

OFF A "STRANGE, UNCOASTED STRAND":
NAVIGATING THE SHIP OF STATE THROUGH FRENEAU'S
HURRICANE

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THE FIRST OF TWO editorial footnotes¹ to Philip Freneau's *The Hurricane* in the second edition of *The Heath Anthology of American Literature* (1994) reads:

Also titled, "VERSES, made at Sea, in a Heavy Gale." Composed in 1784 when Freneau was a ship captain plying the West Indian trade. Freneau's poem belongs to a tradition of sublime poetry depicting Caribbean storms dating back to Edmund Waller's famous poem on Bermuda, "The Battle of the Summer Islands" (1645).²

While *The Hurricane* certainly participates in the sublime tradition of English Caribbean verse, literary critics have yet to observe that Freneau originally conceived and composed his poem as an American contribution to a much longer-lived genre: the "ship of state" poem as developed and practiced by the classical lyric poets Alcaeus and Horace. This article will illustrate how Freneau, through the allusion and imagery of the poem, very consciously invokes these Greco-Roman precedents while, simultaneously, underscoring the inescapably unique direction of the newly-launched American vessel.

1.

Verses, Made at Sea, in a Heavy Gale is a 36-line tetrameter poem, divided into six stanzas, with an *ababcc* rhyme scheme.³ The poem

¹ The third footnote is Freneau's own from his *Poems Written and Published during the American Revolutionary War and now Republished from the original Manuscripts; interspersed with Translations from the Ancients, and other pieces, not heretofore in Print*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Lydia R. Bailey, 1809): "Near the east end of Jamaica. July 30, 1784."

² David Shields, "Philip Freneau 1752-1832," in *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, 2d ed., ed. Paul Lauter et al. (New York: Heath, 1994), 1: 1021-1039.

³ Freneau shows a characteristic independence by not attempting to utilize any particularly classical stanzaic patterns such as the Alcaic or Sapphic meters which Horace adapted from Greek into Latin.

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begins with the juxtaposition of, on the one hand, the "happy" (1) man who, "unmov'd" (3), is "safe on shore" (1) to "us" (5), on the other, who in a "feeble barque" (6) must withstand "the tempests" of the sea (3).

The second stanza juxtaposes the sailors again, but this time they are contrasted to the "blest" (10) animals—birds (7), squirrels (8), and wolves (9)—which all seek shelter of some kind from the storm. Only "wretched we" (10) are:

Foredoomed a stranger to repose,
No rest the unsettled ocean knows.
(11-12)

The three succeeding stanzas depict the obscure gloom of the "dark abyss" (13) through which the sailors of the barque must sail. Having witnessed the "last departing gleam" (14) of the sun, they find themselves off a "strange, uncoasted strand" (19) where "fate permits no day" (20). Here, while the "tempests rage with lawless power" (26), they sail without "charts" (21), "compass" (22), or a "new Columbus" to "take the helm" (24). Nor are they reassured by "friendship's voice" (27), for:

What friendship can in tempests be,
What comfort on this raging sea?
(29-30)

The poem then concludes with the apparently inevitable failure of the impotent and frightened sailors to save either their ship or themselves:

The barque, accustomed to obey,
No more the trembling pilots guide:
Alone she gropes her trackless way,
While mountains burst on either side—
Thus, skill and science both must fall;
And ruin is the lot of all.
(31-36)

With no one at the helm, the vessel cannot but founder.

2.

Customarily, while critics have almost unanimously agreed that *The Hurricane* is one of Freneau's best poems, almost all have read it from two perspectives: autobiographical and/or pre-Romantic. The autobiographical readings highlight the origins of the poem in Freneau's actual encounter on the *Dromelly* with a tropical storm off the Jamaican coast on 30 July 1784:

Death had been very close as the brig skirted the coral reefs of Jamaica.
 . . . The experience was new and terrifying to Freneau.⁴

To Freneau, happily saved from this threat of doom, the hurricane was only an added proof of the transitory state of man and all his works.⁵

To these scholars, the important aspect of the verse is its poetic account of Captain Freneau's maritime experience and "his honest sailor-talk."⁶ One critic, apparently forgetting that Freneau was a professional seaman and not some passenger on a cruise, even seems to suggest that Freneau wrote the poem while the hurricane was battering his ship:

[T]his is a unique work, in which a poet attempts to record his thoughts while experiencing the dangers of a hurricane.⁷

While such readings reduce the poem to a single biographical event, however, the other critical perspective, the pre-Romantic perspective, completely removes the poem from its times and denies the verse any contemporary context whatsoever.

