The Providence of Pirates: Defoe and the “True-Bred Merchant”

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IT IS strange that Daniel Defoe, for all his fascination with criminals, exploration, and commerce, never wrote the definitive pirate novel. Defoe’s chameleon-like ability to inhabit the clothes of men and women throughout society, particularly its lower classes, seemed tailor made for capturing the ambiguous morality that fueled the English pirate. He certainly lived at a time when models were ripe for the picking: Henry Avery, Edward Teach, Captain Kidd, and scores of others pirated during his lifetime and excited the interest of publishers throughout England. Not that Defoe avoided the subject completely, as his name has been linked to numerous pirate fictions, from the now accepted Captain Singleton (1720) to the more controversial King of Pirates (1719), An Account of the Conduct and Proceedings of the Late John Gow (1725) and the largely discredited A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pirates (1724). The sense of ‘should have’ rings through many of these works, as Defoe should have been the one to write a comprehensive encyclopedia of English pirates and their effect on the economy, especially given his obsessive interest in trade and nationalism. Perhaps this fueled John Robert Moore’s famous 1939 work, Defoe in the Pillory, which argued for the inclusion of The General History and many other pirate fictions (theories cemented in his 1961 Checklist of the Writings of Daniel Defoe). For decades, this more or less settled the matter: Defoe was the great pirate novelist before Stevenson, though he never bequeathed us with a great pirate novel per se. Instead, his disparate writings functioned as working notes for a great pirate epic, stillborn in a mishmash of travel narrative, anecdote, and legend.

However, in 1988 P.N. Furbank and W. R. Owens challenged many of Moore’s attributions, chief among them the General History.1 Of the roughly 570 works in Moore’s Checklist, hundreds were classified as spurious or doubtful based on insufficient evidence or previous scholars’ unchecked enthusiasm for Defoe. For example, William Lee’s belief that Defoe worked for John Applebee, who published...
the lives of Newgate inmates, opened the door for a bewildering number of publications—the lives of highwaymen and pirates such as Johnathan Wild, John Gow, and John Sheppard. Yet the lack of any contemporary evidence associating Defoe with Applebee made this unlikely, in addition to the authors’ assessment that “On mere grounds of style and tone, much of the material is a kind of sub-Spectator whimsical foolery that, to our ears, does not suggest Defoe at all” (“The Myth of Defoe as Applebee’s Man” 202). While some critics, notably Paula R. Backsheider, chided them for being “tone deaf to history” (“Firing off the Canon” 116), Furbank and Owens largely discredited the pirate fictions, with Captain Singleton alone raising the Jolly Roger. However, the argument continues, particularly in works where the ‘should have,’ upon closer reflection, shifts to the more provocative, ‘might.’ A comparison of the pirate fictions with Singleton reveals an astonishing pedigree less with The General History (the work most often discussed in this venue), than the more obscure The King of Pirates. Both are stylistically consistent variations on the myth of Captain Avery, an audacious pirate who reportedly robbed the treasure ship of the Great Mogul and made off with his loot (and his daughter) to Madagascar. However, it is the second part of the myth -- the pirate’s secret return to England, treasure in tow -- which would most appeal to Defoe and his overriding interest in trade.

As early as 1869, William Lee rescued The King of Pirates from obscurity in his book, Daniel Defoe: His Life and Recently Discovered Writings. In his brief discussion of the work he notes, “This work, like Crusoe, has the advantage of addressing the reader directly, as an autobiography” (Lee 315). Though hardly conclusive, the link to Crusoe is important given its date of publication, 1719, the same as Robinson Crusoe. In terms of technique, the novel’s use of first-hand narrative (in this case, two letters from Avery himself in response to his crimes) allows the author to humanize the now mythic pirate as someone very recognizable -- a pirate Crusoe, marooned from his true calling as an Englishman. Of course, detractors would note the obvious: The King of Pirates seems relatively unacquainted with the dramatic sweep and depth of Robinson Crusoe, revealing tell-tale signs of haste, contradiction, and disjunction. However, even John Robert Moore, writing of Captain Singleton in Defoe: Citizen of the Modern World, noted that “[w]hen Defoe was uncertain what story he meant to tell, he could make sad work of it…Four stories in Captain Singleton, yes; and each not without merit. But here the parts remain greater than the whole” (252). For Moore, the weaknesses of Captain Singleton did not disqualify it for inclusion in the canon of Defoe’s works; on the contrary, Defoe was simply “uncertain what story he meant to tell,” and dashed it off on the way to his next opus.

Of course, The King of Pirates shares more with Captain Singleton than charges of shoddy craftsmanship. Perhaps most significant is the voice of the narrator: both are shrewd, unsentimental figures who seem at times unwilling -- or possibly unable -- to complete their task. Because of this, they indulge in a significant amount of backtracking, often fudging places and dates -- and in the case of Singleton, exiling
characters only to restore them on the next page. These ‘mistakes’ are often so glaring as to seem an integral part of the plot. The plots, too, are curiously episodic, the events crudely pasted together from disparate sources with only our pirates to connect them. As Moore points out, Singleton is comprised of four basic stories: his early life as a stowaway, a failed mutiny and a protracted trek through Africa, and a successful pirate career alongside the colorful Quaker William, leading to his return to England disguised as an Armenian. While any one of these may have made a perfectly acceptable novel (particularly the African section, which is roughly one-third of the book), they are not digested into a psychological whole. The modern reader misses the conflict of personality, much less the compelling inner voice of a pirate warring against humanity. Why did Defoe fail to bring off such a promising work in 1725, a few years after succeeding so resoundingly with Robinson Crusoe? Was it a simple case of becoming lost in his work, of chasing too many hares, as Moore would have it? Or is this, too, a questionable work in the Defoe canon?

