

Appeasing Neptune: The Functions of Nautical Tradition

Louisa W. Pittman

Introduction

Several years ago, I had the unique opportunity to become a working member of the historic sailing ship community. I had no background in sailing and started with absolutely no practical knowledge of what I was getting into, but, like most American children, I had grown up with a rather fairy-tale image of historic ships associated with pirates and tropical islands and lots of men with eye-patches going around saying things like “Arrgh, me matey” and “Shiver me timbers.” It was this somewhat romantic notion which caused me to act on a friend’s recommendation to take an entry-level position as a deckhand on a small New Jersey schooner while I was still very young and in desperate need of a job. I continued for six more years working on seven different ships, both originals and replicas, which ranged from early seventeenth- to early twentieth-century schooners and square-riggers.

Like most “greenhands,” or first-time deckhands, my initial fantasies of the romantic sailor’s life were quickly dispelled by the wet, cold reality of the life of the tallship sailor, but, at the same time, I found myself being initiated into a world which seemed to the outsider just as bizarre and unlikely as any pirate story or fairy tale. It was a world of sea monsters and ghost ships, of freak storms and rogue waves. It was a world in which a perfectly ordinary man from New England could pour the last swallow from a bottle of rum into the water as an offering to Neptune without anybody so much as batting an eye. I had become part of a culture with its own language and customs which remains, even in our modern world, almost completely foreign to those on land.

Chrestomathy: Annual Review of Undergraduate Research, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, School of Languages, Cultures, and World Affairs, College of Charleston
Volume 5, 2006: pp. 198-226

© 2006 by the College of Charleston, Charleston SC 29424, USA.

All rights to be retained by the author.

I was particularly intrigued by the way those operating these vessels were able to maintain a continual balance between the modern and the traditional. Modern technology is necessary to operate in today's naval world and fast-paced way of life, but the whole idea behind keeping these ships sailing is to keep alive skills and traditions which would otherwise only be found in books.

The result of this continuous struggle between the old and the new is a strange blending in the person of today's tallship sailor, who can function quite well in the modern Merchant Marine with its increasingly complex technology, but who still manages to approach sailing life with a stubborn hold on the traditional. I worked for a captain in Maine who considered himself a man of logic and reason; he scoffed at all forms of religion and superstition, but saw no contradiction in flying into a rage if anyone whistled on his ship. When questioned, the captain made the same reply made by most tallship sailors to explain such tendencies, "It's tradition." This reply suggests a question which this paper attempts to answer: why do these traditional folkways and beliefs still have a hold on today's sailor? If it were merely a matter of keeping alive a piece of history, one would expect nautical beliefs to be presented the same way an explorer's chart of the New World might be, as being of some academic interest but no longer of much practical use. There must then be some function that the beliefs and customs serve which prompts even today's sailors to see them as a necessary part of shipboard life, even though most nautical traditions go against modern "reason" and "logic."

To develop an explanation, it will be necessary to study the customs and folklore of modern sailors in an historic context, to show what continuity or variation has occurred over the centuries. I have chosen to make a comparison with British ships at the height of England's naval power during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. This period was one in which most of the customs held by modern sailors were considered part of everyday life on European and American ships, and so historic accounts are readily available to provide verification of these folkways, though rarely explanation. Most of the explanations for particular customs and beliefs that I offer here have been put together by combining what historians have to say about them with explanations suggested by modern tallship sailors.

To supplement my own knowledge and experience in the area of maritime folklore, I also engaged in a limited amount of ethnographic research by conducting informal interviews with two of my acquaintances in the traditional sailing community. The first I will call “Carver”; he is a practicing shipwright and carver who has spent most of his adult life working on traditional tallships, and who has participated in the building and restoration of at least ten ships. I have had the opportunity to sail on two of these ships, and both of us are currently working on the project to build a nineteenth-century schooner here in Charleston, South Carolina. My second interview was with a captain I have known for twelve years, to whom I will refer as “Cap,” since that was his nickname onboard ship. I worked with him on two different square-rig ships, one nineteenth-century original and one seventeenth-century replica, and I would consider him to be one of America’s leading authorities on practical rigging and the handling of seventeenth-century square-rig vessels.

It is hard for someone outside of the maritime community to fully grasp what the ship means to the sailor. The common British sailor in the historic Royal Navy viewed the ship as a living, breathing entity in a way that has no true analogue on land. To him, the ship was a person with her own thoughts and feelings, moods and eccentricities. Treat her well, and she will keep you safe, but slight or neglect her, and she may abandon you to the mercies of the pitiless ocean. (The appropriate pronoun is always “she” instead of “it.”) In the eighteenth-century sailor’s mind, the ship was inextricably linked with a unique personality, be it good or bad. Though no modern tallship sailors will admit to really believing the ship to be alive, most will talk in the same manner as their eighteenth-century counterparts. Rather than saying it is difficult to tack a particular ship, for example, they will say she doesn’t *like* to tack, as if the ship herself had a preference in the matter. It is important to keep this personification in mind, since it plays an important role in the reasoning behind many of the maritime customs I will discuss.

As with all folk traditions, maritime folklore serves several functions at the same time. In his essay, “Four Functions of Folklore,” William R. Bascom maintains that all folklore serves four basic purposes: (1) to amuse or entertain, by bringing up or laughing at things that would not normally be discussed or laughed at; (2) to justify or validate a culture’s

institutions and rituals; (3) to educate; and (4) to maintain conformity to accepted patterns of behavior by showing approval for those who do conform. To these four functions I would add a fifth which seems to be extremely important in maritime culture particularly, and that is to give individuals a sense of control over uncontrollable events and elements.

This last function is the common thread running through almost every aspect of maritime folklore. There is nothing I can think of in our day which comes close to paralleling the complete lack of choice the common sailor in the British Navy had over anything in his life at sea. The weather, the enemy, and his superiors decided when he slept, ate, bathed, worked, relaxed, and, not uncommonly, when he died. Even today, it is often said that “being at sea is a lot like being in prison...with the added chance of drowning.” The origin of this saying is unclear, but it has been repeated on almost every ship I have worked on. The modern tallship sailor has slightly more control over his destiny, but ships are still one of the last bastions of the absolute monarchy in which the captain rules with unopposed authority as head of a strict hierarchy. It is thus understandable that the average sailor wants — even strives — to have some sense of control, even if it is in the form of what might be considered superstitious belief.

I have divided the many forms of maritime folklore into four broad categories: (1) customs in shipbuilding; (2) taboo and ritual in daily shipboard life; (3) folklore dealing with people, animals, and creatures; and (4) nautical words and language, including the use of names and song. For each of these categories, I have chosen a few specific customs or folkways that I find to be most common in nautical writing and in the experiences of myself and my informants. However, these few examples barely scratch the surface of nautical custom, since the maritime world is one of the unique cultures that does not know geographic boundaries, and has had thousands of years to develop its rich blend of traditions.

