Sea Voyages in Medieval Romances: Symbolic Trails through Existential Experiences and Female Suffering on the Water

Albrecht Classen [1]

Professor of German Studies
Department of German Studies, University of Arizona, Tucson, United States

Abstract

In a considerable number of medieval narratives we encounter the shared theme of sea voyage, either undertaken for the purpose of marriage, or imposed on the suffering female protagonist who is persecuted by evil-minded people. Considering that most medieval audiences were not that much familiar with travel across big bodies of water, the literary motif emerges as highly significant because the voyage itself, mostly without any crew of sailors, carried out almost automatically, with the protagonist all by her/himself, transforms the traveler and has also a major impact on the countries or people where the ship arrives. The voyage emerges as an enterprise brought upon by God, who helps the individual to survive this most dangerous experience, which then brings about significant change in the people who live in the new country. At the same time, this theme also represents a kind of horizontal *catabasis* and regularly has a deep transformative impact on everyone involved.

1. Introduction

1.1. Travel in the Middle Ages

Current research on travel and travel literature in the pre-modern age has almost reached a point of saturation, with the focus on the actual travel narratives, the travel experience, the cultural encounters, the religious experiences, and the material conditions (see Classen, 2018a). As we have learned through many different approaches and the investigation of numerous different narrative genres and records, the medieval roads were actually filled with travelers, and quite a large number of them ventured out far beyond the traditional limits of Europe (Ohler 1989; Reichert 2001; Reichert 2014; Legassie 2017). To some extent, we could even be justified talking about global travel already prior to 1500, and this even at a significant level, if we think of courageous travelers such as Marco

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[1] aclassen@arizona.edu

Polo and Odorico da Pordenone, but also of Ibn Fadlān and Ibn Battuta (Houari 2000). Countless roads crisscrossed all of Europe and far beyond (Silk Road) because there was intensive trade between western Europe and the Mediterranean, from there with the Black Sea, and then further east (Giraldez 2015; Khvalkov 2018). This astounding mobility had obviously also consequences for the literary discourse, and some recent scholars have now even recognized here an opportunity to uncover an early but distinct sense of globalism *avant la lettre* also in some literary documents from the Middle Ages (Heng and Ramey 2014; Uhlig 2014; Heng 2004; Taylor 2020).

1.2. Travel in Medieval Literature

Medieval literature at large is filled with comments about travel experiences, both over land and across the sea, obviously because traveling by itself constitutes a fundamental transformative, intercultural experience. The individual leaves home, crosses a huge body of water, or covers a vast stretch of land, and reaches new territory where there are different people, cultures, languages, and religions. Both heroic poetry and courtly literature are deeply determined by this fundamental movement, whether we think of *Beowulf* or the *Nibelungenlied*, of Chrétien de Troyes's *Erec* or *Yvain* (or Hartmann von Aue's Middle High German translations as *Erec* and *Iwein*) or the various Grail romances (again, Chrétien, and then Wolfram von Eschenbach). The *lais* by Marie de France are as much structured by the protagonists' travel as is the anonymous alliterative Middle English romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Virtually all Old Norse Sagas contain extensive reports about the protagonists' travel, the exploration of new lands, about enormous voyages across the sea, along coastlines, deep into rivers, and so forth (Classen 2018).

In most of these examples, the motivation for travel is simply the search for adventure and heroic challenges, or religious quests (see also Dante's *Divina Commedia*). In some cases, we also observe mercantile interests in traveling, such as in Rudolf von Ems's *Der guote Gêrhart* (Rudolf), or simply curiosity, as most dramatically outlined in the anonymous *Fortunatus* (printed in 1509; for an edition, see *Romane*). Religious reasons (pilgrimage) were also of greatest significance, as the vast body of relevant travelogues (Margery Kempe, e.g.) confirms. But what happens in those narratives when women are forced to leave their home because they have to escape from danger to their lives or are simply shipped across the sea to marry a foreign ruler? Here we face the pan-European motif of the "Constance story," which was maybe most poignantly developed by Chaucer in his "Man of Law's Tale" and in numerous other late medieval narratives.

