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*Much Ado* about Black Naturalism:  
Don John, Blood, and Caged Birds

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**Abstract**

William Shakespeare's comedy, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem, "Sympathy," peer through black naturalism's socially deterministic lens, despite conflicts in time, geopolitics, social norms, and literary imagination. Specifically, Don John's truculent reference about "sing[ing] in his cage" (1.3.32) inspired investigation into whether Dunbar's famed line, "I know why the caged bird sings" (21), intentionally alludes to Shakespeare's work. While the research is inconclusive, the references provide clarity for Don John's character particularly. Essentially, Don John's foolhardy evil meets society's standards for masking social truths, just as Dunbar's poem has been reduced to a sweet and imaginative ditty over time. Thus, this article broadly explores society's tendency to recycle oppression under expedient pretenses. Although Don John self-proclaims inherent evil, closer scrutiny of his figurative scar – coat of arms, representing illegitimacy – reveals a socially determined position, more consistent with Dunbar's second-rate life based on skin color and his naturalism based on whiteness. Because Mowat and Werstine suggest that Don John's ill-intentioned behaviors are less about biology (blood) than impassioned human response to social injustice (Blood), naturalism links the unlikely pair. As such, the article uses Dunbar's black naturalism to exemplify societal "caging" in *Much Ado* and "Sympathy."

**Keywords:** Shakespeare, black naturalism, Dunbar, biological determinism, Don John, sympathy, oppression, social determinism, comedy, *Much Ado About Nothing*

Most people do not hope for a physical injury to leave a scar, for a visible reminder of pain, regardless of its origin. Instead, people prefer to detach pain from memory even though the scar's external demarcation is also a

sign of healing. Furthermore, since scars hold literal and metaphorical meaning, both must be considered. While literal scars denote physical marks left on the body after mutilation, metaphorical scars connote lingering psychological and emotional pains that have been repressed and dressed by other wounds or calloused attitudes and behaviors. In William Shakespeare's comedy, *Much Ado About Nothing*, Don John fits the bill of a hardened individual who carries scars of both kinds. Barbara Mowat and Paul Werstine inform the reader that although battle wounds do not mutilate him, his armor displays a bold stripe to signify that he is an illegitimate son (10). Worn daily, it represents his scar, a societal-inflicted wound. Still, Don John instigates much turmoil in this Shakespearian comedy by intentionally causing others pain, which he claims is born out of inherent evil. Yet, is his behavior innate or consciously defensive? And, if they are defense mechanisms, should the audience sympathize with Don John's tyrannous acts as pleas for companionship and love? Oddly enough, these questions can be answered by scrutinizing Don John's words and actions through naturalism or Paul Laurence Dunbar's particular take on naturalism. Don John and Dunbar's poetic speaker in "Sympathy" converse through dissimilar times and social contexts, addressing matters of social position and predetermination, yet both worlds declare them rogues. More acutely, an explication of Dunbar's poem places diametrically opposed "persons" and conditions on an analogous literary playing field. An even more effective suture for these linked characters is that "black naturalism represents an 'unusually syncretic form' [because of] its ability to adapt to 'a wide range of historical and aesthetic traditions'" (Morgan 32). Consequently, these sixteenth- and nineteenth-century works use oppression as an acceptable form of governance, yet both marginalized "characters" learn to cope, albeit differently. Although their varying degrees of societal awareness ignite distinct responses, the necessity for undesired rejoinders, three centuries apart, reveals society's tendency toward recursive subjugation. More specifically, Don John's resolute opposition to "singing in a cage" (1.3.32) is contentious with Dunbar's poetic speaker who welcomes the opportunity to sing a despondent song while caged, yet the incongruities connect them across time and space. Ultimately, through Dunbar and his

poetic speaker, Don John's figurative scar presents itself as a wound that is less about biological makeup and more about social determinism, or black naturalism.

*Much Ado About Nothing* is significantly a comedy that opens up opportunities to scrutinize the world. According to Heather Hirschfeld, "comedy is a 'problem-solving story'" (10). Although critics have not settled on a "unified" idea for Shakespeare's comedies, they typically revolve around domesticity and marriage (10-11). Essentially it is the juxtaposition of ideas – light and heavy – that makes Shakespeare's comedies work. More specifically, Steve Mentz claims his comedies "bring unlike things together on multiple levels, from the marriage-plots that unite male and female characters to rapprochements in the arenas of class, politics, and nation" (250). Hirschfeld's scholarship further identifies less conciliatory elements such as "intrigues of desire running up against familial and social obstacles" (10). For example, class divisions between sixteenth-century Spanish and Italian characters in *Much Ado* allow Shakespeare to bring social awareness to the afore-mentioned topics through relational banter. Consequently, Shakespeare's comedy is a "juxtaposition of ... holiday spirit, even transgression, that acknowledges the absurdity of human foibles at the same time that it promises their resolution" (Hirschfeld 10). Specifically, Don John's ignoble character and low social status make him a pivotal player in reading the text through a naturalist lens; he provides a clear division between the "spirits" of the privileged and the deprived because the disadvantaged are cast as transgressors in naturalism. Although *Much Ado* does not end in perfect harmony since Don Pedro does not find a wife, there is hope that he will marry based on his desire to find love, social position, and geniality. Don John's future, on the other hand, entails "brave punishments" (5.4.132) because of self-inflicted actions that require a keener scrutiny of his gravitations towards villainy. Therefore, Shakespeare cleverly exposes social transgressions based on the separations of class.

