

“Artibus Ornatissimus”: Embodied Materiality and Affect in *The Praise of Folly* and  
*Utopia*

by

Miranda G. Castro

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written by Miranda G. Castro  
has been approved for the Department of English

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Dr. Katherine Eggert

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Dr. Ramesh Mallipeddi

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Dr. David Glimp

Date \_\_\_\_\_

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

## Abstract

Castro, Miranda G. (M.A., English)

“Artibus Ornatissimus”: Embodied Materiality and Affect in *The Praise of Folly* and *Utopia*

Thesis directed by Professor Katherine Eggert

This project begins by contextually and historically investigating Desiderius Erasmus’s and Thomas More’s relations to the institutionalized thinking they are bound by, but also observes the highly critical positions they stake through this contextual analysis and especially in their satires: *The Praise of Folly* and *Utopia*. I will establish that Erasmus and More are conscious of the highly constructed psychological implications of hierarchical exhibitions of wealth and the corrupt relation to the material world that hierarchical figures maintain. This observation is demonstrated in both of their satires. I argue that the state, in *Utopia*, transgresses traditional notions of materiality by re-appropriating the value of certain material items—for instance, by forcing prisoners, slaves, and children to wear traditionally coveted items like gold chains, diamonds, and pearls. Not only does the state enforce public displays of punishment for criminal subjects, but by making enfranchised people wear these items during public punishment they construct a narrative that sharply contrasts happiness and suffering. Similarly, in *The Praise of Folly*, the personified Folly asks her audience to question the reality of their own state of mind, despite the ways in which regulatory figures have influenced them to think about their own wellbeing and happiness. These narratives force regular citizens to consider their own lack of suffering, but it is, in fact, through these material signifiers and formulated ideologies that subjects are able to conceive of their own happiness.

## CONTENTS

## CHAPTER

I.	Introduction.....	1
II.	Background of Erasmus's and More's Rejection of the Material.....	2
III.	Embodied Alleviation from the "Pangs of Death" in <i>The Praise of Folly</i> .....	19
IV.	Authoritative Materiality and State-Sanctioned Happiness in <i>Utopia</i> .....	36
V.	Conclusion.....	54
	BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	57

## I. Introduction

Thomas More and Desiderius Erasmus were enmeshed within a world of governmental corruption, as well as a material-driven society in the midst of crucial theological debates. We can observe their relations to these critical issues in their varying national and political affiliations. Erasmus presents contemporary readers with a European perspective on humanistic rhetoric surrounding the current political and theological unrest extending all the way to Rome, while More provides readers with perspectives on humanistic understandings of these issues within the English domestic realm. Still, both Erasmus and More are bound by the confines of their theological and national affiliations, partaking, for example, in debates regarding the Reformation and Henry VIII's annulment from Catherine of Aragon. Despite their varying global perspectives, analyzing their prose works as texts working in conversation with one another aids in an understanding of humanist reactions and understandings of the affective implications associated with hierarchical corruption. Essentially, we can use their satirical prose as a way to think about how these changes affected members of Renaissance society at the individual psychological level. In other words, their commentary on these larger theological and political issues function as an insight into the way that publicly manifested material exhibitions of governmental and ecclesiastical hierarchy influence affect for common citizens. These individualized affectual responses are provoked by governmentally constructed impressions of the material world. Even more specifically, through *Utopia* and *The Praise of Folly*, we are able to understand the ways in which hierarchical interactions with the material world influence individual citizens to perceive their own well-being and happiness.

The idea of this affective influence through material exhibitionism is most clearly demonstrated within these texts' critiques of veneration of the material world, critiques that provide the basis for how Erasmus and More define their opposition to corrupt ecclesiastical and governmental figures. Their satires function as a means to criticize the exhibitionist nature of these leaders' demonstrations of wealth. More and Erasmus seem to be aware that these outward indications of material wealth have psychological implications for those who do not maintain the same position to the material world as do wealthy monarchs and religious figures. Therefore in these texts, we can observe one's position to the material world—typically influenced by governmental regulation—as being a determining factor of individualized happiness. We can also view examples of the hierarchical control of individual affect by understanding the contextual framework of early sixteenth-century relations to the material world in both governmental and ecclesiastical realms.

## **II. Erasmus's and More's Rejection of the Material**

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, humanist thinkers at the heart of debates surrounding the Reformation, including Erasmus and More, began to find themselves conflicted between their alliances to the Catholic Church and their present desires for institutional reform. Like most theological contributors of the early sixteenth century, Erasmus and More were beginning to conceptualize new methods of reforming the flawed ecclesiastical hierarchies, even while they still condemned Protestant reformers as heretics. The harsh contextual realities of the sixteenth century provide a foundation for interpreting the various paradoxes present in *Utopia* and *The Praise of Folly*, especially considering the paradoxes of these humanists' approach to the material world in general. The foundation of their paradoxical ideologies lies in their ties to

the church and government. Their allegiance to governmental and ecclesiastical institutions made it difficult for them to critique them for their various flaws, such as greed, materialism, and problems of power. Yet, they manage to do so thoroughly in their satirical works.

The opinions of More and Erasmus proved to be much more controversial than those of other members of the Renaissance theological schools because of their astute demonization of false practices of veneration and engagement with the material world. These two authors found themselves constantly debating with theologians of the University of Louvain, or the scholastics, who attempted to academicize religious discourse. As we see in Erasmus's work, humanists were extremely critical of the way that scholastic theologians consistently appropriated the Bible as a means for asserting their political and religious agendas, and of their false reading practices. Erasmus also condemns theologians for their misinterpretations of the word of God; he goes as far to call these theologians one of the most foolish sorts of humankind in his *Praise of Folly*. The classification of the scholastics as the most foolish sort is deeply rooted in Erasmus's opposition to their biblical appropriation and corrupt interactions with the material world. As Hanan Yoran and other scholars of sixteenth century humanism have noted, Erasmian humanism proves to be the "purest" form of humanism because of the autonomy it presents as being an approach "uncontaminated" by immoral and anti-intellectual alternatives, unlike how, as Erasmus argues, the scholastic approach is contaminated by these issues.<sup>1</sup>

As the most devoted follower of Erasmian humanism, Thomas More executed his text utilizing an approach faithful to his friend's philosophically, theologically, and politically reformative views. Their work comes together to form a complete critique of hierarchical corruption and a subsequent desire for institutional reform. Thus, in this section of the thesis I

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<sup>1</sup> Hanan Yoran, *Between Utopia and Dystopia: Erasmus, Thomas More, and the Humanist Republic of Letters* (Lexington Books, 2010), 2.

will establish some of the theological, political, and intellectual contexts in which Erasmus and More outline the ideological positions influencing their satires. I will further establish that their texts—unlike this simple historical analysis—further notes the particularly psychological implications of their observations of flawed engagements with the material world.

Erasmus found himself conflicted between his allegiances to the “true” church and his recurring desire for change at the institutional level. In 1508, after a trip to Rome to visit the Vatican, Erasmus found himself becoming increasingly critical of the institution to which he dedicated his entire life. Having been presented with the flawed hierarchical system, as well as outright sinful nature, of those in control of the Church, Erasmus eventually became a major critic of the institution as a whole. Since he indeed engaged in some of the same critiques as Protestant reformers, he remains a foundational figure in the proliferation of Protestant ideologies, even though Erasmus never outright identified his reformative methods with Protestants. Like More, Erasmus critiqued this monastic institution in a discreet manner to protect himself from being condemned as a heretic. The satirical form of *The Praise of Folly* functions as veiled protection from any real consequences for its controversial remarks. In the prefatory letter to *The Praise of Folly* dedicated to Thomas More, Erasmus implies that the following text invokes these particularly veiled methods of critique.

During my recent journey back from Italy to England, not wishing to waste all the time I was obliged to be on horseback on “idle gossip” and small talk, I preferred to spend some of it thinking over some topic connected with our common interests or else enjoying the recollection of the friends, as learned as they are delightful, whom I had left here.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Desiderius Erasmus, “Prefatory Letter: Erasmus of Rotterdam to His Friend Thomas More.” *The Praise of Folly* (London: Penguin Classics, 1993), 3.



References to “idleness” and “writing on horseback” are “conventional scholarly disclaimers,” or indications that Erasmus’s text should be read as a satire. Despite these clear indicators, however, Erasmus tends to contradict himself when defending the nature of his text in various instances, thus again complicating our interpretations of his assertions.<sup>3</sup> At times Erasmus, as in this instance, defends his texts as a satire, but at others he notes the vitality of his text. Thus, this combination of laxity and severity forms the foundational paradox of his text. He deals with very serious issues—specifically issues of flawed ecclesiastical practices—in an extremely frivolous manner, which is one of the main critiques that his main ideological opponent, Dutch theologian Maarten Van Dorp, levels.

However, the sole fact that Erasmus deals with heavy issues in a light manner does not mean that his writing is simply without meaning. One way that we might attempt to understand where Erasmus’s voice emerges through Folly’s is by observing the sequence of the narrative voice that develops throughout the text. Towards the beginning we are introduced to a narrator who is easygoing and delights in characterizing all of humankind as foolish. As we move towards the latter half of the book, in contrast, we are confronted with a narrator who becomes increasingly harsh in her criticisms of specific sects of people like theologians, noblemen, and philosophers (though no specific individuals are named). It has been argued, and seems almost certainly true, that the tone of this harsher voice evolves into that of Erasmus, since this voice demonstrates many of the specific opposing ideological stances that Erasmus had with the scholastic theologians.

After the publication of *The Praise of Folly* in 1511, Erasmus was heavily criticized for the way in which his text attacked theologians; his main opponent in this controversy was Van Dorp, who represented a much more conservative theological approach to reform and other

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<sup>3</sup> Erasmus contradicts himself in the Prefatory Letter to Thomas More, as well as in his Defense of Folly to Maarten Van Dorp.

ecclesiastical debates—an approach that was typical of the French humanist faculty at the University of Louvain.<sup>4</sup> Van Dorp responded in a pair of letters to Erasmus regarding the harsh nature of his critiques of theologians, claiming that Erasmus “wounds the delicate ear with sharp-edged truth.”<sup>5</sup> Erasmus responds to this accusation saying, “If you think that one should never speak freely and that truth should only be told when it gives no offence, why do doctors prescribe bitter drugs and count *hieraprica* amongst their most valuable remedies?” Using the same sort of rhetorical methods that Folly invokes in his text, he continues, “If those who cure the ills of the body use these methods surely we should do the same when we would heal the diseases of the soul.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, Erasmus advocates for embellished invocations of truth, as in his text, in order to cure the diseases of the soul, but most importantly deprioritizing the material body and emphasizing the transcendental soul. In many instances in *The Praise of Folly*, but also in his letters, Erasmus notes the power of a transcendental truth—that is embellished truth—as a method of dealing with difficult issues. We will see that his friend and fellow humanist Thomas More similarly invokes methods of unveiling hidden truths in a way that deprioritizes the material world.

In September 1514, when Van Dorp wrote his first letter to Erasmus, he not only critiqued *The Praise of Folly* for its reproaches of scholastic theologians but also sharply criticized Erasmus’s interest in editing a Greek version of the New Testament. The controversy over annotating a new edition of the New Testament in Greek was one of the main conflicts between evangelical humanists and the scholastics. The scholastics held that the ancient languages were inessential to a complete understanding of sacred texts, but the humanists maintained that sacred texts should be preserved in their original linguistic form of the text to

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<sup>4</sup> Van Dorp was a member and representative of the Louvain school of humanism, which Erasmus had previously fell out of favor with because of their various oppositional theological and educational stances.

