

Excesses of Drinking, Sex, Violence, and Religion: Which of These Things Actually is Like the Others? Disrupting the Boundaries between Pirates and Methodists

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At first glance, pirates and Methodists could not appear more different. Pirates were criminals who attacked towns and ships for their own gain and against the interest of their own country. As followers of John Wesley and his compatriots, Methodists remained a part of the Church of England throughout the eighteenth century but sought a tangible experience of God's grace. Both groups, though, were viewed as guilty of excess and as ruled by passion instead of reason. And because pirates and Methodists were viewed as counter-cultures, society, whether in the form of government or the mob, punished them, and authors waged a war against them in print. While authors presented both Methodists and pirates at various times as rogues, threats, and over-sexed, I will concentrate on just one image, that of the bumbling fool. Certainly, one way to deflect anxiety raised by a group subverting the structures of one's society is to represent that group as being filled with ridiculous figures about whom one need not worry.

Before entering into a discussion about representation, we need to situate pirates and Methodists in their historical context. Both groups called into question and undermined the economic structure of society. Pirates obviously threatened, while living off of, the economic system of mercantilism, capturing ships and disrupting trade routes. Though not setting out to ruin trade as the pirates were, Methodists also were accused of hurting the economy, with critics claiming that workers neglected their trade in order to preach. Members of certain trades—actors, bar keepers, and musicians—felt particularly threatened by Methodist preaching against drinking and popular entertainments such as attending the theater.

Pirates and Methodists called attention to class structure as well. Pirates rejected the stratified system on board mercantile or privateer ships that mirrored the class hierarchy on land. Instead of a strong captain who ruled with strict discipline, pirates operated under a loose hierarchy and shared their plunder based on a set of articles (rules of governance) that equitably distributed spoils and gave the captain limited power. Defoe writes in his pamphlet on the pirate Gow, "'tis eminently known, that among such Fellows as these, when once they have abandon'd themselves to such a dreadful hight (sic) of Wickedness, there is so little Government or Subordination among them, that they are, on Occasion, all Captains, all Leaders" (xi). Pirates also appropriated aristocratic signals of identity, such as clothing, possessions, and social graces, with a self-conscious flair that satirized and rejected England's class system. Methodist preachers (who often were not ordained clergy) ignored the established hierarchy and protocols of the church, preaching to the masses in open fields that belonged in other priests' parishes. Preaching in the open field allowed Methodists to reach the poor, teaching that Jesus had died for them and that they could directly experience God's grace, a move the upper classes did not particularly appreciate. As the Duchess of Buckingham noted of George Whitefield's preaching, "Their

doctrines are most repulsive, and strongly tinged with impertinence and disrespect towards their superiors, in perpetually levelling all ranks, and doing away with distinctions. It is monstrous to be told, that you have a heart as sinful as the common wretches that crawl on the earth” (qtd. in Rack 280).

Most importantly, eighteenth-century writers and observers saw pirates and Methodists as guilty of excess. Pirates displayed excess in their spending, drinking, sex, and violence. Defoe depicts Blackbeard in *A General History of the Pyrates*, for instance, as prostituting his own wife and shooting one of his own men, with whom he had been having a nice social drink, to assert his authority on board ship. Against all reason, pirates would destroy those mercantile goods that they did not want when capturing a ship so that the act of pillaging itself moved beyond what was necessary for the pirate’s gain and was in itself excessive. Clement Downing expresses his disgust with this practice in his 1737 *A Compendious History of the Indian Wars and an Account of the Rise, Progress, Strength and Forces of Angria the Pyrate*, writing of the pirates’ taking of a rich Moor ship. It was filled with a “great quantity of Balm of Gilead; all of which these Pyrates made waste of, and suffered the same to lie exposed to the Wind and Weather on the Island of St. Mary. There we found the Ruins of several Ships and their Cargoes piled up in great Heaps, consisting of the richest Spices and Drugs; all of which they valued not” and therefore let go to ruin (46).

