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# Disney's Pirates as Anti-Piracy: Promoting Family Values and Morals Through an Unlikely Group of Villains and Knaves

BY WENDY DEACON

When we think of pirates, we tend to imagine a group of unruly men plundering and looting seaports and towns, leaving destruction and death in their wake. Such is the reality of piracy: pirates were motivated by greed, lust, and a desire for freedom from conventional society and order. It is with surprise, then, that we find pirates as a focal point in the films and works of a company that is primarily concerned with instilling family values and maintaining innocence in an increasingly corrupt society. The Disney Company, through modifications of classic stories and alterations of history, has managed to portray pirates in opposition to traditional piracy. These portrayals undergo a process of “Disneyfication,” which is “the application of simplified aesthetic, intellectual, or moral standards to a thing that has the potential for more complex or thought-provoking expression” (Shortsleeve 1). However, Disney’s pirates are not merely simplified. They are altered to fit a particular mold so that much of the historical truth of piracy is lost in the end result. Disney is able to get away with such a “Disneyfication” of history because our society desires it. Historical pirates—lawless men driven by greed and self-interest—were outside of society and opposed to our values. Rather than accept their marginality as historical fact, we desire instead to overlook the debauchery in their acts and find a way to connect them with one of our most important values: the family. In so doing, we are pulling them into our conventional structures of society and disregarding the qualities that set them apart as objectionable outcasts. Disney’s most recent portrayals of pirates exhibit strong connections to the family, which, I argue, is what makes them acceptable to our society. However, if we look at earlier depictions of pirates in Disney, we cannot find such explicit connections to the family. Why would portrayals of piracy be more problematic today than fifty years ago? Has our society become so much more conservative or concerned with family values that such “Disneyfication” of history is required—or, conversely, have we become non-conservative to the extent that Disney is altering history in order to reaffirm traditional morals and values that have recently been in decline? Since the 1950s, when Disney first used pirates in films, we have become less conservative and likewise less concerned with values that were inherent in our society at that time. Disney’s portrayals of pirates exhibit a change over time that emphasizes

a growing need for the pirate, an individual normally associated with rebelliousness and immorality, to be connected with conventional family ties in order to encourage a return to traditional family values and morality.

In 1953, Disney's animated film *Peter Pan* was well received by an enthusiastic American audience. The film takes a considerable departure from the original novel by James M. Barrie, but it is perhaps because of the changes Disney made to the story that the film was so widely accepted. These changes made the story more family-friendly and suitable for all ages. Especially important is the alteration of the pirate villain, Captain Hook. In a review of this and other versions of *Peter Pan*, C.W. Nevius comments on the "Disneyfication" of the story, particularly with Hook: "Captain Hook may be a preening buffoon in the Disney cartoon, but the first time we meet him in the book one of his pirates accidentally stumbles into him and Hook guts and kills him." Instead of a dark, violent villain, Disney provides us with one who is merely threatening. Hook is more comical and cowardly than he is frightening. His characteristics and his motivation throughout the story—to defeat Peter Pan, a young boy capable of stripping Hook of his dignity—remove him from the reality of historical piracy and make him acceptable to a society that is reluctant to acknowledge such history. We do see a few glimpses of "real" piracy with Hook—his ship, the Jolly Roger, and his crew. But we are never given a depiction of Hook as a true pirate. He is removed from motivations and principles that we would associate with piracy: plundering, looting, and the desire for freedom from a land or nation-state.

