

Humour in Capt. Marryat's Works

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Captain Marryat's critics have long remarked on his use of humour in his numerous popular nautical novels. Louis Cazamian in a 1927 *History of English Literature* observes that "to the lively interest of his tale he (Marryat) adds a rich vein of humour" (284). Captain Taprell Dorling in his sketches of five outstanding British sea officers published in 1929, includes Frederick Marryat, "the most famous of naval novelists" (181), whose "rollicking fun and sense of the ludicrous went far towards popularising his books" (186). In a post-war reassessment of Marryat's naval career and literary output, dated 1953, Oliver Warner again emphasises that "what continues to make his (Marryat's) works memorable is their zest, fun, invention and overflowing power of characterisation" (178). These statements have somehow been taken for granted, no attempts having been actually made to examine the writer's use of humour.

It seems that the present study may well start with some commentary of a biographical nature, for humour can be defined as an intellectual and emotional attitude predisposing man to discern comical sides in people, situations, utterances, etc., releasing and stimulating wit (cf. Sierotwiński, 1986: 95). This kind of attitude seems to have characterised Marryat's whole life, from his boyhood through his naval service to his mature years as a popular writer. His daughter Florence recalls in the *Life and Letters of Captain Marryat* (1872) that he learned at school with great facility though he often forgot his tasks, and, "being of a genial temperament, he preferred play to lessons" (vol. I, 14). He was fond of practical jokes such as tying a sleeping schoolmate to a bed, or standing on his head with a book in his hand to learn his lessons more effectively. He also ran away from school three times or so with the intention of going to sea. On one of those occasions his father sent him back to school in a coach, but Frederick managed to slip

out of the vehicle, returned secretly home and used the money that he had got from his parent for the journey to take his younger brothers to the theatre.

Having joined the Royal Navy as a volunteer in 1806, Midshipman Marryat, aged 14, began a most exciting, adventurous and successful service that was to last 24 years. He first took part in the long war against Napoleonic France and her allies mainly in the Mediterranean, then fought in the Atlantic against the United States, and after that was engaged in the Burmese War in the Far East. He also pursued smugglers in the Channel as well as pirates and privateers in the high seas all over the world. The years of intense and perilous fighting did not deprive Marryat of his specific sense of humour. During a hot naval encounter in Almeria Bay in 1808, for example, he was stunned and left for dead among the bodies of his shipmates killed while boarding a large enemy privateer. A seaman who took the insensible Marryat for his corpse, slightly said of him: "Here is a young cock that has done crowing!", to which Marryat, who was slowly recovering consciousness, faintly replied: "You're a liar". Needless to say, this made the whole ship's company burst into hearty laughter. In his private log, fragmentarily quoted by Florence Marryat, the future novelist summed up his memories of the French campaign, recalling, among others, "the ludicrous situations which would occur in the extremest danger and create mirth when death was staring you in the face" (1872: 19-20). It was also during his service in the navy that Marryat became a skilful draughtsman and caricaturist. Between 1819-24 he co-operated with George Cruikshank who later illustrated the novels by Dickens, Thackeray and W. Harrison Ainsworth, and one effect of this collaboration was a series of caricatures issued as "The Progress of a Midshipman, or the Career of Master Blockhead", Marryat providing the drawings and subtitles which were then engraved by Cruikshank (cf. Meyerstein 1935: 285, Lloyd 1939:23-4, Gautier 1973: 411-422).

Frederick Marryat retired from the Royal Navy in 1830 in the rank of post captain to enter on the career of a magazine editor and man-of-letters. His private correspondence, partly revealed by Florence Marryat, shows that he preserved and continued to practise the witty sense of humour that had characterised him as a sailor. In a letter addressed to his mother before setting out for the Continent in 1835, he made a witty remark on the haste in which he left, demonstrating his predilection for linguistic puns which is often reflected in his novels: "Not one day was our departure postponed; with post horses and postillions, we posted, post-haste, to Brussels" (1872: I, 221). In the same letter he included a personal request cast in the form of a witty statement, consisting of three parts, the first two of which prove that the third part is true: "Is it possible to make V – a mem-

ber of the Horticultural? He is very anxious, and he deserves it; the personal knowledge is the only difficulty; but I know him, and I am part of you, and therefore you know him. Will that syllogism do?" (I, 224). On another occasion in 1837, Capt. Marryat wrote to a publisher arguing with him about their respective shares in the profits, and calling himself Sindbad the Sailor who is willing to throw off the Old Man of the Mountain clinging to his back. He concluded the letter saying that his idea of anticipated bliss in Paradise was grounded on the conviction that there are no publishers there: "That idea often supports me after an interview with one of your fraternity" (qtd. in Florence Marryat 1872: II, 76-77). Capt. Marryat's daughter also recalls one of the anecdotes involving her father and a celebrated friend of his, also an author. He had a very curious nose, bent in the middle from a fracture, which made somebody in the company observe: "C – G – is a capital fellow, a first-rate fellow, there's no denying that; but I can't get over his nose". The Captain's quick reply was: "I'm not surprised to hear you say so, considering there is no bridge to it" (I, 241). As we will see, noses constitute an important facial feature of his characters.

