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Charles T. Eby
Sacred Heart University

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CHARLES T. EBY

Sebastian Brant and the Northern Renaissance

No age of mankind has aroused as much conflict in historical interpretation than the Renaissance. Not only has it been extremely difficult to pinpoint its beginnings and its ultimate end, but also the wide diversity of its manifestations defies strict analysis. Wallace K. Ferguson, in his attempt to formulate a definition of the limits of the Renaissance, has incisively remarked that "within the civilization of the Renaissance there were innumerable cross-currents, inconsistencies, and apparent reactions."¹ This confusion, he continued, was the natural result of a struggle, more intense than in any other age since the dawn of Christianity, between inherited traditions and a changing society. Moreover, Ferguson recognized that the Renaissance was more than an era of moral, religious, intellectual and aesthetic crisis. It also represented an age of acute ferment in the realm of economics, politics, and social life.

Without a doubt the central figure in this turmoil produced by the Renaissance movement was man himself. His normal routine as being buffeted by forces that he had never encountered. Open criticisms of the sacred character of the guideposts of his culture — of the Church and the State — became commonplace. Disillusionment and pessimism overshadowed past attitudes of security and faith. But the coming of the Renaissance also introduced an optimistic atmosphere into the European scene. Human energies were channeled and put into practical action for the improvement of the individual man. Man could not remain untouched by such a rapidly changing situation. He had to make a response, whether positive or negative, towards it. Several avenues of choice were open to him. Either he could continue on the well-worn path of tradition, or he could rise above his heritage and accept the new modes of living. Then again, he could be cautious and choose only those aspects of the Renaissance which he felt were applicable to his present way of life.

It is the purpose of this paper to investigate just such an individual's reaction to the changes that the Renaissance stirred in Northern Europe, namely, the response of Sebastian Brant, one of the leading figures of German Humanism in the late fifteenth century. By concentrating in particular on his vernacular works, an attempt will be made to determine the elements in Brant's life and thought that were inspired by this Renaissance movement. Another aspect of Sebastian Brant that will be analyzed is the manner in which he differed from the basic trends of the Northern European Renaissance. Finally, Brant will be placed among the ranks of his contemporaries in an effort to evaluate his true status as a representative of this particular intellectual mood.

Religious overtones, national sentiment, hostility towards scholasticism, and a broader prupose behind the study of the classics comprised the basic components of German Humanism. Criticisms have been leveled that too many condrictions exist between these various elements, but some scholars note how they can be combined. Referring to just two of these characteristics, Ferguson states that "divergent as their interests were, the 'Christian humanist,' and 'national humanist' movements were not altogether mutually exclusive. They operated on different levels and many of the German scholars were drawn to both."² This statement can be expanded to include the other traits. All the above-mentioned components of German Humanism blended together to form the thought of each individual humanist. This process can account for the significant divergence of thought among the German Humanists. These elements of German Humanism combined with other general characteristics of the Renaissance, such as individualism, a feeling of inquisitiveness, and a sense of adventure, to form the Renaissance mood in Germany during the later part of the fifteenth century. It was against this complex background that Sebastian Brant made his response.

Although the exact date remains unknown, Brant was born in the year 1457 and died on May 10, 1521. Almost immediately, these dates indicate the significance of this humanist figure. After living through the highpoints of the German Renaissance, Brant would be a witness to the beginnings of the Reformation under the leadership of Martin Luther. Fortunately, his life was fairly well documented. His father, Diehold Brant, was the owner of an inn and his mother,

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Barbara Picker, was the daughter of an influential member of the wine-dealer's guild in Strasbourg. The death of his father in 1468 was a heavy blow to Brant, but his mother proved more than equal to meeting her responsibilities and she saw to it that Sebastian and his two younger brothers obtained a sound education.

In 1475 he was sent to the recently founded University of Basel, where he acquired his baccalaureate degree in 1477. Prompted by the economic needs of his family, Brant reluctantly decided to pursue a law career and received his degree of *Doctor utrisque Juris* in 1484. While at Basel, he was to come into contact with some of the leading figures in the early German Humanist movement, including Johannes Heylin and Peter von Andlau. Brant's life-long friendship with Johannes Reuchlin also began during these years at the university. The significance of this particular relationship will be considered later.