The typical viewer might have trouble discerning any connection of the pirates in *Peter Pan* with the family. An assumption that there is no correlation would almost be correct, as Hook and his crew are outwardly detached from any conventional familialities. However, a significant parallel can be made between Hook and Wendy's father. Historically, both characters have been portrayed by the same actor. Disney maintains this tradition in the film as one actor provides the voice for both Hook and Mr. Darling. Here we find Hook's connection to the family as a father figure in Neverland. Both Hook and Mr. Darling are threatening paternal figures and their menace is directed at the same issue: childhood. Just as Mr. Darling demands that Wendy must grow up and relinquish her precious childhood stories and dreams, Hook embraces an identical desire to kill Peter Pan, the very symbol of childhood. Hook is the fatherly voice of adulthood in Wendy's fantasy world, threatening throughout the story to bring an abrupt end to her childhood adventures and innocence. When Wendy is captured by the pirates, Hook gives her a choice: to join the crew or walk the plank. Hook is ultimately forcing Wendy to choose between adulthood and death, leaving no room for childhood. Wendy chooses to walk the plank because the adulthood that Hook represents is evil and corrupt, and he, rather than Mr. Darling, is ultimately punished because he threatens to separate a family in his demand. Although Peter Pan could be viewed as a similar threat to the family in his rejection of adulthood, he is responsible for reuniting Wendy with her family in the end and so is not as threatening as Hook, who would send Wendy to her death rather than allow her to remain in childhood.

The only other connection that can be made between the pirates in *Peter Pan* and the family can be seen when Wendy sings a slow, serious song to the Lost Boys called "Your Mother and Mine." At this point in the film we see the pirates' reactions to Wendy's song: some look sorrowful, others are sniffing, and Smee, the comical pirate, actually cries aloud and lifts his shirt to reveal a tattoo of "Mother" enclosed by a heart. The pirates' reactions to the song suggest that the song is imparting a moral about the consequences of deviating from home or the family. The pirates have a brief moment of reflection and their response implies a feeling of sadness or regret at their detachment from their own mothers. Only Hook appears to be unmoved by the song as he is focused solely on his goal to kill Peter Pan.

Hook's defeat and punishment at the end of the film suggests two things. First, Hook must be punished not simply because he is a pirate and villain, but more importantly because he is a threat to conventional social order in his animosity toward childhood. Hook would have childhood killed, thus destroying the traditional family mold in which childhood and adulthood exist in harmony. Hook remains outside the boundaries of acceptable society in his refusal to reconcile with childhood and is punished accordingly. However, we do not see him die. We last see Hook being chased by the crocodile and can make our own assumptions as to his fate. Here we find the second significant aspect of the ending: Hook cannot be killed because of his connection to Wendy's father. To kill Hook would be to symbolically kill her father, and likewise adulthood. Wendy's reconciliation with her father is necessary to maintain the family structure. When Wendy announces that she is ready to grow up, Mr. Darling concedes that she can do so "in due time." The resolution at the end is comforting to an audience that expects to see traditional family values and morals upheld. Thus we find that this pirate's connection to the family, though not a positive one, is more significant than it initially seems, and Hook is detached from historical piracy in order for this association to be acceptable to a family-friendly audience.

In 1967, Disney presented us with another portrayal of pirates that was more specifically focused on piracy itself. Instead of playing a villainous role subservient to a protagonist, the pirates featured in Disneyland's *Pirates of the Caribbean* ride are the primary focus. The characters in the ride are referred to as "the rowdiest crew that ever sacked the Spanish Main" ("*Magic Kingdom*" para. 1). But here again we find a "Disneyfication" of piracy that favors a toned-down depiction of history as opposed to a reality that might be more offensive to viewers. Instead of frightening guests with tales of menacing pirates that terrorized towns, we are given "a comical cast of rascals, scoundrels, villains, and knaves" as we depart on a "rollicking boat ride to a Caribbean seaport under siege by a band of swashbuckling pirates" (para. 2). As a park that is concerned primarily with remaining family-friendly, Disneyland needed to portray a fantasy world that omits the worst aspects of piracy; a more realistic world in which pirates might be "hacking people to pieces with axes, raping young captives of all genders, and generally wallowing in filth and squalor" would be unacceptable (Memminger). The most disturbing and violent aspects of piracy were then made comical

and light-hearted so that instead of frightening they would amuse and entertain. In the ride the pirates are humorous and silly as they sleep with pigs and sing their well-known theme song, “Yo-ho, yo-ho, a pirate’s life for me!”

