

## Immortal Voices of the Speechless Deep: The Sea as “Gray,” “White,” and “Black” Villain in Nautical Melodrama

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Only the sea is like a human being; the sky is not, nor the earth. But the sea is always moving; always something deep in itself is stirring it. It never rests; it is always wanting, wanting, wanting.

—Olive Schreiner, *The Story of an African Farm*

Nautical melodrama as an authentically British genre originated from a mixture of dumbshows at the Royal Circus in the 1790s, “Aquatic Theatre” (lavish marine entertainments and spectacles) performed in Sadler’s Wells in the early 1800s, and the growth of the popularity of melodrama as a genre since the 1790s in England. It is not without reason that Britain is the birthplace of nautical melodrama. Known as a seafaring nation since its earliest history, Britain has had its identity in a large part shaped by the sea. Having established an invincible naval empire by the late eighteenth century, the nation took great pride in not only its navy but also its seamen, both of which are revered as the best of their kinds. Such nautical pride displayed itself in maritime novels such as Tobias Smollett’s *The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle* (1751) and *The Life and Adventures of Sir Launcelot Greaves* (1762), as well as various musical entertainments written by Charles and Thomas Dibdin in the 1780s and 90s that lauded the British Tar as a good-natured and heroically gallant patriot. Nautical melodrama flourished in the 1820s, and developed a new type of dramatic hero—Jack Tar, whose patriotism and valor historically secured Britain’s victories in the Napoleonic conflicts. Alluding to nautical legends (e.g. the Flying Dutchman), and specific historical events (including Horatio Nelson’s naval victories, the famous mutinies at Spithead and the Nore, and the shipwreck of *Medusa*), different kinds of melodrama took shape as a result of the versatile nautical themes, and the genre could thus be categorized into supernatural nautical plays, conquest plays, mutiny plays, pirate/smuggler plays, shipwreck plays, and so on.

The most essential element of nautical melodrama—the sea—has been, however, largely overlooked in the study of nautical melodrama. The sea has been naturally treated as the setting and spectacle, or “opsis”—the bottom tier of the six Aristotelian components of a serious theatrical presentation, namely, in the order of importance: mythos (or plot), ethos (character), dianoia (theme), lexis (diction), melos (melody), and opsis (spectacle). In the scholarly study of nautical melodrama, whereas most attention has been paid to the glorification of heroic sailors manifesting in an upsurge of patriotism (hence the first three tiers of the Aristotelian six), the sea is often ignored as merely the venue where melodramatic

actions take place. I propose, however, that the sea plays a more important role than simply the “opsis,” but rather, that of an “ethos,” which is analogously a living character—whether or not the melodramatists intended it to be so.

As Michael Booth points out in his most acclaimed contribution to the study of melodrama, *English Melodrama*, among all the melodramatic stock character types (hero, villain, heroine, old man, old woman, comic man, comic woman, and sometimes child), the villain is the most essential, as it is “the moving force of melodrama.”<sup>1</sup> The two main kinds of villain, according to him, are: “the grim, determined, immensely evil; and the shifty, cowardly, half-comic.” When stage appearance is taken into consideration, they are also referred to as the “black” villain and the “white” villain. These terms are taken from Thomas Erle’s description of both types in his 1880 book *Letters from a Theatrical Scene Painter; Being Sketches of the Minor Theatres of London as They Were Twenty Years Ago*:

The black is the strong-minded and bold villain. A personage of this class is corked up to such a pitch that his face rivals in blackness that of a metropolitan statue.... His countenance is steeped in gloom, and if he ever does manage to achieve a laugh, it is not by any means a satisfactory kind of transaction, being either demoniacal, or defiant, or dreary, or derisive, or has some other uncomfortable quality about it. His voice is a basso profundo, or rather profundissimo, emanating apparently from a depth coinciding in latitude with about the middle button of his waistcoat.

The “white” villain, however, has

Pink, bloodshot eyes like a white mouse’s, and on every alarm of detection they start out of his head like a scared rabbit’s or a prawn. He is as pale, through guilty apprehension, as plaster of Paris.... His gushes of merriment, when any such occur, are not roughly explosive like those of his black compeer, but forced and faint, and they sound hollow and unreal.

In the above description, while the “black” villain is unwavering, dauntless, overruling, and never likely to repent an evil act, the “white” villain is unprincipled, terror-stricken, evasive, and prone to desert to the side of goodness.

