

A Fool's Errand: Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and the Parodic Use of Tragic Characterization in Early Elizabethan Drama*

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ABSTRACT

Herein I argue that Christopher Marlowe's revered Elizabethan drama *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* subverts the allegorical conventions of the Medieval morality play, recasting the everyman figure—the protagonist tempted by personifications of sin—in an ironic light. As the title implies, the learned doctor is cast ostensibly as a tragic hero, yet the character to appear onstage is far from heroic, and his inevitable demise comes across as more pathetic than tragic. Whereas the classical tragic hero embodies larger-than-life qualities ultimately undermined by a devastating flaw, Marlowe's protagonist possesses no such grandeur. In Marlowe's hands, Doctor Faustus becomes a buffoonish clown, a figure of public ridicule offered up to assuage the anxieties of the Elizabethan audience. Marlowe's take on the Faust myth speaks just as loudly to the present age—an age fueled by relentless technological ambition often tinged with ethical indifference and heedless of unintended consequences.

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It has become commonplace to opine that we live in an era of self-obsession. “Narcissism” is the word of the day, and popular usage of the term is often associated with the seismic cultural impact of social media. But the seeds of contemporary self-conception were sown in the Renaissance, when the human subject became an autonomous entity. With this rise in subjectivity came a three-dimensional conception of literary characterization, a newfound roundness of character that comes to full flower in Elizabethan drama. The complex, dynamic characters fashioned by Shakespeare, Jonson, and Marlowe wholly transcended the stock allegorical personae of the Medieval morality plays. Marlowe’s *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, originally composed in 1593, may be the first harbinger of this literary paradigm shift. *Faustus* still bears the stamp of the Medieval morality play while anticipating the depths of characterization to come in Shakespeare and Jonson. Marlowe adopts the allegorical conventions of the morality play only to subvert them, recasting the everyman or pilgrim figure—the protagonist tempted by personifications of sin—as the recklessly narcissistic Doctor Faustus. Marlowe introduces Faustus as a tragic hero in the play’s title and prologue, but with an ironic wink, as the character to subsequently appear on the stage is hardly heroic, and his inevitable demise comes across as more pathetic than tragic. For all the august mystery of the Faust figure in the popular imagination, Marlowe’s Faustus becomes a figure of ridicule—a hapless fool doomed by his own delusional grandiosity.

The play fuses comic and cautionary elements to present the portrait of a lost soul whose attempt to transgress socio-religious norms leads him to damnation through a series of absurd predicaments, teasing its audience to laughter in an appeal to *schadenfreude*. Faustus’ interiority is truncated and superficial. He is “tragic” insofar as he suffers a downfall, but as a protagonist, he is more antiheroic than heroic, painfully flawed in an all-too-human way. His dramatic journey is one of comic extremes, as Marlowe subtly mocks Faustus’ naive attempts to achieve absolute power. Faustus’ dabbling in the magical arts—considered a genuine danger to Elizabethan audiences—is so hamfisted and bumbling in Faustus’ execution that his susceptibility to the devil’s temptation becomes parodic, as if Marlowe is sending up the conventions of the Medieval morality play itself. Marlowe demystifies the demonic temptation purported to be a sinister threat in traditional Christian dogma, generating a comic form of *catharsis* fit to assuage the collective anxieties of the Elizabethan audience.

As previously noted, the title itself—*The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*—brims with irony. From the first appearance of the protagonist, Marlowe employs comic tropes. He casts the doctor’s self-aggrandizing dreams of unbridled power as puerile fantasies. Faustus’ immediate rejection of all he has learned is so rash as to disabuse

the audience of any notion that his learned intellectualism gives him the genuine power to summon dark supernatural energies with any effectiveness. He comes across as the stock figure in a parody—the caricature of a remote intellectual. As Maggie Vinter notes in “*Doctor Faustus* and the Art of Dying Badly,” “[Renaissance] Humanists revived *parodia* as a rhetorical term to imply that imitation of a serious subject necessarily derogates that subject” (5). With the increasing cynicism of the British Renaissance, late in its emergence on the heels of its Italian origins yet adamant in its Protestant turn toward individual agency, the learned scholar could be seen as a vestige of the Medieval scholastic, whose erudition only served to sustain church hierarchy.

Though educated as a scholastic, Faustus remains susceptible to earthly temptation. The esoteric nature of his education, to the average Elizabethan, would have rendered him more suspect than trustworthy. He is easily seduced by the devil—not unlike the standard pilgrim of morality plays, yet irredeemable in Marlowe. The narrative is predicated not on his salvation, but on his inevitable damnation. This shift in teleology may be what makes Marlowe’s play most distinctive as a harbinger of the dramatic flourishing to come in the golden age of English theater: a damning treatment of its protagonist, a willingness to expose the darkest impulses of a character that would previously have been seen as a larger-than-life figure.

