Byron, Pushkin, and the Theatre
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Pushkin¹ thought that he modelled his most considerable play, Boris Godunov, on Shakespeare. Byron made some of his most notable plays – Marino Faliero, The Two Foscari, and Sardanapalus – as unlike Shakespeare as possible. “You will,” he writes, “find all this [Marino Faliero] very unlike Shakespeare – and so much the better in one sense for I look upon {him} to be the worst of models – though the most extraordinary of writers”).² However, the plays of neither writer have entered the standard repertoire.

The last “normal” production of Boris in Russia was in 1988, directed by Yury Liubimov. There is a Declan Donnellan production of Boris going the rounds at the moment, with Boris in a business suit and the Pretender as a microphone-toting Media Celebrity: and there was one at Princeton in 2007, in the style of Meyerhold, with music by Prokofiev, women playing men in the modern fashion, and much business with bungey-ropes. These two are / were experiments in “director’s theatre”; not a sign that Boris Godunov is becoming a staple item for regular revival.

Donnellan Boris
Princeton Boris

Byron’s The Two Foscari was last performed in 1952 (at the Norwich Maddermarket), and Marino Faliero in 1982 (at the Young Vic). Sardanapalus has fared only slightly better, with two university productions in the USA in the 1990s, and one private acted reading in London last year. Given the marketability of the authors’ names, this is strange. Pushkin would have been disappointed at the scarcity and strangeness of his play’s stage-history: Byron relieved at the extreme paucity of his.

My argument is that Pushkin’s failure is a result of his inability to understand Shakespeare, and Byron’s deliberate failure a result of his wilful indifference to Shakespeare. Neither writer is a professional man of the theatre (despite Byron’s dabling in Drury Lane), so that Pushkin cannot see the elements which makes Shakespeare so stageable, and so that Byron – if he did see them – would avoid them, in case they made his plays stageable. The comedy lies in reading Pushkin’s comments on the inadequacies of Byron’s plays, and watching how his own critical judgement, so strong when analysing Byron’s weakness, fails him when attempting to emulate Shakespeare’s strengths.

³My thanks to Tatiana Wolff and Svetlana Klimova for their help in writing this paper.
⁴Byron to Murray, July 14th 1821 (text from NLS Ms.434891; BLJ VIII 151-2).
In July 1825 Pushkin writes to Raevsky, “Verisimilitude of situations and truth of
dialogue—here is the real rule of tragedy … what a man this Shakespeare is! I can’t get over
it. How paltry is Byron as tragedian in comparison with him! This Byron who never
conceived but one sole character …” and so on (Shaw I 237). Pushkin writes only of
character: he never discusses incident, or use of stage. Byron writes consciously for a mental
theatre, rather than for the stage which he despised: Pushkin, critical as he is of Byron,
ignores the stage, and writes unconsciously for a mental theatre. But a mental theatre is still a
theatre, with entrances, exits, plays-within-plays, dialogues, soliloquies, asides, crowd scenes,
and so on.

At the start of the nineteenth century there was virtually no serious Russian drama, and indeed
precious little Russian poetry. Russian critical thinking about drama thus existed in a vacuum,
and was dominated by classical thought and rules – Aristotle misread and mediated through
Boileau. According to these rules, Shakespeare was simply wrong: to say so was an easy way
of avoiding having to read him. He combined tragedy and comedy; he mixed prose and verse;
he used common language and vulgar comparisons (“Nor heaven peep through the blanket
of the dark”, for instance). He had commoners and lords together on the stage; his plays moved
from location to location; there were often gaps of months or even years between scenes; and
he often ran two plots at a time. In other words, everything which demonstrated his flexibility
and skill was used as evidence of his incompetence. Dr Johnson had demolished many of
these criticisms in his Preface to Shakespeare, despite his own objection to heaven peeping
through a blanket; but to no avail on the continent. Pushkin did not know Johnson, but arrived
independently at the same conclusions, favourable to Shakespeare.

