Early modern English piracy and privateering

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In the final scenes of Thomas Heywood’s tragi-comedy *Fortune by Land and Sea* (c.1607–9), two pirates awaiting execution, Purser and Clinton – based on the exploits of Clinton Atkinson and Thomas Walton – hark back to their ‘golden days’ at sea. Purser asks ‘was’t not better when we raign’d as lords, nay, Kings at Sea, the Ocean was our realm’.¹ Written during James I’s reign, this play evoked the glory days of piracy and privateering under Elizabeth I. Piracy as popular entertainment is clearly not a new phenomenon. Since the early 2000s, especially after the first *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003) movie, academic and popular interest in the field has exploded.²

The best of this scholarship opens up new research avenues and situates piracy and privateering within wider concerns about the early modern world. This work moves beyond well-known periods such as Elizabeth’s ‘Sea Dogs’ or the so-called Golden Age in the Caribbean, Americas, and Indian Ocean to lesser known aspects of piracy and privateering.³ This chapter examines three elements that are key to understanding the nature and inherent complexities of piracy and privateering from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. Since distinguishing between pirates and privateers was rarely clear-cut, I assess ways of defining and understanding these activities and the individuals that undertook them. Following on from this, the chapter evaluates the role of the state in utilizing and suppressing pirates and privateers. Finally, I explore why men, and occasionally women, chose such a risky career. What factors persuaded or compelled them to sign up to a dangerous pirating or privateering venture?

**Defining piracy and privateering**

In its simplest form, piracy is defined as ‘The action of committing robbery, kidnap, or violence at sea or from the sea without lawful authority’.⁴ Early modern jurists defined those who committed piracy as ‘common Enemies to all Mankind, having no Legal Authority for what they do’.⁵ Monarchs such as James I unequivocally declared that ‘all such Pyrates and Rovers upon the Seas to be out of his protection, and therefore to be lawfully pursued and punished to the uttermost extremitie’.⁶
Victims of attacks at sea and government officials clearly identified and labelled those who committed these outrages as pirates. In 1716, for example, Lieutenant Governor Spotswood complained about ‘a nest of pirates’ in Providence.7 This unambiguous language and classification of piracy masks a more complex and fluid situation that attracts considerable historical scholarship. The first of these complexities is that the concept of pirates as ‘hostis humani generis’ (enemy of mankind) did not hold true for many people. Pirates received widespread acceptance and support from maritime communities that allowed them to survive and thrive. Government officials often tacitly condoned pirates and piracy. James I’s officials flaunted his authority, released condemned pirates, and profited from their illegal seizures. Leading courtiers such as Robert Cecil, Earl of Salisbury, and Robert Rich, Earl of Warwick, invested in and ‘winked at’ their activities.8 From the 1660s to the 1720s, pirates like Benjamin Hornigold, Henry Avery, and others found ready markets in American and Caribbean colonies for the plundered loot they brought to sell. Colonial governors and colonists in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Providence tolerated pirates and privateers as they profited from the commerce or lacked the will or resources to eradicate the problem.9 The popularity of works of fiction, drama, ballads, and histories such as Captain Johnson’s *General History of the Pyrates* (1724) also challenges this idea of the perception of pirates as the enemy of all mankind.10 Relatively few women went to sea on pirate ships but in numerous port towns, their activities as aiders and abettors of piracy demonstrate the ways in which local communities supported piracy and thwarted attempts by the authorities to stamp it out.11 Edward Edmonde’s mother, wife, and sister-in-law hampered a number of attempts by admiralty officials to arrest him on suspicion of piracy in 1604.12 Collusion by local populaces and government officials enabled piracy and privateering to flourish.

The issue of privateering presents a number of ambiguities when trying to understand how private enterprise at sea operated. A privateer, unlike a pirate, held a commission from a government, which allowed them to seize enemy shipping and goods. The term ‘privateer’ came into usage in the mid-seventeenth century, but it is commonly applied to privately owned and operated men-of-war in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.13 For many historians ‘privateer’ is a useful shorthand for describing private warships who put to sea with a licence from the state or monarch.14 Others such as N. A. M. Rodger argue that using the term ‘privateer’ for these private men-of-war is anachronistic and encourages a ‘muddle’ about how we understand piracy.15

