The “Mischief-Making Monkey:” Byron’s *Don Juan* as Carnival¹

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Abstract

This paper analyzes George Gordon Byron’s *Don Juan* (1819) in light of Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories of the carnival and carnivalesque in literature. The carnivalesque as a form of humor can be seen in *Don Juan*; first by Byron reconfiguring the legend of Don Juan and transforming him into a mock hero, inverting gender roles, which is evident in Don Juan’s cross dressing, parodying the epic and its conventions, and using obscene and abusive language as well as elements of the grotesque. This paper emphasizes the comic vision of Byron, suggesting reading the sentimental and tragic elements of *Don Juan* in this light. It also correlates between the instances of multiculturalism in *Don Juan* with the universal egalitarian nature of the carnival as it considers the instability of both the narrator/storyteller and Don Juan, who wore different masks as if in a masquerade. The implications of reading Don Juan as carnival discourages readers from looking for a stable identity for both the speaker and Don Juan, as a degree of artifice is imposed on the text, suggesting that different social situations involve a degree of acting and role-playing, yet the comical roles in the text are seditious as they bolster droll dissidents, who attempt to destabilize society through mockery.

Key Words: *Don Juan*, Byron, Carnival, Instability, Egalitarianism

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The legend of Don Juan Tenorio, the larger-than-life womanizer, was first written in 1630 by Spanish dramatist Tirso de Molina as the titular character in his play *The Trickster of Seville and the Stone Guest*.² Since then, the character of Don Juan has been appropriated by writers in more than six hundred accounts.³ The original character was more trickster than

¹ This research project was supported by a grant from The Research Center for the Humanities, Deanship of Scientific Research, King Saud University.

² The title of the play in Spanish is *El burlador de Sevilla y convidado de piedra*.

³ James A. Parr, “Tirso de Molina: El Burlador de Sevilla”, *The Literary Encyclopedia*. First published 02 July 2009, <https://www.litencyc.com/php/sworks.php?rec=true&UID=13224>, accessed 10 May 2019.

womanizer, and the romantic tales of the story became exaggerated as the story passed on from century to century.⁴ Writers such as Byron played a significant role in stripping the mythology surrounding Don Juan through parody and unfavorable representations of the legend.⁵ Hence, the world George Gordon Byron presents in *Don Juan* (1819) is a world of chaos, mockery and exaggeration, leaving critics at odds as to whether to consider the poem as amusingly humorous or bitterly sardonic. Anne Barton considers *Don Juan* to be a poem of retrospect, written by an exceptional yet forlorn genius, who looks back upon an entire era.⁶ Helen Gardner, adopting a somewhat similar view, considers *Don Juan* to be a poem about “the salutariness of being undeceived,”⁷ a moralizing poem condemning the evils of hypocrisy and hollow ideals. Other critics argue for the comicality of *Don Juan* yet differ in categorizing the work as a satire or a mode of the theatrical. Martin Maner reads *Don Juan* as a satire of the Horatian tradition, in which the narrator alternates between the literary naïf and the naive moralist; two variations of the traditional satiric persona, enabling Byron to mock the prudishness and arrogance of his contemporary English society.⁸ Caroline Franklin, like Maner, sees the poem as a predominately sexual satire with the controlling perspective of the narrator mocking the effeminized European and English culture while also celebrating female sexuality.⁹ Angela Esterhammer, on the other hand, considers *Don Juan* to be a parody of Italian improvisational poetry; a parody that gives the poem its theatrical flair.¹⁰

Nonetheless, it is George M. Ridenour’s description of *Don Juan* that is most fitting as he proposes that *Don Juan* be called a “comic vision,” due to the neutrality of this word against the totality of reducing the work to a satire or parody, which he argues, are classifications that reduce the literary excellence of the text. The manner in which *Don Juan* describes and discloses the deficiencies of people and society should not be regarded as exaggerated far-fetched fiction, but should rather be seen as relative and proportional to their possibilities in life.¹¹ Still, while Ridenour correlates between the comic vision in *Don Juan* and the literature of the absurd, he emphasizes the differences between them, and suggests finding new terms to better elaborate upon the comic vision of Byron. Accordingly, I argue for a better understanding and appreciation of the comic vision of *Don Juan* by regarding it as an instance of the carnivalesque in literature. Reading it along these lines allows us to better appreciate Byron’s play and experimentation with the text, leaving us less baffled with the sentimental and melodramatic scenes in the poem by considering them as purposefully overemotional,

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Anne Barton, “Don Juan Reconsidered: The Haidée Episode”, pp. 194–203 in *Byron*, edited by Jane Stabler (London: Addison Wesley Longman, 1998) p. 195.

⁷ Helen Gardner, “Don Juan”, pp.303-312 in *English Romantic Poets: Modern Essays in Criticism*, edited by M.H. Abrams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975) p. 310.

⁸ Martin Maner, “Pope, Byron, and the Satiric Persona”, *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 20/4, pp. 557–73 (Autumn 1980) p.564.

⁹ Caroline Franklin, “‘Quiet Cruising o’er the Ocean Woman’: Byron’s Don Juan and the Woman Question.” pp. 79–93, in *Byron*, edited by Jane Stabler (London: Addison, Wesley Longman, 1998) p.81.

¹⁰ Angela Esterhammer, “Improvisational Aesthetics: Byron, the Shelley Circle, and Tommaso Sgricci.” *Romanticism on the Net*, no. 43, 2006. <https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/ron/2006-n43-ron1383/013592ar/>, accessed on 15 May 2019.

