BYRON AND HAMLET

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I

Referring to what he had omitted from his Memoirs Byron wrote that they were "like the play of Hamlet—the part of Hamlet omitted by particular desire". This seemingly careless witticism suggests a line of investigation of some importance, since the correspondences between Byron's life and Shakespeare's play may be used to enrich our understanding of both.

The fatherless Byron grew up in close association with a mother as difficult as himself, each enduring a dramatic interplay of antagonism and affection. As a youth Byron was anxious to break free from "this maternal bondage" under a "domestic tyrant". He could be violently critical; she whom he should revere as his "guide and instructor" shows a "perversion of temper" corrupting his own, her "harshness" being varied by "ridiculous indulgence". Byron's youthful criticisms resemble Hamlet's at a slightly later age; each demands of his mother virtues she does not possess and suffers agonies of revulsion. And yet Byron wrote home regularly on his early travels. We must hold in mind both the affection, on which John Galt lays a heavy emphasis, and the antagonism. After Mrs. Byron's death Byron's entanglement in familial emotions was maintained through his association with his half-sister, Augusta Leigh.

1 A lecture delivered in the Library series of public lectures. The main sources used, other than the poetry, are: The Works of Lord Byron: Letters and Journals, edited by R. E. Prothero, Lord Ernie, 6 vols., 1898–1901 and Lord Byron's Correspondence, edited by John Murray, 2 vols., 1922. These are designated by the signs LJ and C. respectively. Shakespearian references apply to the Oxford Shakespeare.

2 Murray, 29 October 1819 (LJ, iv. 369).

3 Augusta, 18 August 1804; 6 November 1805; Hanson, 13 December 1805 (LJ, i. 31, 81, 90).

4 John Galt, The Life of Lord Byron, 1830; xxv. 162.
Byron was by nature lonely and melancholy. Despite school and university friendships and early love-affairs an autobiographical truth is conveyed by the stanzas “to Inez” in *Childe Harold*:

It is that settled, ceaseless gloom
The fabled Hebrew wanderer bore;
That will not look beyond the tomb,
But cannot hope for rest before.

The supposed hero’s life is blighted, like Hamlet’s, by “the demon Thought”.

Sometimes Byron felt himself “an isolated being on the earth”, and despite his happier tendencies his wife, years later, was not far out in saying “at heart you are the most melancholy of mankind; and often when apparently gayest”.

Sir Walter Scott thought that the “proper language” of his features “was that of melancholy”.

It was the romantic, Gothic, Byron so well described by John Galt, withdrawn, silent and wrapped in a mysterious gloom that first impressed itself on his contemporaries.

These tendencies were fearfully accentuated by bereavement. Hamlet lost his father and was shocked by his mother’s hasty re-marriage. On his return from his early travels, Byron was staggered by a succession of bereavements. His mother and some of his nearest friends, C. S. Matthews, J. Wingfield and John Edleston, were dead. “Some curse,” he wrote, “hangs over me and mine. My mother lies a corpse in this house; one of my best friends is drowned in a ditch.” This was Matthews who had “perished miserably in the muddy waves of the Cam”.

The various sorrows fell on him, as on Hamlet, “within a month”; this last phrase, together with “one little month” in another letter, and the word “muddy”, all recalling *Hamlet*. Byron realizes, as Claudius reminds Hamlet, that we “shall all one day pass along with the rest—the world is too full of such things, and our very sorrow is selfish”; but Hamlet’s bitter “Ay, madam, it is common”, balancing Byron’s “too full”, is the prevailing note.

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1 *Childe Harold*, after i. 84. 2 Long, 16 April 1807 (*LJ*, ii. 19, note).
3 *Detached Thoughts*, October 1821, 73 (*LJ*, v. 446).
4 Quoted *LJ*, iv. 73, note.
5 Galt, viii. 63.
6 Scrope Davies; Hobhouse; Dallas; 7, 10, 12, August 1811 (*LJ*, i. 324-7; *C*, i. 44); *Hamlet*, i. ii. 145, 147; iv. vii. 184.
Though Byron had for long lived close to death, meditating in a graveyard at Harrow and keeping four skulls in his room at Newstead,\(^1\) the corruption that had once been his mother remained "incomprehensible"; and yet, like Hamlet after the experience of communing with his father's ghost, he can engage in "a kind of hysterical merriment" which he cannot understand, and even laugh "heartily", wondering the while at himself; and he engages in athletic exercise.\(^8\)

Hamlet's loss of his father and grief at his mother's betrayal corresponds to Byron's loss of his single remaining parent and his friends, especially Matthews, whom in a phrase from *Romeo and Juliet* he calls the "god" of Hobhouse's "idolatry". Just as Hamlet's father was "a man" on whom "every god did seem to set his seal" and whose "like" will not again be seen, so Matthews bore "the stamp of immortality" as one "created to display what the Creator could make his creatures", and this man was now "gathered into corruption".\(^3\) Later Byron was to praise William Windham as "a man of action", seeing him as Mercutio or Hamlet's father, both conceived, if we remember Mercutio's aspersions on the new duelling, as persons of an older order of manliness: so an action of heroism, he writes, has sent "that gallant spirit to aspire the skies"; he is gone, and Time "shall not look upon his like again".\(^4\)

Hamlet sees his father's ghost and Byron thought on one occasion that he saw Matthews's, soon after his death; "I nearly dropped, thinking that it was his ghost"; but it turned out to be his brother.\(^6\) Byron was strongly aware of ghostly presences: "Such a dream!—but she did not overtake me. I wish the dead would rest, however. Ugh! how my blood chilled. . . ."\(^6\) This was presumably his mother. The half-ruined Newstead was ghostly: "The ghosts, however, and the goths, and the

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\(^1\) Dallas, 12 August, 1811 (*LJ*, i. 327).
\(^2\) Hobhouse, 10 August 1811 (C, i. 44).
\(^3\) Hodgson, 22 August; Dallas, 7 September; 1811 (*LJ*, i. 338 and ii. 29); *Romeo and Juliet*, ii. ii. 114; *Hamlet*, iii. iv. 61–62; i. ii. 188; and see ii. ii. 323.
\(^4\) *Journal*, 24 November 1813 (*LJ*, ii. 342–3); *Romeo and Juliet*, iii. i. 123; *Hamlet*, i. ii. 188.
\(^5\) Murray, 9 November 1820 (*LJ*, v. 116).
\(^6\) *Journal*, 23 November 1813; *LJ*, ii. 334; also 341.
waters, and the desolation, make it very lively still.”¹ Byron thought that he saw a ghost there. Moore writes:

It was, if I mistake not, during his recent visit to Newstead, that he himself actually fancied he saw the ghost of the Black Friar, which was supposed to have haunted the Abbey from the time of the dissolution of the monasteries.²

This, or some similar, experience is reflected in the early narrative Lara and the late Don Juan. In Lara the hero communes with the dead while his retainers hint and gossip about those who are too discreetly wise

To more than hint their knowledge in surmise;
But if they would—they could.³

The correspondence with Hamlet’s warning to his friends not to let slip hints such as “we could an if we would”⁴ is exact. Lara undergoes ghostly experiences. He is in his Hall, by night, surrounded by Gothic windows and pictured saints of more than “mortal” life. His “bristling locks” are themselves like those of a “spectre” with a grave-like “terror”. Ghostly impressions pile up. A shriek wakes his retainers, who find him unconscious, sabre half-drawn, having fainted “in more than nature’s fear.”⁵ Afterwards Byron re-worked his Newstead memories into the description of Norman Abbey in Don Juan. Through its ruins sweeps an unearthly music of unknown cause which Byron claims to have heard “once perhaps too much”.⁶ We have a ballad on the ghost:

Amundeville is Lord by day,
But the Monk is Lord by night. . . .⁷

And so on, to the gripping conclusion when Juan, by night, beneath portraits mystically alive from the living past, is confronted by what seems a ghost; and though the conclusion takes a humorous turn, every element of terror has been given its poetry. It is not surprising that phrase-reminders from the ghost scenes of Hamlet occur near-by, though the actual context is trivial: “List, oh list” and “Alas, poor ghost.”⁸

¹ Moore, 13 August 1814 (LJ, iii. 126).
² Quoted LJ, III, 126, note; and see Thomas Moore, The Life, Letters & Journals of Lord Byron, 1 vol., edn. of 1866; iii. 27.
³ Lara, i. 9.
⁴ Hamlet, i. v. 176.
⁵ i. 11-13.
⁶ xiii. 64.
⁷ After xvi. 40.
⁸ xiii. 97; Hamlet, i. v. 22, 4.
On the young Byron Newstead Abbey with all its past and ancestral associations weighed heavily, exerting on him a kind of paternal authority. He seems to have thought that his own recent experiences had reawakened the slumbering dead. Of his old servant he writes to Hobhouse on 15 December 1811:

Joe Murray has been frightened by dreams and ghosts; it is singular that he never superstitized for seventy-six years before. All my affairs are going on very badly, and I must rebel too, if they don’t mend. I shall return to London for the meeting of Parliament.

