

“Arrrr! To hell with convention!”
Unpacking the Appeal of Pirates in Tampa’s
Gasparilla Festival

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Abstract: *Historically, pirates of the 17th and 18th century had a reputation for being ruthless plunderers and scheming villains. However, despite their barbarous history, pirates are often romanticized in current popular culture in films, books, and in Tampa’s Gasparilla festival. This romanticization of piracy allows society to forget the more accurate, brutal deeds of historical pirates in favor of a more light-hearted perception of them in popular culture, such as through the Pirates of the Caribbean film series. By examining the representation of pirates in film and in Gasparilla in relation to their historical counterparts, this essay explores how the idealized pirate has come to represent freedom and independence. Additionally, this essay argues that though the romanticization of pirates in film and festival provides a means of collective release from societal pressure, the historical reality of piracy should not be forgotten.*

Western society has long been enraptured with pirates and pirate culture, most prominently since the 2003 release of the first movie in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* series. This is evident in children’s desire to dress up as pirates at events such as Halloween and in adults’ desire to do the same in the annual Tampa Bay Gasparilla festival. But what is it about piracy that is so appealing? When we consider Jack Sparrow’s lawful disobedience, or the Gasparilla festival’s glorification of pirate culture, we might infer that, despite their differences, the one thing most of these would-be pirates share is the desire for disobedience against social structures. However, this longing also reflects a more prominent aspiration: People have a strong craving to undergo new, exhilarating experiences by escaping their demanding, sometimes restrictive lives. Consequently, studying the representation of piracy both in film and in the Gasparilla festivities can help us to properly understand why living a lawless life is so appealing.

In Tampa's annual Gasparilla festival, the community glorifies pirate culture by dressing and talking like the stereotypical representation of pirates in popular culture. Pirate-themed clothes, food, children's toys, and blankets are an outcome of society's glorification of pirate culture today. The celebration of pirates in this celebration consists of live music, masquerade dances, parades, and a live re-enactment in which pretend pirates seize the key to the city. In studying the actions of the participants of Gasparilla, the general appeal of piracy seems to be an appeal of revolt and release against societal regulations and norms. This essay assesses essential characteristics of pirate culture in respect to the representation of pirates in film and festival. I will therefore analyze historical and pop-cultural representations of piracy to argue that pirates as represented by film and popular culture are a misrepresentation of their real-life and historical counterparts. I will also assess the reasonings behind the glorification of pirates in popular culture.

Gasparilla and Carnavalesque as a Social Outlet

In Tampa's Gasparilla festival, the community glamorizes certain aspects of piracy and ignores other aspects that would contradict the public's positive/nostalgic representation of pirate culture. By dressing up like pirates and cheering the pirate invaders on as they take control of the city, Gasparilla participants romanticize the life of piracy they choose to celebrate (living a free, lawless life on the high seas, for example) and ignore the evident, brutal reality of piracy that often includes kidnapping or murder. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as cognitive dissonance, wherein when confronted with conflicting information about values or ideas we believe in, we tend to dismiss the parts that don't fit our value or idea. Dutch anthropologist Anton Blok suggests that "[w]e idealize all the more easily those things and people with whom we are least acquainted, or whom we rarely actually see, and we tend to ignore information that is detrimental to a beloved image" (501). This beloved or "ideal image" society fosters with respect to piracy focuses specifically on the appeal of freedom and adventure that is typically associated with 18th- and 19th-century

pirates on the high seas. This is evident in the romanticization of living unconfined that is present in film and in the Gasparilla pirate-themed festivities. The romanticization of these particular traits of piracy allows the community to temporarily set aside social norms, expectations, and class structures. In doing so, this provides the community with a sense of release from the routines of every-day lifestyles.

The term “carnavalesque” describes the idea of festival as a form of social deviance (Bakhtin 7). As represented by Gasparilla, the carnivalesque is a spectacle in which the people come together to escape the constrictions of society. Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian philosopher and literary critic, explains that “[c]arnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people” (7). The participation by all regardless of class or ethnicity creates an essence of escape through such festivals as a form of collective social release. During the festivities of Gasparilla, everyday people dress up as amusing and humorous characters that captivate the audience and invite laughter and liberation from cultural, social, and behavioral norms. Gasparilla participants achieve this liberation by laughing, drinking, and participating in pirate themed parties. This is the image of the carnival that, according to Bakhtin, serves as the basis of “temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from established order” (10). Moreover, the glorification of piracy through carnivalesque festivities provides this temporary liberation by offering a release from social norms, social classes, and a sense of community.

