

Women and English Piracy, 1540-1720: Partners and Victims of Crime

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In the last two decades numerous maritime historians have answered Daniel Vicker's call 'to integrate what we now know about life at sea with our increasingly sophisticated understanding of life in port', and began researching the complex connections between life aboard ships and societies ashore.⁽¹⁾ The followers of the 'new maritime history' have challenged the stereotype of the distinctly masculine sailor 'Jack Tar', living largely in isolation from society, and produced a rich amount of research on hitherto neglected or little explored topics such as gender, sexuality, the role of women in maritime enterprises, and the complex domestic ties of seafarers.⁽²⁾ While the topic of piracy has attracted much attention from scholars, little research has been done on the experiences of women with piracy – besides a few studies about famous female pirates such as Anne Bonny and Mary Read. John C. Appleby's *Women and English Piracy* sets out to fill these gaps and explores how the lives of early modern women intersected in various and nuanced ways with maritime plundering.

The book is clearly structured into five chapters, with a brief introduction and an epilogue. The first chapter provides the context for the followings analysis of female experiences of piracy and offers a broad chronological survey on English piracy, including small-scale coastal plundering as well as river piracy in and around the British Isles in the mid-16th century, the long-distance plundering voyages in the Atlantic at the end of the century, the buccaneering and privateering expeditions against the Catholic Spanish Empire in the Caribbean in the second half of the 17th century, the pillaging voyages of American sailors around the

tip of Africa into the Indian Ocean in the 1690s, and the short-lived peak of radical piracy in the Atlantic after the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713. Appreciating the permeable and repeatedly shifting boundary between illicit piracy and licit reprisal ventures, the study applies a broad understanding of piracy and considers various forms of seaborne plundering. Appleby has published widely on piracy, particularly in the Tudor and Jacobean era, and the chapter clearly demonstrates his vast knowledge on the subject.

The second chapter focuses on the dense socio-economic integration of piracy within coastal communities in the 16th and early 17th century. Appleby starts the chapter with the story of the pirate John Piers, captured in Dorset in 1582, and his mother Anne, who was not only accused of fencing her son's plunder but also of witchcraft, thus providing a striking example of the criminal partnership between male pirates and female supporters. Although early modern piracy was a highly gendered criminal activity and direct involvement of women in maritime raiding was extremely rare, the chapter shows that women maintained and supported piracy in diverse ways. Working mainly with legal records from the High Court of Admiralty and official correspondence from the State Papers, Appleby discusses how wives, mothers and widows acted as receivers and dealers of stolen goods along the coasts of England, Wales and Ireland. Although the number of women supporting pirates was rather small and their activities were part of wider patterns of local support for piracy, their involvement is an intriguing example of female agency in relation to piracy. Yet, their activities often put them at great risks. Anne Piers was cleared of the allegations of witchcraft in the following official investigation, but the accusations against her illustrate the particular vulnerability of women in such partnerships.

The commercial relations between pirates and women often emerged out of existing family bonds. Like most sailors, many pirates had a wife and a family ashore and a respectable number of them maintained these domestic relations and a sense of responsibility even when they were thousands of miles away. Some of these men went through considerable efforts to provide for their family and used existing seafaring networks to send home gifts or parts of their booty. In return, some wives and female relatives of pirates tried to protect their loved ones by helping them to escape arrest or to conceal their stolen goods, thus becoming accessories in crime. The chapter provides various examples of female agency and female victimisation and illustrates the ambiguous relationship between women and piracy.

