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The Georgian Royal Navy:  
Rules, Regulations, Violations, and Agency

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The Kingdom of Great Britain formed in 1707 as a result of the Act of Union, which merged the Parliaments of England and Scotland at Westminster. Over the following centuries, the union explored the globe, fought in near-countless conflicts, and created an empire that fundamentally influenced the world. This success would have been impossible if not for the greatest pride of the nation: the Royal Navy. Only through their Navy could Britain control the nation's colonial and imperial network that expanded during the Georgian period.<sup>1</sup> It is thus unsurprising that protecting the identity and honor of the Navy was paramount and that both sailors and officers were supposed to live highly regimented lives. The Articles of War first established in 1661 – subsequently amended to reflect changing ideologies – clearly denoted naval rules and the appropriate consequences for violations. The 1749 edition, for example, stated “If any Person in the Fleet shall commit the unnatural and detestable Sin of Buggery or Sodomy with Man or Beast, he shall be punished with Death by the Sentence of a Court Martial.”<sup>2</sup> These rules were not designed to obfuscate details. Commanders were expected to recite these rules in full twice a month to their crew – although how often this standard was met is unknown.<sup>3</sup> Regardless, naval regulations left little room for interpretation as naval authorities attempted to prevent sailors from tarnishing the public image of the Navy.

However, as is often the case, ideals did not align with reality. Numerous incidents throughout the formative Georgian period showcased a radically different identity of the Navy, contrary to how the Admiralty attempted to portray itself.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, these incidents were not hidden. From the salacious accounts of rampant prostitution to the infamous HMS *Africaine* incident, historians have analyzed aspects of naval disorder throughout the period. The scope of these violations has only grown as further research has been conducted, yet these incidents have been largely academically isolated. While they have been analyzed as aspects of naval life, they have not led to new interpretations of the Navy as a whole.

The question therein lies: how extensive was this schism between ideals and reality? In a highly structured and hegemonic masculine space with little privacy, the expectation would be that transgressions were rare and difficult. Even if sailors had such desires or impulses, they likely would not have acted out of the fear of being caught and prosecuted. Some historians have agreed with this assessment: Nicholas A.M. Rodger in *The Wooden World: Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* determined that the relatively few incidents of sodomy over an expansive period in the Admiralty's court

documents did not equate to an embedded culture of homosexuality.<sup>5</sup> He did not dispute that such impulses existed, merely that the lack of regular adjudication supported the idea that the Royal Navy was well-regimented. However, interpreting these incidents not as isolated events but as elements within the Navy's whole culture as well as incorporating additional sources may lead to a different conclusion. The hope is that this analysis will arrive at a better understanding of what the Royal Navy was like beyond how it attempted to portray itself.

This analysis will first explore the idealized masculine, regimented, and heteronormative culture of the Royal Navy by examining official documentation and published sailor literature. This ideal shall be juxtaposed with an exploration of how sailors violated this culture specifically in regards to women and homosexual relations. Finally, conclusions will be drawn regarding what the true lived experiences of sailors during the Georgian period were, and how this period of history showcased the agency embedded within all those involved with the Royal Navy.

### **Sailor Life in the Georgian Royal Navy**

Defining the Georgian sailor begins with the idealized persona that was crafted by influential authorities. Authoritative individuals – those who could affect change throughout the entire institution such as the Admiralty and popular writers – often expressed their ideals regarding the Navy through guides. These guides, whether written for regulation or as materials for potential new sailors, implied that naval life was strictly regimented. These authoritative guides did not significantly evolve throughout the period as indicated by the aforementioned 1749 Articles of War. The Articles maintained a ban against homosexuality that had been established in 1661, stating that “If any person or persons in or belonging to the Fleet shall commit the unnatural and detestable sin of Buggery or Sodomy with Man or Beast he shall be punished with death without mercy.”<sup>6</sup> This pattern of updating rules was common throughout the period to reflect changing administrative beliefs. The main change between the 1661 and 1749 rules, for example, was the inclusion of adjudication through court-martial. The punishment of homosexual acts by execution remained consistent.

Nor was this continuity exclusive to rules governing homosexuality. A longstanding tradition of banning women from navy ships was similarly reflected in the rules. Thomas Audley wrote in 1553 at the bequest of King Henry the VIII that “No women to lie a shippe borde all nyght.”<sup>7</sup> Regulations against women continued to appear in other official publications. The often-republished *Regulations and Instructions Relating To His Majesty's Service At Sea* provided even clearer instructions, detailing in the 1757 edition, “That no Women be ever permitted to be on Board, but such as are really the Wives of Men they come to, and the Ship not be too much pestered even with them. But this Indulgence is only tolerated while the Ship is in Port, and not under Sailing Orders.”<sup>8</sup> Again, the core idea of regulating women remained constant over centuries. Yet changes were nonetheless taking place. The Admiralty in this later publication noted exceptions for married women whilst in port – perhaps

in an attempt to placate wives separated from their husbands for extensive periods especially given the nation's growing colonial holdings. While not radically reforming institutional practices, such alterations displayed that the Admiralty was responsive to changing social circumstances.

