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An English East India Company Ship's Crew in a Connected Seventeenth-Century World

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Abstract

This contribution to the forum Gender, Intimate Networks, and Global Commerce in the Early Modern Period follows the career of a single late seventeenth-century English East India Company ship and her crew, in order to challenge the claim that long-haul ships were isolated spaces. Specifically, it looks at the many kinds of connections –intimate and otherwise—that characterised early modern ships and their crews. These included connections between and among sailors themselves, between ships at sea, and between ships' crews and the diverse communities from which they came.

Keywords: English East India Company; Sailors; Maritime history; Gender history

Much scholarship has focused on connections and networks in and around the various East India Companies and the *Estado da Índia*. There has also been a good deal of attention to diasporic travellers and merchants. An especially rich body of work deals with encounters between Europeans and Asians, though, owing to the nature of the sources, much of the focus has been on mercantile and political elites.¹ Still, notably with respect to the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and Portugal, there has been some attention to ordinary sailors, both European and Asian, their labour relations, and their onshore connections, at least on the European side.² Close attention to the connected history of English East India

¹ For diasporic trade see especially David Sebouh Aslanian, *From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean: The Global Trade Networks of Armenian Merchants from New Julfa* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2014), and Engseong Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean*, California World History Library 3 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006). For connected history see Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia," *Modern Asian Studies* 31:3 (1997): 735–62, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Courtly Encounters: Translating Courtliness and Violence in Early Modern Eurasia* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2012). A more recent contribution to the study of "connections" in Asia and beyond is William A. Pettigrew and Mahesh Gopalan, *The East India Company, 1600–1857: Essays on Anglo-Indian Connection* (London: Routledge, 2016).

² J. R. Bruijn and E. S. van Eyck van Heslinga, "De scheepvaart van de Oost-Indische Compagnie en het verschijnsel muiterij," in *Muiterij, Oproer en Berechting op de Schepen van de VOC*, ed. J. R. Bruijn and E. S. van Eyck van Heslinga (Haarlem: De Boer Maritiem, 1980), 9–26; G. V. Scammell, "The Pillars of Empire: Indigenous Assistance and the Survival of the 'Estado da Índia' c.1600–1700," *Modern Asian Studies* 22:3 (1988): 473–89; M. van Rossum et al., "National and International Labour Markets for Sailors in European, Atlantic and Asian Waters, 1600–1850," *Research in Maritime History* 43 (2010): 47–72; Ghulam Ahmad Nadri, "Sailors,

Company sailors, however, especially in the later seventeenth century, is sparser,³ though thanks to the work of Cheryl Fury, among others, it is becoming more common.⁴

This essay focuses on the theme of connection with respect to a single, unusually large East India Company ship called the *Modena*. The *Modena* was named after Mary of Modena, the wife of James II, and it came off the blocks in 1685, the same year that James and Mary ascended the throne. The ship sailed twice to the East Indies, and, after the Revolution of 1688, it briefly served as one of “their majesties hired ships” in the Nine Years War.⁵ In 1694, returning from its second trip to the East Indies, the ship was caught in a hurricane in the mid-Atlantic and went down with all hands aboard. That tragedy gave rise to at least three court cases, and it is these, coupled with probate and East India Company records, that allow us to look in some detail at the intimate connections that helped constitute this ship’s crew (or ship’s company in the language of the day).

What does a study of a single East India Company ship contribute to the field of “connected history”? First, a truly connected history of an early modern sailing ship challenges the heavily masculine model that still dominates discussions of the “shipping” part of long-distance trade. This essay does look at the homosocial world of the seventeenth-century ship, but it does so in order to stress the interplay of shipboard life with kinship, love, indebtedness, coercion, letter-writing, labour militancy, and asset-transfer from the dead to the living and between ship and shore. Though some of these issues have been looked at before, focusing on one seventeenth-century ship offers insights into how “connectedness” worked to facilitate long-distance ocean travel.

A connected history of one early modern sailing ship also contributes to our understanding of the financial involvement of women in regional and global enterprises. This is a growing field. Women of the seventeenth-century Mughal aristocracy owned ocean-going ships and, in some cases, actively engaged in trading ventures associated with the hajj. In England, significant numbers of elite and some middling women invested in East India Company stock, while other women, both in the British Isles and in South Asia, invested in the slave trade, owned ship shares, or were directly involved in private

Zielverkopers, and the Dutch East India Company: The Maritime Labour Market in Eighteenth-Century Surat,” *Modern Asian Studies* 49:2 (2015): 336–64. For women and families see Amélia Polónia, “Women’s Contributions to Family, Economy and Social Range of Maritime Communities in Sixteenth-Century Portugal,” *Portuguese Studies Review* 13:1–2 (2005): 269–86; Manon van der Heijden and Danielle van den Heuvel, “Sailors’ Families and the Urban Institutional Framework in Early Modern Holland,” *The History of the Family*, Special Issue: Broken Families, 12:4 (2007): 296–309; Danna Agmon, “The Currency of Kinship: Trading Families and Trading on Family in Colonial French India,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 47:2 (2014): 137–55; Francisca Hoyer, *Relations of Absence: Germans in the East Indies and Their Families c. 1750–1820*, *Studia Historica Upsaliensia* 270 (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2020).

