

## BYRON THE EPIGRAMMATIST

ITSUYO HIGASHINAKA

*Ryukoku University, Kyoto*

When I read a paper entitled “Byron’s Indebtedness to Martial and Catullus” last summer in Boston, I concluded the paper by wondering if the spirit of an epigrammatist in Byron was not at work when he was writing his *ottava rima* poems. This year I would like to attempt to probe to what extent Byron is epigrammatic in *Don Juan*. Here is a stanza where the narrator apostrophizes god of Love:

Thou mak’st the chaste connubial state precarious,  
 And jestest with the brows of mightiest men:  
 Caesar and Pompey, Mahomet, Belisarius,  
 Have much employed the Muse of History’s pen:  
 Their lives and fortunes were extremely various,  
 Such worthies Time will never see again;  
 Yet to these four in three things the same luck holds,  
 They all were heroes, conquerors, and cuckolds. (II, 206)<sup>1</sup>

Here Byron deftly yokes the four personages together, because they share “the same luck” of becoming “heroes, conquerors and cuckolds”, thus belittling their stature as “worthies Time will never see”. The rhyming of the last two lines: “luck holds” and “cuckolds” is clever and comic. The reader is surprised by reading the reversion of the heroes’ fortune and is also made aware of the couplet of the *ottava rima* stanza put to use to construct a structural reversion. The whole stanza leads up to the final word of the stanza, “cuckolds”, so as to be completed as an epigrammatic unit.

According to M. H. Abrams, the epigram is “polished, condensed, and pointed”, and “often ends [...] with a surprising or witty turn of thought”.<sup>2</sup> This definition applies neatly to the couplet of Byron’s stanza I have just quoted, which is clearly pointed, twisted and surprising. Barbara Smith associates the characteristics of English epigrams with “witty or sententious conclusions, aphoristic formulation, balanced and alliterated repetitions, puns and antitheses, and, indeed, brevity itself”, and says these features contribute to “strong closural effects”.<sup>3</sup> Lessing, who perceives a bipartite structure of expectation

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1: Quotations from *Don Juan* are from CPW, V.

2: M. H. Abrams: *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 4th edn (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981), p.53.

3: Barbara Smith: *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968),

and resolution in the epigram, refers us to “the centrality of the conclusion to the working of Martial’s epigrams”.<sup>4</sup>

Reading these comments about the characteristics of the epigram, one would almost suspect that they refer to the *ottava rima* stanzas of *Don Juan*. In fact, Byron often makes use of one of the most important characteristics of the epigram, the use of the pointed finish, as tellingly as in Martial’s originals. Here is a typical epigram of Martial: “Zoilus, you spoil the bathtub washing your arse. To make it filthier, Zoilus, stick your head in it.”<sup>5</sup> Ben Jonson uses a similar technique in his epigram, “To Pertinax Cob”: “Cob, thou nor soldier, thief, nor fencer art, / Yet by thy weapon liv’st! Thou hast one good part.”<sup>6</sup> These epigrams underline Barbara Smith’s words, “this combination of surprise and fulfilment that gives the last phrase its wit and the epigram its point”.<sup>7</sup>

The pointed finish, however, is not the only similarity between Martial’s epigrams and Byron’s *ottava rima* stanzas. As far as the subject matter of the epigram is concerned, it is receptive of the most diverse kinds of topics. This can be said about *Don Juan* too. We all know Byron can touch on virtually any subject conceivable under the sun. He says his narrative is “a mere airy and fantastic basis, / To build up common things with common places” (XIV, 7, 8). We are reminded of that Horatian phrase chosen by Byron for the motto of *Don Juan*: “Difficile est proprie communia dicere” (“’Tis no slight task to write on common things.”) to use his own translation.<sup>8</sup> In fact, quotidian happenings are what occupy the minds of both Martial and Byron. Byron states clearly that his Muse “gathers a repertory of facts, / Of course with some reserve and slight restriction, / But mostly sings of human things and acts—” (XIV, 13, 4-5).