In 1832 Marryat bought the *Metropolitan Magazine* in which he began to serialise his novels as well as publish a miscellany of articles and other materials. Among the latter can be found three funny skits – respectively on a fashionable novel (1833), a book of travels (1834) and a romance (1835). They are cast in the form of a dialogue between a modern fop who is obliged to write in order to pay back his debts, and his worldly companion who advises him how to proceed. Some of the advice in the first case goes like this: "turn probability out of doors, (...) possibility out of the window"; add "patches of philosophy as unintelligible as possible because they strike readers with veneration for the author's talents"; draw "Decorous heroes and heroines" who "whatever their circumstances must never lose their caste"; "make the vices glorious"; use "flippancy (...) on the level of diction"; and the like (Frederick Marryat *Olla Podrida* 187-192). As for a successful book of travels, it can be produced without going "farther than the Lincoln's Inn Coffee House" by those authors "who have never put their foot into the Calais packet-boat" (201-211). *How to Write a Romance* satirises the Gothic genre by wittily pointing out its limitations and absurdities. Thus, its inseparable requisites are said to include "a castle perched so high up in the air, that the eagles even in their highest soar, appear but as wrens below"; "subterraneous passages, to which the sewers of London are a mere song"; "such a heroine – such a love – she has never seen her sweetheart, yet she is most devotedly attached, and has suffered more for his sake than any mortal could endure"; the hero who is both "a prince and a robber", and who is "here, there, and everywhe-

re. He fills all Europe with terror, admiration, and love"; "grand scenes, amazingly effective" set, for instance, in St. Peter's at Rome and featuring the Pope and a band of robbers disguised as priests; and a number of secrets that are never divulged at all (215-7).

We shall add that in 1841 *Fraser's Magazine* criticised Marryat for condescending to publish one of his novels in a weekly newspaper (the *Era*), which provoked him to send in an ingenious reply: "You appear to set up a standard of precedence and rank in literature, founded upon the rarity or frequency of an author's appearing before the public, (...). Now, although it is a fact that the larger and nobler animals of creation produce but slowly, while the lesser, such as rabbits, rats and mice, are remarkable for their fecundity, I do not think that the comparison will hold good as to the breeding of brains" (qtd. in Florence Marryat 1872: II, 102-103).

Marryat's eccentricity and sense of humour accompanied him in the last phase of his life when he left London for his small manor house and estate at Langham in Norfolk. He had 16 clocks installed in the house which were made to strike simultaneously while part of the garden was converted into the shape of a poop (i.e. the raised part at the back end of a sailing ship), so that he could imagine himself on board of a real vessel. The Captain called his favourite bull Ben Brace after the hero of a sea novel by his friend Captain Frederick Chamier. He also rode a skittish pony called Dumpling. His love for children and of children's parties became legendary; he romped with them and was a great favourite with his own (he had 11 of his own progeny) as well as with those of his intimate literary friends such as Dickens and Harrison Ainsworth.

Turning to Marryat's novels in search of humour, we must emphasise two points. One is that they abound in comical scenes of all kinds, and the other that we can observe many different shades of humour. These are determined by the observer's (author's) attitude to the object(s) that become(s) the butt of his ridicule, ranging from unconcerned general mirth, through kind-hearted forbearance and even mawkish leniency, to malicious irony, sneer and heavy sarcasm (cf. Sierotwiński 1986: 95). The representation of particular phenomena of life by magnifying their inner antagonisms and disproportions in order to evoke comical effect, is realised in satire which gives expression to the author's critical attitude towards those realities (cf. Głowiński et al. 1962: 412-413). Shipley also distinguishes between the genial and affirmative forms of humour on the one hand, and satire, mockery and ridicule on the other. He claims that humour is "Now widely used as a generic term for everything that appeals to man's disposition toward comic laughter" (1970: 150). The varieties of humour in Marryat's no-

vels have been noticed by critics; Harold Child, for example, asserts that in his early work there are "touches here and there of the lower humour of Smollett", though "In the deft delineation of oddity of character he is worthy of mention with Sterne or with Dickens" (1915: 250-251). Ernest Baker in his review of Marryat's best titles passes judgements like "a mixture of broad fun and naval history", "a tale enlivened with overmuch farce and horseplay", "the outward and visible traits of Smollett's burlesque", "grotesques in the Smollett fashion", or "extravagances trying at Sterne's humour" (1936: 100-107). These are all interesting assumptions that need to be proved.

