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“Arguing the Point” in Marryat’s Midshipman Novels

Jessica Johnson

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

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Rebels haven’t always been sexy. In fact, throughout history “fighting the power” has often revealed the ugliest side of human nature. Of course, sometimes rebellion is necessary, even if it isn’t pretty, but it should never be considered lightly. So, under what circumstances is rebellion against authority—particularly a governing authority—morally sound? Is mutiny ever justified? Such questions are difficult, perhaps impossible, to answer, but literature can be a powerful tool for dissecting them. Captain Frederick Marryat (1798-1848), often called the father of naval fiction, used his novels to air these and other morally ambiguous questions for an early Victorian readership. At a time when widespread poverty, food shortages, and social injustices were leading to heated protests, Marryat’s microcosmic ships were a space to think through issues of rebellion, discipline, and the appropriate use of authority. This thesis analyzes two of Marryat’s novels, *The King’s Own* (1830) and *Mr. Midshipman Easy* (1836), highlighting themes of authority/discipline and the rhetorical functions of his didactic style. It’s easy to oversimplify Marryat—a patriotic ship captain and veteran of the Napoleonic Wars—as a classic establishment figure, but a close reading of these texts reveals that he was much more than an imperial flag-waver.

Keywords: Marryat, rebellion, revolution, mutiny, reform, meritocracy, didacticism, midshipman, novel, equality, navy, maritime, sea, adventure

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Introduction

In every man is some obscure feeling that his position, oppressive or else oppressed, is a false one: all men, in one or the other acrid dialect, as assaulters or as defenders, must give vent to the unrest that is in them. Of such stuff national well-being, and the glory of rulers, is not made.

-Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution: A History*

Pitchforks are terrifying. They're sharp, they have a long reach, and they're brandished in whimsical art by impish devils. They are also stereotypically carried by human 'devils': members of unpredictable, uncontrollable mobs driven by fear and desperation. That stereotype has historical sources. For example, in May 1816 (less than a year after Wellington's victory at Waterloo put an end to Napoleon's reign and the long wars with France), about a hundred hungry rioters in Littleport, Cambridgeshire, "armed with pitchforks, cleavers and guns smashed windows and broke down doors, stealing money, food and goods from their wealthier neighbours" (Prickett). Incidents like this led to the pitchfork becoming the tropified weapon of the dispossessed farmer, the displaced veteran, the underpaid worker, the everyman father or mother desperate to feed their children. Pitchforks became, in short, a metonymic symbol of the collective will of the common folk and a source of fear for British government officials, particularly during the Age of Revolution (1775-1848).

Only a few decades before the riots in Littleport, Britain's closest sovereign neighbor was in the throes of the most infamous insurrection of modern times—the French Revolution. With the horror of the riots, the execution of Louis XVI, and the mass beheadings of the Terror fresh in their minds, British authorities rushed to crack down on social unrest of every kind, treating

even the smallest petition or gathering as if it were contaminated with sedition. Keeping the nonsense (as they saw it) of French and American politics far from British soil was a primary concern of policy makers. This remained true from the 1790s through the post-Waterloo decades of the early Victorian Age. But in their efforts to avert disaster, British elites too often ignored the very real concerns of the people carrying the pitchfork. That is, in distancing themselves from the language and values of revolutionaries, they downplayed or even exacerbated issues in their own country—issues like the poverty of rural workers, bad harvests due to global weather changes, ongoing social injustices, the disruption of industry by mechanization, and the ever-widening gap between the haves and have-nots.

Protests and riots were natural responses to legislation like the Corn Laws of 1815, which set high tariffs on imported wheat and other grains. Supporters of the tariffs claimed the Corn Laws were implemented to support British farming and to keep workers' wages high (Pickering and Tyrell 10). The disaffected believed that inflated prices served only to improve the situations of already-wealthy landowners. Whatever the case, the reality was that many people were being driven to the brink of starvation. Countless associations formed against the perceived cause: legislative injustice.¹ Such organizations prodded the government into remembering its fear of the people. Though the war-weary nation hoped that the threat of actual violence was far away, in truth, it was all too near.

The Peterloo Massacre made this abundantly clear. As those familiar with the period know, it happened in the summer of 1819, just four years after Waterloo and three after the riots in Cambridgeshire. A large crowd had gathered at St. Peter's Field in Manchester to demand parliamentary reform. Perhaps the local magistrate was afraid of Littleport-style disorder when

¹ See Pickering's and Tyrell's eight-page appendix for a complete list of anti-Corn Law associations.

he sent sabre-wielding Hussars to drive the people away, resulting in 17 deaths and over 650 injuries (Chase 12-13). In any case, the massacre was clear evidence that England was not immune to civil conflict; things could very easily get out of control and bloody.

The issues surrounding Peterloo didn't go away in the decades that followed. If anything, the government's failure to respond appropriately to the tragedy only increased unrest, which in turn intensified public concerns. In response to both government oppression and the collective fear of open revolution, the rhetoric of reform found a home in magazines, pamphlets, and even novels of the 1830s and 40s. What has been termed "social problem fiction" became a popular genre for writers of many backgrounds.

Into this sea of reformist voices sailed Captain Frederick Marryat (1792-1848). A veteran of the Napoleonic Wars, Marryat was an intrepid naval commander and writer who saw the social unrest all around him on shore as a familiar reflection of situations well known to him at sea. Considered the "father of the British sea novel" (Parrill 141-142), Marryat was perhaps the first novelist to recognize that life at sea could symbolize more than the thrill of adventure or the testing of man against nature; ships were places to play out high-stakes thought experiments, to recognize in miniature the kinds of issues that were affecting the nation and indeed the whole Western world. Though others had written sea stories before him, Marryat's books are distinguished by their use of naval life as a laboratory to work through controversial questions of authority, power, discipline, and obedience. Because a ship is a microcosm, its daily struggles between common sailors and officers can be understood as representations of the greater struggle between people and their government. In Marryat's time, uncertainty and fear were facts of life on a ship, where close quarters, no immediate recourse to outside authority, and the strictness of leadership and law (represented by the captain, his lieutenants, and the Articles of War), echoed

circumstances on land in an amplified form. Sailors shared a unity of fate (what affected one affected all), as, ultimately, did all of Britain. And as noted, at the time Marryat was picking up his pen, British society had become like a ship's powder magazine: one spark away from blasting into pieces.

