THE STATE OF A CHRISTIAN, 
lively set forth by an Allegorie of a 
Shippe under Saile.

There were ships or crime, but change. That representations which writers tested their own, and their culture's, understandings of the ocean. Narratives of maritime disaster make explicit the tremendous stress (practical and symbolic) that the transoceanic turn of European culture created in English habits of orientation. Representations of shipwreck also provide a resonant structure for ideas of cultural change.

The face of the ocean in the early modern period may have been empire, mercantile trade may have been its circulatory system, and slavery its most notorious crime, but its secret history was shipwreck. For every successful circumnavigation or voyage of exploration, every bouillon-filled flota or Pilgrim-carrying Mayflower, there were ships that never returned. During this period the familiar topos of shipwreck, already present in a standard and classical Biblical narratives, became a major subject.
of artistic representation across many media. In fact, given that disaster shadows any maritime voyage, all depictions of ships embed within them, at least implicitly, the threat of shipwreck. Shipwrecked ships show human labor and technology dashed to pieces against a hostile world. The symbolic force of these disasters emerges out of the ancient symbology of the ship, which Michel Foucault describes as simultaneously providing Western Europe with a “great instrument of economic development” and also its “greatest reserve of the imagination.” Encounters between ships and what Simon Schama calls the “moral geography” of the sea underwrites a transoceanic cultural phenomenon, the rise of the shipwreck narratives as tools for representing humanity in the world.

As an image of violent rupture, shipwreck replicates in a tragic key familiar conceptions of the Renaissance itself as a break from the Middle Ages. In the Hegelian reading of history made popular by Burkhart and Michelet but also emerging from the claims of early modern writers from Petrarch to Bacon, early modernity resembles a fortunate shipwreck, in which the birth of something new destabiliizes the medieval order and re-orients the West’s new cultural voyage. In proposing modernity as an analytic frame for early modern shipwreck narratives from The Tempest to Robinson Crusoe, I don’t mean that these writers understood their era as “early modern” in anything like the way we use the phrase. Instead, I suggest that shipwreck’s Janus-faced narrative structure – its combination of local disasters and global recoveries, and its intimate portraits of an oceanic world which is simultaneously cruel and redemptive – underlines a basic ambivalence built into early modernity itself. As Margreta de Grazia, Hugh Grady, Douglas Bruster, Richard Halpern, and others have recently emphasized, part of the charge of the term “early modern” is its two-fold articulation of a rupture with an immediate past and a connection to our own present day. Medievalists like Lee Patterson, Maria Rosa Menocal, David Wallace, and Kathleen Davis have helpfully challenged this self-serving depiction of early modernity. But even in our somewhat chastened and resistant to meta-narratives historicist and gradualist critical mode, we still engage early modernity through versions of the radical break: to invoke the broad terms we are careful to qualify now, humanism breaks with scholasticism, capitalism with feudalism, science with superstition, religion with magic. Perhaps if we can’t quit old stories like the great instauration or the birth of man, we can use shipwreck to supplement them with more violent and disorienting narratives.

The formal structures of early modern shipwreck combine classical exemplars from Homer, Virgil, and Ovid with Biblical sea-voyagers like St. Paul and Jonah to describe a break that reasserts basic continuities. The worlds into which shipwreck delivers ancient heroes—Odysseus’s Phinicea, Aeneas’s Carthage, Jonah’s Nineveh—complete predestined journeys. In these (and other) examples, shipwreck invokes the turbulent but hospitable seascape of romance. Because shipwrecks appear catastrophic but often (at least when there are survivors) prove fortunate, they mirror the structure of romance itself, whose typical plot “wants deaths...yet brings some nectar it,” in John Fletcher’s famous description. These narratives present moments of danger and sometimes death, but also imagine a larger continuity that bridges disaster. Taking early modern shipwreck narratives as representations of cultural change thus marries a lingering continuity to the modernist rupture. These representations emphasize both emerging modernity’s insistence on breaking with its immediate past and its continuity with it. These shipwrecks are crossroads as much as endings; in Northrop Frye’s happy phrase about the classical narrative tradition, shipwrecks provide a “standard means of transportation.” They suddenly wrench mariners from one world to another.

