
When Women Pirates

BY MARCUS REDIKER



Mary Read

During the early 18th century, the heyday of Anglo-American piracy, two women, Anne Bonny and Mary Read, joined the crew of Calico Jack Rackam, a notorious Caribbean pirate. As historian Marcus Rediker relates, their choice was not unique. It placed them in the company of others of their gender—sailors, soldiers, adventurers—who “seized liberty” from society by disguising themselves as men.

Sailed the Seas

In late 1720 Jamaica's most powerful men gathered at a court of admiralty in St. Jago de la Vega for a series of show trials. Governor Nicholas Lawes, members of his Executive Council, the chief justice of the Grand Court, and a throng of minor officials and ship captains confirmed by their concentrated presence the gravity of the occasion. They had recently complained of "our Coasts being infested by those Hellhounds the Pirates" and they were not alone. Pirates were attacking and plundering merchant shipping throughout the British Empire and beyond. The great men came to see a gang of pirates "swing to the four winds" upon the gallows. They would not be disappointed.

Eighteen members of Calico Jack Rackam's crew had already been convicted and sentenced to hang, three of them, including Rackam himself, afterward to dangle and decay in chains at Plumb Point, Bush Key, and Gun Key as moral instruction to the seamen who passed their way. Once shipmates, now gallows mates, they were meant, according to *The Tryals of Captain*



Anne Bonny

John Rackam, a contemporary account of the proceedings, to be "a Publick Example, and to terrify others from such-like evil Practices."

Two other pirates were also convicted, brought before the judge, and asked "if either of them had any Thing to say why Sentence of Death should not pass upon them, in like manner as had been done to all the rest." These two unusual pirates, in response, "pleaded their Bellies, being Quick with Child, and pray'd that Execution might be staid." The court then "passed Sentence, as in Cases of Pyracy, but ordered them back, till a proper Jury should be appointed to enquire into the Matter." The jury inquired, discovered that they were indeed women, pregnant ones at that, and gave respite to these two particular "hell-hounds" named Anne Bonny and Mary Read.

Much of what is known about these extraordinary women appeared originally in *A General History of the Pyrates*, written by a Captain Charles Johnson and published in two volumes in 1724 and 1728. Captain Johnson (who may or may not have been Daniel Defoe) made Bonny and Read leading figures in his study, boasting on the title page that the first volume contained "The remarkable Actions and Adventures of the two female Pyrates, Mary Read and Anne Bonny." Johnson's book proved a huge success. Translated into Dutch, French, and German, published and republished in London, Dublin, Amsterdam, Paris, Utrecht, and elsewhere, it carried the tales of the women pirates to readers around the world. Their stories were doubtless told and retold on countless ships and docks, and in the bars and brothels of the sailor towns of the Atlantic.

Mary Read was born an illegitimate child outside London; her mother's husband, who had died at sea, was not her father. In order

to get support from the husband's family, Mary's mother dressed her to resemble the recently deceased son she had borne by her husband. Mary grew "bold and strong" and developed, reported Johnson, "a roving Mind." She apparently liked her male identity and decided by the time she was 15 or 16 to become a sailor, enlisting aboard a man-of-war, then signing up as a soldier, fighting with "a great deal of Bravery" in both infantry and cavalry units in Flanders. She fell in love with a fellow soldier, "a handsome young Fellow," allowed him to discover her secret, and soon married him. But he proved less hardy than she, and before long he died. Mary once again picked up the soldier's gun, this time serving in the Netherlands. At war's end she sailed on a Dutch ship for the West Indies, only to be captured by pirates. Before long she threw in her lot with the freebooters, plundering ships and exhibiting great boldness. When her new lover one day fell afoul of a pirate much more rugged than himself and was challenged to go ashore and fight a duel "at sword and pistol," Mary saved the situation. She picked a fight with the same rugged pirate, scheduled her own duel two hours before the one to involve her lover, and killed the man "upon the spot."

