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‘We split!’

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‘We split!’

Shipwreck in early modern European history and culture

Steve Mentz

Europe’s turn toward global oceanic navigation during the early modern period gave new currency to ancient narratives of shipwreck while also generating many new stories of maritime disasters. As European ships entered unfamiliar waters, wrecks and near-wrecks became both more common and increasingly meaningful, not only to mariners but to readers and intellectuals. Shipwreck narratives proliferated in historical and fictional texts. The threat and experience of shipwreck came to epitomize the risks of maritime expansion, both in historical compilations such as Richard Hakluyt’s The Principal Navigations and literary fictions such as Sir Philip Sidney’s The Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia. These disasters would populate canonical literature, from William Shakespeare’s plays to the verse epics of Luis vaz de Camões, and John Milton to lyric poetry that descended from Francesco Petrarch through assorted Continental figures to Sir Thomas Wyatt and the tradition of the English sonnet. The global maritime expansion of European culture fuelled awareness of and fascination with maritime disasters.

Certain sea routes, especially the Carreira d’India, which sent at first mostly Portuguese ships around the Southern Cape of Africa into the wealthy trading centres of the Indian Ocean, became notorious for catastrophic wrecks. During this period, literary culture reexamined classical and biblical texts that employed the narrative trope of shipwreck. In such prominent literary works as Shakespeare’s The Tempest (1611) and Camões’s The Lusiads (1572), European writers signalled their engagement with shipwreck as a master-trope for thinking about the risks and benefits of oceanic exploration and trade. The crisis moment at the end of the opening scene of The Tempest in which the sailors give themselves over as lost, crying ‘We split, we split, we split!’ provides a poetic microcosm of shipwreck as it rippled through European culture. In nations that were becoming increasingly dependent upon overseas travel, trade, and exploration, shipwreck represented the shock of individual and collective
risk. To ‘split’, in Shakespeare’s resonant language, means to risk spilling one’s self and one’s collective community into hostile waters. Shipwreck shadowed early modern maritime exploration as looming disaster, feared even when not encountered directly.

As Europe entered its transoceanic and eventually its global maritime imperialist phases, shipwrecks both real and fictional were central to its globalizing culture. In contemporary historical records and ancient narrative models, shipwreck represented a hinge-event, a radical swerve away from a safe path, and a crisis moment in which divine or infernal powers might directly touch human lives. In sermons by English clergyman John King, historiographical materials collected by Hakluyt and Samuel Purchas, and lyric poetry from courtier-poets such as John Donne to common sailors such as Edward Barlow, shipwreck came to define the risks of oceanic travel in early modern European culture. For political and theological thinkers as well as poets, preachers, painters, and other intellectuals, shipwrecks and the narratives they generated were central to early modern Europe’s experience of the global oceanic world. For sailors, including shipwrecked sailors who were in some cases themselves trained or untrained writers, shipwreck represented the painful touch of God’s heavy hand in the sublunary contingent world. The multiple valences of shipwreck makes these events and their representations revealing windows onto the early modern oceanic world.

This chapter’s overview of the place of shipwreck in early modern history and culture will structure its three major examples by bringing accounts of early modern shipwrecks into dialogue with familiar narrative models from the classical and biblical traditions that provide early modern intellectual context for narratives of disasters at sea. Two famous examples of the shipwreck topos that were widely understood to be ideal models appear in the classical epic poetry that was central to the education of European humanists. In both Homer’s *The Odyssey* and Virgil’s *The Aeneid*, the titular heroes survive shipwreck at crucial moments. Odysseus suffers shipwreck on his way home to Ithaca, where he eventually re-establishes his kingdom and family. The Greek hero’s return to his home, however, diverges sharply from the Trojan refugee Aeneas’ founding of a new imperial settlement in Rome after his experience of shipwreck. Aeneas’ model of shipwreck-into-empire was the one that became central to the ideology behind early modern maritime expansion. During early modern trans-oceanic expansion, Aeneas’ colonial outward-bound model appeared more directly applicable than Odysseus’ homeward journey. For Odysseus, shipwreck was an obstacle directly in the way of his return home. For Aeneas, however, the shipwreck that deposited him on the shores of Dido’s North African kingdom represented an errant turn from which he barely escaped. For many early modern European thinkers, the Virgilian narrative of shipwreck-into-empire would become a potent model for their own era’s experiences of voyaging, settlement, and empire. Odysseus’ wreck, as I shall show, was not quite as comforting or generative.

