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The Linkister Looks at Subjectivity in English Historical Sea-Slang¹

Introduction

This article constitutes the second stage in a study of English historical sea-slang, and is the sequel to a preliminary formal and semantic analysis, the findings of which were presented at the conference entitled *Ancrages/passages* held at the Université Nancy 2, on 23-24 January 2004.

The data upon which the study is based are the 1,759 naval and nautical terms extracted from the c. 50,000 entries (= 3.5%) in E. Partridge, (abridged by J. Simpson), 1972, *A Dictionary of Historical Slang*, Harmondsworth, Penguin. This dictionary is itself an abridgement of E. Partridge 1937, *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul (5th edition 1961), containing only those words and expressions already in use in 1914, many of which have since disappeared.

Here we shall look at sea-slang with reference to a number categories borrowed from traditional literary analysis (as represented in Abrams 1988), with a view to demonstrating how at least some of the devices associated with the work of greater poets, can be found in the humbler, but equally ebullient speech of seamen, an observation which points to popular origins of (at least some) poetic techniques. The difference of course is that a poet is perpetually striving for novelty, whereas the average user of sea-slang simply repeats learned

¹ *Linkister* 'A linguist, esp. an interpreter' (see below 2).

routines. He looks backwards and inwards while the creating poet looks forwards, and outwards. In order for the parallel between poetic devices and sea-slang to hold, the reader is recommended to think of the 150-odd forms presented in the following pages, as the fresh coinages of some anonymous sea-borne word-smith, rather than as the doubtless tired tokens they were to become during their working life.

The categories within which the data will be presented are: 1) alliteration and assonance; 2) solecism; 3) burlesque; 4) hyperbole and understatement; 5) euphemism and dysphemism; 6) irony; 7) metonymy; 8) metaphor. It is within the last of these categories that the most detailed and revealing part of the analysis is to be found.

Each form is printed in italics, and is accompanied by Partridge's definition or a paraphrase of it.

1. Alliteration and assonance

1.1. Alliteration

The role of alliteration in, for example, Old English poetry was undoubtedly aesthetic in as far as the *scop*'s² ability to arrange his meanings according to fairly rigid segmental patterns would arouse the admiration of his audience. Alliteration, like rhyme and rhythm is also a mnemonic device designed to facilitate the *scop*'s task but also to add to the enjoyment of those listeners who were able to recite with him, *sotto voce*, parts of the text.

Sea-slang makes abundant use of alliteration, presumably for both æsthetic and mnemonic reasons. Among the 40-odd instances of alliterative formations we find: *ballyhoo of blazes* 'The last word of contempt for a slovenly ship'; *bear a bob* 'To lend a hand'; *beat the booby* 'To strike the hands across the chest and under the armpits to warm one's chilled fingers'; *Blanket Bay* 'The nautical form of Blanket Fair (bed)'; *live lumber* 'Soldiers or passengers on board ship'; *pusserpock* 'Bad, hard salt-meat'. Only one form, viz. *Captain Copperthorn's crew* 'All officers; a crew in which everyone wishes to be captain', involves triple alliteration.

² OE *scop* 'Singer, poet'.

*Subjectivity in sea-slang***1.2. Assonance**

Much less used than alliteration, assonance is found in a dozen forms, among which we find: *black strap* 'Molasses' or 'The hospital in a ship of war' or 'One of the specially made strong bags used for removing pilfered cargo from ships'; *cracker-hash* 'Pounded biscuit with minced salt meat'; *long Tom* 'A large, long-range gun'.

Several forms involve both alliteration and assonance, e.g. *custom of the country* 'A bribe given to port officials to avoid delays'; *Fanny Nanny* 'Nonsense'; *flag-wagging* 'Flag-signalling'; *hoddie-doddie* 'A lighthouse's revolving light'; *long-winded whistler* 'A chase-gun'. There are also a few reduplicatives of the type: *chow-chow water* 'Eddies in the sea (*ex term* used by Chinese pilots); *fu-fu* 'Barley and treacle (a favourite dish in the early 19th century sailing ships)', hence 'an amateur band raised in a ship's company'; *gaw-gaw* 'A useless seaman'.

