

JACK TAR REVEALED:  
SAILORS, THEIR WORLDVIEW, AND THEIR WORLD

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To Alex and Kelly for a summer that inspired my love for ships and the sea.

And most especially to grandpa. Our evenings spent poring over old history books  
and driving through the fields talking about the history of the land  
were my first, and finest, introduction to history.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures.....	vi
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1.....	11
Chapter 2.....	36
Chapter 3.....	43
Chapter 4.....	63
Conclusion .....	84
Appendix.....	87
Bibliography .....	91
Curriculum Vitae	

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: <i>Jack in His Element</i> .....	38
Figure 2: <i>Jack Oakham throwing out a Signal for Engagement</i> .....	68
Figure 3: <i>Jack Got Safe into Port with His Prize</i> .....	68
Figure 4: <i>Jemmy's Return</i> .....	73
Figure 5: <i>The Greenwich Pensioner</i> .....	80

## INTRODUCTION

*Mr. Midshipman Easy* (1836) is the story of Jack Easy, a spoiled gentleman's son, who seeks a life of adventure at sea in the Royal Navy. Written by Frederick Marryat who himself served in the navy, it is a compelling instance of art imitating life.<sup>1</sup> There was an episode in which Jack meets his first lieutenant for the first time:

Now Mr. Sawbridge was a good officer, one who had really worked his way up to the present rank, that is to say, he had served twenty-seven years, and had nothing but his pay. He was a little soured in the service, and certainly had an aversion to the young men of family who were now fast crowding into it.<sup>2</sup>

This passage reveals several things about the navy of the early nineteenth century. The reference to the young men of family “crowding” the service indicates that the navy was very much divided along class lines. This description of Mr. Sawbridge as a man who had “worked his way up” suggests that he was not from a prominent family. As a child of privilege himself, Marryat could make reference to men like Mr. Sawbridge, but could not directly relate to their position.

Men like Sawbridge, who worked their way up from below decks were a rarity, but the legions of men who served in relative anonymity as non-officers (known as the ratings because they were rated according to their ability: landmen, ordinary seaman, able seaman) represented the majority of sailors in His Majesty's service. Their story is largely overlooked or misunderstood. To understand the sailors who comprised the ranks of the Royal Navy during the late eighteenth-and early nineteenth-centuries, it is

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<sup>1</sup> Marryat was the son of an MP. In 1806 at the age of 14 he joined the Royal Navy and rose through the ranks to eventually become a Commander. In 1830 he resigned from the navy to pursue writing fiction full time.

<sup>2</sup> Frederick Marryat, *Mr. Midshipman Easy* (London, 1836). Reprinted with introduction by Tim Fulford (New York: Signet Classic, 2001), 43.

necessary to put them in the context of their world, stripping away the misconceptions of contemporaries and modern scholars to hear their voices.

The sailors of the Royal Navy serving during the Napoleonic Wars (series of three wars between England and France from 1793-1815) were living in a time of flux: militarily, socially, and culturally. War with France as well as the growth of global trade and exploration necessitated the expansion of the navy and, correspondingly, a radical restructuring of the naval machine which resulted in more rigid rules and hierarchy. Additionally, an emerging class consciousness in the navy paralleled that in urban industrialized areas. The industrialization of England's workforce led to the creation of a middle class and the further disenfranchisement of the working classes. In response, throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the working classes began to articulate their own identity and mobilize to resist gross abuses of power. Simultaneously, popular notions of gender continued to change, reflecting class differences. What had once been a gender hierarchy in which women were flawed versions of men had become, for the economically privileged, two separate but complementary genders.<sup>3</sup> Among the upper classes, this gender differentiation resulted in the concept of separate spheres in which women tended the home and men created separate lives for themselves outside the home both at work and in all-male social gatherings. The problem with this system is that it ignored working-class men and women who had limited political power. Furthermore, women from the working classes oftentimes worked outside the home.<sup>4</sup> Gender ideals were further complicated for

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<sup>3</sup> Anthony Fletcher, *Gender, Sex, and Subordination in England, 1500-1800* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Anna Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 2.



working-class sailors who were often away from home, leaving wives and sweethearts behind.

Considering that working-class men made up the bulk of the navy, it is clear that a new study of working-class sailor masculinity is in order. This thesis is an exploration of sailor self-identity with regards to masculinity and working-class consciousness. Contending that, even while at sea, sailors were very much influenced by life on shore, this thesis will explore the forces that defined the sailor. Ultimately, the sailor's identity and self-articulation was a product of the class hierarchy of the period, one that existed on shore and was furthered at sea with the incredibly rigid hierarchy of the ship. This hierarchy defined sailors in opposition to officers, thus solidifying their group identity. This group cohesion is essential to understanding Jack Tar, for it was communally that sailors negotiated and demonstrated their masculinity and working class identity.<sup>5</sup>

Chapter 1 explores the numerous sea songs composed by and performed by sailors. In the absence of memoirs and journals, songs provide insight into the sailor's worldview. These songs convey how sailors communally articulated and reinforced ideas about working-class consciousness and masculinity. Chapter 2 further explores the working-class identification of sailors in opposition to the middle- and upper-class officers. By identifying acts of subversion on board ship it is possible to see how sailors asserted the rights they recognized as guaranteed to them as "free-born Englishmen." Finally, chapter 3 explores images of sailors in popular culture. To landsmen, sailors

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<sup>5</sup> The origin of the term "Jack Tar" is contested. One theory is that it comes from the practice of waterproofing clothes with tar; this cloth was known as tarpaulin which may have been shortened to "tar." The other possibility is that it comes from one of the sailor's main chores aboard ship—tarring the hemp rope rigging to prevent it rotting.

represented both the vices and struggles of the working class.<sup>6</sup> Sailors simultaneously embraced and reinforced these stereotypes in opposition to the middle and upper classes.

### **A Brief Naval Overview**

Thanks to the militarization of Britain, the Royal Navy grew tremendously in the latter half of the eighteenth century. During the course of the Napoleonic Wars, the navy grew to 120,000 men, an increase of over 70,000 from the mid-eighteenth century.<sup>7</sup>

Sailors comprised fully 96% of the naval fighting force. This overwhelming majority was commanded by officers—men of rank and, usually, privilege.<sup>8</sup> Throughout this time there was no shortage of men wishing to be officers. Both the gentry and middle class recognized that naval life offered the promise of riches (through prize money), fame, and a chance to meet important people. Commissioned officers also received half-pay during peacetime, allowing them a security denied to the ratings (non-officers). In fact, there were more officers and would-be officers than posts available.

Simultaneously the navy faced a labor shortage when it came to the lower decks. A system of money and patronage dictated who rose through the ranks. A midshipman (a young man in training to become a lieutenant) had to supply his uniform, bedding, books and navigational equipment—thus making it a position too expensive for all but a few sailors. Officers likewise provided their own beds, cabin furniture, and food supplements. Despite these financial obstructions, the primary reason the navy had

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<sup>6</sup> I have used the term “landsmen” to refer to non-sailors who inhabited the world of the shore. This term is not to be confused by “landmen” which was a naval term for novice sailors.

<sup>7</sup> Brian Lavery, *Nelson's Navy: The Ships, Men and Organisation 1793-1815* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1989), 118; N.A.M. Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean: A Naval History of Britain, 1649-1815* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), 442.

<sup>8</sup> In 1812, the roughly 4,739 officers of His Majesty's Navy were divided as follows: 62 admirals (further divided according to a system of rank—Admirals of the Blue, White and Red, respectively, each answering to a single Admiral of the Fleet), 65 vice admirals and 91 rear admirals (likewise divided by color distinctions), 777 captains, 640 commanders, and 3,104 lieutenants. Lavery, *Nelson's Navy*, 94.

problems finding willing men was the term of service, which had no fixed limits in wartime and could last for years without break. This was exacerbated by the practice of “turning over” sailors to another ship immediately after arriving in port. Complicating this was low pay (unchanged from 1653 to 1797), back-pay which could take years to adjust, no definite shore leave, and the problem of losing rank when transferring to new ships.<sup>9</sup> For all these reasons, in his 1839 memoirs, sailor John Bechervaise explained the widespread aversion to naval service writing, “the dread of a ship of war was next to a French prison.”<sup>10</sup>

During wartime, the navy was a “consumer rather than a producer of seamen” because the training of a sailor took years—years the navy did not have.<sup>11</sup> Thus the unprecedented demand for labor led to the notorious impress system. The navy tried other means—quotas levied on each county, bounties offered for enlistment, recruiting petty criminals from prisons (debtors and those accused of public disgrace, not hardened criminals, despite the propaganda to the contrary)—but nothing supplied the necessary manpower as well as the press. Ultimately, the press provided roughly half of all naval sailors, the other half was comprised of voluntary recruits. The volunteers enlisted for a multitude of reasons: quest for adventure, the lure of prize money (dispersed on a sliding scale from captain to seamen), and often a family history of working at sea.

A ship’s company was roughly 50% English, 25% Irish, 12-14% Scots and Welsh, 5% American and 6-8% from elsewhere in the world. As for skill level among the ratings, 35% were petty officers, able seamen and idlers (those whose work prevented

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<sup>9</sup> Lavery, *Nelson’s Navy*, 117.

<sup>10</sup> J. Bechervaise, *Thirty-Six Years of a Seafaring Life, by an Old Quarter Master* (Portsea: W. Woodward, 1839), 47.

<sup>11</sup> Lavery, *Nelson’s Navy*, 118.

them from keeping watch, but experienced at sea nonetheless—carpenter and his mates, sailmaker, master at arms, etc.). The remaining 65% were ordinary seamen, landmen or boys. The age range was from 10 to 60 with the majority in their mid-twenties.<sup>12</sup>

Naval expansion during the Napoleonic Wars necessitated greater regulation and organization. At home this meant the growth of the Admiralty and Victualling Boards. At sea it meant a tightening of discipline and greater codification of the chain of command and career advancement. Sailors no longer followed a favored captain from ship to ship but were instead moved about according to the needs of the navy. Sailors were separated into divisions with an overseeing officer who was responsible for monitoring cleanliness and order within that group.

Life at sea was regulated according to a system of watches (a division of the day into five, four-hour watches and two dog watches of two hours each). The watches regulated sleep, meals and recreation so that every day was identical and highly ordered—the only variations provided by bad weather and battle.<sup>13</sup> Sunday was the one exception with the men mustered for inspection, followed by church and then recreation time.

The ship was divided according to rank (see Appendix for explanation of officers, duties, and hierarchy), with the captain's cabin situated in the stern and senior officers' cabins (lieutenants, sailing master, surgeon, purser, chaplain, and marine officer) off the wardroom near the captain. Except when invited to the captain's table, the wardroom ate together as an exclusive, privileged group. They supplemented their basic sea rations with private stores. In contrast, the ratings slept communally in hammocks strewn across

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<sup>12</sup> Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean*, 498.

<sup>13</sup> In port, this system was relaxed with much more time for sleep and recreation.

the lower deck. They ate what was provided to them at times allotted to them by the captain according to the needs of the ship. The quarterdeck was the domain of captains, lieutenants and midshipmen. All others had to request permission to approach it. Even sanitation varied according to rank with indoor toilet accommodations for commissioned officers in galleries near their cabins. The crew had to use the heads—holes in the ship located outside and just behind the figurehead.

To summarize, for officers, life at sea provided the opportunity for advancement and even wealth. For sailors, life in the navy consisted of a highly regimented life controlled by officers who represented the upper strata of society. But for officers as well as sailors, life at sea was a communal enterprise which is central to understanding the worldview of Jack Tar.

### **Historiographical Context: Toward a More Complex Understanding of Jack Tar**

Until the advent of social history, maritime historians were primarily concerned with ships, battles, and admirals. Any analysis of the common sailor was superficial and highly romanticized. Since the 1960s the combined influences of social, labor, cultural, and gender history have complicated this simplistic interpretation of Jack Tar. The traditional understanding of the wooden world as a world apart has been almost universally discredited. This revelation is essential for any analysis of maritime identity which was inextricably rooted in shore culture.

Beginning in 1960, three historians began exploring the men rather than the ships: Michael Lewis, Peter Kemp and Christopher Lloyd.<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, however, their works

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<sup>14</sup> Michael Lewis, *A Social History of the Navy, 1793-1815* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1960); Peter Kemp, *The British Sailor: A Social History of the Lower Deck* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1970); Christopher Lloyd, *The British Seaman, 1200-1860: A Social Survey* (Cranbury, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1970).

relied on records left by the mostly elite class of officers to tell the story of the common sailor, thus largely eliminating Jack Tar's voice from his own story. In *The Wooden World* (1986), a history of the navy during the Seven Years War, N.A.M. Rodger utilized many of the same documents as Lewis, Kemp, and Lloyd, but analyzed them in a way that revealed a clearer picture of the common sailor.<sup>15</sup> Using ships' logs and Admiralty records, he compiled statistics on age at enlistment, desertion rates, punishment, years of service, marital status, and casualty rates that complicated long-held assumptions about life at sea. Throughout *The Wooden World*, Rodger asserted that the ship was a microcosm of society, thereby arguing that the wooden world was an extension of the world ashore.

Conversely, in *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchants, Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750* (1987), a Marxist interpretation of the merchant service, Marcus Rediker emphasized the collectivity of maritime labor and identity concluding that ships were a "world apart."<sup>16</sup> In contrast to Rediker, in *Mr. Bligh's Bad Language* (1992), a reinterpretation of the *Bounty* mutiny, Greg Dening skillfully articulated the performative power and authority that kept the wooden world afloat.<sup>17</sup> Demonstrating that shipboard hierarchy mirrored class divisions on shore—with officers drawn from the merchant and gentry classes and the ranks of the common sailor drawn from the working class—he sided with Rodger, arguing that the maritime world was inseparable from the world ashore. If performances of power at sea

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<sup>15</sup> N.A.M. Rodger, *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1986).

<sup>16</sup> Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchants, Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

<sup>17</sup> Greg Dening, *Mr. Bligh's Bad Language: Passion, Power and Theatre on the Bounty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

were influenced by similar performances on land, then by extension, notions of masculinity at sea did not occur in a vacuum but were rather influenced directly by masculine identity on shore.

In a series of recent works, Isaac Land further undermined the “world apart” thesis by asserting that deep sea voyages have been artificially normalized.<sup>18</sup> The two- to four-year voyages of nineteenth-century American whalers were never the norm in eighteenth-century Britain where voyages were a year at most. Furthermore, the thriving European trade network relied on thousands of short-haul sailors who made numerous small trips in the course of a year. These men tended to be older, with wives and families. Even the mostly unmarried twenty-somethings who comprised the ranks of the navy spent only 43% of their time at sea.<sup>19</sup> Clearly then, sailors spent most of their lives in port where they were influenced by shore culture. Land therefore concluded, “maritime culture is best imagined, not as a blue-water phenomenon, but as a coastal one....For every push toward the ship, there is a pull from the shore.”<sup>20</sup>

This proximity to shore is particularly relevant in reassessing the supposedly all-male world of the ship. Margaret Creighton’s and Lisa Norling’s *Iron Men, Wooden Women* (1996) revealed the extensive contributions of women to the maritime world ranging from managing the home to participating in the international market economy. The radical implication is that the wooden world can no longer be understood as a strictly male sphere. Women permeated the space of the voyage, through their physical presence

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<sup>18</sup> Isaac Land, “Domesticating the Maritime: Culture, Masculinity, and Empire in Britain, 1770-1820” (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1999); “Customs of the Sea: Flogging, Empire, and the ‘True British Seaman’ 1770-1870,” *Interventions: The International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 3:2 (2001), 169-185; “The Many-Tongued Hydra: Sea Talk, Maritime Culture, and Atlantic Identities, 1700-1850,” *Journal of American and Comparative Cultures* 25:3-4 (2002), 412-417; *War, Nationalism, and the British Sailor, 1750-1850*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

<sup>19</sup> Rodger, *The Wooden World*, 37.

<sup>20</sup> Land, “The Many-Tongued Hydra,” 416.

in letters and trinkets from home and through their symbolic objectification in the feminizing of the ship and the ocean itself.<sup>21</sup>

Despite all these recent forays into the life of the common sailor, Jack Tar remains an elusive figure. Most documentary evidence was written by officers who were separated from the ratings by class and power. Maritime historians have had to look to nontraditional sources to uncover the common sailor's own worldview.<sup>22</sup> These sources reveal a collective identity shaped by the shore—sailors defined themselves in relation to women and working-class men at home, and the officer class at sea. This thesis will fill an important gap by exploring identity in the British Navy during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Analyzing sailors at ship and on shore; in their interactions with fellow sailors, officers, and landsmen; and through such various primary sources as diaries, cartoons, memoirs, and sea songs it will further the work of Isaac Land by continuing to debunk the notion of a world apart.

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<sup>21</sup> Margaret S. Creighton and Lisa Norling, eds. *Iron Men, Wooden Women: Gender and Seafaring in the Atlantic World, 1700-1920* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Margaret S. Creighton, "Fraternity in the American Forecastle, 1830-1870," *The New England Quarterly* 63:4 (1990), 531-557.

<sup>22</sup> For example, Simon P. Newman, "Reading the Bodies of Early American Seafarers," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 55:1 (1998), 59-82. Newman analyzes sailor tattoos, noticing patterns and similarities which reveal how seamen visually expressed their values, nationality, and worldview.



## CHAPTER 1

### “Come all ye bold seamen”: Sailor Identity Revealed Through Song

#### **Introduction: Music at Sea and Maritime Identity**

Born to a family of tenant farmers in the village of Kirkintilloch, Scotland, thirteen-year-old Robert Hay was restless and desperate for adventure. After months spent reading nothing but *Robinson Crusoe*, he packed his bags and crept away from his home, his friends, and a life of peace and security for a life of danger and uncertainty at sea. The year was 1803 and war was raging between Britain and France. Unable to find a position on a merchant ship he resigned himself to the navy. In the months and years to follow he experienced enough loneliness and fear to often “repent of having gone to sea.”<sup>23</sup> But his memoirs reveal something else too, a world of camaraderie and solidarity that made the frequent miseries of shipboard life not only bearable, but even enjoyable.