Marryat's five midshipman novels, derived from his experience in the Royal Navy, are the clearest examples of this microcosm strategy in action. Of these, *The King's Own* (1830) and *Mr. Midshipman Easy* (1836) are definitive. Read together, they reveal the scope of Marryat's views on authority, governance, and rebellion, from small-scale personal relationships to empire-enveloping civil conflict. His perspectives have value, particularly because they address the same questions of authority and discipline that we face today. Marryat's works have their shortcomings and blind spots, to be sure, but by examining the complex, multifaceted picture Marryat presents of mutiny and its causes, I will show that simplistic critical readings of Marryat as a pure authoritarian or jingoist fail to acknowledge the genius of his work and the potential influence of its social critique on readers.

Marryat's Midshipmen

[Marryat's] novels are not the outcome of his art, but of his character, like the deeds that make up his record of naval service.

-Joseph Conrad, *Notes on Life and Letters*

Between the drawn-out tragedy of *The King's Own* and the episodic, at times almost slapstick comedy of *Mr. Midshipman Easy*, Marryat uses cause-and-effect relationships to show that the consequences of open rebellion are often far-reaching and devastating. Willy, or William, the hero of *The King's Own*, lives a short and very difficult life, defined by rebellion from the beginning. His father is executed for mutiny when William is just six years old. His

mother commits suicide the same day. After these tragic events, William grows up in the navy, informally adopted by a common sailor who was friend of his father's. When William is nine, his guardian is killed in action, but during the battle, William saves many lives when—in complete disregard for his own safety—he rolls a bomb off the deck into the sea. Captain M— (Marryat's avatar within the novel) recognizes the boy's heroism and promotes him to Midshipman. Many adventures follow, throughout which William continues to distinguish himself as an obedient, loyal, and brave young man, despite the fact that his life seems to be cursed. By the time we read of his untimely end (as a teenager apparently on the verge of inheriting a fortune and marrying the love of his life), we feel truly haunted by the original mutiny that seems to have brought down the curse in the first place.

Jack Easy, on the other hand, has a charmed life from birth. As the only son of a wealthy couple, he finds his childhood as easy as his name. Jack is raised by an ineffectual and silly mother and an absurd philosopher father, who is risibly obsessed with “the rights of man.” (Readers will note the familiarity of that phrase; Mr. Easy's use of the language of revolution is another clear sign that Marryat was writing to the times.) As Jack grows older, he discovers some problems with his father's philosophy (not least the stubborn persistence of hereditary power and private ownership) and resolves to find the truth once and for all. He reasons that perhaps he will find the equality he seeks at sea: “the waters at least are the property of all” (44). In the end, despite frequent “scrapes” and various contradictions he must reconcile, everything seems to go right for Jack. As a gentleman of wealth with a personal connection to the captain, he gets away with much more than any other midshipman would normally be allowed, from minor disobediences to mutiny—though his experience with the latter scars him.

In sum, *The King's Own* is a thrilling epic about a boy who proves a victim of fate, while *Mr. Midshipman Easy* is a semi-autobiographical swashbuckling tale starring a young man who must learn to “act and think for himself,” balancing realism and idealism early in life in order to find success (*Mr. Midshipman Easy* 88). Jack's beginning is humorous and satirical; William's is profoundly tragic. Jack learns to reject or reinterpret the lessons of his childhood, whereas William is continually haunted by his. Jack joins the navy to try it out (hoping, indeed, to find an egalitarian paradise), whereas William is forced into it, having nowhere else to go after his parents die. One “hero” (for so Marryat routinely labels his protagonists) is always free to do what he wants, while the other is bound to the service for life, having been literally marked as the king's property (“The King's Own”) at the tender age of six to atone for his father's rebellion. Taken together, the novels produce a one-two punch of tragedy and comedy that connects with readers in a wide variety of ways, and though the two lead characters learn and grow through very different circumstances, the same argument appears in both novels: that there exist natural laws and fundamental social principles that cannot be cheated or ignored.

In *Mr. Midshipman Easy*, Dr. Middleton is Marryat's advocate for leaving home to pursue a journey of self-discovery. He is instrumental in getting Jack out from under his parents' roof, saving him from further fatherly indoctrination and setting him on the path that eventually leads to life at sea, which Dr. Middleton agrees is “the very best thing for [him]” (45). Dr. Middleton is a voice of reason who confronts the absurd philosophies of Nicodemus Easy, Jack's father—philosophies which Marryat must have heard (in slightly less exaggerated forms) on a regular basis from his radical countrymen. The conflict between Nicodemus's “rights of man” and Middleton's clever sense is useful because it allows Marryat to present dissonance between common revolutionary philosophies and the realities he has come to know through his own

experience. By countering Nicodemus's ideas with Dr. Middleton's questions, Marryat gives the reader an opportunity to reason through some of the most prominent, important issues of his day, including the rightful articulations of discipline, paternal duty, and equality.

