

# Shakespeare's Sea Dogs and Archetypes of Constancy in *The Comedy of Errors* and *Twelfth Night*

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*Sir Francis Drake in Cartagena 1585, by Baptista Boazio (1589). Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.*

When shoals and sandy banks appear  
What pilot can direct his course?  
When foaming tides draw us so near,  
Alas! what fortune can be worse?  
~"Another of seafarers, describing Evil Fortune"

The word "sea dog" has been in use for centuries by seamen, referring to mythic creatures, part dog and part fish, as well as oceanic creatures such as seals, dogfish, and even species of shark.<sup>1</sup> During Shakespeare's time, "sea dog" not only referred to an aquatic animal, but to older, experienced seamen like Sir Francis Drake. Drake had a pivotal role in England's global expansion as one of Queen Elizabeth I's Sea Dogs, a group of privateers sanctioned to help English naval efforts against the Spanish (Clifford 2693). A sea song recounting Drake's return from his voyage around the world (1577-80) presents a bold challenge: "You gallants all o' the British blood, / Why don't you sail o' the ocean flood?" (Oxford 4). The same song reminds its audience of Sir Humphrey Gilbert, who, unlike Drake, "neer came home again" (4). With their successful circumnavigation, Drake and his crew were regarded as national heroes for their navigational skill. Drake and the other Sea Dogs, who included Sir Walter Raleigh,

were also successful in raiding Spanish ships until the Treaty of London ended the Anglo-Spanish War in 1604 (Clifford 2693-2700). Elizabeth's Sea Dogs helped England stake its claim in Spain's general monopoly in the New World, and Drake, in particular, helped instigate growth and change for England's Atlantic trade enterprise while serving as a model of endurance and constancy.<sup>2</sup>

Drake's model of the Sea Dog—a constant pilot amidst terrible waters—was adapted in sea songs and shanties, but this archetype also appears in Elizabethan drama.<sup>3</sup> Shakespeare's shipwreck plays seem particularly inspired by the model of constancy that the Sea Dog represented during this time. In *The Comedy of Errors*, Egeon tells a shipwreck story that recalls Drake's own perils at sea, as well as a miraculous survival. Egeon's situation is bleak, as he experiences great turmoil and loss and then becomes a prisoner after arriving in restricting waters. Finding himself at the mercy of nature and law, Egeon is forced to recount his most painful memories of the sea and offer testimony of his troubles. As his story goes, Egeon proves himself a "sea dog" for his skill in surviving a storm by fastening himself to either end of a ship's mast; then "floating straight, obedient to the stream," he is able to return home

(continued on page 6)



# Shakespeare's Sea Dogs

*Continued from Page 2*

(1.1.86). Though he suffers considerable loss, Egeon continues to move forward, obedient to his mission to reunite with his lost family. What connects Egeon and Drake is the archetype of the “constant man.” As Douglas L. Peterson explains, “The constant man is unshaken even at that moment when the tempest is about to capsize his ship” (48). The constant man is an especially apt model for seafarers, as he can anticipate danger yet never recoil or surrender to nature’s wrath. During Shakespeare’s time, the “constant man” is the Elizabethan Sea Dog, specifically Drake. For Egeon, the “constant man” is a version of himself he desperately seeks to embody.

Through the sea dog character, Shakespeare emphasizes that when men and women are constant to their true mission, they will be restored. This message is reiterated by the Captain in *Twelfth Night*, a sea dog who guides Viola and tells her the story of her brother’s survival. The Captain’s stirring account of Sebastian’s struggle in the relentless waters offers yet another version of the “constant man” archetype. The Captain’s narrative emphasizes both the miracle of Sebastian’s survival and the strength within him that fought the testing waves. Like Egeon, Sebastian responds quickly and binds himself to a mast, but it is his endurance that keeps him tightly held. Egeon and the Captain prove themselves to be constant seamen by surviving devastating sea storms, and their stories of constant seamen move their respective plays forward.

