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Byron's *Corsair* and the Boundaries of Sympathy

Abstract

Contemporary reviewers of Byron's work often noted his skill in cultivating sympathy for outlaw figures – a skill that was admired, but also worried over since it implied sympathy's independence from a moral code. Recent scholarship about sympathy in the Romantic period has not focused much on Byron, but this essay highlights a complexity and originality in his invocation of sympathy that has been overlooked. Analyzing *The Corsair* with particular attention to narrative perspective and the use of direct address, this essay shows Byron portraying characters overcoming the boundaries of gendered, national, class or religious difference in acts of generous sympathy, only to have these acts rendered ineffectual or even destructive. The ineffectiveness of intradiegetic acts of sympathy complicates the text's invitation for readerly sympathy, suggesting that sympathy is morally neutral, a catalyst for unpredictable actions.

Keywords

Byron, Sympathy, *The Corsair*, Outlaws, Narrative perspective

On the appearance of *The Corsair* in 1814, Francis Jeffrey praised Byron above all poets because he 'alone has been able to command the sympathy, even of reluctant readers, by the natural magic of his moral sublimity'.¹ The general arc of Byron's success is a familiar story, and *The Corsair*, which sold 10,000 copies on the first day, represents the apex of that arc.² However, Byron's command of readerly sympathy has not been considered as a source of his fame in recent accounts. Early work by Robert Langbaum points to the centrality of sympathy as a romantic way of knowing, and in the last twenty years, Thomas McCarthy, Rae Greiner, and Nancy Yousef have refined our understanding of romantic period

1 [Francis Jeffrey], 'Review of *The Corsair* and *The Bride of Abydos*', *Edinburgh Review* 23 (1814): 199.

2 Samuel Smiles, *A Publisher and his Friends: Memoir and Correspondence of the Late John Murray, with an Account of the Origin and Progress of the House, 1768–1843*. 2 vols. (London: John Murray, 1891), 1:223.

sympathy while insisting, with Langbaum, on its primacy.³ But these inquiries into romantic sympathy comment on the works of Coleridge, Wordsworth, Hazlitt, Austen, and Mary Shelley – not Byron.⁴



Fig. 1: Thomas Phillips, *Portrait of Lord Byron in Albanian Dress*, 1813. Oil on canvas, 127 x 102 cm. Government Art Collection, British Embassy, Athens.

In fact, Andrew Stauffer argues in *Anger, Revolution, and Romanticism*, that Byron generally ‘replaces readerly sympathy with a curious fascination’. He does so, Stauffer suggests, by creating ‘angry writing as a theatre of revenge’.⁵

3 A search in the MLA database using the keywords ‘romantic period’ and ‘sympathy’ returns four results between 1970 and 1999, fourteen results between 2000 and 2009, and twenty-five between 2010 and 2017. Thomas McCarthy, *Relationships of Sympathy: The Writer and the Reader in British Romanticism* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997). Rae Greiner, *Sympathetic Realism in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012). Nancy Yousef, *Romantic Intimacy* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2013). See also Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in the Modern Literary Tradition* (New York: Norton, 1957), 79.

4 Thomas McCarthy does address Byron’s journals, but not his poetry. He concludes that even the journals fail to evoke sympathy because of the privacy they preserve: ‘his journal becomes a creative outlet for avoiding himself’. See McCarthy, *Relationships of Sympathy*, 76–77.

5 Andrew Stauffer, *Anger, Revolution, and Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 15. Emphasis added.

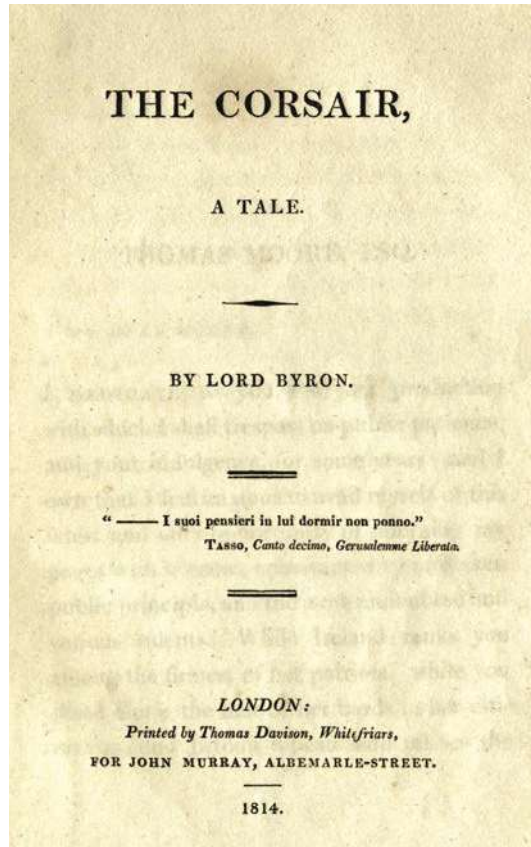


Fig. 2: First edition title page, Lord Byron, *The Corsair. A Tale*, 1814.

