The Annals of Ovidius University of Constanța: Philology Series Vol. XXVIII, 2/2017

MARITIME METAPHORS IN SEBASTIAN BRANT'S *THE SHIP OF FOOLS*

Iuliana Tănase
University of Bucharest

***Abstract**: Although the maritime metaphor of the ship was not applied to Sebastian Brant's* The Ship of Fools *in the initial version but was subsequently added as a framing device, the compound metaphor of 'the ship of fools' remains a prominent symbol of the late Middle Ages. The complexity of the work is linked to the late-medieval transition to the modern age and the attending shifts in the medieval worldview. The paper aims to investigate the symbolism of the ship as used by S. Brant by reference to the contemporary context. It examines the relevance of the historical context and analyses whether the maritime metaphors are used solely as formal and structural device or they actually participate in the underlying significance of the book.*

***Keywords**: Sebastian Brant, "the ship of fools" metaphor, maritime metaphors*

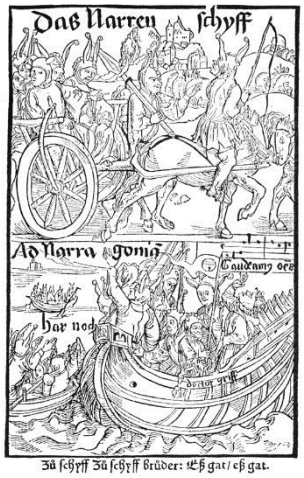
The paper focuses on the symbolism of the ship and other maritime elements, and the question of whether it is used as a framing device or participates in the underlying significance of the work. The metaphor of "the ship of fools" remains a prominent symbol of the late Middle Ages.

The symbol of the ship was not used with reference to the work as a whole in the initial version but was included in several chapters. Its use as a framing device emerged in the process of translation into Latin by J. Locher. The increasing importance attached to it transpires in its formal prominence in the second part of the work, in particular the chapters 109 ("Contempt of Misfortune"), 103 ("Of the Antichrist"), 91 ("Of Prattling in Church") or chapter 108 ("The Schluraffen Ship"), which is focused on the symbolic ship.

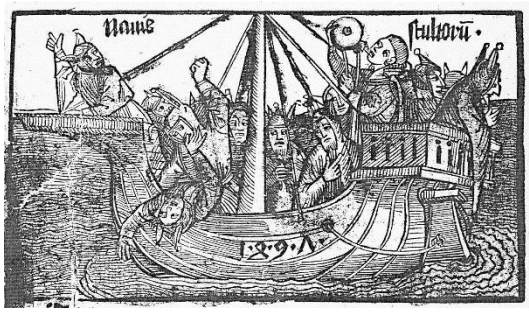
The work was essentially intended as an extensive or comprehensive catalogue of all varieties of folly in contemporary society which affects all categories and all areas of human existence and uses most contemporary metaphors connected with the fool and folly, such as the dance of fools, the cart of fools, the ship, the mirror.

The comparison between the title woodcuts for the first and the subsequent editions is indicative of the increasingly complex significance of the ship metaphor. The original woodcut made by Dürer includes two pictures, of a cart of fools and a ship of fools below it ("Navigating Dürer's Woodcuts for *The Ship of Fools*"). The combination establishes a connection between the two and suggests that the ship is close in meaning with the cart symbol. The exclusive use of the ship for the title page of subsequent editions implies that the ship absorbs and expands the significance of the former.

BDD-A27700 © 2017 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:54:50 UTC)



Narrenschiff, 1494, Title page



Narrenschiff, 1497, Title page

The cart of fools has a complex and contradictory significance in the late medieval period. The fools can embody persons with disabilities who were perceived together with other socially marginal categories such as the poor, the beggars, the lepers, etc as a social burden, as undesirable groups. The approach to dealing with such categories was most frequently isolation, imprisonment and punishment or banishment, exile. The cart and the ship were used as vehicles for expelling these groups from the city. In the case of disabled persons, the expulsion by ships or carts included stops in various other cities where they were displayed as a curiosity to the locals. The cart of fools also suggests the carnival, and the fools' representation identifies them with either professional jesters or carnival revellers.

