

LORD BYRON'S CRITIQUE OF DESPOTISM AND MILITARISM  
IN THE RUSSIAN CANTOS OF *DON JUAN*

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LORD BYRON'S CRITIQUE OF DESPOTISM AND MILITARISM  
IN THE RUSSIAN CANTOS OF *DON JUAN*

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	ii
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS .....	iv
ABSTRACT .....	v
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION .....	1
2. “You will take Ismail at whatever price”: The Heroic Absurdity of War and the Critique of Militarism in <i>Don Juan</i> .....	9
3. The Image of Catherine II in the Poem: A Female Who Holds Absolute Power ...	21
3.1. The Figure of Catherine in the Context of the Theory of Enlightened Despotism .....	21
3.2. The Interaction Between Politics and Gender in Byron’s Portrayal of Catherine .....	28
4. The Russian Materials of <i>Don Juan</i> in the Context of Contemporary Historical Works and Travel Narratives .....	40
5. CONCLUSION .....	55
APPENDIX	
ILLUSTRATIONS .....	59
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	62

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure	Page
1. The Christian Amazon, With Her Invincible Target, 1787 (Library of Congress) .....	59
2. Rowlandson (?), An Imperial Stride, 1791 (English Cartoons and Satirical Prints).....	60
3. William Dent, Black Carlo's White Bust, Or, The Party's Plenipo in Catherine's Closet, 1791 (English Cartoons and Satirical Prints).....	61

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ABSTRACT

In his mock-epic masterpiece *Don Juan* (1819-1824), Lord Byron dwells on the example of Russia in his discussion of the politics of European imperial powers and their military ambitions. In Cantos VII-VIII, the poem's hero, Juan, participates in storming of Turkish fortress Ismail by the Russian army. The poet draws on historical accounts of the Siege of Ismail (1790) for his background and satirizes them for their misrepresentations of war. In Byron's opinion, imperial war discredits all Russia's claims about its progress and cultural improvement. This critique of Russian imperialism amplifies Byron's critique of British imperialism and develops into a universal anti-war critique.

The Russian empress Catherine II is the central character in Cantos IX-X. Byron condemns the concept of enlightened despotism that Catherine was widely considered to represent, which leads him to a critique of the Enlightenment. Using imagery from political cartoons, Byron explores Catherine's gender identity in its interaction with her political power. In the context of contemporary travel narratives, Byron is among those who express a more negative attitude towards Russia. On the whole, those who write about Russia's foreign affairs and imperialism offer more critique than those who are concerned with witnessing the life inside the country. This paper argues that Byron's critique, though more superficial than the travel narratives, takes advantage of commonplace perceptions of Russia and Catherine to comment of the politics of post-Napoleonic Europe.

## 1. Introduction

In Lord Byron's *Don Juan* historical context plays a very important role. The poet comments on politics and makes many references to current and recent historical events. Russia becomes one of the important destinations of the peripatetic hero. Byron draws multiple examples from Russian politics in order to discuss some of the principal themes in the poem. Many critical works exist on *Don Juan*, yet none of them offers detailed analysis of the Russian cantos and their background.

*The Cambridge Companion to Byron* does not contain information on this topic. It only mentions Byron's popularity in Russia in the chapter "Byron's European Perception" by Peter Cochran. The major critical works on this poem pay only little attention, if any, to the Russian cantos. In his work *England in 1819*, James Chandler analyzes a passage about femininity in Catherine II from these cantos (383-88). He speaks about gender but does not touch on the other aspects of this historical figure who appears as a character in Byron's poem. In *Lord Byron's Strength*, Jerome Christensen discusses the poem's complex narrative techniques without touching on the content of the Russian cantos, although in them we can find many examples of how these techniques are used in constructing the image of the country. Jerome McGann has research on various contexts of *Don Juan*, including the historical one. Much of the historical context of the poem remains to be explored. The Russian cantos offer a vast amount of material; and research on those cantos leads to a more comprehensive view of the poem.

After a depiction of Juan's numerous adventures in the Mediterranean region, Byron poet chooses Russia as a location for the events in Cantos VII-X, and after that the hero goes to Great Britain. Thus, the poem, as it exists, can be divided into three bigger parts. Although all the parts are united with the plot, the main character and the many themes, each of them has its own distinctive principles of organization. From the very beginning, Byron plays with the conventional image of the Mediterranean and Southern lands, in speaking about hot climate and intense passions. As the hero moves eastward, the Orient appears with its tyrannical rule and strict patriarchy. The well-known local details remain important in the depictions of all the "exotic" locations in the poem, including Russia. This approach makes Juan's odyssey a travel through fictitious lands represented by a set of internationally familiar conventions such as, for example, the oriental harem. The author does not at all seem to aim at creating a complex and veracious image of any country. On the contrary, he emphasizes the importance of the stereotypical images created by many travelers that unavoidably guide the perception of a different culture.

Cantos I-VI remain within a kind of mythological space and time. The poem starts in Seville; then the hero lives through a shipwreck and travels on a life raft somewhere in the Mediterranean Sea where he literally falls out of the normal course of time and place. After that, his life on a Greek island flows in a utopian mode. His captivity and arrival at the slave-market in Constantinople return Juan and the poem to more precise settings and anticipate further movement towards this kind of precision. In general, the Mediterranean cantos explore very different situations and represent the possible extremes of human life on a personal level, where the hero moves from desperate suffering to supreme happiness

and back. The content of these cantos bears a striking contrast with the following part of the poem connected with Russia and its affairs.

Canto VII marks a major shift in the poem. The narration moves from adventure travel to war epic. The poem sharply shifts from an uncertain mythological space and time to the precise date and place attached to a well-known historical event, the battle for Ismail (1790). History suddenly appears in the plot of *Don Juan* and organizes all the levels of narration, especially in Cantos VII and VIII. When Canto VII starts, we do not even meet any of the characters from the previous parts of the poem. In his descriptions, Byron borrows materials from historical works about Ismail and literally recounts the sequence of events and some technical details taken from them, adding many of his own comments. At the end of Canto VII, Juan appears at the Russian camp as a runaway from Turkish captivity and participates in the storming of Ismail on the Russian side.

The assault led by Suvorov followed after two unsuccessful sieges launched in the previous months by the other commanders. It took place on the 22nd of December, 1790. The fortress was famous for its very strong fortifications and taking it by storm was extremely risky. It was the biggest and bloodiest battle in the second of the two Russo-Turkish wars (1787-1791) that took place in the reign of Catherine II. These wars were marked by the consistent success and many victories of the Russian army. They greatly changed in the distribution of power in Europe. In fact, the events of the Russo-Turkish war of 1787-1791 tied together the political interests of the most powerful European countries. Isabel de Madariaga outlines the main events of this war (Madariaga [b] 162-175). It was initiated by Turkey in order to restore the territory lost in the previous war with Russia. While Austria and Russia ratified the alliance against Turkey, an anti-

Russian coalition was formed by Prussia, Sweden and Poland. These states also hoped to reclaim the lands that had been lost to Russia. Great Britain officially supported this coalition and Turkey's ultimatum. Britain was following to its own interest in maintaining the balance of power in Europe. This situation showed that Russia's power was growing more quickly than ever before. During these years Russia came under a severe critique of its actions in the international arena. Thus, the battle for Ismail becomes the initial point in Byron's close discussion of European politics, particularly, in his general critique of militarism and imperialism.

As a hero of the battle, Juan goes in Canto IX to St. Petersburg in order to deliver Suvorov's message about the victory to the empress. Juan's erotic adventures continue as he becomes the lover of Catherine II and the official favorite at her court. Byron is very interested in the personality of Catherine. He portrays her satirically, drawing substantially on popular English political cartoons from the 1790s, and also explores the relations between her femininity and monarchical power. Catherine is considered even by the historians of our time to be one of the exemplary enlightened despots of her epoch. The poet expresses his negative attitude to this idea. He also formulates a universal critique of despotism and the suppression of freedom. Russia, famous for its long tradition of despotic rule, offers many examples for his argument. Byron remains skeptical about Russia's progress toward liberty.

Preceding this "Russian" part of *Don Juan*, all the discussions of politics, politicians, monarchy and military commanders exist only as the deviations from the main plot line and stay absolutely apart from Juan or any of the other characters that surround him. Starting with Canto VII, Byron brings together these two parallel currents

in the poem. The historical figures become the characters of the poem, and the imaginary characters become the makers of history in the world of the poem. This interaction of fiction and history complicates the structure of the poem and lets the narrator evade an ultimate statement of his position.

Although Canto VII is the first of the four Russian cantos, Byron introduces Russian themes earlier in the previous canto and so makes a kind of transition between the two big parts of the poem. At the end of Canto VI we find with the first reference to actual historical time. With the Sultan, we move from the subject of love to political issues, as he leaves his harem in order to perform his state duties. Byron writes that the Sultan

. . . withdrew to hear about the Russians,  
Whose victories had recently increased  
In Catherine's reign, whom glory still adores  
As greatest of all sovereigns and whores. (VI.92.5-8)

These few lines offer a complex view of Russia and its ruler based on different background sources. The passage refers not only to the Russo-Turkish war but also to the whole political situation in Europe, where one of the principal changes was Russia's quickly emerging power. The name of the Russian empress appears for the first time in the poem here. To some extent, Catherine becomes the personification of her empire's ambitions. From the very beginning, Catherine is presented as a monarch in whom political ambitions and sensual lust unite. The ambiguity of Catherine's reputation also lets Byron state the officially acknowledged grandeur and merits of Catherine and then sarcastically undermine them. The poet distances himself from common notions as he

does many times in *Don Juan*. At the same time, he avoids stating his own clear position on the subject.

Interestingly, Canto VI offers one of the few instances of the poet speaking of contemporary Russia and its politics in the 1820s: “But oh, thou grand legitimate Alexander! / Her son’s son, let not this last phrase offend / Thine ear...” (VI.93.1-3). These lines follow the description of Catherine, and so Byron addresses the events of the recent past in their connection with current European politics. In the Russian cantos he omits direct references to contemporary events, focusing instead on events that happened 30 years before. However, in the quoted lines he touches on a dangerous topic. Catherine’s debauchery could result in her son, the Russian heir, being illegitimate, which throws a shadow on the whole subsequent Russian dynasty. In connection with this well-known rumor, Byron discusses his doubts about the political legitimacy of Alexander. David Walker says that here Byron draws a parallel between Catherine and her grandson Alexander’s usurpation of the throne; the former sanctioned the murder of her reigning husband and the latter did the same with his father (Walker 152). The implications about the Quadruple Alliance between Great Britain, Russia, Austria, and Prussia are quite obvious because the poet strongly condemns it several times in other passages in the course of the poem. He scrutinizes Alexander for his taking the position of a self-proclaimed controller of peace and freedom in Europe. In the poet’s eyes, the present emperor appears as Catherine’s true heir in his despotism.