Stauffer here builds on an interest in Byronic theatricality initiated by Jerome McGann. For McGann, Byron is unique among romantic poets because in his work 'Theatricality replaces Sincerity as the measure of Romantic style'.⁶ Being reminded of the rhetorical manipulation behind sincerity, readers are invited to step back from the experience of reading and make sincerity itself the object of inquiry. This line of thinking here is instructive for understanding the function of sympathy in *The Corsair*. The text does not quite *replace* sympathy with theatricality or fascination. Sympathy, I argue, is provoked and sustained. But, it is also called into question. Like his use of sincerity in some lyrics, Byron's use of sympathy in *The Corsair* can be read as both the method and the object of the poet's critique. By manipulating narrative perspective, the tale lures readers to

⁶ Jerome McGann, *Byron and Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 95. Capitalization in the original.

vicariously participate in repeated acts of obeying, loving, and saving a superficially unsympathetic hero. Then, by showing sympathetic acts' unpredictable consequences, the poem exposes the gap between sympathy as sentiment and sympathy as productive of just and effective action. Byron's 'natural magic' in manipulating readers' sympathy is, as Jeffrey notes, remarkable, and I will begin by analyzing some of the ways that Byron accomplishes it. But what Byron ultimately accomplishes is more than a call to difficult sympathy. Once reading stops, and the temporally bound process of reading can be contemplated in its stilled structure, *The Corsair* exposes readers' sympathy to charges of banality and blindness, and it is with this unraveling of sympathy that I will close.

Byron's contemporary reviewers recognized sympathy as a central theme in the poet's work. For them, the experience of sympathizing with a Byronic outlaw called into question the widely-held assumption that sympathy was morally positive. Writing about *The Corsair* in the *Quarterly Review*, George Ellis described the cultivation of sympathy as 'the object of the whole poem'. '[E]very reader will', he concludes, 'sympathize with Conrad', but Ellis regards such sympathy as dangerous because the Corsair is 'a selfish, haughty, merciless villain'.⁷ Similarly, a writer for the *Monthly Magazine* opines that: 'it is the glory of Lord Byron's muse to compel us to sympathize with a class of persons, with whom we should be ashamed to acknowledge any communion of mind'.⁸ Byron's stimulation of sympathy for outlaws contests the 'nearly automatic association' of sympathy 'with socially beneficial action in the world' that had been bequeathed to the nineteenth century by moral philosophers Adam Smith and David Hume, and cultural critics such as Henry Home, Lord Kames.⁹ Byron does not discredit the possibility that sympathy can lead to virtuous action, but he indicates that its relationship to action is unpredictable.

For those who have not recently studied *The Corsair*, a brief summary of the plot may be helpful. Conrad, the titular corsair, shares with other Byronic heroes a guilty, but shadowy, past and a superiority to moral convention. The tale opens on an Aegean isle with Conrad's band of pirates celebrating the glories of their counter-cultural pirate life. After visiting his long-suffering love, Medora, Conrad discloses that he will depart that very night to the citadel of an evil pasha called Seyd. Although the attack on Seyd's citadel is successful, Conrad is captured after delaying his escape to free Seyd's harem. As he awaits death in prison, Conrad is visited by Gulnare, the sultan's favored odalisque, and one of the women he has earlier rescued. Gulnare risks her life to free Conrad and kills Seyd

7 [George Ellis], 'Review of *The Corsair* and *Lara*', *Quarterly Review* (April and July 1814): 457, 454.

8 'New Books Published in July', *The Monthly Magazine* 48, no. 2 (1819): 57.

9 Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 44.

in his sleep before leading Conrad to safety under the protection of rebel guards. He and the other surviving pirates return to their isle to find that Medora has died of grief. Conrad thereafter departs alone by sea, leaving 'a Corsair's name to other times, / Linked with one virtue, and a thousand crimes'.¹⁰ Although not explicitly discussed in the poem, sympathy emerges as one of the major themes, touching and entrapping each of the three main characters. Medora, imagining Conrad's suffering, dies of grief. Gulnare, sympathizing with Conrad in his captivity, fails to feel any sympathy for Seyd and kills him. Conrad does not seem a character given to sympathy, but his most sympathetic act, pausing in his destruction of Seyd's palace to rescue the women in his harem, is the act that gets him captured.

As one of Byron's 'Oriental tales', *The Corsair* shares with *Lara*, *The Giaour*, *The Siege of Corinth*, and *The Bride of Abydos* the form of a long narrative poem set partially, or entirely in the Ottoman Empire. Each of the tales features a glowering counter-cultural hero faithful to one true love who is pitted against a powerful imperial force. The tales were extraordinarily successful in their time, but Byron himself wrote dismissively of them. In a letter to Lord Holland that he 'had no great esteem for lines that could be strung as fast as minutes'.¹¹ Yet his anxiety over their supposed ease of composition (not all of them were written with equal speed) was balanced by his pride in their authenticity. In the same letter, he distinguishes his own work set in the 'East' from that of his contemporaries: 'it is my story and my East (and here I am venturing with no one to contend against – from having *seen* what my contemporaries must copy from the drawings of others only)'.¹² Although some early critics followed Byron's lead in dismissing the tales' importance to his oeuvre, beginning in the late 1960s, the tales were gradually re-assimilated into the Byronic canon. Jerome McGann was the first to approach the tales as an integral part of Byron's poetic development in *Fiery Dust* (1968). Serious studies of the tales, by Daniel P. Watkins, Nigel Leask, Susan Wolfson, Caroline Franklin, and Andrew Warren have followed, treating the political, formal, and gendered implications of Byron's choices in composing the tales.¹³

10 'The Corsair' in *Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*. ed. Jerome McGann. 7 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980–1993), 3:148–213; (Canto III: ll. 695–696); hereafter cited in the text.

