Romanticizing Piracy During its Golden Age, 1650-1730

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Piracy can be traced back as far as the reign of Ramesses II, pharaoh of Egypt from 1279-1213 BCE.[1] In modern times, pirates continue to operate off the Somalian coast, capturing shipping vessels and holding crews hostage, like the 2009 capture of the *MV Maersk Alabama* that inspired the film *Captain Phillips* starring Tom Hanks.[2] There is one era of piracy, however, that outshines all the others, that comes racing to the forefront of imaginations when the word "pirates" is uttered: the Golden Age of Piracy. This is the period when the West's most feared and notorious pirates - Blackbeard, William Kidd, and Calico Jack Rackham, among many others - ruled the seas, terrorizing the merchants and British Royal Navy in the Caribbean, along the coasts of colonial America and Western Africa, and in the Indian Ocean. Nearly all of the well-known portrayals of pirates in popular fiction from the 20th century to today are taken from the Golden Age of Piracy.

While certainly more prevalent in popular culture today, the romanticizing of these pirates is not exclusive to the most recent centuries. In fact, even during the Golden Age of Piracy itself, books, plays, and ballads were produced that sensationalized and romanticized the pirates and their nefarious deeds. And their deeds were nefarious, contrary to the way pirates are depicted in produced works, both theatrical and in print, modern and contemporary. It was not uncommon for pirates to beat merchant captains to find out where any valuables were stored on the captured ships, and numerous reports show that more sadistic means were undertaken if the captain did not immediately release the information.[3] Additionally, many of the romantic aspects

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[1] K.A. Kitchen, *Pharaoh Triumphant: The Life and Times of Ramesses II, King of Egypt.* (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 198). pp. 40-41

[2] Edmund Sanders and Julian E. Barnes. "Somalia Pirates Hold U.S. Captain." *Los Angeles Times*, April 9, 2009.

[3] David Cordingly. *Under the Black Flag: The Romance and the Reality of Life Among the Pirates.* (New York: Random House, 1997) pp. 128-30

surrounding the portrayal of pirates - walking the plank, buried treasure, and plunder that consisted of chests of gold and jewels chief among them - were either overly exaggerated or completely mythic. Although there are a few reported cases of pirates burying their treasure to avoid its capture by authorities - William Kidd's being a notable example - such acts were rare.[4] Likewise, while a few prizes (the nautical term for captured ships) did indeed have gold, silver, and jewelry on board, the vast majority of vessels that were taken by pirates contained trade goods - sugar, spices, cloth, slaves, etc. The idea of forcing hostages or others to "walk the plank" as a form of punishment/death seems to have been entirely fabricated, as there is not a single recorded instance of it being used on ships, pirate or otherwise.[5] Given the discrepancies between the portrayal of pirates in popular fiction and the reality, it is necessary to define both piracy and the distinction between pirates, privateers, buccaneers, and corsairs as they existed during the Golden Age of Piracy.

Piracy is the act of robbing or plundering on the sea, or on coastal lands by ship-borne attackers, either through force or the threat of force. Those who engage in piracy are naturally designated pirates. A pirate differed from a privateer in that the former attacked anyone they chose to and held no loyalties to anyone other than his shipmates and the sea, while the latter was "an armed vessel, or the commander and crew of that vessel, which was licensed to attack and seize the vessels of a hostile nation." Privateers were given a letter of marque by their government that enabled them to essentially perform legal acts of piracy against ships belonging to the nation(s) with whom the privateer's nation was at war.[6] Privateers were used extensively in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in times of war, before large navies existed to fight

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[4] Richard Zacks, *The Pirate Hunter: The True Story of Captain Kidd* (New York: Hyperion, 2002), pp. 241-42

[5] Cordingly pp. xiv

[6] Cordingly, *Under the Black Flag* pp. xvii

battles on the sea, and engaged in both ship-to-ship warfare and in the raiding and looting of goods to disrupt enemy economies.[7] Additionally, pirates held all claim to any booty they secured, and could distribute it how they pleased and when they pleased. Privateers, in contrast, "were required to submit their prizes to admiralty courts which ruled on the legality of their captures."[8]

Pirates, corsairs, and buccaneers also all varied, but only slightly. Corsairs originally referred specifically to pirates from the Mediterranean Sea that were in their height of operation during the Crusades, but the moniker eventually came to represent all pirates, no matter their origin or area of operation. The term "buccaneers" has also been stretched to include all pirates that operated in the Caribbean in the seventeenth century, but "the original buccaneers were hunters in the woods and valleys of Hispaniola," mainly of French descent, who eventually took to the sea to raid and pillage nearby islands.[9] The word "buccaneer" comes from the French word "boucane," itself derived from the Caribbean Arawak word "buccan," a type of wooden frame used to smoke or cure meat that both the natives of the island and the French buccaneers used.[10] Sir Henry Morgan, the captain after whom a popular brand of rum is now named, is easily the most famous of the buccaneers.