After attaining his degree Brant became a professor of humanities at Basel. During this time he was active not only in the field of education, but also in politics, printing, and editing. In fact, by 1494 when he published his famous *Narrenschiff* (*Ship of Fools*) he was a well-known figure throughout Germany. In 1500 Brant at the insistence of a friend moved to Strasbourg, where he was appointed municipal secretary, a post he retained until his death in 1521.

Brant's vernacular works deserve more attention than his works in Latin. He wrote fewer works in Latin than in German, and they did not represent the main thrust of his thought. More importantly, he had a distinct reason for choosing German. Edwin H. Zeydel, in his thorough biography of Brant, has noted that while in Brant's earlier works Latin was dominant, as his writing developed further he began to favor the German language. This change, Zeydel concluded, was not merely a matter of translation or of adaptation of words; it signified a change in purpose. Consequently the tone and the emphasis in the German as contrasted with the Latin works were quite different.³ The motive behind his use of German can simply be reduced to the fact that Brant wanted his writing to have a serious impact upon the society in which he lived. Although he did possess a sound knowledge of both Latin and Greek,⁴ he rose above the intellectual snobbery of those figures who purposely used Latin as a

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symbol of their elitism.

Even among his fellow German humanists, Brant was unique in his consistent use of the German language to spread his message. For example, Johannes Reuchlin, a close friend of Brant and one of the main opponents in the famous Pfefferkorn dispute out of which the *Letters of the Obscure Men* evolved, became more esoteric in his work and therefore limited his appeal, while Brant increased his emphasis on writing for the common people.⁵ Perhaps a comparison with the powerful humanist figure Erasmus of Rotterdam will shed further light upon the significance of Brant's efforts in German. Johann Huizinga, the well-known historian of Humanism and the Renaissance, asserted that Erasmus could only write in Latin because in the vernacular everything would have appeared too direct, too personal, and too real for his taste. He could not do without that thin veil of vagueness, of remoteness, in which everything was wrapped when expressed in Latin.⁶ Although Brant did write in Latin, he worked with it only when he wanted to address the immediate circle of humanist thinkers. Brant, believing that humanist learning should be more than just a study of the classics, tried to touch a wider public with his German works. So in his choice of the native language to communicate his thoughts on the critical topics of his time, Brant was reflecting one aspect of the Renaissance mood in Germany. He was removing Humanism from its place as a scholarly enterprise and was making it more accessible.

One final comment can be made about Brant's literary efforts in the vernacular. Ferguson has stated that during this period Germany failed to produce a vigorous national literature. With the exception of the violent nationalist and poet Ulrich von Hutten, none of the German humanists used his native tongue with distinction.⁷ This judgment, however, is far from accurate. Although Brant's vernacular poems and even his masterpiece the *Narrenschiff* may not have a polished literary style and grammar, they do pulse with emotional and intellectual forcefulness. Nowhere can the effectiveness of Brant's German works be illustrated better than in their impact upon the reading public. During his lifetime six editions of the *Narrenschiff* were published. From the time of its first publication in 1494 to the present, no less than forty editions have been produced, in such

languages as Low German, French, Dutch-Flemish, English, and even Russian.

Perhaps an even more significant example of the value of Brant's efforts in the realm of the German tongue can be found in the views of his contemporary Humanists. Ulrich von Hutten praised him for his classical metrical treatment of a barbarian dialect and for the use of a new structural principle in his poems.⁸ Jacob Wimpheling, one of the leading educators of his time, summed up Brant's contribution by saying that "he has written a book of satires in German which is called the Ship of Fools, and has interspered it so adroitly with stories, fables, and the wisdom of the great masters that I do not believe you can find a comparable book in our language."⁹ He finished with a remark that the *Narrenschiff* should be used in schools as a literary model. The importance of Brant's work in German as a contributing factor to the development of his native tongue cannot be denied.

