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The Affordances of Allegory

Ships, Travel, and the Atlantic in Henry Watson's ›Shyppe of Fooles‹ (1509) and Alexander Barclay's ›Shyp of Folys of the Worlde‹ (1509)

Abstract: The first two English translations of the ›Ship of Fools‹ – Henry Watson's ›Shyppe of Fooles‹ (1509) and Alexander Barclay's ›Shyp of Folys of the Worlde‹ (1509) – differ significantly in their allegorical depiction of ships, travels, and the Atlantic. These variances can be explained partly by the texts' different translation routes as well as by their distinctive use of allegory as a formal device. Drawing on James J. Gibson's (1966) concept of ›affordances‹ and on Caroline Levine's (2015) study of the affordances of literary forms, this article examines the representations of maritime voyages in Watson's and Barclay's texts with a particular focus on the forms and functions of the ship allegory. In Barclay's verse translation, ship symbolism takes on a distinctly material dimension that responds to nautical developments around 1500. Watson's prose translation, in contrast, works predominantly with the religious potential of the ›ship of fools‹ allegory. Taken together, the two texts remind us of how differently allegories of maritime journeys are put to use in the early sixteenth century and, in so doing, illustrate the literary potential of real and imaginary travels in an increasingly globalized world.

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1. The Affordances of Allegory: A Ship of Fools¹

A ship that travels but never reaches its destination because the crew consists of fools entirely: this is the well-known allegory of Sebastian Brant's ›Narrenschiff‹ (1494), the first European secular bestseller that has become the basis of numerous translations, adaptations, editions, and the origins of the ›ship of fools‹-tradition all over the world.² Brant's moral satire utilizes the image of the vessel populated with fools as an extended metaphor to structure the episodic narrative, where each chapter focuses on a folly or vice, ranging from drunkenness and gluttony to avarice as well as to less obviously foolish matters, such as playing instruments by night, unknowing physicians, or being jolly at all seasons. Brant's text puts the figurative ship to work mainly as an allegory, i.e., as a story that »uses symbols to convey a hidden or ulterior meaning, typically a moral or political one« (OED Online 2025, n.p.). Often, albeit not always, the focus of allegory is on the »spiritual rather than literal meaning« (OED Online 2025, n.p.).³ This emphasis on allegory's spiritual and symbolic meaning has implications for the interpretation of literary texts, including Brant's ›Narrenschiff‹.

Most commentators so far have read Brant's ship allegorically and underlined the metaphorical, rather than the literal dimensions of travel (e.g. Bertelsmeister-Kierst 2023; Classen 2012; Gaier 1968; Skrine 1969). The ship as a spatial and material object is hardly ever at the centre of such readings. As an organizing form, the allegory's main function lies in creating the pivotal paradox of the plot, which emphasizes the immovability of an object that is usually defined by movement across water. Its voyage, pictured on the famous woodcut as on the move ›Ad Narragoniam‹ (›To Narragonia‹), is not understood as a physical movement in time and space but as a figurative movement that employs the central conceit to narrate a story full of contradictions.⁴ The ship's stagnancy functions both as a source of

humour and as a warning device. Readers are meant to recognize themselves in the follies of the world and to embark on a mental and emotional journey of self-improvement. The text invites such an interpretation by asking not only the figurative fools but, by extension, the implied readers on board: *Comyth to our shyp*, ›Come to our ship‹ (Barclay 1509, V6^r),⁵ the narrator exclaims. Such an allegorical reading of the ship focuses on the »movement of thought« among readers rather than the »movement of figure« or the »movement of plot« that Eva von Contzen and Karin Kukkonen have identified as the »three types of movement« central to literary texts (Contzen/Kukkonen 2024, p. 406). In this way, the moral satire is meant to provoke spiritual and cultural change, if not among the fools, then among the readers: ›Whatever the symbolic function of a ship might have been, it has always reflected people's fascination with bodies of water and man-made objects to cross them, and by the same token their deep fears and troubles of the unfathomableness of their own existence« (Classen 2012, p. 16). Given the potentially subversive nature of parts of Brant's ›Narrenschiff‹ (Grundig 2023, p. 63), it is not surprising that the text relishes in this symbolic function of the ship to tell a story of absurdities, but also of possible self-improvement, where the Christian journey towards spiritual salvation is key to the allegorical nature of the ship (Bertelsmeier-Kierst 2023, pp. 171-178).

For all the focus on spiritual symbolism, some scholars have attempted to link the allegorical nature of the ship to the material-historical conditions of medieval and early modern Europe. Michel Foucault famously read Brant's ship in relation to the medical-cultural history of the time. The figurative fools are not unlike outcasts who are forced to leave their communities behind for physical and/or mental reasons. Sometimes literally and sometimes metaphorically, the outcasts are put into »boats that conveyed their insane cargo from town to town« (Foucault 1988, p. 8) without ever reaching a final destination. Following this line of thought, the allegorical ship becomes a »prison« for those onboard of the ship because it remains

forever on the threshold of society, where it occupies »a half-real, half-imaginary geography« (Foucault 1988, p. 11).⁶ The symbolic immobility of the ship forces the fools into a liminal space, where spiritual movement is reserved for those who stay behind: by excluding the outcasts, the rest of the community is hoping to move forward on their way to religious salvation and, with it, towards a more wholesome future.

My own reading of the first two English translations of Brant's ›Narrenschiff‹ – Henry Watson's ›Shyppe of Fooles‹ (1509) and Alexander Barclay's ›Shyp of Follys of the Worlde‹ (1509) – emphasizes a different historical-material context in which the ship allegory gains significance. This article examines how ship imagery in the early English translations interacts with seafaring culture around 1500 and how it incorporates references to real-life travel narratives. My interest lies in the various kinds of affordances that the ship as an allegorical form holds for the first two English translations of the ›Narrenschiff‹ and in understanding how one and the same allegory could lead to such starkly opposite renderings of the ship in early sixteenth-century England. I employ the term ›affordance‹ to refer to the potential functions, expenditures or meanings of the ship allegory and its changing utilities, meanings, and potentialities over time and space.

The term affordance was introduced into scholarly studies by James J. Gibson, who borrows it from design theory to refer to the potentialities of a given object or thing, without framing the latent possibilities in an ideologically biased way. In ›The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems‹, Gibson writes that he employs the term »as a substitute for *values*«, because he considers that value is »a term which carries an old burden of philosophical meaning« (Gibson 1966, p. 285). For Gibson, objects have »properties« or qualities that can »afford the observer« different uses, but in the end, the values humans attribute to these functions or possibilities are not the same as the affordances things hold in themselves: »the human observer learns to detect what have been called the values or meanings of things, perceiving their distinctive features, putting them into categories and subcategories,

noticing their similarities and differences and even studying them for their own sakes, apart from learning what to do about them« (Gibson 1966, p. 285). Following Gibson, it is crucial to think about the ways in which objects invite or confine, attract or resist human actions and activities, but also to recognize that the way we engage with objects is oftentimes practically or ideologically limited. A cup can be used for drinking, but also for watering flowers, holding pencils, or being thrown to the floor in a fight. Not all of these affordances hold the same value for the users, but recognizing the different potentialities of objects, things or, indeed, literary works draws our attention to the ways in which they interact with other conditions at a given time and space. This is also true for allegory.

