

NICK DEAR'S ADAPTATION OF TIRSO'S *DON JUAN*

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Don Juan Tenorio is still our contemporary. His legend is still a major source of dramatic material. His theatrical life seems to be endless as Nick Dear's recent adaptation has proved. The mythical trickster wants to play his role for modern audiences once again. But for how long? This might well be the last dramatic affair of the famous and unparalleled lover of all time. *Nick Dear's The Last Days of Don Juan* could be the beginning of his anticipated end. Moreover feminism forms a solid and compact front against Don Juan's free approach to sex and positive devaluation of female possession without material retribution. Feminists can understand his sexual liberty and promiscuity -though he is a gentleman who has respect for married women and only deals with young ladies for social politeness and improvement. They can share his open understanding and appreciation of sex life. However they might be infuriated by Don Juan's male predominance. Thus he becomes the hated anti-hero of feminist revindications who takes advantage of his ability and defiance to impose his radical desires of everlasting lust since he thinks that women are just sexual objects to be abused. From this perspective his figure and dramatic challenge seem to be much out of place and out of time. To make matters worse his existential attitude and moral commitments are old-fashioned. His moral code and personal values are not so convincing as they used to be, for the contemporary "burlador" is expected to have a more consistent personality and a deeper vital scheme. Therefore we need to make a critical revaluation and to have a new theatrical appreciation of his singular and peculiar way of life. And perhaps Nick Dear's dramatic proposal of a contemporary Tenorio could be the awaited answer.

His *Don Juan* was given its British première by the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Swan Theatre of Stratford in 1990 and then went to the Barbican in London in 1991. It is originally and wholly based on the Spanish play *El Burlador de Sevilla y Convidado de Piedra* (1616-1625?) by Gabriel

Téllez known as Tirso de Molina.¹ This dramatic work is its only and relevant source since it deals with the theatrical presentation of the character of Don Juan. Dear's adaptation has the same setting, contains the same plot and has the same characters but yet it is different. It might appear as a dramatic contradiction, but no doubt it is what it shows and dramatizes. Bearing in mind this consideration we may ask ourselves if it is an adaptation or if it is just a new theatrical production with similar dramatic elements for this could perfectly be the case where imitation becomes creation in its deeper sense and with all its meaningful connotations. We see the same events focused on the same character but the final result is a new dramatic approach with a different theatrical performance. It does not mean a devaluation of the original literary work because Tirso's general view and treatment are relevant and pertinent within the whole framework of the adaptation. This is the reason why we still get the most remarkable and outstanding features of Tirso's production, even those aspects or themes which might appear less attractive and uninteresting for today's theatre-goers. Moreover, we find that the religious and theological dimension of the original play makes sense for it conforms to its essential understanding. Dear shows himself to be concerned with the first dramatic delineation of the play as its fundamental theatrical reference. He takes all the performative potential out of the material available in the seventeenth century Spanish masterpiece, having no need to invent a plot or describe the concrete outlook of the *dramatis personae* as it is already done. However he is aware of the implications that a real adaptation carries with it for it is not a simple repetition or an external recreation. He is expected to be capable of presenting a new dramatic picture with the same features and components. This is the main justification for his positive theatrical manipulation exhibited in his production and confessed in the introduction of the dramatic text where he points out his intention of producing decisive changes and taking textual liberties, adopting a modern critical perspective in the interpretation of the popular legend of Don Juan Tenorio. Thus he engages his personal appreciation and professional skills in the creation of a modern version of a classic in order to get a provocative and meaningful performance which is also good fun. In this way Nick Dear tries to reconcile tradition with modernity, the serious with the ludicrous, and the learned with the popular. In the end what we see on stage is a contemporary play with new performative potential and new theatrical considerations. The plot

and the other primary components are nothing but a pretext for a full dramatic recreation. But differences also make coincidences.

