



Women

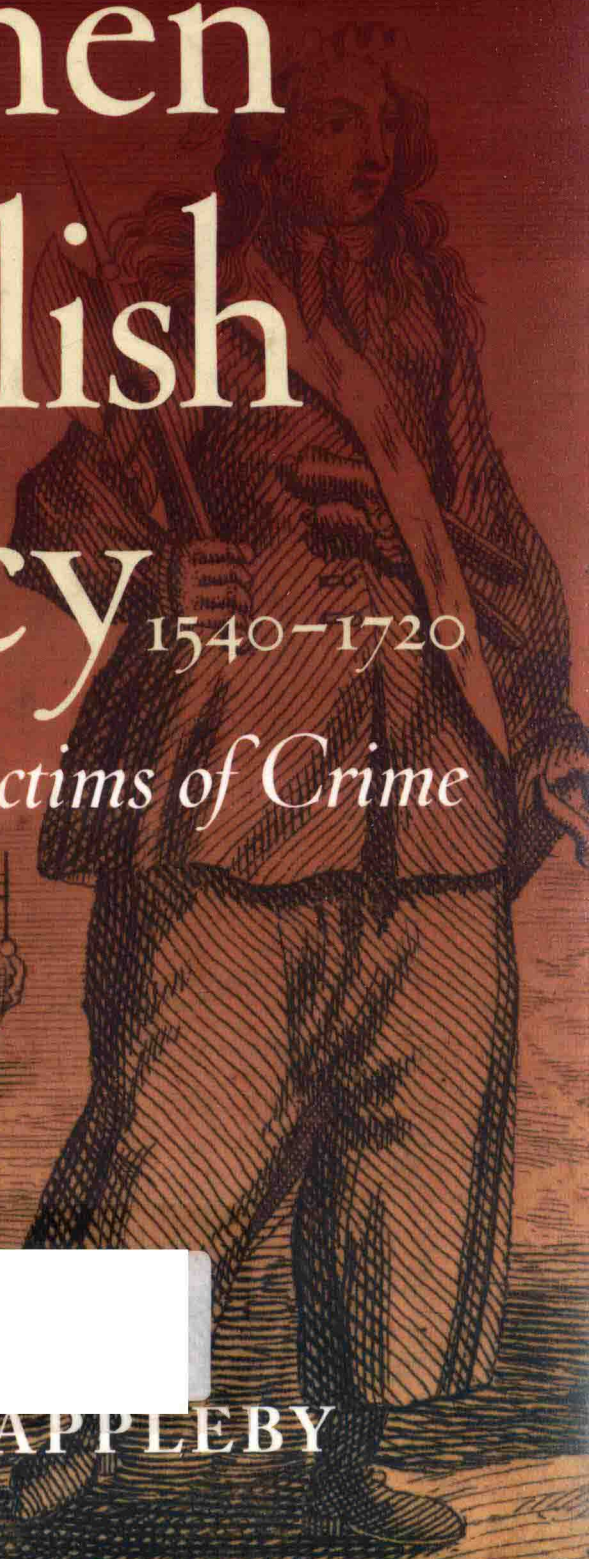
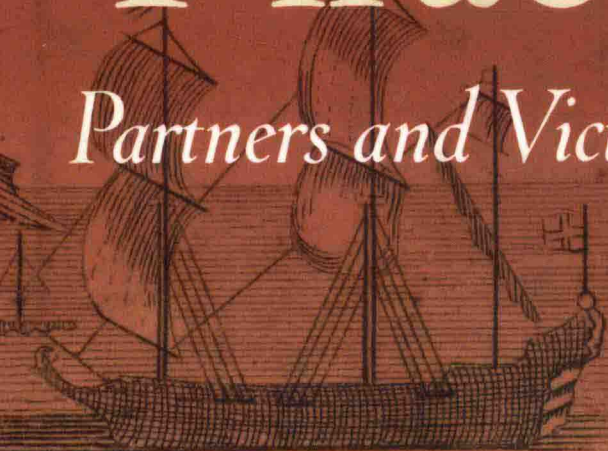
AND

