A NOTE ON "DOVER BEACH," LINES 21-23

While it is generally assumed that the reference to ignorant armies clashing by night in the last line of "Dover Beach" is a reminiscence of Thucydides' account of the night battle of Epipolae, no consensus has been reached as to the origin of the curious image in lines 21-23, where it is asserted that

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle unfurled

Three attempts have been made to elucidate this passage by reference to literary analogues. In 1950 B B Trawick suggested that "The Sea of Faith" should be seen as inspired by some lines in a poem by Arnold's friend A H Clough, The Bothie of Toper-na-Fuasich, printed in 1848. However, the verbal similarities between the two poems are not very striking, nor are the similarities of sentiment and thought. Hence it is not surprising that Kenneth and Miriam Allott do not mention Trawick's article in their annotated edition of Arnold's poems. The second comment on the enigmatic passage dates from 1983. According to Ronald A Sharp, we should understand the phrase "round earth's shore" in line 22 as a reminiscence of a similar phrase in Keats' "Bright Star" sonnet, also first published in 1848, lines 5-6 of this poem speak of "the moving waters at their priestlike task / Of pure ablution round earth's human shores." The verbal resemblance between this passage and "Dover Beach" is admittedly closer (though not strikingly close), but the religious implications would seem to differ, in Keats' poem the ocean is above all seen as a purifying force, whereas in Arnold's the emphasis is on the idea of world-wide domination. Moreover, Sharp's explanation entirely evades the central problem of the comparison of the ocean to "a bright girdle." Thus, though familiarity with the Keats sonnet lends poignancy to the difference between Arnold and received opinion in the matter of religion, as Sharp contends, it also leaves an important aspect of the "Dover Beach" passage unaccounted for.

The problem of the girdle metaphor is addressed in a 1985 article by William A Ulmer, who would see Arnold's preference for "girdle" over the original "garment" (crossed
out in the MS) as due to the occurrence of a similar phrase in J A. Froude's *The Nemesis of Faith*, which appeared in 1849. In the relevant passage, Froude, discussing the trials of life and commenting on the peace of mind that is forever lost "when we cast adrift of system," makes use of the following metaphor "Even superstition is a bracing girdle, which the frame that is trained to it can ill afford to lose." This sentence has the indisputable merit of dwelling on the topic of lost religious fervor while also talking of a girdle. However, Ulmer's contention seems unsatisfactory on at least one count: it does not throw any light on the connection between the girdle and the "Sea of Faith" encompassing the "earth's shore", on the contrary, there is a certain incongruity between Arnold's visually suggestive metaphor, conjuring up the entire globe, and the prosaic nature of Froude's image "bracing girdle," "frame trained to it." However, Ulmer's suggestion is, on the whole, a plausible one, and the Froude parallel need not be ruled out even if another one, which has specifically to do with the sea/girdle connection, can be produced.

It is obvious, as Ulmer recognizes too, that the difficulty of visualizing the scene described in lines 21-23 is the chief cause of the problems posed by Arnold's mysterious girdle. The Allotts provide a long note, which deserves to be quoted in full:

23 *girdle* garment MS The sense of this, the one dubiously "poetical" line in the poem, is not clear. Perhaps the girdle is meant to be visualized as a sash broad enough to allow the appearance of parallel wrinkles, i.e., the successive waves. G H Ford notes, "This difficult line means, in general, that at high tide the sea envelops the land closely. Its forces are 'gathered up' (to use Wordsworth's term for it) like the 'folds' of bright clothing ('girdle') which have been compressed ('furled'). At ebb tide, as the sea retreats, it is unfurled and spread out." (*The Norton Anthology of English Literature* [rev ed 1968] 2 1039)

Helpful as these suggestions are, they do not, in my opinion, account for all the meanings conveyed by the three lines. Nor does a review of Arnold's practice in other poems cast sufficient light on the passage. It is true that he appears to have been fond of images mixing abstract and concrete elements and particularly of the traditional "sea-of-life" metaphor. An example is to be found in "To Marguerite—Continued" (lines 1-6):
Yes! in the sea of life ensiled,
We mortal millions live alone
The islands feel the enclasping flow,
And then their endless bounds they know

However, while "the sea of life" is a conventional image (particularly in love poetry), "The Sea of Faith" is not Nor does the ensuing expression "the enclasping flow" constitute more than a very general parallel to the metaphor of a girdle encompassing the shores of the world. The only passage I can find in Arnold's poetry which could qualify as a related case is "A Summer Night," lines 18-19

Houses, with long white sweep,
Girdled the glistening bay

Here the "glistening" of the bay provides a parallel to the "bright" impression made by the sea-girdle of "Dover Beach," but the central notion of houses girdling a bay seems more conventional than that of the Sea of Faith spreading like a girdle round the world. These parallels are helpful only in that they indicate that Arnold had a general propensity for imagery of the kind exemplified by lines 21-23 of "Dover Beach." If an extraneous parallel can be found which fits not only the tenor but the vehicle of Arnold's statement about faith, it might add an important dimension which the passages examined above do not. As I hope to show, such a parallel can be found.

