

SEA-STORM, TIDE IMAGERY AND MUTINY IN SHAKESPEARE

An interesting complex of images in Shakespeare's writing associates tumultuous behaviour of the sea with mutiny, usurpation and the riotous behaviour of a rabble. The culmination of this set of associations is, not surprisingly, to be found in *The Tempest*, where usurpation of authority and a storm at sea are basic to the action.

Boatswain: ... What cares these roarers for the name of king?..
You are a counsellor; if you can command these elements
to silence, and work the peace of the moment, we will
not hand a rope more; use your authority. (I. i. 16-17, 20-23)

The idea of roaring insurrection threatening authority is carried on in the next scene, where Ariel describes the storm.

... the fire, and cracks,
Of sulphurous roaring, the most mighty Neptune
Seem to besiege, and make his bold waves tremble,
Yea, his dread trident shake. (I. ii. 201-204)

A little later we have «contentious waves» (II. i. 118) and then towards the end of the play the idea is taken up once more, this time by Prospero.

..... I have bedimm'd
The noontide sun, call'd forth the mutinous winds,
And twixt the green sea and the azured vault
Set roaring war. (V. i. 43-6)

Once more a storm, mutiny and roaring. The «calm seas, auspicious gales» of Prospero's last speech go with the restitution of his authority in his dukedom and the pardoning of his deceivers.

But these same associations run right through Shakespeare's

work, dramatic and poetic, from the beginning to the end. In the storm at sea in *Othello*,

The chiding billows seems to pelt the clouds.. (II. i. 12)

Here in the verb to pelt, there is the suggestion of the stone-throwing of a riotous mob. Ulysses, in his speech on the collapse of order and degree, exclaims,

..... what mutiny,

What raging of the sea... (*Troil. & Cress.* I. iii. 96)

and later in the same speech his example from nature of the result of loss of degree is,

..... the bounded waters

Should lift their bosoms higher than the shores

And make a sop of all this solid globe. (I. iii. 111-113)

This is not so much a storm as a flood image, of a type to be referred to later, but the idea is that of the usurpation of authority.

The mutiny in Tarquin's blood carries echoes, or rather forecasts, of the sea-storms of the plays.

His eye, which late this mutiny restrains,

Unto a greater uproar tempts his veins. (*Lucrece* 426-7)

Here authority itself, represented by Tarquin's eye, seems to join in the insurrection of the tide of blood. Two stanzas later Tarquin is called «a foul usurper.» But the image is used in a reverse sense soon afterwards, when Lucrece pleads with Tarquin.

Be moved with my tears, my sighs, my groans:

All which together, like a troubled ocean,

Beat at thy rocky and wrack-threatening heart

To soften it with their continual motion... (589-591)

A troubled ocean is very different from a stormy sea and here the motion of the sea is gentle and continuous, in accordance with the protective associations of the sea which are to be seen, for instance, in *Richard II*, II. i. 40-63, where also we have,

England, bound in with the triumphant sea,

Whose rocky shore beats back the envious siege

Of watery Neptune... (61-63)

In *King John*, too, England...

..... that white-faced shore

Whose foot spurns back the ocean's roaring tides.

(II. i. 23-4)

Here the roaring tides are advancing enemies and the word *usurpation* occurs only a few lines earlier. The «white-faced shore» is not only the cliffs of Dover but a suggestion of the fear felt by one whose authority is threatened.

Not only storms at sea but also the flooding of the tide is linked with mutiny and usurpation in Shakespeare's mind. The furrowed brow of a messenger who brings news of the failure of a rebellion to a participant is brilliantly likened to the lines left in the sand by the receding tide.

So looks the strond whereon the imperious flood
Hath left a witness'd usurpation. (2 *Henry IV* I. i. 62)

The ebbing of the tide symbolises the collapse of the insurrection and the wrinkles in the sand the worries that face the defeated rebels.

Antony says to the listening crowd which he is about to turn into a destructive rabble,

..... let me not stir you up
To such a sudden flood of mutiny. (*Jul. Caes.* III. ii. 214-5)

In *Hamlet* the revolt of Laertes is compared to the tidal flooding of low country.

