

DEFOE DANIEL

OF CAPTAIN
MISSION

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Of Captain Mission

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Daniel Defoe Of Captain Mission

INTRODUCTION

Defoe has been recognized as the author of *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pyrates* since 1932 when John Robert Moore suggested that the supposed author, Captain Charles Johnson, like Andrew Moreton, Kara Selym or Captain Roberts, was merely another mask for the creator of *Robinson Crusoe*. Although most of the first volume is of minor literary importance, the second section which appeared in 1728 as *The History of the Pyrates* commenced with a life "Of Captain Misson and His Crew," one of Defoe's most remarkable and neglected works of fiction. In much the same manner and at the same time that John Gay was satirizing Walpole's government in *The Beggar's Opera*, Defoe began to use his pirates as a commentary on the injustice and hypocrisy of contemporary English society. Among Defoe's gallery of pirates are Captain White, who refused to rob from women and children; Captain Bellamy, the proletarian revolutionist; and captain North, whose sense of justice and honesty was a rebuke to the corruption of government under Walpole. But the fictional Captain Misson, the founder of a communist utopia, is by far the most original of these creations.

If we were to accept the view of nineteenth-century critics, that Defoe was one of the earliest exponents of *laissez faire*, his creation of a communist utopia would seem remarkable indeed. But paradoxes fascinated Defoe, and his ideas can seldom be reduced to unambiguous platitudes. He was especially fascinated by the comparison between businessmen and thieves. In 1707 he urged the government to pardon the Madagascar pirates if they agreed to stop their crimes, pay a large sum of money and "become honest Freeholders, as others of our *West-India* Pyrates, *Merchants I should have said*, have done before them." And he noted that "it would make a sad Chasm on the *Exchange of London*, if all the Pyrates should be taken away from the Merchants there."¹ Twelve years later just before the start of the South Sea Bubble, Defoe attacked stock-jobbing as "a Branch of Highway Robbing."²

Although these attacks were directed mainly at "trade thieves" and corruptions in business practices, they reflect Defoe's growing concern with problems of poverty and wealth in England. In his preface to the first volume of the *General History of the Pyrates*, Defoe argued that the unemployed seaman had no choice but to "*steal or starve*." When the pirate, Captain Bellamy, boards a merchant ship from Boston, he attacks the inequality of capitalist society, the ship owners, and most of all, the Captain:

damn ye, you are a sneaking Puppy, and so are all those who will submit to be governed by Laws which rich Men have made for their own Security, for the cowardly Whelps have not the Courage otherwise to defend what they get by their Knavery; but damn ye altogether: Damn them for a Pack of crafty Rascals, and you, who serve them, for a Parcel of hen-hearted Numskuls. They villify us, the Scoundrels do, when there is only this Difference, they rob the Poor under the Cover of Law, forsooth, and we plunder the Rich under the Protection of our own Courage. ³

Bellamy asks the crew of the captured ship to abandon the slavery of working for low wages under severe captains for the complete economic and political equality of life on a pirate ship.

Government on Captain Misson's ship, the *Victoire*, and in the colony of Libertia is partially an idealization of the pirate's creed. But two other elements which must be considered are, first, the concept of government in the state of nature, and secondly, the ideal of the socialist utopia. Most political theorists of Defoe's time postulated a state of nature in which man lived either entirely free from government or under loose patriarchal control, from which he was removed either by the

invention of money, the discovery of agriculture or by some crime. To a certain extent, Misson's pirate government may be regarded as a stage in the evolution of government. In *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, Defoe showed how government evolved from the anarchy of the state of nature. Both Crusoe's colony and Libertalia are eventually forced to establish government, private property and criminal laws, but Libertalia, which retains its egalitarian and democratic character, is overthrown by its failure to account for human evil and crime.

A second influence on Captain Misson's ideology is Plutarch's description of the laws of Sparta and Rome. Even during the "Anti-Communist Period" which followed the Glorious Revolution, the well-regulated state of the Lacedemonians remained the norm for Utopias. The influence of Plutarch pervades the biographies in the *General History of the Pyrates*. Lycurgus' laws echo throughout Misson's attacks on luxury and the unequal distribution of wealth, while Plutarch's study of Spartacus, which is mentioned in Defoe's preface, may well have been the model for his hero.

