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THE SEARCH FOR FREEDOM AND VENGEANCE DURING THE GOLDEN AGE OF PIRACY

Haley Doby

Piracy is often romanticized in books and films, where pirates are depicted as roguish heroes or anti-heroes. Despite the popularity of pirates in media, most people know very little of the realities of piracy during its Golden Age (c. 1715-1725).¹ The period leading up to the Golden Age of piracy was a time of war and maritime revolt. This age of piracy began after the War of Spanish Succession started in 1701, during which, sailors were high in demand. The British Royal Navy impressed over a thousand men each year, only half of which would survive their service. Then, once the Treaty of Utrecht was signed in 1713, ending the war, thousands of sailors were suddenly without work, and their already low wages declined significantly. In the two years after the treaty was signed, over 36,000 sailors were laid off.² The increase in sailors looking for work caused merchants to cut wages. It is not surprising that a number of these sailors took to piracy, both to escape their impoverished circumstances and to retaliate against those who caused them suffering. When we focus on pirates in the Atlantic and Caribbean, their acts of resistance against rich merchants and an oppressive society become evident. Piracy during its Golden Age, then, served as a form of rebellion that gave the lower classes and other marginalized groups the opportunity for freedom and equality.

When England joined the War of Spanish Succession, which was fought from 1701 to 1713, the demand for sailors in the British Royal Navy rose drastically. The Navy initially tried to entice sailors by offering them a few months pay upfront, but this typically attracted only naïve young men and those desperate for fast cash. Experienced sailors knew the money was not worth the backbreaking labor, poor long-term wages, horrible living conditions, and extremely high chance of death.

When the number of sailors voluntarily joining the Navy could not keep up with the demand, the impress service tried to make up for the shortage. A Royal Navy officer would lead “press gangs,” typically armed with clubs, who would abduct men from their homes and off the streets, forcing them to join the Navy. Often, these men already worked for merchant ships, but others were poor laborers. They were forced to work for reduced wages, which they often never saw. Sailors would try to avoid these press gangs by skipping town or by signing on with merchant ships, preferring to join merchant crews than fight in the Navy. These attempts did little good, as the Royal Navy often stopped merchant ships before they pulled into port and pressed a large portion of the merchant crew into service before they even had a chance to receive the wages earned from their voyage.³



A press-gang at work in a London street, 1779. Library of Congress.

Whether they worked for merchants or the Royal Navy, sailors had to fight to receive their wages. Merchants often tried to dock wages, using damaged goods as an excuse,

while the Navy issued “tickets” which stated that a sailor’s wages would be paid at some undisclosed future date. These tickets essentially functioned as “IOUs” and left sailors and their families in desperate need of the money they hoped to earn from the Navy.⁴ Sailors who could not afford to wait for months to be paid were forced to sell their tickets to debt collectors at a huge discount. As the government continued to accrue debt, their credit deteriorated, as did the value of the tickets.⁵ Furthermore, the risk of death while at sea was so high that many sailors did not even survive to receive their wages. Women had very few opportunities for work, which left sailors as the sole providers for their families. Since many sailors worked to provide for their families back on land, dying at sea meant family members did not receive the money they needed to survive.

Not only did sailors infrequently receive fair compensation for their labor, but it was a very dangerous job, often causing injury or death. The working conditions on both Navy and merchant vessels were abysmal. Hard labor and rough seas made injury a common occurrence, and the loss of a limb meant no work and no income. Sickness spread quickly, often caused by pests, contaminated water, or old food. In an effort to cut costs, merchants often provided less food than the crew needed, which meant that crews were often in danger of starvation and any unforeseen delays at sea could spell disaster.⁶ Crews frequently suffered abuse from merchant or Navy captains, as these captains ruled their ships with complete authority and doled out any punishments they deemed necessary. These “necessary” punishments often included brutal beatings, or even executions.⁷

