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## A Question of Trousers: Seafarers, Masculinity and Empire in the Shaping of British Male Dress, c. 1600–1800

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### ABSTRACT

Trousers have a history. The British-imperial biography of this garment reveals the significance of ready-made clothing production for naval and merchant administrations with global reach. This history demonstrates the significance of male sartorial experiments in colonial settings. And it also confirms the rising importance of imperial and maritime cultures in shaping masculine ideals and habits of dress. Ultimately, middle ranked and elite male Britons came to rethink their allegiance to breeches and hose, a mnemonic of the *ancien régime*. Social cross-dressing ensued, with men of higher status adopting the garb of nautical working men, at a time when mariners were increasingly esteemed. The study of trousers opens new vantage points from which to assess the forces altering British masculinity, forces that also reshaped material norms.

### KEYWORDS

Fashion; masculinity; Britain; imperialism; trousers; sailors; mariners; Royal Navy; empire; ready-made clothes; consumerism; working men; clothing; material culture

Trousers have a history.<sup>1</sup> This apparently simple, two-legged garment intersects with expanding merchant empires and long-distant fleets. Its British-imperial biography reveals important facets of cultural cross-dressing that brought a humble article to the forefront of respectable male fashion by the late eighteenth century.<sup>2</sup> I will trace its dramatic change in status from a thing of labouring affiliation ca. 1700, to the favourite wear of naval officers, colonists and the fashionable cognoscenti by 1800 – a process of sartorial acculturation amidst shifting masculine ideals. The history of clothing is recognized for its power to illuminate key issues like industrialization and consumption, race and imperial politics.<sup>3</sup> Terence Turner defines clothing and bodily décor as ‘the social skin,’ noting that ‘it is the medium most directly and concretely concerned with the construction of the individual as social actor or cultural “subject”’.<sup>4</sup> Historical actors were well aware of the power of clothes to make or unmake their status, to declare their loyalties or distinguish them from those they despised. Material boundaries were policed in global societies through formal and informal sumptuary regimes. Nonetheless, clothing systems evolved, adopting once foreign garments, with fashions also trickling up the social hierarchy.<sup>5</sup>

Trousers crossed social and cultural categories, reflecting the power of imperial agendas, global trade and institutional transformations. I argue that the growing use and acceptance

of trousers by respectable male Britons also exemplifies the rising social authority of a militarized imperial masculinity, as expressed by Britain's seafaring men. Alexandra Shepard notes the importance of examining male experiences of war in the early modern era as they affected the constructions of masculinities; Karen Harvey likewise reports on the paucity of works that address the impact of martial life on male cultural norms.<sup>6</sup> I address these debates through the history of trousers. The sartorial habits of deckhands and officers are pivotal in this equation, as are representations of this increasingly lionized occupational sector.<sup>7</sup>

Mariners were uniquely positioned within an evolving global system, growing from modest thousands in the early 1600s to an estimated 60,000 British long-distance mariners by 1750.<sup>8</sup> About two million men sailed from Europe to Asian-based trading posts in the three centuries after 1500 in the service of European merchant companies. About half that number returned, expunged from muster roles by death, disease, injury or the occasional decision to remain in Asia. Mortality rates were high. But the rewards were deemed worth the risks. Shipping lanes saw a seasonal flow of ships and men to and from European ports and those of the China Seas, Pacific, Atlantic, Indian and Arctic oceans. The numbers of seamen also swelled in times of war, as men were pulled from merchant to naval vessels and pressed from fishing fleets, coastal shipping and riverine employment, or volunteered. The navy stood at 40,000 men during the wars with France up to 1715, sailing to all quarters of the globe in defence of commerce and empire, reaching a height of 120,000 men during the 1780s.<sup>9</sup> Mariners developed an exceptional rhetorical authority over this period, evident in print and material culture. They offered alternate models of masculinity, reorienting male fashion, at a time of increasing imperial engagement.

### Deep-sea long-distance mariners: dressing the part

Initially, trousers served as exclusively labouring attire throughout Western Europe and its colonial territories, although men of all social classes shared some clothing elements: shirts, waistcoats, jackets, hosiery and shoes. Rank determined the quality of fabrics, trim and fastenings. Social standing also emphatically governed what would be worn on the nether regions of the male body: breeches and hose, or trousers. This was the great divide, a defining mark of status.<sup>10</sup>

Long breeches or trousers were common among labouring men, including mariners. The materials of such garments were utilitarian, even if on occasion good-quality fabrics were used.<sup>11</sup> In the 1600s and for generations after, mariners wore two forms of nether garments: petticoat breeches and trousers. The former, a voluminous article with hems flapping at the knees, was adapted from a stylish mid-seventeenth century fashion for gentlemen and it remained in use among seamen as an archaic survival because it suited an athletic maritime life. Petticoat breeches remained a clichéd symbol of seafarers, even as their use declined. Figure 1, from 1800, records a standard theme associated with mariners ashore – their proclivity for wholehearted indulgence following weeks or months of enforced temperance. In this case, a sailor's money keeps the fiddler at play and a young woman dancing to his tune. Likewise, this image documents the prevailing nautical styles: the central mariner wears trousers, his shipmate petticoat breeches and the fiddler sports what were by then old-fashioned breeches and hose. Trousers were normative articles of dress among mariners from the later 1600s.



**Figure 1.** 'Jack and his doxy.' Published 20 October 1800 by Laurie & Whittle, London. Lwlp10030, Courtesy of The Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.