Caroline Levine has shown how the concept of affordances benefits the study of literary forms. In ›Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network‹, Levine argues that the concept of affordance ›allows us to grasp both the specificity and the generality of forms—both the particular constraints and possibilities that different forms afford, and the fact that those patterns and arrangements carry their affordances with them as they move across time and space« (Levine 2015, p. 6). If literary forms are, basically speaking, organizing principles, then these principles hold certain potentialities for readers and authors:

Affordances point us both to what all forms are capable of—to the range of uses each could be put to, even if no one has yet taken advantage of those possibilities—and also to their limits, the restrictions intrinsic to particular materials and organizing principles. [...] But a form does its work only in contexts where other political and aesthetic forms also are operating. A variety of forms are in motion around us, constraining materials in a range of ways and imposing their order in situated contexts where they constantly overlap other forms. Form emerges from this perspective as transhistorical, portable, and abstract, on the one hand, and material, situated, and political, on the other. (Levine 2015, pp. 10–11)

Levine's emphasis on the importance of context and the variety of forms that are operating simultaneously at a given time and space is helpful to understand why the affordances of allegory change meaningfully in the early translations of Brant's ›Narrenschiff‹, even if the form itself remains steady. Allegory, like other literary forms, adheres to an overarching organizing principle – using symbols to communicate hidden or underlying meaning, often with political or spiritual implications – but the implications depend partly on the way it is presented by authors, translators, printers, and the way it is received by audiences. One and the same form can be put to different uses, as we can see in the two first English translations of Brant's ›Narrenschiff‹. The central conceit of a ship that never reaches its destination develops its own very different spatial and temporal logic in each of the translations. For Watson, the potentialities of the ship allegory lie mostly in its ability to move the audience spiritually and to help the readers on their journey towards religious salvation. For Barclay, the allegory affords him with the possibility of linking the satirical nature of the ship to the increasingly material dimensions of travel around 1500 and to develop the form so that it bears meaning for global exploration and Atlantic voyages. To pave the way for my argument that the differences between Watson and Barclay's texts bear witness to the coexisting, yet starkly divergent affordances of the ship allegory in the early sixteenth century, it is useful to first take a closer look at the printing and translation history of the two English texts, since these material histories interact significantly with the affordances of allegory.

2. Crossing the Channel: A Ship of Fools Travels to England

The first two English translations of Brant's bestseller were published within a few months of each other in 1509. Henry Watson's ›Shyppe of Fooles‹ (STC 3547) was printed in July 1509 in London by Wynkyn de Worde, followed shortly by Alexander Barclay's ›Shyp of Folys‹ (STC 3545), printed

by Richard Pynson in December 1509.⁷ Little is known about Watson himself, except that he also translated ›Valentine and Orson‹ (c. 1510; reprinted 1524), a medieval romance about twin brothers separated at birth and reunited through adventures. Barclay (c.1484–1552), in contrast, is known as poet and clergyman who wrote and translated several works of literature, including his series of ›Eclogues‹ and the ›Life of St George‹ (c. 1515), and the English translation of ›Mirroure of Good Manners‹ (c. 1518). Barclay appears to have been originally from Scotland but settled in England and became a monk in the Benedictine cloister of Ely before joining the Franciscan order. He collaborated frequently with Richard Pynson and Wynkyn de Worde, the first being the royal printer of the English monarch and the latter being a student and successor of William Caxton (1422–1491), the first printer in England who was also a translator and publisher. As Caxton's successor, de Worde was instrumental in the spread of Renaissance literature in England and expanded the range of books available in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. He printed, amongst others, classical literature, religious works, educational books, and popular romances in English, Latin, and other languages, catering to both scholarly and popular audiences. This also included Watson's translation of the ›Shyppe of Fooles‹.

Like Pynson, de Worde belonged to the first printers of his time to include woodcuts in his books. In Watson's ›Shyppe of Fooles‹, the woodcuts are fewer and less elaborate than in Barclay's ›Shyp of Folyes‹. This has effects on the nature of the narrative, which allows for fewer ambiguities in the image-text relationship, but perhaps also for a wider reception of Watson's ›Shyppe‹ in its own time because a printed version with less images may have been more affordable for buyers on the early modern book market. After all, Watson's ›Shyppe‹ was the first to be reprinted in quarto in 1517 by Wynkyn de Worde (STC 3547a), whereas Barclay's ›Shyp‹ was only reprinted in 1570 by the printer John Cawood (STC 3546).⁸

For the ship allegory in Barclay's and Watson's translations, the joint publication year 1509 is relevant in several respects. First, as others have

pointed out, both Barclay and Watson pay tribute to the newly crowned Henry VIII and become part of a literary culture closely attuned to the political and cultural developments of the Tudor reign (e.g., Colley 2020, p. 154; Flood 1995, pp. 134–35; Grundig 2021, p. 219; Rankin 2018, pp. 74–76). At eighteen years of age, Henry VIII became King of England in April 1509 after the death of his father, Henry VII. His coronation took place on 23 June 1509, twelve days after he had married Catherine of Aragon (1485–1536) on 11 June 1509. Catherine was the youngest daughter of Ferdinand II of Spain and of Isabella I of Castile and had been previously married to Henry VIII's older brother Arthur (1486–1502), Prince of Wales and heir apparent, who had died prematurely at the age of fifteen. Henry's marriage to a daughter of the Spanish monarchy in the same year as the two first English translations of the ›Narrenschiff‹ were printed is the second historical context for my reading of ship and maritime metaphors in the text, where it serves as backdrop for my reading of Atlantic imagery vis-à-vis Ferdinand II of Spain's role in overseas exploration below.

Notwithstanding the ship imagery, it is worthwhile to mention that Watson praises Henry VIII as *our moost naturell souerayne lorde kynge Henry y^e. viii whome Ihesu preserue from all encombraunce*, ›our most natural sovereign lord King Henry VIII whom Jesus preserve from all encumbrance‹ (Watson 1509, A2^v). Likewise, Barclay, in a more elaborate tone, includes an entire set of new verses on *A lawde of the nobles and grauyte of Kynge Henry the eight*, ›A commendation of the nobility and gravity of King Henry the eighth‹, and *An addicion of Alexander_barclay in the lawde of kynge Henry the viij*, ›An addition of Alexander Barclay in commendation of King Henry VIII‹ (Barclay 1509, Tabula). Barclay's additions indicate how strongly his translation is meant to honour the new Tudor king as leader of England's monarchy. Both authors participate in a process of »Englishing« their translations and, as Brenda Hosington has shown with regard to Watson, »domesticating« the source text »for an English audience« (Hosington 2007, p. 18). This can also be seen in Barclay, who

lauds Henry as a *Prynce* who *is moste worthy by honour to ascende / Vnto a noble Diademe Imperyall*, a ›Prince‹ who ›is most worthy by honour to ascend unto a noble imperial diadem‹ (Barclay 1509, CCXVI^v, fol. N iii^v). Like other authors and translators of the time, Barclay envisions Tudor England as a globally leading monarchy that may be able one day to rule not only England but the entire world and especially Jerusalem, to which the previous passage relates. Before commenting more specifically on Barclay and Watson's approaches to global matters, a note on the different source texts and translation strategies of Barclay and Watson helps to explain how their divergent positions on their roles as translators affects their rendering of the ship allegory. In the process, other kinds of affordances emerge that can partly be explained with the translations not travelling directly from Basel to London but taking intermediary routes via Latin and French.