<sup>5</sup> Desiderius Erasmus, “Letter to Maarten Van Dorp.” *The Praise of Folly* (London: Penguin Classics, 1993), 145.

<sup>6</sup> Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, 145.

maintain the original sanctity. Erasmus especially held the idea that a text/written language does in fact present a means of accessing the transcendental soul of the author, as well as the reader. As James Kearney points out, Erasmus believed that a text was the only method of accessing the soul of the author because of the transcendental nature of language. However, as Dorp points out here, the majority of Europeans could not read Greek, Latin, nor Hebrew; thus publishing a Greek version of the New Testament would exclude a majority of lay people who only spoke the vernacular, making such an important text inaccessible to many. This entire debate seems ironic considering both the scholastics and humanists encouraged methods of advanced learning—the humanists with their ancient languages and the scholastics with their dialectical reasoning. Their common interests were not enough from keeping these two groups from disagreeing over the methods in which religious knowledge should be acquired.

For the purposes of this thesis it is important to note Van Dorp's main critiques—which Erasmus responds to in his letter—of this overall controversial text. Van Dorp seems to have two main issues with Folly; the first, as I have mentioned, is the bantering and frivolous nature of serious political and theological controversies and the second is her harsh criticism of individual theological figures. Erasmus's response to the first accusation is most important for the purposes of this thesis, since it invokes his (and More's) opinions of the way that essential truths are best expressed. He says,

The famous sages of antiquity who chose to present the most salutary counsel for life in the form of amusing and apparently childish fables, *because truth can seem harsh if unadorned*, but with something pleasurable to recommend it can penetrate more easily the minds of mortals.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, 141.

Here, Erasmus notes that throughout the history of human consciousness people have invoked “amusing and apparently childish fables” to deflect from the pains of aging and maturity. The invocation of these frivolous methods function as Folly’s evidence in proving her argument that aging causes one to stray from folly. This claim outlines the everyday pains of life as too difficult to endure without the interventions of his protagonist. We will further explore how enduring the agonies of the world manifests as a common theme between these two texts, as well as a common theme that Thomas More notes upon his death. As a common theme these texts express how alleviation of the sufferings of the world necessitates folly, by means of human relation to the material world. However, concerning the second accusation, Erasmus quickly defends himself to note that he actually hasn’t criticized anyone in particular or named any specific person. Erasmus writes, “Can you tell me anyone whose reputation I have damaged or besmirched in the slightest? What nation, class of person or individual have I ever censured by name?”<sup>8</sup> The defense that Erasmus uses against Van Dorp’s accusations reflects the assertions he makes in his prefatory letter to More, where he anticipates the criticism he would receive from the publication of this book and already seems to have his defense prepared by pointing out that he intentionally does not name individuals, thus no one person should be offended. By outlining his innocence of naming individuals, he adheres to his texts’ overall rejection of individually based criticism and instead critiques larger societal flaws—which indicate the influential role hierarchy has on the implementation of systemic thinking.

Although his response to Van Dorp does, in fact, demonstrate a clearly amicable attempt to mend relations with the scholastic theologian through Erasmus’s consistent naming of his subject as “my dear Dorp,” there is no doubt that Erasmus attempts to outwit Dorp and disregard

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<sup>8</sup> Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, 140.

his critiques throughout.<sup>9</sup> Thus, Erasmus does invoke satirical methods in his regular interactions. He quotes and references various authors and philosophers from antiquity to note that they took on projects similar to his own in *The Praise of Folly*. Being the Neoplatonist that he is Erasmus invokes Plato, as well as Horace, to defend his text:

The philosopher Plato, serious-minded though he is, approves of fairly lavish drinking matches at banquets because he believes that there are certain faults which austerity cannot correct but the gaiety of wine-drinking can dispel. And Horace thinks that joking advice does as much good as serious. ‘What stops a man who can laugh?’ he says, ‘from speaking truth?’<sup>10</sup>

This citation not only functions as an attempt to defend the comedic nature of the project that he has undertaken, but also demonstrates his thorough knowledge of ancient writers. His demonstration of this knowledge essentially proves Erasmus’s thesis that a text can possess a sort of transcendent power that the material world is incapable of, a thesis which will of course be essential to my reading of his *Praise of Folly*. This particular assertion invoking Horace and Plato demonstrates a larger project that attempts to mend the broken system of philosophized religion through which the more conservative scholastic theologians: a position of Erasmian humanism. Thus, Erasmus himself invokes Horace’s methods of “joking advice” in his text to critique the scholastics’ dialogic methods of interpreting the Bible.<sup>11</sup> Not only does he use authors of antiquity to justify his satire, but most importantly he emphasizes the necessity of invoking linguistic methods of humor to speak truth. He prioritizes the idea that the nonchalant

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<sup>9</sup> Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, 140.

<sup>10</sup> Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, 141.

<sup>11</sup> Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, 141.

nature of his text is effective in producing truth in addition to alleviating suffering from the pains of aging and maturity, an idea which will be touched on further in this thesis. Erasmus in his defense utilizes written language (texts) as a method to invoke the essentialities of the world. Here he uses his reading of the texts of Horace and Plato to justify the frivolous tone of his own text since, as he argues, language can uncover the hidden truths of the world. *In The Praise of Folly*, we will see Erasmus using this same approach to provoke the transcendent truths of the world, and we will most importantly see how Erasmus relates the immaterial world to individualized happiness and spiritual wellbeing.

Therefore, the satirical, or transgressive, mode in which Erasmus alludes to serious issues is essentially illuminating of a larger truth of societal corruption and individualized suffering. His transgressive method of writing about serious issues satirically denotes Erasmus's position on the power of language. But it is important to note the manner in which Erasmus expresses his essential truth, which is through language and text production, since he was keen on the power of language to produce these truths. As James Kearney notes, Erasmus tends to disregard the essentially material nature of language itself, especially in regard to theological texts. Despite this paradox, we can still observe Erasmus's high disregard for the immoral and corrupt nature of the material world.

In the dedication to More in *The Praise of Folly*, we can begin to understand Erasmus's rejection of the material world and the connotations that the material world has for the individual psyche. He begins by observing the hypocrisy among scholastic theologians by highlighting the way that contemporary theology, pre-Protestant Reformation, promotes the reverence of religious figures in various material forms, rather than of Christ himself. Both Erasmus and More are critical of the way in which these theological practices promote the veneration of other religious figures like the Virgin Mary and saints over the veneration of Christ himself. Erasmus

says, “You can find a good many people whose religious sense is so distorted that they find the most serious blasphemies against Christ more bearable than the slightest joke on pope or prince, especially if it touches their daily bread.”<sup>12</sup> As we know from Erasmus’s letters, he presents the materiality of the physical world and the material body, even of Christ, as an obstacle to achieving spiritual transcendence or happiness, which explains his veneration of text over body. It is important to note here that the way in which I am using the term materiality for Erasmus differs from my use of the word for More. For Erasmus, the material world denotes the body, while for More the material world denotes items that signify luxury. However, in this specific instance Erasmus critiques these false veneration practices since in many ways Christ represents a far more transcendental figure than living religious figures. This sets the precedent for his critique to come where Folly not only derides prioritizing any religious figure over Christ, but also highlights the selfish and materially fixated society that practices these false methods of veneration.

Erasmus’s idea that Catholicism prioritizes other figures over Christ can easily be seen as an extension of critiques of greed and material affliction among the church as a whole, especially considering the way that saints and the Virgin Mary were typically venerated utilizing the most luxurious substances—like gold, pearls, and other precious materials. This critique seems to reflect and extend to similar critiques of the church that other sixteenth century reformers had of Catholicism, especially Protestant reformers. This critique can be observed in the later sixteenth-century when authors like Edmund Spenser similarly express concern over the nature of luxuriously manifested veneration practices. In *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser portrays demonized caricatures of Catholics using figures like the monster Errour. He also uses Errour as an example

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<sup>12</sup> Desiderius Erasmus. “Prefatory Letter: Erasmus of Rotterdam to His Friend Thomas More.” *The Praise of Folly* (London: Penguin Classics, 1993), 7.

to comment on flawed reading practices of ecclesiastical texts—an argument which we see More and Erasmus take on as well.

Erasmus goes on to blame these flawed practices on the scholastic theologians, who he claims interpret and thus appropriate the Bible to suit their political agendas. Thus, Erasmus critiques their practice of molding their pedagogical methods of the Bible into whatever suits their current political interests. In fact, Erasmus and More's main critique of the scholastic theologians is the way that they approach teaching religion as an academic endeavor, rather than preserving the sanctity of the divine text without overly complicating it. The humanists staunchly reject the idea that the Bible could be appropriated as piece of political propaganda, furthering the humanist approach to the power of the written word. As we see in *The Praise of Folly*, Folly criticizes the way that theologians dissect the Bible and labor for hours in order to interpret its meaning. Though Erasmian humanism elevates the capacity of all written language, the Bible functions as a particularly powerful text. This entire debate again reflects critiques that Protestants had of Catholicism—which can also be noted in Spenser's religious epic when the monster Error vomits "bookes and papers."<sup>13</sup> Linking Spenser to Erasmus highlights the common nature of criticism that Protestants had of Catholicism and that humanist Catholics had of the ideologies of their own religious institution.

These critiques of false reading methods and corrupt material engagements in satirical form in *The Praise of Folly* and *Utopia* appear even more connected when considering their manner of production. The composition of *Folly* took place during Erasmus's second trip to England. He resided at More's estate while the two humanists translated a series of volumes of Lucian together, which were published in a joint volume in 1506. There seems to be a direct correlation between Erasmus's work on these satirical Lucianic volumes and his eventual

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<sup>13</sup> Spenser, Edmund, *The Faerie Queene*, Book 1.



production of *The Praise of Folly*, which he wrote directly after completing this work with More in England. The satirical nature of his Lucianic translations certainly seems to have influenced the ironic, and often paradoxical, nature of his text's main focus on praising folly while also condemning it.

Being the intimate friend to Erasmus as well as the devout Erasmian humanist that he was, More notably defended *The Praise of Folly* from critics of the satire, like Van Dorp and other scholastics. In his reply to Van Dorp dated October 21, 1515, More, unlike Erasmus, responds in a much less amicable manner than Erasmus did, noting the irrelevance of Van Dorp's opinion of *Folly* and of Erasmus's character as a whole. More seemed most struck by the manner in which Van Dorp attempts to insult Erasmus's character, especially since Erasmus's text doesn't actually offend any individuals by name, whereas Van Dorp's insults offend Erasmus directly. This critical observation denotes the distinction between offending an individual as opposed to lambasting larger ideological or philosophical approaches. More also claims Van Dorp incapable of giving an opinion which universally represents all theologians, and notes the arrogant nature of his critiques. In fact, More emphasizes that the scholastic theologians of Louvain were themselves currently at odds with one another over questions of universal ideals, denoting his skepticism of their ability to collectively disapprove of Erasmus's text. More's defense of Erasmus to Dorp indicates the close bond between himself and the author of *Folly*, especially with regard to their common humanistic ideals. It also illuminates the conflicted state of ecclesiastical debates among scholastics and humanists, as well as the controversies among scholastics themselves during this extremely influential period of reform. Noting the staunch nature of More's defense of his friend's satire furthers the idea that More invokes similar methods of Erasmus's approach in his own text.

