Medieval Ecocriticisms

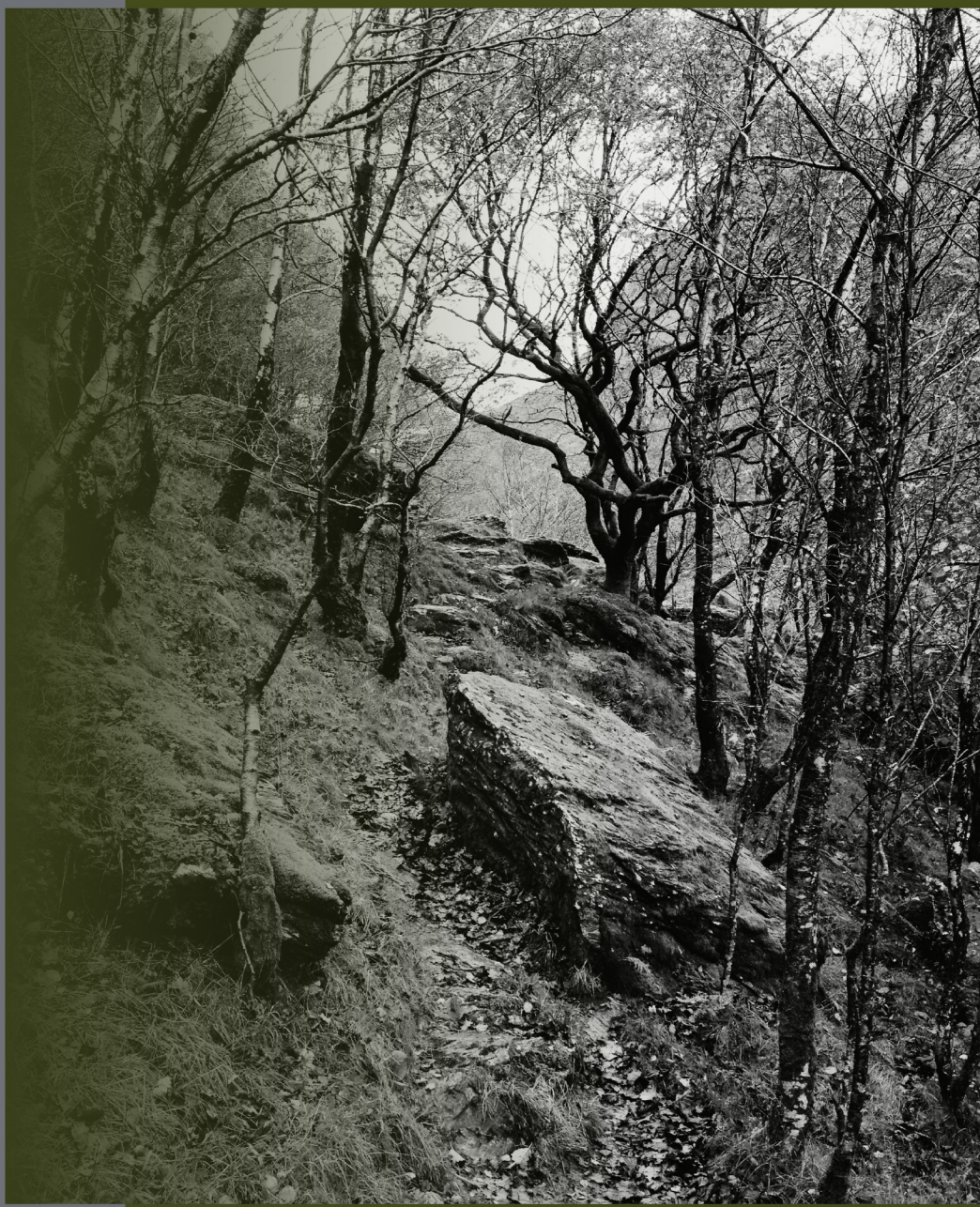
Volume 2 *Medieval Ecocriticisms, Number 2 (2022)*

Article 3

The Saint and the Sea: The Maritime Rhetoric of John Lydgate's Life of St Edmund and BL Harley 2278

Rebecca Pinner
School of Literature, Drama and Creative Writing, University of East Anglia, rebecca.pinner@uea.ac.uk

Medieval Ecocriticisms



Volume 2 • 2022

MEDIEVAL INSTITUTE PUBLICATIONS

Medieval Ecocriticisms

Volume 2
2022

MEDIEVAL INSTITUTE PUBLICATIONS
Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo

eISSN: 2769-7363
Full issue DOI: doi.org/10.32773/QDIO4268

Medieval Ecocriticisms is published thanks to a grant from Monmouth University

Medieval Institute Publications is a program of
The Medieval Institute, College of Arts and Sciences

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

Contents

It has always made me think of the sort of landscape Sir Gawain is described to traverse in the Wirral, although it's actually a place in the Cambrian mountains of central Wales. - MJW

The Saint and the Sea: The Maritime Rhetoric of John Lydgate's *Life of St. Edmund* and BL Harley 2278

Rebecca Pinner

AT FIRST GLANCE St. Edmund, King and Martyr (d. 869 CE), might not seem the most fruitful subject for ecocritical enquiry. It is certainly the case that he is not normally regarded as a saint synonymous with the maritime environment. This is despite there being opportunities in his saintly biography to associate him with the sea, where the tradition existed at Bury St. Edmunds, the epicenter of his cult, from at least the mid-twelfth century that Edmund had travelled from overseas to claim his throne.[1] As a crucial moment of narrative transition and the moment

[1] This tradition seems to have arisen as a result of a misreading: Edmund's first biographer, Abbo of Fleury, writing in the 980s CE, refers to Edmund having "sprung from the noble stock of the Old Saxons" (*ex Antiquorum Saxonum nobili prosapia oriundus*). Abbo of Fleury, *Passio Sancti Edmundi*, ed. and trans. Francis Hervey in *Corolla Sancti Edmundi: The Garland of St. Edmund, King and Martyr* (London: John Murray, 1907), 6–59 (I. 15), but in the 1140s Geoffrey of Wells interpreted this to mean that Edmund was not just Saxon by heritage but that this was his place of birth, claiming in his *De Infantia* to relate "the story of the saint's arrival, that is, from Saxony into England" (*De aduentu scilicet patroni nostri a saxonia in angliam*) (Geoffrey of Wells, *De Infantia*; Hervey, *Corolla*, 137). As we shall see in the course of this article, Geoffrey's error was taken up by subsequent authors and deployed to great symbolic effect.

The most scholarly edition of Abbo's *Passio Sancti Edmundi* is by Michael Winterbottom in *Three Lives of English Saints*, Toronto Medieval Latin Texts 1 (Toronto: Centre for Medieval Studies, 1972). The only modern English translation remains that by Francis Hervey in *Corolla Sancti Edmundi* and for accessibility, quotations are from the latter. Geoffrey of Wells's *De Infantia Sancti Edmundi* is reproduced in this same volume, from which quotations are taken, and also in *Memorials of St. Edmund's Abbey*, 3 vols., ed. Thomas Arnold, *Rerum Britannicarum*

Rebecca Pinner. "The Saint and the Sea: The Maritime Rhetoric of John Lydgate's *Life of St. Edmund* and BL Harley 2278." *Medieval Ecocriticisms* 2 (2022): 21–52.
doi.org/10.32773/LQYW6212.

which marks Edmund's arrival in East Anglia, where most iterations of his *vita* were subsequently produced, it might be expected that authors would linger over this detail. In most versions of his life, however, this part of the story is briskly dealt with as the narrative trajectory builds inexorably to Edmund's confrontation with the Danish Vikings who invade East Anglia and put the king to death.[2] Edmund was regarded as a saint primarily by virtue of his martyrdom, so this is the part of the story upon which the majority of his biographers inevitably focused; as Richard Gameson aptly puts it, the moment of a saint's death was usually the "irreducible minimum."[3] Edmund's martyrdom also came to visually define him as a saint as the iconography of the king bound to a tree being shot full of arrows became the most common way of representing him in various media and iconographic contexts.[4] Any potential symbolic significance which might be afforded to his journey by ship is thus ignored in nearly every *vita*.

