



93-WHY A SHIP IS CALLED A "SHE"?

In sailors clubs and pubs in harbours around the world one can find this type of statement:

Why is a ship called a she?

A ship is called a 'she' because there is always a great deal of bustle around her; there is usually a gang of men about, she has a waist and stays; it takes a lot of paint to keep her good looking; it is not the initial expense that breaks you, it is the upkeep; she can be all decked out; it takes an experienced man to handle her correctly; and without a man at the helm, she is absolutely uncontrollable. She shows her topsides, hides her bottom and, when coming into port, always heads for the buoys.

The real question is: Is it always true?

Let us examine the question and explore the various sexist puns.

In English, a ship is called "she" because :

- There is always a great deal of bustle around her.
- There is usually a gang of men around her.
- She has a waist and stays.
- Her rigging costs more than her hull.
- It takes a lot of paint to keep her looking good;.
- It is not the initial expense that breaks you, It's the upkeep.
- She can be all decked out.
- It takes an experienced man to handle her correctly.
- Without a man at the helm, She is absolutely uncontrollable.
- She has her topsides, hides her bottom and, When coming into port, She always heads for the b(u)oys.

We also call a ship a "she", because:

- She displays a well-curved knee and body regardless of the season,
- She scorns the man whose heart is faint and shows him no pity.
- Like a girl with makeup she needs the paint to keep her looking pretty.
- For love she'll race the ocean vast, be she a gig or cruiser. But if you fail to tie her fast you're almost sure to lose her.
- On ships and Dames we pin our hopes, we fondle them and flatter them.
- Every man must know his ropes or else he will end up tied in knots himself.
- Be firm with her and she'll behave when skies are dark above you.
- Let her take a water wave - praise her, and she'll love you.
- That's why a ship must have a mate; she needs a good provider, a good strong arm to keep her straight, to comfort her and guide her. For this, she will brace the roughest gales and the angriest seas.

Keeping it short:

- A ship is like a Lady in that she's feminine and swanky;
- Yes, ships are ladylike indeed, as we know the ones that show a lot of speed can't stand the roughest weather.
- Last but not least, no Lady looks any prouder than when she wears a brand new finery of cloth and bunting.

Why are ships and countries (and sometimes cars and other vessels or vehicles) often referred to with the feminine pronoun?

Although, as in other matters, this practice is in steady decline now, thanks to feminism, it has been used in nautical language for many centuries.

The basic explanation is that the gender of the Latin word for "ship", Navis, is feminine. But there is another notion of the « ship as a she » statement:

In the ancient times, ships were dedicated to goddesses, and to mortal women of national or historic importance. This protected the ship with a positive and powerful feminine spirit, a blessing that would safely carry their seafarers across the dangerous oceans.

Figureheads were often female images, denoting the ship's name and protective guardian for a largely illiterate maritime crew. This practice dated from the 18th century, a period in which superstition ruled. By tradition, boat owners were (and still are) often naming their vessels after important women in their lives, such as wives, daughters, and mothers.

However, contradicting this desire for female protection, the presence of women aboard a vessel (whether in human or representative form) was a sign of bad luck.

Nowadays things haven't changed much. For example, Bill Schanen, the publisher of the American sailing magazine "Sailing" can be quoted: "Ships are feminine because they are beautiful and that beauty is a symphony of curves for women and ships. "

However then a revolution happened.

In 2002, the famous "Lloyds List", a merchant marine paper published in London for 268 years, announced that the Lloyds will only name ships with the neutral article.

The pretext being that **a ship is an object**, that a vessel is neither a character nor a woman. There was an outcry and many tradition bound sailors protested violently. The Royal Navy firmly stated: "Our ships remain Ladies."

The practice of feminizing vessels, naming them after women continues today, but habits are slowly changing.

Love and its contradictions

Despite the protests of traditionalists, there remains a very British expression which completely contradicts all that was written above: The word "**man-of-war**" which means a warship. This term was born in the 17th century defining the masterpiece of the English and French navies, and was used until the 19th century. In fact, it's actually a line ship or a high-ranking military vessel.

