Enter Jack Tar

The blue-water mariner in early modern world literature

Dan Brayton

In European culture, argues the philosopher Hans Blumenberg, the trajectory of human life is persistently compared with a sea voyage. ‘Humans live their lives and build their institutions on dry land’, Blumenberg notes in his study *Shipwreck with Spectator*. ‘Nevertheless’, he continues, ‘they seek to grasp the movement of their existence above all through the metaphorics of the sea voyage’.1 Yet how have those human lives spent predominantly on salt water been represented in cultural history? From the ancient Mesopotamian hero Gilgamesh to Noah, Jonah, Jason, Odysseus (that green-eyed quester forever thwarted by Pontus), and Aeneas, cultural heroes have quested across the waters. Yet ancient and classical mariners were part-time sailors, forced to navigate under dire constraint or as part of a one-time mission to slay a foe or retrieve a precious object. Such legendary and literary mariners clung to the coastlines, rowing through the Mediterranean calms and only hoisting sail in a favourable following wind.2 There is not a blue-water mariner among them, for the simple reason that, until the early modern period, Europeans had not devised the means to transit the oceans. With the exception of the Norse, who mastered the North Atlantic sub-Artic gyre by 1000 CE and populated Iceland, southern Greenland, and parts of Newfoundland, European navigation remained resolutely coastal in scope until the fifteenth century. The Norse were themselves seasonal and occasional mariners, fitting their extraordinary nautical exploits into lives taken up with farming, fishing, and – for several centuries – looting and pillaging. It is not their story that I mean to tell here. My subject is the oceangoing or blue-water mariner of early modernity, commonly known as Jack Tar, a sobriquet that gained currency toward the end of the seventeenth century and thereafter stuck like tar on canvas for more than two centuries.3

Oceangoing mariners, whose lives were spent on literal rather than metaphorical sea voyages, cluster at the margins of European cultural history in a sort of cultural intertidal zone by hegemonic groups – the Tudor-Stuart aristocracy, the Georgian
Enter Jack Tar

and Victorian bourgeoisie – preoccupied with their own central role in the politics of the nation state. An everyman with folkloric roots, the oceangoing mariner would become, by the seventeenth century, a familiar albeit peculiar and threatening figure in the ports of western Europe and, later, the globe, frequenting the decks and pages of early modern seagoing vessels and texts in various guises. In English, this character type came eventually to be called Jack Tar, a diminutive that marked him as a type rather than an individual. The parodic family name derives from the material most closely associated with the mariner’s trade when sailors spent much of their time at sea tarring the standing and running rigging of sailing vessels, which was composed of perishable materials – linen, wool, hemp, canvas – and softwood spars that would quickly rot when exposed. Mariners’ clothing and bodies were habitually covered with the redolent substance, detectable by its distinctive odour. Until quite recently mariners’ garb – hats, trousers, and foul weather coats – was composed of textiles that were tanned for preservation and waterproofing, as were sails and awnings. By the late seventeenth century, the olfactory association of mariners with tarpaulins garnered them the nickname that would last even beyond the demise of working sail. Universally described as tarry, marked by a humble yet indelible tactile and olfactory presence that is at once cultural and material, familiar and foreign, early modern sailors became tars.

In much the same way as John Bull later became a familiar cartoon caricature of the generic Englishman in eighteenth-century broadsides and newspapers, Jack Tar came to denominate the English blue-water mariner (and, for some time, American mariners as well). Yet his origins lie at the intersection of print culture and transatlantic navigation, somewhere between the late fifteenth century and the first usage of the nickname to signify an oceangoing mariner. The Oxford English Dictionary cites the date for the first use of Jack Tar as ‘a common appellation for a sailor’ as 1659. As early as the mid-sixteenth century, the Jack denoted ‘a man of the common people; a lad, a fellow, chap; esp. a low-bred or ill-mannered fellow, a knave’. Two centuries earlier, Langland and Gower both employed ‘Jack’ to refer to ‘any representative of the common people’. The class connotations of the nickname are invariably humble in nature. For this reason, the early modern origins of Jack Tar as a generic term for sailors are of particular interest, for the name signifies, more than a style or subculture, a blue-water ontology both familiar and exotic. What interests me about the development of this character type in European literature and culture are two moments of historical emergence, the first when the oceangoing mariner first appears in works of imaginative literature, the second when he becomes a recognizable stereotype (and, hence, a stock character). This trajectory correlates with appearance, in print culture, of a trans-oceanic imaginary.

Early modern literary texts haphazardly track the historical itineraries of extravagant voyagers who inhabited early modern oceanic and textual spaces. The blue-water mariner traverses oceans and national boundaries, languages and literary genres, moving across, between, and even beyond textual and territorial borders, peopling diverse art forms in various guises. My purpose in pursuing this intertextual and international figure is to map some of the overlooked relationships between early
modern oceanic voyagers, the emergent maritime powers of England, Portugal, and the Netherlands, and literary production. In what follows I offer an abbreviated literary history of the blue-water mariner, a trans-cultural character who appears in early modern Europe wearing a variety of costumes and speaking disparate languages. My goal is to specify, as nearly as possible, the moment and conditions of his irruption onto the stage of European literary history as a distinctive cultural presence in the literatures of several maritime nations. Although this character type goes by a host of different names in different historical periods and literary texts, I shall refer to this figure as both Jack Tar and \textit{Homo pelagicus}, an oceanic man. The mock-binomen gestures to the distinctiveness of the blue-water mariner as a species apart. It is also deployed as a challenge to ready and easy notions of Renaissance Man. In what follows, I excavate the literary genealogy of this character type in the cultural production of early modern seagoing nations, mapping its early development in Portuguese, English, and Dutch literary texts.

