"That Familiar Proverb": Folly as the Elixir of Youth in Erasmus's Moriae Encomium

by HARRY VREDEVELD

In order to make good her claim to be of all divinities the most important and generous, Folly in Erasmus's *Moriae encomium* begins her argument, according to rhetorical theory and practice, with the strongest proofs in her arsenal. First of all, she argues, it is she who has given us life, the greatest gift of all. Who among us would have been born without our parents' folly? Second, it is the spice of folly that makes life enjoyable. For what is life if you take away merriment, pleasure, and joy? And third, it is folly that rules the best and happiest time of life—childhood and youth—and restores it to us in the second childhood of decrepit old age. Does the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom not also end the joys of youth? Just look at them, those austere people old before their time—the ones so addicted to philosophical pursuits or other serious and difficult affairs that they have no time for fun and, in truth, succeed only in prematurely exhausting their spirits and drying up that moisture which is the wellspring of life. The devotees of folly, by contrast, are in fine fettle; *they* are plump and sleek of skin and will never feel the ravages of old age unless (as does happen rarely) they become infected with wisdom's contagion. But then, she adds, citing Horace, nothing in life can ever be perfect.

Folly's claim to be the giver of life in all its youthful splendor is confirmed—or so she tells us—by a bit of proverbial wisdom: "Supporting these arguments is the weighty testimony of that familiar proverb by which they often assert that folly is the only thing that both holds back otherwise swiftly fleeting youth and keeps loathsome old age far away."[1]

As is the case with all her sophistries, Folly's appeal to a popular saying is meant to sound impressive—until one takes the time to examine it more closely. Devotees of Philology, surely, will want to spoil Folly's fun by noting wryly that we know of no proverb—

[1] "Accedit ad haec vulgati proverbii non leve testimonium, quo dictitant Stulticiam unam esse rem, quae et iuventam alioqui fugacissimam remoretur et improbam senectam procul arceat." (*Moriae encomium*, ed. Clarence H. Miller, in *Opera omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami* [Amsterdam, 1969ff., hereafter cited as *ASD*] 4, pt. 3:84, ll. 247–49. All translations are my own.)

certainly no "familiar" one—which says that *folly* is the only means of prolonging youth and staving off old age. As Professor Clarence H. Miller points out in his superb edition of the *Moria*, the closest we come to her adage is the medieval sententia: "A blockhead grows neither grey nor bald."[2] But this saying, while tantalizing, is manifestly not the one Folly has in mind and besides hardly fits her characterization of it as "familiar" and "of weighty testimony."

We thus suspect, and with good reason, that Folly is up to her usual tricks here and is once more attempting to make royal fools of us. But how exactly? If we assume that she is simply inventing a proverb off the top of her head, we immediately find ourselves contradicted by her claim that the proverb she refers to is well-known and authoritative to boot. Renaissance readers of the *Moria*, better situated to judge such matters than we, never did seem to raise an eyebrow at this passage, at least not in print. They evidently, in Professor Miller's fine phrase, were able in this case "to catch the wit on the wing" without recourse to "the taxidermy of annotation."[3] We, by contrast, who are no longer in on the joke are forced to surmise, rather uncomfortably, that Folly must be distorting a common saying drawn from some weighty and unimpeachable source, the Bible perhaps.

This supposition seems all the more justified in view of the many instances where Folly, more or less subtly, turns the proverbs she cites to her own partisan use.[4] And does she herself not give us a hint that this is what she is about here? For instead of quoting the proverb directly, as she might well have done, she gives the distinct impression of paraphrasing it, or rather, of citing an *interpretation* of it—and not hers, either. Look how she introduces the saying, carefully and circumspectly, with a relative clause attributing the thought to an unspecified "they": "proverbii non leve testimonium, *quo dictitant. . . ,*" followed by the clause in indirect discourse. The point is small, to be sure, too small to be retained in many translations, and yet crucial enough to our understanding of the passage to be insisted upon. The archsophist, we observe, does not directly cite

[2]"Stultum caput nec canescit nec calvescit," cited in Hans Walther, *Proverbia sententiaeque Latinitatis medii aevi,* 6 vols. (Göttingen, 1963–69), no. 30436a.

[3]Clarence H. Miller, introd. to his annotated transl. of *Desiderius Erasmus, The Praise of Folly* (New Haven, 1979) xv.

[4]See Miller, "The Logic and Rhetoric of Proverbs in Erasmus's *Praise of Folly*," in *Essays on the Works of Erasmus*, ed. Richard L. DeMolen (New Haven, 1978) 83–98.

the well-known proverb which asserts: "folly is the only thing that. . . ," but rather appeals to "the weighty testimony of the familiar proverb *by which they often assert* that folly is the only thing that" can do this and that.

