Forging an Iron Woman: Piracy's effects on gender roles and other social conditions in the 18th century Caribbean, particularly in the cases of Anne Bonny & Mary Read

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Gender plays a poignant role in almost any historical narrative, particularly in the record of piracy and government sponsored privateering. The opportunity for women to embrace various social classes at will in the late 18th century came out of an environment in which ideas about politics, economics, and race continually shifted. Society was in chaos, and social mores, therefore, changed constantly. Even as some pirates transported slaves for profit, others took on former slaves as captains, rejecting religions, nationalities, and former loyalties for the sake of freedom. Female pirates such as Ann Bonny and Mary Read exemplify a case of crossing sexual borders in search of social and economic liberation. They forfeited their femininity to steal, sail, and drink with men, like men. Yet in the end, they intentionally became pregnant – a decidedly female enterprise – to escape imprisonment and death. In the midst of nations' trans-Atlantic battles for God and money, pirates wrote their own rules. Women fought like men, slaves captained ships, and entire cities fell overnight. Identity, as well as gender, was a mercurial feature, and important so long as it served a purpose. This paper therefore considers not only the motivations that women had for turning to piracy, but also the social conditions that allowed for such radical opportunities.

There is a tide in the affairs of men
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.
On such a full sea are we now afloat,
And we must take the current when it serves,
Or lose our ventures.
–Julius Caesar, Act 4, Scene 3[1]

A merry life and a short one – this was the objective of those who went upon the account to become the rebellious, demonized, courageous, and cursed lot known as pirates. Yet in the midst of their daring thievery and adventurous derision for authority, pirates did more than break laws; they made history. Through their defiance, they challenged ideas about class, race, and nationality. But more than this, they effectively introduced the concept of sexual equality three hundred years ahead of their time by embracing a group historically rejected by both the general public and academic scholars alike: women. Female pirates like Anne Bonny and Mary Read thrived alongside their male counterparts, learning to benefit from both sexes by fighting like men in war and intentionally escaping execution through pregnancy. Despite the sharp social stratification found on land, life at sea afforded strong men and women the opportunity to escape the lives prescribed to them. Thus all pirates represented a culture far better than their landlocked counterparts – one that did not judge any individual by skin color or even gender, but by character.

Pirates hardly embodied eighteenth century values of conduct or civility. According to Marcus Rediker in *Villains of All Nations*, pirates were largely poor, multi-cultural rebels who spat on the order that governments sought to establish through tyranny and oppression.[2] They flouted the standard perceptions regarding class, race, nationality, and even government. There were no fixed categories for a pirate's identity. For instance, Rediker argues that a vast majority of pirates arose out of poverty. Sailors often suffered horrific abuse at the hands of their employers – hunger, thirst, mutilation, humiliation, and even death.[3] Money (or the lack thereof) determined the policies of social stratification. Thus, by becoming pirates, individuals not only agreed to break the laws of the land, but also to break free from the barriers of their economic class. Rediker refers to this as the "political arithmetic of piracy," and identifies poverty as one of the strongest motivations for sailors to "go upon the account". Pirates fought more for freedom and equality than they did for treasure, choosing their

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fates out of an odd mixture of "ignorance, desperation, and hope". [4]

Similarly, pirates also deconstructed the significance of race. For instance, an African-American man could be little more than a field slave on land, but a pirate captain on the high seas. Frederick Douglass described ships as "freedom's swift-winged angels"[5] – a metaphorical description of the possibilities that existed for black men away from the confines of land-locked society. W. Jeffrey Bolster attributes this fortune to the "specialized nature of seafaring", which suffered a constant scarcity of sailors. This shortage allowed for black men to view the occupation as the only readily available profession for them in a highly racist society.[6] Statistically, foredeck gangs were substantially more integrated than many early nineteenth century labor forces.[7] The effects of such a system present themselves in the way these sailors translated the working conditions at sea to their lifestyles on land. For instance, in 1718, pirates settled in Madagascar, intermarried with the indigenous population, and eventually created a new ethnicity.[8] Later, in1787, three white sailors befriended a black man from Georgia and went so far as to shake his hand in public, an act that Bolster called "unthinkable" in white Georgian society.[9]

