

Response to D. L. Macdonald's "Postilla": The One and the Same Redux*

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"You say eether and I say eyether"1

The distance between Mandrell's position and my own has to do, I think, both with subject matter and approach. ("A Postilla")2

D. L. Macdonald is scrupulously correct in his account of the circumstances that have brought us together in the pages of *Connotations*. I am grateful that my inability to find an opening in his article on Derek Walcott's Don Juans—my blindness, if you will—did not prevent Macdonald from creating the possibility for his own insightful remarks on my version of Don Juan as set forth in my book *Don Juan and the Point of Honor*. While reading and rereading Macdonald's article I had the niggling feeling that I should be able to formulate a pithy commentary of the analysis, but I couldn't put my finger on what was troubling me. Now Macdonald's "Postilla" and his engagement with me make clear the direction in which I should proceed in my response, since the "Postilla" in essence provides the conceptual underpinnings for the study of Walcott and for Macdonald's future work on Don Juan, as is duly noted: "this postilla . . . has challenged me to think through the theoretical implications of my historical project." It is in the "theoretical implications," not surprisingly, that I find the entrée for which I was initially left searching.

Indeed, the notion of "theory" or the "theoretical" is critical for Macdonald's understanding of his work and mine. After rehearsing a number of differences in "subject matter," Macdonald draws what is

*Reference: D. L. Macdonald, "Derek Walcott's Don Juans," *Connotations* 4.1-2 (1994/95) 98-118, and "Derek Walcott's Don Juans: A Postilla," *Connotations* 6.1 (1996/97): 103-10.

for him a central distinction between his project on English-language versions of Don Juan and my book dealing with Spanish versions. Whereas my "approach" is avowedly theoretical, Macdonald's is primarily historical: "My intention . . . is precisely to write a history of English-language Don Juans." Yet there is more, I think, to Macdonald's articulation of difference—a key concept for him—than initially meets the eye.

I have to admit that I was immediately suspicious when Macdonald began to catalog the different "emphases" to be found in our approaches to Don Juan. After all, if the theory of Don Juan that I elucidate is valid in a general and not merely a particular sense, it should prove useful not only for understanding Don Juan in Spain but for Macdonald's work on English-language Don Juans, too. Still, Macdonald finds a number of differences. Among the more notable, and for me more curious, are first, my "emphasis on the continuity of literary history" as opposed to his "emphasis on the discontinuity of literary history"; and second, that, "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" (emphasis in the original). Clearly, for Macdonald the key terms here are "continuity," "discontinuity," "only," and "new." But from my perspective, and from that of my book, the most important words are "continuity" and the peculiar locution "women (and men)."

Before I continue to sketch out my disagreements with Macdonald—and they are substantial—I need to acknowledge where I think he makes a genuine contribution to discussions of Don Juan. First and foremost, Macdonald deserves credit for making explicit the inclusion of Walcott's *The Joker of Seville* (1974) and *Omeros* (1990) in the canon of texts treating the *burlador* [trickster or joker]. Many critics have remarked on the absence of modern and contemporary Don Juans in literary—but not critical or theoretical—texts. Macdonald has shown that the literary tradition of this character extends not from the sixteenth century to the early-twentieth century but, in fact, to the mid- and late-twentieth century. Moreover, the inclusion of Walcott's texts foregrounds the crucial issues of colonialism and class, topics that are all too often left to one side. Finally, by bringing up colonialism and

class, Macdonald reintroduces the importance of the particularity of history, a putative lacuna in my own study that Macdonald proposes to rectify in his work on English-language Don Juans.

That said, and despite Macdonald's averral that he has "profited greatly" from my book, it seems to me that Macdonald has ignored one of the principal lines of argumentation in *Don Juan and the Point of Honor*, as I shall try to demonstrate.

"It was *déjà vu* all over again."³

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 . . . ("A Postilla")

