



Sebastian Brant's The Ship of Fools in Critical Perspective, 1800-1991 (Literary Criticism in Perspective)

By John Van Cleve

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Until the mid 1960s, scholarship on *The Ship of Fools* (1494) by Sebastian Brant was characterised by a kind of academic schizophrenia. For decade after decade, one obstinate underlying question failed to elicit a satisfying answer: How could a supposedly disorganized, soporific sermon in wooden verse have been so wildly popular for well over a century throughout most of Europe? It was Gervinus who first saw the ambivalence suggested in the dichotomy of quality — popularity as a tension between external form and inner worth. He set a trend when he excused what he thought to be mediocre form by placing the poem in a time of supposed insensitivity to considerations of literary conventions and poetic language. Van Cleve traces scholarship on *The Ship of Fools* through the methodological developments of modern Germanics and suggests directions for future work. In the process he analyzes attacks on and defenses of the work that have much to say about their authors' perceptions of literature and of their own societies, and about the transformations that the field of Germanics was undergoing. VAN CLEEVE is Professor of German at Mississippi State University. He has published numerous articles on German literature of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, and he has written four books, most recently (with A. Leslie Willson) *Remarks of the Needed Reform of German Studies in the United States*.

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