It seems significant that in revising the poem Arnold changed the "garment" of the MS version, a pencilled autograph probably dating from a visit to Dover in June, 1851, to the more specific "girdle," for in so doing he brought a powerful poetic tradition to bear on "Dover Beach." The most obvious single instance of it—obvious to modern-day readers as well as to Arnold and his audience—is _A Midsummer Night's Dream_ II ii 175-76 where Puck makes the following reply to Oberon's request that he fetch an herb to be used in a love-potion:

I'll put a girdle round about the earth
In forty minutes

The force of this striking image was dwelt on by Shakespeare's early editors and commentators Steevens,
for one, writes, "Perhaps this phrase is proverbial Compare Chapman's *Bussy d'Ambos*, 1607: 'To put a girdle round about the world.' "8 Such a use of the girdle metaphor was in fact well-known to Elizabethan and Jacobean readers and theatre-goers. An early example is an emblem in Whitney's *A Choice of Emblemes* (1586) which shows a girdle encircling the world; one end is held by God's hand, and the other is attached to Sir Francis Drake's ship.9 The same image recurs in plays by Dekker, Massinger, and Shirley.10 In all these cases, it is synonymous with circumnavigating the world or making an exceptionally long voyage. The religious overtones of Whitney's emblem (which would make excellent sense in connection with "Dover Beach") are not retained, on the other hand, the girdle is very clearly associated with water, which is perhaps even more important in the present context.

However, Whitney is not the inventor of the image as such, although he gave it memorable expression. Another of Shakespeare's early editors, Halliwell, writing in 1856, notes that the metaphor in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

is not peculiar to Shakespeare. The idea and expression were probably derived from the old plans of the world, in which the Zodiac is represented as "a girdle round the earth." Thus, says the author of *The Cosmop of Ptolemeus*, "the other is large, in manner of a girdle, or as a garland of flowers, which they doe call the Zodiac."11

The "old plans" Halliwell has in mind here are in all probability illustrations in Renaissance editions of the works of well-known cosmographical authorities such as Sacrobosco and Proclus. In these one finds pictures of so-called armillary spheres, skeletal representations of the *sphaera mundi* in which a black ball, indicating the earth, is surrounded by metal rings onto which the zodiac, symbolized by a ribbon or "girdle," is fastened.12

However, the girdle metaphor is much older than these Renaissance diagrams would seem to suggest and can in fact be traced back to the classical literature Manilius, *Astronomica* I.679, refers to the zodiac as "stellatus balteus," a baldrick studded with stars, and at III 334 ("obliquo signorum balteus orbe") he provides an explanation of the image: the zodiac is like a "girdle" or "shoulder-belt" (the Latin word *balteus* carries both these meanings) because while half the zodiac is over the horizon the other half is below *Balteus* in
the more general sense of "girdle" occurs in the Latin versions of Aratus,13 whereas the Greek usage is somewhat different. Zóνη is not used about the zodiac (however, Porphyry, Adversus Christianos, uses it about the girdle of the ocean). The normal expression is δ [ξωδακόδ] κύκλος, which is found in Aratus, Phaenomena 544, and in the works of other astronomers. A curious case not related to the usage of the astronomical poets but identical with Arnold's phrase in "Dover Beach" is Anthologia Graeca IX 421 where ζωστήρ ("girdle") is used about the Aegean. "νῆσοι ὃς ζωστήρ Ἀγαίων κύμωτος ἐντὸς ἔκτελ" ("islands which the girdle of the Aegean encompasses")

This is probably the origin of the girdle metaphor as employed by Shakespeare and other dramatists. As one might expect, the phraseology of the classical astronomers is reflected in the works of Renaissance poets. Du Bartas, for example, describes the zodiac in the following terms:

Les douze [maisons] sont fichez en la riche centure,
Dont l'ouvrer immortel estreha la Nauire

Cenature qu'elle porte en escharpe acrochee,
Non sur ses reins seconds ronlement attachée,
Ce cercle, honneur du Ciel, ce baudrier orangé,
Chamarré de rubis, de fil d'argent frangé,
Bouclé de bagues d'or, d'un bandeau qui rayonne,14

Lines translated by Sylvester as

In certame Houses to devide the Skyes
Of those, are Twelve in that rich Girdle greft

To weare it biae, buckled overthrowth-her,
Not round about her swelling waste to grt-her
This glorus Baldricke of a Golden undge,
Imbost with Rubes, edg'd with silver frendge,
Buckled with Gold, with a Bend glstring bright.15

