In 1781, there was a report in a London newspaper about a girl who had been discovered, disguised as a seaman, on a ship trading to the East Indies. Her motives are unknown. ‘Can you believe’, the report states, ‘that after being five weeks at sea, we found a young girl in boy’s clothes’.¹ In the second half of the eighteenth century, a one-way passage from Britain to India cost at least £30, substantially more than a male labourer could earn in a year, and she might have hoped to take advantage of the brisk marriage market operating in the territories controlled by the East India Company.² She was discovered only when there was a theft on board. The enquiry that followed included a search of seamen’s bedding, and her petticoat and gown were discovered in her pillow. This was an incident calculated to catch public interest and sell newspapers. In Britain there was a long tradition of women going to sea dressed as men.³ Such stories had romantic and salacious undertones and found a ready market. Yet the girl herself had probably made a calculated life choice, based on information acquired in the maritime communities along the River Thames and on known accounts of women who had served at sea, both legitimately and disguised as men.⁴

Before air and rail travel, given that roads were generally bad and in winter often impassable, travel by water was the norm. In the same way that we might have a passing knowledge of different makes of car, people would have known about different types of sailing vessels. They would have seen men working on these ships in ports and major rivers. They would have been more aware of winds and tides, which affected the price of goods in market. And while we think now of seafaring as an exclusively male province, in fact it impacted strongly on women’s lives and women themselves often went to sea. This essay explores the links between women and seafaring, focusing for the most part on Western Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁵
Romantic partners

The custom of naval officers taking women to sea was entrenched. As early as 1587, when the Armada was preparing to invade England, its commander, the Duke of Medina Sidonia, specifically included in his orders, ‘No public woman aboard the ships’. He threatened severe punishment for anyone contravening the order, regardless of rank.6 Yet in navies there must always have been a distinction between officers’ women and those whom common seamen tried to smuggle aboard. The custom persisted into the seventeenth century. One of Samuel Pepys’s closest friends, the wealthy merchant James Houblon, sent him a letter on 7 May 1677, imploring him, in his capacity as Secretary of the Admiralty, to do something about ‘the rascally officers of the fleet’:

Particularly that the King’s ships may not be made bawdyhouses nor the captains publicly carry and entertain their whores on board as some of them have formerly done and that from port to port in the Mediterranean, to the great scandal of our religion and government both amongst Turks Jews, and Christians.’7

A slow change in naval attitudes is reflected in the early novel, in *The Jamaica Lady; or, The Life of Bavia* (1720), which describes a British warship’s return voyage from Jamaica to England. Captain Fustian expostulates with one of his officers, Frutesius, who has brought Holmesia, his mistress, on board, drawing a distinction between sleeping with a prostitute ashore and keeping one at sea: ‘Tho’ you went every Night on Shore to your loose Woman at Jamaica. I pass’d it by without Notice; but this is such an Affront to her Majesty, that I am oblig’d to resent it.’8

In January 1731, Admiralty orders forbade officers and seamen from taking women to sea ‘without Orders from the Admiralty’. An Admiralty Directive of 1756 tightened up this ruling. It stipulated that there should be no women in the ship but ‘such as are really the Men’s wives’, and then only in port.9 But it was difficult to establish whether visiting wives were genuine or spurious. When the *Royal George*, a first-rate warship with a crew of 800, sank in an accident at Spithead in 1782, some 300 women and 60 children were on board. The numbers could never be confirmed as the majority drowned.

Officers continued to take women to sea without reprimand unless the matter was officially brought to the Admiralty’s notice. For some, having their wives aboard was a way to save money. A captain’s pay was not high and the officers not only had to pay for their uniform and equipment but also entertain others at table.10 If they failed to win prize money, when peace came they would have to maintain their family on half pay alone. Jane Austen’s naval brother Charles took his wife on board ship with him, where tragically she died in childbirth. Other officers took their mistresses aboard when serving overseas – although as the navy became more professionalized, this was increasingly frowned upon. Yet there were always exceptions: when Admiral Rodney sailed from Portsmouth during the American Revolutionary War, he was so anxious to catch a favourable wind, he did not delay to put the women and children ashore.11
Women and the Sea, 1600–1800

