

Commentary

# Much Ado About Truth: On Seduction, Deception, and Self-deception

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## ABSTRACT

Seduction, while not an unqualified good, is something most people enjoy and desire, especially when it's done in the right way. However seduction almost always involves techniques of deception and self-deception, and risks trust and other moral goods we associate with truthfulness. We examine various accounts of seduction, and focus in particular on two texts: Kierkegaard's *Diary of the Seducer* and Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. We do not draw any strong conclusions about the moral status of seduction; rather, we use the phenomenon to explore the complicated philosophical and psychological terrain of how truth, trust, deception and self-deception may interact in a process with which we are all intimately familiar.

## 1. Introduction

Think about who you would most want to seduce you. Now ask: by seducing you, need this person wrong you? Only the puritanical will say yes. Seduction done by the right person at the right time and in the right way can be a dream come true. Romantic love – one of the highest goods – rarely occurs without seduction. Seducing rightly is tricky, however. It requires, we will maintain,

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the complicity of the seduced. And once such complicity occurs, it becomes puzzling why one might say that seduction occurs. We hope to make this puzzle more strongly felt. In doing so, we hope to shed some light on self-deception, deception of others, and the relationship between the two.

Seduction can be crude, and much worse. Sexual predators seduce, scar, often ruin children. Charismatic ministers seduce their parishioners, cajoling them to donate their wealth to projects that only bolster ministerial egos. Demagogues seduce the public with empty promises of tax-free increases in public benefits and blood-free victories in war. All these seducers wrong their victims not only by the harm that they cause but also by the way that they cause it. Seducers have at best an unstable relationship with truth, and at worst, a hostile relationship. A seducer has plans for the prospective seduced, but does not reveal them, and more likely hides or lies about them. Seduction, it will be plain, often involves deception. Nevertheless seduction can be morally praiseworthy or at a minimum quite fine, even if it is not always so.

At the most general level it may seem easy to say how seduction involves wrong. It may violate a person, playing with his will in ways that disrespects him, by duping him into attaching his affection to an illusion. But the wrong in seduction cannot be reduced to deception. Seduction often also involves preying on a person's vulnerabilities by stimulating his desires in destructive ways that he has a hard time controlling, something as close to offering alcohol to a struggling alcoholic as deceiving someone. A seducer can understand a person's weaknesses and wrongfully exploit those weaknesses without ever deceiving that person. Much seduction, however, seems deceptive at its core. The most successful seductions may involve both the exploitation of the weakness of the seduced and deception. Interestingly, both these strategies involve an attack on a person's autonomy.

## 2.

### 2.1. Seduction and falsehood

Take a simple and common case of seduction. When Smith lies to Jones about his love for her, he seduces her through falsehood. Why not just say that what makes seduction wrong in these cases, is deception, and that what makes deception wrong, when it is wrong, is the violation of autonomy that deception involves? Contemporary Kantians, including Barbara Herman, Christine

Korsgaard, Thomas Hill, and Onora O'Neill take some variant of this autonomy line against deception, and the line seems easily extended to cover seduction (Herman, 1993; Korsgaard, 1986; Hill, 1984). Sarah Buss rejects the appeal to autonomy that the neo-Kantians make in their discussions of deception. She says that deception's apparent clash with autonomy provides no "key" to explaining why deception is sometimes wrong (Buss, 2005). Indeed, she says that claiming an essential clash between autonomy and deception involves metaphysical error (Buss, 2005, p. 213). We disagree with Buss on the explanatory value of autonomy and on her diagnosis of metaphysical error, and will explain why. On other matters, we agree with her. We agree that seduction and hence deception are sometimes morally fine. Indeed, we think that this agreement may transcend the three of us, that at least some of the Kantians Buss selects as her foil are more open to welcoming deception and seduction than Buss acknowledges. So in this paper we investigate when deception is wrong and why, using seduction as our base case of deception. In the end we hope to shed light on the complexity in the idea of respecting autonomy that forms the heart of so many analyses of the wrong in deception.

Before ascending to theory, it will be good to get something more about which to theorize. Here we join Buss in focusing on Johannes' seduction of Cordelia in Kierkegaard's *Diary of the Seducer* (1843/1987). Johannes' seduction is unusual both in its motivation and technique. These details will soon matter for our argument, but not yet. Focus now on the big picture. To cause Cordelia to fall in love with him, Johannes deceives her about his love for her and his intentions for their future. When she does fall for him, he abandons her. Can this have anything to do with Cordelia's autonomy? We think so. We think that he flouts Cordelia's autonomy. It is surprisingly hard to say just how he does this.