¹¹ George Ridenour, “The Mode of Byron’s Don Juan.” *PMLA*, 79/4, pp. 442–46 (1964) p.446.

exaggerated, and satirical. This article shows that *Don Juan* not only reflects elements of the popular theater, it also draws upon the tropes of the type of folk humor called the carnival through multicultural settings to destabilize oppressive structures, gender roles and expectations, as well as attitudes towards life and death.

In his study of poetic mood, G. R. Elliot calls Byron the “recreant son” of the comic Spirit.¹² Writing in 1924, he argued against critics, who have conflated between Byron’s poetry and his personality, especially those critics, who read *Don Juan* as being based upon the tragedy, irony, and pathos of Byron’s own life.¹³ He objected to reading the sentimental passages like “No more- no more- Oh! Never more on me/ The freshness of the heart can fall like dew-” (1.214.5-6) as being genuine. Instead, he sees passages of this tone as being extremely “showy,” deeming this quality as being “the main defect of Byron’s work.”¹⁴ Rather than recognizing the melodramatic passages as ironical, Elliot finds Byron’s writing faulty because he thinks Byron did not capture “true verse,” by not reflecting genuine feeling and expressions of the poet.¹⁵ Elliot disregards the showy and ironic passages in *Don Juan* in favor of passages that reflect a “true poetic mood,” and by that he means a distinctly “romantic” mood, which reflects a personal, more authentic expression as well as a subtlety of wit.¹⁶ Thus, he posits Byron as a poet of limited talent, who attempted but failed to write both satirical and romantic poetry. He argues that Byron’s feelings sought “romantic expression,” yet he could never establish a romantic mood and was “merely cloaked in it,” and “it made him swagger because it fitted him imperfectly.”¹⁷ Byron’s proper genius, he argues, is the “comic spirit,” neither satirical nor sentimental, being stoical and comic rather than “satirico-romantic.”¹⁸ It is this comic spirit that must be kept in mind as we encounter the farcical, hyperbolic, and ironical verses in *Don Juan* to better appreciate Byron’s comic vision.

Thus, *Don Juan*’s hilarity, farcicality, and jocosity, I argue, represents the highest degree of Byron’s comic genius and is inspired by his first-hand experience of real-life carnivals. Byron’s familiarity with the Italian carnival, a successor of the European medieval carnival, is documented by his biographers from 1817 to 1819, when Byron wrote “Beppo” and *Don Juan*, while attending the seasonal carnival festivities in Italy from January through February.¹⁹ “Beppo” is considered to be the forerunner of *Don Juan*; it is Byron’s first attempt at the Italian *ottava rima* form of poetry later to be adopted in *Don Juan*. “Beppo,” like *Don Juan*, involves sexuality, concealed identities, flamboyant displays of dress and food, and merriments. “Beppo” is a narrative of an Italian merchant, who after being missing for three years on a trade voyage, is taken for dead only to arrive at the peak of the carnival to find his wife with another man, a *Cavalier Servente* she took in his absence. Disguised as a Turk, Beppo discerns his wife and watches her and her lover closely during the Carnival, later revealing himself to them as they are leaving for home. Rather than ending disastrously, the story is resolved merrily, with the *Cavalier Servente* lending Beppo his clothing and eventually

¹² G.R. Elliott, “Byron and the Comic Spirit.” *PMLA*, 39/4, pp. 897–909 (1924) p.897.

¹³ Elliot, p. 898.

¹⁴ Elliot, p.899.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Elliott, p. 900.

¹⁷ Elliot, p. 900.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Truman Guy Steffan and Willis Winslow Pratt, *Byron’s Don Juan: The Making of a Masterpiece* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971) p.x1.

becoming a good friend of him. A confrontation, such as this can be tragic, yet by speaker's humorous mood it is turned into a "comedy of embarrassment" as Beppo, his wife, and her lover adapt to their new circumstances.²⁰ What makes such a comedy possible is the tone of the narrator as well as his digressive illustrations of the festivities taking place. The backdrop of events in "Beppo" is none other than a Venetian carnival as described by the narrator: "The Carnival was at its height, and so/ Were all kinds of buffoonery and dress" (21.3-4). The emphasis on festivity and merriment, compressing time and space through disguise and costume, is illustrated through the dress and activities of the participants, the speaker portraying them in the following:

And there are dresses splendid, but fantastical,
Masks of all times and nations, Turks and Jews,
And harlequins and clowns, with feats gymnastical,
Greeks, Romans, Yankee-doodles, and Hindoos;
All kinds of dress, except the ecclesiastical, (3.1-5).

The carnival here is of an egalitarian universal nature, all-inclusive, with people from all times and places, joined in revelry and excitement. The events here are merry as they occur within the context of Venetian Carnival, a place that was "most facetious in the days of yore/For dance, and song, and serenade, and ball/ And masque, and mime, and mystery, and more" (10.2-4). The carnival here is at its peak, with a magnificent display of costumes and dresses; a lively atmosphere of fun and merriment (21.3-4). The influence of "Beppo" on *Don Juan* is such that the latter is regarded as "a larger Beppo, gay and lively and a little loose."²¹ The celebrations of the carnival in "Beppo" correspond to a similar, yet extended scene in *Don Juan*, describing the social gathering which Don Juan and Haidee preside over in the Greek Island:

Afar, a dwarf buffoon stood telling tales
To a sedate grey circle of old smokers,
.....
Here was no lack of innocent diversion
For the imagination or the senses,
Song, dance, wine, music, stories from the Persian, (3.34. 1.1-2; 35.1-3)

A feast for the imagination, this animated scene is the locus of the carnival, nourishing both sensually and inwardly, with the entertainment described as an "innocent diversion;" offering an outlet for those partaking in it from the banality of everyday life.

