

Risking Life and Limb: Commerce and the Value of Life in Caribbean Adventure Narratives

by

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In one of the more awe-struck passages of Alexandre-Olivier Exquemelin's *Histoire des aventuriers*, the narrator suggests that the kings of France and England might succeed in wresting the Caribbean islands away from the Spanish if only they employed some pirates to do their fighting for them. He writes:

Un seul de ces hommes vaut mieux que dix des plus vaillants de l'Europe. Comme ils sont braves, déterminés et intrépides, il n'y a ni fatigues ni dangers qui les arrêtent dans leurs courses; et dans les combats ils ne songent qu'aux ennemis et à la victoire. (175)

In the next sentence, though, the narrator admits that pirates might not make such reliable defenders of the empire after all. Although they may exhibit bravery and single-mindedness, "tout cela pourtant [est] dans l'espoir du gain, et jamais en vue de la gloire. Ils n'ont point de pays certain, leur patrie est partout où ils trouvent de quoi s'enrichir" (175). This passage neatly illustrates the two-sided nature of the pirate as represented in late seventeenth-century travel and adventure literature. His strength and courage in battle resembled an ideal, chivalric form of heroism. The fact that it was motivated by the pursuit of worldly riches rather than fame or glory, however, made his valiance seem more criminal than virtuous.

Some of this ambivalence surrounding late seventeenth-century depictions of Caribbean piracy stems from the larger "crisis" of heroism in that period. Scholars have suggested that the literary pirates evoke a traditional form of aristocratic heroism made anachronistic by absolutism. In her analysis of British pirate stories, for example, Erin Skye Mackie argues that the outlaws "nostalgically figure a type of personal sovereignty operating above the law" (12). At a time when British nobles were losing power to an increasingly centralized government, pirates represented a fantasy of individual autonomy and resistance to the state. Doris Garraway similarly notes that in Exquemelin's work, "pirates deliberately seized power and glory through behaviors that mimicked older forms of aristocratic violence, warfare, and privilege" (112). Pirates' resemblance to noble heroes of old allows readers to view them in a romanticized light, in spite of their moral flaws. In her brief analysis of Exquemelin's charac-

terization of Captain Grammont, for instance, Sylvie Requemora-Gros observes that he benefits from an “aristocratisation” of the pirate in earlier, fictional representations (457). She notes that, in spite of his moral flaws (cruelty, debauchery, impiety), Grammont’s heroic virtues such as generosity and bravery transform him into an alluring, almost mythic figure (457).¹ This is also what connects the early modern pirate figure to his nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary descendants. As Margaret Cohen has shown, the moral and social transgressions of modern literary pirates are often depicted as sublime: “Byron would recognize the kinship between pirates and more elevated strivings of the modern spirit when he dignified them to embody the existentialist pursuit of freedom in the Romantic gentrification of the work of the sea” (113). For both early modern and modern readers, the main attraction of the pirate figure derives from the way he epitomizes a degree of absolute autonomy and individual sovereignty only available to an outlaw.

In wholeheartedly embracing the romanticized view of pirates as embodiments of pure freedom, though, scholars have tended to neglect a second dimension of their morally ambiguous status, namely their connection to materialism. Piles of coins, jewels, and assorted booty serve as the alluring backdrop for many descriptions of pirate culture. In Gomberville’s *Polexandre* (1637), for example, the scene in which the novel’s protagonist befriends the pirate king Bajazet takes place in a cove compared to a “magasin public” on account of its stores of exotic treasure (Venetian glass, Persian carpets) that are minutely catalogued by the narrator (I: 175–80). Such descriptive scenes appeal to the readers’ own fascination with worldly goods at the same time as they metonymically signify the role of wealth as the primary motivating force in pirates’ lives.

The pirate’s single-minded pursuit of riches makes this figure a productive site for analyzing contemporary notions of the honorableness of commercial endeavors. As portrayed in literature, unashamedly individualistic, treasure-seeking pirates represent the inverse of the period’s dominant attitude toward commerce. As historians from Henry C. Clark to

¹ This assessment of Grammont comes in the context of Requemora-Gros’s wide-ranging study of literary depictions of Caribbean pirates alongside representations of Mediterranean *corsaires*. This comparative approach allows her to note that the few texts to portray Atlantic piracy in the second half of the seventeenth century pale in comparison to the large number of early seventeenth-century texts to feature Mediterranean pirates. She suggests, interestingly, that the pirate fades from the French literary scene in the second half of the seventeenth century in parallel with the social “demolition of the hero” identified by Paul Bénichou (479).