Some punishments were especially cruel. For example, Richard Payne, a young cabin boy was brutally tortured for eighteen days after he was caught stealing a bit of rum from his captain’s quarters.⁸ The crew were likely horrified

by the captain’s actions but were unable to stop him, as the captain ruled the ship. If the crew mutinied, the captain could prosecute the offending members for piracy, which could have resulted in imprisonment or hanging.⁹ The captain was eventually executed for his actions, after several of the crew reported him to the authorities. While the captain’s execution demonstrates that legal protections did exist to discourage predatory captains, they were often ineffective. The laws were frequently unclear and, if a sailor could not find someone willing to act as a witness, it was a sailor’s word against a captain’s.¹⁰ Furthermore, these laws offered no protection mid-voyage, and sailors were unable to defend themselves at sea. Richard Payne’s story was an extreme case, but it highlights the power these captains held over their crew. The captain believed it his right to treat his subordinates however he wished, and the crew was unable to intervene to save their fellow sailor. Even though the crew was able to get justice for Payne, that justice came too late to save his life, which might often be the case in instances where the crews were able to utilize legal protections. While the brutality of Payne’s torture was extreme, it was not uncommon for sailors to be permanently disfigured, or even die from, beatings dealt out by their captains.¹¹ Inflicting harsh punishments was seen as the captain’s right, and courts did not always agree with sailors on what qualified as excessive punishment.

Many sailors turned to piracy as a way to escape the abuse and poor wages they experienced on Navy and merchant ships. Piracy during the Golden Age was focused on obtaining freedom from oppression and poverty, as well as declaring vengeance against abusive captains. Historian Marcus Rediker uses the term “social banditry” to describe Golden Age pirates because they protested systematic poverty and sought vengeance against their oppressors.¹² One way pirates attempted to break free of the oppressive culture they commonly found on board merchant and Navy ships

was by taking a more democratic approach, thus creating a fairer working environment. To create a more democratic environment, the pirates created articles or terms of agreement that pirates would sign before joining the crew. Pirates were able to review the articles and have a voice in what their lives at sea would look like, rather than being forced to accept poor treatment from abusive captains. These articles laid out who would hold positions of authority, how plunder and food would be distributed, how certain actions would be disciplined, and what rules would be used to maintain order while at sea. The very first agreement in the articles of Bartholomew Roberts, a pirate captain active from 1719–1722, outlined every man’s right to vote, as well as their right to fresh provisions. The agreement also specified that, if the crew happened to be low on provisions, they would vote on how to ration their supply.¹³ In contrast, crews on merchant ships were often given old food and short rations, which left sailors starving. Roberts’ crew lists both the right to vote and to fresh and plentiful provisions as the first agreement, which shows how important these rights were to the crew—and how often these rights had been denied them in the past. Every person on board the ship also participated in a common council. This council gathered to elect officers and to vote on any decisions the crew needed to make, such as the fate of their prisoners or where to hunt for ships. Everyone had the opportunity to debate and share their thoughts before they voted. This process ensured that all members of the crew had a voice in the matters of the ship.¹⁴ The choice to break away from oppressive captains and to instead build a better system was very radical, especially for the early eighteenth century. Pirate crews went from a system that required them to follow the captain’s every order to one where every crew member had been given the right to vote.

Because pirate crews strongly rejected the system that allowed captains to abuse their near-absolute power, pirate

captains were allowed a very limited authority over their crew. Pirates had several ways of keeping their captains’ authority in check. The crew elected the captains and could remove them by popular vote. The common council also elected a quartermaster. The quartermaster approved the decisions of the captain, again checking his power, and made sure everything was distributed equally.¹⁵ The wage gap between the captain and crew on a pirate ship was much smaller than it was on merchant and Navy vessels, and each crew member was guaranteed their share of the plunder. The quartermaster was responsible for dividing the plunder into shares for each crew member, the amount of which was determined by the agreed-upon articles. Crew members who had more responsibilities or riskier positions, such as doctors or gunners, were allocated more shares.¹⁶ While most of the crew received one share each, doctors and gunners received one and a quarter, and the captain and quartermaster could expect to receive two shares each. This system demonstrated the crew’s respect for pirates with more dangerous or demanding positions, as they were compensated accordingly for their labor. In his book, *Villains of All Nations*, Marcus Rediker describes this system as having been “one of the most egalitarian plans for the disposition of resources to be found anywhere in the early eighteenth century.”¹⁷ To summarize, many sailors, critical of how their ships were run, turned to piracy and participated in creating a new system where everyone could have a voice in governance. In the age of the Enlightenment, many men were discussing the possibility of a democratic society where all men could have a say in how they were governed, but few people actually accomplished this goal. Pirates, then, are an example of how Enlightenment ideals were successfully practiced on a small scale.

