Citation:
Burroughs, RM (2016) 'The Nautical Melodrama of Mary Barton'. Victorian Literature and Culture, 44 (1). 77 - 95. ISSN 1470-1553 DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150315000431

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The Nautical Melodrama of Mary Barton

Introduction

In his Memoirs of an Unfortunate Son of Thespis (1818), the actor Edward Cape Everard recalled a performance of Sheridan's School for Scandal that was interrupted in its third act by a rowdy bunch of sailors. At the sight of Charles Surface drinking, the sailors allegedly left the auditorium, entered the stage, and accosted the actor playing Charles, "exclaiming 'My eyes, you're a hearty fellow! Come, my tight one, hand us a glass'" (qtd. in Russell, 104). As apocryphal as the encounter seems, it is not the only account of mariners rushing the early-nineteenth century stage to join in with the drama. In her analysis of these anecdotes Gillian Russell comments that though they may have been intended to depict the sailor "as naïve and unsophisticated, unable to make the distinction between fiction and reality… it is not surprising that the sailor should have disregarded the rules of mimesis and the distinction between stage and auditorium" (104), for the sailor's life lent itself to, and was structured by, theatricality. Service in "the theatres of war", or more generally in the "wooden world" of the ship, demanded strict performance of custom and ritual in the forging of social identities and relations, not least of all in the ritualistic initiation ceremonies and corporal punishments that were enacted in front of the amassed audience of the crew (Russell 139-57; see Dening). At sea and in dock sailors entertained themselves with amateur theatricals. On shore, they were keen theatre-goers, and in auditoriums and elsewhere they played up to the characteristics of the sailor in the brazen assertion of an identity that was celebrated in stories, songs, and plays, but frequently also belittled, bemoaned, and victimized, the latter particularly while the press gangs were active.

Stories such as Everard's disclose that in the early nineteenth century "nautical melodrama" did not confine itself to the stage. Informing sailors' self-representations, as well

as discussions of sailors' exploitation by their sympathisers in the press and in parliament, nautical melodrama was a pervasive representational mode through which the stereotype of the "Jolly Jack Tar" was accreted in British public consciousness.[1] Still, the term "nautical melodrama" has origins in the subgenre of plays featuring honest, heroic Jack Tars in battle against various seafaring and land-dwelling villains, which had its golden era in the 1830s and remained popular for most of the nineteenth century. While recent studies identify nautical melodrama as an escapist form that harnessed working-class men's agency in the service of empire, early examples centre on social injustices experienced by the sailor at sea and on land (Bratton; Cox). The setter of the trend for nautical melodrama, Douglas Jerrold's Black Ey'd Susan; or, All in the Downs (1829), for example, concerns unjust corporal punishment. Jerrold followed up on the success of Black Ey'd Susan with The Mutiny at the Nore; or, British Sailors in 1797 (1830), which drew inspiration from the largest insurrection in British naval history, and The Press Gang; or, Archibald of the Wreck (1830). Impressment and flogging were thereafter themes of numerous melodramas, popular examples including A.L. Campbell's Tom Bowling (1830), C.A. Somerset's gothic The Sea (1834), and J.T. Haines's My Poll and My Partner Joe (1835). Many of these plays work toward cheering denouements in which the happiness and loyalty of the tar is restored, usually after a suitably foreign, "real" villain (a pirate or a slave trader, for example) has been vanquished, although Jerrold's Mutiny, in closing with a noose lowering onto the neck of the play's tragic hero, Richard Parker, chances a more ambiguous conclusion. Jerrold's own comments on the play confirm that he intended it as an attack on corporal punishment, "a most atrocious and tyrannic system of punishment," his abhorrence of which he attributed to firsthand experience as a midshipman in the Napoleonic-era navy, at which time he served under the brother of Jane Austen, Charles (qtd. in Slater 79; see 23-31).

The majority of early nautical melodramas originated in London's illegitimate theatres -- principally the Surrey Theatre, Southwark -- but successes were quickly exported to provincial towns and cities. At the Surrey, they were performed to a socially diverse audience that included local seafaring communities (Davis and Emeljanow 3-40). The broad appeal of this theatre and its "tar dramas" may be partly due to their leading star, T.P. Cooke, another former sailor whose performances were credited with bringing pathos to the stage tar (Davis and Emeljanow 18; Bratton 42). Michael R. Booth points also to the plays' spectacular and technologically innovative middle acts featuring battles and other deeds of daring (63). Yet the theatre historian's argument neglects the central appeal of melodramatic thought in the early nineteenth century. Elaine Hadley defines melodrama as a reactionary representational mode that responded to new forms of social classification and control ushered in by the consolidation of market practices in the nineteenth century. Melodrama's morally unambiguous opposition of virtue and villainy, made highly legible by its use of music, tableaux, character asides, and other formal techniques, targeted the institutional forces that ensured social injustices, even if it was nevertheless prone to reinforcing hierarchies of class, gender and race by denying its "victims" agency and by seeking its solutions in an idealised past social order organised by deference to patriarchal authority. Much of the appeal of nautical melodrama rested in its adherence to these traits of popular radical fiction. [2]

In its breathless courtroom chapter describing the last-minute reprieve of Jem Wilson by the evidence of his seafaring cousin Will Wilson, Elizabeth Gaskell's Mary Barton (1848) deploys the trope of the sailor's return that features in most if not all nautical melodramas. Will Wilson is traditionally overlooked in studies of Mary Barton, or else is dismissed as one of the novel's diversions from its focal concern with the privations of Manchester's labouring classes (eg. Altick 139-41; Williams 89). In this essay I look in new detail at this character,

interpreting his role as an heroic agent of change in the framework of the returning sailors of theatrical nautical melodramas of the pre- and early-Victorian period. On stage in this time, the return of the sailor promised the vanquishing of tyranny and the restoration of a more agreeable social order. It enabled the cheering denouement to melodramatic plots in which the exploitation of the labouring classes by their persecutors seemed otherwise unstoppable. In Mary Barton, Gaskell seeks to harness the defiant energies of the homecoming Jack Tar, and the nautical melodrama he embodies, in her critique of social, and in particular legal, injustices. Contrary to those critics who interpret the pronounced melodrama of the novel's latter chapters as an escape from social criticism, I contend that Gaskell exploits a well-worn melodramatic trope to express broadly reformist views on the labouring poor.

Gaskell's is no straightforward borrowing from nautical melodrama, however. Will's characterisation is also at odds with that of the sailor-heroes of the stage. Specifically, whereas the latter's return to shore brought about a confrontation with villainy in which the sailor was fully embroiled -- often himself playing the part of victim as well as hero -- Will is detached from the social problems that his court-room appearance helps to resolve. Indeed, that many critics have failed to see the relevance of the sailor to this condition-of-England fiction is attributable to the novel's characterisation of Will and other maritime peoples, which foregrounds their difference from the labouring classes of Manchester, and comically depicts the failure of marine and metropolitan workers mutually to sympathise. The novel uses the returning sailor in its political commentary, but it resists forging bonds between urban and seagoing workers, and is oblivious to sailors' exploitation, proffering instead in other chapters besides the trial a politically anodyne image of the mariner that obscures the history of radicalism at which his appearance in the witness-box hints. The nautical melodrama of Mary Barton reveals how social realism of the mid-nineteenth-century contributed to the metropolitan definition of the condition-of-England question, and in the

process occluded its debts to maritime literature and culture and the questions of work and exploitation that these raised.