A conversation between Dr. Middleton and Nicodemus early in the novel reveals that "equality" was a sentiment that, according to Marryat, sounded attractive, but was ultimately impossible to enforce; his nods to revolutionary language suggest he was suspicious of French and American attempts to do so. Captain Wilson (Jack Easy's superior in *Mr. Midshipman Easy*) is another of Marryat's mentors who shares this view. A distant relation of Jack's father, Wilson feels duty-bound to treat Jack as he would his own son because of a debt he owes Nicodemus (51-52). However, unlike William of *The King's Own*, Jack never takes any direction without question. His constant "arguing of the point" and quest for equality repeatedly put Wilson in a quandary as to how to respond. Wilson is being asked, in essence, to defend society against the claims of the commoner.

During one of Wilson's attempts to reconcile Jack to reality, Marryat does something clever: he tries to balance the potential chaos of the popular desire for equality (associated with the naive revolutionary views of Nicodemus Easy) with a just order of discipline (linked with the moderate, experienced views of Marryat's mentor figures), using the navy as a laboratory. Wilson explains that where discipline is required, it is impossible for more than one person to be in charge. The captain represents the king, who in turn represents the country. Orders are "transmitted from the captain through the lieutenant" and so on throughout the ship. Everyone—here is the key point, articulated by Wilson to Jack, and by extension by Marryat to readers—is "equally obliged to obey. Indeed, as the captain himself [has] to obey the orders of his superiors, the admiral and the admiralty; all on board might be said to be *equally* obliged to obey... equally

bound to do their duty to their country, ...obeying the orders of the country, which [are] administered through their channels" (53-54).

There are obvious flaws in this solution, which Marryat's narrator acknowledges in the text, adding that Wilson "took care not to dwell too long upon it," but it would likely have been refreshing as well as amusing to readers to see the step-by-step reasoning Wilson presents in this passage. If it is casuistry, it is kindly meant, intended to keep Jack alive and in harmony with his shipmates. The effort to reconcile two apparently opposing views is a valiant one, and it shows how complicated questions of authority and resistance can be.

This principle of equal obligation is reinforced for readers in a series of parallel events. For instance, at an early point in Jack's naval training, he is told to go to the masthead to receive punishment for an offense he has unknowingly given. He refuses, responding with his favored rejoinder: "I should wish to argue this point a little" (85). This phrase, so typical of Jack, has a dual purpose for Marryat. First, it illuminates Jack's character and background and becomes a sort of running gag throughout the book. Second, it allows Marryat to pause the story and ask questions, and that is a useful tool for an author who encourages intellectual engagement from his readers.

In this instance, refusing to receive punishment gets Jack sent below, where he has the chance to argue the point with the master's mate, Joliffe. Marryat takes the opportunity to explain (through Joliffe) that if it were permitted for everyone to "argue the point" when an order was given, "the service would be at a stand-still—that would not do;— you must obey an order first, and then complain afterwards, if the order is unjust... if every order were to be cavilled at, and argued upon, as just or unjust, there would be an end of all discipline" (86). A ship is a dangerous place, especially in times of war, and it requires the cooperation of every man on it to

function properly. Never mind working the guns; simply steering or managing the speed of a ship is possible only if everyone works together. The sails must be in the correct positions, the tiller must be functioning, and the helm must be manned correctly. That kind of unity can be achieved only if there is a single mind to direct everyone's efforts—an experienced mind that (presumably) knows best. If every man were allowed to do as he wished, the entire ship could be lost. In the best-case scenario, the ship simply wouldn't go anywhere. For everyone's safety, then, orders must be followed quickly and without question. Marryat presents the need for discipline as another natural principle. For the good of the ship, the service, and the nation, order must be maintained and authority followed.

Examples like Mr. Joliffe, a man of "correct behaviour in every point," make Marryat sound a bit preachy, but a closer, more contextualized look reveals that far from advocating blind patriotism or pushing a state agenda, Marryat's goal was to prod his readers into deeper thought (65). After he explains the need for discipline, in the same breath Joliffe acknowledges the weaknesses inherent in the system. He agrees that, in the service as well as in the world outside it, those in authority often do wrong and are not held accountable, adding that naval life "has been hard bread to [him]" (86-87). Regardless, he advises Jack that every young man must find his own way in this messy, imperfect world: "—not the level of equality, but the level which his natural talent and acquirements will rise or sink him to." He is advocating meritocracy—a strong value in the navy and yet another reason the service works as a laboratory for developing moderate values. Like Jack, every young man "must claim his proper station in life and aid those below him" (Parascandola 83). Sailors may not have equal success, but they should have equal opportunity to excel and to help others along the way.

Importantly, however, though he frowns at disobedience, Marryat applauds initiative. His characters often reap what they sow, rising to the level that “natural talent and acquirements” allow. In *The King’s Own*, after Captain M— has learned that young William saved his life by throwing his hat to distract an enemy, he says, “A good turn is never lost... and the old fable of the mouse and the lion is constantly recurring to make us humble. If I had not put that boy on the quarter-deck, I should in all probability have made a vacancy. It was remarkable presence of mind on his part” (112-113). This is an interesting contradiction: a good sailor should obey orders with precision but still have the “presence of mind” to make choices independent of those orders for the good of others. Obedience and order do not preclude ingenuity.

The golden combination of initiative and obedience is rewarded in Marryat’s novels. William is a boy with “a romantic history, early courage, and amiability... who combined energy of mind with docility of disposition and sweetness of temper” (156). Because of these qualities, he becomes a “general favourite” on the ship. He has the support and patronage of the captain, having saved him during battle—twice. By showing initiative, William wins hearts—including those of his readers. Because of this, people are willing to do things for him. William has many sponsors of his education, including his captain, his friend M’Elvina, and the ship’s doctor, who all go out of their way to make sure he has opportunities for personal growth and career achievement.

