

## Immortal Voices of the Speechless Deep: The Sea as “Gray,” “White,” and “Black” Villain in Nautical Melodrama

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Only the sea is like a human being; the sky is not, nor the earth. But the sea is always moving; always something deep in itself is stirring it. It never rests; it is always wanting, wanting, wanting.

—Olive Schreiner, *The Story of an African Farm*

Nautical melodrama as an authentically British genre originated from a mixture of dumbshows at the Royal Circus in the 1790s, “Aquatic Theatre” (lavish marine entertainments and spectacles) performed in Sadler’s Wells in the early 1800s, and the growth of the popularity of melodrama as a genre since the 1790s in England. It is not without reason that Britain is the birthplace of nautical melodrama. Known as a seafaring nation since its earliest history, Britain has had its identity in a large part shaped by the sea. Having established an invincible naval empire by the late eighteenth century, the nation took great pride in not only its navy but also its seamen, both of which are revered as the best of their kinds. Such nautical pride displayed itself in maritime novels such as Tobias Smollett’s *The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle* (1751) and *The Life and Adventures of Sir Launcelot Greaves* (1762), as well as various musical entertainments written by Charles and Thomas Dibdin in the 1780s and 90s that lauded the British Tar as a good-natured and heroically gallant patriot. Nautical melodrama flourished in the 1820s, and developed a new type of dramatic hero—Jack Tar, whose patriotism and valor historically secured Britain’s victories in the Napoleonic conflicts. Alluding to nautical legends (e.g. the Flying Dutchman), and specific historical events (including Horatio Nelson’s naval victories, the famous mutinies at Spithead and the Nore, and the shipwreck of *Medusa*), different kinds of melodrama took shape as a result of the versatile nautical themes, and the genre could thus be categorized into supernatural nautical plays, conquest plays, mutiny plays, pirate/smuggler plays, shipwreck plays, and so on.

The most essential element of nautical melodrama—the sea—has been, however, largely overlooked in the study of nautical melodrama. The sea has been naturally treated as the setting and spectacle, or “opsis”—the bottom tier of the six Aristotelian components of a serious theatrical presentation, namely, in the order of importance: mythos (or plot), ethos (character), dianoia (theme), lexis (diction), melos (melody), and opsis (spectacle). In the scholarly study of nautical melodrama, whereas most attention has been paid to the glorification of heroic sailors manifesting in an upsurge of patriotism (hence the first three tiers of the Aristotelian six), the sea is often ignored as merely the venue where melodramatic

actions take place. I propose, however, that the sea plays a more important role than simply the “opsis,” but rather, that of an “ethos,” which is analogously a living character—whether or not the melodramatists intended it to be so.

As Michael Booth points out in his most acclaimed contribution to the study of melodrama, *English Melodrama*, among all the melodramatic stock character types (hero, villain, heroine, old man, old woman, comic man, comic woman, and sometimes child), the villain is the most essential, as it is “the moving force of melodrama.”<sup>1</sup> The two main kinds of villain, according to him, are: “the grim, determined, immensely evil; and the shifty, cowardly, half-comic.” When stage appearance is taken into consideration, they are also referred to as the “black” villain and the “white” villain. These terms are taken from Thomas Erle’s description of both types in his 1880 book *Letters from a Theatrical Scene Painter; Being Sketches of the Minor Theatres of London as They Were Twenty Years Ago*:

The black is the strong-minded and bold villain. A personage of this class is corked up to such a pitch that his face rivals in blackness that of a metropolitan statue.... His countenance is steeped in gloom, and if he ever does manage to achieve a laugh, it is not by any means a satisfactory kind of transaction, being either demoniacal, or defiant, or dreary, or derisive, or has some other uncomfortable quality about it. His voice is a basso profundo, or rather profundissimo, emanating apparently from a depth coinciding in latitude with about the middle button of his waistcoat.

The “white” villain, however, has

Pink, bloodshot eyes like a white mouse’s, and on every alarm of detection they start out of his head like a scared rabbit’s or a prawn. He is as pale, through guilty apprehension, as plaster of Paris.... His gushes of merriment, when any such occur, are not roughly explosive like those of his black compeer, but forced and faint, and they sound hollow and unreal.

In the above description, while the “black” villain is unwavering, dauntless, overruling, and never likely to repent an evil act, the “white” villain is unprincipled, terror-stricken, evasive, and prone to desert to the side of goodness.

Building on Booth’s theorization and Erle’s description, I propose to modify the definition of the two types of villain, and thereby humbly introduce a third type: the “gray” villain. The color terms I use here no longer refer to the stage appearances of the villains, but instead, metaphorically, to the different levels of commitment to villainy. The quotation marks indicate that the color metaphors, drawn from historical stage presentation, are used only for the purpose of distinguishing degrees of villainy in a most straightforward way.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Booth, *English Melodrama* (London: Herbert Jenkins Ltd, 1965),18.

The “black” villain is the absolute villain of darkness who fits well with Erle’s description; there is no exhibition of one trace of goodness. The “white” villain is the well-intentioned pseudo-villain who is mostly restrained from villainy; they slip into villainy for trivial and mysterious reasons, and after realizing their path astray, they eventually right their own wrongs and part with evil for good. The “gray” villain is the semi-villain who indecisively alternates between paths of good and evil. They are in between the ultimate “black” villain and the surrendering “white” villain. Sometimes they repent; other times they remain dedicated to evil. Henceforward I will use “the ‘black’ villain” interchangeably with “the absolute villain,” “the ‘white’ villain” with “the pseudo-villain,” and “the ‘gray’ villain” with “the semi-villain.” I will also use “she” as the pronoun to address the sea.