Although somewhat differentiated, pirates, buccaneers, and privateers all operated during what is today referred to as the Golden Age of Piracy. This period, in which piracy of a Western European nature was in its height, spanned roughly from 1650-1730, and is usually divided into

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[7] Marcus Rediker. *Villains of all Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age.* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), pp. 6-7
[8] Margarette Lincoln. *British Pirates and Society, 1680-1730.* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2014), pp.4
[9] Cordingly, *Under the Black Flag* pp.xviii
[10] Oxford English Dictionary

three distinct phases: the buccaneers and their raids of 1650-1680, highlighted by two Henry

Morgan-led expeditions, one on Spanish Portobello and the other on Panama;[11] the "Pirate

Round," of the 1690s, when the likes of Henry Every (also spelled Avery) and William Kidd

sailed from England and the Americas to the Arabian Sea, robbing Indian and East India Trading

Company vessels; and most popularly, the period following the War of Spanish Succession, from

1716-1726. It is from this final era that the majority of pirates still familiar to laypeople today

were at their height, including Edward Teach, better known as Blackbeard, Calico Jack

Rackham, and the female pirates Mary Read and Anne Bonny. These famous few were part of as

many as 4,000 pirates roaming the Atlantic Ocean in the opening decades of the eighteenth

century.[12] As mentioned, many of the 20th and 21st century pirate films, television shows, and

video games take place during the third wave of the Golden Age of Piracy.

Piracy in such a magnitude as the one in the Golden Age did not happen by chance;

something drove those sailors to piracy. Something in their lives caused sailors to decide that a

short life plundering merchants was their best option (the average age of a pirate in this era was

27).[13] Two prevailing motivations have surfaced, both of which can be traced back to

government rule: poor treatment of sailors by navies, particularly the British Royal Navy, and

merchantmen; and the lack of work provided to privateers and sailors following the end of war.

Following the War of Spanish Succession, the combat of which ended in 1711, Britain,

France, and Spain severely reduced the size of their navies. The British Royal Navy in particular

cut nearly 75% of its sailors between 1712 and 1714. The end of war also meant the letters of

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[11] Cordingly, *Under the Black Flag* pp. xviii-xvix
[12] Rediker, *Villains of All Nations* pp. 8-9
[13] Rediker, Marcus. *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750. (*New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 12

marque, the licenses privateers held that provided them the legal power to capture ships sailing

under the flag of enemy nations, were no longer valid.[14] These two actions left tens of thousands

of sailors, most of whom had grown up sailing and were not versed in any other trades, out of

work, either begging in port cities, or, if they were lucky enough to be captain of their own ship,

traversing the oceans in search of odd jobs.

The sudden reduction of the Royal Navy in the years between 1712 and 1714, however,

was not the sole reason sailors who had previously been legally employed turned to piracy. Even

prior to the end of the War of Spanish Succession (1701-14), the Royal Navy's poor treatment of

its crewman influenced many to become pirates and cast government agencies in a negative

light, allowing for pirates to be sympathetic characters and easily romanticized. In the late

seventeenth and early eighteenth century, Royal Naval officers and captains were notorious for

their cruel treatment of sailors. Punishments for even minor infractions were harsh, and were

dealt out with a number of instruments, including whips and canes.[15] Although after the Golden

Age of Piracy, Richard Sargeant was lashed by his captain in 1729 for the "irregular steering" of

the ship.[16] Captains appeared to take pleasure in getting creative with their punishments, as a

number of sailors were beaten with animal parts, cookware, and fishing equipment.[17] On board a

ship, isolated from any sort of societal regulation, the captain "had formal powers over the labor

process, the dispensing of food, the maintenance of health, and general social life."[18] It was not

uncommon for ship captains - both of naval and private vessels - to supply only the bare