Privateers operated under the authority of a letter of reprisal, also called letters of marque. In times of war, the letter of reprisal allowed ship-owners and merchants to seek redress if a foreign power seized their goods or vessel. In times of peace, the state revoked these commissions, with the English government withdrawing them in 1604 and 1605 after the Treaty of London, for instance.16 Regulations for issuing letters of reprisal against the Spanish in 1585 stated that English merchants seeking commissions needed to prove their losses. In November of that year, John Foxall, a London merchant, provided evidence for the seizure of merchandise worth £7,800 belonging to him at Cadiz. He received a licence to ‘to arme forthe some shippe for reprisall against the subjectes of the said King of Spaine’.17 In 1643, John Harris petitioned the
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admiralty in London for a letter of marque to set out the *Alexander* to gain reparations for his losses of £2,000 from the Irish rebels who robbed his family in Kerry when they rose up against Charles I in October 1641. Over time, the reprisal element in these commissions declined. By the Civil Wars of the 1640s, ship-owners sought letters to seize enemy shipping if an opportunity arose. Solomon Clarke, the master of the *Solomon* of London bound for Ireland, applied for a letter of marque in case he encountered any hostile vessels on the voyage. Others petitioned for licences to build or buy warships for their ‘nimbleness and strength’ in order to set out solely to attack enemy shipping. By the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, these changes became more formalized as the admiralty authorized two classes of privateer. Ship-owners sought commissions for private men-of-war, such as the purpose-built *Mars* privateer in 1780, which went out solely to capture enemy shipping. Some merchant ships also received licences so they could legally take any hostile shipping they encountered on a commercial voyage. The Declaration of Paris in 1856 abolished the use of privateers in naval warfare.

In reality, distinguishing between pirates and privateers was rarely clear-cut. As Miles Ogborn argues, ‘piracy is in the eye of the beholder’ and double standards existed. On the one hand, Elizabeth I ruthlessly suppressed pirates who attacked shipping on the English coast in the 1560s and 1570s. At the same time, the queen and her officials tolerated and profited from Sir Francis Drake’s marauding against Spain even though war had not been declared. They justified these activities by blaming the Spanish who, it was argued, ‘brought these evils on themselves by their injustice towards the English’. Unsurprisingly the Spanish did not share this viewpoint and regarded Drake and his compatriots as ‘English pirates’. The possession of a letter of marque did not necessarily confer privateering status on the holder, as the state often refused to recognize the commission. James I regarded those who took letters of marque from foreign princes as pirates. During the Civil Wars and Nine Years’ War, captains who sailed under licences authorized by the Stuart monarchs often found themselves branded as pirates. In 1692, the admiralty prosecuted a number of men as pirates even though they ‘shew a Commission signed James Rex’.

The fact that privateers sometimes veered into outright piracy blurred the distinction between the activities even further. Ship-owners and captains eager to capitalize on wartime opportunities set out without official authorization or attacked neutral merchantmen. During the 1580s and 1590s, ships with English commissions regularly assaulted French, Dutch, Danish, Scottish, and Norwegian vessels. In 1587, Frederick II, King of Denmark, wrote to Elizabeth I that a pirate with ‘the royal insignia of her Majesty painted on the poop’ seized various Danish ships. The queen asked the king to understand ‘how hard it is to restrain men of war from outrages by sea and land, in times of hostility between princes and civil wars’. This blurring between legitimate and illegal activity at sea continued in the later seventeenth century as weak government control and conniving by colonial officials led many privateers to overstep the boundaries of their letters of marque. Henry Morgan’s claims that he acted within the remit of his licence did not prevent his arrest and transportation to London on suspicion of piracy in 1672. William Kidd received commissions to eradicate pirates in the Indian Ocean, but he and his crew turned to piracy on reaching
Madagascar. Pirate in the eighteenth century continued the tradition of intercepting neutral shipping despite government efforts to limit these predations. During the Seven Years’ War, ‘reckless arrests’ by British privateers in the Channel enflamed tensions with the Dutch Republic and Denmark. Piracy and privateering in the early modern maritime world existed on many, and at times confusing, levels. The difficult relationship between pirates and privateers and the early modern state adds further complexity to our understanding of private warfare at sea.