The analysis of Marryat's characters and plots reveals numerous parallels with the picaresque kind. His young heroes often play the role of adventurers and rogues who must keep their wits at the ready in order to survive in the oppressive world of a man-of-war which they so recklessly enter. The writer relishes ingenious jokes played by the ship's company on greenhorn reefers (i.e. inexperienced midshipmen) on their first appearing on board. Peter Simple in the novel under the same title, who is bursting with pride on such an occasion, immediately appeals to the purser's steward for a cocked hat and dirk. He is sent to look for Cheeks, the marine who is apparently in charge of the store-room. He goes everywhere about the ship inquiring for Cheeks and is even sent up the mast where the marine is said to be standing sentry over the wind so that it does not change. Of course, his search proves futile, for Cheeks is the prototype of Mr. Nobody on board of a warship; he is a widow's man in other words, an imaginary seaman borne on the ship's books and receiving pay and prize money which are appropriated to Greenwich Hospital for disabled ex-servicemen. On many other occasions Marryat's teenage heroes are taught more painful lessons before they eventually master all tricks of the sailor's trade. In the ordinary course of things, they begin to play them on the new recruits, working in some "improvements" and inventing more refined varieties. Tricks, pranks, jokes of a practical kind and life at the expense of others are elements of the picaresque emphasised by Harry Sieber in his study of the genre (cf. Sieber 1977: 20-21). Marryat's young heroes follow this pattern on salt water (as Frank Mildmay or Percival Keene), fresh water (as Jacob Faithful and Poor Jack), and on dry ground alike (as Japhet and Joseph Rushbrook).

Sometimes they accompany a master, in which case the author may be tempted to change their roles with the aim of provoking extra laughter. This happens in *Peter Simple* when Chucks, the servant, takes over the role of "His Lordship" after the sudden death of his aristocratic employer during a sea voyage. In *The Three Cutters*, the smuggler captain Jack Pickersgill exchanges his vessel for the

yacht of Lord B. who, in his eagerness to assist the Revenue cutter, attempts to take possession of the smuggler. "My Lord" finds himself sent ashore in a boat while Pickersgill steps into his shoes – not only commandeering his yacht for a few days, but also changing into his clothes, making free with his wine and eatables, and even enjoying the company of Lord B.'s lady passengers (who are not harmed in the least as the smuggler proves every inch of a gentleman). The device of such an exchange had been practised in the picaresque genre long before Marryat. In the first English tale of this kind published by Thomas Nashe in 1594, the roguish hero Jack Wilton and his aristocratic master change their roles during a tour of adventures through Italy.

Sometimes the Captain's use of humour is of a more genial kind evocative of Fielding's version of the picaresque – the famous "comic epic poem in prose" (cf. the author's Preface to *Joseph Andrews*). Domine Dobiensis in *Jacob Faithful* who acts as the title hero's pedagogue, is an excellent scholar, a master of Latin and Greek, benevolent, generous and trustful, and therefore easily and often let down by the selfish and interested world (like his great predecessor Parson Abraham Adams). Marryat's situational humour also runs parallel to that of Henry Fielding, providing comicality of a farcical, that is lower type, often using play on words. In *Newton Forster*, for instance, the identification of the fair sex with sailing ships, typical of sailors, leads to some funny scenes of confusion in a conversation carried on in the mixed company of a few seafaring men and land-dwellers:

"Good morning, Mr. Forster, how is your good lady?"

"She's safe moored at last", interrupted Mr. Hilton.

"Who?" demanded the curate, with surprise.

"Why, the sloop to be sure".

"Oh! I thought you meant the lady – Ha, ha, ha!"

(...)

"take a chair; it's all covered with dust! but that Betsy is such an idle slut!"

"Newton handles her, as well as any man going", observed Hilton.

"Newton!" screamed the lady, turning to her son, with an angry inquiring look – "Newton handles Betsy!" continued she, turning round to Hilton.

"Betsy! no; the sloop I meant, ma'am" (*Newton Forster* 41).

The readers of *Joseph Andrews* will remember at this point the great comic scene of an interview in Book II, chapter 14, between Parson Adams and Parson Trulliber, in which the former visits his "brother in the parish" to ask him for a loan of money, and is taken by the latter – at the supposition of his wife – for a dealer in bacon who has come to buy his hogs. The result of this misunderstan-

ding is that Parson Adams is dragged, willy-nilly, into the hogs-sty where an unruly beast throws him in the mire.

More often than Fielding, however, Captain Marryat's master of humour appears to have been Tobias Smollett. He is mentioned by name in the text of *Snarleyyow or the Dog Fiend* when the author recollects severities of the naval service, and especially tyranny of the officers and oppression of their subordinates (ch. III, 18). It does not seem to be a coincidence that one of the characters in this novel bears the rare first name Obadiah, and that a number of other seafaring folks are caricatures in the manner of Smollett's ex-soldier Obadiah Lismahago (who is made to resemble a grasshopper), and that immortal figure of fun – the retired Commodore Hawser Trunnion who talks and behaves as if he still were on board of his vessel. Consequently, Lieutenant Cornelius Vanslyperken in Marryat's novel appears to be:

(...) a tall, meagre-looking personage, with very narrow shoulders and very small head. Perfectly straight up and down, protruding in no part, he reminded you of some parish pump, with a great knob at its top. His face was gaunt, nose and chin showing an affection for each other, and evidently lamenting the gulf between them which prevented their meeting. Both appeared to have fretted themselves to the utmost degree of tenuity from disappointment in love: as for the nose, it had a pearly round tear hanging at its tip, as if it wept (*Snarleyyow* 10).

