

## *Summary*

*Byron's Don Juan tells of the adventures and conquests of the hero. But, although there are some elements in common with the original play on the subject of Don Juan,*

*El Burlador de Sevilla by Tirso de Molina, there is no direct imitation of the original in Byron.*

# **Byron's Don Juan:**

## **Source and**

## **Imitation**

*Don Juan de Byron: fonte e imitação*

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### *Resumo*

*O Don Juan de Byron conta as aventuras e conquistas do herói. Mas, apesar de ter alguns elementos em comum com a peça original sobre Don Juan, El Burlador de Sevilla de Tirso de Molina, não parece ser uma imitação direta desta peça.*

### **1. INTRODUÇÃO**

**D**on Juan is an unfinished satirical poem in sixteen cantos written by Byron between 1819 and 1824 and was left uncompleted at the time of his tragic death in Greece, where he died from disease while fighting for the independence of his second fatherland. The story records six major episodes, and contains as many verses as six of Shakespeare's plays. He starts by describing with malicious good humour Juan's childhood and the strange educational system employed by his mother, the priggish Donna Inez (so like Byron's own mother) to keep him sexually pure. Despite her efforts, Donna Julia, with the "darkness of her Oriental eyes",<sup>1</sup> and despite her close friendship with the mother, seduces

the susceptible sixteen year old because, as Byron points out, "What man call gallantry, and the gods adultery, is much more common where the climate's sultry".<sup>2</sup> To her credit, she did resist a little to the temptation: "a little still she strove, and much repented/ And whispering 'I will ne'er consent', consented".<sup>3</sup> But her husband, Don Alfonso discovers that she was "sleeping double" and Donna Inez has to send her son off from Seville and Spain to avoid the scandal:

She had resolved that he should travel through  
All European climes, by land and sea  
To mend his former morals and get new  
Especially in France and Italy.<sup>4</sup>

Then begins his second adventure. He suffers shipwreck and after hunger and exposure in an open boat (spiced with cannibalism), he eventually lands on a small Greek island which is ruled over by Lambro, a successful pirate and slave trader. He is found on the beach by Haidée and so to his third adventure. The two young people become lovers and while her father was away from his base and home, the two have an idyllic romance marked by naturalness and innocence. But the father returns unexpectedly, thus causing the death of Haidée and the selling of Juan as a slave in Constantinople. Gulbeyaz, the wife of the sultan, buys him with an idea of keeping him as her secret lover. However, Juan resists the seduction although he does have an affair with one of the women of the seraglio, Dudù. Eventually he escapes from the Turks and enlists in the army of the Russians who at that moment were at war with the Turks. His fifth adventure follows as he contributes to the capture of Ismail and he is then sent by the Russian general with a dispatch announcing the victory. This he takes to St. Petersburg and becomes the

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lover of the notorious queen, Catherine II, who had a special liking for young foreigners. Because of a deterioration in his health, Catherine sends him off to England on a diplomatic mission. While mixing with society, he attracts the attention of three women: the lavish Duchess of Fitzfulke, Lady Adeline Amundeville, wife of a politician, and Aurora Raby, a beautiful young Catholic heiress. The first of these disguised as a ghost makes herself his lover just before the poem breaks off.

The five women in the poem are clearly distinguished one from another. Julia is sentimental and very self-deluding while Haidée is simple, natural and affectionate. Dudù is shy and undemanding while her unsuccessful mistress is domineering before and vindictive after her frustration. Catherine of Russia is insatiable and the English Duchess is playful and able to use unusual means to obtain her ends. However, *Don Juan* is not just a love story: it is also full of action and adventures — a shipwreck, a period of slavery, battles and various diplomatic and social occasions and an apparent supernatural haunting.

Byron had, however, a much more ambitious plan for the poem than this. He assured Murray, his editor in a letter that he intended a vast comic epic:

I meant to take him the tour of Europe, with a proper mixture of siege, battle and adventure, and to make him finish as Anacharsis Cloots in the French revolution. To how many cantos this may extend, I know not, nor whether (even if I live) I shall complete it. But this was my notion: I meant to have made him a Cavalier Servante in Italy, and a cause for a divorce in England, and a sentimental "Werther-faced man" in Germany so as to show the different ridiculous of the society in each of those countries.<sup>5</sup>

But *Don Juan* was not nearly as popular as the previous poems of Byron. *The Corsair* was an amazing

success and he wrote to his publisher, Murray, "I have sold, on the day of publication, a thing perfectly unprecedented, 10.000 copies."<sup>6</sup> In 1816, he had sold the booksellers, in one evening at dinner, seven thousand copies of *Childe Harold* and a similar sale of *the Prisoner of Chillon*. *Don Juan* sold badly and, even among his closest friends, there was opposition to its publication. Hobhouse, Moore, Kinnaird and others had advised against the publication of Canto 1 on the grounds of its blasphemy, its bawdry and its personal satire against people especially Southey.

