*Captain Blood* (1935): Pirates as Heroes

Affected by the Great Depression (1929-1941), the year 1935 saw economic and psychological hardship in many nations, including the United States. Political unrest was common as the Axis Powers aggressively expanded their borders, unemployment rates surged, and morale was at an all-time low. Hollywood movies underwent a transformation in genres and creative approaches throughout this period to improve morality for viewers seeking an escape from reality. Pictures like *Captain Blood* (1935) served as exemplars of novel code-pushing and morality pictures under Hay’s Code at a time when the Production Code Administration was beginning to consolidate its control. This paper contends that *Captain Blood* examines a new type of pirate-action movie that produced inaccurate yet non-traditional heroic figures by enlightening individuals on censored ideas like enslavement, piracy, and violence.

*Captain Blood*, a Michael Curtiz-directed film with Errol Flynn and Olivia de Havilland, follows a surgeon named Peter Blood during the Monmouth Rebellion (1685). He is wrongfully charged with disloyalty and transported to the Port Royal colony in Jamacia where he is sold into slavery. Peter Blood, who spearheads a rebellion against the Jamaican government, develops a reputation as a famed pirate captain over a number of journeys and missions. He changes his name to Captain Blood by venturing into cruel missions yet fair leadership. The film touches on historical subjects, such as the Age of Piracy, and is based on Rafel Sabatini’s *Captain Blood* novel from 1922. *Captain Blood* is fundamentally about the transformation of an unfairly accused slave into a valiant commander who fights for freedom and justice while quintessentially highlighting themes of atonement, loyalty, and corruption.

In the 1930s, audiences who wanted thrilling tales as an escape from their miserable existence continued to be drawn to gangsters, pirates, and other outlaws as symbolic heroic figures. Particularly in swashbuckler movies, the cliché of the pirate is shown as a heroic figure who is exotic, mercenary, and often idealized as a violent renegade (Waite). For instance, Peter is viewed as romantic because of the bold and unyielding moral values that make him attractive to Arabella. He is glorified as a dashing hero who effortlessly vanquishes his adversaries, the unfair government and dishonest King, with crafty yet brutal methods, glamorizing rebellious tendencies despite his uncontrolled habit of stealing, violence, and murder. Despite the fact that their behaviors are illegal in society, these characters have received excellent reviews for them in movies because of the actor’s dashing good looks and alluring charm. Audiences during the Great Depression were drawn to leaders of such crimes as Blood who inspired reform and offered hope to the populace, supporting the idea that organized crime is a lifestyle meant to reduce economic and social inequalities.

While the genre of pirate-action films provides audiences with great heroic personalities and exciting entertainment, it fails to discern and confront the difference between fact and fiction, offering inaccurate historical representations and interpretations of pirates. During the Golden Age of Piracy, pirates typically mistreated seafarers who participated in violent crimes as a way of “avenging themselves against their tormentors” (Ritchie). While Blood is not a mistreated sailor, his experience parallels that of conventional pirates, since he is sold into slavery under harsh conditions. Blood is compared to the accounts of historical pirates who were cruelly persecuted and shunned by their government, tormentors, and society, from beatings to being overworked on the plantations. The plot’s emphasis on exoticism, adventure, savagery, and romance – which are often not connected with piracy – are examples of fiction that *Captain Blood* fails to recognize as fantasies. Peter symbolizes pirates as that are uncommon and romantic. With a chiseled appearance, exaggerated clothing, tone, vocabulary, and non-association with religion, he is described as exotic and desired (Waite). By letting Peter have it all – a successful crew of pirates that are loyal to one another, a lovely love interest, and no trouble defeating his adversaries – the film erroneously glorifies piracy. Furthermore, unlike the typically non-educated, isolated, and filthy pirate, Blood is completely the opposite as he is educated, attractive, wealthy, clean, successful, and rational. The failure to accurately depict the realities and failures of pirates who were often “hunted down by the navy,” miserable, and rather “accept death than submit themselves to authority,” ultimately takes away the meaning of the lives of the seamen who went against the unjust system that tormented them which led them to take extreme measures like piracy (Ritchie).

