

Kara Ussery

Romantic Literature

Dr. Pratt-Russell

Nov. 20, 2017

A Comparison of Love in Byron and Keats

It is no secret that Lord Byron and John Keats held different opinions on romantic literature. Byron was one of Keats's biggest critics, even going as far as to say that Keats was "always fugging his imagination. I don't mean that he is indecent, but viciously soliciting his own ideas into a state which is neither poetry nor anything but a bedlam vision produced by raw pork and opium" (Cheatham 24). Keats's Romanticism was everything Byron hated and "he was consistent, criticizing Keats either for a lack of decorum (in his straining cockney vulgarity) or for a lack of restraint (in his 'outstretched' imagination): the eroticism of Keats's poetry... offended him on both grounds" (Cheatham 24). Of course, the place this difference of opinions is most easily seen are their respective written works. The differences in romantic style are perhaps most clear in the comparison between the first canto of Byron's "Don Juan" and Keats's poem "The Eve of St. Agnes". Because of his contempt for Keats's poetry, Byron uses "Don Juan" to parody and satirize the conflated image of love that can be found in Keats's "The Eve of St. Agnes".

Upon first glance, the poems seem to have a great deal in common. "The Eve of St. Agnes" follows Porphyro on the holiday known as the Eve of St. Agnes. He sneaks into a party where Madeline, his love, is supposed to be- despite being abhorred by her family. He runs into a servant, Angela, who tells him that Madeline is sleeping, attempting to use the holiday superstitions in order to have dreams of her lover. Porphyro hides himself in her room and makes

love to her, while she believes that she is dreaming. Once Madeline wakes and realizes that what happened was real, the two lovers run away with each other. Keats was infatuated with the idea of epic poetry, and wanted nothing more than to immortalize himself with a grand epic poem. An epic poem is a long, narrative poem that centers around a 'hero' figure and follows him as he does great deeds and goes on grand adventures- a description that seems to fit Porphyro. From the first line of the work, "I want a Hero," "Don Juan" appears to also fit this profile perfectly. "Don Juan," of course, follows Juan, a beautiful young man who has been sheltered from any kind of exposure to erotic love by his mother's strict upbringing. Juan falls in love with Donna Julia, a young and attractive woman married to a man much older than herself. While Julia initially tries to hold her attraction to Juan at length, she quickly acquiesces, and they begin an affair. Unfortunately, Julia's husband eventually discovers them, and Juan is forced to flee. Despite "Don Juan's" similarity to the epic style, it is instead an "anti-epic", and as Lauber writes, "Don Juan's achievement is not to reinterpret or recreate but to destroy the epic form by a comprehensive attack on the whole tradition of epic poetry" (Lauber 607).

In fact, the heroes of the two works are exceptionally different. Keats's hero Porphyro seems to be a typical 'romantic hero'. From his first appearance (attempting to pay a visit to his love, despite being forbidden in her house due to his family), he hearkens back to a Shakespearian Romeo-

For him, those chambers held barbarian hordes

Hyena foemen, and hot-blooded lords,

Whose very dogs would execrations howl

Against his lineage: not one breast affords

Him any mercy, in that mansion foul (Keats).

This passage also brings to mind heroic escapades- the hero flinging himself into mortal peril so that he may see his love. Porphyro has a purpose and a goal, as is expected of the romantic hero in an epic. In contrast, Juan himself is the parody of the hero. In the first verse of “Don Juan”, Byron laments on the simultaneous lack and multitude of heroes:

*I want a Hero: an uncommon Want,
 When every Year and Month sends forth a new one,
 Till, after cloying the Gazettes with Cant,
 The Age discovers he is not the true one;
 Of such as these I should not care to vaunt
 I'll therefore take our ancient friend Don Juan. (Byron 1-6)*

Here, Byron is explaining that, despite the numerous false ‘heroes’ that are created by the media, the time in which he lives lacks the capacity to produce a true hero worthy of an epic tale. Instead, he decides to use Don Juan, an “average man, well-meaning but weak” (Lauber 609). Juan is not introduced with the higher purpose of love-he is simply “exposed by his charm to temptations considerably more frequent and attractive than the average man encounters” (Lauber 609).

The heroines of these two stories also differ, but most significantly in the way that they participate in their respective love affairs. Keats’s Madeline seems to be extremely passive about her experience, and perhaps through no fault of her own- despite attempting to dream of her lover, she never expects there to be an actual affair and does not seem to comprehend the reality of the situation until it has ended- her words are “No dream, alas! alas! and woe is mine!” (Keats). Even Porphyro seems to see her as a consumable good- laying out an extravagant feast only to leave the food untouched and devour Madeline instead.