In yet another example of the their challenge of the status quo, pirates almost completely disregarded issues of political patriotism, rarely holding any loyalty at all to governments or nations. In 1717, a largely English crew of pirates overthrew their commander because he refused to attack English cargo ships.[10] In most cases[11], pirates stole with complete disregard to a ship's political allegiance. They did, however, consider the character of the ship's captain. More important than his birthplace or ethnicity, a man's honor stood as the true test of his worth. For instance, when merchant Captain Snelgrave was captured in 1719, his crew stopped the pirates from beating him to death by declaring that they had never known a "better man." As a result, the pirates stole another ship, sold the goods, and gave all the proceeds to Snelgrave before releasing him – a reward for his virtue. Rediker argues that Snelgrave's experience exemplified the pirates' attempts to make up for the "standard brutalities that marked the social relations of production in merchant shipping".[12]

Such concepts of fairness and equality emerged from the cruel treatment the pirates had received as sailors on merchant and navy vessels. Many pirate ships instituted what Rediker called a "rough, improvised, but effective egalitarianism" – a system in which little power was given to the captain and instead distributed to every member of the ship.[13] In order to ensure that each individual received his or her fair share, pirates often had a quartermaster whose primary job was to distribute food and provisions equally, and to prevent the captain from abusing his power. Moreover, each ship had a council that included every crewmember. All decisions were arrived at by collective agreement, except in times of combat.[14] Then, the captain had complete authority simply out of necessity. The individual therefore maintained his or her basic rights while still participating as a useful member of the ship, signifying the pirates' battle against corrupt government. In many ways, they represented a crude yet forceful divergence from old authority to new. Despite the pirates' intentional lack of political patriotism, such ideals appear as distinctly American since all of the Americas were the "New World" – wild, raw, and ferocious – and as such, inherently the natural habitat for pirates.

Yet many have failed to draw a similar correlation between piracy and gender. Just as they flouted the conventions of class, race, and nationality, pirates also transcended the boundaries of sex whereby a strong, intelligent, independent woman could achieve greater success at sea than on land. Away from the freedom of a ship, women faced the dichotomy by which society viewed their gender: they were either faithful mates or salacious whores. A "faithful mate" essentially espoused female virtues such as monogamy, continuous childbearing, and deference to the dominant male in her life. A "salacious whore", on the other hand, sold her body for profit and with complete disregard as to the state of her reputation. In short, society regarded women based on nothing more than their sexual capacity. [15] But by embracing the same watery escape as poor men and former slaves did, women could find wealth, adventure, and freedom all on board a pirate ship.

Perhaps the most famous female pirates who sailed the Caribbean in the eighteenth century were Anne Bonny and Mary Read, poster children for gender equality. They personified possibility – the simplest and most fervent hopes of the cast off, the destitute, or the lost. Mary Read was born in England to a young widow. Her mother's first child, a son, died shortly before Read's birth. In order to receive money from the dead boy's paternal grandmother, Read's mother dressed her as her dead brother for the formative years of her life. Thus,

Read's oscillation between masculine and feminine dress began early.

As an adult, Read dressed as a man again and joined a military regiment. There she met a soldier who would soon after become her husband. She hid her gender from the rest of the company, but revealed herself to her lover in private. To his chagrin, Read refused to engage in any sexual activity until they were married; she may have dressed like a man but she maintained her virtue as a lady. After the campaign ended, the entire regiment pooled their money to buy Read female apparel and give the couple a public wedding. Read and her husband set up an "eating-house"[16], or restaurant, and settled into married life on land. However, the husband died shortly thereafter, and Read, unsure of how to survive as a single woman, dressed again as a man and joined a ship bound for the West Indies. Captain Rackam and his pirates eventually captured that ship and, as their rules dictated, allowed each person on board the opportunity to become a pirate. Read chose to join their party.[17]

However, Mary Read was not the first female pirate who served with Captain Rackam. Anne Bonny was the illegitimate daughter of a wealthy Irish lawyer and his maid. When his wife learned of the affair, she had the maid arrested on false charges of theft and went to her husband's mother for consolation. Taking pity on her, the wealthy old woman left all her belongings to her son's wife. While in prison, the maid gave birth to a girl, Anne Bonny. Since her father was fond of her, he dressed her as a boy and brought her to live in his household. Eventually, the wife discovered the pretense and stopped her husband's allowance. Bonny's father became enraged and booked passage to North Carolina with Bonny and her mother. But Bonny's mother died shortly before their journey and so Bonny went with her father alone to the American colonies.

