

Delusion, Lucidity, and the Imposition of Will: Mark Twain's Hank Morgan as the Anti-Don Quixote

Arthur Shattuck O'Keefe

Abstract

Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), has been compared to Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605) in terms of the conflict between modern and traditional values encountered by the protagonists of both novels. While *Connecticut Yankee* protagonist Hank Morgan is commonly viewed as "a sort of Quixote in reverse" (Wonham, 165), the assertion here is that Hank Morgan and Don Quixote are directly analogous in terms of each man's intense desire to impose his will on his environment in a way he is convinced will be beneficial to it, and that success or failure in these attempts is determined by whether the protagonist's mindset is characterized by delusion (Don Quixote) or lucidity (Hank Morgan). In this respect, Hank Morgan is much more of a Don Quixote analogue than is Tom Sawyer, despite the latter's Quixote-like obsession with adventurous, romantic fiction. In reversing the motifs of delusion and lucidity from where Cervantes placed them while maintaining the protagonist's intention to alter his world, Twain creates a hero whose adventures exemplify what he views as Cervantes' humorous critique of literary knight-errantry and its associated social and political institutions.

Introduction

Since its publication in 1889, Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (hereafter referred to as *Connecticut Yankee*) has been widely regarded as in part a condemnation of institutions Twain held in contempt: monarchy, class systems, slavery, and state-mandated religion. In connection with this is Twain's dim view of medieval chivalric romance, an opinion which in turn relates to critical comparisons made between *Connecticut Yankee* and Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605). Twain praised what he viewed as Cervantes' humorous demolition of knight-errantry through his eccentric protagonist Don Quixote, and condemned the perceived rehabilitation of such tales by Sir Walter Scott in the early 19th century. He even accused Scott of providing, through works such as *Ivanhoe* (1814), a rationale for the faux aristocracy and slave system of the US antebellum South, and by extension the outbreak of the US Civil War (1861-1865).¹ As he states in *Life on the Mississippi* (1875):

A curious exemplification of the power of a single book for good or harm is shown in the effects wrought by *Don Quixote* and those wrought by *Ivanhoe*. The first swept the world's admiration

for the medieval chivalry-silliness out of existence; and the other restored it. As far as our South is concerned, the good work done by Cervantes is pretty near a dead letter, so effectively has Scott's pernicious influence undermined it. (423)

For Twain, romantic tales of gallant knights were propaganda serving to justify oppression; viewed in this light, *Connecticut Yankee* was meant to depict absolute monarchy with its mask of benevolence torn off.

The main assertion here is that, insofar as *Connecticut Yankee* was written under the influence of *Don Quixote*, Twain emulated what he viewed as Cervantes' debunking of fictional knight-errantry in part by transposing the symbiotic motifs of delusion and lucidity which Cervantes had laid out², i.e. Don Quixote, the delusional hero, is surrounded by the lucid, while Hank Morgan is Twain's anti-Don Quixote, the lucid hero surrounded by the delusional. Moreover, despite these opposite traits, each protagonist possesses a passionate desire to impose his will upon the world in a manner he is absolutely convinced will be beneficial to it.³; in this narrow yet vital sense, Hank Morgan and Don Quixote are synoptic in a way that Don Quixote and Tom Sawyer are not, despite the latter being commonly viewed as Twain's most Cervantean character.

The corollary to this is that both Don Quixote and Hank Morgan repeatedly try to fundamentally affect their respective environments with vastly different results: Don Quixote fails miserably in his quest to bring chivalry back to the world, at various times being robbed, beaten, or made the object of ridicule. Hank succeeds spectacularly in his project of modernizing Arthurian Britain, despite being ultimately thwarted by the Church interdict and the grim outcome of the battle between Hank's military cadets and an army of attacking knights (Ch. XLIII). Delusion, then, is both the catalyst and the cause of Don Quixote's failure, just as lucidity in the face of ubiquitous delusion characterize Hank Morgan's success, albeit short-lived.