Of course, there is such a thing as too much initiative. At one point in *Mr. Midshipman Easy*, Jack disobeys orders after taking command of a cutter in order to go fight a gunboat. Instead of returning to his ship after his primary mission is completed, he decides to “go on a cruise” in order to look for additional prizes. Jack explains to the small crew that “his zeal had induced him not to return to the ship until he had brought something with him worth having”

(96). And he succeeds—at least in the short term: capturing a valuable Spanish brig with prisoners and supplies. Unfortunately, the supplies include a substantial quantity of wine, and the entire crew gets thoroughly inebriated. When Jack tries to deny them further access to the wine, the men mutiny. Acting outside of authority (but in their own self-interest, just as he had done) they take the supplies ashore on an island and continue their revelry. But when they try to come back to the ship, they ignore Jack’s warnings about sharks, and several of them are killed and eaten. Jack is agonized by this loss of life and realizes, “If I had not disobeyed orders... if I had not shown them the example of disobedience, this would not have happened. How can I expect submission from them?” (113). This is a critical moment for Jack. Up until now, his father’s “rights of man” philosophy has led him to believe that all men should be free to do what they like, that ownership does not exist, and that any time he is confronted with anyone who tells him otherwise, he should “argue the point” until the other party sees reason. This is one of the first moments when Jack realizes that applying his father’s philosophy could have disastrous consequences, particularly in the case of a leader who himself rejects authority.

Like Jack, readers must come to accept that life isn’t always fair. Marryat’s cause-and-effect relationships come with a caveat: fate sometimes chooses its favorites. *The King’s Own* is a tragedy from the beginning, and though it appears at first to follow a redemptive arc, it ends quite suddenly with William’s cruel and wholly unnecessary murder by arsenic poisoning. The boy who has done nothing but good all his days dies a horrible death. His apparently cursed life has run its course. On the other hand, Jack’s ending is a charming fairytale romance. He falls in love, marries, retires from the service (having always been financially independent anyway), and lives happily ever after.

Marryat does send a clear message that, in general, good deeds are rewarded. Though William's death is tragic, he is surrounded by friends in the end. His murderer expires alone in ignominy. When we tally consequences, Marryat's characters that behave correctly and generously more often than not are repaid for their goodness with true and lasting friendships, whereas those who do wrong are justly punished. Even if they survive, they wind up broken and isolated.

Marryat's Mutinies

Did nations combat to make One submit;

Or league to teach all kings true sovereignty?

-Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Canto III

Though good things may not always follow good people, it is certain that, in Marryat's world, bad things always happen to mutineers. That may sound typical for a ranking naval officer whose career relied on the authority of his position, but Marryat's perspective is more nuanced than we might expect. Marryat condemned rebels, but he also critiqued the system and the failed authorities that incited them. The following examples, taken together, show that though Marryat indeed warned against rebellion ardently, he also sympathized with mistreated sailors and spoke truth to power.

One important point that readers unavoidably take away from both *The King's Own* and *Mr. Midshipman Easy* is that tyranny is a fact of life. In *Mr. Midshipman Easy*, the narrator explains, "In all societies, however small they may be, provided that they do but amount to half-a-dozen, you will invariably meet with a bully" (65). Only a day or two after his arrival on board Captain Wilson's ship, Jack meets his first real despot, Mr. Vigors, who ironically takes issue with Jack's philosophizing. Jack, having had to "argue the point" with his fists before, wins their

subsequent fight within fifteen minutes, at the end of which Vigors lies on the floor missing several teeth, while Jack has only “trifling scratches” (69). Jack’s willingness and ability to stand up for himself turns him into a protector of others. This little revolution, and even the cruise Jack later takes, remain within the boundaries of acceptability, or at least forgivability, for his captain. But for the rebel who crosses the line, there are serious consequences.

Jack Easy’s venial offense with the cutter contrasts markedly with events depicted in the opening of *The King’s Own*. The novel begins with a description of the famous mutiny at the Nore. As many of Marryat’s readers likely remembered, the mutinies at the Nore and Spithead were similar in their beginnings but drastically different in their outcomes. They both took place the same year, 1797, and both involved whole squadrons of ships anchored just off the English coast. Unlike the mutiny at Spithead, which was essentially a peaceful strike, the mutiny at the Nore involved a violent show of force, one that Marryat clearly marks as ill-conceived treason: “Forty thousand men... turned the guns which they had so often manned in defence of the English flag against their own countrymen and their own home, ...determined to sacrifice the nation and themselves, rather than listen to the dictates of reason and of conscience” (*The King’s Own* 9).

Marryat relates the circumstances of this important historical event through Edward Peters, the father of our young hero, William. Peters is a common sailor whom Marryat portrays with a compassionate eye. He is a husband and father, well-liked by his shipmates, who is just trying to earn a living to provide for his family. When a cheap watch goes missing on board, he is branded a thief and punished, even though proof of his innocence comes to light *before* his punishment (10-11). Marryat decries this injustice:

[T]o degrade a man by corporal punishment, to ruin his character, and render him an object of abhorrence and contempt, in the absence of even bare presumptive evidence, was an act of cruelty and injustice, which could excite but one feeling; and, from that day, the man who would have gloried in dying for his country, became a discontented, gloomy, and dangerous subject. (11)

Dangerous indeed, for such injustices provoked not only the mutiny at the Nore, but also what historian Niklas Frykman notes was an unprecedented surge of rebellion that would go on to sweep the Atlantic: “Shipboard riots, mass desertions, armed strikes, all-out insurrections, violence against officers, and even assassinations swept through Europe’s wooden warships like a wildfire” (87). Within a period of ten years, hundreds of ships’ crews mutinied. Frykman adds, “by the late 1790s up to 100,000 experienced mutineers were spread across the lower decks of the French, British, and Dutch fleets, all of them men who had risked their lives to contest for power with one of the world’s most entrenched autocracies, the European naval officer corps” (87-88). The mutiny at the Nore (1797) was a paradigmatic part of this wave, beginning small and quickly spreading to other ships throughout the anchorage and even beyond it to other squadrons oceans away. Mutineers at the Nore organized themselves using the language of the ocean-spanning revolutionary movement, even hoisting red flags and wearing symbols of the French Revolution to coordinate and declare their intentions (91, 102, 106).

