

Sea changes: the Sea, Art and Storytelling in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Isak Dinesen's *Tempests* and Marina Warner's *Indigo*

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The imaginative stories of Shakespeare's romances have a lot to do with the presence of the sea, which often figures as a veritable arbiter of human destinies, or as a quasi-divine force as in Biblical and mythological traditions, where human beings must confront themselves in order to survive, or against which they must test their moral claims, their desires, emotions and feelings.

The conspicuous presence of the sea in Shakespeare's last works has been read as the result of the influence of some of their sources, including texts from ancient mythology, whose stories and geography inform *Pericles*, *A Winter's Tale*, *Cymbeline* and *The Tempest*, but also, in the specific case of *The Tempest*, the increasingly popular accounts of oceanic travels and colonization exploits such as Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations* (1589 and 1598-1600)¹.

In this essay, I will read the marine settings of these plays as an expression of the new geopolitical paradigms that emerged in European culture during the sixteenth century and explore the ways in which two contemporary rewritings of the Shakespearian text, namely, Isak Dinesen's *Tempests* and Marina Warner's *Indigo*, have reflected on these topics. As Bernhard Klein observes, this is the period in which J.H. Parry and Carl Schmitt saw the emergence of a new world view – a phenomenon which Parry labels as «the discovery of the sea», namely «the moment when Western seafarers “discovered” that all the seas of the world were really just one vast navigable ocean»². In *Land und Meer* (1942) Carl Schmitt

argues that this also generated, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a shift from a terrestrial to an oceanic world view in European culture, and particularly in England, which effectively revolutionised the political and economic discourses, and effectively brought about the turn towards a modern form of capitalism³. Schmitt equates this to a global «spatial revolution» (*Raumrevolution*), and sees the orientation towards the ocean in its vastness and without obvious limits, as the affirmation of an additional force of Protestantism against the backwardness of Catholicism, with its roots in land ownership and agriculture⁴. Schmitt is careful not to posit a simple cause-effect relationship between the geographical discoveries made possible by developments in ship-building techniques, mathematics, cartography and astronomy, and the development of a new consciousness based on an all-encompassing *Raumrevolution*: on the contrary, he recognises that such a change can only be envisaged as a theory rooted in a complex interaction between multiple cultural forces.

For the purpose of investigating the significance of the sea in *The Tempest* and in some of its contemporary rewritings, certain points in Schmitt's ideas are particularly relevant: for Schmitt, an island is not born as such but becomes one in the sense that insularity is not a simple geographical condition, but the result of a process based on a maritime, rather than territorial, point of view⁵. This consists in conceiving land as if from a ship, that is, viewing it as a coast with a hinterland and rethinking, or even eliminating the notions usually connected with territorial thinking, such as that of geographically determining a unit of land by its geographical boundaries⁶. Schmitt illustrates this point with the famous quotation from Shakespeare's *Richard II*, Act II, Scene 1 (ll. 40-50), spoken by John of Gaunt:

This royal throne of kings, this scept' red isle,
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
This other Eden, demi-paradise,
This fortress built by Nature for herself
Against infection and the hand of war,
This happy breed of men, this little world,
This precious stone set in the silver sea,
Which serves it in the office of a wall,
Or as a moat defensive to a house,
Against the envy of less happier lands;
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England,
[...]

This England, according to Schmitt, continues to be the product of a kind of insularity preceding the «spatial revolution»: its viewpoint is located on the island and offers an image of itself constructed from the inside outwards, as a piece of land separated from the mainland and surrounded by the sea⁷.

It is the tension between the representational dissolution brought about by a shift in point of view, and the aesthetic and moral possibilities implied by

this new standpoint which *The Tempest* seems to be concerned with – a concern, which is intimately connected with the idea of the sea as a protagonist.

1. WATCHING THE SEA: THEATRICALITY, TRUTH AND PAIN

The sea of *The Tempest* is highly ambiguous from the geographic point of view: partly Mediterranean, partly Atlantic Ocean, partly Irish Sea⁸, it is a highly wrought intertextual phenomenon evoking Virgil's *Aeneid* and the Homeric poems, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and functioning symbolically also as a catalyst for some of the fundamental themes in the text. The themes of exile, metamorphosis and art, the moral justification for power and property, the loss of self are all associated with it.

The action of the play opens with the sailors fighting against the storm and their troublesome aristocratic passengers, in the attempt to save the ship from sinking in what turns out to be a mock tempest orchestrated by Prospero and Ariel to bring about a shipwreck which will bring the courtiers onto the shore of the island.