In the first full chapter in my book on Don Juan, I explore the ways in which Don Juan has been discussed, particularly those treatments that turn on the designation of his story as a "myth." What I discern in the various studies I cite is that an appeal to "an ahistorical and temporal category [such as] myth allows the critic to avoid all issues of writing and rewriting, as well as specific texts, in the search for either the so-called *original* Don Juan or *real meaning* of the story" (38). The end result of this appeal is a scheme in which "interpretations become ideological recapitulations." Ultimately, I admit that, "depending on how myth is defined, Don Juan is or is not a mythical figure" (40), meaning that Don Juan could indeed be a sort of "modern myth," as Macdonald argues in his "Postilla." But I go on to suggest that it is both more interesting and more useful to read Don Juan in terms of Marcel Detienne's notion of a "mythography," the writing of or on myth; all of the versions of Don Juan's story that we discuss are, in fact, written versions, since there is no originary oral tale that would qualify as a myth in its usual definition. This allows us to dispense with questions of the origins of Don Juan's story or some originary version to deal with the textual evidence and the meaning that it bears, all without having recourse to some unknown and, more likely, unknowable prior version. Moreover,

if we follow Claude Lévi-Strauss' view of myth—and it is curious that, even without direct mention, Macdonald seems to concur with Lévi-Strauss' student Roland Barthes with respect to modern myths but not to heed the words of the teacher as regards myth in general—, we recognize that, in spite of myth's startling propensity to change, it essentially remains constant throughout cultures and time, as does, I assert, much of the criticism relating to Don Juan and, indeed, the story of Don Juan itself.⁴

This is why the title of the first chapter of my book is "The One and the Same: Meaning and the Critical Myth of Don Juan." By reading the critical and literary treatments of the *burlador* through Lévi-Strauss as well as Jacques Derrida's reading of Jacques Lacan's reading of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter," I conclude that "Don Juan's story is an exceptionally powerful one, not only seductive in its ability to engender commentary, but also surprisingly preemptive in its capacity to control what would pass as explanation and analysis" (47). The interpretations of literary versions of Don Juan become yet other versions, in essence perpetuating the tradition of the character. We are therefore dealing not with "one" and "another," or "an other," but "one" and "the same."

I stress this point in order to disclose what, in at least one sense, is at the root of Macdonald's disagreement with the argument of my book: that I find in the various stories of Don Juan a constant and continuity and do not see the literature dealing with this character as evidencing few similarities or as somehow discontinuous. Macdonald is not the first to have given voice to this criticism, but its mention in the present context is neither as simple nor as insignificant as Macdonald might want to think. To be sure, where I see similarities, another reader might find difference, which merely means that, in any discussion of a character, concept, or trope and its deployment or development through time, I will privilege similarities over differences, since, I fear that if the differences are too great, what few unifying threads that serve to tie the discussion together will prove irrelevant. If this causes my approach to be marked as transhistorical or, worse yet, ahistorical, so be it.

However, Macdonald's distinction overlooks the fact that similarity and difference are central to my discussion of Don Juan, warranting an

entire chapter in *Don Juan and the Point of Honor* in which the multiple lines of argumentation are drawn together in terms of social principles and principles of exchange as they are implicated in Don Juan's story. As should by now be obvious, in my view Don Juan serves as a means of articulating the ties that bind a social and cultural community as well as a principle of differentiation with respect to gender and class. When Don Juan is drawn into critical and theoretical considerations, he becomes the embodiment of "the structuring as binary opposition that characterizes both the literary and critical treatments of the *burlador*" (*Don Juan and the Point of Honor* 268), the possibility expressed by the very title of and explored in Søren Kierkegaard's treatise on seduction and Don Juan, *Either/Or*.⁵

We will have occasion to return to the issue of my insistence on continuity in my treatment of Don Juan and its pertinence to the present discussion. More immediately significant in Macdonald's passing reference to the question of myth is the sense of *déjà vu* it provokes, both in terms of my book and in terms of the perspective from which I respond to Macdonald. As Macdonald points out, my book concludes that Don Juan and treatments of his story represent the ongoing hegemony of patriarchy. Although my hope was that the critical stance articulated in my study would allow it to escape inclusion in that hegemonic discourse—I suggest that it may be possible "to speak of Don Juan without resurrecting his seductive ways" (281)—I'm now more or less certain that the truth is otherwise. I do, however, remain convinced that I shifted the terms of the discussion in a way that is apparently discomfiting to many critics and therefore liable to correction. In this regard, Macdonald appears to execute what Harold Bloom might term a corrective swerve: Macdonald returns discussion to those timeworn topics whose absence he laments in my study, to wit, "Don Juan's relations with men," i.e., with his servant and with the Statue. It is as if Macdonald were writing *before* me or as if my book served as only a negative example of what *not* to say about Don Juan.⁶ In this view of things, it really is *déjà vu* all over again, or "The One and the Same Redux."