We shall accordingly proceed on the hypothesis that Folly is alluding to a common and authoritative, possibly biblical, proverb which she is deliberately distorting beyond our present recognition. To discover which proverb she expected her audience to think of we need to search the context for further clues.

In the sentences immediately preceding her allusion to the familiar proverb by which they say that folly is the only means of staying otherwise fleeting youth and keeping loathsome old age at bay, Folly points to the adepts of philosophy and to the men of affairs whose brain-racking studies and bone-wearying worries cause them to exhaust their spirits, dry up their vital moisture, and so become old before their time: "Do you not see that those austere people who give themselves entirely either to philosophical pursuits or to serious and difficult affairs have generally grown old already before they are truly young—plainly because the worries and the assiduous and penetrating activity of their thoughts gradually exhaust the spirits and dry up that vital moisture of theirs?"[5]

It is remarkable that Folly chooses to buttress her paradoxical thesis here not with literary or philosophical arguments, but rather with terms and concepts drawn from medical theory. She says, in effect, that a man so foolish as to pursue wisdom and greatness will grow old before his time for the specifically *medical* reason that intense cogitation and worrying exhaust the physiological spirits and dry up the moisture on which his bodily life depends; whereas one so wise as to live a life of unthinking folly will possess, as it were, the elixir of youth. This medical context is surely a lead worth following. What other course is there? The search for the elusive proverb in the wisdom literature and the proverb collections has long since proven to be a fool's errand. And even supposing we had the proverb under our very eyes, shall we know how to recognize it when we see it? For all we know, Folly has twisted it in such a way that we can no longer recognize it, as Erasmus's contemporaries still could. Let us travel,

[5] "An non videtis tetricos istos et vel philosophiae studiis vel seriis et arduis addictos negociis, plerunque priusquam plane iuvenes sint, iam consenuisse, videlicet curis et assidua acrique cogitationum agitatione sensim spiritus et succum illum vitalem exhauriente?" (84, ll. 240–43).

then, for a little while on a path not commonly taken bymodern readers of the *Moria*: the once broad road, now largely overgrown, of medical thought in the later Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

It is fair to say from the outset, I think, that Folly's account of the aging process does quite accurately reflect the views of her contemporaries concerning the causes of aging in man. According to the physiology developed by the Hippocratic physicians and subsequently worked out by Aristotle, Galen, and Avicenna, the human body is a little world or microcosm with numerous points of correspondence to the macrocosm. Thus, the four humors and qualities are correlated with the four elements; and the four ages of man, each dominated by one of the humors and temperaments, are in turn paralleled by the four seasons of the year. Blood, hot and moist in quality, is associated with air, the sanguine temperament, adolescence (until around age twenty or twenty-five), and springtime. Yellow bile, hot and dry, corresponds to fire, the choleric temperament, youth (until about age thirty-five or forty), and summer. Black bile, cold and dry, correlates with earth, the melancholic temperament, manhood (until approximately age fifty-five or sixty), and autumn. Phlegm, cold and moist, is linked to water, the phlegmatic temperament, old age (until death), and winter.[6] Now, as the body ages it moves not only from one age and temperament to another, but also from an initial state in which the hot elements predominate to one where the cold ones are dominant. This inevitable process is paralleled or, rather, occasioned by the gradual cooling of the body's innate heat and the drying of its vital or radical moisture,[7] both of

[6]It is to these four seasons of life that Folly alludes on 82, ll. 186–99. Professor Miller's note on these lines (*ASD* 4, pt. 3:83), that "Folly mentions only four of the usual seven ages (infantia, pueritia, adolescentia, iuventus, virilitas, senectus, decrepitus)," misrepresents Erasmus's intentions. The system of *four* seasons of life of about twenty years each, while primarily at home in the medical tradition, is by no means confined to it. See, for example, Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 15, 199–233, and Horace, *Ars poetica* 158–74. See also J. A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford, 1986) 12–36, and Elizabeth Sears, *The Ages of Man: Medieval Interpretations of the Life Cycle* (Princeton, N.J., 1986) 9–37. When Folly claims that her rule lasts at least to the end of "adolescentia" she means to mid-life at age thirty-five or forty. Compare Erasmus, sermon on Psalm 4 (*ASD* 5, pt. 2:251, ll. 874–76), where the four ages are termed "pueritia," "adolescentia," "iuventus," and "senectus." In this he is following patristic usage. See E. Eyben, "Die Einteilung des menschlichen Lebens im römischen Altertum," *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie,* N.F. 116 (1973):156–58.