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[14] Rediker, *Villains of All Nations* pp. 23
[15] Rediker, *Between the Devil* pp. 212
[16] Deposition of Daniel McNamera (1729), as quoted in Rediker, *Between the Devil* pp. 216
[17] Phillips v. Haskins, HCA 24/133 (1722); Arnold v. Ranson, HCA 24/129 (1706) as quoted in Rediker, *Between the Devil* pp. 216-17
[18] Rediker, *Between the Devil* pp. 211-12

minimum of food, drink, and other necessities for a trip to cut down on costs, forcing the crew to "spend half their wages buying themselves victuals."[19] Food and drink could also be manipulated to serve as a form as punishment, as well. A number of court cases from the early eighteenth century show that captains would fairly regularly restrict access to provisions, which led to starvation of many and the deaths of several sailors.[20]

Abuse and mistreatment of sailors was not limited to the corporal, either. Officers of the Royal Navy, as well as captains of private vessels, frequently delayed payment of wages to their crew, either in an effort to prevent desertion or simply because there was no money to be doled out. (Captains believed that a sailor would stay on the ship and continue to work if he was due pay. Eventually, however, if that pay was delayed for long enough, the sailor would find another ship on which to sail.) In one instance, members of the crew of the HMS *Suffolk* of the Royal Navy were brave enough to demand their back pay after fighting off the French. Instead of receiving their due wages, the men were hanged.[21] Shortly after, in the 1690s, a song about these events was written by an unknown person. Entitled "The Sea-Martyrs; or, the Seamen's Sad Lamentation for their Faithful Service, Bad Pay, and Cruel Usage," the ballad is sympathetic of the men of the *Suffolk* and entirely critical of the Royal Navy and British government as a whole. A stanza emphasizes the importance of the sailors' wages for their families, and the apparent disregard by Admiralty Court - the governmental body that oversees the Royal Navy - as the author writes:

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[19] Barlow pp. 529, 540, as quoted in Rediker *Between the Devil* pp. 143
[20] Robuds v. Selby, HCA 24/129 (1710); Parker v. Boucher, HCA 24/132 (1719), as quoted in Rediker *Between the Devil* pp. 222-23
[21] Lincoln pp. 5

> Their starving families at home / expected their slow pay would come, / But our proud Court meant no such thing; / Not one groat [an English silver coin] must they have till spring; / To starve all summer would not do, / They must still starve all winter too.[22]

Before the lyrics of the song, the author penned two lines highlighting the sad circumstance surrounding many sailors under the Royal Navy: "Thus our new Government does subjects serve, / And leaves them this sad choice: to hang or starve."[23] Given these torturous and unfair conditions, it is easy to understand why sailors were eager to look for a different means of living, even if it meant being branded an outlaw.

Pirate ships were operated in stark contrast to those of naval, privateer, and merchant ships, which helped to create a positive depiction of them and contributed to the romanticizing of pirates in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They were primarily democratic, not authoritarian mini-states; victuals were shared evenly amongst officers and crew, so men only starved if supplies were low; pay was distributed fairly and on time, and captains were incentivized to continue to do so. In essence, pirate ships were the polar opposites of any legally operated sailing vessel. Nearly every pirate ship was conducted according to agreed upon articles, written up and signed by each member of the crew, detailing the rules and customs. Based on these articles, "crews allocated authority, distributed plunder, food, and other resources, and enforced discipline." The captain of a ship was elected by the crew, and remained in power only as long as the crew allowed it.[24] In times of war, a pirate captain was given absolute power, but at any other time, decisions about where to sail, whom to attack, and the like were decided by a majority vote of all sailors. Neither captains nor officers were given larger

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[22] C.H. Firth, ed. *Naval Songs and Ballads*. (London: Printed for the Navy Records Society, 1908), pp. 141
[23] Firth pp.140
[24] Rediker, *Villains of All Nations* pp. 64-65

rations or better quality food, and while captains were often given a cabin in which to dine and sleep, it was just as common for ordinary sailors to dine and sleep in those quarters as the captain.[25] A quartermaster, the second-in-command on a pirate ship and counterbalance to the captain to prevent corruption and abuse of power, who himself was elected by popular vote, oversaw the acquisition and fair distribution of any prizes taken by the crew.[26] For its time, a pirate ship was remarkably egalitarian and politically progressive. It gave each sailor a voice and chance to climb the ranks - an opportunity that was virtually nonexistent for a common sailor on a merchant ship or naval vessel.

