



## Piracy as a Space for Unshackling Chains of Heteronormative Society

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### Abstract

A considerable number of women raided the seas, alongside men, demonstrating equal, if not more courage and valour. From cross-dressing to complete neglect of identity and coping with compromising sanitary conditions in the vessels, these women had to go through a variety of ordeals to be at the sea and establish authority. Pirate captains, both male and female rarely found it difficult to recruit crew members even though the average life expectancy of a pirate during the time was not more than two years. Ann Bonny and Mary Read are two of the most famous female pirates who reigned the seas during the Golden Age of Piracy. “Lost women”, as many historians would refer to them, preferred to be savages in the seas rather than being the ‘Angels of the house’; whose lives revolved around looking pretty and finding a respectable and rich husband, even at the cost of cross-dressing or betraying their lovers. Naturally, there should be a reason for these women to embrace the career, defying both male and female gender roles. What led them to choose the rough storms and tides of aggressive and raging seas?

Keywords: Piracy, female pirates, agency, freedom, equality.

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### 1. Introduction

As terrestrial creatures, human beings used the land to provide them with a place to grow crops to support themselves, a hunting ground, a place to live and love and eventually to be one with, at the end of their lives. The land was a home for us to prosper and perish. The sea, however, was always either a mere means to travel to another land or a kind mother who fed those who lived close to it. Mysterious and unpredictable, she was an untameable entity that most men feared; however, a few people were daring enough to venture far and beyond; to plough the raging seas in search of whatever the land failed to offer them. Some of them were sailors; typically, men who worked for some other higher power, men who always flew under the radar. Needless to say, they attracted a less favourable crowd to the sea, people with a lot fewer rules and laws, and these reckless hooligans who plundered and exploited the sailors were called *pirates*. Now the word pirate brings to our minds a handful of images - a man with an eyepatch, a talking parrot on his shoulder, or a missing hand or leg replaced by a metal or wooden prosthetic, all thanks to the hard work of pop culture and Hollywood. However farfetched and super exaggerated the image is, it is almost always a strong and mighty man with murderous rage in his eyes and savage expression and a large part of the society seems to be fine with the strict heterogenous male domination in this field. Contrary

to popular belief, pirates were not always ruthless angry men in search of money and hidden treasure chests; women as fierce and untameable as the sea too frequented the waves on pirate ships, mostly disguised as men, as crew and more surprisingly as Captains who commanded these crew; who were mostly always men.

Zooming into this particular portion of history, during the period between the 1650s and the 1730s, which is also rightly called the golden age of piracy, we see how a large majority of women preferred to find a respectable man, marry him, and 'secure' their future. Patriarchy, misogyny, and hegemony stood around them with politicised and weaponised spaces forcing them to succumb to the heteronormative prescriptive practises. Nevertheless, a handful of them was lured into the rough tides and pitiless winds of the sea. What did the sea offer to these women that they threw away the comfort and security of the land? Were they not warned by anyone about the innumerable possibilities of danger that awaited them hundreds of miles away from the land, in the mid-sea?

Among the many known and unknown female pirates, this paper will focus on the life and stories of Anne Bonny and Mary Read. They had a lot in common, apart from their enormous courage and exceptional fighting skills, the reasons that drew them towards the sea were almost identical. Mary Read, an Irish young girl who had to cross-dress as a man in the land to inherit her dead father's property thought it would be better to do the same in the sea if the freedom to own all the riches and money, she cast her eye upon. Anne Bonny, yet another victim of patriarchy, found herself breathing the air of freedom in the company of her husband Calico Jack (a well-known pirate) embraced piracy to explore the horizons of freedom and equality in her husband's company. They intended to run away from the clutches of injustice and inequality, and the sea welcomed them with ships full of riches and more importantly, an opportunity to showcase their abilities and skills without being judged by their old lives in the land, something that the 'good women' back in the land could only dream of. Piracy, to a large extent, was their seventeenth-century counterpart to the modern rhetoric that came to be known as feminism. A cry for equality, a plea to be heard and seen, not as mere objects of pleasure but as human beings with a personality of their own. Something that helped them to shatter everything that stood in their path to adventure, freedom, and success. Though the vile lawbreaking and unsympathetic cruelty towards those helpless people on the target ships is in no way reasonable, one can consider piracy as a profession that these women undertook, or the society forced them to undertake due to the very inability of society to provide sustainable space for women with the agency to flourish.