Even though the sea as a character is speechless (she lets out emotional murmurs, roars and howls, none of which are verbal), she voices her character by way of her own actions and other characters’ speeches, and plays the role of the villain throughout, with varied levels of villainy in different stages of the development of nautical melodrama. Here “character” is no longer a human being or a corporeal object in the traditional sense; rather, it is an amorphous driving force that plays a role no less important functionally than a human character. So the emphasis of this article here is *not* to analyze the personified features of the “character” and the ways in which it passes as a human character metaphorically or symbolically, but to explore the role of the sea as an entity that is analogous to a melodramatic villain, and the functions of such a role in the historical transformation of nautical melodrama.

I propose that in the classical nautical melodrama era (roughly 1820s to the end of the nineteenth century), especially the so-called Golden Age of nautical melodrama (1820s and 30s), the sea is characterized *not* as a “black” villain, but either a semi- or pseudo-villain with a distinctive virtue of homecoming, which is in line with the contemporary drive toward an ideology that upholds domesticity and repudiates rebellion. As the classical nautical melodrama declines at the end of the nineteenth century, an avant-garde alteration of nautical melodrama, which revolutionizes the classical form while maintaining some of its essential features, shortly emerges on the American stage in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is during this period that, under the influence of naturalism, the sea represents the absolute villain, in whom no trace of goodness can be found. In this essay, I will trace the progression of the character of the sea in nautical melodrama from her role as a “gray,” to a “white,” and finally a “black” villain.

### **The Sea as a “Gray” Villain**

The sea’s villainy, first and foremost, lies in the natural catastrophes she generates. In nautical melodrama, this atrocity of the sea is most often seen in the category of shipwreck plays. One of the earliest and most remarkable shipwreck plays was W. T. Moncrieff’s *Shipwreck of the Medusa; or, The Fatal Raft* (1820), inspired by the actual disaster of July, 1816, when the French frigate *Medusa*, en route to Senegal to

repossess the colony from the British, hit a reef off the coast of Africa. Soldiers and sailors fought with passengers for places in the lifeboats, and when all lifeboats were full to be launched, 147 people were left with a makeshift raft which drifted on the sea until the handful still alive were rescued, after having to endure starvation, dehydration and cannibalism.<sup>2</sup> As one of the greatest nautical disasters of the century, it was depicted in the canonical Romantic masterpiece *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818-19) by French painter Théodore Géricault.

The *Medusa* scandal was considered a huge public embarrassment for the French monarchy, which was restored to power after Napoleon's 1815 debacle. In the incident itself, the sea was the most convenient villain to blame, but the ultimate villain turned out to be the French monarchy. This is indicated in Géricault's painting, in which those marooned on the raft had been abandoned by their leaders. The painting became the talk of the town the moment it was displayed at the Paris Salon in 1819 because of its confrontational anti-Bonapartist political statement and its bold departure from the then prevailing neoclassical aesthetics.<sup>3</sup> British dramatist Moncrieff chose to stage this sensational event, on the one hand to use the political implications of the incident to mock the newly installed French monarchy, and on the other, to mobilize the heroism of British tar and the English generosity as exhibited throughout the journey. The story goes like this: the heroine disguises herself as the midshipman on her lover's ship, on which the villain Adolphe (a French naval officer), who is in love with the heroine, is also aboard. After the shipwreck of the *Medusa*, Adolphe tows the raft, on which both the heroine (still disguised) and her lover are onboard, but cuts the towrope to destroy his rival in love. Whereas Adolphe ventures his life in the land of the Moors after his boat is wrecked, those on the raft experience great misery; and the only man who keeps them alive is the cheerful and courageous English sailor Jack Gallant (everyone else is French).

At the beginning of the play, the peaceful sea is the source of happiness to the dancing and singing sailor lads and lasses that are about to sail to Senegal: "Over the sands we'll like sea sprites go, / With a sea jig step and a yeo! Yeo! Yeo!"<sup>4</sup> They face the potential perils lying ahead with a heroic composure: "Far o'er the wave / We sail, to brave / The perils of the sea; / And ne'er again / Across the main, / Return, alas! May we."<sup>5</sup> After the vessel sets sail, they dress up as sea gods in the embarking ceremony, drinking and making merry. It is after some of them get drunk and the ship deviates from its route that the sea

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<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Miles, *The Wreck of the Medusa: The Most Famous Sea Disaster of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2007), 50-65.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Meisel, *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 189-90.

<sup>4</sup> W. T. Moncrieff, *Shipwreck of the Medusa, or, The Fatal Raft: A Drama, in Three Acts*, (London: John Cumberland, 1837), 9.

<sup>5</sup> Moncrieff, *Shipwreck of the Medusa*, 18.

transforms into a furious villain and actuates the shipwreck of the *Medusa*. After the shipwreck, the villainy of the sea is unveiled through the way in which she brings about the calamity of the human beings in the forms of thirst and hunger, and consequently an attempted murder and lurking cannibalism.

The bright side of the sea as a semi-villain is portrayed through its facilitation of Jack Gallant's valiant gallantry and nationalist pride, which is displayed throughout the play. Before the *Medusa* sets sail, as the newly appointed Bosen, Jack Gallant comments on the achievements of his motherland, "though we didn't win Waterloo, damme, we led the way to it; —we won the Nile and Trafalgar, aye, and single handed too, and we will again whenever old England chooses to give the word, for British heart of oak stands firm for ever!"<sup>6</sup> On the fatal raft, before it sets sail, Jack again drinks to his homeland: "we'll drink success to our native land!—mine's old England—God bless her!—A health to our wives and children!—long life to the king and our noble captain!"<sup>7</sup> After Adolphe abandons the raft, Jack curses, "the lubberly rascal!—when did he ever find a British officer desert his men in this way?"<sup>8</sup> When asked to prepare the lots to decide whom to be the victim of cannibalism, Jack replies, "'Tis a hard service, Governor, but a British sailor never flinches from his duty in the hour of trail, be it what it may."<sup>9</sup> Right before Adolphe's boat comes to rescue after he finds out about the disguise of his love interest, Jack decides to commit suicide by sinking into the sea and keeping its companionship forever: "I have done all a British sailor should, and now, good-bye, friends, good bye old England; and the great commander have mercy on us all."<sup>10</sup>

To Jack Gallant, the British Jack Tar, the sea has become the emblem of Britain. To be loyal to the sea is to be loyal to one's homeland, even when one is deserted by the latter. To echo the political association of the actual scandal and the theme of the painting, Moncrieff has Jack Gallant moderately criticize at one point the British abandonment of their tars, which further demonstrates the inseparable tie between the Jack Tar and the sea:

Jan: ... You shall be Bosen of the *Medusa* for Senegal: ahoy! Vive le roi!—Louis for ever!