³ Peter Earle, *Sailors: English Merchant Seamen 1650–1775* (London: Methuen, 1998); Margaret R. Hunt, “Women and the Fiscal-Imperial State in the Late Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries,” in *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660–1840*, ed. Kathleen Wilson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 29–47; Beverly Lemire, “‘Men of the World’: British Mariners, Consumer Practice, and Material Culture in an Era of Global Trade, c. 1660–1800,” *Journal of British Studies* 54:2 (2015): 288–319.

⁴ Cheryl A. Fury, *Tides in the Affairs of Men: The Social History of Elizabethan Seamen, 1580–1603*, Contributions in Military Studies, no. 214 (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2002); Cheryl A. Fury, ed., *The Social History of English Seamen, 1485–1649* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2012); Cheryl A. Fury, *The Social History of English Seamen, 1650–1815* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2017). See also Richard J. Blakemore and James Davey, eds., *The Maritime World of Early Modern Britain* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020).

⁵ Ca 1690 a third rate was typically a ship of the line with 60–80 guns arrayed on two or three gundecks. The Board of Admiralty intended the hired ship *Modena* to carry 64 guns and be manned by a crew of 350. The National Archives, Kew [hereafter TNA] ADM 3/280 fol. 78 (Board of Admiralty Special Minutes, 10 July 1690).

trading.⁶ This is important work, but with some notable exceptions it tends to focus on elite women, or, at the very least, women from mercantile backgrounds. Less well-off women also invested both emotionally and financially in long-distance trade and seafaring, however, often using their connections to sailors to do so.⁷ This essay shows some of the forms this took.

Finally, the connected history of a single ship pushes us to ask what difference ships and shipping actually made. Everyone acknowledges that ocean-going ships made new kinds of connections possible, but did they also fundamentally change the nature of those connections? Often social, economic, and political historians have tended to focus on events and impacts at either end of the journey and to see ships and sailors primarily in functional terms, as a means to an end. Conversely, maritime historians have tended to emphasise ships and shipboard life while slighting connections to shore, or even to other ships. This has begun to change, with a burgeoning literature on maritime communities in both the Indian Ocean regions and Europe,⁸ and a small but growing body of work on sailors and their trading connections.⁹ There has also been a recent interest in the interface between labour history and maritime history in the Indian Ocean context.¹⁰ However, it remains the case that one of the least studied set of connections for English East India Company sailors is, in fact, their links to their communities of origin, which is the topic of this paper.

Here the focus is on the *Modena's* second trip to the East Indies (1692–94). For the second voyage we have the names and rank or occupation of ninety-one men out of the one hundred fifty or sixty who made up the original ship's company—perhaps 55 to 60 percent. In addition, quite a bit of information has survived about where these men came from and the nature of their family and other connections in England. Unfortunately, there is no information about the remaining 40 percent, not even their names, and the names we do have are biased towards men with London connections, since these people's relatives and creditors would have been significantly more likely

⁶ On early modern Indian women in trade, especially connected to the hajj trade in the Red Sea, see Shireen Moosvi, "Mughal Shipping at Surat in the First Half of the Seventeenth Century," in Moosvi, *People, Taxation and Trade in Mughal India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008), 257–74. For English women investors see Amy M. Froide, *Silent Partners: Women as Public Investors during Britain's Financial Revolution, 1690–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Misha Ewen, "Women Investors and the Virginia Company in the Early Seventeenth Century," *The Historical Journal* 62:4 (2019): 853–74; Aske Laursen Brock and Misha Ewen, "Women's Public Lives: Navigating the East India Company, Parliament and Courts in Early Modern England," *Gender & History* 33:1 (2021): 3–23.

⁷ Hunt, "Women and the Fiscal-Imperial State"; Lemire, "Men of the World."

⁸ See, e.g., Ashin Das Gupta, "Indian Merchants and the Trade in the Indian Ocean, c. 1500–1750," in *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, ed. Tapan Raychaudhuri and Irfan Habib (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 410–33; and Tom Hoogervorst, "Sailors, Tailors, Cooks and Crooks: A Vocabulary of Neglected Lives in Indian Ocean Ports," *Itinerario* 42:3 (2018): 516–48. For a different approach see Edmond J. Smith, "English Trading Companies and the Sea, 1550–1650 'Beyond the Seas Merchant Like,'" in *The Routledge Companion to Marine and Maritime Worlds, 1400–1800*, ed. Claire Jowitt, Craig L. Lambert, and Steve Mentz (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2020), 447–68.

