Religion and the Supernatural in Tirso de Molina's *El Burlador* and Byron's *Don Juan*

Katherine Kernberger

We can't show that Byron had direct knowledge of Tirso's late medieval morality play, *El Burlador de Sevilla y convidado de piedra*, but the essential elements of the Don Juan legend are transmitted through later works derived from the Spanish play. In particular, Byron links his character to Don John in Shadwell's 1676 play *The Libertine*:

> We all have seen him, in the pantomime,
> Sent to the Devil somewhat ere his time. (*Don Juan* I, 1)

From his first appearance in Tirso, the traditional Don Juan is an unrepentant seducer of women, a betrayer and murderer of men, and an unbeliever. This last trait – his rejection of the deity, of heaven and hell – is my main concern here. Tirso's Don Juan abandons his skepticism when he confronts the Stone Statue – a *revenant* that gives sure proof of the supernatural, if not of God – and is swept to Hell.

In contrast to Tirso's view of creation, the world of Byron's poem has no deity, only an indifferent, natural and realistic power, akin to Circumstance, "that unspiritual god," that Byron introduces in *Childe Harold* IV, stanza 125. Don Juan may be a believer; the narrator is not. Though we never learn Juan's ultimate fate, one sequence presents a *revenant* of sorts – the Black Friar of Norman Abbey. Juan's first encounter with the Friar is the only potentially supernatural event in the poem. Let's compare the traditional Don Juan ending with the last two cantos of Byron's *Don Juan*.

Tirso and Byron are poles apart in their treatment of Religion and the Supernatural. To begin with, Tirso's assumption that God intervenes in human affairs is at odds with Byron's secular universe. The Statue that acts as God's avenger in *El Burlador de Sevilla y convidado de piedra* is quite unlike the Black Friar at Norman Abbey. We could even say that Byron is referring to the reality (or unreality) of the friar when he comments on Juan's "morning face" after his midnight encounter with the Duchess of Fitz-Fulke: "I leave the thing a problem, like all things" (XVII, 13). Most important, the two supernatural visitors (whatever their reality or unreality) have very different reasons for seeking Don Juan, reasons which alter the emotional effects and narrative outcomes of the scenes. The fact that Byron did not finish his poem also leaves an open, rather than a closed, ending.

To Tirso, the reality of God's involvement in human lives, the punishment imposed on sinners, and the vengeance exacted from them were all self-evident. God's vengeance stands at the core of his fictional narrative, delivering a pious message to the audience. The warnings given to Don Juan throughout the play repeat this message, and the warnings are not about his sexual sins, but about his rejection of God's power. In Act I, Don Juan's uncle Don Pedro, his servant Catalinón, and the fishergirl Tisbea, all deliver some variation of the uncle's warning: "But don't forget that punishment, death, and Hell await people like you" (I, 1).[1] Don Pedro says this even though he lies to the King of Naples to cover up his nephew's escape after his seduction of the Duquesa Isabela. In Act II, 2, Don Juan's father Don Diego,[2] delivers a powerful warning, joining God in cursing his son: "May God punish you according to your deserts. . . . I say your punishment is at hand. Profaner of God's name, God will be a terrible judge on the day of your death." It is as a "profaner of God's name" that Don Juan will be carried off to Hell.

Don Juan brushes these warnings off with "tan largo me lo fiáis" – "plenty of time for that" – though by Act III he is more likely to speak in ways that suggest he has begun to fear divine intervention. These qualifications are expressed in subjunctive clauses that sound as if he is bargaining with God: "If I am not to be punished until the day of my death" and "If you give me that much time…" (III, i). In promising to marry the shepherdess Aminta, he delivers this quibble – "If I do not keep my word, let God send a man to ensnare and kill me. [*Aside.*] A dead man, of course. God forbid he should be alive" – which may forecast the scene with the Commander's statue.

By Act III, Don Juan has seduced four women – the Duquesa Isabela, Doña Ana, the fishergirl Tisbea (Thisbe), and the shepherdess Aminta – and thereby also betrayed the four men who hope to marry them, the Duque

---

[1] **1:** The English translations come from Adrienne Schizzano and Oscar Mandel's text in Mandel's *The Theatre of Don Juan.*

[2] **2:** The strictly moral Don Diego is not at all like Byron's Don Juan's philandering father, Don Jóse, who is guilty himself as a "lineal son of Eve" of "gathering various fruit."

