, Erasmus emphasizes it as a historical event in his New Testament translation.[296]

The humanists' claim to moral authority in theology was bolstered by the hermeneutic habits of Scriptural exegesis. Not only is moral doctrine expressed literally and explicitly in the Bible but a moral or tropological level of interpretation applied to biblical narrative and poetic had been one of the three spiritual senses of biblical hermeneutic since Cassian. There was no methodological difference between the moral interpretation of the Bible and that of secular literature, even though the latter was tailored to suit the needs of the clergy. Moreover, since Christian hermeneutic methods were adapted from pagan models, there is a clear similarlity between the interpretive strategies of a rhetorician and a biblical theologian. As the hermeneutic practices of the ancients became more widely known through new translations, the blending of moral interpretation with other, more recondite levels of allegory and anagogy suggested for humanists another crossroads for practical and speculative theology outside the Aristotelian canon. But humanists also had a new "edge" over scholastics in their conquest of the Greek language,

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[296]For Cusa's metaphor, see section 5.5. For Erasmus' translation of John's *Logos* as *Sermo*, see Jarrott.

for a knowledge of grammar and rhetoric was far more useful in interpretation than demonstrative logic.[297]

The impact of a new biblical theology on a notion of authority is also hard to imagine. Paul Botley refers to philology as a "revolution," a fittingly anachronistic twist on the battle over epistemologies, i.e., what objectives and methods best lead to true knowledge (*scientia*).[298] In their high regard for ancient texts as the most significant kind of "origin," humanists placed the authority of historical artifacts above the authority of memory, succession, tradition, and ritual. The Scriptural scholar as archeologist (in the literal sense), paleographer, and textual editor thus rivaled the professional theologian's custodianship of true doctrine as well as his right and ability to teach. To be sure, the contention between humanists and professional theologians over Biblical theology did not erupt with full force until the sixteenth century, but the heated exchanges between Poggio Bracciolini and Lorenzo Valla in the 1450s presaged future conflicts.

6.8 The Intersection of Speculative and Practical Wisdom

Thus far we have argued that a humanist concept of wisdom involves far more than a stock definition and that the objectives of a theological science provide the common aims and ambitions which unite humanists' efforts. This might also be said of some scholastics; but what distinguishes humanists is the way they reframe and reshape the disciplines, expanding and reclassifying the sources of knowledge, reorganizing the priorities for intellectual pursuits and for education, and developing new methods of analysis and research. We might call it a period of intellectual-educational reconstruction and revision. Platonism – itself a diverse tradition,

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[297]Cassian's quadriga was passed on through the *glossa ordinaria* of Anselm of Laon and the *Handbook* (*Rotulus pugillaris*, literally, a hand-held scroll) of Augustine of Dacia de Lubac 1–2; Broz*..

[298]Botley 62. New translation techniques applied to Scriptural theology is, ironically, a "scientific revolution" of another kind.

adapted to Christian thought over the centuries – and Ciceronianism aided humanists in their endeavor to reinvent a comprehensive approach to knowledge, one which might reconcile the very diverse texts and traditions it draws from. To achieve this end, humanists frequently muted or ignored dissimilarities among ancient thinkers and emphasized a harmony between ancients and Christians, even while they excited antagonisms with contemporary scholars and decried present-day social and political divisions. There was something of the modern-day radical in humanism's argument for intellectual and institutional change. The long term cost would include deep, personal rivalries and a period of academic, social, and political destabilization.

There is no easy formula for distinguishing humanists along disciplinary lines as philosophers or rhetoricians unless we look only at professional scholars in teaching appointments. We should not forget that "humanist," though rooted in *humanista*, is our own critical term, which groups together many educated intellectuals energized by the possibilities ancient thought held for rethinking present systems and methods. Cusa, Ficino, Pico, and Lefevre were among the smaller number of scholastic-trained metaphysicians who took a strong interest in original languages, texts, and rhetorical methods; Erasmus and More were riding the crest of a fifteenth-century wave of *litterati*, who, emphasizing reforms, relied on Christianity's core doctrines in place of metaphysics.

But by and large, humanists sought to unite speculative and practical aspects in a common, cultural understanding of wisdom. Both aspects are reflected in Cicero's famous definition and in Martianus' marriage allegory.[299] Rather than move humanists closer toward a secular

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[299]See also Cicero's treatment of wisdom (*sapientia*) in as an "art of living" (*ars vivendi*) in *On the Ends of Goods and Evils* (*De finibus bonorum et malorum*), which seems to disregard the definition set forth in *On the Orator* and treat *sapientia* as practical wisdom: "Hence we need the aid of Wisdom, to rid us of our fears and appetites, to root out all our errors and prejudices, and to serve as our infallible guide to the attainment of pleasure. Wisdom alone can banish sorrow from our hearts and protect us from alarm and apprehension; put yourself to school with her, and you may live in peace, and quench the glowing flames of desire."
Seneca,

view of reality, Cicero's union of divine and human privileges the higher metaphysical principle of "causes."[300] This distinction was carried over into Christianity, in Augustine's discussion of *sapientia* and *scientia* in *On the Trinity*, and in Aquinas' definitions of *sapientia* and *prudentia*. For Christians, divine wisdom in the human soul is understood as a kind of "illumination," or as "infused" grace, and is compared to knowledge acquired by learning.[301]

Like their medieval predecessors, humanists believed that theology completes and crowns all arts and sciences; however, a different kind of piety and spirituality led humanists to the very *un*-medieval notion that theology is the end of *every* discipline. The consequent blurring of disciplinary boundaries served to reassert the role of rhetoric and weaken the position of logic and a logic-laden metaphysics, which were tethered to Aristotle. Moreover, humanists' experimentation with form and method cleared the way for a more literary theology, in imitation of various Platonist models, including those which survived the Middle Ages as well as those which were rediscovered and retranslated in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In the speculative thought of Ficino, Platonist metaphysics is a divine discourse, a *pia philosophia* which un-

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[300]Another powerful example well known to humanists can be found in Seneca's *Epistles*. In a letter to Lucius on the nature of philosophy, Seneca accepts Cicero's definition (quoted from the Tusculan Disputations, IV.57), but clarifies the divine origin of *all* causes, as in a metaphysical science: "First, then, if you agree, I shall explain the difference between wisdom and philosophy. Wisdom is the perfect good of the human mind; philosophy, love of wisdom and progress towards it. Philosophy's objective, wisdom has attained. The meaning of philosophy is clear from its derivation, which indicates love of wisdom (*phil-*, "love"; *sophia*, "wisdom"). One definition of wisdom is "knowledge of things divine and human and their causes." To me the addition seems superfluous, because the causes of things divine and human are part of the divine. Philosophy, too, has been variously defined. Some have called it the study of virtue, some the study of mental improvement, and some have called it the striving for right reason. But that there is a distinction between philosophy and wisdom is virtually agreed." Hadas Ep. 89, pp. 220–25. Also note that Seneca's definition of wisdom as "the perfect good of the human mind" inclines to moral wisdom and has more in common with Aristotle's *eudaimonia* than with his *sophia*, which is an intellectual attainment of theoretical knowledge.

[301]See Aquinas, "Summa Contra Gentiles" 3.53, where Aquinas discusses the means by which one is able to "see God": "That the Created Intellect Needs an Influx of Divine Light in order to See God through His Essence" (Quod intellectus creatus indiget aliqua influentia divini luminis ad hoc quod Deum per essentiam videat). See also Hopkins, J., *Nicholas of Cusa on Wisdom and Knowledge* 9.

Through her title as "Seat of Wisdom" (*sedes sapientiae*), the Virgin Mary represents a second form of mediation between divine and human. As the historical Jesus represents mediation as a descent of the divine, eternally-begotten Son, Mary is "assumed" body and soul into heaven at her "dormition," taking her place as God-

veils the mysteries of pagan theology, while in the predominantly practical thought of Erasmus, the Bible reveals all the principles of reality necessary for the happy life, a *philosophia Christi*. Two unique and distinct approaches but with a unifying end in the theological wisdom of Christianity.

The accomodation and assimilation of pagan ideas in Christian theology demonstrate the humanist tendency to harmonize arts and sciences, even as philology and hermeneutics integrate aspects speculative and the practical thought. Such blending of approaches and styles can be found in devotional texts of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, which had no definitive generic form. Many spiritual classics combined a Platonist, intellective ascent with autobiographical narrative, dialogue, and an array of poetic images (mirror, veil, cloud, angel, banquet, ladder, light, etc.). Hermeneutics, on the other hand, brings together habits of reading in Platonism, Biblical theology, and rhetorical training. Indeed, a humanist's experience with Platonic texts and Platonist allegory must have provided a comparative filter for the structure of sacred knowledge in the Scriptures, where the transcendent wisdom of God is directly reflected in the wisdom of the moral law, "Be holy as the Lord, your God, is holy" (Lev. 11:14, 19:22).

Thus the wisdom ideal of the Renaissance leaves us many opportunities for comparing the dialectical and speculative character of Cusa's learned ignorance with the rhetorical and moral emphasis of Erasmus' moriasophia. While the correspondence between speculation and practice is evident in Cusa's contemplative and active life, Erasmus makes that connection explicit in a mimetic and rhetorical literature. The Cusan dialectical poetic of opposition, paradox, and reconciliation are thoroughly explored and exploited by the humanists of the next generation through mimetic and figurative models. Despite the differences in methods and styles, Cusa and

bearer (*Theotokos*) and "Queen of Heaven" (*basilissa ton ouranou*; *regina caeli*), and so represents the highest ascent of humanity. Thus Mary's role is remarkably reminiscent of Philologia's *apotheosis*. See Boss 111–14.

Erasmus each reflect the literary freedom germane to Platonism and the unifying ideals of a Renaissance theology.

Chapter 7

Moriasophia and the Concept of Reform

This chapter establishes new ground for connecting the learned ignorance of Nicholas of Cusa to Erasmian folly, through the reforming potential of moriasophia. St. Paul's Corinthian letters, the primary source of inspiration for both authors, sets the precedent for intellectual and social reform through moriasophia. The ironic reversal of folly and wisdom makes a theological point about faith and reason even as "folly for Christ's sake" addresses communal divisions with a model of service and sacrifice. Paul's persona and rhetorical strategy also have much in common with Plato's Socrates, the second greatest influence on moriasophic personae. If Plato's texts were not well-known in the original during the Middle Ages, the Socratic profession of ignorance and the technique of ironic understatement survived in the figure of the idiota, a holy fool whose simple piety is "wiser than men's wisdom." Thus Cusa and Erasmus were able to draw on an evolving composite of Paul and Socrates.

7.1 From Cusa to Erasmus: Continuities in Humanism

Literary scholars who have followed Colie's and Kaiser's lead, such as A.H.T. Levi, continue to assert that Erasmian folly is "indebted" to Cusa's learned ignorance. Charles Nauert adds that "the simple fool or patient ass" of Cornelius Agrippa and Erasmus is "closely akin" to the idiota, a figure which he says, is "idealized" by Cusa.[302] "Indebted" is the stronger term here,

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[302]In a section on humanist skepticism, Nauert connects Erasmus' *Moria* and Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa's *On the Vanity and Uncertainty of Arts and Sciences* to Cusa's learned ignorance and to the "ideal" of the medieval idiota,

prompting us to ask: On what evidence? Is there a historical justification demonstrating influence and continuity?[303]

The thesis that Cusa influenced Erasmus in some way, or that Cusa and Erasmus at least shared some common intellectual formation had, as its greatest support, Vansteenberghe's thesis. Vansteenberghe, the chief biographer of Cusa in the earlier twentieth century, stated that Cusa was educated at the chapter school of Deventer (St. Lebwin's) under the direction of the Brethren of the Common Life (*Fratres Vitae Communis*), an association of unmarried lay men and women joined together in a movement of spirituality and piety, called the Modern Devotion (*devotio moderna*).[304] This is the same movement to which Thomas à Kempis, the author of the *Imitation of Christ*, belonged. Since Erasmus was also educated for a time at St. Lebwin's, a direct connection in education and spiritual formation was established, one which echoed through modern scholarship for many years. Time and again critics have referenced the environment of the Mod-

though without sufficient explanation: "[Agrippa's *Vanity*] is just an example of a genre of satires, partly humorous and partly serious, aimed at various social classes and professions, including especially the clergy, and urging the targets of the satire to reform their evil ways. Such books included Sebastian Brant's *Ship of Fools* (1494), which was widely diffused in the original German and in Latin and French translations, and also Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*, which is by far the most penetrating and effective humanistic satire. But Agrippa's *Vanity* shows a savage bite and an unremitting determination to prove that all fields of learning, all social and occupational groups (especially the clergy), and all human institutions, both church and state, are corrupt, involve people in sin, and lack any secure intellectual foundation, being based purely on conjecture and false reasoning. The book ends with a fideistic insistence that the only true and certain knowledge is to be found in the Gospel, and that the humble Christian believer, symbolized by the simple fool or the patient ass, is closer to truth and to salvation than the learned scholar. This ideal is closely akin to the *idiota,* or humble believer, idealized by the fifteenth-century philosopher Nicholas of Cusa, whose masterpiece *On Learned Ignorance* is cited by Agrippa. The same idea, with less overtly fideistic overtones, appears in Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*, where the perfect Christian is presented as a fool when judged by merely worldly standards," 209–10. While such connections obviously exist, the absence of distinctions between types of fools and folly fails to capture the nature and purpose of learned-ignorance and the individual methods of moriasophic discourses. The definition of an idiota as "humble believer," for example, does not account for learned-ignorant *ingenium*, manifested variously as practical wisdom, native intelligence, ironic posturing, and wit.

[303]In his notes to the 1971 edition of *Praise of Folly*, Levi writes: "Although Folly boasts[...]that she was nursed by Drunkenness and Ignorance, it is important not to forget that the intoxication induced by Bacchus became in Renaissance authors like Rabelais and Pontus de Tyard a figure of the divine 'furor' of the Platonist tradition which, in Marsilio Ficino, was the beginning of the soul's reunification in its ascent to beatitude. Ignorance is at this date an equivocal concept since some at least of the evangelical humanists were heavily indebted to the idea of a 'learned ignorance' used by Nicolas of Cusa in his *de docta ignorantia* to describe human receptivity to divine knowledge. Postel, Bigot and Rabelais were to make Pan, here the father of Ignorance, into a figure of Christ, the Good Shepherd, an identification suggested by Paul Marsus's commentary on Ovid's Fasti," Erasmus, *Praise of Folly and Letter to Maarten Van Dorp, 1515* 72.

ern Devotion and the Brethren, whose literature (especially the influential *Imitation of Christ*) emphasized the traditional theme of the conflict between Christian piety and worldly vanity, a theme reminiscent of St. Paul's Corinthian letters and folly for Christ's sake.[305] The apparent coincidence was very attractive and cited often by those who wanted to establish a deeper theoretical foundation for Erasmus' folly-figure and rhetorical theology.

Such an easy conclusion, however, has been undone in more recent historical scholarship. The Cusa-Erasmus connection became tenuous when modern biographers of Cusa as well as historians of the Modern Devout began to expose Vansteenberg's long-standing thesis as an assumption rather than a fact. Although Cusa was indeed schooled in areas where the Brethren flourished and was on familiar terms with members of the Brethren later in his career, there is as yet no hard evidence verifying either Cusa's residency at one of the Brothers' hostels or educational guidance he may have received from known Brothers, or exposure he may have had to the Modern Devout spirituality at an early age.[306] Of course it is still possible that Cusa was schooled at Deventer. But what might we conclude from that fact, if established? Furthermore, the notion that St. Lebwin's chapter school was somehow "run" by the Brothers is no longer ten-

[304]Vansteenberghe 6–7.

[305]"Clearly, Erasmus's *Folly* belongs to the same Christian understanding of 'learned ignorance' and Socratic wisdom as Cusanus's *Learned Ignorance* and of the *Imitatio Christi* (1441) attributed to Thomas à Kempis." As with Nauert, the significant differences between the description and operation of folly and wisdom in these texts begs the question of a single "Christian understanding of 'learned ignorance'." Presberg also follows the spurious historical connection between Cusa and Erasmus based on the fact that both "boarded in their youth[...]with the BRethren of Common Life at Deventer," Presberg 28.

Without mentioning Cusa, Richard Schoeck examines in great detail the historical circumstances as well as internal evidence for connecting the Brethren's piety to that of Erasmus. See "Erasmus at School" as well as Appendix B, "The *Devotio Moderna* and the Brethren of the Common Life" in Schoeck, R. J., *Erasmus of Europe* 42–59, 264–71. For the common expression of *devotio moderna* piety in à Kempis' *Imitation of Christ* and Erasmus' *Enchirdion of the Christian Soldier*, see Schoeck, R. J., *Erasmus* 28–29.

[306]Pauline Moffit Watts, relying the work of Erich Methuen, articulates skepticism toward Cusa's upbringing 1–2, n.1. For a more recent summary of the scholarship of the Brethren of the Common Life and the Modern Devotion in relation to Cusa, see Watanabe's article on the "Devotio Moderna" and bibliography in *Nicholas of Cusa: a Companion to His Life and to His Times* 34–39. As Watanbe points out, the conflicting twentieth-century studies of Albert Hymna (*The Brethren of the Common Life,The Christian Renaissance*) and R.R. Post (*The Modern Devotion: Confrontation with Reformation and Humanism*) have long been surpassed, 345.

able. While documents detailing the roles of various brothers indicates that a number of them had teaching positions and that they recruited boys in the school for their religious society, there is no particular reason to suppose that the Brothers had a determining role in shaping the school's curriculum, pedagogy, or spirituality.

And what of a more direct contact Erasmus may have had with Cusa's works, his ideas, or even his reputation? We do not have, unfortunately, any comment from Erasmus' extent writings, i.e., no explicit naming of the German cardinal, whose reputation was so well-remembered in the very lands where Erasmus lived and traveled. Moreover, any theory of indebtedness must also contend with the obvious and pronounced differences in clerical career, personality, and literary style, with diverging attitudes toward scholasticism and speculative thought and with different approaches to political strife and moral reform. So it indeed appears that if we want to establish a relatedness of Erasmian wisdom and folly, or moriasophia, to Cusan learned ignorance, we will have to do so on some other grounds than a mutual affinity for the Modern Devout and the spiritual guidance of the Brothers of the Common Life.

Despite the absence of explicit statements or some other "smoking gun," it is the contention of this chapter that there is still an argument to be made for continuity from Cusa to Erasmus and, more specifically, common ground for their moriasophic theme, though some fifty years apart. But we must first consider how the trends in theology – trends which underscored Pauline folly and the dialectics of Christian Platonism – interacted with reforming ideals of the fifteenth century. If there is any single common concept or spirit to which Cusa and Erasmus are dedicated, it is reform. A reforming impulse made a deep impact on religious and social life North of the Alps long before the effects of humanism were felt. The idea is so central and important to

the Renaissance that one might even conceive of humanism as a phase in the history of reform movements, a history which stretches back well into the beginnings of the Church.

Reform is much a wider concept than one might think and is worth considering in some detail. It presupposes a historical moment, situation, or establishment, followed by a period of decay (a "falling away" or "de-forming" as it were), and a desire to "return" back to the prior state. Behind the conceptual pattern stands the doctrine of original sin and a hapless yearning for a more pure and blessed prelapsarian existence. Tertullian seems to have invented the phrase "renewal for the better" (*renovatio in melius*), while Gregory the Great introduces the term "re-form" in a similar context (*in melius reformare*).[307] Ambrose's notion of a "fortunate fault" (*felix culpa*) insured that the best way to regain the lost innocence of Eden is to "return" to God spiritually in the present.

The actual term *reformatio* is rare in late antiquity. But there are many other words which carry the same or a similar significance. Gerhert Ladner, the first historian of the "idea of reformation," recites a Latin vocabulary of related terms, which includes *renovare, innovare, reparare, restaurare, instaurare, reformare, reficere, restitutere, recuperare, reducere, revocare, redire, recurrere, reverti, corrigere, corripere, emendare, expolire, emundare,* and *convertere*.[308] Since the Church's inception, the reform concept branched out in two main directions. The first refers to the individual, whose soul is "formed" by God but tarnished by the stain of sin. Reform of the individual is analogous to "conversion": a turning away from sin and acceptance of God's grace, so that the original "image" of God can be restored. This personal and internal sense of reform can be traced back to the teachings of St. Paul. As I. S. Robinson writes:

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[307]Gerhart B. Ladner is the standard authority on the concept of reform. See *The idea of reform: its impact on Christian thought and action in the age of the Fathers* 156–58 and *Images and Ideas in the Middle Ages: Selected Studies in History and Art* 533–58. Ladner examines the uses of the terms *renovare* and *reformare* in Gregory's *Moralia* on pp. 631-643.

> The Christian terminology of reform and renewal is already found in the letters of St. Paul, where it denoted the transformation of an individual personality in the likeness of God: 'be transformed by the renewal of your mind' (Romans 12:2); 'the inward man is renewed day by day' (II Corinthians 4:16). In patristic writings the language of reform and renewal continued to be used mainly in the sense of personal spiritual development. (Robinson 272–73)

In later times, reform and renewal of the individual became significant for the institutional Church as a whole, where the call to convert implies a return to rules or patterns of life in a community, such as an episcopal administration, a diocese, a monastic house, or an entire religious order. This is the context in which the term *reformatio* gained currency and was adopted by secular regimes and administrations. Institutional reform seeks to preserve the integrity of its purpose and practices, often by returning to the original intentions at the time of foundation; reform in this sense may result in either a "correction" of aberrations from the norms or a division in the community. The religious orders of the Middle Ages set an important precedent. A major thrust towards religious life led to reform movements among the Benedictines and Augustinians in the twelfth century, followed by periodic reforms of the mendicant orders from the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries.[309]

Nicholas of Cusa was a celebrated reformer in this religious and institutional sense. A canon lawyer by training, he was an active participant in Church councils, rising quickly within their ranks and distinguishing himself as a conciliarist spokesman in the wake of the papal crisis of the 1410s. His earliest works concern his proposals for healing the divisions within the Council of Basle, reconciling the Hussites, and correcting the Roman calendar. From then on, Cusa

[308]Ladner, *The Idea of Reform* 194; Ladner, *Images and Ideas* 667.
[309]See also Bellitto; Bellitto and Hamilton.

changed sides and became an ardent reformer on behalf of the papacy. After representing the papal cause at several German Diets between 1438 and 1447, he was appointed by Nicholas V to the episcopacy of Brixen (Bressanone) in the Tyrolean Alps and tasked as his legate (*legatus a latere*) with dispensing Jubilee indulgences and enacting reforms throughout Germany and the Netherlands.

This latter task would prove an enormous undertaking, for it involved a large-scale moral reform of the clergy. Cusa was given the authority "to hold local and provincial synods, to carry out censures, to render absolution in cases reserved for the Holy See, to visit and to reform monasteries, to investigate abuses, especially of simony and concubinage, and to impose reform."[310] During the two years from 1450 to 1452, Cusa assembled bishops in several provinces and dioceses and presided over a Benedictine chapter. He visited over seventy religious houses as far south as Switzerland and in such German cities as Hambourg, Salzbourg, Mayence, Magdebourg, Cologne, Trèves, Hildesheim, Nuremberg, Munich, Utrecht, Amsterdam, Leyde, Liège, Luxembourg, and Louvain. He heard complaints, settled disputes, reinstated church taxes, and put a stop to commercial operations inside churches. To address clerical concubinage, he used the threat of papal excommunication on entire communities. He reprimanded those who were not observing their rule, condemned the accomodation of luxuries, and appointed delegates to insure, through inspections, that the reforms were carried out. He spoke out against superstitious practices, such as pilgrimages made to churches with specious relics.

As an independent scholar and teacher of grammar and rhetoric speaking to a combined audience of clerics and laity, Erasmus' view of reform at first focuses on the personal and the psychological. Since language for Erasmus is the direct reflection of human nature, education in language necessarily reforms the individual. While the ancients were not enlightened by Chris-

tian doctrine, their eloquence reveals a closeness to nature which had vanished along with their civilization. Medieval Latin, on the other hand, evolved into something unnatural, corrupt, and "barbarous," resulting in moral confusion and social breakdown.

The humanist argument regarding language affected the arts curriculum, which had changed little over several centuries. Erasmus' advocacy of ancient Roman literature was rooted in his search for stylistic models and an improved literary standard. But when Erasmus turned to the Greek language and to the text of the Bible, the reform concept transitioned from a moral-philosophical ideal to one which was theological and spiritual. Although still concerned primarily with language, the shift from grammatical analysis and rhetorical imitation to interpretation of Scripture had enormous consequences. Scriptural theology gave Erasmus the clout he needed to advance his reform of society, a grand ideal aimed at exposing and repairing abuses in church and state alike while fostering personal virtue and educated piety.

Humanism and reform are, of course, frequently linked though not always adequately distinguished. There is an argument to be made that humanists of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries are reformers by definition. Whether we refer to curricular expansion in the humanities disciplines (including moral philosophy), or the antique manuscript-hunting of civil administrators, or to the speculative project of philosophical reconstruction and synthesis, humanists are those who "turned back" to ancient sources (*ad fontes*) in order to preserve and renew the integrity of their institutions as well as their commitment to Christian moral principles.

Besides the radical notion that pagan authorities can assist the Church in reforming its institutions and practices, the humanist movement contributed to the idea of reform in three other principal ways. First, since many were involved in the administration of secular governments, they extended the notion of ecclesiastical reform to political regimes and institutions at the state

[310]Cusa, *Spiritual Writings* 8.

and local levels. Such systems were formed to advance the common good, and humanists deplored corruptions and abuses of power which betrayed the high ideals of "divine right" sovereignty, republican patronage, and civic duty. Second, humanists would recall the more ancient concept of reform, as the personal, internal restoration of the image of God within. This self-conscious aspect of reform represents an area where humanism intersects with the developing spirituality of the Northern European countries in which Cusa and Erasmus lived. Third, humanists, as teachers and intellectuals, believed that learning and improvements in education were necessary and expeditious tools of reform.

The concept of reform captures the prior and more significant religious dimension of moral rectitude for European Christians. Ancient expressions of virtue, though highly prized for psychological depth and rhetorical range, are reinterpreted in the light of the gospel, the ancient Fathers of the Church, and Christian doctrine. Petrarch speaks for several generations of humanists when he argues that he would rather be reputed as a good man than a learned one: "I desired to be both good and learned. Now that the latter is wrenched from me or denied me, I am grateful to my judges for leaving me the better of the two[…]"[311] Aristotelian *eudaimonia* may be assimilated with Christian *beatitudo*, but the pagan ideal is still the inferior mirror image.

Many humanists, no small number of whom were clerics and therefore participating in religious life, called for an end to dissident living of all kinds, to violations of norms and standards, and to abuses of privilege. Their exhortation to moral virtue cannot be effectively separated from the idea of religious reform and progress. While the language may differ in some respects, virtue which leads to "the good life" or "happiness" is understood in a Renaissance religious milieu as those psychological dispositions, intentions, decisions and actions which cooperate with divine grace, purifying the soul and leading to salvation. Savonarola's rise to power in

the Florence of the 1490s was the direct result of applying the reforms of religious life to the secular state. Though he took the standards of reform to a tragic extreme, his short-lived success depended on a culturally-shared vision of moral and spiritual ideals.

In those works which concern an individual's path to virtue, especially the *Handbook of the Christian Soldier*, Erasmus harkens to the apostolic era of St. Paul and the early Christian Fathers. Religious and social reform begins with the reform of the individual's soul; it is personal, internal, and spiritual, a putting off of sinful habits, a conversion of heart, a renewal of baptismal promises – with the ultimate goal of restoring God's image. In Erasmus' treatise, personal reform of one's psychological disposition and morals follow from the proper understanding of Christian anthropology. The exhortation to virtue is a traditional genre, for which Erasmus selects an equally traditional literary metaphor: the spiritual battle. Originating in St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians and dramatized in the Book of Revelation, this theme was a central feature of Christian spirituality, permeating the history of monasticism from Anthony of the Desert onward. Benedict of Nursia draws on the spiritual warfare theme in the Prologue to his Rule, and every subsequent monastic rule touches on it in one way or another. Erasmus' list of "rules," which he describes metaphorically as "wrestling holds" to "disentangle [oneself] from the errors of this world as from an inextricable labyrinth and attain to the pure light of the spiritual life" is an adaptation from monastic tradition.[312]

It might seem at first that Cusa's role in reforming institutions has little to do with Erasmus' designs for personal reform. Erasmus, after all, following a brief period as Latin secretary to his bishop, Henry of Bergen, shunned any direct involvement in the political affairs of church and state, even when contacts in Rome might have obtained for him a cardinal's hat. But the two

[311]Petrarch, *On His Own Ignorance* 63. For a detailed treatment of this work, see Chapter 8.
[312]Erasmus, *Handbook* 54.

are connected in ways that extend beyond the theoretical correspondence of reform's two central aspects. The key lies in understanding how spirituality is related to institutional and personal reform. For Cusa and Erasmus, theology is inseparable from spirituality; the two are mutually dependent as the speculative informs, emerges from, and interacts with the practical, recalling the ancient connection between metaphysics and ethics in a Christian-Platonist framework. A theologically sound spirituality reforms individuals, and individuals in turn reform the Church and society. It is therefore important that Cusa's theology be seen not merely as speculative but meditative and a form of prayer; the dialectic of the perpetual and the absolute, leading to the experience of the supereminent, divine nature in a coincidence of opposites, are reformative and cannot be separated from his ecclesial-political activities. Erasmus' Biblical and moral theology, on the other hand, cannot be separated from the *Enchiridion*'s metaphysics nor from Platonist hermeneutics, culled largely from Origen and Plato. Both thinkers thus break the medieval mold of theology as a predominantly rational science.

Scholarship has not always been clear in distinguishing the reforming impulse in this period from either the traditional spirit of reform in the context of the Church or from the anti-Catholic reforms of Luther, Zwingli, Tyndale and others whom we now associate with the term "Protestant." Such terms can be the inauspicious results of long, bitter rivalries and the conveniences of scholarship rather than confessional identities.[313] Renaudet's concept of a period of "pre-reform" has further contributed to the terminological restriction which obscures the reforming intentions and efforts of so many in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.[314] It is there-

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[313]"Protestant" is an anachronism referring to Lutherans at the Diet of Speyer (1529), while "reformers," applied to the dissident theologians of the early sixteenth century, were by Catholic standards subversive heretics (McGrath, A. E. 211)..

[314]See Renaudet.

fore important that we refine earlier scholarship in order to view the thinkers of this period on their own terms.

The perspective of reform adds another dimension to the relationship of Cusa to Erasmus based on their appropriations of Pauline moriasophia. While the former brings the two closer together in purpose and mission, the latter joins them in a common theme and method. The remainder of this chapter will reexamine the intellectual and cultural context, focusing on the idea of spiritual reform in Western Germany and the Netherlands. Recent research on the Modern Devotion as well as new editions of Modern Devout writers reveal a close affinity between Cusa's metaphysical poetics and the literature of spiritual exercises. The theology and spirituality of Erasmus' early sixteenth century does not jettison the devotional traditions but rather builds on them with new resources. Finally, we will ask how St. Paul's discourse and the memory of Socrates lends itself to the reformer's purpose and reconsider the most compelling a case for continuity between Cusa and Erasmus, which is the literary character of the Idiota.

7.2 The Return to Saint Paul: Moriasophia as a Reform Strategy

The many common interests, objectives, and friendships in the Parisian milieu of Erasmus and Lefèvre are suggestive of the greater commerce of ideas and persons at the time, but the evidence also begs for a more specific connection between Cusa's learned-ignorant method and the genesis of Erasmian Folly. This kind of evidence exists in the character type Cusa calls "Idiota," an unlearned (hence, ignorant) persona of a simple yet profound wisdom.[315] In the summer of 1450, Cusa wrote a series of three dialogues featuring Idiota, at the end of a remarkably productive several-year period and just prior to setting out on his reform mission for the Jubilee

year. Although a number of scholars have stated that the Idiota is a precursor of Erasmus' Folly, there have been no substantial critical arguments, either external or internal to the Idiota dialogues and the *Moria*, in support of theological or literary continuity.

While there is no doubt among scholars that Erasmus' Folly reflects and plays upon the concept of folly in St. Paul's Corinthian letters, there has been as yet no acknowledgement of Cusa's particular debt to St. Paul. We have demonstrated the metaphysical and especially dialectical dimension of Pauline moriasophia, developed in a Neoplatonist framework by Dionysius. The Idiota dialogues portray a literary character which parallels the learned ignorant persona of Cusa's letter to Cesarini ten years earlier. The development from learned-ignorance as an abstract method to a particular persona demonstrates the humanist tendency in this period to use literary forms to bridge the gap between theory and praxis, animating speculation and making ideas relevant to the present.

Before we address Cusa's Idiota, however, it is important to ask how St. Paul and his Letters to the Corinthians lend themselves to a reform strategy. The letters of St. Paul in general were undergoing a reevaluation in Cusa's time as a result of the re-translation efforts of many humanists, mostly Italians, who either traveled to Constantinople to learn Greek or took lessons from one of the several Greek emigrés present in Italy. This facet of history has been explored thoroughly.[316] A revival of Greek studies in Italy began at the turn of the fifteenth century with Manuel Chrysoloras, who taught in Florence and Pavia, traveled to Rome, Verona, Paris, London, and Barcelona, and cultivated a significant circle of Grecophile humanists. Learned and

[315]The origin of the idiota figure is treated in section 7.4. Please note the distinction between "Idiota" as a proper name and "idiota" as a character type. This nominal anonymity, personification, or role-name, echoes that of the fool figure.

[316]There are several excellent studies on the acquisition of Greek language skills by Western Europeans during the fourteenth century. See, for example Geanakoplos, D. J; Geanakoplos, D. J., *Constantinople and the West: Essays on the Late Byzantine (Palaeologan) and Italian Renaissances and the Byzantine and Roman Churches*; Monfasani,

affluent men from other European countries soon traveled to Italy with the intention of acquiring Greek from one of Chrysoloras' students. This network of scholarly interest was followed by the mid-century influence of the Greek episcopal delegation for the Ecumenical Council of Ferrara-Florence, including Gemithos Plethon, Ioannes Bessarion, and George of Trebizond. Moreover, there was a lively cultural exchange between humanists and Greek refugees in Venice.

One significant constant among all the students of Greek during this century was the use of sacred Scripture for translation exercises. Paul Botley reminds us that Latin translations of the Greek Bible became a routine exercise for those scholars learning the Greek language during the fifteenth century.[317] Eventually (and as translators became more confident) this would lead to a more detailed analysis of the language of the gospels and apostolic letters and retranslations of the New Testament. Lorenzo Valla, a contemporary of Cusa, wrote a series of *Annotations* based on the comparison of the Latin vulgate with the Greek, which he began at the court of Alfonso of Naples but continually revised during his employment as a papal scriptor and secretary for Nicholas V and Calixtus III. Gianozzo Manetti, another contemporary who worked as a diplomat for the Florentine Republic, Pope Nicholas V, and Alfonso of Naples, translated the entire New Testament and the Psalter in the 1450s. Since Parentucelli (Nicholas V) was a humanist and a personal friend of Cusa, Valla, and Manetti, it is likely that Cusa was introduced to Manetti's translations in manuscript when he was in Rome for his ordination as cardinal. Members of the Greek delegation, whom Cusa knew personally, were still in Rome and most likely

Byzantine Scholars in Renaissance Italy: Cardinal Bessarion and Other Émigrés: Selected Essays; Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*; Jayne.
[317]Botley 82–98.

involved in the translation projects. We know this is the case with Bessarion, who read Valla's *Annotations* and made numerous suggestions.[318]

It is impossible to know exactly what impression the translation activities of Rome made on Cusa. And yet, for some reason, it was in Rome between January and the summer months that he decided to craft a protagonist of learned ignorance and to situate him *right there in Rome*, in a contemporary dialogue setting with an anonymous scholastic philosopher and an orator. Since Cusa was also on the cusp of the most significant Northern reform mission of his time, it is fitting to ask how Paul's letters contribute to the notion of reform and how those themes feed into the invention of a Pauline folly persona.

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Even as the first communities of Gentiles were founded, many who were initiated reverted back to prior habits, and elders like Paul had to urge the faithful to return back to their commitments with remonstrations and admonitions. Magic was practiced in Ephesus, idleness in Thessalonika, competing religious doctrines and pagan philosophy were corrupting the churches in Galatia and Colossae. Eating meat sacrificed to idols scandalized the faithful in Rome. Most communities were plagued by divisions between Jewish and Gentile Christians on such issues as traditional dietary laws and circumcision. But Corinth, the cosmopolitan port city, seems to have had the worst of everything – lawsuits among the faithful before secular authorities, prostitution, fornication, drunkenness (even before the Eucharistic meal), and a case of incest. The length of the letters is no doubt called for by the severity of the problems and the dire need for theological clarification and moral reform. Paul urges the community to preserve his foundation, "what I taught you to do" (1 Cor. 11:2; cf.. 2:1-5; 3:5-17; 4:14-16; 11:2), something which can be ac-

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[318]Geanakoplos, D. J., "Theodore Gaza, a Byzantine Scholar of the Palaeologan 'Renaissance' in the Early Italian Renaissance (c. 1400–1475)" 85.

complished not only by faith and instruction but by imitating Paul's own example (Cor 4:6,16; 6:12; 7:7; 11:1).[319]

Pauline folly is not a response to "sins of the flesh" but rather to intellectual arrogance. Christian preachers new to Corinth appear to have persuaded people that Paul's character and authority was less than impressive, the result being rivalry and factionalism among the brethren. The crisis puts Paul in a tight spot: he cannot reform the community effectively unless he also defends himself personally.

Moriasophia is, first of all, Paul's stratagem to contextualize local disputes in the larger spiritual context and to best his critics with a show of superior rhetorical skill. Shifting the center of attention away from specific accusations against himself, he goes on the offensive, attacking the arrogance of his critics. Several times throughout his first letter, Paul refers to them sarcastically as the "inflated" men (*pephysiomēnoi*; 4:6,18,19; 5:2). These competitors hold a critical standard on par with Greek rationalism, which is opposed to the perspective of faith. There is, then, a *logos*-battle, in which the Greek "language of wisdom" (*sophia logon*) is juxtaposed to the "language of the cross" (*o logos gar o tou staurou*). Paul adapts his antagonistic stance from Isaiah, where the princes of Tanis (on the Nile delta) are said to be fools, and the "wise counsel" of the Pharaoh is similarly foolish (Is 19:11-12; cf. 33:10). These passages are uncommon in the Septuagint: the Hebrew terms for folly (*aulim*) and irrationality (*nbore*) are translated as *moria* in the Greek.[320] The contrast between Paul's *moria* and that of the Egyptians corresponds to the war of wisdom traditions, setting up a situation ripe for the equivocating rhetoric of moriasophia.

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[319]Sources which I have consulted on St. Paul and his letters to Corinth include Murphy-O'Connor, *1 Corinthians*; Murphy-O'Connor, *The Theology of the Second Letter to the Corinthians*; Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul the Letter-Writer: His World, His Options, His Skills*; Collins; Thiselton.

[320] Isaiah uses satire in his censure of the Egyptians:
The princes of Zoan are utterly foolish;
the wise counsellors of Pharaoh give stupid counsel.
How can you say to Pharaoh,

One reason Paul's argument for a "folly of God" succeeds is because it is bolstered and complemented by the fundamental paradoxy of faith, what we have called the "apparent" as opposed to the "irresolvable" paradox. As we mentioned earlier, the apparent paradoxes of faith contrast the human logic of the present with a rational system of religious doctrine, resulting in two distinct notions and traditions of wisdom. We have also indicated that this paradoxy is thoroughly allied to Platonic metaphysics, which juxtaposes the temporal to the eternal, the *phantasmata* of the senses to the "true appearances" or *eikasia* of Forms, such that a double, conflicting rational standard comes into focus. Here Paul is reminiscent of Plato, who uses the inverted language of folly to emphasize the divided perspective between the philosopher and the rhetorician, between the higher knowledge of the former and the common opinion of the latter.

Paul thus makes ecclesial and personal reform consequent upon the playful, ironic subversion of conventional terms and the restoration of true perspective. In the affirmative mode, the "worldly wise," the "arrogant" and "boastful" dissenters are reminded that they are in fact united to the community by the "true wisdom" of Jesus Christ, a "hidden" wisdom, revealed only by the Spirit (2:7-8). The former are "puffed up" with self-importance, causing a blindness in reason and judgment; Paul calls them "unspiritual" (2:14-16; 4:6,18; 8:1). Paul opposes their

> 'I am one of the sages,
> a descendant of ancient kings'?
> Where now are your sages?
> Let them tell you and make known
> what the Lord of hosts has planned against Egypt.
> The princes of Zoan have become fools,
> and the princes of Memphis are deluded;
> those who are the cornerstones of its tribes
> have led Egypt astray.
> The Lord has poured into them
> a spirit of confusion;
> and they have made Egypt stagger in all its doings
> as a drunkard staggers around in vomit.
> Neither head nor tail, palm branch nor reed,
> will be able to do anything for Egypt.
> (Is 19:11-4).

worldly logic to love and grace in the "spiritual man." Indeed, the guiding doctrine of the first letter concerns how reasoning according to the spirit surpasses a crude, Hellenistic rationality and leads to Christian unity and harmony. Arrogance and boasting are forces of separation and division, while love "builds up" the community (8:1). Grace not only "enriches" the spiritual Corinthians "in all speech and knowledge" but also bestows upon them "spiritual gifts" (1:4-5). The metaphor of spiritual fortification and the theology of spiritual unity are developed in detail in Paul's discourse on love and the "mystical body of Christ," a figure of unity-in-diversity. This collective of spiritual gifts in the Christian community parallels Paul's description of the individual as "God's building" and a "temple" of the Holy Spirit (3:9-17).[321]

The attack on conventional terms and the argument of Christian wisdom, while powerful, is not the tour-de-force of the Corinthian letters. Paul takes the argument for reform a leap further in his signature assault on Greek rationalism. Not content to reverse the perspective on folly and wisdom ("Has God not made foolish the wisdom of the world?" 1:20), Paul suddenly pursues another rhetorical strategy, accepting as valid the terms of his adversaries. The result is the "folly of God," a jarring and rhetorically shocking use of paradox and verbal irony: "For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe" (1:21). Rational language, then, is unstable but pliable: God is both a super-wisdom and an alter-folly, in Dionysian terms, a supereminent affirmation and a transcendent negation, thus exceeding the terms of conventional wisdom in every conceivable way.

Why should the negative mode of reasoning be necessary? Isn't Paul's message of reform and his theology of Christian unity sufficient, indeed persuasive, without the inverse lan-

[321]Similarly, in Plato's *Republic*, political and social harmony correspond to the accord of virtues in the soul.

guage? This particular question, highly important for the ironic figure of the idiota, is neglected in New Testament criticism. Because Paul's aim was not only to repair the communal divisions but to defend himself, he needed a way reconcile the frailty of his appearance and the ignobility of his frequent rejection with the power of his apostolic authority. A divine folly justifies and dignifies the appearance of failure in Paul, specifically because Paul, in his sufferings, imitates Christ:

> We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honour, but we in disrepute. To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless, and we grow weary from the work of our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we speak kindly. We have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things, to this very day. (1 Cor. 4:10-13)

Paul's folly is the folly of God instantiated: God's folly is the transcendent reality, manifested in the providential reason or "plan" in which his own beloved Son is rejected, tortured, and killed; and therefore Paul's sufferings on account of Christ, *imitatio Christi*, is the proof that he is an authentic agent of God. In its very destabilizing of logic, its inversion of conventions, and its defiance of cultural standards, Paul's negative language emphasizes, to the point of hyperbole, his similarity with and fidelity to the model. If Paul's language is paradoxical, it is because human nature in the second person of the Trinity is paradoxical.

Paul's exaggerated self-debasement demonstrates not only that he *is* a fool for Christ but he also *plays* a fool for Christ. The distinction is noteworthy. Paul's trials and sufferings are evidence of the first kind of folly, while his ironic "boasting in the Lord" is something else alto-

gether. Turning away from theology and soteriology, Paul's boasting (*kauchesis*) about his rejections and beatings constitutes a second counterpoint to the inflated pride of the arrogant, worldly-wise Christians.[322] While the self-importance of his adversaries leads to self-absorption, spiritual blindness, and communal division, Paul's exaggerated egoism calls attention to the intensity of his moral courage. Thus his self-deprecation isjustified as radical *imitatio;* and the one who imitates Paul (an *imitatio Pauli*) will likewise be imitating Christ.[323]

Paul's ironic boasting becomes a prevalent theme in his second letter to the Corinthians.[324] Here Paul repeats the main themes and structure of his first letter but extends them in ingenious ways. First, the *imitatio Pauli* requested previously is fulfilled in the "afflictions" of those who are faithful to Paul's teaching. Some have opposed the arrogant ones and thus have suffered for it like fools for Christ. The contrast between the "spiritual" and "unspiritual" Corinthians is the social context for Paul's renowned metaphor of letter and spirit: the worldly-wise are likened to the scribes and Pharisees mired in their own interpretations, while the "spiritual" Corinthians are compared to a living Decalogue, "a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts" (3:3). Paul's dialectic of letter and spirit connects, profoundly, the paradoxy of the fool for Christ to the hermeneutical paradoxy of truth concealed and revealed, a significant connection for both Cusa and Erasmus. In Paul, the one who reasons spiritually is also the one who can

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[322]Duane Watson demonstrates amply the conventions for boasting in the Greco-Roman world in (). Paul's scriptural source, Watson points out, is Jeremiah: "Thus says the Lord: Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; but let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the Lord" (9:23). However, Watson's emphasis on proper contexts for boasting in the rhetorical tradition avoids other important associations between the Pauline persona and the braggart-fools of comedy and satire.

[323]As noted above, 1 Cor. 4:6,16; 6:12; 7:7; 11:1.

[324]The second letter is occasioned by the continuing drama of internal strife among the Corinthian Christians. That the situation caused Paul great grief is evidenced in his reference to a pleading, "tearful" letter, now lost to us (2 Cor 2:4).

read with a spiritual sense and even embody what is read: "Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their minds; but when a man turns to the Lord the veil is removed" (3:16).

Secondly, the unrelenting personal attacks on Paul – including the request that he show credentials on par with the rival preachers – compel him to self-defense with yet more passion and verve. In Chapters 10 through 12, he sets the fool for Christ against the "inflated" agitators, referred to sarcastically as "peddlers" (*kapeloi*) of themselves and "super-duper apostles" (*hyper lian apostolon*). Describing his "boasts" as weapons in the spiritual warfare, he makes a sudden transition in his rhetoric, asking his audience to bear with him "in a little foolishness" (*mikron te aphrosune*):

> But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by its cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ.… I think that I am not in the least inferior to these super-duper apostles. I may be a common man in speech, but not in knowledge; certainly in every way and in all things we have made this evident to you. (11:3,5-6)[325]

In this passage, Paul underscores the distinction between the spiritual fool and the worldly sage. Like the serpent, the latter gives the appearance of knowledge through clever words (*panourgia*), while the former wears foolishness on his sleeve, "a common man in speech" (*idiōtēs to logon*). The Greek term *idiōtēs* denotes a private citizen as opposed to a public official, or an ordinary person as opposed to someone with an expertise or professional skill, such as a charioteer, civil engineer, or poet. Since ancient times, *idiōtēs* was also used in the derogatory sense as one who is uneducated, rude, vulgar – a plebeian. Early in the Acts of the Apostles, the powerful members of Jerusalem's Sanhedrin are astonished at the confident witness of Peter and John, "because they perceived that they were uneducated commoners" (*agrammatoi eisin kai idiōtai*;

4:13). In the context of Paul's letter, *idiōtēs* is most often translated as "unskilled," to distinguish Paul's language from the polished rhetoric of his adversaries.[326]

Yet there is something more: Second Corinthians marks the first *ironic* use of the term *idiōtēs* in Christian literature. Paul's persona illustrates the motif that learning and rhetoric do not signify grace and that the "spiritual man" of humility – here represented in Paul's bold and blunt speech[327] – is superior in the uncorrupted "knowledge" (*gnosis*) of faith. The language is ironic because Paul's rhetorical command (i.e., understatement of his own ability and hyperbole regarding his competitors) undermines the simplicity with which he characterizes himself (*aplotētos*).[328]

From ignorant *idiōtēs* Paul then proceeds to role-play, where boasting is portrayed as an attribute of the fool for Christ:

> I repeat, let no one think that I am a fool; but if you do, then accept me as a fool, so that I too may boast a little. What I am saying in regard to this boastful confidence, I am saying not with the Lord's authority, but as a fool; since many boast according to the flesh, I will also boast. For you gladly put up with fools, being wise yourselves! For you put up with it when someone makes slaves of you, or preys upon you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or gives you a slap in the face. To my shame, I must say, we were too weak for that! But whatever anyone dares to boast of—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast of that. Are

[325]Translation based on NSRV.
[326]The distinction between the *panourgia* of Paul's adversaries and his own "common man's speech," recapitulates the contrast in First Corinthians between the "language of wisdom" and the "language of the cross."
[327]See Sampley.
[328]Stephen Pogoloff demonstrates that even a skilled rhetorician might be regarded as an *idiōtēs* if they had not received formal training and did not function in a professional capacity. This situation applied to Isocrates: "An ι δ ι ω τ η ς may be one who is quite well trained in rhetoric, but does not practice it professionally. We must remember that virtually all educated people were rhetorically trained, but only a small percentage spoke in the courts

> they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I. Are they ministers of Christ? I am talking like a madman—I am a better one: with far greater labours, far more imprisonments, with countless floggings, and often near death. (11:16-23)

Paul's irony demonstrates the ludic nature of Christological folly with remarkable rhetorical flourish. If the Corinthians concede the *appearance* of folly in Paul, he now asks them to regard him as they would an actual fool of their culture and time. The signal is clear: Paul is offering a literary performance, and the Corinthians should expect another change in the conventions. While the folly of God asks the epistolary audience to suspend certain semantic and logical expectations, Paul's personal folly – a folly caricature or persona – asks them to enter into the illusion of entertainment and to "suspend disbelief." The Corinthians, for their part, should take pleasure in it (*ēdeōs gar anechesthe tōn aphronōn*).[329]

Paul's performance is to be distinguished from the theological doctrines he has already introduced, since it is not proclaimed "with the Lord's authority." His literary tone is here loquacious and boisterous, conveyed in shortened phrases, especially rhetorical questions, and frequent repetitions. In three chapters alone, Paul refers to his folly eight times and to boasting twenty-one times. Paul's persona illustrates the Greek concept of *parrhesia*, the license to speak freely and frankly (his "boastful confidence," 11:17), sometimes said to be characteristic of Paul's style in general, but here taken by Paul's fool persona to a theatrical extreme. Expressed as a contest of "daring" ("But whatever any one dares to boast of…I also dare to boast of that"),

or declaimed in public. Thus, even Isocrates is among the ι δ ι ω τ α ι [...]" 149. Most biblical commentators agree that, according to classical standards, Paul is an effective rhetorician, e.g Witherington 39–47.

