
Zita Turi

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Introduction

Lunacy has always been central to human interest, especially in Europe where the binary opposition of common sense and insanity gains decisive significance in art. The fool represents a unique perspective which is, on the one hand, bereft of reason, but on the other hand it also renders a peculiar and hidden knowledge unattainable to sane people. Insanity displays a liminal position as well: the transgression of borders between earthly knowledge and the notion known as the holy wisdom of the fool. Since their words are taken with a pinch of salt, fools can say almost anything. However, interestingly enough, prophetic magnitude is attributed to the lines they utter, which suggests that even if madmen are not necessarily taken seriously, they are blessed with exceptional talent. In the Middle Ages, fools also exhibited human characteristics, mostly faults which soon became identical with folly. One of its most outstanding representations, the ship of fools metaphor penetrated contemporaneous European literature and the visual arts and besides its massive popularity on the continent it had a considerable influence on English literature as well. At the beginning of the twentieth century, critical attention turned towards the ship of fools and numerous articles and books were written in the English-speaking world on this subject. Afterwards, apart from a few attempts, scholars did not show much interest in the ship image until Michel Foucault’s Madness and Civilization (1961) discussed its significance, although he was mostly concerned with the continental and not the English framework. Extending Foucault’s approach to sixteenth-century England, this paper seeks to study the presence of the ship of fools in translated and original literary works.
The Ship of Fools Tradition

At the beginning of *Madness and Civilization*, Michel Foucault discusses the metaphor of the *Stultifera Navis* emphasising that it determined the visual arts as well as literature in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Basing his discourse on a social perspective, Foucault claims that with the disappearance of leprosy at the end of the Middle Ages the hiatus of social outcasts was filled in by madmen. Lepers in medieval Europe were considered to be constant manifestations of God, since they were the signs both of His anger and His grace; they were excluded and by their exclusion did they gain salvation. They were removed from the community of the Church as the hieratic witnesses of evil who accomplish their salvation by their exclusion.\(^1\) In the Renaissance mad people were regarded similarly and Foucault claims that the notion of insanity soon turned into a metaphor condensed by the ship of fools that Foucault claims to have sailed along the Rhineland rivers and the channels of Flanders. This image, however, is definitely fictitious, and it soon became fashionable in arts since it was an ideal tool for listing imaginary heroes, various representatives of society and moral patterns, whose destinies evolve during a symbolic voyage.\(^2\)

The ritual significance of the ship of fools lays in its purifying function: the sea drives away the incarcerated fools and purges the community of sin. Madmen embark on a journey towards the unknown and the uncertainty of fate. Foucault emphasises that it is ‘for the other world that the madman sets sail in his fool’s boat; it is from the other world that he comes when he disembarks. The madman’s voyage is at once a rigorous division and an absolute Passage.’\(^3\) The madman’s liminal position gains crucial significance: it is the privilege of the fool who is imprisoned at the gates of the city into which he is not allowed to enter and he is enclosed by his own exclusion. Since he is captured at the location of entering the city or in other words crossing a borderline, he is kept at the point of the passage, thus placed in the interior and the exterior at the same time.\(^4\)

The fool’s position on the ship is similarly ambiguous: on the one hand it is cast into the middle of the sea utterly freed from the constraints of society; on the other hand, however, it is confined in the ship as a prisoner. Foucault emphasises that water and madness have long been linked in the dreams of European men, the idea the ship of fools epitomises.\(^5\) Towards the end of the Middle Ages madmen became the agents of ridiculing and mocking human folly: they were no longer mere laughing stocks; they became the guardians of truth. If folly leads people into blindness where they get lost, the madmen, on the contrary, reminds each man of the truth. In performative arts the fool fulfils this very function: during the feast of fools, which was popular in Flanders and northern Europe, theatrical events were organised into social and moral criticisms, mostly related to the parody of religious beliefs.\(^6\)

At the turn of the sixteenth century, a whole series of visual and literary works exploited the ship of fools metaphor: Erasmus wrote his *The Praise of Folly*, Hieronymus Bosch painted *The Cure of Madness* and *The Ship of Fools*, and Sebastian Brandt compiled his version of the *Stultifera Navis*, which most probably was the source of the above mentioned works as well. Brandt’s *Das Narrenschiff* originates in classical Roman and Greek works, the Bible and the Corpus juris canonici (*The Body of Canon Law*), which contains the sources of canon law of the Catholic Church. Folly is also crucial in German literature and Brandt had numerous antecedents to borrow material from. Also, the word...
'narr' in everyday use referred to the madmen. Therefore his version of the ship of fools is much more like a compilation of the already existing literary and folk material than an utterly original work.7