Hirschfeld addresses both Northrop Frye and C. L. Barber's concept, "saturnalian," to further explicate social-political aspects of Shakespeare's comedies. Whereas Barber's term evokes an "ideologically conservative" approach that "provides an outlet for psychological and

political energies which, having been discharged, no longer threaten the status quo (11), Frye's theory maintains that Shakespeare's comedies "begi[n] with an anticomic society, a social organism blocking and opposed to the comic drive, which the action of the comedy evades or overcomes" (qtd. in Hirschfeld 11). Further, Frye's anticomic society fits the black naturalist doctrine, yet the cathartic liberation that Barber suggests does not exist in a naturalist text, for social pressures make it difficult for naturalist characters to emit sighs of relief. Despite dissimilarities between the genres, readers should consider Shakespeare's original intent but also cogitate the ways in which generations and systems perpetuate hegemonic control.

In *Much Ado*, the ensemble cast carries multiple cunning plots forward. The major characters conspire over love, war, and relationships, each of which Don John attempts to use to his advantage. Fundamentally, the play reveals light-hearted conspiracies – primarily between Hero and Claudio, and Beatrice and Benedick – based upon Shakespeare's traditional comedic themes. The plot begins after Don Pedro is victorious over the uprising of his half brother, Don John the Bastard. Fighting during the Italian Wars and adding to his social stigma, Don John is an illegitimate Spaniard from Aragon who is defeated by his noble Spanish brother in a Spanish occupied territory. Although the brothers publicly reconcile, Don John begins to look for opportunities to harm those responsible for his defeat in battle. As a celebrated accomplice to Don Pedro on the battlefield, Claudio (from Florence) becomes one of Don John's targets. Thus, when Don Pedro courts Hero on Claudio's behalf at the masquerade ball, Don John tries to convince Claudio that Don Pedro's intentions are impure. After his plot fails, Don John accepts Borachio's plan to harm Claudio's pending nuptials. They lure Claudio and Don Pedro to Hero's home, informing Claudio of her infidelity, while Borachio uses Hero's servant girl, Margaret, as a ruse to make Hero appear to be intimately disloyal. After Claudio publicly condemns her, Hero must feign death to overcome social embarrassment. Yet, as expected, the truth of Hero's innocence and existence is made known by the not-so-expected watchman, Dogberry; the new insight sanctions Hero and Claudio's matrimony as well as confessions of love from Beatrice and Benedick,

despite their history of bickering. Nonetheless, Don John flees the scene, is captured, brought back to Messina, and made to wait until the joviality ends and proper punishments can be arranged.

Throughout the eventful plot, it is Don John's bastard label and foul acts that invoke naturalism. As Natasha Richter asserts, "he cannot participate in rewarding social exchanges like his brother or [become] married to anyone respectable, like Claudio or Benedick. In fact, his alternative to interacting with society in an evil and manipulative way is not interacting with society at all. Don John would rather be hailed as the 'plain-dealing villain' than a 'nobody.'" His journey from manipulation – as a means of escaping his circumstances – to alienation, with dismal results, reflects naturalism's premise. For example, during the audience's first encounter with Don John, he declares gratitude to the governor, who commends his public reconciliation with Don Pedro; however, Don John disguises his intentions with meekness: "I thank you, I am not of many words, but I thank you" (1.1.154-155). However, it quickly becomes evident that Don John is less than appreciative of Don Pedro and the other victors. And, though he is not the most loquacious character, his actions speak loudly while creating mischief. In true Shakespearean fashion, his evil intents focus on marriage, as the pain from lost love often removes social filters that potentially delegitimize the legitimate, proven with Claudio's public shaming of Hero, his true love. These malicious acts are characteristics of naturalism, "the seedy underbelly of human existence" (Thompson 83).

Still, social repression conditions Don John to respond provocatively towards a society that punishes him for sins that do not belong to him. Being half-brother to the adored Prince Don Pedro of Aragon, who is heir to intangible prestige and tangible lands, Don John is nothing more than a "*fillius nullius* (the heraldic term for illegitimate), ... [and] 'not so much the son of nobody, as the *heir* of nobody'" (Pritchard 51). Through a naturalist lens, Don John's lack of inheritance places a glass ceiling on his ambitions, so he acts with passionate emotions in order to make headway on his schemes (Mowat and Werstine 28). Because aristocrats have no visible wounds or scars to display, Don John finds it necessary to create injury for them. Although his actions affect

other characters, he intends to harm his brother and Claudio, men whose legitimate blood provides them a seemingly carefree existence. According to Amiri Baraka in "Expressive Language," "the view from the top of the hill is not the same as that from the bottom of the hill." Those privileged with noble births or unaffected by social stigma cannot understand Don John's position, for it is a testimony that only those experiencing affliction from the margins can comprehend. Particular to Dunbar's black naturalism, Don John's seediness plants hope for retribution as his *raison d'être*. Stating that his aim is, "to be disdained of all" (1.3.26-27), he convincingly makes plain that it is his life's purpose to make others hate him. Thus, errant behaviors allow him to momentarily attain his goal, a sort of countercultural accomplishment for a deviant. However, as occurs with most characters in black naturalism, Don John continues down a superficially victorious path until the realities of systems become apparent. He fails to realize that without the proper social standing or at least the right support, there will be little concern for his name and agenda. He will merely commit horrendous acts that will satisfy his thirst for evil but ensure his downfall. To him, this depravity is inherent, or "fit[s] his blood" (1.3.26), and eliminates any sense of remorse, because passing on evil is his divinely assigned duty. Richter argues that Don John wants others to believe that "his blood, his origins as a bastard, forces him outside of society and renders him 'evil.'" Thus, by acting the part of a villain, Don John believes he fulfills a role delegated to him by his biological makeup, and, Richter surmises, Don Pedro evades corruption because he only shares half of his brother's genes. Furthermore, the social deterministic components of black naturalism oppose biological determinism, making Don John's impassioned decisions against Messina occupants based on social oppression.

