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## Book Reviews



Terence J. Martin, *Truth and Irony: Philosophical Meditations on Erasmus* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2015). pp. 258 + x. ISBN 978-0-8132-2809-9.

### 1 Erasmus—Silenus

In a book that explores the use of irony by Erasmus, it becomes fair to ask: what did Erasmus *really* think? Is warfare rooted in human nature—what is the nature of truth—how should Christians pursue the chief ends of human existence? He addressed these topics with an ironic twist that makes it difficult to pin him down. During his lifetime, Erasmus was accused, not only of dissembling his views, but of arguing for the expediency of a well-crafted lie (84–85). He was said to be an untrustworthy author like the sophists of old. Meanwhile, modern interpreters find confirmation in his writings for widely varying interpretations of his thought.

Erasmus adopted the complex figure of the Silenus from Plato's *Symposium* as an ironic model of the truth, adding a layer of complexity that was obviously too much for some of his readers. In the *Symposium*, Alcibiades tries to explain why he, the most eligible aristocratic bachelor in Athens, should have developed a passion for Socrates: the most handsome for the most homely? In a remarkable metaphor, Alcibiades says that Socrates is like a Silenus: toadlike and ugly on the outside, but hiding the beautiful figurine of a god within, a deceptive rough surface that can be opened to reveal the truth within. Alcibiades preferred Socrates, with his strange double-meanings, to the smooth public face of Athenian piety.

In a further ironic step introduced by Folly in Erasmus' *The Praise of Folly*, the Silenus figure is extended to embrace two categories of people: those of the inward Silenus, ugly on the outside and beautiful on the inside, and those of the inside-out Silenus, lovely outside and abominable within (43, 55). In fact

the Silenus image can be applied to anyone, as it reveals the difference between appearance and reality (78). As Folly herself explains, the inside-out Silenus is someone who, like hypocritical magnates of the Church, or seemingly-pious monks, has the outer appearance of beauty and truth, but inwardly is greedy or self-serving. Here we can also locate the flatteries of the merchant, plausible and attractive on the outside, but deceptive within (77).

The leadership of church and state, “princes and courtiers in the political sphere, and monks, theologians, bishops and popes in the world of religion,” set out to deceive society and to benefit themselves, while maintaining a sanctimonious guise (19–20). But self-deceit and folly extend their sway throughout society. Deceit is clearly the best way to gain favor in society, because “the less skillful anything is, the more admirers it obtains, according to the rule that the worst things please the most people” (76). How true!

In considering the ironic diatribes issued in the name of Folly in *The Praise of Folly*, we might naturally imagine Folly as this character appears in the woodcuts of Hans Holbein the Younger, dressed in cap-and-bells. But instead we might put Erasmus himself in the role of Folly, seated at his writing desk, in dark robe and scholar’s cap, as in the Holbein painting of 1523, now in the Louvre (8). Erasmus observes: “it is always the same: what is excellent in any way is always the least showy” (76). Isn’t it the erudite, Jerome-like scholar Erasmus who puts his ironical judgements in the mouth of Folly?

## 2 Philosophical Meditations

The goal of Martin’s book is not only to explore Erasmus’ use of irony, but to find out what we can learn about ourselves by taking his words to heart, to ask “what kind of creatures are we?” (223)—and how we might understand ourselves differently were we to adopt an Erasmian manner of thinking (ix, 10 f., 32, 96, 236). Martin would like to renew the ironical, challenging manner of Erasmian thinking. The philosophical meditations contained in this book take up “key matters of human self-knowledge” which are difficult because they are so “full of folly” (35).

The acerbic questions raised by Erasmus are not held at a distance by Martin, viewed dispassionately through a scholar’s monocle, so to speak, but are presented as current questions of the first order, still urgent, and still illuminated (if not resolved) by the writings of Erasmus, the multi-dimensional man: Erasmus the vulnerable orphan and monastic escapee, Erasmus the wandering scholar and punching bag of Martin Luther, Erasmus the prince of European letters. The discussion seems unusually timely. The existence of truth and knowledge