Another feature they share is outspokenness. In Canto XI, Byron talks to the reader, “Ne’er doubt / *This* —when I speak, I *don’t hint*, but *speak out*” (XI, 88, 7-8). He ends the canto by saying that his book will be attacked “By those who love to say that white is black. / So much the better!—I may stand alone, / But would not change my free thoughts for a throne”(XI, 90, 6-8). He certainly shares this characteristic of frankness of speech with epigrammatists. Martial says in the introduction to Book I of his *Epigrams* that he uses the license of “calling a spade a spade, the language of epigram”, because “that is how Catullus

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p.197.

4: Quoted from Martial, *Select Epigrams*, ed. Lindsay and Patricia Watson (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.16.

5: The translation is by D. R. Shackleton Bailey in Martial, *Epigrams*, ed. and trans. D. R. Shackleton Bailey (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), 3 vols. I, Book II, no. 42.

6: Ben Jonson, *Epigrams*, no. 69, quoted from *Ben Jonson*, ed. Ian Donaldson (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1985).

7: Barbara Smith, pp.200-1.

8: *Hints from Horace*, ll. 181-2 in *CPW*, I.

writes [...] and whoever else is read all through”.<sup>9</sup> Ben Jonson in his second epigram tells his book to “Become a petulant thing, hurl ink and wit / As madmen stones, not caring whom they hit.”<sup>10</sup> Thus Byron shares this literary trait of speaking out with Martial, Ben Jonson or any other epigrammatist.

As for the stylistic tenor of *Don Juan*, what Abrams says about the epigram applies to Byron’s narrative tone characterized by mobility. These are the adjectives Abrams uses for the various modes of the epigram: “amorous, elegiac, meditative, complimentary, anecdotal, or satiric”.<sup>11</sup>

Martial’s epigrams are very often written in the first person. He uses several “I”s for his persona. Thus he places himself in the position of writing about many facets of the Roman society, mostly its vices and foibles. In *Don Juan* Byron creates the narrator of the poem in the earlier cantos, half fictitious and half real, but as the poem proceeds, the poet himself becomes one and the same as the “I” of the poem, the narrator. Nonetheless, both Martial and Byron use the first person singular to express their candid opinions.

Martial uses many personal names in his epigrams. Some are fictitious, but there are real persons as well. *Don Juan* is also full of proper names, both ancient and modern. In fact, it is a strong feature of *Don Juan* that so many people are almost inexhaustibly listed. Emperors and kings are often mentioned in epigrams. In fact, one interesting characteristic of epigrammatists is how they treat emperors and kings of their respective times. Martial often mentions the emperor Domitian, whose client Martial was. As the following epigram shows, he not only pays homage to Domitian, but seeks the emperor’s approval of his book of epigrams:

Caesar, if you happen to light upon my little books, put aside the frown that rules the world. Even the triumphs of Emperors are wont to tolerate jests, and a warlord is not ashamed to be matter for a quip. Read my verses, I beg, with expression with which you watch Thymele and jesting Latinus. A censor can permit harmless jollity. My page is wanton, but my life is virtuous.<sup>12</sup>

Ben Jonson is respectful of James I:

How, best of kings, dost thou a sceptre beare!  
 How, best of poets, doest thou laurel wear!  
 But two things, rare, the Fates had in their store,

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**9:** Martial, *Epigrams*, I, p.41.

