

BB8 Don Juan and older women

Text of **Byron Bits No.8** by Peter Gallagher available on MadBadDangerous.com

In the poem, Juan has sex, we presume, with six women: Julia, Haidee, Dudu, la Protasova, Catherine of Russia and the Duchess of Fitz-Fulke.

Yes, I've kept score. Byron might one day have revealed others. Juan's narrative contains several gaps. But these are the only fictions we have to work with.

Since, even at the end of the poem Juan is at most twenty or twenty-one – Adeline Amundevile's age – it's perhaps not surprising that at least four of Juan's partners – Julia, Catherine, her Eprouveuse, and Fitz-Fulke seem to be older than he and that he turns down an offer – almost a plea, really – from a seventh woman who may have been a little older and was certainly a lot more powerful: the Sultana Gulbayez.

Only Catherine is described in the poem as middle-aged. The others are elder in years and more experienced in amours. In fact, most of them are married. This profile is sort of intriguing. Especially when we recognize that, like Juan, it was often older, married women who counselled, comforted and sometimes cotted Byron.

He had a dutiful relationship with his rather silly, volatile mother and was also very likely abused, as a child, by his nurse.

On his tour of the continent in his early 20s, Byron suggests a liaison with one of the unmarried sisters who were his hosts in Seville; his preference being for for the elder, Donna Josepha. Then in Malta he had an affair with Mrs Spencer Smith, the wife of a British diplomat and narrowly escaped fighting a duel when discovered.

In Greece it appears all his affairs were with males: maybe with Ali Pasha the tyrant of Tepelena and certainly with a series of catamites who gave him at least one dose of the clap.

Back in London, he had a torrid affair with the half-mad Caroline Ponsonby-Lamb, two years his senior; an intimate and long-standing friendship with her formerly-adventurous mother Lady Melbourne; he was a live-in Cavaliere Servente to Lady Oxford, 14 years his senior. He enjoyed a mutual respect and intellectual friendship with the redoubtable and

voluble Mme de Stael, and a very close – too close – and abiding bond with his older, married, half-sister, Augusta Leigh.

There were plenty of younger women in Byron's life, of course. Teenage girlfriends, teenaged prostitutes, teenaged actresses and a teenaged vamp in Claire Clairmont. His Italian mistress Teresa Guiccioli was only 19 when they first "did it" in a gondola.

But his relationships with other young women were uniformly less stable than his initially passionate and finally dutiful bond with Teresa.

He was quite unable to manage either the start or the finish of 18-year-old Claire Claremont's attempt to colonise him.

And he managed only slightly better with his first mistresses in Venice: Maria Segretti and Margarita Cogni. Both had fiery tempers and presumably passion to match. Both were married, working class women who naturally took advantage of the relationship. But because of his wealth and position he was able, finally, to turn them away and pay them off.

His bitterest young lover was his wife Annabella Milbanke whom Byron tried to love but but foolishly married after even he knew he did not.

Now, given the mechanics of the poem – described by Byron himself as 'Montaigne with a story for a hinge' – we are bound to wonder to what degree Juan's erotic career illuminates the *main* point of interest: Byron's understanding of his own?

The answer, I think, is not much. As I said last time, Don Juan is the wrong vehicle for self-examination or apology. The comedy depends on momentum not reflection and on a tone of unrelenting insincerity that matches its mockery of almost everything.

We have to look elsewhere for Byron's views about his own love-life.

Perhaps such a testament would have been found in the Memoirs that his friends and executors burned after his death. Many speculate so, but I'm inclined to doubt it. Had Byron *told all* in that document then either it would have leaked – since it was read by several – or Thomas Moore to whom Byron had given the manuscript might himself have approved of the vandalism.

The most we can say of the link between Don Juan's amorous adventures and Byron's is

that both are more experienced but still unfulfilled when each arrives unexpectedly, and too young, at the end of their personal drama.

Byron's story is about a sexually precocious young man with a fine intellect, a brilliant instinct for verse and for self-promotion; incautious with both love and money, plausibly disturbed by his bisexuality at a time when male homosexuality was a capital crime. Greece loosens these bonds for him. But he finds no fulfilment, or even quiet, by his mid-thirties, as his final flight from feminine society into mad adventure suggests.

Then we can say both Juan and Byron spent a short life, even up to the end, looking for diversion, sex and then an undemanding love – of the sort their *mothers* failed to give either – from both women and men, and mostly in the wrong places.

None of Juan's relations lasted long because of the demands of the narrative. None of Byron's relations lasted long because... I don't know, and nor do you (as Byron would remind us).

But we've plenty of reason to believe that his only life-long fascination was with himself. That's perhaps obvious in the author of both **Childe Harold** and **Don Juan** (not to mention his dramas such as Cain, Sadanapaulus and Werner). None, even of his lovers or closest friends could be more than a planet, trapped for a time in Byron's orbit.

Marguerite Blessington explained the consequences to him, or so she *claims*, when she observed that he had too often exposed the confidences of his friendships and even his marriage, whether in his conversation or in his letters or his poetry. Byron serially betrayed the intimacy he apparently sought.

Still, who is an expert in the affairs of the heart? Byron's errors were hardly unique and hardly a tragedy. If there is a tragedy, it's that a great poet died too young to give us a more mature understanding of himself.

#Byron/Bits