The same stanza offers a witness of Byron’s awareness about his own fame in Russia, as Walker points out (Walker 152). He does not speak directly of his own works

but makes a generalization about poetry's ability to embody freedom and the struggle for liberty:

But oh, thou grand legitimate Alexander!  
Her son's son, let not this last phrase offend  
Thine ear, if it should reach, and now rhymes wander  
Almost as far as Petersburg and lend  
A dreadful impulse to each loud meander  
Of murmuring Liberty's wide waves, which blend  
Their roar even with the Baltic's. (VI.93.1-7)

Ideas of liberty become a potential threat to despotism when the poetry that carries them spreads among people. They may find the response to their own thoughts about liberty in it. The imagery of the sea and waves is a metaphor for Liberty expressing in poetry that becomes a danger because of government's inability to fully notice and control its subjects. The stanza also anticipates one of the next destinations of Juan's travel. Petersburg appears as a city on the border between the civilized world and the little known remote territories and countries. The quoted lines link up with the poet's claim in Canto IX, "And I will war at least in words" (IX.24.1). Possibly Byron sees freedom of thought that can be expressed in poetry as a strong counterbalance to despotic rule. To sum up, the few stanzas on Russian politics in Canto VI introduce a number of topics that form the content of the following four cantos. These stanzas provide an important basis for interpretation of the materials about Russia in *Don Juan*.

In the context of the whole poem, Russia is tightly connected to the discussion of various aspects of politics and history. Ismail becomes concentration of imperial

ambitions and, in general, international political intrigues and rivalry. Byron gives Russia the role of a representative of militarized imperial power. Unlike Great Britain, the Russian empire had only recently gained prominence in European politics in the 1820s when *Don Juan* was being written. Russia's ongoing development lets the poet trace how these processes work. It appears that national strength grows mostly because of successful wars initiated and led by a despotic government. In Russia, growing militarism was accompanied by the adoption of Western cultural achievements. Westernization, or civilization, was supposed to bring more peace and liberty. However, the poet's observations on recent history show that those ideals of Enlightenment do not work in reality.

Many historians and travelers of that age were writing about Russia, especially from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century on. The late 18<sup>th</sup> century is the epoch in which Byron chooses to set his events; it is remote enough in time from the period when Byron was writing *Don Juan* and recent enough for him to make connections with the present. There are very few precisely identifiable sources from which Byron draws information about Russia, but by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century an image of Russia with multiple local-color details about its political and everyday life has already taken shape. Together, many different sources create the context in which Byron was working on his Russian cantos. I will try to look at Byron's ideas in the context of several narratives about Russia written by travelers of the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. They contain much information that is very relevant to the events and phenomena described in *Don Juan*.

## 2. “You will take Ismail at whatever price”: The Heroic Absurdity of War and The Critique of Militarism in *Don Juan*

In cantos VII and VIII Byron depicts the battle for Ismail that was the culminating event in the Russo-Turkish war (1789-1791). Catherine II initiated this war in order to expand the territory of her empire and further strengthen the position of Russia in European politics. The siege of Ismail became notorious for being one of the bloodiest and most ferocious battles of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Ismail’s strong fortifications and strategic location at the Danube close to its mouth into the Black Sea made it especially important to Catherine’s imperial ambitions. Byron uses this historical occasion to discuss the military and imperial ambitions of Russia and other European countries.

Byron builds the two cantos on a historical work, Gabriel de Castelnau’s *Essai sur l’Histoire ancienne et moderne de la Nouvelle Russie*. The whole plot line is built on that historical account. The poet describes the fortress and its strength, and provides many details about the preparations of each side for the battle and the initial failure of the Russian army. Then he depicts the storming of Ismail, emphasizing its most dramatic moments. Many allusions and discussions are built around this plot line. The poet’s opinions and implications grow from the interaction between the sequence of events and the narrator’s comments on them.

One of his main principles in the narration is a juxtaposition of official accounts of war and depictions of battles from a witness’s point of view. Byron doubts the value of national and personal glory and keeps reminding readers that war is essentially murder

and causes the death of many people. This angle of view ties together his critique of contemporary imperialism and his general anti-war critique. All this results in a satire of historical accounts and official “media” that pays special attention to what they overlook, particularly to multiple instances of unnecessary cruelty. For example, the *Gazette* is constantly present in the background. The *Gazette* was a journal that published governmental information, including the accounts of wars and lists of the dead. The poet plays with the dry language of statistics that tends to erase the realistic perception of war: “And therefore we must give the greater number / To the *Gazette*...” (VIII.18.1-2). The narrator demonstrates many times the failure of this type of discourse in giving a true picture of events. The poet’s aim is exactly to give readers an idea of “the true portrait of one battlefield” (VIII.12.8).

The battle was an event significant enough to inspire a contemporary literary treatment on it called *The Siege of Ismail* (1794), a play by William Preston. The author precedes his tragedy with an expanded introduction where he discusses the role of the siege in the context of European politics and states his own political views. He scrutinizes Russia and refuses to give it credit for becoming more civilized. At the same time, he dedicates a considerable part of the text to France and some elements of British politics, which signifies his assignment of a kind of universal importance to Ismail, far beyond Russian affairs. Preston is a religious and conservative author who expresses his loyalty to the British monarchy. Obviously, such views are in opposition to Byron’s. Nevertheless, some of Preston’s statements are similar to those uttered in *Don Juan*. Preston speaks about the substantial differences between the popular image of war and its genuine face: “When we read . . . of a village burned or a town given up to be pillaged,

by the soldiery, we pass these things over with *sang froid*; . . . nay, I am afraid, we rejoice if the agents in these tragedies happen to be our friends and allies; without reflection that such military executions include in them murder, conflagration, – robbery, and every crime that can degrade human nature. . .” (vii). Byron also emphasizes that there is an official attitude to military campaigns imposed on people by historians and “media” such as the *Gazette*. Such views let us put Byron in the context of general anti-war rhetoric. Preston aims to make readers realize the absurdity of any war: “The cause of war, and consequent enmity between nations is frequently some captious verbal subtlety, some nice metaphysical refinements, or some abstruse political speculation. . .” (vii). The two authors utter some very similar opinions, yet their contexts differ very much: Preston’s pious pacifism contrasts with Byron’s sarcastic critique of, basically, all European monarchies. Remarkably, the two poets, being so far from each other in any other respect, both choose the siege of Ismail as the exemplary event in their critique of militarism.

The battle for Ismail in *Don Juan* appears to suit very well with the narrator’s habit of discussing of several issues at once. In the situation of war we can see the worst results of international political relations and the ambitions of governments. The simple eyewitness narration (in contrast to historical generalizations) becomes quite an effective critique on its own. Consistent comparisons between the historical discourse and subjective experience let the poet keep an ironic gaze on how the historical sources portray the events. For example, Byron offers a quote from the historian’s work and adds parody to it:

‘If’ (says the historian here) ‘I could report  
All that the Russians did upon this day,

I think that several volumes would fall short,

And I should still have many things to say' . . . (VII. 32.1-4)

Here the narrator uses the poetic mode for a kind of critical analysis. Even the simple restatement of the borrowed materials changes the meaning of the latter, sometimes to one quite the opposite. The historian says such a thing in order to emphasize the significance of the battle, while the poet draws, or perhaps invents, the quote in order to speak about the unreliability of people's memory of the past and, consequently, of historians' works. The author reveals the absurdity of fame in showing the arbitrariness with which historians choose from the known facts.

The poet also, to some extent, undermines ideals of patriotism. He reminds readers that there are always those people for whom war is a source of money, “. . . Not fighting for their country or its crown, / But wishing to be one day brigadiers . . .” (VII. 18. 2-3). Besides promotion in rank, another benefit of army men is the booty they gain from robbing taken cities. This theme of material interest recurs in this war episode with constant sarcastic reminders of the key role of money:

A moderate pension shakes full many a sage,

And heroes are but made for bards to sing.

Which is still better. Thus in verse to wage

Your wars eternally, besides enjoying

Half-pay for life, makes mankind worth destroying. (VIII.14.5-8)

The heroes of war can get their pensions as well as literary fame by writing about such a sensational topic as war. The discussion of money goes even further and touches on try and the poet himself. Here the narrator finds irony in his own position. The above lines

link curiously to his utterance later in the poem, “And I will war at least in words” (IX.24.1). Eventually, even the war of ideas and writing for the sake of liberty can turn into a business. This kind of paradox becomes the source for the aggressive irony of the whole poem and its portrayal of a changing and unstable world.

As a result, the wages of war are universal and one can earn them fighting for anyone who pays well. This fact easily turns fighting for “ideas” into nonsense. Thus, those who fight are either executors of imperial orders, like Suvorov and his army, or careerists. In connection with this, Byron describes foreigners, mostly English and French, who fight in the Russian Army. He also keeps mentioning different ethnic groups: “. . . Great joy unto the camp! / To Russian, Tartar, English, French, Cossack. . .” (VII.46.1-2). Thus, the poet emphasizes that Ismail is the battle between imperialist governments no less than between nations. Preston does the same in his tragedy; there are two Englishmen in it, Lennox who fights on the Turkish side and Elliot who is in the Russian army.

The demonstration of internationalized warfare culminates in Byron’s poem with the narrative about Juan and Johnson. A Spaniard and an Englishman escape from Turkish captivity and join Suvorov’s army. By such vicissitudes of fate they fight on the Russian side and show themselves to be genuine heroes. Interestingly, Suvorov finds the motivation for them to fight: “You shall have vengeance, for the town surrounded / Is twice as strong as that where you were wounded” (VII.61.7-8). He sees the participation in the battle as the chance to gain revenge for their previous enslavement. There is a motif of vengeance in Preston’s play too, where Suvorov says to his army before the final storm, “Hear ye not this? And will ye not revenge?” (Preston 80). According to Preston,

one of the causes of the Russian army's cruelty is its desire to avenge huge losses during the siege, which demonstrates the barbarity of Russians. In *Don Juan*, atrocities done in Ismail do not receive any explanation of this kind and appear as something possible in any war.

