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Bodies of Water as Epistemological Challenges in Medieval and Early Modern European Literature. With a Focus on Late Medieval Entertaining and Didactic Narratives

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Abstract

This study reflects the new concern with water as an essential force in all of life. Too little water means death, and too much water can have the same effect. Humans need good drinking water, and all cultural history has already confirmed the essential function of water. Living in the Anthropocene today, taking care of water and respecting nature's resources, both from a historical-literary and a natural-scientific perspective constitutes a *conditio sine qua non* for our future. Studying medieval and early modern writers' and artists' stance toward water provides us with a critically important discursive platform to understand the relationship between people and their natural environment in deep terms, uncovering the history of water awareness as it still affects us today.

Keywords: Water in medieval and early modern literature; Boccaccio; Christine de Pizan; Sebastian Brant; *Eulenspiegel*; Georg Wickram; Hans Jacob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen

1. Introduction

As we all know, water is the crucial source of life as such, but it also carries ominous threats brought about by flooding, leading to drowning or destruction, snow avalanches, or frost and ice. It's always a question of balance since water represents energy in liquid form, sustaining all existence and taking it away as well. From ancient times onwards, water has been associated with founding myths (sirens, Melusine, Undine, nymphs, etc.) [1]. representing a third space,

so to speak, to use Homi Bhabha's famous term, and with death (*Apollonius of Tyre*) as a result of shipwreck. Already Homer's *Ulyssees* was predicated on the protagonist's experiences on the sea, often barely avoiding death through drowning or other dangers (e.g., the sirens; see, for instance, the anonymous *Reinfried von Braunschweig*, late thirteenth century).

Not by accident did many of the Romantic writers from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries draw from medieval sources for their own concept of human existence because they wanted to reflect on experiences with water (nixies) and to come to terms with their universal intrigue with this life-granting liquid. Many medieval poets engaged with the power and significance of water in epistemological, spiritual, and erotic terms. On the one hand, we observe the significant role of waterways as challenges or opportunities for travel (*Partonopeus de Blois*; *Herzog Ernst*, Marie de France's *Lais*; Rudolf von Ems, *Der guote Gêrhart*); on the other, bodies of water have regularly functioned as barriers between spaces (see the many *Tristan* romances; and for a late medieval/Renaissance example, Marguerite de Navarre). Those, however, who embraced water in spiritual terms were entitled to visionary enlightenment (Grail motif in Chrétien de Troyes's *Perceval* or in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*), or to existential innovations (Thüring von Ringoltingen's *Melusine*; cf. also the vast corpus of medieval mystical narratives with many references to water) [2] [3].

At the same time, we also hear of rivers that prevent the individual characters from continuing their journey in physical and metaphysical terms (*Nibelungenlied*). Once the Burgundians have managed to cross the Danube, however, Hagen destroys the ferryboat, an act that symbolizes that no one will return alive from the Hunnish court. After all, the nixies in a well near the river had predicted that only the Burgundian chaplain would survive once they had reached the other shore. Hagen, anxious to test that prophecy, then attempted to drown that poor man with all his force available, but the latter managed, though not able to swim, to reach the safe shore, which Hagen recognized as a clear sign that they all would be doomed, which then is the actually outcome of this epic poem [4].

In short, crossing water has regularly represented a transformation of the individual in practical and spiritual terms (cf. the many versions of the Irish *St. Brendan* narratives [5], and Dante refers to the river Styx the sinners have to cross with the help of the ferryman Charon to enter Inferno). At close examination, we recognize that late antique and medieval poets often incorporated references to rivers or the open sea as markers of a significant pause or transition in the narrative development (first Parzival, then, much later, Gawan, in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, or in Dante's *Divina Commedia* where the pilgrim has to cross the river Styx) [6].

Moreover, major rivers such as the Rhine and Danube were intimately associated with ancient powers (again, *Nibelungenlied*) and existential threats (Loreley) [7] [8]. Similarly, considering economic aspects, the Black Sea has always been a major center of trade connecting Asia with Europe, although medieval poets hardly ever reflected on that part of the world – perhaps with the exception of the South-Tyrolean poet Oswald von Wolkenstein (song no. Kl. 18) [9]. And larger bodies of water such as the North Atlantic served as the operational space for entire peoples (Anglo-Saxons, Vikings, Icelanders, Frisians).

Significantly, the Swedish hero Beowulf in the eponymous heroic Old English epic poem (ca. 700) arrives in Denmark after having crossed the sea and then embraces the task of killing the flesh-eating monsters. In the course of events, he even has to dive deeply to the bottom of the sea to track down Grendel's mother who has her abode in a cave, where he is eventually able to kill her and to decapitate dead Grendel. Beowulf emerges triumphantly, but not before Hrothgar's men have abandoned all hope, especially once they have observed blood surging from the depth [10]. We would also have to keep in mind that Beowulf is renowned for his swimming contest with Unferth during his youth which cast him already as a semi-divine figure closely associated with water.

Research has already recognized the major function of the Mediterranean as a nodal point in world history, and this already since antiquity [11]. If we turned our attention to other continents, we would recognize similar phenomena, particularly if individual cultures bordered on a major body of water. Here, however, I limit myself to pre-modern Europe, extending the investigation to the late seventeenth century.

2. Relevance of Water Throughout Times

Even the smallest amount of water in a well or a fountain represents a critically important element to transcend one's own material dimensions or to come into contact with creatures from a different world, as we often hear especially in late medieval and then again in nineteenth-century poetry, such as in Conrad Ferdinand's famous poem "Der Brunnen" (first version in 1866, seventh version in 1882, or in Heinrich Keller's "Seemärchen," see online at: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Der_r%C3%B6mische_Brunnen; for a good selection of relevant German poems, see https://gedichte.xbib.de/_Brunnen_gedicht.htm; for the text of Keller's poem, see http://mermaidmania.de/gedichte/keller_seemaerchen.php [12] [13] [14] [15]. In short, studying water in its symbolic and epistemological functions opens profound perspectives toward human epistemology, both in antiquity and the Middle Ages, and so also in modern times. Whereas the well and the spring represented the origin of life and were embraced as the central icons of idyllic sceneries since antiquity, the open sea was a huge challenge for medieval people, especially when they had no particular tradition of seafaring.