⁹ Lemire, "Men of the World"; Emily Erikson, *Between Monopoly and Free Trade: The English East India Company, 1600–1757* (Princeton NJ.: Princeton University Press, 2014); Meike von Brescius, "Worlds Apart? Merchants, Mariners, and the Organization of the Private Trade in Chinese Export Wares in Eighteenth-Century Europe," in *Goods from the East, 1600–1800: Trading Eurasia*, ed. Maxine Berg et al., (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015), 168–82; Richard J. Blakemore, "Pieces of Eight, Pieces of Eight: Seamen's Earnings and the Venture Economy of Early Modern Seafaring," *The Economic History Review* 70:4 (2017): 1153–84; Maria Fusaro et al., "Entrepreneurs at Sea: Trading Practices, Legal Opportunities and Early Modern Globalization," *International Journal of Maritime History* 28:4 (2016): 774–86.

¹⁰ Sujit Sivasundaram, "The Indian Ocean," in *Oceanic Histories*, ed. David Armitage, Alison Bashford, and Sujit Sivasundaram (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 31–61.

to participate in a lawsuit in a London court. Almost certainly there is also a bias towards Europeans. From the start the *Modena* ship's company must have been quite multinational, as was typical for most East India ships, whatever flag they sailed under.¹¹ However, the only evidence of this in the names we have is a single African or person of African descent listed as "John Green Coffere"¹² and a few men with names that sound Scandinavian or Dutch.¹³ The ship's company was probably even more diverse by the time the ship went down. The *Modena*'s trip out to India in 1692 took longer than usual and a number of the men did not survive the journey. At least fifty-three members, or about one-third, of the original ship's company on the second voyage, had either perished or deserted by the time the *Modena* left the Persian Gulf around August of 1693, shortly before departing for England.¹⁴ Additional hands would have been needed to sail the ship back home and the East India Company's usual solution in such cases was to hire lascars (Asian sailors) to fill out the crew. However, we have no actual record of this, and a great many papers went down with the ship.¹⁵ All we can say is that it is probable that the ship's company of the *Modena* was neither as English nor as European as the English court records imply.

In a recent article, the maritime and Swedish East India Company historian Lisa Hellman has attacked the image of "the lonely ship on the open sea," arguing that it needs to be replaced with a far more "connected" understanding of the early modern sailing ship.¹⁶ The trope of the lonely ship on the open sea has a long pedigree however. Heroic adventurers who set off into the unknown are a popular way to represent a certain type of masculinity as well as a staple of romantic notions of European expansion. Though there is much more scepticism today about such enterprises, this narrative is still deeply engrained, and it still defines a lot of thinking about the age of sail.

As Hellman also points out, from the mid-1980s on, the trope of the lonely ship on the open sea gained added weight from Michel Foucault's notion of heterotopia. Foucault originally used the term to denominate social institutions like the clinic or the prison that, because they were engaged with the control and confinement of social misfits of one sort or another, tended, or so he argued, to develop their own utopian or dystopian rules. At a certain point, Foucault grew interested in ships and exploration, and he would go on to claim that "the ship is the heterotopia par excellence." It seems, however, that Foucault's heterotopic ship is far more isolated and more self-contained than is the case with some of his other heterotopias.¹⁷ It therefore makes it even harder to think outside the ship.

¹¹ Earle, *Sailors*, 200–204; Jelle van Lottum and Jan Luiten van Zanden, "Labour Productivity and Human Capital in the European Maritime Sector of the Eighteenth Century," *Explorations in Economic History* 53 (2014): 83–100.

¹² "Coffree" was a contemporary term widely used around the Indian Ocean for a person of African origin. A probable twentieth- and twenty-first-century cognate or derivative is the generally offensive term "kaffir."

¹³ British Library, London [hereafter BL], Add MSS 22,185, fol. 116–19, Henry Johnson Papers; TNA, High Court of Admiralty [hereafter HCA] 15/31 (unfoliated), "List of men dead and run from ship . . . dated in Gombroon Road, August 24, 1693," and TNA, HCA 24/127 (unfoliated), Files of libels, 1700–1703.

¹⁴ TNA, HCA 15/31.

¹⁵ "Lascar" was an imprecise category. On this see Michael H. Fisher, *Counterflows to Colonialism: Indian Travellers and Settlers in Britain, 1600–1857* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004); Michael H. Fisher, "Indian Ghat Sarangs as Maritime Labour Recruiting Intermediaries during the Age of Sail," *Journal for Maritime Research* 16:2 (2014): 153–66; and Nadri, "Sailors, Zielverkopers." The *Modena* did carry twenty "lascar" sailors on its 1692 outgoing voyage as passengers. These men were returning to Surat after they helped sail a different company ship back to England. See BL, Oriental and India Office Collections, B40 fol. 94, Court Minutes, 1690–95 entry for 21 December 1691.

¹⁶ Lisa Hellman, "Ett ensamt skepp på öppet hav? Kopplingar, kontakter och utbyten ombord på svenska ostindiefarare," *Historisk Tidskrift* 134:3 (2014): 357–84.

