

Pale as Death:
The Fictionalizing Influence of
Erasmus's "Naufragium"
On the Renaissance Travel Narrative¹

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Abstract

Erasmus' *Colloquia Familiaria* (1518) was one of the most influential books for Renaissance culture. Although condemned by the Sorbonne in 1526 for its satiric barbs against moral laxity in the Church, and eventually placed on the Tridentine Index, the popular pedagogical manual went through many editions during its author's lifetime. "Naufragium," a dramatic dialogue of a shipwreck, was perhaps the most vividly dramatic and readily available of such descriptions in Renaissance letters. Its influence on popular fictions such as Rabelais's *Gargantua* and Shakespeare's *Tempest* has long been acknowledged. But it also exhibits a previously undocumented influence on popular, ostensibly non-fictional travel narratives by, for example, Robert Tomson (pub. 1598-1600), Francis de Ulloa (pub. 1598-1600), and William Strachey (pub. 1625). We investigate the fictional nature of Renaissance travel narratives and explore implications of the appropriation of "Naufragium" for source studies of Shakespeare's *Tempest*.

Genre theorists have long known that the early modern travel narrative, like the modern ethnography, was constructed not from the unmediated experience of actual travelers but by a process of filtering factual events through literary conventions and idioms, characteristically resulting in a text which reflected both the practical needs of the author for colorful material and the ideological preconceptions of his society. The travel narrative was also a lucrative genre, and the temptation to appropriate what experience did not supply was strong. "I am extremely astonished," writes Peter Martyr in an early edition of his *De Orbe Novo*, the first book to describe the voyages of Christopher Columbus,

that a certain Venetian, Aloisio Cadamosto, who has written a history of the Portuguese, should write

when mentioning the actions of the Spaniards, "We have done; we have seen; we have been"; when, as a matter of fact, he has neither done nor seen any more than any other Venetian. Cadamosto borrowed and plagiarised whatever he wrote, from the first three books of my first three Decades. (pt. 4 of 7)

This circulation of ideas and rhetorical elements was not limited to the theft of the work of one travel narrator by another who might never have left his native port, and the consequences could be enduring. In fact, cultural historians long have recognized a close association between travel narratives and the development of early fiction. Tropes, narrative techniques, and topoi—commonly held beliefs about people, places or things—

circulated across the boundary between the fictional and the authentic, and “particular items of description, and even particular turns of phrase bec[a]me established and persist[ed], often through centuries” in the literature of the exotic (George 65). This process is relevant to the disposition of one of the most vexed and longstanding debates in early modern source studies, namely the identification of sources for Shakespeare’s *Tempest*, a play conventionally dated, almost solely on the basis of an alleged source, to 1611.

The traditional belief that the play’s “new world” ambience results from the influence of William Strachey’s account of the 1609 wreck of Sir George Somers in the Bermuda Islands has recently been defended by the appeal to a positivist faith in the transparent and unquestioned priority of the “factual” over the “fictional”:

it is *obvious* that Shakespeare could *only* have borrowed from Strachey, Jourdain, and *A True Declaration* rather than the other way around; *this was not another work of fiction* Shakespeare was basing his play on, but three independent accounts of *actual events*. (Kathman; pt. 3 of 6; emphasis added)

But the cultural historian understands that Kathman’s reification of the *actual events* of the Bermuda pamphlets neglects the epistemic problems posed by the free circulation in early modern texts of elements back and forth across the boundary between fictive and “factual” narratives.