The pre-Romantic readings, for example, by employing such phrases as "a world of directionless chaos,"⁸ "the meaninglessness of individual death,"⁹ "the vaster and more terrifying aspects of the sea,"¹⁰ as well as "a dark abyss holding a tragic fate for those who braved its dangers,"¹¹ emphasize that Freneau's storm comes to serve as an emblem of the metaphysical disorder of "ultimate reality."¹² From this critical perspective, moreover, Freneau's seafaring verse, on the whole, foreshadows how authors such as Byron, Scott, Cooper, and Melville would more fully explore the Romantic mystery and nihilistic power of the sea.¹³

⁴ Lewis Leary, *That Rascal Freneau: A Study in Literary Failure* (New Brunswick: Rutgers U Pr, 1941), 129.

⁵ Jacob Axelrad, *Philip Freneau: Champion of Democracy* (Austin: U of Tex Pr, 1967), 147.

⁶ Harry Hayden Clark, ed., *Poems of Freneau* (1929; rept., New York: Hafner, 1960), liv.

⁷ Samuel B. Bandara, "Philip Freneau: First American Poet to Write about the Caribbean," *Inter-american Review of Bibliography* 36 (1986): 151-179; 162.

⁸ John McWilliams, "Poetry in the Early Republic," *Columbia Literary History of the United States*, ed. Emory Elliot (New York: Columbia U Pr, 1988), 156-167; 163.

⁹ Richard C. Vitzthum, *Land and Sea: The Lyric Poetry of Philip Freneau* (Minneapolis: U of Minn Pr, 1978), 63.

¹⁰ Clark (above, note 6) liv.

¹¹ Philip Marsh, "Philip Freneau, Our Sailor Poet," *American Neptune* 6 (1946): 115-120; 116.

¹² Vitzthum (above, note 9) 62.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 177; Clark (above, note 6) liv.

On account of this narrowness of critical approaches, scholars have credited the superiority of the poem mostly to its apparent distance from the majority of Freneau's works:

Some [poems written before 1789] survived in fame—"To the memory of the brave Americans" ("Eutaw Springs") and "Verses, made at Sea, in a Heavy Gale"—but most were contemporary, political, and satirical.¹⁴

According to Marsh, then, it appears that *The Hurricane* is rightly remembered mostly because it is not contemporary, political, or satirical. Indeed, Harry Hayden Clark, in his edition of Freneau's poems,¹⁵ includes *The Hurricane* in "Part Two: Poems of Romantic Fancy" rather than in "Part One: Poems of Freedom."

Only one critic, Emory Elliot, has offered an overtly political reading to the poem:

The mention of Columbus points to the launching of the American ship of state. Thus, the speaker's barque becomes a symbol of the perilous state of man sailing the "dark abyss" of life without Christianity and of an American society adrift without the reliable guidance of a Columbus.¹⁶

Elliot, however, concludes this only when, in the final stanza:

the sudden introduction of the surreal elements of the bursting mountains suggests other possible meanings for the ship, sea, and the near tragic situation of the crew.¹⁷

In many ways, therefore, Elliot, while recognizing and appreciating the political essence of the nautical metaphor, still may be said to have missed the proverbial boat. For Freneau, the classically-trained poet¹⁸ and devotee of Horace,¹⁹ has ensured that his similarly-trained and classically-oriented readership,²⁰ would comprehend his political message—long before the "surrealism" of the final stanza—through his

¹⁴ Philip M. Marsh, *The Works of Philip Freneau: A Critical Study* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1968), 38.

¹⁵ Clark (above, note 6) liv.

¹⁶ Emory Elliot, *Revolutionary Writers: Literature and Authority in the New Republic, 1725-1810* (New York: Oxford U Pr, 1982), 163.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Mary S. Austin, *Philip Freneau, The Poet of the Revolution: A History of His Life and Times*, ed. Helen Kearney Vreeland (New York: Wessels, 1901), 222; Ruth Wentworth Brown, "Classical Echoes in the Poetry of Philip Freneau," *Classical Journal* 45 (1949): 29-34.

¹⁹ Austin (above, note 18) 182.

²⁰ Leo Kaiser, "The Classical Tradition: Three Notes," *Classical Bulletin* 61 (1985): 33-36; "Colonial American Renderings of Horace in *The Massachusetts Magazine*," *CB* 39 (1963): 81-84.

employment of generically traditional elements and language. In other words, Freneau, in his *Verses, made at Sea in a Heavy Gale*, a.k.a. *The Hurricane*, allusively comments upon the apparently undirected course of a newly independent America by consciously invoking the classical "ship of state" genre as practiced by the Roman Horace and his Greek predecessor Alcaeus.²¹

3.

