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Shakespeare’s (Un)fortunate Travellers: Maritime Adventures across the Genres

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Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* famously opens with a scene of storm at sea and with eventual shipwreck. And even though the storm is soon revealed to be mere illusion and, as a result, harmless, what the play thus articulates at its very beginning is a vision of a hostile sea which is, emphatically, not humanity’s natural element. The storm might well be a product of Prospero’s art, and the shipwreck nothing but a magic trick. However, the play creates the illusion of a physical experience of the storm for both the characters in the play and the audience. While we see the characters battle against the storm with all their might, being physically drenched in the process (see Arden SD 1.1.49), and while they also have to fight against the storm acoustically, in order not to be drowned by the “tempestuous noise of thunder and lightning” (Arden 1.0.1), we are, in watching the storm scene in the theatre, similarly subjected to a very physical experience in which the clamour of the storm firmly establishes its sensory reality. Indeed, in the theatre, the opening tempest is a cacophony of sound, created through the mates’ dialogue as much as through stage machinery such as, in the early modern playhouse, musical instruments, sea machines and wind machines (see Arden 1.0.1n and Cambridge 1.0.1n). The modes of showing and telling are fused here as the storm is “shown” less through the actual action on stage than through the manner in which the characters speak. As Neill reminds us, “[e]arly modern playgoers, after all, went to ‘hear’ a play rather than to see it; they were ‘auditors’ or ‘audience’ before they were ‘spectators’” (36-37). The “soundtrack” (50) of *The Tempest*, he contends, is part of its insistence “on the superiority of the aural tradition” (36), and, indeed, the representation of the sea in the play draws much of its effect from the manner in which Shakespeare handles sound. Rather than narrating the storm, the characters on board the ship produce storm and shipwreck in their poetic language; the boatswain’s sibilant speeches, for instance, do not merely suggest the hissing of the wind, but acoustically create it for the audience, as in his reaction to Gonzalo’s appeal for him to “be patient” (Arden 1.1.15):

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BOATSWAIN. When the sea is! Hence. What cares these roarers for the name of king? To cabin! Silence! Trouble us not. (1.1.16-18)
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The proliferation of alveolar fricatives, especially in combination with velar plosives, renders this speech not only descriptive but constitutive, as the storm emerges directly from the boatswain’s words as an aural rather than a visual presence. Prospero, still hidden from the audience, is not the only conjurer in this scene.

Focussing on the dramatic contrast between action and narration, as well as between present and past, Tribble claims that “[s]eldom in Shakespeare are two so disparate
scenes juxtaposed as 1.1 and 1.2” (155), but there are, in fact, important structural echoes between the two. Miranda’s first speech in scene 2, which directly follows the shipwreck, exists on a continuum of showing and telling similar to the one established in scene 1:

MIRANDA. If by your art, my dearest father, you have
Put the wild waters in this roar, allay them.
The sky, it seems, would pour down stinking pitch
But that the sea, mounting to th’welkin’s cheek,
Dashes the fire out. O, I have suffered
With those that I saw suffer – a brave vessel
(Who had no doubt some noble creature in her)
Dashed all to pieces – o, the cry did knock
Against my very heart! Poor souls, they perished.
Had I been any god of power, I would
Have sunk the sea within the earth or ere
It should the good ship so have swallowed and
The fraughting souls within her. (1.2.1-13)

Miranda’s initial appeal to her father suggests that the storm is still raging. And in her speech, of course, it does. Again we have a proliferation of alveolar fricatives, now combined mainly with bilabial plosives, whenever Miranda refers to the sea and ship, and again rhetorical devices help create the sound of the hissing storm. According to Lindley, Miranda’s speech here is “a rhetorical set-piece, with many literary precedents, designed verbally to recreate a picture of the storm and to register the reaction of pity” (Cambridge 1.2.1-13n). But Miranda’s words do not only “recreate a picture” of the storm; rather, they signal, indeed they perform, the undiminished potency of the storm, rendering its continued ferocity acoustically tangible for the audience.