Building on Booth’s theorization and Erle’s description, I propose to modify the definition of the two types of villain, and thereby humbly introduce a third type: the “gray” villain. The color terms I use here no longer refer to the stage appearances of the villains, but instead, metaphorically, to the different levels of commitment to villainy. The quotation marks indicate that the color metaphors, drawn from historical stage presentation, are used only for the purpose of distinguishing degrees of villainy in a most straightforward way.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Booth, *English Melodrama* (London: Herbert Jenkins Ltd, 1965), 18.

The “black” villain is the absolute villain of darkness who fits well with Erle’s description; there is no exhibition of one trace of goodness. The “white” villain is the well-intentioned pseudo-villain who is mostly restrained from villainy; they slip into villainy for trivial and mysterious reasons, and after realizing their path astray, they eventually right their own wrongs and part with evil for good. The “gray” villain is the semi-villain who indecisively alternates between paths of good and evil. They are in between the ultimate “black” villain and the surrendering “white” villain. Sometimes they repent; other times they remain dedicated to evil. Henceforward I will use “the ‘black’ villain” interchangeably with “the absolute villain,” “the ‘white’ villain” with “the pseudo-villain,” and “the ‘gray’ villain” with “the semi-villain.” I will also use “she” as the pronoun to address the sea.

Even though the sea as a character is speechless (she lets out emotional murmurs, roars and howls, none of which are verbal), she voices her character by way of her own actions and other characters’ speeches, and plays the role of the villain throughout, with varied levels of villainy in different stages of the development of nautical melodrama. Here “character” is no longer a human being or a corporeal object in the traditional sense; rather, it is an amorphous driving force that plays a role no less important functionally than a human character. So the emphasis of this article here is *not* to analyze the personified features of the “character” and the ways in which it passes as a human character metaphorically or symbolically, but to explore the role of the sea as an entity that is analogous to a melodramatic villain, and the functions of such a role in the historical transformation of nautical melodrama.

I propose that in the classical nautical melodrama era (roughly 1820s to the end of the nineteenth century), especially the so-called Golden Age of nautical melodrama (1820s and 30s), the sea is characterized *not* as a “black” villain, but either a semi- or pseudo-villain with a distinctive virtue of homecoming, which is in line with the contemporary drive toward an ideology that upholds domesticity and repudiates rebellion. As the classical nautical melodrama declines at the end of the nineteenth century, an avant-garde alteration of nautical melodrama, which revolutionizes the classical form while maintaining some of its essential features, shortly emerges on the American stage in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is during this period that, under the influence of naturalism, the sea represents the absolute villain, in whom no trace of goodness can be found. In this essay, I will trace the progression of the character of the sea in nautical melodrama from her role as a “gray,” to a “white,” and finally a “black” villain.

### **The Sea as a “Gray” Villain**

The sea’s villainy, first and foremost, lies in the natural catastrophes she generates. In nautical melodrama, this atrocity of the sea is most often seen in the category of shipwreck plays. One of the earliest and most remarkable shipwreck plays was W. T. Moncrieff’s *Shipwreck of the Medusa; or, The Fatal Raft* (1820), inspired by the actual disaster of July, 1816, when the French frigate *Medusa*, en route to Senegal to

repossess the colony from the British, hit a reef off the coast of Africa. Soldiers and sailors fought with passengers for places in the lifeboats, and when all lifeboats were full to be launched, 147 people were left with a makeshift raft which drifted on the sea until the handful still alive were rescued, after having to endure starvation, dehydration and cannibalism.<sup>2</sup> As one of the greatest nautical disasters of the century, it was depicted in the canonical Romantic masterpiece *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818-19) by French painter Théodore Géricault.

The *Medusa* scandal was considered a huge public embarrassment for the French monarchy, which was restored to power after Napoleon's 1815 debacle. In the incident itself, the sea was the most convenient villain to blame, but the ultimate villain turned out to be the French monarchy. This is indicated in Géricault's painting, in which those marooned on the raft had been abandoned by their leaders. The painting became the talk of the town the moment it was displayed at the Paris Salon in 1819 because of its confrontational anti-Bonapartist political statement and its bold departure from the then prevailing neoclassical aesthetics.<sup>3</sup> British dramatist Moncrieff chose to stage this sensational event, on the one hand to use the political implications of the incident to mock the newly installed French monarchy, and on the other, to mobilize the heroism of British tar and the English generosity as exhibited throughout the journey. The story goes like this: the heroine disguises herself as the midshipman on her lover's ship, on which the villain Adolphe (a French naval officer), who is in love with the heroine, is also aboard. After the shipwreck of the *Medusa*, Adolphe tows the raft, on which both the heroine (still disguised) and her lover are onboard, but cuts the towrope to destroy his rival in love. Whereas Adolphe ventures his life in the land of the Moors after his boat is wrecked, those on the raft experience great misery; and the only man who keeps them alive is the cheerful and courageous English sailor Jack Gallant (everyone else is French).