Despite the reception at the time of publication, *Don Juan* has come to be recognised as the masterpiece of Byron. T.S. Eliot, who has shaped the critical opinion of this century, states: "All things worked together to make *Don Juan* the greatest of Byron's poems".<sup>7</sup> Jump, a leading authority on Byron and the Romantic period, also agrees with this opinion:

For those who do not insist upon too purposeful an organisation and to strict an economy, *Don Juan* is Byron's masterpiece. Untidily and unpredictably, it shows us life as viewed by a brilliant exponent of worldly commonsense. He is disillusioned and sceptical; impatient of cant, robust, high-spirited, and humane.<sup>8</sup>

At the present time, the majority of critics accept the comic epic poem as his masterpiece.

However due to the insularity of English criticism, very little attention has been paid to the source of this poem. Great attention has been given to the narrator and his relationship with Byron, to the Italian origin of the ottava rima, to the irony and satire and to the autobiographical elements of the poem. But little attention is given to the source of the title "*Don Juan*". Even Byron is very blasé in his reference to the name given to the hero:

I want a hero: an uncommon want,  
When every year and month sends forth  
a new one  
Till, after cloying the gazettes with cant,  
The age discovers he is not the true one;  
Of such as these I should not care to  
vaunt  
I'll therefore take our ancient friend Don  
Juan.<sup>9</sup>

Byron takes *Don Juan* as his hero flippantly and it is necessary to study the real origins and the true character of Byron's old friend.

## 2. TIRSO DE MOLINA

The literary creator of the character *Don Juan Tenorio* was Tirso de Molina, the pen name for the religious Fray Gabriel Telléz, member of the order of the Merces, who lived in Spain from 1584 to 1648. He wrote over 300 plays besides living a very active life as a religious superior and chronicler and we have still over 85 of his plays in manuscript (a high number for an author of this period). He was one of the three great playwrights of the Golden Age of Spanish Renaissance drama and contrasts clearly with the other two Lope de Vega and Calderón. Lope was interested in intrigues and presented characters with national connotations and in his plays was more preoccupied with the portrayal of the physical appearance than with the stage personality of his characters. Calderón, on the other hand, was much more reflexive and dealt with a notional and metaphysical presentation of his characters so that they became abstractions. Tirso de Molina, in turn, was interested in the psychological study of the characters in his plays and the vital impulses which made them act. His personalities are therefore much more real men and women than those of the other two.

Tirso de Molina is remembered in a special way for the brilliance of his female characters: Ruth, Tamar,

Jezabel, Maria de Molina and Marta: this is a strange quality for the religious who lived an exemplary religious life and had no love affairs, unlike the other two famous contemporaries. He also goes down in the history of world literature as the man who gives literary expression to the myth of Don Juan, one of the four great myths of European literature, the other three being *Hamlet*, *Faust* and *Don Quijote*. Don Juan had had a long existence as a legend in both the Nordic countries and the Latin speaking communities of Southern Europe. But it was the genius of Tirso which made him into the literary figure that spread much more rapidly and widely than the other.

*El Burlador de Sevilla*, the play by Tirso de Molina, tells the story of Don Juan Tenorio and his amorous conquests in various countries of Europe: Isabela in Spain, Tisbea in the village where he was shipwrecked and Doña Ana de Ulloa. The father of the last one challenged Don Juan to a duel in which the defender of the girl's honour was killed. The second part of the play tells the story of the Invited Statue of Don Gonzalo, which, after going to supper with Don Juan, invites him in turn to go to supper with him in the cemetery. There the statue of the father becomes the punishment of God and carries Don Juan off to hell, pulling him by the beard through the open grave. The manner of the punishment was obviously suggested by the possibilities and limitations of the open stage of the period and shows a chilling version of the chastisement of God against the ungodly. The moral aim of the play is very clear and no later version has thrown the same emphasis on the presence of the statue. The play is of course in the tradition of the medieval morality plays:

Está es justicia de Dios  
Quien tal hace, que tal pague.<sup>10</sup>

Ramón Menéndez Pidal in his *Estudios literarios* analyses the source

of the play of Tirso and updates the studies of the great Farinelli and J. Bolte. He points out that like so many literary characters, Don Juan was born out of the folklore legends and fertilised by the creative genius of a great writer. The folklore origin was obviously a version of the legend which existed in Seville about the "convidado de piedra" and not as had been claimed a version of the legend of Leonicio nor the "Convite a la calavera".

