

## JUVENALIAN SATIRE AND BYRON

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“Whatever mankind does ... their hope, fear, rage and pleasure, their business and their sport, are the hotch-potch of my book, and when was there a richer crop of vices?”<sup>1</sup>

When I first came across these lines, I thought, “this sounds like a quotation from Byron”, but I was wrong. The quotation is from the redoubtable Juvenal, reputation intact as the godfather of literary satire. This great Latin poet has become synonymous with bitter and ironic criticism of people and institutions, filled with personal invective and moral indignation. In his sixteen Satires, he brilliantly denounces Roman society, criticizes philosophers, whom he considered hypocrites, and decries the humiliation of poor men in Rome (especially writers like himself). He is particularly scathing on the faults of women, the evils of pride and false friendships, misguided ambitions, people’s brutality to each other, the unfair privileges of soldiers and the bad effects parents can have on their children. All this from a man reputed to be born about A.D.50, who trained as a rhetorician, and died sometime after A.D. 127. He is considered the true founder of this particular genre which has continued as a lasting tradition, in cartoons, newspaper columns, and satirical magazines such as *Punch*, *Phoenix* and *Private Eye*. The essence of Juvenalian satire can be simply summed up in the phrase “joking in earnest”.

Juvenal’s works have been translated by Dryden and Johnson, honoured by Rousseau and Marat on the title-pages of their pamphlets, and quoted by Edmund Burke in the British House of Commons. Above all (from Byron’s point of view) they were translated by his “literary father” William Gifford,<sup>2</sup> whose Juvenalian satires *The Baviad* and *The Maeviad* were the main sources for *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*. Although *The Baviad* is directly based on Persius, it is Juvenalian in tone.

Satire X is one of Juvenal’s best satires, and describes how the ambitions of mankind such as wealth, power, glory and personal beauty can lead to disappointment and danger. What mankind should aspire to is the notion of “a sound mind in a sound body” (“mens sana in corpore sano”). This satire is also the source of the phrase “panem et circenses” (“bread and circuses”). Juvenal suggests that “bread and circuses” are all the Roman population cares about, now that they have given up their birthright of political freedom. When we think of Juvenal’s satire X, Samuel Johnson’s *The Vanity of Human Wishes* comes to mind, with its subtitle “The Tenth Satire of Juvenal, Imitated”. In Johnson’s work, written in 1749, he expresses at length his own tragic sense of life and his belief that the pain and misery of human existence far outweigh its pleasures and happiness. Byron, who was fundamentally opposed to Juvenal’s gravity and Johnson’s gloom, ironically commented to Francis Hodgson (who had himself translated Juvenal) “the tenth satire has always been my favourite, as I suppose indeed of everyone. It is the finest recipe for making one miserable with his life, and content to walk out of it, in any language.”<sup>3</sup>

Juvenal writes:

... then ask  
For a sound mind in a sound body, a valiant heart  
Without fear of death, that reckons longevity  
The least among nature’s gifts, that’s strong to endure  
All kinds of toil, that’s untainted by lust or anger,  
That prefers the sorrows and labours of Hercules to all  
Sardanapalus’ downy cushions and women and junketings.  
What I’ve shown you, you can find by yourself: there’s one  
Path, and one only, to a life of peace – through virtue.<sup>4</sup>

The virtuous Juvenal tells us that wealth often destroys; the more power, honour and glory man seeks, the harder he will fall – look at Demosthenes, Cicero, Hannibal; the world was not big enough for Alexander the Great, but a coffin was. The prospect of people living longer is brutally attacked by Juvenal.

1: *Latin Literature* (Penguin Classics 1981), p.364.

2: BLJ XI 117.

3: BLJ II 95.

4: Juvenal, *The Sixteen Satires*, tr. Peter Green (Penguin 1998) p.217.