Anne Bonny was also born an illegitimate child (in Ireland), and to hide this fact she too was raised in disguise, her father pretending that she was the child of a relative entrusted to his care. Her father eventually took her with him to Charleston, South Carolina, where he became a merchant and planter. Anne grew into a woman of "fierce and courageous temper." Once, "when a young Fellow would have lain with her against her Will, she beat him so, that he lay ill of it a considerable time." Ever the rebel, Anne soon forsook her father

Marcus Rediker is associate professor of history at Georgetown University. He is the author of the award-winning book, Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750 (1987). He is currently working with Peter Linebaugh on The Many-Headed Hydra: The Atlantic Working Class in the 17th and 18th Centuries. A longer, footnoted version of this essay will appear next year in Iron Men and Wooden Women: Gender and Maritime History (Johns Hopkins Univ. Press), edited by Margaret Creighton and Lisa Norling. Copyright © 1993 by Marcus Rediker.

and his wealth to marry "a young Fellow, who belong'd to the Sea, and was not worth a Groat." She ran away with him to the Caribbean, where she dressed "in Men's Cloaths" and joined a band of pirates that included Mary Read and, more important, Calico Jack Rackam, who soon became the object of Anne's affections. Their romance too came to a sudden end one day when she and her mates fell into battle with a British vessel sent to capture them. When the ships came to close quarters, "none kept the Deck except Mary Read and Anne Bonny, and one more;" the rest of the pirates scuttled down into the hold in cowardice. Exasperated and disgusted, Mary Read fired a pistol at them, "killing one, and wounding others." Later, as Calico Jack was about to be hanged, Anne said that "she was sorry to see him there, but if he had fought like a Man, he need not have been hang'd like a Dog."

Of the existence of two women pirates by the names of Anne Bonny and Mary Read there can be no doubt, for they were mentioned in a variety of historical sources, all independent of *A General History of the Pyrates*. A rare official pamphlet, *The Tryals of Captain John Rackam and other Pirates*, paints Anne Bonny and Mary Read as fierce, swashbuckling women, genuine pirates in every sense. One of the witnesses against Bonny and Read, Dorothy Thomas, had been captured and made prisoner by Rackam's crew. She claimed that the women "wore Mens Jackets, and long Trousers, and Handkerchiefs tied about their Heads, and that each of them had a Mchet[e] and Pistol in their Hands." Moreover, they at one point "cursed and swore at the Men," their fellow pirates, "to murder the Deponent." "[T]hey should kill her to prevent her coming against them" in court, as was indeed now happening before their very eyes. Bonny and Read were at the time dressed as men, but they did not fool Thomas: "the Reason of her knowing and believing them to be Women was, by the largeness of their Breasts."

Other captives testified that Bonny and Read "were very active on Board, and willing to do any Thing." When Rackam and crew "saw

any vessel, gave Chase or Attack'd," Bonny and Read "wore Men's Cloaths," but "at other Times," presumably times free of armed confrontation, "they wore Women's Cloaths." According to these witnesses, the women "did not seem to be kept, or detain'd by Force," taking part in piracy "of their own Free-Will and Consent." A captured master of a merchant vessel added that they "were both very profligate, cursing, and swearing much, and very ready and willing to do any Thing on board."

Historians in recent years have discovered that these two bold women pirates were not entirely unusual cases. Women had long gone to sea, and in many capacities—as passengers, servants, wives, prostitutes, laundresses, cooks, and occasionally as sailors, serving aboard naval, merchant, whaling, privateering, and pirate vessels. They also made their way into armies. An anonymous writer insisted in 1762 that there were so many women in the British army that they deserved their own separate battalions, not unlike the women warriors who fought for the African kingdom of Dahomey during the same period.

Bonny and Read were part of a deeply rooted underground tradition of female cross-dressing, pan-European in its dimensions but especially strong in early modern England, the Netherlands, and Germany. Like other female cross-dressers, they were young, single, and of humble origin; their illegitimate births were not an uncommon characteristic. They had, in other words, little or nothing to lose, and a society that offered few opportunities for women to break out of their sharply defined positions had little to offer them. Bonny and Read perfectly exemplify what historians Rudolf M. Dekker and Lotte C. van de Pol have identified as the two main reasons why women suited up as men: Read did it largely to escape poverty, while Bonny, turning her back on her father's fortune, followed her instincts for love and adventure.

Other famous women in the cross-dressing tradition include Mrs. Christian Davies,



Ann Mills

who, dressed as a man, chased her dragooned husband from Dublin to the European continent during the early 1700s, survived numerous battles, wounds, and capture by the French, and returned to England and military honors bestowed by Queen Anne. Hannah Snell's picaresque life as a soldier and sailor during the 1740s and '50s was chronicled in the *Gentlemen's Magazine*, the *Scots Magazine*, and in books long and short, in English and Dutch. Ann Mills, according to an 1820 English account, went to sea "as a common sailor" in 1740 and distinguished herself in hand-to-hand combat against "a French enemy." She "cut off the head of her opponent, as a trophy of victory."