The picture of the sea that emerges from these sibilant renditions of the tempestuous ocean is overwhelmingly negative. The sea is hostile, it is dangerous, and it is, above all, repulsive. It is illuminating to look at how this impression is evoked, however. The opening scene of the play, interestingly, contains hardly any direct allusions to the sea as such. We are aboard a ship, of course, and the characters’ exclamations are full of nautical references. This is to be expected, as the threat of shipwreck naturally governs the scene, and the storm at sea necessitates particular forms of behaviour. But even though we are very much made aware of the maritime context and the nautical state of emergency, the sea itself is peculiarly elusive; indeed, in the master and boatswain’s initial duologue, as well as in the boatswain’s taunting address of the wind (Arden 1.1.6-7) and subsequent commands to his sailors (1.1.43-44), it is the proximity of the land rather than the sea which is most problematic – as Mentz observes, “[o]n the open sea, land represents danger” (12). The mariners’ immediate task hence consists in trying to increase the distance between ship and coast rather than to seek out safe land, as the uninitiated might expect. And yet, despite this enforced manoeuvre and despite the lack of direct references to the sea, its negative presence is tangible. The danger of drowning is repeatedly conjured up (1.1.25-26, 1.1.33-34, 1.1.39, 1.1.40, 1.1.49-52), as is the possibility and eventual certainty of sinking (1.1.34, 1.1.55). As such, the sea
is constantly presented as a watery grave ready to receive the crew and passengers of
the ship:

GONZALO. Now would I give a thousand furlongs of sea for an acre of barren
ground – long heath, brown furze, anything. The wills above be
done, but I would fain die a dry death. (1.1.56-58)

As Gonzalo’s words, which close scene 1, suggest, it is less the proximity of death as
such than more specifically the prospect of death by drowning which is so disturbing.
Faced with the imminent threat of a watery death, Gonzalo can at least pretend to
himself that “a dry death” would be far less frightening. The vision of giving up his
body to “a thousand furlongs of sea,” however, is horrifying. In fact, “anything,” even
the least attractive and most barren patch of dry ground, would be more welcome to
Gonzalo than to be swallowed by this immense body of water, and lost within the
vastness of the ocean. The sea is, above all, a frightening “nonplace” (Balasopoulus
131) which can swallow human subjects without leaving a trace. Even though all those
believed to be lost at sea will eventually be miraculously resurrected in The Tempest,
the threat of fatal disorientation looms over all endeavours. The fact that the sea only
exists as noise in this first scene of the play metaphorically strengthens its elusive but
simultaneously – and literally – overwhelming presence.

If such indirect allusions to the sea emphasise its link with perdition and death, the
more direct references metaphorically align it with unruliness and chaos. When
Gonzalo exhorts the boatswain to “be patient” (1.1.14), he replies that he will be so
“[w]hen the sea is,” (1.1.15) hence personifying the sea and characterising it as
deficient in the virtues of patience and temperance. And when he apostrophises the
tempestuous waves as “roarers” (1.1.17), the boatswain continues this personification,
conjuring up a vision of the waves as an “unruly” (1.1.17n) and “disorderly”
(Cambridge 1.1.15n) mob which chaotically and subversively challenges the king’s
power. As Lindley suggests, this activates a set of correspondences between nature and
humanity, implying that there is “a metaphoric link between the chaos in nature and
the upsetting of hierarchy in the Boatswain’s speeches” (Cambridge 1.1.15n). In this
sense, the sea is dangerous precisely because in addition to revealing the
precariousness of human life as such, it poses a threat to the status quo, unsettling
social hierarchies by instituting a different chain of authority. The boatswain’s
challenges to kingly authority are possible because the state of emergency renders a
strict adherence to nautical ritual and expertise indispensable, and compels even the
king to submit to this altered chain of command. Despite the fact that common sense
would dictate that the courtly passengers subordinate themselves to the boatswain’s
expertise, however, their reactions show how perverse and truly shocking his speeches
seem in the context of early modern hierarchy. Indeed, the boatswain is exceptionally
blunt in revealing the boundaries (and above all the uselessness) of the courtiers’
authority aboard the ship and in highlighting his own supremacy in this particular
heterotopic context instead. The lack of grace of his claim to authority cannot but
antagonise the king’s entourage, for it is far too supportive of the subversion the storm
has unleashed.