"Martir, Mayde and Kinge," and Mariner?

Edmund is credited with performing some miracles associated with the sea, but these are in small quantities relative to the scale of his wonder-working corpus as a whole and are of types that may be regarded either as

Medii Aevi Sciptores (Rolls Series), 96 (London: Printed for Her Majesty's Stationary Office by Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1890–1896), I, 93–103.

2 One exception to this is the *Vie de St. Edmund*, an Anglo-Norman version of the saint's life composed at Bury St. Edmunds by a monk of the abbey Denis Piramus ca. 1170, which, although unfinished, deals in some detail with St. Edmund's voyage to East Anglia. The best edition of the *Vie* remains *La Vie Seint Edmund le Rei: Poème Anglo-Normand du XIIe Siècle Par Denis Piramus*, ed. Hilding Kjellman (1935, repr.; Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1974). For discussion of the maritime motifs in the *Vie* see Judith Weiss, "East Anglia and the Sea in the Narratives of the *Vie de St. Edmund* and *Waldef*," in *The Sea and Englishness in the Middle Ages: Maritime Narratives, Identity and Culture*, ed. Sebastian Sobecki (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2011), 103–11. For the *Vie* in the broader context of the St. Edmund hagiographic tradition, see Rebecca Pinner, *The Cult of St. Edmund in Medieval East Anglia* (Wood-bridge: The Boydell Press, 2015), 80–82.

3 Richard Gameson, "The Early Imagery of Thomas Becket," in *Pilgrimage: The English Experience from Becket to Bunyan*, ed. Colin Morris and Peter Roberts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 46–89 at 46.

4 For the iconography of St. Edmund see Rebecca Pinner, "Images of St. Edmund in Norfolk Churches," in *St. Edmund, King and Martyr: Changing Images of a Medieval Saint*, ed. Anthony Bale (York: York Medieval Press, 2009), 111–32, and Pinner, *The Cult of St. Edmund*, 193–227.

generic miracles of assistance (rescuing pilgrims in distress, for example), or originated in coastal communities whose own preoccupations influenced their appeals to the saint.[5] On the whole, however, the popularity and longevity of Edmund's cult and the accompanying proliferation of hagiographic sources, particularly *vitae* and miracle collections, the majority of which were written or compiled at the Abbey of Bury St. Edmunds, present him as a generalist or, in the language of medieval saints' cults, a holy figure who could be relied upon to intervene in almost any situation.[6] This was in keeping with the high esteem in which Edmund seems to have been regarded but also benefited the abbey in attracting as wide a range of pilgrims (and their donations) as possible.

As a saint, we might also expect that any depiction of the natural world, particularly by a writer working within the hagiographic tradition, would be purely instrumental, and be included in the text solely to reflect the holy credentials of the protagonist. This depiction of the natural world is certainly at odds with the principles of ecocriticism. In an article in the first volume of this journal, Heide Estes explicates what constitutes an ecocritical perspective.[7] Estes cites Laurence Buell's influential definition of what he terms an "environmental imagination" where the non-human does not simply function as a framing device, there is a sense of the environment as a process rather than a constant, where human interests

[5] The miracles originating in the coastal community of Wainfleet, Lincolnshire, are collected in what is now Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodley 240, a huge compendium of hagiographic materials compiled at the Abbey of Bury St. Edmunds in the last quarter of the fourteenth century, possibly by the monastic librarian Henry de Kirkstead. These and St. Edmund's other, more generic maritime miracles are discussed by Pinner, *The Cult of St. Edmund*, 184–92.

[6] For an overview of the various miracle collections written and compiled at Bury see Pinner, *The Cult of St. Edmund*, 33–75. Tom Licence has edited and translated the longest collection of St. Edmund's miracles produced at Bury and his introduction to this volume offers a detailed insight into their production and revision within the context of the broader cult of St. Edmund: *Herman the Archdeacon and Goscelin of Saint-Bertin, Miracles of St. Edmund, Edited with an Introduction and Notes, by Tom Licence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2014), xiii–cxxxi.

[7] Heide Estes, "Weather and the Creation of the Human in the Exeter Book Riddles," *Medieval Ecocriticisms* 1:1 (2021), 11–27; see especially 11–19.

are not the only natural interests, and where there is an ethical orientation towards human accountability towards the environment.[8]

Why then, given that so many factors seem against it, have I chosen to read John Lydgate's *Life of St. Edmund* through an ecocritical lens? Primarily it is because, as this article seeks to demonstrate, the material and historical circumstances surrounding the production of the *Life* both facilitated and necessitated a version of the legend which centered the sea in ways not previously seen in the St. Edmund tradition. It is also because it is in many ways at odds with the other texts which form St. Edmund's hagiographic corpus. The *Life* is part of a long and, by the time Lydgate was writing, well-developed legendary tradition pertaining to the saint.[9] The majority of these texts were written at Bury St. Edmunds and, as a monk of the abbey, Lydgate was likely to be familiar with most of them, and certainly with the major *vitae* and miracle collections. Lydgate characterizes his poem as a "translacion" (l. 55) but this is more a conventional assertion of his authorial humility rather than a straightforward description of the text's origins, and his innovations in the text, not least its length and elaboration relative to any previous version of the legend, are clearly apparent. A. S. G. Edwards notes, for instance, that "Lydgate's use of his sources was not straightforward," citing as an example Lydgate's tendency to draw on multiple texts and combine them within one section of his narrative.[10] We know, then, that Lydgate made deliberate choices

[8] Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), cited in Estes, "Weather and the Creation of the Human," 5.

[9] It is partly also for this reason that in this article I will be focusing on the portion of the text—Books I and II, which together comprise lines 1–2021 and which detail the life and death of St. Edmund, rather than Book III which describes the martyrdom of his putative relative St. Fremund, about whom virtually nothing is known in either historical or legendary terms. Lydgate's St. Fremund is also a far more land-locked character and lacks the engagement with the maritime afforded to his holy relative. Lydgate's account of St. Fremund certainly merits further attention but is beyond the scope of this article.

For the development of the St. Edmund legendary tradition at Bury up until the fifteenth century, see Pinner, *The Cult of St. Edmund*, 33–111. See also Grant Loomis, "The Growth of the St. Edmund Legend," *Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature* xiv (1933), 1–23.

[10] Anthony Bale and A. S. G. Edwards, "Introduction," *John Lydgate's Lives of Ss Edmund & Fremund and the Extra Miracles of St. Edmund: Edited from British*

in how he depicts Edmund and, given the wealth of earlier written sources with which he was likely to have been familiar, it is reasonable to assert that any significant innovations are deliberate. This includes, I would argue, his amplification of the sea and, as I will demonstrate, this kind of innovation enables not just the nature of the changes but the reason behind them to be made legible.

This is not to say that Lydgate's *Life* neatly fits the criteria delineated by Buell. It is, after all, a text predicated on a world view dominated by allegory, typology, and an approach to the natural most commonly characterized by anthropocentric utility at one extreme or the pure manifestation of divine will at the other, with the two not being seen as mutually contradictory in the Middle Ages. As Estes acknowledges, however, citing the Exeter Book "storm" riddles as an example, a text does not have to perfectly accord with a given theoretical frame in order to be a fruitful site of enquiry; Estes observes that "even if they do not fully fit Buell's criteria for 'environmental literature,' and perhaps even especially if they do not, the Exeter Book Riddles have much to teach us about early medieval English attitudes towards and understanding of the environment."[11]

Part of the appeal of Lydgate's *Life* is that it requires careful unpacking in order to assess the extent to which it exhibits what could be termed an ecocritical imagination, but where too it resists this identification. The potential for anachronism in applying modern critical definitions to texts which pre-date them (in the case of the Middle Ages by many centuries) is readily apparent, but the work of Estes and others has done much to demonstrate the potential for reading texts of all eras through an ecocritical lens. The creation of this journal is a prime example of a field which is burgeoning, and the chronological and generic breadth of the articles in its first edition speak to the broad applicability of these methodologies, as does the editor's encouragement to "broadly construe" the terms "environmental" and "ecocritical."[12] Reading Lydgate's *Life of St. Edmund* from this original angle therefore simultaneously offers a new

Library MS Harley 2278 and Bodleian Library M (Heidelberg: Universitats-verlag, 2009), 20; see 20–24 in this introduction and in the notes in the Commentary where appropriate 147 ff. for further discussion of Lydgate's use of his sources.