The transition in thought serves to remind us that for Byron the occult powers held political relevance. Newstead and its pre-Reformation ghost symbolized the authority of an older order; and throughout his life the past existed as a semi-supernatural power variously countering and impelling his revolutionary course.

If Byron was, as we are so often told, superstitious, his superstitions, like Shakespeare’s, empower much of his greatest poetry, as in his sense of a numinous past throughout Childe Harold; the ghosts on the beleaguered battlements of Rome in The Deformed Transformed; the Doge’s communing with the ancestral dead on the eve of revolution in Marino Faliero; and the hero’s nightmare contact with his forbears in Sardanapalus. Byron was never himself for long free from such over-watching presences. The philosophy of it is written into Manfred, where the protagonist searches out death’s meaning from study of graves and skulls, is able, like Lara, to commune with the dead, and is shown doing it. Manfred, “the enlightener of nations”, is under the spell of

The dead, but sceptred, Sovereigns, who still rule
Our spirits from their urns.

Among Byron’s last works is Cain, patterned closely on Hamlet.

We open with a scene showing Cain standing apart from his family’s ceremonial of prayer and thanksgiving in which he cannot join because he is more sensitive than they to his parents’ fall and the new law of death. His parents are disturbed:

But thou, my eldest born? art silent still?

1 C, i. 67. 2 Manfred, ii. ii. 79–83, 177; ii. iv. 82–98; iii. i. 34–9. 3 iii. i. 107. 4 iii. iv. 40. 5 i. i. 26.
Cain's answers are curt as Hamlet's. Abel's "Why wilt thou wear this gloom upon thy brow?" and Adah's "Wilt thou frown even on me?" balance the Queen's "Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted colour off. . . .". Cain is half-paralysed by the situation arising from his parents' sin, in a state corresponding to the young Byron's—"Indeed the blows followed each other so rapidly that I am yet stupid from the shock"—and to Hamlet's after his father's death, his mother's marriage, and his subsequent meeting with the Ghost. Cain's encounter with Lucifer follows his first appearance among his relatives in a manner reminiscent of Hamlet; his decision to follow Lucifer has on the stage the exact impact of Hamlet's decision to follow the ghost, and both receive terrifying revelations. Cain is taken on a metaphysical excursion which includes the world of death where phantoms from the past stagger him as Hamlet is staggered "with thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls". His mental state after his return is a commentary on Hamlet's; having seen "the dead", and with eyes newly opened by his dialogues with Lucifer to the injustices of existence, he is "unfit for mortal converse". His following crime, motivated by a virtue, corresponds to Hamlet's disruptive and at times murderous behaviour. The ruling impression is death. Manfred is preluded by Hamlet's

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

The heading would have been even more apt for Cain.

Byron's Journals are used as Hamlet uses soliloquy to "unpack" his "heart" with "words".

This journal is a relief. When I am tired—as I generally am—out comes this, and down goes every thing.

They are full of Shakespearian reminiscence:

I am now six-and-twenty; my passions have had enough to cool them; my affections more than enough to wither them—and yet—and yet—always yet and but—'Excellent well, you are a fishmonger'—'Get thee to a nunnery'—'They fool me to the top of my bent'.

1 i. 53. 2 i. 56. 3 Hamlet, i. ii. 68. 4 Hodgson, 22 August 1811 (LJ, i. 338). 5 Hamlet, i. iv. 56. 6 III. i. 177, 184. 7 Hamlet, i. v. 166. 8 Hamlet, ii. ii. 622. 9 6 December 1813 (LJ, ii. 366). 10 18 February 1814 (LJ, ii. 383); Hamlet, ii. ii. 174; III. i. 144; III. ii. 408.
Death is a favourite theme. In a letter to Francis Hodgson on 3 September 1811 he had opposed immortality, introducing an argument with "argal" and saying "I argue like the Gravedigger";¹ though this is not to doubt the existence of God.² In his 1813–1814 Journal he quotes from Hamlet: "My restlessness tells me I have something within that passeth show."³ Thinking perhaps of Hamlet's "country from whose bourne no traveller returns", he wonders, "Is there anything beyond—who knows? He that can't tell. . . ."³ In Detached Thoughts he is more positive, concluding that mind is immortal and able to affect matter directly.⁴ Once, as an example of the "fulness" of Shakespeare's "finest passages"⁵ he chose the "To be or not to be" soliloquy,⁶ which in its interweaving of the themes of being, action, death and suicide was certainly the perfect example for his purpose. He discussed Shakespeare's "to be" again in Don Juan:

'To be or not to be?—Ere I decide,
I should be glad to know that which is being.
'Tis true we speculate both far and wide,
And deem, because we see, we are all-seeing:
For my part, I'll enlist on neither side,
Until I see both sides for once agreeing.
For me, I sometimes think that Life is Death,
Rather than Life a mere affair of breath.

Looking on his dead mother in 1811, Byron doubted "whether I was, or whether she was not".⁸

Like Hamlet, Byron thinks from time to time of suicide, the thought occurring as early as his boyhood letters to Augusta. After his ghostly nightmare he threatened to try "whether all sleep has the like visions", the suicide-thought following Hamlet's "for in that sleep of death what dreams may come".⁹ His wife feared his suicide during the troubles leading to the

¹ L J, ii. 21; Hamlet, v. i. 13, 20, 53.
² Gifford, 18 June 1813 (L J, ii. 221–2).
³ Journal, 27 November 1813; 18 February 1814 (L J, ii. 351, 385); Hamlet, i. ii. 85; iii. i. 79.
⁴ October 1821, 96; (L J, v. 456–8); and see Childe Harold, iii. 74 and Don Juan, v. 39.
⁵ Note to Childe Harold, iv. 75.
⁶ Hamlet, iii. i. 56.
⁷ ix. 16.
⁸ Hobhouse, 10 August 1811 (C, i. 44).
⁹ Journal, 23 November 1813 (L J, ii. 335); Hamlet, iii. i. 66.
separation. He was near suicide during the composition of the third Childe Harold:

I should, many a good day, have blown my brains out, but for the recollection that it would have given pleasure to my mother-in-law; and even then, if I could have been certain to haunt her...¹

The tone touches the jocular; but the jocularity of both Hamlet and Byron may be macabre.

In both there is a turning inward, as from life itself, expressed in Byron by his strong anti-physical tendencies. He is a mind at war with his body. His diet was generally vegetarian.² Often he lived on tea or soda-water and biscuits, and then normal dinners upset him.³ He was afraid of obesity,⁴ but another motive was the belief that meat aroused dangerous passions.⁵ These habits continued, with intermittent exceptions, throughout his life, and caused anxiety to his friends on his last expedition to Greece. He was a spiritualized, intellectual, type. "By starving his body", wrote E. J. Trelawny, "Byron kept his brains clear".⁶ William Parry said that he lived more on "thought" than on "food", and regarded him as "more a mental being" than "any man I ever saw".⁷ Byron could resent the dependence of intellect on food.⁸

There was in him, as in Hamlet, a strong moralizing, puritanical, strain, perhaps derived from his Calvinistic upbringing,⁹ and directed against both himself and others. He could no more "trust" himself than others with a "good motive"; if he is slandered, "Am I not in reality much worse than they make me?"¹⁰ His view of human nature—"Curse on Rochefoucault for being always right!"¹¹—corresponds to Hamlet's "Use every man after his desert, and who should 'scape whipping?"¹² and

