

Bastardy in shakespeare



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In four of Shakespeare's plays, he introduces a character who is illegitimate. Philip Faulconbridge, Don John, Thersites, and Edmund are all children who were born out of wedlock. Also, all four characters were antagonists, if not the main antagonists, of the plays. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, Don John causes doubt in the mind of Claudio, which leads the relationship between Claudio and Hero to crumble. However, as the play is a comedy, the relationship was ultimately repaired and Don John is captured. Don John, while talking about himself, says that he cannot hide what he is: ' a plain-dealing villain.' (*Much Ado* 1. 3. 28) As a contrast, Edmund, while still a villain, seems to have been created due to the social stigma of being a bastard, rather than born evil. At the end of *King Lear*, Edmund, as a villain, is killed. Both Don John and Edmund are shaped both by the social stigma surrounding their births, but also by their nature. Therefore, in comparing the characters of Don John and Edmund, one can see that a villain is sometimes both born and made, rather than born or made. As an illegitimate child, Edmund is not entitled to any of his father's inheritance once Gloucester died. Instead, the entirety of the wealth would go to Edgar. While Gloucester proclaimed to treat both sons equally, it would be well known that his land and possessions would be inherited by Edgar alone, not shared with Edmund. Even as a younger, legitimate son, Edmund would have received a portion of Gloucester's money. However, since Edmund is not legitimate, Edmund gets nothing once Gloucester dies. It is due to the stigma of being a bastard that Edmund hopes to overthrow his brother and his father to gain the inheritance he sees rightfully his. " Edmund's bastardy is not in itself the source of his evil, and Gloucester should not be taxed for his humane treatment his illegitimate son. But bastardy manifestly is a dreadful stigma

which Edmund is forced to bear, a condition from which he can never escape.” (Summers 227) Rather than the illegitimacy itself, it is the stigma that warps Edmund and motivates his evil. In Shakespeare’s time, illegitimate children were seen in the eyes of the church, and therefore society, as not only bastards, but as illegitimate people as well. From the first time Edmund is introduced, it is made clear that he is not a legitimate child. Every character he meets, from his brother to the Duke of Kent knows that he is illegitimate and most make snide remarks that could pass as jokes regarding his birth. “‘I cannot wish the sport undone,’ Kent laughs, ‘ the issue of it being so proper’ (I. I. 17-18); but his banter turns on a cruel pun, since to be a ‘ proper’ person in seventeenth-century England...is ‘ to be propertied [...] to possess’, while Edmund’s alienation from what Lear calls ‘ propinquity and property of blood’ (I. I. 112) renders him an ‘ unpossessing bastard’ (II. I. 67) fundamentally improper.” (Neill 283) Even Edmund’s own father does nothing to deny the stigma. While he claims that he loves both Edgar and Edmund equally, he makes light of the circumstances concerning Edmund’s birth, and also of him as a person. “ Indeed, Gloucester presses home the stigma of bastardy, calling Edmund “ knave” and “ whoreson”- words which are repeated throughout the play as labels of contempt—and obscenely emphasizing the “ good sport at his making.” (Summers 227) It is this stigma, propagated by society, and by his own father, that drives Edmund to step up to the stereotype of the bastard and become one of the villains of the story. Rather than being driven solely by selfish means, Edmund, while still a bad person, becomes so due to the circumstances of society, rather than nature. Edmund has much to say on the subject of bastardy and nature, even going as far as to call Nature his goddess. This

