

Julia Bacskai-Atkari:

THE LAY WITHIN THE LAY

Scott, Byron, and the Romantic Verse Narrative

It is almost a commonplace that Sir Walter Scott influenced Lord Byron's narrative poetry to a great extent and that both were key figures in the history of English romantic verse narrative; however, little has been said about how the connection can be pointed out in the texts and how both authors played a central role in establishing an intricate narrative structure, ultimately also contributing to the de-establishment of the verse narrative as such.

Hermann Fischer describes the period between 1790 and 1830 as preoccupied with the question of the epic and how it could be revived.¹ Of course, it was already clear from the 18th-century examples that reviving the genre with all of its conventions would have been rather out-dated. Still, one of the central questions was whether there could exist something that would equal the epic in terms of its status but would suit modern requirements with respect to its form. In other words, the power and the influence of the epic was to be preserved but melted into a more flexible form that reflected the modern age, as the old form did that of a previous one.

This gave rise to the romantic verse narrative: a loosely defined genre that covers all longer texts that were written in verse (without further specification of the form) that were to some extent narrative and can be associated with romanticism. Though Fischer's term might not seem to be of much use at first, given that it can cover almost anything, a closer look at the period will immediately reveal that, in spite of all the differences, the underlying aspiration described above can be traced in most of these works. The abundance of narrative poems and the constant experimenting with new forms were the natural consequences. Experimenting involved the reinterpretation of the epic and the revival of older genres, most prominently the ballad and the romance.

Narrative poetry was thus fairly divergent in the period, there being several sporadic experiments only loosely connected to one another. Yet, with the appearance of Scott's romances divergence was replaced by convergence: Scott started to be imitated and considered as an example – his overwhelming success² not ceasing until the appearance of

¹ Hermann Fischer, *Romantic Verse Narrative: The History of a Genre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

² See also See Michael Alexander, *Medievalism: The Middle Ages in Modern England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 30–33.

Byron, who came to be more popular in terms of verse narratives.³ While Scott turned to the more promising form of the novel, Byron not only brought the romantic verse narrative to its maximum (and became an example to be imitated) but he also, as it were, destroyed it by bringing it to its extremes.⁴

To gain a clearer picture of their relation, I will compare the texts of Scott's *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* and Byron's *Don Juan*, the former being the first overwhelming success of Scott in the genre and the latter being the most provocative instance thereof. My aim here is not to investigate the reasons for the popularity of either author but rather to examine the differences between their narratives, and to point out how Scott served as a forerunner of Byron and how Byron's work in turn undermined the structures still respected by Scott. In other words, the questions are: what did Scott do that Byron would also do – and what did Byron do that Scott would never have done?

1. The last minstrel and the first person

The first question to be examined is the status of the narrator(s): the personality and the overall presence thereof determines the entire narrative structure, besides having crucial impact on the treatment of literary norms and the reading process.

In *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, one is immediately faced with the rather intricate – though not unprecedented – structure of having two narrators: the one narrating the frame story, in which there is the other one, the last minstrel, narrating the main story.

The role and the characteristics of the external narrator are quite different from those of the minstrel: whereas the latter is shown both by the external narrator's reflections and by self-reflection, there is practically no information available about the former. The external narrator clearly has the function of providing details about the minstrel and his song but is far from stepping forward as a person himself: his presence is merely grammatical.

The narrator of the embedded story, however, does occasionally become visible. The most common instance is when the minstrel's poetic *I* is included in the text, as a thinking

³ Fischer, p. 93. On the popularity of the two authors, see also Andrew Nicholson, "Byron and the 'Ariosto of the North'" in *English Romanticism and the Celtic World*, eds. Gerard Carruthers and Alan Rawes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 130–150, p. 130.

⁴ See also Fischer, 148.

agent expressing his thoughts.⁵ Such cases do not in themselves result in an intricate or playful narrative structure but they definitely make the text more personal. Especially because sometimes the minstrel ventures to say even more, reflecting on his own narrative competence:

*I cannot tell how the truth may be;
I say the tale as 'twas said to me.* (II. 22)

The minstrel's presence is rather strong at this point: in the story, Deloraine and the monk, having uncovered a tomb, hear strange voices in the dark monastery. There is a fair amount of undecidedness as to what the cause of these voices can be, and the reader's uncertainty will only increase when the narrator himself calls attention to the fact that there is – and will be – an information gap, maintained (if not created) by himself. On the other hand, he will also inform the readers about the fact that the entire event was told him by someone else, further referring to his limited competence as he is neither an inventor nor a witness of the story. Again, his admittance of certain limits in fact stresses an information gap: the inaccessibility of certain data for the reader – both from the main story and from the frame story (i.e. how the minstrel came to know about the tale and what he actually changes about it).