Women working at sea

Some women were legitimately allowed onboard naval vessels. The Sick and Wounded Board ruled on 1 January 1703, ‘every Hospital Ship to have Six Nurses and Four Laundresses, none under the age of Fifty Years’. Six days later, Admiral Sir George Byng, a member of the Board of Admiralty, inspected the hospital ships and insisted that, instead of women, men only should be employed. His order was duly enforced but it was noted that many men died who might have lived if they had been allowed female nurses. By 1705, women were back on hospital ships as ‘nurses and Laundresses’ and paid as crew. British warships also carried women in their own right. The wives of certain warrant officers (boatswains, carpenters, and gunners, who remained on ship even when the vessel was out of commission) were allowed on board. They had particular roles in battle – often helping the surgeon or carrying gunpowder from the ship’s magazine to the guns. After Admiral Nelson’s victory against the French at the Battle of the Nile in 1798, two women, Ann Hopping and Mary Ann Riley, applied for medals, already awarded to men, but were refused on the grounds that other women had been equally useful. Women also served at Trafalgar in 1805, in both the French and British ships. In Nelson’s fleet, few have been identified by name. Ellis Armstrong, wife of the quartermaster on the Swiftsure, received £10 from Lloyds Patriotic Fund in 1808 for the help she gave to the ship’s surgeon in the battle. And when, in 1847, Queen Victoria directed that the Naval General Service Medal for Trafalgar be awarded ‘without reservation to sex’, Jane Townsend, alongside another surviving woman, duly applied for it, based on ‘useful services’ in the 74-gun warship, Defiance. Her application was warmly supported by the ship’s former captain, Philip Durham, but turned down. The official reasoning was that consent would expose the navy – and army – to many other applications.

In peacetime, warrant officers’ wives were not always welcome to live on board warships maintained in reserve or laid up for repair. In 1767, the Admiralty issued orders to remove women from ships in ordinary (reserve) at Chatham, on threat of suspending the officers involved. And in 1772 there were complaints from men in Sheerness who said that when they came back to their ship from work, wet and cold, they could not get to the fire because of the numbers of women and children on board. Standing warrant officers were poorly and infrequently paid. They found it difficult to maintain their wives ashore, so the most practical step, if they had no young family, was to bring their wife on board with them. In time, there were young children as well as women on the ships.

Many women routinely sailed with the army on troop ships. Travelling with the army became a ‘quasi-acceptable, if not precisely respectable’, way for some women to see the world. For example, in 1777 the Gibraltar garrison had 4,000 men, 500 women, and 1,000 children. Conditions on troop ships would have been cramped and chaotic. Susanna Middleton, who in 1805 sailed to Gibraltar with her husband, a dockyard official, described her ordeal to her sister in London. She complained of drinking water that was almost black, of stinking meat, and of ‘such a collection of dreadful nasty smells’ that she felt nauseated whenever she tried to sit in the cabins below. Yet some remarkable women, such as Elizabeth Marsh (1735–85), born into...
Margarette Lincoln

a seafaring family, had the stamina to lead global lives, crossing oceans and continents, their experiences shaped ‘as much by water as by land’.22

Women in disguise

There are also famous tales of cross-dressing women who went to sea.23 Anne Bonny (1690–1782) and Mary Read (c.1690–1721), were immortalized in Captain Charles Johnson’s *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pyrates* (1724). The book, sometimes attributed to Daniel Defoe, was an immediate best-seller and went through four editions by 1726. Born in Ireland, Bonny grew up in South Carolina where, having married against her father’s wishes, she was barred from the family home and she and her husband settled in the Bahamas. There she took up with Captain Jack Rackham, one of the many pirates thereabouts and in 1720 sailed with him. Legend has it that on board she met Read, another cross-dressing female pirate, who apparently had always been dressed as a boy by her mother in order to receive an inheritance intended for the male line. Some claimed that the two women only wore men’s clothes in combat: both were said to be active whenever fighting was involved, particularly Bonny:

> When any Business was to be done in their Way, no Body was more forward or courageous than she, and particularly when they were taken; she and Mary Read, with one more, were all the persons that durst keep the Deck’.24

When Rackham’s ship was captured, pregnancy saved Bonny from execution. She lived out her days in South Carolina. Read died from a violent fever while in jail.25

In Britain, Hannah Snell won fame for her military career dressed as a man. She claimed to have joined the British army in 1745, after the Jacobite rising, using the name of her brother-in-law, James Grey, and taking some of his clothes. In 1747, she joined the marines in Portsmouth and sailed with Admiral Boscawen’s squadron to the East Indies. Snell served at sea and in India for three years, only revealing her sex when she was paid off in 1750. Afterwards, she became a kind of entertainer. She celebrated her military life on the stage and was applauded for her patriotism.26 Snell’s audiences were chiefly interested in the gory episodes – her injuries and sufferings – but it is difficult to tell how much of her story is true. The 500 lashes she claimed to have received as a soldier in Scotland is almost certainly a fabrication.27