11 Estes, "Weather and the Creation of the Human," 14.

12 Michael J. Warren, "Medieval Weathers: An Introduction," *Medieval Ecocriticisms* 1:1 (2021), 1–10 at 8.

way of reading an important medieval text and facilitates greater understanding of a still-developing critical methodology.[13]

John Lydgate's *Life of St. Edmund*, BL Harley 2278 and King Henry VI

As noted above, the historical circumstances in which Lydgate wrote the *Life of St. Edmund* make it particularly suited to this kind of enquiry, because compared with many medieval texts we know a considerable amount about its provenance. A copy of the poem survives in a manuscript now known as British Library MS Harley 2278 which was almost certainly the version of the poem presented to King Henry VI, to whom the poem is dedicated, and which is therefore likely to be one of, if not the, earliest copies of the text. The young king had arrived at the Abbey of Bury St. Edmunds on Christmas Eve 1433, celebrating "the feest principal / Of Cristemesse" (ll. 59–60) in the company of the monks, and remaining as their guests until after "hesterne" (Easter) (l. 63) the following year.[14] Lydgate informs us that his abbot, William Curteys, requested this new version of the legend: "he in ful purpos to yeue it to the king" (l. 112) as a "remembraunce" (l. 1) of his stay, a shrewd political move on the part of the abbey. This knowledge of the manuscript's intended reader thus enables Lydgate's repeated invocation of the sea to be further contextualized.

Furthermore, Harley 2278, commonly referred to today as "the presentation manuscript," is lavishly illustrated with one hundred and

[13] Studies such as Sebastian I. Sobecki, *The Sea and Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008) and *The Sea and Englishness in the Middle Ages: Maritime Narratives, Identity and Culture*, ed. Sebastian I. Sobecki (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2011) demonstrate the value of exploring maritime imagery in medieval literature, as Estes work on early medieval literature similarly indicates the vitality of this line of enquiry, particularly "Imagining the Sea in Secular and Religious Poetry," which is the second chapter of *Anglo-Saxon Literary Landscapes: Ecotheory and the Environmental Imagination* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 35–60.

[14] Henry VI's visit and the preparations made by the abbey are detailed in Abbot Curteys's *Register*, now London British Library Add. MS 14848, fol. 128r–128v. This passage is reproduced in Craven Ord's "Account of the Entertainment of King Henry the Sixth at the Abbey of Bury St. Edmunds," *Archaeologia* 15 (1806), 65–71. See also Walter F. Schirmer, *John Lydgate: A Study in the Culture of the XVth Century*, trans. Ann E. Keep (1961), 145–46.

twenty miniatures.[15] The close relationship between the poem and its miniatures has been discussed elsewhere, with Edwards going so far as to suggest that Lydgate was involved in the design of the illustrative scheme.[16] A significant number of these miniatures (fifteen in total and twelve in Books I and II alone) depict the sea and thus provide an additional valuable opportunity to consider how the maritime world structures the narrative and, crucially, how word and image interact in what was conceived as a multimedia project where meaning was conveyed visually as much as verbally.[17] This is particularly valuable given the differences in the descendent manuscripts, with the two which contain comparable illustrative schemes (British Library Yates Thompson MS 47 and a copy with no shelf-mark in Arundel Castle) not adhering strictly to either the number or iconography of the illustrations in the presentation manuscript, thus reiterating the crucial intersection of author, patron and recipient in the conception and execution of the original manuscript, including its emphasis on the sea in both word and image.[18]

As the provenance of the poem and its original manuscript version can therefore be historically located with some certainty, the role of the sea can be further examined and its significance better understood as products of a particular historical moment. Approaching both the poem

[15] The manuscript can be viewed in full online http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Harley_MS_2278 [last accessed 30 May 2022] and a printed facsimile is also available: *The Life of St. Edmund, King and Martyr: John Lydgate's Illustrated Verse Life Presented to Henry VI. A Facsimile of British Library MS Harley 2278* (London: The British Library, 2004). A. S. G. Edwards' "Introduction" to the facsimile edition (pp. 1–15) contextualizes the illuminations, as does Kathleen L. Scott in *Later Gothic Manuscripts, 1390–1490: A Survey of Manuscripts Illuminated in the British Isles*, 2 vols. (London: Harvey Millar, 1996), vol. II. no. 78, plates 310–13.

[16] Edwards, "Introduction," *The Life of St. Edmund, King and Martyr … A Facsimile of British Library MS Harley 2278*, 10–11.

[17] For an instructive exploration of the importance of reading texts and images together see Cynthia Hahn, *Portrayed on the Heart: Narrative Effect in Pictorial Lives of the Saints from the Tenth through the Thirteenth Century* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2001).

[18] For Yates Thompson 47 see Scott, *Later Gothic Manuscripts*, II, 307–10, and for the Arundel Castle MS see Kathleen Scott, "Lydgate's Lives of Saints Edmund and Fremund: A Newly Located Manuscript in Arundel Castle," *Viator* 13 (1982), 335–66. See also Pinner, *The Cult of St. Edmund*, 102–5.

and its manuscript through an ecocritical lens thus helps to illuminate both text and context and facilitate a more nuanced understanding than would otherwise be possible.

Although this is a major text by a well-known author whose circumstances of production are relatively well understood, the centrality of the sea has hitherto remained unobserved. In the case specifically of St. Edmund I believe it is largely because Lydgate's particular maritime rhetoric does not conform to what might be considered the expected relation between a saint and the natural world in medieval hagiography: Edmund is not depicted as a saint with a special patronage of the sea, credited with working the majority of his miracles on it or near it, or with the power to subdue its natural forces, nor does he die in a watery context but, as I will demonstrate, the sea is crucial to the unfolding of the plot; for example, every major plot development involves a journey across one or another sea by one or more of the characters. In this way the sea is more than purely symbolic: it is an aspect of the natural world which serves the plot, but which does so on its own terms.

John Lydgate's Thalassocentric *Life*

Every key narrative turn in the poem occurs in relation to a sea voyage. Firstly, King Offa of East Anglia crosses the sea to the kingdom of Edmund's parents (he is a relative of Edmund's father) en route to the Holy Land (ll. 351–79). He is so impressed with the young prince that he appoints him his heir (ll. 380–427). Offa continues his journey to the Holy Land, where he dies (ll. 428–546). Following Offa's death, Edmund travels by sea to his new kingdom of East Anglia to claim his throne and begins to reign (ll. 631 ff.). Meanwhile, in Denmark, King Lothbrok is cast adrift whilst fishing and washes ashore in East Anglia, where he is warmly welcomed by Edmund who recognizes the inherent nobility in his fellow monarch, despite the Dane being pagan and Edmund a devout Christian (ll. 1121–83). After Edmund's huntsman, Bern, has killed Lothbrok in a jealous rage (ll. 1198–1225) he is cast adrift in a boat with no oars or sail (ll. 1275–87) and washes ashore in Denmark where he convinces Lothbrok's sons, Hyngwar and Ubba, that Edmund was responsible for their father's death (ll. 1288–1323). The Danish princes sail to England to avenge their father's death, thus precipitating the events which lead to Edmund's own demise (ll. 1324 ff.). The importance of these journeys by sea is evident in narrative terms, with one maritime voyage leading to another, and ultimately resulting in Edmund's martyrdom.

The extent to which Lydgate's *Life of St. Edmund* is structured by maritime motifs is evident from their significance in the poem even prior to the birth of its saintly protagonist, with Lydgate initiating the theme by structuring the events leading to Edmund's inheritance of the throne of East Anglia around journeys made by sea-going ships.

Consideration of the miniatures of Harley 2278 reveals the maritime emphasis to be even more pronounced. Of the sixty-six miniatures in the presentation manuscript which accompany the *Life of St. Edmund*, twelve depict the sea, a number which is strikingly disproportionate to the number of lines of verse which these episodes occupy, with the greater density than elsewhere in the manuscript suggesting a closer attention to how meaning is being made and conveyed. There is also a greater concentration of miniatures than is strictly necessary; for example, Edmund's voyage to East Anglia occupies three miniatures (fols. 26r, 27r and 27v), but only fifty-four lines of verse).