Pirates also set a sum of money aside for those who were injured. A pirate who became permanently disabled

would receive an amount of money as compensation and would remain a part of the crew, despite any blindness or missing limbs that might hinder their ability to work. The amount a crew member would be paid, and for what injuries, were typically outlined in the ship's articles. For example, Bartholomew Roberts' articles stated that if any of the crew lost a limb or became disabled, they would be compensated with 800 dollars, "and for lesser Hurts, proportionably."¹⁸ Pirates acknowledged that their way of life was dangerous, and they would not quickly abandon a crew member who had become disabled while serving the interests of the crew. The care pirates displayed for their sick and injured differed significantly from the situation on merchant or Navy ships, where, in the event if a crew member lost a limb, they would lose their job and have great difficulty finding employment elsewhere.¹⁹ Pirates went to great lengths to care for their sick; for example, Edward Teach, commonly known as Blackbeard, stopped trade at the Charleston Harbor until he received medicine for his crew.²⁰ These pirates built their rules and culture around providing for the common sailor, which was in opposition to how Navy captains and merchants ran their ships. The system of care pirates created demonstrated a consideration for worker's rights that was not widespread until centuries later. Because the entire pirate crew typically consisted of poor, working class people, it makes sense that the system they created would address issues they faced when working legally. The system was progressive, not just in comparison to Navy and merchant ships, but it was also progressive in general.

The Golden Age pirates had a deep mistrust of merchant captains and the wealthy. Their experiences with poor treatment and oppression made them feel resentful. While some pirates were content to break free from their oppressors and rebel against systems of oppression by building better, more equitable systems for themselves, many

other pirates chose to seek out vengeance against their oppressors. Samuel Bellamy, a notable pirate captain, made his contempt for authority known when he called common sailors "snivelling Puppies, who allow Superiors to kick them about Deck at Pleasure..."²¹ Further, he told a sailor who was unwilling to join him, "you are a sneaking Puppy, and so are all those who will submit to be governed by Laws which rich Men have made for their own Security."²² Bellamy's statements reveal his feelings of resentment toward both abusive captains and a society whose laws prioritized the values and desires of the wealthy over the needs of the working class. His contempt for both those who abused their power and the sailors who refused to rebel against it suggests that he saw violent rebellion as the only way to deal with an abusive authority. Further, these quotes suggest that Bellamy wanted the oppressed working class to rise up in rebellion with him, rather than submitting to corrupt authority.



Blackbeard the Pirate, 1736. Wikimedia Commons.

Pirates sometimes considered themselves "Robin Hoods" in taking what they could from the rich merchant captains²³ and redistributing the goods to their crew. However, a merchant was occasionally shown mercy if his crew defended his

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character. This situation occurred when the crew of Thomas Cocklyn seized the ship of merchant captain William Snelgrave at the Sierra Leone River. The pirate quartermaster beat Snelgrave with the handle of his pistol until Snelgrave's crew begged him to stop. Snelgrave later recounted how his crew was interrogated by Howell Davis, another pirate captain who had joined them. Davis' interrogation of the merchant captain's crew was intended to reveal if Snelgrave had been abusing his power and treating them poorly. When none of the merchant crew complained about Snelgrave, Davis expressed his disappointment in Cocklyn's crew for abusing Snelgrave, telling them that, "They should remember their reasons for going a pirating were to revenge themselves on base Merchants and cruel commanders of Ships."²⁴ Here, Davis contradicts the myth that pirates attacked merchant ships at random or for the sake of causing chaos; instead, he names revenge against merchant captains as the primary reason these sailors had taken to piracy. Even if the pirate crew was not taking revenge on their former captains, attacking any corrupt merchant captain was a way to take vengeance on the oppressive system as a whole.

Many pirates rejected the nations they once belonged to,

forming a nation of their own upon the decks of their ships or seizing a piece of land for themselves as a pirate haven. The pirate republic of Nassau, which existed from 1716 to 1726, is one example of pirates creating their own nation on land. Bellamy referred to himself as a prince with the right to "make War on the whole World."²⁵ Other pirates, such as Dirk Chivers, a pirate captain active in the Indian Ocean and Red Sea from 1694–1699, ceased to claim their country of birth as their own.²⁶ The nations these pirates belonged to often denied them rights. The Navy and merchant ships that abused and exploited sailors received support and sanction from the state, so it makes sense that pirates would also resent their nations. Rejecting their countries was also a form of rebellion for pirates. Just as they tried to create a democratic working environment on their ships, they also attempted to create their own nation where they could be equals rather than be subjected to abuse and oppression. There was a solidarity amongst pirates, which was often referred to as a "brotherhood." Pirates would sometimes come to each other's defense or seek vengeance for one another, such as when the pirate ship the Whydah Galley crashed near Boston, Massachusetts. Boston authorities imprisoned the survivors of the crash and subsequently hanged them. Afterwards, Blackbeard, captured a merchant ship from Boston, burning it in revenge.²⁷ The crew of the Whydah Galley was not Blackbeard's crew, but the pirate brotherhood and connection through this new national identity among pirates drove him to seek vengeance for them.