Closer in time to the 1781 cross-dressing female discovered on the East Indiaman, is the story of Mary Lacy (c.1740–1801), who went to sea in masculine clothes and later trained as a shipwright, still disguised as a man. She published her autobiography, *The Female Soldier; Or, the Surprising Life and Adventures of Hannah Snell, etc*, in 1773. As in the story of Ann Bonny, there are several titillating episodes of same-sex eroticism, when she describes advances women made to her believing she was a man. The book was an instant success and there was a New York edition as late as 1807.28 We can read it closely for details of life at sea during the Seven Years War (1756–63), or a first-hand view of what it was like to work in a naval dockyard, or even scan it for material
about contemporary attitudes toward women and relations between the sexes. But we need to be careful: Lacy claims to have written a factual account but may have coloured events to appeal to a market and probably had help to write the book. All the same, we know that during the American Revolutionary War (1775–83) several other women dressed in men’s clothes and tried to enlist as seamen in privateers, or join the army.29

**Women and shipwreck**

Women who accompanied seamen or troops on voyages, or who just travelled overseas, were subject to the same dangers of piracy, shipwreck, or battle. Disaster at sea was an everyday occurrence (one source claims that in the 1750s around 4,200 Britons a year perished through shipwreck).30 The notion that women and children should leave a sinking boat first was not current before the loss of the *Kent* East Indiaman in 1825, when soldiers on board behaved better than the majority of the seamen and ensured an orderly evacuation. If seamen and passengers took to an open boat, a woman was often a liability and might become a target. Survivors often resorted to cannibalism, the weakest being sacrificed to save the strongest. This was accepted practice among seamen and not considered a crime provided that lots were properly drawn. But even when lots were cast, the shortest straw seems to have been reserved for the weakest among them.31 Another problem was women’s cumbersome dress which restricted movement; it seems genteel women were not overly willing to strip in an emergency. This is reflected in *Paul et Virginie*, a hugely popular story of innocent love first published in 1788, in which the heroine drowns. A burly sailor does his best to save her: “The man approached Virginia with respect, and kneeling at her feet, attempted to force her to throw off her clothes, but she rejected him with modesty, and turned away her head […] seeing death inevitable.”32

When, in 1786, the *Halsewell* East Indiaman foundered in a blizzard on precipitous cliffs at Purbeck, Dorset, several passengers managed to scramble to rocks and safety.33 Captain Pierce had his two daughters on board, who could only take refuge in the ship’s roundhouse and await their fate, although he secretly ordered his chief officer to make sure the ship’s long boat was reserved for officers and the ladies, should there be a chance to use it. Unable to save his daughters, Pierce drowned with them when the ship broke up. He had hoped to marry them well in India and was posthumously criticized for putting them in danger in the pursuit of mercenary alliances.34

If shipwrecked women survived to be captured by native peoples on non-European shores, they were assumed to suffer a fate worse than death. Survivors from the wreck of the *Grosvenor* in 1782 on the North African coast faced protracted suffering. Women’s reputations did not survive captivity. Several white women were reported to be living among the Caffres after the *Grosvenor* went down. Later they were offered escape but allegedly, ‘apprehending that their place in society was lost, and that they should be degraded in the eyes of their equals after spending so great a portion of their lives with savages’, they chose to stay with their children and the chiefs who protected them.35 Yet some women turned captivity to advantage. Elizabeth Marsh,
Margarette Lincoln
dughter of a British naval official based in Gibraltar, had the bad luck to be captured by Moroccan corsairs off the North African coast in 1756. The British government negotiated her release after a few months. Over a decade later, in 1769, she published an account of her ordeal, called *The Female Captive*. Writing for an established literary marketplace, she followed the pattern of earlier popular romances, notably by Penelope Aubin, shaping her narrative as a battle to retain her sexual virtue against acting ruler and future sultan, Sidi Muhammad, who allegedly tried to entice her into his harem.

**Working ashore**

If we consider what happened beyond Britain, the obvious point is that seafaring, by removing men to sea, everywhere made them dependent on the work of women ashore. Women played an important role in the economy of maritime communities. In Europe, this was as true in coastal areas where people were dependent on local fishing as in larger ports where resident seamen were chiefly involved in long-distance trade or naval warfare. The role of women in maritime communities, therefore, differed from that of women in urban economies where, in early modern times, trade became more regulated and women’s formal involvement in it declined. In early modern Portugal, for example, in northern coastal communities and in larger maritime centres such as Lisbon, women looked after the household while men were away in the cod fisheries for months at a time. They also sold the catch when the men returned.

While the greater proportion of women in these communities were restricted to low-level, supporting roles, some became involved in financing these high-seas fishing voyages and even owned fishing vessels. A register of ships in Aveiro in 1552 shows that of 70 vessels, mostly used for the cod fishery off Newfoundland and in the coastal trade off Ireland, England, and Flanders, 19 were either owned or part-owned by women. Opportunities for these Portuguese women probably differed from those in other northern European fishing ports where male primogeniture was a more established tradition and women less economically independent. However, studies have found that in some small European maritime communities, along the Brittany coast and in Basque country, households were woman-centred whether or not husbands were at sea. Local women were fiercely self-reliant and resilient, and took care of all household matters ashore.