Long trousers also defined commoners, signalling that the wearer was someone to command, low in status, possibly an artisan with his own occupational affiliations. Philippe Ariès claims that trousers signalled 'collective craft identity' in eighteenth-century France and Daniel Roche notes their use in urban settings as well as among sailors and river men in that kingdom.<sup>12</sup> This social marker was apparent in many European maritime communities, including Britain and its hinterlands. Information survives in detail about the garments prepared for sea-going men and it is clear that mariners' clothing shared common visual and design elements with those of other working men – indeed, the garments (or slops) stocked on board naval and merchant vessels from the 1600s were largely interchangeable with clothes worn by men on shore. But in one respect, sailors' clothes were distinctive, for they were ready-made.

Ready-made clothing was produced in growing quantities as military complements soared in early modern Europe – the full scale of production is not yet known. Spanish force numbered 300,000 men in 1630, during the Thirty Years' War, suggesting the challenges to its supply chains and manufacturing capacity.<sup>13</sup> Keeping early modern fighting men adequately clothed was a demanding task, imperfectly performed.<sup>14</sup> Mariners were the principal focus of the English (later British) state and were among the first large communities of men routinely dressed in ready-made garments. Innovations in naval administration began from the mid 1600s onwards, and in 1694 the new Bank of England laid the foundation for a dramatically

expanded state-funded manufacture of men's clothing. Naval contingents far exceeded in size the needs of individual army regiments who arranged their own stores. Ready-made sailors' slops signified a new concept in clothes production, made in a range of sizes, from set patterns approved by the Navy Board, ideally alike in look, fabric and thread<sup>15</sup> – although sailors' use and occasional decoration of these garments precluded a full uniform appearance. Daniel Roche argues for the power of uniform apparel on soldiery, seeing these garments as 'an instrument in a process designed to shape the physique and the bearing of a combative individual ... into collective power.'<sup>16</sup> The deployment of naval forces can be equated with massed regiments in the field. Training in the technologies of sail and artillery at sea demanded disciplined collective action that generated a distinctive ethos among ordinary seamen and the officer core, 'bound together in skill, purpose, courage and community.'<sup>17</sup> Ubiquitous slop clothes personified this collectivity. Naval authorities approved prototypes and assessed samples of garments for climate and conditions, with a price set for bulk orders, resulting in garments infused with rationality through their design and production processes.

The features defining these clothes, so familiar to present-day shopper, were exceptional in this era when tailor-made or homemade garments dressed the majority of people, aside from second-hand goods that were variable by nature.<sup>18</sup> In contrast, dockside warehouses amassed mountains of slops for dispatch on vessels large and small, for month-long or year-long voyages. These were essential resources, especially in the 1600s and early 1700s when alternate sources of supply in distant ports were not yet easily available.<sup>19</sup>

Individual contractors and subcontractors supplied tens and then hundreds of thousands of items annually, the stock rising with the size of the fleets.<sup>20</sup> Consider that in October 1747, in the midst of the War of the Austrian Succession, about 15 tons of baled slop clothes were shipped from London in one season to the Royal Navy's Mediterranean headquarters at Port Mahon, Menorca.<sup>21</sup> Effective naval administration required efficient provisioning and there was a constant demand for clothing.<sup>22</sup> Manufacturing capacity strengthened and contracting networks thickened at a time of almost continuous conflicts. Slops supplies became available at major ports throughout the British Isles and Ireland – like Edinburgh, Cork, Whitehaven, and Bristol – with London the preeminent manufacturing site.<sup>23</sup> Of course, the reach of the Royal Navy extended well beyond European waters and essential supplies were shipped in bulk to harbours along the Atlantic coast of North America and into the West Indies: Halifax, Nova Scotia; Boston, Massachusetts; Charleston, South Carolina; Kingston, Jamaica and English Harbour, Antigua, the base for the Royal Navy in the Caribbean.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, slops were carried on naval voyages to the Indian Ocean from at least the later 1600s, a practice that became routine for several generations.<sup>25</sup>

The resulting manufacturing capacity spilled over into other arenas, making slops available to other institutions and ventures. The English East India Company (EIC) and its ships were also catalysts in this supply chain, providing clothing very different in scale and character than the parcels and trunks of apparel sent out by family members to their sons, nephews or fathers working on the subcontinent for the EIC.<sup>26</sup> These private infusions of clothing attempted to uphold a status quo in dress among Britons at great distance from their natal land. In contrast, the new sartorial enterprise of naval and mercantile administrations precipitated innovations evident in the look of male apparel and the scale of production. Ready-made goods were part of this mix. The massive, sustained flow of these garments, carried to disparate locales, brought unexpected results. The growth of manufacturing systems in Britain encouraged the channelling of these wares wherever low-cost attire was



required, whether a Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) post, a Caribbean slave plantation or a Newfoundland fishing port.<sup>27</sup> Thus, Britons adventuring across the globe received ready-made garments with the seasonal trade winds, evident not only in the stores held by individual ships, but in the storehouses constructed, maintained and filled.

Cheapness and utility were the overriding priorities in the making and selling of slops, which inevitably imparted a new-style uniformity to the masses of goods used by the navy, the EIC and HBC among others. Contracting and subcontracting networks flourished in British cities and poured out streams of generally homogeneous garments – or at least so the purchasers hoped. Slops were supposed to be firmly sewn, fit for hard conditions and of sound fabric.<sup>28</sup> Capitalist technologies of production and the priorities of the 'fiscal military state' defined the characteristics of these shirts, jackets and trousers, from the cloth to the cut to the stitching.<sup>29</sup>

But, we must think as well about the meanings of these garments and the associations they acquired for global maritime communities and shipboard crews. For enlisted men, slop clothes were valued necessities that figured in routine exchanges, acquired from the purser on board ship, worn at sea as needed or sometimes traded in ports for other essentials. The mariner Edward Barlow recounted in 1668 that: 'His Majesty's ships carry out of England with them all manner of clothes for seamen to sell to the men of the ship if they want them in the term of the voyage, setting it upon their score ... when the ship is paid [off].'<sup>30</sup> Slops were an investment against future wages, the stuff of sea chests and a valued resource.<sup>31</sup> Mariners' portside interactions also shaped the impact of these ready-made clothes. They wore their best when in port, with many hands adding decorative touches like ribbons down the trouser seam or distinctive buttons on the jackets – in defiance of the nascent uniformity underpinning these garments.<sup>32</sup> A later naval officer confirmed the 'handicraft the Seaman knows'.<sup>33</sup> A mariners' vocation was written on his body and in his clothes. These were what Marcus Rediker termed 'Men of the World',<sup>34</sup> garbed in rationally constructed apparel, personalized through use.<sup>35</sup> The distinctive qualities of these clothes and the distinctive men modelling these garments produced a new mode of manhood with an influence that extended across social and geographic boundaries.