makes sense, as Edmund is a bastard, and illegitimate children were often called ‘ natural children.’ However, the nature that Edmund worships is not the ‘ natural’ social order that society seemed to worship, in a sense. That nature, he despises. One of the themes of King Lear is natural social order, and its disruption. Gloucester very much believes in a natural social order, while Edmund does not. To Edmund, nature and society do not mix. Nature is something that is free forming and exists outside the bounds of social constraint. The distinction between nature and what society deems natural is emphasized by Edmund rejecting the ‘ natural’ loyalty of children to their fathers in favor of Nature, as seen in his soliloquy. He says that “ Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law my services are bound.” (Lear 1. 2. 1-2) Edmund goes on to say that he will take Edgar’s land, and that “ the base shall to th’ legitimate. I grow, I prosper. Now gods, stand up for bastards!” (Lear 1. 2. 20-22) In his soliloquy, Edmund distinguishes between natural social order and nature. He completely rejects natural social order in favor of nature, asking the gods for aid in usurping natural social order. Had natural social order not existed, perhaps then Edmund might not have felt the need to overthrow it. Not only does Edmund hope to overthrow his father and brother, he also tries to insert himself into the lives of Lear’s two eldest daughters, Regan and Goneril. Although he does not appear to have as much love for them as they do for him, he uses them as the means to an end. All he cares about is gaining the most he can from the both of them. He considers both marriages seriously, weighing the advantages of being married to each sister. It does not matter to Edmund that Regan and Goneril will be, and subsequently are, hurt due to his actions. In fact, more are hurt than just Regan and Goneril. Albany, Goneril’s husband is hurt by his wife’s

infidelity. Edmund only serves as a distraction from their mutual enemy: The French. He is all too eager to provide this distraction, as he enjoys the fact that both women love him. It is only as Edmund dies that he feels remorse for the fact that one sister was driven to kill the other and then commit suicide. This need for the love of another could stem from the fact that Gloucester, while claiming to love him as equally as Edgar, only loves him as an illegitimate son, not as a son equal to Edgar. Again, this can be seen through Gloucester and Kent's banter about his 'making.' " Edmund's failure as a human being is ultimately also a failure of love. The stigma he bears as a bastard causes him to feel unloved and renders him incapable of loving others. In the realm of love, ' Nothing will come of nothing" (I. i. 92)." (Summers 228) This explains why Edmund does not appear to love Goneril and Regan as much as they love him. The audience is able to still feel some modicum of sympathy for Edmund as he dies. Seeing that both Goneril and Regan have died for him, he states " Yet Edmund was beloved." (Lear 5. 3. 216) That these are some of the last lines Edmund speaks is incredibly telling, especially as Goneril and Regan did not actually love Edmund, but rather lusted after him. While it cannot be argued that Edmund is a villain, he has also been subjected to mockery, snide remarks, and jabs about something he couldn't help: the circumstances of his birth. " Edmund's egotism is obvious in the remark, but so is his need for love. Edmund is a villain, but he is also a victim; and his villainy can be fully understood only in terms of his victimization." (Summers 229) Perhaps, had Edmund been treated as an equal to Edgar, or even more civilly, he would not be the villain he was. Although he was a villain, for the most part, it seems he was made that way by having to endure the social stigma of being a bastard.

Shakespeare also introduced the illegitimate character into one of his comedies, *Much Ado About Nothing*. Don John, Don Pedro's bastard brother, is the main antagonist of the play. Rather than trying to usurp his father and brother to gain land, as Edmund does, Don Pedro deceives Claudio into believing that his intended bride, Hero, is unfaithful to him. He is a prime example of how a villain can be mostly born, rather than mostly made, like Edmund shows. "In *Don John*, Shakespeare paints a vivid portrait of the mind of a slanderer. There is no complex ambiguity here, no admirable character traits marred by tragic flaws—just simple evil. Don John, the brother of Prince Don Pedro, has lived a disgruntled and envious life in the shadow of his ruling brother." (Kornstein 174) While Don John and Edmund both live in the shadow of their legitimate brothers, the audience doesn't ever feel sympathy for Don John, like they do Edmund. Perhaps this is due to the fact that Don John's illegitimacy is not openly mocked and made light of as Edmund's is. Whatever the case may be, Don John does not try to defend his actions, or even give a reason for them. Instead, he states that "...it must not be denied but I am a plain-dealing villain. I am trusted with a muzzle and enfranchised with a clog; therefore I have decreed not to sing in my cage. If I had my mouth, I would bite; if I had my liberty, I would do my liking." (*Much Ado* 1. 3. 28-32) Don John compares himself to a dog with a muzzle. Rather than deny his nature, he readily accepts it. He does not seek the approval of others, or want to be changed. Don John goes on to tell Conrad, his closest associate "in the meantime, let me be that I am and do not seek to alter me." (*Much Ado* 1. 3. 32-33) It would seem that Don John likes being a villain. He enjoys stirring up trouble for trouble's sake, rather than to prove a point about nature. His goal isn't to prove anything, but to have fun by deceiving

others, namely Claudio. Unlike Edmund, his villainy isn't at all driven by self-gain or the desire to see natural social order destroyed. "One cannot recognise a certain purpose. Don John simply things and acts villainously without pursuing any purpose or benefiting from his actions." (Richters 7)