Cordelia chooses to allow herself to fall in love with Johannes. She could have resisted, let us suppose, but did not. In fact it is crucial for Cordelia that she understands herself as actively engaged in the process of Johannes' courtship of her: the depth of passion she comes to have for him is the result, she thinks, of her having freely decided to commit herself to him. Cordelia views her choice as an expression of her deepest values, an expression of her autonomy. But it was not. She had been deceived – conned – in ways that undermine her prospects for making a choice that expresses her deepest values. Buss never comes to terms with the con, we will argue. Cordelia's love was aimed at a man who, it turns out, did not meet the description of Johannes

as she understood it. She trusted him to be truthful about himself, but he was not. Her choice to allow herself to fall in love was not autonomous because it flowed from a con, departing from her deepest values, which could only have been realized by a man satisfying a description very different than a true description of Johannes. Here we believe that we echo Barbara Herman, who says that deception is wrong because it causes a person to act on desires that are not hers «all the way down» (1993, p. 228). But Herman's words are vague, and so far ours are, too. The best analysis of "all the way down," we will maintain, requires reflection on the structure of conning, which we soon endeavor to present.

But first back to Buss, and her limits. She offers a causal interpretation of Herman's idea of "all the way down" that is consistent with, but we think not required by Herman's text, and that we find uncharitable. This interpretation provides that a person acts on desires that are hers all the way down when these desires are not caused by anything external to her. Because Cordelia's desire was caused by Johannes, it was not hers all the way down. This interpretation relies on a notion of causation as mere influence; it is hopeless, we think. Typically a person's desires are influenced by something external to the person, as Buss observes. Every person who falls in love is influenced by the object of her affection. So on this causal interpretation of "all the way down," acts of love are never autonomous, nor are virtually any other acts. Although Buss rightly mocks this causal view, she lacks clear textual evidence that it is Herman's view she mocks, and it does not strike us as a view that Herman (or anyone) would be likely to defend. Unfortunately, Herman herself does little to say what she means by her vexing but provocative phrase, "all the way down."

## 2.2. Buss's argument and the problem of autonomy

We think that there is a credible interpretation of the idea that a person's act is not autonomous unless it expresses a desire that is hers all the way down. It is the idea that, at least for important choices, an act expresses autonomy only if it expresses one's deepest desires relative to the object of one's choice. On our view, wrongful deception always wrongly impinges on autonomy. Our argument for this view will be indirect. We aim to show how our argument is needed to explain why Buss's argument fails. Then we will develop an alternative.

Here is Buss's main argument that wrongful deception lacks an essential link to impinging on autonomy:

- (1) A person acts autonomously if he makes the choice that he sees as justified in the circumstances.
- (2) Deception does not prevent a person from making a choice that he sees as justified in the circumstances.
- (3) Deception does not undermine autonomy. Whatever is wrong with deception must be something else.<sup>1</sup>

The lure in this argument comes from its hard-nosed stance regarding autonomy. Autonomous choice is resilient. It occurs even when based on false belief, and this seemingly has implications for the relevance of deception to autonomy: if false belief generally does not undermine autonomy, then why should false belief caused by deception undermine autonomy?

Against Buss, we will argue that in the right circumstances, though not in all circumstances, false belief caused by deception undermines autonomy: sometimes enough false belief undermines autonomy. And we will argue that deception may undermine autonomy in ways that cannot be understood simply in terms of the false belief that it causes: sometimes factors other than quantity matter. (Think of false beliefs that are tailored to one's weaknesses.) Still, we recognize that Buss is on to something when she suggests that autonomy may survive false belief. As Columbus first sailed across the Atlantic, he falsely believed, because he trusted his day's science, that he might run into India. He made the decision to head to India based on the best evidence available, and saw himself as justified in making it. His decision was autonomous, or at least not deficient in autonomy, on Buss's account, because it satisfies (1).

We doubt that satisfying (1) carries the weight that Buss suggests. If the reasons for which one sees one's choice as justified in the circumstances are sufficiently defective reasons, it may undermine the autonomy of one's choice. Some reasons for doubting (1) can be derived from skepticism about the work of Harry Frankfurt, who identifies a free action as one that issues from desires that mesh together in the right way.<sup>2</sup> While Frankfurt's focus was a connection between properly meshing desires and free action, Buss's focus is on properly meshing beliefs and autonomous action. Doubts can be raised about the

<sup>1</sup> For Frankfurt's defense of this view against critics, see Buss & Overton 2002.

<sup>2</sup> See for example, Stump 2002.

importance of meshing. Variants of cases that have been offered as counterexamples to Frankfurt's account of freedom can be used against (1), we believe. Perhaps these cases would not move Buss, as they do not move Frankfurt. They move us. We will argue, moreover, that the cases prove stronger against Buss than against Frankfurt. And we will later offer a very different argument against (1).