### Trousers make the man

The ascendance of trousers takes place within an imperial context, reflecting new facets of masculinity. The era following direct European oceanic contact with Asia and the Americas was marked by what R. W. Connell terms: 'a [new] recognizable masculine cultural type in the modern sense. This new ideal arose within the tumult of unprecedented imperial ventures, for 'Empire was a gendered enterprise,' as Connell notes, 'initially an outcome of the segregated men's occupations of soldiering and sea trade.'<sup>36</sup> Our library shelves are filled with volumes charting the rise of empires and commercial enterprises, plus the ascendancy of the British navy, with many fewer works considering the impact of these ventures on cultural products such as clothing.<sup>37</sup> However, the dawn of the age of trousers in the late 1700s and the demise of breeches and hose is a striking evocation of the shifts in culture and economy underway.

My focus is British. But this history cannot be written without assessing the multi-directional influences of global contacts, some of which remain to be identified. The centuries after 1500 witnessed profound changes, including the expansion of western commercial capitalism and the expanded commodification of goods around the world, generating

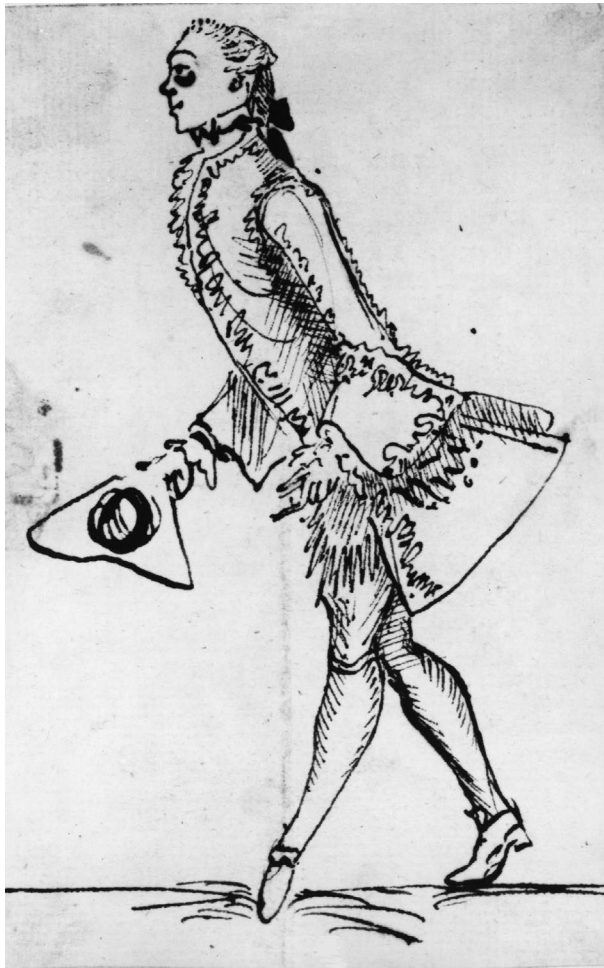
closer commercial and human ties among distant societies. Mariners were a mediating force building these connections, powering the transportation of goods from Arctic to tropical waters, and enforcing imperial policies, all the while learning the techniques of cross-cultural exchange. Sophie White recently observed that 'the movement of people and the movement of goods,' over this era were 'codependent,' an important point for the topic at hand.<sup>38</sup> As European merchant and naval fleets grew, so too did the functional value and cultural influence of mariners.<sup>39</sup>

These men were distinguished from others of their social rank by the seas they travelled, the links they forged and the role they played (voluntarily or involuntarily) in articulations of maritime might. Fraternal bonding in homo-social groups had long shaped some young men's socialization in early modern institutions, such as universities.<sup>40</sup> Naval and merchant fleets signified a collectivity of a different scale, with different aims and values, not least physical strength, seafaring skills and mental endurance, traits tested and judged on repeated voyages.<sup>41</sup> The distinctiveness of these men lay not simply in their nautical prowess, although this was acclaimed, but in their opportunities to acquire goods in Asia, the Mediterranean and the Americas. Private trade (or 'privilege') was the defining compensation for long oceanic journeys, a perquisite that inspired all European maritime crews. All mariners in merchant fleets were permitted to carry goods on board to sell, barter or gift at another port or on returning home.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, micro-enterprises and entrepreneurial zeal typified the economic and material lives of these men, at sea and on land. Mariners were unique among labouring peoples in their extensive contacts with the 'new luxuries,' a term Jan de Vries applies to new consumer items like tobacco, Indian calico, Chinese silk, tea and coffee – goods mariners routinely encountered in their travels. The theme rendered in Figure 1, a sailor's return with money to spend, was repeated endlessly in ballads, plays and visual satires and became a recurring trope in the production of eighteenth-century visual, theatrical and material culture. We need to consider more fully this cosmopolitan cohort who handled, bartered, gifted and sold small parcels of these items in global ports, whether in merchant or naval vessels. Over generations, seafaring men gained a unique cultural capital for their access to 'new luxuries,' for the gifts they dispensed when on shore, for the prestige they earned from travel to distant lands and for their storied combat in pursuit of imperial ambitions. The social values assigned deep-sea mariners over the 1700s, defined a new type of imperial masculinity and imbued the garments they wore with an unexpected prestige.<sup>43</sup>