Smallbones, his steward resembles in turn –

(...) a ghost; a thin, shambling personage, apparently about twenty years old – a pale, cadaverous face, high cheek-bones, goggle eyes, with lank hair very thinly sown upon a head, which, like bad soil, would return but a scanty harvest. He looked like Famine's eldest son just arriving to years of discretion. (...) his ears were very large, and the rims of them red with cold, and his neck was so immeasurably long and thin, that his head appeared to topple for want of support (*ibidem* 12).

To complement the crew of His Majesty's cutter *Yungfrau*, who are distorted into monstrous caricatures, here is the ship's boatswain, one Jemmy Ducks:

He was indeed a very singular variety of human discrepancy as to form: he was handsome in face, with a manly countenance, fierce whiskers and long pigtail, which on him appeared more than unusually long, as it descended to within a foot of the deck. (...) But for some reason, some accident, it is supposed, in his infancy, his legs had never grown in length since he was three years old: they were stout as well as his body, but not more than eighteen inches from the hip to the heel; and he consequently waddled about a very ridiculous figure, for he was like a man *ra-zeed* or cut down (*ibidem* 26).

Marryat's other novels feature several other nautical characters dehumanised in a similar way: the captain of a flagship at Gibraltar in *Frank Mildmay* looks like "a trotting elephant" (91), those who look in the face of the commander of

the *Windsor Castle* in *Newton Forster* are immediately struck with his likeness to “a bull-dog” (322), while the first lieutenant of H. M. frigate *Unicorn* in *The Pirate* resembles “the crane”(58).

Another humorous device amply used by Captain Marryat after Smollett’s fashion is language. His characters, like Commodore Hawser Trunnion, use sailors’ jargon away from its natural context, which inevitably produces the desired comic effect. Thus, Captain Turnbull complains that his lady-like wife has lumbered their drawing-room with expensive furniture and ornaments to such an extent that:

One might as well be steering through an ice floe as to come to anchor here without running foul of something. It is hard a port or hard a starboard every minute; and if your coat-tail jibes (i.e. to put up sails in the direction of wind – MB), away goes something, and whatever it is that smashes, Mrs. T. always swears it was the most valuable thing in the room (*Jacob Faithful* 129).

Marryat’s sailors always describe women in terms of sailing craft, distinguishing details such as a “pretty figure-head” and “neat rigging” for the head and hair, “swelling bows” for the breast, “devilish well-rounded counter” for the buttocks, and the like (*ibidem* 103). Even on his death-bed, Capt. Turnbull speaks of “tripping his anchor” and sailing for the “moorings” laid down for him in heaven (*ibidem* 367). For his own part, Captain Marryat as the narrator uses nautical terms to comment on the progress of his narrative. In *Newton Forster* he compares the chapters of the novel to “a convoy of vessels” which he must “see safely into port”. His problem as the “commanding officer” is that some of the vessels in this convoy lag behind the rest so that he must “tow” them, beating against the “foul wind” of all kinds of difficulties (166, 287).

Commenting on the use of language for humorous purposes, we must also deal with puns that once again bring to mind the author of *Humphry Clinker* who employed the comic device of mis-spellings and malapropisms that has “a genuinely creative gusto in it”, contributing to make Smollett’s characters round and convincing (cf. Allen 1978: 75). Marryat’s *Jacob Faithful* and his Quixotic preceptor, Domine Dobiensis, are both fond of puns, differing as they are in nature and quality. The latter “loved a pun, whether it was let off in English, Greek, or Latin. The last two were made by nobody but himself, and not being understood, were of course relished by himself alone. But his love of a pun was a serious attachment: he loved it with a solemn affection – with him it was no laughing matter” (*Jacob Faithful* 22). The Domine refers to Jacob as “My little navicator” (it must be remembered that Jacob was born and brought up on a Thames boat), calling him “one of Father Thames’ cast-up wrecks, Fluviorum rex Eridanus”,

and wittily advising him "To thy studies, be thyself – that is, be Faithful" (24). However little Jack can understand of his master's refined puns, he is ready to make up his own. Thus, when the Domine tells him to spell the word *c-a-t*, the boy finds it to be "the pitch-pipe to *cat-head*" and answers accordingly. In the same way *c-a-p* spells *capstern*, which provokes the pedagogue to make the following comment:

"Indeed, Jacob, thy *stern* as well as thy *head*, are in danger, and I suppose then *w-i-n-d* spells *windlass*, does it not?"