2. Solecism

The conspicuous mispronunciation (whether accidental or deliberate, but in either case comical) of common as well as sea-terms is well attested in the data. This habit is manifest in 1) names for ranks, ratings and functions, e.g. *boa-constrictor* 'An instructor'; *carfindo* 'A ship's carpenter'; *linkister* 'A linguist; esp. an interpreter'; *lufftackle* 'A lieutenant'; *maltoot, maltout* 'A sailor, esp. in address or as a nickname'; *sea-William* 'A civilian', 2) in everyday words and expressions, e.g. *hands out beckets!* 'Hands out of pockets!'; *lounce* 'A drink' (*ex allowance*); *soap and bullion* 'Soup-and-bouilli', 3) in poor attempts at foreign words, e.g. *cropoh* (*ex crapaud*) 'A Frenchman'; *lazy-roany* 'Lazzaroni, or Neapolitan beggars'.

3. Burlesque

In sharp contrast to the instances of solecism above, sea-slang also makes use of a small number of expressions whose highfalutin tone is a mockery of their (actual) referents as well as, obliquely, their supposed ones. We find, for example: *admiral of the narrow seas* 'A

drunk man vomiting into another's lap'; *captain of the heads* 'The rating responsible for the cleanliness of the heads (= latrines); *one of King John's men* 'A little under-sized man'; *King's-Bencher* 'A notable galley orator'; *lady's pocket-handkerchief* 'Any light fancy sail or flying kite'; *Prince Alberts* 'Burlap wound round the feet when a man's socks are worn out'.

4. Hyperbole and Understatement

It is somewhat surprising to find that sea-slang makes little use of hyperbole, given the seaman's reputation for telling tall stories. Only three instances of pure hyperbole (i.e. not tinged with any noticeable irony) are to be found, viz. (*with his*) *cap on nine hairs* 'Jaunty or jovial' (the cap being worn at an extreme angle); *climb the rigging* 'To lose one's temper' (cf. *rear up*); *smashed* 'Reduced in rank'. Understatement is so often ironic that it is equally difficult to find instances of it in its pure form. Perhaps the following could be considered as such: *complaining* 'The cracking of a ship at sea'; *the ditch* 'The sea'; *the Pond* 'The North Atlantic Ocean'.

5. Euphemism and Dysphemism

As pointed out by Carnoy (1927, quoted by Partridge, 1950:14), slang is frequently dysphemetic in as far as it replaces the common word by one which highlights the least desirable, the least romantic, the least honourable, yet possibly the most prominent feature of the referent, and can thus be seen as a lexical form of caricature. However, slang can also go in the opposite direction. It is the case in sea-slang, each time a referent which is undesirable, unglamorous, frightening or taboo, is represented by a whimsical or inoffensive form. Examples of what might usefully be termed *dysphemes* (in order to bring them into line with other *-eme* terms) are: *bug-trap* 'A small vessel, a bunk'; *bullock* 'A Royal Marine (artilleryman)'; *dog in a blanket* 'A roly-poly pudding'; *drains* 'A ship's cook'; *the sink* 'The Royal Marine office in a battleship'; *a spit and a drag* 'A smoke on the sly'; *sucking Nelson* 'A midshipman'.

Subjectivity in sea-slang

It is perhaps not surprising, given the arduous, brutal and often dangerous nature of life on the old sailing ships, that we should find fewer dysphemes in the data than what we might, for the reason given above, refer to as *euphemes*. Instances of the latter include: *coil up one's cables* or *ropes* 'To die'; *expended* 'Killed'; *fore-and-aft* 'To have sexual connection'; *garters* 'The irons or fetters'; *mop up* 'To kill, slaughter'; *rations* 'A flogging'; *soldier's joy* 'Masturbation' or 'Pease pudding'; *Yarmouth mittens* 'Bruised hands'.