[7]By "succum illum vitalem" ("that vital moisture"), 84, ll. 242–43, Folly does not mean "vitality" (as in some recent translations), but "the radical moisture." This, indeed, is how Hoyt H. Hudson, following John Wilson (1668), translates the phrase. See

which were thought to be relatively great early in life but grow small as life draws to its natural close. Aging, consequently, was defined as the insensibly slow cooling and drying of the body, the effects of which begin to make themselves felt at mid-life.[8]

It is important at this point to realize that this drying and cooling were regarded as causally linked, the radical moisture being the "fuel" that nourishes the innate heat. Theprocess was frequently lik-

Hudson's transl. of *The Praise of Folly by Desiderius Erasmus* (Princeton, N.J., 1941) 19. For John Wilson's translation see the rpt. Oxford, 1913, with an introduction by Mrs. P. S. Allen; I have used the rpt. (unacknowledged as such) introduced by Hendrik Willem van Loon (New York, 1942) 112. For the concept, see Thomas S. Hall, "Life, Death and the Radical Moisture," *Clio Medica* 6 (1971):3–23, and Michael McVaugh, "The 'Humidum Radicale' in Thirteenth-Century Medicine," *Traditio* 30 (1974):259–83. The phrase "vital moisture" was sometimes used as a technical term for radical moisture; see *The Touchstone of Complexions. First written in Latine, by Levine Lemme, and now Englished by Thomas Newton* (1581), cited in Lily B. Campbell, *Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes: Slaves of Passion* (1930; New York, 1960) 55: "Vitall moysture is the nourishment and matter of naturall heate." The radical moisture should not be confused with the spirits (natural, vital, and animal) produced by the liver, heart, and brain respectively. Intensive cerebration, it was agreed, dries and cools the brain; this not only causes the animal spirits to be exhausted but, more importantly, also accelerates the drying of the body's radical moisture and the cooling of the innate heat. Clarence H. Miller (*ASD* 4, pt. 3:85, note on lines 242–43; and trans. 23, with n. 9) follows Chaloner's rendering in *The Praise of Folie* (1549), ed. Miller, Early English Text Society 257 (London, 1965) 19. Chaloner condenses Erasmus's text by combining the weakening of the animal spirits with the decaying of the radical moisture and translates "spiritus et succum illum vitalem exhauriente" as "sokyng up the lively iuyce of the sprites." This has led Prof. Miller to explain in his ed. of Chaloner: "Both Erasmus and Chaloner have in mind the 'vital spirits' (highly refined bodily fluids) of medieval physiology" (141). Miller consequently translates the two terms as if they were one and the same: ". . .so that their vital spirits gradually dry up, leaving them exhausted and juiceless, as it were." But the spirits were always thought of as a "hot breath" *(pneuma)* or as a vapor—not a fluid, however rarified. See James J. Bono, "Medical Spirits and the Medieval Language of Life," *Traditio* 40 (1984):91–130, and E. Ruth Harvey, *The Inward Wits: Psychological Theory in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, Warburg Institute Surveys 6 (London, 1975) 4–7. Marsilio Ficino, like the medieval physicians, defined the spirits as "vapor"; see his *De vita libri tres* (Venice, 1498; Hildesheim, 1978, ed. Martin Plessner) 1, 2, fol. b1^{v}: "spiritus. . . , qui apud medicos vapor quidam sanguinis purus: subtilis, calidus, et lucidus definitur." And Thomas Elyot, *The Castel of Helth* (London, 1539), fol. 10^{v}, explained "spirite" ("naturalle," "vitall," and "animalle") as "an ayry substance subtyll, styryng the powers of the body to perfourme their operations."

[8]It was sometimes objected that this contradicted the theory that youth is dominated by yellow bile, which is hot and *dry*, and old age by phlegm, which is cold and *moist*. But these humors were explained as being distinct from the radical moisture. While the latter is found within the tissues, the former are extraneous to them. Hence, the tissues themselves could be hot and moist as in the summer of life or cold and dry as in the winter of life while being surrounded by the hot-dry humor of yellow bile or the cold-moist humor of phlegm.

ened to the way a burning lamp consumes oil.[9] In the ascending arc of life (childhood and youth), the flame of life burns hot because the body still possesses a plentiful supply of radical moisture. In the descending arc of manhood and old age, however, the flame burns cooler and cooler as the body's vital moisture is gradually depleted. The consequences of this cooling and desiccation are the symptoms or "accidents" of old age: greying hair, wrinkled skin, the shrinking of the body, the weakening of the natural, vital, and animal spirits, and the resulting decay of physical and mental powers. Aging is thus a process that under ideal conditions ends in natural death when the flame is extinguished for lack of fuel. As Erasmus himself explains in his "De senectute carmen" on the discomforts of old age: "old age consumes the little flame, the giver of life, as well as its nourishing moisture."[10]

