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The Sailor's Tale

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Abstract

This article explores the connection between a specific occupational group—long-haul sailors—and a specific genre of oral literature, the sailor's tale or 'long yarn'. The style and content of sailors' tales seems remarkably consistent both over time and space, with ancient, medieval, and modern stories of cannibals, whale islands, magnetic mountains, giant ships (ATU 1960H), among other repeated themes. The sailor's tale is reputedly both utterly fantastic yet simultaneously expressive of some truth. By investigating the function of stories and storytelling in the challenging conditions aboard ship—how they built reputations, established solidarities, intimated both resistance and accommodation—this paradox will be, if not resolved, at least clarified.

Introduction: Narrative and Occupation

My main interest as a folklorist is in narrative, but one of the things that has always bothered me about narrative folklore studies is the convention that assigns tales and other genres of oral literature to nations or other administrative divisions: *Deutsche Sagen* (1816-19), *Norske Folkeeventyr* (1852), *The English and Scottish Ballads* (1861) . . . Such titles make an implicit, sometimes explicit, claim to the congruence between a people, a territory, a culture—and ideally a state to protect all three. Even at the time of the Grimms, Asbjørnsen and Moe, and Francis Child—the compilers of the above-named collections—it was clear that the distribution of oral genres paid little attention to administrative boundaries, and not much more to linguistic ones, as these authors' own notes demonstrate. And in practice such collections were usually made up of material from a just a handful of individuals, who may have been more idiosyncratic than representative. Yet the practice continues, and while I suspect that today the motivation is less ideological than taxonomic, there is a residual identity claim: somehow these things belong to us, somehow they represent us. Folklore remains haunted by the phantoms of romantic nationalism, as Roger Abrahams put it (1993).

To escape such spectres, postwar folklorists turned their attention to the individual, the tradition-bearer to use a term that entered folkloristics

in the 1940s, and the moment of performance. And yet I must acknowledge that storytelling requires not just a teller but also an audience, a community in other words; it also requires some kind of collective tradition which, while projecting both in time and space, remains coherent, and therefore bounded. If I shun national communities and administrative confines, what other communities support the verbal arts, what other solidarities are evoked in, perhaps even created through, narrative?

A logical alternative to the geographical is the occupational: people who work alongside each other, day in day out, will both inherit and contribute to a distinct culture that relates in some way to their task. Within occupational lore, sailors provide an obvious example to anyone trying to escape 'methodological nationalism' (Wimmer and Schiller 2002). Notoriously, sailors formed, indeed form, 'a motley crew'—the phrase was already current in the eighteenth-century to describe the multi-ethnic character of a ship's company (Anson 1748, 28)—while the world of ships and ports sustains a recognizable and distinct maritime culture, operating at a supranational level.

The Sailor's Yarn: Truly Unbelievable, Unbelievably True

Tellingly, a narrative genre specific to this occupation has already been recognized. It has its own entry in that definitive guide to folk narrative, the *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* (EdM) under the headword *Seemannsgarn*, which translates as 'sailors' yarns' (Thomas 2007). The sailor's yarn, says this authority, is related to other types of 'tall tales', but is marked out by its nautical language, its distinctive content (seas, ships, crews, islands, weather . . .), and also a specific rhetorical style. It is exaggerated, it touches on the supernatural but also the farcical, indeed sometimes it is a straight lie told to deceive the gullible, the kind of story that 'will only do for the marines', because 'sailors will not believe it', as Lieutenant John Davis wrote of the story of Jonah and the Whale in *The Post-Captain* (1806, 72). (Davis's naval novel is the first attested use of this phrase 'tell it to the marines'.) Subsequent first-hand accounts of sailors who survived being swallowed by whales, such as James Bartley, crewman of *The Star of the East* in 1891, do indeed seem to have been deliberate hoaxes, even if they prompted scientific investigations (Davis 1991). Yet the sailor's yarn is told in the first person, and it could be an attempt to express something actually seen, actually done. Hence the term 'sailors' tales' often describes something widely believed to be erroneous, but which turns out to be true.

A clear example of this last characteristic of 'sailors' tales' is provided by Benjamin Franklin, who doubted what he had read in Pliny the

Elder about the benefits of pouring oil on troubled waters. However, while at sea in 1757 his captain explained, with some contempt for his ignorance, that the reason the ship's wake was so smooth was because the cook had emptied his pans in the scuppers. Later, in 1762, he heard an old sea-captain relate that Bermudians, when fishing, pour some oil on ruffled waters so they can see below the surface, while Portuguese fishermen use the same method to pass through the breakers at the mouth of the Tagus. He shared these sailors' tales with other natural philosophers, who themselves had heard similar stories, and this exchange led to several experiments, in Britain and the Netherlands, which were reported in Enlightenment science journals (Mertens 2006). These in turn stirred up a controversy about who had the right to label something as fact, sailors or philosophers? 'The learned . . . are apt to slight too much the knowledge of the vulgar', wrote Franklin about this episode (Franklin 1774, 447). Incidentally, the crew in Richard Hughes's great novel of maritime life *In Hazard* (1938) use this method to weather a hurricane. The same novel features an almost ethnographic depiction of Chinese sailors' yarning.