Women in fishing communities were not always tied to the land: mending nets, processing and selling fish. In Norway and Sweden, they also helped with the catch. In Sweden in particular, where many households combined farming and fishing, women were adept at handling small boats. They rowed out to cattle pastured on spurs of land in order to milk them. Eighteenth-century Swedish oarswomen even made a living by ferrying people across rivers. In England, bum boat women earned money by rowing out to the fleet and selling fresh produce, and whenever there was a shortage of men in wartime, women in ports would have been able to do small boat work, as they did in Europe.
Women petitioners

In Britain, women married to seafarers were often expected to look after their husbands’ interests while they were away, or to lobby on their behalf. This was certainly true of the wives of seamen captured by the Barbary corsairs. Throughout the seventeenth century and into the early 1700s, corsairs routinely terrorized the Western Mediterranean from North African bases, and pillaged even as far as West Country villages, where they seized women and children too. In England and subsequently Britain, the wives of male victims were licensed to beg in order to raise the ransom needed to set them free.44 It is estimated that, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there were over 20,000 British captives in Barbary.45 Some seafarers languished in captivity for ten years or more before their release could be negotiated – if it ever was – meanwhile their families endured poverty at home.

Economic distress could spur seamen’s wives to action. During the Dutch Wars, on 10 July 1666, Samuel Pepys recorded in his diary that the navy office was plagued by a crowd of over 300 women. They were protesting on behalf of their menfolk, who had not been paid and who languished in Dutch jails as prisoners of war. The women were so rowdy, Pepys was afraid to send out his supper – a venison pasty – to be baked in the cook shop.46 On 14 June 1667, he noted that sailors’ women were again unruly, as news spread that the Dutch fleet, which had daringly raided Chatham on the River Medway and seized English ships, had been partly crewed by English sailors. This Dutch triumph brought shame to the navy, but sailor’s wives in Wapping cried out that it was the Admiralty’s fault for not paying their men handsomely as the Dutch did.47 One woman had actually confronted Sir William Batten, Surveyor of the Navy, on Tower Hill, accusing the old naval officer in colourful language of penny-pinching mismanagement. In Queen Anne’s reign, even the wives of pirates holed up in Madagascar felt entitled to lobby for their husbands to be pardoned and allowed home with their loot. The queen had made a gracious response to an address in the House of Commons calling for the suppression of piracy. Encouraged, the wives submitted their petition to her in 1707. It was unsuccessful.48

Rowdy sailors’ women typically came to notice during periods of impressment. Britain depended on trade to finance wars and there were never enough experienced seamen to man both merchant and naval vessels in wartime.49 While impressment was unavoidable, it was always felt to be a contravention of Englishmen’s boasted liberties. Pepys was deeply affected by the lamentations of the wives of impressed sailors during the Second Anglo-Dutch War (1666–67):

But, Lord! how some poor women did cry; and in my life I never did see such natural expression of passion as I did here in some women’s bewailing themselves, and running to every parcel of men that were brought, one after another, to look for their husbands, and wept over every vessel that went off, thinking they might be there, and looking after the ship as far as ever they could by moone-light [sic], that it grieved me to the heart to hear them. Besides, to see poor patient labouring men and housekeepers, leaving poor wives and families,
taken up on a sudden by strangers, was very hard, and that without press-money, but forced against all law to be gone. It is a great tyranny.50

Women encouraged their men to resist press gangs. In 1755, Captain Wheeler reported that in Newcastle he might have recruited more men if he had been able to transfer volunteers promptly into a tender, or holding vessel used to ferry men out to warships, before they changed their minds, but the next day they were ‘teazed and baited out of it’ by the women.51 Women were prominent in anti-impressment riots, collecting missiles for men and themselves pelting press gangs with stones, chunks of coal, and broken bottles.52 In 1759, one recruiting captain in Bristol reported that women even helped men escape from the tenders.53

In maritime parishes like Wapping in London, the local populace was ready to help sailors who said they were evading press gangs, although this excuse was used by thieves to gain entry to premises they later robbed. It was also used as a defence in trials for theft, when the accused might claim he was only caught running because he was trying to escape a press gang.54 Equally, women used the excuse, or fact, that their husbands had been pressed to gain sympathy and to encourage others to wink at crime. One woman, fencing stolen goods in the 1790s, allegedly cajoled a shopkeeper to accept the items with just such a hard luck story.55

There was a tradition of women energetically petitioning the authorities for all kinds of favours and benefits. In early modern Europe, petitioning was ubiquitous at all levels of society because it was the only acceptable way to address local and national authorities when seeking redress or advancement. Women could employ a professional scribe to produce an elegant document and be sure of adopting the correct tone, or they could follow one of the many guides to letter writing and chance their own efforts. In 1702 Frances Moody, a seaman’s wife, petitioned the commissioners of the navy’s Sick and Wounded Board for travel funds to transfer her mentally ill husband to Newcastle. He had been discharged from the navy as unlikely to recover and refused admittance to a London hospital but, as she explained, family in Newcastle would care for him. The commissioners obliged.56 In 1775, Lacy traded on her reputation as ‘the female shipwright’ to lobby naval officials on her husband’s behalf at Deptford dockyard, where he worked as a shipwright, asking that he might be granted an apprentice.57 In the same way, middling and elite women lobbied those naval officers with influence, seeking promotion for their sons and husbands.