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias," *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité* 5 (1984): 46–9. This section owes a great deal to Hellman, "Ett ensamt skepp på öppet hav," 359–60. One would not want entirely to

Does this mean one should replace the lonely ship with the fully connected ship? That would be a step too far. The sailing ship, especially the long-haul sailing ship, did present certain unique spatial and temporal problems that Foucault was neither the first nor the last to notice. These resembled those of, say, the prison, but were also different in kind and degree. To point out the obvious, prisons do not typically float about from place to place; nor do they sink or run aground in storms. And while the temporal regime of prisons is clearly different from that of the world outside—prison-time is not ordinary time, at least if you are an inmate—the mismatch between a two or more year voyage to and from the East Indies and the more mundane temporalities of marriage, parenthood, land-based work, or even politics, had to have made the ship, if not lonely, then certainly detached. In fact, the connections ships and their crews inherited, had imposed upon them, and attempted to create very often sought to *compensate* for the spatial and temporal peculiarities just mentioned—to grapple with the things that *did* make sailing a ship different from living and working on shore. This means that one cannot simply replace the lonely ship with the connected ship. Rather it is necessary to look at the productive tension between detachment and connection, and to acknowledge as well that forming and maintaining connections took hard and sustained work.

How do groups of people turn connections into the functioning social ties they need to combat isolation and work relatively effectively together, both towards individual interests and common goals? If one is talking about an all-male work group in a demanding occupation like seafaring, the answer has often been both heterotopic and internalist: the regime of the ship itself. It is understandable that the technical and disciplinary challenges of sailing a ship would take up a good deal of space in the literature, especially in the study of naval warfare, but this has not always been accompanied by a very sophisticated view of the ties that bound sailors together. Thus, in the older literature on seafaring, and certainly in popular culture, social bonds at sea were often understood almost entirely as a product of men facing danger, hard work, and an unforgiving command structure, drinking together, and performing various ritualistic defences of group honour, such as fighting or hazing. An almost risibly extreme modern version of this is the popular reality show *Deadliest Catch* about Alaskan crab fishing, airing on the Discovery Channel since 2005. Already in the 1990s, however, scholarly works began appearing that critiqued the way highly stereotypic notions of gender had permeated not just popular views of seafaring but more serious scholarship, and several of these also made mention of the way the connections between ship and shore tended to be misrepresented, ignored, or sentimentalised.¹⁸

Internal logics of connection—like the danger-drink-violence nexus—are not necessarily wholly wrong, but they are also not the sole story. Thus, one of the things that drew the men of the *Modena* together was the fact that most of the men whom it is possible to trace came from a band of communities stretching from the Tower of London east along the north bank of the River Thames roughly to the edge of the old Isle of Dogs (now the Docklands). Moving from west to east this comprised the extra-parochial precinct of St. Katherine's by the Tower, the southern portion of

jettison heterotopia. A useful attempt to operationalise the concept is Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2007).

¹⁸ See, e.g., Margaret S. Creighton, "Women' and Men in American Whaling, 1830–1870," *International Journal of Maritime History* 4:1 (1992): 195–218; Steven Maynard, "Making Waves: Gender and Sex in the History of Seafaring," *Acadiensis* 22:2 (1993): 144–53; Margaret S. Creighton and Lisa Norling, eds., *Iron Men, Wooden Women: Gender and Seafaring in the Atlantic World, 1700–1920* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). The Discovery Channel documentary series *Deadliest Catch* has also given rise to a scholarly literature in its own right. See, e.g., Lisa A. Kirby, "Cowboys of the High Seas: Representations of Working-Class Masculinity on *Deadliest Catch*," *Journal of Popular Culture* 46:1 (2013): 109–18.

St. Botolph without Aldgate,¹⁹ and the so-called Tower Hamlets of Wapping, St. Paul Shadwell, and Ratcliffe, all three of which belonged to the large extramural parish of Stepney. These riverside communities lay adjacent to the Pool of London, that part of the River Thames that was deep and wide enough to permit ocean-going sailing ships to get surprisingly close to the City. Not unexpectedly, maritime activities predominated here. In addition to their wharves, timber yards, rope walks, shipyards, taverns, money-lenders, lodging houses, and brothels, these communities were within easy walking distance of major nodes of the fiscal-military state, such as the Navy Board and pay office, and the headquarters of the great mercantile trading companies, including East India House. The Admiralty Courts, which handled most maritime disputes, were also close by. The relatively small strip of communities where many East India sailors lived, most of them only a few streets wide before open fields began, meant that it was highly likely that many or most *Modena* sailors knew each other before they shipped out to the East Indies together.