The barrier between Shakespeare’s texts and their full-scale realisation on the stage was
in addition increased, even in Byron’s England, by the way in which they were presented,
with scenery taking many minutes to change, huge cuts as a result, and actors’ slow,
dramatic delivery. There was a star system, which gave no emphasis to the teamwork
needed to hold his plays together. None of the productions Byron saw would have given him
any practical idea of how Shakespeare’s stagecraft worked. For him, Shakespeare was a great
writer to be quoted in letters, not a playwright to be emulated when writing plays oneself.

Pushkin too had no experience, outside his own imagination, of what Shakespeare looked
like in the theatre. Nevertheless, he admired Shakespeare in a way that Byron didn’t, and
disagreed with Byron’s idol Alfieri over all theoretical matters. He even had time to read
Byron’s plays. But for him, the influence of Byron – doubly overwhelming in Pushkin’s
poetry – was to be countered by rejecting the influence of Byron’s plays. He disliked Byron’s
dramatic method, in reverse proportion as he imitated his poetic method. He was anxious to
be a Shakespearean dramatist:

Firmly believing that the obsolete forms of our theatre demand reform, I ordered my
Tragedy according to the system of our Father Shakespeare; and having sacrificed two of
the classical unities at his altar, have barely kept to the third. Apart from this notorious
trio, there is a unity not mentioned by French critics (who probably do not suspect that
one can question the absolute necessity for it), that of style – the fourth absolute condition
of French tragedy – of which the theatres of Spain, England and Germany are free. You
realize that I too have followed such a tempting example (Wolff 221).

I sincerely confess that I would be distressed by the ill success of my tragedy, as I am
firmly convinced that the popular rules of Shakespearean drama are better suited to our
stage than the courtly habits of the tragedy of Racine and that any unsuccessful
experiment can slow down the reformation of our stage (Wolff 106).

Boris Godunov (Pushkin describes it as “my favourite work”: Shaw II 458) opens with a
long dialogue between two noblemen, Shuisky and Vorotynski. They discuss in disgusted
tones the approaching enthronement of Boris, which disturbs them not only because Boris,
like Macbeth, has gained his power by killing his predecessor, the Tsarevich Dmitri, but because he is not, like them, of noble blood.

There are at least two Shakespearean precedents for the scene. First is the short scene (Macbeth, II iv) between Ross, Macduff and the Old Man, lamenting what the consequences of Macbeth’s enthronement will be. But this scene is brief, though full of foreboding. More important is the dialogue in Julius Caesar I ii, between Brutus and Cassius, in which Cassius rages about the quasi-deification of Caesar, to whom he feels equal. At once we see how Shakespeare can milk the full dramatic potential from an idea, where Pushkin can’t see it – for as Cassius and Brutus converse, noises off show us and them that in the Forum nearby, Caesar is being offered the crown. Their dialogue is made more intense by everyone’s awareness of how close the events are which worry them, and when their scene concludes, Casca arrives and tells them what has happened in the Forum. It’s a process of condensation and narrative economy (enabling two scenes to occur simultaneously) which Pushkin, not being a man of the theatre, hasn’t grasped. He writes to Raevsky in 1829, “Following the example of Shakespeare, I have restricted myself to developing an epoch and historical personages, without seeking after theatrical effects, the romantically moving, etc …” (Shaw II 365). But Pushkin’s contempt for “theatrical effects” is misplaced. Shakespeare’s plays create “theatrical effect” after “theatrical effect”: they wouldn’t be such masterpieces of drama if they didn’t.

Pushkin isn’t writing for the stage, any more than Byron is.