These regulations showcased how the Admiralty viewed its authority throughout the period. Military institutions inherently wield power; however, the naval guidelines implied an authority to regulate beyond the scope of what was necessary for the Navy to function. The Admiralty established their authority to regulate the social and moral behaviors of their sailors, transcending their public identity and into their sexual activities. Regardless of how effective they were in controlling non-conforming behavior, what is important is that the Admiralty established the idea of an ideal sailor and it believed it had the power to make subordinates conform to this ideal.

However, this conflicts with the established lack of change throughout the Georgian period. If the Admiralty believed it held the ultimate authority, then institutional reactions to problematic events would have likely been more apparent beyond occasional syntax changes and clarifications. While many reasons may have caused their inaction, the most probable reason was inability. Addressing structural flaws within the Navy could have weakened the Admiralty's authority. Thus, despite their flaws, maintaining the existing structure and status-quo within the Navy was likely the best option for the Admiralty's self-interests – as will be showcased later in this analysis.

### **Basil Hall's Autobiography**

Thus, there was an ideal Georgian sailor persona that was characterized by period-appropriate morality. However, this persona also incorporated the idealized experiences sailors were supposed to have during their service. Perhaps the most expansive exploration of the subject came from Basil Hall's 1831-1840 *Fragments of Voyages and Travels*. Written at the end of the Georgian period for (though not exclusively) young boys to entice potential recruits to naval life, his multi-volume autobiography detailed his experiences and thoughts in and about the Royal Navy. While largely anecdotal, his account helped to illuminate the fictionalized ideals ascribed to Georgian sailors.

His narrative began with his early life as a schoolboy. Immediately, Hall made it clear that his formative education was not ideal and that he longed to escape the mundane and explore.<sup>9</sup> Thus, bored and disenchanted, he relished his eventual escape into naval life. Given his young age of thirteen (which coincidentally he noted as the perfect age for such a journey), he was enlisted as a midshipman.<sup>10</sup> Thereafter, he described his experiences from formative mistakes such as throwing the misplaced pants of a sailor overboard to triumphant accomplishments such as the first landing on the dangerous island of Rockall.

Emphasis should be placed on two pertinent elements in Hall's guide: his drive for change and his subsequent experiences. Before his enlistment, Hall juxtaposed his school life with his dreams outside the institution, writing in response to an inquiry from an instructor as to the nature of his

depression, "...that the confinement of the school was much too great, and that I could not bear being always treated as if I had no feeling or peculiar wishes worthy of separate consideration."<sup>11</sup>

The clear allusions to youthful feelings of alienation from mainstream society were incredibly powerful hooks for drawing in potential recruits. In doing so, he empowered his following statements regarding the sea and discovery, writing that "The pleasure which this primitive voyage inspired, has never since been much exceeded. It was the first unalloyed happiness I had ever experienced, and at once opened up a new prospect of hope and resolution, which rendered the weary load of school existence somewhat less intolerable than it had been before."<sup>12</sup> Hall crafted an incredibly vivid but romanticized interpretation of what young future sailors could (or should) experience when connecting with the sea. To overcome such common fears of inadequacy, these young boys could cure themselves with the ocean – or rather with Hall's idealized version.

Within Hall's narrative lies the idealized Georgian sailor – the theoretical young boy Hall is appealing to. This targeted persona was an individual who felt disconnected from mundane British society and wanted to go on a journey of self-improvement. Nor was this individual conflicted about their path – they were driven and resolute in their convictions. These aspects are hallmarks of classic masculinity, a stereotype that was inexorably linked with the male-dominated navy. This is not unexpected given that Georgian society emphasized independence as a key and primary component of masculinity.<sup>13</sup> However, establishing this tie is important as it illuminates what authoritative voices believed both recruits and enlisted sailors were: idyllic young men on a journey of growth whom they could mold and control.

Nor did Hall's insight into the Georgian sailor end with his targeted appeal – his early experiences once joining the Navy are equally revealing. For a young man transitioning into an unfamiliar environment, difficulties would not be unexpected – yet to detail such complications would transgress upon the masculine narrative he had already established as fundamental to his idealized persona. Hall, however, takes a middle approach, writing that:

... I went to my hammock ... It was very queer to find myself swinging about in this uncouth manner, for there was only about a foot of space between my face and the roof – so, of course, I broke my head a great many times on different posts in the cock-pit where all the midshipmen sleep. After having got in, you may be sure I did not sleep very well, when all the people were making such a noise, going to bed in the dark, and the ship in such confusion.<sup>14</sup>

Hall noted the difficult lifestyle changes he faced on his first voyage, from minor injury to crowded quarters. Nor was this the limit of the challenges he faced, he knew few onboard and had to navigate these challenges alone.<sup>15</sup> However, these challenges were framed in a way that was acceptable to masculinity. Sleep deprivation and loneliness could be extreme barriers to adjustment, but Hall suggested that they were minor inconveniences. It was not that the ideal sailor would not face hardship

during their service, but that these complications were part of the experience and helped build strength of character.