While Brant may have differed from some of his fellow humanists regarding the use and purpose of language and classical thought, he enthusiastically shared their love of the German nation. Here the influence of the German Renaissance mood can be clearly discerned. One of the early teachers of Brant, Hermann Peter aus Andlau, gave the German nation an aura of divinity in his work *Der Libellus de Cesarea monarchia* (1460): "when the power of the Greeks had held the sacred summit of the Empire for only 415 years, the Roman Empire was transferred again from the east to the west, from the Greeks to the most powerful Germans, not without divine ordainment to the new state of affairs."¹⁰

Admittedly, during this time the German-speaking lands were tenuously bound together under the political organization known as the Holy Roman Empire. The power which it actually possessed was negligible and its members were connected only by threads of abstract feudalism. In fact by the end of the fifteenth century the Holy Roman Empire was little more than an empty shell. Still it served as a symbol of the German nation's past greatness, and therefore was valuable to the German humanist's mind. Sebastian Brant expressed this idea when he stated that "the Germans once were highly praised and so illustrious was their fame, the Reich was theirs and took their name."¹¹

However, there was an even more tangible symbol of Germany's importance than the Holy Roman Empire itself, namely the Emperor. The central figure who held this office from 1493 to his death in 1519 was Maximilian I. To Brant, Maximilian represented the future of the German nation. It would be Maximilian, he was convinced, who would lead the Germans out of their state of confusion and restore them to even greater glory. Brant, like other German Humanists, could not restrain his praises for this emperor, and complimented him effectively in his poetry.

Brant's affection for Germany took another form, namely a reaction against the influence of the Italian and other foreign Renaissance movements. In one of the most important chapters of the *Narrenschiff* he scolded German students for traveling to schools such as Pavia, Paris, and Bologna. There was no need, he emphatically stated, to attend foreign universities because everything that was necessary for a sound, if not superior, education could be found in their native land.¹² Again, Brant was not alone in his convictions about the constant intrusion of foreign intellectual elements. Conrad Celtis, the poet laureate of German Humanism in the late fifteenth century, urged his colleagues to assume the cultural leadership of Europe: "I wish to stimulate and awaken those men among the Germans who excel in learnedness and genius . . . [T]hen the Italians, most effusive in self-praise, will be forced to confess that not only the Roman imperium and arms, but also the splendor of letters has migrated to the Germans."¹³ In national sentiment, therefore, Sebastian Brant was no different in his opinions than the majority of his fellow humanists.

Yet perhaps Brant's disappointment at Maximilian's ultimate failure to respond to the pleas of the German scholars was much more intense than some of the other humanists. In comparison with his humanist friends, Brant was generally more aware of the practical realities behind the Holy Roman Empire. At a time when most German thinkers were idolizing the Empire as a symbol of the German nation and its greatness, Brant was berating its political leaders, in particular Maximilian, for not recognizing that its existence was in danger. The immediate source of this threat was the Turkish hordes which were steadily pushing nearer to the boundaries

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of the Empire. Brant's sense of urgency regarding this threat derived from the fact that the two main bastions of his thought were the German nation and the Catholic Church: if one fell under the impact of political invasion, the other would soon follow. In one satire of the *Narrenschiff*, "Of the Decline of the Faith," Brant wrote:

We have the archfoe close at hand,
We perish sleeping one and all,
The wolf has come into the stall
And steals the Holy Church's sheep
The while the shepherd lies asleep.¹⁴

While Brant's mood in the *Narrenschiff* was one of criticism, he still hoped that Germany and its leaders could correct the external and internal turmoil which was strangling the life of the Empire. Ten years later this feeling had changed to one of pessimism and despair. In a letter dated July 1504, addressed to Konrad Peutinger, a humanist from Augsburg, this mood can be felt:

There was a time when we could rightly claim of our empire that it was lord and master over the world. Now, however, our society has become a haven for every kind of folly and vice. . . . Do you doubt that our end will be the same as the end of all the kingdoms and empires that went before us and all those that are still to come: dust, ashes, a scattering of rubble, a mere name?¹⁵

Bitter words for a man who once believed that the German nation could lead mankind to an era of peace and goodness. Brant's disillusionment symbolized the decline in the humanist ideals of the fifteenth century.

