

DON JOHN, A VILLAIN OF CIRCUMSTANCE:  
MEAD'S SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM IN 'MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING'

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of  
Bachelor's Degree Honors Project  
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14 April 2015

## DON JOHN, A VILLAIN OF CIRCUMSTANCE: MEAD'S SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM IN 'MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING'

Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* contains some of the most animated characters in all of Shakespeare's folio. The villain of the play, Don John, is the exception. He speaks little, doesn't devise his own plans, and cowardly runs away from punishment, leaving his henchmen to take the fall. At first glance, Don John is a dull character study. A second look, with deeper understanding of the time period and of the communication theory, Mead's Symbolic Interactionism, reveals that Don John can actually be one of the most interesting characters to study in *Much Ado*. Don John is not an inherent villain. In other words, Don John was not born evil, despite the fact that people of that time period believed he had been. He is a victim of circumstance as defined by the communication theory of Mead's Symbolic Interactionism. Ultimately, Don John is a villain because human language and interaction have created a reality in which he must be a villain.

According to Mead's Symbolic Interactionism, "Humans act toward people, things, and events on the basis of the meanings they assign to them... Without language there would be no thought, no sense of self, and no socializing presence of society within the individual."<sup>1</sup> In other words, people assign meaning and create reality through human interaction and language. Analyzing *Much Ado About Nothing* in light of Mead's theory, it can be surmised that society created a reality in which Don John is treated like a villain, so he becomes a villain. Mead calls this a self-fulfilling prophecy. During the Elizabethan era, illegitimate persons were often treated as criminals.<sup>2</sup> In the play, Shakespeare writes that Don John is an illegitimate son to an important man.<sup>3</sup> Applying Mead's Symbolic Interactionism, it can be speculated that Don John believes he's a villain because, as a bastard, people have treated him as a villain since birth. To reiterate, the way a person is treated is the way a person becomes. Don John is treated like a villain, so he becomes a villain.

*Much Ado About Nothing* is a play of deception. The importance of deception in this play is made clear in the title alone: *Much Ado About Nothing*. The entire plot of the play is propelled through lies. Don John is labeled the villain, but he is far from the only character to commit trickery in the play. Each character schemes against another

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<sup>1</sup> Em Griffin, *A First Look at Communication Theory*. 8th Ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2012), 55.

<sup>2</sup> Dorothy L. Haller, "Bastardy and Baby Farming in Victorian England." *The Student Historical Journal of Loyola University New Orleans* 21 (1989-1990), <http://www.loyno.edu/~history/journal/1989-0/haller.htm> (accessed February 8, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> William Shakespeare, *Barnes and Noble Shakespeare: Much Ado About Nothing*, ed. Robert S. Miola (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2007), 45.

character at some point or another.<sup>4</sup> *Much Ado About Nothing* begins when a group of soldiers return from war to the Italian city of Messina.<sup>5</sup> Don Pedro, the prince and most important member of the soldier's entourage, leads his men to the house of Leonato, governor of Messina. This house is the setting of the entire play. Don John, the person considered least important in the hierarchy of characters, is a half brother to Don Pedro, the person considered most important.<sup>6</sup> Mead's theory states, "Meaning arises out of the social interaction that people have with each other."<sup>7</sup> To better understand how completely Don John differs from the rest of society in Messina, one must completely understand his character and how he interacts socially with other characters. The following is a brief character analysis of Don John, as provided in the character biography section of my honors thesis.<sup>8</sup> It is included to show that Don John is a villain in light of Mead's Symbolic Interactionism:

Don John is the jealous, bastard brother of Don Pedro. He speaks very little, which, in a society in which joviality is the social norm, makes him an obvious outsider. John is characterized by irrational mood swings. At one moment he is subdued and quiet. The next moment John is uncontrollably angry, even to the point of abusing his only two friends, Conrade and Borachio.

Society looks down on John because of his illegitimate birth. His father had an affair with a woman and took John in out of responsibility. Although John was given a home, he was not truly treated as part of the family. John was permitted to grow up in court, but was never allowed to be a part of it. The majority of people John came in contact with as a child were above his rank. Even his own half-brother ceased spending time with him, seeking more fitting company. John would never receive the money, status or respect that were freely given to his brother.

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<sup>4</sup> Elliot Krieger, "Social Relations and the Social Order in *Much Ado About Nothing*," in *Shakespeare Survey: An Annual Survey of Shakespearian Study and Production*, 32, ed. Kenneth Muir (Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 49.

<sup>5</sup> Shakespeare, 47.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Griffin, 56.

<sup>8</sup> Makala Coleman, "A Study of Villainy in *Much Ado About Nothing*" (bachelor's honors project, Southwestern Adventist University, 2015).