Black naturalism is primarily concerned with characters whose decisions are governed by the environment or external forces. While Shakespeare inspired several Romantic writers, naturalism is a subcategory of Realism, which was largely reactionary to Romanticism. Because they dreamed of authentic as opposed to romanticized depictions of ordinary life, Realist writers ventured away from the Romantics' notion of finding individualized truth through poetic imagination. Naturalists

instead expounded upon Realism's position by focusing on the lower class as subjects, especially postulating human inability to control the forces ruling the natural world. Black naturalism is a literary genre that acknowledges characters deemed outcasts as a means of reforming the stratified system, which declares outsiders as unworthy of the leisurely freedoms guaranteed to the aristocracy. Essentially, "there [was] tension between what was seen as the 'overcivilized' man and the 'brute'" (Thompson 95). Although naturalism has a clear natural or environmental component, there is also a social element that instigates labeling others as civilized or brute. Furthermore, Kecia Driver Thompson identifies a key element of naturalism as the notion "that we are at the mercy of forces beyond our control, and there is no stable or just order in the natural world that will ensure that we get what we deserve" (81). And from this instability among external controlling forces, black naturalists began to scrutinize human nature as well as the contributing, exterior forces that stimulate reasons for individual and collective "brute" behaviors.

Following similar ideas, Dunbar's prolific writing more specifically represents black naturalism. His oeuvre supports the basic premise of traditional naturalism, but more pointedly calls attention to the discrepancies between races within the always already hierarchical system of the time. Crucially, however, "the naturalist canon has traditionally not included African American writers before the 1940s and 1950s; before then, black writers tended to be labeled as local color or regionalist writers" (Thompson 85), which is in and of itself a symptomatic concern about systems and hegemonic forces which black naturalism speaks against. Consistently, as black American writers trickled into the literary marketplace, their restrictions from major genre categorization (i.e. separate genres according to race – black naturalism) exposed subtle power dynamics regarding readership, transculturation, marketability, and subjections to social injustices that in earlier times had more blatantly reduced them to animalistic labels and restricted their writing capacities. Accordingly, Dunbar's career was established by the influential literary critic William Dean Howells, who based his initial raving review of the writer's collection of poems, *Majors and Minors*, on a photo revealing Dunbar's "pure African features" in conjunction with his now familiar

dialect (Jarrett 496-97). Being grateful to Howells' notoriety but also trapped by his suggestion that black dialect should be his mainstay, Dunbar experienced a slightly more privileged account of the disrepair that defines many characters in black naturalism.

Nevertheless, Dunbar's black naturalism cannot be lumped into an arbitrary "black" category, as he and his literature are heavily criticized for a "contradictory range of racial representations" (Daigle 634). While most readers concur that his work is revolutionary and brave for the time, some regard his canon as being too full of white pandering rather than racially uplifting ideas. Most agree, however, that he was a talented writer whose art was controlled, in some manner, by society, which exemplifies that social control or determinism is a major point of consensus between traditional and black naturalism. As Thomas L. Morgan (2012) claims, "Dunbar's naturalism presents white social control as a deterministic influence on black life" (8). For black characters, and specifically Dunbar's poetic speaker in "Sympathy," "white determinism functions as the overarching 'natural' law governing [its life]: it is the material reality affecting [its] daily li[fe]" (Morgan 9). This determinism acknowledges, perhaps even exposes, hegemonic realities that American majorities have allowed for centuries. Dunbar's black naturalism, then, fights against society's trend of cloaking its oppressive forces labeled as romantic or imagined ideals by simply exposing the root cause of disruption in black communities.

Whereas quintessential black naturalist writers like Richard Wright and Ann Petry portray their subjects as hopelessly and consistently bound to the systems society creates for them, Dunbar utilizes gritty moments of hope to set his naturalism apart from other examples of black naturalism. Jonathan Daigle uses Dunbar's naturalist novel, *Sport of the Gods*, to point out this difference claiming, "Dunbar suggests that unexpected cultural possibilities can emerge from inhospitable environments" (646). Similarly, "Sympathy" proposes an anticipative "cultural possibility," despite the caged bird's uncongenial circumstances. Dunbar, then, sets his naturalism in a slightly different category. Still, he is a black naturalist writer, regardless of snippets of optimism, because he represents the inequitable standard to which black characters are held. Because invented



differences about black characters have a tendency towards societal surreptitiousness, “naturalist texts have a history of negotiating meaning between social classes, including the delineation of urban realities to middle class readers” (Thompson 81). Dunbar’s debatable incongruities opened up broader ideas to his predominantly white readership, but his unique sense of naturalism also contributes intricacies that provide greater opportunities to discuss characters outside a specific genre, era, or race.

