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Alfieri and Byron

In Santa Croce's holy precincts lie
Ashes which make it holier, dust which is
Even in itself an immortality,
Though there were nothing save the past, and this,
The particle of those sublimities
Which have relapsed to chaos: here repose
Angelo's, Alfieri's bones, and his,
The starry Galileo, with his woes;
Here Macchiavelli's earth return'd to whence it rose.

(Childe Harold, Canto IV)

Oh qual silenzio! ... Infra i rimorsi adunque,
fra le torbide cure, e i rei sospetti
placido scende ad ingombrar le ciglia
de' traditori e de' tiranni il sonno?
Quel, che ognor sfugge l'innocente oppresso?
Ma, duro a me non e il vegliare: io stommi
co' miei pensieri, e colla immagin cara
d'ogni belta, d'ogni virtu...

(Filippo, IV. i)

And I would rather fall by freemen's hands
 Then live another day to act the tyrant
 As delegate of tyrants; such I am not,
 And never have been...

(*Marino Faliero*, III.ii)

Lord Byron's high regard for Vittorio Alfieri has been well known to his biographers and critics, yet only a few studies established a little more than the obvious connections between Alfieri's tragedies and Byron's historical dramas. The two writers shared a deep sense of patriotism and an abiding hatred of tyranny, two subjects which are inseparable in their works. On a personal level, they were kindred spirits of restless nature and fiery disposition. In the view of most Italians of Byron's time, Alfieri was regarded as a national poet who articulated his people's desire for national consciousness and liberty. Byron admired Alfieri's heroic vision and high moral aims. He praised his elevated style and specific approach to the classical elements of tragedy. In his historical dramas, particularly *Marino Faliero* and *The Two Foscari*, Byron attempted to follow Alfieri's poetics as close as his own unpredictable temperament and lyrical pen allowed him to. He composed a structure based on observance of the Aristotelian unities, most importantly that of action, moving in ceaseless, Alfierian stream. Noble characters of great strength and intense emotion surround a passionate hero whose inner torments come to life through violent conflicts and exalted speech. Byron refers to Alfieri in his letters, journals, introductions to historical dramas and poetry. Not only was he inspired by Alfieri's tragedies but by his essays and autobiography as well.

In Vol. IV of *La Vita*, Alfieri analyses his feelings on paying respects to Vittorio Amedeo II when he passed through Turin upon his return from France in 1784. Although he had nothing personal against the monarch of Piedmont, who even seemed favorably disposed towards him, Alfieri recalls that he was sud-

denly seized with an intense longing to leave Turin, the reason being, as he put it that "...chi entra in casa del tiranno si fa schiavo."(1) Rather than enter the house of a despot, however benevolent, Alfieri decides to leave Piedmont. In the third canto of *The Prophecy of Dante*, Byron expresses his distrust of tyrants in much the same words and elaborates on the Alfierian notion of the subtle processes of tyranny:

He who once enters in a tyrant's hall
 As guest is slave, his thoughts become a booty,
 And the first day which sees the chain enthral
 A captive, sees his half of manhood gone...
 (80-83)

The lines immediately following seem to be inspired by Alfieri's account of his indignant refusal to be introduced to Metastasio, who was then imperial poet at the court of Vienna. Alfieri records that he felt a revulsion for Metastasio's cringing attitude to his Austrian patrons and on no account would he have sought acquaintance of a poet who had 'prostituted' his Muse: "I would never have accepted to contrast friendship or familiarity with a Muse which was hired or sold to a despotic authority so bitterly abhorred by me..."(2) Byron's lines on the abject subjection of poets to their patrons have a similar resonance:

... thus the Bard too near the throne
 Quails from his inspiration, bound to *please*, - -
 How servile is the task to please alone!
 To smooth the verse to suit his sovereign's ease
 And royal leisure, nor too much prolong
 Aught save his eulogy, and find, and seize,
 Or force, or forge fit argument of song!
 (111, 85-91)

Byron glorifies Dante and Alfieri as heroes of Italian liberty who

urged their fellow citizens to awake from the spiritual lethargy and fight against oppression. The poem echoes with Alfieri's main argument from *Del Principe e delle Lettere*, a treatise well known to Byron. Based on the fact that the potentates of his times kept writers and artists in their pay in order to suppress the truth, Alfieri concludes that no form of art can thrive under a despot. In *The Prophecy of Dante* Byron refers to Alfieri's patriotism as a constant source of inspiration in his own genuine attempt to appeal directly to the nationalistic sentiments of the Italians. As he became increasingly involved in the Carbonari movement, Byron's poetry endorsed political revolution by urging his Italian readers to organize themselves against Austrian domination. His five historical dramas, all of which were written during this period, reflect the same patriotic sentiment and the true extent of Alfieri's influence.

