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**“BATTLING AT THE NAME OF SCANDERBEG”: THE
LITERARY METAMORPHOSES OF GEORGE CASTRIOT**

I take the title of this essay from the poem by Padraic Colum, entitled “Scanderbeg”, which I will be quoting in its entirety at its conclusion. Judged at least from a strictly grammatical perspective, the phrase “battling at the name of Scanderbeg” might perhaps appear to be a somewhat dubious one, but it is nonetheless serviceable enough in view of the remarks I shall be making in the following pages. As Colum’s poem recalls, the name of George Castriot Scanderbeg has in the course of the centuries been invoked by different peoples in the most disparate contexts. But as the term “alias” or “surnamed” by which the title “Scanderbeg” is often preceded suggests, that name is in some ways a deeply schizophrenic one, and this schizophrenia extends to the way in which the individual to which it refers has himself often been perceived. With its curious mixture of Albanian, Greek and Turkish elements, with its juxtaposition of the European and the Asiatic, of the pagan, the Christian, and the Moslem, the name reflects what might be described as the polymorphous quality of Scanderbeg the man, but also the fact that in many respects he is as ambiguous a figure as he is unique. This ambiguity, and the consequent ambivalence Scanderbeg has historically been capable of arousing in those contemplating his colourful but, at least in some eyes, by no means unimpeachable career as military commander and political leader, manifests itself imaginatively in the very different ways he has been treated in literature. This is nowhere more evidently the case than with the literature of English-speaking countries, and it is this that I will be discussing in what follows.

In England no less than elsewhere, Scanderbeg was elevated in the decades following his death to the status almost of cultural icon by those seeking to delineate a specifically European identity in opposition

to what was perceived to be the darkly exotic but essentially barbarous world of Islam. The compelling image of a Christian hero of virtually superhuman stature, wielding at once both the Cross and the sword, and resisting the incursions of the alien hordes against all odds, was of vital importance in this process of collective self-definition. But there is more to the legend of Scanderbeg than simply the epic grandeur with which its protagonist is invested. Scanderbeg owes much of his mythic allure, his power to evoke deeper resonances in the imagination, not only to his fame as a warrior but also to his peculiar position as a liminal figure, as a man of boundaries in more senses than one. In the stories narrated about him he is perpetually on the margins, shifting between realities antagonistic to one another, negotiating their claims without seeking to reconcile them. For many Christians of his own period much of his significance consisted in precisely this aspect of his saga, in the fact that, having been educated by the Ottomans and indoctrinated into the tenets of Islam, he was familiar with both the Christian and the Moslem worlds and had deliberately chosen the former over the latter.¹ If Scanderbeg was uniquely qualified to affirm the superiority of Christianity over its rival, at least part of the reason was that he was capable of transacting on equal terms with non-Christian realities, that he was mysteriously conversant with that menacing other against which he came to define himself.

Inevitably, however, the mythic charisma attaching to Scanderbeg's reputation came at a price. Precisely because he belonged simultaneously to two contraposed worlds Scanderbeg was a potentially troubling figure, because if one of those worlds was chosen it was necessarily at the expense of another to which he also owed some kind of allegiance. If he had remained what for many years he seemed to be, a renegade from the fold of Christianity putting his prodigious talents at the service of a potentate dedicated to the foundation of a universal Islamic empire, then he would have been branded as a traitor to his ancestral faith. As things turned out he abjured Islam in favour of Christianity, but the manner in which he

¹ Cf. Matthew Dimmock's contention that the "ongoing currency" of narratives dealing with Scanderbeg into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is due in part to "his status as a reconvert at a time of anxieties concerning the number of converts to Islam" (Dimmock 2005: 65).

proclaimed this choice was itself liable to aspersion, consisting as it did in an act of betrayal of people who had treated him generously and accorded him a position of the highest dignity in their society. By the very nature of the unique situation that imbued him with such authority in the eyes of many Christians, Scanderbeg could not avoid being a traitor to someone, and this made him a subtly disturbing figure as well as a heroic one.

The dark side of the Scanderbeg legend was rendered explicit by the historian Edward Gibbon in the sixth volume of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, published in 1788. While not disparaging in the least the qualities as warrior and leader that had made him renowned throughout Europe, Gibbon dissents on a number of counts from the conception that was still prevalent of the immaculate hero struggling to preserve Christian civilization at all costs from the depredations of barbarism. He is particularly sceptical about the crucial act that inaugurated the Christian phase in Scanderbeg's career, the desertion of a Turkish army that had been placed under his command and the betrayal of those who had made him one of themselves and reposed their trust in him. By casting doubt on the veracity of the report that his brothers had been poisoned by the Turks who held them hostage, observing that such a suspicion "is in a great measure removed by the kind and paternal treatment of George Castriot" himself (Gibbon 1995: 926), Gibbon effectively denies Scanderbeg any moral justification whatsoever for turning against his benefactors. And he goes on to launch even more damaging accusations:

In the eyes of the Christians, the rebellion of Scanderbeg is justified by his father's wrongs, the ambiguous death of his three brothers, his own degradation, and the slavery of his country; and they adore the generous, though tardy, zeal, with which he asserted the faith and independence of his ancestors. But he had imbibed from his ninth year the doctrines of the Koran; he was ignorant of the Gospel; the religion of a soldier is determined by authority and habit; nor is it easy to conceive what new illumination at the age of forty could be poured into his soul. His motives would be less exposed to the suspicion of interest or revenge, had he broken his chain from the moment that he was sensible of its weight; but a long oblivion had surely impaired his original right; and every year of obedience and

reward had cemented the mutual bond of the sultan and his subject. If Scanderbeg had long harboured the belief of Christianity and the intention of revolt, a worthy mind must condemn the base dissimulation, that could serve only to betray, that could promise only to be foresworn, that could actively join in the temporal and spiritual perdition of so many thousands of his unhappy brethren. Shall we praise a secret correspondence with Huniades, while he commanded the vanguard of the Turkish army? Shall we excuse the desertion of his standard, a treacherous desertion which abandoned the victory to the enemies of his benefactor? In the confusion of a defeat, the eye of Scanderbeg was fixed on the Reis Effendi or principal secretary: with the dagger at his breast, he extorted a firman or patent for the government of Albania; and the murder of the guiltless scribe and his train, prevented the consequences of an immediate discovery. (Gibbon 1995: 927)

