

## **The Widow Ching-Pirate** **by Jorge Luis Borges**

*Editors Note: The story below is contained within a collection of short stories, also called The Widow Ching-Pirate by Jorge Luis Borges. It is published here as reference material for Prof. María Elena García Autino's article in Discourse, Issue 13, 'Kites and Pirates in Argentine Literature.'*

The author who uses the phrase "female corsairs" runs the risk of calling up an awkward image—that of the now-faded Spanish operetta with its theories of obvious servant girls playing the part of choreographed pirates on noticeably cardboard seas.

And yet there have been cases of female pirates—women skilled in the art of sailing, the governance of barbarous crews, the pursuit and looting of majestic ships on the high seas. One such woman was Mary Read, who was quoted once as saying that the profession of piracy wasn't for just anybody, and if you were going to practice it with dignity, you had to be a man of courage, like herself.

In the crude beginnings of her career, when she was not yet the captain of her own ship, a young man she fancied was insulted by the ship's bully. Mary herself picked a quarrel with the bully and fought him hand to hand, in the old way of the isles of the Caribbean: the long, narrow, and undependable breechloader in her left hand, the trusty saber in her right.

The pistol failed her, but the saber acquitted itself admirably.... In 1720 the bold career of Mary Read was interrupted by a Spanish gallows, in Santiago de la Vega, on the island of Jamaica.

Another female pirate of those waters was Anne Bonney, a magnificent Irishwoman of high breasts and fiery hair who risked her life more than once in boarding ships.

She stood on the deck with Mary Read, and then with her on the scaffold. Her lover, Captain John Rackham, met his own noose at that same hanging. Anne, contemptuous, emerged with that harsh variant on Aixa's rebuke to Boabdil\*: "If you'd fought like a man, you needn't have been hang'd like a dog."

Another woman pirate, but a more daring and long-lived one, plied the waters of far Asia, from the Yellow Sea to the rivers on the borders of Annam. I am speaking of the doughty widow Ching.

### **THE YEARS OF APPRENTICESHIP**

In 1797 the emperor with gifts and tears to send them aid. Nor did their pitiable request fall upon deaf ears: they were ordered to set fire to their villages, abandon their fisheries, move inland, and learn the unknown science of agriculture. They did all this; and so, finding only deserted coastlines, the frustrated invaders were forced into waylaying ships—a depredation far more unwelcome than raids on the coasts, for its serious shareholders, in the many pirate ships of the Yellow Sea, formed a consortium, and they chose one Captain Ching, a just (though strict) man, tested under fire, to be the admiral of their new fleet. Ching was so harsh and exemplary in his sacking of the coasts that the terrified residents implored the threatened trade.

Once again, the imperial government responded decisively: it ordered the former fishermen to abandon their plows and oxen and return to their oars and nets. At this, the peasants, recalling their former terrors, balked, so the authorities determined upon another course: they would make Admiral Ching the Master of the Royal Stables. Ching was willing to accept the buy-off.

The stockholders, however, learned of the decision in the nick of time, and their righteous indignation took the form of a plate of rice served up with poisoned greens. The delicacy proved fatal; the soul of the former admiral and newly appointed Master of the Royal Stables was delivered up to the deities of the sea.

His widow, transfigured by the double treachery, called the pirates together, explained the complex case, and exhorted them to spurn both the emperor's deceitful clemency and odious employment in the service of the shareholders with a bent for poison. She proposed what might be called freelance piracy. She also proposed that they cast votes for a new admiral, and she herself was elected. She was a sapling thin woman of sleepy eyes and caries-riddled smile. Her oiled black hair shone brighter than her eyes.

Under Mrs. Ching's calm command, the ships launched forth into anger and onto the high seas.

### **THE COMMAND**

Thirteen years of methodical adventuring ensued. The fleet was composed of six squadrons, each under its own banner—red, yellow, green, black, purple—and one, the admiral's own, with the emblem of a serpent.

The commanders of the squadrons had such names as Bird and Stone, Scourge of the Eastern Sea, Jewel of the Whole Crew, Wave of Many Fishes, and High Sun.

The rules of the fleet, composed by the widow Ching herself, were unappealable and severe, and their measured, laconic style was devoid of those withered flowers of rhetoric that lend a ridiculous sort of majesty to the usual official pronouncements of the Chinese (an alarming example of which, we shall encounter shortly). Here are some of the articles of the fleet's law:

Not the least thing shall be taken privately from the stolen and plundered goods. All shall be registered, and the pirate receives for himself out of ten parts, only two: eight parts belong to the storehouse, called the general fund; taking anything out of this general fund without permission shall be death.

If any man goes privately on shore, or what is called transgressing the bars, he shall be taken and his ears perforated in the presence of the whole fleet; repeating the same, he shall suffer death.

No person shall debauch at his pleasure captive women taken in the villages and open spaces, and brought on board a ship; he must first re-request the ship's purser for permission and then go aside in the ship's hold. To use violence against any woman without permission of the purser shall be punished by death.\*

Reports brought back by prisoners state that the mess on the pirate ships consisted mainly of hardtack, fattened rats, and cooked rice; on days of combat, the crew would mix gunpowder with their liquor.