The symbolism of the ship must be understood in the context of age and it combines historical, allegorical and sacred meanings drawn from the contemporary context, the Bible, the Church, the secular culture and popular traditions.



Narrenschiff, Chapter 108, The Schluraffen ship

BDD-A27700 © 2017 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:54:50 UTC)

The relation with the carnival is suggested by the etymology of carnival in *carrus navalis* or naval wagon. The ship symbol could have derived from the use of a ship during carnival processions as carnival floats, viz. platforms on wheels drawn through the city and making up the carnival procession. The carts on wheels were used in many ancient religious processions including those dedicated to Dionysus (<http://www.deblauweschuit.be/site/de-blauwe-schuit-2/>). The ritual use of the ship originates in the ancient cult of Isis. Isis is the pagan Egyptian goddess imagined as an earth mother, a deity that governs life and rebirth, ensures fertility and has an association with water. She is a giver of life, a magician that resurrects Osiris and protects him against the force of destruction and death, Seth. The association with water can account for her becoming the patron of navigation ever since ancient Egypt. The ship becomes a symbol of Isis and the association of Isis with the ship originates in the Isiac myth and religion. The box in which Osiris is enclosed by Seth travels on the Nile and which becomes his coffin also serves as a marine vehicle and the myth portrays Isis searching for Osiris in the attempt to restore him to life and power. On the other hand Isis acquires the life-giving powers of the sun-god Ra and she sails the barque of Ra or sits in the barque together with Ra in its nightly journey through the underworld (Detraci 97; Pinch 151). Existence in time is imagined as a sea or ocean and the soul's passage is projected as a journey by ship. The boat or ship appears a symbol of the soul or of life that travels in the sea of darkness or nothingness. In many funeral rites the mummy was placed on a boat (on a cart on wheels) with representation of Isis behind (Venit 12). She was associated with funerary rites as a protector against evil through her being the consort of Osiris, the first king of the earth and following his murder, the lord of the underworld. Isis is a goddess of life and renewal that protects and guides/ navigates the living or the dead through their worldly and otherworldly existence and protects them from being destroyed by evil deities. The role was extended to the world and she became the protector of mariners that ensured a safe journey (Pinch 152).

The festival Isidis Navigium or "The Ship of Isis" was a ceremony at the beginning of spring (5th March in Rome) which was a central part of the Isiac mystery. It had a dual function of ensuring fertility and of starting the season of navigation. The procession included the officiating priests carrying symbols of Isis, one being "a small golden vessel rounded in the shape of a woman's breast, from which he poured libations of milk" (Apuleius 83). It also included an assembly of initiates disguised in animals with a mythical significance, as well as musicians, which suggests a fertility ritual. It involved the procession through the city and to the sea of a ship placed on a cart on wheels, the symbol of Isis. The procession ended with the ritual of purification and protection of the ship (by cracking an egg on the hull and pouring milk into the sea) before launching it to sea. The second part of the ceremony included singing, dancing and feasting.

Isis was one of the most enduring Egyptian deities that with Alexander's conquests was disseminated in Greece and the Roman Empire. The ritual was a celebration of life and focused on the life-giving powers of the goddess in her resurrection of Osiris. The perpetuation of the pagan festival in Rome and the Christian world met with resistance. In the Roman Empire the gods were meant to promote family values and respect for the state. The fertility ritual was eventually prohibited in Rome by Emperor Augustus by reason of its degradation of public morals by immoral conduct and the inclusion of obscenities.