Despite the rigorous censorship laws under Hay’s Code, one of the mass-produced films created by Warner during this time period that earned positive reviews is *Captain Blood*. An intriguing article by Carlisle Jones for Publicity describes the film as a “pirate’s curse without swearing in film play,” demonstrating how the movie deftly depicts the pirate-action genre without using foul language. Without insulting a specific demographic, the movie eschews modesty in favor of “vehemence and effect of reality” (Warner Bros. Pictures). Instead, it uses softer language to convey notions that go hand in hand. For example, rather than going down a romantic path, Blood refers to Arabella as “an attractive baggage” to highlight how difficult yet gorgeous she is (Warner Bros. Pictures). Another illustration is the language used by pirates, which contains “blood-curdling substitute for the doughty oaths” and expressions like “we’re not such lily-livered scrum” or “ye muckrake” directed towards the adversaries. *Captain Blood* adhered to the production code guidelines that prevented offending viewers and cultural norms by employing inventive yet indirect techniques to convey identical messages. The absence of vulgar language yet the ability to portray a violent pirate-action genre is evidence of this.

The Certificate of Approval No. 1552 was sent to *Captain Blood* on November 27, 1935, along with a remark from Breen claiming that it had a good production value and a fantastic pirate story. Additionally, Massachusetts, Ohio, Chicago, Kansas, and Pennsylvania approved of it. States like Maryland requested the removal of shots showing the man’s back and arms closely, a dead man washing up on the coast, and floggings. New York requested the removal of all images of the guy being abused. However, states like Virginia asked to reduce only some of the flogging and branding scenes. The whipping sequences and scriptural verse “Dust thou art, and unto dust, thou shalt return” were modified per England’s censorship board (Motion Picture Associations of America). For example, a woman wearing a v-neck attire that exposed her cleave prompted concerns. This presented a controversial challenge, particularly for Europeans, as England continued to upload many conservative Victorian and Edwardian traditions in 1935. As a result, for the typical woman in England, low-neck dresses would have been seen as indecent or scandalous. Another worry was that this would revive the Nell Gwyn cleavage campaign, a historical character famous in English literature for being King Charles’s second mistress. Once these recommendations had been changed, by January 1936, numerous publications and magazines, including Variety, praised the movie, saying it boasts excellent camerawork, acting, and music (Motion Picture Associations of America).

The script for *Captain Blood*, however, was rigorously scrutinized in accordance with the severe guidelines imposed by the PCA to be recognized and avoid censorship. The first part of the script required some minor alterations in terms of language, religion, and violence, in order to comply with the guidelines (Motion Picture Associations of America). Violence in movies was severely limited and prohibited during the Production Code era. Deception of violence had to be carefully reasoned and essential to the development of the overarching theme. “Hollywood’s Censor: Joseph I Breen and the Production Code Administration” examines how Hay’s Code has affected how violence is portrayed in American movies, such as by mandating that violence be added only if it is essential to the plot. Because of these restrictions, filmmakers like Michael Curtiz looked for inventive ways to indicate violence without actually showing it on screen. Violence could be implied without being said or seen overtly by using suggestive camera angles or of-screen sound effects (Doherty). This is undoubtedly the case with *Captain Blood* when the final distribution was altered to better suit the tastes of the general American public, who were unaccustomed to piracy and excessive cruelty. By replacing the on-screen whipping with sounds that subtly suggested that the slaves were being whipped, Curtiz lightened violent sections from screenplays.

Similarly, the next portion passed censorship with minimal changes in language, religion, sex, and the words “Sacre nom de Dieu” (Motion Picture Associations of America). This idiom, which translates to “Sacred name of God,” is similar to “Oh my God” in that it also includes the name of the creator. Although the intention of this phrase is to express a sudden emotion, the PCA has determined that the use of religious expressions in this context may be viewed as disrespectful and offensive by some people or pressure groups, which may result in unjustified government censorship (Black). The words “strumpets” and other variations were eliminated using the same logic. This term, which refers to a woman who is sexually immoral, is considered to be pejorative and may help to reinforce discrimination and unfavorable stereotypes about such people. In addition, when it came to scripture quotations, the code mandated that any religious material in a film be handled delicately to prevent alienating followers of that particular religion (Black). The code forbade the exploitation of religious content for outrageous or profit-making endeavors. Due to these reasons, it was unusual practice to steer clear of scriptural references because they required special consideration and protocol in order to avoid having a movie or scene flagged. To evade censorship and represent the novel themes of pirate, slavery, governance, and brutality, *Captain Blood*, therefore, used a substitute or shield away from religious comments altogether.