6. Irony

Irony, like metonymy and metaphor (see below) tends to pervade all slang. The simultaneous inclusive and exclusive function of slang turns on speaker and hearer's supposed shared knowledge. Irony fosters complicity and a feeling of superiority between those who are in the know, while bewildering or irritating hearers who sense it but don't understand it, and neutralizing or even ridiculing those who miss it altogether.

The simplest form of irony consists in saying the opposite of what is meant. If I may be permitted an eye-pun, not entirely out of keeping with my subject, I should like to call this crude, heavy stuff *cast-irony* (mindful of the ON etymon *kasta* 'throw, heap'). In contrast, a more subtle or more elaborate manifestation of irony, requiring more of speaker and hearer than a simple inversion, I should like to call *wrought irony* (mindful, this time, of the ME metathesized variant of *worht* (pp. of *wurchen* 'work')). Sea-slang contains more of the latter sort of irony than the former. Here are some (manifestly nationalistic) examples of *cast irony*: *Paddy's hurricane* 'A dead calm'; *Port Mahon sailor* 'An inferior seaman'; *Portug(u)ee parliament* 'A forecabin discussion which degenerates into all talkers and no listeners'; *sailor's blessing* 'A curse'; *Scotch prize* 'A capture by mistake'; *Shanghai gentleman* 'One definitely not a gentleman'. The more subtle play of *wrought irony* may be felt in the following: *belaying-pin soup* 'Rough treatment of seamen by officers, esp. in sailing-ships'; *back-scratching* 'flogging'; *blackbird catching* 'The slave-trade'; *dining out* 'Undergoing punishment, esp. cells'; *long ship*

'A ship in which it is a long time between drinks'; *made to walk up Ladder Lane and down Hemp Street* 'Hanged at the yard-arm'; *pick a soft plank!* 'Sleep easy!' (ex the inability of drunken sailors to find their way to their hammocks); *purser's grin* 'A hypocritical grin; a sarcastic sneer'.³

7. Metonymy

In keeping with its caricatural 'point of view' function, Sea-slang's main recourse to metonymy is in the area of synecdoche, principally of the *pars pro toto* variety. Hence: *arse-foot* 'A penguin'; *boot-neck* 'A Royal Marine' (from the [leather] tab closing the tunic collar); *pills* 'A physician'; *pipes* 'A boatswain'; *pot* 'An executive officer' or 'A steward' or 'A stew'; *scabby neck* 'A Dane; esp. a Danish sailor' (very probably motivated by the initial sound of Scandinavia and/or by Norwegian *mannskap* 'crew'); (*old*) *stripes or O.S.* 'A sergeant of Marines'; *tarry-breeks, -jacket*, 'A sailor'; *Yaw-Yaw* 'A Dutchman'. Other, miscellaneous instances of metonymy include *bring-'em near* 'A telescope'; *iron rations* 'Tinned meat'; *rum-bottle* 'A sailor'; *suction* 'Strong drink'.

8. Metaphor

Metaphor gives the widest scope for imagination and is thus the area of sea-slang most impenetrable to the uninitiated. We are invariably in the presence of *implied* metaphor, so that the tenor, if not obvious to the hearer, can only be identified through experience or overt explanation. We will look first at some examples arranged according to the tenor → vehicle pair.

8.1. Man → ship

A dozen metaphorical expressions refer to a man as if he were a ship. Thus an invitation to take a seat is rendered by *bring your arse to*

³ Partridge gives *purser's* (adj.) 'Contemptuous or derisive in *Purser's dip* An undersized candle'. This particular type of officer appears to have been universally mistrusted and disliked in the pre-1914 navy.

Subjectivity in sea-slang

an anchor. A seaman's eyes are his *side-lights*, more particularly, his left eye is his *larboard peeper* and his general appearance *the cut of his jib*. When in financial difficulties, he is said to be *at or in low tide* or *water*, when drunk he is *too far north*, his use of bad language is described as *opening lower deckers*, while he might prove himself innocent of an accusation by *clearing his yard-arm*. *Old ship* is a jocular form of address.