"Yes, sir", replied I, pleased to find that he agreed with me.

"Upon the same principle, what does *r-a-t* spell?"

"*Rat*, sir", replied I.

"Nay, Jacob, *r-a-t* must spell *rattan*, and as thou hast missed thine own mode of spelling, thou shalt not miss the cane" (*Jacob Faithful* 32).

One of the characters in the above-mentioned novel by Tobias Smollett is a servant maid Winifred Jenkins who marries the ostler-boy Humphry Clinker, recognised in the end as a gentleman's son. Winifred now feels "removed to a higher spear", and she writes to a former fellow servant to inform her that "Provin-dich hath bin pleased to make great halteration in the pasture of our affairs. We were yesterday three kiple chined, by the grease of God, in the holy bonds of mattermoney, and I now subscribe myself Loyd at your service" (*Humphry Clinker* 394-5). Now, in Capt. Marryat's novel there is a similar fashionable would-be lady who works hard at gentility, and whose misunderstanding of French serves as a self-exposure of her pretension, vanity and plebeian descent. The woman in question is Captain Turnbull's wife in *Jacob Faithful* who gives a splendid party in order to impress her acquaintances. The menu is in French and among the guests is a distinguished French couple, Monsieur and Madame de Tagliabue. The following are a few samples of Mrs. Turnbull's comic blunders at the party:

"Madame, do you soup? Or do you fish?"

"Merci, no soup – *poisson*". (i.e. fish – MB)

"Don't be afraid, madame; we've a French cook; you won't be *poisoned* here", replied Mrs. Turnbull, rather annoyed.

(...)

"Let me see – hoh! Bidet du poms. Madame, will you eat some *bidet du poms*?"

"Comment, madame, je ne vous comprends pas – "

"Ve"

"Monsieur Tagliabue, expliquez donc"; said the foreign lady, red as a quarter of beef.

"Permettez", said Monsieur, looking at the card. "Ah c'est impossible, ma chère", continued he

laughing. "Madame Turnbull se trompoit, elle voudrait dire *Beignets de pommes*". (i.e. apple cakes – MB) (*Jacob Faithful* 133-135)

Another variety of humour that we can find in Captain Marryat's novels appears to be of Sterne's brand. Indeed, following Shipley's discrimination between humour and wit, this variety deserves the latter label as more intellectual and less emotional than the former, and more likely to evoke a smile than to provoke laughter (cf. 151). The present analysis consequently focuses on Marryat's portraits of priggish eccentrics who display undue attachment to different trifling details. The discussed writer actually did not have to resort to exaggeration in presenting his nautical characters as "the ways of sea-going folk are notoriously eccentric" anyway (Lloyd 1939: 254). It is striking that his young heroes often have philosophic fathers and prosaic silly mothers, and that they themselves manifest propensity for mental speculation. Jacob's father is thus "a perfect philosopher" never parting with his pipe and elaborating his favourite "apophthegms" (*Jacob Faithful* 3). He helps to usher his son into the world, assisting his wife at childbirth, and then performs the baptismal rites by crossing him on the forehead with the end of his pipe and calling him Jacob. The parent of Newton Forster is another "eccentric person, one of those who had narrowly escaped being clever; but there was an obliquity in his mind which would not admit of lucid order and arrangement" (*Newton Forster* 18). At this point parallels with Walter Shandy become evident. Readers of Sterne's novel will remember irony with which Tristram described his own father as "a philosopher in grain, speculative and very systematical (...) irresistible, both in his orations and disputations; (...) whether he was on the weak or strong side of the question, (...) And yet, 'tis strange he had never read (...) the ancients; (...) nor the moderns; - and what is more astonishing, he had never in his whole life the least light or spark of subtlety struck into his mind" (*Tristram Shandy* 38). There are more humorous, or rather witty parallels to come for Mr. Nicholas Forster christens his son Newton "out of respect for the great Sir Isaac" (*Newton Forster* 29). The wittiest father, however, in Capt. Marryat's novels appears to be Mr. Nicodemus Easy who is genuinely obsessed with names in the truly Shandean manner. When his ignorant wife suggests the name Robert for their son, she is rebuked by her husband for not looking to consequences:

"You forget the county in which we are residing, the downs covered with sheep".

"Why, Mr. Easy, what can sheep have to do with a Christian name?"

"There it is; (...) My dear, they have a great deal to do with the name of Bob. I will appeal to any farmer in the county, if ninety-nine shepherds' dogs out of one hundred are not called Bob. Now observe, your child is out of doors somewhere in the fields or plantations; you want and call him. Instead of your child, what do you find? Why, a dozen curs at least, who come running

up to you, all answering to the name of Bob, and wagging their stumps of tails" (*Midshipman Easy* 11).