## **2. Mary Read (1685 – 1721)**

If given a choice, no one would ever choose to be a misfit. It would be safe to believe that neither did Mary Read. Most of the stories of her life that we know today are from *A General History of the Pyrates* by Captain Charles Johnson, who should be given some degree of appreciation for trying to view the world from a woman's perspective. But he was also not able to transcend the baggage associated with the stereotypically regressive tenets of the patriarchal gaze, as we could see how he found it absolutely necessary to evaluate the character of Anne Bonny, Mary Read and their unnamed mothers' character by their 'chastity'<sup>3</sup> (Captain Charles Johnson 162). According to him, Mary Read's life was a history full of surprising turns and adventures, it is perplexing how one person's woes can be

another's entertainment. Mary Read was born out of wedlock, into a society that denied women all and every right. Her mother, knowing quite well how it worked tried her best to give her child what she could not get for herself. When she was only a few months older, Mary Read's mother dressed her as a boy, so that her grandmother would provide her with a weekly sum to bring the child up, this went on for about six years before she let Mary Read into this little secret and young Mary Read learned at a very young age that the world works differently for men and women. This was one of those reasons she did not find it wrong to dress like a man to escape the cruel rules of the world that only affected women. However, the security that her grandmother's pocket money gave her was short-lived when the latter died and Mary Read started working as a footboy in a brothel, again dressed as a boy. A few years later, when she joined the Regiment as a Cadet, still dressed as a man, she is said to have exhibited bravery and dedication as a young soldier but could not be commissioned as it was usually bought during the time. By this time, she had gotten considerably comfortable with cross-dressing, as when she joined the military a few years later not even her roommate (soon-to-be husband) questioned anything related to her sexuality. According to Captain Johnson, Mary Read had to leave the military after her marriage and started an eatery of their own, but bad luck had not decided to leave her alone yet. When her husband died, as a young single widow her capabilities to run the restaurant were looked down upon by the people around her and she was forced to abandon the business. Upon returning to the army, she found that peace was re-established and there was so little work for her in the army, so, once again she was forced to search for other survival methods. It was at this point it happened, that fateful incident that changed the course of Mary Read's life forever. She was on a ship headed to West Indies, in the hopes of joining a regiment there when it was attacked by a band of pirates. Being the only English traveller on the ship saved her life when the bandits killed off everyone else on board. It does not appear as if Mary Read had a lot of choices when she joined the crew as a pirate, little did she know that there began a journey that later made her a daredevil hero and a cold-blooded villain in bedtime stories, legends, and ballads. One can begin to trace some patterns from here, Mary Read's female body and her gender made it hard for her to merely survive in those days when patriarchy's clutches were even more explicit and inescapable compared to today's sensibilities. Her father's inheritance that rightfully belonged to her was denied for she was a woman. Dressing up as a man, something she is not, showed her how much easier life became when society saw her as a man. Cross-dressing gave her a sense of security which allowed her to work even at a prostitution home without giving in to sex work; which would have been a very likely end to the story of a poor young girl born out of wedlock without a male caretaker or guardian during the time. Cross-dressing became too popular to the point that 'anxieties regarding clothing primarily concerned questions about class rather than sex. It is fair to say that society denied her all that should be hers; freedom, equality and justice; proving the rules and laws as useless as her need to cling to her gender. Her womanhood was the only thing that held her down; shedding that skin was a declaration of independence, the beginning of a quest for social liberation. Piracy took her to a new world where she was assessed on what she had to offer, her skill sets and other abilities. However, it all happened still at the cost of her having to hide her gender. According to Marcus Rediker in "Villains of All Nations", pirates were largely poor,

