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### "And Clove the Wind from Unseen Shores": The Sea Voyage Motif in Imaginative Literature

#### **Abstract**

Discusses the long history of the sea journey as a symbol in religious and secular literature, and its use in the work of more recent fantasy and mainstream authors.

#### **Additional Keywords**

Arthurian romances; Journeys in literature; Sea in literature; Sea voyage in fantasy; Ships in literature; Paula DiSante; Paula DiSante

# "And Clove the Wind from Unseen Shores"

## The Sea Voyage Motif in Imaginative Literature

Eleanor M. Farrell

Humble voyagers are we,  
O'er life's dim, unsounded sea.<sup>1</sup>

One of the most powerful images in imaginative literature is that of the sea voyage. The significance of this theme reflects, in part, our European cultural inheritance. From its social and economic associations for civilizations bordering the Mediterranean, through the sea-carried spread of the cultures of northern Europe, the historical importance of ocean travel permeated European narrative, both factual and fictional, from the time of the classical epics. The sea journey motif reached a height of popularity during the Middle Ages, where it can be found in medieval epics, poetry, romances, travel diaries, cultural mythology, and pilgrimage literature.

Why was this particular image so strong to medieval minds? To answer this question it is necessary to look at the traditions influencing the literature of this period, which revered the lore and learning of the past. There were three major sources for the literary products of the Middle Ages. The first of these encompassed the works of the classical Greek and Latin writers: the epics, the plays, and the philosophical treatises, many of which were known only in second-hand or garbled forms. The collection of Judeo-Christian writings, including the Bible and the patristic writings of the Church Fathers, made up a second source. Finally, the oral traditions of the tribal cultures of the Celts, the Anglo-Saxons, and the other peoples settling Europe, traditions combining history, myth and religion, helped to form cultural identities as different groups came into contact with each other and with the monks who copied these works, too, onto their parchments.

Proportions of these traditions might change in various literary recipes, and blending was often uneven. Yet the combination of influences can be seen more often than not: in the description of St. Andrew's preaching as "unlock[ing] his word-hoard"<sup>2</sup> in the Anglo-Saxon poem "Andreas", for example, or in the tale of the voyage of Uilix Maic Leirtis, an Irish Ulysses. The bards and storytellers in the Middle Ages knew both a good story and how to maximize its impact by making it apply to their audience.

Probably the two most important classical voyage texts were The Odyssey of Homer and Vergil's Aeneid. Both of these epics relate the adventures of survivors of the Trojan War, but there are important differences between the two heroes and their

voyages. Ulysses (or Odysseus), the wily Greek creator of the Trojan horse, incurred the wrath of Poseidon, and the sea-god thwarted Ulysses' attempts to return home to Ithaca for ten years. The wandering hero encountered storms, shipwreck, cannibals, sirens and many other harrowing adventures during his exile, including a descent into Hades. Ulysses' character is unique in the classical epic, as he is noted for his guile and curiosity as well as for the traditional virtues of generosity and courage. The hero of Vergil's work, Aeneas, was a Trojan, exiled from Troy after the city's defeat. His journey, however, was sanctioned by the gods (particularly Aeneas' mother Venus), who sent him to Italy to found a new nation there. Like Ulysses, Aeneas is shipwrecked, and the Trojan hero, too, makes a journey through the underworld. Both stories were well-known and very popular throughout the medieval period. Dante, in particular, weaves the voyages of these heroes into the tapestry of the Divine Comedy, a tale of journeying that involved, physically at least, no ocean crossings.

The Old Testament of the Bible deals more with the desert than with the ocean, as it narrates the history of the Jews. There are two oblique but important exceptions to this: the story of the flood in "Genesis" and the crossing of the Red Sea in "Exodus". These stories were widely retold and adapted during the Middle Ages as powerful religious metaphors: the flood of baptism and rebirth, and the exodus of the earthly pilgrimage of all men. The symbolic associations of water with spiritual life were extended in medieval literature to add a dimension of meaning to stories of journeys, and sea journeys in particular.