The carnival influence can further be seen in the 1819 preface to cantos I and II of *Don Juan*. Here, Byron creates a festive and jovial setting for the poem, one that cannot be read in isolation from the poem as it determines its overall mood. Byron asks his readers to imagine the polyphonic scene of a "twilight festival," where cheerful activities are occurring simultaneously. The narrator of the poem, the Spanish gentleman, is a storyteller participating in the events and is sitting near the door of a lodging house with the curate of the village by his side. At ease with a cigar in his mouth and wine and food on the table before him, the storyteller is ready to narrate his story to the elderly audience gathered before him. In a panoramic view

²⁰ David Ellis, "Byron's Sense of Humour", *Romanticism*, 17/1, pp. 106–15 (March 2011) p. 111.

²¹ Hugh J. Luke, "The Publishing of Byron's *Don Juan*", *PMLA*, 80/3, pp. 199–209 (1965) p.202.

of the carnival grounds, the scene encompasses peasants dancing to the flute, two foreign travelers; one dismounting his horse to join the audience listening to the storyteller, the other traveler watching a graceful peasant girl's soulful dance. The scene also includes a group of French prisoners shoving each other to get a better view of the twilight festival, one of them beating the bars of the prison to the rhythm of a fandango, a festive couple's dance traditionally accompanied by hand-clapping (52-80). From the very beginning, Byron sets up the carnival as the background for *Don Juan*, and by this he establishes the overall mood and tone as playful and lively.

Here, the place of the narrator cannot be undermined, and to appreciate the comic vision of *Don Juan*, readers must read him as the storyteller on the carnival grounds, who has both a performative and omniscient role. The narrator acts like a stage director to the story, a connection that he makes from the onset of the story by referring to the pantomime, where he introduces his audience to the story by saying: "I'll therefore take our ancient friend Don Juan/We all have seen him, in the pantomime" (2.1.6-8). He exhibits a familiarity with theatrical conventions as well as the Italian improvisatory technique and his style draws upon both of these elements. Peter Graham makes the case that the major plot points of *Don Juan* are a variation of the common nineteenth-century pantomime of a pair of young lovers, who are opposed by a despotic authority figure, who in retaliation, attempts to kidnap or kill the male suitor.²² Alfonso, Lambros, and even Gulbeyaz are manifestations of the authority figure who seeks to hinder Juan and a young woman's love. The oriental stage setting, with its harems and slave market, is also common in spectacular theatre, as is both the Sultan's and Sultana's attraction to the disguised stranger, which is similar to the secondary plot of Sidney's *Arcadia* in which the king and queen are both smitten by Pyrocles/Zelma. Moreover, these theatrical encounters share the "bustle," "variety," and "sudden changes" of the pantomime. The duels between Don Juan and Alfonso and later Don Juan and Lambros are borrowed from the opening scenes of a traditional pantomime in which the actors non-verbally express themselves through theatrical gestures and meaningful glances.²³ The love between Haidee and Juan is also expressed non-verbally as they only had "recourse to nods, and signs/And smiles and sparkles of the speaking eye" and so "in every look she saw exprest/ A world of words, and things at which she guess'd" (2.162. 1-2, 7-8). The narrator goes to great length to explain meaningful glances, becoming an intermediary between the readers and the pantomime.

In writing *Don Juan*, Byron also draws upon elements of the *improvvisatore* theatrical practice, which has its origins in popular and folklore festivals. Byron was familiar with the shows of Tommaso Sgricci, one of the most famous stage improvisers in Europe during the 1820s, who had a powerful effect upon audiences, receiving a wide range of responses from those who found his performances fascinating and to those considered it vulgar and anti-aesthetic.²⁴ The *improvvisatore* started out as "eighteenth century incarnations of popular, marketplace" performance,²⁵ and in this sense its resemblance to Bakhtin's carnival is augmented. Esterhammer shows how Byron repeatedly documented his interest in the *improvvisatore*, describing it as "a curious effort of human powers."²⁶ The improvisational

²² Peter W. Graham, "All Things--But a Show?", pp. 62-88 in *Don Juan and Regency England*, edited by Jane Stabler (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990) p.70.

²³ Graham, p. 72-9.

²⁴ Esterhammer, p.5-6.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Byron as quoted by Esterhammer, p. 8.

aesthetics can be seen in Byron's poetry through his mimicry of the style of oral improvisators, as the narrators in his comic poems humorously express fleeting thoughts, refer to popular performances, and parody major historical events and historical characters. Esterhammer describes Byron's use of the *improvvisatori* in *Don Juan* as being a "more explicit, albeit ironic, persona for the narrator," whose manner of composition is "unpremeditated and haphazard."²⁷ The *ottava rima* in which Byron composes his verse is the traditional *stanzaic* form of the Italian *improvvisatori*, and like the *improvvisatori*, Byron allows rhyme-words to determine the meaning of the lines. The link between the poem and this type of writing is established in canto fifteen; the narrator contemplates upon his mode of writing, stating his uncertainty in the adeptness of "this sort of desultory rhyme," still he comes to realize that the capacity of this style is in its "conversational facility" (15.20.2-3). Regaining his confidence, the narrator affirms:

Of this I'm sure at least, there's no servility
In mine irregularity of chime,
Which rings what 's uppermost of new or hoary,
Just as I feel the '*Improvvisatore*.' (15.20.4-8)

Adopting a conversationalist style, the language is informal, casual, and relaxed, so that when the narrator comes up with a flowery, sentimental passage, such as "Oh Love! in such a wilderness as this/Where transport and security entwine. . .," (1.88.1-2) it is a suggestion that the narrator is ridiculing this type of writing.

