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The rebirth of an old genre: The traditions of the sea narrative in Marie Brennan's fantasy novel *The Voyage of The Basilisk*

Ganna Kolesnyk

Ganna Kolesnyk is an associate professor at the Department of English Philology at Petro Mohyla Black Sea National University in Mykolaiv, Ukraine. She received her PhD in Literature at the Shevchenko Institute of Literature of the National Academy of Sciences in Kyiv, Ukraine. Her main fields of interest are YA fantasy fiction, rewritings of fairy tales, historiographical metafiction, and postmodern literature. She has published articles on Peter Ackroyd's experiments in biographical writing and fantasy fiction.

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2443-7042

Abstract:
Marie Brennan's novel The Voyage of The Basilisk (2016) *is the third book in the series chronicling the exploits of Lady Trent, a naturalist residing in a world reminiscent of Victorian England. Written in the form of sea voyage memoirs, the narrative unfolds during the protagonist's expedition aboard the* Basilisk, *a royal survey ship commissioned to traverse a fantastical realm in pursuit of studying various species of dragon. Employing the traditional sea narrative genre, the author follows its defining conventions, rendering the text abundant in both encyclopaedic and active descriptions of cultural artefacts and animals, alongside events ranging from mundane life on board to thrilling adventures. The characters venture into uncharted territories, engage with indigenous populations, exploring their customs and traditions, and study the diverse fauna inhabiting these lands, particularly the dragons. Working within the framework of classical nautical fiction, the author features a number of archetypal characters, including a "mad" captain, an inquisitive youth and a fellow researcher. Furthermore,* The Voyage of The Basilisk *is highly intertextual and alludes not only to iconic fictional works such as Herman Melville's* Moby Dick *and Robert Stevenson's* Treasure Island *but also seminal non-fictional accounts like Charles Darwin's* Voyage of the Beagle.

Introduction

People have been fascinated by the sea since the earliest times, and the desire to represent it is evident across different periods and cultures. This has resulted in a plethora of cultural texts

related to the sea, including documentary texts such as scientific documents, travel writing, diaries, memoirs, letters as well as various fictional works like novels, poems, and short stories. Attitudes towards depictions of the sea vary greatly, ranging from viewing it as a strange space full of danger and the unknown to seeing it as a realm of possibility and potential as well as a site of conflict and contest. As Robert Foulke once noted, people "embark on voyages not only to get somewhere but also to accomplish something, and along the way to discover ourselves and our prospects in the world. In this sense voyages are a natural vehicle for the human imagination exploring the unknown, whether to be discovering new continents or finding out the truth about oneself" (1986, p. 3). Notwithstanding the mode of narration, the sea as a literary subject was quite popular with both readers and writers for many years.

But in an age of impressive technological achievements, comfortable, fast ships and transatlantic flights, the sea seems to have lost a good deal of its charm, attracting less and less public attention. Alan Sekula in his *Fish Story* aptly characterized this disappearance of the sea from the focus of attention as "forgetting the sea" (2002, p. 48). This process took place very slowly, and as a result of it "culturally, the sea becomes a vast reservoir of anachronisms" (ibid., p. 51). According to Shin Yamashiro, these days sea literature is either anachronistic or scarcely exists for the reason that most of those maritime activities have dwindled away or have radically changed. For many people the oceans of today appear to have value primarily for tourism, for providing food and mineral resources, and for disposal of unwanted substances (2014, p. 15). So, there is nothing surprising in the fact that nautical fiction has become an outsider of contemporary literature. Rare examples of sea narratives in modern literature mostly refer to historical romantic or adventure literature and non-fiction featuring scientific research devoted to sea-related topics.

Strangely enough, it was fantasy literature that breathed new life into the once popular genre of the sea narrative. The last decades of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century saw the exuberant development of fantasy. Each year brings forth fresh names and unveils new texts as authors follow in the footprints of J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis, endeavouring to create their own fantasy worlds. In fact, fantasy literature (genre fantasy) is an umbrella term which encompasses a number of various genres with clear characteristic features. "Genre Fantasy (GF) is almost always High Fantasy, Heroic Fantasy or Sword and Sorcery, and its main distinguishing characteristic is that, on being confronted by an unread GF book, one recognizes it" (Clute, 1999, p. 396). While a significant number of fantasy authors adhere closely to established fantasy genre conventions, faithfully reproducing typical narrative models characteristic of popular mass culture, some fantasy writers willingly push beyond these

boundaries, exploring new avenues of storytelling within the genre. Postmodern experiments have blurred the boundaries between different genres leading to the emergence of hybrids as a common occurrence. Elements of various genres form endless and often unusual combinations, resulting in unpredictable and fascinating results. Modern fantasy authors enthusiastically embrace this trend. Under the motto of postmodernism "everything goes", they actively utilize the vast heritage of world literature to craft highly original works that boldly blend different features of traditional genres in exuberant experiments.

The sea narrative has found renewed relevance within fantasy literature, experiencing a rebirth in popularity. Drawing extensively on the rich traditions of the genre, fantasy authors follow its established conventions while infusing it with fresh perspectives and innovative storytelling techniques. Over the last two decades, there has been a notable increase in the number of fantasy texts featuring the sea narrative. Renowned authors such as Robin Hobb, China Miéville, Scott Lynch, Joanne Harris, Joe Abercrombie, and Jake Vance, have all contributed to this revival. Additionally, in 2023 alone, nautical fantasy novels by Shannon Chakraborty, Brandon Sanderson, Rita Chang-Eppig, Adrienne Young, and Gabi Bourton were published, further highlighting the enduring popularity and relevance of the sea narrative within the realm of fantasy literature.

