

## Is the Sea Voyage Genre Theory Shipwrecked?

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### **Introduction**

This is an analysis of Peter Kirby's [\*First Person Perspective in Ancient Sea Travel\*](#) which was an essay that interrogates Vernon K Robbin's [\*By Land and By Sea: The We-Passages and Ancient Sea Voyages\*](#). First off, both papers made excellent reads. Kirby's extensive research, coupled by his remarkable ability to let the experts speak for him made his arguments more persuasive. It is clear that even though Robbins has won over Robert Price and Burton Mack and Doherty among others, he also has very keen critics: Colin Hermer, Stanley Porter, Susan Marie Praeder and Joseph A. Fitzmyer. So it's a matter people are divided over: whether or not Vernon Robbins shows that "we" passages in Acts was employed as a narrative style.

But after reading Kirby's [\*First Person Perspective in Ancient Sea Travel\*](#) and looking at Robbins' [\*By Land and By Sea: The We-Passages and Ancient Sea Voyages\*](#), I had to ask myself whether he had really shown there is no precedent for a literary device of narrating sea voyages in the first person plural such as is found in Acts. And the extent to which Kirby's work had changed the impression I had of Robbin's work. There was a feeling that some stones were left unturned somewhere...

To be clear, Robbins argues in his paper: "The coincidence of sea voyages and first person plural narration in Acts is striking. There are four we-sections in Acts: 16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1 -18; 27:1 -28:16. In each instance, a sea voyage begins as the first person plural narration emerges. While this observation can lead the interpreter in various directions, it points vividly to accounts of sea voyages in antiquity. Sea voyages are often couched in first person narration. Either the author narrates it as a participant (I sailed to Byblos ....) or the author stages a participant recounting the voyage (he then said, "As I was sailing to Byblos ...."). Sea voyage narratives in Greek and Roman literature, however, become a distinct genre. One of the features of this genre is the presence of first person plural narration. *Undoubtedly the impetus for this is sociological: on a sea voyage a person has accepted a setting with other people, and cooperation among all the members is essential for a successful voyage. Therefore, at the point where the voyage begins, the narration moves to first person plural.*"

So, from the get go, Robbins is clear that there are sociological reasons underpinning this style of discourse and that we passages can convey the idea that the narrator was part of a group or community. Robbin's approach involves showing the transition from first person singular, to the alternation between first person singular to first person plural, and showing the influence of sea voyage

narratives on the Hellenistic literature - even in narrating battlefields to prison situations, and how the artistic use of the pronouns changed with time. Then he goes to Acts and demonstrates that the author of Luke Acts 'preserved' sea voyage narratives for Paul, and how the sudden shifts from "we", which includes Paul, to "Paul and us", and coincidence of sea voyages and first person plural narration in Acts is remarkable and attributes it to the author responding to a genre.

Kirby does not lay down what would qualify as a literary precedent. What that means is that the reader doesn't know 'what we are looking for' even in the survey of texts mentioned by Robbins.

Robbins doesn't use the term "literary precedent" and it's unclear whether showing the absence of a literary precedent will falsify Robbin's theory or otherwise.

Be that as it may be, Kirby's approach seems to involve showing that the usages of the first person and the shifts from first person singular to plural and vice versa either go beyond sea voyage accounts, or is used to convey the idea that the author is participating in the voyage, or the use of pronouns is not restricted to sea voyage narratives.

The mammoth problem with this approach is that he shows this even where the Robbins is making a different point: whether Robbins is illustrating Homeric influence in the texts, the use of sea voyage imagery to describe situations in battle, prison etc, employment of shipwreck accounts in first person, employing shipwreck accounts in sea voyages as a way of enriching the narrative etc. So in 90% plus of the instances where Kirby argues that "there is no shift from first person to third person here", or vice versa, Robbins is actually busy illustrating a different point. If the reader doesn't notice this, they may emerge confused and wonder - how could Robbins fool Robert Price and Burton Mack if the texts don't corroborate his claims?

This is a very important point because it renders the criticisms to be red herrings which leave Robbin's arguments untouched.

**Note:** The words "confirm" below, are used in all cases where its clear that Robbin's argument remains untouched and in all cases where Kirby, or the scholars he cites, are addressing a different argument than the one Robbin is making, thus failing to falsify Robbin's arguments - thus simply restating or "confirming" them. This also applies where the cited texts conform with Robbin's arguments. Numbers 3, 11 and 17 may be argued to show something different than what Robbin's argues. But for the rest, Robbin's arguments stand as indicated.