**10:** Ben Jonson, *Epigrams*, no. 1, “To My Book”.

**11:** Abrams, p.53.

**12:** Martial, *Epigrams*, I, no. 4.

And gave thee both, to show they could no more.<sup>13</sup>

Byron has no intention of mincing his words about George III and George IV. In fact, he never gets tired of making the Georges the butt of his satiric attack. As early as 1808, Byron wrote an epigram on George III: "From Crown and Mitre Wit alike hath flown, / George damped poor Mansel's and hath lost his own."<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, both Martial and Byron often use everyday language. The readers of both poets belonged to the educated upper-class with whom they felt comfortable, and therefore their language became voluble. Furthermore, the Cambridge edition of *Martial: Select Epigrams* notes Martial's "tendency to build up detailed catalogues", besides his fondness of pun and wordplay.<sup>15</sup> Incidentally, I gave a paper on Byron's love of cataloguing in *Don Juan* in St. Andrews.<sup>16</sup> Martial is also said to like "insistent repetition of words or phrases as a build-up to a satiric or pointed climax."<sup>17</sup> We are reminded of Byron's "'Tis sweet" stanzas (*Don Juan*, I, sts.123-7) or what Professor Anne Barton calls "the ubi-sunt" stanzas (*Ibid.*, XI, 76-86). Thus far I have talked about some of the more conspicuous literary traits shared by Martial and Byron.

At this point let me talk briefly about some other poets who possibly had something to do with making Byron write couplets the way he does. Talking about "couplet" brings to Shakespeare's *Sonnets* to one's mind. In most cases Shakespeare used the couplet to make a summary, and not quite epigrammatically. Still one finds some sonnets that end with pointed wit. For instance, in no. 129, one of "the dark lady sonnets", Shakespeare piles up in the first twelve lines such maddening effects of love as "perjur'd, murd'rous, bloody, full of blame, / Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust", and then concludes the sonnet by this couplet: "All this the world well knows, yet none knows well / To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell."<sup>18</sup> Or one is reminded of no. 138, which sardonically states in the three quatrains how love is made up of truth and falsehood, and ends with this couplet: "Therefore I lie with her, and she with me, / And in our faults by lies we flattered be", thus deftly making use of the *double entendre*. It is quite likely that Shakespeare's love of juggling with ideas and words seen in some couplets of his sonnets most likely gave some influence on Byron.

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13: Ben Jonson, *Epigrams*, no. 4, "To King James".

14: The second epigram of ["Three Epigrams"] entitled "On the King's Speech to the Bishop of Bristol". See CPW, I, p.227.

15: Martial, *Select Epigrams*, p.17.

16: See "Byron's Love of Cataloguing in *Don Juan*" in *The Newstead Byron Society Review* (2010), pp.13-21.

17: Martial, *Select Epigrams*, p.19.

18: Quotations from Shakespeare are all from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans and J. J. M. Tobin (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997, 2nd edition).

I don't have to reiterate Pope's influence on Byron. Though Pope did not write stanzaic poems, Byron must have learned a lot from his master's effective use of couplets. The same can be said of Dryden, whose clever use of couplets must have been to Byron's great liking. Here is a passage which could be serviceable in an *ottava rima* stanza. It is taken from *Mac Flecnoe*, in which Richard Flecnoe, an Irish poet and playwright, names Thomas Shadwell as his heir (hence "Mac"), because

"Sh----- alone, of all my Sons, is he  
Who stands confirm'd in full stupidity.  
The rest to some faint meaning make pretence,  
But Sh----- never deviates into sense."<sup>19</sup>

I end this section of this essay by quoting from Andrew Marvell's famous "To his Coy Mistress", which contains a passage of thirteen lines beginning with "But at my back I always hear / Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near",<sup>20</sup> which ends with this couplet: "The grave's a fine and private place, / But none, I think, do there embrace." Doesn't this couplet nicely round off the thirteen-line epigrammatic section with a good pointed closure? Incidentally the penultimate couplet, "And your quaint honour [shall] turn to dust, / And into ashes all my lust" is another fine short epigram, or an epitaph, to be more precise, on his mistress's honour and the poet's lust. Marvell's use of the word "quaint", is nice and epigrammatic, because its old usage hints at an unmentionable thing.

It is, however, John Hookham Frere's *Whistlecraft* that concretely influenced Byron. There one meets many clever, pointed couplets. Byron writes to Murray on 25 March 1818, talking about *Beppo*: "the style is not English—it is Italian—*Berni* is the Original of *all*.—*Whistlecraft* was my immediate *model*".<sup>21</sup> I just quote two couplets from *Whistlecraft* which Byron probably found quite congenial to his taste:

The steed were fed and litter'd in the stable,  
The ladies and the knights sat down to table." (I, 2)<sup>22</sup>

There were wild beasts and foreign birds and creatures,

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**19:** *Mac Flecnoe*, ll. 17-20 in *The Poems of John Dryden*, ed. James Kinsley, 4 vols. I (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1958).

