The Ship of Fools: Hieronymus Bosch in Response to Sebastian Brant

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In her now classic book, *Reading Rembrandt: Beyond the Word-Image Opposition*, narratologist Mieke Bal proposed a view of the humanities as one discipline composed of “word-and-image studies” (33). Whether applied to the pursuits of the poet-painter William Blake, the genre of emblematic poetry, or simply to the peculiarity of the art-historical standard of attaching written description to physical objects—Bal’s proposition is most clearly enforced by the sheer frequency of humanities-based work that dialectically pairs words with images. Further, Bal’s proposition draws attention to the fact that the qualifying term, “word-image,” has yet to be condensed to a singular term. Even when presented as a singular adjective applied to a broad body of work, the terms “word and image” are not “a whole, do not match, do not overlap; they can neither do with nor without each other” (34). In effect: these terms are not so much working in combination as they are actively colliding. Additionally—by the very nature of being able to collide—they become fit for, and demanding of, the act of translation. Thus describes the ultimate in translational investigation—the intermedial hybrid work, the singular entity that is partially between word and image, benefitting from and expanding upon its inclusions of each.

One such work, Sebastian Brant’s *The Ship of Fools* (Das Narrenschiff) (1494), addresses the synergistic effects of combining verse and
imagery by employing these two components to a didactic end. Composed of over one hundred individual chapters, Brant’s work analyzes human folly through a structured approach of three lines of text that can be termed a “motto,” followed by a woodcut print, followed by several pages of verse. This format repeats for each instance of folly, providing engaging modes of both visual and textual significance through which to understand the faulty nature of humanity. There is hardly any deviation from this format, and no instances in which a chapter includes solely an image or solely a body of text. Though Brant’s work is peculiar in its intermediality, what is most perplexing about the composition is its slew of revised editions. Given Brant’s complex reliance upon intermediality in order to convey his ideas, it seems a daunting task to reproduce these ideas with the exclusion of either medium. Yet, in the trajectory of this work’s republication, the revised editions and reprints tend to exclude the original woodcuts, regarding them as unnecessary. Notable examples include the following sixteenth and seventeenth century reprints, each of which is lacking the original woodcuts: 1553, Hermann Gülfferich; 1560, Weygand Han; 1574, Nicolaus Höninger; and 1625, Jakob de Zetter (Zeydel, “Introduction” 22).

Considering the popular indifference amongst republished editions to the inherent intermediality of the original, it would be almost impossible to imagine an edition of Brant’s work that is exclusively visual. Yet, such is the advent of Hieronymus Bosch’s The Ship of Fools (1495-1500), a painted translation of the oft-revised book that dismisses all semblances of textual elements in favor of an entirely new composition. A unique response to a unique original, Bosch’s fully-transformed rendition of Brant’s work affords
further insight into the genre of intermedial works by providing a radical
counterpoint to the existing transformations of Brant’s work, one that equi-
tably promotes the verbal and visual achievements of the original.

Sebastian Brant’s text *The Ship of Fools* was published in Basel in
1494 and exercised tremendous influence over both Brant’s career and the
existing canon of European literature. Immediately received and exten-
sively translated across Europe, *The Ship of Fools* solidified Brant’s renown
and introduced a distinctly German perspective into the literary world of
Europe (Zeydel, “Preface” v). Though the exact philosophical nature of this
perspective is debated—whether humanist, realist, or medieval—its con-
tent is ubiquitously accepted as a satirical approach to the shortcomings of
human nature (Gaier 266). Obviously humorous in its underlying descrip-
tion of a ship of poorly-behaving “fools” dressed to various extents in jester’s
clothing, the text is doubly humorous in its inclusion of visual aids. These
aids—appearing in the form of woodcuts—accompany every textual detail,
and often expand upon them. “Dame Venus” is not just textually prolific
as an enchanter of fools, but she is also forcefully depicted as a cohort of
death, wielding her many fools upon her many leashes (Figure 1, below).
The “world upon [the fool’s] back” is not just metaphorically significant,
but is seen in full physical capacity weighing upon the donkey-eared sufferer
(Figure 2); and so on, as each fool chronicled is paired with an equally criti-
cal depiction. Thus, in Brant’s *The Ship of Fools* visual and textual elements
each contribute essential meaning to the work. The inherent humor, the
very essence of Brant’s design, is anchored in rendering the verbal metaphors
visual.
Despite this clear intermediality, there is evidence to suggest that the textual content of Brant’s work was historically perceived by publishers as superior to the visual content. As is noted in Edwin Zeydel’s introduction, the woodcuts were not reproduced in their entirety in a later edition of Brant’s work until 1872—almost 400 years after the original edition was published (“Introduction” 19). Critical of this approach, Zeydel suggests that this tactic of partial reproduction limits the effectiveness of the verbal translations. Further, he promotes his own current translation into English—which includes the entire body of original woodcuts—by concluding that Brant’s original work “cannot be fully understood or appreciated without this integral component” (“Preface” v). With conviction, Zeydel’s edition and criticism renders obsolete the purely textual approaches to Brant’s work, as we will see, and elucidates Hieronymus Bosch’s early, cohesive response to the complementary effect of image and text in Brant’s work.