But neither the desire to regain the purity of the state of nature nor an admiration for Spartan simplicity entirely explain Misson's vigorous demand for freedom and his attacks on the corruption of the ruling class. By refusing to fly the pirate flag, Misson dramatizes the growing revolt of the poor against a useless nobility. The crew of the *Victoire* are, prophetically enough, French. Their aspiration is for a society following the precepts of *la carrière ouverte aux talents*; their revolt is that of a few courageous men unafraid to engage in the pirate's "war against mankind" while those of lesser courage "dance to the Musick of their Chains."

Defoe's study of Misson is different from the Utopias of More, Bacon or Campanella in so far as there is no discovery of an ideal civilization. Libertalia is a Utopia which reflects a direct reaction to the abuses of the time – abuses of economic, political and religious freedom. Anticipating Beccaria's criticism of the death penalty by almost forty years, Carracioli argues that since man's right to life is inalienable, no government can have the power of capital punishment.⁴ Misson's belief in equality is extended to include the negro slaves the *Victoire* takes at sea as well as the natives of Madagascar. After asking the negroes to join his crew, Misson tells his men that the Trading for those of our own Species, could never be agreeable to the Eyes of divine Justice: That no Man had Power of the Liberty of 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 Crimace...: For his Part he hop'd, he spoke the Sentiments of all his brave Companions, he had not exempted his Neck from the galling Yoak of Slavery, and asserted his own Liberty to enslave others.

Slavery is banished from Misson's ship, and the negroes are schooled in the principles of freedom.

Perhaps the most difficult problem in discussing the principles of Misson and Carracioli is to attempt an explanation of why Defoe, a Presbyterian, should have made his protagonists into deists. Defoe attacks Carracioli's deistic arguments through his narrator, Captain Johnson, who remarks that such ideas are pernicious only to "weak Men who cannot discover their Fallacy." But since similar ideas appear in Robert *Drury's Journal* published a year later, it may be assumed that the arguments of the deists held a certain fascination for Defoe at this time. Carracioli's deism also has a dramatic function in the story. That on a voyage to Rome a young man like Misson should be converted to deism by a disillusioned "lewd" priest was in harmony with the traditional English belief in the dangers of Italy.⁵ That Carracioli should combine the rebellion against organized religion with the revolt against monarchy is indicative of Defoe's keen apprehension of the future course of history.

Considered as a short novel, the history "Of Captain Misson and his Crew" reveals many of the same techniques which Defoe used in his longer works. To gain a sense of verisimilitude the narrator pretends to be working from a manuscript, a device which Defoe also employed in his *Memoirs of a Cavalier*. As in *Colonel Jack* real historical figures and events from the War of the Spanish Succession are woven into the adventures of the *Victoire*. Captain Misson and his crew sink the *Winchelsea*, an English ship lost in the West Indies at the end of August, 1707, and they barely

escape from Admiral Wager's fleet which fought a famous battle there in 1708. Even the name of Misson's ship, the *Victoire*; was undoubtedly familiar to Defoe as the vessel commanded by the famous French corsair, Cornil Saus.⁶ So convincing is Defoe that although his hero is shown meeting a real freebooter, Captain Tew, ten years after Tew's death, Misson is still included in the histories of piracy.⁷

Also typical of Defoe's fiction is the relationship between Captain Misson, the leader, and his intellectual mentor, Carracioli. Colonel Jack and his tutor, Moll Flanders and her Governess and particularly, Captain Singleton and William Walters form similar groups. Just as William Walters, a Quaker, reminds Captain Singleton and the crew that their business is not fighting but making money, so Carracioli addresses lengthy speeches to the crew, converting everyone on the *Victoire* to democracy and deism. Misson's Libertalia takes root in Madagascar, where Singleton wanted to establish a colony, while both Carracioli and Walters adapt the secular aspects of their religion to piracy. But whereas Walters eventually converts Singleton into an honest Christian, Carracioli leads Misson into piracy.