**The emergence of a global persona**

\textit{Homo pelagicus} appears in European literature shortly after the development of movable type transformed literary culture forever, striding across the English stage in Robert Daborne’s 1612 play \textit{A Christian Turned Turk}.

\begin{quote}
\underline{Gismund:} Of what land are you/And whither are you bound?
\underline{Davy:} We are of Marcelles, bound for Normandy. Of which are you?
\underline{Gismund:} We are of the Sea!
\underline{Sailor:} The Devil land you!
\end{quote}

In this exchange, familiar to any mariner who has ‘spoken’ to another ship at sea, Gismund identifies himself not as a subject or citizen but as a member of an oceanic nation for his ‘we’ denotes a collective identity; yet it also suggests the self-conferral of royal status, a proximity to King Neptune. As Claire Jowitt argues in her recent study of the role of pirates in Tudor and Stuart literary culture, ‘for him [Gismund] the pirate vessel represents an alternate political space, and that his allegiances are free from the claims of orthodox national identity’. While it is certainly the case that early modern piracy was a complex and dynamic social phenomenon that tested national affiliation, as dramatized in Daborne’s play about the pirate Jack/John Ward, the focus here is the way Gismund claims an extra-national identity defined by oceanic space. His name itself evokes the Latin root for ‘world’ (‘mundus’), and indeed worldliness is one of the markers of the blue-water mariner, whose voyages have kept him away from home for months and years at a time. Gismund stakes a claim to both an ambivalent social position at the border of criminality and patriotism, and he asserts an emergent subjectivity born of ocean voyages and intimacy with strange lands and cultures. In so doing, he points to an oceanic ontology readily assimilated into commonplace notions of cultural alterity: declaring allegiance to the sea was but a step from ‘turning Turk’, a renunciation of national and religious identities tied to the sea and to the threatening cultures that lay across it.
Gismund’s oceanic identity and worldliness resulted in part from the rapidly changing early modern *imago mundi*, which was suddenly very blue, and in part from the transnational nature of print culture. ‘I take world literature’, writes David Damrosch, ‘to encompass all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language […] In its most expansive sense, world literature could include any work that has ever reached beyond its home base’. This encompassing definition is then qualified: a literary ‘work only has an effective life as world literature whenever, and wherever it is actively present within a literary system beyond that of its original culture’. The culture of Renaissance humanism surely constituted a literary system within which texts frequently circulated beyond cultural boundaries: sonnets and other lyric forms, so avidly read by Tudor courtiers, were not the only textual elements disseminated by Petrarch; so, too, were neo-Platonic ideas and a particular set of poetic postures, which circulated as surely as sonnets. Textual circulation was not limited to texts, per se, in the form of bound, printed volumes, whether biblical, classical, or incunabular. If world literature is ‘a mode of circulation and reading’ as Damrosch defines it, whereby texts and textual effects signify in new ways even as they cross national and cultural borders, then surely world literature must also encompass *characters*, those anthropomorphic textual constructs that so often ‘circulate beyond their culture of origin’, as units of analysis.

As print culture takes hold in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the stock characters of medieval fabliaux and chivalric romance give way to early modern iterations of classical character types (such as the clever servant). We also witness the emergence of wholly new character types, some of them defined by their association with newfound lands across the oceans and with arduous trans-oceanic sea voyages. The ‘discovery of the ocean’, as J. H. Parry described the geographic foundations of the Columbian exchange, generated new frontiers for the literary imagination, and new characters. World literature, then, in its nascence, is an early modern phenomenon generated at the conjunction of the printing press, the reading public, and the ship. In the early sixteenth century, precisely what constituted the world was just as conceptually uncertain as the complex of ideas and practices signified by *litteras*. Jack Tar, an international and oftentimes transnational character type circulating and signifying well beyond the ‘home base’ of the nation state, is born at the moment of cultural negotiation when western European nation states turn to the sea.

It is tempting to claim to locate the earliest incarnation of *Homo pelagicus* in the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*, as a sailor making his literary debut not aboard ship but on horseback while tippling wine from Bordeaux as the Chapman naps. This would be a grave mistake, but not for obvious reasons. Chaucer, who came from a family of wine merchants and knew much about the treacherous waters between Bordeaux and Ipswich, wrote a treatise in 1391 on the astrolabe for his son, demonstrating considerable technological knowledge of it and the compass, two technological devices that would make it possible for generations of mariners to transit the oceans. Yet Chaucer describes his Shipman as a man of coastlines, capes, and ‘craft’: ‘But of his craft to rekene wel his tydes,/His streymes, and his daungers hym besides,/His herberwe, and his moone, his lodemenage,/Ther nas noon swich from Hulle to Carthage’ (GP, ll. 401–4). These are the marks of a highly skilled yet primarily coastal
mariner, whose experience of navigation out of sight of land was limited to short transits across the Celtic Sea and the Bay of Biscay. His nautical knowledge consists primarily of pilotage and dead reckoning, for the kinds of knowledge and experience required to ‘rekene’ currents (‘stremes’), tides, navigational hazards, the cycles of the moon, the use of the compass (‘lodemenage’), and distances between harbours (‘herberwe’) belong to mariners engaged for the most part in cabotage (coastal trade). The geography that defines the Shipman, ‘Fro Grootlond to the cape of Fynystere,/And every cryke in Britaigne and in Spayne’, though international, is a catalogue of capes and landmarks that recapitulates the ‘haven-finding art’ of medieval coastal pilotage. Thus, the Shipman does not belong to the genus *Homo pelagicus*, even if he is a clear progenitor of later seagoing mariners such as Francis Drake and John Hawkins. When it comes to the genealogy of the blue-water mariner, Chaucer’s Shipman is that most English of fishes, a red herring, for he circulates entirely within an old-world geography.

