“A Pirate’s Life for Me”: legends of buccaneers at sea

Tuesday/Thursday 01:30 PM - 02:45 PM in 1 Bow St, Room 317

In this course, we will read (and watch!) some of the best-known stories about pirates in the age of sail. We’ll explore both the myths and realities of these infamous outlaws, and ask why their crimes were treated so uniquely: sometimes the stateless “villains of all nations,” society’s most wanted criminals; sometimes celebrated for their daring, or even seen as patriotic heroes. We’ll also consider what “work” stories about pirates do in our culture—what ideas they offer, what institutions they challenge or defend. The “wooden world” of the ship’s decks, after all, offers a space for thinking about how communities are made. It is a space where state violence is enacted and ideas of criminality are formed. It is also a space where norms and perceptions about gender, sexuality, race, and class can be re-imagined in new ways. But does this translate into subversive potential? Or are tales of life at sea just places where society can make castaways of its own inner demons? And, perhaps most strangely of all, how do the murderous escapades of society’s villains become the stuff of Disney rides and cartoons for children? In other words: why are pirates "fun"?

Preceptor: Samuel Diener

Office hours: Mondays, 1-3 PM by Zoom https://harvard.zoom.us/j/2221644041
or at 142 Barker Ctr. (in the hallway across from the History and Literature office),
or otherwise by appointment.

(If you have any questions about the class, feel free to shoot me an email! You can reach me at sdiener@g.harvard.edu for now; I'll be migrating to a new one once the semester starts.)

Required text (please purchase in this edition ASAP):


Available for $7.95 w/free shipping from Barnes and Noble. See here: https://bit.ly/3t7c73B
Class Overview

Though there have been (and still are!) pirates on oceans all around the world, our modern myth of piracy begins in the Caribbean in the seventeenth century. As Spanish imperial power declined and the rise of new colonial competitors destabilized the region, hundreds of renegade crews began to settle on out-of-the-way islands to launch raids on Spanish ships and treasure fleets. Before long, these “buccaneers” had begun attacking the ships of other nations, too, leaving behind tales of violence and terror—and fabulous wealth. The Golden Age of piracy was born.

Module 1

We’ll begin the class with some stories of these real-life pirates, both men and women, that were collected in the 1720s by the pilloried, exiled, and nine-times-imprisoned opposition journalist Nathaniel Mist in his bestselling *General History of the Pyrates*. We’ll find that there are many familiar names and stories—but also some strange ones.

To what end did Mist collect these tales? And why did they become so immensely popular over the centuries that followed? For many, the excitement of the pirate ship was that it was a site of possibility: old ways of living and regulating life had been violently thrown off. On the ship’s deck, readers had room to imagine life lived different. Elected leaders? Redistributed wealth? Why not?

Module 2

In the second module of the class, we’ll look a century or so ahead to a novel that perhaps did more than any book to shape the idea of piracy that we know today: Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*. All the pirate things are here—peg legs, parrots, buried treasure, skeletons, gallons and gallons of grog, and, of course, the song—

*Fifteen men on a dead man’s chest,*
*Yo, ho, ho, and a bottle of rum!*

But the novel also changed the genre of the pirate story. Reconceiving it as a tale for children (specifically, a tale for boys) Stevenson used it to frame an episode in a young man’s coming-of-age: his departure from his mother and into a world of masculine adventure. The ship’s deck had become a place where a certain kind of “manhood” is taught.
But what if the boy never grows up? *Peter Pan* was originally a play by the playwright J.M. Barrie, first produced in 1904; it was the 1953 animated Disney version, however, that launched the tale to its undying fame. Converting the island, the Caribbean, the pirate, and the boy into a fantasy “neverland” of magic and fairies, Barrie transformed *Treasure Island*’s psychic drama. But—why magic? And what to make of Wendy?

In this unit, we’ll consider the way film and popular culture, from *Peter Pan* to the five-film series *Pirates of the Caribbean*, picked up the stories of the pirate and made them into myth: a modern legend for a modern time.

(I do believe in pyrates, I do!)

But the legend is not entirely new. Neverland’s luscious greenery has a troubling colonial history. And, as we watch the legend cast and recast, we will find it wrestling with (or simply reproducing) ideas it has inherited of how gender, race, and sex are thought.

**Entering a Scholarly Conversation**

The French philosopher and theorist Michel Foucault once wrote that “the boat has been … for our civilization … the greatest reserve of the imagination. In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates.” Foucault, it seems, was reading some pirate tales himself. Arrr, Michel!

If, as Foucault thought, “civilization” is imagining itself at sea, then it’s probably worth paying attention to the tales in which it does so. In this class, by reading, watching, and analyzing those tales, we’ll be looking for insights into how the world works, and why people think the way they do. But we won’t be the first to do so. Other folks have sailed these seas before! So, on our journey, we’ll travel with a number of thinkers from different intellectual traditions who have written about the dynamics of violence, of power, of gender, of race, and of the legacies of colonialism that we will see play out in the stories of piracy.

Because this is a college writing class, we will also be going one step further. You will each be formulating ideas of your own about the texts that we read, how they work, and what they do; you will be sharing those ideas with your classmates; you will be supporting those ideas with evidence; and you will be engaging with the other scholars we are reading, challenging their ideas, and building on what they have said.
Scholarly Writing

Over the course of this class, you will produce three pieces of scholarly writing. In Assignment 1 (4-5 pages) you will examine a text that we read for class and you will develop and practice a set of basic analytical skills. You’ll look at things like specific word choices, descriptions, the development of characters and plot, and the details that a text includes or leaves out. You might even look at illustrations or the size of the physical book! All these things will become pieces of evidence out of which you will draw conclusions about what the text is doing and how it does it.

In the next module of the class, Assignment 2 (5-6 pages) will give you an opportunity to put your ideas into conversation with those of others. You’ll choose a theory proposed by one of the thinkers and scholars we have read in the class, and you will respond to this theory with a claim of your own. Perhaps you’ll agree, and have more to say; perhaps you’ll disagree completely. Either way, you’ll take a stand, and you’ll back up your claim with examples and evidence using skills you practiced in assignment 1.

In the Assignment 3 (8-10 pages), you’ll be doing original research of your own, choosing a film or text to analyze and a conversation to engage with. You may engage with a theorist who has written about the idea you are thinking about—gender identity, for example—but also with literary or film scholars who have discussed the particular film or text you are writing about. As you write, you will be creating knowledge, just as they have done.

Anchors aweigh!