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“Thou knowest my foolishness:”
The Schizophrenic Spiritualism of Paul in Erasmus’s Praise of Folly and Jim Grimsley’s The Lizard of Tarsus

By
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“You confuse what’s important with what’s impressive.”
E.M. Forster, Maurice

Apostle, Saint, Martyr, Pharisee, Convert, Jew, Christian, Apostate, Missionary, Prisoner, Fool. These “titles” are but a random sampling of the various descriptors attached to the penultimate Christian conundrum that is Paul of Tarsus, for surely no other mortal Christian has actively been involved in as many divisive polity policies as has this self-professed Father of Christianity. Yet it is precisely Paul’s divisiveness, propensity for self-promotion, and conscious corrupting of Jesus’ Jewish message to fit a Hellenistic type of religion that has led writers throughout the centuries to challenge and question Paul’s enormous influence on the Christian landscape.

My epigraph from E. M. Forster’s novel Maurice neatly encapsulates Paul’s infuriating duality as detailed by two very disparate writers, Renaissance humanist Desiderius Erasmus and 20th century queer playwright Jim Grimsley. Although separated by centuries, both authors are unified in their (albeit grudging) admiration of Paul and yet deeply troubled by what I term Paul’s “schizophrenic spiritualism,” the dualistic deployment of proto-Christian ideology accomplished by Paul through his repeated deployment of thundering dogmatism and equally furious “corrective” backpedaling. It should be noted that I do not intend to clinically diagnose Paul using the psychological definition of schizophrenia. Rather, I utilize the more layman-like definition, “a state characterized by the coexistence of contradictory or incompatible elements,” since this

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2 Jesus Christ should perhaps be considered the “ultimate” Christian conundrum because of his “earthy divinity,” the Spirit of God descended to earth and made man in the flesh. Erasmus/Folly is wrong in asserting, “But there is no need to worry about producing all this evidence to prove my point [about the folly of the doctrine of the cross promising, to those who are facing eminent death, resurrection and eternal life] when Christ openly says to his Father in the sacred Psalms, ‘Thou knowest my foolishness.’” See Desiderius Erasmus, Praise of Folly and Letter to Maarten Van Dorp, 1515, trans. Betty Radice (New York: Penguin) 124. It is at best unclear who is the Psalmist choirmaster. But Folly is nonetheless thinking in the right direction. Jesus, by virtue of his spirit-made-man incarnation, becomes subject to human foibles and frailties, while still retaining his divine status. Therefore, echoes of this “earthy divinity” can easily be heard in Folly’s chosen Psalm (Ps 69:5), “O God, thou knowest my folly; the wrongs I have done are not hidden from thee.”
“state” perfectly encapsulates Paul’s bifurcated thought process. Moreover, the juxtaposition of two contextually and temporally distinct authors under the rubric of this spiritual schizophrenia illustrates that, while there has been a great diversity of attitudes and interpretations about Paul and his writings through the centuries, Paul continues to radiate an enduring, deeply problematic influence on what David G. Horrell calls Christian (or post-Christian) societies.

As Horrell notes, “There were other leaders within early Christianity, Peter, James and John, with whom Paul sometimes came into conflict, who probably at the time enjoyed more authority and influence than Paul. Yet the level of Paul’s enduring influence far outweighs his influence during his lifetime, largely because of his weighty theological letters that are preserved in the New Testament.” However, as a result of his relativistic religiosity, Paul’s reputation has paid a heavy price in the Christian imagination. In his incisive “biography” Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?, David Wenham writes, “Many ordinary Christians, as well as non-Christians, have found Paul extremely difficult, and feel that Christianity would be very much better off without some of the dogmas that he propounds (e.g., the divinity of Jesus and Jesus’ death as a blood sacrifice), not to mention his teachings on sex, women, and slaves. They would be quite happy if we could keep Jesus, but quietly lose Paul.” These competing assessments of Paul effectively bifurcate him into a superior Christian and a prototypical fool, thus making him worthy of the high praises bestowed in Erasmus’ Encomium Moriae, the Praise of Folly.

Composed in 1509 as a humorous tribute to Thomas More (the Greek title, Encomium Moriae, is a pun on More’s name), the Praise of Folly is, according to editor A. H. T. Levi, a “slight work” when considered inside the huge corpus of Erasmus’s writing. Nonetheless, Levi notes, it is an exciting piece filled with considerable literary merit and virtuosity, in which Folly, “considered blinded by the self-love that impels her to sing her own praises, turns out to be wise with Pauline as well as Shakespearean folly.” In the Praise of Folly, however, Folly’s vaunted, self-styled wisdom is repeatedly compromised when she is confronted with the bellicose, if often contradictory, early Christian dogma Paul employs throughout his Biblical letters.

While in Erasmus’ “slight work” Folly vacillates between praising and condemning Paul’s dueling and often contradictory pronouncements, contemporary Southern playwright Jim Grimsley’s theatrical piece The Lizard of Tarsus pulls no punches in its ruthless spiritual and personal deconstruction of the troublesome saint. In an interview published in American Theatre, Grimsley describes his play as “coming

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5 Horrell 2.
6 Ibid. 1.
7 David Wenham, Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity? (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995) 3.
9 Levi xv.
from inside all of these Christian myths, so I didn’t want to be irreverent to their true intent. I wanted to poke fun at the surfaces.” Grimsley’s word choice here is interesting, as he clearly acknowledges his respect for Paul’s predominant place in the Christian imagination. However, this reverence is undercut by Grimsley’s reference to “these Christian myths,” as if he is suggesting that the foundation of Christianity, established in large part by Paul’s influential Biblical writings, is built on very shaky and suspect ground. Grimsley is also aware that, for most Christians, Paul is regarded in one of two ways, either as a religious genius whose writings have made him the great hero of the Christian church, or as an egotistical megalomaniac who will stop at nothing to establish himself as the undisputed father of Christianity. It is precisely because of this duality, therefore, that Grimsley views Paul as a deeply troubled and troublesome figure whose spiritual schizophrenia has done irreparable damage to those who labor under his enormous influence.