The Return of the Sailor in Early-Nineteenth Century Nautical Melodrama

Nautical melodrama is an amphibious representational mode. It charts the lives of sailors afloat and ashore, crossing the unstable generic line that encloses the "domestic drama" from its gothic and nautical cousins. Such generic indeterminacy is reflected in the titling of plays. When republished in Lacy's Acting Edition, for example, Black Ey'd Susan was relabelled "A Nautical and Domestic Drama", having first been printed with the subtitle "A Nautical Drama" in Duncombe's Edition. Kate Mattacks speculates that this renaming was "to appeal to the rising demand for domestic drama" (141), but this claim overlooks that Jerrold's play is essentially domestic in setting: it takes place entirely on dry land except for two closing scenes on a moored Man-of-War. Similarly, another successful play featuring a sailor-hero, John Baldwin Buckstone's Luke the Labourer; or, The Lost Son (1826), is set in a village outside York. It is subtitled "A Domestic Melodrama in Two Acts". Even though later nautical melodramas capitalised on technological developments in theatrical production to create spectacular middle acts depicting heroics at sea (Booth 63), these salty middle acts were usually framed by others taking place in domestic environs where various characters, including the heroic sailor, his dependents, and his exploiters, all come into contact. As much as this structure reflects technical limitations of theatre production, it is crucial in interweaving the sailor's personal battle against exploitation with other forms of victimisation that he encounters, and sometimes experiences, back home.

As Black-Ey'd Susan and Luke the Labourer make clear, the homecoming of the sailor is more important to nautical melodrama than his seafaring exploits per se. The

seafarer's return is pivotal to these negotiations of genre and the explorations of social iniquity they make possible. As the sailor reappears on shore the injustices with which he does battle grow to include depredations of the vulnerable that were themes of domestic and gothic drama, and later of condition-of-England fiction. Back on land, the sailor brings an end to the injustices that surround him. He enters the domestic scene to vanquish mistreatment of the "helpless and unfriended" (Buckstone 15), and to restore the endangered labouring community, even as his heroism tends to reinforce inequalities that were less often acknowledged as such, not least the subjection of women and abuse of non-white mariners (Cox 179-82; Waters; Burroughs). In this sense the genre is reactionary: the physical return of the sailor is invested with a symbolic return to a past social order either implicitly or explicitly deemed preferable to the corrupt present in which the play takes place. In its own, more intricate fashion, Mary Barton uses the same structure: the opening chapter describing the Wilsons' and the Bartons' walk in the countryside is repeated by the rural Canadian idyll to which Jem and Mary retreat at the novel's end, after the hardships brought on by unemployment and casualisation of the workforce in Manchester's mills. Jem's release is enabled by Will's reappearance on dry land.

Sailors were among the most destitute inhabitants of Britain in the early nineteenth century. Why does their return to shore portend of such transformative power in the early nineteenth century melodramatic imagination? Undoubtedly the answer has much to do with the celebration of the sailor as a national hero during and in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars, though this point is complicated and requires further examination. Following the major naval mutinies of 1797 and recommencement of war in 1803, the popular naval ballads of Charles Dibdin claimed the sailor's indefatigable service of the nation. Dibdin was commissioned by William Pitt to compose war songs, and later issued with a government pension. His Jolly Jack Tar was cheerily frivolous, self-sacrificingly brave, naively virtuous,

and loyal to his "Poll" and his nation. Jack was unquestioningly devoted to service afloat regardless of the personal cost to him or his awareness of his moral superiority to his overseers (Land, War 88-97; Russell 101-02; Rogers 110). When the press gang and the navy's severe disciplinary regulations became subject to serious debate after the decisive victory over Napoleon at Waterloo in 1815 (Rasor 24), Dibdin's cheering image of the tar was perpetuated -- often as a retort to humanitarian concern for the sailor -- in the "breezy" novels of Captain Frederick Marryat and the other "naval novelists" Frederick Chamier and W.N. Glascock (Lloyd 204), as well as jingoistic plays by Edward Fitzball.

Admiration of this kind was of course won at great cost to sailors. They and their supporters realised, moreover, that the same Jack Tar stereotypes with which the nation lauded its naval personnel counted for little back on dry land. The stereotypes were indeed regarded by opponents of naval reform as proof of Jack's unfitness for metropolitan society. The sailor's rough manners, his overindulgences ashore, even his billowing gait and salty dialect, suggested to such commentators that the sailor was better suited to the iron command of the naval vessel than "civilised" metropolitan culture and law. Some of the few sailors who published memoirs at this time identified "Jolly Jack Tar" as a politically motivated mis-representation of the seaman as an apolitical animal who fights and serves purely for love of duty. In 1827, for example, Charles MacPherson criticised his fellow sailors' taking solace in "Dibdin's songs, and of many of the melo-dramas of our small theatres, which put into the mouths of our sailors so much false heroism and nauseous sentimentalism" (qtd. Land, War 113). These feelings were echoed by Charles Reece Pemberton, a former naval sailor turned lecturer, actor and playwright whose pseudonymous "The Autobiography of Pel. Verjuice" was first published in the Unitarian Monthly Repository. Pemberton's memoir attacks the cant, hypocrisy and nonchalance that he regarded as defining features of "polite" English society (Land, War 128). As a past victim of the press gang and a veteran of the Napoleonic

Wars, Pemberton was particularly cynical about patriotic inducements to military service. In his lengthy review of literary writings about sailors he shows disdain for Dibdin and the nautical novelists, seeking instead "the common seaman's reality" (148-50, 150). His representation of a lower-deck filled with press-ganged men in hammocks, writhing together like "bats suspended by the heels to the roof of a cavern", has more in common with abolitionist representations of the Middle Passage than it does most nautical literary antecedents (120).

