

ARTS & LETTERS

The Demise of Don Juan

THE SOURCE: "A Splendid Wickedness" by David Bentley Hart, in *First Things*, Aug.–Sept. 2011.

THE MYTHICAL STORY OF THE energetic seducer Don Juan fascinated Europe for three centuries, stirring thinkers such as Søren Kierkegaard and Albert Camus to pen reflections on his character. But today the Don Juan myth is all but dead. How did one of literature's most potent figures become what David Bentley Hart calls an "imaginative impossibility"?

The early Don Juan offered commentators the opportunity to weigh in on society's morals, argues Hart, a *First Things* contributing editor. A longtime folk legend, the infamous sensualist made his first notable literary appearance in the 17th-century play

The Trickster of Seville and the Stone Guest, by the Spanish writer Tirso de Molina. The early Juan had all of the legend's trademark rakishness but was more dissolute than the one of later centuries. Writing during the Renaissance, when morality plays prevailed, Molina wanted the great seducer to stand as "a cautionary example of the vicious and debased state to which unrestrained appetite reduces a soul," Hart writes.

Writers of the Romantic period, such as Lord Byron, added a more positive and philosophical dimension to Don Juan's lustiness, transforming him from a figure of "unreflective sybaritism" into an idealist who pursued his desires in "Promethean defiance of the gods." Romantics portrayed Don Juan's bed-hopping as a hopeless quest for the perfect woman. He was "a tragic lover whose soul was worth contending for."

The 20th century did not look upon the roué so kindly. The

works in which Don Juan took a leading role, such as George Bernard Shaw's *Man and Superman* (1903), were largely satires. In a culture increasingly defined by "glandular liberation and relaxed consciences," Juan's earnest yearnings had little resonance.

There's more to Don Juan's faded glory, Hart argues. Earlier incarnations of Juan, which had the seducer rejecting the reigning moral framework for one of his own devising, demonstrated "the godlike power of the soul." The notion of a great if misdirected soul is all but lost in an age in which will is commonly thought of as a "random confluence of mindless physical forces and organic mechanisms." The demise of traditional morality took a crucial frisson out of Juan's story. "His proper element was that long cultural gloaming in which the old moral metaphysics retained its formal authority, but not its credibility." ■

EXCERPT

Modest Pursuits

Many of my writers have extremely handsome educational histories and broad experiences of the world. And many don't. . . . [But] they are all equally persuaded that they are culturally or intellectually disadvantaged, relative to writers of other times and places. That is, they feel that culture and circumstance have relegated them to lesser levels of attainment. Big thought is not a thing they ought to attempt.

On one hand, modesty about one's education is wise and appropriate. At best it is an outline, an agenda, a

curriculum for the decades of learning that should follow—and which, by the way, this big, buzzing civilization of ours has done an extraordinary amount to accommodate. And on the other hand, a modesty that disqualifies anyone from making a real, full test of his or her ability simply impoverishes the world. The attempt to take on ideas is full of perils, of course. Many people fear embarrassment. There are those who will not give words to a thought, in all silence and privacy, with a delete key at their fingertips, because they fear embarrassment. . . . Modesty is a fine thing under all circumstances, except those in which it becomes disabling.

—MARILYNNE ROBINSON, novelist and University of Iowa creative writing professor, in a commencement address at Holy Cross College (May 27, 2011)