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Piracy, Nation, and Identity: Teaching Robert Daborne's *A Christian Turned Turk*

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**Piracy, Nation, and Identity:  
Teaching Robert Daborne's *A Christian Turned Turk***

**by Christopher L. Morrow**

Though Robert Daborne is not usually a playwright found in Renaissance literature and drama courses, his play, *A Christian Turned Turk* (1612) and his main character, the English pirate John Ward, can be effectively used to appeal to the interests of contemporary students and more importantly to introduce them to a variety of Renaissance genres and themes. Daborne's tragedy focuses on the English pirate, John Ward, and, to a lesser extent, the Dutch pirate, Dansiker – both of whom were real-life contemporary pirates and were prominent in 17th century culture, being the subject of two contemporary news pamphlets and being mentioned, for example, in popular ballads, by James I, and by John Donne.<sup>[1]</sup> Drawing on the pamphlets as his primary sources, Daborne's play follows Ward from the open sea where he captures French merchants and survives a mutiny to the safe harbor of Tunis where he meets and falls in love with Voada, the sister of the captain of the Turkish janissaries. The rest of the play follows the Turkish efforts to convert Ward to Islam. Voada feigns interest in the English pirate until his conversion is complete at which point she repudiates him. This

rejection leads to the play's end when Ward recants his conversion and commits suicide.

This play can be situated nicely in both upper division Renaissance literature courses as well as introductory British Literature surveys. In general, Daborne's play also offers a wide range of themes appropriate for discussion at both of these levels, including piracy, nationalism, identity, religion, and class, to name a few. Likewise, I have found this play useful for its connections to legal, poetic, journalistic, and music texts. For students in upper-division courses, the play provides a gateway into introducing these interesting and sometimes overlooked forms of Renaissance literature. With its cosmopolitan characters, *A Christian Turned Turk* also offers opportunities to examine the historical and contextual conditions of Europe, the Mediterranean and the Turkish Empire. At the survey level, I drastically reduce the emphasis on other primary texts and historical context to focus more on theme.

Drawing, too, on the popularity of Disney's four *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies (with a fifth due in 2013), it is Ward's piracy that I use to draw students to the course, promising in course descriptions an examination of Renaissance piracy which includes not only Daborne's play but also excerpts from the news pamphlets and the ballads. I begin a discussion of the play by providing students with a bit of historical background to Renaissance pirates – including the often ambiguous distinction between pirates and privateers.<sup>[2]</sup> Daborne's play illustrates the ambiguity between pirates and privateers

through the subplot where Dansiker attempts to have France sanction his activities. With this historical understanding in place, I shift the class to a conceptual examination of piracy through Claire Jowitt's assertion: "a pirate's life beyond the law – and outside the boundaries of conventional European society – creates a potential site for the expression of other unorthodox beliefs and patterns of behavior" ("Parrots" 4). This notion of the sea and piracy as a liminal space for conceptual exploration becomes the primary frame for exploring Daborne's play. Specifically, we explore different forms of liminal identity in the play. We question how identity is formed and defined in the play as well as how it evolves and how it is used to explain behavior. It is through this emphasis on constructions of identity that we also explore the play's other themes – such as class, nationalism and monarchical authority and, finally, religious identity.

### *Piracy and Class Identity*

In the survey course, I focus primarily on the connections between piracy and class. To examine how piracy and class affect identity in the play, we read accounts of Ward's upbringing in the news pamphlets, relate those to allusions to his origins in the play, and examine how both the pamphlets and play connect these origins to Ward's piracy. I ask students to read short excerpts from the pamphlets and connect these descriptions to the play. Despite making his name as a pirate, Ward begins life as a

“poor fisherman” as described in one of the pamphlets and as “a poor fisher’s brat” by a rival pirate in Daborne’s play.

Having established his humble beginnings, we interrogate to what extent these works suggest a causal relationship between Ward’s birth and his career choice.