¹ Murray, 28 January 1817 (LJ, iv. 49).
² Mrs. Byron, 25 June; Hobhouse, 17 November; Hodgson, 8 December; 1811 (LJ, i. 311; C, i. 61; LJ, ii. 87; Calt, viii. 62).
³ Journal, 5 and 6 December 1813; 10 April 1814 (LJ, ii. 360-1, 366, 411).
⁴ Long, also Pigot; April 1807 (LJ, ii. 19; i. 127, 290, with notes).
⁵ Journal, 17 November 1813 (LJ, ii. 327-8).
⁶ Records of Shelley, Byron and the Author; 1905, originally 1878; vi. 44.
⁸ Don Juan, v. 32.
⁹ Gifford, 18 June 1813 (LJ, ii. 222).
¹⁰ Lady Melbourne, 28 September 1813; March 1814 (C, i. 183, 247).
¹¹ Journal, 1 December 1813 (LJ, ii. 359).
¹² ii. 561.
I am myself indifferent honest; but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me. I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious; with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. What should such fellows as I do crawling between heaven and earth? We are arrant knaves all; believe none of us.¹

"Crawling": Byron too could see himself as an "insect"; he had long "despised" both himself and mankind.²

He was a severe critic of society. His disapproval of the new waltzing on moral grounds makes a substantial poem, *The Waltz*, which includes a satiric description of the Prince Regent reminding us of Hamlet's criticism of the drinking and dancing in Claudius's court:

The King doth wake tonight and takes his rouse,
Keeps wassail, and the swaggering up-spring reels;
And as he drains his draughts of Rhenish down,
The kettle-drum and trumpet thus bray out
The triumph of his pledge.³

From youth on, Byron makes bitter comments on contemporary morals, seeing the literary and social worlds as "penetrable stuff" to his thrusts.⁴ He could never "share in the commonplace libertinism" of Cambridge "without disgust"; he may himself fall, but he "hates" it; he takes no pleasure in "fashionable dissipation"; his friends' amours repel him; sickened by vice, he learns the value of love.⁵

At the period after Byron's first return from the East, "no anchorite", wrote Moore, was more averse to sensuous allurements than he.⁶ Though that does not tell the whole truth of Byron, it tells a part, and the strain persisted, rising to fierce moral denunciation in the *Ode on Venice* and the conclusion of *Marino Faliero*. Though Byron was, as he readily admitted, himself guilty, Hamlet was probably no saint either. He could attack Ophelia and his mother with neurotic frenzy, but himself appears

¹ iii. i. 125.
² Journal, 9 and 19 April 1814 (LJ, ii. 409, 412).
³ i. iv. 8.
⁴ English Bards and Scotch Reviewers, 1050; Hamlet, iii. iv. 36.
⁵ Detached Thoughts, October 1821, 72; Hanson, 23 November 1805 and 18 November 1808; Harness, 15 December 1811; Hoppner, 2 July 1819 (LJ, v. 446; i. 85; i. 199; ii. 91; iv. 326).
⁶ Moore, Life, ix. 95.
to have been a full-blooded Renaissance man, normally assiduous at athletic exercise¹ and ready enough to engage in bawdy talk;² and perhaps Laertes had reason to warn Ophelia against his advances.

II

Both Hamlet and Byron are happy in male companionship. Mixed parties Byron rejects with a Hamlet reminiscence: “I'll none of it.”³ But Hamlet’s welcoming of Horatio and afterwards of Rosencrantz and Guildernstern show a friendliness exactly Byronic. John Cam Hobhouse was a devoted university friend, Byron’s Horatio; intellectual, yet steady, almost stolid, more scholar than poet, of advanced politics and conventional morals, he recalls Hamlet’s high praise of Horatio, and if he does not quite deserve it, it is likely that Horatio did not either. Byron, rocked by diverse impulses, must often throughout his life have admired, and relied on, Hobhouse as a man of “judgment” who “is not passion’s slave”.⁴ In gayer moods Thomas Moore suited him better, or the “dashing vivacity” of Scrope Davies, always so “full of pleasautn mirth”⁵. Scrope was Byron’s Yorick:

I have solaced myself moderately with such ‘flagons of Rhenish’ as have fallen in my way, but without our Yorick they are nothing.⁶

Once, comparing him with a dull man of sterling virtue, Byron concludes with the words of that precursor of Hamlet the melancholy Jaques, “Motley’s the only wear”; and when Scrope is gone he comments, like Hamlet over Yorick’s skull, “I shall never hear such jokes again”⁷.

Elsewhere, writing to Lady Melbourne on 18 September 1812, Byron inexacty quotes from Jaques:

O that I were a fool, a motley fool,
I am ambitious of a motley coat.⁸

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¹ II. ii. 315; v. ii. 221. ² As at II. ii. 243–4; III. ii. 126. ³ Journal, 10 March 1813; and see 12 December 1813 and 20 March 1814 (LJ, ii. 399–9, 374, 402); Hamlet, III. i. 155. ⁴ Hamlet, III. ii. 74, 77. ⁵ Dallas, 7 September; Hobhouse, 15 December; 1811 (LJ, ii. 29; C, i. 66). ⁶ Hobhouse, 16 May 1816 (C, ii. 7–8); Hamlet, v. i. 196. ⁷ Hobhouse, 20 September 1811; 11 May 1820 (C, i. 47; ii. 148); As You Like It, ii. vii. 34. ⁸ C, i. 81; As You Like It, ii. vii. 13, 42–3.
Jaques wanted motley as a medium for social attack. So was it, often enough, with Byron; and here we must widen our discussion. Byron's resentment at maternal tyranny widened to a life-long campaign against political tyrannies. *Lara* is a study in personal anguish, but the hero is also a political revolutionary. Byron's mental torment has its political extensions and implications. He was bitterly critical of contemporary politics. Three times in 1812 in the House of Lords he attacked the ruling powers, arousing their hostility and mistrust, and being the more dangerous for his rank and the success of *Childe Harold*. However, he was quickly dissatisfied by the ineffectuality of speeches. Life was out-of-joint:

A king who *can't*, a Prince of Wales who *don't*,
Patriots who *shan't*, and Ministers who *won't*,
What matters who are *in* or *out* of place,
The *Mad*, the *Bad*, the *Useless* or the *Base*? ¹

Of these discontents, the Prince Regent was the obvious symbol and in 1812 Byron published an anonymous eight-line attack on him starting "Weep, daughter of a royal line...". Soon after, the Regent made a point of meeting the young and popular poet. Though Byron was impressed by his courtesy, he deliberately reprinted his attack under his own name, appending it to the second edition of *The Corsair* in 1814, with explosive effect.² Byron's refusal to respond to the kindly approaches of royalty from sense of a deep-seated iniquity that could not be veiled by manners corresponds to Hamlet's relations with Claudius.

And yet, like Hamlet, he was impotent. Disillusion regarding "parliamentary mummeries"³ had left him limp, unable to "stimulate" himself to help a petitioner:

Ah, I am as bad as that dog Sterne, who preferred whining over 'a dead ass to relieving a living mother'—villain—hypocrite—slave—sycophant! but *I* am no better... Curse on Rochefoucault for being always right! ⁴

We remember Hamlet's soliloquy "Now I am alone"—Byron often itches for aloneness⁵—with its self-accusation "Who calls

¹ Lady Melbourne, 21 September 1813 (C, i. 182).
⁴ *Journal*, 1 December 1813 (*LJ*, ii. 359).
⁵ E.g. *Journal*, 10 April 1814 (*LJ*, ii. 410).
me villain?" In society Byron had outbursts of unnatural hilarity like the hysteria he observed in himself at the time of his bereavements. When, soon after the hornet's nest aroused by the admission of his attack on the Prince Regent, he went to dinner with the Princess of Wales, he records that "The 'damnable faces' (as Hamlet says) of the whole party threw me into a convulsion of uncourtly laughter", which he had to strangle with his handkerchief.

Byron shows a mixture of impudence and self-accusation, of pride and humility. To intimates he was open, but for the world he adopted, as did Hamlet in putting on an "antic disposition", a mask: "I have", he wrote, "a part to play" and his "insolence" was half deliberate and half natural. Despite violent opposition he refused compromise. His lampoon was to be discussed in the House of Lords:

To complete the farce, the Morning Papers this day announce the intention of some zealous Rosencrantz or Guildernstern to 'play upon his pipe' in our house of hereditaries.

He remains calm. He has, quoting Hamlet, "that within me" that is unafraid; again, "All these externals are nothing to that within"; and anyway he takes no pleasure "in torturing earwigs", a phrase to be compared with Hamlet's use of "water-fly" for Osric.