Dunbar’s black naturalism allows for considerations of Don John’s comportment. Mowat and Werstine point out in their explanatory notes of the Folger Shakespeare Library edition of *Much Ado* that “Blood,” rather than blood, “[is] considered the seat of emotion and passions” (28), which juxtaposes one’s naturally stable condition and implies Don John’s actions are based on a lustful desperation. Hence, Don John is impassioned by the extreme societal circumstances before him and is coerced to act accordingly. Instead of intrinsic reflexes, social conditions define his nasty disposition. Correspondingly, the “plain-dealing villain” (1.3.30) is conjured from Blood (social determinism associated with black naturalism) rather than blood (biological determinism). Nevertheless, notions about blood in the Greek philosophers’ theory of humours factor into Don John’s demeanor (U.S. National Library of Medicine). The early psychological or medical system connects four bodily fluids – black bile, yellow bile, phlegm, and blood – to temperament, behavior, and atmospheric elements. Because of its apt use during Shakespeare’s time, critics suggest that understanding the theory helps comprehend Shakespearean rhetoric. Mathew Steggle claims that “Shakespearean comedy engages through the humours with an idea of selfhood that is frequently figured as mutable, communicable, and liquid” (234). Having an ability to endure change, the humours offer a breadth of considerations for the Shakespearean text. Because blood represents sanguine or optimistic temperaments, yellow and black bile are humours more characteristic of Don John’s behaviors, because yellow fluids reflect anger and impulse and black humours indicate gloom and unpredictability (Steggles 223). Accordingly, sixteenth-century medics would have judged Don Jon’s ignoble conduct as triggered by an imbalance in fluids. Yet, external forces drive his deeds and Blood rather than blood is allied to

social controls. Thus, while collecting data to plot against Claudio and Hero's marriage, Don John emotes about his powerless public position: "I am trusted with a muzzle and enfranchised with a clog" (1.3.30-31), professing the heftiness of being without a voice that leads him to be a "canker" (1.3.25) instead. Maurice Charney's analysis similarly explains Don John's brutishness: "His calumny of Hero, which results in her supposed death, is weakly motivated and seems anomalous in this play. Don John seems to be playing out his own vengeful and unsubstantiated impulses, as if something dire is needed to cure his melancholy" (8).

Moreover, a change in systems is an ominous but much needed charge to heal broken individuals who perpetually inflict pain on others, especially since Don John's callous motivation towards Claudio is an attempt to "cure" his own internal pain. Hence, Don John wildly points his sword toward the pawns of societal affairs, battling persons or the blood that boils inside of him, rather than the customs that defeat him in combat at each turn. While Don Pedro is nurtured by society's structure, Don John falls sick from its recourses, so he must act, albeit immorally, to heal the infection troubling his psyche and his body. Although his illness mimics symptoms of imbalanced humours, his desperation parallels that of unsolicited inheritors of black naturalism whose "lives ... seem doomed by a combination of fate and chance. It shows us violence, gut, poverty, dirt, blood" (Thompson 83). Thompson also regards blood in its fluid form, but she suggests incensed savagery causes its materialization. Again, these unfortunate circumstances do not point to a glitch in the hereditary structure, but to one individual aggressively fighting his way out of social despondency. Although his plan fails and he does not live in squalor, as do some naturalist characters, his audacious behavior forces him to flee towards the "dirt," outside of Messina's graces. He, however, cannot escape the system that assigns him to a humble position.

Still, intentional villainy might seem a far-reaching connection compared to that of singing birds in cages. The most obvious connection between Dunbar's "Sympathy" and Shakespeare's Don John is found in Act 1, scene 3, when Don John resolves to prove his true character while confiding in Conrade. Contextually, Don John feels compelled to entrust

his feelings to Conrade because of the governor Leonato's previous condescending remarks upon his return to Messina:

Leonato: If you swear, my Lord, you shall not be forsworn. (1.1.124)

In the same way that Leonato "covers his harsh greeting with a welcoming of Don John, his doubts remain dormant under the surface of his kind words" (Richter); so too are the social deeds hidden beneath romantic idealism. Still, Don John's rejoinder has prompted intertextual investigation:

...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. (1.3.30-35)

To contemporary readers, Dunbar's repeated and rather iconic line, "I know why the caged bird sings" stands out as an intertextual parallel to Don John's decree to not "sing in [his] cage." Simply put, these famous lines appear to be inspired by Shakespeare. The question arises as to whether or not Dunbar had in mind Don John's socially leprous condition, which clearly weighed down his freedoms, or, if Don John's villainous behaviors encouraged the poetic speaker to pray so that his soul might find freedom rather than remain incarcerated by evil deeds. While there are interesting speculations about Shakespeare's influence on writers like Dunbar, unfortunately, there are no conclusive findings on Dunbar's familiarity with Shakespeare's *Much Ado*. For example, Shakespeare's theatrical compositions inspired many black writers because of their griot-like charm. Experts weighed in on the topic during a Folgers Shakespeare podcast:

HALL: African Americans have come from a long tradition of oral performance, and so I think they have an appreciation for theatre, and for someone like Shakespeare who comes from an oral tradition.  
JENNINGS: We use storytelling to tell history. So much of that is part and parcel of African, particularly West African, cultures. (Hall and Jennings)

While these oral traditions are applicable to Dunbar's literary repository, as a black writer both criticized and praised for his use of dialect, Shakespeare's diction and form inevitably influence his writing. Certainly "cages" or "birds" do not belong to Shakespeare, but Phillip Valenti reports from the Schiller Institute that Dunbar "continued his practice of immersing himself in Classical culture, attending recitations from Shakespeare's *Othello* and *Macbeth* [and was] ... inspired by knowledge of universal history." It seems possible that Dunbar penned "Sympathy" about a bird trapped in a cage singing a sorrowful song, while thinking of what comedy and notions of illegitimacy have shielded over time. However, the ways in which race entraps Shakespeare's tragic character Othello builds a case for Dunbar's using *Much Ado* as a poetic springboard for his own poetry. Accordingly, while Dunbar could not directly relate to Othello's royal background, he was familiar with notoriety and status through his literary works. Importantly, however, both men are stifled by socially constructed blackness that undoubtedly evokes Dunbar's interest in Shakespearean plays and personal desire to write lyrics that highlight the ways in which insatiable hegemony affects the marginalized. Correspondingly, Dunbar's diligent exploration in Euro- as well as Afrocentric histories suggests a possible intentional allusion, but a definitive resolution of this issue is not possible. What can be resolved is that Dunbar's naturalism grounds the two distant worlds, since social exclusion is an ever-present reality.