This is not to say that sailors simply rejected the melodramatic excesses of the Jack Tar stereotype. Though some authors repudiated the image, and the marginal legal and social standing which it inhered, few did so wholesale, and many would replicate its more positive traits in forging group bonds and defending their rights back in the hostile home environment. Military service was profoundly transformative, particularly for those who felt that their liberty was compromised by it. In response to their alienation sailors played up to what Russell describes as "[t]he strangeness of the sailor -- a deracination represented by a different way of speaking, a distinctive costume, and in many cases, a loyalty to a ship and mates that superceded previous ties to family and community" (99). Isaac Land argues that the customary outward characteristics of the Jolly Jack Tar -- his rolling gait, showy dress, and highly salted dialect ("sea talk") -- were appropriated by sailors on shore in the defiant assertion of their difference from the crowd in spite of the threat of the press gang (War 31-35; see also Russell 8-9).[3] Sailors also found it expedient to claim the more palatable stereotypes, such as "Jack's" loyalty to his home and his nation, and to express these in melodramatically appealing ways. Dibdin's paean to the constancy of the tar could easily be appropriated to radical ends by critics of the navy who were nonetheless loyalist in outlook. A telling example of this appropriation is the statement by the Nore mutineers that their rebellion was motivated by desire to provide for their wives and children -- rhetoric that

equated faithfulness to the home to that of the nation, and which won much sympathetic press coverage (Land, War 10, 11, 97-102).[4] The mutineers' sentiments reclaimed melodramatic depiction of the reliable but mistreated tar as a tool of protest. Melodramatic performance of the Jack Tar character, then, had roots not only in Napoleonic-era fanfare, but also in sailors' remonstrations against their alienating experience of naval service. In the theatre, the sailor's ostensible anti-authoritarianism lent itself to the resolution of plots in which patrician figures exploit the downtrodden. As an extroverted critic of social injustice the sailor makes his return to shore.

The melodramatic force of the returning sailor is exemplified by Philip in Luke the Labourer. Philip speaks in the customary saltwater dialect attributed to sailors on the stage. His first words, with which he ruminates upon being lost in a forest, for example, are: "Haloa! Any body a-hoy. Nobody with in [sic] hail? I want a pilot here, the wind has shifted four points, and brought the ebb tide sharp on my broadside…" (25). This seagoing lingo renders Philip alien and promises to reinforce and legitimate the sailor's social marginality. But if the comic translation of his experience on dry land into nautical jargon is the measure of the differences in Philip's character to those he encounters ashore, then crucially these differences empower him, for Philip remains in touch with the rules of fair play that other characters who possess agency cannot summon (see Kaiser 51-84, esp. 58). Life at sea enables Philip to see through the venality that threatens the Yorkshire village. Whereas the play's other would-be hero, the young farmer Charles, is easily duped by the villains, Luke and Squire Chase, Philip's nautical analogies instantly identify these figures as villains: he calls them "Algerines" and "pirates" (29, 49). Through language, Philip sees the world of the village askance, and in such a way as to expose its wrongs. And if his language at first marks Philip out as an interloper, the revelation of his personal ties with the other main characters

places him centrally in the play's examination of the breakdown of working relations under the cash nexus.

It is precisely the linguistic and physical incongruousness of the Jolly Jack Tar which expresses his disaffiliation with the moral malaise in which he intervenes, and thus paradoxically confirms his relevance and bestows him with powers of social critique beyond his station. Gaskell acknowledges this feature of nautical melodrama in drawing upon the testimony of a sailor at the trial of the wrongly indicted working man in Mary Barton. Her novel acknowledges how nautical melodrama embroils the sailor in social-problem plots. Yet its ultimate prioritisation of the urban contexts of the condition-of-England question has led many critics to emphasise the diversionary, escapist qualities of its movement to the waterfront.

The Nautical Melodrama of Mary Barton

As the novel's chief melodramatic chapter, the trial of Jem Wilson for the murder of Harry Carson is key not only to understanding Mary Barton's relation to nautical melodrama, but melodrama in general. Mary Barton is claimed by much twentieth-century literary criticism to be compromised by its melodrama.[5] In light of the Hadley's re-evaluation of melodrama as an aesthetic of social protest, however, and as several studies have reconsidered the alleged evasion of social commentary in Mary Barton by pointing to the novel's structural and thematic consistencies (e.g. Stoneman, 68-86; Bodenheimer; Schor, 13-44, esp. 16-17), Gaskell's deployment of melodrama has been reassessed.[6] Sally Ledger identifies that the trial, and episodes leading in to and out of it, are marked by the self-conscious handling of melodramatic representation and its persuasive appeal to audiences. Prior to the trial Mary sees a "halfpenny broadside" with an account of Carson's slaying "and a raw-head-and-bloody-bones picture of the suspected murderer, James Wilson" (201; ch. 20), and she

overhears scurrilous gossip about herself on the train (246-47; ch. 26). After the trial the gossip Sally Leadbitter discusses its outcome in terms of theatrical conventions (310; ch. 34). During it, the narrator relays false physiognomic readings of Jem by anonymous voices in the crowd, and another onlooker's description of Mary as the likeness of the Beatrice Cenci (277-78, 281; ch. 32), who was tried and executed in 1599 for the murder of her father. Each of these moments highlight that the court proceedings are complexly mediated by the sensationalism that structures everyday "reality".[7] Will's dramatic arrival is filtered through the same lens:

> The barrister who defended Jem took new heart […], not so much out of earnestness to save the prisoner, of whose innocence he was still doubtful, as because he saw the opportunities for the display of forensic eloquence which were presented by the facts; "a gallant tar brought back from the pathless ocean by a girl's noble daring". (286; ch. 32)

For Ledger, the framing of the sailor's return in quotation marks that denote an onlooker's hackneyed perspective "creat[es] a species of alienation effect avant la lettre" as it jolts the reader into distinguishing between the barrister's specious melodrama, and "the realism of Gaskell's deployment of melodramatic aesthetics". Mary Barton "extends and interrogates" melodrama in the production of a realism of affect that could rouse her readers' indignation at the sufferings of the Manchester labouring poor ("'Mere dull melodrama'"; see also Recchio).[8]

Ledger's suggestion that Gaskell self-consciously moves between differing levels of melodramatic sincerity is tantalising. Before complicating her claim, I want to develop it affirmatively by reading the courtroom drama of Mary Barton in the framework of the returning sailor-heroes of nautical melodrama. In each of Jerrold's nautical plays of the 1830s, upon returning to shore the sailor stands trial for having avenged his persecutor. Trial scenes were popular in early-nineteenth century melodramatic fiction because the courtroom is "the most theatrical arena of the law", in which exaggeration and overblown gestures both

carry out legal process and also highlight injustice (Ledger Dickens 42), and the sailor is a compelling testifier because of the theatricality that marks him out from the land-dwelling crowd. Trials moreover dramatized the problems of identity and representation that surrounded real sailors in discourses of the early 1800s. Just as sailors penned memoirs in this period to give voice to an otherwise largely voiceless subclass, one habitually dismissed as inarticulate, to place the fictional sailor in the dock was to enable him to voice his own mistreatment. Above all, the sailor's fair-dealing and honest pleas distinguish him from the lawyer. The sailor and the lawyer are nemeses in nautical melodrama. According to The Illustrated London News in 1853, "a lawyer" is "the stage devil of the sailor" ("Sketches" 25). Jerrold's nautical melodramas pit the disruptive energies of the sailor against a state-sanctioned penal code, calling attention to the gap between the moral integrity that the tar personifies and the legal justice that he receives. The comparison is made explicit in Black-Ey'd Susan when the play's heroic tar, William, calls a bailiff a sailor in "Beelzebub's ship, the Law!" (18). Through customary nautical analogy William develops his comparison and establishes his moral opposition to legal codes: the law "always sails best in a storm, and founders in fair weather. I'd sooner be sent adrift on the North Sea, in a butter cask, with a 'bacco-box for my store room, than sail in that devil's craft, the Law" (18). "[I]t is below the honesty of a sailor," he adds during his trial, "to go upon the half tack of a lawyer" (34).[9]

