

# To Honor their Worth, Beauty and Accomplishments: Women in Early American-Anglo Shipwreck Accounts.

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Women and their place at sea is often overlooked in early American accounts. Nineteenth-century concepts of separate spheres supposedly kept women tied to home and family while men explored the vast oceans. Romantic views of wives, waiting anxiously for returning husbands, and issues of proper middle-class behavior have distorted historians' depictions of women's place in the maritime world.<sup>i</sup> From such representations, women's greatest contributions in relation to maritime activities were support on land and the ability to maintain hearth and home.<sup>ii</sup>

Despite such perceptions women did go to sea (though only a few worked as sailors). Those who sailed were usually captains' or officers' wives, while others sailed as passengers. Unfortunately, crew lists rarely included women, keeping their identities hidden and participation silent. By the nineteenth century, the concept of separate spheres actually worked to keep women on board where wives could maintain the hearth and home on a ship, bringing the private sphere to sea.<sup>iii</sup>

The captain's place on a ship was lonely because his status required distance from the crew. As such, a wife provided companionship.<sup>iv</sup> Ship life forced private life into a public sphere and the ship offered little room for creating a home. Societal expectations demanded women remain secluded, but with privacy at a minimum, such aspirations often fell short. Depending on the vessel's size, the captain's cabin often served as a space for conducting the ship's daily business. Additionally, officers might share the aft cabins, forcing wives to interact with these gentlemen on a daily basis, further reducing privacy.<sup>v</sup> Social ranking and propriety separated women from much of the crew, allowing them to venture in only a few acceptable areas and to interact with only a few specific individuals.

At sea, women had various jobs, most within appropriate gender roles. Such women became civilizing influences in their efforts to reform sailors' drunkenness, cursing, and ubiquitous whoring.<sup>vi</sup> On larger ships with passengers, women acted as hostesses, making sure food, drink, and entertainment were available. With children on board, women worked as nannies, nurses, and teachers, essentially taking over all spiritual and educational duties.<sup>vii</sup> Additionally, women often took charge of the pantry;



Ann Jane Thornton, posing as a boy aboard ship in the 1830's. Courtesy G.W. Blunt White Library, Mystic Seaport Museum, Inc. VFM 1168.

but with galleys forward in the bow, wives found it imprudent to be in the men's quarters. Women instead made recipes or mixtures in the pantries and then sent the food forward for cooking. She could cook on the aft stove, but it was small and difficult to use. Such constraints physically hampered a wife's ability to perform traditional duties, requiring innovative means to achieve basic tasks.<sup>viii</sup>

Beyond traditional female duties, some women also learned the art of navigation. In several instances women took control of the ships when their captain-husband died, they being the only ones able to bring the ship into port.<sup>ix</sup> Such actions conformed to society on land when widows took over businesses after their husband's death. Women sometimes participated in the ship's daily chores, helping to prepare the sails or to work on smaller projects. Most women, however, kept themselves busy with sewing, cleaning, and writing. Women remained productive, but not self-sustaining, maintaining a code of female dependency.<sup>x</sup>

Women at sea tried to create a domestic atmosphere, but had to adjust to meet new and challenging constraints.<sup>xi</sup> The private and the public regimes, both dominated by patriarchal relations, were not isolated but overlapped or blurred into one another.<sup>xii</sup> The sea provided some opportunities for women to be "manly" and take control, but never permanently and only when circumstances absolutely required. As seen in the larger world of maritime history, women at sea lived in an ambiguous state, somewhat private, but not public, constrained to be wives and mothers within their floating houses, but existing in a social world. These "sister sailors" influenced the masculine sea, leaving signs of their presence which are only now beginning to resurface.

This article examines printed shipwreck narratives from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth century, and their place in American history. Although, of course, shipwrecks occurred at sea, accounts describing them reflected land-based perceptions and ideologies. The narratives expressed issues of hierarchy, race, and gender that revealed society's attitudes towards aspects of religion and labor. Rather than debate the veracity of the tales, my research is a cultural and social analysis of this moment in crisis that placed the image of shipwreck within the broader context of North American society.

Published shipwreck narratives were meant to be popular and to appeal to a broad audience. Printed as cheap, or street, literature in the form of broadsides, chapbooks or poems, they were affordable to all levels of society. In general, they were short stories, running from a few paragraphs to several pages, and gave a precise account from the voyage's inception to the rescue of remaining survivors. Advances in printing technology and the increase of worldwide commerce expedited publishing in the nineteenth century and allowed for the creation of larger anthologies, but later editions were almost always merely adaptations of earlier shipwreck accounts. The published narratives afforded a public platform that individuals used for a variety of purposes: to obtain money, to express religious beliefs, or simply to create an interesting story. Their use as popular literature implies authors and publishers manipulated, qualified, and adapted the stories to make a best-selling book.<sup>xiii</sup> Although this malleability suggests some information in the narratives is less than accurate, it does not diminish their value. Rather, this factor increases their significance because the authors and publishers crafted their stories to appeal to a broad audience and therefore the stories reveal much about the social and cultural context of that time. Such continuity suggests the narratives remained true to their original story and, despite subsequent editions, related events as told in the

first printing. This standardization appears in several narratives and each exhibits little or no change over time. Modifications typically reflect a distancing of the narrator from the story, usually seen in a shift from first person to third. Other alterations are abridgements that do little to take away from the original story.

Perhaps shipwreck narratives appealed to a broad audience because they provided an exciting story of human endurance and ability. Rather than a depressing account of death and deprivation, the narratives presented something positive. The printed accounts transformed the chaos of shipwreck into an ordered and understandable event where aspects of gender, status, and religion remained solid. Even in shipwreck's most extreme situation, cannibalism, survivors maintained social hierarchies in deciding who would be sacrificed next.