The classical conception of genre, or, more accurately, γένη or εἶδη, differs from the more common critical use of the term, since classifications were made not according to form but, rather, according to content.²² This classificatory content, in turn, can be divided into "primary or logically necessary elements which in combination distinguish that genre from every other genre" and secondary elements, or *topoi*.²³ These *topoi*, as Cairns describes them:

are the smallest divisions of the material of any genre useful for analytic purposes. Their usefulness lies in the fact that they are the commonplaces which recur in different forms in different examples of the same genre. They help, in combination with the primary elements, to identify a generic example. But the primary elements are the final arbiters of generic identity since any particular individual *topos* (secondary element) can be found in several different genres.²⁴

Defined thus, a γένη, easily traverses the most basic of literary boundaries. The "ship of state" genre, for instance, while having its origins in the verse of the Greek poet Alcaeus (18) and its most famous example in the Roman poet Horace (*Odes* 1.14),²⁵ also surfaces in,

²¹ The longstanding debate over whether Horace's (and even, to a lesser extent, Alcaeus') poem was intended as political allegory is moot, in relation to this discussion, because, since at least the time of Quintilian, both *Odes* 1.14 and its Greek precursor have been understood and enjoyed almost universally as political poems. Cf. J. Patsall's translation of Quintilian 8.4, "Of Tropes," in his *Quintilian's Institutes of the Orator in Twelve Books*, 2 vols. (London, 1774): "The allegory, which we interpret as inversion, says one thing and means another and sometimes quite the reverse of what is said. The Ode of Horace, in which by a ship, he means the commonwealth; by the agitations of the stormy seas, civil wars; by a harbour, peace and concord; may be an example of the first sort of allegory" (2:95).

²² Francis Cairns, *Generic Composition in Greek and Roman Poetry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh U Pr, 1972), 6.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ For further discussions of Horace's *Odes* 1.14, see the critical discussions by Steele Commager (*The Odes of Horace: A Critical Study* [New Haven: Yale U Pr, 1962]); H. D. Jocelyn ("Boats, Women, and Horace *Odes* 1.14," *Classical Philology* 77 [1982]: 330-335); Niall Rudd ("Horace," in *Cambridge History of Classical Literature, Volume II: Latin Literature*, ed. E. J. Kenney [Cambridge: Cambridge U Pr, 1982], 370-404); Matthew S. Santirocco (*Unity and Design in Horace's Odes* [Chapel Hill: U of NC Pr, 1986]); and A. J. Woodman ("The Craft of Horace in *Odes* 1.14," *CP* 75 (1980): 60-67.

among others, the drama of Sophocles (*Oedipus Rex* 22, 101; *Antigone* 163) and Euripides (*Rhesus* 248); the dialogues of Plato (*Republic* 6.488); as well as the oratory of Cicero (*Pro Sestio* 20.46).

In the "ship of state" genre, the primary elements are (1) an "allusion to the ruler in terms of the helmsman," and (2) the speaker's anxious presence as a sailor on the ship or observer on the shore.²⁶ The *topoi*, or secondary elements, common to these poems are (1) the dangerous situation of the ship and (2) the presence of nautical terminology.

Clearly Freneau's poem, especially as originally titled *Verses, made at Sea, in a Heavy Gale*, seems to participate in this traditional genre by its possessing all of the primary elements as well as secondary *topoi*:

(1) reference to a helmsman needed to steer the ship:

What Pilot shall explore that realm,
What new Columbus take the helm!
(23-24)

(2) the identification of the poem's speaker as a sailor:

Alas! on us they [the tempests] doubly fall
Our feeble barque must bear them all.
(5-6)

(3) the violent storms: tempests roar (3); tempests rage with power (26); mountains burst on either side (34),
and

(4) the nautical terminology: "charts" (21), "compass" (22), and, to a lesser degree, "barque" (6 and 31), "uncoasted" (19).

More than a simple exercise in *imitatio*, however, the poem pointedly reflects Freneau's perspective on the political realities of the late Revolutionary years. Indeed, according to Silverman, Freneau's anxiety concerning both "the uncertainty of the moment" and "the erosion of the line between patriotism and self-serving, seemed to have reawakened his natural melancholy" in the early 1780s.²⁷ As Freneau biographer Lewis Leary writes (emphasis added):

The Revolution was virtually over, and Freneau saw a group ascending to power who seemed worthy of no public trust. *Men who had stood on the sidelines to watch which way the victory would turn* [lines 1-4] now threw their wealth and their influence to the support of measures which threatened the rights of free men. . . . *Natural rights, menaced on all*

²⁶ William S. Anderson, "Horace *Carm.* 1.14: What Kind of Ship?," *CP* 61 (1966): 84-98; 87-88.