The potential for exorbitant financial gains present in the life of a pirate also largely contributed to piracy being looked on with favor in working class Britain and America in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Undoubtedly the main - and often the only - source of income for a given pirate was the plunder gained from capturing a prize. This meant that a sailor would receive immediate pay for helping to take a vessel or raid a town or fort - something that rarely, if ever, occurred on the deck of a naval or merchant ship. The ballad "Villainy Rewarded; Or, The Pirate's Last Farewel to the World," written after the execution of some of the crew of pirate captain Henry Every in 1696, claimed that "all had a share" of the plunder of the *Gunsway*, the ship of a Mogul prince, the capturing of which vaulted Every into pirate stardom, which amounted to "each man [receiving] 600 pounds and more" of "gold and silver store."[27] Whether or not the lyrics of the ballad were honest, such a high payday would certainly be enticing to any mariner of the seventeenth century. Prizes for pay also meant, however, that if a

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[25] Captain Charles Johnson, *A General History of the Pirates*. London, 1724. Reprint Seattle: Loki's Publishing, 2018. pp. 124, 131
[26] Rediker, *Villains of All Nations* pp. 67-68
[27] Firth pp. 134

crew was unable or unwilling to capture a vessel, there would be no loot, and therefore no money. Crew members and, especially, captains of pirate ships were thus motivated to continually hunt for prizes, for if too much time between captures elapsed, captains, officers, and some ordinary sailors were in danger of being removed, either from positions of power or from the ship entirely.[28] Despite this risk, piracy was still an attractive option to many seafaring men of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century. Much of what was so appealing to sailors also seemed attractive to members of working class in Britain and the American colonies, as it promised much more freedom and many more opportunities than they would see in their lives, and contributed to piracy being romanticized among the masses, especially when their lives had become upended economically not too long prior.

England in the mid-sixteenth century through the early-seventeenth century saw a complete overhaul of its economic and socioeconomic structure, the effects of which continued to impact lower-class members of British society during the Golden Age of Piracy some 50-plus years later. Fields were being converted from primarily large-family, subsistence-based farming to fit market and exporting needs (i.e., turned into cash crops); deforestation was rampant as lumber was increasingly needed to build ships for military and commercial ventures across the oceans; and demand for coal, wool, and cloth soared as cities urbanized and markets grew.[29] As a result, the lives of most peasant farming families were flipped on their heads. Their main sources of food - forests, where wild game, nuts, berries, fish, and herbs could be found, and plots of land used for subsistence farming - were destroyed, and the primary sources of income, selling crops to landowning members of the gentry class, was replaced by day- and wage-labor jobs,

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[28] Rediker, *Villains of All Nations* pp. 68-70

[29] Joanna Brooks, *Why we Left: Untold Stories & Songs of America's First Immigrants* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 25-26

"exposing… households to cyclical market depressions without the benefits of customary protections."[30] An unprecedented surge in population occurred at the same time, as England's population doubled from "an estimated 2.5 million in 1520 to an estimated 5 million in 1680." This created an excess of demand for food and other necessities, as well as a surplus of potential laborers able to work the land and in commercial markets, causing prices of food and other necessities to skyrocket while simultaneously forcing wages to plummet:

> The price of food tripled from 1500 to 1570, then grew sixfold from 1570 to the early seventeenth century. Rents increased eightfold between 1530 and 1640; in some areas, rents tripled between the 1570s and 1640s. During the same time period, the price of firewood… increased fifteenfold… [while] real wages fell by 50 percent from the early sixteenth to the early seventeenth century.[31]

These compounding economic forces compelled many family members to continually migrate in search of work. Between the sixteenth and seventeenth century, the percentage of English laborers without their own land grew from between 10 and 20 to between 50 and 70. Similarly, in the mid-seventeenth century, upwards of 60 percent of a given English community's citizens uprooted in any decade. Other villages and towns saw such a large influx of people that the residents "complained that they were being overrun by subsistence migrants."[32] The same mass-immigration was seen in major cities like London, whose population "grew from fifty thousand in the 1520s… to four hundred thousand by 1650."[33]

British government did nothing to alleviate the situation of the poor in the late sixteenth and seventeenth century. In fact, they compounded the issue, as parliament passed laws that made illegal what used to be understood rights and/or privileges of the poor, including the

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[30] Brooks pp. 26
[31] Brooks pp. 29.
[32] Brooks pp. 27
[33] Brooks pp. 29

gathering of kindling from downed branches in a forest. Some men were even hanged "for being without a means of making a living."[34] When faced with conditions such as these, many of England's poor harbored a legitimate resentment toward British government and aristocracy. While some were able to emigrate to colonies in the Americas or the Caribbean, most were stuck in England. It is completely understandable, then, that the poor and working-class members of British society of the mid-1600s saw pirates in an empathetic light. No longer stuck on land, working countless hours for an unlivable wage, pirates like Henry Morgan were free to do as they pleased, roaming in exotic and tropical locations and earning a lifetime's amount of money in the capture of a single ship. They were tailor-made to be romanticized.