The political relationship to Hamlet is closer than might be supposed. Byron's earliest poems were tuned to an old-world, classic heroism. The Newstead ghost represented a pre-Reformation order. Byron was deeply imbued with the mystique of the past and had enduring sympathies with Catholicism. To him England under the new Hanoverian monarchy may well have seemed, like the Queen in Hamlet, to have left a past greatness for a decadent present under pigmy kings controlled by dangerous cliques. Claudius's virtues include manners as fine as the

1 Hamlet, II. ii. 607.
2 Lady Melbourne, 25 April 1814 (C, i. 252); Hamlet, III. ii. 267.
3 Hamlet, I. v. 172.
4 Lady Melbourne, 29 April 1814 (C, i. 254).
5 Lady Melbourne, 11 February 1814 (C, i. 243); Hamlet, III. ii. 373.
6 Lady Melbourne, 11 February and March 1814 (C, i. 243-4, 247); Hamlet, i. ii. 85 and v. ii. 84; for "externals", Richard II, iv. i. 296.
Regent’s, a pacific diplomacy and a constitutional reliance on the “better wisdoms” of his advisers; there would appear to be an advance on the fierce old warrior-king in his “angry parle” smiting “the sledged Polacks on the ice”; and yet the new regime secretes a deception, an evil. Nor is religious help available. Claudius’s useless prayer of repentance is conceived—as is Laertes’s attack on the Priest—in what might be called “Protestant” terms in contrast to the more traditional eschatology of Hamlet’s following speech and the Catholic tonings of the Ghost scenes. Since the new British order was based on the blood of Stuart royalty Hamlet’s

Almost as bad, good mother,
As kill a king and marry with his brother. . . .

might be Byron addressing his own country. We must never forget that he thought himself descended from the Stuarts. Charles I, he once said, was “the greatest king (that is, villain) that ever lived”; and his own “bad blood” he attributed to those “bastards of Banquo”. Charles I had at least been a real king; that is the point, developed by Byron later in his study of the fiery warrior-Doge in *Marino Faliero*, chafing under the control of a vicious oligarchy. After thinking of the proposed strictures on him in the House of Lords Byron remembers his “pedigree”. On his departure from England he left a ring containing the hair of his royal ancestor for his child. Southey and Wordsworth he regarded much as Hamlet regarded Rosen- crantz and Guildernstern, men who sponge-like soak up the new king’s favours. Of Southey he wrote:

I was born of the aristocracy, which he abhorred; and am sprung, by my mother, from the kings who preceded those whom he has hired himself to sing.

To the last he remembered “through whom” his “life-blood” traced its descent (*On this Day I Complete my Thirty-Sixth Year*). Byron was no propagandist for royalty, but he knew that it had once held a validity to which contemporary society offered no

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1 i. ii. 15. 2 i. 62. 3 v. i. 262-4. 4 iii. iii. 36-98. 5 iii. iv. 28. 6 Lady Melbourne, 7 April 1813 (C, i. 147). 7 Journal, 18 February 1814 (LJ, ii. 382). 8 Lady Byron, April 1816 (LJ, iii. 281). 9 Hamlet, iv. ii. 15. 10 “Blackwood’s Defence” (LJ, iv. App. ix, 483).
real equivalent; and something of the old essence he felt active in himself. While rejecting the suave exteriors of their respective societies and yet ill-tuned to violence, both Hamlet and Byron are trying to focus some new and finer order in descent from religious tradition and the heroic past.

Byron’s ambitions were unique. Hamlet complained that he lacked “advancement”, though in other moods he could be “bounded in a nutshell” and count himself “king of infinite space” were it not that he had “bad dreams”. Once Byron told Hobhouse that he had “no ambition left”; ambition might awake him; as it is, “I merely start in my sleep”. Again, “I have no ambition; at least, if any, it would be aut Caesar aut nihil”. That, tersely, was the truth.

Britain’s monarchy was only one among a number of effete monarchies throughout Europe, and Byron thought and felt as a European. His “detestation of all existing governments” and desire for a “universal republic” extended beyond Britain. When deploring his country’s war with Napoleon he quotes against himself “Brutus, thou sleepest”. Ought he not to act, not only for Britain, but for all Europe? Anxiously he followed the fortunes of Napoleon whom both he and Hobhouse admired. Napoleon was Byron’s Fortinbras, always on his horizon as the man of action shaming the more finely-tuned introvert of ineffectual profundities. He could see, and in his poetry diagnosed, the faults, but at least Napoleon stood for action against moribund dynasties. At his abdication Byron was in distress. “Napoleon Buonaparte has abdicated the throne of the world. ‘Excellent well’ . . .” Hamlet’s phrase here carries a bitter irony. Though himself an “insect” compared with Napoleon, Byron believes, thinking of suicide, that even he could have struck a nobler gesture than this miserable retreat, concluding with Hamlet’s

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1 Hamlet, iii. ii. 361; ii. ii. 264.
2 Hobhouse, 23 August 1819 (C, ii. 124).
3 Journal, 23 November 1813 (LJ, ii. 338–9).
4 Journal, 16 January 1814 (LJ, ii. 381).
5 Journal, 18 February 1814 (LJ, ii. 384); Julius Caesar, ii. i. 46.
6 Journal, 18 February 1814 (LJ, ii. 383).
7 Childe Harold, iii. 36–45; Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte.
"Something too much of this".\(^1\) His next entry registers despair. His faith in man is in shreds. *Hamlet* is scarcely adequate. The conclusion, that "the Bourbons are restored," is accompanied by violent quotations from *Macbeth* and *King Lear*.\(^2\)

Byron did, however, establish contact with social normality in two ways, one romantic and the other artistic. Among his many loves heterosexual, homosexual and familial, one alone blended social normality with ideal fervour; this was his youthful love for Mary Anne Chaworth, who rejected him, as Ophelia rejected Hamlet. Henceforth she remained to Byron a symbol of what might have been. In his *Epistle to a Friend*, in 1811, Byron prophesied that Mary's rejection might make him end up as one of "the worst anarchists of the age"; her love was as his life-line, now broken. So too in *Hamlet* the Queen had hoped that Ophelia might prove Hamlet's saviour.\(^3\)

Mary's subsequent lot was as unhappy as Ophelia's, and Byron's poem *The Dream*, written in 1816, describes it. First we have the youthful love, followed by the parting in an "antique Oratory" recalling Ophelia's "orizons" in Hamlet's scene with Ophelia.\(^4\) The boy's actions, the controlled anguish, are.

Hamlet's:

He rose, and with a cold and gentle grasp
He took her hand; a moment o'er his face
A tablet of unutterable thoughts
Was traced, and then it faded, as it came;
He dropped the hand he held, and with slow steps
Retired. . . .\(^5\)

The lines recall both Ophelia's description of Hamlet's visit to her after the ghost scenes and also his behaviour at their subsequent meeting. Byron's fateful marriage is next described, his thoughts still on "the starlight of his boyhood"; and then comes Mary's unhappy life and subsequent insanity. The vein is again pure *Hamlet*:

Oh! she was changed
As by the sickness of the soul; her mind
Had wandered from its dwelling, and her eyes

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\(^1\) *Journal*, 9 April 1814 (*LJ*, ii. 409–10); *Hamlet*, ii. ii. 174; iii. ii. 79.

\(^2\) *Journal*, 19 April 1814 (*LJ*, ii. 411–12).

\(^3\) *Hamlet*, n. ii. 174; iii. ii. 79.

\(^4\) *LJ*, ii. 40–2; v. i. 266

\(^5\) iii.

\(^6\) vi.
They had not their own lustre, but the look
Which is not of the earth; she was become
The Queen of a fantastic realm; her thoughts
Were combinations of disjointed things;
And forms, impalpable and unperceived
Of others' sight, familiar were to hers.
And this the world calls frenzy . . .

Compare from *Hamlet* these lines on Ophelia:

. . . speaks things in doubt,
That carry but half sense; her speech is nothing,
Yet the unshaped use of it doth move
The hearers to collection; they aim at it
And both the words up fit to their own thoughts.

"The wise," Byron's poem tells us, endure "a far deeper madness," being "melancholy" through too close a view of "truth" stripping the veil of "fantasies" from "cold reality." Such was the madness of Hamlet and Byron in contrast to Ophelia's and Mary's. How deep and enduring Byron's love of Mary was may be questioned, but he for long, as in *The Duel*, liked to regard it so, with as much or as little sincerity as Hamlet's

I lov'd Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers
Could not, with all their quantity of love,
Make up my sum.