When Borachio enters the room in which Don John and Conrad are speaking, he brings news of Claudio's intended marriage to Hero. The first thing that Don John asks is "Will it serve for any model to build mischief on?" (Much Ado 1. 3. 40) He does not even know yet that it is his brother's close companion who wishes to marry. Therefore, as a villain, it would seem that Don John was made, rather than born. When Conrad asks if he can use his discontent, Don John replies "I make all use of it, for I use it only." (Much Ado 1. 3. 35) It appears that Don John's sole existence is defined by stirring up mischief and strife within any company he can, whether it has to do with his legitimate brother or not. However, Don John's nature seems to be predetermined by the social circumstance of his birth. This is understandable, as Don John is the illegitimate brother of Don Pedro. "To underscore Don John's evil nature, Shakespeare stresses his illegitimacy. Again and again, he is referred to as 'the bastard,' as if the circumstance of his birth explain his wicked disposition." (Kornstein 174) It is well known that illegitimate children were not treated as equals. In most cases, illegitimate children were mocked and ridiculed. While it is not shown in great detail in Much Ado About Nothing, it is still clear that such a distinction exists, as Don John is constantly referred to as 'the bastard.' Don John would also be driven by resentment toward his brother. In some ways, Don John has more of a reason to resent his brother than Edmund does. Despite Gloucester's treatment of Edmund, he does still profess to love Edmund as much as he

<https://assignbuster.com/bastardy-in-shakespeare/>

loves Edgar, his legitimate son. From the beginning of the play, a contrast is made between Don Pedro and Don John among the other characters in the play. The first description of Don John by another character is Beatrice. She calls him 'tartly' and states that she "never can see him but...am heart-burned an hour after." (Much Ado 2. 1. 3-4) Hero, as well, says that "He is of a very melancholy disposition." (Much Ado 2. 1. 5) The first time Leonato meets Don John, he greets him, saying "Let me bid you welcome, my lord: being reconciled to the prince your brother, I owe you all duty." (Much Ado 1. 1. 147-149) This greeting must have had some impact on Don John, as it only emphasizes the fact that his brother is a prince while he is not, and it is only because of his brother that the invitation to Leonato's house was extended in the first place. As a contrast, Don Pedro is well liked by everyone, held in high esteem, and above all, a prince. He is a warrior, generous, courteous, and powerful. From the beginning of the play, the distinction between Don John and Don Pedro is made very clear. Where Don Pedro is the golden boy of the two, Don John is definitely the black sheep, taking joy and pride in causing mischief and deceiving those who are easily deceived, including his brother. One similarity that both Don John and Edmund have, other than the circumstances of their birth, and the fact that they are both villains, is the fact that they only deceive those who are already gullible. Don John's deception of Claudio, Don Pedro, and Leonato was incredibly easy. All it took were a few words against the honor of Hero, as well as one woman, not even disguised, who was supposed to be Hero. "...the villains only point out how easily the characters are manipulated by perception, e. g. Claudio believes Don John's intrigue. Now Claudio thinks Don Pedro wooed Hero for himself (Act 2. 1) When Don Pedro and Claudio see Margret alias Hero having