Anoush Terjanian have shown, seventeenth-century French political theorists struggled to reconcile traditional notions of virtue and concepts of loyalty with the empire's dependence on mercantile ventures. In his 1646 tract *Le Commerce honorable*, for example, Jean Eon, père Mathias de Saint-Jean, hypothesized that the French were “plus picqués d'honneur que de profit” (200). For that reason, Frenchmen had to be coaxed into participating in commercial endeavors by convincing them that it was honorable and good for the state.² This position is reflected in the language of the founding documents of France's trading companies, such as François Charpentier's 1665 *Discours d'un fidèle sujet au roi, touchant l'établissement d'une compagnie française pour le commerce des Indes orientales*, in which he asserted that the commercial venture was inspired by a “love of the public good” (Clark 42).

Pirate narratives complicate this view that commerce is only valuable when performed for the glory of the state.³ Instead, they expose a profound ambivalence about individualistic materialism. On one hand, these exciting, often sensationally violent narratives glamorize the lives of “adventurers” who reject the bonds of law, country, and family to chase after treasure. On the other hand, they depict their pirate heroes as corrupt, if not perverse, for their choice to renounce normal social values for the sake of profit. Through their presentation of lives governed by the proto-capitalist logic of investment—the weighing of risk versus reward—these texts reflect on how commerce challenges more traditional ways of theorizing value, especially the value of life.

This essay examines this ambivalence in two French-language narratives about Caribbean piracy: the anonymous, clandestinely published *Nouvelles de l'Amérique ou le Mercure américain* (1678) and the first French edition of Exquemelin's *Histoire des aventuriers* (1686). The works' publication history suggest that their subject struck a chord with

² Eon supported allowing nobles to engage in commerce as well as the ennoblement of bourgeois merchants, a policy that had been adopted with the Code Michaud in 1629 (260-9). The text of the Code Michaud may be found in Isambert (16: 337-42).

³ It is worth noting here that sanctioned privateering coexisted with illegal piracy in the Caribbean of the late seventeenth century. Patrick Villiers and Jean-Pierre Duteil write that, although by 1650 there was a clear distinction between *corsaires* contracted by states for the protection of their ships and outlaw pirates in the Mediterranean, no such clarity existed in the Antilles: “Le développement des flottes de guerre n'a pas remis en cause le principe, issu du Moyen Age, consistant à déléguer à des civils le droit d'attaquer le commerce ennemi. Ce droit trouve son origine dans l'incapacité des cités maritimes à protéger leurs navires.... Il s'ensuit une confusion complète entre les particuliers corsaires et la course d'Etat” (59).

French and other European readers: Exquemelin's work saw three French editions between 1686 and 1699 (possibly including a counterfeit one) as well as translations into Spanish, English, and German. The *Nouvelles* were hurried to press without royal approval (Ouellet and Villiers 33–4). In fact, these texts emerged in the context of a small flurry of representations about Caribbean piracy that hit the French publishing scene in the last quarter of the seventeenth century. Although most depictions of pirate society appeared in works of descriptive travel literature such as those by Dutertre, Rochefort, Raveneau de Lussan, and Labat,⁴ the more complex narratives contained in *Nouvelles* and Exquemelin's *Histoire* offer a deeper reflection on the confrontation of traditional and commercial values in the pirate Caribbean. I wish to argue that the narrative pattern of adventure in these works—repeated cycles of risk and reward, loss and profit, fortune and misfortune—mirrors the logic of investment that underpinned commercial ventures in the early modern Atlantic. In these tales, life itself often serves as the stake that characters venture in hopes of future gain. By placing life and health in the same narrative equation as material riches, the stories reflect on the way a commercially driven society might alter the perception of life's value.

Assessing Risk and Reward in *Nouvelles de l'Amérique*

Long before the late seventeenth-century spike in publications about Atlantic piracy, French readers were of course accustomed to consuming stories that featured “bandits of the sea.” Mediterranean *corsaires* served as agents of misfortune in countless romances, kidnapping maidens, separating lovers, providing the necessary obstacles to delay the foregone conclusion of “happily ever after.” As Sylvie Requemora-Gros aptly puts it, in these tales “le pirate a la même fonction initiatique que la tempête: mettre le héros à l'épreuve de l'adversité” (461). The Caribbean *flibustiers* depicted in *Les Nouvelles de l'Amérique ou Le Mercure américain* reference this older narrative tradition. They appear not as full-fledged characters in their own right, but rather as narrative actors who imperil—and occasionally help—the protagonists. As plot devices, they serve both to test the heroes' mettle and to inject a measure of (pleasurable) unpredictability into the unfolding of the tales. Consequently, the pirates in these stories do indeed function in the same way as the storms, shipwrecks, periods of enslavement, encounters with sharks and crocodiles, and other misfortunes that the Spanish and French protagonists must endure.

