

ALEXANDER BARCLAY
 THE SHIP OF FOLYS [THE SHIP OF FOOLS]
 LONDON, ENGLAND, 1509

Translation of the original German text *Das Narrenschiff*
 by Sebastian Brant; Basel, Germany, 1494



title page illustration



engraving, poem five

**Poem Five: “Of the foolish description and inquisition
 of diverse countries and regions”**

**Of the folysshe descripcion and inquisicion
 of dyuers contrees and regyons**

Who that is besy to mesure and compace
 The heuyn and erth and all the worlde large
 Describynge the clymatis and folke of euery place
 He is a fole and hath a greuouse charge
 Without auantage, wherfore let hym discharge
 Hym selfe, of that fole whiche in his necke doth syt
 About suche folyes dullynge his mynde and wyt.

That fole, of wysdome and reason doth fayle
 And also discession labowrynge for nought.
 And in this shyp shall helpe to drawe the sayle
 Which day and nyght infixeth all his thought
 To haue the hole worlde within his body brought
 Measurynge the costes of euery royalm and lande
 And clymatis, with his compace, in his hande

He coueytyth to knowe, and compryse in his mynde

**Of the foolish description and inquisition
 of diverse countries and regions**

Who that is busy to measure and compass
 The heaven and earth and all the world large,
 Describing the climate and folk of every place,
 He is a fool and hath a grievous charge
 Without advantage, wherefore let him discharge
 Himself of that folly which in his neck doth sit
 About such follies, dulling his mind and wit.

That fool, of wisdom and reason doth fail,¹
 And also discretion, laboring for naught.
 And in this ship shall help to draw the sail
 Which day and night enfixeth all his thought
 To have the whole world within his body brought,
 Measuring the coasts of every realm and land
 And climate, with his compass in his hand.

He coveteth to know, and comprise in his mind,

National Humanities Center, 2006: www.nhc.rtp.nc.us/pds/pds.htm. In T. H. Jamieson, ed., *The Ship of Fools Translated by Alexander Barclay* (Edinburgh: Wm. Paterson / London: H. Sotheran & Co., 1874, 2 vols.), Vol. II, pp. 23-27. Modern English translation by John Wall, Professor of English, North Carolina State University; Fellow, National Humanities Center, 1980-1981. Complete image credits at www.nhc.rtp.nc.us/pds/amerbegin/imagecredits.htm.

¹ I.e. "That fool whose wisdom and reason fail him, / And also his discretion, laboring for nothing."

Euery regyon and euery sundry place
Whiche ar nat knowen to any of mankynde
And neuer shall be without a specyall grace
Yet suche folys take pleasour and solace
The length and brede of the worlde to mesure
In vayle besynes, takynge great charge and cure

They set great stody labour and besynes
To knowe the people that in the east abyde
And by and by theyr mesures after dres
To knowe what folke the west and north part gyde
And who the sowth, thus all the worlde wyde
By these folys is meated by ieometry
Yet knowe they scant theyr owne vnwyse body

Another labours to knowe the nacions wylde
Inhabytynge the worlde in the North plage and syde
Metynge by mesure, countrees both fyers and mylde
Vnder euery planete, where men sayle go or ryde
And so this fole castyth his wyt so wyde
To knowe eche londe vnder the fyrment
That therabout in vayne his tyme is spent

Than with his compace drawyth he about
Europe, and Asye, to knowe howe they stande
And of theyr regyons nat to be in dout
Another with Grece and Cesyll is in honde
With Apuly, Afryke and the newe fonde londe
With Numydy and, where the Moryans do dwell
And other londes whose namys none can tell

He mesureth Athlant, calpe, and cappadoce
The see of Hercules garnado and Spayne
The yles there aboute shewynge all in groce
Throwynge his mesure to Fraunce and to Brytayne
The more and lesse, to Flaundres and almayne
There is no yle so lytell that hath name
But that these Folys in hande ar with the same

And regyons that ar compasyd with the se

Every region and every sundry place
Which are not known to any of mankind
And never shall be without a special grace.
Yet such fools take pleasure and solace
The length and breadth of the world to measure
In vain busyness, taking great charge and care.

They set great study, labor, and busyness
To know the people that in the east abide
And by and by their measures after dress²
To know what folk the west and north part guide
And who the south; thus all the world wide
By these fools is meated³ by geometry
Yet know they scant their own unwise body.

Another labors to know the nations wild,
Inhabiting the world in the North plage⁴ and side,
Meeting by measure countries both fierce and mild
Under every planet, where man sail, go, or ride,
And so this fool casteth his wit so wide
To know each land under the firmament
That thereabout in vain his time is spent.

Then with his compass draweth he about
Europe and Asia, to know how they stand,
And of their regions not to be in doubt.
Another with Greece and Sicily is in hand
With Apulia,⁵ Africa, and the new found land,
With Numidia,⁶ and where the Mauryans⁷ do dwell
And other lands whose names none can tell.