One of the authors whose original genre experiments within the limits of the fantasy genre are worth paying attention to is the American writer Marie Brennan. In her novel, *Voyage of the Basilisk*, she rebrands the sea voyage genre by mixing its elements with those taken from other genres and thus creates a unique hybrid which enables the author to tell her story in an unusual way.

The author and her philosophy

Marie Brennan is the penname of the popular American fantasy writer Bryn Neuenschwander. She started her writing career in 2006 with her first novel from the Doppelganger duology *Doppelganger* (2006) (reissued as *Warrior* in 2008) which was followed by *Warrior and Witch* (2006) (reissued as *Witch* in 2008). From there she moved to historical fantasy, first with the Onyx Court series (*Midnight Never Come* (2008), *In Ashes Lie* (2009), *A Star Shall Fall* (2010), *With Fate Conspire* (2011)), spanning 300 years of London history, and then with the acclaimed pseudo-Victorian *Memoirs of Lady Trent*. This series consists of five books: *A Natural History of Dragons* (2013), *The Tropic of Serpents* (2014), *Voyage of the Basilisk* (2016), *In the Labyrinth of Drakes* (2016), and *Within the Sanctuary of Wings* (2017). Later these books were followed by a spin-off novel *Turning Darkness into Light* (2019) and a book of short stories

("From the Editorial Page of the Falchester Weekly Review" [2016]). The first book of that series, *A Natural History of Dragons* (2013), was a finalist for the World Fantasy Award; the final book, *Within the Sanctuary of Wings* (2017), won the RT Reviewers' Choice Award for the Best Fantasy Novel. The series as a whole was a finalist for both the Hugo Award and the Grand Prix de l'Imaginaire.

Perhaps one of the most notable aspects of Marie Brennan's biography is her undergraduate degree in archaeology and folklore from Harvard University, followed by graduate studies in cultural anthropology and folklore at Indiana University before embarking on a full-time writing career. The writer openly acknowledges that her academic background fed naturally into her work, providing her with the tools to construct fantastical worlds. "I've come to realize that it's an important clue to how I think and what I think, not just in an academic or general context, but specifically with regards to my writing. … And since 'anthropological fantasy' is an unwieldy term, let's call it 'cultural fantasy'" (Brennan).

In discussing her creative process, the author emphasizes that world-building is the central aspect of her woks: "Character, for me, arises from and is shaped by the socio-cultural context of the individual; their beliefs and the actions they take aren't independent of that context. People aren't puppets of their cultures, of course, but neither are they free of them … I'm interested in constructing messy, complicated societies that are full of flaws and then saying, ooh, this is interesting, let's see what happens if I poke it here. And concurrently with this and the previous point, I'm interested in making up cultures that are different" (Brennan).

The Memoirs of Lady Trent serves as an excellent example of the practical application of this philosophy. The world depicted in the books is intricately constructed featuring meticulously mapped geographical locations inhabited by unique wildlife such as wild dragons. Additionally, various countries with distinct cultures and social structures, as well as enigmatic peoples, further enrich the immersive experience. Set in an alternate world and inspired by the 19th century, the books chronicle the adventures and discoveries of Isabella Camherst, Lady Trent, described as "the remarkable woman who brought the study of dragons out of the misty shadows of myth and misunderstanding into the clear light of modern science" (Brennan). *The Voyage of the Basilisk* features Lady Isabella's ambitious expedition, a two-year trip around the world aboard the Royal Survey Ship Basilisk "to study all manner of dragons in every place they might be found" (Brennan).

The outline of maritime fiction

Contemporary literary criticism uses several terms to refer to literary works in which the sea plays a leading role, among which the most popular are sea (voyage) narrative, nautical fiction, naval (adventure) fiction, sea fiction (novels), sea adventures or even maritime fiction. This genre has a long and flamboyant history dating back thousands of years. As Margaret Cohen aptly noted, sea fiction is international in its poetics as well as in its geography (2003, 483). The history of the sea voyage narrative as a literary genre can be traced back to the birth of the English novel during the Enlightenment era, although its roots extend across different cultures and time periods. Keen interest in the sea and stories connected with it were quite typical for the period: "In England, at the time of Defoe, the maritime corpus of literature was thriving. Publishers of practical nautical literature … counted scores of volumes in their lists, and non-fictional overseas voyage literature outstripped even devotional literature in its popularity" (Cohen, 2010, p. 7).

By the beginning of the 19th century, sea voyage narratives had gained widespread popularity in England. This phenomenon has an obvious historical explanation. After the end of the Napoleonic Wars, Great Britain emerged as one of the most prosperous nations globally, boasting extensive colonies, robust trade networks, and rapid industrialization. In 1852, Alexander Campbell quite aptly described the situation using Fray Francisco de Ugalde's phrase, calling the British Empire "The Empire on which the sun never sets". The increasing significance of naval power in sustaining Britain's expansive global empire precipitated the rapid evolution of sea voyage narratives. During this period, Romantic poets (such as Samuel Coleridge, George Byron and Percy Shelly) created striking images of the sea and sea travelling. As Jonathan Raban justly pointed out in his introduction to *The Oxford Book of the Sea*, "Byron and his contemporaries made the sea into a proper habitat for aspiring authors" (1992, p.20). In their turn, Walter Scott and Frederick Marryat were the writers whose maritime adventure novels began to define generic expectations about such fiction (Klein, 2002, p. 8).