Despite their virtuous testimony, Jerrold's sailors are never pardoned on the strength of their words alone. Indeed, in Black Ey'd Susan, their moral superiority leave his fellow tars unable to defend William during his court martial: when asked about his "moral character", Quid can only pay tribute to William's seafaring prowess (35). Instead, the sailor's reprieve rests on improbable plot contrivances: fortuitously recovered mitigating evidence (as is the case in Black Ey'd Susan), last-minute arrivals, and legal technicalities. Previously regarded as flimsy plotting, these moments have more recently been said to

expose the precarious legal and social standing of the sailor, and by extension that of other vulnerable social groups, and to test the audience's belief in the likelihood of just outcomes despite and indeed because of the enforcement of the law (Slater 68; James 56; C. Williams 202-03). [10] "Poetic justice stands in for a social justice that is in grave doubt", writes Carolyn Williams (206).

Viewing Mary Barton in this context, it becomes crucial not just that the barrister -- Jem's legal representative -- recycles melodramatic clichés, but that he does so out of cynicism and self-interest. Doubtful of Jem's innocence, he nonetheless heralds Will's return to display his own eloquence. This sneering characterisation of the lawyer is soon corroborated by the narrator's remarks about the prosecutors who dismiss Will as "a suborned witness, who dared to perjure himself" (286; ch. 32). Even though Will is not under court-martial like Jerrold's sailors, he is under scrutiny in the trial. In response, the narrator notes the spurious truth-claims of lawyers who "are paid to uphold" opinions (286; ch. 32). The narrative questions legal justice in much the same fashion as do Jerrold's trial scenes. Crucial to this intervention are Will's physical movements in the court. As Will bursts into the courtroom, "[t]he officers of the court opposed his forcible manner of entrance, but they could hardly induce the offender to adopt any quieter way of attaining his object, and telling his tale in the witness-box, the legitimate place." The sailor "forced his way over rails and seats, against turnkeys and policemen". On top of Mary's faint after giving evidence, this results in "commotion in the court, among all the cries and commands, the dismay and the directions, consequent upon Will's entrance" (285-86; ch. 32). While Patsy Stoneman is right that Mary's emotional appeal at the trial will be ultimately successful (81), Jonathan H. Grossman nonetheless correctly points to Will's adeptness in "the male-controlled space of the court", in contrast to the problems faced by Mary and Jane Wilson in giving testimony (120). Will's power lies in his disruption of the trial, which is drifting toward an unjust

verdict prior to his arrival. By rushing the bar, the sailor reclaims melodramatic performance from its complacent usage by the barrister. The saltwater radicalism of Jack Tar upends the sober, "civilised" courtroom proceedings.

In Will's cross-questioning, the sailor's disruptive energies are again unleashed. When the prosecutor accuses him of taking a bribe to testify, Will is at first "a little confused" by the "garb of unaccustomed words". The sailor's slow grasp of the accusation builds to his defiant response, which is to ask the counsellor:

> how much money you've been paid for your impudence towards one who has told God's blessed truth, and who would scorn to tell a lie, or blackguard, any one, for the biggest fee as ever lawyer got for doing dirty work? (287; ch. 32).

The presence of the boatman who ferried him back to land confirms Will's honesty, and with it the triumph of moral integrity over legality. Having foregrounded the melodrama and supposition that threatens to engulf truth, then, Gaskell invests in a familiar trope of nautical melodrama to reassert, from the mouth of the defiant sailor, the withering view of the legal profession that the narrator had first aired shortly before. Whether the narrator's prior assertion of precisely the same point made by Will delimits or endorses the radicalism of the sailor's words is debatable. Arguably, the narrator's foretelling of Will's point exemplifies how, at the level of form, the novel "controls the discursive framework" in which characters reach "truths" (Miller 25), in contrast to drama. As D.A. Miller notes of free indirect discourse, "respeaking a character's thoughts or speeches, the narration simultaneously subverts their authority and secures its own" (25).

On the other hand, the passage is one of the few explicit attacks upon corruption in the novel's latter chapters, which are traditionally seen to militate against the unapologetically bleak early chapters by seeking reconciliation between the classes (e.g. R. Williams 89). Will's words and actions help change the legal course of justice that will see the wrongly accused man hanged for a crime that is, at any rate, partly the result of

dehumanising social conditions. The sailor overturns the trial in the novel's recognition that justice, in this case, is beyond the machinery of the courts, a conclusion shared with Jerrold's nautical melodramas. Indeed, in Mary Barton, the murder case remains officially unsolved at the novel's close (Guy 154). He does not speak out against Carson or his like, but as Josephine M. Guy points out: "Will's indignant reply echoes a theme central to the first half of the book: that the possession of money corrupts the wealthy far more than its absence corrupts the poor" (153). His riposte further links the trial scene to earlier passages in which the legal failings -- the lack of protective legislation of the kind called for by John Barton and his fellow Chartists in London -- that leave Manchester's workers open to exploitation are an important part of Gaskell's social critique (Cazamian 221).

The Taming of the Tar

As Ledger claims, Gaskell draws positively on melodrama in exposition of her reformist beliefs. Yet the melodramatic representation of Will Wilson also highlights some of the limitations and preconceptions of her views. In this section I look beyond the trial chapter to other parts of the novel in which Will is less well integrated in the novel's attack on bourgeois blindness to the sufferings of the poor. I find that Gaskell's deployment of nautical melodrama departs from its theatrical antecedents in ways that highlight her novel's overriding concern with the problems of metropolitan labour that define the "condition of England".

All court scenes involving sailors are a trial of the tar's reliability, and of his ability to represent himself to the metropolitan audiences that misapprehend him. For the sailor to ingratiate himself, he must prove his fitness for civilised society, thus undermining his disruptive potential. In Jerrold's Mutiny, for example, Parker's loyalty to the king supersedes his rebellion against the navy. Comparably, Will's authority stems from complying with the

courtroom's protocol (Grossman 120). Seeing that his "tale […] would be heard by judge and jury […] his courage took the shape of presence of mind, and he awaited the examination with a calm, unflinching intelligence, which dictated the clearest and most pertinent answers" (286; ch. 32). This quieting of the sailor is reinforced as in the narrative the sailor is denied his time at the bar: at the moment that Will defies the sailor stereotype in giving composed, measured evidence his words disappear in diegetic description (Altick 140; Grossman 118). Gaskell puts the stereotypical image of the tar in inverted commas, then, but she does not explicitly counter it. And in other passages besides the court-scene Will appears as a happy-go-lucky interloper in metropolitan society. Thus, the sailor's relation to the social and political commentary in Mary Barton is obscured.