Shortly after his arrival in Venice in the fall of 1816, Byron established himself as one of the eminent figures and literati of that city. He was greatly inspired by Italian culture, language and history. In February 1817 he undertook the dramatization of *Marino Faliero*, the first of his historical dramas. The writing of the play advanced slowly and sometimes with discouragement amidst Byron's revolutionary plans and adventures of his restless heart. This tragedy was to be the first in his new dramatic genre which would create a profound change in the works of his English contemporaries. "It is too regular," Byron writes considering *Marino Faliero*, "the time -twenty four hours, the change of place not frequent, nothing melodramatic — no surprises, no starts, no trapdoors nor opportunities 'for tossing their heads and kicking their heels'...only the simplicity of plot and the avoidance of rant." (3) With the same intent and all in the course of less than two years between 1821-22, Byron will produce four more tragedies: *Sardanapalus*, *Cain*, *The Two Foscari*, also based on the events of Venetian history, and *Heaven and Earth*. In his journals

and letters from the same period, Byron was fond of comparing himself to Alfieri — his themes, temperament and style. “It has been my object to be as simple and severe as Alfieri,” he writes to a publisher, “and I have broken down the poetry as nearly as I could to common language.” (4)

Some critics have related Byron’s departure from the romantic mode in *Manfred* (1817) in favor of the classicism in his later dramas to the influence of Alfieri and in a lesser degree to Vincenzo Monti. Monti and Alfieri were mentioned in Byron’s journal as early as February of 1814, when he contrasts them favorably with Schiller. E.H. Coleridge remarks, Byron had been powerfully impressed by the energy and directness of Alfieri’s work, and he was eager to emulate the gravity and simplicity, if not the terseness and conciseness of his style and language. (5) No doubt that in his desire to reform the English drama Byron was profoundly inspired by Alfieri’s works and thus consciously determined to follow Alfieri’s dramatic technique, particularly the notion of the three unities. Goethe is said to have “laughed to think that Byron, who, in practical life could never adapt himself and never even asked about a law, finally subjected himself to the law of the three unities.” (6) In a letter to John Murray, his publisher, Byron remarks on how deeply he was affected by *Mirra* in 1819: “Last night I went to the representation of Alfieri’s *Mirra*, the last two 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. (7) The lady who accompanied him that evening described his reaction as follows: Lord Byron took a strong interest in the representation and it was evident that he was deeply affected. At length there came a point in the performance at which he could no longer restrain his emotions -he burst into a flood of tears and, his sobs preventing him from remaining any longer in the box, he rose and left the theater. (8) His devoted companion, Countess

Guiccioli, recorded some time later that Byron was similarly affected by *Filippo*. (9)

Byron's instinct for classical form and rules was also fostered by his observation of the extravagance of the English stage. He replaces the horrible with the heroic; he decides to move from medieval and exotic settings to historical and from utter lack of truth to nature to insistence upon fact. Instead of unrestrained wildness and frequent harpings upon love preferred by others, Byron chooses to write with almost austere control and to focus on the problems of states and tyranny. He frequently contrasts his conception of tragedy with that current upon the stage: "My dramatic simplicity is studiously Greek, and must continue so: no reform ever succeeded at first. I admire the old English dramatists; but this is quite another field and has nothing to do with theirs. I want to make a *regular* English drama, no matter whether for the stage or not, which is not my object — but a *mental* theatre." (10) The close reading of *Marino Faliero* and *The Two Foscari* suggests that Byron was consciously striving to capture the simplicity of diction and the emotional intensity of Alfieri's plays. Other elements of Alfieri's classicism appear as well: the brevity of action (embracing hardly more than the catastrophe), the adherence to the unities, the simplicity of plot, the lack of comic scenes, the abundance of rhetoric, impressive dialogues and lofty speeches, and the general stateliness (characteristic of the French pseudo-classical drama, especially Comeille and Racine). Byron repeatedly expressed his wish to create plays of a marked contrast with the contemporary drama in England. In the Preface to *Sardanapalus*, Byron explains: "My object has been to dramatize like the Greeks (a modest phrase!) striking passages of history, as they did of history and mythology. — You will find all this very unlike Shakespeare — and so much better than him in one sense — for I look upon him to be the worst of models — though the most extraordinary of writers. It has been my object to be as