⁴ On representations of pirates in travel literature, see Pioffet.

On account of this reliance on chance misfortune to drive the plot, the three tales contained in *Nouvelles de l'Amérique* might have struck their first readers as hopelessly outmoded, opportunistic transpositions of romance clichés from a traditional Mediterranean setting to the exciting, exotic backdrop of the Caribbean and South America. As John Lyons has demonstrated, already in 1643 Madeleine de Scudéry portrayed the “excessive dependence on chance as a technique of composition” as a “clumsy” crutch for poor writers (106).⁵ In the compressed form of the novellas, the accumulation of misfortune appears all the more noticeable, and presumably all the more implausible. It might be tempting to dismiss the author of the *Nouvelles de l'Amérique* as an inferior novelist who offered readers the cheap thrills of an accident-laden plot while hiding from critical opprobrium under the mask of anonymity. But the work does make several concessions to the late seventeenth-century expectation of verisimilitude. The book advertises its contents as “trois histoires véritables arrivées à notre temps.” Moreover, as Réal Ouellet has shown, its tales appear to have been inspired by anecdotes related in the 1678 Dutch edition of Exquemelin’s ostensibly non-fiction work.⁶ The novellas’ extravagant plots are rooted in the real dangers of the American landscape: the man-eating dogfish and crocodiles the characters encounter were all documented in descriptive literature on the Antilles. The pirates they meet bear the names of freebooters who actually trawled the Caribbean. The “white slavery” suffered by classic romance protagonists is here transformed into the system of indentured servitude that provided much of the colonies’ labor in this period. The haphazard nature of the adventure plot, in other words, productively interacts with the real contingencies and everyday hardships of the Atlantic setting. The nature of the risks—if not their frequency—is plausible and predictable.

While the fiction’s accidents reflect real New World perils, the novellas’ dependence on fortune as a structuring device also usefully engages with realities of the Atlantic economy. As Valerie Forman has shown in her work on commercial themes in early-modern English drama, the Christian concept of the *felix culpa*—the “happy accident” that shapes romance and adventure narrative as well as dramatic tragicomedy—lends

⁵ As Lyons shows, a skilled novelist of the second half of the seventeenth century—namely, Lafayette—used random events less frequently and it is characters’ reactions to them rather than the events themselves that drive the work (107-31).

⁶ Réal Ouellet suggests that the *Nouvelles de l'Amérique* expand and develop “raw material” drawn from the first 1678 Dutch edition of Exquemelin’s work (“Fiction et réalité” 296).

itself well to representing the logic of mercantile investment. Forman demonstrates how English plays mapped the cycle of suffering and redemption onto mercantile plots in which initial outlays of effort and fortune translated into future material rewards, effectively educating spectators about trade. The *Nouvelles de l'Amérique* make many of the same structural moves as the plays studied by Forman. The protagonists give up safety in Europe and hazard their lives in America. Sometimes, they are rewarded in gold. Yet, the novellas' conclusions are much more ambiguous than those of the pro-investment plays studied by Forman, showing not only what might be gained but also what is lost when redemption takes a material rather than moral form.⁷

“L’Histoire de Mont Val,” the second novella in the collection, exemplifies the way all three tales map the traditional plot devices of adventure narrative onto real aspects of Caribbean colonial society. This story follows a young, naïve French gentleman whose idle curiosity inspires him to travel to America. He enlists a certain La Rivière, noted for his honesty as well as his savvy, to serve as companion and guide. La Rivière advises Mont Val to consider his voyage as a financial opportunity, recommending that “il y fallait conduire avec soi des Marchandises, sur lesquelles on faisait toujours un gain très considérable, bien loin de dépenser un sol du sien” (119). As soon as the two characters arrive in Saint Christophe, La Rivière’s commercial shrewdness gives him the advantage over Mont Val’s nobility. He makes a fortune selling not only the merchandise but also all of Mont Val’s domestics, consigning them to three years of indentured servitude (121). Shortly thereafter he sells his master, too: “sans

⁷ The novellas’ complex plots are nearly impossible to summarize. “Histoire de Don Diego de Rivera: Nouvelle Première” focuses on the son of a Spanish sergeant major of Grenada who falls in love with Leonor, daughter of a colonial governor. The young couple runs away to sea together but is shipwrecked during a battle with pirates. Leonor dies when a shark bites her leg off. The marooned Don Diego is eventually rescued by pirates, joins their ranks, and eventually becomes their captain and the self-declared “mortal enemy” of the Spaniards. The third novella, “Le destin de l’homme, ou les Aventures de Don Bartelemi de la Cuba, Portugais,” describes the birth and upbringing of the protagonist, son of a Spanish exile and a Portuguese woman from the Azores. Sent to Europe for his education, he takes up with bad company, seduces a girl, and is forced to escape to Brazil, passing through Africa en route. He falls in with English pirates, then French ones, with whom he seduces more women. He eventually flees to the Mediterranean, where his adventures with *corsaires* affect a peace treaty between France and Algiers. He makes his way back to America, where he joins Captain Morgan’s band of pirates and eventually gets eaten by a crocodile. I will attempt to integrate a plot summary of the “Histoire de Mont Val” into my analysis. However, the only way to grasp fully the extravagance of these stories is to read them.