Jack: What! Desert my king and country, you shark?—never! I've fought and bled for old England—I've been wrecked and lost my all, and past my life in her service, and though she neglects and deserts her brave tars just now, damn me if I'll ever desert her: she may one day reflect on our services and reward them; but whether she does

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<sup>6</sup> Moncrieff, *Shipwreck of the Medusa*, 16.

<sup>7</sup> Moncrieff, *Shipwreck of the Medusa*, 28.

<sup>8</sup> Moncrieff, *Shipwreck of the Medusa*, 31.

<sup>9</sup> Moncrieff, *Shipwreck of the Medusa*, 34.

<sup>10</sup> Moncrieff, *Shipwreck of the Medusa*, 38.

or no, when the hour of peril comes and a presumptuous enemy dares to invade her shores, old England will find, as she always has done, her best defenses in her wooden walls.<sup>11</sup>

Even if deserted by his leaders, Jack claims he will stay loyal to their leadership. This is analogous to a sailor's permanent loyalty to the sea. In this sense the sea becomes, apart from a friend, companion and leader, the sailor's home, the last retreat one faithfully returns to.

As one of the earliest fully developed nautical melodramas, *Shipwreck of the Medusa* starts with a tragic event but turns it into a sensational melodrama with a happy ending: Adolphe marries the Moor princess who falls in love with him at first sight, and the heroine marries her sailor lover. Jack remains single and happy; with a companion to spend the rest of his life with—the sea. Jack Gallant, the spokesperson for the sea for the most part, upholds domestic moral values such as staying loyal to one's authorities, staying faithful to one's companion and never to separate from him/her (when they decide on the raft whom to be the victim of cannibalism by drawing lots, the heroine draws the lot of the victim, but Jack spares her because he thinks the couple should stay together; fortunately he spots a turtle and therefore nobody needs to sacrifice) and being hospitable to one's guests (when brought in front of the King of Moor, he stresses hospitality). All these virtues point to a domestic ideology that advocates home-return, or retreating to a safe haven where no disloyalty could ever take place.

*Inchcape Bell; or The Dumb Sailor Boy* (1828) is another shipwreck play of the same period by Edward Fitzball, who is famous for his concoctions of horror, adventure, mystery, and domestic crises.<sup>12</sup> In this play, the “black” villain Hans comes back to an ancient seaside castle, owned by a retired sea captain Sir John Trevanly, for a dumb sailor boy, who was abducted by Hans with the help of Guy after the pillage of the castle years ago. Guy, who has quit the business for a while since the pillage, is forced to return to service. Guy reveals his true identity as Sir John's son, and that of the dumb sailor boy as is his half brother: Sir John's son with Lady Trevanly, who dies during the pillage. Guy repents and decides to save the boy, but is tied up and left to die alone by Hans with the rope cut down from the Inchcape Bell, after Hans' seizure of the dumb boy. Without the Bell, Hans's ship sinks, and Guy struggles to save the boy and then sinks into the sea with exhaustion.

The villainous aspect of the sea is represented through, first of all, the Inchcape rock that is concealed by the sea, which is known to have killed thousands of sailors. Because of the rock, the Inchcape

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<sup>11</sup> Moncrieff, *Shipwreck of the Medusa*, 14.

<sup>12</sup> Larry Stephen Clifton, *The Terrible Fitzball: The Melodramatist of the Macabre* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1993), 5.

Bell is “attached to a raft,” and “rung by the rising of the sea itself”<sup>13</sup> to save lives. The natural disaster-looming quality, however, only makes up the superficial vice of the sea; the sea displays its darker side through the social aspect of sponsoring smuggling and pirating, which involve malevolent businesses such as abduction and murder. The primary villain of the play, Hans, is the epitome of this dark force. Owner of a pirate ship, he smuggles cargo from and to foreign places once in a while on the sea. When Sir John was a sea officer waiting on His Majesty years ago in town, it was Hans who sailed to the coast and led the pillage of the castle and the abduction of Lady Trevanly and the infant son. In the stormy night Lady Trevanly, looking for her son, rushed over the edge of a precipice to her death, leaving the boy motherless. Years later, the boy, now dumb, reappears in the castle; that is why Hans comes again to the castle with his pirate ship: to repossess his cargo—the boy. As the sole character who never leaves the sea, Hans apparently represents one of the voices of the sea.

There are two other characters who live their lives mostly on the sea: Guy and the dumb boy, who both represent the voices of the sea (in this case Guy, since the dumb boy is speechless). They are both mothered by the sea, and the sea is represented through them as a righteous and nurturing force. Guy Ruthven witnessed the death of his mother at a very young age, after she was distressed by Sir John’s marriage to another woman (Lady Trevanly). With “no paternal voice [to] still [his] sea of passions,”<sup>14</sup> Guy was pressed into the service of Hans Hattock, and started his life as a seaman. The sea became his substitute mother and a just force to aid his revenges: “mortal men, laden with crimes like this, live not through such storms...”;<sup>15</sup> “Oh, these hands—how often...have I plunged them into the sea-wave to wash away the guilt which enstained them.”<sup>16</sup> Initially, Guy planned to take revenge on his father Sir John by joining in Hans’s plan of pillaging the castle. However, after abducting the infant boy and spending time with him, Guy found it hard to let go of him: “He was my prize, mine alone. Many years I fostered him in our ship; kind was I to him [...]. I meant to hate him, but my hate changed all to love, and the poor thing loved me, too.”<sup>17</sup> The dumb sailor boy, who had also lost his mother, like Guy, grew up in Hans’s ship on the sea; the sea is his nurturer and substitute mother too, as she is to Guy.

