William Falconer's "Sons of Neptune": The Merchant Service, the Royal Navy, and *The Shipwreck*

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In the advertisement to the first edition of *The Shipwreck. A Poem. In Three Cantos. By A Sailor* (1762), William Falconer explains his decision to provide explanatory footnotes for the maritime terms in the poem. He insists that none of the available dictionaries of "sea-phrases" are adequate and that he could not endorse any of them "without forfeiting his claim to the Capacity assumed in the Title Page, of which he is much more tenacious than of his Character as a Poet."[1] Although Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) defines a "sailor" simply as "a seaman, one who practices or understands navigation," Falconer could have identified himself more precisely as one of the merchant sailors who, in vessels large and small, moved cargo from coast to coast, country to country.[2] Perhaps Falconer was anticipating the change in his career as a sailor that came in June 1762, less than a month after the publication of the first edition of *The Shipwreck,* when he left merchant sailing for a distinctly different branch of seafaring: the Royal Navy. Falconer's active service ended just six months later, with the end of the Seven Years' War, but he remained in the pay of the Royal Navy for a further seven years, during which time he twice revised *The Shipwreck* (Jones, 6).

This article focuses on what bearing Falconer's career change, from merchant service to the Royal Navy, has on *The Shipwreck.* William Jones is right to suggest that the poem can be read as "the epic of the British merchant marine, with the object of celebrating the unsung heroes of overseas and coastal trade," whose achievements, unlike those of the Royal Navy in the many wars of the eighteenth century, "passed largely unnoticed" (Jones, 90, 71). But in

many ways, the merchant marine was often noticed. From the mid-seventeenth to the eighteenth century, Britain was in the midst of a "Commercial Revolution," as Ralph Davis terms it, and the growth of trade depended on the labor of merchant sailors.[3] By the mid-eighteenth century, the merchant service was well established, and commentators had long-standing opinions about the dubious character of merchant sailors compared to the superior merits of Royal Naval sailors. By setting *The Shipwreck* in this context, we can better understand how Falconer's revisions to the poem, completed after he had joined the Royal Navy, stress that merchant seamen are just as meritorious as any of Britain's other "sons of Neptune" (C, 1:222).

It is possible that, as a native of Edinburgh, Falconer found his way to a career as a sailor by accident of geography. His biographers have long thought that Falconer began working as a sailor in 1746 and that his first years at sea, from the ages of fourteen to seventeen, may have been spent in the coal trade, sailing along the east coast of Britain.[4] By following the details in *The Shipwreck*, biographers suggest that Falconer moved at the age of seventeen to become a second mate on a ship trading in the Levant, the waters between North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean. As Jones notes, "To be appointed to a second Mate's berth at the age of seventeen was rare but by no means impossible": sailing in the coal trade was a suitable way to learn basic seacraft, and Falconer may simply have been "a very good student" (2). Since he began his career as a sailor in the late 1740s, it is plausible that he continued in merchant service by an accident of timing: the War of the Austrian Succession ended in 1748, which meant that the Royal Navy would not have needed new recruits. However, the navy would need sailors in the early years of the Seven Years' War (1756–63), and Falconer's biographers believe that he joined the Royal Navy at this stage (Jones, 4–7).

Falconer's move to the Royal Navy just one month after the first publication of *The Shipwreck* marks a turning point in his career.

When Falconer joined the Royal Navy in June 1762, he did so as a midshipman, the term used for a class of junior officer, or as Falconer puts it in his *Universal Dictionary of the Marine* (1769), "a sort of naval cadet."[5] Of course, if he had sailed as a second mate on a Levant trading ship at the unusually young age of seventeen, he would have been sailing as an officer, but as N. A. M. Rodger writes, the Royal Navy attracted subordinate officers from merchant ships on the basis that Royal Naval rank could provide greater "honour, gentility, and wealth."[6] According to Falconer's first biographer, the Prince Regent's librarian and naval enthusiast, James Stanier Clarke, Falconer joined the Royal Navy under the patronage of Edward, Duke of York, brother to the king, rear admiral in his own right, and the figure to whom Falconer had dedicated the first edition of *The Shipwreck*. Clarke writes that the duke, "eager to honour Falconer with every possible mark of his favour, advised him to quit the Merchant Service for the Royal Navy."[7] Had Falconer joined the Royal Navy for the "honour" of belonging to its officer class, it is possible that he was quickly disappointed by life as a midshipman. Midshipmen were required to have some knowledge of seafaring, acquired either by experience or by following a course of academic study, but since it was possible to sail with a Royal Naval ship before the age of ten or enroll in the Royal Naval Academy at Portsmouth at twelve or thirteen, a young man might become a midshipman in his teens. Given this, Falconer, who was the son of a wigmaker, may have found himself as a midshipman on HMS *Royal George* in June 1762, surrounded by the sons of gentlemen some fifteen years his junior, in terms of both age and experience, and subordinate to lieutenants and captains who were his age and who had no greater level of competence in matters of seamanship.

