

## Byron's View of the Ottoman Empire: The Case of *Don Juan*

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### Abstract

This paper covers Byron's view of the Ottoman Empire through his famous poem *Don Juan*. Byron is deemed as central to the Romantic vision. His visit to Turkey and the Turkish seraglio made him a bridge-builder between the East and the West where we can easily recognize the patriarchal despotism and the sexual and cultural wealth. Byron's memories of his Eastern experiences had almost faded by the time he wrote *Don Juan*, so it can be summed up that the material in it is not the result of first hand experiences, but Byron's deep readings and observations of the Ottoman Empire's history and manners. This is where Byron's attitude towards the East in *Don Juan* comes from seen as calculated, slight, and satirical. Having established the direction of Byron's approach which is concentrated in the fifth and sixth cantos and referred to in the seventh and eighth, it can be said that Byron's involvement with the East in *Don Juan* is mainly focused on the seraglio, the symbol of Eastern Power and fraud and the most powerful aspect of the Muslim East. In the final chapter of this paper I further explain the Byronic hero introduced by Byron and Don Juan as a typical Byronic hero who seeks adventure and is seen as mixture of good and evil.

**Key words:** Ottoman Empire, seraglio, wanderings, Byronic hero

### Апстракт

Овој труд го обработува погледот на Бајрон кон Отоманската империја преку неговата поема *Дон Жуан*. Бајрон се смета како централен бит во Романтичарската визија. Неговата посета на Турција и турскиот харем го прави мостоповрзувач на Истокот и Западот каде лесно се препознава патриархалниот деспотизам и сексуалното и културно богатство. Сеќавањата на Бајрон за неговите источни искуства биле скоро заборавени во времето кога ја пишувал поемата, но може да се заклучи дека напишаното во поемата е резултат не на неговите првични искуства туку длабоките читања и набљудувања на Бајрон за Отоманската империја и манири. Оттука доаѓа и гледиштето на Бајрон како предвидено, занемарувачко и сатирично. Оформувајќи го своето согледување во шестиот и седмиот дел од поемата на Бајрон, може да се каже дека Дон Жуан е главно фокусиран на харемот – симболот на моќта на Истокот, измамата како најмоќен аспект на Муслиманскиот Исток.

**Клучни зборови:** Отоманска империја, харем, лутање, Бајроновски херој

## 1. Introduction

Being considered as a masterpiece, Byron's *Don Juan* – a poem spanning seventeen cantos, often called the epic of its time, is also regarded as shocking and controversial because it is equally involved with its own contemporary world at all levels – social, political, literary and ideological. On the one hand *Don Juan* shows a special intimate notion of Byron's psychology. He expresses the story by a narrator who speaks for himself. Speaking of that, there was nothing unusual in Byron's visit to the Ottoman Empire. When Byron first visited the Ottoman Empire, the empire was powerful a lot. It consisted of the quarter of Europe, half the Middle East and part of North Africa too. That was a fascinating power in terms of Islam and domination of the enchanting remains of antiquity such as the pyramids, Palmyra, Athens and Delphi.

The character of Don Juan is a constant seeker of meaning rather than one who already knows the moral basis for his actions. Byron developed several Eastern and Turkish affinities while he was in Turkey and Greece. Since Byron's memories of his Eastern experiences had almost faded by the time he wrote *Don Juan*, it can be easily noticed that the material in it is not the result of first hand experiences, but rather of Byron's deep readings and observations of the Ottoman Empire's history and manners. Thus Byron's attitude toward the East in *Don Juan* is calculated, slight, and satirical. Having established the direction of Byron's approach which is concentrated in the fifth and sixth cantos and referred to in the seventh and eighth, it can be said that Byron's involvement with the East in *Don Juan* is mainly focused on the seraglio, the symbol of Eastern Power and fraud and the most powerful aspect of the Muslim East.

According to Andrew Rutherford, Byron uses variations in satiric texture that justifies his assertion of Don Juan being in some way moral. All his immoral episodes, like the adventures in the harem are presented as amusement, entertainment i.e. a light satire. "It expresses his deep hatred of emotional and intellectual dishonesty or delusion, his contempt for hypocrisy, false sentiment, and cant of every kind." (Rutherford 146)

### 1.2 Don Juan and the seraglio

It can be easily seen that the Byron's interest in the seraglio can be categorised into two levels: social and political. In terms of social norms, Byron shows the dwellers of the seraglio - the Sultan and his favourite wife, Sultana. His maids and eunuch expose the perverse relationships which characterize the ties among them, as well as those which they have with the outside world. This deviance is easily felt in the dramatic encounter of Sultana and Don Juan where the Sultan's attitude to his wives many maids in the harem reveals the most secretive part of the seraglio and the Ottoman Palace.

At the political level, Byron seems to criticize the reckless, indifferent, and lustful master of the seraglio, and especially blames him for the catastrophic siege of Ismail which resulted in the death of thousands innocent Turkish people. Moreover, this seraglio helps Byron launch his severest and unjust attack against the tyranny of the Sultan and his wife.