"Cherchez la femme!"⁷

Discussing Don Juan as a seducer means concentrating on his relations with women; concentrating on Don Juan and the statue means concentrating on Don Juan's relations with other men. ("A Postilla")

As a first step in my reading of Macdonald, allow me to trace the notion of "woman" or "the feminine" through his article and "A Postilla." In "Derek Walcott's Don Juans," women in *The Joker of Seville* and *Omeros* serve chiefly to further the connection between the female and natural bodies, between women and landscapes. Through this identification, the traditional Homeric tale in *Omeros* is linked to the story of Don Juan: the "topos [of woman-as-landscape] affects the portrayal of virtually every woman in the poem [*Omeros*], and it is crucial to integrating the allusions to Odysseus, who travels from land to land, with those to Don Juan, who travels from woman to woman" ("Derek Walcott's Don Juans" 109). Yet, as Macdonald points out, the association of the female body with the landscape is a commonplace not only in Walcott's *oeuvre*—"Don Juan accomplishes his mission on a woman's body, much as Columbus, in [Walcott's] *Midsummer*, accomplishes his on a feminized landscape" ("Derek Walcott's Don Juans" 105)—but belongs "to a sexism as old as Judeo-Christianity and also to a more recent, imperialist tradition: as Mary Louise Pratt has shown, the (typically male) European traveller on the frontier typically thinks of himself as an Adam in a garden which is itself his Eve" ("Derek Walcott's Don Juans" 109). In this way, Walcott participates in a general cultural misogyny (I would have referred to it as the discourse of patriarchy) and his works become part of that tradition.

This, of course, is Elaine Savory Fido's position, which Macdonald rejects, claiming "I think she [Fido] is wrong to suppose that Walcott endorses it [misogyny]. Instead, he suggests that Don Juan's disgust at the vagina, his sense of it as a grave, is essentially a reflection of his self-disgust, his sense of the phallus as a corpse" ("Derek Walcott's Don Juans" 101). Yet the darker side of the connection between the female and natural bodies remains lurking in Macdonald's article; the identification of the vagina as a grave, a culturally prevalent if not innocent notion, does not disappear with this brief mention but is

trumped by the "sinister trope" in *The Joker of Seville* of identifying "Isabella's sexual desire with the Cyclops' cannibalism" ("Derek Walcott's Don Juans" 99).

If female desire and sexuality in Walcott presage death and destruction, it nonetheless falls to woman, at least in *The Joker of Seville*, to allude to the possibility of some form of redemption and renewal. At the level of culture, Macdonald points to the "exuberant celebration of Trinidadian music, dance, and sports like stick-fighting" ("Derek Walcott's Don Juans" 106); as for the personal, it is in Isabella who suggests "the play's hope for the future." Despite, then, the negative aspects of woman found in Walcott and voiced by Macdonald, a woman allows for the future. What we find in "Derek Walcott's Don Juans," is a coherent—and, for stories of Don Juan, an almost predictable—presentation of the role of the feminine and its importance in *The Joker of Seville* and *Omeros*.

The same cannot be said of "A Postilla." Where I attempted in *Don Juan and the Point of Honor* to turn discussions of Don Juan away from the Statue, from the second part of the traditional story, to seduction, the first part, Macdonald proposes to address again the notion of relations among men. Thus, woman disappears almost entirely from Macdonald's view of Don Juan, to be replaced by a concern for relations between and among men: between and among male characters, between and among male authors, between and among male authors and critics, between and among male critics, *inter alia*. This is similar, I think, to Macdonald's suggestion in the "Postilla" apropos of *Omeros* that "the male rivals, Hector and Achille, are much more interesting than Helen, the object of their rivalry." Or, as I say in *Don Juan and the Point of Honor* in the context of the nineteenth-century novel *La Regenta*, by Leopoldo Alas or "Clarín," "the function of woman . . . is to exist as the necessary yet secondary element in an equation involving three terms: to exist between two men, between families, between and author and the literary text. Woman is always the projection of masculine desire and in service to that projection" (160). All of which means that the discussion of women in the article "Derek Walcott's Don Juans" becomes the *pretext* for and *prologue* to the "Postilla" and a discussion of relations among men in English-language versions of Don Juan's story.

"On ne tarde pas à trouver l'homme."⁸

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. . . . Or the preoccupation may simply be my own. ("A Postilla")

Perhaps it is not remarkable that the focus shifts from the article to the "Postilla," from a more specific discussion of Don Juan in Walcott's *The Joker of Seville* and Omeros to a general explication of the historical and cultural meaning of Don Juan as found in English-language versions of the *burlador*. Still, I would argue that where there's smoke there's fire, and that the trajectory of Macdonald's argument is meaningful. Although I wouldn't go so far as to assert that Macdonald replaces my own attempt to recuperate the feminine in Don Juan with some type of celebration of the masculine, I do think that he implicitly assumes a critical position that approximates the dynamics of my theory of Don Juan, a suggestion that Macdonald would perhaps reject out of hand.