Guy therefore repents having done wrongs as a fellow smuggler of Hans’s, and plans to make things right by taking revenge on Hans. In the concluding scene of the play, the corrupt side of the sea,

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<sup>13</sup> Edward Fitzball, *Inchcape Bell; or The Dumb Sailor Boy*, in *The Lights O’ London and Other Victorian Plays*, ed. Michael Booth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 4.

<sup>14</sup> Fitzball, *Inchcape Bell*, 27.

<sup>15</sup> Fitzball, *Inchcape Bell*, 12.

<sup>16</sup> Fitzball, *Inchcape Bell*, 13.

<sup>17</sup> Fitzball, *Inchcape Bell*, 28.

epitomized by Hans, fights with the nurturing side of the sea as represented by Guy, and is defeated by the latter, with the aid of a shipwreck. The shipwreck in this sense is less of a natural disaster than of an avenging force, not only from Guy, but from the dumb sailor boy's dead mother, Lady Trevanly. Lady Trevanly's spirit haunted Hans until the last moment of his life: "Hans: ...Death—terrible—spirit of Lady Trevanly, leave me. I—sinking—sinking—help—I—(*Falls amongst the rigging*)."<sup>18</sup> After completing the revenge and saving the life of the dumb boy, Guy sinks into the sea and joins his natural mother, his stepmother Lady Trevanly, and his substitute mother.

In this play, the Gothic, nautical, and domestic elements are brilliantly woven together. The Gothic elements include the ancient seaside castle inhabited by Sir John, the enigmatic legend of the Inchcape Bell, the haunting effect of the death of both Guy's mother and Lady Trevanly, the disappearance of the dumb sailor boy, and the abductor Guy who turns out to be Sir John's other son. The treatment of the sea is enshrouded in a mysterious and superstitious atmosphere. The domestic elements are exemplified in minor characters like the maid and her two sweethearts, which lend comic and even farcical flavors to the play. Although Fitzball is most renowned for the Gothic and supernatural elements in his works, the shift toward the domestic in this piece, which parallels the transformation from Gothic to domestic as a general trend in the first half of the nineteenth century,<sup>19</sup> is apparent.

Sir John's abandonment of his wife turned his own son into his enemy, and this action cost him to lose the lives of his two wives and his older son to the sea villain, as her punishment. All is left to him is his younger son, whose life is saved by a repentant Guy, at the cost of Guy's own life. The not-so-happy ending bolsters virtues of repentance and the transformational power of love, which is represented by Guy, the righteous voice of the sea. The villainous part of the sea is voiced through Hans, who receives the ultimate punishment of losing his life. The virtue of the sea is marked by Guy's home-coming to her, as well as her driving home the eventual justice.

The most popular and famous of all the classical nautical melodramas of the time, *Black-Ey'd Susan; or, All in the Downs* (1829), is categorized by Douglas Jerrold himself as domestic nautical melodrama. It is a terrific example of how nautical melodrama transitions toward domestic melodrama and later Victorian urban drama that depicts urbanization and the growth of big cities. In this play, the sea is contrasted with the land in many ways, and the villainous and facilitating qualities of the sea as a semi-villain are represented in contrast to the terrestrial.

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<sup>18</sup> Fitzball, *Inchcape Bell*, 30.

<sup>19</sup> According to Michael Booth, the Gothic, the nautical, and the domestic melodramas, the three main divisions of melodrama, succeed one another roughly in chronological order. See Chapter 4 "Military and Nautical Melodrama" in his *English Melodrama*.

There are two minor villains in the play, one terrestrial and the other nautical. The terrestrial villain is Susan's heartless uncle and landlord, Doggrass, who is about to send Susan and her sick widowed mother away for arrears in rent. The nautical villain is the smuggler captain Hatchet, who plans to take William's place by giving his wife a forged report of his death. The major villain also turns out to be a nautical villain: William's captain, Crosstree, who is fascinated by Susan's beauty and is determined to possess her. If the atrocity exhibited by the land is merely avarice, the villainy represented by the sea is much more depraved—lust, deception, envy, and greed all in one, presumably due to the monotonous life at sea compared to that on the ground. William, however, is both a terrestrial and nautical hero, for before he was forced to the navy, he was a hardworking farmer who supported his whole family. As an epitome of the highest of both terrestrial and nautical, as well as civilian and military virtues, William is portrayed as a perfect citizen, a perfect soldier, and a perfect husband, who is loyal to his country, his officers, and his wife.

William finds himself caught in a dilemma only as the terrestrial and nautical codes conflict, when Crosstree, William's own captain, tries to proposition his wife Susan. As a husband, William has to defend his wife to keep her honor; but as a soldier, he has no choice but to bow down to the commands of his superior. Having just rescued Susan from a group of smugglers and unaware it is Crosstree who's harassing Susan, William stabs his captain and is court-martialed. The code of the sea turns out to be much grimmer, for William's actions are deemed mutinous, and the "Twenty-second Article of War" prescribes death for lifting one's finger against one's superior officer, whichever the causes, which William obviously violates despite his appeal to "condemn the sailor" and "respect the husband."<sup>20</sup> William eventually accepts that he is guilty and prepares to sacrifice his life to abide by martial law. The dilemma is happily resolved triply, however, by Crosstree's miraculously sudden transformation from villainous to virtuous. Crosstree confesses that it was his behavior that drove William to stab him, and moreover, reveals a discharge he applied earlier for William, which arrived just before the attack and restored William from a sailor who attacked his superior to a common citizen who protected his wife.