**Piracy and the early modern state**

Piracy and privateering played a key role in the development of English, later British, imperial and colonial ambitions and expansion from the late sixteenth century onwards. Private enterprise became embedded in overseas expeditions and colonizaion schemes ranging from Drake’s raids and circumnavigation to Woodes Rogers’ round-the-world voyage from 1708 to 1711. So long as pirates and privateers remained useful in fostering commercial or imperial advantages, the government in London saw little incentive to stamp out the problem. Britain did not possess a monopoly on the use of private enterprise at sea. Other European powers turned to privateers to bolster their own naval efforts. The Spanish authorized Flemish frigates based in Dunkirk and Ostend to attack Dutch shipping in the seventeenth century. Rebel forces and princes also claimed the right to issue letters of marque to their supporters such as the Huguenots in France in the 1560s, the Dutch ‘Sea-Beggars’ in the 1560s and 1570s and the Irish confederates in the 1640s.

Licensing private men-of-war offered many attractions for early modern states and became the ‘characteristic form of maritime warfare’ in the period. Vessels could set out quickly and cheaply to harass enemy shipping and generate revenue from prizes. In the First Anglo-Dutch War (1652–4), for example, English privateers seized 1,250 Dutch vessels. They bolstered the Crown’s naval forces during wartime by providing convoys or patrols when naval ships were otherwise engaged. Privateers also allowed the state to pursue strategic aims, often against Spain, while offering plausible deniability. Drake’s circumnavigation (1577–80) offers the perfect example of the appeal of private enterprise to Elizabeth I. It represented an opportunity to strike at Spanish power and capture significant prizes at minimum cost and risk to the queen. The value of privateers to the British state became less clear-cut in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Privateers drew large numbers of skilled seamen away from the Royal Navy at times when the navy desperately needed manpower. Temporary suspensions of letters of marque, such as in 1666, helped to sustain the fleet in an emergency. Nevertheless, between 1702 and 1815 approximately 10,500 privately owned vessels received licences to prey on enemy shipping. A nostalgic attachment to privateering that drew on the apparent ‘glory days’ of Elizabeth’s ‘Sea Dogs’, combined with the ability of investors to convince the government and public of their usefulness ensured that they remained a feature of warfare.

Once pirates and privateers lost their utility to the state, often by becoming too much of a nuisance to trade or disrupting diplomatic relations with other powers, the government in London sought to eliminate the problem. Eradicating piracy
required considerable resources, and it was neither quick nor simple to achieve. It required careful use of the judicial system, deploying the Royal Navy, and winning over public opinion. Monarchs issued proclamations against piracy and closed legal loopholes, such as those that allowed sailors to accept commissions from foreign powers. In order for a tough legal framework to work, strong enforcement was required. This process usually began with the removal of ineffective or corrupt officials who sympathized with pirates. James I dismissed Sir Richard Hawkins as vice-admiral in Plymouth, for instance, due to numerous complaints about his involvement in piracy. Richard Coote, Earl of Bellomont, replaced the flagrantly corrupt Benjamin Fletcher as governor of New York in 1698. Over time, the actions of pirates alienated the colonial populations who previously protected them and profited from their endeavours. After 1699, damage to mercantile interests and shifting political winds led to a decline in support for pirates in the colonies.

New laws, such as the ‘Act for the More Effectual Suppression of Piracy’ in 1700, also aided officials since it allowed them to prosecute suspected pirates in admiralty courts in the colonies. Large ‘show trials’ and executions of leading pirates followed. Stede Bonnet and 33 of his men were tried and executed in Charleston in South Carolina in 1718. Two years later, John Rackam and most of his crew met a similar fate in Jamaica. Executions of notorious pirates, such as John Gow and William Kidd, attracted large crowds and their corpses hung in gibbets for years on the foreshore of the Thames as a warning and deterrent to other seafaring men.

The ritual of public execution combined with the display of the bodies of executed pirates demonstrated and reinforced the authority of the state and its monopoly on violence. Whether or not they had the desired effect of persuading men and women not to turn pirate is a separate matter.