The biblical narrative of Jonah, as sermonized for a full calendar year by English clergyman and future Bishop of London John King in his *Lectures upon Jonas* (delivered 1594, published 1597), provides a third important ancient template in relation to which early modern shipwreck narratives were understood. The revelations the prophet found in the whale’s belly helped him to produce different wisdom from that
of Aeneas or Odysseus. Jonah’s oceanic experience is deeper, more alien, and legible to readers primarily in theological terms. In a culture that engaged with multiple literary, religious, and philosophical perspectives, shipwreck served as a flexible touchstone. Renaissance humanists including Desiderius Erasmus and Leon Battista Alberti used the topos of shipwreck as both a literary commonplace and a valuable rhetorical figure. All these kinds of shipwreck writings show how early modern shipwreck narratives developed a hybrid between Christian and classical ideas and literary forms.

The core of this chapter will consider how classical, humanist, and Christian topoi operate in accounts of three significant historical shipwrecks, each of which generated multiple literary responses. The first of these is the wreck of the English ship the Sea-Venture on Bermuda in 1609. The ship had been on its way from England to resupply the just-established Virginia Colony at Jamestown when it encountered a destructive storm that forced it onto the Bermuda islands. The second wreck-story explores the loss of the Portuguese great galleon S. João off the southern coast of Africa in 1552, when the ship was on the return voyage of the then-thriving Portuguese trade with India. The final wreck that I will discuss is the sinking with all hands in a storm of Sir Humphrey Gilbert’s ship the Squirrel in the North Atlantic in 1583, as his fleet was on its way back to England from attempting to found a colony in Newfoundland. All three of these shipwrecks interrupted voyages that were central to early modern maritime trade and settlement. All three also generated significant literary and cultural texts in response to their disasters. Shakespeare’s The Tempest is the most famous of many responses to the wreck of the Sea-Venture, including several published and manuscript eyewitness accounts. The destruction of the S. João and the trials of the ship’s survivors would become central to Portuguese literary culture in the late sixteenth century, appearing in Camões’ epic poem The Lusiads, in a less well-known poetic epic by Jerónimo Corte-Real, entitled Naufrágio de Sepúlveda (1592), and in other poems and plays. The story of this wreck would also become the first prose entry in the Portuguese historical compilation, The Tragic History of the Sea, assembled in the eighteenth century by Bernardo Gomes de Brito and still considered a landmark of Portuguese culture.

This handful of historical and literary accounts of these three wrecks represents only a small fraction of the massive corpus of early modern shipwreck narratives. In making sense of shipwreck as a micro-genre, my efforts to pair three mythic accounts of shipwreck, in The Odyssey, The Aeneid, and the Book of Jonah, with three historical wrecks, of the S. João, the Sea-Venture, and the Squirrel, enable some provisional structural interpretations of the way this narrative trope helped Europe’s maritime cultures imagine their global salt-water turn. Looking at the wreck of the S. João in dialogue with Homer’s depiction of Odysseus at sea provides a picture of maritime disaster as a symbol of environmental hostility and bare survival. By contrast, the story of the Sea-Venture inscribes the redemptive shipwreck-to-empire trajectory of Virgil’s The Aeneid onto the painful sufferings of early English colonists. Accounts of the drowning of Gilbert on board the Squirrel in the North Atlantic show how biblical ideas that suffuse the parable of Jonah continued to influence accounts of shipwreck by evoking
We split!

the deadly hand of divinity touching human bodies in the world. These historical accounts of shipwreck were interpreted through existing cultural ideas about Odysseus’ skill, Aeneas’ piety, and Jonah’s prophetic duty. These stories were understood as tragic, in the cases of the S. João and the Squirrel, or redemptive, in the case of the Sea-Venture. Juxtaposing these fictional and historical wrecks can provide a sense of how shipwreck helped early modern Europeans imagine the disorienting experience of the first age of maritime globalization. Shipwreck turns out to be both a window into early modern ideas about oceanic expansion, and a mirror in which early modern mariners and writers imagined their changing places on the watery globe.

Shipwreck as representation and encounter: analysis and keywords

Shipwreck tells a story of disaster and loss, and, in some fortunate cases, also a tale of redemption or even salvation. Before I explore the three pairs of exemplary literary and historical wrecks that will make up the bulk of this chapter, I shall summarize some of the range and innovation of current critical writing in shipwreck studies by offering a brief account of four key terms that are prominent in current literary and cultural responses to these texts. Scholarship on pre-modern shipwreck is interdisciplinary, with prominent contributions from English Literature and History scholars, from the fields of Art History and the Environmental Humanities, and from scholars who work on religion, maritime culture, and other areas. The critics and theorists whose work I take up here represent only a small slice of the rich scholarship on representations of pre-modern maritime disasters. Scholarly projects from different disciplinary conversations have different critical aims, but together the current state of criticism suggests that shipwrecks powerfully present the shock and disruption of cultural, physical, and environmental change. Recent critical work in shipwreck studies suggests that representations of these disasters can be employed as techniques for focusing attention on the maritime environment in ways that may be particularly valuable for pre-modern studies and the environmental humanities. My aim here is to provide a concise but broad overview of the ways that humanities scholars are using shipwreck today.