Yet, the very opposite could also be the case if we consider the history of the Vikings, above all [16]. Lack of water (draught) or its over-abundance (flood) can lead to death, as artists, chroniclers, and poets have noted throughout the ages. Water has also always been identified as a cleaning agent, especially for religious rituals in most world cultures (baptism, rebirth, fertility, and death). Little wonder that water regularly appears in fairy tales, ballads, riddles, and other narratives throughout times, offering healing, spiritual transformation, although its deadly force is also quite present in countless poetic expressions [17] [18]. Water represents life in a myriad of ways, and it can also bring death, so it represents a rather ambivalent, amorphous, or fluid element [19].

Many times, we also hear of baths which provided the opportunity to clean oneself, to gain some comfort, and to enjoy the pleasures of this unique and yet universal fluid (*Herzog Ernst*; Marie de France, "Equitan," Der Stricker, "Der nackte Bote," Pleier, *Der Meleranz*). In short, water by itself constitutes, with regard to human existence, a highly complex and even dialectic element, giving and taking life, creating or destroying culture, all depending on the circumstances. Both artists and poets, both theologians and philosophers have amply responded to this phenomenon, acknowledging widely its central relevance and functionality in virtually every aspect of (human) life.

These general observations serve here only as the foundation for specific investigations of how late medieval and early modern poets configured water and how they incorporated that liquid substance into their works as a concrete physical object and as a metaphorical, epistemological challenge for their protagonists. We can be certain that water has always served as the central icon in human life, both within a basically material and a spiritual context. The need for clean water, for instance, to survive in a hostile and dry world was fully understood in many medieval and early modern narratives and poems, and this both in Europe as well as in other parts of the world [20]. Since we are now living in the Anthropocene, all natural elements and resources have gained in critical importance, so a critical study of water constitutes a valuable reflection on our human existence within the natural environment in the past and the present [21].

To lay the foundation, below I will begin with some general observations and then turn to a larger body of literary texts that will confirm the ubiquitous presence of water in the minds of pre-modern people.

3. Cultural-Historical Background

Two moments in human history or existence at large can be identified that represent life and death at the same time, although at first sight they do not seem to be correlated at all. When rain broke loose with the beginning of the Great Flood described in Genesis, all of humanity

was at risk and then eliminated; only Noah, his family, and the chosen animals were saved in the Ark (chapters 6–9 of the Book of *Genesis*, ca. 5th c. B.C.E.) [see the excellent survey online at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genesis_flood_narrative].However, that deadly event was also the beginning of new life, with the rainbow signaling the covenant with God guaranteeing that never again would humanity be wiped out. Flood myths exist around the world, and they all confirm the absolute dominance of water in life, determining all existence, the very element used by God to transform chaos into cosmos [22] [23]. The other moment, only seemingly far removed, underscores the birth of life and happens all the time all over the globe whenever a baby is about to be born and the mother's water breaks, in literal terms, allowing the fetus to migrate out of the womb and to live on its own. Could we talk about a new flood and then a new covenant [24]?

In our day and age, but also many times in other periods, the lack of water (draught) could have resulted in massive deaths, and the disappearance of an entire culture, such as in the Southwest of the United States (formerly part of Mexico), when a long-term draught eliminated all human civilization in that region around 1300–1400. Their architectural ruins, such as in the states of Arizona (Montezuma's Castle) and Colorado (Mesa Verde), are stark reminders of the catastrophic consequences when the rain stops and when drinking water runs out for good [25] [26]. Although currently more and more people are moving to the Southwest of the United States, the secure supply of water in the near future is no longer guaranteed, and in face of global warming and declining rain- and snowfall in the Rocky Mountains, we might face a cataclysmic catastrophe in the near future.

These various snippets of cultural history in conjunction with the history of environment and climate serve as a jumping board for deeper interpretations of how people in the pre-modern world viewed water. This paper is not based on historical documents, such as chronicles that often talk about draughts, flooding, or even snow avalanches. Instead, what I can address more specifically pertains to the reflection of and awareness about water within the literary discourse from the late Middle Ages. Much work has recently been done to reflect on the existential function of water as discussed by medieval and early modern poets and artists [27] [28]. Water mattered, of course, centrally for all people, which would entail for our investigation that we would reflect on water supply lines, clean versus dirty water, public wells and fountains, and also on the use of water for shipping and transportation.

The papers delivered at the sixteenth symposium held in Bern, Switzerland, in March of 2015, already blazed a path into the large topic of water in medieval literature. As a synopsis of the global goal of that symposium and hence the subsequent published volume, we can quote from the online summary:

Wasser ist Leben. Der individuelle Organismus, menschliche Sozialbildungen und Kulturleistungen sind auf das Wasser angewiesen. Es kann lebenserhaltend und zerstörend, verbindend und trennend, erlösend und auflösend wirken. Menschliche Gesellschaften und Institutionen sind gezwungen, sich diesen ambivalenten Funktionen zu stellen. Das natürliche Element Wasser fordert zu kulturellen Reaktionen im Bereich seiner Bewirtschaftung, Bewertung und Symbolik heraus. Alle Funktionen, die das Wasser in der realen Welt erfüllt, können auch in Literatur und Kunst thematisiert werden [29] [see also 30].