The trading practices of the Celtic, Norse and Germanic tribes during the early Middle Ages assured the inclusion of seafaring adventures in their bardic traditions. Combined with the elements of folklore and religious beliefs, sea journeys became a source of marvel and magic. Often the heroic epics, such as Beowulf, began with the hero travelling to a strange land to seek his destiny; this journey was an essential part of the hero's adventure. Celtic mythology celebrated the magical voyage, both in the Irish voyage of Bran and in the second branch of the Welsh Mabinogi. Here the hero Bran and his companions are led to an Earthly Paradise, where they feast unaging for eighty years, until the memory of their former life leads them to return home. There, they are remembered only as legend.

This theme was carried forward into two literary directions: the saints' lives

narrative and the romance. "The Voyage of St. Brendan" is essentially that of Bran, with Christian trappings. The hero of the romance Tristan, after being wounded by a poisoned blade, is carried in a coracle to Isolde, the one woman who can cure him. Another striking depiction of the "magical boat" motif is that in the lai of "Guigemar", composed by Marie de France. The hero, wounded in the thigh by a hart, is carried via magical ship to the woman who cures his wound and then becomes his lover. The boats in this type of narrative are potent metaphors of change, magic, destiny - the very elements of adventure.

The medieval romance tradition reached its culmination during the twelfth century in the body of literature centering on the quest for the Grail. The earliest elements of the quest, introducing Arthur as a Celtic chieftain and warrior, are found in the body of Welsh myth, the Mabinogi. Wedded with the courtly love tradition of southern France, Arthurian tales became the most numerous and popular romances. In time, Christian themes permeated this literature, and by the time of publication of Malory's Le Morte d'Arthur in 1485, the Grail had evolved into a profound religious mystery.

The Grail stories are complex, combining many and various streams of motifs which meander across the narrative landscape. One of these is the voyage image. The search for the Grail is a voyage toward enlightenment, and frequently the knights of the quest are carried to new adventures in mysterious vessels requiring neither wind nor tide. In the climax of the Grail quest literature, the pure knights Galahad, Percival and Bors reach Sarras, City of the Grail, in a magical craft, once belonging to Solomon; this voyage symbolizes the ascent from the earthly to the spiritual life.

But the actual ship, the hollow of  
Jerusalem,  
beyond the shapes of empire, the capes  
of Carbonek,  
over the topless waves of trenched  
Broceliande,  
drenched by the everlasting spray of  
existence,  
with no mind's sail reefed or set, no  
slaves at the motivated oars,  
drove into and glove the wind from  
unseen shores.<sup>3</sup>

Similar symbolism, but with a very different tone, can be found in the Anglo-Saxon elegaic poems "The Seafarer" and "The Wanderer". Both poems speak of the exile of the poet from his society - losing the "mead-hall" of his lord and companions to the "care-hall" of the sea. Here the journey is one of loneliness, and emphasizes the negative character of the ocean voyage: isolation, hardship, fear of the unknown and the alien. However, in a spiritual context, the journey may also represent a turning toward God and away from the transitory nature of life, companionship, or even fame:

Cuckoo's dirge drags out my heart,  
whets will to the whale's beat  
across wastes of water: far warmer to me  
are the Lord's kindnesses than this life  
of death lent us on land.<sup>4</sup>

Whatever the religious philosophy of these Anglo-Saxon poets might have been, the strong imagery in the poems makes them profoundly dramatic, emotionally intense, and very personal. Their power and impact can be felt still by modern readers.

In the fourteenth century, Europe was bitten by a religious wanderlust, and thousands of people from all social stations travelled to shrines across the continent and as far as the Holy Land. Many pilgrims wrote accounts of their journeys, which became a sort of collection of medieval tour guides. In these, practical tips on travel and details of routes were interspersed with fantastic descriptions that were accepted by the medieval mind as readily as were reports of miracles. The Middle Ages were a time of faith, and God could create gryphons and wine-bearing trees as easily as He could falcons and turnips.