The lack of knowledge is present more forcefully as well; for instance, the minstrel does not know who struck the elf on the head:

*Now, if you ask who gave the stroke,
I cannot tell, so mot I thrive;
It was not given by man alive.* (III. 10.)

The action itself comes as a *deus ex machina* device into the plot, unexpectedly and is left unexplained. The question arises whether it is so because of the limited competence of the narrator or because he simply chooses not to reveal an important piece of information. The former raises the question how a narrator not knowing the source of the stroke can know about the circumstances of the stroke at all; the latter suggests that the minstrel either decides to conceal something in order to make his tale more interesting by revealing things later or he makes an arbitrary decision of not narrating everything his listeners may be interested in.

⁵ See e.g. Canto I, stanza 29; Canto II, stanza 16; Canto III, stanzas 3, 15, 22 and 29; Canto IV, stanza 13; Canto VI, stanza 5. I quote the following edition of *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*: Sir Walter Scott, *The Poetical Works*, ed. James Logie Robertson (London: Oxford University Press, 1931).

⁶ See also Canto V, stanza 13.

The story thus sometimes might seem to be independent from the minstrel's personality, his competence being limited to how he narrates it – whereas at other times he turns out to be the constructor as well, who is not only responsible for the extradiegetic level but also for the diegesis: he is the selector of what is to be narrated:

*Alas! fair dames, your hopes are vain!
My harp has lost the enchanting strain;
Its lightness would my age reprove:
My hairs are grey, my limbs are old,
My heart is dead, my veins are cold:
I may not, must not, sing of love.* (II. 30)

The topic of love is thus (temporarily) excluded by the minstrel for personal concerns: he deems himself too old for narrating such matters.⁷ Canto II almost ends in a similar way: he becomes tired and interrupts his tale, but then he drinks some wine, and he quickly regains his powers and, more importantly, his passionate will to talk about love – and he begins Canto III as follows:

*And said I that my limbs were old,
And said I that my blood was cold,
And that my kindly fire was fled,
And my poor wither'd heart was dead,
And that I might not sing of love? –
How could I to the dearest theme,
That ever warm'd a minstrel's dream,
So foul, so false a recreant prove!
How could I name love's very name,
Nor wake my heart to notes of flame!*

The change in his attitude towards the topic in question is a direct result of something that happens to him as a person in the frame narrative: his position as an outsider merely narrating the story is thus questioned, since a great deal of personality is overtly involved here (and may be so elsewhere too).⁸ This is even stronger when, at the end of Canto III, the listeners ask the minstrel whether he had any family and he begins to remember his dead son, which is reflected in his actual song at the beginning of Canto IV (stanzas 1–2).⁹ The significance of

⁷ For similar examples, see Canto V, stanzas 4–6; Canto VI, stanzas 4 and 26.

⁸ For a similar examples, see also Canto IV, stanzas 34–35; Canto V, stanzas 2–3.

⁹ There is a partly similar, though naturally not as dramatic example as this, at the beginning of Canto VI (stanzas 1–2) in connection with Caledonia.

this deeply personal outburst becomes obvious when considering how much he otherwise represses his own personal concerns – though not altogether, as was demonstrated above.

On the other hand, the minstrel's truly personal references, which do result in a shift from the main story, are invariably placed either at the beginning or at the end of the cantos: that is, as far as the main story is concerned, these personal references appear in marginal positions and thus never actually interrupt the narrative.

The division of the text into cantos is determined solely by the minstrel; or, more precisely, the ability of the narrator of the frame text to insert a division. What happens in each case is that the minstrel becomes tired during the act of narration and needs to take some rest; interruption could theoretically be arbitrary but what happens is rather that the minstrel does not separate events forming a closer logical unit and continues his story as soon as possible – therefore his listeners will be able to receive his text as a whole. The narrator of the frame story only reinforces these division lines but likewise does not venture to impose any other restrictions on the structure.