Theatricality and contemporaneity are, perhaps, the two most radical and outstanding features of *The Last Days of Don Juan* and the basis of this modern adaptation. Movement and action are stronger and more decisive than in Tirso's dramatic work. Theatrical action gives a new insight to the play and the characters show their essential performative implications. Moreover language is simplified and changed into a more dynamic sort of spectacular activity. Dear's adaptation is just pure theatre where the Spanish component greatly contributes to emphasize the overall dramatic effect. The procession, songs and dancing, among other theatrical features, give the play a remarkable Spanish flavour which reinforces its theatrical significance. This adaptation, then, is not a pretext for a theological debate of the retribution of the wicked and the existence of hell since its dramatic quality prevails over any other aspect. Of course we have the same themes and similar topics but they are of secondary importance as they are not so relevant within the performative framework. Dear prefers to emphasize the theatrical dimension not taking much into account the philosophical and theological implications as Bernard Shaw does in *Man and Superman* where we find a different dramatic presentation of Don Juan who is no longer "a libertine and seducer [...] punished by supernatural powers for his various sexual crimes". Shaw takes, in this case, a theoretical perspective to come to terms with the complexity of his personality. In this way we may say that he shares Tirso's concern about the ultimate meaning of his dramatic role. Shaw is more interested in showing what he embodies and represents as an ideological personification than in his theatrical connotations for he is:

[...], more attracted to the philosophical implications of the Don Juan story. Since Juan, while pursuing his own desires, inadvertently breaks moral, canon, and statute law, Shaw elects him as the agent of revolutionary Shavianism, envisioning him as a kind of Faustian rebel against God. Transformed into a messianic idealist and metaphysical saint, Shaw's Don Juan, therefore, both anticipates and predicts the coming of the God-defying Superman.²

However in *The Last Days of Don Juan* the didactic and moral concern is changed into dynamic theatricality which becomes the central issue of the representation where dramatic action and theatrical interest meet to show how classic material in full scope may be of great help to undertake new dramatic enterprises through conscious provocation. The outline and division into two acts of the whole dramatic sequence greatly contribute to make a more substantial impact in theatrical terms than in *El Burlador de Sevilla* which is divided into three *jornadas* following the traditional pattern which was fashionable in the Spanish drama of the seventeenth century. So Dear's text is the shortest, being characterised by its theatricality, for everything is designed and performed within a theatrical mood and intention following twentieth century dramatic conventions which try to exploit and reproduce the performative potential. The theatrical dimension makes possible a new experience of the dramatic universe full of action and passion with not much time for discussion since acting is the most relevant aspect of this modern version which is no longer a classic. However it brings about a modern Don Juan whose archetypal figure opposes contemporary expectations. The theatrical scope makes the contemporary connotations of the play stronger. Thus contemporaneity and theatricality are perfectly combined and linked in order to give a new picture of the universal Spaniard.

But its contemporaneous implications go beyond theatrical action. Language also plays a decisive part in the adaptation of the original dramatic structure to modern times. The verbal component helps a lot in the delineation of characters and situations which are also effective and meaningful through words. Tirso's verbal text has been changed into a more popular, colourful and understandable language which becomes more direct and colloquial. Words are repetitive weapons used to seduce and abuse female prerogatives. They are a means of manipulation to accomplish sexual fantasies. Don Juan shows himself to be a master of linguistic discourse and a very skilful manipulator of the performative meaning of words. He does not use them to communicate, to exchange ideas and affections but to express his desires and expectations which must be fulfilled immediately. They are commands with submission as the only possible answer for linguistic ability is something natural in him. His affairs and adventures require a special verbal skill and competence. Thus sexual possession presupposes verbal intercourse as the necessary ingredient of the love game. We may say that Don Juan is a loquacious animal who cannot stop

talking, for talking and playing shape his everyday existential ambition. Moreover, he knows exactly what to say and how to say it. These are his words to the fair and gentle Aminta:

Listen! I am a gentleman of ancient family, heir to the house of Tenorio, conquistadors of Seville. My father sits at the King's right hand. His lips say life, or slaughter. As I was travelling along this road today, I chanced to see you smile. I was inflamed. I had to have you for my wife -without delay! I give you my name, Aminta. I give my hand in marriage. Take it. The King will disapprove - he's lined me up with someone else -some Duchess- in beauty, way beneath you, your inferior in love. My father will be angry; but I will suffer it. I must have you. I worship you. I must be your husband. Please!³

Don Juan knows how to perform the gentle approach to women for he has a deep understanding of female psychology. First he offers more than he can give. He is conscious of the precious gift he should be ready to handle if he wants to manipulate Aminta's decision. So he promises material reward and social promotion before confessing his desperate love to her since this is the best way to succeed in his sexual ambition. He must offer everything to get something. His linguistic assault does not admit any verbal exchange. Aminta must accept as it is the best thing she could ever hope for. Therefore Don Juan's free utopian proposition turns out to be a formal command which should be followed at once. He does not mind using lies and abusing truth. For him to speak means to deceive. His existential frustration and anxiety make him invent fallacies in order to seduce and impose his will within a world in need of liberation. Moreover Don Juan knows how to manipulate language to change reality through verbal discourse. Thus linguistic fantasy becomes the most effective weapon for abuse and depravation.

Undoubtedly Tirso and Dear share a feminist dramatic interest since they are deeply concerned with the female characters. *El Burlador de Sevilla* shows a wide variety of heroines who try to challenge male impositions, demanding their rights. They do not accept being the victims of male misuse. Moreover we find that one of the outstanding features of Tirso's drama is:

El papel preponderante que juega la mujer, y la penetración psicológica del escritor se ejerce muy especialmente en escrutar las sutilizas del espíritu femenino. La mujer [...] adquiere [...] una sorprendente variedad al mismo tiempo que un más humano realismo.⁴

His female characters have prejudices against male predominance and do not trust men's loving promises as Tisbea's words point out, "Casi te quiero creer; mas sois los hombres traidores".⁵ However Dear's adaptation keeps to a deeper and thorough feminist view, presenting a twofold vision of womanhood. On the one hand women seem to be made to please male satisfaction since they are thought to be mere objects of pleasure. This negative female appreciation is taken to its dramatic limits because there is a positive intentionality of stressing a contradictory polarity of feminine considerations. Thus Don Juan becomes the repetitive abuser of female rights. His servant Catalina describes her master's hunger for female possession perfectly when she tells him:

You're a locust who preys on virginity; you gobble up girls like fresh corn. You should have a warning sign, written on your britches: Caution, Deflowerer of maids. Do not be fooled by this man's name, he's the greatest cheat in the whole of Spain!⁶

But nobody can stop it. He does not care for anybody but himself. He lives for the impossible dreams of new experiences and adventures which might fill his radical emptiness. The result is his repetitive nonsense and existential exile in search of a lost identity.

On the other hand this extreme position is confronted by radical feminist claims as women try to subvert a rigid social order structured under patriarchal impositions. They are determined to impose their demands at any cost. The increasing oppressiveness they suffer from the dominant male ideology within a hierarchical order was theatrically counteracted by dramatic heroines who, in the end, would succeed in achieving their aims. They show a radical opposition to Don Juan's masculinity since it means their total human degradation. Dear's female characters pretend to abolish women's traditional roles as virginal sexual partners since they try to be dirty and to devote their

life to sin. Donna Anna is the best and most representative example of female independence and emancipation. She pretends to be Don Juan's feminine counterpart for she is ready to be herself and enjoy sex as much as she can without any moral or social restraint:

To Mota: [...] I have something rather precious and I want to know if you want it. (She kisses him hard) I have heat and moisture, spit and artistry. My fingers dawdle in forbidden places. My tongue knows several languages, including Arabic and French. My thighs can grip like wrestlers' arms, and lock our hips together. I'll lick the sweat from off your skin, from every crack and crevice. I'll be dirty. I like sin. I offer filthiness. You want it?⁷