To be sure, it really is difficult to speak of Don Juan without implicitly discussing relations among men. And despite what Macdonald would lead readers to suspect, the topic of relations between and among men runs throughout my *Don Juan and the Point of Honor*. But I don't speak of the relations between men that appear to interest Macdonald, Don Juan's relations with his servant and with the Statue. Then again, neither does Macdonald, not in "Derek Walcott's Don Juans" nor in the "Postilla."

What Macdonald does suggest in the "Postilla," by means of his critique and the catalog of differences—including the way his study would differ from mine—is precisely the type of one-ups-manship that I suggest is at work in the story of Don Juan. The agonistic dimensions of Don Juan turn up in the earliest known version of Don Juan's story, Tirso de Molina's *El burlador de Sevilla o convidado de piedra* (c. 1630), where Don Juan is dragged to hell by the Statue. In contrast, in Zorrilla's *Don Juan Tenorio* (1844), Don Juan is saved by the love of a woman and ascends to heaven. As Macdonald would have it, via what I believe is a misreading of Chris Baldick's notion of the ways in which myth is adaptable and open "to new combinations of meaning" (4), this would

demonstrate the discontinuity at work in the story of Don Juan. I, on the other hand, would and did argue that the inversion in the endings of the two dramas marks not a difference in the story's *meaning* but is *meaningful* as regards the play of similarities and the way that Zorrilla marks his distance from Tirso. In Horatian terms, Zorrilla proves his worth by taking up the topic of Don Juan and showing how he can better a canonical author of Spain's Golden Age.

As for Macdonald, there are two ways in which the dynamics of rivalry are at work in "A Postilla" and to a lesser degree "Derek Walcott's Don Juans," first, in the types of comparisons that Macdonald draws between Walcott and other authors, and second, in his positioning of himself with regard to other critics, mainly me. With respect to the former, I don't think it's naive to detect a sense of literary rivalry, or an anxiety of influence, to use Bloom's phrase, in the discussion of the Homeric overtones in Walcott's writing. Macdonald himself indicates the extent to which such dynamics motivate his interest in the Don Juan stories with remarks such as this: "Walcott's 'Homeric parallels' are not, of course, simple or servile imitations, any more than Joyce's are. One of the ways in which Walcott asserts his independence from his Homeric material (as Joyce does) is precisely by the 'deliberate deflation of analogy'; another way is by combining it (as Joyce does) with other material, such as allusions to Tirso" ("Derek Walcott's Don Juans" 107). But Walcott's dialogue is not just with Homer. According to Macdonald and other critics, "Walcott's use of the motif of nothingness is a response to V. S. Naipaul" ("Derek Walcott's Don Juans" 104). Throughout his own reading of Walcott, Macdonald has attested to the agonistic dimensions of Walcott's versions of Don Juan's story and how these are integral to an understanding of the works as a whole.

Indeed, I wonder if an emphasis on discontinuity does not further the notion of rivalry and its importance to a study of English-language versions of Don Juan. Macdonald certainly seems to think so, even though he does not acknowledge as much. But what else are we to make of his line of argumentation in the context of a longer study? On the one hand, Macdonald claims to find male characters more interesting than female characters. On the other hand, and supposing that "the English versions are more preoccupied with power and violence than

the Spanish" texts, it comes as no surprise that Macdonald discerns through his "emphasis on the confrontation with the statue . . . an emphasis on the discontinuity of literary history."

What these claims lead to is inescapable for both Macdonald and me, but we see it in terms that are diametrically opposed. Macdonald obviously sees this sense of confrontation and difference as an example of discontinuity: "Since the 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." But I would and have argued that confrontation and difference are part and parcel of Don Juan as a character and of the story that contains him. If Macdonald is correct in linking masculinity to issues of violence and power—and there is clearly evidence to sustain this view—then why should we not understand Don Juan's story as exemplifying this aspect of masculinity and the confrontation between different versions as responding to the dynamics of the texts they explicate? Moreover, if Don Juan's story includes and elicits this "will to power" and if we can understand the dialogues and controversies between and among critics in this light, can't we then understand Macdonald's preoccupation with male rivals and interest in discontinuity in these same terms?