[Water is life. The individual organism, human social constructions, and cultural activities are dependent on water. It can preserve or destroy life, bring together or separate, offering salvation and utter loss. Human societies and institutions are forced to face these ambivalent functions. The natural element of water challenges us to produce cultural reactions with regard to its handling in economic terms, evaluation, and symbolism. All functions carried out by water in the real world can also be thematized in literature and the arts.]

Moreover, water was of critical importance in medieval monastic and philosophical discourse, relevant for reflections on the meaning of life, especially considering its endless shapes, forms, aggregates, purposes, and power, all depending on the specific circumstances when humans and water meet. Focusing on water within human culture truly allows us to explore global history because without water there is no life. As James L. Smith now emphasizes, 185: "Water provides the fluid conduits by which thought moves, divides, flows, lives. It is not neat and tidy, but messy and winding, always in flux. Its journey from source to destination, however, is inevitable" [31].

In particular, I will investigate next how late medieval poets integrated the element of water into their narratives and poems to determine to what extent they reflected on the critical importance and also danger of excessive amounts of water in very practical terms. By drawing from literary documents, we have the advantage of examining mental-historical perspectives that dominated the public discourse, reflecting on common experiences with water as a force with a direct impact on human life.

4. Marguerite de Navarre and Giovanni Boccaccio

Whereas Giovanni Boccaccio utilized the suffering from the Black Death in Florence ca. 1347 or 1348 as the narrative framework for his famous collection of hundred tales, *Decameron*, the French Queen Marguerite de Navarre, in direct competition with him and trying to outdo him, referred to a massive rainstorm with subsequent floodings in the Pyrenees in her *Heptaméron*, published first in 1558 and then again, fully, in 1559. A group of storytellers is forced to seek refuge in an abbey where they have to wait for a destroyed bridge to be rebuilt and use their empty time to tell each other stories [32]. In the fifth story, which is, however, not necessarily

representative of the entire collection, a ferrywoman is in danger of being raped by two Franciscan monks and manages through her cleverness to set off both men on separate islands and then to flee from them. Once having informed the authorities, the monks are captured and severely punished. As the narrator concludes: "Never again did they take a ferry across a river, without making the sign of the cross and commending their souls to God" (100), as if the water itself had tempted them to commit this serious sin of trying to force the poor woman to have sex with them. However, the open body of water itself saves the ferrywoman's virtues and makes it possible for her to get them caught each one on a separate island. The river provides the woman with an income, but it also puts her into a most dangerous situation being alone with those two friars who want to rape her. The narrator comments: "But she was as sensible and shrewd as they were vicious and stupid" (98) [33] [34].

Major composers of didactic and entertaining narratives have hardly ever ignored the central function of water for a variety of purposes. A curious exception proves to be Gian Francesco Straparola's *Le piacevoli notti* (1st ed. 1550-1553; 2nd ed. 1555). As far as I can tell, this Venetian author never incorporates water in any meaningful ways to illustrate a significant aspect in human life. Since Venice is located in a lagoon in the northern part of the Adriatic Sea, this appears to be a strange anomaly [35].

Hence, we must not dismiss Boccaccio either although he used a very different narrative framework for his *Decameron* than Marguerite [36]. The company of ladies and knights spends a delightful time at the various estates, and water itself matters much throughout their 'vacation' in the countryside (fountains, baths, pools, etc.). One interesting example is the scene preceding the stories told on the second day:

they all sauntered off towards a stream of crystal-clear water, which descended the side of a hill and flowed through the shade of thickly wooded valley, its banks lined with smooth round stones and verdant grasses. On reaching the stream, they stepped barefoot and with naked arms into the water and began to engage in various games with each other. (68)

And in the introduction to the third day, the narrator delights in presenting to us one of the gardens truly as a *locus amoenus*, determined by architectural genius and emotional pleasures, while the narrator also keeps an eye toward the economic advantage of water driving mills and hence making money:

In the middle of the lawn there stood a fountain of pure white marble, covered with marvelous bas-reliefs. From a figure standing on a column in the centre of the fountain, a jet of water, whether natural or artificial I know not, but sufficiently powerful to drive a mill with ease, gushed high into the sky before cascading downwards and falling with a delectable plash

into the crystal-clear pool below. And from this pool, which was lapping the rim of the fountain, the water passed through a hidden culvert and then emerged into finely constructed artificial channels surrounding the lawn on all sides. Thence it flowed along similar channels through almost the whole of the beautiful garden, eventually gathering at a single place from which it issued forth from the garden and descended towards the plain as a pure clear stream, furnishing ample power to two separate mills on its downward course, to the no small advantage of the owner of the palace. (190–91)

The aesthetic and mechanical aspects are intricately combined with a focus on the economic profit from that water arrangement, which highlights the aristocratic milieu of the estate and the pleasantries that the company can enjoy there. Water is here a source of energy and also enjoyment because it is entirely domesticated and controlled for human purposes, which makes it possible for the owner to contain it within the *hortus conclusus*, so to speak. Throughout the entire *Decameron*, whenever the narrator remarks on the group of young nobles, nature, hence water, contributes obediently to their cultural interests and helps them to enhance their personal happiness and delight. Within the storytelling, however, water emerges as quite a different agent, much more threatening and dangerous because it is often uncontrollable and life-threatening.

The best example proves to be the story of the Arabian princess, Alatiel, who is supposed to marry a prince living in the western parts of the Mediterranean. In the seventh story told on the second day, Sultan Beminedab of Babylon wants to send his daughter Alatiel to her future husband, the King of Algarve. But the ship runs into a major storm, and they all suffer badly from shipwreck, with only Alatiel and some of her maids surviving the catastrophe. She is rescued by the nobleman Pericone da Visalpo who is completely smitten by love for her although the differences in their languages makes it impossible for them to communicate. Although he can make love with her, he is soon murdered by his younger brother Marato who kidnaps the beautiful woman and takes Pericone's most precious treasures with him. However, he himself soon meets his death, and this then continues because men lose their mind when they encounter this beautiful lady. Alatiel thus slowly but surely makes her way back home to the eastern Mediterranean where her father ultimately welcomes her in the naïve believe that she is still a virgin. Finally, he sends her off once again to marry the King of Algarve, which appears to conclude with a successful wedding.