The ideal Georgian sailor constructed by authoritative figures was highly romanticized. Such an individual conformed to established moral values, but was also driven towards self-actualization and was capable of surmounting the minor challenges that were inherent to the lifestyle. This constructed identity aligned closely with ideals about how Georgian masculinity was equated to independence.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the Admiralty believed it held a longstanding authority to enforce this ideal regardless of their success, and that through authors such as Hall it was creating a positive masculine space that appealed to the individuals they desired most. This crafted and hegemonic masculine identity was the ideal that all Georgian sailors were judged against, leading to the conundrum between imaginary and real: how close did the lived experiences of Georgian sailors match with what was expected of them?

### **Actual Experiences in the Royal Navy**

Perhaps the largest schism between the romantic ideals and the lived experiences of Georgian sailors lay in regards to how they joined. While Basil Hall described his experience as voluntary and for his benefit, many sailors lacked such a choice. While some sailors joined the Royal Navy on their own volition – especially those wishing to become officers – most others were coerced through the judicial system. Criminals accused by British courts were provided the opportunity to serve in the Navy or serve their sentence in British jails. However, many prisoners opted to serve their sentences in prison because they knew what naval service was actually like.<sup>17</sup> Thus, to keep the Navy crewed, courts increasingly forced criminals to serve in the Navy without choice.<sup>18</sup> Jails were emptied when ships departed port with little forewarning to the sailors' families.<sup>19</sup> Nor were criminals the only men forced into service – press gangs often roamed around the country and captured men for service.<sup>20</sup> Thus, many of the sailors who crewed navy ships did so unwillingly, often deployed for years at a time with no contact with family or friends. While this led to highly disgruntled sailors, sufficiently crewing ships was the priority of the Admiralty – the more sailors in the Navy, the stronger their power and influence.

Once onboard, the difficulties continued to mount. Contrary to Hall's description of such challenges as minor inconveniences, the probability of death was high. As a military institution, sailors could expect the risk of dying in combat. However, most sailors died as a result of accidents, malnutrition, and the rapid spread of disease.<sup>21</sup> A lack of sanitary conditions and effective medical practices meant that once injured, survival was often a matter of luck. Furthermore, the wages paid to sailors were pitiful and inconsistent – not only did sailors have to pay for any shipboard services they used, but they also went without pay for months or years at a time. One complaint to Parliament cited ships in the East Indies that had gone without pay for upwards of fifteen years.<sup>22</sup>

While these terrible conditions did not reflect the experiences of all sailors (especially high-ranking officers), for many sailors, service within the Royal Navy was a living nightmare. Thus, it comes as little surprise that the threat of mutiny was a very real fear for most ships – sailors could only tolerate so much suffering until they attempted to escape. Barring a takeover, sailors could also attempt to flee when docked in port. As a countermeasure, most ships never allowed their enlisted sailors ashore.<sup>23</sup> Thus, many sailors spent their entire enlistment at sea, only returning to land once discharged. Consequently, this imprisonment fueled many violations of the Admiralty's rules as enlisted sailors struggled to fulfill their desires in a restricted space. Altogether, these conditions were not only radically different from the romanticized version of sailor life that authorities espoused, but they also affected how individuals violated these ideals.

### **Women in the Georgian Royal Navy**

If the legislative barriers against women by the Admiralty had been enforced, the Georgian Royal Navy would have been entirely gender-segregated. The aforementioned long-standing measures against women entering the masculine navy sphere theoretically prevented mingling except in specific cases. Nor did the Admiralty take such actions without reason. Portsmouth, the home port of the Royal Navy, experienced increased violence from women during the period as a reaction to the city's transient sailors, thus supporting the need for such rules.<sup>24</sup> Yet once again, ideals rarely synced with reality. Throughout the period, violations of this theoretically gender-segregated space took place. Wives and prostitutes routinely challenged the masculine public image of the Navy.

### **Motivations for Boarding**

In the crowded living quarters of warships where private space was nearly nonexistent, hiding ascribed biological indicators of gender would have been difficult. However, wives easily boarded ships and did not hide their gender identity, which theoretically opened them up to repercussions. Yet throughout the Georgian period, many wives journeyed with their husbands whilst at sea and were not subsequently punished. Although these women blatantly violated rules, their work and relationships insulated them from expulsion.

