

## SHIPBOARD SURFACE READING AND ROBERT COPLAND'S *RUTTER OF THE SEA*

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Robert Copland's *Rutter of the Sea* is a navigational guide dating from the mid-15th to early 16th century. Pilot guides, or 'rutters', were practical navigational tools intended to help sailors with planning and undertaking sea voyages. Copland's *Rutter* specifically concerns Channel shipping and voyages to Andalusia and Bordeaux, with the majority topic being the safe exit and entry of ports, but also relevant warnings, advice, and sparse descriptions of seafarer observations.

At the time Copland's *Rutter* was in use, maps and sea charts were extremely rare and inaccessible, so navigation largely came down to the ability to recognise visual signifiers on land (such as church steeples and cliffsides), experience (either your own or shared) and the limited but vital technology of things like sounding equipment and the dry compass. The format of the rutter was an effective medium for navigational purposes in that it provided a practical means for learning about a trip in advance or directions to follow mid-voyage. It involves the seafarer not only as its reader but as its user, acting as a portable reference for environmental and navigational information.

The *Rutter* is a utilitarian text, designed for cursory, surface-level reading and to be consulted and then moved away from, allowing sailors to return their attention to the sea. However, in both content and form, it includes its own internal commentary, a sort of self-review provided by Copland, who offers a preface in which he describes his role as the *Rutter's* translator and reflects on the process of translating it from its original French into the English language. As I'll expand upon, the navigational advice in the *Rutter* was first circulated in a French text named *Le Routier de la mer*, meaning 'The Road of the sea.' It seems that Copland misunderstood 'Routier' to be the type of text he was handed, leading to the name 'rutter', which became an alternative term for a pilot guide. Copland included his reflections on his experience with translating the rutter in the final

printed edition. Typically, the inclusion of commentary into a literary work would afford that writing a presumed interpretational capacity beyond the immediate impressions of its literary meaning, or the “‘hermeneutics of depth’, that is, interpretations premised upon meanings thought to reside below the surface of texts, political arrangements, or artistic forms” (Tanke 11). The presence of commentary suggests that the language possesses depth, whether in terms of its literary complexity or references to external meanings and culture. The layers within texts take readers further away from the immediate meaning of its words and towards some other supposed significance, suggesting that the value of the text is not the language but the way it can be engaged with. This potential of a work’s capacity for extra meaning beyond words is its depth, in that its real meanings exist beneath the “surface” of the page.

The surface meaning of the *Rutter* is the directions it offers. It works best when only its surface is needed— in other words, its success as a tool is measured by how little it needs to be read and interpreted. Copland also tries to provide commentary that adds no additional complexities or dynamics to the language. In fact, his reflections on the language are a stubborn refusal of his own ability to impress meaning into words. Copland’s commentary, the extra layer that he adds in both a preface and as its translator, seeks to counteract the typical convention of commentary instead of adding depth and meaning to the text.

The *Rutter* thus offers an interesting subversion of expectations when it comes to discussing the depth of a work and the implicit bias towards writing with ‘depth’ being more profound or more worthy of analysis, or more relevant to networks of meaning. Copland’s *Rutter* instead functions as a fascinating piece of historical evidence because its shallowness not only suits the early medieval spatial hermeneutics of the sea but is also a lasting proof of its effectiveness as a tool. To read it and ask about depth, I’d argue we would be better served by engaging with the immediate impression of the words—that is, its instantaneous meaning, available without the need for further investigation. Tanke, in his introduction to Jacques Rancière, identifies this method as “topographical analysis”, which “sticks to the surface of things” and “credits its addressees with being already in possession of capacities for making sense of sense”. Discussing the depth of a thalassological text inherently tied to maritime history feels thematically suitable, a point that’s reinforced by taking a specifically topographical approach to depth when

reading a rutter's navigational writing. By examining the translation of the text and comparing Copland's *Rutter of the Sea* to other similar rutters, we can consider Copland's attempt at a commentary that adds no new layers or depth. As we will read, his insistence that translation does not change the nature of a text aligns with not only his goals as a translator and how he needed to make the text suitable for sailors to use but also the rutter's design as a tool suited for a medieval sea understood in shallow hermeneutics.