However, it is essential to emphasize that the popularity of sea narratives was not an exclusively British phenomenon. American writers of the time period also embraced the sea narrative genre with great enthusiasm. As Jonathan Raban explains, it was very emblematic because "…American History began in sea voyages…" (1992, p. 30). The most prominent figure in the history of American sea voyage fiction is Herman Melville, whose masterpiece, *Moby Dick* (1851), is a true icon of maritime fiction and manifests all the distinguishing features of the genre.

The second half of the 19th century witnessed a revival of Romantic themes during the age of neo-romanticism. Throughout this period writers remained captivated by the sea,

producing numerous breathtaking sea voyage narratives. Authors such as Wilkie Collins, Robert Louis Stevenson and Rudyard Kipling made their significant contributions to the development of nautical fiction as well. The Modernist period in the history of British maritime fiction is closely associated with Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and *Lord Jim* (1900). At the beginning of the 20th century in American literature, Jack London became the leading figure in nautical fiction writing. His *The Sea Wolf* (1904) is a remarkable text for its literary exploration of heroic masculinity.

In discussing the history of sea narratives, it is nearly impossible not to mention the host of sea adventures by Jules Verne, a French writer of the period. He wrote a widely popular series of scrupulously researched adventure novels titled *Voyages Extraordinaires.* The images and characters created by this author have become an inescapable part nautical fiction, and contemporary writers continue to actively reference them.

The period immediately after the end of the Second World War marked the emergence of novels by writers who had served in the British and US navies and were eager to share their wartime experiences. The list of such writers includes Douglas Reeman, Brian Callison and Antony Trew. However, their works did not gain widespread popularity among readers compared to the works of Cecil Forester and Patrick O'Brian, which were highly admired by the public. Both authors operated at the intersection of sea narrative and historical fiction, depicting marine adventures during the Napoleonic Wars.

This brief history of British naval fiction would not be quite complete without mentioning the postmodernist trilogy *To the Ends of the Earth* by William Golding. On the one hand, these novels continued the traditions of Joseph Conrad and Herman Melville, featuring a coming-of-age story. On the other hand, they gave a completely new turn to the development of the genre by introducing postmodernist writing, thus turning the novel into a prominent example of postmodern historical metafiction.

With regard to the further development of nautical fiction, Jonathan Raban pointed out that writing about the sea in the 20th century "needed some fresh understanding, some shift of knowledge or sensibility, to liberate it from the 19th century masterpieces to which it is in thrall" (1992, p. 30). Thus, contemporary writers have done their best to follow this suggestion, working diligently to breathe new life into this old genre.

Generic features of the sea narrative

The sea voyage narrative as a genre possesses a number of characteristic features which clearly distinguish it from other novel types. According to Margaret Cohen, it was invented by James

Fenimore Cooper with *The Pilot* (1823) when the author "took the codes of historical fiction, pioneered by Walter Scott, to map the boundaries and identity of the nation, and translated them to the supranational space of the open sea" (2003, p. 483).

From the very early stage of the genre's development, individuality was placed at its centre. The British researcher John Peck in his *Maritime Fiction: Sailors and the Sea in British and American Novels, 1719–1917* singles out three chief elements which lay the basis for the genre:

> … the individual sailor, who more often than not will display distinctively masculine qualities; the sea and the other shore as places of danger, where challenges have to be met; and thirdly, the social, economic and political dimension, that the ship is a product of technology, that it has been built for a purpose, and that there is a practical aspect to every sea voyage. More briefly: there is a sailor, a challenge, and this takes place in a context. (2001, p.14)

Consequently, the voyage acquires additional symbolic significance when a common story about a trip on board of a ship, whether the ship is becalmed or experiences shipwreck and disaster, "stresses the insignificance of human effort in the larger context of nature" and at the same time "represent[s] a testing of human resourcefulness in the face of natural adversity" (ibid., p. 14). In such a way, a voyage in the sea narrative becomes a form of initiation where the sea places a young protagonist into unfamiliar situations and teaches them the true value of people and things. This liminal experience of being at sea either strengthens their character, forcing them to reevaluate life, or breaks them entirely. "When the test becomes more menacing and the possibility of failure greater… the stakes change from growing up to risking moral destruction … When the test becomes severe enough, men get initiated into death rather than life" (Foulke, 1986, p. 7). Still, if the rites of passage are successfully completed, the character's worldview undergoes significant changes, they acquire new personal qualities and quite often a different social status.

The chronotope of the sea narrative is also remarkable because time in such texts has a dual nature, being simultaneously linear and cyclical. It is linear as the ship moves from one point to another, with prearranged stops and a thoroughly planned route. Yet, cyclical due to daily routines on board which depend greatly on natural cycles. Besides that, as Hester Blum observes, "the narratives end, naturally enough, where they begin: in port" (2012, p. 7). This time pattern influences the conventional plot structure which most sea narratives follow, with its clearly marked beginning and end.