Widows might petition naval authorities for their husband’s back pay, or plead with charities for an allowance. Resourceful widows of naval supply contractors might petition to be allowed to continue a naval contract after their husbands’ deaths. In these situations, widows claimed a good understanding of their husband’s business, or reassured the navy that they had a capable foreman who could help shoulder the responsibility. Merchant seamen’s widows might seek charitable relief from Trinity House. The corporation, set up by Henry VIII in 1514 to regulate pilotage and maintain navigational lights and buoys, used some of its large income from light dues to help mariners and their dependants. Those in need had to submit a petition and be recommended to the corporation as a proper object of charity.58 In the eighteenth century, Trinity House supplied printed forms, presumably to spare the petitioner the
Women and the Sea, 1600–1800

The forms were then completed by hand. The signatures strongly indicate that some petitioners were semi-literate, able to sign only their first name with any assurance. Trinity House received requests for assistance from all over the kingdom, with most petitioners applying for an annual allowance rather than accommodation in their almshouses, which was highly prized and more difficult to obtain. During the French Wars (1793–1815), Trinity House also provided a form that allowed a merchant seaman’s wife to claim temporary relief for herself and children if her husband was a prisoner of war in France, supplementing whatever parish relief she might obtain. The certificate had to be signed by the owner of the vessel in which the seaman had been captured.

Communications and relationships

Women kept in touch with men at sea through customary seafaring networks, and by letter. It is notoriously difficult to estimate literacy levels. Some figures suggest that literacy was as low as 30 per cent in the eighteenth century but others indicate that between 1700 and 1790 literacy remained fairly steady at 60 per cent for men, rising in women from 40 to 50 per cent. At the end of the seventeenth century, we know that the wives of pirates in New York were able to communicate by letter to pirate bases on Madagascar. And if a woman could not write, she could get someone to scribble a letter for her.

In all cases where menfolk were absent at sea for long periods, women acquired power – over the home, child-raising, and domestic finances. This did not advance their legal status since property was still owned by men, but marriages to seamen sometimes developed into good partnerships. In other cases, the absence of men at sea for long periods produced fractured relationships. At sea, mariners were constantly reminded of the power that others, more senior, had over them. If they compensated on return by asserting their authority over the home, there could be violent scenes. Domestic violence was high in port towns. Lacy gives a vivid picture of marital relations in Portsmouth in her autobiography of 1773. As a carpenter’s assistant, she witnessed passionate quarrels between her master and his common-law wife. In one such episode, her mistress threw her two-month-old baby at the carpenter. The child’s howls could be heard through the open window and disturbed the whole neighbourhood. When Mary tried to calm the woman, she roared at her man, ‘Oh the dog! I’ll pull out his guts!’ Both parents neglected their children and left them to the casual care of servants. This is a unique picture of a maritime community, described by someone who actually experienced it.

Women in maritime districts might have long-term relations with more than one man, co-habiting with whoever was in port. Such arrangements potentially suited all parties. The woman was assured of a more regular income; the men returned to trusted partners. This was an important consideration since prostitutes and bawdy-house keepers routinely fleeced returning sailors of their wages. Sometimes women fell into multiple relationships by chance rather than design, if there had been no news of their first partner for years and it was presumed he had been killed or lost.
at sea. Obviously, if ever their men happened to be ashore at the same time, there was plenty of room for disagreement. In 1761, mariner Daniel Looney was tried at the Old Bailey for murdering Captain Joseph Shanks at their home in Wapping. Looney had complained to his ‘wife’ that it was very hard she could not bring him a roll and butter for his breakfast as he brought so much money home. Shanks had retorted, ‘Captain Looney, it is d – d hard I cannot live in peace and quietness in my own house’. A fracas ensued during which Looney hit his wife with a sugar hatchet before repairing to the pub. Later that evening, extremely drunk and convinced that his wife’s affections were disproportionately bestowed on another, he discharged a loaded musket at his rival. Looney, former master of a Bristol privateer, was found guilty, hanged, dissected, and anatomized.66

