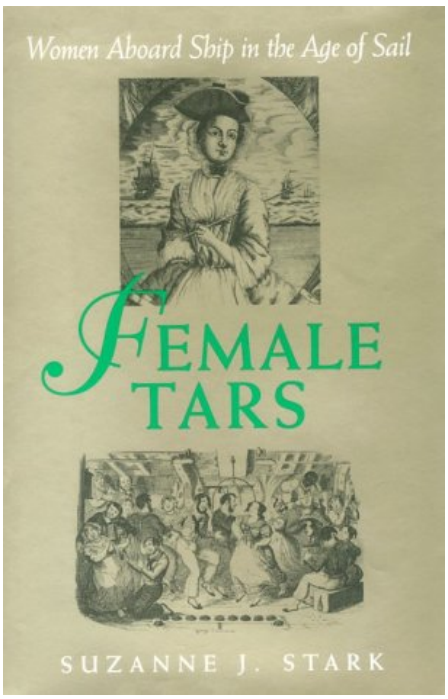


# Female Tars: Women Aboard Ship in the Age of Sail

*Suzanne J. Stark*

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**Female Tars: Women Aboard Ship in the Age of Sail** Suzanne J. Stark
Provides an in-depth study of the women who lived and worked on British warships of the 18th and early 19th centuries. The author investigates the custom of allowing prostitutes to live with the crews of warships in port and why the Royal Navy unofficially condoned the practice. She offers accounts of the wives of warrant officers and seaman who spent years at sea living - and fighting - beside their men without pay or even food rations and of the women in disguise who actually served as seaman or marines.

## Female Tars: Women Aboard Ship in the Age of Sail Details

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# From Reader Review Female Tars: Women Aboard Ship in the Age of Sail for online ebook

### treva says

Probably unsurprising that the most interesting chapter was the one that drew from Mary Lacy's autobiography, using her own words. Placing the romantic myths and ballads in historical context is highly valuable, and while a scholarly text, this book is very readable.

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### Cindy Vallar says

During the Age of Sail, the British Royal Navy was decidedly a man’s world. One might think this meant women were not aboard these wooden vessels that ruled the oceans and protected the world’s largest empire. Female Tars shows the contrary to be true. The Admiralty and officers may have ignored their presence or not even been aware they were aboard, but women did live and work on navy ships during the seventeenth century through the middle of the nineteenth.

Stark’s book, first published in 1996, is a succinctly written and engrossing academic study for scholars as well as lay readers. Four chapters comprise this easy-to-read exploration: Prostitutes and Seamen’s Wives on Board in Port, Women of the Lower Deck at Sea, Women in Disguise in Naval Crews, and The Story of Mary Lacy, Alias William Chandler. The endnotes provide fascinating historical tidbits that don’t readily fit within the main narrative. They also provide the source material documenting the text, although no separate bibliography is included. In addition to the index, black-and-white illustrations depicting women with seamen further enhance the chapters.

The largest category of women found on ships was prostitutes, who spent time on the lower deck where the sailors lived whenever a vessel put in at a port. This was a period when shore leave was rarely granted since most captains believed the crew would desert. To prevent this and to keep the men happy, boatloads of women came out to the ship to entertain and console them. To a lesser degree some of these females were the actual wives of the seamen, but for them to have this opportunity to visit with their husbands was a rarity, as Stark so ably demonstrates. Within this chapter she discusses the reasons for allowing women to board the ships, which also entails what life was like in the navy and pertinent Admiralty regulations. The inclusion of contemporary quotations allows Stark to contrast how men of the lower deck viewed these women with the viewpoints of commissioned officers. Her discourse also covers what life at home was like for all these women and their families, as well as the reforms that eventually led to the cessation of this practice.

Chapter two focuses on warrant officers’ wives, who often accompanied their husbands. For many, the ship was the only home they ever had and they raised their families within these wooden walls. Aside from comparing these wives with those of soldiers, Stark explores the tradition of women going to sea (which dates back to medieval times), the regulations concerning this, and the wives’ daily routine (meals, recreation, sexual harassment, childbirth, and participation in battles). She also touches on women in the French navy during this time period. The final segments of the chapter summarize how this tradition came to an end and why these valiant women who deserved the General Service Medal failed to receive it.

The third chapter focuses on women in disguise. Only a few accounts survive as evidence that prove they existed, but it’s likely others also donned male attire and joined the navy. Either their stories were never

recorded, or their true identities were never revealed. In presenting this information, Stark asks and attempts to answer three questions:

How were they able to pass as male on crowded ships where privacy didn’t exist?