Neither of the first two English translations takes Brant's original as immediate source text. Both Watson and Barclay drew on intermediary sources (Steiner 2023, p. 345). Watson translated his ›Shyppe‹ primarily from Jean Drouyn's French prose version ›La grant nef des folz du monde‹ (1498; USTC 767199), which is itself »an abbreviated prose version of *La Nef des folz du monde* (1497, USTC 70940), an anonymous French verse translation of Locher's *Stultifera navis*« (Colley 2020, p. 148).⁹ Olga Anna Duhl describes Jean Drouyn, also spelled Jehan Droyn or Jean Drouin, as »a law clerk from Amiens who became known in the cultural world as a *rhétoriqueur* and a prose translator/adaptator« who »as translator was guided by didactic rather than literary concerns« (Duhl 2007, p. 55; italics in original). Drouyn's translation of ›La nef des folz du monde‹ follows a similar style as his translation of Jodocus Badius's ›Stultiferae Naves‹ (1501) into French, where »Droyn adopted the voice of a ›petit orateur francoys‹ [a minor French orator], a seemingly humble preacher/rhetorician delivering a sermon« (Duhl 2007, p. 56). Regarding his translation strategy from French into English, Watson sticks closely to the source text and

chooses similar words, phrases, and generic forms as Drouyn. In contrast, Barclay's ›Shyp‹ draws for the most part on Jakob Locher's ›Stultifera Navis‹ (1497).^[10] The Latin text is partly included in Barclay's translation so that it becomes a bilingual edition. This choice adheres to the »gold standard of humanist scholarship and conferred authority« (Colley 2020, p. 159) insofar as it increases the textual affordances of intellectual, political, and cultural-historical meaning. Like Locher before him, Barclay takes liberties with the source text and becomes a co-author of the text with numerous new passages (Steiner 2023, p. 362), including so-called envoys at the end of each chapter and other passages within the text (Colley 2020).^[11] »Each form can only do so much« (Levine 2015, p. 6), Levine writes, and by printing a bilingual version that is rich in woodcuts, elaborate glosses, and additional envoys, Barclay increases the potencies of his text quite literally.

These different routes of translation corroborate what Ulrike Draesner, Annkathrin Koppers, Regina Toepfer and Jörg Wesche have shown with regard to early modern translation cultures: that the pluralization and professionalization of translation practices in early modernity led to such diversity that they questioned not only established categories of source and target language but also of categories such as author, translator or literary authority (Draesner [et al.] 2023, p. 8). Literary forms, too, partake in this destabilization of established categories. Whereas some translators stick to the spiritual and religious message of Brant's ship allegory, others saw different kinds of affordances in the allegory and formed it further into a direction of humanist satire, as a closer look at the translators' prologues by Barclay and Watson illustrates. In his chapter »Barclay the Translatour to the Foles«, Barclay utilizes the allegory to caricature his own authority as translator. By using the familiar tropes of hyperbole and irony, he adds to the paradoxical nature of the vessel's situation and invites the readers to become part of the folly.

*But I pray you reders haue ye no dysdayne.
Thoughe Barclay haue presumed of audacite
This Shyp to rule as chefe mayster and Captayne.
Though some thynke them selfe moche worthyer
than he
[...]
But if that any one be in suche maner case.
That he wyl chalange the maystershyps fro me
yet in my Shyp can I nat want a place.
For in euery place my-selfe I oft may se.
(Barclay 1509, fol., A5^v–A6^r)*

But I pray you, readers, have you no disdain,
Though Barclay has presumed, out of boldness,
This ship to rule as chief master and captain.
Though some think themselves much worthier
than he
[...]
But if anyone be in such a case
That he will challenge the mastership from me,
Yet in my ship can I not lack a place,
For in every place myself I often may see.

With its string of ship and captain metaphors, the passage broadens the affordances of the ship metaphor into the direction of satire by playfully challenging the authority of the translator. Barclay casts himself into the role of *Captayne*, ›captain‹, and *chefe mayster*, ›chief master‹, but mockingly acknowledges that some readers may be even more skilled in foolishness than he is and, hence, invites them to *challenge the maystershyps fro me*, ›to challenge the mastership from me‹ (Barclay 1509, fol., A5^v–A6^r). In this manner, a carnivalesque movement is set in place that both stabilizes and undercuts the translator's expert role. The text thrives in the allegory's potential for disorder by telling the audience that no roles are fixed, including those of *chefe mayster and Captayne*, ›chief master and captain‹. Satirical literature is the domain where existing imperatives and governing rules are challenged, which is translated here into an allegorical rendering

of a ship as a symbol of both orientation and disorientation. As readers, we can follow the translator and enter the ship, but we should be aware that no claim for authority is permanent. The paradoxical logic of the ship that never reaches its destination is extended to describe the equally absurd position of a translator who is an expert on the text but lays no permanent claim to its authority, even though he is the captain.

In contrast to Barclay, Watson's ›Shyppe‹ develops the translator's note into a direction that clarifies that the ship, as the entire text, intends to take readers on a journey towards spiritual salvation. Watson's prose, like Drouyn's source text, features a homiletic narrator whose style is steeped in religious and moral narrative structures. Similar to Barclay, Watson's prologue utilizes the ship allegory to situate the translator in relation to the text and the implied readers, and it highlights the prose version's intention of using as straightforward a style as possible to reach a broad readership: *I haue consydered that the one delyteth them in latyn / y^e other in Frensshe / some in ryme / and the other in prose / for the whiche cause I haue done this / more ouer consydyerynge this that Therence sayth. Tot capita tot sensus / also many heedes / also many opynyons*, ›I have considered that the one delights them in Latin, the other in French, some in rhyme, and the other in prose, for the which cause I have done this moreover considering this that Terence says, Tot capita tot sensus, as many heads, as many opinions‹ (Watson A2^r). Watson continues to explain his generic choice by stating that *prose is more famylyer vnto every man than y^e ryme*. ›prose is more familiar unto everyman than rhyme‹ (Watson A2^v), which connects the translation with a different readership: not an already educated circle but a wider audience who may wish to read the text to educate themselves in English.¹² Watson links the choice of generic form to different affordances, including accessibility and ease of understanding. He organizes the narrative's central ship allegory so as to afford accessibility for his readers and offers a spiritual interpretation of the ship that highlights religious insight as key value of the allegory:

I Henry Watson indygne and symple of vnderstandynge / haue reduced this present boke in to our maternall tongue of Englysshe out of Frensh / at the request of my worship full mayster wynkyn de worde [...]. I haue not wyllled to chaunge the name of the boke y^e whiche hathe ben called by the fyrste composer the shyppe of fooles. He hathe figured a shyppe full of fooles fletynge vpon a see. By the shyppe we may vnderstonde the folyes and erroures that the mondaynes are in [...] the fooles beyng in the shyppe / is the synners / for we are in this worlde as pylgrymes fletynge frome one countree to another / and after our operacyons we shall be remunered at the porte of salute.
(Watson A2^v)

I, Henry Watson, unworthy and simple of understanding, have rendered this present book into our maternal tongue of English out of French at the request of my worshipful master Wynkyn de Worde [...]. I have not wished to change the name of the book, which has been called by the first composer the *Ship of Fools*. He has figured a ship full of fools fleeing upon a sea. By the ship we may understand the follies and errors that the mundane people are in [...], the fools being in the ship is [sic] the sinners; for we are in this world as pilgrims fleeing from one country to another and after our operations we shall be rewarded at the port of salvation.

