HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Sexuality in Cinema

Don Juan (1926)

Frederick Alan Crosland (1894-1936)

OVERVIEW



Director Born to a well-off family in New York City, Crosland served as a writer and critic for the *New York Globe* after graduating from Dartmouth College. His motion picture career began very early, when in 1912 Crosland was hired to work a variety of jobs at Edison Studios in the Bronx. He was directing his first feature, *Kidnapped*, just five years later. Through his whole career, he would direct fifty-nine features, including the first American pseudo-talkie feature—*The Jazz Singer* (1927)—and the first Vitaphone sound-on-disc synchronized film—*Don Juan* (1926). In 1936, at age forty-one and only a year after his second divorce, Crosland was in a fatal automobile accident on Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles, California. It's notable that his grave in Hollywood Forever Cemetery was unmarked for sixty-seven years until The Hollywood Underground (not to be confused with the rap/rock group of the same name) donated a headstone in 2003.



Film At the time of release, *Don Juan* was Warner Bros.' biggest release, grossing over $1.5 million despite some negative reviews in film magazines. It was the first sound-on-disc feature in America, but very few theaters were set up for the Vitaphone system the film used. The film's production began late, giving up its first week of shooting to another production, *The Sea Beast.* It was an incredibly short production, likely owing to director Alan Crosland's wealth of experience and the skill of the crew, beginning shooting on the week of October 7th, 1925, and ending production in the first week of January 1926. Another interesting fact about the film is screenwriter Bess Meredyth would go on to help found the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. While contemporary audiences had mixed feelings about *Don Juan*, modern audiences seem to appreciate the film, giving it a rare 100% rating on Rotten Tomatoes and a 7/10 on IMDB at the time of writing.

Background This 1926 feature was the first film ever synchronized with the Vitaphone sound-on-disc system. While there was no spoken dialogue, there was a musical score performed by the New York Philharmonic and sound effects. George Groves, the film sound pioneer, developed a unique microphone array to perform a live mix on the orchestra recording, making him the first music mixer in film history. While the Vitaphone disc still survives in the UCLA Film and Television Archive, it is often not included with the film outside of the 2011 DVD release. A legal oversight led to composer William Axt using copyrighted tunes at several points in the film, leading to extended legal battles. This headache would lead Warner Bros. Pictures to create their own copyright research database to prevent the same mistakes from being made again.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Don Juan de Marana – A suave young nobleman from Spain who distrusts and uses women
Adriana della Varnese – A pious Italian noblewoman who falls in love with Don Juan
Cesare Borgia – The patriarch of the powerful Borgia family
Lucrezia Borgia – Cesare's sister, an expert manipulator seeking to ensnare Don Juan
Count Giano Donati – A talented swordsman working for the Borgia
Pedrillo – Don Juan's squire and impersonator

SYNOPSIS

In a prologue, we see snippets of Don Juan's youth. His father, Don José, learns of his wife's infidelity, punishing her by entombing her lover in the castle wall before disowning her. A few years later, we see Don José teach the adolescent Don Juan his philosophy around women, showing the boy around his veritable harem of courtiers, all beautiful women. In doing so, he shows his boredom with his former favorite, causing her to stab him out of jealous rage. Don José dies after telling his son to never give his love to a woman, only to take hers.

Years later, the Borgias tour Rome, handing out invitations to a party that evening. In a window high up a building, they spy a topless woman fighting with a monkey for her blouse. One of their servants mentions that the young Don Juan is visiting the city, and he has quite the reputation as a womanizer. Lucrezia Borgia bets her brother that she can ensnare the man, and Cesare accepts, having Don Juan added to the list of guests. We then see Don Juan deal with his multiple lovers and their husbands and lovers with the help of his squire, Pedrillo. That night at the party, Don Juan meets Lucrezia Borgia for the first time, but he is taken by another young woman, Adriana della Varnese. Still juggling his other lovers, Don Juan begins to pursue the young woman. After just a few days, he has fallen completely for her. Jealous and petty, the Borgias arrange her marriage to one of their loyal lackies, Count Giano Donati. Don Juan discovers this and thinks Adriana has forsaken him.

As Adriana and Donati are wed, the cathedral bells ring endlessly. Not even a harem of willing young women can distract Don Juan from them. He still loves Adriana. Driven mad by the loss of the one he loves, Don Juan scales the manor wall and enters Adriana's bedchambers. From there, he begins a duel with her new husband, eventually winning. As if having planned for this already, the Borgias have Don Juan arrested for murder and Adriana imprisoned as an accomplice. With some accidental help from another prisoner, Don Juan is able to get into the nearby river and swim away. Finding a horse and weapon, he infiltrates the tower where Adriana is imprisoned, kills the men who pursue them, and rides off with her toward Spain, where they can be happy together.

PLOT



Prologue – A title card announces the prologue before setting the scene, telling us of Don Juan's childhood. Don Juan is but a toddler, playing with dolls and his dog before a fire. In the cold stone chambers, his father—Don José—and mother—Donna Isobel—go through their farewells, as the lord must leave on some duty for the king. Some servants deconstruct a wall in the chambers, retrieving from behind it a cache of treasure, which they carry away. Don José promises to return shortly before giving his wife one last passionate kiss. His retinue parades out of the front gate of the castle as little Don Juan and his mother wave from the parapet above.