Why did they volunteer and go to great efforts to remain on board when many men were pressed into service and deserted whenever the opportunity arose?

How did their fellow seamen, their officers, and society as a whole view these women once their true gender was revealed?

Her first offer of proof of these women seamen come directly from the archives of the Royal Navy. They are Gentlewoman Anne Chamberlyne (1690), a nameless Gentlewoman (1690s), a Marine known as William Prothero (1760-1761), and a black female seaman known as William Brown (1804-1816 [or later]). In addition, Stark discusses Hannah Snell’s “Muddled Biography” and Mary Anne Talbot’s “Spurious Autobiography.”

The final chapter focuses on Mary Lacy and showcases excerpts from her autobiography, first published in 1773. After running away from home in 1759, she eventually assumed the persona of a male and enlisted in the Royal Navy. The chosen selections document various stages in her career, which includes her time as an apprentice and a shipwright, and informs readers of her goals, attitudes, and opinions about what she experiences and witnesses. They also provide insights into why she joined the navy and why she continued to serve in spite of the severe hardships she endured during her twelve years of service.

Stark masterfully disentangles the myths and facts about women of the lower deck of warships. She also enlightens us as to why they chose this harsh life. Finally and perhaps most importantly, she illuminates the social context of these lower-class women and the limited roles open to them. Female Tars is an invaluable addition to any collection dealing with the Royal Navy, women at sea, women’s history, and life during the Age of Sail.

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### Paulina says

It's not exactly the most academic or well-written of books, but let's face it, taking any academic work as a stand-alone source of facts is bad practice. And the topic is pretty bad-ass so I'm giving it 3 stars here. Shout out to Mary Lacy and the lady known as William Brown.

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### Matthew J. says

I ended up reading some reviews of this book after I bought it, but before I read it, which made me nervous. In fact, I read a great many reviews that spoke of this as some kind of anti-man screed, or "...someone's angry gender studies dissertation..." I don't get that at all. I found Stark's writing very easy, the flow of her discussion logical, and her assessment of women, men, wealthy, and poor to be fair, nuanced, and well founded. While describing the horrors of life as a port prostitute, rented to an incoming vessel, she also goes to great lengths to explore the horrors suffered by the seamen they serviced. Life in England during the Age

of Sail was difficult generally, terribly difficult for the poor, and more terribly difficult for women. Over the course of the book, she explores the three main types of women who ended up on ships of the British Royal Navy (occasionally talking about women in the French Navy, as well). Prostitutes, wives, and cross-dressers. Each subject is interesting, and gives a deeper understanding of life during the Seventeenth, Eighteenth, and early Nineteenth Centuries (there are a few dips back into the late Middle Ages, too). It gives a very different view of the Age of Sale from what is typically portrayed in classic movies, or novels written in the late 1800s or early 1900s. And Stark goes to the source, to eyewitness accounts and records. Other negative reviews point to Stark concluding that cross-dressing women were all lesbians. I don't think that's at all what Stark is saying. I felt she made it clear not that they all were, but that some may very well have been, in spite of those reporting on the women trying to reassure their readers the women were heterosexual (so that it could all be passed off as a lark, and not an assault on 'proper behavior').
The latter part of the book is made up of excerpts and commentary from one Mary Lacy, aka William Chandler. This part was also quite interesting.
Several of the women discussed in this book could easily serve as the inspiration for novels and films. I would absolutely love to see a film featuring William Brown (birth name unknown), a black woman who served for at least a dozen years in the guise of a man, and may have even continued to serve after her sex was discovered (records are fuzzy).
I enjoyed this book thoroughly, and am baffled, frankly, by many of the negative reviews.

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### Rachel says

I gave this two stars only because it's an obscure topic and I couldn't find any other books on it, so the author deserves some credit for researching this topic. As an historian, she does a shoddy job. It reads like someone's angry gender studies dissertation that didn't pass. The author is outraged at the treatment of women, at the living conditions of sailors, the impressment of seamen, the quality of their rations... I really don't like to see historians being so outraged. Gentle dissapproval at the horrors of the past is fine, but at a certian point, I expect them to present history and leave the moralizing to the philosophers.

The title is also misleading as 2/3 of the book is about prostitutes and wives/girlfriends of sailors, not women disguised as men working aboard ship. The author describes 18th century prostitution as "horrifying," which is no doubt was, but conditions weren't very good for any poverty-stricken person of the era. Never for a moment does she consider that prostitution may not have been worse than being married off to a brutal man, slaving as a domestic, or doing exhausting manual labor. She just does not want to consider the facts within the context of the era. Corporal punishment aboard ship was not any different than corporal punishment dished out to petty lawbreakers on shore. Sailors' rations were generally better than what they could obtain on shore, even if they were sometimes spoiled, but they navy did not intentionally starve the men. Rations were big part of what drew men to enlist: the promise of three squares, plus grog, and meat every day - most would not see that kind of food on shore.

