

Lord Byron, “Don Juan” (1818-24) — Canto 1 [Overture]

I.

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;
Of such as these I should not care to vaunt,
I'll therefore take our ancient friend Don Juan —
We all have seen him, in the pantomime,
Sent to the Devil somewhat ere his time.

II.

Vernon, the butcher Cumberland, Wolfe, Hawke,
Prince Ferdinand, Granby, Burgoyne, Keppel, Howe,
Evil and good, have had their tithe of talk,
And filled their sign-posts then, like Wellesley now;
Each in their turn like Banquo's monarchs stalk,
Followers of Fame, “nine farrow” of that sow:
France, too, had Buonaparté and Dumourier
Recorded in the Moniteur and Courier.

III.

Barnave, Brissot, Condorcet, Mirabeau,
Petion, Cloutz, Danton, Marat, La Fayette
Were French, and famous people, as we know;
And there were others, scarce forgotten yet,
Joubert, Hoche, Marceau, Lannes, Desaix, Moreau,
With many of the military set,
Exceedingly remarkable at times,
But not at all adapted to my rhymes.

IV.

Nelson was once Britannia's god of War,
And still should be so, but the tide is turned;
There's no more to be said of Trafalgar,
'T is with our hero quietly inurned;
Because the army's grown more popular,
At which the naval people are concerned;
Besides, the Prince is all for the land-service.
Forgetting Duncan, Nelson, Howe, and Jervis.

V.

Brave men were living before Agamemnon
And since, exceeding valorous and sage,
A good deal like him too, though quite the same
none;
But then they shone not on the poet's page
And so have been forgotten: — I condemn none,

But can't find any in the present age.

Fit for my poem (that is, for my new one);
So, as I said, I'll take my friend Don Juan

VI

Most epic poets plunge “in medias res”
(Horace makes this the heroic turnpike road),
And then your hero tells, whene'er you please,
What went before—by way of episode,
While seated after dinner at his ease,
Beside his mistress in some soft abode,
Palace, or garden, paradise, or cavern,
Which serves the happy couple for a tavern.

VII

That is the usual method, but not mine—
My way is to begin with the beginning;
The regularity of my design
Forbids all wandering as the worst of sinning,
And therefore I shall open with a line
(Although it cost me half an hour in spinning),
Narrating somewhat of Don Juan's father,
And also of his mother, if you'd rather.

[...]

CC

My poem's epic, and is meant to be
Divided in twelve books; each book containing,
With love, and war, a heavy gale at sea,
A list of ships, and captains, and kings reigning,
New characters; the episodes are three:
A panoramic view of Hell's in training,
After the style of Virgil and of Homer,
So that my name of Epic's no misnomer.

CCI

All these things will be specified in time,
With strict regard to Aristotle's rules,
The Vade Mecum of the true sublime,
Which makes so many poets, and some fools:
Prose poets like blank-verse, I'm fond of rhyme,
Good workmen never quarrel with their tools;
I've got new mythological machinery,
And very handsome supernatural scenery.

Byron's eleven-syllable line is permanently off-balance and thus provides an ideal vehicle for a somewhat grandiose form of comic poetry. His sense of topical allusion—all the names of the day in politics and literature with a good dose of classical knowledge—immediately grabbed and held contemporary readers' attention and both “Childe Harold” and “Don Juan” enjoyed unprecedented fashionable success, resulting in the phenomenon of literary ‘lionisation’. Byron built persistently on his character as a lover, rover, and a man of high spirit in adventures in such as in his ultimate (and fatal) support for the Greeks in their War of Independence against the Ottomans—a conflict which was eventually won by British investment and army intervention for less-than idealistic reasons.