

Shakespeare in *The Sandman*: Two Worlds Colliding



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Whereas comics have always been regarded as some kind of pulp, the kind of work that attracts male adolescent fan boys of spandex-clad superheroes and their scantily dressed female counterparts, the winds have been changing. A major factor in this change has been Neil Gaiman's series of short stories *The Sandman*. This series features stories of a more psychological and literary kind, and its popularity caused the establishment of a new brand of comic, a branch of the famous DC Comics which goes under the name Vertigo. Vertigo imprint produces comics that are meant to also attract an audience unfamiliar with comic books, opening up the genre and showing its virtues to the outside world. *The Sandman*'s popularity reached its summit with the acquiring of the World Fantasy Award for best short story in 1991, which was the first time ever for a comic to win a prize in the category of prose fiction. The boundaries between high and low culture appear to be fading. Interestingly, the story which won Gaiman the prize, was the one that goes by the name of "A Midsummer Night's Dream", and is actually a rendering of Shakespeare's play, including both Shakespeare himself, as a character, and *The Sandman*'s main character, Dream (also known as Morpheus and by several other names). Shakespeare features in three of the short stories. The first is "Men of Good Fortune", in which Gaiman introduces his Shakespeare character. The other two are explicitly about him and his work: "A Midsummer Night's Dream", aforementioned award winning comic, and "The Tempest", which also happens to be the last short story of the entire series. In these stories, Gaiman plays with several popular notions that have been attached to Shakespeare and his work over the years, such as the notion of Shakespeare as a character and how he may or may not be found in his own works, the authenticity of his work, the elitist nature his works have acquired and the universality of his narratives. The focus of this paper will lay on Gaiman's use of the medium of the comic book, and his play with the questions of authenticity and reality.

About *The Sandman*

First of all it is a good idea to briefly summarize what the series *The Sandman* is all about. The main character is, as stated before, Dream, who is one of the Endless. The

Endless are Dream, Death, Delirium, Destiny, Desire, Despair and Destruction – they are eternal forces, or as Analisa Castaldo says it in her essay on *The Sandman*, the “embodiments of essential characteristics of life” (Castaldo, 2004: 98). At the beginning of the series, Dream has been captured by means of some kind of occult ritual and finally escapes after seventy years. His imprisonment changed him though – he has to try and set things right that have gone awry during his long absence, but he also has to look at himself, what he has done in the past and must do in the future. The series goes back and forth in time by means of short stories, showing bits of Dream’s past and things he has done, and through it all there is a main storyline of how the Dreamlord finally passes away and is succeeded by a new Dream of the Endless.

When Dream first meets Shakespeare, Shakespeare is a rather unsuccessful playwright who exclaims to Kit Marlowe: “I would give anything to have your gifts. Or more than anything to give men dreams that would live on long after I am dead. I’d bargain, like your Faustus, for that boon” (Gaiman, *The Doll’s House*, 1995: 126), after which Dream asks him whether he truly wishes this, and then leads Shakespeare away. It turns out the two made a deal that day: Dream would help Will to write, and Will in turn would write two plays for the Dreamlord. The first one is *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, which Shakespeare performs in the story by that name, for an audience of fairies (Auberon – Gaiman uses the old spelling of the name – and Titania amongst them). The second is *The Tempest*. Gaiman gives his reader bits and pieces from the original plays and intermingles it with his own narratives, thus giving his own alternative interpretation (or, perhaps better said, story) about what these two plays are all about.

The Medium

As mentioned above, the medium of the comic book or graphic novel if you will, is generally thought of as being ‘low culture’, in the sense that it is amusement for the masses without much of a message. While one might well argue that *The Sandman* is already more literary than most other comics, it is also safe to state that Gaiman could well be playing with the high culture versus low culture issue by having Shakespeare walk around in the Sandman’s universe. We see two worlds colliding and then merging successfully into a grand narrative that has a message which is entirely its own. Gaiman also uses his medium quite cleverly in several ways. First of all, he is a master of the genre. As Kurt Lancaster tells us: “According to writer Joe Straczynski [...], Gaiman [...] ‘does things with words, simple yet elegant tricks that can explain an entire character in a few carefully selected words’ ” (Straczynski in Lancaster, 2000: 72). For example, Gaiman’s ‘comic relief fairies’ in “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” just have a few lines of text, but with these lines they are made to display their character. Some credit must certainly also go to the illustrators, whose images cooperate with Gaiman’s words to bring his message across. The composition of words and images creates an interesting new view on Shakespeare’s work. For

