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English 300

## Sexuality at Sea

Pirate ships were geographically isolated vessels—floating institutions—independent yet frighteningly unable to sustain themselves, in that they had to prey upon other ships. These pirate ships were sea-faring communities that operated independently of their native societies. Amid all the looting, plundering, searching for goods, and other piratical activity, one must wonder about the bodily functions of the pirates.

Aside from eating, drinking, and relieving himself of these things, how did the pirate cope with his sexual needs and urges? As humans are inherently sexual creatures, how did the pirates deal with their isolation? According to Hans Turley, “sexuality is left out of almost all depictions of [the pirate life]” (2). So then, where does sexuality fit within the picture of a pirate’s life at sea?

Heterosexuality has historically always been the preferred sexual orientation, in accordance with religions and societal values, and especially in the Christian West. In the Royal English Navy, the contemporary legal counterpart to the pirates, homosexuality was a known ‘problem’, ignored until the 1600s when King James I decreed the “Buggery and Sodomy Act” (Burg, 215). According to this law, acts of a homosexual nature, subsequently, were punishable by death, but were rarely enforced as such.

In English law, there appeared to be gradations of seriousness of the sexual act committed. A credit to the classicism and racism of 17<sup>th</sup> Century England, miscegenation—

interracial sex—was a more serious offense than a homosexual act between two Englishmen, and “buggery [with] a heathen” (Burg, 218) was considered a more serious offense than between two Englishmen. Another delicate matter is that the definition of buggery and sodomy can be disputed. The definitions sometime refer to any sexual act that deviates from traditional sex, meaning vaginal sex between a man and a woman.

As pirates were clearly bounded by no government law, they chose their own course in everything, as well as sexual matters. This was greatly influenced by the role of the pirate ship. The ship not only created the pirate’s world, a world consisting of homoeroticism and hyper masculinity, but also contained them (Turley, 3). The pirate ship was a huge influence on the pirate’s sexual life, because it was the birthplace of this unique “homosocial world” (Turley, 2).

For the pirate, this ship typically meant freedom and travel upon the open seas. Paradoxically, however, the ship could also be considered the supreme prison, as the men were at the mercy of what goods, food, and company they found. It was especially a sexual prison in that, wives and spouses could not sail alongside one another, and the single men no doubt found the number of their potential partners extremely finite. The sexuality of the pirates could no longer exist and be practiced in the way as it had on land, and so the pirates had to adapt, similarly in the same way modern convicts in prison do (Burg, 118).

As close quarters in an inherently homosocial environment tended to breed homosexual action, the economy of this action only makes sense. Besides that heterosexual relations were impossible to have or maintain, in terms of the pirate life style, heterosexuality was not economically viable for the pirate in the same way it was for a self-employed man of the land. Where a baker or a farmer operated his own business in which all available help was necessary,

the pirate had absolutely no need of that (Burg, 220). Heterosexual relations, for most, inevitably result in pregnancy, and pirate ships could not carry families, as quarters were close and very crowded. "The single certainty is that the only non-solitary sexual activities...aboard ship were homosexual" (Burg, 111).

What about the actual sexual orientation of the pirates? It is impossible to know the actual sexual orientations of pirates, it is presumable that many were heterosexual and preferred 'lusty wenches', but made do with their fellow crewmates. Another notable aspect of the pirate's sexuality is his relation to women because the pirate had a complex and conflicting view of them. According to Marcus Rediker:

"many sailors saw women as objects of fantasy and adoration but also as a source of back luck or, worse, dangerous sources of conflict, as potential breaches in the male order of seagoing solidarity." (303)

This view of women further complicated the pirate's heterosexuality because pirates had difficulty in interacting with women of equal or superior social rank. When pirates had relations with women, which seemed to be rare, they preferred women that could be dominated, such as natives or prostitutes (Burg, 120). As the pirates were probably comfortable with each other, and uncomfortable and unsure with women, this only fostered their homosocial, homosexual tendencies (Burg, 120).

In the case of captive, when they were taken aboard the pirate ship, the women were often guarded in order to protect against quarrels among the crew. Any man that meddled with the captive women would be put to death. Both the Caribbean Buccaneers and the Chinese pirates had their own laws in place against rape. According to Chinese Pirate code, if a pirate "committed rape or adultery, the participating offenders were put to death" (Murray, 245).

