

The Praise of Feminine Folly

Holly A. Evans

Writer's comment: When I set out to find a topic for my Renaissance Literature term paper, I was in a state of utter panic. I'm a transfer student, and this was my first experience with the terror of a UCD final—a leviathan of an assignment looming before me, with only my trusty pen at my side. Yet I had more weapons against this creature than I realized. My creative instincts, long repressed, rushed to my aid, enabling me to integrate humor and originality with feminism and literature. Thus, Folly was reborn, and through her inspiration I gained the confidence to slay all of my leviathans with energy and enthusiasm.

—Holly A. Evans

Instructor's comment: When Folly Evans—excuse my typo: HollyEvans!—dropped by my office to ask if she might write her term paper not in her own name but in that of Erasmus' presumptuous Folly, I should of course have earnestly endeavored to dissuade her. Does Folly, in her ludicrous oration in praise of herself, not say, "I fill the mind with a kind of perpetual intoxication, with transports of rejoicing and delight"? Not only does such flagrant frivolity clearly have no place in a serious course like Comparative Literature 164B, "The Renaissance," or indeed in any self-respecting educational—excuse me again, research—institution such as ours, but worse still, to countenance the writing of a term paper cribbed from a drunken female might well subject student and instructor alike to accusations of plagiarism, substance abuse, and worst of all, antifeminism! Yet alas, foolishness is not confined to the fair sex, and in a culpably reckless moment of indulgence—*mea culpa, mea culpa!*—I acceded to the request. The results are before you: folly, sheer folly! Surely next time I must steel myself, must be more respectable, more professorial, more severe, more forbidding. Surely next time . . . ?

—Robert Torrance, Comparative Literature Department

FOLLY SPEAKS: While I still may be in ill repute due to my discourse in *The Praise of Folly*, I believe that there is none more qualified to speak on the subject of women and their follies than myself. Not only am I a woman, but my very name is Folly—I therefore epitomize the virtue of female foolishness. Because I have been endowed by nature with the very qualities I intend to discuss, I perceive myself to be an exceptional judge. The view of woman progresses from idealization to stereotypicalization in Renaissance literature, to the great detriment of womankind. The poet Cavalcanti romanticizes her, while Petrarch recognizes her faults but contin-

ues to romanticize her. The courtiers of Castiglione debate the perfect court lady in great detail, from her actions to her very personality.

Although mortal men seek wisdom, more often than not they succeed in nothing but folly, especially in their understanding of woman. It is foolishness for men to critique the female psyche; it would be easier for Vulcan to fathom Tryphe. Yet in the multitude of Renaissance men writing on women without folly, there is one notable exception. Shakespeare, a man after my own heart, creates in Cleopatra a woman full of folly—so full, in fact, that in her final hours, she transcends human character to attain true wisdom.

If foolishness indeed be a divine attribute, then women are goddesses all. They are responsible for not only their own folly, but also the folly of men, which makes them worthy of the utmost praise, to my way of thinking. However, by denying the essence of womanhood, the Renaissance woman only becomes more foolish—"as the Greek proverb puts it, an ape is always an ape even if it is clad in purple; and a woman is always a woman, that is, a fool, whatever mask she wears" (*Folly* 88). In my opinion, women should not attempt to hide their folly at all, for in doing so, they deny themselves and their companions that which is most delightful. For what is it that makes woman so attractive? It is certainly not her likeness to man. A woman's beauty stems from her folly, but "all the marks of old age in a man can only come from the corrupting influence of wisdom, seeing that a woman always has smooth cheeks, gentle voice, soft skin and a look of perpetual youth" (89). Because women are given to vanity and amusement, they are all the more fascinating to men, and succeed in delighting them more than any wisdom could. They have such a profoundly pleasing effect on man's reason that "there's nothing which men won't permit to women, and for no other return than pleasure" (89). One has only to look to Adam to see the result of foolish devotion to woman's idiosyncrasies. Women are often my most ardent disciples, for they are the primary source of man's folly. They artfully fool him into idealizing her, causing man to be as foolish as woman in matters of love, and perhaps even more. For who is the more foolish—the fool, or the fool who follows her?

