

## MAZEPA IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

By CLARENCE A. MANNING

Ivan Mazepa was one of the greatest of the *Hetmans* of the Ukrainian Kozak state in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Zaporozhian Kozaks under the leadership of Bohdan Khmelnytsky had developed through independence from Poland into a power of the first rank in Eastern Europe but Khmelnytsky's alliance with Czar Alexis of Moscow had led to the interference of the Muscovite bureaucracy into all aspects of Ukrainian life. It was against this interference that Mazepa was obliged to struggle throughout his entire career as *Hetman* and it was to escape this that he formed an alliance with King Charles XII of Sweden against Moscow. The defeat of the Swedes and the Kozaks at Poltava in 1709 not only doomed Sweden and stripped her of her holdings east of the Baltic Sea but it laid Ukraine helpless before the advancing forces of Czar Peter I. It was under these conditions that the aged Mazepa in one of his most brilliant feats succeeded in carrying Charles to safety in Turkey but the effort exhausted the seventy-year old leader and he died in exile soon after but carried to his grave his honors as *Hetman* and he received a funeral worthy of his rank. It was the fitting climax to a career that was filled with service to his people as he conceived it.

Mazepa had an attractive and striking personality. All the Western Europeans who came in contact with him either in his capital of Baturyn or on his many visits to Moscow stressed his graciousness, his deep knowledge of political and economic affairs, his high culture and his more than liberal donations to various Ukrainian and Orthodox institutions not only in Ukraine but throughout the entire Orthodox world. Mazepa was in a real sense the very culmination of all those cultural currents that flowed into the *Hetman* state from the West and were from there transmitted in a dilute form into Moscow and the East. We should expect the Western literatures to reflect in some degree these aspects of his career and yet, if we do, we will be extremely disappointed, for the figure of Mazepa as it appears in English literature, is inseparably connected not with the greatness of the *Hetman* but with a romantic canard that became early associated with his name.

In a sense there is a reason for this. The interests of Western Europe were almost entirely involved in the struggle between Catholicism and Protestantism and in the first half of the seventeenth century these doctrinal disputes flared up into the ferocious Thirty Years War which left the German states a mere shambles and a pale picture of their former selves. The English succeeded in remaining almost entirely aloof from this conflict but at the same time they were busied with the no less furious conflicts between the Kings and Parliament which in a somewhat different form reflected various aspects of the same struggle. It was only natural that Khmelnytsky with his allies in Protestant Sweden should correspond with Oliver Cromwell but the restoration of the Stuarts put an abrupt end to negotiations between the English authorities and the Zaporozhian Kozaks. At the same time the Thirty Years War freed the hands of the Eastern European peoples to settle their own affairs without interference from the great powers of Central and Western Europe. Poland had a priceless opportunity to settle her own domestic problems and to work out a satisfactory solution of her relationships with the Lithuanians and the Ukrainians. Yet that opportunity was recklessly wasted. Poland took no effective steps to rearrange its internal affairs and merely brought about a situation where the embattled Kozaks, wedged in between the Republic of Poland, the aspirations of the Turks and the infiltrating processes of Moscow, lost their own power of independent movement and failed in their effort to make a new settlement based upon a Kozak regime in Kiev which could hold the balance of power between all of its neighbors. The situation was further complicated by the efforts of the Kings of Sweden to assert their claims to the Polish throne, to secure this for the Swedish line of the Vasa family and to make of the Baltic Sea a Swedish lake with the Swedes in control of all the Baltic sea-coast. There were thus three centers of conflict—Western and Central Europe, Ukraine and its neighbors, and Sweden. It was only the first of these that had ready access to English public opinion which was not ready to take sides in the others and was thoroughly indoctrinated with the Muscovite point of view thanks to the visit of Peter to England and the services of such men as Patrick Gordon in the Czar's army and entourage.