The ship is a familiar element in the carnival, in particular in Germany and the Low Countries, and has a slightly different significance. From the very beginning, the carnival had a

BDD-A27700 © 2017 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:54:50 UTC)

double symbolism: of celebration of life and of expelling evil. This explains the contradictory combination of the relaxation or abolition of moral restraints and on the other hand the censure and mockery of moral flaws. The carnival ship can be given a dual function as a festive ship and a moral ship, an infernal ship as in the case of the Schembart Festival (Tanase 286-288). The carnival ship that is populated by vicious characters and is burnt at the end of the feast serves as a means of banishment of a harmful group of the vicious, a ship of exile.

The ship of fools is also modelled on the carnivalesque ship, the allegorical ship called De Blawe schuite. As the organization of the popular feast passed from the Church to the laity, especially young men or students, these groups formed carnivalesque associations, societies that promoted living by the carnival rules of evasion of moral rules, material indulgence, disruption of public order by the feasting and battles, social criticism. Societies and guilds normally associated with work and trade, which are the basis of economy and city life, infiltrate the carnival world. The well-known guild of the Blue ship or barge (De Blauwe schuite) in Germany and the Netherlands is connected with the prominence of the ship in the carnival festivities. The society appears as a world-metaphor in the carnival poem "Blauwe Schuit" by Jacob van Oestvoren in 1413 (Hereford 331). The carnival society gathers all individuals that don't correspond to or are contrary to their social function or mission: nobles impoverished and fallen into obscurity, the wealthy who have squandered their fortune, monks/nuns who live unchaste lives or are guilty of other moral transgressions (theft, deception), merchants that practise deception, beggars, unemployed, the sick. Van Oestvoren's carnival society includes moral transgression but not legal transgression, they are the "lost children"; criminals, thieves, murderers are excluded.

The ship is used in German satires of sin and folly that serve as a model for Brant's *Ship of Fools*, e.g. H. Teichner's poem "Das Schif der Flust" ("The Ship of the Lost") of 1360 and the oration entitled "Monopolium et societas vulgo des Liechtschiffs" ("The Corporation and Society of the 'Windship' or in the vernacular, the Lighter") in 1489 delivered by the German theologian J. Gallus, inspired by Teichner and Oestvoren (Vredeveld 181). Like the Blauwe schuite, Teichner's *liechtschiff* is an allegorical ship hosting the "lost," especially students who have lost their money through idleness, debauchery and other vices (Ristelhuber 8). The carnival origin of these ships is stressed in J. Gallus, where the ship appears as part of a succession of such vessels that travel overland. They evoke carnival floats and are part of a feast as they alternate with food also carried by horses: "in the distance we see a wine keg drawn by two horses" (Brant 12). The fleet of ships or of carnival carts is represented as a world upside down, as the carnivalesque universe takes over the sky and the vessels are shown going through the air. A woodcut accompanying the oration shows a ship laden with passengers sailing through the air. Like the *liechtschiff*, Gallus' carnival ship hosts characters who squander their time and resources in carnivalesque pursuits, in feasting rather than working. They are "light" on account of their lack of money and their lack of consistence and purpose: they literally float through the air gathered in the *liechtschiff*.

BDD-A27700 © 2017 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:54:50 UTC)



Judocus Gallus, The Corporation and Society of the Windship, woodcut

The carnivalesque genealogy of S. Brant's ship is indicated by the itinerary of the fools' journey which includes cities on land rather than ports: "We travel far to every land / From Narbon to Schluraffen land, / From there we go to Montflascon / And reach the land of Narragon" (Brant 350). The carnival connection is emphasized by the itinerary which includes Narbonne, Monte Flascone and ends in Narragonia, the Fools' Land, modelled on Aragon (Brant 15). Yet, the connection with historical Spain is questionable, as the Spanish are praised by the author for their European and Christian values in fighting and defeating the Muslims. Actually, the possible use of the toponym Aragon as a basis for Narragonia may have been inspired by the poem *The Land of Cockaigne*. The thirteenth-century English poem's setting involves not so much sea travel as land: "Far across the sea, west of Spain, / is a land called Cokaygne, / the richest under heaven. / Paradise is merry and bright, but Cokaygne is a fairer sight."[1]

Brant's symbolic ship also designates the carnival floats that are part of the procession and are drawn throughout the city or beyond it. There are carnival processions where the carts on wheels follow an itinerary that includes several cities; the best known between Austria and the Netherlands is Aachen, or Aix-la-Chapelle (Brant 12).

