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*Manfred, Don Juan, and the Romantic Tragedy of the Subject*

Trenton Robert Leinenbach

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

### *Manfred, Don Juan, and the Romantic Tragedy of the Subject*

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While the Romantic lyric has long been understood as an exploration of human subjectivity, the era's dramatic works have been viewed as more oriented toward objective or mimetic representation. As such, scholarship on Romantic subjectivity from Harold Bloom to Andrea Henderson has bypassed dramatic and quasi-dramatic explorations of subjectivity. These explorations, however, add to the conversation about subjectivity in powerful ways by addressing the paradoxes of mimetically representing subjectivity.

These difficulties spring from a paradox question that surrounds mimetically represented subjectivity: how can a supposedly objective medium portray experience that is by definition non-objective, purely interior, and therefore incommunicable? This paradox calls for a reassessment of criticism on Romantic subjectivity, this time attending not only to the Romantic lyric with its recognized formal emphasis on interiority, but also to Romantic drama, which productively resists interiority by underscoring the paradoxes inherent to representations of subjectivity.

This thesis traces the development of dramatic explorations of subjectivity in two of Byron's works, the closet drama *Manfred* and the trans-generic mock-epic *Don Juan*. *Manfred* attempts to mimetically portray the horrors of subjectivity by showing how the title character's solipsism leads to his demise. The work ultimately falls short of this purpose, but in so doing reveals a crucial paradox: the tragedy inherent to subjectivity lies in the very inexpressibility the play hopes to express. *Don Juan*, on the other hand, embraces this paradox by allowing the work's theme of *Manfred*-like subjectivity to leak from content to form—from the story of Juan to the very act of diegesis. This blurring of textual lines results in generic inversions, marked in *Don Juan* by the constant irruptions of comedy into the otherwise tragic tale. Ultimately, if *Don Juan* succeeds as tragedy of subjectivity, it does so by failing, tragically, at being tragedy. Such a tragedy must be understood based on a dynamic, rather than a static, conception of genre; rather than being defined based on a resemblance to recognized tragedies, *Don Juan*'s tragic associations come from the work's constant movement between genres. As such, *Don Juan*'s method for treating the paradoxes of mimetically portrayed subjectivity is to imagine them as the play between content and genre, substance and form.

Keywords: Byron, *Don Juan*, *Manfred*, subjectivity, tragedy, drama, genre

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*Manfred, Don Juan, and the Romantic Tragedy of the Subject*

Trent Leinenbach

When, in 1971, Harold Bloom declared that the Romantic era was “an age of ferocious selfhood,” he was voicing not just his personal interpretation but the consensus view of a generation. For Bloom, his fellow Yale School critics, and a host of others, the Romantic period was, above all, the moment when great writers took up the project of conceptualizing the “Romantic subject,” or the self.<sup>1</sup> This generation’s fascination with Romantic subjectivity carried into the next, when critics like Marilyn Butler, Paul Hamilton, Marjorie Levinson, Jerome McGann, and Clifford Siskin reanalyzed the phenomenon in an apparently less Romantic way than the Yale School had. By extricating scholarship from the Romantic era’s own subjective epistemology, these scholars viewed Romantic subjectivity as a product of material and ideological contexts rather than a transcendental phenomenon. In the midst of this New Historicist wave, twentieth-century scholarship on Romantic subjectivity culminated in Andrea Henderson’s *Romantic Identities* (1996), a book which conjectured that “the proliferation of interest in, and work on, subjectivity suggest that, like the key concepts of other debates of the previous decade, it may well be on its way to exhaustion” (3).<sup>2</sup>

Two decades later, this statement looks prescient, as Henderson’s book remains the last of its kind. While scholars of German literature and, more particularly, philosophy still take up the topic with some frequency,<sup>3</sup> in the field of British Romantic studies years can pass between major monographs focused primarily on the Romantic subject, ego, or self. Tellingly, such seemingly comprehensive recent collections as Stuart Curran’s *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism* (2010) and Mark Canuel’s *British Romanticism: Criticism and Debates* (2015) not only fail to include a chapter on subjectivity alongside extensive treatments of nature,

the imagination, nationalism, and the sublime, but don't even list this once-foundational concept, or any of its synonyms, in their index.<sup>4</sup> For the rising generation of Romanticists, it might actually come as a surprise to read in John Strachan and Jane Moore's *Key Concepts in Romantic Literature* (2010) that "*selfhood* has generally been seen as the central preoccupation of Romantic poetry" (3). The statement might seem all the more confusing given that, over the ensuing three-hundred pages, Strachan and Moore allude to this "central preoccupation of Romantic poetry" three more times. Insofar as it still occurs, then, dialogue on Romantic subjectivity has largely gone underground. When "subjectivity," "selfhood," or "the ego" appear in twenty-first-century studies, more often than not they are merely assumed, factoring in as secondary concerns in work on such topics as Romantic psychology, sexuality, and celebrity.<sup>5</sup>

In this essay, I would like to build upon an area of British Romantic studies where subjectivity might be revisited in provocative ways: namely, drama. Of late, some of the most compelling analyses of subjectivity have occurred in the context of theatre studies.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps most illustrative of this critical trend, the October 2014 special issue of *PMLA* urged literary scholars "to think explicitly about the possibilities of tragedy in modernity" (Foley 619). Contributors to this issue included scholars of classical, early modern, Restoration, modernist, and postmodern literature. In fact, it seems nearly every literary era *except* Romanticism features prominently in this issue. Historical periods aside, however, what seems consistent throughout the issue is an interest in subjectivity and the evolution of the tragic mode. Elin Diamond, for instance, examines modern tragedy as "a loss of faith in the volitional, self-present subject," depicting Caryl Churchill's 1994 play *The Skriker* as a "posthuman tragedy" and "a planetary tragedy that does not assume the centrality of the human" (619). Other contributors analyze the evolving subjectivity of audiences of tragedy, resulting in what Moira Fradinger sees as the "repurposing

of a classical tragedy in new circumstances” (619, 761-72). Similarly, David Scott and Stathis Gourgouris use Hayden White’s notion of “emplotment” and Marxist theory, respectively, to explore the politicization of tragedy for both conservative and liberal agendas.