In conjunction with tougher enforcement, the government granted pardons to those who gave up their illegal trade and offered rewards to apprehend those who refused to surrender. James I issued a general pardon in 1611 and 12 pirate crews surrendered in the following year. Between 400 and 500 pirates ‘surrendered to his Majesty’s Pardon’ in 1717. Many who accepted clemency in 1611, such as William Baughe, and in 1717, such as John Rackam and Edward Teach, quickly returned to a life of crime at sea, as they possessed few other employment options. The effectiveness of a capable governor utilizing both incentives and harsh punishments is visible in the appointment of Rogers, a former privateer, as governor of Nassau in 1718. His arrival with four Royal Navy ships marked a turning point in the eradication of piracy in the Bahamas. Rogers even authorized a former pirate, Benjamin Hornigold, to hunt down those who refused to surrender. The experience and knowledge of reformed pirates made them useful to the government and some prospered as naval officers and colonial officials. Henry Mainwaring and Morgan received knighthoods and high office for their willingness to act against their former confederates. Mainwaring’s Discourse on Piracy (1618) offered guidance to James I on the best methods to deal with pirates. The atrocities Morgan committed against the Spanish and his imprisonment in the Tower of London did not stop Charles II from knighting him and appointing him as Lieutenant Governor of Jamaica. Morgan did not mend his ways and continued to be implicated in illicit dealings at sea.
The courts and colonial governors only had limited tools at their disposal to combat pirates. Hunting down pirates required a strong naval presence. A lack of men and supplies, coupled with unsuitable vessels, problematic officers, and the difficult nature of the task made it challenging for naval vessels to effectively patrol against pirates. In 1632, after a North African pirate raid on Baltimore, government officials blamed Captain Francis Hooke for the navy’s failure to prevent the assault. Hooke, on the other hand, pointed out the near impossibility of thwarting surprise attacks of this kind. By the early 1700s, the navy struggled to cope with the scale of pirate activity in North America and the Caribbean. Marcus Rediker estimated that in the years 1716 to 1726 (part of the so-called ‘Golden Age of Piracy’) approximately 4,000 men served on pirate vessels. By comparison, the Royal Navy employed roughly 13,000 in each year of this period on all its stations. The large, cumbersome nature of the navy’s men-of-war also made them unsuitable for chasing nimble and faster pirate ships. Admiral Vernon described these pursuits as setting ‘a Cow after a Hare’. Gradually the navy adapted and deployed the necessary shipping to harry and capture pirate vessels. In the 1640s, these adaptations included the development of a frigate-building programme to counter the threat posed by fast, well-armed ‘Dunkirk frigates’ based in confederate ports in Ireland. Manning small vessels, capable of operating close to shore, helped to run down and overpower a number of pirate crews. Commanding two small sloops, Lieutenant Robert Maynard on the Pearl overcame Edward Teach in an inlet in North Carolina in November 1718.

The relationship between the government and private naval enterprise remained far from straightforward, however. From the sixteenth to mid-eighteenth centuries, a considerable shift in attitudes toward piracy and privateering took place. As imperial and colonial control and authority expanded, toleration for pirates and unrestricted privateering declined.

Why piracy?

Piracy and privateering were high-risk activities. Seafarers encountered numerous dangers in their careers. Those who went on pirating or privateering voyages faced even greater risks of death from enemy action, accidents at sea, disease, or execution if captured. Captain Bartholomew Roberts reputedly stated that ‘A merry Life and a short one, shall be my Motto’. Pirates tended to die young. Mary Read, one of the women pirates in Rackam’s crew, succumbed to a gaol fever in Jamaica 1721 aged around 26. Roberts lived up to his own prophecy. He turned pirate in February 1720 and died in a skirmish with the Royal Navy two years later. An ill-conceived raid on the Spanish in the River Plate in 1763 left 17 men from the Ambuscade privateer dead, and a further 20 with significant injuries. High mortality rates did not stop men from signing up. Only 20 per cent of those who sailed with William Dampier’s expedition in 1703 returned home. George Shelvocke’s 1719 privateering mission to the South Seas lost all but 15 per cent of the crew. By comparison, the death rate on Royal Navy ships in this period averaged 3 per cent. What, then, persuaded men and a small number of women to gamble with their lives by sailing on a pirate or privateer?
Sailors who went to sea as pirates or privateers left relatively little evidence about their motivations. The flexible nature of seafaring careers, with seamen moving between legal, quasi-legal, and illegal employment as the opportunity arose, makes assessing what drove men into piracy or privateering harder to understand. Accounts that survive, such as trial records, testimonies of condemned pirates, and popular stories, should be treated with caution. A 1609 pamphlet suggested John Ward turned to a life of crime at sea because 'his parentage was but meane, his estate lowe, and his hope lesse' and this led him to his 'wicked resolution'. Other sources suggest that Ward possessed considerable maritime experience and served in the navy and on privateers before turning to piracy. The difficulties of assessing the impulses that drove men to join a pirate or privateer are exacerbated by the fact that records rarely considered the factors that brought the crews to serve on them. In July 1649, for example, Daniel Van Vooren, late of Dunkirk and captain of the St John of Waterford in the service of the king, gave detailed evidence to the admiralty court concerning the prizes he had seized, and how he had disposed of them. Neither he nor other members of his crew gave any information on what persuaded them to move from Flanders to serve the royalist cause. Similarly, William Smart who sailed on the Discovery, a parliamentary private man-of-war in the 1640s, never mentioned in any of his depositions to the court how he came to be a surgeon on the frigate.