Now, since Avicenna and Roger Bacon, the rate at which we use up the radical moisture and weaken the innate heat was held to be correlated to the rate at which the body ages. If you could discover, therefore, which factors speed up or slow down the cooling and drying process you would also possess the secret of prolonging youth and retarding old age. Late medieval physicians accordingly focussed their attention, among many other things, also on hygiene, that is to say, on the conditions of everyday life that either accelerate or slow down the rate at which we grow old. Chief among the hygienic factors that *hasten* old age, it was agreed, are excesses of every kind leading to an imbalance of the humors in the blood and a loss of equilibrium between the vital moisture and the innate heat. Habitual drunkenness, for instance, or continual overindulgence in sexual pleasures were sure to have grave consequences for health and longevity. Eusebius, in Erasmus's *Senile colloquium*, therefore reminds his loose-living and hence prematurely aged companions:

[9]On the history of the lamp metaphor which goes back to Aristotle, Galen, and Avicenna, see Peter H. Niebyl, "Old Age, Fever, and the Lamp Metaphor," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 26 (1971):351–68. See also E. Withington, introduction to *Fratris Rogeri Bacon De retardatione accidentium senectutis cum aliis opusculis de rebus medicinalibus*, ed. A. G. Little and E. Withington, British Society of Franciscan Studies 14 (Oxford, 1928) xxxiv–xxxvii; Gerald J. Gruman, *A History of Ideas about the Prolongation of Life: The Evolution of Prolongevity Hypotheses to 1800,* Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, ns 56, pt. 9 (Philadelphia, 1966) 15–17, 64–65; and Burrow, *Ages of Man* 12–36.

[10]"Autorem vitae igniculum decerpit [senectus], et huius / Nutricium liquorem"; *Carm.* 83, ll. 19–20, in *The Poems of Desiderius Erasmus*, ed. C. Reedijk (Leiden, 1956) 283.

"Nothing . . . so hastens old age as immoderate and unseasonable drinking bouts, wild love affairs with women, and unrestrained appetite for sex."[11] In the *Enchiridion* too, Erasmus points to passionate desire ("libido") as a prime cause of premature aging: "it simultaneously destroys the body's strength and beauty, seriously damages its health, engenders innumerable diseases, and hideous ones at that, prematurely disfigures the bloom of youth, hastens a shameful old age."[12]

Folly, naturally, suppresses such factors in premature aging but is all the more eager to point to the equally detrimental consequences of excessive cerebration and worrying, as we have seen. Overly prolonged and intensive mental activity, physicians explained, rapidly cools and dries the brain, enervates the animal spirits this organ produces, occasions an overabundance of cold-dry black bile and hence melancholy, and, worst of all, depletes the radical moisture. This is summed up clearly in Marsilio Ficino's medical textbook, *De vita* (1489), written for the express purpose of helping the *litterati* combat the unhealthy effects of scholarship and so extend their lifespan: "Because frequent mental activity greatly dries out the brain, therefore, when the moisture that fuels the innate heat has to a large extent been consumed, this heat too is apt to be largely extinguished."[13]

Considered particularly noxious to the body's youthfulness were unremitting worrying, passions, and violent emotions. Erasmus points this out in his *Adagia* (3, 3, 86): "Nothing hastens old age more swiftly than cares of mind, love, hate, envy, fear, and grief."[14] This was proverbial in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: "Cares make you age quickly," we read in Heinrich Bebel's *Proverbia*

[11]"Nihil . . . aeque accelerat senectutem, quam immodicae atque intempestivae compotationes, impotentes amores mulierum et salacitas immoderata" (*ASD* 1, pt. 3:382, ll. 233–35).

[12]*Enchiridion Militis Christiani*, in *Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami Opera omnia*, ed. Ioannes Clericus, 10 vols. (Leiden, 1703–1706) 5:57B: ". . . corporis simul et vires, et speciem interimit: valetudinem vehementer laedit: morbos innumerabiles parit, eosque foedos: iuventae florem ante diem devenustat: turpem senectam accelerat." See further *De conscribendis epistolis*, *ASD* 1, pt. 2:251, ll. 11–13, also concerning erotic pleasures ("corporis voluptates"): ". . . corporis valetudinem atterere, ebibere succum vitalem, accelerare senium, morborum omne genus adducere, sui iustissimas ultrices."

[13]"Quoniam frequens agitatio mentis cerebrum vehementer exsiccat, igitur humore magna ex parte consumpto quod caloris naturalis pabulum est, calor quoque plurimum solet extingui" (Marsilius Ficinus, *De vita* 1, 4, fol. b2^{v}; also cited, from Ficino's *Opera omnia* [Basel, 1576], by Miller in *ASD* 4, pt. 3:85, note on lines 242–43).

[14]"Nulla . . . res citius accelerat senium quam animi curae, amor, odium, invidentia, metus ac moeror" (*ASD* 2, pt. 5:232, ll. 586–87). See also *Adag.* 3, 10, 62, "Mala senium accelerant" (*ASD* 2, pt. 6: 570, ll. 499–504).