Though Don John declares he will not sing and Dunbar's speaker sings while caged, both are bound in black naturalism's melancholia. Dunbar's "Sympathy" addresses the "universal cry for freedom, an inevitable theme of African American literature since black poets tried to sing in a strange land. The speaker in the poem metaphorically becomes the caged bird beating its wings against bars that do not give way" (Gabbin 228). Like Don John, Dunbar's speaker discusses the sadness the caged bird feels from not only being confined, but also being cognizant of losing its habitat's natural beauty while detained. Dunbar, himself, was something of a caged bird while working at the Library of Congress, and, after quitting in 1898, he penned "Sympathy" in 1899. It was a period when African Americans were hardly perceived as intellectual,

still Dunbar wanted greater creative freedom (Roman 32-36) and, thus, finally uncaged himself. According to his wife, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, also a poet,

the 'iron grating of the book stacks...suggested to him the bars of the bird's cage.' [Therefore]...this outstanding, gifted African American male poet realiz[ed] that these highly regarded books were responsible for oppression, rather than freeing him, because of their racist assumptions. (Roman 32)

Because of this confinement, Dunbar chose a deceptive, or naturalist response, asking for leave of absence from the LOC due to illness, when in fact, he desired literary freedom (Armenti par. 14). A need to fabricate the truth in order to leave one honorable career for another paints constricting bars around him. Naturalism, again, provides a cruder examination of real life, though his mendaciousness is incongruent with the moral norms of the period. Hence, in the same way that a nineteenth-century black poet's prestigious job brings him no closer to power or creative license, so Don John's proximity to privilege grants him no access to royal treatment. Despite being centuries apart, each speaks of society's oppressive structure. Don John is oblivious to its snares, while Dunbar and his speaker abrasively contend against its forces. Nevertheless, in both scenarios, the dominating tiers of society continue to weigh down the devalued.

Dunbar and his poetic speaker's injustices are decidedly different from those of Don John. In "Sympathy," the bird's cage is representative of black naturalism's social determinism. Its home equates to unrelenting entrapment because instead of lackadaisically feeling the sun, "on the upland slopes" (Dunbar 2), as a biologically determined flying creature should, it is culturally instructed to beat "his wing / Till its blood is red on the cruel bars" (8-9) and "fly back to his perch and cling" (10). The speaker must work against its natural proclivity in order to stay within the boundaries society creates for it. And although it sings, "it is not a carol of joy or glee" (18), but one of supplication, of plea and determination that compels it to fight another day. The bird speaker is careful to clarify its lack "of joy and glee," in order to detach its compromised position from contentment, especially as its blues

are deeply ingrained in a painful history that used dark bodies for entertainment. In tune with the poem's title, the speaker lets out a dejected and exasperated, perhaps prayerful, "ah me" (15) after narrating the prisoner's song; it is clearly scarred from such warrings, yet it is the social climate that composes a perpetual fighting song within its own home.

Often because they have no control over their environment, black naturalist characters evoke behaviors that society labels "primitive" or "dark," characterizations that Don John is as prone to as is Dunbar's caged poetic speaker. Simply put, "weaker" forces or characters provide raw reactions to "stronger" ones acting upon them, and strong and weak are bound to the same ideas of deterministic, color-coded systems. While Don John's whiteness seemingly plays no part in his low repute, his outer apparel confirms his "weak" status. But upon closer glance at the Oxford English Dictionary's (OED) many definitions of "white," Don John moves closer to the scarred, black characterization of Dunbar's naturalism. Because the OED describes one of its early definitions of "white" as "free from malignity or evil intent" (qtd. in De Sousa 182), Don John's biologically deterministic excuse for villainy falters. Interestingly, Don John's lack of love more convincingly aligns with famed black author James Baldwin and his self-proclaimed "'loveless education'" (qtd. in De Sousa 172). Appropriately, Baldwin once attributed his callous upbringing to Shakespeare's "oppressive writing" but later confessed it was more accurately on account of a past replete with Southern racial sins (De Sousa 172). As a white male, who seemingly set the standard for writing and writers, Shakespeare is easily viewed as repressive to a black homosexual male writer living and writing within the Jim Crow South. And, in the same way that twentieth-century Baldwin interprets his life through Shakespeare's pen, Don John's whiteness can be read through Dunbar's naturalist perspective.

Reading Dunbar as the caged bird, his speaker is reduced to African-American stereotype; yet, by developing a perseverant naturalism, the writer-speaker fights the system. Don John, on the other hand, concedes by accepting that his armor's symbolic sin seeps into his blood. By painting a darkened portrait of himself, he hopes to escape

further scrutiny. But, in doing so, he falls into society's trap, which coaxes him to oppress himself in order to elide its (society's) sins. Accordingly, Don John is excluded from the final festivities, and the ensemble eagerly defines and dismisses him as ignoble. Furthermore, it seems that Shakespeare leaves a space for "uncovering the lived experience of Others through early modern texts. Doing so ... we might be able to resist what [Kim Hall] terms, 'White privilege in Renaissance studies, the luxury of not thinking about race – hence duplicating racism in writing and professional relations'" (De Sousa 176). Because black naturalism candidly debates white privilege in relation to Others, and because Shakespeare allows space for such disputes, black naturalism, and particularly Dunbar's, is an efficacious lens through which to study Shakespeare's Don John.