Octavio, the Marqués de la Mota, the fisherman Anfriso, and the shepherd Batricio. Don Juan feels no compunction for these deceptions and betrayals, but considers his conquests signs of honor. In addition, he seems indifferent to having killed the Commander Don Gonzalo de Ulloa, who had defended his daughter Ana. To Don Juan, killing the father (in what might be justified as self-defense) is merely collateral damage in the seduction of the daughter. He lacks a moral sense.

In the first of three meetings with the statue, Don Juan sees the stone monument to his victim and jokingly invites the effigy to join him for dinner. Reading the inscription at the base of the statue – "Here the most loyal of knights expects God's vengeance on a traitor" (III, 3) – he says: "You've been waiting a long time for this vengeance. If you still want it, you'd better wake up from your sleep. Or are you waiting for me to die? If you are, give up hoping, because I've plenty of time till then, plenty of time" (III, 3). In this scene the statue does not show any sign of "life" – it is merely a stone monument – and Don Juan is still convinced that he has plenty of time to repent: "tan largo me lo fiáis."

He is wrong. By inviting the statue to dine with him, he sets in motion God's vengeance. He still feels secure in his courage and indifferent to religious matters. Oscar Mandel, in the introduction to his collection of Don Juan plays, claims that Tirso's character "feels no hostility toward society or religion; in fact, he has no connection with society or religion *until the connection is forced upon him*" (my italics, 17-18). Don Juan is forced to confront that connection in his second meeting with the statue. The supernatural, incarnated in stone rather than flesh, knocks at his door and takes center stage, moving and speaking. The Statue invites him to dine in his chapel. Here Don Juan encounters the reality of a realm he has denied. The sins that others have preached against and that he has committed without remorse turn out to have consequences. A true *hidalgo*, he still keeps up an appearance of bravado and promises to return the visit. We listen as he shakes off his terror:

> Pah! I must be imagining all this: fear of the dead is the basest of all fears. If I don't cower before the noblest men alive, powerful men, reasonable and endowed with souls, why should I tremble before a dead body? Tomorrow I shall be his guest in the chapel. All Seville will be terrified and astounded by my courage. (III, 4)

By dining with the dead man, he will assert the primacy of his code of aristocratic honor and bravery: regardless of the danger, he will face his challenger, whatever the consequences. And his triumph will be displayed to all Seville.

True to his aristocratic code and to his oath, Don Juan returns to the chapel where he discovers that it is now too late to repent, confess, or be reconciled to God. He watches as black figures set a black table made of the lid of a tomb and offer a hideous meal of "vipers and scorpions" served with a vintage of "gall and vinegar." His blood is freezing, yet the handshake of the Statue burns him – merely a taste of what will come in the afterlife – and he sinks with Don Gonzalo and the tomb down to Hell.[3] The rituals of religion have been denied the mocker of Seville, and the hollowness of his leitmotif – plenty of time for that – has been revealed.

This scene, reminiscent of the fate of Faustus in Marlowe's play, reminds us that we are not far in Tirso from the medieval morality plays depicting the Devil and showing Hell mouth receiving the sinners. However, the dramatic placement of Faustus' descent as the last scene (like Manfred's death in Byron's play) is lost in Tirso's drama. Here we return to a scene showing the ordinary world of human vengeance after the Statue has dragged Don Juan down. All the narrative threads of the play are neatly tied up and all the couples reunited.[4]

In Byron's poem, we see no evidence of the hand of God working in the universe. In this epic there are no gods or goddesses descending to intervene in human affairs. No Ino lends her scarf to bring Juan ashore, no Athena arranges for a Princess to come to wash wedding garments at the beach. Whatever fate guides Juan's adventures, it is the whim of the narrator, not of a deity. We know Byron's "materials" for his poem as he expresses them in an 1821 letter to John Murray:

---

[3] **3:** In Tirso's play the statue has come explicitly to exact God's vengeance, but it has a personal grudge against Don Juan, both for killing him and for seducing his daughter. When Don Juan excuses himself by saying that the seduction did not succeed because Doña Ana saw the "hoax" in time and called for help, the Statue reminds the Don that his "intentions" condemn him.