A later study of Dorothy Epplen Mackay, published in 1943 throws further light on the origin of the double invitation legend of Don Juan. Using the method of motive analysis popular to the Finnish school of folklorists, the author looks for the archetype or first version of the legend in the various versions of the European tradition. She sees that there are basically three elements in the legend: the challenge of a living man to a dead one by giving a supper invitation; the appearance of the dead man at the supper and the return invitation; and the appearance of the living man at his rendezvous with the dead and his punishment or warning. Mackay finds that there were innumerable versions of this legend throughout Europe and that the double invitation existed in many. Her findings were principally that all the versions of the legend existing in Spain fell under the archetype established and therefore had a considerable degree of unity. The only stories in which the dead man appeared in the form of a statue belonged to the Spanish peninsula - 4 in Spain and 1 in Portugal. The Spanish folk tales are predominantly religious in their moral. These factors obviously contributed to the play *El Burlador de Sevilla*. There is a strong religious moral, the statue is the form that the dead father takes and the double invitation is clearly present in the play. The genius of Tirso de Molina added the vivid

characterisation, the element of Don Juan as the conqueror of women, the local colour of places and of course the brilliance and beauty of the poetry.

The findings of Pidal and Mackay made obsolete the search for an historical figure who might have inspired Tirso in the creation of the character of Don Juan. The theory of Gregorio Marañon about the Conde of Villamediana and other attempts are outdated. The contribution of the legends is clearly established.

Having been given life by Tirso de Molina, the spread of the character of Don Juan was much more dramatic and much more far-reaching than that of the other three, Faustus, Quixote and Hamlet. Soon there were masterpieces in many countries and such great names as Molière, Mozart, Zorilla, Lenau, Pushkin, Byron and Shaw produced their versions of the famous literary work. From being a play, it took various other forms of literary and musical creation and the character of Don Juan changed according to the ideas and the periods of literature into which it was adapted. Don Juan became a major literary figure in France, Italy, England, Germany as well as in Spain and Portugal.

But we must now come back to our subject. To what extent can we say that the play by Tirso de Molina is the cause and source of Byron's *Don Juan* and what evidence is there in the work itself about this interdependence? To exemplify more clearly the imitation, we will compare and contrast the use of the play of Tirso by Byron, Lenau and the other English writer, Shaw, who have created a version of value of Don Juan.

### 3. IMITATION

There is no direct evidence in *Don Juan* that Byron knew of the text of Tirso de Molina. He tells us playfully:

If any person doubt it, I appeal  
To history, tradition and to facts  
To newspapers, whose truth all know  
and feel  
To plays in five and operas in three acts;  
All these confirm my statement a good  
deal  
But that which more completely faith  
exacts  
Is that myself and several now in Seville  
Saw Juan's last elopement with the  
devil.<sup>11</sup>

There is explicit reference to plays and operas on the subject. But the plays are in five acts. This eliminates the play of Tirso which is divided into three "jornadas" and that of Zorilla, which is anyhow posterior, being published in 1840, which is divided into two parts and seven acts. It must refer to Molière's version and maybe to Musset's. The opera is obviously that of Mozart finished in 1787. Even the actions in the poem of Byron have little to do with the play of Tirso. There is the shipwreck and the travel to Italy and France but this seems to have to do with the tradition of classical epic poetry as he tells us in stanza CC. There is therefore no proof that Byron knew of the play of Tirso.

Something quite distinct may be observed in Shaw and Lenau. Shaw published his *Men and Supermen* in 1903 and included a special scene (Act 3 Scene 2) which is known as Don Juan in Hell, which is often detached and performed as a one-act play. It was conceived as a dream experienced by John Tanner in which he appears as Don Juan, Ann Whitefield as Dona Ana and Roebuck Ramsden as the statue. In the preface which is an "Epistle Dedicatory" he states clearly that he conceived this scene as a twentieth-century version of Don Juan of Molina:

You once asked me why I did not write a Don Juan play. The levity with which you assumed this frightful responsibility has probably by this time enabled you to forget it: but the day of reckoning has arrived: here is your play!<sup>12</sup>

This scene of the play is a Don Juan play in the tradition which began with Tirso:

The prototype Don Juan invented early in the XVI century by a Spanish monk

was presented according to ideas of the time as the enemy of God.<sup>13</sup>

But the public could not accept the damnation of Don Juan and later versions changed the tragic ending:

Don Juan became such a pet that the world could not bear his damnation. It reconciled him sentimentally to God in a second version and clamored for his canonization for a whole century.<sup>14</sup>

This is a very perspicacious summary of the progress of Don Juan from Tirso, through Molière to Zorilla and Mozart. But Shaw was aware that the Romantic version would not do for the twentieth century. He was well aware of what he had to do when he wrote his "Shavio-Socratic dialogue with the lady, the statue and the devil";

You see from the foregoing survey that Don Juan is a full century out of date for you and for me; and if there are millions of less literate people who are still in the eighteenth century, have they not Molière and Mozart, upon whose art no human hand can improve. You would laugh at me if this time of day I dealt in duels and ghosts and womanly women... Even the more abstract parts of the Don Juan play are dilapidated past use: for instance Don Juan's supernatural antagonist hurled those who refused to repent into lakes of burning brimstone, there to be tortured by devils with horns and tails.<sup>15</sup>

Shaw therefore sets out to write a modern version of the correct idea of Don Juan, not as a libertine but as

a man who though gifted enough to be exceptionally capable of distinguishing between good and evil, follows his own instincts without regard for the common statute or canon law; and therefore while gaining the ardent sympathy of our rebellious instincts finds himself in mortal conflict with existing institutions and defends himself by fraud and force.<sup>16</sup>

This is a good definition of Don Juan as the man who refuses to respect social, moral and religious codes.

In fact, Shaw goes on to write a play which respects very little these intuitions and he makes his Don Juan into a superman who refuses to obey the laws of marriage because they chain him down to such things as distract the superman from his mission

of forging the future of the human race:

Invent me a means by which I can have love, beauty, romance, emotion, passion without their wretched penalties, their expenses, their worries, their trials, their illnesses and agonies and risks of death, their retinue of servants and nurses and doctors and school-masters.<sup>17</sup>

Don Juan is therefore the man who frees himself from all this and lives as a superman satisfying his simple "impulse of manhood towards womanhood" whenever it is convenient for the Life Force which inspires the true superman.

However, there is no doubt that in all this, Shaw knew his history of literature and had a first hand close knowledge of the other plays on Don Juan especially that of Molina.

The case of Lenau is a little less clear because he did not share Shaw's passion for preface writing. The poem of Lenau was finished in 1884 and entitled *Don Juan*. A specialist on Lenau tells us explicitly that he knew and read the German version of the play of Tirso de Molina published by C. A. Dohrn in 1841. This fact is supported by a close reading of the play: the names of the minor characters such as Catalinon are the same in the poem of Lenau and in the play of Tirso. The scene in which Don Juan deceives the Duchess Isabelle and the scene in the cemetery are very close to Tirso's version. There is also evidence of elements taken from the play by Molière and the opera by Mozart.

We can therefore conclude that while Byron showed no knowledge of the play of Tirso de Molina, both Shaw and Lenau followed the play closely and since they were both geniuses, they were able to create something new and different with what they borrowed as Eliot would demand.

We must therefore try another approach to see if Byron's portrayal of the central character shows understanding of the essential elements of this character as handed

on by Tirso. In the Spanish play, Don Juan is both the conqueror of women and the challenger of a dead person in such a way as to insult him and all the supernatural. He is a man who disrespects the laws of God and man. In Byron's *Don Juan* there is not any element that could be considered as a challenge to a dead person. In fact whereas Don Juan Tenorio kills the father of Dona Ana, Don Juan of Byron flees from Don Alfonso and puts up no opposition to the father of Haidée. There remains only the element of the conqueror of women in the poem of Byron but in a form that is significantly different. T.S. Eliot was the first to put his finger on this difference in his classic essay on Byron of 1937:

It is noticeable — and this confirms, I think, the view of Byron held by Mr Peter Quennell — that in these love episodes, Juan always takes the passive role. Even Haidée, in spite of the innocence and ignorance of that child of nature, appears rather as the seducer than the seduced... The innocence of Juan is merely a substitute for the passivity of Byron.<sup>18</sup>

The opinion of Mr Quennell is of course that Byron, as essentially homosexual, was always passive in his relationship with women. This is rather a strange doctrine coming from Eliot, the defender of the impersonality of poetry. But the fact is true in the poem. Don Juan is the aggressive conqueror of women of the Spanish tradition. In Zorilla, he arrives at the point of killing thirty-one people in a year and seducing seventy women in the same period. The method used was described briefly:

Um dia para aliciá-las  
Outro para conseguir-las  
Outro para abandoná-la  
Mais dois para substitui-las  
E uma hora para olvidá-las.<sup>19</sup>

The Spanish Don Juan is certainly very different from the passive Don Juan of Byron.