Secret lover – Donna Isobel looks out over the courtyard as the remaining soldiers secure the gate. Nearby, a man sneaks into the open and looks up to her. Don José's dwarf watches from the shadows while Donna Isobel lowers a knotted rope for the man to climb up to her. As Donna Isobel and her lover kiss and speak in her chambers, the dwarf climbs the tower with a torch, placing it on a prominent point on the wall. On cue, Don José returns, jumping from his horse

and entering a sally port and confronting his dwarf. “If you have lied—” the Don threatens, holding the man’s collar. Upstairs, the lovers discover Don José’s return too late. They scramble, looking for a hiding spot, the man eventually hiding himself in the hole in the wall where the men retrieved the king’s treasure. Donna Isobel does her best to convince Don José that nothing is wrong when he enters, but eventually, he notices the tapestry covering the hole has been disturbed.



Exposed – “In the haste of departure,” says the Don, “the wall was left unmended.” Don José orders some of his men to reconstruct the hole in the wall. Donna Isobel is unable to hide her concern as the blocks are stacked higher and higher. In the cavity, we see the nobleman begin to panic, but even as the last block slides into place, he remains quiet. Donna Isobel, however, reaches out, mouthing, “No!” Don José stops the men, asking his wife, “Think you of any reason why they should not seal the wall? There is nothing of value there—now—is there?” Donna Isobel shakes her head, and the last block seals the man in. The dwarf gives the Don a sadistic smile, winking in the direction of the wall as he leaves. Unable to contain herself any longer, Donna Isobel rushes to the wall and tries to pull a block away. Don José only laughs before striking her and shouting at her, “Betrayer of men and the honor of men!” Little Don Juan cries as Don José threatens to kill his wife if she refuses to leave. Adding salt to the wound, the boy runs to his father for comfort, not his mother. She hangs her head and rushes down the stairs. “Yonder goes your mother,” the Don says to his son, “and with her goes my faith in women!”



Don José’s bitterness – A title card reads, “In the years that followed, Don José kept his bitterness alive after a curiously sardonic fashion – – and banquet torches flared nightly in the gaunt halls of the Marana castle.” The banquet hall comes onto the screen, and a bunch of dancers perform for a group of noblewomen, who eat fruit and drink wine, looking bored. The dwarf enters and announces Don José, and the dancers stop their performance, dropping to the ground in reverence. Proudly, Don José and the now adolescent Don Juan strut into the hall. The dancers reach out to caress them as they pass, and the nobelwomen begin doting on both the boy and the man, trying to curry favor. A title card tells us that Don José had given one of the women, Elvira, his exclusive attention for two months, but he clearly shows us that he is bored of her, openly flirting with another woman. While Elvira pantomimes jealousy, the other women turn their attention to the young Don Juan, chatting with him and even kissing him.



“Three-fold debt to women” – The dwarf has been watching Elvira’s jealous rage develop, and he tries to warn Don José, but his master waves him off, and he obeys. Seeing Elvira trying to kiss Don Juan, Don José motions for her, and she happily approaches. In her ear, Don José whispers, “Is one member of the family not enough to contaminate?” Elvira’s rage reaches its tipping point, and from her bodice, she draws a dagger, swinging it into Don José’s chest. He throws her off and stumbles to the end of the table, where Don Juan joins him. Realizing what she’s done, Elvira tries to beg his forgiveness, but he patronizingly smacks her face as one would a loyal dog, saying, “My three-fold debt to women is now complete – Life – disillusionment – death!” As he takes his last breaths, the Don turns to his son, telling him, “This is my legacy to you—beware of giving *your* love to women. Go out into the world and take *their* love when it please you—smile—and forget!” With that, Don José falls down dead. Don Juan cries over the corpse of his father as the screen fades to black.



Rome: Years later – A series of title cards takes us to Rome about a decade later. People mill about the busy streets as boats cruise up and down the river. Deeper into the city, a procession pushes people aside. This sequence introduces the Borgias, Lucrezia and Cesare. Riding with them is a cousin and esteemed swordsman in their employ, Count Donati. The siblings wander around the city, seeking rich and famous people to attend their party that evening. Stopping near a cathedral, Donati and Cesare lustfully eye a pious young woman taking part in a ceremony. Lucrezia recognizes her as the daughter of a supporter of their enemies, Adriana della Varnese, saying she and her father should be invited to the party. The procession continues on for a few

blocks before Lucrezia holds up her hand to stop the retinue. The three nobles look up to a nearby window where a topless woman wrestles with a monkey over a blouse. A servant mentions that this is the home of the young and infamous lover Don Juan. Lucrezia makes a bet with her brother that she can ensnare the man and make him forget all other women. Cesare doubts her abilities but goads her sadistically.



Don Juan's home – A title card takes us inside of Don Juan's home. Inside a grand parlor, a chubby young man trots toward a table. Another title card names him as Pedrillo, Don Juan's attendant and biggest fan. He dutifully goes over Don Juan's correspondence, taking no small pleasure in learning about his master's doings before stashing the enclosed jewel-studded ring in a small box filled with similar trinkets. After he takes a drink of strong coffee to focus his mind on his work, a noblewoman enters and demands to see Don Juan. Pedrillo steps forward and tells her, "A sick friend doubtless detains him, milady." "A woman?" she asks. "Madonna," Pedrillo chuckles, "you are the one love of his life." As he continues, another lover of Don Juan enters the manor: "Why wait? It may be a matter of hours?" After shooing the first woman out, an almost identical scene plays out, the dialogue repeating in perfect synchronicity. Just as the second woman is about to leave, the first re-enters to speak with Pedrillo, and they see one another. They begin to bicker, and Pedrillo tries to put himself between them. He manages to move them back toward the exit, but they refuse to go, shouting accusations at one another.