11 George Gordon Lord Byron, *Byron's Letters and Journals*. ed. Leslie A. Marchand. 3 vols. (Harvard: Belknap Press, 1974), 3:168.

12 *Ibid.*, 168.

13 Jerome McGann, *Fiery Dust: Byron's Poetic Development* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968). Daniel P. Watkins, *Social Relations in Byron's Eastern Tales* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1987). Nigel Leask, *British Romantic Writers and the East: Anxieties of Empire*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). Susan J. Wolfson, *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997). Caroline Franklin, *Byron's Heroines* (Oxford: Clarendon Press,

The most recent of these works, Warren's *The Orient and the Young Romantics*, offers a post-colonial critique of Byron's Eastern tales (particularly *Lara*) and, in doing so highlights the sometimes-overlooked otherness of the tales' heroes who, while they resemble Byron's other heroes in some ways, inhabit more violent worlds. Increasingly, critics have recognized Byron's manipulation of narrative perspective as one of the most sophisticated aspects of the tales. With the exception of *The Bride of Abydos*, each of the tales presents a fragmented narrative, complicating further the already complicated process of sympathizing with an outlaw character. In the next section, I discuss the barriers to sympathy that Byron constructs for Conrad, as well as the ways in which these barriers are overcome.

Difficult Sympathy

In *The Corsair*, Byron manages to command readerly sympathy for a hero who defies the national, social, and moral boundaries that frequently enclose such sympathy. He accomplishes this, not by leading readers to imagine ourselves in Conrad's position, but by inviting us to imagine ourselves a person capable of imagining ourselves in Conrad's position. By defining and valorizing a category of person capable of Byronic depths of feeling and then crediting readers with the capacity to understand his hero, the poet makes readerly sympathy appear desirable and rare. By focalizing the narrative through the characters nearest to Conrad, Byron repeatedly invites us to imagine adoring Conrad – as his fellow pirate, his lover, his rescuee, and his rescuer. Each of the characters that the narrative perspective bids us become sees a different side of Conrad. Yet, none of these characters knows the corsair as well as the implied reader.¹⁴ Medora knows nothing about the events at the pasha's palace. Gulnare knows nothing specific about Medora. The pirates are excluded from Conrad's love life altogether, and nobody is with him for the three days and sixty-two lines he spends in the tower before Gulnare comes to assist him. Nobody, of course, except the reader. Byron's shifty narration associates readers with characters in a pattern of circling intimacy, fostering the sense that we are somehow uniquely capable of understanding this figure at the center of everyone's attention.

1992). Andrew Warren, *The Orient and the Young Romantics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

14 This term was coined by Wayne Booth in his *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961). It refers to the reader as constructed by the text, as opposed to actual historical readers. My use of the term is particularly influenced by Wolfgang Iser's exploration of texts' processes of constructing readers in his *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

The phenomenon of Byron's popularity is so familiar that the peculiarity of what he accomplishes in marshaling sympathy for the corsair can be overlooked, so I want to de-familiarize the romantic pirate just a bit. Pirates are 'the scum of all nations ... The worst men in the world picked out from the worst', as Dickens writes in mid-century.¹⁵ In 1814, Mediterranean piracy threatened international shipping to such an extent that the United States would intervene militarily in the region only a year later. Britain followed in 1816. Nor was the threat limited to the commercial sphere. Captivity narratives popularized images of Barbary corsairs as purveyors of violence and fear.¹⁶ For Admiral Sir William Sydney Smith, founder of the 'Anti-piratical Society', the continuing presence of corsairs in the Mediterranean represented nothing less than a failure of 'the progress of Enlightenment and civilization'. Only seven months after *The Corsair's* publication, Smith fumed to the Congress of Vienna that 'This shameful banditry not only revolts humanity, it ... outrages religion. ... The progress of Enlightenment and civilization must necessarily make it disappear'.¹⁷ Conrad and his crew, according to this representation, threaten not only an exoticized other like Seyd, but also the image of Europe as an arbiter of civilization.¹⁸ In order to command sympathy for such a dubious character, Byron's corsair draws on a popular image of pirates as adventurers whose violence was directed at established political entities rather than at capturing and ransoming human beings. The only human captives mentioned in the poem reside in Seyd's harem, not in the corsairs' camp. The poem also portrays Conrad as succeeding in a milieu of brutality and greed that he excels within but did not create. Daniel P. Watkins has argued that *The Giaour* portrays 'predictable incidents in a world pervaded by extreme violence', and this can equally be said of *The Corsair*.¹⁹

However unsympathetic the public attitude toward actual pirates may have been, the taste for a misanthropic marauder in literature was increasingly well-

15 Charles Dickens, 'The Perils of Certain English Prisoners' (1857) *The Works of Charles Dickens*. Gadshill Edition, ed. by Andrew Lang, 36 vols. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1897–1908), 31:191–247; quoted in Bradley Dean, *Masculinity and the New Imperialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 91.