Indeed, the dualistic mindset that Paul occupies and exploits throughout his Biblical writings becomes one of the foremost jumping-off points for both Grimsley and Erasmus. Erasmus, for the sake of prudence and deliberate authorial ambiguity, adopts the satirical role of the goddess Stultitia, or Folly. When Folly celebrates Paul’s foolishness, she is also mindful of Paul’s reluctance to assume the moniker of “fool” because of his overarching conviction to become the essential foundation for Christian theology. As Folly remarks, Paul wanted to carry forward this conviction “without his words sounding arrogant and offensive, so he made folly his pretext to forestall objections, writing ‘I speak as a fool’ because it is the privilege of fools to speak the truth without giving offence.” Yet Folly acknowledges, immediately preceding this observation, that offense has already indeed been taken. She notes that Paul deploys the “full forces of dialectic, and states, “[W]hen he said ‘They are ministers of Christ; so am I,’ as if he had made a boast of putting himself on a level with the others in this, he went on to correct himself by adding ‘I am more,’ aware that he was not only the equal of the other apostles in his ministry for the Gospel but to a large extent their superior.”

This Pauline contextual dialectic proposed by Erasmus/Folly is taken up and ruthlessly scrutinized by Grimsley’s postmodern drama The Lizard of Tarsus. First produced in 1990, The Lizard of Tarsus embodies what Reynolds Price refers to as one of the central confrontations that continue to invigorate and torment the weakened but still-presiding faith of our civilization — the endless debate between Rabbi Jesus of Nazareth, a provincial healer and teacher who ran afoul of the religious establishment of his own people and their Roman overlords, and Paul of Tarsus, whom Jesus never knew but who is almost single-handedly responsible for the astonishingly rapid spread of a cult about Jesus throughout the world.

11 Erasmus 119.
12 Ibid. 119.
In his play, Grimsley ventures into the recesses of Paul’s mind and exposes the paradoxical, darker side of his folly, one that is shrewdly thought out and meticulously executed, echoing Levi’s pronouncement in *Praise of Folly* that “(t)he complex thought of Erasmus suggests that, while the followers of Folly pretend to be wise, they have the wisdom to be foolish.”¹⁴ The question thus arises: is wisdom (and, by extrapolation, folly) merely unconscious pretense, or is it consciously decided and summarily declared as folly? According to the interpretations of Paul’s thought processes in both *The Praise of Folly* and *The Lizard of Tarsus*, it can easily (if problematically) be both, depending entirely on Paul’s seemingly schizophrenic whims.

Throughout the latter portion of *The Praise of Folly*, a central tenet emerges in both the Pauline and Folly-esque pronouncements: the curious, almost symbiotic relationship between wisdom and folly. For example, in 1 Corinthians Paul notes, “For it is written, ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will thwart.’”¹⁵ Since man’s wisdom and wit can never approach Godly wisdom, what remains for man is only the appearance of wisdom: folly. This, however, presupposes that man must first have an inkling of Godly wisdom gained as a result of Adam’s prelapsarian actions in the Garden of Eden.¹⁶ But this rudimentary knowledge is all that God allows, and the rest is only foolish pretense. By exposing this cerebral aspect of folly, Grimsley moves Paul from praiseworthy “fool” into the decidedly more sinister Pharisaic element from which he sprang.

Paul, born Saul of Tarsus, was raised as a Jew and educated as a Pharisee after his father. In the quasi-biography *The Life and Times of the Apostle Paul*, Charles Ferguson Ball observes “(a) Pharisee accepted not only the Scriptures in their fullness but also the oral traditions of the rabbis. This, they said, was because these had come from the Word of God in the first place. . . . They were proud and intolerant, and they thanked God that they were not like other people.”¹⁷ While Ball’s definition is somewhat simplistic, it nevertheless establishes the foundation for Paul’s later categorical Christian pronouncements. It is therefore crucial to ask, how much of these Jewish Pharisaic teachings (and traditions) remain with Paul, even in the face of his “road to Damascus” Christian conversion? Moreover, are Paul’s post-epiphany actions hallmarks of “true” folly, or are they instead calculated attempts at establishing himself as the nonpareil Christian in the inceptive Church?

Late in *Praise of Folly* Levi notes that “Folly is about to embark on the serious panegyric of Pauline folly.”¹⁸ “Serious” is the operative word here because, by this juncture in the encomium, Folly’s satiric salvos regarding the artificiality of accepted wisdoms and truths have shifted perspective, progressing in quasi-linear fashion from

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¹⁴ Levi 14, n. 11.
¹⁶ Gen. 3:4-7.
¹⁸ Levi 116, n. 132.
open mockery to near-seriousness. This progression, however, is plainly ironic precisely because of her chosen subject in the concluding pages: the folly of Christianity as expressed not through its “best spokesperson” Jesus, but rather through its loudest bullhorn, Paul.

I continue to be troubled by Levi’s interpretation of Folly’s words as a “serious panegyric” of Paul. Such lauding indicates that Folly has dropped her “mask” and is speaking truthfully in praising Paul’s actions. Paul, interpolated through Erasmus, explains his words by repeatedly invoking folly, noting that “I do not speak according to God but as if I were foolish” and “Receive me as a fool,” yet this in no way mitigates his deeds. Even if we overlook, for the moment, Paul’s (in his “former incarnation” as Saul) extraordinarily cruel acts towards Christians (comprising all of Acts 8), many of Paul’s misguided deeds post-conversion nevertheless come about as a result of his own contrariness.

