

The Don Juan Theme in the Works of G.B. Shaw with Specific Reference to Man and Superman.

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Abstract

The Don Juan Legend has had an irresistible appeal to a great number of writers and artists over the centuries. It was used by people such as Tiro de Molina, Moliere, Mozart, Balzac, Byron and Shaw, to name only a few in a long line of writers.

The purpose of this study is to investigate some approaches to the Don Juan theme before the advent of Shaw; and to show how shaw utilized the creative minds of these earlier writers; and how the traditional image of Don Juan, the hedonist, the libertine, is converted by Shaw's pen to that of a highly gifted human being, an artist - philosopher, with a conscious vocation in life of improving his mind to the utmost, and consequently improving the lot of mankind.

In his preface to **Man and Superman**, Shaw declares that his reason for writing a Don Juan play is a half-joking remark made by the prominent critic A.B. Walkley.¹ It is clear, however, that the idea of writing such a work had long been brewing in Shaw's mind, long before he had met Walkley, long even, before he published his short piece "Don Giovanni explains" in 1887. The roots of his interest lay in his mother's singing lessons, in those extensive hours when she, instructed by Vandeleur Lee, had sung Dona Ana's arias and the fifteen-year-old boy, fascinated by the opera, insisted on learning to play the piano through practicing the Overture. Shaw's admiration for Mozart was to last throughout his life. Later, as critic for **The Star** he was to describe Don Giovanni as "The greatest opera in the world." (Holt, 1966: 101)

In the Preface to his Don Juan Play he calls Mozart "the artist - enchanter, the master beloved by masters revealing the hero's spirit in magical harmonies, elfin tones, and elate darting rhythms as of Summer lightning made audible." (Shaw, 1903: xi)² In a letter to a young actress, Molly Tompkins, he indicates the extent of the influence Mozart has had on his writings: "I don't know whether you are a musician. If not, you don't know Mozart: and if you don't know Mozart you will never understand my technique." (Holt, 1966: 102) Nevertheless, even this profound admiration for the composer would not have motivated Shaw to write both a story and a play about Don Juan. Clearly, there is something else involved.

It was in the year 1885, on his twenty-ninth birthday, that Shaw was first initiated into the world of sensual experience. Mrs. Jenny Patterson, a woman about fifteen years Shaw's senior, induced him to spend a night at her house in Brompton Square. She was an extremely possessive and jealous woman, and for the next two years strove to achieve sole control of Shaw's life. Shaw reacted by openly seeking the company of other women. In 1890 he wrote to one of his friends, Jules Magny:

As for "les seduction de la femme", I believe opinion is divided between the people who regard me as a saint or a statue, and those who suspect me of being an Irish Don Juan who will eventually compromise Socialism by some outrageous scandal of the Parnell sort. (Crompton, 1967: 93)

It is not clear whether Shaw actually lived such a licentious life or whether he simply tried to give that impression. What is obvious, however, is that Shaw saw in the character of Don Juan a reflection of himself, and that he interpreted the fictional character in his own way. To Shaw, Don Juan represents the rebel against society, one who did not hesitate to openly defy the world and to refuse to submit to its powers. Thus, in many respects, Don Juan is a Shavian hero "Who believes in free will, the power of the mind, and the capacity of man to transform himself and his environment. (Wisenthal, 1974: 109-110) Don Juan is therefore any superior individual who discards the established modes of behaviour. However, he does not see Don Juan as a hedonist pursuing his own pleasure. In his Preface he dismisses the idea of Don Juan as "Vulgar, a libertine," and defines him as

a man who ... follows his own instincts without regard to the common statue, or canon law: and therefore ... finds himself in moral conflict with existing institutions, and defends himself by fraud and force. (P: X)

However, to take on such a role is no longer possible. The Don Juans of today are not fighting against a god who will burn them in the fires of hell if they disobey him, but against "those forces of middle class public opinion" which, with their uncompromising morality, have paralysed the Don Juans of old to such an extent that, as a consequence, "no nobleman dares now shock his greengrocer." (P. xiii) Thus Don Juan has been forced to stage his rebellion in a way different from the past, not through defying the sexual conventions of the time, but through turning to philosophy: "Instead of pretending to read Ovid he does actually read Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, studies Westermarck, and is concerned for the future of the race instead of for the freedom of his own instincts." (P. xix)