In asking why Defoe seemingly ‘failed’ with Captain Singleton, we should also consider why The King of Pirates fails in a similar fashion. The novel clearly falls short of our expectations of pirates: the narrator lacks any flair for drama or suspense, relying instead on the ‘truth’ of his narrative. Yet as with Singleton and surprisingly, Robinson Crusoe, the truth runs away with him, and his so-called vindication becomes something of a sales pitch. All three narrators keep largely to themselves (Avery more or less intimating that a true Englishman is marooned on the deck of a pirate ship), working out a secret plan to return to England and record the fruits of their colonial enterprise. If Defoe did not write The King of Pirates, its author clearly learned his craft from Robinson Crusoe, borrowing many of its tell-tale details, chief among them a delight in the supernatural. More curious is why these works appeared within a few years of one another, each expressing views that Defoe had tinkered with for years, but which suddenly appeared as fictional narratives. What seems more likely is that Defoe experimented with Avery in a short, semi-fictional manner before incorporating his character and aims into a hypothetical pirate: Captain “Bob” Singleton. Quite unlike The General History of Pirates, which lovingly details crime after bloody crime, these works stress the business of piracy, or more precisely, the pirate’s role as what Defoe would term a “true-bred merchant.” Defoe seems to have realized that only an anonymous pirate -- anonymous in both name and characterization -- could realize this fictional transformation, which perhaps explains The King of Pirates’s greater ‘failure’ with posterity.

In Defoe’s Review on February 3, 1713, an article appeared discerning “a kind of divinity in the origin of trade” (Vol. I, No. 54). Defending the impulse to explore the globe and open new markets, Defoe asks, “Shall any tell me that God in His infinite providence did not guide nations by invisible directions into trade, and lead them by the hand into the methods, manner, and consequences, to render commerce both easy and useful?” He goes on to illustrate the artful creation of rivers that lead
into the “very bowels and centers of countries,” as well as the science of navigation, which has created markets where previously none existed. The essay ends with a call to further exploration, since “Providence has yet an inexhausted [sic] store of undiscovered advantages in trade.” Despite its fanciful nature, this philosophy obsessed Defoe for a lifetime, finding expression in further articles, pamphlets, histories, and eventually, fictional narratives. Trade was no low occupation or theoretical abstraction for Defoe; on the contrary, it was the very basis for a national identity, one that balanced the commercial and the spiritual aspects of life. If Providence itself -- which Defoe saw in the almost miraculous appearance of foreign markets -- revealed its Will to foreign merchants, then England was duty bound to obey.

Yet it wasn’t until the 1720’s that Defoe decided to put his theories to the test, illustrating their virtues through the ‘memoirs’ of the fictional Captain “Bob” Singleton, and quite possibly, the infamous Captain Avery himself. Not surprisingly, the fictional careers of these pirates are a virtual point-by-point illustration of Defoe’s thesis: namely, how trade creates not only markets, but a rare breed of men capable of exploiting them. Defoe’s pirates, far from being mindless thieves, offer a sin-to-redemption narrative that sidesteps conventional morality and offers a more attractive proposition for the English merchant. It is perhaps less a sign of Providence than Defoe’s business acumen that these narratives appeared when the pirate scourge was definitively on the wane. The first age of English piracy began in the sixteenth century, when famous privateers such as Drake and Hawkins abandoned the slave trade for the more lucrative possibilities of plunder. Elizabeth I encouraged these privateers as they opened up new markets, discovered new trade routes, and weakened Spanish dominance in the New World. Though this so-called golden age of piracy dried up around 1603, writers such as Richard Hakluyt immortalized the privateer-heroes in his books, *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques, and Discoveries of the English Nation* (1598–1600), which places them alongside more conventional explorers. Future heroes would include Sir Henry Morgan, a ruthless buccaneer who savaged the Caribbean, invaded Panama, and was ultimately appointed the deputy governor of Jamaica for his pains. His exploits became legendary in the work *The Buccaneers of America* by the Dutch pirate Alexander Exquemelin, which was translated into English in 1684 and boasted a wide readership.

However the pirates that are most remembered today are those that came later, a much more lawless and dangerous band of rebels who saw little distinction between Spanish and English booty. In *Pillaging the Empire*, Kris Lane claims that many of these pirates were former sailors and privateers who were out of work after the War of the Spanish Succession (172). This point is echoed by “Captain Charles Johnson,” the ostensible author of *A General History of the Pirates*, who notes: “Privateers in time of War are a Nursery for Pyrates against a Peace” (Preface 3). This work (which, as stated before, has tenuous ties to Defoe) details the crimes and exploits of this new
breed of pirates, which included Blackbeard, Captain Kidd, Charles Avery, and the female pirates Anne Bonny and Mary Read. By 1720, however, the English navy had undertaken an aggressive campaign to destroy piracy altogether, mainly because so many had set up shop in the Americas. But pirates soon found a second life in print and on the stage, and Defoe was quick to capitalize on the current vogue. However, Defoe had little interest in sensationalism, much less in romanticizing the pirate. Both Captain Singleton and The King of Pirates handpick details that other accounts either skim over or leave out entirely, some of which Defoe invented wholesale.

