

The Melancholy Villain: An Examination of the Character of Don John in Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*

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Don John is perhaps one of the least examined characters in the entire Shakespearian canon. There are likely several reasons for this: First, Don John is a villain but one who, on the outset, seems fairly straightforward in his motives. Further, the character is given almost no backstory and speaks very little, if at all, when he appears on stage. In some ways, Don John may on the surface appear to be just a simple character added to contrast the happiness and mirth of the other characters and to help move the plot along to its happy ending. I argue that Don John's simplicity is deceiving in many respects. Indeed, his apparent lack of complexity reveals volumes about early modern understandings of melancholy. Examining Don John's motivations and melancholic nature, I will discuss the way in which Shakespeare employs this character and what implications this has on both Don John's role and the play as a whole. Ultimately, I will demonstrate that Don John represents mortality and all the despair that accompanies it; therefore his rejection by the other characters in the play is not only a rejection of him but of the flawed and finite nature of humanity.

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In order to discuss Don John's significance to the play, it is necessary to define and discuss the condition that makes up the greater part of his character: melancholy. In his massive 1621 work, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, Robert Burton gives this detailed definition:

Melancholy, the subject of our present discourse, is either in disposition or habit. In disposition, is that transitory *Melancholy* which goes and comes upon every small occasion of sorrow, need, sickness, trouble, fear, grief, passion, or perturbation of the mind, any manner of care, discontent, or thought, which causeth anguish, dullness, heaviness and vexation of spirit, any ways opposite to pleasure, mirth, joy, delight, causing forwardness in us, or a dislike. In which equivocal and improper sense, we call him melancholy, that is...ill-disposed, solitary, any way moved or displeased. And from these melancholy dispositions no man living is free,...none so wise...that can vindicate himself;...Melancholy in this sense is the character of Mortality. (125)

According to Burton, melancholy is characterized by a persistent feeling of anguish and discontent, a nature that is indisposed to pleasure and joy. Further, it is a condition that no man affected can alleviate himself from fully. Importantly, Burton specifies that all "living" humans are subject to "melancholy dispositions." The attribution of melancholy to man's fallen state is not new. Johann Weyer expressed similar sentiments years earlier in his *Of Deceiving Demons*. Weyer was of the opinion that the Devil was the primary cause of the temperaments and violence associated with melancholy (Radden 96). For Weyer, those who were inclined

to reject God opened themselves up to the influence of demons that tempted them, in their vulnerable and wretched state, with the power and importance that they craved:

...the sort of person most likely to be attacked is one who possesses such a temperament or who is so moved by external or internal causes [e.g., if he is attacked by a demon-specter or tempted by a demon's suggestions] that as a result of specious inducements he will readily present himself as a suitable instrument of the demon's will. (Radden 97)

Melancholics were thus removed from God, the ultimate source of joy and comfort, and in the realm of the Devil, the author of lies and misery. Of those most liable to be lead astray by melancholy were those who were rebellious and discontent with the current social order (Lyons 17). These people came to be labeled "malcontents," a word which, according to the Oxford English Dictionary encompassed such characteristics as dissatisfaction with the self, family authority, and political order; the word became synonymous with "rebel" and was used almost interchangeably (Lyons 18). Melancholics were thus not merely in danger of harming themselves but also a great threat to others. Melancholics threatened the social order and accepted mores; they undermined authority in ways that prompted many to attempt to stamp them out. It is not surprising, therefore, that one was just as likely to earn the title of "witch" just as easily as "melancholic" or "malcontent." Indeed, those afflicted with a melancholic disposition seemed to have an almost infectious quality about them. If not dealt with, their disease could just as easily spread to others and cause greater trouble for all involved. Given the nature of melancholy, as described by scholars of the early modern era, it seems only natural to place the

disillusioned loner as the villain. Don John is most certainly a rebellious character with a hatred for the mirth of the others, his inability to be reasoned with make him the ultimate threat to the mores presented in the play and the other characters waste no time in condemning him to the most terrible punishments that they can think of upon learning of his treachery with little in the way of a second thought.

