

**Research Article**

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# The Delusion of Enchantment in Miguel Cervantes's *Don Quixote* and William Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*

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**Abstract:** The aim of the present article is to investigate the conceptual framework of magic and enchantment in the works of Miguel Cervantes de Saavedra and William Shakespeare. The works chosen for this comparative study are *Don Quixote* and *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Shakespeare and Cervantes portray an ironic vision that may seem comic and grotesque on the surface, but in fact shows a violent and malign world. The portrayal of fantasy and realism parallel with the delusory aspects of enchantment create an interplay between the ironic mockery and reality as seen through the experiences of the characters themselves. The delusions of enchantment experienced by the protagonists present a flawed world where jealousy, greed and corruption prevail.

**Keywords:** magical delusion, enchantment, Shakespearean comedy, mockery, Quixotic irony

The use of magic and its relevance is as old as mankind. Belief in magic and enchantment features strongly in pagan rituals, healing and everyday customs. Man's belief in the otherworld is filled with giants, fairies, sorcerers and other supernatural beings, which offers an endless source for tales, legends and myths. These have been retold in countless versions over the past centuries, often with a similar storyline in the different cultures, and have never ceased to amaze its listeners or readers. Magic and enchantment continue to perplex the human mind to our very age.

Within the present essay I aim to investigate the conceptual framework on the usage of magic and enchantment in two of the world's most noteworthy writers, Miguel Cervantes de Saavedra (1547-1616) and William Shakespeare (1564-1616). The works chosen for this comparative study are *Don Quixote* (1605) and *Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595-6). Though the theme itself is immensely large and would singularly fill volumes in itself, a few examples from each work can at least sketch the authors' individual achievements in engaging both reality and romantic enchantment in ways that simultaneously focus on and highlight the delusory aspects of late sixteenth century and early seventeenth century England and Spain.

William Shakespeare and Miguel Cervantes de Saavedra were both outstanding personalities of an age that brought great discoveries overseas, innovations and developments in social and cultural structures. This was the height of the English Renaissance and the Golden Age of Spain. Both authors were men of their time, who were involved in the current turbulence of historical happenings. This is more obvious in the case of Cervantes than Shakespeare, since there seems to be more information available on Cervantes's life though—as with Shakespeare—there are blank spaces in between. On the basis of information available to us, neither man went to university, Shakespeare's grammar school studies serving as the foundation

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for his great poetry and dramatic oeuvre,<sup>1</sup> while in the case of Cervantes there is a source that refers to a Miguel de Cervantes as a “beloved pupil” of an Erasmus intellectual named Juan López de Hoyos in 1569 at a municipal school in Madrid (“Cervantes Britannica.com”). Whether he was in fact a pupil or teacher there is uncertain, but according to *Britannica* his first published poem on the death of Elizabeth of Valois, Philip II’s young queen, appeared that year. If he did study there then his studies may have certainly added stimulus to his writing.

Shakespeare never went abroad or became a soldier and fought in any of the European battles, though many of his plays are set in foreign lands, as is his play *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, which is set in Athens. Cervantes, however, we know for certain left for Italy and by 1570 had enlisted as a soldier in a Spanish infantry stationed in Naples (“Cervantes Britannica.com”). There are also enough references throughout his work and other independent accounts that relate his conduct in action in the battle of Lepanto in 1571, where “he received two gunshot wounds in the chest, and a third rendered his left hand useless for the rest of his life” (“Cervantes Britannica.com”). Cervantes, therefore, was versatile not only in the different genres of literature, but was an experienced soldier, who was captured by Barbary pirates and sold as a slave in Algiers, then finally released for a ransom in 1580 (“Cervantes Britannica.com”). These adventures were then to supply him with subject matter in several of his works including *Don Quixote*. In contrast to this adventurous episode, his life back in Spain was characterized by financial difficulties to the very end. He seems to have been unable to establish himself financially and although he achieved instant fame for his work *Don Quixote*, even beyond Spain, still he never achieved the financial recognition that would have been due.

