

# SHAKESPEARE, CERVANTES, AND THE ROMANCE OF THE REAL

R. V. Young

There is no more arresting coincidence in literary history than the death of two of the world's greatest writers, William Shakespeare and Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, on the same date, April 23, 1616.<sup>1</sup> The coincidence is fitting because of the similarity in the depiction of the world attained by both men, who are equally credited with opening the way for modern literature, especially the novel, with its intimate engagement with "real life."

While both writers strive to represent reality, it is also true that human experience can only be manifest by means of ideas, which define in some measure what that experience is. Thus the greatest literature of Western civilization both "imitates" our life and shapes our understanding of what it can be. While a full account of the complex engagement of either of these authors could hardly be managed in many volumes, a few examples from each can at least sketch their singular achievements in engaging both reality and romantic enchantment simultaneously.

Just past the midpoint of his landmark study, *Mimesis* (1946), Erich Auerbach offers consecutive chapters on Shakespearean drama and Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. The authors occupy a key place in Auerbach's argument that the growth of the West's unique literary realism is principally a matter of rejecting the hierarchy of stylistic and generic classifications characteristic of ancient classical poetry, which were, for a time, resuscitated by humanist critics and writers of the Renaissance, whose neoclassicism persisted into the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.<sup>2</sup> The aristocratic genres of epic and tragedy, according to this scheme, would deal with momentous events and heroic characters in a consistently lofty style. Commonplace occurrences and ordinary men and women would be confined to comedy, pastoral, and other lesser genres that eschew elevated diction and figures.

Shakespeare notoriously breaks all the "rules." He mingles clowns and kings in

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R. V. Young is the editor of *Modern Age*.

the same play, and his style ranges from sublime blank verse to coarse, often bawdy prose within the same scene. Hamlet speaks grandly to the splendid, though ominous, ghost of his father, but banters crudely with the gravedigger. “To be or not to be” is followed within a few moments of stage time by “Get thee to a nunnery.” As he slides in and out of madness, the aged Lear can speak eloquent defiance to the divine powers that govern the world and subsequently mock Gloucester’s blindness with cruel humor. One might argue that this tragedy’s most heroic figure is the nameless servant who dies while trying to defend the helpless Gloucester and gives Cornwall a mortal wound—a bit of characterization quite out of keeping with the neoclassical norm—as is the prominent role of Lear’s fool.

From this perspective, *Don Quixote* is even more manifestly a stage in the “disenchantment of the world,” to borrow Max Weber’s melancholy phrase. John Ormsby, who produced the most distinguished nineteenth-century English translation (1885), is at pains to disabuse his readers of the fantasies of romantic German theorizing:

All were agreed, however, that the object he aimed at was not the books of chivalry. He said emphatically in the preface to the First Part and in the last sentences of the Second, that he had no other object in view than to discredit these books, and this, to advanced criticism, made it clear that his object must have been something else.

Seeing the book as “a kind of allegory setting forth the eternal struggle between the ideal and the real, between the spirit of poetry and the spirit of prose,” Ormsby continues, results in a monstrosity: “Perhaps German philosophy never evolved a more unlikely or

ungainly camel out of the depths of its inner consciousness.”<sup>3</sup>

In less than a century, however, this sturdy realist view of *Don Quixote*, which insists that Cervantes offers us a representation of reality itself rather than the ideal vision of romance, is challenged by the postmodern notion that literature also fails even to represent reality, because language can represent only itself, since “reality” is no more than representation in any case: “Magic, which used to permit the decoding of the world by discovering secret similarities beneath signs, now serves only to explain in a delirious manner why analogies always disappoint.” Hence the world is disenchanted with a vengeance: “What is written and things no longer resemble each other. Between them, Don Quixote wanders randomly.”<sup>4</sup>

Much the same has occurred with Shakespeare. In the preface to his landmark edition of Shakespeare (1765), Samuel Johnson, whose neoclassical predilections were tempered by his common sense, praised Shakespeare for devising a unique moral realism:

Shakespeare is, above all writers, at least above all modern writers, the poet of nature, the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life. His characters are not modified by customs of particular places, unpracticed by the rest of the world; by the peculiarities of studies or professions which can operate but upon small numbers; or by the accidents of transient fashions or temporary opinions; they are the genuine progeny of common humanity, such as the world will always supply, and observation will always find.<sup>5</sup>