The spatial dimension of the sea narrative's chronotope is also dualistic, based on the contrast between the space of the ship and the space of the sea. On the one hand, the sea is perceived as "a space of inherent disorder—if not always visible disorder" (Siobhan, 2015, p.79). At the same time, this chaotic space is counteracted by the carefully managed and well-structured space of the ship. Moreover, the ship itself represents a unique space, an ideal heterotopia, possessing all the attributes characteristic of it while being encompassed within a larger space of the world and distinguished by its changing geographical position. The unique nature of the ship as a space is described by Michael Foucault in his theory of heterotopia. For Foucault, the ship is "heterotopia par excellence" where "the boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea" (1986, p. 27). This space offers the authors of sea narratives numerous possibilities, which they actively exploit in their texts using the ship as a symbol of a state or even of the entire world and applying to it various scenarios, both real and utopian. Taking all this into account, it is obviously possible to approach the sea narrative as "a liminal space where history, representation, and social experience break down" (Cohen, 2003, p. 483) and study the genre taking into consideration all these elements.

It is undeniable that adventures play a significant role in nautical fiction. A sea voyage narrative typically begins with an account of the events that compel the protagonist to embark upon a voyage. Throughout the voyage the protagonist encounters a series of adventures. The events may include facing perilous conditions such as enduring storms or periods of calm seas, experiencing a shipwreck or being kidnapped, and undergoing miraculous rescues. Additionally, protagonists may face epidemics, contract tropical illnesses, or sustain injuries. Quite often, characters encounter enemies or outlaws, such as pirates, who hinder their progress towards achieving the goal of the voyage. Another typical trope found in sea narratives is a visit to a mysterious place, such as an island or foreign land. Sometimes, writers may also incorporate romance between characters, adding a sentimental atmosphere to the plot. Maritime texts are known for their extensive use of real-world geography and frequent references to exotic locations. Consequently, authors of maritime narratives often depict situations where characters interact with indigenous peoples, focusing on their customs and traditions. Besides that, sea voyage narratives may include encounters with marine animals, both dangerous and peaceful, which characters observe or hunt, making the hunting process itself a popular sea narrative trope.

Alongside these plot elements, sea voyage narratives actively employ several important tropes closely connected with the aforementioned archetype of initiation. The first one is a

descent which may be “both obvious and natural as a ship sinks to the bottom… In this way sinking is a psychic repetition of myths of visiting the underworld” (Foulke, 1986, p. 7). The second one is “falling from aloft” (ibid., p. 7), when one of the characters experiences an almost deadly fall from the height of the sky to the depth of the ocean. The final voyage archetype is immobilization when “a ship [is] becalmed or stranded” (ibid., pp. 7-8). Though not all these tropes are present in every sea voyage narrative, it is really difficult to find a text that does not feature at least one of them.

It is worth mentioning that the sea narrative quite often features a standard set of characters. Apart from the protagonist (who in most canonical texts is male, but may fulfil various functions aboard), it includes a captain, researcher/a doctor, teenage boy, woman at sea, crew members, villain, and so on.

Narrative techniques used in sea fiction are quite varied, but description holds a markedly significant place in this list as one of the genre’s oldest devices. It was pioneered by Sir Walter Scott and might be called *encyclopaedic description*. Sea fiction uses encyclopaedic description, notably when delineating the physical aspect of the sea and coast, or offering a portrait of the countries and inhabitants discovered on the voyage (ibid., p. 488). The authors of sea narratives employ an abundance of descriptions, thoroughly depicting all stages of the sea voyage, and with much attention given to naturalistic details. Additionally, genre conventions require elaborate descriptions of exotic places with their flora and fauna, the local style of life including appearances, clothing, social order, cuisines, traditions and religion. Often these descriptions are presented from the viewpoint of the protagonist, serving as an additional means of characterizing their personality.

This encyclopaedic description is contrasted by what might be called active description, which is “integral to the forward movement of the plot, incorporating both a sequence of actions and dialogue”. This type of description is characterized by the excessive use of various professional details and “unexplained precise nautical terminology” which contributes to the reality effect and creates suspense vitally important for this type of literature (ibid., p. 489).

Another characteristic feature of sea fiction is its extraordinary attention to various manifestations of violence, resulting in the richness of their detailed description. Authors of sea narratives often depict death scenes, bloody battles and bodies mutilated by illnesses, both trivial and exotic, or by horrific punishments inflicted on sailors. In some cases, they go even further, describing acts of cannibalism committed by victims of shipwrecks driven mad by hunger and despair. This inclination towards terrifying descriptions can be attributed to the

violent nature of life at sea where brutality and constant danger blur the border between life and death, human and beastly, making it all too easy to cross.

Rebranding the tradition

As mentioned earlier, the sea narrative as a genre reached its peak in the second half of the 19th century at the crossroads of several dominant tendencies of the period. Firstly, the Royal Navy played a pivotal role in supporting the power the British Empire worldwide. Consequently, British sea trade flourished, bringing wealth and prosperity to the British Isles and highlighting the significance of the sea and seafarers to the nation's wellbeing. Additionally, it was a period marked by intensive scientific research with numerous maritime expeditions sponsored by the Crown venturing to destinations across the globe, thereby strengthening British influence on multiple levels. Simultaneously, the sea narrative was closely intertwined with the tradition of Victorian fiction. The novel became a dominant literary genre during the period and "was in a position to comment upon and try to understand Britain's position of global domination, a supremacy that relied upon naval power and marine trade" (Peck, 2001, p. 8).

