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## The Effects of Dramatic Fiction in a Catalan Baroque Re-Creation of Corneille's L'Illusion comique

RÉSUMÉ: L'Illusion comique de Corneille, publiée en 1639, est au fondement du mélange de genres que constitue Lo desengany, poema dramàtic, écrit entre 1645 et 1652 par le poète et dramaturge Francesc Fontanella. Tout en s'inspirant clairement de l'œuvre de Corneille, le texte catalan diverge de façon substantielle dans la fonction qu'il assigne à la fiction et à la représentation théâtrale. L'objet de cet article sera de mettre en lumière les points de connexion entre L'Illusion comique et Lo desengany ainsi que, et peut-être plus encore, les divergences entre le concept de fiction et la fonctionnalité qui lui est assignée dans chacune des deux œuvres.

Mots-clés: théâtre baroque, métafiction, fiction, catharsis, Corneille, Fontanella

ABSTRACT: Corneille's *L'Illusion comique*, published in 1639, is the basis of the mixture of genres that constitutes *Lo desengany, poema dramàtic*, written between 1645 and 1652 by the poet and dramatist Francesc Fontanella. While clearly inspired by Corneille's work, the Catalan text differs substantially in the function it assigns to fiction and theatrical representation. The aim of this article will be to shed light not only on the points of connection between *L'Illusion comique* and *Lo desengany* (literally: disillusionment), but also – perhaps more importantly – on the differences between the concept of fiction and the functions assigned to this concept in the two works.

Keywords: baroque theatre, metafiction, fiction, catharsis, Corneille, Fontanella

In the Baroque era, the epistemic concept of disillusionment, the understanding of the empirical world as deceptive, and the growth of metafiction gave rise to a dramatic model in which theatre deals with theatre, potentially through embedded theatrical representations and even the provision of explanatory parameters for the play being performed. This is the case of Corneille's *L'Illusion comique*, a paradigmatic Baroque mix of tragedy and comedy which, in the words of Georges Forestier, "représente le point limite de la dramaturgie de l'illusion: sur le premier plan, celui de l'illusion dramatique, vient se greffer un second niveau d'illusion, l'illusion magique [...] qui enserre lui-même une troisième illusion, pur trompe-l'œil se résolvant à son tour en illusion théâtrale." And although Corneille portrays his tragicomedy as a "pièce capricieuse" and as "galanterie

- On the inevitable (and beneficial) character of epochal constructions, see Hempfer 2018, pp. 214–256.
- 2 Forestier 1996, p. 245.

extravagante"<sup>3</sup> – or precisely for that reason – L'Illusion (written at the end of 1635 and not published until 1639) very soon spawned a series of creative imitations. I am thinking of Le Triomphe des cinq passions (1641) and L'Art de régner (1643) by Gillet de La Tessonnerie and hagiographic metafiction like Le véritable saint Genest (1645) by Jean de Rotrou.

Into this textual family I propose inserting an original Catalan generic mixture by Francesc Fontanella, *Lo desengany, poema dramàtic* (written between 1645 and 1652). The Catalan text, although clearly based on Corneille's work, differs substantially when it comes to the function assigned to fiction and theatrical representation. This article aims to shed light, not only on the points of connection between *L'Illusion* and *Lo desengany*, but also on the differences between the concept of fiction and the functions assigned to this concept in each of the works.<sup>4</sup>

The author, Francesc Fontanella (Barcelona, 1622 – Perpignan, 1682/1683), was a playwright and poet. Considerably ambitious in his formal experimentation and stylistic choices, he imitated the style of Spanish poet Luis de Góngora in Catalan, using literary references to classical and modern works and incorporating core elements of the Baroque episteme.<sup>5</sup> The novelty of his literary approach and his links to the European literature of the time are best viewed in the context of the writer's stays in France, Germany, and the Netherlands, accompanying his brother Josep on his diplomatic missions during the Thirty Years' War. The Corneille connection is rendered far more intelligible if we consider Francesc's stay in Paris from late August to the end of September 1643, where his brother met Cardinal Mazarin; his subsequent trips to Charleville, The Hague and Münster, where from March 1644 he took part in the negotiations for the Peace of Westphalia; and his return to Paris in 1644. Francesc Fontanella, in that respect, resembles the prototype of the creator and political advisor that Günter Grass captures in fiction in Das Treffen in Telgte (The Meeting at Telgte, 1979) and undoubtedly shares the concerns of Grass's protagonists regarding the political involvement of a man of letters and the legitimisation of his own language as a vehicle of literary expression in the Baroque.

