

**Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem  
Bölcsészettudományi Kar**

**Doktori Disszertáció**

**Turi Zita**

**The Ship of Fools Tradition in Early Modern England –  
Its Performative Origins and Presence on the English Renaissance  
Stage**

**Irodalomtudományi Doktori Iskola**

**A doktoriskola vezetője:** Dr. Kállay Géza, PhD, egyetemi tanár

**Program:** Angol irodalom és kultúra a középkorban és a kora újkorban

**A program vezetője:** Dr. Kállay Géza, PhD, egyetemi tanár

**A bizottság tagjai:**

**A bizottság elnöke:** Dr. Dávidházi Péter, CMHAS, egyetemi tanár

**Hivatalosan felkért bírálók:** Dr. Matuska Ágnes, PhD, egyetemi adjunktus

Dr. Pikli Natália, PhD, egyetemi adjunktus

**A bizottság további tagjai:** Dr. Földvári Kinga, PhD, egyetemi adjunktus

Dr. Szalay Krisztina, CSc, egyetemi docens

Dr. Mudriczki Judit, PhD, egyetemi adjunktus

Dr. Hargitai Márta, PhD, egyetemi adjunktus (titkár)

**Témavezető:** Dr. Fabiny Tibor, PhD, egyetemi tanár

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## I. Summary of the Thesis

The aim of my dissertation is to map the presence of the ship of fools tradition in early modern England, which owes much of its fame to Sebastian Brant's *Das Narrenschiff* (Basel, 1494). The work enjoyed massive popularity and left its hallmark on visual and literary representations throughout Europe in the sixteenth century. In this enumeration of folly, each of the 112 chapters depicts a type of fool both in an implemented woodcut and an accompanying poem and it was soon translated into Latin, French, and English, the latter by Alexander Barclay (*The Ship of Fools*). The main focus of the thesis falls on Barclay's translation, published twice in the sixteenth century (1509, 1570), which was domesticated in England, and which has been a marginal subject in English Renaissance studies. Its impact on early modern English drama is even more rarely discussed, despite the fact that scholars recurrently refer to the work. My dissertation aims at filling this gap and mapping the early modern applications of the ship of fools device, with special emphasis on the dramatic implications of the work and its possible impact on Renaissance English drama. I propose that the central governing idea behind Brant's *Das Narrenschiff* is to be found in late medieval fool plays, most notably those of the Feast of Fools popular primarily in France but also present in Basel; I also argue that the ritualistic festive patterns of fool performances were transferred to the pages of the work. In my view, a number of early modern English playwrights recognised this performative potential, and not only did they apply the ship of fools as a stage metaphor, but in some cases there are also textual correspondences between Barclay's version and the dramatic pieces of the authors in question. In order to substantiate this and to anchor my argument, I restricted the scope of my investigation to those Elizabethan/Jacobean dramatic pieces that contain references to the ship of fools. The only exemptions are William Shakespeare's plays which I discuss in light of the metaphor in a tentative subchapter at the very end of the dissertation.

The second chapter discusses the dynamics of the ship of fools tradition and argues that it is rooted in the carnivalesque festivals of the late Middle Ages. The fool performances of a variety of carnivals, most notably the French Feast of Fools, feature enumerations of folly in order to confront the audience with their imperfections. Also, *The Ship of Fools* is a record of the rite of passage at the turn of the sixteenth century, a passage not only between the medieval and early modern periods, but also between unfixed popular culture and printed

literature. The work balances between popular and elite culture (rooted in Classical traditions and medieval religious practices), represented in the woodcuts and the verses, the significance of which I discuss in a separate subchapter on the interplay between image and text.

