“WE ARE SUCH STUFF/ AS DREAMS ARE MADE ON”:
DREAMING IN CERVANTES AND SHAKESPEARE

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What is life? An illusion,
A shadow, a fiction,
And the greatest profit is small;
For all of life is a dream,
And dreams, are nothing but dreams.
(Calderón)

Shakespeare and Cervantes are deeply concerned with questions and preoccupations about human life and nature. In them we acknowledge the otherness of the human. The greatness of their literary achievement is not only due to artistic considerations but also to the questioning of their literary discourse. They had a kind of philosophical instinct that shaped their genius and helped them to write on human contradictions and dreams. The fundamental problems that worry us prompted their art. Their questioning cast of mind acted as a precondition of their literary creativity in the exploration of human truth and nature. They anticipated the debates about, and suggested solutions to, central aspects of man and of the world. They facilitated a different apprehension of truth, making possible a different exploration of the problems and questions that urged an immediate answer. Shakespeare and Cervantes have found new ways of approaching and exploring human limits, anxieties, dreams and possibilities. For them there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in man’s philosophy.

They show that there are other means of analysing truth and illusion “in the quest for the ontological certainty […]” beyond the boundaries of rational thinking. In Cervantes and Shakespeare there are continual collisions between illusion and reality. For both, the question is “whether I know with certainty of the existence of the external world and of myself and others in it.” The dichotomy reality-appearance is also a major topic in their works, where characters experience the twofold nature of human life. They call into question the reality of the senses, since they create confusion and contradiction between what they see and what they dream and imagine, producing a state of
suspicion, deception and scepticism as they experience as real what seems to be illusory. Christopher Sly in the Induction of *The Taming of the Shrew* is the new Quixote who suffers from existential confusion. He needs to acknowledge who he is and have answers to his questions: “What, would you make me mad? Am not I Christopher Sly, old Sly's son of Burtonheath, by birth a pedlar, by education a cardmaker, by transmutation a beard-herd, and now by present profession a tinker?” (Ind. 2.14-16). He needs to know who he has been and what he has done to be aware of his present identity. For this reason he gives a detailed account of his previous professions. He experiences the interplay of reality and fiction. He particularly emphasises the bright side of dreams as they provide him with everything they have been longing for. Dreams may come true, as Sly confesses:

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Am I a lord, and have I such a lady?  
Or do I dream? Or have I dream'd till now?  
I do not sleep. I see, I hear, I speak.  
I smell sweet savours and feel soft things.  
Upon my life, I am a lord indeed,  
And not a tinker nor Christopher Sly.  
(Ind. 2.62-67)
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This new status carries with it a new identity that does not seem to worry the new lord. His happiness is nothing but an illusion that cannot last for long. His dreams have been filled with temporary fantasies like those of Don Quixote. When he awakes he can see the contrast between fiction and reality, though it is Macbeth who best expresses the blurring limits between dreams and life:

```latex
And all your yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!  
Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player,  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.  
(5.5.22-28)
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Macbeth’s speech recalls Don Quixote, the Knight of the Sorry Face, whose life is also nothing but a “walking shadow.”
Shakespeare and Cervantes were particularly concerned with dreams. They attached great importance to dreams as they revealed significant aspects of human life. They show that there is a world of fantasy and illusion that shapes human reality. They provide strange, vivid truths about the self and the world that cannot be fully understood and experienced without the dream-like activity that is a part of human life. Through dreams we come to know other dimension of human nature. It is reported that S.T. Coleridge wrote *Kubla Kahn* in a dream and that Robert Louis Stevenson said that a part of his writings was developed in dreams. Dreaming has not only been a source of literary activity but also a recurrent topic in literature over the centuries. Dreams have had a long literary tradition from the *One Thousand and One Nights* and *The Bible*, through the medieval dream allegory of Chaucer to the early modern period where dreams become a recurrent theme as in Quevedo’s five *Dreams*.