In *Black-Ey'd Susan*, the William figure departs from the typical Jack Tar seen in earlier melodramas like *Shipwreck of the Medusa* who, without a family life, is wholeheartedly devoted to the service of the monarchy. This model citizen, however, returns to his home and all it represents, and epitomizes the crystallization of the highest virtues of a domestic hierarchical society. In the play, the wicked aspect of the sea is projected upon Hatchet and Crosstree. Hatchet as a minor villain reflects her promotion of evildoing; Crosstree as the primary villain of the play voices the depravity of the sea.

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<sup>20</sup> Douglas Jerrold, *Black-Ey'd Susan; or, All in the Downs*, in *Nineteenth Century Plays*, ed. George Rowell (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), 36.

However, Crosstree deserts to goodness eventually and even actuates William's discharge from the navy and return to domesticity. In fact, Crosstree represents the most compromising evil self of the sea. Even as the most vicious mouthpiece of the sea, primary villain Crosstree advocates homecoming by realizing William's return to his wife and comes home himself to the ideology of domestic subordination. This makes *Black-Ey'd Susan* a most thorough home-coming piece, and a most typical "domestic nautical melodrama" that illustrates the general historical transition from nautical to domestic melodrama.

In the above three plays, the sea as a "gray" villain exhibits the same kind of virtue—the kind that reflects a vision of home-coming and domestic order. Jack Gallant comes home to the leadership of the monarchy; Guy comes home to his conscience, repentance and his abyssal substitute mother; William comes home to his nautical duties as a patriotic naval officer, and eventually to his wife and home. The idea of "home" becomes more and more substantial in each case, as the nautical melodramas strive to consolidate an ideology that disavows mutiny of any kind and endorses pacified domesticity. The villainy of the sea also, to some extent, serves the same end as natural catastrophes and social evils such as smuggling: to instigate fear inside the audience and thereby bolster the privileges of a cozy, tame and peaceful home. As Jeffery Cox aptly points out, nautical melodrama is used to "discipline any rebellious tendencies... [in which] history is rewritten to alter the moral balance of power between the mutineers and the government," or in other words, between insurgents and authority. Ironically, "the mutiny that almost brought England to its knees in 1797 is in 1830 transformed into a matter of personal jealousies, the protection of one's children, respect for the family, reverence for the monarchy, and the belief in subordination."<sup>21</sup> Radical elements of history are purged in nautical melodrama to clear the way for a pacified audience and a submissive domestic order. That summarizes the essence of the virtue and vileness of the sea as a "gray" villain.

### **The Sea as a "White" Villain**

As a "white" villain, the sea's level of villainy drops, and her virtues intensify. Even though the sea commits little villainy in the following plays, she is still characterized as a villain, as her viciousness lies in her menacing power, which is the intrinsic nature of the sea—a hovering evil force that threatens the lives of whoever is at her bosom, and intimidates whoever dares to come to her encounter. There are fewer plays in the classical nautical melodrama era that portray the sea as a pseudo-villain, since the evildoing of the sea is one of the nautical melodramatists' favorite devices to create sensational effect among the audience. The nineteenth century audience flocked to the theatres to see harms done by the sea (and her

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<sup>21</sup> Jeffrey N. Cox, "The Ideological Tack of Nautical Melodrama," in *Melodrama: The Cultural Emergence of a Genre*, ed. Michael Hays and Anastasia Nikolopoulou (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 186.

spokespersons) on stage, which was made possible by developments in stage design, machinery and lighting. Nevertheless, the “white” villain plays still make up a crucial part of the gamut of classical nautical melodrama.

A similar plot pattern can be detected in many of these “white” villain plays: a main character returns home after an Odyssean journey at sea, and reunites with a family which has remained faithful throughout the years. The sea’s virtue is intensified in these plays; on top of reflecting a vision of homecoming and domestic order, the sea herself becomes a force of preservation and salvation—sometimes even to a religious degree—and reinforces the merit of subordination and domesticity. This is evident in the two plays that I am to briefly analyze: *Ambrose Gwinett, or a Sea-side Story* (1830) by Douglas Jerrold and *Sea of Ice, or A Thirst for Gold, and The Wild Flower of Mexico* (1861-69?) by French dramatist Adolphe d’Ennery.

Both plays deal with a journey or transformation that lasts over a decade, resembling the decade-long Odyssey. In *Ambrose Gwinett*, jealous of his love rival Ambrose Gwinett, primary villain Ned Grayling develops an evil plot to kill Ambrose by accusing him of the murder of Master Collins, Ambrose’s uncle-in-law, who is safely sailed to India by Grayling and will survive and thrive in the foreign land. Ambrose is hanged but miraculously survives the hanging, and leaves England for the sea. For Collins, the sea acts as a life preserver and a safe haven far from the earthly evils; for Ambrose, the sea launches him to an Odyssean journey after preserving his life. During the eighteen-year exile, Ambrose has spent six years on the sea and twelve years working as a captive for the Moors, and when he finally returns home with gold, his wife Lucy, much like Penelope, still remains lovingly faithful to him. Unlike Odysseus, Ambrose does not avenge his enemy when he comes back home, but provides him with alms and asks him to repent. The sea journey has transformed Ambrose into a saintly being, in front of whose virtue the villain feels too ashamed to live and ends his own life. In this play the sea as a “white” villain, on the one hand, brings about sufferings for both the hero and the heroine; on the other, she leads the hero to a journey of spiritual salvation. The years of ordeal only makes home-return more rewarding and worthwhile. Again domestic virtues such as patience, repentance, subordination and marital faithfulness are stressed and exalted to such a level that Ambrose, the sea’s voice, epitomizes a Christian saint.

*Sea of Ice, or A Thirst for Gold, and The Wild Flower of Mexico* also portrays revenge after the completion of an Odyssean exile. Written after the tremendously successful French novel, *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1844), *Sea of Ice* employs a storyline that closely resembles Dumas père’s masterpiece, except that in the novel Edmond Dantès completes the revenge himself, while in the play the Captain de Lascours and his wife are revenged by their daughter Ogarita (Marie). Just as Dantès, in the novel, manages to unearth the location of the treasure from Abbé Faria before his death, Carlos the Adventurer also has

someone reveal to him the location of the gold. Both Dantès and Carlos make their way to the treasures by way of the sea—the sea journeys bring both of them fame and fortune.

