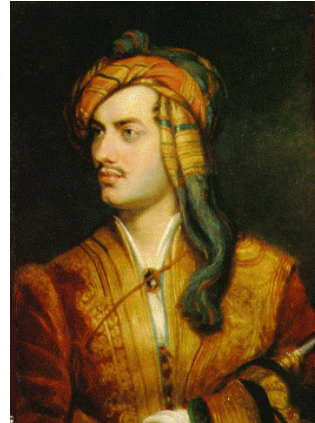
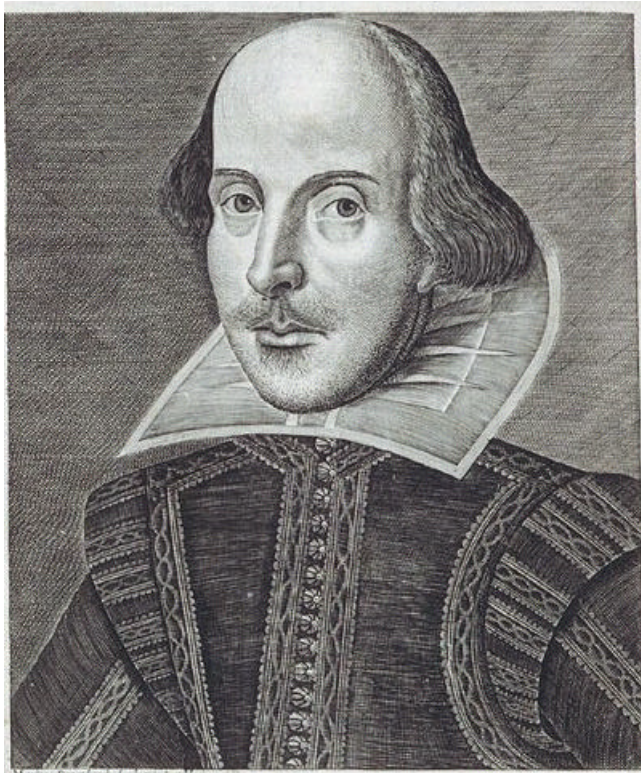


## MANFRED STEALS FROM SHAKESPEARE



Byron could wax braggadocio on the subject of Shakespeare's second-rate qualities. On March 24th 1814 he wrote to James Hogg about them:

Shakespeare's name, you may depend on it, stands absurdly too high and will go down. He had no invention as to stories, none whatever. He took all his plots from old novels, and threw their stories into a dramatic shape, at as little expense of thought as you or I could turn his plays back again into prose tales. That he threw over whatever he did write some flashes of genius, nobody can deny: but this was all. Suppose any one to have the *dramatic* handling for the first time of such ready-made stories as *Lear*, *Macbeth*, &c. and he would be a sad fellow, indeed, if he did not make something very grand of them. [As] for his historical plays, properly historical, I mean, they were merely redressings of former plays on the same subjects, and in twenty cases out of twenty-one, the finest, the very finest things, are taken all but *verbatim* out of the old affairs. You think, no doubt, that *A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse!* is Shakespeare's. Not a syllable of it. You will find it all in the old nameless dramatist. Could not one take up *Tom Jones* and improve it, without being a greater genius than *Fielding*? I, for my part, think Shakespeare's plays might be improved, and the public seem, and have seemed for to think so too, for not one of his is or ever has been acted as he wrote it; and what the pit applauded three hundred years past, is five times out of ten not Shakespeare's but *Cibber's*.<sup>1</sup>

Shakespeare, then, had no invention – he borrowed his best ideas from previous works – anyone could do as he did, given the same old novels and plays to plunder – most of his supposedly greatest hits are by other writers anyway.

The conscious contempt seems, however, to have been compensated in Byron's mind by a huge reservoir of Shakespearean quotation<sup>2</sup> which shows a subconscious reliance on the previous writer much greater than that he shows for his supposed favourites, such as *Pope* or

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1: BLJ IV 84-5.

2: In his letters, Byron's favourite Shakespearean phrase is *Falstaff's* "us youth". He identifies more with *Falstaff* than with the next two favourites, who are *Coriolanus* and *Macbeth*.

Fielding. Whatever his public strain, the private Byron knew his Shakespeare intimately. I propose to look at some examples, from one work.

