**Detached and teasing accounts of the plot and supernatural machinery**

We must not think that some of the absurdities of *Manfred* passed without comment at the time. Byron himself summarised the plot with typical wit and detachment in a letter to his publisher:

It is of a very wild, metaphysical and inexplicable kind. Almost all of the persons — but two or three — are spirits of the earth and air, or the waters; the scene is in the Alps; the hero is a kind of magician, who is dominated by a species of remorse, the cause of which is left half-explained. He wanders about, invoking these spirits, which appear to him and are of no use; at last he goes to the very abode of the Evil Principle to evoke a ghost, which appears and gives him an ambiguous and disagreeable answer; and in the third act he is found by an attendant, dying in a tower, where he has studied his art.

In 1818, a year after the publication of *Manfred*, Thomas Love Peacock gently satirised Byron as Mr Cypress (alongside Shelley as Scythrop, Coleridge as Flosky, and Mary Wollstonecraft as Celinda) in his witty and penetrating roman à clef, *Nightmare Abbey*. (Incidentally, the novel appeared the year after Jane Austen’s no less delightful satire, *Northanger Abbey*, written in 1803).

Here are two after-dinner speeches from the novel attributed to Mr Cypress:

Sir, I have quarrelled with my wife; and a man who has quarrelled with his wife is absolved from all duty to his country. I have written an ode to tell the people as much, and they may take it as they list.

I have no hope for myself or for others. Our life is a false nature; it is not in the harmony of things; it is an all-blasting upas, whose root is earth, and whose leaves are the skies which rain their poison-dews upon mankind. We wither from our youth; we gasp with unslaked thirst for unattainable good; lured from the first to the last by phantoms – love, fame, ambition, avarice – all idle, and all ill – one meteor of many names, that vanishes in the smoke of death.

And here is Peacock’s note about Arimanes:

Ahrimanes, in the Persian mythology, is the evil power, the prince of the kingdom of darkness. These two powers have divided and equal dominion. Sometimes one of the two has a temporary supremacy. According to Mr Toobad [a character in the novel], the present period would be the reign of Ahrimanes**.**

Lord Byron seems to be of the same opinion, by the use he has made of Ahrimanes in *Manfred*; where the great Alastor of Persia, is hailed king of the world by the Nemesis of Greece, in concert with three of the Scandinavian Valkyrae, under the name of the Destinies; the astrological spirits of the alchemists of the middle ages; an elemental witch, transplanted from Denmark to the Alps; and a chorus of Dr Faustus's devils, who come in the last act for a soul. It is difficult to conceive where this heterogeneous mythological company could have originally met, except at a *table d'hôte*, like the six kings in *Candide*.