

A FOOL'S GUIDE TO FOLLY

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Link: Self-portrait from medical school

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Part One: Introduction

Personal experiences with folly

A man must be a little mad if he does not want to be even more stupid.

Michel de Montaigne, Book III, Chapter XI¹

I begin with a drawing I produced in medical school in the late 1960s. Hold it in mind as I take you on my “Fool’s Guide to Folly” that starts with a few recollections of folly in my personal life. (All the images and film clips referenced in this chapter are on ARAS at <https://aras.org/ancient-greece-modern-psyche>. At each point where an image or film clip is discussed the link to ARAS appears in bold.) This particular drawing reflects how I have often felt in my life. It shames me a bit while also warming my heart. It depicts through the body a particular state of mind and feeling that I want to convey—the legs are disjointed, in a somewhat awkward but simultaneously nimble dance. The middle part of the body is tied up obsessively in conflicting tendencies, and the head has a surprisingly radiant, even illuminated quality about it. This drawing can be seen as the self-portrait of the fool in the midst of “dancing the folly of life.”

Link: Albert Durer, *Goose Fool*, Woodcut 1511 (from http://www.spaightwoodgalleries.com/Pages/Durer_Fools_1.html)
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Perhaps less glowing but equally foolish is Durer’s 1511 version of the *Goose Fool*, which I only recently stumbled upon in writing this essay—but he has the same knocked-kneed instability and even a hat with a couple of doodads that bear a resemblance to the heady balls of my more

radiantly ambiguous figure—all of which reminds me of a conversation I had with a Greek cab driver on arriving in Athens on one of many journeys to Greece over the decades. My pidgin Greek allowed me to engage in a simple exchange with him. He asked me what I did and where I lived. I told him I was a psychiatrist from the United States. He responded—with something of his own foolish wisdom—that he was a Greek cab driver and that his mind was much like the Aegean Sea, mostly full of watery emptiness with a few rocky islands interspersed. He had a sense of folly.

Here is a dictionary definition of folly:²

1: lack of good sense or normal prudence and foresight. *His folly in thinking he could not be caught.*

2a: criminally or tragically foolish actions or conduct **b obsolete:** EVIL, WICKEDNESS; *especially:* lewd behavior

3: a foolish act or idea. *The prank was a youthful folly.*

4: an excessively costly or unprofitable undertaking. *Paying so much for that land was folly, since it was all rocks and scrub trees.*

5: an often extravagant picturesque building erected to suit a fanciful taste

But I maintain that this definition of folly is lacking in the more positive and inspired variety of folly, which is generative of creativity in life. So there is folly and there is folly—for the source, content, and outcome of folly can often shift before one's eyes in an instant. There is the folly that can lead one into the joyful, almost ecstatic delight in life that takes one on totally unexpected and essential paths, and there is the folly that makes a mess of life or even destroys it. Sometimes these two experiences of folly are indistinguishable; sometimes one leads to the

other; and sometimes they are not linked at all. On the one hand, a sense of folly can lead to the ability to laugh at our human foolishness, allowing us to plunge into life with abandon, enjoying the folly of being human that occasionally joins hands with divine folly and the creative madness that it can inspire. And a sense of folly can allow us to tolerate and even laugh at what is otherwise both unbearable and ridiculous—a challenge that faces many of us today, both in the United States and in the rest of the world on a daily basis. As Jung said, “Do you believe, man of this time, that laughter is lower than worship? Where is your measure, false measurer? The sum of life decides in laughter and in worship, not your judgement.”³

There is also that kind of absurdly blind folly that can launch major powers into reckless wars that achieve nothing but the destruction of countless lives and unending animosities and trauma that pass from generation to generation. This essay, then, foolishly presents itself as a Fool’s Guide to Folly, exploring both the creative and destructive sides of folly—that which is humanly or divinely inspired and that which is blindly stupid. And there are many shades of folly in between these extremes—from the sublime to the horrific, from the comic to the tragic, from the life affirming to the death dealing. Folly includes everything from play to murder. Folly can be a truth teller, and folly can be a deceiver. Folly can lead us forward, and folly can take us backward. Sometimes which roles the fool and folly are playing get all mixed up with one another and we find ourselves in a stew of folly, revealing and hiding the truth of folly leading us forward and backward in human and social development. For instance, in 1867, U.S. Secretary of State William H. Seward negotiated a treaty with Russia for the purchase of Alaska for \$7 million. Despite the bargain price of roughly two cents an acre, the Alaskan purchase was ridiculed in Congress and in the press as “Seward’s folly.” After a slow start in U.S. settlement,

the discovery of gold in 1898 brought a rapid influx of people to the territory, and Alaska, rich in natural resources, has contributed to American prosperity ever since.

Perhaps we come to know folly best through the emotions she (following Erasmus who identifies her as feminine) evokes in us, which range from joy and delight, to horror and disgust, to shame and humiliation, and finally from incredulity and disbelief to their opposites of credibility and belief. Folly is polymorphous indeed.