Brant's response to the use of classical humanism on a much broader scale has been touched upon in the discussion of his German

works above. Still, a few points need to be made. Although Brant did not follow the practice of closely imitating the ancient thinkers of Greece and Rome, many of his ideas find their origin in the classics. The most obvious example of his indebtedness was his master work, the *Narrenschiff*. Kristeller has observed in his studies of Humanism that the humanists inherited from the ancient and medieval grammarians and literary critics the view that moral instruction was one of the main tasks of the poet.¹⁶ The *Narrenschiff's* main thrust was a moral criticism of the times. In a series of loosely connected poems or chapters Brant attacked the corruption in every aspect of German life. Rulers, merchants, clerics, and even peasants passed under his scrutiny. Even the term "fool" itself can be traced back to the literature of the classical eras.

Yet the *Narrenschiff* was not representative of only the classical strain, but rather was a combination of several divergent trends. Brant ranged in this work from the purely classical humanist statement that "if you're prudent through and through, read Virgil's words, they're meant for you" to a medieval affirmation of faith that "there is so much of Holy Writ, of Testament both Old and New that everything's been proved to you."¹⁷

Ulrich Gaier, in his interesting article on the *Narrenschiff*, has isolated four distinct elements in this work.¹⁸ First, Brant was a satirist whose purpose was to define the various follies of his time. Secondly, he was a late-medieval moralist in his intention to reprimand his world and to call for a return to common sense values. Thirdly, Brant was a humanist thinker and aspects of that outlook blended themselves into this work. Finally, he assumed the role of a religious and allegorical poet. Each of these intellectual positions contributed to the development of Brant's thought, not classicism alone. Brant did not, therefore, imitate classicism but rather adapted it to meet his needs.

In his response to another feature of the German Renaissance, scholasticism, Brant was extremely moderate. The German Humanists did not attack scholasticism on philosophical grounds. Instead they criticized it for its practical failings in life. Brant followed this pattern. Some of his thoughts were clearly within the scholastic tradition; for example, he says "it is order that raises the little things in life to the

starts, and when order is subverted, nothing pleases God."¹⁹ Most of his fellow German Humanists also did not stray far from the path of scholastic thought. Conrad Celtis, the "arch-humanist" as Lewis Spitz identified him, did not oppose scholasticism on a philosophical basis; it was *the interests and the methods of the scholastics to which Celtis objected* in his works, not the validity of their premises and conclusions.²⁰ In contrast to this general acceptance, there were some individuals who totally despised scholastic thought. One outstanding figure was Ulrich von Hutten. To him, scholasticism was a theology which had seriously damaged the Christian religion for nearly three hundred years. He characterized it as "a darkness which obscured the true worship of God."²¹ Sebastian Brant would not have agreed with these harsh words of Hutten.

One aspect of the German Renaissance in which Brant stood out as a singular figure was in his intense religious convictions. Zeydel has said that Brant's interest in literature, whether ancient or modern, was not a poet's; it was always colored and conditioned by his concern for morality and Church dogma.²² Throughout the *Narrenschiff* Brant did not demonstrate any tendency to approach critically the subject of the Catholic faith. This facet of his thought constituted one of the most significant differences from the general currents of German Humanism: no other person in humanist circles of the late fifteenth century was so outspoken in his belief in the orthodoxy of the Church as Brant. While institutions such as the clergy can be satirized, the religions doctrines of the Church were not tampered with under any circumstances by Brant. As early as 1494 in the *Narrenschiff*, Brant did not hesitate to castigate those thinkers who desired to reform the tenets of the Church: "Some think they are so very shrewd that sense enough they have induced that now by all their subtle wit they can interpret Holy Writ."²³ So fervent was Brant's love of his faith that it can be easily said that he was primarily medieval in his religious outlook.

Brant was more than willing to sublimate his intellectual abilities to his religion. In his evaluation of the Renaissance idea of wisdom, Eugene F. Rice has concluded that "a religious sensibility which spontaneously minimized nature in order to exalt grace will tend to deny all validity to human wisdom and resolve the traditional antagonism of 'Christian wisdom' and that of philosophers by

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eliminating natural wisdom altogether."²⁴ While Brant did not dismiss secular wisdom because of his religious ideas, he did make the sole purpose of wisdom and knowledge religious, underscored by his phrase "the road to high salvation, pure wisdom's only destination."