The first key term I will introduce for engaging contemporary shipwreck studies is ‘now’, a word that focuses attention on the peculiar experience of time in these disasters. Shipwreck scrambles the human experience of chronology. Depictions of maritime disaster engage what the modern critic Walter Benjamin famously calls ‘now-time’, or time suffused with the possibility of messianic redemption. The dramatic foreshortening or intensifying of temporality in shipwreck is a common theme in many accounts. The opening scene of Shakespeare’s The Tempest, for example, lasts fewer than 75 lines and usually under 10 minutes of stage time, but its chaos and disorientation ripple through the play. Benjamin describes ‘now-time’ in several places in his writing, but the phrasing of the posthumously published Arcades Project might be the most revealing. ‘Each “now” is the now of a particular recognizability’, he writes, ‘In it, truth is charged to the bursting point with time’. The technical challenge of representations of shipwreck, in poetry, or paint, or prose, entails forcing that bursting
point into stillness, so that we can interpret it. Representing ‘now’ in a lasting medium defines the art of shipwreck.

A second key term regarding shipwreck is ‘spectator’. Hans Blumenberg’s sparkling little book of metaphorology, Shipwreck with Spectator, unravels the long and eventful history of a scene from Lucretius in which the philosopher takes pleasure in watching from the shore the spectacle of another person’s shipwreck. In Book II of Lucretius’s De rerum natura (The Order of Things), the philosopher-poet praises the position of the spectator, feeling solid ground beneath his feet as he watches a ship struggling offshore. ‘’Tis sweet’, the poet intones, ‘to watch another’s laboring anguish’. Early modern literary writers were fascinated by Lucretius’ image of the shipwreck spectator who looks eagerly at the disaster. Perhaps the most famous example is Shakespeare’s Miranda, who gazes at the shipwreck that opens The Tempest and empathizes with the mariners’ pain. ‘O I have suffered’, she laments, ‘with those that I saw suffer’. The spectator’s position, as elaborated by Montaigne, staged in the second scene of The Tempest, and traced forward by Blumenberg into Goethe, Nietzsche, and many others, turns passivity to advantage. The one who watches the wreck from shore, Blumenberg writes, ‘survives through one of his useless qualities: the ability to be a spectator’. From stability, we watch disorder. We enjoy watching, and through spectatorship, we generate lasting ideas about shipwreck and the human relationship with the watery globe.

The remnants left after shipwreck include survivors and pieces of flotsam, but in cultural terms the key items are ‘texts’. Josiah Blackmore, whose work on Portuguese shipwreck narratives has been foundational for early modern shipwreck studies, emphasizes the way shipwreck builds symbolic structures from failed voyages: ‘Out of shipwreck, the poet tells us, come texts. Disaster sends them, waterlogged but intact, to the readers waiting on shore’. I will return to Blackmore’s treatment of shipwreck and empire when I discuss the S. João, but his sense that the legacy of shipwreck appears via textual interpretation as well as physical salvage seems essential. In The Tempest, to continue with my Shakespearean example, the play itself emerges from the wet chaos of the opening scene.

The last of these four critical terms, ‘valuation’, comes from the art historian Anne Harris’ analysis of the economics of pre-modern shipwreck. She emphasizes that even the most literary of shipwrecks operates within a global economic system in the early modern maritime world. She chooses as her textual example an enigmatic description of shipwreck from Book Four of Rabelais’ Pantagruel: ‘To whom does a shipwreck belong?’. Tracing a brisk history of Roman and medieval maritime law, Harris emphasizes that wrecks belong both to the sea and to investors. We salvage from them both meanings and, at least if the insurance is paid up, money. Building on influential work by Luke Wilson in Shakespeare studies, and drawing also on broader historical studies of medieval and early modern maritime law, Harris emphasizes that shipwreck studies can contribute to the economic history of ideas of risk and valuation. As Wilson also notes, insurance was available for early modern ships, even though neither Antonio, whose argosy founders in The Merchant of Venice, nor King Alonso in The Tempest appear to take that financial precaution. Even if literary writers such as Shakespeare downplay marine insurance in order to increase dramatic tension,
the economic realities attendant on marine disasters seem crucial to understanding the cultural history of shipwreck in this period.