Twain perceived a wrong-headed and malignant romanticization of medieval society that, in his view, had first been demolished by Cervantes and then rebuilt by Scott. Twain took it upon himself to demolish it again, using Sir Thomas Malory's version of Camelot as his setting, and making an explicit comparison of past and present by placing a 19th century engineer into Arthurian Britain.⁴

Influences on Twain in the Writing of *Connecticut Yankee*: Malory, Scott, and Cervantes

Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* (1485) is a much more obvious influence on the composition of *Connecticut Yankee* than either Cervantes or Scott, the latter being relegated to a brief criticism by Hank Morgan (as first person narrator) of Scott's alleged inaccuracy in depicting medieval English mannerisms in *Ivanhoe*.

Suppose Sir Walter, instead of putting the conversations into the mouths of his characters, had allowed the characters to speak for themselves? We should have had talk from Rebecca and Ivanhoe and the soft lady Rowena which would embarrass a tramp in our day. (31)

Not unlike Twain's comments in *Life on the Mississippi*, through the fictional mouthpiece of Hank he asserts (albeit from a decidedly Victorian perspective) that Scott idealizes an unpleasant reality. In another possible allusion to Sir Walter, Hank at times exclaims "Great Scott!" in exasperation, such as when the damsel Sandy (later to become Hank's wife) takes an extremely long time getting to the point in relating a story (Ch. XV).⁵

As for Malory's influence, the fundamental Arthurian element of *Connecticut Yankee* is explicitly stated in the title, and Camelot provides the model for Twain's setting, including King Arthur, Queen Guinevere, Merlin, and the various Knights of the Round Table. Malory is even quoted directly in the novel, such as in the tale told by Merlin in Chapter III which—having been told countless times before—puts the court to sleep.⁶ This is hardly surprising, as Twain's direct literary impetus for writing the novel was apparently having read a copy of *Le Morte D'Arthur* given to him by fellow novelist George Washington Cable in 1884 (Inge, viii).

Thus there has been a plethora of literary criticism of *Connecticut Yankee* focused to some extent or another upon its Arthurian context. This dates at least as far back as Andrew Lang's 1891 non-review of the novel, and has continued to the present day.⁷ The more subtle Cervantean influence on *Connecticut Yankee* deals in part with how the characters perceive—or do not perceive—reality. This element has been less explored, but notable analyses include Olin Harris Moore in 1922 and Henry B. Wonham in 2005.

The Question of Analogous Characters: Tom Sawyer vs. Hank Morgan as "Twain's Don Quixote"

In addition to his commentary on *Connecticut Yankee*, Olin Harris Moore's analysis is also focused upon the influence of *Don Quixote* on Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and its sequel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884).⁸ Tom Sawyer, states Moore, is "a romantic youth, who has read a great many exciting tales, and desires to play the roles of his heroes" (327). He cites, for example, the episode in *Huckleberry Finn* in which Tom, Huck, and their "gang" raid a caravan of diamond-carrying Arabs and Spaniards who are in reality the members of a Sunday school picnic. Huck, as first-person narrator, describes the doubts he expresses to Tom in the aftermath of the "raid."

I didn't see no di'monds, and I told Tom Sawyer so. He said there was loads of them there, anyway; and he said there was A-rabs, too, and elephants and things. I said, why couldn't we see

them, then? He said if I wasn't so ignorant, but had read a book called 'Don Quixote', I would know without asking. He said it was all done by enchantment. (14)

This episode emulates Chapter 18 of *Don Quixote*, in which Don Quixote attacks a large flock of sheep which he is convinced is an army of knights from various nations. Driven off by rocks thrown by the shepherds, he insists to his skeptical squire Sancho Panza that the knights were transformed into sheep by an evil enchanter.

'Did I not desire you, Señor Don Quixote, to come back, for those you went to attack were a flock of sheep, and not an army of men?'

'How easily,' replied Don Quixote, 'can that thief of an enchanter, my enemy, make things appear or disappear!...this malignant, who persecutes me, envious of the glory he saw I was likely to acquire in this battle, has transformed the hostile squadrons into flocks of sheep.' (Part I, 131-132)

In this connection, Moore argues, "Tom Sawyer has his counterpart, the matter of fact Huck Finn. Don Quixote's counterpart is the prosaic Sancho Panza. The humor of Mark Twain, as well as of Cervantes, lies to a great extent in the contrast between imaginative and unimaginative characters" (328). Like Don Quixote, Tom Sawyer's imagination is fueled by adventurous, romantic fiction.