Actually, the full title of Brant's work, *Das Narrenschyff ad Narragoniam*, indicates that the ship heads for Narragonia. The ship is sometimes called "schiff von Narragonien": the ship of fools is the ship from Narragonia, which implies a carnival ship making regular visits to and from Narragonia, or the itineraries of the carnival processions that covered a certain area.

The ship of fools metaphor becomes central in chapter 108, where it is included in an allegory, the journey of the fools to Narragonia. The combination between the catalogue of fools and the journey to a fools' land by sea is not new. It appears in the popular English poem "Lubberland" which is a marine version of the popular ideal of the "Land of Cockaigne." Here the various types of fools analysed are envisaged as individuals waiting to board the ship going to "Lubberland": "There is a ship, we understand, / Now riding in the river; / 'Tis newly come from Lubberland, / The like I think was never; / You that a lazy life do love, / I'd have you now go over, / They say the land is not above / Two thousand leagues from Dover"

[1] "Fur in see bi west Spayngne / Is a lond ihote Cokaygne, / þer nis lond vnder heuen riche / Of wel, of godnis hit iliche./ Þoȝ paradis be miri and briȝt, / Cokaygn is of fairir siȝt" (<http://members.aon.at/neuhold/itgramm/texte2.html >).

BDD-A27700 © 2017 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:54:50 UTC)

(<http://members.aon.at/neuhold/itgramm/texte2.html >). There is abundant food, there are no rules, "ev'ry one do's what he please," no justice (judges and jury), there is universal individual property, community of wives. It is a carnival world of recreation, perpetual holiday, where "there's nothing [there] but holy days." The ship comes from Lubberland and issues an invitation for the next trip there: it invites the "lazy ones" together.

The chapter 108 (entitled "The Schluraffen Ship") indicates that the fools targeted are the *schluraffen*, idlers, sluggards or lubbers, pleasure-seekers, engaged in carnivalesque pursuits. This indicates the creation of a material ideal on the model of the Land of Cockaigne or Lubberland. The inclusion of an imaginary voyage and the references to other metaphorical ships reveals that Brant goes beyond and complicates the carnival symbolism.

The image of the carnival ship emerged also as an opposite of the ship as a Christian symbol. S. Brant, like other German and Dutch authors, focuses on the ship of sin and folly to serve his purposes of moralization and satire. In contrast to the other authors that take a light, burlesque approach to moral ills, the "Ship of Fools" builds a gloomy, dark picture which includes the destruction of the sinful. He evokes death in the context in which the fools sing gaudeamus (let's have fun) but never requiem: "But if perchance he's missed the ship / Upon the next one will he slip. / To cronies easily he'll cling / And with them 'Gaudeamus' sing / Or else the dunces' melody" (Brant 354). The banner in the woodcut of Chapter 108 indicates the first two words of the fools' theme song: Gaudeamus omnes. Brant's vision is focused on the fools' doomed voyage in the last part. Although the moralization and warnings are present in all chapters, the allegory of the fools' sea journey is conceived as a final revelation which elucidates definitively and unquestionably the significance of moral vices. The metaphor of the ship where the sinful are gathered criticises not only folly, but also the implications of vice, at the spiritual and social level, at the individual and collective level.

The ship is a major symbol in the Christian world. Clement of Alexandria saw the ship as a choice symbol for Christians: "Let the dove or the fish," he says, "the vessel flying before the wind, – or the marine anchor be our signets."[2] It is the symbol of the faithful, with Jesus Christ or St Peter as the helmsman, or of the Church identified with the body of believers led by the priest as helmsman. Church architecture includes elements that evoke the ship, such as the nave (*navis*, ship) and the roof that resembles an upside-down keel/hull.