Yet little more than a century after Chaucer’s death, the blue-water or world mariner emerges in the wake of the first trans-oceanic voyages by the likes of Christopher Columbus, Vasco da Gama, and Amerigo Vespucci, and thence becomes a cultural presence in several national literatures as print culture spreads across Europe. He first takes the form of individual characters, in fiction and nonfiction, whose oceangoing exploits align him with the political and economic interests of particular nation states – but not always the one where he was born. Thus, the Genovese (or Catalan) Columbus becomes a hero of Spain, as does the Portuguese Ferdinand Magellan. Later, Drake becomes a national hero for guarding the interests – indeed, the very survival – of an upstart island nation suddenly transformed, by means of its sea power, from a politically and economically marginal polity to a major geopolitical power. Yet even as such historical personages make their entrances onto the world-historical stage, writers of imaginative literature begin to imagine fictional characters marked by a new kind of transnational subjectivity.

Thomas More’s vagrant philosopher Raphael Hythlodaeus is one such character, born of a political discussion about enclosure and criminality in England that transforms into a narrative of an idealized, fictional foreign nation. Yet Hythlodaeus fails to qualify as an avatar of *Homo pelagicus*, ‘for’, as Peter Giles explains near the beginning of the *Utopia* (1516), ‘he has not sailed as a seaman, but as a traveler, or rather a philosopher’. Hythlodaeus is a global voyager, noteworthy for his knowledge of far-flung lands and peoples, yet his dedication to philosophy and his lack of seamanship render him a type of Renaissance Man, the embodiment of the ideals of humanism, but not a mariner. Hythlodaeus, who personifies the transnational life of the mind that lies at the heart of More’s utopian agenda, is marked by his travels with Vespucci, whose travels and writings gave a name to the New World on the far side of the Atlantic. The discovery of the ‘Americas’, those immense land masses named after the first navigator to realize they were not part of Asia, was rendered conceptually coherent by means of a publishing event: Martin Waldseemüller’s 1506 world map with the Americas gave visual form to the vast land masses of North and South America for the first time. The first genuine avatar of Jack Tar is roughly contemporaneous with Hythlodaeus.
Camões’ *marinheiros* and the *Volta do Mar*

Before the *Homo pelagicus* type entered the imaginative literature of the British Isles, he already played a central role in Portuguese literature, where he made his debut at least half a century before Daborne’s Jack Ward. Home to two major Atlantic seaports, Oporto and Lisbon, with ready access to the so-called prevailing northerly winds so predictable sailors have nicknamed them ‘the Portuguese Trades’, and blessed with the strong south-running Canary Current, Portugal was ideally situated to become the first European nation state to define itself by global navigation. During the fifteenth century, the Duke of the Algarve, who would become known as Prince Henry the Navigator, provided the financial and intellectual capital that sponsored a series of voyages that would lead not just to the discovery of new lands and varieties of trade, but also for mastering the prevailing winds and currents of the great oceanic gyres. Those who would do so, *os marinheiros*, were oceangoing mariners possessed of specialized geographic and oceanographic knowledge. Atlantic navigation differs fundamentally from navigation in the Mediterranean, for such phenomena as tides and ocean currents (the Canary Current, the Gulf Stream) are nonexistent in the Mediterranean. The sheer length of oceanic transits made life at sea different in kind, for the vast circulatory patterns known as the ocean gyres put new demands on shipmasters and seamen alike.

The navigational feat that would pave the way for the Portuguese to make the perilous trip to the Indies and back was the *Volta do Mar*, a ‘turn to the sea’, which necessitated sailing far offshore (westward, in the northern hemisphere) in search of favourable winds for the return home. As the historian Alfred Crosby explains:

> Sailors of the Mediterranean Atlantic pinned in the Canaries by the southward rush of air and water had to steer northwest into the open ocean and steadily sail farther and farther away from their last landfall, perhaps without gaining a centimeter toward home for many days, until they finally sailed far enough out of the tropics to tap the prevailing westerlies of the temperate zone. Then they could steer for home. They had to have faith in their knowledge of the wind, turn their back to the land, and become, possibly for weeks, creatures of the pelagic deeps. 

The *Volta do Mar* required a leap of faith in a navigator’s ability to negotiate the prevailing circulatory pattern of winds and currents in the North Atlantic subtropical gyre. This was a massive, and collective, nautical achievement on the part of the Portuguese, a conceptual triumph built upon feats of nautical endurance, which brought Europeans ever further south, east, and west in the fifteenth century. The *Volta do Mar* was the condition of possibility for the European nautical encounter with the Americas, and it required considerable knowledge of prevailing winds and currents in the North Atlantic. It was a feat that led to the establishment of the trans-oceanic shipping lanes that would become the early modern super-highways where blue-water mariners henceforth plied the waters, and their trade. Without knowledge of the circulatory patterns of the subtropical gyre, a mariner could neither cross an ocean nor...
reliably return home. After a century of voyages in search of a route to the Spice Isles around Africa that put Portugal on the geopolitical map, the *marinheiros*, now blue-water or world mariners, had figured out how to set out and return home using the anti-cyclonic forces available to them. No wonder that Columbus (whether Genoese gentile, or Catalan Jew) learned his trade in Lisbon and married a *lisboeta*, for it was Portugal that led the way in early modern trans-oceanic navigation.

