

The Sea in the Literary Imagination

The Sea in the Literary Imagination:

Global Perspectives

Edited by

Ben P. Robertson,
Ekaterina V. Kobeleva,
Shannon W. Thompson
and Katona D. Weddle

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INTRODUCTION

The Sea in the Literary Imagination: Global Perspectives is a collection of fresh, newly-written essays that discuss a broad range of literature that engages with interpretations of nautical texts, widely defined. The collection spans a millennium, from the medieval romance to twenty-first century reimagining of classic literary texts in film, and our authors engage in discussions of literature from Britain, the United States, India, Chile, Turkey, Spain, Japan, Colombia, and the Caribbean. This project is a truly trans-national effort that embraces the multiplicity of cultures and interpretations of nautical literature around the world. Given that oceans cover around seventy percent of the earth's surface, it is no surprise that so many cultures foster literature related to the sea, and this collection, uniting a mere fraction of them, emphasizes the extent of their connectedness.

In 2016, the editors of this collection collaborated to host a conference called "Literature at Sea: Maritime Literary Currents." Unlike most conferences about nautical literature, however, our conference literally took place at sea. We hosted the gathering of scholars aboard the *M.S. Carnival Fantasy*, which sailed from Mobile, Alabama, USA, on 3 December 2016 and returned five days later after making two port calls in Mexico. The conference was small, but the quality of the papers was so high that after our return, we decided to collaborate on an essay collection on the same subject. This collection is not a conference proceedings volume. We crafted a call for papers, which we circulated internationally, and collected abstracts from a variety of scholars. Of course, we advertised the collection among our conference participants, but of the twenty-one essays in the resulting volume, only four originated in the conference.

This collection fits perfectly within a tradition of scholarship related to nautical literature that has seen significant growth in the last two decades. Interest in this field has been bolstered by rising scholarly attention to environmentalist literature. While earlier scholarship often emphasizes the extent to which the sea is an amoral adversary in relation to literary characters, more recent scholarship tends to decry the role of humanity in large-scale environmental destruction. For scholars today, the sea is not just the unknowable sublime of the Longinian philosophical tradition; it is, instead, an organic—one might even say *living*—entity upon which humanity depends. For contemporary scholars, the sea provides far more

than just a literary tradition from which authors draw some of their most powerful metaphors. Twenty-first-century scholars view the sea as a site for debates about ecological sustainability, power, politics, and human identity.

During the past twenty years, a number of important books have been published that engage directly in discussions of literature and culture and their relationship with the sea. Some, like Leon Fink's *Sweatshops at Sea*, have been more historically oriented, while others, like Joanna Rostek's *Seaing through the Past*, have more narrowly confronted the idea of maritime literature.¹ Our volume builds upon ideas discussed in earlier scholarly works like these but offers more intense scrutiny of the global scale of nautical literature. Rather than focusing on the literature of a single country, like Jason Berger's *Antebellum at Sea*, our volume ranges from Europe to Asia to the Americas.² The book establishes nautical literature and the sea itself as a complex site of intellectual engagement with ambivalent consequences for humanity. While the sea can offer solace and inspire creativity, its exploitation may lead to a post-Anthropocene world in which humanity must struggle ever more desperately for survival.

The global focus of our collection sets it apart from other similar books. Another part of its uniqueness lies in its engagement with traditional texts in new ways and its introduction of lesser-known works into the debates about the interaction between the ocean and human agency.

The first section, European Literature: The Hazards of the Sea, includes articles written by scholars from the United Kingdom and Italy that focus on the hazards of the sea in European literature. Jamie McKinstry explores sea imagery in the Middle-English romances *Sir Isumbras* and *King Horn* as providing contradictory representations of both destructiveness and unity. Ana Fernández Castro engages in a discussion of the House of Trade of Seville and the extent to which its records in the sixteenth century cast the sea as a legally troublesome entity that required new thinking about maritime law. Lucy Johnson discusses the ocean in works by Percy and Mary Shelley as an indicator of the potential formlessness of Romantic-era individuality, while Alice Kelly

¹ See Leon Fink, *Sweatshops at Sea: Merchant Seamen in the World's First Globalized Industry, from 1812 to the Present* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011) and Joanna Rostek, *Seaing through the Past: Postmodern Histories and the Maritime Metaphor in Contemporary Anglophone Fiction* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011).

² Jason Berger, *Antebellum at Sea: Maritime Fantasies in Nineteenth-Century America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

discusses the inherently unplotable nature of the sea in Joseph Conrad's "The Planter of Malata."

The second section of the collection, Asian Literature: Seascapes and the Environment, includes works by scholars from Italy, India, and Turkey that discuss seascapes and the environment as depicted in Asian literatures. Gala Maria Follaco explores the extent to which the sea engenders a sort of maturation for characters in the work of Japanese writer Nagai Kafu. Then, Nirojita Guha suggests that the sea offers women greater agency in *Manasa-Mangal Kavya*, and Erkin Kırıyman explores the complexities of land-ethic and human-sea relations in the works of two Turkish writers, Yashar Kemal and Sait Faik Abasıyanık.