The published shipwreck narratives provide an additional lens to understand gender and the role of women at sea. As prescriptive literature, shipwreck narratives reinforced the dominant world view; they helped people understand and organize their society by strengthening accepted ideologies.<sup>xiv</sup> As women rarely wrote the narratives, historians must understand femininity through a male perspective. Shipwreck narratives did not promote new ideas; rather they reflected accepted perceptions of an already established order.<sup>xv</sup> The stories did not attempt to instill a new form of gender definition but rather maintained a conservative stance that reinforced established forms of behavior. For example, James Clarke, in his 1821 collection of narratives, felt shipwreck accounts were to:

inculcate the lesson of Resignation and Perseverance; to point out the Resources which Shipwrecked or distressed Mariners had discovered....to form a work, which yielding not in point to the horrors and unnatural Incidents of the Modern Novel, might engage even the female Mind, without poisoning its Principles, or Tainting its Purity.<sup>xvi</sup>

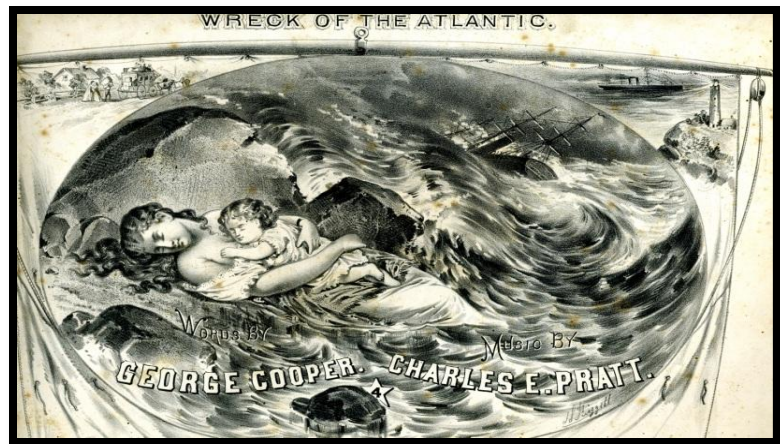
Unlike fictional novels, widely condemned for their immoral influence, shipwreck narratives provided something useful and appropriate for the female mind. They did not promote female independence, but instead reinforced women's place as wives, mothers, sisters and daughters; women in relation to men.

Out of twenty narratives that mention women, about half suggest that all or some of them perished.<sup>xvii</sup> In most instances, circumstances prohibited any chance of removing women, and their only hope for survival rested on the vessel remaining afloat. Rather than assisting women and children this situation became literary, "every *man* for himself."<sup>xviii</sup> The presence of women in shipwreck, however, added to the stories' drama and tragedy. Despite their moral foundation and the role of male protectors, many women did not survive shipwreck. Their small chance of survival is surprising as popular conceptions held that women and children went into lifeboats before crew and officers.

B.R. Burg suggests the historical emphasis on the preferential preservation of women and children came about in the mid-nineteenth century as greater numbers of women came aboard ships. Women and their families going to sea found this concept reassuring, believing that sailors and passengers might protect them in times of crisis.<sup>xix</sup> For example, in 1825, while evacuating the *Kent*, "one of the officers asked major Macgregor in what order the officers should abandon ship?" The major replied they

should leave by “funeral order.” Colonel Fearon agreed and stated “Most undoubtedly the juniors first—but see that any man is cut down who presumes to enter the boats before the means of escape are presented to the women and children.”<sup>xx</sup> This sentiment proved rare among printed narratives, and was practiced only when time allowed. Instead, most shipwreck narratives suggested the crew acted for themselves, choosing life over honor. Without time or a readily available means of securing women’s safety, men opted to save their own skins. The narratives rarely indicated the women’s deaths were avoidable and little attention was given to the possibility of their rescue.

On a practical level women at sea faced a poor chance of survival in shipwreck, compared to common sailors. Women were less familiar with the ship, usually traveling as passengers in the company of male relatives. Ann Saunders wrote in her 1827 narrative “The whole of the ship’s stern was stove in! This was only the beginning of a scene of horrid calamities! Doubly horrible to me, (as the reader must suppose) who had never before witnessed anything so awful.”<sup>xxi</sup> Her statement implies that she rarely went to sea and had never experienced the rigors of storm and shipwreck. Physically weaker than men, women had less endurance to hold onto railings or to keep footing on a rolling, pitching ship with waves crashing over. In addition, their dress affected the ability to move and swim when petticoats inhibited a woman’s movements.<sup>xxii</sup> Wearing a long, wet skirt, was not conducive to moving about on a tossing ship. Add a scared, screaming child, who might cling to one leg and the chance of moving decreased dramatically.



*Wreck of the Atlantic, or Clasped to Her Breast Her Baby Lay*, sheet music cover, published Boston by Oliver Ditson & Co., 1873. Mystic Seaport accession 2008.93.4

Of the one hundred narratives examined, twenty refer to at least one female but only ten go beyond mentioning the vague “female passenger.” Not surprisingly, most narratives that included women appeared in the late eighteenth century or early nineteenth century, reflecting a time when women increasingly went to sea.<sup>xxiii</sup> Their inclusion added much to the overall drama of shipwreck; the women provided a sympathetic focus that increased the horror and sensationalism inherent in popular literature. For example, when attempting an overland trek across Florida, the only female passenger, Mrs. Sara Allen, on the verge of death, lamented that her life was over and she would surely remain there forever.