Over the course of the fifteenth century, Portuguese navigators and foremost Jacks transitioned from being coastal sailors of the ‘Mediterranean Atlantic’ into trans-oceanic mariners over the course of a series of blue-water voyages that grew longer and more hazardous with each embarkation. This transition is evident in the rig design of the caravels they employed on their century-long campaign to round the African continent, culminating in da Gama’s 1497 doubling the Cape of Storms. The vessel of choice, the *caravela latina*, was a hybrid form, with its flexible, Mediterranean rig dominated by multiple lateen sails, and its seaworthy ‘round’ hull more suited for Atlantic conditions. The versatility of the lateen sail, with its relatively high aspect ratio, was valuable for coastwise expeditions, but once Bartholomew Diaz and da Gama had established the *Volta*, they developed the *caravela redonda*, which carried square sails on the main and foremasts, a clear indication that the *marinheiros* had learned how to keep the winds mainly at their backs. From then on – the moment when conceptual mastery of the gyres allowed for predominantly downwind sailing – it became possible to sail the immense, cumbersome carracks or naus to Goa and back. Homo *pelagicus* preferred to sail downwind.

It is in sixteenth-century Portuguese literature that *Homo pelagicus* makes his literary debut. One *marinheiro*, named Luís Vaz de Camões, was a poet whose career spanned oceans as well as literary genres. In his lyric poems, Camões describes the often-harrowing experiences of the *Careira da India*, the Indian voyages that garnered immense wealth for Portugal by the early decades of the sixteenth century, spawning the architecture known as Manueline and catapulting Portugal to the first rank of maritime nations. Camões most notably celebrated the historic accomplishment of his sea-borne countrymen in his epic poem of the Portuguese people, *Os Lusíadas*, placing the great navigator da Gama in the role of Odyssean hero. The da Gama of Camões is no Odysseus seeking *nostos*; rather, religiously-inflected nationalistic fervour drives his desire for discovery, combined with a hunger for trade with the Indies. In *Os Lusíadas*, Camões made a major contribution to the literature of overseas travel and shipwreck (*naufragio*). Josiah Blackmore has argued that such narratives occupy a privileged position in the textual history of maritime Europe because they inaugurate the genre of prose text known as the shipwreck narrative […], a genre that will flourish in Portugal and will eventually expand northward, reaching the pens of Dutch, English, and French writers.25

By imagining a developing blue-water ontology in terms of the life-and-death experiences of seamen engaged in sea voyages of unprecedented geographic and chronological scope, Camões inaugurated a trans-cultural literary reflection on the relationship between human life and the global ocean. Each of the major
maritime powers that would emerge in western Europe contributed to this genre during the next few centuries in an early modern refiguration of the 'nautical metaphors of existence' that Blumenberg identifies as a trans-historical feature of Western culture.

Yet it is Camões himself, more than his most famous poem, who interests me here. His life encompasses the kind of oceanic and cultural circulation that I have argued define the literary history of the blue-water mariner. The scent of tar is most palpable in Camões’ use of the first-person plural, 'we', for the ship’s crew. Camões had firsthand knowledge of the major nodal points of the mariners’ world, sailing to Ceuta, Goa, and Macao. As one translator notes, ‘Camoes was the first great European artist to cross the Equator and face the challenges to language and form in describing the unfamiliar people and places he encountered’. As the first truly trans-equatorial European author, Camões would seem to personify world literature, yet his oeuvre and reputation remain, for the most part, bounded by the Portuguese language and national identity. Is it any wonder that Hythlodaeus, the well-travelled philosopher who is not quite a mariner, is described as a Portuguese by birth?

**Vondel’s tarry guild**

In his subsequent incarnations, the early modern blue-water mariner would be equally at home aboard a Dutch *fluyt*, a Portuguese *canavela redonda*, or an English pinnace, defined, increasingly, by a peculiar set of characteristics and skills. By the end of the sixteenth century, the Dutch dominated the international herring fishery and began out-competing the Portuguese along the sea routes to the Indies. In the two centuries after its 1602 charter, the Vereneegde Oost-Indische Company, or VOC (the Dutch East India Company) would send more Europeans abroad than any other organization, and VOC trade would dwarf that of the London East India Company. By the seventeenth century, the Dutch were the global masters of seafaring, rivalling the English for control of sea routes and outdoing their rivals in the tonnage of global freight carried. In 1623, the year of the First Folio, Amsterdam native Joost Von den Vondel (1587–1679), a prolific playwright, penned ‘Het Lof der Zeevart’, an ode known in English as ‘The Praise of Seafaring’. Vondel’s plays have remained in production on the Amsterdam stage continuously for nearly four centuries. Nothing like ‘The Praise of Seafaring’ exists in early modern English poetry for sheer nautical texture; it is a paean to mariners, viewed through a triumphalist nationalistic lens, which offers a teleological verse history of European seafaring. ‘Lof’, or praise (cognate with Latin *laudare*), is heaped not on an individual but a ‘guild’ of mariners more at home at sea than on land. The opening 14 lines paint a lively and colourful portrait of the blue-water mariners who were successfully building the Dutch maritime empire, competing with English ambitions.

All you who grasp the rigging, tarred and pitched,
And like cats amid the cordage climb, bewitched

Al wat bepeckt beteert aengrypen kan, en vatten,
En danssen op de koorde, en klauteren als katten:
Sea-ghosts, you scale steep masts, fly aloft and prance;
Crandle-rocked in Thetis’ womb, at sea you dance;
5 Fraternity of fishers, blue-hat guild that flees
The feverish shore and yet breathes free upon the seas:
Grey-pate old salts who’d rather sleep out in all weathers
Than lie ashore, stinking, on beds of
You skippers who cannot rest for long with landsmen hosts,
10 But weigh your anchors early and steer for far-off coasts,
’Till all aboard be sore with toil, salt, and spume,
Now sailing straight, now seeking more sea room –
Embark with me, my lads, on this my voyage daring,
And join with me in my lofty praise of noble Seafaring.