### 2.3. Frankfurt's dog

Consider "dog". Imagine that you love dogs but that your spouse, an ingenious neuroscientist, hates them. So she secretly implants in you the minimal constellation of desires needed to get you to wholeheartedly donate your pet schnauzer to the pound. Frankfurt would say that you have freely chosen to take your dog to the pound, though not all metaphysicians would agree that such alien desires could be a source of free choice. We can imagine Buss similarly saying that your choice was autonomous, because you see it as justified, even though you only see it as justified because of your spouse's sneaky move. We believe that this case is perplexing in ways that Buss's account does not allow her to acknowledge. Thus, if one were to discover that an outsider had implanted these anti-dog desires, it is simply unclear how one should respond. From an internal point of view, these desires seem impeccable. Because they mesh well with one's other desires, one is badly positioned to disown them or complain about them. For that reason, one may feel constrained to see the choice as autonomous. But matters are not so simple. Knowing the history of the desires should create a creepy feeling, a sense of alienation from the desire. That this particular history includes someone else's desire to manipulate your choice toward the direction you have in fact chosen heightens the sense of alienation. So we think that a lucid person who discovers that his desires have been implanted should feel confounded about his choice to take the dog to the pound. He should feel perplexed about which course of action, or choice, is in fact free, authentic, or autonomous. Any theory that gives an easy answer misses the complexity of the phenomena. We raise the topic of the controversy regarding Frankfurt's analysis of freedom not because we hope to make a new contribution to resolving the controversy, but because we think that the sources of skepticism about Frankfurt's view, whatever problem they create for him, create worse problems for Buss. Frankfurt faces a problem of alien desires. If some of a person's desires are

alien, then the fact they mesh with other desires he has does little to improve the autonomy of a choice rooted in those desires. The problem of alien desires has a cognitive counterpart. If one's beliefs have an alien genesis, then the fact that they give you a reason to feel justified may leave you with impaired autonomy. This seems clearly true when the beliefs are implanted artificially. But similar impairment occurs when the genesis of beliefs is ordinary deception.

#### 2.4. Guilt-free pancakes

Consider a purely cognitive case, "pancake". You are a brain in a vat. It didn't start out that way, but as you watch the Super Bowl one Sunday afternoon scientists pluck you from your armchair and drop you into their vat. Now you see only what they want you to see, and they have been wholly successful in getting you to think that life had proceeded normally since the Super Bowl. You think that you are choosing and then eating pancakes for breakfast each morning, choosing to jog and then jogging each afternoon, and so on. We think it plain that you do not autonomously choose to eat your pancakes (though the success of our argument does not hinge on this). Despite the fact that your choice was wholehearted, the choice has a suspect history that destroys its authenticity. What made these putative pancakes seem attractive to you was wholesale illusion. If you had known even a fraction of the truth, you would have felt repulsed by this fake food. Perhaps Frankfurt would nonetheless find your choice suitably free; perhaps Buss would follow in finding the choice autonomous. But there is a difference between "dog" and "pancake" that makes it harder to find autonomous choice in the later case than in the former. The difference concerns plausible answers to a telling counterfactual question. In "dog", which involves instilled desires, if one asks: now that you know about the instilled desires, would you choose otherwise, it is hard to say. You have no alternative value set available to you that can serve as the basis of a choice. But in "pancake" you can say: these are not even pancakes! I do not even have a mouth! In an important respect, one cannot make the same choice to eat pancakes once one knows the history one's beliefs. In contrast, once one knows the history of one desires in "dog", one can still choose to take the dog in. Indeed, apparently Frankfurt thinks that one might reasonably do so (although if we know a little bit about husbands and

wives and how they respond to one another's attempted manipulations, it seems highly unlikely).

The conclusion that we draw from “pancake” is that no matter how much internal meshing attaches to the beliefs that undergird a choice, the falsity of those beliefs may well matter in an assessment of the autonomy of that choice. In “pancake”, because of the falsity of one's beliefs, one does not make an autonomous choice. We have described “pancake” in a way that involves an illicit path toward the beliefs it involves, but that was only for expository ease. We can describe a variant, “pancake\*”, relevantly the same except for the absence of illicit etiology. Suppose that you were not kidnapped and made into a brain in a vat, but that you instead accidentally fell into the vat that had been created as a test. Nonetheless, you were automatically anesthetized, your body stripped away, and the relevant electronics were set to work creating pancake beliefs. In this case, in which no foul play but only nasty accidents occur, it nonetheless seems that your choice for pancakes is less autonomous than one might like. “Pancake\*” suggests the following principle:

P1: The deeper your error regarding the factual grounds for a choice, the less the choice expresses your preferences (or is yours “all the way down”) and hence the less it expresses your autonomy.

