

Moving Forward, Falling Back, or Staying Put: An Examination of Change and Transformation in Early Modern Drama

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Abstract

*The Early Modern era in England was a time of great change and upheaval socially, politically, and spiritually. Therefore it is no surprise that cultural authorities and structures of power had a vested interest in urging the population to abide by the traditional roles assigned to them at birth via sex, class, and religion. Three plays of the period respectively demonstrate the necessity of maintaining the status quo and the degradation and ultimate cost of rebellious self-determination. In Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, all of the characters come to their requisite and anticipated ends, reinforcing the current establishment as it stood. Then, though the *Everyman* title figure does change dynamically along his journey, he changes along the path laid out for him by God without challenging the structures of authority over him or their right to judge and punish him. Finally Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and its journey of degeneration illustrate all the worst consequences for when a man tries to overreach his given role and its expectations. Herein representations of dramatic characters from the stock to the progressive to the regressive and degenerative were manipulated to support the dominance of cultural institutions. Each of these plays addresses the notion of transformation, what it should be and should not be, in accordance with the Early Modern British authorities.*

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In many ways, Early Modern society depended on established traditions and hierarchies, rigid social classes, implacable gender roles, four distinct estates, and apparently inviolate religious institutions to ensure that civilization as they knew it functioned. This conformity to a predetermined role is represented in the stock characters and classical scenarios of *The Spanish Tragedy*, Thomas Kyd's 1580s rendition of the Senecan tragic rhetorical formula. As an artist, and more as the roommate to outspoken fellow artist Christopher Marlowe, Kyd was no stranger to the consequences attending nonconformity with the governing structures of power. When the authorities came to arrest Marlowe and did not find him, they detained Kyd instead ("The Life of Thomas Kyd"). At the hands of the notorious Star Chamber, Kyd was subjected to lethal torture. His personal experience was representative of the severe prosecution suffered by seditious and heretical sentiments during his time period. Contemporary artists, outside of even Kyd and Marlowe, were ominously aware that "[t]he punishments for writers whose works were felt to be seditious or offensive could be extreme, including imprisonment, torture and mutilation" (Larque). Recognizing these and like risks, producers and theatrical companies took no chances. Every play manuscript was given over for careful inspection, and likely censorship, by the Revels Office. At a time when all productions had to obtain licensing from Queen Elizabeth's Master of the Revels, Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* did nothing to cause controversy with his plot, characters, or the ending anticipated for a revenge play.

Kyd's play begins in a classical style. The audience is introduced to a warrior king who has recently been killed in battle on his way to the classical afterlife to meet with the king and queen gods of the underworld:

In keeping on my way to Pluto's court
Through dreadful shades of ever-glooming night,
I saw more sights than thousand tongues can tell,

Or pens can write, or mortal hearts can think. (I.i.55-58)

In the voice of the deceased knight, Kyd gives a rich narrative journey to the mythic Roman afterlife. Upon encountering the King and Queen of the dead, the knight presents his passport and makes his obeisance. The very courtliness of the scene and how it is played out displays respect for hierarchy, form, and ceremony. As the story progresses, the dead warrior is joined by the spirit of Revenge and the duo act as chorus to all of the action that takes place (Erne 102). By beginning his play in the unchanging environ of the afterlife, Kyd informs the audience that he is not planning to challenge the powers and structures which govern death or life and the land of the living. Kyd's still-living characters demonstrate the traits expected of their respective social classes: kings and princes of Spain and Portugal behave royally; nobility like Horatio behave nobly; and servants like Pedringano are greedy and manipulative, behavior considered befitting to their status in the lower class.

Even characters like spirit figures and women, who typically exist outside of traditional constructs, function for Kyd in ways that maintain a classical status quo of Senecan stock characters. The Revenge character's narration on the sidelines structures and directs the means by which the play maintains Senecan norms. Even the witty heroine, Bel-imperia, who does not conform to the standards of a conventional virginal love-interest, demonstrably enacts her role as the "female confidante" to the revenger, Hieronimo ("Thomas Kyd"). From the beginning of the plot to the bloody-end, the whole of Kyd's tragedy is obviously adapted from Seneca's revenge construction. There are no surprises. Kyd intensifies audience frustration by drawing out the story and adding a subplot about counterfeit and accusation in the court of Portugal but still reaches the expected climax without deviating from tradition or in any way challenging the Elizabethan status quo. Indeed, Kyd's revenge plot merely illustrates the negative consequences of deposing established cultural authorities—in this case, the murdered warrior king.