Indeed, throughout major portions of The Praise of Folly, Folly allows herself to elide crucial portion of Paul’s contrariness, a quality that he transmutes and transmits through his (alleged) self-deprecation. Grimsley, however, is not so charitable. In The Lizard of Tarsus, Paul has captured and is holding Jesus (who, like Erasmus’s “Folly” persona, is masked simply as “J”) as a political prisoner following what Paul terms His long-overdue “return trip.” In the course of Paul’s prolonged soteriological interrogation of J, this contrariness and self-deprecation is supplanted by outright egotism. Paul tells J, “[T]here are certain challenges. Dogmatic and otherwise. To my current authority. And I have rested much of my authority on the miracle of my conversion. Along with impeccable scholarship, worldwide vision and a letter-writing talent second to none. The David O. Selznick of religion.” Grimsley’s depiction of Paul’s contrariness here stands in sharp contrast to the almost sympathetic portrayal of Paul offered by Erasmus, particularly since this contrariness is rooted in Paul’s repeated demand for respect and acknowledgment of his authority. Yet it is exactly Paul’s insistence on control, coupled with his almost lustful pursuit of power in the inceptive Christian church, which becomes fodder for Folly’s satiric skewering.

In spite of her praiseworthy panegyric, Folly is more than happy to point out many of Paul’s shortcomings. One of the most glaring shortcomings occurs as Folly demonstrates her “serious” thought progression by embracing Paul at his most problematic. Folly tells the story of Paul’s journey to Athens in Acts 17 where “Paul once happened to see an inscription on an altar in Athens and twisted its meaning into an argument for the Christian faith. He left out all the words which would have damaged his

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19 On the subject of progression in The Praise of Folly, I am indebted here to Donald Gwynn Watson’s incisive consideration of Folly as an exemplar of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, much of which discusses the rhetorical structure of Erasmus’s work. See Watson, “Erasmus’ Praise of Folly and the Spirit of Carnival,” Renaissance Quarterly 32.3 (1979): 333-353.
20 2 Cor. 11:19.
21 2 Cor. 11:1.
case and selected only the last two, ignoto deo, ‘to the unknown god.’²³ Paul’s action, assuredly a foolish act, is also an effective means to an end. Yet as Folly points out, Paul’s calculated elision sets a dangerous precedent for future “sons of theology” who “pick out four or five words from different contexts, and if necessary even distort their meaning to suit their purpose, even those which come before or after may be either totally irrelevant or actually contradictory.”²⁴ Thus, Folly concludes, any tenet of faith gained through blatantly deceptive machinations remains hypocritical at its core.

It is interesting to note that, in a wry twist on Paul’s own “foolish” act in Athens, his dualistic deception falters among members of the inceptive Church in Corinth. The Corinthians, in fact, expose Paul’s true foolishness by turning his own teachings against him. As David Wenham notes,

> It seems that the Corinthians themselves were very familiar with the traditions of Jesus and were using them in ways that Paul strongly disagreed with (for example, in justifying their immorality, on the one hand, and in advocating Christian celibacy, on the other). Some at least of these traditions had been taught to the Corinthians by Paul himself; he therefore takes them back to what he has taught them, supplementing it and correcting their misinterpretations of it.²⁵

Paul attempts to answer the Corinthians’ objections by utilizing a purportedly folly-esque passage, stating, “I repeat, let no one think me foolish; but even if you do, accept me as a fool, so that I may boast a little.”²⁶ In doing so, he nevertheless resolutely repudiates any possible hint of foolishness by insisting that his interpretations are always already the correct interpretations. Moreover, this repudiation of foolishness, like his conscious ignoring of seemingly “unimportant” verbiage on the altar in Athens, is imbued with the taint of hypocrisy, creating another in a string of troublesome gaps between Paul’s words and deeds.

These gaps that appear throughout Paul’s letters are also duly noted by Grimsley. In *The Lizard of Tarsus*, Paul makes plain his desire to control J’s message and all doctrine associated with His message. Paul declares, “You should understand by now. It’s mine anyway. The message. If you don’t give me the Word, I’ll get it somewhere. Someone will tell”²⁷ and later clarifies his ambition by noting:

> PAUL. I believe I used the phrase “plead your cause sufficiently.” We are suggesting that you make some use of pamphlets and other religious tracts of the sort that we always have to invent later anyway. We thought perhaps you could compose them from here. J. From my cell.

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²³ Erasmus 120. The episode that Erasmus/Folly references is found in Acts 17:23.
²⁴ Ibid. 120.
²⁵ Wenham 392.
²⁶ 2 Cor. 11:16.
²⁷ Grimsley 85.
Paul. I think it’s a very romantic image. The preacher from the wild, fresh from his triumphant Second Coming, writing from the fiery depths of his soul. Imprisoned but bravely carrying on with his ministry. In the last moments of his. Well. You see, I almost gave it away. (Pause.) That’s a later stage, of course.  

The matrix of absolute control that Paul creates over J in The Lizard of Tarsus, along with Folly’s seemingly damning revelations of Paul’s Janus-faced spiritual machinations, begs the question: is Paul a hypocrite? On this subject, Jedidiah Purdy provides a helpful definition by observing, “(S)omeone who professes loyalty to a principle is perceived to be expressing his own character, not describing the strictures that he is subject to as a Christian, a Jew, or just (his view of) a human being. When a gap develops between his expression and his behavior, he is not just another fallen creature or ‘all too human,’ but a hypocrite.” Paul, however, is different in that his “principle loyalties” are his character, and these loyalties are, for better or worse, inextricably tied to his religious strictures.