It is strange that Romantic criticism, which did so much to pioneer studies in subjectivity, has contributed relatively little to this recent turn to subjectivity in tragedy. Perhaps Romantic drama, with its abundance of low-theatre melodrama and pantomime, seems slightly less relevant in a discussion of that oldest and most exalted of dramatic genres, tragedy. After all, it has only been in the last three decades that a significant number of Romanticists have begun reclaiming the era’s drama after more than a century in which Romantic drama was viewed as rightly forgotten.<sup>7</sup> Among those who eventually defended Romantic drama as a viable literary tradition, there were several, like Alan Richardson, Jeffrey Cox, Terence Hoagwood, and Daniel Watkins, who were at least tangentially interested in the stage’s relationship with subjectivity. However, many of these were influenced by the belief that Romantic drama represented a sort of Keatsian *chameleon*-ism, or an “objective” alternative to the Wordsworthian *egotism* that dominates the era’s more “subjective” lyrical works.<sup>8</sup> Thus, while these critics have indeed connected Romantic drama to their explorations of human subjectivity, they have largely done so by antithesis, precluding the possibility that the drama might be able to “portray” subjectivity mimetically, as representation. Insofar as subjectivity still features in criticism of Romantic drama, the privilege of mimetically representing subjective conundrums is largely reserved for the lyric.

In fact, the prevalence of this binary, in which the stage is chameleon (objective) while the lyric is egotistical (subjective), may explain why scholars of British Romanticism have been relatively slow to participate in the recent reassessment of dramatic subjectivity. This is a mistake, however, as this critical turn might offer a breakthrough for scholars of Romanticism. In

what follows, I will argue that Romantic attitudes toward subjectivity help us understand how the era's tragedy transformed. Authorial concerns about extreme subjectivity, including its tendency to result in solipsism, moral relativism, and crises of identity, led to a mode of tragedy which frequently presented excessive subjectivity, not death, as the tragic hero's true catastrophe. In order to artistically represent the terrors of subjectivity, however, tragedians had to deal with the paradoxes of subjectivity itself—for instance, the difficulty of expressing the protagonist's plight to the reader when the plight itself is inexpressibility. Consequently, in the Romantic era we see the development of a type of tragedy from which the tragic subject or protagonist has been removed. While many of the most canonical Romantics were concerned with subjectivity, and some attempted to portray their anxieties artistically in tragic or quasi-tragic works, it is in Byron that we find the most sustained attempt to achieve a tragedy of subjectivity.

In what follows, I begin with a study of *Manfred*, Byron's last attempt to perform, display, or mimetically narrate the horrors of insuperable subjectivity. While Byron's effort is not altogether successful as such, its failings illustrate some of the paradoxes at the heart of any tragedy of subjectivity. After analyzing this phenomenon in *Manfred*, I turn to *Don Juan*, a text rarely read in the context of Byron's dramatic project but one, I argue, that functions as a tragedy about the paradoxes of subjectivity by removing the tragic (human) subject from the tragic plot. The resulting poem is tragicomic in the tradition of *Don Quixote*, but Byron goes even farther than Cervantes by drawing the reader into the inter-subjective play of the poem and causing him or her to misapprehend the genre of the text. The paper closes with a discussion of generic experimentation, specifically how *Don Juan* inverts elements of the popular Regency-era pantomime. By mixing dramatic and narrative representation, the poem problematizes the imagined binary between the objective stage and subjective page. In so doing, *Don Juan* also

questions any form of supposedly objective representation, inviting us to consider Byron himself as a tragic protagonist of the poem.

“Wherefore do I pause?”: *Manfred* and Soliloquys of the Suicidal Subject

Revisiting the long-neglected topic of Romantic subjectivity is key to understanding how, while the tragic mode did not “die” during the Romantic era, it underwent radical changes. Insofar as critics like George Steiner have failed to credit tragedy’s evolution during the Romantic era, it is largely owing to their unshakably *anthropocentric* and *anthropoietic* point of view. Behind the notion of the de-subjectified tragedy lies Romantic despair at the overwhelming burden of selfhood—the fear of “solipsism” which Bertrand Russell saw as one of the era’s defining features.<sup>9</sup> This brand of self-consciousness is perhaps most prevalent in the work of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, whose predilection for Kantian explorations of subjectivity appears as early as *Lyrical Ballads*.<sup>10</sup> Coleridge’s drama never resembles the kind of tragedy of subjectivity we are looking at, but poems like *The Ancient Mariner* and “Love” did make an impression on Lord Byron,<sup>11</sup> who would take this Coleridgean despair over selfhood to its generic apotheosis.

At the time he wrote *Manfred*, Byron felt his life was a shambles. As he wrote to his half-sister, Augusta, in September 1816: “the Separation – has broken my heart . . . I have neither strength nor spirits – nor inclination to carry me through anything which will clear my brain or lighten my heart. – I mean to cross the Alps at the end of this month – and go – God knows where . . . I have still a world before me – this – or the next” (*Letters* 228). Though the register of these words is heightened to melodrama, the suffering it speaks of is genuine. As Leslie Marchand and other biographers have shown, Byron’s treatment of his wife before the divorce was marked by competing emotions of love and loathing, repulsion and subsequent repentance,

cruel bullying followed by vicious self-reproach (Marchand 2.572-83). Of course, Byron was famous for breaking rules and shattering conventions, but this generated conflict in his marriage. The solipsistic subject is not a problem until it encounters other subjects—especially strong, impassive subjects like Anabella Milbanke. Byron’s volatile shifts in attitude indicate he was aware his selfishness was destroying his marriage, and yet to yield before Annabella—to embrace harmonious society with her—was to compromise his being and selfhood. His writing from these months attempts to narrate this difficulty.