In the history "Of Captain Misson and his Crew," Defoe decided to pursue the same method of third person narrative as in his brief biographies of real pirates. The result is that he merely provides a sketch of political theories rather than a study of human beings. Of course there are good reasons for this. Defoe was more interested in dramatizing proletarian utopian ideals than in developing the inner workings of Misson's mind. The novelette is unified by its epic theme, not by its study of character or its episodic plot.

Although Defoe toyed with radical notions throughout *The History of the Pyrates*, he had little faith in their practicality. Libertalia must be understood as Defoe's best expression of political and social ideals which he admired but considered unworkable. The continuation of Misson's career in the section "Of Captain Tew" depicts the decline and fall of the utopia and the hero's tragic death as a disillusioned idealist. This, however, is another story, a story which suggested that private property was necessary, equality impossible and slavery a useful expedient for colonization. It was a far more comforting message for the Augustan Age, but it could not silence the tocsins of the French Revolution which sound throughout the speeches of Misson and Carracioli.

Maximillian E. Novak University of Michigan

Bibliographical Note

The text of "Of Captain Misson and His Crew" has been reproduced from the Henry E. Huntington Library's first edition copy of the second volume of *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pyrates* which appeared under the title *The History of the Pyrates*.

Notes to the Introduction

1 ([return](#))

[Daniel Defoe, *A Review of the Affairs of France*, ed. A. W. Secord (New York, 1938), IV, 424a.]

2 ([return](#))

[*The Anatomy of Exchange – Alley* (London, 1719), p. 8.]

3 ([return](#))

[*A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pyrates* (London, 1728), II, 220.]

4 ([return](#))

[See Cesare Beccaria, *An Essay on Crimes and Punishments* (Stanford, 1953), pp. 97-99.]

5 ([return](#))

[In the previous year Defoe had written that "it was the most dangerous thing in the World for a young Gentleman, sober and virtuous, to venture into *Italy*, till he was thoroughly grounded in Principle, ... for that nothing was more ordinary, than for such either to be seduc'd, by the Subtlety of the Clergy, to embrace a false Religion, or by the Artifice of a worse Enemy, to give up all Religion, and sink into *Scepticism* and *Deism*, or, perhaps, *Atheism*." *A New Family Instructor* (London, 1727), p. 17.]

6 ([return](#))

[See Ruth Bourne, *Queen Anne's Navy in the West Indies* (New Haven, 1939), pp. 63, 169-172; and *Manuscripts of the House of Lords*, New Series (London, 1921), VII, 117-119.]

7 ([return](#))

[See Philip Gosse, *The History of Piracy* (New York, 1934), p. 194; and Patrick Pringle, *Jolly Roger* (London, 1953), pp. 136-138.]