dire en détail de quelle manière il agit pour la faire, nous dirons seulement qu'il le vendit bien cher, puis que ce fut pour trois ans, afin d'en recevoir une plus grande somme d'argent" (123). The merchant becomes a villain, and the young nobleman a casualty of the profit-driven society. This first misadventure is the story's most important, as it serves to disillusion Mont Val and initiate him into the ways of colonial life. As a gentleman, he had been accustomed to a social order in which his station and wealth guaranteed an easy, predictable life. In America, he discovers, his nobility no longer counts for anything. As a victim of the "pernicieux négoce," he is only worth the price of his own labor, a fact that is driven home when his new master offers to set him free if he will buy him an African slave as replacement. Of course, this solution is impossible for Mont Val, who "n'avait ni connaissance ni argent, et par conséquent aucun crédit" (127). He is subject to the same ruthless economy as everyone else.

To regain heroic status in the adventure tale, Mont Val has to adapt by acquiring and demonstrating a practical form of merit that carries more weight in the American context than the mere mark of nobility that conferred heroism in traditional romances. In the fields and kitchens of the plantation, he learns to transform American crops and game (potatoes, chilies, and turtle meat) into tasty dishes that win the favor of his fellow slaves. After several months, he allies himself with two other workers, including a failed merchant forced to sell himself into servitude (135–6), and together they plan to flee in a canoe and thus "donner eux-mêmes la liberté" (134). They succeed in escaping but are soon arrested by Spanish soldiers who mistake them for French pirates. They run into the woods, swim to an island and, like Robinson Crusoe, must hunt, fish, cook, and build pontoons out of logs in order to survive. Mont Val exchanges the inherent privilege of the nobleman for a different kind of merit, based on his ability to transform natural resources into usable goods.⁸

The novella's final adventure reflects on these competing notions of worth (the traditional and the commercial) by introducing Mont Val to a group of French pirates. The famous freebooter L'Olonnais rescues Mont Val from a Spanish ship and welcomes him into his band of pirates, "reconnaissant l'esprit de Mont Val et ses mérites" (171). Mont Val is glad to be free from imminent danger, but his relationship to the pirates is ambivalent at best. He willingly participates in the pillage of a wealthy Spanish

⁸ The narrator places a particular emphasis on the gathering and preparation of foodstuffs, providing elaborate descriptions of local fish, game, and fruit. The novella even includes recipes for potatoes with pimento sauce (131) and turtle with broad beans and peas in herbs (132).

settlement but also prevents one of his fellow pirates from raping a young Spanish beauty (176). His discomfort becomes clearer afterwards, when they divide up the spoils of the venture: “Mont Val en eut sa part aussi bien que les autres; mais méprisant un si petit gain à cause des périls qu’il avait courus en exposant plusieurs fois sa vie, il voulut le hasarder au Jeu pour s’en défaire entièrement ou pour l’augmenter” (180). Mont Val understands that the booty functions as a kind of payment, but finds that it is not sufficient reward for the risks he has taken. He prizes his life more highly than the other pirates do. By resorting to gambling, a favored pastime of the French nobility, Mont Val shuns the pirate’s view of risk as investment in favor of a more typically aristocratic approach to risk as an ostentatious display of indifference to material wealth.⁹ Better to lose everything at the games table than to accept the terms of an exchange that places such a small price on life.

In fact, Mont Val’s clinging to traditional noble values appears to be what ultimately saves him. Later, when a failed raid on another Spanish town results in Mont Val’s capture and injury, he is rescued by the young woman whom he saved during his first adventure with the pirates. She takes him into her home, helps him heal, and finally puts him on a ship back to Europe, where he rejoices in his safety and vows never to return to America. His virtue (in saving the woman) is the cause of his redemption. Yet even this seeming reversion to a traditional, chivalric narrative pattern is tainted by materialism. As he departs, the woman gives him a “présent d’une Bourse de deux cent Pistoles d’or, qui le consola en quelque façon de la perte qu’il avait faite avec le traître la Rivière” (189). Mont Val returns to Europe like any other adventurer, having suffered but with a pile of gold to show for it. In spite of his travails, Mont Val’s unwitting “investment” paid off and, from a financial point of view at least, his accident was indeed a happy one after all.