As Robert Gleckner observes, *Manfred* is about “humanness *in extremis*” (253), or the unbearable weight of subjective consciousness. Similarly, Jane Stabler argues that the play is about the title character’s internal struggle to repent of his destructive selfhood and the related struggle to obtain “society” (76). Thus, whereas the protagonist of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* often laments the loneliness and sorrow that result from his intense solipsism, *Manfred* goes a step farther in functioning as a tragedy in which subjectivity is the *central* catastrophe. Ward Pafford argues that “*Manfred* dramatizes the tragic dilemma of mind aspiring to complete independence but constrained by its fleshly condition” (107). Certainly *Manfred* is a play about the terrors of subjectivity, even if Pafford’s assertion that Manfred still “aspires” to independence is arguable. It is, after all, Manfred’s solipsistic independence that destroys Astarte,<sup>12</sup> and the consequent despair propels every major event in the play. In fact, Manfred wishes to escape his subjectivity through “oblivion, self-oblivion,” as in this scene from the play’s first act:

THE SEVEN SPIRITS. What wouldst thou with us, son of mortals—say?

MAN. Forgetfulness—

FIRST SPIRIT. Of what—of whom—and why?

MAN. Of that which is within me; read it there— /

Ye know it, and I cannot utter it. (1.1.135-38)

When the spirits answer, “It is not in our essence, in our skill; / But—thou mayst die” (1.1.147-48), Manfred settles for the destruction of his body, gazing down at “My mother Earth” from a steep precipice, intending to cast himself upon the “rocky bosom’s bed” below (1.2.7 and 1.2.18).

Yet, for all its tragic tropes, *Manfred* does not entirely succeed in its endeavor to portray the tragedy of human subjectivity, and its failures hint at several paradoxes beneath any such attempt.<sup>13</sup> For one, Manfred’s constitutive desire for self-erasure is precisely what lends permanence to his selfhood. That is, since Manfred’s character is constituted by the desire to escape his tragic subjectivity, portraying this escape in the play effectively preserves Manfred’s tragic subjectivity indefinitely, keeping him from his wanted oblivion. Furthermore, the argument that subjectivity is tragic is itself conspicuously subjective; it appears to beg the question, since a depiction of pure subjectivity cannot “step outside” of that subjectivity in order to stipulate how the reader should interpret the narrative. Since the terror of subjectivity lies in its tendency toward solipsism and the consequent inability to objectively understand or express oneself, Byron is caught in a double-bind: insofar as Byron tries to communicate Manfred’s subjectivity to the reader, he sacrifices the sensation of inexpressibility which gives subjectivity its dread; yet if Byron honors the incommunicable nature of subjectivity by remaining silent on the issue, he provides the reader with no justification for Manfred’s supposed suffering. Either way, the protagonist’s lofty language and extreme behavior feel overwrought and self-indulgent, his supposed inner pathos frequently translating to bathos on the page.

Byron’s later drafts try to address these problems through the character of the abbot. Originally conceived as a hypocritical stock-villain (Stabler 75), the abbot of the later drafts

represents a key figure in Manfred's struggle to renounce his own subjectivity. The abbot's invitation to Manfred is to "live and act with other men" (3.1.123). Stabler rightly identifies this invitation as the play's central theme: by entering into society, Manfred would relinquish his solipsistic identity and selfhood. Yet here Byron seems caught in the very paradox he is exploring. For Manfred to accept the abbot's invitation would undercut the play's core themes, since its tragic irony rests on the inability of the play's Byronic hero to join society. The same overweening selfhood that enables him to call forth deities against their will and summon specters from beyond the grave is what prevents him from being able to tolerate Astarte's otherness, eventually leading to her destruction before the play's opening lines, in which Manfred laments, "I lov'd her, and destroy'd her!" (2.2.117). The better option, then, is to have Manfred reject the abbot's invitation; but in so doing, Manfred's solipsism is preserved despite his seemingly tragic death, and the play falls back into its logical circularity.

In the play's final scene, Byron ultimately attempts to chart a middle path by having Manfred formally reject the abbot's invitation while still reaching for his hand. If this represents an acceptance of society, it is at best a noncommittal one. This equivocation seeks to bypass the paradoxes of subjectivity the play sets out to explore. Is *Manfred* the story of a solipsistic consciousness that eventually accepts society and its own consequent annihilation? Or is that consciousness eternally damned within the narrow walls of its own subjectivity, destroying those with whom it would maintain society? These are thought-provoking questions, but the choose-your-own-ending ambiguity lessens the force of *Manfred* as a tragedy about human subjectivity.

Forensic Traces of the Tragic Subject in *Don Juan*

The “humanness” Gleckner sees as the subject of *Manfred* may be “*in extremis*,” but it remains intact at play’s end. *Manfred* mourns humanness—but it is this mourning that here anthropomorphizes the tragic genre, thereby diluting the play’s commentary on what it means to be human. This is quite different from *Don Juan*, which focuses on the tragedy of diegesis, illustrating how any attempt to communicate the sorrow of subjectivity is swallowed up by that subjectivity. To accomplish this critique, Byron gives us a narrator who does not simply accept but embraces and accentuates the fall from pathos to bathos, which, as we have seen in *Manfred*, is a natural risk in literary attempts to communicate the incommunicable. Rather strikingly, *Don Juan*’s abundance of underlying tragic themes and events makes the absence of a tragic subject conspicuous. The sensation is that we are reading a tragedy without being asked to enter the interpretive space of the traditional reader of this genre. In creating this effect, *Don Juan* tries to present the tragedy of human introspection from a perspective that resists humanity, empathy, and, above all, subjectivity.<sup>14</sup>

Thus removed from its anthropocentric context, in *Don Juan* tragedy behaves unexpectedly. The absence of a subjective, human consciousness from an otherwise tragic work triggers a perverse rupture into comedy—tragedy’s supposed opposite. And yet these comedic ruptures are imbued with tragic pathos, since their levity is only gained through a perpetual *fall* from the suffering, isolation, and despair that constitute the tragedy of human subjectivity. As the narrator remarks, echoing Macbeth, “Now my sere fancy ‘falls into the yellow / Leaf,’ and Imagination droops her pinion, / And the sad truth which hovers o’er my desk / Turns what was once romantic to burlesque” (4.21–24).