In this way she becomes the active provocative agent of immediate sexual assault. Donna Anna, then, is ready to challenge male seductive superiority and to demand her right to lust and full pleasure. She is a devil⁸ in existential desperation as she does not mind breaking moral law. She thinks that she must be herself after being tragically abused. Later she repeats her sexual offer to Mota again, "Do you want it?" She is ready to give everything but in a fair and remunerative exchange, since she is obsessed by the name of her father's murderer. She resembles Don Juan's open understanding and easy manipulation of sexual bargain. However the main difference between Don Juan and herself is that she uses sex to get something else. It is not her final goal and pretension. Sexual intercourse is viewed from a wider scope. Life for her is more than to have sex as Don Juan's free approach proclaims. Moreover Donna Anna is conscious that her dramatic attempt to get women's liberation has its limits.

Tirso in *El Burlador de Sevilla* gives us a more restrictive presentation of women's attitudes and expectations although his female dramatic universe might appear provocative.⁹ His play is basically concerned with the traditional conception of womanhood since *el honor* seems to be the keyword to understand women's dramatic activity, for they fight to regain honour which is their most precious treasure, as Isabela shows when she exclaims, "¡Ay, perdido honor!"¹⁰ after making love to "un hombre sin nombre" who turns out to be Don Juan. Honour, therefore, becomes the essential virtue for women. They are supposed to be honest. This is the reason why the king of Naples reproaches

Don Pedro for the disgraceful affair of Isabela with these words: "Ah, pobre honor! Si eres alma del (hombre), ¿por qué te dejan en la mujer inconstante, si es la misma ligereza?"¹¹ It is dishonour that is the unexpected agent which causes Don Gonzalo's death. However we find in *The Last Days of Don Juan* a provocative devaluation, even a contemptible attitude towards honour, for Don Juan is unable to understand its meaning and significance within a particular social order. He is surprised at Batricio's words when he confesses that at least he has honour. But Don Juan cannot believe it. He is completely lost as his words reveal:

[...] Pathetic muck-stained peasants, clutching at their honour, little scrap of honour in the wind [...]! That's how they think the world works. Money, no. Lust, no. Rank, no. Honour. Hah!¹²

He cannot go further in his personal appreciation of life. So he strongly opposes a radically traditional conception where honour was considered to be more valuable than riches and possessions. Therefore we come across a more open and positive approach to feminism in Dear's adaptation as it is shown in his treatment of women who are looking for self-assertion and realisation. We may say that he presents a radical female picture within the theatrical possibilities of the original play. Women not only try to get rid of their traditional submission but also try to get social acceptance. For this reason he introduces decisive changes in the characters to make the feminine perspective stronger. Hence the original Catalinón becomes Catalina, since women can also be good and efficient servants, as she really proves to be for she is constantly warning Don Juan of his forthcoming destruction. Moreover she becomes his faithful partner and adviser.

Don Juan is the dramatically manipulated feminist anti-hero in both plays. He is always inventing utopias to satisfy his insatiable appetite for sex. He accepts that he is "[...] a seducer and a rogue" whose "great pleasure is to hunt down women and abuse them and leave them weeping hot tears for their honour."¹³

He is the authentic and most sophisticated *burlador* for his greatest pleasure is "burlar a una mujer y dejalla sin honor".¹⁴ He knows how to perform his tricks to get what he wants. But his playful enthusiasm for breaking

hearts ends in unavoidable tragedy. His everlasting punishment is his only reward. Finally women take revenge on him and put Don Juan to death through divine action. And the Spanish trickster becomes the great loser. Justice is restored and Don Juan's sinful defiance and arrogance towards women are punished. Don Gonzalo is the chosen instrument to accomplish his complete downfall:

Nothing compared with the heat that is to come; that you've sought for so long. God demands your debt be repaid! You failed to heed His warning. Now His mercy turns to justice. Every man pays, for every sin!¹⁵