The Don emerges – Just then, Don Juan's bedchamber door swings open, and the young man emerges. He blows a kiss back into the room and turns to face the parlor, where he sees Pedrillo failing to calm the two women. With a visible sigh, Don Juan calmly closes the door and makes his presence known. Pedrillo takes the ladies' coats and leaves the room. As Don Juan takes charge of the situation. He stands between the women, showing them identical affection in turn. "Love lent my feet wings," he whispers in each of their ears, one after the other. Inside his bedchamber, a third woman rests on his bed, the Duchess Margoni whose husband is also engaged in an affair with one of the other women. Slyly and skillfully, Don Juan is able to separate the two women, taking one into another room where they can speak privately. He flags Pedrillo to follow, miming offense that he did when his lady friend notes the servant's presence. Pedrillo hands him her coat and dutifully leaves.



Alone at last (twice) – Finally alone, Don Juan holds the woman close and kisses her several times. As Pedrillo bides his time in the parlor, keeping an eye on the second woman, Don Juan puts his plan into action to get rid of the two new visitors. "You must hasten!" Don Juan says to the first woman. "Your uncle Margoni suspects—he is coming here!" She begins to panic, asking for her coat. "Tomorrow?" she asks Don Juan. "Tomorrow," the Don agrees before showing her out. In the parlor, an almost identical scene unfolds, this time with Margoni's mistress. Again Don Juan promises to see her tomorrow, and again Pedrillo brings her coat and shows her the door. With the two women gone, Pedrillo congratulates his master on his skill in diffusing these tense situations. A noise makes them look to the bedchamber door. Behind it, the Duchess Margoni tries to listen to their conversation. "Is there a woman on earth who knows just when to leave?" Don Juan asks.



Margoni – Don Juan enters his bedchamber and goes through the same act with Duchess Margoni: "You must hasten! Your husband Margoni suspects—he is coming here!" The duchess begins to panic. Outside, Margoni's mistress enters the parlor in a haste as an angry-looking man enters the courtyard below. After being shown out of the bedchamber, Duchess Margoni looks out the window to see her husband entering the manor, and she runs off to hide as his mistress did. Duke Margoni enters the parlor where Pedrillo reads letters and Don Juan reclines. The Don lifts a glass, saying, "Margoni—without knowing it—served us well!" The older man grimaces and puffs out his chest. "Pompous old ass!" Don Juan laughs, not knowing the duke stands behind him. Pedrillo motions with his head, and Don Juan rises, bowing politely to the duke. "I have been told that the Duchess, my wife, is

here!" Margoni barks. Moments later, he sees his wife pass in a nearby hall, but Don Juan stops him, saying, "Don't let her see you!" After gesturing to the man's mistress hiding in a corner, he continues. "Your lovely wife suspect your affair with Imperia–and sent messages to bring you both here—she came herself to catch you together–I've done my poor best to protect you!" The duke thanks Don Juan and leaves quickly so as not to be seen. Having seen Duke Margoni, both of the remaining women scamper from the house without a word.



Knock at the door – Don Juan and Pedrillo try to kick back and relax again only to be interrupted by an armored knock on the door. Pedrillo opens the door to find a guardsman with a letter from the Borgia. Don Juan instructs him to leave it on the desk. After he's left, Pedrillo asks why. "Borgia parchment is ofttimes poisoned!" Don Juan explains, opening the letter carefully with a knife. The message inside is an invitation from both Lucrezia and Cesare. "What are my engagements tonight?" Don Juan asks Pedrillo. The servant pulls out a book and lists off a series of clandestine visits to lovers throughout the city. Don Juan waves his hand dismissively, and Pedrillo simply pulls the page from the book and crumples it.



Palazzo Santa Maria – A title card whisks us away to the Palazzo Santa Maria, where the Borgia hold their party that evening. In the grand parlor, the party is in full swing. All eyes turn to the entryway as Duke dell Varnese and his daughter Adriana are announced. The Borgia send them a mix of lustful and sly looks, Lucrezia teasing Donati about his preference for women with large busts since Adriana is flat-chested, saying "the ample figure of her father's fortune" will help to console him after they're married. On the other side of the room, Adriana asks her father why he willingly walked into this manor filled with enemies. "The invitation was a command," her father responds, resigned. "It is death to defy the Borgia, even though it may be fatal to obey." Cesare and Donati cross the room to make introductions. Back across the room, Lucrezia tries to stop herself from pacing, telling a servant, "Inform me the instant Don Juan arrives."



"A bird in the hand" – In the courtyard outside, Don Juan and Pedrillo enter on horseback. As they begin to enter the manor, a beautiful servant girl catches Don Juan's eye as she lights candles outside a balcony. Pedrillo reminds him that Lucrezia Borgia is awaiting him, but Don Juan waves him off, staring at the servant girl. "If her face matches her feet," Don Juan mutters, "God help us all." She turns and is surprised to see the nobleman staring. "It does!" Don Juan says, foisting his coat on Pedrillo and starting to climb up the balcony to the servant girl. Dutifully, Pedrillo urges Don Juan to reconsider and head into the party, but the suave nobleman simply says, "A bird in the hand, Pedrillo," before ascending the balcony and making his move on the servant girl. Pedrillo stands watch for his master, noticing Lucrezia's servant spotting Don Juan. He moves to warn him, but again, Don Juan brushes him off. News of Don Juan's arrival moves quickly to Cesare, who uses the fact that Don Juan is dallying with the maid to torment his sister. She storms off to confront Don Juan.



Balcony switch – Realizing the necessity for haste, Pedrillo scales the balcony himself, though much more clumsily than his master. Don Juan waves him off again, still kissing the servant girl, but they hear a door swing open in the room beyond the balcony. Don Juan creeps to a nearby window along a ledge and enters an empty room. Lucrezia opens the balcony door to find Pedrillo kissing the servant girl. On cue, Don Juan enters the room behind Lucrezia, bowing when she turns. He makes a show of dismissing and scolding Pedrillo but shoots his attendant a wink as he leaves arm in arm with the servant girl. Turning his attention to Lucrezia, Don Juan turns up the charm, showering Lucrezia in complements. She leads him onto the balcony where the flirting continues. While they chat, Don Juan notices Adriana by a nearby fountain, and he can't take his eyes off her. For the first time in his life, he knows what it is to be spellbound by desire. He watches with barely-hidden jealousy as Donati approaches and kisses Adriana's hand. Lucrezia warns him that Donati is a skilled swordsman, and going after the same woman may pit Don Juan against his blade.