Indeed, it is very likely that all these tendencies influenced Marie Brennan's decision to not only embrace the sea narrative genre for her fantasy novel but also to model the secondary world in *The Voyage of the Basilisk* after the real world of the late 19th century. The novel exhibits a high degree of intertextuality: though the plot is set in a totally imagined world, there are multiple allusions deeply rooted in real-world history.

The 19th century witnessed rapid advancements in science and technology, with remarkable progress made across nearly all fields of research. Expeditions around the world, involving numerous British researchers, played a crucial role in this transformative process. These journeys turned travel into an educational experience which, as Casey Blanton explains, was not so much a type of finishing school for the traveller but a way to bring back information that would benefit the entire society. This perspective became the dominating mood of Victorian travel books (Blanton, 2002, p. 20). Taking all this into consideration, Marie Brennan turns the history of 19th-century natural science and the role of female researchers in it into the chief sources of inspiration for her novel. The author's efforts culminated in the creation of an extraordinarily diverse fantasy world, rich in detail and depth, prompting exploration and study. Therefore, it is only natural that Marie Brennan utilizes the "travel around the world" trope as the foundation of the book's plot.

The choice of the main character for the novel is quite remarkable. The protagonist of the story is Mrs Isabella Camherst, also known as Lady Trent. In her late twenties, she is a

devout naturalist with a keen interest in the study of dragons. As a widow, Lady Trent enjoys a certain degree of freedom, yet she must contend with the disapproval from both her late husband's family and her own family due to her unconventional pursuits and style of life. The primary objective of her sea voyage is scientific research focused on dragons. In Lady Trent's world, dragons are not mythical creatures but majestic wild beasts. Driven by her innate curiosity, the protagonist observes these animals in their natural habitat, making notes about their behaviour, breeding habits and physiological characteristics.

Traditionally, the space of the sea and maritime life was referred to as a purely masculine realm with the inclusive dominance of masculine power when "men took pride in their physical hardness, including their capacity to drink" (Peck, 2001, p. 6). For centuries sailors considered the presence of women on board to be a bad omen, and they took great pains to avoid such a situation. One possible explanation for the prejudice is provided by Carl Jung, who interprets the water as the archetype of the maternal. In such a way, "the unconscious of sailors, saturated with the feminine, is unable to bear the presence of real women at sea", though "taboos against women at sea did not apply to women as paying passengers" (Bonatti, Crane, 2012, p. 34). At the same time, female characters at sea have never been common in nautical fiction, so "no women are to be found on Captain Ahab's ship *Pequod* or in Captain Nemo's submarine *Nautilus*" (ibid., p. 33). Making a woman not only the protagonist but also the first-person narrator of her novel, Marie Brennan challenges the tradition of sea voyage fiction where women primarily played subordinate roles as passive passengers or faithful Penelopes patiently waiting for their Odysseuses on shore. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that in doing so, she relies on non-fictional female accounts of sea travels which were definitely outnumbered by male testimonies and thus marginalized within the genre. In Marie Brennan's novel, a woman has to undergo a typical initiation characteristic of the genre, testing both her physical and spiritual strength to gain recognition in the male-dominated world she continually challenges simply by her presence on board.

The fictional personality of Mrs Isabella Camherst, Lady Trent, is quite probably a combination of what is known about three prominent women researchers from the history of British science. The first one is Lady Eliza Maria Gordon-Cumming, a Scottish aristocrat, palaeontologist and scientific illustrator. She held correspondence with the most famous geologists of the time as well as collected and studied fossils from the Devonian period. Also, her son became a famous traveller, and the same thing happens to Mrs Isabella Camherst's son Jacob (Ewan & Pipes, 2018, p. 167). The second female prototype is Constance Frederica "Eka" Gordon-Cumming, the daughter of Lady Gordon-Cumming, a noted Scottish travel writer and

talented painter. She learned to paint without the help of a teacher despite being a young girl, and Brennan mentions the same fact about Lady Trent. This woman travelled the world, mostly in Asia and the Pacific, and received much criticism from male writers of the era – she did not fit into the traditional Victorian female mould and often travelled alone and unaided. In 1882, she went on a voyage aboard a military ship and later wrote a book about this travel experience: *A Lady's Cruise in a French Man-of-War* (Laracy, 2013). Quite remarkably, Mrs Camherst in the novel travels across the territories which correspond to the places visited by Eka Gordon-Cumming during her trips in the real world, making the parallel between the fictional character and the historical woman even more obvious. The last probable prototype of Mrs Camherst is Isabella Lucy Bird (Bishop), a 19th-century British explorer, writer, photographer and naturalist as well as the first woman to be elected Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society (Middleton, 1993, p. 11). It is worth mentioning that Isabella Camherst becomes a member of such a society as well and gains the respect of male researchers in a similar manner later in the series. In an era where societal expectations for women revolved around marriage, motherhood and domestic responsibilities, these courageous and adventurous Victorian women travellers challenged norms by exploring remote regions of the world, undeterred by public judgment. Marie Brennan holds a clear admiration for them, melting together the best traits of their characters to cast her own image of an exceptional woman-scientist.