Starting a few decades later, during the Golden Age of Piracy itself, the late seventeenth and late eighteenth centuries in Britain saw an explosion in the creation of a middle class, as the dependence on overseas colonies created a growing need for merchants to import trade goods from the West Indies and British colonial America, and export manufactured goods from Britain and slaves from West Africa back to the colonies.[35] These merchants, who oversaw the buying and selling of goods in port cities like Bristol and London in England, Boston in North America, and Jamaica in the Caribbean, and especially the seamen they employed to transport the goods, were "the very Pillars" of England and its empire in the 1600s and 1700s.[36] But they were not alone in this triumph. Before a merchantman could see the exorbitant profits he did, in fact often before the business could even get off the ground, he required financial backing. This came, more often than not, in the form of a wealthy aristocrat, who wished to take advantage of the ludicrous amounts of money to be made in the overseas trade. Thus the global trade, which was

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[34] Brooks pp. 31-32
[35] Lincoln pp. 115
[36] Petty pp. 259-60, as quoted in Rediker, *Between the Devil* pp. 16

to be so affected by the pirates of the Golden Age, connected the growing middle class and upper

class of Britain together, and in fact "subtly affected the representation of piracy."[37]

While pirates of all kinds during the Golden Age were officially recognized as enemies of

the state for their disruption of national economies by raiding in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans,

they were often appreciated by certain merchants in busy port cities like New York and Port

Royal, Jamaica for the very same reason. The crew and officers of a pirate ship can survive on

capturing prizes only so long as they have the ability to turn the stolen goods into physical

money; silks and tobacco are well and good, but one cannot expect to live long off of them.

Therefore, the pirates had to find individuals who were willing to purchase their ill-gotten goods.

Middlemen, also known as fences, like Adam Baldridge saw the opportunity of purchasing

stolen goods at a fraction of what they would normally cost and selling them as legitimate items

to "honest" merchants in the port cities, who were more often than not aware of just from where

the goods were coming.[38] It was a harmonious and mutually beneficial relationship for all; the

pirates were given money with which they could purchase booze, women, food, and items for

repairs for their ships; middlemen made a hefty profit buying discounted goods and selling them

to merchants back home; and the merchants received exotic items at reduced prices.[39] These

merchants, who were often respected members of their society, were therefore loathe to condemn

piracy and the actions of pirates, and contributed to the favorable light shed on pirates by many

during the Golden Age, indirectly adding to the romantic appeals of piracy. Money, it seemed,

was more valuable than morals to certain populations.

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[37] Lincoln pp. 115-16
[38] Frank Sherry. *Raiders & Rebels: The Golden Age of Piracy*. (New York: Hearst Marine Books, 1986) pp. 92-93
[39] Sherry pp. 116-17

As the pirate continued to interrupt trade and commerce in mid-seventeenth century with the beginning of the first wave of the Golden Age, tales of piracy and encounters with pirates began to disseminate across all classes in Britain and colonial America. Literacy rates in England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, however, were still low, with only about 40% of men and 25% of women being able to read and write by 1700.[40] In the working classes, where one was fortunate to receive even an elementary-level education, the rates were even lower, so news outlets like papers and fliers, and books like Captain Charles Johnson's *A General History of the Pyrates* were generally not read by the poor (those who could read likely could not afford to purchase newspapers and books).[41] Instead, many members of the working class learned about current events via word of mouth, or, especially in the case of adventures on the sea, via songs and ballads.[42] It is important to note, however, that since there is so little physical evidence remaining from members of lower classes in England on this topic, conclusions on how they consumed stories and information are murky at best. Regardless, songs and ballads about the Royal Navy, pirates, and the interactions between the two were prominent, as evidenced by the number of ballads from the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries compiled in C.H. Firth's collection for the Navy Records Society.[43]

Many of the ballads, written by "professional composers who had no direct connection with the navy, and no part in the events they described," were celebratory in Royal Naval affairs, whether they be victories over the Dutch, Spanish, or French, or the capturing of notorious