Following closely Drouyn's self-stylization as *a figure [...] plaine*, ›a figure plain‹ (Drouyn 1499, A2^v), Watson stylizes himself as a translator for those *indygne and symple of vnderstandynge*, ›unworthy and simple of understanding‹, which leads him not only to *reduc[e] this present boke in to our maternall tongue of Englysshe*, ›render this present book into our maternal tongue of English‹, but to interpret the ship metaphor for his readers. In contrast to Barclay, who draws attention to the allegory's and the translations' ambiguities, Watson explains that the *shyppe*, ›ship‹, symbolizes *the folyes and erroures that the mondaynes are in*, ›the follies and errors that the mundane people are in‹, and that *the fooles beyng in the shyppe*, ›fools being in the ship‹, are, quite clearly, *the synners*, ›the sinners‹. Religious categories of sin, pilgrimage, and secular mistake (*erroures that the mondaynes*, ›errors that the mundane people‹) shape Watson's explanation of the ship allegory. There is a clear trajectory of the fools' journey from *this worlde*, ›this world‹, to the biblical *porte of salute*, ›port of salvation‹.

Such a reading is underscored by a closer look at ships and traveling imagery in other parts of the two translations, where Watson's text prioritizes the allegorical meaning of the journey while Barclay references real-life voyages and navigation terminology that interacts with travel narratives around 1500.

3. Between Allegory and Authenticity: Ship and Travel Imagery around 1500

Ship imagery significantly changed in late medieval and early modern literature and culture. Parallel to the expeditions of voyagers such as Christopher Columbus, John Cabot or Ferdinand Magellan, travel writing became linked to scientific and empirical writing, even if systematic forms of observation and first-person accounts still interacted, and continued to do so, with established narratives of travel as mythical and religious journeys (Korte 2020, pp. 98–101). Brant's ship imagery, too, can be traced back at least as long as Book VI of Plato's ›Republic‹ and, also, to medieval traditions of metaphorical ships voyages (Classen 2012, p. 33), but, like other texts around 1500, it increasingly interacted with overseas travel narratives (Möllenbrink 2023, p. 232–241).

In the English tradition, works such as Thomas More's ›Utopia‹ (1516), Francis Bacon's ›New Atlantis‹ (1626) or Henry Neville's ›Isle of Pines‹ (1688) illustrate the close links between voyages of global exploration and fictional travel narratives in early modernity. More's ›Utopia‹ is perhaps the most eminent example of how the allegorical tradition interacts with discourses of actual travels in the early sixteenth century. More draws on medieval texts such as John Mandeville's ›Travels‹ (c.1365), »the satiric *Land of Cockaigne* (c.1320)« as well as other medieval narratives that inform »the monastic backdrop of the Utopian society« (Contzen 2014, p. 4). At the same time, More's fictional character Raphael Hythloday is said to have travelled along on one of the voyages of Amerigo Vespucci before he

went further and came across the island known as ›Utopia‹. In these and other ways, ›Utopia‹ is linked to the »rapid expansion in travel« (Day 2015, p. 161) in early modernity, even as the text invites readers to question and challenge these traditions through the satirical mode.¹³ Perhaps because of this ambivalence, ›Utopia‹ has been received as marking »the dawn of our modernity« (Marin 1993, p. 411). Although Barclay translated Locher's ›Stultifera navis‹ a few years prior to More's ›Utopia‹, it is possible to see some early links between humanist allegories and authentic travel narratives in Barclay's ›Shyp‹.

The first chapter of both English 1509 translations introduces the meta-conceit of the text, which is that books – like ships – are only valuable if they are used in a purposeful way. If not, the misuse of the object's obvious affordances is the first and foremost of all follies. Both translations formally arrange their openings in the poetic shape of the rhyme royal, which was popularized in English by Geoffrey Chaucer's ›Troilus and Criseyde‹ and became a standard of medieval and early modern literature. Barclay's chapter then continues in verse form whereas Watson follows Drouyn's prose translation. In terms of style and allegorical framing, Watson continues to opt for a relatively plain language that taps into the spiritual potencies of the ship allegory:

Of bookes inutyle. ca. primo.

*The fyrste foole of the shyppes I am certayne
That with my handes dresse the sayles all
for to haue bookes I do all my besy payne
Which I loue not to rede in specyall
Nor them to se also in generall
Wherfore it is a prouerbe all aboute
Suche thynketh to knowe y^t standeth in doute
(Watson 1509, fol. A1^v)*

Of useless books, chapter the first

The first fool of the ship I am certain
That with my hands dress all the sails
for to have books I do all my busy effort
Which I love not to read in particular
Nor to see them also in general
Wherefor it is a proverb all about
Such think to know who stand in doubt

In Watson's translation, the *shyppe*, ›ship‹, is depicted as having *sayles*, ›sails‹, that the narrator operates with his *handes*, ›hands‹. As usual, the lines follow closely Drouyn's source text, where the sails (*Les voiles*) are also said to be lifted by hand (*de ma main*) (Drouyn 1499, A4^r). Apart from these details, there are few nautical terms in Watson's translation. Barclay, in contrast, draws readers into a more material dimensions of early modern seafaring by using detailed vocabulary for rendering his ship allegory:

*Here begynneth the foles and first inprofytable
bokes.*

*I Am the firste fole of all the hole nauy
To kepe the pompe / the helme and eke the sayle
For this is my mynde / this one pleasoure haue I
Of bokes to haue grete plenty and aparayle
I take no wysdome by them: nor yet auayle
Nor them perceyue nat: And then I them despyse
Thus am I a foole and all that sewe that guyse
(Barclay 1509, fol. B5^v)*

Here begins the follies and first unprofitable books

I am the first fool of all the whole navy
To keep the pomp, the helm and also the sail
For this is my mind, this one pleasure have I
Of books to have great plenty and display
I take no wisdom by them: nor yet use
Nor perceive them at all: And then I despise them
Thus am I a fool and all who follow that way

In Barclay's verses, much emphasis is put on the materiality of the ship. Words such as *navy*, ›navy‹, *pompe*, ›pomp‹, *helme*, ›helm‹, or *the sayle*, ›the sail‹, illustrate the translator's familiarity with early modern seafaring terms. Following Pompen, Barclay's translation »adds a great many details to the description of the ships, showing that he is perfectly familiar with nautical terminology« (Pompen 1925, p. 265). Whereas in Watson's verses, the metaphorical nature of the ship emerges in the overall lack of what Monika Fludernik refers to as »embodiedness« (Fludernik 1996, p. 22),¹⁴ Barclay's verses turn the ship into an embodied object that allows readers to both cognitively and emotionally relate to the ship. This can also be seen in other parts of Barclay's translation.