There are suggestions in Falconer's early poetry that he may have been disappointed by the new career on which he embarked. His early poem, "Description of a Ninety Gun Ship" (1759), is a hymn to the "vast stupendous" warships in the Royal Navy, and the "Eight hundred youths of heart and sinew bold" who hoisted the sails and loaded the guns: "Thus arm'd, may Britain long her state maintain, / And with triumphant navies rule the main" (Jones, ll. 3, 38, 49–50). The celebratory rhetoric of "Description of a Ninety Gun Ship" reappears in Falconer's later "Ode on the Duke of York's Second Departure from England, as Rear Admiral" (1762), a poem that lauds the duke for taking up the "avenging naval sword" and following the "course that Honor steers" (Jones, ll. 37, 32). However, the later ode, which was written after Falconer had joined the navy, feels constrained: he refers somewhat too candidly to the duke as his "royal patron": "Deep on my grateful breast, / Thy favour is imprest" (Jones, ll. 207, 204–05). Falconer displays a much freer hand in another pair of poems. Written before he joined the navy, "The Sea Chaplain's Petition to the Lieutenants in the Ward-Room for Use of the Quarter Gallery" (1758) satirizes the subordinate officers of the Royal Navy, who, "e're taught the diff'rence, to commissions due," compete against each other rather than against the nation's enemies (Jones, l. 5). Four years later, though, Falconer satirized the men who were, at the time of composition, his peers. "The Midshipman" (1762) opens with a scene of surgery on a naval ship, but there is no suggestion that the poem is set in the aftermath of a naval battle, or that the grim episode is meant to qualify the satirical passages that follow. Rather, Falconer joins the sailor who receives routine medical treatment and the naval cadet who struggles to grasp the mathematics necessary for navigation: "with Sines, and Tangents, fraught / A Mid reclines—in calculation lost!" (Jones, ll. 68–69). "The Midshipman" ends with an appeal on behalf of those "Guardians of the British fleet," but only because some few might rise to become exceptional figures, like "an [Admiral Edward] Hawke, an [Admiral Richard] Howe" (l. 88).

There are further suggestions of Falconer's deepening skepticism about the Royal Navy in *An Universal Dictionary of the Marine*, which was published shortly before he finally left his Royal Naval post to sail with the East India Company. Falconer's descriptions of the principal officers of a naval ship in the *Dictionary* contain none of the satire on the Royal Navy's officers that can be found in the "The Sea-Chaplin's Petition" and "The Midshipman." The *Dictionary* described the Royal Naval captain as one who "is enjoined to shew a laudable example of honour and virtue" and "to take all opportunities of annoying his enemy . . . and exhibit an example of courage and fortitude to his officers and crew."[8] Falconer's definitions, which, Jones explains, grew from the notes included in the first edition of *The Shipwreck*, record the difference between the ideal Royal Naval officer and those actually in service. Falconer recommends that the earnest midshipman should strive to ignore "the dunces" who prefer "rattling the dice, roaring bad verses, hissing on the flute, or scraping discord from the fiddle," since "noble studies will sweeten the hours of relaxation."[9] As Jones observes, Falconer, "doubtless . . . drawing on direct experience," betrays some sympathy in his *Dictionary* for the midshipman who finds himself surrounded by "unprofessional" colleagues.[10]

Taken together, then, Falconer's early poems and his later *Dictionary* do not suggest that he viewed the time he spent in Royal Naval service, when he revised *The Shipwreck*, as superior to his years as a merchant seaman. Much of his posthumous reputation as a poet has rested on his use of technical terms in *The Shipwreck*; Bridget Keegan has suggested that Falconer's use of nautical terminology "inscribes . . . heroism" on the sailor who understands such language: it is "a sign of [the mariner's] knowledge and an assertion of the valuation of that knowledge."[11] The theoretical and practical aspects of seafaring are clearly important to the sailor-poet, who observes in his *Dictionary* that the Royal Naval officer "who is eminently skilled in the sciences [of astronomy, geometry, and mechanics], will command

universal respect and approbation; and that whoever is satisfied with the despicable ambition of shining the hero of an assembly, will be the object of universal contempt."[12] Nonetheless, Falconer's sympathetic portrayal of the merchant service in *The Shipwreck* is not limited to stressing the merchant sailor's equal, if not superior, knowledge and understanding of the technical aspects of sailing. As I will show, the revisions that he made to the poem in the years after he had been "honored" by his appointment to the Royal Navy combat long-standing prejudice against merchant sailors, and specifically the notion that merchant sailors value money over duty, safety over bravery.

If Falconer sought, rather than simply found, work in the merchant service instead of in the Royal Navy at the end of the 1740s, he would not have been unusual. Rodger comments that sailors "joined a King's ship or a merchant's as opportunity or preference suggested," but there were clear differences that would have shaped an ordinary sailor's choice (113). Merchant ships sailed with smaller crews than Royal Naval ships, and this increased the amount of work for each man. Merchant sailing also required additional physical labor from sailors for loading and unloading cargo. Rodger observes that "life in men-of-war may have been arduous, but we never hear of [Royal Naval sailors] dropping exhausted from the yards, or dying of fatigue at the pumps, both of which are reported from merchantmen of the period" (41). Merchant sailors were, indeed, compensated for more strenuous work. According to Marcus Rediker, the Anglo-American merchant seamen was one of the first free-wage laborers in what was still a nascent capitalist economy, and he had considerable choice when contracting his labor, as well as opportunities for withdrawing that labor. Rates of pay in merchant ships and Royal Naval ships were broadly similar in peacetime, and merchant sailors could lose wages for damage to cargo or shipwreck, but the standard pattern of regular wages to merchant sailors made payment more reliable. In

addition, due to looser hierarchies onboard, merchant sailors were not subject to the same formal disciplinary codes as Royal Naval sailors, which gave them greater scope for personal autonomy. It does seem to be the case that Royal Naval sailors received a better standard of food at sea, but merchant sailors might have had more opportunity to pilfer food supplies from the ship's cargo, and they also had opportunities to purchase personal supplies of food or drink when in port, as well as small commodities they could trade privately.[13]