Now it seems that although *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* does have an intricate narrative structure, certain rules seem to be unquestioned, if not unquestionable. Neither of the narrators attempts to invade the narrated story by his personality, and even if the minstrel becomes visible in a number of ways, these instances never undermine the central status of the narrated story and do not cause the narrator to be dominant, both in terms of his relation to the story and to his listeners.

The importance of all this becomes obvious when comparing Scott's work with Byron's *Don Juan*, with its one narrator and his array of narrative games.¹⁰ First of all, the narrator's presence is emphatic throughout the whole text and his figure is at least as much in the focus as Don Juan himself. This is demonstrated by the fact that at the very beginning of Canto I, the narrator still speculates about who the hero of his text will be:

*I want a hero, an uncommon want,
When every year and month sends forth a new one,
Till after cloying the gazettes with cant,
The age discovers he is not the true one.
Of such as these I should not care to vaunt;
I'll therefore take our ancient friend Don Juan.*

¹⁰ For a more detailed analysis see Julia Bacskai-Atkari, "The Ironic Hero: Narration in Lord Byron's *Don Juan*," *Első Század* 1 (2008), pp. 45–92.

*We all have seen him in the pantomime
Sent to the devil somewhat ere his time.*¹¹

The basic relationship between the narrator and his hero is that the narrator *needs* a hero, any hero, as an excuse for speaking. Not surprisingly, then, his poetic *I* will be dominant: he does not *serve* as the narrator of a story, as Scott's narrators did, but it is rather the story that creates an opportunity for him to talk.¹² In this way, Don Juan will necessarily be subsidiary to the narrator. To what extent his story is interesting for the reader at all is also questionable inasmuch as the narrator himself stresses that it is something well-known, and so the reason why one should read the text is perhaps not really *what* is to be told but rather *how* it is told.

The foregrounding of the narrator also means that he writes about his personal concerns and opinions as well:

*But now at thirty years my hair is grey
(I wonder what it will be like at forty?
I thought of a peruke the other day) –
My heart is not much greener; and, in short, I
Have squander'd my whole summer while't was May,
And feel no more the spirit to retort; I
Have spent my life, both interest and principal,
And deem not, what I deem'd, my soul invincible.* (I. 213)

Examples like this would be numerous but the one given here is especially significant when compared to Scott's minstrel, who also talks about his aging. However, while the latter does so only to provide an excuse for evading a certain topic, Byron's narrator makes it a central issue: he has already digressed from the story and so placed his personal reflections in the forefront.

The shift of focus away from the story and the hero already marks a crucial change in the development of the romantic verse narrative but there are other questions involved. The narrator clearly appears as the chief constructor of the text and he is free to choose what he says and how. This is demonstrated in Canto I when he renounces the *in medias res* beginning and states the following:

*That is the usual method, but not mine;
My way is to begin with the beginning.*

¹¹ i quote from the following edition of *Don Juan*: Lord George Gordon Byron, *Don Juan*, ed. Truman Guy Steffan, Esther Steffan and Willis Winslow Pratt (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2004).

¹² On Byron's poetic *I*, see also András Horn, *Byron's "Don Juan" and the Eighteenth-Century English Novel* (Winterthur: Buchdruckerei Geschwister Ziegler & Co., 1962), p. 28.

*The regularity of my design
 Forbids all wandering as the worst of sinning,
 And therefore I shall open with a line
 (Although it cost me half an hour in spinning)
 Narrating somewhat of Don Juan's father
 And also of his mother, if you'd rather.* (I. 7)

Undoubtedly, the centrality and the ironic voice of this narrator are very much unlike Scott's narrators. Of course, this does not mean that the narrator would be omniscient; when he claims not to know something, he is unconcerned:

*This licence is to hope the reader will
 Suppose from June the sixth (the fatal day,
 Without whose epoch my poetic skill
 For want of facts would all be thrown away),
 But keeping Julia and Don Juan still
 In sight, that several months have passed. We'll say
 'Twas in November, but I'm not so sure
 About the day; the era's more obscure.*¹³ (I. 121)

This nonchalant attitude is unlike the minstrel's admittance of his own limits: here the credibility of the narrator and the narrated story are questioned by the narrator's gesture, whereas this was so only to a lesser degree in the case of the minstrel. On the other hand, the narrator's power is again reinforced: if he does not know the exact date or month, he will *say it was in November*, stressing the creative aspect of writing.

