

I WANT a Hero: Don Juan's Shipwreck and Byron's WANTED Hero

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Abstract. The study aims to explore the complex motif of the hero in Don Juan, using Canto II as a focal point. In dialogue with traditional heroes, Byron provides a comprehensive reflection on the creation of heroes, suggesting that they are instantly devalued when conceived as either epic or recorded heroes. Both models adhere to the same logic, which is encapsulated in the rallying cry "I want a hero." In the epic-hero model, "I" signifies the poet and the nation's manipulative propaganda; in the recorded-hero model, it has evolved into the desire of the desiring-machine. The study posits that building upon the remnants of the two models he opposes, Byron proposes his own model of Don Juan—a hero genuinely seasick amid the shipwreck, serving as an embodiment of poets in a state of ennui within the 19th-century commodity culture. Through Juan, Byron offers a viable solution for literature within the commercial society.

1 Introduction

Don Juan is a satirical epic composed by Lord Byron from 1819 to 1824. Based on the archetype of the Spanish folk legend, Byron's version is anti-epic as it presents its protagonist as an anti-hero in a dialogue with the traditional heroes. Canto II is an epitome critical to this construction, with various epic elements, such as shipwrecks, cannibalism, and island narratives, bringing the Byronic world and the Homeric world to contrast as the inner virtues of Odysseus are marked absent when the anti-hero Juan is placed in similar contexts. This absence of traditional *heroness* makes the epic mechanism of inventing a hero also contrasted. Whereas the virtue of Odysseus is in organic unity with the epic poet, making him an agent of divine beings, Juan is conjured as a lame hero simply in reply to the narrator's call in the first stanza that "I WANT a hero".

Previous studies on this wanted hero focus on the tension between Byron's epic and the narrator's list of heroes. What indeed distinguishes Juan from epic heroes like Odysseus or phenomenal, recorded ones like Napoleon?

Firstly, while some consider the 19th century itself morally barren of epic heroic spirits, most scholars in their studies further specify the vague notion of *heroic spirits*. Instead of deprecating the 19th century itself as unheroic, these studies clarify that the "Brave men living before Agamemnon" are significant for their "authority and passions of expression" [1], which is a "high mimetic view"() of human nature absent in the 19th century. Thus, Juan as

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a hero of “low mimetic code” [2], acting totally passive, not morally credited, and not rewarded for deeds, appears adaptable to the narrator.

While this passive hero is recognized as Byron’s elegy for the lost epic ideals of heroness, studies suggest that Byron totally denies recorded heroes as made celebrities by the public. The narrator’s *want* is thus “kin to the unbridled consumer desire of early 19th-century commodity culture” [3]. Based on this phenomenon of commodity culture, Mozer and Moore come to a shared conclusion that Byron’s narrator demonstrates that the only way to present a hero, which had become a “cultural commodity” in the 19th century [3], is advertising one. Besides, the middlebrow nature of Juan echoes the nature of *commodity*: Society churns out them while the consumers “always are left wanting a new one” [3].

This study, however, holds that the two models (the epic hero model and the recorded hero model) both belong to the tradition of *Inventing a Hero*, to which Byron’s creation of Juan is a thorough denouncement. It is dedicated to a re-illustration that the mechanisms of two traditions and Byron’s following, further introduction of his new *hero*, are actually three versions of the call that *I want a hero*.

In the first model of epic heroes, a hero is wanted as a means to an end, including both the internal end in the plot and the external end in reception as a cultural propaganda. Contrary to the previous assertion that this denial is a “Romantic Revolt against classicism” [4], this study takes it as a consequence of the shift from the Homeric organic world to the unlicensed 19th-century society.

In the second model of recorded celebrities, this study furthers previous elucidation of commodity culture with Deleuze’s concept of a desiring-machine, suggesting that celebrities are in nature, homemade heroes who are turned public by successful marketing. Byron’s own hero Juan, instead, is *recruited* by the narrator’s advertisement-like call. Moreover, Juan’s staying seasick in *the shipwreck* in Canto II makes him unmarketable, whom this study holds as an incarnation of the poet himself *jn annui*. By demonstrating this trait of sentimental melancholy as the origin of reflection and literary meditation, this study states that Byron here indicates poets who voluntarily stay seasick are wanted as a powerful element in 19th century society.