The Compilation of Brandt

The first quarto version of the *Narrenschiff* was published in Basel in 1494 and altogether six authorised versions came out during Brandt’s life, until 1521.8 Charles Herold Herford highlights that Brandt gave medieval fool literature its last and crowning work and it was equally popular with scholars and everyday readers, due to which it was soon translated into Latin elegiacs by Jacob Locher, a humanist and Brandt’s fellow poet. Locher’s translation became one of the classics of Humanism, supplying the conception of Erasmus’s *The Praise of Folly.*9 The Brandtian thought suggests that all sins are reducible to types of folly. However, Herford also emphasises the difficulty of setting up pure categories since the repertoire of fools is highly heterogeneous; yet, Brandt’s text mostly highlights types of sins such as greed, gluttony, avarice or carelessness, based on the analogy of the seven deadly sins. Besides, follies related to life conduct, such as not taking good advice, adultery, the impertinent patient or the foolish doctor, also feature the poem. Edwin Hermann Zeydel classes the work under six general headings: vicious and criminal offences, insolence, riotousness, sloth, presumptuousness and perversities.10

The fact that it is a picture book considerably contributed to the further popularity of the metaphor: each implemented woodcut depicts a fool either individually or in a group.11 These illustrations were recurrently used in the translations as well.

Locher’s Latin translation was the basis of Alexander Barclay’s English version (1509), which eventually gave an enormous stimulus to English vernacular satire and held the literary status of *The Ship of Fools* even more persistently than in Germany. One of its main merits is that in England Barclay’s translation of the *Narrenschiff* helped to bridge over the difficult transition from the literature of personified abstractions to that which deals with social types, to turn allegory into narrative and moralities into drama. The tradition of fool literature in England, however, was not entirely unprecedented. These works coincided with Brant’s text, yet they have to be distinguished from the German original. This distinction falls primarily upon two works: Nigel Wireker’s (also known as Nigel de Longchamps) *Speculum Stultorum* (*A Mirror of Fools*) and John Lydgate’s *Order of Fools.*12

Fool Literature in England

Wireker’s *Speculum* is a satire written in Latin elegiac verse depicting the clergy and the contemporaneous society. Its hero, Brunellus, was a highly popular character in the Middle Ages and influenced Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* as well. Wireker serves with a strongly moralising introduction on the folly of aiming at a higher status in life than nature has fitted one for, personified by the character of the Ass who wishes against the law of nature to have a longer tail. Chaucer absorbed this pattern in his *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* both in its literary complexity and comic vision.13

Chaucer adopted some elements of the *Speculum Stultorum* and John Lydgate relied mostly on him in his satires. In the middle of the fifteenth century, satire was so popular that Lydgate also turned to it and wrote the *Order of Fools*, which he probably introduced into
English from French. In this work he invents an order of sixty-three fools under Bacchus and Venus, then he lists a series of personified follies. It begins with the chief fool, who scorns the laws and commandments of God and the Church, and he scourges the follies of extravagance, hypocrisy, clumsiness, vanity, covetousness, flattery, perfidy, gullibility, quarrelsomeness, licentiousness, and laziness. Finally, he invokes God’s curse upon his foolish fraternity.

Both Wireker’s *Speculum Stultorum* and Lydgate’s *Order of Fools* differ from Brandt in starting with the notion of religious fraternity: there is a memorable foundation of orders at the beginning of both. In the *Speculum*, it is the ‘Ass’s Order,’ the result of Brunellus’s dissatisfaction with any existing contemporaneous orders. The ‘Ass’s Order’ combines the good merits of all the rest, so that, for instance, he might enjoy horse exercise, like the Templars, share the liberal diet of the Dominicans, or borrow the privilege of that divinely founded Order of which Adam and Eve were the first members, and have a wife. As for Lydgate, he barely enlarges on the allusion conveyed in his title; he merely enumerates the members without dramatising the lives of the fools, hence turning it into a mere catalogue. He also observes folly from a catholic point of view and his selection of fools also follows Brandt’s classification: the insolent, the riotous, the self-neglectful and the presumptuous. However, the proportionate emphasis laid upon these classes differs, simply because Brandt’s text focuses on contemporaneous Germany; for instance Brandt’s elaboration on sexual offences does not appear in Lydgate’s work.

