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THE ODYSSEYS OF ULIXES THROUGH MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN LITERATURE*

This essay focuses on the medieval and early modern reception of Ulysses and his myth, with a strong focus on German vernacular literature, the concepts established and communicated by this reception, its continuity but also its unique shifts and "peaks" within specific texts. It begins with Ulysses' role in the medieval Trojan romance, then outlines the long tradition of the allegoric interpretation, especially in regard to the myth of the Sirens, reaching back to the Antiquity. Both separated tracks of reception show a significant continuity and ambivalence, culminating in the representation of Ulysses in Dante's *Commedia*, which contains not only the famous but also crucial report of Ulysses' last journey, wherein Ulysses functions as an example of human curiosity and human desire for knowledge and experience, both fatal and fascinating. In relation to medieval allegoric concepts Sebastian Brant wants to conceive Ulysses as a counterexample to foolishness and fools in his *Narrenschiff*, the intended clear didactic meaning nevertheless is thwarted by the complexity of the myth's narrative. Finally, Simon Schaidenreisser's first German translation of the *Odyssey* returns to the original story. Though still accompanied by allegoric and moral interpretation, provided by commentaries in the margins, the myth now claims its own right and Ulysses' interest in mundane experience and knowledge becomes an undisputed positive quality indicating the anthropological turn performed by writing and learning of the Early Modern period.

Vlixes was kleine
Doch was ir deheine
Also gefuge in allen wis
Er was vzzer mazen wis
Wol gehoubet wol erkant
Manige not er vberwant
Vnd grozzer erbeit

* I would like to thank Michael Power, Salzburg, for his corrections of my English.

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Mit siner wisheit
Er hette sinnes harte vil
Beide zv ernste vnd zv spil
Kvnde er wol gebaren
Da tusent ritter waren
Da hette er alleine den hob
Auch gap man im gut lob
An der zervnge
Auch was sin zvnge
Wol gespreche vnd gerade
Daz enwas nimans schade
Er sprach gerne an daz recht
Des libes was er ein gut knecht (*Daz Liet von Troye*, vv. 3021-3040)[1]

(Ulysses was quite small, / but none of them [the Greeks] / was that smart in all respects, / he was wise beyond all measures, / he was courtly educated and well known, / overcame many troubles / and great labours / with his wisdom. / He had a good lot of wit. / Both in serious and sportive action/ he could behave brave. / If there were a thousand knights / he had the whole court for himself, / was also praised very well / for the effort (he made in courtly feasts), / also his way of speaking / was elaborated and well directed. / That was nobody's harm. / He liked to speak according to the laws, / in regard of his body he was a good guy.)

These verses from *Daz Liet von Troye* ('The Song of Troy') by Herbort von Fritzlar, the first Middle High German Trojan romance, written *c.* 1190, describe the appearance and the character of Ulixes, the Latinised name of the Greek hero Odysseus, as he is consistently referred to in medieval Western Europe. This description recalls essential attributions, the origins of which can be traced back to Homer's *Odyssey* and characterise Ulysses also in vernacular medieval receptions of Antiquity:

[1] Quotation according to the edition by Frommann 1837. This and all following translations are mine. If quotations are introduced by extensive and exact paraphrases, I forgo translations.

His labours and sufferings, but particularly his eloquence and intelligence. Both qualities, as I will show, are highly ambivalent and always implicate negative meanings, such as deceitful speech and treacherous cunning.

The passage is also embedded in a whole ensemble of descriptions, which includes several Greek and Trojan heroes. Despite probable expectations, the passage rejects a formulaic and stereotypical style, instead presents a nuanced "genre image" that is quite poetically playful. For example, it reveals that Aeneas was quite short, stubby and had an ash blond beard (vv. 3210, 3214). Rather than portraying ideal, representative and similar types of courtly rulers and leaders, the text develops individual characters, each with their own distinctive "Diderotian wart", which in line with Diderot's observation, claims that individuality in literary characters can be easily achieved by giving them a unique trait, such as a wart.[2] This passage thus preliminarily attests to the originality of medieval, particularly vernacular, receptions of Antiquity, which often owes much to romanesque literature, in this case specifically to Benoît de Sainte-Maure's *Roman de Troie* (cf. here vv. 5201-5224), Herbort's main source. Incidentally, Herbort is the only Middle High German adapter who abridges his source rather than expanding it.[3]

Konrad von Würzburg, who wrote the second Middle High German Trojan romance nearly a century later, between 1380 and his death in 1387, also based his work on Benoît but incorporated several additional classical and medieval sources.[4] His composition programmatically aims to create an exhaustive

[2] So within the reflection on the art of narration at the end of the story *Deux Amis de Bourbonne*, cf. Mortier 1967, 165f.

[3] For this aspect and Herbort's *liet* in general cf. Herberichs 2010, providing one of the most recent detailed investigations on the topic. My following remarks on medieval Trojan romance refer to my articles "Ulixes" and "Sirenes" in Kern, Ebenbauer 2003, 631-638 and 582-586, listing all citations in German literature of the High Middle Ages, resuming the content and discussing the mythographic tradition and sources.

[4] For a detailed analysis cf. Lienert 1996.

intertextual horizon that integrates virtually all medieval epic traditions into the text. As stated in the prologue, his story of Troy intends to be a book of all books, a sea into which all streams of storytelling flow (vv. 234-243).

The following analysis focuses on the reception of Ulysses, primarily in German literature of the Middle Ages and Early Modern period. I will first remain within the realm of Middle High German Trojan romance, focusing mainly on Herbort, then turn to allegorical Christian interpretation of classical mythology, in this case of the myth of the Sirens, tracing back to early patristic writing. From there onwards, I will discuss Dante, who cannot be omitted from this context and serves as a link between medieval reception and that of the Renaissance and Humanism. This will lead to Ulysses in Sebastian Brant's *Narrenschiff* (1494), and I will conclude with an outlook on the first German translation of the *Odyssey*, Simon Minervius' *Odyssea* (1537).

1. *Ulysses in the Medieval Trojan Romance*

In general, Ulysses plays only a secondary role in the Trojan romance. Certain motifs, however, exhibit remarkable consistency, even traceable back to the *Iliad*. For instance, Ulysses serves as one of the envoys attempting to resolve the conflict diplomatically and to make the Trojans return Helen peacefully. His leadership of this mission is grounded in his eloquence and competence as a councillor. Although not directly narrated in the *Iliad*, this is referenced (3, 204-224). Similar to the *Iliad*'s second book, Ulysses prevents the Greeks' premature departure in these Trojan romances, albeit not at the same chronological point.

Another recurring motif is the close friendship between Ulysses and Diomedes, which also originates in Homer's *Iliad*. However, episodes where Ulysses takes a leading role, such as the mission to bring Achilles to Troy, stem not from Homer but from later Greek mythography and most likely were conveyed to the later German Trojan romance, namely Konrad von Würzburg and the *Göttweiger Trojanerkrieg*, by the late antique *Excidium Troie* (4-

6th century), a prose summary of the Trojan war and the story of Aeneas:[5] Achilles' mother Thetis, fearing a prophecy of his death at Troy, hides him, disguised as a girl, on the island of Syros and Achilles is brought up there in the company of Lycomedes' daughter Deidamia and her female friends. Konrad elaborates this episode with a certain level of humour (vv. 27426-28451): Ulysses is able to identify Achilles, even in his state of disguise; Achilles finally reveals himself through his interest in weapons.

In the *Göttweiger Trojanerkrieg* – a Trojan romance contemporaneous or possibly earlier than Konrad's work and attributed to Wolfram von Eschenbach, the author of the famous Parzival romance and therefore an authority in later Middle High German epic literature – the mission to retrieve Achilles becomes a covert merchant expedition and Ulysses himself transforms into a merchant, evading all dangers by hiding in the ship's hold (cf. vv. 15000-16185). It is accepted that the *Göttweiger Trojanerkrieg* engages in curious reworkings of traditional material without any mythographic restraint.[6]

A further divergence from classical tradition is the conflict between Ulysses and Aias. Unlike Sophocles' tragedy or Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which both centre the dispute around Achilles' weapons, the medieval romance shifts the conflict to the Palladium, stolen by Ulysses and Diomedes with the help of the Trojan traitor Antenor. Herbort also references to this (vv. 16344-16758).

All these fundamental changes to the plot in the Homeric tradition result from the different sources, on which medieval reception in Latin Europe is based. Homer's epics are simply not known, disregarding the so-called *Ilias latina,* a radically shortened version of the Homeric master epic. As mentioned, the Achilles-mission appears to be based on the *Excidium Troie*, the

[5] The episode is not to be found in *Le Roman de Troie* by Benoît de Sainte-Maure according to his main sources Dares and Dictys (see below), therefore it is also not told by Herbort.

[6] Cf. Kern 1995, on Ulysses' Achilles-mission 126-132, on the pretended authorship by Wolfram von Eschenbach and the question of the chronological relation to Konrad 104-121 and 183-193.

quarrel about the Palladium (in addition to the main strands of the entire plot) follow the *De excidio Troiae historia* ('History of the Destruction of Troy'), attributed to the supposed Trojan War witness, Dares Phrygius. Together with his Greek counterpart, Dictys Cretensis, and his records, entitled *Ephemeris belli Troiani* ('Diaries of the Trojan War'), this text constitutes a crucial source for Benoît and medieval Trojan literature in general, primarily due to the fact that they are supposed to be historical accounts. Unlike poetic works, they claim to convey truth rather than the "poetic lies" reflected, for example, in the apparatus of Gods to be found in classical epics. In the Latin form, in which they are available to us, both accounts, those of Dares and Dictys, date back to the 4th century. Although they refer to Greek sources, at least Dares' work likely was originally written in Latin.[7] In keeping with their pseudo-historical approach, they demythologise the whole story, including the wanderings of Ulysses in the aftermath of the war, which, however, are only reported by Dictys.

