THE MYTH OF THE COMMENDATORE IN THE DON JUAN LEGEND AND ITS REINTERPRETATION IN BYRON’S “DON JUAN”

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ABSTRACT

Centred on the myth of the Commendatore in the Don Juan legend and Byron’s interpretation of this symbol in his “Don Juan”, the present analysis aims at demonstrating how the author reformed, yet did not abandon one of the most emblematic figures in literature. The Stone Guest, a commander returned from the dead to perform divine justice and castigate the sinner is turned upside down by Byron’s dandy genius. In traditional versions, the Commendatore, a knight and gentleman, is a righteous man who has the spiritual competence of judging the libertine. In his poem, Byron decides to tell Don Juan’s story from the perspective of a seducer and fashionable, unlike traditional creators, who remain neutral and prefer the deus ex machine sort of sentence. Thus, he chooses to operate not with one, but with three commanders, who partially play the role of the traditional punisher, but are unable to reinstitute morality in the world because they are themselves flawed.

KEYWORDS: ethics, dandy mockery, commander, tradition, Don Juanism

1. Introduction

Although even nowadays – almost two centuries after its author died, leaving the denouement of his Don a mystery – there is still much controversy in criticism whether Byron’s Don Juan should be considered within the coordinates of the legend or excluded completely, we believe that the poem can be interpreted as a non-conventional rewriting of the Don Juanesque topos. Starting with the profile of the hero, continuing with the feminine typologies and ending with the course of events occurring in the amorous sphere and elsewhere, there is no doubt that this Don Juan appears to resemble very little – if at all – Tirso’s Molière’s or Mozart’s, the three pillars of Don Juanism we will refer to here.

However, whereas the addition of the main character and his life style to the canon of libertinism would be farfetched, the reading of the final Byronic masterpiece in a Don Juanesque key is not untenable. In other words, there is scarcely any Don Juanism at the level of the hero, but the presence of the myth is felt at the level of the themes. Byron’s text
encompasses more legendary elements than many researchers acknowledge. If these motifs are not remarked, it is because of the package in which they are wrapped and delivered, a package with a sonorous name: dandyism combined with libertinism.

Recycling a scenario with the same duels, the same escapades, the same dialogue patterns between master and butler, the same deus ex machina sort of punishment, would have been against Byron’s dandy nature, irrespective of the geniality of the rewriting. The kernel of dandyism is after all modifying conventions in an original, striking manner. That is exactly Byron’s approach to the Don Juanesque invariants, which are distorted heavily, satirized but not abandoned. The proof that this Don Juan will be dandified is given by the author himself, who declares ironically, with the dandiest talent for diminishing serious questions: “I’ll therefore take our ancient friend Don Juan, / We all have seen him in the Pantomime / Sent to the devil, somewhat ere his time” [1]. Reading these lines means almost visualizing Byron in a most impeccable dandy pose, with a sarcastic smile on the face, choosing Don Juan as a protagonist – not because he is the best, but because there is such crisis of heroes – while commenting on the most powerful message of the play and reducing it to the ambiguous expression ‘sent to the devil’. And to the devil he sends Don Juan again, not in the concrete sense imposed by tradition, but in the other sense, the abstract one, by demolishing him, along with one of the most powerful icons of the classic variants: the Commendatore.