The ship has been a leading symbol in Christianity since its inception, and its significance is connected with the divine. The Christian significance of the ship and of the sea is apparent in the frequent occurrence of the ship in the OT and in episodes centred on Jesus Christ. The stories of Noah and Jonah feature the ship as salvation for the morally righteous and punishment for the sinful. A prominent biblical ship that served as a model for the ship as a Christian symbol is Noah's Ark. The episode of the Flood is important because the construction of the ship and the voyage follow from God's command. God is discontented with humans committing sins and straying from Him. He is disappointed with the creation, which He decides to annihilate by flooding. The selection of Noah for salvation is based on his faith and moral virtue. The world is conserved in Noah's ark. The ship appears as a universe, a world and a bridge to a new world, it saves the righteous from certain death and enables a new existence, renewal in a new world. The significance of the ship is perpetuated and reinforced in the NT, where Jesus Christ calms the winds and waves to protect Peter's boat (Luke 8:22-25), walks on water (John 6:16-21, Matthew

[2] *Paed*. III, ii; *PG*, VIII, 633 (<http://www.jesuswalk.com/christian-symbols/ship.htm>).

BDD-A27700 © 2017 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:54:50 UTC)

14:25-26) and scolds Peter for not being able to walk on water and his lack of faith (Matthew 14:28-31): "In the fourth watch of the night he came towards them, walking on the sea, / and when the disciples saw him walking on the sea they were terrified. 'It is a ghost,' they said, and cried out in fear. /Then Peter got out of the boat and started walking towards Jesus across the water, / but then noticing the wind, he took fright and began to sink. 'Lord,' he cried, 'save me!' / Jesus put out his hand at once and held him. 'You have so little faith,' he said, 'why did you doubt?'" (Matthew 14: 25-31).

The New Testament episodes involving the ship stress the rethinking of the foundation. The material basis is treacherous, it is revealed to lack solidity and consistency. Man must have a spiritual basis, reference or anchorage. The divine emerges as the really material, solid foundation, being compared with the rock sustaining man. The ship stresses the importance of faith, the survival by faith which refers to both physical and spiritual survival. The metaphor applies to the new realities facing a world at the crossroads which appear beyond man's ability to control.

The sea becomes a fitting symbol of the world, of earthly existence. The world is not a home, a familiar place, but an alien one to navigate and escape from. The world is an environment inimical to man, unknown, fraught with evil. Humanity is interpreted as a ship and is divided into two parts: the sinful inhabit a ship that heads towards destruction, or spiritual death, while the believers' ship of faith is the realm of God that is both a shelter in an unknown, threatening world and a vehicle carrying them to their destination and enabling salvation.

The ship metaphor is frequently used in medieval churches, especially in Germany, and it draws on the Bible and the expansions on biblical topics in sermons, exempla, etc. The ship was a familiar metaphor in sermons or church hymns. In a hymn published in 1394 in Heidelberg, the ship is a symbol of the Holy Trinity: "Here comes the ship, / It bears the child born in the stable in Bethlehem, / It bears God's son full of grace that God gave for us, / The Father's eternal Word. / He must be praised. / The ship is silent, the child carries with joy a heavy burden. / The sail is love, The Holy Spirit is the mast, / He must suffer with him great torment and torture. / The anchor is on earth and the ship is on land, / after we with Him die we are resurrected with Him" (Wernicke 827).

Brant's ship combines the carnival and the Christian paradigms and the inclusion of the sea voyage is primarily influenced by a sermon. Although S. Brant doesn't include St Ursula's Ship he mentions St Peter's ship, the metaphor for the Church or the Christian world as the opposite of the ship of fools in chapter 103. Actually, the combination is not new but appears in a 15th sermon, namely "Disz ist ein hubsche predig gethon uff S. Ursula tag, sagt von dem geistlichen narrenschiff,"[3] delivered by A. Spamer. In this sermon the fools' ship is followed by St. Ursula's ship, a ship of moral virtue and martyrdom, led by Christ who walks on sea to the ship of fools and helps or urges the fools to board St. Ursula's ship.