The ocean, of course, was not exempt from hyperbole. Sir John Mandeville, who claimed to be an English knight who had served with the Sultan of Egypt and travelled to Cathay, described in 1356 the dangers on the way to the isle of Prester John:

I was once in that sea, and I saw what looked like an island of trees and growing bushes; and the seamen told me that it was all great ships that the rock of adamant [which attracts iron] had attracted and caught there, and that all these trees and bushes had grown from the things that were in the ships.<sup>5</sup>

The power of the sea was also described by many travellers who watched horrified as ships full of pilgrims were dashed against rocks or sank during storms because of poor caulking or old age.

The dangerous earthly waters tried by pilgrims are reflected in the imagery of the greatest poem of pilgrimage, Dante's Divine Comedy. Very little of Dante-pilgrim's journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise involves travel through or over water. Yet Dante's strongest metaphors of the spiritual journey, from the image in Canto I of the Hell where he describes himself as a swimmer just escaped from perilous seas, are those of the sea journey.

Having established this image, Dante describes the entry into each of the three states of life after death in terms of voyage. The damned are ferried to Hell across the River Acheron by Charon, the classical ferryman of the dead. Souls entering Purgatory are carried in the Ship of Souls, piloted across the width of the world from the mouth of the River Tiber by an Angelic Pilot. Finally, Heaven is reached for Dante and his guide Beatrice by ascent through a sea of light.

Except for these incidents, most of Dante's journey is across an earth terrain - though not quite an earthly one. Many of the particulars of the visages of Hell were adapted by Dante from the details of Aeneas' descent into Hades (particularly fitting, as it is the author of the Aeneid who is Dante's guide). When first told he is to journey through Hell, Dante protests that he is not as worthy as Aeneas or St. Paul (who also described an image of Hell). Thus, Aeneas, although not a Christian, is used as a model of the true pilgrim: his life quest was the foundation of Rome, which in medieval allegory was often used as a figure of the Eternal City.

In contrast to the position of Aeneas and his voyage, Dante introduces, the the bowge of Hell allotted to Counsellors of Fraud, the figure of Ulysses. Dante did not know Homer's Odyssey, and the Italian poet's perception of the Greek hero might have been colored by nationalism and Virgil's Trojan bias. For whatever reasons, Dante invents for Ulysses, in the most beautiful passage of his Hell, a last voyage. In this account Ulysses, driven by pride and a thirst for knowledge, attempts to sail across the world ocean to Mount Purgatory. Ulysses here becomes a false pilgrim, because his voyage to regions forbidden to living men was fueled by pride rather than by Christian piety and humility. The attempt ends in shipwreck and death - the ultimate end of all false pilgrimages. The shipwreck of Aeneas and his crew, experienced as they fled Troy, might consequently be seen as a form of baptism: Aeneas, unlike Ulysses, is not killed, and he goes on to found Rome, the Eternal City. Dante is quite aware of the power of the water image from the Old Testament pilgrimage passages, and strengthens it even further by adding the dimension of the classical voyage to his own rendering of the "Exodus" journey. Although it is questionable whether Dante had any direct familiarity with the "magical ship" elements of Celtic or Anglo-Saxon tradition, he had probably come into contact with their usage in the romances and lais of southern France. Such references are not, of course, found in the Divine Comedy, but it is interesting to speculate on their possible influence in strengthening Dante's sea journey metaphors in his own mind. In this respect perhaps it is wisest to heed the poet's warning in Canto II of the Paradise:

Turn back and seek the safety of the shore:  
Tempt not the deep, lest, losing unawares  
Me and yourselves, you come to port no more. 6

Changes in social, political and technological conditions in the centuries following the medieval period resulted in a shift in the symbols of literature. The boundaries of the known world widened, and ship travel led more often to riches than to adventure. The laws of science replaced the rules of magic. Man's philosophical concerns began to focus on more internal journeys: braving the terrors of the psyche instead of those of the deeps. There are, of course,

literary works that use the old symbols, but they often seem to reflect more "modern" themes. Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels is more a political tract than a fantasy; Herman Melville's Moby-Dick emphasizes psychological torment over the descriptions of natural history interspersed within. Both of these approaches are valid, but they tend to blur the images established through earlier story-telling traditions.