The third section, South American Literature: The Unknowability of the Sea, shifts the focus to South America and the unknowability of the sea in articles written by scholars from the United States and Colombia. Elena De Costa discusses works by Chilean author Marjorie Agosin in the context of memories of exile and how the sea shapes Chilean and Jewish identity. Juan Muñoz Zapata continues this section with an examination of Colombian poetry as it relates to the traditional Longinian sublime, and Danette DiMarco ends this section with an essay that suggests unique connections between the literature of Caribbean writer Monique Roffey and Herman Melville.

The fourth section, North American Literature: Melville and the Sea, moves to North America and concentrates exclusively on the works of Herman Melville as related to the sea. The scholars in this section work primarily in the United States and Germany. Kelvin Beliele explores "textured narratives" in Melville's *Mardi*, while Hanna Straß-Senol discusses mermaids as exotic "Others" in Melville's work. Megan Barnes then deconstructs Melville's *Moby-Dick* as a nautical yarn, and Alexandra Meany explores the ramification of vortices at sea in the same novel.

The fifth section, North American Literature: Transcendentalism, Modernism, and the Sea, maintains focus on North American fiction with emphasis on the works of Henry David Thoreau and later writers. These scholars come from the United States and Tunisia. Kathleen Healey suggests that Thoreau's *Cape Cod* connects with contemporary landscape painting and the concept of Manifest Destiny. Paul Blom provides a psychoanalytic analysis of Ernest Hemingway's "After the Storm," and Mongia Besbes moves our nautical inquiry into a Foucauldian, postmodern examination of the *stultifera navis* figure in recent literature.

The sixth section, Global Literature: Popular Culture and the Sea, brings the essay collection's focus into contemporary popular culture through articles written by scholars from the United States. Tara Moore

discusses rising sea levels in young-adult climate-fiction (or cli-fi) as a literary call toward greater environmental sustainability. Rachel Carazo discusses film versions of classic literature by focusing on the image of the Kraken. Then she examines the concepts of consumption and sea monsters in a recent re-imagining of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*.

The seventh and last section, Literature and the Sea: Final Thoughts, includes musings by American scholar Paul Guajardo about the nature of the sea and of its relationship with humanity through our literature and through our interactions with the physical presence of the sea.

We hope that a wide range of readers will enjoy the many points of view expressed in this collection and that some of our readers may be inspired to pursue maritime literature studies as a result.

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**EUROPEAN LITERATURE:
THE HAZARDS OF THE SEA**

CHAPTER ONE

FLOATING IDEAS: MEMORY AND THE SEA IN MEDIEVAL ROMANCES

JAMIE MCKINSTRY

In the end each clan on the outlying coasts
beyond the whale-road had to yield to him
and begin to pay tribute.¹

hron-rād, noun f. *whale's riding-place or road; sea*.²

The Journey as an Opportunity

The sea is full of literal and symbolic paradoxes. It can bring hope and life, but also can create fear and destruction; it is a realm of possibility and potential, but equally a place of limitation and interruption. Our thoughts regarding the sea range beyond the interpretation of the body of water itself. In fact, what the sea gives us is the freedom to project our own thoughts into and onto this immense space. The sea gives us time to *think* about ourselves in terms of where we have been, where we are now, and where we might be going. We can journey across the sea, or we can travel mentally, guided and reassured by its ceaseless rhythm of tides and waves in which each moment is individual, yet part of some greater cycle or scheme. The Old English kenning “hronrad,” extracted from *Beowulf* above, emphasizes this sense of journeying and potential as our gaze is directed away from the present moment toward the “outlying coasts” and the lands beyond.

¹ Seamus Heaney, trans., *Beowulf* (London: Faber, 1999), 3.

² C. L. Wrenn and W. F. Bolton, eds., *Beowulf*, Exeter Medieval English Texts and Studies, 4th ed. (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1988), 253.

The importance of the sea as a symbol in medieval literature is discussed in a seminal study by Sebastian Sobceki and defined as a “mythopoetic agent,” or a shifting symbol, which is used in secular, religious, and philosophical writings for a variety of purposes.³ More generally, James Bloom has identified the imaginary sea voyage in literature as a “hybrid between outright fantasy and authentic seaman’s yarns.”⁴ In other words, the sea has great imaginative potential. It can allow individuals to journey to exciting far-away places (and return home safely); it also encourages a comparison between source and destination, and, as such, the journey becomes psychological and, often, didactic. This chapter will explore this hypothesis in relation to medieval romances, specifically Middle English romances. Beyond its literal function in these narratives of journeying and questing, the sea in romances also makes us acutely aware of people’s origins, where they are currently residing, and where they might (or should) be going in the future. As this chapter will argue, the sea in medieval romance is inherently connected to memory, a faculty which depends upon the creation and recollection of events, thoughts, and ideas over time.