In this respect, Balasopoulus’s reminder of the historical connections between the gradual disintegration of feudal society with the “oceanic turn” towards “the planet’s nonterrestrial space” (140) in the fifteenth century is significant, as it links the incipient age of overseas explorations and expansions to a larger historical trajectory and to wider social changes. Up to the late fifteenth century, socio-economic and political power in Europe mainly relied on land as a real and figurative basis of legitimisation: “Its immobility made it an apt symbolic embodiment of the principles that were most vital to the preservation and reproduction of the feudal social order: moral constancy, hierarchical fixity,” and a celebration of stability (Balasopoulus 140).

With the rise of an increasingly marine and non-terrestrial topography, the blank “nonplace” of the ocean that came to fill more and more cartographic space in representations of the earth was symbolically connected to the prospect of an authorial void. In this context, Balasopoulus also points to Columbus’s systematic falsification of the account of sea miles travelled per day in his logbook as a means of allaying his crew’s fear and of preventing unrest during his first voyage (140-141). The “vacuum” (141) presented by the uncharted ocean was too profoundly unsettling.

In scene 1 of *The Tempest*, then, and despite the little actual reference that is made to the sea, the danger which it poses is rendered tangible through the – social, as well as existential – effects of the storm. The sea has a decidedly negative effect, both in the imagined destruction it appears to cause, as well as in its challenge to authority, which becomes all the more incisive due to its dramatic positioning in the exposition of the play. The play opens with hierarchical chaos, and the question of social, and in particular regal and feudal, order is something that the text remains concerned with throughout.

Given that the threat to the rightful and divinely given social structure is metaphorically rendered through the opening storm at sea, it is fully in tune with the iconography of the play that the scene in which Prospero relates to Miranda and the audience how his own rights and position have been usurped opens with a negative vision of the sea as well. While I have suggested above that the rhetorical devices in Miranda’s speech produce and thus “show” us the storm, Miranda, in “telling” us about the shipwreck from her more spatially distant perspective, also reveals much about early modern attitudes towards the sea: she depicts the “wild waters” in a “roar,” hence linking her perception of the ocean with the boatswain’s by stressing its unruliness. Indeed, her own behaviour also echoes the disregard of hierarchical relations highlighted as so disturbing in scene 1. As James suggests, the feelings of sympathy Miranda expresses in her opening words become “the grounds for dissent, however painful, from her father’s will,” causing her “to ally herself with the shipwrecked men instead of her father, who has, as she suspects, conjured the storm” (361). The confusion of the elements which she highlights in her speech continues

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1 As Magnusson points out, Prospero’s first extended monologue, in which he relates the circumstances of his deposition to Miranda, is syntactically and rhetorically chaotic (55-56). This stylistic incoherence can be related to the general atmosphere of chaos that the raging of the tempest has unleashed.

2 James further proposes that Miranda’s “protest sets the precedent for the scene’s successive troublemakers, the plaintive Ariel and cursing Caliban” (368).
this association with unruliness, suggesting that neither the sky nor the sea remain within their natural boundaries during the storm (Arden 1.2.2-5). Miranda’s representation of the tempest here is by no means extraordinary within its early modern context. Rather, as Lindley observes, the “conflict and disorderly mingling of the elements of air, fire and water is a standard topos of storm descriptions” (Cambridge 1.2.4-5n). But Miranda’s speech is illuminating precisely because it is so typical of early modern perceptions of the sea. According to Corbin, the sea was for centuries regarded as a remnant of the state of chaos in which the universe originally existed, and thus as implicitly threatening to the order of God’s Creation:

This un conquerable element was evidence that Creation remained unfinished. The ocean was the remnant of that undifferentiated primordial substance on which form had to be imposed so that it might become part of Creation. This realm of the unfinished, a vibrating, vague expression of chaos, symbolized the disorder that preceded civilization. (2)

This view of the sea, which persisted well into the seventeenth century, is easily detected in Miranda’s description of the tempestuous ocean, which juxtaposes the “noble creature” (Arden 1.2.7) and “fraughting souls” (1.2.13) aboard the “brave vessel” (1.2.6) with the “wild” (1.2.2) and unruly sea. In fact, so repulsive is the sea to Miranda that she “would / Have sunk the sea within the earth or ere / It should the good ship so have swallowed” (1.2.10-12). The sea here takes the shape of a wild beast, of a Leviathan, and Miranda’s impulse is to deny its existence or, at least, to lock it within firm boundaries – “within the earth” itself – in order to remove its repulsive watery mass from her sight. This impulse is metaphorically connected with a perception of the sea already present in the Book of Genesis. As Corbin observes in commenting on the associations of the sea with “the unknowable” and the “frightful” in the Bible: “There is no sea in the Garden of Eden. There is no place in the enclosed landscape of Paradise for the watery horizon whose surface extends as far as the eye can see” (2). Whether it is locked out or locked in, the sea needs to be contained; in the context of the early modern world picture until well into the seventeenth century, its unfathomable vastness is too disturbing to be contemplated. In fact, later in the seventeenth century, the sea was re-envisioned as a remnant of the deluge rather than of the state before Creation, and it was hence re-interpreted as a painful reminder of humanity’s, and, indeed, Nature’s, fall (Corbin 3-6). Treatises such as Thomas Burnet’s *Sacred Theory of the Earth*, reprinted throughout the 1680s and 1690s, argued that the sea did not even exist before the Flood, but was the literal residue of the retreated waters (Kolter 75-78). While the antediluvian earth was a perfect sphere, mountains, river- and ocean-beds bore witness to the scarring of the globe during the Flood, and hence were regarded as the result of humanity’s sins and punishment (Corbin 3-4). Whether or not this interpretation was already active as a competing discourse to challenge views of the sea as the remnant of pre-Creation chaos in the early seventeenth century and hence available to Shakespeare, both views of the sea are fundamentally negative. As a remainder of something outside God’s Creation, or as a visible reminder of the earth’s lost perfection, the sea in the early modern period and until its retrieval by the Romantics in the eighteenth century was regarded as repulsive. Despite the importance of ocean travel for trade and the expansion of imperial power, documents expressing early modern disgust with and fear of the sea abound (see, for
instance, material quoted in Balasopoulus 139). Miranda’s desire to banish the sea to the centre of the earth in order to deflate its dangerous influence would have been recognisably in tune with the sentiments of a contemporary audience.

Charles Arrowby in Iris Murdoch’s 1978 novel *The Sea, The Sea* clings to a very different view of the sea. Charles is Murdoch’s powerless Prospero and the narrator of her novel, a famous but recently retired director who has left the world of the theatre behind in order to retreat to the seclusion of the northern English coast. The novel relates his experiences during this period of voluntary exile, and focuses on his mounting obsession with Hartley, his first love, whom he recognises in the village. Convinced that she must be profoundly unhappy with her husband and just as eager to be reunited as he is himself, Charles eventually abducts and imprisons Hartley. Matters are complicated by the appearance of many of the prime players in Charles’s life: former colleagues and friends, lovers, and his cousin James gradually gather in his house and interrupt his planned solitude. Eventually, Charles is persuaded to release Hartley, and after a climactic day, on which Charles is almost murdered and Hartley’s adopted son Titus dies, the group disperses, with Charles himself returning to London as well.