Eventually John decides to accept his natural birth and the stereotypes that accompany it. He says, “Let me be who I am and seek not to alter me.” John has no control over his birth, but he can control his attitude about life. He believes he is exerting control over his circumstances by becoming evil. The irony is that by doing what is expected of him, acting evil, he is not controlling his own fate, but rather, letting society dictate. John has a weak character. He believes that anger makes him strong, but it actually shows him to be a coward. John is too caught up in self-pity to do anything that could better his life, so he simply lives to destroy the lives of others.

John’s ultimate dream is to overthrow Pedro and receive power and respect. But, John knows in his heart that upon the destruction of Pedro, his situation would not actually change. That’s why John seeks to cause pain more subtly. When the trick he plays on Hero and Claudio works out perfectly, he is overjoyed. Yet when others discover his trickery, he runs away, leaving Conrade and Borachio to take the punishment alone.

Don John’s character can be better understood through the three core principles of Symbolic Interactionism. The three principles of Symbolic Interactionism are meaning, language and thinking.<sup>9</sup> According to Mead, meaning is the construction of social reality. As previously stated, during the Elizabethan era, people constructed a reality in which bastards were considered evil.<sup>10</sup> People connected bastards with the sinful action of lust and they were therefore treated as villains. According to Dorothy Haller in *Bastardy and Baby Farming in Victorian England*, a series of laws called “The Poor Laws” were created during the Elizabethan era to relieve peasants from poverty. Bastards were not included as recipients of this relief, but the law does not totally ignore them. Parents were required to take care of illegitimate children. Haller writes, “Since the 17th and the 18th centuries, the negative attitude toward bastards was evident in legislation, which denied them assistance from the poor rates. Justices were merely to see that the parents supported their child, and not to enforce morality.”<sup>11</sup> The Poor Laws contributed to the

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<sup>9</sup> Griffin, 55.

<sup>10</sup> Haller.

<sup>11</sup> Haller.

problem of a bastard being treated differently than others in that society. Parents were required to take care of bastard children physically, but did not need to attend to them in any other way. According to Mead's theory, a bastard will act as a villain because people assign the meaning of villainy to bastards.<sup>12</sup> Using the formula *if a=b and b=c then a=c*, we see that Don John must be a villain. During the Elizabethan era, bastards were considered villainous. Don John is a bastard; therefore, Don John is a villain in the Elizabethan era.

The second core principle of Symbolic Interactionism is language, the source of meaning. People construct reality through language. Language is not limited to speaking. Language, in terms of Symbolic Interactionism, is the way an object or person is treated or referred to in order to assign meaning.<sup>13</sup> A bastard in Elizabethan times would not only be spoken of poorly, but her or she would be a literal outcast. Natasha L. Richter writes in *A Second Look at Don John, Shakespeare's Most Passive Villain*, "Don John, who is excluded above all because of his dubious lineage, and who additionally excludes himself by his anti-social actions throughout the play, is marked as different from his companions by his refusal to engage in artful use of language."<sup>14</sup>

Don John is also set apart from society in appearance. People of Messina are very concerned with appearances, and Don John does not fit into the appearances assigned through language as normal. David Horowitz, author of "Imagining the Real" in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Much Ado About Nothing*, writes of Messina as a

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<sup>12</sup> Griffin, 55.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 56.

<sup>14</sup> Natasha L. Richter, "A Second Look at Don John, Shakespeare's Most Passive Villain." *Student Pulse: The International Student Journal*, 2010, <http://www.studentpulse.com/articles/133/a-second-look-at-don-john-shakespeares-most-passive-villain> (accessed October 19, 2014).

society that is charming on the surface “for all appearances lie on the surface. Messina is a world in which appearances … are necessary to social solidarity.”<sup>15</sup> Don John, as a bastard does not fit in this superficial society. He reminds people of a darker reality where not all is always well.

The third core principle of Symbolic Interactionism is thinking. Thinking is the final stage in the creation of reality.<sup>16</sup> The mind is where symbolic meaning must be accepted or denied. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, Don John decides to accept himself as a villain within his own mind. He thinks he is a villain because people use language towards him that carries the meaning of villainy. Don John is treated so poorly that he believes the reality others have created without question. In Act 1, scene 3, lines 25 and 26, Don John says, “I would rather be a canker in a hedge than a rose in his grace,” and that “it better fits my blood to be disdained of all.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, he believes that his blood, or his illegitimate birth, makes him behave the way he does. It better fits Don John’s blood to be a villain because his blood is illegitimate. The symbolic meaning of bastardy is so ingrained into Don John’s mind, that he believes without question that it’s better to be a thorn than a rose. Don John clearly states that he is as he appears.<sup>18</sup> He is a victim, and a villain, of circumstances.