Byron’s literary model in illustrating the fall from tragedy to comedy—from “romantic to

burlesque”—is another Spanish don, this time that of Cervantes. *Don Quixote* in many ways provides the missing link between *Manfred* and *Don Juan*. If *Manfred* tries to bypass the title character’s subjectivity in order to convey that subjectivity to the reader as tragedy, *Don Quixote* acknowledges and embraces the inability of a character’s subjective self-consciousness to translate to a reader intact.

Byron first read *Don Quixote* as a boy at the Aberdeen Grammar School (Marchand 1.38). In *Don Juan* he references his love for the book multiple times, saying at one point, “To read Don Quixote in the original, / [Is] A pleasure before which all others vanish” (14.777–78). But it is in the thirteenth canto that we see how *Don Quixote* models the tragic fall to comedy. The narrator calls Cervantes’ “too true tale” “a real epic unto all who have thought” (13.63, 73). This is high praise, since *Don Juan* aspires for both of these titles—*true* and *epic*. Moreover, the narrator accuses the poem’s detractors of thoughtlessness—“And I will war, at least in words . . . / . . . with all who war / With Thought”—further aligning *Juan* and *Quixote* as works which can only be understood by those “who have thought” (9. 185–87). So what is the truth that both *Don Quixote* and *Don Juan* may reveal to careful thinkers? Is it that inordinate subjectivity renders every hero’s fate tragic? *Don Quixote* is

Of all tales . . . the saddest—and more sad,  
 Because it makes us smile: his hero’s right,  
 And still pursues the right;—to curb the bad,  
 His only object, and ’gainst odds to fight,  
 His guerdon: ’tis his virtue makes him mad!

But his adventures form a sorry sight;— (13.65-70)

The truth about heroes is that while they would “pursue . . . the right” or “curb the bad,” they are

doomed to charge at windmills—their heroism “makes us smile.”

The comparison to *Don Quixote* is central to our understanding of *Don Juan* as a tragedy of diegesis. First, it illustrates how laughter can factor into a tragic work: we might call *Manfred* a tragedy, but the “truth” is that there is nothing to separate Manfred from Quixote insofar as their identities as heroes are intensely subjective. It is the narrative leap from the hero’s consciousness to the reader’s that generates humor; we smile at Quixote because we know that he is unaware of his absurdity, and if we balk at Manfred, it is for similar reasons. The difference is that *Manfred* does not own up to this inter-subjective leap; it still tries to translate the gravity of its title character’s subjectivity to the reader. *Don Quixote*, on the other hand, not only acknowledges the subjectivity of Quixote’s perception of reality but depends upon it: the awareness that our conception of Quixote is so different from his own is an important element of the book. It is also what make *Juan*’s narrator consider it “of all tales . . . the saddest—and more sad / Because it makes us smile” (13.65-66). Cervantes’ work emphasizes how subjectivity can make one person’s epic quest another’s comedy.

Yet for all this, *Don Quixote* bridles its commentary on subjectivity by limiting the paradigm-upheavals to the characters of the book. As readers, we maintain a sense of objectivity in that we are separated from the characters’ inter-subjective exchanges, viewing them from above. *Don Juan*, on the other hand, pulls its readers into the fracas, making us like the characters of *Don Quixote* who mock the “delusional” knight-errant. Like them, we are unable to imagine that someone who appears so absurd could, in his own subjective reality, be a hero. The narrator speaks from the ignorant perspective of the reader when he says, in the first canto’s opening,

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— (1. 1-8)

Thus even the poem's narrator refuses to recognize Juan as a tragic protagonist, the "want" in the first line signifying the desire for, but also the lack of, a "hero." Consequently, the narrator will settle for a non-hero—Don Juan. This character's non-heroic status is further emphasized by the poem's famous Anglicization of his name, making his first appearance in the poem something of a joke. This sets the pace for the rest of the poem—whenever we come close to seeing Juan as a tragic protagonist, the poem's narration renders him a clown.

The narrator's transformation of the tragic to the comic is one of the poem's most widespread and consistent features, though we have yet to understand it in such terms. But a reading of the first stanza alone can reveal that underneath all of the narrator's jokes, forced rhymes, and digressions, the world of Juan ranges from melodrama to tragedy. We learn that Juan's father dies while the boy is still young, leaving him to be raised by a mother who is as abusive as she is doting. She decides that "Juan should be quite a paragon, / And worthy of the noblest pedigree," meaning that he should be as perfect as she is—an iteration of her own ego (1.38.2-3). To this end, Donna Inez micromanages her son: "But not a page of anything that's loose, / Or hints continuation of the species, / Was ever suffered, lest he should grow vicious" (1.40.6-8). Coming in the wake of dozens of brilliantly end-rhymed couplets (mystery/history, gunnery/nunnery, mother/another, pride/died, etc.), the slant rhyme here between "species" and "vicious" is jarring, just in case we hadn't already noticed that Inez herself is quite vicious. If we

can filter out the narrator's digressions, tonal inconsistencies, and turns of phrase, Juan becomes an almost Dickensian protagonist in a bleak world.

This bleakness continues throughout the whole canto. The narrator goes so far as to note that Inez and her affiliates "toiled" to "destroy" Juan's "natural spirit" (1.50.4-5). This, of course, explains Juan's naivety ("Poor little fellow! he had no idea / Of his own case, and never hit the true one") (1.86.2-3) during his earliest encounters with Julia—an affair which results in a wrecked marriage, triggering Julia's personal ruin and the beginning of Juan's prodigal life. Had Inez's overprotectiveness alone caused this disaster, she would have been less guilty, but our narrator speculates that Inez is turning a blind eye to the entire affair, possibly to avenge herself on Don Alfonso and Julia, win back Alfonso, or even perhaps stop Julia from blackmailing her.<sup>15</sup> This type of manipulation is not simply "vicious," but emotionally and sexually abusive. Moreover, Inez's willingness to commodify her son's sexuality for personal gain may lead us to question the extent of her sexual abuse when we read other passages, in which, right before a tangent on sexual promiscuity, the narrator alludes to the impropriety of having Juan "shut" in with "Donna Inez . . . / . . . to learn his catechism alone" (1.52.5-6).