The personal contacts he made and the books he read on these international journeys – as well as the plays he presumably attended – must have left their mark on his literary work and explain the incipient connection between *Lo desengany, poema dramàtic* (written between 1645 and 1652) and *L'Illusion comique* (published in 1639). Like Corneille, Fontanella creates a new harmony, melding a host of dramatic genres together. In the words of one of his protagonists, the magician Mauro, "[n]o és tragèdia, ball,

<sup>3</sup> In the letter-prologue to the published play (1639) and in Examen de L'Illusion comique (1660), respectively: Corneille 1997, pp. 29 and 140.

<sup>4</sup> The allusion to Corneille as a referent for Fontanella appears in the prefaces of Maria Mercè Miró on Fontanella 1988 and is further elaborated in the studies of Rossich 2012 and Solervicens 2012. However, none of these previous works delves into the divergent function assigned to fiction that Fontanella constructs from – and in reaction to – Corneille's.

See Rossich 2011 and Solervicens 2016 for an overview of Fontanella's literary work. Maria Mercè Miró has edited his literary work in its entirety. Fontanella's dramatic work can be read in Fontanella 1988. Quotations from this edition are given below in modernized spelling.

comèdia, / ègloga, entremès ni lloa, / però de tot lo dramàtic / és una harmonia nova." Metafiction also plays a central role through the representation of a play within the play, a mechanism widely exploited in French theatre in the 1630s and 40s.

Both works are structured across two dramatic planes. In both cases, the first plane (or frame) consists of a bucolic setting with all the essential elements of an eclogue. We find ourselves before a gloomy cave, where in *L'Illusion*, we see a father in search of his son, and in *Lo desengany*, we witness two pastoral characters, Tirsis and Mireno, suffering the pangs of love, the former due to the sentimental shift in his beloved and the latter due to jealousy. In the frame drama in *Lo desengany*, however, unlike in Corneille's play, and rare in an eclogue, a comic character emerges: the clumsy, ridiculous sorcerer's apprentice Cassolano, a conceited, vain character, prone to self-praise, yet fearful and, above all, inconsequential and comic, in clear contrast to the solemnity of his master, the magician Mauro.

Tirsis and Mireno – just like Pridamant in *L'Illusion* – think to trust to concoctions and incantations to cure what ails them, but our magicians reject black magic as, according to them, it has no effect on the passions of the soul. They propose an alternative healing method: in the case of Mauro in *Lo desengany*, this involves an invisible remedy based on imagination "amb fantàstica matèria / tindrà verdadera forma." The formula consists of observing one's own problems in the theatre as though it were a mirror; indeed, the stage is presented as a magic mirror that "tot lo verdader demostra," where humans can understand the deep meanings behind their worries and find the remedy to heal them because "[e]n eix eminent teatro / cesaran vostres congoixes." In both initial dramatic planes (or frame dramas), the parallels between Fontanella's and Corneille's work are at times extremely clear.<sup>8</sup> The moment in which the second plane (or embedded play) is introduced in both works also shows striking similarities:

ALCANDRE: Sous une illusion vous pourriez voir sa vie,

Et tous ses accidents devant vous exprimés Par des spectres pareils à des corps animés,

Il ne leur manquera ni geste, ni parole. (I, 2, vv. 150–153)

