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The Seafaring Narrator: Romanticism's Storyteller

Regarding his narrator in "The Thorn," William Wordsworth writes, "The Reader will perhaps have a general notion of it, if he has ever known a man, a Captain of a small trading vessel for example ("Note" 425). "The Thorn" was originally printed in *Lyrical Ballads*, which Wordsworth published in partnership with Samuel T. Coleridge in 1800. Wordsworth is not wrong about his readership's familiarity with his narrator. Even today, though modern readers are less likely to be acquainted with captains of trading vessels than those of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the chances are high that any reader of "The Thorn" will be familiar with the type of character Wordsworth employs as his narrator—the ambitious, superstitious, seafaring man. This character would have been familiar to Wordsworth's audience because he is not the only author from this era who makes use of a seafaring narrator. Samuel Coleridge employs a strikingly similar voice in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," another poem from *Lyrical Ballads*, as does Mary Shelley in her novel *Frankenstein*.¹ From the similarities between these three seafaring narrators, one can piece together a trope of the seafaring man—he is a storyteller who earns recognition, explores the unknown, and dabbles in the supernatural. Because these narrators share these qualities with the Romantic authors to whom they owe their existence, they can be seen as representative of the Romantics themselves. Furthermore, because they represent Romantic writers, the challenges that these narrators face in telling their stories represent challenges also faced by Romantic authors. The seafaring narrator in British Romantic literature, then, serves not only to represent Romantic authorship, but also to reflect the author's anxieties about his or her writing process.

There have been many studies of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," "The Thorn," and *Frankenstein*, but there is surprisingly little criticism available that links all three of these texts.

Earlier critics have examined the connection between Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and Shelley's *Frankenstein*, particularly through a biographical lens.² There also exists much scholarly work regarding Wordsworth and Coleridge's conflict over "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and "The Thorn."³ Although these studies provide valuable analyses of the relationships between these texts and of their individual narrators, they do not view all three seafaring narrators in conversation with each other. This essay seeks to fill this gap through a comparison of the narrators in "The Thorn," "The Rime," and *Frankenstein*.

I

A close reading of "The Thorn," "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," and *Frankenstein* serves to highlight the characteristics that make up the trope of the seafaring narrator in Romantic literature. Through their narratives, Wordsworth's Captain, Coleridge's Mariner, and Shelley's Walton achieve three major accomplishments: each gains a reputation as a storyteller, explains or seeks to explain the unknown, and incorporates the supernatural into everyday life. Because these achievements are common to all three narrators, they can be viewed as characteristics typical of the seafaring man in British Romantic literature.

Although William Wordsworth's seafaring narrator in "The Thorn" is somewhat ambiguous—we learn about his identity only through Wordsworth's "Note to 'The Thorn'"—he shares with Coleridge's Mariner and Shelley's Walton characteristics of the storytelling seaman. Wordsworth's narrator manages to earn a reputation as a storyteller, to provide an explanation for the unknown, and to bring an element of the supernatural into what would otherwise be mere local gossip. This narrator is, as Wordsworth reveals, "a Captain of a small trading vessel for example, who being past the middle age of life, had retired upon an annuity or small independent income to some village or country town of which he was not a native, or

in which he had not been accustomed to live” (“Note” 425). This Captain actively seeks to be known within his community; for, although he has only recently relocated to his current residence, he is already familiar with local gossip about Martha Ray. The Captain has learned Martha Ray’s story from interactions with “Old Farmer Simpson” (“Thorn” 149), and “some [who] remember well” (“Thorn” 163). His widespread interactions with members of the community speak to his desire to be well known. In the “Note to ‘The Thorn,’” Wordsworth provides additional evidence that the Captain crafts his story for the sake of earning a reputation: “[men like this narrator] have a reasonable share of imagination, by which word I mean the faculty which produces impressive effects out of simple elements” (425). The key word in Wordsworth’s explication is “impressive.” With this word, Wordsworth signals that the narrator’s purpose in crafting a story about Martha Ray is to impress his audience, and thereby to earn himself renown as a storyteller.