What did these naval sexual practices look like in other parts of the world ?

France

In French, the use of the article in front of the names of the ships has caused a lot of discussions and one can find on the web an interesting site called <troisponts.net>, a page that I invite you to visit for its richness and clarity.

On September 29, 2015, an article by Nicolas Mioque on the subject of the sex of ships in France appeared on the site named above. Here is a summary:

In ancient times of the sailing navy, the tradition wanted that the article (he, she, it) was an integral part of the name of the French warships and the article thus appeared on the stern of the ships:

- **Masculine** for vessels: **Le** Soleil Royal, **Le** Cerf
- **Female** for frigates: **La** Gloire, **La** Belle-Poule

With the introduction of mechanically powered ships in the early 19th century, the article preceding the name of the steamship was deleted but kept for sailing ships and it was so until the early twentieth century. At that time, habit had systematically become masculinizing the name of a ship. For example: **le** " la Jeanne d'Arc".

Voices were raised against this new hermaphroditic practice, which was deemed contrary to custom and logic. There was an opinion poll by the major newspapers in France and soon after, on August 13, 1934, the Minister of Marine, François Piétri, laid out a circular stating in three points that:

*"First: The article should always be used when citing the name of a warship without preceding it with that of its category, for example: **La** Jeanne-d'Arc, **Le** Vauban.*

*Second: When the name of the vessel is preceded by that of its category, the article must always appear before the name if it is an integral part of the official name; it will not appear there otherwise; example: the destroyer **Le Fantasque**, the submarine **La Sultane**.*

*Third: As a result, all the sentences to be constructed with the use of this article we should say for example: the turbines of **La Bourrasque**, or I embark on **le Suffren**. "*

You can not joke around with the "La Royale" - the (female) French Navy !

Today, the question of the sex of ship seems less and less controversial. The custom seems to go to the systematic masculinization of ships for the merchant navy and to the agreement between the article and the name of a warship for the military navy. With pleasure crafts, the habit is towards masculinization, with some trending towards gender neutralization of the name.

And in Germany?

Like in English, Germans use the female article when talking about ships. For our neighbours to the north using the language of Goethe, rowing boats, sailboats, freighters or luxury yachts, the names of all the ships, even male or neutral, always use the feminine article "**die**". So we say "**die** Titanic" or "**die** Gorch Fock".

Like in English, it is accepted that ships, as in Antiquity, are considered to be female. So we also find in the German culture the notion of the symphony of the curves of a ship, the loneliness of sailors during long voyages at sea and the sometimes capricious behaviour of a vessel. All of this may have contributed to this Teutonic feminine designation.

However, in Germany, ships have not always been considered female. In the 15th century we spoke of **Der** "Peter von Dantzig" and at the turn of the 20th century it was still common to speak of **Der** "Bismarck".

It was only during the reign of Emperor Wilhelm II that the British custom of feminizing ships was adopted in Germany.

In the Kingdom of Spain

Basically, the three "caravels" of the Discovery of America were called La Niña, la Pinta and la Santa-Maria. It seems thus that there is also in this country a naval gender etiquette to be respected; unwritten standards but compatible with oral traditions, even if this sometimes leads to false rituals.

The general rule indicates that the genre was originally related to the type of ship: A "frigate" was female, but a "navío" was male. So as general rule, we consider a boat, a transatlantic, a ship, a sailboat or a canoe to be male. Hence, "**el**" Titanic".

However, some boats remain feminine, like the caravels of Columbus, the frigates like "la" Fragata Sarmiento.

A ship with a feminine name, such as "Esmeralda" can take the masculine gender assuming that it is in fact the (ship / buque) Esmeralda. But if the name is "La Esmeralda" it will say "EI" (boat) La Esmeralda, even if it may seem shocking, just like "le" La Jeanne d'Arc mentioned above.