Secret room – After a servant gives Lucrezia a hidden signal, she invites Don Juan to rejoin the party guests before they part ways. Instead of continuing down the hall toward the foyer, Don Juan dips behind a curtain and watches Lucrezia enter a secret room. Inside this hidden chamber, Lucrezia and Cesare retrieve a powerful position from their magician. He says it will kill whoever drinks a single drop with a heart attack a few hours after, loading a dose into a locket for Cesare to hold. They enter the atrium together and watch as Don Juan begins to chat with some of the other guests.



Poisoned wine – A servant carries out a tray with three ostentatiously sized glasses of wine. Lucrezia and Cesare pick up one each, using some slight of hand to tip the contents of the locket into the third. Don Juan sees this out of the corner of his eye, a concerned look crossing his face. The Borgias make a big show of making a peace offering to Duke Varnese before the servant carries the poisoned goblet toward him. Don Juan plucks it from the tray and waves the servant off. While Cesare looks annoyed, Lucrezia can't keep a worried look from her face. Don Juan knows something is going on, but he's not sure what. As he tips the goblet to drink, Lucrezia appears by his side, stopping him with a single touch and a look. With a smile, she invites him to join her outside. There, Don Juan tries to propose a toast to her charm, but when she reacts again to him lifting the glass, he pours its contents on a nearby planter from which Don Juan plucks a rose to give to Lucrezia. After a brief interruption from Cesare, Don Juan leans in close, asking Lucrezia, "Your balcony—at midnight?" She starts to walk away in a huff, but after a moment, she turns and simply says, "Yes."

"Yours to win – or mine to slay" – Back in the foyer, Cesare confronts his sister. "This Spaniard, sweet sister, is yours to win—or mine to slay!" Cesare threatens, gesturing to Donati's sword arm. Lucrezia smiles before saying, "In that case, dear brother—he shall live!" From the balcony, Don Juan notices Adriana getting into a sedan chair. He jumps from the balcony and rushes to greet her. "Tonight you saved *my father's life," she gushes. "What can I do to prove my heart's gratitude? You have* but to name it—I pledge my word." Don Juan simply hands her a rose and says, "Later!" He watches the sedan leave as Pedrillo hands him his coat and fetches the horses.



Midnight – At midnight, Lucrezia stretches in the middle of her bedchamber. A servant carrying a small dog enters to inform Lucrezia that Don Juan is late. After putting the dog down, she turns to her mistress and suggests, "Perhaps he stays away because of the lady Adriana?" Lucrezia lashes out in frustration, pushing her servant. An inverse scene plays out in Adriana's bedchamber. Her servant, however, decides to gossip, saying she finds Don Juan most enticing. Adriana smiles and laughs, bidding her servant farewell. Don Juan and Pedrillo appear below, the Don scaling the building and surprising Adriana by entering her window. "Why are you here at such an hour?" Adriana asks. "If I am late," Don Juan replies, "a thousand pardons!" Adriana, realizing she's in her nightclothes, covers herself while Don Juan removes his cloak and locks the window behind him before beginning to kiss her hands and arms. It's clear Adriana doesn't accept his advances as she tries in vain to push him away. "You promised to reward me," he quips, blocking the door to her bedchamber, "but perhaps you fear Donati, your swordsman friend." Unable to make him leave, Adriana picks up a knife. Don Juan approaches slowly, and she tries to stab herself in the chest, but he jumps forward and disarms her. Adriana collapses in his arms, and, defeated, Don Juan carries her to her bed. Seeing the tears on her sleeping eyes causes him great concern and leaves after assuring her he's done nothing to her.



Show of devotion – A title card reads, "Days passed slowly for Juan." In his white cloak, he paces in the courtyard of a church. Adriana emerges from her daily mass and sees him. He approaches and tells Adriana he's been waiting to talk to her for days. She doesn't know what to say or what to do with her hands as he stoops to kiss the hem of her skirt. "My soul has been asleep," he says, looking up at her. "You have awakened it!" Through a nearby gate, Lucrezia enters with her servant and oversees this display of devotion. Don Juan continues, "You have given me a new faith—faith in the goodness of women. Teach me; help me so that I may never lose that faith again!" Lucrezia's servant



teases her, saying, “The chapel garden holds more allure for him than your grace’s balcony.” As Don Juan follows Adriana from the chapel through the gate onto the street, Lucrezia watches jealously before whispering an unheard order to her servant.



Unprovoked attack – A title card explains that the Borgia attacked the Varnese manor to take control of Adriana with flowery language. We see the Borgia’s forces charging through the streets and starting fires or engaging in combat with guards and soldiers. After a few shots of the chaos, the forces storm into the Varnese manor with Cesare and Donati in tow. They take custody of Adriana and her father, taunting them cruelly. Adriana’s father is taken away to be beheaded, saying Adriana can avoid this fate for her father if she marries Donati, who grins devilishly beside his cousin. Feeling trapped, Adriana convinces her father to agree to the alliance and marriage. Cesare leaves with Adriana’s father but leaves her and Donati behind with a large group of soldiers.