MAURO: Lo lloc vos descobriré

on sa claredat ditxosa feliçment il·lustrarà

- 6 Fontanella 1988, p. 200. In a similar way, Corneille describes the genre of L'Illusion as a generic mixture in that "[1]e premier acte ne semble qu'un prologue; les trois suivants forment une pièce que je ne sais comment nommer: le succès en est tragique; Adraste y est tué, et Clindor en péril de mort; mais le style et les personnages sont entièrement de la comédie. Il y en a même un qui n'a d'être que dans l'imagination, inventé exprès pour faire rire, et dont il ne se trouve point d'original parmi les hommes" (Corneille 1997, p. 140).
- 7 Fontanella 1988, pp. 197–200.
- 8 For example, "ALCANDRE: Dorante, c'est assez, je sais ce qui l'amène, / Ce fils est aujourd'hui le sujet de sa peine!" (Corneille 1997, p. 37) closely resembles "MAURO: Ja sabí vostra vinguda / amb les causes doloroses / que a consultar ma doctrina / vos han guiat a ma cova" (Fontanella 1988, p. 196).
- 9 Corneille 1997, p. 39.

de vostres enganys les ombres.

[...]

Ensenya, entre aquestes roques lo mirall que a ma presència tot lo verdader demostra.

(I, 1, vv. 265-268, 270-272)10

MAURO:

I will show you the place where its blissful clarity will gaily illustrate

the shadows of your delusions.

[...]

Behold, among these rocks, the mirror that in my presence shows all that is true.  $]^{\text{u}}$ 

For the effect of the magic – and in Fontanella's case also catharsis – to take hold, Mauro the magician invites our pastoral characters to participate (with very minor roles) in a representation of the myth of Venus, Mars, and Vulcan. The staging of the embedded play is central to both *L'Illusion* and *Lo desengany*. The scenic space of this performance is hinted at in *L'Illusion* but not made explicit in *Lo desengany*. However, looking to Corneille's play, on which Fontanella's play is most likely based, the location of the other side of the mirror can be inferred to be the inside of the magician's dark cave too: "[d]e ma grotte surtout ne sortez qu'après moi."<sup>12</sup>

The identity of the fictional author of the embedded play is not specified either, although the fact that the role of author-demiurge is assumed by the magician implicitly presents him as the author-director of the play in both works. In *Lo desengany*, Mauro the magician not only prescribes the play, outlines the dosage and lists the specific therapeutic effects for the love-struck pastoral spectators, he also summarises the plot of the play within the play for them, defines its genre as a "harmonia nova" and articulates generic praise for fiction, specifically for the fictitious play being performed. These are all things authors tend to discuss in the prolegomenon of their work. At the end of the embedded play, Mauro appeals directly to the spectators, once again in the role of author, as if giving it an epilogue. Albeit implicitly, we can conclude that Mauro, one of the protagonists from the frame drama, assumes the functions of the author of the embedded play.

We are talking about an authorial profile which was widely-used at the time for plays within plays: The magician whose supernatural powers include fantasy and poetic fancies is a distant cousin to the titular characters of Ariosto's *Il Negromante*, Bruno's *Il Candelaio*, and Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*, as well as Polisthène, the magician in *Les Bergeries* by the Marquis de Racan, the Enchanteur in *Le Triomphe des cinq passions* by

<sup>10</sup> Fontanella 1988, pp. 197-198.

<sup>11</sup> All translations from Catalan are by the author, J. S.

<sup>12</sup> Corneille 1997, p. 44. On the hypothetical staging of Corneille's play, see Alcover 1976.

Gillet de La Tessonnerie and, in a broader sense, Polidore in *L'Art de régner* by the same. As Forestier notes, in Baroque theatre the magician plays a very important role in the creation of illusions and in the process of revealing the truth.<sup>13</sup> Thus, in both *L'Illusion comique* and *Lo desengany*, the magician assumes the role of author and stage director, a profile that parodic Baroque theatre repeatedly mimicked in burlesque plays, intermezzos and dances.