**20:** "To His Coy Mistress" quoted in *Oxford Anthology of English Literature*, ed. Frank Kermode and John Hollander, 2 vols. I (London, Oxford University Press, 1973), ll. 21-32.

**21:** BLJ, VI, p.24.

**22:** John Hookham Frere, *Prospectus and Specimen of an Intended National Work*, intro. Donald H. Reiman (New York & London, Garland Publishing, Inc., 1978). Reprint of the 1817 edition published by J. Murray.

And Jews and Foreigners with foreign features. (I, 6)

Now the paper proceeds to show in what ways certain stanzas of *Don Juan* are epigrammatic. To probe this theme, I have chosen Canto XI, one of the English Cantos, because, as Martial had Roman society about which to write his epigrams, here Byron has English society as the target of his candid comments. These locales serve them respectively as an ideal place to observe humanity.

I have singled out in the above “pointed closure” as a major characteristic of this literary genre. This has to do, in Byron’s case, with how to end *ottava rima* stanzas. Here is a stanza that reads like an epigram. Juan, after his arrival in England, comes to Shooter’s Hill and starts piling up laudatory remarks on England as a land of freedom: “And here [...] is Freedom’s chosen station; / Here peals the people’s voice [...]” (XI, 9, 5-6). He continues:

Here laws are all inviolate—none lay  
 Traps for the traveller—every highway’s clear—  
 Here”—he was interrupted by a knife,  
 With—“Damn your eyes! Your money or your life!”— (XI, 10, 5-8)

The couplet (“knife” and “life”) rounds off the stanza in a comic way to prove that Juan has been naive, and that his rosy view of England is too optimistic. As the couplet shows, his technique is reversion. The optimism of Juan is completely shattered as the couplet rounds off the stanza. Sure enough, a pointed twist concludes the stanza. This is a typical instance of reversing what has been built up since the preceding stanza concerning England as the seat of freedom. The rhyming of “knife” and “life” is ingenuously appropriate.

In stanza 26, where Byron makes a comparison of lamplights of such streets as Charing Cross and Pall Mall with those of the French, who became “a lamp-lighting nation” later than England. The couplet goes: “And when they grew so—on their new-found lantern, / Instead of wicks, they made a wicked man turn” (XI, 26, 5-8). Again the last two lines are unexpected. We are led to read about a new invention of lamplight and how it was used in England and France rather as a nondescript description until we reach this couplet. Byron suddenly brings in French politics, and surprises the reader by telling him the use the lamplight is put to. This is another case of reversion. On top of that, he indulges in a grotesque wordplay in the last line: “Instead of wicks, they make a wicked man turn.” The French, instead of turning up or down *wicks*, are said to have hanged *wicked* people from lamp-posts during the Revolution.

In this canto Byron devotes some fifteen stanzas (from 51 to 63) to the theme of the writing profession, which is one of the main themes of the epigram. Martial and Ben Jonson wrote many epigrams on this topic. In fact, Martial’s first epigram begins thus: “You read him, you ask for him, and here he is:

Martial, known the world over for his witty little books of epigrams.”<sup>23</sup> Ben Jonson talks to the reader: “Pray thee take care, that tak’s my book in hand, / To read it well; that is, to understand.”<sup>24</sup> Pope’s epigrams are, of course, full of vindictive comments of a literary kind.