2 Model of the epic heroes

Generally, in the model of epic heroes, the construction of a hero involves a collaboration of both the internal narration of the epic and, externally, the reception of it in the following ages. The epic heroes are granted significance by the mechanism as a means to an intelligible end.

Internally, the Homeric narration features a worldview of divine machinery, regarding epic heroes as agents of divine beings for their ends. With the joined union of Zeus, *μοιρα*, and the Erinyes that serve as the mover of affairs, the epic narration is supernaturally inspired. Hero-ness of the protagonist, in such a way, stands not for a specific trait but for the significance granted to him by gods so concerned about his fate.

This divine machinery is shown intelligible to the characters as the *license*. For example, in Book IX, when Odysseus encounters the island of the human-eating Cyclopes, he takes active *actions* to avoid cannibalism according to the license of *ξενια*; Euripides’ *Cyclops* even furthers this highlight of *license* by stressing that Odysseus actively allies himself with satyrs living in the cage.

On the other hand, from the external perspective, the hero in reception is wielded as a means to consolidate a shared identity. In most cases, it is not only the epic poet that authors the hero, but also the reception in following times participates in the invention. In this reception, epic heroes are introduced as the quintessential incarnation of *Greekness* as a shared cultural identity, marking traits such as moderation. Historical studies of epic texts have found that the invention of *Greekness* is fundamentally constructivist and that the poet’s

composition of the epic model is just the first step of this construction, which is a long-lasting procedure often stretching far beyond the poet's own time. As scholars such as Jonathan Hall have stated, *Greekness* was never wanted more by the Greeks than in war times like that of the Greco-Persian wars. On the one hand, *Greekness* appeared as an aggregative layer among ethnic groups on which armies and leagues could be forged. On the other hand, it also encouraged oppositional identification, which promised a radical political division from those labelled *barbarians* as well as the superiority of Greeks themselves. The two trends, begetting and complementing each other, helped build together for Greeks a shared identity and furthered the progress of their centrality.

Epic heroes are, as a matter of fact, not invented immediately by the epic poet himself but usually acknowledged by the following reception for practical reasons. An example lies in the invention of *civilized heroes* as a measure of self-distinction from *barbarians*. While in the Homeric tradition, Odysseus ponders whether inhabitants are "arrogant, wild and lawless, or hospitable and god-fearing" without verdict [5], in the following reception, this episode is deemed an opposition between *Greekness* (the civilized as Odysseus) and the Barbarians. While the awareness of the presence of βαρβαροφωνοι (people speaking the barbarian language) could be traced back to the days of Homer, the status of Odysseus as a hero of *Greekness* was not truly established until political, economic, and cultural allegiance *wanted* an ethnic identity, of which the Homeric hero serves as a spokesman.

It can be concluded that the epic heroes are *wanted* for an intelligible end. Internally, the epic hero is invented on the want of the divine machinery, which holds him a licensed agent to fulfill the epic episode. Externally, they are re-evoked by the want of following reception for cultural and political propaganda.

3 The recorded heroes

The list of recorded heroes covers those from "Buonaparte and Dumourier" to "Barnave, Brissot, Condorcet, Mirabeau", who were "exceedingly remarkable at times". These heroes are further specified as *celebrities*, which the nineteenth century confuses with timeless *heroes*. The want for recorded heroes (celebrities) is in close connection with the 19th-century Graphic Revolution and consumer culture, a period during which "men's ability to make, preserve, transmit and disseminate precise images grew at a fantastic pace" [3]. This model involves a coherent, audience-centre synergy of consumer desire and marketing, which is a relativist method of making a privately-made figure *turn the public* into a celebrity.

Previous scholars, including Doris Langley Moore, have made a shared suggestion that this model is propelled by "the unbridled consumer desire" [3]. However, it has to be clarified here that the *consumers* are no longer sheer recipients of cultural commodities. Instead, it is this consumer's desiring-machine that creates the recorded hero. While desire has long been recognized as an outspoken mark of its missing or absent object, in modern ages, "we see it brought back onto the side of production" [6]. Desiring something is, in the 19th-century commodity culture, an activity of production.

