

**METAPHYSICAL CONNOTATIONS OF THE DREAM AS A LIQUIFYING TROPE
IN 16th – 17th CENTURY COMEDIES AND THEIR CONTEMPORARY
APPLICABILITY FOR THE 21st CENTURY HUMAN: *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S
DREAM* AND *LA VIDA ES SUEÑO***

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Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to investigate the philosophical connotations of the trope of the dream in William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and in Calderón de la Barca's *La vida es sueño*. What are the authors' auctorial catalysts in connecting this trope to their key characters? How do these auctorial devices connect the plays to the needs of the contemporary reader, searching for solutions to the challenges of the 21st century modus vivendi?*

Keywords: *counter-patriarchal, dream, feminine, feminine literary criticism, quid-pro-quo*

1. Introduction. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: Origins and Intertextuality

A Midsummer Night's Dream (1996 (1596)) is one of Shakespeare's most widely staged comedies due to its philosophical depth. As in most of his plays, Shakespeare resorts to certain sources of inspiration; therefore, intertextuality becomes a major auctorial device. For example, the trope of forbidden love between Pyramus and Thisbe stems from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (2009 (8)), which most probably served Shakespeare in writing *Romeo and Juliet* (1996 (1597)) as well. Bottom's transformation into a donkey may be traced back to Lucius Apuleius' novel *The Golden Ass* (1998 (180)). Another possible source is *The Knight's Tale* from Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (2003 (1400)), where Chaucer describes the story of Theseus, Duke of Athens and his wife Ypolita, Queen of the Amazons.

The trope of life seen as a dream has proven a fruitful resource in world literature, yet two of the most successful literary masterpieces presenting it are Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1996 (1596)) and de la Barca's *La vida es sueño* (1970 (1635)), the leading

figure of Western Baroque literature. This is the nexus where these two masterpieces intersect, even if the two artists never exchanged ideas: de la Barca (1600-1681) was sixteen when Shakespeare (1564-1616) passed away.

2. Life As a Dream: Renaissance and Baroque

The moment the human being steps into the theatre hall and the curtain rises, a parallel, magic reality commences. A new world opens in front of one's eyes, a dream-like universe that one immediately enters, together with the actors. It is a fictional realm; therefore, the entire theatrical performance is comparable to a dream. This 'dream-play', this trance lasts as long as the audience sits in front of the stage, as long as the actors perform on stage in this magic, fictional universe. Eventually the curtain falls and the play, that is the dream, is over, one wakes out of the dream-like trance and the audience returns to reality. Following the same train of thought, life itself may be equalled to a dream and further on, to a theatre or to a theatre play.

The motif of the dream as a means of communication with the cosmic level, with the Absolute which is denied to humans while awake, is already present in the literature of Antiquity: for example, in Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, where the heroes often communicate with the gods and listen to their divine responses. Another illustrative example is *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the first piece of literature in the history of humankind, where Gilgamesh foresees in a dream the arrival of his friend, Enkidu.

Nevertheless, life seen as a dream proper gains its paramount function as a literary device in the Baroque literature (17th - 18th centuries). Moreover, it becomes a *Weltanschauung* in the Spanish Baroque arts. The Baroque is characterized by the constant play upon reality – dream / illusion, day - night, truth – *maya* and by the *quid-pro-quo* literary motif and identity alterations (usually under the auspices of the carnival, marked by chaos, farce and confusion). Reality, truth and real life are constantly interwoven and disrupted by farce, masquerade, dreams and inconsistency. Reality merges with dreams and nightmares. With such a *Weltanschauung*, no wonder that the (Spanish) Baroque further applies literary motifs such as *carpe diem*, *vanitas vanitatum* and *hic et nunc*. Hedonism and despair remain in a constant oppositional binary.