Daborne’s prologue, in particular, aligns with the pamphlets as all three suggest a combination of pride, ambition, and being content with one’s meager place. Despite this prologue closely echoing the pamphlets, the play itself is a bit more ambiguous and opens more possibilities for discussion. Specifically, as a class, we close read Ward’s own reference to his birth:

My merit – shall I thrall them? The sway of things  
Belongs to him dares most. Such should be kings,  
And such am I. What Nature in my birth  
Denied me, Fortune supplies. This maxim I hold:  
He lives a slave that lives to be controlled. (4.83-87)

These lines conveniently open up a discussion in class on the “Nature versus Nurture” debate. For Ward, identity is not restricted by Nature or an essentialized notion of identity but is something which can shaped by merit and ambition. Not only did he escape Kent and a model of Englishness based on birth, Ward also escaped the constrictions of this birth to become, in his words, a “king.” For Ward, the course of piracy becomes that which frees men from the oppression of class hierarchy. Despite his problematic morality, Ward’s position is one that my student’s often find sympathetic. Specifically, they seem to admire that he is not willing to let his birth

determine his position in life. With his emphasis on freedom and upward mobility, Ward reads to students as almost proto-American.

At this point, I will ask the students to find any additional explanations for piracy in the play – other than ambition. If necessary, I encourage them to collaborate or discuss the question in small groups. There are a number of passages of a counter discourse which suggests the lack of social and economic support services in European countries. As one example, Dansiker blames his behavior on “want of employment, not of virtue” (5.17-18). Pirates, in Daborne’s play then, become a symptom of the failure of nation to provide for its inhabitants. Here, I refer again to critics such as Daniel Vitkus and Barbara Fuchs who discuss the historical conditions of poor and unemployed seamen. Vitkus points out that “life on a pirate ship, even as a low-ranking crew member, was much freer and more profitable than serving as a seaman on a law-abiding merchantman, and piracy was certainly preferable to life under the miserable conditions that existed on royal ships” (*Turning Turk*, 149-50). By the time we finish the discussion, the class understands how, for some Englishmen, piracy seems to have been an attractive vehicle for economic mobility.

## *Piracy and National Identity*

In upper-division courses, I extend the discussion beyond issues of class to issues of nationalism. Specifically, the liminal space of piracy affords an excellent opportunity to discuss nascent forms of nationalism in early modern England. Drawing on Richard Helgerson's seminal work, *Forms of Nationhood*, I introduce students to two of the primary ways national identity can be constructed in the period: through identification with the monarch (i.e., Elizabethans and Jacobean) and/or through a connection to the geography of the nation. Daborne's play provides the avenue discussing these forms of national identity through piracy's resistance of both the control of the monarch and the attachment to the land.

Described by a subordinate as "Heroic Captain Ward, lord of the ocean, terror of kings, landlord to merchants, rewarder of manhood, conqueror of the Western world" (1.22-24), Ward replaces a monarchical model of Englishness based on heredity by establishing himself as a surrogate monarch. This discussion also represents an ideal moment to bring in the ballad, "The Famous Sea-Fight Between Captain Ward and the Rainbow," Ward asks the English ship to send a message to James I: "'Go tell the King of England, go tell him thus from me, / If he reign King of all the land, I will reign King at sea.'" (verse 10, lines 1-2). Other comparisons include descriptions of his "princely" wealth in the pamphlets, the identification of subordinate pirates with their captains

(i.e. Ward and Danseker), and the power of their decrees, as when Ward proclaims:

“Know that our word shall be a law” (4.33).

Just as the pirate becomes the surrogate the monarch, so does sea becomes the surrogate for the land in terms of national identity. Often, I will prepare for this part of the discussion by having students come to class having already identified 2-3 passages where the characters reference the geography of the nation (i.e. land, soil, air).