These wanderings, which remain central to the myth of Odysseus to this day, do not play a prominent role in the Middle High German Trojan romance. This fact highlights the generally diminished role and significance of Ulysses as a central figure in the Trojan narrative. Konrad von Würzburg's expansive romance does not recount them, as it breaks off before the death of Hector. The continuation, authored by an anonymous writer a few years later, addresses them only briefly, as does the *Göttweiger Trojanerkrieg*. Herbort's version is the most detailed and meaningful in this regard, closely following Benoît's *Roman de Troie*. The complex narratology of Homer's *Odyssey* – with its framing as a first-person narrative within the narrative – is also preserved.

[7] No approximately complete Greek version is transmitted, neither for Dictys nor for Dares. There are some more probable testimonies for a Greek original of Dictys, those for Dares seem to me heavily obscure. For the discussion cf. the foreword of Kai Bodersen to his edition, Diktys/Dares 2019, 10-17.

In Herbort (as in Benoît, vv. 28549-29078, and according to Dictys, 6, 5-6) Ulixes recounts his adventures, though not to the royal couple, Alcinous and Arete, at the court of the Phaeacians, but instead to his comrade-in-arms, Idomeneus, the king of Crete, whereto his wanderings ultimately bring him. Herbort seems to follow in this passage Dictys directly, as there are no traces of Benoît's changes and extensions. It is also remarkable, that he allows Ulysses to present his report himself, whereas in Dictys and Benoît it is narrated in the third person, the last only partly presenting the report in direct speech.

Ulixes reports, that when he had left Smyrna, the land of the *lotofagos* (*Liet von Troye,* v. 17563), he was displaced to Sicily by evil winds, where the brothers *Cycrops* and *Lestugo* (*Liet von Troye,* v. 17571, in Dictys 6,5 *Cyclops* and *Laestrygo*) attacked and robbed him of most of his goods. He then was attacked by their sons *Olifeus* and *Polifemus* (*Liet von Troye,* vv. 17578f., in Dictys *Antiphates* and *Polyphemus*), who robbed the remains and captured him. Following his eventual release, his comrade *Alfenor* (the classical *Elpenor*, in Dictys *Alphenor*) fell in love with *Polifemus'* sister. In an attempt to abduct her, they were once more attacked by her brother, but managed to escape him, owing to the acts of Ulysses, who blinded him (*Liet von Troye,* 17608-17619).[8] Afterwards he was driven into the land of King *Eolis* (*Liet von Troye,* v. 17622, *Aeolus*), where he was bewitched by the nymphomaniac *Circe*, who gave him a love potion, but in the end escaped her (*Liet von Troye,* vv. 17620-17684),[9] just to be trapped by *Calypsa*, with whom he would have stayed, if she would have been faithful (*Liet von Troye,* vv. 17685-17695). Then he came into the reach of the Sirens, who lure the ships to them using their beautiful voices. He escaped them, by stuffing his ears

[8] Benoît reports, that Ulysses gouged out at least one of Polyphemus' eyes with his bare hands (28680-28690).

[9] In Benoît Ulysses is able to overcome Circe, because he is the better warlock (vv. 28747-28770).

with wax (*Liet von Troye,* v. 17713),[10] but then lost most of his ships to Charybdis and Scylla, an immense swirl, only finally to once again be imprisoned and robbed of all his possessions in Phoenicia (*Liet von Troye,* vv. 17744-17749).

The deviations from classical motifs of the Odyssean wanderings can be explained on various levels. As with manuscript transmission, mythography produces variations or ruptures, especially when shifting over major cultural transitions – here from classical Antiquity to the Christian Late Antiquity, and from Latin to the vernacular Middle Ages. Former research used to dismiss resulting divergences from the classical versions as errors, distortions, or corruptions. However, a particularly dominant model of mythographic interpretation is the rationalising or historical approach, which dates back to Hellenistic times and thus to Antiquity itself. This approach is also known as Euhemerism, named after Euhemeros, who, if not its inventor, was one of its earliest systematic practitioners.[11] It explains the irrational and the miraculous, particularly the divine, elements of mythology in rational or historical terms. Thus, the gods were "in truth" (as the classical interpretive formula states) not gods, but rather celebrated humans and kings, revered as gods by earlier, naive, and credulous people.[12]

It's this strategy of dealing with mythology that is applied by Dictys and leads to the main changes and rationalisations in

[10] In Benoît Ulysses manages to overcome the Sirens by his spells. By the way they are a whole army, Ulysses and his men slay about thousand of them (vv. 28826-28874). Dictys (6, 5) just tells, that Ulysses could pass the cliffs of the Sirens safely. Herbort seems to be influenced by other sources or has some own knowledge about the myth, perhaps relating to the allegoric tradition discussed below.

[11] A survey on the methods of interpreting myth, known by and an important tool in medieval reception of classical mythology is given by my introduction to Kern, Ebenbauer 2003, xlv-liii, still relevant in this field of research is Seznec 2012.

[12] An early and interesting example of euhemeristic mythography is the collection Περὶ ἀπίστων ἱστοριῶν ('About Unbelievable Tales') by the so called Palaiphatos from the late 4th or 3th century BCE, cf. Palaiphatos 2002.

Benoît's and then in Herbort's reports about the hero's wanderings. Thus, the gigantic and man-eating Laestrygonians become the people of a treacherous king, Laestrygo, who is conceived as the father of Polyphemus. Nevertheless, some telltale details of the mythological background may remain, like Polyphemus' blinding by Ulysses or the motif of the unavoidably attractive song of the Sirens.

Euhemerism is one of the key tools of what Hans Blumenberg memorably termed "Arbeit am Mythos" ('working on myth').[13] This concept suggests that cultural history and practice fundamentally involve creative engagement with, or reinterpretation of, authoritative narratives such as mythologies. Moreover, Blumenberg argues that these narratives do not exist in any pure or original form; they always come into being through the work done on them. The Middle Ages are likewise engaged creatively with Antiquity, and particularly with classical mythology, in ways ranging from a theological-polemical to a poetic-playful attitude. This creative engagement formed the basis of the medieval Christian self-conception as the continuation of Antiquity, which presupposed the ability to integrate classical culture with biblical tradition. Such strategies were already developed in Late Antiquity and became central scholarly practices. As the treatment of Ulysses' wanderings in Herbort demonstrates, they also extended into vernacular reception, underscoring the learned character also of these works and their authors.

2. *The allegoric Ulysses*

A second prominent way of dealing with classical mythology to make it fit for a Christian understanding and to ensure theological approval is the allegoric interpretation. It admits that mythology and especially mythological poetry is simply lies in a literal understanding, but these lies implicate a deeper meaning beyond

[13] Blumenberg 1990.

the literal level. This deeper meaning communicates important allegorical, moral and even spiritual truths. Thus, it is the main goal of allegorical interpretation to reveal those *integumenta*, as the deeper truths hidden beneath the poetic lies are termed.

His encounter with the Sirens is one motif within the wanderings of Ulysses that could be counted as one of the most prominent myths, which are the focus of allegoric interpretation. The traces of its Christian moral exegesis reach back to Greek patristic literature, namely to Clement of Alexandria (*c.* 150-215); this Christian interpretation, however, is itself based on moral exegesis already given by Hellenistic mythographic writing.[14] In this tradition Ulysses represents the devout Christian, who is safely tied to Christ's cross like the Greek hero to the mast of his ship and can resist the seductions of the Sirens representing the danger of worldly sin, as the influential *Mitologiae* (II, 8) by Fulgentius (6th century) report. This religious reading fits perfectly to the widespread allegory, which conceives the life of the single believer or the whole Christian community or the church itself as a dangerous cruise over the sea of sin until it can reach the secure harbour of God's kingdom.[15] I will return to this Christian "master-allegory" and the affinity of the Ulysses myth when discussing Sebastian Brant's *Narrenschiff* ('The Ship of Fools') below.

The allegoric interpretation of Ulysses and the Sirens – not least by mediation of Fulgentius' *Mitologiae* – becomes a commonplace in learned theological writing and is also reported by influential theological works in the High Middle Ages, like the *Speculum ecclesiae* of Honorius Augustodunensis (*ca.* 1020). Honorius provides perhaps the most detailed medieval exegesis of the myth, according to the classical tradition speaking of three

[14] The Christian tradition of allegoric interpretation of Ulysses and especially his encounter with the Sirens is extensively described by Rahner 1984, 281-328.

[15] The connection between the general Christian allegory of life as a dangerous cruise through the sea until finally getting to the harbour of God's eternal kingdom and the prominence of the Ulysses-myth in Christian reception is already stressed by Rahner, *ibid*.