multicultural rebels who spat on the order that governments sought to establish through tyranny and oppression. The world of pirates was sexist, of course, but the boundaries of class and financial background seemed to have disappeared. All those social misfits were trying to fit in, to accomplish what the land denied them; they hardly had time to discriminate but the hierarchical nature of gendered existence unfortunately remained intact. Mary Read's subversive resistance and triumphant reappropriation of those tentacles that weighed her down will be elaborated on later in the paper. Now let us move on to another of those torchbearers who blazed a path of her own in the realm of piracy, Anne Bonny.

### 3. Anne Bonny (8 March 1697 – disappeared April 1721)

*“if he had fought like a Man he need not have been hang'd like a Dog”*

Anne Bonny, the lovechild of a rich Irish merchant with his maid, stood captured and defeated in front of her husband Captain Rackham, while she spat these words at him. Bonny had a fierce temper, going so far as to marry a poor sailor in it of passion, leaving behind her father and her wealth<sup>9</sup>. Having had a little issue with anger management, Anne Bonny was notorious even before choosing the pirate's life for herself seeking adventure in her pirate career. She becomes a textbook example of a stereotypical pirate who rides the waves just for the thrill of breaking rules left and right just because she could. Embracing the darker areas of piracy in contrast to her comrade Read, Anne Bonny was not the favourite of many historians such as Captain Rackham who held the torches of patriarchy pretty high. “Mary Read was his favourite, ” for he could always find some means of excusing her actions or praising her purity”(Wilford Miriam 61). Anne Bonny lacked Mary Read's urgency to get married and ‘settle down’, which might have been the reason why he hated her thereby unearthing the regressive parameters on display when it comes to evaluating women, even pirates.

Captain Johnson points out how she was not willing to let the Flemish soldier have sex with her before marriage and stayed chaste, whereas he accuses Anne of not being revered for her chastity. This again showcases the unholy alliance between femininity, morality and sexuality within a realm far removed from normative sensibilities like piracy. Read would not have been a pirate if she had a chance to have a peaceful life on the land, which quite a few other historians might oppose to. She returned to the sea like a young female Ozymandias who tasted life on board and was greedy for more. She abandoned her first husband and her child back in Cuba to be with her lover and lead her life as she pleased. All of this was held against her later in the court and by the writers who documented her story years later. One cannot help but feel pity for poor Anne who ran away from men like these into piracy, only so that her narrative could be recounted by those same people through their biased lens.

Seafaring to these women was a needle that pointed to freedom. Mary Read was denied inheritance and allowance from the land because she was a woman. After the death of her husband, she was forced to give her business up and return to the sea; similarly, Anne was denied the life she wanted since her childhood and both these women found solace in life at sea. As captains or close acquaintances of the captains, both of them were allowed to keep a fair share of the loot they received to themselves which would have been an eyebrow-raiser on the land, as women were not allowed the property right then. Back in the land, women were not allowed to make decisions of any sort whereas they could navigate ships and give the ‘biddings’ as a pirate. The disappearance of class, race, and gender (sometimes) in the

pirate community might have a great deal to do with the fact that they are misfits and know the pain and hardships that accompanied discrimination.

As Christine Hernandez points out in her essay 'Forging an Iron Woman', "Although one cannot claim that pirates' ambivalence to gender markedly affected social concepts of sexism, it did exemplify the possibilities for gender equality. Anne Bonny and Mary Read were remarkable, strong women – early embodiments of twentieth-century feminism." which proves them to be very early distillations of what came to be known as proto-feminists. Mark G Hanna believed that a prevailing paradigm in pirate historiography existed that suggests pirates challenged everything modern society finds repulsive about the early modern period. Some sources claimed Mary Read was not always dressed as a man while she was on the deck. Dorothy Thomas, one of her victims reportedly said that" they "wore men's jackets, and long trousers, and handkerchiefs tied about their heads: and ... each of them had a machete and pistol in their hands and they cursed and swore at the men to murder her [Dorothy Thomas]. " (Morgan Michigan 12) Thomas also recorded that she knew that they were women, "from the largeness of their breasts." Anne Bonny and Mary Read dressed up as men during their raids but preferred something more comfortable during the other times. This shows how these female pirates were forced to dress up and look like men for the outside world. Their crew might have been completely supportive of this idea despite women being considered a bad omen on board.