Furthermore, episodes involving a journey by sea are visually bookended, with every episode involving a sea crossing being depicted by at least a pair of miniatures. This is particularly noticeable in relation to Offa's journey to Saxony, the kingdom of Edmund's parents: he departs on folio 16v, arrives on the facing page (fol. 17r) and then goes on his way six folios later on 20r. Other events worthy of visual depiction have taken place in between—notably he appoints Edmund his heir with the gift of a ring—but the insistence of the maritime rhetoric is such that the sequence is concluded with another sea voyage miniature. This pattern is replicated in each of the sequences involving a journey by sea outlined above, where the miniaturists are careful to preserve the sea as the structuring motif.

It is important to note that this is not the only time when the visual scheme works to emphasize or draw attention to particular moments in the narrative. I have argued elsewhere that this is also the case in the description of Edmund's just rule of his kingdom, which is emphasized in order to contrast sharply with the villainous Danes who are introduced to the story shortly after.[19] Indeed, as alluded to above, the sophisticated inter-relationship between words and images in this manuscript has been

[19] Pinner, *The Cult of St. Edmund*, 95–101. See also Katherine J. Lewis, "Edmund of East Anglia, Henry VI and Ideals of Kingly Masculinity," in *Holiness and Masculinity in the Middle Ages* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004), 158–73.

widely recognized, with it being commonly held that Lydgate himself had a hand in designing, or at least overseeing, the illustrative scheme.[20]

I would argue, then, that there is a recognizable strategy at work in the poem and manuscript but while other instances of it have been observed, Lydgate's maritime rhetoric has hitherto been overlooked. I would also contend that while other concentrations of miniatures, or instances where word and image most closely converge, occur in more discrete instances or vignettes, in contrast the sea is present throughout both the poem and its illustrations and is therefore crucial to appreciating the argument of the work as a whole. Closer consideration of additional examples with elucidate this further.

Siware's Sorrow

Following Offa's voyages which lead to Edmund's inheritance of the throne of East Anglia, the next episode in the poem and manuscript in which the sea is crossed is the young prince's journey to his new kingdom. Edmund's leave-taking is a sorrowful occasion for his parents and one which is additionally marked by water of a different kind: tears. Although at first glance not part of the poem's maritime schema, I would argue that the tears shed by Edmund's parents are in fact a key part of the narrative of Edmund's sea voyage and thus worthy of consideration.

The tears of both parents set the tone for Edmund's journey. When Alkmund hears the news that his son must leave his side he "gan weepe as he to water wolde" (l. 549), a powerful image symbolically conveying the total effect on the king's being as his grief is so great that it threatens an elemental transformation from one state of being to another. Siware also weeps, and her tears echo her husband's as the "salt terys bedewed al hir face" (l. 647). Lydgate repeats the motif of overwhelming grief as the pair are united in sorrow as "they in terys gan hemsyluen drowne" (l. 636). The saltiness of Siware's tears and the metaphorical threat of drowning invoke the sea which Edmund must cross in order to assume his new throne, reflecting the reality of a voyage of this kind.

Lydgate affords particular attention to the parting of mother and son in a moving description:

[20] Edwards, "Introduction," *The Life of St. Edmund, King and Martyr: A Facsimile of British Library MS Harley 2278*, 10–11.

Whan she hir sone gan kyssen and embrace
And in hir armys moderly hym streyne,
With salt terys bedewed al hir face,
So bittir was the partyng of them tweyne.
And in especial most she felte peyne
Whan she sawh Edmund entren into se.
She koude nat stynte to wepyn off pite.

Off al that day she list nat for to pleye,
Nor no man kowde make hir glad nor liht.
For whan the shippis gan saile upon the weye
She stood ay style and affter cast hir siht.
So weel as moodres loue ther kan no wiht.
And whan Siware hadde longe mournyd,
Conueyed in armys hoom she is retournyd. (ll. 645–58)

The queen seems particularly troubled that her young son must undertake this journey by sea: she feels "most … peyne" (l. 649) when Edmund boards the ship and is unable to "stynte to wepyn" (l. 651). When the ships set sail she "stood ay style and affter cast hir siht" (l. 655), presumably watching until the ships can no longer be seen.

The miniature on fol. 27r (fig. 1) is double-sized, reflecting the significance of this moment in the narrative, and shows the crowned figure of Siware ashore in the top left of the frame gazing downwards towards her son aboard a ship at bottom right. In contrast to the rosy-cheeked attendants who surround her, Siware is ashen-faced. The courtiers' raised hands indicate speech, perhaps offering words of comfort to their queen, but also look as though they are reaching out to physically support her, reflecting the poem's claim that "conueyed in armys home she is returned" (l. 658), with the syntactical construction implying that she is compelled to return home by her companions rather than doing so of her own volition.

Figure 1: © British Library Board
London, British Library, MS Harley 2278, fol. 27r[21]

In the miniature one female attendant stands with her back to the departing ship and extends her left arm in front Siware as if preventing her from running to her son.

Although richly arrayed and surrounded by companions, Edmund looks particularly diminutive and vulnerable, his oversized crown reiterating his youthfulness. A courtier stands above him, leaning over the little king and blocking his view of his mother on the shore as though attempting to distract him at this distressing moment. Edmund looks uncertain, and his body language conveys the moment of transition which is taking place: he looks to his right, towards his homeland and his mother, but points with his right hand in the opposite direction, towards the sea

[21] All images shown here courtesy of and available at https://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Harley_MS_2278&index=0.

and his new home in East Anglia, a gesture indicating speech but also conjuring the inevitable departure. The miniature's square frame is divided horizontally from lower left to top right by a rocky shoreline, with Siware and the Saxon court on one side, and Edmund aboard his ship on the other. The completeness of the separation is reiterated by the continuation of the line of the shore into the vertical by the inclusion of a solitary tree which reaches almost to the top of the frame. Likewise, the sea on which Edmund sets sail is depicted not just beneath his ship but wraps above and around it, separating him entirely from the land and his childhood home.

His parents' weeping calls to mind the gift of tears experienced by the medieval devout as a sign of divine grace, thus elevating this episode from a family drama into a more spiritual realm.[22] This is a moment of transition and the change is affected on both of the king's two bodies: a son takes leave of his parents and the land of his birth, and simultaneously a young man is transformed into a king.[23] It is the sea which is the agent of change as it facilitates the physical breaking apart of the family unit and is the means by which Edmund is transported to his new kingdom. As his journey by sea represents his transition from Prince of Saxonie to King of East Anglia there is also something sacral about this ocean, akin to the holy oil with which English kings were anointed at their coronation. Edmund had become king at the moment of Offa's death and his coronation, in keeping with traditions surrounding succession, represented the ceremonial confirmation of his new status, rather than in itself conferring kingship upon him.[24] This reiterates the ceremonial

[22] One of the seminal works on this topic remains Piroska Nagy's *Le don des larmes au Moyen Âge. Un instrument spirituel en quête d'institution (Ve–XIIIe siècle)* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2000). For tears as ritual see Piroska Nagy, "Religious Weeping as Ritual in the Medieval West," in *Ritual in Its Own Right: Exploring the Dynamics of Transformation Social Analysis*, special issue of *International Journal of Anthropology* 48:2 (Summer 2004), 119–37.

[23] For the foundational work on the king's two bodies see Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1957).

[24] The notion of royal anointing has Old Testament origins in 1 Kings 1:38–40. Coronation rituals by the time of Henry VI are preserved in the *Liber Regalis*, now London, Westminster Abbey Ms 38, and have been edited by L. G. Wickham Legg in *English Coronation Records* (London: A. Constable & Co., 1901) 81–131; for anointing see 93 ff.

nature of Edmund's maritime voyage. The sacral imagery also invokes the waters of baptism whereby a Christian is welcomed into the family of the Church, where in this configuration East Anglia, Edmund's new "family," is the congregation of the faithful.