Perhaps a reference to Brant's position in one of the most controversial disputes of his time, the Pfefferkorn conflict, can shed further light on his stress upon religious orthodoxy. This controversy began when Johannes Pfefferkorn, a converted Jew, in the years 1507-1508 urged that all studies in the Hebrew language be banned and the existing works destroyed. Immediately, his demand encountered opposition from humanist circles. They felt that as scholars they had the right to use Hebrew as an instrument in their search for biblical truth. One of the main spokesmen of the humanist standpoint was Johannes Reuchlin, a friend of Brant since their days as students at the University of Basel. Reuchlin tried in letter after letter to induce Brant to enter the fray, but Brant refused.²⁵ Even when Emperor Maximilian entered on the side of the humanists, Brant did not budge. He would have nothing to do with an issue which was tinged with religious overtones.

In October 1515 a by-product of the Pfefferkorn dispute appeared in the form of the *Letters of Obscure Men*. These "letters" were the work of several individuals, including Crotus Rubianus and Ulrich von Hutten. Written to support Reuchlin in his defense of humanist learning, these documents also represented the growing moods of reform and discontent in Germany. An interesting point in these "letters" was one particular reference made about Brant. A letter penned by a fictitious Johann Helferich contained the statement that "all things are out of joint, and heretics and mock Christians are springing up — Johann Reuchlin, Erasmus of Rotterdam . . . Ulrich von Hutten, Hermann Busch . . . and Sebastian Brant . . . thereby many scandals arise within the Faith."²⁶ Even though the author was attempting to praise Brant for his open criticisms of the clergy's corruptions, Brant would not have favorably accepted the epithets of a "heretic" or "a mock Christian." For him, faith was held as a firm and unshakable conviction. Religious attitudes, therefore, comprised a particularly sensitive element in the thought of this German Humanist.

One final aspect of Brant's reaction to the Renaissance mood in Germany has yet to be discussed, specifically his response to the new emphasis on individualism, a sense of adventure, and an optimistic spirit. At first glance Brant's life seemed to be completely lacking in any of these Renaissance qualities. While he did possess the title of "Titio" or "Firebrand," his personal actions did not reflect the enthusiasm which this name appeared to denote. He was very sober and proper throughout his life. In the moral sphere he was almost puritanical. One story has been told that throughout his life Brant felt ashamed for having read in his youth the lewd pseudo-Virgilian poem *Priapus*.²⁷ How different were the lives of either Ulrich von Hutten or Conrad Celtis. Both these men grasped at life every moment of their days. Without a doubt Brant's everyday actions revealed his general sobriety and conservatism. The open expression of a spirited individualism cannot be found in Brant's patterns of living.

Yet in his literary works Brant manifested some features of Renaissance individualism. He stood out as an individual in his personal criticisms of the evils of his era. Zeydel paid Brant the compliment that in the *Narrenschiff*, perhaps for the first time in German literature, one can sense a writer's philosophy of life. There we find a world view that revealed man as the central figure on earth, faced with the necessity of deciding whether he will take the path of wisdom and be a microcosmic image of the macrocosm or prefer to follow the path of folly and subvert that image.²⁸ Surely this *Weltanschauung* must be an expression of individualism, and Brant therefore merits some recognition for sharing this view with other major figures of the Northern Renaissance.

No "typical" German Humanist of the late fifteenth century ever existed: each person reacted as an individual and developed a way of thought and life that was uniquely his own creation. We find this clearly apparent in the wide range of intellectual influences which modeled Brant's mind. At one point in his life the dominance of humanism was undeniable; then the pattern changed and the traditional strains of medieval thinking rose to the surface. The only reasonable conclusion that can be reached is that Sebastian Brant was a blend of major components from the Italian and the German Renaissance. However, since Brant lived in a generation of humanists

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who were consciously attempting to deliver German thought from the bonds of Italy, those aspects which formed the basic mood of German Humanism were emphasized in his actions.