Sirens, one who sings, one playing the flute and one playing the harp, the first representing the sin of *avaricia* ('avarice'), the second *jactantia* ('proudness, ostentation'), the third *luxuria* ('luxury, lust'), whereas Ulysses represents the true Christian or even the Christian community, cruising safely in the ship of church across the dangerous and sinful sea of this world: "Ulixes dicitur sapiens, hic illesus preternavigavit quia christianus populus vere sapiens in navi Ecclesie mari hujus seculi superenatat".[16]

Honorius' interpretation, followed by the rather short commentary on the Sirens in Fulgentius' *Mitologiae,* is combined with a famous visual representation in the *Hortus Deliciarum*, a type of monastic encyclopaedia arranged by the abbess of the cloister Hohenburg in the Alsace, Herrad of Landsberg (reg. 1167-1195) for her nuns. Unfortunately, the precious codex was burnt along with many others in the fire of the University Library of Strasbourg, caused by German artillery bombing in the night from 24th to 25th of August 1870. Nevertheless, various modern copies of the texts and the illustrations of the codex have survived, what made the creation of a detailed reconstruction by Rosalie Green *et al*. possible.[17] It provides a well-rounded impression of the entire work, specifically of the allegoric visualisation of the Siren myth. The illustration consists of three image areas, the first showing sleeping sailors on board a ship just passing the island of the three Sirens, according to the text one of them singing, the others playing the flute or the harp respectively. They are depicted as winged female creatures with claws as feet,[18] attack the sailors in the second picture and throw them into the sea. The third picture shows a man intently steering the ship and two (!) vigilant armed knights, tied up to the mast and ordering the crew to kill the Sirens by drowning them (fig. 1).

[16] The citations of the text follow the excerpt given by the below mentioned *Hortus delicarum,* cf. Herrad of Hohenbourg 1979, vol. 2, 367.

[17] For the history of the codex, its initiator Herrad and the cultural context cf. the contributions *ibid*., vol. 1.

[18] This representation of the Sirens relates to one of the two possible types, the bird-Sirens, the other type is the double-tailed fish Siren.

Once more the reflections of this allegoric interpretation in various allusions of Medieval High German literature proves the interest and the learned reception of classical mythology and its Christian adaption also within vernacular writing. I refer specifically to two allusions given by Konrad von Würzburg (both *c.* 1260-1280), one in his so-called *Kreuzleich* ('Lai of the Holy Cross', 1, 136) stating that the cry of the dying Christ sounding like the death-song of the swan made the seductive singing of the Sirens fade out, a singing that used to tear the ships down to the ground of sin. The second is mentioned in his great praise for Holy Mary, the so-called *Goldene Schmiede* ('The Golden Smithy', v. 148), addressing Mary as the light, that guides the ships to the saving coast, when they are threatened by the sweet song of the Siren, who wants to drown them.[19]

In addition to this there is also a tradition of euhemeristic interpretation of the Sirens, which in some aspects is related to the allegoric one.[20] It conceives the Sirens as a mythologisation of a quite earthly phenomenon: "In truth" they simply were famous prostitutes who seduced the sailors and took all their money. When they managed to make it home without any means, they said that they had been misled by the Sirens, claiming they would be powerful supernatural beings. A very prominent work, widely received by medieval writing, Boethius' *Consolatio philosophiae* (I, 26-40, *c.* 520/524) alludes to this rationalising interpretation in its opening scene: The personified Philosophia enters the dungeon, in which Boethius is imprisoned, and sees the poetic Muses shedding tears over the fate of the prisoner and making him write his useless elegies. In a sudden fit of anger she addresses them as Sirens and *scaenicas meretriculas* ('theatre prostitutes') and casts them out, providing Boethius with real comfort given to him

[19] Cf. for this and further proofs Kern, art. *Sirenes*, in Kern, Ebenbauer 2003, 582-586.

[20] Like the allegoric one, this euhemeristic interpretation too dates back into Hellenistic times, cf. Rahner 1984, 302f.

by her "real Muses", impersonating the truths of philosophy.[21] What connects this rationalising exegesis with the allegoric one is the aspect of sexual seduction, which is especially related to the musical abilities the Sirens have. This aspect is also underlined in another influential euhemeristic interpretation of the Sirens to be found in the *Eymologiae* of Isidor of Sevilla (11.3, 30-31, *c.* 612-633).

It must be mentioned that this way of integumental dealing with mythology is not a specific nor, from a modern viewpoint, naïve way of medieval reception but rather a continuous learned tradition reaching far into the modern period. Traces of it can still be found in mythographic writing of the late 18th century, namely in Benjamin Hederich's *Gründliches mythologisches Lexikon* ('Thoroughly mythological Lexicon'), the second edition published in the year 1770, which was widespread and intensively used, for example by Goethe.[22]

Returning to medieval mythological reception one can clearly state, that the Sirens are definitely conceived as extremely negative representations of seduction and sin with a dominant and equally negative sexual meaning.

To come to a last example, it is all the more astonishing that the voice of the narrator in the Tristan-romance of Gottfried von Straßburg (*c.* 1205-1210) asks himself with whom he should compare his female protagonist Ysot while she is singing in front of the Irish court. And then he compares her with the sirens sitting and singing on the magnetic mountain:

> Wem mac ich sî gelichen,
> die schœnen, sælderîchen,
> wan den Syrênen eine,
> die mit dem agesteine
> die kiele ziehent ze sich?
> als zôch Ysôt, sô dunket mich,

[21] I have discussed those aspects in relation to the myth of the Muses and its late antique and medieval reception in Kern 2005, 136-138.

[22] Cf. Hederich 1996, s.v. *SIRENES*, cols. 2220-2224, here col. 2223f.

> vil herzen unde gedanken în,
> die doch vil sicher wânden sîn
> von senedem ungemache. (*Tristan und Isolde*, vv. 8085-8094)
>
> (To whom shall I compare her, / the beautiful and blessed one, / if not to the Sirens, / who attract by means of the magnetic stone / the ships to them? / In the same way, as I suppose, / Ysot attracted many hearts and thoughts, / which believed themselves secure / from the pain of longing.)

This passage combines the Sirens with another traditional motif of the dangerous miracles awaiting men in the midst of the sea: the magnetic stone or mountain, which destroys the ships by attracting or tearing out their iron nails. This combination is likely to be an invention ad hoc by the text itself, because the further lines develop a specific meaning which seems to give the reason for it.[23] There are two kinds of music, the first of which is produced by Ysot and is the common audible one, similar to the music of the Sirens, which enters the ears of the audience and heads directly into their hearts. The other music is the secret one, corresponding to the secret attraction caused by the magnetic stone, her miraculous beauty, sneaking silently and clandestinely through the eyes into the hearts and enchants them with the bonds of desire (cf. vv. 8112-8131). The whole passage is clearly aiming to present the female protagonist as an outstanding and excellent character, but it does so by using a mythological comparison implicating a highly negative theological meaning. Thus, it reveals a crucial general quality of the romance, which tends towards fundamental ambivalence and transcends common and agreed, not at last theological concepts.

To resume, regarding the tradition of euhemeristic or allegorical Christian interpretation of the Siren myth as of classical mythology in general, it should be noted that it always has to reduce the narratological complexity of the underlying myth if it wants to

[23] I gave a detailed analysis of the mythographic sources and their creative use by the text in Kern 2000.

succeed and produce a clear and transparent meaning. In the case of Ulysses' encounter with the Sirens this concerns mainly the aspect of the hero's curiosity. The original Ulysses is not tied to the mast of the ship because he is wise or insusceptible to the seductive song, on the contrary he is curious and absolutely longing to hear it. Thus, presenting him as an impersonation of the true and wise Christian believer is a "productive misunderstanding". I would like to express with that notion a specific strategy of "reading", "understanding", and "shaping" a myth and mythology newly according to a certain interest, which relates mainly to didactic and moral intentions provided by Christian ideology. Thereby, the necessity of applying this strategy results from the cultural authority of classical writing, on which Christian art and science is continuously based and therefore has to integrate it in its system.

In our case a "correct" reading of the original story would have to regard the true believer as one who is tied up to the cross not simply because he is endangered but wilfully longing for the seductive sound of sin. Accordingly, it is another way to reduce complexity by means of making a mythographic "mistake", when in the euhemeristic tradition it can be Ulysses himself, who jams not only the ears of his comrades but also his own ones with wax, as we can read in Herbort's version. We do not have to conceive this changed motif as an expression of medieval neglect, but should rather take it as a deliberate or at least consequent change.

It's exactly this alteration, which Franz Kafka applies in his own famous rewriting of the Siren myth, *Das Schweigen der Sirenen* ('The Silence of the Sirens').[24] As it states in the text, Ulysses jams his ears with wax in the stupid assumption that by doing so he could avoid the danger of the Sirens. This affront of the naïve self-assured human being forces the Sirens to use their sharpest weapon, which is not their song, but their silence, and let Ulysses pass by with a blissful grin on his face. The text states, that there is also an alternative version of the story, reporting that

[24] The text has no original title and is to be found in Kafka's legacy, cf. Kafka 2002, 40-42.

Ulysses was that wise, that he knew about all that, and that he just pretended to be the fool, who thinks to be tricky, and that he did so to hold up a mirroring shield towards the gods to unmask their mean nature. Once again, the long and constant tradition of "working on myth", reaching from medieval to modern times can be observed here.

3. *Ulysses' curiosity: Dante*

There is another example of great creative misunderstanding of Ulysses' classical myth and character, perhaps it's the most famous medieval one: the last journey of Ulysses reported in Dante's *Commedia.* I would like to delve briefly into this widely discussed subject.[25] First of all, its context fits perfectly to the common medieval conception of the hero in the Trojan romance. Virgil and Dante are encountering Ulysses and Diomedes in the eighth moat of the eighth circle of the *Inferno*, the place where the false advisers are incarcerated, their souls enclosed in flickering flames (*Inferno*, xxvi,25-42).[26] Dante the wanderer notices a double flame and asks his leader, Virgil, about it. He tells him that it contains the souls of Ulysses and Diomedes (*Inferno*, xxvi,52-57).