While differences between Dunbar's speaker and Don John are inevitable, Dunbar's black naturalism analyzes the environmental forces typically associated with the cultural institutions of his time. Clearly, Shakespeare's Don John is not African American or from the late nineteenth century during which Dunbar writes. Even so, "in Dunbar's hands, ... white Western hubris masquerades as scientific legitimacy" (Morgan 9). Essentially, Dunbar's particular spin on naturalism examines whiteness and its propensities toward enforcing global legality. Morgan uses Charles Mills' *The Racial Contract* to help clarify this ideology as one which

'tak[es] for granted as natural what are in fact human-created structures,' a blindness contingent upon a collective white complicity with established systems of power. Whether overt or accidental, this complicity foregrounds supposedly race-less or universal claims to human identity that leave racial hierarchies silently intact. (7-8)

Divorced from race or perhaps "playing in the dark," as Toni Morrison's 1992 book phrases it, Dunbar's nineteenth-century perspective allows contemporary readers of Shakespeare to scrutinize Don John's biological explanation for wicked behavior as a blind cover-up for societal shame. Just as Morrison's work details white "choked" (17) regard for African-American contributions, so too does society use its power to disregard Don John. However, he attempts to use his ill repute for personal gain.

Whereas Don John announces his blood is to blame, he forgets that it is the social circumstances of his illegitimacy that determine his demeanor, position, and behavior. Because the ideological systems of the time are complicit in shaping his identity, Don John accepts society's attribution to him of a second-rate status beneath his brother, hoping that it will create a "place" for him. What he seems to hide even from himself is that he constructs the genetical story about his own evil nature to shield his sadness about being an outcast. Genetics become a convenient cover for his prideful shame and society's oppressive system that unfortunately leaves racial and social hierarchies "silently intact." As time and science have proven, most prejudices linger because of what people build, not because of biology. Accordingly, when exclusionary ideals prevail, society creates glass houses for flashy Blood appeal rather than sustainable homes that welcome all.

Whereas Dunbar's bird-speaker evokes spiritual supplication to endure its circumstances, Don John does not appear to utilize such a method; but, upon closer review, he slyly educes sacrilegious language. Because Don John's world is something of a social purgatory between the Roman Catholic- and Protestant churches, he epitomizes naturalism, being without power to escape some of the era's religiously derived social contentions. As Kenneth Graham claims, "Shakespeare's generation inherited an unsettled and confusing religious landscape" (106). Don John's perplexity shows up in his rhetoric. When he discusses breaking up the ensuing marriage between Hero and Claudio, he claims, "If I can cross him in any way, I bless myself every way" (1.3.65-66). As Don John asserts irreverent blessings upon himself, he is consumed by atypical religiosity. He parallels his prayer life with a "cross" life by manifesting evil as a stand-in for religious ceremony-prayer, song, or penitence – for which sixteenth-century citizens struggled to solidify as standard practice, producing a hefty sect of citizens who "fell uncomfortably ... in the 'muddled middle'" (Graham 107) during the Reformation. By using this language, however, Don John wants to fall comfortably in line with the nobles who "make the sign of the cross" (Mowat and Werstine 30) as Godly reverence and social compliance. Contrastingly, Dunbar and his speaker do not combat spiritual uncertainty; instead, they struggle with



supplications that teeter between black and white worlds that serve different purposes.

Outside of color, the body represents a bird, shuttling back and forth between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, signifying rhetorical toil from both comedy and black poetics. Thompson claims black naturalist writers and texts “provide a rich context for consideration of the body and the struggle for articulation within the contemporary matrix of desire and power” (98). Moreover, Don John’s body is his coat of arms and Dunbar’s, as the poet speaker, embodies a bird, typifying unreliable and animalistic stories told of Africans in America. Therefore, “the body is presented as often under stress, under attack, and as striving for the basic needs of survival” (Thompson 98). As a writer, however, Dunbar’s body simply signifies blackness, extra pigmentation that indicates deficiency, not opportunity. Shakespeare, contrastingly, has the world as his stage. Still, he seemed to notice society’s naturalistic tendencies and amalgamated them into unique dramatic form. Thus, by reducing characters and writers to bodily representations, black naturalism exposes social disparities that society often ignores, regarding the blatant concerns of black characters, as well as those, who, at first glance, benefit from the top tiers of privilege. Don Jon, then, is a character whose mischief raises consciousness beyond transient merriment.

But, according to Alice Walker, “there was no sympathy for struggle that ends in defeat, which meant there was no sympathy for struggle itself – only for winning” (317). Land conquest is a global and generational concept associated with winning. Considering *Much Ado* is set during the Italian Wars and Dunbar’s bird is a prisoner to Jim Crow democracy, both Don John and Dunbar understand, to varying degrees, how hegemony marginalizes those who lose control of their “place.” The contention between victories and losses exemplifies another component of naturalism by exposing grim realities between the privileged and deprived. Dunbar and his singing speaker evade victory, but his naturalism is made distinct in the determined singing that gives him a voice, nonetheless. Daigle insists that “racist expectations did not trap Dunbar; rather they prompted his remarkable movement across genres and forms” (633). His movement, in avian form, warbles joyless tunes and

moves it and others closer to the bright sun and soft wind (Dunbar 2-3). Thus, Dunbar strategically removes societal inclinations toward complacent felicitousness even when fiery struggle merely provides mild advantages. His approach admonishes a society that gazes at a bird with sympathy while locking it in a cage.

