

Receives rain still

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Steve Mentz

AT THE BOTTOM OF
SHAKESPEARE'S OCEAN
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At the *Bottom of Shakespeare's Ocean* is my first encounter with "new thalassology". Taking its name from the Greek *thalassos*, "the sea", this critical discourse is rewriting the cultural history of the oceans. In our globalized age of airline travel, automatized ports and space exploration – so the new thalassologist reasons – we have started to forget the central role the sea has played in the development of global culture. William Shakespeare might seem much more of a landlubber than sea-obsessed writers such as Lord Byron, Joseph Conrad, or Herman Melville, but as Steve Mentz eagerly points out, "there's more salt in his plays than you might expect".

By the late sixteenth century, the sciences of navigation and hydrography were shedding new light on the sea. Shakespeare lived through an age in which society's conception of the ocean was shifting, as Mentz puts it, from "divine mystery to primal reality". The playwright must have at least seen the sea in his lifetime, and may have swum in it or sailed on it. But he probably didn't voyage extensively across the ocean. His knowledge of foreign waters is more likely to have come from books, or oral stories shared by the mariners who landed in London's docks. And with its classical, biblical and Ottoman associations, Shakespeare's favourite literary ocean is the eastern Mediterranean.

Recreational swimming was an exotic activity in Shakespeare's time (it was even banned at Cambridge in 1571). Interest did increase towards the end of the sixteenth century, or so the publication of several illustrated manuals seems to suggest. But the playwright tends to associate swimming

with human insufficiency and the world's inhospitality. Macbeth and Macdonwald are described as "spent swimmers, that do cling together / And choke their art". For Egeon in *The Comedy of Errors*, the first in a long line of Shakespearean plays to explore familial separation at sea, the ocean is alienating, threatening and vast: a place where identities are not found, but lost.

Turning to *Othello*, Mentz sees a parable concerning the danger of salt water. Iago is the god – or anti-god – of the sea: "we've ignored this figure's oceanic significance for too long". Editors have often noted the maritime vocabulary of Shakespeare's villain: his language is peppered with words like compass, salt, carrack, cable, scurvy, fathom and sail. Mentz thinks that more lies behind this linguistic association, however, arguing that his character "matches the ocean's unstable nature". From here on, the oceanic associations become a little strained. The "not" of "I am not what I am" becomes a "seaman's knot with which he manipulates his general". And it's far-fetched – however poetically inviting – to claim that "Iago's heart remains unknowable precisely because it lies, metaphorically, in the deep sea". Conversely, *Othello* has an "aversion to liquid disorder" and his language, apparently, "resists liquefac-

tion". Such claims rest on passing metaphors – "for the seas worth", "she was false as water", "he foams at mouth" – and however watery such language might be, it isn't always salty.

At the *Bottom of Shakespeare's Ocean* becomes more insightful when we come to the late plays. Here the dramatist really does seem emboldened to put the ocean on stage, often literally. As with most tempests in Shakespeare's oeuvre, the first storm in *Pericles* is represented offstage: "Enter Pericles, wet". But for the second, the chorus draws specific attention to its physical staging: "what ensues in this fell storm / Shall for itself itself perform". The theatre audience are led to imagine "this stage the ship, upon whose deck / The sea-tossed Pericles appears to speak". So rich is the maritime language in *The Tempest's* onstage storm that A. F. Falconer hypothesized that Shakespeare must have travelled at sea during the "lost years" of the late 1580s. These works also play host to Shakespeare's "most sea-drenched" characters: Caliban, "half a fish and half a monster", and Marina, "born at sea . . . and found at sea again".

Environmentalism, postcolonialism and globalization all intersect with Mentz's new thalassology. This study certainly does a good job of opening up Shakespeare to a new – and welcome – critical discourse, even if sometimes it has to skew the plays to fit. In one such leap of his oceanic imagination, Mentz suggests that *Twelfth Night* portrays a "hedonic, erotic and self-indulgent beach culture that feels oddly modern". Yet somehow it does seem strangely fitting to imagine Shakespeare's riotous drunkards and cross-dressing heroine fooling and scheming on the shores of some sun-drenched Mediterranean resort.