On the surface, both narratives are pirate success stories: Captain Avery reaps incredible rewards in the East, establishes a pirate colony on Madagascar, and eventually flees to Europe disguised as a Persian merchant. Oddly enough, Singleton boasts a similar trajectory, though the journey from sin-to-repentance is more elaborate. Yet neither pirate is punished or made to renounce his illegal gains (even when they are reaped from English vessels). Indeed, the manner of each pirate’s repentance is surprisingly commercial: they ‘trade’ their goods over to England through a comic bit of playacting which reminds one of money laundering. As will be discussed later, Singleton is suddenly seized with a profound awareness of his identity as an Englishman; likewise, Captain Avery dreams of a pardon from Queen Anne, as he is suddenly “resolved…to make full satisfaction to all the persons who I had wronged in England” (King of Pirates 61). These passages jar with their earlier actions and sentiments, and ultimately nullify our expectations of a battle-hardened pirate (no one expects Captain Avery to talk like a tradesman!).

Yet Michael Boardman, in Defoe and the Uses of Narrative, notes that “When functioning personality fades, as it does in Singleton, one can be fairly confident that ideological units have originated straight from Defoe’s own set of convictions…contradiction can indicate authorial belief in Singleton” (106). In many ways, the true ‘character’ of these novels is Defoe himself, who arranges his players mechanically, even hastily, without drawing the curtain of fiction. Yet this very inability to conceal the ‘lie’ of his art illustrates how consistently they represent Defoe at every stage of his writing career. In these works, he is at once a novelist, historian, biographer, speculator, journalist, economist, and travel writer -- often within the same paragraph. Because of this, they also allow us to see Defoe at his most unguarded, wrestling with the thornier issues of the Enlightenment while advancing his beloved issue of trade. Providence, it seems, provided Defoe with the very tools he needed, as the popularity of pirates proved an easy selling point for his readers (especially as they were no longer a viable threat). He only lacked a willing accomplice, one who would risk his neck in offering up the tricks of the cruising trade.

The character of Captain Avery obviously intrigued Defoe, as he makes a seemingly unnecessary cameo in Singleton, and certainly provides the prototype for Captain Singleton and his companion, Quaker William. His use of Avery differs from the story told in A General History of the Pirates, though both are quick to dispel
myth from reality and paint Avery as a cunning, clear-headed Englishman. Almost as soon as Avery’s exploits washed ashore, hack writers pilfered his life for the juicier details, which they inflated to epic proportions. As Hans Turley notes in *Rum, Sodomy, and the Lash*, “The authors heroized the stories that by implication should be most rejected: illegitimate sovereignty, thievery, and economic havoc to the status quo” (63). Despite his interest in thieves, whores, and pirates, Defoe was no literary voyeur; he strongly believed that all art, however modest, “must serve mankind” (Moore 26). Defoe glimpsed the making of a myth in Avery, and lacking the pirate’s cooperation, he possibly did the hack writers one better by publishing two “letters” in response to their slander. In many ways, *The King of Pirates* follows the same basic format of his much earlier work, *The Storm* (1703), where various reports or episodes are woven together by the editor or, in this case, Avery himself. And indeed, while Avery’s story is a veritable potpourri of pirate adventure, what makes it unique is Avery’s admission, made early and often throughout the work: “I would try my fortune in the cruising trade, but would be sure not to prey upon my own countrymen” (9). Like Moll Flanders, Defoe defends Avery as someone thrust into a criminal life, struggling to advance himself at any cost -- save his Englishness.

Of course, within pages of stating this, Avery’s crew attacks and loots an English vessel, a practice that continues throughout the work. Yet each time Avery offers a calculated aside, as in the following: “Redhand would have given them no quarter, but according to his usual practice thrown the men all into the sea. But I prevailed with them to give [the English crew] good usage too, and so they yielded” (13). Thus, Avery emerges as a quasi-British spy among pirates, and secretly plots the downfall of Redhand, his unfeeling commander. When Redhand is killed raiding a Spanish vessel, Avery remarks, “So certain it is, that cruelty never recommends any man among Englishmen, no, though they have no share in the suffering under it. But one said, ‘Damn him, let him go, for he was a butcherly dog’” (24). Perhaps sensing his true Englishness, the crew unanimously votes him the new captain, which is all for the best, as Avery remarks the voyage “[had] for some time before been chiefly managed by my direction, or at least by my advice” (25). However disingenuous this might sound, Defoe found precedent for this role in the writings of William Dampier, a buccaneer who circumnavigated the globe with the notorious Bartholomew Sharp. Dampier sidestepped his criminal past in his first book, *A New Voyage Around the World* (1696), where he makes the bold statement, similar to Avery, that “I dare avow, according to my narrow sphere and poor abilities, a hearty Zeal for the promoting of useful knowledge, and of anything that may never so remotely tend to my Countries advantage” (Preface 2). This “narrow sphere” was of course his career as a pirate, which is only faintly alluded to, and then only for the edification of his readers. Like Defoe, Dampier claimed to have no interest in a sensational story, as he was first and foremost an Englishman -- not a pirate.
Perhaps the most notable similarity between Defoe’s pirates and Dampier occurs in Captain Singleton, when Singleton slyly announces to the reader, “I resolved now that we would leave off being Pyrates, and turn Merchants” (199). In Dampier’s narrative, the line between pirates and tradesmen is similarly blurred. In one of many instances, while trying to flee his pirate company and escape to England, he writes:

I thought now was my time to make my Escape . . . Indeed, one reason that put me on the thoughts of staying at this particular place, besides the present opportunity of leaving Captain Read, which I did always intend to do as soon as I could, was that I had here also a prospect of advancing a profitable Trade for Ambergreece with these people, and of gaining a considerable Fortune for my self. (*A New Voyage* 363)

Dampier is constantly at work ‘selling’ the places he travels to the reader, as well as calculating his own profits from the exchange. Similarly, William the Quaker functions as Singleton’s mercantile conscience, offering Dampier-like advice throughout the novel. While waiting to pounce on a Portuguese Man of War (to take as a prize), William pulls him aside and asks, “what is thy Business, and the Business of all the People thou hast with thee? Is it not to get Money?...And wouldst thou…rather have Money without Fighting, or Fighting without Money?” (153). Having already netted a considerable sum, William sees no point in gambling on the uncertain profits of an unknown, and possibly well-armed, vessel. Interestingly, the decision to lie in wait for the Man of War is made by Captain Wilmot, who is the ostensible pirate captain of the fleet. In this passage, William confides in Singleton (as he does again and again) as if he is the proper captain (similar to Avery’s self-appointed captaincy). In Singleton he finds a willing pupil, one who will increasingly see piracy in an economic light, turning his back on the conquests of Spanish galleons that will make their fame at the expense of their coffers.