This last detail, chillingly precise in its evocation, is telling. A “guiltless scribe”—a man of the pen and not of the sword—was ruthlessly murdered so that Scanderbeg’s defection from the Ottoman camp would remain undetected. What Gibbon is voicing are the severest misgivings concerning the personal rectitude as well as the motivations of the man who for several centuries had been vaunted as a hero of unblemished character. In other words, what he is quite deliberately attempting to do is undermine the myth that had been artfully constructed by Scanderbeg’s first biographer Marin Barleti, the priest and scholar from Shkodra who had striven by every means available to him as a chronicler to erect his compatriot into a model of chivalry for the edification of all Christendom. “In the old and national history of Marinus Barletius”, Gibbon remarks dourly, Scanderbeg’s “gaudy and cumbersome robes are stuck with many false jewels” (Gibbon 1995: 926 n. 36), and it is these counterfeit gems that he is resolved to strip away.

England, the land of King Arthur and Robin Hood, afforded a hospitable climate for the kind of legend that Barleti, whose *Historia de vita et gestis Scanderbegi Epirotarum principis*, first printed in Rome between 1506 and 1510, was intent on promulgating. A number of English translations of chronicles celebrating Scanderbeg’s exploits had been in circulation since the mid-sixteenth century, many of them with impressively long titles that in some cases amount to being virtual

summaries of their contents. These include Paulus Jovius's *A Short Treatise upon the Turke's Chronicles* ... (London, 1546), Thomas Norton's *Orations of Arsanes agaynst Philip; of the Ambassadors of Venise against the Prince that vnder crafty league with Scanderbeg layed snares for Christendom and of Scanderbeg prayeng ayde of Christian Princes against periurous murdering Mahumet, and agaynst the old false Christian Duke Mahumetes confederate* ... (London, 1560), and Andrea Cambini's *Two very notable Commentaries, the one of the Original of the Turcks and Empire of the House of Ottomanno; and the other of the Warres of the Turcke against George Scanderbeg* ... (London, 1562).² But the story of Scanderbeg's career became known to the wider English public chiefly through an amplified version of Barleti's biography that appeared in 1596 under the title *Historie of George Castriot, Surnamed Scanderbeg, King of Albanie. Containing his famous actes, his noble deedes of Armes and memorable victories against the Turkes for the Faith of Christ*. This was a rendering by a certain "Z. I., Gentleman" of Jacques de Lavardin's French account of the reign of Scanderbeg, a work largely based on Barleti's history and published in 1576. "Z. I." was Zachary Jones, a barrister who translated various French texts. In its complete form his title betrays the bias of the work in its English redaction, the fact that it is in the final analysis an extended exercise in Christian propaganda. Of a piece with this intention is the fact that the prefatory material in the volume includes a sonnet contributed by Edmund Spenser, himself no negligible a propagandist in his own right:

Wherefore doth vaine antiquitie so vaunt
 Her ancient monuments of mightie peeres,
 And old Heroes, which their world did daunt
 With their great deedes, and fild their childrens eares?
 Who, rapt with wonder of their famous praise,
 Admire their statues, their Colossoes great,
 Their rich triumphall Arcks which they did raise,
 Their huge Pyramids, which do heauen threat.
 Lo one, whom later age hath brought to light,
 Matchable to the greatest of those great;

² This information has been drawn from Pérovitch 1972: 21-25.

Great both by name, and great in power and might,
 And meriting a meere triumphant seate.
 The scourge of Turkes, and plague of infidels,

Thy acts, O Scanderbeg, this volume tels. (Spenser 1970: 481)

This is unabashedly fulsome tribute, and affords some indication of the role assigned to Scanderbeg in the militant Christian myth of the day. Contrary to all expectations, the poet is saying, this latter age has been capable of producing a hero equal in stature to those of antiquity, and he happens to be one of ours. The epithet “scourge of Turkes” applied to Scanderbeg, it might be mentioned, was a familiar one even before Spenser used it. It is to be found for instance in the version of the Prayer Book issued at Queen Elizabeth’s behest in 1559, in which are found the words: “The good Prince Scanderbeg king of Epyrus, a scourge to the Turke, as vpon this day, died” (1890: 194).

There is another curious mention of a Scanderbeg in a work of literature preceding Spenser’s, and that is in a sonnet composed by Gabriel Harvey in September of 1593 as part of a poem in four parts entitled “*Gorgon, or the Wonderfull yeare*”. The sestet of the sonnet reads as follows:

*I mus’d awhile: and having mus’d awhile,
 Jesu, (quoth I) is that Gargantua minde
 Conquerd, and left no Scanderbeg behinde?
 Vowed he not to Powles A Second bile?
 What bile, or kibe? (quoth that same early Spright)
 Have you forgot the Scanderbegging wight?* (Harvey 1884: 296)

This poem is cryptic in the extreme, and has been variously construed. The reference to Scanderbeg, in particular, is a conundrum that has taxed the ingenuity of numerous commentators, and what these have very largely agreed on is that the sonnet is not in any sense alluding to Scanderbeg as a historical personage. One interpretation of the poem as a whole that is of interest in the present context is that it concerns the death of Christopher Marlowe, the surmise being that the lines in question might recall the fact that Marlowe had undertaken to produce a play—or even a second play—about Scanderbeg, which

however his untimely demise in May 1593 had prevented him from delivering.

