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Review Essay: Ernesto Grassi and Maristella Lorch, *Folly and Insanity in Renaissance Literature*

Silvia R. Fiore
University of South Florida

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Ernesto Grassi and Maristella Lorch, *Folly and Insanity in Renaissance Literature*, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1986, 128 pp., biblio., index, \$18.00.

Two distinguished, internationally known scholars—a philosopher and a literary critic, both experts of Renaissance culture—have authored this unusual commentary on the Humanistic dichotomy of folly and insanity. Grassi (author of the first four chapters, the last part of chapter five, and the conclusion) and Lorch (author of chapter five) have presented a challenging study of a topic important to understanding why Humanism represented such a significant milestone for the history of philosophy as well as of literature. Donald Verene, the Vico scholar, offers a brief but incisive introductory clarification of this monograph's purpose and scope, particularly its importance as a reassessment of the traditional view of "Renaissance Humanism . . . as a period of literary and aesthetic activity with only indirect philosophical significance" (9).

The book's thesis asserts that by anachronistically imposing Cartesian, Kantian, Hegelian, or other contemporary definitions of philosophy—for example, analytic or phenomenological, which stress systematic, logical, and deductive approaches to reality—scholars have demoted the philosophical primacy of Renaissance Humanism and have viewed the writings of Landino, Salutati, Bruni, Erasmus, and others as mainly literary, rhetorical, and mythical. Grassi and Lorch instead demonstrate how these writers use folly (in the form of fable, tale, and narration, and the rhetorical and poetical tropes of irony and metaphor) to transform the praxis of the human situation into a meaningful, universalized, philosophical vision. Thus, they attempt to demonstrate how philosophy and literature shared an interchangeable nature in the Humanist tradition by virtue of Humanism's preservation of reflection and universalized meaning through the specificity and uniqueness of the human situation.

The ontological illumination of folly emerges from an act of *igenium* that allows one to perceive the open nature of reality, to see and accept the ironic potential or reversed dimension of any event, situation, or word, to accept that truth goes beyond logic, reason, and deductive proposition to illusion, experience, and metaphor. The rhetorical tropes of irony, myth, allegory, and imagery operate as the reflective vehicles of understanding.

In chapter one, "The Priority of Metaphoric Thinking," Grassi, after establishing the complex classical Greek context for rational thinking, traces and defines the rhetorical stages leading to *scientia* as exemplified by Salutati. Chapter two, "Folly as a Philosophical Problem," explores the roots and insufficiencies of rational, casual thought and introduces Erasmus's concept of *moria* as the Humanist answer to the problems of human existence. It argues that Erasmus affirmed "that *moria* is the deeper root of the *unveiling of all*

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beings. . . . Through its power the world appears" (43). This crucial chapter establishes the essential difference between folly, the unveiling of sense through the metaphorical function of the word (chapter three), and insanity, "the incapacity of 'getting down' to things, of arranging things in the right manner, having the ends meet with respect to the environment" (48). Chapter four, "The Allegorical Fable," and chapter five, "The Poetic Tale of Folly," apply this approach to interpreting the philosophical, historical, and literary interrelationships in Alberti, Ariosto, Boiardo, and Cervantes. These chapters deal with the use of allegory and metaphor as forms of philosophizing, with the secularization and demythologizing of history and politics, and with the rhetorical and philosophical functions of chivalry, *pazzia negativa*, and *avventura* in the Renaissance long poetic tale.

This is a difficult study, directed to scholars versed in classical Greek language, culture, and thought, as well as in all aspects of Renaissance Humanist discourse. In rehabilitating the philosophical integrity and value of analogy as a significant method of interpreting reality, it skillfully reaffirms the importance of language in achieving *acutezze*, *apertura*, *enlightenment*, and in the *clearing of the dark wood* (117).

Silvia R. Fiore
University of South Florida