Germanica.[15] The thought is, of course, not new, for its roots go back to biblical and classical antiquity. Thus Ecclesiasticus exhorts us: "keep despondency far from you. For despondency kills many people and is of no use whatsoever. Envy and anger shorten your days, and worrying brings on old age before its time."[16] Ovid in his *Tristia* and *Ex Ponto* laments over and over again that banishment and its attendant sorrows have caused him to age prematurely.[17] And Boethius in his early forties, imprisoned and awaiting execution, begins his *Consolatio philosophiae* with an elegiac plaint about his old age prematurely brought on by grief: "For hastened by misfortunes Old Age has unexpectedly arrived and Grief has commanded her season to come upon me. The hair that flows down from my head has prematurely turned white, and the slack skin on my worn-out body trembles."[18] It was from these very lines that the young Erasmus himself borrowed some phrases to express the depth of his own grief at friendship unrequited. In *Carmina* 4, entitled "Elegia querula doloris," he writes:

> Though *the hair which grows on my head has* not yet *turned hoary white* and my forehead is not shiny, robbed of its locks, . . . though stiff bristles do not as yet make my arms prickly and *the slack skin on the dried-out body* does not yet hang down; in short, though I do not see any symptoms of my old age, Fate and God have I know not what in store for me, poor wretch. They have destined me to suffer the evils of old age in tender years, they want me to be an old man already and do not let me grow old. *Sorrow and Grief* which already sprinkle my temples with gloomy grey *have come before their time*.[19]

[15] "Curae cito senescere faciunt" (Heinrich Bebel, *Proverbia Germanica*, ed. Willem H. D. Suringar [1879; Hildesheim, 1969] 117, no. 436). See also Suringar's commentary, with numerous parallels, on 117, 487–88. Add to these parallels Walther, *Prov.* 2287b, 2292a, 31577 (29398, adapting *Regimen sanitatis Salernitanum*, lines 14–15): "Triste cor, ira frequens, mens raro gaudia volvens: / Vitam consumunt hec tria fine brevi."

[16] "Tristitiam longe repelle a te. Multos enim occidit tristitia, Et non est utilitas in illa. Zelus et iracundia minuunt dies, Et ante tempus senectam adducet cogitatus" (Ecclus. 30:24–26).

[17] See, for instance, Ovid, *Trist.* 3, 8, 24–34; 4, 6, 39–50; and *Pont.* 1, 4, 1–20.

[18] *Consolatio philosophiae* 1, M. 1, 9–12:

> Venit enim properata malis inopina senectus
> et dolor aetatem iussit inesse suam.
> Intempestivi funduntur vertice cani
> et tremit effeto corpore laxa cutis.

[19] *Carm.* 4, 1–12 (my italics):

> Qum nondum albenti *surgant mihi vertice cani*,
> Candeat aut pilis frons viduata suis, . . .
> Atque acuant rigidae nondum mihi brachia setae, aut
> Pendeat *arenti corpore laxa cutis*,
> Denique nulla meae videam argumenta senectae,

If excessive indulgence in food, drink, and sexual pleasures, if incessant cogitation, worrying, sorrow, fear, and grief cool and dry the body and thus speed the onset of old age, it seemed reasonable to assume that their opposites would have the opposite effect. Medieval physicians accordingly recommended moderation in everything, regular periods of rest and recreation, and, above all, cheerfulness as the best prescription for a long life. In the famous words that introduce the eleventh- or twelfth-century *Regimen sanitatis Salernitanum*, that most popular of all dietetic poems, printed over and over again throughout the Renaissance and beyond: "If you have no physicians at hand, employ these three as your physicians: a merry heart, rest, a temperate manner of life."[20] Mirthfulness—in moderation, be it understood—could thus in contemporary thinking be considered the true elixir of youth. For just as brainwork, cares, and grief produce black bile and melancholy while cooling and drying the body, so a measure of joy and conviviality warms the heart, produces good blood and a sanguine temperament, revives the spirits, and prolongs youth. The Catalonian physician Arnald of Villanova (c. 1235–1313) therefore gives his readers the following advice: "Despondency cools and dries the body. Consequently it leads to loss of weight and strength, it congeals the heart, darkens and engrosses the spirits, blunts the wits, impedes understanding, beclouds judgment, and dulls the memory. Whatever occasions it should therefore be avoided at all costs. . . . Those individuals, however, who are distracted by many cares and anxieties and suffer mental distress should often make time for merriment and honorable pleasures so that the soul may once more be gladdened and the spirits revived."[21]

Nescio quid misero sorsque deusque parent.
Me mala ferre senum teneris voluere sub annis,
Iamque senem esse volunt, nec senuisse sinunt.
Iam quae canicie spergant mea tempora tristi
Praevenere diem cura dolorque suum.