The son is eventually christened John which is Biblical and royal, but most important of all it brings up the association with the "honest and witty Jack Falstaff" (12). It is interesting to refer at this point to Boatswain Chucks in *Peter Simple* who theorises on proper names. According to him, one-syllable names like Bess, Poll or Sue can be good only for some port girls, but they would degrade a true lady (like Seraphina). The same is true of family names: in good society one can hardly come across such names as Potts, Bell or Smith – indeed, one "seldom bowed, sir, to anything under three syllables" (like Fortesque, Fitzgerald or Fitzherbert). Chucks would not be a true seaman if his theory did not include the names of sailing vessels. Thus, all petty craft such as gun-brigs bear nothing but low, common names such as Badger, Pincher, Thrasher, whereas "all our dashing, saucy frigates have names as long as the main-top bowling, and hard enough to break your jaw – such as Melpomeny, Terpischory, Arethusy, Bacchanty – fine flourishers, as long as their pennants which dip alongside in a calm" (*Peter Simple* 126).

To come back to Mr. Nicodemus Easy, some of his other obsessions include craniology and phrenology. He actually dies by phrenology, his head squeezed in the machine of his own invention designed for the study of the shape of the human head as a way of determining one's character and abilities. His son Jack, a pluming philosopher known as "Liberty Jack", gives the most absurd reasons of all Marryat's heroes for going to sea. Finding the whole earth "so nefariously divided among the few", he hopes to find upon the ocean an ideal environment where "natural equality and the rights of man" are not abused (*Midshipman Easy* 42). The young man consequently gives up school which he detests for the above reasons, and goes to sea to propagate his opinions. There are many comic situations in which he gets entangled on board of the *Harpy*, for example, when he argues the point of equality with the sloop's first lieutenant who flies into a fury. Obviously, service in the Royal Navy painfully cures Jack of his nonsensical conceptions, for nowhere are the liberties of individual abused as completely and flagrantly as on board of a man-of-war. One more witty scrape involving the title hero is the famous duel by trigonometry worked out by the gunner of the *Harpy*. Convinced that gunnery is a strict mathematical science, he decides that the duel between Jack and his two adversaries, Boatswain Biggs and the purser's steward Easthupp, can only be fought upon the principle of an equilateral triangle, in which each of the three combatants has his shot at one, and at the same time receives the fire of another. The outcome of this ridiculous pistol duel is

that the boatswain loses his best upper double teeth plus the quid of tobacco that he was chewing, the purser's steward has the former's bullet "passed clean through his seat of honour" while Jack himself gets off safe and sound (cf. *Midshipman Easy* ch. XVII).

As far as the characters' appearance is concerned, Marryat seems to have imbibed Shandean obsession with noses. The owner of the wittiest in all his novels is the Domine:

(...) his predominant feature was his nose, which, large as were the others, bore them down into insignificance. It was a prodigy – a ridicule; but he consoled himself – Ovid was called Naso. It was not an aquiline nose, nor was it an aquiline nose reversed. It was not a nose snubbed at the extremity, gross, heavy, or carbuncled, or fluting. In all its magnitude of proportions, it was an intellectual nose. It was thin, horny, transparent, and sonorous. Its snuffle was consequential, and its sneeze oracular. The very sight of it was impressive; its sound, when blown in the school-hours, was ominous. But the scholars loved the nose for the warning which it gave: like the rattle of the dreaded snake; (...) (*Jacob Faithful* 22-3).

Capt. Marryat even makes a feeble attempt at grasping Sterne's specific sense of humour manifest in his refined and allusive indecency. The hero of *Midshipman Easy* is thus nursed by a young country-girl named Sarah, handsome and healthy-looking, but naive and apparently not over wise, who admits to having "had a misfortune" – "a very little one", as she explains, "very small indeed, and (it) died soon after it was born" (15). Generally speaking, however, the discussed author is too reticent about sexual conduct to develop this comic potential any further.

There is finally Marryat, the ingenious and digressive narrator affording some more parallels with the method of Laurence Sterne who treated his masterpiece as a kind of witty intellectual adventure, in the course of which he could recreate his own mentality through countless digressions. As Walter Allen puts it, the author of *Tristram Shandy* "is constantly amused at the wayward behaviour of his own mind in the act of remembering, and constantly exploiting this waywardness for two ends: comedy and the deliberate intention of shocking the reader" (1978: 77-78). Frederick Marryat adopts such an attitude and tone in some of his novels. In *Newton Forster* he claims that "it is the nature of man to digress" and that "This is a world of digression", hoping that "my digressions in this work are as agreeable to my readers, as my digressions in life have been agreeable to myself" (236-7). A few chapters later the writer ingeniously digresses on the incompatibility of fat and ambition. He complains that he has now grown old and fat (in reality he had just turned forty years of age), and finds something in fat which chokes and destroys ambition. The following exempla are meant to support his hypothesis: "Caesar was a spare man; Buonaparte was thin, as long as he clim-