The reoccurrence of the pair once again reflects the aforementioned motif of their close comradeship, reaching back to Homer. Nevertheless, the extreme closeness portrayed by the image of one double-flame that encloses them, appears slightly exaggerated and out of place, especially if one considers the fact, that Diomedes is not of any further importance for the upcoming narration. The motif may be inspired by the fact, that the double-flame distinguishes this special pair of wrongdoers from the other countless flames flickering around the scene and thus attracts the attention of Dante. The text itself has Virgil give to Dante the following explanation for their close community:

[25] For the broad research I just want to hint at the references given in the commentary by Chiavacci Leonardi (Dante 2003), cf. also Imbach 1994 and Stierle 2007.

[26] Quotations according to the edition by Chiavacci Leonardi 2003.

> […] Là dentro si martira
> Ulisse e Dïomede, e così insieme
> a la vendetta vanno come all' ira. (*Inferno*, xxvi, 55-57)
>
> (Within this flame Ulysses and Diomedes are tortured, and that close together they came to revenge as they came to their rage.)

Virgil continues listing the reasons for their punishment in the circle of false advisers: firstly the Trojan Horse, secondly the fraud that brought Achilles to Troy and caused the ongoing lament of his beloved Deidamia (for it was the cause of his early death), thirdly the robbery of the Palladium, which had protected the city. The initial and the third point are clearly an intertextual relation to the famous report Aeneas gives to Dido regarding the destruction of Troy in the *Aeneid* (book ii), repeatedly condemning Ulysses and Diomedes and naming Ulysses *scelerumque inventor* (ii, 164) in connection with the robbery of the Palladium. The allusion to the Achilles mission rather refers to the medieval Trojan tradition discussed above.

So far, in mythographic respects Dante's *Commedia* shows itself on the solid ground of medieval knowledge, with a preference to the Roman tradition shaped by Virgil's *Aeneid,* which is nevertheless also common not only to the learned Latin but also to vernacular medieval reception, if one regards the influential Eneas-romance, represented by the anonymous French original (*a.* 1160/70) and its German revision by Heinrich von Veldeke (*c.* 1185).

The remarkable and unique new aspects the *Commedia* creates in its version are revealed in the subsequent lines. To understand Dante's ability of poetic invention based on the broad classical and medieval tradition of shaping Ulysses' character one must also be aware of the subtle details. A primary and main irony of the scene is, that real authors are speaking directly to their fictitious literary characters. If I see right, Dante is the first in history of literature imagining such a curious encounter. When Dante begs Virgil to await the horned double flame, obviously because he is curious to

hear about the fate of the enclosed sinners and wants to address them, Virgil consents, but stresses, that he himself will address them because, as they are Greeks, they could feel offended, if Dante would speak to them directly: "[…] ch'ei sarebbero schivi, / perch' e' fuor greci, forse del tuo detto" (*Inferno*, xxvi, 74f.). This short remark implicates a tricky reflection on different languages, language value, and the knowledge of languages or the lack thereof in medieval Western Latin Europe. Firstly, within the narration Virgil's remark *perch' e' fuor greci*, seems to joke ironically about Greek arrogance in language and learning (not at least in relation to the Romans): Ulysses has to be addressed in Greek, not only because he wouldn't understand Latin, but obviously because he would feel offended by it. Secondly, on a metapoetical level, the text appears to reveal the language spoken between Virgil and Dante within the narration, to be Latin, whereas the narration itself is programmatically given in Tuscan medieval language. Thirdly, Virgil's hint, that he, but not Dante, is able to speak Greek, is stressing the fact, that Greek is not yet known in Latin Europe or rather that its knowledge which was still given in Virgil's times has been lost. What seems to be a plain statement on the surface of the text, could implicate a kind of criticism or perhaps a lament, if it were to be read as a posteriori. Dante seems to state a lack of knowledge which the upcoming learned community in Western Europe will deeply regret and will be eager to compensate within the following decades. This seems to have been proven quite soon after Dante by the fact that Petrarca is in possession of a Greek codex of Homer's work and complaining about his inability to read and understand it in his famous fictitious letter to Homer (*Familiares* xxiv, 12).[27] Thus, Virgil's comment anticipates this lament and the forthcoming Western studies in Greek inducing a new period of Humanistic literacy.

[27] Content and concepts of this letter and Petrarca's project of having engaged Leonzio Pilato to translate Homer's Works for him are discussed by Stierle 2003, 207-211.

It is possible to claim that Virgil's two lines implicate a quite impressive reflection on the state of learning concentrating on future needs and efforts. Language is crucial to intellectual abilities, which is also a central theme of the following famous narration, that Ulysses gives about his fate and his "last journey". To resume briefly: Virgil asks the passing double flame to rest, if he ever merited much or a little for them when in his lifetime he wrote his sublime verses ("s'io meritai di voi assai o poco, / quando nel mondo li alti versi scrissi", xxvi, 81f.), but 'the one of them' ("l'un di voi", *Inferno*, xxvi, 83) should tell where (rather than when!) it came to him that he had to die ("dove, per lui, perduto a morir gissi", *Inferno*, xxvi, 84).

This introduction could be understood as another ironical commentary, because Virgil's *Aeneid* may have merited a lot, but it surely does not contribute to the fame of Ulysses or it merely does in a negative way by pointing out his major role in the destruction of Troy leading straight into his punishment as a false adviser in the *Inferno*. Another detail that could be revealing is the emphasis laid on the mundane sphere, in and for which Virgil's *alti versi* were written. Perhaps, as one could assume, Ulysses is triggered by that codeword so much so that he does not refuse to give his account, although he could be rather offended by the doubtful fame the author of the *Aeneid* had attributed to his name. World and mundane experience are the main themes of his report. As he tells, having left Circe, who had held him back for one year, he could not be restrained from his desire to become an 'expert of the world' ("del mondo esperto", *Inferno*, xxvi, 98), which – despite of the following conjunction "e" – would appear to mean (rather than to include) an expert in human vices and virtues ("e de li vizi umani e del valore"), which is exactly the point, the *Commedia* is dealing with: to judge people and distribute them in *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, or *Paradiso*, pretending to have this exact knowledge about vices and virtues, Ulysses wants to achieve. Thus, he resorts to 'the high open sea' ("ma misi me per l'alto mare aperto", *Inferno*,

xxvi, 100), which would appear to mean the Western part of the Mediterranean, on one small ship and accompanied by the small group of comrades who never deserted him. They reach the Spanish coast and finally the strait of Gibraltar, where Hercules had set the signs for humans not to go any further (*Inferno*, xxvi, 108f.). Ulysses and his ship have reached or even surpassed this crucial mark by having left Ceuta at the left side and leaving Sevilla at the right ("da la man destra mi lasciai Sibilia, / da l'altra già m'avea lasciata Setta", *Inferno*, xxvi, 110f.), when he addresses his famous speech to his crew, remembering them of the many dangers they had faced together in the occidental sphere and inviting them, 'on the last small realm of the vigilance of our remaining senses' ("a questa tanto picciola vigilia / d'i nostri sensi ch'è del rimanente", *Inferno*, xxvi, 114f.), not to neglect the experience, may mean the exploration of the uninhabited sphere of the world by heading south ("non vogliate negar l'esperïenza, / di retro al sol, del mondo sanza gente", *Inferno*, xxvi, 116f.). They should consider their special 'seed' ("la vostra semenza", *Inferno*, xxvi, 118), may say their special intellectual gift or talent, and should not live like 'villains' ("bruti", *Inferno*, xxvi, 119),[28] but following 'virtue and consciousness of knowledge' ("virtute e canoscenza", *Inferno*, xxvi, 120). With these words Ulysses makes his comrades 'keen' ("aguti", *Inferno*, xxvi, 121) to the intended southern course, and with the rear turned eastward they start the 'crazy flight' ("*folle volo*", *Inferno*, xxvi, 125) directed consequently to the left, referencing the direction of the south, until after five full phases of the moon and already under the stars of the southern pole they can see an immense mountain. But before they can reach it, a sudden swirl arises which finally submerges the ship and buries it in the depths of

[28] I am using the word "villain" in the etymological sense and in its medieval meaning in Old Medieval French, conceiving as "villain" the uneducated, brute and boorish rural person, in contrary to the mannered courtly one, here more the learned, intellectually orientated one – a concept presumably included in the original *bruti*.

the sea, 'as it pleased the Other' ("com' altrui piacque", *Inferno*, xxvi, 141).