What was the cause of all this rebellion? Simply put, it was desperation based on decades of mistreatment. Though the punishments naval officers could inflict on their subordinates were many and varied, flogging often lay at the root of discontent. Dudley Pope, a scholar and fiction writer of the maritime genre, offers illustrative statistics: “One captain in 1795 recorded fifteen floggings in his journals in nine months—five of 12 lashes, seven of 24, one of 36, and two of 72

(for desertion).” When the frequency and severity of punishment were questioned, “The journals went to the Admiralty, where they were inspected, but nothing was done.” Another captain punished his men with an excessive number of floggings (*seventy* in the same nine months). These punishments were given for such various and inconsistent offenses that his men eventually murdered him (Pope 221–22). Marryat himself hated flogging for any reason, and he applied it as a punishment in only the rarest of cases. Though he did not see a way to eliminate its use entirely, his view was that there were more humane and effective forms of discipline (Pocock 114).

This shows that Marryat was something of a rebel himself. His choice to begin the story from Peters’s point of view is telling. By showing us the inner thoughts and background of an enlisted man, he not only puts readers in that man’s shoes, but he also shows that Peters’s experience has value and import. The narrative gives a different side to the reductive “Captain knows best” story preferred by the Admiralty, what Siobhan Carroll calls the “national mythology of the Royal Navy” (74, 286). “In the wake of the mutinies of 1797,” Carroll explains, “a thinking sailor was a dangerous sailor”; therefore, “Marryat’s descriptions of the private thoughts and workings of Britain’s maritime culture reopen sources of anxiety that stage images of honorable officers and Jolly Jack Tars were meant to contain” (102-103). Far from being a mere voice of power or Empire, Marryat lost popularity with the Admiralty through his transparency and critique of the service in *The King’s Own* (Warner 86, 153; Pocock 104). However, he also inspired reforms in naval rules. This was a sacrifice he was willing to make; in order to promote change, he felt that the first step was to “reeducate the British public” about what the proper conduct of naval personnel ought to be (Carroll 101).

On at least one occasion, life directly imitated art as Marryat's fiction landed among naval decision-makers. His humane alter-ego, Captain M— from *The King's Own*, makes a point of declaring, "I am liable to error... and have therefore made a compact with myself never to punish until twenty-four hours after the offence has been committed... I have found, upon reflection, which delay has given time for, reasons to mitigate the severity" (123). Captain M— adds that he wishes the Admiralty would make a twenty-four-hour delay in punishment a service-wide rule. Shortly after *The King's Own* was published, the Admiralty actually took Marryat's not-so-subtle suggestion under consideration. The twenty-four-hour delay eventually became naval law (*Mr. Midshipman Easy* 183).

The best practice, as Marryat's books argue, was simply to be the kind of leader who commanded respect without having to resort to corporal punishment. He therefore suggests that the greater part of the blame lies not with the men who choose to mutiny, but with their officers (Parascandola 31). At the beginning of *The King's Own*, he frames his narration of the mutiny at the Nore with the following thought:

Whether we act in a body or individually, such is the infirmity and selfishness of human nature, that we often surrender to importunity that which we refuse to the dictates of gratitude, —yielding for our own comfort, to the demands of turbulence, while quiet unpretending merit is overlooked and oppressed, until, roused by neglect, it demands, as a right, what policy alone should have granted as a favour. (10)

In the case of Edward Peters, the narrator bluntly asserts that he "had just grounds of complaint," and that it was "the behaviour, on the part of Government, which produced the mutiny at the Nore" (*The King's Own* 10). Peters's participation in the mutiny seems absolutely reasonable. On the surface, it seems to have the potential primarily to do great good.

But as sympathetic as Marryat makes Peters out to be, Peters is ultimately condemned, and not by the voice of another character or the narrator, but by himself. As he awaits death by hanging, he explains to his wife, “I desire to die, and my fate must be a warning to others. When I reflect what dreadful consequences might have ensued to the country from our rebellious proceedings, I am thankful... that we did not succeed.” Then, as if he knows what the reader is thinking, he adds, “I know what you would urge—my wrongs, my undeserved stripes... They are no more in comparison with my crime than the happiness of one individual is to that of the nation which I assisted to endanger, because one constituting a part of it had, unauthorized, oppressed me.” Here, he answers the question of whether mutiny could be justified by the wrongs done to him, concluding, “No, no... I should not be happy if I were not to atone for my faults; and this wretched life is the only atonement I can offer” (26).

This is an incredibly important moment. Up until now, Marryat has painted Peters as a sympathetic character whose decision to mutiny was an entirely justifiable response to the degrading, painful treatment he had received at the hands of his so-called superiors. Why the dramatic shift from sympathetic hero to criminal? In this case, Marryat is using his experience and moral authority to deny the claim that certain circumstances can justify rebellion, and he is saying that a man of Peters’s character—a man of moral integrity—would agree. The ends did not justify the means, and in Peters’s case particularly, rebellion did more harm than good. Similarly, the common Englishman of the early nineteenth century might have felt entirely justified in his revolutionary leanings—after all, what did so many sacrifice their lives for during the Napoleonic Wars, if not to demonstrate that the British nation would not suffer a tyrant? But Marryat counters that a revolutionary movement can do just as much, if not more, to harm individuals and nations than to correct or improve a repressive or unresponsive government.

