



Article

“In Truth, They Are My Masters”: The Domestic Threat of Early Modern Piracy

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Abstract: Thomas Walton (known as Purser) and Clinton Atkinson (known as Clinton) were hanged for piracy in 1583. This article examines a range of texts relating to Purser and Clinton, including court depositions, plays and ballads, to consider the ways in which their lives and deaths were depicted and discover what this might tell us about contemporary attitudes towards piracy. Purser and Clinton were based in Dorset where the boundaries delineating piracy as an illegal activity were blurred and the local beneficiaries of piracy spanned the social hierarchy, reaching as high as nobility and the Admiralty. A wealth of textual evidence details the links between the maritime and littoral networks which sustained their activities, enabled their rise to prominence, and engineered their ultimate downfall. In reading together both official documents and popular printed texts this article reveals some of the complex networks which supported and were supported by piracy and, in doing so, locates the figure of the pirate within wider discourses of society, governance and mobility.

Keywords: piracy; early modern; literature; Purser; Clinton; execution; mobility; networks



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1. Introduction

On 30 August 1583, Thomas Walton (known as Purser) and Clinton Atkinson (known as Clinton) were hanged for piracy at Execution Dock at Wapping in London, where their final moments were witnessed by crowds of onlookers. Both dressed in finery for the occasion and engaged with friends and acquaintances along the way to the gallows. The condemned duo had been part of a loose confederacy of pirates based on the Isle of Purbeck on the Dorset coast, a place ideally situated for access to the Channel and vessels trading between London and the Mediterranean. From this advantageous location Purser and Clinton participated in a campaign of violent and lucrative raids on shipping. Yet, despite the brutality of their crimes, they sustained dense networks of friends, family and trade throughout their piratical careers, and their execution was attended by supporters. Posthumously they received sympathetic portrayal in a number of popular printed texts. This article examines texts as diverse as confessions, court depositions, plays and ballads, to discover what depictions of the lives and deaths of Purser and Clinton might reveal about contemporary attitudes towards piracy.

Pirates are often categorized as outsiders, distanced from the authorities of church and state and isolated from human society. Historically, piracy has been viewed as an exceptional form of crime, with pirates considered to be the enemy of all humankind—hostis humani generis—following Cicero’s definition in his political and legal work, *De Officiis*, an English translation of which was printed in 1556 (see [Cicero 1556](#), 151v–152r). Cicero’s view of piracy has persisted, and a body of scholarship has built on the conceptualization of the pirate as excluded from the rest of human society. Some academics have suggested that pirates were little more than criminals, motivated by greed and acting outside the law (see [Cordingly 2011](#); [Earle 2003](#)). Others, following on from Christopher Hill’s influential work, have argued that the choice to turn pirate was the result of a coherent radical ideology (see [Hill 1984](#); [Burg 1995](#); [Rediker 1987](#)). This second view has gained significant cultural purchase in recent years, resulting in the frequent fictionalization of pirates as attractive

anti-heroes.¹ In either of these interpretations, pirates are cast as outsiders and, as Mark Hanna has commented, both share the same paradigm separating life at sea from communities on land (Hanna 2015, p. 8). The act of piracy may have been outside the law, but pirates were not the enemies of all humanity; as we will see, many retained strong connections within coastal communities suggesting a level of acceptance which complicated the legal narrative against piracy.

Although piracy was officially denounced, the distinction between lawful trade or privateering and unlawful piracy was often opaque, particularly so in the fraught years of Elizabethan expansionism (see Harding 2007). Equivocal attitudes towards piracy prevailed at the highest levels. When advising Elizabeth I on the construction of a standing navy, John Dee acknowledged the courage and abilities of those involved in piracy and advocated that the navy should be comprised of pirates (Dee 1577, p. 6). Far from disowning them, Dee sought to utilize the talents of pirates and suggested that, harnessed by the state, they might prove a significant force if their putative criminality were to be overlooked or neutralized. Acting on Dee's advice, the Queen began to put these skilled men to service approving privateering expeditions and attacks on the Spanish. Pirates, now transformed into privateers, became agents of England's newly forged mercantile identity with men such as Sir Francis Drake and Sir Walter Raleigh ennobled and cast as national heroes. Experienced pirates and privateers, with their knowledge of navigation, became indispensable with the launch of the Levant Company, founded in 1581 to trade with Turkey and the Levant (Andrews 1964, pp. 230–32). Texts such as Richard Hakluyt's *Principall Navigations*, first published in 1589, encouraged and inspired ambitions for further expansion into the emerging global market. These changes in the economic system of England caused new roles and models of identity and action to emerge (Vitkus 2007, p. 77). The Devon antiquary, John Hooker, described how reports of Drake's 1585 voyage and sack of the Indies were received in England:

[It so] inflamed the whole country with a desire to adventure unto the seas, in the hope of like good success, that a great number prepared ships, mariners and soldiers and travelled every place where any profit might be had. (Harte 1926, p. 39)

Men were inspired to emulate Drake when it became apparent that fortune and reputation could be made through overseas trade. For the first time, skilled seamen might achieve financial reward and advancement which had previously been unavailable to them within England's rigidly structured society. That this often involved an element of maritime plunder added a further layer of complexity to perceptions of piracy and exacerbated existing social tensions.