For the sailors of the early and mid-eighteenth century, then, both merchant service and Royal Naval service had practical advantages, but also disadvantages. To many commentators in this period, the crews of merchant and Royal Naval ships reflected the difference in those ships' purposes: the one moving cargo, and the other combating enemies. Edward Ward's *The Wooden World Dissected*, which was first published in 1707 and became popular again from the 1740s to the 1770s, is a satirical anatomy of the Royal Navy. In his preface, Ward establishes his support for the Royal Navy by commenting that "we have some Captains in the Navy, as much the Glory of our Isle, as are the Ships they command," which licenses him to lampoon those Royal Naval captains as not being truly dedicated to their duty. Ward satirizes the captain who would "rather have a good Runner, than a Ship of great Force," that is, who would be surer of his ability to escape than to attack an enemy; such a captain, Ward writes, "would fall in with none but Merchant ships."[14] Ward also criticizes a Royal Naval captain who was once a cabin boy on a merchant ship, and consequently has "a mortal Aversion to your Merchant-Ship Captains," for the ill treatment he received as a boy. The embittered captain deals with merchantman "with as much supercilious State, as an *Eastern* Monarch, or *West India* Vice-Roy" (19). That said, in his pen-portrait of the Royal Naval lieutenant, Ward casts doubt on the character of the merchant seafarer: " He reckons himself (tho' perhaps but the Son of a Custard-monger) fifty Degrees above a Commander of a Merchant Ship; and yet his Gentility is sure to stoop lower than the other in Matters of

Traffick; nay, such a sorry Dealer is he of small Ware, that you'd swear he had serv'd twice seven Years 'Prentiship to a Scotch Pedlar" (28). While Ward ridicules the Royal Naval lieutenant who, though from a lowly family, imagines that his Royal Naval rank puts him far above a commander of a merchant ship, he also points out that both are demeaned by their association with trade: the lieutenant only "stoop[s] lower" than the merchant captain by setting up as a small-time dealer.

Although the purpose of merchant ships was to trade, not to combat the enemy, in times of war, the Admiralty could issue "letters of marque," a document to license merchant ships to attack enemy vessels. This benefited both parties: the Royal Navy gained supplementary strength, and the privately owned ships gained the opportunity to make additional profit (Rodger, *Wooden World*, 130). Even if a merchant ship did not enter formally into the nation's war effort, in times of war, a merchantman ran the risk of meeting an enemy ship at sea. In his treatise *Defensive War by Sea* (1704), Robert Park, a retired merchant mariner, maintains that many a past merchantman crew have, as "brave Men," "gallantly . . . discharged their Duty to their Country, Merchants, and Owners," and laments that many present merchant sailors "were never in Action, and consequently know not how to manage a Fight, but as they learn by Communication, and their Reason dictates."[15] Park offers his text to merchant sailors, to "recommen[d] you to the God of War, who, I hope, will infuse Courage into every one of you in the Day of Battle, that, with a Noble Resolution, you may chuse an Honourable Death rather than a Miserable, Ignominious Life" ("Preface," n.p.). Forty years later, William Mountaine revised and republished Park's text as *The Seaman's Vade-mecum, and Defensive War at Sea* (1744). Whereas Park criticizes merchant ships that deliberately carry few weapons as a "cloak for . . . cowardice," Mountaine advises that a merchant crew surprised by an enemy should not feel compelled to play the warship:

> Though a Ship be well supplied, and fitted for a Close Fight, yet a Merchant Commander is not obliged to Fight, if he can with Safety shun it: For a Merchant Ship is not sent to sea to annoy the Enemy, by venturing his Cargo; but to encrease [*sic*] the Trade of the Nation, the Public Revenues, and employ the Poor; therefore whenever he can depart from an Enemy, without the Hazard of a battle, it is Prudence so to do; and if he should be chased, he ought to embrace every Advantage that can be taken, either by Wind or Tide.[16]

Mountaine's advice, which was reprinted in the 1750s and 1760s, conflicts with Park's view that the merchant sailor should welcome the glory of "Honourable Death." Mountaine states that if the practical information he has provided "be a Means of saving the Life but of one Man, or the Preservation of one Ship, it will be an inexpressible Satisfaction" (ix).