A landmark date in my personal discovery of folly was in the summer of 1963 when I spent my first day ever in Greece by buying a copy of the newly published English version of Nikos Kazantzakis's *Zorba the Greek* and climbing Mt. Lykabetos in the heart of Athens. After the steep climb, the blinding sun, and the magic of reading *Zorba the Greek* for hours atop Lykabetos, I was never quite the same. *Zorba the Greek* is the story of a young English writer named Basil who has come Greece to inspect an abandoned mine in Crete owned by his father. He invites Zorba to join him on his trip and "folly strikes." In many ways, Zorba himself can be seen as the very incarnation of divinely inspired human folly, as can be seen in "The Full Catastrophe," a scene in which Zorba tells Basil, "Am I not a man? And is a man not stupid? I'm a man, so I married. Wife, children, house, everything. The full catastrophe."⁴

Film Clip: *Zorba the Greek*, "The Full Catastrophe"

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Perhaps the height of Zorba's folly—and his message of folly to the Boss (Basil)—comes in the wonderful misadventure of a lumbering scheme that includes building a contraption to carry logs from a mountaintop to the sea.

Film Clip: *Zorba the Greek*, “The Collapse of the Structure”

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This is the kind of inspired folly that ends in literal collapse and disaster, but not in the breaking of the human spirit. Throwing oneself into life with a sense of folly can be liberating and affirming of the human (and perhaps the divine) spirit. It is the affirmation of plunging into life itself, not unlike Joseph Conrad's advice, spoken by the German Stein, in *Lord Jim*:

The shadow prowling amongst the graves of butterflies laughed boisterously.

“Yes! Very funny this terrible thing is. A man that is born falls into a dream like a man who falls into the sea. If he tries to climb out into the air as inexperienced people endeavour to do, he drowns—*nicht wahr?* ... No! I tell you! The way is to the destructive element submit yourself, and with the exertions of your hands and feet in the water make the deep, deep sea keep you up. So if you ask me—how to be?”

His voice leaped up extraordinarily strong, as though away there in the dusk he had been inspired by some whisper of knowledge. “I will tell you! For that, too, there is only one way.”

With a hasty swish of his slippers he loomed up in the ring of faint light, and suddenly appeared in the bright circle of the lamp. His extended hand aimed at my breast like a pistol; his deep-set eyes seemed to pierce through me, but his twitching lips uttered no word, and the austere exaltation of a certitude seen in the dusk vanished from his face.

The hand that had been pointing at my breast fell, and by-and-by, coming a step nearer, he laid it gently on my shoulder. There were things, he said mournfully, that perhaps could never be told, only he had lived so much alone that sometimes he forgot—he forgot. The light had destroyed the assurance which had inspired him in the distant shadows. He sat down and, with both elbows on the desk, rubbed his forehead. “And yet it is true it is true. In the destructive element immerse.” ... He spoke in a subdued tone, without looking at me, one hand on each side of his face. “That was the way. To follow the dream, and again to follow the dream—and so—*ewig-usque ad finem...*” The whisper of his conviction seemed to open before me a vast and uncertain expanse, as of a crepuscular horizon on a plain at dawn—or was it, perchance, at the coming of the night?⁵

I remember reading and studying *Lord Jim* as an adolescent and, just as Zorba’s “full catastrophe” took up permanent residence in my soul, so did the phrase: “In the destructive element immerse.”

This is the positive notion of folly into which the Zorbatic spirit initiated me. Feeling much like the bookish narrator I began my own dance with Zorba and his joyful embrace of folly, of setting reason aside for a different kind of logic that can affirm the nonrational as a source of life. Retrospectively, I have come to think of this kind of folly as a kind of inspired madness that just a few years later allowed me to jump into a crazy project with some friends and plant our little flag on a remote, empty bay named Klima some ten miles from Santorini where we, in time, built three houses. The Klima folly has continued for almost fifty years, although we are running out of juice and inspiration.

Link: The dock that lasted twenty-four hours at Klima

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In the spirit of Zorba's doomed construction project, our most glorious failure at Klima (other than starting the project at all and not knowing what to do about it now as we age) was building a 30,000-pound cement dock that lasted less than twenty-four hours. The cement had not hardened when a huge spring storm swept the entire baby dock into the Aegean. It was our own moment of the Zorbatic falling apart of the grand scheme.

I remember another moment of being possessed by the spirit of folly that has long been a source of embarrassment about how crazy I was in medical school but which, in retrospect, had its own wisdom. I was attending medical school in New Haven in the late 1960s. As one can glean from Robert Rauschenberg's *Signs*, it was, among other things, a time of great political and cultural upheaval, of overwhelming and highly charged folly—all mixed up in a psychic stew that one swam in, sometimes just hoping not to drown, other times delighting in its thrilling and unexpected highs, and ultimately witnessing the devastation that flowed from its folly.

Link: Robert Rauschenberg, *Signs*, 1970 silkscreen

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I vividly remember the violent outbreak of riots in New Haven in 1970 when I found myself literally in the middle of it as a volunteer first aid and crowd control person. Bobby Seale, a famous leader of the Black Panthers, was on trial in New Haven for murdering an informant. It

was a chaotic and disorienting time with black rage flaring at home and the war in Vietnam raging abroad. One day while on a pediatric clerkship, I showed up for rounds with a child's holster strapped around my head like a hippie bandana with the toy guns hanging over each of my ears. When asked what in heaven's name I was doing appearing on the ward like that, I answered, "I can't hear you. I have guns in my ears." I'm very lucky they didn't throw me out of medical school and commit me to the psychiatric wards. I was quite mad, but in some ways I was acting out a frightening truth for all of us.