I could summarize my observations as follows:

### **What Kirby Did**

1. Confirm Robbin's assesment that the 1st person singular narration is used in *The Journey of Wen-Amon to Phoenicia* and *The Story of Sinuhe* and that Unapitshim, in the Akkadian *Epic of Gilgamesh* recounts the voyages in the waters in first person singular - that these early documents used 1st person singular narration.

(note that Kirby's argument, that the 1st person is "not used just for the time in the boat" is not part of Robbin's argument - ie., with regard to the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Robbins' argument does not preclude that 1st person singular is used outside the boat)

2. Falsify Robbin's belief that "Homer's *Odyssey* contains the earliest example among Mediterranean literature of a sea voyage that employs first person plural narration" - this, as Kirby notes, is a trivial point. But very informative.

3. Show that the 1st person plural, as a narrative style for launching a ship, is consistent with the idea that there must be passengers in "any vehicle larger than a bicycle". This is with regard to Barrett's arguments regarding *Odyssey*. This argument does not falsify Robbin's thesis.

4. Confirm (more or less) Robbin's theory that "Vergil's use of first person narration in *Aeneid* results directly from Homeric influence" (from Colin Hermer's statements).

5. Confirm that in *Alcaeus 326*, "alternates between first person singular and plural as the poet captures the anxiety that attends the injury inflicted on a ship in a storm". (Homeric influence)

6. Confirm that "Theognis (fl. 544-541 B.C.) continues this imagery and style of narration in the section of his lyric poetry that treats the city-state metaphorically as a ship on a turbulent sea" (Homeric influence).

7. Confirm that "Pindar (518-438 B.C.) used sea voyage imagery metaphorically to describe the process of writing an ode" (Homeric influence)

8. Confirm that in *Seven Against Thebes*, "The attack on the city is like a storm that threatens to destroy a ship at sea. With disciplined effort and gradual abatement of the storm, the ship is successfully kept afloat" (Homeric influence).

9. Confirm, regarding *Libation Bearers*, that "The difficult situation faced by Electra and her companions calls forth the danger of sailing on the sea. Mortals have little choice but to turn their petitions to heaven and hope for a successful outcome. First person plural narration attends this imagery in epic, lyric, and tragic poetry. During later centuries, this literature is copied, quoted, and read,

and its influence is found in widespread sectors of Hellenistic and Roman civilization."

Note that Kirby's statements, re: "its a shift from 1st person sing. to 1st person pl. if attributed to Electra", miss the point because Robbin's objective in citing the passages is to demonstrate that they use sea-voyage imagery and not show that there is any shift from 1st person singular to 1st person plural. (Homeric influence).

10. Confirm that *The Menippean Satires of Varro* provides "evidence that first person style persists in voyage imagery during the first century". Fitzmyer's statement that we can't draw much from *Menippeas Satires* when they are only one or two epigrams that deal with boating is besides the point given that Robbin's argument is not that the first person plural is used in boating alone in *Menippeas Satires* but that first person style is used in voyage imagery. (Homeric Influence)

11. Show that in *Dio Chrysostom*, seems to be using pronouns in the expected way rather than responding to a genre. This challenge's Robbin's argument that "Dio's use of first person narration for this tale of voyage and adventure suggests that he was responding to the genre itself. This style had established itself within the cultural milieu, and writers found it natural to respond to this convention" But it does not falsify it.

12. Confirm that Petronius (1st cent. A.D.), "...exhibits this interest in shipwreck accounts and also shows the natural propensity for first person narration in them. It only seemed proper to recount the dangerous episode with first person plural" Praeder's argument that "there are no shifts to first person narration" is a red herring since that is not Robbin's argument wrt Petronius. Robbin's objective, by citing *The Satyricon of Petronius Arbiter* was to illustrate that "within sea voyage accounts, the shipwreck became an increasingly attractive feature". This applies to Kirby's statements regarding the lack of restriction of the 1st person plural to sea voyages.

13. Confirm that "Even the Jewish historian Josephus mentions a sea voyage and a shipwreck in his biography. And little surprise it is that he shifts from first person singular to first person plural as he recounts it" Arguments that "it contains an expected and legitimate alternation between first person singular and plural within the context of an acknowledge historical account" do not falsify Robbin's point.