Throughout the poem, the narrator is conscious of the festive carnival setting, reminding the audience that the nature of the text is neither moralistic nor didactic, but rather is intended to evoke laughter and carefree responses. Taking a jab at Plato, calling him "a bore, a charlatan, a coxcomb" and "no better than a go-between" (1.116.6-8), the speaker takes issue with Plato's austere and self-abnegating principles of morality, saying that it is these "fantasies" that drive people to immoral behavior, rather than the poets Plato bans from his Republic on the grounds that they encourage vice. It is this system which "feigns o'er the controulless core/ Of human hearts, than all the long array/Of poets and romancers" that truly drives people to immorality as vice becomes as forbidden fruit that tempts people. (1.116.3-6). Don Juan's mother, Donna Inez, represents the morality that the narrator condemns. Because of her seriousness, she looks like a "lecture/Each eye a sermon, and her brow a homily" (1.15.2). The narrator gives an exaggerated description of her righteousness, describing her as "perfect past all parallel," and as virtuous as a saint (1.17.1). Accordingly, Donna Inez takes it upon her to raise the young Don Juan in a strictly moral manner, expurgating his education from what she deems as improper, and excluding natural history from his education as this branch of knowledge would familiarize him with human procreation. Ironically enough, Don Juan's perceived immorality is an indirect result of his mother's deliberations. For instance, Donna Inez takes due precautions to ban young women from serving her household, yet she introduces Don Juan to the beautiful and young Julia, in an act of short-sightedness, or malice for Julia on her part. When the affair between Don Juan and Julia becomes known, Donna Inez sends Juan off to an undisclosed destination for the purpose of mending his morals, yet ironically this voyage leads him to engage in many sexual liaisons. For those readers who disapprove of Don Juan's amorous adventures, the narrator reminds them to read the story again to realize that "this is not a moral tale, though gay" (1.207.2), "And beg they'll take [his]

²⁷ Esterhammer, p.17.

word about the moral, /Which [he] with their amusement will connect” (1.209.2-3). Once again, the narrator refutes those, who accuse him of “a strange design/Against the creed and morals of the land,” saying that he has “nothing plann’d/ Unless it were to be a moment merry” (4.5.1-2, 6-7). Thus, the aim of *Don Juan* is not to give any life lessons; it is to rouse merriment and delight, as the narrator repeatedly affirms throughout the text.

In accordance with the carnivalesque atmosphere, laughter is the response the narrator is looking for, despite the scenes that seem to be sorrowful and gruesome, such as the shipwreck scene, Don Juan’s enslavement, and the siege of Ismail. The laughter in these instances is therapeutic and restorative as the narrator declares: “And if I laugh at any mortal thing, /‘Tis that I may not weep” (4.4.1-2). Carnival laughter in particular is “gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives,”²⁸ in turn making it easier to understand the nature of the passages in which *Don Juan* may seem bleak and sardonic. The language relating the shipwreck scene is fraught with laughter and hilarity, specifically in describing the efforts the shipmen take to evade death, a death that is considered natural in the cyclical course of birth, death, and rebirth. The narrator relates the shipmen’s futile attempts to make a raft in the following lines:

A sort of thing at which one would have laugh’d,
If any laughter at such times could be,
Unless with people who too much have quaff’d,
And have a kind of wild and horrid glee,
Half epileptical and half hysterical: — (2.50.3-7)

Here, the narrator entices the audience to laughter by mentioning that this picture is something, depending on one’s sense of propriety, extremely funny to behold. By drawing a parallel between the frantic shipmen and drunken people in an intoxicated exultant state, the narrator also stresses the comicality of the situation at hand. The manner of the shipmen’s death, however gruesome, is also imbued with droll diction. The dying men “foam[ed] and roll[ed], with strange convulsions rack’d. . . Tearing, and grinning, howling, screeching, swearing, / And, with hyaena- laughter, died despairing” (2.79.4-8). Despite the tragedy of the shipwreck scene, the narrator tones down the gloom several stanzas later by calling for “wine and women, mirth and laughter,” requesting that “sermons and soda-water” be brought “the day after” (2.178.7-8). Even at the siege of Ismail, laughter triumphs as death is personified as an indestructible entity that laughs in the face of human demise. “Death” the narrator exclaims, “laughs at all you weep for” (9.11.5.). Death mocks and scorn humans, scoffing at man whose “dead bones will grin” (9.12.8). Death smiles, and the scene is one of “sad merriment,” but it is still merry, as “Life” should be content with the superior death whose “lipless grin smiles without breath” (9.13.1). In this comic struggle for life and freedom, death reigns supreme and is worthy of celebration.