Postmodern criticism, however, problematizes the dramatic integrity of Shakespeare’s characters. Discussing *The Tempest*,

for instance, Lorrie Jerrell Leininger avers, “Caliban is made to concur in the accusation [of rape, because] Prospero needs Miranda as sexual bait, and then needs to protect her from the threat which is inescapable given his hierarchical world—slavery being the ultimate extension of the concept of hierarchy.”<sup>6</sup> Shakespeare’s characters not only do not fit the proper tragic mold; they seem to have an independent existence outside the play in which the playwright has somehow misrepresented them. Literature is thus consumed by the ideological preoccupations of the critic’s perceptions of current reality.

But while the postmodern proposition that Cervantes and Shakespeare are unwitting participants in the deliquescence of literary representation of reality is altogether untenable, there is also something problematic about the notion that they are simply harbingers of the triumph of modern realism. Although the latter view is clearheaded and in some respects plausible, it hardly captures the experience of most readers and playgoers. Enchantment is as much on offer in the work of both authors as disenchantment. Most readers of *Don Quixote* do not approach it as they would, say, Émile Zola’s *Thérèse Raquin*, and patrons of the theater are unlikely to confuse Shakespeare’s dramas with those of either Samuel Becket or Henrik Ibsen.

William Dean Howells, the leading proponent of literary realism in nineteenth-century America, discovered *Don Quixote* as a boy:

It was full of meaning that I could not grasp, and there were significances of the kind that literature unhappily abounds in, but they were lost upon my innocence. I did not know whether it was well written or not; I never thought about that; it was simply there in its vast entirety, its inexhaustible opulence, and I was rich in it beyond the dreams of avarice.

He tells us that, as a boy, “I believe I carried the book about with me most of the time, so as not to lose any chance moment of reading it”; and “when I was fifty, I took it up in the admirable new version of Ormsby, and found it so full of myself and my irrevocable past that I did not find it very gay.” Nevertheless, “In what formed the greatness of the book it seemed to me greater than ever” (*Delphi Cervantes*, loc. 114866–114898). It is difficult to imagine anyone feeling this way about *The Grapes of Wrath* or *Wolf Hall*.

By the same token, playgoers think of Shakespeare mostly in terms of delight, not hegemonic politics. His quality is intimated most succinctly by that cool neoclassicist John Dryden in his comparison of Shakespeare to his classically inclined contemporary Ben Jonson:

If I would compare him with Shakespeare, I must acknowledge him the more correct poet, but Shakespeare the greater wit. Shakespeare was the Homer, or father of our dramatic poets; Jonson was the Virgil, the pattern of elaborate writing; I admire him, but I love Shakespeare.<sup>7</sup>

If we recognize that “wit,” in Dryden’s lexicon, means something like what we mean by “imagination,” then the force of the comparison is clear. No one loves *Volpone* or, for that matter, *Hedda Gabler* the way many men and women love *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* or *The Tempest*.

In order to account for the unique place held by Shakespeare and Cervantes, both early influences on the development of *realism*, it is necessary to reconsider what is meant by the *real*. At its best, literature—drama, narrative, and the various forms of lyrical and satirical writing, whether in prose or verse—mediates between an objective

world, existing independently of human perception or even awareness, and our conscious experience and imaginative apprehension of that world. Both are elements of *reality*, but we are perennially tempted to incline toward the one or the other, to regard either the ideal realm of our own minds or the concrete fact of the material universe as the exclusive domain of the real. The movement of literary fashion reflects this dichotomy, but Shakespeare and Cervantes transcend it.

Cervantes draws particular attention to the chivalric romances, those ravishing flights of untrammelled fancy that had bedazzled Spanish readers for several generations by the time Don Quixote galloped across the Spanish plains on the back of his caparisoned nag, Rocinante. No less a figure than Santa Teresa de Jesús berates herself (and her mother) for a virtual addiction to chivalric romances, as if they were the soap operas of sixteenth-century Spain.<sup>8</sup> No doubt, there was some virtue in “discrediting” them. Still, no one would confuse *Don Quixote* with the gritty realism and searing cynicism of Fernando de Rojas’s *La Celestina* (1499) or of the anonymous picaresque novel *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554), each of which represents a sharply contrasting tradition during the century preceding Cervantes’s great work.

