

Classic Poetry Series

**Sebastian Brant**  
**- poems -**

**Publication Date:**

2004

**Publisher:**

Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

# Sebastian Brant(1457 – 10 May 1521)

Sebastian Brant (also Brandt) was an Alsatian humanist and satirist. He is best known for his satire *Das Narrenschiff* (The Ship of Fools).

## Biography

He was born in Strasbourg. He studied at Basel, took the degree of doctor of law in 1489, and for some time held a professorship of jurisprudence there. Returning to Strasbourg, he was made syndic of the town, remaining there for the rest of his life.

In 1485 he married Elisabeth Bürgis from Basel, the daughter of a cutler. Elisabeth bore him seven children. Keen for his eldest son Onophrius to become a humanist, he taught him Latin in the cradle and enrolled him in university at the age of seven.

He first attracted attention in humanistic circles by his Latin poetry, and edited many ecclesiastical and legal works; but he is now only known by his famous satire, *Das Narrenschiff*, published by Bergmann in 1494, the popularity and influence of which were not limited to Germany. Under the form of an allegory, a ship laden with fools and steered by fools goes to the fools' paradise of Narragonia. Brant here lashes with unsparing vigour the weaknesses and vices of his time. Here he conceives Saint Grobian, whom he imagines to be the patron saint of vulgar and coarse people.

Returning to Strasbourg in 1500, Brant made several petitions to the Emperor Maximilian to drive back the Turks in order to save the West. But when he realises that the Emperor is not up to the task, he writes to his fellow humanist Konrad Peutinger in Augsburg in 1504 that the role of Emperor could equally well be carried out by another people if the Germans were incapable of fulfilling the role that history had given them. In the same spirit, in 1492 he had sung the praises of Ferdinand II of Aragon, for having conquered the Moors and unified Spain. A staunch proponent of German cultural nationalism, he believed that moral reform was necessary for the security of the Empire against the threat of the Turkish hordes.

Although, like most of the German humanists, essentially conservative in his religious views, Brant's eyes were open to the abuses in the church, and the *Narrenschiff* was a most effective preparation for the Protestant Reformation. Alexander Barclay's *Ship of Fools* (1509) is a free imitation of the German poem,

and a Latin version by Jacobus Locher (1497) was hardly less popular than the German original.

There is also a large quantity of other "fool literature." Nigel, called Wireker (fl. 1190), a monk of Christ Church Priory, Canterbury, wrote a satirical *Speculum stultorum*, in which the ambitious and discontented monk figured as the ass Brunellus, who wanted a longer tail. Brunellus, who was educated in Paris, decides to found an order of fools, which shall combine the good points of all the existing monastic orders. Cock Lovell's *Bate* (printed by Wynkyn de Worde, c. 1510) is another imitation of the *Narrenschiff*. Cock Lovell is a fraudulent carrier who gathers round him a rascally collection of tradesmen. They sail off in a riotous fashion up hill and down dale throughout England. Brant's other works, of which the chief was a version of Freidank's *Bescheidenheit* (1508), are of inferior interest and importance.

The letters that have survived show that he was in correspondence with Peter Schott, Johann Bergmann von Olpe, Emperor Maximilian, Thomas Murner, Konrad Peutinger, Willibald Pirckheimer, Johannes Reuchlin, Beatus Rhenanus, Jakob Wimpfeling and Ulrich Zasius.

## 16. Of Gluttony And Feasting

He shows a fool in every wise  
Who day and night forever hies  
From feast to feat to fill his paunch  
And make his figure round and staunch,  
As though his mission he were filling  
By drinking too much wine and swilling  
And bringing hoar-frost o'er the grape.  
In to the fool's ship toss the ape,  
He kills all reason, is not sage,  
And will regret it in old age.  
His head and hands will ever shake,  
His life a speedy end may take,  
For wine's a very harmful thing,  
And man shows no strong reasoning  
Who only drinks for sordid ends,  
A drunken man neglects his friends  
And knows no prudent moderation,  
And drink leads to fornication;  
It oft induces grave offense,  
A wise man drinks with common sense.  
For wine old Noah cared no whit,  
Although he found and planted it;  
By wine Loth twice to sin was led,  
Through wine the Baptist lost his head,  
Through wine a wise man comes to prate  
And set a fool's cap on his pate;  
When Israelites were drunk with wine  
And glutted full like silly swine,  
They gamboled then in highest glee  
And had to dance in revelry.  
To Aaron's sons did God decree  
That abstinent and chaste they be  
And that to wine they should not turn,  
But this decree the priests would spurn.  
King Holofernes too when drunk,  
He had his head cut off his trunk;  
To feasts Tomyris had recourse  
When old King Cyrus she would force;  
Wine caused the fall of Ben-hadad,