²⁷ Kenneth Silverman, *A Cultural History of the American Revolution* (New York: T Y Crowell, 1976), 422.

sides [line 34], *were again in danger of being surrendered* [lines 25-30], this time to a selfish aristocracy.

So America seemed now. *There were few among those in power who held to the principles of liberty* for which Freneau believed the Revolution had been fought. *Sordid quarrels and even more sordid scrambling for political spoils dominated the national capital* [line 34]. There was little for a poet to admire, little for him to defend except the ideals which he believed lay at the root of all successful living. And no one seemed to care for such ideals.²⁸

Correspondingly in *The Hurricane*, the sun, a traditional symbol of monarchy, has set,²⁹ and a ship, once "accustomed to obey" (31), but now "trackless" (33) due to its weak "trembling pilots" (32), must withstand the battering on all sides of the "lawless" (26) tempests.³⁰

To emphasize his melancholy view of the times, Freneau employs yet another Horatian allusion. He gives an ironically pertinent twist to the traditional generic perspective by including both a sailor on board the ship and someone on shore. Unlike Horace's *Odes* 1.14, however, where the concerned speaker, who is on land, helplessly watches and prays for the safe arrival of the ship in port, Freneau's poem juxtaposes the entire endangered crew with a single "happy" (1) and "unmov'd" (3) man "trim[ming], at home, his evening fire" (2). The happiness of the sheltered and apathetic individual, nevertheless, must be understood ironically in light of the original Latin source of the phrase "happy the man," *beatus ille*, from the first line of Horace's *Epode* 2.1.

In *Epode* 2, Horace's satirical panegyric of the simple country life, the joy of the first 66 lines is deflated and inverted completely by the

²⁸ Leary (above, note 4) 117-118. Cf. this passage from the Freneau poem *The Prophecy of King Tammany* published 11 December 1782 (emphasis added):

When half your foes are homeward fled,
And hosts on hosts in triumph led,
And hundreds maim'd and thousands dead,
A timid race will then succeed,
Shall slight the virtues of a former race,
That brought your tyrant to disgrace,
Shall give your honours to *an odious train*
Who shunn'd all conflicts on the main,
and dar'd no battles on the bloody plain,
whose little souls sunk in the gloomy day
when VIRTUE ONLY could support the fray.
(54-64)

²⁹ While Freneau certainly was no monarchist, the prospect of anarchy or, even worse, a plutocracy might underscore the rather ambiguous description of the setting sun in the third stanza. Who, after all, is "unpitied" (18), the "sun" or "we" (15)?

³⁰ Emory Elliot, in his reading, also suggests that Freneau's capitalization of "Pilot" in line 23 supports an allegorical understanding (above, note 16, 163).

final quatrain. For this famous Horatian celebration of the pleasures of *otium* is discovered only then to be spoken by Alfius the moneylender, who never realizes his dream of peaceful leisure. For, at the conclusion of the poem, Alfius once again is planning to offer loans on the first of the month (67-70).

Freneau's "happy man" must be viewed equally ironically. He is "happy" only because, selfish and disengaged, he is ignoring the dangerous storm and, unlike the sailors who must trim their sails to survive, "trims . . . his . . . fire" alone and in safety (2).

Reading the poem as an attack on self-serving political factions thus explains its very dark conclusion without resorting to pre-Romantic notions of the nihilistic sea. From Freneau's perspective, the way things seemed politically in 1784, the shipwreck of the noble American experiment was almost inevitable. Silverman even suggests that Freneau, who after a year-long "literary war" with the conservative *Independent Gazetteer*, would resign as editor of Philadelphia's *Freeman's Journal* in December 1783 and who, shortly thereafter, would return to the sea:

prophesied ultimate American victory but foresaw that the Revolution would be betrayed by . . . stupidity and injustice.³¹

Without moral leadership, the poem suggests, the American ship will continue to grope its trackless way "foredoomed" because, unlike the birds, squirrels, and wolves (7-9), who exist and can survive instinctively, human beings, the "wretched we" (10), must band together voluntarily.³² Unfortunately there was little evidence of such unity developing. Indeed, given Freneau's experience of the rabid partisanship and in-fighting among the patriots in the early 1780s, he can only cry:

Of friendship's voice I hear no sound.
(27)

The poem thus becomes a political jeremiad on the dangers of staying the present (directionless) course. Unless some "new Columbus" (24) takes control, the ship will not only continue to founder but, ultimately, sink.