14. Confirm, using *Ovid* that "By the first century A.D. the sea voyage, threatened by shipwreck, had established itself as a distinct genre. An essential feature of this genre was first person narration. The status of the genre provided the possibility for authors to employ the situation of a sea voyage to interpret many situations in life. Thus Ovid, in *Tristia* 1.2.31 -34 (composed A.D. 8-9), compares his life in exile to a sea voyage threatened by shipwreck"

Hermer's argument, regarding "we" meaning "I" *metri gratia*, is tangential to Robbin's point.

15. Confirm, using Lucian's parody *A True Story*, that Lucian "begins in first person singular and shifts to first person plural at the embarkation". Kirby's statements re: "the first person plural is also used to include the narrator's companions whether travelling on land, sea or air", miss Robbin's point. Robbin's argument is not how the first person plural is used, but how it is introduced.

16. Confirm that "Achilles Tatius (A.D. second century) includes a sea voyage in the *Adventures of Leucippe and Clitophon*, and the appeal of the account is strengthened by first person narration"

Regarding Hermer's argument contra Robbins, the following illustration may explain the exchange:

**Vernon Robbins** : They started wearing trousers to bed from the 1500s. (Shows photo's of people sleeping without trousers in the 1200's, 1300's and 1400's then shows photos of people sleeping in trousers from the 1500's)

**Colon Hermer** : (Showing a 1967 photo with people wearing trousers in public) False, see, they wore trousers in public too.

The argument is that the first person narration was used in sea voyages. Preclusion of the use of first person narration in other situations is not part of the argument

This applies to (counter)arguments regarding *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*, *Heliodorus* and the *Gallic Wars*

Regarding *Voyage of Hanno*, if Hanno is the author, it does not matter whether or not paragraph 1 is printed as a prefatory paragraph. The meaning conveyed, per the pronoun usage would still indicate a shift. Thus the "three page account begins with third person narration and shifts into first person narration" And that is Robbin's point.

Stanley Porter's arguments re "...these prefaces have their own style and literary characteristics and often use the third-person or first person singular" leans towards stylistic use of the "perspectives".

17. Show that *Episodes of the Third Syrian War* are found by others to be "difficult to assess" (Hermer). Fragmentary (Praeder) etc, but does not disprove Robbin's argument that *Episodes from the Third Syrian War* I.1-II.11 "contains third person narration. In II.12 the narration shifts to first person plural as a sea voyage is recounted"

18. Confirm that "In the *Antiochene Acts of the Martyrdom of Ignatius*, third person narration shifts unannounced to first person plural as the author gives a summary of the voyage"

Kirby's statement regarding Xenophon: "There is no shift made by any one writer" is not consistent with Robbin's and Praeder's, who both entertain the idea that an editor chose to speak for Xenophon - maybe he can confirm?

Kirby states that his essay:

1) Is not on the authorship of Acts

2) Is "undertaken as an examination of the ancient evidence that could be used to support a hypothesis that first person narrative was a literary device used in sea voyage genre".

First of all, Praeder's and Kirby's arguments that 1st person narrations in ancient literature refer to participating authors or characters is a red herring: it leaves Robbin's main argument untouched while at the same time agreeing with it as I indicated at the opening of this post. This applies to Fitzmyers argument that the first plural on board ship may be explained as an expression of the sociological character of such an experience.

Secondly, the "we" passages in acts are not used to draw "the conclusion that the narrator is not claiming to be part of the 'we' who took the voyage" as Fitzmyer argues.

Thirdly, Kirby concludes that "Since sea voyages are always undertaken with others, it is expected for the narrator, if already speaking in the first person, to use the first person plural"

I disagree. Its clear that the narrator doesn't have to shift to first person plural as we see in *The Journey of Wen-Amon to Phoenicia* and *The Story of Sinuhe* where the first person singular is used throughout the sea voyage.

IOW, whether or not the narrator shifts is dictated by the narrative style or genre the author is using.

Kirby's statement also does not disprove that there was a narrative style in use: it just offers another way of looking at the texts (another "perspective") and hence leaves Robbin's main argument untouched: it doesn't weaken or strengthen the theory but creates another theory.

### **How do they Detect Presence of a Literary Style?**

As I was reading the comments of Fitzmyer and others, I kept asking myself everytime I met the statement "there is no literary style here": how would you detect a literary style? how would you detect the difference between when a

pronoun is used to designate participants and when they are used to employ literary location or convention?