Shakespeare, on the other hand, did acquire substantial wealth by the end of his life and was in fact able to retire comfortably to Stratford. However, as far as scholarly research has been able to establish, Shakespeare was never involved in or experienced the kind of adventurous life that Cervantes had. What was the key to Shakespeare’s success? Perhaps the fact that much of his dramatic work was a collaboration with other playwrights and poets: he was a member and later even shareholder of the Globe theatre, and above all, he was a member of an acting company (The Lord Chamberlain’s Men, then the King’s Men), which enjoyed the protection of the most privileged men of contemporary England.

Therefore, as member of a privileged acting company and shareholder of a theatre Shakespeare, as far as we know, never worked alone, but together with others. Cervantes, however, tried to acquire the patronage of influential persons throughout his life, but seems to have been somewhat unlucky with his choices.<sup>2</sup> As he worked independently rather than in collaboration with other writers, Cervantes—though undoubtedly a genius and exceptional personality—was unable to connect himself to the more influential circles. “It is apparent that he would have liked a securer place in the pantheon of the nation’s writers than he ever achieved during his lifetime” (“Cervantes Britannica.com”).

Cervantes and Shakespeare obviously knew of each other,<sup>3</sup> and Shakespeare may have even read the first part of *Don Quixote*. By the early seventeenth century Shakespeare was a well-known playwright and poet, while Cervantes an established author, playwright and poet. The two great authors, each in their own home environment, created literature that “both imitates our life and shapes our understanding of what it can be” (Young 7). The portrayal of fantasy and realism parallel with the delusionary aspects of enchantment create an interplay between the ironic mockeries and realities as seen through the experiences of the characters themselves. Magic and enchantment is a mask used to hide behind, and thereby allows the characters to disregard reality.

1 In particular, this has been one of the major points that has divided and still continues to divide Shakespearean scholars and scholarship since Delia Bacon’s research and publication in the nineteenth century, and has since brought forth several theories on the possible identities of Shakespeare.

2 Cervantes had dedicated Part I of *Don Quixote* to the young Duque de Béjar, which was obviously a mistake. He was more fortunate in acquiring the patronage of the Conde de Lemos to whom he dedicated Part II of *Don Quixote* and three other works. Another influential person, whose favours he was able to enjoy, was Don Bernardo de Sandoval y Rojas, archbishop of Toledo (“Cervantes Britannica.com”).

3 Thomas Shelton’s English translation of the first part of *Don Quixote* was published in 1612. (“Cervantes Britannica.com”).

What is reality? What are its conceptual boundaries? In Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* the so-called boundaries are clearly distinguishable by the act divisions. The play has a very obvious frame structure, whereby acts I and V represent the harsh realities portrayed by the world of Athens where humans and their laws rule. Athens may be a reference to an ancient culture, the antiquities, and Greek mythology, with suggestions of an existing other world inhabited by gods and supernatural beings. But human greed and lust for power disrupts and mocks any enchantment the location itself may provide. This is a world where Duke Theseus wins his love Hippolyta, the Amazon, by defeating her in battle:

Hippolyta, I wooed thee with my sword  
 And won thy love, doing thee injuries;  
 But I will wed thee in another key,  
 With pomp, with triumph, and with revelling.  
 (Shakespeare, Act I. scene i. ll. 16-19)

This is love that has been won and conquered not in the usual sense of the word. The enchantment that love embodies is a mockery, a delusion. Due to this Theseus wants to organize a wedding full of grandeur, ceremony and magnificence. There is, however, a strong suggestion of power control and male dominance involved.

The notion of ultimate control and dominance continues in the same scene as Egeus arrives with Demetrius and demands that the ancient laws of Athens be used to judge the case of his daughter Hermia and Lysander. Here, true love is contrasted with false love, which is backed by the brutal force of a patriarch father figure.

To you your father should be as a god,  
 One that composed your beauties; yea, and one  
 To whom you are but as a form in wax  
 By him imprinted and within his power  
 To leave the figure or disfigure it.  
 (Shakespeare, Act I scene i. ll. 47-51)

Shakespeare presents another side to the idea of parental love, which becomes a mere mockery. Egeus is prepared to sacrifice his daughter's life in order to enforce his own will. Theseus naturally decides in favour of Egeus thereby disrupting the image of Athens as a centre of high culture and nobility. The threat of death hangs over the whole play until the very end, when the situation is finally resolved. This highly ironic vision of human society is anything but comic.

