

Don john as a threat  
to comedy in much  
ado about nothing



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

The world presented in *Much Ado About Nothing* is populated mostly by noble characters: The Prince of Aragon, Lord Claudio, Lord Benedick, The Governor of Messina and his daughter and niece. These characters embody the courtly ideas of social grace and wit, qualities that drive the comedic nature of the play. The *Bedford Companion to Shakespeare*, by Russ MacDonald, notes other qualities driving the comedy, stating, “ The characters act on their intuition that the world is good, that life is worth living, that conflict will ultimately find a positive resolution. (153) Don John, lacking grace and wit, is the antithesis of these ideas, seeing the world as awful, life as depressing, and hopeful that he can create conflicts to ensure a negative resolution. Although he is the catalyst that creates the necessary chaos from which harmony ultimately arises, his nature is so malicious that it threatens to transcend this role of catalyst and completely destroy the play’s comedy. Don John makes his first appearance as his group of men, recently victorious in war, has just made its celebratory arrival at Leonato’s residence. He wastes no time in darkening the bright and jovial atmosphere of the play. After the exchange of humorous pleasantries between Leonato and Don Pedro and witty banter between Benedick and Beatrice, his first words are an unemotional and unadorned response to Leonato’s generosity, “ I thank you, I am not of many words, but I thank you.” (1. 1. 157-58) This abrupt shift in mood halts the pleasant momentum of conversation, leading to the departure of all but Benedick and Claudio. This cold nature, completely disharmonious with the courtly behavior of other main characters, is easily noticed. With humor that cannot mask her aversion to Don John’s personality, Beatrice comments, “ I never can see him but I am heart-burn’d an hour after.” (2. 1. 3-4) His disposition is one of the only

<https://assignbuster.com/don-john-as-a-threat-to-comedy-in-much-ado-about-nothing/>

things about which Don John is truthful. Speaking of his brother, Don Pedro, on whom he is dependent, he fumes, "I had rather be a canker in a hedge than a rose in his grace, and it better fits my blood to be disdained of all than to fashion a carriage to rob love from any: in this, though I cannot be said to be a flattering honest man, 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: in the meantime let me be that I am and seek not to alter me." (1. 3. 27-37) Don John refuses to abide by social customs, the same customs that will forever prevent him from becoming a fully respected member of society due to his birth as a bastard. Therefore, he spurns his friend Conrade's suggestion that he attempt to act more cheerful around Don Pedro to retain his brother's favor. Rather than pretend to be someone he is not in order to receive love, he chooses instead to act naturally and be disliked by all. He makes this choice knowing how it is to be disliked, comparing his existence to that of a dog that is so distrusted and restricted that it is muzzled and chained to a "clog," or heavy block. As long as his life is so, he will not put on a show for others, or, as he puts it, "sing in my cage." Don John's behavior in the beginning of the play, although detracting from the merriment of others, is merely antisocial. But his admission that he is a "plain-dealing villain" is quickly confirmed after the arrival of Borachio. Immediately upon finding out about an impending marriage, an occasion that arouses joy in the hearts of the socially graceful characters, Don John wonders if information about the marriage will allow him to cause trouble. At a time when religious devotion was paramount, his subsequent comment, "If I can cross him any way, I bless myself every

<https://assignbuster.com/don-john-as-a-threat-to-comedy-in-much-ado-about-nothing/>

way,” (1. 3. 67-68) is quite ominous. This statement asserting that he will be blessed for causing needless misfortune accentuates the extent to which his personality conflicts with that of the other main characters. Conflict of personality soon gives way to open conflict brought upon by Don John’s self described evil tendencies and desires, as Don John proves that his bitter words are not hollow. When Borachio confirms that Claudio’s marriage can be ruined, Don John replies, “ Any bar, any cross, any impediment will be med’cinable to me. I am sick in displeasure to him, and whatsoever comes athwart his affection ranges evenly with mine.” (2. 2. 4-7) Claudio has done nothing to offend Don John, yet the latter is sick with anger against the groom-to-be. The fact that Claudio’s life is characterized by splendor and happiness is enough to incite Don John’s hatred, accompanied by the desire to prevent the fulfillment of Claudio’s desires. Once the villainous plan concocted by Don John’s collaborator, Borachio, is in motion, Don John meets with Don Pedro and Claudio, resulting in the first dark encounter of the play in which the cheerful Prince and his friend have been involved. In an urgent manner, Don John speaks of Hero, saying, “ the lady is disloyal.” (3. 3. 104) In doing so, he accuses the innocent and naive girl of exactly of what he, a person embodying the opposite qualities, is guilty. Don Pedro and Claudio are deceived by Don John’s lies and trickery, setting off a catastrophic chain of events. The wedding day, the play’s climax, marks the first time in the play that all of the main characters are brought from their collective happy, relatively undemanding existence to Don John’s life of pain and revenge. Even before the ceremony, Hero senses that something is awry. As she gets dressed in her wedding attire, she portentously comments to Margaret, “ my heart is extremely heavy.” (3. 4. 34-35) Even with these feelings of

<https://assignbuster.com/don-john-as-a-threat-to-comedy-in-much-ado-about-nothing/>

anxiousness, she must never have imagined just how horribly her wedding day, usually a day of celebration and elation, would become. After Claudio, backed by Don Pedro and Don John, publicly crushes and humiliates Hero, the overwhelmed young lady loses consciousness. Claudio, Don Pedro and Don John leave in a fury, and Hero's father, Leonato, is mortified. He laments, " O Fate! Take not away thy heavy hand, Death is the fairest cover for her shame That may be wished for." (4. 1. 115-117) Leonato believes that the lascivious behavior of which Hero has been accused has shamed her beyond redemption. He would rather she die than live as an embodiment of her shame and the shame brought upon him for presenting an unchaste daughter for marriage. By feeling such emotions, he has fallen victim to the plotting of Don John, a man destined by birth to live in shame, and driven by spite to see others feel his dishonor. Shortly after, Don John succeeds similarly with Beatrice, who experiences vengefulness like his when she asks Benedick to " Kill Claudio." (4. 1. 289) This serious and plainspoken utterance is uncharacteristic of both Beatrice specifically and comedy in general. For a moment, it seems as Don John may be successful in draining the play of all comedy. Don John's plotting is eventually discovered, and the truth allows the destruction inflicted by him to give way to mending and atonement. But even in the very last portion of the play, after lighthearted and romantic teasing between Beatrice and Benedick, the mere mention of the now captured Don John's name threatens to darken the mood. However, Benedick asks his cheery group to " think not on him," (5. 4. 127) and strikes up the band. Despite his tireless efforts, Don John is not able to destroy the comedy by depriving it of an essential feature, a happy ending.