8.2. Man → creature

A seaman may be referred to as a *fish*, *an old shell* or, if tough and knowledgeable, a *shell-back*, and if rough and blunt, a *scaly fish*. His moustache may be referred to as *face-fins*. A stoker is called a *kipper* (because 'smoked'). A *bird* is a troublesome seaman, a *gannet* a greedy one, while a *shark* is a lawyer, and a *turkey* a Royal Marine Light Infantryman. A young midshipman recently come to his first ship is a *young bear*, while a *seagull* is an old sailor-man retired from the sea.

Partial zoological metaphors include *ash-cat* 'A fireman in the Merchant Service'; *bull-dance* 'A dance with men only'; a *bunker-cat* 'A lower fireman', a *gone goose* is 'A person left in the lurch', *horsy face* 'An unpopular officer'; a *lobster-soldier* 'A Royal Marine'; a *packet rat* 'A seaman in the old transatlantic sailing packets', and a *powder monkey* 'A boy employed to carry powder from magazine to gun'.

8.3. Ships and vessels and manoeuvres

Ships, parts of ships, and manoeuvres frequently come in for metaphorisations. Among the more picturesque we find: *bald-headed* (of a ship in square rig) 'with nothing over her top gallants'; (of a schooner) 'without top-masts'; *coffee-mill* 'A marine engine'; *darning the water* 'Ships moving backwards and forwards before a blockaded port'; *flatiron gunboat* 'A gunboat of the 1870s-80s, "with a short turtle-back"'; *frying-pan* 'A collier brig from Whitby'; *hang out the washing* 'To set sail'; *hedgehog* 'A many-oared boat'.

8.4. Prosopopeia

Given the seaman's traditional use of *she* when referring to his ship, it comes as no surprise to find several sea-slang expressions attributing human characteristics and feelings to ships. A ship with structural defects is said to be *born weak*. A sailing ship with all canvas set is *in her Sunday best*; the cry: *Give her beans!* is an order to 'crack on sail in a strong wind', while to *give her something else to do* means 'constantly to work the helm in order to check rolling or pitching'. The moon, too, known also as *the sailor's friend*, and ever feminine, is said to be *stepping out of her hammock* as she rises.

8.5. *Okend heiti, kend heiti* and *kenning*

Here we look at three devices widely used in early Germanic poetry. Though only the third, *kenning*, is entirely metaphorical in nature, I have chosen to treat all three together for the sake of clarity.

8.5.1. Definitions

In his *Sagas islandaises* (1987), Régis Boyer contrasts the impersonal nature of the sagas with the vital, emotive nature of skaldic verse, in which

'Le poète a toute licence d'exposer ses états d'âme, ses désirs, ses haines ou ses affections [...].

Ce genre de composition associe constamment, par le jeu des métaphores élaborées (*kenningar*), un registre sensoriel à un autre ou un ordre de représentation à quelque homologue mieux apte à enchanter l'imagination : ainsi le marin joue vis-à-vis de son bateau le même rôle que le cavalier pour sa monture ...' (*op. cit.*: 1514).

Cleasby (1874) points out that though many ancient *kenningar* were taken from mythology (e.g. *Jarðar sunr* 'son of Earth' = Thor'), all ancient northern poetry made abundant use of *sann-kenningar*, i.e. those derived from the thing itself, without any mythological reference. He gives no original example, but gives as a translation of this more self-contained type of *kenning*: *the mind's abode* 'breast'.

Kastovsky (1992: 299) describes *kenningar* as '... simple or complex lexical items with different meanings as coreferential

Subjectivity in sea-slang

designations...’ A little further on (*op. cit.*: 353), following Snorri Sturluson’s categorisation in *Skaldskaparmal*, he makes the following three-way distinction:

- 1 *okend heiti* (‘uncharacterised terms’) [...] simple, unqualified nouns with a literal (e.g. *scip*, *bat*) or a metaphorical/figurative (e.g. *flota* ‘that which floats = ship’; *ceol* ‘keel = ship’) interpretation;
- 2 *kend heiti* (‘characterised terms’) [which] identify the referent by something which it is by emphasizing a certain quality, aspect or function of it (e.g. *wægflota* ‘wave-floater = ship’; *heofonleoma* ‘heaven-light = sun’);
- 3 *kenningar* (i.e. the nominative plural form of *kenning*) [in which] ‘the base word identifies the referent with something it is not, except in relation to the concept expressed in the limiting word’.