Information may also be left out of the text consciously in the sense that the narrator does not even pretend that he would not know the answer:

*But to our tale. The Donna Inez sent
 Her son to Cadiz only to embark;
 To stay there had not answered her intent.
 But why? We leave the reader in the dark.* (II. 8)

Such gestures, showing the superiority of the narrator over his reader, are unimaginable for Scott's minstrel: what the minstrel knows, deems important and can narrate, he will include in his text. This of course implies that he cannot have excessive digression, whereas Byron's narrator certainly can:

¹³ A similar instance can be found in Canto I, stanza 134.

*But let me to my story. I must own,
 If I have any fault, it is digression,
 Leaving my people to proceed alone.
 While I soliloquize beyond expression.
 But these are my addresses from the throne,
 Which put off business to the ensuing session.
 Forgetting each omission is a loss to
 The world, not quite so great as Ariosto.* (III. 96)

Each digression of the narrator thus means that part of the story remains un-narrated.¹⁴ The narrator quite frequently reflects on his tendency to digress, and he almost always digresses for a second, sometimes even for a third time. The above quotation shows a particularly ironic example of this, since the narrator, after admitting digression, begins to digress on digression itself. More importantly, he does so when the father of Don Juan's lover could any time endanger the lovers' lives.¹⁵ If this were not enough, the narrator decides that the canto is too long anyway and so ends it at a crucial point of the story:

*I feel this tediousness will never do;
 'Tis being too epic, and I must cut down
 (In copying) this long canto into two.
 They'll never find it out, unless I own
 The fact, excepting some experienced few,
 And then as an improvement 'twill be shown.* (III. 111)

This shows that the length of the individual cantos is defined solely by the narrator, probably (though not necessarily) taking the readers' interest into consideration as well, i.e. in that he does not wish to have too long units.¹⁶ The point to stop at is not a logical division but a radical cut and the narrator's gesture is therefore arbitrary. Even if he will not do so with all the cantos, it is fairly obvious that he *might* do so any time.

The other crucial problem with the narrator's game is that he thus further digresses away from the story: instead of telling about the events in the diegesis, he starts to discuss

¹⁴ The narrator chooses various parts of the story to be left un-narrated in a rather arbitrary way, thus it is not quite the case of filling in 'dead periods' of the story. See Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London–New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 93.

¹⁵ Cf. Anne Barton, "Don Juan Reconsidered: The Haidée Episode", in *Byron*, ed. Jane Stabler (London: Longman, 1998), 194–203, p. 195. Similar digressions can be found throughout the text, notably in Canto VIII (see stanzas 48–52 for instance) or in Canto XVI (stanzas 77–78). Such delaying digressions are present in previous works as well, notably in Fielding. See Rimmon-Kenan, pp. 125–126.

¹⁶ The narrator ends Canto IV too because of its alleged lengthiness.

question closely related either to the extradiegetic level, or to the diegetic one.¹⁷ Whereas for the minstrel there was a natural flow of storytelling, which nevertheless could be interrupted if necessary, the narrator of *Don Juan* clearly sees the inevitability of dividing his work into cantos and yet feels it difficult to do so, as demonstrated by the opening of Canto IV:¹⁸

*Nothing so difficult as a beginning
In poesy, unless perhaps the end;
For oftentimes when Pegasus seems winning
The race, he sprains a wing and down we tend,
Like Lucifer when hurled from heaven for sinning.*

Composition, then, is not something subsidiary to storytelling and dependent on external factors, but a central question in its own right, so much so that it occasionally delays the act of storytelling.

The extent to which narrators are developed in Scott and Byron is quite different. Byron's dominant narrator is deconstructing certain patterns, both in terms of the story and in terms of his relation to the readers. The narrator of *Don Juan* is an overwhelming first person, not only in the sense that he has a forceful grammatical presence throughout the text but also in that everything and everybody is subsidiary to him. By contrast, the last minstrel is not exactly an *I* but rather a *minstrel*, i.e. someone having a defined function: by conforming to the rules associated with his role, there are some ways for him to add his personality to the text. However, he is interesting only as a minstrel, his *differentia specifica* only being that he happens to be the last one.