As Erasmus's text was dedicated to More, More's was similarly inspired to produce *Utopia* in 1516 by his collaboration with Erasmus while translating the Lucianic verses. After completing this project of translation of Lucian's satire, More's own satire was born. The pretext of their collaboration and Erasmus's subsequent production of *The Praise of Folly* seems to be the factor leading to More's creation of his fictional world in *Utopia*. We can observe further obvious connections between these texts in the original Latin title of *In Praise of Folly: Moriae Encomium*, a pun on the friendship between More and Erasmus since the Latin title translates to "In Praise of More." Although More does not formally dedicate *Utopia* to Erasmus as Erasmus dedicates *Praise of Folly* to More, there is still sufficient evidence to note the influence that Erasmus played on the creation of More's fictitious world.<sup>14</sup> As we have noted a general disillusionment with the morality of church figures in Erasmus's text, so can we also observe Thomas More's disappointment not only with religious figures, but also with political ones—especially Henry VIII—in *Utopia*. Most importantly for the purposes of this thesis we can note similar observations of the material practices of institutional figures and the implications that those practices have on the individual psyche of regular citizens. A prominent example is demonstrated in More's increasing intolerance of the approach that Henry VIII took to annul his first marriage to Catherine of Aragon which resulted in England's eventual breaking from Rome. However, what I find to be most relevant to my argument is More's disillusionment with the King's exhibitionist methods of relating to the material world and the consequences that this relation has on the well-being of his subjects.

Since I will be considering *Utopia* and *Praise of Folly* as demonstrative of how these humanists deal with issues of material idolatry and emotional wellbeing, it is important to note how More uses *Utopia* as a platform to express his current disillusionment with the reign of

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<sup>14</sup> These similar satirical influences from Lucian are present in *Praise of Folly*. Lucianic influences also present in this nonchalant critique of serious political and societal issues.

Henry VIII while serving as his councilor, as well as Erasmus's disappointment in the current state of Rome. Despite the real-life repercussions of hierarchical corruption taking place during the sixteenth century, the only way to truly understand the rhetorical methods of these texts is by examining the way they function as satirical commentary on these contemporary conflicts. In *Utopia*, the reader notes various examples of counterintuitive expressions of the way Utopians disregard material items, particularly items that would traditionally signify luxury and wealth. In More's text we see the way that Utopians devalue materiality by forcing prisoners to don gold chains and conceptualizing pearls as toys for children. These counterintuitive conceptions of typically coveted items raise various questions regarding More's essential commentary on the value and significance of these items. This devalorization of luxurious material objects can be read as a critique of the way in which Henry VIII flaunts gold chains and an overall exaggerated outward appearance of wealth. These transgressive notions of the material world can also lead us to thinking about the role that the government plays in enforcing these counterintuitive material ideals in *Utopia*, since the practice of flaunting wealth through particularly embodied expressions is demonized.

In *Praise of Folly*, Erasmus expresses similar disappointment in the institutional hierarchy of the church and its public displays of wealth. As previously noted, after his trip to Italy Erasmus was highly disillusioned by the immoral nature of the church leaders under Pope Julius II. Both *Utopia* and *The Praise of Folly* these texts demonstrate the role of the government in protecting and maintaining happiness and the relationship of the material world to one's ideas of their own happiness. I argue that the state, in *Utopia*, transgresses traditional notions of materiality by re-appropriating the value of certain material items—for instance, by forcing prisoners, slaves, and children to wear traditionally coveted items like gold chains, diamonds, and pearls. Not only does the state enforce public displays of punishment for criminal subjects,

but by making enfranchised people wear these items during public punishment they construct a narrative that sharply contrasts happiness and suffering. Similarly, in *The Praise of Folly*, the personified Folly asks her audience to question the reality of their own state of mind, despite the ways in which serious regulatory figures of have influenced them to think about their own wellbeing and happiness. These narratives force regular citizens to consider their own lack of suffering, but it is, in fact, through these material signifiers and formulated ideologies that subjects are able to conceive of their own privilege. In *Utopia*, like Erasmus, More similarly transgresses traditional ideological positions of coveted material items, like diamonds and pearls, in order to force readers to think about how we value precious objects for means of wellbeing and happiness. We can see that these invocations of individualized well-being and materiality are relevant not only to Utopians or to the spectators of Folly's speech, but in fact mirror contemporary ecclesiastical and political issues considering the reformative tendencies of Erasmian humanism.

We see a difference, of course, in the way that Erasmus and More approach their critiques of religious and political institutions because of their differing global perspectives: More's tends to lean towards a critique of policies in England, and Erasmus's focuses on larger European ecclesiastical debates. Within the realm of sixteenth-century England, problems of real-world corruption appeared more obvious to humanist Thomas More due to his relationship with Henry VIII as his councilor. More became increasingly critical of the King's lustful and materialistic tendencies, especially the King's desire to annul his marriage to his wife Catherine of Aragon in order to marry Anne Boleyn. More's continued criticism of the tyrant eventually led to More's beheading in July of 1535, approximately one year before the King eventually accused Anne Boleyn of adultery, incest, and conspiracy. The cause of Anne's death in 1536 was most likely the result of Henry's desire to marry a third time in order to produce a male heir for

the throne, since Anne had not borne a male heir for the King. Despite the shameful nature of the charges the King brought against him, we still know Thomas More as Saint Thomas More, the martyr and defender of the true Catholic church.<sup>15</sup> More's fame in martyrdom proved to be a result of his persistence in advocating for the "old church" despite the wave of reformist ideologies disseminated throughout sixteenth-century England and throughout other formerly Roman Catholic nations. The interesting paradox is that while More did in fact desire reform for the church, his refusal to conform to the break from the church that Henry enacted was the reason for his execution. As we see in *Utopia*, as well as in his condemnation of Henry VIII, More strategically articulated the corruption within the church, while maintaining his desires to preserve the sanctity of the old church.

Despite his attempts to preserve the church and his subsequent beatification, More was not, in fact, always a perfect Catholic figure. As today's iterations of the history of Henry VIII's reign remind us, More was, in many instances, responsible for burning Protestant reformers at the stake.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, as interpreters of the sixteenth century Reformation era, we are presented with conflicted characterizations of figures such as More, since his own theological ideologies present hypocritically.<sup>17</sup> The dichotomy between the severe Thomas More who burned heretics at the stake and the More who calls for religious tolerance in *Utopia* remains a bit of a mystery. However, he defends his actions as negligent of the physical body, but highly concerned with the soul. In his *Apology* More notes,

As touching heretics, I hate that vice of theirs and not their persons, and very fain would I that the one were destroyed and the other saved. And that I have toward no man any other

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<sup>15</sup> More was beatified by Pope Leo XIII on December 9<sup>th</sup>, 1886.

<sup>16</sup> Contemporary interpretations of the Tudor dynasty, such as *The Tudors*.

<sup>17</sup> Catholics vs. Reformers and Humanists vs. Scholastics.

mind than this—how loudly soever these blessed new brethren and professors and preachers of heresy belie me—if all the favour and pity that I have used among them to their amendment were known, it would, warrant you, well and plain appear; whereof, if it were requisite, I could bring forth witnesses more than men would ween.<sup>18</sup>

Here More notes that these punishments for heresy are not only for the good of the individual soul, but also for the good of the collective community. The idea of a communal protection against the evils of the individual is equally reflected in his satire. However, the critique that his protagonist Raphael makes about the treatment of thieves in Utopia seems to contradict the unjust nature of his own treatments of criminals. More goes on in his *Apology* to say,

That who so be so deeply grounded in malice, to the harm of his own soul and other men's too, and so set upon the sowing of seditious heresies, that no good means that men may use unto him can pull that malicious folly out of his poisoned, proud, obstinate heart, I would rather be content that he were gone in time, than overlong to tarry to the deconstruction of other.<sup>19</sup>

He continues the same rhetoric that justifies his cruelty to heretics for the greater good, but mostly importantly demonstrates his willingness to sacrifice the material body for the transcendental soul. In many ways, More's cruelty to heretics is a result of his disregard for the material world, in this case the material body, as he like Erasmus demonstrates the irrelevance of the material to individual piety.

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<sup>18</sup> T.E. Bridgett, *Life and Writings of Sir Thomas More: Lord Chancellor of England and Martyr under Henry VIII* (Yale University Press, 1891), 255.

<sup>19</sup> Bridgett, *Life and Writings of Sir Thomas More: Lord Chancellor of England and Martyr under Henry VIII*, 255.

An alternate interpretation of his treatment of heretics might note that there exists a gap in time between More's vastly different approaches to religious toleration presented in his *Apology* and in Raphael's observations of Utopia. We see a significantly more tolerant More in the satire: Raphael notes that the Utopians prohibit violence or reproaches against those of different religious views and that those who invoke violence for religious purposes are subject to imprisonment or slavery—though there seems to be a difference between what Raphael means by “those of different religious views” and Protestant heretics. It seems that this tolerance extends to those of religious views that do not impose upon Christian views. Only those whose religious views do not infringe upon the original church are extended the courtesy of non-violent toleration, which means this courtesy would not extend to Protestant reformers. This contradiction presents another paradox and hermeneutical obstacle when reading More himself, as well as his satire. This paradox raises questions of More's sincerity in writing of religious tolerance during his younger years. Another alternative explanation can be that More was pressured by the King to enforce punishments to the fullest extent, since prior to England's split from Rome Henry was a staunch punisher of Protestant heresy. Yet, in his *Apology*, he maintained that “these laws had been administered with the utmost leniency and indeed with a dangerous laxity.”<sup>20</sup>

### III. Embodied Alleviation from the “Pangs of Death” in *The Praise of Folly*

In both of *The Praise of Folly* and *Utopia* we can observe how methods of approaching materiality are regulated by governmental and ecclesiastical forces. However, in *The Praise of Folly* we are confronted with commentary on flawed material culture in more implicit ways than

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<sup>20</sup> Bridgett, *Life and Writings of Sir Thomas More: Lord Chancellor of England and Martyr under Henry VIII*, 256.

we are in *Utopia*. Folly exposes these hidden structures of material culture in the way that hierarchical figures flaunt their own embodied interactions with luxury and how those particularly public demonstrations influence lay people and individual affect.

After a week residing at the estate of his dear friend Thomas More, Desiderius Erasmus composed *The Praise of Folly*. His satire functions as a critique of corruption within political and theological hierarchies of the early sixteenth century, during the early stages of the Protestant Reformation. Despite the previously established controversial reception of his most successful text, *The Praise of Folly* demonstrates societal-wide critiques of idolatry and material afflictions especially among church hierarchies. Though his text functions as a harsh critique of various groups of people, his approach is abstracted in the sense that he does not name individuals. This method denotes again this overarching distanced—or immaterial approach—to his criticism. Not only is Erasmus's methodical approach highly abstracted, Folly's rant-style speech also demonstrates a profound understanding of a flawed material culture and its subsequent erroneous affectual implications.

