Avonlea Bowthorpe, Western Washington University, undergraduate student, "Seamen and Sinners: Piracy and the Labor Culture of the Early Eighteenth-Century British Atlantic World"

Abstract: Between 1700 and 1730, the British Atlantic was significantly influenced by two compelling forces. The first was the continued and accelerating growth of competing European empires in the region, who in this period endeavored to define and protect their territorial boundaries whilst setting up profitable economic systems of production and commerce within them. The second was that of the pirates of the Atlantic, who, in a final crescendo of violence and destruction, would take hundreds of ships, disrupt highly valuable trade, and engage in bloody warfare with the Royal Navy. The purpose of this paper is to examine the ideology of industry and honest labor that underwrote the involvement of working-class men in these dual processes and understand how they took advantage of it just as such industry took advantage of them. This ideological wrestling match played out in courtrooms as accused pirates gave testimony as to why their lives ought to be spared, judges condemned or exonerated them, and preachers beseeched the sailors passing by their station at the pulpit to make the choice that would save their souls. This paper argues that piracy presented legal and religious authorities of the British Atlantic with an ideological puzzle that was solved by doubly condemning the accused, not just for being pirates but for having chosen piracy, for being corrupted as lawful subjects and also as workers. In doing so, it joins the conversation around piracy and labor by illustrating 18th century British ideas about morality and the purpose of work as the key connection between the two.

Seamen and Sinners: Piracy and the Labor Culture of the Early Eighteenth Century

British Atlantic World

Avonlea Bowthorpe

Western Washington University

WWU Phi Alpha Theta Undergraduate Submission

"How happy were Sea-men and Sinners, if they were always as unwilling to go to Hell, as they are in a storm to go to Heaven?"[1]

The words of the unknown author of *The Mariners' Divine Mate,* published in Boston in 1715, astutely reflected the concerns of those maritime moralizers who sought to help save the souls of the sailors who each day passed through the countless ports of the British Atlantic. They also have a prophetic ring to them: in the fifteen years following the minister's plea, piracy in the region would reach a final crescendo of violence and destruction. The pirates of this era would take hundreds of ships, disrupt highly valuable trade, and engage in bloody warfare with the Royal Navy. They would be stamped out violently by military and legal action and become forever an example of terror and rebellion on the high seas. Yet as much as it was a disturbing reality, piracy was also an ideological puzzle. Government officials, ministers, and sailors alike asked themselves what piracy meant for those who went on the account and for the ever-changing world they all shared under the rule of the British Crown. Beyond the need to end piracy though military and legal means, the moral and spiritual basis of piracy also warranted investigation. Such investigation facilitated a multifaceted condemnation of the piratical violence and lawlessness of the early 18th century. Not only were pirates breaking the law, but they were also fundamentally corrupted as leal subjects of the Kingdom of God and of the British Empire. They had foregone their avenue to moral righteousness when they had chosen to end their careers as honest sailors and take up arms under the black flag instead.

Piracy's role in the cultural and ideological dynamic of the British Atlantic world in the early eighteenth century is best understood in the context of the events of 1700-1715. During the War of Spanish Succession, 1702-1713, the need for maritime workers was high, and many young men benefitted from the stable employment and economic growth that the conflict

brought. The fierce wartime competition for such sailors not only drove up wages and improved treatment by employers but enhanced a seaman's awareness of the importance of his skills.[2] While the War of Spanish Succession provided opportunities for gainful maritime employment, the end of the war marked a downturn in demand for their services. By 1713, there was a surplus of newly unemployed sailors. This included men who were not only skilled in navigation and naval engagement but also seasoned privateers, employed by the Crown during the war to harass French and Spanish shipping. This postwar collapse of the labor market was one of the most significant causes of the explosion in Atlantic piracy between 1714 and 1716.[3] The large number of recently unemployed men in the Caribbean, combined with the sudden and tantalizing opportunity posed by the sinking of a Spanish silver fleet in 1714, created an ideal moment for an explosion of piracy in the region.[4]