2. Byron’s Triad of Commanders

Any approach to the legend’s invariants as perceived by Byron should perhaps start with the motif of the commander, which normally emerges at the end to intermediate divine justice. Byron himself dictates this twist by opening the poem with the announcement of the ultimate punishment, reversing the conventional order of the progress of action. The simplest explanation for this poetic device would be that he did not consider it necessary to keep the suspense of a story which was no longer an enigma for the public. Secondly, he may have altered the classic sequence so as to suggest that a different finale for Don Juan should be expected with this version, because if ‘we all have seen him in the pantomime sent to the devil’, then variation is required to avoid monotony. Thirdly, and perhaps most significantly, Byron realized the importance of a backward reading of the legend for the clarification of the global sense and proposed a similar process for the proper understanding of his own fiction. And, indeed, the last scenes are decisive for the circularity of the epic poem, for the zero evolution of the hero, which is truly ascertained only when the meeting with the ghost sends him back to infancy and imprisonment by women, canceling the glamorous surface. A fourth motivation may be perceived as the auctorial desire to remind the crucial moment of the play, which in his Don Juan will occur not merely once, but several times in different forms. To accomplish that, Byron does not operate with a single commander, but with three, who intervene more or less violently on Juan, at essential turning points in his existence.

The first is Alfonso, whose main function, we opine, is his incapacity of imposing the paternal authority upon the son and shattering the primal mother-son union. Yet, Alfonso’s task is double: he also interprets the commander, a role that cannot be doubted, although he plays it as badly as that of father to Juan. We argue that Alfonso cannot be contested in this quality, because the essence of his problem is the same: an aristocrat, with an age suited for the Commendatore of tradition, is wronged by the seducer, deeply hurt in
his honour and morally obliged to fight a duel with the insulter. By keeping these central elements, the narrator is aware of the parallel that is impossible not to appear in the mind of his readers. Except that, the teller decides to laugh at the commander and his intransigence, by demystifying a serious figure with great dandy mockery.

Alfonso is not Ana’s father, as it is the case with Tirso and Mozart, but the husband of the less virtuous Julia. He does not have to repair a rape, but an adultery, which was fully accepted by the unfaithful wife, turned into the pursuer and sexual initiator of virgin Juan. Alfonso, on the other hand, is very far from what the Statue should represent. A knight and gentleman, the Commendatore is the embodiment of ethics and dignity, a righteous man who has the spiritual competence of judging the sinner. Julia’s husband is not surrounded by the same degree of respectability. Quite the opposite, he is rather flawed, guilty of the same violation of the laws of marriage, through his rumoured affair with Inez: “some people whisper [...] / That Inez had, ere Don Alfonso’s marriage, / Forgot with him the very prudent carriage” [2].

Ironically, Byron makes the prosecutor as culpable as the condemned and consequently incapable of performing the revenge correctly. In this equation, husband and wife, cheater and cheated are quits: “Julia in fact had tolerable grounds,/ Alfonso’s loves with Inez were well known” [3], comments the narrative voice. That is why nobody is slain in this duel. A dead Alfonso, deprived of punitive potential, would not have been able to return from the dead and drag the roué to Hell. The repercussions Juan has to suffer are reduced to some ridiculous wounds – “blood (’twas from the nose) began to flow” [4], the shame of running away naked in the middle of the night, the separation from Julia and a voyage abroad. If someone is castigated in this episode, then that person is Julia, who after having “so viciously deceived herself with so much talk about spiritual love should be sent in a convent, where presumably she may contemplate the spiritual forever” [5]. Again, consciously or not, Byron makes a new allusion to and switch from tradition. Julia’s living in a convent reminds an Elvira turned upside down, for, if Molière’s heroine is corrupted by Don Juan to renounce monastic existence for worldly pleasures, Julia is taken there to learn to be pious after having experienced earthly corruption. Alfonso is permanently removed from the plot, probably left to continue his romance with Dona Inez.