Will is referred to by the narrator in epithets that are as hackneyed as those attributed to the barrister at Jem's trial. He is "the handsome, dashing, spirited Will Wilson" (137; ch. 13), "the merry, random, boisterous sailor" (154; ch. 15), "who roved from house to house, finding and making friends everywhere" (137; ch. 13). "[H]is usual joyous beaming appearance" is noted for its absence once he is love-struck (169; ch. 17). The narrator sees in Will affableness and transparency. While the Manchester workers are forced increasingly to hide things from one another, and even at times themselves, Will has an "open and undisguised […] nature" (155; ch. 15). He is further distinguished from the urban workforce by his language, his beliefs, and his attitudes. Will is the timeworn superstitious sailor, regarding as "his most precious possession" a caul (the membrane that covers a new-born child's head) that he believes guards him against drowning (154; ch. 15). Only because he exemplifies another stereotype, generosity bordering on recklessness, does Will offer the caul to Job Legh. Gaskell makes full use of Will's profligacy in explaining that he walked to Liverpool with Jem, thereby providing the latter with an alibi, because he was short of money for the train having spent most of his earnings on presents for friends in Manchester (170; ch.

17, 286; ch. 32). Again, this is in contrast to the necessarily careful management of money by the novel's urban inhabitants, Mrs. Barton's economical preparations for the tea party with the Wilsons, for example.

All of these aspects of Will are in keeping with nautical melodrama's characterisation of the sailor-hero as an ostensible outsider to the society that he enters into and helps to restore. Where Mary Barton differs from plays such as Luke the Labourer and Black Ey'd Susan is in not integrating the sailor's story with the travails of other characters. The novel instead repeatedly evokes the incommensurable cultural differences between metropolitan and maritime communities and individuals. At the Mersey, the sailors Mary meet appear a "new race of men […] to a girl who had hitherto seen none but inland dwellers, and those for the greater part factory people" (253; ch. 27). Job has previous experience of Liverpool's mariners, as is proven by the anecdote about the torpid scorpion, given to him by a sailor, which reanimates by his fire (38-39; ch. 5). The meeting of Job and Will nonetheless takes its comedy from the dissimilarity of the two, and their mutually self-serving efforts to overcome the gaps. Job and Will speak in foreign languages to one another. Will's yarn about a mermaid receives Job's "contempt", as does his unawareness of the value to the natural historian of the insects he accidentally collects on his voyages. Job's use of Latin classifications to describe animals further alienates Will (133; ch. 13).[11] In attributing scientific rationality to the amateur natural historian and superstition to the sailor, the novel might appear to credit Job at the expense of Will. A formulaic view of the sailor is pitted against a representation of the manufacturer, in Job, which was credited -- at the time of its publication, and subsequently -- for its progressiveness (e.g. Bamford 363-64; R. Williams 88). However, when Job seeks to repay Will's donation of a specimen by asking his granddaughter Margaret to sing, the sailor is "entranced" (137; ch. 13). The narrator later repeats that "Margaret's angelic voice had […] entranced him, and […] made him think of

her as being of some other sphere" (155; ch. 15). In alluding to the siren song, the passage ironically suggests an underlying, symbolic truth to Will's story about the mermaid.[12] The key point is that even Job, one of the novel's most sage and sympathetic characters, cannot see this truth, and the differences in understanding between him and Will are not bridged. When the two strive to ingratiate themselves with one another in the passage's humorous close, both are motivated by self-interest: Job seeks further specimens, Will more time with Margaret.

As with the passage that pits Will's superstition against Job's science, the Liverpool portions of Mary Barton appear to give little credit to the city and its seafarers. Even if it plays up the danger that Mary faces in the docks, however, the novel is at pains to depict the sympathetic treatment she ultimately receives "among kind, though rough people" (270; ch. 31). The issue is more accurately one of focus and priorities. Gaskell states in her preface to the novel that her aim is to "give utterance" to the privations of "the workmen in our manufacturing towns" (5). That the novel's foray to Merseyside does not divert Gaskell from her concern for the Manchester poor is most tellingly shown in an aside by the narrator. Having painstakingly reduced the Mancunian dialect, the self-professed "land-lubber" narrator joins Mary in finding the "slang" of the "old tar" Tom Bourne and Mary's Liverpool guide Charley "unintelligible" (254; ch. 27). As a result, while it draws upon the tar's outspokenness to highlight the gap between the lawful and the just in Jem's trial, the novel registers little awareness of the exploitation of maritime workers. It is noteworthy in this respect that the Wilsons are a "countrybred family" less antagonised by class division than the likes of John Barton (Bodenheimer 515). Also important is the characterisation of Will as a merchant mariner whose career -- at least until he abandons ship to come to Jem's rescue -- affords opportunities unlikely to be extended to him by naval service: he is promised promotion to second mate on the John Cropper (171; ch. 17, 250; ch. 27). Little wonder that

Mary declares she would join Will at sea if only she were a “boy” (170; ch. 17). The thinking space that Will is afforded “when out alone on the deep sea” is a resource that the Manchester workers could only dream of, and indeed Will’s reflections on his regrets lead Mary more fully to understand her mistreatment of Jem (172; ch. 17).

The difference between a life on the ocean waves and one in Manchester’s mills is further connoted by the chapter headings. Simon Dentith observes that the poetic extracts that form the epigraphs work, alongside other allusions and quotations, to bring out the novel’s themes of exploitation and hardship in ways that emphasize the production of knowledge from “within” the labouring classes (see also Schor 130). In beginning with a quotation from George Crabbe’s “The Borough”, the first Liverpool chapter joins many of the Manchester ones in summoning a poet of social conscience, though the passage from Crabbe is politically innocuous (249; ch. 27). The chapters detailing Mary’s voyage on the Mersey are prefaced by excerpts from nostalgic, patriotic war songs, Thomas Campbell’s “Ye Mariners of England” (1801) and Allan Cunningham’s “A Wet Sheet and a Flowing Sea” (1825). At this extra-diegetic level, the foray to Liverpool diverts from social commentary. In this regard the epigraphs suit well the chapters they preface, for while the travails of the Manchester workers are mined to their social and economic roots, the trials caused by a sailor’s departure are described as matters of the heart and hearth. The families Mary meets in Liverpool suffer because they miss their loved ones away overseas: Mrs. Jones awaits her husband’s return from India (268; ch. 30); Mrs. Sturgis pines over her sons in China and the Baltic (273; ch. 31). Similarly, Alice Wilson objects to Will becoming a sailor in case he suffers from sea-sickness (33; ch. 4). In regarding the hardships of the sailor as inexorable, apolitical consequences of the work, the novel detaches Will’s rousing courtroom intervention from the social contexts that first gave scenes of its kind meaning, exploiting it instead in the working out of an urban labour problem. The sailor’s travails meanwhile becomes the stuff of

romance, so that the radicalism of Jack Tar and the maritime culture he stems from is screened even as its energies are redirected to concerns "closer to home".