My purpose here is not to probe to what extent we could agree with Jamie K. Taylor in her most recent article regarding a new sense of globalism contained in this literary account (Taylor 2020; see also Heng and Ramey 2014), and I also do not want to investigate in what ways the various narratives were related to each other through translations or inspirations (Black 2003). More important seems to be the questions what this travel means by itself, how the female, at times also male, protagonists experience this travel, how this voyage, if not imposed by force, is possible in the first place, and what the outcome of those voyages are for them and their families. Those long transports across large bodies of water regularly lead to profound changes in the narrative set up, profile the main figures' destiny, and serve as catalysts for critical transformations in the social environments.

2. Crossing Water in Medieval Literature

Following recent research on the eco-critical significance of water in medieval literature, which can provide meaning, direction, orientation, but can also constitute challenges and dangers (Sobecki 2008; Smith 2017; Classen 2018b), we have here an enormously potent opportunity not yet fully utilized to gain deeper insight into metaphorical and symbolic features determining those narratives which obviously appealed to many different audiences. Social and economic historians have already examined the relevance of the maritime environment of Europe throughout times (Ayers 2016; Elvert et al. 2018; Huber-Rebenich et al. 2017), and the same has been done for the Arabic and Asian world, for instance. The practical use of water in everyday life, for commerce, and in economic terms (canals, wells, irrigation, water mills, etc.) has now also found much interest (Mielzarek and Zschieschang 2019).

Here, however, I suggest to pursue a literary-historical approach to the topic of sea voyages undertaken mostly by female heroines because it will allow us to understand more profoundly how medieval writers attributed epistemological significance both to water itself and to the sea voyage, which offered freedom while exposing the woman (at times also male) traveler at the same time to enormous dangers, though the end result always seems to have been transformative and inspirational.

Instead of applying an ideological, religious, or political lens to these "Constance stories" (Taylor 2020), I suggest that the motif of crossing a body of water was regularly perceived as an epistemological operation of a physical and a spiritual kind, and this at a time when Europeans were already exploring many venues to cross the major bodies of water surrounding that continent (Blume et al. 2018) in order to reach distant markets, to extend diplomatic ties, or to satisfy personal curiosity.

3. A Modern Fairy Tale

Surprisingly, we find a remarkable avatar of the medieval narratives with this topic in the famous collection of fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm, *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* ("As Mädchen ohne Hände" 228-36), first printed in 1812, and in the final version in 1857, although there the emphasis on crossing water is much reduced and only a faint echo of the cases from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Although not a representative of medieval literature, I want to begin with a short analysis of this text in order to gain a better understanding of the shared structural elements and of the historical arc of the motif under investigation because it appears to have exerted a universal influence, or rather mirrored a global concern about a fundamental conflict in the life of young women (Köhler-Zülch 1996).

A poor miller inadvertently promises his daughter to the devil in return for money, but she can protect herself through her piety, although her father must cut off her hands in that process. Even though the miller would like to provide for her with all of his 'illicitly' acquired wealth, she prefers to leave and beg people for her sustenance. She reaches a royal orchard with many fruits, some of which she would like to eat, but she can enter the garden only after an angel has closed a lock and thus drained the canal around it. Eventually, the king discovers her and quickly decides to marry her, but the persecutions by the devil then continue.

After a year, while she is expecting a child, the king has to leave on a military campaign, and his mother then informs him about the delivery of a healthy son. However, the devil steals the letter and changes it, which now claims that she had brought to the world a changeling, or a wolf-child. Even though the king orders his people not to do anything about it, the new letter instructs the mother to kill the young woman and her child. The old woman is not willing to commit this crime, but she sends the daughter-in-law away to protect her from harm. When her son returns home and realizes the truth, he embarks on a long search for his wife and son, and eventually discovers them seven years later, during which God had helped her to have her hands grow again.

For our purposes, we can disregard here the highly complex motif of the cut-off hands and the many attempts at psychological, sexual readings (Dundes, *Folklore Matters* 112-50; Black, *Medieval Narratives* 39-41) and focus on the one specific episode with the young woman being able to cross the trench once the water has been blocked because this constitutes the critical connection with the numerous medieval sources. The garden could be viewed as a representative of Paradise, though it would be rather doubtful that hence the king stands in for God, although the female protagonist (maybe even the Virgin Mary?) is

constantly persecuted by the devil. However, the fact that she can cross the trench with dry feet constitutes a miracle created by an angel acting upon God's behalf. Once on the other side of the trench, she can enjoy the fruit, and thus she is discovered by the king. Of course, her trials and tribulations have not yet been overcome, and she has to escape once again, but this time her husband follows her and desperately tries to find her, which is possible only after seven years of searching, whereupon he encounters the secret house where she and her son live, protected by the angel.