Closely intertwined with Wordsworth’s Captain’s attempt to make a name for himself as a storyteller by creating an impressive story out of an unimpressive subject is the Captain’s endeavor to explain the unknown. The Captain renders the story of the thorn impressive by introducing a mystery for which he proceeds to speculate solutions. The thorn is a mundane plant, “a wretched thing forlorn,” (“Thorn” 9) which is of little interest to the audience. That is, the thorn is of little interest until the narrator reveals that it is located beside a heap which, “Is like an infant’s grave in size / As like as like can be” (“Thorn” 52-53) and that a woman often kneels beside the heap crying ““Oh misery! Oh misery!”” (“Thorn” 65) After introducing this mysterious scene to the audience, the Captain deprives the audience of a revelation, stating, “I cannot tell; I wish I could; / For the true reason no one knows” (“Thorn” 89-90). Thus, the Captain makes use of the unknown to intrigue his audience. Once he has effectively captured

the attention of his listener, as evidenced by the interspersed questions of a secondary voice such as, ““Oh wherefore? Wherefore? tell me why / Does she repeat that doleful cry?””

(“Thorn” 88), the narrator promises to enlighten the audience as to the reason for the woman’s crying. He tells the listener:

I’ll give you the best help I can:
 Before you up the mountain go,
 Up to the dreary mountain-top,
 I’ll tell you all I know. (“The Thorn” 111-14)

As a storyteller, Wordsworth’s narrator makes use of the unknown to capture and to hold the audience’s attention. Although he proposes a possible explanation for the mound next to the thorn, the Captain’s efforts to expose the truth are not entirely sincere. Instead, he maintains a air of mystery throughout his tale to keep his audience engaged, which also speaks to his desire for distinction as a storyteller.

To supplement his use of the unknown, Wordsworth’s Captain brings language reminiscent of the supernatural into a story about otherwise everyday occurrences to captivate his audience. Although the plot of “The Thorn” does not rely on any supernatural figures or events, the story of Martha Ray is haunting. Throughout the tale, Wordsworth’s narrator employs language that evokes the supernatural. For example, he describes the thorn’s location, “High on a mountain’s highest ridge, / Where oft the stormy winter gale / Cuts like a scythe” (“Thorn” 23-25). The scythe calls to mind the figure of Death, because Death classically carries a scythe. This discreet reference to a frightening, mythic figure contributes to the overall eerie tone of the ballad. Another example is found in stanza XVI:

For many a time and oft were heard
 Cries coming from the mountain-head,
 Some plainly living voices were,
 And others, I’ve heard many swear,
 Were voices of the dead. (“Thorn” 170-74)

The idea that “voices of the dead” are coming from the mountain adds an aura of the supernatural to Martha Ray’s tale. Although the Captain never explicitly attributes an action to a supernatural being, his use of language that evokes the supernatural contributes to his effectiveness as a storyteller. Furthermore, the Captain intertwines this supernatural language with quantitative facts such as, “I’ve measured it from side to side: / ‘Tis three feet long, and two feet wide” (“The Thorn” 32-33). This blend of the mythic with the concrete is a source of tension in the Captain’s tale—a tension of which he makes use to demonstrate his abilities as a narrator.

Although he tells a captivating story, Wordsworth’s Sea Captain was not universally well received as a narrator, particularly not by Wordsworth’s contemporaries. Samuel T. Coleridge harshly criticizes Wordsworth’s language in “The Thorn” in his *Biographia Literaria*, writing, “But in a poem, still more in a lyric poem...it is not possible to imitate truly a dull and garrulous discourses without repeating the effects of dullness and garrulity” (194).⁴ Coleridge’s critique of Wordsworth’s Sea Captain is particularly intriguing given the fact that in the same collection, *Lyrical Ballads*, Coleridge published a poem with a similar narrator — “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.”⁵ Although Coleridge’s Mariner is perhaps less “dull and garrulous” than Wordsworth’s, he shares with Wordsworth’s Sea Captain the typical characteristics of a storyteller, including notoriety for his story telling, interest in the unknown, and a fascination with the supernatural.