Abrupt shifts? Well, when given abrupt shifts, like in *Antiochene Acts of the Martyrdom of Ignatius*, the scholars rub their hands and state its a "difficult case", call it "uncertain material for arguing a literary case", they introduce questions of dating of the document etc.

When given *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*, all Porter says is that the text displays an "unstudied and unsystematic use of person, the kind of thing to be expected in a non-literary document". Now the document becomes "non-literary" when the intrusion of the pronouns in the narrative style strains the flow.

So, Robbins is stuck. If he shows well written texts with "we" passages, they argue normal use - i.e. "we" being used to indicate participation. If he shows abrupt shifts, the document is characterised as difficult, having the wrong or uncertain date or being non-literary. These are arbitrary standards of judgement and simply involve moving of goalposts and raising any available objection.

Kirby's last statement "There is no precedent, and, thus, there is no such literary device" is unclear to me:

What would entail a "precedent"?

If a precedent would be "examples of a simply generic first person plural", how did you establish the criteria for such a precedent? What about the way Thucydides introduces himself in *History of the Peloponnesian War* 4.104.4ff, or Xenophon in book 3 of *Anabasis* 3.1.4-3.1.8? The way Xenophon introduces himself into the narrative in book 3 in third person then Xenophon becomes a participant in the action and the dialogue?

## **Observations**

Its clear to me that whereas Kirby chose a specific, narrow topic: 1st person perspective as a narrative style for sea voyages - literature survey, he attacked arguments meant to illustrate Homeric influence (like Vergil's *Aeneid*), or shift in perspective as those meant to show the 1st person perspective in sea voyages or those meant to show shift in perspective is not to be found elsewhere, respectively. Thus many times, he was addressing an argument that was not being made.

By narrowing his topic area, he denied himself the chance to address other arguments that strengthen Robbin's case. As a whole, Robbin's arguments are to do with:

We passages as a narrative style in Greek and Roman literature with Acts sea voyages in mind

- \* Third person narrative in the we passages
- \* Study of historiographical literature that is pervaded by third person narrative
- \* Greek literature having alternation between third person and first person plural narration
- \* Primary features of sea voyage genre - shipwrecks etc
- \* Positioning of the we passages in Acts.

Thus, Robbins citations do not just deal with shifts of the first to third person alone, or with sea voyages alone: he demonstrates that the narrative styles manifest in sea voyages pervaded the styles of discourse and influenced the form of imagery people employed and was used for "special effect" in conjunction with the shift from first person and so on - hence its influence in the Hellenistic literature.

It seemed to me that even as the authors of the cited texts weaved from one part to the other, one document to the next, Kirby seemed to be looking for "shifts" even where the author was not arguing a "shift" an example is in his treatment of Robbins take on *The Menippean Satires of Varro* and *Seven Against Thebes* and Josephus.

It would be good to see a thorough handling of the chiastic structure Robbins argues is present in Acts, parallels to the voyages in Acts in other literature, the abrupt shifts in Acts from first plural to third person narration, examination of false stories in Acts like Paul being bitten by a poisonous snake in Malta while we know that there were no poisonous snakes in Malta, architectonic parallels between Luke and Acts, the author of Luke acts "preservation" of the sea (*thalassa*) for Paul and not allowing Jesus to the sea in Luke, the fabrication of geographical features by the author, the great omission, the meaning of "happened among us" with regard to "we" etc etc.

Then one could go to the dating of Acts - copying of Josephus by the Author of Luke-Acts, the author of Luke-Acts not being keen on historical fact both theological objective, Marcion's proto Luke, ignorance of Pauline epistles, why the author had to study what was "handed down" yet he was an eyewitness etc etc.

## **My Conclusion**

Kirby, for the most part, confirms Robbin's theory, and where Kirby faults Robbins, Robbins is mostly making a different point than the one Kirby is

criticizing. The scholars Kirby quotes adopt a similar approach and a number of times miss the point being made.

I think its plausible that the author of Acts employed a narrative style for the sea voyages in Acts as Robbins argues. I am not sure about the extent to which I am persuaded. I don't regard it as a particulatly important argument regarding the question of whether the author actually travelled with Paul because I am convinced the author was never present in the scenes described - and for different reasons.

Whats important is that, in my considered view, Kirby's arguments do not make Robbin's thesis implausible.

For a discussion on this subject plus Peter Kirby's response, go [here](#).