He measureth Atlantic,⁸ Calpe,⁹ and Cappadocia,¹⁰
The sea of Hercules,¹¹ Granada, and Spain,
The isles thereabout, showing all in gross,
Throwing his measure to France and to Brittany
The more and less, to Flanders and Almayne.¹²
There is no isle so little that hath name
But that these Fools in hand are with the same.¹³

And regions that are compassed with the sea

² *Dres*, or *dress*, here means "to organize," "to put in order," to arrange," or "to divide" their "measures," or activities. The word refers to the process of thought by which the "fools" who want to know about the peoples of the world organize or arrange their efforts so that they may know who lives in the east, in the west and north, and in the south.

³ *Meated*, as in "fed by"; these people feed their minds with the study of the world, but neglect their bodies.

⁴ *Plage*: region, section, zone.

⁵ *Apulia*: region in southeast Italy.

⁶ *Numidia*: ancient north African kingdom.

⁷ *Mauryan Empire*: first unified empire of India.

⁸ *Athlant*: variant spelling of "Atlantic"; in Barclay's day, the sea on the western shore of Africa, hence linked to Calpe (Gibraltar) and the Sea of Hercules.

⁹ *Calpe*: Gibraltar.

¹⁰ *Cappadoca*: ancient country, now Turkey.

¹¹ *Sea of Hercules*: Mediterranean Sea.

¹² *Almayne*: Germany.

¹³ I.e., "There is no island that has a name that is too little to be included in these fools' efforts to encompass it."

They besely labour to knowe and vnderstande
And by what cause, nature or propertye
These doth flowe, nat ouercouerynge the londe
So he describyth his cercle in his honde
The hole worlde: leuyng no thyng behynde
As in the Doctrynes of Strabo he doth fynde

Whiche wrote in bokes makynge declaracion
Somtyme hym groundynge vpon auctoryte
Howe eche Royalme and londe had sytuacion
Some in brode felde some closyd with the see
But ye geometryans that of this purpose be
Ye ar but folyes to take suche cure and payne
About a thyng whiche is fruteles and vayne

It passyth your reason the hole worlde to discus
And knowe euery londe and countrey of the grounde
For though that the noble actour plinius
The same purposyd, yet fawty is he founde
And in Tholomeus great errours doth habounde
Though he by auctoryte makyth mencyon
Of the descripcion of euery regyon

Syns these actours so excellent of name
Hath bokes composyd of this facultye
And neuer coude parfytely perfourme the same
Forsoth it is great foly vnto the
To labour about suche folysshe vanyte
It is a furour also one to take payne
In suche thynges as prouyd ar vncertayne

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

They busily labor to know and understand
And by what cause, nature, or property
These doth flow, not overcovering the land,
So he describes, his circle in his hand,
The whole world: leaving no thing behind
As in the Doctrines of Strabo he doth find,¹⁴

Which wrote in books making declaration
Sometime him grounding upon authority
How each Realm and land had situation,
Some in broad fields, some closed with the sea.¹⁵
But you geometricians, that of this purpose be,
You are but fools to take such care and pain
About a thing which is fruitless and vain.

It passeth your reason the whole world to discuss
And know every land and country of the ground,
For though that the noble actor Plinius¹⁶
The same purposed, yet faulty is he found
And in Ptolemy great errors doth abound
Though he by authority maketh mention
Of the description of every region.

Since these actors, so excellent of name,
Have books composed of this faculty
And never could perfectly perform the same,
Forsooth it is great folly unto them
To labor about such foolish vanity.
It is a furor¹⁷ also one to take pain
In such things as proud or uncertain.

For now of late hath 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, that late was king of Spain,
Of land and people hath found plenty and store,
Of whom the bidding¹⁸ to us was uncertain.
No Christian man of them heard tell before.
Thus is it folly to tend unto the lore
And unsure science of vain geometry

¹⁴ *Strabo* (1st C. B. C.–A. D. 1st C.): Greek philosopher, historian, and geographer; author of the seventeen-volume *Geographica*.

¹⁵ i.e., "closed by the sea."

¹⁶ *Pliny the Elder* (1st C. A. D.): Roman military commander and natural philosopher; author of the thirty-seven-volume *Naturalis Historia* (*Natural History*), of which four volumes summarized the geographical knowledge of his time.

¹⁷ *Furor*: mania, i.e., "It is a mania for someone to put such an effort into such proud or uncertain things."

¹⁸ *Biding*: abiding, i.e., "Ferdinand, the King of Spain, has found a large number of people and lands; we did not know who lived [abided] there, we did not know they existed."

Syns none can knowe all the worlde perfyteley

THENUOY OF BARKLAY

Ye people that labour the worlde to mesure
Therby to knowe the regyons of the same
Knowe firste your self, that knowledge 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

Since none can know all the world perfectly.

THE ENVOY OF BARKLAY

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