There would be a lot to discuss about this account as it has been discussed and will be until the *Commedia* itself may be submerged in the waters of forgetfulness by the villain fury of oblivion itself. First there is the mythographic question, whether Dante assumes Ulysses never to have returned to Ithaca but refused to and preferred willingly to stay on the sea, as Dante could have (mis)concluded by the allusive reports of his wanderings in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (books xiii and xiv). Or if he perhaps meant that Ulysses set out to another expedition after his return, which would fit to the allusions of a necessary second journey given already by the seer Teireseias in the catabasis of Homer's *Odyssey*: That he must sail out again and find a place where people don't know what his shouldered oar is for and there place it and sacrifice a bull to reconciliate Poseidon's wrath (11, 119-137). One could reflect upon the medieval concepts concerning the southern hemisphere and the question as to whether it is uninhabited (as Dante's Ulysses thinks) or inhabited by the antipodes – a question raised in Medieval poetry by the idea of an expedition southbound lead by Alexander the Great already in the 10th book of the widespread *Alexandreis* by Walter of Chatillon (*c.* 1180), which may have inspired Dante.[29] Finally, the fascination eradiated by the Ulysses episode on later reception results not least from the prophetic impact it seems to have had on the upcoming age of expedition, especially Columbus' discovery of America. In the poetic realm of this interpretation, it is Ariost's *Orlando furioso* and Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* who identify Ulysses' journey as an expedition to the New World and Dante's Purgatorium, which is the mountain Ulysses sees, with Mount Teide of Tenerife.[30]

However, I would like to focus specifically on the fundamental ambivalence of Dante's Ulysses and his narration, resulting from

[29] I have discussed that in Kern 2009, 328-335.
[30] *Ibid.*, 334f.

the clearly decided classification of the hero as an eternally condemned traitor at the beginning to a tragic and unconscious challenger of the highest authority, God himself, who seems to be or who is even forced to be the only one who can stop Ulysses. This ambivalence manifests on specific concepts and notions in the passage. Ulysses' motivation to continue (or – less likely – recontinue) his expeditions seems to reflect *curiositas*, in general conceived as highly vicious by Medieval moral theology, because it is basically related to one of the main vices, *superbia*, as it intends to reveal and gain a knowledge only to be attributed to God.[31] Dante clearly alludes to that concept when his Ulysses stresses that he wants to become "del mondo l'esperto", an expert in mundane affairs, obviously neglecting the real truth, which only lies in God and in believing and trusting in him. Nevertheless, it is Ulysses' goal to understand the vices and virtues of man, which clearly implicates a positive meaning. This ambivalence is continued by the corresponding issues of Ulysses' speech to his comrades: they shall avoid rudeness and strive for conscious knowledge and experience, an attitude that clearly tends to the positive side, especially as it remains uncommented, let alone criticised by the text and is annihilated only by the narration itself that lets men and attitude be drowned wordlessly and seemingly reasonlessly in the sea by the ominous *altrui.*

It is Ulysses' speech that formulates this apparently positive program of human intellectual ambition. The reaction of the listeners, Ulysses' comrades, however, is not rational, but emotional: As obviously intended by their leader, they become *acuti*, incited, keen to follow the challenge. The plea for knowledge and experience becomes the last treachery of Ulysses, though a treachery that does not spare him but includes his own doom, a treachery fatal to himself. Dante's Ulysses shifts form a clearly

[31] Cf. *e.g.* Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Altera pars, Quaestio 166, Articuli 1-2, at the *Bibliothek der Kirchenväter* online: <https://bkv.unifr.ch/de/works/sth/versions/summa-theologiae/divisions/2806> (last accessed January 25, 2025).

negative to a tragic character, who in the end seems to have the empathy of the text because he is mirroring in a desperately ambivalent way what the protagonist of the *Divine Comedy* nearly became but what he luckily was spared to become and finally managed to secure by the helpful guidance of Virgil and Beatrice, philosophy and theology. It is entirely possible that Jorge Louis Borges was the first to recognise this essential connection between Ulysses and Dante in the *Commedia* in one of his famous *Nueve Ensayos Dantescos* ('Nine Essays in Dante'), entitled *El Último Viaje de Ulises* ('The Last Journey of Ulysses').[32] Borges stresses that Ulysses is not simply a counterpart of the wanderer Dante who achieves to get to the Purgatory mountain by having the divine permission to do so. Moreover, there is an essential typological relation, Dante the wanderer representing the new Ulysses. And there is a subtle analogy between the daring of Dante's Ulysses and Dante the author, who somehow challenges God like Ulysses did by imagining what only lies in God's hands: How the transcendent world is shaped, who is punished and who is saved.[33]

The status of Dante's Ulysses within medieval reception and far beyond seems to be singular and unique: He stands for a radical, measureless desire for experience and knowledge – being measureless means, that it transcends a clear moral judgement and has neither a definitely negative nor a definitely positive meaning, or simultaneously both. Dante's Ulysses therefore exceeds the traitor role, in which he is represented in the medieval Trojan romance as well as the limited, domesticated example of the Christian wise man who is not free minded but stays toughly tied to the mast of the ship like the believer to the cross in the tradition of allegorical interpretation.

[32] Borges 2004, 107-112, the relation is exhaustively discussed by Stierle 2007.

[33] *Ibid*. 110f., cf. especially111: "Dante [the author] fue Ulises y de algún modo pudo temer el castigo de Ulises" ('Dante was Ulysses and in some respect he had to fear Ulysses' punishment').

4. *Brant's foolishly wise Ulysses*

Sebastian Brant's *Narrenschiff* ('Ship of Fools') was printed for the first time in 1494 in Basel by Bergmann von Olpe. A second and third edition with some extensions were published immediately after in 1495 and 1499. The impact of Brant's work is not limited to German literature, but also affects European literature as a whole which is evident by the numerous translations which followed – into Latin and various vernacular languages, such as French and English.[34]

The text as a whole is organised by a structural concept which is quite common and widespread in different genres of Late Medieval and Early Modern literature. The main theme, the foolishness of mankind, is treated within an exhaustive and more or less well sorted series of vices and representatives of the different social classes, a literary method that lets the *Narrenschiff* correspond for example with the chess-books or the danse macabre. The basic satirical tendency fashioning the whole text is in the same way a common and widespread phenomenon, shaping the named parallel genres too.

As already expressed by the title, the allegorical baseline is the above mentioned prominent master-allegory of human life as a ship's journey. The representatives of mankind figured out by the text are on board the ship of fools intending to sail to "Narragonia", the homeland of fools. However, the ship is lacking a steer and therefore the whole cruise is condemned to end in final doom, theologically spoken in the loss of salvation, heavenly paradise

[34] For these and the following general facts cf. the introduction in Joachim Knape's edition of the *Narrenschiff* (2005), 11-99. The original work and a great variety of examples for the broad reception, combined with commentaries and further information is provided by <https://www.narragonien-digital.de/exist/index.html> (last accessed January 25, 2025). I cite the text according to Knape's edition, rendering "a", "o" and "u" with a diacritic "e" as "ä", "ö" and "ü". For recent research on Brant, especially his *Narrenschiff* including its broad European reception cf. Henkel 2021 and the contributions in Büchli *et al.* (Hrsgg.) 2023.

and eternal life. This main message proves the *Narrenschiff* as a quite conservative, not to say blimpish text, having its roots deep in the anti-mundane tradition of medieval *contemptus mundi*-literature.

On the other hand, the progressive humanist tendency of the text can be observed in the broad variety of example-figures, especially from classical Antiquity cited by Brant. In this regard his work can be seen as a veritable compendium of actual and more or less exact and learned classical knowledge. According to that and to the allegorical baseline of *navigatio* it is not a miracle, that one of the most prominent cited figures is Ulysses, who in contrary to most of the others does not function as a negative figure, but rather stands for the wise man as a counterexample to fools and foolish behaviour.

There are two allusions to the adventures of Ulysses, one in general (chapter 66, 133) the other to his encounter with the Sirens (chapter 36, 31), clearly following the tradition of the above described allegorical interpretation.[35] I will concentrate on a third exhaustive reference within one of the last chapters, chapter 108 (out of 112 in total), which shapes Ulysses, his journey and his fate in a quite detailed and consequent way as the wise counterpart of the fools. The chapter is entitled *Das schluraffen schiff* and resumes the journey of the society of fools as a whole, whereas the previous chapters treated the various singular types of fools and foolishness. As in most of the other chapters the narrative perspective is that of the fools themselves, thus the verses are spoken from their point of view, an important fact not to be neglected by an analysis of the crucial didactic statements. Firstly the fools, represented by the collective pronoun "we", resume the intended route of their journey, which starts from *Narbon in Schluraffen landt*. *Narbon* is not the French city but is to be conceived as a telling name ('manor of fools'), *Schluraffen landt*, the later fabulous "Schlaraffenland" ('The Land of Cockaigne'),

[35] Cf. the references given by the index in Knape's edition (Brant 2005, 617).

is here rather in the original meaning the land of the *slur-* or *slûderaffe*, the Medieval High German word for the luxurious layabout.[36] They intend to continue to *Montflascun*, another telling name meaning 'Mount Bottle', alluding to the vice of drinking. The final destination as said is *Narragun* (108, 6-8). Nevertheless, the fools confess that they are travelling in great despair because they do not know how to navigate, therefore their journey will be endless (cf. 108, 10-13). In the following lines they are naming some dangers which they are confronted with, and here the first allusions to the adventures of Ulysses (among others) are made: They have to pass Scylla and Charybdis (108, 37) and are confronted with numerous miraculous animals in the sea, such as Dolphins (which do not seem to be that miraculous) and the Sirens, who sing sweet cantilenas to them, which causes them to fall asleep, so that there is no hope for their safe landing:

> Die syngen vns s*üß* Cantylenen
> Vnd machen vns als vast entschloffen
> Das vnsers zů lend ist keyn hoffen (*Narrenschiff*, 108, 42-44)

This corresponds to the cited allegoric reading, as well as to the first picture to be found in Herrad's *Hortus deliciarum*, which in turn underlines Brant's familiarity with the medieval mytho-allegoric tradition and may also prove the constant impression of this tradition on early modern reception of mythology.