I say "second play" because it has sometimes been maintained that Marlowe did in fact write a drama about Scanderbeg and that, as had already occurred in the case of *Tamburlaine*, a sequel would be produced in due course. The grounds for such a belief are, however, so tenuous as almost to be inconsequential. The facts as we know them are the following. A play entitled *The true historye of George Scanderbarge*, described as having been "lately playd by the right honourable the Earle of Oxenforde his servants", was entered into the Stationers' Register on 3 July 1601 (Chambers 1923: 400). There can thus be little doubt that a work of this title existed, and that it had recently been performed at the time that it was registered, but no information concerning its authorship is on record. E. K. Chambers, one of the most attentive historians of the Elizabethan stage, declared that there is "no satisfactory reason" to attribute the play to Christopher Marlowe (Chambers 1923: 400), and subsequent critics have generally been of the same opinion, the sole item of evidence hinting at the possibility of such authorship being in fact the poem by Harvey already mentioned. In his absorbing historical investigation into the circumstances surrounding Marlowe's murder, Charles Nicholl takes issue with the theory that Harvey's poem alludes to this latter event, contending instead that the death referred to is that of a notorious braggart named Peter Shakerley (Nicholl 2002: 70-76). If this is the case, of course, then any direct connection between Marlowe and the play which, to judge from its title, was based on the life of Scanderbeg disappears altogether.³

The issue might perhaps appear to be somewhat academic, since the work in question is in any event lost and we know nothing about it beyond what is recorded in the Stationers' Register. There is however one by no means irrelevant point to be made before abandoning the topic. This is that the image of Scanderbeg as the "scourge of the Turkes" might very plausibly have held a certain attraction for the man

³ In their recent study of Marlowe Lisa Hopkins and Sean McEvoy endorse Nicholl's view: "It is also often said that Marlowe wrote a lost play on the history of the Albanian patriot George Scanderbeg, but the only evidence for this is Gabriel Harvey's reference to 'a Scanderbegging wight' in 'Gorgon', which Charles Nicholl has convincingly suggested actually refers to Peter Shakerley" (Hopkins and McEvoy 2008: 45).

who revelled in the exploits of Tamberlaine, another warrior who had made life difficult for the Turks at a somewhat earlier phase of history. In a note to her edition of Marlowe's *Tamberlaine*, indeed, Una Ellis-Fermour implies that Marlowe's representation of his protagonist is directly influenced by the figure of Scanderbeg (Marlowe 1951: 184, n. 16). Such a hypothesis seems more than reasonable. In his immensely erudite study of the relation between Islam and England during the Renaissance, which has lost none of its relevance seventy years after publication, Samuel C. Chew points out that Scanderbeg and Tamburlaine were frequently coupled in the English imagination of that epoch, and to demonstrate his point quotes a line from Thomas Randolph's *Hey for Honesty*, published in 1651: "I will be the Scanderbeg of this company, the very Tamburlaine of this ragged rout" (Chew 1937: 478). Other critics have taken the same view.⁴ In view of this association, it is highly probable that the story of Scanderbeg exercised some sort of influence upon Marlowe's writing, even if it did not directly inspire any particular play based on his biography.

It is possible to go further, and suggest that there is another way in which Marlowe contributed indirectly to the dissemination of the Scanderbeg myth through drama. It is almost certainly the case that the immense popularity of Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* in the final decade of the sixteenth century was one of the factors responsible for the fascination with exotic and larger-than-life warrior figures which was burgeoning during this period and which led in turn to the interest in Scanderbeg so clearly evinced by various writers. Both Marlowe's own company, the Admiral's Men, and the other companies active during this period would have recognized the considerable commercial value of plays possessing those features, and above all the kind of protagonist, that made *Tamburlaine* so popular. *Tamburlaine* was successfully revived by the Admiral's Men in 1594-95, and authors eager to capitalize on the vogue would have been on the lookout for comparable subjects that might appeal to the public. The publication in 1596 of Zachary Jones's *Historie of George Castriot*, obliquely derived as I have mentioned from Barleti's biography of Scanderbeg, would have provided a wealth of material admirably suited to meet such a demand. It could well be in other words that the play entitled *The true*

⁴ See for example McInnis 2012: 77.

historye of George Scanderbarga that is mentioned in the Stationer's Register was another expression of an interest that can at least in part be attributed to Marlowe's influence even if he was not himself the author.

This, however, does not solve the problem posed by Harvey's *Gorgon*. If the "Scanderbegging wight" is not Marlowe, and the reference to Scanderbeg is not to a drama supposed to be in the process of gestation, then why is the name of Scanderbeg mentioned at all in Harvey's frustratingly opaque poem? One possibility is that it is the dark side of the myth of Scanderbeg to which I have already alluded that is surfacing here. The name Scanderbeg, however resonantly it reverberated in the panegyrics of his admirers, seems also to have carried pejorative connotations in certain quarters, in part perhaps because of the suspect nature of Scanderbeg's repudiation of Islam and reconversion to Christianity, but also it would appear because of the larger-than-life quality of the character himself. This hyperbolic quality was calculated to inspire amusement and even uneasiness in those not readily disposed to uncritical adulation, as were the unconventional military tactics to which Scanderbeg sometimes resorted in harrying the Ottoman forces. Chew suggests that the phrase *Scanderbegging wight* used in Harvey's poem "may mean nothing more than a swashbuckling fellow", and he cites a number of other instances in the literature of the period in which the name was used in such a sense, and indeed in which—presumably through a process of associative extension—it acquired the even less flattering connotation of "ruffian" as well (Chew 1937: 477). Among the authors mentioned by Chew are Jonson, Dekker, Shirley, Dryden and Otway, which suggests that the association was by no means a circumscribed one.

The name Scanderbeg is used as a term of derision in Thomas Dekker's *The Shoemaker's Holiday*, first acted in 1599, in which it forms part of the compound name "Skellum-Skanderbag-can-you-Dutch-speaken" by which one of the characters refers to a foreign skipper (Dekker 1999: 7.106).⁵ Perhaps the idea for this irreverent appropriation was borrowed from another play in which Scanderbeg's name is invoked for humorous effect, this being Ben Jonson's *Every*

⁵ On the parsing of this name, which differs from that of most other editions of the play, see the note on p. 123.