In this feverish period of maritime expansion, where profit could be made through trade or plunder, seamen frequently veered back and forth across the porous boundary between the two and, even during a single voyage, it was not unusual to become both perpetrator and victim of piracy. Many mariners intermittently and opportunistically participated in piracy and did not necessarily view it as a permanent career. 'Pirate' was a label applied to seafarers by those in authority; few engaged in piracy labelled themselves as such (see Blakemore 2013). Prior to his ennoblement, Drake himself was infuriated by social snubs from noblemen who referred to him as a common pirate and refused gifts of pirated money from him but, at the same time, considered similar acts of plunder performed by nobility as legitimate (Hanna 2015, p. 47). Piracy could provide a welcome boost to the economy of coastal communities with seafarers and their families deriving valuable income from plunder.² On a wider scale, ports which harbored and victualled pirate vessels were, in addition, able to receive and trade pirated goods at favorable rates (see Starkey 2003). In ports distant from London's mercantile and political center, pirates could exert considerable local influence due to the income they generated.³

This article focuses on the figures of Purser and Clinton to examine the connections forged between pirates and coastal communities and how these were perceived in wider society. The Isle of Purbeck in Dorset was a notorious pirate stronghold, and pirate activity

in the area is well documented. Evidence of the web of relationships nurtured by pirates in the region is apparent throughout texts concerning Purser and Clinton. Traces of their exploits can be found throughout state papers and court records, and their execution was the subject of three contemporary broadsheet publications, one of which, *Clinton, Purser & Arnold, to their Countreymen Wheresoever*, survives ([Anonymous 1583](#)).⁴ Unusually, for more than fifty years after their deaths they continued to appear in chronicles, ballads and, perhaps most notably, as dramatized versions of themselves in Thomas Heywood and William Rowley's play *Fortune by Land and Sea*. Much previous scholarship has tended to focus on these literary and dramatic representations of Purser and Clinton (see [Ellinghausen 2018](#); [Fuchs 2001](#); [Jowitt 2010](#)). However, a wealth of material exists detailing the relationships forged between Purser and Clinton and the littoral communities which sustained their activities and enabled their rise to prominence. This study takes an interdisciplinary approach, building on the valuable work of literary scholars such as that of Laurie Ellinghausen, Barbara Fuchs and Claire Jowitt, who have interrogated popular depictions of Purser and Clinton, and of historians such as John C. Appleby and Mark Hanna, who examine the role piracy played in the development of local and national economic infrastructure (see [Appleby 2013](#); [Hanna 2015](#)). Here, the lives, deaths and textual afterlives of Purser and Clinton are considered by reading together both official documents and popular printed texts to expose some of the complex networks which supported and were supported by piracy and, in doing so, locate the figure of the pirate within wider discourses of society, governance and mobility.

2. Pirate Lives

The pirates Purser and Clinton are often linked together in popular texts, sometimes accompanied by William Arnewood (known as Arnold) who was condemned to hang alongside them. Although they went together to the scaffold and, in life, occasionally sailed in the same vessel or fleet, they were not an inseparable team but rather part of a substantial pirate alliance based on the Isle of Purbeck, an area which became infamous for piracy and the trade of looted goods. Clinton, originally a merchant from London, Purser, a mariner from Northwich in Cheshire, and Arnold, a gentleman from Fordingbridge in Hampshire, converged there along with many others seeking to make their fortune through plunder ([L'Estrange Ewen 1949](#), pp. 88–89; [Rodger 1997](#), p. 344). Remote from London, it was difficult for the court to exert political authority on the Dorset coast and this, coupled with the advantageous location, led to a proliferation of piracy in the area. In 1582 an Admiralty official based on the Isle of Purbeck lamented the hegemony of pirates in the area: 'the common infamy of this poor island and me [. . .] the place of their repair is here where in truth they are my masters' ([Page 1908](#), p. 201). During the late sixteenth century, pirates dominated trade and held control over official structures in the region, partly through the patronage of powerful allies such as Sir Richard Rogers who, in 1577, was fined for his involvement in piracy and ordered to return stolen goods ([Hasler 1981a](#); [Rodger 1997](#), p. 344).

Such networks of influence were apparently in play when, in 1580, Clinton Atkinson was apprehended as part of a crew which had seized a vessel and returned to England to sell the cargo. Clinton was held in Exeter gaol and whilst there established a relationship with the Mayor, Symon Knight, who attempted to obtain a pardon for Clinton ([L'Estrange Ewen 1949](#), p. 90). The request for a pardon was also, surprisingly, supported by the Company of Spanish Merchants, the victims of Clinton's piracy. The corruption of authority and the judicial process was blatant: when Clinton subsequently escaped from Exeter gaol an Admiralty official, Gilbert Peppitt, complained that he had done so 'not without the consent or great negligence of the Mayor and gaoler, the Mayor having given him two very favourable testimonials'.⁵ In November 1580 a warrant was issued for the arrest of Clinton at the behest of Robert Giles, a Dartmouth merchant, who had bought cochineal from Clinton which was subsequently seized by the Admiralty as plunder ([L'Estrange Ewen 1949](#), p. 90). Clinton was captured again and, this time, held in the Marshalsea

prison in London where, the following March, John Spencer and Andrew Payne stood bail of one hundred pounds for him, an act they perhaps regretted when Clinton failed to appear before the court at the allotted time and escaped once again (L'Estrange Ewen 1949, p. 93). These incidents reveal the dense web of connections Clinton built amongst officials, merchants, and gentry, many of whom, as we will see, profited significantly from his piracy. Such connections expose barely disguised support for piracy from local authorities in contrast to the punitive attitude of London.