Masked visitor – Don Juan paces in his penthouse. The gate in the courtyard below swings open, and Pedrillo enters from the smoke-swept streets. He rushes up to his master to report on the attack at the Varnese manor. Don Juan barks some orders, and Pedrillo rushes off to do as he is asked. In the courtyard, a small retinue enters with a masked woman in tow. She enters Don Juan’s home and approaches him, still hiding her identity. Slowly, she drops the mask and reveals herself to be Lucrezia. She smiles at Don Juan, and he bows, unable to keep a confused look from his face. “Twice I summoned you,” she begins, “and you ignored me—tonight I lay aside my pride and come to you.” She sits on Don Juan’s bed, but he doesn’t say anything. Pedrillo returns with the things Don Juan asked for, and upon seeing Lucrezia begins to back out. Don Juan, however, waves him in and begins to dress for travel. Lucrezia pouts, realizing where he’s going, but she asks anyway, and he says to the Varnese manor. “You fool!” Lucrezia mocks. “Do you think Donati will allow any harm to come to her?” As he begins to leave, Lucrezia reaches out, saying that all Rome knows him as a fool and to return to her when he finally learns his lesson.



Prayer interrupted – In her bedchamber, Adriana kneels before a shrine and prays. Donati enters and greets her. She reacts with fear, begging him to come no closer. She rushes to her window, unlatching it, but Donati simply scoops her up and holds her close, saying, “No outcries if you would protect the lives in this household!” Outside, Don Juan enters the foyer, flanked and followed by countless soldiers. A lead guard says that Adriana is at the Vatican. As Don Juan leaves, he sees Donati kissing Adriana. He then climbs the wall and enters the room. Donati and Adriana are surprised by Don Juan’s sudden appearance, and Donati rushes to hide, saying he’ll kill Don Juan if Adriana betrays him. He reacts harshly, calling her a betrayer and saying she’s destroyed his trust in women. He knocks aside a nearby drape and reveals Donati standing with his dagger. “Your pardon, signore,” Don Juan says coolly, “for trespassing ever so slightly in your garden.” As Don Juan exits, his head hanging low, both Cesare and Lucrezia take a moment to mock his broken heart.



Cathedral bells – A title card takes us a month into the future amid the boisterous marriage of Adriana to Donati. The bells ring endlessly, and we see them rocking in the towers at the cathedral near Don Juan’s home. Inside, a performance including women dressed as mythical nymphs and a fat man dressed as Bacchus goes on in a large atrium. On one side of the room sit the Borgias who drink and laugh. The mood is the opposite across the room, where Donati sits with his new bride. She looks panicked and heartbroken, only taking comfort from her father’s occasional touch. The bells ring on and on. In Don Juan’s parlor, we see a veritable harem of women who try to get his attention. He is distracted by the bells, however, and reminded that Adriana is so close and yet so far away. Eventually, Don Juan kicks everyone out, seeking solitude in his bedchamber.



Angry husband – After a heartbeat, one of the women bursts into Don Juan's bedroom, fretting that her husband is here and angry. "Help me, Juan," she begs. "If he finds me out, it will end everything for me!" The angry man pounds on the door below, and the woman seeks a place to hide. She promises to kill herself if her husband finds her. The husband bursts into Don Juan's bedchamber, gripping his dagger. Don Juan nods his head, gripping his own dagger. The husband sees his wife's dress creeping beneath the nearby curtain and rushes to expose her. Pulling the drape aside, he finds her stabbing herself in the chest. Don Juan is stunned by the sudden suicide and the husband's reaction. His wife's blood on his hands, tears in his eyes, the man points at Don Juan, saying, "Betrayer of women—destroyer of men's faith!" The man continues to rant and rave as the bells toll on. Hearing the ruckus, Pedrillo enters with some men who see the husband with his dead wife. "Shh," the crazed man shushes. "My lady sleeps!" Believing him the murderer, one goes to fetch the guards who take him into custody.



The bells toll on – Outside, the bells keep ringing. Even with the situation under control and blame shifted to the angry husband, Don Juan takes no comfort or joy in his situation. "Will those bells ever stop?" he asks Pedrillo. "Not until the banquet is over and Donati escorts his bride to their nuptial chamber," Pedrillo replies. Don Juan downs yet another cup of wine, holding the empty vessel out for Pedrillo to fill. We see the bells tolling yet again. Back at the church, the performance continues. The Borgia and Donati are elated, but Adriana weeps openly. She is particularly offended when the man she was forced to marry begins holding and kissing one of the dancing girls as she feeds him grapes.



Adriana's bedchambers – The performance ends, and Adriana crosses the room in her wedding dress, curtsying before the Borgia. She makes some final plea for mercy, and Lucrezia begins to respond, but Cesare stops her, simply saying, "Go—prepare yourself for the nuptials." Lucrezia sends her personal servant to make sure the orders are followed. She returns a few minutes later to report, "The Lady Adriana defies your command." The Borgias and Donati go to the bedchambers where Donati calls for his wife. Slowly, fearfully, Adriana approaches the door. A sword stops her as she reaches for the latch.



Duel – Donati calls again, and this time the doors open in unison. Don Juan, equipped with dueling swords, steps into view. He steps forward and taunts Donati, saying, "Your bride is here—come and get her!" Donati responds by drawing his own swords from a nearby wall. In her bedchamber, Adriana pleads with Don Juan, saying the Borgia forced her to marry Donati. After this, the men begin fighting across the room. They maneuver back into the main concourse, trading blows. Both men are cut at several points in the fight. While Donati is large and clearly skilled, Don Juan fights with fury unmatched. The young man manages to push Donati over the railing, sending him tumbling to the ground. Another taunt emanates from his lips: "Your bride is still here!" Donati stops the fight for a moment, asking permission from Cesare to kill Don Juan, and his request is granted. The fighting begins again and is all the more vicious. Both men drip with blood from multiple cuts, but eventually, Don Juan disarms Donati, flinging his rapier across the room. In one final struggle, Don Juan plunges a dagger into Donati.



