DON JUAN: AN INTRODUCTION

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Byron wrote *Don Juan* between July 3 1818 and his death in 1824, when an incomplete seventeenth canto was discovered among his papers at Missolonghi. His Italian mistress, Teresa Guiccioli, writes that it was the only one of his works the writing and copying of which he did not approach as an onerous task, and the only one the writing of which he enjoyed. He seems to have writing enjoyed it more than he did her company, for she persuaded him to cease its writing; but he took it up again without telling her.

Don Juan is *The Odyssey*, turned inside-out. Homer's Odysseus is brave and virile, as an epic hero should be, but he is also clever, resourceful, used to command and the taking of initiatives; in as far as the gods permit – and in the final event they do permit – he rules his own life. Byron's Juan is brave and virile, and clever enough to take advantage of the situations into which fate or the gods place him; but he takes no initiatives, and is a passive fellow; as Dr. Johnson said of Hamlet, he is "throughout rather an instrument than an agent." Odysseus knows where he wants to go – home to Ithaca – and with whom he wishes to be reunited – Penelope, his wife, and Telemachus, his son. Juan drifts from crisis to crisis with no destination, and no family with whom he wishes to be reunited. He has a mother, who sends him off on his travels, and who is modelled on Byron's wife; and the most celebrated woman with whom he is united sexually has the same name (Catherine) as Byron's mother. Juan's mother congratulates him on the liaison.[1] Catherine the Great, Tsarina of Russia, loves Juan because he is a military hero, and she would never discourage him from heroic feats. She takes him to bed because he has achieved his destiny, unlike Circe, who tries to prevent Odysseus from achieving his. There is no way in which the other women with whom Juan makes love prevent him from achieving his aims – he has no aim, and we are unable to divine what his destiny is, apart from making love to them, or, in the case of Gulbayez, Sultana of Constantinople, not making love to them.

Unlike his predecessors in the Don Juan tradition, Byron's protagonist is not a sexual predator, but an innocent victim of the women he meets. The tradition against which Byron is in reaction goes back to a Spanish play first staged in 1630 and called *El Burlador de Sevilla y convidado de piedra* (The Joker of Seville and the Stone Guest) by a monk called Gábriel Tellez, better known as Tirso de Molina. His Juan is a mixture of heartless seducer, murderer, and blasphemer. The character is taken over by Molière, in *Dom Juan ou le Festin de Pierre*, first performed in 1665, and then by the English playwright Thomas Shadwell, whose *The Libertine*, with music by Purcell – including *Nymphs and Shepherds come away*, and the march which was used at the funeral of Queen Mary – was first acted in 1676.

The theme was followed in plays, ballets, operas, and puppet shows, throughout the eighteenth century. Don John / Juan / Giovanni is always damnable, treacherous, and heartless – a scorner of human and divine laws. Mozart's *Don Giovanni* (1787) is his finest hour; though a strain of pre-Byronic Byronic irony is visible in the creation of Mozart and Lorenzo da Ponte: their Don, though avid for women, is frustrated in his desires throughout the action, and is finally pulled down to Hell by the statue of a man whom he has killed, not in a cowardly way, but in a straightforward duel. Da

1: Canto X, stanzas 31-4.

Ponte was the rival of the Abate Casti, one of Byron's favourite Italian poets, and was at the end of his life to translate Byron's *The Prophecy of Dante*.

Byron's poem stands in defiance of all its predecessors, and historians have always to make out a special case for it (after they've stared at it, glazed, for a short period). Its Juan is a passive innocent, never blasphemes, a good Catholic, always the seduced and never the seducer, whose life is arranged for him by the women who either love him, or lust after him, or both. But no matter much of "an instrument" he may be, Byron insists that he is damned all the same, as they are for exploiting his vulnerability.

But this is to treat the poem as just a narrative, which it isn't. Byron had always been interested in finding a form in which, while telling a story, he could also pass political and social comments, digress, philosophise, be facetious, insult his publisher, insult his enemies, compliment his friends, insult the reader, insult his wife, and so on. In *Childe Harold* he had attempted to do such a thing, but found Spenserian stanza a hard medium in which to be flexible enough; and in any case, his advisors persuaded him to cut all the jokes from *Childe Harold* Canto I. There are no jokes in *Childe Harold* II, III, or IV, or in the Turkish Tales which consolidated his fame in the second decade of the century. Then, self-exiled in Venice in 1817, he wrote *Beppo*, his first masterpiece in the Italian verse form ottava rima. In *Beppo* there is a plot, but it is, though amusing and dramatic enough, pushed to one side by the author's non-stop need to speak, in his own person, about anything that springs to mind. In *Beppo* (published 1818) he developed – and in two nights! – the skill and confidence which he put to work in *Don Juan*.

It has often been said that *Don Juan* is confessional, and contains much of Byron's life-story. He announces its commencement in the same letter[2] in which he announces the writing of his memoirs. His memoirs were burned by a convocation of both his friends and his enemies; *Don Juan* was already in print all over the world when they did so. One theory[3] is that, like *Childe Harold* only done with much more sophistication, *Don Juan* is an encoded autobiography, with Juan as Byron and Catherine the Great as Ali Pasha. Whatever the case, the poem contains much that is thinly veiled autobiography. Juan's mother, Inez, was recognised with horror by Byron's London friends (who did not want it published) as a clear portrait of Annabella, his wife: like Byron, Juan travels – with no more purpose than Byron had had in 1809 – from Spain to Greece, and then to Constantinople and to barbarous regions beyond: in the final cantos he meets the cream of English society, as Byron had.

A happy event was the arrival from John Murray, late in December 1819, of a copy of the novel *Anastasius*, by Thomas Hope. This provided Byron with many ideas for *Don Juan*, which he developed by refinement and inversion all the way from Cantos III to XVI.

The politics of the poem are Byron's. In international terms, he was disgusted with the way the Congress of Vienna had, in 1815, restored all the brutal, obscurantist, canting monarchies which his great idol, Napoleon, had overthrown. The satire against them, and against poets who hymned them, like Robert Southey, his worst enemy and the "super-dedicatee" of *Don Juan*, never ceases. In British terms, he was appalled at the oppression of Ireland and at the way the Tory government, which was in power for most his adult life, stifled dissension and attempts at reform (and at the

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2: BLJ VI 58-9.

3: Cecil Y. Lang, *Narcissus Jilted: Byron, Don Juan, and the Biographical Imperative*, printed in *Historical Studies and Literary Criticism*, ed. Jerome J. McGann, Madison 1985, pp. 143-79.

way prostitute poets such as Southey or Wordsworth hymned them). But at the same time he was no follower of Paine or of Cobbett, and no advocate of revolution – though he gloated over the possibility of its happening anywhere it threatened to. The satire on the politics of Lord Henry Amundeville in Canto XVI is an urbane, balanced expression of his outlook.

Byron has the most fascinating personality of all the so-called English "Romantic" poets, and in *Don Juan* he found his ideal style.