As the century drew to a close, Louis XIV of France tried to assert his authority over the whole of Western Europe and this led to another long and continued series of wars not only in Europe but also in America and in India. It led to continuous clashes between the French and English colonies in America and for a

century both the British and the Americans saw the whole field of European and international relations through the prism of this struggle between England and France on three continents.

The Northern War which opened with King Charles XII of Sweden embroiled with Peter of Moscow, Poland and Denmark went on simultaneously with the War of the Spanish Succession in which Great Britain, Holland, Austria, Denmark, Portugal and some of the German states were allied against France, Bavaria, Cologne and Spain. France and Moscow did their best to secure the intermingling of the two wars or perhaps we might say the liquidation of the one in which it was not involved, for France was constantly making efforts to induce Charles XII to give up his struggle against Moscow and take his place in the anti-British combination and Peter was trying to induce Marlborough to throw his talents and energy into the war against Sweden, even at the price of peace between Great Britain and France. The resulting complications produced a bedlam in which the cause of Ukraine and the Kozaks was hopelessly concealed from the minds of Western Europe and the position of Mazepa was thoroughly misinterpreted just as the cause of Ukraine later under the exiled *Hetman* Orlyk was involved in the fate of Sweden and France.

By this period too England as a maritime state was far more interested in exploration and expansion overseas. Moscow had not yet secured a firm hold on the Black Sea and the Dardanelles were still more or less closed to commerce. As a result English travellers and diplomats who reached Constantinople rarely penetrated into the interior. They knew the future Russia from access by St. Petersburg and Archangel. Ukraine and Kiev were not on the route of the Grand Tour taken by all young men of fashion and of wealth during the eighteenth century and there were few English travellers and diplomats who made the long and tedious journey overland to visit the Ukrainian centers. For a knowledge of Ukrainian affairs, they were dependent upon sources hostile to the Kozaks and these wasted no opportunities to stress Mazepa as a traitor in those lurid colors with which Peter had painted him.

Furthermore with all of his great qualities Mazepa was a favorable subject for criticism. A member of a Ukrainian noble family, he had been reared at the Polish court and had a definite position there even before the rise of Khmelnytsky and the independence of the Zaporozhians. His passage from the service of the King of Poland to the Kozaks aroused criticism among the Poles and they in their turn did not spare any efforts to blacken

his character, especially when they realized that he was no longer going to do their bidding.

It was just at this period that the young Mazepa made a bitter enemy, Jan Chrysostom Passek. Passek was a swashbuckling Pole, a brawler and a general disturber of the peace but unfortunately for Mazepa's reputation he possessed the fatal gift of not spoiling a good story. After several personal encounters with the young Ukrainian, Passek in his memoirs told the unforgettable tale of Mazepa's ride. According to this, Mazepa was caught by the irate husband of a lady with whom he was having an affair and to take vengeance the husband had him bound naked on a wild horse which was then turned loose. Passek covered himself in case of controversy by not giving either the time or place or even the precise name of the insulted husband, so that it was impossible to pin down the actual episode, if there was one, that served as the basis of the story. Yet that story, as Passek told it, sounded convincing. In the original form, the horse carried Mazepa back to his own estates after a wild ride, but later gossips embroidered it even more. They told how the young man was so scratched up that the peasants believed that he was some supernatural monster from hell and secured the village priest to exorcise the demon. Each one added some new twist to the tale without regarding the fact that Mazepa could not have survived, if he had had to go through all the details with which they burdened him. It was a jolly example of a story, highly improbable at first, but becoming more and more fantastic with each individual new accretion. Thus at the moment when Peter let loose a torrent of denunciation and the vilest possible language on the defeated *Hetman*, there was already in existence a mass of scandalous stories connected with Mazepa and only waiting to be incorporated in a pseudo-historical account.