The Biblical Paul seems continually amazed, not to say baffled, by the contradictions he discovers both in himself and his faith, thus exemplifying a keen awareness of his dualistic religious nature. But such dualism is also part of Paul’s overarching spiritual schizophrenia, namely: how can one man be all things to all people, Jew and Gentile, pagan and Christian? Furthermore, by tenuously balancing two faiths, surely he knows (and Erasmus/Folly is pleased to point out) that, despite his Pharisaic upbringing, there can never be any definitive answers to dogmatic questions. In short, while Paul’s amazement saves him from the onus of hypocrisy, it places him squarely within the realm of skepticism.

Could Paul be a skeptic? This assertion is certainly plausible given Erasmus’s Letter to Maarten Van Dorp, an appended communiqué that serves as his own “defense” of Praise of Folly. To Dorp, a renowned Louvain humanist theologian, Erasmus paraphrases Paul’s “charge” to Timothy, writing, “Make your appeal, says Paul, argue and reprove, in season and out of seasons. If the apostle wants faults to be attacked in every possible way, do you really want no sore spot to be touched, even when this is done so gently that no one could possibly be hurt unless he deliberately sets out to hurt himself?”

Unfortunately, Erasmus’s exhortation is the same type of rhetorical Pauline “hat trick” that Folly finds so laudable in her self-styled “Praise of Paul.” Paul’s apostolic appeal reads in full:

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word, be urgent in season and out of seasons, convince, rebuke, and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching. For the time is coming

28 Ibid. 86.
30 Erasmus 145.
when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths. As for you, always be steady, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfil [sic] your ministry.31

Paul, despite displaying astonishment at the continual, though seemingly untenable, contradictions attendant in the fledgling Christian faith, nevertheless falls back on Pharisaic knowledge in order to resolve any quandaries and, more importantly, to restore a semblance of order to both his mind and his milieu.32

As with Erasmus, Grimsley is well aware of Paul’s rhetorical legerdemain, particularly when it comes to his continual, almost compulsive, drive to solve any potential or lingering theological problems. Following Paul’s discussion with J of the challenges (dogmatic and otherwise) he has faced, Paul appeals to J first for sympathy, then for substantiation. These appeals lie at the heart of Paul’s constant desire for, and relentless pursuit of, an ordered milieu. He exhorts J to “(l)ay claim to some of my works. Paul, my good and faithful servant, that kind of thing. You have no idea how valuable such a reference would be. In certain circles.”33 Grimsley, like most persons familiar with Paul’s Pharisaic past, would easily intuit that these “certain circles” refer to both the pre-conversion Sanhedrin cohort (in which Paul, as Saul, played a major and damning role, particularly with regard to the stoning of Stephen late in Acts 7) and Paul’s current, post-conversion apostolic adherents. By virtue of J’s “stamp of approval,” Grimsley indicates here, Paul can bring about a religious fait accompli, relying on the past in order to stabilize the future of himself and “his” Church.

Biblical historian Jerome H. Neyrey observes, “As a Jew, Paul was strongly socialized to perceive the world as an orderly cosmos. And as a Jew he shared the same specific cultural definitions of order as this was developed in the Bible and the Temple….Like most other Jews in his cultural milieu, Paul strongly believed in an orderly universe, even if he tinkered with the existing arrangement of it and urged reform of it.”34 In Paul’s mind, much as with Erasmus, theology and religion generally has become fractured, distorted, and disordered, thus leaving behind no single “Truth.” But

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31 2 Tim. 4:1-5.  
32 A convincing example of Paul’s astonishment at God’s contrariness (perhaps God’s own folly?) is cited in Eugene F. Rogers, Jr.’s essay, “Sanctification, Homosexuality, and God’s Triune Life.” Rogers observes, “God is said to act ‘contrary to nature,’ para phusin, in bringing the gentiles into the covenant with Israel, grafting wild branches onto a domestic olive tree (Rom. 11:24). . . . It calls for a reconceptualization of ‘nature’ in soteriological terms, in terms — that is, of God’s freedom to complete what God began with human beings, God’s intent to elevate nature into the glory of the trinitarian communion. . . . In Rom. 1, acting contrary to nature characterizes idolatrous gentiles, and the great amazement that drives Paul’s ministry is that God pours out the Spirit also on those people, an amazement Paul expresses in Rom. 11 by characterizing God’s saving action as itself contrary to nature.” See Rogers, “Sanctification, Homosexuality, and God’s Triune Life,” Sexual Orientation and Human Rights in American Religious Discourse, eds. Saul M. Olyan and Martha C. Nussbaum (New York: Oxford UP, 1998) 134-160.  
33 Grimsley 91.  
how can Paul create an ordered truth when his own “house” is decidedly off-kilter? To this query Paul can only answer “For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.”\footnote{1 Cor. 1:21.} Given Paul’s stolidly religious convictions, this surprising invocation of folly seems directed to his Corinthian followers (most notably Apollos and Cephas). In fact, by acknowledging the folly of his mission Paul is able to seamlessly coalesce his own antithetical faiths into a single Christian Truth. Or this is what Paul would have us believe.