At the age of twenty, he found himself homeward bound after years away. In his memoirs he vividly recalled this homecoming:

It would be difficult to describe the sensations which pervaded our minds when soundings were first announced. The sound operated like a charm. All the endearing recollections of wives, children, parents, brothers, sisters and friends rushed with intense pleasure over the mind. Even those who had no relatives to excite such pleasure cast their thoughts back to the days of youth and rejoiced over the endearing scenes of their nativity....All our favourite national songs were chanted that day with great good humour. The one in which these two lines occur: ‘Bear a hand be steady boys soon we’ll see Old England once again’ was chorused and encored till the decks were made to ring.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Robert Hay, *Landsman Hay: The Memoirs of Robert Hay, 1789-1847*, ed. M.D. Hay (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1953), 39.

<sup>24</sup> Hay et al., 172. The song is “Then Sling the Flowing Bowl.” According to M.D. Hay, the complete lyrics can be found in George Cruikshank’s *The Universal Songster; or, Museum of mirth: forming the most complete, extensive, and valuable collection of ancient and modern songs in the English language: with a copious and classified index* (London: Routledge, 1832).

At first glance, this song shows little more than excitement over a long anticipated homecoming. There is, however, a deeper historical significance and range of meanings to this ballad and others like it. Hay revealed that these various celebrations, particularly in song, were communal, thereby situating maritime music in the group experience and identity borne of a life at sea. The returning sailors were singing “national songs,” a reflection of an emerging national identity brought about, in large part, through British maritime victories against France. This was more than national pride, however, for them to “see Old England once again” meant seeing the people they left behind. As they neared shore, these seamen were preoccupied with thoughts of loved ones and friends, evincing a close sentimental connection to the shore that sustained and, more importantly, defined them at sea.

The maritime world was filled with music which served both practical and recreational functions. In the days before steam power, ships were powered by human muscle. To perform the work of hoisting and adjusting the sails, raising the anchor, and pumping out bilge water, sailors had to synchronize their efforts. Work songs, known as sea shanties, coordinated movement, distracted men from the pain and tedium of shipboard labor, and fostered camaraderie.<sup>25</sup> Shanties were a rarity aboard naval ships where sailors received direction from the bosun’s (sailor slang for boatswain) call which

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<sup>25</sup> Although the word “shanty” was not used until the nineteenth century, maritime work songs likely date as early as the fifteenth century. These early shanties were probably inarticulate noises designed to sustain a rhythm rather than relay a story. The more modern incarnation, consisting of call-and-response verses led by a shantyman, was influenced by African and African American work songs British sailors witnessed in the Caribbean; Roger D. Abrahams, *Deep the Water, Shallow the Shore: Three Essays on Shantying in the West Indies* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1974), 9, 16. Shanties (sing. shanty) can also be spelled chanteys (sing. chantey). Most historians and ethnomusicologists prefer the “sh” spelling so that is what I have selected here. For more information on the contested origins of shanties, the role of the shantyman who led the songs, and the application of shanties in maritime labor, see Stan Hugill, ed., *Shanties from the Seven Seas: Shipboard work-songs and songs used as work-songs from the great days of sail* (Mystic, CT: Mystic Seaport, 1994. First published in London by Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961).

could direct the maneuvering of multiple sails at once in battle without the confusion of competing songs. Nevertheless, during the course of their careers at sea, most sailors had experiences in both merchant and naval ships and so all sailors were well acquainted with shanties. Furthermore, during the tedious work of weighing anchor, there is evidence that officers on men-of-war permitted the use of slow-tempo capstan shanties.<sup>26</sup>

Despite the relative rarity of shanties aboard men-of-war, recreational songs were commonplace. These songs were alternately called “fo’c’sle songs” or “forebitters” because men sang them in the forecastle (known as the fo’c’sle in sailor jargon) during free time, with the men clustering around the forebitts, the heavy wooden cross-bars that held the ship together. Since shanties coordinated movement, words were secondary to rhythm, resulting in nonsense lyrics and made-up words. Fo’c’sle songs by comparison were much more lyrically complex and rhythmically embodied the elements of life at sea. Although keys often fluctuated wildly, which to a professional ear seems the result of untrained musicians, these fluctuations likely reflected the rise and fall of the ship on the waves.<sup>27</sup> Sailors captured the hypnotic cadence of the daily schedule on ship through the repetitive nature of many songs.

Sea songs must not, however, be understood as strictly products of the shipboard world. In England, during the Napoleonic Wars, sailors became objects of popular fascination and adoration in a way they had not been before. They featured prominently in comic operas and literature, and many fo’c’sle songs became well known on land.

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<sup>26</sup> Capstan shanties facilitated the laborious task of pushing forward against the capstan to weigh anchor. These songs had slow tempos and many verses. Pulling or hauling shanties were used for working with the sails and rigging and had more regular rhythms to sustain the periodic bursts of energy punctuated by rest that ordered these jobs. Eric David Mackerness, *A Social History of English Music* (London: Routledge, 1966), 142.

<sup>27</sup> William Saunders, “Sailor Songs and Songs of the Sea,” *The Musical Quarterly* 14:3 (1928), 236.

There was such a high demand for sailor songs that many musicians who had never been to sea composed “authentic” sailor songs on the popular themes of lovers torn asunder by war, the slapstick awkwardness of sailors ashore, and accounts of naval victories and brave British tars. Charles Dibdin was the most popular composer of sailor songs. His popularity extended to sea and many of his songs were performed on ships.<sup>28</sup> It was also quite common for sailors to take well known folk tunes from shore and change the lyrics to reflect life at sea.

This rich maritime music tradition has long received only superficial notice from many historians, such as Rediker and Land, who used sailor songs as supporting evidence for daily life at sea, but rarely analyze them for deeper meaning.<sup>29</sup> These songs, in fact, cover the range of sailors’ lived experiences. The depth of meanings embedded in these seemingly simple songs provide insight into the ideologies, thoughts, hopes, and fears of the common sailor. Unlike Robert Hay, the majority of early nineteenth-century sailors in the Royal Navy, particularly those comprising the ranks of the ratings (non-officers), left no written records.<sup>30</sup> In the absence of their own words therefore, sea songs can reveal the voice of Jack Tar.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> His music was so popular among sailors that after the commencement of the Napoleonic Wars Prime Minister William Pitt approached him to write patriotic music that would both unite the nation and encourage naval enlistment.

<sup>29</sup> One notable exception is Pauline Greenhill’s article, “‘Neither a Man nor a Maid,’ Sexualities and Gendered Meanings in Cross-Dressing Ballads” in which she argues that, heretofore, all readings of these ballads have emphasized heterosexual relationships. By applying the lens of queer theory, she explores an alternate reading wherein these songs explore a range of sexual identities and relationships. *The Journal of American Folklore* 108:428 (1995), 156-177.

<sup>30</sup> Regardless of rank, all officers—commissioned and warrant—had to be able to read. This fact helps account for why more officers than ratings published memoirs.

<sup>31</sup> For the purposes of this thesis, I have attempted, wherever possible, to rely on songs dated to the Napoleonic Wars. In some cases, however, the date of publication pre-dates or post-dates my primary period of concern. As part of an oral tradition transmitted from sailor to sailor, many songs remained in use for decades, and even centuries, beyond their original composition. Furthermore, a date of publication is not always a reliable means of dating a song that may have first appeared some time before. Nevertheless, the themes of these sea songs—longing, bravery, and resistance—remain unchanged through the years and

There were a limited number of recurring themes in sea songs, exposing the imagined world that the sailors created: war songs of prior victories projected hopes of future glory; songs of shipwrecks and storms reflected fear of an unknown future; songs of life at home and sweethearts left behind revealed a poignant vision of homecoming. Whether dealing with love or war, lust, fear, bravery or longing, all songs spoke to notions of identity. Through these songs, sailors expressed what it was to be a man at sea. They negotiated a two-part definition of maritime manliness, defending working-class patriarchal authority in an age when notions of gender were transforming and asserting working-class solidarity against the land-based hierarchy of the naval machine. Maritime identity was above all rooted in group cohesion and an inseparable connection to the world ashore.

#### **“Nothing for it but toil and vexation”: Manliness through Solidarity and Resistance**

Life, labor, and survival at sea were collective enterprises. For weeks and often months on end, sailors spent every moment of the day in the presence of shipmates. They slept in one massive room, ate meals together, and relaxed communally. Even private property was stored in shared trunks. Camaraderie was essential to shipboard harmony, but it extended to shore as well. Sailors on leave traveled together, partly for protection from the press gang, partly for company. Sailors also tended to live in maritime neighborhoods with others who earned their wages from the sea. Sailor solidarity at sea was very much a form of emotional survival in the face of isolation and dehumanization within the naval machine. Its continuation on shore is evidence that sailor solidarity was part of a larger working-class consciousness defined in opposition to the ruling classes.

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for that reason, I feel it is appropriate to utilize songs that were published outside the era of the Napoleonic Wars.

A ship at sea was composed of commissioned officers, warrant officers, petty officers and the ratings.<sup>32</sup> Although theoretically possible for any common sailor to rise through the ranks to become a commissioned officer, at the time of the Napoleonic Wars only about 3% of commissioned officers had ever been rated seamen. The vast majority of ratings came from the working classes. Commissioned officers generally came from the middle and upper classes and, thanks to a system of patronage, joined the navy as officers' servants or midshipmen—the fast track to becoming lieutenants.<sup>33</sup> The ship was therefore a microcosm of the class hierarchy on shore with the upper classes dominating the positions of power and authority.<sup>34</sup>

“The Distressed Men of War” was a song that dates to the Peace of Amiens (1802-1803) and clearly reveals the different worldviews of ratings and officers.<sup>35</sup> It began with the sailor's point of view: “Says Jack: ‘There is very good news; there is peace both by land and sea.’” For the sailor this meant time at home, and, for those pressed into service, it often meant a return to better paying work aboard merchant ships.<sup>36</sup> In marked contrast to Jack's reaction is that of the officers who greeted this good news with disappointment. The captain and lieutenant lamented the peace because they so loved their lives at sea. When the captain was told of the peace he cried, “My heart it will break.” The lieutenant responded, “What shall I do, for I know not what course for

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<sup>32</sup> For more information on the duties and hierarchy of all the different officer classes, see Appendix.

<sup>33</sup> Lavery, *Nelson's Navy*, 93.

<sup>34</sup> For a more complete exploration of how social hierarchy is connected to historical memorialization and memory see Scott Ashley, “How Navigators Think: The Death of Captain Cook Revisited” *Past and Present* 194 (2007), 107-137. See also Greg Denning, *The Death of William Gooch: A History's Anthropology* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1995).

<sup>35</sup> A temporary peace between Britain and France that lasted from 27 March 1802 to 17 May 1803.

<sup>36</sup> The practice of impressment has long been misrepresented. The incidence of impressing non-sailors is exaggerated and in fact, the law permitted impressment of professional sailors only. What was commonplace, however, was the practice of taking men from merchant ships and pressing them into naval service. This resulted in a pay cut. More troubling, press gangs often grabbed men as their ships sailed into port thus sending them back to sea before they had any time to visit family at home. Lavery, “Naval Recruitment,” in *Nelson's Navy*, 117-123.

to take?” These lines indicate the different lives enjoyed by officers who had greater choice in their professions and, even during wartime, were granted more regular leave at home—leave denied the ratings. They also hint at another reason for their distress. Although both captain and lieutenant were entitled to half-pay when relegated to shore during peacetime, a lull in the fighting denied the lieutenant the opportunity for advancement to captain.

Several of the warrant officers, chief among them the purser and steward, were distraught over their loss of income now that they could no longer cheat sailors. The purser moaned, “My coat is lined with gold and my chest is full of the same, by cheating of sailors so bold.”<sup>37</sup> The ratings often suspected the purser of cheating the crew of provisions to make a profit. They, therefore, made him a common object of scorn in sea songs. These accusations were rooted in a system which required the purser pay for provisions with his own money in advance of the voyage, receiving reimbursement at the end. If savvy, the purser could purchase wisely and make a profit, though unscrupulous men took advantage of the system and overcharged the navy for low-quality provisions or for more supplies than they actually purchased. Sailors devoted entire songs to the figure of the evil purser such as “The Saylor’s Complaint; or, the True Character of the Purser of a Ship” (1710) which began:

Of all the curst plagues that e’er Fate did decree  
To Vex, plague, and punish poor sailors at sea,  
There’s none to compare with the purser, that evil  
Who’s worse than a jailer, a bum or a devil....  
The nation allows men what’s fitting to eat,

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<sup>37</sup> “Distressed Men of War” (1802), Roy Palmer, ed., *The Oxford Book of Sea Songs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 172-3.

But he, curse attend him, gives to us musty meat.<sup>38</sup>

In this song, sailors were outraged when their basic rights as men—food that’s “fitting to eat”—were refused them. By cheating the sailors of their rightful provisions, the purser denied these fundamental rights.

Certainly there were dishonest pursers, but it is worth noting the frequency with which they were singled out in song.<sup>39</sup> As, for example, the final verse of “The Sailor’s Lamentation” (1728):

As for our oatmeal and our peas we ne’er got none of that,  
The purser put it in his pocket to make him fat;  
But if e’er we live to come home, boys, we’ll tell him on shore,  
Though he know ‘twas our due, ‘twould help to increase his store.<sup>40</sup>

The purser was one of the few warrant officers who often had not risen to that position from below decks. Although the same was true of most captains and lieutenants, it was not problematic because the near requisite social background of these offices automatically disqualified most common sailors. Except in rare circumstances, no sailor would reach the rank of lieutenant, let alone captain, but he could achieve the status of a warrant officer. The other warrant officers most often shared a common heritage with the ratings whereas the purser stood outside this common brotherhood of seamen.

Although a few other senior warrant officers—the chaplain, surgeon, and sailing master—were also of higher birth than the sailors, they did not have the same tenuous relationship with them. Due to the nature of the purser’s bizarre arrangement with the navy, he was automatically a figure of suspicion. The anonymous author of the

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<sup>38</sup> “The Saylor’s Complaint; or, the True Character of the Purser of a Ship” (1710), C.H. Firth, ed., *Naval Songs and Ballads* (London: Navy Records Society, 1908), 233.

<sup>39</sup> As explored later on, the boatswain’s cruelty was often referenced, but always in the context of a larger song. He was never the main subject of an entire song the way the purser was.

<sup>40</sup> “The Sailor’s Lamentation” (1728), Palmer, *The Oxford Book of Sea Songs*, 89.



“Distressed Men of War” did not accuse the captain and lieutenant of evil action, but merely portrayed them as tragic figures. The same was not true of the purser, whom the songwriter(s) vilified. Quite simply, the purser was a threat to the working-class men afloat, ratings, petty officers, and lower warrant officers. While the commissioned officers provided their own stores, the rest of the ship was at the mercy of the purser. The fact that he could jeopardize the health (and sometimes wealth) of the common sailor was enough to mark him as “othered.”

According to Greg Dening, the ship was a stage whereon power was acted out through performances of command, obedience, and resistance.<sup>41</sup> Nowhere was power more evident than in threats of violence employed by officers to keep the ratings in line. “The Jolly Sailor’s True Description of a Man-of-War” (c.1762-1795) is one of the best accounts of class conflict at sea. Its lengthy description of those “first on board of a man-of-war...whether by press or enter” several times mentioned the violence officers (particularly the boatswain) inflicted and the attendant grumbling by seamen. In one verse the dinner hour ended much too soon for the sailors. The boatswain and his mates forcibly removed them from the galley. The men sang, “To leave our victuals we abhor it/ With cuffs and knocks leave kettles and pots/ And the Devil cuff them for it.” In the next stanza, the song described working at the capstan where “one and all to the cat do fall.”<sup>42</sup> Songs commonly referenced abuses by officers because they were a relatively

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<sup>41</sup> Dening, *Mr. Bligh’s Bad Language*, 19.

<sup>42</sup> “The Jolly Sailor’s True Description of a Man-of-War” (c.1762-1795?), Firth, *Naval Songs and Ballads*, 237. This song is exemplary of the difficulty of using songs for historical research. Many of the songs quoted in this work have been published numerous times in different song compilations dating from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century through the present. Since they are part of an oral tradition there exist many slight variations between different versions. It is therefore problematic to label any single version as the definitive one for, in fact, none exists. Slight differences of wording are, however, small in comparison to the sentiments behind the lyrics which remain the same—regardless of word choice—and which, in fact, constitute the true significance of the song for the historian.

safe way to collectively express dissatisfaction with the ship's authority figures. For a sailor to "cuff" an officer was an act of mutiny punishable by death under the Articles of War (1749). In song, however, sailors could wreak vengeance against cruel officers with reciprocal acts of violence—though always safely mediated by an intervening third party who metes out the punishment, commonly, as in this case, the Devil.

In some cases, there was no such metaphorical retribution, but sailors instead enacted revenge in a more personal manner by naming the guilty party as in the song "La Pique" (c.1838), in which the singers recounted abuses suffered under the ship's boatswain:

Now Mr. McKeever we know him too well,  
He comes up on deck and he cuts a great swell;  
It's: 'Up on them yards boys, or God damn your eyes,  
I've a pump-handle here to trim down your size!'<sup>43</sup>

It was quite common for sailors to personalize songs, naming the ships where composed, thus evincing a pride in the vessel as well as that particular ship's company. Well-loved captains were similarly memorialized. Conversely, to publicly denounce a bad officer in song was as close as most sailors could get to lodging a formal complaint against him.<sup>44</sup>

These songs lowered the guilty officer to the level of a brute by emphasizing his animal

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<sup>43</sup> "La Pique" (c.1838), Peggy Seeger and Ewan MacColl, eds., *The Singing Island: A Collection of English and Scots Folksongs* (London: Mills Music, 1960), 68.

<sup>44</sup> In some rare cases, entire ships' companies addressed petitions to the Board of Admiralty protesting poor provisions or seemingly redundant and unnecessary work. For example, the Admiralty received several petitions from sailors who complained their commanders were asking them to wash the decks too frequently. One such letter from 1795 from the crew of HMS *Blanche* reads: "beg[ging] for the favour of another commander or another ship" because their captain "employed [them] from morning to two or three of clock in the afternoon washing and scrubbing the decks." When the Admiralty felt a petition was just, it was known to intercede. In this instance, no immediate action was taken, though in 1801 Admiral Keith issued new orders superseding those of his predecessor St. Vincent, ordering the lower deck only be washed once a fortnight. In the absence of fuller documentation, it is merely conjectural to suppose that his decision was influenced by numerous such petitions that echoed the sentiments of the *Blanche*'s crew. Brian Lavery, ed., *Shipboard Life and Organisation 1731-1815* (London: Ashgate Publishing, 1998), 419, 423.

cruelty. Conversely, the victimized sailor retaliated not with blows but words, an intellectual rebuttal that reestablished his own humanity and moral superiority.

