CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-33841-7 - Byron: Don Juan
Anne Barton
Excerpt
More information

Chapter 1

The making of *Don Juan*

George Gordon, sixth Lord Byron, began *Don Juan*, a work meant initially 'to be a little quietly facetious upon every thing' (BLJ VI. 67), in Venice on 3 July 1818. By the following January, he had completed two out of what, at this time, he envisaged as twelve cantos of a substantial stanzaic poem, and was embroiled in fierce debate with his friends back in England, all of whom begged him either to make drastic cuts or (better still) not to publish at all. Byron, however, was unpersuadable. Cantos I and II appeared in the summer of 1819, without either the author's or publisher's name on the title page, stripped of the Dedication, and (to the author's fury) with asterisks replacing some lines and stanzas, but otherwise intact. The reception of these cantos in England was exactly what had been feared. Byron's authorship, proclaimed equally by the wit and brilliance of the poem and by what most readers felt to be its blasphemy, immorality and outrageous satire on contemporaries, including the poet's estranged wife, was clear from the start. A 'filthy and impious poem' was the verdict of *Blackwood's Magazine* in August 1819; an 'infamous publication' that 'will do more harm to the English character than anything of our time' the response of William Wordsworth. Even the courtesan Harriette Wilson professed to be shocked: 'Dear *Adorable* Lord Byron, *don't* make a mere *coarse* old libertine of yourself.' Byron, meanwhile, in his self-imposed Italian exile, came to take *Don Juan* more and more seriously, as 'a *satire* on *abuses* of the present *states* of Society – and not an eulogy of vice' (BLJ X. 68). Stubbornly he continued to write, and at intervals to publish, further cantos of what Shelley was for a long time alone in recognizing as a landmark: the greatest long poem in English since *Paradise Lost*.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-33841-7 - Byron: Don Juan
Anne Barton
Excerpt
More information

Shelley never read Wordsworth's *Prelude*, the one post-Miltonic work which might have challenged *Don Juan* in his estimation. Nervously aware of the extent to which this poem 'on his own life' was private and self-absorbed, Wordsworth reserved it for posthumous publication, by which time both Shelley and Byron were dead. *Don Juan* too is intensely personal: 'Almost all *Don Juan* is *real* life', Byron maintained, 'either my own, or from people I know' (BLJ VIII. 186). Biography, the circumstances and events of the author's past, his loves, hates, sexual relationships, friendships, journeys and opinions, is integral to it, constantly forcing the reader to remember the facts of Byron's short but crowded existence. It is not, however, a private poem in the manner of *The Prelude*. When Byron said of it defensively, 'it may be profligate – but is it not *life*, is it not *the thing*? – Could any man have written it – who has not lived in the world?' (BLJ VI. 232), the world he had in mind encompassed most of Europe. What he chiefly disliked about Wordsworth and his circle (apart from their turncoat politics and disdain for the Augustan poets) was a narrowness and provinciality radically opposed to his own cosmopolitanism: their preference, as he complained in the Dedication of *Don Juan*, for each other's company to the exclusion of wider acquaintance, and for Cumberland lakes over his own global ocean. *Don Juan* has been called, with some justice, the epic of modern life. It is a consciously perverse epic: digressive, largely unplanned and accretive, left unfinished in 1824 at the beginning of Canto XVII, when Byron died at the age of thirty-seven in the Greek War of Independence. A picaresque adventure story interwoven with the meditations and recollections of a compelling, highly individual narrator, the poem is at once the most gloriously comic and the saddest of tales. It also reflects an entire era of European social, political and intellectual history as perceived by a man who had lived both more intensely and more variously, in and out of England, than almost any of his contemporaries.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-33841-7 - Byron: Don Juan
Anne Barton
Excerpt
More information