The same went for their families. It used to be thought that sailors were averse to settling down and allergic to family ties; more recent evidence disputes that claim. At least for the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, sailors, unless they were teenagers or men in their early twenties, were more often than not married.²⁰ And those who were not married often had close connections to parents (especially their mothers) and to siblings. Marriage or other close ties on shore were important to sailors not just for emotional reasons but because relatives helped to functionally bridge the almost inconceivably long distances that East India ships had to traverse. Family members, especially women, organised the credit relations of the family or kin-group and performed crucial maintenance and survival tasks that the men were unable to do while they were away at sea. Family members on shore were key to negotiations with shipowners, with East India Company officials, and with the Royal Navy, and they often knew more about how the pay systems worked than the sailors did. They also supported sailors when they were out of work (which for many sailors was most of the winter months), nursed them when they came home sick, lent them money to fit themselves out for voyages (for example, warm clothes were essential), and shared the bounty when the men came home. Relatives on shore also attended wage payouts on the men's behalf.²¹ This was especially important for the many sailors who alternated between East India voyages and service in the Royal Navy, which was notorious for its long payment schedules.²² It was unwise to embark on a long journey without these kinds of connections and wherever they could sailors cultivated them.

One way these onshore connections were sustained was by equipping wives or other representatives, such as creditors, with a power of attorney or a will (or an instrument that combined the two) that allowed that "attorney" to collect a man's wages, to pursue wage-claims with the Royal Navy and the trading companies, and to sue in court. If a man died while abroad the power or will made it simpler for their "attorney" to execute or administer the estate—which usually consisted mainly of unpaid wages.²³ Relatives of

¹⁹ St. Botolphs was split between Middlesex and the Portsoken Ward of the City of London. Most sailors lived in the Middlesex part, which was next to the river.

²⁰ Jennine Hurl-Eamon, "Insights into Plebeian Marriage: Soldiers, Sailors, and Their Wives in the Old Bailey Proceedings," *The London Journal* 30:1 (2005): 22–38. For the Netherlands see Heijden and Heuvel, "Sailors' Families."

²¹ Hunt, "Women and the Fiscal-Imperial State."

²² John Ehrman, *The Navy in the War of William III 1689–1697: Its State and Direction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 127–37, 156–68, 263–4 et seq.; Personal communication, Barbara Todd.

²³ Margaret R. Hunt, "The Sailor's Wife, War Finance, and Coverture in Seventeenth-Century London," in *Married Women and the Law: Coverture in England and the Common Law World*, ed. Tim Stretton and Krista J. Kesselring (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), 139–62.

sailors were also heavily involved in public demonstrations and petitioning drives against the Royal Navy and the big trading companies. In 1693, for example, a group of wives and widows of East India Company sailors, headed by one Edith Holloway, submitted a petition to parliament complaining about their sailor relatives having been forced to fight, and in many cases to die, in the East India Company's War with the Great Mughal (also known as the first Anglo-Mughal War, 1685–1690) and demanding that East India Company sailors get a larger share of the profits for the sale of prizes taken in that war by East India Company ships.²⁴ It is likely that *Modena* relatives were involved in this action, for the *Modena* had participated in the first Anglo-Mughal War and was empowered to seize enemy ships.²⁵

People on individual ships were also often linked by kinship, and the *Modena* was no exception. Many of the boys on the ship (most of them listed as “servants” or “apprentices”) seem to have been relatives of their masters. One Creswell, a trumpeter, was apprenticed to his father, also a trumpeter, who had sailed on the *Modena*'s first East India voyage. It is likely that there were other connections by marriage or other kinds of kinship that cannot any longer be traced. Sailors were also connected by their common indebtedness to certain moneylenders, victuallers, landladies, etc., who almost certainly were involved in recruiting them for the voyage. This resembles the far better-known *zielverkop* system in the Netherlands.²⁶ All these relationships facilitated recruitment; but the inclusion of kin was also intended to ensure loyalty, and captains often tried to pack relatives and dependents in as their “servants,” presumably in part so they would have a reliable power-base. Measures like these also permitted specialists to augment their pay, because they had the right to their servant's pay as well as their own. They may also have helped ensure better care of young people, since a powerful adult had a financial as well as, ideally, an emotional interest in their well-being and survival. They must also have gone a long way towards assuaging the “loneliness” of a long voyage. It was these kinds of connections, based on neighbourhood, both blood and affinal kinship, credit and debt, and servant or apprentice relations—and not primarily on the working/drinking/fighting nexus—that provided the deep structure for most ships' companies.