[20] "Si tibi deficiant medici, medici tibi fiant / Haec tria: mens laeta, requies, moderata diaeta" (*Flos Medicinae Scholae Salerni*, 2d ed., ed. Salvatore de Renzi, [Naples, 1859], ll. 12–13). For medieval and Renaissance citations of these verses see Walther, *Prov.* 29239, with numerous references.

[21] "Tristitia corpus refrigerat et exsiccat, propterea maciem et extenuationem inducit: cor constringit, spiritus obtenebrat, et ingrossat, ingenium hebetat, apprehensionem impedit, iudicium obscurat, et obtundit memoriam, ideo vitanda sunt eius obiecta. . . . Qui vero multis curis et solicitudinibus distrahuntur, et cerebro punguntur, gaudio

Erasmus apparently tried to take this advice to heart, for in another of his juvenile poems he exhorts himself (and, implicitly, the friend to whom this poem was no doubt addressed) to take advantage of life's springtime. Let us not, he cries, cut short the joyous days of youth by inflicting upon ourselves the pain of friendship unrequited:

Away with anxious grief! It always defiles flourishing youth prematurely with its wrinkles. It always hastens burdensome old age before its time. It always cuts short the sweet days [of youth]. It undermines strength. It devours the marrow of our bones: our good looks diminish and disappear because of sorrow. That most detrimental frenzy robs the heart of feeling. That most detrimental frenzy snatches intelligence away. Therefore away with it! Let it depart far hence, down to the Stygian waters and the vast darkness of Tartarus! Let anxious grief disappear. Let joy come hither: that is what adds grace to the beauty of youth. Without it nothing can be beautiful, nothing good. *Joy strengthens the body and staves off repulsive old age and prolongs the happy days [of youth].* Through joy beauty is heightened, the brow smoothed; through joy the mind always shines more brilliantly.[22]

---

saepe vacare debent, et honestis solatiis, ut animus refloreat, et spiritus recreentur" (Arnaldus Villanovanus, *Regimen sanitatis ad inclytum Regem Aragonum*, chap. 7, "De accidentibus animi," in *Opera omnia* [Basel, 1585] col. 795BC). Similarly, Roger Bacon, *Liber de conservatione iuventutis*, in *De retardatione accidentium senectutis* (see above, n. 9) 137: "Hillaris anima et refecta vigorem viribus tribuit et naturam excitat, et in omnibus iuvat actionibus, confortat etiam et gaudere facit, retinet iuventutem et conservat sanitatem, et sanguinem clarificat et ipsum in venis currere facit, morbum expellit et crisim accelerat." In his *De compositione quarundam medicinarum in speciali que iuvant sensum* 102 (in the edition cited above), Bacon writes: "De hiis rebus que retardant accidentia senectutis in iuvene et in sene accidentia senii, et in senio accidentia decrepite etatis sunt hec: letitia, cantus, et visio pulcritudinis humane. . . ." The thought is biblical; see Ecclus. 30:23: "Iucunditas cordis haec est vita hominis . . . ; Et exsultatio viri est longaevitas."

[22] *Carm. 2, 9–24:*

Cura dolorque procul, viridem solet ille iuventam
Ante diem rugis commaculare suis.
Ante diem solet ille gravem celerare senectam,
Ille solet dulces abbreviare dies.
Ille rapit vires, vorat ossibus ille medullas,
Fronte perempta perit forma dolore suo.
Pectoribus sensum furor aufert pessimus ille,
Eripit ingenium pessimus ille furor.
Ergo procul Stigias, procul hinc demigret in undas
Tartareumque cahos, cura dolorque cadat.
Adsit leticia, pulchram decet illa iuventam,
Qua sine nil pulchrum, nil queat esse bonum.
Corporis illa iuvat vires seniumque moratur
Tristius, et letos protrahit illa dies.
Leticia maior est forma, serenior est frons;
Leticia ingenium clarius esse solet.

The lines italicized here come very close to that statement of Folly's which alludes to the well-known proverb upon whose weighty authority they often assert that *folly* is the only means by which otherwise fleeting youth can be prolonged and horrid old age kept at a distance. Folly—we see it clearly now—must be putting herself here in the place of *joy*, the quintessence of youth. This identification of herself with merriment and youth, of course, should come as no surprise, for she has been laboring the point ever since the start of her declamation. Her exordium, we recall, opens with the claim that she, and she alone, is able to cause gods and men to rejoice: "deos atque homines exhilaro" (71:7). An audience, even if just returned from the cave of Trophonius, she avers, smooths the brow and breaks out in laughter at her mere appearance. She is like springtime when all nature returns, so to speak, to its youth ("iuventa quaedam redeat") and all men rejoice. Daughter of the young Pluto and the nymph Neotes ("Youth"), she declares herself born in the Isles of the Blest where there are no labors, cares, or diseases, only pleasure and merriment. Without the spice of folly—carefree joy—life would not be life, she argues, nor youth the best and happiest of times. It is only when mature manhood forswears folly's juvenile pleasures and begins to burden us with its brainwork, responsibilities, and cares that our spring and summer give way to cold-dry autumn and melancholy decline.