According to Byron, the Sultan and Gulbeyaz abuse the entrusted power by their people. It is important to remember the Byron's merciful fight against the Turkish tyrants, especially in the Greek Independence war against the Ottoman Empire. This actually does not prevent him from reverence

and praise of the courage and heroism of Turkish soldiers who die in the defence of their homes, and from making Juan, his hero, who indeed risks his life for the sake of saving Leila, the orphan Turkish child. At this point Byron succeeds in accomplishing an ultimate level of moral impartiality in his objective attitude toward the siege and subsequent destruction of the Turkish city of Ismail. This is the biggest realism in the biggest sense including the good and bad elements of human nature. Byron attacks the cant of glory and recognises the battle and the men who can show great courage and gives them credit for it:

The troops, already disembark'd, push'd on  
To take a battery on the right; the others,  
Who landed lower down, their landing done,  
Had set to work as briskly as their brothers:  
Being grenadiers, they mounted one by one,  
Cheerful as children climb the breasts of mothers,  
O'er the entrenchment and the palisade,  
Quite orderly, as if upon parade. (Don Juan 113-120)

In fact, Byron admonishes all kind of aimless wars and vain generals. He does not weaken his indictment of war but reinforces it by making us feel the honesty and fairness. He presents the fortification of Ismail and the tactics of the defenders and attackers, the failures and successes on each side. Byron's visit to Turkey and Greece, his tolerance and broad-mindedness to the strange and unfamiliar have worked all together to shape his impartial, unbiased attitude toward the Turks. However, Byron's fascination for the Ottoman Empire can be seen as cosmopolitanism.

As a true European, he had an opened mind and opened heart for other countries, an openness which is not very common nowadays. He was no more exclusive in his choice of countries than in his choice of lovers. Byron did not adopt one country and condemn others as many Balkan enthusiasts and this makes him unique. He wrote that most of the countries are the same for him and he is the citizen of the world where he is present at a certain point and of course, wished for the emancipation of all countries, even his own. But still, all citizens do not share equal characteristics and when writers deal with them, they produce kinds of heroes seen by their points of view. Such is the case with Don Juan - being literally treated as his kind of hero.

## 2. Don Juan – the perfect image of the Byronic Hero

The term "Byronic hero" seen as another type of romantic hero got the name after Byron who was firstly introduced by Byron's famous poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. The historian and critic Lord Macaulay (1843) made a description of this hero as "a man proud, moody, and cynical, with defiance on his brow, and misery in his heart, a scorner of his kind, implacable in revenge, yet capable of deep and strong affection". Byron created many Byronic heroes in his writing such as Childe Harold, Manfred and of course Don Juan.

Bronte sisters who were reading Byron a lot, also created this type of Byronic heroes influenced by Byron's works through their novels *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre* and others. These heroes possess

attractiveness, virtue, a type of their own darkness and for women they may become a heart throb by their own virtue and qualities. We can see Don Juan's physical attractiveness described in Canto I:

Young Juan was sixteen years of aye  
Tall handsome, slender but well-knit he seemed  
Active, though not so sprightly as a page (Don Juan 424-426)

Lord Byron did not want to make the military heroes like Vernon, Cumberland, Wolfe, Ferdinand nor the Revolutionary leaders like Barnave, Brissot as central in his poem. Bernard Beatty, a famous critic of Byron, comments: "Byron's hero seems to resemble his original only in his name and in his sequence of love encounters. There are, however some important underlying connections between them." (Beatty 236)

The Byronic heroes share their own unique personality and philosophy and then are not often handsome, good, smart or dignified. They are often seen as mixture of good and evil and these heroes resemble from other epic heroes exactly for these qualities. This can be seen from the opening lines of Don Juan:

I want a hero; an uncommon want.  
When every year and month sends forth a new one,  
Till after cloying the gazettes with cant  
The age discovers he is not the true one. (Don Juan 1-4)

### 3. Conclusion

In terms of hero's heroic virtue, Don Juan can be taken as an adventurous piece of art. Exactly from this hero we can get the real picture of the Byronic hero. This hero is a person who does not hesitate to do an immoral thing. He would be a person who seeks power and breaks all the chains of authority. Don Juan does not want to lose any battle. In the case when Alfonso wanted to kill him, he tried to get away from the situation by knocking Alfonso down although he was forced to leave his only dress. The main protagonist in this poem responds the love of Julia, enjoying her company and consuming her love. Here the attitude of the womanizer is passive. We cannot see the seriousness and emotions because Juan enjoys the physical love and never cares about the girl's feelings. Here Don Juan uses many occasions without any moral or social responsibility. When his illegal love has been discovered he falls down in the darkness.

Finally, it can be summed up that the Byronic hero is interested in sexuality, escaping in a tricky way, journeys, and adventures and of course, disobedience. Although sometimes seems like a villain, while reading the poem we still feel sympathy for this hero.

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