Shipbuilding

One of the most important parts of a ship's life comes before she even hits the water. The process of building a ship on dry land is often lengthy and complicated, requiring the coordination of large teams doing several different projects at once. British shipyards of the eighteenth

and nineteenth centuries turned out naval ships at an amazing rate, producing hundreds of “cookie-cutter” ships based on a standard design for each type (Masefield 1). In all likelihood, hundreds of men worked in the shipyard at any given time. Each had his particular specialty, working over, under, and around one another in a complicated dance under the watchful eye of the Master Shipwright (Abell 29-31). Today the building of traditional ships is a much slower process, since there are relatively few who have undergone the lengthy apprenticeship required to be considered even barely competent as a wooden shipwright. According to my informant Carver, a large wooden shipbuilding project will average about ten to twenty workers, and by “large” he means a ship of over one hundred tons.

The building process is really like the infancy of the ship. As she grows in size and complexity from the keel up, different parts are fitted, tested, and made to work with other parts. Her personality starts to show in the way she takes to each new piece; a ship that proves easy on land will probably be a good sailer, but a ship that shows herself to be obstinate and stubborn during the process of building will most likely stay that way. Carver admits that it is not uncommon for a ship to have a reputation before she ever sets a single sail, especially if her building has proven difficult.

There are several important milestones in the ship’s development which are singled out for ceremony and celebration. Two such events are the keel-laying and the fitting of the last hull plank. The keel is the very first piece of the ship to be prepared. It acts as the main support, as a kind of “backbone” upon which the whole structure takes its strength. Much like the ribs of a vertebrate tie into the spine, the frames of the ship tie into the keel, and the whole ship is constructed on this frame. This makes the keel arguably the most important piece of the entire vessel, and much time and effort goes into selecting the material for and the shaping of this piece. In the past, a priest would have been brought in to bless the wood selected for the keel (Beck 12), but neither Carver nor Cap have heard of this practice still in existence today.

The keel, once shaped, is then laid out in a north-south orientation if possible. This custom has been determined by careful calculation to have a very practical purpose which was probably not immediately

evident to those responsible for its origin. Even wooden ships have some metal in their construction, and any large structure will start to develop a magnetic field of one kind or another as it is built. Laying the keel on the north-south axis minimizes the magnetic effect of the ship on the compass, by causing the magnetic field surrounding the ship to align more closely with the magnetic poles of the earth itself. And a keel laying in a north-south direction will be more evenly affected by the drying and warping of the sun on both sides than one laying east-west (Beck 12).

Since keel-laying is the first important stage in the building of a ship, it is considered appropriate at this point to hold a public ceremony as a way of officially introducing the project. For today's U.S. naval vessels, this ceremony includes a visiting dignitary who is brought in to mark his or her initials on the top of the keel (as was the case with the latest ship being built in the U.S. by Northrop Grunman, the *USS George H.W. Bush*). There is no historic precedent for the marking of initials, but the dignitary serves the role of granting official approval to the project. Therefore, the keel-laying ceremony can be tied into the second of Bascom's functions, the validation of cultural institutions, because an important individual from outside of the ship community is present to mark the start of the building process.

The next important stage in a ship's life is the fitting of the last hull plank, which is alternately referred to as the "shutter" or "whiskey" plank. The planking of a large vessel is an extremely lengthy and tedious process, so it is no wonder that the fitting of the last plank is a cause for celebration. The term "shutter" plank is subject to some speculation. It may refer to the way the last plank closes the last gap in the hull, similar to a shutter closing over a window. It may be a shortening of the older term, "shutter-in" plank, which refers to the way it "shuts her" in (Abell 80). The other term, "whiskey" plank, is of slightly less hazy origins, since it seems clear that whiskey is the preferred beverage for toasting the completion of the planking.

On today's wooden tallships, the whiskey plank party generally consists of the entire building crew and invited dignitaries gathering around the spot where the last plank has been fitted. Carver notes that the last bolt is traditionally gold (or, these days bronze, painted gold or gold-leafed), and each member of the crew takes a turn hitting it until it

is driven home. The origin of the golden spike is unclear. Carver speculates that the main purpose of the party is to reward the building crew for the successful and proper completion of the most difficult stage of building, which would fall under Bascom's fourth function of rewarding conformity.

Great care is taken to make the ship safe and efficient, but this care is not limited to making sure that seams are caulked tightly and pieces fitted perfectly. Some precautionary measures are customs and ceremonies with ancient roots designed to keep the ship safe from bad luck or angry spirits. One of the more interesting customs is the placing of coins under the masts. On sailing ships, the masts go through the decks and are fixed, or "stepped," directly on top of the keel. The process of stepping the masts is usually done after a ship has been launched. In the Royal Navy of the eighteenth century, stepping was accomplished by tying the new ship alongside an old, stripped-down gunship with its masts and yards intact. The old rig could be used as a type of crane to lower the new masts into place (Masfield 3), but just before the biggest, the mainmast, was fitted in, a gold sovereign or similar coin was placed in the bedding into which the mast was fixed.

Like many maritime customs, this one is said to have pre-Christian roots, since it is associated with the ferryman Charon in Greek myth. He is mentioned by Virgil in *The Aeneid* and later by Dante in *The Inferno* as the one responsible for ferrying the dead across the river Styx into Hades, but anyone who wished to cross had to pay for the service. Therefore, the coin under the mast of the ship serves as the ship's payment to Charon (Jeans 306). This custom would seem to contradict the sailor's desire not to "jinx" the ship by anticipating its demise, but here sailors take the realistic view that no ship can last forever, and that it is better to keep the gods happy by planning ahead. This is the first of many examples in which the main function of a custom is to give the sailor a sense of control, since the coin is way of controlling the ship's ultimate fate.

Appeasing the gods is rarely cited as a serious reason by modern shipbuilders, but the coin tradition continues to the present day when replicas are built or rigs are restored. It is often seen as an occasion to find coins which have some special significance for the history of the ship. For instance, according to Cap, when the barque *Elissa* was restored

in Galveston, Texas, three coins were placed under each of her three masts: the first was an 1877 English gold sovereign, to represent the year she was built as an English merchant ship; the second was a 1966 Greek drachma, to represent the year she was rediscovered being used in the Greek smuggling trade; and the third was a 1982 American silver dollar, to represent the year the restoration was completed in Texas.