Having established the dynamics of the device, I examine how the ship of fools was adapted to the English literary setting in the first half of the sixteenth century by discussing an anonymous poem, the adaptation of *The Ship*, called *Cocke Lorell's Bote* (1509), which is one of the first examples of the so called rogue literature in England. This is followed by the discussion of an allegorical poem, the *Bowge of Court* (1499) and the most significant Tudor interlude, *Magnificence* (ca. 1526), both written by John Skelton. As for Elizabethan/Jacobean drama, I discuss the dramatic works of Thomas Nashe (*Summer's Last Will and Testament*, performed in 1592, first published in 1600), Thomas Dekker (*The Whore of Babylon*, 1607), and John Marston (*Parasitaster*, or *The Fawn*, 1606), whose plays contain textual references to the ship of fools. In order to gain a deeper insight into the use of the ship of fools device in the works of these playwrights, I refer to some of their non-dramatic pieces relevant to my argument. Having established the typological framework within which the device circulated at the turn of the seventeenth century, I focus on the works of Robert Armin, whose pamphlets *Foole upon Foole* (1600, 1605) and *A Nest of Ninnies* (1608) may be seen as the continuation of the ship of fools tradition. The first half of the chapter puts this proposition under close scrutiny and seeks correspondences between Armin's works and *The Ship of Fools* in order to support the argument about Shakespearean drama by suggesting that the device might have seeped into Shakespeare's works through Armin. I am particularly interested in the presence of the tradition in *Hamlet*, *As You Like It*, *The Tempest*, and *King Lear*. Although the ship of fools is not conspicuously present in Shakespearean drama, the dissertation offers a tentative study which investigates these four dramas in light of the tradition. The biggest challenge of such a scrutiny is that although elements of the ship of fools, such as the ship, universal folly, and the enumeration of types of fools on stage, are present in his plays separately, these elements remain scattered and do not assemble as coherently as in the case of Nashe, Dekker, or Marston. This chapter attempts to collect such devices and examines the ways in which their occurrence follows a systemic pattern, and the ways the said pattern is explicated in the plays.

## II. Theoretical background

The dissertation is primarily concerned with the socio-cultural and literary background from which *The Ship of Fools* stems and which enabled the work to turn into a metaphor in England by the turn of the seventeenth century. For such contextualisation, I partly relied on the available topic-specific secondary literature, most notably the studies of C.H. Herford, Aurelius Pompen, T.H. Jamieson, Edwin H. Zeydel, and the comprehensive article by Robert C. Evans.<sup>1</sup> All these researchers acknowledge the ship of fools device's origins in medieval carnivals, yet, they most commonly discuss the work as an enumeration which castigates human sins on the analogy of the Seven Deadly Sins. The thesis offers an alternative reading of *The Ship of Fools* in light of popular festive traditions by relying on the findings of other scholars' understanding of this legacy. To support my argument, I briefly discuss Michel Foucault's chapter on the *Stultifera Navis* in *Madness and Civilization* (1961), in which he elaborates on the notion of liminality. I also rely on Victor Turner's conceptualisation of the rite of passage in his *The Ritual Process* (1969). I employ some of Mikhail Bakhtin's theoretical approaches outlined in *Rabelais and His World* (1965), with special attention to his thoughts on the upsetting of social hierarchy during carnival. I refer to Peter Burke's and Edward Muir's understanding of carnival and ritual,<sup>2</sup> and last but not least, I found the book *Sacred Folly* (2011) by Max Harris very useful for its valuable records in relation to the popular festival, the Feast of Fools. These scholarly works feature mainly in the second chapter where I discuss the underlying dynamics of *The Ship of Fools*. Here, I am concerned with the governing ideas in the work mostly originating from the medieval fool plays of carnivals. This is followed by the discussion on the interplay between text and image in *The Ship of Fools* in relation to the sixteenth-century emblematic tradition containing references to such classic academic works as Rosemary Freeman's *English Emblem Books* (1948), Peter M. Daly's *England and the Emblem and Literature in Light of the Emblem* (1979), John Franklin Leisher's *Whitney's A Choice of Emblems* (1987), and Charles Moseley's *A Century of*

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Herford, *Studies in Literary Relations of England and Germany in the Sixteenth Century*, Cambridge: At the University Press, 1886; T.H. Jamieson, *The Ship of Fools*, Edinburgh, New York: W. Paterson; D. Appleton, 1874; Robert C. Evans, 'Forgotten Fools: Alexander Barclay's *Ship of Fools*,' in *Fools and Folly*, ed. Clifford Davidson, Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996; Aurelius Pompen, *The English Versions of The Ship of Fools: A Contribution to the History of the Early French Renaissance in England*, Shannon: Irish University Press, 1971; Edwin H. Zeydel, *The Ship of Fools by Sebastian Brant*, New York: Dover Publications Inc, 1962; Edwin H. Zeydel, *Sebastian Brant*, New York: Twayne, 1967.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern England*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Farnham: Ashgate, 2009; Edward Muir, *Rites and Rituals in Early Modern England*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

*Emblems* (1989). The main aim of this subchapter is to demonstrate my understanding of the work in which humanistic/classical and popular traditions coexist and complement each other in the forms of the woodcuts and the accompanying verses. Additionally, it also anticipates my emblematic reading of *King Lear* and *The Tempest* in the last chapter.

