CHAPTER 3
Byron’s The Corsair

As editor of the British Review from 1811 to 1822, William Roberts made it a personal responsibility to review the publications of Lord Byron. Best known for his biography of Hannah More,1 whose morality he praised highly, Roberts in his criticism of Byron cautioned against the current mode of perverse immorality.

It is not, we believe, until within these last forty or fifty years, that the pirate, the robber, and the man of blood, have shewn themselves in our poems and novels to be tender lovers, generous friends, and persons altogether of the highest sentimental cast; who, in short, if it were not for the exclusive spirit of our laws in respect to person and property, marriage and succession, might possibly live among their fellow creatures without crime or reproach. These sturdy sentimentals, these elegant outlaws, these stately despisers of form, are a class of entities that owe their existence principally to the ideal in morals so well known to the German philosophers, who have shewn how easy it is for a man to be the perpetrator of the deepest crimes, and, at the same time, to be actuated by feelings the most disinterested and exalted.2

Amid the proliferation of pirates on the London stage, discussed in chapter 2 and listed in the appendix, are many examples of “sturdy sentimentals” and “elegant outlaws,” supporting Roberts’s contention that the current literary tastes had fostered a predilection for the sympathetic representation of pirates. Such characters are all the more insidious because their charm seems to exonerate their crimes. In referring to the “German philosophers,” Roberts lays part of the blame on the Kantian aesthetics of “disinterestedness.”

To be sure, Kant had advocated a separation between ethics and aesthetics. He further argued that neither morality nor sensual feelings were relevant. Reason and imagination are the arbiters of aesthetic judgment and respond to a beautiful rape (e.g., Rubens, Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus, 1619)
or a beautiful murder (e.g., David, Death of Marat, 1793), not in terms of moral issues but exclusively in terms of disinterested aesthetic judgment.\(^3\) But Byron’s championing of the pirate’s exploits had nothing to do with the “German philosophers” and everything to do with revolutionary opposition to tyrannical authority.

In spite of his service on the committee at Drury Lane, Byron declined to have his plays performed. John Murray brought an injunction in an unsuccessful attempt to stop performance of Marino Faliero (Drury Lane, 25 April 1821). Posthumously, all eight of Byron’s plays were performed.\(^4\) Among them Sardanapalus enjoyed the greatest stage success, with Heaven and Earth and The Deformed Transformed staged belatedly.\(^5\) Byron’s narrative poems, too, were being adapted for the stage and quickly became prominent attributes of the dynamic public reception. Within weeks after Byron’s The Island appeared in print, Douglas William Jerrold transformed it into a melodrama, utilizing the aquatic effects available at Sadler’s Wells (1823). Similarly Henry M. Milner adapted Mazeppa; or, The Wild Horse of Tartary as an equestrian drama to be performed at the Royal Amphitheatre (4 April 1831). While Byron was still alive, living in exile while scandal still boiled and bubbled in London, stage representations such as Lord Ruthven (The Vampire) and Lord Glenarvon Ruthven (Glenarvon) were sure to feed the curiosity about Byron’s wicked ways. For the purposes of popular melodrama, the poems provided a further means for bringing the Byronic hero to the stage.

If William Roberts, in his concern over the profligacy of Byron’s poetry, raised the expectations of unrestrained orgies, readers might well have been disappointed. The contemporary effort of the British Navy to halt the Algerian pirates provided an allusive context justifying Conrad’s attack on the sultan’s palace.\(^6\) In The Corsair, the attack is disrupted when the seraglio bursts into flame. Sending his men to rescue the harem slaves, Conrad himself bears to safety the pasha’s favorite. Byron may have conjured sensual effusions of gratitude, yet such effusions remain unconsummated. Neither the assault on the pasha nor the attempted rescue sufficed to transform the scene into a coup de théâtre. Rather, the evocative titillations of such scenes made Byron’s tales of the corsairs extremely popular in their visual representation on stage.\(^7\) The melodramatic adaptations owed their theatrical success to the music, costumes, and set designs as well as the mediating skills of the popular playwrights. Jonathan Blewitt wrote music for Michael O’Sullivan’s Corsair; or, The Pirate’s Isle (Crow-street, Dublin, 1814). Dimond’s Bride of Abydos (Drury Lane, 5 February 1818) had Edmund Kean mimic Byron in performing Salim’s love for his supposed sister Zuleika. Jerrold’s The Island; or, Christian and his Comrades (1823) used the water tank at Sadler’s Wells