

Steve Mentz. *At the Bottom of Shakespeare's Ocean*.

Shakespeare NOW. Harrisburg, PA: Continuum, 2009. ix + 118 pp. index. \$24.95. ISBN: 978-1-84706-493-6.

Since the publication in 1964 of Alexander Frederick Falconer's book, *Shakespeare and the Sea*, there has not been another book solely devoted to this topic, until Steve Mentz's study. Although it is only 118 pages long, Mentz's book offers "infinite riches in a little room," to echo Marlowe's Barabas, a literary character who knows his seas. The riches of Mentz's little book are manifold. While selecting some of the most representative plot situations, speeches, dialogues, imagery, and allegories involving the sea, one of the most "versatile symbols" (xiii) in Shakespeare, Mentz, in fact, weaves a much bigger critical narrative about the possible meanings the sea produces in Shakespeare. He offers a new methodology of historicizing the sea. Rooted in both historicism and literary comparativism, at once scholarly and creative, Mentz's book interweaves stylizations of some of the obvious external scenarios involving the sea — such as fishing, pirating, the beach, and sunken treasure — with the analyses of phenomena such as sexuality, gender, language, and psychology, which depend on Shakespeare's use of the sea as a formative element close to the creation of literary men and women.

Mentz opens with *The Tempest*, offers a persuasive model of exploring the empire not (only) through theory, but through literature. The next chapter, "Keeping Watch: *Othello*," continues to heap up gems of critical observations. Who has noticed, until Mentz, that the not-understanding of the wife in this play is concomitant to non-understanding of the sea? It also makes sense to frame Casio's language of sexuality with the sea, the element associated with the water of birth and

the moisture of *eros*. In *The Comedy of Errors*, an early drama thoroughly framed by the tempest, Mentz lucidly remarks that the sea is (Adriana's) "marriage bed" (42). Here, Mentz is right that for Shakespeare the Mediterranean (or the Med, as Mentz popularly shortens it) was "the sea as ideal literary subject" (48), and speculates that Shakespeare might have focused on the Atlantic, had he "been more attuned to the ways the Atlantic would change English (and world) history" (48). The knowledge of the Mediterranean, however, was so much more deeply engrained in the cultural consciousness of Shakespeare's world that such familiarity inevitably engendered the rich fantasies without which Shakespeare's canon would have been poorer. In chapter 4, "Beachcoming: *Twelfth Night*," Mentz explores the changing power of the sea on the lovers' fluid desires; then, in the next chapter, on *Pericles*, he examines the many "visceral" (74) manifestations of the sea, and shows the depth to which the multifariousness of the language of sailing and water imbues this play. *Timon of Athens* is a difficult play to interpret, but Mentz finds some coherence in it by reading it through the metaphor of "the deathly seashore" (85), placing this late play alongside Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* only to return to Shakespeare and the sea as the most extreme refuge after Timon rejects everything else on the shore.

Mentz's tight analysis of language, and persuasive exploration of the cultural phenomena that give meaning to any human experience of the sea, move the reader elegantly and convincingly throughout. His study combines elegance and vigor of expression with lightly impressive erudition, and his subtle meditations on the ocean and on the esthetic force of the ocean within the writing other than Shakespeare — from Melville to contemporary Caribbean poets — add another unique dimension to his captivating analyses of the ocean in literature. Sometimes, chapters open with epigraphs from other poets; at other times, chapters are series of epigrammatic thoughts on a specific aspect of Shakespeare and the sea. In these Mentz is frivolous in the best possible way: he gives signifying presence to that which is marginal in Shakespeare's texts (e.g., "Sunken Treasure" and "What the Pirates said to Hamlet"), but which is a central part of the life of the ocean and of Shakespeare's treatment of it. Mentz is right to loosen the grip of historicism: "to historicize is to set boundaries, and the sea always overflows its borders" (5). There's much more than a historical narrative within the borders of Mentz's book, as he charts the critical territory of a "new thalassology." His book is a scholarly manifesto, or a critical prolegomena to "the new maritime humanities," (xi) needed now, more than ever, as the oceans are, we are told, dying, getting warmer and more polluted; and when postcolonialism, eco-criticism, environmentalism, and other forces are shaping the current idiom about the oceans. These combined cultural forces, animated precisely at this moment when the social urgency around the sea increases, give rise to what Mentz justly calls a "Blue Cultural Studies" (96).

Going over the rich bibliography at the end, one is impressed at the volume of digested literature that went into the making of this compact book. It is a pity, though, that the list of sources does not include Predrag Matvejević's impressive cultural poetics of the Mediterranean, *The Mediterranean: A Cultural Landscape* (1999), within whose tradition Mentz's scholarly poetics of the sea also belongs.

Next time I look for a new book that will introduce Shakespeare to my students, I will most certainly reach for this timely and slick volume.

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