

The Sailors' Language in Smollett's *The Reprisal*

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I

Tobias Smollett's *The Reprisal; or The Tars of Old England*, a farce, was produced in 1757 at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane.¹ This was his second drama, in which he accomplished his long-cherished desire to acquire fame as a dramatist.² His attitude towards dramas is presumably "In the drama, all utterances have a relevance in terms of their moment of occurrence but also in terms of characterisation or story development".³ He creates the setting of his dramas with the utmost attention to his characters' speeches.

The setting for *The Reprisal* is drawn on the sea. Byron Gassman traces Smollett's adoption of naval life as a place of the drama:

In settling upon the misadventures of men aboard a naval vessel as a subject for his new theatrical piece, Smollett must have been moved by several considerations. An important element in his success with *Roderick Random* had been its depiction of naval life. And he had enjoyed additional success with his portraits of such comic naval types as the Welshman Morgan and Lieutenant Bowling in *Roderick Random* and of Commodore Trunnion, Hatchway, and Pipes in *Peregrine Pickle*.⁴

Lewis Mansfield Knapp, moreover, mentions "Smollett's use of life and scenes in the British navy in the early 1740's in his first novel has long been recognized as an original and important contribution to the materials of English fiction".⁵ Smollett's experience in the navy had a very crucial and instructive influence on his writing.

Admiral Sir Herbert Richmond gives a historic background of the navy in the eighteenth century:

The Navy of 'Johnson's England' was the principal instrument of British policy in that series of three wars which decided whether England or France should possess the New World and the Indies. In each of these wars the Navy was slow to get into its stride, its power was but tardily

brought into effective use.⁶

In *The Reprisal*, we witness the war condition between French and British navies. Block drinks French brandy and cries in high spirits, "An Englishman will fight at a minute's warning, brother--but a Frenchman's heart must be buoyed up with brandy" (2.8),⁷ and he shows his distaste for French seamen by sneering at them. On the other hand, in the last scene, Lyon tells his sailors about his experience as a prisoner in the French navy: "I was once taken by the French, who used me nobly" (last scene). He shows some respect to the nation, as well.

This article is intended to examine and analyse the sailors' language, in order to find Smollett's sharpest linguistic humour.

II

In the drama, we find various nautical words and phrases that function as a means of expressing verisimilitude and of showing the characters' peculiarities. Eric Partridge discovers the brilliance of Smollett's linguistic knowledge in his works, and mentions:

Smollett was the eighteenth century's sole novelist with a thorough knowledge of nautical colloquialism and slang, though it should be added that he possessed almost as thorough a knowledge of the general slang of his period.⁸

The linguist acknowledges Smollett to be the leading authority on sea language in all eighteenth-century literature. Smollett actually "shipped in 1740 for the West Indies as a surgeon's mate, and observed the British navy under Admiral Vernon during the war with Spain",⁹ so that he naturally absorbed and collected sailors' daily words and phrases at that time.

Throughout his works, his seaman characters are hardy physically, with simple and practical needs, and they are rude and short-tempered mentally. They use their language according to their natures. Smollett not only described the sailors' lives, but also made them vigorous and comical enough to entertain his audience or readers. In *The Reprisal* Block and other seamen are honest and funny characters, which draws a favourable impression on the readers. Thus,

the characters perform and speak in exuberant style, which leads to "a certain success in spite of the very harsh criticisms of contemporaries".¹⁰

In *The Reprisal*, the sailors' language has two features. First, it reflects on their daily life. So we bear it in mind that it is colloquial. Simeon Potter mentions this *colloquial speech*:

Colloquial speech, as the epithet implies, is that of spoken conversation, easy without being slovenly, conventional but not formal.¹¹

The other feature is the language is full of the seamen's slang. Potter gives further comment on *slang*:

Why should people not be content to 'call a spade a spade' ? Their motives for using slang can seldom be analysed convincingly, but in general they seek three things in various degrees and proportions: novelty, vivacity, and intimacy. Slang proceeds from a new way of looking at things and it exercises every form of intellectual wit and verbal ingenuity. Slang is picturesque, livens up a dull theme, and administers salutary jolts or shocks to listeners. Slang increases intimacy because it allows the speaker to drop into a lower key, to meet his fellow on even terms and to have 'a word in his ear'.¹²

We will see some other linguistic characteristics of the sailors' language in the drama.