We think that P1 is roughly true, but requires some qualification. No doubt Buss would simply reject P1. We think that her reasons for rejecting P1 can be accommodated in a suitably qualified principle.

## 2.5. More ado about autonomy, error and trust

Remember Christopher Columbus. Suppose that going to India was his principal aim in crossing the Atlantic. Columbus would then have made his choice on the basis of false belief. That would not show that his choice was deficient in autonomy, we think. Columbus knew he was taking a gamble. He understood that he might be making a mistake, was aware of the risk that he was mistaken. At a minimum, P1 should be modified to reflect the possibility of an autonomously chosen gamble. (The notion of an autonomously chosen gamble will be crucial to an understanding of the processes of seduction and being seduced, as one would expect.) Suppose, however, that Columbus was not reasonably undertaking a gamble. Instead, he believed, while consciously rejecting the best evidence available, that he would encounter India at the end



of his trip, and he believed this because an astrologist advised him to do so. In that case, his decision was deeply mistaken, not because he took a reasonable gamble, but because he was unreasonable. He was at fault. Still, his faulty reasoning does not excuse him of responsibility for his choice. He chose autonomously, if unreasonably, to head across the Atlantic seeking India. This suggests that not all factual error undercuts autonomous choice: autonomy is not undercut by error that is one's own fault, or error that occurs as part of a reasonable gamble. It also suggests a modification of P1:

P2: The deeper your factual error regarding a choice, to the extent that it is not attributable to your fault, or simply a reasonable gamble, the less the choice expresses your preferences and hence the less it expresses your autonomy.

Of course, if P2 is correct, then much garden-variety deception, including Johannes' deception against Cordelia, violates autonomy and is therefore wrong. Cordelia's factual error about Johannes's intentions are not attributable to her fault. And we would not say that Cordelia's love for Johannes is predicated on "a reasonable gamble" – as much as love is always a kind of reasonable gamble – because Johannes is playing a very different game than Cordelia supposes he is playing. Cordelia is gambling for love (and Johannes pretends these are also his stakes); Johannes is gambling for a night in the sack. To make Cordelia's innocence that much more clear, we should not forget that what "a night in the sack" means for Johannes: it is the symbol of her relinquishing her autonomy to him.

Buss might resist P2. She seems wedded to coherentist justificatory principles. If your beliefs mesh together in the right way, you are justified in acting on them, no matter what their history, no matter how unreasonable you were in acquiring them. But P2 seems to take care of the cases that motivate Buss to say false belief, and hence, deception, do not undercut autonomy. Her (1) and our P2 are at odds, but perhaps, based on the cases so far presented, she'll take (1). Although we think that P2 can be used to explain away Buss's intuition, she might stick to them. We think, however, that an argument can be made that goes beyond this simple appeal to intuition. This argument appeals to the idea that deception in crucial cases involves breach of trust. We will propose that the involved breach of trust compromises autonomy.

Plainly Cordelia trusted Johannes. He courted that trust. And he breached it. Breaching trust, particularly when trust forms the basis of belief,

compromises autonomy. When Cordelia trusts Johannes about what he says, it follows that she accepts what he says as true, without skepticism. This process is a gradual one – she does not trust him instantly, as no reasonable person does, and especially not in the game of love – but with his persistent courtship, his many devices and ploys, his astonishingly complex and artistic techniques of winning her trust, she comes to believe him wholeheartedly. Because she does so, she transfers the effective locus of her decision-making on the truth of these beliefs to Johannes. Her autonomy with respect to these epistemically significant matters is in his hands. Thus when he deceives her by betraying her trust, he compromises her autonomy and wrongs her. He achieves his goal: he takes her freedom. But he is able to take her freedom precisely because she entrusts it to him (Studler, 2005).

Our harsh remarks about Johannes may seem too easily generalizable, or at least inconsistent with our earlier embrace of seduction, even when it involves deception. Our position is that some seduction involving deception is morally fine. Yet such deception, on our account, may conflict with respecting autonomy, and so seems wrong. How do we reconcile these strands in our position?