Higher up the social scale, some officers’ wives embraced the additional responsibility of running a household on their own. Others were fearful. In 1747, Frances Boscawen assured her husband, Edward, that his young family was thriving under her watchful care and that he had no cause to worry while at sea.67 In contrast, Betsy Freemantle was distinctly nervous when her husband, Thomas, took up a new commission in 1803 leaving her with five young children and the estate to manage.68 She rose to the occasion, dividing her time between rural Buckinghamshire and London society. Some wives were not so capable. Admiral Cuthbert Collingwood was disappointed in his wife’s excessive spending, but as he was not home at all for the last six years of his life he understood that she sought pleasure in entertainments and small luxuries.69

Surviving letters between maritime couples show that prolonged warfare and separation brought distress and hardship. This is particularly true during the long French Wars, when there were long periods between shore leave. Husbands tried to fulfil fatherly obligations, sending directions and advice about the education of children but of necessity often left decisions to wives on the spot. Sadly, wives were also left to make excuses for the poor correspondence record of children who did not know what to put in a letter that would interest their fathers, often complete strangers.70

For centuries, seafaring has been associated with prostitution in seaports. The Black Book of the Admiralty, compiled in the early fifteenth century, admonished the medieval mariner to avoid taverns and loose women, and to respect the virtuous. In fifteenth-century England, the port towns of Sandwich and Southampton, and the London borough of Southwark had licensed brothels. These conurbations had large sailor populations and there was a sense that wives and daughters would be at risk if sailors’ sexual needs were not catered for. By the mid-sixteenth century, there was a more repressive attitude toward sexual morality and the legal brothels were closed down.71 As Britain’s maritime trade and navy grew, so did the number of prostitutes in port towns. Eighteenth-century Portsmouth was reputed to be able to provide about 1,000 prostitutes whenever the fleet returned. During the height of the wars against Napoleon, there was a shortage of trained seamen and captains were unwilling to grant them shore leave in case they deserted. Instead prostitutes and wives were rowed out to the fleet. Bacchanalian scenes ensued on the lower deck.72
Transportation and prostitution

Women’s experience of the sea extended to transportation to the colonies as criminals. First-hand accounts of their experiences throw light on prostitution in ports. After the outbreak of the American Revolutionary War (1775–83), it became impossible to transport convicted offenders to the British colonies in America, as had been the norm. Convicts were later transported to Australia instead. In 1789, the Lady Juliiana left Plymouth with 226 women and girls aboard, mostly sentenced for petty theft and prostitution. The conversation of one young prostitute, as reported by a seaman serving on the convict ship, helps us to understand the circumstances that might make a short stay on the lower decks of a warship more attractive than life ashore. When he asked her if she minded being banished from her native land, she retorted:

How much more preferable is our present situation to what it has been since we commenced our vicious habits? We have good victuals and a warm bed. We are not ill treated, or at the mercy of every drunken ruffian, as we were before. When we rose in the morning, we know not where we would lay our heads in the evening, or if we would break our fast in the course of the day. Banishment is a blessing to us. Have we not been banished for a long time, and yet in our native land, the most dreadfull of all situations? We dared not go to our relations, whom we had disgraced. Other people shut their doors in our faces. We were as if a plague were upon us, hated and shunned.

As seamen criss-crossed the globe, their expectations of finding prostitutes in every port affected their relationships with women across the world. In the second half of the eighteenth century, it may have coloured the dealings of Western Europeans with women on the Pacific islands, although even at the time there was unease about the justice of representing Pacific women as uniformly open to prostitution. Even the partial evidence that survives indicates that it is a mistake to generalize about female islanders’ relationships with the crews of expeditions sent to explore the Pacific. While some formed voluntary liaisons, maintaining their dignity, a measure of control over the situation, and even becoming sincerely attached to seamen, others were exploited by islanders, who took a share of the goods they bartered for sex. Women might be forced to travel with European crews, only to be abandoned in a crisis, or when they had lost their attraction. Relations between women and European seamen in the Pacific were complex: ‘The transition from sex-as-intercultural exchange to sex-as-barter to “prostitution” was probably more “entangled” than a discrete sequence’. Some indigenous women were victimized, but others won respect as sexual traders and mediators between ship and shore. And if sailors were accustomed to using women for pleasure, they would also have known examples of strong women who could be trusted with business.

Provision for the elderly and destitute

Such was the importance of the navy and sea trade to Britain by the end of the seventeenth century, that some provision was made for those who had grown old or become disabled at sea. In 1692, Queen Mary II revived her father, James II’s idea
of building a naval hospital at Greenwich. The first Pensioners (as the inmates were called), entered the unfinished Hospital in 1705. Within its walls there was provision for only a handful of naval wives or widows, employed as nurses to care for the sick and to feed men too disabled to manage that themselves. As a result, numerous wives of Greenwich Pensioners came to live nearby, where they took in washing or did other menial work to survive. Many women of the time would have found themselves caring for mutilated or debilitated seamen in their own homes. One poignant example is Ann Flinders. Her husband, Matthew, was sent to survey the coast of Australia in 1801 just a few months after their marriage. She waited nine years for him because the French made him a prisoner of war on his voyage home, only to find him prematurely aged on return and chronically ill. He died within four years.