### III. Structure

#### I. Introduction

- 1.1. Critical Background
- 1.2. Fool Literature in England Before *The Ship of Fools*
- 1.3. The Early Modern Editions of *The Ship of Fools*

#### II. The Ship of Fools Tradition

- 2.1. The Ship of Fools Device
- 2.2. The Dynamics of The Ship of Fools
- 2.3. Text and Picture
- 2.4. Performative Potentials in *The Ship of Fools*

#### III. The Ship of Fools Tradition in England in the Second Half of the Sixteenth Century

- 3.1. *Cock Lorell's Bote*
- 3.2. John Skelton's *Bowge of Court* and *Magnificence*

#### IV. The Great Stage of Fools

- 4.1. Thomas Nashe and Thomas Dekker
- 4.2. John Marston
- 4.3. A Tentative Study
  - 4.3.1. Robert Armin
  - 4.3.2. William Shakespeare

#### Conclusion

#### IV. The Findings of the Thesis

The dissertation intended to explore the ship of fools tradition in early modern England, a subject largely overseen by scholars of English Renaissance studies. The focus of my attention fell primarily on the performative potentials of Sebastian Brant's *Das Narrenschiff*, as the tradition originates in medieval carnival performances which Brant transferred to the pages of his work. *The Ship of Fools* may be seen as a piece of ritualistic literature which, on the one hand, dissolves the religious-secular dichotomy by referring to human imperfections of all fields of life as folly. Although the work resembles medieval religious tractates and in many respects it castigates human sins, the application of the notion of folly and the carnivalesque nature of the woodcuts especially lessen the gravity of such didacticism; instead of condemning fundamental human attributes, the work employs a mocking tone and incoherent form which enables the reader to perceive the moral content from a different perspective. This different perspective originates in the carnival fool plays of the Middle Ages, the patterns of which are the main governing idea behind Brant's work.

I have argued that the ship of fools tradition ran a full circle from being the device for ritualistic performance to the professional theatres of the early modern period. The fool plays were recorded in a piece of literature, which was transferred to the common literary stock of sixteenth-century England and to early modern drama in particular. The majority of academic studies on the subject regarded the work as an incoherent enumeration of human sins, however, such scholarly views needed to be revisited in order to further understand the underlying dynamics of the piece. A number of English Renaissance dramatists recognised at least four theatrical potentials of the work. First, its transformative power as a piece of mirror literature, looking into which the audience can confront their reflection and the awareness of their own folly can lead to profound wisdom. Secondly, the confrontation with one's flaws has cleansing power and the fools on the ship, as well as the vices of the dramas I have interpreted, are driven away by the sea. Third, carnival fool plays enumerated large numbers of heterogeneous stock characters in order to present the various patterns of human behaviour and so did *The Ship of Fools* and the dramatic pieces discussed. Last but not least, the ship of fools device correlates with the notion popular in the sixteenth and seventeenth century perceiving the world as a universal stage, and human existence as roles acted out on this stage. *The Ship of Fools* tackles fundamental issues of identity and proposes the question what

remains of the self after the driving away of the foolish parts one plays, a theme also echoed in *King Lear*, a subject of the last chapter of the thesis.

The visual and textual records confirmed my hypothesis that the work carries considerable performative potentials, a suggestion which is the basis of my chapters on the ship of fools and early modern English drama. The chapter ‘The Ship of Fools Tradition in England in the First Half of the Sixteenth Century’ proposed to bridge the gap between the 1509 first edition of the work and the dramatic works of the turn of the seventeenth century; it also wished to demonstrate how *The Ship of Fools* was adapted to the English literary context and which of its features were appealing for contemporary writers. To achieve this, I have argued that the anonymous *Cocke Lorell’s Bote*, and John Skelton’s works, the *Bowge of Court* and *Magnificence* display correspondences with *The Ship of Fools*, and in the case of *Cocke Lorell’s Bote* and *Magnificence* I proposed that they were at least partly inspired by *The Ship of Fools*. Whilst the *Cocke Lorell’s Bote* became the model for exhibiting heterogeneous characters on the ship, both works by Skelton apply the device to enumerate courtly vices. I have also argued that Skelton was familiar with *The Ship of Fools* both in Latin and in English. This section provided preliminary aspects for the next one in which I have mapped the use of the device and demonstrated how Thomas Nashe, Thomas Dekker, and John Marston exploited the tradition.

These dramatists employ the image in order to stage a large number of characters and depict the universality of folly; in every case, folly is linked with vices within the community and connotes the stage. Although the use of the ship of fools varies in each case, the pattern is identical: vices are identified with folly and driven away. Robert Armin applies the device similarly and, additionally, his works exhibit a fundamental feature of *The Ship of Fools*, namely, the fools’ permanent transgression, a notion which is characteristic of Armin’s fools. This permanent transgression gains crucial significance in *King Lear*, a highly transformative play. Such Shakespearean dramas as *Hamlet*, *As You Like It*, *The Tempest*, and *King Lear* offer grandiose tableaux which exhibit the omnipresence of human flaws on the universal stage of fools and they may also be seen as purging rituals in which the characters’ sins are driven away.

