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The Myth, the Man, and the Monster: the Evolution of *Black Sails* ' Captain Flint

In Robert Louis Stevenson's novel *Treasure Island*, Captain Flint is little more than a name; a notorious figure who exists only in legend. When the novel begins, he is already dead and out of the picture; it is his legendary buried treasure which Jim Hawkins and the other pirates are chasing. The 2014 television series *Black Sails*, created by Robert Levine and Jonathan E. Steinberg, is set some decades before the events of *Treasure Island*, and chronicles the endeavors of Captain Flint, among other characters from Stevenson's novel, real historical figures, and original characters in early eighteenth-century Nassau, New Providence. Over the course of the series, Flint leads a pirate "war against the world" in response to the empires of Europe declaring the pirates of New Providence "enemies of all mankind" (Episode "I"). Amidst dramatically shifting loyalties and assaults from all sides, Flint's rationale for this war endures: a reformatory desire to create a new, free society in the Bahamas. Despite this optimistic goal, Flint is doubly doomed by the premise of the series and historical reality; at the end, he must die, with these ambitions and the legendary treasure in the ground, unrealized. However, *Black Sails* defies both historical reality and the master narrative of *Treasure Island*, finding ambiguity and freedom within the seemingly absolute, and twisting Flint's tragic end into a message that is resolutely hopeful and bittersweet. To accomplish this defeat of literary and historical constraints, Levine and Steinberg synthesize historical context, the cultural precedents of *Treasure Island* and modern television, and flesh

out Flint's previously nonexistent humanity with a number of key themes: most notably, queerness, monstrosity, darkness, and othering. Over the course of the series, Flint undergoes a series of changes in identity – from closeted naval officer to pirate king – by turns hiding, denying, and embracing his sexuality and darker nature. In doing so, the creators of *Black Sails* connect Flint to various historical and contemporary themes, transforming Flint from his murky *Treasure Island* origins into a fully fledged, complex queer protagonist in a mainstream television drama.

The first episode of *Black Sails* opens much like any other pirate epic, with Flint as the formidable pirate enemy – a sweeping shot of the ocean gradually tilts upward to focus on two large, eighteenth-century sail ships. Cut to the deck of one – an English merchant ship – where the captain timidly raises his spyglass to identify the flag of the approaching ship: a skeleton on black fabric, the banner of the notorious Captain Flint. For the chaotic, tragically one-sided fight that ensues, the viewer remains situated in the perspective of the English merchants. Thus, as Tumblr user @hapless-and-hopeless puts it, we are introduced to the series' protagonist, Captain Flint, through the eyes of those who see him as a monster; we see the myth long before we get to see the man. This is Captain Flint as *Treasure Island* renders him: a shadowy, ruthless tyrant captain. The media scholar Leyre Carcas describes this visage as adhering to the “hypervirile stereotype” of the “mercilessly violent pirate” (Carcas 60). While this is perhaps true for the opening scene, this description is qualified by other aspects of Flint's character in the series' early episodes, as noted by Diana Cristina Răzman, who brings attention to his love of books, refined and eloquent speech, and relatively clean, kempt appearance. These characteristics lend to the sense of distance between Flint and his

crew in terms of social class and sophistication, but also other him in a way that, when read in conjunction with later revelations about his character, become subtly queercoded.

One of the key characteristics that distinguishes Flint from the fearsome persona we are introduced to in the first episode is his desire for domesticity and peace; a crucial motivator for his pirate exploits that is among the first we learn of. The first two seasons chronicle Flint's struggle to find and secure an immense amount of gold being transported through the region on a Spanish ship, L'Urca de Lima – thus seemingly framing the series as a classic pirate tale of gold and adventure. However, this narrative is qualified as Flint reveals his true motivation for seeking the Urca fortune: to secure peace for New Providence Island. Referencing Homer's *Odyssey* – something that, in itself, solidifies his identity as an unusually well-educated, sophisticated man, he says in the second episode:

“Odysseus, on his journey home to Ithaca, was visited by a ghost. The ghost tells him that once he reaches his home, once he slays all his enemies and sets his house in order, he must do one thing before he can rest. The ghost tells him to pick up an oar and walk inland. And keep walking until somebody mistakes that oar for a shovel. For that would be the place that no man had ever been troubled by the sea. And that's where he'd find peace. In the end, that's all I want. To walk away from the sea and find some peace” (“II”).

