

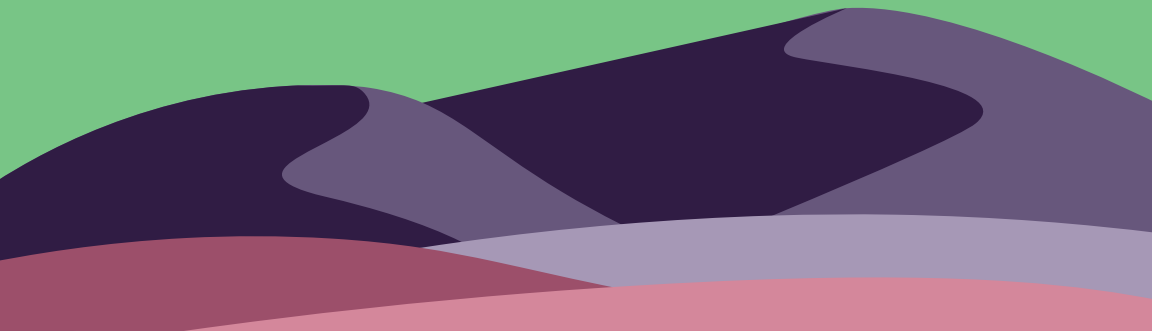
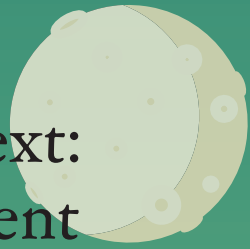


# The Pirate Ship in Context: A Vessel for Enlightenment Thought

Alexander Costello

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In 1728, the waning years of the Golden Age of Piracy, Daniel Defoe released *The General History of The Pyrates*, Vol II under the pseudonym “Captain Johnson.” This work follows the adventures of some of the most notorious pirates of the era and blends historical fact with romanticized fiction. One of the most striking stories focuses on the adventures of a pirate named Captain Misson, who is the only completely fabricated pirate in the account. By analyzing his story through a spatial lens, it becomes clear that Defoe took aspects of the historical pirate ship and distorted them in ways to suit his purposes. Recognizing that the pirate ship was historically a liberatory and marginalized heterotopian space that allowed the pirates to create their own micro-societies, Defoe then placed this space within a fictionalized narrative, allowing him to center his social critiques.



# The Pirate Ship in Context: A Vessel for Enlightenment Thought

Alexander Costello  
Ball State University

The modern interpretation of swashbuckling Atlantic pirates, both as pop culture and historically accurate figures, stem largely from Daniel Defoe's *A General History of The Pyrates* separated into two volumes and written in the final years of the Golden Age of Piracy (1650-1730AD). Defoe's work is a compendium of the most notorious pirates' adventures, which take place in a pivotal historical period that saw the rise of globalization, the creation of the maritime state, and the advancement of Enlightenment thinking. While this source is a valuable historical document, as Defoe utilizes verifiable sources such as court records and trial manuscripts, it is also evident that he romanticizes the pirates and their adventures in order to present social critiques of abusive government structures and the Atlantic Slave Trade. Historians have analyzed Defoe's use of the historical and social aspects of the pirate archetype

to formulate these social critiques, but little attention has been given to how Defoe's representation of space contributed to his critique. Defoe distorted and embellished the central spaces that pirates occupy, particularly the ship and terrestrial pirate communities. Given his fastidious use of historical records, we can be sure Defoe was aware that the pirate ship was in reality a marginalized space that acted as a zone of resistance to the effects of the growing maritime state and globalization as a whole. However, in identifying the ship as a liberatory and heterotopian space, Defoe pushes beyond the historical reality and utilizes the ship as a vessel within a confined chronotope to present John Locke's Enlightenment arguments on government and his own social critiques of the Atlantic Slave Trade.

## Historical Context

Before analyzing Defoe's

fictional representations, let's consider what historical accounts tell us about the space of actual pirate ships. In their book, *The Many Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and The Hidden History of Revolutionary Atlantic*, Peter Linbaugh and Marcus Rediker identify the ship as both an "engine of capitalism" and a "zone of freedom" for the self-organized sailors below decks (144). With the creation of the maritime state, employment for seamen dramatically increased. However, the work was harsh, lacking financial compensation and characterized by abusive hierarchical discipline practices. Sailors were pressed into service, mostly from poor and ethnically diverse populations. This forced conscription created a micro-society made of international, lower-class individuals. Additionally, sailors often worked for a number of different countries throughout their career, making the ship a space where sailors both lost their national identity and gained an identity in the much larger world beyond their homelands. Despite the diversity within crews, racial and ethnic differences were still sources of conflict aboard the 17th century ship. However, Linbaugh

and Rediker point out that sailors eventually began to develop distinct phonetics and dialectics unique to the society onboard ships. Thus, sailors began creating their own identities distinct from their home nations. Furthermore, pirate ships also developed common symbols and social norms that crossed between ships as crews split and multiplied into more pirate crews (214, 226).