#### THE HISTORY AND TRANSLATION

The following is a quotation from a section of the pilot guide subtitled "Entringes and harborowes of the coast of Normandy":

If ye wyl lye at Sherburgh cast anker at .vi. fathome, and ye shall finde faire bottom, and ye shall go west fro the point of the South, and beware of the sayd point, for there it is daungerous. If ye wyl lye at Hag[ge] cast anker beneath the Church at .xii. fathomes. If ye wyl lye at the fosse of Coluile cast anker without . . . <sup>1</sup>

The prose ebbs and flows from one clause to the next, creating a directional reading experience that mirrors the journey as it unfolds. Each clause functions as its own moment in the trip, such as the casting of the anchor in a safe place beneath the church, delivering information in relevant sequential segments that should ideally unfold in the order that they are delivered. Each clause is conditionally useful and accurate so long as the clause before it was followed, in the same way that a charted journey on a map can only include the points of a journey that fall within the plotted course.

The language uses limited and repetitive descriptions, prioritising accuracy to the extent that it is not the sort of text that a traditional commentator would find immediate value within. That is, were we to regard it within a traditional understanding of acts of commentary—to ask it for depth, to assume that its language must have some deep and therefor profound quality—we would likely be disappointed, because outside the inclusion of contextual framing

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<sup>1</sup> Copland, "The Rutter of the Sea," 14-15. All transcription efforts and errors are my own, and I would like to thank the University of Michigan Library Digital collections for their own transcription which supported my reading.

media and prologues, the above-quoted section could very well represent the entirety of the *Rutter*'s written content. It is made entirely of sequential, sparsely descriptive instructions. In his observation of the text in all its contents, W. Senior surmises, "it is probably chiefly as a repository in English of Sixteenth-century place-names and mariners' terms that Copland's *Rutter* will be found of interest".<sup>2</sup> Senior treats the *Rutter* similarly to how household-keeping texts have been treated—as evidence of history and a result of the working mind, rather than as a piece of literature. After all, Copland has made no evident attempt to make the language traditionally engaging or dynamic, nor is there a use of references that associate with a reserve of information to be found through engaging with the text in a scholarly or meditative way. What it says should be enough for anyone taking the journey it describes.

Comparatively, some other rutters offer more specialised advice for specific types of ships or niche information about the locations they cover. Personable and specialised rutters have survived from the same era as Copland's, though in a limited quantity, since it seems to have been common practice to discard a rutter at sea once it was done with (Ruddock 1961, 409-410). At sea, paper was exposed to harsh elements, so any rutters that survived were likely either published repeatedly (as is the case for Copland) or was never used—such as the *Hatfield Rutter*, commissioned by Henry VIII for the safe transportation of Princess Anne of Cleves and written by John Aborowgh and Richard Coche in 1539. Compared to Copland's *Rutter*, the *Hatfield Rutter* uses much more descriptive language, though it had considerably less "ground" to cover:

. . . Item. Westnorwest from the town gate is the Road and four cables length in toward the sea from the town towards the road you shall have but 5 or 6 foot water, and is fair hard sand. Item. From the town Road a gunshot westnorwest from the sea gate is 10 foot water, and is soft black ooze . . . (Ruddock 410)

The *Hatfield Rutter* was never used as the journey was deemed too hazardous to the young princess's complexion, with her

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<sup>2</sup> W. Senior, "The Rutter of the Sea," *The Mariner's Mirror* 6, no. 8 (March 2013): 245.

ambassadors from the Duke of Cleves insisting that “the time of year being now cold and tempestuous”, Anne “might there, although she were never so well ordered, take such cold or other disease, considering she was never before upon the seas, as should be to her great peril and the King’s Majesty’s great displeasure” (Ruddock 425). Luckily for historians, and perhaps Anne, the rutter was shelved despite being written by expert mariners, unlike Robert Copland. Copland, like Anne, had never taken to sea at the time he was commissioned.