The next step in this collection of misrepresentations was to link the stories in some way with Mazepa's withdrawal from the Polish service and his entrance into the Zaporozhian Host. There was no need for this to excite wonder, for Polish and Ukrainian families were largely intermingled especially in the western part of Ukraine and there were many cases when as a result of some deliberate insult a Ukrainian gave up his hopes for serving with the King and yielded to the cause of his own people. But Mazepa's choice could not be made to seem so simple and entirely regardless of the geographical truth of the setting, some one discovered that it was the wild horse that had carried Mazepa to the Ukrainian camp. That was enough and when Voltaire set himself to write a history of Charles XII, he perpetuated the story and included it in

his celebrated history. The stage was set for poets and literary men to complete the immortalizing of Mazepa's ride.

This step was taken by Lord Byron who in 1818 published his poem *Mazeppa* and prefaced it with the appropriate passages from Voltaire. It was only natural that the story of the *Hetman* with all of its fantastic additions should appeal to the Scotch bard, for he was the very heart and soul of that Romanticism which sought everywhere to find examples of extravagant passion and of superhuman manifestations of the human will. The story as told by Voltaire fitted perfectly into his formula, for no ordinary mortal could have stood all the trials and tribulations which the mythical Mazepa had had to undergo.

Yet Byron did not lose touch with reality, for he represented the aged Mazepa in his own historical form and he gave vent to his anti-monarchical feelings in his description of Charles XII, who had sacrificed so many thousands of his people to satisfy his ambition:

For thousands fell that flight to aid:  
And not a voice was heard t'upbraid  
Ambition in his humbled hour,  
When truth had nought to dread from power.

Yet even then he pays a tribute to Charles' endurance:

But yet through all,  
Kinglike the monarch bore his fall,  
And made, in this extreme of ill,  
His pangs the vassal of his will:  
All silent and subdued were they,  
As once the nations round him lay.

Then the poet pictures Mazepa as he was during the retreat from Poltava:

Among the rest, Mazeppa made  
His pillow in an old oak's shade —  
Himself as rough, and scarce less old  
The Ukraine's *hetman*, calm and bold,  
But first, outspent with this long course,  
The Cossack prince rubbed down his horse,  
And made for him a leafy bed,  
And smoothed his fetlocks and his mane,  
And slacked his girth, and stripped his rein,  
And joyed to see how well he fed;

His horse attended to, Mazeppa next looked to his arms and then he offered the King and his men what food he had available. Charles appreciated the old man and his tribute:

Of all our band,  
Though firm of heart and strong of hand,  
In skirmish, march, or forage, none  
Can have less said or more have done  
Than thee, Mazeppa! On the earth  
So fit a pair had never birth,  
Since Alexander's days till now,  
As thy Bucephalus and thou:  
All Scythia's fame to thine should yield  
For prickling on o'er flood and field.

And at the end:

The *Hetman* threw  
His length beneath the oak-tree shade,  
With leafy couch already made,  
A bed nor comfortless nor new  
To him who took his rest whene'er  
The hour arrived, no matter where:  
His eyes the hastening slumbers steep.

Here we have the essence of the real Mazepa, the old courtier and campaigner who despite almost superhuman obstacles carried the wounded Charles XII to safety in Turkey practically out of the middle of the followers of Peter. Mazepa in this last ride called into play all the knowledge of the steppes and of the Russian enemy that he had stored up during the many years when he had ridden with the Kozaks hither and yon across the steppes. It would have been well, had the readers of Byron's poem taken as their evaluation of Mazepa that tribute to the aged man that Byron pays so handsomely in his account of the night when Mazepa and his Kozaks were on guard to protect the helpless Swedish King and his surviving followers.

Then to console the King and to put him to sleep by setting his mind at rest Mazepa tells how he came to join the Kozaks. He describes the luxurious and cultured life at the court of Jan Casimir and the poetic sports that were used to pass away the time instead of war and battles. It was here that he fell in love with the beautiful Theresa, the wife of a Count Palatine,

A count of fair and high descent,  
Rich as a salt or silver mine;  
And he was proud, ye may divine.