The song itself poses a problem that raises questions concerning the ride’s regard for family. While the pirates featured in the ride are based on fantasy, the lyrics in the song are startlingly close to reality:

Yo ho, yo ho, a pirate’s life for me!  
 We pillage, we plunder, we rifle and loot,  
 Drink up me ’arties, Yo Ho!  
 We kidnap and ravage and don’t give a hoot,  
 Drink up me ’arties, Yo Ho! (“Pirates...Script”)

The song is repeated throughout the ride, and in some scenes is being sung by the pirates. In its insistence on altering the historical accuracy of pirates, Disney overlooked the bluntly truthful lyrics of the theme song, which is often the greatest lasting impression for guests who experience the ride. Perhaps Disney included the lyrics as a humorous component that adults would notice but that would likely go over the heads of most children. However, in the song itself we find perhaps the only connection to family in the ride. The last two lines of the song contain a reference to family that seemingly places the pirates in an acceptable light: “Aye but we’re loved by our mommies and dads! Drink up me ’arties yo ho!” The song suggests that the pirates do have a conventional family relationship as they are loved by their parents. The fact that their parents would love them despite their deplorable acts implies that these pirates are not evil or unacceptable to society. Disney’s pirates again maintain a connection to the family that allows them to be acceptable to us despite their position outside the margins of society.

Disney’s emphasis on familial ties in its portrayals of pirates, once simply a minor and often unnoticed part of a larger story, has in recent years become the primary focus of the company and the chief desire of its audiences. In “Disney Revisited, Or, Jiminy Cricket, It’s Musty Down Here!” Betsy Hearne observes the change over time and suggests, “Disney’s modifications originate from accurate readings of our culture” (para. 17). At some point in the past decade Disney read our culture and decided that it needed to be changed. As a society we have become so accustomed to the unconventional and non-conservative that they have become normal and expected in our culture rather than the exception. Instead of connecting piracy with the family as a supplement to a film or ride and an implicit reinforcement of family values, Disney is now using pirates as a way to explicitly instill the family values and morals that we seem to have lost somewhere between the 1950s and today. Because they are still considered a criminal group outside the margins of society and opposed to our values, pirates are an ideal choice for Disney to use as a means of imparting a moral message concerning family values to today’s society.

Disneyland is committed in its determination to be “based upon and dedicated to the ideals, the dreams, and the hard facts that have created America” (Schaffer para. 3). Yet, Disneyland has been forced to sacrifice the hard facts in order to preserve the ideals. In 1995, the Pirates of the Caribbean ride was refurbished to expose an even more toned-down and benign crew of pirates that are a further distortion of reality. In response to complaints that the ride was not politically correct, a scene in which pirates were originally chasing women was altered to portray the pirates chasing women carrying trays of food (Foxx). The new version of the scene is almost as problematic as the original. In “Disney’s ‘Bad’ Pirates Walk the Plank,” Charles Memminger comments on Disney’s decision to adhere to such an objection: “Yes, men shouldn’t chase women. But frankly men shouldn’t chase women carrying trays of food, either. Men also shouldn’t have shot at each other with cannon balls.” Disney bowed down to the pressures of a society that is unwilling to accept the reality of piracy and altered a ride that was already fictitious in order to create an even further rift between its portrayal of pirates and the historical truth of piracy.

The refurbishment failed to account for all politically incorrect scenes. Surprisingly, Disney left intact perhaps the most problematic scene of the ride: the auction of women. When the ride was first created, Imagineer Claude Coates said that Walt Disney was most hesitant about this scene and its implications: “He came in one time and even said, ‘This will be okay won’t it?’ He was just a little doubtful of auctioning off the girls. Was that quite ‘Disney’ or not?” (Foxx). In order to make the auction scene acceptable, a sign was added: “Take a Wench for a Bride.” Why would such a scene be allowed to exist after the 1995 refurbishment if other scenes exploiting women were changed? It remains intact for the simple reason that the auction scene is connected to the family. The sign indicates that the women will be “taken” in order to be married, not to be abused, by the pirates. Because the tie to marriage is in the foreground of the scene, it is permitted to remain untouched. The theme song also remains untouched for perhaps the very same reason. Although the lyrics imply much more than we actually see, their implication is seemingly unnoticed in the light-hearted and comical atmosphere created in the ride. The connection to family, however slight, is enough for us to accept Disney’s portrayal of pirates, even in such a politically correct climate.