16 See for example: Linda Colley, *Captives: Britain, Empire and the World 1600–1850* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2002), or Richard Joseph Snader, *Caught Between Worlds: British Captivity Narratives in Fact and Fiction* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2000).

17 Quoted in Gillian Weiss's *Captives and Corsairs: France and Slavery in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2011), 148.

18 Fabian Klose outlines the shift in British policy toward the Barbary Corsairs between 1700 and 1816 in *The Emergence of Humanitarian Intervention: Ideas and Practices from the Nineteenth Century to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 110–116. Britain tolerated human capture and enslavement as long as it primarily affected German and Italian states or America.

19 Daniel P. Watkins, 'Social Relations in Byron's *The Giaour*', *ELH* 52, no. 4 (1985): 875, doi: 10.2307/3039470.

cultivated when *The Corsair* appeared, not least of all through Byron's own creations. The dark and dangerous Byronic hero had already gained popularity via *Childe Harold I and II* and *The Giaour*. By drawing out Conrad's misanthropic qualities, Byron makes his own recent heroes a more immediate reference for him than the corsairs portrayed in captivity narratives or international politics. In her article, 'The Pirate Poet in the Nineteenth Century', Deborah Lutz notes that: 'it is easy to see' how the pirate would become 'a ruling figure' given 'the Romantic and Gothic interest in the noble, self-willed outlaw, who, in his superior passions, sees through society's petty interests and has the courage to defy them with a misanthropic villainy'.²⁰ Many critics have written about the tendency of Byron's contemporaries to mistake the poet's heroes for the poet himself, and about Byron's rhetorical gesturing toward a 'secret self' that his heroes promised to reveal.²¹ This alignment of Conrad with Byron himself also reduces the character's otherness.

Although Byron probably did sustain the illusion that he was the final referent for his gloomy heroes, in order to capitalize on the related publishing success, I think Byron's texts construct a more self-centered reader than this interpretation alone implies. Byron charms readers not only by the way he leads us to imagine him, but also by the way he leads us to imagine ourselves. If I imagine myself as Byron's or Conrad's intimate after reading *The Corsair*, I am not imagining me in my twenty-first century jeans and ponytail conversing with a glowering nineteenth-century hero. Of course not. I become a pirate, or a lady with wild 'dish-eveled charms' (I: xiv, l. 471), or a killer of evil pashas with 'vassals – Greek and Moor' to do my will (III: xii, l. 439). The problem with this, and this is a profound point about Byron's manipulation of sympathy, is that if I assume these imaginative roles, I become, successively, an aggressor against an alien other, a casualty of passion, and a murderer. And the fact that my sympathy can be manipulated toward and through such a menagerie of characters demonstrates a problem in itself. Sympathy this facile clearly lacks any anchor in an operable moral philosophy. It is just fun, a kind of emotional acrobatics.

In order to analyze Byron's manipulation of readerly sympathy in more detail I want to discuss Conrad in terms of what Patrick Colm Hogan calls 'categorical'

20 Deborah Lutz, 'The Pirate Poet in the Nineteenth Century: Trollope and Byron' in *Pirates and Mutineers of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Grace Moore (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011), 28.

21 Andrew Elfenbein, *Byron and the Victorians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 13–46. Elfenbein builds on earlier discussions of Byron's literary personae such as Peter Manning's *Byron and His Fictions* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1978); and Frederick Garber's *Self, Text, and Romantic Irony: The Example of Byron* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988). For a view challenging the alignment of Byron's characters with his life, see Jerome Christensen's *Lord Byron's Strength* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), especially 16–19.

sympathy. Hogan suggests that all sympathy arises from similarity, and that there are two bases on which readers recognize this similarity: categorical and situational. In categorical sympathy, a person foregrounds a trait in himself – something externally recognizable like gender, or something subjective like a preference for staying home in the evening – and conceives of that trait ‘as defining group membership’. Other people who share this trait benefit from our in-group or categorical sympathy because ‘the group is in effect, a version of ourselves’.²² As a pirate, a murderer, and eventually a prisoner of an angry pasha, Conrad is not likely to appear in the categories readers create as versions of ourselves. Moreover, Conrad resists easy categorical classification. He cannot be accommodated to a stable social class. Through his contrast with Seyd, who luxuriates in ‘sumptuous fare’ (II: iv, l. 113) and his abstinence from ‘the grosser joys of sense’ (I: ii, l. 75), Conrad is aligned with men of humble circumstance.²³ Yet, he is ‘Lord Conrad’ to his subordinates (I: vii, l. 158).²⁴ He also resists nationalistic categorization. Seyd identifies him in nationalistic terms as a Greek and therefore an enemy. The description of a sunset over the Aegean that opens Canto III further positions his pirate isle near Athens, but Conrad and his men never use the language of nationality. For them, Greece and its adjacent waters are ‘dark mountains’, ‘lovely land’, and boundless waves (III: i, ll. 26, 27. I: i, l. 2) – geologic and aesthetic companions rather than politically circumscribed spaces.²⁵ Finally, Conrad resists religious categorization. Although not Muslim, he cannot be securely defined as either Christian or atheist, much less Protestant or Catholic. The ‘sole resources ‘of his youth, we learn’, were his bark, his sword, his love, and his God’ (II: xiv, l. 477), but he no longer ‘mocks’ God’s ‘throne with prayer’ (II: xiv, l. 480). He lives in defiance, but not in denial of God’s presence. Nationless, classless, godless, and without a personal history, Conrad cannot be contained within the most obvious definitions of an ‘in-group’.

