



Pirates

by Geoffrey W. Bateman

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Since the "Golden Age of Piracy," roughly from 1690 to 1730, pirates have played an important role in the cultural imagination, especially in British and American writing and film. Their status as economic and cultural outsiders has appealed to a broad range of people, but suggestive speculation about pirate sexuality has made the figure of the pirate--both male and female--into something of an icon for gltbq people.

Undoubtedly, the reality of pirate sexuality was far less affirming of homosexuality than our imaginations might like us to believe. Hans Turley cautions us against assuming that pirates must have been sodomites. While it is possible and perhaps even likely that many were, the lack of evidence means that we can only speculate about what sexual life was like aboard a pirate ship in a predominantly male environment.

Pirating Before the Golden Age

In various forms, piracy has existed since antiquity. Migrating tribes called the "Sea Peoples" invaded Egypt in the late thirteenth century B. C. E. In the second century B. C. E., Cilicians turned to piracy and plunder for their livelihood, creating haven for pirates in the Roman world. In 67 B. C. E., the Roman Senate ordered Pompey to clear the Mediterranean of pirates. Historians estimate that his campaign killed as many as 10,000 pirates and destroyed more than 120 bases or fortresses.

Late in the fifteenth and throughout the sixteenth centuries, the Corsairs of the Barbary Coast attacked European trading vessels, using North African ports as their bases. In league with the Ottoman Empire, they paid a small percent of their plunder to the local potentates of the port cities and kept the rest for themselves.

During Elizabeth I's reign, English privateers such as Sir Francis Drake and Sir John Hawkins led secretly sanctioned raids against the Spanish in the New World. Although they served under a Letter of Marque that granted them permission to "rob by command of the Queen of England," the Spanish viewed such activity as piracy.

The Golden Age of Piracy

The most intense and best known period of pirate activity occurred between 1714 and 1724. During that decade a number of notorious pirates were captured, and their trials inspired numerous written accounts, both true and fictional, that became very popular.

The best known of these works, Charles Johnson's *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pirates*, was first published in 1724. The work, which may have actually been written by Daniel Defoe, chronicles the lives of a number of infamous pirates whose lawlessness had created a sensation in the previous decade. In addition to a number of well-known male pirates, such as Captain



Top: Pirate Anne Bonny.
Above: Pirate Mary Read slays an enemy.

Avery and Captain Roberts, the book also includes the stories of Mary Read and Anne Bonny, two women who had been captured and tried in Jamaica in November 1720.

It is from this body of writing that our modern sense of the pirate emerges. In the early eighteenth century, pirates were seen as groups of mostly male criminals who banded together in defiance of all cultural norms. Legally, they were considered "the common enemy against all mankind." Swearing no loyalty to any nation, pirates were outlaws who plundered for their livelihood.

Sodomitical Suggestions in the World of Pirates

B. R. Burg's work from the early 1980s uses contemporary studies of male sexuality in prison to suggest that sex between men on buccaneer and pirate ships was common. Although his work is largely speculative, he challenges the assumption that pirates were heterosexual. As he suggestively concludes, "The single certainty is that the only non-solitary sexual activities available to buccaneers for most of the years they spent in the Caribbean and for almost all of the time they were aboard ship were homosexual."

Although Turley has criticized Burg's work for his imprecise marshaling of evidence, Burg does highlight many areas of pirate life that could easily have involved homosexuality in some fashion.

For instance, Burg contrasts pirates' attitudes towards women and their cabin boys. Even though some captains prohibited both on board their ships, Burg argues that pirates were more tolerant of pederasty than they were of relationships with women. On Captain Roberts' ship, for example, the crew was subjected to the rule that "[n]o Boy or Woman [was] to be allowed amongst them. If any Man were found seducing any of the latter [S]ex, and carry'd her to Sea, disguis'd, he was to suffer Death." As Burg points out, no mention is made of capital punishment for seducing cabin boys.

But as Turley rightfully points out, nothing conclusive can be drawn from such material, and the truth of the pirate experience comes to us highly mediated through fiction, popular history, and legend.

In addition to Charles Johnson's history, a number of Daniel Defoe's works tell stories of pirates in the early eighteenth century. Like much of Defoe's work, his pirate novels, including *The King of Pyrates* (1719) and *Captain Singleton* (1720), blend historical truth with fiction and create an indirect glimpse into the sexuality of pirates.

Turley argues that the relationship between Singleton and his closest friend, a Quaker pirate, appears in a romantic light. The two characters end the novel by retiring to England and spending their days in "private domesticity."

Rather than read this as an avowal of homosexual identity, however, Turley places it more cautiously in the context of eighteenth-century sexuality and masculinity. At a time when both categories were under great cultural pressure, pirate sexuality seems to have defied the strict hetero/homo binaries that we are familiar with today, allowing for any number of sexual practices and identities.

Lesbian Pirates?

Although most scholarship on pirates repeatedly claims that it is primarily a history of men, more recent writing and scholarship on female pirates shows that women also turned to piracy. For them it was a way to defy cultural and gender expectations.

The most notorious pair of women pirates was Mary Read and Anne Bonny. According to Johnson's account, Read was born in England, Bonny in Ireland. After a series of adventures--disguised as a man, Read served in the army, while Bonny grew up as a reckless tomboy in South Carolina--the two women, who had both been married, flouted convention again by dressing in men's clothes and becoming pirates.

After leaving her husband, Bonny became the lover of Captain John "Calico Jack" Rackam and joined him on his pirate ship. Shortly thereafter Read joined their crew. Read and Bonny became friends on board ship in their male personae.

From Read's point of view, Johnson describes her realization that Bonny was a woman, as well: "Her Sex was not so much as suspected by any Person on board till Anne Bonny, who was not altogether so reserved in Point of Chastity, took a particular Liking to her; in short, Anne Bonny took her for a handsome young Fellow, and for some Reasons best known to herself, first discovered her Sex to Mary Read."

As Emma Donoghue writes, even though there is no way of knowing what transpired between the two women, "Their friendship [was] so intimate as to look to an outsider like a love affair." It angered Bonny's lover so much that the pair revealed Read's sex to him, which apparently appeased him. The women remained close and undertook numerous pirating raids together.

In the end, they were captured and tried in Jamaica for their crimes. Although the judge sentenced them to hanging, they "pleaded their bellies"--that is, claimed that they were pregnant--and temporarily avoided execution. Not long after, Mary Read died in prison of a fever. Anne Bonny simply disappeared.

Even though we will never know how sexual, if at all, the relationship between Bonny and Read was, they do stand out as fiercely independent women who were committed to each other in a mostly all male environment.

The Cultural Legacy of Pirates

After the intense publicity that pirates received in the early eighteenth century, they continued to play an important role in British and American culture and literature. In the nineteenth century, works such as Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* and numerous novels about Blackbeard portray pirates as romantic anti-heroes who seek adventure with other men.

Forever outside social norms, the pirate has become, at least in a figurative sense, suggestive of gay identity in the modern world.

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