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[40] David Mitch, "Education and Skill of the British Labour Force," in Roderick Floud and Paul Johnson, eds., *The Cambridge Economic History of Modern Britain, Vol. I: Industrialisation, 1700-1860*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) p. 344.
[41] Margaret Spufford. *Small Books and Pleasant Histories: Popular Fiction and Its Readership in Seventeenth-Century England* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1981), pp. 19-21
[42] Lincoln pp. 133
[43] Firth pp. vii-vix

pirates operating in the Atlantic. In 1719, American founding father Benjamin Franklin wrote a

ballad that depicted the capturing and killing of Blackbeard, a year after the terrifying pirate's

death.[44] Some were written by sailors who experienced firsthand the events of the song; a few

were even written by pirates themselves. Captain Henry Every is credited with penning *A Copy*

of Verses in the summer of 1694 to persuade seamen or other "brave boys, whose courage is

bold" to join him and go 'on the account' - a common phrase for engaging in piracy. Every

promises readers/listeners of the song "I'll glut you with gold," and declares that while he will

treat ships sailing with English flags with more care, "good quarters I give, but no nation I

spare."[45] Songs like this, and *Captain Kid's Farewel to the Seas; Or, The Famous Pirate's*

Lament (circa 1706), which depicted the infamous William Kidd in a not-unsympathetic light,

would have reached the ears of the lower classes and ignited imaginations about a life at sea, free

to explore the world, to voice their opinion and have it heard, and to be unshackled by the

economic and political oppression at home.[46] The fable of Libertatia (or Libertalia) fed into this

belief and underscored the romantic idealism of piracy.

The tale of Libertatia emerged during the second wave of the Golden Age of Piracy,

known as the "Pirate Round," which took place primarily in the 1690s. This period saw a fair

number of pirates - primarily of English, Scottish, and Welsh origin - patrolling the Indian Ocean

and Arabian Sea and preying on merchant ships carrying spices and silks from Bengal,

Indonesia, and other islands in what is today referred to as Southeast Asia back to Europe and the

Americas. Being so far from home, the pirates deemed it necessary to establish a base where they

could return to restock on supplies and run if in trouble. The British East India Trading Company

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[44] Firth pp. ; The Taking of Teach the Pirate, 1719." Founders Online, Accessed September 13, 2018.
[45] Firth pp. 131-32
[46] Firth pp. 134-37

was already established in India and boasted a number of trading ports and fortifications along the coast, and the Dutch had long had been trading in the region, so establishing a base there was not an option. Madagascar was an ideal location for a number of reasons. It was close enough to the Indian trading routes that they could be raided, yet far enough away so as not to invoke attacks by the British, Indians, or Dutch. The island offered "sheltered harbors, where mariners could clean and repair their hulls…, overflowed with fresh water, and meat was always available, as were oranges and limes - indispensable for preventing and curing scurvy."[47] After 1691, when Scottish trader Adam Baldridge set up shop on St. Mary's Island, a small isle just off the northeastern coast of Madagascar, sailors operating in the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea were able to buy and sell goods from England, America, and the Caribbean. Baldridge did not much care whether he was dealing with merchants or pirates, so long as the profits were good.[48] Madagascar could have become a haven for sailors of any kind; pirates just took it over and made it their own.

As pirates of the second wave earned their fortune robbing in the Pirate Round, a fair number of them retired with their riches and settled down to a life of luxury in Madagascar and St. Mary's Island, building homes and farms, marrying some of the native peoples of the island and enslaving others. At this new base, the pirates seemed to form their own commonwealth, governed by an communally agreed-upon set of rules. Rather than claiming loyalty to a European nation, these pirates declared themselves "from the sea," and "showed loyalty [only] to their fellow outlaws."[49] When news reached England of the pirate haven at Madagascar, it

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[47] Sherry pp. 87-88
[48] Sherry pp. 91-92
[49] Sherry pp. 94-95

seemed to readers that the raiders were forming their own nation, and it is from this idea, and the

story of a one Captain Misson, that the fable of Libertatia was born.

> Frank Sherry recounts the story of Captain Misson in *Raiders & Rebels*:
> The amazing Misson came from an old French family and had gone to sea as a boy, rising
> to become a keen ship's officer… Misson and [his friend, the Dominican priest]
> Carracioli thereafter underwent a series of hair-raising adventures, culminating in
> Misson's becoming captain of his own ship… These unusual pirates then set out to found
> a democracy where men could shake off "the yoke of Tyranny, and live in freedom."[50]

This democracy, as the story goes, took shape in the form of a pirate colony on

Madagascar and was named Libertatia. It "was run on socialistic principles with all property held

in common under a democratic government." Slaves found on captured ships were freed and

treated as equals; all laws in the community were fair and just; Libertatia was a complete utopia.