This dramatic change in the number of active pirates demonstrated that piracy was predominately a labor issue, evidenced by such sources as the 1724 text *A General History of the Pyrates.* Captain Johnson writes that "there are multitudes of seamen at this day unemploy'd; it is but too evident by their straggling and begging all over the kingdom." Johnson describes the hardships a great number of sailors had fallen upon as a direct result of their lack of employment. Though he does not take an entirely sympathetic stance towards pirates throughout the rest of the introduction to the text, he argues that it is not "so much their inclination to idleness, as their own hard fate, in being cast off after their work is done" that has caused the surge in piracy. In stating this, he reflects ideological concerns around idleness and working-class morality back on to the reader by attributing the growth in piracy over the last decade to an idleness imposed from above by an imperial system failing its subjects. Even when these cast-off sailors are employed, "those few seamen who are in business are poorly paid, and but poorly fed; such usage breeds

discontents among them" and as such they turn to piracy.[5] The high demand and high risk for sailors during the war served to emphasize the importance of their labor and its necessity to the economic and political standing of the British Empire.

In dealing with accused pirates, wielders of spiritual and legal justice alike sought to meet the beast on its own terms. As a labor issue, piracy was intellectually and legally navigated through labor ideology. Protestant conceptions of work and morality heavily informed 18th century British labor culture and emphasized godliness as a state achieved through one's earthly labors.[6] To take up the plow or the oar, in acceptance of one's lot and without upsetting the social and economic system by pursuing self-glorifying or sinful forms of work, was to embody the Holy Spirit. As they would argue in their depositions, and as those who condemned them would refute, pirates were workers corrupted in action but not in intent, forced on the account by seasoned seafaring villains.

In 1717, eight men were brought to trial in Boston on charges of piracy. These eight men were the remaining crew of the stolen ship *Whydah,* which had been shipwrecked on the coast of New England. Of 155 men, nine had survived and eight had been captured: standing trial were Simon Van Vorst, John Brown, Thomas Baker, Hendrick Quintor, Peter Cornelius Hoof, John Shuan, Thomas South, and Thomas Davis.[7] All eight men were working-class sailors. John Shuan, Hendrick Quintor, and Thomas South all identified themselves as "mariners." Peter Hoof and Thomas Davis both specified how long they had "used the sea," Hoof having left his home country of Sweden eighteen years prior and Davis having been at sea for five years. John Brown had been a sailor by profession for at least one and a half years prior to his trial, and Thomas Baker described himself as someone who "sometimes went to sea."[8] All eight men gave depositions of varying lengths which were published in the appendix of the pamphlet recounting

the trial. In them, the men discuss their personal backgrounds, give details and names of

individuals they encountered during their time as pirates, and provide information about what

happened aboard the *Whydah*. These depositions were also paraphrased in the body of the

pamphlet. What the summaries and the more extensive recordings have in common is that they

both feature the claims made by all eight men that they were forced to become pirates. John

Brown stated that "he and every one of the other prisoners were forced to join the pirates," and

his sentiments were echoed by the other men in both the depositions found in the appendix and

in the summaries given by the author.[9]

Simon Van Vorst is recounted as having stated "that he was forced by Capt. Bellamy's

company to do what he did, and would have made known his intentions to make his escape."

Captain Bellamy's coercion was also described by Thomas South, who said he was "forced to

tarry with him," and Peter Cornelius Hoof, who stated that "the said Bellamy's company swore

they would kill him unless he would join with them in their unlawful designs." Thomas Baker

reinforced Vorst's claim and alleged that the two men had tried to escape as well, and Hendrick

Quintor stated that "he was unavoidably forced to continue among the pirates." The language

used to paraphrase John Brown's testimony is of particular interest, as the author of the trial

transcript wrote that he "pretended himself also to be a forced man."[10] This emphasis on the part

of the accused is a sensible one; in claiming that they became pirates under great duress and not

of their own free will, they separate themselves from the true pirates who put the onus upon them

to make such a choice and make an argument against suffering the legal consequences. Six of the

eight were convicted nonetheless, the men being overwhelmingly not believed.