Thus, like Mozart, Byron precipitates the entrance of the commander and the consummation of the duel. And because this Commendatore “in his dressing-gown” [6] escapes death, Byron repeats the scene in Canto IV with Lambro, who is much fitter for the part than Alfonso. As Haslett [7] notices, this time the rake – commander encounter mirrors the legend more exactly because Lambro is the offended father coming back from the dead. Indeed, his motivation is to annihilate Juan in the name of his daughter’s lost virginity, which is a progress from Alfonso’s rage of betrayed consort. And, it is also true that the pirate appears as if resurrected. What was not remarked, and we find this aspect particularly revolutionary, is that, within the same episode, he interprets the living Commendatore and the Stone Guest at once. Byron merged two distinct moments in a single unit through a clever Odyssean artifice. After a delay on the sea, “a report [...] / Avouched his death [...] / And put his house in mourning several weeks” [8], which makes Lambro seem “risen from death” [9] upon arrival. It is now, after the absence and reappearance, that the armed confrontation takes place, not before. With Tirso or Mozart, the commander performs twice: the first time when he is alive and fights for Ana, the second time, after a
while, as a ghost sent to take the rake’s soul to Hell. Considered deceased, Lambro is symbolically both flesh and spectre and acts in accordance.

Stepping in the palace, “like Odysseus, Lambro finds his house usurped by reveling strangers” [10], and, like a more modern Commendatore, takes out his pistol, which replaces the spade. Juan is not dared to fight a duel; instead he is scornfully asked to surrender, which represents a new modification of the Don Juanesque pattern. In Tirso’s play, as well as in Mozart’s opera, it is the commander who insists upon the fight, whereas Don Juan is not so eager to comply with it. In Da Ponte’s libretto, we even discover the reason for this reluctance: his opponent is perceived as an old man incapable of such actions, a weak adversary who is doomed from the outset, because he stands no chance in front of the much younger and stronger Don Juan. With Byron, the fool is not the old man, who is accompanied by “a thousand scimitars” [11], thus having the power on his side, but Juan, who, although advised with a tone of superiority: “young man, put up your silly sword” [12], declaims with pathos: “not while this arm is free” [13]. Through this exchange of replies, the poet alludes to the known dialogue between Ana’s father and the seducer before the struggle and the assassination of the former. The vengeance of the Statue follows immediately, when Juan, though not sent into the fire of the biblical Hell, is yet pushed into another inferno: that of mercantilism, consumerism and slavery, a vicious circle our hero will no longer escape.

Recapitulating briefly, Lambro’s function of father to Haidée, combined with his staged death and revival constitute the elements that transform the pirate into the Commendatore. And there is another similitude which brings them together: they are knights, respected patriarchs, representative figures for the systems they belong to, men of their word, each in his way. Lambro is in actual fact a sort of Commendatore through his office of head of the island. His status of man-at-strife, opposing the oppressive system of the Turks, confers an aura of bravery and nobleness to him. Due to his art of acting with “such true breeding of a gentleman, / You never could divine his real thought” [14], an attitude that reminds the constant courtesy of the Stone Guest in his dialogues with the sinner, culminating with the perfect politeness with which he offers the most awful dishes.

Admirably moderated and self-controlled Lambro may be; honest he is not. An ordinary fisherman, “though of men”, [15] in his youth, he progressed and became a military man controlling a mini army, without leaving the illicit habits. His ‘job’ continues to be that of waiting for merchant vessels, confiscating their cargoes and selling crews plus passengers into slavery. His refinement is doubled by criminal life and ruthlessness: “he was the mildest mannered man / That ever scuttled ship or cut a throat” [16]. In this context, the pirate is a sinner himself, “the principle of domination and earthly corruption” [17], and therefore is not entitled to effectuate Don Juan’s crossing to Hell. What he can accomplish is a terrestrial punishment, with Juan shipped to the slave market. Consequently, any concrete trace of battle between the two is erased. If with Alfonso there was a mock fight, with Lambro any physical contact is effaced. The pirate’s hand does not touch Juan, who is annihilated, hurt and bound by Lambro’s men.

The last Commendatore fabricated by Byron is the Duchess, a most unexpected and daring face of the Statue. After having been introduced with all the pre-requisites of a female libertine and dandy, Fitz-Fulke surprises again as the substitute of the male commander. Doubtless, the Duchess is the utmost dandification of the idea of spectral judge. From her displayed licentiousness, to the fact that she is a woman fulfilling a task
ascribed to a man, and finishing with her ‘trial’, – that enriches Don Juan with a new erotic escapade instead of throwing him into the demons’ eternal fire – everything points to the auctorial wish of playing with the moralizing message of the legend’s final act.