Life at sea was incredibly dangerous. If wives boarded ships with their husbands, their risk of injury or death increased. Thus, the reasons for joining their husbands needed to counterbalance the danger, otherwise they would have remained separated. While specific accounts of the experiences of such wives are rare, their existence often appears in tangential texts. Captain (later Admiral) William Henry Dillon wrote that on one occasion he invited his wife to sail aboard HMS *Leopard* for pleasure, to which she quickly agreed. Dillon subsequently noted that his second lieutenant also had his wife permanently onboard.<sup>25</sup> Dillon treated these experiences as entirely mundane and normal. Moreover, his wife willingly joined her husband onboard. The wives of high-ranking officers frequently sailed

with their husbands with little repercussions, however, due to their class they were isolated from many of the perils of life at sea. These high-status wives were well-fed and did not have to perform physical labor. Moreover, they traveled with luggage and servants, which allowed them to maintain the lifestyle that Georgian society demanded of them.<sup>26</sup>

Another subset of shipboard spouses was the polar opposite in class: impoverished wives. The majority of a ship's crew consisted of less-affluent enlisted sailors who performed the manual labor required to operate a ship, many of whom were married. Yet unlike officer's wives, these women could not expect similar comforts if they joined their husbands. Despite the hardships they could face, many wives throughout the Georgian period sailed on Royal Navy ships. These women did so knowingly because of their economic class – they could not afford to live separated from their husbands. Economic opportunities were few for separated wives as many jobs were gender-segregated, and support from their husbands was inconsistent due to the distances between them.<sup>27</sup> Petitions to the Admiralty for financial support often went unanswered.<sup>28</sup> Thus, to avoid destitution, some wives joined their husbands at sea, performing tasks that fit their gender identity and were important to ship functions.<sup>29</sup> In certain rare circumstances when they were required to perform more masculine jobs such as during combat, their identity could be morphed to avoid contradictions. Such women would often have their masculine traits emphasized to hide their transgressions and justify their role.<sup>30</sup>

It is however important to note that many wives did not join their husbands even if they needed to do so financially. Overwhelmingly, the majority of couples lived separated – especially if wives could obtain an acceptable standard of living on land. Moreover, because of how most new sailors were forced into service in the Royal Navy, many wives were unaware of their deployment until it was too late.<sup>31</sup> These women were forced to live without their husbands, which could often lead to destitution. Many penniless women turned to prostitution while their husbands were away to generate income, which spared them (and possibly their children) the suffering of having to live in inhospitable workhouses to survive.<sup>32</sup> Shipboard wives were thus rare but would become such when circumstances aligned – provided that their life at sea would be better than that on land.

Thus, the wives of sailors who transgressed into the masculine space of Royal Navy ships were highly polarized in their circumstances. Affluent women could afford to do so because their class protected them, whilst less-affluent women did so to survive. Yet in neither case was the Admiralty proactive in enforcing their own rules barring women from traveling and living aboard ships – the aforementioned Captain Dillon's account suggested that the practice went unhindered. Inaction implied that the moral aspect of such a union may have been enough to waylay a response. These women maintained their gender identity whilst onboard and acted per period morality by being married. However, it is important to note that most of these women, especially less-affluent wives, lived in naval spaces because they were pressured by their circumstances. Regardless, their existence in these spaces challenged the ideal gender homogeneity of the Navy.



## Prostitution

Wives engaged with the Georgian Royal Navy as individuals, compelled by specific motives. However, prostitution evolved as an institutional system that affected all ships. While wives constructed their position within the confines of their gender role, prostitution was inherently immoral in Georgian society and could not escape scrutiny. Yet despite its obvious immoral nature, prostitution became fundamentally important to sailors. Despite lackluster attempts to stop or regulate such behavior by the Admiralty, prostitution endured as an important tool to control sailors throughout the period.

One important aspect of shipboard prostitution was how sailors utilized their services. Prostitutes were often tied to a single port, thus, sailors were only able to utilize their services during brief periods of their deployment. Some prostitutes remained onboard ships they were servicing after leaving port, but these women often did so on accident or out of desperation.<sup>33</sup> Thus, when arriving in port, accessing the services of prostitutes was paramount as sailors often did not know when they could have contact again. However, as per the aforementioned restrictions to limit desertion, sailors were not allowed to leave their vessels. Ships often remained anchored some distance away from land so that sailors could not leave. As a result, this led to accounts of flotillas of small craft being deployed whenever a ship laid anchor in port, ferrying prostitutes to ships so that sailors could utilize their services.<sup>34</sup>

Because of the inherently maligned nature of prostitution in Georgian society, prostitutes were often subsequently desperate and experienced terrible conditions.<sup>35</sup> Prostitutes tended to be younger women, often ranging between twelve and fourteen years old.<sup>36</sup> While young, these girls were still over the legal age of consent for the period.<sup>37</sup> Their young age however was not a conscious choice – they became prostitutes to survive in their circumstances. Nor did their conditions improve once on board ships where they faced the same environment sailors endured. They could also face new conditions unique to their position.

Poor girl! It was a dear brought pleasure for her, for next morning she was seized with convulsions severe, which indicated the quick birth of the infant in her womb. When her situation was made known, our First and Second Lieutenants (to their honor be it said) gave her a guinea each; I contributed a small matter, but not half so much as I could wish, and she went on shore.<sup>38</sup>

Seaman Robert Mercer Wilson noted in his journal that while docked in port, a prostitute who had come aboard his ship later went into labor. Although she delivered her child once rushed back to land, such was the labor conditions of Georgian prostitutes that they could be simultaneously working and pregnant. Despite such conditions, prostitutes continued to service Royal Navy ships due to nearly

inexhaustible demand throughout the Georgian period. Nor was such behavior significantly restricted by authorities despite clearly observable actions. Wilson included a mention in his description of events of his First and Second Lieutenants willingly interacting with and helping the prostitute in labor.