The wives of superannuated men who had been masters or pilots in the merchant service might be fortunate enough to secure a place with their husbands at one of Trinity House’s three London almshouses, built in the mid-seventeenth century: two in Deptford, one in Whitechapel. Rooms were basic but well maintained, although at the end of the seventeenth century, Ned Ward, the London satirist, denigrated the newer of the two Deptford almshouses as a ‘Pinch-Gut College’. Candidates for admission had to be in reduced circumstances and unable to maintain themselves by their own labour. After 1792 they also had to be at least 60 years old. The needy could petition for a place but only a recommendation secured one, with the Elder Brethren of Trinity House usually taking it in turns to make these representations. Men received a monthly allowance of 20 shillings and wives admitted with their husbands received 16 shillings, but only after they had turned 60. Husbands and wives were able to live together in Trinity almshouses (in a workhouse they would be separated). Inmates might also marry and move in together, which freed up rooms. Rarely did anyone leave before death unless they became chronically unwell or mentally unstable. There were no facilities to deal with such cases. For example, Anne Kinselagh, declared insane, was sent to a mad house on 6 October 1791. Mary Hardisty, merely ‘disordered in mind’, was removed to Wapping Workhouse on 1 December 1792. A week later Joanna Posgate, ‘infirm and helpless’, was ordered to reside with her daughter. Very occasionally, individuals were dismissed for misconduct, so the regime was a controlling one, though Trinity’s Council may have regulated behaviour to ensure a harmonious community.

In eighteenth-century Britain, many poor maritime women became all too familiar with the workhouse. In maritime parishes, the workhouse fulfilled a function that differed in some respects from that of workhouses elsewhere. As men were often at sea, workhouses routinely formed part of the support structure for seamen’s wives. If their credit failed because husbands were slow to return or died abroad, they and their children might go there as a last resort. Sometimes, only the children might be admitted, allowing the mother to work. Or a family might be allowed the provisions of the house as ‘out-relief’, as was Ann Ransom in 1791, about to lie in, with three children already and her husband at sea. Predictably, in wartime, instances of seamen’s families needing relief rose smartly as men were either pressed or willingly joined the navy. Some men enlisted in order to evade family responsibilities, never intending to return. Wartime steadily placed additional burdens on those paying the poor rate. In
1796, the Greenwich workhouse committee ruled that the wives of seafaring men should no longer have a cash allowance, presumably because it was too great a drain on resources. Yet sometimes the workhouse helped women with the cost of taking their family to other ports if their husband’s ship had docked there: in 1773 Mary Giffin was allowed 5s 3d to help her get to Portsmouth with her children.

Occasionally, seamen unable to be at home to supervise errant wives actually chose to pay for their families to be maintained in the workhouse. In September 1777, William Smith, a seaman on His Majesty’s Yacht Royal Charlotte, informed the committee of the Greenwich workhouse that his wife ‘was such a Sottish Drunken Woman that she was incapable of taking care of herself or her Children’ and begged that the workhouse would keep them. He made over his entire pay to the workhouse for their upkeep. Similar arrangements could be put in place when infirm and aged seamen retired. The Pensioners in Greenwich Hospital were expected to contribute toward the maintenance of their wives in the workhouse if those wives were infirm and needed care. They had to transfer a portion of their monthly allowance or their tobacco money to the parish.

Even in peacetime, the workhouse might be a means for poor women to get their boys equipped to go to sea. Another resource was the Marine Society, set up by Jonas Hanway in 1756 to send poor boys into the navy. The workhouse also served to keep troublesome young people off the streets but there was a limit to what it could do.

Given the resourcefulness of women in maritime communities, there were always capable women involved in maritime businesses. In early modern Portugal, records show that women operated as wine merchants and were involved in such long-distance trades as the importation of textiles and iron products from northern Europe. In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain, women were also ship owners, although usually these women were from smaller maritime communities and the lower-middle class. Many women also ran smaller ancillary trades such as ship chandlers, slop-selling (dealing in ready-made clothes for sailors), and public houses or inns catering for sailors.