Coleridge’s Mariner is less eager than Wordsworth’s Captain to earn fame for his storytelling, but he gains notoriety nonetheless, in part because his tale is distributed to such a wide audience. Although the Mariner repeats his tale against his own will, he tells the tale

effectively and leaves an impression upon the listener. The Mariner is compelled to recount his tale in diverse locations. As he recites:

I pass, like night, from land to land;
I have strange power of speech;
That moment that his face I see,
I know the man must hear me:
To him my tale I teach. (“Rime” 586-90)

The Mariner does not have the agency to determine when or where he will recite his tale, but he successfully disseminates it to a wide audience. He not only tells his tale, but “teaches” it, which implies that the listener gains an understanding of the content. The listener is affected by the tale, so he may potentially repeat the tale, thus extending the scope of the Mariner’s audience. In the article “Unspeakable Discovery: Romanticism and the ‘Rime of the Ancient Mariner,’” Matthias Rudolf provides further evidence that the Mariner’s tale has earned him glory. Rudolf writes:

That the Mariner, compelled by an agony that returns ‘at an uncertain hour’...tells the tale over and over again, that it is then again retold uncounted times, written down, redacted, glossed, modified by others, indicates both the *Rime*’s multiple authorship...and its constitution by the multiple forms of recognition and transmission of that discovery. (186)⁶

In other words, Coleridge’s revisions and his addition of glosses to his original “Rime” make the “Rime” seem like it has been recorded and passed down through generations. Thus, Coleridge makes the Mariner’s “Rime” seem like a more famous, historically rooted ballad than it really is. Finally, the Mariner’s successful distribution of his story is evidenced by the fact that in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, another seafaring narrator, Robert Walton, reprises the Mariner’s words when he writes to his sister, “I am going to unexplored regions, to ‘the land of mist and snow;’ but I shall kill no albatross, therefore do not be alarmed for my safety”

(Shelley 12). Coleridge's Mariner has, albeit unintentionally, achieved a level of fame such that characters in other works of literature refer to him as a role model.

In addition to achieving fame, the Mariner, like Wordsworth's Sea Captain seeks to explain the unknown in his tale. The sea voyage which the Mariner recounts is essentially one of exploration. Neither the Mariner nor the audience are familiar with the setting in which the tale takes place. He describes a journey through "mist and snow" ("Rime" 51) and "wondrous cold" ("Rime" 52) to a place where "Nor shapes of men nor beast we ken" ("Rime 57). As with Wordsworth's Captain, the Mariner's use of the unknown is tied to a desire for notoriety. However, where Wordsworth's Captain seeks fame specifically for his storytelling, the Mariner seeks fame for his voyage, which he only later transforms into a story. The Mariner recounts, "We were the first that ever burst / Into that silent sea" ("Rime" 105-06). The purpose of the Mariner's voyage is to discover the previously undiscovered and to earn recognition for this discovery. In his effort to emphasize the unknown, Coleridge, like Wordsworth, interrupts the narrative with an interrogative voice. For example, in Part the Sixth, the "First Voice" poses the question, "What makes the ship drive on so fast? / What is the OCEAN doing?" ("Rime" 412-13) Through this non-narrative voice, Coleridge draws attention to what the audience does not know and the questions the audience should be asking. Thus, Coleridge's Mariner uses the unknown in the same way as Wordsworth's Captain—to maintain the audience's engagement with his story.

Even more prominent than the unknown in the Mariner's tale is the presence of the supernatural, through which the Mariner demonstrates his association with forces beyond human comprehension. Whereas Wordsworth's narrator only hints towards the supernatural,

the supernatural, particularly Life-In-Death, plays an essential role in the Mariner's tale. The Mariner depicts Life-in-Death as darkly beautiful:

Her lips were red, *her* looks were free,
Her locks were yellow as gold:
Her skin was as white as leprosy,
The Night-Mair LIFE-IN-DEATH was she,
Who thicks man's blood with cold. ("Rime" 190-94)

Although Life-In-Death has red lips and blonde hair, traits typically associated with beauty, her skin is as white as "leprosy" and she frightens those who look upon her. In his article, "Darwin, Coleridge, and 'The Thorn,'" James Holt McGavran Jr. offers an explanation of Life-in-Death: "The unreliability of Coleridgean narrators is frequently related to their fascinated terror before linked images of woman, sexuality, and maternal nature" (120). If, as McGavran suggests, Coleridge's Mariner experience "fascinated terror" before women, it follows that the narrator uses a beautiful woman to evoke fright in his audience. In her article "Domesticity and Uncanny Kitsch in 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and *Frankenstein*," Sarah Webster Goodwin argues, "Authors of the Gothic in the eighteenth century could measure success by two physiological responses in readers: hair standing on end and blood running cold. Thus LIFE-IN-DEATH has the same effect on the mariner that the poem should have on us" (98). The Mariner's "fascinated terror" detracts from his reliability as a narrator; but, at the same, it captivates the Mariner's audience.