According to firsthand accounts, Bonny had a fierce temper, going so far as to marry a poor sailor in a fit of passion, leaving behind her father and her wealth. When her hasty marriage failed, she dressed as a man and joined the pirate ship of John Rackam. However, new evidence suggests that Rackam was the not captain of the ship until Bonny joined. The crew voted on who would lead them: Rackam and a pirate named Pierre Vane each received ten votes, while Anne herself received six. She then added her votes to Rackam's and he was named captain with Anne as his second-in-command.[18] They lived as lovers and Bonny hid her gender from the rest of the crew until Read joined the ship.[19]

When authorities finally captured Rackam's crew in 1720, only Read, Bonny, and one other [unnamed] pirate stood on the deck and fought. Witnesses claimed that in the midst of the fight, Read called to the other pirates to "come up and fight like men." When they did not, she turned her pistol on them in anger and frustration, killing one and wounding several others.[20] At their trial, Read and Bonny revealed their gender to the court, at which time the authorities questioned whether or not the women were complicit in the piracy. However, several witnesses, including one captured woman, testified that not only did Read and Bonny actively take part in the piracy but they often directed their male peers.[21] The court found them guilty and sentenced them, along with the rest of the crew, to death. However, at the last minute, Bonny and Read informed the court that they were both pregnant. Thus, they saved themselves from execution by catering to a patriarchal society and embracing the prescribed feminine role of motherhood.[22]

Later, when the crew and Bonny's lover Rackam were hung, Bonny was said to have commented that she was sorry to see [Rackam] there, but "if he had fought like a man, he need not have been hang'd like a dog".[23] Soon after the trial, Read died in prison from illness. Bonny's fate remains uncertain, however Archibald Hurd speculates that she was eventually set free with her infant child, living the rest of her life quietly. In any case, the records do indicate that while neither Read nor Bonny would have "feared the gallows," neither was executed for piracy. [24]

Throughout their lives, these female pirates maintained a pattern of "switching" genders when it most suited them. Both Read and Bonny adapted to their environments, appearing as boys to escape poverty, as women to marry, as men to become pirates, then finally as mothers to save themselves from death. However, while they certainly achieved a rare notoriety for the time period[1], they were not unique. In the ninth century B.C., Princess Elissa,

1 One must consider the state of national and international communication in the eighteenth century. Although Bonny and Read's trial occurred in Jamaica, newspapers all along the eastern coast of the United States printed stories about the female pirates (though did not include their names or particulars). As far north as Boston, the *Boston Gazette* included a short article on the two women pirates who had been captured along with Captain Rackam's crew.

the eldest daughter of the Tyrean King Mutto, led tours of plunder around Carthage and Cyprus.[25] In the sixteenth century A.D., Grace O'Malley, an Irish pirate, proved to be so ruthless that Queen Elizabeth I issued her a royal charter so that she could plunder instead beneath England's flag.[26] In the seventeenth century, buccaneer Jacquotte Delahaye led one hundred men on an attack on Fort de la Roche; when a corsair proposed marriage, she declared, "I couldn't love a man who commands me – any more than I could love one who lets himself be commanded by me".[27] The early nineteenth century Chinese pirate Lady Ch'ing successfully commanded a fleet of ships with over 70,000 people as they raided China's coastal towns.[28]

Recent research has disproved the long held myth that only men served at sea. Women served on ships in numerous capacities: as cooks, servants, seamstresses, nurses, wives and mistresses of captains, and, as with Bonny and Read, pirates.[29] In 1807, the crew of the *Hazard* found a fourteen-year-old girl by the name of Elizabeth Bowden hiding on their ship dressed as a boy. When he discovered her true gender, the captain gave her a private apartment to sleep in and allowed her to remain onboard as an officers' attendant.[30] Contrary to the belief that women were "bad luck" on a ship[31], Robin Miskolcze argues that a woman's presence transformed a vessel into "a symbolic ship of state".[32] In other words, women represented the codes of honor that pirates created for themselves and vigilantly followed. According to David Cordingly, many women took part in sea battles and at least three female sailors published accounts of their exploits.[33]

The gender dynamics that life at sea allowed for arose out of the same social considerations that affected pirates' attitudes towards class, race, and nationality. Pirates have historically maintained a high degree of civil disobedience. Although some worked as privateers beneath the flags of various nations, many already disrespected authority and made war against "the world entire".[34] Pirates like William Fly – who "defiantly and courageously" refused to apologize for his deeds, even at the gallows – protested bad usage and left a warning to all masters to treat their workers well. He sealed his warning with his own example: he committed mutiny and threw his abusive captain overboard.[35] Such volatile behavior towards authority suggests that pirates did not have to venture far in their principles to accept women just as they did former slaves and men of various nations. As with other social conventions, sailors and pirates regarded the boundless sea as a world apart, free of the prohibitions that they so abhorred on land.