We get to know Folly as a woman who criticizes her own sex as we also understand her as the dominant narrative voice from the beginning of the text. The narrative voice of *The Praise of Folly* functions as an essential factor in understanding the progression of the satire throughout the text, as well as the material critique—since Folly herself presents the female body as highly material. As scholars have argued, Folly essentially functions as the shield which deflects culpability away from Erasmus from the harsh criticisms presented in the book. This shield also comes from the fact that Folly is gendered as female, thus perhaps women are the ultimate fools, but Erasmus's invocation of the feminine voice complicates this definition since Folly simultaneously functions as the ultimate judge of all of humanity. Folly possesses a divinity that alludes to happiness and well-being, a characterization typically reserved for God. As Harry



Berger, Jr. notes, this invocation of folly serves as a counteraction to the cynicism of being trapped in a “life that is not worth living.”<sup>21</sup>

However, just as we’ve seen from the previous section of this thesis, this satire presents various paradoxical ideologies. Folly elevates the rest of her sex over the masculine sex by denoting its capacity to alleviate humans from the pangs of the material world. Her cynical view of the material world proves paradoxical though, since invoking the pleasures of the material world functions as the only method of alleviation from its discomforts. We can observe smaller nuanced details throughout her speech that point to her opinions of womanhood, and possibly Erasmus’s opinions of women. When prefacing her speech she provides commentary on her opinion of the current state of religious education:

I’ve a fancy to play the sophist before you, and I don’t mean by that one of the tribe today who cram tiresome trivialities into the heads of schoolboys and teach them *more than feminine obstinacy in disputation*—no, I shall follow the ancients who chose the name sophist in preference to the damaging title of wise men.<sup>22</sup>

Here the audience observes Folly’s intentions to educate youth without adhering to the common practices of the scholastics when she says she will not “cram tiresome trivialities into the heads of schoolboys.”<sup>23</sup> Her critique of the trivialities being taught by the “tribes” of her day is clearly alluding to Erasmus’s current disillusionment with the way that theology was being practiced by contemporary scholastics, discussed in the first section of this thesis. But pointing out this passage does not simply contextualize the theological debate amidst the Reformation period; it

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<sup>21</sup> Harry Berger Jr., “Utopian Folly: Erasmus and More on the Perils of Misanthropy.” *English Literary Renaissance*. 12, no. 3 (1982), 274.

<sup>22</sup> Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, 10.

<sup>23</sup> Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, 10.

also functions as a reinforcement of a gendered stereotype by a feminine narrator, since in many ways the female body is viewed as being more material than the male body. Her general diversion from “feminine obstinacy” alludes to her “bad feminist tendencies,” which are present throughout, since she often disregards the intellectual abilities of women. Folly’s assertions about the material nature of female beauty and women’s subsequent relation to foolishness in many ways denote the female body as what Sarah Ahmed calls “happiness means,” for in “directing ourselves towards this or that object, we are aiming somewhere else: towards a happiness that is presumed to follow.”<sup>24</sup> Thus, orienting ourselves towards the female body subsequently orients us to happiness, in the same way that other highly material objects orient individuals towards the same affect.

However, Folly justifies her controversial assertions about the objective nature of the female body by regarding the human relation to this material object as an essential component in diverting from the suffering of the world. Since Folly prioritizes the material world as this essential component driving individualized well-being, she says,

But I don’t think the female sex is so foolish as to be angry with me for attributing folly to them, seeing that I *am* Folly, and a woman myself. If they look at the matter in the right way they must see that its entirely due to folly that they are better off than men in many respects.<sup>25</sup>

Here, again we see Erasmus deflecting responsibility for what can be perceived as sexist rhetoric by invoking these sorts of paradoxical assertions—that Folly’s sex is both most foolish and most

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<sup>24</sup> Sarah Ahmed, “Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness” (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 576.

<sup>25</sup> Ahmed, “Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness,” 576.

powerful among humans for its capacity to even allude to a happiness incomprehensible to the masculine body. The beauty of women is directly associated with their inherently foolish nature, since beauty itself is an inherently material quality of the human body. Nonetheless women are also at an advantage for their ability to “tyrannize over tyrants themselves” because of the power that their beauty affords them over men.<sup>26</sup>

Folly further materializes the female body by arguing that their lack of aspiration to attain wisdom, as men do, demonstrates the lack of signs of aging. Women maintain their youthful beauty because of their lack of intellectual pursuits. This prevents them from exhibiting traits of the unkempt wise man. She notes these traits as “rough skin, bushy beard.” Instead, women maintain their “smooth cheeks, gentle voice, soft skin, and look of perpetual youth.”<sup>27</sup> The maintenance of youth is one of the traits that distinguishes the sexes, thus functioning as the distinguishing factor between wise men and foolish women. The emphasis on youth preservation and the way that it functions between the different sexes is one of Folly’s main theses: that one’s relation to happiness or folly is highly embodied and material and thus can be observed in one’s physical appearance.

However, as we’ll see throughout, her speech isn’t simply preoccupied with youth as an expression of difference between the genders, she also uses the juxtaposition of youth and aging as a way to demonstrate folly among various professions, emphasizing the aged physical appearances of those working towards wisdom as a career versus those who enjoy a life of folly. Contemporary readers of *The Praise of Folly* can think about how women (and foolish bliss) are elevated through an analysis of Folly’s own characterization of herself as esteemed almost

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<sup>26</sup> Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, 30.

<sup>27</sup> Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, 31.

equally to God, or the gods.<sup>28</sup> At the beginning of the book, we are introduced to Folly through a demonstration of her noble lineage. She claims her father was Plutus and she goes on to say,

my father was neither chaos, nor hell, nor Saturn, nor Jupiter, not any of those old, worn out, grandsire gods, but Plutus, the very same that, maugre Homer, Hesoid, nay, in spite of Jove himself, was the primary father born amongst these delights.<sup>29</sup>

Distinguishing Plutus from other deities, she says her father was the God of wealth and the subsequent delights of the world. She then differentiates her birth from that of other children by noting the manner in which she emerged from her mother's womb. She says, "I did not, like other infants, come crying into the world, but perked up, and laughed immediately in my mother's face."<sup>30</sup> Here we begin to see not only the way in which she defines herself as a divine figure, but also how she distinguishes her folly from that of other fools, specifically children. This point emerges as another one of her main theses, as I will shortly discuss: defining folly through an approximation to childhood and old age. For now, I want to think about the space that she occupies as a divine figure or think about how she relates folly to divine transcendence herself. Erasmus invokes Folly as the ultimate judge of the wise and foolish tendencies of humanity, thus situating her similarly as one would situate God.

Though Folly does not the judge of pious acts of humanity (although one can argue that she actually does, since she defines piety in relation to pleasure in the same way More does), her similar capacity to critique the actions of humanity functions in the same way the Christian God judges religiosity. She functions as this ultimate or divine judge under the council of various

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<sup>28</sup> Folly consistently makes references to the Christian God as well as the pagan gods. Therefore, her religious affiliation is complicated throughout.

<sup>29</sup> Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, 30.

<sup>30</sup> Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, 30.

figures who embody various attributes, particularly those of a traditionally sinful nature, but most importantly a materially embodied nature. While reciting her speech, she surveys her divine councilors by outlining their materialized characteristics:

This, who goes with a mincing gait, and holds up her head so high, is *Self-Love*. She that looks so spruce, and makes such a noise and bustle, is *Flattery*. That other, which sits hum-drum, as if she were half asleep, is called *Forgetfulness*. She that leans on her elbow, and sometimes yawningly stretches out her arms, is *Laziness*. This, that wears a plighted garland of flowers, and smells so perfumed, is *Pleasure*. The other, which appears in so smooth a skin, and pampered-up flesh, is *Sensuality*. She that stares so wildly, and rolls about her eyes, is *Madness*. As to those two gods whom you see playing among the lasses the name of the one is *Intemperance*, the other *Sound Sleep*.<sup>31</sup>

This display of her council demonstrates the capacity of assistance Folly needs to function as the ultimate judge of human actions, but most importantly their divine folly manifests in a highly embodied manner. Their descriptions as divine entities are defined in the way they roll their eyes, lean on their elbows, and appear to have smooth skin. Madness, Self-Love, Pleasure, and all of the rest seem to collectively function as demonstrative of the sinful nature of the material world. She goes on to say, “by the help and service of this retinue I bring all things under the verge of my power, lording it over the greatest kings and potentates.”<sup>32</sup> Although Folly, the leader among her councilors, demonstrates a similar divinity as the Christian God, she and her councilors demonstrate quite the opposite of the principles of Christian piety since they relish in the delights of the material world.

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<sup>31</sup> Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, 18.

<sup>32</sup> Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, 18.

Folly also distinguishes fools of different professions—because of how their choice of profession reflects in their material body—by their approximation to death or away from youth, claiming that men who pursue academized theology and philosophy are much closer to death than those who pursue the pleasures that a foolish life has to offer. As when Folly outlines the physicality of her sinful councilors, the bodily signifiers of one's profession similarly imply the state of their psyche. As we've seen with her separation of the genders and their beauty or lack thereof, the physical outer appearances of a person depending on age function as demonstrative of a person's mental wellbeing or their proximation to folly. Thus, the older and more tired one physically appears the more likely it is that that person has pursued rigorous scholarly inquiries, while those who don't preoccupy themselves with achieving wisdom tend to appear more youthful and beautiful. However, Folly begins to complicate these signs with her assertions about the elderly. Similar to the assertions she makes about the physical appearances of women, she also claims that the elderly are similarly alleviated from the perils of the life of pursuing wisdom, since in many ways physically and psychologically they mirror children. Thus, as humans get older they enter into a sort of second youth—which can be observed both in their physical appearance, as well as in their psychological affect. Therefore, children and the elderly—those whose minds wander far from reason—reflect one another in their youth and innocence. Though elderly people may demonstrate signs of aging that could allude to the pursuits of wisdom of philosophers or the scholastics, they nevertheless maintain many of the physical characteristics of children. In regard to the physical appearances of the young and old, Folly says, “indeed what difference can be discerned between them, but that the one is more furrowed with wrinkles, and has seen a little more of the world than the other?”<sup>33</sup> It seems their similarities certainly outweigh their differences.

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<sup>33</sup> Erasmus, Desiderius. *The Praise of Folly*, 60.

For otherwise their whitish hair, their want of teeth, their smallness of stature, their milk diet, their bald crowns, their prattling, their playing, their short memory, their heedlessness, and all their other endowments, exactly agree; and the more they advance in years, the nearer they come back to their cradle, till like children indeed, at last they depart the world, without any remorse at the loss of life, or sense of the pangs of death.<sup>34</sup>

Therefore, the further away that one is situated from the pains that come with wisdom acquisition and maturity, the closer one is to sharing the same physical, and of course psychological, attributes and mannerisms. Ultimate relief from the “pangs of death” is the most essential benefit of being a fool, and the most natural manifestations of foolishness come with childhood and old age. Thus, childhood and old age are the purest expressions of human innocence and subsequent liberation from the pain of anticipating one’s own death (an anticipation that is essentially what Folly claims philosophers do). Folly equally situates children and old men/women as the archetypes of a sort of natural fool—one who inherently expresses a sense of freedom from the suffering of world.

