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## Pirates and Propaganda: The Condemnation of Piracy In the Early Modern Era

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## **Pirates and Propaganda: The Condemnation of Piracy In the Early Modern Era**

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**By Alexandra Wisner**

The modern view of pirates is shaped by their representations in media, from the *Pirates of Penzance* to the *Pirates of the Caribbean*. Often, pirates are in direct opposition to the imperial British navy, which is depicted as bumbling at best and overwhelmingly cruel at worst. The pirates in these stories, whether historical or fictional, are heroes, eking out a living on the seas. Such depictions are over simplified and lack the nuance of what piracy meant in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In addition, they glorify pirates, turning them from men looking to make a profit into champions of democracy and equality. These notions, however idealized, are incorrect. However, the violence often ascribed to piracy in the eighteenth century was exaggerated in newspaper reports of pirate activity; first person accounts from captured sailors paint a very different picture. Piracy was condemned to serve imperial and commercial interests; merchant shipping to colonies in the Americas was damaged by rampant piracy, and imperial powers sought to protect their colonial acquisitions. The Golden Age of Piracy was not a time of democracy and equality on the high seas, but a time of treasure-

seeking and unrest between imperial powers, where sailors hedged their bets to make their fortunes. Pirates were not as violent as post-Golden Age propaganda made them out to be, nor were they as egalitarian as modern people imagine them.

During the American early colonial period, the word ‘pirate’ was used to describe anyone who had not obtained a wartime commission from his government or did not pay the total fees due from his activities to his government. The term described a spectrum of illegal activity that ranged from accidental to premeditated, from privateers to criminals. Modern usage of ‘pirate’ defines it as a rigid and narrow category, where all pirates were unsavory societal outcasts, willing to prey on whoever crossed their paths. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, however, “monopoly companies, foreign combatants, and smugglers were called ‘piratical’ almost as much as renegade sea bandits were.”<sup>1</sup> A better word is ‘buccaneer’, which is usually used to describe pirates who sailed in the West Indies and the lower coasts of North America in the seventeenth century, but pirate is the term used in this paper.<sup>2</sup> In addition, pirate lore holds that

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<sup>1</sup> Mark G. Hanna, *Pirate Nests and the Rise of the British Empire, 1570-1740* (Williamsburg, VA: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 6-7.

<sup>2</sup> Guy Chet, *The Ocean Is a Wilderness: Atlantic Piracy and the Limits of State Authority, 1688-1856* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014), xiii.

pirate ships were individual societies, with no ties back to their homes or countrymen. In these stories, pirates are on the search for societal and democratic ideals, or even act as anti-imperialists; they have become Robin Hood-esque in their portrayals. On the other hand, as British sea naval captains described it, pirates—as the word is used today—were motivated by greed.<sup>3</sup> Both require piracy to group itself into a neat, easily definable ideology, which is not nearly so easy to do.

Piracy depended upon the state, its land, and its resources. The connection between sea-faring pirates and the land goes far back, but it was Elizabeth I who surmised that pirates could not operate without the aid of ports. She instituted a commission to investigate pirates who preyed upon English trade allies and their elite patrons. During her reign, England was not a unified, integrated nation, like how England's acquisitions in the New World were not unified until years after their colonization.<sup>4</sup> Pirates were a broad group, filled with accidental deviants to criminals, and they did not altogether forsake their connections to the land. Ports were pirates' lifelines, enabling repairs and exchanging of goods, and many pirates returned to the ports once they had retired

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<sup>3</sup> Hanna, 8.