As a merchant sailor in the 1740s and 1750s, Falconer must have been aware of the views expressed by the likes of Ward and Park, not least because those views were rehearsed in the public debate about how to find sailors for the Royal Navy, a debate that boiled over in the early 1740s and again in the mid-to-late 1750s, just when Falconer may have found himself caught up in the scramble to man the king's ships (Jones, 4–7). The government could never afford in peacetime to retain the number of sailors required for the king's navy in wartime, so the prospect of war always brought with it a phase of rapid recruitment. But at the outbreak of war, merchants sought just as earnestly to keep their ships, and thus their businesses, afloat, and they were prepared to increase sailors' wages greatly to do so.[17] As one commentator observed in the mid-1740s, "Wonder not then that Seamen are scarce in being found for the Navy, when the Merchants are provided in plenty."[18] When the supply of volunteers for Royal Naval service dwindled, the government resorted to impressment—a system of compulsion—to fill ships.[19] Impressment was not designed to force landsmen to

sea against their will: the Royal Navy at war wanted "sea-faring men" or men who "use the sea," such as merchant sailors, instead of raw recruits.[20]

In Rediker's words, "The state's demand for maritime labor and the seaman's refusal to be the supply produced something of a civil war over maritime muscle and skill," but for many eighteenth-century commentators, the debate was really about money.[21] Thomas Robe, author of an essay on manning first published in 1726 and reissued, with revisions, until 1740, suggests that the government could address cheaply the manning crises by retaining experienced Royal Naval sailors in times of peace and loaning them to merchants, who would then be responsible for the sailors' wages. Robe admits that the merchants might object, but he asserts that they should view this measure as "Lenity, Tenderness, and Regard for their interest," because "The King's Men, it is to be presumed, will be as good, if not better than what they may otherwise be obliged to take up with."[22] For Robe, the Royal Naval sailors are "better" sailors, and they ought to be distinguished as such. He suggests that men might be keener to join the Royal Navy if they were provided with "a Silver Medal of the Flag of *England*, to be worn as a peculiar and honourable Distinction, from all other Sailors" (17). Such is the honor of the Royal Navy, Robe suggests, that if the government were to avoid the "rough Measure[s]" of impressment, an "abundance of Seamen would [think] the Glory of serving in the Navy preferable to some Advanc'd Wages they might gain from the Merchants" (22).

Whereas Robe implies that merchant sailors could be coaxed to the Royal Navy by the honor and glory of the king's service, later contributors to the manning debate argue more directly that the merchant sailor follows only financial reward. In an essay on manning (1741), one commentator writes,

> If . . . the Difficulty of manning the Navy arises from a real Scarcity of sailors, the whole Matter turns into a Competition betwixt the King and the Merchants which of them shall have the Sailors, and he that offers most, no doubt, will carry it, if the Sailors have a Vote in it. . . . I have a very great Opinion of the generous Temper of the *British* sailors, but cannot help thinking that they will prefer the Master who gives most to he that gives less, tho' more honorable of the two.[23]

This commentator recommends that, rather than match the merchant sailors' wages, the navy should look to recruit coastal fishermen, who are "seasoned to all the Hardship of the Sea, and yet accustomed to earn so small Wages, . . . that they always take the first Opportunity to leave this laborious Way of Life." [24] When the next manning crisis came in the late 1750s, wages remained at the forefront of the debate. A wide-ranging pamphlet by Captain John Blake, *Plan for Regulating the Marine System of Great Britain* (1758), covers the issue from the perspective of one "who was in the [Royal Navy] Fleet under Sir Charles Wagner at the Siege of Gibraltar," and who has also sailed as a merchant seaman. Blake writes that although he "has not had the honour of the command of a ship of *war*, or *flag*: yet (if the expression may be allowed) [he] was honoured with the command of capital ships in commerce."[25] Writing as a Royal Naval and merchant sailor, Blake observes that an able seaman can hardly be "contented with 22s. 6d. a month" from the Royal Navy, "when at the same time he sees his fellows, perhaps worse seamen than himself, earning from 50s to 3 and 4 pound a month on board a merchant ship" (34). Here, Blake's sympathies seem to lie with the Royal Naval sailor; certainly, his solution to the problem of manning the Royal Navy is to bring the wages of the Royal Naval sailor and the merchant sailor into line, giving a raise to the former and a pay cut to the latter.

Falconer's response to the public debate about merchant sailors can be traced in *The Shipwreck* by contrasting the first edition of the poem with the revisions he made after joining the Royal Navy in 1762. The first edition engages directly with the idea that the merchant seaman sails for money, not honor, in the passage that explains the decision made by the captain, who is termed the "master" in accordance with standard usage in the merchant service, to set sail, thus taking the ship into a storm.[26] Falconer sketches only briefly the wider circumstances that informed the master's decision: the sailors have "dispatch[ed] their commerce" and the ship has been "four days becalm'd in Crete" (A,1: 148, 178). He goes on to suggest that the master sailed with undue haste for mercenary reasons:

> The cautious Mariner, whom sky informs,
> Oft deems the prelude of approaching storms.
> No dread of storms the Master's thoughts restrain,
> A fetter'd Captive to the oar of Gain! (A,1: 182–85)

Falconer is careful not to suggest that the master of the merchant ship lacks the knowledge, skill, or experience to read the sky for "approaching storms," but he contrasts the master with the "cautious Mariner," who is willing to be guided by the sky. The sky "informs" the cautious mariner, but the arrogant master willingly mistakes wise caution for capitulation to "dread" and so refuses to allow the sky to "restrain" him.[27] The final lines expose the underlying motive for the master's refusal: rather than exercising autonomy, he is a "fetter'd captive" to his desire for "Gain." This passage does respond to contemporary debate about merchant sailors' mercenary motives, then, but only by castigating one such sailor for being too distracted by thoughts of future financial reward to credit the possible danger of the coming storm.