Before looking at romances themselves, it is perhaps useful to consider the connection between the sea and memory in some earlier medieval literature which, less obviously, aligns literal and mental journeys across a vast open space, for example in the Old English elegies *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*. The importance of the sea as a symbol in these poems has been discussed extensively, as in both works the exile is carried over the

³ Sebastian I. Sobceki, *The Sea in Medieval English Literature*, Studies in Medieval Romance 5 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008), 10. For other studies of the literal and symbolic function of the sea in medieval literature see Peter Dronke and Ursula Dronke, *Growth of Literature: The Sea and the God of the Sea*, H. M. Chadwick Memorial Lectures 8 (Cambridge: Department of Anglo Saxon, Norse and Celtic, 1998); Jennifer Neville, *Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry*, Cambridge Studies in Anglo Saxon England 27 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Daniel Anlezark, *Water and Fire: The Myth of the Flood in Anglo Saxon England*, Manchester Medieval Literature and Culture (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006); and Kelley Wickham-Crowley, “Living on the Ecg: The Mutable Boundaries of Land and Water in Anglo Saxon Contexts,” in *A Place to Believe In: Medieval Monasticism in the Landscape*, ed. Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 85-110.

⁴ James J. Bloom, *The Imaginary Sea Voyage: Sailing Away in Literature, Legend and Lore* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2013), 16.

waves and far away from home.⁵ The speaker in *The Wanderer* laments that the “solitary man,” weary, “has had to stir by hand / The ice cold sea along the waterways.”⁶ The exile in *The Seafarer* is in a similar state of distress on the waves and compares his fortune to those who continue to reside, comfortably, on land. He, in contrast, spent “winter on the ice-cold sea [. . .] hung round by icicles.”⁷ Although apparently going nowhere, both speakers allude to the possibilities of journeying, and this awareness points toward the subtle sense of movement that is created beneath the surface of each poem and hints at the somewhat abrupt, spiritual awakening regarding the transience of earthly materiality, the inescapability of fate, and the reward of heavenly glory after the sufferings of this life. The sea, although initially exacerbating loneliness and hardship, actually does seem to be moving the speakers along toward this eventual realization. For example, in *The Seafarer*, the narrator exclaims,

And yet the heart’s desires
Incite me now that I myself should go
On towering seas among the salt waves’ play.⁸

The sea is a barrier to happiness, but it also creates a tempting atmosphere of potential. This space can be tamed (or even timed), and paths can be created across it *in the mind*. In *The Seafarer*, especially, these routes become visible to the speaker, just below the surface, as the poem uses a

⁵ See, for example, I. L. Gordon, “Traditional Themes in *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*,” *The Review of English Studies* 5 (1954): 1-13; Daniel G. Calder, “Setting and Mode in *The Seafarer* and *The Wanderer*,” *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 72 (1971): 264-75; Frederick S. Holton, “Old English Sea Imagery and the Interpretation of *The Seafarer*,” *The Yearbook of English Studies* 12 (1982): 208-17; John L. Selzer, “*The Wanderer* and the Meditative Tradition,” *Studies in Philology* 80 (1983): 227-37; John Richardson, “The Hero at the Wall in *The Wanderer*,” *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 89 (1988): 280-85; Dee Dyas, “Land and Sea in the Pilgrim Life: *The Seafarer* and the Old English *Exodus*,” *English Language Notes* 35 (1997): 1-9; Susana Fidalgo Mongue, “The Sea in *Beowulf*, *The Wanderer*, and *The Seafarer*: On Semantic Fields and Mediterranean Limitations,” *SELIM: Journal of the Spanish Society for Medieval Language and Literature* 9 (1999): 155-62; and Paul S. Langeslag, “Boethian Similitude in *Deor* and *The Wanderer*,” *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 109 (2008): 205-22.

⁶ *The Wanderer*, in *A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse*, ed. and trans. Richard Hamer, rev. ed. (London: Faber, 2015), 178-89.

⁷ *The Seafarer*, in *A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse*, ed. and trans. Richard Hamer, rev. ed. (London: Faber, 2015), 188-89. All subsequent references to *The Seafarer* will be to this edition and cited by page number.

⁸ *Seafarer*, 190-91.

variation of the “whale road” kenning with “hwælweg” and also “flōdwegas” (“sea-paths”).⁹ The sea gives the speakers of these two poems the time and the opportunity to take views of their lives thus far, recollect all they have lost, and then use this knowledge to guide them toward the future. They end each poem with a greater awareness of themselves and life, in general, than they had at the start; however, the initial suffering was crucial. They needed to step beyond the temporal divides between past, present, and future, and to do this, the poets used the fluidity and opportunity of the sea journey.