Despite these parallels, a crucial difference between Tom Sawyer and Don Quixote is that while Cervantes depicts Don Quixote's imaginings as truly delusional, there is no indication in *Tom Sawyer* or *Huckleberry Finn* that Tom literally believes in the fantasies he concocts. Tom is rather a clever prankster, even a sort of con-man, the most famous example of which is his use of reverse psychology to get other boys to whitewash a fence for him in Chapter 11 of *Tom Sawyer*. Don Quixote shows no such savvy or cunning. Similarly, Sancho, despite his frequent misgivings about Don Quixote's behavior, sits on the fence between realism and sporadically buying into Don Quixote's fantasies if he thinks it will benefit him. One example of the latter is Sancho's tenure as "governor of an island," an elaborate prank played by a duke and duchess who exploit Don Quixote's delusions (and Sancho's acquiescence in them) for their amusement (Part II, Ch. 45). Sancho never seems to think it strange that the "island" he governs is a landlocked community comprising part of the duke's estates. Huck, by comparison, never completely buys into Tom's fantasies, or at least far less than Sancho buys into Don Quixote's.

In commenting on *Connecticut Yankee*, Moore takes note of Hank's commonsense realism versus the perceptions of Sandy—such as her conviction that a sty containing pigs is a castle with imprisoned princesses, and the swineherds ogres (*Connecticut Yankee*, 142-143)—and concludes that "Alisande ('Sandy'), speaking the language of Malory...is the author's Don Quixote. The scoffing Yankee is his glorified Sancho Panza" (346). Henry B. Wonham

takes a similar view, stating that Hank is “really less a Quixote figure than a Sancho Panza” and that Sandy “provides the novel’s clearest echoes of *Don Quixote* when she mistakes a pigsty for a magnificent castle...” (165).

However, it is not just Sandy that believes in the reality of Quixote-like fantasies: various characters, including Sandy, Hank’s protégé Clarence, and the various members of the court at Camelot are convinced at different times that Hank is an inhuman creature who “sprang into the top of a tree two hundred cubits high at a single bound” (30), that his 19th century clothing is enchanted to protect the wearer from harm (30-31), that he is a wizard with the power to destroy the sun (Chapter VI), that the castle dungeon at Camelot is escape-proof due to enchantments by Merlin (33), and that a holy fountain which has ceased to flow may be restored by magic (Chapter XXXII). The ubiquitous belief that Hank’s use of 19th century technology is actually magic is simply the logical extension of such perceptions. Such a view of the world is not unlike Don Quixote’s conviction that every tale of knight-errantry he has ever read is literally true, magical events and all.

Delusion, then, is not a trait specifically confined to Sandy as a purported Don Quixote analogue, but is rather a common characteristic of the world Hank finds himself in. He is surrounded by a legion of “Don Quixotes,” and often needs to humor them in their beliefs as a strategy to accomplish his goal of modernizing Arthurian Britain.

A key element of the character of Don Quixote that Twain does not replicate in either *Huckleberry Finn* or *Tom Sawyer*, then, is the *literal* belief that such enchantments are a part of reality. There is no indication that Tom is doing anything but getting carried away in an elaborate game of make-believe, being just as aware as Huck that the “Spaniards and A-rabs” are actually Sunday school students and their irate teacher. Such delusion is, however, replicated by Twain in *Connecticut Yankee* in reverse fashion of how it is depicted by Cervantes: rather than a single delusional person surrounded by the lucid, Twain gives the reader a single lucid person surrounded by the delusional.

In connection with the conflict between tradition and modernity depicted in both novels, Henry B. Wonham makes an important observation:

With its aggressive condemnation of chivalry and aristocratic pretension in medieval England, *A Connecticut Yankee* may be Twain’s most Cervantean book, but the two are more like mirror reflections of one another than like identical twins. Whereas Don Quixote finds his chivalric values and sensibilities hopelessly out of place in Cervantes’ modern Spain, Hank Morgan—a sort of Quixote in reverse—experiences a different kind of frustration as a modern engineer trapped in the mythical world of King Arthur’s Camelot. (164-165)

Wonham further asserts that “whereas Cervantes develops a contrast between archaic notions and modern conditions, Twain’s *Yankee* struggles to reconcile archaic conditions with modern notions” (165).