There are other examples of sailors' tales initially treated with scepticism, but which later prove to have some foundation. The premise, that behind the extravagant imagery must lurk some unexplained experience of the sea, is quite entrenched, even among folklorists trained in the fantastic. For example, Catherine Jolicoeur's study of one of the most universal of sailors' tales, the phantom ship, argues that such stories represent attempts to make sense of something encountered, even if no single convincing natural explanation has yet been established (Jolicoeur 1970). The same assumption has led to multiple attempts to locate the lands and phenomena described in those presumed treasures of sailors' tales, Homer's *Odyssey* and the *Thousand and One Nights*, on an actual map of the physical world. (For two overlapping but not consistent geographies for the former, see Bradford 1963 and Pocock 1965.)

However, there is also an opposite effect: things which were widely believed to be true can be dismissed as falsehoods, once it is established that they belong to the genre sailors' yarns. At the start of this century there was a dispute in anthropology about Pacific, and specifically Fijian, cannibalism. The anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere argued that two of the most famous and often cited accounts of Fijian cannibal feasts, supplied by the British seaman John Jackson and the American William Endicott, were just 'sailors' yarns', written to satisfy their public's desire for salacious stories. At the same time, they upheld a colonial hierarchy that projected the worst types of behaviour onto those who opposed European rule, and thus justified their conversion, suppression, even eradication (Obeyesekere 1998). This provoked a torrid response from

Marshall Sahlins, listing dozens of other, supposedly more reliable, witnesses to Fijian cannibal practices, with which he mounted an assault on what he saw as Obeyesekere's flawed, postmodernist methodology: 'Literary criticism of one or two European texts, reducing them to some fictional genre such as sailors' yarns, serves the purpose of obscuring the factuality of scores of cannibal events' (Sahlins 2003, 3).

This is a complex debate and I cannot do it justice here. Part of the problem is that both participants make valid points. Sahlins was undoubtedly right that anthropophagy was an element of some Pacific cultures, and to be fair Obeyesekere never disputed this. His focus was on how that practice was interpreted by Western colonizers, and inflated in the process. And Obeyesekere was undoubtedly right that sailors told stories of cannibalism as part of their world-making, defining an 'us' against an unknown, but threatening, Other. Sailors had been doing this long before European colonists encountered the Caribs in the Antilles: the origin of the modern term 'cannibal'. In the tenth century, Arab sailors shared reports of cannibal kingdoms on the east coast of Africa, several of which were recorded by the Persian sea-captain Buzurg ibn Shahriyar al-Ramhormuzi, who wrote them down in his book *The Wonders of India*, a work to which I will return (Shahriyar 1981).

Such stories had a direct effect on sailors' behaviour: when in 1820 the Nantucket whaling ship *Essex* was sunk by a sperm whale, the surviving crew decided not to make for the (relatively) nearby Marquesas, because they feared the inhabitants were cannibals, and so set sail for the more distant coast of South America. During that three-month journey, the castaways themselves engaged in survival cannibalism (Philbrick 2000). This practice was euphemistically known as the 'custom' or 'tradition of the sea' (Simpson 1984). Again, stories of survival cannibalism were part of the common narrative tradition of seamen, and that no doubt informed their ascription of the practice to others. Meanwhile, the story of the *Essex*, related in several survivor accounts and then reworked by Edgar Allen Poe (1838) and Herman Melville (1851), would have a significant influence on the course of American literature.

Sailors' Yarns, an Enduring and Ubiquitous Genre

Already I have touched on the ancient world, the medieval Persian Gulf, and the Anglo-American age of sail. The genre, and even the specific contents, of sailors' yarns seem remarkably persistent not only over space but also over time. Cannibalism is one of those tenacious themes of sailors' yarns, as noted in the *EdM*. Some of the others listed under this headword include giant whirlpools and waterspouts, floating islands, congealed seas, and magnetic mountains.

To illustrate the point, let us take the last of these, the magnetic mountain. It is mentioned by Pliny the Elder, and by Ptolemy, it is described in Buzurg's *Wonders of India*, it was visited by Sinbad, Saint Brendan, Herzog Ernest, and Huon of Bordeaux, among other real or fictional medieval voyagers (Tuczay 2005; Murrin 2003). It even has its own international tale-type number: ATU 322. And it continues to find a place in sailors' tales into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. James Cook gave the name 'Magnetical Island' to an island off the east coast of Australia in 1770 because 'the Compass would not travis well when near it', though as far as I know no subsequent traveller has experienced the same problem (Cook 1955, 1: 338). Even for Cook, rationalist hero of the century of Enlightenment, the sailors' yarn cannot be just a story one heard, it had to be experienced.

Another yarn that gets repeated through time and space concerns an island that turns out to be a giant sea creature. The version below was recorded by the Chinese Emperor Hiao Yüan in the sixth century AD:

Once upon a time there lived a huge turtle amidst sandy islets. The animal's back was covered with trees which made it appear like a regular island in the ocean. It happened that merchants came there, and believing that it was an island, gathered fuel with a view to prepare their food. The turtle was burned hot and dived back into the sea, whereupon several tens of men suffered death. (Laufer 1933, 501)

The Persian sea-captain Buzurg had also heard about such a turtle, while a similar story, featuring a whale, occurs in the Babylonian Talmud, the second-century AD Greek natural history treatise *The Physiologus*, the first voyage of Sinbad, the *Voyage of St Brendan* and numerous other travellers' accounts (Frim 2017; Tuczay 2005). Echoes of this story can be found throughout the Anglo-American literature of the sea, albeit often in ironic form as the decomposing bodies of captured whales became islands that sailors mine for their every resource. And in the nineteenth-century, the British Admiralty still received reports of islands or rocks in various locations but which they dismissed as merely sightings of whales.