Falconer's efforts to create a more sympathetic account of the merchant sailor's relationship with gain are developed in his revisions to the explanation of the master's decision to set sail. Falconer begins with a more detailed account of the harsh conditions of the sailors' voyage. For three years, the ship has "unwearingly wafted her commercial store" between the "richest ports of Afric" and Europe (C, 1: 144, 145). The ship calls at Crete as the next to last stop on its exhausting journey: "from gay Venice, [they] soon expect to steer / For Britain's coast" (C, 1: 153–54). With this, Falconer implies that the master, now named Albert, hastens the departure from Crete because the crew longs for home.[28] The changes continue in the revisions to the lines that had previously blamed the master for sailing into the storm:

> The watchful mariner, whom heaven informs,
> Oft deems the prelude of approaching storms.
> True to his trust when sacred duty calls,
> No brooding storm the master's soul appals:
> Th' advancing season warns him to the main:
> A captive, fetter'd to the oar of gain! (C, 1: 206–11)

While we have the same contrast between the "watchful mariner" and the master, Falconer has assigned the master a new responsibility, whereby he increases the emphasis on the master's mercenary motivation: now, with the added line, the master needs to proceed because of his "sacred trust," that is, his employer's desire for profit. In the first edition of *The Shipwreck*, Falconer does not specify whether Albert owns, or at least has a share in, the ship and its cargo. Independent merchant ships were usually owned by groups of private individuals, with one or two of the owners operating as managers on behalf of the group. The

master of a ship might have a stake in the ship: indeed, Davis suggests that this was a de facto prerequisite for promotion from mate to master, which brought higher reward, including better opportunities for private trading (84–86, 126–30). However, in the second and third editions, Falconer suggests that Albert is not a shareholder and has not acquired equivalent wealth through private trading, which would imply that he's a "captive, fetter'd" to his employer's desire for gain. Albert's circumstances are twice described as "humble": he has been placed in a "humble station" and his career has secured for his family only a "humble mansion" (C, 1: 475, 509). In contrast, Palemon's father, who is referred to only as "The Merchant," is so "Elate with wealth, in active commerce won" that he cannot countenance an alliance between his son and Albert's daughter, Anna (C, 1: 382, 370). Albert's employment status is further explained in the subplot concerning Palemon and Anna. Jann M. Witt argues that during the eighteenth century, the number of master-owners declined and the increasing use of written, as opposed to verbal, contracts gradually formalized the difference between the master's control of the business of sailing the ship and the merchant's control of the ship's business. Certainly, the trustworthy and dutiful Albert seems to be, like the general crew, subject to an external authority. The merchant's "sordid mind" formulates the plan to send his son to sea with Albert, and Albert must accept the charge with which he is "consign'd" (C, 1: 389, 390). In conversation with Palemon, Anna explains that her father does not agree, but must further the avaricious merchant's plan: "Too well thou know'st good Albert's niggard fate, / Ill-fitted to sustain thy father's hate" (C, 1: 626–27).

In contrast to the first edition, then, in the revised editions of *The Shipwreck*, Falconer responds more explicitly and defensively to contemporary criticisms of merchant sailors' avaricious nature, shifting the blame to the merchants who owned the ships. Indeed, in the second edition, Falconer distills that criticism into a question: "Can sons of Neptune, generous, firm and brave, / For sordid meed in pain and peril slave?"[29] In the third edition,

Falconer replaces the word “meed,” which might be read as the financial reward merchant sailors receive for their labor, with “gold,” a term that refers not to the sailors’ wages, but to the merchant’s profits:

> Can sons of Neptune, generous, brave, and bold,
> In pain and hazard toil for sordid gold?
> They can; for gold, too oft, with magic art,
> Subdues each nobler impulse of the heart. (C, 1: 222–25)

The answer Falconer gives to the question would be contradictory if it were not the case that the sailors toil in pain and hazard for others’ “sordid gold,” that is, that the sailors perform noble work for those whose “nobler impulses” have been subdued by greed. Furthermore, in the final formulation of the question, the term “generous” functions on its own as an antonym for greed, but also as part of a set of synonyms for the bravery that commentators more readily associated with the Royal Navy.

The advertisement to the second edition of *The Shipwreck* makes clear that Falconer had hoped that the first edition of the poem would have been read by the officers of the Royal Navy. An irritated Falconer grumbles that the “inferior Officers of the sea,” presumably the Royal Navy’s junior, noncommissioned officers, had been unable to afford the first edition of the poem, and the “gentlemen of the sea,” presumably the senior, commissioned officers, unwilling to purchase it. Later, in a revised passage at the start of the second canto, Falconer puts his irritation aside and appeals to all his readers as “brave companions”:

> Approach, ye brave companions of the sea,
> And fearless view this awful scene with me!