Zeespocken, die geswind den steylen mast op vliegt
En zijt in Thetis schoot van kindsbeen opgewigert,
5 Bolkvanger'-dragend gild, en blae- uwe toppershoeden,
Die koortsen haelt op ’t land, en lucht schept op de vloeden:
Stuurluyden grijs van kop, die liever rijst, en sinckt
In ’t bedde vande Zee, als in de play- men stinckt:
Ghy Schippers die niet lang aen eenen oord kond rusten,
10 En ’t ancker licht, en worpt an veergheleghen kusten:
En al wat binnens boords, van schuym en pekel soor,
Nu oomeweghen soeckt, nu houd een rechter spoor,
Begunstige onsen tocht; want hy is omgedragen
Verselschapt myne reys, en voorghe- nomen bevaert,
Di ick gheheyligt heb den lof der nutte Zeevaert.

Particularly striking about these opening lines is their insistence on the collective identity of a class of labourers (sailors) who nonetheless remain anonymous. They are types, not individuals, clearly intended to typify, not individualize, the practitioners of their craft. Of course, the Dutch had their individual maritime heroes, such as Jan Huygen van Linschoten, but here Homo pelagicus is defined in terms of a collective identity. Nowhere in sixteenth- or seventeenth-century English poetry do we find any such composite portrait of the blue-water mariner. The poem offers an aggregate portrait of a work-based subculture, beginning with Vondel’s apostrophization of Dutch mariners as a ‘blue-hat guild’ of ‘skippers’. He does so in diction that evokes the docks, wharfs, quays, lighters, schuyts, busses, and fluyts that filled the harbour of his hometown, deploying rhymed couplets, which bespeak a profound familiarity with the appearance, lifestyle, work habits, and preferences of blue-water mariners in the Dutch Golden Age. The opening line appeals to those who can grip or grasp ‘things tarred and pitched’ (‘bepekt beteert aengrypen kun’), praising sailors for their physical prowess. They climb aloft in the rigging with such agility that the poet compares them to cats (‘als Katten’); possessed of an alterity born of years at sea, they are also ‘sea-ghosts’ (‘zeespocken’), eerie members of an aquatic republic. Vondel’s seamen
are a breed apart, a subculture with specialized skills and a nation of pelagic beings more at home ‘rising and sinking’ aboard ship than ‘lying on feathers stinking’ (‘als in de pluymen’ [“plumes”] stinckt). In an era when feather beds were luxury items, far preferable to beds of straw that were almost invariably full of bed bugs (known as ‘wall lice’), this is a strong statement of preference derived, perhaps, from the emergent association of the Netherlands with the freedom of the seas.

The arguments of Hugo Grotius, who penned his influential argument for the freedom of the seas in *Mare Liberum* in 1609, haunt the ‘The Praise of Seafaring’, which everywhere insists on the freedom-loving nature of mariners and the universal brotherhood of seafarers. Written to challenge the Portuguese monopoly on trade with the Far East, Grotius’ legal broadside was translated by Richard Hakluyt into English shortly before his death in 1616. Yet whereas Grotius grounds his argument in theories of natural law, Vondel constructs a composite portrait of *Homo pelagicus* based on shared expertise. Sailors are free, Vondel insists, because they belong to an ancient fraternity of skilled specialists who possess the knowledge and craft to harness the wind and go where they will. Yet this freedom was equivocal, for Dutch mariners took part in a network of developing capitalist practices that increasingly defined them as interchangeable mobile labour, or ‘hands’ (as in ‘all hands on deck’). If early modern mariners took part, on the one hand, in a sophisticated, emergent set of financial and material practices that propelled citizens of the United Provinces to far-off lands, they were also, on the other hand, cannon fodder for a militarized project of global exploitation. Dutch sailors belonged to a core nation in a developing capitalist world system, and the vessels they sailed were the most complex, expensive devices known to early modern Europeans.

In the words of the maritime historian N.A.M. Rodger, ‘to build, arm, and maintain ships, to feed and pay their crews, three things above all were necessary, in the words of a well-known sixteenth-century cliché: money, money, and yet more money’, something the Dutch had in abundance and managed as well as their ships. Sailors themselves were in actuality far more expendable than the wooden vessels they directed across the world’s oceans, even if they were, as in ‘The Praise of Seafaring’, renowned for their unique skillset, mindset, and cohesive subculture. They died like flies in the Spice Islands they strove so hard to find, in Ceylon, Batavia, and were themselves all too willing to take the lives of those with whom they traded, as well as of Englishmen at Amboyna. Thus, when Vondel refers to mariners as the members of a guild, he gestures to a social history fraught with anxiety over international trade. By its end, ‘Het Lof’ amounts to a nationalistic maritime history of the United Provinces.

**William Shakespeare’s cheeky sailors**

By the early seventeenth century, the oceanic voyager – not yet bearing the nickname of Jack Tar – was a frequent guest on the London stage, possessed of a distinctly transnational subjectivity considered transgressive by nature, an equivocal threat to landed polities. Rogue mariners prowl the margins of Shakespeare’s dramatic works – in the character of a disguised sea captain unwanted in Illyria (Antonio in *Twelfth Night*), a pirate who dies in prison (Ragozine in *Measure for Measure*), an upstart insubordinate...
super-sailor (the Boatswain of *The Tempest*), and as political assassin (the captain in *II Henry VI*), vacillating between criminality and agents of state interests. The Boatswain who shouts down aristocrats on deck in the first scene of *The Tempest* exhibits the transgressive characteristics of the *Homo pelagicus* while not yet bearing his name. In the second half of the seventeenth century, the currency of the nickname Jack Tar increases to the point where, by the early eighteenth century, it denoted a cultural stereotype of the hard-working, hard-drinking English career sailor.