English

Piracy

1540-1720

*Partners and Victims of Crime*



JOHN C. APPLEBY

*Women and English Piracy*

1540–1720

Partners and Victims of Crime

John C. Appleby

THE BOYDELL PRESS

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*Women and English Piracy*  
1540–1720

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## A NOTE ON CONVENTIONS

This study follows the common convention of using Old Style English dates which were slightly out of step with the New Style adopted by most European countries after 1582. The start of the year, however, is taken as 1 January. English currency is in old pounds, shillings and pence (£ s d). Pieces of eight, or Spanish silver dollars, a phrase widely used by pirates and rovers, were worth about four shillings and two to four pence during this period, though values could vary slightly. Quotations are given in the original spelling, but abbreviations and contractions have been expanded.

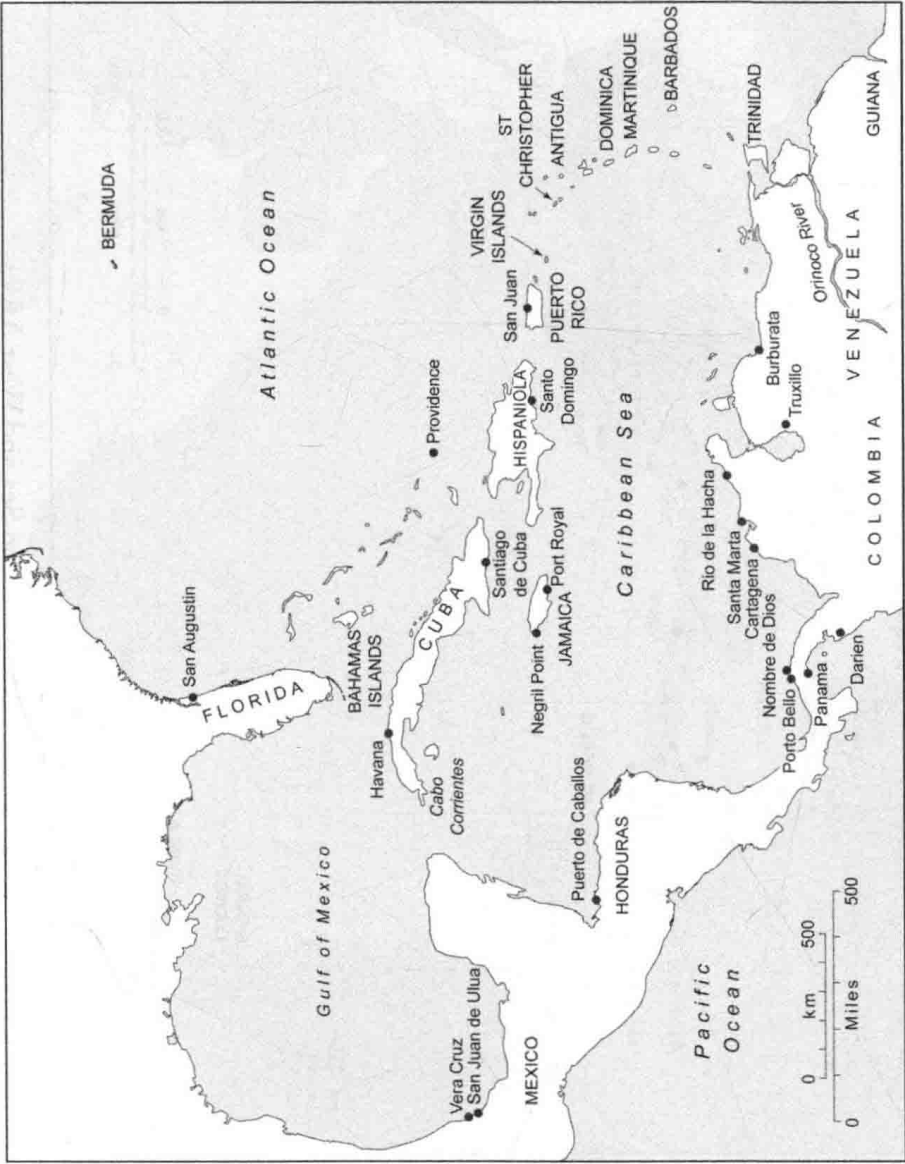
## ABBREVIATIONS

<i>APC</i>	<i>Acts of the Privy Council</i>
Baer (ed.), <i>British Piracy</i>	J. H. Baer (ed.), <i>British Piracy in the Golden Age: History and Interpretation, 1660–1730</i> , 4 vols (London, 2007)
BL	British Library
<i>CSPC</i>	<i>Calendar of State Papers Colonial</i>
<i>CSPD</i>	<i>Calendar of State Papers Domestic</i>
<i>CSPF</i>	<i>Calendar of State Papers Foreign</i>
<i>CSPI</i>	<i>Calendar of State Papers Ireland</i>
<i>CSPV</i>	<i>Calendar of State Papers Venetian</i>
DRO	Devon Record Office
<i>HMC</i>	<i>Historical Manuscripts Commission</i>
Johnson, <i>General History of the Pyrates</i>	D. Defoe, <i>A General History of the Pyrates</i> , ed. M. Schonhorn (London, 1972)
TNA, CO	The National Archives, Colonial Office Papers
TNA, HCA	The National Archives, High Court of Admiralty
TNA, SP	The National Archives, State Papers