"Don Giovanni Explains" probably provides us with the most lucid idea of Don Juan as a character since **Man and Superman** is more concerned with presenting the mature Don Juan than with examining his actual actions. Don Giovanni is a ghost, but the setting is "down-to-earth", it is a railway carriage. The story is told by a young girl who is travelling home after attending a performance of **Don Giovanni**. The Don Giovanni who appears to her is an extremely attractive and impressive person, and she falls in love with him immediately. However, Don Juan, far from being a flirt or libertine, is "steadfast and tranquil", "with no more sense of her attractiveness" than if she "had been a naughty little girl of ten or twelve". (Shaw, 1934: 173) He tells his story, which conforms in many ways with the traditional plots, from his "seduction" of Dona Ana to the commandants, death, the pursuit of Alvira, the ball, and the talking statue. But each situation is comically disposed of, presenting Don Juan as innocent of all accusations, albeit a nonconformist. Dona Ana, engaged to Ottavio, had heard so much about Don Giovanni's notoriety that when he comes to visit her she immediately raises a hue and a cry. The Zerlina episode is set up by Don Giovanni to enable Ottavio to prove his valour and Don Giovanni to get away from Elvira, the insanely jealous wife, who is based on Mrs. Patterson. The speaking statue is a result of the hunger of Leporello and Don Juan, who, escaping from Elvira, have become weak and begin to have hallucinations. The "thousand and three" are totally non-existent, Don Giovanni acknowledges six of them but reveals that the rest were imagined by Leporello, who wrote down the name of every woman they set their eyes on. In addition, Don Giovanni is not taken to hell by the statue, but rather, falls through the floor when the statue is brought in and proves to be too heavy for the rotten floorboards. The whole story is a farce of mistaken identities. nor does Shaw refrain from adding a personal touch when he gives an account of his love affair, which resembles closely his experience with Mrs. Patterson.

The story's importance lies, however, not in the plot, but in the seeds of later ideas on Don Juanism and the concept of hell. In "Don Giovanni Explains" Shaw relates Don Giovanni's experience of hell:

I found society there composed chiefly of vulgar, hysterical, brutish, weak, good for nothing peoples, all well intentioned, who kept up the reputation of the place by making themselves and each other as unhappy as they were capable of doing. (Shaw. 1934:186)

What is interesting about Don Giovanni is how he looks at himself. His chief fault, he remarks, was "an indifference to conventional opinions, and a humorously cynical touch in conversation, "and the fact that he had refused to waste his time as a title lackey" (P. 186) as his ancestors of the Tenorio family had done. He is extremely critical of his contemporaries and later finds himself unable to fit into hell and is therefore sent to heaven. The basis of **Man and Superman** has been laid.

After writing "Don Giovanni Explains" Shaw began to expand his knowledge of the Don Juan tradition. In his preface he refers to Tirso de Molina's version, Moliere's **Festin de Pierre**, to Byron's "Vagabond Libertine", and to Mozart's Don Giovanni, who was "the last of the true Don Juans." He also classifies Goethe's Faust as part of the tradition.

The Don Juan that Shaw presents to us both resembles and differs from Prototypes. From Tirso, for example, "Shaw got a serious moral condemnation of romantic amorism, which he considered the greatest waster of the life force". (Mills, 1967: 218) Both writers preached repentance because to have nothing to do but to amuse yourself, is the ultimate sin against the forces of life". (Shaw, 1903:93) To Shaw, the "tedious, vulgar pursuit of happiness" means stagnation and waste, thwarting the purpose of the life force which is the "pursuit of perfection". (P. 93) Hell is to be dreaded because it is a world where people play and pretend, where there is no hope, because hope is a "form of moral responsibility," (P. 93) or, as the Statue puts it, "there is no hope, and consequently no duty, no work, nothing to be gained by praying, nothing to be lost by doing what you like". (P. 93) Hell is the abode of the romantics, whose "beauty worshipping and happiness hunting and woman idealizing was not worth a dump as much as a philosophy of life". (P. 113)