The shift in focus on the family is evident not only in Disney’s theme parks but also in its films. In 2003, Disney’s next animated attempt at pirates was an adaptation of Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*. *Treasure Planet* is a characteristic Disney movie, with “wholesome family morals and winsome comedy sidekicks” (Review 1). But in order to achieve such family morals, the original storyline had to be drastically altered. In sharp contrast to the original story, *Treasure Planet* focuses more on the father-son relationship between Long John Silver and Jim Hawkins than it does on the actual search for treasure.

The conflict of Silver and Jim’s relationship lies at the heart of the story. Disney altered the original in a way that makes Silver appealing and ultimately heroic. Instead of viewing Silver as a villain because he is a pirate, adults can see his “innate sense of

parental instincts” and understand his connection with Jim (“Treasure” para. 4). While Disney villains are typically one-dimensionally evil, Silver is ambiguous. We know from the start that he is a pirate and a villain, but Disney’s portrayal of him makes us forget his role as anything other than a father. Silver is also visually connected to Jim. The film, which is set in space, features creatures that are combinations of animals and insects, and some that simply look alien. Jim and his mother are the only humans present, until we meet Silver. Silver is a cyborg—half-machine, half-human. His human side visually ties him with Jim and his mother, allowing for an even smoother transition for Silver from the role of the villain to that of the father. The rest of the pirates are alien, and so are situated at an acceptable distance from us.

Silver becomes Jim’s substitute father through a brief montage of scenes. As visions of Silver teaching Jim skills on the ship are contrasted with his faceless father gradually disappearing from his life, the film is explicitly informing us that Silver is the father Jim never had. The final transition from his father leaving to Silver reaching out for Jim solidifies his role as the father as well as our approval of him. In this scene and one immediately following, Silver sheds his pirate image and steps fully into the father role. Our only indication that he is a pirate at this point is his thick accent. The encouragement and admiration he voices for Jim is perhaps one of the most poignant moments in the film:

You’ve got the makings of greatness in ye, but ye gotta take the helm and chart your own course...and when the time comes ye get the chance to really test the cut o’ your sails and show what ye’re made of...well, I hope I’m there, catchin’ some of the light comin’ off ye that day.

The affection Silver obviously has for Jim comes across clearly in this speech, and is affirmed for us when he later remarks, “Gettin’ in too deep here. Next thing ye know they’ll be sayin’ I’ve gone soft.” Because of Silver’s relationship with Jim we never see him as frightening or a real threat, even when he turns on Jim and steps into his pirate role. Even then we are more uncertain of Silver than we are fearful, and it is more surprising to see him act like a pirate than it is to see him as a father figure and friend.

Comparing *Treasure Planet* to *Peter Pan*, we can see how the pirate has changed over time, especially with regard to his connection to the family. The pirate as a father figure in particular has evolved since Hook was created in 1953. While Hook as a symbolic father figure was threatening, Silver as a substitute father is more involved and important to the story. He actually assumes the role of a father by teaching Jim useful skills and caring for him during their journey. Unlike Hook, Silver is spared at the end. Hook would kill Wendy, and childhood, thus destroying the family, but Silver chooses to save Jim over the treasure, thereby redeeming himself for any piratical deeds by placing priority on his “son.” The other pirates, all clearly evil and one-dimensional, are punished for their wicked acts. Where Hook was unredeemable because of his refusal to accept childhood and remain faithful to the traditional family structure,

Silver must be redeemed because the audience desires to see him take the role of Jim’s father. He even goes so far as to give Jim a handful of treasure as he leaves at the end, to give to his mother to rebuild their inn. Silver is not merely a substitute father, but a fully realized one as he provides for his “family” and influences Jim’s decision to abandon his rebellious ways.