*Don Quixote* creates a kind of “magic realism” *avant la lettre*. The achievement may perhaps be best understood by contrasting it with Cervantes’s last, posthumous work, *Los trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda* (1617). The latter falls into the genre of the “Greek romance” or “Byzantine novel” of which the most prominent example is *An Ethiopian Tale* by Heliodorus, variously dated to the third or fourth century AD, and widely influential in subsequent European literature. True to the genre, *The Travails of Persiles and Sigismunda* features star-crossed lovers, hairbreadth

escapes, and perilous wandering through a varied, fantastic, and geographically vague setting. A modern analogue might resemble J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*.

Although Cervantes reportedly regarded *Persiles y Sigismunda* as his crowning work (*Delphi Cervantes*, loc. 30753), I am aware of no ten-year-old boy in a later century who carried a copy with him at all times, as Howells carried *Don Quixote*, “so as not to lose any chance moment of reading it.” The paradox of this great work of literary realism is, then, that it is more enchanting, more *romantic*, than not only the books of chivalry that Cervantes set out to mock but also his own effort at beguiling the reader with fantastic adventures, characters, and settings. Something analogous may be said of Shakespeare, who rarely devised his own plots, but rather lifted stories from hither and yon, turning material that ranged from ordinary historical chronicles to banal Italian novellas into fascinating dramas in which the characters—their doings and their speech—take luminous shape in our imagination and yet seem compellingly *real*.

Cervantes and Shakespeare are thus the literary embodiments of the genius of Western civilization, which is both shrewdly critical and aspirational. To grasp, however faintly, their means of achieving this is to apprehend in some measure the transformation of lead into gold in a way never attained by alchemy.

Ormsby points out the incongruity that emerges immediately from the title of the novel, *Don Quixote de la Mancha*:

It would be going too far to say that no one can thoroughly comprehend “Don Quixote” without having seen La Mancha, but undoubtedly even a glimpse of La Mancha will give an insight into the meaning of Cervantes such as no commentator can give. Of all the regions of

Spain it is the last that would suggest the idea of romance. Of all the dull central plateau of the Peninsula it is the dullest tract.

“To anyone who knew the country well,” he continues, “the mere style and title of ‘Don Quixote of la Mancha’ gave the key to the author’s meaning at once” (*Delphi Cervantes*, loc. 115520–115527).

But the actual effect of reading the book is to endow this dullest district of Spain—and its dullness is part of the story’s design—with endless fascination for generations of readers. Just as the drab, utilitarian windmills of La Mancha become giants in the mind of Alonso Quijano, the somewhat down-at-the-heels country gentleman who has assumed the guise of Don Quixote, doughty knight errant; even so La Mancha becomes in the mind of the young William Dean Howells and countless others a magical landscape where the reader eagerly anticipates the next misadventure of our benighted knight. Don Quixote’s “quest” is thus to discover in ordinary places among ordinary men and women a vein of meaning and purpose. Insofar as both readers and the other characters are compelled to go along with him, to enter into his chivalric fantasies, he succeeds in opening up a realm of imagination among the poor, dusty villages of La Mancha.

Ormsby is of course correct in rejecting the simplistic German scheme in which Don Quixote embodies the spirit of the ideal and Sancho Panza the spirit of the real, because both figures are a mingling of both tendencies—as are all human beings. This becomes clear, for example, when Don Quixote and Sancho fall in with a group of goatherds, who share their wineskins, roast goat, and acorns with the errant pair. Inspired by the acorns and the rural setting, Don Quixote delivers a lengthy, ornate paean to the inno-

cence and contentment of the classical pagan Golden Age: “Fortunate the era and fortunate those ages to which the ancients gave the name of golden, and not because at that time gold, which in this our iron age is so much esteemed, was acquired in that prosperous one with no effort at all, but because those who lived then did not know those two words ‘thine’ and ‘mine.’”

The rustic, presumably illiterate goatherds understand Don Quixote’s implicit praise of mythical “pastoral” life as little as they do his prior encomium of the adventurous life of the knight errant. The “ingenious gentleman,” who fails to notice the authentic generosity of the goatherds, seems to be as deluded by the sixteenth-century fashion of pastoral literature as by the chivalric romance.