What Byron respects from the story more than in the previous two cases is connected to the number of the dead man’s apparitions. The Commendatore usually comes into sight three times, respecting the order sacred – profane – sacred [18]. With Mozart, there is a fusion between moment two and three; the second meeting is capital for the rake. Byron also sticks to the model of the double tête-à-tête between Juan and the ghost alias Fitz-Fulke, a supplementary indicator in support of the poet’s familiarity with the opera. Alfonso too had rushed into Julia’s bedroom twice the same night, but the first intrusion was not valid because he had not seen Juan and Juan had not seen him either from under the sheets. With the Duchess, the two stages are clearly separated, occupying a two day spam and there is action occurring between them, like in the myth. Bernard Beatty suggests that the first encounter may have been governed by the true Black Friar and only the second by Fitz-Fulke: “if we attend to the narrative as closely as Byron again requires us to, it is plain that the first appearance of the ghost is authentic and the Duchess’s scheme is a quick-witted improvisation in response to this unforeseen occurrence. Where others react with dread to the hunting, the Duchess foresees mischief and sex” [19].

Fitz-Fulke’s reaction of looking insistently at Juan the next morning, while playing with her veil, says something else. However, it is true that Byron leaves the mystery of the phantom hover throughout the text. For instance, we cannot be sure whether the Amundevilles really saw the spectre during their honeymoon, as they claim, or whether there was a mere illusion induced by the tale. As Boyd puts it, “Byron’s treatment of the ghost-story is typically Don Juanesque; it is antisentimental and self-mocking, but it shows under a mask of skepticism, humor, and disillusionment, an undeniable will to believe” [20].

Real or not, the phantom is released into a climate that respects the sacred-profane alternation, not through a succession of decors revolving round the grave / chapel and Don Juan’s home, but through the infusion of mysticism and urbanity within the same location. Norman Abbey is a monastery turned pleasure palace haunted by a relic of the monastic community dispossessed of properties in favour of the Amundeville clan. The Friar is “the spirit of these walk” [21] which have witnessed both sacrality and depravity. It is on the corridors of Norman Abbey that Juan initially glimpses the spectre creeping along the halls. Unlike the still Statue in the cemetery, the monk walks. In the other respects, the spectre imitates quite faithfully the Commendatore, by being silent and looking at Juan with sparkling eyes: “He moved as shadowy as the sisters weird, / But slowly, and as he passed Juan by, / Glanced, without pausing, on him a bright eye” [22]. The common scenario, in which the famous invitation to supper should have followed, is spoilt at this point by Juan, who is too puzzled to utter it. The Gothic entrance of the ghost stepping in the moonlight, wrapped in a cowl and dusky garb, is organized so as to frighten hero and reader alike. Without forgetting the ironic tone, Byron seems to finally give some credit to supernatural symbols which “in the course of some six thousand years, / All nations have believed” [23] in. The tension increases as in the traditional plays, with a new day interposing between the meetings. And when the thread goes back to the crucial point, occultism is deflated through the transfer of immaterialism into the very corporeal and terrestrial Duchess.

Explosive eroticism in a shadow considered sexless and preoccupied with spiritual matters is the maximum
deceitfulness of any moral expectation. Instead of an enraged Commendatore, a lustful Duchess emerges in front of Juan and the dinner preceding death is replaced by an after-dinner amorous dessert. For the mock similarities to be complete, Juan “put forth one arm” [24] – an allusion to the sinner’s gesture of giving his hand to the Statue – which does not touch the unfriendly, burning fingers of the Stone Guest, but a “glowing bust / Which beat as if there as a warm heart under” [25]. The pleasant warmth of the Duchess’ breast takes the place of the hot flames swallowing the libertine. Don Juan ‘dies’ into Fitz-Fulke’s arms, engulfed by a new personality killer. It is, however, an agreeable death surrogate, which turns out to be satisfactory for the protagonists and writer alike. Juan recovers from the shock, the female commander fulfils her duty of not letting Juan mature and Byron, who “in Seville / Saw Juan’s last elopement with the devil” [26], arranges for Don Juan a metaphorical elopement with diabolic Fitz-Fulke into the ‘hell’ of perversion. The she-devil executes the divine regulation in her particular style, with great acting efforts though, which gives her the right to appear “suitably ascetic” [27] the next morning, invaded by a statuary pallor.