<sup>4</sup> Hanna, 21, 25.

from their lives at sea to establish themselves through land ownership and marriage.<sup>5</sup> Piracy depended on the land; frontier colonial societies provided them with the infrastructure to allow organized crime to thrive without the efficiency necessary to shut it down.<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth was a “scourge of pirates” during her reign, partly due to pressure from wealthier and more powerful European nations like Spain; English pirates preyed on Spanish ships and earned the ire of Philip I’s ambassadors, who demanded Elizabeth punish pirate captains. James I held no such qualms about piracy, and doled out pardons. Some of those pardoned went on to become pirate hunters themselves; others used the reprieve to search for new plunder. Sometimes, mariners who had not made their fortune legally turned pirate and sailed to far-off ports to make their names or get revenge.<sup>7</sup> European powers insisted on protecting their colonial acquisitions, but Spain took it a step further. The Spanish crown employed guard cruisers (‘*guarda costas*’), armored ships ready to destroy every foreign ship they met. In turn, foreign ships regarded all Spanish vessels with hostility, creating “a state of perpetual warfare.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Hanna, *Pirate Nests*, 1, 12.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

<sup>7</sup> Hanna, 59. John Esquemeling, *The Buccaneers of America* (New York: Dover Publications, 1967), vi.

<sup>8</sup> Esquemeling, xxiii.

Sailors in the Americas made profits for their mother countries by pillaging, smuggling, and avoiding customs fees. In addition, the colonies could be used as a base of operations for attacks on other European powers in the Americas—namely, the Spanish. Sir Walter Raleigh and Francis Drake used Roanoke as a support station for attacks in the Caribbean. A group of wealthy colonial promoters from England, known as West Country Men, used piracy as colonial propaganda; without it, plans for colonization would have had far fewer supporters, as agriculture alone could not turn a quick profit. Even the opposition to piracy had to concede that it was necessary until colonies could sustain themselves. And once a pirate retired, he could advance in the world of colonial politics.<sup>9</sup> Imperialistic expansion required piracy and laws flexible enough to allow it to thrive. In the early days of British expansion, pirates seizing goods from non-British ships bolstered colonial economies. Richard Braithwaite, an English aristocrat, described seventeenth-century mariners: “[n]ecessary instruments are they, and agents of main importance in that Hydrarchy wherein they live; for the walls of the State could not subsist without them; but least useful they are to themselves, and

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<sup>9</sup> Hanna, *Pirate Nests*, 62.

most needful for others supportance [sic].”<sup>10</sup> The English state, through Charles II’s advisor Sir William Petty, realized that its greatest power was in shipping and sailors, and used them as such.<sup>11</sup>

Eventually, overseas colonial markets reached a point where they no longer required privateering and piracy to bolster themselves. When the English crown stopped supporting piracy around 1713, largely due to trade agreements with Spain, such as the *Asiento*, piracy became “at first superfluous, then an affliction.”<sup>12</sup> Pirates persisted in the face of the state’s efforts to stop them; accounts that describe the Royal Navy as an effective police force are incorrect, and, for the most part, policing did not take place at sea; “naval policing, such as it was, took place—intermittently, unenthusiastically, and ineffectually—at port and in coastal waters, rather than on the high seas.”<sup>13</sup> In addition, many early pirates were originally privateers whose contracts had run out. Delivering orders to stand down was a logistical nightmare on

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<sup>10</sup> Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh, *Many-Headed Hydra: The Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Beacon Press, 2000), 152, Ebook.

<sup>11</sup> Rediker and Linebaugh, 155.

<sup>12</sup> Hanna, *Pirate Nests*, 18. The *Asiento de Negros* was a trade agreement between the Spanish crown and merchants for the right to sell African slaves to Spanish colonies, through contracted work.

<sup>13</sup> Chet, *The Ocean Is a Wilderness*, xi-xii.

the open ocean; although hostilities between European imperial powers had diminished, severing privateering contracts was more difficult.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to the imperial and economic conflicts that played out on the seas, the racial conflicts of the early modern period also followed pirates. According to Arne Bialuschewski, a scholar of piracy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, “[i]t has been asserted that “as many as [thirty] percent of all pirates during the years 1715 to 1725 were of African descent.”<sup>15</sup> Supposedly, one-third of all pirates in that time period were Black, but the evidence is vague and most encounters between Black people and pirates went unrecorded. Of the available evidence, the best is from pirate crews along the west coast of Africa. When England and Spain turned against pirates and bolstered their ships’ defenses against pirate attacks, many ‘freebooters’ left the Caribbean and West Indies for new waters. Some of them ended up on the African coast, where they picked up sailors who wanted out

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<sup>14</sup> Paul Hallwood and Thomas Miceli, “Piracy and Privateers in the Golden Age: Lessons for Today,” *Ocean Development and International Law* 49, issue 3 (Jul.-Sept. 2018): 236-246, accessed December 9, 2022.