Most distinctive in *Doctor Faustus* is Marlowe’s comic insouciance in handling these dark materials. Magic and sorcery were clear and present dangers to the Elizabethan audience—an audience steeped in Calvinism, wherein the “dark arts” signified reprobation and exile from grace. A spirit of anxiety pervaded the newly-Protestant society, as citizens were forced to live in fear of the soundness of their own piety, never certain whether they were born for salvation or doomed to damnation. These anxieties color the determinism that seals Faustus’ fate. “Most scholars concede that Faustus is predestined to be damned,” argues David K. Anderson. Any agency behind Faustus’ actions is “beyond his control altogether” (253). For Mark James Richard Scott, the play “inhabits a Calvinist universe,” and stands as an “incomparable portrait of reprobate living” (9-10).

As befitting the Faust legend, Faustus’ downfall is foreordained from the start. The plot is built upon an immediate “spoiler” when the chorus informs the audience of Faustus’ outcome in the Prologue. Before the doctor even appears onstage, the chorus casts him as a shade of the mythical Icarus: “Swollen with cunning of a self-conceit / His waxen wings did mount above his reach. / And melting Heavens conspired his overthrow” (Prologue 20-22). The lines assure the audience that what it is about to witness is a myth of moral import with a classically tragic arc. While the 1604 English

audience may or may not have been familiar with the Germanic legend of Faust, they were certainly familiar with the Greek myth of Icarus, whose fate provides the same cautionary moral: *Do not fly too close to the heavens. Do not attempt to exceed your mortal limitations.* Marlowe's narrative henceforth does not depend on plot twists or unexpected consequences. Rather, the play serves a ritual function, the vestige of the morality play, in which the audience shares a collective experience as a means of reinforcing its dearest values. This echoes the original purpose of tragedy for the ancient Greeks, which evolved out of religious ritual. The Greek tragedy replaced the sacrificial goat of Dionysian ritual with the narrative sacrifice of the tragic hero. In his fall from grace, the hero became a scapegoat for the agonies of the human condition.

Doctor Faustus functions as such a scapegoat on the Elizabethan stage, but for a different purpose than that of the traditional tragic hero. Marlowe's intent is to mock the protagonist rather than bewail him, and the audience's *catharsis* comes not in the form of dread, but in laughter. Faustus is hardly an Aristotelian tragic hero, a superior, Nietzschean figure whose downfall occurs when his outsized *hubris* leads to a dramatic error of judgment. The classical tragic hero's attempt to transcend the human condition possesses a certain majestic will to overcome our mortal limitations. Faustus, on the other hand, is foolhardy and rash. Although he has excelled in higher learning, the audience sees no demonstration of his expertise, only the emotionality of his impulses and his pride in dismissing his learned achievements in favor of the "dark arts." He never earns the audience's trust. Casting aside all his books in the opening scene, dismissing all he has learned—Marlowe could not have intended his audience to find this admirable. Other than his academic degrees, Faustus has no backstory suggesting accomplishment, which makes his arrogance appear clownish from the play's opening. At the same time, he lacks the charm or loveable-loser quality of a Don Quixote, the ill-fated but endearingly passionate dreamer. Faustus' beef with philosophy and theology is not rooted in critical argumentation or intuitive sagacity—he merely finds educated knowledge boring and useless. He seems to live in idle decadence, discarding any wisdom he might have gleaned through higher learning in favor of black magic and sorcery—beliefs and practices that in today's parlance would be deemed "pseudoscience," the rejection of reason in favor of "magical thinking." The lure of the dark arts in *Doctor Faustus* carries no mystique of sagacious wizardry; it only suggests pride in ignorance. When Faustus bids his Divinity texts adieu to pick up the necromantic books full of "lines, circles, signs, letters and characters," he seems to delight in his own inability to understand the lexicography (1.1.51), as if his lack of understanding makes the texts' obscurity more powerful. These works of magical conjuring carry the schoolboy allure of secret codes

and hidden passageways. Faustus dreams of a power he longs to possess, but without any foundational knowledge that would merit such power. All of the knowledge he possesses—his only claim to credibility—is irrelevant, even hostile, to the practice of necromancy. Faustus' desire for unbridled power thus comes across as more delusional than intimidating or alluring:

Oh, what a world of profit and delight,
Of power, of honor, of omnipotence...
All things that move between the quiet poles
Shall be at my command (1.1.54-58)

The voice is not that of a learned scholar, but of a boy putting on a wizard's hat and staring in the mirror. In the words of venerated literary critic Cleanth Brooks, Faustus is "naive and jejune" (236), eager to don the mantle of the dark magician though he is woefully ill-equipped to handle it. He is the great ancestor to Mickey Mouse. Even his use of Latin, which his education would purport him to have mastered, is bungled, demonstrating a "puzzling textual incompetence" (Scott 13).