bed the ladder; Nelson was a shadow. The Duke of Wellington has not sufficient fat in his composition to grease his own Wellington-boots" (*Newton Forster* 287). In another novel Marryat spots an ant in his cabin, which makes him think of his grandmother who used to feed ants with bread and butter, he then recollects her funeral and an old family vault which was full of water on that occasion. This leads him to his uncle's post-mortem hydrophobia and a new vault dug on the top of a hill far from the river, then to his fair cousin's burial and the uncle's witty remark: "There, she will lie as dry as possible till the end of time". The author next relates an odd dream in which he witnesses his own death in action, funeral service and the body's descent into the depth of the ocean where it is devoured by sharks. All this is followed by some philosophic reflections on Young's *Night Thoughts* and the nature of change, illustrated by the recollection of a wether sheep taken on board of a frigate and tamed to such an extent that it began to chew tobacco and drink grog (cf. *The King's Own* ch. XXXVII).

Marryat also enjoys demonstrating in a humorous way his superior position in the novel as an omnipotent narrator whose overall design may thwart the reader's expectations. The readers of *Tristram Shandy* will remember the conversation by the fireplace between Walter Shandy and Toby, interrupted by a noise upstairs. Walter inquires about it, but his brother is not allowed to answer, the narrator informing the reader there are other important considerations to deal with. A similar thing happens in *Newton Forster* when the title hero is attacked by two ruffians who stretch him down quite senseless on the ground. Marryat the narrator wittily plays on the reader's apprehension for the hero:

Now, my readers may probably feel some little distress at the misfortune of Newton, and have some slight degree of curiosity to know the grounds of this severe treatment. I, on the contrary, am never more pleased than when I find my principal character in a state of abeyance, and leave him so with the greatest indifference, because it suits my convenience. I also have now an opportunity of returning to Mrs. Forster, or any other of the parties who act a subordinate part in my narrative; and, as Newton is down on the ground, and *hors de combat*, why, there let him lie – until I want him again (*Newton Forster* 62-3).

Commenting on Captain Marryat's characters, David Hannay points to the blending of fun and kindness, true humour and sympathy in them (cf. Hannay 1889: 92-93). This observation directs the present analysis towards what was to become known as the Dickensian variety of humour whose peculiarity was the mixture of comicality and tragic nature of a character, scene or situation, resulting in the synthesis of the comic and of the sublime (cf. also Janion 1987: 9-10). The examination of Frederick Marryat's heroes shows that he was able to offer valuable inspiration in this field to Charles Dickens. In the first chapter of *Jacob*

Faithful, the juvenile hero loses both parents in tragic circumstances, he is aged only eleven and becomes a complete orphan; consequently, the proprietor of the lighter (a kind of a boat) in which his parents sailed, one Mr. Drummond, becomes anxious about the boy's fate and brings him to his own house. The Drummonds are determined to help him somehow, though Jack apparently takes the whole situation "coolly"; he repeats a few of his philosophic father's apophthegms, which have been deeply impressed upon his childish memory, without realising their meaning or application to his present situation:

"Have you any friends, my poor boy?" inquired the lady.

"No".

"What! no relations on shore?"

"I never was on shore before in my life".

"Do you know that you are a destitute orphan?"

"What's that?"

"That you have no father or mother", said the little girl.

"Well", replied I, in my father's words, having no answer more appropriate, "*it's no use crying; what's done can't be helped*".

"But what do you intend to do now?" inquired the proprietor, looking hard at me after my previous answer.

"Don't know, I'm sure. *Take it coolly*", replied I, whimpering.

"What a very odd child!" observed the lady. "Is he aware of the extent of his misfortune?"

"*Better luck next time*, missus", replied I, wiping my eyes with the back of my hand. (*Jacob Faithful* 12-3).

In the life story of Boatswain Chucks in *Peter Simple*, humour alternates with melodrama and pathos. He is born a poor man and serves as a ship's boy – "clouded here, kicked there, damned by one, and sent to hell by another" (96). It is no wonder that when his master suddenly dies on board of a Maltese xebeque, the boy puts on his lordship's midshipman's uniform and disembarks at Gibraltar as his lordship himself. He first wants to play the role only temporarily, but soon finds his new situation very agreeable. The sham continues for some time in Portsmouth and London, leading to a number of funny scenes, the boy alternately enjoying his rare moments of happiness and suffering from the pangs of conscience. Of course, he is eventually detected as an impostor and drafted into a man-of-war. His "longing to be a gentleman" (100) never forsakes him in his capacity as a boatswain, and he has a passionate love affair with a proud Spanish donna during the ship's stop in the port of Valencia. This time the lady's family take him for a person of considerable rank, and Boatswain Chucks is not strong-willed enough to open their eyes to his actual condition and thus wreck his happiness. As in the previous case, he is exposed by the ship's officers who take this