If Suvorov easily finds a reason to fight, the narrator obviously does not share his view. He says that Juan and Johnson are going “. . . To burn a town which never did them harm” (VII.314.8). The poet tends to see all the events as games of fortune. Juan simply submits to them: he “fought / He knew not why” (VIII.324.2-3). Juan displays himself as an exemplary reluctant hero. At the same time, he shows mercy when he saves a 10-year-old Turkish girl from death.

His little captive gained him some applause  
For saving her amidst the wild insanity  
Of carnage; and I think he was more glad in her  
Safety than his new order of St Vladimir. (VIII.140.5-8)

By chance and without aim, he reaps all the fruits of war, and glory most of all. “Some applause” can come from people who may simply be amused rather than truly admire Juan's mercy. Juan's genuine kindness contrasts with the cruelty, bloodthirstiness and greed of so many other characters mentioned in the episode. There is bitter irony in the fact that mercy is left for the fictitious hero, a stranger, who alone embodies the image of an ideal virtuous soldier here. This very stranger turns out to be the messenger of the Russian army's victory. By such invented alterations in history, Byron consistently undermines the dignity of this victory and so mocks those who may admire it.

The poet does not strive to be unbiased and his empathy is obviously on the Turkish side. Ismail's defenders prefer death to surrender, which makes them similar to traditional epic heroes. Byron depicts in detail instances of heroism among the Turks. He dedicates several stanzas to the heroic death of an old man and his five sons, whose bravery struck their enemies so much that they were ready to spare these Turks' lives but in vain asked them to surrender (VIII.105-118). Another memorable and dramatic scene is the town's pasha stoically and quietly smoking his pipe amidst the ruined fortress (VIII.121). No instances of bravery in Suvorov's army are described in terms of heroism. There are several allusions to classic heroes of the *Iliad* but they sound rather ironic. The Russian army outnumbered the garrison of the fortress yet suffered huge losses. The negative attitude of Byron and Preston to the actions of the Russian side at Ismail is caused by, among other things, its refusal to have mercy on the prostrate enemy. Preston sees the situation in quite the same way and more directly sympathizes with the defenders of Ismail and condemns the cruelty of the Russians.

Byron uses the word "Christian" for the description of Russians several times in these cantos: "The armies of the Christian Empress Catherine" (VII.64.8); "Christian thunders" (VIII.7.4); "Christian soldiery" (VIII.37.5). This repeated word may have the connotations "peaceful" and "merciful". Used in the context of war, such an epithet reveals a dramatic discrepancy between the word's conventional meaning and the exactly opposite actions of so-called "Christians." The poet brings into the foreground the power of words. He reveals the wrongs in common cultural notions. For some reason, Christians may see themselves as more merciful than, for example, Muslims. The philosophy of the Enlightenment sees cruelty as an attribute of backward, barbaric people. The events that

happened at Ismail undermine such ideas of progress and let the poet doubt self-proclaimed supremacy of Christians in terms of peace and charity.

In the context of these themes the Russian empire appears as a very specific example. Its rapid development and transition from backwardness toward civilization draws much attention in the West in the late 18<sup>th</sup> – early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, much of it due to Russia's sudden military success. The Russian materials let the poet emphasize his negative attitude to imperialism. Unlike that of the old European monarchies, Russia's development was recent and ongoing and so in full view for analysis and critique. This is how the narrator introduces the Russian topic in the beginning of Canto VII: "Achilles' self was not more grim and gory / Than thousands of this new and polished nation / Whose names want nothing but – pronunciation" (VII.14.6-8). In these three lines Byron touches on several topics, such as the general image of Russia, its militarism, and its exotic language. The poet mentions the commonplace statement about Russia's recent progress and at once throws in the sarcastic juxtaposition of the descriptions "new and polished" and "grim and gory." The facts concerning Russia's ferocity contradict the idea of progress, and so Byron leads us to doubting the achievements of Russia in its becoming "polished." The comparison to the *Iliad's* hero underlines the very ancient, primitive, side that the Russian army demonstrated in its bravery and merciless cruelty. It reminds us that the classic epic marks bloodshed as heroic. Byron depicts the war in a way that lets him subvert these notions. In the comparison with the *Iliad* the poet also explores the cultural and literary image of war. A tradition as long as known human history glorifies victory at war with everything that constitutes it, including the murder of people who during war turn into "enemies." With all his satire and condemnation, Byron

does not fully withdraw from this model of military glory, since he makes Juan participate in the actual battle. This twist in the plot lets the poet make another ironic observation. Without any serious motivation for fighting, Juan demonstrates genuine bravery, and this characteristic has strong associations with celebration of a hero in epic poems. As a result, having shown bravery in killing men at war, Juan most closely resembles the classic heroes. We see how Byron “deconstructs” the epic heroism of bloodshed; yet this does not mean he fully denies it because, in following this tradition, he shows how it guides the perception of readers. This is a kind of play with the text and its reader that Jerome Cristensen writes about in his work *Lord Byron’s Strength*, “. . . the *Juan* effect – a kind of differential linkage between things that likens them by eroding their insular identities, brings them together without producing a new unity of fabricating a synthetic identity” (218-19). With Juan’s heroism, irony and even common sense can question the admiration of bravery in war, but cannot subvert it or construct a new alternative.

In Byron’s portrayal of the Russian army, the figure of Suvorov becomes one of the central images. For Byron, this successful military commander who is popular among the soldiers represents those who are responsible for the whole tragedy of war: “. . . Suvoroff or *anglice* Suwarrow, / Who loved the blood as an alderman loves marrow” (VII.8.8). Such a juxtaposition of war and a well-known English satirical remark fits very well into Byron’s general ironic view of military careers and glory. He dedicates several stanzas to Suvorov that show his personality and conduct. Byron is interested in both the professional and human sides of this man’s character. The poet cites some sources that show how Suvorov trains his soldiers:

It is an actual fact that he, commander  
In chief, in proper person deigned to drill  
The awkward squad and could afford to squander  
His time, a corporal's duty to fulfill. (VII.52.1-4)

Byron underlines the historical truthfulness of this account. He shows how Suvorov does much more than his position as a commander requires, which was very unusual, even unique. In him professional duty results in personal devotion to the accomplishment of tasks. Moreover, participating personally in the training of the soldiers, Suvorov demonstrates his disregard of strict military hierarchy. The poet emphasizes that this makes Suvorov an exemplary successful commander. He mentions the joy of the whole army at his arrival (VII.49). The victory at Ismail itself is an indicator of Suvorov's talent as a commander because in a few days he managed to do what the previous commanders had not been able to accomplish in several months. Of course, the risky storming resulted in big losses, so Suvorov's success can be viewed in very different ways.

Byron develops the character of Suvorov further when he talks to Juan and Johnson, who escaped from Turkish captivity (VII.60-63). He interrogates them in a dry and terse way, in the style of a military commander. When Suvorov recognizes Johnson, who once served under his command and showed himself brave, he immediately starts to treat the newcomers as officers of his army. He resolves the situation very quickly and without any doubts, which also speaks to his advantages as a military leader. Suvorov does not allow himself any pondering but, on the contrary, appears to be utterly concentrated on his task.

There is also another mode in which Byron depicts Suvorov. Several times in Canto VII the poet adds some details about this famous commander's manner and conduct that present him in a grotesque way:

Hero, buffoon, half-demon and half-dirt,  
Praying, instructing, desolating, plundering,  
Now Mars, now Momus, and when bent to storm  
A fortress, Harlequin in uniform. (VII.55.5-8)

Probably Byron builds this image on accounts of the appearance and personality of Suvorov, who was quite a short and frail-looking man with an informal manner, and yet possessed genuine strength and power. Anyway, the poet emphasizes some comicality in Suvorov that strangely coexists with his seriousness, love for order, and decisiveness.

Interestingly, the poet uses very similar expressions in speaking about Suvorov and history in general: "Suwarrow, who but saw things in the gross, / Being much too gross to see them in detail. . ." (VII.77.1-2). These lines link directly to the following utterance: "History can only take things in gross. . ." (VIII.3.1). Suvorov becomes almost the personification of history and of a historian's view of events. He is the brilliant commander thanks to his ability to see and manage things "in gross" and, according to the poet's logic, this very talent makes him inhumane. The narrator mentions "a slight shade / of feeling" (VII.69.4-5) in him but does not go further in discussing this issue. Preston seems to be more interested in the inner character of Suvorov, who says, in *The Siege of Ismail*, "Think me not cruel / My station . . . bids me to assume enforced barbarity" (69). Both authors seem to ponder on the problem of personality in a commander who has to be "gross" and, at the same time, try to remain humane.

Suvorov is also an important figure in the discussion of the imperialism that governs the war. He submits not only directly to the orders of the empress, but also to her minion Potemkin. The poet's satire is merciless toward a favorite of this kind who is "a great thing in days / When homicide and harlotry made great" (VII.37.1-2). Catherine and Potemkin are responsible for the casualties of the war. In *Don Juan*, Suvorov turns out to be an agent of imperial power talented in performing his duties. He is mostly absent from view in Canto VIII, although he is known to have himself led his units to attack Ismail's ramparts. As the battle ends, he acts as an ideal subject who completed his task and sends Juan with the message about the victory. Byron's portrayal raises some questions when compared to Preston's interpretation. Again, in the tragedy Suvorov as a character is given more opportunities to speak his mind: "What is war? The cruelty of fools / To serve the craft of villains. Proud Potemkin / Will reap the fruits of war" (100). If, according to some accounts, Suvorov could be discontented with his submission to Potemkin, then Byron overlooks such an important detail and does not appear to have an interest in it. He presents an example of a hierarchy founded by a despotic ruler and traces how monarchic power interacts with the masses. Suvorov functions as a medium in this system. In the next chapter I will analyze in detail how Byron sees the despotic power represented by Catherine II.