My unhappy companions could only answer me with tears and moans....it is a consolation to the unhappy to see themselves the objects of compassion. The captain took my hands between his, and pressed them with the utmost tenderness....No, my dear friend (said he) I will not abandon you.<sup>xxiv</sup>

He went on with words of encouragement and suggested that the men go in search of refreshments to help her persist. Mrs. Allen's presence added to the narrative's interest as the men heroically did all they could to protect her. Her inability to continue situated the men around her in a protective role and supplied a means for the men to redeem a level of control and authority. In addition, a woman, struggling to survive in the wild, surely affected the sentimental or romantic reader and increased the narrative's overall appeal. The presence of such ladies, all virtuous Christians, added another layer to the narratives that Robin Miskolcze suggests "meant visualizing the titillating prospect of a test of female delicacy under the threat of physical dissolution."<sup>xxv</sup>

Audiences often did not realize a woman was on board until shipwreck began. Even then, many narratives failed to give names, instead referring to "a female passenger" or "the women." Even in their death many women remained anonymous as on the French East Indiaman, *Prince* (1752) where the author, "saw one of the ladies fall off the mast with fatigue, and perish; she was too far distant to save." That bit of information is all that we know about her. A lieutenant related that two other women were on board the *Prince*, who were female cousins of a passenger; despite efforts to save them, these women perished in the water. Although we do not know their names the author pointed out the extraordinary efforts put forth by the sailors to save these women. According to the author the women were stripped and placed in hen-coops so that a few sailors could swim with them. The sailors grew tired, however, and the hen-coops sank.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Even when women did survive they might remain nameless. The "Dutch-Merchant's Wife" is the only title given to one poor woman although she and only one sailor lived to tell their tale.<sup>xxvii</sup> Although her husband died early in the narrative the author continued to label her in reference to a male figure. The stories suggest these women remained outsiders, coming onto ships only because they were passengers or had male relatives on board. We know almost nothing about them, except for a few vague references to their relationship to men. According to the account, the Dutch Merchant's Wife "was of great fortune, a gentlewoman of many worthy accomplishments, and exceeding Beautiful."<sup>xxviii</sup> Even though she was one of only two survivors, and from a well-to-do family, the author thought it unimportant to relate her name.<sup>xxix</sup>

Status and class were very important elements to the accounts and the narratives made a special effort to differentiate female servants, slaves, and sailors and soldiers' wives from the "ladies." For example, the *Kent* (1827) carried families of soldiers, including forty-three women. When the vessel caught fire, chaos ruled the deck with men, women, and children running around, some "in a state of absolute nakedness." According to the author, the soldiers' wives and children prayed and read scriptures with the "ladies." The soldiers' wives are not mentioned further but the author added that the young ladies were "enabled, with wonderful self-possession, to offer to others those spiritual consolations."<sup>xxx</sup> The separation between ladies and soldiers' wives continued when the first boat lowered contained "all the ladies, and as many of the soldier's wives as it could safely contain."<sup>xxxi</sup> The narratives suggest that only with available time and space to place *all* women in boats did both upper and lower class women survive and that upper class women were given preference to any possible means of safety. As with the

*Halsewell* (1786), it was proposed that if “the opportunity presented itself, to reserve the long boat for the ladies and themselves [the officers], and this precaution was accordingly taken.”<sup>xxxii</sup> The narrative failed to mention the soldiers’ wives or black women who were also on board. On the hired transport, *Harpooner* (1818), 385 men, women, and children accompanied several regiments and crew on their way to Quebec. The vessel went aground that year and eventually came apart due to rough seas and weather. The “suddenness of the sea rushing in” between decks killed many women and children instantly and only 177 people survived. The narrative neglects to mention how many of these were women except that, the “daughter of Surgeon Armstrong,” and “the wife of a sergeant,” survived shipwreck.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Neither of them was given a name and each was recognized only in relation to a male family member.

Despite the class difference, gender itself permitted certain allowances. On the *Kent*, while waiting for the hull to give way, the ladies and officers sat in the protected round-house when three black women and two soldier’s wives entered, even “though the sailors, who had demanded entrance to get a light, had been opposed and kept out by the officers.”<sup>xxxiv</sup> These women, although from the lower classes gained access ahead of common sailors. However, even in a crisis, status remained fundamental. These lower-class women came into the round house late in the narrative, and this is the only information we have about them. The lower-class women were not allowed immediate entrance but came in only as the situation worsened. The narrative minimized their role, while emphasizing the ‘ladies,’ who remained calm and pious throughout the ordeal. The unnamed women appear only because of their gender, but their status failed to provide a focal point for sympathy. Emphasis instead remained on the upper-class ladies and the tragedy of their demise.

Defining women by family or in relation to a male figure implied they were not of the ship’s company, keeping the vessel a male-dominated realm. Not only was it unusual to have a woman on board but rarely did they actively participate in the shipwreck event. A survivor from the *Albion* thought it so unusual for a woman to assist in saving a ship that he included, “it is an interesting fact, that Miss Powell, an amiable young lady, who was on board, was desirous to be allowed to take her turn [at the pumps].”<sup>xxxv</sup> Of course, they refused the young lady’s offer. Her suggestion did not threaten social order and therefore she remained within acceptable boundaries for a “lady.” Without her help any chance for life remained with the men, and men alone. The narratives imply women in shipwreck situations relied on men to save them, adhering to historical implications of female dependency and the need for men in survival.

Supporting women’s marginalization, the narratives situated most women in relationship to the men on board. Such writing subordinated women and “helped position the women of the new nation as domestic dependents and disenfranchised citizens even as the developing economy and expanding public sphere were providing potential new places for men and women alike.”<sup>xxxvi</sup> For example, on the *Halsewell* (1786), the narrator identified all the female passengers in association with a male. “The passengers were Miss Eliza Pierce, and Miss Mary Anne Pierce, daughters of the commander; Miss Amy Paul, and Miss Mary Paul, daughters of Mr. Paul of Somersetshire, and relations to captain Pierce; Miss Elizabeth Blackburne, daughter of the captain, etc.”<sup>xxxvii</sup> These labels not only identified women through men but also designated them as upper-class or gentlewomen, thus adding an element of status. All of the women were single and

therefore their place on the ship must be justified and their honor intact for the story to have sentimental meaning. Later in the narrative other women appeared but since they lacked proper social standing we learn very little about them. The narrative described them as merely soldiers' wives and "three black women." Readers learn next to nothing about them, except that they die.

