

Books

THE THEATRE OF DON JUAN by Oscar Mandel

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Reviewed by Harvey Eagleson,
professor of English

Like the Oedipus, Electra-Orestes, and Faust legends, the Don Juan legend has been one of the great sources of inspiration for artists in every genre from literature and painting to music and ballet. In his new book Oscar Mandel, associate professor of English at Caltech, has done a great service for both the scholar and the general reader in bringing together the major theatrical works based on the legend, some of them hitherto not easily available. The book contains nine plays, two of them puppet plays and one the libretto for Mozart's *Don Giovanni*.

But the book is not just an anthology, a collection of pieces illustrating a certain theme. This is a book on the Don Juan legend and the pieces are integral parts of the general discussion. For that reason I found the book absorbing, as I would not have done if it had been merely a collection of plays about Don Juan — particularly, as Professor Mandel himself points out, since the plays on the whole are not very good ones, even the one by the great Molière. Mandel writes, "The fact must be faced: Don Juan as a type of man remains in the end more interesting than any of the plays, poems, or novels which gave him life."

But the legend itself is basically a good yarn and the various purposes to which it has been adapted during its life make interesting reading. Unlike the Oedipus and the Electra-Orestes legends whose beginnings are lost in time, we know by whom and when the Don Juan legend was invented. "The man who created Don Juan was a monk and dramatist of the first half of the seventeenth century, Gabriel Tellez, better known as Tirso de Molina, and considered today one of the four best playwrights of Spain's Golden Age. In 1630 a play entitled *El Burlador de Sevilla y convidado de piedra* (*The Jester of Seville and the Stone Guest*) appeared under his name in a collection of works by Lope de Vega 'and other authors' . . . No play of the Renaissance has so vast a progeny as this undated piece which its author, not even identified beyond all possibility of doubt, did not bother to include in his own collected works."

The myth created and established, Professor Mandel traces its various manifestations, its accretions of symbol or new significant meaning, down to our own day, using a collection of plays, as I have said before, as illustrative material interwoven in the text. "For the purpose of this collection, a Don Juan play is one which uses, adapts or alludes to the original legend . . . In eighteenth-century puppet plays Don Juan is not amorous; in nineteenth-century musical comedy he is an oaf; in the twentieth-century conceptions of Shaw and Frisch he distrusts and even dislikes women."

As Don Juan changed — he can scarcely be said to have developed — he represented first the "triumph of sensuality." Then, naturally, as he flouted some of the conventions of society, he easily became a symbol of revolt, politically, religiously. "Here Don Juan is an atheist; there a Christian. At one time he is a thinker; at another a fool . . . He can be a gentleman or a ruffian. And he may appear as hero, villain, or — often — as both . . . They are the attributes which give him his individual humanity while he pursues his symbolic career of pure sensuality."

Professor Mandel calls the present and third stage of Don Juan's evolution his Molecular stage "for ours might well be known as the Molecular age. The name points to the science which dominates our lives; to our habit of analyzing all things down to their indivisible minimum; to the dehumanization of life; to our sense of isolation and fragmentation; to the virtual abandonment of the idea of human progress; and to our small helplessness . . . The man in love is ripe for disappointment and failure. The scene darkens. Don Juan becomes modern . . . And here is by all odds the most important event in the dramatic life of Don Juan. *He ceases to enjoy himself* . . . what happened to Don Juan also happened in the fiber of our whole culture. The irrepressible child of the Renaissance, who seems to have enjoyed even the scene of his damnation . . . crumbles into a shabby and uneasy psychological case."

I hesitate to call this work a scholarly book, because the epithet is usually a polite euphemism for saying a book is filled with recondite information and is dull. This book is a scholarly work, but it is not dull. Scholars will find it on their own. What I wish to do is recommend it to people who just like to read interesting books and haven't the remotest intention of ever writing an article or giving a lecture on the Don Juan legend.

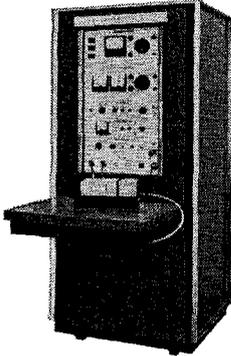
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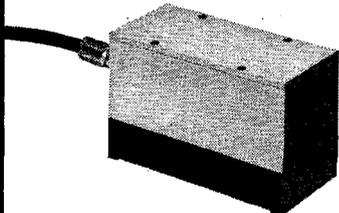
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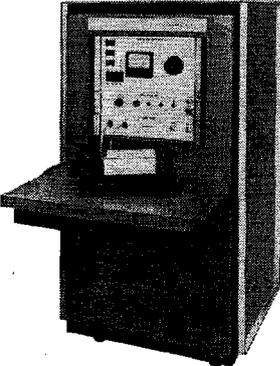
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