

**Richard Cronin, *Byron's Don Juan: The Liberal Epic of the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Pp. 258. £85. ISBN 9781009366236.**

Richard Cronin's monograph *Byron's Don Juan: The Liberal Epic of the Nineteenth Century* is the first study on *Don Juan* in over 30 years. It was started during the COVID-19 lockdown and was the subject of nearly 50 years of rumination on Byron's *magnum opus*. This enlightening work, on arguably Byron's most challenging text, affords the reader the opportunity to thoroughly engage with *Don Juan* in ways that previous generations were not afforded. Cronin 'asks what kind of poem *Don Juan* is' (2) in the first chapter, whereby he sets the book's plan in motion. He argues that it is a modern epic that is clearly in the lineage of *Paradise Lost* and Wordsworth's plans for epic poetry as exemplified by *The Excursion*. By setting out his argument for *Don Juan* to be seen and treated as an epic poem, Cronin elevates the poem and scholarship into a new realm where readers are challenged to take *Don Juan* as a text that warrants the same serious scholarship as its epic precursors. From here, it feels 'natural' that the second chapter presents *Don Juan* 'as an anti-heroic poem' (166) even though most scholars- from Byron's day until the twenty-first century- have argued that Juan *is* a modern-day hero. Cronin's unconventional reading continues when, in chapter three, he convincingly argues that 'Byron's poem has a better claim to embody the age's spirit than *The Prelude* or *The Excursion* or, for that matter, Southey's *Joan of Arc* or *The Curse of Kehama*' (6). This statement, although well-supported, is sure to make Wordsworth, Southey and Byron scholars alike feel slightly uncomfortable in the sense that Byron is categorized with his Laker 'enemies'.

In chapter four, Cronin shifts focus to examine the role of language and its importance within the poem and cultural elements between Britain and Europe. By marking the poem as a 'public poem', Byron is able to vacillate between the public and private spheres by introducing purely fictional characters based upon real individuals and real individuals based on fictionalized events. Chapter five elaborates on British and European influences and supplements them with 'thickly seeded references to Byron's own domestic circumstances' (6) that would come to dominate and influence the next two generations of European novelists more than poets. Chapter six looks at the 'swift transitions' of the poem, namely examining the 'digressions within digressions' (137). In addition to examining the digressions, Cronin also briefly looks at the role and significance of Byron's use of dashes and em dashes and the role they play in shaping the poem micro and macrocosmically. He calls into question, and makes the reader wonder regarding, the significance of punctuation within poetry. While chapter seven explores the demands of *ottava rima* and how the uniquely Italian poetic form helps shape the poem's physical and internal structures, Cronin uses *Beppo* as a way to support his ideas, as *Beppo* was composed (1817) during the early cantos of *Don Juan*. Finally, in chapter eight, the book is brought 'to a conclusion by asking what Byron means by insisting that his is a liberal age even though he was writing at a time when liberalism seemed to be, if not defeated, then at least everywhere in retreat' (7). Looking at the quickly evolving politics of Britain and the Continent, during *Don Juan*'s composition, Cronin facilitates the ever-changing life and times of Byron, Juan and the age and demonstrating that it is a kind of 'perfect storm' that affords Byron the ability to create his masterpiece.

Cronin ends his study by what I believe to be the most important idea: that *Don Juan* is not only an epic that is on par with his Miltonic and Wordsworthian precursors, but is one that influences the Victorian novelists and is the last bastion of liberalism in British literature. For too long, Byron and *Don Juan* have largely been ignored by Romanticists who have felt that the poet

and the poem were insignificant when compared to their contemporaries. He convincingly argues that Byron's thought process and skill in composing *Don Juan* is a force to be reckoned with and is one that warrants the necessity of serious thought and study. Taking this into consideration, Cronin provides readers with a book that not only thoroughly examines Byron's epic poem but contextualizes the framework by which *Don Juan* was created and the lenses through which the next generation of Byron scholars will examine the poem. This is, without a doubt, a text that belongs on the bookshelves of all Romanticists – not just Byronists.

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