

Travel Text Paper
Shelvocke: The Rhetorical Pirate

Captain George Shelvocke may be the only man in seafaring history to make people feel sorry for an accused pirate, looter and murderer. Although he may also have been the courageous, hard-nosed and morally upright leader of arguably the toughest and most challenging voyage in naval history. These two descriptions, stated in more extreme terms for the purposes of establishing the spectrum of thought on Shelvocke, also highlight the central issue addressed by Shelvocke's travel text, or more specifically, by its dubious author.

Authored by Shelvocke upon his long-awaited return to England, A Voyage Round the World by the Way of the Great South Sea provides readers with a firsthand account of the three and a half year voyage circumnavigating the globe with the primary purpose of looting treasure from Spanish ships along the West coast of South America. The sailors of this voyage started in England, and then ventured across the Atlantic to the East coast of South America. From there, the majority of the three years was spent sailing around South America and attempting to uphold the mission funded by the Gentlemen's Adventurers Association along the Western coast. Once Shelvocke left California, the voyage was fairly uneventful. After crossing the Pacific and stopping on some islands by China, the crew proceeded onto the Indian Ocean, went around Africa and finally back to England. But the voyage was anything but a simple, pseudo-military operation. As Kenneth Poolman states, "The voyage of the Speedwell, high seas privateer, would encompass greed, envy,

tyranny, class hatred, and a crude socialism. Above all it would be about command—its demands, its limitations, its proper application in a ship and perhaps, by extension, in the wider world” (12). In the midst of all this political, social and meteorological turmoil, George Shelvocke emerged as one of the most rhetorically clever naval officers of the eighteenth century.

The preface to Shelvocke’s famous text is indicative of how efficiently he uses rhetoric to appeal to his different audiences. He first subtly diverts his audience away from issues such as piracy by establishing the ethos of the non-sailing population, stating that, “I conceive it must be allow’d that those who have the happiness of living at home, in full possession of every thing that may contribute to make life agreeable, can be but indifferent judges of what is undergone in so great a journey as is the circumference of the Earth...” (Shelvocke viii). Similar to the contemporary, conservative American rhetoric that anyone not serving in Iraq should not have an opinion about military operations in the Middle East, Shelvocke establishes his own authority and reputation by automatically and rather abruptly suggesting to people back home that they are better off tending to domestic affairs. In a sense, this strategy almost feminizes British citizens who choose to live through the adventure of others by reading travel narratives, while simultaneously continuing to erase or assuage in the mind of the reader any lingering doubts about Shelvocke’s guilt or moral stature. This strategy mostly works because of how Shelvocke sets up the entire preface, “Presume that it will not be expected I should make any apology for the publication of the following sheets...” (Shelvocke i). Here is a good example of where Shelvocke’s arrogance, possibly even contempt, shines

through his very official demeanor. At the same time, he is appealing to his readers' sense of duty reinforced by the rhetoric of empire, a powerful shared cultural reference point. British citizens would almost certainly be willing to excuse decisions or acts made in the heat of battle or on the open sea with little food or water, especially if such sordid tales were to be presented by someone like Shelvocke who, very subtly, appears to be incapable of lying or distortion but in actuality understands the rhetorical strategies involved in producing the text. This is compounded by his consistent use of tone and language, which sometimes make it obvious that he is telling part of his narrative selectively, but it also makes him appear much more in control than Captain Clipperton.

Although seemingly unrelated to the preceding paragraph, the infamous incident involving Simon Hatley, a gun and one very ominous black albatross is massively significant in the rhetorical and historical sense. Beyond the mysticism that has rapidly grown out of the incident, which most often involves more spiritual significance that an albatross usually represents to most non-seafaring people, is how Shelvocke reacts and addresses the strangely obtuse actions of Hatley, his second captain. Shelvocke's characterization of the event is very non-chalant, even fairly passive: "...nor one sea-bird, except a disconsolate black albatross, who accompanied us for several days, hovering about us as if he had lost himself, till Hatley, my second Captain, observing, in one of his melancholy fits, that this bird was always hovering near us, imagin'd, from his color, that it might be some ill omen" (Shelvocke 73). His tone is very plain, even when recalling this in retrospect. The obvious interpretation is that Shelvocke could not have possibly known how

famous that incident would become decades later, and while that is the most likely explanation, it does tend to ignore how Shelvocke portrays Hatley in that scene. This becomes more significant when considering that Hatley is partly responsible for two mutinies that almost came to fruition. However, those attempted mutinies were of a handful of incidents where one or some of Shelvocke's officers plotted against him.

Interestingly, the function of the albatross, which some sailors believed in superstitiously, provides another layer of authority and credibility, thereby bolstering Shelvocke's side of what happened over three years away from civilization. This is due to the absurd amount of attention people have paid to the book as a result of Coleridge's discovery of the incident and his immortalization of it, though the origin of how Coleridge came to include this incident is debatable. The most common story involves William Wordsworth, who supposedly was reading Shelvocke's book and then proceeded to initiate a conversation with Coleridge: "Suppose," said I (Wordsworth), "you represent him as having killed one of these birds on entering the South Sea, and that the tutelary Spirits of those regions take upon them to avenge the crime. The incident was thought fit for the purpose and adopted accordingly. I also suggested the navigation of the ship by the dead men, but do not recollect that I had anything more to do with the scheme of the poem" (The Grace Files). During the conversation, Wordsworth is rather amusingly taking credit for some of the more famous parts of the poem. However, since Coleridge lived in Bristol for a time, it is also possible that he merely picked up Shelvocke's text on his own. The powerful ethos of both Coleridge and Wordsworth also helps

to support Shelvocke's "legend", or at the very least make it seem far more important than it actually may be, though this is decades after his death.