It is no coincidence that Folly repeatedly recites verses from 1 Corinthians, for Paul’s “second awakening” seemingly occurs as a direct result of his journey to the church in Corinth. Indeed, many of these Pauline pronouncements have particular relevance for Erasmus, so much so that Praise of Folly oftentimes reads as a logical extension of Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians. The echoes are everywhere: for example Paul’s words, “Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?”\footnote{1 Cor. 1:20.} can easily be heard in Folly’s statement:

Then these verbal wizards produce another argument. Man, they say, is especially gifted with understanding of the branches of learning so that they can help him to compensate by his wits for what nature has denied him. But does it seem likely that nature would be so alert and careful about things like midges and grasses and flowers and yet be caught napping over man alone, so that he needs the kinds of learning which the notorious Thoth, the evil genius of the human race, devised to be its greatest curse?\footnote{Erasmus 50.}

Although this pronouncement occurs early in Praise of Folly, by the time Folly reaches the Pauline panegyric, all is forgiven or forgotten. For reasons left unexplained, Erasmus tends to forget (or, in the truer fashion of Folly, ignore) Paul’s learned upbringing, though a reasonable explanation could stem from John Colet’s overt influence on Erasmian thought.

Colet’s influence, as Catherine A. L. Jarrott notes, is seen in (s)everal key ideas emerging from his (Erasmus’s) annotations on Paul’s letters (Romans in particular) [that] offer a challenging similarity to central concepts in John Colet’s commentaries on Paul, at least in those portions that have come down to us. The similarity is challenging not merely because it suggests another chapter in the ongoing discussion of Colet’s influence on Erasmus, but, more important, because it throws a spotlight on two significant themes of pre-Reformation theology: the fulfillment of the promises of the Old Testament in the Gospel of the New,
and the practical consequences of this fulfillment in the spiritual transformation of every believing Christian.\(^{38}\)

Erasmus, following Colet’s example, felt that Paul’s overarching message (the “spiritual transformation of every believing Christian” which would, of course, have particular relevance for Paul) was much more important than the messenger. In so doing Erasmus could comfortably overlook the human failings and contradictions inherent in Paul, the man. However, this presents a recurring problem with all subsequent Bible interpretations: by being filtered through fallible human beings, how much of God’s infallible message is necessarily being altered?

Not surprisingly, Grimsley has a ready answer to this question, and it comes in the guise of a protracted prayer that Paul initiates by reflecting on the spiritual transformation of all true (read: Christian) believers, but quickly transmogrifies into a bald, desperate, and hilarious appeal for the enduring preservation of Paul’s place in the incipient Christian church. Before starting his prayer, Paul remarks to J, “I would prefer that you didn’t begin answering my prayer till I get through the whole thing. Context, you know.”\(^{39}\) The prayer then begins in earnest. Paul first invokes God’s mercy and love, then moves to man’s “loathsome crawling oozing superating vile ulcerated cankerous”\(^{40}\) sinful place in God’s universe, before beseeching God’s humility and mercy. However, as the prayer gathers steam, Paul loses track of the Christian message of his prayer and indulges in a bit of self-congratulation and adulation culminating in an urgent request that his legacy be ensured for all posterity:

Have mercy upon us, now that you have sent your shepherd to live among us, and let him afflict us not with too much revelation. Teach us the truth as we are able to receive it and not all at once in a rush so that we are apt to forget big chunks. Bring peace abroad to all peoples and here in our city as well, from neighbor to neighbor and kind to kind. Above all, work out your own will among us, and teach us to live more as you would have us live. For me, I would ask only that you help me to get the deposition I need to convince my adversaries within the church that I am the cornerstone of your church and of your message in this world. Please reveal to me this revelation for which I have waited and yearned through all these ages. Please let me hear the words that will teach me faith in my own salvation, after such a long career. In the name of You-Know-Who I pray. Amen.\(^{41}\)

Grimsley, Erasmus, and Colet all seem to reach the same accord here with regard to Paul’s theological shortcomings and contradictions. Paul is only a man, after all, and is thus subject (or prey) to the fallibilities associated with “mere” humanity. However,


\(^{39}\) Grimsley 99.

\(^{40}\) Ibid. 101.

\(^{41}\) Ibid. 102.
while Colet and Erasmus are willing to forgive and forget the foolishness surrounding Paul’s emendations, qualifications, and corrections of God’s message to all Christian believers, Grimsley sees these changes as intractably harmful and destructive to the Church, both historically and in its current incarnation.

Apropos of the subject of Paul’s “foolish” alteration of God’s message, Charles Ball’s own Pauline “biography” extrapolates that “Before Saul was in his midtwenties he went home to Tarsus. His days of study and learning never ended, but he had been a long time with Gamaliel [Paul’s Pharisaic mentor in Jerusalem], and the opinions of the great rabbis on all religious subjects were known to him. He felt that he could now stand on his own feet. He had learned and seen much.”

By virtue (or despite) of his extensive education, Paul thus finds himself again in an uncomfortably schizophrenic position, becoming in Folly’s words one of “those ‘wiseacres’ who put their trust in their own intelligence.”

He is, however, obliged to use this learning in his later capacity as the de facto arbiter for Christian dogmatism. Paul’s entreaties “Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age?” become exercises in rhetorical reasoning, thus forming a Pauline trinity of disingenuous self-doubt from which he can never truly emerge. Therefore, his only mitigating solace (as it were) is through folly.

Infused throughout the Praise of Folly is Erasmus/ Folly’s valorization of Paul for his deprecating reliance on foolishness as a “be-all” solution to his various and sundry religious quandaries, and Paul is happy to return the compliment. In Folly’s Pauline coup de grace, she begins by noting, “Then perhaps we shouldn’t overlook the argument that Folly finds favour in heaven because she alone is granted forgiveness of sins, whereas the wise man receives no pardon. So when men pray for forgiveness, though they may have sinned in full awareness, they make folly their excuse and defence.”

This, of course, begs the question: can folly completely absolve the sins of the world?

In this respect, Paul and Folly are in total agreement. Folly continues, “Paul writes to Timothy in the same vein, ‘But I was granted God’s mercy because I acted ignorantly, in disbelief.’ What else is acting ignorantly but acting foolishly, with no evil intent? And when Paul speaks of being granted mercy, he clearly implies that he would not have been granted it had he not had folly to plead in his defence.”