The Don victorious – Don Juan stands over Donati's corpse, his dagger held aloft triumphantly. His victory is short-lived, however, as the guards seize him and Adriana. Cesare has him taken away to be prepared for execution. Adriana is to be imprisoned in a tower for her role as an accomplice. Lucrezia and Cesare grin devilishly as their orders are carried out.



Prison – A title card describes the dank conditions at the St. Angelo prison. Don Juan finds himself in a "slimy cell below the level of the River Tiber." He paces as he did in his penthouse when something outside catches his attention. Peeking his head out as far as he can through the window bars, he sees a man in the neighboring cell waving something: a wooden plank, which he passes with the help of the river's current. A simple message is etched in the plank: "BLOCK SECOND LEVEL LOOSE." Don Juan finds the block in question and hears the prisoner on the other side respond to his knock. They try to move the block for a moment, but Lucrezia makes a surprise appearance in Don Juan's cell, and he has to stop so as not to be caught. "Your quarters," she teases, "rash Spaniard, are none too tidy." Don Juan bows and responds calmly, "They will serve, I think—for the brief time I remain here." Lucrezia shoots a disgusted glance at some nearby rats before stepping close to Don Juan, tempting him, "Your freedom shall be a gift from me—if you are capable of appreciating it." He responds that the scaffold is far less dangerous. Lucrezia leaves in a huff, saying he'll regret insulting her, taunting further that Adriana is being tortured by her magicians.

"Hell gapes wide for thee" – After assuring the door is once more bolted and Lucrezia isn't coming back, Don Juan returns to the loose block, the prisoner on the other side banging away with a chain to get his attention. Pulling and pushing, they manage to get the block loose. On the other side, Don Juan is surprised to find the man he framed for the woman's murder. The man rants on about God's justice for a moment before leveling a finger at Don Juan and telling him, "Hell gapes wide for thee—my hands shall send thee thither!" He laughs madly, but Don Juan quickly gains a new route of escape when the old mortar gives in to the river's pressure, and the outermost block gives way. Don Juan swims away from the prison and rushes off to find the tower where Adriana is being held.



Room of horrors – A title card reads: "The tower of the Borgia Palace – – A room of horrors – Neri's workshop." A cloaked man dodders around an alchemy laboratory. On the left-hand side of the room, we see Adriana tied to a wheel, bent at an uncomfortable angle. Slowly, a set of shutters at the nearby window opens. Don Juan enters the room, and Adriana sees him. He urges her to remain silent as he stealthily subdues the maniac wizard. Lucrezia enters the room soon thereafter with her brother, and the cloaked figure approaches, his face a haunting grimace of sadistic pleasure as he stoops to do Lucrezia's bidding to Adriana. As he turns to face her, the man's face changes as if by magic: it's Don Juan in disguise, and he once again urges Adriana to play along. He mimes giving her a potion, and she spasms before pretending to pass out. The two leave to view the execution of Don Juan, promising to return soon to watch the rest of the torture process.



Escape – Juan wastes no time getting Adriana down after the Borgias leave, but just as their escape begins, the injured magician begins to ring a nearby bell. The Borgias return just in time to see Don Juan holding Adriana in his arms. He laughs tauntingly at them before kissing Adriana's lips and using a nearby vine to quickly descend to the ground below. They hop on the back of a waiting horse, but their lead disappears quickly as the Borgia guards give chase. Don Juan rides recklessly through Rome until the city recedes behind him, the guards in hot pursuit. After finding a safe spot for Adriana to rest, Don Juan wheels his horse around and chases down their pursuers. One by one, the guards fall to Don Juan's blade. He deals with the final two by making their horses run off a cliff into the river.



"Spain and happiness" – Adriana holds onto the tree, watching Don Juan win the battle, cheering him on. Don Juan rushes back to her and scoops her onto the horse with just one hand. They kiss passionately as the horse carries them further away from Rome. "Before us, beloved," says Juan, "is Spain and happiness." He flings his sword to the wind and kisses her again. They gallop away together into the sunset.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Don Juan

Don Juan is a Spanish nobleman living in Rome. As a child, his father taught him to distrust and use women. When he meets Adriana, however, he starts to doubt these lessons.

Intelligent A man of many traits, central to most are Don Juan's intelligence. He has a quick wit, often aided by his observant eyes and sturdy memory. Using his intelligence, he is able to turn missteps into honest mistakes, twist betrayals into assistance, and flatter his enemies into submission. While many characters of this archetype tend to lean into indomitable soldier tropes, Don Juan is shown to be mostly a thinker and a strategist, though he can hold his own in a fight when necessary.

Determined Don Juan shows determination in many different ways throughout the film. We see this most often in the way he pursues women. He pushes through their resistance until they finally give in to his desires. It begins to show again when he falls for Adriana. For several days, he forsakes his other beaus to wait for a chance to speak with Adriana. After learning the Borgia set up the marriage between Donati and Adriana, Don Juan is determined to have her for himself. This means facing the Borgia's most skilled swordsman, but Don Juan doesn't bat an eye on that. He is simply determined to marry the woman he loves, who made him feel real love for the first time.

Adriana

Adriana is the daughter of a nobleman allied with enemies of the Borgia. She gets wrapped up in the Borgia's schemes because of Don Juan's attraction to her. While she isn't thrilled by Don Juan's early advances, she grows to love him over the course of the film.

Pious When we first see Adriana, it's often in the context of the church. She is incredibly pious, attending mass almost daily. Adriana is also the only character we see praying. It's obvious that her faith means a lot to her, as in many of her darkest moments, she turns to her personal shrine in prayer.