The narrator has nothing else to report and leaves us behind with a somber feeling about the evanescence of the sea where human destiny is completely subject to external, uncontrollable forces [37]. Love gives way to sexual desire, which leads to a series of murders, and chaos really rules, which Alatiel never fully fathoms because she cannot communicate with any of those many who desire to possess her at any cost. Only once she has reached home

again, also by ship, does her life return to normal. Her father, not knowing anything about her many trials and tribulations, finally sends her off again in a ship to marry her future husband, and that time, no accident happens, the sea is friendly and allows the princes to reach her goal.

Boccaccio never returned to a water-based narrative and instead made sure to entertain his audience with a large variety of other tales without engaging further with the symbolism of water, characterizing his stories as "written to dispel the woes of ladies" (801–02). However, he also refers to the contingency of this world, as mirrored by these narratives: "the things of the world have no stability, but are subject to constant change, and this may well have happened to my tongue" (802). Without referring to water, Boccaccio certainly implied that life was uncertain and dependent on all kinds of vagaries, as people have always experienced when crossing bodies of water [38] [39].

5. Shipwreck and Female Suffering

Not long after Boccaccio, the French courtly poet Christine de Pizan picked up this global motif and resorted to the idea of the ship and hence shipwreck to describe the events affecting her life in private and in public. Not only did she lose her father, but then also her husband Etienne (1390), and had to take care of her children and ailing mother, first working as a scribe, but since the early fifteenth century also as one of the first independent poets making a solid living with her writings [40] [41].

In her *Book of Fortune's Mutation*, one of her longest works with close to 24,000 octosyllabic verses in rhymed couplets completed around November 1403, she offers a comprehensive autobiographical reflection, one of the earliest one by a medieval female author – and this even before Margery Kempe wrote her famous *Book*. Both here and in many other works, Christine relies, of course, on classical Latin works, such as Ovid's story of Ceyx and Alcyone in his *Metamorphoses*, in order to come to terms with her personal experiences, i.e., suffering as a widowed woman. However, Christine transcends this individualized aspect and turns to a discussion of the nature of Fortune at large, so she engages with one of the most universal issues concerning human life and death in all of its evanescent character, never stable, constantly changing, with happiness and sorrow intimately tied into each other. As Margolis notes, "the modern reader is struck by the interweaving of real history and mythology, literature, chronicle, and *summa* to create the author's own view of the world, all to prove a rather Senecan theme, that Fate (here Fortune) guides those who follow and drags those who resist" [42, p. 93]

In contrast to Boccaccio's Alatiel, Christine is the active part and tells us her tragic and yet also uplifting life story, as best captured by the experience on the ship [43]. She insists from the start on the factuality of her report and hence distances herself from literary or

imaginative accounts (56–57). Nevertheless, as she also notes, Fortune has an unforeseeable impact on people and cannot be combatted with any effectiveness or hope for success: "She deals in victory and loss / As men pursue the shallow gloss / Of honor, wealth, and property, / While killing life and liberty, / True happiness and so much more" (76–82). Christine has learned to accept the good with the bad and to balance it all out and to pursue one's own honor and virtues to the best of one's abilities.

In Christine's case, Fortune brings about her transformation from a woman into a man simply out of life's necessities: "How I, a woman, became a man / By a flick of Fortune's hand" (142–43). After a lengthy passage about her parents and her own upbringing, the poet describes the unique and yet universal experience on a ship with her husband, whom she calls the 'captain.' A sudden storm swept him from the ship, so he drowned. Christine finds herself in a desperate situation and faints, when the ship, now without the captain, crashes against the shore and falls apart (1332–33). But once she has recovered from her swoon, she realizes that her body is transmuted: "No longer weak and subjugated. / Each limb of mine did feel much stronger, / I, discomfited no longer, / Felt no further need for crying" (1336–39). However, the poet does not fight against Fortune; instead, she welcomes the impact on her: "All over I felt myself afresh, / As I touched muscle – a man's flesh! / And my voice took on assurance / As my body gained endurance" (1347–50) [44].

Turning her back to the past, Christine studies the devastated ship, resolutely grabs her tools, and begins to repair it, which makes it possible for her to set sail and to travel forward, without her dead husband but strong enough to resume her own life, independently: "In no time at all, I could sail, / For I learned to pilot, to prevail / Over oceans at my command, / I and my crew knew to withstand / Danger and fend off death. Now see, / Like a real man; I have to be" (1384–91). Having suffered the loss of her husband and shipwreck, she finds herself transformed into a new person who can handle her own life without the assistance of others: "As you can tell, men are my peers / As they have been for thirteen years" (1394–95).

Certainly, Christine drew skillfully from the rich reservoir of classical tropes and metaphors (Homer, Ovid, etc.), but she also succeeded in focusing on her personal experiences, and demonstrating thereby the resolve she acquired that made it possible for her to step forward and acquire her new-found independence and strength as a person and poet. From the ruined ship, a new individual arises, and once having fixed the leaks, she resumes her voyage, though now without her husband. The poem then turns to deeper reflections on the nature of Fortune and on how people ought to respond to it.

