



## 17 *The Torrid Zone: Sex and Romance on the Main*

Sailors have always been stereotyped as lusting after “strumpets and whores”<sup>\*</sup> when ashore, and indeed, the stereotype is more fact than fiction. Exquemelin noted that buccaneers and filibusters gave “themselves to all manner of debauchery with strumpets and wine.”<sup>1</sup> In 1692 the entire crew of a French privateer, including a *mousse* (ship’s boy) of fifteen or sixteen, was afflicted by the *vénériens* over the course of three days, providing one of many concrete examples of what sailors had on their minds when they went ashore and of the consequences of passion overriding common sense. Bawdy houses were the natural habitats of various forms of the “French pox.”<sup>2</sup> However, sailors’ lust was not limited to exotic women or “loose” women, but to women in general—all were fair game. Prostitutes were simply closer to the *embarcadero* and the most easily had.

Many sailors and sea rovers made little distinction regarding race when selecting partners for several reasons: the lure of the exotic, the “when in Rome” philosophy, and the women available. In the Caribbean colonies of England, France, and the Netherlands, availability carried weight because men far outnumbered women (a factor that also contributed to prostitution). Further, the distance from the various European social orders allowed men and women of different races more freedom to engage in sex and other social relationships, including marriage. Unfortunately, that same freedom also

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<sup>\*</sup>All quotations have been reprinted with their original spelling and punctuation.

permitted the exploitation of women slaves and indentured servants. Wrote one scholar: "West Indian slave societies were characterized by distorted social relationships and unchecked male sexual tyranny. From the latter, female servants received insufficient protection."<sup>3</sup>

Black women were considered the most exotic of the Spanish Main, and some observers remarked on them with extraordinary fascination, in particular on their perceived overt sexuality compared to European and Creole women. The Spaniards were "lying, as they do, so promiscuously with their Negrines and She-slaves," wrote Dampier, but his account was surely an anti-Spanish sentiment tinged with prudery and legitimate moralizing (given the master-slave relationship, such liaisons morally constituted rape) and racism and hypocrisy, because English slave owners certainly did likewise.<sup>4</sup> Thomas Gage, an Englishman and Catholic priest who lived among the Spanish in the New World in the first half of the seventeenth century, described a Spanish slave owner, perhaps much like many slave owners of any nation, who routinely forced himself upon his female slaves, including those who were married, and even bought female slaves solely for sex.<sup>5</sup> That being said, "[n]ot all relations between slave women and males in authority can or should be construed as sexual abuse," according to one scholar.<sup>6</sup> Another scholar noted that some slave owners freed their "slave mistresses" or their children by these mistresses, or both, or otherwise displayed "some measure of love and responsibility toward his illicit black family."<sup>7</sup> Gage revealed his own personal conflict of faith and lust (in his case, remarkably like a Puritan's) in his description of black women in Mexico City, running to three long paragraphs, fragments of which are excerpted here:

Nay, a blackamoor or tawny young maid and slave will make hard shift, but she will be in fashion with her neck-chain and bracelets of pearls, and her ear-bobs of some considerable jewels. The attire of this baser sort of people of blackmoors and mulattoes . . . is so light, and their carriage so enticing, that many Spaniards even of the better sort (who are too prone to venery) disdain their wives for them. . . . Their bare, black, and tawny breasts are covered with bobs hanging from their chains of pearls. . . . Most of these are or have been slaves, though love have set them loose, at liberty to enslave souls to sin and Satan.<sup>8</sup>

The average sailor's reply to this prudish tirade would be along the lines of "Thank God for these women!" and his single thought when observing one of them: "What a woman!" (If French, "Quelle femme!") The similar lustful and typical fascination of the French officer at Petit Goave has already been noted in chapter 5. Many blamed the tropics for such behavior, believing heat to incline one to idleness and excessive sexual proclivities.<sup>9</sup>

There was, however, a more romantic, marital, even familial side to the sailor, buccaneers and filibusters included. Most sailors married, many to foreign women, including those of other races, during long voyages. At Santa Helena in the South Atlantic, Dampier wrote,

[M]any of the seamen got Sweethearts. One young Man . . . married, and brought his wife to *England* with him . . . and several other of our Men, were over Head and Ears in Love with the *Santa Hellena* Maids [who] are but one remove from *English*, being the Daughters of such. They are well shaped, proper and comely, were they in a Dress to set them off.<sup>10</sup>