Doubtless, the echoes of the French Revolution and Napoleon's conquests were seared into Marryat's memory, as they would have been in the memories of his contemporaries, especially veterans of the wars. He did not take threats to peace lightly. As Edmund Burke had concluded in his famous pamphlet, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790): "The fresh ruins of France, which shock our feelings wherever we can turn our eyes, are not the devastation of civil war; they are the sad but instructive monuments of rash and ignorant counsel in time of profound peace" (34). "Rash and ignorant" are almost the precise terms that Marryat chooses to describe the actions of Edward Peters. He later observes, through Captain M—, "I find that, by rash and injudicious behaviour, a greater sacrifice is made than there is a necessity for" (*The King's Own* 194).

The ultimate question these examples present is plain: when or how is it acceptable to resist authority? Does it depend on the nature of that authority—how legitimate, tolerant, or powerful it is? Why are Jack's (and Marryat's) little rebellions okay? In many cases, the answer may lie in Captain M—'s comment about "rash and injudicious behaviour." Marryat's guiding question seems to be: What sacrifice does rebellion demand? In the case of Vigors, the only injuries to Jack were a few scratches, and justice was dealt directly to the despot in question with no collateral damage. Mutinous flouting of authority, on the other hand, affects entire ships, and sometimes, as in the case of the mutiny at the Nore, entire fleets. The potential for damage and loss of life is much greater in the case of Peters than it is in Jack's case. Even Jack's own little mutiny stops at the deaths of a few unwise crewman. Because its scope is limited to the survivors of the cutter's crew (and given that it was brought on by an excess of "zeal"), it is ultimately forgivable.

Of course, Marryat still wants his readers to think about the rights of man and equality, and he isn't entirely negative about them. His books show that he believes it is important to advocate for a better world. He just has little confidence in mutiny or revolution as a strategy, likely due to his distaste for any form of mob justice, what he calls "the mobocracy" (*Diary in America* 190). He was deeply suspicious of anything he perceived as evidence of mob mentality. Even the zeal of a religious revival meeting he once witnessed in America drew his suspicion and abhorrence. Confronted by a cacophony of "sobs intermingled with prayers and ejaculations," he recorded,

I quitted the spot, and hastened away into the forest, for the sight was too painful, too melancholy. Its sincerity could not be doubted, but it was the effect of over-excitement, not of sober reasoning. Could such violence of feeling have been produced had each party retired to commune alone? Most surely not. It was a fever created by collision and contact, of the same nature as that which stimulates a mob to deeds of blood and horror. (*Diary in America* 278)

Marryat's encouragement for his young readers to ponder questions of moment and think things through for themselves is likely tied to his concerns that mob mentality could be a huge limiter of individual and collective freedom. Therefore, his decision to martyr Edward Peters by turning him against the very mutiny he helped stage is significant, because it acknowledges that an ungoverned mob cannot guarantee safety or freedom any more than an unrighteous dictator can. This is a nuanced perspective that belies any relegation of Marryat to the position of a mere propagandist for the status quo.

The powerful conclusion voiced in *The King's Own* is this: "Doubtless there is a point at which endurance of oppression ceases to be a virtue, and rebellion can no longer be considered

as a crime; but it is a dangerous and intricate problem, the solution of which had better not be attempted” (9). Though he may not have a definitive or categorical answer, Marryat has seen what happens to those who choose mutiny as their solution to tyrannical rule. Life is messy, but no mess that he can conceive of is worth the cost that open rebellion would be to an individual or the country as a whole. “War is bad enough,” he attests, “but civil war is dreadful” (qtd. in Warner 124).

Marryat’s moderate views, framed by meritocratic thinking and realism, are often conflated with cowardice, but anyone who has studied Marryat’s life knows that he was far from cowardly. His view that incremental change was preferable to violent upheaval was not rooted in fear of the unknown or loss of power and social standing, but an intimate knowledge of the horrors of war and the conviction that such horrors should be avoided at all costs. Incremental reform brought about by patient effort and reasoned discourse was by far the better option.

Marryat’s Methods

How true it is that any deviation from what is right invariably leads us into a scrape.

-Captain Wilson, *Mr. Midshipman Easy*

As Gregory Vargo writes, “Realist fiction that raised the debate about the ‘Condition of England’ in the age of industrialization contained within itself a host of stylistic innovations” (2). I present Marryat as one of those innovators. His juggling of meritocracy and mutiny inspired what Joseph Conrad called “a priceless legend.” His books were read and loved by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Washington Irving, Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, Robert Louis Stevenson, Virginia Woolf, and Ernest Hemingway, just to name a few (Parascandola 1). Conrad wrote of him, “His greatness is undeniable... If he be not immortal, yet he will last long

enough for the highest ambition... The tradition of the great past he has fixed in his pages will be cherished for ever [sic] as the guarantee of the future” (54-55).

Unfortunately, Conrad was wrong, at least insofar as lasting readership was concerned. Far from being immortal, Marryat’s books and fame have all but disappeared into the folds of history. Few even in the field of British literature pay much attention to him. Why is this so? It is difficult to point to any one reason. Curiously, in a literal sense, his books were lost when the stereoplates (owned by Routledge after his death) were melted down for munitions to aid the war effort in 1916 (Weedon 172; St. Clair 431). But the books were subsequently reprinted from pirated copies or older editions, and today they are easily accessed as eBooks—only a Google search away. The work never entirely disappeared, so accessibility cannot be the only issue.

More troublingly, some critics believe that the books are simply unremarkable. Even Tom Pocock, Marryat’s most recent biographer, opines that Marryat is nothing special as a writer (11). Of course, Pocock is more interested in the colorful story of Marryat’s life than his literary prowess. Still, even the enthusiastic biography put out by Oliver Warner in 1953, which describes Marryat as “greatly gifted,” calls his writing “good and bad” (14). Critical views of Marryat appear as ambivalent and complex as Marryat’s own political perspective.