Don John stands apart in birth, speech, and appearances. Natasha L. Richter writes in *A Second Look at Don John, Shakespeare’s Most Passive Villain*, “Don John will never be able to interact with society in a positive way. He will always be ostracized

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<sup>15</sup> David Horowitz, “Imagining the Real.” In *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Much Ado About Nothing*, edited by Walter R. Davis, 39-53. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc, 1969.

<sup>16</sup> Griffin, 58.

<sup>17</sup> Shakespeare, 81.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 80.

by owning his illegitimate roots. His only alternative, Shakespeare reiterates, is to act the ‘plain-dealing villain’ and be remembered for his villainy.”<sup>19</sup> Deception and scheming are normal parts of the society of Messina, so Don John lies, just like all others.<sup>20</sup> Yet, Don John is the only person to receive punishment for his tricks. Don John’s punishment could be considered a side effect of the lack of empathy from Don Pedro. Empathy is very important to Mead’s Symbolic Interactionism. Mead states that the process of taking the role of the other, through a concept called minding, helps people experience empathy.<sup>21</sup> Minding is defined as an inner dialogue used to better understand what other people experience. Unfortunately, just because people have the ability to take the role of another person doesn’t mean that they will do so. This is especially true in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Don Pedro and society do not take the role of the other, so Don John is treated poorly.

Don Pedro considers his brother evil without considering the hardship connected with John’s birth.<sup>22</sup> He does not take the role of another person, as Mead suggests people should do. All other characters in *Much Ado About Nothing* seem to be forgiven for the mistakes and trickery they act out in the play. This is especially evident in the maidservant Margaret. Unlike Don John, society has no preconceived notions of villainy about Margaret.<sup>23</sup> So, when Margaret is discovered to be a part of the trick on Claudio and Hero, she does not receive blame or punishment for her actions. Margaret acted

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<sup>19</sup> Richter.

<sup>20</sup> Krieger, 50.

<sup>21</sup> Griffin, 58.

<sup>22</sup> Philip Edwards, “Shakespeare and the Healing Power of Deceit,” in *Shakespeare Survey: An Annual Survey of Shakespearian Study and Production*, 31, ed Kenneth Muir (Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 122.

<sup>23</sup> Krieger, 55.

unknowingly when assisting the villains in their trick, but her actions are not the reason she should be punished. It's her lack of action after the trick takes place that makes Margaret deserving of punishment. Margaret knows the truth of what really happened, but she says nothing. Her silence causes just as much trouble as the villains cause. By speaking up she could have stopped the entire trap that disrupts society. Yet, at the end of the play, Margaret is not punished, and Don John is punished.<sup>24</sup> This is because Margaret is not defined as a villain in the minds of other people.

The entire story of *Much Ado About Nothing* balances Don Pedro's "good" deceptions against Don John's "evil" deceptions.<sup>25</sup> Pedro doesn't manipulate other people because John forces him to. Rather, deceit is simply a part of life in Messina. Philip Edwards, author of *Shakespeare and the Healing Power of Deceit*, writes that the "conventions of Shakespearean comedy require deceit."<sup>26</sup> Both brothers, and most other people in Messina, are born schemers. Elliot Krieger, author of *Social Relations and the Social Order in 'Much Ado About Nothing'*, writes, "Messinians do not search behind appearances for a truth, but attack and manipulate appearances, in an attempt to get their society into new configurations."<sup>27</sup>

In conclusion, Don John's action of deception does not make him a villain. In fact, the main reason Don John's trick is seen as worse than that of Don Pedro's is because the majority of characters do not like Don John. Edwards writes, "Concealing what you are and pretending to be what you are not is a widespread activity among

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Edwards, 122.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 116.

<sup>27</sup> Krieger, 51.

Shakespeare's good characters as well as among his villains."<sup>28</sup> Deceit is not a moral matter. The fact that Don John uses trickery does not make him a villain. Both "bad" guys and "good" guys function on deception. The only other possible explanation for why Don John is a villain is his bastard birth.

Edward writes, "*Much Ado About Nothing* makes no difficulties about its thesis: that people are being endlessly taken in, and are constantly making major decisions on the basis of evidence that turns out to be manufactured or illusory."<sup>29</sup> Symbolic Interactionism makes Don John a villain. He is seen as a villain in the play because of his illegitimate birth. Through the study of Mead's Symbolic Interactionism, Elizabethan culture towards bastardry, Shakespearean text, and studies of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, we now understand that Don John is not a villain by choice, but of circumstance. He is a villain created through a language-constructed reality of Symbolic Interactionism.

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<sup>28</sup> Edwards, 116.

<sup>29</sup> Edwards, 124.

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