For Shakespeare’s sea dogs, the “constant man” archetype is used to reiterate how steadfastness effects growth and change, just as it served Elizabeth’s privateers at sea. Shakespeare’s storytelling sea dogs use this figure in their narratives to inspire others to act. By giving profound examples of loss, confusion, and perseverance, Egeon and the Captain follow a tradition in maritime narrative that emphasizes the importance of weathering the storm and staying the course. Their accounts not only inspire other characters to act, but they also anticipate the restoration of order after tragic events.

## EGEON IN THE COMEDY OF ERRORS

Egeon’s woeful tale reiterates a pivotal truth in *The Comedy of Errors*: everyone is mastered by someone or something—ocean, fate, ruler, God, or any other powerful force that surrounds its subjects. Egeon, a Syracusan merchant, is held captive due to a trading war between Syracuse and Ephesus, where he has been washed ashore. In order to escape imprisonment and death, he has to recall the most devastating event in his life: surviving a shipwreck twenty-five years ago. The sea storm has haunted him for decades, and he still struggles to accept that his family will be gone forever. His story reflects the plight of sea travelers who face the ocean and the future with uncertainty. More critically, Egeon functions as an emblem of constancy amid the forces that continually seek to control him, whether at sea or on land. His miraculous survival and steadfast search for his sons evidence his role as the play’s “constant man” figure. His constancy is tested most dramatically by the sea storm, which itself is a fitting representation of life’s unexpected turmoil.

After searching futilely for his family, Egeon has nearly lost faith in the world. He explains that “by misfortunes was my life prolonged / To tell sad stories of my own mishaps” (1.1.119-20). Egeon hopes that the Duke will be overcome

with sympathy and release him, but the feeling of dread and futility in his story conveys a struggle to remain hopeful during a prolonged, unfortunate life. As he explains, the storm comes like a revelation, and Egeon does not have time to ready himself. He explains to the Duke that during that fateful encounter, the sea did not bring any sign of warning, and, being ruled by the wind, was able to hide any sign of its menace:

A league from Epidamnum had we sail’d,  
Before the always-wind-obeying deep  
Gave any tragic instance of our harm:  
But longer did we not retain much hope;  
For what obscured light the heavens did grant  
Did but convey unto our fearful minds  
A doubtful warrant of immediate death. (1.1.63-9)

Egeon’s powerful phrase, “the always-wind-obeying deep” conveys the sense that he is knowledgeable of the sea’s machinations, but his admission of powerlessness undercuts that knowledge. For seafarers, learning to read the wind was a crucial skill, and this ability coincided with other predictors of weather change, such as the color of the sky and position of the clouds. As Alexander Falconer observes, the mariners of Shakespeare’s time could name “the ‘winds of all the corners’ by the thirty-two points of the compass,” and sea dogs with a magnet compass could find their ways by the Earth’s magnetic field, rather than by landmarks (142). It is not known what kind of navigational tools Egeon has, other than his own intuition, but perhaps this is also what gives the tempest its sense of immediacy. By emphasizing his fears of “immediate death,” Egeon portrays the sea as a space of fated disruption, heightening the sense of urgency from his capture in Ephesus.

Sea dogs like Egeon have to remain constant and resourceful when the tides change, literally and figuratively. He at first states that “what obscured light the heavens did grant” gave only the worst possible outcome (1.1.67). His wife also begins “weeping before for what she saw must come,” as she assumes that she and her husband will die at sea (1.1.71). However, Egeon and his wife manage to survive by fastening themselves to either end of the ship’s mast, then “floating straight, obedient to the stream” (1.1.86). The mast is a recurring object that appears in Shakespeare’s shipwreck plays to reinforce the idea of constancy. It reappears in *Twelfth Night*, for instance, when Sebastian survives the shipwreck in the beginning of the play, and it is also mentioned in *Pericles* as a helpful object in surviving a shipwreck.<sup>4</sup> True sea dogs know how to stay calm and use the mast as a support when the rest of the boat’s structure collapses. If the ocean in Egeon’s story can be interpreted as a mirror to his inward struggles, the mast can be interpreted as the will that keeps him afloat. The storm and the plunge into dangerous waters are thus a test of Egeon’s spiritual stamina.