The central section of the play consisting of Acts II, III and IV offers a change of location, outside the city of Athens in the nearby forest. This is another place and another world in itself, inhabited and ruled by the fairies. But here again what may on the surface seem wondrous and enchanting is disrupted by the quarrels between the King and Queen of the Fairies, Oberon and Titania. The magical enchantment is further unsettled by Puck, Oberon's jester, who is sent to fetch a love potion so that the King might use it on his Queen. This act parallels that of Theseus and Egeus in enforcing his dominance over his Queen. The world of the fairies parallels that of the human world, in which jealousy, greed and power struggles prevail. The enchantment and magic that should characterize the forest and its supernatural inhabitants becomes a place of uncertainty and disillusionment, which is only resolved when Titania is awakened by Oberon following her flirtatious engagement with the ass-headed Bottom. Here, contrary to the human world, all the happenings are taken lightly and events untangled in the blink of an eye.

The lovers enter the forest bringing with them quarrelsome bickering, into which Puck is told to intervene, but the mischievous elf confuses the mortals and with this ensues a mad frenzy, each mortal chasing the other. The situation is highly comic, but not without irony highlighting the negative side of human nature. Here, away from the social norms, the mortals, both men and women, lose all sense of conduct. The only one enjoying the 'madness' displayed by the mortals is Puck:

Lord, what fools these mortals be!  
 (Shakespeare, Act II scene ii. ll. 115)  
 Then will two at once woo one;  
 That must needs be sport alone;  
 And those things do best please me  
 That befall prepost'rously.  
 (Shakespeare, Act II scene ii. ll. 118-121)

Puck is the instigator of the action, the central character whom the playwright considers worthy of taking control. Shakespeare clearly differentiates between the fairies and the mortals, but where the fairies embody the magical enchantment and mischief, the human beings are presented through their negative characteristics. These are features that Puck and other supernatural beings may and do ridicule without remorse. And obviously what better way to highlight the foolish and senseless behaviour of the mortals than through such explicit comparisons.

Shakespeare cunningly mixes reality and dream within the play. This is why Puck takes on the role of the chorus at the very end and clearly says:

If we shadows have offended,  
 Think but this, and all is mended:  
 That you have but slumb'ed here,  
 While these visions did appear.  
 And this weak and idle theme,  
 No more yielding but a dream,  
 (Shakespeare, Act V scene i. ll. 425-430)

The harsh reality with which the play begins in Athens continues in the magical world of the forest. Within the forest magic and a seeming reality take over and rule the misguided lovers. The dreamlike quality of the happenings are enforced by the location, the forest, and the darkness of the night. These tools further strengthen the imagination allowing individual fears and passions to erupt, because the imagination has the power to summon up visual images which ultimately result in the 'madness' displayed by the mortals. Shakespeare distinctly shows us that violence and imagination run parallel through the play in the same way as violence and love come together. Speed, urgency and desire are elemental in bringing across the delusory aspect of enchantment. Altogether Shakespeare portrays a frightening and hostile world, which shows signs of uncertainty.

Whether Shakespeare's audience believed in fairies or not, the drama implies "that there are realities in our world that transcend simple Realism, much the same as Cervantes suggests that Don Quixote, foolishly seeking wonders in chivalric romance, fails to see how he and his squire are really romantic characters" (Young 15). As in Shakespearean drama, Cervantes, too, portrays an ironic vision that may seem comic and grotesque on the surface, but in fact shows a violent and malevolent world. Chivalric literature may seem fashionable, because it offers a retreat into an imaginary world where love, honour, fame and glory are still held in esteem.

The protagonist, Don Quixote, is in reality Alonso Quesada, a member of the lesser Spanish nobility living in an unnamed location of La Mancha with his niece and housekeeper. He is in fact a nobody, who is so engrossed in reading chivalric literature that he decides to become a somebody who will perform great deeds for mankind. Cervantes, thereby, magnifies an insignificant individual and creates a significant nobody.