The chorus' prologue and the opening scene establish a dramatic irony that sustains a steady undercurrent for the remainder of the play. The audience, already aware of the fated outcome, is unable to revel in Faustus' acquired powers. The excitement Faustus shows upon attaining power becomes at best laughable, at worst pitiful. Marlowe seems inclined toward the former, though his contemporaries accused him of lacking a sense of humor (Sofer 290). Faustus' humiliation rises exponentially with each act. When this humiliation mingles with Marlowe's use of spectacle, the resulting laughter ensues from the darker side of parody: an appeal to *schadenfreude*. The audience laughs by reveling in the protagonist's idiocy. The would-be hero becomes the unwitting fool. But unlike the Shakespearean fool, he is not in on the joke. He *is* the joke. This is the theater of ridicule.

What makes Faustus most compelling as a character is his self-questioning and deliberation, a precursor to modern interiority, and this quality comes out in his soliloquies. Faustus speaks *of* himself in third person and speaks *to* himself in second person. Through this self-dialogue, we witness him wrestling with his lack of faith and resolve. But because the play is supremely ironic—indeed parodic—his faith is not devoted to God, but to the devil. The soliloquy allows the audience to overhear him giving himself a pep talk: "Despair in God and trust in Beelzebub / Now go not backward; no, Faustus, be resolute. / Why waverest thou?" (2.1.5-7). His speech displays interiority, but with a knowing smirk on Marlowe's part. The soliloquy allows for self-dialogue, but without a "to be or not to be" degree of internal torment, because the play is not a genuine tragedy, and the protagonist is in no way heroic. Nevertheless, Marlowe's

dramatic attention to self-questioning does set the stage for the more probing interiority of his Elizabethan successors. It allows Faustus to become a round character, testing his resolve and fighting against his own weakness, albeit with flipped allegiances. As an inversion of the morality play, he does not seek the courage to trust God, but to trust Satan. Reframing the context of his protagonist's plea to maintain faith, Marlowe makes Faustus' interior monologue ridiculous, showcasing the human potential for cognitive dissonance at its most egregious.

However novel, Faustus' confused pathos may reflect a climate of Elizabethan anti-intellectualism. Marlowe's Cambridge education acquainted him with higher learning as the stuffy province of Church scholastics. Mikaela Von Kursell has recently discussed this factor in "Faustus as Dunce," in which she takes a cue from the moment Wagner refers to Valdes and Cornelius as "dunces" (1.2.15-16). Von Kursell traces the roots of the word "dunce" to its origins in the term "Duns-man"—a term used in the late Renaissance to refer to a follower of scholastic theologian and Franciscan friar John Duns Scotus. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "dunce" was originally "a descriptive term for a schoolman," a "dull pedant," or "one whose study of books has left him dull and stupid" (303). The term as used by the character Wagner, Von Kursell points out, "could just as easily be applied to Faustus, who was a product and purveyor of the same scholastic educational system" (302).

As dunce-worthy dabblings in magic, the conjuring spells contain no substance. Genevieve Guenther argues that Mephistopheles, the anti-mentor, dismisses "the notion that magical signs have any spiritual efficacy" (276). "Magical language," Guenther maintains, "works performatively in the spiritual realm only by its accidental as opposed to essential qualities" (276). Katherine Walker agrees, pointing out that "Demonic knowledge is all show and no substance" in *Faustus*. Mephistopheles' knowledge, in this context, is merely "theatrical" (406). As a theatrical figure, a holdover from the Vice of the morality play, Mephistopheles acts as a trickster, playfully letting the audience in on his shenanigans at Faustus' expense. "Satan's forms of knowing are a mere pantomime of divine providence," argues Walker. They are "a parody that hinges on the calculation of earthly probabilities from visible cues and the manipulation of fallible human passions" (412). Mephistopheles thus uses the impression of divine providence as a playbook for manipulating Faustus' desires. Just after Faustus signs the blood contract, Mephistopheles makes the aside, "I'll fetch him something to delight his mind" (2.1.81). He then exits the stage—arousing the audience's eager interest—only to promptly return with a troupe of dancing devils and garish wizard apparel for Faustus, inviting the audience to revel in his diabolical mischief at Faustus' expense. The entire scenario echoes the pageantry

of the Medieval mystery play, but with a newfound irony. One could still imagine Mephistopheles springing up through a trap door at centerstage, a stock trope of the mystery play.