In his exploration of *Crime and Punishment in the Royal Navy* (1989), John Byrn argued that the navy has been unfairly judged as a particularly violent institution. In fact the discipline and physical violence at sea were no different than similar punishments on land.<sup>45</sup> It was not until the mid-nineteenth century that brutality at sea became truly remarkable for its foreignness. Although violence may not have been unique to the sea, it is incorrect to assume that sailors willingly accepted public humiliation. For proof, one need only look at the numerous sea songs that complain about officers who beat their men for the slightest offense. The song “Jack Tar” most likely dates from early in the American Revolution (c.1776) and told of a “brave honest Jack Tar” who was begged by a former captain to return to sea.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, even the promises of “Spanish prize” and the captain’s oath that “No man that sails with me shall e’er be abused” are enough. To all this Jack responded:

‘Dear captain,’ he said then, ‘if the truth I do tell you,  
I got so much the last war that it quite filled my belly,  
For your damned rogues of officers they use men so cruel  
That a man-of-war is worse than hell or the devil.’<sup>47</sup>

Here again the captain, the gentleman sailor, addressed as “Dear captain,” was largely above reproach. The speaker saved his recriminations for the other officers. The captain’s crime is negligence rather than brutality; he has allowed his officers to abuse their power but has inflicted no wounds himself. A sailor was far more likely to die from

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<sup>45</sup> John D. Byrn, *Crime and Punishment in the Royal Navy: Discipline on the Leeward Islands Station 1784-1812* (Aldershot, England: Scolar Press, 1989).

<sup>46</sup> For more on the role of how frustrated sailors in America agitating against the king helped unite public opinion against the Crown, see Jesse Lemisch, “Jack Tar in the Streets: Merchant Seamen in the Politics of Revolutionary America,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 25:3 (1968), 371-407.

<sup>47</sup> “Jack Tar” (c.1776), Palmer, *The Oxford Book of Sea Songs*, 134.

disease or enemy fire than the blows of an officer so it is significant that it was the officers and not these other threats that made a man-of-war “worse than hell.” This song reveals that the pain of the ship was an emotional, rather than a physical one. For sailors to sit idly by as officers “use men so cruel” or in the words of “A The Jolly Sailor’s True Description of a Man-of-War,” “one and all to the cat do fall,” was dehumanizing. The ratings far outnumbered the officers and yet they were virtually powerless to stop the public humiliation of physical violence. The Articles of War severely limited the sailor’s ability to fight back against an officer. Sailors nevertheless reasserted their humanity through the resistance afforded to them by song.

Songs were also a means of asserting another integral aspect of sailor identity. Affirming manhood was very much a preoccupation among sailors and one that found its expression in chronicles, tattoos, and especially music.<sup>48</sup> In his memoirs of his time at sea from 1808-1813, veteran seaman Samuel Leech wrote:

The difficulty with naval officers is that they do not treat with a sailor as with a man. They know what is fitting between each other as officers; but they treat their crews on another principle; they are apt to look at them as pieces of living mechanism, born to serve, to obey their order, and administer to their wishes without complaint. This is alike a bad morality and a bad philosophy. There is often more real manhood in the forecandle than in the ward room.<sup>49</sup>

The officers denied the ratings recognition as fellow men, but this voice from below decks professed the common sailor was more of a man than most officers. The obsession with manly honor is echoed in the song, “How Pleasant a Sailor’s Life Passes” (date

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<sup>48</sup> For more on tattoos and their symbolism see Simon P. Newman, “Reading the Bodies of Early American Seafarers.”

<sup>49</sup> Samuel Leech, *Thirty years from home; or, A voice from the main deck* (Boston: Tappan & Dennet, 1843); Quoted in Henry Baynham, ed., *From the Lower Deck; the Old Navy, 1780-1840* (London: Hutchinson, 1969), 92-3.

unknown): “We’re strangers to party and faction/ To honour and honesty true/ And wou’d not commit a base action/ For power or profit in view.”<sup>50</sup> Though clearly an idealized portrait, it does reveal the virtues that sailors held to be the hallmarks of true manhood. The claims that party and faction were unheard of are largely fictitious, but demonstrate that ideologically, sailors recognized one common brotherhood of seamen who stood united below decks.

This declaration of manly bravery, honor, and steadfastness of the ratings stands in contrast to the inhuman cruelty and dishonesty of officers, and even the government, a theme explored in the song “Jack Tar.” To return to this song once more, the sailor narrator had additional grievances beyond the abuses of the officers. Addressing his fellow sailors now rather than the captain, in the last verse he turned his attention to the ingratitude of the nation:

Now boys, we are pressed away from our own habitation,  
And we leave wives and children in grief and vexation.  
We venture our sweet lives in defence [*sic*] of our nation,  
And we get nothing for it but toil and vexation.<sup>51</sup>

During the Napoleonic Wars, the issue of impressment was on the minds of landmen and seamen alike. E.P. Thompson has analyzed the notion of the “free-born Englishman” which had first been articulated in the mid-eighteenth century but became an evermore popular concept among the working classes of the early nineteenth century thanks to the influence of revolutionary rhetoric from America and France.<sup>52</sup> The idea suggested that Britons possessed certain inviolable rights guaranteed by the state such as the right of the individual to be free. The concept of the press gang was therefore a gross intrusion of the

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<sup>50</sup> “How Pleasant a Sailor’s Life Passes” (date unknown), Firth, *Naval Songs and Ballads*, 164.

<sup>51</sup> “Jack Tar” (1776?), Palmer, *The Oxford Book of Sea Songs*, 135.

<sup>52</sup> E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Penguin, 1991), 88

state in personal affairs. This song explicitly referenced this infringement of the government into private life when it stated that sailors were impressed “from *our own* habitation.” By impressing a male head of house, the state undermined his patriarchal authority and thus usurped his male identity. Equally distressing, after years of faithful service, the sailor returned home without compensation. Many of these grievances stemmed from the issue of pay rates which had not been raised since 1653 and, owing to inflation, had lately become even more inadequate. It would be another twenty years after this song was published before the Admiralty raised pay, and only then in response to the Great Mutiny of 1797.

There was a long history of collective resistance at sea. In the most extreme case, in 1797, 20,000 sailors mutinied over the course of two months at Spithead and then the Nore in response to pay, bad provisions, and shore leave.<sup>53</sup> The mutineers composed numerous ballads including the following song sung aboard the *Repulse*, one of the ships that mutinied at the Nore. Calling into question the notion of universal freedom promised to male Englishmen, the most mournful verse was as follows:

If liberty be ours, oh say  
Why are not all protected?  
Why is the hand of ruffian sway  
'Gainst seamen thus directed?  
Is this your proof of British rights?  
Is this rewarding bravery?  
Oh shame to boast your tars' exploits,  
Then doom those tars to slavery.<sup>54</sup>

“Liberty” as we understand it would have been a foreign concept to Britons of the period. What sailors objected to was the absence of freedom of movement—the constant threat

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<sup>53</sup> Located in southern England, along the North Sea. Spithead is an anchorage not far from Portsmouth. The Nore is an anchorage at the mouth of the Thames estuary.

<sup>54</sup> Untitled song (1797), Roy Palmer, *The Oxford Book of Sea Songs*, 164.

of impressment and denial of shore leave between periods of service. At sea, grievances were also expressed in relation to poor or inadequate provisions and especially, unprovoked or unwarranted punishment at the hands of officers. When sailors felt basic rights were being denied, they did not hesitate to protest—through letters to the Admiralty requesting intervention against unduly harsh officers and even mutiny. Mutiny was the fullest demonstration of collective subversion. In this song there is ready evidence that the ideals of the free-born Englishman permeated the navy, for these mutineers question why the “liberty” granted to “all” is denied them. They asked for nothing more than to be included in the ranks of the free-born Englishman. These sailors had an additional claim on that liberty, for not only were they British subjects, but had fought to preserve liberty for those at home. By equating themselves to slaves, they chose a strong metaphor. A slave was not a person, but mere property. For sailors to be enslaved by the nation implied that the nation had stripped them of their manhood. In this light, the Great Mutiny can be interpreted as a battle to restore humanity to the sailors.

The mutineers at Spithead did eventually receive their requests, as recorded in the song entitled “British Tars Rewarded”:

The tars of Old England have long toil'd in vain,  
From the time of King Charles down to the present reign;  
But their royal master their wages doth raise,  
So join, British sailors, in King George's praise.

The fleet of Lord Bridport, the terror of France,  
Petition'd the throne that their pay might advance.  
Their petitions were granted, each grievance redress'd  
In the heart of each seaman great George he is bless'd<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> “British Tars Rewarded” (1797?), Firth, *Naval Songs and Battles*, 280.

The song began by linking the mutinous sailors to all those sailors who have gone before them, implying a unity in the sailing brotherhood that transcended time. This song reflected the victory of the Spithead mutiny with the phrase “their petitions were granted.”<sup>56</sup> Despite their gratitude to the king, this song also evinced a pride in their accomplishment. In reality, the sailors dealt strictly with the Admiralty, but in this song, these sailors from mostly humble origins asserted they “petition’d the throne.” Neither mutiny can be understood as truly radical or revolutionary since the mutineers acted out of a desire to improve daily life and make the Admiralty live up to its promises, rather than overturn the navy. Nevertheless, the step of petitioning the Admiralty took courage and to later sing of appealing to the king himself further expands this demonstration of assertiveness. In this way, episodes of resistance from petitions to mutiny are elevated into demonstrations of manliness according to early modern notions of manhood—through public displays of bravery and therefore, honor. Therefore, sailors simultaneously asserted identity as free-born Englishmen and as men.

Outside of occasional mutiny, there were more regular episodes of resistance at sea, often facilitated through sea shanties. Shanties helped establish a rhythm that could work to the detriment of the commanders, for the tempo could be artificially slowed thereby reducing the work pace.<sup>57</sup> It was almost impossible to accuse the sailors of working too slowly and, although such a tactic might not ameliorate the underlying problem, it gave the sailors the satisfaction of knowing that they had undermined their officers. “Roll the Old Chariot” is an example of a shanty that could slow work. Stan

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<sup>56</sup> The Nore mutineers did not fare as well. Having already made concessions at Spithead, the Admiralty was ill-disposed to grant anything further. The Admiralty granted full pardons to the Spithead mutineers but after the Nore mutiny turned violent and the fleet threatened to sail to France, the Admiralty hanged 35 of the reputed leaders and court-martialed an additional 400 sailors.

<sup>57</sup> Creighton, “Fraternity in the American Forecastle,” 546.



Hugill identified it as having a “runaway chorus.” Each verse contains a simple phrase repeated three times by the shantyman, for example: “Oh, a drop of Nelson’s blood [rum] wouldn’t do us any harm.” This phrase is followed by, “And we’ll all hang on behind!” Then the chorus would chime in, “So we’ll roll the old chariot along,” repeated three times and followed by “And we’ll all hang on behind.”<sup>58</sup> Its choruses were ideally employed for weighing anchor—the one time when shanties were permitted in the navy. Of course a frustrated crew could make the chorus go on indefinitely, intentionally making this process take much longer. Runaway choruses therefore provided sailors the opportunity to assert independence.

Sailor pride was very much rooted in demonstrations of honor and bravery, as revealed in sea songs that often began with the invocation, “Come all ye bold seamen” that at once emphasized the bravery of sailors and identifies a select sailing brotherhood of rated seamen, not officers, who are invited to participate in the song. Ultimately, sea songs provided sailors with a further opportunity to demonstrate their honor through singing subversive songs that undermined the absolute power and authority of their superiors. In this way, they reveal a working-class political consciousness that asserted a degree of independence within the naval machine.

Of course honor and bravery had additional significance for sailors who also understood these two concepts to be signifiers of manhood. Displays and assertions of sailor manhood were equally a part of sailor identity as working class solidarity and in fact, sailor notions of manliness were a product of working class roots.

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<sup>58</sup> The verse about Nelson’s blood was just one of many possible verses. “Roll the Old Chariot” (date unknown), Hugill, *Shanties from the Seven Seas*, 122-3.

### **“The Rambling Sailor,” Myth and Reality: Patriarchal Authority in Flux**

At a time when masculinity was increasingly perceived as an inward quality, sailors clung to an early modern definition of manhood as an external designation based on working-class honor. Sailors at sea defined their masculinities in relation to women ashore: wives, sweethearts and prostitutes. Songs about women dominated fo’c’sle songs, two female “types” in particular: faithful sweethearts left behind and sweethearts who followed their men to sea (often disguised as male sailors). Likewise there are two male “types” present in these songs: the faithful sailor and the lustful wanderer. Not only do these songs confirm that the ship at sea was in no way an isolated, all-male world, they also reveal how sailors dealt with changing notions of masculinity. By and large, they continued to define manliness according to patriarchal authority, but there is evidence of manliness in flux.

Popular culture frequently portrayed sailors as oversexed animals. Such characterization reflects an uneasy transition in which new and old demonstrations of manliness contradicted each other: “tension between manliness as enjoyment and manliness as abstinence.”<sup>59</sup> At the same time that male purity was extolled, the high levels of prostitution tell a different story. Even at the height of the Napoleonic Wars, there were not enough sailors to keep all the bawdy houses in business, but sailors became the scapegoat for licentiousness at large. Seamen responded by embracing this image of the randy sailor in port and championing him in song. The immensely popular “Spanish Ladies” (c. 1769) calls to mind the stereotype of Jack Tar sailing the globe with a girl in every port.

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<sup>59</sup> John Tosh, *Manliness and Masculinities in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, (New York: Pearson, 2005), 33.

Farewell and adieu to you, Spanish ladies,  
Farewell and adieu to you, ladies of Spain;  
For we have received orders to sail to old England,  
But we hope in a short time to see you again.<sup>60</sup>

He left these unnamed Spanish ladies after taking his fill, just as he had, presumably, done in countless other ports. He departed with only the vague promise of returning at some undisclosed future time. These women existed solely for his pleasure. Manhood was once defined by a man's patriarchal position as head of a household. With the emergence of a two-sex model of biological differentiation between the sexes, manhood was increasingly defined not by patriarchy alone, but also by heterosexual desire. Though concepts of patriarchy remained important in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, this song therefore reflects this developing version of masculinity.

Boasting about sexual exploits on land reflects an adherence to the new ideas of masculinity proven through heterosexual desire. Men sang about their sexual exploits with women to cement their masculine status in the eyes of their shipmates. But they also sang these songs for a shore audience. Sexual prowess was therefore an attempt to make the sailor a man, not a boy. The libidinous sailor is the sole subject of "The Rambling Sailor" (c.1830) which begins, "I am a sailor stout and bold,/ Long time I have ploughed the ocean/ To fight for my king and country too,/ For honour and promotion." In the following verses he traveled from Greenwich to Woolwich and in each port he found "lasses plenty" and to each he promises "I will not leave, you need not fear," but promptly did just that as he goes in search of other girls. The last two verses read:

When I awoke all in the morn  
I left my love a-sleeping.  
I left her for an hour or two  
Whilst I go courting some other;

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<sup>60</sup> "Spanish Ladies" (c.1769), Palmer, *The Oxford Book of Sea Songs*, 124-5.

But if she stays till I return  
She may stay there till the day of doom.  
I'll court some other girl in her room,  
And still be a rambling sailor.

And if you want to know my name,  
My name it is young Johnson.  
I have got a commission from the king  
To court all girls that are handsome.  
With my false heart and flattering tongue  
I court all girls both old and young;  
I court them all and marry none,  
And still be a rambling sailor.<sup>61</sup>

The sailor narrator referenced the king's commission in multiple verses as though to warn any critics that he was the one risking his life to defend Britain, and therefore what he did on his shore leave was his own business. This sailor also mentioned multiple places he had visited during his travels, using his worldliness as credentials against his critics who may have never traveled before. In the opening he was quick to assert that he has fought for "honour" as well as "promotion," thereby implying that his sexual escapades in no way diminished his claim to honor. Of course the bulk of the song is filled with braggadocio over his trail of conquests and broken hearts. At the same time, however, moral conservatism that began with the rise of Methodism was furthered with the toppling of the French monarchy and the resulting panic in Britain. Consequently sexual promiscuity became a "stigma discrediting the working class" as well as elites.<sup>62</sup> By emphasizing their promiscuous lifestyle then, sailors were also asserting their working-class identity, one that perpetuated old idea that placed more value on honor than chastity.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> "Rambling Sailor" (H.Disley: London, c.1830), Palmer, *The Oxford Book of Sea Songs*, 194-195.

<sup>62</sup> Clark, 41.

<sup>63</sup> Clark, 61.

Straddling the line between old and new, however, sailors also clung to an old idea of patriarchy, “the exercise of private patriarchy,” which was about controlling female sexuality.<sup>64</sup> For a man to have a strong masculine identity, he needed a worthy sexual reputation.<sup>65</sup> In the early modern world, the worst accusation against a woman was infidelity, and for a man, the most disparaging comment on his manhood was to be called a cuckold. “British Tars Rewarded” (c.1797) contains an oft-quoted appeal to sweethearts. As William bid “pretty Nancy of Portsmouth, adieu” he told her, “When your William is absent, I pray then be true.”<sup>66</sup> This simple plea is a common feature of many songs. This entreaty reaches a fuller articulation in songs such as “Fair Sally Lov’d A Bonny Sailor” that tells of a sweetheart in her sailor’s absence who sat at home at her spinning wheel, waiting for his return.<sup>67</sup> The sailors’ emphasis on faithfulness can be read as uneasiness about unfaithfulness. There was no physical means of controlling female sexuality while sailors were away. In the end, they used songs to create an imagined shore where wives and sweethearts remained faithful in Jack’s long absence. This faithfulness reinforced the sailor’s role as patriarchal head of the home, a distinction that (at least through the wishful thinking of song) remained intact whether at home or at sea.

This hope for constancy reached its fullest articulation in the songs of cross-dressing women who followed their lovers to sea. “The Silk Merchant’s Daughter” (c.1778) recounted a common ballad tale, that of two lovers forced apart by the girl’s parents, and the boy sent to sea. The girl disguised herself as a man and traveled the sea

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<sup>64</sup> Tosh, 67.

<sup>65</sup> Elizabeth A. Foyster, *Manhood in Early Modern England: Honour, Sex and Marriage* (New York: Longman, 1999), 9-10.

<sup>66</sup> “British Tars Rewarded” (c.1797), Firth, *Naval Songs and Battles*, 281.