Precisely because she is in the throes of valorization, Folly plays a rhetorical “hat trick” similar to the one Paul deploys in Acts 17. She leaves out a significant portion of this Pauline declaration to Timothy, particularly when Paul states,

I thank him who has given me strength for this, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful by appointing me to his service, though I formerly blasphemed and persecuted and insulted him; but I had received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

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42 Ball 38-39.
43 Erasmus 124.
44 Ibid. 126.
The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. And I am the foremost of sinners; but I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience for an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.  

Through this declaration, Paul articulates his full awareness that, by this time in his career, self-reflection alone did not save him. Rather, his conversion and salvation occurred as a result of Christ’s tempered impatience exemplified in the “road to Damascus” episode.  

That said, even if we ignore for the moment the troublesome intersection of Folly’s rhetorical trickery with Paul’s seemingly humble appeals for mercy and patience, Folly’s assertion that Paul, pre-road-to-Damascus, “merely” acted foolishly and without evil intent, is nevertheless astonishing and deeply disturbing, as it wholly ignores Paul’s pre-conversion activities as Saul, a member of the Sanhedrin directly responsible for the death of Stephen as well as his attempted purge of Christians in Acts 8. In The Lizard of Tarsus, Grimsley effectively leaps to Stephen’s defense by detailing the retributive and vindictive motives surrounding Paul’s complicity in Stephen’s stoning. Paul tells J:

We stoned him, for cause. For professing belief in you, of a religious nature. We drew a great crowd. I could tell some of the people there had heard you talk before you died. So I asked them to tell me what you had said. Just that. But they couldn’t. Even the ones who tried. And finally Stephen Wiggins told me, “You will never understand, Saul. Never.” So we stoned him, because he could not explain what he meant.

Indeed, it is precisely these horrific and sadistic Pauline actions that continually undergird the character of Paul in Grimsley's The Lizard of Tarsus. In direct contrast to Folly’s praiseworthy elisions, Grimsley squarely focuses on Paul’s “crimes and misdemeanors,” both past and present, and in the process recasts Paul’s folly in a much more personal light.

While Grimsley, whether consciously or unconsciously, draws on the same Pharisaic tradition noted earlier by Charles Ball for his theatrical depiction of Paul, he remains coy about his decision to engage head-on with one of the foremost problematic fixtures in Christianity. With what appears to be no small amount of deprecating, Folly-esque irony, Grimsley admitted to interviewer Kipp Cheng in American Theatre that his play was “delicate,” and noted, “To talk about religion has to be done delicately.” In The Lizard of Tarsus, however, delicacy performs a virtual disappearing act once Paul takes the stage.

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46 1 Tim. 1:12-16.  
48 Acts 7:59.  
49 Grimsley 79-80.  
50 Cheng 47.
Grimsley, in fact, makes clear his opinion of Paul at the very beginning of the play, describing Paul as “an inquisitor; male, serpentine, good looking, oily, politically shrewd. Age can vary.” This antipathy becomes increasingly more pronounced as the play progresses, first and foremost with Paul’s twofold, manifest concerns with J’s return. In Paul’s mind, J has come back to steal his dogmatic thunder and thus overtly undermine his newfound Christian authority. However, given the corrective actions noted in 1 Corinthians, Paul’s authority has already been challenged, and his covert fears that J’s return will also uncover a deficiency in his teachings have been dramatically realized. Paul knows, therefore, that in order to preserve his ordered milieu, J ultimately must be silenced:

PAUL. What do you tell people when I’m not listening? What do you say? (Pause; no answer.) I had a woman follow you. With a cassette recorder and three blank tapes. And then you gave your message and the people around her took the cassette recorder and smashed it against a fire hydrant. And they wound the tapes around her and stuffed them in her mouth. And the mob destroyed a camcorder as well. I don’t know who sent that, I hadn’t thought of video. (Pause.) You should write your teachings down.

J. That’s never a good idea.

PAUL. But if you don’t write them down, someone will write them down for you. (Listens to the crowd sound, which has continued all this while, in varying degrees.) Listen to them. Do you think they want to save you this time? Or kill you? Or what?

J. I suppose that all depends on you, doesn’t it? (Silence.)

Paul’s comment about the interpretative problems with J’s “true” teachings, “And they always get it wrong, afterward,” is hilariously, if disturbingly, self-reflexive. Demonstrating an ironic twist of Erasmian folly, Paul wants, wishes for, and ultimately demands of J a completely accurate and unadulterated recapitulation of His teachings. J is well aware that this act is impossible, thus reflecting Folly’s admonition that “He (Jesus) taught them to shun wisdom, and made his appeal through the example of children, lilies, mustard-seed, and humble sparrows, all foolish, senseless things, which live their lives by natural instinct alone, free from care or purpose. And then when he forbade his disciples to worry about how they should answer the charges of the governors and told them not to seek to know times and seasons, it was surely because he wanted them not to rely on their own intelligence but be wholly dependent on him.”

For Lizard’s Paul, of course, this creates a troubling conundrum. Paul is compelled to learn everything about J, to know Him wholly. Yet in another curious

[51] Grimsley 73.
[53] Grimsley 79.
[54] Erasmus 126.
Erasmian echo, by successfully accumulating this knowledge, Paul must go against J’s own injunctions against wisdom and intelligence. Folly illustrates this Pauline problem by stating, “Secondly, you can see how the first founders of the faith were great lovers of simplicity and bitter enemies of learning. Finally, the biggest fools of all appear to be those who have once been wholly possessed by zeal for Christian piety.”

