

But among these satirical and novelistic ships, the *Narrenschiff* alone had a genuine existence, for they really did exist, these boats that drifted from one town to another with their senseless cargo. An itinerant existence was often the lot of the mad.²³ It was common practice for towns to banish them from inside the city walls, leaving them to run wild in the distant countryside or entrusting them to the care of travelling merchants or pilgrims. The custom was most common in Germany. In Nuremberg during the first half of the fourteenth century the presence of sixty-two madmen was recorded, and thirty-one were chased out of town. There were twenty-one more enforced departures over the fifty years that followed, and this was merely for madmen arrested by the municipal authorities.²⁴ They were often entrusted to the care of the river boatmen. In Frankfurt in 1399, boatmen were given the task of ridding the city of a madman who walked around naked, and in the earliest years of the following century a criminal madman was expelled in the same manner from Mainz. Sometimes the boatmen put these difficult passengers back ashore earlier than they had promised: one Frankfurt blacksmith returned twice from being expelled in such manner, before being definitively escorted to Kreuznach.²⁵ The arrival in the great cities of Europe of these ships of fools must have been quite a common sight.

It is hard to pin down the precise meaning of the practice. It is tempting to think of it as a general means of expulsion used by the municipalities to punish vagabondage among the mad, but that hypothesis doesn't quite fit the facts as this was a fate that only befell certain madmen, as some were treated in hospitals, even before the construction of special houses for the insane began. In the *Hôtel-Dieu* in Paris they had specifically allocated bunks in some dormitories reserved for them,²⁶ and in most of the great cities of Europe throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance there was always a special place reserved for the detention of the insane, like the *Melun Châtelet*²⁷ or the famous *Tour aux Fous* in Caen.²⁸ In Germany there were countless *Narrtürme*, like the gates of Lübeck or the Hamburg *Jungfer*.²⁹ So the mad were not systematically run out of town. It could be argued that only foreign madmen were expelled, and that each town only took responsibility for its own citizens who had lost their wits, and indeed in the accounts of various medieval cities there are records of funds put aside for the mad, and donations made in favour of the insane.³⁰ But the problem is not so simple, for there were centres where the insane, more numerous than elsewhere, were certainly not indigenous. To the fore

here were centres of pilgrimage like Saint-Mathurin de Larchant, Saint-Hildevert de Gournay, Besançon and Gheel; such trips were organised and even paid for by cities and hospitals.³¹ And it may be that these ships of fools, which haunted the imagination of the Early Renaissance, were in fact ships of pilgrimage, highly symbolic ships filled with the senseless in search of their reason; some went down the rivers of the Rhineland towards Belgium and Gheel, while others went up the Rhine to Besançon and the Jura.

But there were other towns, like Nuremberg, which were certainly not places of pilgrimage, yet which contained a higher than average number of madmen, far more than the city itself could have furnished. These madmen were lodged and paid for out of the city coffers, but were not cared for: they were simply thrown into prison.³² It may be the case that in some big cities – where there were markets and many people who came and went – the mad were brought in considerable numbers by merchants and river boatmen, and that there they were ‘forgotten’, thereby cleansing their home town of their presence. Perhaps these places of ‘counter-pilgrimage’ became confused with places where the insane really were taken as pilgrims. The concern with cure and exclusion fused within the sacred space of the miraculous. It is possible that the town of Gheel developed in this manner – a place of pilgrimage that became a place of confinement, a holy land where madness awaited its deliverance, but where it seems that man enacted the ancient ritual of division.

This constant circulation of the insane, the gesture of banishment and enforced embarkation, was not merely aimed at social utility, or the safety of citizens. Its meanings were closer to rituals, and their trace is still discernible. So it was for instance that the insane were barred entry to churches,³³ while ecclesiastical law allowed them to partake of the sacraments.³⁴ The church took no sanctions against priests who lost their reason, but in Nuremberg in 1421 a mad priest was expelled with particular solemnity, as though the impurity was multiplied by the sacred nature of the character, yet the town paid the money that was to serve for his viaticum.³⁵ On occasions, the insane were publicly whipped, and in a sort of simulated hunt were chased out of town while being beaten with sticks.³⁶ All of which indicates that the departure of the mad belonged with other rituals of exile.

So the ship of fools was heavily loaded with meaning, and clearly carried a great social force. On the one hand, it had incontestably practical