[329]Oddly, many commentaries neglect the comedic aspects of rhetorical performance in this Pauline discourse. Watson, for example, focuses his study of boasting on the formal conventions of rhetoric in matters such as decorum, honor and license. Witherington, however, accounts for Paul's exploitation of irony, parody, sarcasm, invective, and paradox 429–64.

Paul's challenge to the worldly-wise is on par with the familiar verbal and physical contests of skill between fools.

The abrupt shift in tone and purpose is also clarified by significant changes in vocabulary. *Moria* and *moron*, the terms for the folly of God and the fool for Christ in Paul's first letter, are replaced in these chapters by *aphron* and *aphrosune*, the common Greek terms for "fool" and "folly." A different term for wisdom, too, suits the occasion; Paul describes the Corinthian audience as prudent or wise in a practical way, *phronimoi*. The term is, again, ironic (more specifically, sarcastic) – the apostle praising the Corinthians' gullibility as if it were a sort of patience. This naïvely "wise" audience is nevertheless distinguished from both the worldly wisdom of the arrogant ("the wisdom of the wise," *tēn sophian tōn sophōn*; "the wisdom of the world," *tēn sophian tou kosmou*) and from the mysterious and dynamic *sophia* of Christ ("the power of God and the wisdom of God," *theou dunamin kai theou sophian*).

> In his folly performance, Paul also embellishes on the theme of ironic boasting:
>
> Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I am not indignant? If I must boast, I will

> boast of the things that show my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus (blessed be he for ever!) knows that I do not lie. (11:24-31)

The pattern follows First Corinthians closely. The fool for Christ imitates the example of Christ, an imitation which must include Christ's extraordinary sufferings. Yet here Paul's literary cataloguing of punishments takes boastful self-deprecation to the point of comedic hyperbole, inverting neatly the boasting of exploits one finds in the stock figures of Cynic philosopher and "braggart soldier" (*miles gloriosus*). Many of the sufferings Paul boasts about – whippings, beatings, sleeplessness, hunger and thirst, exposure to the elements and to the dangers of homelessness, banishment, etc. – are in fact those endured by actual fools and tricksters when such are chastised by their masters or expelled from home, village, or town. Yet, in Paul, that which debases paradoxically dignifies.[330]

Paul's inverted hyperbole is especially comical in the proclamation of insanity: "I speak as a madman" (*paraphronōn lalō*), which represents an impassioned, emphatic folly rather than a mental disorder.[331] This madness is consciously and humorously linked, in Chapter 12, to the unnamed "man" who is "caught up to the third heaven" (12:1-7). Though taken by Biblical scholars throughout history as a serious and literal description of Paul's own rapture, the image is presented within the same rhetorical framework of "boasting" and therefore conflates the madness of folly with the ecstasy of the ideal, spiritual man. We find instances of folly and madness linked to ecstasy in Erasmus' Folly and Shakespeare's Bottom, whose "dream" of asinine bliss both parallels and inverts the Pauline prototype.[332]

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[330] It is perhaps no mere coincidence that, Plato, in the myth of Er, depicts the reincarnating soul of Odysseus – made wiser through his sufferings – longing for the life of an *idiōtēs* Plato, *Republic* 620c.

[331] *Paraphronōn*, or "madness," combines the Greek root for mind, understanding, and self-possession (*phroneō*) with the emphatic prefix of *para* + *a*, indicating the absence of mental control, as in "beside oneself," or "out of one's wits." *Lalos* describes Paul's madman as a "babbler."

[332] Folly's mock-ecstasy is discussed in Chapter 10.10.

In terms of moral instruction, Pauline moriasophia is a peculiar incitement to the virtue of humility. In the conventional sense, humility is the acknowledgment of limited perception and power, and the humble person is therefore dependent on a higher reality, trusting in divine providence and obedient towards spiritual authority. Humility, while antithetical to the classical ideal, is at the very center of the Judeo-Christian tradition, the chief remedy for the defect of pride. The virtues which compliment humility are faith, hope, and especially love. If humility, expressed as "fear of the Lord," is the necessary disposition for the soul's ascent to divine wisdom, the spiritual virtues represents wisdom's mystical end.

Nevertheless, Paul's fool-persona is not that of a fearful and reverent suppliant, nor an obedient disciple, nor a silent contemplative. Rather, like other fools of his time and culture, the fool for Christ is a generative source of language, bold and loquacious, a humorous provocateur, and a multiplier of meanings. The Greek term for humility (*tapeinophrosunē*) is suppressed throughout First Corinthians and does not appear until the later, polemical chapters of the second letter. Why? Paul wants to radicalize the very concept of humility so that he can actively challenge his adversaries on the issue of credentials. His paradoxical boasting-in-humility dissociates authority from ego; as a fool, his freedom is "licensed" by another master. Self-assertion, self-praise, and self-exemplification merit him nothing. Whatever is good, comes from and belongs to God (he denies himself even customary wages), while he accepts as his own ignominy, ridicule, and public rejection. Ironically, of course, Paul's remarkable endurance and indefatigable preaching demonstrate the very strength and intelligence he claims to lack.

Although biblical commentators of earlier periods have shied away from making literary-critical associations, recent critics find common ground between Paul's epistolary discourse and ancient satire. This is because Paul's boasts are explicitly intended as a humorous mockery of

his adversaries' claim to credentials. Like the satirist, a distorting lens of inversions, understatement, hyperbole, and the manipulation of convention is used to expose vice and corruption, here intellectual pride. But Paul's fool replaces the haughtiness of the satirist with the virtue of self-debasement. L.L. Welborn links this strategy to a "comic-philosophical tradition" combining the fool of the ancient Greek and Roman mime and the figure of the Cynic philosopher, a disheveled old man who mocks the hypocrisy of false philosophers:

> [...]it is our conviction that Paul's exposition of the folly of the message about the cross is best understood in the context of an intellectual tradition which, for want of a better term, we have designated the 'comic-philosophic tradition'. The intent of this phrase is to suggest that a common cultural perspective connects Socrates, satire, and the mime…a growing number of researchers into Greco-Roman culture have begun to trace a trajectory that reaches from Epicharmus to Lucian, and that includes, as one of its high points, Menippus of Gadara. What these authors have in common is what John Winkler has called 'the grotesque perspective'. In this tradition, the world is viewed from the perspective of the poor, the dishonored, the deformed, the outsiders. The hero of this tradition is the 'wise fool', who, in grotesque disguise, is allowed to utter critical truths about authority.[333]

Welborn's thesis of cultural and literary contextualization demonstrates a closer affinity between Paul and later purveyors and craftsmen of moriasophia than many have supposed. Menippus, whose name now designates for us a literary genre of harsh and biting censure in a form of alternating prose and poetry, was also a manumitted slave and a Cynic philosopher of renown. Though none of his works have survived, Varro imitated him and probably Lucian as well. He is featured as a kind of tourist of Hades in Lucian's "Dialogues of the Dead." Strabo and Stepha-

nus Byzantinus refer to Menippus as “serio-comic," *spoudogeloios* (from *spoudaios* and *geloios*), the most ancient moriasophic term, used by Aristophanes in the *Frogs*. If the Menippean-Cynic portrait lends Paul some authoritative pluck, the popular mime-fool supplies the comic paradigm for Paul’s braggart. Welborn compares Paul and his catalogue of hardships to descriptions of mimes in antiquity and finds many parallels. For example, the mime was an older man with a bald head, often boastful, cunning, and loquacious, impoverished and shabbily clad, often homeless, hungry and thirsty, sometimes an outcast or runaway, sometimes carrying a stick with which he either strikes others or is beaten himself.[334] For some scholars, the fact that Paul intended his letter to be read before the assembly is another indication of his theatrical consciousness.[335]

In the end, Paul’s rhetorical method succeeds only if he is able to compel a reconciliation between the Corinthian Christians and the agitators in their midst or to effect the expulsion of the latter from the community. Whether the Corinthians did so is not known; but more important is the precedent Paul sets for future generations. Paul’s letters demonstrate that, as an instrument for the reform of the Church, satire is not only permissible but *exemplary* if the conditions warrant it. The distortions of convention and signification in satire are justified when an enemy has abused and corrupted the very terms and categories which define moral behavior. Thus the “spiritual weapons” Paul speaks of in the war against the “strongholds” (*ochurōma*) of arrogant arguments (*logismous*; 10:4-5) are satire, irony, inversion, folly role-play, and boasting, through which Paul might censure, counter-attack, and instruct. This battle against human arrogance is to be distinguished from the cosmic, supernatural battle referred to in the Letter to the Ephesians,

[333]Welborn 12. See also Witherington 437, n. 32.
[334]See Welborn 24–43, 63. Given Welborn’s thesis, one is compelled to question why he limits his study to 1 Corinthians 1-4.
[335]See, for example Collins 17–18.

where Christians struggle "against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness" and "spiritual forces of evil in heavenly places" (6:12).

The war metaphor underscores the enmity which characterizes satire of the Cynic, Menippean sort. The aggressive response to social antagonism often slips into invective speech, and this is also the case with Paul. Although he does not refer to his enemies by name, Paul does not shy away from terms of vilification. The "puffed up" adversaries of the first letter are further identified in the second as "false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ." Paul even condemns them as servants of Satan, for the proud "disguise themselves as servants of righteousness" just as Satan "disguises himself as an angel of light" (11:13-14). Thus the invective aspect of moriasophia in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance continues to look back to Paul for its inspiration.

7.3 Paul, Socrates, and Plato

Christian Platonists since late antiquity have demonstrated similarities between Socrates and Christ. Although most accounts were written in Greek and therefore lost to the West until the recovery of Patristic sources in the Renaissance, the basic outlines of an ancient philosopher reputed for great wisdom, in search of divine truth, committed to a life of moral virtue, and sentenced to an unjust death were widely known and referenced throughout late antiquity and the Middle Ages.[336] But what about Socrates and the apostle Paul? Is there any basis for this comparison in the New Testament?

While the subject does not seem to have been broached until modern times, Paul's Corinthian folly-persona does indeed share several characteristics in common with Plato's Socrates. A

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[336]The comparison between Socrates and Jesus is taken up in the Renaissance by Ficino in his commentary to Plato's dialogues. See Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance* 321–25.

similarity is not unlikely if we consider the fact that the *imitatio Pauli* exhortation is founded on the ideal of *imitatio Christi*. But in the Corinthian letters the likeness is so impressive that it is hard not to think that the cultural memory of the Athenian philosopher is very much alive in Paul's own mind. First, consider Paul's vocabulary, i.e., his numerous references to wisdom, knowledge and mystery. For example, the term *sophia* appears seventeen times in First Corinthians, sixteen of which occur between chapters 1 and 3, and only eleven times more in all the rest of Paul's letters (Witherington 108). The repetitions serve not only Paul's particular theme but seem to have been chosen for the appeal these concepts would have had to Paul's Greek audience.

Like Socrates, Paul rejects the clever and learned speech of popular orators in favor of an inspired kind of "straight-talk," setting up a competition of *logoi* reminiscent of the rhetorician-philosopher contention in Plato. Indeed, in Paul's *idiōtēs* persona we hear echoes of Socrates' confession of ignorance. More than a passing or coincidental reference, Paul's professed ignorance of contemporary linguistic sophistication is suggested throughout. For example, Paul says:

> When I came to you, brethren, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God in lofty words [*huperochēn logon*] or wisdom [*sophias*]. For *I decided not to know anything among you* [*ou gar ekrinâ ti eidenai en umin*] except Jesus Christ and him crucified. (1 Cor. 2:1-2; my emphasis)

This declaration of ignorance may not seem as pronounced as that of Socrates, but Paul's thematic equivocation of the wisdom ideal, his illustration of semantic and perspectival conflict, and his repeated disavowal of clever speech ("wisdom speech") must be taken into account. Perhaps a Socrates is also behind Paul's rhetorical "trick" in the Athenian Council of the Areopagus, when he calls the attention of the Greeks to a shrine with the inscription "To An Unknown God"

(*agnōstō theō*; Acts 17:23). By telling the members of the Council that Christ is very one "whom you already worship without knowing it," Paul was applying an ingenious hermeneutic solution to the problem of faith and knowledge. The concept of faith-in-ignorance would have some currency with Paul's Greek audience, appealing not only to their piety but to their sense of philosophical mysticism. Even if we, today, should question whether Paul intends Socratic learned ignorance, later readers of the Acts of the Apostles took quite seriously the fact that Dionysius joined Paul as a believer following the speech (17:34). How else could one explain the fifth-century mystical theologian and Platonist who borrowed Dionysius' identity?

Of course in both cases ignorance is a literary-rhetorical device for emphasizing epistemological assumptions. Socrates and Paul dissociate themselves from particular arguments or sets of related arguments in use among a respected class of professionals. The disavowal allows Socrates and Paul to attack common assumptions and to reconstruct a theory of knowledge, the former with a dialectical process, self-evident truths, collection/division of virtues, etc., and the latter with eye-witness testimony of "Jesus Christ and him crucified," a system of doctrine, and the interpretation of sacred text and tradition. In both cases, the popular "wisdom" or "knowledge" represented by self-assured authorities is rejected for something inexpressibly superior – something at once intellective and intuitive-mystical.[337]

Although Paul does not treat ignorance systematically, neither can his language and literary technique be reduced to rhetoric and persuasion. True, Paul's moriasophia has the magnetic appeal of performance; but the complexity of both content and context provokes the very kind of philosophical and theological attention paid to the Corinthian letters in numerous interpretations and commentaries. Therefore we might say that the essential core of the wisdom-folly dialectic we have identified in Plato, Dionysius, and Cusa – with their antitheses and paradoxes – can be

found in Paul, in more ways than are apparent. For example, Paul invents a theory of spiritual unity and diffusion which recapitulates the one-many dialectic in a theological context. Thus Paul says that each person possesses distinct "spiritual gifts" or performs distinct kinds of service, but these are all unified by the "same Spirit," the "same Lord" and the "same God" (a reference to the Trinity). Paul's "manifestation" (*phanerōsis*) in each "for the common good" (1 Cor. 12:7) resembles Plato's discourse of "likenesses" or "appearances" of the Good. The harmony of participation is aptly illustrated in Paul's metaphor of the Church as "Christ's body": "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body" (12:12). Once again, Paul was probably familiar with Plato's corporeal analogy for the soul and the city-state, although the Apostle stresses the interdependence of members rather than a hierarchical class system.

The paradox of "one Spirit"-"many gifts" underlies Paul's social and moral resolution for the Corinthian community in the same way that ethics compliments metaphysics in the Platonic tradition. The destabilizing effect of equivocation and irony, involving the terms for wisdom, folly, knowledge, and ignorance as well as the concepts they signify emphasizes the underlying epistemological problems. Things both are and are not what they seem, the "appearances" may be "true" or "false," "divine" or "terrestrial," in short, they are ambiguous. Thus Paul asks, "Do you take heed only of things as they appear?" (2 Cor. 10:7). Language is a reflection of the appearances: neither universal, nor absolute, nor objective, it has the potential to generate multiple meanings but it can also get in the way; it may enlighten but it may also obscure. While the exploitation of such ambiguities delights in irony, doctrinal clarity relies on the theologian's ability to negotiate and resolve hermeneutically what is revealed and what is concealed.

[337]E.A Judge. compares the rhetorical strategies of Paul and Socrates.

As with Plato, such equivocation, irony, and ignorance might easily lead to skepticism. But faith and the positive doctrine of sacred text and tradition take the epistemological "leap" from a rational process into the conceptual absolute, whether philosophical or theological. Without the certainty of faith and doctrine, Paul's immediate and practical purpose – that of *re-forming* the attitudes and moral behavior of the Corinthian Christians with moriasophia – would fall flat, a mere competition between the clever rhetoric one preacher and another. Whether Paul succeeded in admonishing the "puffed-up," "super-duper apostles," or to what extent the Corinthian Christians mended their contentions and factions, we will never know. But in these two letters, Paul combines antitheses, paradoxes, and resolutions with a playful, dialectic, literary-rhetorical method for a practical purpose: to exhort people to transcend reputations and conflicts, to put aside individual and collective pride, and to bind together in reverence for a higher spirituality.

7.4 From Paul's Moriasophia to the Idiota

A history and tradition of Christian folly would be incomprehensible without a firm grasp on the Pauline precedent. Indeed, Paul becomes an apologist for Christian folly of all kinds, particularly in the context of monastic life. The Christian fool may be portrayed as the Lord's braggart or the victorious victim who rejoices in hardships, persecutions, and human failures. But a detailed history of the interpretation of the Corinthian letters and the imitation of the Paul persona through the time of Erasmus has not yet been written. Prior to the *Praise of Folly* this particular debt to Paul is rarely clear or acknowledged. And while we may point to Paul as the model for many "holy fools," not all holy folly is moriasophia, and not all Christian satire is Pauline. Moriasophia is essentially "artificial." A line of defense against pagan rationalism and intellec-

tualism, it disturbs and exploits the conventions of terminology and the premises of dialectic, converting antithesis into paradoxy, for the purpose of introducing some new resolution to perspectival, epistemological, and moral problems. Moriasophia stimulates and provokes with humor and wit, attacking an opponent or defending a position so that conflicts in theology may be reconciled, the corruptions of agitators exposed, and the moral fiber of society healed.

In the first chapter, we examined the juxtaposition of wisdom and folly as it occurs in various works of Western literature, including the *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid*, the Roman drama, the Bible, the legend of Solomon and Marcolf, and the apocryphal Harrowing of Hell. But the moriasophic persona of Paul is most responsible for the genesis of the idiota as a new European character type. A Roman-Latin translation of the Greek noun *idiōtēs*, the idiota is a particular manifestation of the Pauline fool for Christ, one which hearkens back to Paul in his self-avowed simplicity, as one "unskilled" or "non-expert" in the subtleties of rhetoric and dialectic. This aspect of Paul's persona recalls and emphasizes the feigned naïvété or learned ignorance of Socrates. At times this means that the idiota may lack the tactical deception of the *metis* or *ingenium* figures, but the ironic resonances of the pseudonym are implicit.

The origins of the idiota as a character type are shrouded in mystery. Lexical evidence indicates a very wide range of meaning for the ancient Greek *idiōtēs* and somewhat less for the ancient Roman importation. The difficulty of translation is noted sporadically in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially in a drawn-out controversy regarding Tertullian's idiota, which the English Churchman Samuel Horsley rendered as "idiot."[338] Still, a thorough philological analysis of the terms *idiōtēs* and *idiota* in Greek and Latin literature needs to be written in order to relate the concept to the character type.

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[338]A letter from Unitarian founder and scientist Joseph Priestley to Samuel Horsely, Bishop of St. David's, provides a glimpse into the larger controversy Priestley 426–28.

Because the terms are generic, they can be defined only in context. For example, in Plato's *Republic*, *idiōtēs* signifies a person in relation to:

1. the city (364e5, 435e4, 492c4, 495b6, 501a5, 560d1, 564a4, 578d3, 578d12, 492c4, 492d9, 493a6)[339]
2. public officials (578c1, 579c6, 615d7)
3. trained professionals, specialists (389b5, 536a5)

When contrasted with the city and the public official, the *idiōtēs* is often translated as "private individual" or "private citizen"; when contrasted with the trained professional, the same is rendered "layman." Other references in ancient literature suggest a common soldier, a taxpayer (as opposed to a tax collector), an amateur, or an outsider.[340] Generally speaking, the *idiōtēs* is therefore a person without the distinguishing features of a name, reputation, position, profession, or group; he is an "ordinary individual." It is interesting to note that the *idiōtēs* is most often defined by what is lacking or absent (i.e., he is a non-public official, non-professional, non-officer in military service, non-expert in professions, etc.). There is no hint of personification or of any particular attributes. The very suggestion of an idiota persona thus invites an ironical sort of *apophasis* from the outset. It is an empty shell, filled by language.

This generic persona is for the ancients a malleable "straw man." As other types of this kind, the *idiōtēs* may be disdained or derided. This occurs especially when the individual is viewed as a member of a crowd or mob, i.e, not distinguished by independent thought and expression. Plato speaks of *idiōtai* "who associate with the majority and want to please them"; like their counterparts, the *sophistai*, they "sit together in assemblies, courts, theaters, army camps, or any other gathering of a mass of people in public and, with a loud uproar, object excessively to

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[339]Textual references are provided in the index to C.D.C. Reeve's recent edition of *Plato's Republic*.
[340]See Spicq 212–14.

some of the things that are said or done, then approve excessively of others, shouting and clapping" (494a8, 492a7).

However, Plato's *idiōtēs* is also dignified through the natural, human capacity for philosophy. While the ordinary individual may not be distinguished by stately office, *he is a state in himself*, according to the guiding analogy of the *Republic*. As a city organizes the duties and labors of its citizens with appropriate laws, the soul arranges and harmonizes its virtues with rational principles (441c-442d). Plato's repeated use of the noun *idiōtēs* in this context is important in relation to his elitism. While the guardians and the philosopher-king represent the soul's highest rational principles, it should be remembered that every soul has such principles, even if it is weak and ineffectual. The implication, often neglected by critics, is that ordinary persons – when assisted in a special way by the gods (a significant exception) – can cultivate guardians and philosopher-kings within their own souls.[341]

Plato's final reference to an *idiōtēs* in the *Republic* is the interesting and complex example of Odysseus, related by Er the Pamphylian. As Er describes how various souls select bodies for reincarnation, he first mentions "the soul of the clown Theristes clothing itself as an ape." Next he describes the hero Odysseus:

> Now it chanced that Odysseus' soul drew the last lot of all, and came to make its choice. Remembering its former sufferings, it rejected love of honor, and went around for a long time looking for the life of an ordinary man (*andros idiōtou*) who did his own work, and with difficulty it found one lying off somewhere neglected by the others. When it saw it, it said that it would have done the same even if it had drawn the first-place lot, and chose it gladly (620c5).

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[341]See, for example 492a.

The juxtaposition of Theristes and Odysseus is not accidental but reminds us, firstly, of the episode from Homer's *Iliad*. In the *Iliad* the mocker is mocked (and beaten) by the virile, courageous hero; here the contrast has a very different purpose. According to Er, the choices made by the souls reflects the character of the person when alive. Theristes, reflecting a folly which is improper and immoral (Plato calls him a toilsome individual, *ponēros idiōtēs* in *Gorgias*, 525e), willingly descends from human to animal. This fate, not the worst of the lot, might be anticipated. But Odysseus defies expectations by surrendering his status and fame (*philotimias*) as a tribal leader for the soul of an ordinary person. The moment recalls the Achilles of the *Odyssey* XI, who, upon meeting Odysseus in the underworld, tells him that he would rather be a slave on earth than reign as a king in the underworld. While both seem to renounce the cultural standards for warrior virtues ("wrath" for Achilles, "cunning intelligence" for Odysseus) and fame, Odysseus' eager choice of privacy and simplicity not only escapes suffering but puts him in a position more suited to the practice of philosophy.

Why did the Romans import the Greek word? Greek was still, in Roman times, a significant language of commerce and administration in the Eastern part of the Empire as well as the language of higher education a vast literary tradition, of philosophy, rhetoric, and poetry. Many educated Romans studied in Greece, and many Greek-speaking peoples lived in Italy. It must be therefore the case that the term *idiota* became convenient where similar Roman words did not suffice. Romans had numerous Latin terms (mostly noun clauses) for the non-distinct individual or private person – such as *homo privus* (or *privatus*), *proprius*, s*pecialis*, *singulo*, *peculiaris* and *quis* – but none which might represent a man who lacks sophistication and refinement without

being completely uneducated and naïve (*simplex*, *indoctus*), illiterate (*illiteratus*), or uncultivated (*rudis*). These modifiers thus become the important qualifying terms for *idiota* in Latin.

For late antique and medieval commentators of the Latin Vulgate Bible, the clear Scriptural precedent for the idiota figure was not Paul's Corinthian performance but Peter and John before the Sanhedrin, who are described as "illiterate and idiotas" (*agrammatoi eîsin kai idiōtai*) in Acts 4:13. The case of Peter and John is noteworthy in context: not only had they brought about a miracle (the cure of a lame man in the Temple) but their testimony before the hostile assembly proved so impressive that the officials "marveled" (*ethaumazon*) at them. It is likewise significant that *idiota* did not in itself convey illiteracy (as in the Greek) or else *agrammatoi* would be redundant. Rather, the term conveys some other form of ignorance, such as not knowing the proper social and rhetorical conventions used to address an authoritative assembly.

A definition of *idiota* in the Latin West would have been shaped by the Christian exegetical tradition; but a philological analysis of the Greek and Roman biblical commentary, particularly that of late antiquity, still needs to be done. In the Eastern European countries, Paul's letters to the Corinthians underlie the cultural figure of the holy fool, which also became a formal category of sanctity (*salos*). Exactly how this happened, how Greek-speaking Christians explained and transformed the notion of *idiōtēs*, and how they distinguished between the Pauline persona of First and Second Corinthians and other kinds of "holy folly" is still unclear. This question will have to go unanswered for now.[342]

This does not mean that Paul's example was unimportant in the West but that Jerome's translation was simply non-literal, i.e., the Latinized *idiota* was turned down for the adjective phrase *imperitus sermone*, "inexpert in speech." It is quite possible that Jerome was trying to avoid certain connotations, even those which are intended in Paul's irony. Obviously Paul was a

learned man, unlike most of the other Apostles. And yet, the purpose remains essentially the same: to contrast spiritual knowledge with secular learning, to defend Christian belief against opposition, and to champion the idea of an infinite and mystical reality by throwing it into relief with contemporary expectations and standards. Like Paul, the Apostles Peter and John speak without the refinements of education yet boldly (*conperto*). Yet the author of Acts lends an objective perspective to the idiota through third-person narration as well as the perspective of the Sanhedrin.

As with fools, we find in both Eastern and Western Church Fathers an ignorance of the idiota which is ambiguous: it may be culpable, non-culpable, or ironic. On the one hand, *idiotae* are those in need of instruction, new converts who lack catechesis, or the layperson without the advanced training of the theologian and exegete.[343] In his treatise *On the Soul's Witness*, Tertullian speaks of the necessity for discovering Christian truth in the simplicity of heart (*te simplicem et rudem et impolitam et idioticam compello*) as opposed to a process of rational argumentation (1.23–25). Among the culpable sort, Tertullian and Hippolytus, the former in Greek, the latter in Latin, refer to Praxeas, Zephyrinus and the Monarchianist heretics as *idiotae*. For example, Hippolytus calls Zephyrinus "an *idiota* and illiterate" (*idiōtēs aner kai agrammatos*); but equally to blame are those Christians who have allowed the heresy to take hold in Rome (*andra idiōton kai apeiron ton ekklesiastikon horon*) (Athanasius xxiv). Similarly, Tertulllian speaks of the *idiōtai* who have misinterpreted the Trinitarian doctrine, whether from lack of instruction or because they have distorted it (*Adversus Praxean* 91, 198).[344]

Despite the obvious connotations of deficiency, a divinely-inspired wisdom of the idiota persisted on account of Peter and John in Acts. Augustine writes that among Christ's chosen

[342]Patrick Laude offers a comparison between "fools for Christ" in the East and West in 131–76. See also Saward.
[343]See "idiota" in Lampe.

disciples were "*idiotas* and unlearned, and fishermen, and publicans" (*Concerning Faith of Things Not Seen* 1.3). Again, in his sermon on the parable of the vineyard, Augustine paraphrases: "Come, thou poor one, follow Me; thou hast nothing, thou knowest nothing, follow Me. Thou poor and ignorant one [*idiota*], follow Me. There is nothing in thee to inspire awe, but there is much in thee to be filled." Augustine glosses with a quotation from First Corinthians, "God has chosen the weak things of the world to confound the strong" (1 Cor. 1:27-28), and comments in the spirit of Paul: "And so now the fishermen's words are read, and the necks of orators are brought down. Let all empty winds then be taken away, let the smoke be taken away which vanishes as it mounts; let them be utterly despised when the question is of this salvation" (Sermon 37, 373–78). Augustine's image of orators' "empty winds" and "smoke," is reminiscent of Paul's "puffed-up" agitators and "peddlers" of knowledge.

We continue to find these three manifestations of the idiota in the literature of the Middle Ages. The morally-neutral, non-culpable simpleton is described by Guibert of Novigento (Benedictine historian, theologian, and abbot of the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries), who teaches in his *ars praedicandi* that a sermon ought to be properly suited to the audience, whether *simplex et idiota* or *doctus et litteratus* (Alberte 55). In the twelfth century, Thomas Aquinas speaks of idiotas in several places as persons who are uneducated. For instance, in *Summa Contra Gentiles*, says that "the intellect of an angel excels that of a man more than the intellect of the ablest philosopher excels that of the most uncultivated idiota [*rudissimi idiotae*]." Yet this fact does not mean the philosopher is superior to the idiota in matters of faith, for "it would be the height of insanity [*maximae amentiae*] for an idiota to assert that what a philosopher proposes is false on the ground that he himself cannot understand it, so (and even more so) it is an exceed-

[344]See also Harnack 226, n. 1.

ingly great stupidity [*niminiae stultitiae*] for a man to suspect as false what is divinely revealed through the ministry of the angels simply because it cannot be investigated by reason."[345]

Blameworthy obstinacy is represented by Walter Map's *On the Trifles of Courtiers* (*De nugis curialium*). Map, a courtier of Henry II of England, archdeacon of Oxford, and chancellor to the bishop of Lincoln, was appointed to a commission charged with examining several Waldensians who appeared at the Third Lateran Council of 1179. Their education almost entirely Scriptural, the Waldensians were unsophisticated and so easily led into doctrinal error by Map's simple questions, like "birds which do not see the subtle snares or nets." Map calls them *idiotae et illiterati*, and for important reasons. The Waldensians were like traveling hermits, inspired by the gospel exhortation, "If you would be perfect, sell all your belongings and come and follow me" (Mt). They lived by apostolic example, in poverty and holding possessions in common, traveling on foot from town to town. The term *illiterati* does not mean that the Waldensians are unable to read – on the contrary, they submitted a French translation and gloss of the Psalter and of many other books of the Bible to Pope Alexander III – but rather, as laypersons of the lower classes, they did not have a proper theological education and they did not know Latin, the language of theology in the West.[346] The Waldensians resembled other communities of lay faithful such as the Franciscans and Conversi in Italy, except that they placed themselves under no authority and thus had no license to preach. Map found them over-confident, proud, and unteachable:

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[345]"Intellectus autem Angeli plus excedit intellectum humanum quam intellectus optimi philosophi intellectum rudissimi idiotae: quia haec distantia inter speciei humanae limites continetur, quos angelicus intellectus excedit[...] Sicut igitur maximae amentiae esset idiota qui ea quae a philosopho proponuntur falsa esse assereret propter hoc quod ea capere non potest, ita, et multo amplius, nimiae stultitiae est homo si ea quae divinitus Angelorum ministerio revelantur falsa esse suspicatur ex hoc quod ratione investigari non possunt," Lib. 1, cap. 3, n. 5. Translation based on Aquinas, "*Summa Contra Gentiles*".
[346]Sullivan 193–94.

> On every dot of the divine page, noble thoughts are wafted on so many wings, and such wealth of wisdom is amassed that he alone to whom God hath given something [to draw with] may drink for the full [well]. Shall, therefore, in any wise pearls be cast before swine, and the word given to idiotae who, as we know, receive it foolishly, to say nothing of their giving what they have received?[347]

Map's description, which was echoed in descriptions of the Waldensians throughout the next century, illustrates with increasing clarity the negative image of the idiota figure. His censure most certainly reflects the tensions of class, education, and probably gender.[348] At stake is theological authority, orthodoxy, and stability, catalyzed by the idiota's "ignorance" and his freedom from clerical orders. Whether the idiota is favorable or inimical, an unlikely hero or a self-defeating ignoramus is determined by intellectual and moral failing. Is the idiota deficient in essential doctrines, or distorting them, or is he merely unaware of human conventions? Is he proud in spiritual matters or is he humble?

If the threat of heresy inclined those of the established church to regard some idiota with skepticism and suspicion, others were praised for their simple piety and wisdom. Among these are St. Giovanni Buono of Mantua, a founder of the Conversi in Italy (1168-1249), the monk and lay brother Christian of L'Aumōne (d. ca. 1146), and St. Goderic of Finchale (d. 1170). St. Goderic was a pious peasant who taught himself to read, entered a monastery of Durham, and memorized the Psalter. Though he never took holy orders and was *laicus et pene ineruditus lit-*

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[347]Peters 145.

[348]According to a comment by the anonymous writer of Passau, the Waldensians educated both men and women. See Sullivan 194, n. 26.

teris, Goderic was capable of defending himself against four monks of Durham even when they addressed their questions to him in Latin, a language did not know.[349]

The most notable example of the medieval, saintly idiota is Francis of Assisi, whose outstanding reputation tends to eclipse many similar personages of his era. In a letter written to his entire religious order, Francis includes an open confession for violating his own Rule, "whether from negligence or on account of my weakness or because I am ignorant and an idiota."[350] His allegory of true joy imagines a moment when he is shut out of his Order's house on a brutally cold night and told: "Go away! You are an idiota and a simpleton."[351] The final *Testament* of Francis extends the characterization to all the brothers, reflecting on the early days, "we were idiotas and subjected to everything."[352]

Francis' language is echoed by Thomas da Celano in his biography. Reflecting on the heavenly triumph and honorable legacy of his mentor, he writes:

> Where also the wise and most learned men of the world, of whom Paris is accustomed to produce a greater abundance than the rest of the world, humbly and most devoutly venerate, admire, and honor Francis, an idiota and the friend of true simplicity and complete sincerity.[353]

While the contrast between the "worldly wisdom" of Parisian scholastics and Francis' simple, authentic piety is a clear echo of St Paul, Celano also refers to the inspired education of Philip, Francis' seventh disciple, who became like the Apostles Peter and John in

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[349]For Giovanni Buono of Mantua, see Thompson, A. 8, 71, 114, 144, 186, 192–93, 204–05. For Christian of L'Aumōne and Goderic (Godric) of Finchale, see Constable 9–11, 198, 211.
[350]"[...]sive negligentia sive infirmitatis meae occasione sive quia ignorans sum et idiota." This and all subsequent quotations are taken from Francis of Assisi *Opuscula*.
[351]"Vade; tu es unus simplex et idiota."
[352]"Et eramus idiotae et subditi omnibus."
[353]"Ubi etiam sapientes orbis et litteratissimi viri, quorum copiam super omnem terram Parisius maximam ex more producit, Franciscum virum idiotam et verae simplicitatis totiusque sinceritatis amicum, humiliter et devotissime venerantur, admirantur et colunt." (3.120). Translation based on Thomas of Celano 110.

his ability to preach: "Understanding and interpreting the sacred Scriptures, although he had not studied, he became an imitator of those whom the leaders of the Jews considered idiotas and illiterate."[354] Note that Francis himself is never referred to as *illiteratus* or *sine litteris*; he wrote in Italian and Latin and was a masterful preacher..

The witness of Thomas of Spalato in 1222 highlights these aspects of the saintly idiota:

> When I was a student in Bologna I saw Saint Francis preach in the main square outside the Palazzo Comunale; almost the whole city had gathered to hear him. His theme was 'Angels, Men and Devils'.
>
> Although no scholar [*idiota*], he spoke so well and developed the subject of these three classes of rational and spiritual beings so clearly that he won the un-bounded admiration of even the academics in the crowd. Yet his was more of a general address than a sermon.
>
> He wore a tattered habit, his appearance was insignificant, and his face wasn't handsome; but God gave his words such power that they actually restored peace to many of the noble families long torn apart by hatred, cruelty and murder. At the same time ordinary men and women flocked to him out of devotion and respect, afterwards trying to tear a shred from his habit or at least to touch him.[355]

The "power of the word" given to Francis is a direct reminder of Paul's "word of the cross" which he says is the "power of God" (1 Cor. 1:17-18), as well as the stark contrast between Francis' shabby appearance and his rhetorical ability. The admiration of learned men is also indicative of a kind of intelligence and ingenuity proper to the idiota.

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[354]"Scripturas quoque sacras intelligens et interpretans, cum non didicerit, illorum imitator effectus est, quos idiotas et sine litteris fore Iudaeorum principes causabantur" (1.25)
[355]*Historia Salonitarum*, quoted in House 236.

The popularity and reputation of Francis, the growth of the Franciscan order, and the proliferation of oral and written accounts helped to give a more definitive shape to the saintly idiota figure in the West. By the time of Catherine of Siena (1347-1380) and her confessor-correspondent (and later biographer) Raymond of Capua (c. 1330-1399), it is clear that the idiota had become a figure of vernacular culture. For both Catherine and Raymond, the idiota is a pious layperson with the potential for extraordinary spiritual insight.[356]

In what is perhaps the zenith of the saintly idiota tradition, a series of religious works appeared in Southern France in the late fourteenth century under the pseudonym Idiota. These include six books of meditations (*On divine love, On the Virgin Mary, On true patience, On the perpetual conflict between the flesh and the spirit, On lost innocence, On death*), three treatises (*On the Blessed Virgin, On the religious life, The spiritual or mystical eye*[357]), and a commentary on Psalm 15. The titles demonstrate that the definition of an idiota had been modified considerably from its origins in rusticity, illiteracy, mediocrity, and incompetence to a person of simple piety and moderate intelligence, possibly adept in vernacular languages and in knowledge of Scripture, to a Latin-literate person of great spiritual insight and mysticism. Although Raymun-

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[356]In Chapter 85 of her *Dialogue of Divine Doctrine*, Catherine hears the voice of God instruct her on the virtues of the idiota who is illumined by truth, as opposed to the learned who have been blinded by their pride: "Chi la dichiarò che questa fusse la veritá? El lume che fu dato ed è dato a chi el vuole ricevere per grazia sopra el lume naturale, come decto è. Sí che ogni lume che esce della sancta Scriptura è uscito ed esce da questo lume. E però gl'ignoranti superbi scienziati aciecano nel lume, perché la superbia e la nuvila de l'amore proprio ha ricoperta e tolta questa luce: però intendono piú la Scriptura licteralmente che con intendimento; e però ne gustano la lectera rivollendo molti libri, e non gustano il merollo della Scriptura, perché s'hanno tolto el lume con che è formata e dichiarata la Scriptura. Unde questi cotali si maravigliano e cadranno nella mormorazione vedendo molti grossi e idioti nel sapere la Scriptura sancta, e nondimeno sonno tanto illuminati nel cognoscere la veritá come se longo tempo l'avessero studiata. Questa non è maraviglia neuna, perché egli hanno la principale cagione del lume unde venne la scienzia. Ma perché essi superbi hanno perduto el lume, non veggono né cognoscono la bontá mia, né el lume della grazia infusa sopra de' servi miei," 85.165. See Tylus on the *idioto umile* 233–34, 245–46. The English word "idiŏt" has similar connotations in the fourteenth and fifteenth century. See Kuhn and Reidy 20.

[357]de Lubac points out that the metaphor of a "mystical eye" appears in Ambrose, Paschasius, and a Spanish treatise of the eighth century called *Clavis Scripturae*, where the author relates the "two eyes" of the Bride in the biblical *Song of Songs* to the allegorical and moral senses of Scripture 97, 342 [n. 15]. As indicated in Chapter 3, Augustine offers a related metaphor in *On Christian Doctrine*, the "inner eye," which is capable of mystical insight when "cleansed" by good counsel 2.7.9–11.

dus Jordanus (a canon regular of St. Augustine and prior of his house in Uzès, in south-eastern France) is now assumed to be the author (his signature appears on several manuscripts), this was not known when the works were in circulation, and it is highly significant that the Idiota became a recognized identity and persona for the first time. These writings were collected and published by Jacques Lefèvre in 1519 as *Contemplationes Idiotae*, after which they enjoyed a large audience throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Thus the idiota of the West represents a cultural tradition which has interacted with and been influenced by Paul's Corinthian letters and the description of Peter and John in Acts. While the Greek noun seems to have supplied the Romans with a hollow man of ignorance and simplicity, a Christian interpretation branches off in a new direction, exploiting the figure to demonstrate the conflict between a rational-intellectual standard and one based on theology and faith. Paul's recalibration of wisdom and knowledge as inspired and spiritual symbolizes the necessary restructuring of authority and values in a culture where theology is superior to philosophy. The very threat that Peter, John and Paul posed to the Judeo-Hellenic establishment in Palestine and Greece is reinvented within a Christian context, where the idiota borders on heretic and saint. Taking the form of hermit, recluse, monk, lay-religious, or adult convert (*converso*), the persona develops intellectually and spiritually into a figure of moriasophia. Consistent with these manifestations is the idiota's poverty, lack of formal theological education, and profound piety.

The figure of the idiota has been neglected in modern scholarship, and so has the relationship between the idiota and the fool. Several common characteristics are outstanding, such as the figure's poverty and shabby dress, the "outsider" status (either as a solitary figure or a traveler), lack of formal education, and the occasional show of native intelligence and wit. To consider the idiota always simple and pious is to neglect the full range of evidence; "natural" and

"artificial" are categories which may apply to both types as well as degrees of madness.[358] While the idiota rarely seeks to entertain or to induce laughter, there is a strain of the performative in the extremities of their pious practices, in their dynamic and demonstrative preaching, and in their debates with theologians. Most importantly, both the idiota and the fool appeal to an alter-wisdom which challenges the assumptions and methods of established traditions and schools. In this respect, idiota and fool alike pit ingenuity and creativity against complacent systematic thinking.

7.5 Socratic Irony Rediscovered

While a learned-ignorant aspect of Paul's Corinthian persona was developed in the medieval figure of the idiota, the rhetorical aspect of the moriasophic dialectic – witty and ironical – was brought to light during the Renaissance, gradually and obliquely, through the recovery of ancient literature and philosophy. Here we will necessarily have to by-pass the discussion of the contributions of a vast array of comical authors – from Terence, Plautus, and Aristophanes in the drama, to Juvenal, Horace and Lucian in satire, to Apuleius and Petronius in the novel – to focus on the figure of the ancient *eiron*, a kind of philosopher-fool, which became a central feature of moriasophic discourse in the Renaissance. We have indicated that such a figure was a common-

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[358]Jacopone da Todi, a *converso* who joined the Franciscan Spirituals, outdid Francis in this regard. A prominent citizen of Todi who purportedly became disconsolate after his wife's death, Jacopone (a nickname meaning "mad Giacomo") exhibited a mad folly for Christ on numerous occasions. In his poetry, the conventions of the secular jongleur or minstrel could become the language of the saintly idiota, intensified with a madness for divine love. He regards madness for Christ's love is the highest wisdom, because of God's mad love for him. In *Laud* 90, "The Lament of the Soul for the Intensity of Infused Charity," Jacopone writes:

> For this Love I have renounced all,
> Traded the world and myself;
> Were I the lord of creation
> I would give it all away for Love.
> And yet Love still plays with me,
> Makes me act as if out of my senses,
> Love without limits, why do You drive me mad
> And destroy me in this blazing furnace?" Egan 267–71.

place in the ancient world, particularly among the Cynics and represented in the accounts of Menippus of Gadara and Diogenes of Sinope. But the preeminent model in the Renaissance is Socrates, the philosopher-fool who maintained the greatest reputation for wisdom among ancient writers and whose image became a cultural touchstone. As we suggested earlier, Paul may have had the Socratic character in mind when he debated with Athenians on Mars Hill and when he played the braggart-fool for the Corinthians.

Who exactly was Socrates? What can we know about him? Scholars of the Renaissance were caught up in the celebrated enigma of a Socrates as we are today. Despite every scrap of recorded evidence, historians of philosophy are unable to tell us anything about Socrates with certitude. Our three main sources – Plato, Xenophon, and Aristophanes – are literary representations rather than histories, and their characterizations are not without serious conflicts. The controversy Socrates must have generated is reflected from the outset in the antipathy between Aristophanes' conniving sophist and Plato's principled and dignified victim. As early as the 390s, a pamphlet condemning Socrates circulated throughout Athens, and Plato and Xenophon were only two of the young Socratics who came to his defense. Socrates represented the best and the worst of intellectualism; symbolic and iconic, the struggle to define his legacy became the struggle of philosophy in and against society.[359]

In their fervor for the roots of ancient wisdom, Western Hellentists of the Renaissance were faced the problem of Socrates, i.e., how to bring the ancient figure of Socrates back to life from the relative obscurity of the Middle Ages. The foreign invasions of the fifth and sixth centuries – a period of immense destruction, political instability and constant fear – took a heavy toll on the long-standing tradition of learned Greek communities in the West. Libraries were burned

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[359]Gabriele Giannantoni has compiled all the available evidence on the person of Socrates. Johansen describes and compares Xenophon's more practical and down-to-earth Socrates to Plato's 128–31, 131–40.

to the ground along with estates and public buildings, leisured activities gave way to the necessities of survival, and Greek learning nearly vanished. Beginning the long work of preservation, the emerging monastic culture of the West collected the remnants, but competency and proficiency in Greek among the monks of Western Europe was in short supply. As a result, the most direct sources for a portrait of Socrates, the writings of Plato and Xenophon, went the way of most other Greek texts, neglected, abandoned, or lost..

Nevertheless, the tradition was not stifled altogether. Platonism was, as the historian Norman Cantor writes, "the most influential philosophical system of the ancient world,"[360] a system which exceeded by far the parameters of the first generation of Socrates' students. With the dispersion of Platonism and the eclecticism of ancient systems in general, the names, reputations, and doctrines of Socrates and Plato were spread across the Mediterranean and to the far reaches of its empires. An image of Socrates – easy to identify by his bald head, beard, bulging eyes, wide nose, large mouth, and thick lips – is a frequent motif in Roman as well as Greek art, "Hundreds of ancient portraits with such features have been recognized in diverse media: marble, bronze, teracotta, ivory, and bone, engraved gemstones, clay seal impressions, wall-paintings, floor mosaics, and even coins."[361] Socrates was even incorporated into representations of the seven sages. Platonism's vast influence insured its survival; but without the earliest sources, it was a tradition detached from its roots. The cultural memory of Socrates of the West was deeply affected by this detachment, the silhouette of a quasi-historical person, fragmentary and disfigured.

Any discussion of the Socratic revival in the Renaissance must therefore come to terms with the "legend of Socrates" during the Middle Ages of Western Europe. This legend incorpo-

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[360]Cantor 14.
[361]Lapatin 110.

rates a large assortment of biographical data, Socratic dicta, and doctrine from the Platonic and Xenophonic tradition as well as fragments of Socratic lore.[362] Here we mention several prominent features of the Athenian philosopher available to the educated Latin audience before the recovery of the fifteenth century. Socrates was remembered, first and foremost, as the teacher of Plato. Although Socrates wrote nothing, he pursued a more certain knowledge of virtue in conversations with his contemporary Athenians. He had numerous young disciples whom he attracted with eloquent philosophy. Though tried and condemned for his heterodoxy, , his belief in a higher justice and the immortality of the soul gave him the courage to stand up against his accusers and to suffer a noble death.

On these few basic facts most sources agreed. But many other testimonies of Socrates available to medieval readers distort the Greek tradition in ways which reveal their own interests and prejudices. Cicero, for example, one of the most significant Roman authorities, affirms Socrates' as the founder of moral philosophy, but emphasizes his eloquence rather than his dialectical method. Oddly, while Socrates is said to have excelled at rhetoric, he is also said to have died for "lack of skill in speaking." Cicero also criticizes Socrates for "a divorce of the tongue from the heart," or a separation of knowledge from eloquence, opposing the notion that philosophy is necessary for speaking well.[363] For Seneca, Socrates died like a Stoic; he is praised for maintaining a "level temperament" throughout the many hardships of his life, among which Seneca numbers his domestic problems, his military service, the hostility of some of the Thirty Tyrants, and finally his unjust conviction and sentence.[364] For Seneca, Socrates' example was more important than his words, for he knew how to keep to his principles and avoid the corrupt-

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[362]See Jayne's "The Relapse into Medievalism," which summarizes the fragmented and distorted view of Socrates and Plato during the Middle Ages 22–62.
[363]Cicero, M. T., *De Oratore* 1.54, 3.16.
[364]Seneca 24.4, 28.8, 70.9, 71.17.

ing influence of the majority. Apuleius takes quite seriously Socrates' personal *daimonion*, which he incorporates into a general theory of daemonology and daemon worship. But his thesis runs afoul of Plato's treatment of the gods in the *Republic* and of the passions in general (Apuleius treats *daimōnes* as emotional beings), contradictions which Augustine takes him to task for when writing *The City of God*.[365] Lastly, Valerius Maximus, a conservative Roman, praises Socrates for his understanding of sacred and divine matters but at the same time also thinks the Athenian's death was justified. For Valerius virtue and wisdom stem from deep emotion (*adfectus*) rather than intellectual knowledge so that Socrates is praised as "the first to compel his spirit to examine the deepest matters of the human condition and the emotions arrayed in the recesses of the heart."[366]

The Christian writers of late antiquity in the West echoed much of what they read about Socrates in the works of the ancient Romans, but many Latin-speaking Fathers also knew Greek and included aspects of Socratic doctrine and lore they found there. Significantly, Socrates – viewed in light of Athens' New Academy and of its greatest Roman representative Cicero – was for the Christian Fathers an ancient skeptic in the Academic tradition. This means that the foundation of moral philosophy is thought to be developed in the context of doctrinal uncertainty. Thus Socrates' profession of ignorance is, in this instance, taken quite literally. Tertullian, Felix Minucius, Lactantius, and Jerome are among those who hold this point about Socrates, a few quoting the dictum (now untraceable) "Things beyond us are of no concern to us." [367] Why they do so is essential to their own polemical position, namely, that truth arrived at through divine

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[365]Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans* 8.14.
[366](Mueller 3, 94, 150).
[367]For example, see Jerome, *Against Rufinus*, in *Saint Jerome: Dogmatic and Polemical Works* 198 and Lactantius 3.20.

revelation is superior to truth attained through philosophy; the former is certain, the latter uncertain, even by pagan standards.