The ferocity of the crimes of the Purbeck pirates was widely known. Those who sought to gain from a relationship with Purser, Clinton and their comrades did so with full awareness of the nature of their activities, which often involved violence and torture. In 1581 Purser arrived on the Dorset coast in the *Little Diamond* and by June 1582 both he and Arnold were sailing alongside Clinton as part of the pirate fleet (L'Estrange Ewen 1949, pp. 94–95). In 1582, Purser in the *Diamond* and Clinton in the *Prosperity* were sailing under licences issued by Don Antonio to attack Spanish shipping as part of the opposition to Phillip II's rule of Portugal (Andrews 1964, p. 202). They did not, however, restrict their predation to Spanish vessels and their piracy intensified in both frequency and violence, with around forty prize vessels brought into the area in the early 1580s (Rodger 1997, p. 344). Their exploits were brought to the attention of Elizabeth I when, in April 1583, she received a letter from James VI of Scotland in which he complained about the torture of the crew of the *Grace of God*, a Dundee ship, which had been seized by Clinton and others at Dungeness in July 1582. The King condemned the pirates' 'cruel and strange usage' of the crew who were set 'naked on the shore' and then tortured 'with towis throwin about their heidis, quhat be licht luntis in betwix thair fingers'—ropes placed around their heads and lit fuses placed between their fingers—to force them to reveal where money was hidden. As a result of this abuse some of the crew had lost their sight and others fingers and thumbs, rendering them unable to work, 'to their utter wreck and undoing'.⁶ In August 1582, Purser and Arnold were implicated in the torture of William Kinge, an Admiralty informer. Kinge testified that they 'tied him to the mayne yarde and ducked him into the bottom of the sea' and that he believed he would have been killed if not for the intervention of 'gentlemen who then were on borde'.⁷ Notwithstanding this brutality, when in port the pirate vessels were often visited by gentlemen, such as those who rescued Kinge, who came to trade and also to socialize: in 1582, the Mayor of Corfe Castle reported that Thomas Ayres, William Parsons and William Chalcott were observed playing dice with pirates (L'Estrange Ewen 1949, p. 101). Gentlemen may have expedited the release of Kinge but in consorting with the pirates they were complicit in the integration of piracy within society.

Although social diversions such as drinking and gambling with gentlemen helped to consolidate relationships, they were incidental, and the main business of the pirates ashore was to dispose of their loot. Some of the stolen goods, Clinton confessed, were offered as bribes to Admiralty officials. The corruption of local Admiralty officials was widespread and blatant. In 1582, Clinton arrived at Studland with a French vessel and a cargo of salt and 'there left the same upon a price of 1x^{li} with Mr John Uvedale and Mr Thomas Aiers, deputies for Mr Hawley [. . .] to have their goodwill and favor in that Islande'.⁸ 'Mr Hawley' was Francis Hawley, the Deputy Vice Admiral, acting on behalf of Sir Christopher Hatton (Hasler 1981b). Clinton reported meeting with Hawley: 'To whome he made knowne what commodities he had brought in, and at the said Vice-Admirall's request made promise that he sholde have the first sight of his goodes before he made sale thereof'.⁹ Clinton gave Hawley the first choice of the goods he brought into port in return for which, presumably, Hawley would overlook his illegal activities. This was not an exclusive relationship: Hawley is recorded as accepting a gift of wine from a cargo looted by Arnold, and Purser reported that Hawley's servant, George Fox, came aboard his ship every day to see what would be given to him (L'Estrange Ewen 1949, p. 101). Admiralty records show trade with the pirates was rife from the very top of Purbeck society to the lowest taverns, with goods being secreted locally and then distributed all over the country. In addition to developing and nurturing these profitable trading relationships

the pirates retained strong bonds with family and friends ashore. Clinton was married and was accompanied by his wife when he narrowly evaded capture in a tavern in Erith; he also maintained a close relationship with his brother, John.¹⁰ Despite their violent criminality pirates were not just tolerated but encouraged and enabled by a community which flourished because of this association.

The dominance of the pirates in Purbeck was, however, a temporary state of affairs. The corruption of local Admiralty officials had become so endemic in the area that a substantial investigation was launched during which an Admiralty judge, Dr. Lewes, examined more than a hundred people about their dealings with pirates. This was an overt assertion of centralized Admiralty power. Many ports, such as the Cinque Ports, had never been subject to Admiralty jurisdiction; others obtained charters granting them rights which excluded the jurisdiction of the Lord Admiral (Marsden 1907, p. 472). Although the extent of piracy in the area had long been common knowledge, the Admiralty had been reluctant to intervene until the pirates' influence became overwhelming and threatened to destabilize authority (see Amirell and Müller 2014). Deputy Vice Admiral Hawley was one of those interrogated during the investigation and, in the face of direct accusations against him, said that he was powerless to resist the pirates and asked for munitions to help suppress them (L'Estrange Ewen 1949, p. 104). The corrupting influence of piracy was considered such a threat that eventually, in June 1583, two ships, the *Bark Talbot* and the *Unica* were commissioned to apprehend the Purbeck pirate fleet.¹¹ Clinton was captured and initially held in Corfe Castle where, he claimed, Hawley extorted twenty pounds from him on the understanding that he would be tried on the Isle of Purbeck, and therefore receive a favorable hearing, and a further hundred pounds for the promise of a pardon.¹² Despite the immense bribes they were able to offer, the pirates' hold on the official structures of Purbeck was not robust enough to withstand this outside intervention from London. Forty men, including Purser, Clinton and Arnold, were removed to the Marshalsea prison in London where they were interrogated by Admiralty examiners attempting to discover networks of receivership. Purser and Clinton refused to reveal details of their contacts and, with two others, were sent to the Tower where they were tortured on the rack.¹³ Their trial was set for 26 August 1583, but the outcome seems to have been a foregone conclusion as four days before the trial began ten pirates, including Purser, Clinton, and Arnold, were listed for execution. Clinton, ever hopeful that he could buy his way out of trouble, finally offered eight hundred pounds for a pardon, which he proposed should be recovered from his debtors. Lord Burghley refused the request, not on legal or moral grounds but on the basis that those who owed Clinton money would be likely to deny it and the debt would therefore be unrecoverable.¹⁴