simple and severe as Alfieri..." (11) And indeed, Byron succeeded in following some aspects of Alfieri's style but he could not curb his own tendency toward extravagant and grandiose poetizing. Perhaps the great poet felt that in a dramatic composition his voice was not as precise and consistent as Alfieri's. As if he did not believe that the action, the characterization, the fidelity to actual fact and the preservation of the unities were in his employ sufficient tools to convey emotional power, Byron frequently returns to his exaggerated declamatory monologue, hoping it will carry the main burden of dramatic communication. Prodigious soliloquies dominate Byron's dramatic language; states of mind intrigue him, not events. He is more interested in emotions than in ideas, in attitudes rather than motives, in flourish rather than steady observation, in similitudes rather than analysis.

A comparative study of Alfieri's and Byron's tragedies suggests that *Filippo* and *La Congiura dei Pazzi* served in some aspects as models for *Marino Faliero* and *The Two Foscari*, particularly in their spare form and tense utterance. Similarities are also evident in the pace of the composition, the clear motivation of characters and the unflinching presentation of the horror of political power. Darkness, intrigue, fear and revenge create a web of forces surrounding the heroes. In *Marino Faliero*, the ethical ambivalence of the hero's thought and action — his reluctance to commit himself either to the dictates of his mind or the desires of his heart — is effectively figured in patterns of dim light and is additionally supported by subordinate motifs emphasizing blood, bestial, statuesque and organic figures. We reach the end of *Marino Faliero* with a real feeling of tragedy: something fine has been broken by evil forces.

Like Alfieri's Filippo or Clytemnestra, Byron's heroes perform acts of their free will, but the continuum in which these acts are caught up is not subject to human manipulation. Something inexorable strides abroad, a fatality or the power of supreme

evil, and is captured for our perception in the poetic relations of the two plays. Something of the same destructive force that moves Filippo and makes him even more forbidding and isolated. Unlimited power is a solitary state. Filippo and Doge Foscari are vulnerable, tragic rulers who sacrifice their sons for the interests of state. Similarly, Marino Faliero sees himself as the appointed purge of the state, the agent of an unspecified but superhuman will. He goes to the scaffold with a proud defiance which conceals the emptiness of his own heart. In this, he is a true Venetian aristocrat, the brother of those who sentenced him.

The play opens with the news that Michael Steno has received an unjustly light sentence from the ruling Forty for scribbling on the ducal throne a vicious insult against Doge Faliero's wife, Angiolina. In a fit of outrage caused by his belief that the Forty had added insult to injury by its leniency, Marino spurns the ducal bonnet before his nephew convinces him of the advisability of preserving an outward calm. After taking up the crown again, the Doge listens cautiously to the complaints of Israel Bertuccio — a plebeian unfairly assaulted by a nobleman. Bertuccio informs the Doge of a plot to overthrow the Forty and asks Marino to join them later that evening, at a secret meeting of the conspirators. In Act II, Angiolina speaks of her life with the Doge and his unpredictable and intemperate displays of passion. This scene is followed by a dialogue between Bertuccio and Calendaro who review their revolutionary plans. While he awaits the arrival of Bertuccio in Act III, Marino struggles with the memory of his forebears and the idea of treachery against the state. Nevertheless, he resolves to continue in his present course since he acts strictly in the cause of freedom. At the meeting, Marino's resolve weakens momentarily again, but the cause of liberty triumphs and he advises the conspirators to launch their attack at sunrise when St. Mark's bell tolls. In Act IV, Lioni, a patrician, is joined by Bertram, one of the conspirators, who reveals the revolutionary

plot in his eagerness to save the life of his friend. After Bertram is captured, Marino and Bertuccio are arrested on charges of high treason. Act V is dedicated to the trial and sentencing of all the revolutionaries, including Marino, who is allowed a brief parting moment with Angiolina. A few moments before his execution, the Doge addresses the sun, reaffirms his innocence in the cause of freedom, and dies as the Venetian citizenry murmurs ominously against the injustice of the Forty.