But it turns out he is not alone. The next few chapters recount Don Quixote’s involvement with a beautiful young heiress and a large number of mostly wealthy and well-educated young men who act out the literary conventions of a pastoral novel in the fields of La Mancha. Marcela, niece of an indulgent village priest who is her guardian, flees to the countryside with a flock of sheep in order to escape the importunities of her numerous suitors, whom she suspects of desiring only her beauty and, especially, her wealth. One of them, the recent university graduate Grisóstomo, pursues her, also in the guise of a shepherd; he is soon joined by the others, all of them proclaiming their ardor in pastoral verses nailed to trees. Eventually, Grisóstomo sickens and dies, blaming his fate on the “cruel shepherdess” who has refused to requite his love.

The culmination of this episode is the funeral of Grisóstomo, where all the other “shepherds” gather to extol his virtues, personal and poetic, and denounce the “murderess” who has killed him by rejection. Marcela disrupts this histrionic orgy of

lamentation and sentimental poetry, however, by showing up and vigorously defending her right *not* to marry a man merely because he desires it so intensely. The condemnation of Marcela as guilty of the death of the scholar turned “shepherd” depends upon literalizing the tropes of pastoral poetry and Petrarchanism—even as Alonso Quijano in the guise of Don Quixote has attempted a literal realization of the conventions of the chivalric romance. Hence readers, as well as the other characters, are brought up short by the Don’s stern defense of the lady’s right to reject an unwanted suitor.

The surprise is that Don Quixote’s deluded commitment to the kind of chivalry represented by romantic novels results in a demonstration of justice and prudence. When Marcela departs, having vowed to live free in modest seclusion, some of the bystanders, smitten with her beauty, “gave signs...that they would follow her, not heeding the unmistakable dismissal that they had heard.” Don Quixote, however, who saw “the arrival of a good exercise of his chivalry, succoring maidens in need, with his hand placed on his sword hilt,” admonished everyone against pursuing Marcela. “Whether because of Don Quixote’s threats, or because Ambrosio told them that they must complete the obsequies owed to their good friend,” all the shepherds remained until the funeral was completed (1.14.106).

The effect is what Cleanth Brooks would call a structure of irony.<sup>9</sup> As happens throughout the novel, many of the more sophisticated characters who gather around the funeral of the lovelorn “shepherd” encourage Don Quixote in his literary madness for their own amusement; but the entire pastoral funeral, with its assumption that a man has died of a broken heart, that erotic desire is an uncontrollable force worthy of divine honors, is equally madness brought

on by obsession with a literary and cultural fashion. As Cervantes’s narrator slyly intimates, the effect of the knight’s menaces is problematic; nevertheless, he is the only one to speak up in Marcela’s defense. It is his chivalric delusions that effectively counter the Petrarchan pastoral delusions of sophisticated, presumably sane characters.

And this is how the novel repeatedly works: Don Quixote’s obsessive fantasy serves to reveal not only the illusions of other characters, indeed of early modern Spanish society, but also, in subtle fashion, the genuine heroism and romance that lie hidden beneath the drab surface of ordinary life. The exposure of false romanticism thus recovers a realm of imagination within reality.

The best example is the Captive’s Tale, which may be regarded as the culmination of part 1 of *Don Quixote*, insofar as it offers the most poignant convergence of romantic fantasy and harsh reality. At an inn, which he persistently takes for a castle, Don Quixote joins a number of ladies and gentlemen as well as the barber and curate of his village. In order to trick the wandering knight into going home, they all conspire to convince him that he is journeying to free the kingdom of Princess Micomicona—actually Dorotea, one of the ladies in the company—from a fearful giant.

But while Don Quixote is preoccupied with his own mad world of chivalric fantasy, including an epic battle with a number of wineskins, quite remarkable—and romantic—events are taking place around him. The lovers Luscinda and Cardenio, who have been separated and persecuted by the selfish machinations of the dissolute nobleman Fernando, are reunited; and Fernando, who has pursued them to the inn, confronted by Dorotea, whom he has seduced and abandoned, relents. He grants the two lovers their happiness and accepts

Dorotea as his bride, when he is exhorted by the curate and the others to remember his duty as a Christian and a gentleman. It turns out that there truly are damsels in distress and wrongs that require redress; moreover, the inn, if not exactly a castle, is a place of enchantment for these four characters.