Marginalized groups ultimately responded to the poor conditions and abuses of this micro-society by reclaiming the space of the pirate ship and restructuring it into a space of freedom. Because of the poor conditions on the ship, the different cultures of the crew members, and the abusive power structure, ships saw a dramatic increase in mutinies and quick surrenders to pirate crews (Linebaugh and Rediker 144-60). Instead of a tyrannical and abusive power structure, pirate ships cultivated egalitarian societies that gave authority to the crew with limited leadership assigned to the captain in times of emergency. Justice was dispensed occasionally by the will of the majority against treasonous crew members or tyrannical captains, and quartermasters were elected to see to the needs of the crew. Finally,

because of the liberatory nature of the ship, it was not uncommon to see multiethnic crews or even crews that welcomed women into their ranks. This further distinguished the space from the societal norms of mainland Europe.

While the creation of the maritime state was leading to the rise of piracy, mainland Europe was also experiencing a paradigm shift in the form of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment is a historical period best explained by Dorinda Outram as a “capsule” of debates and ideas that reached into every part of society and politics (7). Defoe’s social critiques seem to be inspired by arguments from contemporary Enlightenment thinkers, particularly John Locke. Locke was one of the first Enlightenment philosophers who set the groundwork for arguments based on reason. Locke’s arguments focuses on the role and structure of government as well as the natural rights of individuals. These critiques are also prominent themes in Defoe’s pirate accounts. Most of these accounts blend the historical truth with Defoe’s creative fabrications, with the notable exception of the entirely fictitious pirate Captain Misson. Yet it is this fictional captain that provides the

most insight into how the spatiality of the pirate ship was interpreted by contemporary audiences and by Defoe himself.

## **Captain Misson**

Misson’s story begins with his life before he becomes a pirate, showing his background and the key moments that led him to become a captain. Interestingly, Defoe depicts Misson’s pirate ship without the tyranny associated with historical pirate ships. Misson is identified as the son of an unknown noble by birth who received an early education (13). This sets him apart from the traditional pirate who comes from the lower-class. Additionally, he does not become captain of the pirate ship through mutiny or violence. He takes on the role because his superiors are killed in battle. Left as the most senior and capable mariner on board, Misson accepts the title of captain at the encouragement of the whole crew. After his promotion to captain, the crew votes to live a “life of liberty” rather than return home (18). To some degree, this interpretation does incorporate aspects of egalitarianism and the liberatory nature of the historic pirate ship. However, it removes the pirate ship’s identity as a

marginalized space and the violence associated with the pirate ship's conception.

This reinterpretation of the pirate ship serves two purposes. First, the author gives Misson an educated background to lend credibility to his enlightened ideas. If Misson's background was similar to the marginalized identity of the historic pirate, audiences would be less receptive to his arguments. Without the respectability afforded to Misson by his noble birth, the micro-society he creates may seem desperate or unintelligent. Secondly, the author avoids the historical pattern of violence in the creation of the pirate ship that would tarnish his ideas; since the ship is a representative space for his ideas, the creation of the space has to remain positive. This is further reinforced when Misson has a meeting with the other elected officers and his right-hand man, Caraccioli. When it is suggested that they fly the traditional black flag of the pirates, Caraccioli objects adamantly stating that "they were no Pyrates, but Men who were resolved to assert that Liberty which God and Nature gave them" (Defoe 20). Clearly, Defoe is attempting to distance Misson from negative pirate stereotypes such

as violence, lack of education, and greed.

Once the legitimacy of Misson and his micro-society is established, Defoe creates a distinct chronotope within the narrative to compel readers to contemplate their discussions. Chronotope is a term defined by Mikhail Bakhtin as "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (84-5). In a chronotope, the author shapes time and space within their creative work in order to organize the narrative and create specific meaning for the audience (Tally 161). In his account of Misson, Defoe uses the ship itself as a confined chronotope since it is both metaphorically and physically separated from the outside world. Socially, the pirate ship is a space disconnected from any nation or terrestrial land. It is also physically disconnected from the world as the ship operates in the ocean, which often functions as a liminal, or in-between, space. This removes the pirates themselves from external affairs beyond the ship, creating a narrative space primarily focused on the contemplation of Enlightenment ideas. For example, three consecutive pages of the account focus on Caraccioli's

thoughts about religion and government (17-20). While there is a minor battle and Misson is given the title of captain within these pages, the central focus is the ideas presented by Caraccioli. The intervening events simply further Caraccioli's arguments of governance and religion.