Memorial Movements and Romance Journeys

Influential work by Mary Carruthers has emphasized the ways medieval concepts of memory were based on principles of order and division which, therefore, allowed for the effective recollection of memories easily and accurately.¹⁰ However, the medieval concept of *memoria* also emphasized a fluidity between past, present, and future as memories could be used to predict future events.¹¹ Moreover, memories could be adapted to fit with current situations, so creativity was seen as an essential part of the memorial process. The sea, as a space in a romance, divides separate episodes or events and thus offers just such an invitation for memory work, connecting disparate aspects of the narrative or journey to create a unified whole. The process, and its association with journeying, can be explained best with reference to Aristotelian theories of memorial movement, that is to say, the transition of thoughts (memories) from the past to the present time. For Aristotle, memory was a receptacle for prior sensations imaginatively transformed into images *and* the process by which these images could be retrieved when needed. It is the *re*-collection

⁹ *Seafarer*, 190-92. There is an interesting discussion of the Old English “gelad,” with the specific meaning of a passage across water (either over it or through it, as in the parting of the Red Sea in *Exodus*), in Dennis Cronan, “Old English *gelad*: ‘A Passage Across Water,’” *Neophilologus* 71 (1987): 316-19. See also John F. Vickrey, “*Exodus* and the Battle in the Sea,” *Traditio* 28 (1972): 119-40.

¹⁰ Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, 2nd ed., Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 78 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). See also the earlier work by Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London: Routledge, 1966).

¹¹ Yadin Dudai and Mary Carruthers, “The Janus Face of Mnemosyne,” *Nature* 434 (2005): 567.

from places and the subsequent remembering of the images which constitute the art of *memoria*.¹²

Aristotle argues, “[E]xercises preserve the memory by repeated reminding.”¹³ This is the art of recollection itself—a sequential process moving from the present moment, backward in time, toward the appropriate memory image, and which is constantly being rehearsed throughout a life or a narrative. Aristotle defines the mental journey between images as follows: “For to recall is the internal presence of a moving potential; and this, as has been stated, must be understood in the way that the person is moved by himself and by the movements he has.”¹⁴ Movement is emphasized (“κινουῦσαν,” “κινήσεων,” “κινήθηναι”), and the semantics range from emotional movement to actual, physical re-location. The memorial images, linked between present and past, should be sufficiently vivid or emotive to “move” the individual, while we also “move” into our memorial places from the present. Creativity also is emphasized with the secondary meaning of *κινειν* being “to originate, author, or create.” Aristotle advocates the use of places for these memorial images by arguing, “Now, a starting point must be taken. This is why people sometimes seem to recollect from ‘places.’”¹⁵ These places also reinforce memory’s dependence upon temporality. During the memorial journeys, we cannot fail to acknowledge the different temporal plane of the past in comparison to that of the present. Aristotle expands upon this idea to comment, “But the most important point is that one must cognise time, either with an exact measure or indeterminately.”¹⁶ A person must remain aware of the origin of the memorial image—the past which, despite resembling the context of the present, never will be totally identical with a current situation.

So what do these complex Aristotelian theories of memory have to do with the sea in medieval literature and, specifically, medieval romances?

¹² For a discussion of how Aristotelian memory theories relate to other classical and medieval theories of memory, and to romance journeys, see Jamie McKinstry, *Middle English Romance and the Craft of Memory*, Studies in Medieval Romance 19 (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2015), 21-43.

¹³ Aristotle, *On Memory and Recollection*, in *Aristotle on Memory and Recollection: Text, Translation, Interpretation, and Reception in Western Scholasticism*, ed. and trans. David Bloch, *Philosophia Antiqua* 110 (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 35 (I.451a12-13). All subsequent references to *On Memory and Recollection (Memoria)* will be to this edition and cited by chapter, folio, and line number. All translations from *Memoria* are from Bloch’s edition.

¹⁴ Aristotle, *On Memory*, II.452a.10-12.

¹⁵ Aristotle, *On Memory*, II.452a.12-13.

¹⁶ Aristotle, *On Memory*, II.452b.7-8.

What the sea offers in romances is a sense of distance and a paradoxical compression of both distance and time. This sense is important because romances, as episodic narratives, rely on the characters' (and the audience's) ability to compare and contrast episodes during the course of a particular tale. The tales show people who have become distanced from their homes, their families, and even their past identities. Such distance must never be too vast, and the motif of the sea journey offers a perfect way to underline the passage of time and the sense of distance, and to compress this space to facilitate memory work. When medieval-romance characters embark on a journey, they experience life aboard the vessel in the present tense, yet they are made aware of their origins (the past) and their destinations (the future). In other words, to use Aristotle's terminology, memories of past events are moved or carried throughout the narrative and are used to interpret and give meaning to a current situation. Moreover, in the best spirit of memorial creativity, memories can be taken into future situations and used as guides for subsequent behavior. The sea acts as a barrier and a vast space to cross, but it is an opportunity for memorial movements—time has passed, certainly, but the past never can be forgotten as it *is* the unforgettable and immovable starting-point of the journey.