In *Sea of Ice*, Captain de Lascours and his wife Louise sail for Mexico with their elder daughter Marie and their crew, leaving behind Diana, the couple's younger daughter, with Louise's mother. On the ship, Carlos the Adventurer stages a mutiny and drives away the Captain's family, who are put on a separate yawl and left drifting on the sea, and their comic helper Barabas, who leaps into the sea after shooting Carlos and wounding him. The four have to struggle in the sea of ice for their lives. Marie and Barabas survive while the de Lascours are taken by the sea of ice. Fifteen years later, at the coast of Mexico, the now wealthy and powerful Carlos calls himself Marquis del Monte. He is passionately in love with an Indian girl, Ogarita, the Wild Flower of Mexico, who shudders while looking at him. Ogarita meets Countess de Theringe and Diana, who soon both realize that that Ogarita is Marie. They together return to Paris. In Paris, Ogarita fully regains her memory after meeting Barabas, accepts Marquis's hand in order to avenge, and reveals the true identity of Marquis del Monte as the mutineer and murderer Carlos the Adventurer. In despair Carlos shoots himself.

The sea in this play, as a force of salvation, is represented in a Christian sense. Louise, Captain de Lascours's wife, while the ice plain on which they stand begins to fall, repeats the prayer together with her daughter Marie, "Oh Thou! Who hast all the strength of a father and the tenderness of a mother, save us from the abyss that threatens, and the wicked who kill."<sup>22</sup> It is a prayer to God, and here in this case, very cogently the omnipotent raging sea. The sea, bearing the features of a robust, tenacious and tender mother, preserves the lives of both Marie and her comic helper Barabas: Marie has been saved by the Indians at shore, and Barabas by a Danish vessel. In the following fifteen years, the sea has served as nurturer of the orphan. Fifteen years' upbringing by the seashore of Mexico has transformed Ogarita (Marie) from a vulnerable orphan to an Indian girl of beauty and wisdom, known as the Wild Flower of Mexico. When Ogarita (Marie)'s sister Diana and grandmother Countess de Theringe meet her for the first time, Diana says the prayer of the sea, which her grandmother has taught her mother Louise: "Oh Thou! Protector of the feeble and of orphans! Save us from the abyss that threatens, and the wicked who kill." The reiterated prayer illustrates the didactic maxim of the play—human beings are vulnerable; only those bearing Christian virtues such as endurance and subordination will attain salvation of the soul. Following this logic, the death of Captain de Lascours and Louise does not mark the end of their lives, but the salvation of their Christian souls by the sea. Carlos's soul has been sold to the desire for gold and power, and as "the wicked who kill," his soul is doomed to suffer in the Christian sense. When Marie (Ogarita), along with Barabas,

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<sup>22</sup> Adolphe d'Ennery, *The Sea of Ice; or, A Thirst for Gold, and The Wild Flower of Mexico. A romantic drama, in five tableaux ... As performed at the Broadway theatre* (New York: Samuel French, 186?), 19.

finally outwits Carlos, Carlos is reduced to an unsaved orphan—the opposite of Marie, as retribution for what he has done unto others.

In both plays, the sea as a pseudo-villain preserves and nourishes lives, and furthermore sustains justice and completes salvation. Ambrose is transformed into a saint; Captain de Lascours and his wife Louise are both redeemed in the Christian sense for their Christian virtues; Marie, as the one who carries out revenge, is changed from an orphan to a resourceful pious young lady, and is rewarded for her endurance, patience and wit. The vision of home-coming is still conspicuous in both plays; both end with happy family reunion. The domestic virtues like loyalty and subordination is clearly more underscored in *Ambrose Gwinett*. Ambrose's wife, Lucy, comparable to Penelope, exhibits the ultimate virtues of a domestic wife; and Ambrose revenges by not having to revenge at all. *Sea of Ice*, a French melodrama, does not come from a direct English nautical melodramatic tradition, but still reinforces values like endurance and patience, which parallel with the essence of domesticity in classical British nautical melodrama. The virtues of the sea intensify in that the sea's force of preservation and salvation is exalted to a religious level, which in turn underlines the vision of domesticity.

### **The Sea as a “Black” Villain**

As classical nautical melodrama declines in the late nineteenth century, and the Victorian urban and domestic drama starts to take over, the element of domesticity is no longer a moving force of characterization. The sea as a character assumes its role as an absolute antagonist: it is sometimes the single “black” villain, and human beings become her victim. This treatment has its roots in the tradition and evolvement of American sea literature.

The American sea literature began with early settlers writing down their treacherous journeys across the ocean and experiences at sea. After the War of 1812 with Great Britain, the US maritime industry flourished as a result of the growing trading market, westward expansion, and immigration. In Britain, the Romantic movement produced works such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge's long poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), which narrates a supernatural story of incessant retribution of Nature on the Mariner who has defied the divine law, and Shelley's “A Vision of the Sea” (1820), which treats of a macabre ship voyage and the death of one mariner after another on a wreck. Unlike their British counterpart which treated the sea as villainous, the sea in American maritime literature in the first half of the nineteenth century was largely romanticized as a place of freedom, peace and adventure, a place to escape from the industrialized society and its insatiable cravings. James Fenimore Cooper (1789-1851) and Herman Melville (1819-1891) are among the most prominent sea writers at this time. Cooper's *The Pilot: A Tale of the Sea* (1824), which was considered to have marked the genre of sea fiction, takes his own life experience as a sailor and idealizes the sea as a place to gain maturity. Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) tells

the story of the mad whale-ship captain Ahab's search for a huge albino whale who had maimed him earlier, and romanticizes the world in which men trade their dull routines in the city for adventurous lives at sea.