opportunity to have a good laugh at his expense. They actually crush him more than he deserves so that he even wants to take his life. In the conclusion of this tragi-comical story, William Chucks assumes the command of a boat in the cutting-out raid on a privateer brig near the coast of Denmark. Approaching the enemy, he discovers he has taken away by mistake – in the dusk of the preparation – the captain's jacket. He wants to take it off out of respect for his captain, but the first lieutenant jokes that he should wear it to make a good aim for the enemy (due to a pair of shining epaulettes). The boatswain is very pleased to stand the risk for the sake of being considered an officer and a gentleman, and indeed is soon shot through the body "in his borrowed plumes". Badly wounded and with little chance of surviving, he refuses to be carried back to his frigate, saying: "Why, have I not fallen dressed like an officer and a gentleman?" said he, referring to the captain's jacket and epaulettes. "I'd sooner die now with this dress on, than recover to put on the boatswain's uniform. I feel quite happy" (*Peter Simple* 258).

Later in the same novel, the narrator who is Midshipman Peter Simple relates the circumstances of captain Kearney's death on the North American station. Known to be a notorious bouncer (joker and liar) and indigent officer at the same time – one who had nothing except his pay, Capt. Kearney dictates on his deathbed his last will to Peter, in which he bequeaths to his relatives and subordinates non-existent estates and valuables. "It was laughable", the midshipman recalls, "yet I could not laugh: there was a melancholy feeling at such a specimen of insanity, which prevented me" (286).

In one of his few land novels, Captain Marryat has a poor secondary character who is a travelling tinker turned philosopher. His name is Augustus Spikeman and he considers himself "in the most enviable situation" as being "the nearest thing to a perfect gentleman" (*Joseph Rushbrook, or the Poacher* 174). There is, indeed, something funny, sentimental and pathetic in the Dickensian way, in the story of his life and different occupations as well as in his argumentation that a man who is not his own master, has not actually got the indispensables that must complete a true gentleman. In this light, the prime minister of Great Britain can not be considered a gentleman at least until he continues to hold his office. The tinker's grindstone, in the same light, provides such an indispensable: "I know no trade where you can gain so much with so little capital and so little labour. Then, I am not controlled by any living being; I have my liberty and independence (the sine qua non of a perfect gentleman – MB); I go where I please, stop where I please, work when I please, and idle when I please" (*Joseph Rushbrook* 174-5).

Sometimes Capt. Marryat intersperses his humour with a social component, antedating Dickens's method in *Pickwick Papers* which is both a comedy and social satire on the English society and its institutions (a good example is the mayoralty election at Eatanswill). In Marryat's *King's Own* there is an officer who takes advantage – in a smart and witty, but at the same time unfair way – of his command to grab naval funds for private use: “The name by which he had christened his domicile was probably given as a sort of salve to his conscience. He called it the ‘Ship’; and when he signed his name to the expense books of the different warrant officers, without specifying the exact use to which the materials were applied, the larger proportions were invariably expended, by the general term, for ‘Ship’s use’” (270).

In several other works, the author shows how ignorant men who are fit for no sensible trade or profession of responsibility, make a quick career in the navy owing to family connections and bribery. One of such anti-heroes is Jack Little-brain (!), a fool of distinguished family sent to sea under the protection of his uncle, Admiral Sir Teophilus Blazers. Jack makes a fool of himself on board of the Admiral's flagship lying at Malta, while his sponsor promises his family in a letter that it should be “very easy to get over the examination necessary to qualify him for lieutenant, as a turkey and a dozen of brown stout sent in the boat with him on the passing day, as a present to each of the passing captains, would pass him, even if he were as incompetent as a camel to pass through the eye of a needle” (*S.W. and by W.* 3/4 *W.* 226).

In the conclusion of the article we must emphasise that humour played a vital part both in Captain Marryat's life and work. The author used it in his novels on different planes such as characterisation, plot, language and narrative techniques as well as depicted a number of its qualitative varieties. The latter ones include comicality of the lower type with elements of farce and caricature characteristic of the picaresque genre, next, the more ambitious and intellectually demanding kind of wit immortalised by Laurence Sterne, and finally the mingling of humour with melodrama, sympathy and pathos. Perhaps Frederick Marryat's greatest achievement as a humorist was the discovery of the tragi-comical potential that points to the whims and inconsistencies inherent in human nature, making its presentation both more complex and complete.

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Humor w powieściach kapitana Marryata

Artykuł podejmuje temat humoru w życiu i jego zastosowanie w powieściach kapitana Marryata. Analiza wykazuje kilka wyraźnych odmian humoru w jego tekstach, poczynając od niższego rzędu pikareski z tendencją do farsy i karykatury, poprzez bardziej intelektualną odmianę bliską 18-wiecznej koncepcji dowcipu, do wersji tragicomicznej będącej połączeniem humoru ze współczuciem i patosem.