In a chapter that describes the folly of professionals who abuse their power, the affordances of generic choice interact with the affordances of allegory. The chapter is titled *Of the extorcion of knyghtis great / offycers / men of war / scribes and practysers of the lawe*, ›Of the extortion of knights, great officers, men of war, scribes and practitioners of law‹, in Barclay's text (Barclay 1509, D3^v) and *Of knytghe / men of armes / scrybes / and practycyens*, ›Of knights, men of arms, scribes, and practitioners‹, in Watson's translation (Watson 1509, fol. R4^r). The opening verses of each chapter criticize the abuse of power in the named professions, where the poor get poorer and the rich get richer because the latter take *more than theyr duete*, ›more than their duty‹ (Watson 1509, R4^r). In both cases, the allegorical nature of the fools assembling on the ship is meant to stimulate a »movement of thought« among readers, meaning the »interpretive and inferential moves readers are prompted to make, based on textual patterns« (Contzen/Kukkonen 2024, p. 406). Yet, the form is distinct and illustrates how the affordances of allegory interact with its contexts. When comparing Barclay's verses to Watson's corresponding chapter *Of knytghe / men of armes / scrybes / and practycyens*, ›Of knights, men of arms, scribes, and practitioners‹ (Watson 1509, R4^r), the differences are immediately apparent. In

Watsons's text, the ship does not seem to be an embodied object but a satirical symbol that is as absurd as the fools:

ADuocates / procurours / knyghtes / scribes notaryes / and men of armes / renne hastely on hors backe or on fote / be not absente / and ye shall here a fayre satyre. Our wylles gyue to vnderstonde / and at this present tyme we somone all scribes and men of warre / we wyl yt they be of our folkes in the shyppe of fragylyte berynge grete asses eres / and gyue unto eche his rewarde after his deserte. Approche you / and come lyghtly or elles our shyppe wyll departe / come and ye shall be in a corner to rowe with ores. (Watson 1509, fol. R4^v)

Advocates, procurers, knights, scribes, notaries, and men of arms, run hastily on horseback or on foot, be not absent, and you shall hear a fair satire. Our wills give to understand, and at this present time we summon all scribes and men of war, we will it they be of our folk in the ship of fragility bearing great asses' ears and give unto each his reward as he deserves. Approach you, and come lightly or else our ship will depart, come and yet shall be in a corner to row with oars.

Watson's prose contains two references to the *shyppe*, ›ship‹, used as noun and verb in his text, and another reference to *row[ing]*, ›rowing‹, which is one of the few verbs signaling »movement of figure« (Contzen/Kukkonen 2024, p. 406) rather than the movement of plot or thought in the passage. Yet, despite the possibility of the characters' departure inherent in ›rowing‹, the ship remains an abstract object. The temporal aspect of haste – *come lyghtly or elles our shyppe wyll departe*, ›come lightly or else our ship will depart‹ – is in the foreground, as can also be seen when the translator insists that everyone should *renne hastely on hors backe or on fote*, ›run hastily on horseback or on foot‹. The language bears out how strongly Watson's texts charts the spatial allegories of biblical narratives, where the fools will end *in the fyre of helle*, ›in the fire of hell‹ (Watson 1509, fol. S1^r) if they do not improve, quickly, in their lives. Watson's chapter stresses the spiritual journey that will either end in punishment or reward: *and gyue unto*

eche his rewarde after his deserte, ›and give unto each his reward as he deserves‹ (Watson 1509, fol. R4^v).

In Barclay's verses, the narrative stimuli provide the audience with linguistic details that connect the cognitive movement of the readers to the ship's readiness to travel. Barclay invites readers to imaginatively enter the vessel by employing a rich and detailed vocabulary that renders the allegory into a quasi-physical object:

*Hast hyther I requyre / my Nauy is a flote
Longe tary hurtyth / for hawsyd is the sayle
The anker wayed / within borde is the bote
Our shyp decked after a homely aparayle
By suche passyngers I loke for none auayle
But fere displeasour / bycause I shall be trewe
Yet shall I so. ensue what may ensue*
(Barclay 1509, D3^v)

Hasten hither I require, my Navy is afloat
Long tarrying hurts, for hoisted is the sail
The anchor weighed, within board is the boat
Our ship decked after a homely apparel
By such passengers I look for no avail
But I fear displeasure, because I shall be true
Yet shall I so ensue, whatever may ensue.

Barclay's application of the term *Nauy*, ›Navy‹, for the professional deceivers adds to the satirical nature of the text insofar as it depicts the bureaucrats as a flotilla of fools who will never arrive anywhere. Detailed depictions of the ship's sail that has been hoisted (*hawsyd*) or of the boat being *decked after a homely aparayle*, ›decked after a homely apparel‹, and the *anker* [being] *wayed / within borde*, ›anchor weighed, within board‹, engage readers in a journey that is also meant to end, as in Watson's translation, with moral improvement. The final verses of Barclay's chapter address the readers and stipulate that *Better is for you to lyue in pouertye [...] Than by oppression to come to hye degree / And than after deth be damnyd for*

the same, ›Better is for you to live in poverty [...] Than by oppression to come to high degree, and then after death be damned for the same‹ (Barclay 1509, D5^r). The allegorical journey thus serves as connection between the abstract travels of the fools and the real-life travels of the audience. The voyage is meant to end in self-improvement, but the experientiality of Barclay's text is strengthened through the emphasis on the physical characteristics of the ship. Barclay puts the spiritual affordances of the allegory to work while adding a material dimension to the spiritual journey that gives readers the impression of an actual, embodied journey. While these different dimensions of allegory in Barclay and Watson appear to bear little global meaning when it comes to administrative professions, they take on a cultural-historical meaning of seafaring culture when the texts comment on Atlantic travels and the Americas.

4. Only Fools Rush In: Global Travelling and the Americas

As the previous section has shown, Atlantic travelling became a prominent motif of expansion around 1500. Numerous oceanic journeys, imaginary and real, were undertaken and became a formative experience of the time: »The idea of a global and extra-territorial sea was a distinctive cultural development in the early modern period« (Mentz 2009, p. 998). In Brant's ›Narrenschiff‹, this »distinctive cultural development« is witnessed with the same sense of ambivalence that characterizes early modern travel narratives. It is worthwhile to trace the development of Atlantic references in the ›ship of fools‹ tradition from Brant's original to Locher and Drouyn's translations and, finally, to Watson and Barclay in order to recognize how significantly the affordances of allegory change in dialogue with their formal and contextual configurations.