example, also in “A Midsummer Night’s Dream”, when the play makes mention of ‘the pale companion’, we see not the moon, but the pale face of Dream himself. Another such playing with the original text in the comic book setting can be noted with the end of “A Midsummer Night’s Dream”, where the real Puck (not Shakespeare’s actor, but a fairy who came with Auberon and Titania) gives his epilogue, which starts: “If we shadows have offended, think but this, and all is mended: that you have but slumber’d here, While these visions did appear” (Gaiman, *Dream Country*, 1995: 85). These lines gain a triple meaning. First, it is Shakespeare’s written text, only just performed in the comic. Second, the Dreamlord has made all the actors fall asleep so they can perform in their dreams, for his fairy companions. If they are offended by his use of them, this epilogue could be some sort of pardon. Third, there are tons of Shakespeare-lovers who would be offended by the use of Shakespeare in a comic book. This pardon could be directed at those in favour of the high culture / low culture divide, although it is clear that by giving the word to the mischievous Puck, no one is truly sorry at all.

Shakespeare: the Man, the Talent

The Sandman comics give their own response to the matter of Shakespeare’s originality. It has often been debated that the ‘genius’ Shakespeare ‘stole’ quite a lot of ideas from existing narratives, and the question would be whether that diminishes his status as an excellent author. Gaiman is obviously aware of the debate, seeing as he has Shakespeare himself make a remark about this in “The Tempest”: “There’s some of me in it. Some of Judith. Things I saw, things I thought. I stole a speech from one of Montaigne’s essays. And closed with an unequivocally cheap and happy ending” (Gaiman, *The Wake*, 1997: 181). One might say then, that Shakespeare was a master-adaptor. But there is more to this in Gaiman’s text – there is Dream. Dream aids Shakespeare in his writing, so he can become the author who gained worldwide fame. But how much of Shakespeare’s art would have been Dream’s, and how much of it would have been Shakespeare’s own talent at work? According to Dream himself, Shakespeare already had the talent, which was one of the reasons why he chose him to write his two plays. When Shakespeare fears for his immortal soul for trafficking with the unworldly lord of dreams, Dream answers: “There is no witchcraft, Will, no magic. I opened a door within you, that was all” (Gaiman, *The Wake*, 1997: 181). Other instances in the stories suggest that this is not the only way in which Dream aids Shakespeare. While Shakespeare’s men perform for Dream and the fairy company, Titania remarks to Dream: “It seems to me that I heard this tale sung once, in old Greece, by a boy with a lyre”, to which Dream answers: “Indeed, my lady?” She continues: “You are a deep one. I would I could fathom your motives...?” He answers: “Later my lady. Watch the play” (Gaiman, *Dream Country*, 1995: 72). The same sort of thing is the case with “The Tempest”: Shakespeare has a conversation with a religious man, and asks him what to do about this magician he has walking around in his play – he says this magician is a good man, not a man whom he would

want to see damned for dabbling in magic. The religious man then says he should let the magician “break his staff, and burn his books, and renounce all magics” (Gaiman, *The Wake*, 1997: 171). At the end of the story, Shakespeare asks Dream why he wanted a play like *The Tempest*, and not some lofty tragedy. Dream answers: “I wanted a tale of graceful ends. I wanted a play about a king who drowns his books, and breaks his staff, and leaves his kingdom. About a magician who becomes a man. About a man who turns his back on magic” (Gaiman, *The Wake*, 1997: 181). These two instances in both short stories would make one suspect Dream inspires Shakespeare on a higher level than just by opening his creative channels. It makes one wonder how much of the story is truly Shakespeare’s and how much of it is Dream’s. It makes one wonder about how stories in general work in the world of *The Sandman* – are they all part and parcel of Dream’s imagination, does he fashion them, one and all? It also gives an interesting perspective on the character of Ariel, from *The Tempest*. It is easy to note, that in Shakespeare’s ‘real’ text (meaning: outside the universe created by Gaiman), one never truly sees Prospero performing his magic. He always sends Ariel to do his bidding, so it is Ariel who performs the magic. How much of the magic is truly Prospero’s, then? This is the exact same question we find in *The Sandman*: the question of ‘authorship’, of who may claim credit for acts performed. Is it the one who inspires or the one who acts upon this inspiration? How much inspiration does the actor need to start working? Another interesting question: is Shakespeare Prospero, or is Dream? And who then, is Ariel? Dream inspires Shakespeare, yes, but is he not also a supernatural being, lending his magic to Shakespeare’s cause? They are both Prospero, and both are they Ariel. Dream and Shakespeare reflect on this themselves at some point as well. Dream asks: “So tell me, Will: do you see yourself reflected in your tale?” To which Shakespeare replies:

I would be a fool if I denied it. I am Prosper, certainly, and I trust I shall. But I am also Ariel – A flaming, firing spirit, crackling like lightning in the sky. And I am dull Caliban. I am dark Antonio, brooding and planning, and old Gonzalo, counselling silly wisdom. And I am Trinculo, the jester, and Stephano the butler, for they are clowns and fools, and I am also a clown and a fool, and on occasion, drunkards. (Gaiman, *The Wake*, 1997: 175-176)

What Shakespeare basically says here, is that his stories are inspired by life as he experiences it, by people he knows (I mentioned earlier that he also claimed Judith could be found in his *The Tempest*), and the person you know best, is yourself.

This view on Shakespeare’s ‘inspiration’ for his plays also gives an interesting view on the epilogue to *The Tempest*, which Gaiman also has Shakespeare write after Dream has ended his bargain with him: “Now my charms are all o’erthrown, and what strength I have’s mine own, which is most faint” (Gaiman, *The Wake*, 1997: 183).

The Reality of Dreams

The matter discussed above concerning 'authorship' ties in well with what will be discussed next: the matter of reality, and the questioning of this. It has already been said that *The Sandman* can be regarded as a psychological comic, and the question of what is real and what is not is a recurring one throughout the series. In the stories featuring Shakespeare this is also the case. In "A Midsummer Night's Dream", reality and the dream world collide and mingle, having fairies (who happen to be old acquaintances of Dream and hence perhaps creatures of the dream world more than the real world) as spectators to Shakespeare's play. The 'real' Titania who watches the play, is quite taken with Shakespeare's son Hamnet, and tries to charm him by telling him of the marvels of her world. At the end of the short story, it says Hamnet died at a very young age. This reminds one of the changeling boy Titania has with her in Shakespeare's play, the boy she quarrels over with Oberon. Folklore tells us changelings were human children who were taken away by fairies, leaving an elderly or disfigured fairy in its place – or a wooden doll, shaped like the infant's dead body. Is this story then, or is it truth? Did Titania steal the boy, like in Shakespeare's play, or do we just assume this because we know Shakespeare's story, and the stories concerning changelings?

In "The Tempest" there is also an intermingling of the real world with that of dreams. First of all because the real world can be seen reflected in Shakespeare's tale (like the courting of Judith by a rather uncharming fellow, which can be seen as Caliban's attempt to rape Miranda), but it is also the composition of the events which plays with the intermingling of stories and the real. When Shakespeare just wrote the beginning of the play, with the storm, Judith comes in and tells him: "Father? There is a storm brewing", to which Shakespeare replies: "What's that, Judith? A storm? Yes... There would be a storm" (Gaiman, *The Wake*, 1997: 147), almost as if he knows (or has gotten used to) seeing his writing reflect upon the real, and the other way around.

To conclude, it is safe to state that *The Sandman* plays with many recurring topics in Shakespearean studies, and does this in a way which fits its own comic book universe like a glove. The question of authenticity and mirror-characters (Dream as Ariel or Prospero, Shakespeare as all characters) is played with on so many levels that it leaves one wondering what Gaiman is truly suggesting. The world of dreams is both real and unreal, and the divide between the two is very vague indeed.

The point is: no one will ever know whether Shakespeare truly wrote his own plays, not for certain. Also, no one will ever know what he intended, or what drove him to write about certain topics while letting others be. Gaiman uses this gap in our knowledge to his advantage, creating his own wondrous answer to these questions, and creating new gaps, new questions, in the process. Why diminish the mystery if you can enrich it

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