If Conrad cannot easily be incorporated into many of the categories that would allow in-group sympathy, it is worth considering whether he woos readers instead

22 Patrick Colm Hogan, ‘The Epilogue of Suffering: Heroism, Empathy, Ethics’, *SubStance* 30, nos. 94/95 (2001): 134–135, doi: 10.2307/3685508. During the last century, the terms sympathy and empathy have been distinguished from one another in several conflicting ways. Generally, empathy is used to mean feeling *with* someone and sympathy feeling *for* someone. However, since these usages are not consistent, and since the term empathy was not in use at the time of *The Corsair*’s initial reception, I have used the term ‘sympathy’ throughout.

23 For an analysis of Conrad’s abstinence see: Tom Mole, ‘Nourished by that Abstinence: Consumption and Control in *The Corsair*’, *Romanticism* 12, no. 1 (2006): 24–34, doi:10.1353/rom.2006.0005.

24 Caroline Franklin points out that the heroes of all the verse tales are, like Byron, aristocrats by breeding but revolutionaries by choice. See her *Byron* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 56.

25 The absence of nationalistic language also reflects the staggered process of Greek liberation from the Ottomans, a process that was not completed until after Byron’s death.

through what Hogan calls situational sympathy. Situational sympathy arises from a person imagining herself in the other's position.²⁶ Although the likelihood that readers will feel situational sympathy for characters may be enhanced by certain traits – the perception of chronic or acute vulnerability, for example, or a suspenseful plot – we can feel situational sympathy for anyone whose perspective we can imagine taking, regardless of their dissimilarity from ourselves.²⁷ Both categorical and situational sympathy have intricate histories that precede this terminology, more intricate than can be covered here, but the concepts as they stand are useful for discerning the poem's multiple techniques for inviting sympathy.²⁸ Byron's use of situational sympathy has been noted previously by Jerome McGann. The poet, McGann recognizes, forces 'the reader to consider all the circumstances' of a 'guilty adventurer's' upbringing.²⁹ This is true of *The Corsair*. Conrad 'was not ... by Nature sent' to perform his 'thousand crimes' (I: xi, l. 247. III; xiv, l. 696). He war[s] with man' because he was 'warped by disappointment's school' (I: xi, l. 253). The poem does not reveal the details of Conrad's disappointments, but considering his 'warped' background arrests a too-easy judgment of his faults.

The Corsair also invites situational sympathy for Conrad by modeling and praising sympathy in specific scenes. For instance, during Conrad's imprisonment, Byron prepares readers for a sympathetic description of Conrad by preceding it with Gulnare's act of situational sympathy. She has just offered to plead to Seyd for Conrad's life, when her tears are deemed 'most sacred' because they are 'shed for others' pain' (II: xv, l. 540). Two stanzas later, the narrator positions readers to shed similar tears. We are in Conrad's cell, looking down on his sleeping form: 'While sets that sun, and dews of evening melt, / Chill – wet – and misty round each stiffened limb, / Refreshing earth – reviving all but him!' (II: xvi, ll. 555–562). The loneliness and vulnerability of the scene invite situational sympathy, and the intimacy of the scene flatters us. But when Conrad is at his most sympathetic, trapped in Seyd's tower and awaiting, assumedly, torture and death, Byron undermines readerly sympathy by reminding us that Conrad's 'foe, if vanquish'd, had but shared the same' (II: xi, l. 371). Furthermore, if the reader

26 Hogan, 'The Epilogue of Suffering', 136.

27 For the effect of perceived vulnerability on empathy, see Daniel Batson, David Lishner, and Elizabeth Huss, 'Tenderness and Sympathy: Distinct Empathic Emotions Elicited by Different Forms of Need', *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 37, no. 5 (May 2011): 614–615, doi: 10.1177/0146167211403157. For the effect of suspenseful plotting, see Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, 94.

28 See, for example, Rae Greiner's 'Going Along with Others: Adam Smith and the Realists' in Rae Greiner, *Sympathetic Realism in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Baltimore: JHU Press, 2012), 15–49. Also, Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, 37–55; and Yousef, *Romantic Intimacy*, especially 25–48.

29 McGann, *Byron and Romanticism*, 24.

follows Conrad in thinking about his recent acts, any sympathy mustered becomes difficult to sustain. Conrad kills people at the dinner table (II: iv, ll. 142–195). He cannot spare an hour for the woman he loves (I: xiv, l. 409). He will not let his fellow pirates rest (I: vii, ll. 157–168). And, when his moment of triumph comes, he cannot kill Seyd, the only character whose villainy might make him look comparatively good (II: vi, ll. 225–230).