## 2.6. A happy surprise at the airport

We think that it is a puzzling fact of moral life that sometimes one may deceive an innocent person, in ways that surprise him and hence seem to breach his trust, but not wrong him. Consider “airport”. Suppose that your friend’s spouse is returning from her tour of military duty in Iraq. She asks you to keep her secret, but to get her husband to the airport for her arrival. So you make up a story about how you need his help at the airport, and get him there, where he is delighted to find his spouse arriving. How does this case differ from Cordelia’s? In deceiving the husband, you act for his sake and out of respect for him. You do not deceive him to “gain an advantage over him” (in Ingmar Bergman’s witty definition of a lie)<sup>3</sup>, as we think that Johannes does to Cordelia. Johannes might claim otherwise, saying that he acts to helping her out in the best way available. We think that he deludes himself. Suppose that we are wrong. There would still be a morally important difference between Johannes’s deception and the airport deception. The former but not the latter

<sup>3</sup> Ingmar Bergman, *Fanny and Alexander*, 1982.

is paternalistic. Regrettably paternalism may be acceptable when one deals with a person suffering some defect. There need be no defect in the airport husband. Instead there is a good – the surprised delight of finding the spouse at the airport – that can be obtained only through deception. You get the good for his sake, out of respect for him, and not because you see something wrong with him. More generally, we propose this principle:

P3: If you deceive a person while reasonably seeing yourself as acting for his sake and not seeing yourself as correcting for his defect, and you do so to obtain a good in which he shares and whose existence is essentially tied to deception, then you do not thereby violate his autonomy.

P3 makes sense if there is a class of goods whose acquisition ineluctably involves deception. (We think certain kinds of seduction are among that class of goods.) It varies with the purported beneficiary whether P3 warrants deceiving him. A reasonable person raised on a steady diet of Kantian fervor might resent being deceived into taking the airport trip, and P3 could hardly be used to justify deceiving him. For most reasonable people, as we have said, we think the deception would be morally acceptable, perhaps even morally praiseworthy.

P3 becomes more plausible if one reflects on the experience of falling in love in everyday life. Even Kant admits that in forming friendships – and how much more so in falling in love – we are naturally led to «cover up our weaknesses, so as not to be ill thought of» and that this is necessary for us to «impart our feelings to the other.» (1997, 187–188). And Kant was no expert on love. Every one of us has known the careful, playful, coy and deceptive game that involves luring and withdrawing, approaching and coercing, mixing truth and lie, and knowing that the other person is doing the same, because we both understand that this is the only way to achieve the goal we are mutually seeking: love. The would-be lover who throws himself on his knees and simply declares the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth about himself goes home alone at the end of the night. To pretend otherwise is to be even more puritanical about deception than Kant himself was, and to be more puritanical about deception than Kant is not going to help us better understand anything about how and why one deceives.

Take “the good” of P3 as “seduction” or “cultivation of romantic love.” If one thinks about seduction, the paternalism we worried over in P3 might be

seen as a kind of conceit: “seeing yourself as acting for his sake” in the context of attempting to seduce someone must be understood as seeing yourself as a good worth having, and a good worth having for the agent you are seeking to seduce. On this ground Johannes’ seduction of Cordelia clearly fails the test of P3 even before we get to the important criterion of helping her “obtain a good in which (s)he shares,” because he cannot reasonably see himself as acting for her sake. He may consider himself a good worth having, but he is not acting in such a way so as to provide her with that good: he plans to deny her the good as soon as he has culminated his own wish to seduce her. He could only be acting for her sake if he wanted to disillusion her about romantic love – he is himself disillusioned about it, and that is part of the greater lesson Kierkegaard is trying to teach through the novella, that Johannes is himself profoundly confused about the psychological condition he thinks he has mastered – but few reasonable people could sincerely consider such disillusionment a good. Most of us happily go to our graves with the belief, illusion or no, that romantic love and the right kind of seduction are among the finest things in life.

Johannes puts Cordelia into a kind of experience machine, and while the extreme case is good for testing intuitions about why deception is morally blameworthy, it is not representative of seduction in general, and certainly not of the kind of seduction in which people are typically involved. A more representative case of seduction, we think, is the reluctant and mutual seduction that takes place between Benedick and Beatrice in Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing*.<sup>4</sup>

### 3.

#### 3.1. Seduction, deception and self-deception in *Much Ado About Nothing*

One revealing feature of the mutual seduction of Benedick and Beatrice is Shakespeare’s emphasis – the same holds true for the seductions in virtually all of his plays – on the complicity that exists between the seducer and the seduced. Even in the extreme case of Johannes and Cordelia, the complicity of the seduced is present: as Johannes’s seduction proceeds, there is a gathering

<sup>4</sup> All references are to William Shakespeare, *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), by Act, Scene, and lines. For ease of reading, act, scene and line references are internal.

atmosphere of deception, a feeling of “everything I want to believe about him turns out to be true.” A telltale sign of self-deception is that one winds up believing precisely what one wanted to believe in the first place – this is not to say that such cases always involve false belief, but that they should certainly raise our epistemological antennae – and Cordelia never calls out Johannes, never fully accepts her own responsibility as an epistemological agent. (Even in love, there is due diligence). As young as she is, one cannot reasonably blame Cordelia for naivete and a little self-deception. But this, again, is why the tale of Benedick and Beatrice offers a richer and more attractive example of seduction and deception than does the tale of Johannes and Cordelia.