A final example of a 'yarn' covered in the *EdM*, is the supernatural power attributed to Finns, particularly over wind and weather, and therefore the fear they inspired aboard ship. This superstition is well documented in Icelandic sagas, but it was still being repeated in the nineteenth century (DeAngelo 2010). Richard Dana, author of *Two Years Before the Mast*, encountered it during a yarning session on the brig *Pilgrim* in 1834. The ship's cook was scared that another sailor was a Finn, and when asked why, Dana

found that he was fully possessed with the notion that Fins are wizards, and especially have power over winds and storms. I tried to reason with him about it, but he had the best of all arguments, that from experience,

at hand, and was not to be moved. He had been to the Sandwich Islands in a vessel in which the sail-maker was a Fin, and could do anything he was of a mind to. (Dana 1899, 40)

When Dana, Havard educated cynic that he was, cast doubt on these yarns, the cook replied 'go 'way! You tink, 'cause you been to college, you know better dan anybody. You know better dan dem as 'as seen it wid der own eyes. You wait till you've been to sea as long as I have, and den you'll know' (Dana 1899, 40-41). A more clear-cut declaration of the experiential source of the sailor's authority would be hard to find.

As we saw in the case of the survivors of the whaleship *Essex*, such stories could have consequences. In 1866 a Swedish sailor aboard a British vessel, the *Raby Castle*, sailing from Penang to England, murdered another sailor under the impression he was, as the newspapers put it, 'a Russian Fin', whose presence threatened the ship.¹

These examples have, I hope, clearly fulfilled the *EdM*'s claim that in the sailors' yarn we are dealing with a specific genre of story: exaggerated, fantastical even, and yet its authority rests on experience, it makes some kind of profession of truth, and at least sometimes was sufficiently believed to be acted upon. Sailors' yarns seem to fit my criteria for narratives that escape any claim to represent a particular nation or geographical community; they belong, rather, to a multi-national occupational group which was remarkably loyal to its own traditions over both space and time, to judge by the ancient, medieval, modern, Chinese, Arab, and European examples I have just cited.

The Literary History of the Sailor's Yarn

However, it's worth reflecting on the origin of the term 'sailors' yarns'. It is not actually that old.² The first use of the phrase 'spinning a yarn' to refer to storytelling only dates to 1819, when it appeared in a glossary of thieves' cant:

spinning a yarn is a favourite amusement among *flash-people*; signifying to relate their various adventures, exploits, and escapes to each other. This is most common and gratifying, among persons in confinement or exile, to enliven a dull hour. (Vaux 1819, 2: 226)

The author of this glossary, James Hardy Vaux, was three times transported to Australia, so it is quite possible that he picked up the term from sailors. Similarly, the first printed account of an encounter with *The Flying Dutchman* occurs in a transported convict's memoir, rather than a sailor's (Barrington 1810, 116-18).

From 1820 onwards, the phrase was repeatedly applied to sailors, starting with a review of Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (Gilje 2016, 113). It would make sense for the term to have originated among

sailors, because ‘spinning yarn’ was a regular task aboard ship. It meant taking worn old ropes, untangling them, and twisting them together to make a new rope or ‘spun-yarn’, which was used for a variety of purposes on sailing vessels. It was a tedious, repetitive, one might say even alienating task, which did not require much exertion and left the mind, and tongue, free. ‘We can well imagine’, writes one recent historian of the American maritime world, that these sailors ‘began to talk to each other, relating their life adventures, and, being the creative sort, pushing the boundaries of the believable’ (Gilje 2016, 109). Giving the story a twist, one might say, and another maritime term for a tale was a ‘twister’ (Ringbolt 1847, 173 and 211).

Very quickly the term ‘sailors’ yarn’ became a commonplace. In fact, sailors’ yarns developed into a recognizable literary genre in the mid-nineteenth century, both within sailors’ memoirs and as obvious fictions. You can hear them in the writing of many famous novelists of the next hundred years, including James Fenimore Cooper, Edgar Allen Poe, Herman Melville and Jack London (in the United States), Frederick Marryat, and later Robert Louis Stevenson, Joseph Conrad, and John Masefield (in the United Kingdom) (Bercaw Edwards 2021). And this was not just an English-language phenomenon: the sea-novels of Edouard Corbière, Gabriel de La Landelle, and Jules Lecomte also appeared in the 1830s, and likewise make use of what they termed ‘contes du gaillard d’avant’ [forecastle tales] (Brosse 1983). Meanwhile, in Germany, Heinrich Smidt was earning himself the title ‘the German Marryat’ with his maritime novels and stories (Fontane 1885, 37). Most of these writers themselves had extensive experience of the sea.

Why maritime literature became so popular in the middle decades of the nineteenth century is an interesting question. Of course, this was a period of relative peace after the high drama of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, and many of these books were, at least purportedly, veterans’ narratives, such as the old salts in Greenwich Hospital from Cruikshank’s *Tough Yarns* (1835; [see Figure 1](#)). This was also an age that was turning to the ‘voice of the people’, witnessed not least in the development of folklore scholarship. The sailor’s aura of plebian authenticity and plain-spoken authority made him an ideal spokesman for the democratic muse: ‘His energetic fist should be ready to resist / A dictatorial word’, as Gilbert and Sullivan declared in *H.M.S Pinafore*, first performed in 1878, and which was both a satire on, and a celebration of, the sailor’s yarn (Gilbert and Sullivan 1879, 18). But nostalgia also played its part: the sailor’s self-proclaimed liberty—‘a British Tar is a soaring soul / As free as a mountain bird’ as the same pair put it—seemed the antithesis of the alienation and dependence threatened by the machine age and the bureaucracy of the modern life. Whether egalitarianism and personal

autonomy had ever really been maritime virtues is a question to which I will return, but they might seem so, when compared to the unremitting discipline demanded by a steam-engine, which simultaneously drowned out human voices.

