

S. 8. 4. – GENDERING THE SEA
Chair: François Drémeaux
(University of Le Havre Normandie/University of Hong Kong)

Masculinities Cast Adrift: How the Atlantic Ocean Re-Shaped the Masculinity of British Sailors, c.1660-1760

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Abstract

Sailors carried goods and wealth across the Atlantic, tying Britain to the rest of the world. The lifeblood of oceanic trade, they formed human links connecting the nodes of imperial trade. The experience of seafaring in the age of sail was harrowing, dangerous, and life-changing. More than anyone, their lives were directly shaped by the Atlantic Ocean. Seafaring placed the lives of mariners at the mercy of the weather, the “enemy” (pirates and privateers), and other men at sea.

This talk explores how the experience of seafaring reshaped sailor’s identities - specifically, how it reshaped their masculinity. It explores sources produced by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century “British” seamen, using research and ideas taken from an ongoing doctoral research project (‘Lives Lived ‘at such a distance’: How Distance Shaped Masculinity and Femininity in the British Atlantic, c.1660-1760’).

The Atlantic ocean changed how men could speak, dress, and act. It marked their bodies in ways all contemporaries recognised, as the records of wealthy male passengers demonstrate by comparison. The ocean created a distinct space for sexual fluidity and ambiguity, distancing sailors from the heterosexual norms of Britain and its colonies. Sailors’ masculine identities were re-shaped by the compressed, hierarchical life aboard ship and the trauma of shipwreck. Though life at sea was dominated by masculinity, this maritime influence on masculinity had a wider effect on the Atlantic world. In particular, it dictated how women on shore, the families of these men, could live.

Keywords

masculinity, mariners, Atlantic, early modern

Biography

Harry Brennan is a doctoral researcher at the University of Glasgow, working on a thesis titled ‘Lives Lived ‘at such a distance’: How Distance Shaped Masculinity and Femininity in the British Atlantic, c.1660-1760’. Studying history at Cardiff University in the 2010s, he developed an interest in early modern history, global history, and gender history. Hailing from Britain and Ireland, he lives in Edinburgh where he spends his spare time gardening and drinking coffee.

Women and Children on the move across the seas.

ROSA CAPELÃO (CITCEM)

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The Carreira da Índia established an annual link between Lisbon and the city of Goa (India), via the Cape Route circumnavigating the African continent, linking the Atlantic and the Indian Oceans. First used by Vasco da Gama (1497-1499), it remained in use for more than three centuries. By approaching the study of social interactions at sea, the paper will examine the presence of women and children on board of the Carreira da Índia ships, an issue that has been neglected so far.

Women and children were among the contingents of migrants who travelled across the Atlantic and the Indian Oceans in the early modern period. Those women could be prostitutes, adventurers, convicts, single and married women, or widows. The paper will pay particular attention to the presence of those women who traveled as stowaways. The presence of children on board, including children as sailors, and their daily circumstances, are also under inquiry, even if constrained by a lack of available data.

This mobility took place at a time when society was extremely vigilant, controlling not only the lifestyle of its members but also their movements. This control meant that not everyone who wanted to travel was allowed to do so. It also meant that gender conditioned the circumstances and behaviors during those long maritime journeys. The paper will therefore pay attention to the control of behaviors and interactions and how women and children responded and adapted to daily life on board. The organization of daily activities, the management of free time, the moments of leisure, the expressions of religiosity, as well as of violence, fear, and laughter, emerge in these maritime contexts.

The – mostly European – sources used include travel books, chronicles, administrative correspondence, and letters from missionaries. We are aware of the fact that we envisage these universes through the gaze of European men, who in their narratives attributed to women and children a subordinate and peripheral position.

Biography

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PhD in History by the University of Porto, Portugal, in 2011 with the thesis «The Cult of Relics in Portugal in the XVI-XVII centuries. Context, Regulations, Functions and Symbolism».

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