Byron was generally as ready as Hamlet to cap such extravagances of "rant" with a disclaimer; but he may have felt deeply about Mary's insanity. Hamlet was himself responsible for Ophelia's. Byron, without such responsibility, deplored the extraordinary ill fortune that appeared to overtake anyone he loved; his "embrace", like Manfred's, was "fatal".

Despite their anti-social propensities, Hamlet and Byron had the potentiality of social grace. In Hamlet Ophelia saw, as we can see in Byron, "the courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword", all cast in a mould of visible perfection. Moore used her phrase "sweet bells jangled out of tune" as an apt description

1 vii.
2 iv. v. 6.
4 v. i. 291.
5 v. i. 306.
6 Hoppner, 2 July 1819 (LJ, iv. 325); see my *Lord Byron's Marriage*, iv. 127.
7 *Manfred*, ii. i. 87; ii. ii. 118-19.
8 *Hamlet*, iii. i. 160.
of Byron; \(^1\) and Byron himself in his *Monody on the Death of Sheridan* wrote bitterly of

> Men who exult when minds of heavenly tone
> Jar in the music which was born their own.

Byron was for a while fashion's darling, one who, in his wife's clever lines,

> makes all the envious Dandys despair
> By the cut of his shirt and the curl of his hair.\(^2\)

True, he once said that he was but "a miserable beau at the best of times". However, Hamlet might have said the same, and years later his recollection was more favourable.\(^3\) In the style of Ophelia's "O what a noble mind is here o'erthrown" women would murmur of Byron "What a pity it is!"\(^4\)

Whatever their own failures to maintain grace and poise, both Byron and Hamlet sustain themselves by images of a more than human excellence such as Byron recognized in the loved chorister Edleston as "a dream of heaven" and the boys in Greece as "sylphs"; in freedom's banner coloured like a "seraph's eyes"; and in the "unseen seraph" of *Childe Harold*, luring and tormenting man with its unrealizable beauty.\(^5\) These touch Hamlet's intermittent intuitions of man angelic in action, god-like in apprehension, and Mercurial in grace.\(^6\)

Since such seraphic insights are evanescent and hard to possess, one is forced back on art. Byron found an equivalent in sculpture, especially the *Apollo Belvidere*;\(^7\) and in the sylph-like, almost bisexually conceived, person of his Juan, praised for his dancing and grace of manner.\(^8\) But both Hamlet and Byron found their most practical and durable equivalent in the art of

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1. *Hamlet*, III. i. 167; Moore's *Life*, viii. 88.
3. Lady Melbourne, 21 September 1813 (C, i. 182); *Detached Thoughts*, October 1821, 29 (*LJ*, v. 423).
4. Quoting Countess Albrizzi (*LJ*, iv, App. ii. 443); *Hamlet*, III, i. 159.
5. *If Sometimes in the Haunts of Men*; Hobhouse, 23 August 1810 (C, i. 14); *On the Star of "The Legion of Honour"*; *Poetry*, ed. E. Hartley Coleridge, iii. 437; *Childe Harold*, iv. 121.
acting. Hamlet’s one expression of energetic purpose comes in his advice to the Players counselling the balance of passion and temperance seemingly unattainable in life, though basic to acting. This, at least, is something to believe in, and hold on to. So, too, was it with Byron. Byron won honour for declamation and gesture at Harrow, and was a good amateur actor. Acting was his favourite art, and he especially admired Edmund Kean:

Was not Iago perfection? particularly the last look. I was close to him (in the orchestra), and never saw an English countenance half so expressive.

I am acquainted with no immaterial sensuality so delightful as good acting; and, as it is fitting there should be good plays, now and then, besides Shakespeare’s, I wish you or Campbell would write one:—the rest of “us youth” have not heart enough.

Byron’s many comments on Kean have flash and point. The acting scenes in Hamlet are remembered when he refers in a poetic discussion to Polonius’s comment on the Player’s lines, “That’s good”; and he is said to have expressed his reluctance to sully his devotion to Kean by seeing the newly famous actress Miss O’Neil, with a Hamlet pun: “No—I am resolved to continue un-Oneiled.” Byron’s dissatisfaction with the famous boy-player Betty reminds us of the “little eyases” in Hamlet.

Here is a pregnant passage on society, loneliness, and art:

Here I am alone, instead of dining at Lord H’s, where I was asked but not inclined to go any where. Hobhouse says I am growing a loup garou—a solitary hobgoblin. True—’I am myself alone’. The last week has been passed in reading—seeing plays—now and then visitors—sometimes yawning and sometimes sighing, but no writing—save of letters. If I could always read, I should never feel the want of society. Do I regret it?—um!—’Man delights not me’, and only one woman—at a time.

The Hamlet phrase has here a stage relevance, since Shakespeare used it to underline Hamlet’s inability to delight in man except under stage artistry.

1 LJ, i. 29, note and 117–8, note; Detached Thoughts, October 1821, 71 and 88 (L.J. v. 445, 453).
2 Moore, May 1814 (L.J. iii. 81); 2 Henry IV, i. ii. 199–202.
3 E.g. L.J. ii. 385–7; iii. 45; C, i. 281.
4 Hobhouse, 5 March 1818 (C, ii. 69); L.J, ii. 386, note, quoting Moore; Hamlet, ii. ii. 535: i. v. 77.
5 Lord Holland, 10 September 1812 (L.J, ii. 142); Hamlet, ii. ii. 362.
6 Journal, 27 February 1814 (L.J, ii. 388); 3 Henry VI, v. vi. 83; Hamlet, ii. ii. 329.
7 ii. ii. 329–51.
That to Byron stage art was from the start a matter of high importance is clear in *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*; *Hints from Horace* is one long demand for a drama worthy of Shakespeare and similar thoughts recur in his *Monody* on Sheridan's death and *Address* for the opening of Drury Lane with its *Hamlet*-like plea for a judicious audience and condemnation of "misplaced applause". In composing this "address", as never elsewhere in matters of poetry except in regard to his own plays, Byron was for once *nervy*. On the living drama he feels strongly, poignantly, intimately. Only fear of failure appears to have prevented him from attempting dramas himself sooner than he did. He once had a kind of fit watching Kean in Sir Giles Overreach and again during a performance of Alfieri's *Mirra*. Byron's comment on the satiric genius of Foote with its wide and fearless range of attack unequalled since is "Alas, poor Yorick". But he is mainly interested in heavy drama. When in 1815 he became a member of the Drury Lane committee he took his duties seriously, reading through scripts and searching vainly for good plays; praising Coleridge's *Remorse* and urging him to do another as good, always assiduous in search for talent.

Byron was now married, and at this third act of his life's drama we find three forces exerting on him their pressures: (i) the troubles of his married life; (ii) his Drury Lane interests and anxieties; and (iii) his distress at the final defeat of Napoleon, after his temporary return to power, at Waterloo. They are all part of a single complex.

He was as unsuited for marriage as Hamlet. Once, thinking of it and dismissing a candidate that might be Ophelia as young and beautiful but foolish, he concludes with a near-quotation from *Hamlet*: "So ' I'll none on't,' but e'en remain single and solitary!" Hobhouse was in France during the "eighty days",

1 *iii. ii. 29–33.
2 Letters to Lord Holland, 10 September–14 October 1812 (*LJ*, ii. 141-73).
3 *LJ*, iii, 233–4, note.
5 *Hints from Horace*, 335; *Hamlet*, v. i. 201.
6 *LJ*, iii. 191, note.
7 *Detached Thoughts*, October 1821, 69–70; Coleridge, 31 March 1815 (*LJ*, v. 442–4 and iii. 191); and see variously iii. 195–233.
8 *Journal*, 16 January 1814 (*LJ*, ii. 380); *Hamlet*, iii. i. 155–8.
but marriage precluded Byron from revolutionary activities, and left him only the drama. His committee work at Drury Lane had social if not revolutionary implications, since his will towards great drama was one with his wider interests, as may be seen from his own plays, composed after he left England; and together with his earlier attack on the Regent it may be allowed to correspond to Hamlet’s “Mousetrap”, and indeed Hamlet’s play before the king had already been closely imitated and expanded in the central scene of Coleridge’s Remorse, which Byron so intensely admired and is sometimes thought to have helped towards production in 1813.¹ There was yet a third outlet. Now, when a Bourbon was being restored to the French throne, Byron published anonymous, yet easily recognized, verses for the revolutionary cause in the British press. More, he seems to have thought of going abroad, perhaps for direct action. “The Paris Scheme”, wrote his wife, “was very near executed in the Summer.”¹ These activities I have discussed elsewhere. Here it is enough to observe that Byron, whose potential of power was considerable, was striking fear into the ruling interests of his country. It is likely that these interests deliberately aroused and used the marriage-scandal to get him removed.³