The early-Christian view of Socrates was therefore ambivalent, a fact which can be appreciated only when the intellectual conflicts of the time are taken into consideration. Socrates was admired but with great caution: while he pursued moral virtue, sought truth in the divine realm, believed in immortality, and had great courage when facing injustice, he was subject to human intellectual limits on knowledge, to sin, and to human error. The kind of heroism we find in Plato (with its Homeric allusions) and also in the somewhat more subdued portrait of Xenophon is profoundly absent. It is also likely that Christians were reacting to the surge of interest in the figure Socrates in the first and second centuries, exemplified in two orations dedicated to the Athenian philosopher by Dio Chrysostom,[368] in three treatises by Plutarch (only one of which is extant), and in frequent references to Socrates made by Seneca, Plutarch, and Epictetus. One repeated concern of Christians was Socrates' *daimon*, often cited by the pagans as evidence of Socrates' true piety. But this sounded to Christians more like a evil spirit than a divine inspiration. Some Christians went as far to suggest that Socrates' quest for divine knowledge was evidence of his pride and his *daimon*, a vain boast.[369]

At any rate, the wisdom of Socrates is often challenged and used as an occasion to demonstrate the contrast between a wisdom which is human and one which is divine. Quoting Cicero's definition of wisdom as "the knowledge of divine and human things," Lactantius argues that humans who say they know divine affairs must be divine themselves and therefore gods.. Thus, unless they are revealed, how else can humans know divine things?[370] Moreover, the Socratic notion that knowledge is one with virtue jarred with the Christian view of sin as freely

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[368]See Dio Chrysostom's discourses "On Socrates" and "On Homer and Socrates" 371–400, n. 54 and n. 55.
[369]Lactantius Vol. 1, *Of the Origin of Error*, 2.15.

willed and this discrepancy could not be ignored. As Lactantius writes, "No one…is wise but God, or certainly that man whom God has taught." Being both "the wisdom of God" and "wisdom itself" in human flesh, Christ-Logos far exceeds Socrates and all the Greek philosophers.[371]

The evidence of late antiquity indicates that Socrates' reputation as a foolish *eiron* lingered on. In the first place, most modern summaries of the sources of late antiquity tend to overlook the humorous bits of Socratic lore which were passed on along with the biographical and philosophical recollections. For example, several authors of antiquity and late antiquity refer to the domestic disputes between Socrates and his wife Xanthippe. Xanthippe makes a brief appearance in Plato's *Phaedo*, a figure of lamentation and grief, but in Xenophon's *Symposium*, Socrates speaks of her as "the hardest to get along with of all the women there are"; nevertheless he explains that he chose her in order to increase his tolerance for the rest of humanity in just the way one would choose a spirited horse so that one might be capable of riding all others (Xanthippe means "blond horse") (2.10). This is the earliest source for what became a wide-spread legend. Diogenes Laertius' account, available in a Latin translation and in a Latin compendium during the Middle Ages, elaborates with a few quippish exchanges:

> When Xanthippe first scolded him and then drenched him with water, his rejoinder was, 'Did I not say that Xanthippe's thunder would end in rain?' When Alcibiades declared that the scolding of Xanthippe was intolerable'; 'Nay, I have got used to it', said he, 'as to the continued rattle of a windlass.' And you do not mind the cackle of geese'. 'No', replied Alcibiades, 'But they furnish me with eggs and goslings'. 'And Xanthippe', said Socrates, 'is the mother of my children'. Once, she attacked him in the market-place, and tore his cloak off; his

[370]Lactantius Vol. 2, *Epitome of the Divine Institutes*, 31.
[371]Lactantius Vol. 2, *Divine Institutes*, 30, 20. Cf. 1 Cor. 1:30.

> friends advised him to keep her off with his hands; 'Yes, by Jove,' said he, 'that while we are boxing you may all cry out, "Well done, Socrates, well done, Xanthippe."' And he used to say, that one ought to live with a shrew, as horsemen are fond of spirited horses', 'but just as, when they have mastered these, they can easily cope with the rest, so I in the society of Xanthippe shall learn to adapt myself to the rest of the world'.[372]

The dramatic humor of these exchanges, echoed throughout late antiquity and into the Middle Ages, suggests that aspects of Socrates' biography had become the stuff of literary legend by Diogenes' time. Perhaps such portraits were invented to illustrate the resemblance between Socrates and the "Silenos" of the dramatic tradition, as an extrapolation on the comic portrait of Aristophanes. What is particularly interesting here, nevertheless, is that Diogenes (representing the opinion of the time?) seems to have no problem linking the aphoristic wisdom conveyed in such comical scenarios to the more profound philosophical wisdom attributed to Socrates by the Delphic oracle. Diogenes thus continues: "*And it was in consequence of such sayings and actions as these*, that the priestess at Delphi was witness in his favour, when she gave Chaerephon this answer, which is so universally known: Socrates of all mortals is the wisest" (my emphasis).

Although we cannot be certain how much of Diogenes' Xanthippe account was available to a medieval audience – there was a Latin compendium and a Latin translation, both of which are no longer extant – some Socratic lore was passed down by the very same authors of late antiquity who assessed Socrates' accomplishments. The story of Xanthippe throwing water at Socrates was mentioned by Seneca (*de Constantia Sapientis* 18.6), Valerius Maximus (7.2.ext 1) and St. Jerome (*adversus Jovianium* 1.48). In most other accounts, Xanthippe pours the water (or wash water, or urine!) over Socrates' head. Valerius has one man asking Socrates "whether

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[372]Diogenes Laertius 1.2.35–37.

he would advise him to marry or not," and Socrates replying, "Whichever you do, you will repent it."[373]

The Xanthippe legend demonstrates how sage and fool are joined as a single character and legend in the Hellenistic cultural memory. The relentless seeker of truth and philosophical martyr coexists with the sophist who measures a flea's foot. It was, after all, a Greek convention to alternate between comical and tragical perspectives in a variety of literary venues. Plato and Xenophon alike touched on Socrates' extremes, each of them portraying a raucous symposium as well as a sober defense. The pagan Cicero, the Christian Felix Minucius, and other writers of antiquity and late antiquity recall the insult of Zeno of Sidon, head of the Epicurean school during the late first and early second century A.D., who called Socrates "an Attic buffoon [*scurram*]."[374] A Greek making ample use of a Roman concept contemptuously, this tag suggests that Socrates was something between an urbane buffoon and a jesting parasite. Lactantius, who also quotes Zeno, finds Socrates poised between idiocy and madness; he was either a "senseless, abandoned, desperate man" for disdaining and mocking religion, or a "madman" if he really believed in it (Lactantius *Divine Institutes*, 3.20). St. Jerome, in a passage on the gemstones of the Celestial City, cites a verse from the Socrates of Aristophanes which reminds him of the sapphire's azure beauty: "I walk on air and look down on the Sun." Once again, a multifaceted Socratic legacy enables Jerome to reference the comic persona in the *Clouds*, speaking while suspended above the ground in a basket, in a serious context and at face value.[375] Thus Socrates' infamously strange behavior, the philosopher's domestic woes, and reputation for sophistry and

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[373]Sources cited in Lapatin 137.
[374]"Zeno quidem non eos solum qui tum erant, Apollodorum Silum ceteros, figebat maledictis, sed Socraten ipsum parentem philosophiae Latino verbo utens scurram Atticum fuisse dicebat." 1.34.
[375]Jerome cites the Greek text of Aristophanes and offers a Latin translation: "scando aerem solemque despicio." Vol. 4, *Commentaria in Isaiam prophetam*, col. 544.

folly added a convenient touch of humility and triviality to the image of the philosophical genius and quasi-saint, weaknesses which corresponded perfectly to his self-acknowledged blindness.

What, then, happened to the image of Socrates the *eiron* in the Middle Ages? It has been argued that medieval readers simply did not know about this aspect of the Socratic character and reputation. In *Ironia: Medieval and Renaissance Ideas on Irony*, Dilwyn Knox writes that the medieval "silence" on the irony of the philosopher can be explained by the absence of those classical Greek and Latin texts which mention Socratic irony and by a lack of understanding select references available (98–99). Despite Socrates' reputation elsewhere, the four Platonic dialogues available in Latin translation or partial translation (*Timaeus*, *Meno*, *Phaedo*, and *Parmenides*) did not portray Socrates in his ironical mode. Several Greek references (for example Aristotle's allusion to Plato's *Phaedrus* in *Rhetoric* and a brief comment in Diogenes Laertius' account of Socrates) went undetected and thus did not transfer to the Latin doxographies. In Latin literature, the subject of Socratic irony was broached in Cicero's *Brutus*, which was rediscovered only in 1421, in a part of *On the Orator* which was missing from medieval manuscripts, and in Cicero's *Academica priora*, which was not widely known and studied. A relevant passage in *On Duties* was poorly copied and rarely cited, and another in Quintilian's *Institutes* was overshadowed by the frequent use of Cicero's *On Rhetorical Invention* and the pseudo-Ciceronian *Letter to Herennius*. The one exception Knox points out is a description of Socratic understatement in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (1127b). But even here Aristotle gives no indication of the *eiron*'s intent to deceive or mock his opponent and the passage is therefore interpreted by medieval commentators as a kind of modesty or humility. What must be added to Knox's excellent analysis is the skeptical sage of the Fathers, one who concedes literal ignorance.

There was, however, at least one other highly authoritative description of Socrates for the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance. In Book VIII of his *City of God*, Augustine begins his evaluation of Platonic doctrine with a doxographical account of Socrates' teaching, *De Socratis disciplina*. This account is far more detailed and complex than what we find in the earlier Latin Fathers. It is quite possible that by Augustine's time the memory of Socrates no longer posed the threat that it had in the first two centuries. Instead than engaging polemically in an attack on the Greek father of philosophy, Augustine summarizes what he knows of Socrates' teaching.

Augustine begins with the widespread notion that Socrates was the first to direct philosophy away from physics to the study of morals. Unlike earlier Latin Fathers, Augustine does not emphasize Socrates' professed ignorance but in fact speculates that Socrates was seeking a more definitive answer to the problem of causation being discussed at that time. While the physicists sought a material first principle, Socrates (like Pythagoras) pursued metaphysics as an intellectual enterprise. Moral philosophy, for Socrates, would purify one of earthly desires so that divine principles might be more clearly discerned by the mind, which then "might rise by its natural energy into the eternal realm and behold with pure intelligence the nature of incorporeal and unchangeable light, where the causes of all created natures dwell" (8.3).

Augustine's description of the Socratic aim here is undoubtedly influenced by Plotinian Platonism, especially in the connection between the "pure intelligence" of the mind and an eternal dwelling place of first causes, described as "incorporeal and unchangeable light" (*incorporei et incommutabilis luminis*). But what Augustine says about Socrates next demonstrates an admixture of Judeo-Christian doctrine (perhaps from Philo): that the Athenian philosopher believed "the first and highest causes lie nowhere else but in the will of the one and supreme God." It is on account of this sentence, joining Platonic unity with Christian divinity, that many Chris-

tian writers during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance (and even later) thought Socrates had reached a monotheistic position.

A searching monotheism in Socrates' metaphysics is offset in Augustine by his description of Socrates' ironical method:

> At any rate it is certain that he used to deride and harass the folly of the non-experts who thought that they were certain of some opinion, even in those very moral questions to which it was apparent he had devoted his whole mind. His practice was either to confess his ignorance or to dissimulate knowledge, employing a wondrous grace of discourse and a very keen wit. In fact, this is how it came that he stirred up enemies, was condemned on a false charge and incurred the death penalty.[376]

Here we find some of the common threads of the Socratic cultural memory greatly enhanced. In a rare moment for medieval readers, Augustine takes the previous Western tradition beyond a literal interpretation of Socrates' ignorance (*confessa ignorantia*) to a strategy of deception (*dissimulata scientia*). Augustine furthermore provides valuable details regarding the setting for the ironical method. First, both Socrates' profession of ignorance and his strategy of deception are employed in the context of debate, wherein he disturbs and overthrows (*agitare*, *vertere*) the undeveloped or ill-informed opinions of his opponents. Second, Socrates' rhetorical mastery, described in glowing terms by Augustine, must be considered part and parcel of his strategy of dis-

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[376]"Constat eum tamen inperitorum stultitiam scire se aliquid opinantium etiam in ipsis moralibus quaestionibus quo totum animum intendisse videbatur vel confessa ignorantia sua vel dissimulata scientia lepore mirabili disserendi et acutissima urbanitate agitasse atque versasse. Unde et concitatis inimicitiis calumniosa criminatione damnatus morte multatus est." 8.3.

simulation. And lastly, it was Socrates' ironical method, more than his beliefs, which cost him his life.[377]

Augustine's image muddies the water for a Christian interpretation of Socrates. On the one hand, Socrates appears to arrive at the truth of the one God in his metaphysics as well as manifesting the ideal of Christian virtue in his moral philosophy, the wisest among the pagans combing admirably theoretical wisdom (*sapientia contemplativa*) and practical wisdom (*sapientia activa*). But on the other hand, Socrates' dialectical method combines superior rhetorical skill with deception. Can Socrates' profound realizations redeem or justify his irony? Augustine does not say. Yet in the end, the Socratic controversy is transferred to his legacy; for while his death is avenged in the murder and exile of his accusers,[378] his philosophical heritage is marred by his students' disagreement over the highest good by which all men are made happy.

In the account of Plato which follows, Augustine assumes the student is the splitting image of the master (apparently Augustine did not know the works of Xenophon). Plato, he says, blended what he learned from others with the rhetorical charm and disputatious dialectic taught to him by Socrates. This similarly extends as well to the method of dissimulation:

> For Plato strives to maintain the renowned practice of his teacher Socrates, whom he fashions the chief discussant in his books, dissimulating his knowledge or opinions; and because this practice was pleasing to Plato, he adopted it, with the result that his own thoughts on important matters cannot be easily discerned.[379]

There is a significant parallel, therefore, between the evaluation of Socrates' char-

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[377]Augustine does not use the term *ironia*, although other commentators and historians of philosophy do. Augustine's view of Socrates' rhetorical ability reflects the Roman tendency to uphold Socrates as a model of eloquence.

[378]A spurious account which Augustine could have found in Diodorus Siculus (14.37) or Diogenes Laertius (2.43). For Diodorus' account of Socrates, see Stone 110–11.

> acter and the interpretation of Plato's literary dialogues. Both are praiseworthy for approximating Christian doctrine better than other pagan philosophers, yet both are fraught with difficulty, thanks to the ironical method of dissimulation, expressed with superior rhetorical style.

Augustine's *City of God* may provide a missing link between the figure of the moral philosopher and the ancient *eiron*. He sums up in a single perspective the two Socratic traditions identified at the beginning of this section, that of the serious philosopher and that of the ancient *eiron*. Although he does not capture the comical nature of the *eiron*, he demonstrates nonetheless that Socrates' reputation for subversive tactics, as *dissimulatio*, survived in a widely-read text of the Middle Ages. Modern scholarship has tended to emphasize what was lost or unknown about Socrates in West until the discoveries of Italian Hellenists in Florence, Rome, Venice, and elsewhere.[380] However, as Trinkaus argues, Petrarch, who knew no Greek (or rather, very little Greek), reinvented a Socratic persona decades prior to the new research of the fifteenth century.[381] In his epistolary treatise entitled *On His Own Ignorance and That of Many Others* (*De suis ipsius et multorum aliorum ignorantia*) Petrarch defends himself against the criticisms of four young Aristotelian scholars with methods reminiscent of Plato's Socratic persona. That he was able to do so begs the question of his source or sources, since we have no explanation for Petrarch's insight in any other treatise or epistle.

[379]My translation. "Cum enim magistri sui Socratis, quem facit in suis voluminibus disputantem, notissimum morem dissimulandae scientiae vel opinionis suae servare adfectat, quia et illi ipse mos placuit, factum est ut etiam ipsius Platonis de rebus magnis sententiae non facile perspici possint." 8.4.

[380]Although a Socratic revival in the Renaissance is unquestionable, the point here is not to underestimate what was known and assumed about this complex figure from Late Antiquity through the Middle Ages.

[381]Trinkaus, *The Poet as Philosopher; Petrarch and the Formation of Renaissance Consciousness* 24. Petrarch undertook some lessons in Greek from a Basilian monk born in Calabria, Barlaam, from whom he may have learned something more about Socrates and Plato. Petrarch had read only those dialogues available in the Middle Ages, the *Timaeus*, the *Phaedo*, and the *Meno*. On Barlaam, see Garin, *Storia Della Filosofia Italiana. Vol.1* 249–50.

Petrarch's *On His Own Ignorance* has been greatly appreciated as a defense of humanism, but it is also an outstanding example of a moriasophic discourse. Nicholas of Cusa owned a copy of it along with several other manuscripts of Petrarch's works. Cusa read this work with attention and care, as has been demonstrated in Giovanni Santinello's study of the marginalia.[382] While Santinello concluded that Petrarch's letter had no direct influence on the philosophical thought of Cusa, he did not consider the evidence of the broader tradition of wisdom-and-folly discourse in Western culture. In the next chapter, will take up an examination of Petrarch's text and demonstrate how it reveals the dialectical and rhetorical strategy of moriasophia, drawing not only Socrates and Plato but also on St. Paul and the medieval figure of the idiota.

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[382]Santinello, *Studi Sull'umanesimo Europeo* 18–28.

Chapter 8

Thematic Continuity: Petrarch's Idiota Persona

In this chapter, we examine an outstanding impetus for humanist moriasophia prior to Cusa and Erasmus, the masterful and widely-circulated epistolary treatise of Petrarch entitled *On His Own Ignorance and That of Many Others*. In this work, Petrarch adopts the moriasophic persona as a rejoinder to a personal assault on his humanist education and learning. Aligning himself at once with St. Paul and Socrates, Petrarch uses the profession of ignorance and ironic understatement as a quasi-legal defense strategy. His ironic capitulation to the identity of an idiota, a man "without learning" (*sine litteris*), clears the playing field of technical discourse so that he might introduce speculative questions in ordinary language – questions on creation, time, pagan learning – and to assert the sovereignty of faith over reason.

8.1 Petrarch's Adaptation of Paul's Corinthian Persona

On His Own Ignorance and That of Many Others (*De suis ipsius et multorum aliorum ignorantia*) has been called "programmatic" and a "manifesto of Quattrocento humanism," since Petrarch here declares his values and defines several positions seminal in the formation of a humanist ethic and in subsequent plans for the reform of education. Among these positions, the following are frequently mentioned: that Latin and Greek works be read in their original form and not through medieval glosses and commentaries exclusively, that eloquence is necessary for the transmission of knowledge, and that the philosophy of Plato comes closer to Christian doc-

trine than that of Aristotle and should therefore be preferred. *On His Own Ignorance* became one of the most widely read of Petrarch's works, and its arguments the essential *point de depart* for humanist polemic during the next century.[383]

However, *On His Own Ignorance* is less often discussed on its own merits and as a work of literature. Petrarch's arguments for a humanist approach to education are incorporated into a complex literary form, a form which is part and parcel of the very causes it seeks to advance. Petrarch's text, including the literary persona he adopts in his discourse, reveal a closer relationship than might be supposed to the figures of the Western moriasophic tradition, including in St. Paul, the idiota, and Socrates. In light of this background, Petrarch's famous declaration – that moral virtue and piety are more important than speculative knowledge – and the several arguments he uses to substantiate this declaration, cannot be separated from his chosen method. Petrarch's rhetoric is highly dialectical, one which contrasts knowledge and ignorance even as it subverts the conventional understanding of these terms. Like the figure of the fool, Petrarch uses humor and wit in an attack on the prevailing intellectual establishment. His rhetorical-dialectical method, enhanced or dramatized in a literary persona of learned ignorance, compels a new perspective on the very issues which have caused social, moral, and intellectual division. Petrarch's persona is effective precisely because he is aware of the moriasophic tradition – ancient as well as Christian – and he can therefore draw together its diverse manifestations.

This section will explore Petrarch's learned ignorance in order to establish a common locus (if not a common source) for the moriasophia of Nicholas of Cusa and Erasmus in this humanist work of monumental importance. *On His Own Ignorance* reveals consistency and continuity in its alternative approach to strict rationalism in philosophy, represented in the medieval

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[383]See Panizza 134. For a brief philosophical assessment of this work in historical context and as "a meditation on experience, a personal search for coherence and meaning, see Hankins, "Renaissance Philosophy" 39–45.

and Renaissance period in the works of Aristotle. As much as his arguments challenge the contemporary notion of wisdom, his method is replete with the folly of sarcasm, hyperbole, and ironic self-deprecation. Petrarch is unquestionably inspired by those vestiges of Platonism and Platonist Christianity which identify the idea of wisdom with the transcendent reality of theology as opposed to a comprehensive knowledge of the physical world or a jargon-laden logical science.

The literary occasion for the work is a snub. An elderly man of some sixty-two years and living in Venice, Petrarch receives four "friends," scholars of a younger generation imbued in the new trend of Aristotelian scholasticism.[384] Petrarch is apparently taken by surprise when his friends make known their critical view of his intelligence and learning:

> Learning, they declare, I have absolutely none. Eloquence, if I had any, they despise according to the modern philosophic fashion. They reject it as unworthy of a man of letters[...] To them [virtue] seems worthless[...] Small things they have denied me, and this very greatest possession they lavish upon me as a small gift. They call me a good man, even the best of men. (Petrarch, *On His Own Ignorance* 184)[385]

This judgment grounds the letter's prevalent themes: the motives of his friends, the relationship between learning and moral virtue, and a defense of the humanistic studies and of his personal reputation. While the letter has been classified as an invective for its

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[384]Scholasticism appeared late in Italy, as compared to Spain, France, and England. See Kristeller, P. O., "Humanism and Scholasticism in the Italian Renaissance"; Ashworth 4. The "visit" took place in 1366, and Petrarch composed the letter-treatise in 1367. He revised it over the next two years, addressed it to his friend Donato, and circulated it in 1371.

[385]"Non denique scientiam aut eloquentiam, quarum primam penitus nullam michi esse confirmant; altera, siqua esset, apud illos hoc moderno philosophico more contemnitur et quasi literatis viris indigna respuitur. [...]virtutem ipsam[...] sed illis, ut puto, vilem[...] et cui parva negaverint, muneris instar exigui, quod est maximum largiuntur. Virum bonum, imo optimum dicunt." Petrarca 184. Unless otherwise noted, Latin text and translation are cited from the above editions.

scathing tone toward the accusers, it demonstrates a multifaceted rhetorical strategy. Petrarch places the question of the relationship of morality to knowledge in the wide-angle lens of the moral epistle, a classical genre exemplified by Seneca, where virtue rather than knowledge is the ground for tranquility and happiness. The genre was revived by humanists and remained in use throughout the sixteenth century and into the seventeenth, when the essay form gained currency. Instead of foregrounding the logical rebuttal of the adversaries' arguments, as one might do in a typical treatise, Petrarch's letter begins with a rhetorical investigation of their psychological motive, i.e., their apparent "envy" of Petrarch's reputation for learning. Neither does Petrarch end his letter with an argument but with "remedies" for envy, whereby such injustices might be corrected or at least endured. That an apology for humanism should be subordinated to the moral issue is justified in the accusation's premise: if virtue is to be preferred before knowledge, than the vice of envy is a more potent danger than intellectual error and therefore more important to diagnose and treat.

From the motive of envy and its object, Petrarch moves to the secondary problem of knowledge. Can all that Petrarch has read and learned his entire life be dismissed summarily as ignorance? How can he be good if he does not possess at least some knowledge of virtue? These questions must be considered as Petrarch inquires into the very concept of knowledge, in what way either he or they can be said to possess knowledge, and the methods by which he has pursued knowledge during his life. In his friends' assessment, virtue appears to be entirely separate from knowledge, since (in their view) the abundance of the former in Petrarch contrasts the extreme absence of the latter. In response, Petrarch's in-depth analysis of the motive demonstrates that, in the human person, character and judgment interact significantly. Intellectual as-

sessments are made by humans, moral agents by nature, and when morals are corrupted, judgments will be affected as well.

Petrarch's situation was ripe for a moriasophic response. The divided perspective, the assaults of a philosophical rationalism on the wisdom of faith, and the personal attack on Petrarch's intellectual deficiencies recreate the atmosphere of contentious engagement best suited to a fool of *metis*, *panourgia*, or *ingenium*. As the sources of ancient and Christian wisdom furnish Petrarch with the substance for his logical argument, models of folly afford him a uniquely powerful rhetorical method.

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Petrarch is well aware of the correspondences between his own situation and that of St. Paul in Corinth. Despite the obvious differences of time and place, Petrarch is a prominent figure in the Christian society of southern France and Italy, faced with a similar dynamic of internal rivalries and factions. In both situations, dissension springs from an attack on authority made by disciples of Hellenistic, philosophical rationalism. Since Petrarch is a leading representative of traditional theology, a rhetorical and pastoral theology based on gospel witness, experience, and morality (or moral psychology), he, like Paul, finds himself unexpectedly at the center of the controversy, an object of a personal attack. Petrarch is similarly charged with a deficiency of intelligence and sophistication, a kind of ignorance. Like Paul, Petrarch is at pains to defend, at a distance and in a letter, the truth which he holds dear as well as his reputation. Finally, the anticipated audience for Petrarch's letter (despite its dedication to Donato degli Albanzani), stretches well beyond Veneto to scholarly communities throughout Europe, just as Paul's extends from Corinth to Christian communities throughout the Mediterranean.

Pauline themes resound in Petrarch's references to the Corinthian letters and in his literary structure. Petrarch characterizes his adversarial friends and philosophers in general as vain, boastful, and proud.[386] Appropriating the Pauline metaphor for pride, Petrarch writes repeatedly that they are "inflated" or "swollen" (*inflatus*, *tumida*).[387] Petrarch makes the same point as Paul that knowledge can be used for selfish ends, as a weapon: "if learning happens to come along, it puffs up, it tears down; it does not build up" (*si sole obvenerint [literae] inflant diruuntque, non edificant*),[388] a clear echo of St. Paul, "We know that all of us possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" (1 Cor. 8:1). Petrarch also sees his own situation in terms of a spiritual battle, described in vivid detail in his exordium against envy: "Most avidly craving for peace, I am thrust into war.[...] I am at war neither with friends nor with enemies but with envy (49–50)."[389]

Petrarch's apology or personal defense also takes the shape of an ironic rebuttal, and for many of the same reasons as Paul's. As Paul exaggerates his folly, declaring himself a fool for Christ in the eyes of the worldly, Petrarch embraces a reputation of pious ignorance among the Aristotelians. After capitulating to the charges that he is an utterly uneducated idiota *illiteratum prorsus et ydiotam*, Petrarch confesses that he is devoid of any knowledge at all (Petrarca 184, 200). He augments the language of his detractors, proclaiming himself "a pitiful peddler of letters" (Petrarch, *On His Own Ignorance* 85).[390] His ignorance is vast and the result of being "senile" (Petrarca 264–66, 294). Indeed he considers himself "the greatest of all the ignorant" (Petrarca 300). Petrarch therefore recapitulates Pauline moriasophia, just as his truth-telling *parrhe-*

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[386]Petrarca E.g., 184, 186, 196, 256, 124–25, 302.
[387]E.g., 184, 256, 302.
[388]Petrarca 196.
[389]"Proprio io, che tanto desidero la pace, sono costretto alla guerra. [...] Michi vero neque cum amicis modo, neque cum hostibus, sed cum invidia bellum est." Petrarca 177–78.
[390]Petrarca 236.

sia excuses his lack of structure and repetitiousness in his protracted discourse, since "ignorance makes people bold and loquacious" (Petrarch, *On His Own Ignorance* 110).[391]

A logical and scholarly defense may fall flat on a large audience. An invective defense may easily recoil on the speaker, branding one with a similar arrogance and the hypocrisy of self-righteousness. But a self-deprecatory acceptance of his friends' insult grabs the audience's attention with unexpected drama. Hyperbole rather than understatement, the device is an inversion of the rhetorician's modesty trope and one of the satirist's stock devices. While both are intended to elicit trust and engage the audience through a diminution of the speaker's ego and self-interest, the satirist's smokescreen of inferiority and ineptitude disarms the audience with humor and sets them up for the provocations of rhetorical conflict and dialectical opposition. Petrarch uses his diminished status to counter-attack his adversaries on the basis of motive while subverting his adversary's criteria for judgment, i.e., the fundamental basis for real knowledge.

At the same time, Petrarch plays the fool for Christ. While Paul's fool-persona endures physical floggings and beatings, Petrarch's suffers verbal abuse and scorn. This oppression is counterbalanced by his *parrhesia*, the fool's privilege to speak the unsavory truth boldly and obnoxiously.[392] Through and despite folly, Paul establishes himself as the authoritative apostle for the reform of the Corinthians, intervening in their controversies and instructing them in morals. Through and despite ignorance, Petrarch becomes the voice of educational reform in Western Europe, a mediator of the rift between reason and piety and the contention between Aristotelians and humanists.

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[391]. "excuset ignorantia, audaces facere solita et loquaces." Petrarca 276.
[392]Petrarch even invites his adversaries to call him Thersites Petrarca 188..

Petrarch dramatizes his ironic submission in distinctly different rhetorical modes. One such mode is an ironic imitation of Augustine's *Confessions*. In a posture of gratitude for his reputation of goodness, Petrarch says:

> I now pray to Thee on the knees of my soul: If Thou does not wish to grant me more, let it be my portion at least to be a good man[…] But Thou, my God, 'Lord of Learning', 'besides Whom there is no other god', Thou whom I must prefer and will prefer to Aristotle and all the philosophers and poets and all those who 'boastingly make many haughty words' to learning and doctrines and to all things whatsoever: Thou canst grant me the name of a good man which these four grant me untruly. I pray to Thee, grant it to me[…] I ask for the thing itself. I want to *be* good, to love Thee, and to deserve to be loved by Thee[…] (Petrarch, *On His Own Ignorance* 62–64)[393]

Petrarch's sudden recourse to prayer manipulates the generic bounds of his moral epistle to accommodate Augustine's stylistic blend of apostrophe, biblical intertextuality, and poetic language which correlates external action to the soul's operation. Petrarch also exploits the double-entendre in the Latin term *confessio*, which can mean either "confession" or "profession."[394] Both senses, of course, denote forms of truth-telling; but while the former declares openly what is personal and individual (in the religious context, mistakes and wrong-doings, such as Augustine's theft of the pears), the latter proclaims that

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[393]"te nunc flexis anime genibus supplex oro, ut si michi non amplius vis largiri, hec saltem portio mea sit, ut vir bonus sim[...] At tu, Deus meus, scientiarum domine, extra quem non est alius, quem et Aristolili et philosophis quibuslibet ac poetis, et quicunque multiplicant loqui sublimia gloriantes, quem denique literis ac doctrinis et omnino rebus omnibus preferre debeo et volo, tu michi quod illi falsum tribuunt viri boni nomen, tribuere verum potes, et ut velis precor. Neque tam nomen bonum, quod unguentis preciosis prefert Salomon, quam rem ipsam posco, ut sim bonus, ut te amem amarique merear abs te." Petrarca 198.

[394]Though as a stylist, Petrarch will also vary his diction, e.g., using *fateor* in place of *confessio*.

which is "known" or believed about God, his creation, his providence, and his salvation.[395]

Without hesitation, Petrarch turns his personal confession of ignorance into a public profession of ignorance: "This very moment I acquiesce in the verdict of any judge whomsoever. [...] Willingly I confess and freely I declare their verdict is right in what they deprive me of[...]" (65).[396] Like Paul, Petrarch makes ironic surrender his rhetorical strategy, and ignorance becomes his fool's boast ("I will boast before the Lord.") Petrarch's boasting in faith and piety serves as the Pauline, competitive counterpoint to the "arrogant ignorance" and "arrogant boasting" of his adversaries.[397]

Like Augustine, Petrarch's "confession" of ignorance converts intellectual weakness into the strength of faith, since the greater the human defect, the greater the glory of God for bringing about what human effort alone could not achieve. Comparing his own search for knowledge to Augustine's, Petrarch paraphrases the much-celebrated "restless heart" of Augustine: "I desired to be both [good and learned], I confess, since human longing is boundless and insatiable until it comes to rest in Thee[…]" (Petrarch, *On His Own Ignorance* 63).[398]

Petrarch's confessional moment also takes up the strength-in-weakness theme of First Corinthians, via Augustine:

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[395]Augustine models this major shift from personal confession to public declaration in *Confessions*, Book IX, where he contemplates the afterlife with his mother. This scene occasions his turn to matters of hermeneutics and theology in Books X-XIII.

[396]"nunc nunc qualiumcunque sententiis iudicum acquiesco[...] Nam in eo quod eripiunt, ultro fateor, imo profiteor verum esse[...]" Petrarca 200.

[397]"in Domino glorier" Petrarca 192. Petrarch's boasting in the Lord contrasts the his adversaries' boasting of their own knowledge, "quicunque multiplicant loqui sublimia gloriantes." Petrarca 198. Petrarch's prayer adapts the prayer of Hannah from the First Book of Samuel (in Petrarch's time, the Book of Kings): "Talk no more so very proudly,/let not arrogance come from your mouth;/for the Lord is a God of knowledge,/and by him actions are weighed" (2:3).

[398]"Utrunque, fateor, optavi, ut infinita est et inexplebilis humana cupiditas, donec in te sistat." Petrarca 196.

> For it is true: 'The bow of the mighty man has been overcome and the weak have been girded with strength'.[1 Cor. 10:4] Happier by far is one of these feeble ones who believe in Thee, than Plato, Aristotle, Varro, and Cicero, who with all their knowledge did not know Thee. Brought before Thee and put next to Thee 'Who art the Rock', their 'judges are overthrown' and their learned ignorance [*litterata ignorantia*] has become manifest. (Petrarch, *On His Own Ignorance* 64)[399]

This passage has been referenced frequently, because here we find what is possibly the only explicit link between Augustine, Petrarch, and Nicholas of Cusa. Because Cusa owned one of only two autograph manuscripts of Petrarch's *On His Own Ignorance*, it was, at one time, suggested that Cusa's *docta ignorantia* owed something to Petrarch's *literata ignorantia* ("lettered/literate ignorance," hence "learned ignorance"). *Literata ignorantia* here represents Christians' knowledge of God through revelation as distinct from the "ignorant" pagans, a knowledge which at once defines and inverts the ignorance of the Christian author, who is accused of being an idiota *illiteratus* or *sine litteris*. A direct connection between Petrarch and Cusa was later denied by scholarly consensus, following Giovanni Santinello.

Petrarch's own Augustinian source and the consistency in Pauline themes would suggest otherwise. But first we must ask what exactly Petrarch means here by *literata ignorantia*, and how Paul's strength-in-weakness is related to learned ignorance. The context of *On His Own Ignorance* is insufficient for arriving at a clear interpretation.

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[399]"Vere enim arcus fortium superatus est et infirmi accincti sunt robore; feliciorque est multo unus ex pusillis istis qui in te credunt, quam Plato, quam Aristotiles, quam Varro, quam Cicero, qui suis omnibus cum literis te non norunt, et admoti iunctiquetibi, qui petra es, absorpti sunt iudices eorum, et literata ignorantia patefacta est." Petrarca 198. Hans Nachod mistakenly places quotation marks around the entire last sentence of Petrarch's, as if it were a quotation from Augustine's letter to Proba (which it is not). Rather, Petrarch interjects phrases from the "confession of Peter" in the Gospel of St. Matthew (16:18) and Psalm 141 (6).

It is therefore necessary to turn to Petrarch's and Cusa's common source for the term and concept of *docta ignorantia* – a famous letter of Augustine written to Anicia Faltonia Proba, a Roman noblewoman who presided over a community of consecreted widows and virgins. Learned ignorance cannot be understood accurately without reference to this letter, which was highly regarded for centuries as Augustine's commentary on prayer.

Treating the subject of prayer in times of adversity (a theme particularly suited to Petrarch's situation), Augustine takes Paul as the model, emphasizing our ignorance: "We know not how to pray as we ought" (Rom. 8:26). This verse becomes Augustine's leitmotif throughout two key chapters. Following Paul closely, Augustine argues that we do not know whether to pray for the removal of trials: on the one hand, most "heal the swelling of pride" or "prove and exercise patience," but on the other, we seek to be free of them, "ignorant of their particular purpose."[400]

Augustine recommends for such times a more profound sort of prayer – a prayer-in-ignorance, which overcomes the anxieties of the present and strengthens one in weakness. This prayer consists of a meditation on eternal life, "the one true and only happy life, in which, immortal and incorruptible in body and spirit, we may contemplate the joy of the Lord forever." Though completely unknown and unknowable, we have been given a deep desire and longing for the eternal; and we seek it with "groaning."[401] We may express our thoughts about eternal life in images (Augustine speaks of thirsting for "the fountain of life" and "the river of His pleasures"),

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[400] Augustine, *Opera Omnia* col. 505. Translation is taken from Augustine, *Letters* 468.

When Paul prayed that God remove his most serious hardship, the "thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan," God responded, "My grace is sufficient; strength is made perfect in weakness (2 Cor. 12:7-9). Therefore Paul accepted his ignorance of God's will with patience and trust.

[401] "quando satiabitur in bonis desiderium nostrum, et nihil erit ultra quod gemendo quaeramus, sed quod gaudendo teneamus." Augustine, *Opera Omnia* 14.27, col. 505. Cf. Rom 8:18-25.

but Augustine warns (in anticipation of Dionysius' *via negativa*) that we must "reject, disown, and condemn" them. In a fundamental way, we are and must remain ignorant of eternal life.[402]

And yet Augustine also claims, on Paul's authority, that we have a kind of knowledge of the eternal, acquired "from that Spirit of God who helps our infirmities" (cf. Rom 8:26). This knowledge is revealed in our desires and longings, since we could have no such thing or the language to express it without some knowledge of the unseen – *ex parte*, as Paul says in First Corinthians. When the Holy Spirit "intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words," our ignorance in prayer is compensated with "inspirations" (Rom. 8:27). This, then, is the learning in – and despite – the ignorance; a definite yearning for a definite object which is itself indefinite.[403] For Augustine it represents the experience of contemplative prayer, an affirming inspiration in the midst of the rationally unknowable. Learned ignorance in Augustine may therefore be compared to *anamnesis* in Platonism: both are intuitive and mystical; but while learned ignorance tends toward the experiential, *anamnesis* tends toward the intellectual.

Though the terms are altered to suit the occasion, learned ignorance in Petrarch and Cusa likewise stems from the Pauline themes and cannot be separated from them. This explains why Petrarch not only parallels his ignorance to Paul's weakness, but his faith to Paul's hope in eternal life. Petrarch writes, for example, "Sorrowfully and tacitly I recognize my ignorance, when I consider how much I lack of what my mind in its craving for knowledge is sighing for"; yet he

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[402]"Quod enim sicuti est cogitare non possumus, utique nescimus; sed quidquid cogitanti occurrerit, abjicimus, respuimus, improbamus, non hoc esse quod quaerimus novimus, quamvis illud nondum quale sit noverimus Augustine, *Opera Omnia* 14.27, col. 505.

[403]Augustine, *Letters* 468. "Est ergo in nobis quaedam, ut ita dicam, docta ignorantia, sed docta spiritu Dei qui adjuvat infirmitatem nostram. Nam cum dixisset Apostolus, *Si autem quod non videmus speramus, per patientiam exspectamus*; ibi subjecit: *Similiter et Spiritus adjvat infirmitatem nostram: quid enim oremus, sicut oportet, nescimus; sed ipse Spiritus interpellat pro nobis gemitibus inenarrabilibus. Qui autem scrutatur corda, scit quid Spiritus sapiat, quia secundum Deum interpellat pro sanctis* (*Rom.* VIII, 25-27) [...Spiritus] interpellare itaque sanctos facit gemitibus inenarrabilibus, inspirans eis desiderium etiam adhuc incognitae tantae rei quam per patientiam expectamus. Quomodo enim narratur, quando desideratur, quod ignoratur?" *Opera Omnia*, Ep. 130, 15.28, col. 505. The Letter to Proba has a much wider influence on Petrarch's *On His Own Ignorance* than has been

consoles himself with "knowing in part" (*ex parte*) in this imperfect world – another paraphrase from First Corinthians (13:9).[404] Learned ignorance is the metaphoric "vision" of faith, epitomized in the biblical phrase "Piety is wisdom" (Job 28:28) and symbolized by Paul in ecstasy, "caught up to the third heaven" (2 Cor. 12:2).[405]

We should not, however, lose sight of Petrarch's irony as a "thoroughly illiterate idiota" with "illiterate virtue" (Petrarca 84, 198). His acceptance of his adversaries' accusations makes his flight of prayerful confession a mock-Augustinian event. Petrarch's acknowledgement of ignorance grounds his aggressive self-assertion in the ironic renunciation of self-interest. This allows Petrarch to "boast in the Lord" from the outset, just as Paul does,[406] using the same word as the Latin vulgate, *glorier*. Petrarch boasts first of his associations with men of learning, such as King Robert of Sicily (who praised Petrarch's natural talent, or *ingenium*) and the three popes who sought him for the position of apostolic secretary. He then boasts – *gloriari enim licet* – of his continual study and travel in search of learning, "not only to learned men, but to learned cities too" (Petrarca 206). Third, Petrarch boasts at great length about the wide scope of his reading, his familiarity with Augustine and Jerome, and his appreciation for the Roman classical writers. Cicero especially, Petrarch admits, "I admire so much that I wonder at people who do not admire him (a "new confession of ignorance" he says) (Petrarch, *On His Own Ignorance* 115).[407] His library (which itself "is not illiterate, though it is the library of an illiterate man") is yet another source of boasting, since his codex of Plato in Greek symbolizes the naïvété of his Aristotelian adversaries.

acknowledged. Petrarch will also take up the theme of the last sentence quoted here, i.e., we must have some knowledge of God, through the Holy Spirit, if we are to love him.

[404]In a moment of serious meditation on the limits of human knowledge in this life, Petrarch writes: "Sed me interim, dum presentis exilii finis adest, quo nostra hec imperfectio terminetur, qua *ex parte nunc scimus*, nature communis extematione consolor [my emphasis]." Petrarca 202.

[405]On piety as wisdom, see also Sir. 1:22, 25; 19:18.

[406]E.g., 1 Cor 1:29-31; 2 Cor 10:12-18.

As Paul demonstrates the relationship between *moria* and *aphrosune* – the folly of God and the cross, as distinct from the buffoonery of the buffetted and outcast servant, *imitatio Christi* – so Petrarch draws a trajectory from the abject and ironic ignorance of his persona to the learned ignorance of devout Christians. True to the Pauline technique, the language of the divided perspective (i.e., the contrast in perspective between the adversaries and the persona) intensifies beyond rational proportionality until each regards the other as insane. Thus Petrarch says the Aristotelians "disputing about four-legged animals and beasts everywhere in the streets and square of every city" have imputed him "not only with ignorance but with madness [*delirium*]" because they despise piety (Petrarca 288). And he appears to them "just as raving mad [*insanire*] as Paul appeared to the Pharisees and priests" (290).[408]

Though he expatiates at great length, Petrarch's use of invective speech against his adversaries likewise finds a Corinthian parallel. Petrarch, we have already mentioned, frames his letter with a moral discourse on envy and its remedies. In the body of the treatise, however, Petrarch repeatedly castigates his adversaries for their arrogance and pride. The emphasis on pride recalls Paul's assault on the moral depravity of his rivals, "the puffed-up" preachers, whom he censures as "false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ," even likening them to Satan.[409] Like a satirist, Petrarch lays on the invective with a much heavier hand than Paul. While the moral qualities of piety, humility, and truthfulness determine the nature of his own ignorance, the arrogance and pride of his adversaries is a culpable and vicious sort of ignorance: they judge others' ignorance ignorantly (202), they are blind in their fury, like mad dogs (188); their boasts are vain, their dogmas errant, and their disputations full of hot air

[407]Petrarca 284.
[408]Cf. Acts 9:21.
[409]2 Cor. 11: 13-14.

(256); they follow philosophers even when their conclusions are insane (240–52),[410] and they are foolish and insane themselves (286–90). This counter-offensive is not mere name-calling but demonstrates the relationship of morality to knowledge in the negative: i.e., moral turpitude will distort and corrupt the pursuit of knowledge, resulting in a subversion of priorities and complacency in error.

8.2 Petrarch as Idiota

While Petrarch's appropriation of Paul's Corinthian letters in *De sui ipsius ignorantia et multorum* is the most important structural and stylistic precedent, he also draws on those figures of learned ignorance and moriasophia which had become an established part of the Western tradition. As we noted, the young scholars' judgment on Petrarch's lack of knowledge is expressed with reference to the idiota, intended as a slur, and the persona's repetition of this label in different contexts indicates a cultural familiarity with the idiota figure of the Middle Ages. Later on, Petrarch says that, after his many years of study as a respected young scholar, he is perceived as "a senile idiota" (*senex idiota*) in his adversaries' eyes (210). Indeed, Petrarch identifies himself with several traits of the idiota figure. First and foremost, he has been largely self-taught and is therefore not a product of the university and its scholasticism, nor of a particular religious order. Petrarch contrasts the technical knowledge of the Aristotelians with native intelligence (*ingenium*) and common sense. For example, his criticism of Aristotle's position on the eternity of the world is an appeal to the reasonableness of a creation principle – the premise stating that "nothing comes from nothing" can be challenged without a dialectical disputation or syllogistic formula.

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[410]This is one of Petrarch's more substantial arguments, supported with numerous citations, especially from his reading of Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods*.

It has been demonstrated that the idiota of Western tradition, like many fools, confronts the cultured establishment with the self-knowledge of humility and the theological wisdom of Scripture and piety. Petrarch casts the humanist in this role, as a disciple of Christ and the Fathers and in opposition to university scholars. Of course it is outlandish that his adversaries would call him *illiteratus* and devoid of knowledge altogether (*absque ulla scientia*), but Petrarch's comic exaggeration is well-suited to the idiota persona and it augments the irony in his highly educated response. As we said in the previous chapter, the medieval idiota was not necessarily illiterate, evidenced in terms like *idiota sine litteris* and *idiota et illiteratus* and in such examples as the Waldensians, Francis of Assisi, and Catherine of Siena. The need to specify just what kind of idiota one is talking about indicates the great variety of idiotas in the Middle Ages and perhaps since late antiquity – there are multiple instances of *idiota et simplex*, *idiota et rusticus*, and *idiota et insipiens*, and many similar compounds, in addition to those above. Some called "idiota" were literate clerics or laymen, such as the renowned mystical writers Richard Rolle and Jans van Ruysbroeck.

Because the name "idiota," like that of "fool," had been used to describe a wide range of "ordinary" persons – including a layman, one without a formal education or culture, one who is illiterate, one who practices simple piety, or one who is mentally deficient – Petrarch was able to exploit the ambiguities of characterization. For example, when Petrarch addresses the contempt some Aristotelians have for the pious, he makes idiocy the lot of all Christians:

> I would not seem so ignorant in their court if I were not a Christian. How can a Christian seem like a man of letters to these, who call Christ, our master and lord,

> an idiota? The crudeness of the master does not easily make the disciple learned if he does not stray from his master's footsteps.[411]

What appears to be a straightforward denigration of Christ and Christians is ironic in two distinct ways. First, if the idiota title applies to Christ as one who is illiterate and uneducated, either the detractors themselves must be ignorant of the gospels (in which Christ reads from the Temple scrolls),[412] or they must suppose that Christ's unity with the Father and his command of the Hebrew tradition does not qualify as knowledge. But Petrarch's own submission to the charge of idiocy proposes a second kind of irony: what if Christ *is* an idiota in way wholly unintended by the detractors? Petrarch surely knows that Peter, John, and most of the Apostles were considered idiotas by the Fathers. Christ himself does not appear to have been educated by any rabbinical school, nor conformed to the establishment of learning in his time, but he repeatedly challenged its interpretations and traditions, including ritual purifications, Sabbath prohibitions, and the Mosaic divorce code; Christ's language was direct and plain, without specialized terminology, and he drew on ordinary experience for his parables and analogies. An idiotic Christ vindicates the idiotic author, *imitatio Christi*. A similar kind of Christian anti-rationalism is put forward by Erasmus' Folly, nearly a century and a half later: "[...] even Christ, though he was the wisdom of the Father, became somehow foolish in order to relieve the folly of mortals when he took on human nature and appeared in the form of a man."[413]

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[411]My translation. "quorum in iudicio non ignorans adeo viderer, ni c ristianus essem. Quomodo enim cristianus homo literatus videretur his, qui ydiotam Cristum, magistrum et dominum nostrum, dicunt? Non facile rudis magistri discipulus eruditus fiet, ab illius vestigiis non divertens." Petrarca 252.

[412]"[Jesus] stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him" (Lk 4:17).

[413]Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly* 130. Faced with inevitable critcism on this point, Erasmus explains himself in his 1515 letter to Martin van Dorp: "Not that there is any danger that someone will think the apostles and Christ are really fools, but rather that they too have a certain infirmity, a sort of concession to our emotions, which, by comparison with the eternal and pure wisdom of God, might seem something less than wise." A little further on, he

To Petrarch's audience, the argument of the saintly idiota was a familiar one. The fame of St. Francis of Assisi had spread throughout Europe, and "Francis" Petrarch (Franciscus or Francesco Petrarca) was drawn to Franciscan spirituality and piety from a young age. In 1326, he decided to take vows as a Franciscan lay brother. While this affiliation opened him up to appointments within the Church and allowed him to receive benefices, he was not a religious opportunist. In his treatise *On Religious Withdrawal*, Petrarch praised St. Francis as the master of the flesh, and in *On the Solitary Life*, he chose Francis as his highest authority, a saint whose marriage to poverty enabled him to contemplate eternal truth continually, even amidst the affairs of ordinary life. Poverty, for Petrarch, was a necessary condition for philosophy. Himself inclined to solitude, Petrarch must have seen the troubadour of God in himself, as another Francis. He describes Laura as a "new sun" in the world, as Dante and Bonaventure had said of Francis. He even appropriated for himself and Laura the terms *il poverello* and *la poverella*.[414]

Thus the ambiguous name of idiota corresponds to Petrarch's equivocal *ignorantia*. What appears to be a mental and educational deficiency in fact begs the question of what constitutes true knowledge, letters, and learning. Like the clever fool, the idiota of apostolic and medieval tradition may strike wonder into the minds of an audience. As Petrarch says, they are "Truly astonishing men, who chase after fame for doctrine on the one hand, while on the other they deserve infamy among the learned for ignorance" (Petrarca 254).[415]

also reminds van Dorp, "In the *Adagia*, I called the apostles Sileni. What is more, I called Christ himself a sort of Silenus." 157, 159.

[414]O'Rourke Boyle 125–29.

[415]My translation. "Vere ergo miri homines, qui hinc doctrine gloriam aucupentur, unde apud doctos ignorantie merentur infamiam." Petrarch enriches the divided perspective of Paul and Plato rhetorically, equivocating on the concepts of wonder and madness. The *admiratio* elicited by the fool's *ingenium* finds is a corresponding wonder in the blindness of atheistic philosophers, while insanity is attributed to both to self-delusion and to faith.