The most important and dramatic step in the building of a ship is the day she is launched. For the shipbuilder, launching is the moment of truth, when he finds out if the ship has been built soundly and caulked snugly. If all goes well, she will slip into the water easily and gracefully, and not a drop of water will leak through the hull. In fact, Carver says that it is often joked by shipwrights that the caulkers will be made to drink whatever water does leak into the bilges through the hull planking upon launching. If launching proves difficult, it is seen as a sure sign that the ship will suffer bad luck for the rest of her days. To ward off any potential bad fortune, launching is seen as another occasion to formally bless the ship, and this is also when the ship is christened with her new name, just as a child is christened when he is baptized. Christening and launching are always big affairs, with many dignitaries and on-lookers attending the ceremonies. In the Royal Navy, as with most of today's historic ships, a priest was brought in to pronounce the blessing, and it was the custom to pour communion wine or sprinkle holy water onto the bow of the ship. The priest (or more commonly today, the visiting dignitary) pronounces the ship's new name, and that name remains with her for the rest of her career unless she is officially rechristened (Beck 26).

Modern ship launchings often use champagne instead of communion wine because it is slightly showier and more expensive, but the purpose remains the same. There are two separate functions of this ceremony, and both seem to be of equal importance. Seeking a blessing for the ship when she is christened is another example of appeasing the gods and, therefore, maintaining the sense of control over the ship's fate. The public ceremony serves as official validation for the culture's traditions in the same way as the keel-laying ceremony. It is only after all of these precautions are taken that the ship is considered sufficiently protected against all evil and can start her working career.

Taboo and Ritual in Shipboard Life

Once the ship is in the water, rigged, and fitted out, she is ready to start sailing, leaving her building crew to be replaced by her sailing crew. The first few weeks are a period of “shake down” in which the crew put the new ship through her paces and fix any lingering problems. It is a tense time for both officers and crew, marked in the Royal Navy, as it still is today, by long hours of drills and heavy work (Masefield 86-87). However, after the ship proves herself to be trustworthy and sound, the work settles into a regular routine. British sailors traditionally worked in four-hour, rotating shifts during which one half of the crew at a time was on deck (Rodger 39). This is a tradition carried on by many historic ships today, and it means sleep can only be had in short stretches of less than four hours, and even this is frequently interrupted by the call of “All hands” to handle sail. The common sailor’s day is an unending cycle of working, standing watch, eating, and sleeping, with little time for anything else.

New “greenhands” are quickly indoctrinated into this harsh life in something of a sink-or-swim fashion in which they mostly learn what not to do, often through painful experience. In the past, this information was communicated by the stinging end of a knotted rope carried by the boatswain who acted as a type of foreman for the crew (Lloyd 233). There is a great deal of rote memorization: “learning the ropes” is literally the process of memorizing the name, location, and purpose of each of the hundreds of pieces of lines and rigging which are used for every aspect of the ship’s operation. Less concrete aspects of the sailing life, such as taboos, can be much harder to teach, because sailors tend to have a strong aversion to talking in any way which links them or the ship with bad luck. So prohibited behaviors are often conveyed in the form of cautionary tales told about other crews on other ships who brought about their own misfortunes by flaunting the taboos.

Whistling on a sailing ship is one of the most common taboos still found today, and it is often strictly enforced. There are many explanations given for why one should not whistle, but everyone agrees on the effect: whistling will bring up a storm. It may not have been entirely clear in the minds of British sailors what it was about this action that would cause the storm, but it seemed fairly clear to them that whistling in some way angered the gods, and so the purpose of the taboo on whistling

was another means of control. A severe storm could be and often was life-threatening for the crew of even the greatest of ships, and is an occurrence which is universally dreaded by sailors of any time or place.

For the crew of sailing ships in the days before mechanical engines, there was a certain ambivalence about wind. The right amount was vital for life and work, to get from one place to another, but too little or too much was dangerous and perhaps even fatal. If the wind did not blow, the ship was becalmed, and the crew could die of hunger, thirst, or illnesses brought on by malnutrition such as scurvy. If the wind blew a gale, though, the ship might capsize and all hands would probably go down with her. The key was to maintain a balance by refraining from whistling when the going was good. If the wind did happen to go away, one exception to the whistling ban was made, which was related to me by Cap: the youngest member of the crew (usually a ship's boy, or cabin boy) could be sent to whistle very softly from the aft-most part of the ship. This was considered just enough to bring up the right amount of wind to keep the ship from being becalmed for too long. Cap speculates that the youngest and therefore the weakest crewmember might be least offensive to the gods. He also says that whistling is the action of a man creating a little wind, an act which would tempt the gods (in this case the wind gods) to reply with a much bigger wind to show their superiority to man. Another captain I worked for used to say that the act of whistling shows a man to be far too content with himself and his life, causing the gods to send a storm to punish him for this seemingly innocent form of pride.

Yet another explanation for the ban on whistling has a more practical spin. Important orders on a British naval ship were often given in the form of a tune piped by the boatswain on a special whistle, still referred to as the "boatswain's pipe." There was an intricate series of notes and trills which could be played, and each sequence could be recognized as a distinct order. This was how "All hands" was called, for instance, or how the crew was mustered for battle stations. It is possible that an individual's whistling could be mistaken for a boatswain's call and create a great deal of confusion for the crew (Jeans 313), and so a rule against whistling which came from the crew itself in the form of a social taboo would have served the officers' purpose of reducing confusion and maintaining order without having the resentment which would come if

the ban was made by superiors.

Another equally common taboo in the Royal Navy was leaving port or starting a voyage on a Friday: to put to sea on this day was thought to bring about disaster for the entire voyage. As with whistling, the origin of the Friday taboo is somewhat unclear, but the explanation which seems to apply most directly to the British sailor is that Friday is the day in Christian tradition when Christ was crucified (Jeans 308). The Royal Navy with its many ships and busy ports could not shut down operations every Friday, so it was often necessary to schedule departure on this day, and this was met with much grumbling and predictions of doom by the crew. Of course, everything that went wrong on the voyage was then easily blamed on the day of departure, which gave the crew an explanation for even the most chance occurrences. Like not whistling, observing the Friday taboo was a way of giving the crew a sense of control.

On modern ships, scheduling demands have caused the Friday taboo to be pushed aside by all but the most traditional of captains. Before engines, large sail ships on long voyages could not reasonably be told to calculate their arrivals down to a certain time of a certain day, and so captains might easily wait an extra day in port to ensure a more content crew, expecting or at least claiming to make up the time en route. Today, with much more accurate navigation systems and reliable engines, a captain knows before leaving port exactly how long the next leg of the voyage will take, and shipping agents will plan very tight schedules which can barely be deviated from by an hour, let alone a day. However, a tanker captain once told me that it is quite common on modern merchant ships for captains to ask for arrival on a Friday and departure on a Sunday. The rationale behind this is that Sunday is traditionally a light day at sea with only the minimal amount of work done to maintain a proper watch and routine maintenance, but this tradition is suspended when a ship makes departure, since this requires a considerable effort by all hands. Leaving on a Sunday is therefore seen as a way to save other days of the week for work which would otherwise be lost on this day, but I cannot help but notice that it is also a sure way of guaranteeing that departure will not take place on a Friday, because even today few ships will make a port turnaround in less than a day.