On the other hand, Shaw's **Man and Superman** owes a debt to Moliere, a lightheartedness and satirical turn that is totally alien to Tirso. The satire of both Shaw and Moliere is directed towards exposing the hypocrisy and artificiality imposed upon the individual by social rules, and to both Don Juan represents the rebel who stands alone against society and its mores. Yet, while Moliere makes his character essentially negative, Shaw's Don Juan is entirely positive, a man who, if not a superman, will probably be the ancestor of one. From Mozart, Shaw took the characters; he himself claims that he based Tavy on Ottavio, and Straker on Leporello, and of course, Don Juan on Don Giovanni. But it is easier to see the differences than to spot the similarities. Ottavio's puppy-like devotion for Ann resembles perhaps that of Ottavio for Dona Ana, but otherwise their characters diverge in every respect. Straker is the ideal servant when it comes to helping his master escape from Ann but he is also a representative of what Shaw called the New Man, and thus feels free to insult his master and to flaunt his superior knowledge. In this respect, the relationship between him and Don Juan is perhaps closer to Moliere's portrayal than to Mozart's.

Ultimately, however, Shaw's play differs from its predecessors because in his case the message is somewhat different. Shaw presents Don Juan as one of those few characters who, aware of the power of the Life Force, are "more or less conscious of a vocation in life to which all other considerations must be subordinated. (Valency, 1973:209) Don Juan's vocation is that of a thinker, and it is through thought that man, as opposed to woman, assumes a function. It is woman's duty to create a better race, while man is left with the task of developing the civilizations and improving his mind. That, in itself, is the true aim of the Life Force³ which is not searching for beauty or for physical perfection. Rather, "Life is a force which has made innumerable experiments in organizing itself", and started out by creating the dinosaurs, scrapped them, and then proceeded to refine its other creations until it reached man's present stage of evolution. But its job is by no means complete. For what it is driving at is "brains ... an organ by which it can attain not only self-consciousness but self-understanding", (P. 109) free from the dictates of the physical. In the final analysis what it is seeking is to create supermen. Shaw saw the Forces as a positive force, as opposed to Schopenhauer, who saw the will as a driving power, but senseless and motiveless.

Don Juan, then, is aware of his purpose and aware of the workings of the Life Force within him. In his argument with the Devil he remarks: "Were I not possessed with a purpose beyond my own I had better be a ploughman than a philosopher." (P. 127) As it is, however, he is in the grip of the Force, which has commanded him thus:

And this... must thou strive to do for me until thou diest, when I will make another brain and another philosopher to carry on the work. (P. 127).

This is exactly why Don Juan in **Man and Superman** must go to heaven. Don Juan is a puritan, who refuses to accept that life has no goal. He cannot fit into hell, "the home of the unreal and the seekers for happiness" (P. 99) for he feels that to be condemned to a futile existence, full of boredom and stagnation, is a terrible fate. "What **really** bores him is the underlying hellish idea that life has no purpose, that 'killing eternity' by total immersion in insubstantial entertainment is all there is to do." (Wexelblatt, 1982: 51) He yearns to be in heaven where he can contemplate and thereby aid the Life Force in its striving for greater self-consciousness. Because he was always primarily a thinker, he must join the "ever dwindling" number of people going to heaven. What is important, too, is that he has the choice. He is free, as all the other characters are, to move from one place to the other as does the Statue, who basically lives in heaven though he wanders back and forth constantly and now has made the decision to join the Devil and his friends. Clearly, he is to be scorned for such a choice, while Don Juan is to be encouraged in his, since Shaw "over and over again reiterated his preference for the man who, in a purposeful world, aligned himself with this purpose. It is the doers who are the religious forces" (Barr, 1973:94). It is ironic in view of the previous versions of the Don Juan legend that Shaw chose to represent Don Juan as a religious force. In none of his previous roles did he strive in any way to formulate a design or a philosophy. Tirso's Don Juan is an adolescent bent on enjoying himself; Moliere's a skeptical who takes delight in play-

ing the role of iconoclast but uses "hellish" methods to do so, indulging in the joy of destructiveness, while the last thing on Don Giovanni's mind in Mozart's opera is formulating a philosophy. He is far too busy charming people and playing his little tricks even to bother to think what he is doing, let alone contemplate as Shaw's Don Juan proposes to do. What both Moliere's hero and Shaw's have in common is their shunning of the unreal and the false; to Shaw's Don Juan the unreal itself, the world of illusions, constitutes the horror of damnation". (P. 88) But while the traditional characters react to pretence by giving in wholeheartedly to therein impulses, Don Juan is conscious that such people "oppose to the Force of Life the device of sterility". (P. 117)

