

The Goodwins – An Appropriate Name

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... Antonio hath a ship of rich lading wrackt on the narrow Seas; the Goodwins I thinke they call the place, a very dangerous flat, and fatall, where the carcasses of many a tall ship, lye buried, ... (*MV*, III, i, 3–7)¹

Recent editions of Shakespeare's plays are content to remark that the Goodwins is a dangerous shoal off the coast of Kent. Just why Shakespeare chose to refer to these sands has, however, been discussed by several who come to the general conclusion that the above passage is used for local color, "... to make us believe that we are in Venice, where Venetians, and not Englishmen, are speaking."²

While this conjecture may be true, it is possible that the choice of the particular shoals involved much more than local color. The *Merchant of Venice* is a play of friendship. The situation, by the beginning of Act III, is that Antonio, who has pawned his life as security for his friend Bassanio, is in danger of forfeiting his life because he is unable to repay the loan.

Antonio is a merchant. His business depends upon the success of his ships at sea. If these ships were to be wrecked, what means of destruction would further the plot and at the same time be most dramatically appropriate for Antonio's situation? In the opinion of this writer, it would be difficult to choose a more dramatically appropriate cause of destruction than the Goodwins,³ for the name

¹ *Merchant of Venice Variorum*, ed. by H. H. Furness (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1888) pp. 124–125n.

² The Goodwin Sands are referred to three times in Shakespeare, the other two instances being in *King John* (V, iii, 11 and V, v, 13) where the reference is geographically appropriate to the loss of supplies intended for the Dauphin.

³ The centrality of the friendship theme to the play has been shown by Laurens J. Mills in his *One Soul in Bodies Twain* (Bloomington, Indiana: Principia Press, 1937).

means *good friends*.⁴ Antonio has been wrecked on the shoals of friendship, shoals which were there even though earlier he could not see them. The dramatic irony of "the Goodwins" makes it probable that Shakespeare did use these sands for more than local color, particularly in a play where the names of persons and places seem carefully chosen for their associative value, e.g., (Brutus') Portia, Belmont, Daniel (God is my judge), Tubal, Chus, Jessica, Laban, Leah.

One may, with greater risk, go a bit further. There was in Shakespeare's time a gentleman who was as dangerous to plays as the Goodwins was to ships. He was Master of the Revels, Edmund Tilney. *Tilney* means *good island*,⁵ and the Goodwins were traditionally islands that had sunk so that even the crests were below sea level. May not Tilney have been responsible, figuratively speaking, for the burial of many a tall ship, for he did surpress certain plays? At least, it is pleasant to think that the Bard broke a lance with the chief censor.

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⁴ *Oxford Dictionary of English Christian Names*, compiled by E. G. Withycombe (New York: O.U.P., 1947), *s. v.* Godwin.

⁵ Henry Harrison, *Surnames of the United Kingdom* (London: Morland Press, 1918, v. 2), *s. v.* Tilney.