Just like Prospero relates his – or rather their – past to Miranda, so Charles also delves into the past. While Prospero wants to regain his rightful position, though, and while his retrospective speech of act 1 hence has a clearly defined purpose, constituted not merely by the desire to rectify, but also by the classical comic trajectory of social re-integration, Charles’s aim is more self-centred. He wants to write his memoir, but this memoir quickly turns into a diary, and hence into a dialogue which Charles leads only with himself. Where Prospero seeks community, Charles’s project remains profoundly egotistic; as Zabus observes, the diary form provides “the ideal medium for his narcissism” (229). I will return to the aspect of community below. What is significant for the moment is that Charles negotiates his identity in relation to the sea more than to other characters, and that he structures his narrative around a few pivotal events, most of which crucially involve the sea: his initial sighting of a sea monster, which casts suspicion on his narrative reliability, as well as on the ontological status of his tale; his abduction of Hartley; his attempted murder in the sea; and Titus’s drowning.

Like Shakespeare’s seafarers, though in quite a different manner, Charles seeks out the sea. But while for Shakespeare’s characters the sea is a means to an end, a hostile expanse which needs to be traversed so that lands and riches can be gained and journeys accomplished, Charles is attracted to the sea per se. The proximity of the sea is what first leads him to his solitary abode on the north coast of England. And it is also the sea that provides his main pleasure while his retreat from the world is still undisrupted. Charles obviously clings to a vision of the sea which is informed by prevalent contemporary twentieth-century perceptions of the sea as a pleasure zone, a realm which caters to the human desires for recreation and regeneration, and which provides release from the ordinary and mundane cares of the everyday. Hence Charles stresses the beneficial influence of the sea and dwells extensively on the pleasure he derives from his engagement with the ocean. He spends a significant amount of his time gazing at and contemplating the sea, he writes about it, and he swims in it.
Despite the taunts of the locals, who regard the sea in quite a different light and despise Charles for his touristy approach to the seaside, Charles, then, views the sea purely in terms of enjoyment and amusement, and he thrives on its vicinity. At least, this is what he tells his readers, and, through the diary form, himself. But telling and showing, in Charles’s narrative, do not necessarily coincide, nor does the same story emerge from both modes of representation. Indeed, as the narrative progresses, it gradually becomes clear that what Charles tells us about the sea is filtered through his anxiety to exclude less beneficent aspects of his engagement with the sea. It is precisely this anxiety, however, combined with the persistent endeavours by this modern-day Prospero to dominate and shape the story, which eventually expose what Charles is desperate to conceal. Charles’s all-too excessive insistence on his natural affinity with the sea cannot, ultimately, fail to show what lies beneath: a deep-set discomfort with the element he perversely claims as his own (Murdoch 4), even though his wilful ignorance of its dangers causes a number of precarious situations and almost costs him his life when he nearly drowns (4-5, 15-16, 364-66; see also below). Beneath the complacent surface of appreciations of the sea as a pleasure zone typical of twentieth-century culture, much older and more unsettling visions of the sea are ready to break forth.

The following description of the sea points towards the presence of two opposed narratives which characterise Charles’s engagement with his maritime environment:

I am a skilful fearless swimmer and I am not afraid of rough water. Today the sea was gentle compared with the antipodean oceans where I have sported like a dolphin. My problem was almost a technical one. Even though the swell was fairly mild I had a ridiculous amount of difficulty getting back onto the rocks again. The ‘cliff’ was a little too steep, the ledges a little too narrow. The gentle waves teased me, lifting me up towards the rock face, then plucking me away. My fingers, questing for a crevice, were again and again pulled off. Becoming tired, I swam around trying other places where the sea was running restlessly in and out, but the difficulty was greater since there was deep water below me and even if the rocks were less sheer they were smoother or slippery with weed and I could not hold on. At last I managed to climb up my cliff, clinging with fingers and toes, then kneeling sideways upon a ledge. When I reached the top and lay panting in the sun I found that my hands and knees were bleeding. (4-5)