Shakespeare utilizes melancholy characters in several plays, not all of whom are given to villainy. Sometimes, the malcontent or melancholic could be utilized for comedic effect as a misplaced character in a comic world (Lyons 30). Such a character would serve as the butt of jokes and be mocked for his continuous satirizing in the face of mirth and celebration (Lyons 30). For instance, Shakespeare's most famous melancholic, Jaques from *As You Like It*, says:

Invest me in my motley. Give me leave
To speak my mind, and I will through and through
Cleanse the foul body of th'infected world,
If they will but patiently receive my medicine. (2.7.58-
61)

Jaques' musings are dramatic, and it is clear that he has an inflated sense of self-importance. However, Duke Senior's words of reproach to Jaques give us further insight into Shakespeare's portrayal of melancholy:

Most mischievous foul sin, in chiding sin;
For thou hast been a libertine,
As sensual as the brutish sting itself,
And all th'embossed sores and headed evils

That thou with licence of free foot hast caught
Wouldst thou disgorge into the general world.
(2.7.64-69)

Clearly the “medicine” that Jaques offers should be avoided at all costs as it is likely to cause nothing but misfortune to all who partake of it. While Jaques believes himself to be the dispenser of needed reform, Shakespeare makes it clear that he is a self-indulgent and immoral character who wants nothing more than to make those in the world just like him. No matter how the melancholic is portrayed, his example is to always be avoided as he is deceitful and only desires to lead others astray. Regardless of the character, there seems to be no place in a happy world for the melancholic, as evidenced by Jaques’ departure from the ceremony in the Forest of Arden and Don John’s imprisonment and promised tortures to come. Don John also has his villainous companions amongst Shakespeare’s works. Aaron the Moor from *Titus Andronicus* is one such example:

Madam, though Venus govern your desires,
Saturn is dominator over mine:
What signifies my deadly-standing eye,
My silence and my cloudy melancholy,
My fleece of woolly hair that now uncurls
Even as an adder when she doth unroll
To do some fatal execution?
No, madam, these are no venereal signs:
Vengeance is in my heart, death in my hand,
Blood and revenge are hammering in my head. (2.3.30-39)

Shakespeare even explored levels of melancholy that could lead one to delusions, Macbeth, for example, is brought to the brink of mental ruin by dwelling on the murder of Duncan and begins to

hear and see things that are not there (Heffernan 36). For example, in the third act Macbeth swears that he sees the ghost of his former companion Banquo:

Avaunt and quit my sight! Let the earth hide thee!
Thy bones are marrowless, thy blood is cold;
Thou hast no speculation in those eyes
Which thou dost glare with. (3.4.93-96)

It would seem, then, that Shakespeare's conception of melancholy is a far cry from what we would today term clinical depression. Depression, as we know it, is characterized more a debilitating state of resignation, something that Melancholy is not (Brady & Haapala, 2003). Indeed, melancholy is a much more productive state that involves a great amount of self-indulgent reflection; something that can even be desired from time to time (Brady & Haapala, 2003). This description fits Don John quite well given his penchant for self-reflection and introspective silence. Melancholy, for Shakespeare, was pervasive, consuming, and often dangerous not just for the afflicted but for everyone in close proximity to them. At best, the melancholic is a nuisance; at worst, he is a menace.

Don John falls somewhere in the middle between these two extremes. He tries to turn the play into a tragedy but fails and ends up being nothing more than a thorn in the side of the other characters. It would be best to begin by discussing Don John's motives for his villainy. The only scene in which we are given any kind of backstory for him is in the third scene of Act One. He responds to Conrad's insistence that he should hear reason:

I cannot hide what I am. I must be sad when I have
cause, and smile at no man's jests; eat when I have
stomach, and wait for no man's leisure; sleep when I
am drowsy, and tend on no man's business; laugh
when I am merry, and claw no man in his humour.
(1.3.10-14)

For Don John, his melancholy seems to be as natural as any
other action that he may perform; he cannot "hear reason" as Conrad
suggests because his disposition is so much a part of him that he
cannot help but act upon it: "let me be that I am, and seek not to alter
me" (1.3.29). When Conrad mentions Don John's brother and how he
has taken him into his grace, Don John again replies:

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 that I am a plain-dealing villain.
(1.3.21-25)

Don John seems to lack any real external motivation for his
hatred towards the other characters. However, a few lines later as he
and his men are conspiring to ruin the courtship of Claudio and
Hero, he reveals what seems to be a small factor related to his
disdain: "That young start-up hath all the glory of my overthrow. If I
can cross him any way, I bless myself every way" (1.3.52-53). If this is
to be taken at face value, then jealousy towards Claudio is the reason
Don John seeks to ruin his potential wedding. This alone seems to be
an unlikely motive. The scholar Carol Falvo Heffernan has this to
say: "Don John's sense of limitless sadness suggests an infinity of
pain that makes the anxiety about measuring time in the

sonnets...seem self-indulgent by contrast" (36). It is thus far more likely that his jealousy combines with his already melancholic disposition and manifests as a deeply consuming and pervasive despair.

The other characters in the play make no secret of mistrusting Don John, from the beginning he is intentionally excluded from the social bonds formed by the others in the play. Upon Don John's entry into the home of Leonato, he addresses Don John: "If you swear, my lord, you shall not be forsworn" (1.1.124). Leonato clearly mistrusts Don Pedro's brother but quickly tries to mask his suspicions with a friendly greeting (Richter, 2010). Don John neglects to give Leonato a lengthy response in thanks, likely sensing his hostility to him. Leonato and Don Pedro immediately depart holding hands, excluding Don John from their conversation (Richter, 2010). From the beginning Don John is an outcast, mistrusted simply by virtue of simply being a bastard. Rather than a condition that he was born with, his melancholy seems to have been thrust upon him by others. Don John, then, is simply fulfilling the role that others have already mapped out for him. Don John acknowledges this and plays the part to the best of his ability as he feels that there is simply no other option ("let me be that I am, and seek not to alter me"). This honest acceptance of his nature is his one redeeming quality, unlike the other characters he does not flatter and feign courtesy, as he says, "I am a plain-dealing villain" (1.3.25). It is this honesty, however, that spells his downfall as it allows him to persuade himself that he cannot be anything other than what his "blood" has deigned him to be ("seek not to alter me") and, thus, he does nothing to amend his reputation in the eyes of the other characters (Richter, 2010). This is what allows the characters to place any and all blame on Don John for his disposition even though his reputation was placed upon him

from the beginning, as we see in the end when Don John is condemned to torture and likely execution for his crimes without a word from him or any interrogation regarding his motives on the part of Don Pedro or the others; his villainy is accepted for what it is. While this may seem paradoxical, it can be seen from the early examination of the history of Melancholy that even though it was perceived as a pre-existing and many times unalterable disposition, those affected were still held fully responsible for their behavior and actions, regardless of the cause due in large part to its association with the demonic. It is no wonder, then, that Don John is so easily dismissed.

Could there be other implications in Don John's hasty dismissal? Returning to Burton's description of melancholy, we see that melancholy is, in its purest form, the essence of mortality. Weyer ramifies this further by ascribing a hellish origin to it, linking it further with our fallen and sinful nature. It would follow, then, that Don John unobstructed and fully embraced sin. Moreover, as the bastard, the quintessential symbol of unwanted things, he represents aspects of the human condition that most would like to ignore such as sadness, loneliness, depression, and anger. Don John carries the stigma of these negative associations and Leonato is hesitant about letting him into his home and only does so because he is with Don Pedro; it would seem, then, that these darker aspects cannot ever be fully turned away as they must accompany all merriment. This can be further seen in the failure to keep Don John imprisoned, again they fail to keep the unpleasantness of mortality away as he comes back more determined and with companions of his own.

In the end, mortality fails to be drowned out by merriment. Even though Don John's plans fail, it is a grim reminder to the characters that all things have the potential to be destroyed by the

frailty of the human condition. The characters feel content to simply not think on this, feeling that it has been successfully swept under the rug even though it so easily escaped their attempts to do so. However, all mirth must eventually come to an end and while this may be postponed for the time being, mortality will again be at the gates, determined not to be pushed aside again.

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