[51] Unfortunately for the pirates, "Libertatia came to and end when Misson's ship foundered in a

hurricane and he was drowned." Whether or not the pirate kingdom of Libertatia actually existed

(most modern historians believe it did not, as "there is absolutely no evidence that a pirate named

Misson ever existed, let alone his republic of Libertatia"), the idea of such a place would have

certainly caught the attention of oppressed or exhausted workers in Britain.[52] A land where

everyone is treated equally, where wealth is shared with the many and not the few, would have

been appealing to the working and the poor, and as such, these people would have seen pirates

and piracy in a sympathetic, romanticized light.

Like the working and poor, the emerging middle class and longstanding upper classes

were drawn to the stories of piracy, but for their tales of excitement and adventure, rather than

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[50] Sherry pp. 99
[51] Jan Rogoziński, *Honor Among Thieves: Captain Kidd, Henry Every, and the Pirate Democracy in the indian Ocean* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2000) pp. 182
[52] Sherry pp. 99

the political and socioeconomic ideologies. A few pirates of the first phase of the Golden Age were well-known among the elites of British society, particularly Henry Morgan, who was pardoned for his crimes and knighted, and whose life ended as a wealthy and respected Lieutenant Governor of Jamaica.[53] Morgan's acceptance in British society, however, was tenuous at best, and dependent upon the elite's perception of him and belief in his respectable behavior. Once Morgan's nature at sea was revealed by his crewmate Alexandre Olivier Exquemelin, those positive perceptions shifted.

Alexandre Olivier Exquemelin (Anglicized as John Esquemeling), who sailed under Captain Henry Morgan until 1674, authored a firsthand account of the capturing of Panama and Portobello, raids led by Morgan, that depicted the captain "as both cruel and lustful." First published in Dutch as *De Americaensche Zee-Roovers* in 1678, the book was translated into German in 1679, Spanish in 1681, and finally made its way to England in 1684 as *The Buccaneers of America*. When the aristocrats and other well-off members of English society read about Henry Morgan's true nature, his reputation was severely damaged, and he returned to being associated with the "extreme acts of violence and the kind of ruthless piracy" that were "regarded as damaging to national reputation."[54] To the upper classes reading about piracy, Henry Morgan's life clouded their attitudes. On the one hand, his acts of piracy as a whole were seen as an evil that threatened the security of England and its global trade. On the other hand, pirates like Morgan disrupted the economies of Britain's enemies while simultaneously strengthening the colonial influence of Britain in the West Indies. The life of pirate turned explorer William Dampier only further clouded the air on a pirate's place in British society.

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[53] Lincoln pp. 116; Cordingly, *Under the Black Flag* pp. 55
[54] Lincoln pp. 118

William Dampier (1651-1715) first took to the sea in the service of King Charles II in the

Third Anglo-Dutch War of 1672-74, near the end of the first wave of the Golden Age of Piracy.

Like many other sailors of the era, he was unable to find steady work after the war, and so joined

a band of buccaneers "looting Spanish towns in the Americas."[55] His piratical career would have

been an ordinary one, but for the fact that his curious nature allowed him to keep "accurate

journals about the geography, flora, and fauna of the places he visited." After partaking in a

voyage circumnavigating the world, Dampier published *A New Voyage Round the World* in

1697, and "he became an instant celebrity." Although most educated individuals knew about his

piratical activities, Dampier was careful to downplay them in his book, and presented himself as

"a respectable captain and promoter of new discoveries." The book itself "thrilled a wider

reading public," as "it was packed with interesting details of strange lands."[56] Like Henry

Morgan, Dampier's contributions to British social and economic well-being trumped any

atrocities committed as a pirate, but unlike his predecessor, Dampier's reputation was never

sullied.

The popularity of books such as Dampier's *A New Voyage* or Exquemelin's *De

Americaensche Zee-Roovers* highlight the interest and intrigue readers had (and continue to

have) about pirates and piracy in the Golden Age, even while piratical activity was still a serious

threat to maritime commerce. Daniel Defoe's novel *Captain Singleton* (1720), which was

originally presented as a pirate's autobiography, and biography on Henry Every titled *The King

of the Pirates* (1720) were well-received, and a 1709 biography titled *The Life and Adventures of

Capt. John Avery*, an alias of Henry Every, was "heavily publicized as a best-seller in

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[55] Lincoln pp. 119
[56] Lincoln pp. 120

newspapers."[57] The most popular and famous of books on the subject, in part because of the mystery surrounding the author, is unequivocally *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pyrates* by Captain Charles Johnson (usually shortened to *A General History of the Pyrates* in modern reprints).