This description of the parting of mother and son is one of the most moving passages in the poem and one of several examples of Lydgate's ability to draw psychologically realistic portraits and convey emotional depths.[25] Given the dedicatee of the poem, it is possible that Lydgate emphasized the bond between mother and son as this was the only parental relationship which Henry VI had directly experienced and perhaps hoped that this would resonate particularly with the young king and thus engage him in the narrative.[26] As Lydgate invokes Edmund as an "exaumplaire and a merour cler" (l. 339) for Henry it is likely that Lydgate, presumably with the support of Henry's advisers, is modeling the necessary transition from youth to adolescence.[27] In Edmund's case this involves the assumption of his throne and the physical separation of a child from his parents, but for Henry the analogy would be more symbolic. Henry had been crowned in England aged seven, the age at which a male aristocratic child was typically removed from the care of their mother and began instruction under male tutors to prepare them for an adult life of rule.[28] Henry's coronation in France took place when he was ten years old, not such a symbolically resonant age but at a moment dictated by political necessity.[29] The exact date by which the presentation

[25] C.f. Pinner, *The Cult of St. Edmund*, 95–96 for Lydgate's description of Edmund surveying the aftermath of the Battle of Thetford (ll. 386–92 in the poem) and the effect this has upon him.

[26] For Henry VI's earliest years see R. A. Griffiths, *The Reign of King Henry VI* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1998), 51–52 and 60–63, and Katherine J. Lewis, *Kingship and Masculinity in Late Medieval England* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 141–44.

[27] For the education of young kings see Nicholas Orme, *From Childhood to Chivalry: The Education of the English Kings and Aristocracy, 1066–1530* (London and New York: Methuen, 1984). For Henry VI's tutelage under Richard Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick (1382–1439) and the literary pro-gramme with a focus on "examples culled from history books" see John Watts, *Henry VI and the Politics of Kingship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 54.

[28] See Orme, *From Childhood to Chivalry*, 17–18 and Griffiths, *The Reign of King Henry VI*, 55–57.

[29] For Henry VI's two coronations see Griffiths, *The Reign of King Henry VI*, 189–94.

manuscript was completed is still debated, but Lydgate was certainly at work on the poem by 1435, the year of Henry's fourteenth birthday, and had probably completed it by 1439 when he was granted a royal pension, possibly in acknowledgement of the presentation of this work.[30] If Henry's fourteenth year marked another transition towards adulthood, then this is reflected in Edmund's own path to kingship: he departs for East Anglia when he is fourteen, after which "he heeld his household nyh a yeer" (l. 708) before his coronation on Christmas Day 856 CE when he "was ful compleet fiftene yeer of age" (l. 777).[31] Perhaps, then, Edmund's stoical acceptance of the separation from his parents, even in the face of his mother's overwhelming grief, and his assumption of adult duty, is intended to model Henry's own transition towards adult responsibility. Fourteen would be the obvious age for Edmund to be crowned King of East Anglia and the one year's delay seems somewhat arbitrary unless it indicates that this was the year in which the presentation manuscript was given to Henry, or at least that this was the date that was aimed for. In any event, the symbolic transition from youth to adolescence is facilitated by the sea. The episode of Edmund's departure therefore speaks simultaneously to the sea as a natural environment beyond the control of humans who travel upon it and who are at potential risk when they do so, while also invoking the numerous spiritual connotations of water in its both maritime and more human, tearful, forms.

St. Edmund's Safe Passage

In depicting the sea, Lydgate and the miniaturists who illuminated the presentation manuscript must strike a balance between asserting the sea as a place of real-life danger while also ensuring it is clear that, as part of the created order, it is subject to divine will. It is also imperative to remind the reader and viewer that while the sea is dangerous, Edmund, as one especially favored by God, is not outmatched by it but is able, in a sense, to subdue it, just as he later subdues the natural ferocity of the wolf who guards his head following his martyrdom (ll. 1933–60). Similarly, as a devout Christian who places all his trust in God, Edmund must not be overcome by fear as his faith and resolve must remain intact.

[30] *Dictionary of National Biography* Vol. XXXIV, ed. Sidney Lee (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1893), John Lydgate: 306–16 at 308.

[31] The full description of St. Edmund's coronation occurs ll. 743–77.

Subsequently, the description of Edmund's crossing to East Anglia to assume his throne is replete with subtle yet suggestive imagery.

Lydgate makes it clear that there is genuine jeopardy in such an undertaking:

> Expert shipmen off ther loodmanage,
> Knowyng the coostis off ech sond.
> And Eolus fortuned ther passage,
> And God by grace heeld ouer them his hond,
> Conueied ther shipp toward Estynglond,
> And at a place, pleynly for to descryue,
> Callyd Maydenburuh in haste they did aryue.
>
> Thoruh Goddis myth whan thei the lond han kauht,
> This holi Edmond of hool affeccion,
> Fro ther arryuaile, almost a bowe drauht,
> He ful deuoutli gan to knele doun,
> And preied God first in his orison
> That his comyng were to him acceptable,
> And to al the land welful and profitable. (ll. 659–72)

They undertake their journey "in haste" (clearly this is not a voyage to be savored or lingered over) and Lydgate heightens the threat posed by the North Sea by multiplying the factors required to successfully complete the crossing. The tripartite prayer-like invocation of human skill (the "loodmanage" of the "expert shipmen"), mythical good fortune occasioned by Eolus's favor and Christian divine intervention shown when "God by grace heeld ouer them his hond" indicates the special grace pertaining to Edmund, but also that one of these alone would not be sufficient to counter the danger.

When the ship reaches East Anglia they "catch" the "lond," implying not that the land itself is unwilling to be seized, but that their position on the waves is so unstable that they must tether themselves to the shore in order to be secure. Rather than a hunting metaphor in which the "lond" must be subdued, the sea on which they travel is the tempestuous creature which must be tamed by being tethered to the fixed point of safety.

Figure 2: © British Library Board
London, British Library, MS Harley 2278, fol. 27v

The peril they have endured is emphasized in the miniature on fol. 27v (fig. 2) showing Edmund leaving his ship, where the decidedly grey-faced figure is physically supported across the gang-plank by anxious-looking retainers. His earnest and relatively rosy-cheeked countenance in the next miniature on fol. 28r (fig. 3) is in direct contrast, and this is heightened as it is painted on the facing page (fol. 28r) and occupies at least part of the same register as that on fol. 27v, thus drawing the eye directly between them. This is also reflected in the warmer palette of the second image which employs more pink in the shading of the retainers' white robes to create the overall impression of a sunnier scene compared to the more muted tones of the miniature on fol. 27v. Even allowing for the presence of different tones necessitated by the depiction of grass as opposed to water, the sun seems to shine on fol. 28r as Edmund steps ashore in East Anglia, depicting his new kingdom as a *locus amoenus* or promised land,

Figure 3: © British Library Board
London, British Library, MS Harley 2278, fol. 27v (left) and fol. 28r (right)

thus casting the sea as the wilderness in which Edmund has been travelling before arriving safely ashore.

Edmund's emotional response on coming ashore reiterates the peril he and his companions have endured as he falls to his knees in thankful prayer merely a bow-shot's ("bowe drauht") length from the ship. Lydgate's choice of "drauht" is inspired: it describes the physical distance from the sea at which Edmund offers his thanksgiving, but also invokes alternative usages of the word to convey a drawbridge by which Edmund crosses safely to land, and also to connote a haven, and in the sense of a water-drawing mechanism simultaneously anticipating the "wellis cler" which are about to burst from the "sondy, hard and drie" land in recognition of the new king's arrival.[32] This one word encapsulates the tran-

[32] *draught*, n. *Middle English Dictionary*, ed. Robert E. Lewis, et al. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1952–2001). Online edition in *Middle English Compendium*, ed. Frances McSparran, et al. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Library, 2000–2022), https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary.

sition from peril at sea to safety ashore, overseen by divine munificence, seen literally in the beams of light which emanate from the figure, hand-raised in blessing, who looks down on Edmund from the crimped oval at the top of the frame in the miniature on fol. 28r.