To introduce the tour through this history of the different kinds of folly and fools that have captured the human imagination and spirit over time, I have included a link to a three-second film image from Fellini's *Satyricon* of visitors being shuttled through a museum. Perhaps we can metaphorically think of ourselves as being like these tourists in *Satyricon* who roll by in the background of this scene as we take a brief tour of the ancient, medieval, and contemporary museum of folly.⁶

Film clip: Museum tour in *Satyricon*

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Part Two: Plato's Cave

There is no wish more natural than the wish to know.

Michel de Montaigne, Book III, Ch. XIII⁷

What better place to start our Fool's Guide to Folly than in Plato's Cave, which appears in Plato's *The Republic*, written somewhere between 380 and 360 BCE in the Classical Age of Greece.

The Cave marks a beginning of the awakening in the history of the Western psyche of a split between the real and the illusory. What we take to be real in the everyday world may, at best, be a shadowy illusion of reality, which in fact is truly known only in the realm of ideal forms, of which Jung's archetypes would be an expression.

Here is a wonderful image of the Cave that orients us to the central features of Plato's allegory.⁸



Link: *Plato's Cave*

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Imprisonment in the cave

Human beings, known as “prisoners,” are lined up facing a wall on which they see shadows dancing before their eyes. Puppeteers carry objects on a roadway behind the backs of the prisoners. Behind the roadway is a fire. The fire’s light casts shadows of the puppeteer’s objects onto the wall that the prisoners are facing. What we see as mortals, according to Plato, are the shadows of objects, not the real thing. And even the objects themselves do not reflect reality. To perceive the true forms of reality one needs to leave the cave altogether and emerge into the light of the “real world” embodied in the “sunlight” (which was a bit how I felt when I climbed Lykabettos as a young man and began to read *Zorba the Greek* in the full, dazzling light of the Greek summer sun).

Departure from the cave

Plato asks us to imagine that a prisoner is freed to turn around and is blinded by the light of the fire that is actually the source of light casting the reflected shadowy images onto the walls at which the prisoners gaze. The prisoner would have to decide what is real and what is shadow, and Plato imagines that the freed prisoner would turn away and run back to what he is accustomed to (that is, the shadows of the objects). Plato writes “... it would hurt his eyes, and he would escape by turning away to the things which he was able to look at, and these he would believe to be clearer than what was being shown to him.”⁹

Plato continues his narrative:

Suppose ... that someone should drag him ... by force, up the rough ascent, the steep way up, and never stop until he could drag him out into the light of the sun. The prisoner would be angry and in pain, and this would only worsen when the radiant light of the sun overwhelms his eyes and blinds him.

Slowly, his eyes adjust to the light of the sun. First he can only see shadows. Gradually he can see the reflections of people and things in water and then later see the people and things themselves. Eventually, he is able to look at the stars and moon at night until finally he can look upon the sun itself (516a). Only after he can look straight at the sun “is he able to reason about it” and what it is (516b).¹⁰

Return to the cave

Plato imagines that the freed prisoner would think that the world outside the Cave was superior to the world he experienced in the Cave; “he would bless himself for the change, and pity [the other prisoners]” and would want to bring his fellow cave dwellers out of the cave and into the sunlight (516c).¹¹

The returning prisoner, whose eyes have become accustomed to the sunlight, would be blind when he reenters the Cave, just as he was when he was first exposed to the sun (516e).¹² The prisoners, according to Plato, would infer from the returning man’s blindness that the journey out of the Cave had harmed him and that they should not undertake a similar journey. Socrates concludes that the prisoners, if they were able, would therefore reach out and kill anyone who attempted to drag them out of the Cave (517a).¹³

If we accept Plato's allegory of the Cave as accurately reflecting something about the human condition, we can begin to imagine the various places in the Cave, or stages in the unfolding of the story, in which both the fool and folly might take up permanent but shape-shifting residence and play a role in the story's evolution. Here are folly's potential places or roles in the Cave that I have imagined; the reader may come up with more.

- *Folly of everyday life*, otherwise known as stupidity, can be quite destructive in its refusal to see anything other than the reflected images on the wall as being real. This is the fate of most "prisoners." And, if we imagine Folly as a god or goddess (which we will see Erasmus doing almost two thousand years after Plato), there is ample room for her to play huge tricks on us with the objects she parades in front of the fire to reflect on the wall as shadowy images—including images of ourselves.
- An enormous human *creative* (perhaps divinely inspired) *folly* is needed to step outside the cave in the first place, even if the prisoner is initially dragged out.
- The prisoner who has stepped outside the cave needs *divine folly* to compassionately reenter the cave in an effort to awaken the prisoners who will laugh at the fool who stepped outside, doubt his story of what exists outside the cave, and perhaps, as Plato tells the story, kill the fool for presenting another view of reality that throws their own illusory view of what's real into doubt.