His rutter functions by offering vague contingencies that could be encountered by any sailor in any ship, making itself an asset to a broader demographic. The navigational directions in Copland’s *Rutter* adopt a format designed for mass accessibility, requiring no specialist equipment and pertaining to any relevant journey and sailor interested in following its course. It comments on possible environmental encounters in order to help the sailor-reader orient himself and his ship. At its core, Copland’s *Rutter* is commentary for the navigator’s cause, suggesting that the sailor may take action in response to environmental cues, and if that were the full extent of Copland’s *Rutter*, then its engagement with the study of commentary would be clear-cut: the corollary of navigation is to encounter a seafarer’s environment and make sense of it through sensory inputs, observation, and reading the rutter relevant to your expedition. This offers space for the reader to disagree with the text and engage with the details it offers, comparing it to their own observations and deciding at each stage whether it is right or wrong.

These details, ranging from the location of the moon to the type of sediment that a fathom would yield, were originally recorded in French and, in order for English-speaking seafarers to access them, needed to be accurately translated into English. It was critical that this translation was precise in order for the directions to be reliable. Originally, much of the *Rutter* existed as the French text named *Le grant routier et pilotage et enseignement pour ancrer tant es portz, haures que autres lieux de la mer, etc* (‘Road and pilotage management and teaching to anchor both ports, harbours, and other places at sea, etc.’)<sup>3</sup> This is the text that Copland describes as being handed by an

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<sup>3</sup> For more specific research into the French material including the Rules of Oléron, its translations and re-working into various texts, I recommend Kinga Lis, “Behind the Early Modern English

“ingenious and circumspect Mariner of the City of Loudon“ who commissioned him to translate a “prety booke imprinted in the french language, called The Rutter of the sea, containing many proper feates of [the Mariner’s] science“ (Copland, 4–5). That “prety booke“ was *Le grant routier de la mer*, written by Pierre Garcie (called Ferrande) in 1483 and first printed by Enguilbert de Marnef at Poitiers in 1520. It enjoyed subsequent success and a dozen editions, finishing with a final publication in Rouen, 1642.<sup>4</sup> The *Rutter* is an abridged version of *Le grant routier de la mer*, translated by Copland and then imprinted in London by Thomas Petyt, with subsequent editions in 1536, 1550, 1555, and 1560, a testament to the *Rutter’s* success, aided by the relatively new practice of printing books coinciding with a time of rapid maritime expansion.<sup>5</sup>

Copland himself had no seafaring experience and, in the preface of the *Rutter*, reflects that he “did un-dertake in doing my delig[en]ce, as a blind hor[se] in a myl, turning the querne ignorantly, yet safely by conduaing of Y milder that setteth him on woke“ (Copland, 5). By likening himself to a blind horse set on a controlled path, Copland oddly asserts that as the translator, he abandons all intentions of interpreting or understanding the text beyond his undertaking to change its language. Instead, he takes a responsibility to translate as dutifully as an ignorant animal, reassuring readers that that his inexperience with the sea will not compromise the information and recognising his job in preserving the integrity of the writing by only engaging with it shallowly.

Sailing directions demand accurate and precise translation, but the language is perhaps less immediately sophisticated and complex than found in other descriptive genres. Still, there is vital meaning that Copland had to preserve over the course of two swift shifts: from French to English and also from expert to potential beginner. The simplicity of the language works in favour of the translator as well as

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translation of the *Laws of Oléron: Determining the Underlying French Text*,” 115–37.

<sup>4</sup> Here I am paraphrasing the research done by L. A. Sheppard in “The Rutter of the Sea,” 18–9.

