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.

Source and Imitation

Don Juan de Byron: fonte e imitação

William Valentine Redmond

Byron's Don Juan: *No* direct imitation of the original in Byron.

1. INTRODUÇÃO

Don 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", 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". 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". 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.

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. Petersbourg and becomes the

* Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora.
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. Doudó 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 more ambitious than the previous poems of his masterpiece.
Está es justiza de Dios
Quien tal hace, que tal pague.10

Ramón Menéndez Pidal in his Estudios litterarios 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 Leoncio 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 Maranon about the Conde de 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:

Byron’s Don Juan: Source and Imitation

87
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
exists
Is that myself and several now in Seville
Saw Juan’s last elopement with the
devil.11

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 Zorrilla, 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
Musséts. 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!12

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.13

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 clamped for his
canonization for a whole century.14

This is a very perspicacious summary
of the progress of Don Juan from
Tirso, through Molière to Zorrilla 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.15

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
moral conflict with existing institutions
and defends himself by fraud and force.16

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.17

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

88
on by Tirso. In the Spanish play, Don Juan is both the conquistador 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. 18

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 día para acertá-las
Otro para conseguirlas
Otro para abandoná-las
Mais dois para substituí-las
E uma hora para olvidá-las. 19

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 Maranon 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 quany of women and not the hunters and that "a woman seeking a husband is the most unscrupulous of all the beasts of prey" 20 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. 21

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. 22

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. 23

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. 24

Byron's Don Juan: Source and Imitation 89
BIBLIOGRAPHY


MACKAY, Dorothy Epplen. The double invitation in the Legend of Don Juan. Stanford, Univ. Press, 1943. 244 p.


NOTES

1 Byron, p.642
2 Ibidem, p.644
3 Ibidem, p.649
4 Ibidem, p.658
5 Jump, p.105
6 Marchant, p.162
7 Eliot, p.202
8 Jump, p.150
9 Byron, p.637
10 Molina, p. 241
11 Byron, p.659
12 Shaw: Prefaces, p.149
13 Ibidem, p.151

90 Revista de Estudios Germánicos
Byron's Don Juan: Source and Imitation