Using the Sea: *Sir Isumbras*

In terms of narrative structure, obvious practical reasons remain for using the sea in medieval romances. Frequently, individuals (usually knights) must leave the familiarity of their homes and journey to far-away lands on crusading missions to avoid shame at court, in answer to some divine instruction, or for myriad other reasons. Indeed, when scholars such as Helen Cooper have categorized romance “types,” a specific romance *topos* was identified as “Providence and the Sea: ‘No Tackle, Sail, Nor Mast.’”¹⁷ In fact, sea journeys often can act as crucial structuring principles in romances, and a particularly intriguing and illuminating example can be found in *Sir Isumbras*.¹⁸ Dating from the early fourteenth century, the tale is based on the legend of Saint Eustace and tells the story of Isumbras

¹⁷ Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 106-36.

¹⁸ For an introduction to this romance, and an overview of its sources and influences, see Jamie McKinstry, “Sir Isumbras,” *The Literary Encyclopedia*, 29 May 2017. <<http://www.litencyc.com/php/sworkeys.php?rec=true&UID=35879>>. Accessed 31 May 2017.

who, on account of being too obsessed with material riches, is visited by a bird who rebukes him for his “pryde of golde and fee” and then asks him whether the knight would prefer poverty in youth or in old age.¹⁹ Isumbras then prays to the Lord to be sent poverty in his youth, and at this point, his world of privilege begins to collapse. His lands are destroyed, his material belongings are lost, and the knight and his family leave their home with no possessions at all and are forced to beg for food. This misfortune, therefore, appears to be a fairly typical form of the penitential romance, with the knight’s losing all he has—only to reach some point in the romance at which he has paid his penance and when a gradual period of recovery of wealth and status can begin.²⁰ However, the romance is interesting in its use of the sea literally to carry the knight along on his spiritual journey while allowing Isumbras to connect past events of the narrative with present, and future, situations.

The sea frequently functions as a literal boundary in the tale, but it is also an invitation for memorial creativity, a way to escape from a seemingly impossible situation of loss and abandonment. This fact undoubtedly explains a rather strange event in the romance when Isumbras has lost two of his children (they have been abducted by a lion and a leopard) and has just been forced to trade his wife to a heathen king for gold. What he then chooses to do with the gold is rather odd:

In here mantell of skarlette rede
 Amonge her gold they putte her brede
 And forth with hem it bere.²¹

The knight and his remaining son place the gold, wrapped in the red cloth with their bread, at the top of a hill. Soon a griffin swoops down and carries away everything. The knight then follows the griffin to the Greek Sea, at which point he can go no farther.²² Isumbras has lost everything—the heathen gold, his remaining food, the scarlet cloth, and, tragically, his last remaining child. Why did the knight place his belongings in this high

¹⁹ *Sir Isumbras*, in *Six Middle English Romances*, ed. Maldwyn Mills (London: Everyman, 1973), 126 (line 51). All subsequent references to *Sir Isumbras* will be to this edition and cited by line number.

²⁰ For an overview of the origins and genre of the romance see Diana Childress, “Between Romance and Legend: Secular Hagiography in Middle English Literature,” *Philological Quarterly* 57 (1978): 311-22; and Rhiannon Purdie, “Generic Identity and the Origins of *Sir Isumbras*,” in *The Matter of Identity in Medieval Romance*, ed. Philippa Hardman (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2002), 113-24.

²¹ *Sir Isumbras*, 358-60.

²² *Sir Isumbras*, 368-69.

place where the griffin could swoop down to snatch it easily, attracted by the vivid color of the fabric? In a consideration of *Sir Isumbras*, Andrea Hopkins claims that “the unexpressed meaning of images and events is there to be explored by the reader” and, this, it seems, is just such an event.²³ A significant detail is the knight’s pursuit of the griffin until he can go no farther and must watch as the creature soars over the Greek Sea. All is now lost, apparently, and the future is uncertain, symbolized by the griffin’s disappearing into the distance over the waves. However, the sea in romances can be a barrier *and* an opportunity; the knight views the sea as a pathway because it is synonymous with journeying. His route is blocked temporarily, and so, instead, he must look back into the past to guide his future movements. He has encountered the Greek Sea before, and although the past memory—of the abduction of his wife—is not identical with the current situation, some important connections must be made as he remembers an earlier journey across the waves.