In the following chapter, Appleby observes a general ‘narrowing of female agency’ (p. 88) as a result of the considerable changes the character of piracy underwent during the 17th century. It was particularly the growth of long-distance plundering that caused a growing social and economic detachment of pirates from English maritime communities and stretched their domestic relations, although some pirates still retained close bounds to their wives and families – as, for example, a letter by Charles Swan suggests. Chasing Spanish treasure galleons in the Pacific in the 1680s, he wrote to his father in England asking him to assure his wife of his enduring love and care. The relations between pirates and women became even more unstable with the increasing criminalisation of maritime plundering and prosecution of pirates in the late 17th century. Authorities began to collect information about the domestic relations and marital circumstances of pirates in order to locate the criminals’ whereabouts, as in the case of the manhunt that London officials launched on Henry Every and his crew after their attack on the Indian treasure ship *Ganj-i-Sawai* at the mouth of the Red Sea in 1695. Another factor that, according to Appleby, further diminished the agency of women was the development of the distinct masculine and boisterous buccaneering culture in the Caribbean, which often reduced the roles of women to that of temporary sexual partners, prostitutes and victims. This was also the case with the opportunistic and short-term liaisons pirates developed with native women in the Caribbean, the Pacific and around Africa when they began ‘sailing the globe in search of plunder and sex’ (p. 101). While such cross-cultural contacts are particularly difficult to assess due to the sparse and often fragmented historical evidence, travel narratives suggest that these kinds of relationships were often highly exploitative. Nevertheless, Appleby argues that the situation was more complex, but not necessarily less ambiguous, in Madagascar where several pirates settled down in the late 17th and early 18th century. There, the relations with native women were usually part of wider patterns of trade and contacts that these pirates established with the local Malagasy, and marital arrangements could help them to gain access to local societies and economic networks.

Another, short-lived form of relationship that Appleby discusses in chapters two and three are the frequent contacts between pirates and prostitutes, providing us with anecdotes of pirates who lavished all their booty within days on alcohol and sex. However, a considerable number of similar descriptions of squandering and promiscuous behaviour can be found about ordinary sailors who returned to a port town after months or years at sea without seeing a woman. Appleby thus rightly reminds us that the relations between pirates and prostitutes ‘operated within the broader context of seafaring culture and community’ (p. 75). Similar considerations might also be applicable to other observations Appleby makes about piracy and women. For instance, the increase of long-distance seafaring ventures in the 17th century stretched the domestic relations of many ordinary seafarers as well – it would have thus been interesting to discuss the impact of long-distance plundering on the relations of pirates in this broader context. In the end, piracy was often an opportunistic activity that ordinary sailors pursued for a short time before returning to other, less violent, maritime occupations.

A refreshing and insightful perspective on female agency is offered in chapter four when Appleby examines the upsurge of North-African piracy in the 17th century and its impact on English women. Although only few women were taken captive themselves, the captivity of their seafaring husbands and sons had profound economic (and emotional) consequences for hundreds of English women. The chapter shows that a surprising number of women were petitioning to the Privy Council, the parliament, or the local magistrate to raise attention for their severe circumstances and gain assistance in the redemption of their husbands or relatives. However, the petitions to the Trinity House of Deptford suggests that these channels of communication were largely limited to women of higher social status, as the petitioners were usually partners or relatives of respected members of the maritime communities.

Despite these examples of female agency, Appleby observes a growing victimisation of women as results of the changing characteristic of piracy during the later 17th and early 18th century. He argues that it was particularly the decline of localised piracy with its close link to coastal communities and the generally shifting attitudes in society towards maritime plundering that caused the relations between pirates and women to become ‘increasingly arbitrary and ambivalent’ (p. 123). Providing a number of examples, largely from sensationalised or even partially fictionalised accounts such as A. O. Exquemelin’s *Buccaneers of America*

or Charles Johnson's *General History of Pyrates*, Appleby suggests that a 'growing number of women suffered pirate violence more directly' (p. 169). However, given the scant amount of sources and the highly ambivalent nature of the remaining historical evidence, Appleby duly admits that the extent of pirate violence against women is in the end impossible to estimate.