Cervantes and Shakespeare are concerned with the power and influence of dreams on human life as a source of illusion, fancy and fiction. They take us to a different reality and provide a different experience which shows truths that are beyond reason. Both dramatise the relationship between appearance and reality, whose dividing line shifts constantly in a dynamic interplay. They know how to produce that fancy and illusion. Prospero is very much conscious of the power of dreams and the tempest makes possible his dream. In *Don Quixote* the narrator makes perfectly clear that Don Quixote’s adventure in the cave of Montesinos was nothing more than a dream. He is particularly explicit at the point where Sancho and the cousin retrieve Don Quixote from the cave and find him in a deep sleep:

Pero no respondía palabra Don Quijote; y sacándole del todo; vieron que traía cerrados los ojos, con muestra de estar dormido. Tendiéronle en el suelo y desliáronle, y, con todo esto, no despertaba; pero tanto le volvieron y revolvieron, sacudieron y menearon, que al cabo de un buen espacio volvió en sí, desperezándose, bien como si de algún grave y profundo sueño despertara; y mirando a una y otra parte como espantado, dijo:

- Dios os lo perdone, amigos que me habéis quitado de la más sabrosa y agradable vida y vista que ningún humano ha visto ni pasado. En efecto ahora acabo de conocer que todos los contentos de la vida pasan como sombra y sueño o se marchitan como a flor del campo. (II, 22)

(But Don Quixote didn’t utter one word in reply, and when they pulled him right out, they saw that his eyes were shut and he seemed to be asleep. They laid him
on the ground and untied him, yet he still didn’t wake up. But hen they rolled him back and forth and shook him to and fro so much that after a good while he did awake, and stretched himself as if emerging from deep and heavy sleep, and looking about him as if in alarm he said:
- God forgive you, friends, for taking me away from the most delicious and delightful life and sights that any man has ever lived or seen. Now indeed I have understood that all the pleasures of this life pass away like a shadow or a dream, wither like the flowers of the field.5)

But as Don Quixote begins to recount his experiences in the cave, he wants to get rid himself of doubts, to be certain he can distinguish reality from dreams. How, then, can we tell reality from dreams? Don Quixote insists that what he saw was real: “porque lo que he contado lo vi por mis propios ojos y lo toqué con mis propias manos” (II, 23) (because what I have recounted is what I saw with my own eyes and touched with my own hands). The problem is: how, then, can we tell reality from dreams? And how can we distinguish them without invalidating the common experience of dreams altogether? The question is raised rather pointedly in Don Quixote because Don Quixote insists so strongly that he is certain of what he saw and that what he saw was real.6

Cervantes in Don Quixote and Shakespeare in The Tempest show that dreams are neither mere reality nor illusion, but both. They cannot be judged true or false. Dreams are just dreams. However, the dream-like state does not fulfil human expectations since it produces deformity, monstrosity and madness. From the beginning, Don Quixote’s invention of an archaic chivalric world populated by giants and his pursuit of a non-existent lover make him one of the most famous madmen together with Lear. However, the knight is not the only one driven by such a state in Cervantes’s works. Cardenio in Don Quixote, Tomás Rodaja in El licenciado Vidriera (The Glass Graduate), and Anselmo in El curioso impertinente (The Tale of Foolish Curiosity) also go strangely mad.

Madness creates confusion and contradiction between what the characters see and imagine. It produces a state of illusion as they experience as real what seems to be illusory. From now on for Don Quixote, the world is nothing more than certain things which appear to us differently according to our personal perceptions. All of Don Quixote’s senses participate in distortions transforming peasant girls into beautiful maidens, windmills into giants, and inns into castles. There is a great distance between
the world as it is and the world as Don Quixote sees it. Cervantes reminds us time after time that the incongruity is due to the hero’s lunacy. He makes him experience the dark side of dreams as self-deception. Dreams become an obsession for him, a phantasmagorical nightmare of illusion. But Don Quixote keeps on dreaming beyond his tragic present condition. He remains a prisoner of his dreams as well as of his utopia.

Cervantes and Shakespeare also show how dreams are essentially theatrical since the experience of dreaming implies a kind of performance of the self that is forced to play a different role, as seen in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* and in Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*. Acting reflects the theatrical dimension of dreams as Prospero does in the island where he “behaves like a theatre manager and dramatist.”7 He dreams the dream that he has produced with his magic art. Besides, he not only devises the plot and creates the characters but he also controls them as the supreme director of the show. Prospero’s power becomes theatrical, for life is transformed into theatre. Thus the theatrical illusion is no longer remote fiction but immediate reality.

Again and again, we find evidence that Don Quixote is acting his role. He behaves and acts as if he were an errant-knight. Even his madness could be a way of acting. As for Hamlet, “For a knight-errant to run mad upon just any occasion is not meritorious; no, the rarity is to run mad with purpose.”8 There is method in what the knight and the prince say. *Don Quixote*, the novel, is essentially theatrical, not only because of the delineation of character, the psychological motivations of the plot, and the dynamism of the stories and dialogues, but also because of the act of dreaming the dream, of acting and performing on different stages and before new audiences. It is in I,11. when Don Quixote, as Hamlet does in Elsinore, encounters a troupe of comedians travelling from village to village, performing a play called *The Parliament of Death* where there are multiple levels of reality, with the implication of dark forces which are just beyond the limits of literal vision. The actors make it clear that they represent Death, Love, and the Devil himself. But are they mere players, or is Don Quixote confronting the essentials of human life?