This is an odd decision for a novelist, since the narrative is in great peril of losing its dramatic spice. As Shiv K. Kumar remarks in his Introduction to the Oxford Classics edition of *Singleton*, “piracy in the second half of the novel lacks most of its expected evil thrill, often seeming more like an elaborate board game…The pirates behave and talk more like merchants than swash-buckling villains” (xvii). Clearly, Defoe did not want “swash-buckling villains” as heroes, as his revision of Captain Avery attests. Yet far from losing control of his material, or telling too many stories at once, this shift from piracy to trade is a calculated risk for Defoe. The reasons for the gamble is twofold: on the one hand, Defoe wanted to explore the moral implications of trade, which found its ironic representative in a pirate; on the other, piracy allowed him to dramatize the mission of trade in the larger world, rather than the destructive (and in his eyes, counterproductive) business of empire.

In many ways, this “board game” aspect of piracy presumes that readers see merchants much as Defoe saw them: not as bland, avaricious straight men but as the
true heroes of the English nation. Writing in his *Review* in 1706, Defoe defends merchants from the attacks of the high born, who naturally despised tradesmen:

A true-bred merchant is a universal scholar, his learning excels the mere scholar in Greek and Latin as much as that does the illiterate person that cannot write or read. He understands languages without books, geography without maps; his journals and trading voyages delineate the world; his foreign exchanges, protests, and procurations speak all tongues. He sits in his counting house and converses with all nations, and keeps up the most exquisite and extensive part of human society in a universal correspondence. (Vol. III, No. 2)

This passage remarkably resembles the portraits of Avery and Singleton -- and Dampier before them -- as much as any “true-bred merchant.” Pirates, from Drake to Dampier, had single-handedly mapped foreign coastlines, discovered new trade routes, conversed with foreign cultures, and committed subversive raids against Spain, Portugal, and Holland. Because of this, they were uniquely qualified to discern the hand of Providence around the globe, revealing new markets to a roving nation of tradesmen.

However, as a devout Puritan, Defoe struggled with the moral implications of trade, particularly in such questionable realms as slavery. If the slave trade fueled the economy and remained lucrative for “true-bred merchants,” did a Christian have any right to abstain? Defoe spent much of his career trying to resolve this to his satisfaction, and as many scholars point out, he often played it both ways. While condemning the human cost of slavery (particularly as practiced by the Spanish empire -- a pet theme), Defoe could never overlook its economic necessity. To support this he fell back on his ideas of Providence and the “divinity of trade,” which were decreed by a greater power. Indeed, Defoe increasingly felt that trade was outside the conventional moral and social compass. As Defoe illustrates in issue No.155 of the *Mercator*, “We know no Parties in Commerce, no Alliances, no Enemies; they are our Friends we can Trade with to Advantage, tho’ otherwise hating us and hated by us...we know no Whig or TORY in Trade: There is no Popery in Commerce; it matters not to us what God they worship...our Commerce worships but one Idol, *viz.* GAIN” (Andersen 32). This seems like a fictional (and even humorous) outpouring, more appropriate to William the Quaker than Defoe; yet as Hans H. Andersen notes in “Trade and Morality in Defoe,”

he never permitted ethical considerations to interfere with business. He observed that there was “some difference between an honest man and an honest tradesman,” that there were “some latitudes, like poetical licenses in other cases, [where] he may give himself a liberty in, which cannot be allow’d in other cases to any man, no, nor to the tradesman himself out of his business.” (41)
In other words, the tradesman (and for the purposes of this essay, the pirate) had the liberty to break treaties, defy kings, and even break the fundamental contract of religion -- so long as he did so while “in business.” This, Defoe suggests, had been ordained by Providence in order to advance the English nation.

This view partially explains Captain Avery’s assaults on English vessels, since this was simply a ‘business loan’ -- to be paid with interest upon his retirement. Indeed, when speaking to a group of captured Englishmen, Avery says, “we know you want money in England: I dare say....[we] would not grudge to advance five or six million ducats to the government to give them leave to return in peace to England, and sit down quietly with the rest” (*King of the Pirates* 70). In most accounts of Avery’s life, the pirate returns to England with his loot, becoming safely anonymous in *The King of Pirates* (compare this to *The General History of the Pirates*, where he dies penniless). Yet the point remains: England has grown richer from the transaction. *Captain Singleton* also has Singleton return to England with his loot, though the work attempts to chart the murkier waters of Defoe’s gospel. In one of the more arresting scenes, the pirates come across a slave ship whose ‘cargo’ has mutinied. Even for pirates, the first impulse is to kill the slaves in retribution and take the vessel. Quaker William, however, advocates a more humane approach:

> with many Perswasions [he] prevailed upon them . . . that it was nothing but what, if they were in the Negroes Condition, they would do, if they could; and that the Negroes really had the highest Injustice done them, to be sold for Slaves without their Consent; and that the Law of Nature dictated it to them; that they ought not to kill them, and that it would be willful Murder to do it. (157)

The humanist Defoe would never sit idly by and cheer on wholesale slaughter, particularly as it went against “the Law of Nature.” Quaker William not only quells a massacre, but teaches the slaves to speak (so they can tell their side of the story), and even cures a nearly fatal wound suffered by the slave’s leader. Surprisingly, Defoe even devotes two pages to recounting the revolt, including the beatings and rapes the slaves endured. These pages are among the most thrilling in the book, and Defoe clearly sympathizes with their plight (and justice). For a moment, it seems that Singleton, having “turned merchant,” will now become an ardent abolitionist and deliver the slaves to freedom in Africa.