This was not to say that prostitution went unchecked. In 1803, the captain of HMS *Superb* ordered that his sailors would be in charge of the conduct of all women they brought on board and would have to file paperwork – his sailors naturally resisted his restriction.<sup>39</sup> In 1821, Admiral Edward Hawker published an anonymous pamphlet decrying prostitution in the Navy. His colorful descriptions painted a damning image of the state of the Georgian navy: “Let those who have never seen a ship of war, picture to themselves a very large and low room (hardly capable of holding the men) with 500 men, and probably 300 or 400 women of the vilest description, shut up in it and giving way to ever excess of debauchery that the grossest passions of human nature can lead them to...”<sup>40</sup> While Hawker exaggerated his claims to promote his agenda, his pamphlet was popularized and sparked outrage within the British public. However, inaction once more characterized the Navy and nothing became of his actions as the subject waned from public attention.<sup>41</sup> Similar attempts to regulate or stop prostitution in the Navy met with equal failure throughout the period.

Access to prostitution on Royal Navy ships endured throughout the Georgian period despite many failed attempts at regulation because it became a fundamental system of control for the Navy. The hardships sailors faced led most sailors to disregard period morality in favor of pleasurable experiences. Such pleasures distracted sailors, which stanching other, more egregious behavior such as mutiny. Homosexual encounters between sailors could also be avoided through access to prostitution. Nor was this a hidden belief – some members of the Admiralty outright admitted to such thinking.<sup>42</sup> Moreover to justify this mentality to a wider public, prostitutes were also framed to be more feminine and strong as opposed to the impoverished young girls they usually were. Dr. George Pinckard described such women as “Portsmouth Polls” in 1795, which helped frame prostitutes as an institutional role rather than jobs of desperation.<sup>43</sup>

Such control was reflective of how women engaged with the Royal Navy during the period – not as a reaction to the strict masculine identity of the Royal Navy, but as a response to the Navy’s structured culture. Wives entered naval spaces not because they desired to do so, but because of social and economic pressures. Prostitutes (in terms of naval regulations) unlawfully entered naval spaces to provide services because of restrictions instituted by the Admiralty. Thus, women violated rules because external actions and regulations guided them to react in a specific manner. They found niches within naval society that allowed them to live as they needed. Altogether, these experiences challenged the manufactured identity of the Navy as a homogenous masculine space.

### **Homosexuality in the Georgian Royal Navy**

While violations by women of Royal Navy policy were protected by a fixed naval culture, such structural protections were not afforded to sailors accused of homosexual acts. Buggery and sodomy (as it would have been referred to during the Georgian period) were completely illegal under religious and moral doctrine. Moreover, the Admiralty held a clear position on the subject: as aforementioned, sailors caught would face a court-martial and a swift execution. Yet as with women, there was a clear schism between naval doctrine and the lived experiences of sailors. Some sailors occasionally engaged in homosexual acts despite the hefty penalties they incurred when caught. Furthermore, as an illegal act, the only sources in which it was recorded were in court records. Through court-martials during the period, a specific pattern of homosexuality emerged.

### Early Incidents

One of the earliest documented cases of homosexual acts that were tangentially linked to the Royal Navy involved Captain Edward Rigby in 1698. Unlike most incidents that were adjudicated by court-martial in the Royal Navy, Rigby was tried in a civilian court after attempting to act upon William Minton (aged nineteen). A published account of the proceedings noted that:

...*Rigby* stood by him and took him by the hand, and squeez'd it; put his Privy Member Erected into *Minton's* Hand; kist him, and put his Tongue into *Minton's* Mouth, who being much astonish'd at these Actions went from him; but *Rigby* pursued him, and accosted him again; and after much Discourse prevailed with *Minton* to tell him where he lodged...<sup>44</sup>

After this aggressive encounter, Rigby was entrapped at the tavern where Minton lodged, caught attempting to perform similar acts. While he did not receive the death penalty for his actions, he was punished heavily and fled the country after his release.

Captain Rigby was a notable and skilled commander in the Royal Navy, which only served to increase the public outcry and further damage the reputation of the Navy once the specifics of the trial were released. Such detailed language increased the dramatization of the event and served to outline a perceived culture of misconduct that pervaded the Navy. However, the true impact of the trial was the subsequent influence over new commanders who would serve throughout the Georgian period. Not only did they construe the prevalence of homosexual acts as an important issue that the Navy needed to contend with, but they also understood the capability of such events to affect the public perception of the Navy.