This does not mean that Misson and his crew are entirely removed from the world around them. There are multiple reports of them attacking other ships, meddling in the affairs of African villages, and eventually creating a pirate colony on land. However, these moments of action typically occur after periods of inaction that allow the pirates to contemplate topics of religion, governance, and slavery. The actions themselves also invite new moments of inaction and reflection. For example, the account includes a story where Misson and his crew find slaves aboard a captured vessel, which prompts Misson to begin a long reflection on the inherent wickedness of slavery. Thus, the focus is not directed toward the capturing of the ship but Misson's arguments against slavery.

Within this confined chronotope, Defoe retains the pirate ship's heterotopian nature. Michel Foucault proposes one definition

of heterotopias as spaces of deviation, where abnormal actions can be exercised. This means that heterotopias often act as a counter site to contest the social status quo. Specifically, Foucault argues that the ship is "the heterotopia par excellence," because of its economic significance and the imaginative power that the space can represent (9). This means that the pirate ship already existed as a heterotopia, and Defoe simply utilizes this aspect of the space for his narrative. Specifically, Defoe places the pirate ship in opposition to the wider world and the rising issues of globalization. Caraccioli expresses this dialectic when he encourages Misson to "bid defiance to the power of Europe...and lawfully make war on all the world" (19). This places Misson and his crew in tension with the European world beyond the borders of their ship. Defoe then uses this opposition created by the heterotopian space to critique the hypocrisy of the wider world, beginning with government.

Discussion on government and the political corruption of the time begins with a simple speech from Caraccioli, who states that every man is born free and has a right to support himself. He

argues that governments were once paternalistic; functioned like families in which the father naturally cared for his children, who responded with obedience. However, Caraccioli claims that stronger families began to enslave weaker ones due to greed and ambition, thus creating the corrupt monarchies of Europe that took this paternal government's place. He concludes his discussion on government by stating that man "usurped the prerogative of God" and that "no crime ought to be thus punished [with death], nor indeed any war undertaken, but in defense of our natural right, which is such a share of Earth as is necessary for our support" (18). The author here is projecting a distaste for divine monarchy, severe criminal punishment, and government that is founded on ambition for power rather than the protection of its citizens. Defoe juxtaposes this corruption in the wider world within this micro-society as Misson, upon being sworn in as captain, states that he would use his power for the public good only. This moment, while a bit dramatized, is historically accurate to the actual social order of pirates within this period. Thus, it appears that Defoe has taken aspects of the

pirate social spaces such as liberty and egalitarianism, and crafted a microcosm of Enlightenment ideas on governance within Misson's account.

Defoe seems to be specifically using the literary space to juxtapose current European governance with John Locke's concept of natural law and the social contract. In his *Two Treatises of Government*, written roughly 35 years prior to Defoe's work, Locke discusses the purpose of government and its relation to natural law. Natural law, according to Locke, dictates that human beings have an intrinsic right to life, liberty, and property (141). This is remarkably similar to Caraccioli's views, such as when he argues that Misson should wage war on the world because men have a right to liberty that stems from "the Laws of Nature" (Defoe 18-9).

Locke famously observed that people will enter into a social contract, creating a government with the intent of preserving natural rights and enforcing the will of the majority. In the narrative, Misson does not force anyone to remain in his crew but is unanimously elected. He then swears to act in the public good and asks that the crew stand by his decisions, which would be made "for the good of all"

(Defoe 19). The overlap between terminology such as “liberty” and “natural law,” as well as the formation of a social contract between Misson (the government) and his crew (the people), establishes a clear connection between this account and John Locke’s Enlightenment philosophy.

Locke argued that when governments abuse their authority, the social contract that existed is void and citizens can revolt. This is reflected in Misson’s story when Caraccioli states that they should not consider themselves pirates because they would be willing to obey governors who acted justly in their position. To Caraccioli, just governors should protect the people’s rights, deliver justice equally, and prevent the rich from oppressing the poor. However, if a governor ignores his duties, then citizens have a right to refuse his authority and “withdraw from sharing the miseries” that come from unjust rule (Defoe 20). This reflects Locke’s arguments because, in rejecting their obligations to a government that has abandoned its responsibility, the pirates are acting within their rights as abused citizens. This reinforces the idea of Misson’s pirate ship as a liberatory space, juxtaposed against

mainstream European society through its incorporation of Locke’s ideas in the narrative structure.