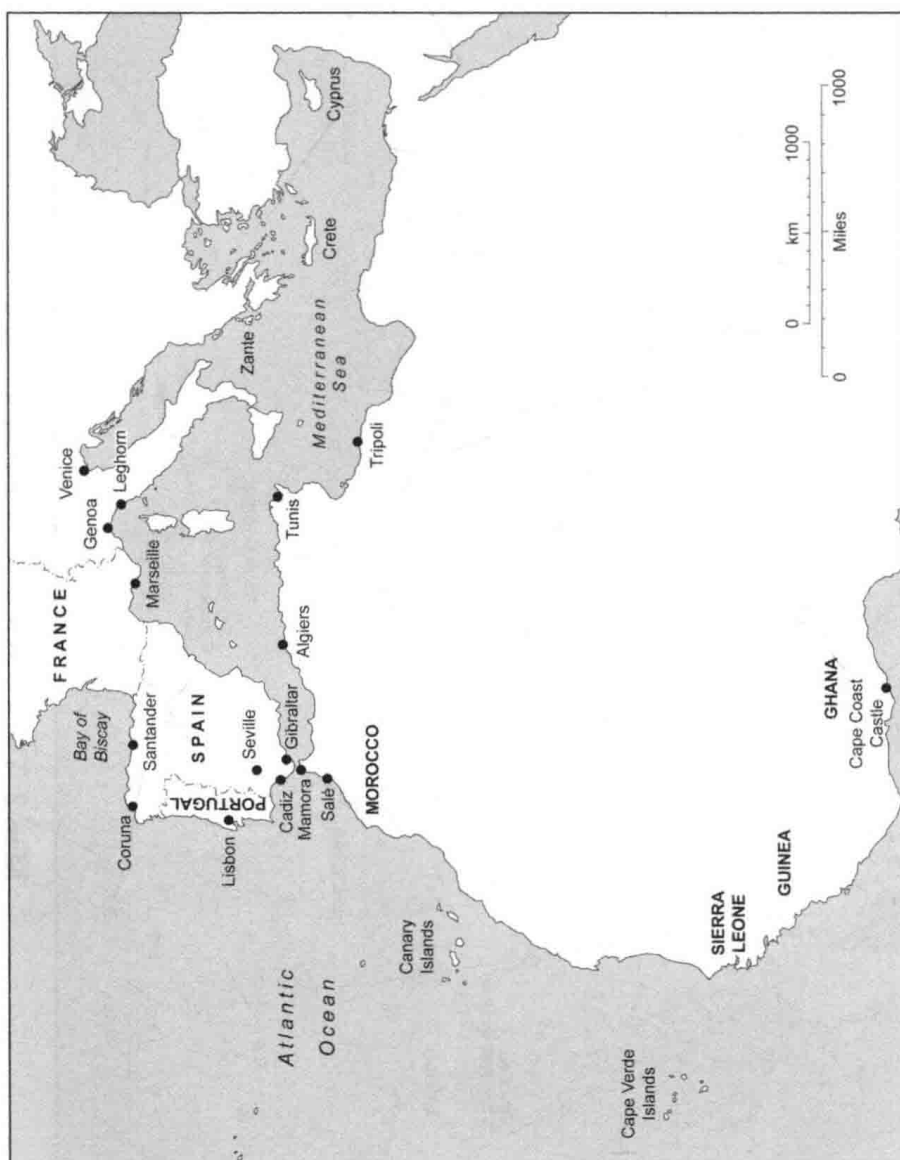


**Map 1** England, Wales and Ireland