Thus we may take it that in an example such as OE *sægenga* ‘sea goer’, the base word *genga* is a description of the function of a ship, while the limiting word *sæ* serves simply to restrict the coverage of *genga*. There is nothing metaphorical about such a straightforward *kent heiti*. However, the functioning of a periphrasis such as *wæghengest* ‘sea-steed = ship’ depends on the hearer’s willingness to withhold judgement on the appropriateness of the base word *hengest* or suspend disbelief for a moment and admit a metaphorical extension of its coverage, into the domain of the limiting word. Otherwise expressed, the base word of a *kenning* (normally the second element) breaks through the referential limit normally imposed by the first element. So that, whereas the elements of a *kent heiti*, though they may be unusual neighbours, are in no way antagonistic, there is an inevitable clash between the elements of a *kenning*, as the second forces entry into the referential domain of the first, thus ‘illicitly’ extending its own coverage.

The whole art of the *kenning* is in the juxtaposition of elements the meaning of the second of which is only just sure of being permitted to invade that of the first. If the invasion is a foregone conclusion, the *kenning* is inevitably hackneyed and unexciting. If the invasion fails, then the *kenning* appears far-fetched and contrived, sacrificing the hearer’s pleasure and admiration.

Kenningar in Beowulf which take the right proportion of risk, and which therefore arguably succeed, include: line 2508 *ban-hus* 'bone-house = body' (which relies on the hearer's acceptance of the body's 'housing' of bones); line 37 *swurd leoma* 'sword-lightening = battle' (which relies on the hearer's acceptance of a sword's propensity to emit something akin to lightning); line 228 *yð-lad* 'wave-path = sea-crossing' (which relies on the hearer's acceptance of path's ability to exist amid waves: the wake of a ship is proof of this). Less convincing *kenningar* in Beowulf are line 1065 *gomen-wudu* 'game wood = harp' (in which the hearer must first understand the synecdochical 'wood' for 'harp', in order to allow 'wood' to intrude into the domain of 'game'; line 200 *swan-rad* 'swan-road = sea' (where not only must the hearer allow swans to have roads, but he must also permit the sea to be their haunt).

Four points need to be made concerning the relation of these literary devices to sea-slang:

1) *okend heiti* being simple synonyms, mobilised in Germanic poetry partly for their formal (segmental and prosodic) properties, also fulfil a dual role of alleviating monotony and highlighting particular qualities and characteristics of the referent. Sea-slang, like all slang, is always on the lookout for novelty as well as highly subjective expressions.

2) *kend heiti*, which are non-metaphorical periphrases, also supply the poet with alliterative and prosodic alternatives to the standard simple word, and more importantly here, imply a particular judgement on the part of the poet typically by visualising a particular activity or function of the referent. Thus, to call a king's hall *hring-sele* 'ring hall' implies a certain (acquisitive) interest on the part of a retainer who refers to it in this way, and in fact distracts attention away from the hall itself and focuses on the fundamental relationship between warriors and their leader. The caricatural nature of slang requires this kind of oblique judgement and highlighting (often with surprising visualization) to achieve its effect.

3) The riddle-like potential (much more fully exploited in skaldic verse, than in surviving OE poetry) of *kenningar* rewards the

Subjectivity in sea-slang

necessarily more active participation of the hearer with a liberating æsthetic and possibly intellectual thrill that the non-metaphorical *heiti* do not produce. The opacity of metaphor in sea-slang to the uninitiated adds to its appeal.

4) All these devices, being conventional, were very probably designed with an effect in mind not dissimilar to that of the stock characters of farce or pantomime. One can easily imagine the audience's fond reaction to new applications of well-known and well-loved techniques, particularly those which pushed back the limits imposed by everyday collocations. The conventionality of historical sea-slang no doubt helped to preserve a sense of tradition and promote a feeling of comradeship among seamen.