After extensive meditations and reflections, regularly determined by her classical learning, Christine concludes with the only possible insight following her experience that

Fortune will always win with respect to external, material conditions: She finally understands that external joys are ephemeral, and only internal happiness can be identified – certainly a Boethian principle she was well familiar with – as a guarantee against the vagaries of an ever-changing wheel of Fortune: "I have discovered an inner joy, / Possessed by others – though too few – Of which Bad Fortune never knew / To steal from me. There's nothing shrewd / In choosing peace and solitude / Disdaining things material / For abstract and ethereal" (23636–37) [45] [46].

There is no more poignant metaphor than the ship that is crashed by the storm against the rocks and falls apart. By the same token, there is nothing more powerful in terms of a woman's self-determination and resoluteness to fight against the strikes of misfortune than Christine's image of her self-transformation into a man who works as a shipbuilder and then becomes a ship captain herself. The poet does not address the sea itself as medium of finding her own self under tragic circumstances; however, describing the loss of her captain, the shipwreck, and the rebuilding of the ship with newly developed manly hands makes it possible for her to present a major metaphor of human existence associated with water, which in her case mirrors the impact of instability and loss of self-control as a result of the raging storm.

6. Late Medieval and Early Modern Didactic and Satirical Accounts

The best known iconic ship in pre-modern literature would be the one the Humanist Sebastian Brant talked about when he published his famous *Narrenschiff* (1494; Ship of Fools) [47] [48]. He intention was, as is obvious throughout, to satirize his world that was filled with foolish disputations, selfishness, ignorance, arrogance, and cantankerousness [49]. But he also notes, from the start, that there are just too many fools at current times to take them all into the ship on the way to "Narragonia" (see the frontispiece, 2) (18–19). Nevertheless, countless people are rushing to the ship, and everyone wants to be its captain (23). The ship, however, is not only the vessel to transport these fools to their goal; Brant also calls it a "narren spiegel" (34; fools' mirror). Even though he is afraid that the masses will not understand his intentions with this book, he trusts the wise people (65) will agree with him and confirm that he is correct in his critical assessment of people at large (68).

The ship serves Brant so well because it allows him to take on board virtually everyone and to make the audience laugh about them, as angry many listeners/readers might get (70–82). After all, he targets all people without exceptions: "All gschlecht der menschen man vnd frowen" (108; all people, both men and women). However, beyond those general remarks in the prologue, Brant is not concerned with the ship as such, or the voyage. Instead, we hear about all kinds of virtues, vices, old and young people, bad habits, deceptive friendship, disregard of the scriptures, adultery, blasphemy against God, gluttony, useless wealth, etc. However, the poet still emphasizes the centrality of the ship for his work because the fools

assemble all on board and demonstrate their ignorance, vices, and bad behavior. Whereas for Christine de Pizan, the ship was a critically important metaphor for her tragic life with the loss of her husband, which ultimately led, after the shipwreck, to her transformation into a 'man,' Brant identifies the ship as a mirror of society and makes his audience laugh about all those people who assemble on board. As we can notice in the various woodcuts, the people all wear fools' caps, they drink excessively, and do not pay attention when one of them falls into the water, obviously about to drown.

Water in its many different manifestations and functions serves thus as the ideal medium to reflect on human foibles and follies, hence on existential issues. This is also expressed, though only facetiously, in the first story of the collection of *histori* (accounts) about famous Till Eulenspiegel or Ulenspiegel (1510/1511) [50] [51]. Although many scholars have responded to the tales about Till Eulenspiegel, the role of water in the protagonist's life, so it appears, has never been addressed specifically. This is the more surprising considering its central importance already in the very first story.

Among the ninety-six tales, most deal with the protagonist's interaction with various craftsmen, including owners of public bathhouses, where the protagonist does not only clean him on the outside, but, to the horror and anger of the owner, also on the inside, leaving behind his excrement (no. 69). The author – perhaps the Brunswick toll official Hermann Bote [52] – also included various stories reflecting on Eulenspiegel's pranks with innkeepers, peasants, some women, and also Jews. Significantly, there are no mentions of sexuality or the rogue's engagement with children.

Water proves to be the very first natural element that deeply impacts Eulenspiegel's life and illustrates the vagaries of all existence. After he has been baptized, the family and their friends celebrate this event with a great feast, which also involves much drinking. His godmother, above all, becomes heavily drunk, and when she crosses a ditch while carrying the child, she falls down and becomes badly soiled. Worse, however, the little infant almost dies in the muck: "besudelt sich und das Kind so jämerlich, das daz Kind schier erstickt was" (10; she and the child became so much covered with filth that the infant would have almost suffocated). The companions rescue both and take them back home where Eulenspiegel is washed and cleaned in a vat. The narrator then comments, which casts the entire situation in ironic light, "Da ward Ulenspiegel eins Tags dreimal geteufft" (11; Eulenspiegel was baptized three times that day).

Considering the subsequent developments with this rogue, who constantly resorts to pranks to ridicule other people, we face thus a remarkable situation because the three baptisms signal the variety of life situations he will later create, poking fun at priests, peasants,

craftsmen, and others. Many times, Eulenspiegel utilizes his own body, especially his excrements, farts, and effluents, to upset his contemporaries and to force them to reconsider the basic framework of their own existence and the meaningfulness of their language. But the first story with the three baptisms, two of which were the consequence of other people's bad actions, indicates the critical importance of water as a cleansing or dirtying agent, which then becomes the basic benchmark of all of Eulenspiegel's pranks. Behind all the laughter, ridicule, or mocking, there are many reflections about the meaning of human life and the proper form of communication [53]. While the infant cannot yet speak, its body, the soil, the baptism, and the cleansing emerge as the key components that will reverberate throughout the protagonist's entire life.

