

D. L. Macdonald's "Derek Walcott's Don Juans": Walcott's Debt to Tirso de Molina*

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After many years as a hispanist teaching in an English department I have come to the somewhat disturbing conclusion that the literature of Spain is too often disregarded by students of other European languages or literatures. Surprisingly little interest is roused by any Spanish writer other than Cervantes and García Lorca (who too would probably be unknown but for his violent death and its political implications) and, strangely enough, scholars of the Elizabethan stage take little notice of Spain's coeval Golden Age drama, even though this theatrical efflorescence produced thousands of plays and exerted a pervasive and profound effect on the revered French classical theatre. Little known even to many of those who teach him in his nineteenth and twentieth century English incarnations is the Spanish genesis of the most famous figure to emerge from that tradition—Don Juan. D. L. Macdonald's essay is perhaps a first step towards a long overdue critical evaluation of the importance of Tirso on the Don Juan figure in the English tradition.

It seems unlikely that the ur-Don Juan play, *El burlador de Sevilla* by Tirso de Molina (Gabriel Tellez, 1580?-1648), should remain largely unexplored by scholars of English literature. But this is, indeed, the case. The field is almost completely open, and I will take the opportunity of this response to show that Tirso's play can provide some useful insights into the reason why its swashbuckling protagonist is so psychologically and dramaturgically agile that he can vault over the barriers of language and culture into the literary traditions of England and America, as well

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as so many others. To know what the original Don Juan is a reader acquainted with him only from his non-Spanish descendants ought to know what he is not. He is not, first of all, a prodigious lover. While the conquests of Mozart's Don Giovanni are so numerous that his capacity to recall them attests as much to his extraordinary memory ("Ma in Spagna son gia mille e tre") as to his ability to achieve them does his remarkable virility, Tirso's Don Juan seduces only three or at most four women (one triumph being controversial). Second, the manner of his "seductions" does not bring Don Juan enormous erotic credit, since all but one are effected by impersonating other men, the lovers of his "conquests," the men they really desire. Third, he is not a sensualist: Indeed, inasmuch as he articulates no keen physical desire for women, why he bothers with sex at all is a central question of the play. Fourth, he does not appear to be a misogynist (although this is a popular explanation for his seductions); at any rate, he does not say anything explicitly hostile about women, and his *burlas*, his sexual pranks (*burlar* means to joke at the expense of someone else) are directed as much at the lovers of the ladies he seduces as the women themselves. Finally, except arrogance, Don Juan seems to boast few human traits at all: Nothing he says suggests that he possesses any interiority.¹

Leaving his protagonist hollow, denying him revealing soliloquies which would force us to concentrate on the motives for Don Juan's actions, Tirso de Molina, a Mercederian monk, in a theological play justifying damnation, compels us to focus on the actions themselves, their moral implications, and their infernal consequences. As to what Don Juan is psychologically (as opposed to morally), why he does what he does, Tirso allows others—his readers and his successors—to fill in and shape the empty mold as they will, color it as they wish, to create, in effect, their own conception of Don Juan.

A reader of Professor Macdonald's "Derek Walcott's Don Juans" soon realizes that the Nobel Laureate from Trinidad in *The Joker of Seville* has created a Don Juan very much in the spirit—and often in details—of Tirso's Don Juan. Macdonald explicitly traces several of the dominant strains in Walcott's Don Juan directly from Tirso; other Tirsian qualities can be inferred from Macdonald's discussion.

No less a trait than the one which defines Walcott's Don Juan, for example, is first found in the Don Juan of *El burlador de Sevilla*. The egoistic isolation of Walcott's protagonist, the basic condition of his existence, which makes him "a nobody" whose "name is Nobody," is little more than a variation of the puerile selfishness of Tirso's Don Juan which renders him "a man without a name." Macdonald's observation about Walcott's protagonist is equally true of Tirso's: "Insofar as a man's identity is based on his relationships—on his being a husband, father, or son—then Don Juan, who repeatedly violates the loyalties that relationships depend on, is not a man" (99). Thus both figures are "nobodies."

A subtlety that plays a conspicuous role in Walcott's work concerning the relationship of Don Juan and the men he cuckolds also derives from the original Don Juan play. In both works, contrary to appearances, common sense and his own wishes, Don Juan is not the victimizer of these men. In Walcott and Tirso apparent male victims and their apparent victimizer engage in an unconscious conspiracy: Don Juan is the agent of their sexual malice. Walcott's Don Juan, in Macdonald's words, "acts out" (100) the inner desires of at least one of his male victims. He is a "wild card that can imitate any of the other cards but has no identity of its own" (105). Thus the cuckolds and Don Juan, according to Macdonald, are "mirror image[s]" (101) of one another. Tirso's Don Juan humiliates the *burlados'* women sexually as they (the male "victims") fear they will be sexually humiliated by their mistresses. The *Burlador*, in effect, makes pre-emptive strikes on their behalf. Additionally, these "surrenders" to Don Juan Tenorio by their mistresses offer these misogynists a psychological comfort: Such feminine "perfidy" reifies their vision of womankind as treacherous and lascivious.

The most bizarre element of the reaction to women by Walcott's protagonist—his morbidity—also has its roots in *El burlador de Sevilla*. Walcott's Don Juan sees death in female sexuality, identifying the female organ with the grave. This death's head view of sex is traceable to a passage in Tirso (though Macdonald does not say so) where Don Juan expatiates on the decaying conditions of prostitutes—their diseases and the slow, degrading ways they die. Walcott, it appears, seizes on the

psychological possibilities of this highly unusual "interest" in Tirso's Don Juan and fleshes it out into a trait in his own character.