In Act 1, scene 1, the sea is the force which human beings have to contend with in order to save their lives. The age-old metaphor of life as a sea-voyage, which informs Shakespeare's oeuvre and the contemporaneous rhetoric of puritan preachers, is developed here as the moment in which humans must divest themselves of their hubris. The sailors are the only people on board who, by reason of their knowledge and technical expertise – and this is a crucial theme in later rewritings of the play as well as in numerous figurations of the encounter between human beings and the sea, especially from the seventeenth century onwards⁹ – are able, if not to tame, at least to minimally manage the blind fury of the elements. In the sailors' actions and words the sea appears as the force that, through the destabilization of established paradigms, unmasks and effectively undermines the corrupted rhetoric of the usurpers. The scant, technical jargon of the boatswain, which adheres to the necessities of navigation and to the dynamics of the sea, is the exact opposite of Gonzalo's ornate and rhetorically empty language, itself a form of hubris:

Boatswain: [...]What cares these roarers for the name of the king? To cabin! Silence!
Trouble us not
[...]
Boatswain [to Gonzalo]: [...] You are a councillor; if you can command these elements to silence and work the peace of the present, we will not hand a rope more. Use your authority! (I.1.16-23)¹⁰

To borrow the title of W. H. Auden's own poem based on *The Tempest*, the sea functions, amongst other things, as a mirror for the main characters' conscience¹¹. The moral valence of the sea continues to operate even after the end of the storm. In

line with the symbolic meanings usually associated with water, the sea functions in *The Tempest* as a means of purification, washing the stains off the courtiers' clothes, both literally and metaphorically. The encounter with the sea, and the subsequent confrontation with the new geographic and political environment on the island, are cathartic. The metamorphosis which is expressed by Ariel's famous song "Full fathom five thy father lies" in aesthetic terms (I.2.396-403) will be expressed at the end of the play in strictly moral terms in act V:

Prospero: [...] Go release them, Ariel.
My charms I'll break; their senses I'll restore;
And they shall be themselves.
(V.1.29-31)

Gonzalo: [...] in one voyage
Did Claribel her husband find in Tunis;
And Ferdinand, her brother, found a wife
Where he himself was lost; Prospero his dukedom
In a poor isle; and all of us ourselves,
When no man was his own
(V.1.208-212)

In the third act Ariel appears to the courtiers as a harpy¹² and, while they have been duly terrorized by the appearance of the fake banquet, he reminds them of the fact that they have attempted to kill Prospero and the infant Miranda by putting them to sea on a scantily furnished boat – apparently common practice for the banishment of exiles in Renaissance Italy – but that the sea, here personified as a moral intervener, has carried out an act of justice and saved them.

In the fifth act the text again stages a confrontation with the sea, this time exposing Prospero's arrogance, as he almost inadvertently replicates Sycorax's magic – which is the object of his indictment – with this promise of calm and navigable seas.

(Prospero): Mark but the badges of these men, my lords,
Then say if they be true. This misshapen knave,
His mother was a witch, and one so strong
That could control the moon, make flows and ebbs,
And deal with her command without her power
(V.1.267-271)

(Prospero): I'll deliver all,
And promise you calm seas, auspicious gales
And sail so expeditious that shall catch
Your royal fleet far off
(V.1.314)

It is the connection between the moral significance of the figure of the sea and the question of theatricality and spectatorship, two major concerns of the play,

which I would like to pursue in what follows. I would like to start with Prospero's description to Miranda, in act 1, of the way in which they reached the island twelve years before:

Prospero: [...]
In few, they hurried us aboard a bark,
Bore us some leagues to sea, where they prepared
A rotten carcass of a butt, not rigged,
Nor tackle, sail, nor mast – the very rats
Instinctively have quit it. There they hoist us
To cry to th'sea that roared to us, to sigh
To th'winds, whose pity, sighing back again,
Did us but loving wrong
(I.2-144-151)

Once again, the sea is endowed with (moral) agency, which here consists in its empathic response (at least in Prospero's view) to the exiles' pain and suffering. There is an exchange between the sea and the exiles which implies a double shift in point of view, whereby Prospero describes his own emotional predicament and voices his own pain through seeing it mirrored in the roaring of the sea and the sighing of the winds, which, in turn, seem to reproduce it as a spectacle. The suffering and the panic caused by Prospero's storm on board the ship are presented also as the result of a similar exchange, whereby in this case the event is witnessed directly by the spectator, then recounted by Miranda and Ariel, who experience it from different points of view, thus offering their own perspectives on it. This visual exchange, in both cases, has to do with the ability to access and understand one's own pain and that of others – something that is part of a sort of general sentimental education which occurs to many characters (and audience) in the play, while Miranda and Ariel seem instinctively capable of such empathy:

Miranda: [...] Oh, I have suffered
With those that I saw suffer – a brave vessel
(Who has no doubt some noble creature in her)
Dashed all to pieces. O, the cry did knock
Against my very heart!
(I.2.5-9)

Ariel to Prospero: [...] Your charm so strongly works 'em
That, if you now beheld them, your affections
Would become tender.
Prospero: Dost thou think so, spirit?
Ariel: Mine would, sir were I human
(V.1.17-20)