Observing taboos can be seen as a way for sailors to prevent bad

fortune, but there are also just as many ways for them to actively promote and control good fortune in the form of the many rituals observed onboard. Rituals are one form of maritime tradition that can be linked to all four of Bascom's functions. They are often carried out in a way which provides entertainment for the crew, they justify cultural institutions, they educate new crewmembers about nautical tradition, and they reward those who conform to these traditions. One of the most famous of these rituals, which is still observed in one way or another on ships all over the world, is the "crossing the Line" ceremony. In this case "the Line" is the nautical reference to the Equator, and, for the common European sailor, crossing this invisible boundary from north to south marks the point at which everything becomes strange and backwards. Seasons are reversed, the sun starts traveling on the northern edge of the sky, and they lose their ever-present nocturnal guide, the Northern Star. Crossing the Line is therefore seen as an occasion worthy of celebration by the entire ship's company. It is a time when the ordinary rules of propriety and authority are bent and sometimes suspended altogether under the ruling authority of Neptune. Those who have made this crossing before are termed "shellbacks," and they rule supreme over the "pollywogs" (or simply "wogs") who are crossing for the first time. Even ships' officers are usually not immune from the initiation awaiting the wogs, though they are often treated with slightly more respect and much less severity.

The ceremony in its simplest form appears to be a mixture of Western legality and pagan ritual. On the day the ship crosses the Line, all of wogs in the crew are summoned to appear before a kind of court on the main deck. The court is presided over by Neptune and his entourage, all played by shellbacks specially picked for each role. The character playing "Neptune" is often the most seasoned, and therefore most respected, of the shellbacks. His costume consists of all of the traditional accoutrements, including beard, net, and trident. Usually he is accompanied by his "wife," a comic and/or somewhat humiliating role, depending on who it is assigned to. There are also an assortment of guards, a jester, and other members of a royal court. Once this "royal" court is settled, a proclamation is read that Neptune has received word that some pollywogs are crossing his royal boundary without permission, and he demands retribution. What follows is a series of

humiliating and disgusting “punishments” for the wogs, designed to serve as a severe initiation into the exclusive world of the shellback. Some of the more extreme examples of these include head shaving, tarring, and crawling through the “whale’s belly,” an improvised tunnel into which is thrown food scraps and other nasty refuse. If the wogs make it through the trials successfully, they are officially pronounced shellbacks and have attained the right to inflict the same punishments on future crewmembers. With all of its ceremony and symbolism, the Line-crossing ceremony serves all four of Bascom’s functions quite neatly, since it is meant to educate the pollywogs and to amuse, justify, and reward the conformity of the shellbacks.

The fifth and most apparent function of the Line ceremony is as a straightforward ritual of propitiation. Neptune is considered in mythology to be the chief deity of the sea, and it is considered important when crossing into unfamiliar territory to seek his approval and protection. I cannot find any reference to the Equator’s being of particular importance to Neptune himself, but given its significance as a boundary only the most “deepwater” of sailors have crossed, it provides a convenient opportunity to actively seek the good fortune that the good will of Neptune is thought to provide. Today the ritual seems to have become slightly more commercial and less ritualistic, with many ships offering a standard certificate of initiation and the trials of wogs becoming more a show of punishment than an actual rite. As early as the late 1800’s, many merchant ships had stopped observing the ritual unless there were passengers on board (Dana 22-3). When asked why this ritual is performed, though, most shellbacks I have encountered still reply that it is to appease Neptune.

Another important ritual aboard ship is performed on the occasion of a death onboard, an occasion requiring burial at sea. This is very rarely done today, because modern refrigeration allows the opportunity to preserve a body for burial ashore. It is also problematic to bury a person without an official death certificate. Today’s licensed masters, though, still have the authority, in certain circumstances, to both marry and bury people onboard their ships. In the historic Royal Navy, though, burials at sea were quite common, especially in wartime, and sailors were used to attending funerals and probably comforted by the knowledge that such provisions would be made for themselves should

they be necessary.

The proscribed funeral for a Royal Navy ship was quite simple and brief, but had a profound impact on the crew. The dead crewmember was first washed and then laid out on his hammock. The sail-maker stitched up the hammock around the sailor after placing a ten-pound shot (cannonball) at the foot to weigh it down (Beck 283). Cap claims that the last stitch was supposed to be sewn through the nose of the sailor just to be sure he was indeed dead. After the body had been prepared, it was laid on a plank protruding over the side and draped with a flag. The crew was mustered, the captain or mate read a brief service, and the body was slid off the plank and over the side (Beck 283). Besides the preparation, the entire funeral rite probably took just a few minutes, and then everyone went back to his regular duties. It is clear that, at least in the Royal Navy, the burial of the dead was carried out in the same fashion as most other shipboard duties: quickly, efficiently, and with a minimum of fuss. Unlike the Line-crossing, the funeral ritual only served one main purpose on the ship, which was to justify its cultural institutions, because the ways in which it differed from a funeral on land set it apart as unique to the maritime tradition.

People, Animals, and Mythical Creatures

Earlier I spoke about the ship as a living being, but much of maritime folklore is concerned with other living beings in and around the ship that might have some kind of influence on her fate, good or bad. As a rule of thumb, most people or animals who are not at home on the sea are looked upon with distrust, and most mythical sea creatures are regarded with, at best, ambivalence or, at worst, dread. Most greenhands learn about the living sources of bad luck in the same manner as other taboos, by listening to the old hands tell their cautionary tales. Sailors can be more open when talking about the beings which bring good luck, though, so these are more easily learned.

I will begin with people. When it comes to bad luck, sailors identify “set types” who will bring misfortune, though they also reserve the right to single out an individual who does not fit into these types but is still considered a “jinx.” Any bringer of bad fortune is often given the generic nickname “Jonah,” an allusion to the Biblical story of Jonah and the whale. In the story, Jonah disobeys God and then tries to hide

on a ship to escape punishment. What he ends up doing, however, is to bring misfortune to the ship, because God sends a storm, and the only way the sailors are able to survive is by taking Jonah's advice to throw him overboard (Beck 289-290).