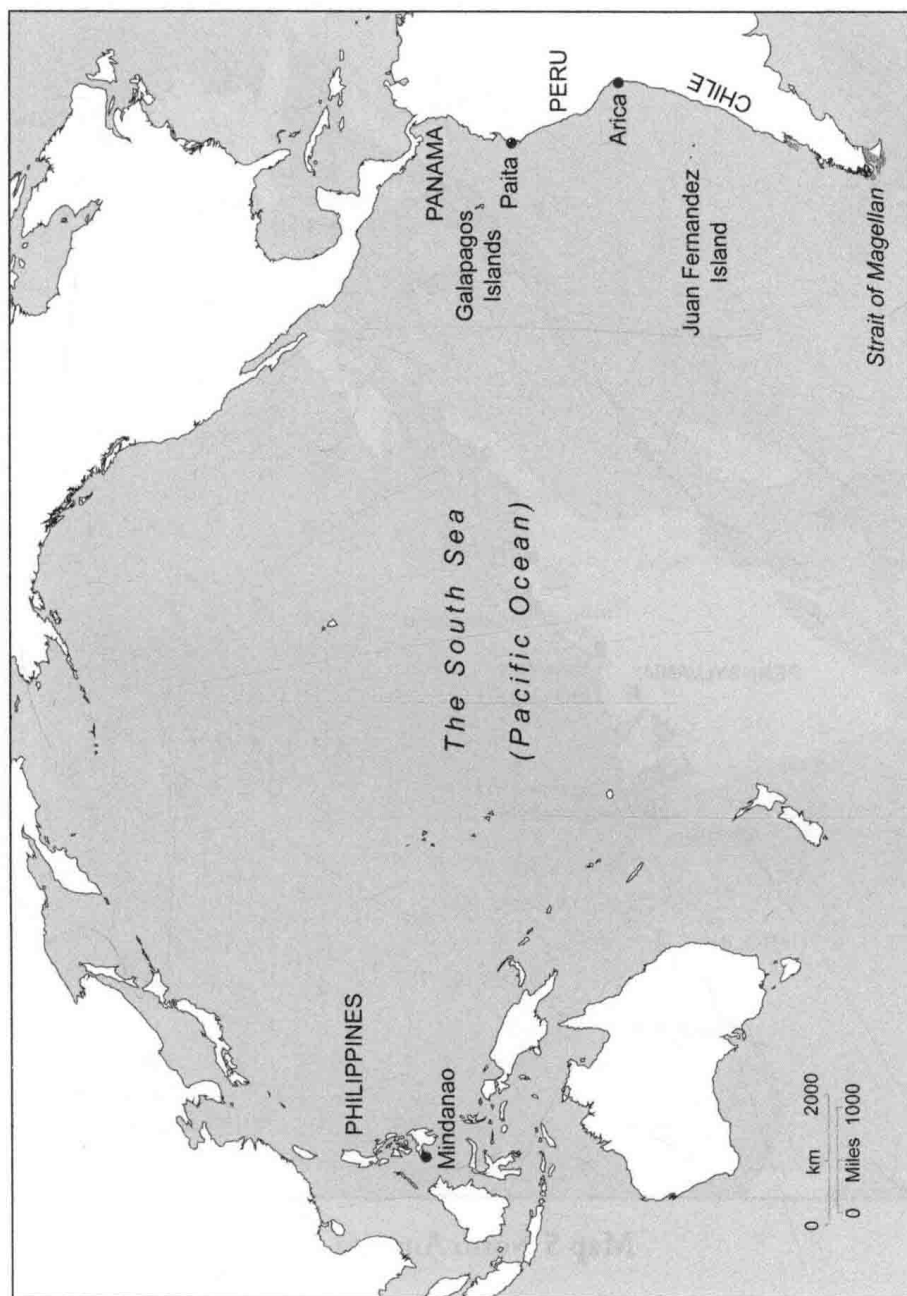




**Map 2** The Caribbean and Central America