At the beginning of the play, the peaceful sea is the source of happiness to the dancing and singing sailor lads and lasses that are about to sail to Senegal: "Over the sands we'll like sea sprites go, / With a sea jig step and a yeo! Yeo! Yeo!"<sup>4</sup> They face the potential perils lying ahead with a heroic composure: "Far o'er the wave / We sail, to brave / The perils of the sea; / And ne'er again / Across the main, / Return, alas! May we."<sup>5</sup> After the vessel sets sail, they dress up as sea gods in the embarking ceremony, drinking and making merry. It is after some of them get drunk and the ship deviates from its route that the sea

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<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Miles, *The Wreck of the Medusa: The Most Famous Sea Disaster of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2007), 50-65.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Meisel, *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 189-90.

<sup>4</sup> W. T. Moncrieff, *Shipwreck of the Medusa, or, The Fatal Raft: A Drama, in Three Acts*, (London: John Cumberland, 1837), 9.

<sup>5</sup> Moncrieff, *Shipwreck of the Medusa*, 18.

transforms into a furious villain and actuates the shipwreck of the *Medusa*. After the shipwreck, the villainy of the sea is unveiled through the way in which she brings about the calamity of the human beings in the forms of thirst and hunger, and consequently an attempted murder and lurking cannibalism.

The bright side of the sea as a semi-villain is portrayed through its facilitation of Jack Gallant's valiant gallantry and nationalist pride, which is displayed throughout the play. Before the *Medusa* sets sail, as the newly appointed Bosen, Jack Gallant comments on the achievements of his motherland, "though we didn't win Waterloo, damme, we led the way to it; —we won the Nile and Trafalgar, aye, and single handed too, and we will again whenever old England chooses to give the word, for British heart of oak stands firm for ever!"<sup>6</sup> On the fatal raft, before it sets sail, Jack again drinks to his homeland: "we'll drink success to our native land!—mine's old England—God bless her!—A health to our wives and children!—long life to the king and our noble captain!"<sup>7</sup> After Adolphe abandons the raft, Jack curses, "the lubberly rascal!—when did he ever find a British officer desert his men in this way?"<sup>8</sup> When asked to prepare the lots to decide whom to be the victim of cannibalism, Jack replies, "'Tis a hard service, Governor, but a British sailor never flinches from his duty in the hour of trail, be it what it may."<sup>9</sup> Right before Adolphe's boat comes to rescue after he finds out about the disguise of his love interest, Jack decides to commit suicide by sinking into the sea and keeping its companionship forever: "I have done all a British sailor should, and now, good-bye, friends, good bye old England; and the great commander have mercy on us all."<sup>10</sup>

To Jack Gallant, the British Jack Tar, the sea has become the emblem of Britain. To be loyal to the sea is to be loyal to one's homeland, even when one is deserted by the latter. To echo the political association of the actual scandal and the theme of the painting, Moncrieff has Jack Gallant moderately criticize at one point the British abandonment of their tars, which further demonstrates the inseparable tie between the Jack Tar and the sea:

Jan: ... You shall be Bosen of the *Medusa* for Senegal: ahoy! Vive le roi!—Louis for ever!

Jack: What! Desert my king and country, you shark?—never! I've fought and bled for old England—I've been wrecked and lost my all, and past my life in her service, and though she neglects and deserts her brave tars just now, damn me if I'll ever desert her: she may one day reflect on our services and reward them; but whether she does

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<sup>6</sup> Moncrieff, *Shipwreck of the Medusa*, 16.

<sup>7</sup> Moncrieff, *Shipwreck of the Medusa*, 28.

<sup>8</sup> Moncrieff, *Shipwreck of the Medusa*, 31.

<sup>9</sup> Moncrieff, *Shipwreck of the Medusa*, 34.

<sup>10</sup> Moncrieff, *Shipwreck of the Medusa*, 38.