Prior to this section, Byron has this couplet to conclude a stanza: “poems must confine / Themselves to Unity, like this of mine” (XI, 44, 7-8). This is said with tongue in cheek. His wit here is pointed, though mild, and comes with a bit of surprise, because we know by now that his poem is anything but being directed by Aristotelian sense of unity. Now, as he traces Juan’s life in London, Byron recalls his years of fame:

Even I—albeit I’m sure I did not know it  
 Nor sought of foolscap subjects to be king,—  
 Was reckoned, a considerable time,  
 The grand Napoleon of the realms of rhyme. (XI, 55, 7-8)

He has compared himself in the first half of the stanza with John Jackson, “the champion in the fisty ring”, and then, with Napoleon in the second half. There is an unexpected leap, rather bathetic, from Jackson to Napoleon, and also it comes as a surprise to see Byron identifying himself with a Napoleon in the contemporary literary world. The next stanza is even more surprising:

But Juan was my Moscow, and Faliero  
 My Leipsic, and my Mont Saint Jean seems Cain:  
 ‘La Belle Alliance’ of dunces down at zero,  
 Now that the Lion’s fall’n, may rise again:  
 But I will fall at least as fell my hero;  
 Nor reign at all, or as a *monarch* reign;  
 Or to some lonely isle of Jailors go,  
 With turncoat Southey for my turnkey Lowe. (XI, st.56)

The unpopularity of, and the outcry against, *Don Juan*, *Marino Faliero* and *Cain*, make Byron regard them as poetic failures, and lead him to associate his fortune with the decline and fall of Napoleon, culminating in the exile to St. Helena. In the couplet that finishes off the stanza, he envisages himself being exiled like Napoleon, and imprisoned and kept watch by Robert Southey as his jailor. “my turnkey Lowe” is Sir Hudson Lowe, governor of St Helena during Napoleon’s exile. “turncoat” and “turnkey” are

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**23:** Martial, *Epigrams*, I, 1.

**24:** Ben Jonson, *Epigrams*, 1.

phonetically and politically nicely juxtaposed, and the pronunciation of Lowe vaguely conveys what Byron thought of Southey. Southey appears in the couplet, because he embodies what Byron stands against, politically and poetically. Politically, Southey is anti-Napoleonic, and poetically, anti-Byronic.

Byron uses Southey also in the couplet of another stanza: “And that deep-mouthed Boeotian, ‘Savage Landor,’ / Has taken for a swan rogue Southey’s gander.” (XI, 59, 7-8) “Landor” and “gander” are cleverly rhymed, and “gander” and “Boeotian” both mean figuratively “a fool” or “simpleton”. The stanza treats Bryan Waller Procter, who wrote a moral poem in the manner of *Don Juan*. He was a Harrovian and Byron calls him “my gentle Euphues”. The two other lake poets are brought in: Coleridge (not much offence meant) and Wordsworth (some offence meant), because he is said to have only two or three supporters), and then comes the Southey part to finish the stanza. The movement of Byron’s critique starts out gently first, then neutrally, a little harshly, more harshly, and ending savagely with Southey. Thus the couplet finishes off the stanza with Southey as the ultimate butt of Byron’s attack.

I shall end my paper by choosing one stanza from “the ubi-sunt stanzas”. The following one shows “The unusual quickness of these common changes” (XI, 81, 8):

Where is Lord This? And where my Lady That?  
 The Honourable 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. (XI, 79)

The quotation appropriately lists things that have changed in the first six lines, and then comes the couplet, which mentions things that do not change: The Grenvilles and The Whigs. The former does not change because the Grenvilles keep changing or remain “Turned as usual”, and the latter, the Whigs, have remained out of power for many years. Byron concludes stanza 82 in a similar way with this couplet: “Nought’s permanent among the human race, / Except the Whigs not getting into place” (XI, 82, 7-8). Anyway this is a surprise ending to the reader, who has been fed all this while by a long list of things which undergo change.

I have treated only a handful of stanzas, and there are many others of epigrammatic nature I could look into. But the stanzas treated here, I hope, have shown some evidence that they have something in common with traditional epigrams, and that Byron and Martial share their interest in pointed ending, wordplay, outspokenness, satiric mode, brevity, wit, and the writing profession as a theme and so forth.

They are also interested in writing about quotidian happenings in everyday language in their respective works, *Don Juan* and *Epigrams*.