Ye native guardians of your country's laws!

Ye bold assertors of her sacred cause! (C, 2: 15–18)

To reinforce the notion that Royal Naval and merchant sailors are fellow "Sons of Neptune," Falconer employs poetic license to superimpose the attributes of a Royal Naval ship on those of the merchant ship, as pictured in the "Elevation of a Merchant-Ship," which was printed with each version of the poem. It is possible that a modest-sized merchant ship sailing between Africa and the Mediterranean might be named *Britannia* and adorned with a detailed figurehead of its namesake and a highly detailed painted scene of English valor on its stern, but, as Jones notes, such decoration seems more fitting for a prestigious naval ship (372). It is less plausible that a crew of approximately forty sailors would be sailing with so many cannon as to make "from van to rear, / . . . a black tremendous tier!" (C, 1: 881–82), although Falconer makes conscientious use of this sleight-of-hand when, in the second canto, he stresses the importance of hauling cannon overboard to steady a ship in a storm.

By painting the merchant ship as a quasi-Royal Naval ship, Falconer implies that merchant sailors might be every bit as "generous, brave, and bold" as their "brave companions" in the Royal Navy. If we bear this in mind, it is striking that, in the two versions of the poem written after Falconer had joined the Royal Navy, he gradually expands his use of military references to describe the sailors' experience in the storm. In the second version, he establishes that Albert, who understands the "science" of navigation, has a "dreadless soul" that "Rose with the storm, and all its dangers shar'd" (B, 1: 242, 244, 249). In lines that appear only in the third version, Palemon embellishes the same points: Albert is

with skill and science grac'd,

. . . . . .

Yet, never seaman more serenely brave

Led Britain's conquering squadrons o'er the wave. (C, 1: 474, 476–77)

It is possible that Falconer intended to imply that, like himself, Albert moved voluntarily between Royal Naval and merchant sailing, but if we consider the regulations governing career progression in the Royal Navy, suggesting that Albert could have actually "led" a Royal Naval fleet, like a Hawke or a Howe stretches plausibility. Rather, the representation of Albert as a quasi-Royal Naval captain of a quasi-Royal Naval warship strengthens the underlying argument that merchant sailors and Royal Naval sailors are equally brave "Sons of Neptune." The difficulty for Falconer is that, as he states in the proem to the third edition, in writing of a storm "No pomp of battles swells th' exalted strain, / Nor gleaming arms ring dreadful on the plain" (C, 1: 13–14). Indeed, in the third version, he likens the unfurling of the storm to the way the "Great [British admiral] Hawke descends in thunder on the main," which clumsily exalts the Royal Navy's prowess at the storm-racked crew's expense (C, 2: 451). Unfortunately for Falconer, his merchant sailors are defined by their battle with the elements, not by success in combat with an enemy nation's fleet.

For Melvyn New, the references to warfare in *The Shipwreck* suggest that Falconer was unable to ignore the extent to which "war serves wealth (the *few*) at the expense of the poor (the *many*)."[30] Certainly, by the third edition of the poem, he is explicitly critical of what he terms "desolating war" (C, 2: 164). Now, he looks beyond merely questioning the value of the kind of warfare for which the Royal Navy were lauded, for as Siobhan Carroll argues, in the revisions to *The Shipwreck*, "The ocean's role as a natural rival to the British Empire is driven home by Falconer's peculiar transference of British martial imagery to the deadly seas."[31] For Falconer, merchant seamen are as "generous, brave, and bold" as Royal Naval seaman not because they give battle, but because both are equally liable to be engulfed

by the hostile elements. Rediker argues that the "confrontation between nature and man" contributed to a "corporate culture" that was imposed on the ordinary sailors in the merchant service, but in the revisions to *The Shipwreck*, Falconer mobilizes that "corporate culture" to cut across service-specific stereotypes (155). Thus, in the first edition of *The Shipwreck*, Falconer surveys the crew's response to the worsening storm:

> As yet no threat'ning aspect of the storms
> The dreadless Seamen's fortitude alarms;
> No thoughts of future woe their souls appall,
> They know no Danger, or they scorn it all;
> The' ev'ry rising wave more dreadful grows,
> And, in succession dire, the deck o'erflows. (A, 2: 219–24)

By the third version, this passage explicitly likens the sailors' battle with the storm to a military encounter that the sailors are brave enough to face, but destined to lose:

> As yet, amid this elemental war,
> That scatters desolation from afar,
> Nor toil, nor hazard, nor distress appear
> To sink the seamen with unmanly fear.
> Tho' their firm hearts no pageant-honour boast,
> They scorn the wretch that trembles in his post.
> . . . . . .
> No future ills unknown their souls appall:
> They know no danger, or they scorn it all!

But even the generous spirits of the brave,

Subdu'd by toil, a friendly respite crave. (C, 2: 416–21, 426–29)

The military references stress that the merchant sailors are as brave and bold as Royal Naval sailors: they have "firm hearts," even though they are not "pageant-honour[ed]," that is, celebrated military veterans. Furthermore, these lines also begin to disclose the broader subject of the poem: the limits of bravery. Falconer emphasizes that Albert's seamen do not allow "unmanly fear" to sway them, but in characterizing courage as a masculine capacity, rather than the preserve of either seafaring service, he anticipates the conflict between limitless courage and limited physical capacity that defines the final stages of the sailors' battle with the storm.