The Boatswain in *The Tempest*, characterized by a professional assertiveness and willingness to put his craft above the demands of aristocrats, is clearly a version of *Homo pelagicus*. His independence and commitment to seamanship, as opposed to the social hierarchy, owes something to the sea dogs who put England on the map as a sea power in the late sixteenth century. The Boatswain is something of a rebel, much like the mariners who capture the Duke of Suffolk after a fight off the coast of Kent in *II Henry VI* and then put him to death offstage. For the beleaguered Suffolk, mariners are unworthy to kiss his boots. ‘O that I were a god, to shoot forth thunder’, he rages, ‘Upon these paltry, servile, abject drudges!/Small things make base men proud; this villain here/Being captain of a pinnace, threatens more/Than Bargulus the strong Illyrian pirate!’

De la Pole miscalculates his advantage. The captain of an English pinnace in the 1590s, when the play first went up, might well be a man of the world, or he might be a ruthless, bloodthirsty world-beater like Drake or Hawkins. During the prolonged sea war with Spain under Elizabeth I, the figure of the mariner took centre stage in the geopolitical gamesmanship of western European nations competing for sovereignty of the seas, not just in plays written for the London stage.

We know what the ‘Tudor-Stuart mariner sounded like to at least one contemporary: a bawling, brawling, blasphemous, and back-talking ‘dog’ of the sea. Yet what, beyond having a ‘wide-chopped’ face that was ‘perfect gallows’, did he look like? We can behold Jack’s tarry predecessors as they appeared on the eve of England’s emergence as a naval power on the frontispiece of *The Mariner’s Mirrour*, Anthony Ashley’s 1588 translation of the Dutch mariner-cartographer Lukacz Janczoon Wagenhaer’s influential 1584 compendium of pilot charts *Spieghel der Zeevaerdt* (*The Mirror of Sailing*). Two mariners, dressed in the costume of their kind, flank the pediment and columns depicted on the title page, each holding a lead line, or plummet, emblematic of the sailor’s trade, giving visual form to *Homo pelagicus* as he appeared in the late sixteenth century. They wear baggy leggings, with a black cap (undoubtedly tarred) and hold a sounding line at the ready. They do not wear the tarred canvas characteristic of later generations of mariners, for cotton only came into general use for clothing after it was introduced to the English public by the London East India Company in the 1660s, but linen breeches and blouses. Above these nameless mariners are the intellectuals – cartographers, scholars, and speculators – who set in motion the trans-oceanic voyages that able-bodied seamen were charged with bringing to fruition. If they appear strangely marginal in *The Mariner’s Mirrour* frontispiece, it is because, as Richard Helgerson has argued of Elizabethan land surveying, the labour of those with technical expertise, as opposed to high social standing and access to financial resources, remained treated as the work of subordinates subservient to the will of those who sponsored their labour.
What unites the different avatars of *Homo pelagicus* across the early modern period is not merely a set of skills and experiences, but a conceptual relationship to oceanic space and coastal locales unavailable to pre-Columbian mariners. For blue-water mariners have to know something that coastal sailors do not: how to harness the prevailing winds and currents that constitute the great oceanic gyres in order to take maximal advantage of intercontinental sea routes. Without this knowledge, no sailor could engage in trade with India, China, or the Spice Islands, much less hope to return. Detailed knowledge of the prevailing winds, from the Northwest Trades of the Caribbean to the Roaring Forties and Howling Fifties of the high latitudes, accompanied a distinctive cultural geography as well. For Jack Tars, the globe was a world of deep-water ports, channels, and navigational hazards. Jack was as much at home in Valparaiso as in Liverpool, and his cultural hybridity – tattoos derived from Polynesian culture adorning his arms, speech a hodge-podge of technical and outlandish terms – marked him as dangerous.

In the seventeenth century, *Homo pelagicus* took the form of a series of transgressive mariners circulating at the oceanic margins, from Hawkins and Drake to John Smith and Henry Mainwaring; later, he would bear the names of Richard Anson, Woodes Rogers, and William Dampier. These were all mariners who transgressed social categories (pirate or privateer? Captain or rogue?) as readily as they crossed national and cultural boundaries. Some were pirates; others were pirate hunters. Some, like Rogers and Mainwaring, played both roles in history. Drake was a mariner-hero who, having ‘singed the Spaniard’s beard’ by destroying the fleet at Cadiz (taking time to burn the city as well), later went on to defeat the mighty Armada. Yet Drake could not have become a national hero without first having been a first-class mariner himself. Nevertheless, Drake did not himself possess sufficient knowledge of the oceanic gyres to circumnavigate the globe (a feat that Magellan himself, who died in the Philippines, never actually accomplished). For that, he had to kidnap a Portuguese navigator and, perhaps, others as well.40 Before he becomes defined as belonging to a social class defined by labour, the blue-water mariner evinces an unusual social mobility, or at least an indeterminate status, that imparts a sense of danger everywhere he goes.

**From sea dogs to Jack Tars**

Jack Tar comes of age over the course of the long seventeenth century. It is no coincidence that the ‘golden age’ of the oceanic mariner coincides with the zenith of Atlantic piracy. Whether sea dog, rover, or ‘Admiral’, the blue-water mariner of the Stuart period vacillated in status between national icon and waterborne criminal, garnering unprecedented wealth yet occupying a dangerously liminal space at the margins of national sovereignties. Blue-water mariners possessed a global understanding of seamanship, prevailing winds and currents, navigational hazards, capes, islands, and other landmarks, unavailable to landsmen. After many years plying the sea routes in all weathers, Jack had a distinctive appearance, marked by an alterity born of years spent living and working in harsh conditions at sea and in foreign ports. His was a life of travail that could not fail to effect certain kinds of physical transformation, from a ruddy (or ruined) complexion to thick, tarry hands swung side-to-side for balance.
Characterized by a rolling gait, swinging arms akimbo, a singular garb (tar on his clothing, tar – and sometimes ribbons – in his hair), and a distinctive idiolect shot through with profanity and outlandish borrowings, Jack Tar was widely perceived as an outlandish creature.