Man in his Humour, performed a year before *The Shoemaker's Holiday* in 1598. In Jonson's comedy the name is worked into the scurrilous epithet "Whoreson scander-bag rogue" (Jonson 1999: 1.3.2), and is tentatively glossed by one editor, after a note explaining who Iskanderbeg was, as "'hence 'adventurer'" (Jonson 1999: 15, note line 20). What is perhaps chiefly of interest is that such allusions to Scanderbeg, which would presumably have been recognizable as such by the spectator of the play however garbled they are in formulation, afford an index of the currency of Scanderbeg's name in Elizabethan England. The modern reader of these plays by Jonson and Dekker might require the assistance of an explanatory note in order to make sense of such references, but the contemporary spectator evidently did not. The name was in the air, if not exactly a household word then certainly part of the cultural vocabulary of the age. At the same time, these appropriations of the name for purposes of abuse would suggest that the historical figure with which it was associated was very far from being an object of universal veneration, that it was one which could arouse mirth as well as awe. It may paradoxically be the case, however, that the frequency with which the name was subjected to sacrilege of this kind is itself indicative of the potency with which the legend was invested in the popular imagination.

As it happens, *Every Man in his Humour* is a play in which William Shakespeare is known to have acted, since his name appears in the list of actors prefixed to the comedy in the 1616 folio of Jonson's works. This is a circumstance that might provide food for speculation. The printer who issued the version of Barleti's book that was largely responsible for introducing the figure of Scanderbeg to the English public, the *Historie of George Castriot*, was none other than Richard Field, who happened to be Shakespeare's fellow townsman, probable school companion, and friend.⁶ It was from Field's press that Shakespeare's own *Venus and Adonis*, *The Rape of Lucrece* and "The Phoenix and the Turtle" emerged over a period extending from 1592 to 1601. That there was an enduring bond between the two men might be

⁶ See the entries "La Vardin (J. de). The historie of George Castriot surnamed Scanderbeg. [R. Field.] 1596. F°.", and "La Vardin (Jacques de). The historie of George Castriot, surnamed Scanderbeg ... Newly translated ... by Z. I. Gentleman. London, Imprinted for William Ponsonby. 1596. F°.", with the editorial annotation "Without printer's name, but device 1 and Field's ornaments" (Sayle 1900: 380, 467)

inferred from the fact that towards the end of his career Shakespeare would remember the name of the printer in that of an extemporaneously invented character in *Cymbeline* identified as Richard du Champ (Shakespeare 2001: *Cymbeline* 4.2.377). If, as has commonly been conjectured, it was Field who supplied Shakespeare with some of the books he consulted while composing his plays, then it is entirely within the realm of possibility that the playwright might have become acquainted with the *Historie of George Castriot* through precisely the same channel. And although there is no explicit reference to Scanderbeg in any of Shakespeare's works, there are aspects of the story of the Albanian prince that may well have influenced the delineation of some of his personages in a number of respects. Hamlet, who in order to fulfil his project of revenge must feign obedience to the king he has designated as his victim, simulating acquiescence in a regime he is in fact bent on destroying, might spring to mind.⁷ Richard Hillman has drawn attention to the parallels that may be discerned between accounts of one of Scanderbeg's more notable military successes and the Battle of Agincourt depicted in Shakespeare's *Henry V* (Hillman 1991: 172-74), suggesting indeed that such parallels might extend to the two parts of *Henry IV* as well (ibid.: 175-182). But even closer affinities might be discerned between the story of Scanderbeg and those of *Othello* and *Coriolanus*, both composed in the first decade of the seventeenth century. This is not of course to imply that any of these works was *directly* patterned on the Scanderbeg legend, a suggestion that that would be absurd since the sources of the plays have been identified with sufficient precision. The story of Scanderbeg may well have been one of the many elements contributing to the formation of that charged intellectual atmosphere in which the playwright's ideas took shape, however, and it therefore seems legitimate to point out parallels between that legend and the lives of Shakespeare's characters, without necessarily insisting on the existence of any kind of immediate nexus between the two.

Thus Othello, for example, might in certain respects almost be seen as the mirror-image or inverted double of Scanderbeg. He is an imposing Moorish warrior of princely extraction—presumably Moslem

⁷ The parallel between Hamlet and Scanderbeg is discussed by Richard Hillman (Hillman 1991: 184-86).

in upbringing or supposed to be such by Shakespeare's audience, although at some point he has been baptised as a Christian. He achieves eminence in the Venetian state as a military commander, and is employed in that capacity in the defence of Christian possessions against the Ottomans on the fringe of the Christian world. This is the converse of the situation in which a Christian born Albanian prince is inducted into the Ottoman military and sent to combat the foes of Islam on the frontier of the Moslem world. Referring to the "lost play about George Scanderbeg" that was entered into the Stationers' Register in 1601, E.A.J. Honigmann argues that "Scanderbeg, a renegade Christian, led Turkish armies against Christians, and Othello could have been written as a counter-attraction, with a Moor starring as a Christian general against the Turks" (Honigmann 1993: 217). Although McInnis objects that "the analogy is imperfect ... since Scanderbeg's defection from the Turkish armies and his coup on behalf of the Christians is the more usual point of remembrance" (McInnis 2012: 80), there is perhaps something more to be said about the matter than this. While it is true that Othello does not betray the trust of the society by which he has been adopted in as obvious a manner as Scanderbeg, he does—according to some interpretations at least—revert in a certain sense to ethnic or cultural type, acting as a Moor rather than as a European is expected to behave, and thus symbolically if not in actual fact going over to the enemy. There is in other words a kind of inverted parallel, however incomplete, between Scanderbeg's reaffirmation of his Christian identity and at least partial repudiation of the persona inculcated into him by the Turks, and the transformation undergone by Othello. It is Othello himself who warns of the danger of "turning Turk" when he intervenes in a brawl between his subordinates: "Are we turned Turks? and to ourselves do that / Which heaven hath forbid the Ottomites?" (Shakespeare 2001: *Othello* 2.3.162-3). The ironic relevance of these words to his own situation is confirmed when, in the instant before committing suicide, Othello assimilates himself to a "malignant and a turbanned Turk" he once killed for having "traduced the state" (5.2.353-4). He has in a certain sense "turned Turk" himself, and it is in that guise that he kills himself.