Folly seems to distinguish children and the aged as the most essential form of fools on the grounds that they don’t necessarily choose to be fools. Psychological and anatomical/physiological impositions and limitations simply do not afford them the ability to pursue wisdom even if they wanted to. Her distinction of the folly of children and old men from that of those who choose to be fools seems to be a clear manner of separating “natural folly” from those of corrupt power hierarchies who choose to be fools highly ignorant of their own absurdities. During the second half of the text, we see the extent to which Folly’s criticism of

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<sup>34</sup> Erasmus, Desiderius. *The Praise of Folly*, 60.

humanity becomes more focused on theologians and philosophers through her outlining of their physical descriptors that point to old age. She also focuses on their consistent preoccupations with the inevitability of death and their proximity to it. Despite her criticism of overly preoccupying oneself with the inevitability of death, the entire premise of the book seems to be a recitation of the methods of avoiding this suffering, since Folly herself functions as the only salvation from the discomforts of life. Thus, as Berger notes, “the argument of Folly is that the examined life is not worth living, the examined self not worth knowing,” since the text presents happiness as achievable only through a lack of examining the self and the world that surrounds it.<sup>35</sup>

The cynical nature of Folly’s worldview illuminates Erasmus’s critiques of contemporary theology and of scholastics during the sixteenth century in the midst of the Reformation. Towards the beginning of her criticism of the scholastics, Folly defines how Paul discusses the idea of charity in the Bible. Folly claims that he provides the “finest examples” of it and that his ideas are highly “unscholastic” and that they do not function according to the rules of dialectic. Thus, Folly emphasizes the idea that religious piety cannot function according to the dialectical rules of the scholastics, since as Paul says, “faith is the substance of things hoped for, evidence not seen.”<sup>36</sup> Folly quotes Paul in order to express the fundamental way that academizing religious discourse contradicts the foundational principals of Catholic approaches to faith. She outlines some of the contested discourses that theologians preoccupy themselves with but notes that the apostles themselves left these questions unanswered because they are essentially unanswerable. She says,

The apostles consecrated the eucharist with due piety, but had they been questioned about the *terminus a quo* and the *terminus ad quem*, about transubstantiation, and how the same

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<sup>35</sup> Berger, “Utopian Folly: Erasmus and More on the Perils of Misanthropy.” 274.

<sup>36</sup> Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, 89.



body can be in different places, about the difference between the body of Christ in heaven, on the cross, and at the sacrament of the Eucharist, about the exact moment when transubstantiation takes place, seeing that the prayer which effects it is a distinct quantity extended in time, they wouldn't, in my opinion, have shown the same subtlety in their reply as the Scotists do in their dissertations and definitions.<sup>37</sup>

This passage functions as a sort of outline of all the ideas which historically in ecclesiastical discourse remained uncontested or unprovoked, but now remain topics of debate among the scholastic theologians. Essentially, Folly disagrees with the practices of complicating the canonical questions of religious discourse, since again the answers to these questions are inherently unknowable.

This disagreement Erasmus has with over-academized theological inquiry enlightens Erasmus's observations on the hermeneutical in relation to other sorts of challenges that the material world presents. Folly's distaste for these theological dialectics reflects her overall disillusionment with the practices of searching for the truth or answers about life and death (the occupation of philosophers), since answers to these questions are unattainable, or at least cannot be accessed in our material world. Since these academized methods of engaging in questions of faith are practiced within the material world, Erasmus seems to be an advocate of answering those questions using a transcendental method. Fundamentally and structurally speaking, academized theology is highly material—in that this practice necessitates the appropriation of books, and dialectical engagement with other people all under the roofs of physical places, like universities. Folly's overall promotion of a transcendental individualized manner of pursuing religious inquiries isn't simply conformist because of its reliance on traditional dogma; rather, it

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<sup>37</sup> Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, 89.

is anti-materialist. It aligns with her criticisms of the theologians and essentially with Erasmus's dissatisfaction with their pursuit of these questions within the framework of the material world.

In fact, Folly is particularly critical of the practice of burning heretics at the stake. This attempt to punish the transcendental soul as if it were synonymous with the body subverts Erasmus's entire view of Christian piety. It should be noted that this practice goes against Erasmus's views and not Folly's, since we know that Folly's assertions of the material function are completely opposite to those of Erasmus. However, Folly's position on capital punishment for heresy also proves to be surprisingly condemnatory of this attention to the material body. Folly comically observes the precarity of the position she claims against this practice. She is hyper-conscious that her own speech can result in her being burned at the stake as theologians treat culprits of heretical practices. She notes how the treatment of heretics is far harsher than it is for any other criminal punished, since theologians are particularly sensitive about their esteemed dogmas. Thus, the treatment of heretics is much less about the actual extent of their crime and more about the esteem in which clergy members hold their teachings. She recognizes the precarious position that she puts herself in making these denouncements by saying the theologians will make her "eat her words," "if I refuse they'll denounce me as a heretic on the spot" and "for this is the bolt they always loose on anyone to whom they take a dislike."<sup>38</sup> They would be quick to condemn her as a heretic just as they have anyone else who challenges the ideas of the church, since they are as Folly claims a "touchy lot."<sup>39</sup>

What, for me, remains most thought-provoking about the way Erasmus critiques figures of theological, political, and educational institutions is the manner in which those same critiques also reflect Folly's critiques of flawed ecclesiastical practices. Though these critiques are generally aimed at these larger institutions, these flawed modes of expressing religious devotion

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<sup>38</sup> Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, 86.

<sup>39</sup> Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, 86.

trickle down within the text as a critique of the individual, despite the constant claim that Folly does not call out individual people. We see, throughout Folly's critique, the ways in which the flaws and corruption at the institutional level are reflected at the individual level; thus institutions, especially religious ones, are responsible for this "monastic malpractice."

As I've noted in the first section of this thesis, Folly's institutionally leveled criticism of material practices begins to erupt when she condemns the prioritization of religious figures over Christ himself. Religious practices, according to Folly, during this time prioritized the veneration of saints, martyrs, and really any other religious figures over Christ. Catholic churches obviously were not only celebrating Christ, but also praising figures that make up the ecclesiastical canon—which proved to be one of the main criticisms that Protestants had of Catholicism. Folly especially alludes to the malpractice of "blind devotees" who place higher significance on the worship of the Virgin Mary than the worship of Christ. She claims that the elevation of saints and other monastic figures over Christ is in fact another form of Folly: "of all the prayers and intercessions that are made to these respective saints the substance of them is no more than downright Folly."<sup>40</sup> Thus, prioritizing prayers to saints and the Virgin Mary and attaching specific expectations to them is, in fact, an absurd practice of Catholicism. This critique develops into commentary upon the material infatuations of Catholicism, since these practices are often expressed using religious materiality, such as rosary beads, girdle books, and embellished images of saints.

We can understand Erasmus's view of relics and icons as being one that transformed Christian piety during the sixteenth century. Erasmus believed that the written text superseded the physical religious relic that Catholicism obsesses over. He says, "The slippers of saints and their drivel-stained napkins we put to our lips, and the books they wrote, the most sacred and

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<sup>40</sup> Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, 153.

most powerful relics of those holy men, we leave neglected.”<sup>41</sup> To Erasmus, the veneration of the physical material manifestations of Christ, or of “holy men,” does not achieve the same level of piety for the individual that the veneration of the textual word of God would.<sup>42</sup> As his protagonist notes in *The Praise of Folly*, Christianity promotes the idea that earthly life is a repetitive recitation of the joys in heaven—while material objects signify the joys of heaven, they are simply signifiers, not the joys themselves. These Christian recitations on the joys of heaven function as reminders not to dwell in the material of the present life but to have faith in the rich future to come. But, of course, she then notes that this sort of ideology over-balances the worldly delights at our disposal. She says, “so great is the precedency of spiritual things before corporeal, of invisible before material and visible.”<sup>43</sup> Erasmus’s contempt for the material world even extends to the materiality of the body of Christ, which would seem to be a highly heretical position to take. He extends the argument that the live orator does not hold the same transcendent sanctity as the dead text. Erasmus claims that Christ himself—in fleshly form—proved to be an unreliable narrator in his explanation of why his material body had to die for human salvation. Kearney says, “Erasmus similarly claims that the corporeal interactions that the apostles had with Christ were not sufficient means to a complete understanding of him. Erasmus goes on to question, “If the physical presence of Christ is of no profit for salvation, shall we dare to place our hopes for the attainment of perfect piety in any material thing?”<sup>44</sup> This line of thinking proves to be the basis for Erasmus’s rejection of the material world and the ways that he treats materiality in *The Praise of Folly*.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> James Kearney, *The Incarnate Text: Imagining the Book in Reformation England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 59.

<sup>42</sup> Kearney, *The Incarnate Text*, 58.

<sup>43</sup> Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, 132.

<sup>44</sup> Kearney, *The Incarnate Text*, 58.

<sup>45</sup> Through Erasmus’s satire we understand pieces of his critique of ecclesiastical practices of the Church, but we can also understand his veneration of the text of Christ as itself being a material obsession. As James Kearney notes, “given his animus against relics and the relation to the material world they embody, it is all the more surprising then that Erasmus should use the metaphor of the relic to describe the proper way to venerate books.” Erasmus thus

Folly concludes her critiques of Catholic material culture and veneration practices by noting, in all of her ironic glory, that “Among all the trophies that for tokens of gratitude are hung upon the walls and ceilings of churches, you shall find no relics presented as a memorandum of any that were ever cured of Folly, or had been made one dram the wiser.”<sup>46</sup> Of all of the images of saints and especially of religious figures escaping danger, there are none that praise Folly for the work that she does to alleviate these individuals’ suffering. Again, here Folly esteems herself as being worthy of praise in the traditional manner that Catholics venerate saints, though she just finished critiquing those practices. This contradiction provokes questions about the sincerity of her previous critique of flawed material veneration, since folly itself presents as a contradiction functioning as both sinful ignorance and blissful enlightenment. Though Folly criticizes the material culture of Catholicism, she nonetheless desires a place within that materially expressive culture. She says,

After all these acknowledgments of escapes from such singular dangers, there is none (as I have before intimated) that return thanks for being freed from Folly; Folly being so sweet and luscious, that it is rather sued for as a happiness, than deprecated as a punishment. But, why should I launch out into so wide a sea of superstitions?<sup>47</sup>

Thus, she situates herself within the structural framework of the Catholic church, essentially making the claim that she deserves a place within these material veneration practices. But I want

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advocates for the veneration of the Bible for its textuality but seems to be disregarding the material nature of the book itself, especially considering the way that the bible often times is adorned with luxurious materials like gold or worn as girdle books to be displayed as what can be interpreted as a fashion accessory. His disregard for these methods of experiencing the bible materially functions as another paradoxical relationship between his more abstract beliefs and the application of those practices.

<sup>46</sup> Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, 66.

<sup>47</sup> Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, 66.

to think more closely about her choice of words in this observation. She says that there are no present signs that demonstrate how people are “freed from Folly,” which seems to contradict her omnipresent thesis that Folly is a liberating factor from the “pangs of death.” However, she does in fact directly relate Folly to happiness and distinguishes it from punishment, since it is “so sweet and luscious.” This assertion provokes the question: why would one need to be “freed from folly” if it is “so sweet and luscious”? Though the particular language seems insignificant, the contradiction she makes seems to allude to much larger issues within her speech.

Folly ends *The Praise of Folly* by asserting her own proximity to both happiness and foolish madness in a particularly pious manner. She invokes St. Paul’s promise of salvation by means of a sort of ignorance by quoting, “Eye has not seen nor ear heard, nor have there entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those that love him.”<sup>48</sup> This quotation, which comes at the very end of her monologue, proves to be a strange profession of a particularly Catholic religiosity, which can only be explained as the voice of Erasmus himself. At this point Erasmus seems to have entirely removed his veil of the narrative voice of Folly and outwardly expresses his theological views. Paul’s emphasis on the importance of maintaining faith despite being blind to actual truth proves to be one of *The Praise of Folly*’s most consistent themes throughout. Essentially, Erasmus’s critique of the scholastics fits into this final proclamation of the importance of a sort of blind faith. Continuing this assertion, Folly claims that, “this is the part of Folly which is not taken away by the transformation of life but is made perfect,” then asserts that people who achieve this perfection “experience something which is very like madness.”<sup>49</sup> Thus, the people who break from this cycle of transformation that life naturally brings away from folly, the mad and the foolish, achieve a sort of transcendental perfection.