Selfless Adriana is defined by her selflessness. In order to save her father's life, she agrees to marry Donati and bind her family to the Borgias. No other character in the film acts with such morals. Even the hero of the tale, Don Juan, avoids responsibility for the death of one of his lovers, framing an angry husband in his place. Of all the characters, the only one with a moral backbone is Adriana, and her sacrifice to save her father makes it clear.

Lucrezia

Lucrezia is the sister of Cesare Borgia. She has great economic and political power in Rome, and many people fear her because of her and her brother's frequent abuses of power. When scorned, she becomes a fearsome and single-minded enemy.

Cruel We often see Lucrezia acting with cruel intent. It's a trait she shares with her brother. Not only is she cruel, she revels in the suffering of others. She finds it amusing. To her, Borgia political ploys are just a kind of game for her entertainment. We see this most clearly when she and Cesare ride through Rome's streets, selecting people to come to their party. They invite Adriana and her father specifically to humiliate them before poisoning her father.

Insecure Lucrezia's cruelty is a shield against rejection. We don't get a clear view of this often, but it's obvious her brother's teasing bothers her more deeply than she lets on. When her servant and her brother mention that Don Juan is late and likely giving attention to some servant rather than her, she seems genuinely hurt for a moment before that expression gives way to rage. This trait turns Lucrezia from a "pure evil" villain typical of this type of melodrama into a more complex and pitiable villain.

Pedrillo

Pedrillo is Don Juan's loyal attendant. He performs various tasks for the nobleman while trying his best to emulate him. Pedrillo wishes to be a great lover like his master.

Admiring Pedrillo wishes to emulate Don Juan. He takes a lot of joy in reading the Don's private letters, a task given to him so Don Juan can focus on womanizing. He also likes to watch as Don Juan flirts with women or lounges with them in the parlor. Where many men would be jealous, Pedrillo simply admires Don Juan for his wit and ability to sweep women off their feet. It's this admiration that elevates the two's relationship from a simple master/servant arrangement to a master/pupil one.

Helpful What would an attendant be if he wasn't helpful? Pedrillo spends most of his on-screen appearances helping nobles out of or into their riding clothes, carrying bulky items for his master, keeping watch, or ferrying information across the city. He and Don Juan have a clear rapport, Pedrillo often reacting to his needs without a word between either of them. Pedrillo does everything he can to help his master too, seen most clearly when he quickly switches places with Don Juan, making Lucrezia think her servant just mistook Pedrillo for Don Juan, and allowing him to avoid an embarrassing (and potentially deadly) situation.

THEMES

Society

Class This is a film about nobles in Renaissance Italy. They all have servants, multiple homes, and nothing but free time on their hands. We don't see much of the lives of the common folk, as they're often just set dressing more than characters. Even the servants we see are more upper-class, Pedrillo being richly dressed enough to be mistaken for a nobleman himself. While there isn't a lot of examination of these ideas, *Don Juan* is another example of upper-class historical romance.

Gender There isn't a real defining moment of gender in this film, as the characterization of each of the characters is more concerned with melodrama than displaying gender ideals. Adriana is very pious, while Lucrezia is just a female version of her brother in her cruelty. Don Juan engages in some of the behaviors of the antagonists, and not always for Adriana's sake. In a lot of ways, Don Juan is something of an anti-hero, and—while many praise his sexual prowess—it is shown to be based in disordered thinking he wishes to change. Some interesting ideas come up throughout the film, but they're not explored at all before the film's melodrama overwhelms them.

Justice

Violence There are many moments of violence in *Don Juan*. Don Juan's father strikes his mother after he confirms her infidelity. He also entombs a man in a wall, and we can infer he left him there to die as punishment for having an affair with his wife. The Borgia are quick to employ all forms of violence, from stealthy poisoning attempts to brutish thuggery. They stage a surprise attack just to bring Adriana under their control, killing hundreds to spite a few political enemies and a Spaniard who made them mad. They also employ a number of torture facilities. We watch a woman kill herself and her husband go mad because of it. Don Juan kills several people in sword fights at the end of the film.



Illustrative moment While modern film viewers might find the fighting in *Don Juan* tame compared to modern film fare, there is a surprising amount of violence shown during the duel toward the end of the film. This is a gritty, brutal fight with both Dontati and Don Juan taking cuts and jabs. By the end of the fight, both have several deep cuts that bleed profusely. The others watch, numb to this kind of violence and seeing it as a form of justice.

Politics

Intrigue We're never made privy to the reasons behind the political intrigue in the film, but the moment the Borgia take to the screen, they are constantly plotting and planning the embarrassment—or worse—for their various political enemies and their allies. We see a petulant edge to their machinations quite quickly as well, both Lucrezia and Cesare using political power to get revenge against even the smallest slights. The siblings also employ a staff of magicians and torturers to help them with their cruel plans.



Illustrative moment One of the most obvious moments of intrigue happens fairly early in the film. After meeting with Don Juan at the party, Lucrezia bids him return to the other guests. Instead of walking to the parlor, Don Juan hides behind a corner and watches Lucrezia enter a secret room. There, she and Cesare plot the poisoning of Adriana's father.

Relationship

Family There isn't a lot to this theme, but it does come up a few times throughout the film. We see Don Juan's family fall apart and then his sordid adolescent years with only a philanderer to guide his development. The Borgias have strong family ties, but they two are dysfunctional and cruel. Adriana's father seems a good man but is too old and frail to protect his family, causing Adriana to sacrifice her future and happiness to save his life and the status of their family from the Borgia's machinations.