While both the ship and the island have been recognised as tropes for the theatre¹³, in *The Tempest*, as well as, for example, in *Hamlet*, meta-theatrical discourse¹⁴ is associated with the emergence, or the possibility thereof, of a truth about the

self, as if this could only be accessed once it is objectified in a show. As Simonetta de Filippis observes, *The Tempest* is structured as a conversation about theatre between the author and the audience. Theatre and its techniques become objectified, so that the audience is made aware of the mechanisms subsuming the story as play, and is also offered a critical position from which watching the play may become a cognitive experience¹⁵. One could therefore argue that the experience of the audience is aligned with those of most of the characters in the play, thus turning the first act into a paradigmatic event of meta-theatre prefiguring the dramatic mechanisms of the whole. The fusion between the shipwreck metaphor with the metaphor of life as theatre, which Hans Blumenberg traces in the works of Galiani and Herder, has already happened in *The Tempest*, in spite of the fact that the play is not mentioned in his study *Shipwreck with Spectator*¹⁶.

For Blumenberg, who traces the evolution of the meaning of the shipwreck metaphor starting from the Old Testament through to the early twentieth century (omitting Shakespeare), representations of shipwrecks are almost always connected with an essential expression of the human condition – an expression that is mostly predicated upon the presence and the position of a spectator, who might feel relief or compassion when confronted with the sight of a sinking ship. While the question of the reaction to the pain of others plagues *The Tempest* and is one of its crucial moral criteria, the position of the spectator is as relevant.

A brief consideration of *Cymbeline* might be of help here. In 1.3 Imogen is following with her gaze the ship carrying her husband Posthumus away from her into exile:

I would have broken mine eye-strings, cracked them but
To look upon him, till the diminution
Of space had pointed him sharp as my needle;
Nay, followed him till he had melted from
The smallness of a gnat through air
(I.3. 17-21)¹⁷

Robin Kirkpatrick notes that a main concern for Shakespeare and the Renaissance in general is «our perception of ourselves as persons in the spaces which we as human beings construct. Yet in *Cymbeline* the space which finally its protagonists occupy is not, after all, a geographical or political space but one that (as in the *Sonnets* and *Othello*) is designated by the looks which persons bestow on each other. [...] At the core of the play is a telling contrast in modes of perception.»¹⁸ For Kirkpatrick these radically different modes of perception are embodied by Iachimo's possessive, «commercial» gaze while he assesses and surveys Imogen's sleeping body in act 2.2 and by Imogen's yearning gaze towards the disappearing ship, which tries to create a space to articulate desire¹⁹. This space is predicated on the awareness of one's own position as a spectator, as linear perspective prescribes (and indeed Imogen's «eye-strings», «diminution of space», «needle» are clear references to the terminology employed in Renaissance treatises on perspective)

but also on the dissolution of that very stance into something inexpressible «till he had melted from/The smallness of a gnat into air».

Both Leonardo's *Annunciation* (1475-78 circa, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence) and the anonymous *View of an Ideal City* (1495 circa, attributed to Francesco di Giorgio Martini, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin) are concerned with this issue: the vanishing point in each of these very carefully calculated spaces ends in the infinite expanse of the sea, mathematically obvious but almost impossible to locate at first sight, thus putting the observer (whose stance is mirrored in the position of the vanishing point in perspectival paintings and drawings) in a somewhat uncertain predicament in regard to her relationship to the painting. The case of the *Annunciation* is somewhat similar to Imogen's: the mystery of the immaculate conception seems to be reflected in the hazy infiniteness which is at the centre of the painting and its spatial articulation, purposefully located beyond any of the signs of human activity represented by a port full of ships. In spite of the historical and conceptual distance between these works and, I realize, the relative haphazardness of this comparison²⁰, what seems interesting is that in each of these instances placing the vanishing point at sea is instrumental in somewhat displacing the observer, and simultaneously makes her even more conscious of her own interaction with the spectacle viewed. This consciousness, in turn, seems to be connected to the reflection on grief, its causes and consequences on the perceiving subject, who is ultimately constructed in this play (as well as partially in *Hamlet* and *Cymbeline*) as a spectator in a play. The sea functions here therefore as a paradigmatic figure linking grief, subjectivity, spectatorship and art (in the form of painting and/or theatre) and creating a special space which only the human glance can inhabit and effectively control, but which is, both in the case of the visual arts and the theatre, the result of mere illusion (as Prospero also reminds us in IV.1).

2. SEA CHANGES: DINESEN'S *TEMPESTS*

Karen Blixen's tale, *Tempests*, published in *Anecdotes of Destiny* (1958) under the pen name of Isak Dinesen, elaborates on this complex interaction by making the connection between the sea, truth, art and theatricality more explicit and its consequences, if possible, even more ambiguous.