Ulysses is explicitly named for the first time in connection with his Polyphemus-adventure which is alluded to by the text more detailed: similar to the Sirens, the fools will also have to face *Cyclops* (as Polyphemus is called here) with his one malformed eye, which was gouged out by Ulysses. As a result of this wise deceit the giant could not see the hero and therefore was unable to harm him anymore, instead he was only able to yell and gape like

[36] Cf. *Mittelhochdeutsches Handwörterbuch von Matthias Lexer*, online version, https://woerterbuchnetz.de/?sigle=Lexer&lemid=A00001, s.v. *slûraffe*, (last accessed January 25, 2025).

a bull who is about to be slain. Ulysses, the wise man, managed to escape and left the giant crying and mourning, fruitlessly throwing big stones. His eye however would grow back as soon as Cyclops sights the army of fools coming, he will open it that widely against them, so that nothing else of his face can be seen, his mouth will reach from ear to ear and will swallow up many of the fools:

> Vnd müssen sähen vmb vnd vmb
> Cyclopem mit dem ougen krumb
> Dem doch Vlysses das vß stach
> Das er vor wißheyt jnn nit sach
> Vnd jm keyn schaden zů möcht fügen
> Dann das er bröllen dett vnd lügen[37]
> Glich wie eyn ochs / dem würt ein streich
> Nit mynder der wise von jm weich
> Vnd ließ jnn schrygen / grynen / weynen
> Doch warff er noch mit grossen steynen
> Das selb oug wechßt jm wider ser
> Wann er ansicht der narren her
> So spert ers vff / gen jnn so witt
> Das man sunst sicht jm antlytt nüt
> Sin mül spatzyert zů beyden oren
> Do mit verschluckt er manchen doren (*Narrenschiff*, 108, 45-60)

As one can observe here, the journey of the fools is increasingly shaped as a second Odyssey, the fools are more or less retracing the tracks of the Greek hero as the text retraces the myth of Ulysses. With much plausibility this textual strategy could be read as an intertextual reference to Virgil's *Aeneid* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, both having Aeneas retrace the adventures of Ulysses. Virgil and Ovid obviously function as literary authorities for Brant, as is evidenced by many explicit references and the fact, that Brant himself initiated a famous illustrated edition of Virgil's works, printed in 1502. Brant was clearly aware of the

[37] *lügen* is Middle High German *luogen*, thus it means 'look', not 'lie'.

corresponding episodes in these classical texts, thus he obviously relates to them in his shaping of the fools' journey accordingly.

Brant's "working on myth" is quite creative and playful. This can be seen by the abstruse motif of Polyphemus' eye, which will grow back and threaten the fools. Due to their inexperience and foolishness they fall into all the traps Ulysses managed to escape by using his experience and wisdom. However, this main message of the text is thwarted by a fundamental discrepancy: It is not only the fools who are threatened to be swallowed up by the Cyclops, but Ulysses too lost some of his comrades to him. And if the following lines refer to the adventure with the Laestrygonians who will eat the meat of the fools and drink their blood like wine, the attentive reader, who knows about the mythographic facts, will have to state, that Ulysses too lost all of his ships despite of the one guided by himself to those cannibals. I will return to this, as it strikes me as fundamental inconsistency within the logic of the narrative and its didactic meaning, but firstly I would like to resume the further references to Ulysses, which even intensify this impression.

It was Homer, as Brant continues, who invented the whole story to underline the importance of wisdom and to warn against thoughtlessly travelling through the sea:

> Homerus hatt diß als erdacht
> Do mit man hett vff wißheyt acht
> Vnd sich nit wogt lycht vff das mer (*Narrenschiff*, 108, 69-71)

The last statement seemingly alludes once again not only literary to the real sea journey but to the allegoric meaning of life as a cruise, which is central for the whole book. Homer also praised Ulysses for his wise advice and well-planned military attacks during the Trojan War. With this further comment Brant clearly differs from the traditional critical view on Ulysses as a tricky commander in the medieval Trojan romance, culminating in the punishment he receives in Dante's *Inferno*. The following lines refer to the Circe adventure as a further proof of Ulysses' wisdom:

When she had bewitched his comrades into animals with a potion, he was wise enough not to drink or eat from what she offered to him, but instead subdued her and released his comrades by using a herb named Moly (108, 77-83). Brant does not explain the specific divine nature of the Moly herb nor that Ulysses was given it by Hermes/Mercurius, thus his allusion remains slightly obscure, especially for an audience less experienced in classical mythology. I will, however, show below that this episode will hold some relevance in the upcoming humanistic Ulysses-reception, namely in the translation of Minervius and the later emblematic tradition.

Subsequently the text states once again in general that it was Ulysses' wisdom and his reasonable advice that allowed him to overcome all distress he had to focus. These frequent repetitions are a typical feature of Brant's poetics and produce a quite fatiguing and poetically clumsy impression on the modern reader or at least on me. Finally, however, Ulysses' ships were smashed by a storm and all his comrades were drowned. Ulysses' life was once again spared by his own intelligence and ability to swim and he alone could reach safe land, naked and without further means. Thus he could tell much about misfortune ("Vnd wust von vil vnglück zů sagen", 108, 94), a line, that could allude on the famous telling of his adventure at the court of the Phaeacians, yet this remains quite diffuse and leads to the description of Ulysses' death, which reinforces and lets culminate the outlined contradiction between his status as an example of wisdom and his tragic, not to say (according to the books main theme) foolish, fate as it is imagined by the text:

> Wart doch von sym sůn dot geschlagen
> Als er klöppfft an synr eygnen tür
> Do künd wisheit nit helffen für
> Nyemans was der jn kennen künd
> Jm gantzen hoff / alleyn die hund /
> Vnd starb dar vmb / das man nit wolt
> Jn kennen / als man billich solt (*Narrenschiff*, 108, 95-101)

> (Nevertheless, he was slain to death by his son / when he knocked at his own door. / In this, wisdom could not help. / There was nobody who was able to recognise him / at the whole court despite of the dogs, / and therefore he had to die, because nobody wanted / to recognise him as should reasonably have been done.)

Brant's *Narrenschiff* – in this respect like Dante – reports a quite curious, odd version of Ulysses' death confusing motives relating to different mythographic traditions. On the one hand there is the Homeric motif that Ulysses has to return to his court incognito so that his revenge on the suitors of Penelope can succeed, combined with the sentimental scene of his true, old hound Argos, who is the only one who recognises him, which is reflected, although imprecisely, by the vague assertion that only the dogs recognised the homecomer. The other, posthomeric tradition, previously formed in classical Antiquity knows about another son of Ulysses born by Circe after his farewell and therefore is unknown to him. This son is called Telegonus ('The one born afar') and once grown up, he decides to search for his father. When he arrives at Ithaca Ulysses, regarding him as a hostile stranger, attacks him but is overcome and fatally wounded, father and son recognising each other only at Ulysses' fatal end.

This motif is reported in various mythographic texts and is also known in the medieval Trojan tradition. Knape, for example, refers to a corresponding passage in Servius' commentary on Virgil's *Aeneid*.[38] I am of the opinion that it is more likely that Brant refers to chapter 6.14 and 6.15 in Dictys' account of Ulysses' death, who speaks about some prophetic dreams of Ulysses predicting his death by his son. He therefore decides to ban Telemachos, but instead is killed by the unknown Telegonos in the described way. The relation of the *Narrenschiff* to this version is made probable also by the role Telemachos plays within it and would explain the mythographic "mistake" that the text ascribes the guilt for Ulysses' death obviously to him, Telemachos, and not to Telegonos. Brant

[38] Cf. the comment of Knape in Brant 2005, 617.

would not have needed to refer directly to Dictys, although this would be plausible because the work has a continuous wide reception also in the Early Modern period.[39] But Brant could also refer to the ongoing Early Modern German Trojan literature, like the *Book of Troy* by Hans Mair.[40] The replacement of Telegonos by Telemachos seems to indicate that Brant's way of citing his sources is rather by mind but by consulting them on a scriptural basis, at least in this case.

An attempt to interpret Brant's mythographic deviation as intentional could argue that by not recognising Ulysses, his son and the members of his court represent the community of fools bringing down not only themselves, but the wise man too. Thus, the wise Ulysses would be conceived as a victim of the fools and their fatal behaviour. This would be a nearby assumption, but one could quite expect that the text would express a meaning like that more explicitly. The narrative perspective of the text should also be taken into account, as the story is told from the perspective of the fools and therefore does not immediately represent the textual voice of the author. But there is no hint, that the text wants to be understood ironically and the mythographic "mistake" should be considered as proof of the fools' foolishness and lacking mythographic knowledge.

I therefore assume that we are confronted with a textual effect named "différance" by Jacques Derrida,[41] which means, that each lingual uttering is in some way contradictory in itself and its intended clear meaning always shifting. Or, as Paul de Man wrote: "Die Sprache verspricht (sich)" ('language promises/contradicts [itself]').[42] In this case the didactic impetus of the text is aiming

[39] The reports by Dares and Dictys' were printed shortly after 1470, cf. Diktys/Dares 2019, 18, it is quite likely that Brant knew of these early prints.

[40] A detailed description of German Early Modern Trojan literature of the 14th and 15th century is provided by Alfen *et al.* 1990, 47-112.