Imagining early modern shipwreck as a master-trope can help replace the decisive once-and-for-all break with an accelerating process of cultural accumulation. In the place of timeworn understandings of modernity as displacement or disenchantment, shipwreck advances the more disorderly image of accumulation. In the modern Caribbean poet and theorist Édouard Glissant’s formulation, the modern era emerges through “the accumulation of sediments.” Discourses, language, cultures, peoples: everything piles on top of everything else. Glissant’s notion of cultural accumulation emerges from his distinction between the ancient Mediterranean, “an inner sea surrounded by lands, a sea the concentrates” and the postcolonial Caribbean, “a sea that explodes scattered lands into an arc” (33). This fragmented world, like the edge of the sea, combines “order and chaos,” and its movement always remains to some extent “illegible” (121-2). Early modern shipwreck narratives suggest that all waters, from the icy depths off Newfoundland where Humphry Gilbert drowned to the warmer waters off Bermuda where the Sea-Venture founded, share this potential to scatter sailors and their stories.

Shipwreck narratives dash early modern European triumphalism onto the rocks. Representations of these disasters often generate something like the experience of the radical present that Walter Benjamin calls “the now” or Jetztzeit. Plunged into salt water, human subjects encounter a hostile, alien globe. Various discourses surface as potential life buoys, including classical literary forms, Christian Providence, maritime expertise, empiricist critique, and attacks on human folly. Amid the chaos,
early modernity seems less definitive rupture than explosive fragmentation, after which spectators and survivors struggle to assemble a coherent vision from the debris that washes up on the beach. Understanding these disasters relies on a Lucretian perspective, a shipwreck-with-spectator vision of rupture that uses rupture to generate a new analytical stance. Watched and read from the safety of shore, shipwreck narratives reveal the tenuous place of human bodies in the world.

The singularity of shipwreck reflects the growing self-consciousness of early modern culture, but early modern representations of wrecks also share cultural space with nostalgia for premodern discourses. In these crisis-moments, all explanatory systems are up for grabs. Is the shipwreck God's inscrutable judgment or His righteous wrath? Did poor sailing or misguided hubris cause the catastrophe? Or can it be simply an accident? Can accidents happen in a Providential universe? From on board sinking ships, human beings read shipwrecks as if they were texts and in order to generate texts. If a vision of heaven is the promised end toward which many shipwrecks gesture, a watery grave makes a nightmarishly final detour. Shipwreck marks the price and establishes the framework of an over-assertive modernity, one that passes beyond established limits. Reading these stories emphasizes the fragility and multiplicity of the modern cultural order.
bourgeois individuality, from manor production to market commodification" ("The ideology of superfluous things: King Lear as period piece," Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture, Margreta de Grazia and Peter Stallybrass, eds. [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996]: 17-42, 19.


John Fletcher, The Faithful Shepherdess (1609).

Northrop Frye, The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976) 4. Staging a wreck all but guarantees that the ship's passengers won't drown (or there would be no second act), but opening shipwrecks are also standards in early modern narrative romance, familiar from Sidney's Arcadia (1590), Greene's Menaphon (1589), and their common source, Heliodorus's Aethiopian History (Eng. trans. 1569).

Edouard Glissant, Poetics of Relation. On Glissant, see also Ian Baucom, Spectres of the Atlantic.

Braudel, The Mediterranean, 103.

"History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now ( Jetztzeit)," "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Illuminations: Essays and Reflections, Hannah Arendt, ed., Henry Zohn, trans., (New York: Schocken, 1969) 261. On Benjamin's "now-time" as an image of the modernist break, see Jürgen Habermas, The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures, Frederick Lawrence, trans., Thomas McCarthy, intro., (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987) 11-16.


See Blackmore's suggestive comments on shipwrecks as text-producing historical moments: "Out of shipwreck, the poet tells us, come texts" (Manifold Perdition, 27). See also 29, 102-4.

Thank you.

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