People in Spain say that their own Armada (navy) has a habit of complicating matters and it seems that there are therefore female and other male ships, depending on the type of vessel. Some examples:

EI Príncipe de Asturias, **el** Castilla, **el** Galicia, **la** Canarias, **la** Numancia, as well as some smaller ships like **el** Virgen del Carmen, or **el** Virgen de Lourdes, not to mention the famous training ship **EI** Elcano.

In summary, in Spain, the Titanic is masculine for being a transatlantic ship. If he was a frigate, it would be La Titanic. In we resume, in Spain, it's the type of ship that defines its gender.

According to the few sources that I have been able to consult, the current Spanish maritime tradition says that the fundamental and indisputable rule implies that the ships belonging to the Armada (the Navy) must be male, while the ships of the merchant marine and yachts will be feminine. So we will have el Elcano, but la Mario, which seems out of place, but ...

The view of the US Navy

On the web, I found an interesting and amazing text written by Rear Admiral Francis D. Foley, U.S. Navy (Retired), published in Naval History, December 1998:

"Ships are referred to as 'she' because men love them, but this encompasses far more than just that. Man-o'-war or merchantman, there can be a great deal of bustle about her as well as a gang of men on deck, particularly if she is slim-waisted, well-stacked, and has an inviting superstructure. It is not so much her initial cost as it is her upkeep that makes you wonder where you founder.

She is greatly admired when freshly painted and all decked out to emphasize her cardinal points. If an aircraft carrier, she will look in a mirror when about to be arrested, and will wave you off if she feels you are sinking too low or a little too high, day or night. She will not hangar around with duds, but will light you off and launch you into the wild blue yonder when you muster a full head of steam.

"Even a submarine reveals her topsides returning to port, heads straight for the buoys, knows her pier, and gets her breast-lines out promptly if she is single-screwed. On departure, no ship leaves port asleep, she always leaves a wake. She may not mind her helm or answer to the old man when the going gets rough, and can be expected to kick up her heels on a family squall.

“A ship costs a lot to dress, sometimes blows a bit of smoke, and requires periodic overhauls to extend her useful life. Some have a cute fantail, others are heavy in the stern, but all have double-bottoms which demand attention. When meeting head-on, sound a recognition signal; whistle. If she does not answer up, come about and start laying alongside, but watch to see if her ship is slowing . . . perhaps her slip is showing? Then proceed with caution until danger of collision is over and you can fathom how much latitude she will allow.

“If she does not remain on an even keel, let things ride, feel your way, and do not cross the line until you determine ‘weather’ the “do” point is right for a prolonged blast. Get the feel of the helm, stay on the right “tact”, keep her so, and she will pay off handsomely. If she is in the roaring forties, however, you may be in the dangerous semi-circle, so do not expect much “luff,” especially under bare poles.

“She may think you are not under command or control and shove off. If she edges aweigh, keep her steady as she goes, but do not sink into the doldrums. Just remember that ‘to furnish a ship requires much trouble, but to furnish a woman the cost is double!’

“To the women who now help us “man” our ships, my apologies for the foregoing. Only the opening phrase presents my true feelings. After all, a ship’s bell(e) will always remain her most prized possession, and every good ship has a heart, just like yours. A trick at the wheel, like you, would have been welcome aboard when I was on “she” duty for 40 years. May God bless you all, sweetheart!”.

In conclusion

It is true that the magnificent curves of our good old ships, being caressed by the waves of Neptune encouraged our ancestors to give their ships femininity. It is with certain sadness that I watch our modern forms and habits steaming toward a more neutral future. We can soon expect the launching of the German ship “Das Mädchen” (the –neutered- Maiden).

Many sailors are sighing for the beauties of yesterday, even while welcoming the equality of the future.

P.-A. Reymond ©
March 2020

Webography (Electronic references) :

<https://troisponts.net/>
<http://www.densatankers.com/>
<https://littleships.org/>
<http://swissships.ch/>

Biography (Paper References) :

Books by Juan Carlos Mejías Taveró