Contemporaries accused Methodists of enthusiasm, which “implied not only religious excess but also social subversion” according to Henry Rack in his book *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (275). The eighteenth century defined enthusiasm as a “claim to extraordinary revelations or powers from the Holy Spirit; and, more vaguely and abusively, any kind of religious excitement” (276). Though John Wesley reviled enthusiasm and saw himself as a primitivist (following the apostolic church), charges of enthusiasm haunted him and his movement. In a 1747 letter to John Wesley, Reverend Lewis Jones writes, “You know that censure was laid on the pretended revelations and seraphical flights in your and Mr. Whitefield’s journals, and on the ecstatic fits and fancied impulses, faintings and visions of some of your followers, all of which bore a strong tincture of enthusiasm. And as to speculative points, that censure was likewise passed on the Methodist doctrine of an imaginary new birth, an imaginary new faith and an imaginary assurance” (qtd. in Rack 277). Jones refers to the Methodist doctrine of assurance of God’s grace. Wesley records his own moment of assurance in Aldersgate in 1738 as a warming of his heart, and his brother, Charles, had a similar “imaginary new birth” just a few days earlier. As Rack notes, “Locke said that men claim a special personal ‘revelation’ when they cannot account for their opinions by reason” (276); hence this assurance became associated with passion, not reason, and even the supernatural. Charles was sick in bed with pleurisy at his moment of grace and claims to have heard someone enter and say, “In the name of Jesus of Nazareth arise and believe, and thou shalt be healed of all thy infirmities.” Thinking he was hearing the voice of Jesus, he felt a strange palpitation in his heart and responded, “I believe. I believe” (qtd. in Rack 144). Though it later turned out to be a mere human speaking to Charles, the speaker claims to have been inspired by Christ in a dream to say those words.

Even the reaction to both groups appears excessive. Writers depict pirates as the worst of all possible criminals, and the state held up their bodies, hanging in chains on Execution Dock, as

examples of how loathsome their crime was. Downing describes the act of pirates signing articles as the renunciation of “Honour, and all human Compassion” so that turning pirate strips sailors of their humanity. Some writers even go so far as to compare the pirates to the devil himself. Defoe, for example, refers to Blackbeard as “the Devil incarnate,” a comparison that Blackbeard invited with the lit fuses in his hair and the attempt he once made to create a hell of his own, burning sulfur below deck to see who could withstand the torture the longest.

Initially, Methodists received the same kind of contempt. Violent riots broke out in an attempt, often instigated by parish priests, to stop Wesley and his followers from preaching, putting the preachers in physical danger. Incidents of mob violence—most frequent in the 1740s, a time when Methodists, like pirates, faced charges of being Jacobites—fill Wesley’s journal and carry with them the same supernatural sense present in Charles’ account of his rebirth. Wesley’s journal for May 20, 1750 records a riot in Cork inspired by the mayor that followed one of his sermons in a Methodist preaching house: “As soon as I came into the street, the rabble threw whatever came to hand; but all went by me, or flew over my head; nor do I remember that one thing touched me. . . God restrained the wild beasts” (183-4). Not all present were so lucky, with one Mr. Jones, according to Wesley, covered with dirt and lucky to escape with his life. Though Wesley escaped any violence, the mob attacked the preaching house, taking frames from the windows and whatever wood they wished for their own use before burning it to the ground.

While the government and mob attacked the problems of piracy and Methodism physically, writers fought them ideologically in print, creating various caricatures of both groups. Whether as oversexed, continually drunk, grotesquely violent, or achingly stupid, pirates and Methodists appear at their worst in print throughout the century, this being particularly true of pirates, who unlike Methodists, did not engage in a print war to rescue their reputations. I will examine just one image of both groups, the bumbling fool, to demonstrate how this depiction undermined any sense of threat raised by the two countercultures.