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<sup>48</sup> Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, 133.

<sup>49</sup> Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, 133.

Erasmus's association of madness and folly as modes of achieving transcendental sanctity and subsequent happiness is particularly important to the note that the text ends on. Folly consistently uses the term "happiness" to define what is achieved after choosing a foolish life over the life of a wise man; thus she continues this rhetoric as she ends her speech on the note of happiness as the finalizing factor of religious salvation. In fact, her invocation of the idea of happiness aligns perfectly with her association of youth and old age with both chronological progression and transgression towards death and happiness. This demonstrates her idea of the cyclical and embodied nature of life, happiness and suffering together. She ends with the same way that Cervantes ends *Don Quixote*—with the idea that enlightenment or a coming to wisdom of sorts often brings unhappiness and death, since upon Quixote's acquiring his reason he simultaneously reaches his death. In defining the lifespan of these foolish men, Folly says, "They speak incoherently and unnaturally, utter sound without sense, and their faces suddenly change expression. One moment they are excited, the next depressed, they weep and laugh and sigh by turns; in fact they truly are quite beside themselves." She goes on to note the depressive nature of this moment of enlightenment that fools and madmen might face.

when they come to, they don't know where they have been, in the body or outside it, awake or asleep. They cannot remember what they have heard or seen or said or done, except in a mist, like a dream. All they know is that they were happiest when they were out of their senses, and they lament their return to reason, for all they want is to be mad for ever with this kind of madness.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, 133.

The previous voice of satire and comedy transforms into a much more serious religious narration of spiritual fulfillment. What's most interesting about this ultimate proclamation of religious fulfillment is the idea that being "out of one's senses" functions as "only the merest taste of the happiness to come."<sup>51</sup>

We will see various ideological contradictions as a common characteristic among these humanist satires, since More similarly allows his narrative voice to stray away from those ideological stances. These contradictions complicate the entire discourse surrounding the meaning or purpose of humanistic satire among these two authors. Folly's interest in being a part of the institutions that she criticizes seems to be an exact reflection of both Erasmus's and More's positions within the Church, since as we can see from reading these texts, these authors maintained positions both within and outside of the institution by means of their dedication and subsequent criticisms of it. This general thesis—that institutions are responsible for implementing an idealized public model of interacting with the material world in order to cause well-being and happiness at the individual level—will also be shown in *Utopia*, but through an analysis of material objects of luxury in relation to the body, not necessarily an analysis of the body itself as in *The Praise of Folly*. Though the forms of the human body and luxurious material objects have different connotations associated with them, I am treating them, as Erasmus does, as equally related to individual affect and subject to institutional criticism.

#### **IV. Authoritative Materiality and State-Sanctioned Happiness in *Utopia***

Both *The Praise of Folly* and *Utopia* present various multifaceted political and religious ideologies that tend to be appropriated by both political and religious idealists. These modern-

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<sup>51</sup> Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, 134.



day interpreters maintain the methods presented in these texts as truths, despite the misanthropic rhetoric that these texts brutally approach. In particular, understanding *Utopia* in conjunction with the contextual/historical life of Sir Thomas More presents various contradictions in regard to both governmental and ecclesiastical ideals present throughout the text. However, the way that More presents his material critiques—that is, critiques of the way both religious materiality and a generally luxurious sort of materiality are appropriated by political leaders—can be clearly interpreted as reflective of More’s ideological views. With this section of my thesis I will focus on the way that Thomas More exaggerates notions of material appropriation in order to comment on his disillusionment with the corrupt institutions of early sixteenth-century, pre-Reformation England.

In many ways, both Erasmus’s and More’s humanist ideals tend to mirror those of advocates of the Reformation, since they outwardly expose the faults of corrupt powers; however, as we know, both humanists held little tolerance for those of heretical views or reformers. The connections between the reality of sixteenth century religious life and the idealized methods presented in these texts illuminate social commentary on hierarchical leaders who publicly present methods of embodying or interacting with the material world. But most importantly, Erasmus and More observe the implications that those public presentations have on individual affect. More perhaps presents an even more explicit understanding of these structures than does Erasmus, since his text provides an actual model for the way hierarchical figures employ particularly materialized methods in order to construct narratives of the way that one perceives one’s own wellbeing.

I want to begin this section thinking about the language in which both of these texts were composed and how their linguistic choice proves to be the kind of significant social commentary characteristic of humanistic thought. Both More and Erasmus strategically composed their satires

in Latin, thus limiting readership for the majority of the population. Considering that these texts comment on the corrupt social structures of the early sixteenth century, writing these texts in a language that was not easily accessible to the masses demonstrates the veiled intent behind the messages within them.<sup>52</sup> However, the choice to write these texts in Latin isn't simply another veil under which More and Erasmus used to make their controversial critiques of society; it also serves as a demonstration of their staunch humanistic values. Preservation of the ancient languages was one of the positions that humanists adopted as a means to maintain the value and knowledge of ancient wisdom; however, this practice proved a point of contention among other Renaissance scholars. Erasmus's Greek version of the New Testament was highly contested by scholastic theologians, who were firm in their beliefs on maintaining the Vulgate as the tongue of ecclesiastical practices and education. Debate over the methods of interpreting divine scripture were, in fact, one of the main controversies between figures of the scholastic school of thought and the evangelical humanists. Thus, More's and Erasmus's decision to write their texts in languages other than English proved to add another layer of complexity to the social commentary throughout—a sort of meta-level form of resisting both reformatory ideals and scholastic imposition. One can speculate that their language choices are functioning to conceal the essential “truths” they are so keen on maintaining. As we will see, the fundamental truth is most importantly, thus most controversially, the affective responsibility of governmental and ecclesiastical leadership and their failure to fulfill this responsibility.

Though *The Praise of Folly* demonstrates more apparent satire with its outright comical critiques of humanity, *Utopia* invokes similar qualities in a more implicit manner. Thus, our own interpretation of the text, in many ways, reflects that of appropriations that have happened since the sixteenth century. We are burdened with the question of how to read *Utopia* in the proper

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<sup>52</sup> An English translation of *Utopia* wasn't published until years after the original publication date in 1516, years after More's death. In 1551 under Edward VI's reign a translation was finally published.

way, assuming that a proper way exists. How do we maintain our innocence as readers—not partaking in this ideological appropriation—of a text that is so highly veiled in satire and problems of translation? Again, the unknowable answer to these questions seems to reflect the idea that authorial intention remains impossible, a similar position that Erasmian humanism maintains regarding interpretations of the bible. We can work only with the text at hand (in translation as well as More’s Latin) and imagine the text as a means of both working with contextual factors of the sixteenth century, and working against its historical context. Clearly, the text takes place in More’s present—Europe during the sixteenth century in the midst of reforming one of the oldest European institutions—but as we’ve noted, *Utopia* remains a tool for orienting one’s political and ecclesiastical ideologies for modern-day readers.

*Utopia* begins with a dialogue between More and his fictional companion Raphael Hythloday on the punishment of criminals in Europe, but the focus remains on England in particular. More and Raphael, as well as Peter Gilles—though he doesn’t participate much—discuss how punishments for thieves are as severe as for those who commit murder. Raphael, the man equipped with abundant knowledge of the New World, questions More about the general social practices of England and how the government itself fosters an environment that encourages criminal acts. The conversation shifts when Raphael tells the story of when he visited England and spoke with the Cardinal and the Archbishop of Canterbury about the way that England punishes its thieves, as thievery is a common occurrence. Raphael is quite critical of the way that imposing the death penalty upon thieves would subsequently encourage murder, since the punishment for these two separate crimes is treated equally. During this conversation Raphael gives an example of how what seems to be an imagined Persian society has formed a model that discourages those sorts of crimes. Raphael goes on to note that if people do commit crimes, governments treat them in a way that benefits the commonwealth as a whole. However,

as Raphael notes, his advice to the English Cardinal and Archbishop of Canterbury falls upon deaf ears since they disregard his advice, at least until the Cardinal utters the same advice himself. The premise of this story seems to provide an example of how governments are “highly prejudiced against everyone else’s ideas, or at any rate prefer their own.”<sup>53</sup>

In many ways this idea of government prejudice sums up Raphael’s thesis, but reducing Raphael to only this thesis eliminates some major ideological points that More’s narrator is keen on presenting. Raphael’s discourse about how governments should alleviate poverty and economic disparity is also an essential factor of understanding his political rhetoric. Raphael initially focuses on the hierarchical corruption and greed that subsequently lead to poverty. He provides a thorough examination of how the flawed and particularly greedy nature of governmental figures structures the necessity for subjects to resort to criminality in order to simply live their lives. After this examination of the reality of English society, he then presents his ideal model of punishment of criminals in the rare case that citizens partake in criminal acts. He presents a system where the repercussion for criminality is enslavement. Raphael importantly observes the benefits of this system as being both rather lenient as a punishment, and rather beneficial to the commonwealth. Though slavery doesn’t immediately resonate as a lenient system of punishment, it does seem lax compared to the system of hanging thieves. But what’s important to me about this passage is the sequence in which Raphael presents this monologue. Since his dialogue begins with a thorough critique of corrupt state powers, Raphael prioritizes larger systemic issues of governmental practices that lead to economic disparity such as land acquisition and greed. Raphael cites canonical law stating that not even God was as cruel to the Jews as the English are to their thieves. Raphael also notes that the Bible promotes the preservation of human life and that punishing thieves by hanging contradicts divine law. He thus

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<sup>53</sup> Thomas More, *Utopia*. (London: Penguin Classics, 2012), 21.

provokes questions of the extent to which English and European state powers should assume such positions of tyrannical cruelty, especially considering the corrupt and outright sinful models they themselves have presented their subjects with. Book One of *Utopia* ends on the sentiment that no matter the amount of wisdom Raphael could project into the ears of political leaders they will never change their ways, unless of course these concepts were conceived of by one of their own.

Raphael presents another example of the corruption of governmental forces and the subsequent negative implications those models have for regular subjects in his critiques of greed in the form of land acquisition and conquest. He mainly notes how kings fail at properly running their own lands since most are too busy acquiring new ones to be able to sustain their own. He notes how Persians have “no inclination to enlarge their borders,” unlike the greedy kings of Europe.<sup>54</sup> (This idea of the flawed, essentially greedy, nature of sixteenth-century monarchs connects, as we will see, with the enforcements and appropriations of material culture at the governmental level.) In his colonial critique, Raphael’s focus isn’t necessarily on preserving the lands of foreigners for a sort of human rights narrative—though he does emphasize the importance of preserving human life generally—but rather on the need for better social policies in a kingdom. Since he believes that the European way of government completely opposes the utopian system, he notes that kings are simply vain and prideful to want to acquire new lands without stabilizing their own first. In fact, he spends a significant amount of time criticizing the “nature” of contemporary monarchs in all of their outwardly expressed wealth, which completely contrasts with the desires of nobility, or anyone for that matter, in Utopia.

In mentioning these exaggerated forms of outwardly expressed wealth Raphael does not mention the English king, Henry VIII, by name, but More himself does at the beginning of

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<sup>54</sup> More, *Utopia*, 36.