We might think of these follies as a tripartite or quadrated theory of folly that emerges out of Plato's primal split of the Western psyche into an illusory world of everyday reality and the real world of ideal forms:

- The totally ignorant, stupid form of folly in which we are unable to see anything but shadowy reflections of objects floating in front of us that we take to be absolutely real.
- A divinely inspired human madness form of folly that allows us to step out of the cave in the first place and glimpse the world of Pure Forms, what Jungians have come to know as archetypes—which can be just as deceiving if taken too literally as concrete reality.
- A compassionate form of folly that would lead us back into the cave with the misguided notion that the prisoners inhabiting it would want to be awakened from their illusory world.
- A tricksterish form of Folly that would insert herself in the role of puppeteer, showing the prisoners images that would simply reflect back to them the way in which they would like to see themselves and the world. (Erasmus will have more to teach us about this incarnation of Folly).

I hope in the course of this chapter to show you the many forms that folly can take as I have extrapolated them from an imaginal excursion into Plato’s Cave with both the Fool and Folly as my guide. But should we take Plato too seriously, Aristophanes was already on the scene in his play *The Clouds*, referring to Socrates and his school as the “Thinkery,” where the folly of fools was being pursued in such important questions as the origin of the humming sound of gnats:

Our Chaerephon was asking [Socrates’] opinion / on whether gnats produce their
humming sound / by blowing through the mouth or through the rump. (ll. 156–158)

...

[Socrates] said the gnat has a very narrow gut, / and, since the gut's so tiny, the air comes through / quite violently on its way to the little rump; / then, being an orifice attached to a narrow tube, / the asshole makes a blast from the force of air. (ll. 160–164)¹⁴

Part Three: Erasmus's *The Praise of Folly*

Whoever will be cured of ignorance, let him confess it.

Michel de Montaigne¹⁵

Plato wrote his allegory of the cave between 380 and 360 BCE. Some 1800 years later, in 1509, Erasmus conceived of *The Praise of Folly* while riding over the Alps on a horse. The book was printed in 1511.

But Erasmus was not that distant from Plato in his thought as he was in time. Plato's Cave provided Erasmus and Western humans with the template of an archetypal split between illusion (our natural condition) and reality, of mistaking shadowy reflections for what is truly *real*. This split creates fertile soil in which Folly can romp. Folly loves the split between illusion and reality. It is her natural playground in which one minute the Fool and Folly are a source of staggering stupidity, hypocrisy, and corruption. And in the very next minute, as occurs in Erasmus's book, Folly can be a way to wisdom. In one moment Folly cruelly caters to self-serving and destructive interests, and in the next she points to redemption.

As I mentioned earlier, if we put ourselves in Plato's Cave and imagine where Erasmus's Folly

would be working her magic she would most likely spend much of her time on the “roadway where puppet showmen perform” (as labeled in the drawing of Plato’s Cave). Indeed, she may be the star “puppet showman” on that stage in which objects destined to become shadowy reflections on the wall of the Cave are paraded in front of the fire. In Erasmus’s *The Praise of Folly*, Folly reveals herself to be the progenitor and sustainer of the illusions that shield us from the painful truths about ourselves, others, and the world as a whole. She allows us to live in illusion, even as in *The Praise of Folly* she unveils her “trickery” to us as if she is encouraging us to leave the Cave. In other words, living in Plato’s Cave can be thought of as akin to living in the embrace of Erasmus’s Folly. What has Folly kept hidden from us in the Cave? Listen to her own voice as she reveals her sorcery to an assembly of the learned:

“...what part of life is not sad, unpleasant, graceless, flat,
and burdensome, unless you have pleasure added to it,
that is, a seasoning of folly.”¹⁶

In the first part of *The Praise of Folly*, Folly takes a developmental approach to her role in the lifecycle:

- About the newborn and childhood, Erasmus says through Folly:

“Who does not know that the earliest period of a man’s life is by far the happiest for him and by far the most pleasant for all about him? What is it in children that we should kiss them the way we do, and cuddle them, and fondle them—so that even an enemy would give aid to one of that age—except this enchantment of folly, which prudent nature carefully bestows on the newly born; so that by this pleasure, as a sort of prepayment,

they win the favor of their nurses and parents and make these forget the pains of bringing them up.”¹⁷

- About youth after childhood, Erasmus continues through Folly:

“After childhood, comes youth. How welcome it is in every home! How well everyone wishes it! How studiously does everyone promote it, how officiously they lend it the helping hand! But, I ask, whence comes this grace of youth? Whence but from me (Folly), by whose favor the young know so little—and how lightly worn is that little! And presently when lads grown larger begin, through experience and discipline, to have some smack of manhood [aside: Erasmus did not give much thought to girls and women], I am a liar if by the same token the brightness of their beauty does not fade, their quickness diminish, their wit lose its edge, their vigor slacken. The farther one gets from me, then the less and less he lives, until *molesta senectus* (that is, irksome old age) arrives, hateful to others, to be sure, but also and more so to itself.”¹⁸

- And about old age, Folly proclaims:

“Old age would not be tolerable to any mortal at all, were it not that I, out of pity for its troubles, stand once more at its right hand; and just as the gods of the poets customarily save, by some metamorphosis or other, those who are dying, in like manner, I bring those who have one foot in the grave back to their infancy again, for as long as possible; so that the folk are not far off in speaking of them as ‘in their second childhood.’¹⁹