Gasparilla and Carnavalesque as Escape from Social Norms

The glorification of pirates in popular culture provides an escape for individuals in times of hardship. In carnivalesque festivities such as Gasparilla, the community comes together with desires of disobedience and release from social norms such as work, schooling, and social expectations. The stereotypical image of pirates’ living a lawless lifestyle on the high seas is particularly appealing because it offers a sense of escape, connection, and revolt. Additionally, pirates are glorified because of their ability to travel and escape confining situations

at their leisure. A primary example of this appeal of escape is to consider the character of Elizabeth Swann in *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl*. Recall that the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise takes place in the 18th century, when women were frequently treated as property and sold into marriage. It is in this era that Swann is pressured into marriage with Captain Norrington and expected to wear an overly tight dress designed to show off her figure, both examples of the strict roles for women in this time period. Not surprisingly, the confines of this dress are the reason that Swann falls multiple stories down into the river before Sparrow saves her life. Throughout the beginning of the movie, Swann frequently wishes for liberation from these strict restrictions and secretly keeps a pirate pendant in her room. This illustrates that the lifestyle of piracy is particularly appealing to Elizabeth Swann because of the escape and adventure it provides from the confines of her restrictive life. This fictional story is one of the bases for the stereotype of piracy that is romanticized today.

Similarly, the urban myth of the Spanish pirate José Gaspar is the inspiration behind the Gasparilla festival. According to the myth, the pirate lived a life of thievery—robbing merchant ships in the early 1800s. Gasparilla's re-enactment of the pirate invasion in Tampa Bay originated as a celebration of the U.S. Navy's purported defeat of the renowned outlaw (d'Ans 1). This was a symbol of victory over villainous pirates. The "pirates" (some adorned with stereotypical pirate hooks, hats, and cigars, and others with plastic beads and stuffed parrots strapped onto their shoulders) invade the defenseless city of Tampa in search of coin and treasure. Sometime later, the Gasparilla parade was born. According to Author André Marcel d'Ans, these festivities allowed participants to "release the ethnic and social tensions in a city where the relations between the different classes...and ethnic groups were marked by repressive violence" (5). For example, in the early 1900s, the Latin population in Tampa, FL became progressively unified with the rest of society as the celebrations encouraged people of all classes and ethnic backgrounds to unite together in celebration--lessening ethnic conflicts (5). Today, participants in the festival treat the

pirate invaders as honored guests instead of terrors to society. Likewise, instead of celebrating the defeat of piracy, the people rejoice as the pirates seize the city and laugh as the fun, carefree pirates toss out fake bead necklaces and gold coins in celebration (d'Ans 1). By solely seeing pirates as "swash-buckling, hyper-masculine men set free from daily labor and the domestic routines of landed life" (Dawdy and Bonni 676), it is evident that the original significance behind the festival is being forgotten and the plundering and thieving of pirates is being blindly glorified for amusement. However, though the Gasparilla festival presents an inaccurate representation of piracy filled with dancing, singing, and laughter, the glorification of piracy in the Gasparilla festival provides an outlet for this collective need of escape, where for a short time every year it is normal for people to dress radically, drink publicly, and forget the confines of typical societal responsibilities and norms.

The glorification of piracy offers more than just an escape from societal mores; it also provides a direct challenge to economic structures. Research on piracy of the early 1700s shows that though most pirates terrorized those on coastal settlements, some pirates specifically targeted powerful companies that took advantage of and had unfair demands of the people (Dawdy and Bonni 682). In some cases, Shannon Dawdy and Joe Bonni believe that piracy "was a more extreme form of economic protest" (682) that generally resulted from acts of self-preservation or self-interest. Film and popular culture often romanticize this lawless revolt against societal rule and typically ignores the more cruel, realistic actions of piracy that often resulted in murder. The appeal of piracy, therefore, is not simply the escape that rebellion provides; it seems to also stem from a strong desire to rise up against unjust societal norms and rulings. Blok suggests that piracy "represents a craving for a different society, a more human world in which people are justly dealt with and in which there is no suffering" (502). Drawing upon the lawless revolt that is glorified in popular culture, it seems Blok is correct in his claim that the appeal of piracy coincides with a desire for rebellion to achieve a betterment of society. This desire has parallel correspondences with the deconstruction of social classes,

which is outlined below.

