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ENGL 318
04/19/22
2341 words

To Be or Not to Be Funny: Analysis of Moral Authority in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*

Being Renaissance drama's most famous "fallen man," Christopher Marlowe's Doctor Faustus has long been seen as a cautionary tale against pride's corrupting influence, and his *Tragical History* an archetypal morality play. But despite *The Tragical History of D. Faustus* now being over 400 years old, the morality play is a genre that has long preceded it and one that Elizabethan audiences would have been quite familiar with by then, and perhaps even tired of. For its systematic reduction of moral issues to allegorical fables of good against evil may have struck an increasingly learned audience as simplistic and its moral journey of redemption repetitive. And so the need arises to make the morality play more adapted to the times. But is *Faustus* merely an updated iteration of this genre?

The critical consensus long seemed to agree that it does in many ways fit into the traditional morality play's mold, especially in the way in which the allegorical tale of damnation is tempered by moments of levity or comic interludes as morality plays so often were. But in their "attempt to impose a generically consistent tragic or moral reading of the play" (Last 23), those critics dismiss its vast comic sensibility and subversive spirit, and how its comic scenes, rather than merely providing levity, actually parody and in a sense actively undermine the more serious Faustus scenes that precede them. The play's comic elements have been "almost universally condemned… as trivial and inappropriate to the elevated tragic themes of the play, as mere filler and comic relief for the groundlings, and, most damningly, as non-authorial, spurious

additions to Marlowe's "original" text" (25), hence critics' general preference of the A-text over the more comically inclined B-text. But this partitioned view of the play, an alternation between the 'Faustus' plot and 'side character' sub-plot, or between the serious and the comical, fails to take into account its sizable middle portion—roughly scenes7 to 11—in which Faustus himself engages in similar hijinks and unimpressive trickery, such as boxing the pope's ears or summoning a bunch of grapes, and thereby takes part in his own parody by abasing himself to the level of side characters like Wagner or Robin. And with his clowning he chips away at his elevated tragic hero stature, thus undermining the catharsis we feel at the play's tragic ending. The line between morality play and parody of one therefore becomes much too blurry for any one reading of *Faustus* to stick.

But how can a morality play retain any credible moral authority if it is undermining itself at the same time? How can a play be both drama and parody of drama? It can be argued that Marlowe, ever the double agent, even in his writing, is perhaps playing both sides (or perhaps neither) here. It is unfair to dismiss the comic elements as irrelevant to the plot for it is in these very moments that the play's moral thesis most clearly presents itself. Marlowe achieves a more complex and nuanced form of moral authority by undermining the rudimentary, fearmongering one that came before. By depicting the dark magic Faustus gave his soul for as nothing more than a bag of cheap tricks, and the seven deadly sins he is supposed to fear as comical figures, Marlowe is telling his audience that the price of sin is too high for something so ridiculous in nature, and ultimately just not worth it. But to make evil look absurd is to make it less fearful, and so the play's moral lesson can only be attained by undermining the tropes of the morality play, whose approach to dissuade its audience from committing sinful acts was to make them fear sin itself. This deliberate, or authoritative, abdication of moral authority frees the audience

from the constant fear of eternal torment and fire and brimstone that morality plays tried so hard to inculcate by simply showing them that sin is too ridiculous an avenue to pursue.

Those who would argue against the primacy of comedy in the play, that its comic elements were mere afterthoughts possibly not even written by Marlowe, would be failing to recognize that "[he] lifted many of the comic episodes directly from [the English Faust Book]", and that by adapting

> them into a traditional morality-play structure… [he] subtly turn[ed] this supposed morality play into a burlesque of the medieval notion of damnation. Marlowe took the old-fashioned, hackneyed techniques of the morality play—the heavenly throne, hell mouth, allegorical figures such as the seven deadly sins, the good and bad angels, and the devils—which would have been still familiar to and perhaps still frightening for an Elizabethan audience, and meshed them with subversive British folk humour... He effectively overturned the traditional function of comedy in the morality, which is a foil for the serious plot or theme, so that comedy, in a sense, becomes the main plot and tragedy the parodied sub-plot (28).