*Manfred* is more Shakespearean than Byron's later closet-dramas *Marino Faliero*, *The Two Foscari* and *Sardanapalus*, in that, like *Cain* and *The Deformed Transformed*, it ignores the unities of time and place with maximum indifference. But the classical dramas are in turn more Shakespearean than *Manfred*, in that they place their protagonists in important political roles, and make the political cost of their sufferings a vital aspect of the drama. It is important for Manfred's individual case that he should be a feudal landowner, unrestricted by the bourgeois demands which circumscribe Faustus and Faust; but his career and death, lamented though they are in both versions of Act III, do not have the significance for his County and his vassals that Macbeth's does for Scotland, or that Hamlet's does for Denmark. Who will inherit his realm? No-one bothers to ask. Byron is interested in creating actively critical perspectives on his protagonist, but not in having him engage in such radical dialectics as characterize, for example, the relationships between Bolingbroke and Richard II, or Octavius and Antony.

I find far more – and more convincing – Shakespearean allusions, both overt and buried, in *Manfred* than I find Biblical ones, despite the assertions of Jerome McGann<sup>3</sup> and the listings of Travis Loper in *Byron and the Bible*.<sup>4</sup> Some are so obvious that they would be embarrassing, if they could not be read as open acknowledgements of creative debt, and if we could not see Byron using them cunningly, in a way that I don't think has been appreciated. Shakespeare's memorable quality, and his overwhelming power, obviously give him an unfair advantage, and place at his mercy any writer who does not exercise care over detail; but I think no playwright who knew what he was doing could make a character say, for example, "Alas! he's mad" (II i 59) or "I am most sick at heart" (I i 113) without setting up a series of echoes which he expects us to hear, and of which he is making imaginative use (for these two, see *Hamlet*, III iv 105 and *Macbeth*, V iii 20). Other lines may show Byron with his guard lowered slightly: thus, when Manfred tells the Chamoix Hunter "I am not of thy order" (II i 38) it could just be bad luck which causes an echo to start from Malvolio's "I am not of your element" (*Twelfth Night*, III iv 119).

I may be open to the accusation of being too charitable: but I should like to examine the possibility that Byron knew exactly what he was doing in placing so many Shakespearean references in *Manfred*, and that he handles them, for the most part, with skill, and in a variety of different ways.

The play's brevity is not Shakespearean, and derives from the fact that where in a Shakespeare play we see the protagonist's whole tragic career, from commencement via transgression to catastrophe (or however it shapes itself), with *Manfred*, all is effectively over before the plot starts, and our interest lies in watching, with leisurely concentration, as he approaches death, with no thought that his end could involve anything else. He is damned from the outset, a fact which Byron signals by two covert allusions to *Macbeth*, in the very first speech of the play:

My slumbers, if I slumber, are no sleep,  
But a continuance of enduring thought ... (I i 3-4)

... I have no dread,  
And feel the curse to have no natural fear ... (I i 24-25)

The lines are not direct quotations, as are the two I refer to in the first paragraph above, but operate with greater discretion, firstly informing us what really is the case with *Manfred*, and then, as if by ancillary dramatic shorthand, making his case graver by offering us *Macbeth*'s by way of parallel (compare *Macbeth*, II ii 35-43 – "Macbeth doth murder sleep", and so on;

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3: See CPW IV 476.

4: Travis Loper, *Byron and the Bible*, Scarecrow Press Metuchen, 1978, pp. 124-5 and 234-8.

III ii 16-22 – “these terrible dreams that shake us nightly”; and V v 9 – “I have almost forgot the taste of fear”.)

The next Shakespearean allusion works in the opposite way, by contrast rather than parallel. It occurs a few lines later, when Manfred summons the spirits. He starts thus (I i 41-6):

... Spirits of earth and air!  
You shall not now elude me – by a power  
Deeper than all yet urged – a tyrant’s spell  
Which had its birthplace in a Star condemned –  
The burning wreck of a demolished world –  
A wandering hell in the eternal space ...

We are being asked here, firstly to be impressed by Manfred’s conviction, but secondly to think of Hamlet’s sarcastic words to Laertes at V i 248-52: “What is he whose phrase of sorrow / Conjures the wandering stars, and makes them stand / Like wonder-wounded hearers? This is I, / Hamlet the Dane!” The immediate dramatic context works directly in one way; the Shakespearean sub-text indirectly, in another. Manfred, like Hamlet leaping into the grave of the woman whose father he killed, to try and strangle her brother, is at once heroic, and at the same time obsessed, and a long way beyond the pale. For conjuring spirits, see also the famous dialogue between Hotspur and Glendower at *Henry IV I* III i 53-5, about which Byron jokes at *Don Juan* VIII Stanza 38.)