[41] Cf. Derrida 2004.

[42] Cf. de Man 1979, 277. The pointed remark refers to Martin Heidegger's famous phrase "Die Sprache spricht". As it is known, Paul de Man's behaviour during the Nazi rule was highly problematic, what he tried to conceal. I want

at a clear message, which is thwarted by the complexity of the mythological figure and its narrative, both transcending simple didactical ways of producing sense. It is evident that the text conceives Ulysses as an impersonation of wisdom and knowledge and as an antipode to the fools. As such, however, he suffers in the end exactly the fate that is threatening the fools, as the chapter stresses once again in the following lines: He ends up in death and doom. This is not what the text wants but what the text happens to say and therefore an effect of its "différance".

Nevertheless, this effect could be considered as consequential and to a certain extent analogous to the ambivalent conception of Ulysses in Dante's *Inferno* as an eternally condemned traitor on the one hand and as exemplary and heroic agent wanting to achieve the utmost degree of human experience and knowledge on the other, and in this respect being the true challenger of no one less than God himself. Accordingly, Brant's *Narrenschiff* wants Ulysses to function as the exemplary wise man, but in reality, similar to the Ulysses of Dante concentrating on the mundane sphere and on mundane experience and skill, he fails in his representation of the ideal wise character the text is aiming for, and this is the honest Christian believer who is the only one to escape from foolishness because he regards all mundane knowledge as foolish and trusts in God alone. Although the text is insisting on Ulysses' function as a positive example (further corresponding comments after the description of Ulysses' death can be found in line 115 and 130 of the chapter), he and his story do not match the main and general concept of the text, which in the end states and communicates a simple, I am induced to say blimpish key message: All mundane knowledge and wisdom is in vain, what counts is the belief in God and God himself.

to stress that I am citing him being aware of that and distancing myself clearly from his political position in this fatal period.

5. *Prospects and Résumé*

I would finally like to shortly discuss the following reception of Ulysses in humanistic German literature and then will resume my observations.

In 1537 the first German translation of Homer's *Odyssey* was published by Alexander Weissenborn in Augsburg, Germany, under the title *Odyssea*. The translator was Simon Schaidenreisser, born around 1500 in Bautzen, a city in Eastern Saxony in the Northwest of Dresden. He acquired his Bachelor at Wittenberg in 1516, then in 1523 the degree of a *Magister artium* at Basel. From 1525 to 1534 he worked as poet in residence and as headmaster of the Latin school at Munich, until 1537 he was *Stadtschreiber* ('writer of the town') and afterwards *Unterrichter* ('writer of the court') at the same institution , until his death in 1572.[43] According to the common humanist practise Schaidenreisser named himself with the Latin nickname Minervius ('son of Minerva'), I shall henceforth refer to him as such. It is not possible to confirm whether he did this in direct relation to his translation work, however, it would appear to correlate well: Minerva or Pallas Athene being the tutelary goddess of the title hero of the *Odyssey* may also well be the patron of the translator. Minervius did not translate directly from the Greek original but mainly from the Latin prose translation by Raphaelus de Volaterra († 1521), first printed in Rome 1510. It is possible that in addition he used the other Latin prose translation by Gregorius or Georgius Maxillus alias Übelin, also printed 1510 in Strasbourg. Similar to his sources he translated in prose.

Corresponding to the remarkable fact that Minervius' *Odyssea* represents the first, although indirect translation of a Homeric epic or, possibly even the first translation of a work of Old Greek literature into German, the new aspect in German vernacular reception of antiquity which can be observed here is that the

[43] Cf. for this and the following Kern 2012 and 2017 with references on further research.

mythological story is not adapted by retelling, but rather translated as such. Thus, the translated Homeric text stands alone and is not combined with interpolated euhemeristic or allegorical comments providing a new and adulterant bias to the original. However, Minervius continues the tradition of interpreting mythology by many comments providing the story with factual, but also euhemeristic and especially allegoric and moral interpretations, but he "bans" them to the margins of the text. Texts and comments are clearly and programmatically separated.

Thus, the first German translator of Homer does not simply want to entertain his readers but is still convinced that the story offers a deeper meaning which he wants to convey to his audience in order to teach and instruct them. This twofold intention follows the common principle deduced from Horace's *Ars poetica*, the principle of *prodesse et delectare* as the main purposes of literature. This is already stated by the subtitle of the *Odyssea*: "Das seind die aller zierlichsten und lustigsten vier und zwaintzig bücher des eltisten kunstreichesten Vatters aller Poeten Homeri / von der zehen järigen irrfart des weltweisen Kriechischen Fürstens Ulyssis" ('these are the most precious and entertaining twenty four books of the oldest father of all poets, most experienced in his art, Homer, telling about the ten year long wanderings of the Greek duke Ulysses, who was wise in all mundane matters'). The aspect of *delectare* is clearly stressed, the other one of *prodesse* is concealed in the attributions to the author, Homer, called the most experienced in his art, the notion 'art' still including the aspect of science and learning, and especially in the main quality attributed to the protagonist, Ulysses, described as *weltweise*.

This attribution corresponds to the main exemplary function which is ascribed to Ulysses by Brant. According to the widespread reception of the *Narrenschiff* – and this is a new assumption of mine resulting from the constellation of testimonies in this article – I theorise that it is more than likely that Minervius did not only know about Brant's work, but that the *Narrenschiff* and its shaping of Ulysses as exemplary figuration of the wise man may have

given a perhaps central motivation to Minervius' undertaking, at least an essential motivation of his, Minervius' way of presenting Ulysses as wise character and the main meaning he attributes to the *Odyssey* as a poetic work communicating essential insight, experience and understanding of the world to its readers.

There are also clear indications for this possible relation to Brant in Minervius' *Vorred* ('preface'), so when he writes about Homer, despite having been blind, had a deeper insight into all mundane matters and that Ulysses functions as impersonation *aines weldtweysen gescheyden* ('of a man, prudent in all worldly affairs'), who therefore could overcome all danger and misfortune, he had to face.[44] This clearly corresponds to what could be read about Homer and Ulysses in Brant, but we also have to notice an important difference: Ulysses is not simply just the wise man, but the wise man integrated in and concentrated at the world and at mundane life, both obviously in a strictly positive sense. Mundane life is no more banned as worthless and as a sphere only fools are related to. Instead, they have their unique worth and the goal of the wise man is not concentrated merely upon the transcendent sphere promising eternal life, but he is also focusing on mundane experience, knowledge and wisdom. This new concept impersonated by Ulysses represents a remarkable achievement and I think we are allowed to state with all emphasis that it expresses what we call the anthropological turn of the Modern Age. What had implicated highest ambivalence in Dante's *Inferno*, Ulysses' thirst for mundane experience manifesting in his utmost curiosity, becomes an undisputed and the highest positive quality of the character.

Despite the exciting general concept, Minervius' comments, as I have pointed out, are still travelling in the wake of mythographic tradition. To give an example I refer to the Circe adventure. According to Brant, Minervius tells that Ulysses achieved to overcome Circe by using the herb Moly, but in difference to Brant's rather obscure allusion he explicitely explains that the

[44] Schaidenreisser 1537, fol. iiib, cf. Kern 2012, 175.

herb was given to the hero by Hermes, here referred to by his Latin name Mercurius, and that it represents knowledge and wise foresight that provides Ulysses with a protectional means against Circe's enchantments, those and the goddess herself representing dangerous sexual temptation.[45] This nicely hackneyed interpretation, however, is clearly thwarted by the story itself, because Ulysses' overcoming of Circe ends in nothing else other than in bed and having sex. The reduction of complexity given by allegoric interpretation is directly confronted and negated by the way the story goes. In general, this effect creates a kind of curious tension between the traditional taming of myth and the validity it claims and is able to assert. And this effect can also be observed in the order of the marginal comments Minervius is giving here. His moral anti-sexual and misogynistic comment of Ulysses' as the wise man's victory over sexual temptation is immediately followed by the contradictory fact that Ulysses and Circe accomplish exactly what was warned of: "darauff ich mitt jr zů beth gangen / haben das spil Veneris mitainander gespilt" ('thereafter I went to bed with her and we played the play of Venus'), as the hero tells the Phaeacians, what Minervius comments lapidarily in the margin with: "Ulysses vermischt sich mit Circe" ('Ulysses intermingles with Circe').[46]

The poetic story outplays the attempts of its allegoric taming. The obviousness of this productive contradiction between the text in the center and the commentary in the margin is a quality of Minervius' translation that is new and makes it, at least to me, a very likeable testimony in the history of medieval and Early Modern reception of the Ulysses myth. I would like to end the part of that history, which I have told here, with the hint, that in some regard Minervius' translation combined with the introducing

[45] Schaidenreisser 1537, fol. XLIIa, Kern 2012, 172. This allegoric interpretation too has a prominent history reaching back to classical antiquity and testified also in Christian Greek and Latin patristic writing as shown exhaustively by Rahner 1984, 161-196.