In *Lo desengany*, the play devised by the magician opens up the second dramatic plane, where a peculiar adaptation of the love affairs between Venus, Mars, and Vulcan is staged. This is a predominately sober mythological drama, centred on Venus's change of heart when she rejects the dazzling Mars and accepts a marriage tie to the grossly coarse Vulcan. Here the divergence in plot of *Lo desengany* from *L'Illusion* is absolute, but the structural similarity remains, since the play is witnessed solely by the pastoral characters from the frame drama. In Fontanella's embedded play, these characters play very minor roles, and clearly behave as spectators in the final scenes. As in *L'Illusion*, the closing scenes see these characters learn a lesson on the use and importance of dramatic fiction.

Fontanella's original adaptation of the classical myth speaks to the Baroque sense of wonder, but also serves to fulfil the function the broader work needs it to, and to produce the required effect on the fictional spectators, who mirror the actual spectators.14 In the mythological play depicted, Mars loves Venus and is loved in return. The sentimental story hits a rut when Saturn, Venus's father, pushes his daughter to marry Vulcan, who is the opposite of Mars: a coarse, conceited, voluptuary blacksmith, who exhibits unbridled, ridiculous verbosity and unrestrained sexual desire throughout the play. Between two antithetical alternatives, Venus ends up in Vulcan's hands through a chain of misunderstandings that depict the implicit deceptions of love: Venus appears to accept her father's will, though she still loves Mars, and Mars misunderstands Venus and responds by feigning coldness. Thus, although he can never forget Venus, he feigns estrangement, and Venus, also misinterpreting Mars's feelings, believes herself to be abandoned and agrees to marry Vulcan out of spite. This play of amorous subtleties shows the deceptive nature of love and serves to validate its antidote: when Mars feels unjustly rejected by Venus and replaced by someone he considers unworthy, an allegorical character, Desengany (literally: Disillusionment, as in the poem's title), ap-

<sup>13</sup> See Forestier 1996, pp. 208-214.

<sup>14</sup> In fact, the creative transformation of mythological fables and ancient history is commonplace in Baroque literature, as another element to provoke a sense of wonder in the audience. That is why Gian Francesco Busenello himself ends *L'Incoronazione di Poppea*, which was set to music by Monteverdi, with the wedding of Nero and Poppea, and not with the emperor kicking the courtesan to death; and, in an even more jarring example, that is why the same Busenello ends *Didone*, set to music by Francesco Cavalli, not with the abandoned queen's lament, nor with her suicide, but with Dido and Aeneas' wedding. Similarly, Fontanella alters the mythological drama, which he may have come across in the Ovidian texts (*Metamorphoses* IV, 171–189; *Ars Amatoria* II, 561–592; *Amores* I, 9), places the sentimental relationship between Venus and Mars at the beginning, and makes the scene that is most well-known and most widely distributed iconographically – that of adultery – impossible. After the lesson imparted by the character Desengany, Mars could not possibly fall into temptation again, nor could the audience conceive of this outcome, even if they knew the canonical version of the ancient fable.

pears on stage with a torch and a mirror, symbolising light and knowledge, and delivers a forceful enlightening speech that makes Mars – and the pastoral characters from the frame drama – aware of the essence of love and of his own human condition.

The lesson Mars learns is to overcome love's deception through the acceptance of disillusionment. Only in this way can he regain self-control. Vulcan, on the other hand, who wins Venus's favours, falls victim to jealousy and is destined to suffer eternally. In contrast to the motley fresco of amorous behaviour depicted in the play – one that includes, with the most idealised finesse, jealousy, inconstancy, caprice, resentment, vengeful fury and stark carnality – the denouement presents disillusionment as an effective means of surmounting all these concerns. Desengany, the allegorical character, displays a mirror, an element which had previously been introduced with the embedded play: It is a symbol of fiction, but also of knowledge. By brandishing the mirror, Desengany interprets the meaning of the play being performed and illustrates the alienation inherent in love, which leads to blindness, enslavement, false hopes, and error. Becoming disillusioned in love does not, therefore, have negative connotations. On the contrary, disillusionment is the means of acquiring the knowledge and self-mastery promoted in the Baroque. The alternative is the fragility of love, too subtle and prone to misunderstanding.