Clearly, Charles here seeks to veil what this episode shows despite his efforts to suppress it: that the sea, no matter how he wants to celebrate its gentleness, remains profoundly dangerous. As the above shows, contact with the sea is potentially destructive, and even though Charles tries to ignore what Shakespeare’s mariners are painfully aware of, the sea undermines the narrative of harmonious interaction which he seeks to construct. Eager to downplay the precariousness of his encounter with the sea, Charles stresses his own expertise in dealing with even “rough water” and ridicules the difficulties he experiences in trying to regain firm ground as a small “technical” hitch, insisting on the essential tranquillity of the sea. And when the sea refuses to let him go, he translates the movement of the waves, which, as the end of the passage reveals, is not only unpleasant but dangerous, into an almost erotic playfulness. The continued motion of the sea thwarts Charles’s efforts to grab the rocks, and exposes the extent to which he is in the power of the element which he purports to master. But in describing the waves as gently teasing, Charles employs a
self-assuring interpretative strategy which allows him to actively ignore or refigure indications which the reader recognises as clearly pointing to quite a different version of events. In fact, the very same manoeuvre he uses in his representation of the sea will later help Charles support his own misreading of Hartley’s repeated rejection of him in a more flattering, though directly opposed manner, and as an invitation.

Charles’s attempts to depict himself as a master of the waves can be directly related to his identification with Shakespeare’s Prospero: as scene 1.2 of The Tempest reveals, Prospero is, in fact, able to command the waters of the ocean. By contrast, Charles’s repeated and increasingly destructive encounters with the sea suggest that his own role is much closer to that of the mariners in Shakespeare’s play, for whom even land is a dangerous realm once they have entrusted their lives to the sea. In the version of events which Charles tells and wants us to accept, the sea is his “natural element.” However, what we glimpse through the fissures in the narrative texture he weaves is quite a different story, a story in which contact with the sea challenges Charles’s body and mind in their imagined sovereignty and coherence. In attempting to disguise, Charles inadvertently shows us his physical and mental incompetence all the more clearly.

Not only does Charles try to represent his repeated failures to conquer the sea in harmonious and positive terms; confrontation with the hostile sea frequently eludes representation as such and becomes unspeakable. This is a manoeuvre the novel introduces already at its very beginning. The narrative voice starts with a poetic description of the sea as it “lies before” Charles (Murdoch 1), but abandons this depiction after a mere third of a page. The narrative suddenly just stops, and the novel indicates a hiatus in narration through a gap between two paragraphs. This is how Charles re-commences:

I had written the above, destined to be the opening paragraph of my memoirs, when something happened which was so extraordinary and so horrible that I cannot bring myself to describe it even now after an interval of time and although a possible, though not totally reassuring, explanation has occurred to me. Perhaps I shall feel calmer and more clear-headed after yet another interval. (1)

After another hiatus, the narrative continues, but we do not learn more about the event which is “so extraordinary and so horrible” until later, when Charles professes to have seen what he fears might be a sea monster. Contrary to Prospero, Charles is no magician; indeed, he does not even wield linguistic sorcery enough to couch his experience in a plausible or persuasive form, and so the traumatic event eludes narrativisation. The genre of the novel might offer more room for description, but in Charles’s case, confrontation with a hostile sea causes words to dry up. The appearance of this – real or imagined – sea monster remains a disruptive factor in the novel, and resists inclusion into any stable narrative form. This is also true of the other, even more traumatic, encounters with the sea in the novel: Peregrine’s attempted
murder of Charles, and Titus’s drowning. In neither of these cases can narration or narrativisation provide relief.

