

Nathaniel's Mission

by [Jeffrey Burghauser](#) (August 2023)



The Storm at Sea, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1569

*From a translation of Siege of Jerusalem, the anonymous
14th c. Middle English epic.*

Now here is Nathaniel, a virtuous Greek
Whose bosom companions included the seas—
An intimacy born of passion to seek
Extravagant spices on sweltering quays.
He hadn't a home and he hadn't a wife.
He fathomed what Freedom was for,

And found he could only adore
The habits involved in itinerant life.

Josephus said Cestius Gallus had sent
Nathaniel to Rome on an errand (it felt,
Across a vexatious enigma's extent—
Across a convulsion) to Nero who dwelt
In Power's supreme, indestructible home
 To tell him the bothersome news
 That Palestine's mutinous Jews
Resolved on withholding their tribute to Rome.

This vagabond crossed all that cankerous land.
This vagabond crossed all those rancorous waves,
Courageously shaking the horrible hand
Confining marines to their watery graves.
This vagabond mastered the body he had,
 Secure on the shivering bow
 With Love and a terrible vow
To lecture the weather when weather was bad.

The clatter of clouds was so powerful that
The sky seemed intent on convulsing apart.
Observable Nature appeared to combat
The world as described by a nautical chart.
The clatter of Heaven unraveled the rain.
 The Daylight's lithe shoulders can seem
 To scatter their garments of steam.
The cinnabar sun was submerged in the main.

Nathaniel's convulsing, hysterical ship
Maintained a condition recalling a lad
Who's suddenly found himself seized in the grip
Of shame that's attendant on learning he had
The previous night inadvertently proved
 Himself a preposterous bore
 And frivolous moron before

The face of the woman he recklessly loved.

Nathaniel delivered himself underneath
The hatches, permitting the water and wind
To drag their fragmented and furious teeth
Across a deserted exterior. Skinned
Sea surfaces hollered. A Promise's ghost
 Coerced that demoralized rind
 Of lumber into the unkind
Direction of some enigmatical coast.

Nathaniel's thin vessel was tumbled among
Viridian towers of water. The chips
Of razorish ice now exquisitely stung.
The sail burst in pieces. The powerless ship's
Precisely constructed Liburnian shell
 Ascended through nautical curd.
 The bow pointed firmamentward;
The stern was a forefinger pointed to Hell.

The waves now aggressed with such savagery, such
Demented, obscene, miscellaneous force,
Such ire inside of its tenderest touch,
Such total ferocity rendering hoarse
The throat of the Tempest, the throat of the snow
 (A Reason-bewildering draft,
 A passionless passion), the craft
Was borne by a gale to the Port of Bordeaux.

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