By the early eighteenth century, the figure of Jack was a working-class spectre that haunted popular and literary culture, having already established himself on stage and in verse, and commonplace in pamphlets, political art, and song. John Adams accused the rowdies who precipitated the Boston Massacre in a snowball fight of being ‘a motely rabble of saucy boys, negroes and molattoes, Irish teagues and outlandish jack tars’. Yet at century’s end, James Gillray would depict a doughty Jack Tar astride the globe, bloodying an emaciated and pitiable Bonaparte’s nose in a cartoon bearing the caption *Fighting for the Dunghill: – or – Jack Tar Settling Buonaparte*, betokening the key role of mariners in maintaining Britain’s geopolitical ventures. Had Jack gone global, or did Gillray put his finger on a trait Jack already possessed, perhaps all along? Outlandish and ‘saucy’ though he seemed to his landed betters, Jack Tar was also a familiar and even to some extent an endearing character, often depicted in political cartoons as a hearty, buffoonish champion of English liberty.

Historians have paid ample attention to this particular avatar of *Homo pelagicus*. He has been analysed as member of the global proletariat, and as fomenter of revolt, both significant roles in the context of the emergence of modern nation states. Maritime historians such as Jesse Lemisch, Marcus Rediker, and Peter Linebaugh have characterized Jack Tar as the member of a distinctive eighteenth-century subculture, a proletarian rover native to international sea routes and rowdy seaports, from Liverpool and New York to San Francisco and Shanghai, inhabiting the margins of the nation state. By 1740 Jack was, in the words of Rediker, a ‘man of the world’, equally familiar with sea routes and the sea ports that functioned as nodal points on islands and capes that operated as beacons and stopping points for oceangoing mariners on long voyages. For Lemisch, the ordinary seaman was a figure for exploited human capital derived from the period of primitive accumulation, ripe for revolution, and a key player in the drama of early modern maritime labour history. ‘Maritime history, as it has been written’, Lemisch argued in a seminal article that remains influential, ‘has had as little to do with the common seaman as business history has had to do with the labourer’. Lemisch goes on to contrast the history of the quarterdeck with the history of the fo’c’sle:

In that *mischianza* of mystique and elitism, ‘seaman’ has meant Sir Francis Drake, not Jack Tar; the focus has been on trade, exploration, the great navigators, but rarely on the men who sailed the ships. Thus we know very little about Jack.

Perhaps the distinction Lemisch makes between the Elizabethan sea dog, conversant with the court as well as the quarterdeck, and the foremost hands who have remained largely nameless, is too stark, for Drake himself was – to some extent – a tarpaulin officer who rose in the ranks by dint of prowess. He often found himself at sea with mariners who were his social superiors.
Jack Tar was thus a hybrid cultural figure dwelling in the interstices of the modern world system in the process of its creation. ‘In an age when most men and women in England and America lived in small, clustered local communities’, notes Rediker, ‘the early-eighteenth-century sailor inhabited a world huge, boundless, and international. The seaman sailed the seven seas; he explored the edges of the earth’.48 Such was *Homo pelagicus* by the middle of the eighteenth century, when the political status of seamen vacillated between political threat (Jack the Jacobin) and as a tarry standard-bearer for ideals of English liberty (Jack the ward of England’s wooden walls). By this point Jack Tar had become, as well, a text of the world, a literary type and cultural caricature available to be employed as textual motif or cultural meme for any number of aesthetic and ideological purposes.49

In the Augustine-Age fiction, Jack Tar appears in many literary forms, showing up in a host of novels. He is Henry Clinker in the novel by Tobias Smollett, Captain Singleton in Defoe’s novel of that title, and he populates the verses of William Falconer’s narrative poem *The Shipwreck* (1762). In Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, he appears as the friendly Portuguese sea captain who helps Gulliver in his time of need, a fitting gesture to Jack’s cultural antecedents, particularly in *Os Lusíadas*. The novels of Jane Austen, never far from the seaside, frequently call the blue-water mariner onto the scene. In *Persuasion*, Jack appears in many guises, donning a naval uniform and striding through Bath and London as Captain Frederick Wentworth, scandalizing the gentry with his coarse complexion and blunt manners yet winning the heart of Anne Elliot. Later Frederick Marryat, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Joseph Conrad would appropriate him for adventure fiction in the guise of novelist Marryat’s Frank Mildmay and Jack Easy, Stevenson’s Long John Silver, and Conrad’s sea rovers Tom Lingard and Peyrol.50 By the nineteenth century, Jack Tar was a ubiquitous figure in sea fiction and in fiction set in port cities such as London, Liverpool, New York, and Boston; he had become a cultural stereotype associated, primarily, with Anglo-American mariners. As Margaret Cohen argues in *The Novel and the Sea*, literary mariners stood apart from their compatriots for their mastery of what Cohen terms ‘The Mariner’s Craft’, which comprised the particular skills of the blue-water mariner. These included expertise in navigation, the ability to ‘hand, reef, and steer’, and familiarity with seaways, navigational hazards, and the myriad other skills of marlinspike seamanship.51 While ordinary seamen, or foremast Jacks, rarely if ever learned to navigate (while ships’ officers had to do so), their existence as sea was based on conceptual as much as on physical skills. ‘Together’, notes Steve Mentz, ‘these elements articulate a cumulative narrative of wandering and survival, which Cohen calls, borrowing the phrase from Thomas Carlyle, “a Romance of the Fact”’.52 It was, beyond doubt, a Romance of global proportions.

