Jane Austen’s Persuasion and Lord Byron’s Don Juan

Jane Austen’s 1818 novel Persuasion and Lord Byron’s 1819 epic Don Juan both make use of satire and narration in ways we have yet to see form the Romantics. Austen’s novel gives us a heroine, Anne Elliot, who seeks the man she rejected eight years before the start of the novel. Austen does not give us the story through a simple third person, objective narrator, but rather tells the story through a consciousness that satirizes some of the characters and even has access to Anne’s interiority at certain times of crisis. Byron’s narrator simultaneously makes claims to “epical pretensions” and undermines his own voice from the outset. His version of “Sing goddess”—“I want a hero”—registers as much more capricious than grandiose. His voice continues throughout Don Juan to wander here and there, establishing a give-and-take rapport with the reader and an uneasy relationship with the characters of his story. Satire serves as the narrative procedure for most of the dedication, Canto I and beyond. Austen’s satire, while less bombastic than Byron’s, operates throughout her novel to strike down aristocratic pretensions and social norms. We will look closely at the different ways satire works in Persuasion and Don Juan: what strategies do both writers employ to establish a satirical tone and how do they differ in their uses of satire for specific ends? We will also inspect how gender plays into both works, and how both authors break with traditions of narration, plot, and other readerly expectations of genre.

In Persuasion we get from the first pages a satirizing account of narcissism. Anne’s father reads and re-reads his own family history and revels in his own good looks. Austen
reserves her satiric edge for certain characters and social groups. The aristocracy in Bath are a repulsive group, while the navy figures like a possible alternate life for Anne. Does Austen’s satire point to an alternate lifestyle or open up a space for something beyond a more reductively negative outlook? Captain Harville and Wentworth might bring us closer to answering this in class. The bigger questions here are how is Austen creating a satirical effect, and what is Austen doing with that satire? How productive is it for her? Aside from questions about satire, we will also discuss gender roles in Austen and how *Persuasion* differs from other Austen works. The marriage ending and introverted heroine are Austen-esque, but it seems like Anne is importantly older than Austen’s other heroines, getting a second chance in the novel. We will also examine how “happy” the ending is as a resolution to the novel.

Reading Byron for me is kind of like reading Blake: the many allusions or references tend to pull me out of the poem while the intensely original voice of the narrator keeps me hooked. In contrast to Austen’s satire, Byron’s satire seems more bombastic and allusive. His many cultural/historical references are named and so invite the reader into a shared ironic understanding. Byron also makes use of poetic form to open up this space between narrator and reader. His rhyme scheme, 11-syllables per line in ABABABCC stanzas, places a couplet as if it were a punch line at the end of each stanza. Plus, the 11-syllable lines encourage feminine (unaccented) end rhymes, which lend his verse a decidedly mock-epic rhythm. We will look closely at the initial descriptions of Donna Inez, Don Juan’s mother, in class as an example of Byron’s formal games and satirical voice. We can also explore how Byron is playing with his own personal history here, as rumors of his divorce were being printed in newspapers all over England (just as his narrator claims of Don Alfonso’s divorce at the end of Canto I). We will also inspect how the theme of epic as genre gets played up throughout the first canto, as the narrator
claims to adhere to strict conventions but seems to roam about the plot of Don Juan’s life, weaving in his own thoughts and satire throughout. We can ask similar questions of Byron’s narrator in regards to satire: how it is created and used as a narrative strategy. How does Byron’s narrator construct a satirical relationship with the characters of his story? Like Austen, Byron often satirizes narcissism, but his narrator constantly plays with his own personal history and simultaneously shows off his flexibility and skill as a rhymer.