The need for the pirate to be connected to family can be most clearly seen in Disney’s most recent pirate film: *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl*. In this film, the main focus is on the pirates, but they are split into two definitive groups of good and evil. In “Avast, Me Hearties! A Review of Disney’s Pirates of the Caribbean” Susan Davies points out what the film fails to address and suggests Disney’s reason for again altering history:

*Pirates* could be, should be, about the return of the repressed, as all pirate...stories really are. Like terrorists, pirates are marginals and outcasts who rage at the power of the state that has screwed them over. A really good pirate story should give us the eerie feeling that people we are supposed to be afraid of are trying to tell us something...But real uneasiness is too risky for Disney. (para. 4)

In *Pirates of the Caribbean* Disney offers us two groups of pirates: one that is evil and threatening, and one that is good and ultimately triumphant. The focus of the film is on the conflict between these two groups, but it primarily lies with the heroes, both of whom are unconventional pirates. In his essay “Jolly Pirates,” Philip Stoup notes the irony of the film: “In Disney’s magical land of fantasy the world is topsy-turvy. The plundering is done by the upright British, and the men we come to idolize and love are the unruly and riotous pirates” (para.13). How have we evolved from deploring pirates like Captain Hook to idolizing them fifty years later?

The answer lies in the portrayal, which Disney has mastered. By “reading our culture,” as Betsy Hearne noted, Disney is able to provide a film in which pirates are both honorable and criminal. We are given excitement and danger, but we know that the heroes will prevail. Although “pirate movies are not easy to write, as they tend to turn off audiences for whatever reason,” Disney’s film succeeds where others fail because it appeals to a family audience instead of portraying pirates with disturbing historical accuracy (“Pirates...Curse” para. 3). The evil pirates in the film are confined to a “floating charnel house” and are clearly separated from the other group (Davies para. 5). These pirates are also set apart from historical pirates because of the curse they are under. This supernatural element rectifies the problem of depicting them in reality as plunderers and enemies of society. Not only does their plunder have a specific motive, but they are also paying for their evil deeds as the greed they were once motivated by now consumes them. Thus the pirates are detached from reality and consequently offer a moral lesson.

The pirates in the other group are unconventionally upright and heroic. Jack Sparrow and Will Turner are not the typical booty-seeking pirates that we have come to

expect historically; instead they seek freedom, adventure, and love. All are ideals that our society values, and so their marginality is acceptable. More importantly, both have strong connections to the family that serve to further solidify our approval for them despite their roles as pirates. It is especially easy for us to accept Will as a hero because he is not explicitly a pirate. He is tied to piracy through his father and does not actually become a pirate until he is forced to in order to save his love, Elizabeth. Will's family ties keep him on the right side of the margins, however. He is connected to Elizabeth through a conventional heterosexual relationship that we infer will lead to marriage. We also see his struggle to accept his connection to piracy, which he initially abhors, and accordingly to accept his father. Will is told in the film that his father was both "a good man and a good pirate," which is evidenced by his disapproval of the mutiny that left Jack marooned on an island: "Never sat well with Bootstrap what we did to Jack Sparrow...he said it wasn't right with the code. He said we deserved to be cursed and remain cursed." Will's father, because he was clearly "a good man," is acceptable as a pirate, and likewise so is Will. Will's ties to family are explicitly clear, as are his motives in the film: to rescue and be with Elizabeth.

Jack Sparrow, our main pirate protagonist, is portrayed quite differently than a traditional pirate. Aside from his odd mannerisms and idiosyncrasies, Jack is separated from historical pirates because of his family connections. Although Jack appears to be independent and not tied to a home or family, we see an unusual bond forming between him and Will. Jack becomes a father figure for Will—a substitute for the father Will struggles to accept throughout the film. Jack agrees to help Will rescue Elizabeth when he realizes that Will's father was his friend and shipmate. Jack stresses to Will, who refuses to believe that his father was a pirate, that he was not just a "bloody pirate and a scallywag," but more importantly "a good man." Jack instigates Will's struggle when he bluntly states, "Pirate is in your blood, boy, so you'll have to square with that someday." Incidentally, this fact never changes our view of Will in the film. We understand Will to be a good man first and foremost, and his piracy is depicted in a way that he maintains that status.