In Brant's ›Narrenschiff‹, there is a brief reference to the Americas in chapter 66, titled *von erfahrung aller land*, ›of the experience of all countries‹.¹⁵ The chapter frames the travels of Columbus in its typically satirical

mode, using doggerel verse with rhyming couplets to ridicule the idea of travelling abroad:

*Ouch hatt man sydt jnn Portigall
Vnd jnn Hispanyen vberall
Golt / jnslen funden / vnd nacket lüt
Von den man vor wust sagen nüt*
(Brant 1495, L4^v)

Also has one said in Portugal
And in Spain everywhere
Gold islands found, and naked people
Of them one before knew nothing to say

The Atlantic is not named explicitly in these lines, but mentioning the Portuguese and Spanish initiative to discover the *jnslen*, ›islands‹, with *Golt* and *nacket lüt*, ›Gold‹ and ›naked people‹, links the verse to narratives of Atlantic explorations. The words express both desire and fascination, as seen in linking gold to the existence of naked people (Brant 1495, L4^v). Following Stephen Greenblatt, such depictions can be understood as expressing a sense of »radical otherness« that early modern travelers experienced in their encounters with indigenous populations of the Americas (Greenblatt 1991, p. 22). In Brant's lines, these encounters are preceded by references to classical and mythological journeys, ranging from Norway to Thule, all of which are said to be useless on one's way towards spiritual salvation (Brant 1495, L4^v). The sea in particular serves as a futile frontier because it cannot be fathomed or measured: *Vnd raechnen biß hynder das mer / Dar jnn menschlich vernunft jrret ser*, ›And measure until behind the sea, Therein human reason errs greatly‹ (Brant 1495, L4^v). Here as well as elsewhere, the verses' predominant trajectory is the futility of travelling abroad, even if Brant's own position on American exploration seems to have been ambivalent. As Linus Möllenbrink has shown, there is evidence to suggest that Brant was interested in, if not openly supportive of the Atlantic voyages

by Columbus and his contemporaries, as seen in the laudatory verses authored by Brant on King Ferdinand (Möllenbrink 2023, p. 236). Such ambivalence dovetails with the equally ambivalent allegory of a ship that never reaches its destination because its main purpose lies in assembling the follies of this world. The narrator asserts that other lands have been uncovered before, yet none has brought true insight or spiritual wellbeing. This formula, of the unfathomable sea that cannot be measured despite being fascinated by it, is a recurring motif in Brant's original. It acquires further ambivalence in later translations and reworkings into other languages.

Starting with Locher's ›Stultifera navis‹, the affordances of the ship develop into ever more ambivalent directions. The figurative object gains an increasingly material dimension that partly provokes a political commentary on the utility of global exploration. Locher's chapter *De geographica regionū inquisitione* mentions King Ferdinand of Spain in connection with the recent journeys to the *incognita tellus*, ›the unknown land‹. As mentioned earlier, Ferdinand II of Spain was the father of Catherine of Aragon and, from 1509 until their divorce in 1533, he was Henry VIII's father-in-law. When Locher translated the ›Stultifera navis‹ between 1497 and 1498, the wedding between Catherine and Henry was more than a decade away, as were the later harbingers of the English Reformation and the eventual break-up of the Anglo-Spanish alliance. Still, Locher's Latin verses pave the way for framing Atlantic voyages as a source of knowledge that accords with the emerging scientific tradition in early modern travel writing:

*Antea quē fuerat priſcis incognita tellus:
Expoſita eſt oculis&manifeſta patet
Heſperie occiduē rex Ferdinandus:in alto
Aequore nunc gentes repperit innumeras*
(Locher 1497, K4^v)

A land that was previously unknown to the ancients:
Is exposed to the eyes and lies revealed
Ferdinand, king of western Occident: upon the vast
Ocean has now discovered countless peoples

Whereas Brant's version situates the Spanish and Portuguese travels in a tradition of ancient and mythological travels, Locher's lines are informed by a knowledge-based approach towards Atlantic travel. In a historical reference that will also feature in Barclay and Watson, King Ferdinand of Spain is named as the initiator of Atlantic voyages. Locher's choice of the Latin *repperit*, meaning finding or discovering, as well as *gentes [...] innumeras* (»countless people«) in the *alto / Aequare* (»vast ocean«) paints an affirmative picture of Atlantic travels. Whereas satire often disrupts a linear teleology and celebrates non-teleological plotlines, as seen in the stationary ship, Locher's lines suggest that the newfound lands may lead to wide-ranging temporal and spatial change. The line *Antea quę fuerat prifcis incognita tellus: / Expofita est oculis&manifesta patet* denotes a sense of wonder and conceivable increase in knowledge – what was »previously unknown« is now »revealed« – that sustains a teleological rather than a satirical narrative structure.

As to be expected from Barclay, a translator known for his humanist style, his ›Shyp‹ picks up on Locher's trajectory and links overseas travel to knowledge acquisition. Barclay's chapter *Of the folysshe descripcion and inquisicion of dyuers contrées and regyons*, ›Of the foolish description and inquisition of diverse countries and regions‹ (Barclay 1509, &4^v), testifies to the translator's interest in global encounters. His translation is 77 lines long, compared to Locher's 64 lines, meaning that he adds lines and further detail to the chapter. It undercuts Brant's satirical emphasis on non-teleological travelling as solution to the follies of the world by closing the chapter with a reference to the Americas that promotes overseas exploration as potentially leading to novel insight:

*For nowe of late hath large londe and grounde
Ben founde by maryners and crafty gouernours
The whiche londes were neuer knowen nor founde
Byfore our tyme by our predecessours
And here-after shall by our successours*

*Parchaunce mo be founde / wherin men dwell
Of whome we neuer before this same harde tell*

*Ferdynandus that late was kynge of spayne
Of londe and people hath founde plenty and store
Of whome the bydyng to vs was vncertayne
No christen man of them harde tell before
Thus is it foly to tende vnto the lore
And vnsure science of vayne geometry
Syns none can knowe all the worlde perfytely
(Barclay 1509, &5^r)*

For now of late has large land and ground
Been found by mariners and crafty governors
The which lands were never known nor found
Before our time by our predecessors
And hereafter shall by our successors
Perchance more be found, wherein men dwell
Of whom we never before this same heard tell

Ferdinand who lately was King of Spain
Of land and people has found plenty and store
Of whom the knowledge to us was uncertain
No Christian man of them heard tell before
Thus it is folly to tend unto the lore
And unsure science of vain geometry
Since none can know all the world perfectly

Here, in miniature, we see Barclay's approach to global exploration as challenging the stagnancy of the allegorical ship. While the final line concedes that *none can knowe all the worlde perfytely*, ›none can know all the world perfectly‹, the lines beforehand accentuate that it is possible to learn about *londes* [that] *were neuer knowen nor founde*, ›lands [that] were never known nor found‹, before and that these new encounters have increased knowledge among Europeans. The repetition of the words *founde*, ›found‹, *known*, ›known‹, and *londe*, land‹, together with the naming of the *maryn-*

ers and crafty governours, ›mariners and crafty governors‹, who make Atlantic travels possible, calls attention to the possibility of leaving the *uncertain*, ›uncertain‹, nature of the world behind and gaining knowledge about *londes* [...] *neuer knowen nor founde*, ›lands [...] never known nor found‹. Like More's ›Utopia‹, Locher's ›Stultifera navis‹ forms an early sounding of the idea that Atlantic travel may symbolize, in Marin's sense, a new ›horizon‹ (Marin 1993, p. 411). Barclay, who worked with the royal printer Richard Pynson, may have geared his chapter to the young Henry VIII and added a political dimension to the chapter that emerges most prominently in his envoy:

Th'enuoy of Barklay.