As mentioned above, Isumbras was forced to trade his wife, and the arrival of the heathen traders has a marked similarity with the knight’s later desperate situation.²⁴ After the lion and leopard abduct the two eldest children, Isumbras, his wife, and their youngest son can journey no farther, and they stand on the shore of the Greek Sea. Soon they see more than three hundred ships sailing toward them.²⁵ Subsequently, Isumbras is forced to accept gold in payment for his wife. This transaction is an obvious contradiction of his desire to avoid all material riches, but he must accept it, and we are left with the tragic image of the father and son watching as the mother sails away, over the Greek Sea. This episode, therefore, explains the knight’s wish to distance himself from the gold and, hence, the way in which he seems to tempt the griffin to steal it. However, more can be said about how both episodes present the knight’s gazing out to sea. The sea, as in all romances, is synonymous with journeying, but here it also seems to be connected to loss. Yet, the loss serves a definite purpose. In both instances, the knight looks toward the horizon, the sea’s not only calling attention to what has been left behind (the bereft, lonely, penniless knight) but also to where he might be going. The knight, and, as Hopkins suggests, the audience, too, must use such events to look back to similar episodes and interpret these as markers on Isumbras’ spiritual journey which began when he was alerted to his materialistic obsessions at

²³ Andrea Hopkins, *The Sinful Knights: A Study of Middle English Penitential Romance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), 124.

²⁴ Gold also plays an important symbolic role in terms of the memorial work which is encouraged in the romance. See McKinstry, *Middle English*, 106-13.

²⁵ *Sir Isumbras*, 200-04.

the start of the tale.²⁶ The emptiness of the sea is filled with memories of, appropriately, that very same sea earlier in the romance. Isumbras must remember why he is on this journey, and it is significant that at this point, he prays to God for direction.²⁷

Following the griffin episode, Isumbras works for a blacksmith in return for food and lodging and soon becomes skilled enough in the trade to fashion himself a suit of armor.²⁸ He proves to be an excellent horseman and fights the heathens on behalf of the king, who, as a reward, wishes to make him a knight.²⁹ However, before the ceremony can take place, Isumbras leaves, disguised as a palmer, and journeys to a now-familiar coastline—"the Grekes See."³⁰ He finds a ship apparently waiting for him on the shore and sails across the sea.³¹ As before, the sea calls attention to his previous journeys and all the other moments when he encountered the Greek Sea. However, something has changed. Whereas before he gazed helplessly over the waves, the future seemingly uncertain, he has been "sent" to this place by God, and even the ship is waiting for him. Finally, he has been given an opportunity to cross the ocean, hopefully in pursuit of his wife, possibly his children, and maybe even his lost wealth. Significantly, this crossing happens while he is dressed as a palmer, as it marks an important step on his penitential journey. He makes the crossing, spends seven years as a palmer, and eventually arrives, starving, at Jerusalem, where an angel appears to him and informs the knight that all his sins are forgiven and that now he can return home.³² Isumbras arrives at the castle of a rich queen, actually his lost wife, and there follows a period of gradual reconciliation, beginning with his discovery of the gold wrapped in a red cloth.³³ Husband and wife are now reunited, and at a crucial point during another battle against the heathens, the abducted

²⁶ Hopkins, *The Sinful Knights*, 124. More detailed discussions of Isumbras's spiritual development are in Laura Braswell, "Sir Isumbras and the Legend of Saint Eustace," *Medieval Studies* 27 (1965): 128-51; and Stephen D. Powell, "Models of Religious Peace in the Middle English Romance *Sir Isumbras*," *Neophilologus* 85 (2001): 121-36.

²⁷ *Sir Isumbras*, 376-84.

²⁸ *Sir Isumbras*, 385-407. In addition to his spiritual development, Isumbras is reassuming his knightly identity gradually. See Samara Landers, "'And Loved He Was With All': Identity in *Sir Isumbras*," *Orbis Litterarum: International Review of Literary Studies* 64 (2009): 351-72.

²⁹ *Sir Isumbras*, 409-80.

³⁰ *Sir Isumbras*, 499-500.

³¹ *Sir Isumbras*, 501-04.

³² *Sir Isumbras*, 505-34.

³³ *Sir Isumbras*, 535-630.

children arrive to aid their father, riding, appropriately, their respective animal abductors.³⁴

The sea has brought Isumbras to this point literally, but it is significant that his actual voyage took place only toward the end of the narrative; however, even before the physical journey, he already had journeyed far *mentally*, encouraged by the way he was confronted repeatedly by images of people making journeys over the Greek Sea. This awareness called attention to where his journey had begun, what he had experienced so far (usually with reference to the sea), where he was at that moment, and what voyages he might make in the future. It could be argued that this romance is unusual for the great emphasis that is placed on the sea and its prominence in the romance genre; moreover, exactly the *same* sea (the Greek Sea) is used throughout the tale. In other more subtle romances, the sea might purely call attention to a certain passage of time and distance or create a sense of some literal and figurative journey more generally. Therefore, *Sir Isumbras* makes the sea rather too dominant, functioning as an opportunity for learning over time and as the didactic symbol itself. Nevertheless, a small detail reinforces the crucial role that the sea has played in this tale, and in romances in general. Before Isumbras and his wife are separated, a ring is broken between them, and this object reappears in the final stage of reconciliation.³⁵ Isumbras, as the palmer, explains, ““A rynge was broken betwyx us, / That no man shulde it kenne.””³⁶ The lady then produces the corresponding half:

That othur party therinne was—
Nowe was this a wonthur kace,
So mony londis as he hadde sowghte.³⁷

The reference to “chance” here (“wonthur kace”) might seem ironic given that their reunion is somewhat predictable, but it underlines what this romance has achieved, as does the reference to “many lands.” In effect, the separated ring has survived, not only two sea voyages, but a vast amount of time (their period of separation runs to at least fourteen years). As these two halves are united, we are reminded how far we have come (in terms of distance and time) but also, paradoxically, how close the past is to the present when a romance has been plotted this carefully. The sea urges us

³⁴ *Sir Isumbras*, 751-68.