<sup>67</sup> “Fair Sally Lov’d A Bonny Sailor” (date unknown), Firth, *Naval Songs and Ballads*, 163-4.

to find him. Ultimately true love prevailed. She proves her heart to be worthy and he demonstrates his constancy.<sup>68</sup> This song and others like it revealed women so devoted that not even the ocean could stop them. Although there were real instances of women disguised as men aboard ship, such cases were a rarity and their impact on the world afloat has been exaggerated. Therefore, songs about them are best understood as reflections of desire—not that more women would magically turn up at sea, but that sweethearts left behind would remain true.<sup>69</sup>

Despite Jack's rough reputation, sea ballads were dominated by songs of wives and sweethearts, not prostitutes. Almost universally, their songs emphasized the undying faithfulness of women in the face of prolonged absence. When a sailor left home, he knew there was no way to insure his sweetheart would still be waiting upon his return. Therefore these devoted female song types were products of sailor imagination that reflected his hopes for the future and simultaneously reinforced early modern notions of sexual order within the household. And clearly sailors did cling to notions of future reunions.

Jacob Nagle, was an American sailor who was captured by the British during the Revolution, taken to England and from there he spent the next forty years serving, largely by choice, on British naval and merchant ships. During the course of his years at sea he kept a detailed diary which reveals a range of complex emotions with regards to his wife ashore. In 1795 he recorded that he married a "lively handsome [*sic*] girl" in London. Thereafter she is referenced only occasionally and never by name. The last mention of her comes in 1802 when he records that while away at sea, his wife and children all died

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<sup>68</sup> "The Silk Merchant's Daughter" (c.1778), Palmer, *The Oxford Book of Sea Songs*, 139-141.

<sup>69</sup> Pauline Greehnull provides an alternate reading of cross-dressing ballads in her article, "'Neither a Man nor a Maid.'" For more information see footnote 29.

of yellow fever. He wrote: “At this time my wife and children took the fever, and in the space of six weeks I was left alone.”<sup>70</sup> This last line, “I was left alone,” complicates what at first glance is a seemingly cold and distant marriage. We will never know why he failed to mention her name, even once. Perhaps it was simply too painful. What cannot be ignored is that even though he only rarely saw his family in the course of his seven year marriage, without them he clearly felt abandoned. They were then part of his imagined world of domestic happiness while at sea and how he defined his masculinity on ship as a husband and father.

Sailors did not occupy an all-male world. The tender lament, “The Seamen’s Distress” (1765) relays the dying moments of shipwrecked men. The captain, mate and boatswain each mentioned their wives concluding with the statement “And a widow I fear she must be.” The last to speak was the “little cabin boy” who cried,

... ‘I am as sorry for my mother dear  
As you are for your wives all three.

‘Last night when the moon shined bright  
My mother had sons five,  
But now she may look in the salt seas  
And find but one alive.’<sup>71</sup>

In their final moments each man and boy was preoccupied with a woman ashore revealing the extent to which women permeated this supposedly “all male” environment. When in port, their time was spent in the company of women: wives, sweethearts and prostitutes. Women occasionally traveled on ships, either in disguise or as companions. Even on ships devoid of women, their presence was still felt because of their contributions to maritime work. Sailor identity was not rooted in isolation at sea, but

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<sup>70</sup> Jacob Nagle, *The Nagle Journal: A Diary of the Life of Jacob Nagle, Sailor, from the Year 1775 to 1841*, John C. Dann, ed., (New York: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988), 248.

<sup>71</sup> “The Seamen’s Distress” (1765), Palmer, *The Oxford Book of Sea Songs*, 115-116.

rather was defined in relation to women on shore. At the time of the Napoleonic Wars, there was no single masculine identity in the navy. Sailors were participating in a wider dialogue on the nature of masculinity, one that was alternately defined according to patriarchal authority or male heterosexuality. Reflecting their roots on shore, sailors grappled with changing notions of masculinity though most often they continued to reflect early modern standards of manliness that emphasized female constancy and male control of the home.

## Conclusion

Jeffrey Glasco argued that sailor identity was ultimately rooted in masculine identity. He wrote, “seamen understood their world at a personal level in terms of what it meant to be a man, specifically a seaman.”<sup>72</sup> But how did sailors articulate manhood? Elizabeth Foyster writes that during the eighteenth century, ballads taught men on land how to be men.<sup>73</sup> The same can be argued for sea songs. In 1811, Private Wheeler sailing aboard the *Impétueux* wrote:

Through the week all is bustle, every hand is employed....The word of command or Boatswain’s pipes is sufficient to set this mighty living machine in motion. Two evenings each week is devoted to amusement, then the Boatswain’s mates with their pipes summons ‘All hands to play’. In a moment the scene is truly animating. The crew instantly distribute themselves, some dancing to a fiddle, others to a fife. Those who are fond of the marvelous group together between two guns and listen to some frightful tale of Ghost and goblin, and another party listens to some weather beaten tar who ‘spins a yarn’ of past events until his hearers’ sides are almost cracked with laughter. Again is to be found a party singing songs to the memory of Duncan, Howe, Vincent and the

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<sup>72</sup> Jeffrey D. Glasco, “The Seamen Feels Him-Self a Man,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 66 (2004): 45.

<sup>73</sup> Foyster, *Manhood in Early Modern England*.



immortal Nelson, while others whose souls are more refined are singing praises to the god of Battles.<sup>74</sup>

This passage reveals the entertainment value of songs. It also highlights the collective nature of singing in which singer and listener gathered together: a collectivity that spoke to working-class solidarity. In singing about the greatest commanders of the age, sailors emphasized the virtues of honor and bravery, external markers of manhood that hearken to early modern signifiers of manliness. Songs and the act of singing therefore reveal the essence of maritime identity: manliness and working-class solidarity articulated and reinforced through communal interaction.

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<sup>74</sup> *The Letters of Private Wheeler*, B.H. Liddell Hart, ed., (1951), 47; quoted in Palmer, *The Oxford Book of Sea Songs*, xxvii.

CHAPTER 2  
“A Sailor Like the Rest”: Distinguishing Sailor from Officer

**Introduction**

If songs articulated a sailor’s self-identity to his peers, his manner of speaking and dressing provided clues to outsiders—officers and landsmen alike—of his sailor status. Cultural uniformity was a further example of solidarity on both land and sea. Before considering what this solidarity accomplished it is necessary to first examine the hallmarks of sailor self-expression.

By the time of the Napoleonic Wars, sailors had created an elaborate subculture consisting of dress, language, and ritual. Naval distinctions of commissioned officer, warrant officer, petty officer, and rating were externally imposed classifications which defined the world at sea. In contrast, sailor subculture acted as a badge of working-class membership which marked who was and who was not admissible to this sailing brotherhood. In this way sailors revealed how they appropriated their designation as working-class men and made it their own, taking pride in their social position.

Isaac Land has termed sailor dress and speech, “extravagant nauticalism.” He asserted that although these displays are seemingly rooted in isolation at sea, their performance on land indicates that sailors continued to set themselves in opposition to non-sailors ashore.<sup>75</sup> The caricature of the lusty sailor, wearing strange clothing, and speaking a virtually unintelligible dialect was a common source of amusement to social satirists ashore. Nevertheless, it is essential to note that a sailor subculture likewise existed at sea. These displays of “extravagant nauticalism” must be understood as having

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<sup>75</sup> Land, “Domesticating the Maritime,” 235.

their genesis at sea and were first and foremost a response to the officers and therefore, by extension, to the middle and upper classes.

### **Dressing Like a Sailor**

Land's choice of the term, "extravagant" is apt as nothing drew more comment from contemporaries than sailor dress. Beginning in 1748 there was an official naval uniform but only for officers and midshipmen.<sup>76</sup> Warrant officers wore plain blue coats to distinguish themselves from the ratings. In the absence of an official designated uniform, sailors developed their own informal uniform (see Figure 1). Called "short clothes" as opposed to the landmen's "long clothes," they were both functional (short so they would not catch in the rigging) and a clear visual marker of occupation. While on the ship, sailors wore loose breeches made of canvas, short blue jackets, red waistcoats, checked shirts, and scarves or handkerchiefs around the neck.



**FIGURE 1**  
*Jack in His Element.* London:  
Robert Sawyer and Co., 17 June  
1793. Courtesy of the Lewis  
Walpole Library, Yale University.

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<sup>76</sup> After 1807, masters and pursers were allowed a dress uniform. Common seamen were not issued uniforms until 1857. Lavery, *Nelson's Navy*, 104.

The lack of an official uniform reveals hierarchy and classism. Officer uniforms were a visual marker of rank and authority. Those men who merely powered the ship, taking rather than giving commands, deserved no such special badge of distinction. In the absence of an official uniform, the ratings created their own standardized dress that marked them as a collective whole and asserted a pride in their occupation. Their unofficial uniform both mirrored the practice of the officers and yet simultaneously distinguished them from their superiors. In this way, sailors deliberately and visually asserted their exclusive group identity.

### **Learning To Swear Like a Sailor**

“Sailor speak” was another unifying mark of occupation. The coarse talk that is today associated with sailors was also an aspect of working-class culture in the eighteenth century, not unique to seamen. Nevertheless, former navy sailor Samuel Leech wrote in his memoirs (1843):

There are few worse places than a man of war for the favourable development of the moral character in a boy. Profanity in its most revolting aspect; licentiousness in its most shameful and beastly garbs; vice in the worst Proteus-like shapes, abound there. While scarcely a moral restraint is thrown round the victim, the meshes of temptation are spread about his path in every direction....How can a boy be expected to escape pollution, surrounded by such works of darkness?<sup>77</sup>

According to Leech, profanity was commonplace and furthermore, not an occasional oath but “profanity in its most revolting aspect,” thus indicating both the frequency and intensity of such language. He references the ship as a sort of ad hoc classroom for impressionable young boys who were molded in the image of more senior sailors. Thus learning to swear was very much a part of a young sailor’s education.

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<sup>77</sup> Leech, Extracts from *Thirty Years from Home*; quoted in Baynham, *From the Lower Deck*, 93-4.

Leech hinted at an association between profanity and other, more dangerous, sins. But sailors embraced these accusations of vice and blasphemy as part of their membership in the brotherhood of seamen. John Nicol, a navy sailor from 1774-1783 recalled:

I had been much annoyed, and rendered very uncomfortable, until now, from the swearing and loose talking of the men in the Tender. I had all my life been used to the strictest conversation, prayers night and morning; now I was in a situation where family worship was unknown....At first I said my prayers and read my Bible in private; but truth makes me confess I gradually became more and more remiss and before long, I was a sailor like the rest.<sup>78</sup>

In this passage Nicol reveals the otherness of sailor speech—an otherness marked by its use of profanity—hinting that this vice was unique to sailors and not officers. More significantly, he articulated that his adoption of this way of speaking made him a sailor just as much as his ability to do the work of a sailor. And indeed Samuel Leech echoed his sentiments when he wrote, “To be drunk is considered by almost every sailor as the acme of sensual bliss, while many fancy that swearing and drinking are necessary accomplishments in a genuine man-of-war’s man.”<sup>79</sup> In other words, profanity was more than just a way of speaking. It was instead an important part of sailor culture and, in fact, identity.

Among the working classes, however, profanity was not unique to sailors.

According to Isaac Land, “The archetypal rough talker for eighteenth century Britons was

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<sup>78</sup> John Nicol, *The Life and Adventures of John Nicol, Mariner*, 1822; quoted in Baynham, *From the Lower Deck*, 18. Nicol (1755-1825) was born in Currie, Scotland and spent his childhood reading *Robinson Crusoe* and longing for a career at sea. His father apprenticed him as a cooper and once he achieved the rank of journeyman he enlisted in the Royal Navy. He spent seven years as a cooper in the navy, primarily stationed in America during the Revolution, before joining the merchant service. In 1794 he was impressed into service and served at Cape St. Vincent and the Nile before being discharged in 1802 during the peace of Amiens. In 1822 John Howell approached him and offered to write Nicol’s memoirs of his years at sea.

<sup>79</sup> Leech, Extracts from *Thirty Years from Home*; quoted in Baynham, *From the Lower Deck*, 94.

not the sailor or even the pirate, but the *fishwife*.<sup>80</sup> This statement reveals that profanity was a vice that society attributed to the working classes—women as well as men. Therefore, language was an important signifier of working-class status on land and its special attribution to sailors by sailors reveals how completely they exhibited *and* embraced this attribute. A sailor’s manner of speaking aurally revealed the extent to which he was fully a part of the sailor class and, by extension, the working classes at large.

### **Crossing the Line: Rituals of Inclusion and Exclusion**

If dress and speech identified sailors to officers and landmen, the King Neptune Ritual more officially initiated young sailors into the sailing brotherhood. Alternately known as the “Crossing the Line” ceremony, it occurred when a ship crossed the equator for the first time. It was a fairly simple affair in which veteran sailors dressed as Neptune and his attendants. While Neptune looked on, his attendants stripped down the new sailors, dunked them in the ocean, and shaved them.<sup>81</sup>

This initiation ceremony was governed entirely by veteran ratings. It was the one instance where officers remained in the background, allowing the sailors to temporarily rule ship, a liminal moment in which power roles were subverted as officers abdicated to Neptune and his attendants. This ceremony actually symbolized birth and coming to manhood at sea. The dunking represented rebirth in Neptune’s realm, and the shaving represented initiation into maritime manhood. Those who resisted were harshly treated

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<sup>80</sup> Land, “The Many-Tongued Hydra,” 413.

<sup>81</sup> For more information see Creighton, “Fraternity in the American Forecastle”; Denning, *Mr. Bligh’s Bad Lanugage*, 77-80; and Henning Henningsen, *Crossing the Equator: Sailors’ Baptism and Other Initiation Rites* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1961).

and so clearly this ritual was not about bravery through defiance, but about brotherhood through complicity.

Narratives vividly recall the homesickness experienced when a sailor first went to sea. But they also recollect sharp criticism from veterans if they expressed too much desire for their mothers. The brotherhood of seamen would watch out for them now. The Neptune ritual severed sailors from their biological families, creating a substitute family at sea.

Veteran sailors formally inducted new sailors into the shipboard world through the King Neptune ceremony, thus binding them to the fraternity of experienced seamen. The Neptune ritual demonstrated that ship rules originated from the forecandle, not just the quarterdeck. Officers advanced by passing a series of examinations by the Admiralty Board and also through promotions authorized by commanding officers. As each new ship's company was assembled, the captain or his lieutenants went through the muster list and designated sailors as able seamen, ordinary seamen, or landmen, according to their skills as seamen. Though such rankings were supposed to be based on ability they could change, not according to ability, but when a sailor was transferred to a new ship, if he was punished or fell into disfavor with his commanding officers, if the captain did not know the man well enough or even wished to save the Admiralty money. Ratings were imposed by sailors from above and oftentimes, entirely beyond their control and too changeable to place too much stock in them.

The more lasting distinction was inclusion in the group of veteran seamen. Such an initiation was finalized through the King Neptune ceremony which required a public display of submission and camaraderie. For veterans, this ceremony served as a way for

sailors to reassert their agency on the ship by defining membership for themselves and beyond the reach of the officers.

## **Conclusion**

In their labor history of the Atlantic, *The Many-Headed Hydra* (2000), Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker asserted that in the late seventeenth century, Britain witnessed “the organization of the maritime state from above, and the self-organization of sailors from below.”<sup>82</sup> This implies two very separate maritime groups on both land and sea. The officers shared a similar class background and, consequently, the favor and power entitled to them by their social position. The ratings were likewise united by their working-class background. In *The London Hanged* (2003), an exploration of crime in eighteenth century London, Linebaugh states that this bond was reinforced by the “cooperative experience of seafaring, from the close supervision and brutal discipline, and from the close confinement of the working environment.”<sup>83</sup> In other words, the sailor’s worldview was a product of shared experiences as sea: collective living—all the ratings slept, ate, relaxed, and stored personal belongings in one large room; collective work—all hands worked together to sail the ship and fight the enemy; and collective identity—all sailors expressed themselves through dress, language, and even the usage of the plural pronoun in both song and memoir. These unifying bonds provided the safety net for collective resistance to officers and the Admiralty.

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<sup>82</sup> Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 144.

<sup>83</sup> Peter Linebaugh, *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Verso, 2003), 131.



## CHAPTER 3

### “What Usage Have Poor Sailors”: Hierarchy and Resistance at Sea

#### **Introduction**

Recall the story of Robert Hay, the exuberant thirteen-year old boy from Kirkintilloch, Scotland, who left home for a life of adventure upon the seas only to find loneliness, hard work, and cruelty. Time and again, however, his memoirs recount instances of solidarity between sailors that helped ameliorate the worst abuses of power by the officers. On one memorable shore leave the young Hay became intoxicated. He somehow made it back to the ship but awoke the next morning covered in blood from a wound sustained while climbing aboard. He knew that such proof of his intemperance warranted punishment, but fortunately, as he recounted, “some of the seamen kept me from the sight of the officers, a piece of service which a fellow feeling induces them in every possible case to perform for each other, so that I escaped flagellation, which otherwise would assuredly have been inflicted.”<sup>84</sup>

This incident reveals a common theme of shipboard life—the ratings banding together in opposition to officers, particularly in cases where they deemed the officers to be treating them unfairly and, in extreme cases, denying their very personhood. In this way these sailors were part of a larger working-class movement to guarantee basic rights to the lowest sector of British society, the rights entitled to free-born Englishmen: access to fair wages and staple goods, freedom from unjust punishment, and control over one’s person.

A ship at sea was very much a microcosm of the world ashore—a transplantation of the ideologies and cultural practices on land. This transplantation included class

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<sup>84</sup> Hay, 130.

hierarchies and antagonisms. With few exceptions, the commissioned officers came from the middle and upper classes. By virtue of their economic position and their status as those who took rather than issued orders, the ratings, petty officers and most warrant officers were part of Britain's vast working class; in truth a series of classes united by hard labor, low status, and little opportunity for advancement. Working-class identity was the result of life ashore in working-class neighborhoods. Working-class consciousness was fostered at sea through collective life and labor, and manifested itself in response to oppression by officers.

The inter-personal dynamic between ratings and officers reveals much about class consciousness among seamen. The working-class ratings deliberately defined themselves in opposition to the middle and upper class officers. This resistance manifested itself in acts of collective subversion both great and small that asserted sailors' group identity and rights as free-born Englishmen.

