

Abstract

Title of Document: JIB-BOOMS, BARRELS, AND DEAD-EYES: SINGING SEX IN SEA CHANTEYS

Jessica Floyd, PhD 2017

Directed By: Dr. Amy Froide, Professor History Department and
Dr. Laura Rosenthal, Professor English Language and Literature

The sailing ship, during the Great Age of Sail (roughly 1500-1860), was a floating, largely homosocial space that housed what historian Marcus Rediker calls a “motley crew” of sailing men. Within the cramped structure of the wooden sailing vessel, men were together for often long stretches of time at sea and, in order to create and maintain a shipboard culture, the sailing men employed many strategies to reinforce solidarity, inculcate new crew-members, and delineate themselves within the lonely, dangerous, and sometimes deadly maritime world. One of the chief modes of creating solidarity and identity was through the singing of sea chanteys (shipboard work songs) while seamen were employed in their various shipboard tasks. What complicates this mode of collective bonding and what serves as the chief object of interrogation in this project is the fact that a vast majority of the narratives in sea chanteys were sexual in nature and in their deployment created an erotically charged work space.

This project views a collection of unexpurgated sea chanteys, located in the once believed “lost” manuscript compiled by bawdy folklore collector Gershon Legman and sea chantey collector Stan Hugill, and investigates the songs as cultural products of the sea. Specifically, through the close analysis of the songs, this project uncovers how chanteys function both internally (within the narratives themselves) and also externally (as they are applied and

employed in the work of the ship). Through a unique theoretical lens, formed through the intersection of the work of Michel Foucault and Sara Ahmed, against the backdrop of Dorothy Smith's theory of texts as agents of organization and re-embodied through Roland Barthes "Grain of the Voice," this project is concerned with the way in which sailing men not only create a sense of identity and self-hood, but also how they bind together to create a unique sailing identity through the sea chanteys that helped structure and spur on their work. By the end, the project highlights how the sexual and erotic narratives of sea chanteys function with and deploy discipline, punishment, and orientation, in the service of structuring, forming, and policing identities and relationships within the constrained world of the sailing ship. Ultimately, I argue that the chanteys orient the sailing men to their work, to each other, and to a unique relationship with sex and erotic release. Within the project I contend that the intimate narratives of the sea chanteys mitigated and articulated the desire to be a part of the brotherhood of the forecabin, were a conduit through which the maritime bond was formed, and were a way through which the men experimented with taboo narratives.

To this point, very few projects look directly into collected sea chanteys in order to mine them for both their symbolic as well as historical possibilities and I seek to rectify the gap in current discussions of the genre. The confined, homosocial space of the ship, combined with the communal bonding through song, and the sexualized subject matter inherent in most of the chanteys creates an analytical space that raises new opportunities for discussion concerning the early modern maritime relationship with the subject of sex. This uniquely interdisciplinary project calls on many different disciplines in order to contextualize as well as interrogate this literature of the sea so as to ultimately venture the argument that sea chanteys are valuable cultural remnants of the Age of Sail, worthy of further scholarly inquiry.