If Moore’s analysis of Defoe’s compositional process held firm, the story might well veer off in this surprising -- and to a modern reader, satisfying -- direction. However, Defoe knew exactly what story he set out to tell. Having rescued the slaves from butchery (and so satisfied his conscience) William reverts into the role of a pirate/merchant who has stumbled upon a large and valuable cargo. He decides to take one of their ships to Buenos Aires and sell the slaves to the Spaniards (the slaves, having satisfied their role in the story, go mute). Within a paragraph or two he
accomplishes this, Singleton noting that “he found Means to trade with the Planters for all his Negroes, as well the Women and the Men, and at a very good Price too; for William, who spoke Portuguese pretty well, told them a fair Story enough” (165). This is quite a leap for the reader to digest, all the more so as Singleton is genuinely impressed by William’s business acumen. Was Defoe equally impressed with his creation? Perhaps he felt that working on a plantation was preferable to death at the hands of pirates? Or perhaps, more cynically, he felt that ‘goods’ were better used than wasted.

What is notable is that Defoe continually refrains from typical pirate violence to find a bloodless -- if occasionally bloodcurdling -- solution. As Timothy Blackburn notes in “The Coherence of Defoe’s Captain Singleton,” “[this] lack of violence stresses Singleton’s continued progress through a state of war and toward a peaceful, civilized society…He represents the ‘Industrious and Rational’ man whom Locke pits against the ‘Quarrelsome and Contentious’ one” (130). The Lockean parallel is well stated, since Singleton is clearly a man of “industry,” whose work is ordained by Providence (or in this case, his creator, Defoe). Singleton doggedly pursues his career, which, under the tutelage of Quaker William, is simply to “make money.” The poetic license William takes in selling the slaves is thus entirely justified, as the slaves would otherwise be killed, or stolen by another band of pirates and the profits lost. Though never commenting on his actions, William seems to suggest “I did not make the world, but I follow its mandates.” Defoe would expect nothing less of the merchant who recognized no “Popery in Commerce,” yet saw the divine hand reflected in the turbulent waters of Trade.

Yet trade has its pitfalls -- as Defoe is all too aware -- in the very human tendency to install an empire and “civilize” the indigenous population. Defoe nursed a healthy contempt for the Spanish empire, and exhaustively documented their cruelty against the peoples of Central and South America. A typical passage occurs in *Robinson Crusoe*, which documents how the Spaniards destroyed millions of these people, who, however they were idolaters and barbarians and had several bloody human bodies to their idols, were yet, as to the Spaniards, very innocent people; and that the rooting them out of the country is spoken of with the utmost abhorrence and detestation by even the Spaniards themselves, at this time, and by all other Christian nations of Europe…for which the very name of a Spaniard is reckoned to be frightful and terrible to all people of humanity or of Christian compassion. (166)

For Defoe, the danger of imperialism is that, ultimately, it endangered trade. Natives understandably ran from Spaniards, and indeed most Europeans, fearing the worst. Profitable trade vanished, essential goods dried up, and all discoveries were at an end. Writing of this in 1707, Defoe claims that “were [we] to possess the silver and gold of Peru, and the wealth of Mexico, the scattering of our people and the bringing our
manufactures to be wrought in those populous countries would make the gain of them
to be less to us than they are now” (Review Vol. IV, No.101). As before, it is trade
that makes nations great, not the dilution of one great nation into many (which
necessitates the barbarous actions of Spain). Through a peaceful trade with Spain,
England could reap the benefits of Mexico and Peru without compromising the
nation’s resources, manpower, or honor. As William advocates, “wouldst thou…rather have Money without Fighting, or Fighting without Money?” (Captain
Singleton 153).

Defoe dramatizes this conflict of trade and empire briefly in Captain Singleton,
though the passage is notable for its cruelty. Wandering through the Indian Ocean,
the pirates alight on a small island in the “Molucco’s,” which appears to be modern-
day New Guinea. To their surprise, the natives have no interest in trading with the
pirates and greet their overtures with arrows and lances. Inexplicably, the pirates (led
by Quaker William) chase the natives into a hollow tree, where the natives
contemptuously defy the pirates, killing and wounding a fair number. The sensible
decision would simply be to withdraw at this point, since (as William instructs
Singleton earlier), nothing can be gained to make the battle worthwhile. Yet William,
of all people, leads the charge to build a tall ladder so they can drive them out with a
“stink pot.” The narrative veers into farce at this point, since the natives are totally
unaffected and even manage to swipe the ladder to boot. William, quite
dumbfounded, remarks, “this is certainly the cunningest Piece of Indian
Engineering that was ever heard of” (211). Here we get a sense of Schonhorn’s observation that
“Quaker William makes piracy a joke, an agreeable and spiritedly humorous
operation; at the same time, his captors become foils, foolish and ridiculously unfit for
their jobs of savage and selfish larceny” (45). In this passage, of course, William is
complicit in the buffoonery, proving himself as small-minded and incompetent as any
pirate or empire builder. In seeking to bend the natives to his will, he disgraces
himself and betrays his code as a merchant. Notably, it is Singleton this time who sits
on the sidelines, waiting for the madness to end (and perhaps chuckling in his sleeve).