Byron's themes in *Marino Faliero* include some of Alfieri's favorite motifs: patriotism, struggle against tyranny, treason, jealousy, revenge, clashes of reason with passion and of intellect with emotion. Byron enriches his themes by representing his protagonist as an eighty-year-old aristocrat flung into intellectual and emotional chaos by a conflict pitting personal against political values. This man of strong passions, undampened by advanced age, must attempt to reconcile his personal feelings with a strong sense of duty. Marino would like to convince himself that he is acting only for the public good with his plan to free Venice from tyranny, but deep in his soul he knows that his desire to satisfy his honor is almost as strong as his revolutionary ideas.

Alterations of orthodox patterns of thought and conduct are for him insufferable. His triumph of character resides in the apparent insurmountability of the intellectual and the emotional barriers he must overcome. As political figures, Doge Faliero and Alfieri's Filippo pronounce different ideas, but as men they both gradually realize the instability of power and their apparent lack of competence and integrity. They must rebuild a moral identity independent of the past and required sacrifice. Because their entire careers have been devoted to statesmanship, as men they secretly feel weak, ineffectual, and thoroughly dispensable. Marino and Filippo are moved by different political motives, yet both desire revenge in order to satisfy their injured pride. The former's disillusionment is profoundly shattering, not only because his aris-

tocratic pride and dignity are reduced, but also because he has betrayed his ancestry by permitting the leadership of Venice to slip from his control. Thus he addresses Bertuccio:

Ay,
 If that the people shared that sovereignty,
 So that nor they nor I were further slaves
 To this o'ergrown aristocratic hydra,
 The poisonous heads of whose envenom'd body
 Have breathed a pestilence upon us all
 (*Marino Faliero*, I.ii.)

This vivid description of aristocratic oppression is immediately followed by a personal reference to his injured pride,

In evil hour was I so born; my birth
 Hath made me Doge to be insulted: but
 I lived and toil'd a soldier and a servant
 Of Venice and her people, not the senate;
 Their good and my own honor were my guerdon.
 I've fought and bled; commanded, ay, and conquer'd;
 Have traversed land and sea in constant duty...
 (*Marino Faliero*, I.ii.)

And so Doge Faliero decides to act, pursuing a course which if he fails will mean his life, but which, if he succeeds, will mean the destruction of the only class in his society to which he can belong. Faliero, then, would lose either way. But in his failure he is memorable, and his fall is momentous. He is able to die feeling that he has done all he could to right an intolerable wrong.

Another set of similarities appears when Doge Faliero is compared to Raimondo from Alfieri's *La Congiura dei Pazzi*. Raimondo's revolutionary spirit cannot tolerate the chains of oppression and he plots to overthrow the rule of Lorenzo and Giuliano Medici. His father Guglielmo, and Salviati, the Arch-

bishop of Pisa, help Raimondo in organizing the conspiracy. Raimondo is caught in a struggle between his desire to achieve liberty for the Florentine Republic and his fear of what might happen to his wife, Bianca, and their children, if his actions fail. His inner torment reflects the conflict of his multiple roles: he is a husband, a father, a citizen who cannot accept tyranny and who becomes a hero of liberty. Alfieri establishes the heroic tone through a set of speeches against tyranny, the same strategy that Byron will follow in *Marino Faliero*. In Act II Raimondo responds to Lorenzo:

Who knows it not? It was your terror gave it;
 Your terror takes it from me: to yourselves
 Terror is law supreme and deity.
 What attribute of kings do ye possess not?
 Already ye possess the public hate,
 Their cruel artifice, their frantic vices,
 Their infamous contrivances...
 (*La Congiura dei Pazzi*, II. ii)