The irony of Petrarch's idiota persona is also clarified when he lets his mask down for the last time towards the epistle's conclusion. Speaking of Hippias, who claimed to know everything, and others who have prided themselves on great knowledge, Petrarch says:

> "As one would expect, many wiser than they have perished while calling themselves wise, as the Apostle said, 'they were made fools, and their foolish heart was darkened' [Rom 1:21-22]. It will be enough for me to know in moderation (whatever can be done without many letters, or without any letters at all) what is made known to the whole company of unlettered saints of both sexes. And I will consider myself to have been given the happier portion, and I won't ever regret my studies. And I will feel pity for these garrulous idiotas, who are swollen with the false title of lettered men (which they like to be called but are not), or else I will despise them and laugh at them, arguing about worthless and unknown things. Nor will I envy their boasts, nor their diseased bloatedness, nor anything else at all, certainly not their wealth."[416]

Petrarch's discourse has returned to a conventional, literal mode of speaking, with the categories of wisdom and folly once again in line with the moral antithesis of the Scriptures. Here the persona places himself among the "long line of unlettered saints of both sexes" (*illiterata utriusque sexus sanctorum cohors*), who possessed that knowledge which is necessary for salvation. While this knowledge does not rely on any product of human learning, pagan or Christian, Petrarch has no need to renounce it, for once the knowledge of revelation is obtained, letters can do him no

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[416]My translation. "Multi plus sapientes quam oportet periere, et dicentes se esse sapientes, ut ait Apostolus: 'stulti facti sunt, et obscuratum est insipiens cor eorum'. Michi ad sobrietatem sapere si contingat, quod sine multis, imo et sine ullis literis fieri posse illiterata utriusque sexus sanctorum cohors indicat, satis erit, et feliciter agi mecum extimabo, neque unquam mei me studii penitebit, et hos garrulos ydiotas, qui, false literarum nomine turgidi, dici amant quod non sunt, aut miserebor, aut odero, aut ridebo, de rebus inanibus atque incognitis altercantes, neque illis iactantiam, nec tumorem pestiferum, nec omnino aliquid, non ipsas certe divitias, invidebo [...]" Petrarca 306.

harm. And so at last he throws the charge of "idiota" back on his accusers, as those who, boasting only of themselves, bear the name of learned men falsely.

8.3 Petrarch's Socratism

Petrarch imposes yet a third figure on the epistolary persona in addition to Paul and the idiota. Socrates, known to Petrarch through Cicero, Seneca, Lactantius, Jerome, and Augustine, here makes his debut on the fourteenth-century stage in the guise of Petrarch's humanist *eiron*. The theme of learned ignorance or knowledge-in-ignorance, to which the persona returns like a refrain throughout his letter, in itself suggests the ancient model. But because Petrarch wants to emphasize his Christian ignorance and impute to philosophy an inferior role to theology, he suppresses the obvious Socratic dictum of ignorance, "This one thing I know that I know nothing," until the letter's end.[417] By this time, Petrarch has already played his Socratic part.

It is evident that Petrarch has Socrates in mind from the beginning. After introducing the commonplace metaphor of spiritual warfare in the letter's first pages, forensic rhetoric and the image of the law court quickly take over as the dominant poetic frame for the accusations of the young scholastics and the author's impassioned defense. Since Socrates' trial, defense, and unjust death sentence were etched in historical memory, eclipsing even Plato's doctrines, it is no coincidence that Petrarch resorts so frequently to forensic rhetoric.

In broad strokes, the phases of a trial lend a literary structure to much of the earlier part of the letter. At the very outset, Petrarch tells Donato "we are dragged before a censorious tribunal" (177). Then Petrarch is charged with ignorance and illiteracy,[418] and the Aristotelian schol-

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[417] On Socrates' dictum, see Section 3.3, note 313.

[418] "Eundem tamen illiteratum prorsus et ydiotam ferunt." "Obstare demum et scrbendi stilum, quem non solum vituperare, sed parcius laudare veriti, elegantem prorsus et rarum, sed absque ulla scientia fassi sunt." Petrarca 184, 194.

ars "set up a council for themselves to condemn [my fame] for the crime of ignorance" (Petrarch, *On His Own Ignorance* 49, 60).[419] The scholars discuss the evidence among themselves,[420] and then pronounce a summary "judgment" or "verdict."[421] That the judges are also the plaintiffs may recall the widespread hostility to Socrates among the members of the Athenian Council; Petrarch would have known at the very least that Socrates' charges were trumped up. For the persona of *On his own ignorance*, the odds are also stacked: he is condemned *in absentia*, undefended, and without witnesses for the defense.[422] The humanist must plead his case alone.

For both Petrarch and Socrates, adversaries seek to undermine a public reputation for learning or wisdom, which each defendant in turn renounces. Petrarch's hasty confession of ignorance[423] recalls Socrates' concession that his philosophical activity stems from a fundamental bewilderment regarding the Delphic oracle's pronouncement.[424] Yet capitulation is not a guilty plea nor a plea bargain for either one, but rather an attempt to derail the premises of the adversaries' argument as well as their motives. Then comes the defense, which takes up the greater part of both Petrarch's *On His Own Ignorance* and Plato's *Apology*. Here, too, we find a number of similarities. Petrarch's defense, like Socrates', attacks not just the charges but the corrupt intent of the plaintiffs, the speciousness of the evidence, the injustice of the verdict and the com-

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[419]"de nuovo sono trascinato davanti al tribunale de chi mi vuole condannare." "collegerunt et ipsi concilium, non ut me, quem profecto diligunt, sed ut famam meam quam oderunt, ignorantie crimine condemnarent." Petrarca 177, 192.

[420]"Ibi de absente atque indefenso multa et varia, non quod varie animati essent, cum unum omnes sentirent unumque dicturi essent, contra se tamen suumque iudicium, peritorum more iudicum, arguentes, ut velut contradictionum angustiis eliquata et expressa veritate coloratius diffinirent." Petrarca 192.

[421]"Quid vis autem? Seu quid reris? Expectas, credo, iudicium sententiam." "[...]ignorantie sententia condemnarer." Petrarca 196, 266.

[422]"Vocassent utinam et alios! fuisset forsitan in consilio dicende sententie contradictum[...] Ibi de absente atque indefenso." Petrarca 192.

[423]Petrarch, *On His Own Ignorance* 62–65.

[424]"Chaerephon[...] went to Delphi at one time and ventured to ask the oracle[...] if any man was wiser than I, and the Pythian replied that no one was wiser." Plato, "Apology" 21a.

petency of the judges.[425] At one point, Petrarch refers to enemies of the truth as *sophistae*" (Petrarca 302), perhaps initiating the ubiquitous polemical gibe of the next century, associating the ancient adversaries of Plato (*sophistai*) with medieval scholastics.[426]

Of course the contexts are vastly different, as are the nature of the charges; but Petrarch's choice of the forensic construct is yet another creative adaptation of the Socratic model, inviting not only parallels but some ironic interpretations as well. For example, Petrarch's insistence that the crime of ignorance is an attack on Christian piety inverts the accusation of impiety made against Socrates. While Socrates surrenders his life for the sake of justice, Petrarch renounces his reputation for learning, which is a metaphoric sort of death. In the end, each finds consolation in "true knowledge" and anticipates an ultimate victory, but in different ways: Socrates is confident in an afterlife of transcendent justice, and Petrarch (with echoes of Augustine) attains peace (*quietus*) in his Christian faith, in the lives of the saints, and by considering the numerous classical precedents for contentiousness (*inquietissimi*) among the learned (294, 302–14).

In the end, Petrarch is careful to keep the pagan philosopher in his place, making use of Platonic themes, character, and literary techniques while leaving behind any trace of philosophical heroism. Augustine and Lactantius concur that Socrates' legacy is a fractured one, resulting in the divergence of doctrine among his students. Petrarch echoes the assessment of the Fathers toward the end of his letter, criticizing rather than praising his stylistic model. After quoting the Socratic dictum of ignorance, Petrarch interjects, "A vicious cycle! A tangled game!"[427] He

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[425]Because of the way Petrarch's forensic language shapes his literary structure, it would perhaps be more apt to associate Petrarch's letter with the genre of apology than with invective. Similarly, Thomas More referred to Erasmus' Letter to Martin van Dorp as an apology, and the letter was subsequently included among the *Apologiae* in the *Opera* of 1540 Erasmus, *Opus Epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterdami* 2.91. This fact says something about the ironic method and the context of moriasophic literature, that (like satire) it is often employed as a defensive strategy.

[426]By calling scholastics "sophists," humanists were at once accusing their opponents of inferior reasoning and also – what is equally important – rejecting (preemptively) the association of the humanist rhetorician with disreputable ancient counterparts.

[427]"Circulatio anceps! Ludus inextricabilis!" Petrarca 304, cf. 252.

adds that the invectives hurled by one pagan philosopher against another testify to the consequences of philosophical ignorance, unguided by theology. Petrarch includes here Zeno's description of Socrates as "the Attic buffoon."[428] Yet this condescending attitude is precisely in line with Petrarch's broader argument, the inferiority, even insanity, of philosophy unaided by theology – "Nothing more deranged can be conceived."[429] The ironic method of Socrates is then a brilliant rhetorical strategy, but as a means of acquiring wisdom, not at all on par with the learned ignorance of the saints.

Petrarch's appropriation of the Socratic character and trial is a cogent reminder of cultural memory and continuity in the intellectual history of the West. In Plato's works, ignorance drives a wedge between the concepts of knowledge and wisdom, the transcendent ideals exposing the limits of the natural science, empirical observation, and the process of rational inquiry. For Petrarch, as for Plato, ignorance motivates the pursuit of wisdom; it is a sign of wisdom and also a challenge to conventional definitions and representations.

Folly and ignorance are joined in the figure of the ancient *eiron*, the expositor of this ignorance; the *eiron* was a catalyst of genres as well as ideas, a device for teaching philosophical matter in literary forms, combining the low and the lofty. Petrarch recognizes in a kernel what the Paul and Socrates had in common and adapted their personae and techniques, quite creatively, to his own situation. In the end, Petrarch comes back to the idea of the "game," saying, "the barbs of my judges are games to be endured with a well-balanced mind."[430] Thus his own composition, a narrative of provocation and defense told with literary flourish, is to be distinguished

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[428]For Zeno's description of Socrates, see section 5.5 and n. 509.
[429]"nihil amentius fingi potest." Petrarca 252.
[430]"omnes meorum iudicum aculei ludi sunt equissimo animo ferendi." Petrarca 314. There may be a double meaning in Petrach's "very balanced mind," with *equissimo* suggesting both "fairness" in judgment as well as psychological tranquility, or "level-headedness."

from the bitter, invective gravity of the great number of philosophical and literary rivalries, which are humorless, "without any clever jests and no joke."[431]

8.4 From Petrarch's persona to Cusa's Idiota

A compelling example of continuity in the tradition of moriasophia and learned ignorance is demonstrated in Cusa's Idiota, who represents a rare instance of pseudonymity or personification. Cusa fashions his Idiota as a simple laborer, by trade a maker of wooden spoons and pottery. He is also unschooled, in the sense that he has no formal education, uses no academic or scholastic jargon, and does not rely on the usual authorities and texts in theology and philosophy. Rather, Idiota demonstrates that theological and philosophical terminology may be derived from a humble faith and human reason, aided by native intelligence and experience.

Nicholas exploits the character type and the reader's expectations from the outset of his first dialogue, *Idiota On Wisdom* (*Idiota de sapientia*). It begins when a "poor Idiota" (*pauper Idiota*) engages "a very wealthy orator" (*ditissimum oratorem*) in the Roman Forum:

> I wonder at your contempt, because you have not yet come to humility, although you exhaust yourself in going through countless books reading constantly. It is surely because of your knowledge of this world that you think you excel others, and this is a certain folly before God which puffs you up. True knowledge, however, makes one humble. How I wish that you could give yourself over to true knowledge, since a treasure of joy resides there.

And the Orator replies:

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[431] "Nulle ibi facetie, nullus iocus sed certamen longe aliud, quam quod de literis aut pro gloria sumi solet." Petrarca 312–14.

> O poor and deeply ignorant Idiota, what is this presumption of yours, that you thus make little of the study of letters, which no one profits without?[432]

Though Cusa's latin style is neither attractive nor subtle, this brief exchange contains several important literary allusions to the moriasophic tradition from Paul through the medieval idiota. Orator here takes the place of the Greek sophist. His knowledge is "worldly" (*scientia mundi*) and it therefore "puffs [him] up" (*inflat*) with "folly" (*stulti-tia*).[433] Orator's reply to Idiota, arguing that he has no standing without an education, illustrates the medieval convention of the idiota's illiteracy or semi-literacy and also looks back to Paul's confession of not knowing the "wisdom speech" (*sophia logon*) of the Greek sophists. Cusa gives his Orator a distinctively medieval and scholastic hue, with the detail that his learning is obtained from an exhaustive study of books.

Idiota, by contrast, is said to be "poor" (*pauper*) twice within the first several lines. His poverty is not only material (as opposed to Orator's extreme wealth, *ditissimum*) but is also that state of mind which Petrarch extols as the ground for philosophy. Idiota's poverty is associated with humility, the moral disposition which leads to "true knowledge." His character is revealed in the brief phrase *facete subridens*, which means that Idiota bears a smile, either as a sign of

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[432]"'Miror de fastu tuo, quod cum continua lectione defatigeris innumerabiles libros lectitando, nondum ad humilitatem ductus sis. Hoc certe ex eo quia scientia huius mundi, in qua te ceteros praecellere putas, stultitia quaedam est apud deum et hinc inflat. Vera autem scientia humiliat. Optarem ut ad illam te conferres, quoniam ibi est thesaurus laetitiae.'

Orator: 'Quae est haec praesumptio tua, pauper Idiota et penitus ignorans, ut sic parvifacias studium litterarum, sine quo nemo proficit?'

Idiota: Non est, magne Orator, praesumptio quae me silere non sinit sed caritas. Nam video te deditum ad quaerendum sapientiam multo casso labore [...]'" Translations are my own unless otherwise noted. Latin text is that of Jasper Hopkins in Cusa, *The Layman On Wisdom* 86–87.

[433]In the Vulgate, *inflatus*/*inflare* is the dominant term used to translate *pephusiōmenoi* and *phusiō*. It does not appear often outside of Paul's letters Wis. 4:19, 1 Cor. 4:18–19, 5:2, 8:1, 13:4, 2 Cor. 12:20, Col. 2:18.

courtesy or because he is in "good humor."[434] In either case the joyful disposition of the simpleton is implied.

Orator's rejoinder that Idiota is "deeply ignorant" (*penitus ignorans*) – a commonplace use of the adverb *penitus* for emphasis but also an ironic reference to the latter's learned ignorance. *Penitus* means primarily "from within" and thus suggests that the ignorance of Idiota is profound. Petrarch uses the same phrase in the literal sense regarding Aristotle's limited notion of true happiness (Petrarca 218).[435] In the second part of the dialogue, Cusa will also use the modifier *imperitissimus* for Idiota (Cusa, *The Layman On Wisdom* 2.46.1),[436] which recalls Jerome's *imperitus sermone*, his translation of Paul's *idiōtēs* in Second Corinthians.[437]

Idiota's spontaneous judgment on Orator is puzzling at first, appearing more like self-righteous arrogance than humility. Unlike the defensive Petrarch, Idiota is the one who provokes the conflict. Yet Cusa invites us to view Idiota's comments as *parrhesia* and "boasting in the Lord" rather than prejudice. In his next exchange, Idiota declares that his motive is "love" (*caritas*) rather than "presumption" (*praesumptio*), contrary to the "envy" (*invidia*) of Petrarch's adversaries. His statement is another explicit reference to First Corinthians, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" (8:1).

The dialectic of learning and ignorance having been defined in Pauline, moriasophic terms, the two personifications discuss the difference between human learning and wisdom. Orator holds that, while some things can be known outside of a learned tradition, matters "difficult and lofty" are acquired over the ages (*cum scientiae creverint per additamenta*). Idiota, on the

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[434]The potential pun on *facete* – "elegantly/politely" or "wittily/facetiously" – cannot be overlooked in ironic discourse.

[435]In similar contexts, Petrarch also uses the term *prorus*.

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[437]Hopkins translation of *penitus ignorans* as "utterly unschooled" misses the irony of Idiota's profound ignorance, just as the translation of "Idiota" as "Layman" detaches Cusa's character from its medieval convention Cusa, *The Layman On Wisdom* 1.1.

other hand, says that the authorities have misled and deceived the Orator. Combining aspects of the two archetypes of Wisdom personified in the Books of Proverbs and Ben Sira,[438] Idiota says:

> Someone wrote that word which you believe. I, however, say to you that wisdom cries out in the streets openly, and her cry is that she dwells in the highest places.[439]

With these words, Cusa's Idiota establishes two important claims of the moriasophic figure. First, Cusa emphasizes the dialectical tension between human and divine wisdom, but avoids the equivocation of terms. Human wisdom is defined as knowledge as "letters," derived from authorities and their books, while the term *sapientia* is reserved for the Idiota. Second, he associates the power of metaphor with Idiota rather than Orator. For example, Idiota describes Orator's entrapment in the "snare" of "opinion" as a horse tied up in a stall and served the "strange and unnatural" food of authority. Opposed to this is the method of ignorance, which, the Idiota says, leads one to knowledge through ordinary things and people, as "the books of God[...] written with God's finger."[440]

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[438] Wisdom cries out in the street;
in the squares she raises her voice.
At the busiest corner she cries out;
at the entrance of the city gates she speaks:
'How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?
How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing
and fools hate knowledge? (Prov. 1:20-22)
"I came forth from the mouth of the Most High, and covered the earth like a mist.
I dwelt in the highest heavens, and my throne was in a pillar of cloud.
Alone I compassed the vault of heaven and traversed the depths of the abyss.
Over waves of the sea, over all the earth, and over every people and nation I have held sway.
Among all these I sought a resting place; in whose territory should I abide?
Then the Creator of all things gave me a command, and my Creator chose the place for my tent.
He said, "Make your dwelling in Jacob, and in Israel receive your inheritance'" (Sir. 24:3-8).

[439] "Scripsit aliquis verbum illud cui credis. Ego autem tibi dico quod sapientia foris clamat in plateis, et est clamor eius quoniam ipsa habitat in altissimis." Cusa, *The Layman On Wisdom* 1.3.11–14.

[440] "dei libris[...] Quos suo digito scripsit." Cusa, *The Layman On Wisdom* 1.4.8, 10. It is significant that the power of metaphor is given to Idiota rather than to Orator, an apparent conflict in characterization. But Cusa here is calling attention to the creative use of poetic language, something rhetoricians do not always achieve. Metaphors, after all, may be borrowed from authorities, as a philosopher might borrow disciplinary conventions and *sententiae*.

While the essential moral disposition for attaining divine wisdom is humility, the intellectual aspect of divine wisdom is grounded in self-knowledge. Therefore Idiota says:

> This is perhaps the difference between you and me: you think you are knowledgeable, when you are not; and so you are proud. I, however, know myself to be an idiota; and so I am more humble. In this, perhaps, I appear the more learned.[441]

With subtle qualifiers (*fortassis, forte*) to avoid the appearance of arrogance, Cusa follows St. Paul and Petrarch in adopting the Delphic wisdom as a secular, philosophical equivalent of the biblical "fear of the Lord," an acknowledgement of human limitations before the unknowable, ineffable, transcendent reality. By this time, self-knowledge has become an indispensable characteristic of the moriasophic fool, as a kind of socio-intellectual "leveling" which strips away technical language and professional standing in order to return discourse to naked reason, expressed in fundamental concepts and ordinary language.

The characterization of Cusa's Idiota and its relationship to Petrarch has not been completely understood in modern scholarship because Cusa's works have not been examined for their literary merits as the works of a humanist. The routine translation of idiota as "layman" has detached the persona from the cultural type, as well as the inspiration for that type in the figures of St. Paul and Socrates. By Cusa's time, the technical term for layman (*laicus*) was no more an indication of illiteracy than the term idiota, since the educated lay class had grown considerably and included larger numbers of nobility, jurists, notaries, landed gentry, and a new class of merchants. Nevertheless, the term *laicus* did not imply the idiota's marginal status, nor the potential for native intelligence, auto-didacticism, and piety, derived from apostolic precedent.

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[441]"Haec est fortassis inter me et te differentia: tu te scientem putas, cum non sis; hunc superbis. Ego vero idiotam me esse cognosco; hinc humilior. In hoc forte doctior exsisto." Cusa, *The Layman On Wisdom* 1.4.

The difference in style between Petrarch's discursive letter and Cusa's dialogue is notable and reflects vast differences in their educations, professions, and methods. Perhaps too the terms *literata ignorantia* and *docta ignorantia* reflect the way humanism is manifested in rhetorical and scholastic traditions. The verbally rich, undulating emotions and affectations of Petrarch's idiota persona seem, at times, far removed from the static symbolism and demonstrative simplicity of Cusa's dialogue. The irony in Petrarch reverberates with sarcasm and satire, while in Cusa, the edge of contention seems blunted. On the other hand, metaphor in Cusa serves the idiota's dialectical purpose powerfully and pointedly. In Cusa, the metaphysical and epistemological function of figurative speech is expressed with greater theoretical clarity as an alternative method of inference, the *eikon* of human experience serving as a springboard for the "transumptive leap" to eternal reality. Despite their varying emphases, the dialectical-rhetorical mode in both Petrarch and Cusa answer to perceived problems in the current relationship of philosophy to theology. Wisdom in Petrarch inclines toward rhetorical encyclopaedism and relies on authority, while Cusa disposes of authorities to focus the native intellect sharply and dialectically on metaphysical questions. Both draw on theological doctrine, tradition, and the Church Fathers as the measure of ancient wisdom. And both look to the figure of Socrates and the legacy of the Greek philosophical dialogue in their appropriation of moriasophic literary styles.[442]

While rhetorical convention in *Idiota On Wisdom* is lean, Cusa is one step closer to Plato in his use of symbolic setting. The Roman forum, a barber shop, the Temple of Eternity, a great bridge, and Idiota's workshop each relate to the subject matter in an ingenious and quasi-allegorical way. The marketplace of the Roman forum, with its images of weights and measures,

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[442]Of course Cusa was able to examine several of Plato's works in detail, while Petrarch had to rely on reputation and second-hand sources; Petrarch's manuscript of Plato's works could not "speak to him." On Cusa's knowledge of Greek, see Monfasani, *Greeks and Latins in Renaissance Italy: Studies on Humanism and Philosophy in the 15th Century* and the discussion in Chapter 5.2.

become analogies for numerical generation and comparative relation, the Temple of Eternity marks the place where contemplation and worship are intertwined, and a flow of people crossing a bridge over the Tiber occasions a discourse on the one and the many. The setting of the Idiota's dark, subterranean workshop with its nearby temple is a Roman incarnation of Plato's Athenian *kerameikos* and *Iera Odos* (Idiota is also a potter). Cusa's interlocutors are likewise symbolically linked to the main themes of the discourse. The dialogue of Orator and Idiota reflect a bivalent dialectic of the infinite and the finite, while in *Idiota On the Mind*, a trialogue of Orator, Idiota, and Philosopher image the demiurgic relationship between divine artist, mental conception, and production. The ancient Roman setting coincides with Cusa's own residency in the summer of 1453 and may have been intended as an appeal to his Italian audience. Such literary aspects represent a significant variation on Cusa's expository method yet are largely untreated in the philosophical scholarship.

Although Petrarch does not employ symbolic setting to such an extent in *On His Own Ignornace*, he does not exclude it entirely. For example, he famously claims that he is writing his letter while seated in a small boat on the Po and contenting with its waves, "navigating against the currents of this huge river with all my ignorance."[443] Glimpses of personal history also provide a mimetic component, his own search for learning reminiscent of Socrates' quest for wisdom within the walls of Athens.[444]

8.5 Petrarch and Christian Platonism

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[443]"per adversum hunc ingentem amnem tota com ignorantia mea navigo." Petrarca 292–94. Petrarch introduces this symbolic action in part to account for his emotion and the consequent unevenness in logical organization.

[444]This section does not do justice to the full range of themes and arguments in Cusa's Idiota dialogues. The purpose here is to demonstrate how Cusa draws from the moriasophic tradition and why Cusa finds the medieval idiota figure a suitable exponent of learned ignorance.

Once placed in its moriasophic context, Petrarch's epitome of its precedents and especially of learned ignorance is undeniable. But does a similarity in characterization indicate any corresponding similarity between Petrarch and Cusa on the theoretical level? Scholars since Santinello have dismissed the possibility. However, if we look beyond the ironical method of rational inquiry to the central argument for a philosophy guided by theological revelation and doctrine, we find a similar concern for the limits of human reason when confronted with the greater reality of the transcendent Absolute. This concern is in itself a medieval one, yet we find in Petrarch and Cusa a new awareness of Platonic themes and language suited to Christian theological inquiry, just as the Socratic method seemed to complement the image of the Pauline fool and the Christian idiota.

It is first of all important to acknowledge that Petrarch's investigation of his friends' accusation in *On His Own Ignorance* leads him to critical philosophical and theological questions, primarily: What is knowledge? Wisdom? How does the learning of the schools differ from the knowledge of faith? What is the relationship between knowledge and virtue or piety? The fact that Petrarch explores these questions in the literary framework of a letter, rather than a systematic or scholastic analysis, does not diminish the theoretical nature and value of the questions themselves.

As in Plato or St. Paul, irony in Petrarch's persona is not an exclusive mode; indeed the style fluctuates between moments of ironic speech and rational speculation. The concern for the primacy of the moral good over "worldly knowledge," or knowledge of the visible universe, originates with Plato, both in the "Socratic turn" from physics toward metaphysics and in the concern for a more perfect correspondence between human virtue and transcendent ideals. This concern underlies the mimetic technique through which theoretical ideas are expressed in Plato,

with Socrates as the model of rational inquiry and ethical behavior. Generations of Platonists in the Academy, Southern Italy, and Alexandria applied the dialogue as a standard in their interpretation of Homeric texts. Petrarch, armed only with the Platonism of the Fathers, concludes that Christian humility leads to the learned ignorance of the saints and is therefore superior to the virtues defined by Aristotle in the *Ethics*.

The most outstanding metaphysical argument taken up by Petrarch in *On His Own Ignorance* is one dear to Cusa – the absence of comparative relation between the finite and the infinite. Petrarch arrives at this notion by comparing the positions of philosophers on the origin of the world; Plato alone (in Petrarch's eyes, following Augustine) held that superior being created the world, while Aristotle, whom his adversaries champion, is among those who believed in the eternity of the world. Citing the anti-creationism of Cicero's Vellius, who asks what the builders of the world were doing prior to creation, Petrarch responds:

> Those who ask thus do not notice that the same question might be asked if the world had been made a hundred thousand years ago or – since we find it written by Cicero too that the Babylonians counted 470,000 years – before this period or even many more thousands of years before. A thousand times a thousand years, compared with the infinite, are no more than just so many days according to the Psalmist, who says: 'For a thousand years are before Your eyes as yesterday which is past'. They are even much less, or, more correctly, they are absolutely nothing. The relation of one day or of one hour to a thousand years or to a thousand times a thousand years is similar to that between one small drop that has fallen as rain and the entire ocean and all the seas. The drop is enormously small, it is true, but a comparison is possible, and there is even some kind of proportion.

> The relation that holds between many thousand years – as many as you like, until the number has no longer a name – and eternity is absolutely null. In that instance there is a greatness and a smallness, and both are certainly finite. On the other side there is an infinity and a finitude, which, however great, must not be judged small but as nothing in comparison to it, as the great man Augustine says when he is discussing the problem so worthily in the twelfth book of his *City of God*. And this is the perplexity which forced philosophers to propound the eternity of the world, since they wanted to avoid God appearing to have been idle so long. (Petrarch, *On His Own Ignorance* 99–100)[445]

The language and emphasis of Petrarch in this paraphrase of the *City of God*[446] moves Augustine's thought in the direction of Cusa. Although Petrarch may seem to be doing little more than repeating Augustine's comparison between the finite drop, the finite ocean, and a concept of eternity, the account extrapolates in a subtle way. Expressing the difference in quantity in terms of a *maxima* and a *parva*, he asserts there is at least "some proportion" (*nonnulla proportio*) between the drop and the ocean, but when compared with the infinite there is no proportion at all (*ad eternitatem ipsam prorsus nulla*).[447] It is

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[445]"Qui hoc interrogant non attendunt, si ante centum milia, vel quia id quoque apud Tullium scriptum est Babilonios quadringenta septuaginta annorum milia numerare, ante hec omnia seu multo plura milia factus esset hic mundus, id ipsum similiter queri posse, cur non prius, cum mille annorum milia infinito collata nichil amplius quam totidem dies sint, dicente psalmographio: 'Quoniam mille anni ante oculos tuos tanquam dies hesterna que preteriit'; vel multo etiam minus, seu verius nil penitus. Unius enim diei, vvel unius hore, ad mille annos sive ad mille milia annorum, sicut unius exigue stille levi imbre delapse ad omnem Occeanum, cuntaque maria, perquamminima quidem, aliqua tamen est compario et nonnulla proportio. At multorum, et quotcunque volueris milium annorum usquedum numero nomen desit, ad eternitatem ipsam prorsus nulla. Illa enim supra modum, hinc maxima et hinc parva, utrinque certe finita sunt. Hec autem contra, hinc infinita, hinc finita, licet maxima, que illis admota non exigua existimanda esse, sed mulla ait ille vir magnus Augustinus, qui de hoc ipso validissime disputat, libro duodecimo *Civitatis Dei*. Et hec est illa perplexitas, que philosophos coegit eternitatem mundi ponere, ne tam diu otiosus fuisse videatur Deus." Petrarca 258–60. The question of creation by a god is discussed in Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods* 1.9.21.

[446]Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans* 12.13.

[447]The argument from proportionality also appears in an earlier passage. Taking Cicero and the Stoics to task for trying to reconcile "the mad belief in the existence of a crowd of gods," Petrarch says: "There can be no true God,

no mere coincidence to locate this hallmark of Cusa's thought in Petrarch, anticipating Cusa's own discussion of proportionality in the very first sections of his *On Learned Ignorance.*

The argument from proportionality/no-proportionality is no digression in Petrarch, but represents an extension of his epistemological argument:

> How infinitely small, I beseech you, is the greatest amount of knowledge granted to one single mind! Indeed, what a man knows, whosoever he may be, is nothing when compared – I will not say with God's knowledge – but with his own ignorance. (Petrarch, *On His Own Ignorance* 66–67)[448]
>
> A generous soul will realize how poor a share of knowledge is that which is allotted to all men combined, if we compare it to human ignorance and divine wisdom. (Petrarch, *On His Own Ignorance* 123–24)[449]

These two statements sum up a fundamental humanist position on knowledge, derived ultimately from Plato. Here Petrarch bases his concession of ignorance on the absence of proportion between human knowledge and divine wisdom. Compared to the infinite knowledge of God, the finite knowledge of humanity is not only just small but a virtual nothing. Ignorance is therefore the epistemological condition of humanity, from the perspective of a *via negativa*. In short, a dialectical-rhetorical discourse beginning in ignorance levels the accretions of learned traditions while abstracting the false affirmations of human pride and reputation from the process of rational inquiry. As material poverty is

unless He is one. He is not anywhere greater or smaller, for He is always the same, and cannot be or have been occasionaly in conflict with himself." Petrarch, *On His Own Ignorance* 89–90.

[448]"Alioquin quantulum, queso, est, quantumcunque est, quod nosse uni ingenio datum est? Imo quam nihil est scire hominis, quisquis sit, si non dicam scientie Dei, sed sui ipsius ignorantie comparetur?" Petrarca 204.

[449]"quamque exilis rerum portio omnium hominum scientia vel humane ignorantie vel divine sapientie comparata." Petrarca 300.

an ideal precondition for the treasure of piety (236), the "mental poverty" of ignorance is the ideal intellectual predisposition for true knowledge.[450] This new ground for knowledge in the self-limitation of humility allows a fresh start for reason in the simple profundity of basic concepts.

However, when Petrarch's humble and pious ignorance is compared to that of his adversarial "friends," there is proportionality. Indeed, one way of describing the main thrust of Petrarch's letter is the measuring of his own ignorance against theirs, a difference not only of degree but of kind. While Petrarch admits to not understanding the "secrets of nature and the mysteries of God, which are higher still," his adversaries "in their insanity[...] believe that they have reached them and strike heaven with their fists. They feel just as if they had it in their grip, satisfied with their own opinion and rejoicing in their error."[451] The ignorance of the young Aristotelians is thus self-delusion and a pretense of knowledge, shrouded by the boasts of their vain pride.[452] Theirs is an "arrogant ignorance": they will charge any philosopher who becomes Christian, even their "god" Aristotle with crudeness and ignorance, they will and look down on anyone who has turned away from "the cloudy and garrulous ignorance of this world to the wisdom of God the Father."[453] Finally, though ignorance is universal, Petrarch concludes that nowhere has he found it more "overflowing" then in his judges (Petrarca 298).

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[450]"Mea vero sit humilitas et ignorantie proprie fragilitatisque notitia et nullius nisi mundi et mei et insolentie contemnentium me contemptus, de me diffidentia, de te spes; postremo portio mea Deus, et, quam michi non invident, virtus illiterata." Petrarca 200.

[451]"sed attingere et pugno celum stringere insani extimant; et perinde est eis ac si stringerent, propria opinione contentis et errore gaudentibus." Petrarca 220.

[452] "tantus est impetus, tanta animi temeritas, tantus tumor, tanta philosophici nominis et tam vana iactantia, tanta denique opinionum pervicacia, et peregrinorum dogmatum ventoseque disputationis improbitas!" Petrarca 256.

[453] "Profecto enim, de quo michi cum magis viris liquido convenit, si quemcunque philosophum, quamlibet famosum, si denique deum suum Aristotilem [sic] revixisse et cristianum factum esse audiant, ruditatis et inscitie arguent, et quem ante suspexerint, superbi despicient ignorantes[...] eo ipso quod ad sapientiam Dei patris a caliginosa et loquaci mundi huius ignorantia sit conversus Petrarca 286!.

This comparative ignorance, rendered more vividly as a contest of boasters, may be described as ironic discourse, but it should not be reduced to rhetoric. The irony of learned ignorance is another sort of *via negativa*, an exploration into true knowledge through the negation of inferior premises, or "opinion," and motivated by the defects of pride and self-delusion. The relation of this learned ignorance to moriasophia in Petrarch is revealed in the course of the letter. The ignorance of his adversaries, for example, resonates as the negative folly of the worldly: "Let them have what they call knowledge, or rather opinion, which is the lot of fools."[454] In a city like Venice, there are many who, without a knowledge of letters, practice philosophy and sit in judgment – "so great a number and everywhere is the battleline of fools that the indignation of the wise is useless."[455] But Petrarch does not equivocate on the terms for folly as he does on those for ignorance. To distinguish himself from the others, he adopts the identity of the madman, as the emphatic form of folly, while reserving standard folly language for his accusers.

One of the most celebrated metaphors for expressing the divided perspective of ignorance and knowledge was Plato's cave, and it is perhaps not a coincidence that Petrarch uses similar analogies throughout his letter. Quoting from Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods*, Petrarch relates a fable from Aristotle's lost work *About Philosophy*: A man live below the earth in a beautiful, well-lit, and richly-adorned mansion. One day the man discovers the surface of the earth, he marvels at the sun, the vast beauty of the seas and the heavens, and he concludes that there must be gods (Petrarca 232). Petrarch's adversaries, however, are content with darkness. He compares their separation of philosophy from theology to "abandoning the sun and, as it were, forcing a way into the deepest pitch-dark fissures of the earth in order to find the light in the

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[454]*Habeant sibi vel scientiam, vel huic apud stultos parem, scientie opinionem.*" Petrarca 294.

[455]"[...] urbem nobilissimam atque optimam; ubi propter populi magnitudinem multiplicemque varietatem multi sunt qui sine literis philosphentur ac iudicient[...] sed tanto maior est ubique stultorum acies, ut sapientium indigantio frustra sit." Petrarca 296.

darkness down there" (Petrarch, *On His Own Ignorance* 95).[456] Even at its best, philosophy alone is severely handicapped. Petrarch makes this point by adapting the famous owl metaphor of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* to the same author's *Ethics*, "he saw happiness as the owl sees the sun, that is, its light and rays, but he did not see the sun itself."[457]

The Platonic one-in-many paradox is also present in Petrarch's letter via the theme of ignorance and knowledge. As Petrarch's title suggests, ignorance belongs not only to himself but to "the many" (*et multorum*). Like folly, ignorance is both a universal and an individual attribute, an abstract quality embodied by each to a greater or lesser degree:

> I have written you not a letter but a book on my ignorance. I have added whatever came my way while I was hurrying along concerning the ignorance of many others and of almost everyone. One could compose huge books on the matter, not such a tiny little booklet, if one had the leisure to think it over more thoroughly. For what, I beseech you, is so common as ignorance? What is more abundant and more wide-spread? Wherever I turn my eyes, I find it: in me and in others, but nowhere in such affluence as in my judges. (Petrarch, *On His Own Ignorance* 122)[458]

The universality of ignorance in Petrarch reflects the "infinite" folly of Ecclesiastes and anticipates the folly's domain in Brant and Erasmus by over a century. As with folly, ignorance may be literal, equivocal, paradoxical, or ironic; it may represent either prideful self-delusion or hum-

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[456]Petrarch, *On His Own Ignorance* cf. 84, 99. "quasi, sole derelicto, in profundissimos et opacos terre hiatus introire, ut illic in tenebris lumen inveniant?" Petrarca 252.

[457]"ut solem noctua, sic ille felicitatem, hoc est lucem eius ac radios, sed non ipsam vidisse videatur [...]" Petrarca 218. As mentioned previously, the same metaphor of Aristotle is cited by Cusa at the beginning of *On Learned Ignorance* Cusa, *DDI* 1.6.

[458]"de ignorantia mea tibi non epystolam iam, sed librum scribens. Addidi de multorum ac pene omnium ignorantia que se obtulerant festinanti, de quibus cogitare studiosius si detur, non libellus exiguus, sed ingentes texi queant libri. Quid enim, queso, comunius ignorantia? quid uberius? quid latius? Quocunque me vertam, in me illam et in aliis, sed nusquam exundantius quam in meis iudicibus invenio." Petrarca 298.

ble self-knowledge. The value of each ignorance is like a proposition to be weighed proportionally: the *superbia ignorantia* of his adversaries and of the *ineptissimi homines* in all cities, everywhere, the *illiterata ignorantia* and *virtus illiterata* of Petrarch and of apostles, saintly idiotas, and mystics. The variety of expression is not intended to be systematic, yet it invites the reader into the dialectic and invites self-examination.

While Petrarch emphasizes the conflict of learning and igorance in rhetorical terms as accusation, defense, and counter-attack, Cusa's Idiota moves quickly beyond the symbolic antithesis to analogies and demonstrations. Nevertheless, Petrarch's bivalent treatment of ideal or virtuous ignorance as *illiterata*, *literata*, or *pietas* recapitulates, in the alternation of literal and ironic modes, the affirmative and negative method of the theoretical sciences. Although it is not expressed in Dionysian terms, the negation of learning as a means to superior knowledge follows a similar pattern to the *Divine Names* and *Mystical Theology*. The persona's insanity-in-ignorance symbolizes – not rational abandonment – but the "spiritual knowledge" of faith, hope, and love.

Indeed, Petrarch's copious employment of negations and litotes throughout his letter demonstrates his engagement with another dimension of the paradoxy of ignorance-in-knowledge and knowledge-in-ignorance: the metaphysical dialectic of being and nothingness. As a dialectical negation of knowledge, ignorance is absolute and therefore nothing; as a quality or property ignorance is relative. It is a nothing of privation which is still something, because it of the way it must "appear" in an individual. The ignorance-in-knowledge of his adversaries is described as empty, vain, swollen, inflated, foolish, and insane; this knowledge is therefore the "nothing" of *phantasmata*, the false image of "prideful opinion" (*superba opinio*). The disputations of his adversaries are "airy" (*ventose*) (Petrarca 256). They relish an ancient philosophy

which could hardly imagine true happiness; "they saw it like a dream, rejoicing in absolutely nothing."[459] Petrarch's *nomen, fama,* and *eloquentia* are like the knowledge of his adversaries in this regard; they are easily surrendered because they are insubstantial.[460]

The vacuity of these personal attributes and predications are paralleled neatly in Petrarch's analysis of ancient metaphysics. "Nearly all philosophers, except Plato and the Platonists" believed in the eternity of the world. To epitomize their position, Petrarch quotes the Roman poet and stoic, Persius, who said, "Nothing comes out of nothing, and nothing can return to nothing."[461] Petrarch remonstrates not so much with Aristotle, who also held this position, but with those Christian Aristotelians who similarly treat causality in material terms alone and without due consideration for the spiritual reality. Repeatedly Petrarch's persona expresses astonishment and wonder at the atheistic position on creation. How could Cicero could be so wrong about creation, when he was so correct about divine providence and virtue? His Aristotelian adversaries likewise astonish him, "blind and deaf," even "insane," in their attacks on Christians for believing in creation on the basis of faith. For Petrarch, this is the "nothing" which truly comes from nothing. In an ironic reference to Persius' materialism, Petrarch jests that he cannot fear the loss of his reputation because "nothing can be less than nothing" (*minus nihilo nihil est*).[462]

The amoral and anti-theological "nothing" of the knowledgeable is challenged forcibly by the "nothing" of the humble and pious ignorant. In part, the persona's deficiency in knowledge, letters, and rationality (implied in terms like *a-mentia*, *de-mentia*, and *in-sania*)

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[459]"non videbant, gaudebantque de nichilo, prorsus quasi somnio beati." Petrarca 218.
[460]"In [fama] illi obliquos defixere oculos, quo et nunc et sepe utinam caruissem; crebrius enim damno id memini michi fuisse quam usui, cumque non paucos michi fecerit amicos, hostes fecit innumeros." Petrarca 186.
[461]"Gigni de nichilo nichil, in nichilum nil posse reverti." Petrarca 248. Of course King Lear's pride and vanity ("Nothing shall come from nothing") are likewise demonstrated through his Persian nihilistic logic.

dramatizes the Socratic dictum, "This one thing I know, that I know nothing."[463] Such deprivation is but the predisposition or ground for the far greater "nothing" of faith – the unseen, supernatural "something" which emerges, inexplicably, out of ignorance, when human reason humbles itself before the wondrous reality of the eternal God, annulling all "proportion." For Petrarch, the emergence of faith in the individual corresponds perfectly to the argument for creation *ex nihilo* – a tangible reality springing forth from an abyss of nothingness. Though this Creator-God can never be known completely, Petrarch insists that he is nevertheless known *ex parte*:

> It is safer to strive for a good and pious will than for a capable and clear intellect. The object of the will, as it pleases the wise, is to be good; that of the intellect is truth. It is better to will the good than to know the truth. The first is never without merit; the latter can often be polluted with crime and then admits no excuse. Therefore, those are far wrong who consume their time in learning to know virtue instead of acquiring it, and, in a still higher degree, those whose time is spent in learning to know God instead of loving Him. In this life it is impossible to know God in His fulness; piously and ardently to love Him is possible. This love is a blessing at all times whatsoever; this knowledge sometimes makes us miserable[…] Things that are absolutely unknown are not loved; but, for those to whom more is not granted, it is sufficient to know God and virtue so far as to know that He is the most transparent, the most tasteful, the most delectable, without ever being exhausted, from which, through which, and in which we are whatever good we are, and to know that virtue is the best thing next to God Himself. When we

[462](Petrarca 276). "Nothing comes out of nothing" is a logical fallacy which can be employed in the service of a creation principle. Inversely, "something comes from something," hence, the world has a causality outside of itself. Petrarch does not make this point exactly but his argument may imply it.
[463]Quoted by Petrach as "Socrates ait: 'Hoc unum scio, quod nichil scio'." Petrarca 304.

> know this, we shall love him for His sake with our heart and marrows, and virtue we shall love for His sake too. We shall revere him as the unique author of life; virtue we shall cultivate as its foremost adornment. (Petrarch, *On His Own Ignorance* 105–06)[464]

Here again Petrarch draws on the theology of Augustine in the letter to Proba, where the Church Father describes our limited-yet-inspired knowledge, indeed the mystical experience, of learned ignorance. This is Petrarch at his most theoretical, asserting the power of the will over the exercise of the intellect. His conclusion is based on the certitude of virtue and faith as compared to the uncertainty of the intellect, which is perpetually deficient and defective. The confession of ignorance is the *via negativa* of self-conscious intellectual imperfection, annulling learned conventions and subtle distinctions in search of an altogether higher order of knowledge. That search is a "regressive" path to metaphysics, i.e., an unencumbered engagement with foundational, commonsense questions and principles. Basic theological doctrine and natural law offer the terms for such a discourse, and Platonism – with its emphasis on moral and transcendent virtue – is an obvious and consistent ally. If the moriasophic embrace of virtue triumphs in the end, it is because the good, acquired by the will and through love, has the power to transform through participation in the Absolute. Thus Petrarch's prayer, echoing the request of Solomon, asks that his insubstantial "fame" for virtue become *actual* virtue: "I ask for *the thing itself*, that I

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[464]"Tutius est voluntati bone ac pie quam capaci et claro intellectui operam dare. Voluntatis siquidem obiectum, ut sapientibus placet, est bonitas: obiectum intellectus est veritas. Satius est autem bonum velle quam verum nosse. Illud enim merito nunquam caret; hoc sepe etiam culpam habet excusationem non habet. Itaque longe errant qui in cognoscenda virtute, non in adipiscenda, et multo maxime qui in cognoscendo, non amando Deo tempus ponunt. Nam et cognosci ad plenum Deus in hac vita nullo potest modo, amari autem potest pie atque ardenter; et utique amor ille felix semper, cognitio vero nonnunquam misera[...] Et quanquam prorsus incognita non amentur, satis est tamen Deum eatenus, quibus ultra non datur, ac virtutem nosse, ut sciamus illum omnis boni fontem lucidissimum, sapidissimum, amenissimum, inexhaustum, a quo et per quem et in quo sumus quicquid sumus boni, hanc post

may *be good*, that I may love you, and that I may deserve to be loved by you [my emphasis]."[465]

The subjection of knowledge to virtue in Petrarch seems to place him in opposition to Cusa on the important medieval argument concerning human freedom, i.e., the argument over whether intellect or will is the primary in attaining the unitive love of God. Given Petrarch's conclusion, it would certainly appear that the secular Franciscan takes the side of Franciscan "voluntarists" against the "intellectualist" Aristotelians, whom Cusa seems to follow more closely. But such a distinction is perhaps too academic here, because Petrarch does not discuss the matter with the kind technical detail we find in medieval scholastics. For example, Petrarch does not say whether the will acts passively upon the intellect's inclination to follow reason or whether the will is an independent power.

But Petrarch does admit there is a kind of knowledge necessary for the will and for the motive force of love: "Things completely unknown are not loved" (*prorsus incognita non amentur*). Thus "the truth" which Petrarch places below will and virtue does not refer to theological doctrine nor to metaphysical principles but rather to those technical questions of natural history which his "judges" appear to value beyond all else: "the nature of quadrupeds, fowls, fishes, and serpents."[466] One might argue on the same principle that Erasmus is not an anti-intellectualist just because Folly objects to "numberless petty quibbles even more fine-spun than these, concerning notions, relations, instants, formalities, quiddities, ecceities – things to which no eyesight

Deum rerum optimam. Quo cognito, totis Illum precordiis ac medullis propter se, hanc autem propter Illum amenus et colamus, vite Illum unicum auctorem, vite hanc precipuum ornamentum." Petrarca 270.

[465]"Neque tam nomen bonum, quod unguentis preciosis prefert Salomon, quam rem ipsam posco, ut sim bonus, ut te amem amarique merear abs te[...]" Petrarca 198.

[466] "Nam quid, oro, naturas beluarum et volucrum et piscium et serpentum nosse profuerit, et naturam hominum, ad quod nati sumus, unde et quo pergimus, vel nescire vel spernere?" Petrarca 190. Petrarch describes with humor the way such questions of natural history have gripped the learned societies of Italy: "Si iam nemo igitur literatus horum iudicio esse potest, nisi sit idem hereticus et insanus, superque omnia importunus et procax, qui per vicos ac plateas urbium de quadrupedibus ac beluis disputans, bipes ipse sit belua!" Petrarca 288.

could ever penetrate, unless it were an 'x-ray vision' so powerful it could perceive through the deepest darkness things that are nowhere."[467]

The differences between Petrarch and Cusa in genre and style need not obscure the similarities in their representation of learned ignorance. In both, the moriasophic theme takes on rhetorical as well as dialectical dimensions, as the conflict drives the discourse toward new territory in a spirituality of reconciliation. As long as theology informs philosophy, Petrarch is willing to plunder the treasury of ancient literature and to challenge them on basic metaphysical and moral questions, such as "the nature of man, why we are born, and where we go to and from."[468] Cusa, on the other hand, collapses historical distance even as he re-proposes Platonism as a literary-dialectical bridge from reason to faith. Both, however, draw elements from the same font of tradition, such as Solomon's request, biblical wisdom literature, Socrates' profession of ignorance, the Delphic inscription, Aristotle's owl, the cave metaphor, St. Paul's Corinthian letters, and Augustine's *Confessions*. In philosophy, both use the persona of ignorance as a *via negativa* to contemplate the dialectic of the finite and the infinite, and to conjecture a kind of intuitive knowledge without proportionality. In theology, both follow learned ignorance of Augustine in his Letter to Proba, agreeing that heaven is not knowing God as God knows himself but in knowing God *ex parte* and in accord with one's own being (as Petrarch says, "we are whatever good we are"); it is a perpetual knowing-in-ignorance, until the unity of creature and creator supersedes the very distinction between knowing and not-knowing.

Note too how Petrarch's language of learned ignorance appeals to the *via supereminentia*: God is *lucidissimum, sapidissimum, amenissimum, inexhaustum, a quo et per quem et in quo sumus quicquid sumus boni*. These three superlatives are carefully chosen by Petrarch. *Lucidissi-*

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[467] Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly* 89.
[468] "naturm hominum, ad quod nati sumus, unde et quo pergimus." Petrarca 190.

mus represents the medieval doctrine of "divine simplicity" and also corresponds to Petrarch's principle of *claritas* in rhetoric.[469] *Sapidissimum* and *amenissimum* represent the theological convention of "spiritual senses," the bodily senses symbolizing the spiritual knowledge of eternal realities. "Most tasteful" recalls the commonplace etymology which derives *sapientia* from the word *sapor*, used of physical sensations like taste, smell, and hearing, but also of intellectual sensations, joining intuition with abstracted experience. "Most delectable" (*amen*- as a scribal contraction of *amoen*-), flows from the former as satisfaction follows a delightful sensual experience. Petrarch and Cusa would have found such language in Dionysius and Proclus as well as Augustine, Bonaventure, and numerous medieval mystics.[470]

In conclusion, an examination of rhetoric and dialectic in Petrarch's *On His Own Ignorance and that of many others* reveals compelling evidence for his adaptation of the moriasophic tradition, especially as it appears in St. Paul, Plato, and the medieval idiota. While there are significant differences of emphasis in the learned ignorance of Petrarch and Cusa, such differences should not deter us from seeing the continuity in their approaches to metaphysics and epistemology and in the interconnectedness of theology and philosophy. The invention of a learned-ignorant persona is a literary-rhetorical and didactive strategy designed to suit the dialectic of antithesis, paradoxy, and reconciliation. A literary-rhetorical approach juxtaposes arguments *in utramque partem* with a logical method of affirmation and denial, derived from Parmenidean-Platonist metaphysics. Affirmation and negation in tandem are transcended in the conjecture of a beatific vision, expressed in language of theological poetry.