The function of metatheatre in both works is "demonstrative" according to the typology established by Forestier, in that, through fiction, a set of parameters is demonstrated that explain the dramatic work itself and bestow prestige on its genesis, the process of elaboration and representation, and the audience, i. e. the author, the actors, and the spectators. However, there are clear disparities in the ways the two works achieve this and the theatrical values they aim to demonstrate. I now focus on the different effects the embedded performance has on its pastoral spectators from Fontanella's frame drama, and on the divergent conclusions that both works draw about fiction.

The discourse around fiction articulated in both works has a performative component, conveyed through the emotional reactions of the pastoral spectators, and a discursive component, made explicit by the magician-author-directors who orchestrate the embedded spectacle.

In *L'Illusion*, the embedded performance makes Pridamant, the father in search of his son, feel surprise, shock and, later, having become aware of the dramatic trickery, a fascination for theatrical art. In this sense, Pridamant's emotional reaction at the end of the fifth act can be seen as proof of the quality of the actor playing the role of Clindor. The magician Alcandre makes the effect of an actor's skill explicit:

Ainsi, tous les acteurs d'une troupe comique, Leur poème récité, partagent leur pratique.

L'un tue et l'autre meurt, l'autre vous fait pitié, Mais la scène préside à leur inimitié ; Leurs vers font leur combat, leur mort suit leurs paroles,

Et sans prendre intérêt en pas un de leurs rôles, Le traître et le trahi, le mort et le vivant Se trouvent à la fin amis comme devant.

(V, 6, vv. 1753-1760)16

Indeed, *L'Illusion* is not the first play to champion actors, or specific companies of actors, through dramatic metafiction: This practice can be found in the two *Comédie des comédiens* by Gougenot and de Scudéry, both from 1633, and, in a broader sense, in Niccolò Barbieri's *La supplica* (1634) as well. In Corneille's case, however, there is also praise for the dignity of actors, which may be extended – through the discursive component introduced by Alcandre the magician – to playwrights and the dramatic arts. The playwright, inspired by Parnassus, conceives a set of superlative marvels and is duly compensated in goods and honours. The dramatic arts, opportunely transformed in the Baroque period, allow fiction to pass for reality. In fact, *L'Illusion* depicts the dramaturgy of illusion at its most extreme, along with Corneille's clear conviction that there can be no theatre without illusion. It is Alcandre who certifies this:

Cessez de vous en plaindre : à présent le théâtre Est en un point si haut qu'un chacun l'idolâtre, Et ce que votre temps voyait avec mépris Est aujourd'hui l'amour de tous les bons esprits, L'entretien de Paris, le souhait des provinces, Le divertissement le plus doux de nos princes, Les délices du peuple, et le plaisir des grands.

(V. 6, vv. 1781-1787)17

On this point, Fontanella's approach in *Lo desengany* differs substantially. It is true that one of the functions of the embedded play is to demonstrate the virtues of theatre and its positive effects for the audience, but the praise of dramatic fiction neither focuses on the social prestige and entertainment it provides, nor on the illusion it affords.

Thanks to the embedded mythological drama, our pastoral characters, Tirsis and Mireno, succeed in calming their passions. Having identified with Mars, they, like the god of war, experience disillusionment at Venus's faithlessness and inconstancy in love, and thus feel their own wounds more keenly. They understand her motives and, as a result, are able to be rid of their ills. We have before us a staging of Aristotelian catharsis, which at that time was usually understood as purification rather than purging. It is for this reason that Tirsis is able to conclude that "la tempesta de l'engany" has "mudat en bonança" and Mireno that "mon sentiment estrany / s'és mudat en alegria." In other words, theatre, rather than simply eradicating harmful feelings, has the power to transform them into beneficial feelings in the genuinely purifying sense once assigned to catharsis. However, this is not a mere abstract conceptual observation, but a performative staging of the whole cathartic process in fiction.