## V. Future research

- I would like to map the use of the device in early modern non-dramatic pieces (such as in Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, or Milton's *Prologue VII*). I propose to explore the use of the ship of fools in these works and see how it differs from its application in drama.
- I am deeply interested in the visual adaptations of *The Ship of Fools*, especially that of Hieronymus Bosch whose *Ship of Fools*, which is a part of a triptych together with two other allegorical paintings, the *Allegory of Gluttony* and the *Death and the Miser*. I would be interested in how the ship fits into the context of the other two paintings and how it corresponds with Brant's work, especially with the implemented woodcuts.
- I would also like to explore the ship of fools tradition's presence in contemporary British and American popular culture; I would examine the film drama directed by Stanley Kramer (*Ship of Fools*, 1965), the 1962 novel by Kathrine Anne Porter (*Ship of Fools*), and it would be interesting to see why in the 1960s popular bands like the American The Doors found inspiration in the tradition and wrote the song 'Ship of Fools' on their 1970 album, 'Morrison Hotel.'
- Last but not least, *The Ship of Fools* is not well-known in Hungary outside the realm of German studies, despite the fact that László Marton produced a Hungarian translation published by Borda Publishing in 2008. I am planning to rewrite parts of my dissertation for Hungarian publication and I also would like to do research on the work's impact on Hungarian literature. I am interested in the illustrations István Orosz produced for the Hungarian translation. Although they are far from the original woodcuts, and Orosz's drawings do not convey the carnivalesque spirit of the pictures in Brant's work, they are highly allegoric and their reading together with the text might add something to the interpretation of the original work. I believe that my project would be interesting for researchers of the Middle Ages and the early modern period in Hungary and could contribute to academic knowledge outside the realm of English studies.



## Relevant publications, conference papers, and scholarships

### *Publications*

'Mirrors of Fools – The Iconography of Folly in the Sixteenth Century,' in Collection of Essays of the 2013 HUSSE Conference, eds. Veronika Ruttkay & Bálint Gárdos, Budapest: Eötvös University Press, forthcoming 2014.

'Vessels of Passage – Reading the Ritual of the Late Medieval Ship of Fools,' in FORUM – Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts 17, University of Edinburgh, 2013. <http://www.forumjournal.org//issue/view/57>

'A bolondok roppant színpada – *A bolondok hajója* és az Erzsébet/Jakab-korabeli színház,' in *Ki merre tart a Magyar Shakespeare-kutatásban? Tanulmánykötet a magyar Shakespeare kutatás jelenéről*, eds. Ágnes Matuska & Attila Attila Kiss, Budapest: ELTE Eötvös Publishing, 2013, p. 139-153.

'This Great Stage of Fools – *The Ship of Fools* and Elizabethan/Jacobean Drama,' in *Early Modern Communi(cati)ons: Studies in Early Modern English Literature and Culture*, eds. Kinga Földváry & Erzsébet Stróbl, Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012, p. 202-222.

“Border Liners” - The Ship of Fools Tradition in Sixteenth-Century England,' in TRANS – Online Journal of the University of Sorbonne Nouvelle 10, Paris, 2010. <http://trans.revues.org/421>

### *Conference papers*

Knaves, Fools, and Villains – Moral Criticism in Thomas Dekker's *The Whore of Babylon*, The Fourth Shakespeare Conference: Shakespeare – Adaptation, Reception, Translation, King's College, London, UK, 14-15 November 2014.

“Enter Tutch the clowne, writing” – The Collaboration between Robert Armin and William Shakespeare, Jágónak IV Shakespeare Conference, University of Szeged, Szeged, Hungary, 9-21 September 2013.

Shakespeare and The Ship of Fools, Jágónak III. Shakespeare Conference, Szeged, Hungary, 2-4 June 2011.

The Ship of Fools Imagery in *King Lear*, HUSSE Conference, Piliscsaba, Hungary, 27-29 January 2011.

The Ship of Fools Metaphor in Shakespeare's Late Dramas, International Medieval Congress, Leeds, UK, 12-15 July 2010.

*Scholarships*

ESSE Bursary, Cambridge, UK, June, 2014.

Campus Hungary Fellowship, Cambridge, UK, January, 2014.

ESSE Bursary, Cambridge, UK, July-August, 2012.

Eötvös Scholarship of the Hungarian Scholarship Board, Cambridge, UK, July – October, 2011.