Yet, in “L’Histoire de Mont Val,” material fortune almost but not quite compensates for moral and physical misfortune. Although the tale ends happily, the tone is far from triumphant. When Mont Val forswears America at the end of the story, the adventure narrative becomes a moral tale. The contingency of the money-driven Atlantic is best to be avoided,

⁹ Gerda Reith sums up the attraction of gambling for the early modern nobility: “The polarization between ‘bourgeois’ and ‘aristocratic’ play which emerged in the seventeenth century produced a form of gambling based on a patrician disdain for money and display of honor, as well as a ‘bourgeois’ mode of play whose aim was pecuniary gain” (151). See Grussi for a more detailed account of the history of aristocratic gambling in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France specifically.

the story implies, because there is no moral justification behind the assignment of reward. When Mont Val experiences misfortune, it is often because an immoral adversary has profited at his expense. As Réal Ouellet notes of another novella in the collection, “aucune providence, aucun Dieu vengeur, non plus, n’intervient dans ce monde” (“Fiction et réalité” 295). Throughout the narrative’s episodes, Mont Val fails to see the risks and hardships he faces as opportunities for gain, as other characters do. Instead, he repeatedly reflects on the “douleur de se voir si mal traité de la fortune” (143). He laments that he has suffered such “rudes envers de la fortune” (144).¹⁰ By assigning agency to “fortune” in these passages, Mont Val subscribes to an older, Stoic notion of chance as the principal force driving events—often tragic events that must simply be endured.¹¹ In so doing, he rejects the possibility that he could play an active role in engineering his own fortune by capitalizing on chance. The depiction of life’s ups and downs as random and contingent rather than informed by conceptions of virtue or merit prepares us for the characterization of Mont Val’s final present as a “consolation” rather than a reward. The novella offers only an empty parody of a happy ending in which acceptance of the commercial values of the Caribbean is figured as a kind of loss.

In this way, the reprisal of the haphazard, accident-filled narrative structure of traditional romance-adventure tales sharpens the novella’s exploration of issues of risk and value in relation to the mercantile space of the colonial Atlantic. The author modernizes the adventure plot by placing its many unfortunate events within an economic frame. The Caribbean landscape naturally contains a multitude of dangers, but a character who survives these risks receives material rewards. In “L’Histoire de Mont Val,” though, only the villains—the devious La Rivière, the pillaging pirates—seem to understand the rules of the story they inhabit. Meanwhile, the protagonist Mont Val dissonantly clings to values of an older type of adventure tale in which disinterested virtue brings recompense in the form of love and glory. The result is an ambivalent narrative that condemns profit-seeking enterprise even as it inculcates a logic of investment, and that rejects New World values even as it appeals to readers with its alluring American setting.

¹⁰ In these brief passages, the novella’s treatment of fortune comes to resemble that analyzed by John Lyons in his discussion of *Zayde*, in that the character’s reaction to misfortune supersedes the importance of plot (108–123).

¹¹ On this conception of chance from Antiquity through the early part of the seventeenth century, see Lyons 1–66.

Disenchanting the Pirate Life in *L'Histoire des aventuriers*

The conflicted presentation of Mont Val's American adventure illustrates the central thesis of Michael Nerlich's work on the *Ideology of Adventure*: that the nature of the risk and the reward in adventure narratives from a given culture typically celebrates and enshrines that society's "highest ethical achievement" (1: 5). The clearest example of adventure stories' ideological function comes from chivalric adventures, in which the noble warrior was ready to sacrifice himself in battle in return for the socially prized reward of glory and honor. In contrast, the pirates in *Les Nouvelles* and in other Caribbean adventure tales were prepared to risk their health and safety for food, goods, or bullion. In the narrative logic of pirate adventures, in other words, material profit displaced aristocratic honor as the epitome of achievement. The result is an exaggerated, exciting, violent version of the cycle of risk and recompense associated with colonial mercantilism.¹² Structured at least in part as an adventure narrative, Exquemelin's ostensibly nonfictional account of Caribbean piracy frequently glamorizes both the dangers and the ample material rewards of the freebooters' lives. At the same time, however, the narrator questions the validity of the materialist ideology that informs the pirates' adventures, exposing the detrimental effects of an Atlantic economy that subsumes human life to material value.