Written in English in the aftermath of Peter Brook's production of *The Tempest* with John Gielgud as Prospero at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in London, *Tempests* tells the story of Malli, a girl from a small Norwegian fjord town, who is somewhat unexpectedly cast as Ariel in a Danish production directed by the mercurial Herr Sorensen, who sees himself and his company as «obedient servants» of art and, specifically, of William Shakespeare²¹. Malli has never met her father, Alexander Ross, a Scottish sea captain who was meant to return from his last voyage and bring his pregnant bride to Scotland, but never came back; his brief stay

in town and sudden disappearance gave rise to all sorts of superstitious tales, such as the one whereby he was the Flying Dutchman, as Malli's grandmother tells her. She is characterised by an unquenchable yearning for the sea, which represents the absence of her father²², but also, in the eyes of Herr Soerensen, with art²³. During rehearsals Malli and Soerensen, who also plays the role of Prospero, are presented as increasingly merging with their own characters, until, during a sea journey, the ship carrying the company on its way to give a performance in Christianssand is saved from shipwreck by Malli, who takes control of the ship during the storm, together with Ferdinand, another young member of the crew. While most of the passengers and crew manage to leave the ship unscathed, Ferdinand dies a few days later from the injuries he suffered during the storm. Malli is received as a heroine into the house of the Hosewinckel family, who own the ship, and becomes engaged to Arndt, their son. The engagement represents for Malli another major change in her life, but once she realises that Ferdinand has died – a fact she had been unaware of – Malli suddenly decides to cancel her engagement, to abandon the Hosewinckel house, and return to act with Herr Soerensen's travelling company.

Malli's abandonment of the man she loves and a new wealthy domesticity in the Hosewinckel household echoes the radical (feminist) choices of many other female characters in Dinesen's stories, but the girl's own explanation in her final letter to Arndt points to a very interesting and complex link between truth, art and performance:

People in Christianssand call me a heroine. But a heroine is such a girl as sees the danger and is afraid of it, but defies it. But I, saw it not, and understood not that there was danger. [...] I thought that the storm was the storm in *The Tempest* in which I was then soon to play a part, and I had read more than a hundred times. [...] When I have heard the crew shout "All lost!" then I recognised the words, and thought our shipwreck was the wreck in the first scene [...]. It is for such a reason that you cannot keep me, for I belong elsewhere and must now go there.²⁴

Malli's encounter with the sea, as in *The Tempest*, is a revelation in two different ways, as it produces a provisory truth which, in turn, will lead to a yet more profound understanding of herself and an ultimate truth, which culminates with Malli's final hypothesis in her letter to Arndt:

[...] when I soon sail from here, I may again run into such a storm as the one in Kvaserfjord. But that this time I shall clearly understand that it is not a play in the theatre, but it is death. And it seems to me that then, in the last moment before we go down, I can in all truth be yours. And I am thinking that it will be fine and great to let wave-beat cover heart-beat.²⁵

In this passage, which is echoed, as we shall see also in the end of Marina Warner's *Indigo*, the sea is a sacred place which can reveal the most inward truth about a person, but only as an ephemeral condition, just before death. Tamar Yacobi

argues very convincingly that in Dinesen's oeuvre space (intended as the different types of settings in which action takes place) is «promoted from enabling to (co)determining action, [...] from mere agency (which, however potent, might still by itself be reduced to the 'brute' or 'blind' force of nature, circumstance, etc.) to intentional, calculating, goal-directed agency: from 'objective' to 'subjective' being»²⁶. Specifically, for Yacobi the sea in *Tempests* and in "The Fish" is an «intelligent agent and a supreme force», obedient to God and to the author's art. While this may just be read as the stuff of superstition²⁷, in line with Malli's townsfolk, who believe that she belongs to the sea and will eventually be drawn back to it, or her grandmother's belief about the flying Dutchman, this is something that Dinesen may have specifically seen in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, as has been discussed earlier on. However, Yacobi compellingly shows that in *Tempests* and other stories by Dinesen, the significance and function of the sea may be aligned with the interest for the primitive and mythology which emerged in Modernism, and constitutes for the author a bridge between the realistic and supernatural frames of storytelling²⁸, a tool which allows her to fuse these apparently opposite narrative modes and focus on the aspect that most interested her, namely that of action, rather than description or the psychological investigation of motivation and character.

The sea is, in *Tempests* a utopian space where even the most radical changes are possible, as in the Shakespearian source; this process is both inseparable from the spectacle of theatre and art, and also from a metamorphic chain that seems to have no end. As in the Shakespearian play, it takes two (or more) successive performances in Dinesen's story, to come to a kind of closure, whether it be of a moral or simply of a narrative kind, but that closure in both texts points to a future outside the text, of stories yet to be told. In both cases these stories are to happen after or during a necessary journey at sea²⁹, which introduces further uncertainty about the fulfilment of the texts' implicit promises. The sea is here also ultimately associated with the theatre, as we have seen above during our discussion of *The Tempest* and the theatre as metaphor in Jacobean theatre. It is the site which allows the textual emphasis on the realm of aesthetics to emerge and come to the foreground, to undo the age-old opposition between life and art³⁰. Only, in this case we are dealing with an internal spectator, watching and re-watching the shipwreck in her own mind through different types of stories, told, as in *The Tempest*, by different voices.