Byron and the Don Juan tradition

Like so much else in the poem, Byron's choice of hero was mischievous. The narrator informs readers at the outset that he has selected 'our ancient friend Don Juan' (I. 1) only because an epic needs a hero and neither the England of George III, the French Revolution, nor the Napoleonic Wars offer a suitable contemporary figure. Of the many previous treatments of Don Juan, Byron (a frequent opera-goer) certainly knew Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, and probably more than one of the plays written about the Don since his original appearance in Tirso da Molina's *El Burlador de Sevilla* (1630). He mentions, however, only those pantomime versions of the story, popular in early nineteenth-century London, in which the seducer, with the approval of all right-thinking people, is 'sent to the devil, somewhat ere his time' (I. 1). Improvisational, topical, eclectic and transformative, Byron's poem has, as Peter Graham argues, a certain amount in common both with Italian *commedia dell'arte* and with English spectacular theatre, including pantomime, in its various forms.

In establishing this fictional Spanish libertine, murderer and blasphemer as the hero of his poem, Byron clearly intended to tease the prigs. He perplexed them further by presenting a Don Juan who is gentle, tender-hearted and, although amorous, forever being seduced by women rather than seducing, with none of the traits of his treacherous archetype. The story, moreover, through which Byron conducts him, bears little resemblance to the one handed down by Tirso da Molina. The traditional Don was, and remained, a demonic sensualist, deceiving women of all classes either with false promises of marriage or by pretending, under cover of darkness, to be someone else. His fatal mistake, committed in a moment of bravado, was to invite the statue of a man he murdered, the father of one of his victims, to dinner. The statue obliges, and ends by carrying Don Juan off to Hell.

Byron's Juan, like Tirso's, is born in Seville, but he is the child of an unhappy marriage transparently based on Byron's own. After hounding her unfortunate husband to death, the

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-33841-7 - Byron: Don Juan
Anne Barton
Excerpt
More information

learned and hypocritical Donna Inez brings up her only child according to the strictest moral principles, protecting him carefully from any fact that 'hints continuation of the species' (I. 40). In consequence, Juan finds himself, at sixteen, committing adultery with Donna Julia, a young woman saddled with an elderly husband, without in the least understanding how he has arrived in her bed. Discovery precipitates a divorce, and Juan is packed off to travel until the scandal has died down (Canto I). His ship sinks in mid-ocean. After surviving agonies of hunger and thirst in a crowded open boat where men are driven to eat each other, Juan is washed ashore on a remote Greek island, the sole survivor. Rescued by Haidée, only daughter of the island's pirate owner, he enjoys for a few months the one perfect love relationship of his life – an idyll destroyed by the sudden return of Haidée's father, who sells him into slavery (Cantos II–IV). In Constantinople, Juan catches the eye of the sultan's favourite wife, who buys him and has him smuggled into the harem in women's clothes. Still grieving for Haidée, Juan resists the advances of the sultana, only to give way that night to the voluptuous charms of the harem girl Dudù (Cantos V–VI). After a narrow escape, he finds himself involved as a mercenary soldier in the sack of the Turkish city Ismail by Russian forces (Cantos VII–VIII). Despatched to bring news of this ghastly victory to the Empress Catherine, Juan becomes her 'man-mistress' and subsequently, when his health begins to suffer, is sent on a diplomatic mission to England (Cantos IX–X). When the poem breaks off (Canto XVII), Juan has endured a London 'season', has just been seduced by a frolicsome duchess at a country house party during the Parliamentary recess, and is hovering on the brink of a far more dangerous entanglement with Lady Adeline, his hostess.