Moreover, Rigby's trial revealed patterns of homosexuality that endured throughout the Georgian period. One takeaway from his trial was the age and power imbalance. While such dynamics were not uncommon in records of homosexuality, in his instance they were highlighted due to the hierarchal structure of the Navy which made this dynamic explicit. Similarly, in other incidents during the period, this dynamic held true as higher-ranking sailors engaged only those far beneath them –

never those of equal or greater power.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, another factor that Rigby's trial highlighted was the violence of the act. He aggressively pursued William Minton and forced the situation, tantamount to rape, yet he was never charged with rape: sodomy was his sole charge. While homosexual encounters could often be violent as a result of the aforementioned dynamic, rape was defined as a cross-gender encounter with a woman and thus sodomy was rarely charged as such.<sup>46</sup> Thus throughout the period, Royal Navy court records showcased an interest in the performative act and proving such, rather than the violence inherent to such actions.

Learning from the public reaction to Rigby's trial, the Admiralty throughout the Georgian period punished perpetrators in military court-martials. The court-martials of offenders such as James Ball in 1706, John Coise in 1709, Richard Beale in 1759, and John Pyle in 1762 among others, revealed a morphing pattern of how homosexual acts were acted upon and examined.<sup>47</sup> Their trials exposed a propensity for cross-generational relationships, with older men acting upon younger boys such as midshipmen. These boys may have been physically more attractive, but the power dynamic between them continued to be the primary driver as it had during Rigby's case.<sup>48</sup> Encounters with young boys were easier to hide because they could be pressured into silence and were less likely to be treated seriously if they complained.<sup>49</sup> Nor was this speculation on the perpetrator's behalf – the judges in sodomy court-martials were less interested in the inherent power dynamic and more in the performative act.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, the burden of proof was increasingly placed upon the young boys as courts attempted to discern whether or not their accusations were revenge and thus purely slander.<sup>51</sup>

In addition to cementing the patterns established by Rigby's trial, these early and mid-period court-martials also revealed how and why the accused were caught. Living conditions were highly stratified depending on an individual's position within a shipboard hierarchy, which affected how much of a ship's limited space was allocated to each individual. Simple enlisted sailors bunked communally whilst higher ranking officers may have shared their space with only one other individual or had their own private quarters. Yet despite potentially having access to a private space, virtually all those accused performed their acts in relatively public locations which allowed witnesses to view and accuse.<sup>52</sup> These witnesses were often instrumental in adjudicating court-martials with the evidence they provided. Moreover, despite being stereotyped as helpless, the young boys entangled in such encounters were not incapable of resisting. When the abuse reached a certain threshold or they felt uncomfortable, these boys were capable of reporting the situation to superiors – though whether or not they were taken seriously was another matter entirely.<sup>53</sup>

### **HMS *Africaine***

These encounters established a specific pattern of homosexuality in the Georgian Royal Navy. Acts were perpetrated by a single, more powerful individual who aggressively courted young boys. They were caught because they failed to sufficiently control and hide their impulses. Yet this highly

specific mold was broken by the 1816 HMS *Africaine* incident. The *Africaine*, a former French frigate captured by the British, encountered complaints during her 1811–1815 cruise. The first notable incidents of sexual transgressions occurred in 1813: a number of her crew were accused and subsequently punished. However, no links between these transgressions and sodomy were made, thus the captain believed that no further investigation was warranted. A pattern of similar complaints peppered her remaining years at sea which were treated similarly.<sup>54</sup> However, by October 1815, Captain Rodney had received numerous accusations that warranted investigation resulting in two dozen from a crew of less than two hundred and forty being accused. With roughly ten percent of the crew accused of capital offenses, the *Africaine* came under extreme scrutiny.

The unfolding web of relationships and encounters was complicated. Many could identify individual encounters, others such as Raphael Seraco (who alone accused twenty-three others), Frank Jean, and Emanuel Cruz became star witnesses in an attempt to shield themselves from the accusations levied against them.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, those accused were initially wary to accuse others— it was only through threats of punishment that the truth was exposed.<sup>56</sup> When the *Africaine* arrived in Portsmouth in December, extensive court-martials by the Admiralty began.<sup>57</sup> However, these trials uncovered little beyond Captain Rodney's initial investigation – the Admiralty was more conflicted by the prospect of executing twenty-four men and boys per established rules. Eventually, they decided to execute four of those accused, including Raphael Seraco whose testimony had been insufficient to protect him. An additional two received lashes and were discharged from service.<sup>58</sup>

This rich event about the *Africaine* is juxtaposed with rather mundane media coverage. While reporting was widespread, the details were limited. The *Northampton Mercury*, for example, reported on 10 February 1816 that, “Four seamen of the *Africaine* frigate were executed aboard that ship, at Portsmouth, on Thursday, for a detestable crime – two of them were natives of Italy.<sup>59</sup> Other publications had similarly short excerpts, with slight variations. Rarely were those charged named, and never was the exact crime detailed. Compared to the account issued following Captain Rigby's 1698 trial, the reporting for the *Africaine* incident was unremarkable and dull.