Figure 1. George Cruikshank, 'Saturday Night at Sea'. Illustration to Charles Dibdin's song 'Saturday Night' (Dibdin 1841, 28).

However, the immediate question, in terms of apprehending the genre, is whether the term sailor's yarn, ubiquitous from 1820s and 30s, can be projected back to characterize earlier nautical tales. Can one use the phrase about *The Odyssey*, for example? Classicists frequently do so: for example, 'It is quite possible that exaggerated sailors' yarns played some role in elaborating the ultimate form assumed by the Cyclopes', writes Justin Glenn (1978, 143). And yes, it is possible, but we do not actually know if Homer, or the narrators and authors of Sinbad and Herzog Ernst were actually sailors or familiar with the culture of the sea. Even when it appears we are on safer ground, as with 'Captain Charles Johnson', the putative author of the classic *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pyrates* (1724, an important source of maritime legends), scholarship can undercut our assumptions with an attribution to Daniel Defoe or a number of other eighteenth-century London authors (Bialuschewski 2004). Recently it has even been argued that Buzurg ibn Shahriyar al-Ramhormuzi, author of *The Wonders of India* and self-declared sea-captain, was an invention and the actual author was a Baghdad cleric (Ducène 2015).

Storytelling at Sea and among Seamen

What, then, can we say with certainty about the practice of storytelling among seamen? 'Yarns are lost on the breath of the voice. A historian can never experience yarning' laments Greg Denning (1992, 74). But common sailors were a comparatively literate population; they had to be able to read and write if they were going to progress up the ranks. Sailors also had more leisure time for writing than most: in port when unloading, when becalmed, in prison or hospital. Perhaps more importantly, they were very used to giving an account of themselves—to shipowners, captains, consuls, governors, overseers of the poor, and so on. The historian Carolyn Steedman has argued that autobiography is really a proletarian genre, because labouring people were so used to narrating their lives to people in authority (Steedman 2000, 28). That is particularly evident in the case of sailors: their mobility, and the adventures and misadventures which were their lot, meant they were constantly thrown into new

situations for which they had to supply an explanation. These factors help explain why so many sailors' autobiographies have survived. Some of these were published in their own lifetime, often as a form of disguised charity; others were preserved only in manuscript. And these autobiographies often contain references to storytelling, and sometimes specifically to 'yarning'.

To cite just a handful of the many examples, the Icelandic Arni Magnusson, who spent two decades in the Danish Navy in the 1760s and 70s, wrote in his memoirs that there were occasions when the wind made the work so negligible that the sailors instead lay on deck 'sleeping or telling each other stories' (Heinsen 2017, 116). John Wetherell, a Whitby sailor who kept a diary while serving, unwillingly, in the Royal Navy through the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, is another witness to this storytelling culture. Serving alongside him was

Barney Appleby, a young man entirely void of learning, could not read his own name—in fact he knew not his alphabet. This man being a verry ready witted fellow as we might say made all the watch on deck amusement thro the night with his curious stories; he would take a book of any kind and open it, sometimes upside down, and repeat one of the Stories of the Arabian Nights, as correct as if he had been reading it out of the book, and continue every night in the same manner with a fresh tale every night. The Officers frequently on the first watch would stand all the watch laughing at Barney. (Wetherell 1954, 59-60)

We also possess indirect evidence, such as tale motifs and tale language being incorporated into sailors' memoirs. For instance, John Nicol, a Scottish sailor, while on St Kitt's in the 1780s, recorded that his captain

gave a black butcher of the name of Coffee a hog to kill. When the captain went to see it, Coffee said, 'This very fine hog, Massa, but I never see a hog like him in all my life, he have no liver, no light [lungs].' Captain Young: 'That is strange, Coffee. Let me see in the book.' He took a memorandum book out of his pocket, turned over a few leaves, and looked very earnest. 'I see Coffee go to hell bottom—hog have liver and lights.' Coffee shook like an aspen leaf, and said 'O Massa, Coffee no go to hell bottom—hog have liver and lights.' He restored them, and, trembling, awaited his punishment. Captain Young only laughed, and made him a present of them. (Nicol 1822, 59-60)

Folklorists will recognize this as a version of ATU785 'Who ate the lamb's heart?' The usual version features an old soldier and a saint who travel around together, and the soldier (having eaten an animal's heart, liver, or lungs) pretends that this animal did not have such organs. In the tale the soldier ends up rewarded for his lie, as of course does the butcher in Nicol's story. Quite how this narrative became autobiographical is guesswork, but it is clear evidence of the circulation of traditional narratives within the maritime world. However, as seems required of the

‘yarn’ genre, the events have been transferred from the once-upon-a-time realm of fiction to that of experience.

The French maritime historian Auguste Jal actually included the headword *conteur* (storyteller), in his maritime dictionary, explaining that ‘in years past, every French ship would have a man with a memory stuffed with jokes and old maritime traditions, who was employed as a storyteller’. He cited as an example the quartermaster, nicknamed ‘Pipi’, of the ship *Le Tourville* on which he himself served in 1811 (Jal 1848, 507). Samuel Leech, a sailor during the Napoleon Wars, made much the same point in his memoirs: men who could ‘spin tough fore-castle yarns’ were much prized aboard ship, including by the officers, because the latter appreciated ‘the effect of their influence in keeping away discontented thought from the minds of a ship’s company’ (Leech 1843, 73).