This is partly due to the absence of shared speech in *The Sea, The Sea*. While Shakespeare’s play is firmly centred on Prospero, but still allows other characters to articulate themselves, Charles completely suppresses competing narratives. As Zabus points out, “throughout the middle part of the book called “History,” Charles’s voice has obliterated other voices: those of Hartley, Lizzie, Gilbert, Ben, which have all been hypocoristically reduced to ‘gabbling’ [...]” (230). Genre here significantly facilitates Charles’s egocentrism. As the autodiegetic narrator of a novel, he holds the narrative threads firmly in hand and is not dependent on the inclusion of other perspectives. By contrast, as a dramatic hero, and as the scheming centre of *The Tempest* in particular, Prospero depends on interaction with other characters, and interaction in drama, naturally, depends on the sharing of dialogue to a much greater extent than interaction in fiction. While Charles can engage with others but still deprive them of narrative expression, the generic rules of an early modern play such as *The Tempest* ensure that dialogue is a shared affair. Indeed, even where Prospero dominates the dialogue, he mostly speaks in the presence of and often directly to other characters, and is thus influenced by a particular audience. Charles, by contrast, does not speak but writes, and as I have already established, he mainly appears to be writing to himself. As Katherine Weese has pointed out, “[t]hroughout the first section of the novel, Charles exhibits an extraordinary self-consciousness about his writing, calling it a diary, a chronicle, and a memoir” (635). It is only in the course of writing that he comes to see the text he is producing as a novel, and thus as intended – at least potentially – for a wider audience (635). In fact, Tucker proposes that the generic shifts of Charles’s writing reflect his “personal obsessions” (393). This suggests that the very fact that Charles’s narrative starts out “as diary and memoir, changes into a novel and back into a memoir” is itself an effect of the peculiar combination of egomania and very limited self-awareness which shapes his character (393). Also, Charles’s specific aim in going to Shruff End, of course, is “to withdraw from the world he has known” and to “become a hermit” (Weese 634-5). Evidently, writing, in *The Sea, The Sea*, is not a shared act, and Charles is loath to give up narrative control to even the slightest degree. Thus the difference in trajectory between Shakespeare’s play and Murdoch’s novel is startling. While Prospero “figures himself as the sole retainer of the past,” the play also challenges this view, particularly through the figure of Caliban (Tribble 156). Ultimately, *The Tempest* is concerned with the role, and indeed with the affirmation, of community, as expressed most forcefully in Prospero’s final promise to disclose his history to his former enemies, Alonso and his companions (Arden 5.1.301-319). By contrast, Murdoch’s narrator remains caught up in his solitude even when he is surrounded by other characters. From a memoir, a genre which rests by definition on

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3 In fact, the dangers of the coastal environment are not defused until the very end of Charles’s sojourn in the north. In this final littoral scene, Charles sees four seals who appear as “beneficent beings come to visit … and bless” him (476).

4 Charles also suppresses the fact that, as Tucker notes, his cousin James is “another Prospero figure” in the novel (380).
the impulse to share one’s past with others, his narrative swiftly develops into a diary, a genre defined by quite the opposite goal, the exclusion of others and the forestalling of participation.

Given Charles’s self-centred narrative trajectory, as well as his egotistic manoeuvres, it is not surprising that in *The Sea, The Sea*, encounters with the sea are solitary. The sea has to be faced alone, though not always by choice. In the case of his nude swimming early in the novel, Charles relishes the sense of isolation and privacy this activity imparts to him, but when he is pushed into “Minn’s Cauldron” (Murdoch 364), he experiences quite a different sensation, and is swallowed by the profound helplessness and hopelessness of solitude. He is, eventually, saved by his cousin, but his surrogate son, Titus, is less lucky and drowns a few pages later (387). When left to battle a hostile sea by themselves, these human characters stand little chance, and the importance of community is highlighted only by its absence.