4. Medieval Sources: Reading Selected Works

The similarities with the medieval tradition of this narrative are somewhat tenuous, but certainly present, though we cannot tell at all how this original account was transformed through oral channels into a fairy tale in the course of time, unless we are simply dealing with archetypal motifs of a universal kind. Without going into further details here, suffices it at least to refer to the various medieval accounts of the late twelfth-century, such as the "Vitae Duorum Offarum," "The Empress of Rome" by Gautier de Coinci (ca. 1177-1236), the Middle English Breton lai, "Emaré" (late fourteenth century), and the fourteenth-century Middle French chanson de geste, *La Belle Hélène de Constantinople* (Schlauch, *Chaucer's Constance* 64-71) where the same motif assumes center position (Black 2003).

The basic elements characterizing the version presented by the Grimm brothers consist of the young woman being completely obedient, willingly submitting under the cruel treatment by her father, her departure from home (here voluntary), the crossing of water (here shut off for her only), the marriage with a king, the delivery of a child which is allegedly being monstrous in appearance or the devil's offspring ("Wechselbalg"; see Piaschewski 1935; Helduser 2016), the new growth of the hands, and the king's long search for his lost family. But there is no voyage, and no wide-open body of water, as is regularly the case in medieval literature. However, the young woman has to leave and roam the world until she finds a secure place for herself, protected by an angel, and her husband must search for her for seven years until he is successful and can reunify with his wife and embrace his son.

4.1. *Mai und Beaflor*

Turning now to our medieval 'sources,' let us take a look first at the anonymous Middle High German *Mai und Beaflor* from the late thirteenth century (*Mai und Beaflor*; cf. now also Bußmann), where the involuntary sea voyage dominates the entire structure of this sentimental romance (Classen 2006). There are, however, major differences to the fairy tale as it evolved in the early nineteenth century.

Beaflor is threatened by her father, the emperor of Rome, with incest (cf. also *Apollonius of Tyre*; see below), but she escapes in a little boat that takes her to Greece. There, the local count, significantly called Mai (May?), immediately falls in love with her, marries her, and soon she also becomes pregnant. The subsequent events are fairly similar, yet with the one major difference that it is not the devil, but Mai's own mother, Eliacha, who falsifies the letters in order to eliminate her daughter-in-law, whose identity has remained unknown to everyone and whom she does not trust at all. While Mai is on a crusade in Spain, Beaflor delivers a child, which is dutifully reported to the father. Again, the infant is allegedly a monstrous birth, but now specifically as a result of Beaflor's adultery with two priests.

Mai is so deeply distraught about the terrible news that he is about to commit suicide, but his people prevent him from this ghastly deed. Hence, in the epistolary response he urges his barons back home to wait for his return and not to do anything about the situation, but the letter, once again falsified, now states that they are supposed to kill the poor woman and the child. While in the fairy tale the mother-in-law tries her best to protect her, here the evil old countess endeavors to have this stranger woman murdered. In the fairy tale, the mother-in-law protects her by sending her secretly away, whereas here the barons conceive of the plan of sending her away over the water and to pretend that she had been killed as commanded in the letter.

When Mai returns home, his people are so much in an uproar about this 'cruel tyrant' that they are about to kill their lord (Classen 2008), but it becomes clear very soon that Eliacha had surreptitiously swapped the letters. Her son is so enraged about this that he stabs her to death, but this does not bring his wife and son back to life. The count lingers in despondency for a long time, until he then travels across the Mediterranean to Rome where he hopes for the pope's forgiveness of his matricide. But there the long-expected happy end becomes possible because Mai encounters his wife and son, recognizes them after a while, and the family is thus joyfully reunited.