Economic factors served as the main driving force behind why most men and women chose to become involved in the business of piracy and privateering. Supplying pirate vessels and receiving stolen goods made financial sense for women in many coastal communities. Margaret Dyvers purchased goods looted from Flemish ships in 1547, which she sold on at local markets. On occasion, trading with pirates proved to be dangerous for women. Edward Teach treated colonial planters with courtesy but reportedly took 'Liberties' with their wives and daughters, which out of fear they could not prevent. Coote warned in 1699 that the 'vast riches of the Red Sea and Madagascar are such a lure to seamen that there's almost no withholding them from turning pirates'. After seizing control of the Charles, Avery informed the captain that 'I am bound to Madagascar, with a Design of making my own Fortune'. Downturns, often following the end of a war, which resulted in fewer employment opportunities for seamen, drove some to piracy. A. O. Exquemelin described how Morgan found no legitimate work on his arrival in Jamaica and being 'destitute of Employ' signed onto a pirate crew. Investors in sea ventures hoped to reap substantial rewards from the vessels they intercepted, while many mariners hoped to strike it rich from their share of prize money.

The triumphs of Elizabethan privateers over the Spanish led Heywood in the Fair Maid of the West (c.1596–1603, first published 1631) to write that the streets of Plymouth did 'Glisten with gold'. Pirates and privateers seized some very lucrative prizes that made the fortunes of those involved. In 1592, a combined force of state-owned warships and privateers set out by George Clifford, Earl of Cumberland, intercepted the Portuguese carrack Madre de Dios carrying treasure worth close to £500,000. The sailors pillaged the bulk of the cargo so that by the time it reached Dartmouth only £150,000 remained. Elizabeth, as a backer of the expedition, retained most of this. Later raids on the Spanish, such as those undertaken by Rogers, also
succeeded financially. Prizes he brought home sold for £147,975 12s 4d.\textsuperscript{77} In 1688, Morgan’s raid on Portobello netted 200,000 pieces of eight. When he departed Panama in February 1672, Morgan brought ‘175 Beasts of Carriage, laden with Silver, Gold, and other precious things’ as well as 600 hostages to ransom and slaves.\textsuperscript{78} Avery achieved his greatest success as a pirate in 1694 when he intercepted a treasure ship belonging to the Great Mughal. Estimates put the value of this ‘infinite Treasure’ at between £150,000 and £180,000.\textsuperscript{79} These figures demonstrate that some pirate and privateering operations turned substantial profits. Not every campaign succeeded, however, and the question of how much individual investors and seamen made needs to be investigated more carefully.

The principle of ‘no prey, no pay’, where sailors on a pirate or privateering vessel worked solely for a share of any profit, meant mariners took a financial gamble when they joined.\textsuperscript{80} Some pirates and privateers made their fortunes from their illegal and quasi-legal activities at sea. Peter Easton, a pirate admiral operating from Ireland in the reign of James I, retired to Savoy with 100,000 crowns.\textsuperscript{81} Robert Daborne’s play \textit{A Christian Turn’d Turke} (1612) presented a fictionalized account of John Ward’s pirate life. In the play, Ward met a horrible death with the warning that ‘Ward sold his country, turn’d Turke, and died a slave’. Ward actually retired to Tunis with his fortune where he lived in ‘a fair palace, beautified with rich marble’.\textsuperscript{82} Some of the crews of prominent pirates such as Avery, Thomas Tew, John Taylor, and Christopher Condent managed to retire with their booty. Not everyone succeeded in integrating back into society. The authorities caught up with some of Avery’s men, and reputedly, unscrupulous Bristol merchants cheated Avery himself of his wealth.\textsuperscript{83} Other less well-known pirates succeeded financially. In 1603, Captain Thomas Tompkins received £2,600 as his share of a Venetian prize.\textsuperscript{84} Both the financial backers of privateering voyages and the men who risked their lives on these cruises could do very well if they succeeded in securing valuable prizes. In 1778, the owners of the \textit{Mentor} privateer cleared £54,118 10s as their share, after the deduction of costs, from the \textit{Carnatic} prize. The crew divided £18,039 10s between them with the captain’s share worth £1,744 and a full share worth £109 for seamen.\textsuperscript{85} The sailors in the \textit{Duke} and \textit{Prince Frederick} each earned over £400 in their six months at sea in 1745.\textsuperscript{86} For some mariners, service in a pirate or privateer enabled them to strike it rich. However, sailors who joined a private man-of-war were far from assured that their efforts would be rewarded financially.