First published in Dutch in 1678, Exquemelin's work was considerably expanded for the first French edition that appeared in 1686. This version is a work of two halves. The early sections focus on geographical and ethnographic description, resembling a traditional travel narrative (and were possibly padded by the French editor with passages borrowed from Du Tertre's *Histoire générale des Antilles*¹³). The later parts (the original ones) recount a series of "adventures" led by a variety of French, Dutch, and English pirate captains. A pastiche of travel description and adventure narrative, the work confirms its hybrid generic status with both numerous reminders of its truthfulness and several comments on the pleasurable

¹² In fact, the word "aventure" and its cognates in early modern French often carried a financial connotation. In the 1694 *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*, an *aventurier* designated "Celui qui n'a aucune fortune, & qui cherche à s'établir par des aventures." Adventure offered an alternative path to "fortune" for those who had none, and thus had the potential to destabilize social hierarchies based on inherited wealth. In his work on eighteenth-century literary *aventuriers*, Alexandre Stroeve includes travelers and wanderers who search relentlessly for a better way of life. He argues that these figures reflect larger social fears, fantasies, and desires (3).

¹³ See the introduction to Ouellet and Villiers's edition (23).

quality of its stories, adventures that could “pass” for those of a novel (193).¹⁴

What unites both halves of the work is the recurring theme of the preeminence of money in the Caribbean. The book foregrounds this theme from the very outset, in its establishment of the narrative voice and point of view. The text presents itself as the eyewitness account of life among the *aventuriers* by Exquemelin, a surgeon and French *engagé* with the Compagnie des Indes occidentales.¹⁵ *Engagés*—or indentured servants—made up the majority of French settlers in the island colonies. In exchange for the cost of their passage to America, they promised to work for a number of months or years in service to the colony.¹⁶ In the opening pages of *L’Histoire des aventuriers*, the narrator Exquemelin recounts his journey to and arrival in the Antilles, and his experience being “engaged”: “On nous fit venir et on nous exposa en vente aux habitants. Nous fûmes chacun à trente écus” (63). It’s not accidental that Exquemelin describes this process in the terms of a slave auction; he is “exposed for sale” like an object, priced at thirty écus. Indeed, he later exaggerates his condition as “fâcheux esclavage” (63). And, throughout the early part of the work, he often depicts *engagés* working in the sugar fields alongside African slaves, metonymically equating the plight of these two groups.¹⁷ Although the narrator rarely calls attention to himself in the rest of the work, these initial passages effectively focalize the narrative through the persona and point of view of a self-described victim of a colonial system that valued individuals in purely economic terms.

This disillusioned perspective remains evident in the first part of the book that describes and classifies the natural riches of the Caribbean in terms of their use or exchange value. For example, in chapter 9, Exquemelin announces he will discuss the rare and peculiar reptiles of the is-

¹⁴ The phrase used by Exquemelin is “passer pour un roman.” On the way the work plays with the boundary between fiction and eyewitness testimony, see Ouellet, “Fiction et réalité” 281-94.

¹⁵ For biography of Exquemelin and a publication history of his work the introduction to Ouellet’s and Villiers’s edition (17-45).

¹⁶ On the system of *engagés*, see Debien.

¹⁷ Exquemelin’s comparison of the *engagé* to the slave is noteworthy because technically—and importantly for early modern economic theorists such as Locke—this form of servitude was not the same as slavery. The distinction between slavery and servitude was of utmost importance in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century legal theory. See especially chapter 9 of John Locke’s second *Treatise of Government* (110).

lands, starting with the tortoise. His discussion of the animal's anatomy is prefaced by the remark that, when cooked, its tastes like pork (125). Within two paragraphs, the narrator starts referring to the beasts as "viande" and the scientific explication of their bodies gives way to a discourse on the best way to hunt them (128–9). Discussions of the native human populations are dominated by lists of the produce they have available for trade or pillage. Finally, the ethnography of the adjacent colonial and pirate societies is organized as a detailed account of the division of labor among legitimate *habitants*, outlaw *boucaniers* (or hunters who pillage the land), and the *aventuriers* who make their living on the sea. The effect of this section is not so much to excite the curiosity of the reader to learn about the marvels of the New World but rather to explain an economy, prefigure the exotic commodities that may soon arrive in Europe along with cocoa and sugar, and explain how they may be harvested and exploited for profit.

The motivating force of profit becomes even more salient in the second, more narrative part of *L'Histoire des aventuriers*. In each chapter or episode of this section of the book, a pirate chief weighs the dangers and potential profit to be gained by a particular action, leads his men into the venture, and usually succeeds in winning the plunder—the outlaw mirror image of the fate of company investors and ship captains engaged in legitimate commercial ventures. Moreover, Exquemelin's vocabulary frequently assimilates piracy to normal mercantile activities. Although contemporary legal discourses treated piracy as a kind of thievery at sea and designated treasures gained in this way as "prises"—seizures or takings—Exquemelin often refers to the pirates' "butin" as "marchandise" or simply as "argent" "gagné" at sea and then distributed as "récompense" for effort and injury.¹⁸ For example, at the conclusion of one successful venture, the French-born pirate known as l'Olonnais carries the booty back to "home base" on the island of Tortue, "afin d'être partagé aux aventuriers qui avaient également risqué leur vie pour cela" (225). What follows is a lengthy descriptive scene in which Exquemelin vividly brings to life the process of adding up the value of the treasure:

Tout ayant été ainsi ramassé, on trouva qu'en comptant les joyaux, l'argent rompu, prisé à dix écus la livre, il y avait deux cent soixante mille écus. . . . Tout ce butin fut

¹⁸ Hugo Grotius's 1604 treatise *De jure praedae commenarius* (*Commentary on the Law of Prize and Booty*) established the legal classification of pirate seizures as "prises." See Terjanian 94-8.

donc ainsi partagé, ayant pris auparavant sur le total des récompenses promises aux blessés, aux estropiés, et aux chirurgiens. Les esclaves qui avaient été pris furent vendus à l'encan, et l'argent qui en provint fut encore partagé entre chaque équipage. (225–6)

After the slaves seized in battle have been sold and after the spoils have been divided, the pirates celebrate their success with games and feasting, but also with plans for the next profitable venture: “Quelques uns . . . furent en France, dans le dessein d'acheter quelques marchandises, afin de revenir négocier en ce pays, comme plusieurs qu'ils avaient vus beaucoup profiter sur leurs camarades en leur vendant du vin et de l'eau-de-vie” (226). This passage demonstrates the fluidity between the pirates' illegal “adventures” and legal commercial investment. It depicts pirates as savvy businessmen, always looking for a new opportunity even if it means capitalizing on the tastes and desires of their comrades in arms, profiting at their expense.

In these moments of pause between escapades, piracy can seem glamorous, attractive, occasionally even righteous according to the logic of the narrative pattern of adventure, with elaborately enumerated riches representing the just rewards for brave fighters who have risked their lives in battle. Yet, piracy's dark side becomes evident in passages that concentrate on the nature of the risks taken in pursuit of those rewards. Although modern critics are rightly often struck by the pirate figures' love of freedom, Exquemelin shows that pirates in fact gamble their most basic liberty for the promise of riches. If they did not die in battle, pirates who failed in a venture to seize a ship would typically enter forced servitude under the ship's captain. For example, Exquemelin recounts the efforts of a Dunkerque adventurer, Pierre Franc, to overtake a Spanish warship. Vanquished by the Spaniards, Franc and his men narrowly escape hanging at sea, and instead become “enslaved.” After working for two years “sans en recevoir pour tout paiement qu'un peu de nourriture,” Franc and his companions are brought back to Europe. First they are sent to Spain, from whence they travel to France, then back to America to pillage Spanish ships “pour se faire payer par les Espagnols de leur salaire” (187–8). This willingness to risk freedom for profit sets up a disturbing hierarchy of values in which the protection of liberty seems less compelling than the desire for the riches that might be gained by adventure. By risking life for profit, in other words, pirate figures literally put a price on their own heads.

Perhaps the most spectacular illustration of the monetization of human life comes in two separate passages in which Exquemelin reproduces the terms of “chasse-parties” or agreements outlining the way to divide up the spoils of plunder. The document stipulates that officers injured in the fight receive a larger part of the spoils in remuneration for their bodily loss:

Pour la perte d’un œil, cent écus ou un esclave.

Pour la perte des deux, six cent écus ou six esclaves.

Pour la perte de la main droite ou du bras droit, deux cent écus ou deux esclaves.

Pour la perte des deux, six cent écus ou six esclaves. (178)

Some scholars have read the *chasse-partie* as evidence of pirate society’s quasi-democratic, utopian form. Requemora-Gros, for example, interprets the documents as a sign of “une véritable contre-société organisée” in which cohesion, liberty, and equality are guaranteed through a form of “sécurité sociale” (457). Indeed, the agreement resembles modern-day insurance contracts. Yet there is something disturbing about its terms. Presented in list form, it startles the reader by disrupting the flow of prose. The repetitive, short sentences disconcertingly take the form of equations: a body part is equal to some amount of money or to some number of slaves. In his analysis of similar documents produced by the British navy, Ian Baucom has described their effect as the “monetizing anatomization of the body” (7). He writes:

There is something more than a little macabre about this list, something unnerving that exceeds the finicky mince of bureaucratic language, the formulaic translation of the loss of a foot, a thigh, a lung, or a bladder into a misfortune.... the financializing, decorporealizing logic of equivalence that so confidently translates a lieutenant’s foot into 5 shillings a day. (6)

The “logic of equivalence” exposed in these passages of Exquemelin’s work underscores the extent to which life and health are themselves part of the outlay required to gain commercial reward in pirate society. The *chasse-parties* make visible the metaphoric substitution of money or commodities (some of which happen to be human commodities) for the body.