Initially created as the left panel of an otherwise unfinished triptych, Bosch’s painted adaptation The Ship of Fools was completed around 1500—shortly after Brant published his wildly successful book—and functions as the artist’s visual translation of the well-known text (Figure 3). Seeking to cement the connection to Brant, Bosch engages in both image-to-image and text-to-image translation in his work. Specifically, he uses compositional aspects from the woodcuts to organize his figures and visual references to certain lines of Brant’s verse to construct the appearances of these figures. This latter practice is what Bal would consider a form of intermedial “quotation” (Caravaggio 10). As is implied by the term “quotation,” the mechanism at work is the grounding of visual elements of Bosch’s work
in specific lines of Brant’s text in service of constructing a new final detail. The effect of this structure is that the original written narrative and Bosch’s new visual narrative “are in tension, but not in contradiction” (Bal, Reading Rembrandt 21). Colliding, these narratives recognize the “already known”—Brant’s work—and thus allow for the “communication of a new, alternative…content”—Bosch’s painting—without dishonoring the original (35). Both the text-to-image and image-to-image mechanisms considered, what is most significant about Bosch’s final composition—beyond its value as a tribute to Brant’s original—is that it undertakes these trials of interpretation and ultimately succeeds in achieving meaning that is decidedly different from that which Brant seemingly intended. Namely, it allows for distinct criticisms of the behavior of identifiable classes beyond Brant’s generic “fools.” Only by constructing his painting as a product of the entirety of Brant’s text—using the writing as well as the compositional choices made in each woodcut—does Bosch produce a representation that is both true to Brant’s formal principal of textual-visual intermediality and, by virtue of referencing an original, expansive in its meaning.

The figure that is a both an apt translation of the text and a subtle tribute to Brant’s supplementary woodcut is Bosch’s image of the gluttonous man (Figure 4). This man reflects the qualities Brant describes in his chapter “Gluttony and Feasting,” where he addresses the issue of consuming wine in excess. In addressing wine’s dangers, Brant points to it as the downfall of several Biblical heroes, the basis for many “grave offenses,” and as something that “wise men” would successfully avoid. In the context of these grievances, Brant believes a glutton to be one who is “round and staunch,” “neglects his
friends,” and is a “silly swine” (97). Additionally, a glutton is “defenseless on the ocean deep,” and does not possess the same foresight as the biblical Noah, who “cared no whit” for wine (97).

Guided by these Brantian verbal cues, Bosch allows for his image to both honor and transfigure the words upon which the image is based. Rather than deliberately contradict or literally represent Brant’s descriptions, Bosch conjures a textually-grounded armature upon which further visual details are molded. The resulting character is not simply a glutton, but is commonly understood as an allegory of Gluttony itself (Morganstern 300). Here, Gluttony appears as an overweight man who is observably “round and staunch,” yet must be deduced to be one who “neglects his friends” through his expressed ignorance to those swimming beneath him. In a subtle dissonance of word against image, Gluttony recalls the “silly swine” through his pink garments and pig-like facial structure, yet fails to embody the literal visual translation for Brant’s line of text as he is not an actual swine (97). In further referential detail, Gluttony rides aboard a leaking barrel in a sea of wine, honoring Brant’s earlier description of the “wise man” Noah (Figure 3). Conversely to the sober Noah, this gluttonous man is entirely obedient to wine’s wiles, and is slowly sinking to his death in the very thing he desires, unable to navigate the wine-filled “ocean deep” (97). In the hands of Bosch as mediator, Gluttony is at the complex intersection of a well-divined metaphor and a veritably human fool, the latter expected by the viewer, having read Brant. As is observed in each of these text-to-image acts of translation, it is the isolation of each individual textually-constructed detail that allows for the text to be refitted for the purpose of Bosch’s visual character.
Having delivered a skillful representation of what Brant verbally describes, Bosch draws no further details from the “Gluttony and Feasting” woodcut to personalize his figure. Brant’s woodcut, depicting a large crowd gorging themselves about a feasting table, has no indication of a sea of wine, nor of any singular gluttonous man (Figure 5). Rather, gluttony is spread about the entire crowd, as some figures consume legs of meat, others choke down gallons of wine, and all celebrate in greedy enjoyment. Comparing this scene to the allegorical image presented by Bosch, it is clear that the Brantian woodcut is quite different in visual representation. To understand why—in the case of Gluttony—Bosch performed an act of text-to-image translation rather than image-to-image translation, an important aspect of Bosch’s translated Gluttony must be considered. Free from the constraints of individually associated chapters, Bosch’s translation of textual Gluttony now exists in a continuous narrative, that of the painted canvas. To compress Gluttony to a singular figure composed of textual references, rather than preserve the entire feast of the woodcut, better serves this allegorical end. Though the indoor feasting scene from Brant’s “Gluttony and Feasting” woodcut is not included in Bosch’s work, it is important to note that the collective imagery produced in this woodcut is not entirely lost. Bosch is able to distribute this concept across the remaining larger narrative. This is clearly shown by Bosch’s central image of the group on the boat (Figure 6), and further enforced by the fact that the painted allegory of Gluttony is united with these figures in a shared environment, the depicted body of water.