Representations of shipwreck also appeared widely in early modern emblems, paintings, and decorative culture. Shipwreck as idea, poetic topos, and object of cultural fascination served as an early modern laboratory for focusing attention on moments of maritime risk and extremity. These resonant narratives, which are both as old as literary culture itself and as new as Welsh writer Cynan Jones’s brilliant short novel Cove (2016), encourage audiences to narrow our attention, to focus, and to interpret inside a field in which everything is meaningful. All objects in view during the scene of shipwreck simultaneously become legible as allegorical tokens and practical tools for survival. The urgency of shipwreck trains humans to face into disaster. In recent years, the French philosopher Michel Serres has suggested that the modern world might need to live on ‘shipwreck alert’, or in a state of constant disaster preparation. The enduring appeal of shipwreck stories, which pre-dates the early modern period but also appears to have increased during that time, suggests that this condition of alert fascination is not new to late modernity but rather has been an essential part of Western cultural history.

The Sea-Venture (Bermuda, 1609) and The Aeneid (Book I)

No work of classical literature was more central to early modern European culture than Virgil’s The Aeneid. As the epic that celebrates the founding of Rome and prophesies its future empire, Virgil’s poem provided a classical template through which Europeans imagined their outward expansion during the early modern period. Self-consciously drawing together a revision of the wanderings of Odysseus in its first six books and a variation on the martial rage of Achilles in the Iliad in the concluding six, Virgil’s Latin poem creates in pius Aeneas a model of endurance, devotion, and ideological rectitude. Aeneas, the hero who carries his aging father on his back out of burning Troy and abandons the beautiful Queen of Carthage in order to fulfil his divine destiny in Italy, does not precisely resemble either the wrathful God-man Achilles or wily Odysseus. Instead, Aeneas presents a model of the hero who always subordinates his own desires to larger national and religious duties. Early modern interpreters found Aeneas’ piety compatible with the missions of both early modern European nationalisms and muscular Christianity. Aeneas, upon seeing his father’s ghost in the Underworld, accepts from him the prophetic vision of Augustan Rome:

Roman, remember your strength to rule
Earth’s peoples – for your arts are to be these:
To pacify, to impose the rule of law,
To spare the conquered, battle down the proud.

This ghostly mandate fashions Aeneas as world emperor, and European monarchs from Charles V of Spain to James I of England explicitly took his model to heart. The power of empire shows itself in the collection of active verbs: rule, pacify, impose, spare, battle down (the Latin verbs, pacique, parcere, and debellare carry comparable
force). The model of this imperial epic, as David Quint has observed, is to assume the position of history’s winners and control all the land. This imperial ideology travelled with European ships around the globe.

The conquering hero’s quest, however, begins with shipwreck off the coast of North Africa. Following the Homeric model of beginning in medias res (‘in the middle of things’), Virgil’s poem opens with wrathful Aeolus scattering the Trojan fleet and driving its remnants to seek sanctuary in Carthage. The scene draws on familiar poetic tropes: lightning brightens the sky, a ship gets sucked under by a whirlpool, men surface clinging to flotsam in the wreck. The force that calms the storm, in a precise inversion of the hostility of the sea-god Poseidon in The Odyssey, is the power of Neptune himself. The sea-god torments Odysseus because of the blinding of his Cyclops son, but the same deity, under his Roman name, protects Aeneas from the rage of Juno. Notably, Neptune’s power presents itself in verse via a political metaphor. The ultimate force, Virgil seems to say, establishes political authority in the midst of the storm:

When rioting breaks out in a great city,  
And the rampaging rabble goes so far  
The stones fly, and incendiary brands –  
For anger can supply that kind of weapon –  
If it so happens they look around and see  
Some dedicated public man, a veteran  
Whose record gives him weight, they quiet down,  
Willing to stop and listen.  
Then he prevails in speech over their fury  
By his authority, and placates them.

The extended metaphor of the ‘public man’ represents the god’s authority in language that recalls Aeneas himself, who is a ‘veteran’, an able speaker, and a hero whose ‘record gives him weight’. In the poem’s allegorical opening, the literal cause of the storm’s diminishment is divine power, but that power becomes connected through metaphor to the political authority of wise Aeneas and his political destiny. For Virgil, and for the early modern mariners, politicians, and poets who followed his model, political unity was the best answer to the storm.