At I ii 23-4, Manfred stands on the cliffs of the Jungfrau, and says, among other things,

There is a power upon me which withholds,  
And makes it my fatality to live.

This seems to me to echo Othello’s words to Iago at V ii 92-3: “I’d have thee live; / For in my sense, ’tis happiness to die”: and the paradox operates well in both cases, for just as Othello wants the hated Iago spared for as long as possible from the eternal rest that is death, so Manfred, not well-disposed towards himself, wishes the same fate on himself. Where Othello has power over Iago, his demon hitherto, so Manfred, his own demon both hitherto and now, retains power over himself, and will not wield it benignly.

At II i 31-2, the Chamoix Hunter refers to “some half-maddening sin” in Manfred “That makes thee people vacancy”, and the echo is clearly of Gertrude’s words to Hamlet at III iv 116-18:

Alas, how is’t with you,  
That you do bend your eye on vacancy,  
And with th’incorporeal air do hold discourse?

As what Manfred has just “seen” is non-existent blood on the rim of a cup, the allusion places him in cross-over territory between the hyper-cerebral Hamlet, guilty by omission, and the hyper-active Macbeth, guilty by commission, both of whom see ghosts invisible to their companions. The Chamoix Hunter, shortly afterwards, completes the equation by echoing Lady Macbeth at the Banquet scene (see III iv 63-4: “Oh, these flaws and starts, impostors to true fear ...”) and telling Manfred that “... these wild starts are useless”.

A different, and more sympathetic, usage occurs in the lines of Manfred about Astarte, to the Witch of the Alps at II ii 106-9:

She was like me in lineaments; her eyes,  
Her hair, her features, all, to the very tone  
Even of her voice, they said, were like to mine,  
But softened all and tempered into beauty ...

Byron here expands the lines of Sebastian to Antonio, about his sister Viola, at *Twelfth Night* II i 21-3: “A lady, sir, though it was said she much resembled me, was yet of many

accounted beautiful”; a borrowing which at once confers grace on Astarte, and, momentarily, on the erring Manfred, via his love for her.

There is a still more massive *Twelfth Night* borrowing (it is from Viola’s willow-cabin speech to Olivia) in Manfred’s words to Astarte at II iv 135-9:

Speak to me!  
For I have called on thee in the still night,  
Startled the slumbering birds from the hushed boughs,  
And woke the mountain wolves, and made the caves  
Acquainted with thy vainly echoed name,  
Which answered me ...

The grace thus given Astarte is, however, dissolved, when, at the end of the scene, Byron refuses to do the Witch’s will, and is asked by her (II ii 159-60)

Is this all? Hast thou not gentler answer?

Which recalls the Duke’s words to Shylock at IV i 33, “We all expect a gentle answer, Jew”: an expectation as surely dashed by Shylock’s behaviour as the Witch’s is by that of Manfred – who thus stands revealed as obsessively self-destructive in the way Shylock is.

There are several more examples of Byron playing elaborate Shakespearean games: but I wish to move on to one which I read as his most interesting experiment in Shakespearean imitation. Madame de Staël (*Germany*, II 193) compares the *Hexenküche* scene from *Faust* with the witches’ scenes in *Macbeth*, and shows a limited understanding of both. I think that Byron understood *Macbeth*, IV i (the Cauldron Scene) very well, and showed it when, in writing the corresponding II iv (the Hall of Arimanes) in *Manfred*, he inverted all its values (to advertise his intention, he starts the sequence with the Third Destiny asking Nemesis “Where hast thou been? / My sisters and thyself are slow tonight”: III iii 60-61 – compare *Macbeth* I iii, opening: “Where hast thou been, sister?” – “Killing swine”).