While Beaflor's boat is described as an almost entirely enclosed tube, with just one window to look out, flying over the water like an arrow (v. 1707-09) despite the heavy load of food, water, clothing, and an enormous treasure, Mai is transported from Greece to Rome in a whole flotilla of sailing ships. Even though they have to struggle hard against the strong wind, they also cross the sea very rapidly (v. 8129) and reach the same spot where Beaflor had landed, the estuary of the river Tiber. As the narrator emphasizes extensively, all those voyages were under the ultimate command of God, and traveling thus constitutes for them a predestined course of events. Without those voyages,

however, Beaflor would have been raped by her father, she would not have encountered Count Mai, she would not have escaped Eliacha's clutches, and Mai then finally would not have been able to unify with his wife again, leading to the overall happy outcome. Crossing the sea thus constitutes an essential operation demarcating the events as they evolve in front of our eyes. But not every voyage is the same, and not every ship is similar.

Beaflor travels all by herself the first time she crosses the Mediterranean; and the second time, on her return voyage, she is accompanied only by her infant son. Each time she has the same clothing, treasures, and the crown with her, nothing is lost or damaged. She is hidden in the hold of her ship and cannot be seen from the outside. We do not know how the ship moves or is directed. Is there even a sail, a rudder, or any of the other important components that make a ship sea-worthy in the first place? The narrator only informs us that a competent carpenter was in charge of building her ship, which must have enough storage space for the food and water, the clothing, and the jewels which Beaflor takes with her both times. Undoubtedly, here we face a ship that operates directly under God's commands which makes it possible for Beaflor to escape first her father's illicit pursuit, then Eliacha's murderous efforts. Without the possibility of fleeing both times across the sea leaving no trace behind, Beaflor would not have survived or would have suffered badly at her father's hands.

Similarly, Mai succeeds in crossing the Mediterranean in his effort to reach Italy despite the heavy storm; the narrator emphasizes explicitly that all this was possible because of God's help (vv. 8189-204). The men regard their safe arrival at the Italian shore as a miracle and give thanks to God (vv. 8229-41), which parallels Beaflor's experience, though she had much less help and would have certainly suffered her death through drowning if she had not be guided and protected by the divine force. The author was obviously also aware about the rather complicated geophysical conditions in the eastern Mediterranean because he points out that those who do know the route across the sea would never believe that she could reach Greece so safely, speedily, and without any danger to her life (vv. 1976-81). In fact, "so ist ez gar vnmugelich" (v. 1983; it is really impossible), and yet Beaflor reaches her goal all by herself, guided and protected by God.

Early on, after she had left Italy and arrived in Greece, she quickly assumes a significant public role as Count Mai's wife and the mother of the future heir. But once she has left Greece and arrived in Italy, Beaflor remains in hiding protected by a well-meaning senator and his wife until her husband has arrived and finally recognizes her, which then quickly leads to the revelation of her father's original evil intentions, which he finally admits and also repents, now being of a very

changed mind. In fact, he resigns from his throne and elevates Mai, his worthy son-in-law, to the rank of the new emperor. The movements across the sea can thus be structurally identified as transformative in personal, political, and social terms, whereas with regard to God, Beaflor remains unflinchingly steadfast in her complete trust in the divine help, which indeed protects and guides her the whole time and never abandons her. As passively as this female protagonist operates while traveling, as successfully does she reach her destination, though she never knows where she is supposed to go and does not care about it either because she places herself entirely in God's hands. Thus, the sea voyage becomes a way for God to intervene in human destiny and to guide the faithful toward the proper goal.

4.2. Geoffrey Chaucer's "Man of Law's Tale"

In Chaucer's "Man of Law's Tale" (1387), included in his famous *Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1400; cf. Calabrese) and, parallel to John Gower's "Tale of Constance" in his *Confessio Amantis*, based on Nicholas Trivet's (ca. 1258–ca. 1328) Anglo-Norman *Les chronicles*, the female protagonist is also identified as the daughter of the Roman emperor, but he has no incestuous interests in her; instead, he offers her as a bride to the sultan of Syria (Grennan 1985; Bullón-Fernández 2000). After her marriage with the sultan, she manages to convince him to convert to Christianity, which awakes such an ire in his power-hungry mother (v. 434) that she has everyone killed at the wedding festivities, except Constance, whom she places in a rudderless boat and sends her away, abandoning her to her destiny. Both the evil mother-in-law and the sea voyage thus prove to be crucial narrative elements shared by both accounts. Taylor recognizes here a very different perspective: "On the sea, dislocated from civilization, Constance epitomizes a global, nomadic subject—that is, someone whose subjectivity makes sense only outside territories and thus outside the law" (Taylor 256). Insofar as the protagonist never loses her connection with civilization and her subjectivity, and is only described as being in the transit from one culture to another, the voyage itself gains much more significance than Taylor is willing to grant since she is overly bent on identifying here a medieval notion of globalism.