Deconstruction of Social Classes and Community

Gasparilla and those carnivalesque festivities that romanticize pirates also provide an outlet for deviance and escape from class structures. André Marcel d'Ans examines a photograph from a Gasparilla festival of 1922 in his scholarly article titled "The Legend of Gasparilla: Myth and History on Florida's West Coast" and relates this photograph to the sense of community that Gasparilla provides for people of different social classes. D'Ans says that once a year the Gasparilla festival "draws a lively crowd of spectators who for once abandon the windowless bunkers of shopping malls, the neon-lit supermarkets, and the clubs and recreational centers that keep the different social classes confined to their own neighborhoods" (23). In other words, Gasparilla serves as a temporary outlet for all social classes where for one day a year they are united together in "peaceful cooperation" (26) and are free to express themselves individually by drinking, dancing, and by wearing bizarre costumes. Moreover, the glorification of pirates and social banditry in popular culture provides a social outlet in much the same way other carnivalesque festivities do: through song, dance, and laughter. And, importantly, it does this through disrupting social norms, including the normal hierarchy of classes, where the peasants have to pay respects to the nobility. The carnivalesque levels the playing field, if only temporarily.

Gasparilla not only offers an outlet from ordinary social laws, norms, and divisions, but also creates a sense of shared emotional connection and needs of belonging. Piracy glorification in the form of carnivalesque festivities allows the people to unite as a single community. By laughing and dancing with both friends and strangers, the temporary feeling of carelessness and connection with others liberates society. And more often than not, this collective desire provides a sense of community that brings people closer together. Discussing this sense of community and connection (typically associated with stereotypical representations of outlaws), Blok says: "What united people behind banditry were kinship, friendship, and patronage—not

class. What animated banditry was the quest for honor and respect" (qtd. in Wagner 373). For our purposes, banditry may be used as a synonym of piracy. However, though the glorification of piracy in popular culture has, in essence, brought positive effects to the community, it must be stressed that this glorification does not represent the reality of piracy and pirate culture. Instead, the public perception warps the reality of piracy into a more admirable and esteemed existence.

Realistic vs. Romantic Pirate Representations

In their analysis of realistic pirate culture, Shannon Dawdy and Joe Bonni define piracy as "a form of morally ambiguous property seizure committed by an organized group which can include thievery, hijacking, smuggling, counterfeiting, or kidnapping" (675). The term "piracy" in today's society has evolved to include the appropriation of intellectual property (Cisler 377). However, for the purposes of this essay we will specifically examine early pirates and pirate culture. In film and popular culture, outlaws such as pirates are misrepresented as being admirable to society when, in actuality, their economic and societal rebellion was oftentimes motivated by greed and often they "terrorized" those of the lower class to achieve their aspirations (Blok 496). In "The Complicated Plot of Piracy: Aspects of English Criminal Law and the Image of the Pirate In Defoe," Joel Baer says outlaws, particularly pirates, purposefully shaped societal views of themselves, claiming that "the more terrible their image, the more quickly would their offer of quarter be accepted" (17). In other words, pirates took advantage of the public's misconception of their image—and even encouraged it—in order to further their own aspirations. However, modern popular culture is largely based on light-hearted stereotypes in which the image of piracy is softened to focus solely on the idea of freedom and rebellion, as illustrated in the character of Captain Jack Sparrow.

