

Girls on the High Seas: Piratical Play in Arthur Ransome's *Swallows and Amazons*

In Arthur Ransome's *Swallows and Amazons* (1930), the four Walker children sail to and explore a nearby island while on holiday in the Lake District, where they meet the Blckett sisters, who sail under the banner of the Jolly Roger. While critics have examined the novel's imperialist legacy, such that the children play and act as explorers and colonizers as part of the British empire, few scholars have noted the importance of piracy to the novel. Indeed, many of the children's imaginative activities involve "playing pirate" as they capture boats and defeat a local pirate foe—the Blckett's Uncle Jim, whom they imagine to be a pirate. Ransome's novel is also unique as it features two boys and four girls, all of whom engage in acts of piracy, with the girls more piratical than the boys. While late-nineteenth-century boys' adventure fiction privileged the new imperial man fashioned as a pirate (e.g. *Treasure Island* and *Peter Pan*), girls' fiction inscribed them within the domestic economy as future wives and mothers. Here, however, girls are pirates. What, then, is the benefit of playing pirate, specifically for girls?

Swallows and Amazons uses the inherited legacy of *Treasure Island* as it perpetuates fictionalized pirate lore (e.g., the black spot and buried treasure) in its quest to transform what it means to "play pirate." Boys no longer *are* pirates, but rather, all children *play* pirate. Piratical play in Ransome's novel becomes a safe form of adventure that privileges childhood for all, not just boys, as an important developmental time. It liberates girls from a strictly domestic sphere, teaching them that they are capable leaders and quick thinkers, prized for their childlike spirit and ingenuity. While naval exploration was the realm of adults, piratical play was for children—girls and boys alike—who could relish in childhood adventure while learning and enacting values of leadership, loyalty, curiosity, and responsibility. Reconsidering Ransome's novel in light of piracy rather than only exploration illuminates how Ransome adapted pirate lore as fanciful play so children could safely enact the alluring mystique of piracy, increasingly equated with childhood.