[4] **4:** In the intervening scenes, the forces allied against Don Juan have gathered. The seduced women and their men level their accusations and ask the King for earthly vengeance on him. The King of Castile has arranged for Don Juan to be married to Isabela, repairing her damaged reputation. But the testimonies of Aminta, Tisbea, and Isabela, joined to those of Duque Octavio and the Marqués de la Mota, convince both the King and the Don's father, Don Diego Tenorio, to arrest and punish him. While Duque Octavio has not yet regained Isabela, the Marqués will be reunited with Doña Ana, and fisherman and the shepherd will have their brides. Into their deliberations, enters Catalinón, delivering news of the death and damnation scene we have witnessed in the chapel.

> I meant to take him the tour of Europe – with a proper mixture of siege – battle – and adventure – and to make him finish as Anacharsis Cloots – in the French Revolution. . . . I meant to have him a Cavalier Servente in Italy and a cause for a divorce in England – and a Sentimental "Werther-faced man" in Germany. . . . But I had not quite fixed whether to make him end in Hell – or in an unhappy marriage, – not knowing which would be the severest. The Spanish tradition says Hell – but it is probably only an Allegory of the other state. (BLJ VIII 78)

Although Byron promises us "a panorama view of hell" (I, 200), "new mythological machinery, / And very handsome supernatural scenery" (I, 202), we wait until the sixteenth canto for our first glimpse of what may be a supernatural event – the Black Friar in the gallery of Norman Abbey. The rest of the poem seems strictly realistic; from the shipwreck in Canto II to the Siege of Ismail in Cantos VI to VII, we watch natural processes or human, not divine, will in action.[5]

Juan is nominally a believer in Catholic doctrines – but when he prays, he turns to the aesthetically pleasing "sweet portraits of the Virgin Mary" – not to "grisly saints and martyrs hairy" (II 150). The narrator reminds us that most people, like Juan's tutor Pedrillo, die "Like most in the belief in which they're bred" (II, 76).[6] Whether Juan will, like the Byronic narrator, develop into a skeptic, we never learn. Nevertheless, Juan's experiences in the course of the poem seem to have chipped away at his innocence and left him "a little 'blasé" (XII, 81), perhaps not merely in his approach to love and women.

The narrator notes that the difficulty of determining the truth about metaphysics lies in the impossibility of proving anything about:

> . . . what no one ever could
> Decide, and every body one day will
> Know very clearly – or at least lie still. (XI, 4)

Death may simply be the absence of life and the immortality of the soul a fiction, as Byron suggests in describing his real-life discovery of the commandant of Ravenna lying wounded in the street in front of his house. We cannot determine what death is through any power of logic or reasoning:

> I gazed . . .
> To try if I could wrench aught out of death,
> Which should confirm – or shake, or make a faith. –
>
> But it was all a Mystery; here we are,
> And there we go – but where? five bits of lead,
> Or three, or two, or one, send very far! (V, 38-9)

For Byron and the narrator, their control over the fictional world replaces what Tirso and his audience attributed to God's decree. (After the poet's digression concerning the death of the commandant – an event in the real world – we return to the fiction as Juan is whisked off to the Sultan's harem.)

---

[5] **5:** At the end of Canto I, he announces that the story behind his epic is "actually true" and sends skeptical readers off to consult the available sources:

> If any person doubt it, I appeal
> To History, Tradition, and to Facts,
> To newspapers, whose truth all know and feel,
> To plays in five, and operas in three acts;
> All these confirm my statement a good deal,
> But that which more completely faith exacts
> Is, that myself, and several now in Seville,
> *Saw* Juan's last elopement with the Devil. (I, 203)

All of these sources are lumped together despite their very different potential truth value. Plays and operas are usually fictitious; newspaper and eye-witness accounts (while more immediately connected to the events they relate than literary works) still are notorious for bias and error; history and tradition are not the same thing, and both may be short on "facts."