The network of pirates had infiltrated society on the Isle of Purbeck at every level. They traded and socialized with gentry and nobility, and corrupted authorities. Local officials were controlled by their pirate "masters" and unwilling or unable to resist their demands or prevent their criminal activities. Piracy had threatened to overwhelm local domestic structures of order and authority and was only able to be countered by a forceful intervention from London. On 30 August, condemned to death and defeated at last by the might of the Admiralty, Purser, Clinton, and their confederates made their final journey to Execution Dock where the state would reassert its power which had been so publicly challenged by their behavior (Foucault 1977, p. 34). How, then, were the lives of Purser and Clinton articulated, by themselves and by others, at the point of execution when death was an imminent reality, and their options were fatally limited? To answer this question, we now turn to accounts of their execution to discover how they chose to frame their deaths and how this might illuminate their lives and actions in respect of contemporary perceptions.

3. Too Sumptuous for Sea Rovers?

The execution of Purser and Clinton excited considerable popular interest due to their success and notoriety, and accounts featured in a number of popular publications.

Two contemporary reports of the execution in particular offer descriptions, each focusing on different aspects of the event. Published to be distributed at the execution and in the immediate aftermath, the 1583 pamphlet, *Clinton, Purser & Arnold, to their countreyemen wheresoeuer*, recounts the purported last speeches of the condemned at the scaffold, whereas Holinshed, in his *Chronicles*, provides perhaps the most detailed description of the deaths of Purser and Clinton, vividly recording their journey to Execution Dock. Taking these two very different accounts together reveals how Purser and Clinton chose to meet their deaths and tells us something about how they viewed their own lives. Such a reading also exposes a broad range of early modern attitudes towards piracy and, in doing so highlights some of the social tensions provoked by their success.

Execution Dock, the site of Purser and Clinton's demise, was a space where the Admiralty sought to make an example of felons who had defied their authority. The executions which took place there were deliberately spectacular, often attended by vast crowds. The accused were taken through London in an open cart preceded by the Admiralty Marshal or his deputy carrying a silver oar, symbol of Admiralty authority over maritime crimes. By parading the condemned through the streets of London in this way, the Admiralty sought to impose authority on the prisoners but also on the maritime communities through which they passed. It was only necessary for the condemned pirates to play their part by confessing and repenting (see [Sharpe 1985](#)). The theatricality of the occasion is evident in Holinshed's description of Purser and Clinton's journey to the scaffold:

Walton as he went to the gallowes rent his venecian breeches of crimson taffata, and distributed the same peecemeale, to such his old acquaintance as stood neere about him: but Atkinson had before given his murrie velvet dublet with great gold buttons, and the like coloured velvet venecians laid with great gold lace (apparell too sumptuous for sea rovers) which he had worne at the seas, & wherein he was brought up prisoner from Corfe castell in the Ile of Porbeke to London, unto such his freends as pleased him, before he went to Wapping. ([Holinshed 1586](#), pp. 1354–55)¹⁵

The clothes which Purser and Clinton are described as wearing are sumptuous, expensive, and showy in the extreme and would certainly have made an impression to onlookers. With their gold buttons and velvet venetian breeches inlaid with gold lace they were splendid and deemed by Holinshed noteworthy enough to be recorded in detail. But Holinshed is doing more than providing mere description; he judges their clothing to be 'apparell too sumptuous for sea rovers' and, in stating this, signals something to his readers about the kind of men Purser and Clinton were and how their lives and deaths should be read. Holinshed views the fate of Purser and Clinton to be a result of 'bad companie and libertie', a failure to observe societal rules ([Holinshed 1586](#), p. 1354). If we examine Holinshed's report in the context of Purser and Clinton's piracy and connections on the Isle of Purbeck the description of their clothing can be seen as containing an implicit criticism of their aspiration and, perhaps, their associations outside of their station. Holinshed's suggestion that these lavish clothes were the pirates' workaday clothes which they wore at sea was highly unlikely due to both the cost and the impracticality of working at sea in heavy velvet and satin. Sea-going clothing held at the Museum of London suggests that early modern sailors would have worn a linen tunic and breeches, both cheaper and considerably more practical than velvet venetians.¹⁶ Holinshed's insinuation that these were working clothes seems calculated to make the pirates appear even more scandalous. In fact, Clinton stated that he had bought his outfit from a Dorset gentleman for five pounds, the equivalent of more than a hundred days' labour for a skilled tradesman, or over a thousand pounds in current terms.¹⁷ With their ill-gotten gains, Purser and Clinton were able to purchase the outward appearance of gentlemen.

Clothing signified status in Elizabethan England: a person was judged by their clothes, and sumptuary statutes existed which categorized the fabrics and materials each rank of person was permitted to wear. As Holinshed describes them, Purser and Clinton were flagrantly in breach of such rules. Sumptuary laws were an attempt to maintain the status

of clothing as an indicator of rank and wealth but, increasingly, mercantile wealth meant that as never before gentry, merchants, and successful criminals, had the means to afford the same clothing as the nobility and often dressed accordingly. Contemporary pamphlets detailed the confusion, real or manufactured, caused by the failure of the lower orders to observe the sumptuary laws and know their sartorial place (See [Stubbes 1583](#), C2^v; [Greene 1592](#)). By flaunting their expensive finery Purser and Clinton emulated the Queen's favorites, the ennobled and famously well-dressed sea dogs Drake and Raleigh, and in doing so threatened the semiotic stability between fabric and rank ([Jowitt 2010](#), p. 22; [Kuchta 2002](#), p. 21). In dressing so richly they sought to construct their own image and fashion how they would be remembered. Purser and Clinton's trade alliance with the gentry and nobility of Dorset and their corruption of officialdom threatened the stability of long-established social hierarchies. They embodied this challenge by choosing, during their last hours, to clothe themselves in the costume of their social superiors at the point when this strategy had most obviously and, for them, catastrophically failed.