This "fleshing out" here points to the fundamental difference between the Don Juans of Walcott and Tirso and a contradiction in Macdonald's analysis. The "interest" of Tirso's Don Juan reflects a sexual cruelty in the culture, but does not come from—indeed could not come from—the coreless *Burlador*. Clearly Walcott's Don Juan is not quite the wild card Macdonald says he is, since the character has feelings of his own, is not, like Tirso's protagonist, an emotional chameleon who absorbs the emotional colors of others. In Macdonald's own words, Walcott's Don Juan is filled with "self-disgust" (101). Moreover, according to Macdonald, the later Don Juan's sexual pessimism ultimately stems from "his sense of the phallus as a corpse" (101). Such feelings of self-disgust and sexual despair would of course be impossible for Tirso's Don Juan, a figure truly devoid of any interiority. The difference between the two figures is a basic one. The earlier Don Juan is a character whose behavior demonstrates various evils and his end the consequence of those evils: in sum, a study of moral cause and effect—sin and consequent damnation for him and by implication for the society whose corruption he symbolizes. The Don Juan of Walcott, on the other hand, is at least a somewhat more realized character, a "personality" with some intrinsic interest.

Because of the sexual hostility in their Don Juan plays Walcott and Tirso share an unhappy likeness: They are misinterpreted. Both are wrongly accused of writing misogynic plays. Macdonald denies this reading of Walcott. Don Juan's hostile equation of the female organ and the grave—the most extreme expression of his feelings about women—Macdonald explains, is not a position of the author (an "endorsement" [101]) but, as already mentioned, "a reflection of [Don Juan's] self-disgust" (101). In Tirso the misogynist misreading is so widespread as to be a received truth.² Equating *El burlador de Sevilla's* theme with the feelings of its principal character, however, overlooks two important facts: 1. the play's attitude towards Don Juan—one of unrelieved disdain; 2. the fact that Don Juan's damnation is clearly a just punishment for, among other sins, his cruel treatment of women.

In his discussions of how Tirso's Don Juan and Walcott's resemble one another and the general influence of *El burlador* on *The Jokester*, Macdonald's observations have firm textual grounding. Less securely linked to Tirso's text are his comments on the influence of *El burlador* on Walcott's *Omeros*. He declares the verse novel to be "an extension of the Creolization of *The Jokester of Seville*" (106-7), formed by the "weav[ing] of Tirsonian [sic] allusions" (106). To document Tirso's influence in *Omeros*, he points out that it contains a reminder of the statue of Don Gonzalo who pulls Tirso's Don Juan into hell: a "spectator [who is] a statue, in fact a marble bust of Omeros himself" (108). The presence of this statue, Macdonald claims, "marks a love scene [and, presumably, by implication the work as a whole] as specifically Don Juanesque . . ." (108). True, a statue is central to Tirso's play, and if this Walcott work contained other Tirsian traits, the verse novel could be legitimately considered Donjuanesque.

The evidence Macdonald adduces, however, to support this claim is not quite sufficient. He sees the two protagonists linked by mutual sexual incompetence. Tirso's Don Juan, however, though not a prodigious lover on the scale of Don Giovanni, is not a sexual fumbler; indeed he is effective. His seduction of Tisbea, a fishergirl, which does not entail an impersonation, establishes this. Thus, while it is true that his impersonations somehow mitigate his sexual accomplishments, he is an imposter not out of sexual necessity but because *burlas* involving impersonation are doubly effective—humiliating both the *burlados* as well as their women.

Macdonald also links the poet figure from *Omeros* with the Don Juan of *El burlador* on the grounds that Tirso's Don Juan, like Walcott's figure, has been "ironized" (108) and the "ironizing of the irresistible seducer" (108) has been a common feature of the Don Juan tradition since the time of Mozart. Here he is on rather weak ground. More to the point, the ground is shifting, from Tirso's Don Juan to the Don Juan tradition generally, which often created Don Juans quite different from the original. Whatever other ways Tirso punishes Don Juan he does not "ironize" him—indeed the sort of ironization of the Don Juan figure (one implying trivialization or poking fun at) we associate with some

later Don Juans would seem to be at odds with the somber religious message of the play.

Finally, according to Macdonald, Walcott's Don Juan-like figure in *Omeros*, the poet, resembles Tirso's Don Juan because the sexuality of the two figures is "identified with violence" (112). The scene from *El burlador de Sevilla* which he uses to substantiate this charge of violent sexuality, however, contains no sexual violence; nor is there a hint of sexual violence in any other scene. Moreover, for Tirso's Don Juan to employ violence to achieve his sexual ends would be at odds with his basic prankish character, one which demonstrates its superiority over others by besting them, often fooling them in such a way that they do not know they have been fooled.

In addition to saying that I found Macdonald's essay an insightful discussion of the influence of Tirso on Walcott I would make two closing points on the works he consulted in preparing it. The first is that Macdonald has not consulted any of the numerous studies of Tirso which have lately appeared in English. The second is a suggestion relating to the translation of Tirso's play used in this piece. While Roy Campbell's *The Jokester of Seville* is justified here because it was probably the translation Walcott used when he wrote the works under discussion, any prospective student of the Don Juan figure should know that since Walcott wrote his *The Jokester of Seville* and *Omeros*, other, far more accurate and poetic translations than Campbell's unreliable and wooden one, have appeared, like those by Lynne Alvarez and Gwynne Edwards.

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NOTES

¹For a developed discussion of this interpretation of Don Juan, see Conlon, "Batricio" and "The burlador."

²Indeed an essay declaring *El burlador* a work of a "serious misogynist" (Lundelius 13) was pronounced the "best" discussion of women in the play (Singer 67).

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