He believes that long life just means ugliness, helplessness, impotence, and the loss of all pleasure: old people are deaf and full of disease, dementia being the worst affliction of all. In Satire X Juvenal is full of anger, an emotion his fellow satirist, Horace, once described in his Epistles as a “short madness”. Classical writers, with whose works Byron was intimately familiar, were fascinated with human emotions, their causes, and especially how they became manifest. They believed anger to be a prime motivator because it is so often a cause of violence, aggression, destruction, and unhappiness. Byron felt he had a lot to be angry about when he left England for the last time. Juvenal’s Satire X clearly underlies Byron’s anger and his constant lament for mortality and mutability, which he displays most especially in Canto IV of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, when he addresses Time:

Oh Time! The beautifier of the dead,  
Adorner of the ruin, comforter  
And only healer when the heart hath bled –  
Time! The corrector where our judgments err,  
The test of truth, love- sole philosopher,  
For all beside are sophists, from thy thrift,  
Which never loses though it doth defer –  
Time, the avenger! Unto thee  
My hands, and eyes, and heart, and crave of thee a gift ...<sup>5</sup>

The gift that Byron craves is that time will allow him live long enough to prove to himself his life was not in vain. Satire X is also invoked in *Don Juan*, in the “ubi sunt” stanzas of Canto XI, as Byron mirror-images Juvenal’s address to great men of his time asking “where are they now?” The change from the morbid tone of Spenserian stanza to the up-beat tenor of ottava rima is palpable:

Where is Lord This? And where my Lady That?  
The honorable Mistresses and Misses?  
Some laid aside like an old opera hat,  
Married, unmarried, and remarried (this is  
An evolution oft performed of late)  
Where are the Dublin shouts and London hisses?  
Where are the Grenvilles? Turned as usual. Where  
My friends the Whigs? Exactly where they were.<sup>6</sup>

In Juvenal’s Satire III, we find the narrator’s old friend Umbricius about to depart Rome for the countryside. Umbricius believes that virtue and lack of pretension can only be found outside the city as he contrasts the perils and degradation of living in Rome with the easy and cheap life of living in the countryside. Slick and immoral foreigners, such as the Greeks, are responsible for shutting real Romans like himself out of all opportunity to make a decent living; there are no prospects in Rome for an honest man. The streets of Rome are dangerous if you are not rich enough to own a horse, and travel by night is fraught with menace from falling tiles, thugs and robbers. Umbricius is in despair:

What can I do in Rome? I never learnt how  
To lie. If a book is bad, I cannot puff it, or bother  
To ask around for a copy; astrological clap-trap  
Is not in my stars. I cannot and will not promise  
To encompass any man’s death by way of obliging his son.  
I never meddled with frogs’ guts; the task of carrying  
Letters and presents between adulterous lovers  
I resign to those who know it. I refuse to become  
An accomplice in theft – which means that no governor  
Will accept me on his staff. It’s like being a cripple  
With a paralysed right hand.<sup>7</sup>

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**5:** CHP IV st.80.

**6:** DJ XI st.79.

**7:** Green, op. cit., p.88.

As already noted, Samuel Johnson was a huge admirer of Juvenal. He particularly admired Juvenal's rhetorical excellence, which he again mirrors in his poem, *London*, written in 1738, ("A Poem in Imitation of the Third Satire of Juvenal"). In this poem, Johnson substitutes London for Rome, posing the archetypal question of whether an urban life of hectic ambition is to be preferred to a pastoral fantasy retreat to the countryside. He follows Juvenal in describing the dangers of living in the city, especially if you are poor:

Some fiery fop, with new commission vain,  
Who sleeps on brambles till he kills his man;  
Some frolic drunkard, reeling from a fest,  
Provokes a broil, and stabs you for a jest  
Yet even these heroes, mischievously gay,  
Lords of the street, and terrors of the way;  
Flush'd as they are with folly, youth and wine,  
Their prudent insults to the poor confine.<sup>8</sup>