In the historic Royal Navy, the most common types of Jonahs were priests and women. Priests seem to have been bad luck simply because they were not commonly found onboard, though fear of them apparently extended to shore leave as well. Cap relates several versions of a standard tale in which a sailor was on his way to start work on a particular ship but, having passed a priest on the dock along the way, decided not to sail on that ship and subsequently learned that the ship sank, burned, or encountered some other terrible fate. The idea of priests as bad luck seems not to have survived to the modern day.

On the other hand, a woman onboard was a debatable type of Jonah. I cannot count the number of times I met men (usually Navy retirees) who took one look at me working on deck of my ship and shook their heads, saying, "Women are bad luck on ships." This seems not to have been a taboo taken seriously in the historic Royal Navy, however. It was common practice for women of questionable morals to pay boatmen to row them out to Navy ships looking for "business" on the lower decks where the common sailors lived. It was Navy law that only wives of sailors were permitted onboard while the ship was in harbor, but fake marriage licenses were easy to obtain, and it seems that officers made little effort to sort out the real ones from the imposters (Kemp 167-8). It was also not unheard of for women to sail with the ship when it left port. This was not officially sanctioned (with the possible exception of the captain's wife), but it was possible for a determined woman disguised as a man to spend many months or even years at sea without discovery, and there are known cases in which this was done to stay near a sweetheart or husband (Kemp 172). Many popular songs came from this concept, such as "The Marchants Daughter of Bristow" and "Young Henry of the Raging Main" (Stark 98-100). It would seem, then, that the taboo on women was more of an acknowledgement that women created problems onboard by not fitting in with the male society of the ship than their being actual harbingers of doom, and it fits Bascom's function of maintaining conformity to societal behaviors.

It was also possible in the past for a single person to be labeled a Jonah, and this often proved very dangerous for such a person. In many cases, the Jonah was just a convenient scapegoat on whom to pin a series of bad events that may have coincided with that person's arrival onboard or with something considered taboo done by that person. This person was often already an outsider in one way or another, so the crew found it easy to rally against him. If the Jonah label stuck, the best that could happen for that unfortunate crewmember was a quick arrival in port and a stealthy desertion. A long voyage, however, might prompt the crew to arrange for a convenient "accident" to rid themselves of the Jonah. As in the Biblical account, this action was thought to appease God by refusing safe harbor to the Jonah, and, in this way, the crew maintained a sense of control.

Individuals could also be singled out as good luck under almost the same circumstances. A "lucky" person was seen to always get the best out of a situation or consistently escape misfortune, and such a person pleased his fellow sailors, since they perceived his good luck as advantageous to all of them. The person with good luck became a sort of "mascot" for the crew, and was probably afforded special treatment and protection to keep him from losing his "lucky" touch (Beck 304). The idea of people bringing good or bad fortune to the ship is not one which has survived to the modern day, but the term "Jonah" is still sometimes used as an adjective to describe unlucky objects. Cap gives two examples: a "Jonah boat" is a hard-luck ship, and "Jonah blue" is a color unpopular with Gloucester fisherman.

Animals are also viewed by sailors as bringing good or bad fortune. They are divided into two main types: domesticated and marine creatures. In the past, domesticated animals onboard were either cargo (cavalry horses, for instance) or livestock (for later consumption by the crew). The common exception to this rule was the ship's cat (or cats), a necessary addition to the crew for keeping the rat population to a minimum. None of these animals were considered particularly bad, but they did not naturally belong to the marine environment, and there are a few interesting references to them which have survived in maritime folklore.

First, there is a reference to a tattoo of a pig on the top of the foot or on the knee, supposedly utilized to keep one from drowning. I have not been able to find any written reference to this tradition, but I heard

from no less than four separate sources about the pig tattoo on the foot, and I have also been told a rhyme of unknown origin by one of my shipbuilding co-workers: "Pig on the knee, you won't die at sea," so there may be something to the validity of this tradition. Second, a donkey was referred to in association with shore leave, when a sailor was said to be "riding his donkey." This was a metaphor for a drunken spree on shore, and has been immortalized in a popular sea song, "Donkey Riding," which dates back at least to the nineteenth century (Hugill 119-20). Finally, the horse was the focus of a ceremony performed after the first month at sea. It was common practice for the Royal Navy to entice men into joining by offering them a bounty of the first month's wages in advance, which was usually spent on drinking and carousing before reporting to the ship. This meant that he would not be paid for the first month of work, and a "dead horse" was a metaphor for that work with no reward. At the end of that time, a dummy horse made of a mattress cover stuffed with straw was paraded down the deck, hoisted up into the rigging, and then cut loose into the sea (Beck 119-20), often accompanied by the singing of a popular work song called the "Dead Horse" shanty. It should be noted, though, that the chorus of this song refers to a "poor, old horse" because sailors had an aversion to using the word "dead" (Hugill 390-2). The references to the donkey and the horse are in the context of a sailor out of his normal situation, since both shore-leave and working without pay are exceptional circumstances in his life. Therefore, the function of the customs surrounding domesticated animals is a justification of cultural norms in which exceptions are associated with creatures which do not belong in the sailor's environment.

The second category of animals still important to sailors is marine life, and this group is rich with legend and ritual, since sailors are very familiar with almost all aspects of the creatures under and over the water. Many of these aquatic creatures are considered good luck, particularly if they are beautiful and graceful. Flying fish, sea otters, and dolphins are still counted among those who promise good fortune (Jeans 5). Dolphins are especially popular with sailors, as they can be an endless source of amusement. One of the dolphin's favorite things to do around a ship is referred to as "bow-riding." The creatures swim immediately in front of the ship's bow and use the cushion of the ship

pushing through the water to move them forward incredibly fast. If there are several of them, they will criss-cross at a dizzying pace and zoom forward to leap up into the air ahead of the ship. I cannot begin to count how many hours I have spent watching this display while serving as bow lookout, and it is something which I never tire of watching. Sailors probably tie dolphins to good luck since the dolphins who seem to like to play near ships are the kind which live close to shore, and so playing dolphins are a reliable sign of land.

The one kind of marine life definitely considered bad luck is the shark. A shark following astern of a ship was historically thought to be a sure sign that someone would soon die onboard, and the shark was thought to be waiting for the body to be thrown over the side (Jeans 314-5). A shark anywhere near the ship is enough to make anybody nervous. One of the talismans found on some ships is a shark's dorsal fin, though it is very rare today. According to Cap, it is pickled or coated with something to preserve it and hung from the bowsprit (the spar sticking out forward from the bow) as a warning to other sharks to steer clear of the vessel.