Macbeth starts the Cauldron Scene weakly placed in relation to the witches, and ends it even more weakly placed – subject utterly to their wills, and determined to kill Macduff’s family, thereby sealing his own doom. Yet the manner of the witches throughout seems to him subservient, and they allow him the impression that he is in control of everything that goes on around the cauldron – that, for instance, they call up the show of Banquo’s monarchs most unwillingly. It is an exercise in the most horrible dramatic irony, all directed against the protagonist. Byron ignores most of its lessons, and ostentatiously goes the other way. By contrast, Manfred starts the Hall of Arimanes strongly placed in relation to the Spirits – knowing (as Macbeth does not) exactly what he’s dealing with, but with faith that his will-power and occult strength will give him more than enough resilience to encounter whatever they can show him. He is damnably well prepared, in other words, to interpret the scene, where Macbeth is damnably predisposed to misinterpret it, and to derive all the wrong, hopeful messages from it. The Byronic irony is that by the end of his scene Manfred has suffered much more than has Macbeth, because he knows exactly what is going on; the knowledge that he isn’t being duped, and that despite his willingness to suffer in her stead (II iv 125-6) Astarte and he are both probably damned.

The Shakespearean protagonist to whom Manfred stands nearest is Prospero; perhaps Byron’s cunning is to be seen in the absence of any obvious references to *The Tempest* anywhere in the play, for the contrast would be too harsh in terms of the limitations the parallel exposed. Prospero seems to me every bit as guilt-ridden as Manfred (conceivably over a liaison with Sycorax, leading to the birth of Caliban, more evil than any transgression Manfred and Astarte could commit): as arrogant, and as self-contemptuous: probably as death-fixated: yet so much more as well. Leaving aside his roles as father, father-in-law, brother, and ruler, Prospero’s attitude to his magic has more generosity about it than does Manfred’s. Manfred’s art is less impressive than his – he has “bedimmed / The noontide sun” (V i 41-2), an act which Manfred would never contemplate. Manfred never uses his art for

anything other than the furtherance of his own self-destruction. No marriage-masques are given in his Tower; and he could never, as Prospero does at the climax of *The Tempest*, listen to the moral advice of one of his own spirits – he must dominate his spirit-world at all costs, and in consequence none of them love him, as Ariel loves Prospero. When Prospero dies, it will be as a mortal: Manfred insists on dying as a Magus, and we wonder whether his version of Magism may not be devalued by the insistence.

We have finally to admit that Byron is no Shakespeare, acute as is his ear for apt allusion, and cunning as is his critical faculty. In III i, Manfred explains to the Abbot why he could never tolerate a role as political leader:

Manfred: I could not tame my nature down; for he  
Must serve who fain would sway – and soothe – and sue –  
And watch all time – and pry into all place –  
And be a living lie – who would become  
A mighty thing amongst the mean, and such  
The Mass are; I disdained to mingle with  
A herd, though to be leader – and of wolves.  
The lion is alone – and so am I. –

Abbot: And why not live and act with other men?

Manfred: Because my nature was averse from life;  
And yet not cruel; for I would not make,  
But find a desolation: – like the Wind,  
The red-hot breath of the most lone Simoom,  
Which dwells but in the Desert ... (III i 116-29)

Compare Coriolanus at III ii 110-23:

Well, I must do it.  
Away, my disposition, and possess me  
Some harlot's spirit! My throat of war be turn'd,  
Which quired with my drum, into a pipe,  
Small as an eunuch, or the virgin voice  
That babies lulls asleep! The smiles of knaves  
Tent in my cheeks, and schoolboys' tears take up  
The glasses of my sight! A beggar's tongue  
Make motion through my lips, and my armed knees,  
Who bow'd but in my stirrup, bend like his  
That hath received an alms! I will not do't:  
Lest I surcease to honour mine own truth,  
And by my body's action teach my mind  
A most inherent baseness.

Byron would eschew, in Manfred as in his classical plays, such base figures as harlots, eunuchs, babies, knaves, schoolboys, knees, and alms: and the result is that we can't take the snobbish Manfred as seriously as we can the viscerally-repelled Coriolanus (it's true that he is, as it were, on the spot, where Manfred is remembering). Lions and wolves are, Byron thinks, more dignified, because more distant and elevated. Manfred's contempt for politics leaves him open to the accusation that he never tried it and so shouldn't knock it. If Vathek's tale smacks somewhat of High Camp when compared with Manfred's, so does Manfred's when compared with that of Coriolanus, or of Macbeth. Byron's Shakespearean echoes finally work towards devaluing the tragedy they are intended to underpin. It's a fine revenge on Shakespeare's part for all the silly jibes in that letter to Hogg.