The basic concept of the Baroque remains the *la vida es sueño* literary motif, which announces Arthur Schopenhauer's philosophy on the concept of *maya*, as well as Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical theory on the (sub)conscious. *La vida es sueño* begot further auctorial devices such as the *mise-en-abyme* technique, frequently used in Western Baroque literature.

2.1 The Dream and the Time - Space Axis

In what follows the different functions of the dream will be analyzed, as they feature in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and in *La vida es sueño*. First, the dream and the state of dreaming earn the philosophical connotations of time and timing. Physical time is seen as a dream, the two entities become almost equal: in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Hippolyta tells her future husband Theseus that he must wait four more nights till they are married and that this span of time will fly away as quickly as a dream (Shakespeare 1996 (1596) :I.1). Dreaming and dreams become an instrument of measuring time.

Secondly, love is tightly connected to the concept of dreams, daydreams and melancholy. Love is seen as part of the act of dreaming, of the state of being asleep and both dreams and love presuppose suffering even while asleep. It is usually during dreaming that the characters undergo the necessary changes conducive to falling in love; this way love and dreaming are closely interconnected.

Moreover, love equals a dream, as it is both bliss and illusion: love is blind, in other words, love is similar to a blissful dream, one can anytime wake up and realize that s/he does not love the other person any more or that they themselves are not loved. Love and dreams may be at any time abruptly terminated and one awakens to utter disillusionment and to the brutal reality.

On the spatial-temporal axis, the dream in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, is connected to the forest and to the night, to the nocturnal coordinates. It reminds of the Forest of Arden in *As You Like It* (1996 (1623)) and they both gain magical connotations: they represent an enchanted place that triggers falling asleep and dreaming, stepping into the 'beyond-reality'. The forest serves as a gateway to a realm where time and space will symbolically fluidify and dilate; subsequently identities may also alter (the *quid-pro-quo* trope) and cause identity crises. All rules of logic and reason are disrupted within this magical framework of space and time, and everything becomes possible before sunrise reinstalls the quotidian normality of being awake.

The magical forest reminds of another *topos* with similar connotations in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1996 (1611)) as well as in its postmodern rewriting, John Fowles's *The Magus* (1965/1988). The island functions as an enchanted realm, far away from the logical norms of science that govern the physical world. It represents a place of initiation, a meta-reality and a meta-physical entity where inner maturation and initiation may be completed (Zelinka 2016:19-24).

The same special *topos* appears in de la Barca's play, where the dream is induced again by a potion, in a special, mysterious place: inside the prison-cave where Segismundo endures his misfortune. The dream thus creates the necessary preconditions to altering Segismundo's perception of time and space coordinates, which seem to melt into total confusion when he wakes up as a prince in the royal castle.

Moreover, his existential coordinates are utterly changed too, as he awakens to a completely different status, having traversed the long way from an outcast inmate to a royal prince. The reverse identity crisis will follow, when his father again induces his state of sleeping and crumbles his most privileged social status by locking him back inside his prison. Therefore, sleep and dreaming become the instruments of altering Prince Segismundo's spatial-temporal and existential coordinates. Similar to the aforementioned Shakespearean characters and to Fowles's protagonist, Nicholas Urfe, Segismundo also acts as a disempowered character, who must undergo painful, yet illuminating existential crises in order to complete his *nostos*.

3. Masculine vs. Feminine: Patriarchal Connotations Deconstructed

Both Shakespeare and de la Barca manipulate the physical time and space coordinates, by submitting them to the subversive laws governing their magic *topoi* (the forest and the prison inside the cave). These laws undermine the traditional norms of order, science, reason and logic, traditionally attributed by the patriarchal canon to the reason- and logic-driven masculinity (Irigaray 1985:210-213). According to feminist literary criticism, undermining the patriarchal, monolithic, masculine norm from a counter-patriarchal, counter-masculine or counter-canonical position approaches a feminine positionality (Kristeva 1989:111-112, hooks 2004:153-156, Longino 1993:106, Burkitt 1999:87-88). These theoreticians argue that the feminine approach deconstructs traditionally masculine-associated rationality and scientific rigour and it opens to universally applicable fluidity, dynamism and proteanism.