In addition to the supernatural elements in the Mariner's tale, supernatural forces influence the Mariner himself. The Mariner does not tell his tale according to his own will, but rather speaks when compelled by a "woeful agony" ("Rime" 589). Just as the Mariner tells his tale unwillingly, his audience does not choose to listen. The Mariner "holds [the wedding guest] with his glittering eye" ("Rime" 13) and the wedding guest, "can not chuse but hear"

("Rime" 18). The Mariner is a supernatural storyteller, equipped with the power to force his tale upon any audience. In his book *Written on the Water*, Baker suggests, "The Mariner is too lively to have been alive; his preternatural intensity is what gives him the spectral air that makes him at once unbelievable and unforgettable" (30). The Mariner is an unreliable narrator, and supernatural one as well. Although these traits differentiate him from Wordsworth's Captain, the Mariner is a seafaring storyteller who has characteristic in common with the Captain nonetheless.

The third and final narrator I discuss in this paper, Mary Shelley's Walton, also participates in the trope of the Romantic era seafaring man in that he, like the Captain and the Mariner, dreams of glory, explores the unknown, and is fascinated by the supernatural. Whereas for Coleridge's Mariner, fame is not the primary motivation for storytelling, for Mary Shelley's Walton, glory is the end goal of both his exploration and his storytelling. Walton borrows language from Coleridge's Mariner in order to associate himself with other famous explorers. He writes to his sister, "I am going to unexplored regions, to 'the land of mist and snow;' but I shall kill no albatross, therefore do not be alarmed for my safety" (Shelley 12). Walton associates himself with the Mariner in order to place himself within a literary tradition of well-known explorer figures. As Anna E. Clark argues, in "*Frankenstein; Or, The Modern Protagonist*," Walton also compares himself to the Mariner because the Mariner is "the epitome of a good story teller" (249). Of the three narrators, Walton's lust for fame is easiest to identify, for he explicitly cites glory as his motivation: "My life might have been passed in ease and luxury; but I preferred glory to every enticement that wealth placed in my path" (Shelley 9). For Walton, glory is more desirable than wealth or anything wealth can buy. Therefore, he repeatedly instructs his sister to remember him not only because of their familial bond, but also

for the sake of his public reputation. He concludes his July 17th letter with the command: “Remember me to all my English friends” (Shelley 13). Walton’s primary concern is his position within British society, so he takes steps to ensure that his memory will not die with him. Even when his pursuit of glory through discovery fails, Walton’s desire for recognition remains. He merely shifts his method of achieving glory when exploration proves to be impossible. Like the Sea Captain and the Mariner, Walton turns to storytelling as a means of earning recognition. He writes, “I have lost my hopes of utility and glory...But I will endeavor to detail these bitter circumstances to you, my dear sister; and, while I am wafted towards England, and towards you, I will not despond” (Shelley 155). As Michelle Levy puts it in her article, “Discovery and the Domestic Affection in Coleridge and Shelley,” “Walton is a failed poet seeking the linguistic mastery over the globe that he could not achieve in the physical realm. Like Frankenstein, he takes enormous risks with the welfare of others so that he has a good story to tell” (705). Although his potential for a glorious discovery is gone, Walton does not despair, for he knows that by recording and recounting Victor Frankenstein’s story, he can still achieve something worthy of recognition.