In *Tempests* the sea is identified with desire as constant lack, and with desire's typical mutability, but also with storytelling and the impossible access to one's own origins. The narrator does not have nor provides any direct access to the scene of the storm: it is told by a newspaper article, and we are informed about the real happenings on the ship by yet another text in the text, Malli's letter to Arndt. The sea is the locus identified with Malli's father and her yearning to know about him and herself, but for her, returning to travel on the sea is no journey towards a fixed *nostos*, towards a fixed self, but rather a plunge into the flux

of continuous performance and reinvention of herself, which only death (at sea) can stop. The sea is therefore the figurative locus where, as Hannah Arendt also observed in relation to Dinesen's work, memory, imagination, storytelling and thought are inextricably linked³¹. An impossibly complex conglomerate which is at best represented for Arendt by Ariel's song "Full fathom five", which emphasises that the rich and strange objects of the broken thread of memory and tradition may be accessed as crystallised fragments³².

Malli's choice may also be read as a refusal of a domesticised version of the sea embodied by the ship owners Hosewinckel. For the Hosewinckel, the sea is a respected and feared enemy, but also the vehicle for trade, and the source of wealth, as it is, in many different ways, for the people inhabiting the fjords. The root of their lives is, however, their household, where Malli is supposed to reside. Malli's rejection of this life parallels Herr Soerensen's who left his beloved wife and the domestic happiness they were experiencing to be always travelling at sea with his company (thus also the rejection of a stable theatre for his work). Being "at sea", and an artist at that, is not a passive, confusing, condition here, but a specific choice, an alternative also to a bourgeois domesticity which seems to be posited as the opposite of art, which presents its own dangers if it threatens to take over life, as much of Dinesen's work thematizes. Dinesen/Blixen, it has been observed, was no Marxist, but «she uses class issues, particularly the historical vantage point of aristocracy, to expose bourgeois sentiment and behavior as a mask for personal security, exploitation, and privilege»³³. An attitude that is also exemplified by the narrator's emphasis on Herr Soerensen's constant concern with money, which informs his language, his relationship with art and with Malli: «He was not to abandon his precious possession, but she was still his and would remain with him, and he was to see his life's great project realized.»³⁴.

3. INDIGO: A SEA OF STORIES

The connection between the sea and storytelling, its being conceived as the locus of desire and freedom, and perhaps of excess, are also at the centre of Marina Warner's novel *Indigo, or Mapping the Waters* (1992), a book concerned, like its source and many of its rewritings, with the significance and power of art. While the characteristics of the Shakespearian characters are distributed throughout the novel among many different voices and figures, *Indigo* draws on numerous sources such as fairytales, Shakespearian romances, myth, and films (renderings of parts of Jean-Luc Godard's *Two Plus One* are interwoven with the story of one of the protagonists, Miranda).

The novel, like *The Lost Father* (1988), is loosely based on the author's own past³⁵. It is set between London and the Caribbean island of *Enfant-Béate*, formerly *Everhope* and, in the language of the native inhabitants, *Liamuiga* (together with *Oualie*, a smaller island opposite the larger one, renamed *Grand-Thom*),

between the seventeenth century, the years before and after its being seized by British colonists, and the 1960s. The sections of the novel set in the seventeenth century portray the lives of Sycorax, an indigenous woman who lives secluded on a beach on the island of Oualie producing indigo, and her adopted children, Ariel, the daughter of a couple of Caribbean slaves who were brought onto Oualie from another island to work on a plantation and died, and Dulé, whom Sycorax manages to extract alive from the dead body of a shipwrecked African slave adrift on the sea. Sycorax, Ariel and Dulé's lives are interwoven with the lives of the English colonists, in particular of Christopher Everard «Kit», a young settler who is hoping to take over the island for himself and his government and make a fortune with plantations. It is, predictably, a story of endless violence, usurpation and death, which re-surfaces in the section set in London, where we follow the lives of Sir Anthony Everard, an Englishman of Caribbean origin, champion of Flinders (a fictional version of cricket), his son from his first marriage Kit, with his wife Astrid and daughter Miranda; Sir Anthony's second wife Gillian and their daughter Xanthe, and the household maid Serafine Killebre who is a native of the island of *Enfant-Béate*.

The novel opens and closes with Serafine telling stories – an operation which, as Lisa Propst and Joanna Rostek have observed³⁶, expresses a concern with the silenced voices and histories of its indigenous inhabitants. The story of the island in the novel is told from Serafine's perspective, and it has no clear beginning or ending (for example, we do not know anything about Sycorax's life before the colonists land on *Liamuiga*; she also never quite ceases to live, as she is transformed into a magic tree after a supernaturally long life), and most of these stories are imbued with the presence of the sea, which functions simultaneously as the element which administers life, death and memory, but also as the great unknown.