The clothing which Purser and Clinton wore for their final public appearance was deliberately extravagant. It functioned as both a measure of their financial success and a visual demonstration that in death, as in life, they would pay no heed to social limitations. Holinshed reported that Clinton made the journey from Corfe Castle to London in his finery and would have made a noteworthy impression on those who saw him. The record of Clinton's burial at St. Botolph's, Aldgate, states that he previously sold haberdashery, so he might have had a feel for the value of fine materials ([Forbes 1971](#), p. 161). The distribution of their finery to supporters was a further part of the scaffold performance. Clothing was often given as a memento to friends and relatives and Clinton's brother, John Atkinson, described wearing clothing made from gifts of pirated cotton received from Clinton ([Jones and Stallybrass 2000](#), p. 22; [L'Estrange Ewen 1949](#), p. 103). Clinton gave his velvet doublet and breeches, with gold lace and gold buttons, to friends. Purser, in a more overtly theatrical performance, tore off his crimson taffeta breeches on his approach to the scaffold and gave pieces of his clothing to his friends and supporters. The act of tearing off these expensive clothes in public would make a memorable enough spectacle in itself, but the gifted garments themselves were then transformed, acting as a memento for the recipient to remember the giver. The clothing became memory materialized and when worn by the recipient would signify their relationship with the donor and carry with it something of the events of the givers life and death ([Jones and Stallybrass 2000](#), p. 3). Those who received gifts from Purser and Clinton might recall the pirates' failure to know their place and, with that recollection, conceive of new possibilities.

If, as Peter Lake and Michael Questier have argued, public executions contained within themselves the possibility of subversion by the condemned then, by choosing to frame their deaths with this performance, Purser and Clinton temporarily seized control of the space of execution and imposed their own narrative of conspicuous ill-gotten wealth distributed within their community ([Lake and Questier 1996](#), p. 69). This was only a brief respite: stripped of their finery they met their deaths as common criminals. In contrast Arnold, a gentleman, who had been sentenced to hang with them escaped death and was issued with a pardon. Holinshed's focus on and disapproval of what he perceived as the pirates' appropriation of the clothing of their superiors exposes the tensions provoked by geographically and socially mobile mariners who might enrich themselves through plunder to such an extent that they threatened existing structures of class.

The second surviving contemporary account of the execution, the 1583 pamphlet *Clinton, Purser & Arnold, to their countreyemen wheresoeuer*, offers a different perspective to that of Holinshed. Likely to have published for sale at the execution and in the immediate aftermath, this text depicts the pirates pleading their case and offering explanations for their actions. Initially, they seem to conform to the trope of the penitent last dying speech, where submission and repentance could lead to salvation ([Sharpe 1985](#), p. 146). The pirates defer to the authority of the Queen but, as Claire Jowitt has shown, all three pirates offer mitigation which undermines the justification for their execution ([Jowitt 2007](#), p. 156).

Purser describes his past service defending England and speculates that the execution of men like him, who had previously been considered a valuable and skilled resource by John Dee and Elizabeth I, will leave the country vulnerable (Anonymous 1583, A2^r).¹⁸ His speech, though ostensibly respectful, leaves a sense of ambiguity hanging in the air. These men are no mere criminals but have fought to defend their country and, perhaps like many seafarers in the audience, were using their skill to make a living in a society where their economic prospects were limited. As Laurie Ellinghausen has observed, the pamphlet has the pirates directly address the spectators at the scaffold and attempt to explain the details of their lives and how they reached this fatal point (Ellinghausen 2018, p. 90). In this way they might connect with their audience: Execution Dock was located in an area densely populated by seafarers who may themselves have intermittently engaged in piracy and been sympathetic to their plight.

Clinton, too, paints himself as devoted to the service of his country: 'Who more then Clinton scowrd in every coast/who holpe the helpelesse more, (say what they shall)/Then Clinton did that came at every call' (Anonymous 1583, B1^v). The aside, 'say what they shall', hints at the possibility of a competing narrative but otherwise the speech depicts his actions as noble and altruistic. Clinton reserves his criticism for those, such as Hawley back on the Isle of Purbeck, who had sought his aid and patronage and yet abandoned him in his hour of need: 'The time hath bene when they to please me prest,/But now they dare not, cause I am distrest' (Anonymous 1583, B2^r). Clintons ceaseless forging of connections had failed him at the last and his networks based on economic exchange had not provided political support in his time of most desperate need. Of the three pirates Arnold appears the most repentant:

But we abused our Princes league and law,
Through which in deed we did deserve to dye
For if we live not under soveraigne awe
But senselesse seeke our own securitie
The publike weale would perish presently.
As for my selfe as bitter as it is,
Welcome sweet Death for I have done amis. (Anonymous 1583, A4^r)

Arnold's speech describes the choice to turn pirate as a breach of the natural order and acknowledges the need to submit to 'soveraigne awe' or risk the breakdown of authority. He implores other men to learn by his example, and the speech with its elements of confession and repentance conforms to the archetype of the good death. Arnold is cast as the ingénue of the piece, an innocent gentleman brought to ruin by the treacherous actions of others. He was pardoned and returned to sea, but the credibility of his repentance was marred by recidivism—he immediately resumed his career of piracy (L'Estrange Ewen 1949, p. 108). In this telling of the execution, Purser and Clinton are equivocal at best, recasting their deeds as public service.