If one accepted the “lonely ship” model one might be inclined to think that men who set off for a long voyage were essentially incommunicado for the rest of the trip—which could easily take two years or more. But the Admiralty Court case between the *Modena* relatives and the shipowners initiated in 1701 suggests that the opposite was true. Sailors went to some lengths to stay in contact with their families. As part of their argument in Admiralty and in a later case initiated in the Court of Exchequer, the *Modena* owners tried to imply that George Knowles, the chief mate, whose widow, Bridget, was the lead plaintiff in the case against them, might have died before the ship went down. But Bridget Knowles' brother, John Sherwell of Shadwell (one of those hamlets along the northeastern shore of the Thames) testified that he had in his possession five letters

²⁴ Anonymous [Edith Holloway et al.], *The Case of the Marriners Which Served the East-India Company in their Wars in the East-Indies. And of the Widows and Orphans of Those That Perished in the Said Wars, to the Number of Five Hundred, and as Many Widows: Humbly Presented to the Honourable House of Commons* [London: 1693]. See also House of Commons Journal, vol. 10, 731–2 (18 January 1693) when “a petition, of Edith Holloway and others,” was read that is identical to this one. The House of Commons petition is excerpted in Margaret R. Hunt and Philip J. Stern, eds., *The English East India Company at the Height of Mughal Expansion: A Soldier's Diary of the 1689 Siege of Bombay with Related Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2016), 171–3.

²⁵ Hunt and Stern, eds., *English East India Company*.

²⁶ Nadri surveys the literature in “Sailors, Zielverkopers,” 5n. See also Bruijn and van Eyck van Heslinga, “Scheepvaart van de Oost-Indische Compagnie en het verschijnsel muiteij,” 17. Recruitment through creditor-networks was never as institutionalised in England as it was in the Netherlands, however. I am grateful to Barbara Todd for many discussions on this subject.

written by George Knowles during the voyage. These tracked the cartographic and temporal progress of the ship. There was one from the Cape of Good Hope, two from Point de Galle on the Island of Ceylon, where the ship was laid up for an extended period for repairs after sustaining damage in a storm, one from Gombroon (Bandar Abbas) in the Persian Gulf, and one that Knowles wrote in Barbados and consigned as a precautionary measure to one of the other ships in the same convoy. Sherwell further testified that the letters “give numerous accounts of his [Knowles] wellbeing and of the proceedings of this Voyage, and more particularly in his last letter [from] Gombroon the said George mentions that his two servants are well and gave [*sic*] love to their relations.”²⁷

Though very few of these kinds of letters have survived, at least for English sailors—and Knowles’s originals were apparently thrown away,²⁸ there is no reason to think that efforts to communicate with one’s relatives at home were at all unusual. Sailors stayed in touch with their families by letter, by word of mouth, and by incidental references in other people’s letters, such as, in this case, George Knowles sending greetings from his servants, people who were certainly kin, neighbours, or other people with whom he and his family had a close connection.

It is worth pointing out that, in this as in many similar cases, the attempts by sailors to stay in touch with their kin (and vice versa, because messages also went the other way) were in part functional. One hopes that sailors tried to stay in touch with their kin because they loved them. But they also were often in debt to them and they knew they would need their support later on. Sailors also knew that credit from local suppliers (landladies, the grocer, etc.) at home could be damaged if word got out that the family’s relative on board ship had died. Whether a man was alive or dead also affected the pay routine at the East India Company, where the person holding a power of attorney from a particular sailor got a percentage of his pay twice a year— but only so long as he was alive and had not deserted. So letting one’s relatives know that one was alive and well was about more than just a desire to sustain an emotional connection across the thousands of miles that separated the Indian Ocean from England. Efforts to stay connected both spoke to and facilitated the transactions that kept kinship networks alive and riverside communities afloat economically, that supported sailors when they were ashore and gave them the funds they needed to prepare for long voyages.²⁹ Connectedness had effects at both ends of the line that were both functional and transformative.

The “lonely ship” model also does not comport well with the way sailors behaved in relation to other ships’ companies. The impression one sometimes gets is that the main way crews dealt with other crews in the age of sail and beyond was by brawling with them in harbour-side taverns and alehouses. While the occasional brawl surely took place, this picture, which smacks strongly of the internalist working/drinking/fighting paradigm of masculine identity formation, is clearly exaggerated. For one thing, there is evidence that sailors checked on relatives and friends on other ships whenever they had the opportunity. Thus, in the summer of 1694, “several of the company” from the ship *Charles II*, in convoy with the *Modena* from St. Helena to Barbados and then on the final fatal run north, went aboard the *Modena* when the convoy reached Barbados to find out which of their friends and relatives were still alive, and they came back to report

²⁷ TNA, HCA 13/82, fol. 386, Examination of John Sherwell, 20 March 1702.

²⁸ A good many letters to and from sailors and their kin have survived in the Prize Papers now housed in the British National Archives, mostly in the HCA class. These were papers seized from “enemy” and neutral ships by the Royal Navy and privateers during wartime. However, few of these letters are in English.

²⁹ Hunt, “Women and the Fiscal-Imperial State”; Hunt, “The Sailor’s Wife.”

to their shipmates (and to repeat much later in court) that among the people they had seen was George Knowles and that he had been “well, and in health.”³⁰

What was true of sailors was also true of ships. Many seventeenth-century East India Company ships preferred to sail in convoy, as a deterrent to pirates, privateers, and enemy navies, and as an insurance policy in case one of the ships ran into trouble. With their ritualistic rounds of gunfire, their trumpets, their forests of tall masts, and their flags and pennants flying, East India Company convoys celebrated their common purpose and also looked and sounded impressive to friend and foe alike. They were the polar opposite of the lonely ship, and it is telling that one of the main alternate terms for a convoy was also company, as in “a company of ships.”