The eighteenth century is notable in sartorial terms for the evolution of respectable male dress. The meanings and materialities of these changes represent profound shifts in thinking, social signs and material routines, as noble, genteel and respectable men gradually discarded breeches and hose. This process was culturally freighted, for the legs of elite men symbolized power and sexuality, highlighted in close fitting white hose and skin-tight breeches, showcased in countless paintings of the era, legs upholding the social order. Their limbs were stylistically deployed through gesture and pose. Politeness as studied by noble, genteel and aspiring men demanded a learned restraint and polished performance, a 'language of the voice and of the body'.<sup>44</sup> The pleasing placement of feet, legs and hands in repeated ceremonial enactments defined the fully civil subject fit for the highest salon and the best company. Breeches and hose embodied this ordered hierarchy, epitomized by inherited privilege, although men outside the elites adopted this garb if they valued politeness for business or other professional reasons. Figure 2 offers a gently satiric depiction of an unknown gentleman sketched in the 1750s by George Townshend, 4th Viscount Townshend (1724–1807).

Townshend was immersed in the military from 1743 and developed his gifts as a caricaturist during repeated military campaigns and political forays. Positioned in an elite milieu, he captured the spirit of his subjects, such as this distinguished young man. Townshend portrays his balletic pose with one leg bent, the other extended in a graceful bow, a stylized salutation. An elegant demeanour matched by equally elegant hose and breeches were expected of a courtier or genteel man-about-town. Yet, this type of practiced presentation attracted increased criticism in the later 1700s, along with warnings of effiteness among Britain's young gentlemen.<sup>45</sup> To some critics, excessive polish on the surface suggested a weakness at the core, an unmanliness that must be repaired. As breeches were a mnemonic of the old order, for others they were a reminder of old corruption, a factor crystalized in the competing sartorial forms of revolutionary France.<sup>46</sup> However, this was a long-run contest not limited to France.

Competing styles of male dress were part of a wider debate on the ideal nature of elite and respectable manhood and on the perils of elegance that might unman unwary youth. The



**Figure 2.** Unknown Gentleman by George Townshend, 4th Viscount and 1st Marquess Townshend. Pen and Ink, 1751–58. NPG 4855(26). © National Portrait Gallery, London.



normative move to trousers and jacket among virtually all classes of men by 1800 signals a complex set of forces of long durations, as social, cultural and political influences from outside the elites percolating upwards among heterogeneous social ranks. Sartorial inspirations came from many quarters.<sup>47</sup> David Kuchta astutely ties the rise of the three-piece suit (and its attendant trousers) with the political contest between Britain's aristocratic leaders and the reform-minded middle classes in the long eighteenth-century. The sober plainness of middle-ranked men visually defined their claims to political authority, plain apparel being a contrast to silk-garbed, corrupt and effete aristocrats.<sup>48</sup> The confrontations Kuchta identifies were real, embedded in broad political campaigns in Georgian Britain. Yet this clothing reformation involved more than middling and elite men and the forces of change extended well beyond the bounds of Britain. Cross-cultural and imperial practice, as well as the rising national status of mariners, propelled the dawning pre-eminence of trousers.

Despite the seeming fixity of breeches and hose among elite and polite men, the commercial and imperial ventures that defined this era encouraged sartorial experimentation, even amidst the increased racial theorizing by Europeans of non-European peoples. Practices of dress altered for the generations who embarked on imperial adventures in different world regions. European men adapted their clothing to suit the climate and culture where they lived, incorporating elements from non-European clothing systems whether Native American or Asian.<sup>49</sup> In part, the social background of many travellers explains their adaptability. Dutch commercial men of the 1600s exemplify the sensibilities of those who rejected customary elite notions of 'honour'. They deemed such concerns irrelevant. Dutch mercantile priorities centred on profits and they aimed for 'friendly traffic' with local communities.<sup>50</sup> English merchant voyagers were similarly informed. Thus, EIC agents, relocating to India in the 1600s, wore the typical male apparel of that region. In 1632 the EIC junior administrator, Peter Mundy, described in detail 'Our Habitt when wee go abroad' which included a turban, a linen coat over what he terms 'breeches,' with a girdle round the waist, plus shoes and a *dupatta* or scarf around the shoulders. Mundy and his compatriots dressed in the equivalent of trousers that covered them from waist to ankle, with a loose jacket on top, 'our swords and daggers by our sides.' Their clothing, as with their food, was 'for the most part after the Custom of this place.'<sup>51</sup> These adaptations were so routine, that in 1672 instructions were issued at the EIC's Fort St George (in present-day Chennai) demanding men wear some natal attire, some of the time, with standing orders that: 'both Officers and Soldiers in the Fort shall, both on every Sabbath Day, and on every day when they exercise, wear English apparel.'<sup>52</sup> Remarks on the wearing of Asian dress by Britons in India continued through the 1700s.