It should perhaps be noted that candidates other than Scanderbeg have been proposed as possible mirror images of Othello. The

Shakespearean critic Jonathan Bate contends for instance that it may have been the story of the Hungarian renegade Piali Bassa, who also achieved eminence in the Ottoman military, and of whom Shakespeare could have learned while reading Richard Knolles's *Generall History of the Turkes*, who supplied a kind of reverse model for Othello. Bates argues that "like Piali, Othello has risen from an obscure background to become a great general and in so doing changed his religion" (Bate 2008: 299). One of the difficulties with this view is that, far from having an "obscure background" like the "base-born Hungarian" Piali, Othello proudly proclaims that "I fetch my life and being / From men of royal siege" (Shakespeare 2001: *Othello* 1.2.21-2). In this respect Othello's situation is analogous to the situation of Scanderbeg, who could also boast a princely lineage. Bate is perhaps approaching somewhat nearer to the mark when he suggests that "Othello is a janizary in reverse" (Bate 2008: 295), alluding to the Ottoman practice of forcibly circumcising Christian youths and enrolling them in the sultan's elite corps, and at this point it is the story of Scanderbeg that presents itself as a more likely inspiration for that of Othello. It might be added that Scanderbeg is also mentioned in Knolles's history, which appeared in 1603, and which is commonly supposed to be one of the works Shakespeare consulted while composing *Othello*.

Also to be mentioned while on the subject of Shakespeare's possible indebtedness to the Scanderbeg story is the protagonist of *Coriolanus*, written a few years after *Othello*. Coriolanus is a Roman general who becomes disaffected with Rome, allies himself with the Volscians, and wages war against his erstwhile countrymen. The name "Coriolanus" is the agnomen conferred upon him by the Romans as a tribute to his martial prowess, and like Scanderbeg he continues even as the sworn enemy of his former country to brandish the name it has bestowed upon him, until the contradictions latent in his situation come to a head. Such parallels, however partial, are suggestive in view of the fact that Shakespeare could hardly not have been acquainted with the Scanderbeg story and been sensitive to its implications. It should be repeated, however, that the notion of Shakespeare's having been materially influenced by the Scanderbeg legend is merely conjectural in the final analysis. Although one might imagine, as various critics have done in the case of Marlowe, that Shakespeare would have been

intrigued by the dramatic possibilities of the Scanderbeg story, it is a matter of historical record that he did not address the theme directly. Nor for that matter is this particularly surprising, since Shakespeare evinced remarkably little interest in exploring the lives of historical figures who were not either British or Roman. Perhaps we should be relieved that he did not choose to pursue this particular theme, since it is difficult to imagine what Scanderbeg would have made of Uncle Toby, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, Malvolio, and the various other personages with which, in the Illyrian setting of *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare peopled his territory.

If unequivocal tokens of Scanderbeg's presence are not to be discovered in Shakespeare's work, there can be few doubts regarding the degree to which he haunted the minds of other authors active in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. An indication of the kind of company that Scanderbeg kept in the popular imagination of the day might be found in Thomas Nashe's *Lenten Stuff*, published in 1599:

A cholerick parcel of food it is, that whoso ties himself to rack and manger to for five summers, and five winters, he shall beget a child that will be a soldier and a commander before he hath cast his first teeth; and an Alexander, a Julius Caesar, a Scanderbeg, or a Barbarossa, he will prove ere he aspire to thirty. (Nashe 1871: 59-60).

Michel de Montaigne's *Essays*, made available to the English reading public through John Florio's translation of 1603, mentions Scanderberg twice: indeed one of these references takes the form of an anecdote recounted at the very beginning of the first essay in the volume, and so is difficult even for a casual reader to miss. In this case as well it is the prince in his character as redoubtable military commander endowed with prodigious force and matchless valour rather than as paragon of Christian virtue who comes to the fore. It is this aspect of Scanderbeg's persona which usually predominates in the literary evocations of his life and exploits belonging to this period, and for which he is extolled as the model of the warrior prince to be emulated by all Christian kings. Thus in 1612 a Scottish scholar named James Maxwell produced a collection of poems entitled *The Laudable Life, and Deplorable Death, of our late peerlesse Prince Henry*,

containing verses foretelling that the new heir to the English throne, the future Charles I, will mature into a latter-day Scanderbeg. True to his prophetic bent, Maxwell was allowing himself to be beguiled by a superficial, and entirely fortuitous, similarity in place names when he delivered this unlikely oracle. One of Prince Charles's official titles was that of Duke of Albany, Albany being those parts of Scotland lying north of the River Forth, and Maxwell imaginatively equates that Scottish Albany with the Albania over which Scanderbeg had ruled:

O happy sight to see Prince Charles one day
With Castriote once chief of chivalrie
Against the Turks his Banner to display,
That as hee's named the Duke of Albanie:
So men may him a Scanderbeg enstile
Th'horror of Turks, the Hector of this Ile. (in Lerner 2008: 175)

Although some writers, recollecting Scanderbeg's identity not only as a soldier but more specifically as a soldier of Christ, made determined efforts to temper the ferocity of the warrior with the piety of the Christian, it was with results that generally failed to conceal a decided predilection towards bloodshed. In 1623, for example, Sir John Stradling issued his long and tediously solemn *Beati Pacifici*, a self-styled "divine poem" appealing for reconciliation among the quarrelling churches of Christian Europe, and advocating a common crusade against the Ottomans as the most expeditious means for attaining this end. At one point in his poem Stradling summons up once again the image of Scanderbeg as Champion of the Cross and implacable scourge of the Turks, and when he does so it is in tones that effectively belie the sanctimonious sentiment of his title:

I am perswaded, some such liue abroad
Among Christs people, like those worthy wights,
Huniades, and *Scanderbeg* that rode
Attended on with many matchlesse Knights,
Ouer the neckes of *Mahometan* bands,
And slue whole hundreds with their proper hands.
(Stradling 1623: 38)

It is interesting that such bloodthirsty evocations of wholesale slaughter should be found in a poem ostensibly extolling the sublime joys of peace. In this case as in others, what I have described as the schizophrenia with which the figure of Scanderbeg is viewed is to be imputed less to the man himself than to the peculiar mindset of those invoking his name for their own purposes.