2. Calls for the epic

Of course, all this largely has to do with how the two works relate to the epic tradition: being verse narratives of English Romanticism, it is inevitable that they somehow position themselves against that tradition, even if neither claims itself to be an epic "proper".

As for *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, it is clearly not an epic but a romance, and if anything else, Scott here also follows and, especially in terms of metre, overwrites the ballad

¹⁷ On the difference between the individual levels, see Rimmon-Kenan, p. 91.

¹⁸ The difference is to a large extent due to the fact the minstrel is an oral poet, whereas the writer of *Don Juan* positions himself as a writer.

tradition.¹⁹ However, there are some common points between the epic tradition and *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*.²⁰

The very structure of having a narrator embedded in the narrative of another can be found already in Homer. The narrator of the frame story sympathises with the minstrel, but the minstrel is not only interesting for him as an individual but more importantly as the enigmatic figure of the last minstrel: the only one who has the ability and the knowledge to talk about certain events. On the other hand, of course, the embedding pattern also makes it possible for him to partly distance himself from the text produced by the minstrel, which is in many ways anachronistic.²¹

The historical and social concerns of the external narrator are met by the minstrel also in terms of the embedded story he tells. It is about the historical past of the community and his listeners are intent on hearing about its heroism. The minstrel fulfils his role as he concentrates on the narrated story. Furthermore, he does not question the importance of the story and the characters as such, nor does he undermine the validity of his own words. The minstrel, and especially the last one, is a prominent person, being credible and serving as a link between the present and the past. Since one of the major functions of poetry – according to the text – is the remembrance and the recording of the past,²² it is not a surprise that the poet should be central, the only one who is able to remember aptly:

*Not that, in sooth, o'er mortal urn
Those things inanimate can mourn;
But that the stream, the wood, the gale,
Is vocal with the plaintive wail
Of those, who, else forgotten long,
Liv'd in the poet's faithful song,
And, with the poet's parting breath,
Whose memory feels a second death.* (V. 2)

Though itself not an epic, *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* does not really go against the fundamental norms thereof. The individual epic conventions are clearly not kept but the problem of keeping them is not raised either: the text does not pose the question whether or not it should be regarded as an epic.

¹⁹ See Fischer, pp. 88–92.

²⁰ See also Nicholson, 137–138.

²¹ See Richard Cronin, *The Politics of Romantic Poetry: In Search of the Pure Commonwealth* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2000), pp. 97–98. Cf. Alexander, pp. 30–33, 39–42.

²² Nicholson also describes this as something characteristic of the epic. Nicholson, 137–138

In the case of *Don Juan*, however, we find exactly the opposite. Many characteristics of Byron's text stem from the heroi-comical epics and it is thus almost a necessity for him to refer to the epic.²³

*My poem is epic and is meant to be
Divided in twelve books, each containing,
With love and war, a heavy gale at sea,
A list of ships and captains and kings reigning,
New characters; the episodes are three.
A panoramic view of hell's in training,
After the style of Virgil and Homer,
So that my name of epic's no misnomer.* (I. 200)

Of course, even his intentions are somewhat dubious, not to mention the fact how much they are not met by the actual text. Yet, the epic conventions are discussed and ironically sometimes also honoured: but the conclusion is basically that the present work is superior to traditional epic poetry.

*There's only one slight difference between
Me and my epic brethren gone before,
And here the advantage is my own, I ween
(Not that I have not several merits more,
But this will more peculiarly be seen).
They so embellish that 'tis quite a bore
Their labyrinth of fables to thread through,
Whereas this story's actually true.* (I. 202)

The absence of the supernatural, thus, is supposed to make *Don Juan* superior to the epic tradition. In *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, however, most determining factors are supernatural.²⁴ *Don Juan*, then, mocks not only the epic tradition but it also overwrites Scott's romantic verse narrative. This is true irrespective of the minstrel's claim for a level of realism.

*I know right well, that, in their lay,
Full many minstrels sing and say,
Such combat should be made on horse,
On foaming steed, in full career,*

²³ See Claude Rawson, "Byron Augustan: Mutations of the Mock-Heroic in *Don Juan* and Shelley's *Peter Bell the Third*," in *Byron: Augustan and Romantic*, ed. Andrew Rutherford (London: Macmillan, 1990), 82–116, pp. 83–85.