Our own study of *Tempest* chronology and sources has already suggested the necessity of a twofold revision of the traditional perspective:

1) Strachey’s *True Reportory* (f.p. 1625): the only Bermuda narrative believed since 1892 to have exerted a significant influence on *The Tempest*—although describing events of June 1609–July 1610—was almost certainly not completed until some time after the play’s

November, 1611 performance record. (Stritmatter and Kositsky [see “Shakespeare and the Voyagers”])

2) Characteristics of *The Tempest* traditionally attributed to the influence of Strachey’s *True Reportory* are more likely the consequence of Shakespeare’s close familiarity with 16th century travel narratives, especially Richard Eden’s *Decades of the Newe Worlde* (1555, 1577), from which the dramatist drew numerous elements. (Stritmatter and Kositsky, [see “O Brave New World”])

To these may be added a third telling sign of Strachey’s curious fusion of the historical and the fictional, namely the frequent and detailed discrepancies between his own account of the wreck of Sir George Somers’ ship and those of other writers recording the same events. Indeed, a close comparison of Strachey’s account with those published earlier in Jourdain’s *Discovery, True Declaration*, and Riche’s *News from Virginia*, reveals intriguing discrepancies which go beyond style and recall Strachey’s documented practice of embroidering his narratives with material from other sources: only Strachey mentions St. Elmo’s Fire, praying sailors, or the cutting down of the main mast. Judging by other accounts, one may reasonably question if these events really happened during Somers’ visit to the Bermudas in 1609—or whether, on the contrary, they represent Strachey’s fanciful elaboration of an account tailored to enhance salability in a readership hungry for adventure. Figure One illustrates that none of these storm scene elements common to Strachey and Shakespeare are found in other contemporaneous descriptions of the Gates’ wreck. Not only is the cutting down of the main mast not mentioned in the three other sources, but Jourdain explicitly says that Gates arrived in Bermuda “with all the tacking of the ship and much of the iron about her” (qtd. in Wright 107), and *True Declaration* states that all the furniture and tackling of the ship was

Strachey	Other Bermuda Pamphlets
The sea touching the sky	No
The lightening of the ship by tossing provisions overboard	No
Sailors praying	No
The (probable) splitting or breaking up of the ship	No
The (probable) overturning of the ship	No
The cutting down of the main mast	No
St. Elmo's Fire	No

Figure One: Comparison of storm elements in Strachey and the other Bermuda pamphlets.

subsequently removed in port in Bermuda.

Subsequent Virginia publications revisit the shipwreck of 1609 with clear reference to the Jourdain account and *True Declaration* but strangely fail to incorporate any of the seven storm elements in *True Reportory* missing from the other narratives. Most striking are the omissions from Smith's 1624 account of *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New England, & the Summer Isles*. Smith's account of "The first English ship knowne to have beene cast away upon the Bermudas, 1609" includes copious details from the earlier narratives, particularly Jourdain's. Smith, like Jourdain and Strachey, depicts Sir George Somers as being on watch during the storm; only Strachey, however, includes the colorful detail of the St. Elmo visitation. Strachey even states that "divers" men on board "observed [St. Elmo] with much wonder and carefulness" (qtd in Wright 12-13), so it is difficult to understand how such a memorable event did not find its way into any other contemporaneous narratives and why it was not repeated in secondary accounts until after the publication of *True Reportory* in 1625.

The omission is particularly glaring in view of the often iterated claim for the wide dissemination and influence of Strachey's "letter" in manuscript, including various hypothetical and typically vague "chains of custody" resulting in Shakespeare's access to it (Wright xi, Bullough 8:239, Kinney 166, Kathman np). Suggestively, all the *True*

Reportory storm elements missing from and/or contradicted by other Bermuda narratives, including the reference to St. Elmo's fire, are present in Desiderius Erasmus' well-known dialogue, "Naufragium" ("The Shipwreck"), a work published as early as 1523. "Naufragium," we suggest, formed an influential storm template or paradigm that circulated in the literary milieu of Renaissance Europe.² During the 16th century, the Colloquies were translated into almost every European vernacular, even Old Irish, and through these numerous translations (as well as many Latin imprints) the book exercised a pervasive influence on many later Renaissance writers. Given this influence, it would not be surprising if "Naufragium" has left a detectable presence not only in Shakespeare's *Tempest* but also on several 16th-century travel narratives. Our research suggests that these narratives appropriated elements of rhetoric, language, and theme from "Naufragium"—and in the process employed Erasmus' fictive constructs to color their ostensibly factual narratives with a gloss of literary plausibility. Such a perspective has profound implications for our understanding of the inter-textual relations of Strachey with both his sources and his imitators. Ironically, even *True Reportory*, like Cadamosto, may be a palimpsest, assembled as much from other texts (including Erasmus' fictive dialogue) as from the author's own experiences in Bermuda.

