Press release

Fashion victims on board Sebastian Brant's *Ship of Fools*

Moral satire about human foolishness still encourages self-knowledge 500 years after the author's death – woodcuts by Albrecht Dürer allow us to see parallels to the graphic novel – also deals with hostility to science at a time when printing was invented – episode 5 of the Cluster of Excellence's research podcast "Religion and Politics"

Münster, 7. May 2021 (exc) Vanity, infidelity, bad table manners: the moral satire *The Ship of Fools* by the humanist Sebastian Brant, who died 500 years ago, depicts all kinds of human foolishness. "In this way, the author and jurist, who died in Strasbourg on 10 May 1521, holds up a mirror to readers. Although written from a viewpoint – Christian humanism – that is no longer influential today, Brant's observations of his fellow human beings show astonishing parallels to current trends and needs", says German scholar Bruno Quast from the University of Münster's Cluster of Excellence "Religion and Politics". Quast's research focuses on literature from the Reformation era. The most popular work before the Reformation, *The Ship of Fools* features some hundred "fools" who embark on a sea voyage, and criticizes those who are addicted to quarrelling, gambling and drinking, as well as usurers and fashion victims. "One section reminds us of fashion victims today, and others of etiquette books and fashion gurus. Whether it is Brant's warning against the overzealous pursuit of happiness or his encouragement of 'moderation' as an antidote to foolishness – some readers still find the book helpful today". All this is dealt with in an interplay of text and image: Albrecht Dürer provided illustrative woodcuts. "This composition can also be found in graphic novels", says Quast. The book also portrays hostility to science, "already a problem at the time of the invention of printing".

Published in 1494, *The Ship of Fools* became the most popular book before the Reformation, making it an early-modern bestseller. "In some 100 brief chapters, Brant opens a dazzling kaleidoscope of inappropriate behaviour towards God and fellow human beings". Readers encounter, for example, a bookworm who adorns himself with unread literature, a sick man who ignores his doctor's advice, and gamblers and drunkards whose vices make them forget the duties of everyday life. Hardly anyone can fail to find either people from their own environment in the book – or indeed themselves. "The chapter on the follies of fashion criticizes the length of skirts, beard fashions, and the similar hairstyles worn by men and women", says Quast, who argues that, despite its humorous exaggeration that reminds us of political cartoons or cabaret, Brant's work has a serious core. "Brant warns us to look critically at ourselves before pointing the finger at others". Quast introduces Brant and his work in [episode 5 of the research podcast "Religion and Politics"](#) for the annual theme "Belonging and Demarcation".

Whether gossipmonger or filled with envy: no one is spared

"Sebastian Brant combines in his work the ancient doctrine of moderation with the Christian idea of reform, which aims at a stricter observance of the Ten Commandments", Quast explains. On the journey to the fictional land of Narragonia, the fools are each in turn exposed to ridicule, with the illustrations bestowing each with the proverbial jester's cap. "Whether gossipmonger or filled with envy: no one is spared. The fools are omnipresent: there is no area of private or social life that is free of them". Historically, Brant takes up the medieval figure of the court jester, a figure that was nonetheless still critical of the ruler. In Brant's case, it is no longer the ruler who is a jester, but potentially anyone and everyone. Quast: "This points to a greater moralization in the period around 1500".

For Brant, the cure for foolishness is wisdom, which enables a person to recognize her own foolish behaviour in the first place. "This is also probably true across time: the wise person orients herself towards moderation and the middle ground, guarding against exaggeration and dissolute behaviour", says Quast. This is also true when it

comes to the household of the soul: Brant warns against both an exaggerated search for happiness, since the darker sides are also part of life, and too much worry, since anyone who wants to shoulder all her worries at once will collapse under the load. "Such guidelines can be found in self-help books today. Chapters on table etiquette that caricature improper table manners remind us of etiquette manuals with their rules of good behaviour".

Collaboration with Albrecht Dürer – lines of tradition leading to the graphic novel

A special feature of *The Ship of Fools* lies in its combination of text and image: each chapter is accompanied by a woodcut, some of which were made by Albrecht Dürer, who was still unknown at the time. According to Quast, this places Brant on the one hand within the medieval tradition, which saw pictures as "writing for the laity", aimed at an audience unfamiliar with reading. "However, the relationship is more complex. The text sometimes adds something to the picture; in other cases, the illustration transcends the text. The image therefore has an intrinsic value beyond simply illustrating the text". Thus, a commonality with the graphic novel emerges. "But there the narrative context follows a narrative line, and the pictures build on each other". According to Quast, the stylistic device of exaggeration has the aim of pointing out what needs improving, and connects the late-medieval moral didactics of a Sebastian Brant with modern political caricatures or cabaret.

As Quast points out, Brant's pre-Reformation text already dealt with the issue of hostility to science that is much discussed today. Brant laments in one of his last chapters that science is despised, while "the uneducated" are given an audience. Quast: "Brant sees a serious problem in how traditions of knowledge are dealt with in the face of a proliferation of printed matter. Tradition faces losing its validity. These early assessments from the time of the invention of printing open up astonishing parallels to current discussions about how a new complexity shaped mainly by social networks is increasing scepticism towards research and rationality". (apo/vvm)