Taken in the context of early eighteenth century British beliefs about labor, however, and

with the knowledge that these men were seasoned working-class sailors, the ideological dynamic

of this trial takes on a new depth. The accused pirates, in being convicted, were doubly

condemned not just for being pirates but for having chosen piracy. They were convicted as

sailors who had foregone honest employment – which each man had testified to having had – and

instead chosen a means of using their skills that was not only villainous and treasonous but self-

glorifying, a pursuit of wealth at the price of the lives of honest seafarers doing their duty as

subjects of the British Empire. According to popular and widespread Protestant ideas about

labor, morality, and good subjecthood - of both God and the King of England - to accept and

obey one's lot as a laborer was a key component of being a moral person. To choose piracy, as

these men were seen as having done, was antithetical to upholding this system of beliefs. In this

way, we see how concepts of labor and morality provided the language and theoretical grounds

to assess the irredeemable corruption of those accused of piracy.

Judge Nicholas Trott, who presided over the trials of Stede Bonnet and thirty-three others

who had sailed with him, makes this dynamic between the condemnation of piracy and the labor

ethic of the British Atlantic world even more apparent. The volume of evidence presented

against the men on trial was overwhelming – the men at the bar could not deny having been

crewmembers of Major Bonnet. Again, their defense rests upon claiming that they were forced to

become pirates under the threat of death or being marooned.[11] The exchange that took place

between Judge Trott and Robert Tucker, Edward Robinson, Neal Paterson, William Scot, and

Job Bayley on October 30th, 1718 is particularly exemplary of the rhetoric of morality as it

relates to labor inherent in the trial.[12]

After evidence had been given by four witnesses, Trott stated the following: "You the

prisoners at the bar stand charged with felony and piracy... the evidences have proved it upon

you... what old offenders you were... that you were with Thatch off this bar, and that you were at

the taking of several vessels... so that it appears that you took up with this wicked course of life out of choice."[13] Again, the element of choice is at the center of this condemnation. This was key to refuting the central defense of men accused of piracy, one leveled by all five of the men on trial. Yet this assertion on the part of Trott, in the context of the way labor and morality were discussed in this era, is reflective of a greater theme in how the issue of piracy was navigated by individuals who sought to make a legally and morally sound argument for their fundamental wickedness. Again, the crux of Trott's argument against the accused pirates was that they had willingly chosen piracy, an act of self-glorification which flew in the face of the need to dutifully accept one's status as a worker. A larger ideological conversation was happening during these trials, one which condemned pirates not just as villains but also as corrupted workers who violently subverted the order of the maritime labor system. It follows that individuals like Trott would be inclined to use the pervasive labor ideology of the British Atlantic world to make sense of and denounce these sailors who had eschewed honest employ and chosen the life of a criminal instead.

The details of the depositions given by the five accused also reflect the rhetoric of morality and labor employed by Trott. Both Tucker and Paterson claimed that they joined with Bonnet after being marooned, a well-known practice that was the fate of many sailors who were either no longer of use to their captain or were on ships that lacked the provisions to sustain them any longer. They state that Bonnet had made them believe he intended to seek out a privateering commission, and that they understood this to be his purpose rather than piracy.[14] Both of these claims appealed to anyone familiar with the maritime labor system; marooning was just one way in which sailors could be maltreated by a ship captain, and privateering was a largely accepted practice that offered gainful employment to many sailors. Just as Trott saw them as laborers

complicit in their own corruption, the two men made arguments in their defense which reflected the dangers and opportunities of a seafaring career. First, they had been left for dead; then, they made attempts to save themselves by seeking out honest employment, only to be once again tricked by a cruel captain. Though they were not believed, the deeper meaning of the appeals they made demonstrate the complex dynamics at play around labor and morality in piracy trials. Accused pirates like Tucker, Paterson, and their fellows at the bar defended themselves as honest sailors at the mercy of corrupt forces. They were condemned as workers who had deliberately and violently thrown off the yoke of their higher duties to their masters, to the Crown, and to God and who, in doing so, had lost their morality.