Moreover, according to Marcus Rediker, most pirates appear to have been more concerned with a man or woman's character than with outward appearances. For instance, while Captain Snelgrave was rewarded for his honesty[36], one Captain Skinner – notorious for cruel treatment of sailors – happened upon his old crew, who had turned pirate. As a punishment for his past indiscretions, they beat him mercilessly with glass bottles.[37] By the time Read and Bonny's genders became known, they had already worked and fought with enough success that the crew greeted their revelation with a kind of ambivalence. They simply did not care.[38] Perhaps, in their bid to wreak havoc on civilization, pirates purposely undermined the standards of society. Or perhaps they did not consider their actions regarding ethnicity or gender as particularly rebellious at all, but as chance products of their lifestyle. Nevertheless, their indifference allowed for the very freedom and equality that many of them sought by going to sea.

Pirates were not the first sea-faring group to reconsider gender roles. Sailors in the British Royal Navy often faced charges of homosexuality and sodomy – unsurprising considering the all-male crews that sailed for the Crown.[39] This is not to suggest that no pirates were homosexual or that none engaged in sodomy. However, gender dynamics had already come into question before pirates took to the sea. Piracy simply allowed for such roles to continually shift and reemerge in a slightly less disapproving community. A Navy sailor could go to prison or worse for acting as anything but a man; Bonny and Read abandoned their gender when it suited them with little to no chastisement from their crews.[2]

Yet the freedoms that Bonny and Read enjoyed at sea were almost always reversed once they set foot on land. For instance, both women wore men's clothing when they engaged in combat or worked on their pirate ships. They cursed, ate, and carried themselves like men. However, when Mary Read found a husband, she moved back to land to live "legitimately".[40] She only returned to the sea when her husband died and she had no recourse (a familiar theme among would-be pirates). When

2 This is not to suggest that either woman was homosexual, but simply that both disregarded conventional feminine behaviors. (According to Daniel Defoe, Bonny did flirt with Read but only when she believed her to be a man.)

she and Bonny faced execution, they "pleaded their bellies", in effect catering to the expectations of authority in order to avoid being killed.[41] They embraced their femininity and the roles they were expected to play only when it suited them, exemplifying the ease with which they oscillated between womanhood and manhood.

Exceptions to this exist, even with Bonny and Read. For instance, when Bonny married her first husband, she fled to the sea rather than staying on land since her father disapproved of her marrying an impoverished sailor.[42] This better symbolizes the freedom with which she associated life on the water. Moreover, Read engaged in combat even before she served on a pirate ship. She cross-dressed in order to serve in the infantry where she met her first husband, a fellow soldier.[43] Similarly, when a man attacked and attempted to rape Anne Bonny while she was living with her father, she "beat him so, that he lay ill of it a considerable time".[44] Yet despite the ease with which Read and Bonny played the parts of men, they only found true gender-blindness as pirates. Only on a pirate ship were they able to dress in men's clothes or women's clothes as they pleased. According to an eyewitness, the women sometimes "wore men's jackets, and long trousers, and handkerchiefs tied about their heads"[45] or else walked about in dresses.[46]

Although one cannot claim that pirates' ambivalence to gender markedly affected social concepts of sexism, it did exemplify the possibilities for gender equality. Bonny and Read were remarkable, strong women – early embodiments of twentieth century feminism. But just as heroic and just as remarkable were the men who served with, respected, and followed these women. Pirates created a society unto themselves, one that was often better and more progressive than any of the "civilized" nations found on land. In spite of – and perhaps because of – their legal exclusion from the social orders that they were born into, pirates managed to build their own shining cities (only on waves rather than hills).

The tides that governed the affairs of men did not simply flow past the women. Gender, as well as class, race, and nationality, was a fluid concept at sea. The shifting currents and open ships allowed for equally shifting identities of the men and women who called themselves pirates. Strong women like Anne Bonny, Mary Read, Princess Elissa, Grace O'Malley, and Lady Ch'ing learned to benefit from the strengths and weaknesses of both sexes. They escaped the shallows and miseries that their genders dictated and instead went on to lead lives of fortune. Just as their peers changed national loyalties at will, so these women changed their genders. Moreover, the men they served with cared little about whether or not women fought with them or commanded them. Only courage mattered on a pirate ship, and these women had plenty of that.

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