The superimposition of the two paradigms suggests that the ship of fools is the opposite of the Church imagined as the ship of salvation. The sea in Brant is the Realm of the Last Judgement, of salvation of the virtuous and annihilation of the sinful. It appears as a final test, and those who enter it are either virtuous or sinful. The sea engulfing the fools reminds of the Mouth of Hell (Tanase 98). The shipwreck can be seen as a variation on the Deluge. However, the sea is also interpreted by reference to baptism and thus it can be the realm of transformation

[3] "This is a nice sermon on St. Ursula's Day, which speaks of a ghostly ship of fools" (Kinsman 283, my trans.).

BDD-A27700 © 2017 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:54:50 UTC)

and return to God through repentance. The sea journey involves a transformation: reaching the destination symbolizes spiritual advancement.

The ship becomes a figure for the new world which diverges from the popular carnival world. The latter involves the vision of earthly existence as an alternation between reality and the carnival world, a periodic escape from rules and order. The carnival "escape" is aimed at returning to order with more motivation. The combination of the two paradigms, the replacement of the carnival ship in the midst of the sea indicates the impossibility of such an approach. Existence is conditional on a reconsideration of its foundation which must be spiritual. In a period of crisis existence can no longer be gratuitous. The lack of care, alertness, spirituality and of a spiritual point of reference leads to destruction. The world devoid of solidity is identified with the sea and the ship; the Christian ship becomes the refuge, the point of stability and the salvation in the treacherous waters of life.

The framing device of the ship of fools is actually a mythological story of Ulysses' voyage of return home. The voyage of the ship of fools and that of Odysseus and his crew are superimposed. The foolish passengers are identified with Odysseus' crew and references to them alternate, so that it is difficult at times to point out the object of the reference: "We spy many a marvellous beast, / Dolphis and sirens do we meet, / Who sing us many a ditty sweet / And make of us a sleepy band / So ne'er we have a hope to land, / And we discover by and by / The Cyclops with the cyclid eye. / […] / That Cyclops eye it grew again/ as he espied his foolish train, / So widely opened he his eye, / His countenance was hid well-nigh. / His mouth it reached from ear to ear, / He swallowed fools both far and near" (Brant 351). In the *Odyssey* the sea appears as an otherworld, a fantastic realm. It is an inimical, hostile environment both in terms of explicit violence and destruction and as subtle, hidden danger. Odysseus encounters unfamiliar, monstrous peoples or creatures which are inimical and potentially deadly to him: man-eating giant races, the man-eating monsters Scylla and Charbdys. His wisdom involves both wit (shrewdness) and spirituality. The sea is the realm of forces beyond man's control. His wisdom consists not only in shrewdness, but also in his relation and appeal to the gods[4] and his use of the gods' help and guidance. His return is decided by a confrontation between the gods who supported (the goddess Athena) and opposed him, and enabled because he is protected and helped by various gods. His spirituality is apparent in his controlling and overcoming of material, lower nature. He maintains vigilance by overcoming vices (dissipation, gluttony, greed for gold, which ironically was the wind given by Aeolus) and by even suppressing his material instincts and appetites for food or drink, and using the former to deceive and annihilate enemies. In this sense his spirituality equals moral reason and virtue. The sea is perceived as inimical, for symbolically, Poseidon, the god of the sea, is the enemy of Odysseus. The voyage is a series of tests of wisdom, a succession of encounters with death; he manages to navigate the sea, overcome danger and escape death through his unbeatable rationality and vigilant spirituality.

Odysseus' voyage stresses human reason or wisdom, which also involves receptiveness and relation to the gods. The importance of reason is emphasized by the contrast between Odysseus and his crew who fall prey to the creatures they encounter. Odysseus' life is centred on home, where his reason is anchored, and the sea voyage is a test of his attachment to reason and moral values. He is supported in his maritime detour by the unrelenting hope of returning home.