However, nowhere does Shaw invert the traditional image of Don Juan as he does in his depiction of the battle of the sexes. The battle in previous versions, if such a battle really existed, was the fight for control sought by determined Don Juans who would use any means, fair or foul, to force the woman to submit. But Shaw's Don Juan is a different matter. Almost the first thing he says when he meets Dona Ana, who accuses him of following her even into the afterlife, is: "I protest I do not pursue you. Allow me to withdraw", (P. 89) and it is she who prevents him from going. Despite the fact that the role given to Dona Ana in the hell scene is comparatively small, yet her fanatic, singleminded determination to produce a superman makes her a powerful element which seems to dominate the action. This is made more noticeable in the Tanner - Ann plot where this force is seen in action. Slowly the "boa - constrictor" tightens her grip round Tanner's neck. As Shaw presents it, "The men are defined through their relationships with women," (Vogt, 1977:48) the whole Tanner - Ann play evolves round Ann's attempt to captivate her mate, while Tanner ineffectively passes judgements on the sex relationship and then, suddenly realizing what is happening, makes a desperate attempt to escape Ann. Shaw likens the relationship between man and woman with that of the spider and the fly, the spider waiting patiently, spinning its web, while the fly foolishly allows itself to be trapped. There are no two ways about it: "She is the pursuer and the contriver, he the pursued and disposed of", (P. xviii) and Shaw presents Don Juan not as the huntsman "but as the quarry." Many of his ideas on woman Shaw took from Nietzsche, and the concept of woman selecting a husband, bearing his children and then discarding him is very close to the view presented by the German - Polish philosopher. "Everything in woman is a riddle, and everything in woman hath a solution - it is called pregnancy." (Kaye, 1958: 103) He ridicules the idea that man has any control over his relationship. Once the woman recognizes in him the most suitable father for her children nothing can deter her:

women must marry because the race must perish without her travail: if the risk of death and the certainty of pain, danger, and unutterable discomforts cannot deter her, slavery and swaddled ankles will not. (P. xix)

Gripped by the Life Force, woman sees man only as an instrument, as a means to an end. Thus she learns all kinds of accomplishments to deceive her man into

seeing her as desirable, "but throws away the bait when the bird is in the net". (P. 116) This is far from the image projected in any of the other Don Juan plays! Basically, Shaw wants to point out the folly of man trying to use woman for his pleasure, for "how can so feeble and transient a folly as a man's selfish pleasure enslave a woman as the whole purpose of Nature embodied in woman can enslave a man?" (P. 23) However, there is more to the tale than that. If Shaw indeed intended to indicate that Don Juan cannot escape the clutches of women, then he did not need to select Don Juan as the "hero" of his play. The point is, Don Juan is immune, as are all Don Juans. For, he too, has a purpose, and thus uses women as an instrument, but not of his pleasure. Don Juan is an artist, and the artist has "a purpose as absorbing and as unscrupulous as a woman's purpose". (P. 23) He becomes involved with women only in order to study them, worships them only in order for them to inspire him, and marries them so that he can experience marriage at first hand! Consequently, "of all human struggles there is none so treacherous and remorseless as the struggle between the artist man and the Mother woman." (P. 24) This is the secret of Don Juan's attractiveness. Because he is a philosopher, because he is a key to a higher form of evolution, he is destined to be always chased by women who are looking for the best father. But as a thinker, his goal is equal to theirs, and so he can pick them up at a momentary whim, but he will always elude them, so that they remain "only a way-station on his road to a philosophy." (Nethercote, 1954: 144)