Thus, multiple conclusions can be ascertained from this relationship between the incident and the media. Importantly, the Admiralty likely saw little reason to release details of the incident to the public. The nature and scope of the crime reflected poorly on the masculine identity of the Navy, and thus they provided only necessary information. Moreover, the Admiralty of the late Georgian period was far more aware of the impact such a release of information could have, as showcased by Captain Rigby's trial. That was not to say the event was not newsworthy – large and small publications alike reported on the event – but that newspapers were limited in what information they could access, as indicated by the similarity between all their statements. This was especially impactful in regards to the scope of the incident – reporting four executed for an unspecified crime is significantly less sensational than the twenty-four that were initially involved, which may have helped reduce sensationalism.

Furthermore, the prudence of the media likely played a part in limiting the information revealed. Although newspapers were willing to report on the event, Georgian sensibilities about homosexuality limited what could be reported to the public.

What the *Africaine* incident revealed in contrast to prior occurrences was that previous conceptions of homosexuality in the Royal Navy fell prey to a form of survival bias. As aforementioned, there was a set of criteria that all incidents seemingly adhered to. However, homosexuality in the Navy was exclusively understood in terms of court records, meaning that these criteria were only applicable to those individuals who were eventually caught and prosecuted. As the *Africaine* incident showcased, homosexual relations could be formed that were not predicated on violence and control. Many of those accused were not involved in antagonistic relationships and were relatively stable, but were only revealed as others within their network outed their existence in a bid to protect themselves. While a complete conclusion on this revelation is indiscernible, the *Africaine* called into question the constructed conception of homosexuality and the scope of it within the Royal Navy. If such stable and hidden relationships were obtainable on the *Africaine*, they could have occurred on other ships throughout the period and were simply never recorded due to their nature. Homosexuality may have played a larger part in overall naval culture during the Georgian period despite the clear risks.

### **Deconstructing the Georgian Royal Navy**

The Royal Navy of the Georgian period was characterized by a schism between the ideals of authoritative figures and the lived experiences of sailors. The harsh reality of life as a sailor could not sustain the lofty moral goals that were expected of them. Women entered the gendered space of the Royal Navy with near impunity, whilst homosexual encounters often went unnoticed. It was not that the Admiralty was unaware of most of these violations, but that it would not or could not change their system. The identity of the Navy as a heteronormative, hegemonic masculine space did not align with reality.

These violations were indicative of the reaction by Georgian sailors to the institution they lived in. In a hypermasculine environment (both within Georgian society and military life in the Navy) where gender identity was constructed on the ideals of freedom and power, joining or being forced into the Navy was tantamount to emasculation. Sailors lost their freedom of movement and joined a compulsory authoritarian hierarchy, factors that were often beyond their control. Thus, violating naval doctrine was a way enlisted sailors regained some control over their lives and expressed their masculine identity. Violating regulations provided physical, social, and emotional support to those who needed it.

Nor should these violations be construed as atypical reactions to an idealized persona. Given the highly structured and constructed nature of gender and sexuality during the Georgian period, it is

easy to assume that all individuals who lived during the period fit such a mold, or were attempting to conform to their assigned identity. Transgressions could have had serious social or even fatal repercussions which likely dissuaded potential violators. However, the above research showcases that the individuals who engaged with the Royal Navy had inherent agency in their actions and decisions.

Men engaged in homosexual acts because circumstances allowed them to enter positions of power and gave them the space to explore their sexuality. Women violated naval doctrine because they were driven by circumstance. They recognized their situation – be it their husbands leaving for service or their own survival – and decided upon appropriate reactions to their dilemmas. Even the Admiralty, which was characterized throughout the Georgian period by inaction, was reacting to their situation through their inaction. They understood that the construction of their institution was predicated upon forcing men to participate – which could not be changed without consequences – leading to the problems that characterized the Navy. Thus, the Admiralty reacted to their predicament by maintaining the status quo as flawed as it was because it preserved their power. The true identity of those who existed in and interacted with the Georgian Royal Navy was never one-dimensional; their identity was always multifaceted.

## Notes

1. The Georgian period was an era in British history from 1714 to the 1830s.
2. “Article XXIV - The 1749 Naval Act,” *Legislation on naval discipline*, <https://www.pdavis.nl/NDS1749.htm>
3. *Regulations and Instructions Relating To His Majesty’s Service At Sea: 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, with Additions* (London, 1734).
4. The Admiralty was the governing authority in charge of the Royal Navy, tasked with managing the regulations and operations of their navy.
5. Nicholas A.M. Rodger, *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* (London: Fontana Press, 1988) 80.
6. *Article XXXII from the 1661 An Act for the Establishing Articles and Orders for the regulating and better Government of His Majesties Navies Ships of War and Forces by Sea*. Notably, this legislation had applied to the earlier navy of the Kingdom of England, which was technically terminated with the formation of the Kingdom of Great Britain but was also largely incorporated into the new Royal Navy. Thus, they will be treated as a continuous unit, as most traditions, rules, and institutions are carried over.
7. Thomas Audley, “A Booke of Orders for the Warre both by sea and land written by Thomas Audley at the Command of King Henry the VIII,” in *Female Tars* by Suzanne J. Stark.
8. “Article XI from the 1757 Additional Regulations”, *Regulations and Instructions Relating To His Majesty’s Service At Sea: 9<sup>th</sup> Edition, with Additions* (London, 1757).
9. Basil Hall, *Fragments of voyages and travels: including anecdotes of a naval life: chiefly for the use of young persons* (Edinburgh: R. Cadell; London: Whittaker, Treacher, 1831-1833) 2-4.
10. A midshipman was the lowest-ranked position on a Royal Navy warship during the Georgian period. These young boys often worked as servants for officers fulfilling odd roles aboard their ship, with the expectation that the experience they gained would allow them to eventually become officers; Basil Hall, *Fragments of voyages and travels: including anecdotes of a naval life: chiefly for the use of young persons*, 31.
11. Hall, *Fragments of voyages and travels*, 5.
12. Hall, *Fragments of voyages and travels*, 13-14.
13. Mathew McCormack, *The Independent Man: Citizenship and Gender Politics in Georgian England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005)100.
14. Hall, *Fragments of voyages and travels*, 46.
15. Hall, *Fragments of voyages and travels*, 41-42.
16. McCormack, *The Independent Man*, 208.