In his letters to his sister, Walton makes great use of the unknown to add intrigue to Victor Frankenstein’s story, which is ultimately what he discovers in lieu of a geographic discovery. At first, the unknown that Walton seeks to discover is, “a passage near the pole to those countries, to reach which at present so many months are requisite; or...the secret of the magnet” (Shelley 8). However, once Walton encounters Frankenstein, the object of his search changes. Walton seeks then to discover the story of Victor Frankenstein, whom he develops as a figure of great mystery. Walton envelops Frankenstein in this aura of mystery by referring to him as “the stranger” (Shelley 14). The title “stranger” emphasizes just how little Walton

knows about Frankenstein, and also draws the audience's attention to their own lack of knowledge. Walton heightens the audience's curiosity by describing the curiosity of his crew, "I had great trouble to keep off the men, who wished to ask him a thousand questions; but I would not allow him to be tormented by their idle curiosity, in a state of body and mind whose restoration evidently depended on entire repose" (Shelley 15). Walton shows that members of the crew are curious about Frankenstein in order to evoke the same curiosity within his audience. Once he establishes this sense of mystery surrounding Frankenstein, Walton tells Frankenstein's story. Essentially, Walton uses the unknown to interest his reader in the tale he has to tell.

As is the case with Wordsworth's Captain and Coleridge's Mariner, Walton proves himself to be a standout storyteller through his captivating inclusion of the supernatural within his narrative. Although Walton introduces Frankenstein as a mysterious figure before he recounts Frankenstein's tale, Walton does not, in the introduction, develop Frankenstein as a supernatural figure. He saves the supernatural for the conclusion of his narrative in order to leave his audience questioning whether or not Frankenstein's story could be true. After he concludes his retelling of Frankenstein's tale, Walton describes Frankenstein, "Such a man has a double existence: he may suffer misery, and be overwhelmed by disappointments; yet when he has retired into himself, he will be like a celestial spirit, that has a halo around him, within whose circle no grief or folly ventures" (Shelley 17). Walton likens Frankenstein to an angel, which differentiates him from a living human. Like the Mariner with his reanimated crew, Walton blurs the line between life and death in his description of Frankenstein. If Frankenstein is an angel, he has moved on from life, and his presence on the ship is perhaps an instance of the supernatural. Additionally, Walton describes the creature in the same language of the

supernatural. However, in his illustration of the creature, Walton evokes not the good, celestial supernatural, but the evil, hellish supernatural. He writes:

Over him hung a form which I cannot find words to describe; gigantic in stature, yet uncouth and distorted in his proportions. As he hung over the coffin, his face was concealed by long locks of ragged hair; but one vast hand was extended, in colour and apparent texture like that of a mummy...Never did I behold a vision so horrible as his face, of such loathsome, yet appalling hideousness. (Shelley 158)

The phrases “coffin,” “ragged hair,” hand...extended,” “mummy,” “and appalling hideousness” all belong to a lexical field associated with the undead. Furthermore, Walton refers to the creature as “the dæmon” (Shelley 158). Walton juxtaposes the angelic supernatural of Frankenstein with the demonic supernatural of the creature. Through this juxtaposition, Walton places his own narrative within the tradition of literature about supernatural forces of good and evil. This evocation of the supernatural allows Walton to add a layer of complexity to his story that defines him, like Wordsworth’s Captain and Coleridge’s Mariner, as a compelling storyteller.

II

As illustrated in the first part of this essay, the Captain, the Mariner, and Walton achieve the same three effects in their respective narratives—they earn recognition for their storytelling, explore and utilize the unknown, and incorporate the supernatural into the real world. In this second section, I will argue that the achievements shared by these seafaring narrators are feats that all effective writers seek to accomplish. Therefore, these seafaring narrators can be viewed as representative of the authors who create them. Each seafaring narrator faces a different challenge as he tells his story, and just as the seafaring narrators represent authors in general, these challenges represent the challenges that authors face when

they write. The seafaring narrator in British Romantic literature both represents the Romantic author and embodies the challenges that the Romantic author faces during the writing process.