Not all privateering and pirate voyages delivered the hoped-for profit. The seamen who captured \textit{Our Lady of the Conception} valued at £3,500 only received £10 each.\textsuperscript{87} Some captains profited at their crew’s expense. Easton cheated and impoverished his crew when he retired.\textsuperscript{88} Despite the vast wealth Morgan seized at Panama, each man only received £20 since so many individuals participated in the raid.\textsuperscript{89} If the admiralty ordered the restoration of a prize taken from a neutral power such as the ‘Hamburger’ worth £180 detained by the \textit{William Bonaventure} in 1589, then the mariners received nothing for their efforts.\textsuperscript{90} Outfitting expenses, government charges, and agency fees absorbed a large percentage of the value of prizes and greatly reduced the share due to mariners. Cumberland’s share of the \textit{Madre de Dios} in 1592 amounted to £36,000, which might or might not have covered his outlay. His later privateering investments
also struggled to make a profit. Disputes in the admiralty court, which often dragged on for years, also made turning a profit difficult for shareholders in privateers. The *Discovery*, set out by a syndicate of leading London parliamentarians in 1644, became embroiled in court cases until the 1650s, as the owners fell out amid accusations of underhand dealings with the ship. Exorbitant costs of £49,584 12s deducted from the prizes on Rogers’ voyage meant a crew share only equated to £42 6s. A junior officer on the voyage like Alexander Selkirk received £145 15s after deductions, and Rogers earned £1,530 in his role as commander. The investors saw a better return on their money and profited from some of the high fees charged to the expedition. For three years at sea on a dangerous voyage, these wages did not represent a high return for the men who risked their lives. Tim Beattie calculates that an ordinary seaman would have earned £66 10s on a similar merchant voyage, and Rogers noted that he only earned a third more than he might have on a less hazardous Newfoundland sailing.

The difficulties of making a substantial profit from private enterprise are apparent elsewhere in Europe. From the 1620s through to the 1640s, the Armada of Flanders inflicted substantial damage to Dutch maritime trade, but the high costs of the operations meant that ‘relatively few fortunes’ were made by the men who fought in the Spanish cause.

Serving on a privateer for a prize share rather than pay was clearly a gamble that many experienced seamen understandably preferred to avoid. David J. Starkey estimates that it represented a ‘lost opportunity cost’ of 22s 6d per month, since an able seaman could earn this amount per month after deductions in the Royal Navy. Recruiting sufficient skilled sailors to operate privateering vessels could prove difficult, especially if it became known that ships already at sea found few enemy merchantmen to intercept. In times of war, governments often ordered merchantmen not to sail because of the threat posed by enemy privateers. In the Third Anglo-Dutch War (1672–4), a Dutch embargo on merchant vessels leaving port meant that British privateers found few prize opportunities. To attract recruits some privateers offered sailors a guaranteed wage rather than just a share of any profit. In 1780, for instance, the *Mars* privateer promised each able seaman a wage of 40s per month as well as four prize shares. On other ships, a mixed economy of mariners serving for shares or wages existed. Jacob Askew and Thomas Banfield joined the *Discovery* purely for wages in the 1640s.

Stories of those who struck it rich, and the memory of past glories, encouraged some investors and seamen to stake their fortunes and lives on the chance of a windfall profit from privateering. Most seamen and merchants preferred trade or naval service and, as R. A. Stradling argues, regardless of which country they came from ‘privateering remained a second best option’.