The catalyst of fool literature in early sixteenth-century England was Alexander Barclay’s Brandt translation, which is based on Locher’s 1497 edition and it also contains the Basel woodcuts, however, it includes some transpositions and additions as well. The translator refers to Brandt’s original and Locher’s Latin verse, yet it seems unlikely that he consulted the German text. Instead, he probably used a French adaptation of Paul Rivière and he actually became acquainted with *The Ship of Fools* through this work. Interestingly enough, even if Barclay most probably did not consult Brandt’s work his use of language also bridges the gap between scholarship and the vernacular. The English *Ship of Fools* was tailor made for sixteenth century English literary demands; therefore it is much more than a simple translation. There were further editions of the Barclay translation: it was reprinted in the nineteenth century in two volumes with the introduction of T.H. Jamieson and selections from the work can be read in various editions. Also, another version of Brandt’s *Narrenschiff* was published in prose translation by Henry Watson entitled the *Shyppe of Fooles*, which had a second edition as well in 1517, translated from French with mottos in verse. Two translations published within ten years clearly show Brandt’s enormous influence on English literature.

The Literary Impact of the Ship

The *Narrenschiff* significantly determined English satire. Broadly speaking, the genre of satire is usually linked with Horace and Juvenal. Horatian satire is colloquial; it deals with a variety of not too serious moral, social and literary topics in the easy-going, familiar style of a man who is talking to his intimate friends. He discusses the folly of running to extremes, the defence of moderation in every aspect, the superiority of country to town life, and some texts were written in defence of the satire genre itself. Juvenal, born more than a century after Horace, is the complete opposite: the conversational tone of Horace is replaced by rhetoric and declamation. Horace’s comic vision of life turns into
melodrama in Juvenal, often expressing his pessimism with the heat of a prophet. But in general, the genre of satire has always been hard to define since it challenges morality and artistic unity: the word ‘satyr’ stands for the half man – half beast, suggesting that satire is lawless, wild and threatening; on the other hand, the ‘lanx satura’ means the ‘mixed’ or ‘full platter,’ which suggests that satire is a formless miscellany, and food for thought.

Sixteenth-century English satire inherited the above mentioned main traditions and several others as well: the medieval tradition of ‘complaint,’ Lucianic dialogues, the Italian epistolary satires, and even the tradition of Greek satire plays. These plays had such a determining effect on English satires that George Puttenham in his Artes of English Poesie (1589) emphasises that satire originates as drama and he makes explicit the link between satire and satyrs. Additionally, in Puttenham’s view the tradition of English satire seemed to have been narrowed down to a genre that was rude, derisive and harsh. This genre however, is much more diverse than mere harshness.

One of the first adaptations of the Ship of Fools in England was the Cock Lorell’s Bote (ca. 1510), a portrait of vagrant life, even if not as bitter as Brandt’s Narrenschiff. Its main ideas are based on Brandt’s Prologue, as well as Chapter 48 (“Gesellenschiff”) and Chapter 108 (“Schlaraffenschiff”). Also, an accompanying woodcut from Watson’s edition appears in the work. The conceits of the text are built on the foundation of a new religious order, derived from Lydgate and Wireker. The Cock Lorell’s Bote is typically English: the boat is crammed with Londoners embarking on commercial ventures, travelling all over England.

Another, even more significant, adaptation of The Ship of Fools is John Skelton’s Bowge of Court, the date of which was subject to numerous debates in the middle of the twentieth century. Helen Stearns Sale for instance suggests that it could be chronologically placed anywhere between 1499 and 1521, since, like other early copies of Skelton’s works, the Bowge of Court does not bear a date on the title page. Charles H. Herford claimed that the satire was probably written between 1509 and 1520 and it carries the influence of Barclay’s Ship of Fools. Others suggested earlier dates, which, however, does not contradict the Narrenschiff’s influence since Skelton might have also been familiar with Locher’s 1497 Latin version. Edwin Zeydel suggests the 1520 date and derives the text directly from Barclay’s translation. The Bowge of Court is an allegorical depiction of courtly life with all its perils and follies based on Brandt’s Chapter 100 on courtiers. The poem begins with the dream of the poet who sees a boat with the name ‘Bowge of Court,’ which embarks on its journey with merchants and aristocrats aboard. The main difference both in Cock Lorell’s Bote and in Skelton’s poem is that whereas Brandt enlists a wide range of human follies, these works focus only on bits and pieces of the themes of the original Ship of Fools. Apparently, the diverse collection of Brandt’s fools narrowed down in England by the second half of the sixteenth century and by 1600 it seems that the huge variety of fools was represented by a single one. This was the stage fool, who condensed the traits of the group of fools on Brandt’s ship. Moreover, not only did it condense folly, but the fool was also mirroring foolish behaviour both on and off stage.
As shown in the previous sections, the ship of fools metaphor seeped into English satire, however, only parts of Brandt’s work were adapted. The German Stultifera Navis was a great storehouse of images and themes from which English authors could select the relevant episodes. This process of selection went on in the second half of the sixteenth century and with the emergence of theatre the genre of satire gradually lost ground. In the second half of the century theatre became massively popular to an extent that by 1600 it replaced satires. Apart from the public taste, this shift also had a practical explanation. In 1599 the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of London issued to the master and wardens of the Stationers’ Company a ban prohibiting the further publication of certain works, and the destruction of such already existing copies. The common interpretation of this ban was usually to see it as a clerical attempt to improve public morality by stemming the publication of pornography. Richard A. McCabe, however, suggests that the bishops could not act independently of the Privy Council or the High Commission; therefore, the government must have confirmed the prohibition. In addition, records imply that the primary target was Thomas Cutwood’s Caltha Poetarum, which was no more obscene than any other works, so the terms of the ban seem to have been not eroticism but satire itself. Verse satire was one of the most popular forms of the day and it became increasingly obvious that the enthusiastic response of the reading public was prompted by an awareness that the new writers begun to realise the potentials of their medium as a vehicle for social complaint and criticism.