The first canto is not alone in its tragic motifs. Catastrophes, in fact, are present in every other canto, including shipwreck, cannibalism, madness, slavery, rape, and death. If Thomas Medwin's report is to be trusted, Byron planned to end the poem with Juan being guillotined (164-65). Yet even if Byron himself had lived to send Juan to such a fate, we can be fairly sure that his hero's death, like all other catastrophic scenes before it, would have struck the reader as humorous and banal. This is not merely "black comedy" and social critique but an exploration of subjectivity. Like *Don Quixote*, it plays with the notion that one person's tragedy, epic, or romance is likely another person's comedy or farce. Yet Byron goes further than Cervantes.

While *Don Quixote* might explore how genre is affected by human subjectivity, it limits the inter-subjective play to the characters of the book. *Don Juan*, on the other hand, draws the reader into the paradox of subjectivity it is exploring, causing the reader to apprehend the poem as comedic without necessarily grasping the tragic nature of the plot.

Summarizing the above, then, *Don Juan*, like *Don Quixote*, shows how the dissonance between human subjectivities can make one person's tragedy another's comedy. Yet *Don Juan* goes a step farther by extending this inter-subjective dissonance outside of the text, making Juan's tragedy the *reader's* comedy. Moreover, the above reading has tested this assertion by attempting to depict the first canto without the narrator's digressive mediation, the result being that the poem begins to read like a tragedy rather than a comedy. Before we can fully accept these experiments with subjectivity as innovations in the tragic mode, however, we need to address two more questions. The first question is whether we can call *Don Juan* tragedy if readers perceive it as comic: in what ways does the poem not just tolerate but privilege a "tragic reading"? The second question is related: by drawing readers into the subjective perplexity of *Don Juan*, does the poem actually ask us to consider Byron's drama on the extra-textual level of biography? In answering both of these questions, we will look at ways in which Byron's innovations in tragedy involve extra-textual relationships with readers, and how, without considering such extra-textuality, we cannot fully understand Byron's drama.

#### *Don Juan*: Trans-generic, Extra-textual

Best known for his portraits of Byron, Richard Westall may capture Byron best in his 1825 portrait of Shakespeare (Figure 1). Westall depicts the Bard on a throne between the muse of comedy, who dances and dotes, almost eager to please him, and the grave muse of tragedy.

While the playwright leans toward this comedic nurturer, holding her hand like a child, his gaze and outstretched arm point toward the tragic muse, who sulks away toward the left frame. As in the painting, *Don Juan*'s narrator seems to court comedy even as his arm stretches out toward something darker at the poem's periphery.<sup>16</sup>



Figure 1. Westall, Richard. *William Shakespeare Between Tragedy and Comedy*.

The space between writer and tragic muse, which produces the painting's central tension, is also the space in which *Don Juan* exists. Like Shakespeare in the painting, the poem dissociates itself from tragedy in order to court comedy, turning every tragic scenario into an opportunity for light-heartedness. Yet it is this dissociation that generates the conflict of the poem. In what follows, *Don Juan*'s relationship with comedy is depicted as the setup for a more important exploration of tragedy—not traditional tragedy, represented by the dark-robed muse in Westall's painting, but the tragedy that occupies the dissociative space *between* genres. The

tragedy of *Don Juan* is trans-generic—a constant falling toward, and away from, the generic modes of tragedy and comedy.

Citing the *Monthly Magazine*'s 1819 review that classified *Don Juan* as a “serio-comic melo-dramatic harlequinade,” Steven E. Jones reads the poem as a printed manifestation of the popular Regency-era pantomime, with its “contrasting modes—comedy, melodrama, slapstick, lyrical meditation, and theatrics” (403). Yet Jones also notes key instances in which Byron’s work departs from the pantomime form in somewhat foreboding ways. For instance, Juan’s affair with Haidée culminates when her outraged father, Lambro, discovers the young pair’s forbidden union during a party. At the same party, “Afar, a dwarf buffoon stood telling tales / . . . Of magic ladies who, by one sole act, / Transform’d their lords to beast, (but that’s a fact)” (3.34). Jones points out how the last line “even calls to mind the female benevolent agent who effects the transformation scene in pantomimes”; but whereas the pantomime’s usual transformation (from beast to human) typically would have resulted in reconciliation and permission for the lovers to marry, “in this case . . . the usual transformation goes in reverse, from man to beast, and, instead of producing a magical reconciliation, Byron kills off Haidée and sends Juan into slavery” (404). Jones concludes his discussion of the pantomime with a key observation: “*Don Juan* seems to take the transformations so characteristic of pantomime as both its subject and its primary structuring device” (404). Hereafter, Jones transitions to an entirely different argument, but his brief observations about the pantomime cut to the core of *Don Juan*’s tragic mode. Pantomime, like comedy generally, depends on jarring transformations. Therefore, Byron’s own transformation of the pantomimic mode into *tragedy* plays with aspects of subjectivity inherent in genre.

The world of Juan, like that of Manfred, belongs in the tragic mode, yet *Don Juan* and

*Manfred* are supposedly generic opposites. What distinguishes these works, then, is trans-generic. *Manfred* is a play, supposedly the most mimetic or “chameleon” of forms; there is no narrating consciousness between character and reader. Yet despite its attempted mimesis, or direct representation, *Manfred* cannot convey the tragedy of subjectivity because conveyance itself is precluded by that subjectivity. *Don Juan* takes a different approach. As if recognizing *Manfred*’s inability to present subjectivity mimetically, the latter poem seems to turn away from the mimesis of the traditional stage- or closet-drama in favor of diegesis, performed by the poem’s infamous narrator. Since this narrator exists both in and out of the poem, seeming to belong to the poem’s world even as he speculates about the poem’s publication and reception in England, his presence suggests the subjectivity of all narration, whether it is called “fact” or “fiction.” The implication is that the only thing that can be mimetically portrayed is diegesis—that is, incomplete or failed mimesis. In this way, *Don Juan* seems to realize what *Manfred* did not: the only shot at conveying the tragedy of subjectivity is to show how diegesis turns that tragic subjectivity into comic subjectivity. There is a sense in which the poem is tragic because it fails, tragically, at being tragedy. This is why it’s more accurate to call *Don Juan* a tragedy than a comedy, despite its comicality. It is not simply a question of which muse Byron chose, whimsical comedy or sulking tragedy, but the fact that “choosing” comedy represented a fall or dissociation from tragedy that in itself is tragic.