Modern man (except for those of us who have lived with or studied the ocean) takes the sea for granted. It is no more the holder of power and mystery, no longer the Frontier. That title has now been bestowed on space (outer, I mean), which may help to account for the tremendous recent popularity of films about alien encounters. (Films are to our popular culture what bards were to medieval man's.) The magic, the adventure, the stranger -- all lie beyond the shores of the earth's atmosphere. H.P. Lovecraft, in The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath, artfully remolds journey symbolism to reflect this change. Randolph Carter, the dreamer in search of the opulent city of Kadath, finds himself on a black galley, which carries him beyond the lands of dream, shooting silently into planetary space and onto the oily sea of the dark side of the moon.

Apart from authors with the bizarre vision of Lovecraft, it is in the fantasy genre that we find the most recent return to the medieval literary symbolism. A look at some examples may help to illustrate how and why this revival has occurred.

The religious allegory so popular during the Middle Ages is reflected in the Narnia series of C.S. Lewis, in which the author creates an imaginary world as a new vehicle for Christian ideals and doctrine. One of the seven books in this series, The Voyage of the Dawn Treader, details the journey of King Caspian of Narnia to the End of the World, accompanied through magical waters by Reepicheep the Mouse and three children from the world of men. The voyage leads to Aslan's land -- Paradise -- for Reepicheep, who has fulfilled his earthly quests and like the Grail knights has turned to spiritual fulfillment. Aslan tells Lucy, Edmund and Eustace, the Earth children, that they must reach his country through their own world, i.e., through living their own lives and earning the way to heaven. Caspian, too, fails here to reach the utter East, because his task of ruling Narnia has not yet been accomplished. This voyage, then, represents the spiritual life journey, with the journey's end being the Christian heaven.

J.R.R. Tolkien's universe also reflects his Christian beliefs, but he uses cohesively created images rather than allegory. The Lord of the Rings introduces the subtle role of the sea in the mythology of Tolkien's world, by showing the other inhabitants of Middle-earth (including the reader) the relationship of the elves to the sea. Legolas, on his return from following Aragorn down the Paths of the Dead, sees some gulls flying over Minas Tirith, and mourns:

The Sea! Alas! I have not yet beheld it. But deep in the hearts of all my kindred lies the sea-longing, which it is perilous to stir. Alas! for the gulls. No peace shall I have again under beech or under elm.

In The Silmarillion, Tolkien describes more fully how the Eldar, led by Feanor, went in exile from Valinor in search of the silmarilli stolen by Morgoth. The elves remained in Middle-earth but yearned for the lands of the Uttermost West, from which they were barred. Finally Earendil the Mariner, half-elf and half-human, passed the Shadows through the power of the silmaril he carried to ask for aid to overthrow Morgoth. He was not permitted to return to mortal lands, but the Valar set his ship bearing the silmaril in the heavens as a sign of hope to the elves in Middle-earth.

Valinor, in Tolkien's mythology, is the immortal land, home of the gods and the elves. It is curious that, despite the author's strong Christian beliefs, he excludes men (and hobbits) from this land: their ties and their destinies lie in Middle-earth. Death is called the "gift of Iluvatar" by the elves, whose immortality is a sort of doom when they become weary of the world. More in concert with the Christian concept of an afterlife, The Silmarillion states that "of old the Valar declared to the Elves in Valinor that Men shall join in the Second Music of the Ainur; whereas Iluvatar has not revealed what he purposes for the Elves after the World's end."<sup>8</sup> Whatever the ultimate fate of the dwellers in Middle-earth, the men of the Third Age thought little about it, and the sea journey was a yearning to only the elves.