*Ye people that labour the worlde to mesure
Therby to knowe the regyons of the same
Knowe firste your-self / that knowlege is moste sure
For certaynly it is rebuke and shame
For man to labour. onely for a name
To knowe the compasse of all the worlde wyde
Nat knowynge hym-selfe / nor howe he sholde hym gyde
(Barclay 1509, &6^r)*

The envoy of Barclay

You people that labour the world to measure
Thereby to know the regions of the same
Know first yourself, that knowledge is most sure
For certainly it is rebuke and shame
For man to labour only for a name
To know the compass of the whole world wide,
Not knowing himself, nor how he should him[self] guide

Beneath the satirical take on attempting to measure the world, the lines draw attention to the importance of learning and education. The allegory of an immobile ship seems far away from the affordances of travelling as depicted here. These affordances extend to self-knowledge and knowledge of

the world. The five-fold repetition of the words *knowe*, ›know‹, *knowledge*, ›knowledge‹, and *knowynge*, ›knowing‹, in a seven-line stanza marks Barclay's approach towards education as the basis of all understanding. Barclay's envoy does not advise against global exploration, even if the preceding chapter is titled *Of the folysshe descripcion and inquisicion of dyuers countrees and regyons*, ›Of the foolish description and inquisition of diverse countries and regions‹ (Barclay 1509, &4^v). In contrast to this title, Barclay's envoy instructs readers to *Knowe firste your-self* before venturing abroad. Afterwards, it may be possible *To knowe the compasse of all the worlde wyde*, ›To know the compass of the whole world wide‹. In the decades and centuries following Barclay's translation, this ethos of knowledge acquisition interacted strongly with European empire-building. Levine's argument that »[a] panoptic arrangement of space, wherever it takes shape, will always afford a certain kind of disciplinary power; a hierarchy will always afford inequality« (Levine 2015, p. 7) helps to explain how the Atlantic became a space not only of political but also of literary and formal hierarchical relations. Needless to say, Barclay was neither a colonist nor a promoter of geographical appropriation of the Americas. His lines illustrate, though, how the affordances of the ship allegory changed in the early sixteenth century to fathom the material and political potencies of the Atlantic for Europeans.

As a counter-narrative to early modern Atlantic exploration, Watson's chapter *Of hym that wyll wryte/and enquere of all regyons*, ›Of him who will write and inquire into all regions‹ (Watson 1509, P3^v) continues to praise the spiritual affordances of the ship and to remind readers of the benefits of scholastic learning. Where Barclay's envoy expresses fascination with transforming uncertainty into certainty, Watson's translation underlines the absurdity of venturing abroad and underscores the pious affordances of staying at home. The chapter opens with a seven-line rhyme royal that captures the gist of the ensuing prose passage. Watson's verses warn of trying

to *mesur[e] the grounde* and launching a project of scientific exploration that is absurd because it can never be completed:

*Of hym that wyll wryte / and enquire of all
regyons. ca. lxiiii.*

*He the whiche mesureth the grounde
The heuens and the clymates all
And the worlde the whiche is all rounde
With the planettes superyall
Dyspraysynge our lorde eternall
By comprysynge so follysshely
The maners of countrees truely
(Watson 1509, P3^v–P4^r)*

Of him who will write and inquire into all regions,
chapter 64

He who measures the ground
The heavens and the climates all
And the world which is all round
With the planets above
Dispraising our Lord eternal
By comprising so foolishly
The manners of countries truly

The language avoids the investigative trajectory of early modern explorations and resorts to a familiar topography of religious salvation and condemnation. This comes out most explicitly when the verses conclude that *He the whiche mesureth the grounde*, ›He who measures the ground‹, is *Dyspraysynge our lorde eternall*, ›Dispraising our Lord eternal‹, which is where scientific curiosity is equated with a violation of Christian doctrine. New knowledge is not valued. Instead, cosmological ideas of the world as constituted of the *grounde*, ›ground‹, the *heauens and the clymates all*, ›The heavens and the climates all‹ as well as the *planettes superyall*, ›planets above‹, are firmly set in place and make any attempts to *mesureth the*

grounde, ›measures the ground‹, futile. Watson's translation seeks to provide moral stability at a time of cultural change, including the epistemological uncertainty of shifting geographical boundaries. It aligns with other narratives where a »Christian worldview« and belief in the preeminence of religious truth »comes with a set of presuppositions and basic assumptions that have a fundamental bearing on the spatial and temporal configurations of a narrative« (Contzen 2014, p. 13). Watson gives priority to the certainties of cosmological time and space whereas Barclay expresses curiosity about nautical investigations.

Despite the differences between their translations, Watson's ›Shyppe‹ also comments briefly on the Americas. Like Drouyn (Drouyn 1499, H2^v), he translates the sense of spatial alterity into a dehumanizing language that aligns with other discursive forces in the early modern colonial arena:

Of prystes that neuer had ben manyfeste / was she not founde with the eye / and not with the herte There was one that knewe that in y^e yles of spayne was enhabytaū tes. Wherefore he asked men of kyng^e Ferdynandus / & wente & founde them / the whiche lyued as beestes. (Watson 1509, P4^v)

Of priests that never had been manifest, was she not found with the eye, and not with the heart; There was one that knew that in the isles of Spain was inhabited. Wherefore he asked men of King Ferdinand and went and found them, the which lived as beasts.

Like Locher and Barclay, Watson names *kyng^e Ferdynandus*, ›King Ferdinand‹, as the initiator of Atlantic exploration. The marginalia on the page call attention to the significance of this reference. *Ferdinand⁹ hispaniarum rex*, ›Ferdinand, Kind of Spain‹, is written in the margins, which may be a subtle way of remarking upon the Anglo-Spanish alliance and expressing support for the Tudor dynasty. At the same time, Watson's translation does not praise the worldly affordances of overseas exploration. To depict the indigenous population as *beestes*, ›beasts‹, and, in so doing, exploit non-human attributes for humans with a different cultural background is a direct translation of Drouyn's *bestes*, ›beasts‹, in his French version (Drouyn

1499, H2^v). What these strategies of dehumanization illustrate is that encounters with the Americas are not only seen as futile by Watson or Drouyn; they are depicted as a space of cultural and temporal retrogression, where travellers are not moving forward on their journeys towards spiritual salvation but are potentially threatened to relapse into a limbo of moving further away from God in the Great Chain of Being. The gist of Watson's allegorical rendering of Atlantic voyages can be found in the opening lines of the passage quoted above. It is better, he writes, to see with the *herte*, ›heart‹, than the *eye*, ›eye‹, meaning it is better to comprehend spiritually than scientifically or materially. The affordances of the ship allegory, for Watson, lie in providing spiritual, spatial, and emotional stability. For Barclay, the political, cultural, and material affordances of the ship become an additional, and sometimes subversive space in which the ship's allegorical meaning can move into the direction of satirical-humanist narratives of travelling as a means of knowledge acquisition.