<sup>15</sup> Arne Bialuschewski, “Black People Under the Black Flag: Piracy and the Slave Trade on the West Coast of Africa, 1718-1723,” *A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies* 29, no. 4 (December 2008): 461-475, accessed September 13, 2022.



of the slave trade. Invariably, they attacked and looted slave vessels. Pirates operating in the waters along the African coast aimed to take their operations to Brazil or the Indian Ocean; they needed the means to get there, through better ships, weapons, and money.<sup>16</sup>

Interactions with free Africans focused on “material exchange.”<sup>17</sup> Europeans in Africa noted that African women were fond of the pirates and the gifts they brought, but Europeans also viewed Africans as inferior; they are not reliable sources. Some retired pirates hired free African *grumetes* whom they paid on a monthly basis; again, European sources note that the women were happy to prostitute themselves for the pirates. These exchanges for goods and labor seem peaceful enough, but pirates also embraced the violence of the slave trade. In 1719, the crew of the *Royal James* stopped to refill their water and asked for the assistance of some African canoe men. A few of the sailors went missing, and after several hours had gone by without their return, the pirates took the Africans hostage, chained them, and shot them.<sup>18</sup>

These few incidents do not represent the full scope of violence against Africans, both free and enslaved. Although pirates

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<sup>16</sup> Bialuschewski, “Black People Under the Black Flag,” 462-463.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 463.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 463-464.

in West Africa comprised a small group, there is little reason to believe that they held better attitudes toward Africans than their land-dwelling colonial counterparts, nor is there reason to believe that Black people in the Americas were treated with more respect. Pirates came out of colonial societies and benefitted from those colonial societies for many years. When it suited their inclinations, pirates were slaveholders themselves, keeping enslaved Africans on board their ships to do hard labor, not to speak of what female slaves might have suffered. However, their activities disrupted the British, Dutch, French, and Portuguese slave trades; in September of 1719, the *intendant* of Martinique claimed that there had been no slaves delivered to the island in two years.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, the slave trade was disrupted largely because the pirates would destroy slave ships indiscriminately, killing trader and slave alike. In the words of Bialuschewski, “[i]n general it seems very unlikely that pirates ever freed African slaves and accepted them as equal shareholding members in their ventures.... Although pirates preyed upon the slave trade, this does not mean that they took sides with the oppressed and exploited.”<sup>20</sup> Black people—whether Africans,

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<sup>19</sup> Bialuschewski, “Black People Under the Black Flag,” 466-468. Bialuschewski cautions against taking this account at its word; the *intendant*’s frustration with impeded trade is more relevant than if he was correct.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 467-468.

enslaved people in the Americas, or freedmen and women—did not fare better under piracy than they did other regimes in the early modern period.

Even in flattering depictions, pirates are not chivalrous or noble. They can be well-intentioned and goodhearted, but they are not mistaken for polite gentlemen. Part of this is due to pirates' excessive masculinity and zest for violence. In literary archetypes, piratical criminality is most often related to violence and economics.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, the myth of piracy is a mix of “historical facts overlaid with three centuries of ballads, melodramas, epic poems, romantic novels, adventure stories, comic strips and films.” Truths about pirates are hard to find since history has been so blended with fiction in each retelling.<sup>22</sup>

There is no pirate more popular or mythologized than Edward Thatch, more commonly known as Blackbeard.<sup>23</sup> Most of the history of Blackbeard has been compiled from *A General*

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<sup>21</sup> Erin Skye Mackie, *Rakes, Highwaymen, and Pirates: The Making of the Modern Gentleman in the Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 2009), 120.

<sup>22</sup> Susanne Zhanial, *Post Modern Pirates: Tracing the Development of the Pirate Motif with Disney's Pirates of the Caribbean* (Boston: Brill, 2020), 111.