The publication of Charles Darwin's controversial *On the Origin of Species* in 1859 marked a major change of sea literature from Romanticism to realism and naturalism, while late nineteenth century writers of sea literature turned their attention to the unsolvable conflict between comradeship among seamen and the Darwinian notion of survival of the fittest, and the way in which man was no match for the hostile and omnipotent sea. Writings by Walt Whitman (1819-1892), Stephen Crane (1871-1900) and Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) demonstrate this gradual change. Whitman explored the mysterious powers of the nature and one's individual identity in poems such as "On the Beach at Night" and "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life" (1881). Crane in his short story about shipwreck "The Open Boat" (1898) portrayed the individual as powerless against the hostility of the sea. *Lord Jim* (1900) by Conrad begins with an abandonment of the ship after rough weather conditions, which left the pilgrim passengers mercilessly to their fate. Following this tradition of sea writing, the nautical melodramas by Eugene O'Neill at the beginning of twentieth century took on naturalistic elements, which transcended the limitations of the traditional form of nautical melodrama and provided it with a new dimension.

There are historical debates over whether or not Eugene O'Neill is a melodramatist, most clearly seen in the 1961 volume *O'Neill and His Plays: Four Decades of Criticism* edited by Oscar Cargill, N. Bryllion Fagin, and William J. Fisher. In "Beyond Melodrama," Homer E. Woodbridge defines melodrama "not as a historical form, but as a trait characteristic of the historical form, which appears in plays of different kinds." He claims that "anyone who has read O'Neill's plays thoughtfully or seen them in the theatre must have been aware of certain elements of melodrama in them," but since there are melodramatic elements in Shakespearean plays, it is unfair to dismiss O'Neill's plays as mere melodrama, without a close analysis of "with what other elements [melodrama] is combined, in what proportions . . . melodrama enters into O'Neill's work."<sup>23</sup> Francis Fergusson contends that "the essence of melodrama is to accept emotions uncritically; which, in the writing, amounts to assuming or suggesting emotions that are never realized either in language or action. Melodrama in this sense is a constant quality in Mr. O'Neill's work."<sup>24</sup> Fergusson gives an overview of O'Neill's treatment of emotions and what exactly he seeks after:

[Melodrama] disfigures his middle period, when his feeling for a character is out of all proportion to that character's importance of the play, as well as his later period, when his attempt to deal with his own unattached emotion takes the unhappy form of a passion for some

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<sup>23</sup> Homer E. Woodbridge, "Beyond Melodrama," in *O'Neill and His Plays: Four Decades of Criticism*, edited by Oscar Cargill, N. Bryllion Fagin, William J. Fisher (New York: New York University Press, 1961), 308-09.

<sup>24</sup> Francis Fergusson, "Melodramatist," in *O'Neill and His Plays: Four Decades of Criticism*, edited by Oscar Cargill, N. Bryllion Fagin, William J. Fisher (New York: New York University Press, 1961), 276.

large idea. In fact it seems that Mr. O'Neill typically resorts to the stage, not to represent emotions through which he has already passed; which have been criticized and digested, and so may be arranged in patterns to form works of art: he resorts to the stage to convey a protest, the first cry of the wounded human being. His fundamental feeling for the stage, so clearly shown in these first plays, is not that of the artist, but of the melodramatist: the seeker after sensational effect.<sup>25</sup>

Acknowledging the merits in both sides, I concede that it is not the purpose of this essay to pass judgment on how much of a melodramatist O'Neill has been throughout his playwriting career. I would like to, however, include in the discussion of this essay two one-acts that are among O'Neill's earliest works—*Thirst* (1913) and *Fog* (1914)—and to analyze them as avant-garde nautical melodrama. The melodramatic bearing of both of these plays has been observed by many, because they make conspicuous innovations while retaining the most distinctive elements of the melodrama, such as the sensational effect, the use of violence, the timely presence of music, constant new events and endless possibilities.

Both *Thirst* (1913) and *Fog* (1914) are shipwreck plays, presumably inspired by the infamous incident of 1912 that is generally regarded as the greatest shipwreck of the twentieth century—the sinking of the *Titanic*. *Thirst* takes place on a life raft adrift on a tropical sea, with three passengers on board: a Gentleman, a Dancer, and a West Indian mulatto sailor, all of which are dehydrated and dying of thirst. Drinking water now becomes their lifesaver—the very thing to sustain their lives at the gate of death, as they are threatened triply by the glaring sun, the circling sharks, and no boat in sight coming to rescue. Both suspicious that the Sailor has drinking water, the Gentleman convinces the Dancer to offer him her diamond necklace in exchange for some water. She concedes, and further offers the rest of what she has to the Sailor—her dancer's body. However, he has no water to offer. When the Dancer gets mad and dies of thirst, the situation immediately descends into a Darwinian struggle for survival, which comprises both cannibalism and shark attack. The strongest of the three, the Mulatto Sailor, is undoubtedly the fittest, as he has grown up by the sea, and is so familiar with the sea he even knows the song, or the superstitious “charm,” to drive away the sharks: “If I sing long enough they will not eat us.”<sup>26</sup> The Sailor is happy to see the Dancer dead: “She is better off. She does not suffer now. One of us had to die.”<sup>27</sup> He then takes out a knife ready to eat her to quench his thirst and hunger. Horrified, the Gentleman pushes her body into the sea, which is taken by the sharks. The refusal to abide by the law of nature only leads the Gentleman to a quicker death. The furious Sailor stabs the Gentleman, who falls into the sea, pulling the Sailor in with him,

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<sup>25</sup> Fergusson, “Melodramatist,” 277.

<sup>26</sup> Eugene O'Neill, *Thirst*, in *Complete Plays* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1988), 34.

<sup>27</sup> O'Neill, *Thirst*, 50.

and both become the satisfying lunch of the sharks, the embodiment of the sea, who proves to be the fittest evil force.