Another point on which all the Don Juans are agreed is that there is no such thing as romantic love. Since Shaw, is aiming through his work at defining the nature of sexual attraction, a large part of the action is concerned with Don Juan's (or Jack Tanner's) relationship with the opposite sex. It is clear that since man and woman are thrown together by the Life Force, "love" can be explained as Life's urge to procreate. Romantic Love, therefore, is "merely a trick of the Life Force, which is pursuing a supernatural and racial aim having nothing to do with mere egotism and private decorum". (Crompton, 1969: 85) Don Juan therefore mocks those who believe in romantic love because all their "beauty worshipping and happiness hunting and woman idealizing was not worth a dump as a philosophy of life." (P. 113) Thus the expounders of romantic love are all sent to hell. It is an illusion that they try to keep up, but it is impossible, since:

in the sex relations the universal creative energy of which the parties are both the helpless agents, over-rides and sweeps away all personal considerations, and dispenses with all personal relations. (P. 119)

Since Don Juan is struggling above all against spiritual artifice and deception, he is therefore struggling against "woman as the instigator of the most artificial experience of all, romantic love." (McDowell, 1963: 249) Shaw related this to the concept of punishment, linking it to the Don Juan stories. The guilty party **will** be punished; but the guilty party is not Don Juan, but those members of society who refuse to obey the dictates of the Life Force. The 'true crime', according to Shaw, "is the waste of human potential which results from Society's efforts to live up to those standards." (Leary, 1979: 63) Ironically, the very person who in the traditional plays

urges Don Juan to repent, namely The Commander, now tries to persuade Don Juan to remain in hell. Shaw also adds a humorous touch to the character by having him, upon first entering, ask Don Juan. "Well, have you repented yet?" (P. 92) But it is he who must repent, for as a seeker of dreams and a shunner of reality and action he belongs to the group in hell.

Although **Man and Superman** provides the most clear-cut view of Shaw's Don Juan/artist/philosopher, Jack Tanner, as the modern-day Don Juan, is not the only representative of these traits in Shaw's works. The artist - philosopher type who is irresistible to women and yet can hold himself aloof recurs again and again. Julius Caesar in **Caesar and Cleopatra** is one: he is able to resist the advances of the "child-queen" Cleopatra because he is too occupied with war and things of the mind to pay her any attention. Hector Hushabye in **Heartbreak House** is, on the surface, everything a Don Juan should be, and like the Don Juan of "Don Giovanni Explains" he distinguishes himself through his romantic style of clothing.⁴ Hector is married but is constantly picking up young ladies, and is telling lies day in, day out. But Hector can be more affiliated with the traditional Don Juan than with Shaw's artist - philosopher. What is ironic about this character is that he actually turns out to be far more of a hero even than he pretends to be, and therefore his lies look pale beside the truth about his deeds! A version of Don Juan grown old is Captain Shotover who committed polygamy by marrying an English woman after he had married a Negress from Zanzibar. Now he has turned to his inventions, all of them destructive. He contains the life Force distorted, yet he still, oddly enough, has his fascination for young ladies such as Ellie Dunn, who insists on marrying him.

All these characters stem in one way or the other from Shaw's concept of Don Juan. Though they seem only distantly related to El-Burlador and his ancestors, each of them carries a distinct trait which proclaims him heir. That Shaw has chosen to see Don Juan as representing the forces of life may seem somewhat unusual, but after all, once Don Juan was taken over by Shaw he became Shaw's property, a Shavian hero out of the Shavian portrait gallery. It is to Shaw's credit that he managed to create a modern character out of the romantic remnants of the past, and to give such a character "a new *raison d'être*, one that offers limitless, worthwhile possibilities and is infinitely more satisfying than mere sensual indulgence." (Mills, 1967: 224)

Notes:

1. See Shaw's "Epistle Dedicatory" which opens **Man and Superman** and which puts forward Shaw's argument for writing the play.
2. Bernard Shaw, **Man and Superman: A Comedy and a Philosophy** London: Constable & Co., 1903 All quotations are from this text.
3. The Life Force, sometimes called "Creative Evolution" is Shaw's most advanced philosophical doctrine which is dealt with at length in his two intellectual plays **Man and Superman** and **Back to Methu-selah**.
4. What adds a romantic touch to Hector's appearance is the fact that he is constantly seen wearing an Arab Costume.

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