This was noteworthy to mention because towards the end of the sixteenth century, due to the popularity of theatre, the critical aim of The Ship of Fools seemed to have been reduced into the character of the fool of Tudor drama. Fools were traditionally considered to have been the ‘truth-tellers,’ seemingly minor characters who were constantly balancing on a narrow line and they had to be exactly aware of the boundaries of the given set of rules, otherwise it could have been fatal for them. They enjoyed enormous popularity among Tudor monarchs; the end of the War of Roses enabled to develop a lighter side of courtly life and the royal account books show that the Tudor monarchs were plentifully provided with fools. These jesters were confidential to the king, their status was similar to that of children (or in some cases even lapdogs) and they were sources of constant entertainment at court. The fashion of fools was so widespread in sixteenth-century England that not only royalties but also aristocratic households kept fools, whose status, depending on the character of the master, were similar to their courtly equivalents. In the second half of the century during the reign of Queen Elizabeth, it seems that household-fools tended to be eclipsed by theatre fools; the famous comedian Tarleton is sometimes described as a jester to the Queen. Later on with the emergence of the Stuarts, the social status of the fool slightly altered, which is best represented in the case of James I’s court jester, Archie Armstrong, who soon came to occupy an unprecedented position in English political and social life. He was the last representative of the classic English fool, and though fools and dwarfs survived for a while, the fall of Archie Armstrong marks the end of an era.

Fools were not only popular in private households and at court but also on English stages in the middle of the sixteenth century. Moral weight was seriously against the articulate fool until the Reformation. Before such personalities as Richard Tarlton, Will Kemp or
Robert Armin, fools were not sufficiently organised or literate to present their own aspects. Therefore, the only point of view expressed by them was that of the Church and moral secular writers. Since the fool was always associated with game playing, the greatest storehouse of foolery is the collection of Morality plays of the age. Most writers were concerned with displaying the evil side of the artificial fool, which leads to the ‘Vice’ character of Morality plays, who was ‘already established as a stage clown before he appear[ed] in the morality.’ The Vice was an already well-known social entertainer, with, of course, massive popularity among the public. The fact that he was the leader of games and dances also connects him to the Fool and, additionally, until around 1550 the Vice wore the Fool’s dress. F.H. Mares gives a list of named Vices of this period and one of them is Flatterie in David Lindsay’s Satyre of the three estaitis, in which the character identifies itself with a Fool. The moral of the satire is to destroy the serious mischief of the Fool, or Flatterie.

Towards the end of the century the connection between satirical tone and the stage became even closer and the jest books and fool books of the period seem to display considerable resemblance with the ship of fools tradition.

Numerous descriptions about the fool were published, yet probably the most vivid one is Robert Armin’s Foole upon Foole, which was printed anonymously (1600, 1605) and later reissued in 1608 under the title The Nest of Ninnies. H. F. Lippincott suggests that this work belongs to the general tradition of Brandt’s Narrenschiff. The fashion of such fool books died out in the mid-sixteenth century following the ‘Englishing’ of Brandt’s text. However, there was a revival from the 1590s until the first two decades of the seventeenth century, of which Armin’s work is the most important. These fool books were related to the jest books and prose satire of the age, however, they almost comprised a separate genre of their own. The writing is self-consciously satirical and is rarely informed by wit or by a consistently foolish attitude. The tone of the text is heavily moral, listing human follies such as gluttony or avarice, which, indeed, resembles Brandt’s list of his fools. Armin’s categorisation, however, often seems to be a parody of moral satires: on the title page of the 1600 quarto he mentions the fat fool and the flat fool, the lean fool and the clean fool, the merry fool and the very fool. Nevertheless, the Foole upon Foole originates in the tradition of sixteenth-century satire, which also stems from the ship of fools heritage.