To understand why this fall from tragedy is as tragic as it is comic, we need to remember what is at stake in such a fall. In Juan’s case, for instance, there is much to be lost if his story is represented as comedy, since his experiences cause him to suffer. This is even truer of Byron himself, not only because we may privilege human suffering over the suffering of a literary character, but because Byron’s status as a tragic protagonist is even more obscured by the

poem's diegesis than Juan's. Obscure as that status may be, though, Byron's presence in the poem is imbued with the characteristics of an unrecognized tragic protagonist we have been identifying in Juan, and to a far greater extent.

*Don Juan* asks us to consider Byron as one of its protagonists not only through the poem's many blatantly autobiographical references, but also as a consequence of the poem's argument about subjectivity. By involving its readers in the inter-subjective play that drives *Don Juan*'s tragedy, the poem blurs the border between text, writer, and reader, inviting us to consider creation and reception as part of the poem. This is also reinforced by various passages in the poem that call more or less explicit attention to Byron's tragic role within the text. However, in line with our reading of tragedy as a fall to comedy, these passages are usually ironic or self-deprecating. For instance, when the narrator reminisces on the time when he was considered "The grand Napoleon of the realms of rhyme," he dawns the role of fallen military hero:

But Juan was my Moscow, and Faliero  
 My Leipsic, and my Mont Saint Jean seems Cain:  
 "La Belle Alliance" of dunces down at zero,  
 Now that the Lion's fall'n, may rise again:  
 But I will fall at least as fell my hero;  
 Nor reign at all, or as a *monarch* reign;  
 Or to some lonely isle of gaolers go,  
 With turncoat Southey for my turnkey Lowe. (11.440-48)

At the time Byron wrote this passage, he had already alluded to Napoleon as a tragic figure in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (3.17-51) and in the poem, "Ode to Napoleon Bonaparte." Tellingly,

the latter poem both eulogizes Napoleon as the “Dark Spirit . . . / The Desolater desolate! / The Victor overthrown!” (35-38), and savagely mocks him for accepting his exile, calling him a “Timour . . . in his captive’s cage” (127). Part of Napoleon’s tragic fall is to be belittled (“Nor till thy fall could mortals guess / Ambition’s less than littleness”), but also lost and obscured in the dark haze of ignominy: “But who would soar the solar height, / To set in such a starless night?” (98–99). Thus in *Don Juan*, when Byron says he “will fall as fell my hero,” the fall is into obscurity, the “lonely isle of gaolers” where he will share Napoleon’s fate as “a nameless thing: So abject—yet alive!” (“Ode” 3). Like his hero, Byron will become an object of scorn, more comic than tragic, yet tragic because he is comic.

Not only does Byron predict his own Napoleonic fall into shame and obscurity, but he also associates his fallen state with “turncoat Southey,” who with Castlereagh is one of the poem’s chief targets for ridicule. Part of Byron’s tragic fall is to become associated with the laughable, canting, poetically impotent Southey.<sup>17</sup> This helps us to retroactively understand the strange conclusion of *Don Juan*’s first canto, which includes a borrowing from Southey:

“Go, little book, from this my solitude!  
 I cast thee on the waters, go thy ways!  
 And if, as I believe, thy vein be good,  
 The world will find thee after many days.”  
 When Southey’s read, and Wordsworth understood,  
 I can’t help putting in my claim to praise—  
 The four first rhymes are Southey’s every line:  
 For God’s sake, reader! take them not for mine! (1.222)

Ostensibly this is merely another jab at Southey, ending this canto where it began. But it also

foreshadows Byron's fate according to *Don Juan's* tragic conception. Southey's plea for the preservation of his own identity in the form of the "little book" sounds *Manfred's* tragic refrain—the agony of communicating the self to the other. Of course, this would-be pathos is exposed as bathetic, and Southey-as-Manfred is more a clown than a tragic hero. Still, somewhere behind this bathetic figure—both embodied and displaced by it—is a tragic consciousness, perhaps Byron's.<sup>18</sup> Unlike Southey's "little book," *Don Juan* will not attempt to play Horatio, preserving the tragic subject by passing it on to "the world." Mediation, symbolized by the "little book," must turn all tragedy to comedy

To emphasize this, the stanza concludes with a grammatical gesture that seems to indicate that the tragic subject of the text is already out of reach, beyond hope of mimetic portrayal and redemption. The narrator indicates that he has quoted "four rhymes" from Southey as a pretext for making his own, final "claim to praise." Yet instead of making this claim, the canto ends on an incongruous note: "The first four rhymes are Southey's every line: / For God's sake, reader! take them not for mine!" (1.222). The emphasis on identity in "mine!" is undermined by its contiguity with "take them not . . .". Thus the sentence's imperative function partly precludes, and partly subsumes, the affirmation of a first-person subject in the canto's final word. The reader is commanded to attribute the preceding text, and by extension all of the cantos to come, to a non-entity (literally a non-Southey) whose presence in this story is precluded and subsumed by an imperative fall from presence to absence. The ridiculousness of Southey's "claim to praise," then, pales in comparison to this last, tragic assertion—that the subject who might have tried to win your praise, sympathy, or understanding, is already extinct. Of course, this claim stipulates the trans-generic fall from tragedy to comedy: the assertion makes sense only if the reader is left laughing rather than mourning. Where else to fall from "praise," but to ridicule?