Although Byron sometimes toyed with the idea of a conclusion recounting 'Juan's last elopement with the devil' (I. 203), particularly in the early stages of the poem's composition, it is difficult to see how Juan's story as he tells it could be made to accommodate the traditional catastrophe in any but a metaphorical sense. When Byron assured his readers in Canto I that

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-33841-7 - Byron: Don Juan
Anne Barton
Excerpt
More information

'a panorama view of hell's in training, / After the style of Virgil and of Homer' (I.200), he had in mind a parody of classical epic at least as much as a dig at orthodox Christian ideas of eternal damnation. But he had not foreseen the direction his poem was to take in its last six cantos, where mock-epic gives way to a detailed, almost novelistic social realism. Byron was not entirely in jest when he told his publisher, Murray, on 16 February 1821 that he was undecided whether to make his hero 'end in Hell, or in an unhappy marriage, not knowing which would be the severest. The Spanish tradition says Hell: but it is probably only an Allegory of the other state' (BLJ VIII.78). At the same time he made it clear that the agent of Juan's death was not to be any avenging statue, but the knife of the guillotine: he was to fall victim, in Paris, to Robespierre's Terror.

In the event, Byron's own death left Juan permanently suspended over breakfast at Norman Abbey, the object of attention from three very different women, with his immediate, let alone his long-term, future still unclear. Adultery with Lady Adeline resulting (again) in a divorce seems inevitable, as does marriage to the coolly reflective Catholic heiress, Aurora Raby, whose partial resemblance to Lady Byron already augurs ill. After that, a possible flight from domestic misery straight into the French Revolution or, also possible, a whole series of intervening foreign adventures, in Germany and Italy, depending on whether Byron was to be trusted when he said he now aimed at the traditional epic total of twenty-four cantos – or when he proposed, outrageously, 'to canter gently through a hundred' (XII.55). A number of writers have attempted to finish *Don Juan*. None has succeeded, for the simple reason that while further adventures for Juan are relatively easy to imagine, no one can re-create Byron's narrative voice.

Byron as narrator

It was part of his flouting of tradition that Byron should deprive his hero of the comic servant – Catalinon, Sganarelle, or Leporello – who accompanies Don Juan in Tirso, Molière,

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-33841-7 - Byron: Don Juan
Anne Barton
Excerpt
More information

Mozart, and all other versions except Byron's own: realistic, fretful, an apprehensive commentator haunted by those moral considerations his master has loftily put aside. In a sense, however, this role has been pre-empted in *Don Juan* by the poem's narrator, with whom it becomes enormously more complex. Byron initially struggled against the idea of narrating the poem in his own person. Although his incorrigible and lifelong habit of inserting new material at the proof stage, or even, in some cases, after publication, helps to obscure the situation, he started out determined to fictionalize the teller of this tale. The narrator is the same rather bumbling Spanish gentleman described in the prose Preface, retailing his story 'in a village in the Sierra Morena on the road between Monasterio and Seville – sitting at the door of a posada with the curate of the hamlet on his right hand, a segar in his mouth, a jug of Malaga or perhaps "right sherris" before him on a small table containing the relics of an olla podrida – the time sunset'. A lifelong bachelor and busybody, inexperienced and shy with women, this narrator claims personal acquaintance in Canto I with Juan and his family, asserts that he actually saw him carried off by the devil, and even admits to once having had 'a pail of housemaid's water' (I. 24) emptied over his head by the young scamp when he tried, officiously, to call.

In the Preface, written probably in the autumn of 1818, Byron uses this figure, wickedly, to parody Wordsworth's note to 'The Thorn' in which the older poet had solemnly advised readers to imagine his narrator as 'a captain of a small trading vessel ... who being past the middle age of life had retired upon an annuity or small independent income to some village or country town of which he was not a native'. Byron ultimately abandoned the Preface without completing it, perhaps because he recognized that his verse Dedication to Robert Southey contained a far more devastating attack on Wordsworth and the Lake poets, and should stand alone. Apart, however, from being hilarious, the rejected prose introduction to *Don Juan* is important for what it reveals about Byron's difficulty in sustaining a narrative voice no one could possibly confuse with that of the author of the poem.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-33841-7 - Byron: Don Juan
Anne Barton
Excerpt
More information