In *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest*, Captain Sparrow's ship is captured in the night by Davy Jones, a ruthless captain who demands that Sparrow deliver the souls of one hundred people, including Will Turner, someone Sparrow has

helped repeatedly in the past. Immediately after this demand, Davy Jones inquires, "But I wonder, Sparrow, can you live with this? Can you condemn an innocent man, a friend, to a lifetime of servitude in your name while you roam free?" Captain Sparrow's reply is indifferent and uncaring, which further portrays his reputation in the trilogy for being self-interested, despite his heroized portrayal. This also shows exactly the extent of his self-interest. At the same time, it provides a contrast between the reality of pirate mentality verses the glorification of pirate culture. As Kim Wagner says, we often "glorif[y] pirates *in spite of their actual behavior*" (358). Most certainly, the romanticizing of Jack Sparrow in popular culture is a too-simplistic reading of his character that largely ignores his ambiguous behavior in favor of highlighting Sparrow's good deeds and adventurous lifestyle. Moreover, the societal glorification of only certain aspects of these lifestyles (lawless, adventurous) instead of the reality (greedy, ruthless) suggests a connection between these particular characteristics and the lifestyles people might wish to lead.

Though the glorification and romanticization of piracy in popular culture has led to an increased sense of community and support, and an outlet for the community, the misrepresentations have led to bad things. As previously discussed, 17th century pirates themselves took advantage of this misrepresentation to better their own lifestyles. Joel Baer states that "whatever their taste for low diversions and petty cruelties, pirates were tormented with great ambitions" (21). Most often, however, pirates during the 17th century (the so-called "Golden Age of Piracy") were known for their acts of brutality and ruthlessness. These pirates were not simply content with stealing for their own needs but were ruthless to the point of burning merchandise that was of no use to them and executing merchants for the sake of "amusement or diversion" (12). The public's perception of pirates as savages allowed for pirates to more easily achieve their demands, such as ransom payments or cargo sieges. However, by excluding the reality of piracy and pirate culture in favor of only certain characteristics of pirates (particularly in film and in Gasparilla festivities), the brutal re-

ality of piracy is often forgotten and brushed aside. This leads to frequent misconceptions and misrepresentations in society of what piracy actually is, and the frequent dismissal of the brutal, criminal acts that early pirates regularly would partake in.

The representation of Jack Sparrow in these films revolves around an image of lawlessness and excitement. Perhaps those who attend festivals like Gasparilla and glorify living such a lawless life also find it appealing because of a love for adventure. In film and popular culture, the imagery of pirates is usually portrayed as positive and heroic, despite evidence pertaining to the brutality of actual historical pirates' lives and behavior. In one scene of *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl*, Captain Jack Sparrow is introduced arriving confidently into town upon a sinking boat, and promptly stealing from the port-keeper afterwards. Sparrow is characterized as quirky and relatable because of his thirst for adventure and habit of making foolish decisions. The music in this scene portrays a feeling of adventure that encapsulates a sense of thrill and anticipation to the audience. This representation delivers an entertaining and positive image of pirates of the mid-18th century that society glorifies and romanticizes. In an interview with NPR, American writer John Baur says, "[T]hat's what appeals to people about pirates. Not the pillaging or plundering or killings. ... It's the freedom to once in a while say, 'Arrrr! To hell with convention! I'm going to misbehave today!'" (qtd. in Weeks). In other words, though society tends to ignore realistic aspects of piracy, they do not necessarily lack knowledge of this reality. Instead, society fosters this ideal image to express themselves individually and to share this desire of freedom and revolt with others.

Conclusion

By identifying the particular characteristics of piracy that society tends to romanticize, it can be inferred that society as a whole glorifies an idealized early modern pirate culture because it represents freedom, rebellion, and free expression. To a certain extent, pirates should be romanticized in popular culture. In Gasparilla, the need for release from the typical routines of everyday life, which is dominated by strict, sometimes

unjust social norms and regulations, bonds the community in a way few other social gatherings have been able to do. During the festival, people for once put aside social norms and class structures and gather as a single, collective community. More so, this glorification in the form of carnival ultimately provides the community with a safe outlet to express their desire for freedom, connection, and rebellion. However, this glorification has led to an unrealistic representation of piracy and pirate culture. Because society romanticizes and promotes only certain, more desirable characteristics of piracy in film and popular culture, the reality of piracy has often been forgotten and brushed aside. The glorification and romanticization of piracy will likely remain in society as an external manifestation of the needs of the community. Nevertheless, the reality of pirate culture of the 17th and 18th century should be remembered to prevent society from labelling these criminals as heroes, and to put an end to the blind glorification of pirate culture.

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