Moral retribution demands the sinner pays his wrongs and Don Juan's joy is transformed into tragic sorrow. He cannot expect mercy and compassion from heaven. The religious dimension is also decisive in Nick Dear's adaptation which is used within a more significant and relevant framework with metatheatrical implications. It provides him with the possibility of showing a more radical picture of Don Juan, giving him the opportunity of accomplishing Don Juan's theatrical demystification since there is a positive intention of dramatic destruction of his myth. His sinful activity and his earthly unrest brings him everlasting damnation. He has not the heroic condition to shape universal expectations in the future. His dramatic playful attitude is no longer an example to follow. His personal utopia cannot be shared for being a projection of his repetitive frustration which is, time after time, rejected through sexual alienation. It means that he cannot be redeemed. Therefore he is theatrically condemned to be an outcast in perpetual exile looking for loving care and sexual affection. Finally infernal death brings him existential salvation. Thus the tragic comedy becomes a comic tragedy.¹⁶

NOTES

1.- He seems to be the author of this play and of *El Condenado por Desconfiado* although "parte de la crítica ha negado que ambas fueran suyas". However we may say that "Por sus temas, su acción y su estilo poético y dramático encajan perfectamente dentro del conjunto del

teatro de Tirso". Cfr. E. M. Wilson and D. Moir, *Historia de la Literatura española*, Siglo de Oro: teatro, Barcelona, Ariel, 1974, p. 145.

2.- Robert Brustein, *The Theatre of Revolt*, London, Methuen, 1965, p. 213.

3.- Tirso de Molina, *The Last Days of Don Juan*, adapted by Nick Dear, Bath, Absolute Classics, 1990, 2. 2, pp. 55-56. This is the edition we shall follow in our comparative approach.

4.- J. L. Alborg, *Historia de la Literatura Española*, Madrid Gredos, 1977, vol. II, p. 412.

5.- Tirso de Molina, *El Burlador de Sevilla y Convidado de Piedra*, Madrid, Cátedra, 1978, 1, 933-934, p. 64. This is the edition used in this paper.

6.- Tirso de Molina, *The Last Days of Don Juan*, *op. cit.*, 1. 6, p. 39.

7.- *Ibid.*, 2. 5, p. 64.

8.- Donna Anna like Vittoria Corombona in *The White Devil* (1612) by John Webster is determined to fulfil all her desires and female expectations for she is also "above law, and scandal" (1. 2) Cfr. Gamini Salgado (ed.), *The White Devil in Three Jacobean Tragedies*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1965.

9.- This could be seen in his presentation and reference to prostitution as it happens in the talk between Mota and Don Juan. Tirso de Molina, *El Burlador de Sevilla*, *op. cit.*, 2, 1198 ff., p. 74.

10.- Tirso de Molina, *El Burlador de Sevilla y Convidado de Piedra*, *op. cit.*, 1, 26, p. 36.

11.- *Ibid.*, 1, 153-156, p. 40.

12.- Tirso de Molina, *The Last Days of Don Juan*, *op. cit.*, 2. 1, p. 51.

13.- *Ibid.*, 1. 6, p. 35.

14.- Tirso de Molina, *El Burlador de Sevilla*, *op. cit.*, 2, 1316-1317, p. 78.

15.- Tirso de Molina, *The Last Days of D. Juan*, *op. cit.*, 2. 10, p. 82.

16.- We should bear in mind the tragic tone of the Spanish "comedias de capa y espada" since they "a pesar de su desarrollo cómico tienden a una solución trágica [...] son de esencia trágica". So "el riesgo trágico" becomes a basic component of these plays. Cfr. Ignacio Arellano, "Convenciones y rasgos genéricos en la comedia de capa y espada", *La Comedia de Capa y Espada*, Cuadernos de Teatro Clásico, Madrid, Compañía Nacional de Teatro Clásico, 1988, pp. 42-4.