Contrastingly, Shakespeare does not construct overt sympathy for Don John. Instead, Don John uses the same coat of arms to protect his heart that society uses to restrict his social position. Instead of professing his sadness, he follows society's plan for the illegitimate. Since he is perceived as a weed, a wild sore spot ready to be plucked from the Messina field with any wrong move, he gears himself to prick his perfectly groomed brother. Because Don Pedro's progress is advantageously destined, Don John labors to foil his seemingly perfect life. As a thorn and clinging wound in his side, Don Pedro is a perpetual reminder that society has no place for bastards, since Don John is fated to remain on society's contemptible rungs. David Kingsley claims that, "The bastard, like the prostitute, thief and beggar, belongs to that motley crowd of disreputable social types which society has generally resented, always endured. He is a living symbol of social irregularity" (21). Although he claims to prefer canker to rose because of his genetic blood, social reputation plays a significant part. From the play's onset, the audience is aware that Don John "stood out against" (1.3.20) Don Pedro, yet the exact purpose for attack is a mystery. While his rationale cannot be answered unequivocally, the ambiguity adds dimension to Don John's character. Accordingly, Shakespeare does not write Don John as an empathetic character, yet contemporary readers understand that his socially deterministic position provokes savage behavior.

Still, sibling rivalry, between legitimate children or not, is complex. Few men desire to sit in the shadow of their brothers; therefore, sympathy for Don John in the initial pages of the drama is natural to muster. It is empathy that is similar but not equal to Dunbar's confined "Sympathy" in that Don John's conversation with Conrade begins with an ability to speak, rather than sing, a confession about "sadness ... without limit" (1.3.4). Don John and Dunbar's speaker share melancholy according to societal standards that unfavorably rank their external attire or appearance.

Applying the theory of humours, “melancholics were associated with mood swings,” but they were also considered “the most glamorous and distinctive of the four humours ... and affiliated with a high social class” (Steggles 224). Although both characters emotive gloominess, they fail to be accepted by the upper echelon. Furthermore, a new environment minus the coat of arms might change Don John’s life in ways that Dunbar would not escape. Since Don John’s illegitimate birth is what makes others recoil, biology is an easy scapegoat for him to use as a treacherous premise, as placing blame on a Blood-bathed society might draw unnecessary attention toward his already spurned coat of arms. Yet, biology does epitomize enmity in ways that are significant. Brothers compete and, as Walker suggests, society welcomes the winners, but, as Don John understands, the losers are shunned. Accordingly, Don John plays into the illusory image society clothes him with in order to maintain the hierarchal system that keeps him affixed to the lower rungs or the elusive evil genetics for which he is “proud.” His pride in sinister ways allows him victory over a section of life that his princely brother will never touch. Richter affirms that “Messina does indeed perceive Don John as the villain, a role Don John feels he must fulfill, but Shakespeare’s audience is not fooled: onlookers of the play identify Don John as the victim of a cruel and often two-faced society.” It is naturalism at its keenest, exposing societal darkness and its deceptions. Unfortunately, this recursive mental game established long before the sixteenth century continues to announce its strategies to the marginalized today.

Similarly subjugated, the caged bird laboriously contends with its emotions, while Don John provides a direct, lethargic, and almost stoic response to Conrade’s query regarding his sadness. As previously stated, Don John bemoans his mental state in Act 1, scene 3: “There is no measure in the occasion that / breeds. Therefore, the sadness is without limit” (1.3.3-4). Don John suggests that further digging into the sensitivities of his spurned existence is useless. If sorrow is endless, seeking its “breed” is an exercise in futility, so he chooses not to sing in his cage. He claims that he concedes to the strictures thrust upon him at birth, parameters that instill perpetual gloom toward its perceivably broken offspring; he also wishes not to be questioned about his

“mortifying mischief,” (1.3.12) claiming that “I cannot hide / what I am” (1.3.12-13). Hence, there is no discernible cause for him to “hear reason” (1.3.4) from Conrade. Society sees his substandard coat of arms and questions his humanity. Therefore, he tells others that his sadness is determined by nature because his conviction of evil is a balm that discreetly heals scars. He ignores socially constructed reactions; rather, they are Blood responses and social defense mechanisms, despite belief that his evil is innate. Don John’s acceptance of himself as a tainted character affirms his inability to sing happy tunes to appease the status quo; he also feels he cannot allow himself to be silenced. Instead, he chooses to believe his purpose is found in devious action: “If I had my / mouth, I would bite” (1.3.32-33). He seeks to inflict pain through action because pain has been inflicted upon him. Also, after his loss on the battlefield garners additional disrespect, Don John chooses biting over singing because words and songs do not win sixteenth-century battles. His decision corresponds with self-serving man-made inequalities predicated on deception over honesty and malevolence over love in order to maintain or justify cultural standards and practices.

Importantly, Don John’s confidence regarding honest villainy is questionable. He shows his awareness of his lack of freedom by using the conditional “if” when he declares life would be different “if [he] had ... liberty” (1.3.33). Still, it is the phrase, “I would do my liking” that divulges Don John’s true feeling, as he subconsciously announces that he is not living his truth, though he vehemently wants Conrade to believe he is openly and inherently malicious. In actuality, Don John wants circumstances to allow him to legitimize his coat of arms, to smile, and to live peaceably, yet that is not the society in which he dwells, so he must paint his face as the villain and convince others to “let [him] be” and “seek not to alter [him]” (1.3.34-35). Ultimately, he must remain cold in his figurative cage, unsung and unloved, preaching the gospel of “nature made me do it,” although facets of naturalism more accurately control his devious behavior.