3. Conclusions

It is evident that with Byron, the Commendatore cannot keep his prestige intact. The three representatives are rather caricatural, disgracing the dignity of the concept, if we watch them through the eyes of monk Fray Gabriel Tellez, alias Tirso de Molina, who conceived his Stone Guest as a superior force, invested with the qualities required to defeat evil and restore normality. If, on the other hand, we appreciate the realism of a poet who is believed to have “reacted strongly against the supernaturalism of the drama” [28] and who had the courage to imply that a Statue will not cure the world of malice and hypocrisy, we cannot but admire the geniality and dandyism with which he shaped the figure of the Commendatore: in accordance with the flaws dominating contemporary society. A dishonest husband, pretending to judge an equally dishonest wife, an enslaver and murderer, ruining the lives of innocent people who happen to fall in his clutches while demanding to have the chastity of his daughter respected, a Duchess blamed for her immorality, yet received in high-life due to her position, are Byron’s commanders. They borrow some characteristics from the Commendatore only to be made more foolish then they already are. Lambro alone in this triad is treated with some deference and absolved of ridicule, probably because of his vague resemblance to the writer himself: “He was a man of a strange temperament, / Of mild demeanour though of savage mood, / Moderate in all ill habits and content / with temperance in pleasures and food” [29]. Even so, the acknowledged “fusion of tragedy, comedy, and satire in the character of Lambro” [30], who cuts throats with the amiability of a gentleman, dismisses him from the office of perfect commander with dandy cynicism.

There is nevertheless a Commendatore in Don Juan, one who does not meet the hero, but the author, the real libertine in the poem. It is the dead commandant of Ravenna, who is welcome into Byron’s house after having been shot. Like Don Juan in front of the statue, Byron admits: “I gazed upon him” [31]. The reasons for receiving the commandant with such Don Janesque promptness are nevertheless “needless to say, not Tenorio’s but those of the Good Samaritan” [32]. Left to perish on the pavement, the military officer is watched with compassion by the poet: “so I had / Him borne into the house and up the stairs, / And stripped and looked to” [33]. It is a moment of serious meditation about the incalculability of death and the
ephemerality of life, one of the rare instances when the dandy — libertine within is not sarcastic about such things: “is this blood then, formed but to be shed? / Can every element our elements mar? / And air — earth — water — fire live — and we dead? / We, whose minds comprehend all things?” [34].

For the rest, death is invited mockingly into the action. The comments upon the cannibal episode with all the pompous manoeuvres of the surgeon, the remarks on human mortality which “depends so much on gastric juice” [35], the amusement in front of Juan’s fear of ghosts, etc., speak for themselves. In all the classic versions of the legend, death is laughed at by Don Juan, alias Byron in our case. In Tirso’s play, the rake pulls the Statue by the beard; in Molière’s, the libertine ridicules the Statue’s looks in his clothes of Roman emperor; in Mozart’s, the dead man is called “a venerable fool of fools” [36].

If Byron’s hero is not impertinent enough to make fun of the pseudo-commanders he confronts, his creator is so for both. The legendary rogue and the lord joke with death, the only opponent able to be as cruelly cynical as them. And because death postpones again and again Juan’s end, it finds Byron to give the frisson of the Commendatore’s revenge.

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34. Ibidem, 228.

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