*Utopia* during his explanation of how he even came into contact with information about the titular territory: he says, “There was recently a rather serious difference of opinion between that great expert in the art of government, His invincible Majesty, King Henry the Eighth of England, and his Serene Highness, Prince Charles of Castile.”<sup>55</sup> More notes how he was sent to Castile to settle the dispute and there met his good friend Peter Gilles, but I want to focus on the extravagant introduction and naming of the king. In the Penguin edition of the text the translation reads exactly as noted above, calling Henry “His invincible majesty.” However in the other translations of the text, the introduction reads as such: “HENRY THE EIGHTH, the unconquered King of England, a prince *adorned* with all the virtues that become a great monarch.”<sup>56</sup> I became interested in how this introduction of Henry the Eighth differed between translations, since we know that More and Henry VIII disagreed over various subjects, especially Henry’s annulment of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon, which resulted in England’s breaking from the Roman Catholic church to found the Church of England. Thus, it was necessary to look to the original Latin text in order to possibly pin down More’s introductory or prefatory thoughts on how to define Henry the Eighth at the beginning of his critical satire.

In the original Latin, we see that the term used to introduce the King resonates much more with the translation of “adorned,” rather than “invincible.” The original text reads: “cum non exigui momenti negotia quaedam inuictissimus Angliae Rex Henricus eius nominis octauus, omnibus egregii principis artibus *ornatissimus*,” The beginning of this passage reads as almost directly equivalent as to the English translation above; however, once Henry appears the terms to define him are complicated. The term “omnibus egregii principis artibus ornatissimus” translates to something like: “distinguished as most skilled and highly adorned.” What is interesting about More’s choice of words here is that the term “artibus,” though it directly translates to

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<sup>55</sup> More, *Utopia*, 15.

<sup>56</sup> Wisehouse and Dover Thrift editions.

skilled/distinguished, also shares its root word with the term “artus,” which means body part. The next word “ornatissimus” directly translates to “highly adorned.” Thus, More seems to be alluding to Henry’s body as being highly adorned. It is important to note the emphasis on the term adorned as being *highly* adorned, since the term for the simpler form of adorned would have been “ornatus.” But More’s choice of adding the suffix “issimus” indicates this particular emphasis on being adorned. Thus, it’s at least possible that More’s introduction to the text highlights the richly adorned, essentially embodied, and highly materialistic nature of his King.

This line of thinking becomes easier to agree with considering how the demonization of the contemporary material culture of luxury as a whole in *Utopia* also appears in *The Praise of Folly* in similar terms. Looking at More’s specific term “ornatissimus” in conjunction with *The Praise of Folly*, we see that Erasmus also uses the term “ornatus” quite frequently in fact throughout his text. Moreover, one of the passages that directed my entire line of thinking for this thesis also highlights this idea of adornment. This passage is found in conjunction with the text, though not directly within it. We can see the same sort of terminology invoked in Erasmus’s justification of the satirical nature of *The Praise of Folly* after its publication in 1515 in a letter to Maarten Van Dorp:

The famous sages of antiquity who chose to present the most salutary counsel for life in the form of amusing and apparently childish fables, *because truth can seem harsh if unadorned*, but with something pleasurable to recommend it can penetrate more easily the minds of mortals.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Desiderius Erasmus, “Letter to Maarten Van Dorp.” *The Praise of Folly* (London: Penguin Classics, 1993), 141.

In this fundamental letter the original Latin of the term “adorned” reads as “ornatus,” the root word of More’s “ornatissimus.” Thus, we see a sort of similar linguistic line of thinking between these two texts in that they both highlight the invocation of adorned truths. As we know, More defended his close friend and his rather controversial text, especially from critical theologians like Van Dorp. Because of this we can read More’s introduction to the King through the definitive qualities of Erasmus’s claim that truth must be adorned to be more palatable. We see More possibly criticizing Henry VIII as being an “ugly truth” of sorts that needs to conceal itself through adornments. In this case the adornments seem to be concealing the ugly truths of greed, of economic disparity, of cruelty, and of the overall pangs of death. We can simply read these quotes as being a part of More’s and Erasmus’s larger material critique; nevertheless, the connections between their statements are present.<sup>58</sup> Without speculating upon the particular semantic and subsequent ideological lineage of these texts, both of these texts maintain similar understandings of governmental corruption and, as we will see, the affectual consequences of those practices.

In *Utopia*, Raphael Hythloday undertakes a similar position as Erasmus here in denouncing the Church for its harsh treatment of heretics. However, this sympathy for the treatment of heretics proves either ironic or possibly premature to the More who condemns heretics to burn at the stake later in his career, as Protestantism and reformatory ideologies disseminate throughout England. As we know, Erasmus was a close friend of More, yet, he staunchly maintains this position of condemning the severe nature of punishing heretics throughout *The Praise of Folly*. Again, this might be symptomatic of a skewed timeline of ideological shifts, since both of these texts are produced early on in the author’s careers—

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<sup>58</sup> It also seems highly likely that More read Erasmus’s letter to Maarten Van Dorp, which included this language of adorning harsh truths, since More invokes the same language in *Utopia* which More published one year (1516) after Erasmus’s 1515 letter.



especially More's—as well as prior to the height of the Reformation that would have certainly shaped the way they viewed punishments of heresy. But, these ideological positions against mistreatment of heretics prove another point of contention when trying to undertake a reading of both *The Praise of Folly* and *Utopia*, as well as understand the ideological shifts of these prominent authors of the Reformation. Because of these paradoxes, historically Erasmus and More, especially More, have proved difficult to pin down as predominantly sympathetic or ambivalent to some of the atrocities, the particularly embodied and individualized suffering, of this major theological shift of the sixteenth century.

The root of this understanding can be observed in Raphael's critique of European practices of criminal punishment. Raphael monologues about how Europeans, particularly the English, think that they are above God and claim to have the ability to terminate human life whenever they please. In Book One, while speaking to English officials about the flaws in their policies, Raphael says, "God said, 'thou shall not kill'—does the theft of a little money make it quite all right for us to do so?"<sup>59</sup> He notes how the violation of man-made European policies currently overrides God's divine law. This critique demonstrates a profound understanding of the methods that the English upper classes invoke in an attempt to preserve their own material wealth while maintaining economic disparity. He explains how "purely human arrangements" are simply not sufficient means to "mutual manslaughter" without any consultation from divine authority. Thus, Raphael discredits the entire foundational practices of crime prevention and law enforcement in England, since their current system treats almost all crimes as punishable by death regardless of the severity of the crime and despite the contradiction with divine law.

Raphael's alternative to the problems of the English system, one that does not contradict divine law, is reflected first in the Persian society and eventually in Utopia. Raphael begins

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<sup>59</sup> More, *Utopia*, 34.

outlining practices of these more exemplary societies and the way that they treat those convicted of crimes in his description of a Persian country.<sup>60</sup> In this Persian country, which reflects almost all the same practices of Utopia, punishments for crimes are dealt with in an almost opposite manner to contemporary England. As noted before, Raphael claims that the Persian system utilizes its criminals for the greater good of the society at large. Therefore, criminals are not hanged for their crimes; rather, their physical bodies are appropriated to slave labor. Though slaves are allotted the hope of liberty if they prove to be remorseful enough for their crimes after years of dedicated labor, the methods of judging this dedication and remorse Raphael never tells explicitly. He claims that this sort of punishment is particularly effective for preventing further criminality because the public nature of slave labor encourages other citizens to obey the laws. Thus, slaves in this Persian country, as well as in Utopia, are not only literal tools for producing agricultural benefits for the society at large, but also metaphorical tools of crime prevention.

For the most part slavery is the punishment even of the greatest crimes, for as that is no less terrible to the criminals themselves than death, so they think the preserving of them in a state of servitude is more for the interest of the commonwealth than killing them, since, their labour is a greater benefit to the public than their death could be, so the sight of their misery is a more lasting terror to other men than that which would be given by their death.<sup>61</sup>

The public nature of these punishments is highlighted here as the means to terrorize non-criminal citizens for the purpose of preventing future crimes. The state publicly displays the forced labor

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<sup>60</sup> The exact “Persian society” is not actually named, though it resonates with some, if not all, of the governmental practices of Utopia.

<sup>61</sup> More, *Utopia*, 138.

and subsequent suffering of the prisoners in order to dissuade others from committing crimes, since the labor that the prisoners are forced to do is much harsher than the labor regular citizens do.<sup>62</sup> Although this seems to be a more humane method of punishment, the visual nature of this method seems resonant with other common practices of public executions. Although life is preserved through this method, the suffering and loss of autonomy function in the same way a public execution would. In both instances punishment functions as a particularly public phenomenon. As I've mentioned, this method of public punishment is almost exactly the same in Utopia: both this Persian country and Utopia invoke similar methods of public displays of enslavement for its criminal subjects, contrasting European methods. But what stands out in Utopia is the way that it uses material objects or signifiers to "other" its criminals as a way to reinforce notions of wellbeing and happiness.

Before getting into the specifics of the material invocations of this method, I want to talk about Raphael's claim that enslavement is more humane than death. Raphael seems to be saying that criminals are happier being enslaved than being dead. Though it sounds obvious that one would prefer enslavement over death, the prospects and subsequent methods of liberation from this sentence are quite ambiguous and uncertain. As I previously noted, Raphael never gives an exact demonstration of how a slave might be liberated from the conditions of his punishment. Though Raphael isn't necessarily an advocate for civil rights of slaves, I still want to think about the ramifications of these blurred policies of freedom and bondage. The lack of clarity on this subject proves that this system is clearly flawed, since this methodological ambiguity can prevent any slaves from being freed due to all sorts of power imbalances. But what is especially flawed about this model is its assumption that humans prefer bondage over death. Though this might be true, it seems like a generalization considering the conditions of their punishment, which include

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<sup>62</sup> Prisoners work longer hours, essentially until fatigue.

labor until fatigue and the prohibition of engaging in any sort of human interaction. Essentially, this system of criminal enslavement disregards the well-being of the individual person; rather, it considers only the benefits of their labor for the generalized community.

But of course, why would any sixteenth-century society, even a hypothetical one, consider the state of mind of its prisoners if our contemporary systems seldom do this? The Utopian system does, however, use its punitive system to advocate for the well-being of some of its free citizens. Finally, in the second section of More's text, Raphael distinguishes Utopia as the model among all other countries in the world because of how effectively its government enforces practices that evoke a sense of general happiness among citizens. This aura of well-being results from the effective labor, educational, and recreational regulations imposed by state forces. Raphael notes how citizens are required to work only six hours a day, three hours in the morning and three in the afternoon. This allows them to make good use of their free time in "some congenial activity." He notes how this free time encourages citizens to further educate themselves in public lectures as well as private reading practices. Some people also spend their free time in other activities like perfecting their trades or gardening, which Utopians seem to be extremely fond of. Because of all of these factors and opportunities at their disposal, Raphael claims,

Thus they have no wars among them; they live rather conveniently than with splendour, and may be rather called a *happy* nation than either eminent or famous; for I do not think that they are known, so much by name, to any but their next neighbors.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> More, Thomas. *Utopia*, 17.

I emphasize the word “happy” because I want to emphasize Raphael’s denotation of the positive affect that these proper governmental practices and regulations of Utopian system provokes.