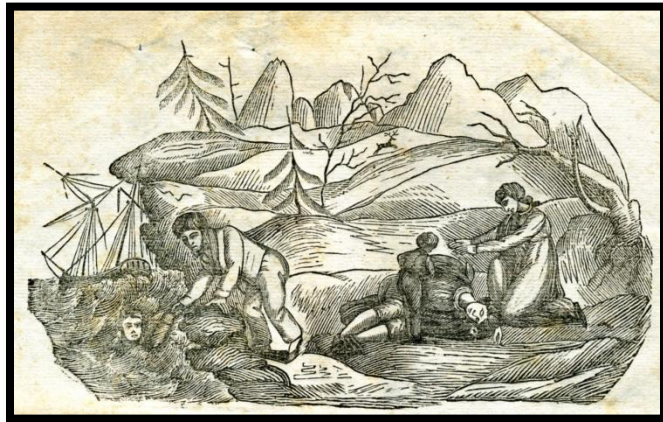
As daughters, nieces and sisters, women had a male family member to protect them in this moment of crisis. For example, a young lady on the *Boston*, Ms. Boag, died in her brother's arms while in a lifeboat.

This amiable young lady's firmness of conduct at the first alarm of fire, and during the whole scene, is worthy of the highest praise. To the divine will of her God she submitted without a murmur, and at 11 o'clock on Wednesday, she died in the arms of her brother, in the boat, thanking him in the most affectionate manner for his kindness, giving her blessing to us all.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

Although she died, she did not die alone, surrounded by strangers. Ms. Boag had her brother whose presence reinforced his masculinity and her dependency.

Women on the *Halsewell* had their father to care for them. The author wrote, "Captain Pierce was seated on a chair...between his two daughters, whom he pressed alternately to his affectionate bosom."<sup>xxxix</sup> He opted to stay by their side and offer what protection he might. He too, perished with the ship. Although these women did have male protectors, none of them survived—at least physically. The author went to great lengths to extol their virtues and to make sure their reputations as gentlewomen persisted beyond the grave.

The presence of women directly affected male representations and the narratives situated these men as protectors. In doing so the narratives reiterated the submissive and passive role of women. For example, as on the *Halsewell*, the captain expressed fear for his "beloved daughters," hoping to find a way he might save them. Later, when all was hopeless, the narrative continued: "Amidst their own misfortunes, the sufferings of the females filled their minds with the acutest anguish; every returning sea increased their apprehensions for the safety of their amiable and helpless companions."<sup>xl</sup> In most narratives the women waited in a protected area of the ship while the men determined the best course to save their "amiable and helpless companions." Readers must surely have anticipated whether the women died or whether they found a means of rescue.



John Smith. *Narrative of the Shipwreck and Sufferings of the Crew and Passengers of the English Brig Neptune*. New York: J. Smith, 1830) illustrating the protective male presence.

Fear and anguish associated with losing the family remained a central theme throughout the narratives. The *Kent* (1827) carried forty-three women and sixty-six

children; most belonged to the forty-nine soldiers on board. Several of the men took on added weight of their children but could only stay in the water a short time. These men “perished in their endeavours to save them.” Others realized their inability to save both women and children and made a choice. “Another individual, who was reduced to the frightful alternative of losing his wife, or his children, hastily decided in favor of his duty to the former. His wife was accordingly saved, but his four children, alas! were left to perish.”<sup>xli</sup> The men were the ones who chose between life and death, not only for themselves, but for their loved ones as well. The burden of being a father and a husband weighed heavily on the men and audiences at home understood the magnitude of this responsibility.

Part of this sympathy in relation to family revolved around the accepted male responsibility to shelter, clothe, and feed loved ones.<sup>xlii</sup> As Lori Merish suggests, “sympathy promotes a deeply felt psychic investment in proprietary power over, and in control, of objects of love.”<sup>xliii</sup> Readers empathized with the survivors, experiencing through print the pain of losing a loved one. Audiences could relate to the difficult choices these men made in determining who survived and who did not.

On one level, death destroyed the family structure and the need to sacrifice women during shipwreck revealed the fragility of such a system. Family was a central theme in several narratives, especially where women were present. The family remained the paramount unit, more important than an individual. For example, after her husband killed himself to spare her from being the next chosen to be eaten, the Dutch Merchant’s Wife “swounded and almost dyed with grief, and beg’d to be her own executioner.”<sup>xliv</sup> She refused to eat her husband’s corpse, choosing loyalty to her husband and potential death over life.

While protection usually came from relatives, men outside the family also offered various levels of support. On the *Halsewell*, a passenger, Mr. Meriton, “observing that the ladies appeared parched and exhausted, fetched a basket of oranges from some part of the round-house, with which he prevailed on some of them to refresh themselves.” Mr. Meriton provided sustenance and comfort to the ladies and attempted to alleviate the hopelessness of their ordeal. George Carpinger, seaman, spared the above mentioned, “Dutch merchant’s wife,” from execution. Carpinger did his utmost to keep her from harm and “used all the consolation he could, by words, or device, to comfort the despairing Lady till at length she was prevailed to hearken to him, and give her promise to spare all violence on her self, and waite her better fortune.” As a side note, Carpinger was well rewarded for his efforts, as the narrative later relates: “And considering the care and kindness of Carpinger, the lady seems much to favour hime, and when time of mourning is over, will undoubtedly make him Happy in her embraces.”<sup>xlv</sup> Perhaps not all efforts were merely altruistic.