Women in British seaports from the later seventeenth century developed complex financial networks organized around ‘sailor’s tickets’. These were promissory notes generated by the navy. Men were given tickets instead of wages when their ship was paid off that could be redeemed at the navy office. Men who needed cash urgently sold their tickets below value, often to women who took on the responsibility of dealing with the navy bureaucracy. Widows might also sell the wages due to them for a lower amount if in need of ready money. Some women were also able to make a living from representing men, as well as other women, who were having trouble getting paid. This was because in English seaport towns it became common for men to assign their wives or female relations the power of attorney while at sea so that the women could legally deal with their financial and business affairs in their absence.
Women in maritime communities from the early modern period onwards, were also involved in a more shadowy economy. In England and Wales before 1620, they played a major part in the support network for pirates operating in local waters. Afterwards, large-scale, coastal piracy seems to have been overcome and pirates looked to new bases overseas. Women ran borrowing networks, managed pawnshops, received and dealt in stolen goods, and catered to a range of seamen’s needs on shore. They were often implicated in smuggling and, particularly in the seventeenth century, helped men to pilfer goods from shipping moored in the Thames.91

As consumers, women provided a large market for naval commemoratives. These became popular during the War of Jenkins’ Ear (1739–48), after Admiral Edward Vernon’s capture in 1739 of the Spanish stronghold, Porto Bello, on the Isthmus of Panama. In this supportive role, afterwards women contributed to perceptions of the social and political importance of the navy. Women found that jewellery, commemorative fans, ribbons, and patch boxes could all be used to convey their patriotism and, depending on circumstances, their opinions about national affairs. Figurines, plaques featuring profiles of naval heroes, tea pots, mugs, purses, and trinkets were produced in quantity, for both the top and bottom ends of the market. In this way, women helped to make the naval heroes of later eighteenth-century wars household names.92 Some commemorative items were acquired as souvenirs of nationally important events. Others were treasured for their personal significance – usually those incorporating portraits or the hair of a loved one. Some were purchased or commissioned with the intention of making a public statement, for example drawing attention to the family’s connection to a naval victory, and so helped to give women a public voice.93

Men’s involvement with the sea – in navies, as pirates and explorers, or in dockyards – has been well studied, partly because surviving records are more extensive and so open to analysis over time. Women’s involvement is necessarily sometimes indirect, but wide-ranging and just as fascinating. The young woman disguising herself as a sailor in 1791, with hopes perhaps of reaching India or any of the ports en route, was just one facet of women’s long association with the sea.

Notes

1 Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser, 26 Feb. 1781, p. 3.
9 *Regulations and Instructions Relating to His Majesty’s Service at Sea*, 8th edn, London, 1756.
15 For other women in the British fleet, see Adkins and Adkins, *Jack Tar*, pp. 153–93.
17 TNA ADM 106/1154/245.
18 TNA ADM 106/1208/310.
19 Adkins, *Jack Tar*, p. 177.
21 NMM X2003 039/2, 4 September 1805, Susannah Middleton to her sister.
26 One of Snell’s songs is reprinted in the *Ladies Magazine*, I, (1750), p. 282.
29 For example, *Morning Post and Daily Advertiser*, 13 July 1779, p. 2; *London Chronicle*, October 23–6, 1779, p. 400.
30 J. Wilkinson, MD, *Tutamen Nauticum: Or the Seaman’s Preservation from Shipwreck, Diseases, and Other Calamities Incident to Mariners*, 2nd edn, London: Dodsley, 1763, p. 1. The 1801 census calculated Britain’s population to be 10,500,000.
40 Abreu-Ferreira, ‘Fishmongers and Shipowners’, p. 22.
364

43 Chester Chronicle Or Commercial Intelligencer, 4 Dec. 1775, p. 4.
44 See Lincoln, British Pirates and Society, pp. 198–9. On the impact of corsairing, see Colley, Captives, pp. 77–8.
45 Colley, Captives, p. 44.
48 BL Add. MS 61620 ff. 155b–171b.
50 1st July 1666; The Diary of Samuel Pepys, VII, XX.
56 TNA ADM 99/2 quoted in Hunt, Women in Eighteenth-Century Europe, p. 313.
57 TNA ADM 106/1231/171.
59 In 1800, 3,682 received Trinity House pensions. See Cotton, Memoir, p. 189.
60 Cotton, Memoir, p. 103.
70 For example, see NMM LBK 58/2 1 (b–c), quoted by E. Gill, Naval Families, War and Duty in Britain, c. 1740–1820, Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2016, p. 84.
Women and the Sea, 1600–1800

77 Lincoln, *Naval Wives*, p. 100.
79 LMA MS30218/2/190 2.
80 LMA MS30218/2/190 2.
81 GHC G ID/12.5, 10 Mar. 1781; 7 Sep. 1783; G ID/12.8, 11 Jun. 1791.
82 GHC, G ID/12.11, 6 Feb. 1796.
83 GHC, G ID/12.4, 27 Sep. 1777.
84 GHC, G ID/12.3, 26 Jun. 1773.
85 E.g. GHC, G ID/12.3, 2 May 1772.
86 GHC, G ID/12.8, 20 Sep. 1788.
89 TNA ADM 106/1098/179B.

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