In order to further experiment with code-pushing films at this time, *Captain Blood* adds to the genre of pirate-action movies under Hay’s Code by addressing issues like slavery and government. The 13th Amendment, which abolished slavery and involuntary servitude, has a deep-rooted history in America that is reflected in the issue of slavery. The Production Code limited how slavery may be seen in movies even if it did not overtly condemn slavery (Prince). As a result, studios were careful to abide by censorship regulations and guidelines to prevent unfavorable publicity or undescried cuts. While the restriction historically hindered depictions of slavery in Hollywood films, *Captain Blood* does so successfully by focusing on Peter Blood, a doctor, and avoiding any servitude that is based on race or religion. Although it was normal to defend cruel and unfair practices, in the name of loyalty, the King and the Royal Family acted as a symbolic monarchy to represent England’s authority, giving people hope and someone to look up to. *Captain Blood* mentions themes of monarchy or government as a sign of racial harmony. Even though the English government has imprisoned him, he fights for King James II, demonstrating that even pirates like Blood see the monarchy as a central stabilizer of society. This implies that a strong monarchy has the capacity to foster wealth and racial harmony among its people, both of which were desperately required in the 1930s.

During the Great Depression, *Captain Blood* was well appreciated by the public and even gained recommendations from a number of reviewers and the Moving Picture world for its promotion of morality and amusement. The newspaper claims that it has achieved great popularity as a result of its faultless production, unmatched camera work, editing skills, a superb score, and swashbuckling thrill, which ultimately highlights the captivating chemistry and performance between the casts. The picture received appreciation for its stunning set attitudes and costumes, despite the Moving Picture World article wishing it had been more conservation “in describing other photoplays” (Chalmers). For instance, all of the injuries that were recorded were real and mild, and stuntmen received substantial pay “in proportion to the risks taken” (Chalmers). *Captain Blood’s* popularity can be ascribed to the audience’s high moral value at the time when they were looking for instruction and diversion. Despite the Production Code, films were nevertheless able to garner favorable reviews from viewers by subverting expectations, making political allusions, and even questioning American customs (Ashby). Directors utilized the strategy of reserving the “traditional moral formula” to acquire popularity and portray the realities of the Depression, which contributed to the rising “public cynicism.” The growth of anti-heroes or criminals being praised as heroic figures is proof of this. Overall the themes in films with flipped traditional morals emphasized the idea that using illegal means occasionally is necessary to survive (Ashby).

Despite the popularity of criminals and their romanticization of them, *Captain Blood* was substantially censored by the PCA because the original version of the film did not adhere to moral standards that were acceptable for the typical American. The government banned depictions of criminals “eluding justice” by committing suicide or other quick deaths, implying that criminals in media must face severe punishment commensurate with their deeds. As an illustration, Peter Blood was subjected to cruel punishment while a slave for defying the King’s instructions and helping a rebel instead of being executed right away. Solutions like compensating moral values have been created to counteract the concepts that are used to justify immoral or criminal behavior by punishing the offender or imparting a moral lesson. In spite of this, the fundamental problem with pirate genres like *Captain Blood* was the “glorification of crime” and “sympathy for criminals,” which perpetuated them as heroes rather than criminals for opposing their own society and government (Sligar). The PCA still had the right to censor Peter Blood’s activities because they involved violence and language that was too graphic for the average viewer as they were classified as theft, manslaughter, and criminal behavior.

Production Code-pushing morality pictures with pirate-action themes, like *Captain Blood*, provided an escape from reality at a time when movies were highly restricted under Hay’s Code. They were well accepted despite their idealized portrayal of criminals as heroes. The entertainment sector created job possibilities while advancing morality messages to inform and assist people in coping during a time of economic and moral recession. The enormous success and techniques of *Captain Blood* paved the way for subsequent pirate-actions films, which added to the vibrant mass-produced films during the Great Depression. *Captain Blood* borrows ideas from the Age of Piracy and the success of gangster films with anti-heroes and organized crime, ultimately romanticizing criminal figures as heroes.

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