### **3. The Image of Catherine II in the Poem: A Female Who Holds Absolute Power**

#### **3.1. Catherine in the Context of the Theory of Enlightened Despotism**

After the battle for Ismail, Juan goes to St. Petersburg, the capital of the Russian empire, with a message for the empress about the victory. The author develops the topics introduced in Cantos VII and VIII. The empress of Russia becomes the central figure in the following canto. Catherine II is another woman of power in the gallery of Juan's lovers and the only one who is not fictitious. Possibly, Byron speaks about the Russian empire mostly due to his interest to Catherine. As the empress, she personifies the strivings of her country and its political interests. The author sees her as an exemplary despotic ruler. In connection with Catherine, Byron discusses the concept of enlightened despotism and the complicated relations between the ideals of Enlightenment and the power of absolute monarchs. Besides that, he is interested in Catherine's identity as a female monarch and explores the connections between her gender and her political power.

The political and cultural situation in Russia was unique in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Catherine was a German princess married to a Russian emperor. In the revolution organized by Catherine the emperor was murdered, and she usurped the throne. She was a monarch educated in accordance with Enlightenment ideas. However,

the fact of usurpation unsettled the legality of her claim to rule as well as her commitment to progressive ideas; yet she quickly strengthened her position and proved herself to be capable of ruling. Her Western background and connections with the most important European philosophers made her famous and increased European interest in the Russian empire. Being an absolute monarch in a backward but progressing country made Catherine an exemplary figure for the concept of enlightened despotism. In theory, she could become a mediator between the philosophers' ideas and the practice of rule, and launch reforms "from above" in order to bring civilization and liberty to her land. Catherine had the intention of doing so, but many obstacles and complexities led her to exercise her power in a more and more despotic fashion.

Current historians of enlightened despotism continue to study the controversies that Byron addressed in this poem. "Believers in the theory of enlightened despotism thought that Russia was the ideal country in which to apply their ideas," observes one historian. "Since it had no ancient institutions, the *philosophe* might inscribe what he wished. Nothing could be less true" (De Madariaga 289). Madariaga argues that, on the contrary, Russia had such traditions of rule that became the serious obstacle for any change in this sphere. Catherine's reign was marked by many territorial wars and peasant revolts inside the country, and the question of liberties in Russia remained very complex. The figure of Catherine was not only suitable for Byron's discussion of relations between Enlightenment and despotism, but the political directions developed by her influenced European politics for decades afterward as well.

The theory of enlightened despotism took shape only in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, mostly in German-speaking countries. For German historians, one of the most

important corroborations of this theory's validity was the reign of Frederick the Great of Prussia (Scott 5-8). The first ideas of this kind and the examples of successful reigns in accordance with them date from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. One of the first famous examples of the concept was Le Mercier de la Riviere's book *L'ordre naturel et essentiel des sociétés politique* (1767), a book that "has been widely regarded as a hand book for an enlightened ruler and which declared the best government to be that of a '*despote patrimonial et légal*' who would rule by discovering and applying established fundamental laws" (Scott 5). Remarkably, Le Mercier does not see such a form of government as one of the steps in the progress towards more liberty, but claims it to be the best possible one. The theory received much criticism. Particularly, Jean-Jacques Rousseau absolutely denied the possibility of despotism being beneficial to a state (Scott 5). While the concept remained very controversial, the actual absolute monarchs in some countries strived and sometimes succeeded in starting liberal reforms, finding more effective methods of political administration and improving the lives of their subjects. Such rulers came to power in some German lands, most notably Prussia, and also in Austria, Spain, Italy, and Russia. They tended to appear more often in the countries that did not have long tradition of parliamentarism.

Byron belongs to those who are skeptical about enlightened despots and see this theory as just another cover for form of despotic rule and tyranny. He quite clearly states his negative attitude in speaking about the political situation in Russia:

Our hero (and I trust, kind reader, yours)

Was left upon his way to the chief city

Of the immortal Peter's polished boors,

Who still have shown themselves more brave than witty.

I know its mighty empire now allures

Much flattery, even Voltaire's, and that's a pity.

For me, I deem an absolute autocrat

Not a barbarian, but much worse than that. (IX. 23)

These lines expose many controversies in the perception of Russia. The author speaks within a common discourse: the praise of Russia's recently initiated progress and of the merits of Peter the First quickly became commonplaces among historians and travelers in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Without any doubt Byron denies the validity of such commonplaces. In Canto IX he looks at Russian as a nation guilty of the Ismail massacre, which becomes irrefutable proof against admitting Russia's achievements. For Byron, Russia's successful wars do not prove but, on the contrary, discredit its progress. The words "more brave than witty" express the idea that military victories do not have a connection with real improvement of culture. In the phrase "polished boors," "polished" becomes only a sarcastic equivalent of its opposite. Byron appears to be particularly disappointed with the approval of the new conditions in Russia that comes from some Enlightenment philosophers. For Byron, absolute monarchical power cannot possibly be "enlightened." The author condemns even more severely the attempt to justify despotism by connecting it with possibilities for more liberty. Thus, in his exploration of imperialism, he concludes that Enlightenment and despotism are not incompatible. This results in a critique of Enlightenment itself: instead of progressing away from despotism, Enlightenment philosophy develops a kind of theoretical basis for it.

Byron states his own position in a peculiar way: “. . .my plain, sworn, downright detestation / Of every despotism in every nation” (IX.24.7-8) These words obviously broaden the theme and emphasize the universality of the poet’s interests and concerns. He uses the principle of denial which, however, does not lead him to any positive alternative. This is a good example of what Christensen defines as apposition (217). Although Byron remains skeptical, he speaks about his role in a world of despotism and imperial wars. The cornerstone for his view of liberty appears to be connected with freedom of speech, in a broad sense:

And I will war at least in words (and should  
My chance so happen – deeds) with all who war  
With thought; and of thought’s foes by far most rude,  
Tyrants and sycophants have been and are. (IX.24.1-4)

The poet sees his own significance in maintaining to freedom of expression in his poetry, which puts him in opposition to the official state power and the publishing industry, both of which attempt to control him via censorship. The repetition of the word “war” emphasizes this confrontation. This word is put in the strong position in both cases: it precedes the caesura in line 1 and ends line 2 in an enjambment that puts the end of the sentence in the next line. Byron chooses quite an abstract word, “thought,” for speaking about freedom. He also uses it twice, which underlines its significance. Critical thinking and sober judgment in politics are incompatible with the passive submission on which despotism is based. The usage of the word “thought,” with an elitist connotation, makes Byron’s critique quite harsh because it implies that the despotic rulers, the “foes” of “thought,” want nothing but passive submission. In the logic of this passage, among

“sycophants” there are those poets who do support tyranny or do not oppose it. This may be another reference to the English poets whom Byron scrutinizes in the course of the poem for betraying the ideals of revolution. The quoted lines are elaborately organized on a formal level. There are repetitions; alliterations (“war” – words”; “foes” – far”); and additional rhymes inside the lines (“far” – “are”; “tyrants” – “sycophants”). These poetic techniques strengthen the rhetorical effect and coherence of the lines.

Interestingly, the poet eventually eludes the pressure to state his position clearly by criticizing his own statements. Having spoken about the importance of “war” in poetry, he continues with doubts: “It is not that I adulate the people. / Without me, there are demagogues enough” (IX. 25.1-2). He speaks here as if he is trying to guard himself against sounding like a kind of tyrannical legislator in poetry just as the actual rulers do in politics. In his perception, democrats can be just as coercive and dogmatic as monarchists, which allows him to decline a commitment to democracy. Further on in the quoted stanza, the poet unites political liberty with inner freedom, “. . . I wish men to be free / As much from mobs and kings – from you as me” (IX.25.7-8). Thus, the political critique moves to self-criticism and forestalls the development of this argument, resulting in the paradox about the ideal freedom. Byron values personal freedom (of “thought,” if not speech) but does not see possible ways to achieve it in politics that would resist his critique.

Catherine II is a prominent figure in the history of enlightened despotism and the only one deemed to be an enlightened absolute monarch among Russian rulers. She has been the subject of very contradictory opinions by her contemporaries and historians up to the present time. Jean-Henry Castéra, an eighteenth-century historian and the author of

the fundamental history of Catherine's reign, admits Russia's success in gaining more prominence in the European political arena and is convinced that the country's power will continue growing. Many travelers, such as Chantreau, perceive Catherine on a more personal level and praise her magnificence and mildness. Certainly, Catherine was severely criticized by many others for Russia's imperial wars and interference in some of the most important issues of international politics. The new empire's quickly growing military strength provoked suspicion and distrust. From some English sources we may conclude that the Russian empress received much more criticism than praise from Great Britain. William Thomson, a traveler, writes the following in his favorable account of her: "I am sensible that, in attempting to bestow the praise on the empress of Russia, I have to encounter opinions, which have long been established in your mind" (Vol 1, 42). Thomson analyzes of the recent Russian history and comes to the conclusion that much improvement came to Russia under Catherine II. Even though she possessed absolute power, she started to accustom her nation to milder forms of rule than it had ever known (Thomson Vol. 1, 18-50). Thus, the judgments of Catherine and her politics range from utterly negative to consistently positive.

### 3.2. The Interaction between Politics and Gender in Byron's Portrayal of Catherine

Byron is among those who estimate Catherine's reign and her deeds rather negatively in terms of politics. He does not have the purposes of a historian and so he is not concerned with seeing Russian history diachronically. He chooses Russia as one of the monarchies important in European politics and famous for its tyrannical state government. He seems to be interested in the ambiguity of Catherine's figure. She inherits and continues the despotic tradition and yet claims her devotion to the ideals of Enlightenment and liberty. Besides, the poet is very interested in the overlap between Catherine's political and gender identity. In constructing the image of Catherine II, Byron could draw information from many sources: historical accounts, anecdotes, and memoirs. There are many obvious connections with the portrayal of her in the cartoons that were popular in Great Britain in the time of her reign, especially during the second Russo-Turkish war. These graphic satires play on her strong will for both political and sexual power. We can see the same approach to her depiction in *Don Juan*. The satirical mode of those drawings is also very suitable for the mock epic genre of the poem. The poet portrays Catherine in this caricatured way from her very first appearances in the poem. In Canto VI, long before Juan actually meets her, the empress is referred to as "This modern Amazon and Queen of queans" (VI.96.4). This view of her directly links to the cartoons. One of them, published in 1787, has the title "The Christian Amazon, with Her Invincible Target" (Figure 1). The cartoon visually presents Catherine II, who ". . . as an Amazon,

wearing a crown and jewels, raises her saber to strike down the Sultan, who threatens her with a leveled bayonet” (George 424). Her position as an absolute ruler with military ambitions results in her portrayal as an Amazon with some masculine features. William Preston goes even further and literally speaks about Catherine’s masculinity:

The Russian greatness towr’s with Catharine  
And may with her subside. The mighty structure  
Is held together by the wond’rous talents  
And masculine ambition, of a female  
Whose life is in the wane. (Preston 63)

Preston seems to admit Catherine’s capacity of being a good ruler but condemns her warlike spirit. He puts most of the responsibility for Ismail and Russia’s aggressive politics on Catherine and doubts that such a power will be preserved after her reign ends. Like Byron, Preston sees Catherine as the personification of the Russian empire’s political interests. However, Byron does not use the epithet “masculine” for Catherine anywhere in the poem. Byron is not concerned with the empress’s positive achievements either. Her character in the poem remains within the satiric mode, which refers back to the cartoons.

