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Vessels of Passage: Reading the Ritual of the Late-Medieval Ship of Fools

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My paper explores the late-medieval image of the ship of fools. The metaphor originates in the fifteenth-century carnivals of Europe and was depicted in Sebastian Brant's 1494 compilation, Das Narrenschiff. The paper explores the underlying dynamic of the imagery and its origins in carnivalesque rituals as well as how the motif was exploited by Brant, becoming a literary force at the turn of the sixteenth century.

Introduction

The ship of fools has long been present in Western art and literature. The image originates in the late-medieval carnivals of Europe and it condenses the allegory of a barge with a seemingly endless number of fools who are unaware of their lack of control over the ship. This is the main theme of Sebastian Brant's *Das Narrenschiff* (1494, Basel, from now on *The Ship of Fools*), a late-medieval enumeration of fools with 112 chapters in verse depicting such types of folly as adultery, heeding bad advisors, or vanity. Each verse is accompanied by a woodcut which exhibits a fool or a group of fools relevant to the chapter. The metaphor is rarely discussed outside the realm of German studies, despite the fact that it became highly popular across Europe at the turn of the sixteenth century and its impact has been considerable ever since then.[1]

Academic papers on *The Ship of Fools* written in English have failed to elaborate on its ritualistic significance; although its origin in medieval popular culture has been acknowledged, the work has been mainly regarded as a satire castigating human weakness.[2] Undoubtedly, *The Ship of Fools* identifies folly with sin, however, the work's significance points beyond mere castigation and condemnation of human faults as the piece seems to be deeply rooted in ritualistic expressions of popular culture. This paper argues that the late medieval fool plays of carnivals seeped into Brant's work and became the main governing idea behind it. In order to substantiate this, I shall discuss the underlying dynamics of the imagery, its use in popular performances of carnivals, and finally I will demonstrate how the carnivalesque tradition of *The Ship of Fools* and its iconology were recorded and articulated in the form of Sebastian Brant's *The Ship of Fools*.

Rites of Crossing

The Ship of Fools was one of the literary symptoms of the epistemological crisis of the late medieval and early modern era, in which the Church gradually lost its spiritual prestige, institutions of education and politics were declining and dominant notions of philosophy and cosmology were being questioned. Additionally, the Great Discoveries redrew the map of the world, and this sudden expansion intensified uncertainty. The numerous editions and translations of *The Ship of Fools* shall

be detailed later in the essay; at this point suffice it to say that at the turn of the sixteenth century, the widespread circulation of the work shows that the notion of folly was central to contemporary European culture and *The Ship of Fools* was a fitting device to capture the transience of the age. This transition seems to point beyond mere reformation of dysfunctional patterns of institutions or education: it represented a phase followed by a qualitative shift from the medieval towards the Renaissance world views. This shift may be linked with the ritualistic expressions of *The Ship of Fools* in carnival pageants.

The image of a ship has long been present in European culture: it frequently denoted the state or the church. Additionally, Edwin H. Zeydel refers to two German poems that feature the ship, Heinrich Teichner's *Schif der Flust* ('The Ship of Ruin,' 1360) and Jodocus Gallus's 1489 poem, the *Monopolium et societas vulgo des Lichtschiffs* (*The Ship of Fools* 12). The literary tradition of a ship, by which various characters could be brought together, had already been established by the time Brant compiled *The Ship of Fools* and his work could be seen as a continuation of this literary practice. Yet, the specific use of the ship device combined with folly, an image originating in late-medieval carnivals, was probably Brant's literary invention.

Samuel Kinser refers to a 1539 illustration in the *Schembart Book*, a record of Nuremberg carnivals, which displays a festival with a ship featuring fools, beasts, and the devil on the bow (47). Carnivals are primarily performative events and the record reveals that the ship was used as a stage on which fools and other characters enacted performances. These performances could be seen as ritualistic pageants exhibiting a group of characters led by the devil, and thus regarded as dangerous in the eyes of the community. Although the record is later than Brant's work, Kinser argues that the festivals called Schembartlauf, the craft-guild parade of butchers in the marketplace, developed between the 1450s and 1530s (46), which implies that the tradition of fool plays on board of ships had already been widespread by the time Brant composed *The Ship of Fools*. This argument is given further when considering the cover page of the first edition of the work which displays a horse-drawn cart alongside a vessel: both vehicles, references to carnival processions, are filled with fools. As cover pages already at the turn of the sixteenth century were serving commercial purposes, Brant might have wanted to exploit the already established popularity of fool plays by linking his work with carnival pageantry.