[46] Schaidenreisser 1537, fol. XLIIb; Kern 2012, 172f.

images to the books and his marginal comments reflect on a macro-level a structure which can be later observed, en miniature so to speak, in the widespread emblematic tradition. The translation is shaped in a pre-emblematic mode, as I attempted to show in a former essay.[47] This emblematic tradition continues the allegoric interpretation of Ulysses and his adventures as we observed them in Brant and Minervius, giving the same moral and didactic meaning in emblems of Circe, the herb Moly and Polyphemus.[48]

To resume, I would like to stress, that one can observe in the medieval reception of the myth and the figure of Ulysses a phenomenon that characterises medieval reception of classical mythology in general: there can be observed a high ambivalence not only what concerns the different traditions like the Trojan romance or the allegoric interpretation, but also the concepts within one tradition or even within one and the same text tending quite often to open up contradictory meanings. We have seen that in the Trojan romance, namely in Herbort's *Liet von Troye,* in the beginning Ulysses is presented as one of the most prominent Greek leaders, but at the end conceived as one of the worst traitors responsible for the doom of the city and its people. This shifting conception corresponds to the pro-Trojan view which this genre usual follows, influenced by the Roman tradition, namely Virgil's *Aeneid* and the political and cultural important idea of *translatio imperii et artium* ('transfer of reign and sciences and arts') from the Romans to the medieval empires, especially but not exclusively the so-called Holy Roman Empire, and to the system of medieval scientific knowledge.[49]

[47] Kern 2017.

[48] For exemplary emblems cf. *ibid*., 296-302.

[49] The widespread idea of *translatio imperii* becomes manifest in the various genealogies of medieval dynasties rooting themselves back to Trojan heroes, who managed to flee from the perishing city like Aeneas and became the founders of the respective House, for example Franco for the Franks or Brutus for the Brits, cf. for the whole complex of Trojan genealogies and the idea of *translatio* Graus 1989.

In an opposite shifting of the text and its contradictory concepts Dante presents Ulysses at first as one of the utmost evil and condemned traitors, who then in his own story and in his own words becomes an example for the human thirst of knowledge and experience giving the hero some kind of a positive touch, although, as an impersonation of curiosity, he remains to be a highly problematic character, however, in the audacity and boldness of his motivation and his wanderings pre-shaping the wanderer and the author Dante himself.

Dante's Ulysses combines in this respect the tradition of Trojan romance and the other of allegoric interpretation, the last reducing myth and figure to a specific, quite narrow meaning. In the allegoric interpretation of the adventure of the Sirens Ulysses represents not only the wise man but the true Christian believer, who ties himself to the cross to avoid the temptations of sin like Ulysses tied himself to the mast of his ship to overcome the sirens, who he is nevertheless extremely curious to hear. This last point shows clearly that allegoric interpretation gives a shortened reading of the underlying narrative and therefore in this sense is contradictory. Its further reception, however, can once again produce fundamental ambivalence as shown by the singing Ysot compared with the sirens in the Tristan-romance by Gottfried von Straßburg.

Ulysses acting as an example for the wise man in Sebastian Brant's *Narrenschiff* illustrates the continuity of concepts and tradition between the Medieval and the Early Modern or humanistic period and underlines that the gap we assume between them is at least in some relevant aspects more imagination than fact. We also can observe here the ongoing phenomenon of reductive and contradictory reading, typical for allegoric or moral interpretation of mythology.

Minervius' German translation of the *Odyssey* brings back the "original" narrative to the sphere of vernacular literature. Although it is still accompanied by an elaborated apparatus of comments, the story stands for itself and stands literally in the

centre of the book, whereas the tradition of its interpretation and functionalisation continued also by Minervius is clearly separated by being banned to the margin. However, in this respect too one can observe an important new tendency the *Odyssea* manages to achieve: Ulysses conceived as *weldtweyser gescheider* gives a positive example of human experience and knowledge literally related to mundane matters and not allegorically referring to the transcendent sphere, the contempt of the world and the believer seeking salvation only in God and the "real" eternal life after this "false" life here in this world.

Resuming our examples from a modern point of view one could be tempted to state that only Dante gets the real point in conceiving Ulysses as the "measureless" character defined by utmost curiosity, and that the *Commedia* comes nearest to what would be the modern understanding of the hero as presented originally in Homer's *Odyssey*. However, this would be the wrong anachronistic and self-referred standpoint. According to Blumenberg's concept of "working on myth" there is no true and right understanding, no true and original meaning, in fact, each period, not to say each text forms its own point of view which always has its own value and teaches us more about the "working" than about the non-existing "original myth" and its "true meaning" itself.

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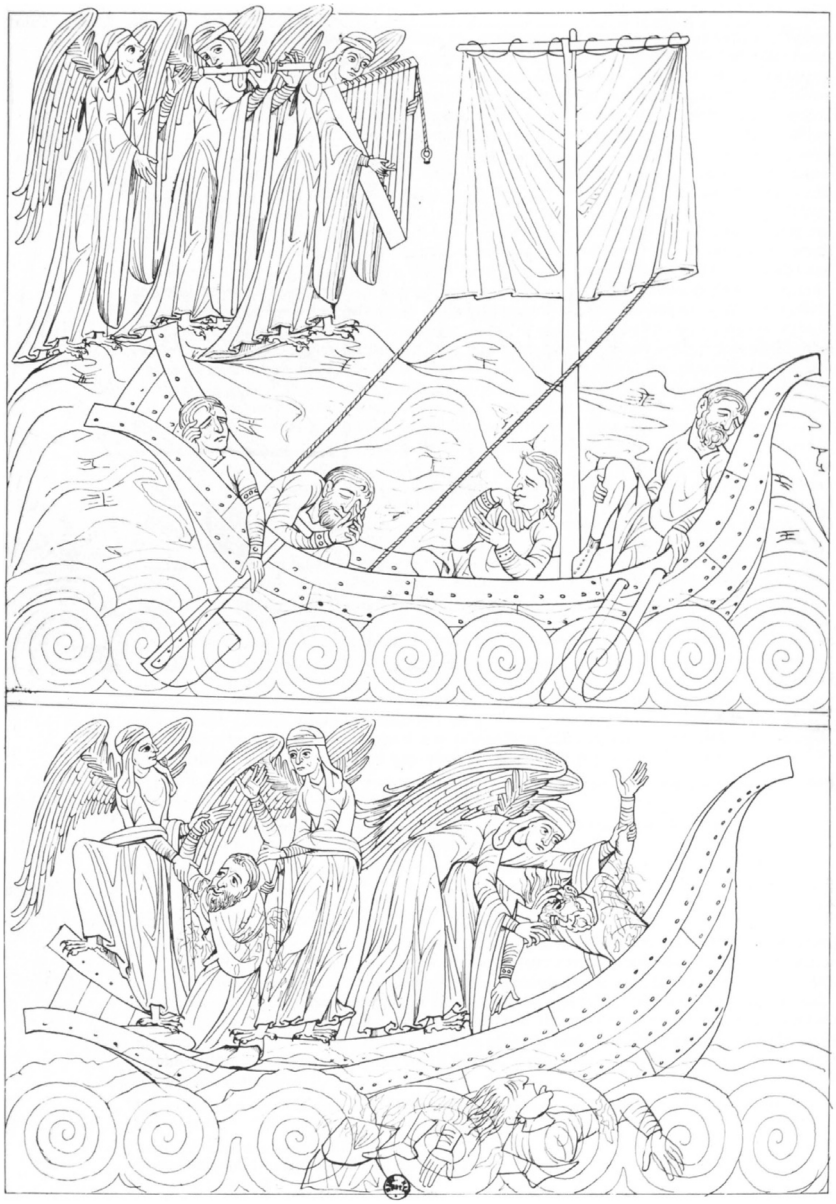

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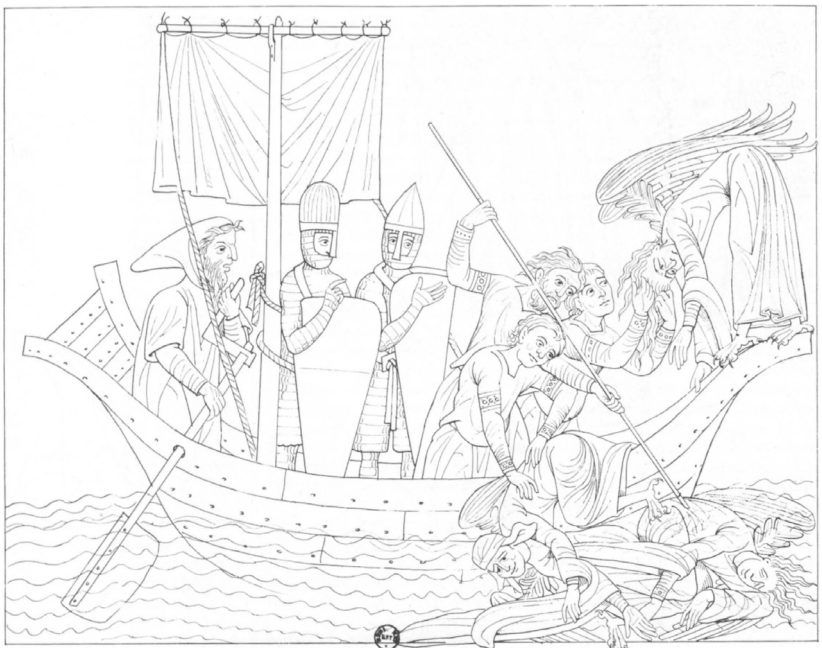

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Figure 1. Herrad von Landsberg. Hortus Deliciarum*. Ulysses and the Sirens. Image area a) Sleeping mariners approaching the Sirens b) The Sirens attack the mariners and drown them c) Ulysses tied to the mast passes by the Sirens, lets them be attacked and thrown into the sea (source: Herrad 1979, vol. 2, 365f.).*