Among my foremost followers are the medieval poets, who idealize women almost as deities, despite their follies. They are almost as reverent in my worship as women, for "they're admittedly members of my party, . . . and no other race of men worships me with such whole-hearted devotion" (147). While "Jupiter, not wanting man's life to be wholly gloomy and grim, has bestowed far more passion than reason," it is only because of me that poets use such passion, creating perfection out of folly (87). They are often aided by my attendant, Kolakia, meaning Flattery, who compels them to glorify their subjects beyond recognition.

Guido Cavalcanti is just such a poet. In his sonnet, he blindly idealizes the woman of his desire: "Who is she coming, whom all gaze upon, / Who makes the air all tremulous with light, / And at whose side is Love himself?" (1-3). I cannot help but recall my mention of Cupid in my discourse to Erasmus—"besides, isn't Cupid himself, who is responsible for creating all relationships, totally blind, so that to him 'ugliness looks like beauty'?" (*Folly* 92). It is I who cause his blindness to her imperfections and

compel him to set her above all others. He says of her, "Lady she seems of such high benison / As makes all others graceless in men's sight" (7-8). He even goes so far as to liken her to a goddess "to whom are subject all things virtuous, / While all things beauteous own her deity" (10-11). While I have no objection to the deification of women, since I am both a woman and a deity myself, I have a trivial dispute concerning his motivation. He attempts to show that his lady transcends the bondage of mortality, not because of her folly, but because of his own. His foolish idealization of her—in which, I must admit, I have a part—causes him to see her as perfect. Consequently, she is not praised for her most admirable quality, her folly.

Petrarch is yet another one of my disciples, a foolish Renaissance poet blinded by love. Although in "Sestina 2" Petrarch idealizes his love for Laura, he recognizes her foibles. He compares her with both the beauty and the terribleness of nature—"A lady fair and purer than the snow— / And colder too than snow which for long years / Has known no sun" (2-4). The folly of her womanhood, however, holds such an intense power over him that he overlooks her imperfections. No one but Folly can take credit for sustaining the poet's love: "what divorces or worse than divorces there would be everywhere if the domestic relations of man and wife were not propped up and sustained by the flattery, joking, complaisance, illusions, and deceptions provided by my followers!" (*Folly* 93). Petrarch's love for Laura is an ideal due to his own folly of self-deception. He demonstrates his foolish devotion to his love: "I'll follow faithfully my tender laurel / Through scorching heat or freezing ice and snow / Until the last day close these anxious eyes" (Petrarch 16-18). He sees her through passion rather than reason, which is certainly no surprise, since Petrarch earns his place next to Dido as one of my most fervent followers—"the emotions belong to Folly, and this is what marks the wise man off from the fool; he is ruled by reason, the fool by his emotions" (*Folly* 106). Even though he has begun to see that his love is less perfect than the ideal woman, he still persists in his intense devotion for her; he swears to wait for her to return his love, "sighing over sea and shore / By night and day, through rain and sleet and snow" (Petrarch 29-30). Perhaps Petrarch is even more the fool than all of my other poets; he knows of Laura's foibles, but he chooses to ignore them and worships her anyway. Furthermore, he praises her for perfection and ignores her most stunning attribute, folly—a quality which, to my way of thinking, deserves far more praise than perfection.

Even more amusing than folly resulting from passion is folly resulting from reason. I have already shown you, my dear initiates, that the passionate side of man far outweighs his reason, so the endeavor to focus strictly on logic is utterly absurd. Indeed, who could possibly fathom the folly of woman with only reason at his side? The delightful cast of characters in Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* illustrates my point magnificently. Even though Jupiter has "confined reason to a cramped corner of the head and left all the rest of the body to the passions," these courtiers wish to magnify reason and exalt it as the highest form of wisdom (*Folly* 87). Only signor Ottaviano is touched by the spirit of folly that I so admire, for upon hearing that courts and their courtiers cannot be gay or happy without women, he quips, "there you have a little sample of the kind of bait that makes men fools" (*Courtier* 205). Although the Magnifico

has good intentions when he creates the Court Lady, he only succeeds in creating a stereotypical woman for the reasonable man. He says she should be "naturally graceful in all her actions, to be mannerly, clever, prudent, not arrogant, not envious, not slanderous, not vain, not contentious," in other words, not a woman at all! (206). In ignoring woman's passion, the Magnifico ignores her most marvellous quality. I am much more inclined to agree with signor Gasparo, who says to the Magnifico:

It should have been enough for you to make this Court Lady beautiful . . . and able to entertain . . . in dancing, music, games, laughter, witticisms, and the other things that we see going on at court every day; but to wish to give her knowledge of everything in the world, and allow her those virtues that have so rarely been seen in men during the past centuries, is something one cannot endure or listen to at all. (213)

As I confided to you earlier, for a woman to wish for knowledge and virtue is absurd, since a woman is a woman no matter how she tries to mask it. Therefore, to apply reason to her is futile—foolishness is passion, and passion cannot comprehend logic. Her virtue is her folly, and it is folly that makes her the most delightful creature in all the world.

Shakespeare is indeed a poet who tickles my very soul with his infinite wisdom concerning women and their follies. He embodies in Cleopatra all of the qualities that I consider most excellent. She is my sister in folly, and my attendants aid her with as much enthusiasm as they aid me—Tryphe, or Sensuality, lends Cleopatra her enchanting spell over Antony, and Hedone, Pleasure, an addictive charm. Kolakia, Flattery, allows her to ingratiate herself with her lovers, and Philautia, Self-love, lends her the tenacity to survive, and ultimately to face her death (*Folly* 73). Her hypnotic charisma has even the great Mark Antony at her feet—"Fie, wrangling queen! / Whom everything becomes—to chide, to laugh, / To weep; whose every passion fully strives / To make itself, in thee, fair and admired" (I.i.49–51). True to her foolish nature, she plays upon his passion rather than reason, and through the charm of her folly, he is completely enamored of her. Enobarbus praises the queen's charming folly, and says to Maecenas, "age cannot wither her, nor custom stale / Her infinite variety: other women cloy / The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry / Where most she satisfies" (II.ii.240–244).

Cleopatra herself acknowledges her devotion to me—"age from folly could not give me freedom" (I.iii.57). I come to her aid when her world comes crashing down around her, because I take the blame for her weakness: "I cannot project mine own cause so well / To make it clear, but do confess I have / Been laden with like frailties which before / Have often shamed our sex" (V.ii.121–124). She fools us into thinking that, despite her love for Antony, her true interests lie in herself. She croons to Caesar's servant, "Pray you, tell him / I am his fortune's vassal, and I send him / The greatness he has got. I hourly learn / A doctrine of obedience, and would gladly / Look him i' th' face" (V.ii.29–32). Although she seems to give in to Caesar after Antony's death, her final folly demonstrates her genuine love for Antony as well as her wisdom. Her suicide, a symbol for her newly awakened love for Antony, causes her character to ascend where others

could not go. She cries to Antony's spirit, "Husband, I come: / Now to that name my courage prove my title! / I am fire, and air; my other elements / I give to baser life" (V.ii.287-290). She attains ageless immortality; as I have said to my friend Erasmus, "Folly is the one thing which can halt fleeting youth and ward off the relentless advance of old age" (*Folly* 81). Cleopatra's ultimate folly transforms her into a character with true wisdom, for she attains Roman honor through her refusal to be humiliated by Caesar and reaches a transcendent love with Antony.

But I've been rambling far too long and have become victim to my own folly. However, as you already know from Erasmus, my greatest weakness is in forgetting myself. It is sufficient to say that Shakespeare goes where other poets fear to tread; as the rest are blind to woman's folly or simply ignore it. He creates Cleopatra, a vital, passionate example of folly, who, through her nature, attains transcendent wisdom and becomes one of the most stunning characters in Renaissance literature. So, having given my discourse on the virtue of female foolishness, I will say goodbye. Live long, be passionate, and cherish your foolish women, for they "are the source of life's first and foremost delight" (*Folly* 89). Farewell, distinguished pupils of Folly.

Works Cited

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