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[469] "Summum enim ingenii et scientie argumentum, claritas. Nam quod clare quis intelligit, clare eloqui potest, quodque intus in animo suo habet, auditoris in animum transfundere." Petrarca 254.

[470] Nicholas of Cusa treats the metaphor of *sapor* at length in 1.10–20, 26–27. For the language of the spiritual senses in *On Learned Ignorance*, see also Chapter 3.6.

The similarities in epistemological arguments also indicate the centrality of authority and methods of inquiry in theology for Renaissance humanists. The strong Augustinian and Platonist appeal in Petrarch and Cusa represents a persistent ambition to reform the discourse of scholasticism with appeals to the rhetorical and literary tradition. This tendency is not a rejection of scholastic logic but a corrective to the hegemony and technical excesses of logical studies, a discipline which became further and further isolated from the repository of ancient and Christian wisdom. For humanists, a Christian Platonism is cohesive and universal, corresponding harmoniously to rhetorical techniques and speaking directly to the rational and affective aspects of the human thought and life. On the theoretical level, this humanist approach to theology aims to enlighten minds with its dynamic and visionary spirituality, while in practical terms, it attempts to rouse hearts and to heal the divisions brought about by rivalry, egoism, and the decay of piety and virtue. For Petrarch as for Cusa, moriasophia was a powerful instrument of education in this transforming effort, connecting experience and poetry with reason and faith.

Chapter 9

Moriasophia and Experiments with Form

This chapter demonstrates significant transitions in the literary style of moriasophia during the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, as humanists elaborated on rhetorical tone, settings, and devices. We begin with a fascinating, anonymous text of the fifteenth century which portrays Cusa's Idiota as an invention of Petrarch's, thereby binding together the fates of these two humanists for several generations. We then inquire how experiments with the dialogue form introduce stylistic anomalies, such as occasions for ironic subversion and, especially in Northern Europe, the blending of philosophical discourse with spiritual wisdom. The translation of Lucian's works reintroduces the *serio ludere* of ancient satire to humanists, so that an author's earnest jesting becomes a necessary adjunct to the learned ignorance of the personae. Finally, Sebastian Brant and numerous imitators place the popular figure of the fool at the epicenter of humanist moriasophic literature.

9.1 Surreptitious Humanism: The Disguise of the Idiota in the Dialogue *On True Wisdom*

The continuity from Petrarch to Nicholas of Cusa may be seen as emblematic of the two cooperating aspects of reform within the humanist movement. Practical as well as speculative thinkers, professional rhetoricians and academic metaphysicians alike were concerned with the relationship of philosophy to theology. In a conflict dating from the latter half of the thirteenth century, humanists reacted to the radical or "heterodox" separation of disciplines, promoted es-

pecially in those arts faculties where Averroes' commentaries flourished, as well as the contamination of theology which resulted from the excessive application of Aristotelian logic and metaphysics.[471] Some tendencies among academicians had bereft theology of its accessibility, lucidity, and universality, and thus diminished its power to inspire the faithful scholar to prayer, piety, and moral virtue. A successful reform, for humanists, reunites faith and reason in a concept of wisdom, appealing to Christian Platonism and mysticism in theory and to Scripture and moral-devotional exhortation in practice. Only with this insight can theology be restored to its rightful place in the hierarchy of disciplines and transform individuals and society.

Though he was not a speculative thinker, Petrarch, through his many writings, defined the broad outlines of an approach: intellectual obscurity and arrogance should be confronted with the clarity, comprehensibility, and immediacy of a discursive-logical style, polemical when necessary, aided by many ancient writers who, like Cicero, are the models of coherence in thought and beauty in language. Above all, true wisdom is thoroughly pious, acknowledging God with humility, contemplative, Christ-centered, attentive to the Scriptures, observing moral precepts and the traditions of the Church. Petrarch's piety, like Dante's, gives a theological purpose to poetry so that the affective spirit might express – in imitation of the Psalms and many other books of the Bible – the human yearning for the ineffable.

Petrarch's Pauline braggart, saintly idiota, and Socratic defendant in *On His Own Ignorance and that of Many Others* are significant aspects of his broad stylistic range. Though not the only instance of humor in Petrarch, it might be said that this work more than any other preserved and perpetuated a rich and varied medieval tradition in such a way that it became an indispensable manifesto of the humanist movement, if not always for the specific issues it raises then for its charming and engaging technique.

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[471]For a brief history of Christian Averroism in the Middle Ages, see Brown 256–60.

Shortly after Petrarch wrote *On His Own Ignorance*, a series of devotional treatises written in Latin appeared, its author identifying himself with the pseudonym Idiota. These treatises, which circulated widely in Europe, especially in France and the Netherlands, include *On the Blessed Virgin*, *On the Religious Life*, *The Spiritual or Mystical Eye*, a *Commentary on Psalm XV*, and a book of six "meditations": *On Divine Love*, *On the Virgin Mary*, *On True Patience*, *On the Perpetual Conflict Between the Flesh and the Spirit*, *On Lost Innocence*, and *On Death*. They were so highly regarded in the fourteenth and fifteenth century that many dated them to the ninth century or earlier, and Jacques Lefèvre published an edition of the *Meditations* in Paris in 1519. It is nonetheless likely that the Idiota treatises were written in the late fourteenth century by Raymond Jordanus, prior of the house of Augustinian Canons in Uzès from 1381, who signed several manuscripts – a discovery made in the mid seventeenth century by Théophile Raynaud, S.J. Raynaud attributed sixteen treatises in total to Jordanus, as the pseudonymous Idiota, and published them in a single volume in 1654.

The attribution of the Idiota treatises to Jordanus makes sense for another reason. Only several hours walking distance from Avignon, and a day's journey from Charpentras and Montpellier, Uzès belongs to a region where Petrarch spent many years of his life and in which Petrarch's reputation flourished. It is certainly possible that Petrarch's use of the idiota motif inspired Jordanus, who appears to be unique in using "Idiota" as a pen name. The Augustinian themes and sources in Petrarch would certainly have appealed to Augustinian monks, who similarly treasured their patron's letter to Proba. The fact that fifteenth and sixteenth-century Europeans placed the Idiota treatises in the ninth century or earlier indicates a strong familiarity with the character type's historical origins. Such familiarity is also evident in Lefevre's Preface to the

Meditations of the Catalan speculative logician and mystic Ramon Llull, whom Lefevre refers to as *idiota et illiteratus*.

If the treatises of Jordanus' contemplative Idiota took Petrarch's persona in the direction of greater piety, an anonymous dialogue, emphasizing the themes of knowledge-in-ignorance and true wisdom, sealed the fate of Petrarch and Cusa together for four centuries. This second work, called *On True Wisdom* (*De vera sapientia*), weaves substantial parts of Petrarch's *On remedies for good and bad fortune* into Nicholas of Cusa's two books of *The Idiota On Wisdom*. *On remedies* was Petrarch's longest and most comprehensive work of moral philosophy, completed at the Visconti court in Milan only a few years before he wrote *On His Own Ignorance*. While the similarities between *On True Wisdom* to Cusa's Idiota dialogue were noticed by Buhle at the turn of the nineteenth century and the false attribution discovered by Übinger toward the end of nineteenth century, no one has investigated the role of this important text in the proliferation of the concept of learned ignorance and the impact it may have had on readers of Petrarch and Cusa in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Indeed the little we know about the publication history of *On True Wisdom* provokes some very important questions about the intellectual and religious environment in which Erasmus was raised and schooled.[472]

In brief, the author-compiler (hence "author") of *On True Wisdom* begins with Cusa's dialogue between the Idiota and the Orator from Book I of the *Idiota On Wisdom*, but then transitions to an exchange from the twelfth dialogue of Petrarch's first book of *On Remedies* (fittingly called a dialogue "*On Wisdom*"). The identities of Cusa's characters take the place of Joy and

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[472]Ernst Goldschmidt was the first to examine the work and to identify its pseudonymity. Two and a half decades later, Giovanni Santinello inquired into whether *On True Wisdom* reveals any possible influence Petrarch may have had on Cusa. Santinello concluded that *On True Wisdom* is evidence that Cusa's works are not widely known in the latter half of the fifteenth century, while Petrarch's reputation endures. For Santinello, neither *On True Wisdom* nor Cusa's marginalia tell us anything of significance about a philosophical relationship between the two thinkers Goldschmidt; Santinello, *Studi Sull'umanesimo Europeo* 10–17.

Reason, as they continue a conversation contrasting systematic knowledge with moral virtue. Virtue requires knowledge of one's own deficiencies and the life-long dedication to learning and experience. True wisdom does not depend on one's reputation, or popular opinion, or a university degree, while the proper disposition of wisdom is not pride but humility.

Then the author of *On True Wisdom* adds a few original exchanges, followed by a long discourse from Idiota. Idiota explains that one must first become ignorant in order to acquire wisdom (reminiscent of St. Paul, who says one must become a fool in order to be wise). The truly wise are those who know mortal things "exactly as they are" but only the Idiota learns to "taste" eternal things. The human person should acknowledge his mortality, despite his ability to reason. Self-knowledge precedes every other kind of knowledge, whether natural or divine. With many long quotations from Seneca, Gregory the Great, Augustine, and John Chrysostom, the Idiota argues that the quality of life cannot be judged by its length and that one must repent and turn back to God at once.[473] The anonymous author ends the first dialogue by drawing a distinction between human and divine wisdom, the former created, the latter uncreated. This section forms the bridge between the first and second dialogue, which continues with Cusa's second book of *Idiota On Wisdom*.

The impression left on modern scholarship by Santinello is that the author of *On True Wisdom* is a poor or failed forgerer, who wrote the treatise with the intention "of publishing and promoting it as a new work of Petrarch" (his interpretation is evident in his repeated references to the author as *il falsificatore*) (11). But this conclusion is unnecessarily reductive and does not address the several reasons for textual reconstruction and pseudonymity, which were common practices during the Middle Ages. It is just as likely that the author, who perceived the obvious similarities in a concept of learned ignorance, was impressed by the theme and struck by the

cleverness and complexity of rhetorical style and intellectual substance; he may thus have wanted to make it more accessible to those whose level of education and sophistication was insufficient for interpreting the original texts. It is also possible that the author of *On True Wisdom* was himself operating under the mistaken assumption that Petrarch was the real author of *Idiota On Wisdom*. He may therefore have been attempting to simplify what he saw as inconsistencies in the exposition and style of the same writer. Santinello points out that confusion between the two humanists (or alternatively, a "forgery") is made more plausible by the similarities in prose style and in the use of figurative language (13–14).

Indeed, the expansion of education and the advent of printing brought a greater demand for moral and devotional texts, and many humanists were hard at work to supply them. *On True Wisdom* would have served as an introduction to and elucidation of the theme of learned ignorance in Petrarch and Cusa. The author's new arrangement amplified the moral dimension of the learned-ignorance paradox, so that the negations, understatements, and exaggerations of irony (especially in Petrarch) and the speculative terminology and theory in Cusa might be clarified with moral doctrine. He added the academic distinction between "human wisdom" and "divine wisdom," once again echoing St. Paul, as a reduction of Petrarch's and Cusa's knowledge-in-ignorance and ignorance-in-knowledge. Finally, the long, interpolated discourse provides a typical humanist argument from authority, incorporating classical authors with Patristic writers from the Greek as well as the Latin tradition, when such a discourse clearly contradicts the Idiota's confident independence from authority.

The textual history becomes more interesting, even fascinating, when we look at the publication record. The earliest known printing of *On True Wisdom* takes place in 1473 or 1474, at the press of Nicholas Ketelaer and Gerard Leempt in Utrecht. This location is quite remarkable

[473]"qualis vita non quanta sit." Quoted by Santinello, *Studi Sull'umanesimo Europeo* 12–13.

when one considers the fact that printing commenced in the Netherlands only in 1473.[474] Other editions were printed by Peter Os in Zwolle (1487-88), and Cornelis de Zierikzee in Cologne (c. 1499). The dialogue appears again in the earliest printed collections of Petrarch's works, including the editions of Johann Amerbach in Basel (1496), an unidentified printer in Northern Germany (the 1490s), and Simon de Gabis (Bevilaqua of Pavia) in Venice (1501 and 1503).[475] At least one vernacular translation was printed in Bohemia c. 1501. This is a strong showing for the period and indicates a certain level of interest in the dialogue.

Why was *On True Wisdom* first printed in the Netherlands of Erasmus and in Germany rather than in Italy, where Petrarch's *On his Own Ignorance* and Cusa's *Idiota* works were written? This simple fact may indicate that its author had ties with humanists in the German territories, at a time when the Modern Devout movement was flourishing. The Modern Devout, some of whom were educators and spiritual directors of Nicholas of Cusa and Erasmus, ran large dormitories for students in Utrecht and Zwolle. Perhaps for this reason Klibansky surmised that Thomas à Kempis, whose monastery was just outside Zwolle at Mount St. Agnes, or another member of the Modern Devout may have been the author.

But Klibansky's attribution is out of character for à Kempis and is probably the result of confusion over the title. Indeed, a different treatise bearing the same title is attributed to à Kempis and included in his *Opera*.[476] This latter work reflects the thought of à Kempis and the Modern Devout. While we also have the typical distinction between worldly wisdom and divine wisdom, the form is not literary, nor is it a dialogue, nor does it employ the Pauline irony.

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[474]Erasmus was, at this time, a young chorister of six or seven singing in the Utrecht cathedral.
[475]ISTC numbers are as follows: Ketelaer and Leempt ip00818000, Os in00099000, Amerbach ip00365000, Zierikzee in00100000. For de Gabis, see Fiske 20. In addition, Martin Flach's edition of Cusa's Opera Omnia (1488 or 1489) includes a work of the same title, Flach 00095800. It would be extremely interesting if this were the compliation rather than the Idiota dialogue, since nowhere else do we find the work printed (or even named) as Cusa's until the twentieth century *ISTC*; Eisermann.
[476]à Kempis, *Vera Sapientia or True Wisdom*.

This does not mean the Petrarch-Cusa compilation *On True Wisdom* would not have appealed to the Modern Devout. Pioneers in the education of the artisan and labor class, the Brothers maintained student dormitories for students from poor families (*domus pauperum*), so that they could attend a local school. They guided and assisted the students, in some instances as teachers in local schools, and in other cases, providing formal instruction within the dormitory. The Brothers chose St. Paul as the first patron of their movement (St. Jerome was adopted soon after); together they read the Bible frequently, in vernacular translations as well as Latin, a hundred years and more before the Lutherans. On account of their humble origins and self-effacing work – the Brothers as copyists and as printers after 1470, the Sisters as seamstresses – they understood too well what it meant to be a fool for Christ. Accepting into their ranks and caring for people with mental and physical disabilities, the Brothers and Sisters must have had their own "natural fools" in practically every household. Although their motives and their work were serious, their piety was not necessarily insipid. The *Imitation of Christ* links the acknowledgement of ignorance with self-knowledge and folly for Christ explicitly. "Knowledge inflates" (*scientia inflat*), St. Paul's metaphor for pride, was a motto of the Modern Devout.[477]

The anonymous dialogue *On True Wisdom* demonstrates, first of all, the prominent place given to Petrarch by humanists in the age of incunabula. Manuscripts of Petrarch's works were already read widely throughout Europe, the most important of these being *On remedies*. In the North, Petrarch was best known for his Latin treatises rather than his poetry. The Petrarchan texts in Cusa's library can serve as an indication of those which interested the clerical and devotional culture of Northern Europe in the fifteenth century: *On the Solitary Life, On Remedies, On*

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[477]There is at least one work of à Kempis' which portrays the theme of learned ignorance with wit and humor, entitled "The Beggar and No Beggar: or, Every Man a King if He Will." In this brief fable, a beggar astonishes a learned doctor with his wisdom, when he proves that the shorter way to God is humility and that a true king is one

Things to be Remembered, On his Hidden Conflict (the so-called *Secret*), *On Religious Withdrawal, The Book Without a Name,* and *On His Own Ignorance and that of Many Others*. It is not the case, however, that a print audience simply replicated the manuscript audience. While there is some relationship, manuscript copies were often paid for (or at least contracted) *before* the product was completed, while printers (belonging to a period of enterprise and investment), needed to sell copies of the final product in order to survive. Printers had to balance their noble ambition to advance education and culture with producing texts in popular demand. It is not surprising, therefore, that Petrarch's Latin translation of Boccaccio's Griselda story (*Historia Griseldis*) and his twelve eclogues in imitation of Vergil (*Bucolicum carmen*) are printed in the North as frequently as his moral and devotional treatises.[478]

Whether or not the author-compiler of *On True Wisdom* was motivated by profit, the publication of the text required a calculated judgment on the part of three different German-Dutch printers. It was not, after all, the only pseudo-Petrarchan text of the period. For example, a treatise called *Lives of the Emperors and Roman Pontifs* was printed as Petrarch's in Florence in 1478, and a non-Petrarchan dialogue between Pylades and Orestes appeared together with *On True Wisdom* in the c.1499 Cologne edition.[479] Humanists favored dialogues for philosophy because they had a classical pedigree and were pedagogically expedient. Thus *On True Wisdom* satisfied fundamental considerations for printing, representing familiar ideas in a popular literary form.

Yet it is nothing short of astonishing to think that the first major printing of Cusa's work in Northern Europe (a single edition of *On the last days of the world* was printed in Nürenberg in

who reigns over his own soul. See à Kempis, *The Beggar, and No Beggar: Or Every Man a King If He Will. A Parable. Containing an Example of a Perfect Man in Christ*.
[478]ISTC, Panzer, GW.
[479]Hain n. 12798.

1471), and in lands where he lived, traveled, and where his reputation shone the brightest, concealed the Cardinal's very name under that of Petrarch. How many people, humanists and non-humanists alike, absorbed some of basic tenets of Cusa's thought by reading *On True Wisdom*? Even when Cusa's Idiota dialogues were published as part of his own corpus,[480] *On True Wisdom* continued to be printed in Petrarch's *Opera*, not only in the editions previously mentioned, but in the Basel editions of 1554 and 1581, and in the German and Italian translations of 1726 and 1824/1833. Consider, too, that Petrarch's *On His Own Ignorance*, which Cusa himself owned and read attentively, was left out of the *Opera* of 1496 and not printed until the Venice editions of 1501 and 1503.

Thus too little is known about this pseudo-Petrarchan work, which played a key role in spreading the concept, theme, and (to a limited extent) the literary-rhetorical style of learned ignorance, together with the central figure of the Idiota. There are pressing questions, and more research need to be done. If *On Remedies* was the most frequently copied manuscript of Petrarch's work from the time of his death through the next century, what was the manuscript tradition for *On True Wisdom*?[481] Might Giovanni Andrea de' Bussi have been involved in the compilation or dissemination? De' Bussi, who was Cusa's Italian secretary, had many connections in the German territories; he assisted Sweynheym and Pannartz in setting up their presses at the German abbey of St. Scholastica in Subiaco, he helped them obtain papal support in Rome, and he acted as their editor-in-chief.[482] How might *On True Wisdom* have been regarded by Hegius, the only accomplished Hellenist in the Netherlands after Agricola, who traveled to Cusa's library

[480]Early editions of Cusa's *Opera* were printed in Strasbourg (1488), Milan (1502), and Paris (1514).
[481]A fifteenth-century manuscript at Cornell University contains *On True Wisdom* bound with other works of Petrarch. A more thorough study of the manuscript tradition will help to determine a more accurate date of composition. See Kristeller, P. O., *Iter Italicum: A Finding List of Uncatalogued or Incompletely Catalogued Humanistic Manuscripts of the Renaissance in Italian and Other Libraries* 5.264.

in order to obtain numerous manuscripts in Greek as well as Latin, including the St. Paul's Epistles and Dionysius' *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*?[483]

It is highly probable that Erasmus imbibed learned ignorance through *On True Wisdom,* perhaps in one of the Brethren's libraries, or at one of the many monasteries he visited, or at his own monastery at Steyn, or at the Collège de Montaigu (which owed so much of its structure and spirituality to Jan Standonck and the Windesheim Congregation),[484] or in Venice, at the house of Aldo. The 1473 edition in particular had an added attraction for the great compiler of *adagia*, for the dialogue was published together with Filelfo's Latin translation of Plutarch's *Apophthegmata*.[485] Thus, if we seek to speculate how Erasmian folly might have been influenced by Cusa, the most logical place to turn is this particular dialogue. Indeed, how could Erasmus have avoided *On True Wisdom,* since it was not only circulating in the Netherlands but included in all the printed *opera* of Petrarch at the time? That the topic of true wisdom interested Erasmus is evident from the *Enchiridion* of 1503, his instructional manual of spirituality for the educated laity, written about six years before the *Moria*. Yet more needs to be said about a shift in the climate of Northern humanism towards the genres of dialogue and satire.

9.2 The Revival of the Dialogue

[482]De' Bussi praised Cusa as patron of printing and as the one responsible for bringing it to Rome. He was also probably the first to print a work of Cusa's, *On the Last Days*, in 1471 Füssel 61–62.

[483]"I have been, as you know, at Cusanus' library, and found there many Hebrew books which were quite unknown to me; also a few Greek. I remember the names of the following: Epiphanius against heresies, a very big book; Dionysius on the Hierarchy; Athansius against Arius; Climacus. These I left behind there, but I brought away with me: Basil on the Hexaemeron and some of his homilies on the Pslams; the Epistles of Paul and the Acts of the Apostles; Plutarch's Lives of Romans and Greeks, and his Symposium; some writings on grammar and mathematics; some poems on the Christian religion, written I think, by Gregory Nazianzen; some prayers, in Latin and Greek." Hegius to John Wessel (written between 1483 and 1489) Allen, P. S. 15.

[484]The activities of the Belgian Jan Standonck and the reformers of the Windesheim Congretation are related by R.R. Post, who also mentions Erasmus' interest as well as that of his close friend Cornelius Aurelius Post 633–35.

[485]Erasmus consulted Plutarch's *Apophthegmata* as he added to his collection of *Adagia*. He would later publish an *Apophthegmata* of his own in 1531. See Milewska-Waźbińska 693–94.

Several dialogues written by Nicholas of Cusa demonstrate an experimentation with the dialogue genre. Among them, however, the only ones which contain irony as a prominent rhetorical feature are those of the Idiota. The irony, situational and verbal, relies on a sense of aesthetic distance between the reader and the elitist pretensions of the establishment figure (exemplified by an academic philosopher as well as an orator) and on the reader's identification with the Idiota's common-sense arguments. The philosophical and dialectical depth of the Idiota adds a completely new dimension to the medieval figure of simplicity, piety, and ingenuity. The 1473 publication of *On True Wisdom* together with Plutarch's *Apophthegmata* is evidence that the former work was regarded as light reading or even as a humorous piece, *utile et dulce*. And yet the full rhetorical and dramatic potential of Pauline folly and Petrarchan irony does not come through in either the extracts from Cusa's Idiota or in the Petrarchan exchanges.

Following Petrarch's example, humanists, in their emphasis on rhetoric, poetics, and morality, were well positioned to rediscover the literary range of learned ignorance. Through their relationships with printers, they influenced the selection of texts which not only helped to meet the market demands but to cultivate a general interest in ancient and devotional literature. It is important to see how, in the context of humanism, ancient and devotional works contributed to a common purpose in the reformation of language, education, and morals. In the intellectual culture of the Renaissance, language and rhetoric are instruments, not merely of persuasion, but of self-affirming knowledge. A rightly disposed soul, nurtured by the rules of rhetoric, will discover its own virtue through the inherent rationality and beauty of language. Wherever humanists were involved, book production reflects this profound interconnectivity of language, education, and morality. A proper education is, at the same time, a personal "formation"; good literature is good pedagogy.

The dialogue was an instrumental literary form on this path of rediscovery. Throughout the fifteenth century, the dialogue flourished among humanists not only because it was a classical genre, used by such admired authors as Cicero, Seneca, and Plato, but because it portrays arguments and the pursuit of knowledge within a human context, integrating philosophical theory and character – contemporary, historical, or allegorical. The advent of printing made the pedagogical uses of the dialogue form even more apparent, particularly for students but also for a larger audience of readers and listeners. Scholars often call attention to the rising number of moral-philosophical dialogues written in Italy during the fifteenth century, many of which were also printed in the North during the incunabula period, by such authors as Poggio, Valla, Alberti, Bartolomeo Sacchi (Platina), Maffeo Vegio, and Bartolomeo Facio. The form and content of these were inspired by Cicero and Seneca rather than Plato.[486]

But there were other kinds of dialogues which also served educational and pedagogical purposes and which were printed during the incunabula period. Cicero's *Tusculan disputations*, for example, was printed in at least fourteen editions before 1500. This work is a consolation dialogue, something like an ancient "self-help" exercise, a genre dating back to the fifth century B.C. Its purpose is to achieve and maintain self-control and tranquility of mind by appealing to divine providence and a rational universe during a time of adversity, sorrow, and grief; the mimetic form thus crosses the intellectual-emotional or philosophical-poetical divide for psychological benefit. Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* ensured the survival of the genre by infusing with a Christian significance and by expanding the boundaries of its form to include poetry interspersed with prose. Boethius' *Consolation* was one of the most frequently printed texts of

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[486]A collection called *Ten Dialogues by various authors* (printed in Cologne, 1473) includes: Pseudo-Isidorus, *De spirituali consolatione*; Pseudo-Jerome, *De consolatione infirmorum*; Bartolomeo Facio, *De summo bono et vitae felicitate*, Seneca, *De remediis fortuitorum*; Lorenzo Valla, *De libero arbitrio*; Maffeo Vegio, *De veritate, etc.*, *De felicitate et miseria*; Poggio Bracciolini, *De avaritia, De nobilitate, De casu rei publicae*. Hain 6107.

the Renaissance in Latin. It was translated into several vernacular languages and imitated frequently, for example in Jean Gerson's *Consolation of Theology* and in François le Roy's *Dialogue of consolation between the soul and reason*. The "remedies" tradition in the Italian dialogues from Petrarch through the fifteenth century hearkens to this consolation genre.[487]

Other dialogues published in the late fifteenth century are clearly the products of a continuous medieval tradition, tapping into the "inexhaustible market" for devotional literature.[488] Examples include the dialogues of Catherine of Siena, Caesarius of Heisterbach's *On Visions and Miracles*, Henry Seuse's (Suso's) *Little Book of Wisdom*, Dionysius the Carthusian's *Mirror or Dialogue On the Conversion of Sinners*, Guillaume Alexis' *Dialogue of the Crucifix and the Pilgrims*, and Matteo Bosso's *On the True and Heathful Joys of the Soul*. These contain a quasi-allegorical meditation on the human soul as it speaks with God or Christ. Some humanists also experimented with the dialogue as a form of instruction, such as Theodosius Gresemundus' *On the Defense of the Seven Liberal Arts*, William of Paris' *On the Seven Sacraments*, Hegius' *On the Art and the Artlessness of Grammar, Logic, and Rhetoric*, Johann Heynlin's, *On Punctuation*, and – in strikingly new application – Lefèvre wrote dialogues as an introduction to Aristotle's *Physics* (1495). Giovanni Pontano, in his *Dialogues* (1491), wrote a satirical account of his education in grammar at the court of Alfonso of Aragon. The pseudo-Petrarchan *On True Wisdom* found its way into print because it served some of the same functions as other dialogues – it was in part theological and didactic, and in part devotional and psychologically consoling.[489]

While numerous studies have called attention to the Italian revival of the dialogue genre, resulting primarily from the imitation of Cicero, a survey of those printed in the later fifteenth

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[487]See Tarrête 133–52.
[488]Armstrong 166.
[489]François Pérènnes catalogues dozens of theological and devotional dialogues published in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. For the individual titles above, see also GW and ITSC.

century, particularly North of the Alps, demonstrates continuity as well as change, the imitation of the ancients swimming in the same stream alongside dialogues which a re representative of a medieval education and a devout popular culture. Cusa's Idiota dialogues are unusual for the way they combine medieval spirituality with scholastic and Platonic dialectic; they are experimental forms when compared to those of the Italian humanists. On the one hand, he expresses the speculative-contemplative issues of the Middle Ages in the familiar rhetorical form of personification allegory, while on the other hand, his dialectical method incorporates a creative use of symbolism, metaphor, and irony. This complex amalgamation of content, methods, styles crosses over disciplinary boundaries in a new way, reflecting the Petrarchan persona and Cusa's own encounter with Platonic texts.

Nevertheless, if we seek to locate a point of transition from the learned ignorance of Petrarch and Cusa to the moriasophia of Erasmus, a transition of emphasis rather than kind, we must ask where this transition occurred, why, and in what way classicism and tradition were impacted by a definitive surge of interest in the theme of folly and wisdom juxtaposed. The answer involves the attitude toward wit and humor in the Renaissance and the insight, on the part of many humanists of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, that the games of verbal and referential dexterity which we associate with wit (the human ingenuity which causes humor) and humor (that which is laughable) are more than mere entertainments of leisure and diversion and can also be used to "spice" a serious discourse, to confound opponents in argument, and to manipulate the responses of an audience in ways distinct from the customary exhortations and reasoned persuasions. Not since ancient times had wit and humor been taken so seriously. Humanists found that, if applied in concert with a range of genres and approaches, comic modes of writing might become creative and powerful agents of the moral and institutional reformation, perhaps as pow-

erful as the invention of printing but also relying greatly upon it, impacting the dispositions and attitudes of educated and uneducated alike.

The reforming potential of wit and humor is perennial and does not necessarily take one or several particular forms, yet there is a common assumption in the Renaissance that the literary devices of comic speech and action not only induce laughter but serve some other affirmative or constructive end. This assumption reflects the same didactic approach to art and interpretation that began in antiquity was continued throughout the Middles Ages and the Renaissance, particularly in the schools. The plays of Terence, for example, expurgated of objectionable content, provided additional incentive for young boys to learn their Latin vocabulary and grammar. But creative composition in various genres and styles was limited in range and scope. The extent to which feast and festival foolery reinforced the established social and moral order is debateable, and the comic interludes of biblical dramas and miracle plays appears more of a diversion than instruction or an incentive to thought. Even that satirical literature which is most engaged with social and moral critique, such as Nigel Wireker's *Mirror of Fools,* Jean Hauteville's *Arch-Mourner,* Alain de Lille's *On Nature's Complaint,* and John Lydgate's, *Order of Fools,* is occasional and expresses mainly the concerns of the medieval clerical culture in which its authors lived.

9.3 Lucian's Cynic Irony

Much has been written about the role of Lucian in the development of a satirical mode in the Renaissance. David Marsh, in *Lucian and the Latins* demonstrates the enthusiasm and esteem for Lucian among translators throughout the fifteenth century, ever since Chrysoloras arrived in 1397 with a large codex of most of Lucian's works. Many of the reasons given for the

efficacy of Lucian are the same as those given by Italian humorists and authors of erotica. To study Lucian is to become familiar with the living language of his own time, the written as well as the spoken, the elite as well as the ordinary, the grammatical as well as the colloquial.[490] Lucian was an inventive and creative writer, colorful, attractive, and therefore useful for instruction. His works were also an index to the Greek culture, interacting with persons and scenarios from Greek history, literature, and mythology. These outstanding benefits made it easier to overlook Lucian's cruder moments and his scathing criticism of Homer, gods and religion. Translation of Lucian appears to have been a common exercise for Western students of Greek. Since the Bible received the greatest amount of attention from translators and aspiring translators, it was inevitable that Lucian would be used to elucidate Biblical texts. Several of the best known Italian Hellenists in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries published their translations of Lucian, including Guarino da Verona, Rinuccio da Castiglione, Giovanni Aurispa, Leon Battista Alberti, Lapo da Castiglionchio, Lilius Tifernas, Maffeo Vegio, Poggio, Giovanni Pontano, and Pandolfo Collenuccio.[491]

It has been pointed out frequently that Lucian wrote in the Menippean satirical tradition, defined by alternating prose and verse, with dialogues figuring prominently. Recent studies of satire reveal, however, that no such distinction in generic form between the Menippean and the Roman existed in ancient times; even the term "Menippean satire" does not appear until 1581. The Romans frequently combined different verse styles, which may denote the "Menippean" aspect of Varro's satires. Quintilian, on the other hand, claims the Roman model is a native genre

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[490]To the West, Lucian contributed (according to Marsh) "hybrids of satirical narrative and comedic dialogue that gave humanists a greater freedom of invention in Latin and vernacular prose." Marsh, *Lucian and the Latins: Humor and Humanism in the Early Renaissance* 11.

[491]Marsh, *Lucian and the Latins: Humor and Humanism in the Early Renaissance* 13.

– "a certain satire is all ours" (*satira quidem tota nostra est*).[492] Neither did fifteenth-century humanist imitators praise Lucian for his Menippean style. This is significant for the simple reason that humanists drew on the Roman satires as well as Lucian. Without a clear knowledge of both ancient languages, how else could they translate Lucian into Latin?[493]

Lucian offered several attractive features for humanist adaptation. Lucian's works are less vitriolic and obscene than Roman satire in general and therefore less matter for the Christian moralist to object to. More importantly, he was regarded as an outstanding model of Greek eloquence, in all its variety of prose, dialogue, verse, and idiom. He was known as a rhetorician in his own time, and several of his rhetorical works also survived. They, too, were studied and translated by humanists, such as *The Fly* and *The Parasite*, paradoxical encomia known to Erasmus. Humanists would have recognized in Lucian's dialogue writing the standard rhetorical exercises of *ethopoeia*, *eidolopoeia*, and *prosopopoeia*, speeches which impersonate historical, deceased, and imaginary figures.[494] In addition, Lucian's handling of philosophers and philosophical schools was so familiar and adept that his humanist readers considered the author a philosopher as well. The perception of Lucian as a rhetorician-philosopher would have echoed the humanists' own educational and disciplinary claims to philosophical competence, affirming their own critique of scholastic logic and metaphysics. Thirdly, Lucian's fantastical voyages and supernatural realms were ingenious devices for Homeric and mythological parody, in such works as *True History*, *Voyage to the Underworld*, *Dialogue of the Dead*, *Dialogue of the Gods*, and *Icaro-Menippus*.

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[492]Quintilian 10.1.95; Relihan.
[493]For recent studies in the satirical tradition and the cultural context of Lucian's works, see *The Cynics*; Quintero; Blanchard; Weinbrot.
[494]Newman 15.

More than other ancient or medieval satirists, Lucian reminds us of the connection between the traditional satire and the Pauline boaster or idiota. He represents himself as an outsider, unaffiliated with any particular school and therefore positioned to take on the establishment as a confident, whistle-blowing critic. His air of defiance (or, for Christians, "righteous zeal") is paralleled in Paul's sarcastic references to the "super-duper apostles," and in Petrarch's more sarcastic moments. Lucian's authorial persona comes even closer to Paul's and Petrarch's, when the satirist "observer" of corrupt behavior becomes a *dramatis persona*, entering the central conflicts of his fictional world. As a performer, the persona demonstrates his ability to triumph over others in the battle of wit. In the *Fisherman*, for example, the persona (who calls himself "Free-speech" or *parrhesia*) is accused of slander and forced to defend himself against the most illustrious philosophers of Greek tradition in a mock-trial, presided over by the figure of Philosophy. Proving that the founders of the philosophical schools and philosophy itself have been given a bad name by the lot of hypocritical adherents, the author's "free speech" is acquitted in what amounts to a court of public opinion.[495]

In brief, some of Lucian's techniques and style are grafted onto the learned ignorance tradition, while some are not. While Lucian is a master of *serio ludere*, his ironic pretense departs from the typical self-deprecation; he does not whine about his poverty as the Roman satirists, nor his lack of poetic ability as Martianus Capella, nor does he profess ignorance as Socrates. Rather, he takes the opposite extreme, the haughty Cynic's approach, portraying himself as a fearless truth-teller. Thus, instead of professing to know nothing, he speaks as if he knows everything, including the realms of heaven and of the underworld. Lucian's penchant for the absurd is in fact comes out of his pretense of truth-telling, since the more fantastical his circumstances, the more ironic is his insistence on literal truth.

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[495]Lucian of Samosata 334–63.

It is important to pause here to note how Lucian's dominant mode of irony compares to that of learned ignorance. As Cicero points out, the *eiron* engages in both *simulatio* ("likeness" or "pretense") and *dissimulatio* ("false likeness" or "false pretense"). While the *simulatio* represents the "put-on" or appearance, and the *dissimulatio* stands for the act of concealing through deception, *serio ludere* (*spoudogelion* in Greek) is more than the concealment of humor under the façade of the serious. It is also defined by the intention and the context of ironic humor. For Cicero, the weakening of an opponent's argument and credibility through irony implies a strengthening and affirming of one's own. Socrates, Cicero's admired model, "dissembles" his doctrine of the forms and participation, Paul his doctrine of authority and self-sacrifice (and his standing in the community), and Petrarch, the priority of moral virtue and spiritual wisdom. In each case, there is content to the knowledge or wisdom concealed under the appearance of ignorance and folly.

But in Lucian's case, what is behind the emphatic truth-teller of fables? The Cynic parody of moral hypocrisy necessarily implies a positive moral doctrine, a doctrine of moral virtues handed down from Plato to his student Antisthenes, and from Antisthenes to Diogenes and Menippus. Yet this doctrine, being nowhere stated, must be presumed, recalled, and "reconstructed" by the audience. In other words, Lucian asks to be read like a Dionysian *via negativa*, where the literal sense of the text – distorted exaggerations, absurd conversations, and performative protests – points elsewhere, to an "other," higher, spiritual truth. As in the Platonist theory of allegory or hermeneutical paradoxy, the more "difficult" a particular passage is, the more likely it deserves a spiritual interpretation. This does not mean that Lucian was writing allegorically but that the double-truth of Lucianic irony is build upon certain cultural expectations in reading. His *dissimulatio*, or "lying," or fablistic truth-telling is intended as an emphatic indicator of its

non-material, inexpressible, and ineffable "opposite," which is moral truth. For this reason, it is interesting to compare Lucian's persona with Martianus', whose irony is part and parcel of an explicitly Platonist allegory. Thus Lucian's "jesting in earnest" is his mode of humor, but the more profound sense of paradoxy comes from the *eiron*'s double-truth of literalism and anti-literalism or discordant symbolism.

While Lucian's creativity, parodic humor, and Cynic *parrhesia* contribute a great deal to the fashioning of an author-*eiron* in Renaissance satire, his performative persona moves the idea of learned ignorance further in the direction of Pauline moriasophia, if only a little. His Cynic's disdain for social class, custom, and convention are registered in his characteristic mockery of the revered cultural tradition and its role models. Yet his satiric leveling and abandonment of norms does no more than the Roman satirists to elevate the low culture and its humor. Rather, Lucian's display of wit is still "high," illustrating the principle kinds of humor outlined by Cicero – witty rebuttal, subversion of expectations, ironic simulation/dissimulation – but replacing a Roman elitism of social standing with a moral elitism. This elite class is not defined by any one school, since the Cynic author stands alone in his battle against corrupt groups or factions.

Lucian's persona does not "play the fool," that is, he does not direct the laughter at his own image. We do not find the qualities of folly in the witty persona, no self-deprecation of an ignorant, boasting, or deprived antagonist. Nor do we find wisdom in the foolish philosophers and heroes of old. The exalted are laid low, but lowly are not exalted. This distinction, one which separates Lucianic satire from the Pauline tradition, is made quite clear in Lucian's portrayal of Menippus and the Cynics. Menippus is to Lucian what Socrates is to Plato, his true hero. Menippus, like the authorial persona of *True History*, is a traveler to lands above and below, where he surveys a humanity stripped of its wealth and power, revealing such conditions as

would defy the appearances of things here on earth. But while Menippus is routinely involved in humorous deprecations – for example, he judges King Nireus (Homer's "most beautiful man") no more beautiful than the deformed fool Thersites in one of the *Dialogues of the Dead* (maintaining they are equal in death) – Menippus himself is never the object or victim of laughter.[496] The Cynics, on the other hand, as a school are not only treated as inept as the other philosophical sects but blatantly farcical. In overt allusions to comic mimes, Lucian has the Diogenes of the *Fisherman* threaten to club the authorial persona with his stick. The allusion is repeated a little later, when Lucian's persona lures philosophers to a logic competition with the promise of gold and the poorly behaved Cynics are told by Philosophy: "stop shoving and whacking each other with those sticks!"[497] Thus if the Apostle Paul self-consciously evokes the comic image of the bald, beggarly Menippus-type of the theater, Lucian dissociates the moral, hard-lining philosopher from the stock character.

The humor and wit of Lucian, then, is still the product of an elite class, explains why ancient satire is not the best form or context for Pauline moriasophia and the idiota's learned ignorance. Ancient satire lacks that theological dimension which levels social and economic class not only in some projected fantasy world but in the here and now of peasants and princes. Faith in a salvific plan and hope in divine restitution release the Christian from the satirist's scorn, while humility and self-sacrificial love elevate the common person rather than education, intellectualism, and enculturation.

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The learned-ignorance of the idiota finds its Pauline roots once again when it comes in contact with the Fool of popular culture. Although fool-types are ancient and pan-cultural, the

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[496]"Nireus, the most beautiful man who came beneath Ilion" Homer, *The Illiad, with an English Translation* 2.671.
[497]Lucian of Samosata 356.

post-classical fools already owe some of their notoriety to Paul, whose "folly for Christ's sake" provided a justification for eccentric behavior, while the doctrine of charity dictated that communities embrace the social outcast and disabled – "the least" of Christ's brethren. While the absence of sufficient data makes it difficult to study and categorize the many tricksters, charlatans, and entertainers of the countryside, there is a distinct and documentable increase in the number of court fools during the Middle Ages. This increase is in part explained by the stabilization of Europe, the expansion of population, the increase of wealth, and the multiplication of courts and large estates. But the reasons are not all certain, and it would be worth investigating if the tolerance of fool-types in monasteries was in any way a precedent for the courtly culture.

Popular fools – that is, those who "performed" for an audience as opposed to the mentally deficient – developed their techniques of humor and their clever gimmicks or "shtick" in towns or countrysides. But as soon as they were welcomed in the courts, they had to compete with other court entertainers (the story-tellers, acrobats, singers, poets, et al.), and meet the expectations of their employers. In other words, licensed fools had to hone their skills in order to please their audiences and fulfill their professional purpose of eliciting laughter. They therefore had to learn the language and customs of the courts and the kind of humor and wit appreciated by the nobility. "Sparring" with royalty and nobility, playing on their expectations, and facetious behavior – such as Cicero prescribed – became the fools' stock-in-trade. One might say they were professional "humorists" in this role.

On the other hand, the role of fools as the antithesis of royalty and nobility contributed to their allure. They brought to the court a kind of humor which was not permissible to the manners and conventions of the environment. Much as today, rural fools attracted attention and entertained crowds by virtue of their liminal, transgressive, and anti-conventional behavior. At the

court, such "crazy" behavior was a novelty. Fools were therefore permitted (and expected) to bring a controlled amount of their raw and rowdy behavior, indecency, farcical slap-stick, bombastic role-play, and braggadocio into the world of rigid protocol, refinement, and propriety.

Unlike any other figure of European culture, the Fool captured the entire range of humor and wit known to humanity, the "high" as well as the "low," the verbal skills of a cross-examining orator with the buffoonish antics of the comic theater. He was a cultural anomaly as well as a symbol of cultural unification, a locus of social leveling where classes and idioms meet. In fact, the Fool, who was by definition a "non-expert" (*imperitus*) in any established trade, had to be a *de-facto* expert in matters of custom and language, since he was constantly setting learned and local traditions on a collision course. It is no surprise, then, that we find a correspondence between the ascendancy of "low" humor and that of the Fool in literature. There was already a narrative genre based on the reminiscences of court fools when Poggio composed his *Facetiae*. Poggio himself included numerous tales involving the fourteenth century fool for the Duke of Ferrara, Gonella (fl. ca. 1385), but similar amusing anecdotes about the parish priest Arlotto Mainardi (c. 1396-1484) and Domenico Barlacchi, a town crier of Florence during the time of Lorenzo de' Medici, were in circulation as well.[498]

A literature of historical recollection helped to transform the popular-culture figure of the Fool from folk legend to urban hero. Of the numerous court fools in Western Europe it was only the most famous who were credited with the abundance of fool-lore – such as Chicot and Triboulet in France, Till Eulenspiegel and Claus Narr in the Germany, Scogan in England – and in some cases, the same essential stories were told of fools who lived thousands of miles apart and in different countries. The anecdotal literature of fools became one of "deeds and sayings" on par with that of famous philosophers and chivalric knights, while the Fool himself became a

spokesperson for the proliferating literature of aphorisms, maxims, and proverbs, a "language of the middle" which might convey either clownish trivia or profound truths, depending often on semantics, application, and context. In the advent of print, many of these legends enjoyed a far wider circulation than ever intended. Indeed, Poggio, who died in 1459, never imagined that copies of his *Facetiae* would be sold by the thousands in the first years of printing, in cities like Milan, Venice, Paris, Nürnberg, Louvain; the very idea of mass promotion runs counter to his apologetic argument for an educated readership.[499]

As the Fool's reputation for humor and wit grew in the eyes of the public, the cultural type came closer in proximity to the learned-ignorant idiota and the Pauline moriasophic boaster. The gap between folly and wisdom had been closed, but still lacked the intellectualism of the philosopher, the authority of the saint, and the spiritual ideals of transcendence and divine union. The philosophical and theological emphasis in learned ignorance and moriasophia would be re-vivified not in Italy but in the North, where the humanist drive for moral reform was stronger, and where the movements of popular piety relied heavily on a steady stream of devotional literature.

9.4 Reform and Satire: Moriasophia and *The Ship of Fools*

While the figure of the medieval fool, a vulgar buffoon gifted with new powers of wit and occasional glimmers of eloquence, was ushered into the literary culture of Italy's fifteenth century as a hero of *facetiae,* a related fool-type was reborn in literature north of the Alps, in

[498]See Bowen 23; Amerighi. Tales of all three, Gonella, Barlacchi, and Arlotto are told in Mainardi.
[499]According to Stephen Campbell, no less than sixteen printed editions of Poggio's *Facetiae* appeared all over Europe between 1470 and 1500., where they inspired numerous imitations. Despite acrid debates concering priopriety and morality, the trend toward humor and obscentiy continued (272). Twenty-two editions of Antoinio Becadelli's *Hermaphroditus* appeared through the Aldine critical edition of 1517, and eight commentaries were written between 1475 and 1606. De' Bussi included the *Priapea* in the *editio princeps* of Virgil in 1469 and 1471,

Germany, France, The Netherlands, and England. Reflecting a general cultural trend toward entertaining literature, the medieval dialogue between King Solomon and Marcolf began to take off in print. Given the selection of literature printed in the first decades of incunabula (e.g., classical works, academic stextbooks, moral and devotional works) the popularity of the *Dialogus Salomonis et Marcophi* is somewhat unusual. It was printed in Germany in at least thirteen cities by eighteen printers in twenty-six editions between c. 1480 and 1500.[500] This output includes several editions in vernacular German after the late 1480s. The *Dialogue* was also well-represented in the Germanic Netherlands, with at least three printers in three cities publishing some nine editions, including the first known English translation by Gerard Leeu in Antwerp in 1492. Several manuscripts preserving the Solomon and Marcolf account in Old French provide evidence of the tradition in that country, and so it is not surprising to note three incunabula editions published in Paris. A number of editions were also handsomely illustrated with woodcuts.[501]

The Solomon-Marcolf debate and story seems to link two distinct literary traditions, a mock-debate and legendary exploits of a rustic trickster. The first half, in which Hebrew King and oriental fool exchange proverbs in a competitive manner, seems to parody the *disputatio*, the

where it remained in the fifteenth-century editions of Venice, Vicenza, Milan, Modena, Brescia, Florence, Parma, Paris, and Nuremberg.

[500]Cities, printers and dates of publication for the Dialogue of Solomon and Marcolf in the German lands include: Speier: Georgius de Spira, c.1480; Strassburg: Heinrich Knoblochtzer, c.1483; Matthias Hupfuff, 1499 (German) Speyer: Johann and Conrad Hist, c.1484; Magdeburg: Albrecht Ravenstein and Joachim Westphal, c. 1484 (Also recorded as Augsburg? Anton Sorg?, c.1488?); Cologne: Johann Koelhoff the Elder, c.1490 (Low German); Heinrich Quentell, 1489/92, 1497-99? post-1500?; Ludwig von Renchen? c.1480; Leipzig: Konrad Kachelofen, c.1488, post 1488?, c. 1490 (German), c. 1494; Stendal: Joachim Westval [Westphal], 1489 (Low German); Erfurt: Printer of Aristeas (cf. Hain 1655), c.1483; Ingolstadt: Johann Kachelofen, c. 1493 (German); Schleswig (Denmark): Stephanus Arndes, c. 1486; Augsburg: Christoph Schnaitter, c. 1493-94; Johann Schobsser, [14]90, 1496, 1498 (German); Nuremberg: Marx Ayrer, before 1487?, 1487 (both German); Ambrosius Huber, about 1500 (German); Ulm: Johann Zainer the Younger, [14]96, [14]98 (both German); Deventer, Richard Paffraet 20 Nov. 1488, 5 Oct. 1490, 1496; von Breda: 1486, 1490-92, 1492-96; Antwerp: M. Gerard Leeu, 1488 (Latin), c.1492 (English); Mathias van der Goes, between 1486 and 1491; Antwerp: G[ovaert] B[ac], about 1505. GW, ISTC. Many incunabulae do not bear a date stamp and thus cannot be dated with precision.

[501]Editions in France include: Antoine Caillaut, 1490; Philippe Pigouchet, 1490; Félix Baligault, c.1496-1500. In Italy, two editions appeared in Venice in 1492 (Petrus de Quarengiis, Bergomensis?), and one c.1500 (Baptista de Tortis). GW.

predominant form of academic debate in the scholastic culture of the North. This dialectical aspect, as well as the Biblical setting, at once familiar and remote, would help to explain why Marcolf's often vulgar and obscene humor proliferated in a pious and austere environment. Might the *Dialogue* also have been considered a comical counterpart to the new, classical-inspired dialogues of the fifteenth century? One thing is certain: the popularity of the Solomon and Marcolf story witnesses to the persistence of fool types and fool legends in Northern culture well before the invention of printing and the ease with which old motifs could find new audiences. Stories which circulated about licensed or court-employed fools added to the appeal, but the literary characters could fascinate with a unique sensationalism. One might recall the distorted faces and vulgar imagery in the niches, capitals, and keystones of many a church and cathedral. With the absence of an apology for the *Dialogue*, it seems no one felt particularly scandalized by its "low" humor – a reminder that a degree of vulgarity and obscenity were accepted or at least tolerated in the religious context of the Middle Ages.

