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Derek Walcott's Don Juans: A Postilla*

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After publishing my article on "Derek Walcott's Don Juans" in *Connotations*, Dr. Leimberg sent a copy to James Mandrell, author of the admirable *Don Juan and the Point of Honor: Seduction, Patriarchal Society, and Literary Tradition* (1992), asking for his comments on it. Dr. Mandrell replied that "[w]hile [he] found it interesting, [he] didn't see any appropriate opening in [my] argument for the introduction of [his] own ideas about Don Juan as a literary character and social force. [He] therefore [did]n't see how [he] could write a response to the article itself." He suggested, however, that if I were "to open a dialogue with [him] through a coda or postilla to [my] article," he might be able to respond to that. So here goes.

The distance between Mandrell's position and my own has to do, I think, both with subject matter and with approach. Mandrell is interested primarily in Spanish-language versions of the story of Don Juan; I am interested primarily in English-language versions (particularly, in my article, those by Walcott). These two traditions have been divergent almost from their beginnings (the earliest English versions are based on Italian and French predecessors, not directly on the Spanish original, if it is the original); it is not surprising that they should have led us in different directions.

As Mandrell points out on the first page of his book, "the story of Don Juan is usually viewed as comprising two complementary parts—the one the history of a dissolute libertine, the other the motif of the double invitation," in which Don Juan invites some supernatural entity (typically

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the statue of one of his victims) to dinner, accepts a return invitation, and meets his fate. Mandrell's Spanish texts have led him to the first part of the story, because of the relations he posits between seduction and honour, seduction and the patriarchy, seduction and the literary tradition. My English texts have led me to the second part, largely because, at this early stage in my research, it has seemed the more interesting; consequently, I was struck that in his long chapter on *El burlador de Sevilla* (50-86), Mandrell devotes only two consecutive pages (74-76) to the role of the Statue. (He returns to the subject interestingly, but not much more substantially, in his chapter on Zorrilla's *Don Juan Tenorio* [109-11].)

This difference is only one of emphasis: as Mandrell points out, the two parts of the story are, after all, complementary; otherwise it would hardly have been such a success. I will be interested to see whether it points to larger cultural differences. Discussing Don Juan as a seducer means concentrating on his relations with women; concentrating on Don Juan and the statue means, since the statue is typically that of a man, concentrating on Don Juan's relations with other men (Mandrell also makes some remarks about relations between men in Zorrilla [102-3, 106-7]). If I am really following the lead of the English-language versions in this regard, perhaps they will turn out to be even more preoccupied with masculinity than Mandrell's Spanish-language versions. Walcott has certainly been accused of such a preoccupation, notably by Elaine Savory Fido, who objects to his "stereotypical attitudes towards women" (111) but praises his portrayal of "male pairs" (116). I have argued that she is unfair to the Isabella of Walcott's *The Joker of Seville*, who articulates the play's hope for the future; but she may be right about *Omeros*, in which the male rivals, Hector and Achille, are much more interesting than Helen, the object of their rivalry. Or the preoccupation may simply be my own. (I am also interested in another relation, about which Mandrell has even less to say than about the Statue: that between Don Juan and his servant.)

Since the confrontation between Don Juan and the Statue is less a matter of seduction than of force (the Statue portrays a victim of Don Juan's violence, and sends him forcibly to hell), perhaps the English versions are more preoccupied with power and violence than the Spanish

ones. A cursory glance might suggest that this is the case. The Don Juan figure in the first, partial English treatment of the story, *The Tragedy of Ovid* (1662), by Sir Aston Cokain, is a soldier; his offense against women is not seduction but the ripping of a fetus out of its mother's womb. The Don John of *The Libertine* (1675), by Thomas Shadwell, the first complete English version of the story, is an astonishing Hobbesian monster who in the course of the play is responsible, along with his two companions, for a robbery, a suicide, seven rapes (and six attempted ones), seven fights, and ten murders; at the beginning of the fifth act, they set fire to a convent to get at the nuns. In their idle moments, which are few, they reminisce about their past accomplishments, which include incest, fratricide, patricide, over thirty ordinary murders, over eighty bigamous marriages, and "Rapes innumerable" (15; I.i.137). The libertines do also engage in three seductions, but these can hardly be called central to their activities. In the versions with which my article was concerned, Walcott insistently associates both parts of the story with violence. In *The Joker of Seville,* Don Juan is a conquistador; his Moorish servant Catalinion draws an emphatic parallel between Don Juan's enslavement of himself and his subsequent conquest of Tisbea. In *Omeros,* the statue comes to stand for (among other things) the institutionalized violence of colonial imperialism.