Given that *Faustus* functions as a parody, the clown subplot serves a different purpose from that of most tragedies. Rather than providing comic relief from intense drama, it simply mirrors and exaggerates the absurdity of the primary plot. This further refutes any implication that Faustus may possess truly sinister powers. Walker notes that in the governing logic of the play, the clowns possess as much magical agency as Faustus does, having "ready access to demonic knowledge" (406). "They are just as at home with learning from the devil as Faustus is" (408). His knowledge "is continually parodied by the clowns' own debased forms of understanding, and their interactions with demons suggest that what is ultimately mocked in the play is the very pretension of desiring to learn the unknowable" (406). As Walker suggests, the clowns have not been afforded the privilege of Faustus' scholastic education, yet they have just as much capacity to engage in necromancy. Faustus' venture into magical narcissism is wholly divorced from any scholastic knowledge he may have hitherto possessed. Though educated as a scholar, his adoption of pseudoscience is a voluntary choice, an embrace of ignorance despite his extensive training in the fine art of rational thought.

In Marlowe's compositional process, the play's parodic element may have arrived by accident. The plot suffers from predictability, which may have fueled Marlowe's reliance on comedic tropes and smoke-and-mirrors spectacle. Once Faustus has struck the deal with the devil, the action essentially consists of a series of comic episodes. "Very early in the play," Brooks writes, "the learned doctor makes his decision to sell his soul to the devil, and after that, there seems little to do except to fill in the time before the mortgage falls due" (229). The comic episodes of the primary plot, in their increasingly whimsical absurdity, come to mirror the free-floating jejunity of the comic subplot. As a foolish protagonist, Faustus "cannot find anything to do really worthy of the supernatural powers that he has come to possess" (232). There is a haphazardness to the unfolding of the action. Both Faustus and Mephistopheles act on impulse, determining their courses of action through trial and error (Walker 425). "By the middle of the play," Sofer notes, as the characters have been swiftly transported to Rome, "Faustus' thirst for absolute power and knowledge of the occult mysteries has dwindled into magical tourism" (299). Events traverse space and time at slapdash speed, as if Marlowe himself is flexing authorial conjuring tricks. The laws of dramatic cohesion no longer apply. For Sofer, Marlowe is simply "devising theatrical entertainments to please moneyed patrons with a short attention span" (299).

While Sofer's deduction may sound cynical, there is undeniably a comic, proto-vaudevillian spirit in the interplay between Faustus and Mephistopheles. From Act 2 through Act 4, to a contemporary reader, the pair might as well be a comic duo at a resort in the Catskills. When Faustus asks Mephistopheles to "fetch me a wife," as if he were requesting a stiff drink, Mephistopheles leaves and comes back "with a Devil dressed like a woman," accompanied by fireworks. We can imagine the delight of the audience when Mephistopheles subsequently asks, "Tell me, Faustus, how dost thou like thy wife?" It comes across as the punch line to a riotous joke. Maintaining the comic tempo, Faustus retorts, "A plague on her for a hot whore!" (2.1.141-145). This is not the kind of exchange one associates with tragedy—much less a tragedy in which Satan damns a man to hell for eternity.

If there remains any question as to whether Marlowe aims to parody the medieval allegory, he makes it plain in the parade of the seven deadly sins in Act 2 Scene 3. Here Lucifer brings forth each allegorical sin figure as if hosting a beauty pageant at a state fair. Faustus stands dumbfounded, needing to ask each what each figure represents in order of their appearance. Their description is tavern-hall comical. Covetousness, "begotten of an old churl and an old leather bag" (2.3.115-116), turns the stage over to Envy, born "of a chimney-sweeper and an oyster-wife" (2.3.127-128). Gluttony—aptly the last in line in a play with a steady food and appetite motif—is descended from an ancestor described as "a gammon of bacon" (2.3.139). Given that the allegory directly parodies the playbook of the Medieval morality play, Marlowe is making an appeal to cultural fatigue. The allegory becomes a vestige of Catholic entertainment. The audience guffaws in delight while Faustus, the dupe, remains enthusiastic:

Lucifer Now, Faustus, how dost thou like this?