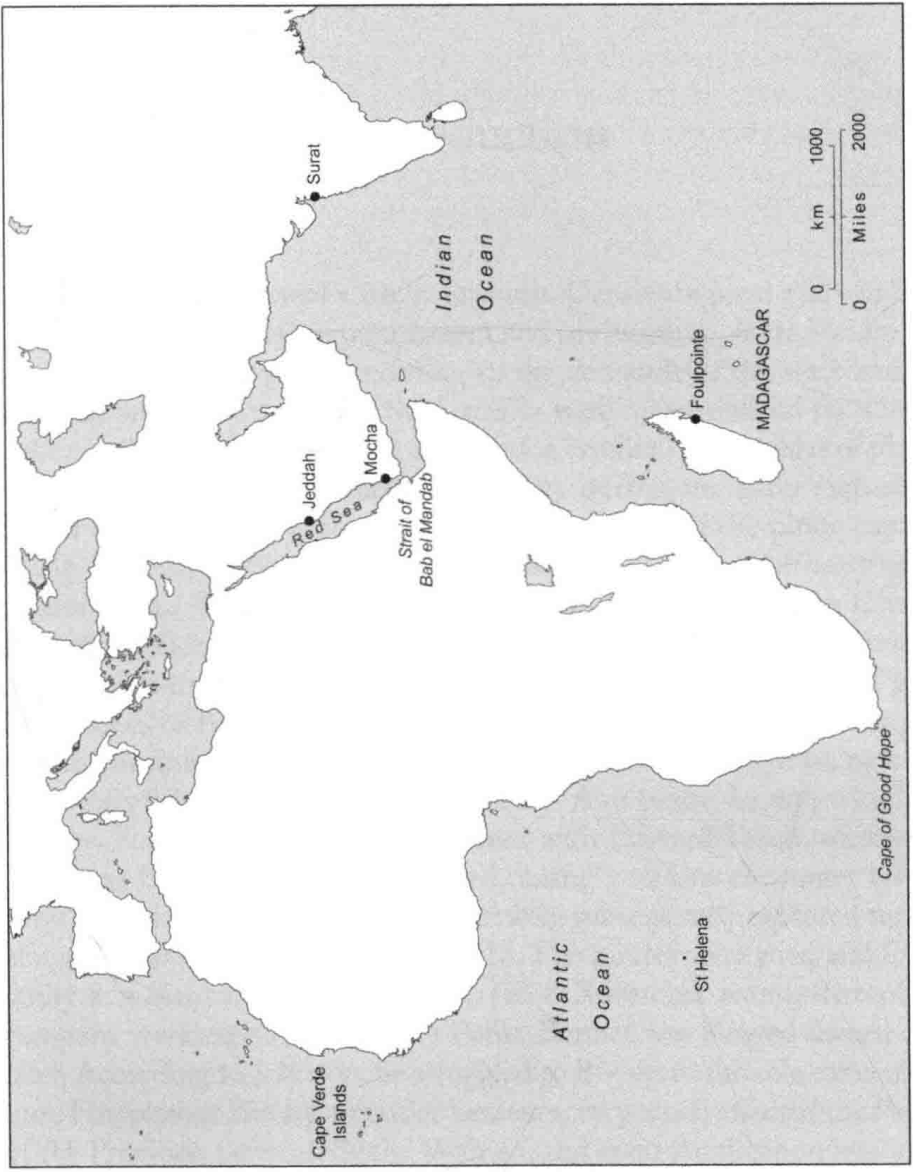
**Map 3** The Mediterranean Sea and West Africa