²⁴ See also Alexander, pp. 39–40. Cf. Michael Gamer, "Gothic Fictions and the Romantic Writing in Britain," in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. Jerrold E. Hogle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 85–104, pp. 94–95. See also Michael Gamer, *Romanticism and the Gothic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 180–186.

*With brand to aid, when as the spear
 Should shiver in the course:
 But he, the jovial Harper, taught
 Me, yet a youth, how it was fought,
 In guise which now I say;
 He knew each ordinance and clause
 Of Black Lord Archibald's battle-laws,
 In the old Douglas' day.
 He brook'd not, he, that scoffing tongue
 Should tax his minstrelsy with wrong,
 Or call his song untrue:
 For this, when they the goblet plied,
 And such rude taunt had chaf'd his pride,
 The Bard of Reull he slew.*
(IV. 14)

However, it seems that historical faithfulness and remembrance of the past can be important without the necessity of avoiding supernatural powers: the two, at least for Scott, can go together.

The major problem for *Don Juan* as an epic is of course its topic and how the narrator relates to it. Don Juan is not exactly a suitable hero to make an epic, especially as his deeds given in Byron's work are also far from being heroic. The narrator does not try to convince the readers of the opposite by applying a whole array of heroic conventions and conforming to the epic rules – even ironically, as a mock-heroic would do; rather, he treats Don Juan as a younger person who is less experienced and knowledgeable than himself, and as *his* hero who has a function in *his* text.

Not only the hero, the narrator is just as problematic. Who exactly is he, apart from being the poet, which he very strongly asserts? Not that this could not theoretically be asked in connection with Scott's external narrator too; but the person thereof is concealed by the story he narrates and therefore his identity does not appear as a problem posed by the text itself, whereas in the case of *Don Juan*, the narrator, as it were, conceals the story by his person, about which we know only what he himself says, there being no external narrator. The narrator is seen as an individualistic poet who, unlike the minstrel, is probably not a central figure within a community, and he does not act as a respectful member thereof.

As far as the relationship of the romantic verse narrative and the epic is concerned, *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* is clearly closer to the aim that there should be something that can replace the epic in the period, whereas *Don Juan*, by deconstructing the epic, rather denies that possibility.

3. Readers and listeners

Whether the individual texts may function as the epic (probably) did largely depends on the relationship between the narrator and his audience, the way of addressing the audience being at least as determining as the choice of the topic or the status of the narrator. In the *Lay of the Last Minstrel*, the embedding structure allows the minstrel to be seen as a poet in the probably most authentic – and by now anachronistic – function of the role, one that is reminiscent of what one finds in the epics: the poet recites the poem, improvising large parts of the text, he talks to an audience that he does not know but to which he is connected by shared cultural patterns, and he talks about events of the historical past. There is an interesting mirroring of this within the text, when the minstrels go to Branksome Hall and thus the narrator–minstrel has the chance to reflect upon such situations himself.

Occasionally, he does address his audience, but in most cases not more than necessary for marking the existing connection to the listeners.²⁵ Very often the experience is shared, in that the narrator presupposes that the listeners have the same feelings about certain events. Consider:

*I would you had been there, to see
How the light broke forth so gloriously,
Stream'd upward to the chancel roof,
And through the galleries far aloof!* (II. 16)²⁶

The immediacy of communication, his direct contact with his listeners allows him to establish a relationship in which such gestures come naturally and which enables a shared experience. This is even stronger in Canto IV, where the minstrel makes an explanatory digression on how the Lady's (his hostess's) predecessors won Eskdale (from stanza 10 onwards):

*Hearken, Ladye, to the tale,
How thy sires won fair Eskdale.*

Again, this is an instance of improvising, at least as much as this “tale” is not a necessary part of the lay but inserted into it because of the present audience. Such instances are not too frequent but once the minstrel addresses the maids:

Needs not these lovers' joys to tell:

²⁵ See Canto II, stanzas 1 and 16; Canto III, stanza 33; Canto V, stanza 1.

²⁶ For similar examples, see Canto III, stanza 15; Canto V, stanza 5 (here the minstrel addresses the hostess directly).