I could cite many more memoirs, but as the reader will no doubt appreciate from the dates I have just cited, these memoirs were really part of that post-Revolutionary, post-Napoleonic flood of maritime literature, in which yarning quickly became an established feature: Wetherell, Leech, and Jal were evidently readers of maritime books, as well as witnesses to maritime experiences. Therefore, we are faced with the same problem: how can we be certain that we are actually dealing with a distinct maritime storytelling tradition that has endured over centuries, rather than a more modern, and primarily literary, fashion?

This is not an unusual problem for folklorists, who are necessarily obliged to rely on surviving written evidence to reconstruct oral traditions which may be of greater antiquity. And they have developed analytic tools to help them in this process. For instance, can we draw inferences from the stories themselves? Are there particular reasons why sailors might have told these kinds of stories? Are there continuities in maritime life that explain why sailors’ tales had a consistent pattern to them?

‘The Great Ship’ (ATU 1960H): Narrative Competition and Collaboration

Let us take another example mentioned in the *EdM*: ‘The Great Ship’ (ATU1960H), a vessel of fantastic proportions, constructed with marvellous materials and crewed in the most extraordinary manner. There are examples of marvellous ‘Great Ships’ in ancient literature, for instance in the second-century AD novella *A True History* by Lucian of Samosata (Hansen 2002, 182-83). In more recent folklore one can find *The Merry Dunn of Dover*, a ship so large that it could receive a cargo of coal in Sunderland while simultaneously discharging in the port of London. The first mention of this vessel that I have found is in a letter to the editors of *The Mirror* magazine in 1823, written by someone who calls himself ‘Tom

Starboard' (1823; [see Figure 2](#)). This was a standard nickname for sailors, regularly found in ballads going back into the eighteenth century. The name itself is an assertion of sailor's declared autonomy, because all should give way before a ship tacking to starboard. This ship is similar to *Le Grand Chasse Foutre* (The Great Fuck Hunt), a ship so enormous that it takes two hundred years to raise the anchor, while a cabin boy sent up into the shrouds would come down an old greybeard, and when they pull up buckets to wash the decks, that is the cause of the tides. The first mention in print of this ship is in Auguste Jal's *Scènes de la vie maritime* (1832, 2: 97-100). It reappears in many French sailors' memoirs, each adding yet further implausibilities to the narrative, such as the train line used to carry orders from the quarterdeck to the mainmast or the cook using a motor-boat to stir the stew.

Figure 2. 'Mr G. Perren as Tom Starboard'. Theatrical print published by M. & M. Skelt, London, c.1830. [Courtesy of the](#) Philadelphia Museum of Art: Gift of the Philip H. and A.S.W. Rosenbach Foundation, 1953-70-497.

These Leviathans and their equivalents, such as the Dutch *Mannigfual*, Swedish *Refanu*, and the American *Tuscarora*, obviously owe something to maritime authors' familiarity with each other's work (Kingshill 2012, 83-84). And yet the tendency to exaggeration which they embody is also well attested in maritime oral tradition. Listen in to this conversation between two Chesapeake oyster fishermen, Harold Hinman and Link Ward, recorded, albeit at second-hand, by the folklorist George Carey in the 1960s. The first says:

You boys ain't never seen a ship. I was down in Norfolk [Virginia] and one of these foreign boats came in for coal. And this one boat loaded ninety-five tons, every five minutes twenty-four hours a day for three weeks, and never even got her waterline under water. (Carey 1971, 81)

To which the other replied, 'Oh, that's nothing. I saw a ship once that it took one hundred and twenty-eight gallons of paint to paint a quarter of an inch bead line around her hull' (Carey 1971, 81). One can readily get from these vessels to something the size of the *Merry Dunn* ([see Figure 3](#)).

Tom Starboard called these 'long yarns': 'a species of marvellous story with which sailors wile away the dreary "midwatch," and to astonish the wondering minds of such *green horns*, or land-lubbers, as may happen to be on board' (Starboard 1823, 154). Why would such stories be so persistent among this particular community? Of course, this could just be the exercise of verbal artistry for its own sake, but is it possible that such stories also perform a function? The folklorist Gustav Henningsen made the interesting observation that while long yarns were common among Norwegian long-haul sailors, he did not find much evidence of them in his

fieldwork among Danish inshore fishermen (Henningsen and Roberts 1965, 215). But then the crew of these inshore boats knew each other, were often related to each other, they had no need to establish their credentials; whereas the crew on a long-haul ship is assembled for each voyage from whatever sources of manpower might be found, and that was as true of the *Argos* as it is in modern times. Most of the crew would never have met each other before, and so each had to stake their claim to be a genuine seaman. Hence all these men say they have actually seen these ships themselves. And while no one is supposed to take these yarns very seriously, they do reveal a lot of maritime information which vouch for the sailor: you do need to know how a ship's decks are washed, what a bead line is, the relationship of the main-mast to the quarterdeck, for these lies to work.