Byron unburdened his tormented soul to his wife much as Hamlet unburdened his to his mother, and both women were terrified. When Lady Byron says that “it is in the nature of such malady to reverse the affections, and to make those who would naturally be dearest the greatest objects of aversion, the most exposed to acts of violence and the least capable of alleviating the malady”⁴, it might be the Queen talking of Hamlet. His wife thought Byron mad, as Hamlet was thought mad by the Queen.⁵ He had for long been willing to regard his Calvinistic “hypochondria” as “a disease of the mind” in the manner of Hamlet’s “my wit’s diseased”⁶; and if he was guilty of some

¹ *LJ*, iii. 190, note.
⁵ *LJ*, iii., “The Separation”, 296, 300, 310, 315-16; *Hamlet*, iv. i. 7, 25; v. i. 306.
⁶ Gifford, 18 June 1813 (*LJ*, ii. 222); *Hamlet*, iii. ii. 340.
BYRON AND HAMLET

sexual abnormality such as sodomy, we can, having regard to its unnatural and death-pointed implications, group it with Hamlet's challenge of regal state in Claudius by reminders of corruption and death. Inevitably, the forces of healthy normality close their ranks against the intruder. Lady Byron thought that Byron was motivated by some kind of "revenge" and accused him of "a boundless and impious pride." At the climax Augusta reports:

He talked of you quite coolly and of his intention of going into a lodging by himself . . . in short, looked black and gloomy, nobody could tell why or wherefore, the rest of the night . . . He said he considered himself 'the greatest man existing'; G [George Byron] said laughing, 'except Bonaparte'. The answer was, 'God, I don't know that I do except even him'. I was struck previously with a wildness in his eye.

Byron speaks, agonizedly, in the vein of Hamlet's

The time is out of joint. O cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set it right.

The first words of that he was to quote later in Don Juan. Meanwhile he suffered from the knowledge of himself as a threat, an anarch, a messiah; and yet he knew, like Hamlet, that he, and not the smooth society that he was being impelled to explode from within, was right. He, like Hamlet in the scene with his mother, was still ghost-ridden. Of this period in London he told William Parry at Missolonghi: "and then the old house was a mere ghost-house; I dreamed of ghosts, and thought of them waking". Byron, like Hamlet, is simultaneously a ghost-begotten life-threatener and a superman of supreme insight and majestic vision. Can such a man rightly claim to be an "enlightener of nations"? For society, as for Claudius, there appears to be only one sane conclusion: "His liberty is full of threats to all." Byron and Hamlet must be expelled.

1 Hamlet, iv. iii. 17-34.
2 LJ, iii, "The Separation", 297, 300, 311, 313.
3 Sir John Fox, The Byron Mystery, 1924; xii, 105.
4 i. v. 188.
5 ix. 41.
6 Parry, ix. 219.
7 Manfred, iii. i. 107.
8 Hamlet, iv. i. 14.
We know little of Hamlet's mental experiences on his travels. Byron's life helps to explain them. Hamlet left with the words:

"O! from this time forth,
My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth."¹

"Bloody" means "virile". Byron fulfils Hamlet's vow: his "thoughts" in anger, in imprecations of vengeance, in literary creation, all show an access of energy.

His mood is this:

I am a lover of Nature and an admirer of beauty. I can bear fatigue and welcome privation, and have seen some of the noblest views in the world. But in all this—the recollections of bitterness, and more especially of recent and more home desolation, which must accompany me through life, have preyed upon me here; and neither the music of the Shepherd, the crashing of the Avalanche, nor the torrent, the mountain, the Glacier, the Forest, nor the Cloud, have for one moment lightened the weight upon my heart, nor enabled me to lose my own wretched identity in the majesty, and the power, and the Glory, around, above, and beneath me.

I am past reproaches; and there is a time for all things. I am past the wish of vengeance, and I know of none like for what I have suffered; but the hour will come, when what I feel must be felt, and the—but enough.²

That, coming after the severance, is a more energetic variation on Hamlet's words in the earlier period of paralysis:

I have of late—but wherefore I know not—lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises; and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory; this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appears no other thing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours.³

We may suppose that Hamlet's own paralysis was lifted after leaving Denmark: we have evidence that it was.

In his thoughts on vengeance Byron, like Hamlet when he calls himself Heaven's "minister",⁴ feels himself in contact with supernal powers. Thinking that unfair means had been used to blacken his name and remove him from England, he invokes Nemesis on his wrongers:

Thou, who did'st call the Furies from the abyss,
And round Orestes bade them howl and hiss....⁵

¹ Hamlet, iv. iv. 65. ² Journal, 29 September 1816 (LJ, iii. 364). ³ Hamlet, ii. ii. 313. ⁴ iii. iv. 175. ⁵ Childe Harold, iv. 132.
In his *Lines on Hearing that Lady Byron was Ill* his wife become "the moral Clytemnestra of her lord". On the suicide of Sir Samuel Romilly, whom Byron regarded as one of his betrayers, he wrote letters grimly remembering his invocation of Nemesis and carrying vengeful hate beyond death in the dark manner that so disturbs us in Hamlet's speech over the praying Claudius.¹ He thought of challenging another enemy, Henry Brougham, to a duel.² On wider issues he expected revolution at home and thought of returning to assist.³ He attacked the throne in *The Vision of Judgment* and *The Irish Avatar*. He was on the warpath.

Nevertheless, it did not come easily. When he once assured Lady Melbourne that despite his calm he could be "as savage and revengeful as anybody";⁴ the remark was as true and as false as Hamlet's "I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious. . . ."⁵ Byron once remarked with what might have been a Hamlet's self-diagnosis that though he could be violent "on an impulse" he would be sorry to put his hatred of the Austrian tyranny into action.⁶ "Honour" and codes of duelling are mere "stuff", masks for primitive impulse; and there is one man he hopes will not come to Italy lest his own "vindicative" nature might take advantage of the Italian habit of assassination.⁷ In his "*Blackwood's Defence*" we hear that he resides abroad to avoid temptations of vengeance consequent on the Scots fire inherited from his mother.⁸ That on the one side; on the other are his darker statements, where he seems to be unnaturally whipping himself up to a vengeful state, almost as a duty, as does Hamlet in his soliloquies. He deliberately tries to "harden" his heart, but "the fact is", he wrote, "I cannot keep my resentments, though violent enough in their onset".⁹ Such ambivalences are equally

¹ Lady Byron, 18 November 1818; Murray, 7 June 1819; Hobhouse, 23 November, 12 December 1818 (*LJ*, iv. 268, 316; C, ii. 92, 96); *Hamlet*, iii. iii. 73–96.

² Kinnaird, Hobhouse, 16 and 21 November 1819; Hobhouse, 21 September 1820 (C, ii. 127, 131, 153).


⁴ March 1814 (C, i. 247).

⁵ *Hamlet*, iii. i. 128.


⁷ Hobhouse, 30 July 1819 (C, ii. 118).


⁹ Moore; 14 June 1814; 6 March 1822 (*LJ*, iii. 92; vi. 35).
true of Hamlet; like Hamlet’s, Byron’s natural tendency was to “speak daggers” but “use none”. The agonies he endured after leaving England, oscillating between vengefulness and reluctance, may be supposed to have been endured, at the corresponding period, by Hamlet too.

Both seem to have been drawn to accept their propensities to madness. After his return Hamlet frankly admits his to Laertes. After leaving England Byron often referred to it. He was “half mad” during the composition of the third Childe Harold; “If I don’t write to empty my mind, I go mad”. He wondered if he would end up mad, like Swift. Hamlet, wrote Robert Bridges in The Testament of Beauty (I, 579), was set by Shakespeare “gingerly” on the border-line between sanity and madness; and Byron was thinking of himself when he observed that poets “rarely go mad” though they are often “near” it, their art saving them. Stendhal thought Byron “labouring under an access of folly, often approaching to madness”. Byron saw his own mental gymnastics as Hamlet-like characteristics. When critics objected to the sharp alternations of “fun and gravity” in Don Juan, he replied:

You might as well make Hamlet (or Diggory) ‘act mad’ in a straight waistcoat as trammel my buffoonery, if I am to be a buffoon...