One day, fair maids, you'll know them well. (V. 27)

At other times he refers to the readers' probable expectations:

*And now, fair dames, methinks I see
 You listen to my minstrelsy;
 Your waving locks ye backward throw,
 And sidelong bend your necks of snow;
 Ye ween to hear a melting tale,
 Of two true lovers in a dale;
 And how the Knight, with tender fire,
 To paint his faithful passion strove;
 Swore he might at her feet expire,
 But never, never, cease to love;
 And how she blush'd, and how she sigh'd.
 And, half consenting, half denied,
 And said that she would die a maid;—
 Yet, might the bloody feud be stay'd,
 Henry of Cranstoun, and only he,
 Margaret of Branksome's choice should be.*²⁷ (II. 29)

These very probable expectations are gently mocked by the minstrel: the minstrel rejects to provide such a scene, though he makes it so explicit what he *will not* provide that he actually provides it. Still, in the following stanza the minstrel says that he is simply too old for such topics. The explanation for why he cannot give the expected description makes his parody less harsh.

Now in *Don Juan*, one finds more playful and complicated interactions with the reader, besides occasional signs of contact (see e.g. Canto I, stanza 7 quoted in section 1). However, the situation is fundamentally different, in that the narrator here is obviously the *writer*, and those who receive the work are *readers*, thus the intimate and direct relationship between the two parties is impossible. The same is of course true for the two narrators of Scott's work; and the fact that the oral narrator has to be embedded already shows that his kind of poetry is anachronistic – not surprisingly, Byron will abandon it altogether, thereby also abandoning certain characteristics reminiscent of the epic.

The narrator of *Don Juan* uses a very colloquial style, typically conversational and at times confidential. Of course, this is paradoxically not opposed to but rather a result of the fact that there is no direct communication: the narrator can go on undisturbed by external factors and he does not have to respect the readers' wishes and opinions.

²⁷ Something similar can be found in Canto V, stanza 21, but there the possibility of parody is excluded.

*But for the present, gentle reader, and
 Still gentler purchaser, the bard – that's I –
 Must with permission shake you by the hand,
 And so your humble servant, and good-bye.
 We meet again, if we should understand
 Each other; and if not, I shall not try
 Your patience further than by this short sample.
 'Twere well if others followed my example.* (I. 222)

When and how the narrator ends or begins the story is decided by himself alone; the reader has to accept the rules set by the narrator. The reader is also important as a purchaser of the work, thus further used by the narrator for his own benefit.

Very often he addresses (parts of) his readership, just as the minstrel occasionally did:

*I don't choose to say much upon this head,
 I'm a plain man and in a single station,
 But – oh ye lords of ladies intellectual!
 Inform us truly, have they not henpecked you all?* (I. 22)

Such addressing may also include reference to some shared experience between the narrator and parts of his readership; for instance when he addresses intellectual women:

*Yet some of you are most seraphic creatures,
 But times are altered since, a rhyming lover,
 You read my stanzas, and I read your features;
 And – but no matter, all those things are over.* (IV. 111)

The narrator of *Don Juan* is playful and also disrespectful, and does not seem to feel that his readers would be his superiors, or that he should live up to their expectations. Whereas the minstrel generally acknowledged the just hopes of his listeners, even if he could not recite accordingly, the narrator of *Don Juan* very often goes against the possible anticipations – for instance in connection with how moral his work is or should be:

*If any person should presume to assert
 This story is not moral, first, I pray
 That they will not cry out before they're hurt,
 Then that they'll read it o'er again and say
 (But doubtless nobody will be so pert)
 That this is not a moral tale, though gay.
 Besides, in canto twelfth I mean to show
 The very place where wicked people go.* (I. 207)

The narrator feels it necessary to defend his poem against some (though not necessarily all) readers, strongly stressing that his work is moral²⁸ and if certain people do not think so, then it is their fault, not his. Within his own text, the narrator may explain practically anything and the readers have no chance to intervene and defend their own standpoint; more importantly, this superposition is very strongly emphasised by the narrator.

The way the narrator treats the readers (or listeners) is a central question with respect to the connection between the romantic verse narrative and the epic: the epic relies on the narrator's respect for and shared experience with his audience. *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* conforms to these requirements and thus may function similarly, while the narrator of *Don Juan* constantly questions the validity of such rules by opposing or violating them. The interaction with the receivers is important in both texts but it is *Don Juan* which achieves a more radical break with the epic traditions.

²⁸ For similar examples see also Canto IV, stanzas 4–7, Canto V, stanza 130 and Canto XII, especially stanzas 28, 39–40, 50–80, 86.