When Edward Fitzball's *The Flying Dutchman; or, The Phantom Ship* premiered in London in 1826, it brought together all the makings for a splash in British theatre: a famous genre, a famous actor, and two famous theatres.

Then as now, audiences responded enthusiastically to gothic tales, especially those with spectacular special effects. In that sense, Fitzball's *Dutchman* was the *Pirates of the Caribbean* of its day. Two earlier gothic shows that inspired Fitzball included characters famous to people today: a vampire and Frankenstein. According to Larry Stephen Clifton, the success of James Planché's 1820 *The Vampire, or The Bride of the Isles* and of Henry Milner's 1826 *Frankenstein; or, The Man and the Monster*, led Fitzball to mimic their "Blood-and-Thunder-blue-fire-fright" theatrical effects in his *Dutchman*.

Beyond their common gothic genre, however, all three of these plays starred one of the most famous actors of the day: Thomas Potter Cooke. Cooke stared as the Creature in three adaptations of Mary Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein*: Richard Brinsley Peake's *Presumption; or, The Fate of Frankenstein* (one night with Shelley herself in the audience!), Milner's *Frankenstein*, and, in Paris, Jean-Toussaint Merle and Béraud Antony's *Le Monstre et le magicien*. Beyond his gothic roles, Cooke also gained notoriety for playing the "Jack Tar" characters of British sailors.

Finally, the Dutchman story brought about competition between two famous theatres. Before Britain reformed its copyright laws in 1833, writers and theatres freely plagiarized popular shows. In 1827, the Adelphi Theatre presented Fitzball's *Dutchman*, starring Cooke as the title character. The Surrey Theatre knew a good thing when it saw one and hired Douglas Jerrold to write another version of the *Dutchman*. The Adelphi sued but lost, and Jerrold's *Dutchman* opened two years later. While bad news for the authors, this proved a boon for Cooke -- because of his fame, he performed in both shows! Some say he did so on the same day, traveling from one theatre to the other to play the demonic Dutchman. In time, the Surrey produced both plays on alternating weeks, both versions featuring Cooke.

But where did the idea for this captivating story come from? The legend of the Flying Dutchman has a long history, mentioned in late-eighteenth-century travel narratives and turn-of-the-nineteenth century poems by Walter Scott and Thomas More. The tale first appears in English in George Barrington's 1795 *A Voyage to New South Wales*. This tells of "a Dutch man-of-war…lost off the Cape of Good Hope, and every soul on board perished," in later years seen as a ghostly vision by sailors traveling the South African seas. The idea that the crew had committed some "dreadful crime" comes from John Leyden's 1803 *Scenes of Infancy: Descriptive of Teviotdale*. Here, because of their crime, the guilty crew receives cosmic punishment and can never return home, a narrative turn which calls to mind Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 1798 poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner."

Fitzball likely became familiar with the story in 1821 when it appeared in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*. This version of the story adds several new elements which found their way into his play, including the captain's fateful oath to "'…beat about here till the day of judgment!'" rather than seek the safety of a nearby harbor. Fitzball also borrows from *Blackwood's* the idea of the haunted letters, as well as the play's central character: Vanderdecken himself!

In the original play, Fitzball calls Vanderdecken "an evil ghost" who shows no regrets as he commits cruel acts, then gives "a demoniac laugh." We see that gratuitous cruelty when the Dutchman attempts to imprison Lestelle and Mowbray at the play's end. Later versions of the Dutchman present Vanderdecken differently, however, often as a tragic hero.

In *The Phantom Ship*, written by Frederick Marryat in 1839, the captain's son redeems his father by giving up his own life. The 1843 opera *The Flying Dutchman* by Richard Wagner draws on the 1833 satirical novel *The Memoirs of Mister von Schnabelewopski* by Heinrich Heine. Here, romantic love redeems the blasphemous captain. Ultimately, Clifton sees Fitzball's Vanderdecken as symbolizing "spiritual chaos." He remains morally ambiguous, since he never repents and never seeks forgiveness.

Although he may not prove a model citizen, the "Flying Dutchman" has thrilled people for going on three centuries. Tragic or demonic, deserving redemption or damnation, who can say? Either way, Vanderdecken's tale continues to entertain audiences and capture the imagination.