One of the main concerns of this paper is the interrelation between Brant's work and carnival fool pageants. More specifically, the paper aims to explore how the ship of fools tradition can be seen as a ritualistic expression, and eventually how this ritual was recorded on the pages of Brant's work. In order to achieve this, the notion of ritual needs to be clarified. Providing a precise definition of ritual is highly problematic since, from religious ceremonies to everyday repetitive actions, most human deeds may be regarded as ways of ritualistic expression. Edward Muir emphasises that rituals always exist at the moment of their performance and they fulfil their function only when they evoke the expected response; otherwise they are empty repetitive actions (2). A ritual points beyond the action itself and Muir adds that it has to be a "unified performance," a "rule of conduct" (3) through which the given aim of the ritual can be achieved. Muir refers to David Kertzer who argues that the importance of

rituals lies not in their dealing with the supernatural; rather, they express social dependence (3). If we consider carnivals as ritualistic expressions which offer a temporary break from the socio-religious order, Kertzer's definition could be amended by adding that rituals also express social independence. That is, rites of popular festivals could be seen as recurring patterns within the cycle of society; they represent the temporary suspension of social constraints. Although the social order is reestablished by the end of such festivals, the subversion of ritual may point towards a shift within the community. Ritualistic expressions of carnivals involved a wide variety of imagery through which the aim of the ritual could be fulfilled.

The ship of fools is a fitting device for the late-medieval period in particular as it was a time of transition; the known image of the ritualistic carnival ship performance provided a meaningful motif to convey the uncertainties of the age and explore the ongoing shift. The fools sail towards an unknown destination on the board of the ship in "permanent transitoriness," constantly having to face the unpredictability of the future. Their journey conveys the idea of transition, a transition which could apply to the broader transition in the life of medieval to early modern communities. is a passage which occupies a crucial stage in the life of a community; in Brant's case, as the last section of the paper shall discuss, *The Ship of Fools* represents the transition from the medieval to early modern period through literary and visual terms. In his influential work *The Ritual Process* (1969), Victor Turner discusses the significance of "rites of passage" in society, which occur at times of shifts within the social framework. Turner refers to Arnold van Gennep's three phases of transition: separation, which signifies the detachment from patterns in the social structure; margin, the liminal state of transition in which the passenger travels through a cultural realm with the attributes of both the past and the forthcoming period; and aggregation, when the passage is accomplished and the new social order is established. Turner adds that liminal personae are ambiguous and avoid classification; they are indeterminate and are examples of ritualisation of cultural transitions (94-95). The woodcuts in *The Ship of Fools* exhibit a heterogeneous crew on board of the barge as male, female, rich, poor, old and young characters are equally bound up with the notion of folly in the work. The identity of the fool seems to be highly ambiguous, and in order to reconcile various definitions of folly, Michel Foucault approaches the question from a social aspect.

In *Madness and Civilization* (1961), Foucault elaborates on how the social status of madmen in Europe altered from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century, and the first chapter of the book focuses on the stultifera navis, the ship of fools. As he argues, the ship was a metaphor for a purging social ritual during which the community was purified of folly, regarded as sin in late-medieval Europe (11).[3] The driving away of sin in the form of a ship filled with fools evokes the ancient cleansing ritual of scapegoating. René Girard's influential study *The Scapegoat* (1982) discusses scapegoating rituals which are centred on a given community's need to become purified from sin. Girard argues that at times of crisis smaller communities see only one person responsible for everything and since this person is the root of sickness he has to be responsible for the cure as well (43). As the scapegoat is the reason for the crisis, by its removal the community can be healed. Even if Girard did not focus on the notion of folly, his findings are applicable to Brant's work as the fools on the vessel represent sin from which the community needs to be purified.

Although *The Ship of Fools* suggests that "[t]he whole world lives in darksome night, / In blinded sinfulness persisting" (trans. Zeydel, 8-9),[4] and hence identifies folly with sin, the aim of the work seems to point beyond the tradition of medieval moral tractates which castigate humanity. The Prologue to *The Ship of Fools* confirms the idea that the sailing off of the fools could be seen as a cleansing ritual as it states that the book was published "[f]or profit and salutary instruction, admonition and pursuit of wisdom, reason and good manners: also for contempt and punishment of folly, blindness, error, and stupidity of all stations and kinds of men" (trans Zeydel 57). Although such rhetoric, discussing the pursuit of wisdom, is typical of medieval theological texts, my findings suggest that direct condemnation of human sins linked with folly was unique in the late Middle Ages.[5] Reading the work and hence becoming aware of one's folly might result in gaining wisdom. The congregation of fools aboard a vessel offers the literary depiction of a scapegoating ritual, the main aim of which is the cleansing of the reader. In late-medieval Europe, this purification took place during such festive occasions as the German Fastnachtsspiele, which in Brant's Basel coexisted with the French Feast of Fools.