Now that we understand how Folly is playfully distorting the commonplace of joy's role in prolonging youth and warding off old age, we can at last uncover that "familiar proverb" to whose "weighty testimony" she appeals. It is indeed a biblical adage, one that was commonly cited in this connection by medical and popular writers. But we can let Erasmus himself explain to us which proverb Folly has in mind. In a lengthy commentary on Psalm 4:2, "in my distress you enlarged me," he shows, in much the same way as Folly had done, why grief and cares cause the body to age prematurely and waste away and why the merriment of youth makes the body plump and sleek of skin. And, like Folly, Erasmus concludes by appealing to an authoritative and familiar proverb (Prov. 17:22):

> Cold and grief contract our body, heat and joy enlarge it, which is why those who are vexed wrinkle their foreheads and scowl, and those who are tormented with anguish wear themselves out and waste away. By contrast, those who are joyful are said to smooth the brow and become plumper in body. For the same reason, in young people when the innate heat unfolds itself, the body grows and

fills out, whereas in old people, when the heat is dying out, all parts of the body contract; even the voice itself becomes thinner. In the same way, the cold of winter contracts all things while the warmth of spring gladdens and enlarges the whole world. It is for this very reason that youth is lightheartedly cheerful, old age gloomy. For the mind, by nature bound to the body, is willy-nilly affected by the condition of the body, just as the cast of mind in turn affects the body, a fact that was noted also by Solomon: *A merry heart makes life bloom; a sad spirit dries the bones.*[23]

Is this the proverb that Folly twists in her mischievous way? We might as well admit it: it is not one we moderns would have thought of. *We* would have gone on looking for something more strikingly similar in language, more obviously related to the problem of premature aging and the preservation of youth. But that is only because we have lost touch with the tradition that interpreted biblical texts such as these in light of current medical views. For indeed, everything points to the conclusion that Proverbs 17:22 is the familiar proverb that Folly too has in mind. The parallels between Folly's words and Erasmus's in the Psalm commentary are too strong to be dismissed. Both passages describe the opposite effects of cares and grief, of joy and mirth; both draw on the same medical concepts; both link youth with merriment, old age with grief; and both conclude by appealing to a weighty and well-known proverb. Even in its phrasing the Psalm commentary recalls Folly's language. Folly tells her audience that at her mere presence "you immediately smoothed the brow" (71, l. 10) and goes on to assert that her fools are plump and sleek (84, ll. 243–44); Erasmus's commentary says that "those who are merry are said to smooth the brow and become plumper in body." And just as Folly in the opening sentence of her discourse likens her joy-bringing appearance to that of spring after a hard winter, when the earth is, in a manner of speaking, rejuve-

[23]"Frigus et moeror contrahit corpus nostrum. Calor et hilaritas dilatat, eoque qui ringuntur contrahunt frontem, adducunt supercilium, et qui dolore discruciantur, macerantur et contabescunt. Contra qui gaudent, dicuntur exporrigere frontem, et corpore fiunt habitiore. Eamdem ob causam in adulescentibus quum explicat se calor nativus, corpus grandescit ac distenditur, rursum in senibus deficiente calore, omnia membra contrahuntur, ipsa etiam vox fit exilior. Similiter hyemis rigor omnia contrahit, veris tepor exhilarat ac dilatat universa. Nec aliam ob causam hilarior est iuventus, senecta tristis. Animus enim illigatus corpori iuxta naturam, velit nolit corporis affectionibus commovetur, quemadmodum vicissim affectiones animi redundant in corpus, quod notavit et Salomon: *Animus gaudens aetatem floridam facit; spiritus tristis exiccat ossa*" (*ASD* 5, pt. 2: 236, ll. 378–90, where *ringuntur* in line 379 is misprinted as *riguntur*, the comma before the phrase *velit nolit* in line 387 is erroneously put after it, and *affectiones* in line 388 is misprinted as *affectionibus*).

nated, and insists that it is she who makes gods and men rejoice ("exhilaro"), so Erasmus in the commentary declares that the warmth of spring, like the innate heat of merry youth, causes the whole world to rejoice ("exhilarat").

We cannot, however, content ourselves with pointing out the similarities between the two texts, convincing as they may be in themselves. We must also prove beyond a doubt that Proverbs 17:22 was in fact a "familiar" proverb, especially in the medical context of premature aging or the preservation of youth. This ought not to be difficult—provided we have the right proverb. Familiar proverbs, after all, are apt to be quoted and paraphrased often.