In the following scenes, Raimondo's reference to the people of Florence will serve as a possible inspiration to Doge Faliero's heroic tone. Raimondo addresses Salviati,

The time to come
 Fills me with mournful and foreboding thoughts.
 Their necks they have accustomed to the yoke:
 Their natural rights forgetting, they know not
 That they are in chains; much less desire to burst them.
 Slav'ry to slaves seems nature's law; more force
 Is needed to unloose them, than to bind them.
 (*La Congiura dei Pazzi*, III.i)

In the same spirit, surrounded by conspirators, Byron's tragic hero speaks through Doge Faliero's voice:

I am before the hour, the hour whose voice,
 Pealing into the arch of night, might strike
 These palaces with ominous tottering,
 And rock their marbles to the corner-stone,
 Waking the sleepers from some hideous dream
 Of indistinct but awful augury
 Of that which will befall them. Yes proud city!
 Thou must be cleansed of the black blood which makes
 thee
 A lazar house of tyranny..
 (*Marino Faliero*, III.i)

A short time later, Doge Faliero's resolve echoes Raimondo's determinism. Here is an excerpt of Faliero's speech before the conspirators:

You are met
 To overthrow this monster of a state,
 This mockery of a government, this spectre,
 Which must be exercised with blood, and then
 We will renew the times of truth and justice,
 Condensing in a fair free commonwealth
 Not rash equality but equal rights...
 And I would rather fall by freeman's hands
 Than live another day to act the tyrant
 As delegate of tyrants;
 (*Marino Faliero*, III.ii)

In comparison, Raimondo's dialogue with his father, Guglielmo, offers another example of heroic tone which Byron used as a model:

My consort is not mine,
 My children are not mine,
 while I permit Him, whosoe'er he be, that tyrant,
 In this place to inhale the vital air.
 I have no tie now left in all the world,
 Except the stern inexorable oath,
 Tyrants and tyranny to extirpate.

(*La Congiura dei Pazzi*, III.ii)

Raimondo is a son and a father himself; a tormented husband and a leader of the oppressed. He is passionate and determined — a true hero born out of every imaginable personal struggle that a noble patriot must endure. His character brings together so many aspects of Byron's tragic protagonist, in drama *and* poetry, that it is hard not to imagine Byron's emotional response. Raimondo's complex position provided perhaps the strongest inspiration for Byron in composing *The Two Foscari*. Guglielmo and Raimondo offer a dynamic and intense parallel to Doge Francis Foscari and his son, Jacopo. In Byron's play, a personal drama between father and son develops through the agency of Marina who speaks and acts for her imprisoned husband. Some aspects of her role carry obvious traits of Alfieri's Bianca. In addition, Byron's Loredano and Barbarigo are mutually complementary as characters and their relationship is similar to that of Lorenzo Medici and his brother Giuliano.

In *The Two Foscari*, the study of heartless oppression is more complex and stark than in *Marino Faliero*. The plot is sparse in incident and physical action. It concerns two linked events: the trial, exile and death of the hapless Jacopo Foscari, and the deposition and death, possible by poisoning, of his father, Doge Francis Foscari. Byron's choice of characters is more Alfierian as well: only six protagonists, with no peripheral intrusions or incidents. The action of the drama unfolds in a setting which brings to mind the macabre atmosphere of Filippo's palace. The setting is restricted to several apartments and a dungeon in the ducal palace, a building which assumes a potent symbolic significance in the work. It is in this aspect of darkness and inexorable evil that *The Two Foscari* echoes the atmosphere of *Filippo* as well. Two soliloquies which illustrate the ominous environment in the two plays, invite close comparison. First, in Act IV of *Filippo*, Carlos is

alone and through the entire Scene I his voice foreshadows the impending doom:

Shadows of night, far more than beams of day,
 Suiting the horrors of this guilty palace,
 With mournful joy I witness your return!
 'Tis not that from your influence my grief
 Finds intermission: but that, for a time,
 I lose the sight of faces that appal me.—
 Here did Elvira pledge herself to meet me
 In Isabella's name: what would she tell me?...
 Profound the silence!...'mid their gnawing cares,
 Spite of remorse, and spite of dark suspicion,
 Does placid slumber from on high descend
 To seal the eyes of tyrants and of traitors?
 (*Filippo, IV. i*)

In this scene, Carlos' tone and the choice of imagery are very similar to the spirit of Jacopo's soliloquy in Byron's drama. Here, before Marina's appearance, Jacopo is alone with his memories and despair.