The ocean, overpeering of his list
Eats not the flats with more impetuous haste
Than young Laertes, in a riotous head,
O'erbears your officers. (IV. v. 100-103)

That Shakespeare had actually seen the sea behave in this fashion is vouched for by Sonnet 64.

When I have seen the hungry ocean gain
Advantage on the kingdom of the shore...

Here the word *kingdom* evokes the idea of insurrection, of usurpation, linked with the destructive flooding or erosion of the land.

A tide-rabble association occurs in *Henry VIII*, where a noisy mob breaks into the palace yard. The Porter asks,

Is this a place to roar in?

And then,

How got they in, and be hang'd?

His man answers,

Alas, I know not; how gets the tide in? (V. iii. 7 ff.)

The rushing of the tide through a gap occurs in another tide-rabble image in *Troilus and Cressida*.

..... if you give way,
Or hedge aside from the direct forthright,
Like to an enter'd tide, they all rush by
And leave you hindmost. (III. iii. 157-160)

A similar use of the image is made in *Coriolanus* to describe the Roman rabble celebrating the triumph of Volumnia over her son and the collapse of Marcius' insurrection.

Ne'er through an arch so hurried the blown tide
As the recomforted through the gates. (V. v. 50-51)

Shakespeare had already used this image of tidal water rushing through an arch, with swirling waters eddying back, in *Iucrece*, to express the conflict of emotions in the breast of Collatine.

As through an arch the violent roaring tide
Outruns the eye that doth behold his haste,
Yet in the eddy boundeth in his pride
Back to the strait that forced him on so fast. (1667-1670)

In all these cases the associations are of sea-storm and tidal flooding with mutiny, insurrection, usurpation of authority, and with an extension of the meaning to the mutiny in the blood and the kind of civil war that goes on in a disturbed mind.

Shakespeare has told us that he has observed the ocean «gain advantage» on the shore, and the picture of Laertes' insurrection in *Hamlet* seems to suggest either Lancashire or the East Coast. He has been appalled at the speed with which the tide rises on a low coast and fascinated by the furrows left on the surface of the sand by the ebbing water.

The image of the cliff which resists the attack of the waves, but which is sometimes eaten away by them, may or may not spring from actual observation, but the frequency of the the image in his work and the particularity of the cliff description in *King Lear* (IV. vi. 14-27) suggests a personal experience. After all, Dover was not far from London for a man who regularly rode down to Stratford.

For the rushing of the tide through an arch Shakespeare had to go no further than London Bridge. There he observed the eddying return of some of the water, which he mentions in *Lucrece*,

and the increased speed of the water when the wind was behind it, a fact familiar to oarsmen, the «blown tide» of *Coriolanus*.

But the sea-storm-mutiny association is surely of literary provenance. Here that most unusual extended simile in the *Aeneid* comes to mind, where Vergil reverses the usual process by taking an image from human behaviour to describe a natural phenomenon.

Ac veluti magno in populo cum saepe coorta est
 Seditio saevitque animis ignobile vulgus
 Iamque faces et saxa volant, furor arma ministrat,
 Tum pietate gravem ac mentis si forte virum quem
 Conspectere, silent arrectisque auribus adstant,
 Ille regit dictis animos et pectora mulcet:
 Sic cunctus pelagi cecidit fragor. (I. 148-154)

«It had been like a sudden riot in some great assembly, when, as they will, the meaner folk forget themselves and grow violent, so that firebrands and stones are soon flying, for savage passion quickly finds weapons. But then they may chance to see some man whose character and record command their respect. If so, they will wait in silence, listening keenly. He will speak to them, calming their passions and guiding their energies. So, now, all the uproar of the ocean subsided.» (Penguin ed. Trans. W. F. Jackson Knight, p. 32)

The riotous rabble is there, the pelting of stones, the roaring; then the reassertion of authority. All this is likened to a storm at sea, an image of which Shakespeare was to make such rich and varied use.

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