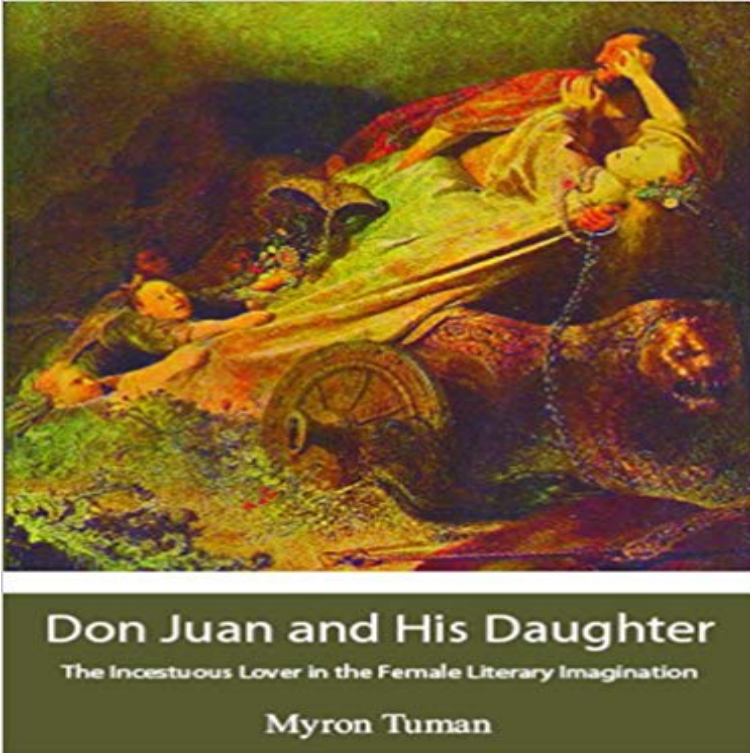


Don Juan and His Daughter: The Incestuous Lover in the Female Literary Imagination



Don Juan and His Daughter, such a beguiling phrase describing a woman's idealized relationship with her father, so offhandedly thrown off by Anais Nin, in a journal entry from March 1934 as the title of [t]he other book . . . ready in my head. What an unexpected image, of father and daughter alone at last in a world of carefree, perhaps reckless, camaraderie, one not unlike the film version of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid in so elegantly combining *jouissance* and danger. Can this possibly be the answer to the famous riddle posed by Freud in a letter to Marie Bonaparte: What does a woman want? This merry reconciliation of the daughter as apprentice with the father as master rogue and seducer? If so, how different from the classical depiction of Persephone being forcibly carried off to the underworld by her own paternal seducer, later depicted by Rembrandt, the daughter in shock, the mother desperately clinging to her gown, the father imperious to any feminine concern. Danger, for sure, but without the *jouissance*. This current work, taking its title from Nin, ventures out of the realm of male sexual desire found in Melville's *Gay Father* to look at both the personal demons and the creative literary power that flow from such illicit, incestuous feelings. The attempt here is to come closer to the source of creative inspiration in the writers themselves, to matters of the heart men and women ordinarily keep out of view, in part by routinely lying to themselves. This current work takes as a given the inordinately high level of discomfort displayed by nearly all these women writers, including the intense physical pain displayed most notably by, among others, Joyce Carol Oates, Kathryn Harrison, and Freud's Dora (the sole work male-authored considered here). Oates' own insight into the masochism of professional boxers, I believe, helps to explain the much-noted (male) frustration

that Freud felt for his adolescent patient. Section One focuses on Edith Wharton, Oates, and Nin, and their narratives about women's romantic feelings either for their own fathers or, like Oates's Uncle Felix in *You Must Remember This*, for older, powerful males that in key ways stand in for their fathers. Section Three returns to this relation, as developed in the novels of Elizabeth Inchbald, Jane Austen, and Mary Shelley, and in the memoirs and a novel of Kathryn Harrison. Meanwhile Section Two focuses on four classic nineteenth-century women writers and their narratives that involve an attachment for otherwise unavailable sexual partners: In Emily Brontë, for an implacable, avenging brother; in Charlotte Brontë, for an equally demanding, and misogynistic mentor; and in George Eliot or Olive Schreiner, for a distant, largely unreflective feminine beauty. In the Postscript, I offer up thoughts on the connection between George Eliot's own idyllic childhood and the relative serenity of my mother's life. *Don Juan and His Daughter*, like Melville's *Gay Father*, is grounded in the belief that the intense passion so evident in these masterful literary narratives cannot be easily divorced from or, for that matter, even imagined without assuming the existence of parallel passions within the writers themselves. The analysis that follows, then, is not just about literary matters (for example, about a genre such as the gothic novel) but about the complicated, often hidden incestuous desires powerfully experienced by these authors themselves—desires that, more to the point, have become manifest in the narratives themselves. The readings presented here, like those in the companion volume on male filicide, represent neither more nor less than an attempt to understand the formative role such desire plays within the imaginative process itself. As such, this book is another effort to draw as close as possible to the white-heat of literary creation, without ourselves being singed.

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