Sea narrative conventions encompass specific text structures and narrative styles. First-person narration is predominant as it lends a personal touch to the experience and immerses the reader more deeply into the story. For the same reason authors frequently employ the narrator's preface as a starting point of the narrative. Following the tradition of sea narratives, *The Voyage of the Basilisk* commences with Lady Trent's *Preface*. In this introduction she addresses the genre of her book, categorizing it as a sea voyage memoir/travelogue. This establishes a connection between the story and a long line of sea voyage memoirs, both factual and fictional. Moreover, in the *Preface* Lady Trent explains that she uses her travel journals as the material, and this detail is also true of the nautical fiction since "most sea narratives, in fact, were adapted from journals kept while at sail or were re-creations of journals or logs lost at sea" (Blum, 2012, p. 39). Also, in the *Preface* Lady Trent reveals that she primarily kept her journal due to the contract obligations she had with the *Winfield Courier* newspaper which regularly featured her travel chronicles. This reference to a characteristic sea narrative trope helps to create an impression of a real-life adventure and makes the personality of the protagonist even more alive. Besides that, Lady Trent mentions publishing her first book devoted to the events of the trip,

Around the World in Search of Dragons, and thus establishes a further allusion to non-fictional sea narratives similar to Darwin's texts.

The very fact of *The Voyage of the Basilisk*'s featuring a trip around the world forces the reader to recollect a good score of sea narratives where the same endeavour became the ground for plot development. Marie Brennan pushes the similarities further by employing multiple conventional genre elements and creating recognizable intertextual parallels with earlier around-the-world stories. The whole voyage of the Basilisk is based on two real trips: the voyage of Charles Darwin on *HMS Beagle*, which the scientist described in his *Narrative of the Surveying Voyages of His Majesty's Ships Adventure and Beagle describing their Examination of the Southern Shores of South America, and the Beagle's Circumnavigation of the Globe, in three volumes* (1839) and the voyage of Captain John Moresby, RN on HMS *Basilisk* which took place in 1871-1873 and is described in his book *A Cruise in Polynesia and Visits to the Pearl-Shelling Stations in Torres Straits of H.M.S. Basilisk*. There are many similarities between the two trips and the novel's trip since the author borrowed a number of episodes from these books. For example, The *Beagle* was modified to make it more manoeuvrable and a better ship for surveying by adding a third mast (the mizzenmast) at the back of the ship. The same adjustment was done to the *Basilisk* in the book. Also, The *Beagle* was seriously damaged during the trip after a severe storm and was laid ashore for repairs on the Santa Cruz River (Darwin, 1839). The fictional *Basilisk* had to go through a similar repair under the same circumstances. As for the second voyage, the similarities here are even more obvious in view of the fact that the author used the name of the ship (the *Basilisk*), and the ship in her book follows the route of the real *Basilisk* quite accurately (Moresby, 1875).

The Voyage of the Basilisk begins in a very typical way, with a detailed description of the events preceding the beginning of the voyage. Later Marie Brennan introduces her characters to a whole set of perilous situations typical of traditional nautical fiction: Mrs Camherst and her companions participate in a sea dragon hunt, become becalmed in the doldrums, endure a dangerous storm and a shipwreck, contract terrible tropical illnesses, interact with savage tribes, visit unknown locations and contend with true villains. It is worth mentioning that each chapter of the novel begins with a brief overview of the most significant events described in it at its outset. Marie Brennan's use of this common 19th-century sea voyage narrative device helps to create a vivid parallel with a long tradition of such texts and conveys an impression of rootedness in the real world.

The *Memoirs of Lady Trent* series that *The Voyage of the Basilisk* is a part of consists of five books, where readers gradually become acquainted with the secondary world step by

step. In the world the author describes the role of the British Empire is mirrored by a state called Scirland. Numerous elements within the text suggest and support this parallel. For instance, Lady Trent's native country is a monarchy. In the first book this state is ruled by the King, but an equally significant role is played by his daughter, young princess Miriam, who is politically engaged and undertakes numerous important missions. By the end of the series the princess ascends to the throne as Queen following her father's demise serving as a clear allusion to Queen Victoria.

The political and economic landscape is also structured in a recognizable pattern. While noble aristocratic families, referred to as lords and ladies and holding typical English titles, still wield significant power within the state, successful international trade elevates a number of merchant families to immense wealth and influence. The author describes the coming to power of a vast colonial empire devoting considerable attention to associated questions such as the treacherous struggle for markets among trading companies, espionage schemes between rival states, the fight for resources, both natural and human, and the role of religious missionaries in cultural expansion. Furthermore, she addresses issues of racism and cultural superiority among the others and makes them key to the story. Through this approach, Marie Brennan offers a unique perspective on colonial matters, shedding light on the mechanism of colonization employed in history.