A seventeenth-century East India Company ship without a convoy was often a ship in some kind of trouble. Most ships, if they lacked a convoy or had lost the one they started with (convoys were notoriously difficult to keep together), sailed to one of the main meeting points (the Canary Islands, the Cape of Good Hope, the Island of St. Helena, or even Barbados) in search of one. Ships also tried to stick to a very rigid time schedule, partly because of the seasonal quality of the monsoon currents and winds, and partly because that made it far easier to find and stay with a convoy.³¹ The intense sense of vulnerability sailors felt when they found themselves in a ship that actually *was* alone in the open sea is expressed powerfully by Edward Barlow, the well-known sailor-memoirist, after the October 1694 hurricane in which the *Modena* went down (Barlow was on another East India ship, named the *Sampson*, in the same convoy). Barlow later recalled that when the murderous wind and waves finally died down,

We [meaning the ship’s company of the *Sampson*] fitted our ship what we could, made sail being all alone having lost all our company, having a fine fleet and two convoys [navy ships] hoping to go home all well in company together that we might be a defence all together against our enemies the French if they should come and meet us, but it pleased God to frustrate all our expectations and disperse us one from another, where the good ship *Medena* [*Modena*] near 800 tons was lost, and twelve Barbados ships and all their men.³²

The hurricane not only scattered the convoy and sank thirteen ships, but it badly damaged those ships that managed to stay afloat, leaving them to limp back to England with jury-rigged masts, yards, and rudders. The *Sampson*, with Edward Barlow on board, only arrived in late November after its crew had come close to dying of thirst. Sailing alone had almost been their undoing.

By that time, with the rest of the convoy long overdue, it must have been clear to the people in London that something terrible had happened. The *Modena*’s owners, reputed to have suffered damage to the value of £10,000 –a fortune at the time– went into arbitration over demurrage payments. Most of the owners were major East India Company stockholders (Sir Josiah Child and members of his coterie) and several, including Child, were

³⁰ TNA, HCA 13/82, fol. 383, Examination of John Duck of Deptford, Midshipman of the *Charles II*, 20 May 1702.

³¹ I owe the approach of looking at convoys and sailing schedules to Hellman, “Ett ensamt skepp på öppet hav.”

³² Edward Barlow, *Barlow’s Journal of His Life at Sea in King’s Ships, East & West Indiamen & Other Merchantmen from 1659 to 1703*, ed. Alfred Basil Lubbock, 2 vols. (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1934), 2: 449. Barlow’s spelling and punctuation were eccentric. Basil Lubbock “adjusted” the original spelling considerably for the sake of clarity and he added punctuation. In this quote I have retained Lubbock’s spellings but dispensed with some of his added punctuation.

also on the Company Board of Directors. Because they were apparently able to vote on the insurance payments for their own lost ship, they did not do badly.³³ The mariners' relatives and heirs were not so fortunate. Seamen's wages were a significant expense that was not covered by insurance and the owners quickly moved to plug that breach. When the convoy failed to turn up on schedule, the East India Company abruptly stopped paying the standard percentage of the men's wages to their families. And when it became clear that the *Modena* was never coming back the owners also refused, despite petitions and memorials from the increasingly frantic and angry family members, to pay the heirs the rest of the men's wages. Ultimately, this was what sent the relatives of the *Modena* sailors to court.

Shipowners' efforts to make sailors or their surviving heirs shoulder their investment losses when a ship went down were a traditional bone of contention in maritime communities, and women were often involved in pressing for redress. Suits often circled around the applicability (or not) of the so-called last port rule.³⁴ Custom dictated that the men or their heirs be paid for the outbound voyage if the ship went down on its way back home, and this was to be the basic argument of the *Modena* plaintiffs as well. They could not collect their relatives' homeward-bound wages, but they believed they had a strong customary right to the wages the men would have received for the trip out to India.

At least three cases came out of this dispute, one in Queens Bench, one in the Court of Exchequer, and the main case in Admiralty Court, which had around seventy complainants. Over three-quarters of those complainants were women. These were heirs (mostly widows) of *Modena* sailors and there were also some creditors, including one named Moses Lacey, who was a moneylender and victualler, and probably a Navy and East India Company recruiter as well. The Admiralty Court case shows one of the other features of the "connected" ship's company, the way it crossed the boundaries not just between ship and shore but between the living and the dead. The men of the *Modena* never came back. What is left of them lies with their ship in one of the deepest regions of the Atlantic Ocean, perhaps five kilometres down. But their relatives and creditors walked the well-worn path through the law-courts that the men would have taken themselves if any of them had managed to survive the *Modena's* sinking. The *Modena* plaintiffs sought to revive and make operational the ties of love, money, and kinship that had developed and been carefully nurtured while the men were alive. They also appear to have taken it for granted—as did the court—that they were now in effect the ship's company. There were two obvious ways in which this was true. The first was the repeated use in the court documents of the standard legal formula "socii nuper nautae navis the *Modena*" (the company of former sailors of the ship the *Modena*) to describe the plaintiffs, even though all of them were relatives and creditors, and predominantly women, and not the sailors themselves. The second was the fact that the lists of plaintiffs deliberately followed the hierarchy on board ship, with the first mate's wife, Bridget Knowles, being the lead plaintiff.