Like Hamlet, he confesses to madness:

I wish that I had been in better spirits, but I am out of sorts, out of nerves; and now and then (I begin to fear) out of my senses. All this Italy has done for me, and not England: I defy all of you, and your climate to boot, to make me mad. But if ever I do really become a Bedlamite and wear a strait waistcoat, let me be brought back among you; your people will then be proper company.

“Make me mad”: the phrase and mood are Hamlet’s, “Go to, I’ll no more on’t; it hath made me mad”. The conclusion is another Hamlet reminiscence, from the Gravedigger’s comment on England “Twill not be seen in him there: there the men

are as mad as he ". The truth is, Hamlet and Byron are enduring that "deeper madness", born of insight, noted in The Dream. Once the acute intelligence of Lady Byron recognised that what might appear aberration was perhaps an "absorption in deep thought".2

Hamlet returns from his travels with a new serenity and poise. How it was won may be best understood by watching Byron gradually mastering his mental universe. The process involves: (i) death; (ii) humour; (iii) respect to royalty; and (iv) action.

Byron, after long reluctance, finding it a way to control and mastery, turned, as did Hamlet in inserting a speech into "The Murder of Gonzago";3 to dramatic composition. If it be objected that Byron's historical plays are built on neo-classic principles and an intellectualized critique of society diverging from Shakespeare, we may observe that Hamlet's dramatic theories are themselves, in regard to both acting and play-writing, classical, and nearer Jonson than Shakespeare. Acting was to be temperate, plays didactic, and only the approval of the cultured to be valued.4 When Byron turned to drama, he was determined to avoid rant, which was as distasteful to him as to Hamlet. Macbeth, King Lear and Timon of Athens give rein to extravagant passions which Byron-as-Hamlet was trying to reject.

Byron had more experiences of ghosts. In the palazzo at Pisa his servant Fletcher was disturbed by ghosts and Byron "bothered" about it; Medwin, referring to the matter, calls them both "superstitious".5 Byron believed that the ghost of Shelley had been seen.6

Though as a young man he had kept skulls in his study, he could not imagine people he had known so reduced "without a hideous sensation".7 After leaving England his interest in bones and skulls was written into Manfred;8 he collected bones from a battlefield.9 Writing to Murray about the deaths of a

1 III. i. 155; v. i. 168. 2 LJ, iii, "The Separation", 297. 3 II. ii. 570-5. 4 III. ii. 1-40. 5 Murray, 4 December 1821 (LJ, v. 486-7 and note). 6 Conversations of Lord Byron with the Countess of Blessington, edn. of 1893; ii, 36-37. 7 Dallas, 12 August 1811 (LJ, i. 327). 8 II. ii. 79-83. 9 Note to Childe Harold, iii. 63.
dentist and a hairdresser, he ruminates on the present state of their teeth and hair, remarking, after Hamlet, "My jaws ache to think on't". Our most interesting correspondence to the graveyard scene comes in his visit to a graveyard at Bologna. The Sexton reminded him of "the Grave digger in Hamlet", drawing from his collection of skulls one of a Capuchin monk and recording, just like the Gravedigger on Yorick, that he "was the merriest, cleverest, fellow", who wherever he went "brought joy", cheering the melancholy with his jokes. This Sexton had "the greatest attachment" to "his dead people"; the epitaphs "Implora pace" and "Implora eterna quiete", together with the flowers placed on the graves, Byron found deeply moving. Contrasting the Sexton's beautiful daughter with the skulls the man has collected of ladies once clothed by a similar beauty, Byron is troubled after the manner of Hamlet's "Now get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come". These descriptions, in all their delicate balance of irony and serenity, are pitched on a note of acceptance matching the lyric prose of Hamlet's graveyard meditations.

In satiric thrust Byron could be fierce as Hamlet, but both learn to replace anger by humour. Apart from The Age of Bronze and The Irish Avatar Byron's major satires are now dominated by humour. The Vision of Judgment contains a mixture of disrespect to royalty and irreverence to religion that faintly recalls Hamlet's answer to the king regarding Polonius's whereabouts:

> In Heaven. Send thither to see. If your messenger find him not there, seek him i' the other place yourself.

There is, however, a sting in that absent from Byron's poem, except where Southey is concerned, and the poem's mood demands that George III should get to Heaven after all:

> And when the tumult dwindled to a calm,
> I left him practising the hundredth psalm.

The humour is good-natured. It sets, moreover, the tone for

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1 18 November 1820 (LJ, v. 119); Hamlet, v. i. 99.
2 Murray, 7 June, 24 August 1819 (LJ, iv. 313-14, 317, 349); Hamlet, v. i. 211.
3 iv. iii. 36.
4 106.
the whole of *Don Juan*, which exists as an extensive record of Byron’s self-conquest. Apart from its anti-militarist satire and the attacks on Wellington and Castlereagh, the prevailing tone is that of humour; good nature abounds, ranging from deep pathos to admirable fooling. And what of Hamlet? This new manner matches the tone of Hamlet’s banter with Osric. Criticisms may be sharp, but they are carried lightly, without bitterness, and in a spirit of personal unconcern.

The new mode to which Byron is attuning himself is already clear in his attitude to the Prince Regent, afterwards George IV. In *Don Juan* Byron takes pleasure in recalling the Prince’s splendid promise in youth:

There, too, he saw (whate’er he may be now)
A Prince, the prince of princes at the time,
With fascination in his very bow,
And full of promise, as the spring of prime.
Though royalty was written on his brow,
He had *then* the grace, too, rare in every clime,
Of being, without alloy of fop or beau,
A finish’d gentleman from top to toe.¹

The poetic gesture is an act of some significance. Nor was it only a question of the Prince’s youth. Once in what is surely the most gracious address from subject to sovereign that our literature affords, Byron honoured the Prince Regent, soon to become George IV, with his noble sonnet ‘to the Prince Regent on the repeal of Lord Edward Fitzgerald’s forfeiture’:

To be the father of the fatherless,
To stretch the hand from the throne’s height, and raise
*His* offspring, who expired in other days
To make thy Sire’s sway by a kingdom less—
*This* is to be a monarch, and repress
Envy into unutterable praise.
Dismiss thy guard, and trust thee to such traits,
For who would lift a hand, except to bless?

Were it not easy, sir, and is’t not sweet
To make thyself beloved? and to be
Omnipotent by mercy’s means? for thus
Thy sovereignty would grow but more complete:
A despot thou, and yet thy people free,
And by the heart, not hand, enslaving us.

¹ xii. 84.
Can we imagine Hamlet thinking so kindly of Claudius’s promise as a young man, or responding to some gracious action from the throne? Perhaps not; and yet Hamlet too at the close shows a new respect to the King and his mother, evident in such phrases as “his majesty”, “your grace”, and “good madam.”¹ There may be a difference in degree, but the change is of similar kind. Hamlet, like Byron, has learned a measure of social self-adjustment.

Both are now set for action. Central in both has always been a craving for some line of action that corresponds to “that within”, some action which is spiritually adequate. Each has a strong, almost Hotspur-like, manly side to him, distrusting sentiment. Byron repudiated the romantic Childe Harold and thought Hamlet less of a man than Richard III.² After watching Fortinbras’s army and leaving Denmark, Hamlet asserts himself in action twice; by undermining the trickery of Rosencrantz and Guildernstern and sending them to their deaths, and again during the fight with the Pirates. So too Byron during these years settles, if only verbally, with Southey in The Vision of Judgment and elsewhere,³ and also with the “political parasite” and “sycophant”,⁴ Wordsworth. Thinking of a duel, Byron observed that Southey would be “too much of a poet” to risk his “blood”; afterwards he sent a challenge, which was not however delivered by his agent.⁵ In assisting the Italian rising, Byron had a cause, and acted for what was, however ineffectual, a blow aimed against tyranny. Both Hamlet and Byron may be felt as working up to their final achievement. For Hamlet, this will be the duel and the killing of the king; his habit of fencing practice, for he has “been in continual practice” while away—like Byron with his shooting, riding and swimming—has a significance contrasting with his earlier neglect.⁶ Byron’s more fully documented story helps us to fill out and interpret the less detailed account of Hamlet’s transition.