His wife was thirty years younger than he and so she and the youthful Mazepa fell madly in love. That was the one love of Mazepa's life:

I'd give  
The Ukraine back again to live  
It o'er once more — and be a page,  
The happy page, who was the lord  
Of one soft heart, and his own sword,  
And had no other gem nor wealth  
Save nature's gift of youth and health.

With this Mazepa goes through all the passions that inspire the Romantic poet as he describes how he and his beloved are caught by the irate husband and how in vengeance the Count has him bound to a wild horse and turns the horse loose. After more than a day of running, the horse drops dead and Mazepa, scarcely alive and unconscious, suddenly finds himself brought back to life by a Kozak girl. Her father has found him in the steppes and has brought him to his home and she nurses him back to life. Yet as befits the Romantic hero, he passes over the devotion that she shows him in relative silence and merely says that from there he has gone to be the *Hetman* of Ukraine.

It is the account of the ride on which Byron expends all of his undoubted talents and it is that picture of the mad rush of the crazed horse over hill and dale that remains in the memory and has completely confused and overshadowed that historic role of Mazepa which the poet elsewhere pictures so fully and accurately. Passek has had his revenge for he, thanks to Byron, has impressed upon the English-speaking reader the picture of Mazepa, not as the intrepid leader but as the love-sick swain who was forced by overweening jealousy to take a hurricane ride and whose endurance won him an undying place in literature.

The effect which this conception of Mazepa had upon the mind of the Americans of the period is well illustrated in an unexpected manner by the history of the Mazepa Engine Company in New York. At the time fire protection was offered to the city by the Volunteer Fire Companies which fostered a great deal of inter-company rivalry. Many of these companies adopted badges and other symbols which signified the speed with which the volunteer members gathered and took their apparatus to the scene of the blaze and to the fortitude and bravery of the members in remaining at their posts, even at times of the greatest conflagrations. In the eighteen twenties, only a few years after the first copies of Byron's *Mazepa* reached New York, we find that some of the volunteer

firemen were organized into a Mazepa Engine Company in an allusion to the speed of Mazepa's ride and the endurance of the hero during his mad flight across the steppes. The badge of the company represented the naked Mazepa bound to the wild horse. The company continued its existence with its ups and downs until it was replaced during the Civil War by a paid Fire Department. The badges of this company have been preserved and when it was finally disbanded, these badges were given to an offshoot company in the town of Nyack, New York. We could probably find still other examples of groups of the same character in some of the other American cities of the day. Yet we can cite this one example to see how thoroughly the character of Mazepa was detached from that of the Ukrainian *Hetman* and acquired an independent appeal with no thought of the source from which the story was taken, for there is no evidence that the founders of this Company had any other Ukrainian connection than their desire to appropriate the tradition which had been so well set in motion by Lord Byron.

Yet we have still not completed the history of the dissociation of Mazepa in English literature from his people and from his historical career. Byron had aided in the process but Byron had travelled extensively in the Ottoman Empire. He had lived among the Greeks, the Albanians and in Constantinople and though he was an ardent Hellenist and preferred to call the Dnieper the Borysthenes, its ancient Greek name, and to speak of Scythia, he had enough opportunity in Constantinople to meet or at least to hear about those Kozak groups which had chosen exile in Turkey to absorption by the steamroller of Russian Muscovite standardization.

The confusion was further intensified because of the widespread misunderstanding of the name of the people of Ukraine. There were in common use for Ukraine in the eighteenth and earlier centuries such old names as Sarmatia, Roxolania, etc. and there were also stories that the Kozaks (Cossacks as they were labelled) were not Slavs but Tartar tribes wandering around on the pathless steppes. As a result more than once Mazepa emerges on the literary scene not as a Slavic individual but he turns also into a Tartar and as such he can become the hero of works written in the full Romantic and melodramatic manner which brings together in one category Kozaks and Tartars. In this stage of development there can be no question of any contact between the literary figure of Mazepa and the real historical personage. Everything is permitted and a drama with Mazepa as the main figure has only one obligatory feature—the hero must be bound for a wild ride on the back of a wild horse.