The great sea-monster *Manjiku*, who is believed to feed on the flesh of women, especially fertile ones, is identified with the sea. The sea brings to the islands the dead African slaves, who have been thrown overboard by their owners during a voyage for simple monetary reasons; it also brings the white colonists, whose skin colour and greedy nature posits them as directly related to the sea-monster³⁷ (one of Sycorax's song begins «The red one, the curly one, came down to the sea»³⁸); but it is also the magically rich world which feeds the islanders and connects them to the rest of their (small) world. The sea is the subject of the dead slaves's songs – powerful versions of Ariel's songs³⁹ in *The Tempest* – which Sycorax, with her magic powers, hears from their dead bodies:

[s]he [Sycorax] saw the speaker rise before her and face her with closed eyes and moving lips, "The sea never harmed us, gave us heavy nets of fish. Now it would make us food for fishes..." [...] Another cried, "Grit for oysters..."
Then another, "Bonemeal for vines..."
And yet another, "We'll make rich loam..."

“From our carcasses, the melon and the gourd...”

“From our flesh, mermaid’s purses, dolphin garlands – Haha!”⁴⁰

For Dulé, the «orphan of the sea»⁴¹, it is a spectacle full of marvellous creatures and also an instrument for organizing an armed resistance against the invaders. It is a realm «before speech»⁴² which turns out to be beyond any attempt to tame it either through descriptions, or storytelling, or by means of turning it, as in Xanthe’s and her husband Sy’s unsuccessful enterprise at the end of the novel, into a commodity.

While the novel’s subtitle⁴³, *Mapping the Waters* refers to Derek Walcott’s poem “The Sea is History”⁴⁴, in which the sea is sung as the great silent container of the lost monuments, martyrs and memories of the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean islands, and which cries out for the need to recuperate those histories which have been silenced and whose witnesses lay in the depths of the ocean, it also seems to indicate an attempt to find some kind of orientation on the ocean – an attempt, however, which the novel itself seems to undermine by its own form, and by positing the sea as an element which will not yield to any such operation.

All the characters in the novel are, in one way or another, children of the sea. As Chantal Zabus observes⁴⁵, Serafine, the storyteller and mediator between the two worlds and epochs, is connected with water: she often bathes Miranda and Xanthe and, at the end of the novel, a dying Astrid, Kit’s unloving and miserable wife. Astrid herself is described at the beginning of the book as «so out of control. So storm-tossed»⁴⁶; for her the London fog is «[l]ike the ocean bottom. [...] and her mention of the ocean brought to mind a dark hybrid that lives on water, half-mermaid, half-stormy petrel, like the woman-faced feathered sirens of myth who blow about on the wind and plummet down to call the sailors to come their way»⁴⁷.

Xanthe drowns on *Enfant-Béate* and her death by water, like the one imagined by Malli, is one that will finally liberate her, and reveal a truth to her about herself when she becomes «vulnerable to love»⁴⁸ in a way which contradicts the life she’s been living since her birth. It is a sea change like the ones that characterise the whole novel. As in the Shakespearian play and in Dinesen’s rewriting, the sea is, in *Indigo*, the site of endless transformations and metamorphoses. While at the outset of the novel, metamorphosis is seen by the child Miranda as dangerous, «Miranda fancied that Serafine had something to do with the change that had overtaken the tree’s nature and turned it into a rock; in her stories everything risked changing shape»⁴⁹, the development of the novel revolves around the metamorphic processes that characterize life and that are also embodied by narrative, and it is part of Miranda’s growth and attainment of freedom that she will be able to manage and effect change.

In an essay on Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, Warner specifies that the crucial difference between Sycorax and Prospero is that between metamorphosis and stasis. For Warner, Shakespeare renounced in *The Tempest* the Circean myth of con-

tinuous and even grotesque transformations, as in Homer and Ovid, for a world in which closure is reached through a moment of epiphanic conversion⁵⁰. *Indigo*, like Dinesen's *Tempests* seems to be directed towards a reversal of this pattern. In these texts, taking as a starting point their common Shakespearian source, the sea is the element against which truth is tested, through which illusions are shattered, and false knowledge dispelled. It becomes a force and a narrative device which, in the case of *Indigo*, seems to even dictate the narrative form; it is associated with endless change, which is also, in all these texts, the stuff of art.

1 Other very important publications are William Strachey's *A True Repository* (an account of the shipwreck of the Sea Venture on the coast of Bermuda in 1609) and Samuel Purchas' *Purchas His Pilgrimes*, published in 1625, which also included Strachey's account.

2 Bernhard KLEIN, *Introduction: Britain and the Sea*, in B. KLEIN (ed.), *Fictions of the Sea. Critical Perspectives on the Ocean in British Literature and Culture*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2002, pp. 1-10, p. 10.