Faustus O, this feeds my soul! (2.3.161-162)

The notion that this pageant of monstrosities enriches the soul sounds patently ridiculous, underscoring Faustus' lack of depth and mocking the morality plays in the same breath. Faustus is being "fed" on numerous levels. Lucifer subsequently reassures him that hell is "all manner of delight," to which Faustus replies, "O, might I see hell and return again, how happy were I then!" (2.3.162-164). Faustus' credulity would sound amusingly cringeworthy if it were not so indicative of his oncoming damnation, his painful inability to grasp that he is not ever going to "return again." The dramatic irony becomes downright menacing. Lucifer then states, quite literally, "I will send for thee at midnight" (2.3.165). Faustus, seemingly oblivious, cannot sense the implications, proclaiming, "Great thanks, mighty Lucifer!" (2.3.168). Lucifer's reminder solely serves the audience, because Marlowe must keep Faustus lighthearted enough for the

episodic gags to continue, and the pace quickens as the episodes become more absurdly fantastical. When Faustus snatches the Pope's meat in Act 3 Scene 1, the Elizabethan audience is able laugh at the Pope's expense, but they are ultimately laughing at Faustus.

Marlowe challenges the audience's degree of delight in witnessing an innocent suffer, as we see in the episode with the horse-courser. The moment the courser yanks off Faustus' leg would seem to be horrifying, but we have entered the realm of black comedy (or proto-black comedy), where slapstick turns grotesque. Any notion that Faustus' amputation might appear melodramatic is undermined by his mewlish response, "O my leg, my leg! Help, Mephistopheles! Call the officers. My leg, my leg!" (4.1.170-171). Such repetition plays to comic effect. Faustus' request that Mephistopheles "call the officers"—as if the damned man had any recourse to legal justice—renders the plea painfully pathetic. And still the episodic comedy continues. Faustus, master of conjuring, conjures up no less than *grapes* for the Duchess of Vanholt. The food motif returns in all its ironic inanity while the scene further highlights Faustus' lack of finesse with any love interest. The ultimate source of his disaffection, in the beginning, was loneliness; here the slap of reality crescendos just prior to his eternal damnation. The irony peaks as the plot peaks, when our romantically-challenged hero meets Helen of Troy—by legend the most beautiful woman ever known to humanity—and after meekly requesting a kiss, proclaims, "Her lips suck forth my soul" (5.1.93). The utterance is at once comically awkward and harrowingly ominous, as the audience is aware that his soul is about to be literally "sucked forth." Helen is mute throughout the scene. Although he kisses her twice, she disappears as unceremoniously as she first appeared—as a flimsy, voiceless apparition.

In a traditional morality play, the opportunity would come in the denouement for the lapsed pilgrim to repent and find atonement. But this is the parody of a morality play. Faustus is not an upstanding pilgrim, or a pilgrim at all, but a passive dabbler without any religious conviction. "Rather than turn to God for forgiveness," Vinter notes, he begs to be spared in spineless pleas, "a pattern of parodic variation on established discourses" (263). These are performative speech acts, not any kind of repentance (Sofer 290). Von Kursell writes, "by the end of the play...he is the naughty schoolboy, set on display for public disgrace" (304). I would argue that he plays this role throughout the entire play. His sins are not sins of action, but of being. He is not evil; he is simply hollow to the core. This character speaks to the present age, in the shadow of modernism and its disenchantments. As Brooks argues, "the confusions and contradictions in Faustus' quest for knowledge make Faustus appear a more human figure and even a more modern figure" (232). Lacking a stable identity, he becomes vain, malleable, and easily

manipulated. Faustus is a new kind of antihero on the world stage, a figure now familiar: the manchild in isolation, yearning for the limelight, functionally powerless yet longing for absolute power.

The plight of the solitary intellectual in a state of *ennui*, seeking godlike power to keep from facing his own existential impotence, may be Marlowe's most prescient contribution to the history of dramatic characterization. "Whether he is a clown or a doctor," writes Walker, "he is always an illusion." Such an ambiguity, wherein the distinction between appearance and reality allows for an infinite gallery of appearances, renders life "akin to the theater itself" (406). Marlowe's Faustus, despite his literary legacy, is not resolute enough to seem dangerous, sinister, or Byronically romantic. Perhaps the greatest irony, ultimately, is that Marlowe's play became the most influential application of the Faust myth in all of literature, the root source of Goethe's *Faust*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, and countless other cautionary tales of grand ambition leading to total damnation or, in so many instances, ridiculous turns of fate.

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