Egeon’s narrative reinforces the idea that enduring hardships effect powerful change when one is steadfast. Guillaume Du Vair explains that “The sailor groweth to be a Pilote amongst tempests and stormes . . . It is affliction makes him know his strength” (91). While sea storms rage, they “obscure light” and restrict Egeon’s vision. Yet, Egeon knows to stay “obedient to the stream” and to let the wind and seas guide the way. In this moment, he relies on the mast as one relies on faith, holding fast amid the turmoil all around. Egeon’s faith is rewarded when he describes how “the sun, gazing upon the earth / Dispersed those vapours that offended,”

and by the benefit of “wishèd light,” the seas “waxed calm” (1.1.88-91). Once the storm passes, two ships become visible in the distance. Egeon frequently draws attention to the ways that nature confounds expectations at every turn. Only by plunging into the ocean does Egeon gain an understanding of the tremendous power of forces beyond his control.

Egeon shares a powerful connection to Drake and the Elizabethan Sea Dogs: their survival and testimony are inspired by Jonah, a biblical version of the “constant man” at sea. Like Jonah, Egeon is pushed to the limits of human capacity in dangerous waters and must tell others of his experience. Egeon explains that “by misfortunes was my life prolonged / To tell sad stories of my own mishaps” (1.1.119-20). Here, Egeon evokes the role of a prophet to deliver his narrative. Elizabeth’s Sea Dogs often invoke Jonah’s story in their travel journals not only to describe their turmoil at sea but also to depict their survival as evidence of divine power. While navigating the southernmost coast of South America, Sir Francis Drake recounts his survival of a violent storm by comparing his situation to Jonah’s:

the same God of mercy which delivered Ionas out of the Whales belly, and heareth all those that call vpon him faithfully in their distress, looked downe from heauen, beheld our teares, and heard our humble petitions . . . [and] did so wonderfully free vs, and make our way open before vs. (86)

Drake’s narrative describes the deliverance of those who trust in God after experiencing devastation at sea. His allusion to Jonah reiterates that the completion of his voyage is part of God’s plan, as the passing of the storm offers them safe passage to their destination. As early modern travel narratives and maps reveal, Jonah served as an accessible shorthand for seafarers to warn others of the ocean’s hidden dangers.<sup>5</sup> In this case, Jonah’s story is invoked to emphasize the virtues of constancy and faith. Seafarers like Drake emphasize that not only navigational skill is needed to survive the most turbulent waters—faith as constant as Jonah’s inside the whale’s stomach is necessary to weather the water.

Egeon and Drake both survive by skill and perseverance, yet both sea dogs present themselves in their stories as also faithful and humble, which anticipates the successful completion of their goals. The goal for Drake and Egeon is to return safely to home and order. Shakespeare completes Egeon’s journey through the reunion of his family, portraying Egeon as a testament of how a constant glimmer of hope can assist the weary sea traveler to pursue the course. At the end of the play, Egeon encounters a young man whom he believes to be his son, saying, “Yet hath my night of life some memory / My wasting lamps some fading glimmer left” (5.1.315-316). After years of hardships, Egeon still has a “glimmer left,” and this last flicker reveals the man is indeed his son, Antipholus. The reunion completes the comic plot but also reinforces the notion that through the sea dog’s “glimmer” of hope, there can be a possibility of restoration. Truth reveals itself to the weary sea dog just as it does to Jonah and other “constant men” in sea stories.

The oceanic test of constancy is something that Shakespeare develops in later plays, especially as the main plot of *Pericles*, but in his earlier shipwreck plays, he seems inspired by the writings of Elizabethan Sea Dogs to heighten the moments of tension and revelation. Egeon’s observation how “the sun, gazing upon the earth / Dispersed those



Portrait of Francis Drake, by Crispin de Passe (1598).  
Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

vapours” shares notes with Drake’s observation that God “looked downe from heauen” to “wonderfully free” him and his men from danger. Both Egeon and Drake are reliant on the heavens to grant them sanctuary, an idea drawn from biblical narrative. Psalm 107, for instance, describes how seafarers and “merchants on the mighty waters . . . saw the works of the LORD” and “His wonderful deeds in the deep.” Sea dogs are not only survivors and “constant men,” but they are witnesses to works of incredible power, voyaging across “mighty waters” with uncertainty and encountering “wonderful deeds.”<sup>6</sup> The oceanic test of constancy is a way that both maritime writers like Drake and dramatists like Shakespeare portray shipwrecked survivors as worthy of the treasure they seek.