In Mary Barton, nautical melodrama is dislocated from the protests against the press gang, corporal punishment, and other injustices that had once enlivened it. In the following section, by way of a comparison to Dion Boucicault's The Long Strike (1866), I further examine this process of disconnection by focusing upon the sailor's sexuality.

Sexuality and the Sailor

According to Land, the overt sexuality of the Georgian sailor on shore -- a casual exploitation of women that today we might regard as an extreme form of misogyny -- was part of his audacious appropriation of the Jack Tar myth (War 44-54). Even the most radical depictions of the sailor in the theatre and in print, however, steered away from his sexual virility. It was, rather, politically expedient, both to proponents of naval reform and their adversaries, to claim the sailor's monogamous commitment both to his wife and his nation. As Anthea Trodd observes, without calling into question his bravery at sea or on foreign soil, in stressing his loyalty to the home the sailor could be "associated with open displays of feelings customarily assigned to the female, and with accompanying qualities of obedience and naivete" (212; see also Russell 102).

In Luke the Labourer, as in subsequent nautical melodramas, the sailor returns to oppose corruption in the form of the wealthy villain's sexual predation upon an innocent maid. Often, the maid is the sailor's own sweetheart, although in Luke the Labourer, as in Mary Barton, the love triangle involves landsmen and the sexual motivations of the returning sailor are deflected into sibling affection.[13] It might be argued that the prominence of romance militates against these plays' radicalism by diverting political commentary in the working out of a love-triangle. Jim Davis makes this point about Jerrold's Mutiny, in which

the leading mutineer Richard Parker's mistreatment at the hands of Captain Arlington, and Parker's murder of the captain, are linked to the two's past rivalry as lovers of Parker's wife (137). Critics have similarly argued that in Mary Barton and other "condition-of-England" novels courtship plots defuse anxieties of class conflict (e.g. Yeazell), but sexual predation is one theme by which melodrama solicits emotions by employing analogy to allow the reader/viewer to see broader, social violence as it is enacted upon individual bodies (Recchio). In the naval context, as Land's above-cited research of the mutinies of 1797 shows, questions of labour conditions and remuneration were posed in domestic terms by defiant sailors. The melodramatic weave of romance and politics was in keeping with radical discussions of sailors' rights. In Mutiny, Parker affirms this point in stating that he "offered [Arlington] up a sacrifice to my resentment" (44).

By comparing Mary Barton with the stage melodrama that it inspired, Boucicault's The Long Strike, I want to explore these texts' moderation of the sexual potency of the returning tar as they adapt his melodramatic appeal to new ends. The Long Strike, which acknowledged its debt to Mary Barton (and, more tenuously, the same author's "Lizzie Leigh"[14]) on playbills, was a hit for the prolific Boucicault on both sides of the Atlantic. It was first performed in London and New York in 1866. In adapting the novel to the stage, Boucicault made several adjustments to the original plot (see Altick); removed some of the novel's central figures including Esther, Job, and Margaret, as well as all of its scenes of domestic privation; condensed Harry Carson and his father into one character, Richard Readley, thus conflating the domestic and industrial spheres even more overtly than Gaskell had done to create an ultimate blackguard typical of melodramatic theatre; and he changed most of the remaining characters' names. One notable alteration to the plot was the replacement of Jane Learoyd's (Mary Barton's) dash to Liverpool with a scene in which her kind-hearted lawyer, Moneypenny, telegraphs the docks to halt the departure of the sailor,

Johnny Reilly (Will Wilson). As an instance of Boucicault's signature use of technological gimmickry, the "telegraph scene" ensured the popularity of The Long Strike. It was performed on its own in US variety shows (Altick 138, 130). Despite thereby limiting Jane's agency to an even greater degree than Gaskell had Mary's, Boucicault's maiden still faints, à la Mary Barton, just before good news is returned to her on the wire. Critics including Hilary M. Schor note that even though Mary emerges as the novel's main agent of change in the latter chapters, she is a faltering heroine (15, 35, 38). She falls -- at times, literally -- into a position of dependence upon Jem once he is acquitted. Ironically, Mary associates the "glittering, heaving, dazzling" river, the site of her most overt agency, with the illness that makes her so physically reliant on Jem in the novel's closing chapters (303; ch. 34). The tendency of Jane/Mary to swoon exemplifies Rohan McWilliams's point that "[m]elodrama was a means of controlling disruptive emotions and sexualities" (63), in this instance reinstating male agency as it has been blocked by unemployment and criminalisation, and (in the case of Gaskell's novel) replaced by Mary's exertions in search of Will. Susan Zlotnick identifies the reaffirmation of a protector role for Jem in and around the trial: the point at which Mary has proven herself most capable of self-assertion (86).

Boucicault's expansion of the Johnny Reilly role, which he played in early productions, further teases out some of the latent sexual politics of his source text. Boucicault had the sailor inadvertently incriminate Jem, and, as Altick explains, "[f]or the sake of making his own acting role more appealing, he portrayed Johnny Reilly as being in love with Jane but cheerfully renouncing his suit in favour of Jem" (136n8). Accentuating his own appeal may have been Boucicault's motive, but by this tweaking of the plot The Long Strike develops the love interest between the sailor and the mill-worker's daughter that Gaskell's novel suppresses as soon as its possibility is raised. Her narrator's first description of the reunion between Mary and Will hints at the attractiveness of the seafaring intruder in a

community in which males are increasingly emasculated by their inability to provide for their families: “Mary gazed with wondering pleasure at her old playmate; now, a dashing, bronzed-looking, ringleted sailor, frank, hefty, and affectionate” (130; ch. 12). Almost immediately, the eroticism is deflated by the cryptic, unconvincing remark that Will was “perhaps too much like her in character ever to become anything nearer or dearer” than a friend (131; ch. 13). The novel never quite dismisses the sexual potency of Will: Mary is confused for his lover by his landlady, and later by watermen, as she searches for him in Liverpool (248; ch. 26, 255; ch. 27). After her return from sea, as she stands stupefied at the waterfront, passers-by throw insults at Mary, presumably questioning her virtue (261; ch. 28). Behind all this salaciousness lurks the spectre of Aunt Esther, whose fall at the hands of an army officer leads to prostitution, a reminder of the dangers of seduction by ocean-going men.