The treatment of pirates and piracy by the British government from 1700 to 1730 facilitated an ongoing public discourse among prominent religious figures that offers insight into how the crimes of seafaring robbers were discussed, rationalized, and used as vessels for lessons about work and morality. Cotton Mather, a prominent minister and moral reformer, used ideas about work based in his religious faith and teachings to produce fully integrated explanations of and warnings about piracy. Mather was involved in a number of piracy trials as a spiritual counselor to the condemned between 1709 and his death in 1728.[15] His son, Increase Mather, went to sea in 1715 and, after a troubled nine years, perished when his ship was wrecked. Over the course of these two decades, as shown by Steven J. J. Pitt, Mather's attitude towards piracy became more complex, shifting from an unyielding condemnation of the actions of pirates and their spiritual selves to an understanding that the working lives of sailors was a major influence in why individuals went on the account.[16] In his later life, Mather's works reflect an understanding of pirates as laborers who had been morally corrupted as a consequence of their mistreatment by ship captains.

In his 1723 essay *Useful Remarks: An Essay upon Remarkables in the Way of Wicked Men,* Mather places particular emphasis on the moral and spiritual meanings of the lives of pirates. The connection between piracy and work is first drawn in the fourth section of the essay, where Mather cites Proverbs and writes "*The wicked worketh a deceitful work.* A wicked man is drawn into his way, with many promises which the tempters work upon him."[17] Piracy was the antithesis of honest work, which promised spiritual reward as a consequence of one's labor. Once one deviated from this path, choosing easy reward over endeavors which fostered moral righteousness, the return to propriety was difficult. Mather goes on to list a number of lamentations made by dying pirates which serve to describe to listeners – particularly sailors – the principles that they ought to follow in their endeavors to remain morally righteous and resist the temptation of piracy. He implores sailors to think of the wishes of their parents, to observe the sabbath, be cautious about the company they keep, and to keep up a daily and earnest worship not just in words but also in deeds.[18] His purpose is driven home in an apparent recollection of the words of one convicted pirate, which read: "[Disobedience] was the first unhappy step, which hindered the perfecting of a work, the foundation whereof was so laid, as might have placed me in a station of life, nothing inferior to some of the most desirable."[19] To commit oneself both to obedience and to an honest trade was portrayed as the way for one to avoid piracy and maintain a spiritual foundation.

This connection is also present in Josiah Woodward's text *The Seaman's Monitor: or, Advice to Sea-Faring Men,* also published in 1723. Woodward opens the text by stating that "As the good success of our maritime affairs is one of the principal concerns of this our island, so nothing will, I conceive, more directly tend thereunto, than the good behavior of our seamen." The great number of sailors who had turned pirate over the past few years had caused the British

Empire "great damage," and also harmed its political standing. The work of pirates was that of "savages and banditti," and the cause, Woodward states, was that these men had not been properly educated in "the principles and power of the Christian religion." As with Cotton Mather, Woodward's solution to piracy was "the good education and religious instruction of faith of such as are designed for a sea-faring life," as well as the imposition of "good government" aboard ships.[20] These concerns were economic as they were spiritual, and it follows that Woodward and Mather would implore sailors to save themselves by adhering not only to the spiritual guidelines of religion but also to the guidelines set forth about the meaning and purpose of their labor.