There was extensive borrowing across cultures, among both common and elite men. Some garments were wholly domesticated once established in Europe, like the Japanese kimono that became a banyan, or dressing gown in its European settings.<sup>53</sup> In colonial North America, so many male settlers turned to indigenous clothing that a garment known as a 'hunting shirt' became emblematic of George Washington's troops.<sup>54</sup> Even while colonial authorities policed clothing systems, attempting to preserve a European essence in apparel, cultural cross-dressing was habitual for political and functional reasons, not least effective travel through challenging terrain.<sup>55</sup> As Dean and Leibsohn note, 'cultural mixings' of material culture was routine in the colonial era and, for many, so normal that it was not a matter for comment.<sup>56</sup> The prestige of some indigenous great men, utility of local apparel, plus the exigencies of climate propelled sartorial innovations even among those steeped in European clothing culture. Nor were these influences restricted to backcountry locales. Elements of

indigenous dress took root in the towns and ports of eastern North America, where moccasins became a signal fashion.<sup>57</sup> The experimentation that characterized this era unsettled the fixity of genteel dress among agents of commercial and martial imperialism. Thus, for men of the labouring, middle and upper social ranks, ethnic cross-dressing was a fact of everyday life that distinguished resident Europeans in Asia or the Americas from newcomers. This is the context in which we should reflect on borrowings across the social classes, with widespread emulation and adaptation, and clothing changes that 'blurred the lines between members of distinct social and ethnic groups.'<sup>58</sup> This globalizing world included more of what Mary Louise Pratt calls 'contact zones,' 'social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other.'<sup>59</sup> These 'interactive, improvisational ... encounters' were materialized in new forms of dressing.<sup>60</sup> Such was the case for India.

In ports along the Indian subcontinent there were added factors in the general sartorial mixing taking place, for ready-made slops were not only shipped there, but were also being made there by at least the early decades of the 1700s. Ready-made clothes production for export to Europe arose in the later 1600s with the making of items like banyans, shipped by the hundreds annually. Similarly 200,000 ready-made cotton shifts were ordered in several fabrics and colours in the 1680s by the EIC. The former venture was relatively small scale and successful; the latter, while more ambitious, was a commercial failure.<sup>61</sup> However, both examples suggest the capacity for large scale manufacturing on the subcontinent, in forms known to British buyers. The efforts were renewed as British fleets arrived routinely in the Indian Ocean and in 1750 pursers of EIC ships stocked 'Slops all made in India', suggesting an established innovation. These made-in-India garments reflect a system perhaps initiated during the War of the Austrian Succession, (1740-1748) when naval officials were pushed to supply the navy adequately. Local production of slops was a benefit to proximate squadrons. Records from 1750 indicate that 'J.T and J. Simpson, Contractors for Slops' organized production in India; the remnants of the bales that arrived back to London included 361 trousers, along with many hundreds of shirts and jackets.<sup>62</sup>

Thus, the context for the wearing of trousers became more complicated, as apparel for tropical and temperate wear was manufactured in a vital imperial locale, where cross-cultural experimentation in dress was already the norm. Thomas Parry was later contracted in the 1760s to make slops for 'His Majesty's Fleet ... employed in the East Indies ... as near as possible to the Pattern of the English slops.' I have not found surviving material evidence from this trade – little wonder as the heavy use given seamen's clothes leaves few surviving examples. In this case, lightweight cottons produced in India were used in uniform trousers. This imperial site of production was so well established that in 1761 a naval official declared: 'No slops have been sent to the East Indies as the commodities of that country are more proper for the wear of the seamen serving in those parts than any sent from here.'<sup>63</sup> Evidently all EIC and naval vessels posted to the Indian Ocean were furnished with garments ready-made in India, pointing to effective systems of production, the dimensions of which remain to be uncovered. Inevitably there would be a significant presence of ready-made garments in port communities around India, with levels of hybridity in cut or in extra-naval diffusion about which we can only speculate. British sailors cruising the Indian Ocean were now supplied with Indian-made trousers adding to the complex provisioning of the fleets.

Tropical weight white cotton trousers, often with red or blue stripes, became emblematic of this nautical constituency. And striped trousers caught the eye of artists and ceramicists, just as seafaring ventures captured public imagination. Merchant shipping was the lifeblood

of Britain, defended by the Royal Navy; the two sectors were intertwined in British consciousness and celebrated by politicians. Lord Haversham's 1707 oration before the House of Lords sketched a theme that would be repeated countless times in the century ahead.

your trade is the mother and nurse of your seamen; your seamen are the life of your fleet, and your fleet is the security and protection of your trade, and both together are the wealth, strength, security and glory of Britain.<sup>64</sup>

Naval victories were commemorated in various ways and re-enactments of the battles drew crowds to the great Southwark Fair in South London. As Margarett Lincoln notes: 'Popular media, including songs and ballads, displayed a burgeoning national pride in naval achievement.'<sup>65</sup> By mid-century, British visual and material culture included hundreds of items praising the British mariner, often shown wearing his distinctively striped trousers. Figure 3 is an earthenware tile, decorated with a transfer print depicting 'The Sailor's Return'. This ceramic was intended for domestic use, celebrating the lives and culture of nautical men. It was produced mid-century by a Liverpool pottery, capturing an iconic relationship between mariners and port-side women, one shown in this tile with her apron laden with gifts from a generous sweetheart.<sup>66</sup> This is one of numerous ceramic items this type, a genre that came to include figurines for table-top displays.<sup>67</sup> Figure 4, portrays another sailor's sexual conquest in port, intemperance typical of this group, reluctantly accepted by some and openly applauded by others as proof of the potency of this fraternity. This sailor's manliness and worthy character are demonstrated in his shining (silver?) buckles and buttons, silk handkerchief around his neck, white shirt visible at neck and cuffs and a prominent hat on his well-combed hair. The artist renders muscled legs beneath the striped trousers. Both print and ceramic knickknacks aimed for a middling audience and captured recurring motifs of robust nautical masculinity defending and enriching the empire. Lincoln observes that: 'Different ranks of seamen can be linked to different aspects of "Britishness", but as part of their imperial aspirations in this period the British in general consolidated a national fiction in which the sea was held to be a part of their being.'<sup>68</sup> How better for the public to enact this British sentiment than to buy collectables depicting mariners at work or play? Striped trousers were visual shorthand, alluding to a unique group men on whose strengths the country relied. Their striped trousers were worn in the Indian Ocean and beyond, sported in the summer months in American and European ports, symbolizing the distances travelled and their nautical profession. These articles of dress also exemplified the reach of the eighteenth-century British Empire, in cloth, pattern and manufacture. Mariners' shore-going clothes defined a group actively subverting hierarchies of dress, creating something new, identifiable in port or miles from the sea – their long white or striped trousers a singular marker.<sup>69</sup>

Daniel Roche reminds us that 'Clothing speaks of many things at once ... because it is through clothing that everyone's relation to the community passes.'<sup>70</sup> Seafarers' clothing defined their status in important ways, a symbol reinforced by cultural media. Officers shared an increasing part of these modes, even as they strived to enforce discipline over this tumultuous mass of men.

