

Don Juan Canto 17th.

edited by Peter Cochran

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1.

The World is full of Orphans¹ – firstly those
 Who are so in the strict sense of the phrase;
 But many a lonely tree the loftier grows
 Than others, crowded in the Forest's maze;
 The next are such as are not doomed to lose 5
 Their tender parents in their budding days,
 But merely their parental tenderness,
 Which leaves them Orphans of the Heart no less. –

2.

The next are “*only Children*,”² as they're styled,
 Who grow up Children only, since the old saw 10
 Pronounces that an “only's” a spoilt child;
 But, not to go too far, I hold it law
 That wherever their Education, harsh or mild,
 Transgresses the just bounds of love or awe,
 The Sufferers, be't in heart or intellect, 15
 Whate'er the *cause*, are Orphans in *effect*. –

3.

But to return unto the stricter rule
 As far as words make rules: our common notion
 Of Orphans paints at once a Parish School –
 A half starved babe – a wreck upon Life's Ocean – 20
 A human (what the Italians nickname) “Mule,” *
 A theme for Pity, or some worse emotion;
 Yet if examined, it might be admitted
 The wealthiest orphans are to be more pitied. –

* The Italians, at least in some parts of Italy, call bastards and foundlings “I Muli”³ – The Mules; *why*, I cannot see, unless they mean to infer that the offspring of Matrimony are Asses. – – –.

1: *The World is full of Orphans*: indicates perhaps that Aurora, an orphan, was to have taken a prominent role in the action of this Canto.

2: “*only Children*,” *as they're styled*: Annabella and B. were both only children – B. didn't meet his half-sister until he was twelve.

3: Compare Dante, *Inferno*, XXIV 125.

4.

Too soon they're parents to themselves, for what 25
 Are Tutors, Guardians, and so forth, compared
 With Nature's genial Genitors? – so that
 A Child of Chancery⁴ – that Star Chamber Ward
 (I'll take the likeness I can't first come at)
 Is like a duckling by Dame Partlett⁵ reared, 30
 And frights, especially if 'tis a daughter,
 The old Hen, by running headlong to the water.

5.

There is a commonplace-book argument
 Which glibly glides from every vulgar tongue,
 When any dare a new light to present: 35
 "If you are right, then everybody's wrong;"
 Suppose the Converse of this precedent,
 So often urged, so loudly, and so long:
 "If you are wrong, then everybody's right;"
 Was ever everybody yet so quite? 40

6.

Therefore I would solicit free discussion
 Upon all points, no matter what, or whose;
 Because as Ages upon Ages push on,
 The last is apt the former to accuse
 Of pillowing its head on a pin-cushion, 45
 Heedless of pricks, because it was obtuse;
 What *was* a paradox becomes a truth, or
 A something like it⁶ – as bear witness Luther. –

4: *A Child of Chancery*: a ward of court, as Ada was.

5: *Dame Partlett*: traditional name for a hen. See Falstaff to Mistress Quickly, *Henry IV I*, III, iii 51; or Leontes to Antigonus, *The Winter's Tale*, II, iii 72.

6: *What was a paradox becomes a truth, or / A something like it – as bear witness Luther*: Luther never indulged in paradoxes; B. means that what was once controversial is now taken as truth.

7.

The Sacraments have been reduced to two,⁷
 And Witches unto none, though somewhat late, 50
 Since burning aged women (save a few,
 Not witches, only bitches, who create
 Mischief in families, as some know, or knew,⁸
 Should still be singed – but *slightly*, let me state)
 Has been declared an act of inurbanity, 55
 Malgré Sir Matthew Hale's⁹ great humanity. –

8.

Great Galileo was debarred the Sun,
 Because he fixed it,¹⁰ and to stop his talking
 How Earth could round the solar Orbit run,
 Found his own legs embargoed from mere walking; 60
 The Man was well-nigh dead ere men begun
 To think his Skull had not some need of caulking;¹¹
 But now it seems he's right – his notions just –
 No doubt a consolation to his dust.

9.

