

Reflective Essay

This research project was originally written for Professor Kevin McDonald's history course, *Pirates and Piracy*, which required students to incorporate a blend of primary and secondary sources to create a unique contribution to the study of Atlantic pirates. My investigation into same-sex relationships among pirates was born from the dismissiveness I saw in my textbooks, which often framed sexuality as an inconsequential part of the overall narrative. I found the prospect of contributing a new historiographic narrative incredibly exciting since it required an advanced depth and breadth of knowledge on the topic, and I was determined to highlight these relationships as a focal point. By utilizing the diverse array of sources that were available to me through Hannon library's online resources, I was able to synthesize many different perspectives into a robust historical thesis.

A unique challenge of conducting research in the Fall 2020 semester was the aspect of remote learning which largely confined my research to online databases. Fortunately, I was able to retrieve a majority of my sources through JSTOR and OneSearch+, including B.R. Burg's seminal book, *Sodomy and the Pirate Tradition*, which served as a centerpiece of my thesis. The goal of my research was to determine how common same-sex relationships were and whether those relationships were regarded as "normal." In doing so, I drew upon legal contracts between pirates and European legislation in order to construct a cohesive picture of society to better illustrate how same-sex coupling and homosexuality fit into it. I did utilize external databases such as British History Online and PDX Scholar to find supplemental legislation to better understand social attitudes around sodomy, though legislation is an inherently constrictive source of information that does not reflect the daily conduct of pirates. To remedy this clinical perspective, I employed the personal diaries of several pirates to add a more personal touch.

Considering the word “homosexual” did not exist at the time of these documents’ creation, Professor McDonald suggested I use the historical terms of “buggery” and “sodomy” to best capture the subject of my paper. Additionally, ‘pirates’ was often spelled as ‘pyrates’ which led me to lean on JSTOR’s multiple character search function heavily to maximize my pool of sources. The use of these search terms sharpened my research skills by using precise, targeted language based on time-appropriate vocabulary. Using the Colonial America database offered through the library, I became fluent in reading primary documents where “s” and “f” were interchangeable characters, a common feature of Old English script.

My favorite, yet most frustrating, part of this research was the lack of evidence that pointed to any firm reality of sexuality among pirates as I pored over volumes of Olaudah Equiano’s diary and the firsthand experiences of buccaneer Alexandre Exquemelin, hoping to stumble across a confession of love between men. However, like many of the secondary sources did, I was forced to speculate due to the fact that pirates seldom wrote things down. Many of my secondary sources outright rejected the notion of widespread homosexuality among pirates based on legal opinions, but I was committed to drawing from sources outside of the realm of legislation. Therefore, I took a retroactive approach to investigating sexuality in the 17th and 18th centuries by analyzing literature about pirates written in the 19th century, using Edouard Corbiere’s 1832 novel to highlight sexually charged themes. While it was not a perfect comparison, it nonetheless illuminated the possibility of homosexual relationships between Caribbean buccaneers which was compelling enough for the purpose of my research.

This particular body of research has fine-tuned my approach to research by training me to search for nuance within my documents rather than relying on explicit explanations. Moreover, I learned how to deftly navigate the research engines available through the library in order to find

the best, most relevant sources for my research. Even with the added hurdle of strictly digital sources, I was able to uncover a rich collection of literature within the library's sources that helped develop my research. This research project has become my favorite piece of work I have written, and I am incredibly grateful to the library's wealth of resources for making it possible.