Finally, having quite lost his wits, he was seized with the strangest conceit any madman in the world has had. It seemed to him that it was requisite and necessary, for the augmentation of his honour and for the benefit of the commonwealth, that he should become a knight-errant and ride throughout the world with his horse and his arms to seek adventures.  
 (Cervantes, *Chapter I*, 28)

This is the foundation on which Cervantes builds his main protagonist, who is presented throughout the whole work as a "sane madman" (de Armas Wilson ix), whose exploits are bizarre and inexplicable to any average person. But as a madman Don Quixote is able to sidestep any responsibility and is able to dwell in

the literary world of chivalry, which contains fantastical creatures (such as giants and enchanters). Whether Don Quixote is mad or sane remains ambiguous throughout the whole work, but this is how Cervantes wants it to remain in order to maintain his readers' interest, however, as Don Quixote says: "I know very well who I am, and I know who I can be" (Cervantes, *Chapter V*, 46). For Cervantes's contemporary readers Don Quixote was a jester, like Puck in Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, who stimulates the action and simultaneously brings the various characters together.

Through Don Quixote's wanderings in the mountainous areas of Sierra Morena he comes across another "sane madman," Cardenio, who relates his personal story of love for his Lucinda and Don Fernando's desire for Dorotea. Here, as in Shakespeare's play, we have two couples of lovers, namely Cardenio and Lucinda, and Don Fernando and Dorotea. Even the relationships seem similar, as Don Fernando first desires Dorotea, but when she yields to him he instead turns to Lucinda, as does Helena to Demetrius in a *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Furthermore, Don Fernando, like Demetrius in Shakespeare's play, has the approval of Lucinda's father. Similarly, the lovers leave their individual homes in secret to suffer their lost loves and eventually end up meeting each other in the barren mountains. In continuance with the analogy, these mountains are like the forest in Shakespeare's play, enchanting, endless, mysterious, and unfriendly. The mountains, like the forest, are an endless labyrinth and only the shepherds and goat herders (hence the fairies in Shakespeare's play) know the way out. This is a world of its own where the borders between seeming and reality cease to exist. Similarly, the clearly distinguishable borderline that defines insanity and sanity disappears as Don Quixote tells Sancho that "you are no saner than I am" and Sancho replies, "I am not so mad as you are" (Cervantes, *Chapter XXV* 168). Who is mad and who is sane? Within the mountains all humans seem to be enchanted and equally abnormal. Nobody is who they are or seem to be. All measure of reality becomes indistinguishable. The mountains, like Shakespeare's forest, is a temporary location for the characters, where their true stories are told, but not resolved.

Once away from the mountains, delusion prevails over enchantment and the characters meet up at the Inn, where Don Quixote experiences quite a few unpleasant adventures during the course of the work. However, whatever happens to him, be it good or bad, he explains this in the following manner:

[a]nd understand with all your five senses that whatsoever I have done, I do or I shall do is guided by reason and conforms to the rules of chivalry, which I know better than all the other knights in the world who have ever professed them (Cervantes, *Chapter XXV* 160).

Through the indirect involvement of Don Quixote the four lovers meet at the Inn and, as in Shakespeare's play at the end of Act IV, the mix-ups are resolved and the lovers are united again.

This story-within-the story is given a romantic happy ending, but not without due sarcasm from Cervantes. The author clearly distinguishes between the educated, beautiful Spanish women of noble birth, the nobility and the uneducated, coarse, vulgar and lying masses embodied by the Innkeeper, his wife, daughter, and others. Cervantes tries to maintain a balance in presenting the various sides of Spanish life, however, the reader must realize that liars and thieves are an essential feature of life, a reality that even Don Quixote cannot avoid confronting. The magical quality that chivalry and knighthood offer is a delusion of enchantment. The different characters within the story enjoy reading literature of chivalry, but no one seems to believe in it anymore or even follow its rules and values, only Don Quixote. Or does he at all? Life according to Cervantes is a delusion, and the magical quality that chivalry upholds for Don Quixote contains suffering, disappointment and loss of integrity. Don Quixote becomes a foolish middle-aged man, whose efforts to maintain his knightly code of honour turn sour and his deeds are ridiculed by the other characters. Even his own books on chivalry are ransacked by the priest and barber, who selfishly decide whether to keep, take or burn Don Quixote's books. These books, on the one hand, offer images of another convention, which the priest considers harmful and dangerous, though he admits that he reads chivalric literature, as well. In his portrayal of Spanish society Cervantes shows that the readership of chivalric literature is divided by those who believe in it, like Don Quixote and the goat herders, and those who merely read it for pleasure (as the Innkeeper, Cardenio, Don Fernando, the priest, etc.), and consider it an enjoyable fairy tale.