While this monologue establishes Flint's true motivation for obtaining the Urca de Lima's gold – peace – it also frames his endeavors in a very particular way; first, it humanizes the fearsome, mythological character we were introduced to, and second, it establishes New Providence Island as Flint's home, thus rendering his killing and plundering as “setting his house in order.” Of course, Flint is not native to the island; he was born in England, and

moved to the island ten years before the beginning of the show. Even so, Flint's protective ownership of Nassau stems not from nationalistic or Anglo-imperialist sentiment, but from a firm belief in the island's potential as the hearth of a new, liberated society. Later in the series, Flint's affinity for tranquility and fine goods comes into question by the enemy-turned-ally Captain Vane, who says:

“All these things... porcelain, books... all so goddamn fragile. The energy it must take to maintain it all. And for what? I can understand a woman's desire for domesticity, but a man's? That I can't understand.” *Flint replies*: “I can't understand how you cannot understand” (“XXVI”).

Not only does Flint not dispute Vane, he purports domesticity as something that is inherently – even obviously – desirable. With the later context of Flint's backstory, we know Flint is acutely aware of how dangerous straying from masculine norms can be, whether in the heart of the British Empire or on its outskirts. To not only not defend himself, but to suggest that the hypermasculine, violent Captain Vane should share the same desire for peace and fine things is a demonstration of his firm belief that his reform of the New World will appeal to and benefit every man, no matter how base or violent. This rationale, along with Flint's queerness, comes to the forefront as the series progresses, developing his character in ways that often subvert historical trends in queer representation.

By subverting a number of queer television tropes with Captain Flint, *Black Sails* toys with heteronormative viewer expectations and humanizes Flint's character with struggles that are both historical and modern, thus creating meaningful queer representation. Though the audience is first introduced to James Flint as a ruthless, seasoned pirate, the second season intersperses the current progression of events with a series of flashbacks to Flint's life ten

years prior in England, when he was a naval officer selected to aid an ambitious young politician, Thomas Hamilton, in his aims to reform Britain's wayward New World colonies. Throughout these flashbacks, the young Flint, then known as Lieutenant James McGraw, grows closer to Thomas and his wife Miranda. We are led to believe that James and Miranda begin to have a romantic affair; however, it is revealed in the dramatic culmination of this storyline that the affair was actually between James and Thomas, with Miranda's tacit knowledge and consent. Carcas refers to this reveal as the culmination of "heterobaiting," as the buildup through the first two seasons is "deliberately misleading in a way that parallels many instances of queerbaiting" (Carcas 60). Queerbaiting is a tactic used by media creators to entice queer viewers without actually providing queer representation, in which characters or the piece of media as a whole will be marketed or hinted to be gay in a manner that is intentionally manipulative. Toby Stephens, who plays Captain Flint, succinctly and satisfiedly describes this reversal as "f-ing with" the show's heterosexual male audience who had self-aggrandizingly identified with Flint prior to the reveal that he was gay (Stephens). The series also grapples with this revelation in-universe in a number of ways which subvert tropes around "coming out," or the often-dramatic experience of revealing oneself to be queer. Miranda tacitly accepts and even encourages James and Thomas' affair, an action which not only radically subverts norms of the time, but also starkly contrasts with the role women typically play in film and media in which their husbands have an extramarital homosexual affair; that of the peripheral, helpless bystander, or jealous, meddling villain. Years later, when Long John Silver, then Flint's closest partner and friend, inquires where Flint's war against the world began, Flint acquiesces and tells him about his political and romantic relationship with Thomas. Like Miranda, Silver reacts with nonchalant acceptance,

in quiet defiance of the stereotypically dramatic “coming out” scene. Lastly, as Carcas also references, the series subverts the “bury your gays” trope – a historical tendency for queer characters to end up dead, if not evil, to ensure their behavior does not appear morally appealing to the audience. In Season Two, when James and Thomas’ relationship comes to light, the guilty parties are quietly and harshly dealt with: Thomas disappears – supposedly instituted in a mental asylum and soon dead – and James and Miranda are exiled from England. In the bittersweet series finale, Flint learns that Thomas had not been sent to a mental asylum, nor had he died; rather, his father had exiled him in secret to a plantation in Georgia; the two are reunited, embrace, and kiss.