Perhaps some readers find Marryat’s books dated and boring. Yet clearly the work has enjoyed great popularity. During his lifetime, Marryat made enough money from the sale of his novels to make him a millionaire by today’s standards (Pocock 171, 191). What’s more, for nearly a century, his early naval novels especially captivated the imaginations of young people, and it was “an ill-equipped schoolroom which [did] not have a battered copy of at least one of [Marryat’s books] lying somewhere around” (Warner 13). In 1950, a comic book adaptation of *Mr. Midshipman Easy* was printed by *Classics Illustrated* as part of a series of “stories by the

world’s greatest authors” intended to encourage children to read the originals (Sawyer 1; see Fig. 1). Anyone with ten cents could read about the adventures of Jack Easy and his friends.



Fig. 1. Photo of cover from: “Mr. Midshipman Easy.” *Classics Illustrated*, No. 74, Gilberton Company Inc., 1950

Those familiar with Marryat’s novel might be disappointed by the comic book whitewashing of Mesty or the glossing over of gruesome details (like the sharks eating Jack’s mutineers, or Nicodemus’s insane and ultimately fatal attempt to manipulate phrenological bumps on his head), but for the most part the comic book stayed true to the rollicking adventure spirit encapsulated in the original tale. It also continued to communicate many of the core ideas about revolution and rebellion found in the original. But vitally, one thing missing was Marryat’s no-nonsense narratorial voice, pointing out issues and sharing insight based on experience. This

change may have represented an update for young readers of modern tastes, but it did mean that twentieth-century Marryat lost some of his social authority before fading into obscurity.

To his contemporary readers, Marryat's sensible, avuncular style may have represented a sort of refuge from a world that seemed at times devoid of reason. During the 1830s, he wrote and published what became some of the most popular tales of the decade—so popular that passing ships at sea would ask each other for the latest story updates (Parascandola 10, 54). His sweeping adventure narratives were an escape for readers of all ages, but his books resonated particularly with young boys who fantasized about running off to sea: would-be midshipmen who identified easily with characters like Jack Easy and William Seymour. In fact, though many of his early novels were clearly geared toward adults, it is likely that boys made up a substantial portion of Marryat's target audience from the beginning. Therein lies a possible explanation for both his initial popularity and his eventual decline into obscurity: adventure novels for children are rarely treated as serious works of literature by critics.

But Anita Moss, a specialist in children's literature, rightly explains that Marryat's novels are much more than simple adventure stories: "For Marryat's young protagonists, self-discovery was the purpose of enduring adventures and trials at sea. But for Marryat... the ship was a microcosm of British society, and hence the perfect place in which to shape the identity of a British gentleman" (14). I have tried to elaborate on this argument, showing not only that Marryat modeled pluck, ingenuity, and other virtues of British masculinity, but also that he inculcated lessons of citizenship. His purpose in writing was twofold, to entertain and to teach, as he explains with characteristic frankness in *Mr. Midshipman Easy*:

We do not write these novels merely to amuse, —we have always had it in our view to instruct, and it must not be supposed that we have no other end in view than to make the

reader laugh. If we were to write an elaborate work, telling truths, and plain truths, confining ourselves only to point out errors and to demand reform, it would not be read; we have therefore selected this light and trifling species of writing, as it is by many denominated, as a channel through which we may convey wholesome advice in a palatable shape. If we would point out an error, we draw a character... We consider this to be the true art of novel writing, and that crime and folly and error can be as severely lashed as virtue and morality can be upheld, by a series of amusing causes and effects, that entice the reader to take a medicine. (182-183)

Didacticism was not unusual for novelists of the period, but the degree to which Marryat injects himself into his own stories is noteworthy. His interruptions do more than break down the barriers that separate him from his readers: they remind them that there is at least a grain of truth in every story. Indeed, Marryat did not simply transition from naval life to novel writing. He actually began composing *The King's Own* while he was serving as a ship captain. In the twenty-second chapter of that novel, he (or his narratorial alter-ego) reports, "I am seated in the after-cabin of a vessel, endowed with as liberal a share of motion as any in his Majesty's service... and I can barely keep my position before my manuscript. The sea is high, the gale fresh, the sky dirty, and threatening a continuance of what our transatlantic descendants would term a pretty-considerable-tarnation-strong blast of wind" (147-148). "Frequent intrusions" like the one just cited allow him to build trust and establish a close relationship with his audience (Parascandola 15).

Admittedly, Marryat's garrulous, and at times overbearing style can also be wearing, like when he spends an entire chapter writing a Montaigne-style essay about an ant (*The King's Own* 238-245). But I believe the most common reason his work isn't read or studied much anymore is

politics. Vargo writes that Marryat's fiction is "antiradical" and promotes only a "triumphalist vision of the national past" (112). Christopher Akehurst similarly suggests that "If you wanted a racist-imperialist author to hold up as an example of all that correct opinion now considers reprehensible in nineteenth-century British attitudes, and Kipling was unavailable, Frederick Marryat would do just as well" (86). Patrick Brantlinger similarly, in his well-known book *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830–1914*, consistently dismisses the ship captain's writing as nationalistic and shallow. From Brantlinger's view, Marryat's novels are full of unremarkable, stereotypical characters and flag-waving. Most damningly, Brantlinger asserts that besides being ultra-conservative, Marryat's books are also overly violent and "sadistic by nature" (49-53).