Caribbean pirates' view on adultery differed from the Chinese in that they did not have wives, or did not travel with them, so, perhaps, adultery was less of an immediate problem,

Offering a different model of sexuality exercised at sea, Chinese pirate vessels sometimes carried whole families, and captains could even have several wives. Far different from the Caribbean pirates, Chinese pirates "did not form a community whose only sexual outlet was male" (Murray, 245). According to Dian Murray, homosexuality still occurred and was documented among the Chinese pirates.

Differing from the English common law, homosexuality was not considered a capital offense. Where piracy was a capital offense, homosexuality was a crime punishable by one hundred...blows of heavy bamboo" (Murray, 246). It was recorded the some pirates confessed to acts of a homosexual nature, rather than acts of piracy in order to escape a death sentence.

Since the isolation of the pirate at sea influenced the likelihood of his homosexual behavior, the pirate's masculinity, according to modern ideas manhood, is no doubt in question. The role of masculinity and piracy is not particularly complicated, in that a pirate's merit was in his strength and courage. The masculine pirate tradition consisted of weaponry, violence, courage, and fighting—this was expected from every man aboard a ship. These qualities of the manly pirate being the antithesis of the effeminate sodomite

The modern stereotyped homosexual—or effeminate sodomite—is expected to be a flamboyant, lisping man, accompanied by a limp wrist and a penchant for flashy attire. In the pirate world, this is not so, for the "the homosexual [was] a rather ordinary man" (Burg, 234). The pirate men aboard the ships did engage in homosexual activities, but it did not compromise their manliness. To these pirates, masculinity and homosexuality, as well as sexual acts thereof,

were not mutually exclusive. How did the pirate reconcile his manliness with homosexual practice?

The identity of a pirate is more flexible than may have originally been ascribed—it was merely the way life was for them, because “the lives of pirates were ordinary within the context of their chronological period” (Burg, 237). Since the pirates were not home in England, or elsewhere, and being pirates, questions of sexual morality did not arise, thus the pirate community, contained in its ship, functioned independently of the typically heterosexual societies from which they came (Burg, 237).

The counterpart to this homosocial and hyper masculine pirate was the effeminate sodomite, and he was unappealing to pirates because he did not conform to their ideal of hyper masculinity. Furthermore, pirates “reject[ed] effeminacy...because it [was] a threat to their own masculinity” (Burg, 234). Homosexuality itself was not threatening; rather, the offending idea was being viewed as being an effeminate man since the pirate’s identity was so largely contingent upon classically masculine qualities (Turley, 3). Undoubtedly, this has influenced the romanticized portrayal of the pirate as a handsome, manly ‘swashbuckling’ hero—cultivating the image of the pirate as ‘He-Man’ of the seas.

The sexual life of the pirate consisted of “solitary [and mutual] masturbation, fantasies, nocturnal sex dreams, and sex contact with members of the same sex” (Burg, 108). Establishing that pirate crews engaged in sexual acts leads to the next question: Where did sexual acts take place on board the ship? Consider the fact that in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, daily life was markedly different and that privacy as it is known today did not exist. Since the pirate ship offered such limited space, and as trysting places were not available, the acts occurred out in the open, on

the deck and presumably any place where bodies could fit. Had pirates shame or a sense of modesty? These obvious questions were, presumably, immaterial. In the 17<sup>th</sup> Century era:

“Sexual acts were not performed as furtively as is presently the custom. This was an age when the mass of men and women lived in close proximity to farm animals. . .and for most of the world’s population the private bedroom had not yet been invented. . .people ate, slept, worked, and copulated in the same space. Presumably, they would conduct themselves in the same manner aboard ships at sea.” (Burg, 219)

This shows that pirates really were just doing as they knew how!

Finally, an important idea to consider is that crew members at sea engaged in sexual activity with young lads. The crew members used anal intercourse, which for the lads was “the type of sexual expression their early life experiences conditioned them to regard as normal” (Burg, 138). Thus this homosexual behavior was socialized as being ‘normal’ to the existence aboard a ship. These youngsters presumably grew up at sea and remained there, thus eventually taking their own youngster to socialize in this way and perpetuating the social acceptability of homosexual activities among the crew.

Sexuality at sea evolved in the 17<sup>th</sup> century as one today would not expect, that men could forgo their typically heterosexual preferences (should there have been one) in order to achieve the fulfillment of sexual gratification. The most remarkable aspect of pirate sexuality at sea is that engaging in same sex activities did not threaten the pirate’s sense of and perceived masculinity. One must be wary of applying modern-day attitudes and models of sexuality upon the pirates, and the world at that time because the social ‘norm’ was appreciably different.

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