Women such as these were celebrated around the Atlantic world in popular ballads sung and heard by common men and women. Soldiers, sailors, dockworkers, farm laborers, washerwomen, servants, and others sang of the glories of "warrior women" at the fairs, on the wharves, around the street corners, and amid the throngs at hangings and other public events. Anne Bonny and Mary Read came of age in an era when female warrior ballads

soared to the peak of their popularity—even if some of the women celebrated in those songs did not, like Bonny and Read, commit mayhem on the high seas.

So the two women rigged themselves out in men's clothes and gained entry into the always rough, sometimes brutal world of maritime labor, into the very line of work long thought to "make a man" of anyone who entered. Cross-dressing was necessary because women were not, as a rule, allowed to serve on the crew of deep-sea vessels of any kind. One reason for this division was the sheer physical strength and stamina required for shipboard labor—loading and unloading cargo (using pulleys and tackle), setting heavy canvas sails, and operating the ship's pump to eliminate the water that oozed through the seams of chronically leaky vessels. Some women, obviously, did the work and did it well, earning the abiding respect of their fellow workers. But not everyone—certainly not every man—was equal to its demands. It was simply too strenuous, too hard on the body, leaving in its wake lameness, hernia, a grotesque array of mutilations, and often premature death.

A second and perhaps more important reason for the segregation of the sexes was the widespread belief that women and indeed any reminder of sexuality were inimical to work and social order aboard ship. Officers of the British Royal Navy, for example, ruthlessly punished all homosexual practice throughout the 18th century, thinking it subversive of discipline and good order. Many merchants and captains believed with minister John Flavel that the death of "the Lusts" among sailors was "the most *Probable Means* to give *Life* to your Trade." Some version of this view apparently commanded acceptance at all levels of the ship's hierarchy. Many sailors saw women as objects of fantasy and adoration but also as the cause of bad luck or as dangerous sources of conflict, as potential breaches in the male order of seagoing solidarity. Early modern seafarers seem to have agreed that some kind of sexual repression

was necessary to do the work of the ship.

The assumption was strong enough to command at least some assent from pirates, who were otherwise well known for organizing their ships in ways dramatically different from those of the merchant shipping industry and the navy. Pirate Bartholomew Roberts and his crew, contemporaries of Rackam, drew up articles of conduct specifying that "No Boy or Woman to be allowed amongst them." Another article stated that, should a woman passenger be taken captive, "they put a Centinel immediately over her to prevent ill Consequences from so dangerous an Instrument of Division and Quarrel." William Snelgrave, a slave trader held captive by pirates off the west coast of Africa in 1719, explained: "It is a rule amongst the Pirates, not to allow Women to be on board their Ships, when in the Harbour. And if they should Take a Prize at Sea, that has any Women on board, no one dares, on pain of death, to force them against their Inclinations. This being a good political Rule to prevent disturbances amongst them, it is strictly observed."

Black Bart Roberts was more straight-laced than other pirate captains (he banned gambling among his crew, this too to reduce conflict), so it may be unwise to hold up his example as typical. But while a few pirate ships willingly took women on board, such exceptions were rare, and they existed only because exceptional women such as Bonny and Read created them.

The harsh reality of working women's lives, which could encourage physical strength, toughness, independence, fearlessness, and a capacity for surviving by one's wits, made it possible for some women to disguise themselves and enter worlds dominated by men; the same reality then assured that such women would be familiar enough within early working-class culture to be celebrated. Bonny and Read represented not the typical, but the strongest side of popular womanhood.

Their strength was a matter of mind as

well as body. Captain Johnson reports the testimony of their shipmates, who stated that in "times of Action, no Person amongst [the pirates] was more resolute, or ready to board or undertake any Thing that was hazardous" than Bonny and Read, not least because they had, by the time they sailed beneath the Jolly Roger, already endured all manner of hazard.

Bonny and Read were well prepared to adopt the ways of the sailor and even the pirate. They cursed and swore like any good sailor. They carried their pistols and machetes like those well schooled in the ways of war. That they eventually wore women's clothes among the pirate crew, as some witnesses observed, is evidence of the acceptance they won, despite their gender.