Men were also motivated to try their hands in pirates and privateers by patriotism, a sense of adventure, or dissatisfaction with their employment. The motivations of the two most famous female pirates of the early modern period, Anne Bonny and Mary Read, are far from clear-cut. Johnson’s narrative of their lives offered a complex back-story for each woman that strongly suggested desires for adventure and to live a less ordinary life played a part in their turning to piracy. Read went to sea after she ‘took a Resolution of seeking her Fortune’ and Bonny abandoned her husband to elope with Rackam. Hostility toward Spain drove men to serve as pirates and
English piracy and privateering under Elizabeth I and James I. Advertisements for mariners to join privateers in the eighteenth century often stressed the prospect of striking at Britain’s enemies in conjunction with financial gains. The notice for the *Mars* in 1780 called on all to sign up who ‘delight in the Music of Great-Guns, and distressing the Enemies of Great Britain’. An advertisement for the *Grand Buck* privateer in 1756 sought men who wished to ‘fight the French and make their fortunes’. Support for the Jacobite cause might have motivated some pirates and the names of vessels such as Bonnet’s *Royal James* might indicate loyalty to that cause. Equally, as Arne Bialuschewski points out, ‘pirates were opportunists’ who took advantage of political upheavals, arguing that it is misleading to read too much into how they named their ships.

Resentment against the harsh conditions and poor pay sailors suffered at sea drove some men to turn pirate. Some mutinied and seized control of the ship, like the dissatisfied sailors of the *Flying Fame* who conspired to ‘run away with the said vessel, and goe a pirateing’. Officers occasionally led mutinies of this sort. A lack of pay caused Avery to lead 65 men to seize the *Charles* in 1695, for instance. Atrocious working conditions on slave ships on the African coast persuaded some men to turn to piracy. Rediker’s analysis of recruitment to pirate crews from 1716 to 1722 indicates that most mariners volunteered from captured merchantmen. The lawless and violent nature of pirate life appealed to some men and women. The early modern maritime world was violent, and mariners understood the need to be ruthless in defending themselves or capturing enemy shipping. Some, such as George Cusack, revelled in the more profane elements of pirate life. Witnesses who testified against Anne Bonny and Mary Read at their trial described the two women as some of the most forward and active members of Rackam’s band, with Thomas Dillon describing them as ‘both very profligate, cursing and swearing much, and both very ready and willing to do any Thing on Board’. Other sailors, including William White, took up piracy on a whim, possibly while drunk. Before his execution in 1724, White lamented that ‘But my Drunkenness has had a great Hand in bringing my Ruin upon me. I was drunk when I was enticed aboard the Pyrate’. A liking for drink, along with other failings such as Sabbath-breaking, blasphemy, and ‘running after Lewd Women’, featured in accounts of condemned pirates recorded by clergymen. The strong religious and moral message in these explanations served as a warning to others. Ministers such as Cotton Mather, or the pirates themselves, might have chosen to mediate and fashion their experiences in this way as the end approached. Some pirates made an outward show of godliness after their arrest, such as Roberts’ men who took to singing psalms. In general, pirates were not noted for strong religious inclinations. As a result, accounts of apparent godliness need to be treated with care.

The allure of a pirate life with equitable treatment for all, plentiful food and drink, fair shares of prize money, and a say in the course of the voyage won over many men like Roberts. The *General History* noted that he changed his principles ‘as many besides him have done’. Popular contemporary accounts of pirate life such as Exquemelin’s *Bucaniers of America* (1684) and Johnson’s *General History of the Pyrates* detailed the attractions of serving on a pirate vessel. The buccaneers who served with Morgan, for example, received as much meat as each man ‘can eat; without either weight, or measure’ and operated a compensation scheme that paid out generously to...
men wounded in action.\textsuperscript{116} John Philips and his crew swore articles upon a hatchet as they did not have a Bible to ‘settle their little Commonwealth’ that included the payment of 800 pieces of eight for the loss of a limb in battle.\textsuperscript{117} Others claimed that they did not willingly partake in piracy. A shortage of crew meant that pirates sometimes forced prisoners from captured merchantmen to join them. In April 1718, James Feff impressed four men into his sloop.\textsuperscript{118} Peter Dearlove claimed Captain John Breholt compelled him to sail as part of his crew to go pirating in Madagascar as he needed a shipwright.\textsuperscript{119} Rediker highlights the ambiguities about the nature of this coercion and that some ‘forced’ men actually willingly became pirates when the opportunity arose.\textsuperscript{120} The courts clearly regarded some of these claims as dubious. William Davis, a Welshman tried as a member of Roberts’ crew, argued that the pirates compelled his service ‘on Account of his understanding the Pilotage and Navigation’. The court found his excuses of ‘Force and Constraint’ to be frivolous as witnesses testified that Roberts did not force any men to stay and others escaped from the pirates with ease.\textsuperscript{121} At their trial in 1717, seven members of Samuel Bellamy’s crew testified that they served against their will on the \textit{Whydah} Galley. The court only believed and acquitted one, Thomas South, who gave evidence that Bellamy threatened to maroon him on a ‘desolate island’ if he refused to join.\textsuperscript{122} On balance, most men turned to piracy of their own accord.