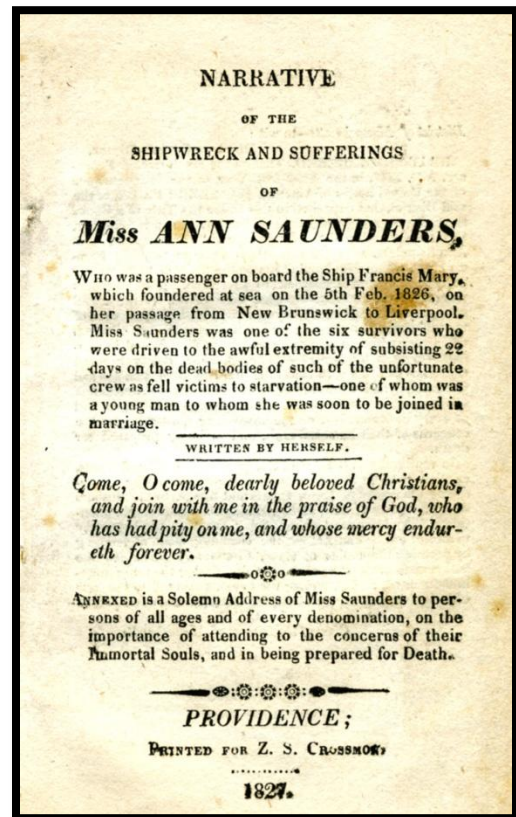
When women appeared in the narratives, they became the stories’ moral center. Acting as spiritual guides, women released the men from having to worry about their souls. As such, women did take an active role in their survival, but always within the acceptable constraints of femininity. For their efforts, the narratives portrayed women as honorable, firm, heroic, skilled, beautiful and virtuous; positive role models for readers. These women remained focused on proper female concerns, of religion and family, and therefore never threatened traditional understandings of social place.



Women, as moral beings, prevented shipwreck from being a moral as well as a physical disaster.<sup>xlvi</sup> The shipwreck of the *Kent* (1827) provides useful detail of how women in crisis centered disaster around a spiritual foundation. The author relates that “several of the soldiers’ wives and children, who had fled for temporary shelter into the after-cabins on the upper deck, were engaged in praying and in reading the scriptures with the ladies.” These women, “enabled, with wonderful self-possession, to offer to others those spiritual consolations, which a firm and intelligent trust in the Redeemer of the world appeared at this awful hour to impart to their own breasts.”<sup>xlvii</sup> The ladies in this narrative revealed an inner superiority. Their strength was not physical but manifested itself as spiritual fortitude, above and beyond those of their male counterparts.

As the narratives regaled the few women who comprised a moral foundation, the authors imparted a class distinction between the “amiable ladies” and the soldier’s wives. Only the ladies exhibited the moral attributes worthy of mention. “The dignified deportment of two young ladies in particular, formed a specimen of natural strength of mind, finely modified by Christian feeling, that failed not to attract the notice and admiration of every one who had an opportunity of witnessing it.” Although death seemed inevitable, “one of the ladies above referred to, calmly sinking down on her knees, and clasping her hands together said, ‘Even so come, Lord Jesus,’ and immediately proposing to read a portion of the scriptures to those around her.” Her sister, yet another fine, young lady, selected several “appropriate psalms, which were accordingly read, with intervals of prayer, by those ladies alternately to the assembled females.”<sup>xlviii</sup> As with men in the published narratives, there is a marked social distinction between those who remained in control of themselves and of their spirituality. Middle or upper class women displayed an inherent ability to remain calm in the face of danger and upheld proper comportment in the middle of a chaotic situation. These women created a strong image that demonstrated the narratives’ use as prescriptive literature.

Proper women waited for men to save them while praying to God for salvation. Women did not have to be physically strong because they excelled in emotional and moral strength. When the *Halsewell* finally broke apart, taking all of the women with her, the author wrote: “Thus, perished the *Halsewell*, and with her, worth, honor, skill, beauty, and accomplishments!”<sup>xlix</sup> On the *Kent*, while the women climbed into the life boats the narrator commended them for “the fortitude which never fails to characterize and adorn their sex on occasion of overwhelming trial, [they] were placed, without a murmur, into the boat.”<sup>1</sup>



Courtesy G.W. Blunt White Library, Mystic Seaport Museum, Inc.

Their strength did not come from being physically able to handle the pumps or cut down the masts. Rather the women demonstrated their abilities through inner fortitude.

Occasionally women did act. In the nineteenth century, women began to write their own narratives. For example, Ann Saunders wrote a version of her shipwreck experience aboard the *Francis Mary* (1827). Two accounts exist, Ann Saunders and Captain Kendall each wrote a version, showing how gender altered the story's overall tone. Full of human suffering and cannibalism, in both narratives Saunders played a major, indeed bloodcurdling, role.

According to Captain Kendall's account, the *Francis Mary* (1826) hit rough seas that crippled the ship, leaving it to the mercy of the tides. For several days, the crew struggled against starvation. On February 22, the survivors turned to cannibalism when John Wilson, seaman, died where they "cut him up in quarters, washed them overboard, and hung them up on pins." By March 5 several individuals perished, including James Frier, cook, who had his betrothed, Ann Saunders, on board as a female passenger and servant to Mrs. Kendall. After Frier's death, Saunders claimed the right to his blood. She fought with the mate and: "The heroine got the better of her adversary, and then allowed him to drink one cup to her two." Finally on March 7, the *Blonde* rescued them from eventual starvation. Upon boarding the *Francis Mary*, a Lieutenant Gambier noticed they had meat, at which time the survivors admitted it was human.<sup>li</sup>

Rather than dwell on the morbidity of situation, Kendall's narrative instead turned to regaling the two women, perhaps in an effort to make his narrative more appealing to female audiences. The Captain wrote that his "wife, who underwent all the most horrid sufferings which the human understanding can imagine, bore them much better than could possibly have been expected." Not only did she endure emotionally but physically as well. "She is now, although much emaciated, a respectable, good-looking woman, about twenty-five years old." Once posited as a gentlewoman he complicates her image, but does not tarnish it completely. Rather he uses her actions to demonstrate the depths to which the survivors had sunk in order to survive.

What must have been the extremity of want to which she was driven, when she ate the brains of one of the apprentices, saying it was the most delicious thing she ever tasted; and it is still more melancholy to relate, that the person, whose brains she was thus forced by hunger to eat, had been three times wrecked before....and then became food for his remaining shipmates!<sup>liii</sup>

The perception is one of continued composure and refinement. She remained a gentlewoman to the end, proper for a woman of her ranking.

The captain, however, painted Anne Saunders in a much different light. While she too exhibited an internal fortitude, Ann transformed into something on the verge of losing control and possessed no form of sophistication.