Holinshed's account of Purser and Clinton's execution reveals a level of disapproval concerning the pirates' criminal lifestyle and refusal to remain in their allotted station in life, as symbolized by their flouting of sartorial convention. Yet his account also infers the existence of a level of popular support for the pirates as he describes them continually fostering networks of support even up to the gallows. Their distribution of clothing to supporters echoes their nurturing of contacts on the Isle of Purbeck where the wealth of piracy infiltrated all aspects of society. Similarly, the ambiguous speeches ascribed to the pirates in the 1583 pamphlet offer deference to the authority of the Queen, but in their mitigation appealed to an audience of seafarers who had experienced the permeability of boundaries separating lawful trade from illegal plunder at sea. This commonality between the condemned and the public combined with the theatricality of their gallows performance ensured Purser and Clinton an enduring afterlife as characters in popular print. Consideration of these texts, some of which were published decades after their deaths, reveals how the lives of Purser and Clinton were reflected through the lens of history whilst also exposing how they were used to critique authority in a changing political landscape.

4. Posthumous Pirates

Although Purser and Clinton failed to evade the hangman, they lived on in a series of texts published over a period of more than fifty years after their deaths, spanning the reigns of three different monarchs.¹⁹ In addition to the 1583 pamphlets published at the time of their execution and Holinshed's account in 1586, they appeared some twenty years later in John Stow's *Annales* and again in Heywood and Rowley's play, *Fortune by Land and Sea*, written c.1607–1609. 1639 saw the publication of a further pamphlet relating their exploits, *A True Relation of the Lives and Deaths of the two most Famous English Pyrats, Purser, and Clinton*.²⁰ Although, as we have seen, the piratical careers of the real-life Purser and Clinton were both brutal and relatively short, this lengthy publication history suggests that something about their lives—or deaths—made them attractive and intriguing cultural subjects. Where Stow's account closely follows that of Holinshed, *Fortune by Land and Sea* and the 1639 pamphlet offer other perspectives on Purser and Clinton and yet, in different ways, each uses the two pirates as a means of highlighting the threat which piracy posed to domestic structures of authority.

Purser and Clinton appear as minor characters in *Fortune by Land and Sea*. The story centres on the fortunes of two families, the Forrests, who are virtuous but impoverished, and the Hardings, headed by the rich and unscrupulous Old Harding. The protagonist, Young Forrest, kills his brother's murderer in a duel. He runs away to sea and, after having been elected captain of his ship following a successful raid on Spanish shipping, captures Purser and Clinton at sea and returns them to justice. The pirates are hanged, and Young Forrest obtains a pardon. Here, Purser and Clinton are portrayed as having successfully created their own empire at sea. Purser declares that they have 'raign'd as Lords, /Nay Kings at Sea, the Ocean was our realm' (Heywood and Rowley 1980, 2182–90). Barbara Fuchs has described this pirate kingdom as 'a kind of shadow realm, one which reproduces the trappings of English power while in no way submitting to it' (Fuchs 2001, p. 127). The play alludes to the threat to rank posed by the rule of the pirates as Purser and Clinton divide their plunder equally between all, in marked contrast with Young Forrest who initially states he will divide the spoils in equal shares but then qualifies this with 'To every mans desart, estate, and place' (Heywood and Rowley 1980, 1850–52). Young Forrest hopes to return to landed society and is bound to its conventions, but the pirates have their own maritime empire and pay no heed to the social hierarchies which apply on land. Jowitt persuasively argues that, in its Elizabethanism and championing of Young Forrest, the play can be read as containing an implicit criticism of the foreign policy of James I and his stance against piracy (Jowitt 2007, pp. 162–64). The actions of Young Forrest are almost indistinguishable from those of Purser and Clinton, but Forrest represents himself as being in the service of Elizabeth and is rewarded by the state whereas Purser and Clinton establish their own oppositional realm. The fictionalized Purser and Clinton's maritime empire carries an echo of the influence they briefly held in their lives but can also be read as offering an alternative to the choices posed by the tyrannical rule and greed of Old Harding on the one hand and the emergent bourgeois virtue of Young Forrest's mercantilism on the other. In the pirate kingdom of Purser and Clinton, the seamen who labor to generate the wealth share it equally, regardless of their station on land. In its advocacy of equality, the pirate domain challenged the domestic status quo just as, in a somewhat less egalitarian manner, pirates on the Isle of Purbeck disrupted social norms.

On stage, as in life, the defiance of Purser and Clinton was curtailed by their deaths at the hands of the state. The execution of Purser and Clinton in *Fortune by Land and Sea* follows Holinshed's account in focusing on their distribution of clothing at the gallows. The play has Purser requesting the permission of the hangman to distribute their clothes: 'Mr Sheriff, you see we wear good clothes, /They are payd for, and our own, then give us leave /Our own amongst our friends to distribute' (Heywood and Rowley 1980, 2245–47). He stresses that the clothes are of good quality and that they own them outright—the clothes were not stolen or bought on credit. Whilst ostensibly seeking to emphasize the pirates' probity, this neglects the origins of the money, probably stolen, used to purchase

the clothing. This elision of goods lawfully purchased and those bought with the profits of plunder highlights the quandary which faced inhabitants of seafaring communities, such as on the Isle of Purbeck, where piracy and trade were so intimately entwined and the boundaries defining legality so blurred, that it was almost impossible to separate the two. Finally, Purser makes a gift of clothing to the hangman, thus including him among their friends and supporters, and urges him to ‘wear them for our sakes, and remember us’ (Heywood and Rowley 1980, 2252). This immediately changes the attitude of the hangman towards them, and he addresses them as ‘your worships’. As Jowitt suggests, the hangman, who should bring the restoration of order, has now been compromised by the acceptance of this valuable gift and could be viewed as supporting anti-establishment behavior as the clothes retain something of the identity of their former owners (Jowitt 2010, pp. 33–34). This scene reflects the ease with which the actual Purser and Clinton, along with their pirate comrades, were able for a time at least to buy the complicity of corrupt officialdom and achieve ‘mastery’ of the Isle of Purbeck.