<sup>5</sup> For those interested in the inclusion of the *Laws of Oléron* in the rutter, W. Senior offers an invaluable and concise explanation of Copland and Petyt, as well as the various versions of the Laws of Oléron and the Judgements of the Sea in *The Mariner’s Mirror*, listed in the citations.

functioning more effectively for the *Rutter's* user, being easier to remember and reference, and allowing the reader quickly to orient themselves on the page. But, having made the *Rutter* into a translation, Copland has, whether he likes it or not, produced a new surface for the words' meanings that is accessible to those who understand the English language, changing the way that these meanings are engaged with. In her book, *This Little Art*, Kate Briggs considers how translation affects the act of reading. When she looks at a translated work, Briggs reflects, "This is a translation! Is it? I feel sure that something would happen – some adjustment to your reading manner would be very likely to occur – if you were to hear me all of a sudden insisting that it is."<sup>6</sup> The adjustment to our reading manner might be as simple as recognising the change in the linguistic surface of the writing, offering readers a chance to decide, consciously or unconsciously, to what extent they believe they are engaging with the original material. Briggs suggests that we pretend that the translated text "is all wholly normal" but that we, like her, "know, on some level, that it is not" (Briggs, 17–8).

Briggs suggests that when we know a work is a translation, we consciously read it under a new aspect to our interpretation of its meaning. Not knowing that it's a translation allows us to treat the translation as though it were the primary text, but once we find out that it is not "wholly normal", then the translated text becomes marginal to the original piece to an extent that is personal to each reader. We must decide how far we are willing to pretend it is the same as the original, if at all, so by reading a translated text we engage in a sort of conscious or unconscious acceptance of its meaning as having a definitive distance from the original version. Copland, by rejecting the idea that he ever had any meaningful access to the core meaning of the *routier*, tries to bring the *Rutter* as close to it as possible, overlaying the two and insisting that the distance is nearly indiscernible. Where most translations are considered marginal in some way to the original—set aside from the primary source by a distance that is dependent on its accuracy and on the reader's willingness to go-along with the translation—Copland wants his version to seem central. Perhaps this was because to have his directions be marginal would compromise its form entirely.

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<sup>6</sup> Kate Briggs, *This Little Art* (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2017), 48.

By using the translation despite Copland's lack of expertise, the risk of being misinformed at sea is weighed against the convenience, availability, and accessibility of the text. For the contemporary reader, who has access to translating aides and has navigation mostly likely taken out of their hands by GPS tools, the most immediate way to ask whether Copland's *Rutter* is valuable is to assess its accuracy. Otherwise, the *Rutter* is accessed primarily in the parameters established by Senior for its place as a composite of terminology and locations. But as is true with commentary as a general rule, these reductive assessments too readily presume that the reader is at ease.

By this, I mean that commentary that demands depth and a plumbable nature from literature, or otherwise would be relegated as arbitrary to critical discussion, risks dismissing value that is attained quickly and easily. In the case of the rutter genre, the shallowness and simplicity are evidence of effective literature. Copland himself described his *Rutter* as a 'pretty book' in its original French form, and once his inexperience and mistranslation led to its renaming it, he asserts that it is now also a tool, advising that any "maister mariner" should "enquireth [and] geteth such necessary instruments . . . as the carde, compass, rutter, dyall and other."<sup>7</sup> With eyes, a sandglass, a compass, sounding line and lead, the *Rutter* can not only be read, but consulted. And in no other circumstance would we criticise a tool for working too quickly, too efficiently, and with too little work required from its user.

To do so would be to imply that accessibility means the devaluation of literature. This conflicts with the presumed status of ease that the reader/commentator should be in when interacting with work, where there should be active participation, but it should not feel like toiling. In this theory, the effort of reading should emerge from literary complexity and not its proximity to active industry. So, when commentary demands depth from a literary work, it prioritises its identity as words over its value as operating meanings; by that, I mean that demanding there be layers and interconnectivity that can only be accessed through the dissection of the literary object ignores the object's existence as anything other than subject to commentary. This assumption presumes that the reader has the time, means, and desire to sink into a work. But for the seafarer, the initial demographic for the *Rutter*, this was simply

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Copland, *The Rutter of the Sea*, 4.



not the case. As Siobhan Carroll writes, the seaman “must be focused on his hands, on his knots, and on his craft, in both senses of the word. Officers, similarly, must keep an eye on the actions of the crew, and the behaviour of the sails”.<sup>8</sup> The information of the rutter lies on its surface, easy for busy seafarers to access and, as we will now discuss, accurate to the early medieval conceptions of the sea that the rutter navigates.