Another cartoon called “An Imperial Stride” (Figure 2, 1791) is also very relevant to Byron’s portrayal of Catherine because it combines political satire with mocking at her lewdness: “A colossal figure of Catherine II steps from Russia, a rocky mound on the extreme left, to Constantinople, her toe resting on the horn of a crescent. . . Beneath her petticoats, and strung out between ‘Russia’ and ‘Constantinople’ are the heads and shoulders of seven sovereigns, gazing up at her” (George 777). Each of the sovereign

makes an ambiguous joke about her politics and sexuality. The “colossal” figure represents the enormous size of Catherine’s empire and the scale of her ambitions. The whole graphic arrangement demonstrates how Catherine strives to make her empire the most powerful in Europe, in other words, to be above all the other states. At the time when this cartoon was published, Russia was either at war or in diplomatic tension with all the monarchies represented in the picture, since they all disapproved Russia’s unwillingness to submit to Turkey’s terms of territorial division. Catherine’s determination in politics was condemned by many and by Byron too.

In the part of the poem preceding Canto IX, Catherine is mentioned only a few times. She is present in the background there; we see the people whom she commands. In Canto IX the poet dedicates many lines to the description of Catherine, especially her appearance and manners, and also to details of everyday life at the imperial court. Descriptions of this kind are frequent in historical writing and travel narrative in the epoch, for example, in Chantreau and William Coxe. The texts, portraits and cartoons together formed a well-known image of Catherine and a tradition of portraying her. This tradition had existed for a few decades by the time Byron wrote about Catherine. The poet uses multiple details about the empress that have become commonplace and builds an image of her that makes Catherine a part of the general discussion of imperial power.

It is interesting to compare the visual depictions of Catherine in *Don Juan* with some of the historical sources. For example, Jean-Henri Castéra provides the following information: “She is of that stature which is necessarily requisite to perfect elegance of form in a lady. She has fine large blue eyes; . . . her mouth is well-proportioned, the chin round . . . and her shape rather plump than meager . . . In her character there is more

liveliness than gravity. She is courteous, gentle, beneficent; outwardly devout” (Castéra 2: 134-35). This and other verbal portraits underline Catherine’s noble looks, elegance and naturally possessed royal grandeur. Probably, such descriptions of her were quite common because we find some similarity between Castéra and Byron’s descriptions:

The court, that watched each look her visage wore,  
Until a royal smile at length disclosed  
Fair weather for the day. Though rather spacious,  
Her face was noble, her eyes fine, mouth gracious. (IX.58.5-8)

Byron writes many brief descriptions of this kind rather than one long unit, as the historian does. The poet may be mocking the conventions displayed in Castéra and speaks about Catherine in the way that emphasizes her position as an absolute monarch. Her power is expressed in her face and in her whole person, in every movement she makes. The uncontested submission of the whole court reflects very well the extent of her power in the whole country. Her mildness only emphasizes her position as a despot who does not need to be tough in order to inspire deference and even fear.

Byron describes Catherine’s appearance, visage, and smiles, and the reactions of the court to this, several times in Canto IX. In fact, the text gives much attention to the empress’ body. Namely, she is shown exercising her power through her body. This identification has some resemblance to the ancient and medieval theories of the body politic. In the case of Catherine, there are some elements of a caricatured and satirical variant of the “body politic.” The two crucial features of her popular image, imperial ambitions and lewdness, become almost united. Her rare position as a female ruler and her personal reputation resulted in shaping such a view. For example, the empress’ body

often represents her country in the cartoons. In some of them her desires and minor actions become the main target of satire. We can see this, for example, in “Black Carlo’s White Bust, of The Party’s Plenipo in Catherine’s Closet” (Figure 3, 1791). The cartoon ridicules Catherine’s admiration for Charles James Fox. Concerning the historical background of the satire, the empress “wrote to the Russian Ambassador in London to order a bust of Fox, to be placed between those of Cicero and Demosthenes, on account of his opposition to the Russian armament. . .” (George 817), i.e. Britain’s preparation for war with Russia. Catherine is the biggest figure on the picture; she holds a black carlo on her lap and both speak ambiguous and obscene words. Not only is Catherine’s lewdness satirized once again, but also her patronage of arts is presented in a humorous way. She is shown with her leg raised as if she had just kicked the busts that fall down at her feet. The busts are identified Demosthenes and Cicero and represent George III and William Pitt respectively. The cartoon is based on a famous anecdote about Catherine’s wish to put Fox’s bust between those of the two philosophers. In this graphic satire, personal and political affairs entwine with each other, showing some informal and anecdotal sides of the political relations between Russia and Great Britain.

In the poem, Catherine’s feminine attraction adds to her monarchical power. This is shown through the plot line of her affair with Juan. The perspective in Canto IX (and in the previous ones) constantly shifts between the romantic mode and the ridicule of that mode. Catherine’s grandeur is presented in all its beauty but also mocked. The following lines offer another example of the poet’s attention to Catherine’s personality as expressed in her physical appearance:

Though somewhat large, exuberant, and truculent

When wroth; while pleased, she was as fine a figure  
As those who like things rosy, ripe, and succulent  
Would wish to look on, while they are in vigour. (IX.62.1-4)

The passage emphasizes Catherine's sensuality. Usage of three epithets in a row in lines 1 and 3 creates the effect of gradation, where every subsequent word strengthens and narrows the meaning of the preceding ones, or adds more nuances to the description. Playing with the meanings of the words "ripe" and "succulent" creates a humorous effect, possibly referring to her age. The depiction of Catherine in the first line resembles her caricatures in some cartoons. For instance, in "An Imperial Stride" she is a big, stout figure with a determined expression on her face, almost exactly "large, exuberant, and truculent." Her posture makes her even bigger visually, which corresponds with her ambitions in expanding the territory of her empire.

Describing Catherine in terms of her femininity, Byron does not speak directly about her age. The historical Catherine was 62 years old at the time that Byron described her in the poem. In the historical sources, such as Castéra's and Chantreau's accounts, she is portrayed without any indications at her age. On the one hand, Byron does not destroy this tradition, but on the other hand, he makes vague comments of this kind: "Besides, he was of that delighted age / Which make all female ages equal. . ." (IX.69.1-2). The quote hints that Catherine was much older than Juan; there is no more precise information on the subject anywhere else in the poem. As in many other examples, Byron does not want to completely discredit the official sources, although he distances his view from theirs.

The poet draws parallels between Catherine II and other famous women from history and mythology. For instance, he makes a connection between Helen of Troy and Catherine (IX.54) Catherine starts wars and has power over men like Helen, although in more literal and much more active way. Concerning Catherine's lust, Byron compares her to Messalina (IX.72). For making the revolution in which her husband was murdered, Catherine gets the name of Clytemnestra, who murdered her husband, although for the reasons of hatred and jealousy rather than politics (IX.80). Remarkably, in this comparison the Russian empress performs the same deeds as the other heroines but for different reasons that are tied to politics. Even her lewdness has huge political significance because her favorites gain much power in the country. In connection with this, there is a sarcastic reference to the English queen: "Love had made Catherine make each lover's fortune; / Unlike our own half chaste Elizabeth. . ." (IX.81.1-2). Thus, the poet mocks at the official image of a British ruler of the past, not only the present. All these allusions refer to the women who had great power of some way or other. These parallels help to create the image of Catherine as an "epic" heroine in the poem.

In his account of the heroines of ancient Greek stories, Byron chooses some archetypal examples of crime and sin and shows how in Catherine's case the same actions can be overlooked or even justified by the fact that they may serve the benefit of the whole country (as in, for example, territorial wars). I think that Byron is very critical towards enlightened despotism because this theory can slip into demagogy and in reality may scarcely leave anything "enlightened" in despotism. Apparently, Byron does not trust in any kind of unlimited power, nor does he believe in the efficiency of a monarch's self-limitation.

Putting Catherine in the gallery of other famous women, Byron emphasizes her femininity more than he does anywhere else in the poem. He quotes the beginning of the line from Horace in order to speak of femininity in general: “Oh thou *teterrima causa* of all *belli* / Thou gate of life and death, thou nondescript! / Whence is our exit and our entrance. . .” (IX.55.1-3). In a parallel with Horace, Byron develops the fact of females being the cause of wars into female genitalia being the ultimate cause of wars and everything else. For a moment, Catherine loses any characteristics besides her gender: “Catherine, who was the grand epitome / Of that great cause of war or peace. . .” (IX.57.1-2). Here the poet portrays “Catherine as Woman. . .” (Chandler 385), who embodies universal femininity. Beside that, Byron speaks about Catherine’s being a woman just as anyone else of her sex, which becomes explicit in the empress’s love affairs: “But in such matters Russia’s mighty Empress / Behaved no better than a common sempstress” (IX.77.7-8). It seems that Catherine’s gender identity is inseparable from her official position, and the former becomes an important part of the latter.

In the shift from speaking about wars to generalizing about femininity as a universal principle of “life and death,” Byron does not condemn females but continues: “Some call thee ‘the worst cause of war’, but I / Maintain thou art the *best*. . .” (IX.56,1-2). Such a statement corresponds well with the fact that the poet does not criticize Catherine’s personal life on its own terms, as the cartoonists and many other authors do. Another proof of Byron’s softer attitude to Catherine’s lewdness is his sarcastic comments about the opposite case, female virtue. He creates a satirical portrait of Donna Inez, an exemplary virtuous woman, in Canto I. The poet is distrustful of female virtue and suspicious about its tendency toward hypocrisy or self-delusion, as in the case with Julia.

Thus, Byron does not really blame Catherine for having many lovers but rather sees it as a natural expression of her femininity. As Chandler puts it, “For Byron, Catherine lacks sense because she embodies it” (Chandler 387).