Ann Saunders, the other female, had more strength in her calamity than most of the men. She performed the duty of cutting up and cleaning the dead bodies, keeping two knives for the purpose...and when the breath was announced to have flown, she would sharpen her knives, bleed the deceased in the neck, drink his blood, and cut him up.<sup>liii</sup>

Saunders was not the traditionally submissive woman, waiting for men to act, yet she was still portrayed as at least a quasi-proper woman. She was not trying to subvert authority but was working in a proper arena for women, that of food preparation.

The captain's account distinguished differences between the two women based on status and class. While Mrs. Kendall, his wife, remained a gentlewoman, Ann Saunders became a harpy, on the verge of losing control. Toby Ditz describes similar imagery in her examination of merchants in which she describes the harpy as "embodying restless, predatory passion, suggests a carnivalesque transgression of the boundaries."<sup>liv</sup> This image appears primarily in Kendall's narrative when he stated that Ann "shrieked a loud yell, then snatching a cup...cut her late intended husband's throat and drank his blood!"<sup>lv</sup> She fought with the mate for this right and continued to claim the deceased's blood until rescued. Although she did not threaten authority, she overstepped boundaries of subordination and acted in ways the captain deemed unbecoming a proper female. The creation of the harpy probably added to the narrative's appeal, exhibiting a sinister impression of women in crisis.

Ann Saunders' account of the event is much different. Her narrative focuses on religion and the need for people to attend to their immortal souls. She begins with a short summary of her background that places her somewhere in the lower classes. Saunders worked for "respectable families in the neighborhood," and at age eighteen she became acquainted with Mrs. Kendall, who persuaded her to accompany her on the *Francis Mary*. Thanks to the entreaties of this "lady of pious and amiable disposition," and of her fiancée, James Frier, Saunders found herself aboard the *Francis Mary*. Little of note occurred on the outbound trip, but on the return voyage Saunders began her story of sympathy and drama.

Early on, Saunders outlined the importance of the family unit with her concern for the women and children affected by this shipwreck.

...many of the seamen were married men, and had left in Europe numerous families dependent on them for support--Alas! poor mortals, little did they probably think, when they bid their loving companions and their tender little ones the last adieu, that it was to be a final one, and that they were to behold their faces no more, forever, in this frail world!<sup>lvi</sup>

Shipwreck affected more than just the men on board. Wives, mothers, and children at home often lost the only bread winner and many families subsequently went on poor relief. Saunders' pleas probably affected readers, the very people often left behind, in reminding them of shipwreck's disastrous consequences. She also created a framework that presented family and loved ones as central to the story.

On the way home, the vessel encountered a series of incapacitating storms. Throughout this time Saunders stated that, "Mrs. Kendall and myself were on our knees, on the quarter deck, as earnestly engaged in prayer to the Almighty God that he would in his tender mercy spare our lives."<sup>lvii</sup> As with many published accounts, the women became the narrative's moral center, as they alone prayed to God while the men consulted with one another. The women looked to spiritual affairs while the men controlled more secular concerns.

As with Kendall's version, on the 22nd, John Wilson died and his body processed for consumption. After much lamenting Saunders finally described the death of her fiancée. She did not give consent to marriage until well into the voyage and they planned to marry upon reaching port. At this point she pleaded directly to female readers, "Judge then, my Christian female readers (for it is you that can best judge) what must have been my feelings." That as she watched him die, she chose to preserve herself and to "plead my claim to the greater portion of his precious blood, as it oozed half congealed from the wound inflicted on his lifeless body!!! Oh, this was a bitter cup indeed!"<sup>lviii</sup> Not bound by marital obligations, as was the devoted "Dutch Merchant's Wife" Saunders looked to the individual rather than family, and self preservation instead of sacrificing her life for others.

Saunders' account continues to parallel the Captain's regarding general events but she refocuses her actions from being a harpy to a more respectable or spiritual image. She omitted the struggle with the steward for the blood, and instead exhorted readers to remember God's mercy and to be prepared for death. Through her undivided trust in God, she remained physically and emotionally stronger than the other survivors, to the extent that it fell to her to proportion the food.

Throughout the narrative, Saunders remained true to God. She was a proper female who supported the survivors in their moral direction. "I exerted the feeble powers which God in mercy had left me, to exhort them to have recourse to Heaven, to alleviate their misery, and to trust in Him."<sup>lix</sup> Her account was much more intimate and emotional than the Captain's and she continued to detail the women's sufferings and the spiritual crisis of shipwreck until the *Blonde* rescued them and Saunders returned to her family. Even after rescue, for nineteen additional pages, her narrative warned individuals to remain pious, virtuous, prepared for death, and to always be proper Christians.

Saunders's narrative is exciting for its in-depth portrayal of shipwreck, especially as experienced by a woman and is much more emotional than those written by men. Unlike male-authored accounts she omitted the practical details of sailing a ship; she instead focused on the emotional turmoil that she and Mrs. Kendall endured. Despite cannibalism these women remained respectable and honored. Indeed, they both persisted in a quasi-proper sphere. Mrs. Kendall remained a good wife and mother and only under these extreme conditions did she descend to cannibalism; even then she did it with grace and gentility. Saunders kept everyone alive by preparing the food. Although the food of choice was nontraditional, a middle- or lower-class woman was well within her boundaries in processing meat.

Only in an exceptional circumstance, far from land and with no alternatives for survival, could such female behavior be tolerated or even honored. The sea permitted some relaxation of gender roles, but assigned positions still persisted. Women's behavior reflected what Ditz refers to as "strategies of the weak;" by becoming what the authors thought as desirable and pleasing to audiences.<sup>lx</sup> Although secondary to male efforts, women could take control of events and preserve others to live another day. No longer constrained by society's watchful gaze, the sea afforded some relaxation of gender roles for both men and women. They located themselves within a social environment with a less rigid gender order, but one that still looked home for definition. Although shipwreck was a moment of crisis, women usually maintained their proper gender roles as dependents with men their saviors. Shipwreck did not question the

traditional, but reinforced the necessity of proper deportment. Following traditional roles, these women were quiet, submissive, and pious. They could be heroines through their suffering.<sup>lxi</sup> They attained their greatness by focusing on others and offering the ultimate sacrifice of their lives as they comforted fellow passengers.