The dual concepts of obedience to God and obedience to one's earthly master – in this instance, the ship captain – are at the center of Woodward's argument in this text as to how to save the souls of sailors lest they instead become pirates. It is the duty of sailors to "do [God] honor by their obedience," and "the want of devotion and good government in ships... [that] are the grand causes of mutiny and piracy."[21] For Woodward, the Protestant labor ethic both explained the problem and offered the solution where piracy was concerned: the abandonment of the duties of obedience and diligence was what produced pirates, and to more strictly enforce those values through the vessel of the ship captain was the necessary change to stop them. Though the onus is placed to an extent upon ship captains to provide for the spiritual wellbeing of their men, Woodward also implored sailors to be "undaunted in danger, easie in affliction, [and] cheerful in the meanest condition."[22] Woodward tied adherence to one's station - accepting even the meanest of lots - tightly to the issue of piracy. Woodward used this collection of ideas to navigate the explosion of maritime violence on the part of common men who, by 1723, had proven themselves capable of wreaking havoc on the British imperial system. Evoking the

connected concepts of work and unholy temptation helped to make piracy an understandable phenomenon. In rooting the solution in a central tenet of the Protestant ethic that was widely disseminated among British subjects he made piracy something to be easily grasped, controlled, and prevented, if only seamen were kept in their prescribed place both as men of faith and as laborers - below God and below their captain.

In this way, then, we see how accused pirates, Admiralty Court judges, and ministers – who were among those at the center of the explosion of and subsequent fight against piracy between 1714 and 1730 – navigated issues of morality, salvation, and legal condemnation within the framework of the labor ethic that was diffuse throughout the British Atlantic world. These individuals explored the boundaries between right and wrong, between just and unjust action, as those lines existed within the maritime labor system. Piracy was a labor issue in addition to a criminal act. Just as piracy was deeply integrated with labor, so too was the language and logic employed by individuals who sought to evaluate it in legal and religious contexts. There was a larger conversation at work in the courts and on the streets of London, Boston, Charlestown, and elsewhere. There emerged a dialectic of morality as it related to a class of working men who had violently leapt from their prescribed station and on to the deck of a pirate ship. Piratical acts were condemned, yes, but so too was the choice to become a pirate. In the context of the maritime labor system and its accompanying values of obedience, industriousness, and diligence, that particular point speaks volumes to how piracy was navigated and understood. From the perspectives of accused pirates and those who looked upon them with mixed contempt and pity, it was through their work - depending on the perspective, either because they had adhered to their station or because of they had failed to do so - that they had been corrupted. Understanding this is crucial to fully understanding the depth of their condemnation.

[1] "The Mariners' Divine Mate: or, Spiritual Navigation Improved," in *British Piracy in the Golden Age, Volume 4.* ed. Joel Baer (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2007), 105.
[2] Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750 (*Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 11-76; see specifically 32. Referred to by Rediker as part of "an international working class," sailors occupied not only an important place in the economy of the British Empire but also roles beyond those they held in the wooden world of the high seas. Sailors made up transient communities of people who shared some or many cultural connections, from language and dress to ideas about hierarchy, discipline, and, crucially, labor.
[3] Marcus Rediker, *Villains of all Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 29-37.

[4] Daniel Defoe, Manuel Schonhorn, and Charles Johnson, *A General History of the Pyrates* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1972), 35-36, and Rediker, *Villains of All Nations,* 16.
[5] Defoe, Schonhorn, and Johnson, *A General History of the Pyrates,* 4.
[6] Stephen Innes, *Creating the Commonwealth: The Economic Culture of Puritan New England (*New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), 114.
[7] John Edwards, "The Trials of Eight Persons Indited for Piracy," 1718, in *British Piracy in the Golden Age, Volume 2,* ed. Joel Baer (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2007), 289-294.

[8] Edwards, "The Trials of Eight Persons," 317-319.
[9] Edwards, "The Trials of Eight Persons," 306, 317-319.
[10] Edwards, "The Trials of Eight Persons," 306.
[11] "The Tryals of Major Stede Bonnet and Other Pirates," 1719, in *British Piracy in the Golden Age, Volume 2,* ed. Joel Baer (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2007), 336-345.
[12] "The Tryals of Major Stede Bonnet and Other Pirates," 336.
[13] "The Tryals of Major Stede Bonnet and Other Pirates," 344.
[14] "The Tryals of Major Stede Bonnet and Other Pirates," 344.
[15] Steven J. J. Pitt, "Cotton Mather and Boston's "Seafaring Tribe."" in *The New England Quarterly* 85, no. 2 (1 June 2012): 236-252.