Edmund's safe arrival is assured by God, indicating both that he favors the new monarch, but also that this blessing is necessary to ensure safe passage. Edmund is safe ashore, either in his childhood home in Saxonie or in his new kingdom of East Anglia, but in danger on the water. The North Sea is therefore depicted as a perilous space, a place of sorrow and risk, to be crossed with caution, human skill and with the aid of divine assistance. It is also the crossing on this maritime body of water which marks, literally and symbolically, Edmund's transition from youth to adulthood and from prince to king.

Lothbrok's Luck

Following the description of Edmund's coronation and his exemplary rule of East Anglia, the next crucial narrative turn introduces the Danish Vikings into the plot. They will ultimately be responsible for Edmund's death, but rather than segue straight into these climactic scenes, Lydgate builds the tension for his readers by deferring the final denouement by means of an additional Danish character, King Lothbrok.

The King of Denmark is introduced at the start of Book II:

> Sometyme in Denmark ther was a paynym kyng,
> As I fynde, Lothbrocus was his name,
> Which him delited in hawking and hunting,
> And to disporte him in such maner game.
> And for thencres of his roial fame,
> Whan he to Mars had doon his obseruance
> To serue Diane was set al his pleasance. (ll. 1037–43)

Lothbrok is first and foremost a "paynym" king, and Lydgate emphasizes this with reference to his devotion to Mars and Diana. The appearance in the narrative of the pagan king and his sons is presaged by one of the presentation manuscript's most extravagant miniatures on fol. 39r (fig. 4) which shows the Danes at prayer in a pagan sanctuary which is, as Salih puts it, "a riot of markers of difference and similarity" in the miniaturist's

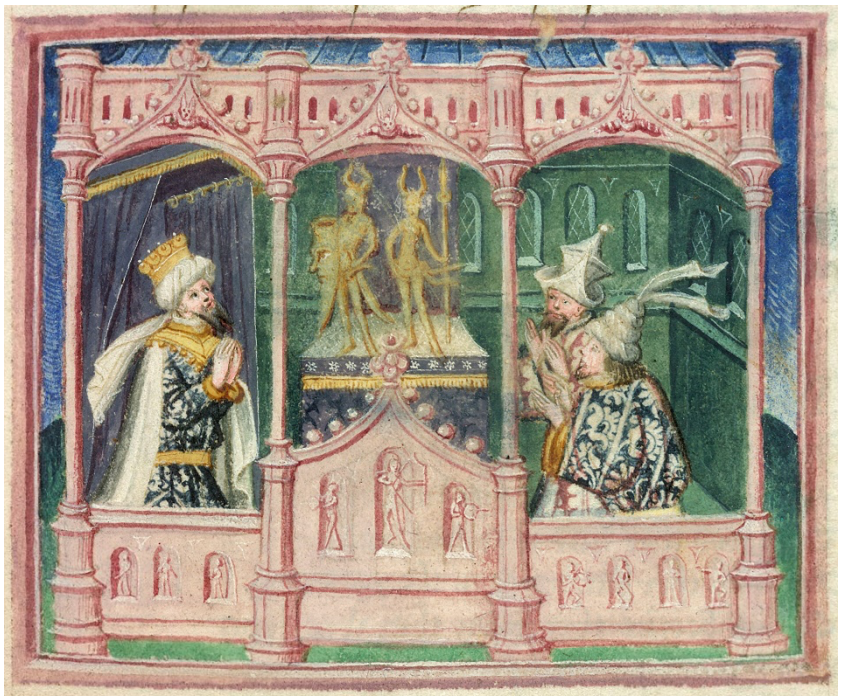


Figure 4: © British Library Board
London, British Library, MS Harley 2278, fol. 39r

conflation of Scandinavian paganity with markers of apparent Muslim identity such as the turban-like head-dresses worn by the Danes.[33]

The orchestration of text and image contributes to the tension which Lydgate attempts to create as the reader encounters the miniature on fol. 39r but must turn the folio to read the description of the characters who are depicted, who have hitherto only been teasingly referred to by Lydgate on fol. 39r, in the concluding lines of Book I, with the promise of "a digression" (l. 1031) wherein Lydgate will relate "the first occasioun / How Danys kam into this region' (ll. 1033–34). The transition from Book I to Book II is therefore a carefully stage-managed reading experience which creates anticipation but also ensures that the reader pays due attention to this next episode in the story rather than perhaps skipping past it to the account of St. Edmund's martyrdom.

[33] Sarah Salih, *Imagining the Pagan in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2019), 3–4.

As the Danish Vikings are the indubitable villains of the story, Lydgate's inclusion of King Lothbrok has the potential to wrong-foot a reader more familiar, as King Henry VI certainly would have been, with the Danes' role in the saint's demise. Far from the archetypal villain we may expect based on foreknowledge of the story, but also the miniature on fol. 39r, King Lothbrok is introduced via his love of hunting, which is both a noble kingly pursuit and one in which we have seen St. Edmund engaging just a few stanzas earlier, where Lydgate stresses that amongst the young king's many virtues of "natural gentilesse" he liked to "hawke and hunte tauoiden ydilnesse" (ll. 967–68). Indeed, the last miniature before the Danes at prayer on fol. 39r is Edmund engaged in these pursuits on fol. 37r.

Crucially, it is also the narrative device which Lydgate employs to translocate King Lothbrok from Denmark to East Anglia when he is cast adrift while hunting alone:

> And at a ryuer it fil thus as I fynde,
> Because that he was allone at large,
> Anoon he entred in talitil barge.
>
> And in that vessel, whil he kept him cloos,
> Sool he himsilff, that no man myht him se,
> Al unwarly, a sodeyn wynd aroos
> And drof his barge into the salt se.
> And by our occian, daies too or thre
> Fordreuen he was, by fatal auenture,
> Among the wawes and koude no land recure.
> Diuers daungeres he passid of many a sond,
> With sondry tempestis forpossid to and fro,
> Tyl be fortune he was cast upon the lond
> Fer up in Northfolke, the story tellith so,
> Beside a village callid Redam tho.
> Men of the contre, for an vnkouth thyng,
> Hym and his hauk presented to the kyng. (ll. 1125–41)

Like Edmund earlier in Book I, King Lothbrok comes ashore in East Anglia, but Lydgate makes it clear that he only benefits from one of the trinity of safeguards which ensure Edmund's crossing (human skill, good fortune, and divine blessing). This voyage is governed solely by luck: Lothbrok is cast adrift "unwarly" and his journey subject to "fatal auenture" and "fortune" rather than God's grace which blesses Edmund's voyage. There is also a lack of human agency, with no skilled shipmen to

steer the craft with their "loodmanage," and the repetition of "driven" (*drof, fordreuen*) makes it clear that Lothbrok is subject to events rather than playing any active role in their unfolding. Although Lydgate likens Lothbrok to Edmund in some respects and elevates him to a certain nobility which enables their friendship to blossom, his paganity ensures his ultimate alterity, with this fundamental aspect of his identity embodied in the contrasting descriptions of their North Sea crossings.

Bern's Rudderless Boat

Ultimately Lothbrok is a narrative device utilized by Lydgate to fashion the circumstances of the Danish invasion which leads to Edmund's martyrdom. At first reading it seems as though the Danes who murder Lydgate's Edmund are more human as they are motivated by a desire to avenge the murder of King Lothbrok. Bern falsely blames Edmund for Lothbrok's murder when he himself was responsible, having succumbed to "serpentyn" envy (l. 1209) at the high regard in which Lothbrok is held by Edmund and his household, with the reptilian reference clearly intended to evoke a devilish influence.

When his crime is discovered, Bern is condemned to be cast adrift in a boat "which nouther hadde oore, seil, nor mast" (l. 1283). This punishment had its basis in reality, as the foundational study by J. R. Reinhard demonstrated.[34] Nevertheless, it was also a popular literary motif, and one commonly found in Romances.[35] This is not commented on by Bale and Edwards in their critical edition, but its inclusion is significant as it demonstrates both Lydgate's creative use of sources and his willingness to import more secular conventions in order to serve the maritime drive of his narrative.