To test the proposition that elements of 145

the *Tempest* storm supposedly derived from Strachey actually belong to the common heritage of the early modern storm scene, we examined the treatment of storms in seven Renaissance and two ancient sources. We traced the occurrence of eleven motifs, ten of which are found in Erasmus' dialogue, including (1) a storm accompanied by St. Elmo's fire; (2) the lightening of a ship by throwing cargo overboard; (3) a master pilot pale from fear; (4) the cutting down of a mast; (5) praying sailors; (6) a mother with child introduced to enhance pathos; and (7) a ship that leaks, splits, and overturns (Appendix A). While not all of these elements can be found in every Renaissance storm account, and while some combinations of them might be seen as commonplace occurrences of any shipwreck, their widespread diffusion (sometimes in unexpected permutations that reveal definite patterns of literary influence) suggests three conclusions: (1) many *Tempest* elements supposedly derived from Strachey actually have a much greater currency than has often been supposed; (2) it seems likely that Erasmus's "Naufragium" exercised a wide influence, well beyond its documented inspiration on Rabelais (see Gilman) and Shakespeare's *Tempest* (Bullough 8: 334), including on supposedly factual travel narratives, offering an intriguing illustration of the transmission of early modern influence across the Maginot line between

recent early modern and ancient shipwreck texts. The results illustrate the wide diffusion of elements of the *Tempest* shipwreck scene in antecedent shipwreck literature. In particular, the association of shipwrecks with St. Elmo's fire appears to have been a commonplace by the early 16th century, occurring in accounts of shipwrecks in such writers as Ariosto, Tomson, de Ulloa, and Gilbert, as well as in "Naufragium," Strachey and the *Tempest*. Appendix B demonstrates specific examples of this "storm set" in Ariosto, Erasmus, and Strachey. St. Elmo's fire, as illustrated in Appendix B, is definitely associated in nature with climactic disturbances, and by the 16th century it had become, in both fictional and ostensibly factual narratives, an emblematic harbinger of shipwrecks, a literary symbol used to charge a storm scene with special emotional and figurative intensity, being considered "a token of drowning" (Eden 217v).

While it is difficult to rule out the *a priori* possibility that St. Elmo's fire actually accompanied the events recorded by De Ulloa, Tomson and other 16th-century travelers, additional elements of Tomson's storm scene, for example, confirm that his narrative was constructed with the Erasmian template before his eyes. Both texts include a pathos-inducing description of a woman and child cast into the sea during the shipwreck (Figure Two).

Tomson	Erasmus
I do remember that the last person that came out of the ship into the boat, was a woman black Moore, who leaping out of the ship into the boat with a yong sucking child in her arms (qtd. in Hakluyt 344).	Amongst all the rest, there was none more quiet, and free from feare, then a certain woman, who had an infant sucking upon her breast (G3v).
<i>Figure Two: The suckling child in his mother's arms.</i>	

fiction and "history"; and (3) several features of Erasmus' narrative *unambiguously confirm* its unmediated influence on *The Tempest*.