4.

As stated at the beginning, no critic previously has acknowledged the link between *Verses* and the "ship of state" genre, and the original cause of this critical blindness to its classical dimension is easily identified:

³¹ Silverman (above, note 27) 423.

³² As Freneau wrote in 1783: "Discord and disorder are interwoven with the nature and constitution of the human race...[who are] naturally as well as habitually quarrelsome and unjust" (Silverman, above, note 27, 422).

Freneau's own retitling of the poem for the 1809 edition of his poems. His recasting of the poem in terms of the storm rather than the ship seems to rebut the argument for the generic classification.

It would not be difficult to hypothesize that, in the early 1800s, as Freneau's newer verses began to show more and more evidence of the influence of Romanticism, the preparation of his early poems for a new edition might reflect those influences as well. Consequently, what in 1784 he conceived as a very specific exercise in the Greco-Roman motif might easily have suggested for him (and subsequent readers) a Romantic paean to the raw power of the sea.

Likewise, it might be postulated that, with the election of his long-time political bedfellow Thomas Jefferson as president in 1800, Freneau's concerns about the survival of the new nation would have been assuaged considerably. The crucial occasion of his occasional poem no longer existed. Redirecting the emphasis from an ancient political theme to one more contemporary, such as the sublime tradition of Caribbean verse which Shields suggests,³³ thus would have offered a fitting solution.

In fact, however, in the 1809 edition, except for the title, Freneau offered no revisions. The poem remained just as the poet had composed it in 1784, and *The Hurricane*, far from offering a dramatic reinterpretation of *Verses*, advances the original political conceit by underscoring the decidedly American nature of the new vessel and its voyage. For, as Hulme has argued, the rapid adoption of the term "hurricane" into English in the sixteenth century reveals a clear perception of the uniquely violent intensity of this kind of New World tropical storm.³⁴ The need for a new word, such as hurricane, matched the experience of something completely new, something particular to and characteristic of the New World.³⁵

By highlighting the uniquely American storm rather than the classical ship, Freneau's new title accentuates the very unprecedented nature of recent history. While many "ships of state" have weathered perilous voyages throughout the ages, Freneau seems to argue that only the recently-launched American "barque" has faced such a storm as the Revolution and its aftermath. Americans clearly had embarked upon uncharted political waters and now were sailing along a "strange,

³³ Shields (above, note 2) 1030.

³⁴ Peter Hulme, "Hurricanes in the Caribbees: The Constitution of the Discourse of English Colonialism," in *1642: Literature and Power in the Seventeenth Century*, Proceedings of the Essex Conference on the Sociology of Literature, July 1980, ed. Francis Barker, et al. (Colchester: U of Essex Pr, 1981), 55-83; 61.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 62-63.

uncoasted strand" (19). As Jefferson had written in a letter to Dr. Joseph Priestley dated 21 March 1801, we could:

no longer say there is nothing new under the sun.³⁶

5.

In his 1788 *To an Author* Freneau defends the very politicized and, at times, unpoetic nature of his verse. The circumstances, Freneau suggests, offer no other choice:

An age employed in edging steel
Can no poetic raptures feel;
No solitude's attracting power,
No leisure of the noon day hour,
No shaded stream, no quiet grove
Can this fantastic century move.
(35-40)

In such a time and place as this, he asks, "what has the muse to do?" (34).

The Hurricane can serve well as Freneau's own answer to the question because, in many ways, it can be viewed as a microcosm of his entire poetic corpus. Composed amidst a flurry of intense activism and disgusted escapism, between the poles of a profound neo-classicism and an incipient Romanticism, the poem captures Freneau's reactions to and embodiment of that "fantastic" age in which he lived. This is exactly what the muse could do.

As so many others in the late eighteenth century had done, Freneau turned to his literary heritage to understand his present and to plan for the future. When that ultimately proved inadequate, he celebrated the uniquely American. The 1784 *Verses, Made at Sea, in a Heavy Gale* chastised a culture of indifference and deceit. His retitling it *The Hurricane* in 1809 subtly offered the reassuring hindsight of success. There was no need to rewrite history, only to remember the dangers America had survived.

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³⁶ Thomas Jefferson, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Definitive ed., ed. Albert Ellery Bergh, 20 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Assoc., 1907), 10: 229.

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