Although the sea provided some with the ability to expand gender roles, this chance was exceptional and only occurred in extreme circumstances. Women did not fare well in shipwreck narratives. Their subordinate social rank prevented them from obtaining the power necessary for survival. In addition, they lacked physical capabilities to withstand the rigor of high seas and strong winds. Women in shipwreck lived and died in an ambiguous sphere, somewhat private, but not public, constrained to be wives and mothers, yet able to assert their strength and fortitude. Above all, narratives reassured readers that gender expectations remained solid, and that both men and women acted appropriately even when all else seemed beyond control.

## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> Various book reviews state these problems. For example, Daniel Vickers, "Book Review of *Iron Men; Wooden Women*." *American Historical Review* 102, no. 4 (October 1997): 1120; Joan Druett, "Book Review." *William and Mary Quarterly* 54, no. 2 (April 1997): 426-427.

<sup>ii</sup> Diane Dugaw, "Rambling Female Sailors." *International Journal of Maritime History* 4, no. 1 (1992): 181, 183. See also, Margaret Creighton and Lisa Norling, *Iron Men, Wooden Women* (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1996).

<sup>iii</sup> Lisa Norling, "Ahab's Wife," in *Iron Men, Wooden Women*, ed. Creighton and Norling, 89. Though this was not common until the 1840s.

<sup>iv</sup> Joan Druett, *Hen Frigates* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 102-3; Margaret Creighton, "Davy Jones' Locker," in *Iron Men, Wooden Women*, ed. Creighton and Norling, 135.

<sup>v</sup> Druett, *Hen Frigates*, 50-54. We know about the lives of these women from the many journals they wrote. Hskell Springer, "The Captain's Wife at Sea," in *Iron Men, Wooden Women*, ed. Creighton and Norling, 101-102.

<sup>vi</sup> Druett, *Hen Frigates*, 79.

<sup>vii</sup> Springer, "The Captain's Wife at Sea," 95; Druett, *Hen Frigates*, 106-108. Sometimes both parents taught the children, each specializing in different subjects. As children got older, parents might send them to live with relatives on land or to boarding schools, 116.

<sup>viii</sup> Druett, *Hen Frigates*, 136-138.

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<sup>ix</sup> Druett, *Hen Frigates*, 39-40, 180-1. Along with Druett, David Cordingly provides several instances in the nineteenth century. *Women Sailors and Sailors' Women* (NY: Random House, 2001), 110.

<sup>x</sup> Elaine Crane, *Ebb Tide in New England* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998), 175-177; Druett, *Hen Frigates*, 155.

<sup>xi</sup> Druett, *Hen Frigates*, 136.

<sup>xii</sup> S. Walby, *Gender Transformations* (London: Routledge, 1997), 6. Cited in Linda McDowell, *Gender, Identity, and Place* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 17.

<sup>xiii</sup> George Landow, *Images of Crisis* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), 15-16. See also Ann Fabian, *The Unvarnished Truth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) for an examination of personal narratives in the nineteenth century. Hester Blum, *A View From the Masthead* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008) presents an analysis of literacy amongst sailors.

<sup>xiv</sup> Ken Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories: Power Change and Social Worlds* (London: Routledge, 1995), 177-8.

<sup>xv</sup> Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 2; Gordon Rattray Taylor, *The Angel-Makers; A Study In The Psychological Origins Of Historical Change* (London: Heinemann, 1958), 109.

<sup>xvi</sup> James Stanier Clarke, *Naufragia or Historical Memoirs of Shipwrecks and of the Providential Deliverance of Vessels* (London: Printed for A.K. Newman & Co., Leadhall-Street, 1821), vii.

<sup>xvii</sup> This number cannot be more precise as in several of the narratives, it is unknown if all or any of the women survived.

<sup>xviii</sup> B.R. Burg, "Women and Children First: Popular Mythology and Disaster at Sea, 1840-1860." *Journal of American Culture* 20, no. 4 (1997): 7.

<sup>xix</sup> Burg, "Women and Children First," 1-2. Margarete Lincoln also indicates this concept did not appear before the early nineteenth century, "Shipwreck Narratives of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century: Indicators of Culture and Identity." *British Journal for Eighteenth Century Studies* 20 (1997): 167.

<sup>xx</sup> Loss of the *Kent*, in R. Thomas, *Interesting and Authentic Narratives* (Hartford: Published by Ezra Strong, 1836), 316.

<sup>xxi</sup> Ann Saunders, *Narrative Of The Shipwreck And Sufferings Of Miss Ann Saunders* (Providence: Printed for Z. Crossmon, 1827), 10.

<sup>xxii</sup> Robin Miskolcze, "Transatlantic Touchstone: The Shipwrecked Woman in British and Early American Literature." *Prose Studies* 22, no. 3 (1999): 42-43. Taking off slippery shoes while on deck and removing any clothing that might weigh a person down when in the water are known survival techniques. Margarete

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Lincoln brings up the issue of clothing and survival, and rightly so in, "Shipwreck Narratives of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," 170.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Ten out of fifty-seven newspaper articles concerning shipwreck mention women but only a few provide any detail. Only one out of twelve log books that directly mention shipwreck had any indication of a woman on board.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Sarah Allen, *Narrative of the Shipwreck and unparalleled sufferings of Mrs. Sarah Allen, On her Passage in May last from New York to New Orleans. Being the substance of a letter from the unfortunate Mrs. Allen to her sister in Boston. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition* (Boston: Printed for Benjamin Marston, 1816), 19. Early American Imprints.

<sup>xxv</sup> Miskolcze, "Transatlantic Touchstone," 50-51. She takes her analysis a step further by examining women who were captured by natives after shipwreck where "female virtue under the threat of moral dissolution" added to the drama, 51. "Loss of the *Albion*," in Thomas, *Interesting and Authentic Narratives*, 302. Most of the women were listed as cabin passengers except for the last two, which were under steerage passengers. All of the women drowned.

