

## BB9 Virtuositic Rhyme

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Text of **Byron Bits No.9** by Peter Gallagher available on [MadBadDangerous.com](http://MadBadDangerous.com)

I take as the text for today's lesson, dear friends, the fifth verse of the fifth book of Don Juan:

Kidnapped by pirates, Juan is on his way to Constantinople to be sold in the slave-market. Byron describes Juan's transit through the Bosphorus narrows between Europe and Asia, choosing a prospect with a reminiscent literary reputation.

Our exiled poet, stands figuratively on the shores of the Euxine sea watching the mighty tides roll through the Symplegades, the treacherous rocks that stand gateway to the Black Sea.

It was here, at the Euxine Passage, according to the Roman historian Suetonius that the poet Ovid lived, after being exiled by the Emperor Augustus. Ovid had been cancelled in Rome for writing mildly naughty poems that didn't fit the Augustan idea of decorum.

Byron who, like Ovid, had a plan to disrupt decorum, now prepares a surprise. He chooses this moment to spring on us one of the best examples of comic bathos in the English language,

"The wind swept down the Euxine, and the wave  
Broke foaming o'er the blue Symplegades;  
'T is a grand sight from off the Giant's Grave  
To watch the progress of those rolling seas  
Between the Bosphorus, as they lash and lave  
Europe and Asia, you being quite at ease;  
There's not a sea the passenger e'er pukes in,  
Turns up more dangerous breakers than the Euxine."

That unavoidably memorable couplet, reversing the tone of the verse from sublime to disgusting, sweeps away any hint of grandeur or even self-possession; reminding us, once again, that Byron achieves his effect by writing about what everyone knows, but doesn't discuss.

Mal-de-mer inspired a sort of purile glee in Byron.

Who can forget the first time we hear Juan finally say something, in Canto II. Standing on the poop-deck of his ship, bound for Italy, he makes a pathetic address to the receding view of his native Spain and his lost lover, Julia. But he throws up before he can get far.

Or perhaps you know Byron's sally on the Lisbon Packet that he and Hobhouse took at the start of their 1809 Grand Tour of Europe:

Hobhouse muttering fearful curses  
As the hatchway down he rolls  
Now his breakfast, now his verses  
Vomits forth & damns our souls...

But I'm getting off my topic. What I wanted to talk about today is the rhyme; not regurgitation in Don Juan. It's one of the biggest attractions in the verse, of course. Byron somehow uses a difficult eight-line rhyming scheme inherited from Italian verse – that is, from a language where every second word rhymes with half the others – to create a conversational poem in a language where rhymes come hard and rely on a fond of synonyms, often borrowed from other languages.

Byron employs – and every now and then repeats – a variety of single, double and syllabic jingles that are mostly full rhymes. He sometimes uses half or assonant even imperfect rhymes, but mostly in the sextet of the verse – the A-B, A-B, A-B section – where the flow of the phrase across lines means the rhyme words at the ends of the lines – although they contribute to the general music – becomes less prominent. He reserves his most conclusive and precise rhymes for the final couplet of the verse that is usually also the punch-line of the gag or, on occasion, the knife between the ribs.

Byron is a rhyme-master and he loves to show it. In just the second verse of the poem he presents a catalog of famous heroes and horrors from the late 18th century in England and France with a mix of names from every region. Yet he squeezes them all into a clever rattle of ridicule:

Vernon, the butcher Cumberland, Wolfe, Hawke,  
Prince Ferdinand, Granby, Burgoyne, Keppel, Howe,  
Evil and good, have had their tithe of talk,  
And fill'd their sign posts then, like  
Wellesley now; Each in their turn like Banquo's monarchs stalk,

Followers of fame, "nine farrow" of that sow:  
France, too, had Buonaparté and Dumourier  
Recorded in the Moniteur and Courier.

Barnave, Brissot, Condorcet, Mirabeau,  
Petion, Cloutz, Danton, Marat, La Fayette,  
Were French, and famous people, as we know:  
And there were others, scarce forgotten yet,  
Joubert, Hoche, Marceau, Lannes, Desaix, Moreau,  
With many of the military set,  
Exceedingly remarkable at times,  
But not at all adapted to my rhymes.