In the face of all these obstacles to categorical and situational sympathy, how does Byron manage to ‘command the sympathy ... of reluctant readers’? In part, I think it is through flattery. He does appeal to categorical sympathy, but he draws the categories according to abstract traits that the text presents as desirable. These trait-based categories are more fluid than gender, nation, or class, and share the possibility of being held in secret. Anyone might, like the reader that *The Corsair* constructs, be brave. Anyone might secretly sustain a love of freedom as strong as the pirates’ portrayed in the tale’s opening scene. The categories of ‘the brave’ or ‘lovers of freedom’ are based on private self-concepts as much as public action, so readers might easily blame social convention for the concealment of those traits. The categories Byron entices readers to join, therefore, offer the allure of a secret shared between reader and poet. The sense of intimacy created by the text’s appeal to a reader’s private self-conception is further enforced by the use of insider/outsider language. *The Corsair* opens with an interplay of narrative address that reveals this pattern. The brave, the wild, the free distinguish themselves – ourselves according to the text’s pronoun – from the tame, and the craven enslaved to luxury. ‘*Our* thoughts ... boundless, and *our* souls ... free’, ‘we’ readers are rhetorically linked with the pirate-narrator as he condemns another imagined category of narratee being addressed in the second-person: ‘*Ours* the wild life in tumult still to range’ (I: i, l. 7; emphasis added), ‘not *thou*, luxurious slave’ (I: i, l. 9). *The Corsair*’s evocation of sympathy for Conrad depends not only on Byron’s implied secret self, revealed in tempting glances through his heroes, but also on the reader’s implied secret self.

Andrew Elfenbein, who first described the Byronic appeal to a secret self, has observed that the ‘interpenetration of selves differing in nationality, gender, race, and social status embodies [a] fantasy ... which bypasses cultural differences for the abstractions of the naked heart’.³⁰ The direct appeal to ‘our’ free souls in the pirates’ opening song enacts such a fantasy across all of these boundaries, as well as the boundary of the text’s fictionality. Within the diegetic frame of the text, Byron portrays sympathy constructed through self-made abstract categories overcoming externally composed categories making the reader’s identification across the boundaries of external identity categories seem easy. Gulnare, Elfenbein points out, identifies with Conrad to such an extent that she functions as

30 Elfenbein, *Byron and the Victorians*, 25.

his double in the text, even superseding him in the role of the Byronic hero when she slays Seyd. Her gender, nationality, and status as a slave do not prevent her from understanding what he ‘deeply, darkly felt’ (II: viii, l. 298). Byron thus models, through Gulnare, and implies, through the pronouns in his opening scene, an us-and-them categorical dichotomy. Members of the ‘us’ category may be of any class or gender, may hail from any empire and accept any or no religion, but during the reading process ‘we’ are invited to self-identify as valuing freedom more than luxury, and excitement more than peace.

Significantly, however, Byron does not abandon categories of nation, gender, race, and social status altogether. He stresses these categories at crucial moments, in order to steer the reader’s identification toward characters close to Conrad rather than Conrad himself. When the narration is figured through Gulnare’s perspective, the text stresses her difference from Conrad by focusing on age and gender ‘[W]hat will not woman dare? / Whom youth and pity lead’ (II: xii, l. 408). When the narration aligns with Conrad’s pirate band, Byron emphasizes the difference between Conrad, the leader, and the rhetorically constructed ‘us’, who, with the rest of the pirate band are figured as followers. When a boatload of pirates, who evaded capture during the attack on Seyd’s palace, have returned to the island to plan a counter-attack, they are ‘daring’, yet the narration stresses their essential difference from Conrad. The poem stresses that his ‘spirit’ ‘breathed’ there inspiring them, subordinating pirates/readers to Conrad’s leadership even in his absence. Readers imaginatively join the pirate band as long as our ‘deeds are daring’ and ‘hearts ... true’, but we are never the most daring. With Anselmo, we are held away from Conrad at the distance of a handshake (III: xv, ll. 1672–1673). With Gulnare, we may briefly imagine an embrace (III: xvii, l. 1711), but most of the time the narrative perspective positions readers ‘watch[ing] his features’ at a small distance implicitly mesmerized by a ‘strange fierceness’ that remains ‘foreign’ to the narratee’s ‘eye’ (III: ixv, ll. 1632–1634).

Byron’s manipulation of situational sympathy similarly positions readers one respectful step away from Conrad. It is easier, for example, to empathize with Medora missing Conrad than to empathize with Conrad missing her. In the 125-line conversation they have before Conrad leaves to attack Seyd, Medora speaks more than twice as many lines. Readers learn of the nights she has spent listening to storms, wondering about his safety. We read that she ‘gazed and gazed – and not a prow / Was granted to (her) tears’ (I: xiv, ll. 383–384). We learn that she has made sherbet for dessert and been three times to the spring for water (I: xiv, ll. 427, 426). Like Medora, readers know only that Conrad has been away. Where he has been and what he has done are never revealed. Consequently, it is easier to imagine being Medora imagining Conrad than it is to imagine being Conrad.