Omne tulit punctum, qui miscuit utile dulci. Hor

THE HISTORY OF THE PYRATES. VOL. II. OF CAPTAIN MISSON

We can be somewhat particular in the Life of this Gentleman, because, by very great Accident, we have got into our Hands a *French* Manuscript, in which he himself gives a Detail of his Actions. He was born in *Provence*, of an ancient Family; his Father, whose true Name he conceals, was Master of a plentiful Fortune; but having a great Number of Children, our Rover had but little Hopes of other Fortune than what he could carve out for himself with his Sword. His Parents took Care to give him an Education equal to his Birth. After he had passed his Humanity and Logick, and was a tolerable Mathematician, at the Age of Fifteen he was sent to *Angiers*, where he was a Year learning His Exercises. His Father, at his Return home, would have put him into the Musketeers; but as he was of a roving Temper, and much affected with the Accounts he had read in Books of Travels, he chose the Sea as a Life which abounds with more Variety, and would afford him an Opportunity to gratify his Curiosity, by the Change of Countries Having made this Choice, his Father, with Letters of Recommendation, and every Thing fitting for him, sent him Voluntier on board the *Victoire*, commanded by Monsieur *Fourbin*, his Relation. He was received on Board with all possible Regard by the Captain, whose Ship was at *Marseilles*, and was order'd to cruise soon after *Misson's* Arrival. Nothing could be more agreeable to the Inclinations of our Voluntier than this Cruize, which made him acquainted with the most noted Ports of the *Mediterranean*, and gave him a great Insight into the practical Part of Navigation. He grew fond of this Life, and was resolved to be a compleat Sailor, which made him always one of the first on a Yard Arm, either to Hand or Reef, and very inquisitive in the different Methods of working a Ship: His Discourse was turn'd on no other Subject, and he would often get the Boatswain and Carpenter to teach him in their Cabbins the constituent Parts of a Ship's Hull, and how to rigg her, which he generously paid 'em for; and tho' he spent a great Part of his Time with these two Officers, yet he behaved himself with such Prudence that they never attempted at a Familiarity, and always paid the Respect due to his Family. The Ship being at *Naples*, he obtained Leave of his Captain to go to *Rome*, which he had a great Desire to visit. Hence we may date his Misfortunes; for, remarking the licentious Lives of the Clergy (so different from the Regularity observ'd among the *French* Ecclesiasticks,) the Luxury of the Papal Court, and that nothing but Hulls of Religion was to be found in the Metropolis of the Christian Church, he began to figure to himself that all Religion was no more than a Curb upon the Minds of the Weaker, which the wiser Sort yielded to, in Appearance only. These Sentiments, so disadvantageous to Religion and himself, were strongly riveted by accidentally becoming acquainted with a lewd Priest, who was, at his Arrival (by meer Chance) his Confessor, and after that his Procurer and Companion, for he kept him Company to his Death. One Day, having an Opportunity, he told *Misson*, a Religious was a very good Life, where a Man had a subtle enterprising Genius, and some Friends; for such a one wou'd, in a short Time, rise to such Dignities in the Church, the Hopes of which was the Motive of all the wiser Sort, who voluntarily took upon them the sacerdotal Habit. That the ecclesiastical State was govern'd with the same Policy as were secular Principalities and Kingdoms; that what was beneficial, not what was meritorious and virtuous, would be alone regarded. That there were no more Hopes for a Man of Piety and Learning in the Patrimony of St. *Peter*, than in any other Monarchy, nay, rather less; for this being known to be real, that Man's rejected as a Visionary, no way fit for Employment; as one whose Scruples might prove prejudicial; for its a Maxim, that Religion and Politicks can never set up in one House. As to our Statesmen, don't imagine that the Purple makes 'em less Courtiers than are those of other Nations; they know and pursue the *Reggione del Stato* (a Term of Art which means Self-Interest) with as much Cunning and as little Conscience as any Secular; and are as artful where Art is required, and as barefaced and impudent when their Power is great enough to support 'em, in

the oppressing the People, and aggrandizing their Families. What their Morals are, you may read in the Practice of their Lives, and their Sentiments of Religion from this Saying of a certain Cardinal, *Quantum Lucrum ex ista fabula Christi!* which many of 'em may say, tho' they are not so foolish. For my Part, I am quite tir'd of the Farce, and will lay hold on the first Opportunity to throw off this masquerading Habit; for, by Reason of my Age, I must act an under Part many Years; and before I can rise to share the Spoils of the People, I shall, I fear, be too old to enjoy the Sweets of Luxury; and, as I am an Enemy to Restraint, I am apprehensive I shall never act up to my Character, and carry thro' the Hypocrite with Art enough to rise to any considerable Post in the Church. My Parents did not consult my Genius, or they would have given me a Sword instead of a Pair of Beads.

Misson advised him to go with him *Voluntier*, and offer'd him Money to cloath him; the Priest leap'd at the Proposal, and a Letter coming to *Misson* from his Captain, that he was going to *Leghorn*, and left to him either to come to *Naples*, or go by Land; he chose the latter, and the *Dominican*, whom he furnish'd with Money, clothing himself very Cavalierly, threw off his Habit, and preceeded him two Days, staying at *Pisa* for *Misson*; from whence they went together to *Leghorn*, where they found the *Victoire*, and Signor *Caraccioli*, recommended by his Friend, was received on Board. Two Days after they weigh'd from hence, and after a Week's Cruize fell in with two *Sally* Men, the one of twenty, the other of twenty four Guns; the *Victoire* had but thirty mounted, though she had Ports for forty. The Engagement was long and bloody, for the *Sally* Man hop'd to carry the *Victoire*; and, on the contrary, Captain *Fourbin*, so far from having any Thoughts of being taken, he was resolutely bent to make Prize of his Enemies, or sink his Ship. One of the *Sally* Men was commanded by a *Spanish* Renegade, (though he had only the Title of a Lieutenant) for the Captain was a young Man who knew little of Marine Affairs.