Buccaneers even chose Valentines on St. Valentine's Day.<sup>11</sup> Bartholomew Sharp (or Basil Ringrose—both used the same superlative) noted briefly of “the Lady call'd Donna Joanna Constanta, about 18 Years of Age, Wife to Don John—and the beautifullest Creature that my Eyes ever beheld in the South Sea.”<sup>12</sup> Rovers also married and had children.<sup>13</sup> Filibusters often married black or mixed race women (much like those described by Gage) at Saint Domingue, many of whom were carried there as slaves from Spanish colonies.<sup>14</sup> The buccaneer Captain Beare ran away from Port Royal to Havana with his occasionally cross-dressing inamorata and married her. In the South Sea, Dutch buccaneer and linguist Jacobus Marquess deserted his comrades for the sake of a “Mustees” woman.

[T]he woman lieing on borde one or two nights, was very familiar with one Copas a dutch a man, who formerly had saild with the Spaniards . . . but was mainly Inamoured with thiss women, making her severall presents of some Vallew.

Marquess pretended to go hunting but deserted instead, taking with him two hundred pieces-of-eight and leaving behind “2200 ps. 8/8 besides Jewels and Goods.”<sup>15</sup> During the filibuster occupation of Guayaquil,

several of our men made friends with the ladies among our prisoners and, without being violent, solicited their favors and made them lose . . . whatever aversion they may previously have had for the French nation before they knew them.

Raveneau de Lussan himself was almost seduced away by the “widow of the local treasurer,” who suggested they hide in the woods until the filibusters left, then they could marry and he could have “her husband's office in addition to her own extensive holdings.” Doubtless the length of the cruise and the great distance from home tempted men to accept such offers. In

spite of the temptation, however, de Lussan declined, for ultimately he did not trust the Spanish.<sup>16</sup>

Spaniards by reputation and behavior were romantics, if jealous ones, some confusing jealousy with love or romance. Tales of romantic assignations abounded, in church, at the theater, covered by a mantle in the streets, and even secretly and dangerously at night. Tales of lovers' deaths, often owing to mistaken identity, were also popular. In one, a jealous woman dressed as a man to eavesdrop on her lover. In another, she invited him to choose between poison and a dagger as punishment for his infidelity. More positively,

*Spaniards* are so kind-hearted to one another in Love Affairs, that if a Man meets his Mistress in a place where he has no opportunity of conversing with her in private, he need only go into the next House, and request the Master (whether he knows him or not) to give him the opportunity of talking with a Lady of his acquaintance in private in his House, and he is sure twill scarce ever be refus'd.

On the physical side, if the baronne d'Aulnoy was to be believed, "after a Spanish Lady has granted the last Favour to her Lover, she will shew him her Feet, as a Pledge of her Passion to him."<sup>17</sup> Notwithstanding Spanish romance, Carlos Fuentes remarked that a "puritanical streak and an outbreak of debauchery existed during [Spanish] colonial times" and that "[s]exual cruelty can be easily exercised in societies of strict social separation"—and in societies of strict patriarchy.<sup>18</sup>

There is little information on how wives, sweethearts, and prostitutes perceived the men who roved in and out of their lives. Perhaps they felt as Moretta in Aphra Behn's comedy *The Rover* did:

Nay, to love such a shameroon, a very beggar; nay, a pirate beggar, whose business is to rifle and be gone; a no-purchase, no-pay tatterdemalion, and English picaroon; a rogue that fights for daily drink, and takes a pride in being loyally lousy? Oh, I could curse now, if I durst. This is the fate of most whores.<sup>19</sup>

Sex itself in the seventeenth century was little different from sex today, and most of what we tend to think of as modern has actually been practiced for ages. Bathing, oral hygiene, antibiotics, and contraceptives, including practical condoms, are the major differences. Sex then, as now, was potentially hazardous, bringing with it the possibility of disease—including potentially fatal ones—for either party, and of pregnancy for the female (we have forgotten how dangerous childbirth could be). Such potentials rarely diminished sexual desire and practices, however. Alcohol and its abuse were common among Europeans and contributed to the number of sexual liaisons, as did closely shared living spaces, bedrooms especially, in a household.

The Earl of Rochester described French kissing, although he did not use this term, and the practice was surely universal. Both conventional and unconventional sexual practices abounded. The female orgasm in general was not neglected, and many believed that it facilitated conception, although some men may have neglected it for this very reason.<sup>20</sup> Pornography, both written (the *École des Filles*, for example) and illustrated (“bawdy pictures” or “postures”), was well known and the latter well represented.<sup>21</sup> Dildos were imported from Italy to London and other cities.<sup>22</sup> Male transsexuals were known and sometimes obvious. In the first years of the eighteenth century, Governor Edward Hyde of New York dressed in public as a woman and even sat for a portrait dressed as one, his hands hidden in gloves and made to look small and feminine.<sup>23</sup> Cross-dressing women were known in life and on stage.