¹ v. ii. 181, 275, 304.
² Dallas, 31 October 1811; Journal, 19 February 1814 (LJ, ii, 66 and 386).
³ LJ, vi. App. i.
⁴ Note to Don Juan; Dedication, 6.
⁵ Murray, 24 November 1818 (LJ, iv. 272; vi, App. i. 392).
⁶ Hamlet, v. ii. 221; ii. ii. 315.
A good way of pointing their similarity as men-of-action is to compare their epistolary styles where action is the subject. Here is Hamlet's letter to Horatio:

Finding ourselves too slow of speed we put on a compelled valour. In the grapple, I boarded them: on the instant they got clear of our ship, so I alone became their prisoner. They have dealt with me like thieves of mercy, but they knew what they did; I am to do a good turn for them.¹

If we compare with this any of Byron's accounts of action—a good example is his account of his and Shelley's escape from drowning in Switzerland²—we find the same terse objectivity. Hamlet's accents, the realism of "compelled valour", the pregnancy of phrase in "thieves of mercy", and the following deflation, all are Byronic. Here is Byron:

Gamba and the Bombard (there is a strong reason to believe) are carried into Patras by a Turkish frigate, which we saw chase them at dawn on the 31st: we had been close under the stern in the night, believing her a Greek till within pistol shot...³

Such passages abound. Byron's letters from Greece are those of a man happy in action.

Byron knew that he was approaching the climax and justification of his life. Like Hamlet, who has grown to thirty in the Graveyard scene,⁴ he was swiftly ageing⁵ and the Greek campaign was undertaken in the spirit of Hamlet's "It will be short; the interim is mine".⁶ From the Conversations with Lady Blessington it appears that he sensed the approach of death.⁷ So did Hamlet, uneasy at heart. "But it is no matter", he says, and goes on:

Not a whit; we defy augury. There's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come; the readiness is all. Since no man has aught of what he leaves, what is't to leave betimes? Let be.⁸

"Let be". Byron's own writings contain such little disclaimers, following what might appear egotism or sentiment. After referring to his own troubles, he breaks off with Hamlet's "it is no matter"

¹ iv. vi. 17. ² Murray, 15 May 1819 (LJ, iv. 296-7).
³ Muir, 2 January 1824 (LJ, vi. 298). ⁴ v. i. 152-76.
⁷ Blessington, xiv. 353; and see Moore, 1 October 1821 (LJ, v. 384).
⁸ V, ii, 223, 232.
and "but no matter". Hamlet's "Something too much of this" comes as a natural Byronic mannerism. As for Hamlet's belief in an overwatching "providence", that too was Byron's. His religious feelings are clear from his conversations with James Kennedy at Cephalonia, and from Missolonghi he wrote to Kennedy, who was anxious regarding his health:

Should I become, or be deemed, useless or superfluous, I am ready to retire; but in the interim I am not to consider personal consequences; the rest is in the hands of Providence, as indeed are all things.

Byron knew that his life was obeying a pattern.

At Missolonghi he was at last, through the London committee, collaborating with his own compatriots in a cause enlisting his total belief; and in conversation he expressed a personal faith in the British constitution. He now both accepted, and was being accepted by, his country. He was making terms with life, even insisting that the liberation journal The Greek Chronicle should not be allowed to antagonize the hated Austrians. Genius, and perhaps more than that, Byron had for long possessed; now he was learning statesmanship. And he was now a soldier.

In his verses On this Day I Complete my Thirty-Sixth Year Byron wrote:

But 'tis not thus—and 'tis not here—
Such thoughts should shake my soul, nor now
Where glory decks the hero's bier,
Or binds his brow.

The Sword, the Banner, and the Field,
Glory and Greece, around me see!
The Spartan, borne upon his shield,
Was not more free.

 Awake! (not Greece—she is awake!)
Awake, my spirit! Think through whom
Thy life-blood tracks its parent lake,
And then strike home!

1 Rogers, 23 January; Hunt, 8 February; 1816; Lady Melbourne, 10 October 1813 (LJ, iii. 258, 261; C, i. 194).
2 Childe Harold, iii, 8; Journal, also Moore, 9 April 1814 (LJ, ii. 410, iii. 65); Hamlet, iii. ii. 79.
3 Kennedy, 4 March 1824 (LJ, vi. 339).
4 Parry, viii. 173-4.
5 LJ, vi. 355, note.
"Strike home": the thought is of a single blow, like Hamlet's at the King, seeing the Greek campaign as a thrust in freedom's cause, to reverberate throughout Europe. Byron concludes by thoughts of dying on the "field" in "the land of honourable death"; and of deliberately seeking out "a soldier's grave".

Both statesman and soldier. And yet, as his almost superhuman attempts to alleviate the sufferings of foe as well as friend witness, no ordinary example of either. In drawing level, as man of action, with Napoleon, Byron inevitably and at once surpasses him. Whether he, who so consistently aimed to blend the Sermon on the Mount with the warrior, Renaissance, virtues, and who even refused to take the life of animals, could have shed human blood, we cannot know; though he would, as always, have been fearless for himself. True to his twin alignments, he died on active service without being personally responsible for bloodshed. However, since we can find no greater honour for a sovereign than to bear his body to rest on a gun-carriage, symbolizing the supreme values of action and heroism in face of death, it is right that our Hamlets and Byrons, personifying a synthesis as yet inconceivable in other than dramatic terms, should be accorded military honours:

Let four captains
Bear Hamlet, like a soldier, to the stage;
For he was likely, had he been put on,
To have prov'd most royally: and, for his passage,
The soldiers' music and the rites of war
Speak loudly for him.¹

There is a dead march and "a peal of ordnance is shot off". Byron lay in state, in a church; and then the guns spoke, also, for him. In his Narrative of Lord Byron's Last Journey to Greece (1825) Pietro Gamba writes:

At sunrise, on the morning after his death, seven-and-thirty minute guns were fired from the principal battery of the fortress; and one of the batteries of the corps under his orders also fired one gun every half hour for the succeeding four-and-twenty hours.²

For both our heroes this cannon thunder makes the same, indefinable, statement.

¹ v. ii. 409.
² vi. 272.
Tolstoy complained that Shakespeare's Hamlet had no recognizable "character". The same was said of Byron by Lady Blessington and others. And yet in both we sense a mysterious unity. Hamlet scorns those who would "pluck out the heart" of "his mystery". Byron, with less scorn, also knew that his personality was mysterious. His early journal indulges in mystification and in the *Detached Thoughts* we read: "I must not go on with these reflections, or I shall be letting out some secret or other to paralyse posterity". When in his parting lines to his wife *Fare thee Well* he writes:

All my faults perchance thou knowest—
All my madness—none can know . . .

he implies the presence of that "something unearthly" in him of which he speaks in *Childe Harold*, corresponding to that "incomprehensible phantasma" which Galt sensed hovering about his personality. Manfred is a man, or superman, above normal categories; and the Doge in *Marino Faliero* offers as his defence the line "The secret were too mighty for your souls." Byron expected to prove an enigma to biographers, hoping to "do something or other—the times and fortune permitting" that, "like the cosmogony, or creation of the world, will puzzle the philosophers of all ages". The mystery in him was like the "creation"; it was a new creation, the creation of a new man, an answer to Hamlet's poser "To be or not to be".

Naturally, both Hamlet and Byron feared misrepresentation. Hamlet wanted Horatio to save his "wounded name" by explaining what was dark, thinking perhaps of the Ghost; and Byron left his memoirs expecting his friends Moore and Hobhouse to preserve his name, a task which they set about not wisely but too well, with the result that the mystery remains today in all its virgin purity, or impurity. However, our observation of these correspondences with Hamlet contributes to a

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1 *Hamlet*, iii. ii. 389.
3 *Poetry*, ed. E. Hartley Coleridge, iii. 539.
4 *iv. 137*.
5 Galt, viii. 63.
6 II. i. 38; II. ii. 123; III. iv. 51; III. i. 138.
7 v. i. 285.
9 v. ii. 358.
10 Hobhouse, 23 November 1821 (C, ii. 205).
mutual elucidation, while doing honour to both. To act Hamlet on the stage is not easy; to live Hamlet on the stage of Europe may be regarded a yet greater achievement. And the comparison honours Shakespeare too; for, even when we have granted that, for one writing from "the prophetic soul of the wide world dreaming on things to come",¹ it may have fallen well within the scope of Shakespeare's genius to envisage his great successor, it yet remains remarkable that he should, by so excellent a use of selection and emphasis, have succeeded in condensing so much of the Byronic story into a single drama.

¹ Sonnet 107.