These differences in subject matter (or emphases on different aspects of the subject matter) suggest different models of literary history. Mandrell's emphasis on seduction suggests an emphasis on the continuity of literary history: not only is the story of Don Juan about the oppression of women, it perpetuates this oppression, and it tends to seduce later authors and critics into doing the same (268). His discussion of the statue in *Don Juan Tenorio* lays the same emphasis on sameness and continuity: both Don Juan and the creator of the statue are self-representations of Zorrilla, and the main significance of the sculptor is to suggest "the triumph of the artist over his single most meaningful rival: time" (108).

My emphasis on the confrontation with the statue suggests instead an emphasis on the discontinuity of literary history. The English versions may stress this confrontation because the story, which originated, as Ian Watt has pointed out, in the Counter-Reformation (120-37), came into English in the immediate aftermath of the Puritan revolution. In

English history, this period was marked, like much of the preceding century, by widespread iconoclasm. (In 1644, for example, at Cambridge, Cokain's alma mater, a government commission "brake down 1000 Pictures superstitious" in a single chapel [Phillips 186].) Iconoclasm represents the principled rejection of works of visual art (for example, statues) as a source of moral religious and religious authority, and Cokain, a Catholic, clearly intends his Don Juan figure, Hannibal, to be associated with the great iconoclast Cromwell (Macdonald, "Iconoclasm"). So pervasive is the theme of iconoclasm in Cokain's play, in fact, that even Helvidius, the spectral character corresponding to Tirso's statue, is an iconoclast: he has been hanged for destroying a statue.[1] The literary implications are obvious (see Gilman): the English Don Juans tend to assume a confrontational posture, not only towards the visual art of the past, but also towards the literature of the past. Harold Bloom, accordingly, has recently characterized Don Giovanni as a kind of enemy of the Western Canon (29). Since that canon includes all the previous versions of the Don Juan story, what the English Don Juans most conspicuously share is, paradoxically, their differences from each other, the confrontational postures that they (or rather their authors) assume towards each other.

These different models of literary history suggest, in turn, the difference between Mandrell's approach and my own. Mandrell's approach might be described as primarily theoretical; he says in his introduction: "My intention is not to write a *history* of Don Juan, but to elucidate a theory that responds to the historical vicissitudes of the character *and* his interpretation. I therefore leave to others the development of similar interpretations with respect to literary texts not treated in this study" (4). My own approach is primarily critical; I am one of the others to whom he leaves the task of interpretation. My intention (so far still mostly an intention) is precisely to write a history of English-language Don Juans. The difference is, again, one of emphasis: nobody who had read Mandrell's richly detailed analyses of Tirso and his successors would believe that he had developed his theory without interpreting any individual works; and nobody would ever believe that I (or anybody else) undertook interpretation with an innocent eye.

Nevertheless, it is, I think, a significant difference. In his letter to Dr. Leimberg, Dr. Mandrell says that he thinks of Don Juan "as a literary character and social force." My own sense of the English Don Juans is that they are many different characters, in very different works, which have equally divergent social implications and effects. As Chris Baldick points out, "The vitality of myths lies precisely in their capacity for change, their adaptability and openness to new combinations of meaning" (4). Mandrell quite rightly critiques the "sort of ahistorical collective classification" too often indulged in by critics who refer to the Don Juan story as a "myth" (23); but his own theoretical approach has something of the same effect. Mandrell describes Don Juan as "a positive force *in* patriarchy," by which he means partly that the character is positive *for* patriarchy (11). But patriarchy is a large concept: large enough to be called trans-historical if not ahistorical. Mandrell does describe the specific historical moment of Tirso, "poised . . . between the old and the new," between the feudal and capitalist orders; but he doesn't seem to think that the transition is ultimately important: "The commodity value attached to women remains constant even as the nature of the *meaning* of that value alters" (262-63).[2] Now, the transition from feudalism to capitalism was a fairly large historical event; if it is ultimately unimportant for the oppression of women, then presumably less dramatic historical events (though Mandrell does not ignore them) are even less important. It is one such comparatively minor event, the decline of the British empire, that forms the historical context for my reading of Walcott.