The *Dialogue of Solomon and Marcolf* is important because it preserves the clarity of moriasophic dialectic in the context of satire and *facetiae*. The diametrical opposition of learning and cleverness in character, language, and culture poses the problem of the relatedness of native ingenuity to conventional notions and expressions of wisdom. The scenario, however, shows no interaction with the Pauline tradition, since the "low" comic figure remains firmly fixed in its folk roots and does not undermine Solomon's authority with divine intuition or insight.

If Poggio's *Facetiae* and the *Dialogue of Solomon and Marcolf* are particularly well represented in the publication history of the North, both are overtaken with the publication of *The Ship of Fools* (*Narrenschiff*) which first appeared in 1494. While Poggio had committed himself

to rendering an Italian vernacular tradition in a Roman Latin idiom, Sebastian Brant and the German translators of the *Dialogue* headed in a new direction by appealing directly to a German vernacular audience. Brant portrays a distinct kind of folly in each of a series of character sketches for a total of one hundred and ten verse chapters. Among the fool-types he includes miserly fools, gluttonous fools, senile fools, wasteful fools, babbling fools, church-going fools, dancing fools, fools for fashion, fools negligent of their children, adulterous fools, and calculating fools who want to measure the circumference of the earth to find the antipodes. Brant's work is written in the same jocular, satirical spirit as Poggio's *Facetiae,* though he manages to violate decorum with greater caution and impunity. Like the authors and compilers of the *Dialogue*, Brant is careful to preserve the boundary between the folly of vice and the piety and learning of conventional wisdom.

Historical and literary criticism of the late nineteenth and earlier twentieth century describes Brant's work unenthusiastically as medieval and even humorless. His character sketches appear to many like old-fashioned personification allegory, thinly-cloaked. Allusions to a plot remain undeveloped, so that the Prologue's framing references to a ship or fleet of ships sailing for a Fool's land (*Narragonia*, or "*narr*" and "*aragonia*," suggesting the kingdom of Aragon) appear to be an afterthought rather than a theme which drives the narrative. Research also indicates that a "ship of fools" conceit was not an invention of Brant's but an offshoot of ideas circulating in Germany a generation or more before he wrote.[502]

Although Brant's *Ship of Fools* is frequently cited as the most popular literary precursor of Erasmus' *Moria*, several significant details can be easily overlooked. First, one must confront the fact that Brant's poem spread rapidly to Paris and to many of the same German regions

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[502]Edwin Zeydel offers the examples of Jodocus Gallus' *Monopolium*, a sermon by Adolf Spamer, and St. Ursula's Ship 11–14.

where the *Dialogue of Marcolf and Solomon* had flourished and continued to flourish. Only some editions of *Ship of Fools* were authorized, five originating at Basle between the years 1494–1509 and overseen through the press by Brant and one from Brant's native city of Strasburg in 1512. Yet within Brant's own lifetime (1494-1521), six unauthorized German editions appeared (in Reutlingen, Nürnberg, Strasburg, and Augsburg) in addition to the six authorized German editions. Zeydel, author of the most recent English translation, remarks that such a large number of books supplied all of Southern Germany liberally with copies (Brant 22). The first Latin translation and adaptation (*Stultifera navis*) was made by one of Brant's students, Jacob Locher (and written under Brant's supervision), and it went through eight printings, in Basle, Strasburg, Nürnberg, Augsburg, and Paris, becoming the foundation for three separate French translations, all published in Paris, between 1497 and 1499.[503] Meanwhile, Paris also witnessed the printing of an anonymous Flemish translation of Locher in 1500 and Josse Bade's *Navis stultifera*, a free adaptation in Latin early in 1501 (but written in or before 1498). From there the idea spread to England, with three vernacular translations of Jean Drouyn's French edition: by Alexander Barclay and Henry Watson, both in 1509, and by Wynkyn de Worde in 1510.

If Brant's composition is not particularly attractive from a literary-critical point of view, then why was it so popular? What exactly was its appeal? The answer is, in part, that Brant's *Ship of Fools* is in fact more innovative than is apparent from our contemporary perspective. For example, when Brant's work is compared with two significant predecessors, John Lydgate's *The Order of Fools* (fifteenth century) and Wireker's *Mirror of Fools*, we find considerable differences in presentation, purpose, and audience. In Lydgate's short poem, the description of fools is quite similar to the traditional personification of deadly sins. Folly, for Lydgate, is kept within

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[503]French editions include those by Rivière, Drouyn, and the Marnef brothers Brant 25–29. As with other literature of folly, Locher's Latin edition demonstrates the cultural trend of adapting low comic themes for an educated

the narrow confines of wisdom's Scriptural anti-type, godless and impious. Brant, on the other hand, treats folly as an aspect of the human condition, a representation of people in their manifold weaknesses, their "foibles." While the purpose of Lydgate's description is to shun and condemn the general idea of serious sin, Brant's account invites self-analysis and self-incrimination. Wireker's work similarly distances the reader from the academic and intellectual folly of his principal figure, the ass Brunellus. While Wireker is far more inventive than Brant in devising a plot (i.e., Brunellus' desire for higher studies, his discontent with scholasticism, and his decision to fulfill all monastic objectives in an order of fools), his audience, like Lydgate's, is the learned clerical culture of their time. Brant instead draws portraits of everyday life in his sketches thereby extending the *speculum* motif to lay society.

Refashioning the genres of a clerical culture for new lay audiences is a fundamental aspect of humanism in the North, an aspect which describes à Kempis *Imitation of Christ*, Jordanus' Idiota dialogues, *On True Wisdom*, and Erasmus' *Enchiridion* as well as Brant's *Ship of Fools*. But the multi-faceted fool figure of popular lay culture, known to all in court, town, or village, puts an entirely new face on moral reform. There is a subtle irony in softening the blow of moral reprehension with a symbol of humor and wit, the suggestive levity of the figure evoking a smile over and against the severity of vicious behavior. The fool gives *speculum* writers like Brant the advantage of visualization without being confined by classification. The very idea that any single, real, flesh-and-blood figure from popular culture can represent such an enormous variety of behaviors and social roles attests to the performative function of fools and the malleability of a folly concept in the Middle Ages. The emphasis on the language, activities, and manners of fools replaces older, allegorical personifications, dependent on the static conventions of iconography, with a dynamic, adaptable model. The identity of a fool is like that of the actor,

audience.

with a Protean ability to morph into characters in a continual parody of everyday life. Like the pervasive quality of ignorance in Petrarch, Brant's folly, in all its manifestations, transforms the behavior of the historical fool into a universal human attribute.

While the poem's narrative does not allow for wit of the Ciceronian kind, is it easy to overlook the originality of Brant's satirical method, which instructs by absurd and exaggerated contrast instead of imitable moral example. The force and humor of this approach cannot be realized outside the context of the plentiful *facetus* literature of moral instruction, courtesy, and etiquette. But Brant, reflecting the didactic and pietistic trends of the North, needs no *lasciva pagina, vita proba* rationale, since his images of vice are held at a safe, fictive distance, giving us the clarity of the Roman satirist and the Cynic's moral perspective without an author's invective scorn casting aspersions on historical persons.

The distinction is significant, since it is through a weakness in or collapse of moral and aesthetic distance between author and fool that Brant invites his audience to identify with the folly-sketches. In what must be regarded as a reader's key, Brant, at the very beginning, portrays himself as the Book-fool (*Bücher-narr*), one who reads voluminously without advancing in wisdom. While the image itself is not profound, the author-as-fool encourages the reader to participate in the satirist's self-deprecation with insight and self-incriminating empathy. This aspect distinguishes Christian satire from that of the ancients, since the latter is written to elicit humility. Such complicity in folly may be also compared with Petrarch's ignorance, where a universal weakness of human nature is transformed into a moral and theological precondition for self-knowledge and grace.

The number of adaptations and imitations of a ship of fools motif by humanists illustrates for us changing attitudes towards education, at a time when methods of instruction begin to wel-

come humor and empathy as a new instruments of moral reformation. Moralizing about the activities of fools affords Brant the opportunity for humanist instruction, with the liberal citation of ancient authors in conjunction with the Scriptures. His chief Latin authors are Ovid, Vergil (the pseudo-Vergilian works), Servius, Juvenal, Seneca, Catullus, Cicero, Persius, and Boethius. He also refers to the Greek authors Plutarch, Xenophon, and Homer (Brant 16). For his main Scriptural resources, Brant relies most on Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, the same wisdom literature which play a key role in the *Dialogue of Solomon and Marcolf*. But while the latter illustrates explicitly the dialectic of cleverness against conventional learning, the consistently negative authorial perspective of Brant relies on an antithesis, dialectical and generic, between folly and wisdom. It is incumbent upon a reader of the *Ship* poems to conduct an internal dialectic between the "how not to" and the "how to," drawing the necessary comparisons and weighing the two sides, even as he or she acknowledges some of the very weaknesses which fools represent.

A psychologically complex response of attraction-and-repulsion demonstrates the Renaissance emphasis on responsible interpretation, but it is also part and parcel of the *speculum* genre. The ambiguity of objective and subjective genitive in Cusa's *On the Vision of God* and Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* is native to the *speculum* genre as a whole, where any given viewer achieves greater self-knowledge as perceiving subject as well as object perceived. In a *speculum principis*, for example, a prince might behold in the "mirror" of the book an "other" prince or a hypothetical ideal in several attributes, as well as a princely "self," that is, an internal reality which approximates the ideal in greater and lesser degrees. In the counter-type of the *speculum stultorum*, the "mirror" of the book is held up to a reader to disclose one's own folly as well as that of the world.

The *Ship of Fools*, then, owes its great success to Brant's adaptation of the fool motif to the purpose of moral reform in a culture eager for innovative approaches. Brant may well have underestimated the appeal, since he apparently did not intend a Latin version from the beginning, but put his own efforts into making an unusually attractive vernacular text. This work was the result of a partnership with a former student, Johann Bergmann von Ople, a man of means who took up the trade of printing to promote the humanist cause. Brant's *Ship of Fools*, printed in 1494, was unique, for it was a masterpiece of the art of bookmaking, complete with woodcut illustrations and beautifully bound (Brant 5). The Latin text of Locher which followed in 1497 found an entirely different audience in the educated, and it is this version which circulated internationally. Locher, with Brant's consent, had no compunction about altering the text to suit his own creative ambitions.

The fool motif is greatly enhanced in the one-hundred and fourteen woodcuts, probably made for the original by a youthful Albrecht Dürer. The tone for each chapter is set by the image at the head, with one or more motley-clad fools appearing as an emblem for the behavior described. The woodcuts were just as successful as Brant's poem, reproduced in all of the German late fifteenth and early sixteenth editions and in Locher's Latin version.[504] The fool figure already enjoyed a long life in art but the kind of circulation afforded by the printed book industry was something new. Dürer's woodcuts may have furnished some readers with their first visual encounter of fool imagery – and not only readers, since Brant's is the sort of poem we can imagine being read aloud to non-literate audiences, the visual images readily displayed to all. The woodcuts were significant precursors of Holbein's sketches in the Froben 1515 edition of the *Moria* and may have inspired them to some extent.

If the accomplishments of Brant have been underestimated, so have the implications of a Northern European "ship of fools" phenomenon. The various adaptations of Brant's text in Latin, French, Flemish, and English demonstrate that the invention or idea far exceeded Brant's own vision. One of the most significant offshoots of the ship convention for Erasmus studies, too often neglected, is that of his countryman Josse Bade (Badius Ascensius), a humanist scholar and member of the Brothers of the Common Life from Asch (near Ghent), who studied classical Latin and Greek in Italy before establishing himself as one of the foremost scholar-printers in Europe He was an editor, author, and preface-writer like Brant but also a school teacher and textual commentator. When Bade travelled to Paris from Lyons in 1497 as an agent for the printer Jean Treschel, he met the Marnef brothers, who at that time were publishing Pierre Rivière's French translation of Locher's Latin edition. Bade must have been deeply impressed by the work, since he began to design or write a companion piece for it, sending this work to the Marnefs for publication when he finished it in September of 1498. Bade's supplement, which rivaled Locher's version in length, added six ships of female fools to Brant's all-male cast and was written in French so that a female audience might share in the delightful instruction. Though Bade's supplement has been disparaged by modern critics as inferior and misogynistic, such an assessment overlooks completely the book's favorable reception. When Bade decided to translate his work into Latin, it was published not only by the Marnefs in 1501 but by Wimpfeling in Strasburg (1502) and by Prüss in Basel (1502). Not to leave it there, Bade wrote his own adaptation of Brant's *Ship* (inverting Locher's title of *Stultifera navis,* he called it *Navis stultifera*), publishing this together with his supplement in Paris in 1505. Bade's "double" version was then reprinted five times in Basel between 1506 and 1515. The very absence of rancor or competition between

[504]In a recent biography of Dürer, David Hotchkiss Price confirms this point: "So important were his woodcuts to the phenomenal success of this book that, in all fairness, *Ship of Fools* should be designated a work by Brant and

Brant and Bade or between the printers of their "ship-of-fools" poems in Basel during this period is a strong indication that these writers saw themselves as engaged in a collaborative humanist enterprise. Bade's editions also made use of the Dürer woodcuts.[505]

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The wide-spread dissemination of the Solomon-Marcolf dialogue and a ship of fools literature in its various manifestations and forms indicates a sea-change in the republic of letters, if not in the popular culture at large. For humanists, who were continuing to gain ground in the cultural battle over the utility of ancient literature, the fool motif represented another useful instructional method by which the individual and society might be reformed. Because of the resurgence of interest in wit and humor, Brant's idea took flight quickly and continued to hold the public's attention for decades to come. The reason for Brant's successful proliferation of folly is simple: with his finger on the pulse of a new book culture, the *Ship of Fools* tapped into an ubiquitous European sensation in order to obtain the widest audience possible.

With this audience in mind, Brant fashioned the theme of wisdom and folly – and wisdom through folly – with exceptional moral clarity. While the reader is asked to look deeply into the *speculum* of the book and the self and to engage in the exercise of identity and non-identity, the image of the fool is always that of wisdom's anti-type. At no point does a given ship-of-fools portrait tempt the reader with subversion of the narrative or the irony of *dissimulatio*. Though safely hued in black and white, this falling back on the antithetical model of wisdom and folly has significant consequences. It relies primarily on the moral view of the Old Testament and on medieval depictions of devil-fools while ignoring completely the anomalies of divinely-sanctioned deception as well as the irony and paradoxy of the Pauline tradition. Moreover,

Dürer 13.

[505]Isaac Gewirtz has written a thorough study of Badius' career.

Brant's sketches distort grossly the actual role of the fool in European history and strip the type of all its moral and cultural complexity. Whether located in court, city, or town, licensed or free-lancer, or as a performer in festival, drama, and legend, the fool is not a figure of malice, vice, or unadulterated concupiscence but a dynamic and multi-faceted catalyst of wit, humor, and circumstance. The appeal of the moral lesson in the ship-of-fool literature depends on the pleasure, charm, and insight suggested by the historical and cultural type. How, then, can one condemn wholesale the very force which attracts and instigates the reader to virtue?

The extreme constraints placed on the fool and on the concept of folly is the price Brant pays for moral clarity, so that he might reach a large audience of educated and non-educated alike without the scandal of obscenity, vulgarity, and ambiguity. Indeed the ship-of-fools literature is so clear and so pious that the portrayal of folly requires no apologetic from precedent, nature, or language (eloquence). The moral perspective of the author and the presumption of a responsible reader justifies completely the surfeit of negative (i.e., anti-type) imagery. If there were any objections to the "ship" poems at all, it was not significant enough to stand out in the historical record.

On the other hand, the absence of controversy signals the mutilation of a tradition that is inherently controversial. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Brant's frequent use of sayings, proverbs and maxims – the language of alter-wisdom and the "middle" ground of morality and intellect – for the sole purpose of denoucing the anti-type. Imagine, if you will, the debate between Solomon and Marcolf, the latter reduced to silence though visually present. Thus in Brant there are no displays of wit in clever retorts, no ambiguity, and no equivocation of terms, which hone the humanist's gift for language and contribute to eloquence. The fool's license, his characteristic *parrhesia*, is taken away. Nothing may be learned from the fool's tricks and plot ma-

nipulations, his daring and his extravagance. If there is any insight to be gained, it is *despite* the fool rather than *on account* of him, a negation without imitation. Meanwhile, the satirist's characteristic irony is reduced to a faint shadow, the reader-identification expectations. We might describe this method as simulation without dissimulation. Yet without dissimulation, the jest in the earnest, there can be no sublimation of folly, no wisdom of the idiota, no folly of God and no learned ignorance.

If we want to understand better the trajectory of moriasophia during the Renaissance and the achievement of Erasmus, it is important to identify these accomplishments and lacunae in Brant's *Ship of Fools* and in the broader ship-of-fools literature. Taking advantage of the new trend in a literature of humor and a new market for books, Brant and others make the figure of the fool more visible than ever before, attracting readers to a dynamic of wisdom and folly, and to the idea of wisdom-through-folly. His own image in the text mirrors the intended hermeneutic of identity and non-identity. Yet, with his purpose is firmly fixed on moral reform for a large audience, he abandons the greater part of the very tradition he evokes – Pauline moriasophia and the idiota – and with it, the dialectical paradoxy of negation and affirmation, the hermeneutical paradoxy of concealment and disclosure, and the theological-spiritual "leap" into a transcendent *coincidentia*, whether of ignorance and learning or of folly and wisdom.

Chapter 10

Erasmian Moriasophia as a Poetics of Apophasis

In this final chapter, we turn our focus to the dialectic of folly and wisdom in Erasmus' *Moria*. An examination of the historical context and a brief discussion of modern criticism demonstrate the difficulty of interpreting the work's three principle parts and the relationship between them. The case is then made for an evaluation of the *Moria* in the context of the moriasophic tradition, in its dialectical and rhetorical aspects. The themes of Pauline folly, Socratic ignorance, idiotic piety, and Lucianic satire are represented, but the method of the work and its transitions from one kind of folly to another are informed by Erasmus' dialectical theology. Folly and wisdom are the operative principles of this theology, expounded systematically in the *Enchiridion of the Christian Soldier*. In the *Moria*, Erasmus not only inverts the moral and metaphysical hierarchy of the *Enchiridion* but he also uses negative images of folly as a means of ironically elevating the discourse. In the end, we have an apophatic method in a poetic form, as ignorance and malice convert into likenesses of holy idiocy and manic rapture.

10.1 The Idea of the *Moria* in the Sixteenth Century

Many have speculated on Erasmus' idea for an encomium of folly, whether some impression effervesced in the mind of the humanist as he crossed the Alps on horseback (a convention which seems as artificial as Petrarch's "fluctuating" composition on the Po, *oratio fluctuat*), or whether we choose to follow the more credible story related by Erasmus in his 1515 letter to Martin van Dorp: that the *Moria* was composed for his own amusement at Thomas More's

home, during several days of suffering from kidney pain.[506] Was the idea inspired by the farcical dramas of the *sociétés joyeuses* or by the *fêtes des fous*, which Erasmus must have experienced as a university student and tutor in Paris? To what might Erasmus have been exposed in Italy, as a tutor in Bologna or during his sojourns to Florence, Padua, Ferrara, Siena, Rome, and Naples, or during the several months he stayed with Aldus in Venice, collecting more matter for his *Adagiorum Chiliades* and perfecting his Greek? Was this complex work of literature indeed written "on the spur of the moment," or was it something more calculated? What kind of encouragement or direct contribution might there have been from Thomas More, the work's dedicatee, or from others frequenting the More household?[507]

So many questions about the historical and biographical circumstances of composition arise from the lack of epistolary evidence, atypical for Erasmus, during his Italian journey, from August 1506 through July 1509 (only six letters remain for the period of 1507-09), and continuing right through the so-called "lost years" of Erasmus – a twenty-two month lapse of correspondence during Erasmus' second English sojourn (Sowards).[508] The obscure situation of the *Moria*'s first printing adds to the mystery of the author's frame of mind. Presuming the *Moria* was written in 1509, why did Erasmus wait until the spring of 1511 to publish it? If friends in England instigated its printing, then why in Paris instead of London? Why did Erasmus give his manuscript to Giles Gourmont instead of Josse Bade, with whom Erasmus had already published Valla's New Testament *Annotations*, the *Adagiorum Collecteana* (the title of his first edition;

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[506]Erasmus mentions the circumstances a few times in his correspondence. See his Letter to Martin van Dorp 144. Also, see his "Reply to the Letter of Albert Pio" in Vol. 84, 58.

[507]Andreas Ammonio, who resided with Thomas More's household for sometime, was among Erasmus' closest friends in England. See Bietenholz and Deutscher 1.48–50.

[508]Richard Schoeck speculates that letters during this period may have been stolen or lost during Erasmus' travels Schoeck, R. J., *Erasmus* 86–94.

Adagiorum Chiliades after 1508), and *On the abundant style*?[509] Why did Erasmus dodge responsibility for this first printing, to the point of blaming its mistakes on the young scholar Richard Croke?[510] Why were the 1511 and 1512 editions of Mattias Schürer and Dirk Martens similarly lacking in the author's involvement and endorsement?[511] The scholarly speculation relies on statements made years later, beginning with the Letter to van Dorp, which was published together with the Froben edition, and again in his more extensive defenses of the *Moria* in the 1520s and 1530s.

In many respects, a paradoxical encomium on folly is not what a contemporary reader would have expected from the monastic poet, avid classicist, tutor of rhetoric, devotional writer, and doctor of theology, known internationally as the author of a learned collection of Latin and Greek sayings and a manual for lay spirituality. His lesser-known writings were also, for the most part, serious works: short poems and treatises, some of which were incorporated into the *Lucubratiunculae* of 1503 and the *Scattered Epigrams* of 1506, an epitome of Cicero's *On duties* in 1501, a *Panegyric* oration for the triumphal entry of Archduke Philip of Burgundy in 1504, and an edition of Valla's *Annotations* on the New Testament in 1505. Whatever flashes of irony and wit may have appeared in his early poems, his dialogues (*colloquia*) and letters prior to 1511 were still hidden from public view.[512] With the possible exception of Erasmus' translations of

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[509]Bade's editions of Erasmus' works would eventually number forty-three, with another forty-eight representing works edited or annotated by Erasmus. See the entry for Josse Bade by Geneviève Guilleminot in Bietenholz, et al. 1.79–81.

[510]In his 1523 *Catalogue of Works* (*Catalogus lucubrationum*) Erasmus appears to put the blame on Croke. See Erasmus, *The Erasmus Reader* 36.

[511]Giles Gourmont was the first to print in Paris Greek typeface Bietenholz, et al. 2.120–21.

[512]Erasmus began writing his dialogues, or *Colloquia*, while he was studying and teaching in Paris between 1495 and 1498. They were not published, however, until 1518.

Lucian, published in Josse Bade's edition of 1506, there was little sign that the Latin grammarian, stylist, educator, and Hellenist was about to blossom into a scourge of the establishment.[513]

Erasmus' literary catapult into a creative, ironical, and satirical mode of writing is not self-explanatory and should not be taken for granted. The entry of the *Moria* into learned circles of the early sixteenth century was far from triumphal, that is, contrary to the ship of fools and other folly literature, the *Moria* was floated surreptitiously by its author before he owned up to it. By the time Erasmus made his involvement known – in Josse Bade's edition of July, 1512 – the *Moria* already enjoyed a wide circulation. Although we have no explicit reason from Erasmus, it is not hard to imagine that one so ambitious for public recognition and a steady income would exercise caution. Despite the erudition of its rhetoric, its humorous and challenging irony, its myriad quotations and allusions, and its Hellenistic seasoning, there is a school-boyish, even silly quality to the work's premise. Declamations were a common exercise for students of the arts, who certainly must have been among the *Moria*'s most ardent admirers. Indeed one is tempted to believe Erasmus when he says he wrote it to relieve the discomfort of illness with a diversion.[514]

On the other hand, the author "doth protest too much" when he says that he regrets publishing or even writing it.[515] As scholars have pointed out, Erasmus was in Paris at the time of its first printing and he might have objected to the publication and perhaps intervened to stop it.[516] But the historical record suggests no such thing, neither in Paris, nor in Strassburg, nor in Antwerp. This kind of distancing from publication is unlike Erasmus, whose tendency it was to

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[513]Likewise his *Epigrammata*, a collection of poetry (using "epigram" in the wider sense) first published together with an edition of the *Adages* in 1507) were not imitations of Martial, quipping and humorous, but occasional, decorative, and devotional poems. On Erasmus and the epigram genre, see Hudson; Manley 409–30.
[514] "vt morbi molestiam hoc velut auocamento leuarem." Erasmus, "'Letter to Martin Dorp'" 2.131–32.
[515]Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly* 144; Erasmus, *CWE* Vol. 84, 58; Erasmus, *The Erasmus Reader* 34.
[516]Miller makes this important point in his introduction Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly* x.

assume editorial control. Perhaps Folly suggests Erasmus' own hesitations, when she considers passing over the praise of theologians in silence, "not touching the swamp of Camaria…For [the theologians] might rise up en masse and march in ranks against me with six hundred conclusions and force me to recant."[517]

As we have noted earlier, Folly was a sensitive subject on several fronts. Issues of decorum (which include vulgarity, obscenity, and any other content deemed inappropriate) and excesses in invective could easily put a writer at odds with theological and secular authorities, who set the moral standards and enforced them with secular and ecclesiastical authority. Erasmus' anticipation of a hostile reaction is one clear sign that he knew his *genus ridiculus*[518] had crossed a line between poking and provoking. Such humor carried social and political consequences.

And it did not take long for Erasmus' expectations to materialize. Beginning with the exchange of letters between Martin van Dorp, Erasmus, and Thomas More in 1514 and 1515, the *Moria* played an important role in the debates between humanists and traditionally-minded intellectuals. In a continuing war of letters between Erasmus and high-profile adversaries like Edward Lee, Alberto Pio, Jacobus Stunica (Diego Lopez Zúñiga), and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, the *Moria* was maligned as heretical, misleading, and a scandal to the faithful. Theologians and other clerics were stung by Folly's attack on their vocation and profession, in an account more disparaging and censorious than any of Folly's other disciples. They perceived its satirical portraiture as an undermining of their authority. Although Erasmus was not the only humanist to use genres of mockery, his outstanding reputation insured that Folly's defamation of establishment figures would reverberate in every corner of Western Europe.[519]

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[517]Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly* 87.
[518]Erasmus calls it this in his "Reply to Alberto Pio," Erasmus, *CWE* Vol. 84, 160.
[519]See Gilmore.

Then came the Lutheran campaign of the 1520s, which sent even larger shock waves throughout the theological establishment. Similarities between humanist reformers and protestant reformers confused matters further, leading many opponents of Erasmus to condemn him as a protestant sympathizer. Charges against the *Moria* escalated in this atmosphere and Erasmus was accused of impiety, a grave offense at the time. His identification of Christianity with folly, they argued, is a condemnation of the faith; he makes religion the butt of jokes, he abuses Scripture, and he aids the Lutheran cause against the Church. They asked Erasmus to retract the work. But Erasmus in turn defended Folly's criticism all the more, almost ignoring the conventions of his own jest. He attempted to refute each and every charge mentioned, pointing out over and over again his adversaries' tendency to draw hasty conclusions and to interpret maliciously instead of treating exactly what was written and intended.

Although the arguments put forward in the *Moria* controversy are of great historical interest today, they are of limited value for a modern interpretation of Erasmus' text. This is because the concerns of Erasmus' adversaries are peculiar to their professional and social role as guardians of Christian doctrine. The most serious attacks on the *Moria* were of a piece with attacks on Erasmus' *New Testament*, that is, his retranslation of the Greek text, as well as decades of humanist research in classical and biblical languages. By 1514, Erasmus' intentions were made known, and in 1516 the first of his editions appeared, followed by his annotations and commentaries. Erasmus' textual criticism threatened the authority of traditional theologians in the West, whose biblical theology was based on the Vulgate. They were largely unprepared for the rising onslaught of arguments resulting from a philological collation of manuscripts and a growing lexicon of classical and early Christian usage. Sensitivities were riding high, and the increasingly large audience for Folly's denigration of the clergy and religious as arrogant, con-

ceited, hypocritical, bloated, and money-hungry continued to throw salt in the same wounds. Thus the main impetus for doctrinal scrutiny of the *Moria* originated in the *New Testament* controversy and not the other way around. While Erasmus' *New Testament* chiseled away at scholastic theology, the *Moria* continued to undercut the scholastics' authoritative reputation.

Nevertheless, the *Moria* controversy provides some insight into the complexities of literary interpretation in Erasmus' own lifetime. The range of folly and its genres in Europe had expanded enormously during the fifteenth century, and contrary to the examples of paradoxical encomia cited in the *Moria*'s dedicatory letter, there was no literary precedent which combined the classical encomium with the declamation, satire, and personification allegory. While the satirical elements of the *Moria* made it a galvanizing text for humanists and scholastics, readers were also challenged to grasp its full intent and value as a composite whole, integrating its satire with its rhetoric, humor, and theology. This was no easy task. Cutting-edge theology and genres of mockery were rarely found in the same author. Even Valla, whose philological criticism, Latin style, and confrontational attitude Erasmus admired greatly, did not compose works in a comic genre.

The first and most obvious literary bone theologians picked with Erasmus concerned decorum. Brant and other authors of the ship of fools literature were careful to stay within the boundaries of Northern sensibilities, displaying a world "full" (*satur*) of vice in its abundance and variety, a *speculum stultorum* for every social class and occupation. For them, folly was a social leveling device. In its satirical aspect, the *Moria* must have appeared to many like an oratorical version of the ship of fools, paralleled in the "world as stage" convention. But Erasmus not only targeted the established class of intellectuals selectively, he pummeled theologians, monks, and other clerics much too hard. Not all fools, it seems, are equally foolish in the *Moria*.

Some are "greatly distinguished[...]those who among mortals have the appearance of wisdom."[520] While Erasmus responded to his critics that he kept within the acceptable limits – making no blanket statements, censoring no one by name, and allowing for exceptions – his argument is weakened by his discriminating invective.[521]

A second major problem for the critics of the *Moria* might be called a perceived lack of moral or didactic clarity. The ship of fools' literature was wholesome instruction for a popular audience because it adopted and illustrated the Scriptural theme of folly as wisdom's anti-type, where folly is a kind of moral and spiritual evil, and wisdom is the knowledge of God and his law. Though it was written for an educated audience, the *Moria* has no mediating authorial voice to distinguish the good from the bad, the wisdom from the folly. Instead we are confronted by the paradoxical title "The Praise of Folly" in two languages (*Moria Encomium id est Stultitia Laus*) and the filtering mask of a declamatory persona, indicated in the simple direction "Folly speaks" (*Stultitia loquitur*). The persona begins an oration with a charming appeal to the reader, in language at once alluringly familiar and rhetorically formal. Though she identifies herself with mountebanks, idle gallants, and those who roam about the marketplaces (*quas fori circulatoribus, scurris ac morionibus*), and though she suggests some kind of fool's outfit to match (*insolito cultu*), her diction, style, and command of resources convey an *ethos* of intelligibility, sincerity, and transparency, qualities which accomplish the aims of the classical *exordium* – i.e., to establish the speaker's credibility, to elicit the audience's good will, and to engage their emotions.[522] There is, of course, a contradiction, if not a paradox, in the idea of a credible Folly.

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[520]"verum insignium tantum[…]qui sapientiae speciem inter mortales tenent." Erasmus, *Moria* 188–89, 240.
[521]One can easily exaggerate the invective tone in Erasmus. Attacks against the clergy and vulgar language are staples of the genre of satire through the Middle Ages. See Kendrick 52–53.
[522]Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1.2.4, 2.1, 2.12–17; Calboli Montefusco 73–74.

Corresponding to the incredibile credibility of Folly's persona, and of greater moral consequence, is the rational irrationality of her enigmatic argument. The sum of the argument (purposefully scattered throughout the first part of the text) is that folly is the means to the greatest happiness for gods and mortals, via pleasure, which is the highest good. Every benefit which folly offers follows this pattern in one way or another, lending a theoretical consistency to Folly's rhetorical *sprezzatura*. Any educated reader of Erasmus' Christian milieu would immediately recognize the Aristotelian allusion, since Aristotle set the standard for subsequent ethical systems, including that of Epicurus.

At first the identification of Folly with Epicureanism would seem to confirm the connection between folly and vice. Epicureanism was roundly criticized throughout history, especially by the Stoics and by monastic and ascetic Christians. For Stoics, pleasure is irrelevant to the pursuit of virtue and to be ignored; like distress, it is an "excessive impulse…disobedient to reason."[523] Similarly, Christian theolog ians, who tended to identify Epicurus with the hedonistic tenets of the Cyreniac school (under Aristippus of Cyrene), condemned both the idea that indulgence in carnal pleasures is licit as well as the notion that pleasure is the greatest good.

Yet Folly's Epicureanism is not hedonistic in the technical sense that it treats pleasure as the only intrinsic good. Folly also demonstrates that a pleasure-principle underlies our closest relationships, our pursuit of great achievements, and our tranquility of mind. Examples such as these broaden the notion of pleasure so that it comes to represent various aspects of love, bravery, and peace. The instances Folly describes redefine the Epicurean ideal as something closer to its founder, who advocated such goods as knowledge, friendship, practical virtue, and moderation.[524] Even educated readers in Erasmus' day did not, by and large, know the distinctions be-

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[523]Arius Didymus (65A), in Baltzly.
[524]Bietenholz *Encounters with a Radical Erasmus* 113–14.

tween the philosophy of Epicurus (known through doxographical sources like Diogenes Laertes) and the reputation of Epicurus. So the idea of a semi-laudable principle of pleasure was probably a shock and also confusing for many of Erasmus' readers.

The manipulation of the pleasure-principle leads to logical conclusions about its counterpart, folly. If pleasure is at least partially good, and folly is defined as the pursuit of pleasure, then folly cannot be a vice. Like pleasure, folly in the *Moria* must be equivocal and ambiguous. That pleasure might be an equivocal and ambiguous concept was no startling idea for sixteenth-century Christians. Plato recognized that some pleasures were good and others not, while Aristotle states that, although some pleasures may not be worth choosing, all are good to some degree, and *eudaimonia* is itself a kind of pleasure.[525] Church Fathers and medieval thinkers similarly distinguished the good pleasures from the bad, showing skepticism towards sensual pleasures, while prefering the contemplative and dianoetic (reflecting Aristotle). Aquinas applies Aristotle's theory of pleasure to beatitude, going as far to say that "a certain pleasure of man may be said to be the greatest among human goods." Whether other pleasures are good or bad depend on the will.[526]

But what did Erasmus' readers think of an equivocal and ambiguous folly? The invasion of truth (or sometimes half-truth) upsets the antithesis of wisdom and folly, embracing stability and inconsistency, sense and nonsense, moral good and evil. This "game" of an equivocating folly was completely in accord with the literary tradition of moriasophia, but the theme and technique was not easily recognized by many in Erasmus' Northern audience, especially philosophers and theologians nursed on Aristotle and a centuries-old tradition of scholastic formulae and

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[525]Bietenholz 495a; Aristotle *Nich. Eth.* 7.11–14, 10.1–5.

[526]See Thomas Aquinas: "Accordingly, man's last end may be said to be either God Who is the Supreme Good simply; or the enjoyment of God, which implies a certain pleasure in the last end. And in this sense a certain pleasure of man may be said to be the greatest among human goods." II-I, q. 34, art. 3. See also Surtz.

commentaries. Martin van Dorp proved just how far one could miss the mark when he suggested that Erasmus compose an encomium of wisdom to offset that of folly.

The conventions of theoretical thought in philosophy and theology demand a fixed subject, while a sustained level of irony was thought hardly suitable for the moral education of the young. On the contrary, the greatest part of fool-culture and fool-lore belongs to genres of entertainment, where folly involves the manipulation of circumstances and a verbal wit; the fool's insights, on the other hand, are random, fleeting, and inconsistent. Only creative, dialectical-rhetorical thinkers like Plato, Dionysius, Eckhart, or Cusa bridged the gap between the literary-poetic and the systematic disciplines of philosophy and theology, but the attempt itself was as rare as the inspirational figures of Menippus, Socrates and Diogenes. It was far easier to regard folly as wisdom's anti-type, a state of mental deprivation or lack of judgment, or (as in the ship of fools literature) to turn the cultural type into a figure of vice related to the comic devils of medieval biblical and morality plays.[527]

As if an equivocal folly were not enough, the *Moria*'s sudden transition from a vice-figure of folly to a representation of holy folly would have been even more difficult for many in Erasmus' audience to digest. Theologians tended to draw sharp divisions, rationalizing away problematic instances of deception and wit. Thus in the Corinthian letters, a divided perspective was routinely acknowledged,[528] but commentators stripped Paul's language of its literary-rhetorical devices and figures, ignoring altogether his irony, sarcasm, and hyperbole. In effect, the biblical interpreters absolved Paul of his foolish behavior, his jesting. Aquinas, for example,

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[527]For example, Aquinas: "it is manifest that folly is opposed to wisdom as its contrary, while fatuity is opposed to it as a pure negation: since the fatuous man lacks the sense of judgment, while the fool has the sense, though dulled" II-II, q. 46, art. 1.

[528]Aquinas is undoubtedly thinking of St. Paul when he writes: "Just as there is an evil wisdom…called *worldly wisdom*, because it takes for the highest cause and last end some worldly good, so too there is a good folly opposed to this evil wisdom, whereby man despises worldly things." II-II, q. 46, art.1.

follows the path of tradition by treating Paul's theatrical play-acting in 2 Corinthians 11 as a series of hypothetical statements, intended only for those who think Paul should not boast.[529] Even centuries later, a rhetorical master like Valla, whom Erasmus quotes in his own *Annotations*, regards Paul's rhetorical understatement in the phrase "an idiota in speech" (*idiotēs to logon*) as an instance of his literal lack of familiarity with the Greek language: "Paul stammers, hindered by the language as by unfamiliar speech" (*balbus et impedita lingua quasi dictatur impedito sermone*).[530] Erasmus' appropriation of the Pauline folly in a predominantly rhetorical form (i.e., a declamation), to the contrary, implies that the Apostle himself was engaging in rhetoric – a thesis hardly acceptable at a time when the rhetorical art was seen by theologians as inferior to logic, ornamental, affective, and frequently deceptive.

In short, Erasmus' audience had every reason to expect moral and didactic clarity from the theologian and humanist, but they lacked a particular frame of reference for dealing with such radically diverse content. The *Moria*'s jesting discourse lumps together instances of an equivocal folly of humor and wit with delusion, a medieval vice-figure, Platonic mania, and the Christian folly of St. Paul. What was the *Moria* first and foremost? A creative rhetorical exercise? A new kind of literary wit and humor? A convoluted sort of satire? A parody of Scripture? Given the literary context of Erasmus' Northern Europe, the inconsistencies in the representation of folly would have appeared like an amalgamation of self-contradicting genres. The popular fools of festivals, dramas, courts, and local legends were sometimes simple and naïve, sometimes clever and sophisticated, but they were not, like Erasmus' catalogue of "apparently wise" fools (*morosophoi*, according to his definition in *Adagia*), figures of unadulterated immo-

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[529]Aquinas, "Seconda Lettera Ai Corinzi Lettera Ai Galati" 11.385, 364.
[530]Erasmus, *Erasmus' Annotations on the New Testament: Facsimile of the Final Latin Text with All Earlier Variants* 357.

rality. Conversely, the fools of the ship literature are bereft of the cleverness and amiability of many popular fools.

The *Moria*'s use of Scripture as a legitimating authority for folly constituted another significant departure from tradition. Despite the widespread imitation of Pauline persona in religious houses and in the medieval literature of the idiota, one would be hard-pressed to cite a *theory* of Pauline folly, transforming wisdom's anti-type into a new sort of virtue. Instead, Pauline folly remained *sui generis* in the domain of biblical commentary through the sixteenth century. This same invisible boundary is maintained in the ship of fools literature, since it employs the Bible as a source of wisdom's anti-type and omits holy folly entirely. To quote Paul in support of foolish antics or practical jokes would undoubtedly risk accusations of blasphemy, as did those who recited the Magnificat and other biblical verses during mock-liturgies for the Feast of Fools.[531] It is not surprising, therefore, that Erasmus' argument in favor of a Christian folly elicited the harshest criticism.

Though most of the arguments of the *Moria* controversy are no longer of concern to the modern reader – the scandalous aspects diminishing along with the humanist-scholastic conflict and many other proximate causes of the Protestant Reformation – they reveal the shock value of Erasmus' idea in its early sixteenth century milieu. The grievances identified by Erasmus' critics were offset by those (mainly humanists) who applauded the work, and the remarkable number of editions printed during Erasmus' life (thirty-six) and after demonstrates its significance on the European stage. The publication history which Miller, Schoeck, Margolin and others have summarized for us include the author's several additions and revisions, the important presses from

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[531]As Ingvild Gilhus points out, the Feast of Fools, "In its excessive form it was never approved by the Church authorities; on the contrary it was restricted and regularly forbidden." It was suppressed by the Counsel of Basel (1431) and by the Faculty of Theology in Paris (1444) 25. More research needed to determine where, if at all, St. Paul is cited to justify folly behavior.

which the *Moria* was issued, Lister's commentary of 1515 (to which Erasmus himself contributed), and a vast number of translations, beginning with Pellegrini's Italian edition in 1539 and Chaloner's English edition in 1549. Erika Rummel also points out that the *Moria*, in its original Latin or any of the vernacular translations, has never been out of print.[532]

10.2 The Modern *Moria* and the Problem of Interpretation

While we today appreciate Erasmus' creative assimilation and departure from conventions and his complex assimilation of diverse sources, some of the interpretive difficulties involved in the *Moria* controversy linger, the text itself defying the elucidations of commentary and the polemics of the sixteenth century. The problem of thematic and stylistic unity in the *Moria* has been central in literary and historical criticism of the twentieth century and still persists. Critics and translators such as Welsford, Huizinga, Hudson, Kaiser, Sylvester, Rebhorn, Radice, Miller, Schoeck, and others have taken note of the major changes in Folly's line of argument and how the shifts in discourse affect both the characterization of Folly and the concept she personifies.

Much as the ship of fools literature provided the occasion for a sweeping commentary on all sectors of society, self-praise is Erasmus' ingenious, versatile, and assimilative device for addressing those issues which were important to him. Appealing directly to the new tastes in humor and wit, the *Moria* summarizes and condenses several European folly trends, some of which are native to Erasmus' Northern culture, and some of which reflect experiments in satire and ancient literary form in Italy. We might relate, for example, Folly's unmitigated assault on respected figures of the establishment to Brant's vice-figures as well as the provocative and abusive satire of German humanists like Heinrich Bebel, Jacob Locher, and Thomas Murner. Meanwhile,

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[532]Schoeck, R. J., *Erasmus* 98; Rummel, E. 107.

the *parrhesia* of Folly's striking apostrophe and her radical "Epicurean" argument suggest the power of laughter and wit in Cicero and Quintilian, Lucian's subversion of gods and heroes, Valla's redefinition of pleasure as beatitude, and the libertarian view of language and literature in Beccadelli, Poggio, and Pontano, justified in their appeals to precedent, poetic license, human nature, and a morally-responsible and hermeneutically-knowledgeable reader.

Despite this eclecticism, the *Moria* is decidedly a new experiment, not only collecting trends and traditions but negotiating between them. Thus Erasmus borrows a sense of moral license and ironic wit from the Italians while rejecting the excesses of their low language. In the Letter to Dorp, Erasmus denounces the double standard by which Poggio and Pontano are praised while the *Moria* is condemned; the works of Poggio are "impious, filthy, pestilential," while Pontano shamefully and abusively thrashes the clergy.[533] In place of their vulgarity and obscenity, Erasmus creates an impression of Folly's license by means of association: Folly allies herself to the gods Bacchus, Silenus, Pan, and Priapus, and she continually defines and defends herself in relation to folly-lore and folly-behavior in hundreds of authorities, from philosophers to poets, dramatists, historians, rhetoricians, and Church Fathers. She also lays claim to sexual desire, generative power, and inebriation. In this way Erasmus carefully mitigates whatever might appear improper in the ridiculous, the audacious, and the racy.

Similarly, Erasmus balances the moral pietism of the ship of fools literature with the scathing, personal invective employed by some of his contemporaries. Folly's disciples are as selfish, wicked, greedy as the villains of Juvenal and Persius, but they remain faceless types. Depicted with more familiarity and realistic detail than their medieval counterparts, the devotees of Folly are ransomed at least in part by the invisible smile of the persona, who acts in the con-

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[533]"quam impia, quam spurca, quam pestifera." "Quibus probris, quibus maledictis clericos insectatur Pontanus?" Erasmus, "'Letter to Martin Dorp'" 336–42.

tradictory capacity of an indicting judge and a vindicating advocate. Thus Erasmus' persona is well-suited to her theater metaphor: she is neither a figure of scandalous license nor a mere tool of moral commentary but a Protean performer moving in and out of various folly-roles.

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What should the reader make of Folly's inconsistencies and contradictions, and how do they affect modern interpretation? One scholarly consensus points to three distinct parts or movements of Folly's oration: first, Folly's Epicurean argument with its "complex irony," second, her satirical and invective description of contemporary sages, and third, her almost straight-forward discourse on Christian folly. The challenge, for textual critics, has been to explain whether Erasmus welded together these different kinds of arguments for folly accidentally, incidentally or purposefully.[534]

Looking squarely at the jagged edges in the major transitions from one kind of folly to another, we can arrive at the fundamental literary-critical question of artistic unity – conceptual, thematic, and stylistic – and how one kind or instance of folly may reflect, critique, or annul another. The text seems designed to confuse a reader in the labyrinth of jest and earnest, of structure and fragmentation, of equivocation, of hyperbole and reduction, of the absurd, of irony in satire, parody, and burlesque. Related to this question is one of Erasmus' hermeneutic strategy or method: just what did he expect his readers to gain and how exactly were they to profit? Does the text of the *Moria* reflect one particular method, or is it simply a rhetorical patchwork, like the fool's motley?

Of the many literary influences on Erasmus, two are mentioned repeatedly: Lucian and St. Paul. To be sure the pagan satirist and Christian apostle are significant contributors to Folly's

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[534]Among those scholars who have commented on the "complex irony" of the *Moria* are Strier 26–28; Rebhorn; Watson, D..

persona, her bold, frank, direct manner of speech, and her ironic, at times sarcastic, representation of authorities and rivals as pompous, self-serving imbeciles. In the several years prior to the *Moria*, Erasmus was steeped in the study of both authors. The edition of Lucian's dialogues published by Bade in 1506/7 included not only the eleven dialogues translated by Erasmus and More in amicable competition but an additional twenty-one by Erasmus. In his dedicatory epistle to Christopher Urswick, Erasmus explains his admiration for Lucian at length: in his view, the pagan satirist writes "in a more amusing fashion than any jester could achieve and yet also with a wisdom exceeding that which divines and philosophers commonly attain in the schools when they dispute with immense arrogance over portentious trifles."[535] Erasmus sent seven more translations to Badius for an expanded edition of July of 1512, the very same month in which the first "authorized" edition of the *Moria* was arranged.[536] As for St. Paul, Erasmus undertook the "bold action" (*audax facinus*) of writing a commentary on the Epistles upon returning from his first English sojourn, soliciting other commentaries from contacts throughout the Netherlands. If we take him at his word, he composed four books of commentary on Romans by 1501. Although Erasmus later wrote that he discontinued his commentaries because he "needed Greek at every point," we should not assume he discarded the Greek text during this early period of study. Rather, we should assume he was practicing his translation technique on the Scriptures in private, like every other serious student of Greek since the mid-fifteenth century.[537]

And yet an awareness of these two formative influences on the *Moria* is but a first step toward developing a critical perspective on the work as a whole. The *Moria* is a marvelously eclectic text, and trying to determine the work's unifying principles and over-riding purpose is

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[535]"magis ridcule quam vllus possit gelotopoios, sed rursum sapientius quam theologorum ac philosophorm vulgus nonnunquam in scholis magno supercilio magnis de nugis disputat." Erasmus, *Opus Epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterdami* Ep. 193, 1.423–26.
[536]Marsh, *Lucian and the Latins: Humor and Humanism in the Early Renaissance* 168.

far from a settled question. It is convenient to identify Lucian with the irony of the first section, but not all of Erasmus' humor is Lucianic. Folly's harshest critique, that of the scholastic theologians, does not measure up to the intensity and abrasiveness of Lucian's invective, his scathing attack on renowned philosophers and literary figures, and his mockery of gods as simpletons and fools. Similarly, not all of Folly's theology can be summed up as Pauline. There are moments, after all, where Folly bends and distorts the words of Scripture to suit her argument.[538]

Thus modern interpreters of the *Moria* have been challenged to explain where declamation meets satire, where pagan meets Christian, where ancient meets medieval and Renaissance, where rhetoric meets theology, and what is the conceptual glue by which all the various manifestations of wisdom and folly in image, allusion, and argument are joined together. Are its arguments and parts knit together in some invisible way or is it intentionally fragmented? Is the final section on Pauline folly and Platonic madness a sincere statement on the resolving power of spirituality or is it a sign of pure artifice? Are Folly's humorous sophisms and satirical jibes affirmed, negated, or merely superseded in the climax?

Wayne Rebhorn summarizes the problem of consistency and unity in his article "The Metamorphoses of Moria: Structure and Meaning," and proposes an explanation for the text's predominant shifts and changes. First, Rebhorn establishes Folly as a transformative power; her illogical yet persuasive arguments demonstrate that she is a kind of "master magician," superior to Circe. But instead of turning men to beasts, Folly "waves her magic wand" and "this gloomy, care-laden, terribly serious crowd metamorphoses into a gaggle of grinning fools." On the conceptual level, "vices metamorphose into virtues, wisdom becomes folly, passion reveals its superiority to reason" (Rebhorn 464, 465). Vices treated as virtues describes the thrust of the first

[537]Botley 82–98.
[538]M.A. Screech suggests this caption: "The theology of the *Enchiridion* as narrated by Lucian." 12.

part of Folly's oration, while models of subverted wisdom dominates the discourse during Folly's satirical catalogue. Following the terminology adopted by Edgar Wind and Walter Kaiser, Rebhorn considers the interplay of opposites "a 'transvaluation of values', an ironic inversion of commonly accepted standards" (Rebhorn 466; Kaiser, W. J. 51–62). And yet something more than inversion occurs in the third "serious and unironic" third stage of Folly's argument, when Folly describes the Christian rejection of worldly values and the "humble faith and dependence on Christ."[539] Here Folly transcends the "comitragic vision," i.e., "the illusory hope of the first section and the horrifying 'reality' of the second," in "a fuller, more all-encompassing" perspective (Rebhorn 471–72), a "Christian transvaluation." While the transcendent perspective gives "new meaning" to human experience and is a "strategy for conversion," the meaning of the *Moria*, says Rebhorn, "is the total structure, the process of movement itself, which leads from comedy to tragedy and then beyond" (Rebhorn 472).