**Map 4** South America and the Pacific



**Map 5** North America



**Map 6** Africa and the Indian Ocean

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## Introduction

Staging an execution was a tricky business. Combining real and symbolic meanings, the spectacle of punishment and penitence depended on the key actors playing their parts according to the demands of the state and the expectations of the audience. Such scenes were memorialized for a wider public in the illustrations which appeared in criminal biographies of pirates and highwaymen with growing frequency during the early eighteenth century. One striking example shows the execution of the pirate captain, Stede Bonnet, in November 1718. It is from *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pyrates* by captain Charles Johnson, which was published in London during 1724. Bonnet was an unusual recruit to piracy. Described by Johnson as a 'Gentleman of good Reputation' of Barbados, his acquaintances believed that he was tempted into the business because of a 'Disorder in his Mind' brought on by 'some Discomforts he found in a married State'.<sup>1</sup> As a pirate, he met with little success. For a brief period he consorted with Edward Teach, commonly known as Blackbeard, who was killed during a violent encounter off the coast of Carolina. Bonnet and his men were subsequently captured further along the coast during September 1718. The pirates were tried and found guilty at a court held in Charleston. On 8 November twenty-two of the company were executed at White Point. Bonnet was hanged several days later. According to Johnson, he struggled to live up to the role expected of him. His 'piteous Behaviour under Sentence, very much affected the People of the Province, particularly the Women, and great Application was made to the Governor for saving his Life, but in vain'.<sup>2</sup> Bonnet was so fearful and overwrought, that he was almost insensible at the time of his execution.

As illustrated in Johnson's *History*, the scene of execution is crowded. Against a background of ships, identified as a forest of masts, Bonnet's body swings, stripped of wig and other marks of identity or dignity. Officials on horseback are in attendance to maintain order, while the presence of a man-of-war, its jack unfurled and blowing in the wind, signals the growing

<sup>1</sup> Johnson, *General History of the Pyrates*, p. 95.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 111. There is little evidence to support Johnson in *The Tryals of Major Stede Bonnet and Other Pirates* (London, 1719), pp. 37–43, where a shameful Bonnet changed his not guilty plea to guilty.



success of the royal navy in its war against the pirates. With a large crowd in attendance, viewers have clambered aboard the upper structure and rigging of vessels in the harbour for a better vantage point. Those closest to the swaying body of the pirate include several women. Framing the scene with unexplained dynamism, one woman on a cart beckons towards Bonnet while another, with her back half-turned, seems about to engage an onlooker in conversation.<sup>3</sup>

The presence of women at Bonnet's execution, though not unusual, illuminates the way in which their lives intersected with those of pirates and sea rovers during the early modern period. Despite their dangerous and disordered careers, including irregular and unpredictable absences at sea, pirates maintained relationships with wives, mothers and other kin, as well as casual female acquaintances ashore. Bonnet's associate, Teach, was married with a wife and family in London. One of his predecessors, the equally notorious John Ward, married a renegade Christian woman in Tunis during the early seventeenth century, abandoning his wife in England. Henry Avery, whose infamy and celebrity were the subject of histories, ballads and plays, seems to have retired from the sea during the later 1690s, fashioning a new life with another woman, conveniently ignoring his spouse in London.<sup>4</sup> These unusual careers should not be taken as representative of pirate lives. But they provoke questions regarding the wider relationships between pirates and women, as yet unexplored, which this study seeks to address for England and its American colonies, during a period of sustained activity when seaborne predation acquired a global dimension.

Narrowly defined piracy was one of the most gendered forms of criminal activity. Thousands of men, including a significant number of boys, were recruited as pirates during the period from the 1540s to the 1720s, but the number of women who accompanied them was tiny. Their direct participation in maritime robbery, at sea or along rivers, was also marked by ambiguity and confusion. Pirates, indeed, were perceived to be among the toughest and most disorderly members of a heavily masculinized seafaring culture. Their conduct varied considerably, but the cruelty and violence they inflicted on victims suggested a pathological, at times unforgiving, pattern

<sup>3</sup> M. Rediker, *Villains of All Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age* (London, 2004), p. 3. For women attending executions and scaffold rituals, see V. A. C. Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree: Execution and the English People 1770–1868* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 65, 68, 80–9, 260, 599.

<sup>4</sup> *CSPC, 1717–18*, pp. 146–3; *CSPC, 1719–20*, pp. 332–4; C. M. Senior, *A Nation of Pirates: English Piracy in its Heyday* (Newton Abbot, 1976), p. 94; J. F. Jameson (ed.), *Privateering and Piracy: Illustrative Documents* (New York, 1923), pp. 159, 171–2.