Courage was traditionally seen as a masculine virtue, but Mary Read and Anne Bonny proved that women might possess it in abundance. As evidence Captain Johnson quoted Read's response to one of her captives, who asked if she feared "dying an ignominious Death, if she should be caught alive":

She answer'd, that as to hanging, she thought it no great Hardship, for, were it not for that, every cowardly Fellow would turn Pyrate, and so infest the Seas, that Men of Courage must starve: That if it was put to the Choice of the Pyrates, they would not have the Punishment less than Death, the Fear of which kept some dastardly Rogues honest; that many of those . . . would then rob at Sea, and the Ocean would be crowded with Rogues . . . so that the Trade, in a little Time, would not be worth following.

Bonny and Read added an entirely new dimension to the subversive appeal of piracy by seizing what was regarded as male "liberty." In so doing they were not merely tolerated by their male compatriots, for they clearly exercised considerable leadership aboard their vessel. Although not formally elected by their fellow pirates to posts of command, they

nonetheless led by example—in fighting duels, in keeping the deck in time of engagement, and in being part of the group designated to board prizes, a right always reserved to the most daring and respected members of the crew.

Did Anne Bonny and Mary Read, in the end, make their mark upon the world? Did their daring make a difference? Did they leave a legacy? Dianne Dugaw, associate professor of English at the University of Oregon, Eugene, has argued that the popular genre of ballads about warrior women such as Bonny and Read was largely suffocated in the early 19th century by a new bourgeois ideal of womanhood. Warrior women, when they appeared in this new milieu, were comical, grotesque, and absurd since they lacked the now-essential female traits of delicacy, constraint, and frailty. The earlier “gender-conflating ideal” became largely unthinkable. The warrior woman, in culture if not in actual fact, had been tamed.

But the stubborn fact remains: Even though Bonny and Read did not transform the popular conception of gender, even though they apparently did not see their own exploits as a symbolic blow for rights and equality for all women, their very lives and subsequent popularity nonetheless undercut the gender stereotypes of their time and offered a powerful alternative image of womanhood for the future. The frequent reprinting of their tales in the romantic literature of the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries captured the imaginations of many girls and young women who, even if they were not about to imitate the pirates’ lawless ways, felt imprisoned by the 19th century’s ideology of femininity and domesticity. Feminists used the examples of female soldiers and sailors to disprove dominant theories that stressed women’s physical and mental incapacity.

Anne Bonny and Mary Read also had an impact on what are now considered higher forms of literature. They were, after all, real-life versions of Moll Flanders, the heroine of Daniel Defoe’s 1721 novel of the same name.

The three had no small amount in common. All were illegitimate children, poor at birth and for years thereafter. All were what Defoe called “the offspring of debauchery and vice.” Moll and Anne were born of mothers who carried them in the womb while in prison. All three found themselves on the wrong side of the law, charged with capital crimes against property, facing “the steps and the string,” popular slang for the gallows. All experienced homelessness and transiency, including trips across the great Atlantic. All recognized the importance of disguise, the need to be able to appear in “several shapes.” Moll Flanders, too, cross-dressed: Her governess and partner in crime “laid a new contrivance for my going abroad, and this was to dress me up in men’s clothes, and so put me into a new kind of practice.”

Moll Flanders suggests the truth of Christopher Hill’s observation that “the early novel takes its life from motion.” The novel, he con-



tinues, "doesn't grow only out of the respectable bourgeois household. It also encompasses the picaro, the vagabond, the itinerant, the pirate—outcasts from the stable world of good householders—those who cannot or will not adapt." Thus for John Bunyan, author of *Pilgrim's Progress*, as for Defoe and other novelists such as Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding, and Tobias George Smollett, the experiences of the teeming, often dispossessed masses in motion—people like Anne Bonny and Mary Read—were the raw materials of the imagination. The often desperate activity of working-class women and men in the age of nascent capitalism helped generate one of the world's most important and durable literary forms, which indeed is inconceivable apart from them.