Pythagoras, Locke, Socrates¹² – but pages 65
 Might be filled up, as vainly as before,
 With the sad usage of all sorts of sages
 Who in his life time each was deemed a Bore;
 The loftiest Minds outrun their tardy Ages;
 This they must bear with – and perhaps much more; 70
 The wise man's sure, when he no more can share it, he
 Will have a firm Post-Obit on Posterity.¹³

7: *The Sacraments have been reduced to two:* the seven sacraments of the Roman Catholic church (baptism, confirmation, the eucharist, penance, extreme unction, orders, and matrimony) have been reduced to two in protestantism, namely, baptism and the eucharist.

8: *Not witches, only bitches, who create / Mischief in families:* echoes above, XV, l.496. B. is thinking about Annabella's confidante Mrs Clermont, subject of *A Sketch from Private Life*.

9: *Sir Matthew Hale's:* Sir Matthew Hale (1609-1676) was a judge who believed in witchcraft and was responsible for several fatal trials.

10: *Great Galileo was debarred the Sun, / Because he fixed it:* Galileo was under house arrest for the last eight years of his life because of his heterodox astronomical theories (which are now all accepted).

11: *caulking:* to caulk is, in sailing, to mend a crack with tar.

12: *Pythagoras, Locke, Socrates:* three persecuted sages. Compare above, XV, ll.137-8. Locke was hardly "persecuted".

13: *a firm Post-Obit:* a bond payable after death: see above, I, ll.824 and 1000.

10.

If such doom waits each intellectual Giant,
 We little people, in our lesser way,
 To Life's small rubs should surely be more pliant; 75
 And so for one will I – as well I may.
 Would that I were less bilious – but, Oh fie on't!
 Just as I make my mind up every day
 To be a “totus, teres” Stoic Sage,¹⁴
 The Wind shifts, and I fly into a rage. 80

11.

Temperate I am, yet never had a temper;
 Modest I am, yet with some slight assurance;
 Changeable too, yet somehow “Idem semper;”¹⁵
 Patient, but not enamoured of endurance;
 Cheerful, but sometimes rather apt to whimper; 85
 Mild, but at times a sort of “Hercules furens;”¹⁶
 So that I almost think the same skin,
 For one without, has two or three within.

12.

Our Hero was, in Canto the Sixteenth,
 Left in a tender Moonlight situation, 90
 Such as enables Man to show his strength,
 Moral or Physical; on this occasion,
 Whether his Virtue triumphed, or at length
 His Vice, for he was of a kindling Nation,
 Is more than I shall venture to describe, 95
 Unless some Beauty with a kiss should bribe. –

(Incomplete and cancelled Stanza 13):

13.

*But Oh! that I were dead, or while alive,
 Would that I ne'er had loved; Oh, Woman, Woman!
 All that I writ or wrote can ne'er revive
 To paint a sole sensation, though quite common,
 Of those in which the Body seemed to drive
 My Soul from out thee at thy single summon,
 Expiring in the hope of sensation,*

14: a “totus, teres” Stoic Sage: at stoic ideal from Horace, Satires II, vii 86: ... *et in se ipse totus, teres atque rotundus* (“whole in himself, smooth and round”). The ideal is queried in Shakespeare, Sonnet 94 (*They that have power to hurt ...*).

15: “Idem semper”: always the same.

16: “Hercules furens”: “Hercules Mad”, a play by Seneca – see above, XI, ll.413-16.

13.

I leave the thing a problem, like all things;
 The Morning came, and breakfast, tea and toast,
 Of which most men partake, but no one sings;
 The Company, whose birth, wealth, worth, have cost 100
 My trembling Lyre already several strings,
 Assembled, with our hostess, and mine host;
 The Guests dropped in, the last but one her Grace,
 The latest Juan – with his virgin face.¹⁷

14.

Which best is to encounter, Ghost or None, 105
 'Twere difficult to say; but Juan looked
 As if he had combatted with more than one,
 Being wan, and worn, with eyes that hardly brooked
 The light that through the Gothic windows shone;
 Her Grace too had a sort of air rebuked; 110
 Seemed pale, and shivered, as if she had kept
 A vigil, or dreamt rather more than slept. –¹⁸

17: *Juan – with his virgin face:* Juan has always looked young and vulnerable.

18: *Juan looked / As if he had combatted with more than one, / Being wan, and worn, with eyes that hardly brooked / The light ... / Her Grace too had a sort of air rebuked; / Seemed pale, and shivered:* this picture of two cases of post-coital depression is perhaps a suitably anti-climactic way of ending the trunk which is Byron's *Don Juan*.