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Comparing the Trickster in a Postmodern Post-Colonial Critical World*

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In his introduction to a collection of essays on Mozart's *Don Giovanni,* Jonathan Miller points out that the first problem a producer has to face when staging Mozart's opera is one of classification:

> With its perplexing alternations of farce and ferocity, natural comedy and gothic horror, it is notoriously hard to achieve dramatic consistency. The producer is often left with the paralysing conviction that he has failed to identify the framework within which these discrepancies of tone might otherwise be reconciled.[1]

The problem of how to classify Don Juan, however, is not reserved for producers of Mozart's opera. Throughout the long tradition of the legendary trickster and seducer's reincarnations, critics—academic, religious, political and otherwise—have had difficulty determining whether Juan is a hero or a fool, a revolutionary or a hypocritical coward. This is so because if one looks at the tradition in its European context only two constants emerge: Juan's ambiguous attitudes toward death and his relationship to burlesque comedy.[2] Don Juan's emergence as hero in Mozart's play established a heroic position in the face of death. Romantics continued to reinterpret Don Juan as the conqueror of various repressed fears and redeemed him from eternal damnation by endowing him with a moment of self-consciousness. On the comic side, critical parodies and *Stoffparodien* such as Max Frisch's *Don Juan oder die Liebe zur Geometrie* continue to burlesque elements of this long and rich literary myth.

Although D. L. Macdonald's article on Derek Walcott's Don Juans is not primarily concerned with problems of classification these same

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*Reference: D. L. Macdonald, "Derek Walcott's Don Juans," *Connotations* 4.1-2 (1994/95): 98-118.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the Connotations website at <http://www.connotations.de/debmacdonald00412.htm>.

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problems emerge under a different guise. Macdonald rephrases the hero or buffoon debate in terms of trickster and joker. Don Juan is not the West Indian folk hero trickster as some critics maintain, but rather a joker, "a wild card that can imitate any of the other cards but has no identity of his own" (105). Macdonald as critic walks the same tightrope between colonial and post-colonial theory as the author of the plays he studies. To justify his navigation of the many Western themes in Walcott's plays he calls Walcott a post-colonial writer, that is one who does not think in terms of reified polarities, or practices the us-versus-them rhetoric of blame.[3] In his opinion, Walcott appropriates or "creolizes" themes to make them speak in his voice. Walcott's Juans in *The Joker of Seville* and *Omeros* are empty, obsessively unscrupulous figures who, through a series of references to Western literature and native traditions critically expose European decadence and imperialism while at the same time they burlesque the poet's imitative and potentially collaborative self.

Post-colonial theory and women and gender studies are the two main fields which, according to Susan Bassnett, are replacing the discipline of comparative literature in the West.[4] Comparative literature, although conceived as an antinationalistic enterprise seeking to minimize differences among cultures and universalize the meaning of literary texts, has been faulted for practicing its own type of cultural colonialism that promoted likeness to its European origins and stifled the study of other literatures. Ironically, as Bassnett points out, the term comparative literature is still used in the Third World and the Far East to designate departments that study their own native literature. Some theorists blame comparative literature's identity crisis in the West on thematic studies which tended to emphasize a bogus sameness and universality with European texts at the center. According to Bassnett, however, the study of themes continues unabated in "areas of work defined under other headings than that of 'comparative literature,' such as post-colonial studies and gender studies (116).[5]

It is precisely over a theme that gender and post-colonial studies engage in a collision course in Macdonald's article. Aware of feminist scholarship that has concentrated on the misogyny of Walcott's images of women and their anatomy, Macdonald argues that these references are part of a vast network of borrowed images and references which represent Juan's sense of self-disgust, "his sense of the phallus as a corpse (101)." Yet, paradoxically, these plays are concerned with the creation of an identity and a literature. If in *The Joker of Seville* Juan is a zero "who turns people into nothings (105)" like himself, in the poem *Omeros,* the wandering poet-Juan is redeemed by a last-minute act of self-accusation which here translates into recognition of and acceptance of complicity with the West and the part of himself formed by the western statues.

Feminist/female reactions to Juan also seem to have followed a colonial, post-colonial trajectory. For Elizabeth Hardwick, Don Juan is an incongruous buffoon who is only saved from ridicule by two actions: the killing of Anna's father and Elvira's (or any other woman's) love for him.[6] George Sand in her 1833 text *Lélia* had already refuted the "tragic" interpretation that women could tame the eternal seducer by redeeming him. As her protagonist states in a lecture on the true significance of Don Juan, God punished Don Juan to avenge his female victims. Women should undertake to umask the nothingness Juan and his promises represent instead of adopting the stance of the *donna abbandonata* and thereby facilitating Juan's next reincarnation.