[6] **6:** The 200 souls who die in the wreck will have to wait for confirmation of their deaths – something unlikely to happen since only Juan comes out alive – before their parsimonious relatives at home pay for their salvation: "When over Catholics the ocean rolls, / They must wait several week before a mass is said . . . Because, till people know what's come to pass, / They won't lay out their money on the dead" (II, 55).

By the time Juan encounters his first revenant in Canto XVI, he has acquired a long list of women himself, though not through his initiative – except with Leila – and that connection is altruistic. All the traditional features of the Don have been inverted. Juan is never the seducer, but always the seduced. The married (or widowed) women – Donna Julia, the Sultana Gulbeyaz, and the Empress Catherine – have sought him out. The single women – Haidée and Dudù (though a concubine is perhaps neither single nor married) – have responded to his beauty,[7] while the child Leila looks up to him, as her rescuer. Unlike Tirso's Don, he never abandons his women, "Unless compelled by fate, or wave, or wind, / Or near relations" (VIII, 54). He is certainly never a "trickster" or a "mocker" – two words used to translate the "el burlador" of Tirso's title. He does not set out to conquer women or to deceive them by disguise or false promises of love or marriage. Alice Levine points out in her article, *Byron's* Don Juan: *The Burlador Burlesqued*, he is a "naïf who is seduced and falls in love," he is "passive and often takes the feminine role," he is "repeatedly the victim of more powerful men and women" (Levine 152-3). In this regard Byron's and Tirso's titular heroes share little beyond a name.

When Juan arrives for the autumn season at Norman Abbey, three more women become potential suitors for his attention. Lady Adeline Amundeville, the Duchess of Fitz-Fulke, and Miss Aurora Raby are lined up by the poet, perhaps as echoes of the women from Juan's past.

Like Tirso's Don, our Juan also has, in a sense, three meetings with his revenant. Byron sets the scene of Juan's first encounter with the Friar with all the available trappings from gothic romance – full moon at midnight, confused and restless hero (rather than endangered heroine) gazing out the casement of the old abbey on the picturesque landscape, and a gothic gallery with the pictured dead (though none of the portraits steps out of its frame as in Walpole's *Castle of Otranto*):

> As Juan mused on Mutability–
> . . .
> No sound except the Echo of his sigh,
> Or step, ran sadly through that antique house –
> When suddenly he heard – or thought so – nigh –
> A supernatural Agent – or a Mouse –
> Whose little nibbling rustle will embarrass
> Most people as it plays along the Arras. (XVI, 20)

Byron's comic rhyme – embarrass / arras – and the narrator's skeptical view that turns a "supernatural agent" into a mouse reduce the gothic effect.

> Into this scene walks the dark figure of the Friar:
> It was no Mouse – but lo! a Monk, arrayed
> In cowl and beads and dusky garb appeared –
> . . . and as he passed Juan by
> Glanced, without pausing, on him a bright eye.
>
> Juan was petrified – he had heard a hint
> Of such a Spirit in these halls of old –
> But thought – like most men – there was nothing in't. (XVI, 21-22)

Juan asks himself whether he had actually seen this, "Or was it a Vapour?" (XVI, 22.) The narrator does not help us out of this dilemma, however, and Juan is transfixed by the figure, which has at least one suspiciously earthly trait, its bright eye. In fact, Byron's simile ("As stands a Statue") recalls the Commander's stone monument. But here it is Juan who is immobile and speechless:

> And Juan gazed upon it with a stare,
> But could not speak or move – but, on its base
> As stands a Statue, stood: he felt his hair
> Twine like a knot of Snakes around his face –
> He taxed his tongue for words, which were not granted,
> To ask the reverend person what he wanted. (XVI, 23)

7: When he washes up on Haidée's island, Juan is described in these terms: "like a wither'd lily, on the land / His slender frame and pallid aspect lay, / As fair a thing as e'er was form'd of clay" (II, 120).

All the circumstances of this first encounter with the Friar are left open-ended. Juan sees the black form and questions his perception. It can't really be there. It seems at least that Juan is hesitant to believe in ghosts. Was this a real ghost? Was it a member of the house party at Norman Abbey? I am tempted to believe that Byron intends us to expect something like Ann Radcliffe's "Explained Supernatural" in which all potential mysteries are solved by rational devices.