Deprives was he of all he had;  
When Alexander played the sot  
His honor, virtue he forgot  
And practiced deeds in drunkenness  
That presently brought sad distress.  
The rich man reveled once so well  
That on the morn he ate in hell.  
Man would not be a slave, in fine,  
If he disowned the demon wine:  
Are wine and sumptuous food your itch?  
You'll not be happy, not get rich.  
Woe's him and woe's his father too,  
He'll have misfortunes not a few  
Who always gorges like a beast  
Proposing toasts at every feast,  
And would with others glasses clink;  
The man whose joy is endless drink  
Is like a man who falls asleep  
Defenseless in the ocean deep;  
Thus they who drink are e'er are gay,  
Carousing, topping night and day:  
If he's their friend, the generous host  
Brings veal galore, a cow almost,  
And gives them almonds, figs, and rice,  
The bill, alas, is writ on ice.  
Some men would be intelligent  
From wine if wisdom e'er it lent,  
Who cool their throats with rich libation.  
Friend drinks to friend without cessation:  
"I drink to you." "Here's happy days!"  
"This cup for you." "This yours!" he says;  
"I'll toast you till we both are filled!"  
Thus speak the men of folly's guild.  
Upset the glass, the drinker too,  
A rope around his neck would do  
Him better far than wild carousing  
And naught but foolishness arousing,  
That ancient Seneca did flay  
In books that still are read today,  
Which say one pays a drunken man  
More heed than many a sober man,  
And how an honor high 'tis rated

By wine to be intoxicated;  
I censure those who tipple beer,  
A keg of it per man, I hear,  
Becoming so inebriate  
That with them one could open a gate.  
A fool shows no consideration,  
A wise man drinks with moderation,  
Feels better, illness too defies,  
That one imbibing bucketwise.  
The wine, 'tis true, our thirst will slake  
But later stabs one like a snake,  
And poison through the veins will pour,  
As Basiliscus found of yore.

Sebastian Brant

## Of Coarse Fools

Vile, scolding words do irritate,  
Good manners thereby will abate  
If sow-bell's rung from morn to late  
.

A new St. Ruffian now holds sway,  
Men celebrate him much today  
And honour him in every place  
With words and ways that spell disgrace,  
And make a jest of ribaldry,  
Though belted not with decency.  
Sir Decency is doubtless dead,  
Fool holds the sow's ear, wags her head,  
And makes the sow-bell loudly ring  
So that the sow her ditty sing.  
The sow leads on and cannot fail,  
She holds the fools' ship by her tail,  
That laden down no wreck it be,  
For that would bring great misery.  
The wine no fool today would heed  
That's quite inferior wine, indeed.  
Full many a litter breeds the sow,  
And wisdom lives in exile now;  
The swine on decent people frown,  
The sow alone now wears the crown.  
Whoever rings her bell, that man  
Is now the one who leads the van,  
While he who does such foolish work  
As that famed priest of Kalenberg,  
Or as Monk Islan long of beard,  
He thinks that he's himself endeared.  
Some men in folly are so free  
That if Orestes them could see –  
He had no brains beneath his hat –  
He'd say: 'Sane men can't act like that.'  
'Come clean to village' lost its sense,  
For peasants drink and give offense.  
Sir Alderblock is roundly fêted,