#### A SHALLOW SEA IN MEDIEVAL RUTTERS

Matthew Boyd Goldie drew on rutters when formulating his argument that spatial hermeneutics in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries involved a concept of continuity, edge, and even extent which differed from contemporary models, shaping medieval perceptions of the areas that surrounded them.<sup>9</sup> It stands to reason then that the medieval sense of self that shaped their thalassology and concept of embodiment differs from our contemporary ones, given our access to flight, aerial imagery, subaquatic image capture, and panoramic photography, and even our access to films and games featuring underwater or sky-based exploration. Instead, Goldie posits that the sense of space and surroundings inherent to the rutter format are fundamentally different and asserts the following two claims. Firstly that:

The writing and images exhibit an understanding of physical space as delimited rather than panoramic. In a sense, the space might be called “horizontal” in that it is typically presented as bounded by the horizon, not as infinite or with ever-receding boundaries . . . The area perceived is horizontal also in the sense that the view is ordinarily parallel to the earth in a zone or band near the ground or sea. (Goldie 702–3)

And secondly:

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<sup>8</sup> Siobhan Carroll, *An Empire of Air and Water* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 80.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew Boyd Goldie, “An Early English Rutter: The Sea and Spatial Hermeneutics in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries,” *Speculum* 90, no. 3 (July 2015).

The structure of the rutter text is episodic rather than integrating its itineraries into one subsuming arc . . . such a structure is a consequence of the first spatial hermeneutic, and it also registers a practical navigational origin for the writing. (Goldie 703)

The rutter's world is flat and periodic. It suggests that the experience of space occurred in disks along the sea's surface, extending as far as the eye can see and no further. In this sense, the shallow descriptive language and repetition discussed so far not only make the text translatable and accessible but also provide a more effective way of explaining the world for navigators. Had the French writers or Copland used a subsuming narrative over the course of the pilot guide, then the continual momentum would be at odds with the individualistic experience of location and area. Instead, sections of navigational writing, such as the following, offer seamarks that split the world up into shallow observations:

At Staples and Bolyn unti the Stabler of Tenet the  
Moone in the south southeastful sea.

At the straite of Calays the moone in the southwestful  
sea.

Fro the straite of Cailais to Dstend the moone in the  
southsoutheast low water . . . (Copland 10)

Beyond being quick to read and use in a busy shipside environment, text like this accurately represents the flatter, more defined sense of space that medieval and early modern rutter users were navigating. A glance at the moon, the compass, and the rutter should suffice to form a fully situated sense of self and compare it to the environment to see if it is accurate.

Whilst rich descriptive imagery, through meditation and focus, may reveal hidden depth that could be invaluable to an ocean explorer, a journey such as this one, encapsulated in episodic and horizontal experiences of space, cannot facilitate such exploration and likely did not need to. This reflects a shallower understanding of the sea and space, and so to match that, we may consider two alternative approaches to topographical commentary, these being skim reading and simultaneousness. These methods offer a way of engaging with the language without depth-focused reading practices unsuited to the rutter's design as a shallow piece of literature,

delivering directions faster and more accurately to the medieval sea environment.