After establishing the mood and tone of *Don Juan* as carnivalesque, it is necessary to discern further instances of the carnival in the poem. Relevant here is Mikhail Bakhtin’s classification of the folk festivities of the carnival type, which include but are not limited to, the presence of clowns and fools, parodies, and other manifestations. Carnival humor is of three forms: “ritual spectacles,” such as that seen in pageants and shows of the marketplace; “comic verbal compositions,” exhibited in parodies whether in formal language or the vernacular; and

²⁸ M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Translated by Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) p.12.

“various genres of the billingsgate” reflected in swears, curses, and obscene phrases.²⁹ The carnival for Bakhtin is subject to its own laws and the main law is freedom from officialdom and formalities. These displays of the carnival permeate Byron’s *Don Juan* and can be seen through the poem’s emphasis on pageantry, disguise, masquerade, and feasting. The world of *Don Juan* showcases a plethora of fascinating objects, both inanimate and animate, as if on a display in a festival. At Juan and Haidee’s celebration in her father’s house, the narrator gives a visual description of an interior of “crystal and marble, plate and porcelain,” “Indian mats,” “Persian carpets,” and “floors [that] were spread [with]; gazelles and cats/And dwarfs and blacks,” an image the narrator sees “as plentiful as in a court, or fair” (3.68.1-8). The Turkish market where Don Juan is sold as a slave is also a scene reminiscent of a carnival. The people he finds himself among, despite also being enslaved, are a merry bunch of entertainers, who keep his spirits up. The connection to the carnival is made vivid through the story of the tenor’s wife, who in the last carnival “made a deal of strife/By carrying off Count Cesare Cicogna/From an old Roman princess at Bologna,” as well as the prostitute called “Pelegriini”, who “was fortunate last carnival/And made at least five hundred good zucchini” (4.83.1-8). The Turkish slave market becomes carnivalesque as a crowd of people of every nation and of every age and gender gather in it. The Turkish harem further expands the site of the carnival as the young women, reaching their own apartments “broke loose . . . like Irish at a fair” and they “began to sing, dance, chatter, smile, and play” (6.34. 5-8). These scenes of the marketplace become a site of relief, providing its partakers with freedom from the more mundane and weighty issues of their lives. It is a celebration of the brief emancipation its participants experience from rigid establishments, suspending with its hierarchal orders and societal prohibitions; all are considered equal during the carnival.³⁰

Disguise and masquerade also contribute significantly to the carnivalesque nature of *Don Juan* and, like the marketplace scenes, offer freedom from the strict and rigid realities of life, especially those concerning societal roles. With nearly every new situation he finds himself in, Don Juan adorns a different costume, thus reflecting the instability of social identity. When Alfonso discovers Don Juan in Julia’s bed, Juan flees in a state of nakedness, which correlates him being stripped of respectability and a dignified social standing as he is sent to exile the next day. Yet this state of undress also implies Juan’s liberation from social restraints and reflects his disregard for social decorum, beginning with his affair with Julia. This notion is further supported when Don Juan is swept ashore Haidee’s island, helpless and unclothed. His near drowning in the sea becomes a symbolic baptism, signifying his rebirth into a simpler Edenic lifestyle. However, at the time of the feast, Don Juan’s rich attire sets him up as the wealthy host of the gathering, much to Lambros’s ire. Juan wore “a shawl of black and gold,” a “white baracan” and “sparkling gems,” that may have belonged to Lambros (3.77.1-3). Still, his clothes in this instance do not represent his status, they are like a costume he adorns to play house with Haidee, and a mockery of the patriarchal rule embodied by Lambros.

Being sold into slavery by Lambros, and subsequently bought by Baba, the Turkish Sultan’s eunuch, Don Juan is yet again forced into another costume and is catapulted into another carnivalesque setting. Again, dressing incongruently to his social identity, Juan is forced to disguise himself as a concubine of the Turkish harem. In one of the poem’s most comic scenes, Juan undergoes a complete transformation, in a hilarious struggle with the

²⁹ Bakhtin, p.5.

³⁰ Bakhtin, p.10.

feminine garb, being tweezed and painted, wearing wig and women's jewelry. The coarseness of his gender is juxtaposed with the delicate clothing he must wear, with him in one instance referring to the lace as gauze as he is unfamiliar with this delicate, feminine fabric. Despite his initial objections to cross-dressing as a woman, Don Juan performs the part a little too well as Baba instructs him to "to swing a little less from side to side" and "look a little modest" (5.91.7-8). Furthermore, when the Sultan takes a shine to Juan's beauty, Juan shows how well he has learned to mimic feminine manners as the Sultan's compliments make him "blush and shake" (5.156. 2). The cross-dressing in this scene shifts the whole paradigm of gender as it is confronted by the fact that Don Juan can easily pass as a woman. Don's disguise challenges the notions of femininity and masculinity, suggesting the instability of gender roles and structures. However, as Caroline Franklin argues, the aim here is not reverse gender roles or to come up with a new definition of the masculine and feminine; it is to privilege individualism over gender identity and to reject the constraints gender role imposes upon individuals.³¹ Susan Wolfson also agrees that Don Juan's cross-dressing is more than a subversion of gender roles as she explains that it allows a man to experience the debasement of women in a patriarchal economy, and is also "a high-camp parody of the trappings of female subjection."³² She also considers Don Juan's cross-dressing to be a form of transvestite behavior common in the masquerade. This transvestitism has political significance, it being a "sanctioned" behavior in the masquerades at the Venice Carnival, which Byron attended in 1818 and 1819. Through transvestitism, the sexual inversions at masquerade parties were productively reversing hierarchal society by expressing conflicts within the system through their "festive and literary inversions of sex roles," thus offering new ways of thinking and reacting to the hierarchy.³³ In the agonizing, yet extremely amusing, effort it takes Don Juan to transform into an odalisque, the readers, both female and male, are given a glimpse into the life of a subjugated woman.