Not all records of shipwreck during the early modern period lend themselves easily to the Virgilian interpretation, but the famous and widely discussed wreck of the Sea-Venture on the island of Bermuda in 1609 fits neatly inside the imperial-Providentialist mode. The Sea-Venture was flagship of a fleet sailing to resupply the nascent colony at Jamestown, Virginia. After wrecking on the uninhabited island chain in the mid-Atlantic, the ship’s crew, all of whom survived the disaster, spent nine months on Bermuda where they built two smaller vessels out of salvage from the wreck and local cedar. These ships arrived in Jamestown in time to meet another resupply fleet from England and fortuitously end what is known as the ‘Starving Time’ in England’s first fragile colony in the New World. In multiple accounts of this shipwreck, including historical retellings by such figures as Captain John Smith,
in *A General History* (1624), and literary extrapolations including Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, the *Sea-Venture’s* wreck helped support and substantially create England’s overseas empire, both in Virginia and in Bermuda itself. First-hand narratives such as William Strachey’s ‘A True Reportory of the Wrack’, which would not be published until 1625 but appears to have circulated in manuscript soon after the event, worked to transform ‘the Devil’s Islands’ of the Bermudas into a settled colony. Sylvester Jourdain’s quickly published account, *Discovery of the Bermudas*, was issued with two competing subtitles that together describe the ideological arc of the shipwreck narrative. The first subtitle, published the year following the wreck in 1610, described Bermuda as, *Otherwise called the Isle of Devils*, but that devilish vision was changed when the book was reprinted in 1613 under the subtitle, *Now called the Somer Islands*. The new title, and the name the colony assumed after its founding in 1612, referred to the leader of the first official settlement on Bermuda, Sir George Somers, but the pun on ‘summer’ as a land of warmth and plenty rang out clearly. These islands, like Aeneas’ Italy, represented England’s destined route to maritime empire.

Treating the *Sea-Venture* wreck as a prelude to empire in parallel to the way that wrecking in North Africa presaged Aeneas’ conquest of Italy, enabled early modern English writers to celebrate Virginia and Bermuda as glorious and as precursors to future glory. While Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* appears ambivalent about some aspects of European imperial rule, the interpretation given to the aftermath of the *Sea-Venture* by writers such as Richard Rich was not. Rich’s *Newes from Virginia* (1610), a 22 stanza mini-epic, celebrates the wreck for saving the mainland colony. Calling his story *The Lost Flock Triumphant*, Rich further assimilates the divine forces behind the storm to Christian rather than pagan deities: ‘heauen was Pylotte in this storme’. That pious refrain, often presented with the phrasing that ‘it pleased God’ to send the storm that wrecks the ship, serves as through-line in many early accounts of shipwreck. God’s hand sits behind the killing storm, but in ideal cases, as with Aeneas and the *Sea-Venture*, a hidden redemptive purpose guides the wreck.

For both *The Aeneid* and the Bermuda wreck, the underlying ideology of shipwreck supports imperial expansion. For England, which by the early seventeenth century was belatedly entering the colonial game pioneered by the maritime expansions of Spain and Portugal over a century before, establishing Jamestown, Bermuda, and later the Massachusetts Bay Colony meant arriving on the global stage. These shipwreck stories represent themselves as fortunate: only two sailors die over the course of the *Sea-Venture’s* disaster and recovery, and the nameless Trojans who perish in ships off North Africa do not impinge upon Aeneas’ epic’s trajectory. Shipwreck fuels empire, and oceanic disorder becomes a means to create lasting political order. This fantasy of control, however, does not accurately describe the experiences of the men and women who sailed on the *Sea-Venture* or other wrecked ships. In fact, Joseph Kelly’s recent reconsideration of the narrative of Stephen Hawkins, an English passenger on board the *Sea-Venture* who attempted to lead a quasi-revolution on Bermuda and then subsequently was among the Mayflower settlers in 1620, suggests that anti-authoritarianism might be another viable way to understand the English settlement of North America. The experience of shipwreck, at least for Hawkins and possibly for other non-elite travellers, appears to have been of loosening rather
than solidifying their loyalties to the Crown. Shipwreck becomes, at least for some, a pathway to radicalization. As scholars continue to examine the records of shipwreck, the early modern Virgilian overlay remains essential intellectual context, but these stories might not be as simple or unifying as English imperialists and propagandists wished to believe.

The Great Galleon *S. João* (South Africa, 1552) and *The Odyssey* (Book VI)

The Virgilian mode reads shipwreck as retrospectively foundational, but the disaster can only create political solidity by forgetting the chaos of the wreck. In previous work, I have explored the difference between the ‘wet’ experience of disaster and the ‘dry’ consolations of interpretive clarity.47 Disaster creates community in the short term, as humans and technology struggle against impersonal forces. However, the communities the disaster creates must engage with memories of chaos and disorder. Even when the waters recede, it can be difficult to wash the taste of salt danger out of one’s mouth. A closer look at one of the most famous wrecks in sixteenth-century European history, in which the Portuguese great galleon *S. João* went down off southwest Africa on the return voyage from India in 1552, highlights elements of the shipwreck narrative that Virgil and apologists for Virginia and Bermuda attempted to pass over. The raw chaos of the wreck of the *S. João* reaches beyond the political moralizing of Virgil’s account to recall the less comforting story of Odysseus’ solitary wreck in *The Odyssey*. Both Aeneas and Odysseus sail from Troy into the central Mediterranean, but while Aeneas and his Trojan retinue found an imperial dynasty, Odysseus returns home alone, having lost all his men and ships. Shipwreck contains violence as well as promise.