In the realm of cultural products, this process finds its due vehicle for machinic composition in the wake of the popularization of printed publication, which makes texts as well as images turn into media for storage of reference, persuasion and even sentiment in the 19th century. Consumers, as authors in this model, are thus able "to analyze and project images that constitute the symbolic meaning" [3]. By these authors, the recorded celebrities are not "Buonaparte and Dumourier" in themselves but actually made into images in mnemonic forms on a fundamental ground of the presence of a *wanting* audience.

According to this production mechanism of a desiring-machine, the loss of their prestige is naturally attributed to the shift of ages, by which "every year and month sends forth a new

one” for an “audience that demands and supports novelty” [3]. Then how is this ever-changing desire catered properly throughout the trajectory of time?

This introduces the need for marketing, which is the second step following the production, making a privately-made image turn into a more stabilized, public form. As a matter of fact, marketing and the desiring-machine are two coherent procedures which beget and complement each other. Besides the image, the original *want* is also marketed in the second step. While the desiring-machine requires marketing to make the commodities circulate, marketing, in turn, manipulates their desires, making one’s want not *his own* want. Through this model, images such as “Buonaparte and Dumourier” are brought to a public realm of context in which significance couples discourse and the Recorded celebrities are constructed by and for the wanting audience.

4 Stay seasick: negation, melancholy, and Don Juan as a hero

Byron’s invention of Don Juan acts as a response to the previous two models, the destruction of which is followed by his own model. Denying the end in the epic model and the marketing mechanism in the model of recorded heroes, Byron presents his seasick protagonist at sea as a portrayal of poets in *ennui* facing the 19th-century world.

Firstly, *Don Juan*’s Canto II is recognized as a response paralleling the journey of Odyssey, in which Byron evokes the model of epic heroes and rewrites the Homeric tradition.

Diametrically different to that of the epic hero model in which both the internal and external *ends* construct a hero, the invention of Juan resorts to neither the internal emphasis of divine-machinery narration nor external acknowledgement for practical reasons. Instead, Juan in Canto II is everything opposed to Odyssey when confronted with similar crises such as shipwreck and cannibalism. However, the marked absence of *Greekness* in this episode does not belong to, as previous studies have suggested, the “Romantic Revolt against Classicism” but is a natural consequence in accordance with the shift of ages [4], worldviews, and their underlying mechanisms.

Different from the Homeric divine machinery, in Byron’s text, supernatural force is absent, leaving the narrative propelled by raw forces of nature and the plot filled with chance surprises. While the shipwreck of Odysseus is a misfortune of causality, what Juan suffers from in Canto II is just a series of occasional mishaps [7].

This loss of divine machinery as the giver of the end further triggers the loss of license. Without the guidance of license, when confronted with cannibalism in his journey, Don Juan behaves passively in Canto II, even as his tutor and his pet are picked to be eaten by the crew. As the ship is a microcosm of the 19th-century public context, Byron here gives a satire on the unlicensed public for whom there is a rupture between morality with legality [8,9]. On the one hand, those who play the role of legislators in Canto II, who decide to pick the victim for food by lottery, are morally lame. On the other hand, the moral choice to avoid both could scarcely be made public as legal. Based on this confusion of morality with legality, Byron even introduces Juan to a third license as the license of “truth” [7]. As the cacophony of licenses leaves Juan governed by neither of them, Juan is not at all nobler than his flesh-eating fellows because he is not declining theoretical cannibalism but simply detesting the very idea of feeding on his tutor in a pragmatic manner [10]. While heroic *action* is always paired with autonomy over *motive*, Juan’s behaviour without license turns out to be sheer activity instead of organic, heroic action.

The loss of an external end is clearly attributed to the lost intention of projecting a shared identity onto a notional symbol. As is stated, the heroic figure in modern ages has turned into the cultural commodities, catering to artistic taste, experimental journey of becoming, and even the precise mechanic ability *to desire*.

Presented as a cultural commodity, Juan further exemplifies Byron's negation of the second model of recorded celebrities, the individuals of whom were "exceedingly remarkable at times but not at all adapted to my rhymes" [1]. This is followed by the assertion that "the tide is turned" [1]. However, this list of heroes fails to cater to the narrator's rhymes not because they are worthless as time changes but because they, whose invention takes ground totally in the public context, are worthless in nature. Byron's own model of Juan can be seen as an engagement in this intellectual warfare, in which both the establishment and the transmission of the heroic figure are denied.