While much of previous Chaucer scholarship has focused on the question of how international or maritime law here might clash with national law, and this in the late Middle Ages (e.g., Ormrod 2005; Reinhard 1941), more relevant seems to be how this poor woman travels, what the crossing of the sea means for her and those who meet her at the various shores, and how her voyages have a transformative effect on those people and cultures where she arrives with her boat (Stavsky 2020). Attempts to perceive here a reflection of a merchant mentality (Staley 2016) mirrored by the fluidity of Constance's repeated and

long-term travels do not take us far especially because the heroine never barters with anything and is far removed from any mercantile thinking. Granted, Constance's reputation extends even to Syria because many merchants have talked about her, but she is far beyond their social class and portrayed mostly as a nearly saintly figure whose spirituality convinces her marriage partners both in East and West to convert to Christianity.

She dreads, however, the voyage, fearing the foreign world where she would be all alone: "strange nacioun" (v. 268); yet she submits under her parents will and departs, without the narrator giving us any details about the ship itself or the voyage, except that it is propelled by sails (v. 321). Moreover, as we can deduce from later comments, Constance was accompanied by a whole crowd of Romans who support her mission to build political connections and to missionize and convert the Syrians to Christianity (vv. 393-94). Those, however, are finished soon enough by the Sultanesse's order, and Constance is then put on board of a ship all by herself, which reconnects her with all the other female figures in medieval and modern literature who have to suffer through this destiny.

This ship is specifically identified as "steerlees" (v. 439; rudderless), but it has sails, which the Syrian men teach her quickly how to operate. Moreover, they do not intend to starve her to death, as they give her enough provisions, then also clothing, sending her off to return to Italy, a journey which actually takes her years, especially because she bypasses Italy, then the Straits of Gibraltar and Morocco, then enters the Atlantic Ocean and finally reaches the shores of northern England: "Fer in Northumberlond the wawe hire caste" (508), where she undergoes the next stage of her long series of trials and tribulations, being falsely accused of having murdered the Constable's wife Hermengyld. The evil man is smitten by God and then executed, and Alla and his people convert to Christianity.

However, the same narrative pattern reappears there as well, with Alla leaving home for a war campaign in Scotland and his mother Donegild being extremely envious of Constance plotting to get rid of her. After having delivered a son, Mauricius, the happy news are sent to Alla, but Donegild falsifies the letter, which now claims that Constance had delivered a monster child since she was really an "elf" (v. 754), a motif which evokes the long and pan-European motif of Melusine (Jean d'Arras, 1393; Couldrette, ca. 1400; Thüring von Ringoltingen, 1456; cf. Urban, Kemmis, and Ridley Elmes 2017; Zeldenrust 2020), though there no assassination attempt is carried out, and Melusine delivers many children without being endangered by a mother-in-law. Nevertheless, even in the *Melusine* novels there is grumbling among the people, general suspicion about her mysterious origin, and simply fear of the stranger woman, whose children,

in fact, reveal a monstrous origin through some facial features.

Parallel to *Mai und Beaflor*, the king, though deeply distraught, orders that the mother and child be taken care of, but this letter is also falsified, now saying that both are to be sent away in the same boat Constance had arrived in. Notably, she is not supposed to be killed, but Donegild still wants her to disappear, and shipping her off onto the wild sea might be considered a form of death penalty after all. As in the other narratives, the protagonist has to trust that God would preserve her life, which then also happens, confirming, once again, the deeply religious message in this and in the parallel narratives. The voyage itself thus emerges as the central motif in human life, critically exemplified by Constance who never knows the direction her boat is taking since she cannot steer it, being completely subject to natural, hence divine forces.