The change in William is significant, as he is no longer the jolly, all-knowing
Quaker from the previous adventures, but a hastily sketched embodiment of Defoe’s
agenda as a historian. Humiliated by his defeat, William decides to drill a hole in the
tree and cram it full of explosives (as he learns the tree is connected to a nearby hill by
an underground tunnel). What follows is a scene of ghastly retribution, as the
explosion levels the entire hill, strewing carnage in its wake. Singleton remarks that
some of the Indians “had no Arms, some no Legs, some no Head, some lay half
buried in the Rubbish” (214). The episode ends as quickly as it began, though there is
no justification for William’s actions, much less any sense of reward. Indeed,
Singleton laconically documents the results of their labors: “this was a losing Voyage,
for we had two Men killed, one quite crippled, five more wounded; we spent two
Barrels of Powder, and eleven Days Time…and we came away, having taken some
fresh Water, but no fresh Provisions” (214). It is less the human loss Singleton takes note of than its commercial effects: two men, two barrels, eleven days. This passage proves, as Blackburn notes, that “[u]sing the language and reason of trade, Singleton attempts to avoid violence and refrain from being the agent of vengeful justice in a state of war. In this he shows himself less a pirate than a successful student of William Walters” (131). An allegorical passage, perhaps, where Singleton (and by extension, England) realizes that imperialism is a “losing voyage,” which commits acts of barbarism at the risk of future trade.

Summing up his view of trade and imperialism, Defoe writes in 1707, “But England is the true center of her own people . . . happy in herself, [she] seeks no living abroad, nor dominion abroad; give her peace and trade, she is the happiest, and will be the richest, and in time the most populous, nation in the world” (Review Vol. VIII, No. 65). Having traveled widely himself, Defoe must have known the dangerous disassociation of a seaman or merchant, much less a pirate. England could easily seem a lost daydream, an illusion of home that pales in comparison to the foreign wonders of a Madagascar or Tahiti. Yet Defoe believed that England proved a sufficient lure to bring all her sailors and merchants back home—with the proper enticement. This is an idea that plays out repeatedly in both works, occurring notably in The King of Pirates, when Avery remarks, “I told [the pirates] the Romans themselves were, at first, no better than such a gang of rovers as we were, and who knew but our General, Captain Avery, might lay the foundation of as great an empire as they” (75). In the story, this suggestion gives rise to the myth that Avery has founded an autonomous nation on the shores of Madagascar.

However, Avery distances himself from the idea by referring to himself in third person (he is in disguise at this point). A page later, he is already plotting to steal away in Persian disguise to England. Clearly, this possibility of escape—despite its mythos—holds no allure for him as a “true-bred merchant” and Englishman.

Defoe, too, was unimpressed (or perhaps terrified) by the suggestion of rogue pirate nations who swore no allegiance to England. Of course, he also had the benefit of hindsight, having read the tragic outcome of Avery’s pirate colonists. As Arne Bialuschewski writes in “Pirates, Slavers, and the Indigenous Population in Madagascar, c.1690-1715,” the former pirate Woodes Rogers returned to the colony in 1710 and published the results in his book, A Cruising Voyage Round the World (1712). Rogers was surprised to find this once mighty band had “dwindled to between 60 and 70, most of them very poor and despicable, even to the Natives, among whom they had married” (Bialuschewski 420). Clearly, the pirates were no Romans—a conclusion a contemporary work, The General History of the Pirates, reiterates, as pirate after pirate meets a grisly end. This, then, was the final problem for Defoe to overcome in the pirate myth: the pirates had to choose England over empire. While the general story of Avery has him returning to England, Defoe goes one better by making him prefer to be English even at the expense of his crew. While
on Madagascar, Defoe’s Avery is careful to note that “I set to work to build me a new house and to plant me a pretty garden at a safe distance from our fort” (King of Pirates 77). Like Crusoe, Avery is obsessed with re-creating the cultural artifacts of home, which function as symbolic “flags” in the wilds of Madagascar. Though his narrative closes before he can return to England, he is clearly on his way. His riches (most of which he has smuggled along with him) will eventually return to England where they will inspire the voyages of a future generation of true-bred merchants (or pirates, depending on the political situation).

If Avery functioned more as a literary experiment for Defoe (since Avery was a real pirate, whose career was common knowledge), then Singleton was Defoe’s first field experiment in creating a believable pirate convert. Singleton, unlike Avery, is quite unambiguous about his career, admitting, “I that was…an original Thief, and a Pyrate even by Inclination before, was now in my Element, and never undertook any Thing in my Life with more particular Satisfaction” (Captain Singleton 140). Though the portrait of Singleton is without nuance, it is important that Defoe establish this fact: that he is a “true-born” pirate shaped by Providence to ruthlessly pursue his trade. Not surprisingly, when William tries to persuade Singleton to abandon the “cruising” life and return to England, he refuses. William falls back on familiar tactics, including the aphoristic statement, “for no body trades for the sake of Trading, much less do any Men rob for the sake of Thieving” (256). Here the mask of William slips to reveal his creator, who would lose interest in both Singleton and William if this were true. Piracy’s crimes are excusable --indeed, encouraged -- so long as they lead to a lucrative retirement in England. William, following a script as yet unknown to Singleton, presses the point: “Why…art not thou an Englishman?...[hast thou] any Kindness for the Country, where thou wast born?” (256–7). Singleton’s response is oddly confrontational and realistic, as one could imagine any number of pirates protesting the same: “I was cheated and imposed upon, and used so ill, that I care not if I never see it more” (257). Clearly Defoe is up to something here, as Singleton refuses to heed William’s advice (as he had earlier); the conflict is underlined by Defoe’s switch to dialogue, which he uses sparingly in the novel, and then only to set William in greater relief.10 William sheds tears for Singleton’s misguided ways, tears which obviously move Singleton to relent. However, even if he could take William’s advice to heart, the problem of precedent remains. As he baldly admits, “did you ever know a Pirate repent?” (258).