*Fog* also takes place on a life raft adrift at sea, which is coming close to an iceberg. The main characters are the Poet and the Business Man, whose identities reveal as the fog lifts. The other two characters, the Polish Peasant Woman and her Dead Child are both silent, as the Dead Child has died before the play begins, and the Polish Woman sleeps throughout the play, and dies during her sleep. When they hear the sound of a steamer in the distance, the Business Man wants to call out for help, but the Poet forbids him, for fear that the steamer might strike the iceberg and sink: “We can die but we can’t risk the lives of others to save our own.”<sup>28</sup> It is the Poet who had also saved the poverty-stricken Polish Woman and her baby by getting them on the raft. The Poet himself also lives in poverty and has suicidal tendencies. The Poet is regarded by the Business Man as mad and unfit: “The Business Man—(edges away from the Poet, firmly convinced that his convictions regarding the similarity of poets and madmen are based upon fact).”<sup>29</sup> The rescue steamer finally arrives, whose officer claims that he was guided through the fog to their boat by the cries of a child. But in fact, the child has been dead for twenty-four hours. It turns out that the Business Man gets on the steamer, and the Poet, who is unwilling to join the “fittest,” stays with the deceased two, and, just like them, is finally taken by the sea.

From the above two melodramatic pieces, it is evident that the genre has experienced a sea change. The essential melodramatic elements, such as the emotional overlay, series of actions, constant new events and the sensational effects, remain the same; but the classic formula is gone and the dramatic form changed. In both plays, there is no longer a resolution at the end, distinguishing them from the classical nautical melodrama; there is also no final confrontation. The progressive and linear cause and effect is also gone, and the moral certainty is under question. The plots become unpredictable and sometimes even puzzling. An element of Strindbergian subjectivity is introduced to the play, in which the objective world no longer has concrete contours, but instead is built through the mental processes of the characters of the play.

The character formulations have also changed, under the influence of late nineteenth century naturalism. In the above two pieces, nature becomes the villain, and all the human beings become the victims. The sea is treated as a primary villain that acts thoroughly against human beings. In *Thirst* the sea is evidently the “black” villain and the ultimate winner. She witnesses the futile struggles of the powerless human beings, all of whom eventually fall victim to her, the one who is the fittest and omnipotent. In *Fog* the sea as an absolute villain is portrayed more subtly and symbolically. The thick “fog” is a force of isolation that disconnects human beings from each other and from the world. The “fog” also reflects

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<sup>28</sup> O’Neill, *Thirst*, 52.

<sup>29</sup> Eugene O’Neill, *Fog*, in *Complete Plays* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1988), 104.

metaphorically the questionable condition of human existence. In the thick fog, what leads the rescue steamer to find the raft is the Dead Child's cry—a supernatural force affected by the “fog,” the treatment of which is reminiscent of Maeterlinck's techniques in creating atmosphere: “We could hear the kid crying all the time,” the Officer maintains; then the Officer notes that this cry “stopped just as the fog rose.” As the fog lifts and the rescue steamer arrives, the Poet, who symbolizes idealism and humanitarianism, decides not to get on the rescue steamer, while the Business Man, who epitomizes avarice and egocentrism, is eager to have his own life saved. The Poet's decision, which is regarded as foolish and ludicrous by the Business Man, is the Poet's philosophical and anti-pragmatic concession to the force of nature (here the sea). The rescue steamer will be sailing to its death soon, because it only sailed safely because of the supernatural guidance of the Dead Child before the fog lifted. The sea, who has taken the lives of the Polish Peasant Woman and her Dead Child, is about to take the Poet, and eventually the lives of the Business Man and the steamer crew. The sea not only symbolizes the shadowy existential condition of the human being, but also the unpromising future of the human race, as everything is taken over by the dark force. It is in this way that the sea completes its role as a “black” villain.

These two one-act plays, by portraying the sea as the absolute villain, explore man's position in the universe in a philosophical way, which is unprecedented in nineteenth century melodrama. What O'Neill was interested in exploring was not the melodramatic plot, but the metaphysical aspect of melodrama. O'Neill explored the ways in which the relationship between man and nature shall be viewed in a metaphorical way, as the titles of both plays (*Thirst* and *Fog*) have suggested. This metaphorical exploration involves the use of naturalistic elements, such as evocation of the sounds (the mulatto's singing, the steamer whistle, the sound of the water melting from the iceberg, the constantly dripping sound, the sound of the horn, etc.), sights (light and darkness) and even smells and tastes (licking the cracked lips, etc.). In addition to these naturalistic elements, O'Neill employs symbolic elements, such as the blending of natural and supernatural elements (Dead Child and the crying voice that draws the steamer). These techniques all transcended the limitations of melodrama and opened up new possibilities for the dramatic form.

Even though it is far from a standard historical practice for nautical melodramatists to intentionally personify the sea, it is useful to study the sea as an essential driving force that is analogous to a melodramatic villain and explore how this treatment influences the historical transformation of the nautical melodrama. By examining the ways in which the sea interacts with human characters and voices herself through others, I have presented the progression of the sea from her role as a “gray,” a “white,” to a “black” villain. In the classical nautical melodrama era, the sea as semi- or pseudo-villain is bestowed with virtues of homecoming, which illustrates the domestic moral values and the ideology of subordination at the time. As nautical melodrama evolves into a more revolutionized form in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the sea as absolute

villain takes on naturalist and symbolist influences, and reflects human beings' metaphysical inspection of man's place in the universe. The different treatments of the sea as villain have paved the way for the portrayals of the sea in contemporary nautical melodramas such as the best-selling film series *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003-) which is still in progress.<sup>30</sup> The taxonomy of the sea as villain proposes a new way of categorizing nautical melodrama non-thematically, and promises an alternative perception of the different stages of the historical evolution of nautical melodrama. The immortal sea certainly speaks; it is we human beings who don't always listen.

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<sup>30</sup> A fifth *Pirates of the Caribbean* film is set for release in 2017.

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