Officers and seamen survived their voyages through strength, seamanship and luck, skills earned through trials of endurance. Deference to rank was expected and enforced on all ships at all times, although naval and merchant ships differed in their aims and administrative priorities. There was a deep-seated respect for seamanship within this hierarchy, demonstrated in the navy with the schooling of young midshipmen (officers in training) by common sailors steeped in their craft. N.A.M. Rodger identifies the culture of the eighteenth-century



**Figure 3.** 'The Sailor's Return' circa 1758–61. John Sadler printer, unknown Liverpool pottery. Tin glazing, transfer printing on earthenware tile. C.1738–1928. Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

British Navy that distinguished it from the military, that is, its focus on professionalism in the training and promotion of officers. Rodger notes that: 'the first essential was not honour, but seamanship and navigation: advanced and extremely technical skills acquired by long experience and thorough training.'<sup>71</sup> Seamanship trumped birth as a route to preferment and the preoccupation with honour that typified scions of the *ancien régime* in military regiments was less evident among naval officers. Yet tensions persisted on this question. Naval officers were not tutored in the ephemeral balletic of politeness, so essential for formal social encounters. And, on one occasion, this perceived failings produced 'ill-timed levity' in the Prince of Wales and his entourage when officers, recent victors in battle, were presented to George III. The officers' 'awkward shyness' was on display in stark contrast to the finesse of royal and noble sons. The royal equerry who recorded this encounter thought the Prince's behaviour 'unpardonable'; it was clear where merit lay.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, the attributes of naval officers were too vital to disparage. As Rodger observes: 'in the Navy different social criteria applied.'

At the same time, at sea and in harbour, officers experimented with a different type of 'cultural cross-dressing,' adopting the routine choice of trousers, as worn by the sailors they commanded. A blurring of sartorial status took place, unsettling to some naval authorities, as officers and midshipmen routinely donned trousers to more easily climb the riggings aloft or the ladders below deck, without injuring their hosiery or their person.<sup>73</sup> Practicality





**Figure 4.** 'The Sailor's Pleasure', 1781. Published by Sayer & Bennett. 2010,7081.3208. © Trustees of the British Museum, London.

and rationality figured in the use of these garments by the officer class. Evidence of change appears in the inventories of genteel midshipmen setting out to sea. In 1704, an elite young midshipman listed '2 pair of drawers good' and '4 Sea Shirts' among a mixed assemblage of apparel and accoutrements in his sea kit. This list extended over several pages, with fashionable items predominating: wigs, powder bag for the wigs, fur cap, breeches, combs and innumerable shirts, ruffles and stockings.<sup>74</sup> In contrast, in the 1780s, six pairs of trousers were deemed indispensable to an ambitious midshipman, against only two pair of breeches for formal occasions.<sup>75</sup> Many officers began their lives at sea in humble positions, as a naval



officer averred, writing in 1808 that: 'there is scarcely an Officer who has not risen through his own exertions.'<sup>76</sup> Thus, the exigencies, dangers and rewards of shipboard life created different dimensions of masculinity reflected in the culture of seafaring officers and men.

Ship owners and naval authorities rewarded seamanship and it was not unusual for men to rise from common seaman to third, second or first mate. Nautical skills increasingly meant the acquisition of rational knowledge for navigation. But, familiarity with slop clothes was also commonplace. Making and mending the contents of sea chests, and decoration of shore-going rigs, transcended social rank and were among the proficiencies that midshipmen and common ratings shared.<sup>77</sup> The quarterdeck, although reserved for officers, did not wholly exclude men of lower social origins. Thus the habit of trousers spread through emulation and promotion, a mark of the seafaring brotherhood. Midshipmen and officers embraced this useful attire, not at all deterred by its plebeian origins and perhaps habituated to the feel, comfort and mobility possible in these garments, impossible in skin-tight breeches. Captains concurred. Captain Richard Tiddeman included in his inventory a pair of striped cotton trousers that he habitually wore in the 1740s when based in the Indian Ocean, an item that could be replaced in a local port if need be.<sup>78</sup> Many others adopted this habit and by at least 1775: 'both white linen and blue cloth trousers ... long figured amongst the many unauthorized garments worn by officers when at sea.'<sup>79</sup> The national reputation of nautical men soared to unexpected heights during this era as a consequence of battles won and prizes claimed. Mariners of higher ranks increasingly wore trousers, a sign of their seafaring allegiance. Martha Howell observes that: 'fashion is ... transgressive in that it compulsively tests the boundaries of the expected.'<sup>80</sup> Popular culture in prints, plays and ceramic goods reinforced the status of this singular group of men, whose apparel became known and esteemed, the stuff of song and story:

His rigging – no one dare attack it  
Tight fore and aft; above, below  
Long-quarter's shoes, check shirt, blue jacket,  
And trousers like the driven snow.<sup>81</sup>