3 Carl SCHMITT, *Land und Meer. Eine weltgeschichtliche Betrachtung*, 7. Auflage, Stuttgart, Klett-Cotta [1942] 2011, pp. 36, 40, 46.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 52 ff.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 90. See also Carlo GINZBURG, *Identità come alterità. Una discussione sulla rima elisabettiana*, in C. GINZBURG, *Nessuna isola è un'isola. Quattro sguardi sulla letteratura inglese*, pp. 45-67. Ginzburg here comments on Fernand Braudel's paradoxical statement that «England became an island», arguing that this was not an event but a long, self-reflexive process affecting and drawing on many different aspect of England's cultural and political life» (p. 67).

6 SCHMITT, p. 93.

7 SCHMITT, pp. 91-92.

8 For studies about this ambiguity, see: Peter HULME and William H. SHERMAN, *Preface and Introduction*, in P. HULME and W. H. SHERMAN (eds), *'The Tempest' and Its Travels*, London, Reaktion Books, 2000, pp. xi-xiv, pp. 3-13. The same volume offers specific sections on the Mediterranean and Atlantic subtexts of the play. Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan's Arden Edition of *The Tempest* also offers an exhaustive account and bibliography

pertaining to the different geographic contexts of the play.

9 Edgar Allan Poe's short story *A Descent into the Maelström* (1845), for example, focuses on the tale of a sailor who managed to rescue himself from the inside of a maelström through scientific observation of the movement of various objects inside the whirlpool. The story's final paragraph echoes Shakespeare's *Tempest* in its account of the physical metamorphosis of the protagonist and the miraculous appearance of the rest of the fleet, who «knew [him] no more than they would have known a traveller from the spirit-land» In Jonathan RABAN (ed.), *The Oxford Book of the Sea*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992, pp. 227-241, p. 241.

10 All quotations from: William SHAKESPEARE, *The Tempest*, edited by Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan, London, Arden Shakespeare, 1999.

11 W. H. AUDEN, *The Sea and the Mirror* (1942-44), in *Collected Poems*, ed. by Edward MENDELSON, London, Faber and Faber, 1994, pp. 401-445.

12 For recent analyses of the context and significance of the harpies' banquet see: Claudia CORTI, *Per una lettura iconografica della Tempesta*, in Laura DI MICHELE, *Shakespeare. Una "Tempesta" dopo l'altra*, Napoli, Liguori, 2005; pp. 21-42. Donna B. HAMILTON, *Re-engineering Virgil: The Tempest and the Printed English Aeneid*, in P. HULME and W. H. SHERMAN (eds), *'The Tempest' and Its Travels*, pp. 114-120. Donna B. HAMILTON, *Virgil and 'The Tempest': The Politics of Imitation*, Columbus, Ohio, Ohio State University Press, 1990.

13 See Michael O'CONNELL *The Experiment of Romance*, in Alexander LEGGATT (ed.), *Cambridge*

Companion to Shakespearean Comedy, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 215-229, quoted in: Simonetta DE FILIPPIS, *The Tempest, ovvero una conversazione sul teatro*, in Laura DI MICHELE, *Shakespeare. Una Tempesta dopo l'altra*, pp. 43-57, p. 48.

14 In the case of *The Tempest* we should also consider the harpy's banquet, the scene in which the courtiers are shown Miranda and Ferdinand playing chess in Prospero's cave, and the masque at the end of the play.

15 Simonetta DE FILIPPIS, *The Tempest, ovvero una conversazione sul teatro*, p. 51.

16 Hans BLUMENBERG, *Schiffbruch mit Zuschauer. Paradigma einer Daseinsmetapher*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1997 [1979], p. 51.

17 William SHAKESPEARE, *Cymbeline*, edited by J. M. Nosworthy, London, Arden Shakespeare, 2007. I am very thankful to my colleague Geoff Lehman for drawing attention to this passage and discussing it with me.

18 Robin KIRKPATRICK, *The Italy of The Tempest*, in P. HULME and W. H. SHERMAN (eds), *The Tempest and Its Travels*, pp. 78-96, p. 86.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 86.

20 Although Shakespeare's texts clearly testify for an interest in many different theories of perspective and optics. For a survey of the meanings of "perspective" (perspectives were also optical instruments) and optics in Shakespeare's texts see: Allan SCHICKMAN, *The 'Perspective Glass' in Shakespeare's "Richard II"*, "Studies in English Literature", 1500-1900, vol. 18, no. 2 (1978), 217-228.

21 Isak DINESEN, *Tempests*, in *Anecdotes of Destiny* [1958], London, Penguin, 2001, pp. 71-152, p. 72 and

76. All quotations are from this edition.

22 «Her mother sewed hats for ladies in a small fjord town, and the daughter sat beside her and dizzily felt that the swell in her own heart was like the swell in the water», in *Tempests*, p. 78.