This theory of Eliot would seem to be confirmed by the statements of Gregorio Marañón who states that the true Don Juan is a man of "equivocal

virility", physically feminine in appearance, but this is not the place to examine this theory. Suffice it to say, that the Don Juan of Byron is not really a character with the qualities or the ideas of the original hero of this name.

Shaw's hero is also passive in a sense, but in quite a different way from Byron's hero. Shaw maintained that all men are the quarry of women and not the huntsmen and that "a woman seeking a husband is the most unscrupulous of all the beasts of prey"<sup>20</sup> So Shaw's Don Juan is passive like all men. Lenau's Don Juan is the true romantic lover seeking many women in order to cling to passing beauty and enjoy it while it remains. But his hero is not passive like the hero of Byron.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

After examining the direct and indirect evidence for a dependence of Byron's Don Juan on the original play by Tirso de Molina, we must conclude that Byron had no direct knowledge of it. We must agree with Shaw who comments on Byron's Don Juan:

Our vagabond libertines are no more interesting from that point of view than the sailor who has a wife in every port; and Byron's hero is, after all, only a vagabond libertine. And he is dumb; he does not discuss himself with a Sganarelle-Leporello or with the fathers or brothers of his mistresses: he does not, even, like Casanova, tell his own story. In fact he is not a true Don Juan at all; he is no more an enemy of God than any romantic and adventurous young sower of wild oats.<sup>21</sup>

Shaw, clear-sighted as usual, points out that Byron's Don Juan has nothing in common with the first Don Juan except for the fact that he is a libertine.

The same opinion is shared by Salvador de Madariaga in the preface to his BBC play *Don Juan y la Don Juana* in which he examines the true nature of Don Juan and concludes that the essential characteristic of the character must be its spontaneous and aggressive, unreflective virility that

disrespects the law of man and God in order to satisfy itself. Byron's Don Juan is something quite different:

El Don Juan de Byron no oculta su índole insolente, displicente, altanera, de inglés perseguido por el spleen. Pero es demasiado blasé, fin de siglo, para armonizar con el símbolo que procreó nuestro gran fraile. No es Don Juan. Es Sir John.<sup>22</sup>

Madariaga puts his finger on an extremely important point in this passage: the identification of Don Juan with Byron himself. The close identity of the narrator of the comic poem and the author is the reason for the failure of the poem as a Don Juan poem but it is at the same time the reason for the success of the poem as the great masterpiece of Byron. Finally he had found an objective correlative in the sense of Eliot, in which he could give expression to all the experiences and opinions he had in a free medley poem describing the travels of a character which he turns into his real self. The cause of the failure of the poem as one of the true series of Don Juan literary works is the real cause of its success on another level.

Byron gives us a hint about the origin of his knowledge of the character of Don Juan in two telling verses:

We all have seen him. In the pantomime,  
Sent to the devil somewhat ere his time.<sup>23</sup>

Here, we have the true explanation in all probability. He had seen Don Juan in the pantomime and for someone who had been living in Italy from October 1816 and was to leave it only in July 1823, Byron had surely had constant contact with the Italian pantomime on Don Juan. Soon after the creation by Tirso de Molina, the Commedia del'arte had seized on the comic possibilities of the play and Don Juan had become one of the constant characters of their presentations. So here we find the contact that probably inspired Byron and explains the lack of real understanding of the true nature of Don Juan. □

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Byron, p.642

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem, p.644

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem, p.649

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem, p.658

<sup>5</sup> Jump, p.105

<sup>6</sup> Marchant, p.162

<sup>7</sup> Eliot, p.202

<sup>8</sup> Jump, p.150

<sup>9</sup> Byron, p.637

<sup>10</sup> Molina, p. 241

<sup>11</sup> Byron, p.659

<sup>12</sup> Shaw: *Prefaces*, p.149

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, p.151

<sup>14</sup> Shaw: *Prefaces*, p.152

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem, p.151

<sup>17</sup> Shaw: *Plays*, p.383

<sup>18</sup> Eliot, p. 202

<sup>19</sup> Bandeira, p.45

<sup>20</sup> Shaw: *plays*, p.382

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem, p.150

<sup>22</sup> Madariaga, p.30

<sup>23</sup> Byron, p.637