Did trousers become the new emblem of a more enlightened, 'modern,' imperial man, who rejected symbols of ancient hierarchy and embraced expressions of professional competence? In fact, hierarchies remained with naval uniforms introduced for officers in the 1740s. But their blue jackets made them look much less like peacocks than military officers in elite regiments. Naval uniforms were intended to distinguish officers from enlisted men. But the inclination of many senior captains was to emphasize functional professionalism over signature fashions. In 1787, the captain of the *Pegasus*, anchored in English Harbour, Antigua, ordered that 'No Petty Officer or Seaman to go on shore or aboard other ships on leave, but in jackets and Trowsers.'<sup>82</sup> In 1790, Captain Drury excused his midshipmen and mates from wearing full uniform on the quarterdeck 'in consequence of their particular duties,' allowing them to wear 'jacket and trousers' instead.<sup>83</sup> In Britain, by the later 1700s, gentlemen similarly moved towards plainer ensembles, sometimes in more sombre colours, evident in the wearing of informal riding attire – jacket, breeches and boots – even in Parliament. Inconspicuous consumption was increasingly the order of the day. One of the new markers of social distinction emphasized soldierly and imperial prowess with the proliferation of military uniforms during the decades-long wars with France.<sup>84</sup> Within this context, an item that began as labourers' attire came to incorporate more martial than plebeian connotations,

powering its social diffusion. Yet there was distaste among some moralists at the unpolished bluntness found among Britain's naval officers, a taint exemplified in their distinctive garb. Mariners' behaviour, looks and apparel extended the range of masculine ideals beyond a vaunted politeness, a fact bemoaned by conservative critics who cited a: 'roughness, which clings to the seaman's behaviour like tar to his trousers, [which] makes him unfit for civil and polite society.'<sup>85</sup> These tensions were never wholly resolved, nor were critics wholly mollified, even as standards of respectable male clothing evolved.

In some circles, wearing trousers in the 1790s or early 1800s carried social risks, perhaps explaining the persistence of breeches in more conservative milieu. The Somerset parson, William Holland, recorded his distaste for the new fashion in 1807 having viewed the garb of a younger cleric, writing: 'I do not much approve [of] White Nankeen Trowsers for a Clergyman.'<sup>86</sup> Nonetheless, trouser-use spread across an ever-widening social span, favoured by naval officers on many ships, an innovation long prefigured by their unsanctioned use. However, their absorption into formal naval hierarchy remained contentious. In 1812, a newly passed midshipman arrived at the Admiralty to collect his first assignment as a lieutenant 'in full dress except the breeches, having on white jean trousers instead.' He was so accustomed to his trousers he forgot their undistinguished ancestry, still offensive in Admiralty circles. The new lieutenant was refused entry until suitably dressed, in breeches.<sup>87</sup> The defence of breeches marked the boundaries of taste, the limits of acceptability in more intransigent cultural communities, like the church or the Admiralty. Mary Douglas observed that: 'hated garments ... signal cultural affiliation. Because some would choose, others must reject.'<sup>88</sup> Breeches were despised and trousers endorsed as a revolutionary symbol in France by adherents of radical political change. But other forces shaped the cultural acceptance of trousers in Britain, for by the later eighteenth century they denoted maritime strength and imperial prowess as exemplified by an iconic group of loyal mariners.

Within wider imperial precincts, trousers also became the new norm for common colonial soldiers and genteel colonists. British soldiers based in North America during the Seven Years' War and the Revolutionary War were equipped with trousers for utility's sake, an innovation that perhaps sparked comment in military circles, with soldiers dressed in a nautical style. But the value of this long-legged garment was indisputable, as a physician explained: 'trousers, or breeches with legs, which reach to their shoes... have been found of great service in defending them [soldiers] against cold in winter, and against the bits of flies, insects, and of serpents, in summer.'<sup>89</sup> In tropical and semi-tropical colonial settings, where slave labour was widely employed, the use of trousers involved complex cultural negotiations. Practicality favoured looser, lighter, cooler garments.<sup>90</sup> However, there was also a compulsion among the plantocracy to differentiate race through apparel. This aim was never fully realized. By the 1770s, slave owners are shown wearing long trousers in Caribbean, colonial Americas and Indian Ocean plantations in sketches and paintings. Slaves in these same locales wore short pants and long, on occasion red striped sailor trousers available from sea to sea. Ethnographic painters who traversed the empire captured the details of this attire; their work was defined by attention to the material minutiae of European and non-European populations.<sup>91</sup> Tensions persisted around many items of dress, except for the almost wholesale adoption of trousers by colonial middling and elite men.<sup>92</sup> A new arrival, Mark Forth, writing to family in 1793 from the Windward Islands, explained what generations of colonist knew, that he must now wear light, wide trousers and, as Forth wrote: 'the other Cloaths I brought from England is of no use to me.'<sup>93</sup>



**Figure 5.** Admiral Thomas Cochrane, 10th Earl of Dundonald, by Peter Eduard Ströhling, 1807, engraved by Charles Turner, 1809. SW00094330. Courtesy of Bridgeman Art Library.

By the late 1700s, most sea officers reflected what we might call ‘anti-fashion’ in their apparel, rejecting the excesses of effete dandyism. A naval officer recorded his approbation of the norms of naval dress in verse, characterizing this style as: ‘Such Clothes as grace the Man! not useless Beau!’<sup>94</sup> This aesthetic defined a new style of imperial masculinity at odds with the excesses of courtiers, even if the Admiralty still demanded breeches on occasion. This was part of a wider rejection of the stilted formality of the old order, evident even among denizens of the diplomatic corps. Similarly, from the mid 1700s onwards, many youth of genteel and noble backgrounds rejected the polished performance of the *ancien régime*, despising its studied politeness. What the older generation termed ‘grossly casual’ manners became a hallmark of noble youth and their acolytes.<sup>95</sup> These young men looked to plebeian





**Figure 6.** 'A Bond Street Sailor in 1797'. Printed by Richard Newton. 1948,0214.1002. © Trustees of the British Museum, London.

exemplars for skill, strength and daring, celebrating coachmen and jockeys.<sup>96</sup> Mariners were another admired set of men, uniquely entwined in imperial contests.

