

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## Lord Byron (1788-1824) *Poems, Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, Don Juan (B, 1671-1730)*

Child of aristocracy on both sides, inheritor too of both extreme handsomeness and a club foot, Lord Byron represents the adventurer/dissolute, /genius in the fullest expression of what was to be the Romantic spirit. How appropriate that, after a life of erotic expenditure, passionate friendship—as with the poet Shelley and his wife-- ultimately Byron met his death fighting for Greek Independence in the War against the Turks. This cause, of real and symbolic power throughout Europe, was widely seen in the West as a Battle to release the imprisoned spirit of Ancient Hellenism. Byron was “heroic” to the end.

*Question: What is the Secret of Byron's narrative skill?*

We turn to a question of prosody, first of all. Byron took the *ottava rima* form of *Don Juan* from a strong tradition in Italian verse. (The scheme is *abababcc*; with an alternation of four and five stress syllables in the rhyming lines. One would say a bouncy, jocose and impish scheme, and so it is.) So what is the secret of Byron's placing a set of tales of romance into the rollicking onward advance of this meter? He never pauses, he presses forward without unnecessary commentary, he mocks himself regularly, he mocks Don Juan regularly, he keeps his own person flittingly intrusive throughout the tale; and above all, of course, he is a master of the erotic tease, as Chaucer had been. *Are we getting close to Byron's secret?*

*Comparative Literature:*

1. The long poem before you is both narratively enchanting (my opinion) and hard to duplicate in other literatures. I suggest you refresh yourself on the libretto of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, which was completed in 1788. In that opera, with a noted libretto by Lorenzo da Ponte, Don Giovanni comes off as a charming and obsessed sexual predator, attracted to an endless series of women, whom he loves to enumerate. By making this comparison between poetry and opera you will, among other things, double your awareness of Byron's passive Don Juan, to whom women just happen. You will also be asking yourself about the difference of music from narrative poetry, as a medium for constructing character. What difference do you see?

2. In your *Norton Anthology*, 1671, you see a provocative quotation from the French critic and early sociologist, Hippolyte Taine (1828-1893). In essence, Taine praises Byron's work lavishly, while rating the work of Coleridge, Wordsworth and Keats on a far lower level. You might ponder that passage, which reflects a view uncommon, even unimaginable, at our time. Taine's evaluation runs with the spirit of his own time, and counter to the evaluation most critics and historians would give today. All that is neither here or there, as far as Byron's “true value” goes, but it is an alarm bell indicator, that literary historical evaluations blow with the wind of their times. In 18<sup>th</sup> century France, people in the know typically scorned Shakespeare, for his vulgarity. Among earlier Christian writers ancient Greek literature was viewed as nothing more than a cesspool of bad moral examples. Times change. Is there lasting value in the productions of literature? Have you observed such taste changes in the literary development of your own time?