[16] Pitt, "Cotton Mather and Boston's "Seafaring Tribe,"" 248-252.
[17] Cotton Mather, "Useful Remarks. An Essay upon Remarkables in the Way of Wicked Men," 1723, in *British Piracy in the Golden Age, Volume 4.* ed. Joel Baer (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2007), 170.

[18] Mather, "Useful Remarks," 183-188.
[19] Mather, "Useful Remarks," 191-192.
[20] Josiah Woodward, "The Seaman's Monitor: or, Advice to Sea-Faring Men," 1723, in *British Piracy in the Golden Age, Volume 4.* ed. Joel Baer (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2007), 213-214.
[21] Woodward, "The Seaman's Monitor," 238-239.
[22] Woodward, "The Seaman's Monitor," 257-258.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Bowen, Ashley, and Vickers, Daniel. *The Autobiography of Ashley Bowen, (1728-1813).* Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Eds., 2006.

Cowse, Benj. "The Tryals of Major Stede Bonnet and Other Pirates," 1719. In *British Piracy in the Golden Age, Volume 2,* edited by Joel Baer. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2007.

Edwards, John. "The Trials of Eight Persons Indited for Piracy," 1718. In *British Piracy in the Golden Age, Volume 2,* edited by Joel Baer. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2007.

Mather, Cotton. "Useful Remarks. An Essay upon Remarkables in the Way of Wicked Men," 1723. In *British Piracy in the Golden Age, Volume 4.* edited by Joel Baer. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2007.

Seybolt, Robert Francis, Jonathan Barlow, and Nicholas Simons. "Captured by Pirates: Two Diaries of 1724-1725." *The New England Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (1929): 658-69. Accessed February 2, 2020. doi:10.2307/359173.

Snelgrave, William. *A New Account of Guinea and the Slave Trade.* London: J. Wren, 1754.

Ward, Edward. *The Wooden World Dissected: In The Character of a Ship of War.* London: The Booksellers of London and Westminster, 1760.

Woodward, Josiah. "The Seaman's Moniter: or, Advice to Sea-Faring Men," 1723. In *British Piracy in the Golden Age, Volume 4,* edited by Joel Baer. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2007.

Books

Brunsman, Denver. *The Evil Necessity: British Naval Impressment in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World.* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013.

Cordingly, David. *Under the Black Flag: The Romance and the Reality of Life Among the Pirates.* New York: Random House, 1995.

Lloyd, Christopher. *The British Seaman, 1200-1860: A Social Survey.* Rutherford, Madison, and Teaneck: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1968.

Morris, Richard. "The Mercantilist Background of American Labor Relations" and "Maritime Labor Relations." In *Government and Labor in Early America.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1946.

Rediker, Marcus. *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750.* Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

Rediker, Marcus. "Who Will Go A Pyrating?" and "The New Government of the Ship." In *Villains of all Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age.* Boston: Beacon Press, 2004.

Rodger, N.A.M. *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy.* Glasgow: William Collins Sons & Co, 1986.

Vickers, Daniel. *Farmers and Fishermen: Two Centuries of Work in Essex County Massachusetts, 1630-1850.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994.

Vickers, Daniel and Walsh, Vince. *Young Men and the Sea: Yankee Seafarers in the Age of Sail.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005.

Articles

Hubbard, Eleanor. "Sailors and the Early Modern British Empire: Labor, Nation, and Identity at

      Sea." *History Compass* 14, no. 8 (August 2016): pp.348-358.

Pitt, Steven J. J. "Cotton Mather and Boston's "Seafaring Tribe."" *The New England*

      Quarterly 85, no. 2 (1 June 2012): pp.222-252.