Defoe’s 1725 pamphlet *An Account of the Conduct and Proceedings of the Pirate Gow* creates a shipful of men who conspire to hang themselves through stupid conduct. Knowing that the last ship they took will alert the authorities to their presence in those waters, Gow and his men decide to head to Scotland, Gow’s home, planning to attack coastal villages for plunder if no ships offer an opportunity. When they arrive, Gow calls his men together and gives them directions on how to behave on shore so no one figures out who they are, “and ‘tis most certain,” Defoe writes “that had they been careful to observe his Directions, and not betray’d and Expos’d themselves, they might have pass’d undiscover’d, and done all the Mischief they intended, without allarming (sic) the Country” (30). Gow’s men, though, call attention to themselves, putting the area on guard and thwarting their own plans, rapidly becoming in the process the Three Stooges of pirates. Hearing that the sheriff is away, Gow sends 10 men in a longboat to plunder his house. The pirates fail abysmally. The sheriff’s daughter escapes with all of the important papers, and his wife makes off with all the gold coin, leaving the pirates with nothing worth plundering but giving Defoe the chance to once again offer commentary on the idiocy of these pirates (34). Meantime, Gow, who is from this area and therefore should know better, has let his ship run aground thanks to the tide running rapidly in those islands. Gow sends to a Mr. Fea, a gentleman of his acquaintance, for a boat to help, but Fea orders his boat to be sunk and the masts hidden so Gow won’t know he had a boat that could have helped. When five pirates come on shore to meet

with Fea, he invites them to have a drink and orders his people to hide the oars, mast and sails of the pirate boat, leaving the men stranded on land. Fea and his small band of men then trick the drinking pirates, capturing all of them, send word to all the gentlemen on the neighboring island, burn fires on the hills as warning to all the countryside, and tell everyone to stay away from the pirate ship as well as drag all boats as far on shore as possible to avoid the pirates taking them. Recognizing their helplessness, the pirates put out the white flag to surrender, though they still hope to escape. Fea tricks the pirates into coming off of the ship one by one until they are all captured. Defoe interjects throughout about how easily the pirates could have avoided capture if they only had a lick of sense, finally commenting, “In a word, they were as void of Council as of Courage; they were outwitted on every Occasion; they could not see in the open Day what any one else would have felt in the Dark; but they dropp’d insensibly into Mr. Fea’s Hand, by one, and two, and three at a time” (51). Basically, Defoe takes qualities associated with pirates’ excess—greed, drinking, raping (a part of the story that I spared you)—to create bumbling idiots ripe for the gallows. Certainly, pirates are not the least bit threatening when they take the form of the pirate Gow and his men, who cooperate unwillingly but so very much in their own capture and ultimately their own hanging.

Gow is not alone in this depiction of the foolish pirate. A similar scene occurs in an anonymous pamphlet entitled, “The Tryal of Capt. Thomas Green and his Crew.” The preface explains that a ship called the Annandale, which belonged to the Company of Scotland, was seized in the Downs of England by special order of the East-India Company. In revenge, when the Worcester, Captain Green’s ship, belonging to English East-India company came to Scotland, the authorities took its cargo as reprisal. The Scots became suspicious when the gunner of the ship, Simpson, acted nervous, asking if there weren’t some other reason why the ship was being stopped. Their superstitions were heightened by the comments from the gunner’s mate, Andrew Robertson, who said to himself, “This is the just Judgment of God upon us, for the Wickedness committed in our last Voyage; and I’m afraid it will pursue us further, since that being reduced to so small a Number aboard, four or five of us cannot agree amongst ourselves” (iii). Like Gow’s men who are unable to behave once on shore, Green’s men lead the authorities to suspect them and ultimately doom them, something the pamphlet emphasizes in several places, even including this information in the preface. The writer notes, “I presume you are not ignorant, that the first Notices of this Matter proceeded from Words which were dropt in Passion” (50) by the pirates.

While not dealing with criminality and punishment, novelist Tobias Smollett takes a similar approach in his caricature of a Methodist. Humphry Clinker, who is not a threat to anyone, (unless you call being exposed to his hindquarters threatening) embodies all of the seemingly threatening aspects of Methodism. He appears to be lower class, at times ignores his work to preach, and is guilty of both enthusiasm and a belief in the supernatural.