*While he forth from the closet brought a heap
 Of candied apple, quince, and plum, and gourd;
 With jellies soother than the creamy curd,
 And lucent syrups, tinct with cinnamon;
 Manna and dates, in argosy transferr'd
 From Fez; and spiced dainties, every one,
 From silken Samarcand to cedar'd Lebanon (Keats).*

Keats himself casts this as typical, claiming that “There is a tendency to class women in my books with roses and sweetmeats” (Jones 344). In contrast, in *Don Juan*, Byron’s Donna Julia seems to be an active participant in her sexual affair with Juan. She does initially try to convince herself that the affection she feels for Juan is purely platonic in an attempt to uphold her ‘honor’ and ‘virtue’, but once she and Juan are in a place to actualize their desires, she gives in easily:

*And Julia’s Voice was lost, except in Sighs,
 Until too late for useful conversation;
 The tears were gushing from her gentle eyes –
 I wish indeed they had not had occasion –
 But who, Alas! can love, and then be wise?
 Not that Remorse did not oppose temptation,
 A little still She strove, and much repented,
 And whispering “I will ne’er consent” – consented. – (Byron 929-936)*

Julia’s active participation becomes a parody again when her husband begins to suspect her affair and barges into her bedchamber in an attempt to gain evidence of her infidelity. Julia chastises him harshly for this lack of trust-

*“Is’t wise or fitting causeless to explore
 For facts against a virtuous woman’s fame?
 Ungrateful, perjured – barbarous Don Alfonso,
 How dare you think your Lady would go on so?”* (Byron 1165-1168).

The irony in her statement lies, in fact, at the foot of her bed- Juan is hidden under the blankets, proving Alfonso’s suspicions correct.

The endings of the stories also indicate their views on love. “The Eve of St. Agnes” ends with the two lovers being forced to flee together into the night because of their indiscretion- “And they are gone: ay, ages long ago/ These lovers fled away into the storm” (Keats). Byron makes a complete mockery of this scene at the end of Canto I- Don Juan is also forced to flee, but in a very different manner- alone and naked. Alfonso discovers him by the presence of his boots, and the two men begin to duel. Unfortunately for Juan, things take a poor turn-

*Alfonso grappled to detain the foe,
 And Juan throttled him to get away,
 And blood (’twas from the Nose) began to flow;
 At last, as they more faintly wrestling lay,
 Juan contrived to give an awkward blow,
 And then his only Garment quite gave way;
 He fled, like Joseph, leaving it; but there,
 I doubt, all Likeness ends between the pair.* (Byron 1481-1488)

The idea of Juan running into the night naked is significant on two fronts. The first is the sheer ridiculousness of the scene, which takes the fairy-tale ideal presented in “The Eve of St. Agnes” and turns it into a mildly vulgar joke. The second is in the fact that Juan flees alone- he does not

end up with his heroine, and he does not get a happily ever after. Instead, Julia is sent to a convent and Juan is sent away to avoid the humiliation of having an affair with a married woman.

Even though Byron's goal was to satirize Keats's magic filled, fairy-tale view of love, there are moments in "Don Juan" where his characters seem to best him and sink into that kind of romance- specifically the first time Juan and Julia make love:

*The Silver Light which, hallowing tree and tower,
Sheds beauty and deep Softness o'er the whole,
Breathes also to the Heart, and o'er it throws
A loving languor, which is not repose* (Byron).

And perhaps this is the human nature of love- despite its absurdity, it is still a part of the human condition, and humanity is willing to consign themselves to a bit of foolishness in order to feel it. Despite their differences, both poems are clearly enjoyable and works of art in their own right. Byron's distaste for Keats (as well as others like him) may have caused him to write "Don Juan", but Byron did eventually admit to Keats's talent- even if Keats was dead by the time he did. At close inspection, both poems provide a look into the complicated emotions of human love, and both are worth studying.

Works Cited

- Byron, George Gordon, Lord. "Don Juan, Canto 1." Edited by Peter Cochran. *Peter Cochran's Website*, New York, 2009.
- Cheatham, George. "Byron's Dislike of Keats's Poetry." *Keats-Shelley Journal*, vol. 32, 1983, pp. 20–25. Web.
- Jones, Mark. "Reading Keats to the Letter: e." *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 51, no. 3, 2012, pp. 343–373. Web.
- Keats, John. "The Eve of St. Agnes." *Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44470/the-eve-of-st-agnes>. Accessed 4 Dec 2017.
- Lauber, John. "Don Juan as Anti-Epic." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 8, no. 4, 1968, pp. 607–619. Web.