Basically the author bends history to suit her purposes. All women who dressed as men and went to sea were lesbians, because that's what she wants to believe. She has no evidence - writings about sexuality are extremely scarce in this era, except for pornography. It just suits her purposes to consider them all lesbians. She also contradicts herself - in some passages, she says women who were discovered on ships disguised as men were treated cruelly, sexually abused, and often raped. She bases that on a scanty passage in which a ship's journal notes that a sailor revealed to be a woman was given separate sleeping cabin so that the men didn't direspect her. It's a huge leap to go from "disrespect" which probably mean they would have sworn or told bawdy tales or undressed in front of her - to "rape." But in another section, she says they were treated

with kindness and often given the captain's berth and money to go ashore. Totally inconsistent.

There are some interesting snippets of journals of women who ran away to sea, and this book does contain more information about the topic than any other I could find, but it is so heavy-handed in its moralizing and extreme in its interpretation of history to suit a feminist agenda that it is not much use to anyone seriously interested in the history of women in the Age of Sail.

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### Unit of Raine says

Interesting comprehensive discussion on women & the British Navy. It really drives home the general & wide-spread improved living conditions for the general population.

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### Seraphina says

Extremely well researched, written, and cited. Reveals a great, great deal about the invisible women in the age of sail.

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### Martin Willoughby says

A clear, concise account of the women who served aboard Royal Navy vessels as women and, occasionally, men.

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### Viridian5 says

The writing is okay, but the rare look at a part of the Age of Sail not often talked about is often fascinating.

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### Kirsten says

The subject of women at sea is one of the areas of the Age of Sail that I find really fascinating. I already have David Cordingly's excellent *Women Sailors and Sailors' Women* (also published as *Seafaring Women*), and I've been wanting to read this one for a while. I actually found a copy by chance in a wee second-hand bookshop a few weeks ago, so I snapped it up at once!

In this book, Stark has chosen to focus her study on the women associated with the lower decks of the Royal Navy from the seventeenth to mid-nineteenth century, putting them into their wider social and economic historical context at the same time. The book is divided into four main sections: the first, on the prostitutes who frequented the lower decks when a ship was in port, and the seamen's wives who stayed on shore when their husbands were at sea. The second is concerned with the "wives of the lower deck" – the wives of warrant officers and ordinary sailors who accompanied their husbands to sea, living and working aboard ship, despite the fact that their presence was officially forbidden, and had no official place on the ship's

muster books. The third section deals with the women who disguised themselves as men in order to serve in ships, with the fourth dedicated to the autobiography of Mary Lacy, who, under the alias William Chandler, served for over ten years in the Royal Navy as a sailor and shipwright.

Unsurprisingly, owing to the relative obscurity of the topic, which itself derives from the patchy and mostly incidental evidence, this, like Cordingly's book, is a slim volume - just over 160 pages, with another twenty-odd pages of footnotes, so for the most part, if the reader finds themselves tantalised for more information, that's certainly not the author's fault. In fact, it's clear that some impressive research has gone into this book, and it's yielded a lot of great information. In particular, the first two chapters, on prostitutes and wives at sea, were extremely thorough in examining the available sources, and giving an idea of how these women lived and worked. And in the chapter on women in disguise, Stark does some impressive work at trying to separate fact from fiction in the much-sensationalised biographies of Hannah Snell and Mary Ann Talbot.

Yet, in some ways, I felt that Stark's book seemed to have a bit less meat on its bones than Cordingly's. Granted, the scope of the Cordingly book is greater (it covers a greater time period, the women associated with all ranks and socio-economic levels, and the Royal Navy is only one part of it), but even in the sections that both books have in common – particularly wives at sea – I felt there was more information in the Cordingly book than in this one.

Apart from that, this one contains some frustrating gaps by itself. One omission that I found particularly frustrating was that Stark opens her chapter on wives of the lower deck with a tantalising quote from Admiral Edward Pellew where he mentions women serving the guns with their husbands at the Battle of Algiers – but when she actually comes to talk about women in battle, she makes no mention of this. Since I would've loved to hear more about this evidence for some women taking a more active role in fighting, that was pretty annoying.

And this more or less sums up my relationship with this book, really. There's a lot of good, interesting stuff in it, but at the same time, there was quite a bit of faulty or missing analysis, which unfortunately kept this from being a completely satisfying study.