In Canto XI of *Don Juan*, Byron, like Johnson, turns satire on Rome to satire on London. Byron's main purpose in placing Juan in the aristocratic world of early nineteenth-century London is to expose the shallowness, hypocrisy, and self-interest of that world and so let the readers of *Don Juan* know the perils to which their hero is exposed. Byron effectively establishes the tone of his social analysis at the beginning of the canto by having Juan held up by a robber with a knife just as Juan is meditating on how much virtue there must be in so vast a city as London. Even though it seems rather unlikely that Juan should look down on London from Shooter's Hill with such thoughts in his mind, the ironic incident serves its purpose very well. Juan's illusions are promptly shattered when he is confronted by robbers:

Juan yet quickly understood their gesture  
And being somewhat choleric and sudden,  
Drew forth a pocket pistol from his vesture  
And fired it into one assailant's pudding,  
Who fell, as rolls an ox o'er in his pasture,  
And roared out, as he writhed his native mud in,  
Unto his nearest follower or henchman,  
"Oh Jack! I'm floored by that 'ere bloody Frenchman!"<sup>9</sup>

If Juvenal's sense of political indignation and the fickleness of time underlies *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, then his attitude to women, partly at least, underlies *Don Juan*. Following his scathing dedication to Poet Laureate, Robert Southey (originally suppressed because "I won't attack the dog in the dark") in *Don Juan*, Byron continues his virulent critique to include the Latin poets; on Juvenal he writes:

I can't help thinking Juvenal was wrong,  
Although no doubt his real intent was good,  
For speaking out so plainly in his song  
So much indeed, as to be downright rude.<sup>10</sup>

For Byron to refer to Juvenal as "downright rude" is like the kettle calling the pot black. He must have been thinking, at that time, of Juvenal's Satire VI, which is sometimes otherwise called "Against Women". This satire is in the guise of a letter to Juvenal's friend Postumus dissuading him from marriage. To bolster his argument, the narrator uses a series of cutting vignettes on the hopelessly deteriorating male and female morality in Rome. Satire VI contains the famous phrase "Sed quis custodiet ipsos custodes?" ("But who will guard the guards themselves?"), a phrase just as relevant today as it was two thousand years ago. Juvenal writes:

I know the advice my old friends would give – 'Lock her up  
And bar the doors.' But who is to keep guard  
Over the guards themselves? They get paid in common coin  
To forget their mistress's randy little adventures;

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8: Johnson, *London* ll.226-34.

9: DJ XI st.13.

10: DJ I st.43.

Both sides have something to hide. Any sensible wife,  
Planning ahead, will first turn the heat on them.<sup>11</sup>

The constant theme of the poem is the deviance of the contemporary Roman woman relative to the sophisticated urban woman of the elegiac ideal. According to Juvenal, the mythical golden age of the opposite sex was when women conducted themselves in the guise of simple country girls (young maidens dancing at the crossroads). Though the poem has often been referred to as a misogynistic rant, Satire VI is not merely a diatribe against women, but an all-out invective against marriage. This decaying of Rome's social and moral standards has caused marriage to become the offspring of greed and corruption. Men have become weak, and allow women to challenge male supremacy so that marital power relations now favour women. Juvenal suggests that there are three options available to the Roman male, marriage, suicide, or a boy-lover; the latter might have been especially attractive to Byron. The narrator challenges Postumus:

Postumus, are you really  
Taking a wife? You used to be sane enough – what  
Fury's got into you, what snake has strung you up?  
Why endure such bitch-tyranny when rope's available  
By the fathom, when all those dizzying top-floor windows  
Are open for you, when there are bridges handy to jump from?<sup>12</sup>

Juvenal, in accepting that Postumus probably won't take his advice by going off and committing suicide as he proposes, continues to taunt his unfortunate friend by suggesting the alternative:

Supposing none of these exits catches  
Your fancy, isn't it better to sleep with a pretty boy?  
Boys don't quarrel all night, or nag you for little presents  
While they're on the job, or complain that you don't come  
Up to their expectations, or demand more gasping passion.<sup>13</sup>

Juvenal continues the poem in much the same vein, telling us that women torment even men they love and that a man will never be happy while his mother-in-law lives. Women who are educated and fancy themselves as orators and grammarians ... are repulsive, according to Juvenal. He is truly concerned about the state of Roman society especially among the rich, who seem to get away with everything, and criticizes avaricious husbands who marry not for love but for a dowry, and subsequently allow their rich wives do whatever they want.

