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**BROWNING'S DON JUAN: LIBERTINE OR
VICTORIAN?**

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The Don Juan character in Browning's *Fifine at the Fair* has long been either misinterpreted or completely ignored. The reigning critical position is to ignore the possibility that Browning intended his Juan to be taken seriously as the spokesperson for the poem's themes.¹ Samuel Southwell, who perhaps better than anyone else has justified traversing the poem's cumbersome meter and narrative, nevertheless insists that the Don Juan in the poem is present in name only, his character clouded as Browning's "ostensible purpose gives way to larger and more interesting themes."² Though I do not argue with Southwell's contention that the poem digresses from action into philosophy, I do insist that without the Don Juan character, the poem would have none of those themes. The Don Juan character, with his mythic ethos juxtaposed with a very nineteenth century sensibility, is exactly what creates the possibility for the tension between the physical and the philosophical permeating the poem.

The purpose here is not to make fantastic claims about the legitimacy of viewing Browning's character literally but to try to explain his presence in the poem. If we discount the possibility of a real Don Juan living and breathing in the poem, then we may never understand Browning's motives for choosing such a character to voice the poem's themes. More important, if we resist grappling with the character, we may miss an opportunity to understand the poem's rich, ironic ambiguity.

The problem most critics have with Browning's Don Juan is his chameleon character. At times he induces us to snicker at his sophistic side-steps as he rationalizes his desires; at other times he elicits our empathy and intellectual understanding as he ruminates on the most metaphysical and relative aspects of the human condition. He has the perspicacity of an eloquent Victorian intellectual and the conscience of a conniving and fatuous classical Don Juan. Far from clouding the poem as critics have charged, this inconsistency is actually what fires it with vitality.

The parallels between Browning's Juan and his mythic ancestor point to a kinship we must address. As Mandel has suggested, the mythic Juan is a symbol of pure sensuality; "with him, sensuality...is

his life's only business,"³ a commitment which constantly leads him to justify his position with a litany of pseudo-philosophical excuses. Likewise, though a Victorian and more a libertine at heart than in action, Browning's character believes that he has the right to pursue the gypsy girl, Fifine, even though this behavior would jeopardize his marriage. When he is forced to defend his desires to Elvire, he becomes a most skillful rhetorician who pleads his case so well that we become so enamored with his casuistry we almost forget he is talking about infidelity.

The typical Don Juan disdains fetters and thus, marriage. Moliere's character is the quintessential Don Juan. When Sganarelle criticizes Juan's habit of "making love all over the place," Juan replies: "Why would you have me tie myself down to the first woman who comes along, give up the world for her, and never look at anyone else? What a fine thing that would be, to bury yourself in one passion forever" (I,ii,16).⁴ Likewise, Browning's character views marriage as all too safe and boring. He compares Elvire to the docked ship which would provide a safe but uneventful passage across the bay and Fifine to a small, unreliable boat which would provide an unpredictable, yet exciting journey: "Elvire is true, as truth, honesty's self, alack! / The worse! Too safe the ship, the transport there and back / Too Certain" (LXXXII, 1422-4).

The mythic Juan as Auden has said is "not promiscuous by nature but by will...and since the slightest trace of affection will turn a number on his list of victims into a name, his choice of vocation requires the absolute renunciation of love."⁵ Moliere's Juan, for example, explains that he subjugates women rather than love them, and that after the conquest, he becomes bored:

What intense pleasure there is in seeing day by day the progress you make in opposing with passions...the innocent chastity of a heart unwilling to yield. But once you are master there is nothing left to say or hope for because passion is over, and you fall asleep (I,ii, 16).

Similarly, Browning's Juan seems less concerned with love than with experiencing the fruits of the sensual life. Speaking for Cleopatra, he champions the cause of passion and accuses respectable people of not really living: "...You die nor understand / What bliss might be in life—you ate the grapes, / but knew never the taste of wine" (XXXII, 445).

Like his ancestors before him, Browning's Juan complains of the ennui that results after conquest. Comparing Elvire to a treasured work of art he has obtained, he admits: "So, any sketch or scrap, pochade, caricature, / Made in a moment, meant a moment to endure / I snap at, seize, enjoy, then tire of, throw aside" (XXXVI, 556).