\textbf{Conclusion}

Pirates, and privateers to a lesser extent, continue to fascinate and entertain, largely thanks to the sanitizing effect of popular culture. Piracy and privateering are regarded as family entertainment, with the less palatable realities of pirate life being neglected or played for laughs. The romanticization and rehabilitation of the lives and exploits of a group of often brutal and ruthless seafarers oversimplifies the early modern maritime world in which they lived and died. This chapter has explored some of these complexities, in order to understand better the nature of piracy and privateering, the role the state played in supporting and suppressing it, and the reasons that men, and occasionally women, ended up in such dangerous employment. For as much as the pirates Clinton and Purser nostalgically looked back to their golden days roving the seas, the reality for them and many other mariners who set out on such voyages was an unknown or unfortunate end.

\textbf{Notes}


3 For an overview of pirate historiography see C. Jowitt, ‘“Parrots and Pieces of Eight”: Recent Trends in Pirate Studies’, \textit{Literature Compass} 1/1, 2003, pp. 1–23; D. J. Starkey, ‘Voluntaries and Sea Robbers: A Review of the Academic Literature on Privateering,
English piracy and privateering


4 ‘piracy’, OED Online.


6 James I, Proclamation by the King, 1605.


13 ‘privateer’, OED Online.


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19 For a sample of petitions for letters of marque in the 1640s see Murphy, *Admiralty*, pp. 304–5, 314–16; Blakemore and Murphy, *Civil Wars*, pp. 104–28.


27 Beinecke Library, Yale, Osborn b185, 2.


29 *CSP Foreign, Elizabeth 21/1*, pp. 357–8.

30 *CSP Foreign, Elizabeth 21/1*, p. 371.


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42 Thomson, Mercenaries, pp. 50–1.


47 Lincoln, British Pirates, pp. 23–46.


49 Hebb, Piracy, pp. 7–17.


52 Lincoln, Pirates, pp. 95, 128; Thomson, Mercenaries, pp. 50–3; Rennie, Treasure Neverland, pp. 57–8.


55 Lincoln, Pirates, pp. 73–5.


59 Murphy, War at Sea, pp. 55, 115–16.

60 Thomson, Mercenaries, pp. 51–3; Rennie, Treasure Neverland, pp. 59–60.


65 *Newes from Sea, of Two Notorious Pyrats Ward the Englishman and Danseker the Dutchman*, London, 1609.

66 Senior, *Nation*, p. 87.

67 Murphy, *Admiralty*, pp. 41, 44, 76, 212.


79 Hanna, *Pirate Nests*, p. 189; *An Account of the Behaviour, Dying Speeches, and Execution of Mr. John Murphey, for High Treason*, London, 1696.

80 Exquemelin, *Bucaniers*, p. 86.


87 Senior, *Nation*, p. 41.
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88 Senior, Nation, p. 41.
90 Andrews, Privateering, pp. 251, 256.
91 Loades, Navy, pp. 140–2; Appleby, Bloody Flag, p. 236; Andrews, Privateering, pp. 70–4.
92 TNA, HCA 24/142, part 1; TNA, HCA 13/126.
93 Rogers was not a shareholder in the expedition. Beattie, British Privateering, pp. 94–6; Beattie, ‘Adventuring Your Estate’, pp. 151–2; Starkey, Privateering, pp. 59–65.
95 Rodger, Wooden World, p. 185; Starkey, ‘Excite the Whole Company’, p. 134.
96 Jones, Anglo-Dutch Wars, p. 30; Rodger, Wooden World, pp. 185–6.
97 An able seaman in the Royal Navy earned 24s per month from 1653 to 1797. Starkey, Privateering, plate 6.
98 Murphy, Admiralty, p. 71.
99 Stradling, Armada, p. 221.
103 Starkey, Privateering, plate 6.
106 CSP Colonial: America and West Indies, vol. 25, no. 266.
108 Hanna, Pirate Nests, p. 382.
114 Mather, Useful Remarks, p. 277.
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