- 16 Corneille 1997, pp. 135-136.
- 17 Ibid., p. 137.
- 18 Fontanella 1988, p. 245.



The defence of dramatic fiction articulated by Fontanella bypasses the illusory component constructed by Corneille completely, and relies instead on the theatre's capacity to act as a mirror endowed with the ability to explain the essence of the human condition. The reaction that the equivocal inconstancy of love portrayed in the embedded play provokes in the fictional audience is not only the expected effect on the *actual* audience of *Lo desengany*, but becomes a representation of the beneficial effect of *all* theatrical representation – that is, the capacity to understand the essence of the human condition in fiction through catharsis. The conclusion, when it comes to the issue of fiction, is clear in the final intervention of our pastoral characters, who are back in the frame drama:

TIRSIS: Has vist

en est teatro eminent de les mudances i celos únic fortunat remei?

MIRENO: Ara he vist, Tirsis, amic,

amb felicíssim succés complit l'oracle de Mauro, i vençut mon accident; vencedor lo Desengany mos errors ha descobert, que en les sombres enganyoses

és lo llum més verdader. (II, 6, vv. 1793–1804)<sup>19</sup>

[TIRSIS: Have you seen

in this lofty theatre inconstancy and jealousy's

only happy remedy?

MIRENO: Now I've seen, Tirsis, my friend,

with most felicitous success Mauro's oracle fulfilled, and my misfortune conquered;

Desengany conqueror my errors he discovered, for in deceptive shadows is found the truest light.

The analogy between the characters of the frame and those of the embedded play is also clear in Corneille's tragicomedy. In *Examen de L'Illusion comique* (1660) he remarks on the "conformité" between Isabelle and Clindor and, implicitly, between Isabelle's father, Géronte, and Clindor's father, Pridamant, as "un trait d'art pour mieux abuser par une fausse mort le père de Clindor qui les regarde, et rendre son retour de la douleur à la joie

plus surprenant et plus agréable."<sup>20</sup> It also seems clear that the flesh-and-blood spectator should be able to identify, in the Aristotelian sense, with Pridamant, who falls victim – like the flesh-and-blood spectator – to the illusory equivocation constructed by Alcandre the magician. However, none of this is explicitly stated within the play by Alcandre and the consequences at the level of the reception of the dramatic work that the magician exposes reiterate the message that the ultimate aim of a theatrical performance is to entertain the audience.

Here, Fontanella's formulation differs from Corneille's, while being consistent with his own use of metafiction and the type of plot he constructs in the embedded play. The vision Fontanella projects is also particularly interesting because, in the theoretical treatises of the time, catharsis was the exclusive purview of tragedy, and was not attributed to tragicomedies. Giambattista Guarini in *Il Compendio della poesia tragicomica* (1601) observes that only tragedy "purga" terror and compassion and that tragicomedy "[p]urga la malinconia, affetto tanto nocivo che bene spesso conduce l'uomo a 'mpazzare e darsi la morte," that is, it purges melancholy, a harmful feeling that can lead to madness or suicide. Similarly, yet in a rather less specific way, Lope de Vega in *Arte nuevo de hacer comedias en este tiempo* (1609) simply observes that the new generic mixtures promote virtuous acts. <sup>22</sup>

Fontanella is fully aware of the potential of the unique, firmly contemporary model put forward by Corneille in *L'Illusion*, a model capable of expressing theoretical concepts through practice, of performatively impelling audiences to react, and of explicitly bringing the theoretical and practical dimensions of a dramatic work together into the same discourse. Fontanella establishes a dialogue, a mirroring, but employs this model extremely creatively, managing to convey his own model of fiction, that which fictional spectators espouse in his work, and what he expects from the works' flesh-and-blood audience, and ultimately, from the spectators of any theatrical work.

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- 20 Corneille 1997, p. 141.
- 21 Guarini 2008, p. 220.
- 22 See Vega 2011, p. 331.



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