Nonsense: he's already 'adapted' them; every one.

As we all know, he prefers pantomime to the purple and instead of the bloody warriors of the Napoleonic wars, elects a mild mannered hero whose name rhymes because Byron insists on its mis-pronunciation. He rhymes it only three times in the entire poem but, curiously, in two slightly different ways : twice with "new one" indicating the mispronunciation should be "jew-wan" and once with "ruin", which points to the mispronunciation "jew-in".

Oh well...

Talking of mispronunciation: who, before Byron, would have dared to rhyme the Guadalquivir; the snow-fed torrent that divides Seville. Who after reading Byron can forget his awful jingle?

Don Juan's parents lived beside the river,  
A noble stream and called the Guadalquivir.

Although this sort of silliness is found scattered throughout the poem, Byron is mostly quite disciplined about rhyme: you can usually count on him to be accurate even when the rhyme seems slightly off to our ears. Early 19th century english sounded different than what we call 'received pronunciation' today. For example, in two places in Don Juan, Byron rhymes the word "virtue" with the words "thirty" and "dirty", because the words were pronounced with broader vowel sounds in his day: 'varty', 'tharty', 'darty'.

Still, most of the rhymes in the poem still work wonderfully well unless Byron intends that

they should not. Why would he ever do this? He gives us an instance in a note he appended to the suppressed Dedication to Don Juan where – on the subject of his dedicatee, Robert Southey – he considers rhyming “laureat” with “Iscaiot”: as in the family name of Judas. But, after pleading for the rhyme as ‘true’ in a semantic, if not a phonetic way, he discards it anyway for a more scurrilous couplet describing the foreign Minister, Castlereagh, as an intellectual eunuch.

Taken as a whole, the rhyming in Don Juan, is virtuosic. The most difficult examples of the most recondite language are challenges to which Byron eagerly responds. Perhaps the oddest is Verse 41 of Canto X where he tightly rhymes an all-but-unpronounceable prescription for the purgative and emetic drugs concocted for Juan’s illness in Moscow, scrawled in the cant of an 18th century apothecary:

But here is one prescription out of many:

Soday sulfat drams six, drams sem man’yooptim,  
Akk. fervent eff. seskay, drams two tinct. senny,  
Howstus (and here the Surgeon came and cupped him)  
Ah. pulv. com. grams tray ipekak-u-anny ...  
With more beside if Juan had not stopp’d ‘em).  
Bolus Potassæ Sulphuret. sumendus,  
Et haustus ter in die capiendus.

Believe me, two panadol and a cup of coffee would be a much better idea.

Byron declares early in the poem that the target of his bile is the cant of the gazettes and apologists for tyrannical oppression. But he has a soft spot, it seems, for cant of other kinds.

The apothecaries’ gibberish is frightening mystification, but there’s a poetry in the cant of the footpads who way-lay Juan on his way from Dover to London. Juan is attacked on Shooters’ Hill south of London by four of them who threaten him with a knife and their traditional cry of “your money or your life”. But Juan draws his pistol and shoots one named Tom in the “pudding”.

Tom expires with all the melodrama expected of a gentleman of the road.

Poor Tom was once a kiddy upon town,  
A thorough varmint, and a real swell,  
Full flash, all fancy, until fairly diddled,

His pockets first and then his body riddled.

For a moment, Juan wonders if killing Englishmen is the right way to start this his secret embassy to London. Doing so gives Byron an opportunity to show-off with clever bit of criminal cant.

He from the world had cut off a great man,  
Who in his time had made heroic bustle.  
Who in a row like Tom could lead the van,  
Booze in the ken, or at the spellken hustle?  
Who queer a flat? Who (spite of Bow Street's ban)  
On the high toby-spice so flash the muzzle?  
Who on a lark, with black-eyed Sal (his blowing),  
So prime, so swell, so nutty, and so knowing?

Thanks to the rhyme, it's not hard to find a half-dozen ear-worms in Don Juan. The hard part is getting rid of them. If you have some favorites I haven't mentioned, please leave me a message in the comments at [MadBadDangerous.com](http://MadBadDangerous.com) and I'll be sure to cover them in another talk.

#Byron/Bits