William’s initial response to this is a sly affirmation: “Nay…we must never talk of repenting while we continue Pirates” (259). In other words, a pirate cannot repent because he is a pirate—a being created to plumb the providential waters of trade; to repent would negate his purpose. William, adopting the trade-morality of Defoe, suggests that once one stops being a pirate, there is no longer anything to repent. It is a bizarre, commercial chrysalis that once undertaken can never be undone (hence his warning -- they can never repent while they continue Pirates). Singleton, however, is
unable to switch masks and ignore the past; as he reasons, “we cannot restore what we have taken away by Rapine and Spoil . . . If we keep it, we continue to be Robbers and Thieves, and if we quit it, we cannot do Justice with it, for we cannot restore it to the rightful Owners?” (266). William agrees that they cannot abandon their spoils here, to benefit less worthy pirates, nor can they grow fat on the fruit of their criminal labors. He advocates a middle path, whereby they “ought to keep it carefully together with a Resolution to do what Right with it we are able; and who knows what Opportunity Providence may put into our Hands, to do Justice at least to some of those we have injured” (267). Defoe’s use of “Providence” is auspicious, echoing his earlier writings and Crusoe’s “chain of wonders.” More importantly, the “justice” William would seek to repay is not to the Spanish, Dutch, or Portuguese; his chief and only aim is to return to England, where a suitable restitution can be made.

Once Defoe’s essential thesis is restated, Singleton’s objections are at an end. Indeed, he admits that “[t]his Resolution of William was very satisfying to me” (267). However, Singleton is no William, nor indeed a Daniel Defoe. He cannot simply “go straight” in his own story, knowing that some change is needed for the reader to believe him. 11 Despite his earlier confessions of criminal bliss, he now claims:

but this I must leave upon Record, that I had from this Time no Joy of the Wealth I had got; I look’d upon it all as stolen, and so indeed the greatest Part of it was; I look’d upon it as a Hoard of other Mens Goods, which I had robbed…I began sincerely to hate my self for a Dog, a Wretch that had been a Thief, and a Murtherer…I could never repent, for that Repentance could not be sincere without Restitution, and therefore I must of necessity be damned. (267)

One can easily imagine William shaking his head at this histrionic display, as the switch from indifference to repentance comes at lightning speed. Nevertheless, the implication is clear: he subscribes to the idea that pirate guilt can be absolved by making the proper “payment” to England.

It is also interesting to note how little William mentions religion. For him, repentance is chiefly commercial in nature: restore the goods and save your soul. Singleton, lacking his instinct for business, runs headlong into thoughts of God and the Devil, feeling the need to cement his conversion in religious terms. At one point, he screams in his sleep that he is a “Thief, a Pirate, a Murtherer, and ought to be hanged,” to which William responds, “why, thou wilt ruine us all, ’twas well the Dutchmen did not understand English: In short, I must shoot thee to save my own Life.” (269). Whether or not William would carry out this threat, he clearly has little use for the traditional nature of confession, which would simply report them. The poetic license given to a “true-bred Merchant” excused their crimes, absolving them before God, the nation, and their own consciences. Singleton, after this moment of weakness, quickly falls in tune.
The work ends with the two fleeing to Venice as Armenian merchants, and from there sending great sums of money to William’s sister, a penniless widow in England. In the closing pages they arrive in England, where Singleton marries the widow, to enjoy a peaceful, if anonymous, life as a retiree (though William makes him vow never to reveal his true identity). Thus the money laundering scheme proves successful, as untold sums from the plunder of Spanish ships enrich the economy of England. Singleton, like Avery before him, learns that England is “the true center of her own people,” where crimes against humanity are forgotten in the balance of trade. Were these ordinary pirates of the order of Captain Kidd or Blackbeard, Defoe would have presumably sent them to a ghastly end. However, as “no one robs for the sake of Thieving,” so Defoe took no relish in writing of pirates per se; rather, his goal was to advance the cause of the “true-bred Merchant” through the cultural capital of the pirate (now safely dispatched to the gallows). It is perhaps no surprise that this myth failed to catch on, and pirates remain glorified for their misdeeds and acts of insurrection. Defoe, however, could never entirely pander to public taste, and felt that every subject, even the most vulgar, should uplift the reader. It is a testament to his imagination (and possibly humanity) that he found the means to exalt the nation through its most wretched outcasts. While his message of trade may find few adherents today, these works reveal the careful -- rather than the slipshod -- art of Defoe’s fiction, and how seldom he separated his multifaceted gifts as a journalist, historian, economist and traveler.

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NOTES

1 Their discussion of The General History occurs on pages 100-113 of The Canonization of Daniel Defoe, where they cast severe doubts on Moore’s attribution, chiefly because neither the style nor subject matter is unique to Defoe. However, they offer no concrete proof to support this, focusing their critique more on Moore’s over-enthusiastic appraisal of the work. For the same reasons, they discredit The King of Pirates from Defoe’s oeuvre. Though most scholars have dropped Defoe’s name from The General History, The King of Pirates fares somewhat better, with Max Novak, Hans Turley, and Richard West, among others, either defending the work or attributing it to Defoe.