The Cultural Performance of Folly

As the identity of fools was ambiguous, they were fitting characters in festivities: their attributes corresponded with the similarly ambiguous carnival during which hierarchy and social order were temporarily suspended. Witnessing such fool plays might trigger self-reflection as a result of which one might become conscious of one's own faults and undergo a qualitative shift in identity. Since the illustration in the *Schembart Book* and Brant's title page strongly suggests *The Ship of Fools*' origins in late-medieval carnivals, it is worth discussing the underlying ideas behind such popular festivals.

Erika Fischer-Lichte's major study, the *History of European Drama and Theatre*, relates carnivals to the notion of cultural performance, a term coined by the American anthropologist Milton Singer in the 1950s. Fischer-Lichte establishes her argumentation on the ritualistic origins of drama and sees its history as derivative from cultural performances (weddings, funerals, christenings, popular festivities etc.) which stage shifts in the identity of the community that performs the ritual. The fool plays of carnivals might be seen as such cultural performances, the main function of which, as Fischer-Lichte argues, are to carry out a transformation of identity (4). Brant seems to have recognised the transformative power of these performances and integrated their patterns into *The Ship of Fools*.

The patterns of the Feast of Fools and the Fastnachtsspiele are rather similar as they both highlighted various abnormalities within the social framework. Even if the Feast of Fools was primarily present in France, its patterns spread all over Europe and it can be traced in Germany and in some parts of England. In England, as Edward Muir points out, it was known as the Day of the Boy Bishop, a festive pattern during which boys, dressed in the robes of bishops, performed mock-sermons in churches (103). Records, mostly Church statutes which abolished the custom, confirm that the Feast of Fools was also popular in the contemporary Basel of Brant. Max Harris refers to a series of

decrees issued by the council of Basel in 1435, which attempted to regulate inappropriate behaviour within the church and which provides a detailed description of the Feast of Fools in Basel:

> Some put on masked and theatrical comedies, others organize dances for men and women, attracting people to amusement and buffoonery […] It forbids ordinaries as well as deans and rectors of churches, under pain of being deprived of all ecclesiastical revenues for three months, to allow these and similar frivolities, or even markets and fairs, in churches, which ought to be houses of prayer, or even in cemeteries. (qtd. in Harris 209)

The increasing popularity of such fool plays can be measured by the hostile reaction of authorities. The decree reveals that the fool plays were organised under the supervision of the Church; however, with their suppression the actors were forced to perform their plays elsewhere. The records in the *Schembart Book* and on Brant's title page show that such carnivalesque performances took place in the streets. The Day of the Boy Bishop reveals that the comic entertainments were largely targeted at the clergy, mocking and ridiculing its faults and corruption, but later on they seem to have evolved into entertainment outside the realm of the Church.

Another performative practice to which *The Ship of Fools* may relate is the homiletic tradition of the age, as the work might be seen as a series of orations in verse framed by the notion of folly. These oratory verses become mock orations by reading them together with the accompanying woodcuts. The homiletic origin of *The Ship of Fools* is confirmed by the chapters which depict the pulpit: chapter 104 discusses the topic of concealing the truth and the woodcut exhibits a fool on the pulpit delivering a speech in front of his audience. The background displays a large window similar to those in churches and the fool on the pulpit together with his congregation evokes the image of the boy bishops' mock orations.

A poem Brant wrote on the occasion of his election as carnival king in 1482 also confirms that he was familiar with contemporary festive rituals. The following translation belongs to Edwin H. Zeydel:

> As king I live in hope, though fate may be invidious.
> Though you, Fortune, have been able to make a poet king,
> yet you cannot bring it about that such a one be king for long …
> After you have taken everything I will still remain
> such a poet, poor as I am among the poor. (qtd. in Sebastian Brant 65)

This poem refers to the image of the wheel of Fortune, popular in Renaissance Europe primarily due to Boccaccio's De Casibus Virorum Illustrium (1355-1377), which appears in *The Ship of Fools* twice, in chapters 37 and 56. The reversal of order is the central force of carnival during which the world is turned upside down and lower rank members of society may temporarily become kings.