The metaphor of life as a dream—as Calderón’s masterpiece suggests—reveals an essential aspect of the twofold nature of human life that is composed of the real world and of dreams and illusions. The metaphor of life as a dream has its continuation in the metaphor of the world as a stage. Both are strongly interrelated in Cervantes and Shakespeare. So life is presented as a stage: “And all the men and women merely players/ They have their exits and their entrances/ And one man in his time plays many parts […]” (As You Like It 2.7.143-145). Life becomes a kind of metatheatre. Dreaming like acting is a part of the theatre of life where we play different roles at different times.

The fictional dimension of dreams makes them deceptive because they provide the dreamer with expectations that he never gets. As when Mercutio talks of dreams:

Which are the children of an idle brain,
Begot of nothing but vain fantasy
Which is as thin of substance as the air
And more inconstant than the wind, who woes
Even now frozen bosom of the north,
And, being angered, puffs away from thence,
Turning his side to the dew-dropping south.
(1.4.101-107)

Dreamers are filled with fantasies that never take place. Deception is the final reward for Don Quixote. It is Sancho who recognises that they:

jamás [han] vencido batalla alguna, si no fue la del vizcaíno, y aún de aquella salió vuestra merced con media oreja y media celada menos, que después acá todo ha sido palos y más palos, puñadas y más puñadas, llevando yo de ventaja el mantenimiento, y el haberme sucedido por personas encantadas, de quien no puedo vengarme para saber hasta dónde llega el gusto del vencimiento del enemigo, como vuestra merced dice. (I, 18)

(Haven’t won a single battle, unless, you count one against the Basque, and you came out of that missing half an ear and half a helmet and from then on it’s being nothing but beatings and more beatings, punches and more punches, and I’ve got the advantage over you of one blanket-tossing, given by enchanted persons that I can’t take my revenge on so as to find out how happy you feel when you beat an enemy, according to you.)

In The Tempest deception also prevails over other considerations. Prospero’s farewell to
his art has negative connotations as he is aware of the limits of illusion. It is not only the
end of his colonial adventure on the island, but also his public acknowledgment of the
relativity of his dream and magic power:

Graves at my command
Have waked their sleepers, oped, and let 'em forth
By my potent art. But this rough magic
I here abjure; and when I have required
Some heavenly music—which even now I do—
To work my end upon their senses that
This airy charm is for, I’ll break my staff,
Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,
And deeper than did ever plummet sound
I’ll drown my book.

(5.1.54-62)

Prospero announces that dreams have come to end. His art can no longer enact them as
he gives up his magic powers. However, the reason for taking this decision is not only
that there is no purpose for using magic in the island any longer, but also that Prospero
must accept that dreams like the theatre do not last for ever. As they begin, they must
end. Prospero is aware that the show is over:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
Are melted into the air,
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind.

(4.1.161-169)

He means that life, dream, and theatre all coalesce in a vision “of an insubstantial
pageant” that will dissolve and fade, and yet is eternal in the living memory of our
imagination. Prospero comes to the conclusion that theatre and dreams are made of a
common stuff. This is why the island experience will then be remembered as a dream.
Dreams, given their theatrical nature, have an epilogue. They belong to the air. Thus the
spectacular vision at the opening is changed into a dramatic farewell. Battles, palaces and temples disappear because they, like the island, are very much like the theatre in its relation to ordinary life. Prospero’s performance as well as Don Quixote’s utopia is “dissolved”. Don Quixote has to admit the story must have an end. He must return to his village and give up his adventures.

But the question that remains after Prospero’s farewell to his art is if it is really the very end of it or just something episodic for he will need it to maintain his power in Milan. Conspiracy and usurpation remain a permanent threat to the political stability of the dukedom. It has been in the island where Prospero has been able to hold power and to have authority over all elements, human beings and spirits, thanks to his magic art. It is going to be hard for him to do so in Milan without his magic robe and book. Besides to leave aside his magic art is to lose a part of himself. Prospero is not the same without his magic art as life is not complete without the illusory dimension of fancy and dreams. For Don Quixote it will be equally difficult to stop dreaming and accept life without magic.

However, the experience of dreaming also has positive connotations since the characters undergo a personal change through it. Characters are not the same after the experience of dreaming, as dreams provide them with a deeper knowledge of themselves. This is possible because they can accept both the world and the people as they are. It is time for Don Quixote to accept Sancho and Prospero to accept Caliban in their singularity. Dreams, therefore, become a means of self-discovery. Through dreams characters discover who they really are. In dreaming they find the ultimate truth about themselves. Dreams help them to arrive at a higher truth about the world and about their own lives. Their experience of dreaming facilitates the discovery of their own identities. They bring them to a new stage of consciousness as dreams take you to a higher reality.