Women were not often involved in piracy, but many of those who were demonstrated a desire for freedom from the limited options presented to women in the early eighteenth century and from the oppressive expectations society set upon them. Two women pirates active in the Caribbean during the Golden Age were Anne Bonny and Mary Read. Read was born near London as an illegitimate child. Her

mother's husband had died at sea, so she was disguised as her deceased half-brother to receive support from the husband's family. Throughout her life, Read continued to take advantage of the opportunities cross-dressing offered; when she was around sixteen years old, she joined the crew of a British Royal Navy man-of-war, and later became a soldier in Flanders.²⁸ Bonny was raised in similar circumstances. She was born an illegitimate child in Ireland. Her father then dressed her as a boy to hide her true identity from his wife. Unlike Read, Bonny was raised in relative wealth, leaving her comfortable life behind to marry a poor sailor and take to piracy. Bonny and Read eventually joined the same crew and sailed under Captain "Calico" Jack Rackham in the Caribbean Sea. For Read, piracy offered an escape from poverty, while it offered Bonny freedom from the oppressive expectations placed on women.²⁹ Legally, women of this era did not belong to themselves, but to the men in their lives. Coverture laws prevented women from owning their own property or controlling their own wealth, as it legally belonged to their husbands or fathers. Piracy offered a way for women



Anne Bonny and Mary Read, who were convicted of piracy on November 28th, 1720 at a Court of Vice Admiralty held at St. Jago de la Vega on the Island of Jamaica, 1724. Wikimedia Commons.

to control their own wealth, have autonomy over their own bodies, and have a voice in how they lived their lives. Piracy allowed them to seize personal power in a society that told them they were not worthy of it.

Some argue against understanding pirates as revolutionaries or "social bandits." In his essay "Well-Behaved Pirates Seldom Make History," pirate historian Mark Hanna uses Anne Bonny and Mary Read's silence during their trial as one example of pirates not being revolutionary, stating that, "If ever there was a moment for a speech about the oppression of women, that was it."³⁰ I disagree; the assumption that someone who experiences oppression could give a speech to their oppressors and expect their voice to be heard comes from a place of privilege. Women were denied a voice in every aspect of their lives and given no agency over their futures or bodies. The treatment of women as second-class citizens was not going to change in a courtroom full of men who had likely already decided Bonny and Read's fates. Bonny and Read's refusal to defend themselves in court, then, was not a moment of submission, but an act of rebellion. Any speech or defense they gave would have been ignored by the court and gawked at by people who could not fathom a version of womanhood that looked like masculinity. Instead, Bonny and Read exercised the only autonomy they still had by refusing to explain themselves to the court. Furthermore, Bonny and Read did not need to convince the world to change for their stories to inspire women for centuries after their deaths, even if that was the "right" time for a revolutionary speech. Foucault argues that the act of power must be intentional on a local scale, but the global impact of power is often unintentional.³¹ The long-lasting, widespread impact of Bonny and Read's stories demonstrate their unintentional power. Bonny and Read were revolutionary because they rejected societal expectations and carved out a place for themselves in a male dominated environment that was often hostile to

women. We often consider rebellion to be the act of trying to change an oppressive system from within, but leaving the system altogether and trying to create a better life elsewhere is also rebellious. Bonny and Read demonstrated just how effective this second kind of rebellion can be.

People are drawn to pirates in books and movies because they are exciting, and the idea of seeking freedom from an oppressive society is appealing to many; however, there was so much more to piracy than is portrayed by media today. Modern media romanticizes the lives of pirates, while the lives of working class people from this era are downplayed or just outright ignored. The radical aspects of piracy, pirates' search for vengeance, and their attempts to break free of

oppressive lives, are instead replaced with playful mischief. Pirates, particularly those of the Golden Age, tried, time and time again, to change the way sailors were treated. These sailors, tired of living with the ever-present threat of poverty and abuse, took to piracy to seek freedom and take vengeance upon their oppressors. Many did this by rejecting the nations that they were from and establishing their own nations upon the decks of their ships, along with creating a democratic system of voting, a more equal distribution of money, and compensation for injury. Thus, the lives of pirates during the Golden Age are more nuanced, and in many ways, more interesting than their portrayal today.

ENDNOTES

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