Let me offer a final observation about Brant's status as a figure of the German Renaissance. Generally, Brant was held to be a conservative humanist, if not a medieval moralist. William Gilbert typified this interpretation in his article on Brant when he stated that "Brant was a contemporary only in the most literal sense."²⁹ This conclusion emphasizes the fact that Brant called for a return to the basic ideals of the Middle Ages as a remedy for the turmoil in his society. While this is true, Brant's work contains far more than just medieval elements. As I have shown, Brant's works combined several features of the Renaissance mood in Northern Europe along with certain elements of medieval thought, a view shared by Peter Skrine:

Therefore, Brant may be better described not as caught midway between the two, an imperfect humanist and a derivative late medieval German poet, but rather as the most impressive example of the synthesis of the two traditions in the German literature of the period.³⁰

The complexities of Sebastian Brant's life and thought were the results of the overall confusion existing in late fifteenth-century Europe. It was a period of vast transition, and Brant reflected this tumult.

ENDNOTES

¹William K. Ferguson, "The Interpretation of the Renaissance: Suggestions for a Synthesis," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, XII (October, 1951), p. 493.

²William K. Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought: Five Centuries of Interpretation* (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1948), p. 40.

³Sebastian Brant, *The Ship of Fools*, trans Edwin H. Zeydel (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1944), p. 41.

⁴For further references to Brant's knowledge of Latin and Greek see Edwin H. Zeydel, "Johan Reuchlin and Sebastian Brant: A Study in Early German Humanism," *Studies in Philology*, LXVII (April, 1970), and W. Gilbert, "Brant: Conservative Humanist," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*, XLVI (1955), 145-167.

⁵Zeydel, "Reuchlin and Brant," p. 132.

⁶Johann Huizinga, *Erasmus of Rotterdam*, trans F. Hopman (London: Phaidon Press, 1952), p. 43.

⁷Wallace K. Ferguson, *The Renaissance* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1940), p. 128.

⁸Ulrich Gaier, "Sebastian Brant's *Narrenschiff* and the Humanists," *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, LXXXIII (May, 1968), p. 266.

⁹Jacob Wimpheling, cited in Gaier, p. 266.

¹⁰Hermann Peter aus Andlau, cited in Frank L. Borchardt, *German Antiquity in Renaissance Myth* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1971), p. 67.

¹¹Brant, *The Ship of Fools*, p. 320.

¹²Brant, *The Ship of Fools*, p. 298.

¹³Conrad Celtis, quoted in Lewis W. Spitz, *Conrad Celtis: The German Arch-Humanist* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1957), pp. 95-96.

¹⁴Brant, *The Ship of Fools*, p. 317.

¹⁵Brant to Peutinger, quoted in Gerald Strauss, ed. and trans., *Manifestations of Discontent in Germany on the Eve of the Reformation* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1971), p. 225.

¹⁶Paul O. Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought: The Classic, Scholastic, and Humanistic Strains* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), p. 27.

¹⁷Brant, *The Ship of Fools*, p. 363.

¹⁸Gaier, p. 578.

¹⁹Brant, quoted in Zeydel, p. 46.

²⁰Spitz, *Conrad Celtis*, p. 111.

²¹Ulrich von Hutten, quoted in Lewis W. Spitz, *The Religious Renaissance of the German Humanists* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1963), p. 113.

²²Brant, *The Ship of Fools*, p. 8.

²³Brant, *The Ship of Fools*, p. 332.

²⁴Eugene F. Rice, Jr., *The Renaissance Idea of Wisdom* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1958), p. 130.

²⁵See Zeydel, "Reuchlin and Brant," pp. 132-35.

²⁶*On the Eve of the Reformation*, trans Francis G. Stokes (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 208.

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²⁷Edwin H. Zeydel, *Sebastian Brant* (New York: Twayne, 1967), p. 21.

²⁸This standard interpretation of Brant's response to individualism can be found in Heinz Otto Burger, *Renaissance, Humanismus, Reformation: Deutsche Literatur im Europäischen Kontext* (Berlin: Max Gehlen, 1969), pp. 258-63.

²⁹Gilbert, p. 166.

³⁰Peter Skrine, "The Destination of the *Ship of Fools*: Religious Allegory in Brant's 'Narrenschiff,'" *Modern Language Review*, LXIV (July, 1969), p. 591.