At the same time as Scanderbeg's name became virtually synonymous with audacious military enterprise for many of his admirers in the seventeenth century, the immense physical strength for which the prince was also celebrated became proverbial in the most literal sense of the word, as the story of his having sent the sultan Mahomet a scimitar which no one in the Turkish court was capable of wielding gave rise to the saying "Scanderbeg's sword must have Scanderbeg's arm". Robert Burton's observation in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, published in 1621, that "antimony is like Scanderbeg's sword, which is either good or bad, strong or weak, as the party is that prescribes or useth it", implies familiarity with the anecdote, while the reference to "Scanderbeg's arm" elsewhere in the book suggests that the proverb inspired by the story might already have entered general currency as well (Burton 2001: 228, 275).⁸ Other stories, more or less apocryphal in character, are also rehearsed by writers of the period eager to exploit the mystique attaching to the figure of Scanderbeg for purposes of their own. In *Lucasta* for example, published in 1649, Richard Lovelace recollects the report of how the Turks plundered Scanderbeg's tomb and fashioned his bones into amulets, ascribing to these relics almost preternatural powers:

And as that soldier conquest doubted not,
 Who but one splinter had of Castriot,
 But would assault ev'n death so strongly charmd
 And naked oppose rocks, with his bone arm'd
 (Lovelace 1864: 251-2)

Like everything else about Scanderbeg, however, this story illustrating the veneration in which the dead warrior was held even by his foes could be viewed in more than one light, and when John Dryden

⁸ There are a number of other references to Scanderbeg scattered throughout the book.

advertises to the same anecdote in *The Medal: A Satire Against Sedition*, published in 1682, his tone is anything but reverential:

I believe when he is dead you will wear him in thumb-rings, as the Turks did Scanderbeg, as if there were virtue in his bones to preserve you against monarchy. (Dryden 2003: 206)

A nineteenth-century editor almost apologetically annotated this remark with the observation that "Scanderbeg's name appears to have been current in Dryden's time in vulgar conversation", adducing as an example the phrase "Oh scanderbeg villains" which occurs in Dryden's own play *Sir Martin Marall*. The fact that the various allusions appearing in the literature of these years are so disparate in tenor, that Scanderbeg is represented by turns as Defender of the Faith and apostate, warrior chieftain and posturer, secular saint and scoundrel, is one that testifies yet again to the radical ambivalence attaching to this personage in the English imagination.

In the first half of the eighteenth century there was a brief resurgence of interest in Scanderbeg among a number of English dramatists. Although this was certainly due in some measure to the reverses being inflicted upon the Ottomans in Europe during this period, the figure of Scanderbeg was also invested with local significance as it was deployed as a thinly veiled symbol of resistance to autocracy by writers hostile to the political ascendancy of Robert Walpole.⁹ Even Samuel Johnson might have been manifesting a certain degree of sympathy with this undercurrent of dissent when he introduced a reference to Scanderbeg into his tragedy *Irene*, composed around 1736-37, though not performed until more than a decade later. In this play Mahomet refuses to desist in his war against the Christians on the following grounds:

What! think of Peace while haughty *Scanderbeg*
Elate with Conquest, in his native Mountains,
Prowls o'er the wealthy Spoils of bleeding *Turkey*?
(Johnson 1781: 1.5.13-15)

⁹ See Ventura 1999: 86.

Three other plays that were spawned by the Scanderbeg legend during these years found little favour with the public, and swiftly subsided into the oblivion they merited. In these works, pivoting on the siege of Croia by the sultan Amurath, the figure of the Albanian warrior prince was enveloped in the aura of romance, and the struggle with the Ottomans took on lineaments other than those of epic as political, religious and amorous concerns competed for precedence. The first of these in order of composition, though not of publication, was Thomas Whincop's *Scanderbeg, or Love and Liberty*, written in the 1730s and published posthumously in 1747. In this play an element is introduced into the Scanderbeg story which has no precedent in the antecedent English tradition, since among the feats Scanderbeg must perform is that of rescuing his betrothed Arianissa, who has fallen captive to the Turks, from a fate worse than death.¹⁰ Similarly, in William Havard's *Scanderbeg*, performed in 1733, Scanderbeg is called upon to deliver not only his country but also a beautiful princess held in thrall by the Sultan, while in George Lillo's *The Christian Hero*, presented in 1735, Scanderbeg must release the virtuous heroine Althea from her imprisonment. In all of these cases, the captive woman in question—as well as providing the kind of romantic interest that the audience of the time expected—is clearly symbolic of the country for whose liberty the hero is fighting.

There are two points to be made in connection with this rather uninspired cluster of plays. The first is that in their published form the dramas of both Whincop and Lillo were accompanied by extended biographical sketches of Scanderbeg. Whincop's play is prefaced by "The Life of *George Castriot*, Commonly called *Scanderbeg*, King of *Epirus* and *Albania*", while the first volume of *Lillo's Dramatic Works* contains "A Brief Account of the Life and Character of *George Castriot*, King of *Epirus* and *Albania*, Commonly Called *Scanderbeg*". The circumstance that in many places the wording of these two sketches is virtually identical is perhaps not altogether to be attributed to coincidence. The fact that it was considered necessary to supply such biographies indicates that Scanderbeg's name was no longer as familiar

¹⁰ Ashcom argues that in the case of Whincop's play this complication was probably borrowed from a novel by Mlle de la Roche Guilhem, *Le Grand Scanderbeg*, which appeared in separate English translations in 1690 and 1721 (Ashcom 1953: 25-8).

to the general public as it had been in earlier times, that it was already receding into the mists of history. The second point is that, at least in the case of Lillo's work, the issue of Scanderbeg's defection from the Ottoman camp, the crucial betrayal that would later bring the probity of his character into suspicion in the eyes of Gibbon and others, is not entirely forgotten. It appears instead in displaced form, as Lillo resurrects from Barleti's history the episode of Hamza Castrioti, a nephew of Scanderbeg who compromised his uncle's cause by deserting to the Ottomans. In Lillo's play this character appears in the person of Scanderbeg's kinsman Amasie, who allies himself with the Turks and converts to Islam. What is significant is that Scanderbeg magnanimously forgives Amasie his treachery although, as it happens, this does not save him in the end. By pardoning the turncoat who has betrayed his trust Scanderbeg is, by proxy, granting absolution to himself as well.