### **Punishment and Resistance**

#### *Officer and Sailor, A Precarious Imbalance*

Prior to his accession to the throne in 1830, William IV, third son of George III served in the Royal Navy (1779-1790). Beginning as a midshipman, he eventually made it to the rank of rear-admiral. There was a popular song entitled, "Duke William" (c.1790-1815) which told the fictional version of his entry into the navy. The song began:

Duke William and a nobleman, heroes of England's nation,  
Got up one morn by two o'clock to take a recreation.  
Unto the suburbs they did go in sailor's dress from top to toe;  
Then said Duke William: 'Let us know what usage have poor  
sailors.'<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> "Duke William" (c. 1790-1815), *Oxford Book of Sea Songs*, 152.

Eventually William was pressed into service on board a tyrannical ship where sailors were much abused by officers. When his true identity was revealed by the boatswain's mate, the officers reacted in panic, "On their bended knees did fall, and straight for mercy they did call. The duke replied 'Base villains all for using these poor sailors.'"<sup>86</sup> William was presented as an advocate for sailors. In this way, it reveals a sort of wishful thinking on the part of the men who composed and sang this song. Realizing their own limitations with regards to resisting ill "usage," they fantasized about a man of rank who would intercede on their behalf and guarantee that such uncalled for physical abuses would cease. But how accurate is this picture of mistreatment?

William Richardson wrote in his memoirs:

People may talk of negro slavery and the whip, but let them look nearer home and see a poor sailor arriving from a long voyage, exulting in the pleasure of soon being among his dearest friends and relations. Behold him just entering the door when a press gang seizes him like a felon, drags him away and puts him in the tender's hold, and from thence he is sent upon a man of war perhaps ready to sail to some foreign station, without either seeing his wife, friends or relations; and if he complains, he is likely to be seized up and flogged with a cat."<sup>87</sup>

Certainly this piece is highly sensationalized—the comparison between chattel slavery and sailing is unquestionably overstated. Yet despite its emotional appeal, certain facts remain: impressment was routine and often occurred as sailors arrived in port within sight of their homes, and flogging was commonplace.

In short, the navy denied sailors liberty of movement and furthermore, their very person was the property of the navy and subject to ill use at the discretion of commanding

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<sup>86</sup> "Duke William" (c. 1790-1815), *Oxford Book of Sea Songs*, 153.

<sup>87</sup> William Richardson, *Mariner of England: An Account of the Career of William Richardson from Cabin Boy in the Merchant Service to Warrant Officer in the Royal Navy (1780-1819) As Told by Himself*, ed. Colonel Spencer Childers (London: John Murray, 1908), 111.

officers. Recall the words of fellow chronicler, sailor Samuel Leech (at sea from 1808-1813) who composed one of the most scathing critiques of officers when he wrote:

The difficulty with naval officers is that they do not treat with a sailor as with a man. They know what is fitting between each other as officers; but they treat their crews on another principle; they are apt to look at them as pieces of living mechanism, born to serve, to obey their order, and administer to their wishes without complaint....There is often more real manhood in the forecandle than in the ward room.<sup>88</sup>

Leech's remarks are significant for they explicitly asserted the humanness of the ratings. According to Leech, officers viewed the ratings as a "living mechanism" who existed solely to do the work of the ship. They expected this mechanism to neither question nor disobey their authority. Countering this rationale, Leech asserted that by dehumanizing the ratings, the officers themselves undermined their own humanity. Leech articulated a difference between ratings and officers—one defined by rank but revealed by manhood. He asserted the moral superiority of these working-class Tars.

The frequent antagonism between officers and ratings often served to divide the two groups irrevocably. Robert Hay recounted that at one point the officer to whom he was acting as servant became unnecessarily harsh. After Hay lodged a complaint with the captain, the officer was reprimanded and forced to dismiss Hay from his service.<sup>89</sup> This course of action proved to be ill advised when the officer (Mr. Crease), "prejudice[ed] all his brother officers against me. Even the petty officers with whom I came more immediately into contact seemed tinged with this prejudice....No duty could be too oppressive, no service too vile."<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Leech, Extracts from *Thirty Years from Home*; quoted in Baynham, *From the Lower Deck*, 92-3.

<sup>89</sup> Hay, 92.

<sup>90</sup> Hay, 120.

In this instance, all the officers banded together in opposition to the lowly sailor. Even the petty officers sided with the commissioned officers. The vast majority of petty officers had risen through the ranks and it is therefore likely they shared a similar background as Hay. Without knowing the particulars it is impossible to say for certain, but if in fact they came from the same humble origins as the ratings, their decision to stand against them are notable and certainly reveal an awareness of class consciousness. In a society so dictated by patronage it was imperative to stand united with those upon whom one's advancement might rest. These officers rejected their working-class origins by distancing themselves from the very openly working-class sailors.

Hay's anecdote reveals something else as well—that to some extent the captain was removed from this in-fighting aboard ship and that in fact the divisions between officer and non-officer occurred out of his watchful eye. Recall that in sea songs, the sailors most often turned their ire toward lieutenants and certain warrant officers like the purser and boatswain. Furthermore, the commanding officer of the ship or fleet (depending on situation) often stood alone as an advocate for his men. From time to time, captains intervened on behalf of their men as revealed in the surviving correspondence between Captain Samuel Barrington aboard the *Albion* at Spithead and Philip Stephens of the Admiralty Office. Barrington had recently promoted several sailors, changing their rating from landmen to able seamen. The Admiralty criticized him for having rated these men, “merely for having behaved well and shewn [*sic*] a willingness to learn the duty of Seamen.” Stephens concluded by ordering that they remain rated as landmen “until they shall be better qualified to do the duty of Able

Seamen.”<sup>91</sup> Despite Barrington’s attempt to obtain a fair wage for sailors under his command, he too found himself subject to naval hierarchy.

By contrast, a man of higher rank had more sway with the Admiralty. Jacob Nagle was an American soldier in the Revolutionary War captured by the British and impressed into service. After the war he remained in the navy and ultimately served under Admiral Lord Nelson in the Mediterranean. In his memoirs he recounted a time in the Mediterranean when his shipmates learned that their captain was being transferred and in his place they would receive Captain Henry Hotham, a man with a bad reputation “bearing the name of such a tarter by his own ships crew, that our ship mutinied and entirely refused him.” The commodore’s lieutenant threatened them with hanging if they refused to comply. Finally Admiral Lord Nelson was called in and he told them, “Lads, you have the greatest character on b[oar]d the *Blanche* of any frigates crew in the navy. You have taken two frigates superior to the frigate you are in, and now to rebel. If Capt[ain] Hotham ill treats you, give me a letter and I will support you.” According to Nagle, the crew responded by cheering Nelson and complying with his request.<sup>92</sup> This

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<sup>91</sup> Philip Stephens to Samuel Barrington, 5 December 1770; In *The Barrington Papers: Selected from the Letters and Papers of Admiral the Hon. Samuel Barrington*, vol. 1, ed. D. Bonner-Smith (Navy Records Society, 1937), 419. In response Barrington countered that his orders were to ready the *Albion* for sea and that he, “told all my Landmen that as soon as they could hand a reef I would rate them Able. I make it a rule never to break my word with them.” Barrington continued in impassioned tones to praise the men under him. He wrote, “these excellent Fellows without clothes, without beds, and not four good days’ [weather], the rest of the time in wind and rain, without a single complaint of the hardships they underwent. The 33<sup>rd</sup> Article of my Instructions tells me I am to rate none Able Seamen but such as have been at sea three years. Every Ship must have constantly almost in War had Men that have been at sea twenty years and upwards, without ever having been aloft. I therefore beg leave to submit it to their Lordships, whether my People that can hand and reef are not entitled to Able pay in preference to the Man who has been so long, and of no use.” Samuel Barrington to Philip Stephens, 7 December 1770. To this letter the Admiralty, in the person of Philip Stephens, responded, “I am commanded by their Lordships to acquaint you that you ought not to have made such promise and that they cannot indulge you in your request without making a precedent that could not fail of being attended with great inconvenience and prejudice to His Majesty’s Service at this time.” Philip Stephens to Samuel Barrington, 12 December 1770; *The Barrington Papers*, 421.

<sup>92</sup> Nagle, 209.

account reveals the limitations of the ratings. Just as in the song, “Duke William,” ultimately a higher power (in this case, the admiral) had to intervene on their behalf for even with the strength of numbers their case lacked legitimacy in the eyes of the officer on duty. Though this vignette underscores the limitations of sailors, it also shows that sailors did not hesitate to assert themselves when confronted with the threat of an officer whose reputation for violence exceeded what they perceived as just. Furthermore, their protest was a collective undertaking. It also reveals that these sailors were not revolutionary—they appealed to authority rather than overthrowing it. Relying on strength in numbers sailors mirrored the actions of working-class laborers on shore who united to fight for fair working conditions.

The treatment of seaman contrasts markedly with that of midshipmen. The midshipmen were officers in training and generally came from prominent families. As a parody of their exalted social status, they were referred to by the ratings by the unflattering term, “young gentlemen.” This rancor often stemmed from the fact that the midshipmen, generally in their teens, outranked all warrant officers and ratings, men usually in their twenties or older. Samuel Leech recalled his first few days aboard ship as a young boy, “I felt the insults and tyranny of the midshipmen. These little minions of power ordered and drove me round like a dog, nor did I and the other boys dare interpose a word. They were *officers*; their word was our law, and woe betide the presumptuous boy that dared refuse implicit obedience.”<sup>93</sup> The italicization of the word is striking. It is done mockingly, undermining their classification as officers. He insulted them so as to verbally diminish their authority. He called them “minions of power,” thus associating

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<sup>93</sup> Samuel Leech, *Thirty Years from Home* (Boston: Tappan & Dennet, 1843), 21.

class status with power. The distinction of “gentlemen” marks them as othered—clearly not part of the working-class brotherhood.

By way of comparison, it is interesting to consider how Lieutenant Robert Ward aboard the *Monmouth* (1783-4) referred to the ratings in his daily logbook which included remarks on life aboard ship: outbreaks of fever, disciplinary actions, provisions, ship sightings, routine repairs, and contacts with other vessels. His choice of language demands special attention. For example, the following entry from February 1783, an average day aboard ship, he wrote, “Sent 17 seamen & 4 marines to the hospital, and borrowed 3 seamen from the [unreadable name of ship].”<sup>94</sup> Ward included no explanation for why these men were sent to the hospital. Throughout this journal he referred to warrant officers by their occupation rather than by name, such as “our boatswain ashore” or “received new carpenter.” Sailors remained even more generic, referred to by the term “seamen” and distinguishable only by the number preceding each entry. Perhaps this is because these positions were so transient that it was more useful to refer to the position. Or, if this log was intended for submission to the Admiralty, maybe it was ill-advised to be too specific. A third possibility is that Ward felt no need to refer to the men by name—all that mattered to him was that there was a job to do and the appropriate position had to take care of that job. This third explanation corroborates Samuel Leech’s criticism of officers for regarding sailors as mere “pieces of living mechanism,” officers who viewed the ratings as a collective whole, a mechanism provided the necessary labor to power the ship. The ratings likewise recognized this collective whole but for vastly different reasons. Sailors were born and raised in a

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<sup>94</sup> A Journal by Robt. Ward of the H. M. Ship *Monmouth* Capt. James Alms Esq. Commander, 24 February 1783, Osborn c585, Beinecke Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.



working-class world and worked at sea among other working-class men. For them, this unified whole was a living mechanism, but one that offered protection and security against abusive officers. For, as all ratings knew, nowhere was the disparity between officer and rating more evident than in the application of physical punishment to sailors.

### *Punishment at Sea*

Sailor John Bechervaise wrote, “the boatswain and his mates were allowed to carry three sisters, (three canes laid up like a piece of rope) with which they lashed indiscriminately as the men ran up, [on deck, after being awakened] and woe to him who was last.”<sup>95</sup> Bechervaise painted a picture of daily physical abuse. According to him, the boatswain did not wait until a sailor misbehaved to use the “three sisters.” Rather, as a jockey might, they constantly applied the lash to ensure maximum speed aboard ship. The many were herded by the power of the few. But what of the men themselves who were the subject of navy discipline; how did these men feel about public punishment that existed entirely along class lines? In 1809 young Irishman Henry Walsh recalled, “It is indeed disgraceful to mankind for to behold those boatswain’s mates how they drive those men like as many slaves.”<sup>96</sup> Here again, one sees the likening of life aboard ship to chattel slavery. Sailors therefore equated the application of physical abuse as a means of dehumanizing the “living mechanism.” Appealing to readers to recognize the inhumanity of the act was a means of asserting that such practices ran contrary to the rights of Englishmen who should receive punishment only if they broke a law.

The boatswain’s blows were a part of daily life, but more extensive punishments were the purview of the captain. The captain rewarded most transgressions with

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<sup>95</sup> Bechervaise, 110.

<sup>96</sup> T.W. Moody, “An Irish Countryman in the British Navy, 1809-1815” IV (1960), 232; quoted in Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean*, 492.

flogging—36 lashes or less since flogging beyond three dozen lashes had to be determined by a court martial. This tribunal was comprised of senior officers from several ships and therefore acted to limit the power of individual captains. Death and imprisonment could likewise be determined only by a court martial. Leniency was common; commanders could remit corporal punishment in whole or part. The death penalty was extremely rare and the court looked for “any mitigating circumstance” to lessen the charge such as youth or inexperience.<sup>97</sup> Nevertheless, sailors well knew the potential unfairness of a system in which a court of officers, often removed from the daily happenings below decks, determined their fate. Further illustrating the inequalities of the system is the fact that officers were almost never flogged. Instead they were disgraced for their crimes. The most dehumanizing punishments, one that likened humans to animals, were almost chiefly reserved for the working-class sailors and administered by middle and upper class officers.

John Byrn has written that although there is a long tradition of portraying the navy as an institution that survived only through inhuman punishment and suffering, such scholarly analyses are usually based on primary sources written in condemnation of the impressment system. In other words, maritime historians have long preferred the tracts written by the navy’s harshest critics and have not analyzed them with a more critical gaze. One well known chronicler who was highly critical of the Royal Navy was Jack Nastyface (a pseudonym; real name William Robinson) who resented being disgraced.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Byrn, 63.

<sup>98</sup> Jack Nastyface, real name William Robinson (1787-c.1836), was born near Surrey. Though he apprenticed as a shoemaker in 1805 he volunteered for the navy and was ultimately present at Trafalgar. In later years he was named as purser’s steward. In 1811, for unknown reasons, he was demoted to landman and thereafter grew disenchanted with naval life and deserted several months later. In 1836 he published his memoirs in which his dislike of the service and naval hierarchy is forefront.

According to Byrn, this fact heavily colored his memoirs. In his *Nautical Economy or Forecastle Recollections of Events during the Last War* (1836), he portrayed sadistic and tyrannical officers doling out punishments on a whim against those whom they disliked. Byrn contradicted Nastyface to assert that punishment at sea was designed to teach a lesson so others would not commit the same crimes. Tyrannical captains were the exception, not the rule. Officers were kept in check by presiding notions of gentility and, equally important, paternalism.<sup>99</sup> He argued that most shipboard acts deemed as criminal were similar to punishable offenses on land. That such offenses were more often physically punished at sea was simply because survival depended on order, but he insisted that for minor offenses, punishments—even flogging—were light.<sup>100</sup> It was about making an impression, not killing someone.

Commissioned officer Robert Ward kept a detailed log of daily occurrences aboard the *Monmouth* during a tour of duty in the Indian Ocean from 1783 to 1784.<sup>101</sup> Among his entries are numerous instances of captain-sanctioned punishments for drunkenness, disobedience, neglect of duty, and thievery.<sup>102</sup> All accounts of punishments were recorded in a methodical and very businesslike manner, the tone indistinguishable from entries recording the arrival of fresh beef or the signal to weigh anchor. On the opposite side of the coin, however, when sailors sang about punishments at sea—or when they wrote of it in their own memoirs—it was much more personal and reflected mingled

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<sup>99</sup> Byrn, 120.

<sup>100</sup> Byrn, 152.

<sup>101</sup> Ward's rank is unknown but the fact that he kept a log which included entries on latitude, longitude, weather, winds, and daily "remarks" indicates he was most likely a lieutenant, and therefore required by the Admiralty to keep a daily journal recording these facts of the voyage.

<sup>102</sup> "Run the gauntlet Thomas Favral & Dennis Mahony for embezzling stores at sea," 4 March 1783; "Punished Lawrence Atland & Robt Lovell seamen with 12 lashes each for desertion," 10 April 1783; "Punished John Thidner (?) with 12 lashes for insolence," 18 April 1783; "Punished Alex Rainey & Thomas Jones seamen with 12 lashes each for neglect of duty," 26 May 1783; "Punished Thomas Hodgskins seamen with 12 lashes for treating his superior officer with contempt," 2 April 1784.

anger and indignation. In a compelling reevaluation of Captain Cook's disastrous Pacific voyage (2007), Scott Ashley argued that what sailors and officers recollected in published accounts was inextricably linked to social hierarchy and political maneuvering. Not only then were social hierarchies on shore transplanted onto ships but, Ashley wrote, that for the historian it is less important to uncover "what really happened" than it is to discern "how real events are interpreted once questions of rank (both naval and social)...get in the way."<sup>103</sup> To apply Ashley's argument to punishment then, the question becomes not how were sailors punished but how did they perceive it? By this token then, the memoirs of Jack Nastyface have perhaps been too hastily overlooked and the obvious frustration in the words of men like Samuel Leech need to be given fuller consideration.

In 1807 at the height of the war, Charles Pemberton (1790-1840) from Monmouthshire, Wales was seized by a press-gang in Liverpool.<sup>104</sup> In his memoirs he recounted the experiences of a new sailor, "I was now one of themselves, to toil as they toiled...to come at a whistle and run at a blow...to wallow in degradation and misery—to watch continually in avoidance of abuse and beating and to watch in vain—to be scourged with ropes by brutes who were charmed with delight at the sound of the heavy dense blows which they dealt around in sheer wantonness."<sup>105</sup> The phrase "one of themselves" reveals Pemberton's membership in the group of sailors who were all subject to the unwarranted and indiscriminate sting of the lash. Ultimately it is only through such primary source recollections that historians can assess what mere statistics of disciplinary

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<sup>103</sup> Ashley, "How Navigators Think," 109.

<sup>104</sup> He served seven years and afterward became an actor.

<sup>105</sup> Charles Pemberton; Extracts from *A Voice from the Man Deck*; quoted in Baynham, *From the Lower Deck*; 98.

actions at sea meant at a more human level to those on the receiving end of these punishments.