Of the Inklings fantasy writers, Charles Williams's works are the most mystical and symbol-laden. In his poem Taliessin through Logres, using the Arthurian material of Malory and earlier sources, Williams creates a vision of the spiritual life journey around the rise and fall of Logres and the Grail quest. With the fall of Arthur, the Grail is removed from the world by Galahad and Bors, in the last voyage of the Grail Ship:

Swept from all altars, swallowed in a path of power  
by the wrath that wrecks the pirates in the Narrow Seas,  
...multiple without dimension, indivisible without uniformity,  
on the ship of Solomon (blessed be he) drove on.

Williams uses the entire body of Arthurian material, weaving together the threads of pagan magic, romantic quest and Biblical imagery, to create a complex and difficult, but profoundly affecting, mystical religious metaphor.

Finally, I would like to discuss two other modern works of fantasy that incorporate the sea voyage motif. The first of these is Patricia A. McKillip's Riddle-

Master trilogy. Morgon, the hero of the story, is Prince of Hed, a small, isolated and peaceful kingdom. However, Morgon is also a Riddle-Master, and the subject of an unanswered riddle, and so his destiny lies beyond his island home. Like the epic hero Beowulf, he leaves Hed and travels by sea to learn more about his fate; like Aeneas and Ulysses, he is shipwrecked, which event alters his identity. So the sea here would seem to be a vehicle for personal growth, destiny, fate: a theme quite common in medieval epics and romances. McKillip adds another facet to this symbol, however, in her heroine Raederle's relationship to the sea dwelling shape-changers who are her ancestors. These Earth-Masters, forced into the sea in a war with the High One, are the forces of Chaos, in conflict with the High One's Order. Thus Morgon and Raederle, joined in their love, have to reconcile the two forces that try to separate them. The beauty of McKillip's story lies in her images of nature, the land-laws that are so strong they bind the land's rulers unto death. In the midst of this ordered harmony, the violence and discord of the people in the sea makes a very powerful and evocative contrast.

Another quite effective use of the sea is that in Ursula K. LeGuin's Earthsea trilogy. In contrast to McKillip's world of land-law, the sea is the universe in LeGuin's setting of tiny island archipelagos. The three books in this series describe stages in the life of the mage Ged: coming of age, adult quest, and acceptance of death. All of these stories are centered around sea voyages. The culmination of LeGuin's philosophical construct -- a Taoist cyclical world as opposed to the Western linear concept -- is The Farthest Shore, the final book in the trilogy. Here Ged must travel to the Dry Land -- the land of death -- to undo the imbalance created by another mage. The story focuses on the relationship between life and death and the great Balance, the Equilibrium of Nature. The sea is life, and death is the Dry Land, but the boundary between these is not sharp: "...neither pale sand nor ocean, but a long slope of darkness going down into the dark."<sup>10</sup>

LeGuin's descriptions of the sea emphasize its power and beauty, in sharp contrast with the traditional European image of power and terror. LeGuin's is an Oriental view, and an islander's view. It makes one wonder how our cultural traditions might be changed if our European ancestors had centered their lives on water instead of on land.

For many of the recent works of fantasy literature, the symbols created (at least in part) the stories, whereas our earlier -- tribal -- literature created the symbols we still use. Creators of imaginary worlds use the images already part of our cultural heritage to help the reader to recognize their creation, and therefore accept it. Metaphor springs from the roots of our culture, while change is seen in the fruits. Perhaps, one day, in (or on) a world without

oceans, the symbolism associated with the sea will become meaningless, and all adventurers and pilgrims will be directed through the ether. Somehow, though, I doubt that empty space contains as much variety of terror and beauty as the sea has had for men throughout our long existence surrounded by it.

## FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Bryan Waller Procter, "A Petition to Time", quoted in John Bartlett, Familiar Quotations, 11th edition (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1946), p. 350.
- <sup>2</sup>"Andreas", quoted in Charles W. Kennedy, trans., Early English Christian Poetry (Oxford, London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), p.134.
- <sup>3</sup>Charles Williams, Taliessin Through Logres (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974). p. 102.
- <sup>4</sup>"The Seafarer", quoted in Michael Alexander, trans., The Earliest English Poems (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1966), pp. 74-75.
- <sup>5</sup>Moseley, C.W.R.D., trans., The Travels of Sir John Mandeville (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1983), p. 168.
- <sup>6</sup>Dante Alighieri, The Comedy of Dante Alighieri the Florentine: Cantica III (Paradise), translated by Dorothy L. Sayers and Barbara Reynolds (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1962), p. 63.
- <sup>7</sup>J.R.R. Tolkien, The Return of the King (New York: Ballantine Books, 1965), p. 183.
- <sup>8</sup>J.R.R. Tolkien, The Silmarillion, edited by Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1977), p. 42.
- <sup>9</sup>Charles Williams, op cit, pp. 102-103.
- <sup>10</sup>Ursula K. LeGuin, The Farthest Shore (New York: Bantam Books, 1972), p.170.

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contemporary view on the matter, especially if the word "feminist" is associated with a narrow and anti-male point of view. But for many readers of the late twentieth century it is almost impossible to understand this play and much else of Miss Sayers's life and career except through the lens of a generous-spirited feminism. No doubt other readers await this and other of Sayers's works in a now unimaginable future. That is why they will outlast both Mrs. Dale's flawed editing and Mrs. Reynolds's spirited criticism of that editing.

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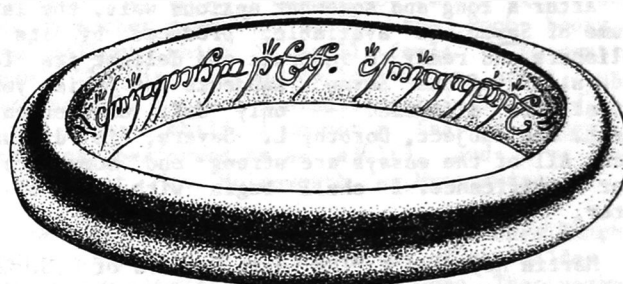
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behind the God who made this imperfect world. He moves then into his own gnosis ("Do you so far err, Peter, as not to know that our souls were made by that good God, the most excellent of all, but they have been brought down as captives into this world?") On the second day of the disputation, stung by the saint's penetrating cross-examination, he falls to a kind of agnosticism — "I know not whether I know" — becomes carping, and turns at last to simple hedonism:

"You persuade many to embrace your religion, and to submit to the restraint of pleasure, in hope of future good things; to whom it happens that they lose the enjoyment of things present, and are deceived with hopes of things future. For as soon as they die, their soul [sic] shall at the same time be extinguished."

These meanderings are sufficient to exasperate a saint and they do. Peter, "grinding his teeth" and making various gestures of frustration, cries out: "You wished to introduce many gods; but now, being confuted in that, you assert that there is not God at all. For by occasion of I know not what unknown God, you denied that the Creator of the world is God, but asserted that He is either an evil Being, or that He has many equals, or, as we have said, that He is not God at all." Then, after the apostle exposes some of the sorcerer's sinister hidden practices, Simon at last spits forth his true creed, which is simply an egomaniacal claim of power and a demand for his own exaltation:

"I am the first power, who am always, and without beginning.... I have flown through the air; I have been mixed with fire, and been made one body with it; I have made statues to move.... I am the Son of God enduring to eternity.... but your words are all in vain; nor can you perform any real works such as I have now mentioned, ...he also who sent you is a magician, who yet could not deliver himself from the suffering of the cross."

He shouts blasphemies at the apostle till the shocked crowd drives Magus forth.

(to be continued)