As to be expected, upon his return King Alla quickly learns the truth of his mother's treachery and slays her as a punishment, but Constance is gone for sure. She spends more than five years on her voyage, survives the attack by a pagan lord who drowns in the water after a struggle with Constance, and is, once she has reached Italy after all, eventually picked up by a Roman senator who takes her home with him and entrusts her to his wife, who is actually Constance's aunt (v. 981). The *denouement* is near when Alla subsequently travels to Rome as well to atone and then receive papal penance for his matricide (v. 991), when he recognizes his own son and then his wife. Soon, they all meet the emperor, and she reveals herself as his daughter. The narrator then quickly wraps up his account, moves into the future when Maurice succeeds his grandfather as emperor of Rome, but he also adds the brief remark about the joyful life which Alla and Constance lead once they are back in England. However, the king then dies, and Constance returns to Rome, which concludes all of her "aventure" (v. 1151).

Altogether, this female protagonist spends a long time of her life voyaging, first from Rome to Syria, second from Syria to England, third from England to Italy, from there, fourth, back to Northumberland, and, fifth, finally back home to Rome. While the first, fourth, and fifth voyage is of no great significance in the narrative development, the second and third last years and represent the most critical phase for Constance, completely abandoned to the "salte see" (v. 1039), as King Alla formulates it in memory of his lost wife, and as she puts it as well when she encounters her father again, begging him never to send her off to another heathen king in marriage (v. 1109; cf. the narrator's description using the same phrase, v. 445; cf. Kolve 302).

I would further disagree with Taylor's claim that Constance's sea voyages transform her into a "nomadic subject defined not by terrestrial borders but by

movement and drift" (Taylor 258). On the surface, this might sound true, but in essence, each one of her travels across water proves to be divinely directed, helping her in that process to escape from a terrible destiny at the hand of murderous mothers-in-law (east and west), contributing to the conversion of pagan people, and proving her complete devotion to God. There is never a sense of cultural difference, apart from the tension between Islam, Christianity, and paganism. Voyage thus amounts to a synecdoche for Constance's life-long endeavors to preserve her innocence, chastity, and faith, and she serves in this way also as God's instrument here on earth. As Taylor insightfully, maybe a little surprisingly, formulates it, "the Man of Law seems most optimistic about Constance's fate when she is at sea, whereas he is most unsure as a reader and storyteller once she finds land" (Taylor 260).

In *Mai und Beaflor* the suffering heroine is equally praised as an astounding character, but the religious element is not as prominent as in Chaucer's tale. The fairy tale version by the Brothers Grimm, by contrast, reintroduces the component of Christianity to an extreme, eliminates the role of the evil mother-in-law, reduces the function of water, and adds the critical function of the angel protecting the young woman.

4.3. *Apollonius of Tyre*

Both in *Mai und Beaflor* and in "The Man of Law's Tale," the traveling protagonist never operates the ship by herself, and it almost seems as if this vessel moves automatically upon God's command. This motif can be found already in the *lai* "Guigemar" by Marie de France (ca. 1190; ed. and trans. Waters) and in the various versions of *Partonopeus de Blois*, such as in Konrad von Würzburg's *Partonopier und Meliur* (ca. 1290; cf. Eley). Travel by ship is also a significant theme (not so much a motif) in the anonymous *Aucassin et Nicolette* (ca. 1250) and in the many renderings of *Floire and Blanchefleur* (earliest version ca. 1160; trans. Hubert).

Most important, however, at least in our context, proves to be the highly popular pan-European *Apollonius of Tyre*, originally composed in Greek during the second or third century C.E., and disseminated throughout time far into the seventeenth century (Archibald 1991). While the protagonist travels by ship virtually all of his life, and while his daughter Tarsia is captured by pirates and sold into prostitution, my interest is here focused only on the second part where Apollonius has virtually abandoned his will to live and does not know what to with his life after the loss not only of his wife, but also of his daughter, who had allegedly died from a sickness. She was also supposed to be murdered as commanded by her foster-mother Dionysias, but was spared by the servant, yet only to suffer her destiny of being snatched away by pirates and of being transported to a slave market to be sold into prostitution.

Very similar to Beaflor and Constance, Apollonius is practically hidden in the hull of his ship and has refused to cut his nails and his hair, feeling completely despondent and not able to handle his own life any longer – the same must have happened with the female figures, but the narrators do not engage with such practicality. As he instructs the sailors: "'Throw me in the hold of the ship, for I want to breathe my last at sea, since I have not been allowed to see light on land'" (157). His rescue arrives only when the ship finally harbors at Mitylene, where all the sailors are allowed to join the citizens' festivities, while the protagonist stays behind, virtually like in a coffin, having no more any wish to live: "nec vivere desiderem" (160).