To represent themselves and their writing process, the Romantics discussed in this essay, namely Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Mary Shelley, could have selected a narrator of any profession, yet all three selected a seaman, perhaps in part due to the sea's unique role in Romantic literature. Samuel Baker asserts, "The sea is among other things one of the key sites or tropes for the sublime, which is obviously a topic of special pertinence to Romanticism" (14). Although Baker specifically avoids engaging in critical debate about the sublime, he recognizes the ocean as one of the most common examples of the sublime. Because the sublime is a concept so frequently addressed by the Romantics, it follows that the Romantics would choose navigators of the sea to represent their own navigation of the concept of the sublime.⁷ Baker also elucidates that in Romantic Britain, "For most everyone, [the sea] had the numinous, phantasmic quality that has helped make it an archetypal symbol for the realms of imagination, representation, and faith" (25). If the sea was universally recognized as an icon of imagination in British Romantic culture, as Baker claims it was, then mariners who explore the sea are ideal narrators for writers who seek to offer commentary on the imaginative process of writing.

These Romantics, in selecting the seaman as their representative, choose a narrator who effectively embodies their both their goals—those discussed in the first section of this essay—and the challenges they face while writing. Wordsworth's Captain, for example, takes on Wordsworth's goal in writing "The Thorn", which Wordsworth expresses in a letter to Isabella Fenwick, "Arose out of my observing, on the ridge of Quantock Hill, on a stormy day a thorn which I had often past in calm and bright weather without noticing it. I said to myself, 'Cannot

I by some invention do as much to make this thorn permanently an impressive object as the storm has made it to my eyes at this moment”” (*Fenwick Notes* 28). Just as Wordsworth tells Fenwick that he sought to make the thorn “impressive,” he tells us in the “Note to ‘The Thorn’” that his narrator seeks to create “impressive effects out of simple elements” (“Note” 425). And, just as Wordsworth uses his narrator to demonstrate his purpose in writing “The Thorn,” he also uses the narrator to exemplify the difficulties of composing poetry in the vernacular language of “The Thorn.” Wordsworth received harsh criticism from Coleridge, among others, regarding the boring effect of his gossipy narrator. Yet, in the “Note to ‘The Thorn’” he explains his repetition:

For the Reader cannot be too often reminded that Poetry is passion: it is the history or science of feelings; now every man must know that an attempt is rarely made to communicate impassioned feelings without something of accompanying consciousness of the inadequateness of our own powers, or the deficiencies of language. During such efforts there will be a craving in the mind, and as long as it is unsatisfied the Speaker will cling to the same words, or words of the same character. (“Note” 426)

With this explanation, Wordsworth defends his narrators, and by extension his own, use of repetitive language. If, in the “The Thorn,” the Captain represents the Romantic writer, then Wordsworth’s use of repetition within the Sea Captains narration can be seen as a representation of the challenge of avoiding repetitive language that plagued Romantic writers.

In the same way that Wordsworth’s narrator grapples with this difficulty faced by the Romantic era writers he represents, Coleridge’s *Mariner* speaks to another challenge faced by writers. Coleridge’s narrator, as previously demonstrated, lacks the ability to choose where or when he recites his tale. This lack of agency speaks to the way inspiration strikes a writer. Coleridge, through his narrator’s lack of control over his storytelling, evokes the way a writer cannot select the moments when inspiration hits him or her. Rather, when a writer is struck with an idea, he or she must immediately write or risk losing his or her inspiration. The *Mariner*

embodies this idea in that, although the setting of the “Rime”, a wedding ceremony, is not conducive to storytelling, he must tell his tale. Coleridge writes:

The Wedding-Guest he beat his breast,
Yet he can not chuse but hear;
And thus spake on that ancient man,
The bright-eyed Mariner. (“Rime” 37-40)

Although a wedding is taking place around them, the Mariner must tell his story and the wedding guest must listen, which signifies that the timing of artistic inspiration is not always convenient. Like a Romantic writer, the Mariner faces the challenge of trying to control his storytelling impulses. Goodwin argues that in both the “Rime” and *Frankenstein*, domesticity seems marginalized but is actually central to the meaning of the work. She writes, “Looked at through this lens, it would seem that the wedding at the margin of the ancient mariner’s story is in fact at its center—its secret care, even its obsession” (94). Although Goodwin views the wedding as a symbol of domesticity rather than as an inconvenient occasion for artistic inspiration, she is correct in her assertion that the wedding, despite its apparent insignificance, holds the key to understanding the rhyme. It is through the setting of the wedding that the inconvenience of the Mariner’s need to recite his tale is emphasized.