The comic scenes aren't so much parodies of the "serious" ones rather than more truthful reflections of them. By subverting the spectacle of morality plays meant to induce fear, obedience, and awe, they are telling us what's really going on and making explicit the absurdity underlying the serious scenes. And by giving the comedy the function of truth-telling, by showing its educational potential, Marlowe effectively undermines the function and need for the morality sequences, thereby turning their very existence into a parodic act.

Scene 4, for example, in which Wagner attempts to get the clown to sell his soul to him echoes the pact Faustus had just made with Mephastophilis. In both cases, they are "gulled into contracts by ignorance" (Goldfarb 354). In the comic scene Wagner summons the devils Balioll

and Belcher—parodies of Belial and Beelzebub—to scare the clown into submission, banking on his ignorance of their limited power. Faustus similarly enters into his pact with Mephastophilis thinking the demon will be "Full of obedience and humility" (3.33) and "do whatever Faustus shall command, / Be it to make the moon drop from her sphere / Or the ocean to overwhelm the world" (3.40-42) only to discover in Scene 5 after the contract is sealed

> the limitations of Mephistopheles's power. Believing that now he can have everything he asks for, the hero ardently requests a wife to satisfy his 'wanton and lasciuious' mood. But because marriage is a holy sacrament, Mephistopheles can supply him only with a devil dressed as a woman… Faustus also quickly discovers, much to his disappointment, that Mephistopheles will not or cannot tell him anything new about the universe. Because the devil is not permitted to name God, the hero's question as to who made the world goes unanswered (Smith 172),

and leaves him wondering "Hath Mephastophilis no greater skill?" (5.240). By giving so much importance to these comic scenes, Marlowe deprives the morality play of its *raison d'être*. And in the absence of such moral purpose, the morality elements become redundant and thus parody themselves in their insistence on still going through the motions. Suzan Last writes that

> The conventional morality structure of the text is further eroded by the uncharacteristic moral meekness of the taciturn Chorus. The Chorus, traditionally a strong interpretive voice, pointing the audience towards the moral lessons of the play, is unusually reticent in *Doctor Faustus*. At the beginning of Act 3, just after Lucifer himself has appeared to Faustus and presented the pageant of Sins, the Chorus presents a simple travelogue of Faustus's eight-day journey on the dragon's back, with no interpretive guidance for the preceding scenes and no moral judgments of Faustus's transgressions. Similarly, the Chorus's presentation of the prologue and epilogue is unusually mild and lacking in specific religious conviction by comparison with the choruses of conventional morality plays. The Prologue announces the intention to "perform / The

> form of Faustus' fortunes, *good or bad*, / … to *patient judgments we appeal* ([8]-9, my italics), leaving interpretation uncharacteristically open (30).

But perhaps this lack of a clear moral indictment of Faustus comes from the fact that there isn't really much *to* indict. Putting his aspirations to "raise the wind or rend the clouds" (1.60), become a "mighty god" (1.63), and other blasphemous words aside, Faustus's actual usage of dark magic is in fact quite tame. Despite the magician Valdes' assurances that it "Shall make all nations to canonize us… / As Indian Moors obey their Spanish lords, / So shall the subjects of every element / Be always available to us three / …If learned Faustus will be resolute" (1.121-134), Faustus never even gets close to acting on these desires. A significant middle portion of the play is devoted to showing how insignificant and far from his fantasies his magical powers really are, how "In return for his soul he has received a bag of tricks" (Goldfarb 360), through

> the calculated anti-climactic order of the personages Faustus meets with—it is to be noticed that he proceeds downward in rank from Pope, to Emperor, to Duke and Duchess, to horse-courser—and also the increasing pettiness of his feats. In the Vatican he achieves invisibility, elementary enough to a magician, but at the court of Charles V he preoccupies himself with fixing horns on a man's head, with the Vanholts he can think of nothing more startling than fetching a bunch of grapes, and with the horse-courser he sinks to the lowest ebb of inspiration, cheating the man out of a few dollars and making him believe he has pulled off the protagonist's leg (Smith 173).