Anne Bonny and Mary Read may have influenced posterity in yet another, more indirect way, through an illustration by an unknown artist used as the frontispiece of the Dutch translation of Captain Charles Johnson's *General History of the Pyrates*. It featured a bare-breasted woman militant, armed with a sword and a torch, surging forward beneath the Jolly Roger. In the background at the left hangs a gibbet with 10 executed pirates dangling; at the right is a ship in flames. Trampled underfoot are an unidentifiable document, perhaps a map or legal decree; a capsizing ship with a broken mainmast; a woman still clutching the scales of justice; and a man, possibly a soldier, who appears to have his hands bound behind his back. Hovering at the right is a mythic figure, perhaps Aeolus, Greek god of the winds, who adds his part to the tempestuous scene. Bringing up the rear of the chaos is a small sea monster, a figure commonly



Delacroix's *Le 28 juillet: la Liberté guidant le peuple*

drawn by early modern mapmakers to adorn the aquatic parts of the globe.

The illustration is an allegory of piracy, the central image of which is female, armed, violent, riotous, criminal, and destructive of property—in short, the very picture of anarchy. It seems almost certain that Bonny and Read, the two real-life pirates who lived, as their narrative claimed, by "Fire or Sword," inspired the illustrator to depict insurgent piracy in the allegorical form of a militant, marauding woman holding fire in one hand, a sword in the other.

This allegory is strikingly similar to Eugène Delacroix's famous painting, *Le 28 juillet: la Liberté guidant le peuple*. Compositionally, both works feature a central female figure, armed, bare-breasted, and dressed in a Roman tunic, looking back as she propels herself forward, upward, over and above a mass of bodies strewn below. The humble social status of each woman is indicated by the bulk, muscle, and obvious strength of her physique. (Parisian critics in 1831 were scandalized by the "dirty" Liberty, whom they denounced as a whore, a fishwife, a part of the "rabble.") Moreover, flags and conflagrations help to

frame each work: the Jolly Roger and a burning ship at the right give way to the French tricolor and a burning building in almost identical locations. An armed youth, a street urchin, stands in for the wind maker. Where the rotting corpses of pirates once hung now mass "the people." Two soldiers, both apparently dead, lie in the forefront.

There are differences: Liberty now has a musket with bayonet rather than a sword and torch. She leads but now takes her inspiration from the living rather than the dead. "The people" in arms have replaced "the people"—as a ship's crew was commonly called in the 18th century—who are hanging by the neck in the Dutch illustration. More important, Delacroix has softened and idealized the female body and face, replacing anger and anguish with a tranquil, if determined, solemnity. His critics notwithstanding, Delacroix has also turned a partially naked woman into a partially nude woman, exerting over the female body an aesthetic control that parallels the taming of the warrior woman in popular balladry. Liberty thus contains her contradictions: She is both a "dirty" revolutionary born of action and an other-worldly, idealized female subject born of a classical artistic inheritance and perhaps a new 19th-century definition of femininity.

It cannot be proven definitively that Delacroix saw the earlier graphic and used it as a model. But there is a great deal of circumstantial evidence to suggest that the allegory of piracy may have influenced Delacroix's greatest work. It is well known that Delacroix drew upon the experiences of real people in his rendition of *Liberty Leading the People*, including Marie Deschamps, who during the hottest of the July days in 1789 seized the musket of a recently killed citizen and fired it against the

Swiss Guards, and "a poor laundry-girl" remembered as Anne-Charlotte D., who was said to have killed nine Swiss soldiers in avenging her brother's death. These real women, like Anne Bonny and Mary Read, were bound to appeal to the romantic imagination.

Moreover, Delacroix himself noted that he often studied engravings, woodcuts, and popular prints as he conceptualized his paintings and sought to solve compositional problems. Finally, and most important, it can be established that piracy was on Delacroix's mind at the very moment he was painting *Liberty*. The English romantic poet Lord Byron was an endless inspiration to Delacroix, who engaged the poet's work intensely during the 1820s, exhibiting three major paintings on Byronic subjects in 1827 and executing several others on the Greek civil war, in which Byron ultimately lost his life. More crucially still, Delacroix was reading Byron's poem, "The Corsair"—about piracy—as he was painting *Liberty* between October and December 1830. At the very same salon at which he exhibited his greatest painting in 1831, Delacroix also entered a watercolor based on Byron's poem.

The image of piracy (1725) preceded the image of liberty (1830) by more than a century, and the two pirates who inspired that image were by then long since dead. Read died in prison of what was probably typhus soon after her trial; Bonny was eventually reprieved and released, but what became of her after that is lost to history. Yet it seems that the pirate's liberty seized by Anne Bonny and Mary Read may have taken a strange and crooked path from the rolling deck of a ship in the Caribbean to the wall of an art salon in Paris—a peculiar and perhaps fitting testament to two very exceptional women.