Sebastian Brant Biography

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Biography

The German writer Sebastian Brant (1457-1521) was the author of the "Narrenschiff," or "Ship of Fools," one of the most famous secular works in European letters.

Sebastian Brant, born in Strassburg, lost his father as a child and was reared by his mother. He probably inherited a testy, sensitive nature from her. In 1475 he entered the University of Basel and received a baccalaureate degree in 1477. Though interested in the humanities and teaching them briefly, Brant studied law and taught and practiced it in Basel. He was also adviser and editor for several pioneer Basel publishers. In 1501 Brant returned to Strassburg as a legal adviser, and in 1504 he became municipal secretary, a post he held until the end of his life, while continuing publication and editorial work.

Brant was an admirer and confidant of Emperor Maximilian I. He was also a confirmed humanist, a staunch adherent of Catholicism, and an arch conservative, becoming ever more pessimistic about the future of the Holy Roman Empire, especially after 1517. He died in 1521.

Brant's masterpiece, the *Narrenschiff,* was published in 1494. It was illustrated by woodcuts, most of which are now recognized as being the work of Albrecht Dürer. A long, satirical narrative written in doggerel verse, this work influenced French and English as well as German works. Written in the vernacular, it was the first German work to pass into the stream of Western literature.

The *Narrenschiff* is not an allegory; instead it catalogs all types of fools in a direct satirical manner. From adulterers to mere fops, they risk eternal salvation and mar the image that the subjects of the Empire must maintain if the vulnerable Empire is to survive. A Latin translation (1497) by Brant's disciple Jacob Locher was responsible for the dissemination of the work in France and England. Thomas Shelton, Robert Copland, Richard Tarlton, and Thomas Dekker were among English writers of the 16th and 17th centuries unwittingly in Brant's debt. His work helped turn English literature from moral satire to satire of manners.

Brant wrote and edited numerous other works in Latin and German in religion, law, didacticism, and exhortation. He also published a volume of Latin verse.