III

Nautical words and phrases

In *The Reprisal*, three English seaman characters are presented: sailor Block, lieutenant Lyon, and midshipman Haulyard. They are all described as energetic and cheerful seamen. Among them, Block is the most prominent and wittiest character, who speaks in true sea language. In the first scene, Block and Brush, the drama hero Heartly's servant, enter, and he approaches Block to get his help. Brush says, "Heh!--how!--no sure!--Yes faith but it is--Odso! cousin Block, who thought to meet with you among the French?" Block greets him with "What chear ho?" (=How are you?), with the nautical interjection "ho" used in naming destination such as "Westward ho!" He calls attention by uttering "bear a hand my hearts" (last scene). The vocative "my hearts" nautically means "brave fellows".

Almost all of Block's speech, like the above quotations, is full of sea-faring slang, which compose a variety of comical scenes in the drama. For example, Brush (Br.) offers

another drink to Block (Bl.), but in vain.

Br. : T'other pull, cousin.

Bl. : Avast, avast----no more canvas than we carry--we know the trim of our own vessel.--Smite my cross trees! We begin to yaw already--Hiccup.--

Br. : Odso! our commander is coming upon deck, to give audience to your midshipman.

Bl. : Steady. (2.8)

The scene makes the readers not only laugh, but also enjoy the casual atmosphere on board the ship. Here he expresses his response and opinions in nautical registers. He rejects Brush's offer of drink by the interjection "avast", a nautical word meaning "stop or cease". He warns against their drinking too much by using the noun "vessel" for his body, and presents the shaking of his head by using the verb "yaw". He compares his body to a ship. The verb "Steady" means "to keep direction of ship's head unchanged". Smollett's use of language like this exemplifies his fondness for word play.¹³ This technique is often shown in his works.

Non-standard language usage

Smollett provides his seaman characters with language usage that is far from standard. He makes the linguistic difference among the characters according to their social position. A sailor did not belong to the educated classes but to simple and unlettered people, and spoke and acted in rude manner and speech. His English is naturally spoken and informal. And it is sometimes archaic or old-fashioned, or dialectal in grammar and diction.

Block is a typical sailor in the drama. He uses non-standard expressions such as the contraction "'un" in his speech: "if you call those heads that have no bodies belonging to 'un" (2.8). He, moreover, shortens words such as "e'er" for ever: "I'll turn 'un a drift with e'er a he that ever reefed a foresail" (last scene); "Odd's heart! I wou'd all their commanders were of your trim" (last scene); "be well scrubbed, d'ye see" (last scene); "if grief and sorrow ha'n't set my eye-pumps a-going" (last scene). The midshipman Haulyard says, "If it wa'n't for such as you " (2.9). Eighteenth-century grammarians often criticised the common people's habit of shortening words as vulgar.¹⁴

We find another type of this non-standard usage--the de-

monstrative adjective phrase "that there" in "Mind that there scarecrow" (2.8) and "that there headland" (2.8). Haulyard says "that there Frenchman is a commander of this here vessel" (2.9).

Proverbs and similes

Block often utters nautical proverbs, making clear his sharp wit. He commically appeases Brush who is in fear of his destiny: "we must all die one time, as the saying is" (2.8). And also: "Odds heart! these braces are so taught, I must keep my yards square, as the saying is." (last scene); "A will fetch up his leeway with a wet sail, as the saying is" (last scene). Haulyard also utters "we'll leave that bowling i' the block, as the saying is" (2.9). This linguistic feature suggests the characters' lack of literary intelligence, in that they depend on proverbs to express their thoughts and feelings imaginatively. Similes are also a means of expressing for sailors. Block's similes are associated with his daily life on board the ship. After the end of a quarrel with Lyon, Block praises his former pupil, Lyon: "he's as brisk a seaman as ever greas'd a marlinspike"¹⁶ (last scene); "the first hard squall don't blow him into the air like the peeling of an onion" (2.8).

Swearing

The sailors exclaim in a variety of minced oaths. William Henry Smyth wrote, "Habitual swearing was usually typical of a bad officer" (s. v. *swearing*).¹⁶ English swearing, however, has the tendency to transform profanities into harmless expressions. Block's swears are, for example, "Adzooks!" (=God's hooks), "Odd's heart!" (=God's heart), "Agad!" (=Ah God), and "s'blood" (=God's blood). Haulyard usually uses the interjection "Agad!"

