

Sebastian Brant and the ship of fools

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The first great literary success of Basel printing was a book about folly that contained a critique of money. In 1494, the Basel printer Johann Bergmann von Olpe published *Das Narrenschiff*, the *Ship of Fools*, by Sebastian Brant, a Strasbourg-born jurist who taught law at the University of Basel. The book, a satirical poem in German verse illustrated with woodcuts, some of them attributed to the young Albrecht Dürer, describes a ship loaded with fools of every kind sailing to the land of fools, Narragonia. Each chapter portrays a type of folly: the fool who collects useless books, the fool who trusts in fortune, the fool who neglects his soul, the fool who lends money and the fool who takes on debt.¹

The *Narrenschiff* was one of the first bestsellers of the printed book. It was reprinted many times, pirated, translated into Latin in 1497 and into French, English and Dutch. For a century, it shaped the European imagination of folly for a century. Its success showed the printers of Basel that there was a large market for books in the vernacular, for illustrated books and for moral satire. It also made Basel known as a place where such books were produced.

Brant's critique of money reflects the moral economy of the late medieval city. He condemns avarice, usury, the pursuit of wealth for its own sake, the corruption of justice by money, the sale of offices and the extravagance of dress. He praises moderation, prudence and the fear of God. These themes would be taken up by Erasmus in his *Praise of Folly*, which was printed in Basel by Froben in 1515, and by the reformers of the following decades. They are part of a long tradition of moral reflection on wealth that runs through the history of Basel, from the preachers of the fifteenth century through the Reformation to the pietism of the eighteenth century and the modern debates on corporate responsibility and sustainable finance.

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The *Narrenschiff* is also an early example of the economics of publishing. Its author was a professor, its publisher a cleric turned printer, its illustrators artists who worked for a fee, its readers citizens who bought books for instruction and entertainment. The success of the book depended on the capital invested in its production, on the network of booksellers who distributed it and on the protection of the printer's investment against pirated editions, which the printers sought by obtaining privileges from the Emperor or the city. The problem of protecting the investment in intellectual products, which the printers of Basel faced in the 1490s, is the problem that modern copyright and patent law address, and which Part G examines in connection with the pharmaceutical industry, whose business model rests on the protection of its investment in research through patents.

1 Notes

1. Sebastian Brant, *Das Narrenschiff*, Basel: Johann Bergmann von Olpe, 1494; on the attribution of some woodcuts to Albrecht Dürer, see the literature on Basel book illustration, including Hieronymus, *Basler Buchillustration 1500–1545*, 1984. To be verified. ↩

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