³⁵ For further discussion of this particular memorial object see McKinstry, *Middle English*, 113.

³⁶ *Sir Isumbras*, 683-84.

³⁷ *Sir Isumbras*, 694-96.

to appreciate a sense of distance and the immense spiritual journey that has been undertaken, but it also allows us to unite the starting and finishing points of the journey. The sea ensures that the journey in romance is challenging but, given the opportunities for creative meditation and recollection, never impossible or without purpose.

The Sea and Forgetfulness: *King Horn*

The ring in *Sir Isumbras* is a memorial object typical of the romance genre. It is carried over sea (and land), and across time, and is used to reunite individuals while serving as an important memorial marker for an audience. Such objects in romances may be, variously, rings, gloves, cups, suits of armor, and even people. The halves of rings in *Sir Isumbras* are transported successfully across the waves, but that is not to say the journey was an easy one. There is the potential for disaster, for forgetting whence one has come, on account of how *far* an individual is taken from home and the past during the course of the journey, and also the ways in which one might have become distracted having reached the destination. *King Horn* explores this potential for disaster as the sea's distance becomes a barrier to literal journeying and threatens any attempts at successful memorial meditations. In other words, the sea in this romance actually causes the hero to forget, at least temporarily.³⁸

In the early thirteenth-century *King Horn*, the knight has been accused falsely of trying to usurp the throne from King Aylmar of Westernesse, the father of his love, Rymenhild. Horn is exiled and decides to sail for Ireland, where he serves with King Thurston, fighting the Saracens. Before he departs, however, he makes a promise to Rymenhild that he will return within seven years, and if he should not send her any word of his situation, or return himself, she should consider herself free to marry another. He tells her,

“At seve yeres ende,
Yef I ne come ne sende,
Tak thee husebonde.”³⁹

³⁸ The use of the sea in connection with cultural boundaries in *King Horn* is discussed in Sebastian Sobocki, “Littoral Encounters: The Shore as Cultural Interface in *King Horn*,” *Al-Masaq: Islam and the Medieval Mediterranean* 18 (2006): 119-40. The sea also features prominently in dreams in *King Horn*, see McKinstry, *Middle English*, 119-20.

³⁹ *King Horn*, in *Middle English Verse Romances*, ed. Donald B. Sands, Exeter Medieval Texts and Studies (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1986), 35

So, despite the length of time and the distance over the waves, the implication is that he will not forget his promise to Rymenhild. He hires a ship, and a favorable breeze carries him to Ireland. Although the sea journey is described relatively quickly, the expanse of water over which he travels becomes synonymous with the temporal distance that has been created between himself and his love, namely, the seven-year separation. In effect, he has journeyed far away from his past. He fights the Saracens under a false identity, Cutberd, and becomes a sworn brother to King Thurston's sons.⁴⁰ When the king's sons are killed in battle, the king makes Horn his heir and grants him the hand of his daughter, Reynild, in marriage.⁴¹ Horn initially declines but requests that he might defer his decision for seven years.⁴² The sea represents, not only the time that has passed, but the many intervening events that have taken place and how distanced Horn has become from his previous identity and, crucially, his promise to Rymenhild. He remembers his love only when he looks at the ring that was given to him by Rymenhild earlier in the narrative and which he gazes at during battle: "He lokede on his ringe / And thoughte on Rymenhilde."⁴³ The readers have seen Horn reminisce about his wife earlier in the romance, before he left his love, and the action is repeated when they are reunited, but this instance is the only explicit reference to Rymenhild during Horn's seven years in Ireland.⁴⁴ For a moment, Horn has remembered his love, demonstrating Thomas Aquinas's belief that "recollecting is nothing other than searching for something that has slipped from the memory."⁴⁵ Rymenhild's ring, like the ring halves in *Sir Isumbras*, can unite the lovers over the waves; however, simply possessing the object is not enough in itself. As Cooper has noted, the object functions only if Horn "remembers to look at the ring," something which,

(lines 737-39). All subsequent references to *Horn* will be to this edition and cited by line number.

⁴⁰ *King Horn*, 825-32.

⁴¹ *King Horn*, 901-12.

⁴² *King Horn*, 913-24.

⁴³ *King Horn*, 565-80, 881-82.