While I do not have the scope here to trace the career of *Homo pelagicus* in American literature, Jack Tar was the preeminent cultural icon of the Young Republic, as Thomas Philbrick argued in his seminal study *James Fenimore Cooper and the Development of American Sea Fiction*.53 The technological transition from sail-powered ships to vessels powered by steam engines, then diesels and turbines, would put pressure on traditional representations of Jack Tar. For what is a tar without his tar pot or tar-paulins? Yet the demise of Jack Tar in American culture, as Philbrick argued, owes as
much to an emergent narrative of American national identity built on the mythology of the western range as it does to the demise of sail. Jack would be eclipsed by the arrival of the cowboy in the early twentieth century; thereafter the cowboy, not the mariner stands for America’s image of itself. Jack Tar finally takes a bow in the early twentieth century when the cowboy, darling of tobacco companies and dime-store novelists, takes centre stage.54

**Conclusion: citizen of the world-ocean**

The birth of *Homo pelagicus*, as I have defined the character type that emerges at the intersection of trans-oceanic navigation and transnational print circulation, can be dated to 1568, the date of publication of *Os Lusíadas*. From this point, the character type passes through a number of scenes in English plays, and a Dutch poem, crossing national boundaries and taking on new guises. This is not a case of direct literary influence. Rather, all three nations responded in literature to the emergence of new ontologies made possible by the rise of trans-oceanic navigation in the late fifteenth century by creating different iterations of a basic character type. I have eschewed the phrase ‘stock character’ in preference for the more vague formulation of ‘character type’ because of the type’s initial novelty, lingering strangeness, and susceptibility to transformation and variation across cultures and historical periods. Jack Tar is no Pantaloon, no Loathly Lady, no Cunning Servant, nor does he resemble the Knight-errant, for his travels and the nature of his craft remain largely obscure to readers and audiences. Where the denizens of comedy are profoundly familiar – they are ourselves in caricature – he can never be fully domesticated by the social order that finds him fascinating, threatening, and at times comical. One thing is certain about his homeland: it is interstitial, beyond the bounds of the nation state, and aquatic. The blue-water mariner might be a man of the world, as Rediker characterizes him, born of the same conditions and circulating within the same systems that define world literature, but he is not wholly of *this* world, the one built on *terra firma*. He is instead a phantasm or, as Vondel put it, a sea-ghost, which emerges at a historical conjuncture defined by the development of movable type, the subsequent rise of print culture, and the discovery of the global ocean.

**Notes**

5. In 1624 John Smith recounted, ‘Wee did hang an awning (which is an old saile) to […] trees to shadow us from the Sunne’; two years later he used a different term for his sun-shield, ‘trar-pawling’, OED ‘awning’.
Enter Jack Tar

6 Stockholm tar has become proverbial as the material totem of the professional mariner. I have sailed with sea captains who carry a hank of marlin, or tarred hemp, as talismans of their own identity.

7 OED, ‘Jack’.

8 OED, ‘Jack’.

9 Following common usage among professional and amateur mariners, I use ‘blue water’ to refer to the open ocean, hence transoceanic navigation as opposed to the plying of inshore or coastal waters.

10 The pseudo-Linnaean taxonomic descriptor, Homo pelagicus, emphasizes the notion that trans-oceanic sea voyagers were a distinctive cultural taxon that appears because of the European trans-oceanic voyages that historian J. H. Parry termed ‘the Discovery of the Sea’. See J. H. Parry, The Discovery of the Sea, New York: The Dial Press, 1974. The normative sexism of the term, of course, reflects the patriarchal nature of shipboard life.


17 Parry, The Discovery of the Sea.


24 For a concise discussion and superb illustrations of caravels, see B. Landstrom, Sailing Ships, New York: Doubleday, 1966. I am grateful to the Portuguese National Maritime Museum, the Museu Naval of Lisbon, for its caravel exhibit, and to the members of the Portuguese sail training association APORVELA for their informative tour of the replica caravel Vera Cruz. Their detailed explanations of the relationship between ship design and route planning was essential information.


29 My co-translator, J. C. A. Schokkenbroek, is Chief Curator and Head of Academic Programs at the Scheepvartmuseum, Amsterdam, and Professor of Maritime History and Heritage at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam. The present translation is the result of our collaboration, for which I am grateful.

30 This refers to the Ancient Greek goddess Thetis.

31 Bolk refers to a type of fish, the *wijting*, or whiting.


33 Froude, a Victorian historian, claimed ‘English sea power was the legitimate child of the Reformation. It grew [...] directly out of the new despised Protestantism’, overlooking evidence inconsistent with simplistic assumptions about religious and national identity, such as Vondel’s lifelong Catholicism. See Froude, *English Seamen*, p. 4.


37 The lead line was essentially an instrument both for coastal and blue-water navigation for ascertaining the depth of the sea. It not only indicated the disposition of the bottom (shoaling fast, rocky, full of reefs, etc.), but also helped to establish location. A sailor in the main-chains would throw the heavy lead weight, smeared with tallow to sample the sea floor. Bits of shell, sand, or seaweed sticking to the tallow, provided key data for experienced mariners. Combined with dead reckoning and celestial navigation with the back-staff or the astrolabe, a master mariner such as Columbus, Magellan, or Drake could calculate location with reasonable accuracy.


40 This was da Gama’s strategy for crossing the Arabian Sea, in which the prevailing winds were monsoonal and thus substantially different to the gyres he mastered to reach the Cape of Good Hope.

41 The textual genesis of John Bull can be traced precisely to the year 1712, when Dr John Arbuthnot, Jonathan Swift, and Alexander Pope first conjured him in the pamphlet *Law is a Bottomless Pit* and, later in the same year, in *The History of John Bull*. Subsequent writers and artists, from William Hogarth to Thomas Nast and George Bernard Shaw, would appropriate him for different purposes.


46 Lemisch, p. 372.

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53 Philbrick, *James Fenimore Cooper*.

**Bibliography**