Despite their corruption of the hangman, the state stood firm in the face of their bribery and this fictional Purser and Clinton, like their real-life counterparts, were not pardoned but executed for their piracy. Fuchs reads the inclusion of Purser and Clinton in the play as a lawless contrast to the virtuous Young Forrest and argues their eventual destruction reasserted class boundaries which had been jeopardized by their actions (Fuchs 2000, p. 65). However, the version of Purser and Clinton we find in *Fortune by Land and Sea* is deeply ambivalent; they are not entirely unsympathetic characters and the barely distinguishable nature of their plunder from that of Young Forrest offers the audience a more nuanced view of piracy. Their inclusion as characters in the play allows for the consideration of new alternative possibilities of governance, society and distribution of wealth.

Published in 1639, *A True Relation of the Lives and Deaths of the two most Famous English Pyrats, Purser, and Clinton* seeks to constrain the unruly pirates by the might of the law. The pamphlet opens with three short chapters entitled ‘Of the power of justice’, ‘Wherefore the Lawes were made’, and ‘All ill actions ought to be awarded’ before moving on to the story of Purser and Clinton (Anonymous 1639, A3^r–A4^v). The text is structured to give the impression that piracy should not be glorified but punished within a robust legal tradition rooted in Roman law (Anonymous 1639, A5^r). Purser and Clinton, the titular subjects of the pamphlet do not make an appearance until Chapter 5. This Purser and Clinton are, then, initially imprisoned within a framework of the law. The author, in common with Holinshed, views the fault of the pirates as originating in dissatisfaction and a desire for liberty: both are described as ‘haughty and ambitious spirits’, desiring to be ‘freemen of the Sea’ (Anonymous 1639, A8^v). They see themselves as having skills which were not being adequately employed: ‘What basenesse it was in them to bee no better than servants, who had both the Judgement and ability to command, and to bee only Employed to benefit and enrich others, whilst they in the Interim wanted themselves’ (Anonymous 1639, A8–A8^v). They refuse to remain in their allotted station working for the enrichment of others and, mustering a crew from the many discontented sailors they find in Plymouth, they embark on their life of piracy. After capturing their first vessel they imagine themselves ‘halfe Lords at Sea’ (Anonymous 1639, B2^v), already seeing themselves as subverting the landed social norms which had so constrained them. In Part II of the pamphlet, the pirates have been so successful that the Queen intervenes and decides to offer them a pardon and reincorporate them as subjects. The Queen’s representative finds Purser and Clinton ‘sitting in Counsell, where they kept a great state, and were attended as if they had beene no lesse than two Princes, and rival Commanders of the maine Ocean’ (Anonymous 1639, B7). Although the pirates thank the Queen for her grace and mercy, they decide to refuse the pardon for fear of the unjust and corrupt Admiralty (Anonymous 1639, B8). They are subsequently captured and hanged but are described as ‘brave in habite’ and ‘bold in spirit’ at the gallows (C5^v).

The hubris and over-reaching nature of the pirates is apparent throughout and, as Ellinghausen comments, their pride sets them up for their fall (Ellinghausen 2018, p. 88). However, Purser and Clinton are not condemned outright and throughout the text are

described as entertaining, thoughtful, bold and courageous. In their bravery and skill attacking a Turkish man of war they are shown to be potentially useful to England if, as John Dee had previously suggested, they could be pressed into service of the state (Anonymous 1639, B2). Although they refuse the offer of a pardon, they are respectful to the crown throughout and only refuse the pardon after reaching a consensus with their crew. In this, their egalitarian conduct recalls the Purser and Clinton of *Fortune by Land and Sea* who share their spoils equally amongst all. As Jowitt has observed, the Parliamentary nature of the debate held by the pirates on deciding whether to accept the pardon was in direct contrast to personal rule of Charles I, the reigning monarch at the time of publication, who had not called a Parliament for ten years (Jowitt 2010, p. 38). This can be read as veiled criticism of a system which had distanced itself from the people and failed to adequately employ talented men such as Purser and Clinton. As in *Fortune by Land and Sea*, the pirates are used as a device to critique the policies of the reigning monarch and, although there is an emphasis on the illegality of their actions throughout the pamphlet, Purser and Clinton remain ambivalent and often attractive figures.

The representations of Purser and Clinton in *Fortune by Land and Sea* and *A True Relation* use elements of their historical lives as a means to raise topical polemic concerns. Although little of the real-life Purser and Clinton's brutality is reflected in these depictions, something remains of their flamboyance, success, and connections. Both texts portray the pirates' execution as warranted and condemn their hubris and criminality, but they also depict Purser and Clinton as brave, successful and building vast and lucrative trading networks. The ambiguity leaves an opening for the consideration of new possibilities. The plucky and defiant pirates bravely taking on a Turkish warship and creating a new, egalitarian society might signal to the audience the opportunity for men of skill to forge an alternative path—albeit doomed in this instance—outside of structures of obedience and authority (Jowitt 2010, p. 36; Ellinghausen 2018, p. 87).