In the second to fourth scenes of Boris, the usurper gets closer and closer to accepting the crown, even though he’s hiding in a convent with his sister, a nun, and ostentatiously refusing to accept it, ignoring the pleas of Patriarch, boyars, priests, and people. The Shakespearean precedent is still more obvious: it’s the scene (Richard III, III vii) in which Gloucester, soon to be Richard III, parades his piety between two priests and yields, with an unwillingness which is comically hypocritical, to the demands of the Lord Mayor and Corporation of London, that he should rule over them. Pushkin plays the rent-a-crowd commoners for comedy – one, dissatisfied that her baby is not crying, throws it on the ground to make it cry; others rub onions into their eyes and apply water to make themselves appear more desperate. But Pushkin’s protagonist, Boris, is not a comic figure as Gloucester is. When he comes forward and announces that he will be Tsar after all, his words and tone are not obviously two-faced, and Pushkin does not give us the spectacle of him and his sister praying that the cup of power be taken from him, as Shakespeare does with Gloucester and his monks. The speech Pushkin writes for Boris’s acceptance reads so sincerely that, when Mussorgsky came to write his opera, he set a lot of the words and made them sound straight. Boris is seen, as the plot unfolds, to be closer to Henry IV than to Macbeth or Richard III.

Another echo of Shakespeare occurs at the end of the scene, when Shuisky and Vorotynski, who have been watching, are left alone. Shuisky, now that Boris is Tsar, denies ever having had any doubts about his legitimacy. His words to Vorotynski in the first scene (“намедни” – “the other day”) were, he says, just a way of testing him out. It’s paralleled by Macduff testing out Macduff – though that’s a long, serious scene (Macbeth IV iii), whereas this is just a comic way of terminating the scene of Boris’s acceptance.

A simple example of Pushkin’s indifference to theatrical effect (or, if you prefer, his proto-post-modernist distaste for closure), is seen at the play’s end. Pushkin has throughout balanced one “actor” (Godunov) against another (the Pretender, Dimitry). If the play were really modelled on Shakespeare – that is, written with an eye to drama – we should expect one or the other to be centre-stage, alive or dead, as the curtain falls. But of the play’s twenty-three scenes, Dimitry is not seen after the nineteenth, at the end of which he falls asleep, and Godunov not seen after the twentieth, at the end of which, dying, he takes monastic vows. The drama then petered out in a sequence of three scenes featuring lesser characters, and the report of what seems to be the assassination of Boris’s son and heir, at the end of which, famously, “The people are silent” (the 2007 Princeton production had the heir killed in view of the audience). As a poem it works well enough: as the script for a theatrical event, it’s a botched job.
Pushkin may have been making a covert political point with his anti-Shakespearean, anti-climactic ending. Had he wanted to please the Tsar, he could have brought on the old monk Pimen, and given him a prophetic speech assuring the people that though times may be bad, they would soon see a new dawn for Russia in the accession of the Romanov dynasty. There would have been a Shakespearean precedent in Cranmer’s speech over the infant Elizabeth at the end of Henry VIII. But Pushkin did not want to flatter the Romanovs with such a trick, and he kept the people silent.

Andrei Tarkovsky’s Kirov production of Mussorgsky’s opera takes this idea a stage further – in his final tableau, the chorus is not just silent, but is lying dead.

Tsar Alexander – philistine as only a tyrant can be – suggested that Pushkin recast Boris as an historical novel in the style of Scott. Vaguely aware (I suspect) of the Dionysiac power of drama, he probably objected to any Tsar being portrayed on the stage, even an evil one like Boris. Pushkin demurred politely.

Richard III aloft between two monks is a good example of one of Shakespeare’s favourite topoi: a real actor in front of an audience in the auditorium, playing someone acting an unreal part in front of an audience on stage. It recurs again and again: Prince Hal and Falstaff each act the part of Henry IV; Rosalind acts the part of Ganymede; the witches pretend to give Macbeth the show he wants, but give him instead the show they want him to have; Perdita dresses up for Florizel … virtually everything Hamlet does is an act: only when he’s hysterical with women do we suspect he may be sincere. Most of Shakespeare’s protagonists are metaphorical actors, directors, or playwrights.