The relationship between Jack and Will develops as the story progresses, and we can ascertain that the men are symbolically, if not literally, falling into the roles of father and son. Although Jack does not appear to be much older than Will, he is actually old enough to be his father. Jack must have been the captain of Will's father, and so would have been roughly the same age, if not older, than his father. Jack instructs Will, both through example and direction, on how to act once he has crossed the margins of society and committed acts of piracy. Will seems unaware of his progression into piracy until Jack points out, "You sprung a man from jail, commandeered a ship of the fleet, sailed with a buccaneer crew, and you're completely obsessed with treasure." Here the treasure Jack refers to is not a pirate's treasure, but rather Elizabeth. Jack acts as a father figure as he works with Will along each step of his journey and opens his eyes to facts that Will is reluctant to admit. It is perhaps because of Jack's influence that Will finally has the courage to profess his love for Elizabeth, and his open defiance of the law when

he saves Jack from the gallows symbolizes his final step toward becoming both a pirate and a good man, like both his real and figurative fathers. But here the figurative father plays the most significant role in Will's struggle. It is through Will's journey with Jack that Will is able to realize that pirates can be good. Will's assertion that Jack is both a "good pirate and a good man," and the development of his relationship with Jack, allow us to accept Jack as both a pirate and a hero. The film suggests that pirates can be good men—when they are not historically accurate. Jack and Will never engage in plundering or unnecessary violence. Instead, their acts of piracy are driven by motives of love and the desire for freedom, which our society values.

Disney's portrayals of pirates have revealed a change over time in accordance with the changing values of society. Over the past few decades we have become increasingly exposed to violence and deplorable acts, especially in the entertainment industry. Our sense of morality and family values has consequently experienced an alarming decline, which is evidenced by our unconcerned acceptance of films and images that are violent, frightening, or lewd. The reality of our society is that we are no longer disturbed by such a complacent disregard for traditional family values and principles. In light of our current climate, it is easy to understand what Betsy Hearnes means when she says, "To the audiences of the 1960s, Disney was an icon. To the audiences of the 1990s, Disney is a myth" (para. 4). The basic ideals and values of the Disney Company reflected those of society in the 1960s, but in today's society those same ideals have been abandoned, and we remember them instead as a "myth."

However, the Disney Company strives to remain moral and upright in its works. In the 1950s and 1960s it was acceptable to portray Captain Hook as menacing and to show the pirates in a theme park ride plundering and chasing women while they sang a good-natured song because they were implicitly connected to the traditional family values that were inherent in society. Disney's portrayals of pirates exhibit a change over time because in today's society we have a greater need for pirates to be explicitly connected to the family. Disney is redefining a group of criminal outcasts by connecting them to society in order to impart moral lessons and instill family values that seem to be lost among current generations. Long John Silver must become a father figure for Jim to show that such a relationship can curb a rebellious teenager and set him on the right path. Silver's role as a pirate is secondary to his importance in Jim's life as a father. Likewise, Jack Sparrow and Will Turner are portrayed as having important family connections. Instead of adding to the violence already prevalent in our society, *Pirates of the Caribbean* offers an environment in which "even pirates shed their ferocious, booty-plundering images to become lovable miscreants" (Stoup para. 1). Disney has always been charged with altering history, but it does so even more overtly in its recent portrayals of pirates not only to make history more acceptable and accommodating, but also to influence today's society.

Why do we desire such a modification of history and accept Disney's portrayals of pirates? Perhaps, despite our tolerance of non-conservative norms and increasing neglect of traditional values, we still desire a connection to the family. The enthusiastic

response of audiences to *Pirates of the Caribbean* would support such a possibility. We might tolerate entertainment that is violent and crude in nature, but ultimately we are more appreciative of films, such as those that Disney offers, that do not simply impart a moral lesson but more notably reaffirm the importance of family and values in our own society. The *Pirates of the Caribbean* ride was modified not merely to be politically correct, but also to be more family-friendly. In 1953 it was not necessary for *Peter Pan* to focus on the pirates' connection with the family because the film itself was adequate in promoting family values to a society in which such ideals were already intrinsic. The pirate was connected to the family in order to make him less objectionable to society, but an emphasis was not placed on that connection. In a society that has greatly changed since then, Disney has taken responsibility for foregrounding essential family values in its films, ironically, through a group of "rascals, scoundrels, villains, and knaves" ("Pirates...Script"). By portraying pirates as being connected to the family, Disney is suggesting that family ties and values are inherent not just in certain societies, but in all societies and cultures, and so offers us reassurance and affirmation that such values are present in our own society even through its fictitious depictions of pirates.

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