Carnivals are brief periods of release of tension representing occasional breaks from the constraints of the socio-religious order. In the case of fool plays, the release of tension results in a

qualitative shift through the liberating and cleansing power of carnival laughter. Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* (1965) provides a lengthy discussion on the nature of carnival and sees its essence in the suspension of social hierarchy, privileges, norms, and prohibitions, which ultimately lead to a shift within the community (10). Bakhtin suggests that the main trigger for this shift is carnival laughter, which is mocking and merry at the same time. It is ambivalent as it represents both life and death, it includes every participant of the carnival, and it is also directed at those who laugh (11-12). Carnival laughter existed outside the realm of the socio-religious order and elite culture (71) and it was central to such occasions as the Feast of Fools, which can be read as the grotesque degradation of spiritual church rituals into lower bodily representations of drunken orgies and gluttony (Bakhtin 74). As Bakhtin argues, carnival was the outburst of energies repressed within the official socio-religious framework, the release of which resulted in bodily regeneration and renewal (75). At the turn of the sixteenth century, popular festive traditions seeped into elite culture and literary techniques of humanism became deeply immersed in carnivals, a fine example of which is Brant's *The Ship of Fools*.[6]

Reading the Ritual

The Ship of Fools was first published in 1494 in Basel and the original German text was soon translated into Latin, French, and English.[7] The accompanying woodcuts preceding the verses, partly produced under the supervision of Albrecht Dürer, are highly carnivalesque, and each displays a fool or a group of fools relevant to the chapter. The interplay between image and text produces a joint meaning in the work.

Brant was one of the most widely acknowledged humanists of his age: a professor of theology and law, a politician, and a poet. His sources for *The Ship of Fools* range from the Bible, the Classical tradition of satire (Horace and Juvenal) and rhetoric to contemporary legal texts and popular culture of the fifteenth century (Zeydel, *The Ship of Fools* 8). Brant's work balances between contemporaneous humanistic and popular traditions, a tension that is revealed in a poem he appended to the 1511 edition of Erasmus's *The Praise of Folly*. In the poem he mentions the difference between elite and popular culture, saying that "Content to have carried vulgar fools in our *Narrenschiff*, we allowed the toga to go untouched" (qtd. in Screech 7). The text makes a clear distinction between "vulgar" popular culture, represented in the carnivalesque woodcuts, and the classical tradition denoted by the "toga," probably referring to the text bellow the images. This qualitative distinction between visual and written culture was still common at the turn of the sixteenth century when printed texts represented high literature to which iconography was inferior.

This distinction originates in the Middle Ages, and one of its examples is the *Biblia pauperum*, the picture Bible of the poor aimed at the illiterate. In the *Biblia pauperum* tradition the images were placed in the centre of the page accompanied only by marginal text or no text at all. Brant follows this popular tradition and defines his work as "[t]he world's whole course in one brief look" which "[a]re reasons why to buy this book" (trans. Zeydel, 53-54). *The Ship of Fools* had to meet the expectations of humanist readers, hence its text is heavily loaded with classical references; however,

Brant seems to have been aware of the commercial benefits of the iconography of popular culture and he might have wanted to exploit the visual familiarity of carnivals.

The images in *The Ship of Fools* are highly grotesque, the characters in the woodcuts are out of measure and they do not carry such unequivocal aesthetic values as beauty or ugliness. Bakhtin describes such grotesquery as "a phenomenon in transformation" (24), a description applicable to *The Ship of Fools* in light of the rite of passage. The work is, on the one hand, a catalogue of sins in the form of folly, while on the other hand, "[f]or fools a mirror shall it be, / Where each his counterfeit may see" (trans. Zeydel, 31-32). Observing Brant's "literary fool-pageant" potentially results in facing one's own folly, which, after having been identified, is driven away through the cleansing power of laughter.

The rite of passage is best captured in the chapters which depict the mutability of life and the whims of Fortune. In chapters 37 and 56 the subtexts elaborate on the fall of the mighty and on how easily earthly riches can be lost. Both verses are accompanied by the same woodcut with the wheel of Fortune. The image displays three characters attached to the wheel, two of them half fools, half asses, and there is a hand, the representation of the transcendental, in the upper left corner operating the wheel. The iconography of this woodcut captures the essence of *The Ship of Fools* as it exhibits the fools in constant motion on the wheel transforming from asses into fools and vice versa. The fools are bound to the wheel and exposed to the whims of Lady Fortune; they become the emblems of permanent transgression, identical with the fools imprisoned on Brant's ship. Becoming aware of the vanity and foolishness displayed in carnival pageantry or on the pages of *The Ship of Fools* might enable one's distancing from folly with the result of a shift in identity. It appears that Brant was aware of the transformative power of the ship of fools and used it intentionally in order to exhibit the transience of his age.