Shakespeare can see what Pushkin cannot see – namely, the meta-theatrical potential of a situation. Spectacle, he knows from experience, is a morally dubious thing, useful to politicians and playwrights alike, whether they be Roman or Plantagenet, Elizabethan or Jacobean. He further sees that the idea of two envious performers (Brutus and Cassius) unable to see an offstage performance, the outcome of which is of great interest to them is an excellent dramatic in-joke. Likewise, to have a villain like Gloucester, who operates in part through his capacity for acting, and to dramatise him acting a saintly version of himself to a gullible audience, is at once sinister and funny. Pushkin knows that acting is a form of hypocrisy, open to misuse by the bad guys of the world; but hasn’t the intuition to weave the intuition into his stage spectacle itself. Shakespeare would have had the first scene of Boris happen simultaneously with the second-to-fourth scenes, and link the changing attitude of Shuisky – sceptical of Boris at first, reverential once he becomes king – to the spectacle of Boris, parading his unwillingness to be Tsar even as he grasps the chance to be Tsar. It’s partly a question of economy, but before that it’s a question of knowing your metier. The proper study of theatre is theatricality.

As we read Pushkin’s Boris, we are constantly reminded of the liberties Mussorgsky took with it, and of the much greater theatrical impact the opera has than the play. Mussorgsky shows himself a much better dramatist, here as elsewhere in his opera Boris Godunov, when he makes his opera end either with Boris’s death, or with the Idiot’s lament (a moment expanded far beyond what Pushkin creates). Mussorgsky seems to have been a man of the theatre, where Pushkin heard things in literary terms, rather than apprehending them in stage terms. The best example is the opera’s Kromy Forest scene, which is put together in part from scraps of the play’s text, but largely from the composer-librettist’s own invention. Perhaps because Pushkin was more of a patriot than the self-destructive Mussorgsky, the Kromy Forest scene gives a much more pessimistic view of the gullibility and changeability of the Russian folk than anything in the original tragedy. It can go either at the very end of the opera, following the death of Boris, or as the last scene but one, preceding his death. The latter used to be the case with star performers like Chaliapin or Boris Christoff; now, it’s more often the last scene we take away with us.

The peasants, in the absence of strong leadership from Moscow, are rioting. They’ve captured a boyar (whose name really is Khrushchev) and are proposing to hang him. At first they put him through a mock-marriage with the oldest crone among them, by way of joke. Then they hear two drunken orthodox monks approaching, whom we know from earlier on in
the opera. They are lamenting the fate of Russia under Boris, and the peasants welcome them. A massive chorus follows, often greeted with delight by Marxists as heralding the workers’ revolution, but in fact heralding anarchy. Suddenly, two more monks are heard off, but they are singing in Latin. They are the advance guard for the Perkin Warbeck-style Pretender, who in fact represents every Russian’s worst fears, for if he takes over Russia, so will Poland, whose backing he has. Now many of the peasants welcome the Pretender, for they believe his lies and take him for the child Boris murdered – an infant Duncan to Boris’s Macbeth. Really he’s an ex-monk and an adventurer.

Latin is to the peasants the language of heretics and atheists, so they propose hanging the two Polish monks, as well as Khrushchev. But as they’re preparing the rope, offstage fanfares herald the arrival of the Pretender, and, with quite the opposite tones from those in which they were about to Lynch his religious advisers, the peasants welcome him (in conservative Bolshoi productions he arrives on a white charger), and he sings a short arioso of triumph before exiting. With this revelation of the complete ignorance and impressionability of the Russian people, the scenes ends with a Holy Fool lamenting the bleak future of the homeland. It’s a scene of great melodic excitement, with memorable themes for each set of characters – and it’s not in Pushkin’s play at all.