The catastrophic narrative of the *S. João*, which wrecked on the coast of Africa and stranded hundreds of survivors, many of whom subsequently perished, became one of the most renowned and often-represented shipwrecks in early modern European history. The story of the shipwrecked aristocrat Manuel de Sousa Sepúlveda and his wife, Leonor de Sá, appears tangentially in *The Lusiads*, the national epic of early modern Portugal, a poem which is itself self-consciously modelled on *The Aeneid* and other classical epics.48 As I have discussed elsewhere, the short narrative of the moment at which the ship goes down provides neither consolation for, nor any definitive explanation of, the disaster.49 Rather, the ship’s doom appears massively over-determined, caused by over-loading, bad seamanship, defective parts, delays for repairs, and other human errors, as well as the fateful and mysterious arrival of the storm. Even though the anonymous narrator of the account defers at the last to divine will – ‘But since it was already written on high’ – the cumulative impact of the narrative of the *S. João* emphasizes the chaos and disorder of transoceanic travel. The wet world appears as likely to break empires as it is to make them.

One conceptual solution to the dilemma of the *S. João* wreck, which marks both the triumph and the tragedy of early modern Portuguese expansion into the Indian Ocean, appears in the critical work of Blackmore. In his influential book *Manifest Perdition* (2002), Blakemore recognizes the entanglement of shipwreck and empire,
but he finds in the Portuguese example an alternative to the Virgilian model to which English propagandists attached themselves. Blackmore notes that ‘the shipwreck narratives undermine the master historiographic narrative of imperialism in all its cultural, political, and economic valences, upsetting the imperative of order and unifying paradigms of “discovery” or “conquest”’.50 In Blackmore’s analysis, shipwreck asserts itself in opposition to imperial fantasies:

Shipwreck is […] the violence done to (maritime) linear forward movement and predictability; it is the reversal of perspective or epistemological frames; it is disorientation realized. If the ship is a symbol of empire and full expression of maritime supremacy, of the uncontested ship of state, a shipwreck represents the wreck to trade and empire and the threat to thalassocratic might.51

In the Portuguese context, the surge of interest in shipwreck narratives can be connected, by the late sixteenth century, to ‘the decline of empire in the East’, and to the late imperial melancholy that Blackmore finds in Camões which also reflects the crisis of Portugal’s maritime reach.52 When Vasco da Gama’s fleet sails forth from Portugal, they are wafted on their way by the deeply anti-maritime curses of the Old Man of Belem, who attacks maritime enterprise. ‘The devil take the man’, the Old Man intones, ‘who first put/Dry wood on the waves with a sail’.53 In considering these two models – the Virgilian/Bermudan/English fantasy of endless settlement, and the Camonian/South African/Portuguese diagnosis of imperial overreach – it might be valuable to consider these narratives as rival poetic modes, which surface differently in different historical contexts. For some writers and some sailors, shipwreck represents opportunity. For others, the disaster shatters all coherence.

The split between epic survival and tragic loss appears within classical literary depictions of shipwreck as well as within the early modern historical record. Taking the example of the shipwreck of Odysseus on the island of the Phaeacians in Book V of The Odyssey, Homer appears to present a more radical and destructive view of shipwreck than his Roman heir Virgil. As the storm nears the raft of the now-solitary hero, whose adventures have already caused the death of all of the companions who sailed with him from Troy, Odysseus fears that he is encountering a ‘sea of sufferings’.54 Ino, the sea goddess who takes pity on him, asks ‘Why does enraged Poseidon/create an odyssey of pain for you?’.55 In an immersive extremity that Aeneas notably avoids, the storm splits Odysseus’ ship, and he must brave the seas by swimming alone for days and nights. The human metaphor that initiates Odysseus’ rescue is not, as in The Aeneid, the successful authority of a brave public man, but instead the last gasp of nearly exhausted mortal weakness:

As when a father
Lies sick and weak for many days, tormented
By some cruel spirit, till at last the gods
Restore him back to life; his children feel
Great joy; Odysseus felt that same joy
When he saw land.56
The hero survives but does not triumph. Interestingly, the metaphor’s point of view shifts mid-way, so that Odysseus is first the tormented father, drowning in sickness, but at the sight of land he instead switches to the perspective of the man’s happy children. Not an emperor in training like Aeneas, but a cunning survivor whose most potent skill is shifting his own identity, Odysseus preserves himself in part by refusing the public role Virgil’s hero must assume. Odysseus’ adventures and his suffering testify to a level of disorientation that Aeneas’ imperial destiny covers over.