Marine birds must be included in a listing of marine life, although only one bird is consistently mentioned as a bringer of fortune, good or bad. That bird is the albatross, which flies in the cold, lonely stretches of the southern latitudes close to Antarctica. It is a curious nautical belief that this graceful bird is possessed by the souls of dead shipmates, and brings good luck as long as it remains unharmed. Since this bird is a solitary creature known to follow a ship for days upon end, it is not hard to see why sailors think it has some reason to be so attached to the vessel. However, misfortune strikes the ship if anyone harms an albatross or kills it outright (Jeans 319-20). In Samuel Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," most famously, the narrator is doomed to forever retell the story of how he brought about the demise of all on the ship by killing an albatross.

The sailor's tally of lucky and unlucky creatures does not end with people and animals; mythical creatures are also included. The most familiar of these in American culture is the mermaid. However, the mermaid of the historic British sailor was not the friendly, Disney version known and loved by so many today. The mermaids of historic myth were irresistible to sailors but invariably deadly. Like the Sirens of

Homer's *Odyssey*, mermaids were known to lure sailors with their beautiful singing until the ship was battered onto the rocks. Despite this reputation, many sailors whiled away the long hours of watch by creating ever more fantastic descriptions of these beautiful women, half-human, half-fish.

Loosely related to the idea of the mermaid is the creature known as the "selkie," whose name comes from the Scottish word "selch," meaning "seal." These creatures of Irish legend were said to be the children of the mythical King of Lochlann, who were drowned and reappeared as seals. They had the magical ability to shed their seal skin and walk on shore as people, and it is said in Celtic lore that if someone can get hold of a seal's shedded skin, or "cast skin," the selkie cannot return to the sea until the item is recovered. It is in this manner that the selkie can be controlled (Jeans 350).

Ghosts and spirits are another category of mythical beings believed to be encountered at sea, and they are probably the most feared of all. One of the reasons sailors have such an aversion to anything to do with the dead is that they believe the souls of the dead might decide to remain with a ship if the body is kept around too long (Beck 289). A ghost on a ship is thought to bring certain bad luck, and there is little that can be done to get rid of it. Since ships are thought of as individuals, they too are susceptible to turning into ghosts, and the concept of the ghost ship manned by spirits still makes for one of the most fantastic and thrilling of sea stories. These stories are rarely told onboard, though, since they violate the taboo on speaking of the dead, but they can often be heard elaborately embellished over a pint in a port town pub. Such stories are a source of pride for sailors, since only the "saltiest" of deepwater sailors could ever experience the phenomenon of seeing a ghost ship.

The most consistently famous of ghost ships is the "Flying Dutchman." Horace Beck writes that "of all the folktales in the world, this is one of the most complicated, oldest and most widespread" (391). The tale comes from an archetype, thousands of years old, in which a soul is doomed to wander the earth without rest. In the case of the ship, three separate stories have been interwoven into one master narrative with an infinite number of variations. The basic stories all involve sea captains who defied God in one way or another. One was

Dahul, a pirate so cruel and evil that he even prevailed over the Devil, and was doomed by God for his evil actions. Another was Fokke, so intent on driving his ship and crew to the limits of endurance to make money that his crew believed he made a deal with the Devil. As a consequence, Fokke must keep driving his ship before the gales eternally. The third was Vanderdecker, who was so determined to get his ship around Cape Horn against the prevailing winds that even when God Himself showed up to stop him, he fired his pistol on God and was forever damned for this action (Beck 390-5).

Out of all of these threads comes the tale of the Flying Dutchman, which is a ghost ship manned by a spectral crew and commanded by a captain who is forever doomed to wander the seas as a punishment for defying God. It is believed that any ship coming across this spirit is immediately beset with bad fortune in the form of illness, starvation, and even madness. The tale has made its way into many forms of popular culture. Coleridge's doomed mariner later encounters a phantom ship with a spectral crew playing dice on deck, a common theme in the tale of the Dutchman. Recently Hollywood used this idea in the plot of *Pirates of the Caribbean*, in which the main characters face off with just such a phantom crew.

Much like the rituals mentioned in shipboard routine, the tales of mermaids, selkies, and ghosts serve several functions. Today, they are mainly told to entertain and even make light of the seriousness of death and the defiance of God. They also educate new hands by informing them of the nature of these creatures. Most importantly, however, they serve as another justification for maritime culture by creating a supernatural realm which is unique to the nautical world and can only be experienced by those at sea.

Words and Language

One of the most distinctive ways in which the maritime culture distinguishes itself is in its particular language. Onboard ship, everything has a very specific and distinctive name which cannot be confused with anything else. This gives a sense of order and place and keeps everything running smoothly. Sailors still tend to harbor a certain amount of pride at having mastered the language of the sea, and will often lapse into maritime terminology even on shore. Many a young deckhand after

his first season on a schooner has recounted to his friends tales of his adventures rife with “salty” words for the sheer pleasure of being asked to explain all of these unfamiliar words. This pride is probably the main reason some words in the maritime dictionary are still in use, even though they have long been replaced with more modern words.

Ship’s names are one noticeable example of nautical beliefs affecting and shaping the language. The name of a ship must be carefully chosen to go along with the individual ship, because it is believed that the ship’s name is tied to her personality (Beck 18). Many ships are given optimistic names in hopes that they will live up to them. This is how we get such famous British warships as *Invincible*, *Conqueror*, and Nelson’s own ship *Victory*. However, mighty names do not necessarily lead to good luck: *Invincible* was wrecked in the approaches to Portsmouth in 1758, and *Conqueror* was wrecked two years later on the way into Plymouth (Rodger 49).

Another popular trend is to give ships the names of famous people or benefactors, so the British naval lists abound with the names of various earls, dukes, princes, and monarchs. In the same manner, ships’ names may be associated with particular places, especially those related in some way to the individual ship. There are a myriad of other things ships can be named after, such as powerful animals and famous heroes, but there is a strict category of names which are taboo. A ship should never be associated with that which can harm it, so names which involve fire, wind, storms, and lightning are considered bad luck. As with many other taboos, stories are plentiful of ships named for fire burning to the waterline and others named for storms sinking in freak weather phenomena (Beck 19-21).

It is believed that if a name is good and fitting for a ship, it is not a good idea to change it without great care. Just as a person’s name becomes integral to his identity, so a ship’s name becomes part of her personality, and it can be dangerous to change it on a whim. According to Carver, in order to keep from bringing bad luck to the ship, the ship owner must effectively rechristen and re-launch her with the new name. It takes a considerable amount of time (and money) to have the ship hauled out, all traces of the old name erased, the new name added, and the whole christening and launching gone through again — a process meant to make the owner think long and hard before changing a ship’s

name. It is not impossible, though, and sailors believe that a ship that has been properly put through the whole procedure, including, as Carver says, re-launching on a full moon, will not suffer any ill effects, and may actually find her new name more fitting.