Although "Great Dryden", as he is called in *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, together with Alexander Pope and John Milton, embodied the English poetic tradition Byron strove in his own writings to uphold, I would suggest that it is a combination of Juvenal's indignation plus Horace's charity and lightness of touch, which inspires his thinking in *Don Juan*, with a little bit of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and Swift's Gulliver thrown in for good measure (Swift's satire is pure Juvenalian). Juan is seduced; he is never the seducer. Most of the women in the poem are divested of their cloaks of deceit, and sin, "without a rag on" is sent "shivering forth". Inez, Julia, Gulbeyaz, Dudú, Catherine, the Duchess, Adeline, even Haideé and perhaps Aurora are sisters of the flesh. All deviant women, some of them married, pursuing the young master in a series of contrived little sex frolics, leading the sometimes moralistic narrator to comment ironically on the necessity to secure the chastity of women in these unhappy climes – that "wedlock and a padlock mean the same".

Byron's negativity towards marriage persists from one end of *Don Juan* to the other, piercing its frauds in the first canto and the zealous ritual of matchmaking in the later ones; he creates a masterpiece of romantic irony. In Canto I, Julia is "married, charming, chaste and twenty three." Her husband, Don Alfonso, is twice her age and has very probably been the lover of Julia's mother before his marriage. The limpidity of young Julia's life leads her into the arms of Juan although she is, herself, consciously aware that her love affair is wrong and avoidable but, paradoxically, inevitable and right. In other words, the

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11: Green, op. cit, p.140.

12: Ibid., p.128.

13: Ibid.

narrator is telling us that the affair between the young married woman and her lover, although wrong, is simply a matter of human nature.

Byron made many statements at different stages in the poem's composition about his purpose in writing *Don Juan*. He claimed it was to be in the style of *Beppo*, "a little quietly facetious on everything". Later he said he was writing a "comedy on the passions",<sup>14</sup> and, on another occasion he suggested that *Don Juan* was a satire on the abuses of present day society,<sup>15</sup> which is exactly what Juvenal claimed he was trying to do nearly two thousand years earlier. Byron wrote to John Murray on October 25th 1822:

Don Juan will be known by and bye, for what it is intended – a satire on abuses of the present states of Society, and not an eulogy of vice: it may be now and then voluptuous: I can't help that ... No girl will ever be seduced by reading D.J: – no, no; she will go to Little's poems and Rousseau's romans for that, or even to the immaculate De Stael: they will encourage her, and not the Don, who laughs at that, and – and – most other things.<sup>16</sup>

Byron rightly guessed that it was the Don's mockery of women which had the propensity to offend rather than his depravity. He always claimed his poem was "true": it gave a candid and faithful picture of human nature: "The truth is that it is TOO TRUE" he wrote to Murray, "and the women hate everything which strips off the tinsel of Sentiment; and they are right, as it would rob them of their weapons". He was not claiming an attempt to reform society or to unmask hypocrisy or scourge vice; he was not misogynistic; he was writing a "human" poem which told the truth about men and women in society. Byron was well versed at this stage in the vagaries of human nature, having been through the marriage ritual himself and well aware of his personal failures in this and many other experiences involving the opposite sex.

While Byron picks up Juvenal's energy and bitterness, he is less bitter and much less misogynistic than Juvenal: Horace is more his model. Juvenal's satire doesn't seem to fit in today's world with men marrying women, men marrying men, women marrying women, and people living longer than could ever have been imagined two thousand years ago. Byron's satire on the other hand still works: it is just as relevant today as it was in Byron's time.

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**14:** BLJ VIII 147.

**15:** BLJ X 68.

**16:** BLJ X 68.