Rebhorn's argument for a "dialectic and dynamic" unity provides a definitive response to those who argued that the *Moria* is indeed a work of genius but flawed. Indeed it makes far more sense that an author of devotional poetry and a manual of moral self-improvement had a similar didactic purpose in mind and was not merely meandering through the fields of rhetorical jest and satire. But there remains a serious question regarding how Folly's "conversion" and ecstasy reflect back on the earlier sections. Rebhorn suggests that we view the examples of folly typologically, invoked when Folly describes the life of the pious as "a contemplation and kind of shadowing of that other…reward to come" – the Platonic language of shadow and reality reflected in the *umbra, typus,* and *figura* of early Christian biblical interpretation. The problem here is that biblical types are proleptic moments in a linear view of salvation history; they anticipate with a suggestive similarity, as Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac anticipates God

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[539]Rebhorn twice refers to the persona's Christian folly as "straight-forward and unironic." 463, 471.

the Father's sacrifice of his only begotten Son (to mention only the most common bibical type). But if the Epicurean pleasures and emotional excesses of the first movement and the satirical mockery of the second are "types of the life to come," then what are those signal similarities which relate the images (Rebhorn 473)? Why is "conversion," or a "turning away" from earthly to heavenly things, even necessary? Where is the persuasive force of exhortation? And what might we say about those arguments which are clearly contrary to the gospel? A "perfect ambiguity" which validates all experience is a kind of gnostic apotheosis rather than *philosophia Christi*.

The problem is amplified in the appropriation of the phrase "transvaluation of values," which originates with Nietzsche's work *The Antichrist*.[540] The "transvaluation of values" represents a rebellious affirmation of life and nature in the midst of a Christian moral world-view, which Nietzsche considered oppressive and delusional. In a Nietzschean context, Folly's ecstatic state is an empty promise which annihilates the natural, carnal, and emotional pleasures which Folly herself lays claim to. A similar tension between transvaluation and transcendence can be educed from Folly's references to Plato's cave allegory. In the earlier half of the book, Folly argues against any effective distinction between the prisoners and the wise man who breaks free; both experience the same desires and pleasures.[541] Towards the end, however, Folly uses the very same Platonic allegory to preference the pious Christian's longing for the invisible things of heaven. Therefore, if we grant Erasmus a transvaluation of values in the first instance, it would be more fitting to call a transvaluation in the second instance a Christian *restoration of values*.[542]

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[540]Nietzsche famously applied this phrase to the Renaissance: "Is it understood at last, *will* it ever be understood, *what* the Renaissance was? *The transvaluation of Christian values* – an attempt with all available means, all instincts and all the resources of genius to bring about a triumph of the *opposite* values, the more *noble* values." Nietzsche 177.
[541]Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly* 73.
[542]Cf. Rebhorn 472.

The notion of values, subverted or confirmed, leads to the persistent critical question of rational certitude and skepticism in the thought of Erasmus. Is Folly a vanguard of humanism? What do we make of her validation of the Academic philosophers, given the author's revival of Academic probability elsewhere? Does Folly's final movement represent the author's abandonment of philosophical rationalism in favor of a pietistic spirituality, as many have claimed? How does a non-subversive interpretation of the theological ideal reflect back on the other two movements or concepts of folly, the principles of pleasure and vice?

The central problem here is, of course, germane to the paradoxical encomium, the genre of jest and earnest, an untrustworthy praise of the absurd seemingly contradicted by revealing flashes of sensible criticism and emotive outrage. But what makes the *Moria* unique is the gravity and topicality of its criticisms as well as the novelty of its theology, neither of which can escape contextualization in the broader program of Erasmian humanism. At times rhetorical ambiguity and theological doctrine appear unevenly yoked, as if there is a crisis of epistemology, a rupture between the reason of its playful argument and its underlying faith; at other times, modern criticism is tempted to fill the chasm with the standard playbook of humanist apologetics. And yet, if the author of the *Moria* intends to do something more than mock scholastic intellectuals and affirm an individualistic spirituality, then there must also be some rational basis for folly and wisdom in dialogue, a theoretical perspective through which literary method and theological purpose are harmonized.

10.3 The Moriasophic *Moria*

Can a critical approach to the *Moria* account for the work's philosophical and theological significance without detaching the analysis from the author and his guiding hand over its con-

cepts and design? The present study suggests that such an approach becomes possible when the *Moria* is situated in the historical and cultural context of mor

iasophia. The themes and techniques of moriasophic writers provide a more comprehensive perspective for the theoretical and literary novelty of the text as well as aspects of structural and stylistic unity. The moriasophic tradition is taken up for the express purpose of addressing a destructive breach between the technical terminology and abstract speculation of a learned class and the kind of speculative thought which is provoked by *mimesis* and metaphor, drawing on a common-sense language, wit, and humor. It subjects the inquiry of a dialectical method to its dominant rhetorical context and relates philosophical and theological concepts to the immediate concerns of human action and experience. In Erasmus' time, the learned questions of the day were defined and debated in the scholastic milieu of the universities and of some monasteries, and as a result the Aristotelian demonstrative method used by those in the theological and philosophical sciences became further and further removed from the rhetorical education of the humanities. Rather than representing a flight from philosophy and theology, a moriasophic mode of writing and its folly-figures compel a confrontation between disciplines and refocus problems of knowledge and education.

Like Plato, Lucian, and Diogenes Laertius, Erasmus employs a highly articulate and intellectually shrewd hero to underscore and put to the test the definitions of wisdom and virtue which underlie his society's learned assumptions and conventions. Familiar medieval concerns, which we find in a literature of the idiota, are added to the classical moriasophic prototypes in Folly's embrace of the clergy and the ecclesiastical hierarchy as well as her claims on Scripture and spirituality. The blinding pride of authority figures, the hypocrisy of the clergy, the eccentricities of academics are themes that run throughout the clerical satire of the Middle Ages. A hu-

manist literature of folly, written with new, large secular audiences in mind, extends the ideal of satirical reform from institutions to the private lives of ordinary individuals, who are represented through the great varieties of human experience.

The *Moria* appears most like the ship of fools literature in its second movement, a literary cataloguing of Folly's disciples according to occupation or profession, and also in Hans Holbein the Younger's illustrations.[543] Emphasizing an iconography of folly, the drawings (and sometimes also the commentary of Listrius) capture the diversity of fool-types and foolish behaviors in a way that recalls the anthological or chapteral design of the ship of fools literature together with its distinctive woodcuts. Holbein must have known he was competing with the woodcuts, which had become as popular as the literature itself.

But Holbein's images of Folly as a jester in cap and bells, her audience of fools, and other foolish types, which frame the text and appear throughout the marginalia of the *Moria*, can also mislead a reader. Erasmus is careful not to attribute to Folly herself any particular costume, social role, or setting. Her physical description is, in fact, quite amorphous: she has an "unusual dress" (*insolitu cultu*). Beyond this, she tells us nothing concrete but rather instructs us about herself through her multitude of inferences and associations, beginning with the imagined faces of her readers, which, upon her entrance, "immediately brightened up with a strange new expression of joy."[544] She then asks her readers to listen to her as they would "those who wander the town squares as buffoons and fools."[545] There is little here or elsewhere which attributes to Folly herself the jester's garb or manner.[546]

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[543]The Holbein illustrations are available in the fascimile edition Erasmus, *Erasmi Roterodami Encomium moriae, i.e. Stultitiae laus*.
[544]Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly* 9.
[545]"[...]quas fori circulatoribus, scurris ac morionibus consuevistis arrigere." Erasmus, *Moria* 22.
[546]Perhaps playing on the words *arrigere* and *consuetio* as they relate to arousal and intercourse? For the classical inuendo, see the references in Lewis, et al.. Even when Folly speaks of court fools, she does not single them out as somehow closer to her own image and likeness Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly* 54–55.

The miscellanea of moral and intellectual deficiency which characterizes nearly the entire text of the ship of fools literature comprises only one section of the *Moria*. It does not account for the *Moria*'s most innovative contributions to a satirical literature of folly, beginning with its attractive persona, its ironical premise, its rhetorical superiority and charm, its vast number of sources, allusions, and references – a *sprezzatura* of folly-types and behaviors – its artful smattering of Greek, Latin, and vernacular proverbs – all of which speak to the outstanding erudition and stylistic talent of its author. But while these aspects have been addressed in depth in the ample body of *Moria* criticism, little has been written about the work's balancing of rhetorical and dialectical methods and how the text relates to the broader conversation about the nature of philosophy and theology in the early sixteenth century. This methodological aspect of the text is illuminated through a comparison with Erasmus' *Enchiridion of the Christian Soldier*, a text which Erasmus himself claimed is similar (if not identical) in content.

10.4 Folly and Wisdom in Erasmus' *Philosophia Christ*

Erasmus is often described as a Latin stylist, a moral philosopher, and a biblical theologian. Though these were indeed his dominant areas of interest, they do not define the whole of Erasmus' ambitions. As we stated earlier, Erasmus and other humanists appealed to ancient ideals of wisdom – pagan as well as Christian – in their attempt to redefine the philosophical and theological disciplines, drawing attention away from a near-universal practice of Aristotle's demonstrative method, exemplified in the syllogism, and a body of onerous texts and tedious commentaries. Exploding the medieval canon with previously unknown authors and works, pagan as well as Christian, humanists sought a new entente between rhetorical and dialectical methods, reflecting a new kind of encyclopaedism, one of wisdom literature, which might ac-

count for neglected areas of intellectual inquiry, such as a theory of the human person and of the individual's place in society and a more extensive view of morality and experience. The ideal leads to a more fluid relationship between reason and revealed doctrine, with both integrated in a wisdom of spiritual practice. It is critical to evaluate the *Moria* in this context. Although Erasmus he would work out a much more complete theory of language, method, interpretation, and a scriptural theology in his later years, he had, by 1509, thought a great deal about the larger project, and he made his first bold attempt to at a learned, spiritual discourse in the *Enchiridion of the Christian Soldier*.

When Erasmus returned to Paris from his first English sojourn in February of 1500, he arrived at two very serious resolutions. First, he would learn and master Greek. Second, he would devote himself entirely to sacred studies and compose commentaries on St. Paul. The two resolutions are, of course, connected. But when Erasmus met Jean Vitrier, the warden of an Observant Franciscan convent in Saint-Omer in the late summer of 1501, a new aspiration took shape. Vitrier introduced the assiduous student of Greek to Origen's Commentary on St. Paul's Letter to the Romans as well as his homilies on Genesis, Exodus, and the Song of Songs. Vitrier was himself an outspoken critic of clerical corruption, and his own attachment to the third century Platonist Christian must have exerted a strong influence on the younger scholar as he began work on a book which might reframe the role of education and reason in spirituality. Origen's provided Erasmus a much-needed theoretical foundation for the Pauline theology which Erasmus had been working on.

"Enchirdion" is a pun in Greek which combines a "handbook" with a "dagger." Epictetus and Augustine had availed themselves of the metaphor for knowledge close at hand and easily consulted, which one can use as a defense against an adversary. Many commentators point

out that the metaphor was on Erasmus mind in 1501, when he describes his commentary to Cicero's *On duties* as "this little-dagger" (*hunc pugiunculum*); later on he himself translates "enchiridion" with the same Latin word.[547] The structure of the *Enchiridion* is reflected in its subtitle, *replete with most salutary precepts, extremely powerful against all the allurements of vice, and a particular method of true Christianity*.[548] Falling roughly into three parts, the *Enchiridion* includes a rousing moral exhortation to take up arms in the "spiritual battle," twenty-two rules (*regulae*) for living virtuously, and advice for overcoming several "deadly vices."

On the surface, the *Enchiridion* may appear like a medieval genre, an instructional work of Christian piety. Erasmus alludes to the *speculum* literature when he says, "I shall set before you a kind of likeness of yourself, as in a painting, so that you may have a clear knowledge of what you are on the inside and what you are skin-deep."[549] The *Enchiridion* is often compared to the devotional writings of Giovanni Pico, *Twelve Weapons in Spiritual Battle* and *Twelve Rules*, which were circulating in Paris at the time Erasmus arrived there and were later translated by Thomas More in 1504-05. But whereas Pico's works were clearly affective, appealing to meditative disposition and conscience, the *Enchiridion* is decidedly educational, in the sense that Erasmus intends to teach and not just summon to the mind familiar doctrines. The "weapons" which Erasmus wishes to pass on to his friend are summed up in the second chapter, entitled "The armor of the Christian militia": they are "prayer and knowledge." The latter quickly dominates, however, as Erasmus outlines a program of study which includes pagan wisdom, the read-

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[547]Erasmus, *Opus Epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterdami* Ep. 152, 1.65.
[548]"saluberrimis praeceptus refertum contra omnia vitiorum irritamenta efficacissimis et ratio quaedam ver christianismi." Erasmus, *Spiritualia* 3.
[549]Literally, "so that you may know clearly what you are inmost and what you appear in skin." Erasmus, *Handbook* 41. "simulacrum quoddam tui tibi uelut in tabula proponam, ut, quid intus, quid in cute sis, plane pernoscas." Erasmus, *Enchiridion* 90.

ing and interpretation of the Scriptures (especially the letters of St. Paul, who is mentioned seventy-two times by name), and the example of wise men and of Christ.[550]

The moral exhortation likewise represents an innovation of form. The text is given a mimetic aspect and a rhetorical occasion as an epistle, like so many other treatises of the Renaissance. While one can hardly find a theme more reminiscent of medieval monasticism as the spiritual battle, Erasmus tailors it so that it can embrace an entirely new audience of educated lay readers, here specifically a man of the courts, and even one who disdains religion. The situation presents Erasmus the unique and self-appointed challenge of establishing the rational ground for faith and religious practice, without presuming a level of theological competency beyond the most fundamental. This instructional-rhetorical aim calls for a discourse which persuades the heart even as it instructs the mind; it is a different relationship of reason to piety. Instead of merely inviting introspection, Erasmus connects the affective with the didactic in a way which re-envisions the *speculum* as a classical protreptic.[551]

After the first two chapters, which together comprise an exordium, Erasmus begins the *Enchiridion* proper with a chapter entitled "Chapter concerning wisdom, that you may know

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[550]Somewhat ironically, the works of the philosopher Pico are traditional in their piety while the rhetorician Erasmus aims to ground piety in a philosophy of the human person. Gaguin met Pico in Paris in 1485. Later the French humanist translated and published Pico's famous letter to his nephew Giovanni in 1498. See Erasmus, *Spiritualia* xiv. See also Maskell.

[551]While linked to the *speculum*, the *Enchiridion* also shares several attributes with the classical protreptic letter and was probably influenced by the genre. Protreptic is a discourse which seeks to persuade its reader to assume a particular way of life; it has been used most often by philosophers, but was adapted to Christianity in works like the *Protrepticus* of Clement of Alexandria. One can easily see why Erasmus would have found this form attractive. The protreptic combines a rhetorical occasion, method and style with arguments in favor of a course of study. The writer exhorts the correspondent to reject whatever evils and illusions are holding him back from a greater wisdom. Vices like self-absorption and pride prevent one from self-knowledge, without which one cannot acknowledge the need for instruction. Thus protreptic links self-knowledge to wisdom and philosophy, and Erasmus follows this pattern. Finally, the protreptic discourse provides an opportunity for the writer to offer an introduction to philosophical doctrines, which explains why Erasmus turns so easily from his spiritual metaphor to instructions about reading the Bible and lessons in Christian anthropology. ("I had intended to prescribe for you a way of life, not a program of study. But I have digressed from the subject because I was attempting to point out to you a suitable arsenal from which you could draw new weapons for your new warfare.") Erasmus, *Handbook* 36. See also Stowers 112–13.

your very self, and on the two-fold wisdom, the false and the true" (*Caput esse sapientiae, ut temetipsum noris, deque duplici sapientia falsa et uera*). The notion of a "true" and "false" wisdom echoes the idea of "true Christianity" in the book's title. A conflict over the definition of such a fundamental term as wisdom recapitulates the divided perspective of St. Paul, whose rhetoric is in turn reminiscent of the Platonic distinction between opinion and knowledge. Erasmus may also have had in mind Valla's dialogue *On Pleasure*, which Valla later called *On the true and false good*. Like Valla and other humanists, Erasmus provides an epistemological context for moral action rather than a devotional one, stressing the idea that progress in virtue is best achieved *when piety is educated*, that is, when piety is supported by reason and unencumbered by "superstition," which for Erasmus refers to an unthinking attachment to religious ceremonies, rituals, or traditions. The classical dictum "know yourself," which Erasmus intensifies with *temet ipsum* ("know your very self"), sets a new epistemological standard for wisdom's starting point, in place of traditional humility and "fear of the Lord."[552]

But what is "false wisdom" if not folly? In the *Second Alcibiades*, Socrates cites several kinds of folly which are all correlative opposites of wisdom, including the mad (*mainomainous*), the silly (*helithia*), the stupid (*embrontetous*), the rashly enthusiastic (*megalophuchia*), and the simple-minded (*euētheis*).[553] Erasmus begins to gravitate in the direction of a more philosophical inquiry, as he defines the difference. Wisdom, he says, is called "complete goodness" (*absoluta probitas*) by Stoics and Christians alike. Erasmus' choice of the term *probitas* implies the moral quality of goodness-in-action, i.e., behavior which is honorable, noble, and principled, in contrast with the abstract *bonum* of the academic philosophers. Folly, on the other hand, is op-

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[552]Erasmus, *Opus Epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterdami* 3.361–77. Erasmus speaks often of a "learned piety," *docta pietas.*

[553]Plato, *Phaedrus Sec. Alcib*. 138c-140d. Mad, silly, and stupid are given in order of descending intensity, adding also innocent (*akakous*), ignorant (*apeirous*), senseless (*eneous*).

posed to wisdom in two ways: as *stultitia* for Stoics, and as *malitia* (malice) for Christians. This distinction is a bit puzzling and may appear to make less sense than the Thomistic one between *stultitia* and *fatuitas*, the former defined as a defect of reason, the latter as a total privation.[554] However, Erasmus is interested in underscoring the connection between immorality and ignorance. *Stultitia* for the Stoics is "thoughtlessness" or blameworthy ignorance and the direct result of *improbitas* (wickedness, dishonesty, etc.). This notion reintroduces the Platonic theory of evil as privation of knowledge, while at the same time providing a (non-Platonic) moral context. This makes a great deal of sense to Erasmus. If wickedness causes or at least contributes to the folly of ignorance, then acquired knowledge can help one achieve the virtue of *probitas* – a view parallel to the ideal of educated piety which Erasmus is striving for.

Why, then, does Erasmus choose *malitia* for his second opposite of *sapientia*, instead of a more general term for vice, such as *improbitas* or *vitium*? Since Erasmus wants to demonstrate the compatibility between pagan and Christian wisdom, he must also do so in his definition of folly. He therefore uses *malitia* to depict the relationship of a universal evil like ignorance to the theological vice of sin. More than privation, *malitia* implies a conscious act of the will preferring a lesser good over a greater. In short, the Erasmus of the *Enchiridion* has arrived at the traditional, biblical association of folly with impiety, grounded in sin and ignorance; yet he uses the Stoic philosophy to enrich the understanding of related concepts (Cicero, M. T., *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum* 4.19).[555]

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[554]See Aquinas, *ST* II-II, q.46.

[555]"Nam si stultitia consensu omnium philosophorum majus est malum[…]" Cicero, *De Natura Deorum; Academica* 3.32.79. "And the vices are ignorance of those things of which the virtues are the knowledge." Diogenes Laertius 54. As far as the question of folly and sin are concerned, Erasmus agrees with Aquinas (II.ii. Q. 46, Art. 2), who distinguishes further between culpable and non-culpable "dullness" of *stultitia*, the *idiota* exemplifying the latter. Aquinas defines malice in *Summa* Q.78, art 1-4.; Erasmus himself makes the distinction explicit on p. 85.

Wisdom and folly, the "true" and "false" wisdom, in the *Enchiridion* are the fundamental, *a priori* principles, metaphysical and theological, but the theological powers of God and Satan explain the origin (and indeed all dialectical opposition) more concretely and truthfully than the Platonic principles of Form and instantiation, or one and not-one. Following St. Paul, Erasmus identifies ultimate wisdom with the person of Jesus Christ, "the author of wisdom to the extent that he is wisdom itself." As malice is opposed to wisdom, Christ is opposed as the spawn of Satan (he uses the alternative name "Belial" here), "the father and prince of malice" and "the lord of darkness."[556] Erasmus' tendency to treat evil as an active power rather than a deprivation carries over the dynamism of his spiritual-battle rhetoric to his opposing theological powers. These terms and definitions are not just academic speculation on Erasmus' part but they are suited to, and probably derived from, Erasmus' reading of St. Paul's First Corinthian Letter. Quoting and borrowing freely from the first and third chapter, Erasmus writes:

> Paul says: 'We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews, to be sure, and folly [*stultitiam*] to the Gentiles, but to those that have been called, whether Jews or Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God'. Through this wisdom, following Christ's example, may we also be able to triumph over the enemy, malice [*malitia*], if only we would be wise in him, in whom we shall also be victorious. Embrace this wisdom, scorning the wisdom of the world, which sells itself under a most deceptive title to the foolish [*stultis*], while in reality, as Paul says, there is no greater folly [*stultitia*] than earthly wisdom, which one must unlearn if he truly desires to be wise. 'If any among you appears wise in this world,

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[556]Erasmus, *Handbook* 38.

> let him become a fool [*stultus*] in order to be wise. For the wisdom of this world is folly [*stultitia*] with God'.[557]

In this passage, Erasmus uses Paul's discourse to demonstrate how Christian theology takes into account both a pagan notion of folly and a Christian notion of malice as the antithesis of wisdom, demonstrating that pagan wisdom is compatible with Christianity on this point. Firstly, aware of a historical context, Erasmus uses Paul's rhetoric of the divided perspective as an illustration of the folly of the Greeks, as it corresponds to the Stoic concept. He implies that the Greeks did not accept the Christian proposal of Paul because their secular rationalism was a kind of *improbitas*, a wickedness causing a most profound ignorance, an ignorance of the one true God, of divine law, of the spiritual realm, and of sacred tradition.

As we have seen, there is a great potential for irony in a "folly of God" and in the contrast between the maliciously foolish wiseman and the Christian wise fool. Erasmus even suggests a kind of learned ignorance when he says (in his own words) that "earthly wisdom must be unlearned" (*terrena sapientia dediscenda ei*) in order to become truly wise. But the Pauline irony lies fallow here, and no mention is made of the fool's boasting. Erasmus does not appear interested at this time in developing the performative "fool for Christ's sake" in Paul's second Corinthian letter. Wisdom and folly are defined strictly as anti-types.

What Erasmus does underscore – and there is some irony here – is the highly critical description of the worldly wise in his own day. Echoing the gospels' condemnation of the Pharisees,[558]8 Erasmus employs the familiar metaphor for culpable ignorance, that is, self-inflicted blindness. The worldly wise are "foolish sages and the blindest of blind men" – *stulti isti sapientes et caeci caecorum*. Here Erasmus employs a Latin equivalent of *morosophos*, one which ap-

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[557]Erasmus, *Handbook* 38. Translation based on Fantazzi.
[558]For example, Mt 15:14, Lk 6:39, Jn 9:39.

pears again in his 1508 *Adagia* (*stulte sapiens*). For Erasmus, the severity with which Christ censures the Pharisees in the gospels sets the tone for the invective of righteous indignation.

Erasmus amplifies his criticism at length and with such pluck that his rhetoric begins to resemble the outspoken voice of the protesting satirist. Recalling Paul's "speaking like a madman," the persona of the *Enchiridion* suggests that the arrogance and ignorance of his adversaries cause madness:

> I do not doubt that these very foolish sages and the blindest of blind men are even now molesting you with an unbearable racket to make you crazy, to cause you to behave like a fool, and to drive you out of your mind with their shouting, because you desert them for the side of Christ.[559]

Here lies a hint of the Pauline moriasophia and Petrarchan idiota. Though stated hypothetically, we can easily imagine how the "clamor" of the worldly and the "madness" of the Christian soldier might play itself out in a poetic or dramatic setting. In contrast with the rabid fury of a morosophic mob, there is an eruption of righteous passion exemplified by the author in this chapter. His passion is manifested in polemical and invective speech, and justified by the insidious nature of the adversary's attack, an attack on morals, religion, and freedom of thought. The suggestion of a "mad for Christ" author hearkens back to Petrarch's pretense of insanity, his Pauline counter-boast in the face of a spiritually-ignorant adversary. In this context, the metaphor of shouting is also significant. The clamor of the worldly (an image associated with devils and hell throughout the Middle Ages) is the metaphorical antithesis of the persona's stated aim, which is the

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[559]My translation. "Nec dubito, quin iam nunc odiose tibi obstrepant stulti isti sapientes et caeci caecorum duces delirare te, desipere, insanire clamitantes, quod ad Christum pares desciscere." Erasmus, *Enchiridion* 85.

"summum bonum" of peace, "promised by the philosophers to their followers, but falsely" and attained rather by "[making] war upon ourselves."[560]

The purpose of this section and how it reflects Erasmus' two-fold definition of folly may not be entirely clear. But the intense condemnation of the worldly wise in Erasmus' contemporary society exemplifies ignorance compounded with malice. Thus the folly of the Greeks in St. Paul is identified with blameworthy ignorance, while "malice," on the other hand, is a kind of folly attributed to those whose arrogant hypocrisy blinds them from the obvious and clear path of biblical wisdom. Although Erasmus does not refer to his concept of malice in this section, the description of the maliciously foolish makes the association abundantly evident:

> Indeed, what is this absurd kind of wisdom that is shrewd and clever in trivial, worthless, and even debasing things while in those things which alone pertain to our salvation it is not much wiser than the brute beast. Paul wishes us to be wise in good things and simple in evil. Those men are wise by acting unjustly and are otherwise ignorant of doing good[...]in what class shall we put those who behave disgracefully and foolishly, and yet never cease to annoy, ridicule, and discourage those who have returned to their senses? In truth, will the mocker not be mocked? 'He who dwells in heaven will mock them in turn, and the Lord will laugh them to scorn'. You read in the Book of Wisdom: 'They will see him and despise him, but God will deride them'. To be laughed at by the wicked is almost to be praised."[561]

Two additional aspects of Erasmus' discourse anticipate the satire of the *Moria*'s second movement. First, he introduces the idea that the malicious folly of the learned is a "backwards wis-

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[560]Erasmus, *Handbook* 38. Petrarch uses similar language, contrasting his "quietus" with the "inquietissimi" of his adversaries as well as those philosophers who are continually disputing with one another.

dom" (*praeposterum sapientiae*),[562] with counter-ingenuity and counter-cleverness (*catum et callidum*), whether referring to Greek philosophy or a contemporary scholastic trained in logic. While this notion amplifies Paul's open challenge to his adversaries, ("Where is the wiseman? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age?"[563]), it is also important to note that such a crafty disordering of common-sense knowledge arises as a result of *improbitas* or sin and is therefore a perverse anti-type of the natural talent implied by *deinotēs* and *ingenium* (1 Cor 1:20). In this light, the cunning of the fool, while not a moral or intellectual ideal, is at least more authentic and potentially insightful and for this reason points a way toward a restoration in subtle thinking. Note also the prioritization of soteriological knowledge, "those things which alone pertain to our salvation. The situation described here recalls Petrarch's lei-motif: he would rather be an illiterate idiota and a good man than a man of letters "swollen" with arrogance.

Secondly, Erasmus introduces the biblical notion of retributive ridicule, "the mocker mocked," an image which does not exactly suit the Pauline template. Paul's discourse is ironical, defensive, critical, and at times sarcastic, but he does not degrade his adversary to the point of mockery. At least not in First Corinthians. Nevertheless, Erasmus can relate the derision of God with its *contrapasso* to Paul's boasting and the anticipated resolution of the wisdom-folly paradox. Similarly, Erasmus' invective against false wisdom does not here cross the line into mockery, but his several biblical citations open a door to divinely sanctioned satire.[564]

[561]Translation based on Fantazzi Erasmus, *Handbook* 39.
[562]*Praeposterus* refers literally to a reversed order Lewis, et al..
[563]1 Cor. 1:20. Erasmus also quotes Paul's rhetorical challenge Erasmus, *Handbook* 39.
[564]In this passage, Erasmus may also be thinking of Plato's cave allegory, those "who have returned to their senses" (*qui iam resipuerunt*) like the man liberated from his chains, the oppressors analogous to the stubbornly ignorant prisoners. When Erasmus is elaborating on this same conflict in the Sixth Rule, he references Plato's cave episode to illustrate the attitude of the masses, who, enchained by their passions, wonder at empty images as if they were "things most true" (*verissimis rebus*) Erasmus, *Enchiridion* 215. The ignorant shadow-watchers who scorn and

In a return to theological principles, Erasmus demonstrates – in typical medieval fashion – a psychological pathology connecting this false wisdom, "animal, diabolical and inimical to God," to perdition and to the death of the soul. It is accompanied by an infectious arrogance (*pestilens arrogantia*), which causes a blindness of spirit (*animi caecitas*), a tyranny of the emotions (*affectuum tyrannis*), a "whole field" of vices, and a false freedom in sin. The license to sin conditions one in bad habits and lulls the mind into "a most unhappy stupor" (*infelicissimus stupor*) which deprives it of the sense of evil and results in "a second death" or the death of the soul. In contrast, "true" wisdom is the wisdom of Christ, "which the world considers folly." There is also a similar medieval quality to Erasmus' personification of wisdom as "the mother of all goods",[565] in contrast to worldly wisdom as "the mother of the greatest evil."[566] Not only does this recall the two female figures of Wisdom and Folly in the Book of Proverbs but it also anticipates Erasmus' extensive mythography of folly in the *Moria*. In the *Enchiridion*, however, wisdom's attendants are modesty (*modestia*) and gentleness (*mansuetudo*). These two qualities allow the Holy Spirit to repose in the faithful soul, imbuing the mind with gifts and allowing its fruits to spring up, the foremost of these being an "interior" and "hidden" joy (*gaudium*), known only to those whom the Spirit embraces.

On the surface, Erasmus' treatment of wisdom and folly does not appear remarkable, and yet several aspects serve as indicators of the theology and philosophy underlying the *Moria*. Firstly, it is of primary importance that Erasmus chooses wisdom and folly as the "first principles" of his treatise, which resound with metaphysical, epistemological, and moral significa-

ridicule the fugitive in Plato are easily related to the "babbling of pagans" and "princes plotting against Yahweh" in the Second Psalm, Erasmus' biblical source for depicting Providence as mocking satirist (Ps. 2:1-4).

[565]Cf. Wis. 7:11.

[566]"bonorum omnium mater; summi mali mater." Erasmus, *Enchiridion* 88.

tion.[567] Insofar as wisdom and folly represent the forces of the spiritual warfare, Erasmus seems to imitate Plato's *Republic* with its city-soul analogy, with the Pauline divided perspective as the "capital letters" and the soul's struggle between reason and the emotions as the microcosm and internal dynamic. We might think of Erasmus and Cusa working to enlarge the scope of their accustomed genres from opposite angles: Cusa adding a rhetorical dimension to dialectical theology with a dedicatory letter or dialogue form, and Erasmus adding a dialectical dimension to rhetorical exhortation with a Platonic anthropology.

Second, the theoretical underpinnings of the *Enchiridion* illustrate that Erasmus is attempting something far more than a moral exhortation and an updated work of piety. As frequent reference to the Scriptures anchors the treatise theologically, the appropriation of Origen and Plato offers a corresponding philosophical foundation. Erasmus is intent on demonstrating the compatibility of pagan and Christian wisdom traditions. The *Enchiridion* offers at least five principle areas of compatibility: an ideal of wisdom in opposition to folly, a correspondence between external and internal reality, the notion of the soul at war with itself, the obligation to pursue virtue, and the application of a hermeneutical method to sacred texts which includes both literal and hidden significance.

Though general and basic, these doctrines constitute a theoretical ground for Erasmus' "philosophy of Christ."[568] Like Petrarch, Erasmus collapses the medieval, scholastic distinction between philosophy and theology as a difference between reason alone and revelation. The strong currents of Aristotelianism in the arts faculties resulted in a philosophical theology, and

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[567]As Erasmus develops his theme, wisdom is a principle of life and every virtue, summed up in the image and example of Christ; it is an ideal of truth, revealed in the Scriptures and supported by reason, a knowledge of the forces in spiritual warfare, the structure of the soul, and the contention between our reason and emotion; and wisdom is a way of living, rejecting impulses which lead to our degradation and cultivating the right moral disposition. Folly, or false wisdom, is a principle of death, a culpable ignorance and malice, which causes intellectual and moral blindness and a "tyranny of the emotions." Erasmus, *Handbook* 40–41.

humanists wanted to reverse the trend. Following Valla, Erasmus envisions a restructuring of priorities in philosophy and theology and a redefinition of the relationship. Indeed, he agrees with Valla that the recovery of a more pure language is the basis for the reform of theology, that philosophy is vastly and unnecessarily over-complicated with Aristotelian terminology, and that the pursuit of virtue relies on the proper education of the heart rather than the intellect.[569]

But the *philosophia Christi* is more intensely Christological and evangelical than in Valla's thought. True philosophy, for Erasmus, begins with biblical precepts and the person of Christ, who is the quintessential teacher and role model. If those rational principles which can be extracted from the teachings of Christ constitute primary matter for speculative thought, then an affective *imitatio Christi* is the appropriate practical response. This notion may appear to be nothing else than theology, but it is more properly what we might call a theological standard and one common to those engaged in the recovery of Greek thought in the fifteenth century. That is, theological wisdom is a criterion by which ancient philosophy is assessed as propaedeutic and compatible with theological doctrines; whatever is not must be rejected as either irrelevant or false. If Erasmus, in his 1518 dedicatory letter to Paul Volz, seems to back away from the *Enchirdion*'s philosophical aspects and shift the attention toward "true piety," it is because he knows his weaknesses and is seeking to deflect the jibes of his contemporary critics.[570] But he has not changed his general view toward philosophy, which is related to theology as learning is

[568]James Tracy offers a thorough explanation of this term in the thought of Erasmus, which first appears around 1515 Tracy, *Erasmus of the Low Countries* 104–15.

[569]According to Tracy, "This kind of philosophy" was expressed "more in the emotions [*affectibus*] than in syllogisms"; it was a matter of "inspiration more than learning, transformation more than reasoning." Tracy, *Erasmus of the Low Countries* 105. His reference to Ep. 1033 (1519) appears incorrect. Erasmus was possibly influenced by Valla's theory that virtue resides in the emotions (*affectus*) rather than the will, and that "the seat of the soul" is in the heart. But the emphasis on the heart and emotions in the Northern piety of the brethren is also pervasive. See van Engen and Oberman 33–34.

[570]In the Letter to Volz, Erasmus writes of his critics, "I am not moved by the jests of those who scorn this little book as not being learned enough or as one which could be written by any schoolboy, because it does not discuss the

to piety. Thus Erasmus praises Volz and the monks of the Abbey of Hügshofen for "Being yourselves endowed with pious learning (*pia doctrina*) and with learned piety (*docta pietas*).[571]

An Erasmian ideal of learned piety/pious learning might be compared to Ficino's *pia philosophia* a related concept of philosophical-theological *concordia*. Both Ficino and Erasmus were life-long scholars, and both believed in the total transformation of the person through spiritual devotion. But while piety for Ficino stems chiefly from the speculative, systematic thought of a Christian-Platonic synthesis, Erasmian devotion arises from the individual's encounter with the Scriptures. That the larger project was on Erasmus mind is indicated in a letter which Erasmus sent to John Colet in 1504 together with his first edition of the *Enchiridion*: "I have tried, however, to teach a certain artistry of piety, in the manner of those who have invented the methods of particular disciplines."[572] The theoretical moorings of this artistry, the *rationes*, are drawn from Scripture, in conjunction with Platonist philosophy and the dialectic of wisdom and folly.[573]

It is important to take the *Enchiridion* seriously if we are to understand the dynamic of wisdom and folly in the *Moria*. Erasmus himself made the analogy between these two works explicit in his letter to van Dorp, but he does not say how far to take the analogy. The *Enchiridion* is an instructive rationale and method for the Christian life of an individual. The principles of wisdom and folly define the vertices of metaphysical and moral dimensions. On the moral level, the metaphor of the spiritual battle between good and evil serves as an internal metaphor corresponding to a cultural conflict between Christian and secular perspectives on reality. In the ex-

questions of the Scotists. As if nothing is learned without these!" Erasmus, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation: Selected Writings of Erasmus* 111.

[571]Tracy, *Erasmus of the Low Countries* 107.

[572]"Conatus autem sum velut artificium quoddam pietatis tradere, more eorum qui de disciplinis certas rationes conscripsere[…]" Erasmus, *Selections from Erasmus: Principally from the Epistles* 10.64–66.

[573]"[...]nearly every theme of the *Enchiridion* may be found in the *Imitation of Christ* as well." Schoeck, R. J., *Erasmus of Europe* 30.

ternal conflict, Paul's first Corinthian letter demonstrates the difference between true/false wisdom *and* true/false folly, and this distinction is immediately recontextualized in the present. Finally, Erasmus links his operative principles to the ultimate theological realities of heaven and hell.

Even though the moriasophic irony, with its ambiguities and paradoxical "bleeding" of categories, is mostly absent from the *Enchiridion*, the function of wisdom and folly in a treatise of this kind is novel. One might be tempted to conclude that the novelty lies solely in the author's rhetoric because of the vibrant literary form and it guiding metaphor. But the *Enchiridion* is also a didactic text, and Erasmus teaches through dialectical juxtaposition. Wisdom and folly are the *archai* which underlie every kind of binary opposition in the text, whether it be spirit and flesh, the invisible and the visible, good and evil, reason and passion, or virtue and vice. What all these categories have in common is their relationship to a Platonic metaphysics of the real and the apparent, most evident in the repeated references to the "true" and the "false." The moral question permeating the text, whether one's piety is authentic or superficial, is therefore judged on the criterion of wisdom and folly.

The moriasophic discourse of the *Moria* echoes several major themes of the *Enchirdion* and reveals a similar integration of dialectic and rhetoric. Two of the *Enchiridion*'s definitions of folly, ignorance and malice, constitute the driving force behind the *Moria*'s first two movements. It is no mistake that the "ignorant folly" of the first movement is tied to Greek mythography and *paroimia* and inimical to the Stoics, while the "malicious folly" of the second movement targets contemporary personages. If the holy folly of the third movement is unacknowledged in the *Enchiridion*, it is because Erasmus has not yet imbibed a Dionysian view of God's folly in

First Corinthians, nor the implications of Paul's role-playing in Second Corinthians, a *stultitia Christi* to compliment his ideal of *philosophia Christi*.

10.5 The *Moria* as a Genre of Inversion

The essential role of wisdom and folly as operative principles of the *Enchiridion* invites us to review the famous comparison between that work and the *Moria* in Erasmus' letter to Martin van Dorp:

> In the *Moria* we have had nothing at all in mind other than what is in the night-time writings, although through different means. In the *Enchiridion* we treated the form of the Christian life in a straightforward manner. In the booklet *On the Education of a Christian Prince*, we recall openly those things in which a prince ought to be instructed. What we did here on the surface and uncovered we do indirectly and under the pretext of praise in the *Panegyricus*. What is done in the *Moria* under the appearance of a game is nothing else than what has been done in the *Enchiridion*. We seek to advise, not to bite; to benefit, not to injure, to reflect on man's morals, not to oppose them.[574]

Erasmus' statement is significant; but are its analogies valid? In a double ratio, the *Moria* stands in relation to the *Enchiridion* as the *Panegyricus* stands in relation to the *Education of the Christian Prince*. The comparisons relate similarities of content and differences of method, distinguishing between discourses which are "open" (*simpliciter*, *palam*) and those which are "indirect" (*sub laudis praetextu…oblique*). Specifically, Erasmus calls attention to the difference be-

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[574]Translation based on Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly* 142. "Nec aliud omnino spectauimus in *Moria* quam quod in caeteris lucubrationibus, tametsi via diuersa. In *Enchiridio* simpliciter Christianae vitae formam tradidimus. In libello *De principis institutione* palam admonemus quibus rebus principem oporteat esse instructum. In *Panegyrico* sub laudis praetextu hoc ipsum tamen agimus oblique quod illic egimus aperta fronte. Nec aliud agitur in *Moria* sub specie lusus quam actum est in *Enchiridio*. Admonere voluimus, non mordere; prodesse, non laedere; consulere moribus hominum, non officere." Erasmus, "'Letter to Martin Dorp'" 86–93.

tween the encomium as a literal discourse and the so-called "paradoxical encomium" which uses the genre of praise subversively. While the *Enchiridion* and *Education of the Christian Prince* reflect the "open" discourse, the *Panegyricus* (an oration written to celebrate the 1504 triumphal entry of Philip of Austria, Duke of Burgundy) is coupled with the *Moria* as an "indirect" mode of writing (*oblique*), a "pretext" related to the "appearance" of play (*sub specie lusus*).

The analogies are simplistic, perhaps deceptively so. Are we to believe, for example, that the praises of the *Panegyricus* are, *serio ludere*, hyperboles intended to expose the weaknesses and faults of its regal subject, as allegiance to Folly undermines all those to whom she lays claim? How do we account for the vast differences in style, historical occasion, imagination, irony, and ambiguity? The precise nature of similar content in the *Enchiridion* and the *Moria* is likewise obscure and intriguing. "We have had *nothing at all* in mind *other than what is in*[…]" (*nec aliud omnino spectauimus*[…] *quam quod*[…]) "What is done in the *Moria*[…]is *nothing else than what has been done*[…]" Since the two antecedents of *quod* are negations, "nothing other" (*nec aliud*) than what has been seen or done previously, the reader is coerced into making vague judgments connecting the serious works with the jocoserious. And yet to equate Folly's Epicurean argument, satire of intellectuals and clergy, and holy idiocy with the *Enchiridion*'s "summary guide to living" and "short way to Christ" is a stretch which requires certain hermeneutical expectations. The notion of a discourse which is "open" and another which is "indirect" recalls the bivalent, hermeneutic paradoxy of the Platonists and Augustine, with the significant exception that Erasmus uses it here to refer not only to figures within a given text but to entire genres.

The comparison of the *Moria* with the *Panegyricus* is illuminated in a letter Erasmus writes to John Colet in 1504. Upon sending Colet his volume of *Lucubrationes*, Erasmus ex-

plains why his literary forms are innovations and not slavish reproductions of the conventional modes. As the *Enchiridion* improves on the devotional treatise by proposing "something like an art of piety, in the manner of those who devised certain methods in the disciplines," the *Panegyricus* alters the conventional *laudatio*: "I however have taken advantage of a new art, so that I am completely free in my flattery and also extremely flattering in my freedom."[575] The sense of this passage and its rhetorical inversion rely on the paradoxical encomium of the *serio ludere* tradition. Erasmus uses the word *libertas* in exactly the same way nine years later in his letter to Dorp, as the license of the fool.[576] Thus even in the *Panegyricus* Erasmus claims for himself a right to use abject flattery as a means of ironical subversion. The elusive contrast between bold truth-telling (*parrhesia*) and pretense-in-praise, recalling the distinction between *simulatio* and *dissimulatio* in Cicero and Augustine, become Erasmus' two alternating modes of "indirect" discourse.[577]

Taking Erasmus at his word, this method represents a real discovery for him, a new grounds for artistic license on par with the wisdom of the fool and in contrast to prior justifications based on the author's upright life (*lasciva pagina, vita proba*)[578] or the integrity of language. Erasmus' *novum artificium* (whether he deems it "new" as his own invention or as a discovery) was undoubtedly inspired by Lucian, whose dialogues he and Thomas More decided to translate for publication in 1505. In Erasmus' dedication to *Gallus* (one of his favorites, men-

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[575]CWE 2, p. 87. "Ego tamen nouo sum vsus artificio, vt et in adulando sim liberrimus et in libertate adulantissimus." Erasmus, *Opus Epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterdami* Ep. 181, 1.403–06.
[576]Erasmus, "'Letter to Martin Dorp'" 95–98, 200–03.
[577]What is "new" in this "art" saved Erasmus from the nauseating obligation to aggrandize and immortalize his subject (using a classical idiom, he says is was written *alieno stomacho*) Erasmus compares *Panegyricus* with some of his early poetry: "I was so adverse to the *Panegyricus* that I do not ever remember doing anything with a more reluctant spirit. For this kind of thing seemed to me impossible to carry out without approaching abject flattery." cwe 2, 87. Cf. *Contempt*, Ep. 1194, p. 457-8; cwe 134.
[578]From Martial, *Epigrams*, 1.4. As stated earlier, Antonio Becadelli borrowed this maxim to defend his own obscene work, *Hermaphroditus* (1425).

tioned also by Folly), he develops the language of *libertas-adulatio* in a discourse of jest-and-earnest:

> He possesses such grace of style, such felicity of invention, such great charm in his humour, and such keenness in his biting criticism; and so he tickles one with his allusions, in this way he mixes frivolous things with serious matters, serious things with frivolous matters; in this way he speaks in truth while laughing and he laughs while speaking in truth; in this way he depicts the manners, emotions, and endeavors of men, as if painting them with a brush[…] You will hear the voice of Gallus the cock conversing together with his master the shoemaker, in a way more amusing than any jester could and yet sometimes wiser than the rabble of theologians and philosophers in the great schools who argue arrogantly over great trifles.[579]

The description of Lucian's method – combining *serietas* with *nugacitas* and truth-in-humor (*ridens vera*) with humor-in-truth (*vera ridet*) – harkens back to Erasmus' "discovery" of 1504 and demonstrates a clear anticipation of the *Moria*'s moriasophia. Here (in the language of the letter to Dorp) a binary system of outspokenness and pretense accounts for the elevation of the ridiculous in tandem with the undermining of the vicious. This system constitutes a second structural aspect of the *Moria*'s first and second movements along with pagan ignorance and Christian malice. In the first movement, the persona of Folly defines herself by elevating natural dispositions like cheer, merriment, optimism, and joyfulness to the status of virtues, while nature, sexuality,

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[579]Erasmus, *CWE* Ep. 193, 2.43–66. "Tantum obtinet in dicendo gratiae, tantum in inueniendo felicitatis, tantum in iocando leporis, in mordendo aceti, sic titillat allusionibus, sic seria nugis, nugas seriis miscet; sic ridens vera dicit, vera dicendo ridet, sic hominum mores, affectus, studia quasi penicillo depingit…Audies enim Gallum cum haero sutore confabulantem magis ridicule quam vllus possit *gelotopoios*, sed rursum sapientius quam theologorum ac philosophorum vulgus nonnunquam in scholis magno supercilio magnis de nugis disputat" Erasmus, *Opus Epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterdami* 43–61.

fantasy, and pleasure are treated as if they were metaphysical and moral principles. In the second movement, Folly speaks pretentiously and facetiously of behavior which is deceitful, avaricious, prideful, and hypocritical.

We might say, then, that free-speech and pretense, also described as humor-in-truth and truth-in-humor, are two rhetorical modes of Erasmian moriasophia. His technique is not so different from that of Plato, St. Paul, Petrarch, and Cusa, who juxtapose learning and ignorance in a similar technique of outspoken boasting and understatement. In a battle of divided perspectives, the distortions of literalism and logic are a "shock therapy" for treating an adversary's gross distortions of reality, when intellectualism is detached from humanity.

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At this point we should pause to consider how Erasmus develops a new way of connecting the rhetorical modes of moriasophia to the dialectical foundation. The authors we have considered up to this point – especially Plato, Petrarch, and Cusa, composed literary discourses or dialogues which juxtapose moments of irony and paradoxy with moments of literalism within a single work (expressed in Petrarch's "undulation" metaphor), providing some sort of anchor in rational argument for the reader to hold on to. But Erasmus suggests, in the *Enchiridion* and the *Moria*, that the joco-serio balance can be maintained in separate, complementary genres. That is to say, wisdom and folly not only define the conceptual and rhetorical dynamics of each work individually but each work is also defined by its rhetorical mode – for the *Enchiridion* this mode is discursive logic, while for the *Moria*, it is the irony of the paradoxical encomium.

The most glaring consequence of an inverse-genre theory is the broadening of moriasophia's two main rhetorical modes, to the point of removing the rational and moral filter through which poetic language is interpreted, resolved, and reconstructed as logical language. Folly is

shady and untrustworthy, yet hers is the only perspective, the only persona through which the premises of the text are asserted. Contrast this to the authorial personae of the ship of fools literature, whose commentaries represent a stabilizing voice of wisdom in the midst of so many foolish behaviors. This does not mean that the *Moria* is entirely without moments of literalism and discursive reason, or that readers detach the author from the work completely. Rather the absence of authorial agency or perspectival commentary within the work means that an affirmative, constructive understanding of the *Moria*'s moriasophia is entirely dependent on a subjective application of ideas drawn from sources outside the text. As with Plato's report-of-a-report-of-a-long-ago-conversation, a mythical realm of Folly detaches the narrative and its "events" from historical context and mystifies them, so that the reader is forced to focus on the language and interpret critically at practically every step along the way. Such a hermeneutic situation, a reader invested with full responsibility to interpret subversive language, is radical for Erasmus' time.