With Roughenough and Seldom Sated.  
Most every fool doth love the sow  
And wants to have his grease box now,  
Which he keeps filled with donkey's fat.  
But rarely is it bare of that,  
Though everyone would take a piece,  
To keep his bagpipes well in grease.  
Now grossness everywhere has come  
And seems to live in every home,  
And sense and prudence both are dead.  
What now is written, what is said,  
Is covered o'er with donkey's fat.  
Carousers know and cherish that.  
The sow the matins does recite,  
The donkey sings the prime all right,  
St. Ruffian sings the tierce with might,  
Hatmakers' boys recite the sext,  
Coarse felters do compose the text.  
Rude rabble doth recite the none,  
And gluttoners the words intone,  
The vespers from a sow's voice ring,  
Filth, gross untidiness then sing.  
And lastly the compline is done,  
When all is full at length is sung.  
The donkey's fat is potent grease,  
With sow's fat it is mixed with ease.  
One reveler smears it on another,  
If he would have him be his brother.  
Reserve and modesty 'twill smother.  
Nor God nor honor then are spared,  
Lewd things are scrutinized and aired,  
The one who's quite the foulest swine  
Is given a brimming glass of wine.  
Applause is his with vim and zest,  
He's asked to tell another jest.  
They say: 'A great success you've scored!  
You keep us thus from being bored!'  
As fool to fool they all declare:  
'Be sociable, gay, debonair!  
Feti gran scbier e belli sckier!  
Let's all be cheerful while we're here,  
Good fellows should rejoice, not pout,



Let's laugh and sing, carouse and shout!  
We've but a little while on earth,  
Let's spend it wassailing, in mirth.  
The man who dies will never rise  
And never walk 'neath sunny skies.  
Has any mortal ever learned  
Of mortal men from hell returned,  
That they might tell us how it's been?  
To have a good time's not a sin!  
The priests can say whate'er they may,  
Let them forbid this, that for aye!  
If this were sinful, as they claim,  
Then why, why do they do the same?  
If priests did not discuss the devil,  
And shepherds saw in wolves no evil,  
No one would profit very much.'  
'Tis fools alone who utter such  
Remarks, and with their brutal crew  
Insult the world and God and you,  
But finally their gain is rue.

Sebastian Brant

# Of Hym That Togyder Wyll Serve Two Masters

A fole he is and voyde of reason  
Whiche with one hounde tendyth to take  
Two harys in one instant and season;  
Rightso is he that wolde undertake  
Hym to two lordes a servaunt to make;  
For whether that he be lefe or lothe,  
The one he shall displease, or els bothe.

A fole also he is withouten doute,  
And in his porpose sothly blyndyd sore,  
Which doth entende labour or go aboute  
To serve god, and also his wretchyd store  
Of worldly ryches: for as I sayde before,  
He that togyder will two maysters serve  
Shall one displease and nat his love deserve.

For he that with one hounde wol take also  
Two harys togyther in one instant  
For the moste parte doth the both two forgo,  
And if he one have: harde it is and skant  
And that blynd fole mad and ignorant  
That draweth thre boltis atons in one bowe  
At one marke shall shote too high or too lowe....

He that his mynde settyth god truly to serve  
And his sayntes: this worlde settynge at nought  
Shall for rewarde everlastyng joy deserve,  
But in this worlde he that settyth his thought  
All men to please, and in favour to be brought  
Must lout and lurke, flater, laude, and lye:  
And cloke in knavys counseyll, though it fals be.

If any do hym wronge or injury  
He must it suffer and pacyently endure  
A double tunge with wordes like hony;  
And of his offycis if he wyll be sure  
He must be sober and colde of his langage,  
More to a knave, than to one of hye lynage.

Oft must he stoupe his bonet in his honde,  
His maysters back he must oft shrape and clawe,  
His brest anyntyng, his mynde to understonde,  
But be it gode or bad therafter must he drawe.  
Without he can Jest he is nat worth a strawe,  
But in the mean tyme beware that he none checke;  
For than layth malyce a mylstone in his necke.

He that in court wyll love and favour have  
A fole must hym fayne, if he were none afore,  
And be as felow to every boy and knave,  
And to please his lorde he must styll laboure sore.  
His many folde charge maketh hym coveyt more  
That he had lever serve a man in myserye  
Than serve his maker in tranquylyte.

But yet when he hath done his dylygence  
His lorde to serve, as I before have sayde,  
For one small faute or neglygent offence  
Suche a displeasoure agaynst hym may be layde  
That out is he cast bare and unpurvayde,  
Whether he be gentyll, yeman grome or page;  
Thus worldly servyse is no sure herytage.

Wherfore I may prove by these examples playne  
That it is better more godly and plesant  
To leve this mondayne casualte and payne  
And to thy maker one god to be servaunt,  
Which whyle thou lyvest shall nat let the want  
That thou desyrest justly, for thy syrvyce,  
And than after gyve the, the joyes of Paradyse.