Twice, Matthew Bramble comes upon Humphry preaching when he should be about his duties as Matthew’s servant, and both scenes highlight the economic and class issues surrounding Methodism. The first time, Humphry immediately recognizes that he is neglecting his job and perceiving “his master, thrust the paper into his pocket, descended from his elevation [on a stool] bolted through the crowd, and brought up the carriage to the gate” (94). Given Humphry’s hasty resumption of duty, Matthew laughs at his servant’s public performance and teases him for setting up as a salesman of medicinal powders. Humphry quickly corrects Matthew, explaining

his purpose of curing his “fellows in servitude and sin” of “profane swearing” (95). Only then does Matthew take umbrage, so that turning color he declares, “But, Clinker. . .if you should have eloquence enough to persuade the vulgar to resign those tropes and figures of rhetoric, there will be little or nothing left to distinguish their conversation from that of their betters” (95). By wishing to hold onto signifiers of class, Matthew echoes the concerns of Duchess of Buckingham, who objected to Whitefield’s levelling of social hierarchy. The second time Humphry neglects his earthly duties to preach, Matthew displays even less patience upon finding that the females of his household are present among the listeners. Matthew is struck by “the presumption of his lacquey, whom he commanded to come down, with such an air of authority as Humphry did not think proper to disregard” (129). While Humphry fetches the hackney-coach, Matthew explains to his niece Liddy, “I don’t think my servant is the proper ghostly director, for a devotee of your sex and character” (129). This is certainly a direct slap at Methodism, which relied on circuit riders, often men who were not formally educated, to spread its message.

Matthew’s confrontation with Humphry upon this occasion addresses the enthusiasm associated with Methodism as well as the doctrine of assurance of grace (which Win. Jenkins spells grease in her own letters) that carried the taint of being ruled by passion, not reason. When Matthew informs Humphry that he has no right to set himself up as a spiritual advisor to his betters, Humphry expresses conventional Methodist doctrine in his reply: “may not the new light of God’s grace shine upon the poor and the ignorant in their humility, as well as upon the wealthy, and the philosopher in all his pride of human learning?” (130). Matthew tellingly responds, “What you imagine to be the new light of grace. . .I take to be a deceitful vapor, glimmering through a crack in your upper story—In a word, Mr. Clinker, I will have no light in my family but what pays the king’s taxes, unless it be the light of reason, which you don’t pretend to follow” (130). Matthew then threatens to fire Humphry, accusing him of being a “wrong-headed enthusiast” who might “infect others with your fanaticism” (130). Of course, Humphry apologizes and remains in Matthew’s service since ultimately, Smollett wishes to undermine Methodism’s threat by recouping its expounder, Humphry.

Like Methodism’s founder, Humphry also believes in the supernatural, another instance of being ruled by passion and not reason. When visiting Scotland, Humphry meets up with an old admiral during a walk through the woods and decides that the figure must be a ghost, causing him to run into the kitchen with his hair on end. Another incident occurs on his wedding night when the practical joker Wilson leaves a cat “shod with walnut-shells” in the bridal suite. When the cat proceeds to make a great deal of noise, Humphry decides that “Satan was come to buffet him” and putting off all ideas of consummating his marriage “began to pray aloud with great fervency” (319-20). On both occasions, Humphry is quickly corrected in ascribing these incidents to supernatural causes by the appearance of the flesh-and-blood admiral and cat. So while passion takes over briefly, reason does prevail.

Ultimately, this is the point for Smollett—Humphry’s eventual recuperation, which nullifies any of the previously perverse or threatening aspects of his Methodism. While other writers viciously satirized Methodists, Smollett instead creates a loveable, bumbling fool who can be dismissed and brought back into the fold thanks to the discovery of his parentage. Even before the discovery of Humphry’s birth, Matthew writes that his enthusiasm “renders him very susceptible of gratitude and attachment to his benefactors” (145) so that Humphry ignores his

calling to preach and Methodism in order to obey Matthew's orders as his master. Certainly with master turned father, such obedience will be even more guaranteed. Humphry's very enthusiasm and simplicity put him in Matthew's debt and within his power to control and therefore tame, perhaps even convert, his illegitimate son. While Humphry does not send himself to the gallows as the pirates did (though he nearly does early in the novel when he refuses to swear he is innocent thanks to his Methodist belief in his sinfulness), his role of bumbling fool maintains correct social order and his place in it.

By overturning neat categories of criminals and religious enthusiasts, I hope to have demonstrated the relationship present among seemingly disparate groups engaged in the extremes of experience. In the future, I will expand this work to include the poets of sensibility—themselves attempting to express the extremes of experience—in hopes of giving more insight into the aesthetics of representation.

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Presented at the South Central Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies, March 2000

Biographical Sketch

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