Link: David Hockney, *Ann at a Mirror Combing*, 1979

(<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/242420392418506876/>)

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“If anyone would like to know the method of bringing about this alteration, I shall not conceal it. I lead them to my spring of Lethe—for that stream rises in the Fortunate Isles, and only a little rivulet of it flows in the underworld—so that then and there they may drink draughts of forgetfulness. With their cares of mind purged away, by gentle stages they become young again. But now, you say, they merely dote, and play the fool. Yes, quite so. But precisely this it is to renew one’s infancy. Is to be childish anything other than to dote and play the fool? As if in that age the greatest joy were not this, that one knows nothing!!!!.”²⁰

Folly is the one thing that makes fleeting youth linger and keeps ugly old age away.²¹

For Erasmus, Folly, then, is the source of illusions and only illusions make life bearable. Folly tricks everyone into seeing nonexistent good qualities in themselves and others. Her magic enables husbands to tolerate wives, wives to tolerate husbands, and teachers to tolerate students and vice versa. Without folly no one could bear his or her companions, to say nothing of him- or herself...

Folly especially turns on those who supposedly embody wisdom and piety. In the second section of *The Praise of Folly*, she turns her sardonic wit on and exposes the hollowness of most humans—especially merchants and those who make claims to authority or wisdom. This includes grammarians, poets, rhetoricians, authors, lawyers, logicians, theologians, scientists, monks, priests, kings, courtiers, bishops, cardinals, popes, and all those who make claim to

wisdom. I'm afraid a modern version of these professions would likely include most of my dear readers. Erasmus's contemporary, Sebastian Brant, enumerated some 112 different kinds of fools in his 1494 book, *Ship of Fools*, which, interestingly enough, also originated in an allegory from Plato's *The Republic*.

Link: Albrecht Dürer in *Stultifera navis (Ship of fools)* by Sebastian Brant, published by Johann Bergmann von Olpe (de) in Basel in 1498
<https://aras.org/ancient-greece-modern-psyche>

In the third part of *The Praise of Folly*, the role of Folly dramatically shifts and takes on a far more positively transformative role in Erasmus's cosmology. In this section, Erasmus, a devout Christian, although highly critical of the Christianity of his time, praises the Folly that leads man to a true Christian life. Here is how Anthony Grafton writes about this Folly in his Foreword to the Princeton classic edition:

In the third and shortest part of her speech, Folly pivots again—this time to the teaching of Christianity and philosophy. What looks to humans like wisdom, she argues, is really madness—as the prophets, Jesus and Paul all proclaimed in passages that she deftly cites. True Christianity, Folly argues, yields none of the things that ordinary, prudent men and women seek: not wealth, not power, not fame. Instead, it offers “the foolishness of the cross” by which Jesus brought healing to sinful humanity. Happily, Christianity is not the only subversive force at work, in a world that needs all the subversion it can get. True Philosophy, Folly argues, is not a pursuit of useless knowledge or sophisticated logical tricks, but a “study of death,” in Plato's words, “because it leads the mind away from

visible and bodily things, and certainly death does the same.” True Christianity and true philosophy converge. Both teach those who embrace them to be fools to this world, “rapt away in the contemplation of things unseen.”²²

As you can see, with Erasmus we find ourselves once again in Plato’s Cave out of which Folly is encouraging us to emerge into the light. What a Fool’s Guide to Folly both Plato and Erasmus offer us!

Part Four: The Wise Fool in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*

by Jules Cashford

The Wise Fool has two virtues: the gift of seeing through appearances to the reality within them; and the ability to *play* the fool, to show the real folly its “form and pressure.”

In Plato’s terms, perhaps the Wise Fool, embodying divine folly, might be seen as the one who has been freed from the Cave but returns out of compassion to free the other prisoners. His wisdom is to understand that the “real folly” is the blindness of those in the Cave, which means they will not be able to accept the truth presented to them as fact until they have let go of their conviction that what they see is real. Thus, the Wise Fool has to play with the ideas of those still imprisoned, so that they might begin to laugh at, and then call into question, what they are seeing—even though it is all they can see, strapped as they are to their seats before the screen. This form of *divine* folly is designed to prevent human folly from making sense and so eventually to free the prisoners from illusion. This prison is ultimately Plato’s symbol of the “unexamined life.”

Shakespeare's response to this in his play *King Lear* is to show, through the fates of Lear and Gloucester, that we cannot see truly unless we "see feelingly," which is to see with our whole being. From the moment the play begins, it is clear there is division in the kingdom and, ultimately, within the King himself because he sees people without feeling—only as reflections of himself. Lear proposes to give his kingdom to his three daughters in equal parts, but asks instead for them to give something to him—to earn their portion of his "gift" by telling him how much they love him, and even, in an elision of love and land, to compete for territory with flattery:

Which of you shall we say doth love us most,
That we our largest bounty may extend
Where nature doth with merit challenge?

(Act I, scene i, lines 31–3)

The two elder sisters, Goneril and Regan, reply in kind. Lear turns to his favorite, his "joy":

What can you say to draw
A third more opulent than your sisters?

Cordelia: Nothing, my Lord.

Lear: Nothing?

Cordelia: Nothing.

Lear: Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again.