The development of James and Thomas’ relationship is rendered with soft, non-sexual tenderness and Edenic imagery – a far cry from the series’ gritty, sexually explicit depiction of sapphic and heterosexual relationships. Scholars like Răzman and Carcas have noted how the contrast between the presentation of male-male versus female-female romantic relationships reflects the creators’ “male gaze” – a term used to describe the sexualization of female characters for the pleasure of the male creator and viewer – and wariness of audience backlash against gay male representation. While the comparatively “sterile and tentative” (Răzman 46) depiction of James and Thomas’ relationship is worth noting, my analysis focuses less on how this informs the misogynistic structure of the male gaze and more on how it humanizes and purifies James Flint as a character. In particular, I want to place emphasis on the contrast between how the creators portray Flint, the monster, and James, the man. Jessica Walker brings attention to the way in which the characters themselves frame their relationship in an Edenic light. When James is first assigned to work with Thomas and

he expresses apprehension about their potential as political partners, as he is much more cautious and pragmatic compared to Thomas' bold optimism, Thomas replies:

“the Lord beheld the man made in His likeness and He beheld his solitude, and He said ‘It is not good that he is alone.’ And the moral of the story? Everybody needs a partner. You are the partner assigned to me” (“X”).

Here, Thomas likens James and himself to Adam and Eve, subtly casting their relationship in a romantic and divinely idyllic light. This purity is extended to the series' depiction of their romantic relationship, which is all soft smiles and fully-clothed embraces. At the end of the series, when they are reunited, the scene takes place in an earthy green field and is rendered in the same cold light used for flashbacks, eliciting Edenic imagery and the idea that Flint has returned to his pure, original state. However, even within this fully humanized, loving version of Flint, wild darkness exists; in the same episode in which Thomas compares them to Adam and Eve, Flint's superior officer and father figure, Admiral Hennessey, says:

“My concern with you is over that [...] thing, which arises in you when passions are aroused. Good sense escapes you. All men have it. But yours, yours is different. Darker. Wilder. [...] when exposed to extremes, I cannot imagine what it is capable of. And of greater concern, I'm not sure you do either” (“X”).

Though Hennessey is referring to James' violent tendencies, this mysterious darkness also implicitly refers to his queerness, which is similarly—if not even more so—of concern to the moral rectitude of the navy.

In its construction of Captain Flint's backstory, *Black Sails* draws from eighteenth-century legal practices and fears regarding homosexuality and piracy, thus firmly

situating its protagonist within a historical context. While homophobia is an enduring issue today, the aversive ferocity with which James and Thomas are punished is reflective of heightened fears surrounding homosexuality and sodomy in the eighteenth century. Historian Arthur N. Gilbert notes that punishment for sodomy in the British navy during this time was particularly harsh, even more so than in broader civil society (Gilbert 132). Sodomy, then referring to anal sex between men, was a particularly notorious crime for naval officers – even more than murder – as it was seen as an unforgivable deviation from order and rectitude:

“Sodomy was releasing the beast, the animal in man, and much like allowing seamen to run amok on shipboard, threatened to destroy the principles on which naval performance and survival depended—discipline, self-control, order, and devotion to duty, manliness, and honor” (Gilbert, 148).

Sodomy and death were also closely linked in eighteenth-century Britain, not only due to the precarity of homosexual life, which often resulted in death at the hands of others (Goldsmith, 8) but also for the association between anal sex, excrement, and decay (Gilbert 150). In the navy, this association was particularly strong, as death and mortal peril were everyday constants at sea; Gilbert argues that the pervasive nature of death in the navy contributed to an acute anxiety surrounding sodomy, which led to the use of harsh punishment – namely execution – to stamp out this reminder of mortality and moral deviation (Gilbert 148).