Into the midst of this emotional scene of reconciliation comes a Spanish soldier, accompanied by the young Muslim woman who has helped him escape captivity in her father's household in Morocco. This could hardly be a matter of mirth for Cervantes, who, like the character in his novel, fought with the victorious Spanish forces at the Battle of Lepanto (the author's left arm was permanently maimed in this battle) and was taken prisoner by the Moors in a subsequent engagement. Unlike his fictional captive, Cervantes never succeeded in escaping, although he made several attempts and was eventually ransomed.

Ormsby takes issue with Byron's charge that "Cervantes smiled Spain's chivalry away" (*Don Juan* 13.9), with an even more cynical assertion: "There was not chivalry for him to smile away. Spain's chivalry had been dead for more than a century.... What he did smile away was not chivalry but a degrading mockery of it" (*Delphi Cervantes*, loc. 115424). Cervantes was, however, throughout his life proud of having participated in the Battle of Lepanto and rightly saw it as a great triumph for Christendom. The Ottoman Empire, by the middle of the sixteenth century, was a formidable power, threatening to clear the Mediterranean of European shipping. Oddsmakers would have favored the Turks before the conflict was decided in 1572.

Once again, Cervantes's vision is conveyed through structural irony: Don Quixote's obsession with the absurd fantasies persists, while authentic romance unfolds around him, and a genuine hero strides into the

"enchanted castle." Yet that is not the entire story; the aspiring knight errant delivers in the midst of these arresting occurrences, of which he is hardly aware, an eloquent disquisition upon the much bruited question of the era: whether arms or arts was the superior undertaking.

One passage is especially powerful in the context of the arrival of the soldier who has made such a daring escape:

But tell me, gentlemen, if you have looked into it: how less common are those who have been rewarded by war than those who have perished in it? Undoubtedly, you must respond that there is no comparison, that the dead cannot be counted, and that you are able to number the living who have been rewarded with three figures. (1.38.325)

Don Quixote has repeatedly told Sancho Panza that knights errant often win kingdoms and fortunes through the prowess of their swords and has consistently promised his squire that he will make him governor of an island. In a lucid interval he is aware of what true heroism is, and of what its reward is likely to be. His listeners at the inn, many of them gentlemen committed to arms, are astonished by the insight and prudence of the mad knight who is *errant* in so many ways.

The structure of irony is further complicated in part 2 of the novel (1615) by Cervantes's frequent references to the first part (1605): Don Quixote and Sancho, along with most of the other characters, are aware of not only part 1 of Cervantes's work but also a spurious continuation (1614) ascribed to a certain Alonso Fernández de Avellaneda. Cervantes thus invents, early in the seventeenth century, the device of *metafiction*, which involves a reference within a

work of fiction to its own fictional status. Long before the lucubrations of postmodernism, he found a way to take the reader into the novel by taking the novel into the “real world.” The effect is to endow not only “realistic” fiction with an aura of equivocal romance but also the real itself.

Eventually, in part 2 of *Don Quixote*, Sancho does become governor of an “island”; like the other characters in the novel, readers are astonished by *his* insight and prudence as he takes on a role that manifests much the same irony as that of his master with respect to the ambiguous tension between the romantic and the real. Sancho receives the rule of an “island” in the course of a lengthy sojourn by Don Quixote and his squire at the estate of a Duke and Duchess, who have read part 1 of the novel. In order to continue enjoying the folly of the errant knight and his squire, the Duke and Duchess subject the famous pair to a series of lengthy, elaborate, and basically malicious practical jokes, treating them both with elaborate deference and courtesy while still managing to subject them to various embarrassments through the collaboration of their servants.

The Duke finally grants Sancho the governorship of one of his neighboring estates, which is not even near the coast, much less an island. Sancho, who has never seen the sea and won't until he and his master arrive in Barcelona near the end of part 2, is none the wiser. He thus appears to be as deluded as Don Quixote, and the Duke and Duchess take cruel relish in fostering the absurd delusions of both knight and squire.

As with the knight, however, Sancho's ignorant simplicity is qualified by genuinely admirable qualities. The denizens of the “island,” all servants and retainers of the Duke, make every effort to baffle and confound him by presenting a rapid succession of apparently insoluble legal cases; nevertheless, he acquits

himself honorably by making prudent, equitable decisions based on practical common sense. “But Sancho, although ignorant, fat, and coarse, held firm against them all.” As the Duke's majordomo puts it, wondering at the illiterate Sancho's success as a ruler, “Each day we see something new in the world: mockeries become realities, and mockers find themselves mocked” (2.69.735, 738).