<sup>xxvi</sup> "Loss of the French East Indiaman *Prince*," in Thomas, *Interesting and Authentic Narratives*, 148. The story was related by one of the Lieutenants.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Congers, *Strange News From Plymouth, in a letter to Mr. D. B. of London* (London: Printed for J. Congers at the Black Raven in Duck-Lane, 1684). John Carter Brown Library, Brown University

<sup>xxviii</sup> Congers, *Strange News From Plymouth*, 3.

<sup>xxix</sup> Another theory might be that that author wanted to protect her name and reputation. However, without further evidence, the lack of the wife's name is purely speculative.

<sup>xxx</sup> "Loss of the *Kent*," in Thomas, *Interesting and Authentic Narratives*, 315.

<sup>xxxi</sup> "Loss of the *Kent*," in Thomas, *Interesting and Authentic Narratives*, 316.

<sup>xxxii</sup> The opportunity never came about and all the women were lost. "Loss of the *Halsewell*," in Thomas, *Interesting and Authentic Narratives*, 197.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Neither of them were given a name and were only situated in relation to a male family member. "Loss of the Transport *Harpooner*," in Thomas, *Interesting and Authentic Narratives*, 341, 344-345.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> "Loss of the *Halsewell*," in Thomas, *Interesting and Authentic Narratives*, 199.

<sup>xxxv</sup> "Loss of the *Albion*," Thomas, *Interesting and Authentic Shipwrecks*, 300. She, along with the remaining women, six in all, drowned.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Toby Ditz, "Shipwrecked; or Masculinity Imperiled: Mercantile Representations of Failure and the Gendered Self in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia." *Journal of American History* 81, no. 1 (1994): 79.

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<sup>xxxvii</sup> “Loss of the *Halsewell*, East Indiaman,” in Thomas, *Interesting and Authentic Narratives*, 195. Stephen Howard examined obituaries in the eighteenth century and found that placing women in relation to men was a common theme. “‘A Bright Pattern to All Her Sex’: Representations of Women in Periodical and Newspaper Biography,” in *Gender in Eighteenth Century England*, eds. Hannah Barker and Elaine Chalus (London: Longman Ltd., 1997), 230-249.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> “Loss of the *Boston*,” 323. Letter transcribed for Mr. Brooks, from the Log of the *Boston* by McKay’s daughter, 1897. Phillip’s Library, Peabody Essex Museum.

<sup>xxxix</sup> “Loss of the *Halsewell*,” in Thomas, *Interesting and Authentic Narratives*, 199.

<sup>xl</sup> “Loss of the *Halsewell*,” in Thomas, *Interesting and Authentic Narratives*, 202. The seven women named were all related to the captain or were wives of officers. Later in the narrative two soldiers’ wives and three black women are included (being lower-class women the authored neglected to provide their names.). All of the women died.

<sup>xli</sup> “Burning of the *Kent*,” in Thomas, *Interesting and Authentic Narratives*, 312, 317; Archibald Duncan, *Mariner’s Chronicle* (Hartford: Andrus and Starr, 1813), 18.

<sup>xlii</sup> Kathleen Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 31.

<sup>xliii</sup> Lori Merish, *Sentimental Materialism: Gender, Commodity Culture, and Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 4.

<sup>xliv</sup> Congers, *Strange News From Plymouth*, 6.

<sup>xlv</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>xlvi</sup> Robin Miskolcze, “Don’t rock the Boat: Women and Shipwreck Narratives in Early United States Culture.” (Ph.D. diss., University of Nebraska, 2000), 100. “They were an inspiration in adversity.” Lincoln, “Shipwreck Narratives,” 170.

<sup>xlvii</sup> “Burning of the *Kent*” in Thomas, *Interesting and Authentic Narratives*, 315.

<sup>xlviii</sup> Samuel Kirkland, *Remarkable Shipwrecks* (Durrrie and Peck, 1836) 16.

<sup>xlix</sup> “Loss of the *Halsewell*,” in Thomas, *Interesting and Authentic Narratives*, 202.

<sup>l</sup> “Loss of the *Kent*,” in Thomas, *Interesting and Authentic Narratives*, 316.

<sup>li</sup> Charles Ellms, *Tragedy of the Seas* (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1841), 193-196.

<sup>lii</sup> “Loss of the *Frances Mary*,” in *Remarkable shipwrecks: or, A collection of interesting accounts of naval disasters. With many particulars of the extraordinary adventures and sufferings of the crews of vessels wrecked at sea, and of their treatment on distant shores. Together with an account of the deliverance of survivors. Selected from authentic sources.* (Harford: Andrus and Starr, 1813), 195-196.



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<sup>liii</sup> “Loss of the *Francis Mary*,” in *Remarkable Shipwrecks*, 196. As a final paragraph, the *Francis Mary* was towed by another ship back to Jamaica, refitted and sent back to sea. “The putrid remains of human bodies, which had been the only food of the unfortunate survivors, was found on board the vessel.”

<sup>liv</sup> Ditz, “Shipwrecked; or Masculinity Imperiled,” 60. Although she is describing men and issues of potency and virility, I think the image applies well to the portrayal of Ann Saunders.

<sup>lv</sup> “Loss of the *Francis Mary*,” in *Remarkable Shipwrecks*, 194-195.

<sup>lvi</sup> Ann Saunders, “Narrative of the Shipwreck and Sufferings of Miss Ann Saunders,” (Providence: Printed for Z.S. Crossmon, 1827), 9.

<sup>lvii</sup> Saunders, “Narrative of the Shipwreck,” 10.

<sup>lviii</sup> “Ibid,” 15.

<sup>lix</sup> Saunders, “Narrative of the Shipwreck,” 18.

<sup>lx</sup> Ditz, “Shipwrecked; or Masculinity Imperiled,” 79-80.

<sup>lxi</sup> Jane Pease, *Ladies, Women, and Wenches: Choice and Constraint in Antebellum Charleston and Boston* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 115.