7. Georg/Jörg Wickram

A contemporary of Marguerite de Navarre, Georg/Jörg Wickram was also interested in the experience with the deadly force of water when he composed his collection of entertaining and didactic prose narratives, his *Rollwagenbüchlein* (1555), which enjoyed considerable popularity for more than hundred years [54, no. 2] [for the history of the story's reception, 55]. In the second story, which the author derived from Erasmus of Rotterdam's *Colloquia familiaria* (1524), we hear of a curious character on a ship who reacts to the imminent shipwreck in very different ways than all the other travelers. Everyone screams, prays, and demonstrates other signs of desperation, although they do not truly think of God and prefer to appeal to some of the saints when the mast and the sails are already lost (15). The protagonist of this story, however, observing that everyone is grabbing a piece of wood to hold on when they are flung into the sea, loudly calls upon Saint Christopher and promises him a huge candle in case he would save him. Of course, as a friend points out to him, neither he nor his entire family would ever be wealthy enough to pay for such an enormous candle. He thus criticizes him for his hypocrisy.

However, the good fellow has different ideas in mind and whispers into the other man's ear that once Christopher would have saved him from this calamity, he would donate nothing but a candle of poor quality or consisting of cheaper material than wax. The narrator laments this duplicity and laughs about this foolish merchant who believed in the saint's power to rescue him from this shipwreck. Moreover, Wickram points out the contradiction between the loud screaming and the low whispers, as if Christopher would be so deaf as not to hear the latter: "er aber moecht die wort, so er seinem gesellen heimlich gesagt, nit gehoeren" (16; he would not be able to hear the words that he had secretly told his fellow).

The author aims his satire against pretentious people who publicly claim to be deeply religious, but who are in reality nothing but hypocrites and do not follow through with their promises to a saint. Further, Wickram ridicules the Catholic faith in saints, which was a very

common theme at that time in the wake of the Protestant Reformation: "Ach der groben einfalt!" (16; Oh, what boorish simplicity!). Finally, which matters the most for us, although he addressed an audience probably little familiar with seafaring and hence the danger of shipwreck, the short jest narrative explicitly brings home the danger of traveling by ship when a storm could threaten all the passengers' and the crew's lives. Drawing his account from Erasmus, Wickram confirmed his own learnedness, while the chosen topic signals the great concern even a major author such as this famous humanist could have regarding the existential threat resulting from a major storm and subsequent shipwreck. Life was ephemeral, unreliable, and only a firm believe in God would have been a guarantee in that dangerous situation: "Da waren gar wenig, so zuo dem rechten schiffmann ruoften, welcher mit seinem betroeuwen wind und meer augenblicklich stillen kundt" (15; There were only few who called out for the true ship captain who could immediately calm the threatening wind and sea).

But it was also possible to find some humor in the way how people might have prepared themselves for an imminent shipwreck, as we hear in the fifty-eighth narrative. Here, we learn of a great merchant vessel that is heavily loaded with many goods. Yet, even this large ship is about to go under during a mighty storm. Everyone tries to prepare him/herself for death through drowning, probably praying or appealing to saints, as in the previous account. The focus here rests on a crude Bavarian man who cares little about all the religious rituals performed by the others. Realizing the danger that he might fall into the water, like all others, he takes a big chunk of bread out of his bag and spreads plenty of salt on it. Calmly, he consumes his meal and ignores his fellows who desperately resort to prayers in the hope of being saved. Eventually, the storm wanes, and the danger passes away, and now the other passengers, who had clearly observed the Bavarian's approach in that situation, inquire with him about his behavior during the storm. Laconically, he explains that he had realized the threat of drowning through all their behavior and had decided to be as pragmatic as possible, eating bread and salt so as to feel very thirsty, which would hence make him enjoy the water of the sea: "solcher grosser trunck" (110). Everyone laughs about this remark, but they do not realize the implied criticism of their panic and religious frenzy in that situation.

Neither here nor in the previous story does the author specifically reflect on water as an intellectual or religious challenge. But both accounts set up a life-threatening situation in which people are afraid of drowning following a shipwreck. Foolishness in the first case and simple-mindedness emerge in the second case, and both times the narrator indicates his criticism of superficial and meaningless piety in the time of death due to a mighty storm threatening to cause a shipwreck. We certainly feel much more sympathy with the calm Bavarian who displays almost a philosophical attitude in face of almost certain drowning, whereas the merchant in the first story is exposed as a fraud and liar.

However, we can be certain that Wickram utilized the experience on a ship during a horrendous storm to reflect fundamentally on people's honesty, faith, and outlook on their lives. The *Rollwagenbüchlein* contains no other significant tale where water would matter centrally, but those two tales certainly signal that the topic of shipwreck was surely on people's mind because its reflected complete helplessness in the face of a natural catastrophe [55]. The author drew from that situation because it allowed him to satirize people who respond to the danger of drowning in very different manners, revealing thereby their true nature. In other words, the confrontation with water – here a raging sea – brings to light people's actual character and reveals their hypocrisy or their tranquility in face of possible drowning, undoubtedly an existential crisis in the extreme.

As far as I can tell, research has not yet even touched upon these specific stories and the topic of shipwreck dealt with in both [56]. Granted, water in its various manifestations does not assume a central role in Wickram's *Rollwagenbüchlein*, but in the two cases discussed, the opposite is the case. It is unlikely that the author had any personal experience with ships, the ocean, or the danger of shipwreck, but he obviously drew from an ancient storehouse of narrative tropes to come to terms with this global and timeless topic.