Another facet of maritime language is the adaptation of words unique to the nautical world into the English language. It is part of a strange sailor's conceit that things which have one name on shore should have an entirely different name at sea, so the kitchen is the "galley," the wall is a "bulkhead," and so on, to the utter bewilderment of greenhands and "landlubbers" alike. Many words which do not appear to make any sense at first can be traced back to an origin which makes them easy to understand and remember. This is something which is often included when teaching new hands the vast amounts of nomenclature they must memorize. For instance, the "fo'c'sle" was a small area in the bow of the ship where the crew of a merchant ship lived, forward of the foremast (Healey 47-8). Cap maintains that the proper punctuation for this word would be "fo'c's'le," which is a shortening of "forecastle," a type of fortification built on the bow of medieval ships as a protected place from which archers could shoot. The sheer numbers of unfamiliar words in the ship's language make this adapted form of English seem completely foreign. For example, two lines from a popular British version of "Spanish Ladies" describe anchoring: "Stand by your bow stoppers, let go your shank painters/Haul up your clew garnets, let tacks and sheets fly" (Hugill 293-4). To the landlubber merely a few words of this are intelligible, but to the square-rig sailor, this is a familiar sequence for anchoring. The anchor is swung loose, the line is made ready to drop it, and the necessary ropes are handled to take the power out of the mainsail.

Since the average common sailor in the Royal Navy was illiterate, or nearly so, the ship's officers could not hand out manuals on terminology for the crew to study, though that is what is often done on modern tallships. Historically, new crew had to rely on experienced hands to teach them everything verbally, and this was often accomplished through the use of rhymes to aid in memorization. Many of these rhymes have survived to the modern day because they are such a handy way to remember difficult terms or concepts. The proper way to "serve," or wrap protective layers around, a piece of rigging to weather-proof it

is encapsulated in the following rhyme: “Worm and parcel with the lay, turn and serve the other way.” This simply tells the rigger that the first two layers, worming and parceling, go along the natural “lay,” or grooves, of the rope, while the last layer, the serving, goes against the lay. Many rhymes have to do with predicting the weather, and I still remember one taught to me by Cap when I was a new officer: “Wind before rain, topsails remain, but rain before wind, bring your topsails in.”

Most of these strange, new terms, however, require rote memorization. There is no simple explanation for why the third mast is called the “mizzen,” or why a rope which serves a single function is called a “clewline” in one instance and a “clew garnet” in another. Once a sailor commits these words to memory, however, he finds there is a very orderly and predictable system to describe any one of the hundreds of ropes which make up the rig of a large sailing ship. The name of one line may be several words long, but these words are ordered in a way which starts from the general and works its way to the specific. The starboard main upper topsail inner buntline is broken down as follows: “starboard” tells which side of the ship to go to, “main” tells which mast to go to, “upper topsail” tells that it is a line for a sail *and* that it is the upper of the two topsails, and “inner buntline” tells that it is the inner of the two buntlines. With this information, an experienced sailor can put his hand on the exact line referred to without any hesitation. New crew have to be drilled over and over again to gain this skill, and a game which has been popular for centuries is the “pin chase,” in which the name of a line somewhere on the ship is called out, and the new hands must race to be the first one to place his hand on the belaying pin of the line. Today, success in this game is rewarded, but a hundred years ago it was expected, and it was the slow one who was singled out for punishment.

Another way of teaching and an integral part of maritime folklore is singing. This is a subject written about quite extensively by several authors, and so I will only scratch the surface here, but a few things must be highlighted. The simplest division of sea songs (if they are sung onboard) is into two categories: shanties and forebitters (Hugill 18-9). Each category has specific characteristics which distinguish it from the other, and historic sailors were once well aware of the division, though the lines between the two have been blurred on modern tallships.

Quite simply put, the shanty is a work song which is tailored to specific jobs onboard the ship. There is a different kind of shanty with a special rhythm for each type of job to be done, the most common being: long haul, short haul, capstan, pump, and bunting. Almost all work shanties have a solo part sung by the shantyman interspersed with responses sung by the crew. The rhythm and responses vary depending on the type of job, but most of the crew members are quite familiar with the choruses required, though the shantyman can, and often does, take creative license with the solo parts (Volo 143-5).

The forebitter, on the other hand, is above all else *not* a work song. In the past, there was one opportunity in the ship's day for the sailors to relax and socialize, which was during the "dog watches." Although all other watches were stood in four-hour stretches, the watch which lasted from four o'clock in the afternoon until eight o'clock at night was broken into two two-hour shifts instead, and these were referred to as the first and second dog watches, because they had the effect of staggering, or "dogging," the watches, so that someone who had the forenoon watch one day would not have the same shift the next day. During the dog watches, the off-watch part of the crew were permitted to hang around up on deck and socialize, and most of them would congregate near the bow of the ship away from the quarterdeck and the officers (Rodgers 39-40). This was a time for telling stories and singing songs, but it was taboo to sing a work shanty at this time, because that might indicate to the officers that the crew would rather be working. Instead, forebitters were sung, named for the habit of the singer to gain a place of advantage by sitting on a part of the ship called the "fore bitts." The forebitter is still a popular form of entertainment during the long stretches of inactivity which are experienced by modern tallship sailors when a ship is becalmed or in port.

The characteristics which make a forebitter unique are mainly that it usually does *not* have a driving rhythm and/or a set pattern of solo and response. In other words, it is in all respects the opposite of a work shanty. Popular forebitters are often ballads, and most tell a story or transmit some knowledge, so their primary functions are to entertain and educate. Many of the cautionary tales already referred to are told in the form of one of these ballads, such as "The Mermaid," which mentions several taboo items in the first verse, and then goes on to

describe the fatal consequences for the ship. Other forebitters tell of specific ships and people who have become famous in the industry, such as the “*Mary Ellen Carter*” and “Ol’ Zeb.” Serious and sometimes painful subjects such as venereal diseases, storms, and death are made fun of quite safely in these songs, because it is the song mentioning the bad luck, not the sailor. It is as if the singer is merely relaying a story of this misfortune happening to someone else.

One characteristic which is shared by both categories of song, though, is that they were once the only acceptable form of “griping” onboard. Under the strict laws of the Royal Navy, the slightest grumble of a common sailor against an officer could conceivably be construed as mutiny, a hanging offence, so most sailors dared not complain in any way other than to themselves (Hugill 34-5). The shantyman was immune to this regulation, though, as long as he limited the complaining to the confines of his songs. This appears to work in much the same way as mentioning bad luck in a song: it does not seem to apply to the singer, and therefore cannot be blamed on him. To my knowledge, there are no examples of these griping songs which mention specific names, such as “Captain Smith” or “Mate Jones,” so it is likely that the generic use of titles as names gave the shantyman the opportunity to cover himself by claiming that he was singing about a different captain on a different ship.