The inclusion of slaves in the *chasse-parties*’ macabre equations particularly highlights the more sinister, disastrous implications of the monetization of life and of the body in the Atlantic. The equation of human life with commercial value is endemic in the world described in narratives of

piracy. Adventurers seize not only bullion but also prisoners, who are later transformed into monetary riches in the form of ransom. They attack slave ships and convert their human cargo into cash at illegal or corrupt versions of the sanctioned, regulated slave markets.¹⁹ In these various ways, *L'Histoire des aventuriers* minimizes the distinction between illegal piracy and legitimate mercantile activity, between voluntary servitude in exchange for the promise of riches and the system of forced slavery for the sake of the sugar trade. The bitter conclusion of Exquemelin's narrative reveals the ultimate complicity between colonial structures and piracy through the story of Captain Morgan, one of the cruelest pirates who, having pillaged sufficient riches—"quatre cent quarante-trois mille deux cents livres" (371) to be exact—settles down into a place at the top of the British colonial government. "A l'heure que je parle, il est élevé aux plus éminentes dignités de la Jamaïque, ce qui fait assez voir qu'un homme, tel qu'il soit, est toujours estimé et bien reçu partout, pourvu qu'il ait de l'argent" (372). Money ensures the kind of esteem and dignity formerly conferred on heroes who displayed conventional forms of honor and valor. Exquemelin presents Morgan's fate as evidence of the infiltration or infection of the colonial structure by an over-valuation of money—a final, devastating instance of the displacement of moral value by the value of ill-gotten wealth.²⁰ This nostalgia for older systems of honor, though, is undermined—or at least rendered more complex—by the attractiveness of piracy's illicit profits, especially when seen from the relative safety of the reader's point of view.

Conclusion

The kind of elite, metropolitan Frenchmen and women who might have picked up a copy of *Les Nouvelles de l'Amérique* or *L'Histoire des aventuriers* in the last quarter of the seventeenth century encountered the

¹⁹ Christopher Miller reminds us that slaves were among the most lucrative commodities in the Atlantic world, as each individual doubled in value when transported across the ocean (17). Not surprisingly, then, the pirates in adventure narratives frequently target slave ships. See Serge Daget for an account of the intersections of piracy and the institutional slave trade in the early modern Caribbean.

²⁰ Garraway reads this account of Morgan's colonial success as evidence of the taming of the sovereign pirate by monarchy—his incorporation into the structures of the state and his "symbolic ennoblement for the glory of the absolutist king" (97). I agree that Morgan's historical service as a colonial governor under Charles II reveals the complicity between pirates and the states. However, Exquemelin's language in recounting the episode (particularly the use of passive voice) puts the emphasis on Morgan's agency rather than the state's.

material rewards of France's Caribbean entanglements in the course of their daily lives. Commodities such as chocolate and sugar, for example, altered the everyday habits and appetites of elite French subjects. In her recent book, *Trading Places: Colonization and Slavery in Eighteenth-Century French Culture*, Madeleine Dobie demonstrates that French readers and writers readily suppressed the economic and geographical origins of such quotidian material comforts. She interprets the relative absence of literary representations of the Antilles as indicative of a cultural desire to forget the abusive economic structures (i.e., slavery) that supplied French consumers with luxury products.²¹ Rather than address harsh realities of the Antillean colonial economy in straightforward literary depictions, Dobie argues, French writers displaced themes of enslavement and exploitation to Oriental settings. The minor genre of Caribbean adventure tales may represent one textual space in which French readers did directly confront unsettling questions about the human costs of the material riches produced in the island colonies. Although they undoubtedly served as an important precursor to the romantic, swashbuckling, sublimely free literary pirates of subsequent centuries, the outlaws of the late seventeenth-century Caribbean appear as decidedly ambivalent figures. They may be liberated from state oversight, these narratives suggest, but they are bound by their own greed. In French narratives, pirate lifestyles serve as an exaggerated refraction of the larger social and economic conditions of the colonial Atlantic where the pursuit of profit trumped freedom, human dignity, and moral order. In this way, adventure narratives complemented contemporary moral and economic discourses that questioned the role of the profit motive in civilized society. Unlike those abstract pronouncements, however, Caribbean adventure narratives implicated their readers actively and emotionally in their questioning of materialistic desires by alternately portraying the pirate life as condemnable and highly alluring.

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²¹ She writes: "I propose that although the island colonies that France established in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans in the middle of the seventeenth century had a significant and by some measures transformative impact on the nation's economy and material culture, their existence registered very little in cultural representations" (1).

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