Conclusion

These jest books and fool books (first besides the satires and after the Bishops’ ban by themselves) continue the ship of fools tradition. Moreover, in the dramas of the period the figures of the fool (or as Mares suggests, the Vice) fulfil a similar function. Both in the case of satires and fools there is a narrow line to balance on; transgressing too much the line which separates the two sides could be disastrous. This liminal position of satire and of the fool suggests more varied perspectives and wider horizons, since from the ‘threshold’ both the outside and the inside are visible. Satires achieve this peculiar viewpoint by balancing on the borderline of genres, fools are to find the boundaries of sanity and insanity, and the ship of fools transgressed several linguistic barriers by having been translated so early and giving a fresh stimulus to the Anglo-Saxon world.
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Stearns Sale, Helen 'The Date of Skelton's Bowge of Court' Modern Language Notes, Vol. 52, No. 8., 1937, p. 572-574.


NOTES

2. Ibid., p. 7.
3. Ibid., p. 8.
4. Ibid., p. 8-9.
5. Ibid., p. 9.
6. Ibid., p. 11.
10. Ibid., p. 18.
11. Ibid., p. 17.
12. Ibid., p. 324-325.
15. Ibid., p. 325-326.
18. Ibid., p. 134.
20. Ibid., p. 134.
22. In Puttenham’s words: “The first and most bitter invective against vice and vicious men was the [dramatic] satyre: which to th’intent their bitterness should breede none ill will ...they made wise as if the gods of the woods, whom they called Satyres or Silvanes, should appeare and recite those verses of rebuke.” Similarly to the Satyrs ont he Greek stages some poets”taxed the common abuses and vice of the people in rough and bitter speeches, and their invectives were called Satyres, and themselves Satyrices: such were Lucilius, Iuvenall, and Persius among the Latines, & with us he that wrote the booke called Piers Plowman.” (qtd. by Griffin 10)
23. Ibid., p. 10.
28. Ibid., p. 189.
29. Ibid., p. 191.
31. Ibid., p. 163.
32. For instance in 1617 when he was hunting with the King he was included among the royal attendants (Welsford, p. 174).
33. Ibid., p. 171-172.
34. Ibid., p. 181.
36. There were traditionally two kinds of fools: the natural and the artificial. The natural fool was foolish by birth, somewhat mentally disabled. In contrast, the artificial fool deliberately acted oddly in order to bring the truth to the surface. Robert Armin, Shakespeare’s fool, sketches this distinction and gives a lengthy description of six natural fools in his Foole upon Foole (London, William Frebrand, 1600).
38. Make room sirs, so that I can run
See, see where I’m back again
Decked out in many colours...
What do you say, sirs; amn’t I gay?
Don’t you see Flatterie, your own fool
Who’s come to join this new festivity
Wasn’t I here with you at yule? (qtd. in Billington, p.26.)
ABSTRACTS

This paper investigates the effect of Sebastian Brandt’s The Ship of Fools in sixteenth-century England. My starting point is Michel Foucault’s Madness and Civilization and I attempt to trace the philological background and the way Brandt’s text determined early-Renaissance satire and later ‘fool literature’ in England. My goal is to articulate the fact that the transgression of the ship does not manifest itself merely in the act of translation but also in the liminal position of the fool and the transgression among generic boundaries as well.

En el ensayo estudio el efecto de la obra de Sebastian Brandt, titulada La nave de los locos, en la Inglaterra del siglo XVI. Mi estudio presenta el desarrollo del texto de Brandt en Inglaterra, partiendo del libro de Michael Foucault, La locura y la sinrazón, y destaca cómo el texto mencionado determina la sátira renacentista temprana y la literatura bufa de los finales del siglo. Espero que hasta el final de mi estudio pueda convencerles que el que el barco cruza la frontera no se encarna sólo en la existencia errante de los locos o en el acto de la traducción, sino se refiere a la interconexión de los géneros literarios también.

AUTHOR

ZITA TURI

English teacher and translator; participating in editing projects (Milton Through the Centuries – Conference held at Károli Gáspár University) and teaching assistant at Károli Gáspár University. PhD candidate in English Literature at Eötvös Loránd University, Doctoral School of Literary Studies - Renaissance and Baroque English Literature Programme 2008-present. Research topics: sixteenth-century English theatre and literature with special emphasis on Shakespeare; contemporary visual culture, especially the films of Peter Greenaway and the contemporary screen-adaptations of Shakespearean drama.