It’s also a scene about people, an onstage audience, watching a spectacle – or a variety of changing spectacles. It’s about politics as theatre, with the chorus as us, the people gaping at the changing leaders who run our lives. The chorus are sometimes active in the drama, as we the people often are in politics, whether as victors or as victims. First they want to hang Khrushchev; then they applaud the two Russian monks; then they want to hang the two Polish monks; finally, they hail the Pretender whose adventure, if successful, will probably ruin them all. They have no perspective on what they’re doing, and no understanding of the mutable characters in the drama before them. They’re the mob in the Forum in Julius Caesar, and the followers of Jack Cade in Henry VI II. The effect is much more Shakespearean than anything in Pushkin’s play.

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Byron’s Manfred is quite Shakespearean. It ignores the unities of space and time, though not that of action; and its hero is a wonderful mixture of Hamlet, Macbeth, Prospero, and Coriolanus, with dashes of Malvolio thrown in:

Manfred:

Patience, and Patience! Hence! that word was made
For brutes of burthen – not for birds of prey;
Preach it to mortals of a dust like thine –
I am not of thine order.

Chamois Hunter:

Thanks to heaven!
I would not be of thine, for the free fame
Of William Tell; but whatsoe’er thine ill,
It must be borne, and these wild starts are useless. (Manfred, II i 35-41)

Manfred speaks with a condescension which comes as much from Malvolio as from Coriolanus; and the Chamois Hunter speaks in part with an ironical proletarian voice of his own, and in part with the voice of Lady Macbeth. We have a mixture of registers and of perspectives which is truly Shakespearean: but Byron later rejected such games.

David V. Erdman, in Byron’s Stage Fright: the History of his Ambition and Fear of Writing for the Stage (reprinted in Robert F. Gleckner and Bernard Beatty, The Plays of Lord Byron Critical Essays, Liverpool 1997) argues that the insecure Byron was at once ambitious to be thought of as a major tragic writer, and at the same time terrified of looking stupid if his plays failed. Hence his anger when Elliston tried to mount Marino Faliero in 1821. I would
add two more factors: Byron’s snobbishness about theatre people, and the influence on him of Alfieri.

Alessandro Guiccioli, husband of Byron’s lover Teresa, and a mad theatregoer, noticed during his first encounters with Byron that the poet bore a close resemblance to Vittorio Alfieri, the supposedly great tragic dramatist of the generation before. He told Byron of the resemblance, and it’s hard to believe that he wasn’t full of anecdotes about Alfieri, whom he had known, and in whose plays he had, as an amateur, acted.

Alfieri, like Pushkin and Byron, is rarely performed now. Luchino Visconti once had a go at staging one of his plays. It was in the late 1940s, and one of his actors was the young Marcello Mastroianni. He never staged an Alfieri again.

Byron, on the other hand, had one of his most profound theatrical experiences at the representation of a tragedy by Alfieri:

Last night [August 11th 1819] I went to the representation of Alfieri’s Mirra – the two last acts of which threw me into convulsions. – I do not mean by that word – a lady’s hysterics – but the agony of reluctant tears – and the choking shudder which I do not often undergo for fiction – This is but the second time for anything under reality, the first was on seeing Kean’s Sir Giles Overreach. (BLJ VI 206).

It’s clear that Maddalena Pelzet, the actress who played Mirra at this performance, was a cut above the amateurs of whom Alfieri writes so disparagingly in his Autobiography. As an actress, she was Kean’s equal in her ability to move Byron. But was it Alfieri, or she, who moved him?

Byron never mentions using Alfieri as a model – a sure sign that he did. Pushkin had no doubts:

English critics disputed Byron’s dramatic talent; I think they were right. Byron, so original in Childe Harold, in The Giaour and in Don Juan, becomes an imitator as soon as he embarks on drama – in Manfred he imitated Faust, replacing the crowd scenes and the [witches’] sabbath with others which he considered more elevated: but Faust is among the great creations of the poetic spirit, being a representative example of contemporary poetry, in the way that the Iliad is a monument of classical antiquity.