We begin once again with Erasmus. In his *Ecclesiastes* (*LB* 5: 1007 F) he cites the proverb to illustrate a *sententia* made up of contrasting halves. And in the colloquy "Epicureus" (*ASD* 1, pt. 3:727, ll. 265–66) Hedonius appeals to its authority to prove his thesis that old age, by nature gloomy and burdensome enough, will be unbearably miserable if it is also tormented by memories of the sins of one's youth. Of the four instances, therefore, where Erasmus specifically cites or alludes to Proverbs 17:22, three occur in the context of premature aging and the preservation of youth. To these three instances we can now add those lines from *Carmina* 2 which we discussed above. Much of that poem comparing the effects of grief and joy is in truth a restatement and amplification of the biblical verse.

In using the proverb in this context Erasmus consciously takes his place in a tradition that goes back to at least the eleventh or twelfth century. Especially familiar throughout the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance was the paraphrase of the proverb in the introduction to the *Regimen sanitatis Salernitanum*: "A sad heart, frequent anger, . . . great toil, these three destroy life in short order; for these drive you to the goal of death. An exultant spirit makes your life bloom."[24]

That it is specifically Proverbs 17:22 that is paraphrased in the *Regimen* is confirmed not only by the clear verbal parallels but also

[24]Lines 14–17:

Triste cor, ira frequens, . . . labor ingens
Vitam consumunt haec tria fine brevi:
Haec namque ad mortis cogunt te currere metas.
Spiritus exultans facit ut tua floreat aetas.

Compare also Walther, *Prov.* 30235: "Spiritus exsultans facit, ut tua floreat etas; / Triste cor ad mortis te cogit currere metas"; and 31576: "Triste cor ad mortis cogit te currere metas. / Spiritus exultans facit ut tibi floreat etas."

by the medieval physician, Arnald of Villanova, whose widely-read commentary on these lines restates them with the words of the familiar proverb: "a man who wishes to live in good health should avoid the burden of cares, for cares dry the body and hence depress the vital spirits, wherefore (it is said): '*a sad spirit dries the bones.*' . . . A man's *heart* should be cheerful and *merry* since cheerfulness or merriment *makes life bloom*, keeps a man in (the flower of) youth, strengthens his manliness, prolongs his life, sharpens his intellect, and makes him better able to perform each and every task."[25] And in 1508, in the year before Erasmus wrote the *Praise of Folly*, Heinrich Bebel quoted the proverb in his *Proverbia Germanica*, number 188, once again in the context of premature aging and the preservation of youth: "There are three things that destroy bodily beauty: disease, old age, and anxiety or cares. For Solomon says in Proverbs 17: "A merry heart makes life bloom; a sad spirit dries the bones."[26]

We may thus conclude with some confidence that it was indeed the weighty testimony of that familiar proverb, Proverbs 17:22, by which they often assert that folly is the true elixir of youth. Folly, after all, is, by her own mischievous account, the soul of merriment and joy that alone can so warm the heart, restore the spirits, and replenish the vital moisture as to hold back otherwise swiftly fleeting youth and keep loathsome old age at bay.[27]

THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

[25]". . . homo sanus volens vivere, debet ab eo removere graves curas: nam curae exiccant corpora ex quo tristificant spiritus vitales, modo *spiritus tristes exiccant ossa*. . . . *animus* hominis debet esse laetus et *gaudens*, quia laetitia sive gaudium *aetatem floridam facit*, hominem in iuventute conservat, virtutem confortat, vitam prolongat, ingenium acuit, et ad singulos actus habiliorem reddit" (*Opera omnia*, col. 1875A–G; the italics are mine). The first sentence, col. 1875A, is a commentary on the lines: "si vis te reddere sanum, / Curas tolle graveis"; the second sentence, col. 1875FG, explains the lines: "Si tibi deficiant Medici, Medici tibi fiant / Haec tria: mens hilaris, requies, moderata diaeta." Arnald's authorship of the commentary is denied by Ernest Wickersheimer, "Autour du 'Régime de Salerne' III," *Atti del 14° Congresso internazionale di storia della medicina, Roma-Salerno 1954* (Rome, 1960) 2:1072–84.

[26]Suringar's edition, 54: "Tria sunt, quae tollunt pulchritudinem corporis: Morbus, senium et anxietas sive curae. Dicit enim Salomon Proverbiorum decimo septimo: *Animus gaudens aetatem floridam facit: spiritus tristis exsiccat ossa.*"

[27]I am grateful to Professors Clarence H. Miller and Klaus–Dietrich Fischer, as well as to the anonymous reviewers of this article, for their thoughtful criticism and valuable suggestions.