Thus, Bosch’s allegory of Gluttony—as an individual figure—serves
as a Bal-ian quotation of Brant’s work, reliant but expanding on the extensive textual detail he presents. The value in this approach to depiction, rather than a holistic one, is that the excluded visual elements can still be easily incorporated across the larger narrative, and so allow Bosch to create new meaning. In combination with the practical effects of condensing a long series of text and image into the space of one canvas, Bosch’s decision to apply the visual renditions of the crowds from Brant synecdochically across the variety of the follies in the painting becomes a clear reflection of his effort to extend the reaches of Gluttony. In Bosch’s reading of the text, Gluttony allegorized in one particular instance, as Brant includes it, is integrated into the collective image of the shared category of fools. Thus, in Bosch’s translation, he juxtaposes the investigation of Gluttony alongside Brant’s other inquiries. Having successfully condensed Gluttony to be represented by a singular figure, the sea of wine becomes an extended symbol, one that sweeps up the entire ship of celebrating singers, and by extension, all fools. In this way, Bosch is able to convey Brant’s fundamental criticisms of gluttonous behavior whilst enumerating his own reading of this characteristic as a universal human folly.

Though Brant’s written text is essential for Bosch’s expansion upon his own conception of Gluttony, Bosch is not as reliant on the text for the creation of his other details. For example, in the case of Bosch’s singing group (Figure 6), the major depicted details are drawn primarily from Brant’s woodcuts. This detail, making up the center of the painting, portrays a group of singers: mouths open, instruments poised, gazes falling on the pancake that hangs between them. Amongst this group, the two identifiable
characters are the monk and nun sitting in the front—each recognizable by their traditional garments. This formulation of characters, of a group singing in a circular formation, is taken directly from the composition of the woodcut that accompanies Brant’s chapter “Of Serenading at Night” (Figure 7). In Brant’s woodcut, there appears a motley group of fools—bearing characteristic donkey-eared attire—with mouths open mid-song in disregard for those sleeping. Placing particular attention on the placement of the instrument in the hands of Brant’s furthest left performer, Bosch’s use of Brant’s image becomes clear. Consistent with the Brantian woodcut, Bosch’s group serenades in complete ignorance to their surroundings and Bosch’s furthest left singer bears the very same guitar (Figure 6). Yet, despite these consistencies, there are several important Boschian developments from the original woodcut. Of particular interest are the presence of the monk and nun figures, as the representation of these figures is absent in Brant’s woodcut. In the woodcut, all the singers sport jester costumes and—beyond their differing stances—are indistinguishable from one another. Further, only one line in Brant’s text is referenced by Bosch’s figures, the one in which Brant advances the identities of the figures who serenade as “priests, students, laity hell-bent” (207). Thus, unlike his heavily textual portrayal of Gluttony, Bosch’s portrayal of the singers can be condensed to a primary compositional reference to a woodcut from *The Ship of Fools*, and only a singular line of text. However, this minimal reliance works in Bosch’s favor, as he is now available to insert his own further interpretations without sacrificing Brant’s groundwork.

Returning to the conspicuous monk and nun figures as a now clear
application of Bosch’s representational freedom, the narrative that they contribute to becomes especially controversial, as it both does not originate in Brant’s visual work and directly interferes with a key Brantian agenda. By creating a generic representation of a fool in his woodcut, Brant avoids offending powerful institutions such as the church. By contrast, Bosch freely elects to target the church directly by depicting two of its foolish members. Thus, Bosch’s portrayal is both deeply based in Brant’s work and profoundly bold. In making Brant’s broader criticism more specific, Bosch allows for an additional layer of social commentary that departs from Brant’s original intentions.