intercourse with Borachio they believe in their perception without hesitation.” (Richters 7) To Don John, not only is deceiving Claudio fun, it’s also incredibly easy. Claudio takes Don John at his word, without even questioning his information. He takes the word of a man he barely knows, rather than listening to the woman he claims to love. Likewise, Edmund is able to fool both his father, Gloucester. Edmund convinces Gloucester that Edgar is secretly plotting against him by forging a letter, in which Edgar is scheming to kill Gloucester so that he might inherit his lands and wealth faster. “ As portrayed in the opening scene of the subplot (I. ii), Gloucester is surely unbelievably credulous in accepting Edmund’s forged letter at its face value, especially since by doing so, he is exhibiting a complete lack of faith in his legitimate son, whom he claims to love ‘ so tenderly and entirely’ (I. ii. 99) and who is by Gloucester’s own testimony no less dear to him than Edmund (I. i. 20). (Block 509) However, the letter is not the only evidence given that Edgar is supposedly trying to kill him. Edmund keeps up the deception, going one step further and deceiving his brother as well, so that both Gloucester’s and Edgar’s actions play off one another and allow the other to believe what Edmund is saying is the truth. Edmund tells Edgar, after delivering the letter to their father, that Gloucester is angry with him and that he should carry a sword with him at all times. This not only takes care of the problem that Gloucester might confront Edgar about the letter, it also raises Gloucester’s suspicions that Edgar is actually trying to kill him. “ Edgar, too, is presented as a weak and gullible character, who foolishly relies on Edmund’s unsupported statement that he has incurred his father’s wrath, and then is easily persuaded without protest to avoid his father instead of confronting him directly and clearing himself. (Block 509.)While both the

characters of Don John and Edmund are villains, neither character deceives those who do not allow themselves to be deceived. Each character that is deceived is credulous to a fault, which is likely why Don John and Edmund choose those characters for their deception. It's easier to play a deception on one who is easily led astray than one who constantly questions everything and uses his or her own judgment. However, it is the deception of the characters that makes both Don John and Edmund villains, not the fact that both characters are illegitimate. Therefore, it can be argued that bastards do not have to be evil. To be an illegitimate child does not automatically make one a bad person. It is the actions that a person chooses that makes him what he is. While both Don John and Edmund deceived people for different reasons, it was still the deception, rather than the bastardy, that made them villains. Through the characters of Edmund from King Lear and Don John in Much Ado About Nothing, Shakespeare raises an interesting point for discussion. Are one's actions determined by birth or by choice? Can one be born a villain, or are villains made? In comparing Edmund and Don John, it can be seen that the answer is not one or the other. In some cases, a villain is both born and made. Edmund could have been born a decent person. However, through the circumstances surrounding his birth and the stigma attached to it, he became a villain in order to gain the recognition he feels he deserves. On the other hand, Don John owns his title of villain, and does not wish to change. He believes that it is his nature to be evil and therefore uses it to the best of his ability, causing havoc and mischief wherever he can. His character is mostly born evil. However, one cannot ignore the fact that he has lived in the shadow of his brother, the prince, for so long that it had to affect his perception. Therefore, through the comparison of Edmund and Don

<https://assignbuster.com/bastardy-in-shakespeare/>

John, one can see that a villain is both born and made, rather than the two being mutually exclusive. Works Cited Shakespeare, William, and Stephen Orgel. *King Lear: A Conflated Text*. New York: Penguin, 1999. Print.

Summers, Claude J. "" Stand Up For Bastards!": Shakespeare's Edmund and Love's Failure." *College Literature* 4. 3 (1977): 227. JSTOR. Web.

Kornstein, Daniel. " Much Ado About Slander." *Kill All the Lawyers?: Shakespeare's Legal Appeal*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1994. 174. Google Books. Google. Web.

Shakespeare, William, and Peter Holland. *Much Ado about Nothing*. New York: Penguin, 1999. 8+. Print.

Richters, Nadine. *Deception and Villainy in Shakespeare's Much Ado About Nothing*. N. p.: n. p., n. d. 7. Google Books. Google. Web.

Block, Edward A. " King Lear: A Study in Balanced and Shifting Sympathies." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 10. 4 (1959): 509. JSTOR. Web.

Neill, Michael. "" In Everything Illegitimate': Imagining the Bastard in Renaissance Drama." *The Yearbook of English Studies* 23 (1993): 283. JSTOR. Web.