By making Faustus partake in these comical escapades, Marlowe is essentially lowering him to the status of clown or side character, turning him into a parody of himself, and in doing so is "establishing evil, though terrible in consequence, as actually petty in nature. Refusing to take

evil as a temptation worthy of an aspiring mind, he makes it completely unattractive by reducing it to its essential smallness" (171). The play consciously shirks the morality play's "obligation" to pass judgment on its hero's actions because his so-called transgressions are simply not worth the spectacle. Sin itself is made to look petty. It is not taken seriously here nor is it supposed to be, as made evident by Faustus' sarcastic reaction to "the ludicrous parade of the seven deadly sins, who, far from being awe-inspiring, are really little more than clowns appropriately equipped with frivolous rejoinders" (172), where he quips "Away, envious rascal!" (5.336), "No, I'll see thee hanged" (5.352), and "Choke thyself, glutton!" (5.355), and joyfully remarks on how "this feeds [his] soul!" (5.371). In his failure to take the sins seriously he fails to recognize that this parade is in fact "an ironic dialogue between self and soul… [where,] despite his involvement with the sins [he] remains completely detached from them. He fails to identify with a single one of the sins, and thus we have the irony of a man corrupted by the seven sins failing to recognize his corruptors" (Goldfarb 356). For, they are very much his own sins despite their unimpressive presentation, and in the middle section he "unconsciously reveal[s] the insidious influence by the seven deadly sins [have on him]: he illustrates the smallness of their preoccupations as he proceeds and, at the same time, their vices. The pranks on the Pope, the snatching away of the food and drink and the boxing of his ears… are really but illustration of gluttony, covetousness, and possibly wrath on the one hand and of folly on the other" (Smith 173), and then in Scene 10, "the sloth into which he has sunk" (Goldfarb 360) with his petty tricking of the horse courser.

These comic episodes, often dismissed as mere filler, are crucial in showing that even if sin can manifest itself in the most harmless of ways, it is still sin at the end of the day and it will earn you eternal damnation. Which is why "The final scenes, despite their "mighty" tragic lines and hellish spectacle… evoke comic imagery from the middle of the play [to] undermin[e] the

tragic or moralistic potential of the ending" (Last 24). By having Faustus in this scene returning from yet another banquet where he caroused "with such belly-cheer" (Ch. 4.6), and reminding us of "what wonders I have done, / [that] All Germany can witness, yea, all the world" (13.22-23), and how "For vain pleasure of four-and-twenty years / Hath Faustus lost eternal joy and felicity" (13.42-43), Marlowe "draws the comic sensibility from the previous scenes into the final act and re-emphasizes their carnivalesque undermining of the status quo" (Last 39) to remind us that his eternal damnation is really due to a few pranks, thereby reiterating "the essential pettiness of evil" and the play's ultimate moral thesis, that "even without the terrible consequences involved, sin is really not worth the effort" (Smith 175).

And by defusing the moral tension of the ending, the elements of traditional morality spectacle such as the thunder and lightning, and the devils, "Adders and serpents" (13.123) coming to take him away to the mouth or "furnace" of Hell become "simultaneously overwhelming in their immediacy and scope, and trite in their antiquated obsolescence, enhancing the sense of parody created in the comic material… [and] suggest[ing] the frailty of these morality play images in the more humanistic context of the Renaissance. The subversive power of these images, then, comes from their self-parodic, excessively spectacular quality, which serves to undermine their traditional moral purpose" (Last 38). And in their excess and subversion of their traditional function, these images further blur the line between tragedy and parody, much as Faustus himself did by becoming a clown in his own play. The play's comic moments cannot be dismissed for they are too instrumental to Faustus' ultimate fate and moral judgment, and so the parody of morality in effect becomes its own form of morality, and in its undermining of tragedy reveals to us the play's real tragedy—that Faustus went really through all that… just for *that*!

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