2 In her review of The Canonization of Daniel Defoe, Backsheider criticizes the authors for failure to produce nuanced readings of historical reality, as well as for their personal attacks on previous critics. Regarding The General History itself, she writes, “A third historical problem involves a lack of knowledge of the literature published before and during Defoe’s life. The authors obviously do not really know the eighteenth century periodical and pamphlet literature where so many of the attributions are argued by Defoe and his
contemporaries, nor have they had time to search state papers and court documents or the published and archival correspondence. In one place, Furbank and Owens join J.R. Moore in his opinion that *A General History of the Pyrates* is a major addition to the list of works attributed to Defoe and is the book that created the modern idea of pirates. The truth is that many contemporary readers would have known most of the lives in the book and that a better case for the source of the modern conception of pirates can be made for *The History of the Buccaneers of America*” (116).

3 In a scene that seems linked both to *Captain Singleton* and *Robinson Crusoe*, Captain Avery is prevented from hoodwinking an honest merchant by the merchant’s wife, who has a series of prophetic dreams. As he writes, “But Providence, and the good fortune of the owner, prevented this bargain...his wife had an ugly dream or two about the ship -- once, that it was set on fire by lightning and he had lost all he had in it; another time, that the men had mutinied and conspired to kill him -- and that his wife was so averse to his being concerned in it that it had always been an unlucky ship, and that therefore his mind was changed” (41). As in other of Defoe’s fictions, Providence is no vague concept but a real, tangible force expressed through dreams and visions.

4 Many critics have noted the inconsistencies of *Captain Singleton*, which fudges dates and has characters disappear only to reappear a moment later (Singleton abandons his former leader, Captain Wilmot, in Madagascar only to consult him later in the voyage). These inconsistencies speak to a haste in the composition of the work which suggests Defoe’s true motive was journalism rather than repeating the success of *Crusoe*. Clearly he wanted to strike while the pirate vogue was still hot, capitalizing on the day’s headlines as he did with *The Storm*, which was quickly pushed through while the memory of the 1703 storm remained fresh in the readers’ minds.

5 Interestingly, as Kris Lane points out in *Pillaging the Empire*, three of the pirates who sailed with Sharp went on to produce “what may be considered the best of the English buccaneer journals, namely those of Basil Ringrose, Lionel Wafer, and William Dampier” (135). Defoe knew all of these works, as well as the writings of a subsequent pirate who sailed with Dampier, Woodes Rogers, who recorded the fate of the marooned Englishman, Alexander Selkirk (and thus inspired *Robinson Crusoe*). Thus, pirates were a constant theme in Defoe’s writing, and may be largely responsible for his turn to fiction in the 1720’s.

6 To further eradicate his profession, Dampier writes in the Preface: “As for the Actions of the Company among whom I made the greatest part of this Voyage...’tis not to divert the Reader with them that I mention them, much less that I take any pleasure in relating them: but for method’s sake, and for the Reader’s satisfaction...I would not prejudice the Truth and Sincerity of my Relation, tho by Omissions only” (3). In other words, the piracy merely provides the narrative “frame” of the work, which attests to the work’s authenticity and value. Those events which might implicate him as a pirate, though undertaken
unwillingly, are necessary to prove the existence of riches which will subsequently prove “to [his] Country’s Advantage.”

7 In his biography of Defoe, Moore cites a few lines from Defoe’s work, *Reformation of Manners*, where Defoe explicitly targets the slave trade: “The harmless native basely they trepan, / And barter baubles for the souls of men; / The wretches they to Christian climes bring oe’er, / To serve worse heathens than they did before” (Moore 290). It is difficult to reconcile this view with those expressed in *Captain Singleton*, though Moore notes that Defoe often distanced himself from the affairs of state when writing as a “social satirist,” as he is in *Reformation of Manners*. This changing of masks is important for Defoe, and partly explains his mercurial views on slavery, trade, and other slippery topics.

8 Compare this to *A General History of the Pirates*, which virtually mirrors Avery’s sentiments: “Rome, the Mistress of the World, was no more at first than Refuge for Thieves and Outlaws; and if the Progress of our Pyrates had been equal to their Beginning; had they all united, and settled in some of those Islands, they might, by this Time, have been honoured with the Name of a Commonwealth, and no Power in those Parts of the World could have been able to dispute it with them (Preface, 6).

9 In the work, Avery concludes that “there was no safety for us but by keeping all together, and going to some part of the world where we might be strong enough to defend ourselves, or be so concealed till we might find out some way of escape that we might not now be so well able to think of” (30). Nevertheless, he seeks the right moment to abandon the entire crew, which he ultimately does with the help of an unnamed pirate companion (which echoes the Singleton / William relationship in *Captain Singleton)*. 

10 In one of William’s most prominent passages, he has a protracted dialogue with a Dutchman who acts as an interpreter for a native king. The dialogue becomes a fascinating study of the ties that bind Europeans amongst the native “others,” though they are otherwise enemies in trade. William slyly gets the Dutchman to “defect” to the pirates’ cause, betraying his king’s true intentions in exchange for safe passage among the pirates, which William agrees to. It is a riveting scene, full of Defoe’s deft dialogue and characterization (which, frankly, the novel could use more of). However, despite his obvious charisma, Defoe clearly wanted William to remain largely in the background, coming out only to advance the author’s agenda; Singleton, for all his anonymity, remains the true vehicle of Defoe’s message.

11 Defoe takes great pains (despite many narrative inconsistencies) to make the work read like an authentic autobiographical travel narrative (following Dampier’s lead). Indeed, the long section devoted to Singleton’s travels through Africa carefully mines contemporary travel accounts while restricting Singleton’s movements to the as-yet-unknown portions of Africa. See Scrimgerour’s “The Problem of Realism in Defoe’s *Captain Singleton*,” for a more detailed account of this section.
WORKS CITED