These things considered, the *heiti* and the *kenning* seem very likely to occur in sea-slang from a notional point of view. What can we say with regard to form?

Following Brodeur (1959:7), Kastovsky (*op. cit.*: 354) reminds us that about one third of the entire vocabulary of Beowulf consists of compounds (903 distinct substantive compounds occur in the poem). This love of nominal compounding is reflected in the sea-slang data, where 65% of the corpus is denominative and where 39% consists of compound nouns of the juxtaposition type. The formations most popular are 1) N+N, e.g. *cockpit mess* 'Eating one's meals in the cockpit with a marine sentry at hand' – a punishment in the old training ship *Britannia*; 2) N's+N, e.g. *rogue's salute* 'The single gun on the morning of a court-martial'; 3) N+N+N, e.g. *dockyard matey* 'A dockyard worker'; 4) Adj+N, e.g. *fancy frigate* 'A warship notable for smartness' but generally 'very uncomfortable to live in'; 5) Ven+N, e.g. *protected man* 'A merchant seaman unfit for the Royal Service and therefore free of the press-gang'; 6) N+Ver, e.g. *rock creeper* 'A coastal ship'; 7) Ving+N, e.g. *acting dickey* 'a temporary appointment'. The prepositional type of compound, e.g. *custom of the country* (see above), accounts for only 3% of the data (for precise figures, see Daniels, forthcoming). This predominance of nouns, and in particular nominal compounds in sea-slang thus provides ample scope for *heiti*- and *kenning*-type formations. The particular

preference for nominal compounds can possibly be explained by reference to an observation of Tournier (1985:5). He remarks that the elements of a compound, typically arbitrary in themselves, when united produce a form of motivation. Thus the two arbitrary elements *arm* and *chair* combine to produce a morphologically motivated compound (*armchair*). It may therefore be the case that compounding, in orally transmitted poetry, as well as in the semi-technical slang of a partially literate community essentially separate from the outside world such as the pre-1914 Navy, has a mnemonic function, as it allows for three storage points (two formal and one possibly purely notional), and three corresponding means of accessing each expression in long-term memory. For example, *Irish horse* 'Salt meat; corned beef' can be stored 1) along with the other (usually derogatory) forms containing *Irish* or *Irishman's*; 2) under the (also derogatory) *horse-* or *-horse* heading; 3) under a purely notional heading of the type 'food and drink'.

I have attempted to show that the notional, social, formal and cognitive conditions appear to be favourable to the use of *okend heiti*, *kend heiti* and *kenning* in sea-slang. Let us now see whether they do actually occur, and what they look like.

8.5.2. *Okend heiti*

Instances of *okend heiti* are easy to identify, as all simple noun slang terms (of which there are 353 = 20% of the data) are synonyms for the standard term. Clear examples of *okend heiti* are: *blazer* 'A bomb-ketch' or 'a mortar-boat'; *bouncer* 'A gun that kicks when fired'; *greaser* 'A ship's engineer'; *jerker* 'A steward'; *kicker* 'A horse'; *muzzler* 'A strong head wind'; *splicer* 'A sailor'; *wad* 'A gunner', which, true to their function, are elliptical or synechdochical terms, expressing the particular point of view of the speaker. In contrast to these, we find around fifty metaphorical *okend heiti* of the type *bible* 'A hand-axe' or 'a small holy-stone (sandstone employed in the cleaning of decks), so-called from seamen using them kneeling'; *farmer* generally *be a farmer* 'be off duty', hence 'an inferior seaman'; *grummet* (if *ex grommet* 'ring or wreath of rope; wad in a

Subjectivity in sea-slang

gun') 'The female pudend' or 'coition'; *mahogany* 'Salt beef'; *packs* 'Storm-clouds'; the *sharks*, 'The press-gang'; *teeth* 'A ship's guns'; *wing* 'An arm'.