The difference between us is, again, one of emphasis: according to Mandrell, Tirso and his successors show that women are *only* being oppressed in new ways; according to me, they show that women (and men) are being oppressed in *new* ways. On the one hand it is important that women are still being oppressed; but on the other hand, it is also important to know something about "women's oppression today," in Michèle Barrett's phrase, if we're going to do anything specific about it.[3]

Unlike Mandrell, I am not uncomfortable about calling the Don Juan story a myth; as Baldick argues, to deny the existence of modern myths is precisely to subscribe to a Romantic "myth of myth" (1). I would insist,

however, that the story of Don Juan is a *modern* myth, indeed a myth about modernity. It may be that this aspect of the myth is especially prominent in the English-language versions; certainly, the iconoclastic and annihilating violence of Shadwell's Don John strikingly resembles the savage demystification Marx ascribes to the modern bourgeoisie:

> It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his "natural superiors." . . . It has drowned the most heavenly ecstacies of religious fervor, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of Philistine sentimentalism in the icy water of egotistical calculation. . . . All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned. . . . (Marx and Engels 9-10)

I doubt, however, that Shadwell is really unique. As Per Nykrog points out, Don Juans appeared all over Europe in about the same historical moment as the institution of the stock market (68).

Moreover, Nykrog points out that Don Juan was not the only quasi-mythical figure to appear in Europe at around the same moment (57): there was also Dr. Faustus (1587-92) and Don Quixote (1605-15); and one might add an English latecomer, Robinson Crusoe (1719), to make up Ian Watt's four "myths of modern individualism." The early modern period seems to have been unusually fertile in myths—and they are all myths about masters and servants: Dr. Faustus and Mephostophilis, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, Don Juan and Catalinon/Sganarelle/Jacomo/Leporello, Crusoe and Friday (Watt 123). (The only later story to achieve anything like the same currency is also, in a way, the story of a master and a servant: Frankenstein and his monster [1818].)[4] One might infer from this that the advent of the capitalist order brought with it an acute set of anxieties about the relations between classes, anxieties that (judging from the continued popularity of the myths) are still with us. It seems especially unfortunate that Mandrell should have neglected this aspect of the story.

The space Mandrell devotes to the historical position of Tirso is scarcely greater than the space he devotes to a consideration of Tirso's Don Juan as an avatar of Cupid (62-64), a consideration which has, for me (despite a footnote emphasizing the importance of Cupid and Psyche for the *comedia* generally, 64n15), the effect of assimilating Don Juan to a mythological archetype (rather than of showing Tirso as modernizing

the myth, as Keats does, or as Walcott does to the myth of Don Juan). Tellingly, Mandrell refers to "Apuleius's retelling of the myth of Cupid and Psyche" (64); but Apuleius didn't retell the myth. He told it. He made it up. A recent editor of the tale notes bluntly: "The 'folktale' elements in *Cupid & Psyche* . . . are not attested in an immediately recognisable form in the extant corpus of Graeco-Roman legend and myth" (Kenney 17); he considers the story "an astonishing feat of originality" (21-22). It is another artificial myth, and if not exactly a modern one, it is determined by its own historical moment, which was, as Keats tells us, "too late for antique vows, / Too, too late for the fond believing lyre . . ." (36-37). Just as Mandrell assimilates Tirso to Apuleius, so his "retelling" assimilates Apuleius in turn to some timeless mythical archetype.

As I may not have made sufficiently clear, I have profited greatly from Mandrell's book, and I am grateful for his invitation to write this postilla, which has challenged me to think through the theoretical implications of my historical project. I only hope I can attain to a comparably broad perspective. But if I ever do, I know what I don't want to leave behind.

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NOTES

[1]The theme of iconoclasm is present, though only marginally, in Walcott. The two acts of *The Joker of Seville* have epigraphs from Pound's *Pisan Cantos*: "With a painted paradise at the end of it . . ." (7) and "Without a painted paradise at the end of it . . ." (87). The movement from the presence to the absence of "a painted paradise" suggests a kind of iconoclasm. This suggestion is not present in the original, which offers the two states simply as alternatives (Pound 436).

[2]Compare Watt's account of the origins of the myth in "the transition from the social and intellectual system of the Middle Ages to the system dominated by modern individualist thought" (xii).

[3]In the Introduction to the revised edition of her book, Barrett warns, in fact, that even the "innocent little word 'today'" can occlude some important specificities (v).

[4]It may not be a coincidence that the historical moment of *Frankenstein* corresponds to the second great moment (after their Renaissance origins) in the evolution of Watts's myths of modern individualism: their "Romantic Apotheosis" (193-227).

Certainly nobody has ever thought it a coincidence that *Frankenstein* was written during the Industrial Revolution.

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