Block, moreover, utters a profane word "damn'd" or "damnable" as in "I'll be damn'd if the first hard squall don't blow him..." (2.8), and "the nob must needs be damnably light that's rigg'd with such a deal of feather" (last scene). He becomes angry, and says "send the Frenchman and every soul on board, to the devil, in the turning of an hand

spike" (2.8). Even lieutenant Lyon uses a profane expression with "the devil": "what the Devil have we got here?" (last scene).

Block curses Champignon, commander of a French Frigate: "Swing the swivel-ey'd son of a whore!...here's a lubberly dog" (last scene). He accumulates curses with "s'blood the fellow has no more brains than a noddy". The English sailor, in high spirits, swears at the French commander. Block is also called bad names. While he remonstrates with Block about his drunken action, Lyon turns on him severely, but in fun: "in the mean time I shall have you to the gangway, you drunken swab"; "None of your jaw, you lubber"; "Peace, porpuss" (last scene). Both the names "swab" and "lubber" meaning "a clumsy seaman" were popular in the eighteenth century. Block hears the swear and cries in rage, "Lubber!--Man and boy, twenty years in the service--lubber!--Ben Block was the man that taught thee, Tom Lyon, to hand, reef, and steer" (last scene). Here his great anger makes the second person pronoun "you" change into "thee" here. The word "lubber" was most humiliating to sailors at that time.¹⁷

Thus Block and other sailors present a variety of nautical terms and linguistic features in the drama. We conclude that the use of sailors' language may illuminate Smollett's sown technique of characterization. We find Smollett's vigorous style and his remarkable skill with words in his characterization. And his style also has the easy rhythm of speech, the colloquial touch of everyday affairs. To see his comedy, we should enjoy ourselves, and react with a guffaw rather than a smile.

Notes

1. Lewis Mansfield Knapp, *Tobias Smollett* (New York: Russell & Russell Inc, 1963) 196.
2. Smollett composed his first tragic drama, *The Regicide* when he was eighteen (1739) but not published. It was published in 1749.
3. W. R. O'Donnell and Loreto Todd, *Variety in Contemporary English*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1991) 130.
4. Byron Gassman, introd., *Poems, Plays, and The Briton* (Athens: U. of Georgia Prs., 1993) 80.

5. Knapp, "The Naval Scenes in Roderick Random", *PMLA*, xlix (June 1934) 593-98
6. A. S. Turberville, ed., *Johnson's England*, vol. 1 (Oxford: OUP, 1933) 39. In the quotation, "three wars" are The War of the Austrian Succession, 1741-9; The Seven Years War, 1755-62; The War of American Independence, 1775-82.
7. The edition used throughout is Tobias Smollett, "The Reprisal; or The Tar of Old England" in *Poems, Plays, and The Briton*, ed. O M Brack, Jr. (Athens: U. of Georgia Prs., 1993).
8. Eric Partridge, *Slang* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1950) 72.
9. Robert Morss Lovett and Helen Sard Hughes, *The history of the Novel in England* (George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., n.d.) 76.
10. Paul-Gabriel Boucé, *The Novels of Tobias Smollett*, trans. Antonia White (London: Longman, 1976) 24.
11. Simeon Potter, *Our Language* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977) 131.
12. *Potter*, 133.
13. John Skinner, *Construction of Smollett* (London: Associated U. Prs., 1996) 201.
14. Susie I Tucker, *English Examined* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. Prs., 1961) 120. Tucker cites James Murnett's comment on "The harshness of English": "English is harsh, owing to its monosyllables and mute consonants, and the prevalence of aspirated t: it is worsened by or habit of shortening words... e.g. *Ev'ry* for *Every*, *lov'd* for *loved*, *built* for *builded*".
15. This line is cited in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd ed.) entry for "Marlinspike".
16. William Henry Smith, *The Sailor's Word-Book* (London: Blackie and Son, 1867).
17. The *OED* cites from Smollett's *Roderick Random* (xxiv): "He swore woundily at the lieutenant, and called him... swab and lubber" (s.v. *lubber*).