While I agree with the respective conflicts between tradition and modernity Wonham points out, I also argue that Hank Morgan and Don Quixote are precisely analogous in one crucial respect: each man earnestly strives to impose his will upon his environment; lucidity (Hank) or delusion (Don Quixote) in turn determines how successful each of these efforts is. In this sense, Hank is not really Twain's version of Sancho because the latter makes no such attempt at affecting his world, other than following Don Quixote's lead. Similarly, Sandy mirrors Don Quixote's delusional views, but not his steadfast determination to impose his will upon his surroundings. Don Quixote attempts this by actions such as attacking windmills perceived as giants (Part I, 59-60) and hacking apart puppets he believes are Moorish enemies (Part II, 641). By comparison, Hank Morgan sets up telephone networks, factories, and schools.

Conclusion

Don Quixote's and Hank Morgan's shared determination to impose their wills upon the world is perhaps the one element that unites them as character types. Moreover, delusion and madness literally determine Don Quixote's course of action, just as sanity and lucidity determine Hank's; his ultimate failure is caused not by an inability to perceive reality but by the intervention of temporal power in the form of the Church interdict.⁹

Don Quixote, before taking on his mission to revive knight-errantry, was Alonso Quixano, a hidalgo, or lower-ranking member of the Spanish nobility. He is typical of those whom Hank Morgan would hold in contempt: he neglects and mismanages his lands and produces little; exempt from taxation, he presumably hangs onto a sense of prestige by virtue of having a title of nobility. The sane Alonso Quixano showed no sign of wanting to impose his will on the world until he went mad after obsessively reading too many romances and became the knight-errant Don Quixote. He regrets his actions on his deathbed, after fully regaining his sanity (Part II, Ch. 74).

Hank Morgan, by contrast, doggedly uses all the reasoning and knowledge at his command to ascertain whether he really is in 6th century Britain. Once he concludes that he is, it is his lucidity and practical knowledge—not madness and delusion, as with Don Quixote—that catalyze his mission to modernize and democratize Camelot and its environs. In transposing the roles of lucidity and delusion in *Connecticut Yankee* from where Cervantes placed them in *Don Quixote*, Twain brings into sharper relief what he viewed as the primary value of his Spanish predecessor's novel: a debunking of romanticized knight-errantry and its associated institutions.¹⁰

Notes:

- 1 There is no indication that Twain believed Scott was consciously seeking to validate the Southern slave system; he rather asserted that Southern slave owners seized upon Scott's fiction as an

idealization of and rationale for their society. Nevertheless, Twain argues in *Life on the Mississippi* (1875) that “Sir Walter had so large a hand in making the Southern character, as it existed before the war, that he is in great measure responsible for the war” (422). A serious indictment indeed. Henry B. Wonham points out that while Twain was perhaps being typically hyperbolic, his opinion also indicates a view that books may either “perpetrate illusions” (e.g. Scott) or “sweep them away” (e.g. Cervantes) (160-161). Romanticized depictions of slavery by Scott include, for example, the warm and loyal relationship seen in *Ivanhoe* between the Saxon lord Cedric and his jester Wamba, who wears an inscribed iron collar indicating his slave status. This stands in stark contrast to the brutal treatment of Hank Morgan and King Arthur when they are sold into slavery in *Connecticut Yankee* (Ch. XXXIV). In a symbolic swipe at Scott in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Twain depicts a grounded steamboat named the *Walter Scott*, upon which Huck and Jim encounter a stranded gang of violent criminals (61-68).