In keeping with the *vita*'s use of paired sea journeys to structure significant moments in the narrative, Bern's crossing to Denmark is the mirror image of Lothbrok's voyage in the opposite direction, to the extent that Edmund orders that he be "lad onto the same stronde / wher first the

[34] J. R. Reinhard, "Setting Adrift in Medieval Law and Literature," *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 56:1 (March 1941), 33–68.

[35] Helen Cooper, "Providence and the Sea: 'No tackle, sail nor mast'," in *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakesp*eare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 106–36. See also Carolyn Hares-Stryker, "Adrift on the Seven Seas: The Medieval Topos of Exile at Sea," *Florilegium* 12 (1993): 79–98.

barge of Lothbrok kam to londe" (ll. 1280–81) and placed aboard Lothbrok's own boat. Lydgate utilizes the same rhetoric of fate seen in the Danish king's crossing:

> Into that vessel, the story is weel knowe,
> Which nouther hadde oore, seil, nor mast,
> Folwyng the cours what coost the wynd list blowe
> This said Bern was be iuggement cast.
> Tween wynd and wawe his barge almost brast,
> Fordryue by rokkis and many hidous roche,
> Til toward Denmark his vessel han approche. (ll. 1282–88)

Bern's boat is likewise "fordryuen" but, in keeping with his villainy, his journey is more treacherous than Lothbrok's as the rocks are "hidous" and his boat is almost "brast"; the roughness of the sea matches the severity of his crime. It is also fitting that the waters around Denmark, a bedevilled kingdom now ruled by the pagan pirate princes Hyngwar and Hubba, are as treacherous as their people.

Figure 5: © British Library Board
London, British Library, MS Harley 2278, fol. 46r

A further synchrony between the natural world and its inhabitants is visible in the miniature on fol. 46r (fig. 5) where the blood-red clouds echo the copious quantities of the king's blood shed by Bern in the miniatures on fol. 44r and fol. 45v. The reflection of the blood-red sunset in the sword held aloft by Edmund's retainer on fol. 46r is an exquisite detail. At first glance it looks like blood, but Bern is clearly seen wielding

a wooden club as he bludgeons King Lothbrok in the miniature in fol. 44r, so this is not the murder weapon being displayed as a symbol of his guilt. Instead, it is likely to be the sword of justice raised while Edmund passes judgement. That the sun shines upon it at exactly this moment reiterates that Edmund is at one with the kingdom he rules as the justice he decrees is, in this instance, literally a reflection of the natural order, and is reminiscent of Lydgate's earlier meditation on the body politic and its accompanying miniature on fol. 34r, lines 855–75. It simultaneously invokes an alternate fate for Bern while reminding the reader that Edmund has demonstrated his capacity for compassion in not having his huntsman put to death.

Bern's fate, however, is sealed, and Edmund's raised left hand indicates that he is speaking his orders to his kneeling retainer. Edmund's gesture simultaneously takes in the means of Bern's punishment as it draws the viewer's eye to the waves lapping at the right-hand side of the miniature where an aghast looking Bern, his arms raised as though in shock, is being bundled into a small boat. Edmund's authority is so absolute that his orders are executed within the same visual frame that he first utters them. Although King Lothbrok's murder was undoubtedly unjust, a contrast is once again drawn between the mostly benign but bumbling pagan king who allows himself to be swept away to sea where he is governed by fate and the decisive Christian ruler who knows his own mind and whose followers obey him without question. St. Edmund has the ability to cast those who wrong into the waves, whereas King Lothbrok, just like Bern, is merely subject to them. The sea, then, is undoubtedly employed by Lydgate as a symbolic device. In keeping with a saint's life, however, the text is rich with symbols of other kinds, too, and if we read the sea purely as another symbol we lose sight of just how significant it is in its own terms as a natural elemental force which exerts a powerful practical influence over the plot.

The Viking Ocean

This subtle interplay between thalassocentrism and symbolism is arguably nowhere more evident than in Lydgate's depiction of the Vikings. In an era when contemporary Scandinavians were trading partners and fellow

Christians,[36] it was less feasible for Lydgate to demonize an entire people in the manner of Edmund's first known hagiographer, Abbo of Fleury who, writing four hundred and fifty years earlier in the 980s CE in the context of continued Viking incursions into England, portrays the Danes as evil incarnate and functionaries of the Devil.[37] Sobecki reminds us of the ubiquity of the belief, ultimately derived from the Bible, that the sea was thought to be governed the Devil and was, according to Micah 7.19, the place into which God would cast all of humankind's sins.[38] So although Lydgate was writing his version of the *vita* in very different historical circumstances than Abbo of Fleury, key elements of the Viking Danes' identity equate them with wickedness and with the sea.

In contrast to the degree of ambivalence afforded to their father, Lydgate leaves the reader in no doubt as to the villainy of the Danish princes Hyngwar and Hubba. They are men of "wilful violence" (l. 1054) whose synonymy with the sea is habitual as they boast of their piratical activity. Although they claim that there is no one "on londe *and* water" (l. 1061, my emphasis) alike to them "in manhood" (l. 1063), from their first appearance in the text alongside Lothbrok at the start of Book II, Lydgate makes it clear that they are most at home afloat:

> This Lothbrocus hadde sones tweyne,
> Wonder despitous and of gret cruelte,
> Hyngwar and Vbba, which that dide here peyne
> To stuff ether shippis with gret meyne,
> Lyk as piratis to robbe upon the se.
> And so lik men of ther corgae wood
> Reiosid hem euere to slen and sheede blood. (ll. 1065–71)
>
> ...
> For there is noon afforn vs dar abide.
> Be title of swerd always we preuaile
> To spoile be force all them that go or ride,
> Take all vesselis that bi the se doo saile.
> St.uf of marchantis we proudly kan assaile,

[36] Wendy R. Childs, "East Anglia's Trade in the North Sea World," *in East Anglia and its North Sea World in the Middle Ages*, ed. David Bates and Robert E. Liddiard (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2013), 188–203.

[37] Abbo, *Passio*, IV–V; Hervey, *Corolla*, 16–19.

[38] Sobecki, "Traditions," in *The Sea and Medieval English Literature*, 36.

> Takyng noon heed whethir it be ryht or wrong,
> For ther be any on erthe now so strong. (ll. 1044–50)

When they set sail for East Anglia in the miniature on fol. 47v (fig. 6) their body language evinces none of the anxiety and discomfort seen in Edmund on fols. 27r and 27v. Tightly packed aboard their ship to the extent that they almost resemble one bristling, dehumanized being, the palette used for the Danes' armor and weapons has the effect of making them blend in with their nautical setting, both visually and symbolically. In her discussion of the depiction of the Danes in the presentation manuscript, Salih observes that they are always at odds with the English landscape:

> While they are in England they are never depicted in an interior setting. In Denmark, they are encultured, albeit in their perverse pagan way. In England, they have no such cultural infrastructure [...] they are only ever matter out of place.[39]

Figure 6: © British Library Board
London, British Library, MS Harley 2278, fol. 47v

[39] Salih, *Imagining the Pagan*, 100.

Salih's analysis is based on the contrast between the elaborate, stylized interior settings which Edmund and the East Anglians occupy, and the tents pitched by the Danes which speak to their lack of permanence and innate incivility, but I would contend that this dichotomy of interior versus exterior and built infrastructure versus temporary settlement applies equally well to the binary of land versus sea. In contrast with their ease aboard ship in the miniature of fol. 47v, when the Danes land in England on the facing page, fol. 48r, their light-colored armor stands out starkly against the brown landscape: they are out of their element (see fig. 7). This contrast is heightened by the miniatures occupying the same vertical register on each page, thus encouraging the visual comparison across the opening of the book. On the one hand, depicting the Vikings as belonging on and to the sea is consistent with the historic experience of many people in coastal communities in the Viking era who encountered them as raiders and invaders who came from the sea. Lydgate exploits these historical associations, as well as the rich symbolism associated with the maritime environment. It is only, however, if we, as readers and viewers of the manuscript, read the sea in the terms to which it is offered to us—as the element which unifies all the strands of the narrative—that we can appreciate the full extent of the careful crafting of Lydgate's *Life*. The sea is therefore at the center of how meaning is made but also must be at the forefront of how it is read.