Appendix A provides a synopsis of the results of our survey of a number of promi-

While it is outside the purview of this brief survey to analyze in detail the patterns of influence linking "Naufragium" to these 16th-century travel narratives, let us examine some previously unconsidered instances of the

"Naufragium"	<i>Tempest</i>
<p>A bal of fire, which...is to the shipmen a most fearful signe of hard successe...by and by the fiery globe sliding downe by the ropes...roled it selfe along the brimmes of the ship, and falling from thence down into the middle roomes...(Gr-v)</p>	<p>Ariel. Now in the beak, now in the waist, in the deck, in every cabin,/ I flamed amazement. Sometime I'd divide/And burn in many places – on the topmast/The yards and bowsprit would I flame distinctly... (1.2.196-200).</p>
<p><i>Figure Three: St. Elmo's Fire</i></p>	

"Naufragium"	<i>Tempest</i>
<p>Adolph. At length the Maister of the ship came unto us very pale. Anto. That paleness doth presage some great evil (Gr).</p>	<p>Gonz. I have great comfort from this fellow. Methinks he hath no drowning mark upon him – his complexion is perfect gallows (1.1.27-29).</p>
<p><i>Figure Four: The shipmaster turned pale with fear</i></p>	

"Naufragium"	<i>Tempest</i>
<p>An. How religious men are in affliction: in time of prosperitie, men thinke neither upon God, nor any godly man (G3r).</p>	<p>Gonz. The king and prince at prayers, let's assist them, for our case is as theirs. (1.1.52-53).</p>
<p><i>Figure Five: Prayer</i></p>	

dialogue's impact on the *Tempest* storm scene. Several specific parallel elements connect the two texts, *viz.* St. Elmo's Fire (Figure Three).

A more specific topos connecting Shakespeare's text to Erasmus is the motif of the shipmaster who turns pale with fear (Figure Four). Unlike St. Elmo's fire, this image is found only in Erasmus, Ariosto and Shakespeare. In both Erasmus and Shakespeare, the image becomes a sign moralized by other characters: in Erasmus, the paleness "presages some great evil," and in Shakespeare, Gonzalo interprets the same image as a token of safety for the ship's crew and passengers, since the boatswain's complexion is "perfect gallows"—that is, it signifies he will die by

hanging instead of by drowning.

Perhaps it is unsurprising that in both texts the shipwrecked sailors turn to prayer as a means of salvation, but since this same parallel has been cited as one of great significance by those who have sought to make Shakespeare dependent on Strachey, we illustrate the parallel language that links Erasmus' dialogue to the *Tempest* (Figure Five).

Finally, and most specifically, both texts parody the disposition of drowning passengers not only to pray to, but to *bargain with*, God. The parallel passages illustrate clear traces of *linguistic* as well as thematic influence. "Naufragium" recalls a "certaine Englishman," who "*promised* golden mountains to his Lady

of Walsingham, *if ever he came safe to land*" (Burton Gv2), while others "vowed to become Carthusians [and] one who vowed to go to St. James of Compostella, barefooted, and bare headed, with nothing upon his bodie but a shirt of male, and begge for vittailles" (G 3) if he were spared. The proto-reformationist Erasmus apparently rejected the logic of such appeals. Later, one of his characters remarks that "I make no covenant with Saints, for what is it else but a formall contract, or bargaine? I will give you this, *if you will doe that for me: I will give you a Candle, if I may swimme to land*" (G3r-v; emphasis added). Gonzalo, in the *Tempest*, imitates both the diction and the sentiment of Erasmus' dialogue: "Now would I give a thousand furlongs of sea for an acre of barren ground—long heath, brown furze, anything. The wills above be done, but I would fain die a dry death" (1.1.65-68; emphasis added).

The suggestion that Shakespeare is indebted to Erasmus for this latter emphasis is not new; it goes back at least to Zachary Grey's 1754 *Critical, Historical, and Explanatory Notes on Shakespeare*. Regrettably, it has been entirely ignored by a Shakespearean discipline uncritically fixed on Strachey as the sole and exclusive source of the *Tempest's* shipwreck and New World imagery.