In other words, the manipulation of space and time, especially the deconstruction of their logical, Apollonian basis proves that the two playwrights depart from the masculine auctorial position and approach a feminine, subversive, dynamic redefinition of the space-time axis. Luce Irigaray (1985:210-213) argues that the masculine is governed by millennia-long norms of reason, coherence and sameness, while the feminine is fluid, subversive, and protean and it escapes all attempts of inflexible, conceptual definition. If masculinity is related to the logically and scientifically provable reality, the feminine is the beyond-provable, the meta-norm.

That is why the two playwrights' device of fluidifying space and time renders them closer to the feminine positionality of subversiveness, dynamism and mystery. Both adopt a counter-masculine, counter-patriarchal auctorial standpoint by pushing their plots under the auspices of feminine connotations.

4. The Dream: Masquerade and *Quid-pro-quo*

The same trope of subversiveness, fluidity and meta-norm may be detected in the case of the characters' identity crises, once they enter the dilated space and time of the magical forest. Entering this special *topos* marks a turning point in all characters' lives, as Shakespeare constructs the magic forest as a place of initiation. Thus, the dream itself takes over the connotations of initiation through identity loss and transformation. These complex existential crises are triggered with the aid of the mythical, fairy-tale characters: Puck and the fairies, Oberon, King of the fairies, and Titania, the Amazon Queen. The characters gain new identities: Bottom is transformed into a donkey, Lysander abandons Hermia and falls in love with Helena, Demetrius pursues Helena. All these characters are given new existential frameworks and they change their behaviour, reason and emotions, according to their new axiological coordinates. They undergo a carnivalesque substitution of identities. Thus, Shakespeare deploys the *quid-pro-quo* literary motif, the identity transformation / substitution, within a carnivalesque paradigm of farce, confusion and disorder.

This surreal night has the power to reveal the most hidden aspects of the characters' personalities, to discover the potential monsters in each of them, all the craze, the demons hidden in the depth of their personalities. This happens due to the chaos and even anarchy enabled by the masks, whether they are masks proper or metaphorical ones, such as intoxication with various substances. Further examples in world literature where the mask creates identity diffusion and the *quid-pro-quo* are: *Le Barbier de Séville* (*The Barber of Seville*, 2011 (1775)) and *Le Mariage de Figaro* (*The Marriage of Figaro*, 2011 (1778)) by Pierre Beaumarchais and I. L. Caragiale's *D'ale Carnavalului* (*Only During a Carnival*, 2016 (1885)). They all stress the role of the mask that gives characters the freedom to show the least expected facets of their personalities, both pleasant and monstrous. However, once the masks fall, the characters must confront reality and the possible consequences of their unexpected facets and of their deeds while having worn their *quid-pro-quo* type of masks.

Francisco de Goya's famous caption and his ravishing etching *The sleep of reason produces monsters* (1799) also touches on the *quid-pro-quo* motif. Goya adopts a psychoanalytical standpoint and announces that when reason disappears or is drastically

reduced, the human being's most hidden and monstrous sides arise to the surface. The new, unexpected facets may be surprisingly hideous, thus reason is annulled; we (may) become monsters, that is we adopt new identities, new 'masks'.

In Shakespeare's play, the *quid-pro-quo* motif is triggered by King Oberon and carried out by Puck. Puck is the naughty little elf, who likes to play tricks on humans, he is the fairy king's, Oberon's aid and he is the one who puts the characters to sleep and thus makes them dream their existence. He also transforms Bottom's head into that of a donkey and at dawn he awakens all characters back to reality. This way they believe that all that happened to them in the forest, during the night was only a dream. Therefore, in the magical forest, where all the rules of the reason-governed physical world are annulled, the humans are reduced to mere puppets, pawns in the hands of supernatural beings.