## Conclusion

Though the Romantic lyric has long been recognized as an exploration of subjectivity, or Wordsworth's "egotistical sublime," drama also provided an important lens for understanding the paradoxes of subjectivity. Moreover, examining subjectivity in Romantic drama reveals a resistance to the idea that mimetic representation can be separated from subjective mediation. In Byron's case, *Manfred* is his attempt to mimetically convey the terrors of subjectivity and solipsism, yet the play is unable to escape its own paradox: Byron cannot communicate Manfred's subjective isolation to the reader, since that isolation is the result of subjective beings' inability to accurately communicate. *Don Juan*, on the other hand, abandons *Manfred*'s project of mimetically portraying subjectivity, questioning whether such a project is even feasible. Taking its cue from Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, *Don Juan* suggests instead that all mimesis is mediated. It does so by staging two works at once: one a tragedy featuring Juan's picaresque episodes, the other a comedy in which Juan's experiences are rendered absurd. These antitheses generate an emotional dissonance that emphasizes the duplicity of "mimetic" stage-genres like tragedy or comedy. Moreover, *Don Juan*'s generic dissonance goes further than *Quixote*. Cervantes's work may have captured the fluidity of genre-borders by juxtaposing his antihero's tragedy with the comedy of the book's other characters, but the world of *Don Quixote* remains, for the reader, a hermetic environment. That is, the reader may peer in quite objectively at the intersubjective genre confluences of *Quixote*'s world. Thus, while the reader may experience the tragicomic sensation that the novel's characters cannot mimetically portray their subjectivity to one another, they are distanced from all of that, able simultaneously to keep an eye on the novel's tragedy and its comedy at once. *Don Juan*, on the other hand, pulls the reader into the work's subjective genre-confusion. The key here is mediation: all of the reader's access to Juan's

tragedy is filtered through the narrator whose subjective consciousness distorts Juan's tragedy into the reader's comedy. The tragedy of *Don Juan* lies not in the poem's world but in the act of diegesis itself—an alienating act that breaks the genre contract between storyteller and audience by indicting mimesis, catharsis, and even basic empathy as illusions. By identifying the tragic nature of subjective mediation, the poem invites us to consider not only its reception, but also its creation as part of the diegetic tragedy. This, in turn, reveals Byron himself as the poem's primary tragic protagonist.

This hitherto unseen level of self-awareness in Romantic drama calls for a review of the era's other dramatic and quasi-dramatic works. At a time when philosophy granted unprecedented privilege to subjective perception with its many potential terrors, drama's pretense of objective, "chameleon," or mimetic representation made it a productive site for critical examinations of subjectivity. Insofar as subjectivity was seen as catastrophic, all drama gained an element of tragic hubris, with its aspirations for unmediated mimeticism. And this was even more emphatically the case when the drama, like much of Byron's, was *about* the tragic subjectivity that precluded its own portrayal.

Byron's correspondence may lead us to other poets and playwrights whose work might contain unrecognized tragedy—not only in its pages but also in its production and reception. Certainly, though, Byron is not the only writer interested in tragic subjectivity. Book Seven of Wordsworth's *Prelude* is another rich commentary on the paradoxes of mimetic representation, describing London as dissemblance-made-panorama, which Simon Jarvis compares to an "unmasking of an unmasking in the sense that it does not take us from illusion to reality, but from appearance to appearance" (716). Coleridge, too, wrote on the tragic elements of subjectivity. In *Tragic Coleridge* (2013), Chris Murray builds on the work of David Boulger to

show how Coleridge tried to construct an image of himself as an “ignored seer” and a “tragic sage” (118). Like Byron, Coleridge is interested in how diegesis extends to the production and reception of a literary work, creating the image of the tragic artist who is misunderstood by readers.

Blake’s work also promises interesting insights into Romantic tragedies of the subject, albeit in a different way from the work of the previously mentioned writers. According to Denise Gigante, “*Jerusalem* illustrates the poetics of epigenesis on an epic scale” (465). Epigenesis was the notion that all lifeforms were infinitely fecund, a view which, as Gigante points out, contrasted with the popular Romantic belief in an organized, Aristotelian *telos* in biogenesis (7). In the epigenetic nature of *Jerusalem*, Gigante reads a Romantic concern over “the dangers of unbounded vitality,” or “monstrosity” (477). This “monstrosity” has much to do with the tragic predicament of both Manfred and Juan. Blake’s epigenesis is the biological counterpart to the equally fecund solipsism we see in Romantic subjective philosophy. Each provides, in its sphere, the capacity for unlimited division, reproduction, and redefinition of the self. On the one hand, the solipsistic self-generation with which Byron was so preoccupied performed the same *positive* function as the epigenesis Gigante finds in Blake: resisting the fustiness of a “preformed world, static and bereft of internal power” (466). On the other hand, however, the potential for purblind self-recreation, or “monstrosity,” which Blake found in epigenesis is related to the terrors Byron found in the solipsistic self. What the monstrous and the solipsistic have in common is a surfeit of subjectivity: if the subject, whether human or artistic, is capable of dividing, defining, and expanding itself without limit, identity itself becomes arbitrary. The borders of the subject become so permeable that the concept of the self signifies both everything and nothing. Understanding solipsism in terms of monstrosity connects the study of Byron’s trans-generic,

extra-textual tragedy to Romantic fascination with the gothic.

Ultimately, understanding Byron's tragic mode also helps us understand a similar struggle in subsequent tragic, comedic, or tragicomic art down to the present. To varying degrees we are still conflicted by the opposing needs for subjective individuality and self-creation, on the one hand, and gregarious, blissful sociality on the other. Arguably, the paradox of subjectivity is also the primary paradox of modernity insofar as questions of selfhood underlie the uneasiness and self-consciousness that remain hallmarks of our postmodern, supposedly "post-tragic" society.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, the influential collection *Deconstruction and Criticism* (Continuum, 1979). This collection's five essays, submitted severally by Bloom, Paul de Man, Geoffrey Hartman, J. Hillis Miller, and Jacques Derrida, all address questions of selfhood, and all five were conceived as responses to a Romantic text—Percy Shelley's *The Triumph of Life*.

<sup>2</sup> Henderson organizes her book around five “model[s] of identity that enjoyed some prominence in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries.” Taking her cue from McGann, she focuses on relating each model's “internal structure and logic to its social context” (4).

<sup>3</sup> See Alexander Schlutz's *Mind's World: Imagination and Subjectivity from Descartes to Romanticism* (2009), Brad Prager's *Aesthetic Vision and German Romanticism: Writing Images* (2007), and Rüdiger Safranski's *Romanticism: A German Affair* (2007).