Although it is unclear in her statement here to who Folly is referring, she has seemingly concluded her Pauline panegyric. Nevertheless, Paul is still very much in evidence as one of these “first founders of the faith,” which makes one wonder whether Folly has once again donned her satirical “mask” in order to attack Paul.

If Folly’s declaration is uttered sincerely rather than satirically, then I must disagree with her assertion that these first Christians were “great lovers of simplicity and bitter enemies of learning.” While many of the first Christian disciples were, in fact, fishermen who were exhorted by Jesus to “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men,” Paul’s Pharisaic upbringing simply cannot be overlooked. Jarrott explains Erasmus’s “take” on Paul’s decidedly unstable religio-cultural bridge by observing,

The next note [in Erasmus’s annotations of Colet’s Commentaries] on segregatus (αφωρισµενος) continues this emphasis on the difference between Paul’s present calling and his former life as a Jew, yet finds a certain continuity in the notion of separateness. The Jews had separate sects and factions; Paul himself was a Pharisee. But now his separateness signifies the transition to a new way of being and acting. Paul’s conversion is both a cessation and a commencement; it includes the former and transfigures it.

It remains to be seen, though, if Paul experiences a true and complete transfiguration of self.

Folly’s second statement, moreover, is also fraught with qualifications. Can she truly consider Paul one of the “biggest fools of all” who seems to be included among “those who have once been wholly possessed by zeal for Christian piety”? Why is he a fool — because of his (albeit presumed) zealous, “simplistic” Christian piety, or as a result of his covert applications of Pharisaic knowledge in the inceptive Christian milieu?

For his part, Grimsley offers a pointed response to these questions: Paul is a fool precisely because he cannot resolve this separateness within himself and his endlessly competing beliefs. In Grimsley’s opinion, Paul is not, and never has been, one of the true “fishers of men,” but is rather a controlling egomaniac whose foolishness lies in his inability to reconcile the two warring sides of his schizophrenic spiritualism: the pious, simplistic Christian and the law-bound Pharisee. Grimsley displays Paul’s true foolishness in a poignant dialogue between Paul and J near the conclusion of The Lizard of Tarsus. After Paul shows J a copy of the Bible, explains to Him its contents, and

55 Ibid. 128.
56 Mt. 4:19.
57 Jarrott 126.
responds to J’s reaction to the book’s thickness by stating, “There was some elaboration of the message,”\textsuperscript{58} J makes one simple request, “If you believe in me as your salvation, come and worship me. Now.”\textsuperscript{59} Unsurprisingly, this request throws Paul into a profound spiritual crisis:

PAUL. What would you like me to do?
PAUL. Are you serious?
J. More than that. I’m divine. (After brief hesitation, PAUL descends the ladder. At the foot of the ladder, he stops.)
PAUL. Kneel and…
J. Worship me. (PAUL slowly kneels and grasps the hem of J.’s garment. He is never resolved to the action, however. He freezes.)
PAUL. I can’t do this.
J. It isn’t so much I’m asking. A few moments of affection. A little sacrifice on your part. (Nevertheless PAUL slowly stands.)
PAUL. I’m terribly sorry.
J. (sighing.) I’ve done all I can do.
PAUL. I’ll worship you later. After all this other business is finished.
J. Yes of course.\textsuperscript{60}

As this dialogue illustrates, Paul’s position as a great lover of simplicity and bitter enemy of learning is seriously doubtful, thus (contrary to Erasmus and Jarrott) underscoring the apparent disingenuousness of Folly’s remarks. Moreover, Folly’s earlier statement that Jesus wanted his disciples “not to rely on their own intelligence but be wholly dependent on him” becomes especially troublesome because it requires His followers to ultimately rely on simple faith rather than doctrine. In \textit{The Lizard of Tarsus}, Grimsley makes clear that this is something Paul absolutely cannot do.

For Paul, furthermore, this way lies danger, given the tenuous distinction I want to make between “faith” and “doctrine.” Faith is, at its center, deeply felt, individualistic, and highly personal, while doctrine, on the other hand, implies a tacitly collective agreement between the faith-seeker and the faith-bestower. Indeed, Paul’s uniformly non-scholastic definition of faith in \textit{Praise of Folly}, “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen”\textsuperscript{61}, can be further extrapolated into doctrine by giving “faith” physical form. Yet while Paul’s own intellectual upbringing has taught him to find (and rigorously defend) the “truth,” he is nevertheless utterly baffled when J, the physical embodiment of “Truth,” arrives.

\textsuperscript{58} Grimsley 117.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid. 117.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid. 117-118.
\textsuperscript{61} Erasmus 89.
Throughout the New Testament, Paul wrestles earnestly with this dialectic of faith and doctrine, but Grimsley, in *The Lizard of Tarsus*, places Paul clearly on the side of religious doctrine. In so doing, he eschews the troublesome amorphousness of faith (which has no written evidence to shore up any possible confusion) in favor of the relative safety and “convenience” of doctrine:

J. I can’t make do with pamphlets and tracts. I’m sorry.
PAUL. You’re really not in any position to be stubborn.
J. There’s no life in pamphlets. Writing down a parable isn’t the same thing as telling it.
PAUL. But what you lose in immediacy you gain in convenience. Look at the beauty of it. From our perspective. I’m just asking you to listen with an open mind. You write the pamphlets, sign them, we do a little picture. Maybe you are sitting on the bed looking haggard and divine, something like that. Light from the window, this beam, we can rig something. I’ll call Aaron. You do a few tracts. You write down some of your favorite sayings, the really great cryptic stuff. Then, when you’re—when this whole thing is over with—we don’t have the usual documentation crisis. Everything you want remembered is right down there on paper, black and white, crystal clear. See?
J. You’ll let me write anything I like.
PAUL. Of course. I’ll edit. Nothing major. A few doctrinal corrections here and there.\(^62\)

J repeatedly attempts to make Paul understand that doctrine is not enough. Indeed, no matter how closely it is recorded, there can never be an infallible written “Truth.” While words are, according to J, always already changing, only the Word remains the same. This is an important distinction that Paul, despite his intellectual background, is unable to grasp.