'The reader', he announces, 'is requested to extend his supposed powers of supposing so far as to conceive that the Dedication to Mr. Southey, and several stanzas of the poem itself, are interpolated by the English editor.' This 'English editor' is reminiscent of John Hookham Frere's 'Squire Humphry Bamberham' in *Whistlecraft*, one of Byron's models, the purported source of learning and 'superior reading' beyond the capacity of Frere's artisan narrator. Behind the joke, however, lies Byron's anxious recognition not only that the savagely brilliant Dedication is inconceivable as the work of the anonymous Spanish gentleman, but also that within the poem itself this narrative persona is impossibly constricting, limiting his range and freedom of expression. The 'English editor' provides a rather lame excuse for what is already happening all the time in Canto I: the flashing out of Byron's own, unmistakable voice and personality.

By stanza 82 (of 222) the Spanish gentleman has faded away, never (apart from the teasingly ambiguous stanza 165 in Canto II) to reappear. From then on, the narrator of this 'versified Aurora Borealis' (VII.2) is undisguisedly Byron himself: the master of an infinite variety of moods and vocal tones, in one moment serious, flippant in the next, self-mocking, nostalgic, trying out and discarding poses, playing with the reader, interrogative, sometimes indignant, sceptical and increasingly obsessed with a personal, which is also a historical, past. Only rarely (in three stanzas during the shipwreck, and once at Norman Abbey) does he pretend to be present at the events he describes in any capacity other than that of their creator. He does, however, project aspects of himself onto a dazzling variety of characters, both male and female. To one, the Englishman Johnson, he even lends for a time his own narrative voice. The unity of *Don Juan*, apparently the most wayward and formless of poems, is fundamentally, as has long been recognized, that of Byron's own extraordinary personality. Of consuming interest to contemporaries, both European and English – it has been said that only Byron could have visited the field of Waterloo in 1816, one year after the battle, and generated almost as much interest as the event itself – that

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-33841-7 - Byron: Don Juan
Anne Barton
Excerpt
More information

personality continues, in his greatest poem, to exert its magnetic pull.

The historical setting

Among Juan's various adventures, only one has a fixed, historical date. The sack of Ismail, an episode in the Russo-Turkish wars, occurred in 1790. Although Byron's mock epic pretensions had involved 'a little touch at warfare' (VI. 120) from the beginning, he almost certainly did not know at the outset that this particular atrocity was the one he was going to select. That decision seems to have been taken when he returned to *Don Juan* in January 1822, after a break of over a year during which the prohibition of his *inamorata*, the Countess Guiccioli (or so he pretended), had put a halt to its progress. Canto VI is a turning-point in the poem, not only because from this point on it would be published by John Hunt rather than by the conservative and increasingly reluctant Murray, but also because here Byron decided 'to throw away the scabbard' (BLJ IX. 191): to attack 'cant' of all kinds – social, political, religious and sexual – regardless of the consequences for his reputation in an England already drifting, particularly among her ruling classes, towards some of the attitudes of the Victorian age. As Jerome McGann has demonstrated, it was in this middle section of *Don Juan* that Byron imposed a retrospective historical time upon the events of the poem as a whole, one distinct from the past and present of the man writing it. If Juan is sixteen at the sack of Ismail in 1790, then he must have been born in 1774 and have left Seville just at the outbreak of the French Revolution. He will die in Paris in 1793 when the Revolution has degenerated into a blood-bath, but before the rise of Napoleon. Byron as narrator, on the other hand, born in 1788, is looking back from the vantage-point of the 1820s not only over the Revolution he was too young to experience himself, but also over the Napoleonic era of his own maturity and fame, and its aftermath of European restoration and reaction: that period of the Holy Alliance, the return of the Bourbon kings, and political unrest, not only in Italy, Spain,

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-33841-7 - Byron: Don Juan
Anne Barton
Excerpt
More information

Portugal and Greece, but also in England itself, which his hero would not live to see, but against the background of which *Don Juan* itself was written.