The ever-changing and shifting appearances and roles of Don Juan, as well as his disruptive presence, indicates his position as mock hero, clown, and even harlequin in this carnival. Don Juan is the "absent" center of the poem; he is molded by his circumstances, lacks any type of differentiation, and does not learn from his experience.³⁴ Rather than being a full sketched-out character, Don Juan is more of a caricature in his one-dimensionality and insusceptibility to change or character development. Don Juan is more like a clown that dons different masks according to the situation he is in. In folk culture, the mask is the most important and most complex theme of folk humor; the mask rejects conformity; it represents the joy of change and reincarnation "with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity."³⁵ The mask contains the playful aspects of life in its transitions, metamorphoses, violations of natural boundaries, and mockeries. Don is described as "a little curly-headed, good-for-nothing," "mischief-making monkey from his birth" (1.25.1-2). Before his appearance in Catherine the Great's Russian court, he undergoes a physical transformation by dressing in "a handsome uniform/A scarlet coat, black facings, a long plume" over a "cock'd hat" and "brilliant breeches . . . of yellow casimere" and "white stockings" (10.43.1-8), a stark

³¹ Franklin, p.81.

³² Susan Wolfson, "'Their She Condition': Cross-Dressing and the Politics of Gender in Don Juan", *ELH*, 54/3, pp. 585–617 (1987) p.605.

³³ Wolfson, p.608.

³⁴ David Punter, "Don Juan, or, the Deferral of Decapitation: Some Psychological Approaches", pp. 122–53 in *Don Juan*, edited by Nigel Wood (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1993) p.136.

³⁵ Bakhtin, p.40.

contrast to his previous role as a concubine in the Turkish harem. He becomes an interesting figure at court and is presented as an object to be beheld by all, a source of amusement, much like a jester. The “dramatic accumulative personalities” of Don Juan also turn him into a “variation of the English *Harlequin*,” a stock character in pantomime, who is usually in love with a *Columbine*, and is challenged by an authoritative figure called a Pantaloon, who tries to separate the lovers.³⁶ Thus, Don Juan’s adventures through various costumes and cultures are a type of harlequinade, the comedic quest-like journey of a harlequin.

Alongside the culture of the marketplace and masquerade in the carnival, necessarily, is a type of ritualistic feast, called the “feast of fools.” The feast, as a part of human culture, is meaningful and philosophical as it is associated with crucial cyclic periods, such as moments of death and revival or change and renewal which lead to a “festive perception” of life. Carnival feasts were a “utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance.”³⁷ The most obvious instance of a “feast of fools” is the extravagant feast Haidee and Juan host together after her father’s death. Haidee reigns as queen of her father’s island as is suggested by her apparel, which is fit for a queen’s coronation. She wore a regal dress “with buttons form’d of pearls as large as peas/All gold and crimson” (3.70.5-6). Such was her air and appearance, leading the narrator to comment that “her overpowering presence made you feel/It would not be idolatry to kneel” (3.74.8). Don Juan, similarly, wore majestic attire, crowned with a turban full of gemstones, most likely belonging to Lambros. Wherein Lambros, unrecognized and unacknowledged, asks two unsuspecting guests about the on-going festivities, they reply: “our old master’s dead/ You’d better ask our mistress who’s his heir,” herby recognizing Don Juan as their new master (3.43.5-6). However, since Lambros is not actually dead, the rule Haidee and Don Juan have is illegitimate, making them imposters and usurpers of Lambros’s authority. Not only that, but Haidee and Juan are in midst of celebrating the new phase of their life, which entails rejoicing at the cycle of life that led to the death of Lambros. When learning about the rumor of his death, Lambros finds offence with the merriments occurring as he expected a company in mourning rather than revelry. Heaping insult upon injury is the extravagance of the feast as Lambros, already acclaimed for his generosity, is outdone by Haidee and Juan’s bounteous event. The feast was made up of the following:

About a hundred dishes;
Lamb and pistachio nuts—in short, all meats,
And saffron soups, and sweetbreads; and the fishes
Were of the finest that e’er flounced in nets,
Drest to a Sybarite’s most pamper’d wishes;
The beverage was various sherbets
Of raisin, orange, and pomegranate juice (3.62.1-7)

Here and throughout the feast, the narrator gives an elaborate description of the foods being offered to showcase the abundance and lavishness of the event, not only providing nourishment and fulfillment for the bodies partaking in the celebrations, but also offering images of gaiety, vividness, and abundancy for the readers. This sort of feast is ritualized in carnivals, signaling a new cycle of life, whether birth or death; a new phase of existence. Appropriately enough, as soon as the feast is finished, Don Juan is seized by Lambros and is shipped to the Turkish slave market, whereas Haidee, suffering from a broken heart, dies a

³⁶ Punter, p.76.