All this is well shown in the drama by H. M. Milner, *Mazeppa* which was produced at the Theatre Royal in London in the eighteen thirties. The author may have read some Polish book to secure the titles and the names of his Polish protagonists and he also had read the *Arabian Nights* to good purpose.

In this *Mazepa*, a young Tartar, falls in love with Olinska, the daughter of a Castellan. She is sought in marriage by Premislas, a Count Palatine and a fabulously rich man. Despite the difference in their ages and wealth, *Mazepa* defies the Palatine and slightly wounds him. In a rage the Palatine has him bound to a horse which is turned loose. When the horse falls dead, *Mazepa* is so exhausted and disfigured that the Tartars who find him imagine that he is a supernatural figure, a Volpas, but he is saved and brought back to health by the Tartar Khan, the aged Abder Khan, who recognizes the unconscious young man as his long lost son. Abder Khan is old and since he has no direct heir, his position is sought by an ambitious lord, Thama, who decides to aid his prospects by murdering the old man, his lord, and for good measure he decides to slay the newly arrived *Mazepa*. Despite his exhaustion *Mazepa* proves his valor by saving both his father and himself and then as the duly recognized heir to the throne, he returns to Poland accompanied by his father and the latter's army. Once again he confronts the Count Palatine who is on the verge of forcing Olinska to marry him. The Count again tries to take vengeance but this time he is dealing not with a helpless page but with a proud and powerful Tartar chieftain. *Mazepa's* troops seize the castle and forbid the marriage and the play ends happily with the lovers united amid the blazing ruins and the Palatine finally and hopelessly thwarted. Romance and misconception have here won out entirely and have corrected not only history but even the romantic hero as drawn by Byron.

There is little need to pursue the study of the appearances in literature of this fantastic figure labelled *Mazepa* but it may be sufficient to mention as a curiosity the satirical vulgarization of it found in *Mazepa, An Equestrian Burlesque* published in 1856 as No. III of *Brady's Ethiopian Drama*, for it gives a good picture of some aspects of the American publishing business just before the Civil War. Brady pirated Dickens' *Household Words* and then in this series, he has obviously satirized the play of Milner. *Mazepa*, here renamed *Satinette*, is in love with Olinska, the daughter of Castiron of Hoboken, a shady character who is willing to sell his daughter to Count Coleslau, some punk, and a swindler in his own right. When *Mazepa* tries to reveal the scheme, he is tied to the

horse which carries him back to his father Abder Khan, Cream of Tartar and the boss white-washer of Jamaica, Long Island. Then Mazepa recovers, turns up as the minister who is to marry Olinska, and Count Coleslau is finally shown up, and again all ends well. It may well be doubted whether the author of this monstrosity had ever heard of the history of Mazepa or of the existence of countries in Eastern Europe.

It is a sad fact that the one idea that appeared in English and American literature about Mazepa and penetrated into the consciousness of the reading public was the utterly fantastic story of Mazepa's wild ride. Yet this was a canard that found respectable backing not only in the semi-literate and artistic circles but even in works of reference.

The 1881 edition of the *American Encyclopaedia* gives credence to this story and calls Mazepa a Pole. Then it alludes to the two versions extant of Mazepa's ride, the one according to which the horse carried him into a Kozak camp and the other [preferred by Passek] where the horse takes him back to his own estate and leaves Mazepa there so mortified that he refuses to continue to move in Polish circles and so makes his way to the Zaporozhians. The ride dies hard and even the 1951 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, while it has learned that Mazepa was a member of an Orthodox family, still finds it necessary to mention that the story is that he was thus treated by the irate husband of a Polish lady with whom he was in love.