Byron had always, from an early age, been politically engaged. While an undergraduate at Cambridge, he joined the Whig Club, and to this Opposition party in Parliament he remained loyal all his life. When, after the publication in 1812 of Cantos I and II of *Childe Harold*, his versified travel diary, he awoke one morning (as he said) to find himself famous, literary success, combined with youth, brilliance and an apparently devastating physical beauty, opened the doors of all the great Whig houses to this previously obscure and impoverished half-Scottish nobleman. Byron was later to draw on his memories of these years of social celebrity (abruptly terminated by the scandal surrounding the dissolution of his marriage in 1816) for the English cantos of *Don Juan*. Yet he was never entirely comfortable within the Whig party, nor the party with him.

Time has vindicated Byron's three speeches in the House of Lords: against the death penalty as a solution to industrial unrest among the Nottingham weavers; in favour of Catholic emancipation; and for the liberation of an imprisoned proponent of the electoral reforms that were to triumph in 1832. At the time, their 'radicalism' made most Whigs (let alone Tories) uneasy. Yet Byron could never quite bring himself into accord with the whole-hearted radicalism on the fringes of the party associated with William Cobbett, Leigh and John Hunt, or even his lifelong friend John Cam Hobhouse. In later life he was to publish with both Hunts, and to support the *Examiner*, Leigh Hunt's liberal journal. He always remained, however, as Leigh Hunt's wife liked witheringly to observe, 'his lordship': a man fiercely proud of his aristocratic lineage and station, and distrustful of anything resembling 'democratic royalty' (XV.23). 'I wish men to be free', he asserted in *Don Juan*, 'As much from mobs as kings – from you as me', and admitted that he was bound, in consequence, to 'offend all parties' (IX.25, 26).

Acutely aware of the protean, contradictory nature of his

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-33841-7 - Byron: Don Juan
Anne Barton
Excerpt
More information

own personality ('So that I almost think that the same skin / For one without – has two or three within', XVII.11), Byron told Lady Blessington, shortly before he left on his last journey to Greece, that the only two principles to which he was constant were a 'strong love of liberty and a detestation of cant'. Both in his life and in *Don Juan*, these are fixed poles. Like many of his generation, he initially mistook Napoleon for a liberator, the hero who would put the French Revolution back on course, only to be disillusioned when he turned into yet another imperialist oppressor and then allowed himself to be led off tamely to St Helena. Upon Bonaparte's conqueror Wellington, however (or 'Vilainton', as Byron liked to call him, in imitation of the French mispronunciation of his name), the man who 'repaired Legitimacy's crutch' (IX.3), he visited a hatred untempered by that grudging admiration he retained for Napoleon even when enthroned. Wellington and Castlereagh, the Tory Foreign Minister who helped keep Italy in foreign bondage, victimized the Catholics in Ireland and opposed poor relief at home, were unimaginative agents of tyranny at whom Byron was always too angry to laugh in the way he laughed at the Lake poets, or even at George III, England's mad old king, and later at his corpulent successor.

Although he detested war ('a brain-spattering, windpipe-slitting art', IX.4) in general, and the cult of military glory in particular, Byron made an exception for wars fought in the cause of freedom – in Britain's American colonies, in South America, or in Greece. Convinced that 'Revolution / Alone can save the Earth from Hell's pollution' (VIII.51), he involved himself closely in the abortive Italian Carbonari movement, hiding their arms in his house in Ravenna. Before casting in his lot with the insurgent Greeks, he contemplated going to live in Venezuela, or even returning to England in the event of a political uprising there. Reactionary governments, including that of his native land, had reason to regard not only what he wrote, but also what he might do, with apprehension.

Although Byron took the last, unfinished canto of *Don Juan* with him to Greece in July 1823, he did not work on the poem during the nine months he spent there before his death.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org