Cordelia: Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave

My heart into my mouth. I love your majesty
According to my bond. No more nor less.

(I, i, 86–93)

Lear: So young and so untender?

Cordelia: So young, my lord, and true.

(I, i, 107–8)

The play explores the essential conflict of values between them. Lear's first response is to banish her:

Lear: Hence and avoid my sight!

(I, i, 124)

But later, still not getting his own way, he disowns her:

Lear: We have no such daughter, nor shall ever see
that face of hers again...

(I, i, 264–5)

Lear does not know he is a fool in the sense of *Ate*, the Greek goddess of Folly and Ruin, daughter of *Eris*, Strife—often called a “blind fool.” The underlying metaphor in *King Lear* is one of vision and moral blindness.

But his Fool is always with him in his folly: *Lear:* “Where’s my Fool? Ho, I think the whole world’s asleep” (I, iv, 47). The Fool, very much awake, offers Lear a compassionately bitter wit, issuing elliptically, in allusion, analogy, and epigram, which breaks through into Lear’s

consciousness where reasoned argument would fail. The Fool continually taunts Lear with his judgement, to force him to grasp that he has a false notion of himself. As the Fool puts it: “Truth’s a dog must to kennel” (I, iv, 120). By teasing and parodying him, the Fool prevents him from forgetting what he has done and inexorably presses him to see he was wrong: “Why, this fellow has banished two on’s daughters, and did the third a blessing against his will” (I, iv, 101–4). We learn that the Fool “hath much pined away” since Cordelia went to France, and he carries Lear’s deeply buried conscience as intuitive knowledge until Lear is reconciled with Cordelia—his heart, the *Cor* of Cordelia.

The Fool plays with the terms already present in Lear’s mind, like a thought that will not go away, but twists them to mean the opposite of what Lear would have them mean. The fateful “nothing” always comes up:

Fool: Can you make no use of nothing, nuncle?

Lear: Why, no, boy. Nothing can be made out of nothing.

Fool: Prithee tell him; so much the rent of his land comes to.

He will not believe a fool...

Lear: Dost thou call me fool, boy?

Fool: All other titles thou hast given away; that thou wast born with.

(I, iv, 146–7)

Then he tries it from another angle:

Fool: Prithee, Nuncle, keep a schoolmaster that can teach thy fool to lie.

Lear: And you lie, sirrah, we’ll have you whipped.

Fool: I marvel what kin thou and thy daughters are. They'll have me whipped for speaking true; thou'lt have me whipped for lying; and sometimes I am whipped for holding my peace. I had rather be any kind of thing than a fool. And yet I would not be thee, nuncle. Thou hast pared thy wit o'both sides and left nothing i'the middle.

(I, iv, 178–84)

As Lear is watchful of Gonerill's frown, the Fool concludes:

...Now thou art an O without a figure. I am better than thou art now;
I am a fool; thou art nothing.

(I, iv, 189–90)

And when Lear, raging at Gonerill's censure of him, cries

Does any here know me? This is not Lear.
Does Lear walk thus, speak thus? Where are his eyes? ...
Who is it that can tell me who I am?
“Lear's shadow,” The Fool replies.

(I, iv, 222–7)

So crucial is the Fool to the finding of Lear's humanity that he leads Lear to his first moment of compassion, first toward himself and then to all dispossessed people.

“O Fool, I shall go mad!” (II, iv, 281). The turning point comes when Lear hurls himself into the storm onto the heath at night—“Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks!” (III, ii, 1)—and has to confront what he later calls the “tempest in my mind” (III, iv, 12): Only the Fool is with him, who, we hear, “labours to out-jest/ His heart struck injuries” (III, i, 15–16).

When Kent, in disguise, finds a hovel for them, Lear shows his first moment of concern for another person, significantly for his Fool:

Come on, my boy. How dost my boy? Art cold?
I am cold myself. Where is this straw, my fellow?
The art of our necessities is strange
And can make vile things precious. Come, your hovel.
Poor fool and knave, I have one part in my heart
That's sorry yet for thee.

(III, ii, 68–73)

Lear makes the Fool go in to the hovel before him: “In boy; go first.—You houseless poverty” (III, iv, 27). This act of feeling moves his heart beyond self-pity to genuine pity for others, who, now like himself, have nothing to shield them from the storm:

Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these? O! I have ta'en
Too little care of this. Take physic, Pomp;
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel...

(III, iv, 28–34)

Once Lear is on his way to Cordelia at Dover, the Fool disappears—as though Lear has absorbed his wisdom in his own heart. At the end, holding Cordelia’s body, Lear says: “And my poor fool is hanged,” bringing the Fool together with Cordelia in death.

We see this when, just before Cordelia awakens him, Lear says to the blind Gloucester:

If thou wilt weep my fortunes, take my eyes.

I know thee well enough; thy name is Gloucester.

Thou must be patient; we came crying hither.

Thou knowest the first time that we smell the air

We wawl and cry. I will preach to thee—Mark! ...

When we are born we cry that we are come

To this great stage of fools.

(IV, vi, 177–84)

Lear has found his conscience and compassion, showing us the meaning of Plato’s phrase: “To know you are a fool is the beginning of wisdom.”