[4] Aeolus gives Odysseus the winds and thus control over the winds; he travels the sea using the veil given by the nymph Ino, etc.

BDD-A27700 © 2017 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:54:50 UTC)

The classical paradigm of folly as opposed to reason is reinforced by the reference to the ship of state metaphor: "But all your lord, you states and kings, / […] If you'll support the ship of state/ it will not sink but bear its freight. / Your king is all benignity, / He'll don for you the knight's panoply, / rebellious lands he will subdue, / But you must help, he needs you too. / […] The Holy Earth, the Promised Land, / He's undertake it any day / If he can trust in you and may. / Cast off your scorn and tauntings all, / God's host it is but very small" (Brant 321). This is also found in Plato's *Republic*, where the metaphor is aligned to the spiritual basis of the ideal state. In the philosophical state there is a coincidence between politics and virtue, power and reason. The Platonic allegory implies a hierarchy within the ideal society. The position of the philosopher who pursues reason and wisdom at the head of the state ensures its survival. Society is a body in which the rational, spiritual nature must rule over the material nature. The subordination of the body to reason is transposed in the horizontal relation where the leader is the navigator that brings the rest of society to the destination and ensures its survival.

Thus, the society of the ship of fools is also a polity that is similar to the dystopian society in Plato's allegory of the ship of state. The ship's journey predictably ends in destruction both because of the ship society's vices and because of the leadership flaws: "Imagine then a fleet or a ship in which there is a captain who is taller and stronger than any of the crew, but he is a little deaf and has a similar infirmity in sight, and his knowledge of navigation is not much better. The sailors are quarrelling with one another about the steering – everyone is of the opinion that he has a right to steer, though he has never learned the art of navigation" (Plato 178-179). The leader is devoid of reason – expressed as awareness, prudence, anticipation, preparation, training, equipment – and doesn't have a destination, a vision. On the other hand, there is discord among the rest of society, suggestive of the refusal of subordination (which enables harmony and unity). Lack of knowledge combines with rivalry and the lack of moral values.

Brant's ship is both an existential and a historical ship. While placing the discourse within the frame of folly, the poem actually exposes what would be the rational course and remedy to the *present* problems. The chapters which include the ship symbol more prominently and explicitly refer to the contemporary crisis of the Catholic Church and the Ottoman threat. The ship is, in fact, a reflection of a period of crisis and the product of a historical fear caused by the Reformation movement and the disunity of the spiritual power, the advance of the Ottomans, and the disagreements threatening the secular power. The author supports the traditional Church and a reform within the Church; he views the Reformation as an attack on the Church: "St Peter's ship is swaying madly, / It may be wrecked or damaged badly, / The waves are striking 'gainst the side/ And storm and trouble may betide, / But little truth is now asserted / And Holy Writ is quite perverted" (Brant 333). The fear of the destruction of Europe is compounded by the fear of the destruction of Christianity, for both can be destroyed by external and internal forces: "In Europe we've been forced to see / The loss but very recently / Of kingdoms, even empires two / And mighty lands and cities true,/ Constantinople, Trapezunt, / Lands known to each and every one, / […]/ So strong the Turks have grown to be, / Four sisters of our Church you find, / They're of the patriarchic kind: / Constantinople, Alexandria, / Jerusalem, Antiochia, / But they've been forfeited and sacked / And soon the head will be attacked" (Brant 317-318). The author is also a staunch supporter of the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, Maximilian, and pleads for the unity of the princes and their subordination to the emperor, which would render the empire undefeatable: "But all your lord, you states and kings, / […] If you'll support the ship

BDD-A27700 © 2017 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:54:50 UTC)

of state / it will not sink but bear its freight. / Your king is all benignity, / He'll don for you the knight's panoply, / rebellious lands he will subdue, / But you must help, he needs you too. / […] The Holy Earth, the Promised Land, / He's undertake it any day / If he can trust in you and may. / Cast off your scorn and tauntings all, / God's host it is but very small" (Brant 321). His support of the temporal power is linked with his support of the Church and the Christian religion and with his view of the Empire as the head of the Christian world. Brant becomes an astrologer and a scientific prophet of the emperor, for whom he creates an ideological support by interpreting charts and monsters as predicting the welfare of the empire under his leadership. Brant's concern with external threats is evidenced by the letters sent to the emperor pleading for the latter's warring with and defeating the Ottomans.