Firstly, on the private establishment of the heroic figure, Byron's method denies the creation of the desiring-machine. Instead, Byron's narrator replaces the model of *inventing* a hero by *advertising* for one, which takes the form of the 19th-century want-ads. As "an avid reader of periodicals and an acute observer of periodical culture, Byron, through his narrator, posts this want-ad for a hero similar to that of the "situation vacant" ads in other words [5], wanting someone to fill a place. This replacement turns *want* back to a marker of lack, and the wanted back to an object. Juan, as a hero, thus, is recruited intact for value exchanging instead of invented inherently as a marketable image.

This is followed by Byron's further denial of marketing as the method for transmission. While the celebrity model makes the homemade hero turn public, in Juan, Byron retains sentimental melancholia as a trait of ultimate privacy, which renders his hero radically unmarketable in the commodity culture. This revolt is seen as part of the Romantic tradition of literary creation, of which Byron himself is an outstanding proponent. Amid the commodity culture where poetry is coupled with merchandise, Byron presents Juan as a romantic reflection on the world of commerce and the poet's position within it.

In the shipwreck episode of Canto II, Juan, whose behaviour is seemingly passive, is radically differentiated from his fellows in that he keeps his hands off the liquid and *stays seasick*. Through this depiction, Byron, labouring "privately and intensively between the lines", creates a poetic "moment's thought" [11]. Revolting against the healthy aesthetic form defined as "elegiac" by Peter Sacks [11], Juan's seasick moment represents an honest, private instinct of melancholia, in which his sentiment claims no substantial significance from the audience since it can not be shared as what can be done to an active elegy.

Further analysis reveals that this moment of seasickness closely resembles Byron's own moment of poetic creation, which he terms as transcending the dichotomy between action and idleness. While the action is predicated on the presence of an audience and idleness is characterized by absolute passivity and malleability, Juan's voluntary seasickness as an act finds a place in neither category, thus positioning it as a "modern substitute for action" [12]. This is in parallel, as a matter of fact, with Byron's own stance on writing as an activity, which is rooted in "the paralysis of ennui" [11]. In this state of sickness where one encounters "an immediate disaffection with reality" [11], writing becomes not a commercial performance designed for a wanting audience but "the very arena of the spiritual struggle that is life" [11]. Though poetry, like every other work of art, turns into a piece of commodity, Byron specifies its very origin precisely as acute alertness and a state of personal, unmarketable seasickness towards the earthly conditions intelligible to everyone. Juan in the shipwreck is, as a matter of fact, an incarnation of a poet amid the fallen world, revealing its essence, including the absent epic license, the lame nature of celebrities, and his own engagement in it. In this way, the narrator's *want* is a prophetic want proposed for the world in the form of a universal want-ad: Amid this commodity culture, the world lacks, needs, and is calling for poets as the ones who voluntarily stay seasick.

5 Conclusion

Byron's creation of Juan is a clear response to the previous two models of hero invention: the epic hero model, which centres heroes around noble ends, and the recorded heroes model, which operates within the desiring-machine and circulates homegrown heroes to the public through marketing. However, the presentation of Juan extends far beyond a mere negation of these traditions. Through his seasick protagonist, Byron puts on an advertisement for poets like himself who embrace *ennui* and voluntarily stay seasick, with *I want a hero* as a rallying slogan. This sentiment is particularly Romantic, with the author's destruction of tyrannical literary narration paired with his looming tendency of anarchism in a literary sense. In this way, it is not just the hero who is reworked in *Don Juan*, but literature itself and poets are also granted a radical emancipation. The significance of *ennui*, as a matter of fact, may be recognized somehow as a newly-introduced law on the ruins of previous models and as a potentially dangerous element which may further become the trigger of relativism, which is just another form of tyranny in a sophisticated disguise. However, what Byron suggests is that the seasick *ennui* is just a preliminary, on which he never stops building new contents, constructing an organic orderliness, a modern substitute for organic order. In this way, Byron's want-ad is no practice of *nekyia* as an elegy of the ideal past, but a rather positive resolution and blueprint not at least inferior to it, in which poets are *wanted* to, and also contradictorily volunteer to stay seasick.

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