8. From *Melusine* and Paracelsus and Beyond

There would be many more examples in late medieval and early modern literature to be considered where water matters in specific ways, assuming an epistemological function. Especially the many different versions and translations of the *Melusine* novel, still highly popular in the sixteenth century, would have to be considered more carefully [57]. I have already engaged with this corpus of texts and the relevance of water there in previous studies [58]. Hence, here just a few remarks will suffice to illustrate the epistemological function of water in all versions of *Melusine* and this far into the late sixteenth and even seventeenth centuries. Melusine is intimately associated with water, the bath, and transforms into a monstruous creature, half human and half a snake, every Saturday when she retires to that bath. She helps her husband, Reymund, to establish and build an entire dynasty, based on the land centered on a well, but she is forced to leave humankind at the end because her husband breaks a taboo that she had imposed on him as a precondition of their marriage, presumably returning to her waterworld. Without any doubt, late medieval and early modern audiences were greatly intrigued by this aqueous figure, and she appears countless times in many early modern castles as a candelabra, as a "Lüsterweibchen," half female and half snake, with antlers behind her to hold the candles [59]. Throughout time, and so also today, monstrous creatures have deeply fascinated artists, poets, philosophers, medical scholars, and theologians, maybe particularly because their hybridity and often their association with water. We can thus observe that our discussion of the topic of water really addresses fundamental anthropological concerns of timeless relevance [60].

Moreover, the learned and yet also highly speculative and theological reflections by the medical doctor Theophrastus Paracelsus would also provide us with valuable insights about the discourse on water and its symbolism, especially because he was deeply interested in the world of nymphs, sirens, and Melusines [61] [62] [63]. In other words, the topic of water in its mythical, spiritual, and medical dimensions continued to dominate early modern discourse, if it did not even assume an even more central role [64]. But let us conclude with a brief discussion of one of the most extensive narrative involving water and its connection with the center of the earth, composed by a German Baroque poet.

9. Grimmelshausen

Hans Jacob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen (1621/22–1676) is most famous for his novel *Der abentheuerliche Simplicissimus Teutsch* from 1669 [65]. It is an early form of a *Bildungsroman*, though the focus rests on the protagonist's experiences in the Thirty Years' War. At the end, he desires to explore the mystery of the famous Mummelsee in the Black Forest, where he soon discovers, having thrown a lot of rocks into the water, that sea creatures ("Wassermaennlein") like nymphs arise and invite him to join them to learn about their abode deep down in the water (Book V, chpts. XII–XVII).

As Simplicissimus learns from the prince of the underwater world, the water goes down to the center of the globe, which allows them to travel quickly to any point on the earth since there is an equidistance from the core to the surface. The purpose of this invited visit of this aqueous world is to instruct him about the "seltzame Wunder der Natur unter der Erden und in Wassern" (495; the strange miracles of nature under the earth and the water). In essence, the protagonist learns that all bodies of water are connected with each other and that these sea creatures are charged with maintaining all life on earth wherever water is needed, and this on behalf of God who wants his creation to be maintained and to prosper (495). If they were forced to interrupt their work providing water to all living beings for whatever reason, the world would be consumed by fire and perish (496), clearly a reference to the late antique and medieval concept of the four elements, two of which are referred to her as polarly opposed (life and death).

The prince of that underworld then explains the reasons why all wells or other bodies of water have different qualities and attributes, which amounts to a universal theory of water chemistry (502–03). He is also told that he could exit from that water world to any part of the world, including America (503).

Once the two have met the king of those water creatures, they engage in a lengthy discussion of the situation on earth, which entails, as to be expected, considerable criticism of many shortcomings and evils everywhere in human society (508–09). Once the time has come

for Simplicissimus's return, the king offers him one free wish, and the protagonist asks that he would get a mineral well in his courtyard as a source of much healing, certainly an indication of early modern interest in balneology, not to mention the fascination with water at large, which is here identified as the substructure of the entire world. Without a solid understanding of that underground, consisting of almost infinite caverns and a vast ocean, nothing here on earth would be comprehensible, and nothing could thrive.

Water thus emerges in this novel as the ultimate element and precondition of all creation, and the little fountains, wells, brooks, creeks, streams, or rivers are only the emanations of the root and essence of it all. Ironically, however, Simplicissimus, on his long way back to the surface, only thinks about the economic benefit of his mineral well (the starting point for a future spa) and in a way betrays the secret teachings about the true nature of God's creation deep in the water (516–17). The narrator relates how the protagonist gets lost in the forest, how he finally comes across forest workers who are afraid of him, but eventually take him to a spot where he can find his way home. The mystery of the waterworld, however, is no longer examined and remains almost something like a fantasy. Above all, the mineral well does not appear in his yard, and so none of his dreams about a huge economic success become reality. Nevertheless, we are left with a glorious imagination of a utopian, subterranean dimension that proves to be the source of all life, and can thus be identified as God's central creation, the core of all existence [66] [67].

10. Conclusion

Literary imagination has always served well to reflect upon larger social, economic, religious, and anthropological issues. This also applies to the topic of water in its many manifestations, which proved to be critically important in terms of epistemology for medieval and early modern poets. It always depended on the specific genre or intention behind a text for water to emerge as an essential element. Many times, shipwrecks and water-related natural catastrophes dominated the various narratives. But the individual poets were not content with mere descriptions of water; instead, we constantly observe considerable efforts to instrumentalize the appearance of water for a learning process concerning the vagaries of life, leading to disasters and also productive reconstruction.

Tracing the thematization of water throughout the centuries, taking into account many different genres, we realize that the traditional borderlines between the various historical-cultural periods do not prove to be particularly valuable or useful. Instead, we have identified a constant stream of comments about the impact and importance of water in many different contexts. Water has always been one of the major mediums for Fortune to show its impact on human life (storms, flooding, even tsunamis). Examining water in whatever manifestation – from the well to the river and ocean – within the literary discourse of the late Middle Ages and

the early modern times sheds important light on human awareness of the absolute importance of water for all existence. The Romantics ca. two hundred years later responded in kind, though their focus rested more on the mysterious, the magical, and the spiritual elements hidden within water.