Though perhaps I should say traditions rather than lies, because of course they were acquired as much as invented. The Canadian sailor Cephas Pearl wrote in his diary in 1884:

the yarns go round and round and you are not counted a sailor if you can't keep your end up. I now count myself as great an old shell as the general class, and when the yarn goes round of your adventures in marine life, why I tell of my trips to 'Frisco and different parts of the world that I have heard of, and as no person knows me or the difference, why it is hoisted in all right. (Sager 1989, 231)

In other words, these had started out as someone's else's story, but now he has made them his own. 'Hoisted in' as maritime slang for making a story believable was already current during the Napoleonic Wars (Davis 1806, 27). As Pearl's account makes clear, yarning was partly about comradeship, about feeling one is a member of a crew and being 'counted as a sailor'. Even accepting an obvious lie was a way to build up what folklorist Richard Bauman called, in the context of hunting stories, 'interactional credit' with one's peers: I won't call you out, but then you can't call me out (Bauman 1996, 171). But, going further, narrators actually collaborated in Great Ship type narratives, collectively shaping the story. Henningsen relates the case of two old Norwegian skippers: one tells about a storm in the Bay of Biscay when the waves were so high that only the funnel still showed above them, and then the other chimes in, 'Oh—that was the time—the time when the engineer had to carry smoke up in buckets' (Henningsen and Roberts, 1965, 195).

Figure 3. 'What May Be Expected After the Great Eastern', *Harper's Weekly*, 14 July 1860, 448. The SS *Great Eastern* was launched in 1858 and made her maiden voyage to New York in 1860 (Stack 2019). She was by far the largest ship ever built at that time and prompted a number of

commentaries in the vein of ATU 1960H 'The Great Ship'. Courtesy of Paul Stack: <https://theleviathan.info/gallery.php>

Forging Solidarities, and Hierarchies, through Storytelling

Historians tend to emphasise what might be called the class dimension of this kind of storytelling: listening attentively to your crewmates, imparting shared knowledge, the promotion of common values, all underlining 'the necessity of cooperation and solidarity in such an insecure work environment' (Rediker 2014, 16). But yarning was not just about generating solidarity, not least because not everyone on board even had the right to listen. Marcel Ledun, twelve-year-old cabin boy bound from Fécamp to the Grand Banks of Newfoundland in 1901, would wander as close as he dared to the sailors gathered on the deckhouse roof who were 'letting themselves be distracted by the chatter of a joker'. Excluded, he said to himself, 'For you too the day will come when, once you've rounded the cape of sorrows, you will have the right to amuse yourself, after your work!'. For the moment, however, he was just '*le castor*' (the beaver), a dumb animal who had no identity, not even a name. Even, later, when he was invited into the circle, that did not mean he had yet earned the right to speak (Ledun 1998, 54).

So while such storytelling certainly helped form solidarities, it could also be, even simultaneously, competitive, helping to establish a pecking order among the crew (for a comparable situation see Sidnell 2000). The shared conditions of forecabin life might make it appear that everyone was, literally, in the same boat, yet there would be several hierarchies working on board, some formal, such as rank, others informal, including ethnicity, the echo of which we might detect in Nicol's and Dana's characterization of the speech of their black crewmates. On the ships with whose history I am most familiar, the Breton and Norman deep-sea fishing fleet, everybody would be on a different wage: the amount did not necessarily accord with the sailor's nominal rank; rather it depended, largely, on reputation, as judged by the captain or—and this was the source of one of the competing hierarchies on board—the shipowner. Establishing one's experience, one's claim to be an 'old sea wolf', was a form of negotiation for better treatment than one's peers. And one of the ways to achieve this was through storytelling (Hopkin 2012, 100-101).

Boastfulness and self-aggrandizement were therefore part and parcel of this kind of storytelling: the places one's been, the things one's done, the officers one's faced down, the meals one's eaten, the women Details of erotic escapades seldom get recorded in printed texts, but many sailor memoirists mention that they were the highlight of such sessions. According to Samuel Leech, an Oxfordshire sailor who had

deserted into American service, the highly sought-after yarns of his fellow Englishman Richard Dickinson 'were by no means favorable in their moral effects on the listener. They generally consisted in fictitious adventures on the sea and on the shore, plentifully interlarded in their recital with profane oaths and licentious allusions' (Leech 1843, 258). Such storytelling was an assertion of the prowess of the individual through their adventures and their triumphs. Indeed, it was an assertion of their existence as an individual in a world where they were regularly reduced just to their labour input, literally counted in terms of 'hands'.

One could also think of this kind of extravagant storytelling as a form of compensation, because actual conditions in a crowded forecabin were terrible. Constantly damp, hungry (or at least hungry for decent food—the most regular complaint), physically exhausted if not ill or injured, subject to arbitrary and sometimes brutal discipline, deprived of female company. Quartermaster Pipi's giant ship, *Le Grand Chasse Foutre*, was a kind of Land of Cockayne for sailors, or perhaps more accurately a sailors' paradise whose crew they joined after death, where there was always food and drink and tobacco galore. None of Pipi's tales, as recorded by Jal, have much narrative content, they are just fantasies, focused on the things sailors want but cannot have. In one tale a sailor from Saint Malo encounters a ship captained by an Indian princess and crewed by other beauties. They invite him on board, ply him with food and drink, take him to the king, who insists that he marry his daughter and inherit his kingdom (Jal 1832, 81-88). This is not unusual: many seamen's tales are similarly plotless, the hero simply wanders from one gratification to another, including the gratification of getting the better of one's superiors (Hopkin 2012, 106). Their very formlessness is suggestive of their cathartic function. And yet the effect of such a narrative relies on the fact that, as Pipi's listeners would have known, various soldiers and sailors in the Napoleonic and post-Napoleonic world had washed up on the shores of India, and somehow managed to become leading figures in the courts of Indian princes (Grey 1929).