Because many critics view Marryat through today's lenses, they see clearly the things that clash with modern sensibilities. Though a close reading shows Marryat was largely moderate, such criticisms paint him as anything but. His work has become a victim of well-meaning historicism that preaches the binary of heroic iconoclasm and brutish colonialism. In cases like Marryat's, such pigeon-holing is unfair. Parascandola rightly observes, "Even those who have examined his work tend to oversimplify his ideas or dismiss them altogether" (2). Siobhan Carroll agrees, arguing that Brantlinger doesn't give Marryat enough credit and that his novels should be read "as a critique, not a celebration of the abuses of empire" (99). Akehurst also questions the supposedly evil motives behind Marryat's novels: "Could an arrogant believer in the unique virtue of Britishness have written the lucid and realistic account of the rise and fall of his own country's fortunes that Marryat offers...?" (86).

On the contrary, as this thesis proves, Marryat was anything but closed-minded, and he certainly wasn't shallow. He was a nonconformist who preached individualism as empowerment

and encouraged critical thinking. He pushed for reforms, genuinely questioned authority, and believed that the purpose of power was to be able to benefit others, “to make so many people happy” (*Mr. Midshipman Easy* 185). These are not the views of an arrogant sadist, concerned only with a “triumphalist vision of the national past.” Yet Marryat’s goals and the virtues of his writing are often buried under the shame of colonialism. I would suggest, however, that in ignoring him, we are simply seeking to build our own version of the past—one where the only voices we listen to are the ones that say the “right” things. Perhaps we feel somehow expiated from the guilt of our own history when we idealize iconoclasts and vilify everyone else.

Conclusion

We must do all we can, and leave the rest to Providence.

-Captain M—, *The King’s Own*

The early Victorian British reader lived in a dangerous time, but an exciting one as well. There was “vice and violence,” but there was also innovation and progress (Vargo 10). New technologies were being developed. A great evangelical zeal was at work. Outside its borders, the nation was expanding its imperial influence. Experimental social problem fiction was creating additional space for conversations about reform, and domestically, the government was beginning to see the need for change, even if it couldn’t agree on when or how to achieve it.

Both *The King’s Own* and *Mr. Midshipman Easy* are stories set within a nation that, following the Napoleonic Wars, had emerged as the world’s lone superpower. Like William, the nation’s people needed to respect the traditions and systems by which it could keep the peace; and like Jack, the nation had to figure out how to wield its power justly in order to provide safety and prosperity to all. That process involved tensions, trial and error, and a certain amount of

luck. In lived reality, it involved on the whole at least as much failure as success. But it is not being overly sanguine to suggest that Marryat's work contributed to that success.

Though Marryat cared about the ways people responded to tyranny, his midshipman novels make it clear that he was most interested in the proper use of power. While members of the radical press were pushing for dramatic legislative changes to address various societal issues, Marryat's approach was less disruptive. He used stories to train young people to be wise and just leaders in the future. As I have demonstrated, he advanced this purpose in several ways. By portraying cause-and-effect relationships, Marryat argued for meritocracy. By promoting the individual, Marryat (paradoxically) denied the appeal of raw equality and depowered the mob. At the same time, he critiqued the oppressive systems that caused rebellion, calling for reforms in the navy and, by extension, in society at large. He specifically advocated for children as contributors to society: "Treat a child as you would an equal, and in a few months you will find that the reason of his having until then remained childish was because he had heretofore been treated as a being of inferior capacity and feelings" (*The King's Own* 51). Each of these interests problematize simplistic readings of Marryat as an arch-conservative or jingoistic imperial apologist. Taken together, they show the great potential worth of his work.

Critics rightly note that there are egregiously offensive aspects of Marryat's writing. His novels often exclude women entirely or depict them as objects with little intellectual complexity. Members of other races are frequently presented as exotic barbarians. Yet alongside the apparent misogyny and racism in his novels, Marryat made progressive moves that went against the traditions of his times, like arguing against flogging (both in naval practice and in schools) and denouncing impressment. He was, in fact, a free thinker: pushing for some social reforms and arguing against others, to the point where many of his contemporaries had no idea what to make

of his politics (Parascandola 4). He certainly marched to his own drum, and that in itself is surprising in a naval captain who grew up in the structured, harshly disciplined Royal Navy of the late 1700s. Perhaps it was his ambivalence that inspired him to draw such clear connecting lines between the socio-political issues of his time and the microcosm of a naval vessel, which he used as a setting in which to try to work out what he believed himself. In the process of doing so, he added valuable perspectives on vital issues of his day and pioneered a role for maritime fiction that has been abundantly followed up by later great writers.

Further attesting to his worth is his enduring literary legacy. Sea-adventure novelists have been following in Marryat's footsteps for nearly two centuries now, using ship life as a stage to play out all kinds of moral dilemmas. As Moss writes, "the sea with its violence, its potential for both destruction and creation, its perpetual motion and abundant life, still inspires writers. People look longingly at the sea, as they ponder and ask unanswerable questions" (15). This pattern is particularly visible in books like Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* (1900), C.S. Forester's *The Happy Return* (1937) and Herman Wouk's *The Caine Mutiny* (1951).

Furthermore, the spirit and insights of Marryat's fiction continue to be of value to readers today. In our contemporary times of protests and pandemics, unanswerable questions—particularly those that concern our relationship to authority—are the order of the day. Like popular maritime fiction writers that followed him, Marryat brought the sea and all "its potential" to his readers. That alone has earned him a place in the constellation of genius that is maritime writers of canon. But what makes his novels—particularly his early midshipman novels—most valuable is his engagement with tangled truths, training his readers as he would his midshipmen to think independently and unravel them. He did not write his novels "merely to

amuse,” but to address morally ambiguous questions in a way that provoked critical thinking in his readers. This “medicine” is what Marryat prescribes as an inoculation against the confusion of life. His novels reveal the potential power of narrative in the human quest to understand the world and one’s place in it. Should we continue to ignore a writer whose explicit purpose is so central to the humanities?

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