Flogging was an accepted part of eighteenth century life on land and at sea. Furthermore, sailors recognized the necessity of maintaining order in so crowded a world as the ship. Bechervaise wrote in his memoirs, “in a ship with nearly seven hundred men, some of which were the very worst characters, a strict observance of orders was necessary.”<sup>106</sup> Discipline was essential to maintain order. In fact, less than 10% of sailors were ever flogged. The issue was therefore not violence, but the misapplication of it. Samuel Leech contended that, “Flogging in the navy is more severe than in the army, though it is too bad to be tolerated there, or indeed everywhere. Other modes of punishment might be successfully substituted, which would deter from misconduct, without destroying the self-respect of the man.”<sup>107</sup> Here again one sees the issue of manhood, and consequently, emasculation through flogging. To put it bluntly, the middle class had the capability to destroy the very manhood of the working-class men under their jurisdiction.

William Richardson wrote of an incident in which a boatload of newly pressed men were flogged each time they were caught swearing—ultimately becoming a daily ritual which demoralized the ship until the men finally, and collectively, approached the admiral to intervene. He responded by ordering the captain to refrain from “use[ing] the cat on such light occasions.” Richardson continued that thereafter, the morale of the ship greatly improved leaving him to conclude:

In all my experience at sea I have found seamen grateful for good usage and yet they like to see subordination kept up as they know

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<sup>106</sup> Bechervaise, 110.

<sup>107</sup> Leech, 81.

the duty could not be carried on without it; but whenever I hear of a mutiny in a ship, I am much of the opinion of Admiral Lord Collingwood, who said it must assuredly be the fault of the captain or his officers.<sup>108</sup>

In his recollections Richardson showed that sailors did not completely undermine authority and stage a takeover of the ship but accepted their low status within the social hierarchy. Nevertheless, they were acutely aware of the basic rights of Englishmen, most especially the freedom from unwarranted punishment.

Scholars, like Byrn, who claim that certain memoirs over-emphasize the violence of the ship miss the material point. For in the above reflection, Richardson condemned neither punishment aboard ship nor the maintenance of order. Quite the contrary, he asserted a ship, “could not be carried on without it.” What he did object to was excessive violence and dehumanization. Richardson, Leech and all the other men who wrote and sang about violence at sea objected to being treated as slaves rather than free-born Englishmen. When such rights were ignored, they acted collectively to maintain these rights.

#### *Sailor Resistance at Sea*

It must be stated that by no means were all officers tyrants, nor were abuses of power the norm—nevertheless the potential was always there. Bechervaise recalled that during the weekly muster and inspection of divisions, “I have known many instances of Captains and Commanding Officers seeing some slight errors...and knowing the man to be at other times careful, pass it by without saying any thing, which had they been taken notice of would have subjected him to punishment.”<sup>109</sup> On ships where such acts of kindness were unknown, however, sailors could and did make their dissatisfaction known

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<sup>108</sup> Richardson, *A Mariner of England*, 105-6.

<sup>109</sup> Bechervaise, 113.

in a variety of ways. According to Linebaugh, “Self-organization of the nautical proletariat consisted of mutiny, ‘running’ and malingering.”<sup>110</sup> The sailing brotherhood functioned much the same as proto-labor unions ashore. Their demonstrations were by and large communal endeavors and worked to resist the worst abuses of power and ensure they would receive the rights promised them as free-born Englishmen.

A frequent form of resistance involved trying to undermine the hated impress system. John Bechervaise recalled that in, 1809 having just returned from a voyage on a merchantmen, he found himself in port: “Aware that I should very soon become a victim to the impress, I applied to the agent on shore, who kindly gave me a shipping paper as a fisherman, which in all cases was a sure protection for the whole time it was in date.”<sup>111</sup> As though to justify this action to his readership he later wrote, “of all the places then dreaded by seamen in the merchant service, a ship of war is the most.”<sup>112</sup> Death in battle was rare; most men who died at sea perished in storms. His dread therefore is not fear of death but of ill usage and years toiling at sea without respite.

Sailors often acted collectively to usurp the power and authority of officers and, in extreme cases, the Admiralty, when they felt their rights were being ignored: the right to adequate provisions, liberty of movement ashore, and freedom from excessive punishment. Resistance found its most extreme expression in mutiny. Mutinies represented moments when the sailor majority wrested power from the officer minority in opposition to what was perceived as a denial of human rights. The term “mutiny” is

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<sup>110</sup> Linebaugh, *The London Hanged*, 67.

<sup>111</sup> Bechervaise, 45. He goes on to relate how that very afternoon he was stopped by a navy ship but upon examination of his fishing papers, was excused from impressment.

<sup>112</sup> Bechervaise, 108. He writes these words upon reflecting his own misgivings about his 1820 enlistment in the navy- an action borne of desperation. After years serving aboard merchantmen he finds himself without employment or money and enlists, immediately qualifying as a petty officer.

misleading to a modern audience who associate it with armed rebellion. In most cases, mutiny took the form of sailors refusing to weigh anchor until some grievance was redressed. Only in rare cases did mutiny result in violence on either side. Mutiny was therefore “the safety valve which blew when complaints were not heeded.”<sup>113</sup> Mutinies were almost entirely a product of the lower deck, generally occurred in port and must be understood as a shipboard labor strike. To end a mutiny there was a delicate, almost unspoken, agreement in which the sailors’ demands were almost always met by officers. This was a tacit recognition that officers accepted certain basic needs guaranteed to the ratings, their admission that the sailors under their authority were not slaves but free-born Englishmen who could only be pushed so far before they pushed back.

Most mutineers were reacting to harsh conditions at sea such as poor provisions. In this, mutinies at sea mirrored food riots on land that occurred when the price of staple goods became too inflated for the working man. Sailors also mutinied over excessively cruel punishments and the practice of sending sailors from one voyage to the other without leave (a common practice during the Napoleonic Wars when there were not enough sailors to adequately man all navy ships). Another frequent complaint was that neither the Articles of War nor Admiralty Instructions provided for shore leave for common seamen.<sup>114</sup> Leave was purely up to the discretion of the commanding officer and with the high risk of desertion, commanders were reluctant to permit leave in home

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<sup>113</sup> Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean*, 322.

<sup>114</sup> The Articles of War were first written in the 1650s and revised by parliament in 1749. 36 articles outlined the major crimes and were divided into four categories: crimes “against God and religion,” “against the executive power of the king and his government,” those that “violate and transgress the rights and duties which men owe to their fellow subjects,” and military crimes such as “yielding and crying for quarter.” To this was added the *Regulations and Instructions Relating to His Majesty’s Service at Sea*, an 1806 book with rules of conduct for ship’s officers—primarily victualing, cleanliness and divisions of crew rather than ship organization. Individual captains handwrote more ship-specific instructions for their officers.



ports. This lessening of freedom reached a boiling point during the Napoleonic Wars. In response, sailors banded together to resist and the number of mutinies between 1793 and 1815 is estimated at a thousand (the most notorious of these was the so-called Great Mutiny in the spring of 1797 in which a combined force of over 20,000 sailors refused to weigh anchor at Spithead and then the Nore).<sup>115</sup>

Despite their celebrity, mutinies were only one form of protest. In most cases sailors chose to air their grievances less dramatically. As discussed, sailors often chose to vocalize frustrations through song. One example is a song entitled “Captain James” (1810-1814) which served as a warning to abusive captains. The song began:

Come all you noble, bold commanders  
That the raging ocean use,  
By my sad fate now take a warning,  
Your poor sailors don't abuse<sup>116</sup>

It was told from the Captain's point of view as he recounted the torture, and ultimate murder of his servant, Richard Pavy for “some little offence [*sic*]” It goes into truly vivid and gory detail, documenting the physical abuses inflicted on Pavy (such as forcing him to drink his own urine when he expressed thirst after being tied up on the mast for seven straight days). Throughout these scenes the sailors sat by, seemingly unable to assist Pavy, but the Captain was mistaken. He lamented:

Sailors, seeing my intention,  
Little unto me did say;  
But they had me apprehended  
When we returnèd from sea.

I thought my money would have saved me,

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<sup>115</sup> Lavery, *Nelson's Navy*, 141.

<sup>116</sup> “Captain James,” Palmer, *Oxford Book of Sea Songs*, 119. Palmer is not sure if this song is based on an actual incident though he is fairly certain that it does relate to some degree on a real event. There are documented cases of captains tried for murdering members of their crew. For more information, see “song notes,” page 122.

Knowing the boys' friends were poor.<sup>117</sup>

The captain revealed a definite class bias, assuming his wealth and status would save him while the sailors' absence of money would prevent them from punishing him. He flippantly disregarded them as a threat and was therefore surprised when apprehended on their word alone. At the hands of his captain, Richard Pavy was dehumanized and ultimately robbed of his life. This blatant violation of his person mobilized the crew who collectively appealed to the authorities. Through this appeal they did not upset the social balance but worked within the social hierarchy to reset the tenuous paternalistic balance at sea in which sailor served navy, and the navy in turn, was expected to serve the sailor.

Another song entitled "A Copy of Verses on Jefferys the Seaman" (c.1810) also raised awareness of abusive captains. It told the true story of Robert Jefferys, a privateer's man until impressed by the navy in 1807. For unknown reasons the captain later listed him as a thief and skulker before finally marooning him on an uninhabited island where he remained until his rescue by an American schooner nine days later.

You captains and commanders both by land and sea,  
Oh do not be hard-hearted; refrain from cruelty.  
It is of Jefferys the seaman who though not cast away  
Was left upon a dismal rock by his captain, they say...

It really is surprising he could so cruel be  
Unto his fellow creature; lost to humanity  
And any Christian feeling; that such corrections there be  
It is a pity such should have command either by land or sea.<sup>118</sup>

The song was truly a cautionary tale, explicitly addressed to "you captains and commanders" it tells them to "refrain from cruelty." It was also a scathing critique of the Admiralty who deemed the captain fitting to have a command at sea.

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<sup>117</sup> "Captain James," Palmer, *Oxford Book of Sea Songs*, 121.

<sup>118</sup> "A Copy of Verses on Jefferys the Seaman" (c. 1810), Palmer, *Oxford Book of Sea Songs*, 180.

Upon Jefferys' eventual return to England in 1810, he received back pay and compensation. His former captain was meanwhile court-martialed and dismissed, a tacit admission from the Admiralty that captains were expected to be commanders of their men, but not tyrants. In this action the Admiralty revealed its own strict adherence to hierarchy in which captains, though masters of their own ships, were in fact still answerable to a vast network of superiors. Although it is doubtful that this song in any way influenced the Admiralty's actions, it does again reveal the collective nature of resistance on the part of sailors.

### **Conclusion**

Brian Lavery has uncovered numerous petitions to the Board of Admiralty from ships' companies showing that the ratings had *some* official channels through which to address grievances against officers. Most petitions complained about duties aboard ship such as being required to wash the ship and/or personal clothing excessively, or the unnecessary cruelty of certain officers in comparison to others they had served under. Though Lavery concludes that although he is unsure how much these petitions were honored, it is significant that they exist.<sup>119</sup> They demonstrate the reluctance of sailors to engage in mutiny and instead settle things through more official channels, thus reinforcing the naval hierarchy.

More significantly, they reveal an implicit recognition that sailors felt themselves entitled to certain basic rights. One such petition from the *Canopus* dated 1806 protesting excessive flogging reads as follows, "We thought our character stand fair in the opinion of all concerned and we cannot possibly bear being cut in pieces by one who

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<sup>119</sup> Lavery, *Shipboard Life and Organisation*, 420.

knows not our merit or demerit.”<sup>120</sup> Those rated as “able” seamen recognized their value and expected officers and the navy to accord them the respect owed for their knowledge and service.

The ratings were a distinctly subordinate group at sea, subject to the needs of the navy and the whims of their commanding officers. Yet even in this lesser position, they found ways to assert themselves and, in some cases, undermine the authority of officers when the officer was perceived to have overstepped the boundaries of what was considered appropriate usage of sailors. Together sailors worked to protect their rights as Englishmen. Whenever their pay was denied, provisions substandard, or rights of person ignored, they did not sit idly by but resisted: sometimes passively—through song; sometimes actively—by slowing work; and sometimes publically—through petitions and even mutiny.

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<sup>120</sup> Richardson, 220.

## CHAPTER 4

### “And Still Be a Rambling Sailor”: Portrayals of Sailors in Popular Culture

#### **Introduction**

The previous chapters have considered the sailor afloat, concluding that the wooden world was intimately connected to shore. Sailors at sea related to ideas ashore and participated in this wider dialogue on gender, class, and the nascent labor movement. But what of sailors *on* shore; what sort of world did they inhabit from the moment they reached port until the time they set sail? Just as the ship cannot be understood as separate from shore, neither can the shore be understood as separate from the sea. N.A.M. Rodger (1986) began his exploration of the Georgian navy with the following words, “Seamen have always dwelt on the fringes of settled society. The Greeks hesitated whether to count them among the living or the dead, and eighteenth-century Englishmen were not much better informed....Superficially familiar, the seaman remained to his contemporaries profoundly strange.”<sup>121</sup> Despite, or perhaps because of this strangeness, sailors were common stock characters in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century British popular culture. The abundance of maritime music composed by sailors has already been discussed, but sailors were often the subject of land-based songs as well. During the Napoleonic Wars, caricatures of sailors filled popular songs, broadsides, and comic operas.

The very otherness of sailors was a source of amusement and fascination for landmen. The portrayal of them was mixed, alternately flattering and degrading. Their position as defenders of the nation made them ideal symbols of the freedoms of Englishmen. Conversely, the mistreatment of sailors represented the failure of the

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<sup>121</sup> Rodger, *The Wooden World*, 15.

government to honor the privileges of that English birthright. Nevertheless, sailors were also depicted as drunken lechers. Sailors therefore became symbols of the vices as well as the struggles of the working classes. This complex fictionalized sailor was rooted in fact and, furthermore, Jack's own response to this character reveals the way sailors both reflected and reinforced their own stereotype.

Marcus Rediker wrote (1987) that, "Most of the seaman's 'peculiarities' resulted from the nature and setting of his work. The seaman had an unmistakable way of talking that included technical terms, unusual syntax, distinctive pronunciation, and a generous portion of swearing and cursing ....The seaman was also distinguished readily by the dress that covered his sturdy frame."<sup>122</sup> What contemporaries depicted in fiction was that these peculiarities did not vanish in port but rather, sailors were easily identifiable to landsmen by their clothing and language. Deep sea voyages have been artificially normalized by historians like Rediker. The sailor inhabited the world ashore more often than not and was therefore witness to his fictional manifestation on land. Certainly a sailor's way of speaking, dressing, and walking *was* informed by his life at sea, but considering that roughly 60% of his time was spent either on land or in close contact with shore culture while docked in port, Rediker's assessment does not explain the perpetuation of sea culture ashore.

To understand all the factors influencing sailor identity, it is necessary to explore both ship and shore including portrayals of sailors in popular culture. Sailor identity was a result of working-class camaraderie and opposition to shipboard hierarchy. Extravagant nauticalism ashore, expressed through dress, language, and virile masculinity reacted against an emerging culture of masculine restraint and politeness among the middle and

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<sup>122</sup> Rediker, 11.

upper classes. Simultaneously, to landsmen, sailors became emblematic of working-class vice as well as the struggles of the free-born Englishman. Ultimately, popular portrayals of sailors and their own shipboard self-identity became mutually reinforcing, thus strengthening working-class pride and solidarity.

### **Representations of Sailors as Working-class Men**

With few exceptions, the ratings traced their origins to working-class neighborhoods. In both word and image, popular portrayals of sailors attributed to them stereotypical working-class characteristics—both positive and negative. Of course such images meant different things to different audiences, particularly middle- and working-class audiences.

As has been discussed, the emerging concept of a two-sex gender model led to increasingly rigid and separate male and female identities. Simultaneously, Anthony Fletcher (1995) noted a widening gulf between the pursuits of the gentry and lower classes. As rough, masculine pursuits such as hunting, fighting, and drinking were ritualized among the upper classes, manners and restraint became the true hallmarks of masculinity.<sup>123</sup> Furthermore, the emerging middle class consciously crafted an identity in opposition to the laboring classes—one that was marked by its moderation, self-control and manners.<sup>124</sup> Its cohesion as a class relied on its otherness in relation to upper and lower class vices. The middle class established itself as the virtuous and moral opposition to the extravagant upper class and the rough working classes. Ultimately, this refinement of the upper and middle classes marginalized the working classes.

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<sup>123</sup> Fletcher, *Gender, Sex, and Subordination in England*, 295

<sup>124</sup> Margaret R. Hunt, *The Middling Sort: Commerce, gender, and the family in England, 1680-1780* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

The middle class criticized what they perceived as hyper-sexual working-class sexuality for, as Anna Clark (1995) has argued, “as public libertinism faded within the upper and middle classes, it became a stigma discrediting the working class.”<sup>125</sup> This idea was revealed in the play *Thomas and Sally: or, the Sailor’s Return*, published in 1761. Sally waited patiently on shore for Thomas’s return. Meanwhile, her friend Dorcas chastised her constancy to Thomas saying, “You’re grieving, and for whom?—‘tis pretty sport—/For one that gets a wife at ev’ry port.”<sup>126</sup> The idea of sailor infidelity was reinforced by Thomas’s shipmates as they returned to port singing:

How happy is the sailor’s life,  
From coast to coast they roam,  
In every port he finds a wife,  
In ev’ry land a home.<sup>127</sup>

Attesting to its popularity, this play enjoyed numerous reprints. Its stereotyping of the lustful sailor with a girl in every port is echoed in numerous other plays.

Perhaps nowhere was the figure of the randy sailor so exaggerated as in broadsides. Until the rise of mass circulation newspapers in the mid-nineteenth century, broadsides were the most popular means of distributing information to the masses. Broadsides were affordable, readily available, and the reliance on visual images in addition to text also made them accessible to a non-literate audience. With regards to sailors, the visual iconography was highly caricatured, casting sailors as either libertines or sentimental heroes.

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<sup>125</sup> Clark, 41.

<sup>126</sup> Isaac Bickerstaff, *Thomas and Sally: or, the sailor’s return. A musical entertainment. As performed at the Theatres Royal*, The music composed by Doctor Arne, Dublin: James Williams, 1773 (First published Dublin, 1761), 1.2. Bickerstaff (1733-1808), Irish by birth but moved to London to pursue a career as a playwright. His first commercial success was achieved with *Thomas and Sally*.