Bosch’s choice to add social commentary to Brant’s work and to diverge from Brant’s visual representation of Gluttony increases the overall complexity of his relationship with Brant’s work. Though Bosch honors lines of Brant’s work, and draws on the composition of Brant’s woodcuts, he does so in the overarching pursuit of a different goal. In the case of Bosch’s presentation of Gluttony, he uses Brant’s text to form a visual representation that is neither ideologically controversial nor a strong departure from what the text describes. Using the same mechanism as a quotation, Bosch establishes a reference to Brant and then places this reference in connection with an entirely different narrative. Outside the context of the chapter in which Brant includes it, this reference then illustrates Gluttony as an item of conceptual importance for all Brantian fools rather than an isolated character trait. In the case of the serenading group, Bosch draws a connection to Brant in the consistent visual representation between Bosch’s collective group and the group in one of Brant’s woodcuts. Simultaneously utilizing
and developing this association, Bosch inserts additional criticisms of foolish behavior that specify and offend specific social classes without sacrificing the connection to Brant’s original. In both the instance of Gluttony and the serenading group, Bosch establishes a connection to Brant’s text that still allows himself the freedom to explore the work’s latent possibilities. Thus, Bosch manages to advance a translation of Brant’s work which ultimately goes much further than the original in terms of social criticism, yet still uses references to the original as an effective protective alibi.

What is of final consideration, then, is the context of Bosch’s Ship of Fools painting as merely one panel of a larger triptych. Having greatly expanded on Brant’s original work within the painting, Bosch goes on to externally expand upon Brant’s text through his juxtaposition and synthesis of *The Ship of Fools* with the thematic implications of the other panels of his triptych. These panels contain no further references to Brant’s work, and are divergent in the content they address as well as their visual cohesion. Thus, what unites these panels with the panel under examination is the singular shared exploration of allegory. In Bosch’s only other fully complete panel of this triptych, entitled “Death and the Miser” (Figure 8), the scene depicted has long been considered an allegory for Avarice (Morganstern 301). As a counterpart to the allegory for Gluttony already discussed, this panel reveals the likely broader ideological implications of Bosch’s entire triptych. Preoccupied towards using “the traditional imagery for the Sins as a point of departure for his ruminations on the human condition,” Bosch’s whole oeuvre is eminent for his depictions of allegorical sin (302). It is then likely that this same interest is at work here, and that a completed triptych would
have revealed several other depictions of allegories of sin.

Returning to considering the finished panels within this larger vision of sin, Bosch’s choice of the glutton in relation to the miser—as opposed to other common sinners—emphasizes the opposing examples of indulgence and parsimony. As the counterpart to the allegory of Avarice, Bosch’s inclusion of *The Ship of Fools* places final emphasis on the allegory of Gluttony represented by the overweight barrel-rider. Beyond a counterpart to the other references to Brant’s *The Ship of Fools* contained within the singular panel, Gluttony now becomes the binding element of the painting to Avarice, and is thus extended to the narrative of the larger triptych. In the context of the earlier analysis of Bosch’s approach to depicting Gluttony, it becomes clear that this approach not only allowed for Bosch to expand upon Brant’s commentary, but also to contribute a commentary that is entirely his own.
Works Cited


FIGURES

Fig. 1. Sebastian Brant. Woodcut from “Of Amours.” *The Ship of Fools*, p. 88.

Fig. 2. Sebastian Brant. Woodcut from “Of Too Much Care.” *The Ship of Fools*, p. 116.
Fig. 3. Hieronymus Bosch. Reconstruction of The Ship of Fools (left wing of The Wayfarer triptych). 1495-1500, Musée de Louvre, Paris and Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven. The bottom half and top half of the painting were separated at some point in history and are currently displayed separately in two fragments. This is a reconstruction of the two panels as they would have originally appeared in a single panel.
Fig. 4. Hieronymus Bosch. Detail from An Allegory of Intemperance (fragment of the left wing of The Wayfarer triptych). 1450-1500, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT.

Fig. 5. Sebastian Brant. Woodcut from “Of Gluttony and Feasting.” The Ship of Fools, p. 96.
Fig. 6. Hieronymus Bosch. Detail from *The Ship of Fools* (left wing of The Wayfarer triptych). 1450-1500, Musée de Louvre, Paris.
Fig. 7. Sebastian Brant. Woodcut from “Of Serenading At Night.” *The Ship of Fools*, p. 206.

Fig. 8. Hieronymus Bosch. *Death and the Miser* (right wing of *The Wayfarer* triptych). 1485-1490, The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.