Chapter 3

CROSS-DRESSING ON THE MARGINS OF EMPIRE: WOMEN PIRATES AND THE NARRATIVE OF THE CARIBBEAN

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To my young friend Aryeh Gold-Parker, who so kindly lent me his copy of The Man Whose Mother Was a Pirate

Nearly 300 years after they sailed the Caribbean Sea from the Bahamas to Jamaica with “Calico” Jack Rackam’s crew, pirates Anne Bonny and Mary Read remain the region’s most infamous women at sea.¹ Their piratical careers, which ended with their capture and trial in November 1720, have fascinated writers from Captain Charles Johnson (the first chronicler of their adventures, once thought to be a pseudonym for Daniel Defoe) to the present, being recounted in countless stories, songs, novels, plays, movies, and children’s books.² The enduring fascination of their story has been doubtless the result of their gender, of their irruption into a quintessentially male world, and of the titillation of their adventures in a highly eroticized environment. They have retained their hold on the popular imagination because of the protean nature of what is known of their personalities and adventures: just enough documentation of their escapades has survived to anchor them firmly in the history of the Caribbean at a specific time and place; enough remains tantalizingly in mystery to give the imagination endless wings.

Writers throughout the last three centuries have woven countless narratives around the erotic possibilities of Anne Bonny and Mary Read’s
cross-dressing adventures in that most male and most lawless of possible settings—the eighteenth-century pirate ship. I would like, however, to claim them for the Caribbean margins in which popular versions of early colonial history begin to be told. Taking my cue from the earliest interpretations of their story and from their connection to a crucial period in West Indian history—when the pressures of European competition are brought to bear on the Spanish empire and the region begins to define itself in more complex terms—I would like to examine the ways in which the various retellings of Bonny and Read’s piratical careers become ways of narrating and interpreting the Caribbean.

The earliest extant sources of the Bonny and Read story, *The Tryals of Captain John Rackam and other Pyrates* (1721),3 a pamphlet printed in Jamaica within days of their arrest and trial (and sent by the Jamaican governor to London in lieu of his official report), and Johnson’s *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pirates*, published in 1724,4 make much of their being women. Their tales are most decidedly “engendered” by the thrill of their male attire, by the play of concealments and disclosure of their breasts that punctuates the narrative of their adventures, and by their ultimate reprieve from the gallows by the plea of “their bellies” (the fact that they both claimed to be pregnant at the time of their conviction and sentence to execution). The constant shifting of the boundaries between their male activities and their female essences will always be at the center of any narration of their real or imagined adventures—ideal canvases on which to deploy the constant shifting of national and geographic boundaries that typify Caribbean history in the early decades of the eighteenth century.

The salient points of their story, as given by Johnson, whom we must trust (despite many obvious inventions) as their earliest biographer, are as follows. Mary Read, an illegitimate child, had been raised as a boy by her mother in a fraudulent attempt to pass her off as the legitimate infant she had lost just prior to the girl’s birth. At thirteen she had been put into service as a footboy in a brothel, but soon tiring of this employment had sailed in a man-of-war to become a soldier in Flanders. Smitten with love for a fellow soldier, she had disclosed her true gender, and having refused a sexual liaison outside of marriage, they had been married with great fanfare. After her husband’s premature death, however, she had again joined the army, but seeing very little possibility of advancement, sailed for the West Indies. En route she was kidnapped by pirates, whom she joined. When her ship was captured by a Jamaican warship in 1720, Anne Bonny was among