<sup>23</sup> Arne Bialuschewski, “Blackbeard: The Creation of a Legend,” *Topic: the Washington and Jefferson College Review* 58 (2012): 39-54, accessed September 13, 2022. He is also sometimes called Edward Teach. Genealogical records confirm that his name was Thatch, so he will be referred to as such.

*History of Pyrates*.<sup>24</sup> The book, in general, is fond of colorful descriptions and exaggerations, but Blackbeard's chapter is especially riddled with them. Edward Thatch was likely from Jamaica and lived in Spanish Town. Thatch's first piratical exploit was in 1716 with fellow pirate Benjamin Hornigold off the east coast of Florida, where they looted silver from wrecked Spanish ships. On their way home, crew members broke away with a large portion of the loot, and the remaining men decided to make up their losses by going after Spanish, French, and British merchant ships. By 1717, Hornigold and Thatch's activities had spread over the Caribbean and up the coast of British North America.

In the beginning of his career, contemporary newspapers presented Blackbeard's exploits as neutral news. An article from July 1717 does not include any foul play or barbarous activities; additionally, "[the article] shows a lack of interest in creating and enriching some sort of excitement about pirates."<sup>25</sup> By November 1717, however, the same newspaper wrote about Blackbeard's seizure of seven ships and said the sailors were "met with most Barbarous inhumane Treatment [sic]." An article from the next week about a robbery uses similar language. Unlike the July

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<sup>24</sup> Captain Charles Johnson, *A General History of the Pyrates* (London: T. Warner, 1724), Google Books.

<sup>25</sup> Bialuschewski, "Blackbeard: The Creation of a Legend," 44-46.

article, there are no detailed descriptions of his activities, so it seems that words like “barbarous” were only used to make Blackbeard appear violent, brutal, and uncivilized.<sup>26</sup> The shift in newspapers was more prevalent in England than in British colonies. Piracy combined popular themes in eighteenth century literature, such as adventure, crime, and travel, but by the publication of *A General History of Pyrates* in 1724, negative reports had supplanted idealistic ideas of piracy. *A General History* was advertised as nonfiction, but it created fictional, larger-than-life ideas of pirates.<sup>27</sup>

As in the papers, the revised edition of *A General History of Pyrates* changed Thatch’s description rather drastically. In the first edition, he was described as “a good sailor, but a most cruel hardened Villain...perpetrating the most abominable wickedness imaginable...Black-beard was truly the Superior in Roguery, of all that company.” In the second edition, he took on fantastical and impossible qualities:

Our heroe, Captain Teach, Cognomen of Black-beard, from that large quantity of hair, which, like a frightful Meteor, covered his whole face, and frightened America more than any Comet that has appeared there in a long Time....This Beard was

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<sup>26</sup> Bialuschewski, “Blackbeard: The Creation of a Legend,” 44-46.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 47.

black, which he suffered to grow of an extravagant Length; as to Breadth, it came up to his Eyes...In Time of Action, he wore a Sling over his Shoulders, with three brace of Pistols, hanging in Holsters like Bandaliers; and stuck lighted Matches under his Hat...Eyes naturally looking fierce and wild, made him altogether such a Figure, that Imagination cannot form an Idea of a Fury, from Hell, to look more frightful [sic].<sup>28</sup>

Bialuschewski finds this description incredulous at best, due to the dangers of starting open, uncontrolled fires on wooden vessels.<sup>29</sup> Regardless of its likelihood, it does make for fantastic imagery, and any Blackbeard fan worth his salt incorporates it into his depiction of the pirate.<sup>30</sup>

According to Captain Charles Johnson, author of *A General History of Pyrates*, Blackbeard ruled his pirate crew through fear; many of them believed he was “the devil incarnate.” There was an incident in a tavern where he shot crewmember Israel Hands through the knee; when asked why, Blackbeard answered “that if he did not now and then kill one of them, they would forget who he was.”<sup>31</sup> Media depictions of Blackbeard, such as *Our Flag Means Death*, do not shy away from this violent element of him,

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<sup>28</sup> Johnson, *A General History of the Pyrates*, 87-88.

<sup>29</sup> Bialuschewski, “Blackbeard: The Creation of a Legend,” footnote 10.

<sup>30</sup> See *Our Flag Means Death*, episode 6.