23 «Thy will be done, William Shakespeare, as one on the stage so also in the drawing room! Here in very reality his Ariel did spread out a pair of wings and did rise into the air straight before his eyes», *Tempests*, p. 107.

24 DINESEN, *Tempests*, pp. 149-150.

25 DINESEN, *Tempests*, pp. 151.

26 Tamar YACOBI, *Plots of Space: World and Story in Isak Dinesen*, "Poetics Today", Vol. 12, No. 3 (Autumn, 1991), 447-493, p. 461.

27 The story teems with references to old folks tales and supernatural occurrences told as real events by various characters.

28 T.JACOBI, *op.cit.*, p.470.

29 In Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Prospero, Miranda and the courtiers will have to return to Italy from the magic island (a topos which will come in later years to stand for the theatre itself), whereas Malli will travel on a ship to perform *The Tempest* in other fjord towns and then back to Copenhagen.

30 Something that also preoccupies Soerensen and that he sees as the dilemma of his life: «In the course of a long life he had gained experience and insight, and to any person of experience and insight, indeed to anyone but a young actress in love, the project of lifting daily life onto the stage was paradoxical, and in its essence blasphemous. For it was more likely that daily life would drag down the stage to its own level than that the stage

would succeed in maintaining it so highly elevated; and the whole world-order might well end up pell-mell», p. 108.

31 The sea is also a very important setting in *The Diver*, the opening story of *Anecdotes of Destiny*, and "Deluge at Nordeny".

32 Lynn R. WILKINSON, *Hannah Arendt and Isak Dinesen: Between Storytelling and Theory*, "Comparative Literature", Vol. 56, No. 1 (Winter, 2004), 77-98, p. 96. Arendt's discussion of Dinesen's work and of Ariel's song in *The Tempest* is to be found in *Between Past and Future* and in the posthumous *Thinking*.

33 Marcia LANDY, *Anecdote as Destiny: Isak Dinesen and the Storyteller*, "The Massachusetts Review", Vol. 19, No. 2 (Summer, 1978), 389-406, p. 389.

34 See DINESEN, *Tempests*, p. 141. See also p. 73: «He played many coarse farces (which in his time were called *Possen*), giving his audience their hearts' desire of capering, roaring and fantastic grimacing, and thanking them for their deafening applause with his hand on his heart and the sweetest of smiles on his lips – and all the time he had the evening accounts, down to the smallest item, in his head». His encounter with Malli in the Hosewinckel household is also characterized by his predatory attitude towards wealth and objects (p. 109).

35 Warner's ancestors were colonists on the Caribbean Island of St. Kitts, and amongst the sources for the novel are documents concerning the administration of the colony, which Warner discovered amongst her family papers.

36 Lisa PROPST, *Unsettling Stories: Disruptive Narrative Strategies in Marina Warner's "Indigo" and "The Leto Bundle"*, *Studies in the Novel*,

vol. 41, no. 3 (Fall 2009), 329-47; Joanna ROSTEK, *Sealing through the Past. Postmodern Histories and the Maritime Metaphor in Contemporary Anglophone Fiction*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2011.

37 For a discussion of the sea-monster and its relation to the feminine element see: Chantal ZABUS, *Tempests after Shakespeare*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, p. 142-143. Zabus also quotes a letter by Marina Warner to Anna Rutherford, where the author explains that the monster's desire to be a woman by swallowing women «arises from the thirst for the Other – to elide difference by becoming one, by incorporating» (footnote 57, p. 301).

38 M. WARNER, *op.cit.*, p. 107.

39 For an excellent discussion of the sea as a paradigm for the different histories and chronotopes in the novel, see Joanna ROSTEK, *Sealing through the Past*, pp. 268-281.

40 *Indigo*, pp. 82-83.

41 *Ivi*, p. 85.

42 *Ivi*, p. 115.

43 See also Joanna Rostek's observation that for the colonists, the sea, «once unfathomable churn, [...] now becomes a shallow 'pretty dish' from which the most appetising pieces may be snatched», in ROSTEK, p. 275.

44 For a discussion of Walcott's poem and the symbolic meaning of the sea, see: Tobias DÖRING, "The Sea is History. Historicising

the Homeric Sea in Victorian Passages", in Bernhard KLEIN (ed.), *Fictions of the Sea: Critical Perspectives on the Ocean in British Literature and Culture*, London: Ashgate, 2002, pp. 121-140.

45 C. ZABUS, *Tempests after Shakespeare*, p. 145.

46 *Ivi*, p. 60.

47 *Ivi*, p. 57-58.

48 *Ivi*, p. 373.

49 *Ivi*, p. 4.

50 Marina WARNER, "The Foul Witch and her 'freckled whelp': Circean Mutations in the New World", in P. HULME and W. H. SHERMAN (eds), *The Tempest' and Its Travels*, pp. 97-120, p. 98.

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