As in Raphael’s description of the Persian society, the term “happy” is invoked when thinking about the structured nature of labor practices in Utopia. Considering all of the opportunities Utopians have for education and recreation, their citizens are not only inhabitants of this ideal republic but also known to be inhabitants of a happy life. Raphael says,

They never force people to work unnecessarily, for the main purpose of their whole economy is to give each person as much free time from physical drudgery as the needs of the community will allow, so that he can cultivate his mind—which they regard as the secret of a happy life.<sup>64</sup>

In many ways this assertion, noting the Utopian model as being freeing from “physical drudgery,” reflects that of Erasmus’s Folly, who similarly notes foolish activities and indulgence in the material world as the basis from freeing oneself from the “pangs of death.” But this argument nevertheless demonstrates the precise affective repercussions governmental enforcement and structure can have on the individual psyches of its citizens. Utopian enforcements of labor, designated recreational time, and, most importantly, an overall anti-materialist rhetorical framework seem to be essential factors to producing a “happy life.” However, the structured nature of these models almost exactly reflects that of its prisoners/slaves. Thus, this structural framework of the lives of free citizens and slave-laborers proves to be more similar than it is different, even though the framework of regular citizens encourages “happiness” while that of the enslaved disregards the same affective consideration.

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<sup>64</sup> More, Thomas. *Utopia*, 59.

This raises various questions of how we define happiness and if it is something that can actually be enforced and regulated structurally. Sarah Ahmed similarly questions humanistic notions of happiness and our relationship to the abstract concept historically. Though her general preoccupations concern the history of women's happiness, her analysis of the unstable nature of affect still remains relevant more generally for the purposes of this thesis. In dealing with the fleeting nature of the idea of happiness, Ahmed cites Kant's pessimistic views on how universal happiness, or even individual happiness, is highly unattainable. "Unfortunately, the notion of happiness is so indeterminate that although every human being wishes to attain it, yet he can never say definitely and consistently what it is that he really wishes and wills."<sup>65</sup> Then she notes, "If happiness is what we wish for, if happiness is necessarily our wish, it does not mean we know what we wish for in wishing for happiness."<sup>66</sup> Therefore provoking the question: how can an entire society like Utopia or Folly's world possibly attain happiness on a communal level if humans cannot even comprehend what happiness means to them at the individual level? The solution to this question seems to be the undertaking of the Utopian society that invokes state powers to enforce happiness. But, how can happiness be true happiness if it is enforced by an external force and therefore not conceived of by an individual?

Now that we've observed the connections between the structured nature of the lives of regular citizens and enslaved ones, it's important to note the particular manner in which the state promotes a particular sense of "happiness" for its free citizens, other than simply allowing them more free time. The state maintains notions of happiness for its free citizens by the public, but most importantly material, nature of its treatment of slaves. The main difference in the way that free people and criminal subjects dress forms the foundation of how free people acquire a sense of their position as privileged subjects in Utopian society. We can observe the differences in the

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<sup>65</sup> Ahmed, *Killing Joy*, 572.

<sup>66</sup> Ahmed, *Killing Joy*, 572.

way that these two groups of Utopians are made to dress or how their outward appearance can be physically detected. As we know, all free Utopians dress uniformly. They don the same “sort of clothes—except that they vary slightly according to sex and marital status—and the fashion never changes.”<sup>67</sup> Because there is no desire for more or different clothing, therefore there essentially aren’t any outward expressions of individuality in Utopia that one can control.<sup>68</sup>

The way that regular citizens are meant to appear through their required dress varies quite drastically from the required dress of the enslaved. Aside from the public nature of their punishment, slaves are also required to don certain clothes and material items that function as signifiers to denote enslavement, thus publicizing their physical appearances as uniformed like the regular citizens but “uniform” in a way that signifies bondage. Throughout the text, Raphael has made it a major part of his monologue to describe how Utopians have a completely opposite view of their precious metals and riches, noting that they regard metals solely for their intrinsic value. Thus they privilege metals like iron—which can be used in a productive manner—over “the raw materials of money” like silver and gold, since “without iron human life is simply impossible, just as it is without fire or water—but we could easily do without silver or gold.”<sup>69</sup> This distaste for the “raw materials of money” raises the question of exactly what it is that they do with their precious materials, since they are apparently in abundance in Utopia. Raphael observes how Utopians don’t use their gold and silver to adorn plates and drinking vessels. Though these items are beautifully crafted, they are constructed with “quite cheap stuff like glass and earthenware.” Instead, Utopians typically use their riches for normal household items of the humblest nature, like for chamber pots.

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<sup>67</sup> More, *Utopia*, 55.

<sup>68</sup> Of course, there are other physically identifying factors of citizens such as gender and age, but these factors function differently than material signifiers.

<sup>69</sup> More, *Utopia*, 66.

What is most essential to my argument is how Utopians “use chains and fetters of solid gold to immobilize slaves.”<sup>70</sup> Raphael also notes, “anyone who commits a really shameful crime is forced to go about with gold rings and a crown of gold on his head.”<sup>71</sup> Thus, these forms of gold essentially function as signifying factors identifying people who are enslaved, and certain forms of gold (rings and crowns) point to a particularly shameful criminal. Now if we were to go back and consider the language Thomas More uses at the beginning of the text to introduce Henry VIII, we can see the connections between Henry’s “artibus ornatissimus” and the descriptions of his “highly adorned” body as being reflective of these particularly shameful criminals. It seems especially significant that More specifies that the notably shameful criminals don a gold crown and gold rings. Though these items might not refer to Henry specifically, we still see the connection between those who don gold crowns and rings in real life and those criminals of a particularly shameful nature in More’s fictional world. Again, even if More isn’t specifically commenting on Henry’s material obsessions here, this description of the dress of criminals does resonate with his and Erasmus’s overall obsession with commenting on harsh truths that require ornate dress.

Raphael notes the general sentiment of Utopians regarding gold and precious metals in comparison to other European countries. Since these metals are appropriated as signifiers of the enslaved and criminal subjects, Utopians do not regard their gold and silver with much interest.

In fact they do everything they can to bring these metals into contempt. This means that if they suddenly had to part with all of the gold and silver they possess—a fate which in any

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<sup>70</sup> More, *Utopia*, 67.

<sup>71</sup> More, *Utopia*, 67.



other country would be thought equivalent to having one's guts torn out—nobody in Utopia would care two hoots.<sup>72</sup>

Thus, the forcing of slaves to don these specific items seems to be an effective tool in dissuading regular citizens from valuing their own material possessions, since positioning these items in the light of bondage and suffering would damper any desire to possess those items. Raphael also claims that the slaves aren't the only ones who actually use traditionally coveted material items; he notes how children in particular enjoy playing with diamonds and pearls. This idea that only foolish subjects such as children would even regard these items highly resonates with Erasmus's Folly. Though according to Folly almost all humans are foolish, she does in fact maintain the significance of age as a fundamental factor of measuring foolishness.

In many ways, the world of the Utopians resonates with Foucault's idea of governmentality, in which governments have the ability to control the actions of its citizens through tactics of "the art of government." In his essay on governmentality, Foucault notes that the sixteenth century birthed debates of proper methods of governance. The clash of ideas over governing one's self and being governed by the state was being contemplated in conjunction with the "problem too of the government of souls and lives, the entire theme of Catholic and Protestant pastoral doctrine."<sup>73</sup> If in fact during the sixteenth century individuals contemplated methods of being governed and governing oneself, more so than in other centuries, then we can understand More's *Utopia* as a similar meditation on governmental practices in the midst of these societal preoccupations.

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<sup>72</sup> More, *Utopia*, 67.

<sup>73</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality," (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 87.

The idea of governmentality seems to reflect the governmental practices in the state of Utopia since the key to these methods of achieving “principality” of government is the power over things, not just humanized subjects.<sup>74</sup> “The things with which in this sense government is to be concerned are in fact men, but men in their relations, their links, their imbrication with those other things which are wealth, resources, means of subsistence.” Foucault goes on to include in this outlining of things governed to “customs, habits, ways of acting and thinking.”<sup>75</sup> The state in Utopia seems to be trying to achieve this perfected art of government by similarly controlling “things” and human relations to those things. The Utopian government controls the value of luxurious material wealth by constructing situations that devalue the material world, thus subsequently controlling the “customs, habits, ways of acting and thinking” when its citizens encounter these items.

#### IV. Conclusion

Though both *The Praise of Folly* and *Utopia* texts pose difficulties of interpretation due to various linguistic and contextual obstacles, they nonetheless clearly demonstrate an insight into their own world of disillusionment with the corruption of political and ecclesiastical hierarchies. These texts provide contemporary readers with demonstrations of critical approaches to social structures that seem beyond our capacity to criticize, especially considering the tyrannical nature of these hierarchies in the sixteenth century. We can look to the way that More and Erasmus—in their capacities as authors, religious figures, and legal councilors—fixed themselves within and simultaneously outside of these institutions.

As I have argued, both of these texts seem to demonstrate these authors’ rejection of the material world. These texts demonstrate a world where material objects, in relation to the physical body, influence the individual’s psyche. But, what’s interesting about their observation

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<sup>74</sup> Principality being the ultimate goal for the government to maintain its power, wealth, etc.

<sup>75</sup> Foucault, “The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality,” 93.

of the power of these material influences is that these influences are, in fact, themselves being constructed by higher powers. *The Praise of Folly* and *Utopia* both establish the way that political and ecclesiastical hierarchies are responsible for the implementation of individualized happiness and that their preferred method is by shaping and molding individualized ideals regarding material objects. In *Utopia*, this argument appears more opaquely since More sets up an actual fictitious society that strongly objects to the material world as a whole. Throughout *Utopia* we can observe strands of how those objections are formulated at the institutional level. In *The Praise of Folly* the general notions of material objects are inversed, since Folly obsesses over the material pleasures in life. We can read *Folly* a bit more satirically considering Erasmus's own clear objection to the material world demonstrated in his letters and in his general opinions of the material in relation to actual Christian piety. Erasmus's outright rejection of the material world can be noted in his prioritization of textual veneration practices over material practices of veneration. Towards the end of his controversial text when his voice begins to emerge through his protagonist, Erasmus's staunch critique of flawed practices of veneration and the flawed nature of these practices is the embodied and material manifestation of these practices. In fact, it is through the idea of embodied materiality that we can connect these texts through as a linear critique of the material world and how it relates to institutionally formulated notions of happiness and individual affective reactions.

Through their satires, Erasmus and More highly contest the idea that happiness or perfect transcendence can be achieved through human experiences with the material world. This position is most apparently demonstrated in their observation of how notions of the material world are dependent on political and ecclesiastical ideological impositions. As Foucault mentions, preoccupations about regular human positionality in relation to larger governmental institutions began to emerge in the early sixteenth century; thus it seems necessary to investigate the ways in

which Erasmus and More engage with these same questions. Though they both maintain similar theses, More considers how only certain citizens, the free ones, are able to achieve happiness over others who are systemically forced to engage with the material world in ways that signify suffering. In Erasmus, the idea of shame in relation to the material is absent. Erasmus's *Folly* promotes the indulgence of the material as the main factor benefitting one's psyche. However different these authors' approaches might be, they still maintain a conscious understanding of how hierarchical corruption, exhibitions of wealth, and regular human relation to the material world have serious implications on those in lesser positions of power or those who are unable to possess similar material objects. For Erasmus's *Folly*, the material world functions as the only "alleviation from the pangs of death," while for More's Utopians material objects function as signifiers to identify "particularly shameful criminals." Again, however different their approaches might be, their satires—in conjunction with their desires for reform—allude to complete understanding of the psychological implications of one's relation to the material world and those implications and affectual responses as being the highly formulaic result of governmental impositions.

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