In the end, though, Will’s virility is softened by his gentle, protective desire for Margaret, and by the narrator’s portrayal of Mary’s “sisterly love” for Will (169; ch. 17). Sibling affection diminishes the sailor’s sexuality, as it does in Luke the Labourer. Yet the detumescent description of Will Wilson is also part and parcel of Gaskell’s broader social vision. As Patsy Stoneman argues, at the core of Mary Barton is a sympathetic labouring-class community that regards the home, above all, as sacrosanct. In the home, men must undertake the kind of nurturing roles that middle-class males fail to perform to their own and to society’s cost (Stoneman 50-53, 68-86). For the sailor to gain entry to this sphere his sexuality must be expressed, like Jem’s, in maudlin terms of quiet heart-sickness and willingness to help others.[15] This is not simply out of step with the models of masculinity advanced by more radical forms of nautical melodrama, for in these, too, as I noted earlier, the sailor could also be almost feminine in his tenderness and romantic faithfulness. The difference is that Jerrold, the Nore mutineers, and others sought to forge a politically

motivated analogy between the sailor's monogamy and his commitment to king and country. If you must "condemn the sailor" then "respect the husband", William's plea to his prosecutors in Black Ey'd Susan (37), interweaves the interpersonal and the social concerns of nautical melodrama. Will Wilson's compassion ensures the reader of his morality, and it enables his eventual assimilation into the labouring-class home by marriage to Margaret, but with no political cause of his own to champion, Will is simply a sailor in love.

Boucicault handles the same problem of the sailor's libido differently. He has Johnny smitten with Jane, but, rather than pit him as Jem's rival, the two give counsel to each other's broken hearts, and Reilly abandons his courtship of Jane -- his reason for dallying in Manchester for five months, in which time he spends all his money -- and heads for the ocean when he realises the depths of Jem's love. As Reilly declares to Jane: "Jem and I went shares in you and I want to give my share to Jem" (433). A "share" is "[a] portion of the profit after expenses derived from a commercial voyage (such as a whaling expedition) promised as wages for each crewmember" (Seatalk). The use of sailors' jargon at this most inapt of moments is revealing. Besides suggesting the coarseness of the tar, it likens his desire of Jane to service afloat, and, crucially, values in both brotherly -- or to borrow Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's term, homosocial -- camaraderie above all. The equation is reversed so that the ship, rather than pursuit of the woman, is abandoned in the fortification of bonds between men when Johnny jumps overboard in response to Jane's request that he saves Jem. Jane, in these as in other moments of the play, is merely the conduit for honourable (and in Readley's case dishonourable) masculine actions, as Boucicault submerges the sailor's sexuality not by effeminising him but by emphasising the primacy of manly ties.

Conclusion

Besides rethinking the sailor's libido, Boucicault adapted his source text by penning a fully-fledged scene in the cabin of the departing sailor's ship, and by developing the character of the ship's captain. In catering for the continuing public taste for dramatic set-pieces at sea, Boucicault recognises Mary Barton's debt to nautical melodrama. In both the novel and the play, the drama of the tar's return is heightened by the captain's refusal to weigh anchor. Mary Barton explains this refusal by insisting upon the emotional causes of a mariner's privation: the captain was "suffering himself from the pain of separation from wife and children, but showing suffering only by his outward irritation" (257-58; ch. 28). In The Long Strike, the captain's refusal is more reasoned, especially since Johnny misleadingly tells him of Jem and Jane: "he has murthered somebody, and she wants me to swear he hasn't" (454). To this the captain responds: "If this fellow's life is in danger so is every man's life in danger on board this ship, if we go to sea short handed" (454). Even if the captain talks sense, the audience's sympathies of course lie with Johnny, and Jem, who is really innocent. Boucicault seizes the opportunity for rousing action as Johnny, according to the stage directions, "snaps fingers" at the captain, before jumping through the ship's window to swim to land (454).[16] Johnny's unruliness carries over into the court, where, like Will's, his physical incongruousness disrupts proceedings: he comically climbs into the prisoner's box before being directed to the witness stand. It is for the purposes of entertainment, but in having the sailor defy his captain's orders The Long Strike connects labour problems at sea to those on shore slightly more overtly than does Mary Barton, which uses the trope of the sailor's courtroom appearance to reinforce Gaskell's broad criticisms of the law.

Nonetheless Boucicault's play submerges the sailor's potential for radical protest in much the same way as Gaskell's novel. A further telling instance of this obfuscation in Mary Barton is the rehabilitation of the lawyer that stands in earlier nautical melodrama as the corruptible antithesis of the sailor. For while Mary Barton doubts the integrity of Jem's

prosecutors and the barrister appointed to defend him, Job's friend Bridgenorth proves to be morally steadfast. And, as an embellishment of Bridgenorth, the lawyer in The Long Strike, Moneypenny, is one of the play's heroes. In a reversal of the satirical humour of nautical melodrama, Moneypenny's comedy derives from his refusal to admit to his own charitable nature (449, 452). The presiding judge in The Long Strike, Sir John Fairfield, has a speaking part, and, as his name suggests, he sees that legal justice is attained: "Not Guilty!" are the play's final words (458). With the integrity of the law upheld, the closing stage directions advise a union of sailor and lawyer that again signals the dislocation of nautical melodrama from its radical moorings: "MONEYPENNY turns and grasps REILLY by the hand" (458).

Hadley writes that "[t]he melodramatic mode can be seen to be a stinging critique, developed through its dissonant relation to market culture, but its practitioners, living in and through the passage of time, subjects of and to uneven development, were often drawn to its expressiveness without wholly adhering to all of its implications" (119). Mary Barton and The Long Strike utilise tropes of nautical melodrama that developed out of defiance of the press gang and other coercive mistreatment of sailors in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Both texts, however, also illustrate the fading of those radical origins behind more easily palatable myths of Jack Tar in later decades, when the appeal of Jack Tar lay increasingly in his perceived political irrelevance. While it is possible to read this change in the context of rising nationalistic and imperialistic ideologies which overlooked his exploitation to depict the sailor in purely heroic, self-sacrificing terms, I have argued that Gaskell's overriding preoccupation with the Manchester poor, and her belief in the value of tender masculinity in the labouring-class home, meant that the political meanings of nautical melodrama were lost under, and to some extent redirected toward, what seemed to be more pressing questions -- for melodrama and for the novel as for Gaskell -- of urban deprivation and alienation.