Although some of the enumerated elements (St. Elmo's Fire and praying sailors, for instance) can be found in Strachey's account of the Bermuda shipwreck, it is evident that Erasmus contains a more dense network of associations with the *Tempest* storm, both of image and theme, than Strachey. Neither the pale pilot whose pallor "signifies" an impending doom, nor the passenger who bargains with the fates, can be found in Strachey's narrative. Moreover, the occurrence of the common elements in a much earlier text indicates the possibility that the similarities between Shakespeare and Strachey are most likely to be the result of *Erasmus* casting his influence over both later texts. Perhaps it will suffice to drive home the probability of this conclusion to mention that of the extant accounts of

the 1609 Somers wreck, only Strachey—the notorious plagiarist—"remembers" that the storm was accompanied by the "fearful sign" of St. Elmo's Fire.

Notes

¹ This paper was also presented at the Annual Meeting of the Renaissance Society of America that convened from March 23-25, 2006 in San Francisco.

² Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* also contains the elements of this template, but they are dispersed among several cantos.

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Appendix B (cont'd)			
Motif	1. Ariosto, Barbara Reynolds translation	Erasmus 1606 translation	Strachey's <i>True Reportory</i>
St. Elmo's Fire	<p>When on the prow they saw St. Elmo's fire. Their jury rig and sail it glowed upon. Instead of on a mast, for there was none. When they beheld that miracle of light, The grateful sailors fell upon their knees... (XIX, 50-51)</p>	<p>And in the top of the mast stood one of the mariners in the basket...looking about to see if he could spie any land: fast by this man began to stand a certain round thing like a ball of fire, which (when it appeareth alone) is to the shipmen a most fearful sign of hard success, but when two of them appear together, that is a sign of a prosperous voyage. These apparitions were called in old time Castor and Pollux...By and by the fiery globe sliding down by the ropes, tumbled itself until it came to the master of the ship... it having stayed there a while, it rolled itself along the brimmes of the ship, and falling from thence down into the middle roomes, it vanished away...(G-Gv).</p>	<p>Sir George Somers, being upon the watch, had an apparition of a little round light, like a faint Starre, trembling, and streaming along with a sparkeling blaze, halfe the height upon the Maine Mast, and shooting sometimes from Shroud to Shroud, tempting to settle as it were upon any of the foure Shrouds ...running sometimes along the Maïne-yard to the very end, and then returning . . . but upon a sodaine, towards the morning watch, they lost the sight of it, and knew not which way it made. The superstitious seamen make many constructions of this sea fire...the same (it may be) which the Grecians were wont in the Mediterranean to call Castor and Pollux... Could it have served us now miraculously to have taken our height by, it might have stricken amazement...</p> <p>Sir George Somers, when no man dreamed of such happiness, had discovered and cried land...</p>

Appendix B (cont'd)			
Motif	1. Ariosto, Barbara Reynolds translation	Erasmus 1606 translation	Strachey's <i>True Reportory</i>
The (probable) splitting of the ship	The ship in many parts is gaping wide, And hostile water rushes through inside (XLI, 14)	and the maister, fearing lest it would be split all in pieces, he bound it together with cables (G3v).	there was not a moment in which the sodaine splitting...was not expected
The (probable) overturning of the ship	Threatening to turn the vessel upside- down (XLI, 14)	Before it could get free from the great ship, [the boat] was overthrown.	or insrant oversetting of the Shippe...
The cutting down of the main mast	Rigging and spars and superstructures crash Beneath the elements' hostility, And what remains the sailors hew and slash and To lighren ship, and cast into the sea. (XIX, 44) The captain, in a plight so merciless, Un- ships the mainmast to relieve the stress. (XIX, 48)	he commanded al the ropes to be cut, and the maine-maste to be sawen down close by the boxe wherein it stood, and together with the saile-yardes to be cast overboard into the sea (G2v).	we much unrigged our ship..and had now purposed to have cut down the Maine Mast the more to lighren her...