Part Five: Folly in modern times

Fellini and Lapham

We are all blockheads.

Michel de Montaigne

Following Plato's and Erasmus's lead over the past 2500 years of human history, what does our polymorphous Fool and Folly look like in the modern world? (Perhaps the reader should take a break now and go throw up.) As I was imagining this section and since we live in an era of images, I kept coming back to scenes from Fellini's films and it occurred to me that it might work to shift from word to image and let Fellini pick up where he left us off in the museum of *Satyricon* and resume as our tour guide through the modern museum of Folly. I think Fellini must have been married to Folly because she is truly the guiding and enlivening Spirit of so many of his films.

Let's start with the folly of everyday life—at the family dinner table in *Amarcord*, a semi-autobiographical film about a young boy growing up in an eccentric town in Fascist Italy.²³ In the clip, hilarious slapstick prevails as the folly of husband and wife plays itself out while the grandfather excuses himself to fart in another room.

Film Clip: Dinner in *Amarcord*

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And, along with Erasmus, let's look at youthful folly as it encounters the folly of established traditions in the ritual of Catholic confession.

Film Clip: *Amarcord*, “Youthful Confession”

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And then there is the folly of madness itself and even its insane wisdom in another scene from *Amarcord*, in which the family takes Uncle Teo, confined to an insane asylum, out to the country for the day. Teo climbs a tree, shouting “I want a woman!” and throwing rocks at anyone who tries to get him down. When the midget nun from the asylum finally gets Teo to come down, the doctor pronounces, “Some days he’s normal; some days he’s not, just like the rest of us.”

Film Clip: *Amarcord*, “I want a woman”

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Just as a youth suffers the folly of institutionalized religion in the “Youthful Confession” scene in *Amarcord*, Fellini shows us that another version of Folly can also lead us out of the “caves” of religious dogma in which we are prisoners, even martyrs, into another realm of being and perhaps even joyful delight, in his film *Juliet of the Spirits*. The Grandfather as Wise Fool liberates Juliet from the cruel martyrdom of her youthful Catholicism.

Film Clip: *Juliet of the Spirits*, “Release from the Cross”

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And later in the film, the Grandfather appears once again as an almost divine incarnation of that form of Folly that is on the side of life as he leads Juliet and the beautiful Circus Queen in a joyful flight that soars away from and above the conventional attitude of the vengeful and naysaying clergyman.

Film Clip: *Juliet of the Spirits*, “The Magical Flight of Folly”

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If Fellini’s folly-filled visions bring such joyful delight to us, other visions of modern folly are far darker. Lewis Lapham, a distinguished American essayist, recently published a book about our contemporary world entitled *Age of Folly*. Here he describes one of the many follies of our times, which gained momentum after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the breakup of the Soviet Union when the United States was riding high:

Reinforced by the fortunes accruing to the Silicon Valley Marketeers of virtual reality and by the high-rise speculation floating the Dow Jones Industrial Average across the frontier of a new millennium, the delusions of omnipotent omniscience bubbled upward to so condescending a height that in March 2001, six months before the destruction of the World Trade Center, *Time Magazine* gave voice to what on Washington’s think tank and cocktail party circuits had become a matter of simple truth and common knowledge:

America is no mere international citizen. It is the dominant Power in the world, more dominant than any since Rome. Accordingly, America is in the position to re-shape norms, alter expectations, and create new realities. How? By unapologetic and implacable demonstrations of will.

The old Greeks also had a word, hubris, for the unbridled vanity that goeth before a fall, men tempted to play at being gods and drawn to the flame of their destruction on the wings of braggart moths. Thus President George W. Bush, prosperous fool and braggart moth, on May 1, 2003, six weeks after launching a second American invasion of Iraq, stepping aboard the aircraft carrier U.S.S. *Abraham Lincoln* [the only President greater

than Donald Trump, according to Donald Trump] stationed close inshore the coast of California to pose for the news cameras under a banner headlined MISSION ACCOMPLISHED.

Wonderful news; magnificent photo-op. Boy wonder as deus ex machina in *Top Gun* navy fighter pilot costume. But what was the mission to which the banner headlined referred? Not the winning of the war on terror, unwinnable because nobody wins wars against an unknown enemy and an abstract noun. Not the nondiscovery of Saddam Hussein's nonexistent weapons of mass destruction. Nothing so pedestrian. The accomplishment was the dramatic significance of the invasion as prime-time television spectacle. Frivolity unbound. An act of folly more glorious than any since the Athenians in 415 BC sent a costly fleet of gilded ships to its destruction in Sicily, and by so doing lost both the Peloponnesian war and the life of their democracy.²⁴

George Bush's declaration of "Mission Accomplished" aboard the U.S.S. *Abraham Lincoln* might remind us of Durer's image of the *Ship of Fools*.

Link: Albrecht Dürer in *Ship of Fools* by Sebastian Brant

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So Lapham, too, has an eye for that side of folly that leads us blindly to destruction. From Lapham's *Age of Folly*, portraying the Fools of our Age pursuing policies for their own self-advancement or simply out of misguided patriotism, we easily progress in our Fool's Guide to Folly to the end result of this kind of folly in a scene from the film *The Fifth Element* in which a beautiful woman from another planet embodies PEACE and LOVE.²⁵ Perhaps her planet is the

realm of Plato's Pure Forms or Jung's archetypes. She is totally innocent of the extent to which humans will go to destroy one another in the name of some grand ideal behind which lurk far more sinister ambitions. In this scene, she gets a quick "download" lesson in the destructive folly of man.

