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Fall 2022

### Acknowledging Women's Efforts within the Whaling Industry

Elizabeth Ruff '26  
*DePauw University*

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#### Recommended Citation

Ruff, Elizabeth '26, "Acknowledging Women's Efforts within the Whaling Industry" (2022). *Best First-Year Seminar Writing*. 8, Scholarly and Creative Work from DePauw University.  
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## Acknowledging Women's Efforts within the Whaling Industry

The whale fishing industry was a prominent economic force during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, fueled not only by the men who worked aboard the whaling ships but more importantly by their wives and the other women back on the East Coast. In Lisa Norling's book *Captain Ahab Had a Wife* the women and wives of the maritime men are claimed to be the essential sustaining influence for those within the whale fishing industry. Despite these women never having been on a whaling voyage, their actions back at home and communications with those aboard are what kept the men at work, further allowing the industry to become so successful. In the past it was easy to dismiss their efforts and subject them to only being domestic housewives, but in today's day and age we must acknowledge their efforts. Without giving them the credit they deserve, people would fail to understand how the whale fishery world was able to reach its full potential and become such a dominant industry.

Without the efforts of the women back at home, the industry would have completely crumbled. When their husbands or the men close to them went away, the women took on their roles and became "deputy husbands"<sup>1</sup>. This meant they began controlling their family's finances, assets, as well as still raising their children. In *Captain Ahab Had a Wife* Norling provides copious examples of women and their deputy husband responsibilities. One being the story of Caroline Gifford, a New Bedford "deputy husband". It was recorded that when her husband left on his voyage she automatically took over the management of her family's farm, its investments, and where the money that her husband made was going. Syliva Leonard, another deputy husband wrote to her husband at sea, "everything I do...is more for you than myself"<sup>2</sup>. This statement of doing everything in the name of someone else seems intense in this day and age, but it was

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<sup>1</sup> Lisa Norling, *Captain Ahab Had a Wife* (University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 148.

<sup>2</sup> Norling, *Captain Ahab Had a Wife*, 149.

normalized during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The women of these maritime men essentially became the foundation for their husbands success, and in turn, the success of the whaling industry as a whole.

With their love far off at sea, almost all women wrote letters to their husbands. These letters served as the only form of communication between land and sea and were what connected fathers to their families. These were also what kept relationships alive despite the large expanse of ocean separating couples. They provided updates on what had been happening back home and reminded whalers of their purpose and why they were doing what they did. In fact, letters were so yearned for by whalers that some men who did not receive them sought out ways to purchase old letters from fellow shipmates. Small photos or miniature portraits of loved ones were also sent after the invention of early photography methods such as the daguerreotype<sup>3</sup>. These personal items held high significance among whalers, and when received men were often found sitting on their chests “in a bath of tears”<sup>4</sup> after opening these packages from their loved ones. Often held close to the heart or in their storage chests, these personal items gave sailors a taste of home and kept them grounded despite all the turmoil at sea. In the words of whaler Henry Beetle, without his wife “the world would be a wilderness” to him<sup>5</sup>.

The idea of home was a strong one among whalers, and at the heart of home were the women they held closest to their hearts. Those back on shore anchored them, and created a place of stability amid all their moving around voyage after voyage. Following the same idea as the letters and photos sailors kept near and dear, poem books were also things they held to keep them steady. Lydia Hunt Sigourney, the “Sweet Singer of Hartford” and the most popular female poet

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<sup>3</sup> Norling, *Captain Ahab Had a Wife*, 186.

<sup>4</sup> Norling, *Captain Ahab Had a Wife*, 155.

<sup>5</sup> Norling, *Captain Ahab Had a Wife*, 141.

in the Victorian era, wrote a book of poems originally called *Poems for Seamen*. This book was taken aboard many whaling ships by sailors and was, as Sigourney states in her autobiography, “a prompter of salutary thought when they should leave the charities of their home”. One of the poems in this book titled, “The Happy Home” reflects on the idea many sailors held of their families back home and describes how by reading about this idea of home, not only was the sailor able to recall fond memories, but he was also “physically and spiritually saved”<sup>6</sup>. Captains of these whaling ships were strong supporters of promoting the ideas of home among their whalemen. They believed that the values found at home surrounded by women were what would repair virtue and fix the weak willed<sup>7</sup>. If historians only focused on the men at sea, they would miss this crucial part of the whale fishing industry.

A key aspect of a functioning whaling ship was a set morality, enforced by many of the sailors' wives. During this era women were seen as the moral compass, and ultimately as Sara Josepha Hale (founder and president of Boston Seamen’s Aid Society) states, “God’s appointed agent of morality”<sup>8</sup>. Faced with the responsibility of maintaining healthy, righteous behavior within their families, women urged their husbands and sons at sea to avoid sinning. These immoral acts of the time were things like excessive drinking and swearing. A letter from an apprehensive wife urges her husband at sea to avoid profanity claiming that if he did swear, he would be deceiving her<sup>9</sup>. While their requests to avoid these activities helped to reinforce moral ideals upon the ships, they could not stop everything. As seen in the book “To Swear Like a Sailor”, many men swore. Their efforts were not fruitless though as their occasional reminders to the men they loved the most slowed down the intensity of so-called “bad behavior” aboard

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<sup>6</sup> Norling, *Captain Ahab Had a Wife*, 218.

<sup>7</sup> Norling, *Captain Ahab Had a Wife*, 220.

<sup>8</sup> Norling, *Captain Ahab Had a Wife*, 219.

<sup>9</sup> Norling, *Captain Ahab Had a Wife*, 179.

whaling ships. In turn, their efforts to protect the souls of their husbands and men at sea also helped to improve the industry's productivity as a whole.

The final part of women's efforts this paper will touch upon (although not the final one in all of their total effect on the industry) is how they were the ones who prepared the men for their voyages. Organizing clothes, books, and preserving food, women got their men ready before each and every voyage<sup>10</sup>. Since they were the ones who gathered everything together for their husbands, women were what made the trips able to happen in the first place. As previously stated, the idea of women acting as their husbands' keepers was the norm of the time causing this act to be ignored. However, because of today's more contemporary gender roles the efforts of whale town women have been able to be properly recognized and given credit for a part of the overall success.

If the men at sea were only focused on when explaining the whaling industry's success, the extremely hard work these women put into making sure things ran smoothly at home during the men's absences would be completely ignored. Without their efforts, the industry would have quickly crumbled and not have been what it was. Lisa Norling's book *Captain Ahab Had a Wife* brings to light this issue and gives readers a better understanding of essentially the "oil" to the workings of the industry. Women at home were what kept the gears moving and thanks to Norling's book, as well as present-day ideas on domesticity, the women behind the whaling industry were finally given the recognition they deserve. In turn, we are able to better understand how the whaling world really functioned.

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<sup>10</sup> Norling, *Captain Ahab Had a Wife*, 154.