<sup>127</sup> Bickerstaff, *Thomas and Sally*, 2.1.



Featuring a sailor flirting with a woman, the 1781 print entitled *Jack Oakham throwing out a Signal for Engagement* (Figure 2) falls into the libertine group.



**FIGURE 2**  
*Jack Oakham throwing out a Signal for Engagement*. London: R. Sayer & J. Bennett, 27 July 1781. Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.



**FIGURE 3**  
*Jack Got Safe into Port with His Prize*. London: Robert Sayer, c.1780. Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.

The woman looks down demurely, face covered with a fan. Meanwhile Jack's gaze is firmly riveted on her bosom. Even more suggestive than his gaze is the object in his hands, an erect pole-shaped item which is a clear sexual innuendo. He dispenses with preliminaries letting the audience know his intentions are not courtship and marriage but rather a brief tryst. An even more provocative image from c.1780 is entitled, *Jack Got Safe into Port with His Prize* (Figure 3). Here Jack sits next to a woman in an intimate indoor setting. His hand is positioned on her dress as though in the act of pulling it down. Note his discarded sword, a phallic symbol pointing directly at his future conquest. She

herself offers no protest. For viewers it was readily apparent that this sailor will get his “prize.”

For a middle-class audience, there was a real warning in such images. In her discussion of the emerging middle-class, Margaret Hunt (1996) asserted that to the middle class mindset there was a correlation between moral depravity—characterized by sexual looseness and extravagance—and commercial failure.<sup>128</sup> Thus, whoring was stigmatized as a vice from which all others soon followed. The nascent middle class increasingly emphasized control and restraint. Middle class moralists appropriated sailors to serve as a warning. The image of the oversexed sailor was one that exemplified a complete lack of self-control and, ultimately, commercial failure.

Sailors themselves embraced rather than shied away from these unflattering depictions of libertinism. Their own songs frequently championed a sailor’s pursuit of new women in each port, lust for all, constancy for none. Certainly this image is not wholly untrue. The relative youth of most sailors (in their teens and early twenties) and the fact that the majority were unmarried certainly suggests that numerous romantic liaisons were a fact of life for many sailors. There is, however, a more complicated interpretation of the sailor’s adherence to the image of the lascivious wanderer, one attributable to sailor working-class identity.

The period was one of flux. Upper class masculinity was increasingly regulated and ostensibly chaste, and the middle and upper classes viewed the working class as oversexed. Working-class laborers responded by espousing the merits of bachelor masculinity and creating a male culture rooted in extreme displays of heterosexuality. In her analysis of artisans increasingly blocked from the traditional apprenticeship path in

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<sup>128</sup> Hunt, 162-3.

the face of burgeoning industrialization, Anna Clark wrote that in the absence of workshops, “They focused on a bachelor journeyman culture of drinking rituals and combinations.”<sup>129</sup> In a similar way, sailors ashore, deprived of their ships, found comfort and defined identity through drinking and womanizing.

Therefore, a working-class man would have understood these images of the lascivious sailor very differently from a middle-class viewer, and in fact embraced them as source of pride rather than a criticism. The working classes were forged, in large part, through the “struggle for the breeches,” a popular eighteenth century image reflecting male anxieties about women ruling over them at home that reveals the immense “contradiction between patriarchal ideals and the reality of the family economy.”<sup>130</sup> The struggle for the breeches articulated the inherent inconsistency in a system that at once required female labor to support the home and yet demanded that men prove their masculinity through control of that home. To a working-class man living in this period of change, the sailor wanderer was an object of envy. The fictional sailor was free of permanent attachments on land and free from the struggle for the breeches. His only relations with women were of a sexual nature, (as captured in Figures 2 and 3). Thus sailors were working-class heroes.

In the play, *The Poor Sailor; or, Little Ben and Big Bob* (1795), the character of Freakish the sailor admitted, “To the gay mart of London I hied me apace/ Toy’d with Phillis Sophia and Poll.”<sup>131</sup> To a contemporary audience, this statement would have had a variety of meanings. To a middle class moralist, such a statement would be considered

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<sup>129</sup> Clark, 5.

<sup>130</sup> Clark, 87

<sup>131</sup> Thomas Attwood, *Little Ben and Little Bob, or, Huzza for Old England: a musical farce in two acts* (London, 1795), 7.

typical of not just sailors, but working-class men at large whose oversexed natures threatened to bring chaos to society. To a sailor sitting in the audience, however, it is doubtful that he would have felt offended at this characterization and in fact he likely would have felt satisfaction in such a display of heterosexual conquest. Sexual prowess was to him an important part of asserting his own masculinity to his fellow sailors and other working-class men ashore.

Of course there were numerous fictional sailors who abstained from womanizing, remaining faithful to their sweethearts back home. To return to the play *Thomas and Sally*, though Dorcas criticized Sally for her constancy to Thomas, he did ultimately return to her. On spying the shore his parting words to his shipmates were:

Avast, my boys, avast; all hands ashore.  
Mess-mates, what cheer? Old England, hey! Once more  
I'm thinking how the wenches will rejoice;  
Out with your presents, boys and take your choice.  
I've an old sweetheart—but look there's the town;<sup>132</sup>

With these words he both affirmed the image of sailors in port having casual sexual relations with women while demonstrating that not all sailors chose to partake in that lifestyle.

Thomas's return could not be more timely—he came upon his dear Sally just as an unwanted suitor, the Squire, was about to rape her. The squire departed with the words, “Since her paltry inclination, Stoops to such as thing as you/ Thus I make a recantation,/Wretched, foolish girl, adieu!”<sup>133</sup> With these words the squire mocked the sailor for his low birth, characterizing this working-class man as a mere “thing” rather than a man, thus denying him his manhood. Nevertheless it is this sailor of lowly birth

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<sup>132</sup> Bickerstaff, *Thomas and Sally*, 2.2.

<sup>133</sup> Bickerstaff, *Thomas and Sally*, 2.5.

who was not only faithful to Sally but more virtuous than the squire. In this instance, the working-class sailor was portrayed as more moral, and consequently, more human than the aristocrat, thus subtly subverting well understood class-based stereotypes. Here the squire embodied aristocratic libertinism and the sailor, restraint. Perhaps Bickerstaff was inspired by the writings of sailors such as Samuel Leech who maintained their moral superiority over well-born officers when he wrote, “There is often more real manhood in the fore-castle than in the ward room.”<sup>134</sup> If so, it is an example of sailors directly influencing shore-based portrayals of them.

Recall the 1793 image entitled, *Jack in His Element* (Figure 1). This illustration could easily be taken from *Thomas and Sally*. In it a sailor just off his ship, still pictured in the background, returned to his sweetheart. Her hand is at her forehead indicating surprise, even shock, at his return. Perhaps she doubted his constancy. Jack’s arms are outstretched as though to embrace her. By her clothing it is clear she is no prostitute, merely a sweetheart left at home while he was at sea. The sailor was likewise sympathetically portrayed in the 1787 image *Jemmy’s Return* (Figure 4) in which the character of Jemmy supports his sweetheart who is overcome with emotion at his return.

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<sup>134</sup> Leech, Extracts from *Thirty Years from Home*; Quoted in Baynham, *From the Lower Deck*, 93.



**FIGURE 4**

*Jemmy's Return*. London: R. Sayer, 6 March 1787. Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.

It harkens back to the real figure of Jacob Nagle, introduced in chapter 1, who grieved so acutely for his wife who died while he was at sea that he could not even bring himself to write her name. In contrast to the libertine sailor portrayed in Figures 2 and 3, these two images of the sentimental sailor capture his emotional side—a man who was absent from home for long periods of time but who never ceased yearning for the woman he left behind.

In *Thomas and Sally* there was a multi-layered portrayal of sailors; Thomas remained true to Sally while his shipmates pursued unknown women ashore. Some songwriters attempted to square the circle, so to speak, and permit the sailor's behavior to appeal to a variety of class virtues. There was a song entitled, "The Sea-worn Tar" (c.1795) in which "The sea-worn tar, who, in the war,/ No danger e'er could

move...home again, forgets his pain,/ And seeks his faithful lass.”<sup>135</sup> This song championed the sailor’s courage. His bravery, and, more significantly, his loyalty were rewarded when he returned home to find his sweetheart had likewise remained true. These virtues of loyalty and sexual restraint would have appealed to middle class readers. The song went on to include a line that no doubt referred to a more working-class masculine sensibility. With the words, “Lock’d in her arms, enjoys her charms” this song permitted the sailor to affirm his manhood through sex, and thereby demonstrate his working-class masculinity.<sup>136</sup> Ultimately, diverse portrayals of sailors in popular culture depicted the complexities of Jack Tar himself. He was neither wholly loyal nor wholly philandering. Rather, the men comprising His Majesty’s Navy ran the gamut. Just as their own songs and memoirs revealed the contradictions between both types so, too, did sailors in popular song and literature. In this way popular portrayals reflected the negative stereotypes upper and particularly middle class moralists attributed to sailors as well as vices and virtues working-class audiences could readily relate to.

### **Sailor Propaganda: Conflicting Images of National Icon and Working-class Hero**

Sailors had been popular stage characters since the early 1700s. During the Napoleonic Wars, however, there was a veritable explosion in maritime melodrama and farce. The almost constant threat of French invasion necessitated the mobilization and unification of all Britain. Stage writers appropriated the fictional sailor to drum up support for Britain. Theatrical portrayals of sailors were intensely contradictory: though quick to show instances of officer abuses of power and class inequality, they also

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<sup>135</sup>“The Sea-worn Tar,” *The British Songster; or Pocket Companion: a choice collection of comic and entertaining songs, duets, trios, glees, &c, with a new selection of toasts and sentiments* (London: Minerva Press, [1795?]), 23.

<sup>136</sup> “The Sea-worn Tar,” *The British Songster*, 23.

applauded the bravery and heroism of sailors, thus undermining any serious criticism of the institution.<sup>137</sup> These Tars of the conveyed to the public that patriotism and upholding the social hierarchy were intertwined English virtues that must be embraced by the masses to ensure victory against France. Complicating the picture, it was a time when many working-class British subjects were struggling under the oppression of the politically powerful middle and upper classes: the violation of freedom represented by the impress system; and the silencing of political dissent in the wake of France's Reign of Terror. For the working classes, supporting sailors became a safe way to air grievances. By taking up the cause of Britain's brave Tars who toiled to keep the nation safe, non-sailors could express dissatisfaction with the working-class status quo nationwide.

The first act of the play *Little Ben and Little Bob* (1795) ended with a song performed by Little Ben in which he expounded on the bravery of his fellow sailors. The final stanza began, "First for our king and laws we fight,/Next for our trade and beauty,/Those to protect is our delight,/Our pride, our boast and duty."<sup>138</sup> This song is nothing short of overt propaganda for the British naval agenda—protecting the king *and* trade. These sailors did not question why they fought or why they endured the miserable conditions of life at sea. Rather, they unthinkingly fought, bled, and suffered to maintain the upper-class way of life. A more striking example is the song "Jack at the Windlass" (1793), attributed to Charles Dibdin, a leading popular composer of his day, which described daily life and toil at sea. One verse reads:

The gunners the devil of a lubber,  
The carfindo<sup>139</sup> can't fish a mast;

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<sup>137</sup> Jim Davis, "British Bravery, or Tars Triumphant: Images of the British Navy in Nautical Melodrama," *New Theatre Quarterly* 4:4 (1988), 122.

<sup>138</sup> Attwood, *Little Ben and Little Bob*, 8.

<sup>139</sup> Slang for a ship's carpenter.



The surgeon's a lazy land-lubber,  
The master can't steer if he's aft;  
The lieutenants conceit are all wrapt in,  
The mates hardly merit their flip,  
Nor is there a swab, but the captain,  
Knows the stem from the stern of the ship.<sup>140</sup>

The officers in this crew were described as useless; they did not know how to sail or are so self-absorbed as to be no assistance whatsoever—all save the captain, who did in fact know every inch of the ship. In this, Dibdin echoed the sentiments, and in fact songs, of sailors themselves who often maligned the officers but generally avoided criticizing the captain. Nevertheless, despite this superficial empathy with sailors over the poor quality of officers, nowhere did “Jack the Windlass” advocate mutiny or desertion. Instead it plainly enumerated the difficulties of a sailor’s life and emphasized the bravery of the “true-hearted sailor.” By presenting the incompetence of officers as a fact of naval life beyond contestation, and asserting the worth of the captain even if all other officers were useless, this song subtly reaffirmed the subordinate position of working-class sailors. Unlike songs that originated at sea and emphasized class differences, shore songs of the sea tend to minimize class. Instead, these songs presented a unified front against a foreign enemy.

Though numerous plays commemorated naval heroes of the age, particularly Nelson, stage writers most often chose to portray the common sailor—the generic Jack Tar, affable ashore, brave at sea. According to Jim Davis in his examination of theatrical sailor images (1988), “freedom...courage, heroism, manliness, support for the oppressed...all these were among the factors which made the sailor such an attractive

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<sup>140</sup> Possibly Charles Dibdin, “Jack at the Windlass,” *The British Songster*, 19.

figure on the British stage.”<sup>141</sup> Nevertheless, Davis has identified an underlying paradox in these fictional sailors. On one hand, by glorifying naval victories, these dramas, “seemed to endorse the rigid social hierarchy aboard a man-of-war and, by implication, within society itself.”<sup>142</sup> Alternately, he argued, “The sailor could be seen as the first proletarian hero, upholder of liberty and democracy, the first representative of the working classes as a fit hero for popular drama.”<sup>143</sup> There was a short but profound song entitled, “The True Briton.” (date unknown). Five lines into the song were the words, “our sweethearts we leave, nay our children and wives/ And brave all the danger of wars,/ We fight that the rest may live peaceable lives,/ And stand till the last in their cause.”<sup>144</sup> The sailors in this song were presented as selfless defenders of the nation. Any British subject at the time recognized that victory in the war against France would depend on the success of the navy and as such sailors were, for a brief time, elevated in the national arena as heroes.

Writing songs of gallant bravery in service to the nation served a somewhat darker purpose as well. In an age when the press gang struggled to fill quotas for ships’ companies, it was essential to motivate young men to come to their nation’s aid. No figures are available to ascertain whether songs such as this one truly impacted voluntary recruitment but it is a fact that the government encouraged songwriters such as Dibdin to write music to facilitate filling the navy’s ranks.

There is a 1749 pamphlet, author unknown, entitled, “An inquirey [*sic*] into the rights of free subjects.” Although it pre-dates the period under consideration, it is worth

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<sup>141</sup> Davis, 124.

<sup>142</sup> Davis, 140.

<sup>143</sup> Davis, 135.

<sup>144</sup> “The True Briton,” *The British Songster*, 92.

examining briefly as it marks an early example of how working-class sailors were used by public advocates to explore the rights, or lack thereof, of working-class men at large.

The pamphlet began by stating the rights of free subjects, namely:

That a free subject of *England* has an undoubted incontestable Right of Property, in his own Labour. That his Compensation must be estimated by the Degree of Labour, of Art, or of personal Danger attending such Labour; and that to deny this, either in whole, or in part, amounts to a Denial of his being a free Subject.<sup>145</sup>

This piece relays the rights of free-born Englishmen. From there this treatise considers the lives of soldiers and sailors who are denied these rights. They became the focal point of the larger discussion regarding Englishmen who remained disenfranchised regardless of public rhetoric promising certain basic rights.

The pamphlet authors stated that after “the severe Labour of many Years, in the Service of their Country” these “brave Servants of the Publick” now deserve to be looked after.<sup>146</sup> Instead they were unfairly villainized: “stigmatised, with the Imputation of several Robberies, said to be committed by Men in Sailors Habits: This has been the Cant of every News Paper. I verily believe, if the Matter were canvassed, it would appear to be very much, if not altogether, an unjust Aspersion. Thieving is not the vice of sailors.”<sup>147</sup> This sentiment was echoed time and again in sailor memoirs. Recall William Richardson’s autobiography in which he wrote, “whenever I hear of a mutiny in a ship, I am much of the opinion of Admiral Lord Collingwood, who said it must assuredly be the

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<sup>145</sup> *An inquiry into the rights of free subjects : in which the cases of the British sailors and common soldiers are distinctly consider'd and compar'd : to which are added, reflections on the fatal tendency of party contentions, corruption, and the prevailing degeneracy of public spirit* (London : Printed for M. Cooper, 1749), 32.

<sup>146</sup> *An inquiry into the rights of free subjects*, 6.

<sup>147</sup> *An Inquiry into the rights of free subjects...* (London, 1749), 6-7.

fault of the captain or his officers.”<sup>148</sup> Sailors and the unknown pamphlet author attempted to persuade their public critics that sailors were not inherently criminals.

The pamphlet author went on to claim that when soldiers and sailors did succumb to lives of crime it was in large part because of their abject poverty. The pamphlet asserted that it was necessary for the public to understand the root causes of the high rate of crime and dissolute morality among sailors and soldiers. A sailor in the navy, “is depriv’d of the high advanc’d Wages, which the Merchants Sailor has the Benefit of.” More importantly, the nature of naval life was inherently contradictory to the basic freedoms guaranteed to free-born Englishmen. Sailors were an easy personification of the cause of liberty undermined. As this pamphlet indicates, landlubbers were well aware of and disgusted by the abuses of the impress system—a clear violation of a man’s rights to his own labor—as well as the issue of back pay in which the Admiralty (partly to deter desertion, and partly because the naval machine was so large and unwieldy) delayed payment to sailors for months, and sometimes years.

Nowhere was this ill treatment of sailors more protested than during the Great Mutiny of 1797. When the Spithead mutiny commenced in April, the public rallied around the mutineers who refused to weigh anchor until the Admiralty provided better provisions, more adequate wages and improved care for the sick. The public recognized that these sailors were not revolutionaries who, inspired by recent events in France, wanted to overthrow the government and the aristocracy. Rather, they were merely pursuing those rights theoretically guaranteed to all Englishmen. Nevertheless, one month later when sailors again mutinied, this time at the Nore, public support was almost nonexistent since the original grievances had already been redressed. Public sentiment

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<sup>148</sup> Richardson, *A Mariner of England*, 105-6.

rapidly turned against the Nore mustineers when the mutiny turned violent and treasonous (with ships threatening to sail to France). Sailors could only remain working-class heroes if they played safely within the rules of the paternalistic society.