#### THE CAPTAIN IN *TWELFTH NIGHT*

Like Egeon, the Sea Captain in *Twelfth Night* is also an adept seaman and an excellent storyteller. *Twelfth Night* begins with an elegiac tale of a shipwreck and battered travelers, and the Captain’s role is to retell the shipwreck narrative from his vantage point. Viola and Sebastian arrive on the shores of Illyria disoriented after surviving the brutal sea, and they both depend on older seafaring companions to help familiarize themselves with their new location. For Viola, it is the Captain who gives vital information to Viola and points the way to her brother’s whereabouts. His most important function, however, is to tell Viola the account of her brother’s survival at sea. The Captain not only gives Viola much-needed truths about Sebastian’s condition, but he also emphasizes the virtue of constancy, which saves him from drowning. The Captain’s story portrays Sebastian as a young man developing into a sea dog like Drake, holding his own against the sea’s thrashing waves.

In giving Viola the crucial account of her twin brother, the Captain gives her a sense of constancy, stability, and hope. The Captain, like Egeon, understands the power of the sea and recognizes that moving forward after a storm requires a



steadfast faith. On the Illyrian shore, he “comfort[s her] with chance” and then tells Viola the story that inspires her to move forward so that she may reunite with Sebastian (1.2.7). As Viola tries to acquaint herself with her new setting, she questions the Captain as to what brought her to Illyria. The Captain dutifully responds:

CAPTAIN This is Illyria, lady.  
VIOLA And what should I do in Illyria?  
My brother he is in Elysium.  
Perchance he is not drown'd:  
what think you, sailors?  
CAPTAIN It is perchance that you yourself were saved. (1.2.1-5)

The Captain's words “chance” and “perchance” emphasize the sense of possibility connected to the sea, and Viola echoes the Captain's language, exclaiming, “O my poor brother, and so perchance may he be [saved]” (1.2.6). The Captain's word “saved” when he tells Viola, “It is perchance that you yourself were saved,” invites a biblical reading suggesting a protection of body and spirit. The Captain's language does not suggest what “saved” Viola, whether natural, supernatural, or human force; yet, he still implies that there is a force that protects and watches over the protagonists. He offers Viola hope, much like the sun's rays in Egeon's tale and the heavenly light described by Drake give hope to the weary, storm-battered sea dog. More crucially, the Captain inspires Viola to keep moving and pursue her course, as well as to adapt and change, both in her physical appearance from female to male, as well as internally. Rather than continue on her journey bewildered and sorrowful, Viola must possess the constancy of a courageous sea dog.

Sea dogs, by their very occupation, rely on navigational tools like compasses, as well as their own intuition, to stay on course. They also know to anticipate disruption and react calmly to redirect the ship. The struggle to achieve constancy amid uncontrollable forces rests at the heart of the conflict in *Twelfth Night*, and this theme is dramatically expressed in the Captain's description of Sebastian. Before Viola leaves the violent waves of her past and starts a new life posing as “Cesario,” the Captain gives her a detailed account of Sebastian's valiant struggle against the turbulent sea. Like Egeon, the Captain extols the virtues of a man who withstands the forces of nature and becomes one with the sea. The Captain asserts himself as a reliable witness to catastrophe and gives testimony not only to the power within nature, but the power of human fortitude.