⁴⁴ *King Horn*, 617-18, 1495-96. For the use of repetition in the romance see Mary Hynes-Berry, "Cohesion in *King Horn* and *Sir Orfeo*," *Speculum* 50 (1975): 652-70; and G. Ziegler, "Structural Repetition in *King Horn*," *Neophilologische Mitteilungen* 81 (1980): 403-08.

⁴⁵ Thomas Aquinas, "Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle, On Memory and Recollection*," trans. John Burchill, in *The Medieval Craft of Memory: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, eds. Mary Carruthers and Jan M. Ziolkowski, Material Texts (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 175.

apparently, he does only once during the seven years.⁴⁶ To borrow Aquinas' phrase, the rest of the time it has "slipped" from the memory—Horn is concerned only with the events which have taken place since leaving Westernesse.

Horn reacts only when Rymenhild sends a messenger, after seven years have passed, to inform him of her planned marriage to King Mody of Reynes. Horn immediately instructs the messenger to return to Rymenhild with news of his imminent return to Westernesse. Unfortunately, the messenger has a particularly perilous return voyage and drowns, his body's washing up on the shore under Rymenhild's bedroom:

Rymenhild hit mighte ofthinke!
The see him con ded throwe
Under hire chambre wowe.⁴⁷

Rymenhild steps out of her bedroom, expecting to find Horn returned safely, but all she finds is the drowned knave, "[t]hat heo hadde for Horn y-sent."⁴⁸ Rymenhild is understandably distraught and "[h]ire fingres heo gan wringe."⁴⁹ The sea that was emblematic of Horn's forgetfulness has now prevented his message from reaching Rymenhild, in effect, reinforcing the distance that has been created between the two lovers over the seven-year period. The image is poignant. Rymenhild surveys the body of her drowned messenger and, subsequently, abandons all hope of Horn's return to Westernesse and to her. The sea, now, is a barrier to her past love with her memory reduced to a subtle acoustic reminder of her ring as she "wrings" her hands, subtly recalling the object that was designed to unite the pair for eternity. Little does she know that Horn already is asking permission to leave King Thurston and about to embark on, significantly, a favorable journey. The sea is, in fact, now going to help them to reunite.

A Safe Voyage: Audience Reassurances

Following Horn's arrival in Westernesse, matters are far from being settled easily and quickly, and many more events take place as the knight disguises himself as a palmer and infiltrates the wedding feast of King

⁴⁶ Cooper, *English Romance*, 150.

⁴⁷ *King Horn*, 978-80. For the perils of sea travel in the period see Timothy Runyan, "Ships and Mariners in Later Medieval England," *The Journal of British Studies* 16 (1977): 1-17.

⁴⁸ *King Horn*, 981-86.

⁴⁹ *King Horn*, 988.

Mody and Rymenhild.⁵⁰ A battle results in the death of King Mody and a further betrayal of Horn by King Alymar's trusted servant, Fikenhild.⁵¹ All this must be faced before Horn and Rymenhild finally are re-united. However, in terms of how the sea's function is developed, Horn's return voyage to Westernesse is significant. He returns "[o]n a gude galey" and is carried by a favorable wind ("The wind him gan to blowe").⁵² The journey is fast, and soon he arrives just as the wedding bells chime.⁵³ The speed is indicative of Horn's eagerness to prevent Rymenhild from marrying King Mody, but it also represents the importance of the sea. Certainly, the sea was a barrier to his past, but now the favorable wind hastily returns him to Rymenhild, and the knight jumps from the boat to wade ashore.

The sea in romances, although a challenging barrier between past and present, and between individuals and their loves, will allow us safe passage to the narratives' (usually) happy conclusions. A sense of divine providence, as suggested by Cooper's categorization of certain romances, is implied, but the voyages in romances also create a sense of narrative reassurance, permitting their audiences to become fully involved in the trials and perils of the characters with the safe knowledge that the voyage and final destination are assured fully. In fact, it already has been written or "charted."⁵⁴

The tempestuous sea is a necessary part of a romance. A barrier which must be crossed, if possible, the sea reinforces the process of romance as a journey between fixed points. This definition of a journey implies that a destination cannot be reached without one's giving some thought regarding where one first began. Arriving at a single conclusion concerning the function of the sea in medieval romances would be reductive given the varied and creative nature of the genre itself. Nevertheless, the sea always must be connected to literal and mental movements and journeying on various levels in romances. The physical relocation of a character from one land to another accompanies the movement of ideas and experiences from a past location to the present situation. Likewise, when we arrive at a destination, certain events may prompt us to cast our minds back to experiences we had before the journey began or on the voyage itself. Finally, perhaps most intriguingly, the sea suggests the possibility of

⁵⁰ *King Horn*, 1025-60.

⁵¹ *King Horn*, 1257-59.

⁵² *King Horn*, 1016-17.

⁵³ *King Horn*, 1021-24.

⁵⁴ See Cooper, *English Romance*, 106-36.