Maritime Monsters

We can see this thalassocentrism once again in a further aspect of the Vikings' characterization: their monstrosity. The Danish Vikings' ease in this maritime environment which Lydgate has already established as dangerous and doleful and potentially devilish is a crucial element of their monstrosity. As with his inclusion of the rudderless boat motif, it seems that Lydgate is once again borrowing from Romance conventions where the sea is a place associated with villainous paganity. Sobecki discusses the King Horn tradition, particularly the Middle English *King Horn*,[40] and demonstrates how the land is associated with native Christian inhabitants

[40] This is included in Jennifer Fellows, ed., *Of Love and Chivalry: An Anthology of Middle English Romance* (London: Phoenix, 1993). Sobecki quotes from this edition and I reproduce its pagination in quoting him.

whereas the sea is the place "from which the Saracens materialise."[41] He explicates the way in which "land" is frequently used as an attribute of the Christian kingdom's inhabitants, and "this 'lond folk' [43], to which Horn belongs and whose future ruler he will be, defines itself against the marauding Saracens."[42] He concludes that these Muslims are "outlandish and alien as opposed to landish."[43] These descriptions apply equally well to Lydgate's Vikings.

They are further monstered by means of their accoutrements of war. Salih explores in some detail their elaborate clothing and weaponry, which exoticizes them and characterizes them as Eastern, rather than Northern, invaders. She argues that this is a deliberate blurring of signifiers to render the Danes generically other and exotic at a time when their living compatriots were anything but:

> The illustrator presumably lacked a sufficiently exotic visual code for Scandinavians, who after all were mundanely familiar trading partners in fifteenth-century East Anglia, so borrowed from another set of infidels feared for their military prowess.[44]

I would argue, however, that a hitherto overlooked aspect of their war gear—their heraldic banners—pertains specifically to their maritime monstrosity. The most self-evident example of this is found in the miniature on fol. 48r (fig. 7) as the Danes come ashore in England carrying four banners:

41 Sobecki, "Realms in Abeyance," in *The Sea and Medieval English Literature*, 107. Sobecki's use of the term "Saracen" reflects its appearance in *King Horn*; however, Shokoofeh Rajabzadeh addresses the problems inherent in modern uses of the term when discussing medieval texts; see Rajabzadeh, "The Depoliticized Saracen and Muslim Erasure," *Literature Compass* 16:9-10 (2019), https://doi.org/10.1111/lic3.12548.

42 Sobecki, "Realms in Abeyance," in *The Sea and Medieval English Literature*, 107.

43 Sobecki, "Realms in Abeyance," 108.

44 Salih, *Imagining the Pagan*, 3–4.

Figure 7: © British Library Board
London, British Library, MS Harley 2278, fol. 48r

Two of these, the horizontal pennants, are indistinct, but may depict a crude rendering of Arabic lettering in a further nod to the Danish-Muslim synergy employed throughout the poem and manuscript. One of the vertical banners has a device in silver against a white background which may be a dragon, invoking the equation between the draconic and the demonic which flourished in the medieval Christian imagination, thus adding to the monstering of the Danes.

The most prominent of the four banners is carried to the fore of the group and is also most readily distinguishable, both of which suggest that of the all the banners carried by the invaders this was the one which is meant to capture our attention. In gold on a red rectangular background it clearly depicts a fork-tailed mermaid holding aloft a mirror. The mermaid was a symbol of vanity in the Middle Ages and is therefore a suitable emblem for the Danes who are distinguished throughout the presentation manuscript's miniatures by their elaborate clothing. As an aquatic creature the mermaid also speaks to their maritime belonging, and her dual physicality (part-human, part-fish) signifies their monstrous nature as human beings who should be at home on land but who instead evince a monstrous affinity with that most treacherous environment: the sea.

Conclusion

The scene is then set for Edmund's martyrdom: his killers have landed in East Anglia and both Lydgate and the miniaturists expend considerable effort to ensure the reader of the poem and viewer of the images is left in no doubt as to their intentions and the depths of their depravity. They are "matter out of place" as Salih describes but this is far more integral than their mere clothing or accoutrements suggest. They are synonymous with the sea, and unlike the other characters who at best endure or survive in the maritime environment, Lydgate and Harley 2278's Danes flourish at sea; they are of the sea. Abbo of Fleury may have claimed in the 980s CE that all that was evil came "from the north," but in Lydgate's *Life of St. Edmund*, all that is evil comes from the sea. The care which has been taken throughout the manuscript to layer the deleterious associations of the sea therefore culminate at this point in the story, where all the negative connotations are brought to bear at once in these characters and their king-murdering, saint-making, villainy.

Sobecki argues that the sea owed its symbolic resonance to "its essential dissimilarity" to land:

> Whereas land is immobile and stable, the sea is in constant movement. Land is permanent; it can be walked and built on (and rode upon). The sea, on the other hand, can merely be traversed by man [...] no lasting habitation is possible.[45]

In constructing his characters Lydgate exploits this duality in his creation of the constant, devout Edmund who is contrasted so starkly with the duplicitous, volatile Danes; they are as dissimilar as the land is from the sea. The inclusion of the noble pagan King Lothbrok does not undermine this dichotomy but rather serves to enhance the monstrosity of his devilish sons.

Examining the depiction of the sea alone in the manuscript's miniatures reveals little distinction between the waters which Edmund traverses as opposed to those across which the Viking Danes sail: the presence of the former does not lead the waters to still, nor do the latter lead the depths to boil. To this extent the sea in the miniatures of Harley 2278 is visually neutral and may be said to exist on its own terms. Nevertheless, it is a place loaded with cultural and symbolic meanings

[45] Sobecki, "Introduction," in *The Sea and Medieval English Literature*, 5.

which Lydgate exploits to create not just one sea, but many: it facilitates fateful visitations, and is the setting of sorrowful departures, dangerous journeys, sacral ceremony, twists of ill-luck leading to murder, and justified but nevertheless dire punishment.

The cumulative effect of John Lydgate's maritime rhetoric is sophisticated and subtle but can only be appreciated if the poem and its accompanying images are read in synchrony, and only if the manuscript is read holistically and through a maritime lens. Doing so sheds new light on this important later medieval text, particularly in terms of Lydgate's recourse to a range of sources and traditions. It also demonstrates the importance of centering the natural world.

In their introductory essay to a special journal edition devoted to new directions in Medieval Water Studies published in 2019, Smith and Howes attest that water in particular is an aspect of the natural world which embodies both the potential and the possible pitfalls of this way of reading:

> Because water is not a stable entity in and of itself, it can more easily soak up and reflect its immediate environment, constantly shifting and transforming, acting as a mirror for a cultural moment when it is employed by writers, either as an individual metaphor or as a wider intellectual framework. It is this ableness of water that makes it particularly attractive as metaphorical material — water is the river of scripture, the flood of sin, the agent of baptism, the well-spring of Christ and countless other things in between. However, this conception of water as indeterminate — everything and nothing at once — can also be a trap for scholars of medieval studies, if it means that we perceive the element only as literary fodder, a catalogue of potential representations, and neglect to consider it on its own terms.[46]

Adopting a nature-centered approach in which the sea itself is read as a crucial maker and carrier of meaning in its own right therefore enables this important text to be read anew and thus makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the rhetorical richness of one of the major authors of the fifteenth century. It also furthers the growing ecological and ecocritical discourse pertaining specifically to medieval

[46] James L. Smith, and Hetta Howes, "Medieval Water Studies: Past, Present and Promise," *Open Library of Humanities* 5:1 (2019): 35 pages, https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.443.

water studies, where recent publications have demonstrated the wealth of new insights which can be gained from adopting what Glotfelty characterized as taking "an earth-centred approach to literary studies" or, in this case, a thalassocentric approach.[47]

It is in the moments which defy confident categorization that the richness of Lydgate's *Life* is most apparent. Likewise, the benefits of reading the text through this lens, which enables this new light to be shone upon it, demonstrates the scope for applying this approach more widely, not just to those texts which are the most obvious fit, and thus speaks to the potential for its application more broadly in medieval literature.

[47] Cheryll Glotfelty, "Introduction: Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis," in *The Ecocritical Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996), xv–xxxvii at xviii.