

The Piratical Counterfactual from Misson to Melodrama (summary)

MANUSHAG N. POWELL

Pirate lore, particularly the melodramatic form that dominated in the nineteenth century and remains very much in circulation today, would simply not function without authors and audiences alike having inherited a tradition of counterfactual thinking. The aim of this essay is to suggest (using pirates both real and imagined as the case in point) that by the eighteenth century, counterfactual writing was already in place and ready to contribute to the romantic aesthetic.

Eighteenth-century pirate writing liked to speculate about pirate colonies and utopias, and while there is nothing especially romantic about utopian thinking in general, the specific case of a pirate paradise brings an air of counterculture freedom that resonates well with the yearnings for *liberté, égalité, fraternité* still to come. That pirates held appeal for nineteenth-century audiences is not very shocking, for they represented rebellion, class warfare, the troubles of empire, and the sort of magnetic, misanthropic antihero often termed “Byronic.” But eighteenth- and nineteenth-century pirates are linked generically as well as thematically.

It is not far wrong to consider nearly all latter-day literary pirates as what some literary scholars call “counterfictions,” deliberate revisions of established literary worlds to improve, correct, or wonder “what if?”—for example, something like Nahum Tate’s famous happy-ending version of *King Lear*, or J. M. Barrie’s Captain Hook, who served with Blackbeard (real) and frightened Captain Flint (fictional).¹ Before they could be fictionalized and counterfictionalized, real pirates were adapted, counterfactualized, and the blank spaces in their autobiographies filled (their dimmer character aspects made more brilliant). This chain of pirate intersections, of the real with the imagined, is the heart of how pirate narratives came to function in the nineteenth century: counterfactuals merging into counterfictions.

On 9 April 1798, the Royal Circus Theatre hosted the premiere of John Cartwright Cross’ *Blackbeard; or, The Captive Princess*, a spectacular pantomime opera that proved the most famous pirate melodrama of its time and through to the 1850s.² The play was centred on the capture of the Grand Mughal’s ship by Blackbeard and the travails of Princess Ismene, one of its fair passengers, when the lustful Blackbeard absconds with her back to his treasure-laden fortress in Madagascar. The plot is complex and includes some complicated racial politics, cross-dressing, wife murder, ghosts, and sword fights in plenty—but it eventually ends, as one might suppose, with fiery explosions and “*British Valour and Humanity conspicuously triumphant*,” all the true lovers reunited, and Blackbeard vanquished by the hero Lieutenant Maynard.³

“Blackbeard” (the nickname of Edward Thatch or Teach) was a real pirate and Maynard the name of his vanquisher, but the historical villain was a West Indian rover with no base in Madagascar, nor did he ever molest a Mughal princess; if he was haunted by a wife’s vengeful ghost,

¹ On the term, see Richard Saint-Gelais, “How to Do Things with Worlds: From Counterfactuality to Counterfictionality,” in *Counterfactual Thinking—Counterfactual Writing*, ed. Dorothee Birke, Michael Butter, and Tilmann Köppe (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co., 2011), 251.

² Burwick and Powell, *British Pirates in Print and Performance*, 39. For a history of its staging, see 39-42.

³ John Cartwright Cross and James Sanderson, *The Songs, Duets, Glees, Chorusses, &c. In the Popular Grand Spectacle of Music, Dance, and Action, called, Black Beard; or, The Captive Princess: As Performed Upwards of 100 Nights, at the Royal Circus, Last Season; and Revived with New Songs, Scenery, Dresses, &c. on Wednesday, May 15, 1799* (London: T. Burton, 1799), 6.

