

How does Shakespeare present Don John in Act 1?

At first, Shakespeare presents Don John as a quiet and reserved character who sits in the shadow of his more powerful brother - Don Pedro. This can be seen in his first line: "I thank you. I am not of many words, but I thank you". This contrasts the earlier picture of Beatrice and Benedick who have almost too many words to say about one another and are constantly sparring. This immediately sets Don John apart as being different and his presence seems to make people feel uncomfortable.

However in Act 1 Scene 3 our opinion of Don John changes. As he talks with Conrade, he describes how "I cannot hide what I am". The reader could infer from this that Don John has been outlawed by his family for being illegitimate, and that he still holds a lot of resentment and anger towards his father and brother. He may be sick of hiding due to the fact that it is not his fault that he is a bastard - this presents a bitter and frustrated version of Don John to the reader.

Whilst talking to Conrade - a very low status character - Don John remarks a lot about his morals and emotions, contrasting the image of him being reserved. This could present Don John as being someone who is only comfortable talking to people who are considered "unimportant" or "lowly". This could highlight his own - and his family's - opinion of his status and class.

Don John goes on to describe how "I had rather be a canker in a hedge than a rose in his grace". "Canker" is a type of wild rose, suggesting that Don John would rather be considered a "weed" than have to suck up to Don Pedro. This could imply that he is out of place and hard to get rid of in his family - the black sheep. "Canker" can also be a disease - this portrays Don John as a pest and something of an annoyance rather than an asset to such a rich and high status family. It could also show how Don Pedro's family struggle or are unwilling - to accept Don John due to him being illegitimate. This clearly causes a lot of tension between them all.

Don John boldly and unapologetically describes himself as a "plain-dealing villain". This presents him as a straightforward criminal with nothing to hide and perhaps shows how he wants to take revenge on his family. The phrase "plain-dealing villain" is also a bit of an oxymoron, as how could a criminal be honest in their behaviours? This presents Don John as a confused man who has suffered a lot for something that wasn't his fault. Shakespeare also presents him as incredibly bitter - he appears to want to stamp on any hint of happiness. This includes Claudio's love of Hero, which he appears envious of ("That young start-up hath all the glory of my overthrow").