Homosexuals probably made up the same proportion of the general population as they do today, and buccaneer and filibuster populations probably reflected this. There was only one brief mention of homosexuals or homosexual acts in all of the journals of the buccaneers, that of Captain Cook being accused of sodomy by his servant:

This day, likewise, William Cook, servant to Captain Cook, confessed that his master had oftentimes buggered him in England, leaving his wife and coming to bed him; that he had also done the same in Jamaica, and once in these seas before Panama.<sup>24</sup>

For this offense, which may have been a false accusation, or personally or politically motivated, or all of these, Captain Cook was put in irons, along with his servant, who was found “with a paper will all our names in it, which it was suspected he designed to have given to the Spanish prisoners.” The accusation apparently did not sully Captain Cook’s reputation, for he soon served again as a buccaneer commander. In the Royal Navy, however, such accusations put a man on trial for his life.<sup>25</sup>

Birth control methods included *coitus interruptus* and probably some form of the rhythm method, based on hearsay and experience. Certainly manual, oral, and anal sex were used to prevent pregnancy in addition to their other roles in sexual practices, despite their classification as “sodomy” by most religions.<sup>26</sup> Aside from the latter three methods, contraceptives had poor results. Antonia Fraser pointed out that women in general in the seventeenth century were “in a state of virtually perpetual pregnancy.”<sup>27</sup> Vaginal sponges existed, but were used primarily by prostitutes as protection against the “pox.” Condoms were available, at least in the great European cities. Made of sheep’s gut and secured with a ribbon around the testicles, they were used primarily to prevent sexually transmitted diseases. “Morning-after” remedies were also available but were certainly quackery. A variety of well-known abortion practices involved physical exercise or potions, although it was unknown

how well they worked, if they worked at all, or how many women availed themselves of them.<sup>28</sup>

Supposed aphrodisiacs included chocolate (said to give men endurance and make women willing), avocados (they “provoke to Lust,” and the word itself derived from the Nahuatl [Aztec] *âbuacatl*, meaning testicle), and “Spanish *flies*” (an extract of a blister beetle, used to arouse cattle). Spanish fly was also considered a cure for impotence in spite of its dangers to humans: “[it] so heated the old man’s reins [loins], that next morning he bragg’d to us, that he never had a pleasanter night.”<sup>29</sup>

Adultery and premarital sex was as common as it is today. Diarist, navy secretary, and husband Samuel Pepys chased every woman he could, for example, and often successfully. Restoration comedies, with their references to prostitutes, cuckolds, promiscuous or prudish (or both) men and women, and sex in general, abounded. Some of the plays were extraordinarily bawdy, hilarious, and insightful.<sup>30</sup> Puritans and other religious or social conservatives were typically strong advocates of sex, as long as it was confined to the marriage bed. Parents, particularly of the upper classes, appreciated the property value of virgin brides and so demanded absolute chastity of their daughters, no matter how many mistresses the fathers may have had, nor how many virgins the fathers may have debauched. Divorce was not unknown, although difficult or sometimes impossible to obtain, depending on society and circumstance. Captain Laurens divorced his first wife, for example.

Where there was sex, there were children, not only from men and women of the same race but of different races. Genes invariably crossed all social and racial boundaries, and genetic testing was not necessary to prove this fact. One needed only to watch sailors of any ethnicity ashore in any port in the world or to note the variety of ethnicities in the New World or of Spanish racial categories. Children, however, were rarely mentioned in the journals of rovers or of mariners, except where they played a role in an incident aboard a vessel: a child nearly drowned, or boys were kept as servants, or a Native American family visited, or a mixed race woman taken aboard as a pilot brought her “three or four small Children” with her.<sup>31</sup> This lack of mention may be because children, like pregnant women, were ubiquitous and thus unexceptional. Rovers commonly avoided mentioning them in their accounts of cities sacked, although children, their mothers, and the elderly were assuredly the most afflicted by these violent invasions, for battle was but one part of a sacking. For the buccaneer and filibuster, however, it was the most critical and most dangerous part. Although his own distant children may have been on the rover’s mind while he attacked a city, sex was seldom on the mind of any man at whom shots were being fired. His mind was on survival, teamwork, and the tactics and violence necessary to ensure victory.