Resistance and Rapprochement in Storytelling

Catharsis helps us to understand the exaggeration, and the fantasy, within the practice of yarning. But to return to the starting point of this lecture, while sailors' tales might be a synonym for a lie, they were also expected to contain some truth, albeit in a disguised or distorted form. This paradox is comprehensible: despite sailors' reputation for candour, a ship was a dangerous place in which to openly voice all one's opinions. According to the sailor William Robinson, who joined the Royal Navy in 1805, and

writing under the pseudonym 'Jack Nasty-face', and using the kind of sea-inspired metaphor which is characteristic of maritime literature:

Whatever may be said about this boasted land of liberty, whenever a youth resorts to receiving ship for shelter and hospitality, he, from that moment, must take leave of the liberty to *speak*, or to act; he may *think*, but he must confine his thoughts to the *hold* of his mind, and never suffer them to escape the *hatchway* of utterance. (Robinson 1836, 1; original italics)

'Sailors raised grumbling to an art form', writes Greg Denning, the historian of the mutiny on the *Bounty* (Denning 1992, 73), and indeed the term 'Jack Nasty-face' became Naval slang for a grouser. However, any direct criticism of officers or conditions could lead to punishment. According to the British Navy's 'Articles of War', 'if any person in or belonging to the fleet shall utter any words of sedition or mutiny, he shall suffer death'. Similarly, anyone who failed to report 'traitorous or mutinous words spoken by any, to the prejudice of His Majesty or government, or any words, practice or design, tending to the hindrance of the service' would also be court-martialled. Evidently politics was out as a topic of conversation, but even grumbling about the quality of the food or other complaint could lead to dire consequences, because 'no person in the fleet, upon any such or other pretence, shall attempt to stir up any disturbance'.³

The rules aboard merchant vessels might not have been so draconian, but commercial ships' articles would include disciplinary obligations and warnings. And even without written injunctions to keep one's thoughts to oneself, there were reasons why sailors chose not to talk too much, or only in a particular manner. Each crew had to share the same tiny space, the same miserable conditions, the same faces over the table, for months, even years at a time. Almost any serious topic of discussion was, therefore, potentially explosive, because as the Navy's 'Articles of War' put it 'reproachful or provoking speeches or gestures' might tend to make 'quarrel or disturbance', which was also a court-martial offence.

Historians have regularly written that sailors were a Godless lot, but to judge by those who have left their memoirs that is not necessarily true. Rather, as the historian Brian Rouleau explains, 'for most sailors the overt exhibition of religious sentiment, with its tendency to devolve into conflict, became anathema to shipboard circumstances' (Rouleau 2007, 34). Politics too might be discouraged for the same reason, hence the pejorative nickname 'Jack Nasty-face' could also be applied to forecandle radicals (Clarke 1827, 49). Yarning was a much safer form of social interaction, and the very act of taking part demonstrated that you

understood that lies were sometimes better than truth. That is another part of what Bauman termed 'interactional credit': there are things that we can talk about, and then there are things that we mutually agree are off-limits.

Yet, you might want to say something of import to your crewmates. How can you intimate your thoughts? For instance, shall we desert? Sailors often did desert one ship for another, but they did not always like to take this step alone: they wanted a friend to come with them. But that necessarily meant opening a conversation which could, if reported, lead to dire consequences. It is surprising how often this difficulty comes up in sailors' memoirs. For instance, this is Robert Hay, a Scots sailor, press-ganged in 1811, and thinking about escaping. He noticed another man on board the guardship looking wistful:

He doubtless had observed my conduct also, for he frequently looked very earnestly at me as we had occasion to pass each other. We soon came on speaking terms, and from that time forth seemed to enjoy much pleasure in each other's company. Still, however, we abstained from introducing a subject in which it was evident enough both of us had very closely at heart. It was not till after a good many days acquaintanceship had elapsed and many conversations on indifferent topics held that we ventured to open our minds to each other. This was done slowly and with great precaution at first, but soon finding how much our sentiments were in unison we dismissed reserve and became inseparable. (Hay 1953, 225)

How can you say without saying? The apparent lie concealing a truth is one mechanism, particularly if doubly cloaked by the authority of tradition: I'm not saying anything about this ship, or this captain, or this voyage, because this is just how the story goes.

This reluctance to be explicit might also explain sailors' reputation for superstition: because that too was a way of saying without saying. 'Every one knows that sailors, as a class, are superstitious', wrote the American seaman and later long-haul captain John Codman, under the pseudonym Captain Ringbolt, and the same comment comes up time and again in sailors' memoirs (Ringbolt 1847, 152). Warnings, omens, foreshadowings, fetches, these are the recurring elements of sailors' yarns, and some sailors' memoirs are genuine compendiums of supernatural lore. But as Karl Bell puts it, 'ghosts are functional entities' (Bell 2014, 53). For example, the folklorist George Carey recorded a Chesapeake oyster-boat skipper, Goreman Tull, explaining how he had lost his command. A black sailor on his ship had tripped on the mound of oysters that covered the deck, fallen overboard, and drowned. Thereafter this skipper was unable to recruit any more black sailors from the waterfronts of Annapolis and Baltimore, because his boat was deemed 'unlucky', or more specifically haunted, either in the form of a man or

giant black snake. No one was directly accusing the captain of undercrewing, or overloading the boat, though the latter was a regular problem with such vessels. Such accusations might lead to confrontation, perhaps even to court, which would be time-consuming and costly for everyone involved, whatever the result. But the point was made and in the end this skipper was forced to sell his boat (Carey 1971, 168-70).