Falconer notes in his *Dictionary* that any admiral of the Royal Navy should know that a sailor is not just in danger when in battle: "A leeshore, [and] an injudicious engagement with an enemy greatly superior, may be equally fatal."[32] With his revisions to *The Shipwreck*, he stresses that, much though the merchant sailors meet the demands of the storm with the "generous spirits of the brave," they cannot overcome the storm's challenge to their physical endurance. As the storm worsens, the sailors are forced into "toils severe" that prove too much for them (C, 2: 263). Although all three versions of the poem emphasize the sailors' efforts to pump water from the ship, Arion, in the revised versions, admits that the sailors cannot work hard enough:

At either pump our seamen pant for breath,

. . . . . .

Still all our powers th' increasing leaks defy:

We sink at sea, no shore, no haven nigh. (C, 2: 741, 743–44)

In all three versions of the poem, the first deaths occur when four sailors are unable to hold on to the rolling ship. In the first edition, Falconer writes that the movement of the ship "shook" the sailors from the masts and "thus surpriz'd, their faithful hold forsook" (A, 2: 164, 165). In the third edition, he places even more emphasis on the power of the storm to exhaust physical endurance: rather than forsake the ship, the sailors are simply "torn with resistless fury from their hold" (C, 2: 356). He further develops this line of argument in the revisions to the third canto. In the first edition of the poem, sailors "benumb'd and feeble . . . forego / Their slippery hold, and sink to shades below" (A, 3: 459–60), but in the revised second and third editions, he also specifies that the strength of even the most experienced of the crew, Rodmond and Albert, is overcome: "As the tumbling waters o'er [Rodmond] roll'd, / His out-stretcht arms the Master's legs enfold" (C, 3: 664–65, 702–03). He underlines the point that survival in such a situation is determined by luck, not bravery, by having Arion, who is an experienced sailor, and Palemon, who isn't, both reach shore.

Taken together, then, the revisions to *The Shipwreck*, which Falconer completed after he had joined the Royal Navy, work against the long-standing notion that the merchant sailor prefers money to honor, safety to bravery. Falconer had started his career in the Royal Navy as a midshipman, and had he stayed a midshipman after the end of the Seven Years' War, he might have progressed to the rank of lieutenant, perhaps captain. Instead, he took the less prestigious role of purser, a rank superior to a midshipman but below a lieutenant. In his biographical essay on Falconer, Clarke explains that Falconer's "friends advised him to exchange the military, for the civil line in the Royal Navy."[33] Still, Clarke seems to echo old prejudices when he writes that the former merchant sailor left the Royal Navy for the promise of a "lucrative" new career in India.[34] As it turned out, when Falconer set sail for the East, he left behind what became his final answer to the view that the merchant sailor is less

"generous, brave, and bold" than the Royal Navy's "Sons of Neptune." Rather than simply "raise" the merchant sailor to the supposedly more honorable Royal Naval standard, Falconer's revisions ultimately stress that, in a battle with the elements, merchant and Royal Naval sailors are equally likely to lose their lives to the sea. In "The Occasional Elegy" on the death of Palemon, which was written for the second edition, and then revised for the third edition of *The Shipwreck,* Falconer again insists that sailors and Royal Naval sailors are alike in courage, but also in vulnerability. It does not make much sense for the narrator to find comfort in the thought that, "No more on yon wide watery waste you stray," as Palemon had been sent to sea as a defined period of punishment, not as a career (Jones, l.33). Likewise, it seems odd to suggest that Palemon will no longer hear "The thundering drum, the trumpet's swell" or see "the long embattled line" (Jones, ll.41, 42). Clearly, Falconer is addressing a broader "you": merchant seamen and the sailors of the Royal Navy. In other words, the elegy is for all sailors whose deaths at sea are not valued "like those who perish in their country's cause," whether Royal Naval sailors or sailors in the merchant service (Jones, l.58).

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[1]*A Critical Edition of the Works of William Falconer*, ed. William Jones (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 2003), 96. All of Falconer's poems are quoted from this edition and are hereafter cited in the text. For the sake of efficiency, the 1762 edition will be referred to in parenthetical citations as *Shipwreck* A, the 1764 edition as *Shipwreck* B, and the 1769 edition as *Shipwreck* C.

[2]Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language,* vol. 2 (London: W. Strahan, 1755), s.v. "Sailor." Johnson notes that the alternative spelling "sailer" is "more analogical" but less "usual."

[3]Ralph Davis, *A Commercial Revolution: English Overseas Trade in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (London: The Historical Association, 1967), and *The Rise of*

Merchant Empires: Long-Distance Trade in the Early Modern World, 1350–1750, ed. James D. Tracy (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 1990).

[4]M. K. Joseph, "William Falconer," *Studies in Philology* 47 (1950): 72–101, and *Works*, ed. Jones, 2.

[5]William Falconer, *An Universal Dictionary of the Marine* (London: T. Cadell, 1769), s.v. "Midshipman."