This Ship was called the *Lyon*; and he attempted, more than once, to board the *Victoire*, but by a Shot betwixt Wind and Water, he was obliged to sheer off, and running his Guns, &c. on one Side, bring her on the careen to stop his Leak; this being done with too much Precipitation, she overset, and every Soul was lost: His Comrade seeing this Disaster, threw out all his small sails, and endeavour'd to get off, but the *Victoire* wrong'd her, and oblig'd her to renew the Fight, which she did with great Obstinacy, and made Monsieur *Fourbin* despair of carrying her if he did not board; he made Preparations accordingly. Signior *Caraccioli* and *Misson* were the two first on board when the Command was given; but they and their Followers were beat back by the Despair of the *Sally* Men; the former received a Shot in his Thigh, and was carried down to the Surgeon. The *Victoire* laid her on board the second time, and the *Sally* Men defended their Decks with such Resolution, that they were cover'd with their own, and the dead Bodies of their Enemies. *Misson* seeing one of 'em jump down the Main-Hatch with a lighted Match, suspecting his Design, resolutely leap'd after him, and reaching him with his Sabre, laid him dead the Moment he going to set Fire to the Powder. The *Victoire* pouring in more Men, the *Mahometans* quitted the Decks, finding Resistance vain, and fled for Shelter to the Cook Room, Steerage and Cabbins, and some run between Decks. The *French* gave 'em Quarters, and put the Prisoners on board the *Victoire*, the Prize yielding nothing worth mention, except Liberty to about fifteen Christian Slaves; she was carried into and sold with the Prisoners at [text unreadable]. The Turks lost a great many Men, the *French* not less than 35 in boarding, for they lost very few by the great Shot, the *Sally* Men firing mostly at the Masts and Rigging, hoping by disabling to carry her. The limited Time of their Cruize being out, the *Victoire* returned to *Marseilles*, from whence *Misson*, taking his Companion, went to visit his Parents, to whom the Captain sent a very advantageous Character, both of his Courage and Conduct. He was about a Month at home when his Captain wrote to him, that his Ship was ordered to *Rochelle*, from whence he was to sail for the *West-Indies* with some Merchant Men. This was very agreeable to *Misson* and Signior *Caraccioli*, who immediately set out for *Marseilles*. This Town is well fortified, has four Parish Churches, and the Number of Inhabitants is computed to be about 120,0000; the Harbour is esteemed the safest in the *Mediterranean*, and is the common Station for the *French* Gallies.

Leaving this Place, they steer'd for *Rochelle*, where the *Victoire* was dock'd, the Merchant Ships not being near ready. *Misson*, who did not Care to pass so long a Time in Idleness, proposed to his Comrade the taking a Cruize on board the *Triumph*, who was going into the *English Channel*; the *Italian* readily contented to it.

Between the Isle of *Guernsey* and the *Start Point* they met with the *Mayflower*, Captain *Balladine* Commanded, a Merchant Ship of 18 Guns, richly laden, and coming from *Jamaica*. The Captain of the *English* made a gallant resistance, and fought his Ship so long, that the *French* could not carry her into Harbour, wherefore they took the Money, and what was most valuable, out of her; and finding she made more Water than the Pumps could free, quitted, and saw her go down in less than four Hours after. Monsieur *le Blanc*, the *French* Captain, received Captain *Balladine* very civilly, and would not suffer either him or his Men to be stripp'd, saying, *None but Cowards ought be treated after that Manner; that brave Men ought to treat such, though their Enemies, as Brothers; and that to use a gallant Man (who does his Duty) ill, speaks a Revenge which cannot proceed but from a Coward Soul.* He order'd that the Prisoners should leave their Chests; and when some of his Men seem'd to mutter, he bid 'em remember the Grandeur of the Monarch they serv'd; that they were neither Pyrates nor Privateers; and, as brave Men, they ought to shew their Enemies an Example they would willingly have follow'd, and use their Prisoners as they wish'd to be us'd.

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