So, pirates were a group of men and women, who left the land and its laws to lead a life according to their own free will; who declared themselves as misfits and believed in a happy life not a long one; who successfully demolished the walls of class, creed, colour, and gender. It would be safe to conclude that these people were among the early prototypes of proto-feminists and revolutionaries who foreshadowed much more regarding the struggles and emancipation to come.

The constant shifting of the boundaries between their male activities and their female essences will always be at the centre of any narration of the real or imagined adventures of the female pirates in Caribbean history in the early decades of the eighteenth century. Cross-dressing has never been a foreign concept to us, and when women dressed as men, we find it more believable, this was usually because women could easily pass off as young men with smooth faces and soft voices. While the most notable incidents took place on stage: Portia's young lawyer who saved Antonio's life in *Merchant of Venice* for example, created comic relief and a masterpiece of artistic brilliance. However, when women dressed up as men in real life, it was for survival purposes. The comedic exaggeration usually associated with men dressing up as women usually did not follow the pattern which embodied the other way around. Being unnecessarily cruel and violent was a method they adopted to merge in with their male counterparts. Many witnesses have stated that they had recognised these women on deck when there were no wars, they let their hair down, dressed as women, and loitered the deck giving out orders and cussing louder and more 'disrespectful' than men did. During a time when women were considered 'ill luck' on board if Mary and Anne got the approval and support of all their crew members, with no reports of treason that is, it is just because they were both good at their professions and managed to dismantle any preconceived notions

associated with femininity, calibre and valour in a space that is steeped in masculine sensibilities.

Anne Bonny and Mary Read, were initially destined for a life confined to the societal expectations which were imposed upon women in the lower middle strata of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, defied conventional norms and forged their extraordinary paths. Born during a time when women were discouraged from expressing opinions, having desires or aspirations, owning property, and assuming leadership roles, their potential for greatness was forcefully hidden. However, these remarkable women, driven by an unending greed for freedom and adventure, proved that they belonged there.

Anne Bonny possessed an inherent affinity for the sea and felt an undeniable pull towards the pirate's life—an unconventional calling for a woman of her time. Rejecting the prescribed roles of wife and mother, she embraced the pirate life, venturing boldly into a world predominantly reserved for men. Anne's inexhaustible spirit and indomitable will propel her to the forefront of pirate lore, fearlessly navigating treacherous waters and engaging in fierce battles alongside her male counterparts.

However even though, Mary Read initially may not have chosen a life at sea, but circumstances eventually led her to adapt with remarkable prowess. Having disguised herself as a man to secure employment, she discovered a latent affinity for the pirate's existence. Embracing her newfound identity, Mary demonstrated unparalleled toughness, quickly earning the respect of her fellow pirates through her exceptional combat skills and unwavering determination. She seamlessly blended herself into this male-dominated sphere of piracy, proving herself by fighting shoulder-to-shoulder with her comrades.

Both Anne Bonny and Mary Read defied societal expectations by challenging traditional gender roles and asserting themselves in a world where women were often relegated to subservient positions. They rejected the notion that their worth was limited to fulfilling duties assigned to them by society, instead chasing their desires and ambitions. By fearlessly navigating uncharted waters, both literal and metaphorical, these extraordinary women defied societal constraints and paved the way for future generations of women to assert their independence and pursue their dreams.

Through their remarkable life journeys, Anne Bonny and Mary Read epitomize the indomitable spirit of those who defy the norms of society. Their unwavering determination, resilience, and tenacity shattered barriers, leading them to the forefront of history as icons of female empowerment.

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