While the discovery of Thomas and James’ relationship and its subsequent fallout takes place entirely on land and during peacetime, thus allowing James to evade the threat of execution, it is politicized and linked to the navy through its consideration of Thomas’ politics and James’ position as a promising naval officer. Thus, James and Thomas are doubly vilified by the British Empire as political dissidents and sodomites. Jessica Walker

writes: “The series links Thomas’s sexuality and his politics by contrasting both his private actions and political views with the rigid code of behavior dictated by British imperialism” (Walker 242). Indeed, Thomas’ revolutionary politics, which centered on the idea of offering a universal pardon to the pirates plaguing the British colony of Carolina, were controversial to many, and he, James, and Miranda struggled to gain support for this plan. Homosexuality was similarly alien to the social order; Admiral Hennessy, James’ father figure, says to him after his relationship with Thomas comes to light:

“I would like to defend you. I would like to remind myself that every man has his flaws, his weaknesses that torment him. I would like to help you recover from yours. But not this. It is too profane. It is too loathsome to be dismissed. This is your end” (“XIII”).

Here, the parallels between Hennessy’s apprehension over James’ “darker, wilder” form of aggression (“X”) and his disgust towards homosexuality are more clearly drawn. Every man has his weaknesses, his inclinations. But the animalistic rage that overcomes James when he is provoked, the utter shame and profanity of his homosexuality – this is too much; this is irredeemable. Sir William Blackstone, a prominent English jurist during this time period, avoided speaking explicitly on this “infamous crime against nature” much like Hennessy, despite spearheading homophobic legislation, citing the fact that its “very mention” was a “disgrace to human nature”; he found it more appropriate to embrace “the delicacy of our English law, which treats it in its very indictments as a crime not fit to be named” (Gilbert 152). Frenzied yet avoidant attempts to exterminate sodomy are reminiscent of the criminalization of piracy – throughout history, states have labeled both pirates and queer

people “enemies of all mankind,” and by extension, of the natural order (Walker 240). This sentiment is echoed by the series itself; in episode one, Captain Flint says to his crew:

“When a king brands us pirates, he doesn't mean to make us adversaries. He doesn't mean to make us criminals. [...] When I say there's a war coming, I don't mean with the Scarborough. I don't mean with King George or England. Civilization is coming, and it means to exterminate us” (“I”).

This is not a personal feud or a conflict between states or empires; it is predicated on a deeply entrenched divide between civil society and those it considers monsters.

Losing Thomas and being exiled from polite society is the catalyst for the creation of Captain Flint as the audience first sees him, but also for the way in which Flint comes to himself: as a monster. Throughout the series, but especially in the second season as Flint and Miranda contemplate how far they have come from their life in England, they refer to “Captain Flint” as another person, establishing a sense of distance between James – the man – and Flint – the monster, the mask, the persona. After Thomas is institutionalized and James and Miranda are exiled, James chooses to go to the New World to carve out the world he and Thomas envisioned, this time markedly divorced from the stifling bureaucracy of the British Empire – Miranda, loyal to James and Thomas to the end, insists on accompanying him. He adopts the surname “Flint,” thus donning a new identity shaped around a mysterious, yet hopefully reformative purpose. After settling on New Providence Island, Miranda learns that Thomas’ father, Lord Alfred Hamilton, who is responsible for his son’s supposed death and Flint and Miranda’s exile, will be travelling aboard a certain ship; she informs Flint, knowing that he, now the captain of a formidable pirate crew, will harness this resource to track Lord Hamilton and his wife down and murder them in revenge. In Season Two, Flint tells Miranda

the story of how he chose the name “Flint” for his role as monstrous pirate; years ago, when his grandfather was a boy working on a ship, he briefly met a mysterious stranger who asked him for some rum and disappeared, only giving his name: “Flint.” James concludes:

“It was as if the sea had conjured that man out of nothing, and then taken him back for some unknowable purpose. When I first met Mr. Gates and he asked me my name, I feared the man I was about to create. I feared someone born of such dark things would consume me were I not careful. And I was determined I would wear him for a while, and then dispose of him when his purpose was complete. And I thought of that story. Am I ready to let him go? Truth is, every day I’ve worn that man, I’ve hated him a little more. I’ve been ready to return him to the sea for a long time” (“XVII”).