Marked cards and loaded dice, drinking and fan-tan, the visions of the opium pipe and little lamp filled idle hours. Two swords, simultaneously employed, were the weapon of choice. Before a boarding, the pirates would sprinkle their cheeks and bodies with garlic water, a sure charm against injury by sprinkle their cheeks and bodies with garlic water, a sure charm against injury by fire breathed from muzzles.

The crew of a ship traveled with their women, the captain with his harem—which might consist of five or six women, and be renewed with each successive victory.

### **THE YOUNG EMPEROR CHIA-CH'ING SPEAKS**

In June or July of 1809, an imperial decree was issued, from which I translate the first paragraph and the last. Many people criticized its style:

Miserable and injurious men, men who stamp upon bread, men who ignore the outcry of tax collectors and orphans, men whose small clothes bear the figure of the phoenix and the dragon, men who deny the truth of printed books, men who let their tears flow facing North—such men disturb the happiness of our rivers and the erstwhile trustworthiness of our seas. Day and night, their frail and crippled ships defy the tempest. Their object is not a benevolent one: they are not, and never have been, the sea-man's bosom friend. Far from lending aid, they fall upon him with ferocity, and make him an unwilling guest of ruin, mutilation, and even death. Thus these men violate the natural laws of the Universe, and their offenses make rivers overflow their banks and flood the plains, sons turn against their fathers, the principles of wetness and dryness exchange places...

Therefore, I commend thee to the punishment of these crimes, Admiral KwoLang. Never forget—clemency is the Emperor's to give; the Emperor's subject would be presumptuous in granting it. Be cruel, be just,

be obeyed, be victorious. The incidental reference to the "crippled ships" was, of course, a lie; its purpose was to raise the courage of KwoLang's expedition. Ninety days later, the forces of the widow Ching engaged the empire's.

Almost a thousand ships did battle from sunup to sundown. A mixed chorus of bells, drums, cannon bursts, curses, gongs, and prophecies accompanied the action. The empire's fleet was destroyed; Admiral KwoLang found occasion to exercise neither the mercy forbidden him nor the cruelty to which he was exhorted. He himself performed a ritual which our own defeated generals choose not to observe—he committed suicide.

#### **THE TERRIFIED COASTLINES AND RIVERBANKS**

Then the six hundred junks of war and the haughty widow's forty thousand victorious pirates sailed into the mouth of the Zhu-Jiang River, sowing fire and appalling celebrations and orphans left and right. Entire villages were razed. In one of them, the prisoners numbered more than a thousand. One hundred twenty women who fled to the pathless refuge of the nearby stands of reeds or the paddy fields were betrayed by the crying of a baby, and sold into slavery in Macao.

Though distant, the pathetic tears and cries of mourning from these depredations came to the notice of Chia-Ch'ing, the Son of Heaven. Certain historians have allowed themselves to believe that the news of the ravaging of his people caused the emperor less pain than did the defeat of his punitive expedition. Be that as it may, the emperor organized a second expedition, terrible in banners, sailors, soldiers, implements of war, provisions, soothsayers and astrologers.

This time, the force was under the command of Admiral Ting-kwei-heu. The heavy swarm of ships sailed into the mouth of the Zhu- Jiang to cut off the pirate fleet. The widow rushed to prepare for battle. She knew it would be hard, very hard, almost desperate; her men, after many nights (and even months) of pillaging and idleness, had grown soft. But the battle did not begin. The sun peacefully rose and without haste set again into the quivering reeds. The men and the arms watched, and waited. The noon times were more powerful than they, and the siestas were infinite.

#### **THE DRAGON AND THE VIXEN**

And yet each evening, lazy flocks of weightless dragons rose high into the sky above the ships of the imperial fleet and hovered delicately above the water, above the enemy decks. These comet-like kites were airy constructions of rice paper and reed, and each silvery or red body bore the identical characters. The widow anxiously studied that regular flight of meteors, and in it read the confused and slowly told fable of a dragon that had always watched over vixen, in spite of the vixen's long ingratitude and constant crimes.

The moon grew thin in the sky, and still the figures of rice paper and reed wrote the same story each evening, with almost imperceptible variations. The widow was troubled, and she brooded. When the moon grew fat in the sky and in the red-tinged water, the story seemed to be reaching its end. No one could predict whether infinite pardon or infinite punishment was to be let fall upon the vixen, yet the inevitable end, whichever it might be, was surely approaching.

The widow understood. She threw her two swords into the river, knelt in the bottom of a boat, and ordered that she be taken to the flagship of the emperor's fleet.

It was evening; the sky was filled with dragons — this time, yellow ones. The widow murmured a single sentence, "The vixen seeks the dragon's wing," as she stepped aboard the ship.

### **THE APOTHEOSIS**

The chroniclers report that the vixen obtained her pardon, and that she dedicated her slow old age to opium smuggling. She was no longer "The Widow"; she assumed a name that might be translated "The Luster of True Instruction."

From this period (writes a historian) ships began to pass and re-pass in tranquillity. All became quiet on the rivers and tranquil on the four seas. People lived in peace and plenty.

Men sold their arms and bought oxen to plough their fields. They buried sacrifices, said prayers on the tops of hills, and rejoiced themselves by singing behind screens during the day-time.