The only person who comes to believe and admire Don Quixote, though with added scepticism, is Sancho Panza, who provides a balance between the enchanting world of chivalry and the harsh realities of contemporary life. Whenever Don Quixote is involved in a new quest or venture to save the world Sancho Panza is the one who interrupts the events and forces Don Quixote to confront reality, if only for a short while, in order to try and save his master from physical harm.

In *Don Quixote* Sancho Panza's character must be given due importance. According to William Worden, Sancho Panza is the "illiterate literary critic" (510), who represents reality. Through his scepticism Cervantes exposes "the absurd nature of the literary conventions of his day" (499). This the author is able to do because Sancho Panza is, according to Worden, really "illiterate" and as such is unable to join in the discussions found in the work on pastoral romances and chivalric literature (500).

Sancho Panza is a man of the flesh, who enjoys eating, sleeping and relieves himself when and where it is necessary, and has pure sexual inclinations without any misleading romantic notions of love, honour and faith. Being in fact illiterate Panza never really takes part in the discussions on chivalry or listens attentively to the goat herders' pastoral romances. He is a man of action, who is rooted in the reality of his time, and this distinction clearly shows how laughable these conventions really are. His scepticism draws attention to the "problematic relationship between literature and life" (Worden 509). The protagonists' physical features also emphasize this contradiction, as Sancho Panza is short and round-bellied, while Don Quixote is tall and abnormally thin. These contraries with reference to the physical and the spiritual reflect the outward features of the two main protagonists, who thereby enhance one another throughout the entire work.

The harsh and brutal physical world is represented by Sancho Panza, who has no misconceptions about Spanish people and his environment. He is able to sidestep the negative features, including the deception and duping prevalent in his daily life. Panza, therefore, is ideally suited and thus makes the most of enjoying the worldly pleasures of life, which are mirrored by his somewhat chubby and fleshy body. Don Quixote, on the other hand, seems to move within a more spiritual sphere, obviously highlighted by the fact that he is willing to go without food and drink, and does not seem to have any sexual inclinations even to his beloved lady Dulcinea. Don Quixote is simply a knight of honour in all its classical conceptions. The bodily outward features of the two main protagonists, thereby, enhance this duality, which is reflected in the double sidedness of life that allows for magical enchantment, but also deception and trickery.

## Conclusion

The portrayal of the generic conventions of early sixteenth century Spain and England "probe into the problematic relationship between real-seeming artifice and reality" (Robert Alter *Partial Magic* x). As José Ortega y Gasset observes in his *Meditaciones del Quijote*, the imaginary becomes "poetic," while reality is "anti-poetic" (Worden 498). And this obvious characteristic is highlighted by the physical features of the protagonists in both works dealt with in the present article. The world portrayed by the two outstanding authors, Cervantes and Shakespeare, are therefore far from perfect. The comic genre allows the writers to delve deeper into the human psyche, whereby the distinctions between class and education are magnified. We are able to have a glimpse of contemporary society and see its flaws and evils at its roots. Corruption and power struggle is embedded in the political and social structure of society, thereby making it an essential part of human life and existence. This is presented through the various situations brought forth within the essay highlighting that thieves, swindlers, double-dealers and political manipulation is ever-present, regardless of social class or even education. However, neither author wishes to make their work too dark by presenting merely the reality of life; that is why they incorporate magic and enchantment, which provide a light, comic illustration and comparative perception of chivalric literature, and the supernatural world. Nevertheless, though the use of magic and enchantment as a literary tool and dramatic device within these works is highly effective, still the message does come across and the result fully achieves its aim of presenting a double-faced delusionary vision of human life.

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