In de la Barca's play, the characters also undergo substantial identity alterations and crises during their dreams. However, their act of dreaming is not dictated in the least by their own freedom of choice. At the end of the play, they do not know whether they have dreamt or not, whether they are dreaming or not, or if their future will be a dream or not. They seem to lose control over their past, present and future and over their destiny. They cannot be certain whether life is dreamt by a supernatural entity or the humans enter the state of dreaming. Their maximum freedom of choice is to presume that all that happened in the play was a dream, a nice or an unpleasant one, on an individual basis. They have no control over their destiny either, whether it be reality or a dream directed by God.

Thus, in de la Barca's play the dream symbolizes the characters' loss of one of their basic human rights: their free will or freedom of choice. They are reduced to simple pawns in the hands of Destiny. They are deprived of the most basic human right, that of knowing whether their existence is real or a meta-physical being's dream. Moreover, they also lose control over their own destiny and over their own identity. They may at any time fall into or wake up from a dream that completely alters their axiological and existential frameworks, their identity or social status. Not only are space and time liquefied, but identity and freedom of choice are also subject to the feminine-related connotations of subversiveness, fluidification and meta-norm. Thus, de la Barca conveys a quadruple fluidification of existential coordinates: time, space, identity and free will, as they all defy the canonically masculine-associated norms of logicity and constancy (Irigaray 1985:213).

At the same level of identity fluidification, the reader also witnesses Shakespeare's distancing from the canonically masculine norms of sameness, coherence and unity. Not only are space and time liquefied, but the characters' identities too, approaching a feminine-

connected atmosphere of fluidity and dynamism (Irigaray 1985:215). Shakespeare and de la Barca do not consider time, space and the human identity as monolithic, unchangeable entities. They rather embrace what feminist literary criticism considers as counter-patriarchal and closer to the feminine standpoint: a position marked by openness to the ever-changing nature of the universe, to fluidity and benefic dynamism.

In the same line of thought, the dream also gains the function of future foreseeing and of ill-omen. Shakespeare's Hermia dreams that a serpent eats up her heart, while her beloved Lysander is cynically smiling at her and her dream proves true, as she soon realizes that the serpent symbolizes Evil and Lysander abandons her for another lady. The same ill-omen dream appears in *La vida es sueño*, where the queen dreams that a monster is growing inside her and eventually kills her. Her destiny follows the connotations of her dream and she soon dies in childbirth.

Finally, life as a whole is seen as a dream. Oberon tells Puck to touch the human lovers' eyelids with a magical flower while they are asleep, so that when they wake up everything seems to have been a dream: "When they wake, all this derision / Shall seem a dream" (Shakespeare 1596/1996, III.2.383). In his soliloquy which closes the play, Puck also implies that life is nothing but a dream: "If we shadows have offended, / Think but this, and all is mended, / That you have but slumber'd here / While these visions did appear" (Shakespeare 1996 (1596), V.1.415). This way, any unpleasant reality may be saved by sleeping and dreaming, characters are granted the freedom to wake up, to detach from the dream they had been dreaming and they may continue their life, regardless of the unpleasant nightmare or dream.

The same concept appears in de la Barca's play, where Segismundo's closing lines express his fear that he might once again wake up from his present dream (which is in fact life itself) and find himself back in his prison. Life and reality on the one hand, and dreams, meta-reality on the other hand are constantly interlacing to a point where the human being loses her/his agency to differentiate between them. S/he is reduced to a mere toy in the hands of capricious Fate.

De la Barca's masterpiece functions as a reflection of the general state of decadence, misery and despair after the fall of the glorious Spanish Empire, starting with the defeat of the Armada in 1588. The entire Empire crumbled to pieces together with the hopes and dreams shared by its people in a relatively short span of time. Decadence and despair followed and the clergy literally encouraged people to seek refuge on a metaphysical level, namely in dreams

and daydreams. Hence the emergence of the belief that life is nothing but a dream, an illusion or a delusion.