Yet we must not blame too harshly the individuals who spread throughout the English-speaking world this grotesque picture of the great *Hetman*. Mazepa himself was well aware of the way in which in his own lifetime he was the object of hostile propaganda. He was in his youth too outstanding a representative of the Ukrainian noblemen in Poland to escape unscathed when he threw his lot in with the Zaporozhians after repeated insults to him by the Polish magnates with whom he was forced to associate. A trusted representative of King Jan Casimir, he could not be ignorant of the fact he would never be accepted by the Poles or given such posts as he might aspire to but that his life would be spent in futile missions to try to persuade the Host not to insist upon its rights in the face of Polish hostility and contempt. When he entered the service of Doroshenko and then of Samiylovyeh he was rewarded by a flood of scandals which emanated from Polish sources, even though they had little effect on Polish lords with whom he was compelled to treat in his new capacity.

He was the trusted friend of Peter, so long as the latter thought that he could use Mazepa by playing upon his personal ambitions to agree with the Czar's plans for taking from Ukraine those rights which had been guaranteed in the Treaty of Pereyaslav. When the Czar believed that the hour for that had come during the Northern War, Mazepa slipped away from his clutches and joined Charles XII so that Ukraine could maintain its traditional usages and freedoms. The full anger of Peter was directed against the Kozaks when he captured and burned Baturyn and massacred without discrimination all of the inhabitants of that city, men, women and children. For Mazepa himself he saved his choicest words of abuse and would have reserved the choicest tortures, if the *Hetman* had not escaped after Poltava. When he did that and carried off Charles XII to boot, there was nothing more for the Czar to add. Mazepa was roundly cursed in the churches, he was damned and compared to the worst criminals and traitors of history and the victorious Peter saw to it that the career of Mazepa was written up in appropriate terms. It made no difference for the evaluation of Mazepa and his work that he had left behind him the high regard of all with whom he came into contact, that Peter had praised him to the skies when he thought he could use him, and that Charles XII was his admirer and his friend in his last hours.

The agents of a declining Poland and a vindictive and advancing Russia grasped every opportunity, every breath of scandal to issue scurrilous propaganda against the man who in defense of his country had succeeded in thwarting their schemes to crush the Ukrainian Kozaks. Nothing was too fantastic for them to utter and to write and they succeeded in catching the ear of Europe, when Ukraine had no defender of equal note. English and American scholars and writers were only too ready to accept one or the other of these hostile sources as the truth and in default of serious study of the real history of Ukraine, they repeated whatever charges were the best accredited by the propaganda which they followed.

In the course of this process, public attention was centered on the story of Mazepa's ride, for it was an episode that true or false, fitted into the general conception of the Romantic poet and his dreams of life on the open steppe. So the story of Mazepa's ride passed into history and literature and there it has remained for the masses of the people who know Ukraine only vaguely as a part of Russia, whatever that may mean.

Today it is two centuries and a half since the Battle of Poltava. We can see now the consequences of that battle and the way in which it barred any normal spreading of free institutions in the

area. We can see what the defeat of Charles and Mazepa really meant to the world and why military historians rank Poltava as one of the decisive battles of the world. We can see that despite that, the spirit of Ukraine has not perished but is still alive even under the adverse conditions of the present.

Now on the anniversary of the battle, the problem is to correct the impressions that the world has of Ivan Mazepa and to try to restore to him that place in history which he fairly earned through his long years of service to his people. It is not only a question of producing new and more accurate histories but it is also the work of tearing down that strange phantom which for more than a century has wandered here and there through the pages of English literature wearing the name of the great *Hetman* but totally apart from him in his vices, his virtues and his accomplishments. It is the task of the present to give to the world a knowledge of the real Mazepa, that courtly and heroic figure who at the very end of his life was still able to conduct one of the great flights of history. It was the *Hetman* of an independent Ukraine that was buried with high honors in Jassy in 1709. It is as such a *Hetman* that English literature and the English and American people must learn to regard him and think of him, of his career, and of his people. To do this will be to erect the best monument to the memory of Ivan Mazepa.

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