Shakespeare offers a similar interplay between fantasy and realism, between “mockeries” and “realities.” *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (ca. 1595) is an excellent example. The play is set in a fanciful medieval “Athens,” surrounded by an English forest. As in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*, Theseus is “Duke of Athens,” but this altogether improbable transmogrification of a mythical Attic figure is the play's embodiment of hard-headed skepticism:

The lunatic, the lover, and the poet  
 Are of imagination all compact.  
 One sees more devils than vast hell can  
     hold;  
 That is the madman. The lover, all as  
     frantic,  
 Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt.  
 The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,  
 Doth glance from heaven to earth, from  
     earth to heaven;  
 And as imagination bodies forth  
 Forms of things unknown, the poet's pen  
 Turns them into shapes, and gives to  
     aery nothing  
 A local habitation and a name.<sup>12</sup>

Like Cervantes, Shakespeare is dealing in multiple ironies: the dismissal of poetry in Shakespeare's glorious blank verse is an obvious example, but there is also Theseus's ardent desire to consummate his upcoming wedding with the Amazon Hippolyta,

whom he has won by defeating her in battle—which suggests that his eye has been very much beguiled by love. As for madness, it possesses all the characters in the play in the form of the famous English fairies.

The comedy opens with Theseus called upon to judge the case that Egeus and Demetrius bring against Egeus's daughter Hermia and Lysander. Demetrius loves Hermia, who loves Lysander, who returns her love; but Egeus approves of Demetrius and, for no discernible reason, despises Lysander. When Theseus, dour patriarch that he is, decides in favor of the father's power, the two lovers flee at dusk into the forest pursued not only by Demetrius but also by Helena, Hermia's girlhood friend who once had Demetrius's love until he abandoned her in favor of Hermia.

The King and Queen of the Fairies, Oberon and Titania, are holding court in this wood and also waging their own marital battles. Oberon's jester Puck has been sent to fetch a love potion so that the King might use it on his obstreperous Queen, but the mischievous elf is not content until he also intervenes in the affairs of the mortal lovers. After a series of confusions and misadventures brought about by Puck's repeated use of the potion, at dawn the lovers awaken with Lysander and Hermia back in love with one another and Demetrius's affection returned to Helena. When a hunting party led by Theseus finds them, he overrules Egeus, and a triple wedding ensues.

Such is the frothy, farcical business of the first four acts. Act 5 consists of the entertainment held in honor of the marriages—a thoroughly inept performance of a play within the play, *Pyramis and Thisbe*, based on Ovid's quasi-tragic tale of thwarted lovers who both end up committing suicide when their attempt to escape unrelenting parents goes awry. The play is put on by a group of Athenian tradesmen (a joiner, a weaver, a

cobbler, and so on), and Shakespeare makes it as farcical as possible and displays the aristocratic newlyweds in the audience mocking the foolishness of the performance.

Thus Shakespeare anticipates Cervantes's metafiction with metadrama: the audience has just witnessed the noble characters who deride the performance of the "mechanicals" acting out their own roles in Shakespeare's play with absurd ineptitude, and of course as members of Shakespeare's audience we are implicitly invited to wonder how our "audience" regards our performance of the roles in our lives.

It is a moot point whether or to what extent Shakespeare or his contemporaneous audience "believed in" fairies, but Shakespearean drama most assuredly suggests 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.

Like *Don Quixote*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a comedy, but the kind of ironic vision that Cervantes and Shakespeare exhibit is not necessarily confined to comic writing. *Romeo and Juliet*, first staged about the same time as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, also takes up the theme of "star-crossed lovers" and ends tragically, but along the way it offers a similarly complex and ambivalent image of love.

Shakespeare treats this theme with consummate subtlety in *Othello* (ca. 1604), a mature tragedy that represents the playwright at the height of his powers. The dark-skinned Moor, mercenary general of the military forces of Venice, wins the heart of the fair Venetian lady Desdemona, to the horror of her father, with the charm of his words:

She lov'd me for the dangers I had pass'd,  
 And I lov'd her that she did pity them.  
 This only is the witchcraft I have us'd.  
 (1.3.167–69)

Othello is a thoroughly paradoxical character: a hardened veteran of the wars who has spent his life in camps among soldiers and camp followers, with all that may imply; but he is also a chevalier of the imagination, whose storytelling turns his experience into a fable that enchants Desdemona.