The split between epic narratives of conquest like *The Aeneid* and romance-inflected tales of survival and disorientation like *The Odyssey* echoes throughout early modern maritime culture, particularly in shipwreck narratives. The frequency of shipwreck in English Renaissance drama increased with the early seventeenth-century surge of romance narrative such as, to take only Shakespearean examples, *Pericles* (1609), *The Winter’s Tale* (1611), and *The Tempest* (1611). The wrecks in these plays tend to disorient and re-structure their dramatic worlds; the most shocking example is probably the sudden wreck of the ship carrying the baby Perdita on the geographically nonsensical ‘sea-coast of Bohemia’ in the middle act of *The Winter’s Tale*, but the opening scene of *The Tempest* also performs Odyssean disorientation more distinctly than Virgilian empire-building. Shipwreck narratives in early modern literary culture refer dually to both Virgil’s construction of empire and Homer’s dissolution of his hero’s frail body. Between these generic and philosophical poles, both literary and historical accounts move.

**The Squirrel (North Atlantic, 1583) and the Book of Jonah**

In the late summer of 1583, Gilbert’s fleet returning to England from Newfoundland encountered a destructive storm. According to an account by Edward Hayes, which was printed by Hakluyt in the second, expanded edition of *The Principal Navigations* (1598–1600), Gilbert’s final moments before going down with his ship saw him, ‘sitting abaft with a booke in his hand’. Gilbert’s last words, which have since become a semi–official motto of the province of Newfoundland in Canada, pronounced his faith in the Christian mystery: ‘We are as neere to heaven by sea as by land’. I have argued elsewhere that Gilbert’s tragic loss captures the divine resonances that subtend early modern accounts of shipwreck, even those like the *Sea-Venture* or the *S. João* that also reflect classical pagan literary models. Plunging into the sea entailed a violent encounter with divine knowledge. Gilbert, though he was primarily a humanist propagandist of North American colonization who wanted desperately to fulfil the Virgilian template, represents in his death by drowning a gesture toward the inhuman and divine in the shipwreck encounter.

Several biblical narratives resonate with the religious meanings of this physical encounter with the God-sea, including St Paul’s shipwreck on Malta (Acts 27), Christ calming the Sea of Galilee (Mark 4), and the admonition of Psalm 107, ‘They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business on the great waters/These see the works of the Lord, and his wonders in the deep’. The most direct encounter between a human body and oceanic depths in the biblical tradition, however, comes in the story of Jonah and his sojourn in the belly of the whale. Jonah performs a ship-less
The verticality of Jonah’s descent and ascent narrative complicates the horizontal binary contrast between Aeneas’ devotion to collective empire and Odysseus’ solitary survival. Early modern shipwreck narratives tend to draw, at least to some extent, on all three poles in this triangle, so that each example of shipwreck becomes a complex hybrid mixture of a tale of collective political formation, an example of individual endurance, and a glimpse of forbidden knowledge. Literary works that deploy shipwreck at key moments, from Shakespeare’s The Tempest to Philip Sidney’s The Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia to shipwreck sonnets by Lady Mary Wroth, Edmund Spenser, and Sir Thomas Wyatt, range among the contrasting points of this triangle, using politics to illuminate religion to engage with individual suffering. Scholarship on shipwreck narratives both literary and historical can benefit from considering these master-tropes as organizing principles from which shipwreck assumes meaning in early modern context.

Conclusions: shipwreck as empire, endurance, and divine will

The interpretive triangle of this chapter contrasts a tradition of collective political structures epitomized by the shipwreck of Virgil’s Aeneas in North Africa against the perspective of a disoriented individual represented by the multiple wrecks of Homer’s Odysseus, and against a divine seeker as portrayed by the Hebrew prophet Jonah and his descent into the whale’s belly. These three poles do not exhaust the cultural meanings of shipwreck in this period, nor do these three sources comprise the only models on which early modern shipwreck writers drew. A substantial lyric tradition that descended from Petrarch treats shipwreck in emotional terms. Alternative versions of shipwreck in Latin poetry appear in Ovid and Lucan. Shipwreck represents a humanist topos in the writings of Erasmus, Alberti, and others. The relative narrowness of the interpretive triangle that I propose should not be taken as a claim of completeness or of exhaustive coverage. Shipwreck was a favourite plot device in early modern Europe, as it was also in the classical and medieval traditions from which these writers drew.