The word "baldric" occurs in Spenser's works as well, it is first found in Prothalamion 174 where it is said that "the twins of Ioue . . decke the Bauldricke of the Heauens bright" and again in The Faerie Queene V 11 6-7, "those twelve signes, which nightly we doe see / The heauens bright-shining baudricke to enchace." A curious case of the baldric metaphor is Paradise Lost XI 247, which involves an inversion of the concepts the Archangel Michael's
appearance is described, among other things, "by his side / As in a glistening zodiac hung the sword"

The girdle metaphor found its way into love poetry as well. An example is afforded by Donne's elegy 19, "To His Mistresse Going to Bed," lines 5-6,

Off with that girdle, like heaven's zone glistening,
But a far fairer world encompassing,

which commentators take as a reference to the belt of Orion. A related case is Waller's "On a Girdle," in which the poet says about this object that "It was my heaven's extremest sphere" (line 5), a phrase probably connoting the outermost sphere of the Ptolemaic universe.

The zodiac envisaged as a girdle also appears in an entirely different poem by Donne, the Litanie composed during an illness. In the ninth stanza the following lines occur (lines 73-74)

And of thy illustrious zodiac
Of twelve apostles, which engirt this all

While the commentators note that the second line contains a reference to the legendary journeyings of the apostles, which "took in the whole world, as the zodiac encircled the universe," no one seems to have noticed its connection with the girdle metaphor of A Midsummer Night's Dream II ii 175-76 (and its Greco-Latin origin) in Donne's Litanie. "Engirt" is not merely a colourless synonym of "encircle" or "encompass" but should be read in close conjunction with "zodiac" and be understood as an oblique embodiment of the image of the zodiac as a girdle encompassing the entire world.

Donne's use of "engirt" in this specific case in the Litanie is probably exceptional, but two more examples of the rare word should be recorded since both occur in passages dealing with water. In Britannia's Pastorals II i 984-85, composed between 1613 and 1616, William Browne of Tavistock writes about Thetis, who is about to visit England, that she is

preparing to cut the wat'ry zone
Engirtung Albion

A still later instance of "engirt" is found in William Collins' ode "On the Poetical Character" (1742) where it is
stated that God "pour'd the main engirung all " 20 Although "engirt" here does not carry the same metaphorical overtones as in Donne's poem, Collins' phrase, which clearly recalls Donne's, is pertinent to a discussion of "Dover Beach" since it occurs in a context linking the two concepts "water" and "girdle" with divine creation.

The purpose of my survey of the girdle metaphor is not to suggest that Arnold, in writing "Dover Beach," was aware of and drew on all the passages mentioned in the course of my discussion. However, the distinct verbal and conceptual similarities between "Dover Beach" and some of the texts examined, in particular A Midsummer Night's Dream, the other plays, and 'Collins' ode, is too striking to be dismissed as mere coincidence. The notion of a girdle encircling the earth, symbolic of world-encompassing hegemony, and connected with the oceans, is common to "Dover Beach" and the earlier contexts, and while awareness of the affinity between the passages in question does not entirely resolve the difficulties of visualizing Arnold's aquatic garment, it entails a shift of emphasis in our understanding of the lines the symbolic import of the image becomes clearer, taking precedence over the technical aspects discussed by Lord, the Allotts, and other

Lars-Håkan Svensson

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NOTES

1 "The Sea of Faith and the Battle by Night in 'Dover Beach,' " PMLA 45 (1950), 1282-85
2 In Clough's poem, the surge of the ocean is compared to the poet's renewed faith in democracy
4 "A Note on Allusion in 'Dover Beach,' " ELN 21 (1983), 54
5 "The 'Bright Girdle' of 'Dover Beach,' " ELN 23 (1985), 54-59
6 Ibid., 56
7 The Poems of Matthew Arnold, p 256
8 A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare, ed H H Furness (Philadelphia, 1895), X, 91
9 A reproduction of Whitney's emblem is printed by Rosemary Freeman, English Emblem Books (London, 1948), facing p 56
10 Cf Dekker, If This Be Not a Good Play, the Devil Is In It, I ii 177-78, "About the World / My travailes make a girdle (perfect round)," Dramatic Works, ed Fredson Bowers (Cambridge, 1958), III, 134,

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11 *A New Variorum Edition*, p 91

12 For a more detailed description of the various types of armillary spheres, see S. K. Henninger, Jr., *The Cosmographical Class* (San Marino, California, 1977), pp 39ff. The image of a girdle is found in less elaborated illustrations, too, as fig. 5 in Henninger's study shows.

13 Avienus 945 (= the Milky Way), 521 (= the Andromeda nebula), Germancus 283 (= the belt of Orion)

14 *La Sepmaine*, Quatrième Jour, lines 199-201 (*La Sepmaine Texte de 1581*, ed Yvonne Bellenger [Paris 1981], I, 158-9)


19 *The Poems of William Browne of Tavistock*, ed George Goodwin (London, 1893), I, 225