In *The Tempest*, the social aspect of the encounter with the sea is highly prominent from the start. The scene of shipwreck is determined by interaction, and tension between characters develops from conflicting ideas of what the notion of community entails, particularly as far as the role and stability of hierarchy are concerned. As already suggested, the opening scene of *The Tempest* readily highlights this; in addition, it also emphasises the importance of community through the manner in which the characters’ verbal interaction produces the storm, as discussed above. Indeed, the communal component of shipwreck partly defuses its existential horror, as it endows the spectacle of death on sea with a stable framework. Derek Jarman’s 1979 film adaptation of *The Tempest* emphasises this aspect of communal strength in its engagement with the masque. As Ellis argues, Jarman’s treatment of the masque focuses on the notions of order and disorder so central to the early modern masque, and stretches from the opening scene of the storm (according to Ellis, a version of the early modern antimasque) to the famously camp finale, in which the threats of storm and shipwreck are ultimately deflated (273-4). By replacing the masque from act 4 of *The Tempest* with a wedding celebration, Jarman’s film includes a much wider audience, for his adaptation of “the masque is staged not just for Ferdinand and Miranda but, rather, for the whole community assembled at the end of the film (which now includes Caliban and the other rebels, who react with pleasure to the spectacle)” (276). The storm which raged in the opening scene of the play is now conjured up in quite a different manner, and by a different conjurer altogether, in the form of the jazz song “Stormy Weather” performed by Elizabeth Welch. Thus Jarman highlights the artifice of the storm and simultaneously stresses the importance of community. The scene is dominated by sailors in white suits, forming rows through which Welch passes as she is singing. The social context and the iconography which Jarman activates here are, thus, obviously maritime. But from an existential struggle, the scene has now shifted to a lavish celebration in which playful eroticism in the form of gently swaying sailors’ bodies has superseded the anxiety of impending death. In the same vein, the cacophony of the storm has yielded to the harmony of music, and in this tame context, the tempest has been deflated so that what is left is “stormy weather” and harmonically pleasing if languid complaints about the fact that “it’s raining all the time.” What Jarman highlights in the camp aesthetics and voluptuously baroque display of this
scene is that the storm can only be contained once it has been refigured as unashamedly hyper-artificial. The primitiveness of the landscape of Jarman’s bleak and tempestuous coast is firmly excluded by the very exuberance of spectacle inside Prospero’s not so “poor cell” (Arden 1.2.20). Still, this landscape exists, and Prospero’s absence from the wedding (which Ellis ignores) and his lonely reappearance in the final scene of the film, which is set in darkness, suggest that the “ideological community” brought about “by the political reconciliations” (Ellis 276) is, perhaps, more fragile than the communal celebration of Miranda and Ferdinand’s wedding indicates. Indeed, in an alternative reading of the film, MacCabe contends that Jarman’s adaptation is centrally concerned with “Prospero’s reign of terror” (506).

Corbin has demonstrated how appreciations of the sea in Western cultures have shifted since the eighteenth century, providing us with a much more positive iconography of the sea through its re-inscription and concomitant re-evaluation as a pleasure zone. While I agree with this view, I would argue that we can only lose by choosing to ignore the persistence of older, pre-eighteenth-century perceptions of the sea, which continue to encode the sea in a manner which differs markedly from its association with recreation, enjoyment, a positive physicality, and, ultimately, pleasure. Texts such as Murdoch’s The Sea, The Sea essentially re-create a pre-touristic representation of the ocean, which interferes with the more harmonious depictions of the sea typical of twentieth-century sources. In a similar vein, Jarman’s film can only depict the sea in positive terms when it is multiply inflected in art and artifice. Thus both Murdoch and Jarman’s renditions of the sea point to the persistence of a tradition of perceiving the ocean in which it emerges less as a pleasure zone than as a realm decidedly outside human control. Indeed, I would suggest that the continued availability of this conception of the sea, in conjunction with the currently increasing cultural preoccupation with environmental change, may well be indicative of re-conceptualisations of the sea as such. This is also borne out by the manner in which postcolonial studies has transformed critical appreciations of maritime history. Even if refashioned by postmodernism, the currents of the early modern ocean still play in our minds.

Works Cited

Primary Literature


Aebischer links references to “state terror and establishment power” (283) to Jarman’s “preposterous contemporary Jacobean aesthetic” (302).


**Secondary Literature**

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Zusammenfassung