no documentary evidence of that survives. To spice up his show with the oriental exotic, Cross deviated from history and borrowed heavily from the plot of Charles Johnson's *The Successful Pirate* (1712), a tragicomic account (whose amorality badly distressed critics such as John Dennis) of the exploits of Captain Avery, the most famous English pirate pre-Blackbeard. Cross's reframing of Teach in Avery's mould launched a vast tradition of the lustful stage pirate versus captive maiden. The twist is that, while Avery was both real and remarkable and his renowned assault on Aurengzeb's pilgrim fleet in 1696 was well-documented, his most legendary action – marrying the princess he found on board the *Ganj-i-sawai* and with her founding a dynasty in his piratical colony on Madagascar – never happened. Cross's play was the most important popular source for romantic pirates and romanticising the pirate until Sir Walter Scott's Captain Cleve-land (who was brought to life in three competing stage versions within less than a month of the publication of *The Pirate* in December 1821) and especially Byron's Conrad (the *Corsair* was staged in at least five different adaptations before mid-century) came along.⁴ And Cross's play is not inventive, but highly speculative: asking not only *what if* Blackbeard had been more like Avery (who was, technically speaking, also not like the historical Avery at all), but also building upon previous widespread speculations that Avery planned a Roman-style future for himself complete with bride theft and a growing empire. Blackbeard, meanwhile, was popular in large part due to his sensational treatment as a theatrical, lascivious devil in *A General History of the Pyrates* (1724-1728).⁵

Not content with fictionalizing the lives of both Blackbeard and Avery, the *General History* also introduced a romance (in the generic sense) about a liberty-loving French pirate named Captain Misson. Misson's strange idealistic, bifurcated, and curtailed narrative feels markedly out of place in the largely law-and-order *General History*. Through Misson's narrative, the *General History* experiments with a number of modes—including history and romance and, through their combination, counterfactual writing. This is more than just an interesting quirk of composition. It is radical experimentation, an extremely early and atypical example of the counterfactual mode. Counterfactual writing is not a new genre, although its popularity within fiction is fairly modern. I am attempting to be somewhat provocative by using the term “counterfactual” here; for although the concept of counterfactual thinking and writing has lately generated excitement in nineteenth-century studies, its place, if any, in the eighteenth century remains mostly unexplored, and among the treatments of eighteenth-century counterfactual that do exist, none account for the kind of writing in the *General History*.

Further, there is a special connection between counterfactual writing and pirates in popular Anglophone culture. The *General History* shrewdly formalizes what has always been the heart of pirate legends: that their transgressions outside the bounds of law, culture, and nation court fiction into every pirate history. The tendency is towards what are called “upward” counterfactuals, retellings that make imagined piracy more positive than it was—more thoughtful, chivalric, ideologically pure; less violent, less implicated in sins like the slave trade, less greedy, less threatening. This is not an impulse limited to the literary realm, either; historians too often want piracy generally, and even Misson in particular, to be representative of an organised anti-capitalist counterculture that never really materialised in a consistent form.

⁴ Burwick and Powell, *British Pirates in Print and Performance*, 73, 59-72.

⁵ John Robert Moore attributed the *General History of the Pyrates* to Defoe in *Defoe in the Pillory and Other Studies* (1939); Furbank and Owens reject the attribution in *The Canonization of Daniel Defoe* (1988) and *Defoe De-Attributions* (1994). Arne Bialuschewski, in contrast, makes the case for Mist in “Daniel Defoe, Nathaniel Mist, and the *General History of the Pyrates*,” *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 98.1 (2004): 21-38.

The *General History* might be said to have three beginnings: the Preface and Introduction, the first chapter of Volume I, and (added in 1728) the first chapter of Volume II. Pointedly, each of these beginnings weighs the possibility of a pirate nation. The first comes from introducing Rome as a nation both of, and dogged by, pirates. The second appears in the *General History's* odd choice for Chapter 1, a heavily revisionist representation of the life and fate of the legendary Captain Avery and his men. By and large (though with the notable exception of the British East India Company!) the English public was inclined to view Avery as a seafaring Robin Hood. Though the captain had not been sighted since 1696, Avery's band lived on in speculative fiction, and were depicted as "merry outlaw" imperialists in texts such as the 1709 *Life of Avery* by the pseudonymous Adrian van Broeck.⁶ In the *General History*, however, Avery's pirates took slaves, set up plantations, and generally behaved wretchedly to the natives around them, "Tyrant like they lived, fearing and feared by all," (61) until Woodes Rogers comes upon them and finds the petty pirate princes rather tattered. Illiterate, bestial criminals of the lowest orders, they neither offer any real threat to a well-armed civilized Englishman, nor any deep appeal to the reader.