5. Liquefied Realities: the Postmodern Reader and the 21st Century *Modus*

Vivendi

Both Shakespeare's and de la Barca's liquefied reality coordinates suggest an overall dissolution and distancing from the existing canon of their time. They attempt to suggest that the existing *status quo* of their epoch has arrived at its dusk and a new civilizational era will soon commence. Indeed, history has proven that, starting with the 16th - 17th centuries, humanity has entered a new stage, one marked by massive industrialization, technologization, secularization and socio-economic changes, triggered by a series of revolutions that paved the way to modern Europe: the Protestant Reformation (16th - 17th centuries), the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment (17th - 18th centuries), the French Revolution (1789), the Industrial Revolution (18th - 19th centuries) and the 20th century super-technological revolution. The last five centuries, marred by revolutions and world wars, have definitely shaped a new, different Western world.

However, it is impossible to overlook the 'price' that these historic changes have demanded. On a psycho-emotional level, both the contemporary Western communities and the individual are massively shattered and a series of stress-related conditions have emerged in the 20th century: alienation, anxiety, depression, workaholism, panic disorders. According to specialists, these are just a few of the quite vast spectrum of contemporary neuroses and psychoses (Horney 2010:23-33, Lorenz 2006:74-87, Minois 2005:273-297). The psycho-emotional dramas undergone by Western society make it almost impossible for its members to escape the dehumanizing and traumatizing effects of social and communicational crises, of axiological and existential crises. The contemporary Occidental society feels stifled and atomized within a Panoptic-Orwellian system.

Could this be the possible cause due to which the contemporary (confused) reader so intimately connects to Shakespeare's and de la Barca's liquefied realities? Could their subtle suggestion that their epoch was slowly approaching its twilight and another one was dawning prove compatible with the psycho-emotional imbalance of the 21st century reader? Both 16th and 17th century playwrights and the contemporary reader seem to undergo a painful transition from an old epoch to a new, dawning one. The 18th century looked quite different from the 16th century: geo-politically, socio-economically and on a micro-individual level, too. The same difference, if not even more dramatic, is discernible when one looks at the hyper-technologized

and depersonalized (dehumanized) 21st century *modus vivendi* as compared to one hundred years ago. One century seems too short for the human psyche to internalize all the aggression and traumatic changes that have unfolded. Hence the contemporary sense of trauma, of liquefied values, of rupture and collapse of ‘old’ value systems, discourses, narratives; a sense of rootlessness, abandonment, identity loss and identity crisis (Monbiot 2016, online).

The postmodern reader, suffering from the traumas of the contemporary dehumanizing transition, may in certain ways identify with the fluidified world of the 16th and 17th century transition to modern Europe. That is a possible reason why s/he reaches back to the canonical forefathers in literature and philosophy, such as Shakespeare and de la Barca, but also to Oriental masters such as Rumi (Ciabattari 2014, online). The contemporary human is looking for self-validating anchors either in the past or in an alternative geo-cultural space.

6. Conclusions

The trope of the dream serves as a 16th and 17th century auctorial device to symbolically fluidify and subvert reality: the time – space axis, identities and axiological axes. All these alterations seem to symbolize the traumatizing transition to a new epoch in the history of Europe, namely to Modern and further on, to contemporary Europe: five centuries of revolutions, industrialization, automatization and hyper-technologization. The price has proven significantly destructive for the Occidental individual: dehumanization and alienation, neuroses and psychoses. Hence the contemporary reader’s search for solutions to the 21st century *modus vivendi*, marked by the fluidification of the old canons and ablation of the former axiological systems. In this uprootedness and psycho-emotional void, the reader easily relates to the similar *status quo* of the 17th century, therefore s/he identifies with the liquefying trends of the Renaissance – Baroque period. In the same line of thought, one further question arises: may the present transition lead to the downfall of the Occidental civilization?

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