[6]N. A. M. Rodger, *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* (New York: Fontana, 1990), 264.

[7]William Falconer, *The Shipwreck*, ed. James Stanier Clarke (London: William Miller, 1804), xxvi.

[8]Falconer, *Dictionary*, s.v. "Captain." Falconer specifies that the terms "master" and "mate" have different meanings for the Royal Navy and the merchant service, and he gives the term "captain" as a title for the commander of "a ship of war" only.

[9]Falconer, *Dictionary*, s.v. "Midshipman."

[10]William Jones, "'It Was Not His First Intention to Swell the Work with So Many Notes': Annotation in William Falconer's *The Shipwreck* and the Birth of the *Universal Dictionary of the Marine*," *Mariner's Mirror* 106 (2020): 175–87; the quotation is from 185.

[11]Bridget Keegan, "'Diving into the Wreck': Learning from Maritime Georgic," *John Clare Society Journal* 34 (2015): 17–22; the quotation is from 20.

[12]Falconer, *Dictionary*, s.v. "Midshipman."

[13]Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700–1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 1987). For conditions for merchant seamen, see also Peter Earle, *Sailors: English Merchant Seamen, 1650–1775* (London: Methuen, 1998), and Ralph Davis, *The Rise of the*

English Shipping Industry in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries, 2nd ed. (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1972).

[14]Edward Ward, *The Wooden World Dissected* (London: H. Meere, 1707), "To the Reader," n.p., 11.

[15]Robert Park, *Defensive War by Sea* (London: Rich. Mount and Tho. Page, 1704), "Epistle Dedicatory," n.p., "Preface to Reader," n.p.

[16]Park, *Defensive War*, 3, and William Mountaine, *The Seaman's Vade-Mecum, and Defensive War by Sea* (London: W. Mount and T. Page, 1744), 187.

[17]For a comparison of wages rates in the merchant service in war and peace, see Ralph Davis, *Rise*, 135–38.

[18]*Observations and Proposals Concerning the Navy* (London: S. Baker, 1745), 12.

[19]Rodger, *Wooden World*, and Denver Brunsman, *The Evil Necessity: British Naval Impressment in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia, 2013).

[20]For the value of impressment as a tool for securing "sea-faring men," see, for example, *A Copy of the Marquiss of Carmarthen's Method for the Speedy Manning Her Majesty's Royal Navy* (London: Printed by John Humfreys, 1706). For analysis of the rate of transferring manpower from merchant ships to Royal Naval ships in the 1750s, see Roger Morris, *The Foundations of British Maritime Ascendancy: Resources, Logistics, and the State, 1755–1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 2010), 226.

[21]Rediker, *Between the Devil*, 33. For responses to impressment in the eighteenth century, see Nicholas Rogers, *The Press Gang: Naval Impressment and Its Opponents in Georgian Britain* (London: Continuum, 2007), and "British Impressment and Its Discontents," *International Journal of Maritime History* 30 (2018): 52–73. For honor in the

Royal Navy, see N. A. M. Rodger, "Honour and Duty at Sea, 1660–1815," *Historical Research* 75 (2002): 429–31.

[22]Thomas Robe, *Ways and Means to Man the Navy with not less than Fifteen Thousand Able Sailors, Upon any Emergency with less Expence* [*sic*] *to the Government; and no Wise Inconvenient to the Merchants, Traders &c* (London: T. Cooper, 1740), 15.

[23]*An Essay on Ways and Means for Improving the Inland Navigation and Increasing the Number of Sailors in Great-Britain* (London: J. Roberts, 1741), 31.

[24]*Essay on Ways and Means*, 34. In 1741, the government introduced an act to restrict wages for merchant sailors, but this had limited effect and was discontinued. See Ralph Davis, *Rise*, 137.

[25]John Blake, *A Plan, for Regulating the Marine System of Great Britain* (London: A. Millar, 1758), title-page, 75–76.

[26]Traditionally, the person in charge of a merchant ship was a "master," while "captain" was reserved for naval commanders, although by the early eighteenth century, "captain" came to be used as "courtesy in an analogy to commanders of warships." See Jann M. Witt, "'During the Voyage Every Merchant Captain is Monarch of the Ship': The Merchant Captain from the Seventeenth to the Nineteenth Century," *International Journal of Maritime History* 13 (2001): 165–94, especially 165.

[27]This also occurs later when the master sees "harbinger[s] of furious gales" but "no dusky frown prevails" (C, 1: 194, 195).

[28]See also, "With joyful eyes th' attentive master sees / Th' auspicious omens of an eastern breeze" (C, 1: 754–55).

[29]William Falconer, *The Shipwreck* (London: A. Millar, 1764), canto 1, ll. 230–31.

[30]Melvyn New, "Laurence Sterne and William Falconer: Soldiers and Sailors," *Philological Quarterly* 99 (2020): 229–44; the quotation is from 237.

[31]Siobhan Carroll, *An Empire of Air and Water: Colonizable Space in the British Imagination, 1750–1850* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania, 2015), 91.

[32]Falconer, *Dictionary*, s.v. "Admiral."

[33]*The Shipwreck*, ed. Clark, xxxiii.

[34]*The Shipwreck*, ed. Clark, xxxviii.