However, the political impact of Catherine’s love affairs receives Byron’s critique. As Katherine Hernberger notes, “. . .Byron uses the power nexus within sexual relations to reflect the political power structure of each society Juan passes through” (42). The empress’s favorites sometimes became powerful officials and influenced the politics of Russia. The poet defines the position of an official favorite: “Twas a high place, the highest in the nation / In fact, if not in rank. . .” (IX.52.4-5). The possible extent of the power of a favorite is clear from the example of Potemkin, who appears in Cantos VII and VIII. He gained his wealth and high position not for his talents as a politician or other civil merits but because of having an affair with the empress. Byron is sharply negative about Potemkin and this kind of favoritism in general. He sarcastically notices that: “. . .for though she would widow all / Nations, she liked man as an individual” (IX.63.7-8). Again Byron reminds us about the real price of war and Catherine’s monarchical responsibility for that.

To explore this side of her royal life, Byron makes Juan another of Catherine’s favorites. With his example, we see a kind of general scheme of how the empress treated her lovers. She was quite consistent in that, as many contemporaries pointed out: “Easy in her new attachments, she never spoke of those that had gone before” (Castéra 2: 127). A favorite enjoyed wealth and power till he was dismissed with many presents and honors, as in the case of Orlov: “. . .for nearly five months he [Orlov] had been traveling in foreign parts. . . She sent order to him to repair to Reval. But she at the same time sent

him considerable presents, and loaded with honours and caresses the most intimate friends of her discarded favourite” (Castera 2: 127). Juan follows exactly the same path. At first, the empress notices him, and he becomes the official favorite, replacing the previous one. He receives much wealth, many presents, and the benevolence of the royal court. It is interesting that everyone including Juan’s relations back in Spain with whom he starts correspondence perceive his success as a favorite as a kind of a good career with brilliant perspectives (IX.30-32). As the poet says, “. . .each lover looked a sort of king” (IX.70.4). This implies luxury and respect as well as political importance.

In the narration about Juan’s success as a favorite, we meet the only instance where Byron mentions the serfdom that existed in Russia. Juan receives land with peasants among many other gifts:

. . .the silver showers

Of roubles rain, as fast as specie can,

Upon his cabinet, besides the presents

Of several ribbons and some thousand peasants. (IX. 79.5-8)

Byron chooses a seemingly indirect way of speaking about serfdom. He does not connect serfdom and slavery on the verbal level but explores the deeper, cultural significance of this issue. The mere naming of “peasants” in the row of *things* presented to Juan contains many implications. The word “peasants” is in the strong position of a rhyming word and at the end of the stanza that lists the presents given to Juan. The passage reveals the realities of life in Russia in that epoch, namely, the casualness with which people, serfs, were viewed by Russian nobility as something to own, buy and sell. The uncertainty

about “some thousand” gives an even stronger impression about the casual perception of slavery in the country.

For some reason, Byron does not speak more about feudal slavery. Not only did it still exist in Russia in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century but it was becoming tougher on the serfs and more regulated during Catherine’s reign. This was one of the issues with which the empress was charged by her critics. Serfdom was the economic basis of the Russian empire. What was very specific is not slavery itself but the strict division of one nation into two groups, serfs and their owners, where only the latter ones, the minority, were going through westernization. These aspects seem to be mainly beyond the poet’s concern.

He rather chooses to speak about slavery universally, as in, for example, his description of the slave-market in Constantinople: “A crowd of shivering slaves of every nation. . .” (V.7.1). This view mirrors the lines about despotism: “this my plain, sworn, downright detestation / Of every despotism in every nation” (IX.24.7-8). In both examples the author is concerned about the universality of a phenomenon. The changing locations in the epic provide materials that lead the poet to some “universal” tendencies. At first Byron puts his hero in the position of a slave, and then Juan becomes a slave-owner. All this is part of Fortune’s games that guide Juan’s adventures and invoke the poet’s irony about the vicissitudes of fate. Juan is dismissed and sent abroad by Catherine just like Orlov or Panin, although it is Juan who loses interest first. With generous presents, he is sent abroad, “on a mission” (X.44.7) to Great Britain.

In general, the rule of favorites is another demonstration of Catherine’s despotism as well as an expression of her femininity. She is a wise and educated person but,

unrestrained by any kind of law, she exercises absolute power or gives power to some people in a way that causes as much damage as benefit to the state. Byron distinguishes the monarchical and human, in this case feminine, sides of a ruler: “Then recollecting the whole Empress, nor / Forgetting quite the woman (which composed / At least three parts of this great whole). . .” (IX.58.1-3). Any ruler is a human first of all, which makes his or her subjectivity unavoidable, and her gender identity is also important part of this subjectivity. A monarch led by personal desires can make decisions that contradict the law and the principles of good government. Byron does not seem to trust in the goodness of human nature enough to accept the idea of a “good despot.”

Catherine is probably the best figure for the discussion of the political and personal sides in a ruler, because, in this case, gender as an embodiment of personal identity becomes a significant part of her perception by others, very much unlike the common image of a male ruler. Discussing Catherine, Byron shows how even a gifted and enlightened ruler can be guided by personal feelings and, in general, cannot avoid being a despot, which, apart from any good intentions, does not lead a country to make any progress toward liberties.

#### **4. The Russian Materials in *Don Juan* in the Context of Contemporary Historical Works and Travel Narratives**

Russian materials constitute a considerable part of Byron's *Don Juan*. They are present in the poem starting from some passages at the end of Canto VI and through the four following cantos. The late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries were a time of increased interest in Russia in Western Europe. The consideration of Russia's military success and growing political ambitions goes along with an interest to its culture, customs and manners. Byron concentrates on one big event, the siege and storming of Ismail, and a few important historical figures, mostly the Russian empress Catherine II. He chooses materials of international significance that let him explore, on the one hand, some universal problems and, on the other hand, the specifics of each changing location in Juan's odyssey.

Behind the issues described in the poem there is a vast background of knowledge about Russia that Byron could use. By his time, multiple historical works and travel narratives had formed the image of the Russian empire for Europeans. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Russia still remained a comparatively new power in the European political arena. Before the reign of Peter I it was not considered to be a Western culture by the West itself. The westernization of Russia complicated its identity. In observing this new empire, the researchers could see ongoing historical processes that had been accomplished in Europe. Particularly, the declared attempts of its traditionally despotic government to transplant some concepts of liberty and new principles of administration

were remarkable. In this respect, Russia was in a unique situation for historical research and prognosis. The comparison of *Don Juan* and several other books on Russia can be very productive for understanding Russia's identity as it was constructed by European authors and for achieving a comprehensive view of the historical context in which Byron writes his poem.

Since the beginning of Peter's reign in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century Russia sharply turned from its existence as an isolated state toward the acceptance of new cultural values and active participation in European politics. Catherine II claimed herself to be Peter's most consistent successor. The starting point in speaking about Russia in most works of the period is the observation of its recently begun and very rapid progress. This commonly acknowledged fact breeds many disagreements about the essence and consequences of such progress. The opinions range between opposites, from optimistic assumptions about the eventual success of this westernization to skeptical statements about the hopelessness of Russia's exertions on this path. Russia's identity in its relations with East and West also becomes a controversial issue. The discussion of the Russian empire goes in two main directions. Firstly, the authors look at its foreign affairs and interaction with other countries. Secondly, they observe its domestic state and its changes. I would like to analyze how several authors look at these aspects and which of them are closest to Byron in their views. In a passage already cited in Chapter 3 Byron expresses his opinion on both the international and domestic politics of Russia. His condemnation of Russia's militarism and wars leads him to an overall denial of its progress:

Our hero (and I trust, kind reader, yours)

Was left upon his way to the chief city

Of the immortal Peter's polished boors,  
Who still have shown themselves more brave than witty.  
I know its mighty empire now allures  
Much flattery, even Voltaire's, and that's a pity.  
For me, I deem an absolute autocrat  
Not a barbarian, but much worse than that. (IX. 23.2-8)

This is the only mention of Peter the Great in *Don Juan*. By addressing his name, Byron inscribes his narration in the context of discussions about the new empire, its history and the principles of its development. This passage engages polemically with those who praise the achievements of Russia. The quoted lines, to some extent, summarize the general idea about Russia in the poem. The old Russia, before Peter, is barbaric for Byron, as for all Europeans. The poet bases his judgments about contemporary Russia mainly on its foreign affairs, which leads him to a negative attitude about the country. In his view, Russia develops from being a despotic power on the remote periphery of Europe into a dangerously powerful tyrannical state. In the course of the Russian cantos, the poet tries to disclose the falseness of Russia's pretensions to progress by underlining the growth of its military ambitions and the persistence of its despotic system.

William Preston appears to have quite a similar opinion, expressed even more decidedly and directly. He begins the introduction to his tragedy about Ismail by observing that, "The last act of this protracted campaign did not redound to the honour of Russia; and evinces that whatever steps may have been taken by the present, or other, sovereigns of this empire to produce a forced civilization, both the monarch and the people of Russia are still barbarians" (3). Preston refers broadly to all the reforms

initiated from above and affirms the failure of such a project. He remains pro-British, however, even in his pacifism, while Byron condemns Russia's actions together with all forms of imperialism in general, including Britain's.

However, not all writers saw Russia as a new threat to peace in Europe. The anonymous author of *Observations and Reflections on a War with Russia* (1791) emphasizes Britain's support of the Turkish side in the Russo-Turkish wars. This pamphlet reveals the demagoguery used by the British government in order to justify its own imperial wars and military politics. The author of the pamphlet notes that the partition of Poland and the wars with Turkey were viewed by some European officials as evidence of Russia's ultimate aim of conquering other states. He opposes this point of view by attempting to prove that Russia enters wars just as much as other empires do. He points out at the inconstancy of all alliances for and against any country in Europe. The writer argues that there is no danger for Great Britain or any other country, "But the stale and chimerical idea of Russia's aiming at universal monarchy, is supremely ridiculous, and such a notion entertained by a minister, a satire on the good sense of the house" (*Observations*, 22). The pamphlet's author builds up quite an interesting argument in opposition to many other English commentators on Russia around the same time. He argues that the vast territories of the empire weaken it because it takes most of its power to keep the country united. The lengthy borders make defense an extremely hard task for Russia. "The fact is, Russia needs no greater enemy than her own conquests. She is hatching the embryos of future kingdoms; and her exertions both in a philosophical and a political point of view must ultimately tend to the welfare of the European republic, and to the happiness of mankind" (*Observations*, 23). The argument is curiously twisted,

moving from stating the lack of threat to giving credit to reforms in Russia. It is not clear why the author comes to such conclusions, yet the fact itself of his positive attitude to Russian politics complicates the general image of Russia being shaped in Great Britain during the period.