<sup>4</sup> It bears noting that while the *Companion to British Romanticism* is silent on subjectivity, the *Companion to German Romanticism*, published one year earlier in the same Cambridge series, discusses subjectivity on dozens of occasions.

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, J.R. Allard's *Romanticism, Medicine, and the Poet's Body* (2008), Joel Faflak's *Romantic Psychoanalysis: The Burden of the Mystery* (2009), Richard Sha's *Perverse Romanticism* (2009), Mark Schoenfield's *British Periodicals and Romantic Identity* (2008), and Ghislaine McDayter's “Byromania and the Birth of Celebrity Culture” (2009).

<sup>6</sup> For instance, in *The Strangeness of Tragedy* (2009), Paul Hammond argues that the moment of *anagnorisis*, or tragic realization, calls attention to the protagonist's subjectivity, transporting him or her into a “time and space . . . which others cannot inhabit,” one that is “transformed by [the protagonist's] imagination into a terrain contoured by guilt or ambition or desire” (3). Terry Eagleton's *Sweet Violence* (2013), on the other hand, regards tragedy as a uniquely subjective *and* objective mode, in that changing institutions and ideologies cause our perception of tragedy to evolve, even while core tragic themes, like the primordial fear of suffering and death, remain fundamental to the human condition.

<sup>7</sup> Case in point, in 1930 Allardyce Nicoll called Romanticism an era of “general dramatic debility” (58). George Steiner reinforced this assessment in *The Death of Tragedy* (1961), locating the genre's death squarely in the Romantic era. While R. Fletcher challenged such attacks in his *English Romantic Drama, 1795-1843*, general disdain for Romantic drama continued through the 1970s, with scholars like Michael Booth referring to the whole Romantic period as “a time of the gradual eclipse of the literary element in drama” (148) and Terry Otten observing of the age's dramatists, “Never have so many major authors contributed so little to the history of English drama” (3). After Joan Mandell Baum called for a reassessment of Romantic drama in *The Theatrical Compositions of the Major English Romantic Poets* (1980), new work on the subject began to appear on a near-yearly basis. Some of the major books in this vein include Erika Gottlieb's *Lost Angels of a Ruined Paradise: Themes of Cosmic Strife in Romantic Tragedy* (1981); Richard Allen Cave's collection *The Romantic Theatre: An International Symposium* (1986); Jeffrey Cox's *In the Shadows of Romance: Romantic Tragic Drama in Germany, England, and France* (1987); and Alan Richardson's *A Mental Theater: Poetic Drama and Consciousness in the Romantic Age* (1988).

<sup>8</sup> The “chameleonism”/“egotism” binary can be traced back to Patricia M. Ball's *The Central Self: A Study in Romantic and Victorian Imagination* (1968). The binary persists as late as 1998, in Hoagwood.

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, this passage in Russell's *History of Western Philosophy*: “Revolt of solitary instincts

against social bonds is the key to the philosophy, the politics, and the sentiments, not only of what is commonly called the romantic movement, but of its progeny down to the present day. Philosophy . . . became solipsistic” (682).

<sup>10</sup> See Stephen Bygrave’s *Coleridge and the Self* (1986) on Coleridge’s constant struggle against “the despotism of the eye,” or the “I,” of subjective perception (56-81). It is probably because Coleridge never fully gives up hope that the subject can access the external world (first causes) that his work is more appropriately labeled melancholic than tragic. As Coleridge notes, the struggle to uphold his faculty of “Reason,” which harmonizes subjective “Impulses” with objective “Influxes” results in a “Tarantula Dance of repetitious & vertiginous argumentation in circulo” (*Notebooks* 2:2336), leading to hypochondria and melancholy (see Wilson 2). This melancholic limbo, however, can certainly lead to tragedy if the subject is so overwhelmed by the inability to reconcile subject and object that he or she chooses to relinquish all subjectivity through death. This is evident in Coleridge’s assessment of Hamlet, whose melancholic arrestment between “outward objects” and “the inward operations of the intellect” (*Collected Works* 5.1:544) leads him to the tragic forfeiture of subjectivity through death.

<sup>11</sup> Byron complimented a fragment of *Christabel* in a letter to Coleridge: “I do not know that even ‘Love’ or the ‘Antient Mariner’ are so impressive—and to me there are few things in our tongue beyond these two productions” (*Letters* 193).

<sup>12</sup> When the abbot asks Manfred why he will not “live and act with other men,” Manfred answers: “Because my nature was averse from life.” He clarifies that he was “not cruel,” but that his very person was destructive, like a “lone Simoom” which “seeketh not, so that it is not sought, / But being met is deadly” (3.1.124-33).

<sup>13</sup> David Eggenschwiler is not alone in noting several “logical contradictions” behind “the apparently confused metaphysics of the play” (63), though these have been attributed to a wide variety of causes.

<sup>14</sup> The poem constantly reinforces the notion that subjectivity prevents us from understanding one another’s thoughts and feelings, or even our own. The narrator spends very little time in the heads of the characters he discusses, and even his own self-representations are riddled with blatant contradictions. This attitude is summed up in his description of Adeline: “She knew not her own heart; then how should I?” (14. 697).

<sup>15</sup> See stanzas 66 and 67, particularly lines 7 and 8 of the 67: “And if she [Donna Inez] could not (who can?) silence scandal, / At least she left it a more slender handle.”

<sup>16</sup> It merits pointing out how little Westall’s young bard resembles any other depiction of Shakespeare. Rather, the poet on the throne resembles other depictions of Byron—Westall’s depictions most of all—all the way down to the damned-but-debonair profile, plus the glossy curls, robust frame, and open collar.

<sup>17</sup> “You soar too high, Bob, / And fall, for lack of moisture quite a-dry, Bob!” (“Dedication” to *Don Juan* 23-24).

<sup>18</sup> See Jerome McGann’s *The Beauty of Inflections: Literary Investigations in Historical Method and Theory* for other instances in which Byron equates himself with “his dark double Robert Southey” (277-83).

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