It seems that in his other tragedies Alfieri was Byron’s model – Cain only has the form of drama, but on account of the inconsequence of its scenes and its abstract dialectic in fact belongs, like Childe Harold, to the poetry of scepticism. Byron threw a one-sided glance at the world and at human nature, then turned away from them and became absorbed in himself. In Cain he conceived, created and described one sole character (his own in fact), and related everything else to this gloomy and powerful figure, one that is so strangely fascinating. However, when he began to create his tragedy, he handed out to each of the dramatis personae one of the component parts of this complex and strong personality – and in this way broke up his majestic creation into several small and insignificant figures.

Byron was conscious of his mistake and at a later date took up Faust again, imitating it in his Deformed Transformed (thinking in this way to improve on le chef-d’œuvre) (Wolff 209-10).

In Boris, Pushkin is imitating, not just Macbeth and Richard III, but the second historical tetralogy, particularly Henry IV. Boris’ guilt parallels that of Henry in that, although he did not kill his predecessor himself, the person who did so was carrying out his will, if not his explicit wish.

Henry IV and Richard II have one huge theatrical advantage over Boris and the Tsarveich: Shakespeare can, with no violation of history, put them on stage together. He choreographs their meeting as one flashy leading man upstaging his less flashy, but stoical, rival:
RICHARD [looking into a mirror]: Was this face the face
That every day under his household roof
Did keep ten thousand men? Was this the face
That like the sun did make beholders wink?
Is this the face which fac’d so many follies
That was at last out-fac’d by Bolingbroke?
A brittle glory shineth in this face;
As brittle as the glory is the face;

[Dashes the glass against the ground]

For there it is, crack’d in a hundred shivers.
Mark, silent king, the moral of this sport –
How soon my sorrow hath destroy’d my face.

BOLINGBROKE. The shadow of your sorrow hath destroy’d
The shadow of your face.

KING RICHARD. Say that again.
The shadow of my sorrow? Ha! let’s see.
’Tis very true: my grief lies all within;
And these external manner of laments
Are merely shadows to the unseen grief
That swells with silence in the tortur’d soul.
There lies the substance; and I thank thee, king,
For thy great bounty, that not only giv’st
Me cause to wail, but teachest me the way
How to lament the cause.

The more loquacious the actor-king becomes, the less loquacious his usurper becomes:
Bolingbroke doesn’t relish public performance as Richard does. Bolingbroke may be the better
politician in terms of manipulation and cunning, but Richard is the more effective showman.
This kind of meta-theatrical comedy is beyond the reach of either Byron or Pushkin.
Neither of them can milk a situation for its theatrical potential as Shakespeare can: Byron, as
I’ve said, elects not to, and Pushkin doesn’t know the theatre well enough.
Marino Faliero, being about the way a Venetian nobleman dies putting himself at the
head of a failed proletarian insurrection, is itself a neat metaphor for what Byron fears may
happen if he joins in with the hard-handed men of Drury Lane (“that never laboured in their
minds till now”), and tries his hand at real playwriting. His horror of the political taint of the
historical deed is at one with his horror at the thought of the social and literary humiliation
which would occur if the tragedy failed.
Faliero shudders at soiling his name by associating with the workers. It’s as if Demetrius
and Lysander should join with Bottom and Quince in trying to overthrow Theseus:

Doge: When
I heard you tempt your sovereign, and forbore
To have you dragg’d in prison, I became
Your guiltiest accomplice: now you may,
If it so please you, do as much by me.
Isaac Bertuccio: Strange words, my lord, and most unmerited;
I am no spy, and neither are we traitors.
Doge: We – we! – no matter – you have earn’d the right,
To talk of us. – But to the point. – If this
Attempt succeeds, and Venice, render’d free
And flourishing, when we are in our graves,
Conducts her generations to our tombs,
And makes her children with their little hands
Strew flowers o’er her deliverers’ ashes, then
The consequence will sanctify the deed,
And we shall be like the two Bruti in
The annals of hereafter … (Marino Faliero, III i, 59-75)
Now Shakespeare would have written the last two lines as