The Captain depicts Sebastian as the prototypical man of constancy, adept in survival skills and virtuous in spirit. However, the Captain also emphasizes the extraordinariness of the twins' survival:

after our ship did split,  
When you and those poor number saved with you  
Hung on our driving boat, I saw your brother,  
Most provident in peril, bind himself,  
Courage and hope both teaching him the practise,  
To a strong mast that lived upon the sea;  
Where, like Arion on the dolphin's back,  
I saw him hold acquaintance with the waves  
So long as I could see. (1.2.9-17)

The Captain's description resonates with Christian imagery, and his phrase “provident in peril” is prophetic in

its expectation of events and alludes to divine providence and the interference of God in the natural world. However, his most powerful reference is to a secular myth—the feats of the ancient poet, Arion, who was alleged to have been kidnapped by pirates and saved by dolphins. In his narrative, the Captain's reference to Arion, a mythical “constant man,” is used similarly to the way Drake refers to Jonah. In both cases, constancy—either of physical endurance (Arion) or faith (Jonah)—is what seafarers need to deliver themselves of their troubles. The Captain's allusion to Arion also reveals the power of sea-myths to relate to contemporary circumstances. Myths like Arion and the dolphins rely on archetypes to present a model of human excellence, but they also perpetuate the idea that humanity and nature are intrinsically connected and work together for the common good. Randall Martin describes Sebastian (or at least, the Captain's portrayal) as a man “merging mythically with the sea,” referring specifically to the description of Sebastian riding the waves like Arion on the dolphins (130). In the Captain's story, Sebastian is not only a man who can work with nature for survival, but also a symbol of possibility.

As the Captain's story suggests, Sebastian can adapt to the sea and ride the waves, literally and figuratively, to shore. Steve Mentz describes this moment as Shakespeare's “aquaman fantasy of a human life amid the waters” (54). Modern versions of the “aquaman” figure live in harmony with the ocean and use the sea to fight forces that disturb the waters. The image of Sebastian riding the waves like the poet Arion evidences this, as Sebastian can (according to the Captain) tame the sea the way Arion could tame the creatures within it. The Captain's description of Sebastian's valor also relates to Egeon, as he presents the sea as a space that tests the strength and fortitude of those caught in its hellish waves. To survive the sea, one must have constancy and gain an intimate relationship with the sea and its creatures. Though Egeon and Drake survive by the power of the heavens, their stories also suggest that there is something exceptional about them that necessitates survival. Similarly, the Captain portrays Sebastian as exceptional due to his constancy. Sebastian is thus presented as a Sea Dog-in-training, an “aquaman” who can merge with the ocean and adapt to its changes.

The Captain's image of Sebastian holding tightly to the mast recalls the beginning of Egeon's dramatic narrative, as he and his wife strap themselves and their children to the mast before being separated. The mast is an instrument of the landed world that conveys stability and constancy. Its purpose is to carry the sails; it also acts as a signal due to its height. The mast is a valuable item during a shipwreck because it enables the seafarer to stay afloat. Symbolically, in both Egeon's and the Captain's stories, it also represents the struggles of faith (“Courage and hope both [teach] him the practise”). Amid the hellish chaos of the sea, shipwrecked passengers must still cling to the mast for survival. By turning the sea into a cooperative force, rather than something to scorn, Sebastian tames the waters and epitomizes the prototypical man of steadfastness and strength.

As a spectator to the opening shipwreck, the Captain provides a figurative mast for Viola as she searches for Sebastian, giving her stability and direction. Sebastian's fortitude and determination offer a model, or mirror, that Viola needs to embody as she becomes him, at least outwardly.

But rather than battling the surging of the ocean waves, Viola must battle emotions that torment her and threaten to veer her off course.

The Captain's portrayal of Sebastian as a constant seaman also operates as a foil for characters who are adrift, searching futilely for love without a compass. For example, Feste tells the capricious Orsino that he "would have men of such / constancy put to sea, that their business might be / every thing and their intent every where" (2.4.75-7). Orsino is an obvious foil for Sebastian, and his changeability is marked in contrast. Feste's comical observation that inconstancy "makes a good voyage of nothing" (78) emphasizes that inconstant men like Orsino need direction and steadiness to sail their ships, so to speak. Viola also veers off course when she becomes entangled in the love triangle with Olivia and Orsino, rather than trying to locate Sebastian. The Captain's story, then, offers a model of constancy that Viola neglects, thus complicating the plot and placing her in the eye of the storm, metaphorically speaking.