The advantage of considering shipwreck through a three-part structure that contrasts collective empire, individual endurance, and divine will emerges from the robust nature of the opposition between these terms. When the collective pressure of politics becomes too constricting, an alternative appears in individual endurance. In fact, one way to understand the episode in The Aeneid in which Aeneas is tempted to stay with Dido, Queen of Carthage, rather than seek his destiny in Italy would be to imagine that the hero’s temptation is to follow the example of his predecessor
Steve Mentz

Odysseus in preferring his personal happiness to his imperial destiny. Alternatively, to take a slightly different example, the plight of Manuel de Sousa Sepúlveda can be read not only as a political or individual failure, but also as an allegorical engagement with the African continent that defined so much of early modern Portuguese expansion, both in the Atlantic and Indian oceans. Sepúlveda’s encounter with African natives and his wife Leonor de Sá’s death on land represent their encounter with the Africa that they previously had skirted by sea. In reconsidering this famous shipwreck, it may be that deeper meanings and implications are still to be discovered.

The shipwreck triangle constructed here can serve to outline a hermeneutic for interpreting other representations of these disasters in other genres and modes. The Dutch tradition of shipwreck painting, for example, also draws upon these imperial, individual, and Christian structures. Shipwreck as micro-genre can be considered a focalizing device that allows artists and writers to explore the relationships among these and other modes of thinking about human experience, the oceanic environment, and political authority. As twenty-first-century blue humanities scholarship becomes increasingly interested in responses to environmental hostility in our own age of climate catastrophes, the substantial tradition of maritime disasters looms large. Shipwreck is an ancient topos, but contemporary stories about migrants attempting to cross the Mediterranean remind us that these stories remain very much alive in the present. Shipwreck’s multi-vocal complexity and variable dramatic structures subtend the continuing interest in these stories on the parts of critics and artists today.

Notes


3 Both Hakluyt’s compilation and Sidney’s romance have complex textual histories. Hakluyt’s collection of writings from English maritime history was first published in 1589 but substantially expanded and revised in a three-volume edition published 1598–1600. For a survey of responses to Hakluyt and his career, see D. Carey and C. Jowitt (eds), *Richard Hakluyt and Travel Writing in Early Modern Europe*, Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2012. Sidney’s narrative fiction, which he left incompletely revised upon his death in 1586, was published in part in 1590, revised and republished by Sidney’s sister Mary in 1593, and published in assorted hybrid editions after 1621. The complete original text, which Sidney finished in the 1570s before writing a substantial revision of the first half of the story, was first published in 1926. On Sidney’s *Arcadia* as shipwreck fiction, see S. Mentz, *Romance for Sale in Early Modern England: The Rise of Prose Fiction*, Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2006, pp. 73–104.


12 Another major tradition of shipwreck representation during this period appeared in painting, beginning with the Dutch maritime tradition of the seventeenth century and spreading from there. See L. O. Goede, Shipwreck and Tempest in Dutch and Flemish Art: Convention, Rhetoric, and Interpretation, State College: Penn State University Press, 1990.


17 For analysis of these sermons, see Mentz, Shipwreck Modernity, pp. 30–5.

19 On the cultural legacy of the wreck of the S. João, see Blackmore, *Manifest Perdition*, pp. 64–86.


23 For a wider survey that moves beyond the early modern era, see C. Thompson (ed.), *Shipwreck in Art and Literature*.

24 For an Anglophone variation on the oceanic theme, see the recent cluster of six essays, ‘Shakespeare and the Blue Humanities’, *SEL* 59/2, 2019, pp. 325–428.


27 Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 1. 2. 5–6.


29 J. Blackmore, *Manifest Perdition*, p. 27.


32 For several examples of emblems and decorative culture, see the online catalog for the Folger Shakespeare Library exhibition, ‘Lost at Sea: The Ocean in the English Imagination, 1550–1750’, curated by S. Mentz: https://folgerpedia.folger.edu/Lost_at_Sea:_The_Ocean_in_the_English_Imagination,_1550%E2%80%931750. Accessed 18 November 2019.


36 On Virgil’s ‘imperial ideology’, see Quint, *Epic and Empire*, pp. 21–49.


44 Many modern Shakespeareans have emphasized the ambivalence of *The Tempest* in relation to England’s nascent colonial ventures. For a representative survey, see Hulme and Sherman (eds), *‘The Tempest’ and Its Travels*.


595

'We split!'
Steve Mentz