Although Don John has a difficult time holding back his thirst for love, he remains faithful to his biological evil claims with imagery about decaying plants:

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. (1.3.25-28)

Likewise, Don John's disregard for love and marriage between the couples in the comedy intimates his inability or unwillingness to appreciate beauty, unlike the caged bird that notes the "wind" and "springing grass" (3) in spite of societal infirmities and setbacks. The bird's ability to see beyond its circumstances not only distances it from Don John but also distinguishes Dunbar's naturalism. Though numerous circumstances prevent Don John from being a "flattering honest man" (1.3.29), the most viable cause is the hierarchal system that will never see past his upper-body scar. However, he also bears his wounds metaphorically, as shown through conversation with his friend, Conrade, who attempts to convince him to tread lightly so as not to lose the progress made with Don Pedro (1.3.20-24). Yet, Don John's deficiency in familial love is based on societal structures that water the canker rather than the rose; thus, evil boils within his blood, though it is not genetically implanted. Instead, he cloaks his dejected position with malicious intent; he uses his blood to justify what is truly his Blood. Because Don John is without foresight or concern for societal problems that determine his position, he contributes to the cyclical oppression designed to cage the Don Johns and Dunbars of the world, under pretenses that they are genetically destined for imprisonment or lowly positions.

Perhaps Don John would gain peace or some sense of freedom if he acknowledged his scars as blatantly as Dunbar's speaker. The scars mentioned in "Sympathy," are both literal and metaphorical:

When he fain would be on the bough a-swing;  
And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars  
And they pulse again with a keener sting –  
I know why he beats his wing! (11-14)

The caged bird sustains scarring and throbbing pains from long periods of stagnant perching as well as psychological scars from years of entrapment, knowing that his wings were created to fly rather than sting.

And though he readily peels back layers to expose every scar, each “with a keener sting” (13), he continues his song of supplication, which provides a freedom that cannot be revoked. Conversely, Don John ignores his Blood or social position draped flamboyantly as a coat of arms, not only alerting courtiers of his inability to obtain property but also the inequality that must dwell between what could have been princely blood. Hence, he chooses evil instead of acknowledging humane “old, old scars” (12) as observed from the aforementioned conversation with Conrade in Act 1, scene 3. Rather than settle differences between Don Pedro and Claudio after losing the battle, Don John devises clumsy plans that fail to make him worthy of noble company. In the final scene, once everyone is recoupled with their chosen lover and Don John has been labeled the schemer, even by his trusted padres, he must isolate himself before he receives further scars to his coat:

MESSENGER. My lord, your brother John has ta'en in flight  
And brought with armed men back to Messina  
BENEDICK. (to Prince): Think not on him till tomorrow.  
I'll devise thee brave punishments for him. (5.4.129-32)

(Of course, this is a comedy and the plans will always backfire.) The “brave punishment” will merely pile on another unfortunate grievance.

These two “characters,” then, bridge unforeseen worlds because “the sense of mobile and global interconnectedness, alongside efforts to erect walls to bear foreign migration and influence” (De Sousa 184) is contradictory as well as necessarily insightful for contemporary readers, as it integrates centuries, spaces, and geopolitical subjects. Both “sides” desire better, and, hence, unite in order to construct metaphorical prayer songs to a God who watches over the centuries despite conflicting languages and struggles. Still, as De Sousa makes clear, this “double gesture has clear implications for the question of race in the comedies and the ‘development of ideologies of racial differences.’ In other words, Shakespeare explores fears of things foreign and suspicion of interconnectedness in a globalized world”; however, he is also invested in borders, as *Much Ado*’s Sicilian backdrop contributes (184). For Don John, this means he is captive to the social conditions set before him,

while Dunbar uses it as foreknowledge to overcome limiting circumstances; but, for a contemporary readership, it reveals the false sense of freedom democracy stingingly gives to some, but not to all. It seems that, centuries later, society continues to scar its characters.

Ultimately, Don John reduces himself to a single identity in order to cover up his wounds and ignore the depths of his scars, which, unbeknownst to him, perpetuate the system (Morgan 7). The “plain-dealing villain,” then, becomes a tyrannical victim. But it is through Dunbar’s naturalism that Don John’s behaviors are understood as more than genetics: “In mapping the process through which white social power and agency masquerade as biological determinism, Dunbar makes traditional naturalist determinist thought serve his own literary ends...” (Morgan 13), a purpose that makes social inequalities clear. As previously stated, Don John is not the typical candidate for the application of Dunbar’s theory; however, he is certainly one affected by society. Just as Shakespeare’s comedies take liberties in expressing social problems through folly, so Don John can be read through the lens of a nineteenth-century black and caged bird. Kevin Leon took similar artful liberties in his twenty-first century rendition of *Much Ado* with an all-black cast at The Public (Sandoval 20). Don John’s illegitimacy seen through black skin in 2019 undoubtedly hearkens to a different tune. The contemporary black drama unconsciously prompts black naturalism in ways that Don John’s whiteness in the sixteenth century initially evades, despite character content remaining the same. The darkened skin further denigrates his illegitimacy, teaching the subconscious important lessons about how oppression is expediently recycled. Because of his inability to address his wounds like the poetic speaker who sings a joyless prayer, Don John will forever be trapped within a hegemonic rather than a self-possessed interpretation of who he is: he will always be Blood and scars.

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