This juxtaposition is not only used to criticize the government but also to argue against the injustices of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. During the Golden Age of Piracy, pirates in the Caribbean and along the African coast had a detrimental impact on the lucrateness of the Slave Trade. After pirates had been largely suppressed in the 1730s, there was an increase of almost 27% in slave exports, showing that pirates had been effectively preventing slave ships from reaching their destination or forcing merchants to abandon the enterprise altogether for fear of lost investment. In fact, full-scale campaigns against piracy were organized as a direct result of their impact on the slave trade (Linebaugh and Rediker 168-72). While these figures coupled with the pirates’ known distaste for the abusive authoritarianism may deduce that pirates were intentionally confronting the injustice of slavery, the reality is a bit more disappointing. According to Arne Bialuschewski, while pirates would, on rare occasions, accept slaves into their crews, the majority of pirates had little regard

for the lives of slaves and did not concern themselves with the injustice of slavery as an institution. Multiple accounts show that pirates often abandoned slaves within ships they had captured or acted abusively towards native African populations (462-67).

However, the account of Captain Misson diverges significantly from this historical narrative. Within the narrative, Misson and his crew come across multiple ships carrying slaves as cargo. In one such instance, Captain Misson captures a vessel with 17 slaves and declares that slavery could not be justified under the belief of a divine creator. He takes it a step further by declaring that they were created by the same God and given the same reason as white men. He then goes on to state that [n]o man had power of liberty over another; and while those who profess'd a more enlightened knowledge of the deity, sold men like beasts; they prov'd that their religion was no more than a grimace. (Defoe 27)

Defoe takes the opportunity within the heterotopian and liberatory space of the pirate ship to argue that slavery cannot be condoned under natural law or a just government.

By specifically calling out the hypocrisy of Christian Europe, Defoe challenges his European audience to question why criminals would have a higher value for human life than their own society. Misson's opinion toward slavery extends beyond the historical reality of pirates. However, it reinforces the notion that the pirate ship is a space for the application of Enlightenment ideas and a site of resistance, if only fictional, against the injustice of slavery in the Atlantic world.

While the ship acts as a site of resistance and Enlightenment thought, the reality is that the ocean is still a liminal zone to Defoe's audience. Despite the great achievements both in the societal structure of Misson's ship and their moral inclinations, the ship exists apart from the terrestrial world. Applying Misson's social critiques to established societies may seem impossible, as the pirates exist outside of the world that the audience occupies. To solve this issue, Defoe ends his account with the creation of a settlement called Libertalia. In this settlement, the people are called "Liberi" erasing previous nationality distinctions among its citizens, which include French, English, Dutch, and Africans (36). This means that

Misson creates a multiethnic and multinational land that provides equality to all people regardless of nationality or race. Furthermore, it is recorded that the form of government for the settlement is democratically established, and Misson becomes the limited term elected monarch (65-6). This again shows Defoe incorporating common Enlightenment arguments for government into the account. By moving the society beyond the liminal zone of the ocean and the confined chronotope of the ship, Defoe displays that his ideas can be applied to a stable and manifest space.

In the end, Libertalia is destroyed by a native tribe in Madagascar and Misson loses his life at sea after fleeing (Defoe 69). It could be argued that by destroying these spaces, Defoe weakens his claim that these utopian and liberatory spaces might exist beyond the liminal zone. However, within the context of this compendium their destruction means quite the opposite. The destruction of Libertalia and Misson's death are more than likely an attempt by Defoe to maintain the facade of the compendium as a purely historical text. This is further supported by the fact that a

majority of the fabricated story of Libertalia exists within the narrative of another pirate named Captain Tew. Tew is a real historical figure who supposedly meets Captain Misson and joins him in Libertalia. The effect of this interaction with historical facts is an increased sense that Misson's story is historically possible.

By creating a quasi-historically accurate space, Defoe utilizes the unique spatiality of the pirate ship to present Enlightenment critiques of globalization, particularly government corruption and the injustice of slavery. By identifying the historic pirate ship as a liberatory and heterotopian space, Defoe crafts a fictional narrative juxtaposing the pirates and European society. Misson's pirate ship is placed within a confined chronotope to emphasize critical conversations about contemporary Europe. These conversations express the Enlightenment arguments of John Locke as well as the author's own rejection of slavery. The interweaving of history and fiction in the text allow Defoe to root his narrative in the actual organization of the pirate ship while simultaneously extending the space beyond the historical reality in order to present his critiques.

Defoe's reinterpretation of spaces shows the effects of globalization and the frustrations it produced during the age of Enlightenment. Furthermore, it allows us to better understand how spatiality can be used within a narrative to advance ideas and critiques of the real world.

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