Conclusion

The Ship of Fools may thus be seen as the "literary symptom" of an era in transformation, a period in which the medieval belief systems were not exclusively valid anymore, and the new ones were not yet fully established. *The Ship of Fools* is a record of the rite of passage at the turn of the sixteenth century, a passage not only between the medieval and early modern periods, but also between unfixed popular culture and printed literature. Towards the end of the fifteenth century Basel became a centre of printing press and mass production of books, which seems a clear sign of a cultural need to record pieces of both popular festivals and high literature. *The Ship of Fools* might be seen as an imprint of the cultural passage during which unfixed rituals became recorded and transferred to the pages of books hence providing access to the increasingly widespread ritual of reading. If the fool plays of the fifteenth century can be seen as ritualized performances, *The Ship of Fools* could also be regarded as a ritualized piece of literature with the potential of driving away the sins of the reader through the liberating power of carnival laughter

Notes

[1] Records confirm that *The Ship of Fools* imagery had not been present in England before the sixteenth century and the popularity of the motif is most probably due to the English translations. There are ample references to *The Ship of Fools* in early modern English texts and such representative works mention the metaphor as Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* (with Thomas Nashe's preface, 1591), Gabriel Harvey's *Pierces Supererogation* (1593), Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), or Robert Fludd's *Mosaicall Philosophy* (1659). Additionally, there are references to *The Ship of Fools* in the works of such Elizabethan/Jacobean playwrights as Thomas Nashe (*Summer's Last Will and Testament*, 1600), John Marston (*The Fawn*, 1606), or Thomas Dekker (*The Whore of Babylon*, 1607). In the twentieth century Katherine Ann Porter wrote a novel with the same title (*Ship of Fools*, 1962) and so did Richard Paul Russo, the science fiction writer (*Ship of Fools*, 2001).

[2] The most authoritative scholarly works on the subject are predominantly products of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century positivist critical tradition: T.H. Jamieson's critical edition of Alexander Barclay's 1509 translation of *The Ship of Fools* (1874); Charles H. Herford's chapter in his *Studies in the Literary Relations of England and Germany in the Sixteenth Century* (1886); Aurelius Pompen's *The English Versions of The Ship of Fools: A Contribution to the History of the Early French Renaissance in England* (1925). Later scholars offered more subtle interpretations of the work: Edwin H. Zeydel published his translation of Brant's text in 1944 and his monograph, *Sebastian Brant* (1967) offered comprehensive interpretations of Brant's works. In 1996, Robert C. Evans published an article 'Forgotten Fools: Alexander Barclay's *The Ship of Fools*', which attempted to re-establish Barclay's works and his translation of Brant's *Narrenschiff* in the English-speaking canon.

[3] Scholars such as Charles H. Herford or Edwin H. Zeydel also highlight the identification between folly and sin, yet they do not emphasise the ship's ritual significance as much as Foucault.

[4] Throughout the paper, I use Edwin Zeydel's translation, which is based on the 1494 edition of Brant's *Narrenschiff*, republished in the facsimile by Franz Schultz in 1913.

[5] An example of literature depicting folly prior to Brant is Nigel Wireker's *Speculum Stultorum* (*The Mirror of Fools,* ca. 1180), which articulates its moral in the genre of beast fables as the protagonist is an ass who is dissatisfied with the length of his tail. This work does not identify folly with sin explicitly and it is not as directly castigating as *The Ship of Fools*.

[6] Besides Brant such acknowledged humanists as Erasmus used the patterns of carnivals. In his *Moriae Encomium* (*The Praise of Folly*, 1511), Erasmus draws up the character of Folly, who delivers a mock sermon on wisdom and foolishness. Clarence H. Miller relates *The Praise of Folly* to the 'sotties', the fool plays of the Feast of Fools (*sot* meaning 'fool') which were often followed by a 'sermon joyeux' the aim of which was to ridicule Christian doctrines and rituals (Miller, xix). Although Erasmus's work is similar to Brant's both in theme and in its use of carnivals, *The Ship of Fools* preceded *The Praise of Folly* and I do not know of any other piece of literature which depicts folly in a similar manner.

[7] The *Narrenschiff* had several authorised and pirated editions and enlargements by 1500. It was soon translated into Latin by Brant's fellow poet, Jacob Locher (*Stultifera Navis*, 1497), into French by Paul Riviére (*La Nef des Fols du Monde*, 1497), and into English verse by Alexander Barclay (*The Ship of Folys*, 1509) and into prose by Henry Watson (*The shyppe of fooles*, 1509). Barclay's translation was republished in 1570 and Watson's edition in 1517.

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