Mary Shelley’s Walton, too, embodies a challenge faced by Romantic writers; he does not come up with his own original story, but rather recounts another’s experience. Romantic writers borrowed widely from each other, as evidenced by Shelley’s use of Coleridge in *Frankenstein*. In this process of borrowing, Romantic writers faced the challenge of both associating their work with and differentiating it from the work of other authors. Walton faces this challenge when he records Frankenstein’s story. He makes the story his own by adding commentary before and after it and describing its meaning to him. However, he must also stay true to Frankenstein’s words. Walton recalls,

Frankenstein discovered that I made notes concerning his history; he asked to see them, and then himself corrected and augmented them in many places; but principally in giving the life and spirit to the conversation he held with his enemy. “Since you have preserved my narration,” said he, “I would not that a mutilated one should go down to posterity.” (Shelley 151)

Frankenstein is concerned that his story will be misconstrued in Walton’s record, so he insists on checking and correcting Walton’s transcript. Originality is certainly something all storytellers strive to achieve. Through Walton’s repetition of Frankenstein’s story, Shelley highlights the difficulty of creating original stories. That Shelley was concerned with the originality of her own work is demonstrated by her defense of her work in her 1831 “Introduction to *Frankenstein*, Third Edition.” She writes, “At first I thought but of a few pages—of a short tale; but [Percy] Shelley urged me to develop the idea at greater length. I certainly did not owe the suggestion of one incident, nor scarcely of one train of feeling, to my husband, and yet but for his incitement, it would never have taken the form in which it was presented to the world” (Shelley 169). Shelley credits her husband with motivating and encouraging her, but she specifically states that all her thoughts are her own. For Romantic writers, who often collaborated with each other, originality was a challenge faced during the writing process, and it is therefore one that this seafaring narrator represents.

The seafaring narrator in British Romantic literature, although a simple character, serves a complex function. He not only represents the Romantic writer through his capacity as a storyteller, but also highlights the challenges that the Romantic author must overcome in composing a poem or novel. Wordsworth’s Captain, Coleridge’s Mariner, and Shelley’s Walton are individually nuanced and developed. However, it is not from individual analysis, or even an analysis of any two, that we gain the most knowledge about the seafaring narrator’s role during this period in literary history. The three narrators must be considered as three voices

in conversation, for they represent a group of writers who conversed frequently with one another. The fact that these three narrators exist to serve the same purpose speaks to the collaboration and communication of the Romantics. The seafaring man, a navigator, is key to the reader's own navigation of this social network of the Romantic era. The seafaring man tells not only a tale from the Romantic era, but also one about the Romantics and the interactions of the Romantic writers. He can be considered, therefore, not just a Romantic storyteller, but also Romanticism's storyteller.

Notes

1. I include Mary Shelley's Walton in my discussion of seafaring narrators despite the assertion by Samuel Baker, in his book *Written on the Water*, that Mary and Percy Shelley should not be included in discussion of British maritime culture because they approach the sea differently than other Romantic writers (15).
2. In "Vital matters: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Romantic science," Maurice Hindle provides detailed background about Shelley's exposure to Coleridge and "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" prior to her writing *Frankenstein* (29-31).
3. Stephen Parrish's "'The Thorn': Wordsworth's Dramatic Monologue" provides an excellent review of previous scholarship about "The Thorn" and corrects what Parrish sees as misconceptions about Wordsworth's narrator (153).
4. Parrish argues that "The Thorn" is a poem about the narrator, not about Martha Ray, and that Coleridge's criticism of "The Thorn" in *Biographia Literaria* can be attributed to a failure to understand Wordsworth's intent (162).
5. In "Darwin, Coleridge, and 'The Thorn'", James Holt McGavran, Jr. suggests that "The Thorn" was is a direct critique Coleridge's unreliable narrator in "Rime of the Ancient Mariner," specifically of how this narrator portrays women (119).
6. Rudolf draws on Jerome J. McGann's idea from "The Meaning of the Ancient Mariner" that the glosses allow Coleridge to fabricate an historical context for the "Rime" (McGann 40).
7. For further definition and discussion of the sublime in Romantic literature, see Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* and Immanuel Kant's *The Critique of Judgment*.

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