Remarkably, the Russian empire's militarism and victories in war were one of the indicators of its successful development and modernization and, at the same time, the main targets of the anti-Russian critique. The epoch of Russia's intense imperial wars, 1770-90s, was also marked by the growth of its economy and the rapid development of trade and international relations. Accordingly, from these years on we may observe an increased interest in Russia among English and French historians and travelers.

When Byron addresses Russian materials of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, he explores not only this country and its international politics but also general relations between militarism and the philosophy of the Enlightenment. The philosophic thought of the age celebrated peace as the absolute ideal, yet war remained the principal means in foreign affairs. Moreover, the rise of Russia resulted in its fighting more wars than before. This fact leads Byron to a critique of the Enlightenment, with its abstract theoretical concepts that were created for practical use yet did not seem to work well in reality. Besides imperial wars, Byron is also concerned about the relations between politics and morality. Enlightenment thinkers claimed barbarians to be more cruel and atrocious than so-called civilized people. The poet uses the example of the massacre at Ismail to dismantle this assumption. His moral critique is even more serious and disorienting than his political discussions.

In our own time, historians have also noted this conflict between the ideals of peace and the actual state of affairs: “. . . in the major states at least, the requirements of great power status and international rivalry, and in particular the resulting military and fiscal priorities, were likely to be incompatible with the kind of reforming programme envisaged by enlightened absolutism” (Scott 10). Thus, wars were hardly avoidable in maintaining the status of a strong power. This is probably what the anonymous author of *Observations* means too. Particularly, Russia became an empire by winning several wars and kept getting more respect in the political arena by pursuing the same kind of aggressive politics.

In *The Russian Empire: A Multiethnic History*, Andreas Kappeler defines the direction of Russian colonial interests over time. In the 16-17<sup>th</sup> centuries it was mainly eastward expansion that led to the conquest of Siberia. The movement to west began with the annexation of the territories of Ukraine and Belorussia in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. From the 17<sup>th</sup> century on westward expansion gained the principal importance. Russia was isolated from the Baltic and Black Seas, which seriously restrained its development and integration into Europe, with Europe’s up-to-date achievements in all spheres of life. The Northern War (1701-1721) with Sweden initiated by Peter the First was a crucial step in this direction resulting in Russia’s conquest of the Baltic coast region. New territorial gains brought about the growth in economics and extended the interaction with western European countries, including Great Britain. The Black Sea coast had no less strategic importance but the repeated attempts to retake the territory from Turkey, including those launched by Peter the First, failed. His heirs tried to accomplish this task and the strengthen Russia’s position in the Baltic region and eastern Europe. This political task

resulted in Russia's participation in the all-European Seven Years' War (1756-1763) in order to annex Poland. There were also several Russo-Turkish wars. The two of 1768-1774 and 1787-1791 took place in the reign of Catherine, who emphasized her continuity with Peter's politics. During the former war, the Russian empire accomplished the task of conquering the Black Sea coast; the latter war, when the battle for Ismail took place, was for keeping the conquered territories.

Russia's domestic affairs provoked no less discussion than its growing international importance. Its tradition of despotic rule and some recent reforms provoked various assumptions about the possibilities of its moving away from despotism. In *Don Juan*, Byron remains skeptical about this possibility. He seems to judge the state of Russia by analogies with western European historical realities. Basically, he remains within the common discourse on this topic that classifies Russia as a stable despotic power unlikely to acquire liberties and rights that are common for Europeans. It is interesting to compare this popular view with the opinions of authors who try to find a different approach and form an alternative view of the problem.

William Thomson concentrates on aspects that, Byron, for example, does not really mention. Some descriptions may give an impression of Russia's being a nation suppressed by inert government and wishing to liberate itself, in the manner of the French Revolution. Thomson shows evidence of quite the opposite situation. The unwillingness of the majority to embrace any change was the most difficult obstacle to reforms and modernization: "Everyone knows the reluctance with which the plans of Peter the Great for the civilization and improvement of the people were received by the nation." (Thomson 1: 25). The writer uses such phrases as "spirit of a nation" (1: 27) in order to

explain why reforms are dangerous and may easily make the situation worse. In the pre-modern state, according to Thomson, a nation perceives despotism as a natural principle of government. It was monarchy itself that introduced some notions of liberty in Russia. Moreover, any change of this sort often resulted in open discontent among people and even caused some unrest and revolts. Thomson reaches a positive but sober conclusion about Russia's perspectives: ". . . though it is very unlikely that Russia is to obtain a distinguished rank among nations, either for the mildness of its government or the civilization of its inhabitants; the nation is certainly in the progressive state of improvement, in both respects" (30-31).

A. Swinton is close to Thomson in his opinions concerning the development of Russia. He goes even further and tries to move away from the Eurocentric view of Russia. He uses Russian materials for comparison and criticism of Great Britain and other European countries:

We shall find that luxury has debauched every European nation; and that those who boast most of liberty, are loaded with taxes, occasioned by the wars of ambitious Ministers, supported by venal representation of venal electors! If this be the situation of the most powerful, and the freest nation upon earth, it will take away from the odious stigma of slave, and barbarian, so liberally given to a happy race of men (Swinton 423-24).

Swinton appears to be as satirical as Byron. In depicting the different countries, Byron draws parallels between them and England. Despotism in Russia, for example, becomes ground for criticizing British home policy. Swinton does the same and goes further in satirizing the refinement of European nations. Swinton appears to be even more well-disposed to Russia than Thomson. Both provide favorable accounts of the country. Yet while Thomson keeps making notes on the underdevelopment of Russia and explaining

its causes, Swinton refuses to criticize this aspect and turns to a condemnation of the West and the vices that civilization brings. He does not seem to judge the situation within the frame of the concept of “progress.”

Thomson is more articulate than Swinton in his observations concerning the development of Russia. After a brief analysis of Russian history, he comes to praise Russian government. He tries to show and prove that the Russian monarchy is self-improving, and this self-improvement is necessarily a slow process: “For the honour of royalty I must add, that the progress is entirely owing to the exertions of the sovereign power” (31). He shows how the monarch and the whole milieu have become milder since even Peter’s epoch, let alone the preceding times. He finds this evolution of the monarchy to be its positive characteristic: “Even in England, national improvements have seldom had their origin in a sovereign power” (31). Here we get the reverse of Byron’s view of the issue. Byron condemns the Russian monarchy and Catherine II, in particular, for hewing to absolutism and striving to strengthen it. Thomson praises the Russian monarchy for its deliberate movement towards milder and more liberal forms of governing, in spite of its own tradition and the expectations of its subjects. Unlike Byron, Thomson does not approve of any kind of revolutionary change. Thomson appears as an advocate of slow reforms. He is convinced that any abrupt change brings more disaster and harm than benefits to a country and so it is impossible to get rid of despotism at once. Byron, on the contrary, opposes any tolerant attitude toward despotism.

In fact, these opposite views exist, in some form, in historians’ works even at the present time. The figure of Catherine II remains no less controversial than in the age of her reign. Many arguments arise around the concept of enlightened despotism too. A

contemporary historian, Isabel de Madariaga, remarks that Catherine “. . . preferred to argue that the ruler of Russia must be absolute in view of the size of the country. She justified her argument by postulating the existence in Russia of fundamental laws and the acceptance of a degree of self-limitation in the ruler’s use of absolute power” (Madariaga 293). Madariaga aims to argue against some common notions that many historians share. She mentions several historians of the 1970-80s, such as D. Griffiths, with whom she does not agree (Madariaga 372). Another historian of Russia, Warren Bartlett Walsh, also speaks about the traditionally negative estimation of Catherine among twentieth-century historians, not from the same reasons that Byron employs, but from the same kind of reasons, the lack of true “liberalism” in her way of ruling (141-142).

We can see that even now it is hard to analyze the ratio of positive and negative consequences of Catherine’s ambiguous position. The complexity of her attempt to move in two opposite directions obviously caused much disagreement. Some writers concentrate on the general critique of absolutism in Russia, while others emphasize the benefits of its “self-limitation.” In general, many actions of the Russian government receive opposite responses depending on the angle of view. For example, the thesis about Russia’s improvement may be proved by the fact that it was moving away from cruel customs: “. . .Catherine put before the Russian public a condemnation of cruelty which had never been heard in Russia before, let alone from the throne” (Madariaga 293). Madariaga addresses such aspects as, for example, legal proceedings; Catherine was against using tortures and issued a law prohibiting that. Yet this passage ironically links to Byron’s accusation of Catherine’s being a cause of atrocious battles. De Madariaga and other historians with similar views underline Catherine’s mildness in the treatment of

her subjects and the domestic state affairs in general. Byron among many others puts the accent on her aggressive foreign policy. These emphases do not really contradict each other but may lead to different conclusions.

Thus, Byron's views on despotism in Russia belong to a tradition that continues among historians today. He does not aim to investigate all the realities of Russia in the poem but plays with a set of stereotypical ideas, employing them for satirical purposes. Apart from satire, many of the ideas and interpretations that he absorbs from multiple sources have remained significant long after his own time.

Apart from politics, the culture of Russia was the object of great interest. Eighteenth and nineteenth-century travelers and historians reviewed the arts, architecture and literature of the country. They had even greater interest in the everyday customs, manners, houses, and clothes, etc. of Russians. The detailed descriptions in many narratives are apparently framed as curious and entertaining information. Moreover, the historians often use the depiction of customs to provide the background for explanations of certain events. As a rule, the Russian way of life appeared exotic to travelers from the West. On the other hand, they noticed huge Western, mostly French, influences in the life of noble Russians. Such a peculiar mixture of familiar Western and authentic Russian elements also attracted much curiosity from the travelers and received different interpretations.

Many Russian customs are depicted as the demonstration of the still barbaric state of the people. For example, William Coxe is disappointed about the small degree of westernization in Russia:

For though a nation, when compared with itself at a former period, may have made rapid progress towards improvement, even when the degree of

improvement, if put in competition with the refinements of other nations, seems scarcely to exist; yet, as exaggerated accounts which I had heard and read of the great civilization diffused throughout the whole empire, made me expect a more polished state of manners than I found, I must own I was astonished at the barbarism in which the bulk of the people still continue (Coxe 2: 317-18).