Readily prepared to abandon the persona of “Flint” and having been provided with one last opportunity to make diplomatic peace with England, James and Miranda head to Charles Town to attempt negotiation with an old political ally and friend, now the governor of the Carolina colony. On the journey there, Flint worries that Governor Ashe, now a fiercely intolerant enemy of piracy, will not be able to recognize Flint for the man he once knew, as “there are some things that Captain Flint has done that cannot be defended” (“XVI”). Much like they had done with Thomas ten years before, Flint and Miranda attempt to bridge the divide between the pirates of the New World and the British Empire through diplomacy; when these attempts fail horribly and Miranda is killed by Ashe’s men, Flint, having lost all tethers to his old life and all avenues of bureaucratic reasoning, resigns himself to his role as monster, and embarks on a total war of terror against the British.

From the end of Season Two onward, Flint devolves into a more extreme version of the mythological “Captain Flint,” committing even more monstrous acts against the British

Empire, with his own men as expendable collateral; thereby vilifying and demonizing himself. Soon after Miranda is killed and Flint is set to be executed in Charles Town, he says, breaking his staunch silence on the gallows:

“I have one regret. I regret ever coming to this place with the assumption that a reconciliation could be found. That reason could be a bridge between us. Everyone is a monster to someone. Since you are so convinced that I am yours, I will be it” (“XVIII”).

Towards the end of the series, Flint is duped into a negotiation session with the newly introduced colonial governor, Woodes Rodgers. During this conversation, Rodgers remarks on the parallels between his current agenda as governor and the political ambitions Flint had ten years prior, wondering aloud how Flint ended up opposing the very pardon system he helped put into place. Flint replies:

“Thomas Hamilton fought to introduce the pardons to make a point. To seek to change England. And he was killed for it. His wife and I went to Charles Town to argue for the pardons, to make peace with England, and she was killed for it. England has shown herself to me. Gnarled and gray, and spiteful of anyone who would find happiness under her rule. I'm through seeking anything from England except her departure from my island” (“XXXV”).

Through these declarations, Flint embraces his roles outside the natural order – as monster, pirate, homosexual, and defender of New Providence Island – now committed to wreaking as much havoc as he can against the British empire. Thus, his previous goal of reforming the New World has been dangerously enhanced into a revolutionary vision of sculpting a new society from its ashes.

This new vision, albeit more destructive and risky, is grounded in Flint's belief that a new society, separate from the suffocating world of empire, is both possible and necessary for ensuring the happiness of those like him, who have been abandoned and vilified by society. Though he is ultimately unsuccessful in the creation of this ideal world, success does take place in another form: the revolutionary storytelling and characterization of *Black Sails* itself. In the last episode of the series, he says, marking the crux of his evolving worldview:

“They paint the world full of shadows, and then tell their children to stay close to the light. Their light. Their reasons, their judgments. Because in the darkness, *there be dragons*. But it isn't true. We can prove that it isn't true. In the dark, there is discovery, there is possibility; there is freedom in the dark, once someone has illuminated it. And who has been so close to doing it as we are right now?” (“XXXVIII”).

Here, the last line is key; Flint's revolution hinges on illuminating darkness – violence, queerness, the potential of the New World, all the shadowy things society has shied away from – rather than continuing to hold to his blindly destructive, all-encompassing rage or the stifling, fearful order of the Old. Without the success of this revolution, Flint believes “all this will be for nothing. We will have been for nothing. Defined by their histories, distorted to fit into their narrative, until all that is left of us are the monsters in the stories they tell their children” (“XXXVIII”). Though Flint's war ultimately ends without victory as he envisioned it, the existence of *Black Sails* as an alternative, queer retelling of classic tales and the real history of eighteenth-century piracy ensures that his fears of erasure and defamation also didn't come to pass, at least in the real world. This reimagination highlights not only the humanity of the series' mythical figures, but also their marginalized equivalents in

contemporary society. As Governor Ashe's daughter succinctly diarizes meeting Flint and his pirates: "it would seem these monsters are men" (XVI).

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