No light, save yon faint gleam, which shows me walls
 Which never echo'd but to sorrow's sounds,
 The sigh of long imprisonment, the step
 Of feet on which the iron clank'd, the groan
 Of death, the imprecation of despair!
 And yet for this I have return'd to Venice,
 With some faint hope, 'tis true, that time, which wears
 The marble down, had wom away the hate
 Of men's hearts; but I knew them not, and here
 Must I consume my own, which never beat
 For Venice but with such a yearning as
 The dove has for her distant nest, when wheeling
 High in the air on her return to greet
 Her callow brood...
 (*The Two Foscari, III. i*)

Alfieri's Carlos and Byron's Jacopo are prisoners of tyranny and sons confined to the shadows of their powerful fathers. Both of them misjudge the actions of the ruling councils and their political opponents. Neither one of them considers the possibility of escape. And to their final breath, both remain true to their passion, loyal even to the palace walls which surround them.

Byron stresses the horror with images of spectres, death and decay. The secret conclave and torture chambers of Gothic convention are transported into a political setting. Although the classical conventions Byron followed in *The Two Foscari* did not allow the physical presentation of Jacopo's trial and torture, our interest is continuously directed towards the business of the adjoining chambers. This brings to mind Alfieri's strategy in *Filippo* when, in Acts IV and V, the Council's final decision to execute Carlos comes from behind the closed doors. Isabella, just like Jacopo's wife, Marina, hears the "mournful cries" and "painful sounds" which "resound throughout the palace." (IV.iii).

The characters in *The Two Foscari* are drawn exclusively from the circle of the oligarchs and aristocrats of the mid-fifteenth century Venice. Two of these, Loredano and Barbarigo, have allied themselves in order to bring about the fall of the "ambitious Foscari / Father and son and all their noxious race." (I.i). Loredano and Barbarigo are members of the Council of Ten, a secret judicial body, as sinister as it is powerful, and the controlling organ of Venetian public life. Loredano is driven by a morbid lust for vengeance, an obsessive conviction that the Foscari owe him a debt for the deaths of his father and uncle. There appears to be no evidence for this belief, yet Loredano manipulates the judgment of the Ten after it is discovered that Jacopo, Doge Foscari's only living son, wrote an incriminating letter to the Duke of Milan, Venice's chief enemy. Jacopo intended the letter to be discovered before it reached its destina-

tion, in order that he might be “re-conveyed to Venice” from his exile in Candia. Although the crimes which brought about his conviction to exile in the first place were dubiously established, Jacopo longs to return not to seek a retrial or vindication, but simply because he cannot bear to be far away from his native land. Here is how one of the Senators refers to Jacopo’s love for Venice:

That’s not their policy: they’d have him live,
Because he fears not death; and banish him,
Because all earth, except his native land,
To him is one wide prison, and each breath
Of foreign air he draws seems a slow poison,
Consuming but not killing.

(The Two Foscari, I. i.)

One does not fight tyranny by running or hiding. Jacopo is not in a position to be an active conspirator of Raimondo’s strength and determinism, but his resistance to despotism and his personal, family drama resemble the character of Alfieri’s hero. Jacopo feels the approach of tragedy but he shares only some of his ideas with his wife, Marina. His final punishment, yet another lifelong sentence in exile, is exquisitely cruel because it has reduced to pointlessness all that Jacopo did to secure his return to Venice. Marina is ready to accompany him into exile but her example is not able to serve him: they draw their strength from different sources, just like Raimondo and Bianca in *La Congiura dei Pazzi*. Jacopo’s mind, like Raimondo’s, is closed to all but his own obsession. This force will inflict the final blow to Jacopo’s life, the force unyielding to the end, just like the dagger in Raimondo’s agitated hand which causes the fatal wound. We are confronted with the sad spectacle of Marina’s normal, human sentiment breaking against the rocks of an obdurate and self-destructive will. She may try to persuade Jacopo that “the sweet freedom of the earth

and air” is better than Venice, “this crowd of palaces and prisons,” whose first inhabitants “were wretched exiles.” III.i.) Marina also tries to remonstrate with him that his love “for an ungrateful and tyrannic soil is passion and not patriotism,” but all to no avail. His love for his native land is the source of all his strength. Thus Jacopo responds:

You call this *weakness!* It is strength,
 I say, — the parent of all honest feeling.
 He who loves not his Country, can love nothing.
 (*The Two Foscari*, III. i)

Marina’s and Jacopo’s dialogue mirrors Alfieri’s scene between Bianca and Raimondo after she perceives the depths of his outrage and interior struggle.

But yet this long uninterrupted night,
 Which sparsely yet the rising dawn disperses,
 How different, how very different,
 Was it to thee from all preceding nights!
 Not one brief moment did calm sleep descend
 Upon thy weary eyes. Thou closedst them,
 The better to deceive me; but the thick,
 And frequent pantings of thy breast, thy sighs
 Suppress’d by force, thy face alternately
 Inflamed with fire, or bathed in hues of death;...
 (*La Congiura dei Pazzi*, V.i)

Raimondo admits his fears and agitation; he explains the hard choice which he had to make as a father and husband: to bring his family up in false safety of servitude or to choose the dangerous but virtuous fight for liberty.

And who the blessednes of speech enjoys,
 Where tyrants dwell? Eternally on high,

Above the head of slaves, a naked sword
 Hangs by a slender thread. Save idiots, here
 No other men repose.
 (*Ibid.*, V.1.)

After Bianca's passionate plea on behalf of their children, the innocent victims of parental actions, Raimondo responds:

And, if erewhile I wept,... I wept the fate
 Of the poor children of an outraged father.
 Must I incessantly not weep their birth,
 And their existence?—Hapless little ones!
 What fate in this long death, which we call life,
 Awaits you! To increase your infamy,
 Ye are at once the tyrants' slaves and nephews...
 (*Ibid.*, V.i.)

Raimondo thinks and acts as a true hero of liberty and a father whose concerns reach far into the future. A devoted wife and mother, Bianca is a complex heroine of real nobility and strength. She represents a more than likely model for Byron's Marina. In her own appeal to Jacopo, Marina also questions the future of their children:

I would that they beheld their father in
 A place which would not mingle fear with love,
 To freeze their young blood in its natural current.
 They have fed well, slept soft, and knew not that
 Their sire was a mere hunted outlaw. Well,
 I know his fate may one day be their heritage,
 But let it only be their heritage,
 And not their present fee. Their senses, though
 Alive to love, are yet awake to terror;
 (*The Two Foscari*, III. i.)

In order to create a character which will complement Jacopo,

Byron takes Marina a step further; he empowers her beyond the espousal and motherly role. Jacopo is devoted to his city and to the cause of freedom, but he is not a hero like Raimondo. Thus, Marina has to appear stronger because of her husband's overwhelming pessimism. She repeatedly opposes despotism and refers to the horrors of Venetian politics. In her plea to Doge Foscari to save Jacopo, her tone is enraged and harsh with almost revolutionary zeal.

Keep
 Those maxims for your mass of scared mechanics,
 Your merchants, your Dalmatian and Greek slaves,
 Your tributaries, your dumb citizens,
 And mask'd nobility, your sbirri, and
 Your spies, your galley and your other slaves,
 To whom your midnight carryings off and drownings,
 Your dungeons next the palace roofs, or under
 The water's level; your mysterious meetings,
 And unknown dooms, and sudden executions, Your "Bridge
 of Sighs," your strangling chamber, and
 Your torturing instruments, have made ye seem
 The beings of another and worse world!
 Keep such for them: I fear ye not! I know ye!
 (*Ibid.*, II.i.)