Analysis and Conclusion

All of these examples of maritime folklore show the variety of forms nautical tradition may take, and, when considered in their historical context and environment, can be understood as serving one or more functions. The first of Bascom’s functions of folklore, to amuse or entertain, is evident in the use of story and song onboard ship. Cautionary tales are acceptable ways of mentioning subjects which are taboo, and many other stories are told merely to amuse one’s shipmates. Through song, the shantyman and crew were once able to complain about the harsh life common to Navy sailors without incurring punishment, and again to mention taboo subjects. Like stories, though, songs are also used purely as forms of entertainment, especially the forebitters used during the dedicated “social” time of the dog watches.

The second function Bascom lists is the use of folklore to justify or

validate a culture's institutions and rituals. This is a purpose of almost all of the customs, rituals, and tales mentioned. In the building of the ship, the milestone ceremonies which require the presence of a visiting dignitary — such as those for the keel-laying, shutter plank, and christening — give official validation from outside the maritime community. Shipboard rituals such as the Line-crossing ceremony and funerals emphasize the unique nature of maritime customs, which separate them from those practiced on land. Cautionary tales and songs are used to press home the importance of observing taboos and rituals, giving them validity. The idea here is that the sailor who is quick to scoff at such “superstitious nonsense” had better think twice, or else he may end up like the poor fellow in the tale. The fact that these nautical traditions have become widespread in the West through centuries of exchange also helps to justify them, because traditions which are observed by other nationalities have more validity by the sheer fact that they have crossed land-based boundaries.

Education is the third function of folklore presented in Bascom's article, and almost everything about maritime custom and tradition is designed to pass on knowledge to initiates in the community. Taboos tell new hands what is not acceptable in the maritime world, such as whistling and Friday departures. Line-crossing and funerals are rituals which inform sailors of their place in the maritime world and how that place should be maintained. Song and story are forms of oral history which allowed even the illiterate sailor knowledge of the past. Rhymes and memory devices were tools for uneducated commoners, and they were likely the reason that men who had spent little or no time inside a classroom were able to command a staggering knowledge of nautical language and ship handling. Myths and legends of sea creatures and specters are another, less obvious form of education, since they were once attempts to explain the unexplainable and somehow make it seem more understandable.

The last of Bascom's functions of folklore is to maintain conformity to accepted patterns of behavior, and to provide a form of approval for those who do conform. The most obvious examples of this attempt to make individuals keep within certain boundaries are the many and various taboos on board. The taboos mentioned in this paper, such as those against whistling and Friday departures, give barely a glimpse of

the wide range of behaviors and speech considered off-limits to the mariner; the taboos as a whole served to divide the maritime world from an ill-omened world into which the sailor dare not cross. Shipboard rituals also maintain conformity, since they are carried out in a formulaic manner passed down from one generation of sailors to the next. Any shellback worth his salt would never let a crossing of the equator go by without an initiation of the pollywogs, and a dead crewmember thrown overboard without ceremony would likely have driven the sailors of Nelson's day to mutiny. The reward for those who maintain the proper standards is membership in an exclusive society. Even today, there is a noticeable swelling of the chest as a young mariner informs others that he (or she) is a tallship sailor. This pride even has the effect of making sailors forget the miserable pay, back-breaking work, exhausting schedule, and terrifying moments that are still part of life onboard ship. All these are superseded by being able to say that they are one of the special few who have experienced this life.

To these four functions I have added one more which permeates all aspects of maritime tradition and lore, and that is to fulfill the need the sailor has to gain some control over his world. Making things taboo is a way to control bad luck. Ritual and ceremony in shipbuilding and shipboard life are often ways to actively seek good fortune and to appease the gods. The myriad creatures that the sailor learns to look out for give him a sense that he can control his fate just by being attentive. The use or avoidance of specific names and language gives the sailor control over the power of the word. Even the stories and songs sailors learn of supernatural and mythical creatures are forms of control, because there is more control in having knowledge of a thing than in being completely ignorant of it.

When looked at as serving a series of purposes, maritime folklore does not seem so strange or outlandish. Just like members of any other culture, sailors have invented ways to deal with their community and the outside world through story, song, and practical knowledge which can be transmitted from one generation to the next. New initiates to this culture often find themselves initially fascinated by the fantastic, and sometimes downright ridiculous, nature of some of these customs, but later find themselves, like myself, impressed by the simplicity and practicality which underlie many of the folkways of the sailor. Those

who venture into this rich culture should heed one word of caution, however: the modern tallship sailor is well aware of the fascination he holds for his land-based counterparts, and like his historic predecessors, he is fond of playing upon their gullibility. I fell prey to this when I was a fresh deckhand on my first schooner and found myself suffering from chapped lips. My mate informed me that a sure-fire cure for this was pelican dung smeared on the aggravated site. Both disgusted and fascinated, I thought this was some mystical maritime remedy passed down through generations, so I asked the mate how the remedy cured chapped lips. "It doesn't really cure 'em," was his reply, "but I can guarantee you won't be licking your lips!"

Works Cited

- Abell, Sir Westcott. *The Shipwright's Trade*. London: Conway Maritime Press, 1948.
- Bascom, William R. "Four Functions of Folklore." *The Journal of American Folklore* 67 (1954): 333-49.
- Beck, Horace. *Folklore and the Sea*. Middletown CT: Wesleyan UP, 1973.
- Dana, Richard Henry, Jr. *Two Years Before the Mast*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1911.
- Healey, James C. *Foc's'le and Glory-Hole*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1969.
- Hugill, Stan. *Shanties from the Seven Seas*. 2nd ed. Mystic CT: Mystic Seaport Museum, 1984.
- Jeans, Peter D. *Seafaring Lore and Legend*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004.
- Kemp, Peter. *The British Sailor: A Social History of the Lower Deck*. London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1970.
- Lloyd, Christopher. *The British Seaman*. Cranbury NJ: Associated UP, 1970.
- Masefield, John. *Sea Life in Nelson's Time*. 3rd ed. London: Sphere Books, 1971.
- Mullen, Patrick B. "The Relationship of Legend and Folk Belief." *The Journal of American Folklore* 84 (1971): 406-13.
- Rodger, N. A. M. *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1996.

226 *Chrestomathy*: Volume 5, 2006

Stark, Suzanne J. *Female Tars: Women Aboard Ship in the Age of Sail*.
Annapolis MD: Naval Institute Press, 1996.

Volo, Dorothy Denneen and Volo, James M. *Daily Life in the Age of Sail*.
Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 2002.