The lord of the city, Athenagoras, realizes that Apollonius needs outside help to recover from his psychological illness, so he sends for the intelligent Tarsia, who indeed manages to reach out to this sullen and dejected man, first, by sharing her own suffering and sorrow in a poem (abduction by pirates, having been sold into prostitution), then by challenging him with a series of riddles, and finally by telling her personal story after she has fallen down and has started to bleed from the nose. Only then does Apollonius realize that she is his daughter, and can thus wake up and recover from his profound grief and despondency.

The narrative then moves quickly toward the happy end, with the pimp being burnt at the stake, Tarsia marrying Athenagoras, Apollonius finding his wife still alive, and all of them returning home safely. Not by accident is the final outcome determined by one last sea voyage back to the city of Tarsus, where Tarsia's foster-parents Dionysias and Stranguillio are executed for their wrongdoing, and then to Pentapolis in Cyrene where the family reunites with Apollonius's father-in-law, Archistrates, whereupon all previous helpers are rewarded. The crossing of the sea thus proves to be the metaphorical 'road map' for all the major events happening in this narrative, and all the ups and downs of the protagonist's life find their vivid expression in the varied experiences on the sea (Classen 2010).

Only rarely does the protagonist really know the direction of his voyage; many times, he is simply roaming the sea and let's destiny determine the course. This is, of course, somewhat different from the medieval narratives of the sea-faring female heroine fleeing death and not being in control of their own destiny, but in terms of the basic experience, with Beaflor, Constance, and Apollonius being entirely subject to the forces of wind and water (voluntarily or involuntarily), we can recognize here a significant commonality, which allows us to determine the true extent to which medieval authors relied heavily on the concept of the sea voyage as a metaphorical, symbolic, and material condition of human life.

4.4. Boccaccio's *Decameron*

My last example containing this phenomenon is contained in Boccaccio's famous *Decameron* from ca. 1350, in which we often hear of voyages, but never as intensively as in the seventh story told by Panfilo on the second day, the story about the Babylonian princess Alatiel (Taylor 2001). Here, the religious component is entirely missing, whereas the sexual element gains supreme importance insofar as the shipwrecked Muslim princess becomes constantly the target of male desires and possessiveness. Every one of those eight men who has fallen in love with her is subsequently murdered by the next one, whereas Alatiel passes through this turbulent sequence of events rather calmly, never being able to communicate with any of those men because of language differences. Those men take her from one port to the other (Kinoshita and Jacobs 2007), trying to hide their crimes and enjoying Alatiel's sexualized body as their possession, but since they all die and the young woman is the only one to survive, finally returning home to her father enriched with much sexual experience and yet pretending still to be a virgin, the seemingly passive female character emerges as the true protagonist who lives out fully her destiny (Taylor 2020) as a voyager and achieves personal happiness all along despite the horrible crimes that happen around her as a result of her physical attractiveness.

The well-equipped ship that is supposed to take her to the King of Algarve cannot withstand the mighty sea storm that hits them after they have passed Sardinia, and in the subsequent shipwreck at the shore of Majorca all the men drown; only Alatiel and a few of her maids survive. The next day, they are rescued by the nobleman Pericone da Visalgo, who eventually manages to get her to sleep with him, but his younger brother, Marato, also enthralled by the lady, has him murdered and kidnaps the lady, only to be thrown into the sea by the two masters of the ship with which he had tried to get away. Those masters, however, fight with each other over who could possess her first, one being killed, the other badly wounded, which soon brings Alatiel into the possession of another man, but the killing continues, and the poor woman passes on to other lovers. But there is a good outcome as well, with her finally meeting an older man of her race who helps her to return to her father, whom she tells a completely fictive account of her destiny, casting herself as a most honorable woman, which makes it possible for her later to be sent to the King of Algarve once again who then marries her happily assuming that she was still a virgin.