Not all feminist/female critics see women in general as inevitable victims of Juan's philandering emptiness. Shoshana Felman reads the Don Juan myth as the key to understanding the confrontation of Benveniste's modern linguistics which still insists on determinate meanings in language with what may broadly be termed the "postmodern philosophy of language." Don Juan is a catalyst figure she employs to determine the similarities in the enterprise of two seemingly opposing philosophers of language, J. L. Austin and Jacques Lacan. Likewise, Julia Kristeva uses Juan to underline and explain continuity in Christianity's repression of erotism and the theories this repression produced.[7] Both readings deal with female complicity with an ambiguous hero/buffoon to show how similarity can become a critical tool to explain difference.

At first glance, it would seem that Hardwick and Sand's recommendations motivate the treatment of the Don Juan theme by prominent Italian feminist critic, novelist and playwright Dacia Maraini. However, through a network of references to both the tradition and its many interpretations, Maraini uses the work to effect a critique of "patriarchal" power on mythical, socio-political, economic and psychological levels.[8] In her 1976 play, Maraini's Juan is a leftist radical who convinces Elvira to kill her socialist-turned-fascist dictator father who had shown her the only tenderness she had known as a child. She then has to watch the endless parade of women seduced by Juan out of habit as part of his battle against the meaningless void of life and death. By collaborating with the killing of her father, Elvira both perpetuates the legacy of a violent mother and establishes her resemblance to Juan's mother whose fear of losing her son and desire to realize her own ambitions through him had caused the latter to become both literally and figuratively "a devourer of women." The theme of Don Juan also structures Maraini's 1984 novel *Il treno per Helsinki*. Narrator Armida is hopelessly entangled with a leftist student rebel Miele. Armida finally abandons the unfaithful Miele when she realizes how his powerful yet empty rhetoric continues to reinforce her preconceptions of women's inferiority and subservient nature. However here, the theoretical gaze of Armida allows her, like Walcott's poet, to enact a limited healing process as a result of the self-confrontation with the emptiness of Juan.

In arguing that the study of the literary representation of named personages is still a fruitful area for comparatists, Siegbert Prawer states such a study should focus not only on pointing out how a theme might appear and disappear across cultures as part of a study of literary history but how it could help to analyze why that process might have taken place.[9] Macdonald's analysis shows how Walcott's confrontation with Don Juan is part of a process of self-confrontation and accusation which results in a certainly partial and limited, "healing of the wounds created by history (116)." This way he is able to escape the predictable nihilism of Juan's actions which admirers and denigrators alike imitate. Likewise, Maraini not only deflates the desolate seducer but through the analysis of female fascination with masculine symbols of power and language creates an aesthetic that was not supposed to exist independently rather than bemoaning its suppression.

A truly comparative study of themes would not aim to list similarities although Maraini's Juans are formed by the same myths of power and domination (here translated into dependency and belonging) that have kept the seducer alive in the first place. Both works review the encounter with Juan in philosophical, psychological, political and historical terms specific to their own experience and aims. However, such a study would assist the process of interdisciplinary debate on the critical level. If the "radical" reassessment of Western cultural models at present being undertaken in gender and cultural studies is to avoid the same self-promoting and resultant self-absorption of the field they are replacing, there needs to be more transfer and interdisciplinary exchange among these evolving fields. Comparative thematic studies would not only promote avenues for that kind of transfer but would also provide contexts for analyzing diversity and similarity in terms other than us-versus-them.

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NOTES

[1] Jonathan Miller (ed.), *Don Giovanni: Myths of Seduction and Betrayal* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990).

[2] Carol Lazzaro-Weis, "Parody and Farce in the Don Juan Myth in the Eighteenth Century," *Eighteenth Century Life* 3.3 (1983): 35-48. In studying the continuation of the theme in Italian and French versions in the eighteenth century, I argued that the Italian and French burlesque versions of Juan effected a parody of the Church's traditional teachings on death and eternal damnation.

[3] On post-colonial theory see Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993). See also Homi Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990) and *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

[4] Susan Bassnett, *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993): "Comparative literature as a discipline has had its day. Cross-cultural work in women's studies, in post-colonial theory, in cultural studies has changed the face of literary studies generally (161)."

[5] Clayton Koelb and Susan Noakes (eds.), *The Comparative Perspective on Literature: Approaches to Theory and Practice* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988). Quoted in Bassnett 115. Koelb and Noakes emphasize the importance of the relationship in these fields between literary theory and comparative study and they assume that the study of movements and themes has moved into the background.

[6] Elizabeth Hardwick, "Seduction and Betrayal," *New York Book Review*, May 31, 1973. "Seduction may be baneful, even tragic, but the seducer at work is essentially comic."

[7] Shoshana Felman, *Le scandale du corps parlant: Don Juan avec Austin, ou la séduction en deux langues* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1980). Julia Kristeva, "Don Juan ou aimer pouvoir," *Histoires d'amour* (Paris: Deoel, 1983) 187-201.

[8] See Carol Lazzaro-Weis, "The Subject's Seduction: The Experience of Don Juan in Italian Feminist Fictions," *Annali d'italianistica* 7 (1989): 382-93.

[9] Siegbert Prawer, *Comparative Literary Studies: An Introduction* (London: Duckworth, 1973).