Film Clip: *Fifth Element*

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And there is a wonderfully foolish contemporary combined portrait of Kim Jong Un and Donald Trump showing how our world leaders bamboozle us in their obsession with pursuing world domination for their own self-aggrandizement that will inexorably lead us into war.²⁶

Link: Trump and Kim Jong Un face swap from Google

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This is, of course, a photo-shopped image created in the spirit of creative folly to demonstrate the monstrosity of folly. In the modern confusion and fusion of images in our collective psyche, we witness how two apparently antagonistic world leaders have become one and the same thing. As mirror images of one another that blend into one another, they create a most dangerous paranoid "axis of evil"—two loose cannon madmen quite capable of triggering the most horrific folly.

Part Six: Conclusion

Every other knowledge is harmful to him who does not have knowledge of goodness.

Michel de Montaigne, Book I, Chapter 25²⁷

It has been the goal of this Fool's Guide to Folly to give a perspective on how to hold folly in one's heart, mind, and spirit as a guide to what is real and what is important. I believe that a sense of folly is essential for embracing life to the fullest, just as I believe that folly may well lead to the destruction of life on earth. There is the spirit of folly that makes a person vital, and there is the possession by folly that can kill civilizations. I leave you with the following questions: How can we live inside and outside of Plato's Cave? How can we live in Praise of Folly and in terror of our Age of Folly? How can we walk hand in hand with folly at our sides (or even inside us) in a way that may actually help us keep our wits, perspective, and sense of humor in a time when folly could devour everything. I end with Folly's wink from Fellini's *Juliet of the Spirits*, a tiny glimpse of an attitude that I hope each of you carries forth, both inside you and into the world from our Fool's Guide to Folly.²⁸

Film clip: *Juliet of the Spirits*, "The Wink"

<https://aras.org/ancient-greece-modern-psyche>

¹ Michel de Montaigne, *The Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Charles Cotton, first published 1686, Book III, Chapter XI.

² Merriam Webster.com, available <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/folly>.

³ C. G. Jung, *The Red Book: A Reader's Edition*, ed. Sonu Shamdasani, New York, W. W. Norton & Co., p. 122.

⁴ Nikos Kazantzakis, *Zorba the Greek*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1952. The film of the same name was directed by Michael Cacoyannis who also wrote the screenplay. The film was released on December 17, 1964.

⁵ Joseph Conrad, *The Project Gutenberg eBook of Lord Jim*, available <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/5658/5658-h/5658-h.htm> (last update September 10, 2016).

⁶ *The Satyricon*, directed by Federico Fellini, screenplay by Federico Fellini, Bernardino Zapponi, and Brunello Rondi, released March 11, 1970.

⁷ Montaigne, *The Essays of Montaigne*, Book III, Ch. XIII.

⁸ Eric H. Warmington and Philip G. Rouse (eds.), *Great Dialogues of Plato*, trans. W. H. D. Rouse, New York, Signet Classics, 1999, p. 316.

⁹ Plato, *The Republic Book VII*, ed. W. H. D. Rouse, New York: Penguin Group, Inc., 1951, pp. 365–401.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* sections 516a–b. See also “Plato’s Analogy of the Sun,” which occurs near the end of *Plato’s The Republic*, Book VI, ed. Benjamin Jowett, New York, The Modern Library, 1941.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Aristophanes, *Three Comedies*, Indianapolis, IN, Focus Publishing (an imprint of Hackett Publishing), 1992, lines 155–165.

¹⁵ Michel de Montaigne, Quotes and images from the works of Michel de Montaigne, Project Gutenberg, http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/7551?msg=welcome_stranger.

¹⁶ All quotes from Desiderius Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, trans. Hoyt Hopewell Hudson with a Foreword by Anthony Grafton, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2015, p. 16.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 16–17.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 17.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., p. 19.

²² Ibid., pp. x–xi.

²³ *Amarcord*, directed by Federico Fellini, screenplay by Federico Fellini and Tonino Guerra, released December 18, 1974.

²⁴ Lewis H. Lapham, *Age of Folly: American Abandons Its Democracy*, London and New York, Verso, 2016, pp. xii and xiii.

²⁵ *The Fifth Element*, directed by Luc Besson, screenplay by Luc Besson and Robert Mark Kamen, released May 9, 1997.

²⁶ Available via Google search,

<https://www.google.com/search?q=trump+and+kim+jong+un+face+swap&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjv7qk9KPaAhVP4VQKHU-tBqQQ7AkINA&biw=1118&bih=623#imgrc=npWG8c2UTsqOM>.

²⁷ Michel de Montaigne, “On schoolmasters’ learning,” in *Essays*, trans. M. Screech, New York, Penguin, 1991, Book I, chapter 25, p. 159.

²⁸ *Juliet of the Spirits*, directed by Federico Fellini, screenplay by Federico Fellini, Tullio Pinelli, Ennio Flaiano, and Brunello Rondi, released November 3, 1965.