### SIMULTANEOUSNESS AND SKIM-READING

Summarising so far, the shallow writing of the rutter and its inclusions of seemingly topographical commentary reflect its utilitarian purpose and are key to how the language effectively delivers its meaning in three distinct ways: First, by ensuring the instantaneous delivery of information; second, by enabling a translator unfamiliar with seafaring but committed to preserving meaning to perform the task well; and third, by offering contemporary readers a glimpse into the thalassology and spatial hermeneutics that shaped navigation in the late medieval era. The last thing to consider is how the absence of deep, plumbable language challenges the idea that slow, thorough reading is a universally effective means of engaging with literature. If traditional commentary in search of depth would perform reading as a means to excavate meaning from beneath language, then instead, methods such as reading in simultaneousness and skim-reading would engage with the immediate meaning as what counts in the ways that matter. Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus describe surface reading as a means to “embrace [the] surface [of a text] as an effective and ethical stance” in a kind of commentary that “involves accepting texts, deferring to them instead of mastering or using them as objects, and refuses the depth model of truth, which dismisses surfaces as inessential and deceptive” (10). This ulterior way to perform reading and commentary offers a means of “receptiveness and fidelity to the text’s surface, as opposed to suspicious and aggressive attacks on its concealed depths” (Best and Marcus, 11). Far from being a refusal to perform commentary altogether, it is instead a way to engage with the meaning of a text, to read it, without scrutinising its surface. Modes of surface reading seem to be an apt way to read a rutter and comment on it considering the fact that the rutter was used by and written for busy sailors.

Both skim-reading and simultaneousness, as proposed means for engaging with language, carry positive and negative connotations, and both have a watery origin. The term ‘skim-read’ suggests engaging with a text through clearly watery means, ‘skimming’ it, either removing a substance from the surface of a liquid or moving quickly and lightly over or on a surface (or through

air).<sup>10</sup> This implies that either the text is contaminated, and the removal of meaning is to take away a meaning that is itself the contamination (thus leaving some unclear yet clarified entity behind), or the surface of the text is scarcely broken. So, either our literary object is fundamentally changed by this mode of interaction and a contaminated meaning is extracted, or the reading is so superficial as to leave the piece entirely undisturbed. Skim reading summons an idea of an insubstantial extraction of meaning—one that is potentially incorrect, unengaging, or perhaps lazily executed.

Comparatively, the wateriness in the term ‘simultaneousness’ might be less evident, but as a practice, it pertains to the environment of engagement. James Steel Smith disparaged simultaneousness as a contemporary capacity, “characteristic of our culture.”<sup>11</sup> However, aboard a ship, nobody had the privilege of navigating in ignorance to the ship’s broader operations. Maintaining composure and simultaneous awareness of the environment is essential for all aboard, regardless of their station. Much like Copland, who must change the language while keeping it the same, seafarers must remain aware of the danger while performing their craft; they must work to keep things working.

However, suggesting that a reading and interpretation were done simultaneously to other engagements may inspire distrust in the resulting interpretation. Both skim-reading and simultaneousness come with their own negative connotations, but perhaps they align with the surface-reading that we have identified and seen to work best for certain texts, like the rutter. They offer a chance to subvert the presumption that the first understanding of a text, or the quickest or simplest or even easiest, is always an illusion.

Commentary that relies on time and study in the ways we have discussed depends on the illusion that there is depth in every literary work, a depth that requires the scrutiny and investigation of a piece of literature in order to defeat the supposed illusion of its surface reading. Under this mode of depth-dependent commentary, what the text is potentially about is valued higher than the ostensible meaning. But, if shallow reading methods such as simultaneousness and skim-reading prove effective in practical environments, then

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<sup>10</sup> “Skim-read,” Oxford English Dictionary, accessed July 1, 2024, OED.com, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4829550456>.

<sup>11</sup> James Steel Smith, “Simultaneousness,” *The English Journal* 57, no. 5 (May 1968): 696.

there must also be other ways to perform commentary, perhaps especially with regards to non-scholarly literature, or literature produced for non-literary purposes (such as the *Rutter*, which was perhaps meant to be read, but not necessarily “for reading”.) Topographical analysis, by legitimising shallow reading practices as a trusted way to engage with language, may offer insight into aspects of literature that remain inaccessible, or brushed aside, by depth-focused commentary and interpretation.

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