The *Modena* relatives and creditors were, however, up against formidable adversaries. Technically the suit was against the shipowners. But, as we have seen, most of the owners, among them some of the richest men in England, were also current or former directors of the East India Company or their heirs. The East India Company had an interest in this and similar wage cases because it wanted to kill the "last port" rule once and for all and

³³ The owners are listed in TNA, HCA 13/83, fol. 235 (Examinations, 1703–1707), Deposition of Thomas Woolley of St. Andrew Undershaft, London, 3 Feb. 1704. For Josiah Child see Richard Grassby, "Child, Sir Josiah, First Baronet (Bap. 1631, d. 1699)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

³⁴ More specifically, the "last port" rule dictated that, if a ship or its cargo were lost en route, the sailors would be paid their wages up to the last port at which the ship had taken on cargo. The ship-owner would not be liable for any wages after that.

establish a precedent that sailors and their heirs did not need to be paid *either* outgoing or incoming wages if a ship failed to return to its home port.

Once it looked as if the judgement in Admiralty might go against them, the owners also sought injunctive relief from the Court of Exchequer. This made it more costly for the *Modena* relatives and creditors, who had far fewer resources than the owners did. In Exchequer the owners rehearsed the central claim of their Admiralty defence, which was that the men had signed a paper before embarking on the voyage in which they agreed that they would not receive their wages until the ship's cargo was unloaded in London. The owners also used their bill in Exchequer to plant the seeds of doubt as to whether the ship went down as a result of "distress of weather" or (as they claimed to suspect) due to "desertion or carelessness of [the] seamen." For their part the plaintiffs argued that owners were trying to contravene customary law (the "last port" rule), that the owners had received plenty of insurance money and therefore had the money to pay the sailors' heirs, and that the ship had gone down in a hurricane rather than as a result of the negligence of members of the ship's company.³⁵ Admiralty Court, as George Steckley has found, usually sided with the sailors or their representatives against the shipowners, and ultimately the relatives won their case, though only after a protracted and costly struggle marred by allegations from the mariners' families that the East India Company was bribing officials in Admiralty Court to slow down the proceedings.³⁶ The *Modena* Admiralty suit reveals another aspect or function of the ship's company (and, in this case, its shore auxiliary). The ship's company, understood in the broadest sense, was prepared to act collectively to defend customary "rules" meant to safeguard the economic position of sailors and their families, as well as to defend the professional honour of the ship's company against attacks by ship-owners and the East India Company, the most powerful private company in the land.

Conclusion

The ship's company was always at least partly constituted of networks: prior connections (including kinship) and lines of communication that sought to bridge and transcend space, place, and time. These networks linked individual ships and their convoys (or "companies of ships"), ships and shore, men and women, and the living and the dead. Those connections are what this essay has attempted to trace.

This reconstruction is clearly limited by the biases and silences in the records, especially with respect to non-English sailors and their relatives. This does not mean that the families of lascar sailors were without resources, though they would have had no way to access the English Admiralty Court. They may, for example, have brought pressure to bear on the Company's servants in Asia, or on indigenous *ghat sarangs* (labour brokers) in ways that have left no written traces. Ghulam Nadri has documented such activism for a later period, including, in the 1780s, violent demonstrations in Surat by the wives, families, and friends of lascar sailors over the Dutch East India Company's failure to pay their male relatives' wages.³⁷ Work like Nadri's gives us hope that, someday, a truly global history of maritime connections will be possible.

³⁵ TNA, E 112/826 Exchequer, London and Middlesex suit no. 133, 1 Anne, Easter [1702], *Grantham v. Knowles*, bill and answer.

³⁶ George F. Steckley, "Litigious Mariners: Wage Cases in the Seventeenth-Century Admiralty Court," *The Historical Journal* 42:2 (1999): 315–45. Several of the *Modena* petitions are to be found in TNA, HCA 15/31 (unfoliated), Exhibita.

³⁷ Nadri, "Sailors, Zielverkopers," 336–7, 364.

The aim here has been humbler, and it has been focused primarily on sailors' links to London maritime communities and to each other. The aim has been to explain how this ship's company represented, facilitated, and depended upon various connections that transcended the ship, and how some of their relatives operationalised those ties even once the men were dead. In the end, therefore, the story of the *Modena* shows us both how the linkages between people helped to create identities and workable communities, and how they could do these things across very long expanses of space and time.

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