There are enough similarities between Alatiel's destiny and those of Beaflor and Constance to draw out the significant parallels, though the differences are equally strong, which appears to make this story by Boccaccio to a most sophisticated but effective pastiche of those nearly hagiographical accounts from

the previous centuries. The young woman is also set to sea, but it is a splendid, royal ship with a large crew. However, while the other characters safely cross the ocean without any help and nautical skills, and this during a period of years, Alatiel's ship is crushed, with all the men drowning. Beaflor and Constance preserve their honor, whereas the Muslim princess becomes a sexual plaything for all those Christian men, whom she accepts without any demur as her new partners. Nevertheless, all three women cross the sea and have to face their miserable destiny all by themselves. Apollonius is a slightly different case but he roams the sea aimlessly after he has lost both his wife and daughter and would not want anything less than his own death.

6. Conclusion

The (often) female voyagers are always in danger of losing their lives, either because of shipwreck, as in Boccaccio's story, or because they are sent out to the ocean in order to die there, or because life no longer means anything (*Apollonius*). The structural framework also proves to be mostly the same, with marriage as the outcome of the sea voyage in all the cases considered here, including the fairy tale by the brothers Grimm. Only Boccaccio's narrative is completely secular and intensively operates with the theme of sexuality, while the other tales keep it more hidden in the background, without occluding it altogether.

Finally, in each case, the protagonist repeats the travel or voyage and thus experiences a circular development, from a dramatic low point to the high point of happiness after the existential crisis has been overcome. All examples treat the lives of young members of royal families who are entrusted to the water for the purpose of marriage (Constance and Alatiel), are forced to embark on a voyage by a violent mother-in-law or an incestuous father (Beaflor, Constance), they tend to be reunited with their (by then repenting) father (Beaflor, Alatiel), and they travel the second time with their new-born child (Beaflor, Constance, Apollonius). Granted, *Apollonius of Tyre* shares less with the other narratives because the protagonist is male, has lost his family, and roams the sea out of deep depression, but he also experiences shipwreck like Alatiel, marries, loses his wife, and recovers her again at the end.

Altogether, even including the fairy tale by the brothers Grimm, sexuality, marriage, virginity, virtues, honor, religious devotion, and character strength are all negotiated, tested, and demonstrated in all the examples examined here. As we may thus summarize, voyage, whether voluntary or involuntary, constitutes an existential experience for all five protagonists, which invites readers to consider the religious connotations of the ship, the voyage, and the sea in the lives of human characters.

To return to our initial reflections, while travel increased tremendously since the high Middle Ages, both over land and across the sea, numerous contemporary poets intensively operated with the notion of the voyage as a central, iconic motif to place their protagonists in life-threatening situations in which they then prove their inner strength, ethical and spiritual vigor, and endurance. The temporary and only superficial (material) fluidity of their existence while voyaging transforms them, because of their long suffering, into strong individuals who emerge as role models for their audiences (Woschitz 2003; Squatriti 1998).

Particularly because of the experience on the water being completely subject to the waves and the wind, all five characters underscore their true ideals and values insofar as they are firm in their character, loyal, steadfast, and devoted, so they are the very opposite to fluidity (spiritual). Alatiel might not quite fit this category at first sight considering her willingness to go along with any man who desires her sexually, but she has no real choice and cannot move to pity the men in charge of her life by means of her words and tears, as Tarsia does in *Apollonius*. Ultimately, even Alatiel proves to be a victim of unstable destiny, fortune, and yet she survives and achieves highest acclaim and enjoys the respect of her father and also of her future husband because she can deceive them with a fictional account about her life with nuns.

Apollonius also seems somewhat set apart because he travels by ship without any specific goal, which reflects his enormous suffering. And yet, even he confirms our observation that voyage represents a key symbol of life because he succeeds in many ways to achieve happiness and success at various points after having been proscribed, having suffered from shipwreck, having lost his wife during her childbirth, and having lost his daughter allegedly to sickness. Consequently, he hides in the hold of his ship, and thus crosses the open water the same way as Beaflor and Constance. The voyage is all of their destiny, which even the fairy tale "Das Mädchen ohne Hände" reflects to some extent who has to cross the trench to reach the garden and later has to roam the world to be protected from the devil. As we can recognize, medieval and modern narratives here join hands and address in surprisingly and refreshing fashion centrally the same concept concerning the deep relevance of the sea voyage, both in material, historical and in literary terms (Black 12). When on the sea all by themselves (or in the forest), those protagonists demonstrate their faith in God and their inner strength and virtues, irrespective of what happens to them bodily. Their voyages transform their lives. The sea really provides them meaning, gives them direction, and lends them purpose, as dangerous as the sea always proves to be.

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