Demonstrating a tendency to intellectualize, which sets him apart from his mythic ancestor, Browning's Juan conducts a metaphoric comparison of Elvire and Fifine. Fifine is the wild lily who, with "such dear and damning scent, by who cares what devices, / takes the idle heart of insects she entices" (XVII, 184), while Elvire is "no flavourous venom'd bell,—the role it is... / we pluck and place, unwronged a jot..." (XVIII, 190). Elvire is perfection, like the phantom of Helen of Troy who inspired men "To give up life for her, who, other-minded, spurn / the best her eyes could smile," (XXVII, 315). Elvire, a "sexless and bloodless sprite" (XVI, 173), is the spirit, the soul, a phantom, but Fifine is the purely physical. As a Victorian, Juan needs the serenity, the subdued sensuality in Elvire. Yet, because he is a Don Juan, a sensualist, he needs the imperfection, the admitted falsity and lustiness of Fifine who, as he says, "shall make my thoughts surer / what they mean," (XV, 149) who "brings sunshine upon her spangled hips" (XV, 167). Clyde de L. Ryals maintains that the Don is caught between two women who are "representative of the opposing thrusts within him, and by implication every man: The yearning for constancy (law) and spiritual perfection on the one hand, the need for change (lawlessness) and sensual satisfaction on the other."⁶ The two characters work as projections of the Don Juan who is at once a libertine and a Victorian.

When Browning's Don Juan justifies his inconstancy, he changes from the self-protecting sophist who argues for voluptuous experience into the metaphysically-inclined philosopher whose aim is to discover just what inconstancy provides the individual that marriage does not. Though his infidelity is only imagined, intellectual rather than physical, he is still selfishly arguing for his own needs, still a Don Juan whose sincerity in love can be called to account.

Rather than argue the abiding power of love as a justification of infidelity, like the true libertine, Browning's Juan submits a pseudo-logical argument supporting investigation. Through inconstancy, he says, one can best explore the mind, the soul, the value of another person and of oneself. Investigating Fifine is comparable with any other objective investigation of an object in nature: "...I prove that bodies show me minds / that, through the outward sign, the inward grace allures" (XXVIII, 335). Don Juan also justifies his desire for Fifine by arguing that she is so much more deceptive and unpredictable

than Elvire that she, the “rakish craft,” can take him “through divers rocks and shoals” while Elvire, “The superior ship... refits in port” (LXXXIII). Through *Fifine*, the flesh, he argues, he journeys to Elvire, the spirit.

We have to ask whether the Don is sincere. As Elvire says at one point, “Be frank for charity! Who is it you deceive— / Yourself or me or God, with all this make-believe?” (LX, 940). Ryals maintains that the “Don, caught up in his own rhetoric, probably believes most of what he says” (p. 67). We do get a sense here that Juan is sincere, if not in firmly attesting his love, at least in redefining for himself what he believes to be true. He is still, though, very much a Don Juan stuck in his solipsistic universe. What he wants has nothing to do with pleasing either Elvire or *Fifine*. He wants sensual and spiritual satisfaction from these women, and he thinks nothing of what he might offer them. Yet his ruminations on the physical and the spiritual take the shibboleths of his ancestors into the realm of philosophy, a likely habitat for a Victorian Don Juan. Moliere’s Juan may have said that all he believes is that “two and two make four, and four and four make eight” (III,ii, 46), but Browning has given us a Juan who presents the relative conditions and intellectual paths that result in that sum.

As Mandel has shown, the Mythic Don finds himself alienated from society, not because he is a political rebel but because his sensual vocation sets him against fathers, the law, and the church. Yet his purpose is not to change things. He follows his own narrow path of conquest and victory which discounts any possibility of true friendship, or noble rebellion, and finally destroys him in the end. For him, there is only the false, only the illusion, only the pretense. But again, Browning’s Juan extends this view to include the false *and* the true, reality *and* illusion, pretense *and* honesty these polarities exist together, and one cannot know one without knowing the other.

This philosophy of polarities is refined throughout *Fifine*. In the beginning, Juan finds that his attraction for *Fifine* has put him in a “no-man’s land”; he is the amphibian who must decide to walk on land or swim in the sea. Earlier a person defined by law, he now yearns for the impetuous, the imaginative, “lawless” realm. Here, he has lost his hold on what he believes to be absolute. He is a Don Juan who has the misfortune of being a Victorian, who cannot let well enough alone, and who feels compelled to redevelop his beliefs, which have been dissected or devalued by his attraction for *Fifine*. Thus he reexplores Art and finds that the artist must work through all that which is imperfect and grotesque to produce the “individual type.” Art, he discovers, is “the love of loving, rage / of knowing seeing, feeling the absolute truth of

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things" (XLIV 685). So, like the artist, Juan is compelled to explore what he knows, the sensual, to find what he does not know, "to reconstruct thereby the ultimate entire" (XLIV, 691).