### CONCLUSION

Shakespeare's sea dogs are "constant men," and they use the archetype of the "constant man" to reiterate truths, to tell their stories, and to give direction and clarity. Through their stories, Egeon and the Captain show the virtues of both physical endurance and inner faith, traits that ultimately make the "constant man." Steadfastness and endurance are not only useful for navigating ships to port and interacting with other passengers, but for any occasion when an individual must stay on course when all seems lost. The physical symbol of the sea dog's constancy—the ship's mast—carries significance as an object a sea-tossed character must use as support.

Shakespeare's sea dogs also portray the sea as a space in which hopeful possibility emerges from chaos. Egeon's narrative is bleak, and his situation is dire, but his narrative suggests that miraculous events may emerge from the most dire and hopeless situations. The Captain represents the sea dog as a guide who helps point the way to the twins' lost families and ensures their safe entrance into an unfamiliar kingdom. Egeon emphasizes the tremendous power of the sea through his framing sea story, but in reuniting with his family, he emphasizes how important the "glimmer" of hope is for the hapless and hopeless adrift at sea. Drake compares himself to Jonah to emphasize how the compass of faith guides the seaman in troubled waters, but Shakespeare's characters provide models which their respective plays abandon and reacquire. For the protagonists of *Comedy of Errors* and *Twelfth Night*, constancy is something that must be developed through fault, emotional tumult, and aimlessness. Like the storms that sea dogs endure, the plays themselves become tests that seek to answer the question posed in a sea shanty during this time: "When shoals and sandy banks appear / What pilot can direct his course?"<sup>7</sup>

### Notes

1. The first recorded usage of "sea dog" in English appears in W. Phillip's translation of Jan Huyghen van Linschoten's *Discours of Voyages into ye Easte and West Indies* (1598), in which he explains that he and his crew "found great store of Sea wolues, which wee call Sea dogges" (415).

2. As William Wood explains, the "general foreign monopoly" that Spain had in the Americas was "unendurable" for England (67). The question was: "Could Spain not only hold what she had discovered and was exploiting but also extend her sphere of influence over

what she had not discovered? Spain said Yes. England said No. The Spaniards looked for tribute. The English looked for trade . . . Thus the lists were set; and sea-dog battles followed" (67).

3. Several sea songs that honor Drake's work include: "Upon Sir Francis Drake's Return from his Voyage about the World, and the Queen's meeting him" and "Sir Francis Drake; or Eighty-eight," both of which are included in *The Oxford Book of Sea Songs* (3-4, 11-12).

4. In *Pericles*, Marina retells the story of her father's survival by pointing out that he "did never fear" and "clasping to the mast, endured a sea / That almost burst the deck" (15.106-7).

5. Chet Van Duzer's *Sea Monsters on Medieval and Renaissance Maps* reveals a number of maps depicting scenes with Jonah, including Sebastian Münster's *Cosmographia* (1540) and John Speed's *As it was Possessed Both in Abraham and Israel's Days* (1595). These maps portray Jonah in the sea or being cast overboard. (38-9) The story of Jonah also inspired plays like Thomas Lodge and Robert Greene's *A Looking Glass for London and England* (1589/90). Recounting the story of the monstrous whale and the fall of Nineveh, Looking Glass dramatically depicts Jonah spiritually changed, having emerged from the belly of the sea beast.

6. The oceanic test of constancy is a useful nautical metaphor in early modern theological writings. Thomas Jackson's essay *The Raging Tempest Still'd* (1623) compares the Christian journey towards salvation to travelling on tempestuous waters on a metaphorical ship. Jackson's essay, as indicated by the full title, depicts Christ's journey with his disciples over the Sea of Galilee.

7. As Roy Palmer explains, "Another of Seafarers, describing Evil Fortune," serves as a "vivid counterblast to the seafaring philosophy" in an earlier sea ballad, "In Praise of Seafaring Men, in Hope of Good Fortune" (*Sea Songs* 7).

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