Of course, this does not mean that every major poet or writer in the pre-modern period made water into a central theme. There is nothing symbolic about water in major novels such as the anonymous *Fortunatus* (1509) or the famous *Faustbuch* (1587), disregarding moments when the protagonist is traveling. The novels by Elisabeth von Nassau-Saarbrücken (ca. 1437) or the anonymous *Malagis* (ca. 1440–1460) contain references to rivers or other bodies of water, but water itself does not take on particular importance. But our selection of literary texts has clearly demonstrated that when we use a special lens, we can still identify a global interest in water as an element, as a natural medium for epistemology, mysticism, love, philosophy, and also for satire and sarcasm. This interest was not limited to the pre-modern era, as Grimmelshausen's novel remarkably illustrates. We can thus continue with our research and probe also later cultural periods as to literary, philosophical, medical, and theological comments on water.

We also should not ignore the numerous depictions of bodies of water and of people riding in boats and ships, often in rather idyllic settings, which signal the central importance of water as a third space within human existence (Bhabha) [68]. Simon Bening (ca. 1483–1561), the famous Flemish illuminator of Books of Hours, for instance, included stunning sceneries of a beautiful landscape crisscrossed by lakes and rivers, such as in the image for the month of May [69]. However, the people in the boat only seek entertainment and courtly pleasure, playing and listening to music, while courtiers at the shore ride on horseback. Only a mill in the background indicates that this is supposed to reflect the rural world [70].

In the Book of Hours for Charles the Bold (1469), we see Christ pushing off a little rocky island with St. James the Greater sitting there asleep, thus being set on his way for future missionary activities. The artists projected a beautiful water scene, with a big city and behind that a hill and then mountains in the background [71]. In the so-called *Golf Book* (ca. 1520) a river cuts through the rural setting where a woman stands on the left, carrying a basket on her head, while there are a man cutting wheat with a hand-held sickle and two people sitting in the grass resting from work [72].

The calmness of the water is heightened by the reflections of the trees growing on the shore on the surface. Significantly, Bening was apparently intensively interested in water, beginning with the image of a fountain in the Garden of Eden behind the scene with the creation of Eve (frontispiece). The image for February stands out for the major vista toward the ocean

and a coastal city. For June, he chose the motive of farmers shearing sheep, and water appears in the background as well. The same applies to the month of July, when the peasants cut grass for hay. Notably, the series of images concludes with one depicting the Great Flood, the deluge. While we see people and animals drowning or desperately clinging to trees, in the background, Noah's is calmly floating on the stormy sea. Out of the chaos caused by water, new harmony and order appears as a promise.

Occasionally, we find other illuminations with a river or a larger body of water, but this element emerges only rarely, so if it does, we can be certain that the scene was meant to be particularly symbolical. This is also the case in *Les douze dames de Rhétorique* (1470 [73]). It would be insightful to investigate further what the cityscape, the bridge, and the boat in the background might indicate since the allegorical figure of Eloquence sitting in an enclosed garden occupies the forefront. The river, or canal, certainly attracts our attention and invites us to explore the distance into which the river disappears more in depth.

Another fairly common motif, intimately associated with water, was the giant St. Christopher depicted on countless church walls, oil paintings, and book illuminations, who unknowingly carries the Christ child across a river or a lake and almost drowns because of the growing weight (representing the entire world), which symbolizes, among many other aspects, the transition from the material to the spiritual dimension – he officially lost his status as a saint only in 1969 because he was regarded as imaginary, not verifiable as a historical person, although he had been venerated already since the fifth century [74].

We also find numerous images of a river, such as in the Book of Hours kept in the Glasgow University Library (Sp Coll MS Euing 3; Flanders, ca. 1460; for the online reproduction of the relevant images, see

https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/library/files/special/exhibns/month/dec2006.html; last accessed on Feb. 16, 2024) in the scene depicting the Annunciation of the Savior's Birth to the shepherds (fol. 73v). While they are debating amongst each other in the foreground, the river demarcates the separation from the background with its urban center (Jerusalem or Bethlehem), while a star above them shines down upon the ground on the other side. There is no bridge or ferryboat to be seen, but the body of water waits for their crossing. Even in the scene showing the Holy Family's Flight to Egypt, the artist included a river, probably because water always demarcates borders that need to be transgressed [75] [76]. The fact that for pre-modern artists and poets water mattered significantly cannot be overlooked. For us living in the desert, all that does not come as a surprise, but it might also dawn upon those who increasingly have to face a water crisis. In the pre-modern age, water was already identified as centrally important in physical and spiritual terms. This does not mean that every reference to a well, a fountain, a pond, or a river would have to be read exclusively in symbolic or spiritual terms.

However, in many different circumstances, both literary and artistic, both philosophical and theological, the appearance of water signals that a semantic shift took place, a new meaning emerged [77]. Already in biblical times, writers expressed great respect, awe, fear, and love of water, acknowledging it as a most fundamental source of all existence. As we have observed in this study, the topic of water greatly gained in significance in the Middle Ages and early modern age and assumed a wide range of symbolic meanings, but its essential function both in material and epistemological terms as the basic building block of all life has never changed. Since we face many dangers today resulting from the consequences produced now in the Anthropocene, that is, by people, it proves to be a deeply relevant concern to develop a more historical and cultural understanding of the discourse on water as a force that sustains and threatens life [78]. To be sure, all bodies of water have a history, not only in natural terms, but specifically a history closely connected with human culture, whether we think of the Rhine, the Danube, the Thames, the Seine, the Ebro, or the Volga [79]. Medieval poets already demonstrated a deep awareness of those bodies of water, or of wells, lakes, and the seas. Human destiny is commonly determined by the individual's interaction with water, both then and today. Whether the human race will survive the Anthropocene will heavily depend on our stewardship of water, and medieval poets have, indeed, much to tell us about that, at least with regards to the need to pay great respect to it.

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