Sebastian Brant

# Of Too Much Spekyng Or Bablyng

He that his tunge can temper and refrayne  
And asswage the foly of hasty langage  
Shall kepe his mynde from trouble, sadnes and payne,  
And fynde therby great ease and avauntage;  
Where as a hasty speker falleth in great damage  
Peryll and losse, in lyke wyse as the pye  
Betrays hir byrdes by hir chatrynge and crye....

Is it not better for one his tunge to kepe  
Where as he myght (perchaunce) with honestee,  
Than wordes to speke whiche make hym after wepe  
For great losse folowyng wo and adversyte?  
A worde ones spokyn revoked can not be,  
Therefore thy fynger lay before thy types,  
For a wyse manns tunge without advysement tryes.

He that wyll answeere of his owne folysshe brayne  
Before that any requyreth his counsayle  
Shewith him selfe and his hasty foly playne,  
Wherby men knowe his wordes of none avayle.  
Some have deltyed in mad blaborynge and frayle  
Whiche after have supped bytter punysshement  
For their wordes spoken without advysement....

Many have ben whiche sholde have be counted wyse  
Sad and discrete, and right well sene in scyence;  
But all they have defyled with this one vyse  
Of moche spekyng: o cursyd synne and offence  
Ryte it is that so great inconvenience  
So great shame, contempt rebuke and vylany  
Sholde by one small member came to the hole body.

Let suche take example by the chatrynge pye,  
Whiche doth hyr nest and byrdes also betraye  
By hyr grete chatteryng, clamoure dyn and crye,  
Ryght so these folys theyr owne foly bewraye.  
But touchyng wymen of them I wyll nought say,  
They can not speke, but ar as coy and styll  
As the horle wynde or clapper of a mylle.

Sebastian Brant

# The Universal Shyp

Come to, Companions: now tyme it is to rowe:  
Our Carake fletis: the sea is large and wyde  
And depe Inough: a pleasaunt wynde doth blowe.  
Prolonge no tyme, our Carake doth you byde,  
Our felawes tary for you on every syde.  
Hast hyther, I say, ye folys naturall,  
Howe oft shall I you unto my Navy call?

Ye have one confort, ye shall nat be alone:  
Your company almoste is infynyte;  
For nowe alyve ar men but fewe or none  
That of my shyp can red hym selfe out quyte.  
A fole in felawes hath pleasour and delyte.  
Here can none want, for our proclamacion  
Extendyth farre: and to many a straunge nacyon.

Both yonge and olde, pore man, and estate:  
The folysshe moder: hir doughter by hir syde,  
Ren to our Navy, ferynge to come too late.  
No maner of degre is in the worlde wyde,  
But that for all theyr statelynes and pryde  
As many as from the way of wysdome tryp  
Shall have a rowme and place within my shyp.

My folysshe felawes therefore I you exort  
Hast to our Navy, for tyme it is to rowe:  
Nowe must we leve eche sympyll haven and porte,  
And sayle to that londe where folys abound and flow;  
For whether we aryve at London or Bristowe,  
Or any other Haven within this our londe,  
We folys ynowe shall fynde alway at honde....

Our frayle bodyes wandreth in care and payne  
And lyke to botes troubled with tempest sore  
From rocke to rocke cast in this se mundayne,  
Before our iyen beholde we ever more  
The deth of them that passed are before.  
Alas mysfortune us causeth oft to rue  
Whan to vayne thoughtis our bodyes we subdue.

We wander in more dout than mortall man can thynke.  
And oft by our foly and wylfull neglygence  
Our shyp is in great peryll for to synke.  
So sore ar we overcharged with offence  
We see the daunger before our owne presence  
Of straytis, rockis, and bankis of sonde full hye,  
Yet we procede to wylfull jeopardye.

We dyvers Monsters within the se beholde  
Redy to abuse or to devour mankynde,  
As Dolphyns, whallys, and wonders many folde,  
And oft the Marmaydes songe dullyth our mynde  
That to all goodnes we ar made dull and blynde;  
The wolves of these oft do us moche care,  
Yet we of them can never well beware....

About we wander in tempest and Tourment;  
What place is sure, where Foles may remayne  
And fyx theyr dwellynge sure and parmanent?  
None certainly: The cause thereof is playne.  
We wander in the se for pleasour, bydyng payne,  
And though the haven of helth be in our syght  
Alas we fle from it with all our myght.

Sebastian Brant