On their own account, neither Benedick nor Beatrice believes in romantic love, at least for himself or herself; moreover, each professes a distinct dislike for the other. Beatrice’s first words in the play are a jab against Benedick – though we notice she is also asking if he has “returned from the wars?” – which she quickly follows up with a long complaint against him, ending with the remark that he has only one wit, the sole “difference between himself and his horse”(Act I, i, 15-94). For his part, Benedick first greets Beatrice with: “What, my dear Lady Disdain! Are you yet living?” (implying she is not just unkind, but old) to which she replies “Is it possible disdain should die while she has such meet food to feed it, as Signior Benedick?”(I,i, 95-136). They quickly go on to reassure one another that:

Benedick: [...] it is certain I am loved of all ladies, only you excepted: and I would I could find in my heart that I had not a hard heart; for, truly, I love none.

Beatrice: [...] I thank God and my cold blood, I am of your humour for that: I had rather hear my dog bark at a crow than a man swear he loves me. (I,i,95-136).

They then proceed to exchange numerous insults.

Notice that both Benedick and Beatrice are already plying their deceptions and in doing so initiating the process of seduction. Benedick’s boast that all ladies love him (a timeworn if silly and no doubt ineffective male technique for attracting a woman’s attention) is obviously false, and not really a lie: he says it so as to contrast all other women with Beatrice, and to suggest that he could have any woman he pleases except for her. The real deception that Benedick is practicing – the deception, repeated by Beatrice, that sets up both the seduction and the comedy of the play – is the claim that his heart is so hard that it cannot love. Beatrice and Benedick open the play already in sexual tension, which both are pretending does not exist between the two of them and which,

furthermore, on their account, is not the sort of thing either of them is interested in anyway. Benedick deceives Beatrice by insisting that he is not interested in love (he repeats the same claim to anyone who will listen to him throughout the first act of the play). By saying that he loves none, however, Benedick is also revealing to Beatrice that there is no woman he is presently attached to or even interested in. Should he take an interest in a woman, it follows, what a rare and fine thing that would be – and this is intended to pique her curiosity and vanity. Beatrice responds with the same deception, but is more direct and to the point (in a funny way, more honest about her deception): I don't even want to hear promises of love from a man, she says, much less the real thing. Of course we know she has already been asking specifically about Benedick, and hers is also a familiar technique for interesting a lover: he is a warrior, and she is raising a challenge. The conversations Benedick and Beatrice both have with friends shortly after this scene confirm, in indirect but no less certain ways, their attraction for one another. All this is so transparent – such a clear and delightful example of schoolyard flirtation – that the audience knows, only a few minutes into the play, that these two will fall in love before it ends.

But the point of their deception is not only to begin the process of seduction, it is also to protect themselves, because neither is sure of the other's interest. They don't trust one another. Benedick puts it plainly: "Because I will not do them [women] the wrong to mistrust any, I will do myself the right to trust none" (I, i, 220-225). Furthermore, they shouldn't trust one another: if either Benedick or Beatrice were to be too overt about their interest in one another, the other's pride and sense of him or herself as superior to love (to which they both at least pretend, and may partially believe) would end the seduction before it could begin. Beatrice and Benedick mutually seduce one another because they regard one another as equals, and should that equality shift too much in one direction or the other – if one, in other words, came to feel that he or she were losing control or being controlled, if he or she were being diminished in terms of *autonomy* – the seduction would be frustrated. Beatrice is as clear about her autonomy as Benedick is about his trust: "Would it not grieve a woman to be overmastered with a piece of valiant dust? To make an account of her life to a clod of wayward marl?" (II, i, 34-78). Soon we learn that Benedick and Beatrice had been involved before, and something went wrong: Beatrice claims she had lent Benedick her heart a while, but that he had

won it “with false dice” (II, i, 243-284). So for Beatrice there is a particular and we may suppose justified distrust of Benedick.