The last chapter discusses the active involvement of women in piracy and debunks some of the popular myths about the famous female pirates Grainne O'Malley, Mary Read and Anne Bonny. Born as daughter of a chieftain of a clan with a long tradition in maritime plundering, O'Malley has been portrayed as a fierce warrior battling the English colonial invaders in the 16th century. While she figures prominently in folklore of later centuries as Irish rebel and pirate queen, Appleby suggests that her piratical activities may have been less spectacular and of rather little significance as she is barely mentioned in contemporary Gaelic sources and most surviving contemporary accounts are written from a condescending English perspective. A similar argument is made for Anne Bonny and Mary Read, who attained lasting fame through their sensationalised portrayal in Johnson's *General History of Pyrates*. While trial records confirm the involvement of the two women dressed in men's clothing in a short and little successful pirate raid under Jack Rackam in the Caribbean in 1720, Johnson's entertaining collection of pirate biographies invents picaresque background stories and dramatises their behaviour as bolder and more masculine than that of their male crewmates. However, eyewitness accounts of their pirate raids offer a contrary picture and describe the role of the two women as merely auxiliary. They also suggest that their cross-dressing was rather a practical necessity and did neither serve as lasting masquerade nor as expression of a fluid gender identity. Appleby thus argues that Johnson's image of Bonny and Reid was intended to shock and entertain readers by challenging existing gender norms. In the end, the early modern sailing vessel was a highly gendered social space, characterised by masculinity, and it is thus little surprising when Appleby concludes 'that women's direct participation in piracy was an exceptional occurrence' (p. 223).

Women and English Piracy demonstrates a complex pattern of multi-faceted and ambiguous relations between women and piracy. The book's findings are supported by an index, six maps and seven illustrations – yet, one has to wonder why the popular print of Stede Bonnet's execution in Charleston in 1718, showing several women among the spectators, is not included even though Appleby discusses this particular image at some length in his introduction. More problematic is that the actual subject of his book – women's experience with piracy – is hardly touched upon in the 42-page first chapter which provides important context for the following analysis but takes up almost one-fifth of the book. It might have been helpful to divide the chapter up completely and provide the necessary context separately in the relevant chapters; perhaps this may have also avoided a few redundancies.

The brief introduction (seven pages) would have certainly benefited of a more detailed discussion of the book's key terms. Appleby is rightly careful in acknowledging the shifting and permeable boundary between illicit piracy and licit private reprisal ventures and points out that 'Caribbean plunder was characterized by a deep-seated confusion between buccaneering, privateering and piratical activity' (p. 207). However, the confusion about these activities and the appropriate terminology did not end with contemporaries and still affects most recent scholarly works on piracy. As with numerous historians before him, Appleby anachronistically applies the term 'privateering' to private reprisal ventures in the 16th and early 17th century (e.g., p. 26), even though the term only came into existence during the Dutch Wars in the 1650s and 1660s when the High Court of Admiralty began issuing a new form of commissions to private warships – now called 'privateers'. The grand naval historian N. A. M. Rodger recently warned of such confusion in terminology of early modern naval warfare and urged all historians to pay more attention to the deeply intertwined issues of language and law in order to achieve a better description and understanding of piracy. (3) A clearer outline of terminology might have also helped the reader to understand why Appleby includes grain seizures on the river Thames into his considerations of piratical activities, even though these actions were, as he makes clear, not even considered piracy by the victims of the attacks.

Despite these very minor issues, *Women and English Piracy* is a well written, insightful, and long-overdue study of the various roles women played as supporters and accessories of pirates, uncovering an – at times –

surprising range of female agency. Appleby successfully demonstrates that collaborative relations with women were usually part of the broader patterns of support sea rovers received in maritime communities and that women's involvement was usually motivated by family relations, showing that economic integration and domestic relations often went along in the seafaring world. His observation that female agency diminished with the changing nature of piracy at the end of the 17th century is plausible, even though his argument has to rely on ambivalent sources due to the lack of other historical evidence. In sum, Appleby not only successfully uncovers the often-overlooked involvement of women in piracy, he also clearly demonstrates how closely maritime plundering was intertwined with the societies ashore.

Notes

1. Daniel Vickers, 'Beyond Jack Tar', *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 50 (1993), 418–24.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Some of the most notable works include Margaret S. Creighton and Lisa Norling, *Iron Men, Wooden Women: Gender and Seafaring in the Atlantic World, 1700–1920* (Baltimore, MD, 1996); Margarete Lincoln, *Naval Wives and Mistresses* (London, 2007); Cheryl A. Fury, 'Seamen's wives and widows', in *The Social History of English Seamen, 1485-1649*, ed. Cheryl A. Fury (Woodbridge, 2012), pp. 253–75.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. N. A. M. Rodger, 'The law and language of private naval warfare', *The Mariner's Mirror*, 100 (2014), 5–16.[Back to \(3\)](#)

The author is pleased to accept this review without any further comment.

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