Through examination of the anomalies of existence, Browning's Don arrives at a philosophy that accepts these anomalies as necessary to the growth and formation of the soul. He brings the polarities of "law" and "lawlessness" together and explains their reciprocal relationship when he ruminates on the differences between his life of the "land" and the life of the gypsies. He yearns to escape the rigidity of his life with Elvire: "My heart makes just the same / Passionate stretch, fires up for lawlessness, lays claim / To share the life they lead" (VI, 45). These lawless creatures, he explains, care for nothing we lawful creatures hold dear; fame, fortune, nobility are unimportant to them as they flee societal obligations without remorse. Yet, Don Juan discovers that "They of the wild, require some touch of us the / tame, / Since clothing, meat and drink, mean money/ all the same" (VIII, 80). And, just as the carnival folk depend on the settled and established to buy cheap stuffed animals and stale cotton candy, the townsfolk depend on the gypsies to give them a taste of "lawlessness" and passion.

Later Juan learns that reality and illusion also have a reciprocal relationship. At the beginning of *Fifine*, the fair is placed in opposition to Juan's and Elvire's world of stability and rules. In the milieu of the fair, nothing is safe, predictable, stable; it is a make-believe world inhabited by deceivers. In contrast, Juan's and Elvire's world is made more of earth than air, a world where tangible signs, nobility, rank, possessions are more important than imagination and lustful pleasure and expression. At this point, these two worlds are directly opposed in Juan's mind, yet later, in the dream sequence, stanzas XCV through CIII, the world becomes a "prodigious Fair." It is in this world of the masses, this world of illusions, that Juan plunges and finds the distinction between the supposed "false" world of the gypsies and the "true" world of conventions to be slight: "I gained / Knowledge by notice, not by giving ear,—attained / To truth by what men seemed not said" (C, 1761-63).

Juan ultimately learns in his journey that illusion is part of reality, and that in order to survive and grow, we must accept this fact; we must be "plated for defense, nay, furnished for attack ... (CI, 1779); Are we not here to learn the good of peace through strife / Of love through hate, and reach knowledge by ignorance?" (CI, 1782).

In this prodigious fair he has found himself: "My hunger both to be and know the thing I am, / By contrast with the thing I am not; so, through sham / And outside, I arrive at inmost real..." (CIII, 1815). In

his swimmer analogy, the false is the underwater, a "false" environment for him, while the "true" is the air. If the swimmer fights and thrashes against the false, the water, then he only falls deeper under and farther from the truth. But, if he submits to the water, to the false, and allows his body to follow its natural buoyancy, or inclinations, then his body rises toward the air. Likewise, if he fights the gypsy environment, he will only fall deeper into it; if he submits, he will come to appreciate the true, Elvire. Now our mythic Don Juan would have appreciated having such a fine line of attack as this and would certainly have used it if he had happened upon a female rhetorician. Yet we can't condemn Browning's Juan, for he, himself, is proof of what he says: his metaphysical casuistry is, ironically, both sincere *and* sophistic, polarities working together. And, we certainly should not be surprised when in the final passage of the poem, Don Juan suggests that he is leaving to see Fifine and may not return. Here, he is the mythic Don Juan; his inherited "Don Juan" sensibility, his epicurean nature, wins out. But neither should we be surprised when we learn in the epilogue that he has been faithful after all. As a Victorian, he can only experience intellectually what his mythic ancestor experienced physically. He is a Don Juan, in spirit if not in action.

We have in *Fifine* a heretofore unexplored chapter in the Don Juan myth. We have a Victorian Don still slithering in the skeleton of his mythical ancestors yet groping in the intellectual jungle of the Victorian age. Southwell's contention that the poem's metaphysical wanderings are actually Browning's rather than those of a character may well be correct. Nevertheless, Browning chose the Don Juan ethos to express those wanderings. The Victorian Don Juan is the perfect guide to lead us through the maze of nonconformist rationalizations to what we, as civilized creatures, have to acknowledge: "Land-locked, we live and die henceforth: for here's the / villa-door" (CXXIX, 2305).

NOTES

¹See Roma A. King, Jr., *The Focusing Artifice* (Athens, Oh., 1968), pp. 172-188. Also Phillip Drew, *The Poetry of Browning: A Critical Introduction* (London, 1979), pp. 303-321; and Edward Dowden, *Robert Browning* (1904; rpt., New York, 1970). All do not associate the speaker with Don Juan and see the Don Juan ethos as only a minor issue in the poem.

²*Quest for Eros: Browning and Fifine* (Lexington, Ky., 1980), p. 9.

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³*The Theatre of Don Juan, A Collection of Plays and Views, 1630-1963* (Lincoln, 1963), p. 12.

⁴Moliere, *Don Juan*. Trans. Wallace Fowlie (New York, 1964). All references to *Don Juan* are taken from this edition.

⁵*The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (London, 1962), p. 392.

⁶*Browning's Later Poetry, 1871-1889* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1975), p. 72.