If the *General History* were to stop here, it would be fairly simple to read its version of the pirates on Madagascar as satirically dystopian. But, curiously, it does not. In Volume I it lowers the historical Avery, who was not a very nice man but did at least really lead a group of poor sailors in successful rebellion against what amounted to wage slavery, *down* into a craven opportunist with no principles and little intelligence. The opening chapter to Volume II replaces Avery with an equally aggrandised but obviously fictional figure who just like Avery begins with mutiny and ends with an attempt at Madagascar dynasty: Captain Misson, who bases his career on revolutionary principles of liberty that seem ripped backwards in time from 1789. When the *General History* revises the fictional source material of Misson's story and interpolates it into Tew's, it transforms the whole into a counterfactual narrative, one that pretends to contain the wild, romantic rebellion proposed by Misson, but is really just admitting the intractable role of the main themes of Avery's legend in received pirate history. This is what counterfactual writing does: it plays upon readers' willingness and even desire to invest in an alternative world in which we pretend a thing we know did not happen, did.

The *General History* is careful to temper the subversive power of Misson by intertwining his imaginary destiny with that of a historically real pirate, Thomas Tew, who sailed in Avery's fleet. Ultimately the *General History* kills off both men, the real and the invented, attempting to bury Avery's fame in their collectively failed potential. The strange staggering of Misson's story into Tew's has vexed readers of the *General History*, for its effect is profound: mixing Misson and Tew means this is not a mere interpolated fiction, but rather, crucially, it is carefully structured as a very early example of counterfactual writing. According to Catherine Gallagher, counterfactual writing did happen in the eighteenth century, but largely with respect to religious debates and "critical military histories," which were more common in the romantic period.⁷ Most eighteenth-century counterfactuals revolved around divinely-rooted versions of the idea of many possible worlds. What happens in the *General History*, which is neither military nor overtly attributed to Providence, is atypical of its cultural moment, and might seem more at home a half century or so later.

Misson's strange story is redolent with almost-romantic discourse; and perhaps the counterfactual mode is especially prone to usher in a romantic discontent regardless of time and place.

⁶ For a discussion of the sources, see Burwick and Powell, *British Pirates in Print and Performance*, 28-30.

⁷ Catherine Gallagher, "What Would Napoleon Do?: Historical, Fictional, and Counterfactual Characters," *New Literary History* 42.2 (2011): 323.

As Damian Walford Davies has remarked, “That aspect of the Romantic aesthetic that valorises the contingent and the possible over the rigidly determinist is always attuned to alternative histories and realities.”⁸ The rebellious Captain Misson calls up his men and tells them he wants “a Life of Liberty,” and that if they choose, as they do, to obey him, he will use it only for their good (391). Eventually, Misson and his men end up near Madagascar, founding a colony on the northwest coast of the main island. He calls it Libertalia, “and gave the Name of *Liberi* to his People, desiring in that might be drown’d the distinguish’d Names of *French, English, Dutch, Africans, &c.*” (417). Here, with the birth of a new nationality, the story suddenly breaks off.

We do not hear of the end of that colony until we encounter Captain Thomas Tew, who, like Avery and unlike Misson, was real. As the author of the *General History* must have known, given the other details he includes about him, Tew met his fate in 1695. But the text is using Misson to present an alternative, or more precisely counterfactual, version of the fantasy version of Avery, one who is truly admirable, even improbably so. Tew decides to visit Captain Misson’s utopian colony, though this is a trip not only to no place, but to no time, for Misson’s story takes place at least a decade or two after the real Tew died. Tew befriends and admires Misson and joins his naval company, but their happiness is short-lived, for one night, “without the least Provocation given ... the Natives came down upon [the *Liberi*] in two great Bodies, and made a great Slaughter, without distinction of Age or Sex” (437). Misson’s radical experiment is, in short, wiped from the Earth as though it never existed; he makes no substantial alteration to the real timeline, and importantly his loss is coded as a personal tragedy rather than a large societal one.

