

Bernard Beatty, *Byron's Don Juan*. Routledge Library Editions: Lord Byron. London and New York: Routledge, 2016. Pp. 258. £90. ISBN 9781138648555.

Bernard Beatty's 1985 study of *Byron's Don Juan* has recently been republished by the *Routledge Library Editions* series. On its initial publication, the book coincided with an important time in Byron's critical heritage, emerging alongside Leslie Marchand's now indispensable *Byron's Letters and Journals* (1973-1994), Jerome McGann's *Byron's Complete Poetical Works* (1980-1993), and Andrew Nicholson's *Complete Miscellaneous Prose* (1991). A major significance, then, of Beatty's study is that it is symptomatic of a time when Byron was beginning to be considered worthy of academic attention. But its relevance to Byronists and scholars of Romanticism extends well beyond the context in which it was produced, existing as it does as one of a handful of studies that compels readers to attend closely and seriously to the greatness of Byron as a Romantic poet, and to *Don Juan* as the great comic poem of the period.

Two questions begin and motivate the study: 'how does *Don Juan* proceed and what kind of poem is it?' (94). The first is shown to be 'the subject of continuous enquiry' (220) – as impossible to draw to a satisfactory close as the poem itself – while the answer to the second is, broadly speaking, that the poem is a comedy (220). Despite Byron lamenting that 'The days of Comedy are gone, alas!' (XIII, 94), Beatty convincingly outlines the poem's central preoccupations with three comic markers: 'woman, Nature and society' (220). This is not to say that Beatty reduces the poem to a single genre, finding instead that the poem is animated by the generic cross-wiring of epic scale, tragic event, and comic momentum. Throughout the study, Beatty dextrously illustrates *Don Juan* as existing betwixt and between affirmation and negation, the 'yay' of comedy and religion, and the 'nay' of scepticism and philosophy. While Beatty is attuned to the significance of the second pair (in no other study of Byron have Hume and Kierkegaard been used to greater effect), it is the relationship between the comic and the religious that emerges as the more significant yoking.

Without arguing that Byron was a theologian, or even of any particular religious conviction (though he does side with Shelley that Byron was 'little better than a Christian'), Beatty deftly shows how we might observe the religious turn of Byron's poetic craft, and how theologically astute readings enrich our sense of this. The first chapter offers a good instance of such enlightened attentiveness, with an elucidation of how allusions to Matthew (8, 5-13) are woven through the narrator's contemplation of the commandant's corpse (22-24). This episode is shown by Beatty to be very like the Siege cantos in its violent intrusion upon the comic integrity of the poem, but very unlike in being superfluous to narrative progress; as Beatty puts it, '[r]emove the dead commandant, and the poem remains as it was' (16). Yet it nonetheless exists as the most curious instance of digression to which the poem yields, being least integral to the poem's substance, while offering the keenest articulation as to what that poetic substance might be. The episode's refusal to return to the central narrative even as it articulates that return ('But let me quit the theme', V, 38) requires a level of patient optimism from the reader, which Beatty later likens to religious faith: 'Persistence and waiting, though quite uncomic in felt experience, are of the essence of religious faith and comic action' (221).

The first half of the study is concerned with the poem's seemingly irreconcilable impulses of comic, erotic, and religious affirmation on the one hand, and tragic, philosophic, and sceptical negation on the other. The second half of the study offers some answers as to how these antitheses are held in dialectic. In practical terms this means paying attention to the final cantos, which Beatty argues exist 'as a clarifying development of the whole poem' (189). The final two chapters of the book revolve around close attention to two terms that

animate the poem's forward momentum while simultaneously offering containment: 'proximity' and 'glow' (118). From the 'glowing arm' (I, 115) with which Juan embraces Julia, to the 'glowing bust' (XVI, 122) of the Duchess Fitz-Fulke, each of the amorous encounters of the Eros-impelled hero are enabled by proximity and realised in the glowing physicality of Juan and his lovers. The embodiment of these concepts is found in Aurora Raby, whose name, shared with the Roman Goddess of the Dawn, implies at once the luminosity of daybreak, and that of the Northern Lights with which Byron's 'versified Aurora Borealis' (VII, 2) is aligned. For Beatty, it is Aurora who 'will herself unlock the logic of the poem for us' (133) and provide us with a 'hold' (211) on the poem.

It is Beatty's enviable purchase on *Don Juan* that makes this re-publication a truly welcome one. The book sets the scene for current scholarly engagement with aspects of gender, genre, and philosophy, while steering a course mercifully clear from biographical speculation and celebrity. As such, Beatty's study serves as a valuable reminder that Byron's most expansive poem 'should excite an answering largeness in its readers and critics' (231).

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