The suggestion of an inverse relationship between the *Enchiridion* and the *Moria* opens the hermeneutic door to numerous parallelisms and inversions within the two texts, as a mirror reproduces its subject with an illusion of reversibility. For example, both works appeal to the Delphic principle of self-knowledge as the foundation for the discovery of truth. The Erasmus of the *Enchiridion* emphasizes self-knowledge as the "beginning of wisdom" in a chapter heading. The ancient exhortation is both "in accord with the Scriptures" as well as his own literary purpose, that of a *speculum*: "I shall set before you a kind of likeness of yourself, as in a painting, so that you may have a clear knowledge of what you are on the inside and what you are skin-deep." [40] A little later, Erasmus says that self-knowledge is also the basis for the ethical ideal, leading to true happiness: "the only road to happiness is first to know yourself and then not to

act in anything according to the passions but in all things according to the judgment of reason."[580]

The *Moria* turns the principle of self-knowledge on its head, but not before offering a negative image, a sort of parody. Self-knowledge, for Folly, is the grounds for her self-praise: "Who can describe me better than I myself? – unless someone imagines that somebody else knows me better than I know myself" (Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly* 11). Of course Folly's premises are erroneous, since self-description is not the same as self-knowledge, and the quality of self-knowledge is measured not only in relation to others but in relation to objective reality or God. Thus, while there is some truth to what Folly asserts, her sophism may be posited by any self-blinded narcissist. Yet Folly persists, building on this claim with the argument that she is self-evident,

> as if you could not tell at a glance who I am, 'prima facie' as it were, or as if anyone who might claim I am Minerva or Sophia could not be refuted by one good look at me, even if I did not identify myself in speech, 'that truest mirror of the mind'. For I never wear disguises, nor do I say one thing and think another. I always look exactly like what I am, so much so that I cannot be concealed[...]
> (Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly* 13)

Once again, Folly's sophism attracts with partial truths, which (at this early point in he *Moria*) contributes to the credibility of her character. Indeed, some things are revealed by physical appearance and by speech. The assertion rings true for Folly, because she, as a personification, appears conceptually pure, folly-in-itself, as self-evident as a Platonic Form. The qualities of Folly are at one with her self-identity. Of course physical appearance and speech may also be deceptive, just as the positive terms given to privations contradict their non-being. *Verba* at odds with

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[580]Erasmus, *Handbook* 46.

res, "folly" does not signify an essential unity any more than terms like "inconsistency," "contradiction," and "sophistry." It is important to point out, however, how this "self-image" of Folly plays on the *speculum* genre evoked in the *Enchirdion*. Her sincerity and clarity are "skin-deep" and a blatant denial of the limits of perspective in this dark world, *per speculum et aenigmate*.[581]

Folly's illusion of self-knowledge is soon passed over for the more substantial, operative principle for Folly's folly, *philautia*, or self-love. In the *Enchiridion*, Erasmus mentions *philautia* as the Greek equivalent for "living in the flesh," an ignorance of spiritual things which causes one to rely on petty concerns and to cling to superstitions in fear (Erasmus, *Handbook* 83). Folly maintains the contrast while reversing the hierarchy, beginning with a valuation of emotion over reason. Twice Folly defines herself as a principle of emotion (*affectus*), and both times in contrast to the Stoics, who (in accord with the persona of the *Enchiridion*) hold that wisdom is "being led by reason" (Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly* 28, 45).[582] An *affectus* principle complements the pleasure principle as a motive force seeking the highest moral good. Like nature and pleasure, emotion is an equivocal concept, good in itself but also relative to reason and vulnerable to disorder. As the golden rule, self-love is the criterion for love of others, while it is also the impetus for Lucifer's rebellion ("I will not serve")[583] and a font of vices to be unleashed in the end times, when "people will be lovers of themselves."[584]

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[581]As Miller points out, the argument from truth-in-appearance contradicts the argument from truth-in-speech Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly* 13, n. 5..

[582]"Etenim quum Stoicis definitoribus nihil aliud sit sapientia, quam duci ratione, contra stultitia, affectuum arbitrio moueri[...]" "Iam primum illud in confesso est, affectus omnes ad stultitiam pertinere, quandoquidem hac nota a stulto sapientem discernunt, quod illum affectus, hunc ratio temperat; eoque Stoici perturbationes omnes ceu morbos a sapiente semouent." Erasmus, *Moria* 316–18, 625–28.

[583]The origin of this medieval attribution is Jer. 2:20 and Is. 14:12-15, yet it appears frequently in the writings of the Fathers of the Church.

[584]"estontai gar oi anthropoi philautoi" (2 Tim. 32). The dangerous potential of self-love is revealed in its apocalyptic context, where it joins the most hateful vices: "You must understand this, that in the last days distressing times will come. For people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, inhuman, implacable, slanderers, profligates, brutes, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to the outward form of godliness

Many such parallels and inversions, facilitated by changes in semantics and perspective, may be discovered through a comparative analysis of the *Enchiridion* and the *Moria*. The dialectic center of folly and wisdom remains the same, but shifts unpredictably. The persona of the *Moria* takes great liberties with every argument and example, destabilizing the criteria for rational discourse with contraries and contradictions. Among the many qualities associated with the folly of the first movement are joy, cheer, laughter, sex, entertainment, flattery, self-love, comfort, desire, pleasure, drunkenness, beneficence, shamelessness and fearlessness, as if folly is a pagan nature deity, such as Rhea, Silenus, Dionysius, or Pripapus. In the second movement, folly seems to represent weakness, error, indiscretion, and all sorts of vices, especially pride and arrogance, like a vice figure from the ship of fools or a medieval morality play. And in the third, an abrupt shift in the discourse depicts folly as simplicity, humility, piety, and faith, much as the idiota of Christian tradition. Folly's dialectical opposite, meanwhile, is associated with such qualities as anxiety, sickness, lifelessness, solitude, criticism, severity, aridity, austerity, tedium, boredom, and gloominess (Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly* 23, 45, 57).

Given the expanded boundaries of definition and signification, Erasmus has provided many opportunities for the dynamic interaction of the "hypothetical" dialectic of the persona and the actual dialectic of a learned establishment in Erasmus' Europe. The delusions of a predominantly ignorant, pagan folly frequently reveal unexpected truisms and flashes of insight, while the self-interested actions of malicious, contemporary folly are often common foibles and sometimes rooted in good intentions. The third movement reverses the trend: the simple-minded spir-

but denying its power. Avoid them!" (2 Tim. 3:1-4). These are the very same qualities attributed to the *morosophoi* of Folly's second movement, the malicious hypocrites.

In the *City of God*, Augustine describes its opposite, a proper self-love: "Indeed, so that man might know how to love himself, an end is established for him, to which all that he does is directed, that he might be blessed. For he who loves himself wants nothing other than blessedness." "Ut enim homo sese diligere nosset, constitutus est ei finis, quo referret omnia quae ageret, ut beatus esset. Non enim qui se diligit, aliud esse vult quam beatus." 10.3.

ituality of the idiota is punctuated by episodes of irrationality. The question we would like to pose here is the basis of Erasmus' *quod*, his premise that the *Enchiridion* and the *Moria* share the same content and purpose. Like van Dorp, many of Erasmus' first interpreters simply did not buy this idea. What makes the *Moria* any different from other works of parody and satire, which belittle the author's adversaries in the exaggeration of faults?

Erasmus' approach to the interpretation of his subversive genre can be viewed through a metaphor, one which became increasingly important for him from at least the time of the *Enchiridion* through the *Adagia* of 1515: the "Sileni of Acibiades." In Plato's *Symposium*, Alcibiades describes Socrates' likeness to a commonplace statue of the drunken teacher and companion of Dionysus. The statue is hollow and "full of tiny statues of the gods." Like the figure of Silenus, Socrates has an ugly appearance (bald, fat, snub-nosed, with thick lips, etc.) but possesses within that which is divine. Though the origin of this metaphor is well-known today, in Erasmus' time it was still novel.

To understand why Erasmus found this metaphor attractive, and why it became for him a figure of literary interpretation, it is necessary to return to its source in Plato. Alcibiades' comparison is substantial, detailed, and a climactic moment in the dialogue, going on for several pages just before the conclusion (Plato, *Symposium* 215a-222c).[585] First of all, the Silenus-Socrates comparison is the centerpiece of Alcibiades' contribution to the evening's contest of encomia. He therefore uses the Silenus "image" (*eikon*) not only to describe Socrates but to extol him with this revealing "truth" (*alētheia*). Second, Alcibiades does not focus so much on the contrasting nature of Socrates' physical appearance as much as his behavior: as witnesses can attest, he is "impudent, contemptuous, and vile." In public, "his whole life is one big game – a game of irony" (216e). Socrates' shows arrogance and pride in his rejection of Alcibiades' physical beauty.

These repulsive attributes put into sharper contrast the divine beauty, courage, strength, and wisdom which Socrates conceals internally. To embellish his Silenus analogy, Alcibiades also compares Socrates with the ominous figure of Marsyas, the flute-playing satyr who was flayed alive for daring to compete with Apollo. While Marsyas "cast spells" on people with his music, Socrates (says Alcibiades) is "yet more marvelous" (*thaumasioteros*); for with words alone he has the power to possess people and "to reveal to the gods those who are ready for the mysteries": "let anyone – man, woman, or child – listen to you or even to a poor account of what you say – and we are all struck with astonishment and possessed" (Plato, *Symposium* 215d).[586] The rest of Alicibiades' speech describes his own "possession" by Socrates and his desperate but failed attempt to make Socrates his lover (i.e., his desire to "possess" Socrates).

In short, Alcibiades eulogizes Socrates as a "wonder" (Plato, *Symposium* 215c, 221c). Bizarre (*atopos*) in his many contradictions, he is a walking paradox who can transform individuals and lead them to the divine mysteries (Plato, *Symposium* 215a, 221d). These qualities are the very same which are transferred over time to the moriasophic fool. Erasmus was undoubtedly fascinated with the metaphor, not only as an illustration of complex irony in Plato's literary character but as a theological and hermeneutical principle. In the *Enchiridion*'s fifth rule (and the most important, if we are to judge by its length), Erasmus writes:

> Therefore let this [fifth] rule be ever in readiness, that we do not linger over temporal matters at any time, but move on, rising up to the love of spiritual things, which are incomparably better, despising visible things in comparison to those that are invisible….You are ravished by physical beauty; why do you show no passion for that beauty which does not manifest itself to the senses. Transfer your

[585]Greek text consulted is (Plato, *Platonis Opera* Vol. 2).
[586]Translation based on Nehamas and Woodruff.

> love to that beauty which is everlasting, heavenly, and incorruptible, and you will be more moderate in your love of the fleeting and fading beauty of the body…. The same rule applies for all literary works, which are made up of a literal sense and a mysterious sense, body and soul, as it were, in which you are to ignore the letter and look rather to the mystery. The writings of all the poets and the Platonist philosophers belong to this category, but especially the sacred Scriptures, which like those images of Silenus mentioned by Alcibiades enclose unadulterated divinity under a lowly and almost ludicrous external appearance. (Erasmus, *Handbook* 67–68)[587]

The appropriation of the Silenus metaphor to literary and biblical interpretation is a bold and insightful step taken by Erasmus. Plato's original does not draw any explicit connection between the figure of Socrates and the idea of the literary text. Erasmus, with the guidance of Augustine, Dionysius, and Origen, seems to find in the Silenus a suitable illustration of St. Paul's distinction between reading the "letter" and reading according to the "spirit." Ignoring entirely Plato's literary context, including Alcibiades, Socrates, and the narrative of philosophy's invisible power and seduction, Erasmus follows the Platonist hermeneutic: in exactly those places where the language of a text appears most absurd, one must turn to allegorical or mystical interpretation (Erasmus uses *mysterium* and *allegoria* synonymously).

He then applies the Silenus image to the various aspects of Genesis' creation narrative – God molding Adam from clay and breathing life into his soul, Eve taken from Adam's rib, the

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[587]"Ergo haec regula semper ad manum habenda, necubi in rebus temporariis restitemus, sed inde ueluti gradu facto ad spiritalium amorem adhibita collatione assurgamus aut prae his, quae sunt inuisibilia, id quod est uisibile contemnere incipiamus….Rapit te uenustas corporis, cur non magis ardes eam speciem, quae latet? In eam transfer amorem tuum, quae perpetua est, quae caelestis, quae incorrupta, et moderatius amabis formam caducam et fugacem corporis. Idem obseruandum in omnibus litteris, quae ex simplici sensu et mysterio tamquam corpore atque animo constant, ut contempta littera ad mysterium potissimum spectes." "Cuiusmodi sunt litterae poetarum omnium et ex

tree of life, the serpent, etc. Without using a Silenus-like hermeneutic, a reader will not be able to see any difference between the Bible and the myth of Prometheus. Through the hermeneutic, one might say the Silenus becomes, for Erasmus, something more than an ordinary metaphor, in so far as a metaphor strikes a comparison between two instances of human experience. Rather, the adaptation of the Silenus statue to the idea of the text elevates the *eikon* to the status of symbol, because its object is absolute – the eternal, mystical, and spiritual.

If we then consider the subject of the *Enchiridion*'s fifth rule, the Silenus reference is not limited to text and interpretation. It applies equally to Erasmus' instruction to "proceed further" (*gradu facere*) and "rise up" (*assurgere*) from the visible things of this world to the invisible reality. His specific reference to an ascent of beauty (*Rapit te uenustas corporis*) recalls both Alcibiades, whose famed attractiveness pales in comparison with Socrates' wisdom, and the prophetess from Mantinea, Diotima, who teaches Socrates how to ascend the ladder of divine Eros. Erasmus exhorts his reader to literally "transfer your love" (*transfer amorem tuum*) from the physical realm to the spiritual, in a movement of the soul and by the power of the will, although he does not say here how this is done.[588] The connection between sensual experience and the act of reading demonstrates Erasmus' understanding of the paradox of Socrates and how it is related to both metaphysical paradoxy (apparent-real) and hermeneutical paradoxy (concealed-revealed). For Erasmus, the Platonist language corresponded almost perfectly to the theology of St. Paul, who juxtaposed flesh and spirit when speaking of human experience but letter and spirit in scriptural interpretation. Erasmus' proposal to somehow "transfer" one's consciousness from ordi-

philosophis Platonicorum. Maxime uero scripturae diuinae, quae fere silenis illis Alcibiadeis similes sub tectorio sordido ac paene ridiculo merum numen claudunt." Erasmus, *Enchiridion* 162–63, 164.

[588] James Rhodes notes the similarity between the town of Diotima's origin, "Mantinea," and the word for prophetic, "mantinikēs." Rhodes 304.

nary, human experience to a state of spiritual vision and understanding connects his theological purpose to the contemplative ideal in Cusa and Petrarch.

The inverse form of this Platonist lens for empirical and literary reality occurs in the *Moria*. In an extended argument that folly, rather than wisdom, is the primary motive for deeds of valor and learning, the persona Folly uses the Silenus to demonstrate her claim to "true prudence":

> […]hear how far the men who boast of [prudence] actually are from possess it. First, it is clear that all human affairs, like the Sileni of Alcibiades, have two aspects quite different from each other. Hence, what appears 'at first blush' (as they say) to be death, will, if you examine it more closely, turn out to be life; conversely, life will turn out to be death; beauty will become ugliness; riches will turn to poverty; notoriety will become fame; learning will be ignorance; strength, weakness; noble birth will be ignoble; joy will become sadness; success, failure; friendship, enmity; what is helpful will seem harmful; in brief, you will find everything suddenly reversed if you open the Silenus[…] If someone should try to strip away the costumes and makeup from the actors performing a play on the stage and to display them to the spectators in their own natural appearance, wouldn't he ruin the whole play? [...]As there is nothing more foolish than inverted wisdom, so there is nothing more imprudent than upside-down prudence. Indeed he who subverts prudence is the one who does not accommodate himself to present circumstances, is unwilling to engage in the forum and will be mindful

> not to skip over that law of festivity, 'take a drink or take your leave', and to protest that the story is not a story (Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly* 43–44).[589]

Without some knowledge of the Silenus metaphor, it would be impossible to understand what Folly is saying. Not only does Erasmus lift the metaphor out of its mimetic context, detached from the *Symposium*'s encomia, Socrates' seductive power, and Alcibiades' homosexual pursuit, but he also obscures the fundamental relationship of its unattractive exterior to its sacred contents. Instead of a dialectic of ugliness and beauty, or of superficiality and substance, or of visible to invisible reality, Folly reduces the signification of the Silenus to illusion and truth. This fact is not immediately apparent but comes into focus after several examples, principally that of the world-as-stage, and her familiar point is that people live by illusion and deception.

Notice that Folly does not only do an injustice to the Silenus metaphor but she inverts it, even as she argues that the wise are those who have perverted the truth. It is particularly clever, when we think of the fact that Erasmus might easily – too easily – have adapted the Silenus to Folly. But Erasmus has gutted and de-mystified the metaphor. There may be contrariety between the many disguises of personal pride or vanity and the hidden inhibitions or limitations but there is no paradoxy, no simultaneous contradiction between outward sign and mystery. One doesn't "wonder" at actors and costumes.

While the Silenus representation is indeed another instance of the *Moria* inverting the *Enchiridion*, it would be a mistake to think that the metaphor has no further importance for

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[589]"audite obsecro, quam procul absint ab [prudentiam], qui hoc nomine sese venditant. Principio constat, res omneis humanas, velut Alcibiadis Silenos, binas habere facies nimium inter sese dissimiles; adeo ut, quod prima, ut aiunt, fronte mors est, si interius inspicias, vita sit: contra quod vita, mors: quod formosum, deforme: quod opulentum, id pauperrimum: quod infame, gloriosum: quod doctum, indoctum: quod robustum, imbecille: quod generosum, ignobile: quod laetum, triste: quod prosperum, adversum: quod amicum, inimicum: quod salutare, noxium: breviter omnia repente versa reperies, si Silenum aperueris….Ut nihil est stultius praepostera sapientia, ita perversa prudentia nihil imprudentius: siquidem perverse facit, qui sese non accommodet rebus praesentibus, foroque nolit uti, nec saltem legis illius convivalis meminerit, η πῖθι, η α*πιθι, postuletque ut fabula iam non sit fabula" Erasmus, *Moria* 577–85, 612–15.

Erasmus' moriasophia. The insight Erasmus' showed in associating the Silenus with metaphysical and hermeneutical paradoxy seems to have evaporated in Folly's argument along with the *Symposium*, and it begs the question of whether there is another sense in which Folly and the *Moria* may be likened to the Sileni. Erasmus' return to the Sileni of Alcibiades in the *Adagia* of 1515 and his uncommonly long commentary demonstrates the depth of thought he had dedicated to it as well as his broad application of its metaphoric value.

In the *Adagia*, Erasmus uses the image of the European fool to embellish on the strange appearance of Silenus as "Bacchus' tutor and the court buffoon of the gods of poetry (for they too have their jesters like the princes of our own day)."[590] This jester's role is reflected in Silenus' look-alike, Socrates, who "might have been taken for some blockheaded country bumpkin" on account of "his peasant face, glaring like a bull, and his snub nose always sniffling." More to the point, his "unbroken flow of humour gave him the air of a buffoon." Though the fool allusions are dropped from Erasmus' subsequent examples of Sileni-like persons, the fool-language leaves its mark. In both cases, Erasmus uses the Greek import *morio*, associating them with the folly of God in St. Paul and the persona of his *Moria*. Other Sileni of ancient history include the philosophers Antithenes, Diogenes, and Epictetus, and from the Bible, the prophets, the Apostles, and even the "awe-inspiring" (*mirificus*) Christ, of whom Erasmus writes, "I cannot see why all who rejoice in the name of Christians should not do their best to imitate [the Silenus]" (Erasmus, "The Sileni of Alcibiades" 264). Such adaptation pushes the boundaries of the original metaphor practically past recognition, most notably omitting the enchanting, seductive power of Socrates' words.[591]

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[590]Translation is that of Margaret Mann Phillips, in Erasmus, "The Sileni of Alcibiades" 262. The Latin text consulted is Erasmus, "Sileni Alcibiadis".

[591]"Bacchi paedagogo numinumque poeticorum morione, quandoquidem habent et illi, principum nostratium exemplo, suos γελωτοποιου." "Facies erat rusticana, taurinus aspectus, nares simae muccoque plenae. Sannionem

What Erasmus emphasizes, in the place of the physical deformity depicted in the Silenus are many of the very same qualities attributed to the idiota. For example, he writes: "Such Sileni were the Apostles, poor, unschooled, unlettered, base-born, powerless, lowest of the low – the objects of everyone's scorn, ridiculed, hated, accursed – in fact the public laughing-stock and abomination of the world."[592] As with the Delphic invitation to self-knowledge, Erasmus borrows freely from the ancients when he finds their images a powerful means of embellishing and reinforcing Scriptural truths. Twice Erasmus links the Silenus with the idiota explicitly. He says, for example, that one "may often find more genuine wisdom in a simple and somewhat stupid idiota, instructed by the spirit of Christ, than in the subtle Scotists or a multitude of solemn-looking theologians, with their inflated (*turdigis*) Aristotle and confusing horde of magisterial definitions, conclusions, and propositions."[593] A little later, he writes that the gospel parables, if viewed superficially, seem to be those of an idiota.[594] By implication, therefore, the insightful piety of the idiota is likened to the philosophy of Socrates, in a *Logos*-to-*logos* analogy, the wisdom of the Word of God compared to that of the godly philosopher, who appeared to believe in the creation of the world and immortality.

With this much broader and richer description of the Socratic Silenus as a character type, Plato's ironic philosopher enlarged to include the fool and the idiota, Erasmus applies the paradox of the individual to every aspect of life and human experience, wherever an essential reality

quempiam bardum ac stupidum dixisses." "Denique jocus ille perpetuus nonnullam habebat morionis speciem." Erasmus, "Sileni Alcibiadis" 12–14, 25–26, 32–33.

[592]"Huiusmodi Sileni fuerunt apostoli, pauperes, inculti, illitterati, ignobiles, imbecilles, abjecti, omnibus omnium contumeliis expositi, irrisi, invisi, execrabiles, ac pene publicum orbis simul et odium et ludibrium." Erasmus, "Sileni Alcibiadis" 103–05. Cf. 1 Cor. 4:13, where Paul speaks of being looked upon as the "scum of this world."

[593]"Adeo ut non raro plus verae germanaeque sapientiae deprehendas in uno quopiam homuncione, juxta vulgi opinionem idiota simplici ac semifatuo, cujus mentem non subtilis ut vocant Scotus, sed coelestis ille Christi docuit spiritus, quam in multis theologorum tragicis personis ac ter quaterque magistris nostris, Aristotele suo turgidis, magistralium definitionum, conclusionum et propositionum turba differtis." Erasmus, "Sileni Alcibiadis" 124–31. My translation.

is masked by appearances. In a paean to nature, he says that living things hide the more precious,[595] as flowers and plants conceal their seeds, and as the earth hides gold and gems deep within. Among the elements, the higher ones (air and fire) are also furthest from the senses. What is best and most vital among animals is "secreted in the inward parts," such as breath, while in humans what is divine is not visible to the eye. Even the most important things in the universe are unseen, such as separate substances. Above all this is God, who is "furthest removed from our senses[…]further than our understanding or our knowing, the single source of all things," and also the sacraments of the Church, whose outward signs (e.g., water, salt, oil) are indicative of spiritual powers.[596]

In hermeneutics, Erasmus echoes the *Enchiridion* when he asks whether the events of the creation story in Genesis would not seem just like the fables of Homer's workshop. To his previous examples from the Scriptures (Erasmus refers to them here as the "secret letters," *arcanae literae*), he adds Lot's incest, the "entire story" of Samson, David's adultery, and Hosea's marriage to a prostitute, exclaiming "would not anyone with chaste ears turn away as from an immoral story? And yet under these veils, great heaven! What wonderful wisdom lies hidden!"[597]

Another instance of the Silenus paradox recapitulates the divided perspective in a way that is related to learned ignorance: "the real truth of things is always most profoundly concealed, and cannot be detected easily or by many people." Here is a theme in Plato and St. Paul

[594]"Euangelicas parabolas, si primum aestimes corticem, quis non judicet hominis esse idiotae?" Erasmus, "Sileni Alcibiadis" 178–79.
[595]"Itidem in cognitione germana rerum veritas semper altissime latet, quae nec facile nec a multis deprehenditur." Erasmus, "Sileni Alcibiadis" 183–4.
[596]"Adeo quicquid in omni rerum genere praeclarum est, id minus in conspicuo est. In arboribus flores et folia blandiuntur oculis, ipsa se late moles ostentat. At semen, in quo vis est omnium, quam est res minutula, quam abdita, quam non lenocinans aspectui, quam non ostentatrix sui! Aurum et gemmas in altissimas terrae latebras abdidit natura. In elementis quae vocant, quo quicque praestantius est, hoc longius a sensibus est remotum, velut aer et ignis. In animantium genere quod est optimum et efficacissimum, id in intimis abditum habent." Erasmus, "Sileni Alcibiadis" 147–54.

which Erasmus finds difficult to detach himself from. Whether we are speaking of the philosopher's *technē* taken for "foolish talk,"[598] or "wisdom language" of the worldly opposed to "the language of the cross," the greater number of people take folly for wisdom and wisdom for folly. Erasmus' tone changes sharply from instructive to critical, as he joins his own voice to Folly's in a seemingly endless parade (or tirade) of those whose physical appearance, learned speech, and exceptional reputation earn them the praise and admiration of others but whose actions reveal selfish, malicious intent. For about half of the commentary – an essay of some 648 lines – Erasmus continues to speak of seemingly learned men (long beards, cowls, stiff necks, belts, a proud brow, etc.) who are really buffoons, squanderers, impostors, gluttons and robbers; princes who are in truth despots, enemies of their own citizens, and despisers of law and peace; and bishops who are men of war, merchants, despots. Words, too, are like reversed Sileni, and when they convey the opposite of what they should. "What is sublime, they call humble; what is bitter they call sweet; the precious is called vile, and life, death."[599]

Time and again, like a refrain, Erasmus emphasizes that the multitude understand the Silenus backwards,[600] perceiving an illusion of grandeur, wealth, or authority as if it were the essential truth. Their admiration for charlatans and hypocrites is therefore a perverse kind of wonder.[601] While the multitude reverse the Silenus in this way, the one who would see things as they truly are must open it, or turn it "inside-out" (*invertere*) just as they would a proper Silenus. (*aperi Silenum praeposterum* 193). At times, Erasmus' language of divided perspective is a little

[597]"nonne qui verecundioribus sit auribus vt obscoenam fabulam auersetur? At sub his inuolucris, deum immortalem, quam splendida latet sapientia!" Erasmus, "Sileni Alcibiadis" 175–77.
[598]Plato, *Parmenides* 135d.
[599]Deinde ex praeposteris opinionibus praepostera rerum vocabula. Quod excelsum est humile vocant, quod amarum dulce, quod preciosum vile, quod vita mortem Erasmus, "Sileni Alcibiadis" 254–56.
[600]"Bona pars hominum praeposterum Silenum exprimunt." "Atque hinc praeposterum de rebus multitudinis iudicium, vt quibus primus debebatur honos." Erasmus, "Sileni Alcibiadis" 121–22, 247–8.

dizzying, since he enjoins his reader not only to "open" the reversed Silenus but to "reverse" it;[602] what this amounts to is a reversal of a reverse Silenus.

The representation of the Silenus metaphor and its development in Erasmus' thought through 1515 reveals a great deal about the relationship of the *Enchiridion* and the *Moria* and about the role of dialectic and rhetoric in Erasmian moriasophia. Extracting the original metaphor from its context, he leaves behind the tale of philosophy's seductive power, along with some of its literary humor, wit, and charm. But if Erasmus scales down the metaphor in some of its mimetic and poetic detail, he also amplifies and perhaps explodes its essential distinction, making of it a universal paradigm, a compression device for the paradoxy of reality in all its aspects, metaphysical, epistemological, and moral. The Silenus stands for dialectical difference which is irreconcilable because it is, in some sense, unknown, unseen, or incompletely understood. As long as there is an outside and an inside, something seen and something invisible, there is division, contrariety, and contradiction.

For Erasmus, the concept of folly is inseparable from the Silenus device. Folly, as depicted in the Sileni of Alcibiades, is a slave to the dialectical principle of contrariety, the paradox of reality viewed inversely. The sage looks beyond the appearances to that which is deeper, more substantial and significant, and ultimately eternal. The fool, on the other hand, prefers the appearances, as Folly herself argues in the *Moria*. To put this distinction in Platonist terms, while the sage looks beyond the many to a principle which unifies the diverse, "enfolding" differences in a cosmological and metaphysical origin, the fool swims in diversity without unity. And, as Parmenides' examination of the "not-one" demonstrates, many without one leads to con-

[601]Crassum vulgus, quoniam praepostere iudicat, nimirum ex his quae maxime sensibus corporis obuia sunt aestimans omnia, passim et labitur et errat ac falsis bonorum et malorum simulachris deluditur inuersosque Silenos miratur ac suspicit Erasmus, "Sileni Alcibiadis" 184–86.
[602]"Inuerte Silenum," Erasmus, "Sileni Alcibiadis" 170.

fusion: unstable identities, contingencies, and a "heaping up" of multitudes without any organizing principle. The dialectic explains the shifting center of the persona's conceptual identity as well as the disordered diversity of Folly's many followers.

What the Silenus does not, in itself, explain is how one-half of the divided perspective "inverts" (Folly's reversal reversed) to become its dialectical opposite, i.e., how Folly can be wise or itself become wisdom. Folly's representation of the Silenus in the *Moria* inverts only the perspective, the value placed on the exterior as in the manner described in the *Adages* of 1515. Her list of devotees (*religiossime*) in the *Moria*'s second movement is hardly distinguishable from the latter half of the Sileni Alcibiades. In both cases, she transitions quickly from those who have no particular claim to wisdom (open fools, who don no masks), to those who have "the appearance of wisdom" (*qui sapientiae speciem inter mortales tenent*) as the reversed Silenus. Grammarian, poets, rhetoricians, writers, lawyers, logicians, philososphers, theologians, monks, princes, popes, and priests are among the long list of hypocrites – literally actors who disguise their pride, vanity, greed and other vices (a malicious sort of *philautia*) under the cover of authority, self-importance, power, learning, and respectability. This is the section of the *Moria* which was augmented considerably in the Schürer edition of 1514 and the Froben edition of 1515. Hypocrisy was a theme with which Erasmus could easily get carried away. Like the hypocritical fools rather than the dull, gaping multitude, Folly is well aware of what is hidden and what is in view and is able to "open" the Silenus for the reader. But to what end? Not to divulge the wisdom of a Socrates or Paul but rather to indulge the appearances.

10.6 The Folly of Folly: Moriasophia at the Wall of Absurdity

It is not clear, nor has sufficient reason been given by literary critics, why the Folly of the second movement, steeped in such delightful depravity, makes a sudden turn to the divine folly and mania of Platonism and Christianity. In the moriasophic literature of Plato, Paul, Petrarch, and Cusa, there is either a rhetorical occasion – an accusation and defense (Paul, Petrarch) or an impetus of reason, a heightened experience of ignorance which increases the natural desire to know (Plato, Cusa). In the first case, the engine of moriasophia is the divided perspective, in the latter it is the paradoxy of reality – intellectual as well as experiential. In the *Moria*, Erasmus follows the rhetorical model, as Folly's very first sentence establishes the occasion for her encomium:

> Whatever mortals say about me everywhere (for I am not ignorant of how bad the rumor about Folly is, even among the most foolish), nevertheless here it is, this I say: I am the one who by my divinity delights gods and also men.[603]

Folly's "bad reputation" warrants her self-defense, setting up the encomium in the *elenchus* model of Paul and Petrarch. Here and throughout, there is a pervasive presence of wisdom, the wise, and philosophers, as well as the general multitude, in an alternative flow of *pro et contra*, through which Folly defines and clarifies her self-image. The wise say, for example, that it is foolish to praise oneself, that deception leads to unhappiness, that folly is insanity and misery, that flatters are dishonest, that reason is superior to emotion, and many such familiar arguments. According to her own principles, Folly refutes the arguments of the wise and establishes her own superiority.

In defending herself, Folly focuses not so much on laying out and critiquing her opponents' positions as she does on asserting her own. Her extraordinary claim to divinity, with the

power to give cheer, laughter, and delight, sets the stage for her role as a generative force of nature, a source of fertility and affective pleasures. Self-praise puts Folly in the classic role of the boaster, "singing her own praises" and "playing herself on the flute,"[604] in direct opposition to the convention of modesty. In this aspect, Erasmus parallels Folly's discourse to St. Paul, who tells us almost nothing concrete about his opponent's "wisdom speech."

Is the Folly of the first and second movements a figure of learned ignorance? Her assertiveness in self-knowledge and her confidence in argument would seem to suggest not. In place of the Socratic profession of ignorance we have a personal principle of self-love, while the desire as a means to pleasure replaces the desire for knowledge and wisdom. Folly argues explicitly that illusion and opinion are to be valued over knowledge and truth, going as far as saying that the man who escapes from Plato's cave is no happier than the one still in chains.

And yet if we look beyond the boldness of Folly's tone, we find not only admissions of ignorance but great praise for it. In fact, the entire thrust of the first movement is that a delusional folly leads to many sorts of pleasure. For example, from the beginning we are told that Mindlessness (Anoia) and Lethe (Forgetfulness) are two of Folly's attendants (Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly* 17). Babies, who have the least knowledge, are considered most attractive, and twice Folly praises the ignorance of old age (21–2, 48–49). Forgetfulness of life's tedium is also praiseworthy for anyone (47–9), as is that sort of insanity which frees one from anxiety and cares (57ff). The life of an ignorant animal is even preferred because they remember no pain and die without fear.

[603]My translation. "Utcunque de me vulgo mortales loquuntur, (neque enim sum nescia, quam male audiat stultitia etiam apud stultissimos,) tamen hanc esse, hanc inquam, esse unam, quae meo numine deos atque homines exhilaro" Erasmus, *Moria* 5–7.

[604]Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly* 11, 73, n. 33. One wonders if Erasmus had in mind (as Plato did) the boldness (and punishment) of Marsyas.

Toward the end of the first movement, Folly offers us an insightful, new reason why ignorance should be preferred: "For human affairs are so obscure and full of variety that nothing can be known."[605] This principle of skepticism is a new ground for unknowing and related to the premise of learned ignorance. Neither the proximity nor the differences should be overlooked. The person of learned ignorance clears away the debris of authority and learned tradition to re-root rational discourse in nature, common sense, and human experience, returning to the mysterious font of all reason in metaphysics and theological doctrine, while Folly simply denies intellectual wonder, brackets off the unknown, and fills the lacuna with opinion and pleasure.

There are still other ways one might discover, in Folly, learned ignorance. On the basis of language alone, Folly is brilliant, a figure of *ingenium*. Her total command over Latin grammar, syntax, and style is a marvel, as is her ability to illustrate a point with a treasure-trove of resources in illustrating every point. Her breadth and scope in the literature of sayings and proverbs (the fruit of years of compilation), applied artfully if not logically, are similarly astounding, a display of alter-wisdom hidden under a cloak of simplicity and joviality.

Folly, then, both is and is not a figure of learned ignorance. This same pattern also holds true for the figure of Socrates. In many ways, Folly is shaped to resemble the father of philosophy, *eiron*, and literary hero of elenchic dialectic. In her implied appearance and her manner, she is certainly unconventional and a kind of gadfly of the learned culture. Folly's every argument challenges authority and the most fundamental assumptions and opinions of the time, such as the cautious attitude toward sensual pleasure, or the basic premise that it is better to know the truth than to be deceived. Nevertheless, as with the person of learned ignorance, the persona of Folly also opposes the Socratic allusions. As we noted earlier, she does not profess ignorance personally even while she promotes it universally. Her self-knowledge is superficial, surpassed by her

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[605]"Nam rerum humanarum tanta est obscuritas, varietasque, ut nihil dilucide sciri posset." Erasmus, *Moria* 98–99.

self-love, and she directly opposes all that passes under the name of conventional wisdom. Most interestingly, Folly wears the badge of Socrates' opponents, the ancient sophists. Her every argument seems to fulfill the very accusation refuted by Socrates in his defense, that he "makes the lesser argument appear the greater." It is difficult to think of a better description of the rhetorical *modus operandi* of Folly in the first movement.

In the language of the Silenus metaphor, Folly represents another kind of "reversal" from that which Erasmus depicts in 1515. In the *Adages*, the reversal of the Silenus means either a shift of perspective or the embodiment of an inside-outside reversal of appearances and reality (the former applying to the ignorant multitude, the latter to the hypocrites). In the *Moria*, Erasmus takes us from an iconographic, static model to a dynamic one. Instead of asking his reader to imagine what a Silenus statue looks like, and then offering an objective commentary on the exterior-interior aspects of the model, he brings the Silenus to life and has him speak from his specific point of view. In the first movement, Folly's encomium, also an apology, focuses on the exterior, at the expense of the precious, interior wisdom. In the second movement, Folly paints a picture of those who embody the reversed Silenus, namely, those who have the appearance of wisdom but, inside, are true disciples of Folly. Folly therefore shifts the object of her praise from the outside of the Silenus to the internal reality, here malice.

This strategy of Erasmus has an interesting effect on the attributes of moriasophia which underscore his demonstration. The Folly of Erasmus' first and second movement bears some of the traits of Socrates, the Pauline fool, and the idiota but in fact contradicts others. The contradictions appear, at times, as if Erasmus is subverting aspects of the moriasophic tradition itself; but this is not the author's motive. Rather the discrepancies between Erasmus and Plato, Petrarch, and Cusa are the result of a radically different approach within the same tradition.

Folly's transition into the third movement is preceded, if not occasioned, through the citation – and *interpretation* – of key proverbs. Setting aside her description of foolish hypocrites, "lest I should seem to be composing a satire" (her praise coincides neatly with the reader's condemnation), Folly announces she will offer examples with "'nothing relevant to the saying',"[606] adding:

> First of all, everyone is very familiar with the proverb which admonishes us that in the absence of the reality, the appearance of it is the best thing. Hence, it is quite fitting that among the earliest lessons taught to schoolboys is the verse, "To pretend to be foolish when the case requires it is the highest wisdom." Judge for yourselves what an enormous advantage Folly must be if a deceptive shadow, a mere imitation of her, has merited such great praise from learned men[…] (117)

Since Folly, up to this point, has been defined as two kinds of appearances (the pleasing appearances of the proper Silenus and the deceptive appearances of the reversed), the absurd suggestion that there is such a thing as an "imitation" of folly and a "reality" of folly upsets the dialectic with a new contradiction. What is a reality of folly, and how does this put the discourse in a new light? Which "face" of Folly has the reader seen so far? Folly's statement at the beginning, that she is transparent, unconcealable, and a true image is suddenly subject to a radical questioning and recontextualization.

As her next move towards "nothing relevant," Folly signals a shift in the discourse with the crucial question: "Which is it more fitting to conceal, rare and precious items or common and cheap things?" Using botched demonstrative logic (a sophism), she responds with the corrupted proverb (quoted by Aristotle), "'The waterjug is left lying in the doorway'." For Folly, this

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[606]"ouden pros epos." One might also translate this, "Nothing to the point." The insertion of "nothing" here is in fact a cue that the persona is leading us to a greater spiritual "something." Erasmus, *Moria* 890.

means that what is left out in the open is not valuable. Taking this as her minor premise, she concludes, "what is precious is concealed, and what is cheap is left exposed." This is a clear reference to the Silenus metaphor, except that now Folly reverses the inner with the outer. Earlier, she argued that the appearances are better, and here she argues for the supremacy of the interior: "'The man who conceals his folly is better than the man who conceals his wisdom'" (121–22).

Changes in argument and tone accompany Folly's absurd interpretations and logical formulae, as she begins to draw on the Scriptures. She provides two new theological justifications for the universality of folly: God alone is wise, and God alone is good, therefore all mortals are fools. While this may appear like a variation on her previous arguments, the theological emphasis quietly assumes the place of her battle with sages and philosophers. Folly then borrows liberally from First and Second Corinthians, and points out that Paul, too, accepted the title of fool (122ff). In a substantial addition of 1514, Folly implies that she herself is a theologian, and she offers lessons in biblical interpretation. Significant is the fact that her biblical interpretations are principled and sound when compared with her interpretation of adages. Finally, Folly advocates for holy fools in their humility, simplicity, and piety and demonstrates how Christian happiness is attained through folly and insanity.

Is Folly still folly? Has Folly simply surrendered her subversive irony for the literal doctrines of theological wisdom? What has the author done with the Silenus and reversed Silenus? Until this moment, Folly's Silenus functions dialectically as negation, opposing, contrasting, and contradicting the worldly, rational wisdom of the philosophers and the systematic, theological wisdom of the learned schools. But in the third representation of folly, the persona seems to argue in earnest, while the conflict between the wise and the foolish dissipates entirely in the final pages. It appears that, in some way, Folly has "opened" the true Silenus, showing the reader an

interior "reality of folly" which is most profound and precious. With this inversion, her "mysteries" have transitioned from negations to affirmations.

It is clear that the holy, ecstatic folly of the third movement has converged with the wisdom of Christian piety and spirituality. But to understand why this last section is part of a logical progression and not a mere contradiction, it is necessary to return to the defense of the *Moria* in Erasmus letter to van Dorp. Speaking of the transition from the second movement to the third, Erasmus writes:

> For when Folly did this – embraced as one class the whole of humanity under the name of folly, and instructed that the sum of human happiness depends on folly – she passed through all types of people through kings and supreme pontifs. From there she came upon the apostles and even to Christ, to whom (we learn) a certain folly is given in the Sacred Scriptures. Not that there is any danger that someone will think the apostles and Christ were truly fools, but rather that they too have a certain weakness bestowed on our emotions, which can seem less than wise compared to that eternal and pure wisdom. Even still, it is this very folly that conquers all the wisdom of the world. In this same manner, the prophet Isaiah brings together the justice of all mortal beings and rags stained by a woman's menstruation. Not that the justice of those who are good is polluted, but because whatever is most pure among men is in some way impure when compared to the ineffable purity of God. And just as I proposed a wise folly, so I also depict a sane insanity and a prudent madness.[607]

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[607]My translation. "Etenim cum hoc ageret *Moria*, vt vniuersum rerum genus stulticiae nomine complecteretur, doceretque totius humanae felicitatis summam a stulticia pendere, per omne mortalium genus peruagata est vsque ad reges ac summos pontces; deinde peruentum est ad ipsos Apostolos atque adeo Christum, quibus stulticiam quandam tributam reperimus in sacris litteris. Neque vero periculum est ne quis hic imaginetur Apostolos aut

Erasmus justifies the concept of holy folly in the same way that Petrarch and Cusa justify learned ignorance, i.e., by re-positioning the dialectic in relation to the infinite. Folly and wisdom, at least in the rational, human understanding, are finite qualities in so far as they are used to modify human experience. Folly, in this sense, is universal, because she represents the privation of wisdom in each individual, what Erasmus calls "a weakness bestowed on our emotions" (*infirmum quiddam et nostris tributum affectibus*). It is significant that Erasmus uses the term *affectus* to refer to the emotions, rather than *cupido* or *passio*. In spiritual discourse, *affectus* is juxtaposed to *intellectus* to refer to the proper emotional disposition one should have for God. For many of the spiritual contemplatives, and for pietistic movements such as the modern devout, it is far more important for one to *love* God than to *know* God. *Affectus* is the motive force for piety, as intellectual desire is the motive force for knowledge. Erasmus balances the transition from the folly of ignorance and malice to that of the idiota and holy fool on this concept, along with *philautia* and *felicitas*. The ascent of Folly to the heights of Platonic mania and Christian ecstasy is not accomplished by the self-giving love of Christ but rather the fulfillment of self-love in the contemplation of God. The "reversed Silenus" has itself been not only reverted again but opened, and also changed into something quite different from what it was in the beginning.

Erasmus does something more than instruct van Dorp in the consistency of folly, he offers him a hermeneutical lesson. Taking an example from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah ("We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth"; Is. 64:4), Erasmus suggests that a responsible reader will not be scandalized by language which ap-

Christum vere stultos fuisse, sed quod in his quoque fuerit infirmum quiddam et nostris tributum affectibus, quod ad aeternam illam ac puram sapientiam parum sapiens videri possit. Verum haec ipsa stulticia vincit omnem mundi sapientiam; quemadmodum et Propheta omnem mortalium iusticiam pannis confert foeminae menstruo fluxu contaminatae. Non quod bonorum iusticia polluta sit, sed quod ea quae apud homines purissima sunt, quodammodo impura sint, si ad illam ineffabilem Dei puritatem conferantur. Et vt sapientem proposui stulticiam, ita sanam insaniam et cordatam amentiam facio." Erasmus, "'Letter to Martin Dorp'" 471–86, 1515.

pears to be at odds with doctrine or absurd, but will interpret in a manner consistent with the work as a whole. His demonstration is essentially the same as he offers in the *Enchiridion*, where he exhorts the reader specifically to imitate the "art and method" of Dionysius, Augustine, and Origen, who in turn followed the Platonists. The application of the Platonist hermeneutic to Folly is extraordinary, however, when extended to the text as a whole. If the text resolves its own conflict of dialectical and rhetorical paradoxy of moriasophia in Folly's final contemplation of an infinite God, who is both folly and wisdom and neither folly nor wisdom, then a reader may effect a similar resolution through interpretation. That is, a discerning reader, as a disciple of a universal folly, may follow the same trajectory toward contemplation through the text – not by entering into the folly of ignorance and malice – but by applying the same fundamental principles as the contemplative theologians: *via affirmativa*, *negativa* and *supereminentia*.

In a new kind of *lectio divina*, Erasmus exhorts (and perhaps expects) his readers to view Folly in these three hermeneutical positions for one's own spiritual benefit, as one would the "hidden scriptures" or *arcanae litteris*. The reader of Folly in the first and second movements is invited to see true folly, holy folly, *via negativa*, by means of what it is not. In every instance, it is not the folly of ignorance, nor that of the hypocrites. In the third movement, the voice of Folly becomes more like that of Socrates, St. Paul, Petrarch, and Cusa, a persona undulating between irony and literalism, between the conflict of opposing forces and the persona's gaze upon the Absolute. Here Erasmus sets the path for spiritual ascent. In Folly's suggestion of an "appearance of folly" as opposed to "a reality of folly," the reader is prepared for the transition from *phantasma* to *eikon*, i.e., from the illusion of folly to folly as divine likeness. Folly's own engagement with reading and interpretation reflects Erasmus' belief that hermeneutics, especially that of the Scriptures, is a transformative experience.

Finally, Folly signals the *via supereminentia* in her discussion of the bodily and spiritual senses. As she describes it, the pious become alienated (*alienissima*) from the physical senses of the body, and the affections of the mind (*affectus animi*) take over those of the other passions, "so that [a person's] spirit, less burdened with the weight of his body, may strive to taste and enjoy the comforts of heaven. So too in the eucharist[…]" (135). Not only does Erasmus here reverse the relationship of passion and reason in the first movement (while maintaining the fundamental principle of *affectus*), he introduces the language of the spiritual senses and the sacraments. The eucharist, in particular, is a Silenus *par example*, the highest spiritual reality concealed in the sensual, ordinary appearances of bread and wine. The description of ecstatic madness completes Erasmus' transformation of Folly, from an apophatic principle of negation into a symbol of transcendent negation:

> Now, although this happiness is not absolutely perfect until he mind, having received its former body, is endowed with immortality, nevertheless it happens that, because the life of the pious is nothing but a meditation and a certain shadow (as it were) of that other life, they sometimes experience a certain flavor or odor of that reward. And this, even though it is like the tiniest droplet by comparison with that fountain of eternal happiness, nevertheless far surpasses all pleasures of the body, even if all the delights of all mortals were gathered into one. So much beyond the body are the things of the spirit; things unseen, beyond what can be seen. This, indeed is what the prophet promises: "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has the heart of man conceived what things God has prepared for those who love him." And this is Folly's part, which shall not be taken from her by the exchange of life, but shall be perfected. Those who have the privilege of experienc-

> ing this (and it happens to very few) undergo something very like madness: they talk incoherently, not in a human fashion, making sounds without sense. Then the entire expression of their faces vacillates repeatedly: no happy, now sad; now crying, now laughing, now sighing – in short, they are completely besides themselves. (137)[608]

More than a few commentators have taken Folly's direct ascent to God as a proto-Protestant rejection of the Church's agency in the act of salvation. While there are indeed no choirs of angels, no images of Christ or Mary, and no heavenly reunions of the saints, Erasmus is not engaging in an act of iconoclasm. Rather, Erasmus is, like Cusa, an excellent student of Dionysius, as he portrays the contemplation of God as a process of abstraction and denial, beginning with the negation of the physical senses. This leads to a triumph of the spirit, depicted in the spiritual senses of taste and smell and in the grace of the sacraments. Then ecstasy, as divine madness, deprives the mind of its wits, as the body is "absorbed" and "transformed" into spirit. Even spirit itself will be "absorbed" in the infinite.

Erasmus' language here could hardly come closer to coincidentia. Folly has reached Cusa's wall of absurdity, where rational language can no longer express the divine and where only through the symbol can one "leap" transumptively into the essence of Paradise. The unknowing of St. Paul, which Folly cites from Second Corinthians (1 Cor. 2:9), replaces the usual emphasis

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[608]"Iam haec felicitas quanquam tum demum perfecta contingit, quum animi receptis pristinis corporibus immortalitate donabuntur, tamen quoniam piorum vita nihil aliud est, quam illius vitae meditatio ac velut umbra quaedam, fit, ut praemii quoque illius aliquando gustum aut ardorem aliquem sentiant. Id tametsi minutissima quaedam stillula est ad fontem illum aeternae felicitatis, tamen longe superat universas corporis voluptates, etiamsi omnes omnium mortalium deliciae in unum conferantur; usque adeo praestant spiritualia corporalibus, invisibilia visibilibus. Hoc nimirum est quod pollicetur Propheta: Oculus non vidit, nec auris audivit, nec in cor hominis adscenderunt, quae praeparavit Deus diligentibus se. Atque haec est Moriae pars, quae non aufertur commutatione vitae, sed perficitur. Hoc igitur quibus sentire licuit, (contingit autem perpaucis,) ii patiuntur quoddam dementiae simillimum; loquuntur quaedam non satis cohaerentia, nec humano more, sed dant sine mente sonum; deinde subinde totam oris speciem vertunt, nunc alacres, nunc deiecti, nunc lacrymant, nunc rident, nunc suspirant; in summa, vere toti extra se sunt." Erasmus, *Moria* 248–62.

on the "face to face" encounter with God in the next life (1 Cor. 13:12). Meanwhile, the spiritual senses and the "nonsense" of ecstatic utterances (reminiscent of the "speaking in tongues" of the apostolic age) represent those words which, Dionysius says, "must not be given the human sense."[609]

The *Moria* is therefore Erasmus' novel apophatic genre, a dialectical poetic of moriasophia, juxtaposed in conflict and in paradoxy and ultimately signifying resolution. Like Petrarch and Cusa, Erasmus was committed to using literature as a way to reunite the aims of philosophy and theology with universal, human experience. Armed with a mastery of classical languages and adages, theological training, rhetorical expertise, the humor and wit of the ironic method, and an ample knowledge of precedent, he re-proposed metaphysics in the language of Platonism and Christian doctrine, joining the paradoxy of illusory appearances and true likenesses to the hermeneutical paradoxy of the open and the closed. In the Silenus, Erasmus found an apt and flexible metaphor. However, in Folly's ascent to spiritual insanity, the Silenus itself is transformed from a metaphor of paradoxy into a symbol of coincidentia, much like Cusa's wall of absurdity. The reality of folly is a Dionysian apophasis, a Silenus whose inner sanctum is the certain yet invisible mystery of faith.

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[609]Pseudo-Dionysius *DN* 106.

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