What then remains for Paul? Grimsley would have us believe that Paul, despite his “salvation” on the road to Damascus, is never really “saved.” In the rush to promulgate a solid, unified doctrinal base for his Church (in more ways than one), Paul seems incapable of hearing God’s/ J’s “still small voice.”\(^63\) In an extraordinary speech, Paul rails at J for not revealing to him His “entire” message:

I knew, I understood at once. Even before you spoke to me out of that blinding cloud. The message was already there, in my heart. Or so I thought. For a long time. Traveling through the whole world, telling people about you, about what I thought you meant, about the whole picture, love, faith, healing, the power of forgiveness, the need for good works. Everything. Then you returned and you went shopping for an orange in the market and you spoke to the people impromptu, standing on a melon cart, and what you said is anybody’s guess. And now, chaos

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\(^62\) Grimsley 87.
\(^63\) 1 Ki. 19:12.
everywhere. Riot in the streets. People are drinking beer and dancing with their clothes loose. Breaking windshields and stringing fiber-optic cable in the trees. Killing mosquitoes with their bare hands in the night. Such things had been outlawed, and now chaos has returned. You decreed this by proclamation extempore from the top of a fruit cart in downtown Jerusalem. (Pause.) This was not what we wanted, what we expected. This is not the glorious silver station wagon sailing down on a cloud of radiance from the east. This is not one thousand years of peaceful shopping in the mall. So I wonder who you really are and what you really wanted that day in the desert.⁶⁴

Ostensibly Paul knows that he has subverted J’s original “received” teachings in an attempt to save and secure the Church for future generations, but having done so he has, in the truest sense of folly, hopelessly complicated the message. Thus, J’s return is heralded by a new and infinitely more disturbing message:

Today. In the market. My message was simple. I said, enough. I said, I didn’t come back for nice-guy stuff. Plowshares into swords, remember? That’s what I said. You want to make religion work for you? Maybe you better just start over. You’re in the holy city for the weekend? All right. Begin with that. Tonight we’re going to burn this city down. (Laughs.) I said that.⁶⁵

Folly seems to echo J’s damning words by observing, “There are also some relevant passages in the Gospel where Christ attacks Pharisees and scribes and teachers of the Law while giving his unfailing protection to the ignorant multitude. “What else can ‘Woe unto you, Scribes and Pharisees’ mean but ‘Woe unto you who are wise’?”⁶⁶ Paul, through his purported “wisdom,” steadfastly refuses to recognize His original message of unconditional love. It is too proletarian, too easy to misinterpret, too difficult to legislate.

J’s only recourse, therefore, is to propose a more direct, visceral approach— to borrow from Langston Hughes, the “fire next time.” For Paul, however, order must always be maintained. J’s “new” message will be intercepted, transformed, and quashed under weighty doctrine. The messenger will, of course, be sacrificed for the greater good, ultimately ensuring the sanctity and security of Paul’s greatest folly, “his” Church.

Nonetheless, the church’s sure foundation is set on decidedly shaky ground, as Erasmus points out to Maarten Van Dorp: “These are the people who want no changes in a text, for fear of exposing their own ignorance. It is they who oppose me with the fictitious authority of assemblies and exaggerate the serious crisis in the Christian faith. They spread rumours about the peril of the Church (which I suppose they support on their own shoulders, though they’d do better propping up a common cart) and other such hazards in the hearing of the ignorant and superstitious crowd who take them for real

⁶⁴ Grimsley 91.
⁶⁵ Ibid. 127-128.
⁶⁶ Erasmus 125.
theologians and hang on their lips.” Paul’s paradoxically foolish reliance on the fear of chaos is what both drives the Church and weakens it.

Why then does Erasmus, in Praise of Folly, find him worthy of high praise? To this query Folly voices a plausible answer, “To sum up (or I shall be pursuing the infinite), it is quite clear that the Christian religion has a kind of kinship with folly in some form, though it has none at all with wisdom.” Rather than negating wisdom altogether, Folly accepts its presence with the proviso that wisdom is seen for what it really is: folly masked by intellect. Like Paul’s “truth,” there can be no “real” wisdom. On this point, Grimsley and Erasmus are in complete accord. In a telling dialogue, J uncovers and subsequently dashes Paul’s most fervent hope, revealing Paul’s weaknesses and exposing his utter folly:

J. You want salvation.
PAUL. Yes. (J. laughs softly.) It isn’t funny.
J. (still laughing) Please.
PAUL. I will not be laughed at.
PAUL. Why is that so hard to believe?
J. Because it’s you. Because you know how this game is played. But you want salvation anyway. It’s too precious.
PAUL. Stop this.

J is happy to point out that Paul’s folly turns on his wisdom, sans spirit, sans personal sacrifice. By both claiming to be wise and pretending to be foolish, Paul’s existence becomes mere pretense. For Paul, there is no hope of salvation simply because he cannot divorce himself from the physical world of wisdom and instead embrace the spiritual realm of folly. Therefore Paul is, in a very real sense, damned to the “muddled middle,” an enduringly elusive enigma who, despite his continual treading the fine line of dogma and folly, ultimately becomes a victim of his own spiritual schizophrenia.

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67 Ibid. 168.
68 Ibid. 128.
69 Grimsley 111-112.
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