The *Ship of Fools* reveals the parallel and link between secular and spiritual reality, the individual and the collective, political and spiritual power. The author champions the salvation of both the Empire and of Christianity threatened by Muslims, which is achievable by both faith and reason (expressed as the will to unity, cooperation, the end of discord). The ship becomes the symbol of life and of survival by Christian faith, it is a means of miraculous salvation of a world which is attacked from all sides.

The emphasis in S. Brant is on reason, which anticipates the discovery of human reason in the early modern period. The solution to the fools' inept navigation stresses the rudder: "Hence fools are drowning more and more. / Let each one haste to wisdom's shore/ And take the rudder firm in hand, / So that he's conscious where he'll land" (Brant 354), "The wise man firmly holds in hand / the rudder, then he reaches land. / A fool has learned no navigation / and often suffers ruination" (Brant 355). This contrasts with other allegorical ships such as Constance's rudderless ship, in Geoffrey Chaucer, which is navigated by faith alone. The voyage and the navigation of the sea become a symbol of existence as destiny. Navigation stresses the idea that existence is conditional on intention and reason. Existence is possible if it is deliberate, the result of intention, purpose. Existence as destiny involves navigating, moving toward the purpose. The work is moralizing although the approach is pragmatic, realistic and advances a remedy to the contemporary problems by cautioning about the imperative of a change or reform of individual and collective life.

WORKS CITED

Apuleius of Madauros. *The Isis-Book (Metamorphoses, Book XI)*. Ed. Griffiths J. Gwyn. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975.

Brant, Sebastian. *The Ship of Fools*. Trans. Edwin E. H. Zeydel. New York: Dover Publications, 1962,

Detraci, Regula. *The Mysteries of Isis: Her Worship and Magic*. Minnesota: Llewellyn Publications, 2001.

Hereford, George. *Studies in the Literary Relations of England and Germany in the Middle Ages.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1886.

The Holy Bible. https://www.bibliacatolica.com.br/new-jerusalem-bible/

Kinsman, Robert S. *The Darker Vision of the Renaissance: Beyond the Fields of Reason*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974.

BDD-A27700 © 2017 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:54:50 UTC)

Navigating Dürer's Woodcuts for *The Ship of Fools*. https://publicdomainreview.org/2011/10/25/navigating-durers-woodcuts-for-the-ship-of-fools/

Pinch, Geraldine. *Handbook of Egyptian Mythology*. Oxford: ABC-CLIO, 2002

Plato. *The Republic and Other Works*. Trans. Benjamin Jowett. New York: Random Books, 1973.

Ristelhuber, Paul. *Heidelberg et Strasbourg: Recherches biographiques et littéraires sur les étudiants alsaciens immatriculés à l'Université de* Heidelberg *de 1386 à 1662*. E. Leroux, 1888.

Tanase, Iuliana. "The Fool and Folly in the Late Medieval and Early Modern European Culture." PhD Thesis.

Van Oestvoren, Jacob, Pleij Herman, ed. *Die Blawue Schute*. http://www.europeana.eu/

Venit, Marjorie Susan. *Visualizing the Afterlife in the Tombs of Graeco-Roman Egypt*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

Vredeveld, Harry. *The Poetic Woks of Helius Eobanus Hessus*. Vol 3. Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2012.

Wernicke, Carl. *Die Geschichte der Welt*. Berlin: Verlag von Herander Dunder, 1854.

BDD-A27700 © 2017 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:54:50 UTC)