- 2 The assumption here is that in most fictional narratives, a more or less lucid perception of one’s surroundings exists by default; thus lucidity is not typically a motif unless delusion is introduced. Lucidity, then, becomes a motif symbiotically tied to its opposite in both *Don Quixote* and *Connecticut Yankee*.
- 3 This element of *Don Quixote* was pointed out by José Ortega y Gasset at least as early as 1932, as quoted by Arturo Serrano-Plaja: “He [Don Quixote] turns everything around him into a pretext for exercising his will” (589).
- 4 An inconsistency between Malory’s Camelot and its replication in *Connecticut Yankee* is the time period of each story. In *Le Morte D’Arthur*, the day Sir Galahad joins the court at Camelot is said by Sir Launcelot to be the Feast of Pentecost, 454 AD (Vol. II, 240). In *Connecticut Yankee*, Hank’s arrival in Camelot is in June 528 AD, 74 years later. This could hypothetically indicate an intention on Twain’s part to make the plot consistent with the solar eclipse which Hank uses to convince the court that he has magical powers (Ch. VI); the date is stated as June 21, 528 AD. However, there is no actual eclipse recorded on or near that date (NASA).
- 5 This chapter of *Connecticut Yankee*, “Sandy’s Tale,” contains excerpts from Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur*, Vol. I, Book IV, Ch. 16, 17, and 18, which primarily describe the adventures of Sir Uwain and Sir Gawain, two knights of the Round Table who do battle with the Irish knight Sir Marhaus. In using Malory as an example of an exasperating anecdote and having Hank exclaim “Great Scott!” in response to it, Twain is apparently poking fun at both Malory and Scott simultaneously.
- 6 Taken from *Le Morte D’Arthur*, Vol. I, Book I, Ch. 25. It describes how Arthur came to possess his sword Excalibur.
- 7 Lang stated that he had not read *Connecticut Yankee* because “Mark Twain is not, and cannot be, at the proper point of view. He has not the knowledge which would enable him to be a sound critic of the ideal of the Middle Ages. An Arthurian knight in New York or in Washington would find as much to blame, and justly, as a Yankee at Camelot” (38). Even granting the dubious implication that Twain’s depiction of medieval chivalry is the single criterion for deciding whether *Connecticut Yankee* is worth reading, Lang ironically denies himself the knowledge to adequately critique Twain’s novel by refusing to read it, yet tries to critique the book anyway by asserting that Twain lacks the knowledge to write it.

- 8 More generally, Moore demonstrates this Cervantean element to argue that, contrary to the common view of Twain's fiction as distinctively "American" in nature, he was much more of a Europhile than many assumed, with Saint-Simon, Casanova, Samuel Pepys, and Thomas Malory as well as Cervantes among his literary inspirations.
- 9 A common critical view of *Connecticut Yankee* since the 1960s has been that Hank Morgan is either a well-intentioned fool or a sort of totalitarian dictator who ultimately does more harm than good. From this perspective, one might argue that Hank is as "delusional" as Don Quixote (or more so) in the sense of not comprehending or respecting cultural differences between his own era and Camelot's, and who bears responsibility for the deadly results of the Battle of the Sand-Belt (Ch. XLIII). I argue against these interpretations in my paper "The Morally Imperative Lie in Twain's *Connecticut Yankee*." (*The Midwest Quarterly*, Autumn 2012.)
- 10 Whether Cervantes would have agreed with Twain on this point is a question outside the scope of this paper, but to briefly speculate: Cervantes served as a soldier with a combined European fleet against the Ottoman Empire in 1571 and was wounded in battle, losing the use of his left hand; he also spent five years as a prisoner of war in Algiers (*Don Quixote*, Chronology of Cervantes, xxi). Moreover, in *Don Quixote* Part I, Chapters 37 and 38, Don Quixote delivers an eloquent discourse asserting the greater difficulty and value of the pursuit of arms over letters (i.e. of the soldier over the scholar). In conveying these views, Don Quixote shows no sign of delusion or insanity, and his listeners are amazed that someone who is otherwise a madman can be so lucid, eloquent, and knowledgeable. It's reasonable to infer that Don Quixote's discourse was informed by Cervantes' first-hand experience as a soldier, and that the author's attitude toward chivalry and its associated ideals may not have been as absolute as Twain apparently believed.

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(アーサー シャタック オキーフ 国際学科)