They transcend the present and can tell you about the future. Dreams take you to a virtual reality that haunts our lives, to the hyper-real as “our lives are suffused and haunted by shades and spectres, quasi and virtual realities.” In Shakespeare and in Cervantes, there are dreams and visions that convey meaning and significance to the dreamer who suffers from their unexpected outcome. It is Bottom who talks about the mystery of the supernatural as well as of the invisible:
I have had a most rare vision, I have had
a dream past the wit of man to say what dream it was:
man is but an ass, if he go
about to expound this dream. Methought I was—there
is no man can tell what. Methought I was,—and
methought I had,—but man is but a patched fool, if
he will offer to say what methought I had. The eye
of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not
seen, man’s hand is not able to taste, his tongue
to conceive, nor his heart to report, what my dream
was. I will get Peter Quince to write a ballad of
this dream: it shall be called Bottom’s Dream,
because it hath no bottom; and I will sing it in the
latter end of a play, before the duke:
peradventure, to make it the more gracious, I shall
sing it at her death.

(4.1.197-206)

He speaks about the visibleness of the non-visible as a kind of supernatural revelation. He makes clear the revelationary potential of Shakespearean drama in spite of the confusion of the senses and dreams which complicates the connection between the material and the spiritual world.

In II, 40-41 Don Quixote and Sancho are guests of the duke and duchess. Both undertake a ride on a wooden horse called Clavileño. They are assured that this is the only way that the Countess Trifaldi and her ladies in waiting can be rid of the beards they have been given by the wicked giant Mambruno. Clavileño will take them to Candaya where they will be able to fight in aid of the bearded women. Sancho describes how a magical steed reincarnates an immense literary family of mythical horses. He has reached the spheres of the fixed stars for he discovers that he is near the constellation of the Pleiades, recollecting the games and pleasures of childhood. The vision is a return to a condition of childish innocence and joy:

Sin decir nada a nadie, ni a mi señor tampoco, bonita y pasitamente me apeé de
Clavileño y me entretuve con las cabrillas, que son como unos alelías y como
unas flores, casi tres cuartos de hora, y Clavileño no se movió de un lugar ni pasó
adelante. (II, 41).

(Without a word to a soul, or to my master either, I slipped as quiet from off
Clavileño and I went to play with the goats and they’re as pretty as petunias or as flowers, for nearly three quarters of an hour, and Clavileño didn’t budge an inch from where it was standing.

The Clavileño adventure does not present any problem of experiencing the hyper-real, despite the fact that Don Quixote and Sancho do not go anywhere as the horse never leaves the ground. But the discussion of Sancho’s reactions, and what he says he saw, throw interesting light on the supernatural dimension for, as Sancho replies to the duchess’s observation, “pues volábamos por encantamiento, por encantamiento podía ver yo toda la tierra y todos los hombres por doquiera que los mirara” (II, 41) (we were flying by magic, by magic I could see all the earth and all the men, whichever way I looked). Thus the mystery or the magic as in Bottom’s case remains. It is a question of belief, of translation so that the experience can be shared as Don Quijote suggests, “Sancho, pues vos queréis que se os crealo que habéis visto en el cielo, yo quiero vos me creáis a mí lo que vi en la cueva de Montesinos. Y no os digo más.”(II, 41) (Sancho, since you want people to believe what you saw in the sky, I want you to believe what I saw in the Cave of Montesinos, I say no more). We need to remain open to dreaming, to the possibility of imagining things in a different way and of being otherwise. It implies a willingness to remain open to the truth-potential of the particular transformation which discloses the world in new ways rather than representing what is known to be already there. In the statue scene at the end of The Winter’s Tale something comes to be seen in a new way, something that happens and refuses traditional attempts to explain it away:

Paulina
Nay present your hand
When she was young, you woo’d her. Now, in age,
Is she become the suitor?

Leontes
Oh, she’s warm!
If this be magic, let it be an art
Lawful as eating.

(5.3.139-134)

Leontes’ own rare vision gives way to a revelation of the extraordinary and the unexpected. Finally, the invisible is disclosed and translated according to particular anxieties. Dreams may come true. Cervantes and Shakespeare show how dreams have the power of transforming us, of leading us to a higher and unexpected truth as they—
like us—are also made of such stuff.

Notes

3 All Shakespearean references will be to *William Shakespeare Complete Works*, Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen (eds.), (Houndmills: Macmillan, 2007).
4 References are to *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, Francisco Rico (ed.), (Madrid: Real Academia Española, 2004).
8 Ángel Alcalá, “Don Quijote como actor”, *Turia* 73-74 (2005), p. 278.