The second encounter is really a literary one: the next morning after breakfast, Lady Adeline, prompted by her husband, delivers her ballad on the Black Friar. This monk haunts Norman Abbey, the ancestral estate of the Amundevilles, coming explicitly to avenge the loss of the Abbey and choosing particular events (usually marked by the rites of the church) in the lives of the lords:

> By the marriage bed of their Lords, 'tis said,
> He flits on the bridal Eve –
> And 'tis held as faith, to their bed of death
> He comes – but not to grieve. –
>
> When an heir is born, he is heard to mourn –
> And when aught is to befall
> That antient line – in the pale Moonshine
> He walks from Hall to Hall. (XVI, 3-4 of Ballad)

Does some disaster hang over the Amundevilles?[8] What business would the spirit have with Don Juan, a mere chance guest at the Abbey?

One member of the house party, the Duchess of Fitz-Fulke, takes particular interest in the legend and asks for "a more detailed narration" (XVI, 53), perhaps for her own undisclosed reasons. The narrator declines to oblige, almost dismissing the story as superstition, yet allowing that some people still "half credit" the possibilities of supernatural matters:

> For Immaterialism's a serious Matter,
> So that even those whose Faith is the most great
> In Souls immortal, shun them tête-à-tête. (XVI, 114)

Ghosts, after all, are a confirmation of the spiritual realm. If one believes in the immortality of the soul, one should perhaps believe in ghosts.

Unable to sleep, Juan again walks the hall at night, in rather convenient undress, given what is to come. He hears the figure approach and sees it emerge from the shadows:

> It is the sable Friar as before,
> With awful footsteps regular as rhyme –
> Or (as rhymes may be in these days) much more;
> Again, through shadows of the Night sublime,
> . . . . the Monk made his blood curdle. (XVI, 113)

In this third encounter, Juan overcomes his fear and tries to test the reality of the figure he sees. His first attempt to touch the specter appears to confirm its immateriality as a disembodied spirit:

> Juan put forth one arm – Eternal Powers! –
> It touched no soul – no body – but the wall. (XVI, 120)

His second thrust finds the Duchess, in masquerade as the creature conjured up by Adeline's ballad performance:

> And Juan, puzzled but still curious, thrust
> His other arm forth – wonder upon wonder! –
> It pressed upon a hard but glowing bust,
> Which beat as if there was a warm heart under. (XVI, 122)

---

[8] **8:** If so, is it connected with Juan, who interests Lady Adeline perhaps more than he should? She is, after all, "the fair most fatal Juan ever met," and Byron's letter to John Murray did say that Juan would be the "cause for a divorce in England," a proceeding that cannot be expected in the case of either the Duchess or Aurora (BLJ VIII 78.)

Juan's skepticism in confronting the Friar, his unwillingness to trust appearances, leads him to check the facts and to reveal the materiality of his third encounter. The poem does not supply any means of determining the reality of the apparition Juan met on the first night, as the narrator avoids confirming or denying it. We have one example of the "explained supernatural" *à la* Radcliffe and one event left unsolved, "a problem, like all things."

The differences between Tirso's and Byron's handling of the Supernatural in their treatments of the legend derive from the gulf between their respective cultural worlds, as well as between their personalities. Tirso's essentially medieval view of the Christian God and man's sinful nature sets him in opposition to Byron's tendency to doubt all received doctrines and to test facts by appealing to his own experience.

Because Byron's poem is unfinished, we never learn what happens to Juan; whether he is doomed to an unhappy marriage or sent down to Hell is left unresolved. Byron labels the latter, traditional ending as allegorical, perhaps giving us his interpretation of religion itself.

Works Cited

Byron, George Gordon, Lord. *Don Juan,* ed. McGann.

Levine, Alice. "Byron's *Don Juan:* The Burlador Burlesqued." *The Hispanic Connection: Spanish and Spanish-American Literature in the Arts of the World.*, ed. Da Silva (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004), 147-158.

Mandel, Oscar, ed. *The Theatre of Don Juan: A Collection of Plays and Views: 1630-1963* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1963).

Schizzano, Adrienne, and Oscar Mandel. "Playboy of Seville, or Supper with a Statue." *The Theatre of Don Juan.* Trans. Schizzano and Mandel (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P 1963), 47-99.