Sexuality



Love There are a couple moments of familial love between Adriana and her father, but they are brief. We see love come up mostly in the context of Adriana and Don Juan. The romance that unfolds between Adriana and Don Juan is surprisingly honest about some typical courtship of the period. His first advances would be considered a form of sexual misconduct in today's contexts. However, seeing how his groping and forced kisses affected Adriana, Don Juan, overcome with love for the first time, adopts a different approach.

Illustrative moment By the time we see Don Juan as an adult, he's already infamous as a womanizer. He stops seeing his various paramours for three days after meeting Adriana, captivated by her beauty and astounded by her piety and moral strength. In the courtyard of the church, he kneels to kiss the hem of her dress, begging for her to teach him how to mend his ways and learn to love.

Lust/attraction These two themes intermingle in such a way they can't really be separated. The nobles in this film seem unduly preoccupied with sex and romance, and it makes simple attraction and lust appear the same on screen. When Cesare and Donati first spy Adriana, they both ogle her with wide smirks. This is played off as lust. Don Juan repeats this same behavior the first time he sees her as well. This time, it's played off as attraction, but we see his lust come up when he sneaks into Adriana's room that night and tries to have his way with her. The characters who show these traits often have ulterior motives, such as the women who try to court Don José, seeking to access his wealth and political power, or the way Lucrezia wants to tame Don Juan to make herself more infamous. The strange way these nobles use sex as a political tool often conceals the difference between lust and attraction.

Infidelity / Affair Infidelity provides most of the drama throughout the film. Either characters expect romantic loyalty and find their partner is unfaithful, such as Don José or Lucrezia, or someone is believed to be unfaithful but is being forced into a situation, such as Adriana's marriage. While this does come up a few times in the film, the nature of infidelity or why people engage in such behavior goes completely unexplored, remaining just plot devices.

Illustrative moment The earliest moment of this theme is also the most impactful. Only a few minutes into the film, it's revealed that Don Juan's mother is unfaithful when her paramour enters the tower with the aid of a knotted rope. His father returns but doesn't see the other man. He realizes, however, that the man is hiding in the recently-vacated treasure room hidden in the castle wall, so he orders the wall put back in place, entombing the man and getting a confession from his wife. This episode begins Don José's woman-hating and womanizing, which he then projects onto the young Don Juan.



Seduction / Womanizing Don Juan's main philosophy in life is that of womanizing. He is taught to do this by his father, Don José, who swore to never give his love to another woman after finding his wife was unfaithful. To spite her, she insists the young Don Juan learn this lesson, inviting noblewomen to cavort with his son. Don Juan follows his father's lessons in several points in the film, but it's often played off for comedy. He also falls back on these habits when mourning Adriana's marriage.

Illustrative moment In the final scene of the prologue, we see one of the most obvious moments of womanizing. Don José leads his adolescent son into a large room filled with dancing girls who all reach to touch them as they pass. At a banquet table, Don José and little Don Juan both begin to flirt with the women there, who caress and kiss them. Don José shows his true colors by mistreating the woman he favored until that day, causing her such embarrassment that she stabs him in a jealous rage.



Multiple partners / Variety The idea of multiple sexual partners comes up several times through the film. It is usually in the context of Don Juan's exploits, but not always. The first time it comes up, it's his father's 'harem' that we see. A dozen or so noblewomen vie for Don José's attention, and most seem fine with this arrangement, save the one who stabs him out of jealousy. Again, we see this idea come up outside Don Juan's exploits during the scene where he is introduced as an adult. He is fooling around with the wife and the mistress of another man, and he uses this fact to manipulate all three of them, first telling the women their lover is coming to expose them, and then—after he appears unexpectedly—get rid of him by saying his wife set him up to catch him with his mistress.

Illustrative moment We're shown this theme most clearly after being introduced to adult Don Juan. He has two women seeking his company while he is in the bedchamber with a third. Trying to keep each of the others ignorant to the multiple affairs, Don Juan tells each of the women that Margoni is coming to expose them, and—each being related or a lover of Margoni—they all try to scatter to the winds. We see him run through the same script three times with only minor alterations, and each time it works. Don Juan often reduces himself to duplicity to keep his lovers in the dark about just how voracious his sexual appetites are.



Psychology

Suicide We see one instance of suicide in the film. Toward the end of the film, after the marriage of Adriana to Donati, Don Juan grows frustrated with one of his female admirers and orders her to go home. Moments after he retreats to his bedchamber, however, she enters and begs for him to hide her, as her husband has come looking for her. Before hiding behind a curtain near his bed, she tells Don Juan that she'll kill herself if her husband discovers her. When her husband enters and finds her, she does just that, dying on Don Juan's bedroom floor. Unable to take the shame and the potential loss of status, the noblewoman opts for death before dishonor.



Life stages

Childhood This is a very small theme, but it is important in Don Juan's characterization. When he is a very young child, his mother is run out of his father's home for her infidelity. After this, we see an

adolescent Don Juan being shown the pleasures of his father's personal harem. When the noblewomen cannot get his father's attention, they turn their affections to Juan. In this, we see Don Juan's dysfunctional childhood and why it drove him to be a serial womanizer.



Illustrative moment A very short moment of childhood comes at the very beginning. Little Juan sits before the fire with his dolls and his dog. Very quickly, this normalcy is interrupted when his father returns home to find his mother engaging in an affair. After this moment, we see how dysfunctional Don Juan's father made his childhood with his devotion to womanizing and woman-hating.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Would you describe *Don Juan's* portrayal of multi-partner relationships as positive, negative, or neutral? Explain.

2. In what ways are women treated as property in the film? Are there moments that challenge these ideas?

3. What does the film have to say about how parents impact their children's sexuality?

4. Would you classify this film as action, romance, or something else? Explain your reasoning.