This passage demonstrates very well the presupposition that, actually, all the writers mentioned above share. They find it quite natural that Russian nobility tries to adjust itself to Western customs, i.e. progress is supposed to go on not only in politics but also in the minor details of everyday life. Since the age of Peter the First, Russian high society aimed very consistently to copy the outward features of European-ness such as clothes, manners, cuisine, etc. -- in fact, the entire style of living. The foreigners praise the exertions of Russian nobility but cannot help noticing the superficiality and, sometimes, strangeness of this process.

These observations lead such authors as Coxe to quite a pessimistic conclusion. He makes an important remark about the growing distinction between the social classes in Russia where only the noble class was influenced by westernization: "I am ready to allow that the principal nobles are perfectly civilized . . . as those of other European countries. But there is a wide difference between polishing a nation, and polishing a few individuals" (Coxe 2: 318). The Western influence aggravated social inequality in Russia, even though egalitarian ideals were the theoretical basis of the change. Just as the despotism of the government demonstrates the lack of progress and the ignorance of majority, so keeping to ancient, "barbaric," customs indicates the slowness of the civilizing process, in the logic of Coxe's judgments.

The discussion of inward and outward aspects appears with more clarity in Swinton's accounts from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he

does not praise the westernized part of Russian society. He speaks about the hope for further progress but is almost fascinated with the more “savage” state of the society: “Let them first be made capable of what we call civilized society, or let them remain as they are, less luxurious, less vicious, and, if you will, less polished and free than we are” (Swinton, 425). This is a very rare opinion among the contemporary travelers’ accounts. It may partly be explained by the influence of Rousseau and utopian notions of the “golden age.” However, Russia was already far from that primal freedom. Swinton’s statements just add complexity to the patterns of discussion around Russia.

Byron mostly speaks about the politics of the Russian empire and pays little attention to customs or manners. However, several examples of this kind help him to create a more holistic image of Russia and outline the specifics of the country just as he shows the Mediterranean locations in the previous cantos. In the description of Juan’s success at Catherine’s royal court, the poet makes a general remark: “Don Juan grew a very polished Russian, / How we won’t mention, *why* we need not say” (X.21.1-2). The poet leaves out any details about Juan’s adjustment to Russian culture. It is interesting how Byron plays with the meaning of the word “polished.” According to the other texts that I analyze, being “polished” is only the goal and not the actual state of the Russian people. Byron’s usage challenges the confident claims of Russian nobility and monarchy to be “civilized” and reinforces the poet’s irony about these claims.

We can find only a few references to the customs of Russia in *Don Juan*. Byron occasionally throws in “exotic” words such as “kibitka,” (IX.30.1) a type of coach, or “versts” (VII.9.7), a Russian measure of distance. In the last cantos, located in Great Britain, some elements of “Russian” imagery appear a few times. At one point, the poet

compares shifts in ladies feelings to “. . . Russians rushing from hot baths to snows” (XII.73.5). This is a meager witness of Byron’s attention to Russian “exotics.” The descriptions of baths are common in many narratives. Another example of the Russian background is the note about Juan’s life, “In this gay clime of bearskins black and furry. . .” (X.26.3). Fur and bears add to the line of commonplace images that Byron uses. The phrase “gay clime” may be ironic or refer to the travelers’ vivid descriptions of the popular amusements in Russia during winter, such as this: “They look forward to the cold season as a season of rest and mirth: covered with furs, and seated in his sledge, none is so happy as a Russian. . .” (Thomson 2: 379). The theme of climate deserves more attention. Byron often speaks about “climes” at the beginning of *Don Juan*. He uses the common notion that a warm climate makes people more open, lively and passionate. For example, he explains the strictness of Muslims in regard to their women by as reflecting the need for control in the hot climate (V.157). By contrast, he makes a note about the North, where cold “. . . makes our snow less pure than our morality” (V.157.6). The veiled sarcasm of this line sounds like a subversion of the notions about climate, but Byron does not develop this juxtaposition further. Most travelers to Russia do not address this issue either. In any case, the temper and character of the country’s inhabitants is not explained by the cold climate. There are no developed comparisons of southern and northern lands in these texts.

Byron also mentions the religion of Russia. At one point, Juan’s mother in a letter “Warned him against Greek worship, which looks odd / To Catholic eyes. . .” (X. 32.3-4). The Orthodox Church drew the attention of travelers. Its singularity was in its being a Christian church and, at the same time, very different from anything Europeans were

accustomed to in religion. Some travelers speak about the pompous and luxurious Orthodox services. Byron's word "odd" describes well the general impression of Europeans. For instance, Thomson objects that "The forms of religious duties should be few and simple, and they will then be sincere. Ceremony has ever been enemy to sincerity" (403). The European authors also speak about how ancient the Russian service is and notice some inconsistency in its practice. In general, they understand the church as an unreformed institution, like many other aspects of life in Russia. However, this side of life is usually simply described to show its authenticity and without extensive judgments.

The "Russian cantos" in *Don Juan* exist within the vast context of cumulative knowledge about Russia that comes from travelers and historians. The poet chooses a fragmentary way of introducing this background. He touches many aspects concerning life in the country but mostly concentrates on its politics and significance in the international arena. As a whole, those who write about Russia's foreign affairs and imperialism offer more critique than those who are concerned with witnessing life inside the country. Byron belongs to the former group. The poet covers a huge amount of material in his mock epic, from a few examples of Russian customs to the discussion of Russia's connections with Enlightenment and imperialism. Further, he makes Russia a representative in speaking about some universal ideas such as politics and ideals of freedom.

## 5. Conclusion

Addressing Russian materials on Cantos VII-X lets Byron discuss many topics that are important in the context of the whole of *Don Juan*. He describes Russia as a rapidly growing military power with a despotic government and criticizes these political issues not only as applied to Russia but also in general. In the Russian cantos many historical facts and characters are present, and the poet speaks about them in the context of historians' accounts and travel narratives about Russia. The analysis of several sources lets us see a pattern of the contradictory opinions about Russia uttered in authors of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

In connection with Russia, Byron introduces the theme of war to his poem, which corresponds with its claimed epic genre. His hero, Juan, participates in one of the biggest battles of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the taking of Turkish fortress Ismail by the Russian army. This battle was also known for its huge losses and the atrocities committed by the Russian army. The battle was the culmination of a war that reflected very tough political situation, when Russia was opposed to almost all of the powerful European states. The poet is negative about the Russian empire's ambitions here. In his opinion, the intense and frequent imperial wars and, especially, the atrocities that happened at Ismail discredit all claims about Russia's progress and cultural improvement. We can find the same opinion in William Preston's tragedy about Ismail. Byron uses the historian's work and the official military reports as a background and satirizes them for their misrepresentations of

the wars. The poet underlines the tragedy of the murder and bloodshed in the wars as much as the official sources tend to overlook it. At certain points, the critique of imperialism develops into a universal anti-war critique. Byron also explores the psychology of war and military people. He is interested in the personality of Russian commander Suvorov. The poet shows him training his soldiers and speaking in a terse way to Johnson and Juan. Suvorov is a talented commander who is devoted to his mission and popular among the army men, but he has to be inhumane and permit cruelty in order to succeed. At the same time, he is only the executor of the imperial will and has to submit to Catherine's favorite Potemkin. The political and military power of this favorite receives a harsh critique from Byron. With his references to the Russian empress and the people from her circle in Cantos VII-VII, Byron starts his discussion of despotism in Russia, which he develops in the following parts of the poem.

Catherine II is the central character in Cantos IX and X. Byron is interested in her due to her position as a female monarch and despotic ruler who had the reputation of being enlightened. The theory of enlightened despotism was shaped during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. According to ideas formulated by some authors, such as Le Mercier, a monarch who possesses absolute power can commit to self-limitation and initiate reforms from above that would bring his or her subjects more liberties and improve their lives. Byron condemns the concept of enlightened despotism and does not trust in the compatibility of absolute power and liberty. This position develops into Byron's critique of the Enlightenment itself, because this system of philosophical ideas is initially devoted to freedom and equality and yet, as it turns out, its apologists can justify the absolute power of a monarch in the name of progress. Byron finds the evidence for his skepticism in

Catherine II, whose reign, in his view, demonstrates the strength and persistence of despotic rule.

In the image of Catherine created in the poem, her gender identity is an important aspect. Byron uses information and imagery from the visual political satires that were widely popular in Great Britain in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, especially during the time of the said Russo-Turkish war. Catherine's position as an ambitious ruler resulted in the cartoonists' giving her some masculine features. The cartoons comically portray Catherine's politics and make many jokes about her sexuality. These satires place attention on her body, which represents her empire. Byron explores Catherine's femininity through the plot line of the love affair between Catherine and Juan, who becomes her official favorite. This plot reflects the usual practice of the empress, whose lovers gained wealth and, sometimes, big power. At certain point, the poet puts aside Catherine's monarchical identity and presents her only through her female aspect, as a woman and an embodiment of universal femininity. Byron also makes connections between her gender and her politics. While the poet is negative about the political impact of Catherine's affairs and the power of her favorites, he is not very critical about her sexuality on its own, seeing it as the expression of her gender.

By Byron's time, many historical accounts had already formed a tradition of portraying Russia and its image for Western readers. The situation in the empire provoked many arguments about its attempts to westernize and become equal to the most important European powers. In his discussion of Russia's politics and government, Byron is among those who are not well-disposed to Russia. Some accounts, such as the one by William Thomson, form a more favorable view of Russia based on research into its

history that demonstrates the state's gradual improvement, which continued in Catherine's reign. Byron does not appear to be interested in going into such a detailed analysis. For example, he speaks very little about serfdom in Russia and does not go beyond familiar imagery in his sparse notes about Russian culture and customs. This approach results in Byron's critique of Russia being rather superficial. He is more concerned about the outside image and importance of the newly risen empire, in its foreign politics and influence on Europe. He does not construct the image of Russia as it is, but discusses this country in connection with his interest in militarism and despotism in general for which Russia provides unique materials that help Byron to uncover the complexity of these issues and the complexity of his own attitudes to them.

Appendix



Figure 1. The Christian Amazon, With Her Invincible Target, 1787





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