³⁷ Bakhtin, p. 9.

couple of weeks later. Although this dire outcome may seem inconsistent with the merry nature of the carnival, it is the reversal of fortune and capriciousness of life that is being celebrated. The idea that Don Juan, “a gentleman so rich in the world’s goods/Handsome and young, enjoying all the present. . . is suddenly to sea sent/Wounded and chain’d, so that he cannot move” illustrates the “strange vicissitudes,” of the carnival world (4.51.3-4,5-6). The Muse that inspires this story is described by the narrator as a “capricious elf” (4.74.6). Accordingly, this tragic outcome for the lovers is soon dismissed as the narrator declares that he will “lay this sheet of sorrows on the shelf . . . For fear of seeming rather touch’d myself” (4.74.1-2). Sure enough, a degree of merriment is restored in the slave ship with the presence of the enslaved, yet still festive Italian troupe. This little company reduce the images of Haidee’s island to the quality of “an operatic scene: entrancing but unreal, something constructed out of canvas and false lights.”³⁸ Misfortunes, tragedies, and sorrow are quickly shaken off, regarded as cyclic and not worth brooding over, and like Haidee’s Island, soon fade away in the distance.

Another aspect of the carnival seen in *Don Juan* is the coarser and undignified type of folk humor exemplified through the various swears, curses, and obscenity in the poem, which feed into what Bakhtin terms “grotesque realism.”³⁹ The vulgarity of *Don Juan* has been subject to extreme criticism as Byron was deemed a corrupter of morals and a nonconformist, who has reckless disregard for society’s appropriated modes of behavior. The verbal coarseness in *Don Juan* also includes the many instances of swearing throughout the poem. For instance, the narrator remarks “ ’Tis strange — the Hebrew noun which means “I am/ The English always use to govern d—n” (1.14.7-8). The narrator continues on with his swearing in instances such as: “the world is damning us,” (1.30.1) “one must be damn’d” (1.119.1.), “all things are damned” (6.23.1), and also by having Don Juan not understand a word of English other than ““God damn!”” (11.12.1-2). Still, the most offensive type of swearing is that it is juxtaposed with prayer. Shortly before their doom, some of the shipman went to prayer, making vows to their saints. One sailor begs Juan’s tutor for absolution “only to be told to “be damn’d” (1.44.8). Accordingly, Robert Southey, who, along with William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge, was subject to ridicule in *Don Juan*, vehemently expressed that in writing *Don Juan*, Byron

had committed a high crime and misdemeanour against society, by sending forth a work in which mockery was mingled with horrors, filth with impiety, profligacy with sedition and slander. . . It might have been thought that Lord Byron had attained the last degree of disgrace when his head was set up for a sign at one of those preparatory schools for the brothel and the gallows, where obscenity, sedition, and blasphemy are retailed in drams for the vulgar.⁴⁰

Southey condemns Byron, for his lack of verbal etiquette and offensive language. Yet, it cannot be overlooked that Southey was most likely offended by insults Byron directed at him personally, although he makes no mention of it. Byron sarcastically dedicates *Don Juan* to Southey, all the while ridiculing his politics and poetry, calling him an “epic renegade” and describing him as being “insolent” and overly ambitious (Dedication). The narrator of *Don Juan*, in a parody of the Ten Commandments, instructs his readers: “Thou shalt not set up Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey/Because the first is crazed beyond all hope/The second drunk,

³⁸ Barton, p. 202.

³⁹ Bakhtin, p.60.

⁴⁰ Robert Southey as quoted by Luke, p. 199.

the third so quaint and mouthy” (1.205.2). And again, in describing Juan’s gentleness, Byron does not refrain from insulting Southey, saying of Juan: “He felt like other plants called sensitive/Which shrink from touch, as monarchs do from rhymes/Save such as Southey can afford to give” (10.37.4). Yet what Southey and many critics overlook is the nature of the speech in a carnivalesque setting; the carnival creates a new type of communication which in turn creates new forms of speech and gives new meaning to old language.⁴¹ Abusive words are used affectionately and are not meant to offend. Mutual mockery is permitted, and verbal politeness is not required. One of the speech patterns of the carnival is to use abusive language and complex and lengthy insults, yet the verbal abuses in the carnival are ambivalent in that they are both degrading and invigorating.⁴² Southey also refers to the fact that *Don Juan* appealed to the rising numbers of the common English readers, specifically readers of the working class, who bought pirated editions of *Don Juan*. The poem also appealed to women, although the work was considered to be improper for feminine sensibilities. Hugh Luke suggests that the availability of *Don Juan* to people of the lower economic strata contributed to the significant liberalization of thought in England in the following decades.⁴³ The attractiveness of *Don Juan* to common people is a testimony to its carnivalesque nature. The carnival is a type of folk humor that has a universal spirit embracing all people; it is subject to its own rules and it mandates the suspension of all hierarchies, allowing its participants to experience pure human relation. This, according to Bakhtin, is the essence of the carnival.⁴⁴

Furthermore, the carnival is characterized by an unusual type of aesthetics, that of the grotesque, which elicits images of the “material lower bodily stratum,” which, for Bakhtin, consist of “images of the human body with its food, drink, defecation, and sexual life.”⁴⁵ These images are often illustrated in exaggerated form. Those parts of the body become open to the outside world and disclose “a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, and the throes of death, eating, and drinking.”⁴⁶ As mentioned before, *Don Juan* is full of images of feasting and abundance, but what makes them grotesque is their hyperbolic function which merges between jarring principles. The seasickness Juan experiences while reading Julia’s letter creates a comic effect in combining emotional and physical pain in support of the principle of growth and continuity, indicating that the physical body triumphs all, and, in times of crisis, it is all that matters. Reading the letter, Don Juan exclaims:

Oh, Julia! (this curst vessel pitches so)—
Beloved Julia, hear me still beseeching!
(Here he grew inarticulate with retching.) (1.20.6-8).