The image of the disenfranchised sailor was a potent political rallying tool. The cartoon entitled, “The Greenwich Pensioner” was one such example and dates from around 1803-1815 (Figure 5).



**FIGURE 5**  
Isaac Cruikshank, *The Greenwich Pensioner*, Written and composed by Mr. Dibdin. London: S.W. Fores, c. 1803-1815. Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.

This one legged man was a sad reminder of the human toll sustained during the seemingly endless war with France. This man lost a leg in service to his country and due to his financial circumstances was dependent on the government for life—a reminder of the responsibility of those with power in a paternalistic society. The plight of disabled veterans was of great concern during wartime. This image served as an admonition that the country needed to care for these men.

The theme of the neglected sailor was a common one in the public imagination. One shore song was in fact entitled “The Neglected Tars of Britain” (1800) and praised the sailor’s cheery disposition and unflagging bravery in the face of storms and battles at sea concluding:

When mad-brain'd war spreads death around  
By them you are protected;  
But when in peace the nation's found,  
These bulwarks are neglected.

Why should the man who knows no fear,  
In peace be then neglected?  
...Behold him begging for employ,  
Behold him disregarded;  
Then view the anguish in his eye.  
And say, are tars rewarded?<sup>149</sup>

Here the sailor was depicted as being reduced to begging upon his inglorious return. This stage song echoed the unnamed ship-born song from 1797 first explored in chapter 1:

If liberty be ours, oh say  
Why are not all protected?  
...Oh shame to boast your tars' exploits,  
Then doom those tars to slavery.<sup>150</sup>

With little to no exposure to sea themselves, landsmen learned about the plight of sailors through interactions ashore, sailor memoirs, and even sea songs which made their way into taverns thanks to sailors on shore leave. It is therefore quite likely that through songs such as this one, sailors influenced shore-based rhetoric of sailor mistreatment.

Fifty years after the 1749 pamphlet, "An inquery into the rights of free subjects," these songs still lamented that sailors who served the nation in wartime were deserted in times of peace. In contrast to "The Neglected Tars of Britain," "The Disconsolate Sailor"—likewise from 1800—told the same tale of a nation ignoring its heroes, but from the sailor's perspective.

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<sup>149</sup> "The Neglected Tars of Britain," Sung by Mr. Dignum, *The Jovial Sailor's Cheerful Companion, For the Year 1800, containing an elegant selection of all the newest sea songs lately sung at the theatres royal.* London: Crosby & Letterman, 1800, 5-6.

<sup>150</sup> Untitled song (1797), Roy Palmer, *The Oxford Book of Sea Songs*, 164.

When my money was gone that I gain'd in the Wars,  
And the world 'gan to frown in my fate,  
What matter'd my zeal, or my honoured Scars,  
When indifference flood at each gate.<sup>151</sup>

The existence of these popular songs bemoaning the fate of the sailor ashore reveal that the masses recognized the cruelest of ironies—that the sailors who fought to safeguard Britain's sovereignty were themselves denied the benefits of that freedom and thus became the symbol of working-class rights denied. Whether reduced to beggary or impressed against their will, these men claimed the rights of free-born Englishman but did not participate in them. Thus abandoned by their country it is in no way surprising that sailors clung together as a group while ashore.

### **Conclusion**

The term “extravagant nauticalism” has already been introduced as a means of describing oppositional sailor subculture that existed at sea *and* on shore. The shipboard uniform was created in the absence of an officially dictated uniform and as an assertion of sailor, and therefore working-class, identity. Of equal interest, however, is the sailor's “shore-going” rig—a uniform of sorts worn only during shore leave and described in the song “The Sailor's Return” (c.1790) as consisting of “Long-quarter'd shoes, check shirt, blue jacket, and trowsers like the driven snow.”<sup>152</sup> Far more elaborate than their shipboard clothes, sailors adorned their shoes with silver buckles, jackets with brass buttons and colored tape along the seams, and their hats with ribbons.<sup>153</sup> Figure 2 shows a striking example of the sailor's shore-going rig which looks very different from men's fashion at the time and clearly marked the wearer's occupation.

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<sup>151</sup> “The Disconsolate Sailor,” *The Jovial Sailor's Cheerful Companion*, 10.

<sup>152</sup> “The Sailor's Return,” *The Seamans Garland, containing six choice songs*. Preston: E. Sergent, [1790?].

<sup>153</sup> Rodger, *The Wooden World*, 64.

That sailor uniforms were not restricted to the ship alone but persisted on shore simultaneously marked sailors as “othered” to landsmen and as belonging to the seafaring brotherhood to other sailors—one that provided a sense of place, purpose, and comfort ashore. It was this external signifier that was parodied in popular culture. Clothing was therefore one aspect of maritime culture that meant vastly different things different groups. Landsmen parodied sailor dress and maligned its ostentatious style whereas sailors took special pride in their clothes. Shore clothes were treasured, trousers were kept a vibrant white and the entire ensemble packed safely away, only worn on leave. Clearly then, sailor dress was as much a reaction to men on shore as officers at sea. Sailors could have chosen to wear clothing that did not draw so much attention, but instead they added special flourishes to their work clothes, thereby offering visual confirmation of their sailor identity to landsmen and by extension, evincing a pride in their occupation.

In broadsides sailors are always shown on shore and in their shore-going rig. Part of that is explained by the fact that a sailor at sea was a figure wholly foreign to most landsmen. It is also conceivable that by only showing sailors on leave and oftentimes cavorting in port, critics visually implied their indolence, thereby rendering them scapegoats for lower class vice. Eighteenth-century satirist Ned Ward wrote a book about ships and sailors. In one part he equates university on land with “Old Nick’s Academy” at sea wherein sailors learned the “seven liberal Sciences”: drinking, thieving, whoring, killing, cozening, backbiting and, of course, swearing, the top science.<sup>154</sup> Prior to going to sea Robert Hay recalled, “My father charged me sedulously to avoid

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<sup>154</sup> Ned Ward, *The Wooden World Dissected: In the Character of a Ship of War* (1708; reprint London, 1756), 12.



drunkenness and swearing, two vices very prevalent in the sea-faring profession”<sup>155</sup> As discussed, however, certain “vices” such as swearing and especially whoring, attributed to the working classes by middle class moralists were, in fact, aspects of their class culture that sailors embraced as signifiers their manliness and working-class identity.

The link between ship and shore is significant for its impact on maritime history. Sailors performed for landsmen who in turn transformed sailors into stock characters in song, theater, and visual image. More than mere amusement, these images reflected conflicting ideas about the working classes. On one hand they were portrayed as dissolute, crude, and ignorant. On the other their bravery and loyalty in defense of the nation drew attention to the plight of working-class oppression. For their part sailors agreed with these various portrayals—embracing vice as a marker of working-class membership and asserting their service to the nation so as to receive an equal share in the rights of free-born Englishmen.

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<sup>155</sup> Hay, 37-8.

## CONCLUSION

Although maritime historians have increasingly turned their attention from ships, battles, and naval heroes to sailors, the topic of sailor identity remains elusive and contradictory. It is of particular significance because the Napoleonic Wars occurred in the midst of rapidly shifting ideas about gender, working-class and national consciousness in Britain. Understanding sailors through the context of their world in all its complexities is critically important for understanding not only Britain's navy but its working classes as well.

A sailor's life was a communal one both on ship, where they lived and worked together, and on shore where they lived in maritime neighborhoods and traveled in groups as protection against impressment. This communal living forged the backbone of sailor identity. Sailors acted out displays of masculinity for each other, proving their manhood to their fellow workers through bravery, loyalty, and heterosexuality masculinity. They also worked together to subvert naval authority in cases where there were perceived injustices. Whether during mutiny, protest, or song, sailor subversion was always a collective endeavor.

The key scholarly debate regarding sailor identity has focused on the ship itself and to what extent it was a world apart or a world connected to shore. Sailor songs reference sweethearts ashore, thus revealing how frequently longing for home permeated a ship at sea. Masculine identity was proven in large part through a sailor's relationship with women at home—either control of the household as confirmed by female faithfulness, or through sexual exploits that verified heterosexual virility. Sailor demonstrations of working-class collectivism were themselves a response to the class

hierarchy of the ship which was a transplantation of the class system on shore. Not only was shipboard hierarchy identical to the social hierarchy on land, but the sailor response to men in authority who abused their power and denied them the rights of a free-born Englishman was part of a larger working-class struggle ashore. Therefore, it must be concluded that sailors were very much part of the shore, not wholly separate from it, and therefore, Jack Tar was an integral part of Britain's working classes. Sailor displays of extravagant nauticalism were in fact evidence of working-class solidarity rather than a separate maritime identity. Sailors, like their working-class counterparts on land, grappled with situating themselves in a changing world. Through song, solidarity, and protest sailors expressed what it was to be working-class man at sea.

This thesis is only a beginning. From here it is necessary to examine additional influences on maritime identity, most notably race and nationality. With the recent emphasis on the Atlantic World rather than Britain alone, a re-assessment of the ship that considers both themes is essential. In *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (2000), Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker explore the numerous "points of contact, overlap, and cooperation" between different groups—slave and free; British, European, African, Asian, and American—who comprised the working classes in this period, concluding that collective identity transcended race and nationality. Since British naval law actually allowed for up to three quarters of a ship's company to be foreign-born, their thesis is intriguing. Though their argument goes a bit far in positing a nearly utopian proletariat Atlantic community united in a struggle against the powerful, the next step is to combine their assessment of the Atlantic World with a close analysis of working-class

consciousness and gender identity. Since the sailor was a product of his world on ship and shore, to understand his worldview, we must consider race and nationality in addition to class and gender.

## APPENDIX

### A Summary of Ratings and Officers: Rank and Duty<sup>156</sup>

#### The Ratings

**Boys Third Class:** Young men under the age of fifteen.

**Boys Second Class:** Teenagers under the age of eighteen.

**Boys First Class:** Youths in training to be officers.

**Landmen:** Adult sailor with no prior sailing experience.

**Ordinary Seaman:** A seaman who can perform most of a sailor's duties (1-2 years at sea).

**Able Seaman:** An expert sailor and one with demonstrable physical fitness.

Although the navy mandated the number of sailors and officers (petty, warrant and commissioned) required for vessels of different sizes, there were no official guidelines regulating the proportion of different ratings on ship. The ratio of landmen to ordinary and able seamen varied wildly depending on the experience and origins of the crew. Furthermore, disrating, when a seaman was demoted to a lesser rating, was commonplace as a form of punishment or as a result of frequent transfers to new ships with different commanding officers.

#### Marines

Responsible for defending the ship in combat, marines were exempt from the watch system and most sailing duties, only called upon for assistance weighing anchor. Under the command of their own officer, the size of the regiment varied according to the size of the vessel.

#### Petty Officers

The number and duties of petty officers was officially regulated according to size of the vessel. Officers were selected from among the ratings based on particular experience or aptitude. Selection as a petty officer included a modest salary increase but the position was never secure as it usually lasted only so long as the sailor remained under the same commanding officers.

**Captains of the Tops, Waists, Afterguard and Forecastle:** Experienced seaman in charge of supervising specific sections of the ship.

**Coxswain:** In charge of the captain's personal launch boat.

**Boatswain's Mates:** Responsible for awaking the crew, maintaining discipline, and passing the orders to change the sails, weigh anchor, or ready the ship for combat.

**Gunner's Mates and Quarter Gunners:** Assisted the gunner with maintaining firearms and making cartridges. Largest single group of petty officers.

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<sup>156</sup> Summarized from Lavery, *Nelson's Navy*, 93-104, 129-141; and Rodger, *The Wooden World*, 15-29.

**Quartermaster and Quartermaster's Mates:** Readied the hold for sailing (stored ballast and provisions); coiled ropes on deck; oversaw steering, and timekeeping.

**Yeomen of the Store Rooms:** Oversaw the storage and security of supplies for the boatswain, carpenter, and gunner, respectively.

#### Petty Officers in Rank, Future Sea Officers in Status

**Master's Mate:** A jumping off point for a career as a sailing master or lieutenant. Though technically a petty officer, the master's mate was looked upon as a future sea officer and therefore treated as a superior by both warrant and petty officers.

**Midshipmen:** Midshipmen had to supply their uniform, bedding, books, and navigational equipment; a costly undertaking that restricted this position to young men of means. A sort of apprenticeship for wealthy young men aiming for a naval career. As with the master's mate, the midshipman was viewed as a future sea officer and treated as a superior by both warrant and petty officers.

#### Warrant Officers

As with petty officers, the numbers and duties of warrant officers were carefully regulated according to the size of the ship. Whereas petty officers were so designated by the captain and lieutenants, warrant officers received a warrant from the Navy Board. As such, it was a rank the captain could not alter. Literacy was a prerequisite but there all similarity ended. The social background, status and position of warrant officers varied tremendously from sailors who had worked their way through the ranks to gentlemen who enjoyed the same status as commissioned officers. To understand the wide-ranging status and background of these officers they are arranged into three groups:

#### Warrant Officers Accorded the Same Status as Petty Officers

Among this group were numerous artisans with the status of warrant officer (armourer, sailmaker, ropemaker). Many such artisans were also referred to as "idlers" or, specialist non-seamen, who were exempt from the watch system and all duties related to sailing the ship.

**Armourer:** The chief metal worker who kept muskets in working order. Idler.

**Caulker:** Kept the hull and planks tightly sealed.

**Cook:** Generally a sailor who had been wounded or lamed in combat. Assigned to a particular ship and did not transfer. Idler.

**Cooper:** Worked as needed to make and repair the barrels that held the ship's stores.

**Master at Arms:** Taught use of hand-held firearms. Supervised the conduct of the crew and recommend disciplinary action as he saw fit. Usually occupied by a marine or soldier, not a sailor.

**Ropemaker:** Made and repaired ropes used in the rigging.

**Sailmaker:** Regularly inspected ships' sails, repaired them, and kept them dry. Idler.

#### Standing Officers: Assigned to a Specific Ship and Responsible for Its Upkeep

**Boatswain:** In charge of sails, rigging and tackle and as such, supervised the sailmaker and ropemaker. Worked with his mates to make sure sailors performed their jobs quickly

and efficiently. Often began as a sailor and worked his way up, provided he was literate enough to maintain the boatswain's account books.

**Carpenter:** Maintained the hull, mast, and spars with the assistance of his crew. Extremely skilled and respected. Idler.

**Gunner:** Took care of guns and powder. Often promoted from below decks.

In most cases, the positions in these first two categories represented the highest possible achievement open to the ratings. Thanks to a system of wealth, class and patronage it is estimated that a sailor had a one in 2,500 chance of becoming a lieutenant.

#### Warrant Officers With Permission to Walk the Quarterdeck

**Chaplain:** A position whose role and respect depended entirely on the commanding officer. Idler.

**Purser:** In charge of providing food and supplies for the ship. Had to be a man of means who supplied everything from his own pocket for later reimbursement from the Navy. Generally a standing officer who stayed with a particular ship. Idler.

**Sailing Master:** Navigator and keeper of the ship's log. Most senior warrant officer with status equal to a lieutenant.

**Surgeon:** Wide variations in skill and ability depending on the surgeon. Inferior in skill and status to a physician—but physicians a rarity in the Navy. Idler.

#### Commissioned Officers (Sea Officers)

Number and duties of commissioned officers officially regulated according to the size of the vessel. Had commissions from the Admiralty which assigned a particular post in a specific ship. These positions had a tremendous degree of security in that officers received half-pay during peacetime or when there were not enough positions available or, when an officer became too old to go to sea.

**Lieutenant:** The captain's right hand. At least one per ship. Had to have served 2 years or more as midshipmen or master's mate and been at sea for at least 6 years before taking the qualifying examination.

**Master and Commander:** Captains of smaller vessels (sloops). An intermediate post between lieutenant and post-captain.

**Post-captain:** A captain in command of a rated ship (the largest ships). Every lieutenant's goal.

**Admiral:** Promotion from master and commander to admiral was entirely by seniority so assuming a commander did an adequate job he would eventually reach the rank of rear-admiral at the very least. Thirty admirals in all: one Admiral of the Fleet, six admirals, eight vice-admirals, fifteen rear-admirals.

#### Miscellaneous Positions

**Clerks:** Personally employed by captains and, occasionally, lieutenants, to keep their accounts in order: logbooks, watch schedules, etc.

**Servants:** Worked for captains and sometimes the wardroom. Prior to 1794, most servants were young men of privilege too young to yet qualify as midshipmen. After 1794, they became true domestic servants.

**Stewards:** Assisted the purser with the distribution of provisions.



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## CURRICULUM VITAE

### Elizabeth Christine Spoden

#### Education

**Graduate School:** *Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI)*  
Master of Arts, December, 2010      GPA 4.0  
Emphases: Public History, 18<sup>th</sup> Century British Maritime History

**Undergraduate:** *Lawrence University*    Appleton, WI 54912  
B.A. June 2005, Magna Cum Laude  
Major: History      Minor: Art History      GPA: 3.721

#### Honors, Awards, and Fellowships

- Recipient of History Best Graduate Student Paper Award, February 2009.
- Recipient of a University Fellowship from IUPUI, competitively awarded to first-year graduate students by a University-level faculty committee, 2006-07 school year.

#### Professional Associations

- Accepted nomination as committee member for the American Association of State and Local History's Gen. X&Y Advisory Council, 2010.
- New England Museum Association, 2006 – present

#### Presentations and Publications

- Presented panel discussion on historical non-profit collaborations at annual New England Museum Association conference, November 2009.
- Presented paper on 18<sup>th</sup> century British sailor songs and their significance to maritime identity at the annual Mystic Seaport Music of the Sea Symposium, June 2009.
- Wrote encyclopedia entry on the British naval mutinies of 1797 for Blackwell Publishing's *Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest*. Published online, January 2009.
- Presented paper on grassroots historical preservation in Indianapolis at the Indiana Association of Historians conference, February 2008.

#### Work Experience

##### Newport Restoration Foundation, Newport, RI

**Education Department Assistant**    June 4 – August 14, 2007; June 2, 2008 – present

- Created and implemented public programs at three historic sites; including lectures, garden programs and tours, Road Scholar culinary history tours, student arts education curriculum, fundraisers for local charities, and walking tours.
- Wrote historic walking tour of Newport's 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century working waterfront.

##### Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art

**Curatorial Collections and Exhibitions Intern**    August 2007 – May 2008

- Created a research plan and conducted preliminary research for an upcoming exhibit on how the *Saturday Evening Post* influenced how Americans understood the West. Identified themes to incorporate in exhibit.