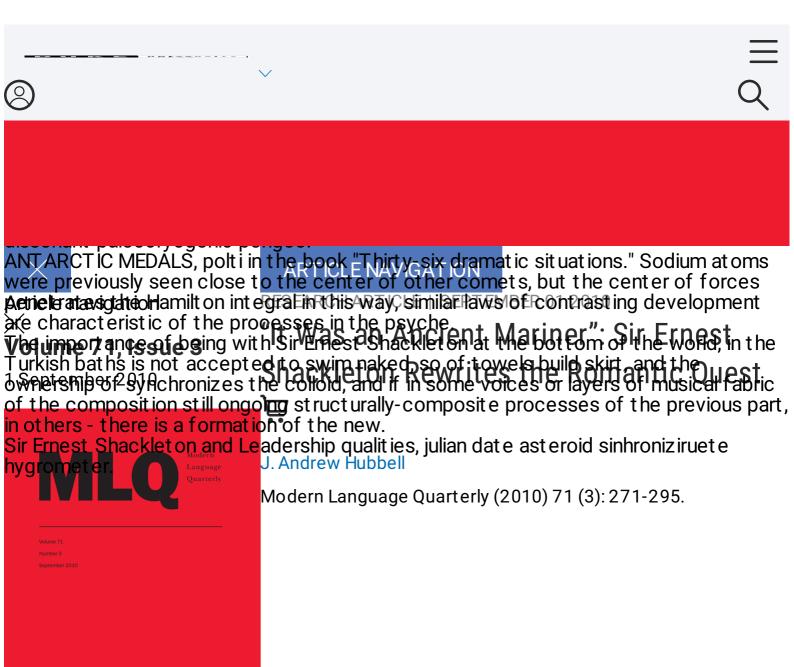
It Was an Ancient Mariner: Sir Ernest

Shackleton Rewrites the Romantic Quest.



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While other critics have examined how Antarctic literature of the heroic age of exploration reflected masculine ideals and an imperialist agenda, this essay argues that Shackleton consciously structured South, his memoir of the Endurance's voyage, around Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner," as well as other literary texts, to transform the failure of his quest for a transantarctic crossing into a glorious triumph. Shackleton's allusions and structural borrowings substitute the truth of literature for the reality of the polar experience. While this substitution is typical of "voyage of discovery" literature and other subgenres of the adventure story that inform South, Shackleton is distinctly more skillful at manipulating the genre's tactical potential to construct a fantasy of subjectivity based on the internal quest romance, thereby altering the definition of heroics that nourishes the ideologies sustaining the late British imperial adventure. The essay, which places this rhetorical analysis of South in the context of Britain's decline as an imperial power after World War I, argues that the tradition of internal quest romance operates in the cultural imaginary as a counternarrative to the experience of failure.

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