5. Conclusions

This brief study of the lives and representations of Purser and Clinton has shown that piracy contained within it the possibility of enabling men to shape their own lives, resulting in something that we might describe as social mobility. Mercantile expansion and the success of the Elizabethan seadogs led many to view plunder as a possible route to wealth and status and during their time of 'mastery' on the Isle of Purbeck, the pirates held influence far beyond that which would ordinarily be available to seamen. Mobile in the unregulated space of the sea and beyond the control of the state, seamen and pirates became the focus of England's expectations and fears of geographical and social mobility. The broad familial and social networks of pirates meant that piracy was enmeshed within coastal communities with many supporting, trading, and profiting from plunder. This might exacerbate tensions between local and central authorities, causing conflict between the two powers. On the Isle of Purbeck, the networks which supported piracy threatened normative social and economic hierarchies and provoked a backlash from the authorities in London which proved fatal for Purser and Clinton but also for the economy of the area which never fully recovered (L'Estrange Ewen 1949, p. 105). Betrayed by Hawley and others who had not only freely traded with them but sought their company and favor, and profited from their piracy, Purser and Clinton set out to meet their deaths clothed in their expensive finery making a statement that, for a brief period, their choice to turn pirate had brought them success and riches and status. Although the threat to authority posed by the upstart pirates was defeated by the stark fact of their deaths, Purser and Clinton's donning of 'apparell too sumptuous for sea rovers' represented the prospect of advancement effected by their own choices. The dramatic spectacle of their final journey ensured that the memory of such possibilities would continue to circulate in popular texts long after their deaths.

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Notes

- ¹ For example, see the character of Jack Sparrow in the film series *Pirates of the Caribbean* (Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2003–2017). For a wider discussion of pirates in popular culture see (Neil Rennie 2013). *Treasure Neverland: Real and Imaginary Pirates*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- ² For an example of family finances bolstered by income from intermittent acts of plunder see the journal of the seventeenth century seaman Edward Coxere, *Adventures by Sea of Edward Coxere*. 1945. Edited by E. H. W. Meyerstein. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- ³ Sir Francis Drake was awarded freedom of the city of Plymouth and obtained permission to trade their after one of his first voyages. He had made considerable financial investment in the West Country and became mayor of Plymouth in 1581 and twice served as member of Parliament for Plymouth (Hanna 2015, p. 51).
- ⁴ Two further publications, *Clinton's Lamentacyon* 1583 and *The Confessions of 9 Rovers, Clinton and Purser being chief* 1586 are lost. See (Arber 1967, pp. 197, 210b).
- ⁵ 'Queen Elizabeth—Volume 144: November 1580'. In *Calendar of State Papers Domestic: Edward VI, Mary and Elizabeth, 1547–80*. Edited by Robert Lemon. 1856. London: HMSO. pp. 685–89. Available online: <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/domestic/edw-eliz/1547-80/pp685-689> (accessed on 12 March 2021).
- ⁶ 'Elizabeth: April 1583', in *Calendar of State Papers, Scotland: Volume 6, 1581–1583*. Edited by William K. Boyd. 1910. London. pp. 356–434. Available online: <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/scotland/vol6/>, pp. 356–434 (accessed on 13 March 2021).
- ⁷ William Kinge. 17 June 1583. High Court of Admiralty 1, 41. High Court of Admiralty references will henceforth be abbreviated to H.C.A. followed by the appropriate reference number.
- ⁸ Confession of Clinton Atkinson. 10 August 1583. H.C.A. 1, 42.
- ⁹ Confession of Clinton Atkinson.
- ¹⁰ Deposition of Agnes Orwell, Christopher Turner, John Fludde, and John Chamberlain, 12–16 November 1582. H.C.A. 1, 40; Deposition of John Atkinson. 27 November 1582. H.C.A. 1, 40.
- ¹¹ 'Queen Elizabeth—Volume 161: June 1583', in *Calendar of State Papers Domestic: Elizabeth, 1581–90*. 1865. Edited. by Robert Lemon. London: HMSO. pp. 111–14.
- ¹² Confession of Clinton Atkinson. One hundred and twenty pounds would be roughly the equivalent of twenty five thousand pounds today according to the National Archives Currency Converter available at Currency converter: 1270–2017 (nationalarchives.gov.uk).
- ¹³ H.C.A. 1, 42.
- ¹⁴ H.C.A. 14, 22, no. 176.
- ¹⁵ Scholars now accept the *Chronicles* to be a compilation of the work of a number of different authors, including that of John Stow. Stow's (1605) *Annales* includes an account of the execution of Purser and Clinton which is very similar to that found in the *Chronicles*.
- ¹⁶ See sixteenth century sailor's breeches and shirt, known as slops, in the Museum of London online collection. Available online: <http://collections.museumoflondon.org.uk/online/object/83032.html> (accessed on 13 March 2015).
- ¹⁷ Confession of Clinton Atkinson. For comparative worth see the National Archives Currency Converter available at Currency converter: 1270–2017 (nationalarchives.gov.uk).
- ¹⁸ See (Jowitt 2010, pp. 26–27) for further analysis of this point.
- ¹⁹ See (Jowitt 2010, pp. 17–46) for a discussion of how these texts use the figure of the pirate to critique the differing reigns and policies.
- ²⁰ *Early English Books Online* attributes this pamphlet to Thomas Heywood but the text does not identify Heywood as the author.

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