Here our earlier notion of romantic love as “an autonomously chosen gamble” comes to the fore, because Beatrice and Benedick had previously gambled at love, and Beatrice – at least, on her account – had lost. (Though as cagey as each is with the other, the feeling one has is that both suffered in the failed game.) The problem now is that, because of shared mistrust, both are reluctant to take a chance, to gamble a second time. Beatrice and Benedick seem to view the very idea of gambling on love as a violation of their autonomy: and it takes several deceptions before either of them is willing to admit that “the die is cast,” and they are willing actively to try to allow romantic love to take hold.

Nevertheless, the seduction continues. It is through another deceit – one of Shakespeare’s classic devices, the masked ball – that the seductive tension between Benedick and Beatrice mounts. They are dancing with one another, each clearly knowing who the other is, but with the comfortable position of enjoying plausible deniability about their epistemic situation. Benedick asks the masked Beatrice what she thinks of Benedick, looking for the least encouragement – “Did he never make you laugh?” (II, I, 114-152) – only to find Beatrice using the mask against him to say even crueller thing about him than she might say to his face, and the words are that much sharper because, he is forced to suppose, she is willing to say them to someone whose identity (he is forced to pretend) she doesn’t know.

The leitmotif of the play comes from the song that opens the famous orchard scene, and is a kind of playful leitmotif of our paper:

Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more / men were deceivers ever, /  
 One foot in sea and one on shore / To one thing constant never: /  
 Then sigh not so, but let them go, / And be you blithe and bonny, /  
 Converting all your sounds of woe / into Hey nonny, nonny  
 (II, iii, 44-88).

Naturally the ladies can no more let the men go than the men can the ladies – “can’t live with ‘em, can’t live without ‘em” – so the advice is ironical: meant truly, in a sense, on its face; but in another sense meant in just the opposite way, that though we recognize and complain about one another’s weaknesses and bemoan them, but they are part and parcel of a good we cannot do without.

While Benedick and Beatrice are slow and reluctant to understand this ironic truth about love, their friends are not. So, growing impatient with the

spectacle of Beatrice and Benedick trying to seduce one another but tripping over their pride, freedom and mistrust in the process, three of Benedick's friends deceive him – while he thinks he is deceiving them, by hiding behind the bushes – and have a “secret conversation” in order to convince him that Beatrice is passionately, desperately in love with him, and all but dying from her fear to disclose it to him. In the very next scene, at the opening of Act III, Beatrice's friends, also part of the plan, have the same secret conversation designed for her eavesdropping ears, persuading her that Benedick is in just the same impassioned, prostrate position he supposes she is in for him.

By this point in the play we have Benedick practicing P3 for Beatrice, Beatrice practicing P3 for Benedick, and both Benedick's and Beatrice's friends practicing P3 for each of them. It's comical and charming; seduction is taking place; no one's autonomy is being violated; and while trust is in some sense being betrayed (that is, by Beatrice and Benedick's friends, who are willfully exploiting their eavesdropping – though we should ask, as Shakespeare wants us to ask, whether you can betray the trust of someone who is already betraying your trust by eavesdropping on you), the betrayal of trust does not look morally blameworthy: on the contrary, it's a happy, well-intentioned, even praiseworthy act. Only the worst kind of moral sourpuss could frown down on this playfulness and friendship.

The drama is not yet over: Beatrice will demand a proof of Benedick's love after he professes it, and the proof is terrible enough that it tests their love. The great moment of suspense is captured by Beatrice when she summarizes their position, add how much depends on whether or not she can trust Benedick. Benedick tells her: “I do love nothing in the world so well as you: is not that strange?” And Beatrice replies: “As strange as the thing I know not. It were as possible for me to say I loved nothing so well as you: but believe me not; and yet I lie not; I confess nothing, nor I deny nothing”(IV, i, 265-271). Sounding a bit like Pyrrho or Sextus Empiricus, Beatrice is about to ask Benedick to prove his love by killing his friend Claudio in recompense for the betrayal of her cousin. Shakespeare is subtle as ever: this proof of love is demanded as the enactment of justice for a betrayal of trust.

Happily, after several more demoniacally clever Shakespearean twists and turns, Benedick succeeds in proving his love, and at the close of the play the two are married. But right until the last few minutes of the play they continue to deceive one another, denying their love, because they find themselves in the classic lover's paradox: “who will say the L-word first?” This paradox is a



paradox of trust, and when at last they are confronted with their own professions of love in writing (produced, naturally, by others), the Gordian knot of their distrust is cut, and – to everyone’s relief – they are at last free to bind themselves to one another. One of Benedick’s friends is about to tease him about marrying, after all he has said against it, and he summarizes his position with one of the most plangent observations about the nature of love in all the vast literature on the subject: “In brief, since I do purpose to marry, I will think nothing to any purpose that the world can say against it; and therefore never flout at me for what I have said against it; for man is a giddy thing, and this is my conclusion”(V, iv, 85-126). He has gained the good he desired, and however giddy and deceptive and full of false belief the process was that got him there, now it doesn’t matter.