One of the most painful controversies of the Victorian Age was the subordinate position of women in society, where they have almost no rights. In Lady Trent's world women find themselves in a similar situation: they face significant discrimination in almost every sphere of life and need to struggle fiercely to be taken seriously in a society totally controlled by men. The early female scientists in the real world were born into influential families and "this position allowed some women to work voluntarily, for no pay and usually no status, because they had a private income or were supported by a man" (Burek & Higgs, 2007, p. 2). Though Lady Trent herself is far from being a feminist and in most cases calmly accepts the limitations enforced on her as a woman by society; her obsession with scientific knowledge makes her fight vigorously whenever she is refused access to it, paying no attention to obstacles in her way. In acting so she is very similar to real-world Victorian female travellers, who, as Dorothy Middleton points out, on the whole, accepted class and colour as they found them, being uniformly polite and considerate, but worked really hard at collecting information (1993, p. 4). On their return these women could contribute "to the enlargement to their own country's culture … they brought back a powerful commodity – knowledge. By educating themselves these

women travellers educated the public" (Hamalian, 1981, p. xi). It was exactly the aim of Lady Trent's memoirs in the series as well.

Discrimination according to gender is not the only form of discrimination Marie Brennan depicts. The author follows the tradition of Victorian fiction and also features class struggle. One of the central male characters of the novel, Thomas Wilker, a gifted young researcher, faces a great deal of hostility from his colleagues because of his working-class background. Due to his own marginal position in the research community, he becomes one of the first scientists to welcome Lady Trend as an equal, judging her not according to her gender, but according to her research achievements, and later accompanies her in the expeditions she organizes. Lady Trent emphasizes the absence of any romantic relationships between them and harbours a bitter grudge against a society which refuses even to entertain the possibility of purely professional communication between a woman and a man.

> Ever since I went to Bayembe, rumors of loose behavior had dogged my steps, particularly where my interactions with Tom were concerned. I was, after all, on a first-name basis with the man, and there were some who could not conceive that we might simply be friends and professional colleagues. (Or, I think, that any woman might be in such a relationship with any man.) (Brennan, 2016)

The cast of characters in the novel adheres closely to the typical conventions of a sea voyage narrative. As the voyage is expected to be lengthy, Mrs Camherst decides that she cannot bear to be parted from her beloved nine-year-old son, Jacob Camherst, and allows him to accompany her. Pondering the possibility of taking her little boy on board at the beginning of the story, Lady Trent comes to the conclusion that there is nothing wrong with it as "boys have gone to war at sea that young. Why should one not go in the name of science?" (Brennan, 2016).

Other important characters in the story include the captain of the ship, Dione Aekinitos, Abigail Carew, Jacob Camherst's governess, and a young archaeologist and linguist named Suhail, who joins the company during the voyage. Marie Brennan is well aware that her characters embody certain stereotypes and actively play with readers' expectations by incorporating multiple intertextual connections with other sea voyage narratives. An example of this intertextual play is the portrayal of Captain Dione Aekinitos, a strong and stubborn sea captain. Right from the outset, she refers to him as "the mad captain", establishing a clear connection with another "mad captain" – Captain Ahab from the renowned novel *Moby Dick*. This similarity is further emphasized by the description of Captain Aekinitos:

> He was tall enough that he could stand fully upright only in the open air… and he had both a laugh and a bellow that could and did carry from the stern to the very tip of the figurehead's nose. His madness lay not in outward appearances, nor even in daily behaviour, but simply in the fact that he considered the sea a *challenge*. … One had no sooner to tell him a thing was difficult than he would immediately begin formulating plans to test himself against it. (Brennan, 2016)

Although Captain Aekinitos lacks the physical attributes of Ahab, such as missing limbs or terrible scars, his behaviour and communication style evoke reminders of the famous captain of the *Pequod*. The thorough explanation of the nature of his "madness", his view of the sea as a "challenge", and his obsessive desire to seek out hardships to overcome them all contribute to this reference making it more evident.

Captain Ahab is not the sole fictional captain Marie Brennan draws upon to shape her character. The second obvious connection is Captain Alexander Smollett from Robert Louis Stevenson's adventure novel *Treasure Island.* He is a strict, bitter man who finds fault with everything and is never satisfied. The Captain plays an important role in disciplining the protagonist of the story, Jim Hawkings, and teaching him the harsh rules of life at sea. Captain Aekinitos does the same thing for Mrs Camherst's son, Jacob. From his first day on board, the boy vehemently adores the sea and the Captain, sensing a soulmate in this young fellow, becomes a willing mentor and protector for him.

> Jake's tipping point was the *Basilisk*. From the moment he set foot on her desk, he knew – though he did not articulate it this way until years later – that he was home. … And so, one step at a time, Aekinitos began to teach him more. (Brennan, 2016)

Marie Brennan consistently employs both encyclopaedic and active descriptions throughout her novel, rendering the world she creates more accessible and vivid to readers. Quite often fantasy fiction uses allusions to certain recognizable cultural objects that played an important role in the history of the real world. In this case descriptions acquire additional importance because they help the reader recognize them. There are a number of such descriptions in Marie Brennan's novel. One of the brightest examples is the description of a mysterious stone Mrs Camherst found in the ruins of an ancient temple with two pieces of text inscribed on it: "I obligingly laid out the general shape of it: the slab of granite, with the chicken scratches of Draconean at the top and the Ngaru script below". Being an experienced linguist, Suhail comes to the conclusion that this is the same text and its two translations into other

languages: " …this is a bilingual! … The same text written in two languages. Draconean above, Ngaru below. We cannot read the former, but the latter… That has been known for ages!" (Brennan, 2016). This discovery helps the researcher to get closer to deciphering the language of the Ancient Race of Dragonmen which had been a complete mystery to many generations of scholars. This situation clearly alludes to the story of The Rosetta Stone's discovery and the pivotal role this object played in deciphering Egypt's hieroglyphs thereby catalysing the development of 19th-century archaeology.