5. Conclusion

As twenty-first century readers are forced to come to terms with the effects of travelling on cultural encounters as well as climate conditions over the past 500 years, it is worthwhile to revisit some of the texts that organize their narrative around the potential affordances of journeying abroad and to examine how travel narratives – both real and imagined – interact with modernity's understanding of global exploration as a symbol of progress. Barclay and Watson present us with utterly opposing viewpoints on this matter. Partly, these differences reflect on Brant's own position as a member of an intellectual and forward-thinking elite who was at the same time concerned with promoting »piety« among his readers (Henkel 2023, p. 31). The links between intellectual and spiritual positions are not totally severed in the English translations, but Barclay and Watson work them into different directions, as my reading of the ship allegory above illustrates. Their

texts remind us not only that travel and global exploration interact with the »overall narrative of progression« (Matthews 2015, p. 256) commonly linked to modernity but also that literary forms have contributed to the construction of travel as linked to knowledge acquisition. This may partly explain why Barclay's translation has been widely received as a key text in the English humanist tradition (Colley 2020; Flood 1994; Grundig 2024; Wilson 2013), whereas Watson's prose version has sometimes been rendered as a less modern – and less successful – translation that no longer speaks to contemporary readers. To summarize a long debate, David Anderson writes that »[a]lthough Watson's version was reprinted within eight years (in 1517), and Barclay's not again until 1570, it is fairly clear that Barclay's version is the one which has stood the test of time« (Anderson 1974, pp. 4). One does not have to identify with such conclusions to recognize that a division into an enduring vs. a non-enduring translation aligns with what Margreta de Grazia has problematized as »the medieval/modern divide [that] determines nothing less than relevance« (de Grazia 2007, p. 453). Various formal markers add to a reading of Watson's text as medieval, including his tendency to adhere to Middle English spelling conventions, for instance, using double consonants, employing »y« rather than »i« or the customary »-eth« ending. In addition, I suggest, the different affordances of the ship allegory in the first English translations help to explain why Barclay's ›Ship‹ has been received as a more modern text in comparison to Watson's ›Shyppe‹.

Both translations draw on the central allegory of the stagnant ship to move readers into an emotional and affective direction of self-improvement. They do so, however, by shaping the ship allegory into either a more or a less material direction. In Barclay's translation, the affordances of the allegory gain potentiality with regard to real-life travels. His text adds physical and material detail to the depiction of overseas travels, which allows the translator to transgress the spatial constraints of the original allegory and develop the symbolic function of the ship into the direction of Atlantic exploration. In Watson's translation, the affordances of the allegory lie

mostly in its ability to move readers cognitively and emotionally, and, in this way, assist them on their way towards spiritual salvation. The key idea is to provide certainty at a time of change, which is why the immobility of the ship is strengthened rather than subverted in Watson's translation.

Taken together, Barclay's ›Shyp‹ and Watson's ›Shyppe‹ demonstrate not only that travel narratives of different kinds were at a crossroad around 1500, but that one and the same allegory can be developed into opposite directions depending on other forms with which they interact. The different ways in which the two texts have crossed the channel and entered the early modern English book market – in Barclay's case, via Locher's Latin verse version and in Watson's case, via Drouyn's French prose version – are crucial to understand how the affordances of allegory shape a text not in a vacuum but in close interaction with contextual forms and movements: »A variety of forms are in motion around us, constraining materials in a range of ways and imposing their order in situated contexts where they constantly overlap other forms« (Levine 2015, p. 11). This shows in the study of Watson's and Barclay's translations through their interaction with different sources texts, translation styles, and generic as well as stylistic choices. In both texts, spatial, spiritual, cultural, and political movements interact meaningfully with the allegory of the ship. The diversity of the allegory's affordances in the first two English translations of the ›ship of fools‹ tradition captures the fragility of the political and cultural moment in Europe but also its potencies, when global contact zones were radically changing the perception of self and other as well as the perception and function of literary forms.

Notes

- 1 I would like to thank Maria Denzlein for assisting with the editing process and the careful proofreading of this article that led to numerous insightful suggestions.

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- 2 Sebastian Brant's ›Narrenschiff‹ (1494) was first printed in Basel by Johann Bergmann von Olpe. The first Latin translation, ›Stultifera navis‹ (1497), by Brant's student Jakob Locher, served as basis for further translations into vernacular languages, including French by Jean Drouyn and Pierre de Rivi re (both 1497), Low German (1497), Dutch (1500), and the two English translations by Watson and Barclay in 1509. I use the term ›ship of fools‹ tradition to refer to this entire network of texts that originates in Brant's ›Narrenschiff‹ and developed partly independently of it after 1494. When I refer to specific versions, I refer to the title of the work. For an overview of the editions and translations before 1500 as well recent publications in the field, see https://www.narragonien-digital.de/exist/resources/pdf/traditio_narragonica.pdf. For recent research on and critical editions of Brant's ›Narrenschiff‹ (1494) and the wider ›ship of fools‹ tradition, see Andersen/Henkel (2023), Baier (2023), Burrichter/Hamm (2021), B chli et al. (2023), Classen (2012), Colley (2020), Flood (1995), Grundig (2024), Hamm (2022), Henkel (2021), Hosington (2007), Knappe (2005), Rankin (2018), Steiner (2023).
- 3 Early examples of allegory in English range from Wycliffite's early version of the Bible (c. 1384) to Earl Rivers' translation of ›The dictes and sayings of the philosophers‹ (1477) to W. Marshall's translation of Erasmus' ›Playne & Godly Expos. Commune Crede‹ (1534). For details on these and other examples, see OED Online 2025, n.p.
- 4 For an analysis of the text-image relationship in Brant's work, with a special focus on ship imagery, see Bertelsmeier-Kierst (2023, pp. 171–178).
- 5 Unless otherwise noted, all quotes from Watson and Barclay's texts into modern English are my own. They are functional rather than poetic translations to make the core ideas of the early English excerpts more accessible.
- 6 For a comment on Foucault's reading of Brant, see Richard Wilson (2013, pp. 773–787).
- 7 For studies on Barclay, see Anderson (2020); Flood (1995); Grundig (2024); Hosington (2007); Pompen (1925); Rankin (2018).
- 8 All four editions – the two first editions from 1509 and the second editions from 1517 and 1570, respectively – are available online (see Barclay 1509; Barclay 1570; Watson 1509; Watson 1517). The present article quotes from the 1509 translations by Barclay and Watson, respectively.

- 9 Watson states in his foreword that he knows of the German and Latin translation, but he follows most closely Jean Drouyn's ›La grant nef des folz du monde‹ (1498).
- 10 As John Colley has shown, various editions of the ›Stultifera navis‹ were printed between 1497 and 1498, and a »staggering ninety-seven copies of the first edition alone are extant« (Colley 2020, p. 147). See, for instance, USTC 200996, 202192, 743657, 743660, 743661, 743662. For details on Locher, see Joachim Hamm (2023, pp. 261–291).
- 11 Barclay states that he also knew de Rivière's French translation (1497) as well as Jodocus Badius's Latin version (1505). He apparently drew on a combination of the texts for his own translation (Flood 1995, p. 133; see also Grundig 2024, pp. 164–65).
- 12 For a different interpretation of the relationship between the Watson and the Barclay translation, see Christine Grundig, who reads the two translators as being in competition with each other (Grundig 2024, pp. 217–218).
- 13 The Greek name Utopia famously means both ›eu-topia‹ and ›ou-topia‹, and the name of the central character, Hythloday, literally means ›speaker of nonsense‹.
- 14 »Embodiedness evokes all the parameters of a real-life schema of existence which always has to be situated in a specific time and space frame, and the motivational and experiential aspects of human actionality likewise relate to the knowledge about one's physical presence in the world. Embodiment and existence in human terms are indeed the same thing [...]« (Fludernik 1996, p. 22).
- 15 For a discussion of Brant's original chapter, see Möllenbrink (2023, pp. 230–243).

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