And we shall be like the two Bruti in
The tragedies hereafter …

After all, in Julius Caesar, the assassins, having killed Caesar, make bold with their theatrical anticipation:

Cassius: How many ages hence
Shall this our lofty scene be acted over
In states unborn and accents yet unknown!
Brutus: How many times shall Caesar bleed in sport,
That now on Pompey’s basis lies along
No worthier than the dust!
Cassius: So oft as that shall be,
So often shall the knot of us be called
The men that gave their country liberty. (Julius Caesar, III i 112-19)

But Byron is unhappy about jokes in a classical drama, especially jokes which draw the audience’s attention ironically to the fact that they’re watching a play. And he’s unhappy, as he was not in Manfred, at giving a proletarian viewpoint or tone of voice at all. Israel Bertuccio, supposedly a chief of artisans, speaks in the same flat, flavourless blank verse as the Doge himself does. Though history dictates that the lower orders should be represented, their voice must remain unheard.

Byron selects his protagonists carefully so that they can’t give theatrical exhibitions of the kind Richard II gives. Manfred, Faliero, both the Foscari, Cain, Lucifer, and Werner, are all straight, sincere men (like Macbeth) who can’t perform to save their lives. Saradanapalus shows off, but doesn’t act his emotions. Only with Ulric in Werner and the two protagonists of The Deformed Transformed (each of whom plays the part of the other!) does he begin to mine this infinitely useful Shakespearean topos.

Marino Faliero, with its careful neutering of the authentic idiom of working-class revolt, may be a warning to his friend Hobhouse not to become one of their number, even as charismatic revolutionary leader – as if he ever would. Here is the play’s version of Cato Street, the aim of which was to assassinate the entire cabinet:

Calendaro: … they think themselves
Engaged in secret to the Signory,
To punish some more dissolute young nobles
Who have defied the law in their excesses;
But once drawn up, and their new swords well-flesh’d
In the rank hearts of the more odious senators,
They will not hesitate to follow up
Their blow upon the others, when they see
The example of their chiefs, and I for one
Will set them such, that they for very shame
And safety will not pause till all have perish’d.
Bertram: How say you? all!
Calendaro: Whom wouldst thou spare?
Bertram: I spare?
I have no power to spare. (Marino Faliero III ii 11-23)

And as with politics, so with writing plays: you mustn’t yield too much to such canaille.
As the Duke says in Measure for Measure:
I love the people,
But do not like to stage me to their eyes.
Though it do well, I do not relish well
Their loud applause and Aves vehement;
Nor do I think the man of safe discretion
That does affect it … (Measure for Measure, I i 68-73)

Such snobbery about both being a political leader and a manager of spectacle may lie behind the absence of incident in Byron’s drama. Richard Lansdown lists seven pages of verbal Shakespearean echoes in Faliero (Byron’s Historical Dramas, Clarendon 1992, pp. 237-44). Despite these recollections, I count only five dramatic moments in it. One is when the light sentence on Steno is revealed (I ii 70); the next when the Doge unmaskes himself (III ii 89); the third and fourth, the Doge’s arrest (IV ii 199) and the tolling of the bell (IV ii 225); and the fifth when the Doge is executed (V iv 20). Five dramatic moments in a five-act play which is 138 pages long in the Clarendon edition. The plot to overthrow The Forty is but a thing of words (like Hamlet’s plot to kill his uncle), and Faliero’s resignation on being arrested, before it gets under way, reads like relief. Byron, like Pushkin, would never pander to his audience’s low appetite for theatrical excitement, any more than he would to their appetite for radical utterance, or even living speech. If that was what they wanted, they could, after all, always go to Shakespeare.