One could also benefit from positive omens: William Whitecar, who served four years on New England whalers in the 1850s, wrote, 'Seamen as a class, being superstitious, are always eager to sail in a ship with which some favorable omen is or has been connected' (Whitecar 1860, 15). But as Rouleau observes, sailors were competent judges of the seaworthiness of a vessel and the proficiency of its officers; the point is they chose to frame their judgements in terms of signs and omens, because that was the common language of maritime life (Rouleau 2007, 49).

Again, historians have tended to emphasise the class affirming elements of such communications, the possibilities that storytelling created for resistance, whether through desertion, strikes (a term that originated at sea), the assertion of maritime traditions as a form of 'working to rule', or even mutiny. For Marcus Rediker, sailors' yarns were revolutionary in their potential: 'Within the enclosed, repressive space of the ship, an engine of capitalism, emerged dreams of freedom, stories of new ways of being, transcendent and sometimes utopian' (Rediker 2014, 18). But such dreams first required a reckoning with the immediate oppressor, the ship's officers. It is certainly not difficult to find sailors' tales inflected with such hostility, and the threat of violence. Take, for example, the Norwegian sailor, Nils Trosner, who kept a diary of the four years he served in the Danish Navy from 1710 to 1714. He related a ghost story he had heard on board about a ship's master who used to curse and beat a common sailor. In the end the sailor killed himself by jumping into the sea, but as he jumped, he said: 'You who is to blame for my death, will get misfortune.' The following night a watchman saw the sailor's ghost enter the ship, and that same night, the master broke his neck slipping in his cabin. This or very similar stories of a captain haunted and punished by a sailor he had driven to suicide, can be found multiple times in the nineteenth-century Anglo-American literature of the sea. The message is clear: abusive officers will receive their come-uppance, perhaps by supernatural means, perhaps (as I think is hinted here) by human agency (Heinsen 2017, 120).

This sounds like the sailors were building a culture of resistance within the forecabin, a sort of class consciousness. But I suggest that does not quite capture how the story works. After all, we do not know if any of these events actually happened, whether the Danish captain

actually broke his neck; all we have is the story, the tradition. And on commercial vessels at least, most officers would have started life as common sailors: they also knew these traditions, and because they were familiar with the same stories, references to them could be used to deliver warnings between the men and their officers about the expectations each had of the other. Sailors might not be permitted to complain, but they were able to narrate, and on the narrow space formed by a sailing ship, inevitably officers would be among the audience, unintended or, in fact, intended.

Officers' listening in to the men's yarns is a common motif in novels by Marryat, La Landelle, Corbière, and their fellows. But these men were also captains, so it seems plausible that this was a common practice. In fact we know so, because the Whitby sailor John Wetherell told us earlier that 'The officers . . . would stand all the watch laughing at Barney' and his stories' (Wetherell 1954, 60). In which case, the fictional qualities of the sailor's yarn might mask the communication of real concerns. Or as Brian Rouleau puts it: 'Unable to express distress verbally for fear of punishment, seamen did the next most logical thing, which was of course to let the ghosts do it for them. Able to avoid retribution while subtly critiquing their officers, sailors utilized their beliefs to serve a definite social function relevant to their experience' (Rouleau 2007, 57). The value of cooperation did not just extend to crewmates, it could encompass officers too.

Conclusion

This survey has been, in part, just an attempt to round out an entry in the *EdM*. It has also been, I hope, an opportunity to introduce folklorists to some relatively recent work by historians who take the practice of maritime yarnning seriously and who have engaged with yarns as a historical source. On the whole these historians, and I am among that number, offer a functionalist interpretation of sailors' tales. Yarns may not be true in a literal sense, but they express a truth about a particular community, its values and aspirations, and reveal to us something of its mechanics—about how people managed to rub along together. However, a social functionalist interpretation might become as reductive as essentialism linked to nation and ethnicity. Stories always escape our attempts to pigeonhole them, to make them say just one thing. And of course, just as they also roam over geographical boundaries, so they can cross between occupational categories. Is a yarn told by a Chinese emperor still a sailor's tale, or has it become an emperor's tale? Other people tell ghost stories, there are 'great farms' and 'great animals'

alongside 'great ships', while tall tales are not restricted to sailors—though they generally are associated with male homosocial labour groups, such as logging crews and hunting parties. Nonetheless, I maintain that some oral genres display distinct characteristics that might reasonably be connected to particular social circumstances, including those of labour, and that our appreciation of storytelling is enriched when folklorists take these into account. The conditions of shipboard life—danger, boredom, repetition, discipline, hierarchy—all in a very small space, all for a very long time, did generate a particularly concentrated form of storytelling, a potent mixture of self-aggrandizement and self-concealment, of personal experience and rampant fantasy, of incredible lies and some measure of truth.

Notes

¹ 'Extraordinary Charge of Murder', *Derbyshire Times*, Saturday, 20 April 1867, 3.

² Because the word 'yarn' appears as a synonym for 'tall tale' in English texts of *The Odyssey*, its venerability is sometimes assumed. However, its first use in that context is in E. V. Rieu's 1946 translation; it is not in the original Greek (Homer 1946, 185). There is also a widespread assumption in folkloristics that the phrase 'to spin a yarn' is associated with women's textile work, and that it encapsulates the feminine nature of oral storytelling 'whose role is to transmit the secret truths of culture itself' (Rowe 1989, 57). While this association seems plausible, the history of the phrase in print, at least in English, suggests other connections.

³ The 1749 Navy Act, 22 Geo. 2, c. 33. s. xix-xxi.

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