References abound in the play and typically take two forms: resistance by the pirates to a geographic connection and the pirates’ adverse effect on the land of their origin. For the former, the play suggests that reliance on the land strips one of agency. As a result, the pirates attempt to launch identity from the moorings of geography. The other form suggests that the pirates are “A race of thieves, bankrupts that have lain / Upon their country’s stomach like a surfeit” (2.44-45). In our discussions, my students typically conclude that while the play does not clearly define the relationship between land and identity, the pirates in the play open a disruptive space whereby identity is not a function of land.

#### *Final Thoughts: Religious Identity, Primary and Secondary Texts*

As play which features Ward’s conversion to Islam and subsequent re-conversion to Christianity, there are also rich opportunities here for discussions of early



modern religion as well as representations Islam in the early modern world. In both types of courses, we examine Ward's religious struggles through the lens of identity formation. In a play that highlights religion in the title, it comes as a surprise to many of my students – who are predominantly Christian – that salvation and religious issues are seemingly absent from Ward's deliberations. These deliberations, rather, loop back to nation, piracy, and even, lust.

Briefly, I will add here that while there is not a great deal of criticism on Daborne's *A Christian Turned Turk*, there is enough scholarly work to provide upper-division students with material to engage in their essays. In addition to Gerald MacLean's essay devoted to Daborne's play, Claire Jowitt, Daniel Vitkus, and Jonathan Burton include substantial discussions of it in their monographs. Greg Bak's biography of John Ward also discusses the play and, more importantly provides a historical examination of Ward's life. Beyond the focus on Ward and Daborne, there are numerous useful sources available on piracy and the relationship between Britain and the Ottoman Empire.

One potential difficulty of teaching this play in the context of the news pamphlets and ballads are their availability. A modern edition of the play is available in Daniel Vitkus's *Three Turk Plays From Early Modern England* (Columbia University Press, \$25.99). While the cost for the entire volume might be high for utilizing a single play, an electronic version is currently available from Google for \$15.33. Vitkus's

edition also provides an excellent introduction, images from the news pamphlets and reprints of three relevant ballads. The news pamphlets are slightly more difficult to find. Full PDF facsimiles are available on *Early English Books Online*. However, for those professors who, like myself, are at institutions that lack access to this database, there is limited online availability. Specifically, the Folger Shakespeare Library has a few PDFs from *Newes from Sea* online in their Primary Sources archive. These documents include facsimiles of the title page, a list of ships captured, and an account of piracy. The pamphlets as well as the excerpts are in a black letter typeface. This typeface proves only an initial difficulty for students. I have been surprised at the number of students who enjoy the challenge of reading the short passages. Specifically, they seem to appreciate the archaic language better in an archaic typeface. It lends a visual authenticity to the linguistic difficulties of early modern prose.

Thus, in addition to exposing students to non-canonical Renaissance texts such as news pamphlets and ballads, Daborne's *A Christian Turned Turk* (itself also non-canonical) allows an examination of identity formation on a variety of levels. The play enables students to engage in discussions of class politics, social programs, and national identity and understand how Ward and his fellow pirates provide a counter-discourse that interrogates cultural practice and is not all that different from Jack Sparrow's claim, in *Pirates of the Caribbean*, that beyond the keel, hull, and sails, his ship is "freedom."

## Endnotes

[1] The news pamphlets are the anonymous *Newes from Sea, Of Two Notorious Pyrats Ward the Englishman and Danseker the Dutchman* (1609) and Andrew Barker's *A True and Certaine Report of the Beginning, Proceedings, Ouerthrowes, and now present Estate of Captaine Ward and Danseker, the two late famous Pirates* (1609). There are two specific ballads devoted to Ward: "The Seaman's Song of Captain Ward, the Famous Pirate of the World, and an Englishman Born" (1609) and "The Famous Sea-Fight Between Captain Ward and the Rainbow" (ca. 1620). James I mentions Ward by name in his 1609 proclamation against pirates and John Donne casually alludes to him in Elegy 14, "A Tale of a Citizen and his Wife."

[2] Specifically, I use the work of Barbara Fuchs, Claire Jowitt, Depending on the level of the course, I sometimes have students read either Fuchs's or Jowitt's essays.

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