

THREE SHEETS TO THE WIND

THE NAUTICAL ORIGINS OF EVERYDAY EXPRESSIONS



Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea

Superstition

The origins of a remarkable number of everyday words and phrases are anchored in our seafaring past. Cynthia Barrett, author of the book Three Sheets to the Wind:

The Nautical Origins of Everyday Expressions has joined Quarterdeck to share entertaining and revealing maritime roots of common English expressions.

Perhaps no group of people has harbored more superstitions than sailors. At the mercy of wind and sea, they sought to ward off evil by wrapping themselves in magical talismans, gods, and the supernatural. In *Moby Dick*, Melville captures the seafarer's vulnerability as the *Pequod* weighs anchor and "...blindly plunged like fate into the lone Atlantic." Many nautical expressions we use today

are rooted in these fears and superstitions.

When a ship was becalmed, it was the seaman's belief that he could summon the wind by facing the direction by which he desired the wind to blow and whistling. Nowadays to be "whistling in the wind" is a futile attempt to change something undesirable. We also knock on wood for the same reason that mariners knocked on their ship's massive wooden masts for good luck.

Sailors believed the albatross, with its magnificent wing spans of up to eleven feet, controlled the winds and contained the souls of dead sailors.

Killing an albatross brought ill fortune. In Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," the narrator, an old ➤



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Your Number's Up

seafarer, is doomed to eternal lament over the fearful consequences of his killing this sacred bird. Be-calmed in a windless corridor, he and his shipmates suffer scorching heat, thirst, and ultimately, death, “And I had done a hellish thing...I had killed the bird that made the wind to blow.” For us having “an albatross around one’s neck” is to carry a heavy, unshakeable burden.

Today the expression “Davy Jones locker,” is simply a colorful name for the ocean floor. But the original nautical meaning was steeped in dark, mystical superstition. Sailors believed Davy Jones was a sea devil who ruled over the souls of dead sailors on the seabed. In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare famously describes those who rest in this mythical place: “Full fathom five thy father lies; of his bones are coral made; those are pearls that were his eyes . . .”

Mariners might curse an unfavorable wind, but they acknowledged that it was a boon to seafarers navigating an opposite route. The expression “It’s an ill wind that blows no good” holds the same meaning today as it did for sailors who coined the phrase centuries ago, what’s bad for you may be good for others. In *Henry IV*, Part 2, Shakespeare precisely captures this meaning. Falstaff asks his old sidekick Pistol “What wind blew you hither.” Pistol answers “Not the ill wind which blows no man to good.”

Since Ancient Egypt, mariners have considered ships living things. They have carved figureheads to imbue their vessel with special powers. In the

1800s the long, sleek clipper ships adopted a full-length human figure. The majority depicted, beautiful, scantily clad women intended to please the gods. Today a “figurehead” is an apparent leader with high visibility but only nominal power and authority.

The expression “Your number is up” is another maritime expression imbued with superstition. It implies that it is someone’s turn for death or bad fortune. The original maritime meaning of this phrase was purely practical.

An admiral needing to confer with or reprimand one of the captains in his fleet summoned him by flying the number of that ship. Hence the captain’s number was up.

One of the most hazardous tasks of the crew was caulking the topmost plank of the ship’s side. One false move and a sailor could find himself plunging into the water. This fraught beam of wood became known as “the devil” and the sailor assigned this perilous job was “between the devil and the deep blue sea.” Today someone “between the devil and the deep blue sea” is in a lousy situation with no good options.

Much like their precarious balancing act furling sails on the yards of tall ships, sailors at sea existed on a thin edge between life and death. On the yards and or on the deck, sailors found solace in superstitions. We may not have inherited those superstitions, but we have adopted the language. ■

Three Sheets to the Wind is available online and wherever books are sold.

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