No one knows who Captain Charles Johnson was, but the overall accuracy of his descriptions of pirates and their activities have led modern historians and researchers to utilize *A General History* as the foremost primary resource on the Golden Age of Piracy. *A General History* took the English literary world by storm in 1724, with a second edition being published also in 1724, a "third in 1725, and a fourth in 1726. The first volume was translated into Dutch in 1725," and then German in 1728.[58] Captain Johnson "took most of his information from the transcripts of pirate trials and from the reports in contemporary newspapers," but sensationalized and romanticized them, adding in dialogue, describing faraway and tropical places "in vivid detail," and focusing mainly on the capturing of prizes and battles between pirates and their adversaries, usually the Royal Navy.[59] The enormous success by *A General History*, even when compared to Dampier's *A New Voyage* or Exquemelin's *The Buccaneers of America*, illustrates the desire for literate members of the British community to read romantic and sensational tales of swashbuckling pirates over entirely factually accurate ones.

Print was not the only place, however, where the portrayal of pirates found a home in England in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century; they could also be found on the stage. In 1712, Charles Johnson (a playwright, not the author of *A General History)* wrote a piece entitled *The Successful Pyrate*, loosely based on the life of Captain Henry Every, which

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[57] Cordingly pp. xix-xx; Lincoln pp. 16-17
[58] Lincoln pp. 16
[59] Cordingly pp. xix

"glamorized [E]very's achievements" and was "performed in London at the Theatre Royal" in

1713.[60] Although Johnson was not a very successful playwright, the very notion that a play

glorifying the life of a pirate was performed illustrated the idea that pirates were not as vilified in

eighteenth century England as could be assumed.

It was not just disenfranchised sailors that adopted the life of piracy, either. In one

peculiar but well-known instance, the adventure and romance of piracy drew a wealthy sugar

plantation owner to go on the account. Major Stede Bonnet, described by Captain Charles

Johnson as "a Gentleman of good Reputation in the Island of *Barbadoes*…, a Master of plentiful

Fortune,... [who] had the Advantage of a liberal Education," traded in the life of comfort he

knew for one of danger and death.[61] His life as an outlaw did not exactly start with the sort of

pillaging and robbing that is associated with most pirates, however, as the ship, guns, and crew

Bonnet acquired to go pirating he purchased at his own expense - the direct opposite of what any

"good" pirate would do. After plundering a handful of ships off the coast of Virginia, Bonnet ran

into the one and only Blackbeard, who realized Bonnet's ineptitude as a captain and relieved him

of his ship. Taken aboard and essentially a prisoner on Blackbeard's *Queen Anne's Revenge*,

Bonnet seemed to have no qualms about his situation, as he was reported in 1717 as to be seen

walking "about in his morning gown, and then to his books of which he has a good library

aboard."[62] Bonnet was captured and hanged in 1718.[63]

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[60] Lincoln pp. 16-17
[61] Johnson pp. 58
[62] Cordingly pp. 18
[63] Angus Konstam. *Blackbeard: America's Most Notorious Pirate* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2006) pp. 235

The pirates of the Golden Age of Piracy "presented a challenge to the establishment and… helped to win the admiration of the downtrodden and the unfortunate."[64] Their egalitarian and democratically-run ships invoked romanticized ideals about what life aboard a pirate vessel would be like for landlocked members of the poor and working classes. The ballads and songs written about, and sometimes by, pirates and piracy also portrayed the raiders as economically prosperous without depicting any of the dangers or tedium of constantly being at sea, ignoring the rare and brief stops in port cities and constant evasion of the government's noose. Pirates, as seen through the eyes of a politically and socioeconomically exploited and oppressed worker, lived the ideal life. To the middle and upper classes, who were more conscious of the foul, evil deeds committed by pirates, the outlaw seafarers were no less spectacular, but more for the stories of adventure than for any social and political motives. Additionally, the portrayal of certain pirates like Henry Morgan and William Dampier as respectable members of British society who furthered British ideals and values allowed elites to look upon piracy with some favor. The books written by and about famous and infamous pirates, the newspaper headlines, and the plays performed during the Golden Age all portrayed piracy in a manner that the most romantic and sensational qualities were shown, while minimizing the harshness that pirates faced.

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[64] Lincoln pp. v

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