According to Margaret Cohen, by dramatizing humans at work and considering know-how "as the ethos of work, the honor and virtue of labour" (Cohen, 2003, p. 487), the sea narrative turns hard physical work into a fundamental subject matter of the genre. Following in the footsteps of the tradition, Marie Brennan makes active descriptions of sailors' activities an essential part of her work. One of the most vivid examples of active description is the sea serpent hunt initiated by Lady Trent. She seeks to obtain samples of the animal's tissues and bones for further research, aiming to ger a better understanding of how the body of the creature functions:

> The ship staggered to one side. … The serpent had struck us below the waterline; on the lower decks, men raced to stop the leaks that began spraying water into the hold. … More gunfire, but no one had yet gotten a clear shot with the harpoons, and only those can be trusted to penetrate a sea-serpent's tough hide deeply enough to do any true harm. (Brennan, 2016)

The trope of the hunt is central to many sea voyage narratives and is one of the most recognizable pattens for structuring such texts. On the other hand, when a hunt "pursues a symbolic object …it becomes a quest" (Foulke, 1986, p. 6), and the very notion of the quest is firmly connected with fantasy literature being essential for a great number of works. Still, there is a fundamental difference between a quest in heroic fantasy and the quest in Marie Brannen's novel which lies in the fact that there is no magic in this world and the aim of the protagonist's hunt is to gain knowledge. Lady Trent is fanatically eager to know everything about the dragons, which are not mythical creatures here but real flesh-and-bone perilous predators still full of enigma as some species can fly, breath fire or use water as a lethal weapon. It is worth mentioning that the whole process of hunting, killing and skinning the sea serpent is highly reminiscent of a similar scene in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, and creates one more provocative parallel between the two texts.

Conclusion

The sea narrative genre, once prominent, has waned in popularity with the decline of the sailing-ship era. Nevertheless, the genre has experienced a resurgence within the realm of fantasy literature. Marie Brennan, an American fantasy author, is one of those revitalizing the tradition of sea fiction. In her work, *The Voyage of the Basilisk*, she masterfully intertwines elements of Victorian fiction, historical exploration, and fantasy, creating a rich and captivating world that both honours and redefines the sea narrative genre.

Set in a fictional world reminiscent of the 19th century, Brennan's novel turns precisely to the period when sea narratives flourished. By employing first-person narration and adhering to the classic "around the world trip" trope, the author pays homage to traditional narrative structures. Moreover, the narrative is rich in typical sea narrative devices such as encyclopaedic and active descriptions.

Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that the writer introduces several significant changes within the traditional framework of the genre. Central to Brennan's narrative is the character of Mrs Isabella Camherst, a pioneering naturalist challenging the societal norms of her time. By placing a female protagonist at the forefront of a traditionally male-dominated genre, Brennan subverts expectations and explores themes of gender roles and societal constraints. Drawing inspiration from real-life Victorian women travellers and scientists, Brennan imbues her heroine with a sense of agency and determination reflecting the struggles and achievements of her historical counterparts.

The Voyage of the Basilisk is highly intertextual and contains numerous allusions not only to significant events of the 19th century, but also iconic texts of the period. To reinforce the connection to the tradition, the author refers to both fictional (Henry Melville's *Moby Dick* and Robert Stevenson's *Treasure Island*) and non-fictional (Charles Darwin's *The Voyage of the Beagle* and Captain J. Moresby's *A Cruise in Polynesia and Visits to the Pearl-Shelling Stations in Torres Straits of H.M.S. Basilisk*) precedent texts written in these genres. Through these literary allusions Brennan enriches her narrative to enhance the reader's immersion in the captivating world of Lady Trent's adventures. At the same time, the author pays a lot of attention to the creation of the cultural atmosphere of her secondary world. Her characters clearly reflect the Victorian frame of mind with its preoccupation with the superiority of the English as a nation over other nations.

Furthermore, Brennan expertly navigates the complexities of class and colonialism within her fictional world, paralleling real-world issues of power dynamics and cultural hegemony. Through Lady Trent's observations and experiences, readers are invited to explore the nuances of colonial expansion and its impact on indigenous cultures.

Brennan's narrative is not only a homage to the sea voyage genre but also a nuanced exploration of human ambition, discovery, and the pursuit of knowledge. By seamlessly blending elements of historical fiction with fantasy, she creates a world that feels both familiar and fantastical, inviting readers on an exhilarating journey of exploration and self-discovery.

In conclusion, *The Voyage of the Basilisk* stands as a testament to Marie Brennan's skilful reimagining of the sea narrative genre. Through her vivid storytelling and complex characters, Brennan breathes new life into a traditional literary form, challenging stereotypes and conventions while paying homage to the spirit of adventure and exploration that defines the genre.

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Ganna Kolesnyk,
8 Bereznya 39, apt 49,
Mykolaiv, Ukraine, 54029
ka_141176@yahoo.com