The scenario developed in these plays of Scanderbeg's having to rescue a young woman from the more or less lascivious clutches of the Turks who hold her captive appears again in Benjamin Disraeli's historical romance *The Rise of Iskander*, first published in 1833. Disraeli was clearly following in the footsteps of Byron when he visited Albania in 1830, and the title of his novel is no less clearly derived from the lines in the second canto of Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* in which Scanderbeg's name is recollected:

Land of Albania! Where Iskander rose,
Theme of the young, and beacon of the wise,
And he his name-sake, whose oft-baffled foes
Shrunk from his deeds of chivalrous emprise (Byron 2000: 63)

In the note he supplied to this stanza, in which he specifies that it is "the celebrated Scanderbeg ... [who] is alluded to in the third and fourth lines", Byron confesses that "I do not know whether I am correct in making Scanderbeg the countryman of Alexander", and cites Gibbon as his authority for the assumption that he is (Byron 2000: 87). If Byron acknowledges at least a margin of uncertainty in the matter of Scanderbeg's ethnic origins, Disraeli has no doubts whatsoever on this score, or at least chooses not to reveal them. One of the first things that strikes the eye in reading *The Rise of Iskander* is that its protagonist is

represented with almost strident insistence as being Greek rather than Albanian. "Iskander was the youngest son of the Prince of Epirus, who, with the other Grecian princes, had ... in vain resisted the progress of the Turkish arms in Europe" (Disraeli 1881: 381). The Ottoman sultan holds Iskander in such high regard that he "destined for the Grecian Prince the hand of one of his daughters" (382). We are told that Iskander's "Turkish education could never eradicate from his memory the consciousness that he was a Greek" (383), and he identifies himself to Hunniades as "a Grecian Prince, and a compulsory ally of the Moslemin" (390). When Croia is seized its inhabitants rise up against the Turkish garrison to the resounding cry "'The Cross, the Cross!' 'Liberty!' 'Greece!' 'Iskander and Epirus!'" (397). There is much more in a similar vein, but perhaps enough has been quoted to make my point. What is evident is that the figure of Scanderbeg is being subjected once again to a process of mythic appropriation, recruited this time as a symbol of Hellenic resistance to Ottoman rule by a writer more interested in the recently concluded Greek war of independence than in the evolution of any Albanian national consciousness as such.

In broad outline the first part of Disraeli's novel retraces the story of Scanderbeg as it was originally recounted by Barleti, although it passes over in discreet silence such potentially disturbing incidents as that of the murder of the Ottoman secretary to which Gibbon took such fastidious exception. Once the taking of Croia has been dealt with, however, the author abandons any pretence at historical reconstruction and plunges into the world of romance as Iskander, together with his friend Nicaeus, undertake to rescue the fair Iduna from the serraglio at Adrianople. The episode is reminiscent of Mozart's *Il Ratto dal Serraglio*, with a substantial admixture of Shakespeare's *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* thrown in for good measure. Whereas the captive Althea of Lillo's play is the symbolic embodiment of the land for whose liberty Scanderbeg is fighting, Iduna, the daughter of John Hunniades, is merely a romantic heroine who becomes an object of amorous contention between Nicaeus and Scanderbeg as the novel proceeds. The image of Scanderbeg has at this point been divested almost entirely of its mythic lustre, as the superhuman hero of former times, now disguised as an Armenian physician, becomes the protagonist of something suspiciously resembling an opera buffa.

Nonetheless, some vestiges of the earlier myth continue to cling even to Disraeli's Scanderbeg. He is still a man of margins, restlessly shifting between his own domain and that of the enemy in order to accomplish his purposes, however much in the latter part of the novel that alien world is figured in diminished terms as a sultan's harem. Crossing boundaries of one sort or another has always been what Scanderbeg is most adept at, and he has lost none of his flair even now.

More recent literature in English affords relatively few reiterations of the Scanderbeg story, and it would be surprising indeed if matters were otherwise. A handful of texts produced in the United States in the latter half of the nineteenth century exploit the exotic appeal of the legend, including a biography by Clement C. Moore entitled *George Castriot, Surnamed Scanderbeg, King of Albania*, published in 1850. The declared intention of this book, based on Knolles's *Generall History of the Turkes* and on the *Historie of George Castriot* as it was translated out of Lavardin, is to offer "an account of an extraordinary person, whose life and exploits afford a real narrative as interesting, if not more so, than most of the works of fiction with which the press has so long abounded" (Moore 1850: 5). If Moore's book is biography that aspires to the condition of fiction, James M. Ludlow's *The Captain of the Janizaries: A Story of the Times of Scanderbeg and the Fall of Constantinople*, which appeared in 1886, is the reverse. In his preface Ludlow remarks that "it seems strange that the world should have so generally forgotten George Castriot ... whose career was as romantic as it was significant in the history of the Eastern Mediterranean", and he proposes to remedy this unaccountable lapse into historical amnesia by offering a work which, though taking "the form of romance ... is more than 'founded on fact'" (Ludlow 1890: v). What is to be noted is that while he is certainly interested in the "romantic" dimension of Scanderbeg's story, Ludlow is far more concerned than some of his predecessors to remain as faithful as possible to the historical record. To assist the reader, Ludlow's work is indeed supplemented with a number of explanatory footnotes, a feature which is an somewhat unusual appurtenance to a novel.