Marina voices the spirit of opposition primarily because she finds herself in a desperate situation trying to save her husband, but at the same time she recognizes the state corruption and its destructive power. Marina exposes what Doge Foscari and Jacopo do not want to admit. "Who dares accuse my country?" Jacopo asks her. "Men and Angels!" she cries:

The blood of myriads reeking up to Heaven,
 The groans of slaves in chains, and men in dungeons,
 Mothers, and wives, and sons, and sires, and subjects,
 Held in the bondage of ten bald-heads; and

Though last, not least, thy silence!

(*Ibid.*, III.i.)

There is nothing left for Jacopo but to die of physical suffering and mental anguish compounded by the unbearable prospect of another exile. In comparison to Raimondo's end, Jacopo's death is more pathetic than tragic. But at the same time his death is his own strange victory, a vindication of his desire to remain forever in Venice. His "native earth" takes him "as a mother to her arms" (V.ii.). As later with the death of the father, so in the death of the son, Loredano is defeated. He has inflicted great suffering on the Foscari but, in the end, their endurance gently triumphs: Jacopo dies in his Venice and Francis expires while still legally Doge.

In Francis Foscari, Byron portrays a man devoted almost wholly to duty. In his determination to abide by the laws of his city, Francis Foscari must see his last surviving son suffer and die. And he bears the burden of this duty with an almost inhuman stoicism. It is only because Byron allows us too see beneath his strong exterior that we feel Francis Foscari to be a tragic figure. And again, one cannot help but remember Alfieri's presentation of the conflict between matters of state and family. Byron models Doge Foscari on Alfieri's notion of a ruler's dual position, with the conflicting roles of a father and a despot. Even the Doge's death by poisoning is kept secret so that the state machine may continue to move with silent steadiness. The hegemony of the oligarchy and the secrecy which pervades its government are preserved intact. The Venice in which both Foscari die is a paradise lost, or rather a paradise from which a number of its inhabitants have been barred by the walls of the palace-prison to which their class or office has committed them. The Doge who has brought great glory to the state is dismissed by its functionaries and may have been poisoned by one of them. Jacopo's attachment to this paradise is a poetic expression, essential to our realization of what

has been lost. If we are to be appalled by the emptiness and heartlessness of the Venetian political machines, whose operation we witness in the palace-prison, then we must be presented with the grace and beauty which has been perverted and polluted.

A close, comparative reading of the two authors reveals the power of Alfieri's precise language in contrast to Byron's. Byron's effort is obvious and his poetic choice of imagery often adds a rare, lyrical tone to his tragedies, but in dramatic expression he could not reach the heights of Alfieri's art. In *Marino Faliero* and *The Two Foscari*, Byron creates tragic heroes whose characterization includes some of the crucial elements of Alfieri's poetics. As impressive studies in mental conflict, Byron's tragedies share the recurring, Alfierian motifs: exposure of tyranny and terror of unlimited power, tradition, demoralization, revenge and purgation. Unable to accomplish the power of Alfieri's clarity and precision, Byron supports these motifs by a complex pattern of imagery which at once strengthens their intellectual substance and intensifies their emotional impact. The present degeneracy of Venice in *Marino Faliero* for instance, is represented in organic figures of diseased vegetation and it contrasts with the moral integrity of the Doge's ancestry, represented in rock and granite images. And finally, we reach Byron's powerful depiction of the patterns of blood imagery, as we find in Alfieri. Byron unites the major themes by stressing as the context demands, virtuous, defiled, shed, or purified blood. Indeed, both dramas are from first to last bathed in a metaphorical sea of blood, another image which reminds of Alfieri's presence. As in Doge Faliero's words:

What are a few drops of human blood? 'tis false, The blood of tyrants is not human...

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NOTES

1. Vita, Vol IV. p. 235.
2. Ibid., p. 255.
3. *The Letters and Journals of Lord Byron*. Rowland E. Prothero, ed. London: John Murray, 1898-1904. Vol, V. p. 243.
4. Ibid., p. 372.
5. *The Poetical Works of Lord Byron*. E. H. Coleridge, ed. London: John Murray., 1904, Vol. IV, p. 327.
6. Ibid., p.328.
7. *The Letters and Journals of Lord Byron*. Vol. IV, p. 339-340.
8. Ibid., p. 340. Note 1.
9. Ibid., p. 342. Note 2.

10. Ibid., p. 347.
11. Ibid., Vol. VIII, p. 152.