<sup>31</sup> Johnson, *A General History of Pyrates*, 87.

but Blackbeard's contemporaries disagreed. When Henry Bostock and his ship were seized by Blackbeard, Bostock recorded that Blackbeard "did not abuse him or any of his men." Other accounts confirm that Blackbeard did not harm crew members; the commander of the *Montserrat Merchant* was invited onto Blackbeard's ship, the *Queen Anne's Revenge*, and Blackbeard's crew shared their food with him. While the commander was aboard the *Queen Anne's Revenge*, he witnessed the seizure of the *New Division*; this crew was treated in the same way. When it was proposed to burn the *New Division*, the captain wept, saying it was all he had to support his family, and the pirates sent him back to his ship with their other captives.<sup>32</sup> In another curious case, after a week-long raid on Charleston, Blackbeard demanded one chest of medicine as ransom for a captured merchant vessel. It was a minor price when he could have demanded much more, so why didn't he?

Bialuschewski situates Blackbeard's behavior in the larger context of life as a pirate in the eighteenth century: pirates would be hanged if arrested, so Blackbeard and his contemporaries had to walk a line between "legal activities and illegal commercial raiding." If the authorities were provoked too far, they would come

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<sup>32</sup> "Blackbeard: The Creation of a Legend," 43-44.

down hard on piracy, so Blackbeard had to temper his demands and behavior if he wanted to continue his career—and if he, like many pirates, wanted to return to normal society one day.<sup>33</sup> Such generous descriptions stand in sharp contrast to the violence assumed to be inherent to piracy. Eighteenth century pirate ships emphasized egalitarianism and equal earnings, at least among white male sailors. It is very unlikely that Blackbeard would have ruled through fear and violence; he would not have shot his crewmates merely as a reminder of his authority.<sup>34</sup>

The veracity of *A General History of Pyrates* is shaky, at best, and it should not be looked to as an accurate reference for pirate activity in the eighteenth century, nor for the pirates of whom it claims to be a biography. It is better read as an example of eighteenth-century perceptions about pirates; it assumes pirates to be violent and barbarous but does not match with verified pirate attacks reported in newspapers. The myth of Blackbeard was a fabrication, created in the midst of a changing imperial landscape that no longer needed piracy to bolster colonial economies. Edward Thatch was likely a talented sailor, taking advantage of his knowledge and the frequent wars between imperial powers. He did

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<sup>33</sup> Bialuschewski, “Blackbeard: The Creation of a Legend,” 48-49.  
Hallwood and Miceli, “Piracy and Privateers in the Golden Age,” 236-237.

<sup>34</sup> “Blackbeard: The Creation of a Legend,” 47-48.



not risk the wrath of colonial governments by taking more than they were willing to part with, and he probably did not shoot his crew in random bouts of violence. Edward Thatch was merely a convenient symbol, a tool to condemn pirates as wicked barbarians.<sup>35</sup> And if this is true for Blackbeard, one of the most infamous pirates of all time, who else is it true for?

Attitudes toward piracy changed as imperial needs shifted. Piracy was no longer needed as empires consolidated power, extended their reach, and colonies became self-sufficient. When pirates were let go, they began to loot and attack indiscriminately; merchant ships were damaged, profit was lost, and sailors were attacked. When pirates are displayed as ‘good guys’ or are on the correct side (which, during early colonial development, was the British empire’s side), they can be idealized. But when pirates turn on their ‘allies,’ they lose their charm.<sup>36</sup> Modern idealization of piracy views them through rose-colored glasses; while pirates were less violent than they have been portrayed in early modern literature, they were hardly perfect societies. Pirates were concerned with money, not with democracy and abolition. For some sailors—predominantly middle to lower class men—piracy was a better option than what life in the colonies offered, but it was

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<sup>35</sup> “Blackbeard: The Creation of a Legend,” 53-54.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 47.

not a better option for all people. History and fiction have been blended to create larger-than-life ideas about pirates, and those fictionalized representations are often understood to be the real thing. Pirates were not as violent as accounts like *A General History of Pyrates* make them seem. They were also not heroes or villains, but products of early modern empires.

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