"Boys will be boys"9

. . . I know what I don't want to leave behind. ("A Postilla")

Which is why I insist on the continuity of Don Juan's story and the need to recuperate the first part of the traditional story *and* on the central and not just secondary role of the feminine in my study of Spanish-language versions and my theory of Don Juan. It would be easy to speak only of Don Juan and the Statue or Don Juan and his servant, and, because "boys will be boys" and find stories about boys most interesting—and don't forget that Macdonald himself admits to a preoccupation with the male rivals—it would be even easier for us to shrug our shoulders

and pretend that it "wouldn't matter if we could only prevent girls from being girls." I believe, however, that Don Juan's story is too complex to interpret it as merely a tale of male rivalry in which the distinct versions have little to say to one another. Indeed, doesn't the fact that Macdonald and I have continued here in the pages of *Connotations* the type of rivalry found in the different versions of Don Juan's story indicate the degree to which the story is *similar* in its many manifestations? After all, if there were nothing in common, there would be nothing to discuss. And is it insignificant that the major difference of opinion is over the relative roles of the masculine and the feminine in these stories? I rather think not.

But then again, critical trends being what they are, maybe I have seen Don Juan as an 80s kind of guy, and Macdonald is fashioning him as a man of the 90s.

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NOTES

¹From the song "Let's Call the Whole Thing Off," words by Ira Gershwin, music by George Gershwin. The song was written for Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers in the 1937 film *Shall We Dance*.

²Citations are from Macdonald's "Postilla" published in this number of *Connotations*; when referring to the article "Derek Walcott's Don Juans," I give the title and page number.

³Attributed to Yogi Berra [Lawrence Peter].

⁴Lévi-Strauss claims with respect to change in the form of inversion: "Thus we arrive at a fundamental property of mythical thought When a mythical schema is transmitted from one population to another, and there exist differences in language, social organization, or way of life that make the myth difficult to communicate, it begins to become impoverished and confused. But one can find a limiting situation in which, instead of being finally obliterated by losing all its outlines, the myth is inverted and regains part of its precision" (2: 184). This *appears* to run counter to Macdonald's view of myth, at least as far as the authority he cites is concerned: "As Chris Baldick points out, 'The vitality of myths lies precisely in their capacity for change, their adaptability and openness to new combinations of meanings.'" Note that Baldick says "new combinations of meanings," which is not to say new meanings in and of themselves, as Baldick himself realizes: "A myth . . . is open to all kinds

of adaptation and elaboration, *but it will preserve at the same time a basic stability of meaning*" (2; my emphasis). In general, Baldick's is a good discussion of myth and his distinction between "myth" and "modern myth" is carefully drawn.

⁵For more on Kierkegaard in the context of my understanding of Don Juan, see *Don Juan and the Point of Honor* 2, 199-200, 213, 216, 234, 271, 281, but especially 126-27, 268-69.

⁶Bloom's ideas are too intricate to go into any detail here. Suffice it to say that he interprets literature as a confrontation between authors who attempt to deal with their "anxiety of influence." Bloom's ideas are set forth in *The Anxiety of Influence* and explained again in *A Map of Misreading*. See, too, David Fite's study of Bloom. I refer here to Bloom's notion of reversal or apophrades, in which an author triumphs by "having so stationed the precursor, in one's own work, that particular passages in *his* work seem to be not presages of one's own advent, but rather to be indebted to one's own achievement, and even (necessarily) to be lessened by one's greater splendor" (*Anxiety* 141). Bloom and the anxiety of influence figure in my own theory of Don Juan (*Don Juan and the Point of Honor* 6, 9, 46, 107 and note, 122, 228) as well as in Gustavo Pérez Firmat's reading of José Zorrilla's *Don Juan Tenorio* (*Literature and Liminality* 20-25).

⁷In *Les Mohicans de Paris*, Alexandre Dumas (père) writes:

Jackal.—Il y a une femme dans toutes les affaires; aussitôt qu'on me fait un rapport, je dis: "Cherchez la femme!" On cherche la femme, et quand la femme est trouvée . . .

Mme. Desmarets.—Eh bien!

Jackal.—On ne tarde pas à trouver l'homme.

⁸See previous note.

⁹From Anthony Hope's *The Dolly Dialogues*. The entire quotation reads: "There's no sin in a little betting, my dear. Boys will be boys—" 'And even that,' I interposed, "wouldn't matter if we could only prevent girls from being girls'" (Chapter 15).