Ludlow borrows the epigraph to his novel from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, whose expanded edition of *Tales of a Wayside Inn*, published in 1872-73, contains a ballad entitled "Scanderbeg" and,

immediately following this, what amounts to being a kind of commentary on that poem. Longfellow would later re-issue the ballad in that section dedicated to Albania in the nineteenth volume of his massive anthology *Poems of Places*, published between 1876 and 1879, together with the verses from Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* that allude to Albania, and more particularly to the "name-sake" of Iskander. Interestingly enough, Longfellow's ballad focuses not on Scanderbeg's persona as the heroic defender of the Christian faith, but on the very episode in Scanderbeg's biography that had occasioned Gibbon such concern in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and that Disraeli had prudently chosen to overlook in his novel. It begins with the desertion of the sultan Amurath's defeated army by "Iskander, the pride and boast / Of that mighty Othman host" (Longfellow 1915: 239). He is visited in his camp by a "Scribe of the King", who reproaches him for his defection and says that it is a blot upon his hitherto unblemished name. Not in the least shamed by this censure, Scanderbeg has "This man of book and brains" bound in chains, and under threat of death compels him to forge a letter to the Pasha of Croia commanding him in the sultan's name to surrender the city to the deserter. Having reluctantly penned this document, and sealed it with the royal signet ring he has in his charge, the scribe refuses to compound his own dereliction of duty by following Scanderbeg, whereupon Scanderbeg strikes him dead with his scimitar. The poem ends with Scanderbeg's triumphant arrival at Croia, which opens its gates to him without resistance: "It was thus Iskander came / Once more unto his own" (244). No explicit moral judgment of Scanderbeg's conduct is rendered in this ballad, but the impression is that Longfellow shares Gibbon's reservations at least as regards his treatment of the unfortunate scribe, who dies "As a stone, pushed from the brink / Of a black pool, might sink / With a sob and disappear" (242). The image is a haunting and effective one, and serves to enlist our sympathies on the side not of the future hero, but of the hapless victim of his ambition. Indeed the ambivalence aroused by the incident emerges even more clearly in the Interlude that follows the ballad in *Tales of a Wayside Inn*, in which two separate perspectives on Scanderbeg are implicitly contraposed to one another:

"Now that is after my own heart,"

The Poet cried; "one understands
Your swarthy hero Scanderbeg,
Gauntlet on hand and boot on leg,
And skilled in every warlike art,
Riding through his Albanian lands,
And following the auspicious star
That shone for him o'er Ak-Hissar."

The Theologian added here
His word of praise not less sincere,
Although he ended with a jibe;
"The hero of romance and song
Was born," he said, "to right the wrong;
And I approve; but all the same
That bit of treason with the Scribe
Adds nothing to your hero's fame." (245)

In the literature of the British Isles, by contrast, so few works emerged during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that were significantly influenced by the Scanderbeg saga that B. B. Ashcom, one of the first critics to trace the ramifications of a distinctive "Scanderbeg theme" in literature, felt warranted in declaring in 1953 that "after Byron the Albanian fades from view" (Ashcom 1953: 29). It should be pointed out, however, that although it is certainly true that the fortunes of the Scanderbeg legend suffered a severe decline in the years following Byron's death, this does not mean that lingering echoes of the story did not continue to reverberate in British writing as in that of the United States. The publication in London of Robert Bigsby's *A Tribute to the Memory of Scanderbeg the Great* in 1886, for example, testifies not only to a persisting interest in Scanderbeg even in the late nineteenth century, but also to the very considerable esteem in which his memory continued to be held. At the same time, the fact that Clotilde Graves, in a mock-heroic verse comedy published in 1902, could mention a character "whose valour pigmies Scanderbeg's" (Graves 1902: 147), and expect the allusion to be understood in all its less deferential implications, suggests that the hyperbolic associations attaching to Scanderbeg's name that had so amused Shakespeare's

contemporaries could still be enlisted into the service of parody at the outset of the twentieth century.

A more recent re-evocation of the Scanderbeg legend that is of particular interest in the present context is to be found in the poem I mentioned at the beginning of this discussion, a work that, implicitly a meditation on history, and taking a graveyard setting as its point of departure, has something of the savour of an epitaph. This is a poem by the Irish poet, dramatist and folklorist Padraic Colum, which appears in a volume of poetry published in 1932. The poem, entitled “Scanderbeg”, employs the name and its associations to juxtapose a sharply focused moment in the present against the vast chain of events, stretching back into the most distant reaches of the past, that have made the contemporary world what it is:

She sat on the wall and dangled her silk-stockinged legs,
 Saying, “I’ll not have them stung for any old man who is dead,”
 So I went where nettles were rank and came on a stone that read,
 “Matthew de Rienzi, Knight, born in Germany,
 Descended from George Castriot, alias Scanderbeg,
 Who fifty-two battles waged with conquest against the Great Turk.”
 More: the Knight de Renzi,
 Learned in Irish, composed for it a Dictionary,
 Corresponded with men of state upon affairs,
 And died here; fifty-seven his years —
 Peace be with Matthew!
 Then I looked where she sat on the wall dangling her silk-stockened legs,
 Which she would not have stung for any old man who was dead,
 As she said —
 Not even, I supposed, for a descendant of Scanderbeg!
 But I heard a curlew
 Over the river beside me, the Shannon it was,
 And saw from that to the Danube, and it was crossed
 By turbaned men under whose stallions’ hooves the grass
 Never grew again;
 And that battlefield, the Plain of the Blackbirds, Kosovo,
 And the Sultan Murad slain,
 And the breach in Constantinople’s wall, and Belgrade,
 Buda and Vienna under great cannonade,
 And the sweep of the Pashas onward till Hungary, Poland,

the Germanies were all dismayed,
And that historyless man, George Castriot, holding at bay
Byzantium's conquerors in the mountains of Albania;
Then battles along the Rhine,
And Dutchmen and English, Frenchmen and Irish, forcing or holding this
line,
And the Shannon crossed and Aughrim lost to our own overthrow!
Two hundred years' battling in Europe at the name of Scanderbeg
Spun through my mind as a curlew cried overhead!
(Colum 1932: 71-2)

In Colum's poem too, as in many of the other works we have been considering here, Scanderbeg is assimilated to a mythology not his own. He is used as a symbol of lines being held and lines being forced, of the endlessly repeated process of defining and breaching and traversing boundaries that is human history. The fact that George Castriot, who epitomized such a process in the circumstances of his own career both as a man and as a legend, should be described in this poem as a "historyless man" might be interpreted in a number of very different ways. What is certain, however, irrespective of the particular construction that is placed upon the words, is that to have the significance of his existence distilled into such a formula as this is a curiously ironic fate for an individual who made so much history, and of whom so many histories were made.

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