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1671

## Description of a Great Sea-Storm

"Sheelah"

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# Early Visions of Florida

Poetry • Stories • Chronicles from an American Borderland

## “Sheelah,” “Description of a Great Sea-Storm”

Posted on [February 24, 2015](#)



— (Courtesy, U California Santa Barbara, Broadside Ballad Archive)

“A Description of a Great Sea-Storm” (1671) describes a crew caught in a hurricane off the coast of Florida from a survivor’s point of view. Little is known about this two-column broadside, other than the time and place of publication. Sea narratives were not few and far between, and the theme of deliverance figures prominently in the literature. The author (“Sheelah”) expresses some sarcasm, and appears to be versed in the classics as well as the language of the local pub. The use of prayer, for example, suggests the trope of providence which pervades the literature, and the author wittily mentions that “the sea could do what no church ever could — make sea-men pray.”

Edited by Michael Sadler, University of South Florida St. Petersburg

### Further Reading

Sievers, Julie. "Drowned Pens and Shaking Hands: Sea Providence Narratives in Seventeenth-Century New England." *The William & Mary Quarterly*. Third Series, 63:4 (Oct. 2006): 743-76.

Wharton, Donald P. (ed.). *In the Trough of the Sea: Selected American Sea-Deliverance Narratives*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1980.

[Anonymous]. "A Description of a Great Sea-Storm, that Happened to Some Ships in the Gulph of Florida, in September Last; Drawn up by one of the Company, and sent to his Friend at London." London: Printed by Thomas Milbourn, for Dorman Newman, at the King's Armes in the Poultry, 1671.

### The Preface.

The Blustering Winds are husht into a Calme;

No air stirs now, but what my Muse Embalmd,

Breaths forth to thee, dear Friend; Heaven smiles upon

My Paper, and the Sea turns Helicon;<sup>[1]</sup>

The Mermaids Muses all, the Sea-Nymphs, bring

Aid to my Genius, whilst to thee I sing

Of Storms, Gusts, Tempests, if compar'd to these,

Bermoodus Winds are but a Gentle Breez;

And to express them fully, I am faine

To raise in the Verse a kind of Hurrycane.

### The Storme.

Nothing but Air and Water is in sight;

(I am no Poet here, since Truth I wright.)

When Eolus<sup>[2]</sup> with his Iron whistle Rouzes

The blustering breathings from their Airy houses,

Which like to Libertines let loose, will know

No Law to guide them, but begin to blow

The Sea to swell her teaming Womb, brings forth

Wave after wave, and each of greater birth:

Waves grow to Surges, Surges Billowes turn;

The Ocean is all Timpany, the Urn

Of water is a brimmer; Neptune drinks

So full a Cup it over-runs the brinks.

To Amphetrites<sup>[3]</sup> Health, the proud waves dash

At Heaven as though its Cloudy Face twould wash:

Or sure the lower Water now was bent

To mix with that above the Firmament;

Or the cold Element did go about

To put the Element of Fire out.

Our Ship now under water seems to sayle

Like to a drowned Tost in John Cooks<sup>[4]</sup> Ale

The Sea rould up in Mountains: O! tis such

Your Cottisall-Hills<sup>[5]</sup> a Wart, ift be so much,

Which fall again into such hollow Vales

I thought I'de crost the Sea by Land ore Wales;

And then to add Confusion to the Seas,

The Sayers speak such Babel words as these:

Hale in maine Bowlin, Mizen tack aboard;

A Language, like a Storm, to be abhorrd:

I know no which was loudest, their rude Tongues,

Or the Big Winds with her whole Cards of lungs.

So hideous was the Noise that one might well

Fancy himself to be with Souls in Hell;

But that the Torments differ, those Souls are

With Fire punisht we with Water here.

Our Helme that should our Swimming-Colledge sway,

We lasht it up, lest it should run away.[\[6\]](#)

Have you a Hedge seen hung with Beggars Fleeces?

So hung our tattered Mainsaile down in pieces.

Our Tackling crackt as if it had been made

To string some Fiddle, not the Sea-mans Trade.

Whilst her own Knell the Sea-sick Vessel Rings,

In breaking of her Ropes, the Ships heart strings,

As to repent, but never to amend;

So we pumpt th Ship, even to as little end;

For all the water we pumpt out with pain,

The Sea returns with scorne, and more again.

The Guns we carryd to be our Defence,  
Heaven thunderd so, it almost ward them thence;  
And yet to Heaven for this give thanks we may,  
But for its Lightning we had had no Day.  
The dropy Clouds drinking Salt water sick,  
Did spew it down upon our Heads so thick;  
That twixt the lower and upper Seas that fell,  
Our Ship a Vessel seemd, and we Mackrell.  
Pickld in Brine, and in our Cabines lye  
Soust up for Lasting Immortality.  
The Fear of being drowned, made us wish  
Our selves transpeciated into Fish.  
Indeed this Fear did so possess each one,  
All lookt like Shotten-Herring, Or Poor-John:[\[7\]](#)  
Nay of our saving, there was so much doubt,  
The Masters Faith begun to tack about;  
And had he perisht in this doubtful fit,  
His Conscience sure (with his own Ship) had split.  
For which way into Heaven could his Soul Steer,  
Starboard or Larbord that still cries, No neer?  
But we were in great danger, you will say,  
If Sea-men once begin to Kneele, and Pray;  
What Holy Church nere could, Rough Seas have done,

Made Sea-men buckle to Devotion,  
And force from them their Letany, whilst thus  
They whimper out, Good Lord deliver us!  
So pray I too, good Lord deliver thee,  
Dear Friend, from being taught to Pray at Sea.  
Be wise, and keep the Shoar then, since you may  
Go in by Land to your VIRGINIA.

[1] Largest mountain in Greece, home to the muses.

[2] Aeolus, Greek god of the winds.

[3] Sea-goddess of waves, wife of Poseidon.

[4] Low-quality ale.

[5] Range of hills in Gloucestershire.

[6] End column.

[7] Shotten-Herring: poor quality herring; Poor-John: dried and salted hake, poor quality.

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