The navy attracted royal and aristocratic men to its ranks. Indeed, George III's son, William, entered the navy in 1779 as an able seaman, rising to midshipman in 1780. William's progress was commemorated in prints, with one from 1782 displaying him in full midshipman garb: white trousers with a patterned handkerchief round his neck.<sup>97</sup> The nobleman Lord Thomas Cochrane was a celebrated 'fighting captain' in the wars with revolutionary and Napoleonic France, noted for his prowess at sea and for his radical political stance on land as a member of Parliament. Above all, Cochrane esteemed the skills and valour of British mariners, recounting



**Figure 7.** 'Belle's and Beaus or a Scene in Hyde Parke', 1817. Printed by William Heath, published by Thomas Tegg. 1872,1012.5066. © Trustees of the British Museum, London.

in his memoirs the talents of a particular lieutenant, raised from the ranks, who instructed a young Cochrane in seamanship. Cochrane honoured British mariners in thought and deed. In 1801, as a seasoned officer of twenty-six he presented himself at a masquerade ball in Malta, organized by a French royalist regiment. Cochrane arrived wearing 'the dress of an ordinary British seaman'. His trousers were very evident, as was the marlinspike in his hand. His French hosts were not amused, engaged as they were in the reestablishment of the old order.<sup>98</sup> Cochrane was told that 'such a dress was not admissible', a scuffle ensued and he was dispatched to the guardhouse. Cochrane adamantly asserted his cause, judging his guise 'as honourable' as any other.<sup>99</sup> He was stubborn in his loyalties. Karen Harvey comments that the 'naval and military contexts in which some men's masculinity was forged suggests limits to the hegemony of politeness.'<sup>100</sup> So it was with Cochrane and the generations who celebrated the martial prowess of seaborne men and the cultural associations of trousers. Cochrane's portrait, painted in 1807, (Figure 5) presents his political views in symbolic form, his legs set front and centre, his foot firmly on the gun carriage, wreathed in the smoke of battle. This portrait epitomizes heroic imperial masculinity – in trousers.<sup>101</sup> His was a hybrid costume, for while he sports the epiletas, buttons and braid of his rank, his most prominent garment had a plebeian, nautical heritage. In civilian life trousers remained Cochrane's signature attire, visually confronting old corruption in the House of Commons, a mnemonic of his years at sea and his affiliation with new forms of masculine representation.<sup>102</sup>

## Conclusion

By 1800, trousers held richly varied meanings for labouring, middling and elite men. Fashion curators explain the modishness of trousers by the century's end with the Prince of Wales' decision to wear this item while at his seaside resort in Brighton. This claim presumes a



top down cycle of emulative fashions and overlooks the powerful cultural associations of maritime ventures – national and imperial – and the long-run influence of nautical men.<sup>103</sup> And while naval officers disparaged the stylish beaux and their penchant for excess, sailors' striped trousers inspired repeated imitations among this land-based crew. Figures 6 and 7 satirize the Bond Street dandy (1797) and the Hyde Park Beau (1817), social actors sporting red striped sailor-inspired trousers, the lineage apparent in the wide-legged garments. These fashion-forward young men played with a form of dress steeped in patriotism and manliness. Both iterations confirm the potency of this garb to define and redefine the wearer.<sup>104</sup>

Sartorial traditions were not easily altered. However, the rise of imperial masculinities over the long eighteenth century, distilled by maritime ventures, is a powerful explanatory factor for the dawning age of trousers. The provisioning of ready-made garments from one side of the empire to the other is another animating factor in this change. The availability of ready-made trousers in ports across the globe was founded on a new global system of production, appended to mercantile and naval administrations. Likewise, the rejection of polished politeness within many social sectors led to a search for other patterns of acceptable manliness, now framed within a strong imperial agenda. Change was not completed in a generation. Breeches and hose held deep symbolic resonance and, even in the tropics, necessity sometimes required their use on formal occasions. However, by the century's end full-length trousers were habitual in military, maritime and assorted imperial endeavours, worn informally by planters, enlisted and officer class, and habitually by legions of mariners.<sup>105</sup> The experiences of empire, the habits of maritime life and the idealization of selected plebeian men shifted the priorities of masculine representation, as new forms of imperial masculinity were created. New fashions followed. Close attention to patterns of social cross-dressing reveals changing criteria of respectable manliness; as well, the functional mechanics of clothing provision redefined the imperial age. The study of trousers opens new vantage points from which to assess the connections made across geographic and social distances, and the forces that reshaped material norms.

## Notes

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  19. Lemire, *Dress, Culture and Commerce*, pp. 9–41. For slops shipped to the East Indies in the 1690s see ADM 106/481/64, N.A., UK.
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  23. ADM 106/497/19; ADM 106/1,075/107; ADM 106/1,110/121; ADM 106/1,036/33; ADM 354/137/33, N.A., UK.

24. ADM 354/160/209, 234; ADM 354/161/128; ADM 106/1,088/84; ADM 354/159/219; ADM 106/826/215; ADM 106/875/132; ADM 106/895/44, N.A., UK. ADM 354/159/219, The National Maritime Museum, (hereafter N.M.M.) Greenwich.
25. ADM 106/481/64; ADM 354/164/346, N.A., UK.
26. For example, in February 1725 Mary Horne sent her brother John 2 suits of clothes, 2 wigs, 2 hats, 6 pairs of silk stockings, 12 pair of shoes and 2 dozen pairs of gloves, as well as snuff, wine and toilet water, to create an acceptable material culture for this young man. IOR, W/1/16/47, British Library (hereafter B.L.). In December 1727, a relative of another EIC sojourner in India wanted to send one wig and four hats. IOR, E/1/18/170, B.L.
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