Despite the legend of Hatley shooting down the albatross and the endless bad luck that followed, Shelvocke endured a much greater and more interesting enemy than a large, black bird stalking the ship. Captain Clipperton, who was theoretically supposed to support Shelvocke and work together with him to complete their collective mission, actually proved to be much more of a problem at times than the Spanish. Clipperton and Shelvocke did not get along from the start of the voyage. According to Poolman, "He (Shelvocke) belittled Clipperton as a tradesman and a freebooter" (13). Furthermore, "Clipperton was also unpopular with his own officers, who had to suffer foulmouthed abuse during the commodore's frequent bouts of violent drunkenness" (14). Shelvocke resented the fact that Clipperton had been put in charge of the entire excursion and considered Clipperton to be well beneath him. At one point, Shelvocke quips, "The truth on't is, that Capt. Clipperton; though he was reputed to be well skill'd in this navigation, was always unfortunate in finding out any port and least his continual blunders should be imputed to his ignorance, he always found out some expedient to evade any suspicion of his inability" (309). This productive beginning to their relationship laid the foundation for everything negative that happened between them on the voyage, and practically nothing positive happened when the two captains were together.

It was because of this antagonistic relationship that Shelvocke and Clipperton engaged in a battle of ethos both during the voyage and back home in England. Clipperton's conduct towards Shelvocke and his men, which included leaving them

stranded with almost no supplies, deserting them, making false “truces” then breaking them and showing no regard for the safety or health of Shelvocke’s crew, may have very well been the major difference in the two captains’ ongoing legal and personal battle back in England after the voyage. Although Shelvocke had lost many men, there were a few who voiced agreement with how Shelvocke kept everything together through sickness, horrible weather, Spanish ships attacking and even being shipwrecked, whereas Clipperton’s men, particularly the officers, grew quite tired of Clipperton’s repeated orders to ignore the *Happy Return*, the reincarnation of the *Speedwell* which had previously wrecked and stranded Shelvocke and his crew. Late in the voyage, Poolman comments on one of Clipperton’s many childish orders regarding Shelvocke: “It was the venom of a bitter and hopeless man, unable to recoup all his past misfortunes, failing at everything he undertook. Clipperton was a loser” (129). Poolman, like seemingly every other scholar or writer, tends to favor Shelvocke as the much stronger and braver sailor of the two of them. This sentiment is echoed and reinforced by the moment where Clipperton finally seemed to have everything together; the moment when he and Shelvocke were together and plotting to steal treasure from the *Santo Cristo*, which was considered to be one of the richest Spanish treasure ships. But again, Clipperton proved to be a coward, unreliable and his officers, “had for some time suspected the state of his mind, from his go-stop-go behavior, his grandiose boasts followed by paralysis in the face of action, his unwillingness to take even minor risks and his drinking bouts leading to outrageous behavior” (134). Of course, once again, Shelvocke is given the benefit of the doubt, and a significant part of the reason could be that Clipperton failed to

produce his own manuscript upon returning to England; in its place he told lies and thought up fake charges that probably applied more to him than to Shelvocke.

Though Clipperton's actions and judgment for much of the voyage went far beyond unreasonable, people back home did not know these things, and Clipperton arriving home first only solidified suspicion of Shelvocke in some ways. However, Shelvocke's biggest problem was not the lies and plotting of Clipperton, but answering the manuscript penned by William Betagh, who made his hatred of Shelvocke blatantly obvious throughout the book. This hatred was fueled by more than one incident; the feud began when Betagh accused Shelvocke of hoarding food from the men, boldly telling Shelvocke, "I hope in God this voyage will be short with you!" (Poolman 40). Shelvocke reluctantly confined him to quarters, but the two battled after that incident as well. The accuracy of Betagh's book is not without its questionable passages, just like Shelvocke's text, but the main problem for Betagh was how he overestimated the amount of sarcasm and exaggeration people were willing to tolerate. As Kenneth Poolman notes, "Betagh painted Shelvocke as an alternately arrogant and fawning, drunken, gouty monster who manipulated events and subordinates in such an outrageously Machiavellian manner as to strain belief" (160). However, even Poolman admits that Shelvocke, while not guilty of piracy or theft on a grand scale, probably benefited financially from the journey in more ways than he was technically given authority by the letters of marque (160). One passage in particular paints Betagh as fairly desperate to cast aspersions upon Shelvocke's character: "And Shelvocke will have it that this fellow was a king, an this black stick was a scepter; which as he delivered, it is pity Shelvocke did not keep it, and make

himself king of the country: for it's plain the Indian resigned his sovereignty by parting with the stick" (as qtd. in Andrews 107-108). The passage is sarcastic, bitter and not consistent with Shelvocke's own accounts of his interactions with native peoples.

Despite the lukewarm reception by the Gentlemen Adventurers Association and William Betagh, amongst others, Shelvocke's voyage could actually be deemed a relative success, even though Captain Clipperton had arrived back in England weeks earlier and put into motion the process by which Shelvocke was temporarily arrested, jailed and brought up on various gratuitous and fairly hypocritical charges—though he was acquitted because of a serious lack of evidence. The air of mystique that hangs over this famous voyage, particularly the albatross incident, continues to characterize the place this text holds within the genre of travel texts. However, the real mystery continues to be why so little has been written about the voyage and Shelvocke himself. Why has almost everyone insisted on focusing their efforts upon the shooting of the albatross and its relation to Coleridge's "Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner"? While the answer to this question may forever remain a mystery, it is abundantly clear that a great deal more critical analysis is needed to fully understand this book, Captain Shelvocke, his detractors and the voyage itself.

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