

BB7 Sex and instagram

Text of **Byron Bits No.7** by Peter Gallagher available on MadBadDangerous.com

A curious thing about Byron's comic epic Don Juan is that it can be read as a poem of female sexual desire. Although the narrative seems to be a sort of mock "boys'-own-adventure" centred on the travels of a handsome young hero, women are more prominent than Juan in the drama.

It's not evident at first, perhaps. But it probably occurs to most readers eventually, that all Juan's romantic encounters – and most of the adventures in the poem – are initiated by his girl-friends or his mother or another women who, for a while, assumes one of those roles or even both.

For instance: consider Julia, the young wife in Canto I who kept tempting herself and the adolescent Juan until he finally did what she expected and certainly wanted.

In Canto II, it's Haidee, his Greek princess, who gave herself passionately to a convalescent Juan whom she kept in a cave on the sea-shore and who later died of grief with his child in her womb.

Gulbayez, the Sultan's regal concubine, who bought Juan in the slave market as a toy-boy but dressed him as a girl, and almost pleaded for sex only to provoke tears from our hero in Canto V.

Then there's Dudu, the sultry odalisque who shared her cot with him in the harem where he somehow managed to penetrate his own disguise in her sleep; Catherine, Empress of Russia who loved him in uniform and out of it when she elevated him to, or in, the royal bed; Adeline Amundeville, his alluring hostess in the last cantos who probably wanted to bed Juan but decided, first, to wed him, to someone else; lastly the Duchess of Fitz-Fulke whose nightly visits for a non-spiritual séance with Juan will forever be hidden from us by Byron's own final curtain.

Juan's lovers possess a sexual energy and appetite for risk-taking quite the opposite of our passive, rather earnest hero. A boy whom every mother might love, although his own did not.

Julia risked discovery by her jealous buffoon of a husband and banishment to a life of purdah in a convent. Haidee risked the fortunes and suffered the wrath of her violent father, Lambro. Had Gulbayez' strategem been discovered the Sultan would have had her garrotted. Or worse, if that's possible. Dudu's generous cuddles in the Harem would have been rewarded by drowning in Bosphorus. The Empress Catherine alone risked little: only the intrigues of Court and perhaps the mysterious death of yet another young lover. Still, 'though this was the most prestigious of Juan's liaisons, it carried no more weight with him than it did with her.

It's possible Adeline Amundeville, too, like many another Georgian hostesses, would have escaped social censure for some quiet adultery with Juan. Still, she would have had to manage some sticky business at close quarters in the grand country house, when their affair progressed beyond playing footsies under the table.

These women who dared something – or even everything – for Juan are so much the engine of the narrative that we have to speculate that this more than a joke about Juan's passivity. Perhaps it is a sort of prism through which Byron sees himself.

Could this repeating pattern suggest Byron felt his own life was shaped by female influences and society, by the advice and, in his case apparently only too often the consent, of women?

Maybe. In part. But on the evidence of his actions, his letters, the correspondence of his friends and advisors, Byron had plenty of agency that Juan lacks so he can't – and I don't suggest he would – hide behind any skirts.

Juan is a paper doll, but Byron was not. Sure, he was a sort of Instagram star of his day; a personality suggested by some careful imagery and reckless behavior.

But Byron's character offers so much more breath than a Harold or a Juan or even a Cain. Taking his correspondence and published works as a whole, he displays so much more intellectual energy, self-regard and diversity that even that earnest anglican Matthew Arnold concedes he is the most fascinating personality in modern literature.

Then the ironic, rather facile tone of Don Juan makes it an unsuitable vehicle for reflections on his own character. That was precisely why Byron adopted it after a successful experiment with Beppo. It was something entirely new in English literature – as John Murray acknowledged in 1819: a sort of roguish soufflé of a tale, compared to the gloomy – by then annotated – treadmill of Childe Harold. It was supposed to be a vehicle in which

he could escape from identification with his hero.

But the thing is: Byron likes to tease us. Because he really can't help it. He invites us by constant reference to his own history, his family, his friends, his sins and literary fame to speculate on the extent to which Don Juan's life is a sort of kaleidoscopic vision of his own.

In that glittering, tumbling perspective, it appears that both in his poetry and beyond it although Byron had male lovers and gave boozy, blokey dinners even in his thirties in Pisa, he **was** more ruled-by, attached-to and more intrigued-by female company than male.

#Byron/Bits