Here, Juan tries to perform the part of a heartbroken lover, yet he is soon silenced by his own gagging. The narrator undermines Juan’s emotional pain by stating that the worst pain of all “is nausea, or a pain/About the lower region of the bowels” (2.23.1-2). Love is no match for Juan’s physical ailment, and, as his passions subside, it is suggested that, when faced with physical ailment, love does not stand a chance as “Love, who heroically breathes a vein/Shrinks

⁴¹ Bakhtin, p.160.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Luke, p. 209.

⁴⁴ Bakhtin, p.7.

⁴⁵ Bakhtin, p.80.

⁴⁶ Bakhtin, p. 26.

from the application of hot towels” (2.23.3-4). Humanity, similarly, falters when met with physical necessity, as the ship men, faced with starvation, resort to cannibalism when they feast upon Pedrillo, Don Juan’s tutor. Taking the grotesque to the extreme, the resigned Pedrillo requests to be bled to death, and dies a meek death, holding out “his jugular and wrist,” while his breath “gently ebb’d” (2.76.1-2). When faced with matters of life and death, survival becomes the greatest concern for Don Juan and the men on the boat. Love, friendship, and even humanity become insignificant as the primal instinct for survival, in all its grotesqueness, overpowers all.

In a somewhat similar manner, the sexuality in *Don Juan*, condemned as immoral, can be regarded positively as an aesthetic of the grotesque carnival. Sexuality is one of the strongest components of *Don Juan*; shown to be natural, for both men and women, and Byron does not shy away from it. Beginning with Don Juan’s parents, the narrator reveals that, “like a lineal son of Eve,” Don Jose has engaged in extramarital affairs and may have had a mistress or two (1.18.7-8). It is even suggested that the moralistic Donna Inez had an affair with Don Alfonso, Julia’s husband, as the narrator reveals “That Inez had, ere Don Alfonso’s marriage/ Forgot with him her very prudent carriage” (1.66.7-8), and the narrator later implies that she may have turned a blind eye to Julia and Don Juan’s infatuation with each other, so that she may incriminate Julia in the eyes of Don Alfonso. Don Juan’s adventures are considered to be sexual in nature, with the narrator sarcastically declaring that he does “denounce all amorous writing” and that his purpose is to create a “moral model” (5.2.1.8), a direct contradiction to his previous assertion that “this is not a moral tale, though gay” (1.207.6-8). Immediately after Julia consents to taking Don Juan as a lover, the narrator apologizes for his indiscretion in mentioning Julia and Don Juan’s affair, explaining that his muse is a chaste one. Of the “still chaster reader,” the narrator further asks that they excuse this transgression upon their sensibilities, explaining that “this liberty is a poetic license” (1.120.4). Probably the most explicit of Don Juan’s “amorous” liaisons is the following one, wherein Don Juan and Haidee consummate their relationship:

Half naked, loving, natural, and Greek.
And when those deep and burning moments pass’d,
And Juan sunk to sleep within her arms,
She slept not, but all tenderly, though fast,
Sustain’d his head upon her bosom’s charms;
And now and then her eye to heaven is cast,
And then on the pale cheek her breast now warms,
Pillow’d on her o’erflowing heart, which pants
With all it granted, and with all it grants (2. 194.8; 195.1-8).

Shortly hereafter, the narrator again absolves himself of blame, and shifts it entirely upon Haidee and Juan. “It is not fair,” he tells his “chaste” readers, “in any way to put/ The blame on me. . . if you’d have them wedded, please to shut/ The book” (3.12.2-5). This frank and uninhibited mode of sensual writing no doubt offended English sensibilities. The editor of *Blackwood’s* literary magazine vehemently condemns Lord Byron’s “demon of depravity” and laments that a poet of Byron’s genius “has devoted his powers to the worst of purposes and the worst of passions.”⁴⁷ The editor argues that Byron’s depiction of love renders him a scorner of the better part of woman” and that the “earthy part of passion is all that has found resting place

⁴⁷ Byron, Lord [George Gordon], *Beppo and Don Juan* (London: John Murray, 1853) p.46.

in his breast.”⁴⁸ Nevertheless, the love scenes in *Don Juan* may be read, they still exist in the chaotic and overarching sphere of the carnival in which vulgarity and boorishness is celebrated rather than condemned.

With this, I once again reiterate that what should be taken into outmost consideration while reading *Don Juan* is its overarching comic vision, which can be properly appreciated and understood if we consider it as an extended example of the carnival in the Bakhtinian sense. As I have shown, Byron was personally familiar with the Italian carnival and the conventions of spectacular theater, specifically the pantomime and Italian improvisational poetry, and has incorporated these different elements in both “Beppo” and *Don Juan*. The narrator, for instance, becomes a stand-in for the *improvvisatori*, whereas Don Juan becomes a clown prototype; a variation called the Harlequin, who goes on an unusual and capricious quest. It is also useful to keep in mind the merry backdrop of the poem, which gives it a merry and festive coloring, dispelling any sense of sorrow or affliction. Thus, *Don Juan* is a tale of amusement as it incorporates many essential components of a carnival in its pageantry and display of food, people, and objects; its comic verbal compositions that consist of parodies and insults to famous and well-known public figures as well as various forms of swearing vulgarity; its cross-dressing and costume change; its “feast of fools”; and its grotesque realism which consists of images of death and copulation.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

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