Sympathy's Undoing

Gulnare seems to model the sympathy that readers are encouraged to feel more than other characters. Her sympathy transcends cultural boundaries, and she elevates Conrad's safety and happiness above her own, yet it is through Gulnare that the text most radically questions the purpose, even the possibility of morally discriminating sympathy. There are many opportunities for Gulnare to feel categorical and situational sympathy for Conrad, as well as opportunities for readers to feel categorical and situational sympathy for her. For example, readers are led sense-by-sense into sympathy with her, as she describes her relationship with Seyd. She recounts hearing Seyd asking if she loves him. She describes feeling that her hand does not warm when he takes it (II: xiv, ll. 506, 511–512). Yet in each case of our being led to identify with Gulnare, readers find Byron directing our attention through her to Conrad. Before the end of the scene, in which she describes her life with Seyd, we are reminded that this scene's function in the plot is not to introduce Gulnare as a consistently proactive character, but only to stress the difficulty of delaying Conrad's death sentence: 'Twill cost me dear', she tells him, 'but dread no death to-day!' (II: xiv, l. 534). Gulnare – like Conrad's pirates, like Medora – serves as a focalizing container for our adoration of the corsair himself, but Gulnare's strong similarities with Conrad combine with her privileged position as his rescuer to make her unique as a figure of readerly identification in the poem.

The categories of identification that facilitate Gulnare's sympathy for Conrad are, like those invoked at the start of the poem, abstract and internal, based on unspecified past experiences or a capacity to feel deeply. Gulnare laments in Conradian fashion her 'wrongs ... unrepaid' her 'youth disgraced' (III: iix, ll. 377–378). Like Conrad, Gulnare suffers an exemption from the natural moral code that Byron implies other (happier) people have. This sense of moral vacuity is expressed through a recurring language of epistemological lack. Gulnare 'feels the void', and 'scarce knows' why she comes through the symbolic 'dark' to comfort Conrad (II: xiv, l. 495. II: xiii, l. 439). Whereas Conrad's exemption from instinctual morality is figured as a curse, for Gulnare it is simply a lack. He knows himself to be outside a moral code. Gulnare, in contrast, becomes an object of ironic condescension as she fails to recognize her own amorality. Gulnare recognizes in herself a lack of understanding, which is portrayed as weakness. Conrad, in contrast, recognizes in himself a rejection of conventional morality, which is portrayed as strength. According to Caroline Franklin, the poem must continually picture Gulnare as subordinate to Conrad, even though she accomplishes the poem's most successful act of heroism, because 'the autonomy of the female individualistic heroine conflicts with the traditional notion of 'femininity' formulated to serve the needs of fathers and husbands in a male-dominated

society'.³¹ Her inability to see herself clearly may be viewed as a product of the poem's more general subordination of its female characters, but I would contend that *The Corsair's* critique of un-considered acts of sympathy is forceful enough to transcend categories of gender identity.

Gulnare's internal emptiness leaves plenty of space for virtue and sympathy to grow, but it also creates the instability of character upon which Byron will base the poem's critique of too-ready sympathy. With no reflective ethic to anchor her sympathy in, Gulnare's desire for revenge easily overthrows it. Conrad assumes that sympathy will keep Gulnare from stabbing Seyd (III; ix, l. 407), but she proves him wrong. Up until this point, she has repeatedly substituted exchange values for a developed moral code. She tells herself that she 'owes' her life to Conrad (II: xiii, l. 425) and later expresses to him that she wants to 'Repay the life' that she owes although it will 'cost [her] dear' (II: xiv, ll. 530–534). She has conceived of herself as a receptacle of sense and an agent in a moral balancing of accounts that transcends her individual will. Only after the murder, when Conrad scorns her, does she begin to think of herself in ontological terms. 'I am not what I seem', she says (III: xiv, l. 472). The act that gives her identity to her is not the act of sympathizing with Conrad, but the act of murdering Seyd. However successful her feat of trans-categorical sympathy for Conrad may be, it is exposed by her successive murder of Seyd as lacking any ontological basis. It is a tool of her exchange-based ethic and could therefore become the tool of any ethos at all, however morally dubious. This exposure of sympathy as superficial mocks the poem's repeated invitations to sympathy. Are we readers like so many Gulnares rushing to Conrad's rescue with our sympathy that transcends difference, only to expose ourselves to the symbolic rejection of that sympathy? Worse, does our sympathy, like Gulnare's, operate so unevenly that we are implicated as capable of murder?

It is through Gulnare, or specifically through Conrad's expectations of her, that Byron introduces an equation between sympathy and a sentimental 'softening' of the heart.³² Conrad does not expect Gulnare to perform any sophisticated moral reasoning upon approaching Seyd. For him, sympathy is a kind of biological reflex to which women are charmingly prone.³³ He is shocked when this reflex fails in Gulnare. To see this as a critique of sympathy relevant only to female readers is to fall, with Conrad, into a nest of assumptions about women's essential differences from men. Byron here questions, for all readers, the potential of sympathy as a basis for virtue. Laudable as it is, and contagious as it is,

31 Franklin, *Byron's Heroines*, 85.

32 For a fuller exploration of Byron's changing relationship to sentimentality in poetry see 'My brain is feminine' in McGann, *Byron and Romanticism*, 53–76.

33 Caroline Franklin explores Conrad's gendered expectations for Gulnare at length in Franklin, *Byron's Heroines*, 76–86.