Strikingly, then, both volumes of the pirate Ur-text *General History* open through allohistory, by describing the failure of different Madagascar-based piratopias that never were. The *General History* compulsively re-writes the demise of Avery perhaps as basic reaffirmation of the need for strong, reliable government particularly in the dawning age of empire. And yet, if that is its purpose, it fails. Libertalia has persisted as a rumoured utopia for centuries, engaging sober historians to take it rather more seriously as an example of pirate principles than they probably ought (even today its Wikipedia page admits only that it is “a possibly fictional anarchist colony”). It failed too, at least in part, to quash Avery, whose fabled exploits are now typically assigned to Blackbeard or other fictional pirates in fictions and films. The *General History* ultimately only guarantees that the myth of the pirate nation will be available to later writers and pirate lovers.

Reading Misson as a self-aware exercise in counterfactual thinking, then, moves us crucially closer to understanding the romanticisation that took place for pirates especially in the nineteenth century, which was the age not of Avery, but of Cleveland, Conrad, and Long John Silver. Stevenson’s Silver, who, like Hook, claimed to have known Blackbeard, hops about with a waggish, dynamic swagger more likely found on the stage than the quarterdeck. Scott’s Clement Cleveland was roughly based on the pirate John Gow, who had been written on by both Johnson and Defoe; Byron’s Conrad came from the complex problem of Greek pirates (who resisted Ottoman rule, but also tended to attack other ships). Under his white flag, Misson, a pirate who thought he was better than a pirate, appears in some core ways more akin to Byron’s idealistic and doomed Conrad than to the *General History*’s notoriously cruel Blackbeard or low cunning Avery. The shift from anarchic thief to ideologically motivated nineteenth-century swashbuckler was especially apparent in the populist incarnation of the stage pirate. The pirate authors who followed

⁸ Damian Walford Davies, ‘Introduction: Reflections on Orthodoxy’, in *Romanticism, History, Historicism: Essays on Orthodoxy* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 10.

Cross's opera were wide awake to the dramatic implications of their vogue, and there is something performative and theatrical even about most prose pirates.

The history of Cross's smash hit *Blackbeard* and the what-if pirate thinking that paved its way—a series of tales in which pirates can be greedy and cruel as well as loving and idealistic, historically based but imagined as fantasy, in Madagascar and America at once—is a monument to the fruitful flexibility of counterfactualism. Pirate lore in the romantic period is strongly anchored by the golden age of piracy in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries (roughly 1650-1730) that was documented by the *General History* and yet, at the same time, as Misson shows, it stays adrift in atemporal seas. The voyages that Stevenson's Silver sailed with Blackbeard and Captain England—and Barrie's Hook with Silver and Captain Morgan—are not only anticipated but enshrined when the *General History* decides to have Captain Tew leave Avery (with whom he really did consort) for Captain Misson (with whom pirates could sail only in dreams). In Cross's *Blackbeard*, source material includes the legend built up around Captain Avery, whose fanciful Madagascar empire had been cried down in Volume I of the *General History*, and then revisited and purified via Captain Misson in Volume II.

The romance and arguably romantic land of Libertalia itself has certainly lived on in pirate lore. In, for example, the 1952 film *Against All Flags*, Libertalia is the name of the pirate community in Madagascar. In a literary example, William S. Burroughs concludes his Red Night Trilogy with *Cities of the Red Night* (1981), a nonlinear counterfiction that thinks itself counterfactual, in which Libertalia survived and men seek to live in the present day by the articles of Captain Misson. "Had Captain Mission [sic] lived long enough to set an example for others to follow, mankind might have stepped free," suggests Burroughs.⁹ Pirate audiences are remarkably willing to balance fascination with the "real" history of piracy against a love for those fantasy versions of pirates who never sailed, but could have. The what-if? questions that seem radical and daring intellectual acts for modern critics were quite literally the core enabling aesthetic of such romantic tales.

⁹ William S. Burroughs, *Cities of the Red Night* (New York: Viking, 1981), xiv. Burroughs returned to his counterfactual Misson in *Ghost of Chance* (Whitney Museum of American Art, 1991).