One of the main issues I had was Stark's assessment of the conditions that the ordinary Age of Sail sailor lived in. From the brutality of the press-gangs, to the terrible food, to the diseases and the dubious health care, the cramped, dangerous living conditions, the slow pay, and the draconian discipline… my God, it's hard to believe *anyone* could endure such horrors. Yet, awful as these living conditions sound to us today, they were hardly much worse than those a working-class man might have to endure on land. In fact, many of the things that Stark decries were actually benefits that drew men (and women) to the navy. (Yes, despite the rifeness of impressment, most sailors were still volunteers.) Okay, so, the food sounds practically inedible to us, but actual, proper, regular meals were still a big plus. Pay was generally bad and always in arrears, but there was also the lure of prize money. Discipline was mostly at the discretion of individual captains, but it was no worse than corporal punishment on land. And, despite the persistent stereotype of the drunken, incompetent ship's sawbones, naval surgeons were actually a pretty professional lot on the whole, and the health of the men of the Royal Navy was actually one of the crucial advantages it had over its rivals. Stark, I feel, has a tendency to view history through what an online acquaintance of mine once called "shit-tinted glasses", pointing out that they aren't necessarily more accurate than rose-tinted ones. And I feel that same point applies to this book.

The other big issue of interpretation I had was with the chapter on women disguised as men, where Stark comes to the conclusion that because they were obviously strong and athletic, and into the rough-and-tumble of navy life, with the grog-drinking and the tobacco-chewing and whatnot, they were obviously lesbians, or

persons who identified as men. Now, I have absolutely no doubt that the ranks of female tars, known and unknown, must have included gay women, or transgender people, who may have found that this life offered them an opportunity for expression that they wouldn't have found in civilian life. Certainly, Mary Lacy's autobiography suggests that she was genuinely attracted to other women. So, on the one hand, it was good to see a serious, thorough discussion of LGBT issues in history, particularly lesbianism and transsexuality, where historical sources are thin on the ground, to say the least. But at the same time, I thought that Stark pushes this almost to the point of stereotype. Because any woman who does hard physical labour and chews tobacco is *obviously* a butch lesbian, *amirite???* As I said, this must have been the case for some female tars, but I feel that Stark overstates this aspect, and understates other, socio-economic reasons why a woman might find it worth it, or be driven, to step outside gender conventions, don men's clothes and join the navy, beyond an almost off-hand concession of yeah, well, some of them *might* have been patriotic, too, I guess. Which, in the long run, seemed less than helpful in exploring what must, in reality, have been a broad, very broad, spectrum of individual motivations.

But even debatable interpretations are better than a complete lack of analysis, which is the main failing of the fourth chapter, about Mary Lacy's autobiography. Stark dedicates over forty pages out of 167 to this account – a fair bit of space! – but all she really does is recount Lacy's story, mostly through quotes. There's very little in the way of actual analysis. Lacy's story is fascinating, and I really want to read it in full now, but without any actual *discussion* of the content, honestly, it just felt like padding on an already short book. Almost like, "I've transcribed this whole thing by hand, and dammit, I'm gonna use it!!" Of what little analysis there is, the most convincing is her argument that Lacy's account was modified (by tacking on a happy, socially acceptable heterosexual ending) by her publisher. Beyond that… all there really is in the way of discussion is Stark's assertion that Lacy's autobiography is more reliable than the biographies of Snell and Talbot.

And, to be honest, I'm still not sure exactly *why* we should believe this. Certainly, the fact that Lacy's alias William Chandler actually appears on muster rolls when and where Lacy says she was (which is more than can be said for Talbot, at any rate) is a point in her favour. But as for the content itself, as Stark herself points out, we know that Lacy's own account seems to have been "modified" slightly by her publisher, as was the case with Snell and Talbot, so it's hardly an unadulterated account. In addition to that, I found at least one of the anecdotes quoted to be dubious at best. Basically, I want to believe that Lacy's autobiography is a reliable account of the life of a female sailor, but Stark simply doesn't give me enough reasons to. If there are any books or articles out there that deal more analytically with Lacy's autobiography, I'd love to read them.

So, in summary, then… mixed feelings, really. As I said, there is a lot of valuable material in this book, the result of some really solid research, and I am putting it on my permanent research pile, because of the good stuff. But on the other hand, I found some of Stark's analyses faulty, or just plain not there. And even with the good stuff, a lot of the time I felt that I'd already read it – and more – in Cordingly's book. This book is interesting, definitely, but at the end of the day, I think the Cordingly book just has more in it.

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