17. Suzanne J. Stark, *Female Tars: Women Aboard Ship in the Age of Sail* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1996) 20.
18. Stark, *Female Tars*, 37.
19. Stark, *Female Tars*, 26.
20. Stark, *Female Tars*, 22-23.
21. Stark, *Female Tars*, 21.
22. Stark, *Female Tars*, 22.
23. Evelyn Berckman, *The Hidden Navy* (London: Hamish Hamilton Ltd., 1973) 17.
24. Jessica Warner, Kathryn Graham, and Edward Adalf, "Women Behaving Badly: Gender and Aggression in a Military Town, 1653-1781." *Sex Roles* 52, no. 5/6 (2005).
25. Berckman, *The Hidden Navy*, 33.
26. Mary Lacy, *The Female Shipwright; or Life and Extraordinary Adventures of Marcy Lacy; Giving An Account of Her leaving her parents disguised as a Man... Written by Herself*, (New York: Printed for George Sinclair, 1807) 10.
27. Stark, *Female Tars*, 30.
28. Berckman, *The Hidden Navy*, 43-52.
29. Stark, *Female Tars*, 57-59.
30. Berckman, *The Hidden Navy*, 35.
31. Stark, *Female Tars*, 26.
32. Stark, *Female Tars*, 30-31.
33. Stark, *Female Tars*, 37.
34. Berckman, *The Hidden Navy* 17-18.
35. Stark, *Female Tars*, 38.
36. Stark, *Female Tars*, 40.
37. Stark, *Female Tars*, 40.
38. Robert Mercer Wilson quoted in, "Remarks on Board His Majesty's Ship Unite of Forty Guns," In *Five Naval Journals: 1789-1817* edited by Henry George Thursfield (London, Navy Records Society, 1951) 131-132.
39. Berckman, *The Hidden Navy* 19-20.
40. Edward Hawker, *Statement respecting the prevalence of certain immoral practices in His Majesty's Navy* (London: Ellerton and Henderson, 1821) 3.
41. Stark, *Female Tars*, 20.
42. Stark, *Female Tars*, 23-24.
43. Stark, *Female Tars*, 41.
44. "An Account of the proceedings against Capt. Edward Rigby, at the Sessions of Goal Delivery, held at Justice-Hall in the Old Bailey...", (London: Printed by F. Collins, 1698).

45. B.R. Burg, "Officers, Shipboard Boys and Courts Martial for Sodomy and Indecency in the Georgian Navy," in *The Social History of English Seamen, 1650-1816*, ed. by Cheryl A. Fury (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK; Rochester, NY, USA: Boydell & Brewer, 2017) 90.
46. B.R. Burg, "Officers, Shipboard Boys and Courts Martial," 91.
47. B.R. Burg, "Officers, Shipboard Boys and Courts Martial," 91-93.
48. B.R. Burg, *Boys at Sea: Sodomy, Indecency, and Courts Martial in Nelson's Navy* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 128.
49. B.R. Burg, *Boys at Sea*, 49.
50. B.R. Burg, *Boys at Sea*, 36-37.
51. B.R. Burg, "Officers, Shipboard Boys and Courts Martial," 95-96.
52. B.R. Burg, "Officers, Shipboard Boys and Courts Martial," 105.
53. B.R. Burg, "Officers, Shipboard Boys and Courts Martial," 105.
54. B.R. Burg, "The HMS African Revisited: The Royal Navy and the Homosexual Community," *Journal of Homosexuality* 56, no.2 (2009) 176-177.
55. B.R. Burg, "The HMS African Revisited," 181-182.
56. Arthur N. Gilbert, "The Africaine Courts Martial: A Study of Bugger and the Royal Navy," *Journal of Homosexuality* 1, no.1 (1976) 112.
57. B.R. Burg, "The HMS African Revisited," 175.
58. Arthur N. Gilbert, "The Africaine Courts Martial," 111.
59. *Northampton Mercury*, February 10, 1816.