### 3.2. The giddiness of self-deception

Benedick’s statement, here at the very end of the play – “his conclusion,” as it is Shakespeare’s – emphasizes what we referred to at the outset as the complicity of the seduced: the willing self-deception that we have thus far sought to illustrate, but not made explicit. While even Cordelia shared some responsibility for her seduction by Johannes, because she never took a step back to examine the constant pressure and manipulation she was experiencing from the man pursuing her, how much more so are both Beatrice and Benedick complicit in their own seduction. They hide behind masks, they lie to themselves about their own feelings and reaffirm their self-deceptions by repeating them to others, they test one another’s interest through insults and jabs, they eavesdrop in the hope of learning that their hopes of shared love might be fulfilled. Before long the audience realizes that both Beatrice or Benedick would be willing to twist the truth in any direction she or he pleased in order to gain the good each of them seeks: the seduction of the other. Both are so complicit in one another’s seduction and each in their own seduction – think of Benedick’s giddy joy as he interprets and reinterprets Beatrice’s innocent and casual invitation to come in to the house after hearing his friends’ speak of her love for him – that it no longer makes sense to divide seducer from seduced. Each not only seduces the other, both recognize that a kind of mutual self-seduction, an allowing oneself to be seduced, is also necessary. Thus theirs is genuinely an autonomous gamble, because they are involved in the risks of the game from both the perspective of the seducer and the seduced.

Some may worry that explaining complicity in terms of self-deception is explaining one mystery in terms of another. But the reason we appeal to the case of Beatrice and Benedick is that we think Shakespeare's depiction of seduction shows how the two lovers deceive themselves while deceiving one another and being deceived by their friends. On our analysis this makes them complicit, without placing the burden on us of explaining how the self-deception does its work (that is the subject for another paper, and of a vast philosophical literature).

As giddy a thing as Benedick undoubtedly is, we don't want to go too far in endorsing giddiness (or deception, or false belief). But the back-and-forth nature of the romance between Benedick and Beatrice, the alternation of true and false, of frankness and deception, and the very tentative small steps forward into trust: these, we think, are the elements of how the more usual kind of seduction occurs. In the case of Beatrice and Benedick, seduction "was essentially tied to deception," and was practiced to obtain a good in which they both shared. There were elements of conceit, paternalism, and manipulation throughout the case, but neither Benedick nor Beatrice was wronged, and it would be silly to argue that either of their autonomy was compromised. In fact, for both of them it was their proud insistence upon their autonomy – proud almost to the point of irrationality – that made so many deceptions necessary in order for them to accomplish the mutual seduction they both desired. And though the case is exaggerated for comic effect, we think anyone who has been involved in this kind of seduction with the result of romantic love – whether or not that love endured – will agree that Benedick and Beatrice seem familiar.

### 3.3. Seduction and self-deception

Now that we've had a little foray into grown up seduction, let us bring the case of Benedick and Beatrice back around to our critique of Buss and the case of Johannes and Cordelia. We have said that Buss is wrong in arguing that Cordelia's autonomy is not violated by Johannes, because her autonomy was reasonably informed by her trust in him, and he violated that trust. Her trust was a consequence, in part, of her being an innocent, in part from the sheer quantity of false beliefs Johannes instilled in her, and in part from the cunning with which he tailored those false beliefs to her weaknesses. Our conclusion was that what makes Johannes's deception wrong, at the end of the day, and *contra* Buss, is a violation of Cordelia's autonomy, when our understanding of

her autonomy is properly robust. Buss misses the connection between autonomy and trust.

But that attack does not undermine the more interesting argument Buss makes. We agree with Buss's intuition that the case of seduction may illustrate why deception need not undermine autonomy, and have employed Beatrice and Benedick to that end. Along the way we have buttressed, if qualified, Buss's argument that an account of the wrongfulness of deception that relies on the wrongfulness of violating a simplistic notion of autonomy is insufficient.

A particularly surprising and interesting byproduct of the Beatrice-Benedick tale is that deception, both of oneself and of others – at least in some seductions – may foster trust rather than betray or destroy it. In scenarios where mutually interested parties begin a seduction with mistrust (and doesn't it usually begin this way?), some deception may be necessary in order for the process of trusting to get off the ground. If trust is importantly linked to autonomy in seduction, as we have argued, then it may be that some deceptions and self-deceptions actually enhance autonomy. Autonomy may not merely survive false belief, but flourish in it.

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