Yet when Iago, a monster of malice and envy, succeeds in arousing jealousy by corrupting and dirtying Othello's imagination, then the dream of love becomes a nightmare. For Shakespeare, tragedy very often is precisely a failure or perversion of imagination. When Rodrigo, a foolish courtier infatuated with Desdemona mentions her "most bless'd condition," Iago makes a cynical rejoinder: "Bless'd fig's-end! The wine she drinks is made of grapes" (2.1.251–52). What Iago says is, of course, factually accurate, but it also obscures the truth. Love is transformative, and a woman who is beloved truly transcends the coarse implication of Iago's reductive dismissal. "Realism" devoid of imagination, without the romance of the real, is ultimately false, and it is Othello's loss of his imaginative vision of his bride that ends in tragedy.

Even in those plays that generations of scholars have agreed to refer to as the "late romances," Shakespeare creates a complex interpenetration of the real with what seems mere fantasy. *The Tempest*, probably his last play, exemplifies the necessary recourse to what might be called the romantic or transformative imagination to get at all that is real in human experience. Without Prospero's magical powers—a figure for the poetic imagination—without the obscure reaches of human nature symbolized by the spirit Ariel and the fish-scaled monster Caliban,

human life would be defined by the cynical calculations of Antonio and Sebastian, who plot against their king and regard the power to dominate as everything.

The key to the meaning of the play is, then, that Prospero must renounce the seemingly limitless power of his magic. This magic is, to be sure, as much illusion as actual power to change the physical world: we are left in doubt as to whether he manufactures a real "tempest" or merely the appearance of one. It has no effect on the ship, no one drowns, and even the clothes of the apparently shipwrecked crew and their party of noble passengers are unaffected by having been drenched in salt water.

But if Prospero's magic creates only illusions, there is a sense in which our temporal lives are also illusory, as the magician himself spells out when he brings to a close the visual pageant conjured to celebrate the betrothal of his daughter, Miranda, and Ferdinand, son of the King of Naples:

Our revels now are ended. These our  
 actors  
 (As I foretold you) were all spirits, and  
 Are melted into air, into thin air,  
 And, like the baseless fabric of this  
 vision,  
 The cloud-capp'd 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. We are such  
 stuff  
 As dreams are made on; and our little life  
 Is rounded with a sleep. (4.1.148–63)

It is worth recalling, fully to feel the thrust of this speech, that Prospero has just been reminded of a "foul conspiracy / Of the

beast Caliban and his confederates” and that the playwright’s theater was called *the Globe*.

Hence the renunciation: Prospero’s magic, unlike the black arts associated with Dr. Faustus, must not be used to alter reality but rather to reveal it.<sup>11</sup> Like literature, it enhances our sense of who and what we are without allowing us to alter fundamentally our nature. A famous exchange between Prospero and Miranda, who having been on the desert island since she was little more than an infant knows little of humanity, makes the point:

*Miranda:* Oh wonder!  
How many goodly creatures are there here!  
How beauteous mankind is! O brave  
    new world  
That has such people in’t!  
*Prospero:* ’Tis new to thee. (5.1.181–84)

Prospero’s rueful irony contrasts sharply with the barren cynicism of Iago—or of Antonio and Sebastian. Miranda is right: mankind is

“beauteous,” created in the image and likeness of God. Her father’s cryptic rejoinder admonishes her that mankind is also fallen. His magic, however, in contrast to the human engineering envisioned by Aldous Huxley in his version of a brave new world, seeks only repentance in the sinners. He doesn’t try to refashion them according to an ideological template.

What makes *Don Quixote* and Shakespearean drama paradigmatic in the literature of the Western world is the uncanny ability of Cervantes and the great playwright to treat vulgar fantasy, such as the chivalric romances, with appropriate derision, while reminding generations of readers and audiences that the reality of human life is more rich, varied, and marvelous than we ordinarily acknowledge; that the real, the world we inhabit, is more romantic than anything we could make up for ourselves. As Hamlet observes, “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy” (2.1.166–67). †