8.5.3. *Kend heiti*

Under this heading come compound nominal forms with a subjective, synechdochical function. Among the fifty or so clear instances of *kend heiti* in the data, we find, for example: *beach-tramper* 'A coastguardsman'; *black squad* 'A stokehold crew'; *break-bulk* 'A captain who appropriates a portion of his cargo'; *clinker-knocker* 'A naval stoker'; *dish-jerker* 'A steward'; *poker-pusher* 'A naval stoker'; *sling-next* 'The two cadets sleeping on either side of oneself'; *whore's get* 'A pejorative form of address'. A small number of formations including *body-snatcher* 'A member of a ship's police force'; *duck-fucker* 'The man looking after the poultry on a warship'; *wood-spoiler* 'A ship's carpenter' constitute a subgroup of, one hopes, defamatory *kend heiti*. Meanwhile, such formations as *flag-flapper* 'A signaller'; *ink-slinger* 'A clerk' and *sick-bay moocher* 'A malingerer' cannot really be said to be synechdochical since they truly – if disrespectfully – describe the full-time activity of the referent.

8.5.4. *Kenning*

Genuine *kenningar* (mostly of the *sann kenningar* type) of which there are around forty in the data, include: *bridge-ornament* (usually plural) 'An executive officer'; *bun-struggle* or *-worry* 'A tea-party for sailors or soldiers'; *cloud-cleaner* 'An imaginary cloud jokingly assumed to be carried by Yankee ships'; *head-rails* 'The teeth'; *meer-swine* 'A porpoise'; *sea-coal* 'Money'; *sea-pheasant* 'A bloater or a kipper'; *stern-post* 'A penis', and (rare old) *water-bruiser* 'A tough (and old, hard-working) shore-man'. There are also a small number of *kenningar*, which, to follow Cleasby (see above 8.5.1), are arguably of the *Jarðar sunr* type, being jokingly drawn from mythology or the Bible. They are: *angel's foot-stool* CN 'A sail carried over the moon-sail by American clippers'; *angel's gear*

‘Women’s clothes’; *Davy Jones’s natural children*⁴ ‘Pirates, smugglers’; *Davy’s dust* ‘Gunpowder’; *devil’s claw(s)* ‘A split hook to catch a link of chain cable’, ‘A cable-stopper on a sailing ship’; *sky-pilot* ‘A clergyman’, esp. if working among seamen’; *devil’s daughter portion* ‘Deal, Dover and Harwich (on account of their impositions on sailors and travellers)’; *heaven-tormentor* ‘A sail above the sky-sail’; *Neptune’s sheep* ‘A nautical variant of *white horses* (waves white-crested)’.

Finally, this is perhaps the most suitable place to mention an expression unique among the data: *Merry Dun of Dover* ‘A legendary ship – drawn from Scandinavian mythology – so large that passing through the Straits of Dover, her flying jib-boom knocked down Calais steeple; while the fly of her ensign swept a flock of sheep off Dover Cliff. She was so lofty that a boy who went to her mast-head found himself a grey old man when he reached the deck again’.

The well attested use of the two types of *heiti* and the *kenning* in sea-slang presents us with the proposition that these devices were perhaps not, in their pre-history, the products of erudite or particularly sensitive minds, but simply colourful, striking and easily memorised formulae providing relief from the harshness and drudgery of life in early Northern Europe.

Concluding remarks

In the foregoing pages we have considered around 150 sea-slang terms, within an analytical framework more traditionally applied to data of a more literary nature. This, perhaps surprising approach has allowed us to view sea-slang as a popular art-form making use of some of the same techniques and devices as poetry. The data may be seen as a collection of naïve artists’ representations, which necessarily imply, and indeed emphasize, subjectivity – a point of view, and a judgement – both determined by the seaman’s shifting, ambiguous, but always emotional, involvement with his element: the sea.

⁴ *Old Davy, Davy Jones* ‘The spirit of the sea’, first mentioned in print by Smollett in *Peregrine Pickle* (1751)

*Subjectivity in sea-slang***Acknowledgement**

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