As such, Gaskell's novel expresses not only shifting literary preoccupations but also broader cultural changes in how Britons thought about the sea. The transition from sail- to steam-powered oceanic transportation and the rise of seaside tourism from the mid-nineteenth century corresponded with an increasingly nostalgic and romantic understanding of maritime places and peoples, in which on-going labour and its exploitation at sea were overlooked (Sekula 45-54; Cohen 190). I have explored how, as an exemplary "condition-of-England" fiction, Mary Barton furthers this process by focusing its labour questions on urban environments despite its debts to nautical melodrama. But I have also highlighted the value of nautical melodrama in our attempts at understanding nineteenth-century literature's changing relation to the sea. The majority of studies of maritime literature focus upon a small, Romantic canon centred on coastal vigils and/or deep-sea voyages of isolated individuals: Byron, Coleridge, Tennyson, Melville, Conrad. Even Margaret Cohen's important The Novel and the Sea (2010) works to a large extent within a recognisable definition of "the literature of the seas" in which first-hand experience of deep-sea travel is privileged. In her efforts to correct the tendencies of twentieth-century literary criticism by reading this literature on its own terms, not "as allegories of processes back on land" (14; see also 57), moreover, Cohen arguably also underplays the role of littoral space in the texts that she studies. In line with Juliet John's contention that melodrama is in many ways the socially inclusive antithesis to Romanticism (esp. 13), I want to propose that nautical melodrama offers an alternative model to the Romantic nautical tradition in which experience at sea matters to, and helps us make sense of, wider social groups than are contained by the ship. Nautical melodrama is a lens through which literary and cultural studies might consider the coastal territories in which women as well as men lived and worked in direct relation with the sea, where many sailors spent the majority of their lives, and where local, national and international cultural formations and exchanges all were makers of social identity.[17]

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[1] This point is informed by Elaine Hadley's historical redefinition of melodrama as not just an allegedly inferior species of dramatic and prose fiction, but a representational "mode" that structured various literary, verbal, and nonlinguistic representations.

[2] Besides Hadley's, this paragraph draws upon the following studies: James; Vicinus; Joyce; McWilliam; John; Ledger, Dickens; C. Williams.

[3] Performance was key to sailors' resistance of the press gang. Land also notes the strategic dressing up of sailors in disguises to avoid impressment (War 40). Rogers notes the impersonation of foreigners to avoid the press (31). For analysis of resistance to impressment, see Rogers esp. 37-58.

[4] For an overview of the mutinies at Spithead and the Nore, see Rogers 107-110.

[5] For Richard D. Altick the novel's melodrama betrays its author's naivety (141). For Raymond Williams the melodramatic murder plot registers her deep-seated fear of working-class violence and evades the social problems that the early chapters raise (87-90). In her response to Williams, Catherine Gallagher observes that, instead of descending into melodramatic excess, Mary Barton employs melodramatic aesthetics throughout, especially in its celebrated early chapters. Gallagher credits Gaskell with "skilful" and self-conscious use of melodrama (75, 77). Still, for Gallagher, Gaskell regards melodrama as a defective, even dangerous, representational mode, from which she tries unsuccessfully to free herself (62-87).

[6] The reassessment of Mary Barton is supported by Brian Crick's textual analysis of the novel's composition. By consulting Gaskell's holograph plan for Mary Barton, which is the best extant guide to her intentions in the absence of a manuscript of the novel, Crick

questions on what evidence lies the widely accepted view that the focus of Mary Barton shifts from the murderer, John Barton, to his daughter, in a travesty of Gaskell's original design. As critics such as Schor have more recently affirmed, Mary is more central to the novel's social commentary than Williams and his followers suggested.

It is worth noting that Will Wilson does not appear in the plan for the novel. Instead, Mary "proves an alibi by Margaret Clegg's help" (rpt. in Mary Barton 346), Margaret Clegg being Margaret Jennings in the published novel. Jenny Uglow comments that Gaskell's introduction of Will was the main structural departure from her plan for the novel (199). Even if Will was conceived of after the novel was outlined, however, he is first mentioned as early as ch. 4, and first appears in ch. 13. Will's presence early in the novel suggests that the melodramatic denouement in which he features centrally may be more intrinsic to the design of the novel than some critics have realised.

[7] Much of the chapter is focalised on Mary, moreover, whose power to discern fact from fiction is undermined by the stupefaction into which her sea journey has lulled her. Of her perception of the courtroom, the narrator comments: "They were all at sea, sailing away on billowy waves, and everyone speaking at once, and no one heeding her father, who was calling on them to be silent, and listen to him" (284; ch. 32).

[8] The late Sally Ledger's discussion of Mary Barton in an entry on The Royal Holloway Victorian MA Blog, from which I here quote, is thought to have been an offshoot from the project that resulted in Dickens and the Popular Radical Imagination (2007). I am grateful to Prof. Adam Roberts and Dr. Ruth Livesey for this information.

[9] For further examples see Kaiser 64-66.

[10] James claims, in contradiction of those who dismiss its denouement as clichéd, that Black-Ey'd Susan is the first play to feature a last-minute reprieve from the gallows. He adds that

audiences confronted with the spectacle of an unjustly sentenced man, facing public execution and forgiving his killers, would have seen the "Christ parallel" (155).

[11] For further discussion of this conversation, see Corley. On Mary's passive part in the exchange, and the denial of geographical knowledge of labouring-class women more generally, see Yan.

[12] The sirens in classical mythology were land-dwellers but they appear in later folklore as mermaids.

[13] This is not before incestuous desire is accidentally articulated by Philip. Even after learning that she is the daughter of his father, Philip calls Clara "the tight little vessel", "handsomely built" and "prettily rigg'd" (37). The playwright's intention here may have been to conceal the increasingly obvious real identity of Philip, but these lines open up issues regarding the sailor's sexuality which repeat in Mary Barton.

[14] Altick notes the curious acknowledgement of "Lizzie Leigh" on playbills (130n5). It seems to me that the play's promoter, perhaps Boucicault himself, confused "Lizzie Leigh" for North and South, with which The Long Strike has more overlap, most obviously in its evocation an industrial dispute.

[15] For example, Will describes Jem "moping like a girl" in his love for Mary (132; ch. 13).

[16] The short MS. plan for the conclusion for the novel, thought to be written by Gaskell, notes that in the courtroom "Will snapped his fingers at the lawyers" (Rpt. in Mary Barton 347-49, 347). This scornful snapping of the fingers does not happen in the novel, unless Gaskell meant it metaphorically as Will's contemptuous verbal riposte to Jem's prosecutor.

[17] See Land's call for a new, "coastal history", in "Tidal Waves".

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Abstract

Centring upon Will Wilson, the sailor whose dashing return to shore saves his cousin Jem from a false murder charge, this article reads Mary Barton in the framework of nautical melodrama. As one of the main melodramatic set-pieces of Gaskell's debut novel, the court-room entrance of Will recalls the anti-authoritarian impulses of nautical melodrama, and militates against the widely held view that Mary Barton simply escapes, in its melodramatic finale, from the political problems it has raised. In other passages describing his language, his customs, and his sexuality, however, Will is represented in the anodyne terms that come to dominate Victorian thinking about the maritime workforce, and which obscure the political connotations of his melodramatic words and actions. Instead of interpreting these passages as instances of melodrama's conservatism, or of contradictions in Gaskell's political and/or artistic vision, I connect them to her progressive views on urban labour questions and masculine gender roles. Using recent theories of the novel, of melodrama, and of maritime literature and culture, I situate Mary Barton in the context of mid-nineteenth-century Britain's changing relation with the sea and its travellers, as the "condition of England" comes to be defined in metropolitan terms. The discussion of the sailor's sexuality is developed in a comparative reading of Mary Barton and Dion Boucicault's The Long Strike, a play inspired by Gaskell's novel.