Gulnare's sympathy for Conrad is volatile and undiscerning. It moves her to decisions – the decision to go see Conrad, the decision to seek his release, the decision to kill Seyd if Conrad will not – and only after these decisions are made does she seek reasoning for them. She models precisely the pattern of readerly sympathy that the *Quarterly Review* describes. 'Every reader', according to the review, will sympathize with this 'selfish, haughty, merciless villain'.³⁴ It is only upon reflection that we begin to question why one would grant Conrad sympathy. Sympathy is, in the end, exposed as a morally neutral emotional outpouring. Other emotions, such as vengeance, could govern us just as easily. Gulnare's sympathy for Conrad, which is the most fully represented act of sympathy in the text, is both salvific and deadly. And, the result for Gulnare is effective annulment as a character. Gulnare disappears from the text after one dearly won kiss from her pirate (III: xvii, l. 549).

After returning Conrad to his island, the poem leads us through two more experiences of failed sympathy at the diegetic and intra-diegetic levels. When the corsair rushes to the palace to see Medora, he finds her lifeless in her room. Her last narrated act had been one of sympathy. She had bravely faced the loneliness she expected when she believed Conrad dead, but when invited to imagine him bound and bleeding, but alive, she collapses (III: iii, l. 113). Medora, like Gulnare, models the success of sympathetic imagination, but her character also dramatizes sympathy's failure to perform any abstract ethical or practically salvific good. Her sympathy destroys her, and without her, Conrad loses the 'one virtue' that had until then thrived in him. His love is compared to a single flower surviving on stony ground, and at Medora's death 'That thunder came – that bolt hath blasted both, / The Granite's firmness, and the Lily's growth' (III: xxiii, ll. 673–674). The morning after Conrad has found Medora, Anselmo comes to Conrad's tower and finds him gone. The final image of the tale repels any effort to imaginatively sympathize with Conrad beyond the boundaries of the text as 'moons roll on moons away' and readers are not told whether Conrad remains alive in 'grief' or if he perishes in 'despair' (III: xxiv, l. 690).

Conclusion

'Mediating the obscure complexities' of the Byronic hero, the reader is, according to Jerome McGann 'thrown back on himself'.³⁵ This is where we find ourselves at the end of *The Corsair*. Through character after character, the narrative perspective invites readers to identify with secondary characters and share their

³⁴ Ellis, 'Review of *The Corsair* and *Lara*', 454.

³⁵ McGann, *Byron and Romanticism*, 38.

adoration of Conrad. A passage of direct address from the first Canto makes explicit the command that the narrative perspective implies throughout: ‘Stranger! If thou canst and tremblest not, / Behold his soul’ (I: x, ll. 243–244). In a parallel line, the narrator then deflects readers’ vision to a generalized spirit of man in which we also find ourselves: ‘Behold – but who hath seen, or e’er shall see, / Man as himself – the secret spirit free?’ (I: x, ll. 247–248). Conrad, here, is both an individualized character with curling lips and clenching hands (I: x, ll. 231, 236), and a vehicle for the contemplation of ‘man as himself’. The moment of transition from contemplating Conrad to contemplating ourselves enacts in miniature the experience of being immersed in a reading of the tale and falling under its spell of sympathy and then, upon reflection, asking ourselves about the easy operation and moral inconsequence of such sympathy. Identifying with the other through the contemplation of ‘man as himself’ – the contemplation of the human condition we all share – would be sympathy’s most complete success. The narrator despairs that such sympathy will not succeed. The rhetorical question implies that none of us can really see the ‘secret spirit’ that binds us together as human beings.

The scene of Conrad in his cell discussed earlier offers the most open invitation for readerly sympathy, but it also shows sympathy collapsing into contemplation of the solitary self. The narration positions readers in the cell with Conrad, able to hear what he hears and sometimes what he thinks. At first, Byron’s language possesses the gasping pace that indicates we are reading free, indirect discourse: ‘long anxious – weary – still – the same / Rolled day and night’ (III: vi, ll. 208–209). Conrad’s vulnerability, the contemplation of mortality which we have been led to perform on his behalf, the intimacy of the cell with only the implied reader present – these elements of the scene consolidate many of the separate techniques for cultivating sympathy that Byron has used throughout the poem. Very soon, however, the narrative voice leads readers to shift from thinking about him to thinking about ourselves.

A close look at this scene in contrast with the initial portrayal of Conrad reveals sympathy’s tendency to collapse into self-absorption. Byron’s use of pronouns is again significant. Readers are implicitly ‘bound and fix’d in fettered solitude’ with Conrad in the cell, ‘To pine, the prey of every changing mood’ when the narrative shifts suddenly to direct address. We readers are told:

To gaze on thine own heart – and meditate
 ...
 To count the hours that struggle to thine end,
 With not a friend to animate and tell
 To other ears that Death became thee well; (III: vi, ll. 222–229)

In Canto I, readers were incorporated with Conrad into the category of 'Man as himself –the secret spirit free' (I: x, l. 248). Now the imagery suggests confinement, isolation, and an individualized man or woman gazing at his or her own heart rather than at a universal free spirit. The suggestion of permeable selves is gone, and we see only our reflection.

Byron inspires our sympathy, particularly through the manipulation of narrative perspective, but *The Corsair* finally demands that we question the value of sympathy as a motivator for morally effective action. In its most hopeless moment, where Conrad contemplates his death, the tale questions the possibility of a sympathy that would release an individual from 'bound and fetter'd solitude'. I do not disagree with Jeffrey's assessment of *The Corsair's* power to inspire sympathy. Rather, I want to credit Byron with doing more than this. Like Gulnare, we sympathizing readers are not what we seem.