An apparent lesson from classically conformed texts without any discernible plot or character transformation like Kyd's tragedy seems to be that people ought to remain as they are and where they are. Alternately, plays illustrating transformation might likewise be consciously didactic, intended to educate the audience regarding what is expected by the institutions of power. Performances that instruct while they entertain were a way to bring the masses into compliance with the dominant ideology of "how the world should be." From the openly acknowledged role of censorship, even a casual observer could see that "the State was clearly obsessed with the power of theatre, thinking it to be a major informer of public opinion, much like television and newspaper chiefs tell us their media are today" (Love). Nowhere was this instructional function more evident than in the morality interludes that came out of the liturgical-drama and Cycle play traditions in the sixteenth century. Though there is still no known author, *Everyman* was one of the most well-known didactic plays that illustrated the positive transformation from temporal to spiritual desired by the Catholic (meaning *universal*—during this period) church. This allegorical drama was used to teach moral lessons in accordance with church doctrine; however, unlike its predecessors, the Cycle plays, this work did not take its subject matter directly from the

scriptures. Unlike other texts of its kind, *Everyman* employed no vice-figures and allowed no comical asides or gimmicks to distract from the moral message.

At the start of the play, God sends Death as a messenger to tell the representative of universal humanity, Everyman, that his time has come and he must prepare for his life to end. This opening sets up popular cultural ideas of *carpe diem* and the obsession with *Ars Moriendi* or ‘the art of dying’ as the title character must wrestle with his own mortality—and thereby come to terms with his morality or lack thereof (Spinrad 79). Everyman’s initial reaction shows his soul’s condition in that he is not ready; he is worldly, he tries to bribe Death to go away, and he even begs and pleads for a reprieve (*Everyman* 119-124, 131-139). His weakness and how he clings to life create sympathy with the audience watching as he bargains with Death. Obviously, as a messenger of God, Death cannot relent, so Everyman *must inevitably* take his journey and confront his misplaced values and personal demons. Transformation occurs for Everyman as each of his values for friends, for family, for riches is stripped away as ineffectual (Knoell 7). The man who proudly resisted his Death is now become humble before it, submitting to his journey, and coming to realize how much he needs to change along the way in order to have a positive outcome when he reaches the Throne of Judgment.

His dynamic (i.e. changing) character is initially broken down with the loss of those things he formerly held dear and then built up with the addition of new virtues: Knowledge, Priesthood, Communion, Strength, Beauty, the Five Senses, and a revitalized and invigorated Good Deeds. Each of these comes to help and then leaves as he completes the soul journey into a peaceful death where the audience is sure that this transformed Everyman will be well-received by God at His Throne of Judgment. As if the transformation and intended message of the play were not obvious enough in and of themselves, the playwright finishes the performance with a lecture from the Doctor of Divinity about the lesson the audience should take from the play (*Everyman* 902-921). So Everyman’s transformation occurs along prescribed lines. In *Everyman* the themes of spiritual regeneration and transformation are used to a specifically didactic purpose before Martin Luther and his Ninety-five Theses (1517) had the chance to divide the religious institution with the Protestant Reformation (Pavao). The play ultimately reinforces the status quo by reifying the values of the dominant culture, in this case the one all-powerful Church.

Illustrating a spiritual transformation in the exact opposite direction, away from heaven and cultural authority altogether, Christopher Marlowe’s tragedy of corruption of faith by intellect, *Doctor Faustus*, shows the title character falling from an assumed practice of Christianity into willful self-determination, rebellion, and ultimate damnation. Written during the same period of dramatic censorship and enforced conformity that Kyd suffered under, Marlowe’s work engaged with spiritual transformation in a man who embodied the deadliest sins—hubris and pride – and overreached the bounds of humanity in order to satisfy his curiosity. As Connors explains: “[a]s the story progresses, Faustus’ quickly approaching fate exposes the true message of the story: to surrender to curiosity about forbidden knowledge has irrevocable repercussions [. . .]. His curiosity has destroyed his life, as well as his reputa-

tion.” Similar to how the dead warrior and the spirit of Revenge act as narrators and gave structure to Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*, Marlowe employs a chorus between scenes to fill in detail not presented on stage and offer commentary on the events as they play out:

Of riper years to Wittenberg [Faustus] went,
Whereas his kinsmen chiefly brought him up.
So soon he profits in divinity,
The fruitful plot of scholarism graced,
That shortly he was graced with doctor’s name,

Excelling all whose sweet delight disputes
In heavenly matters of theology;
Till, swoll’n with cunning of a self-conceit,
His waxen wings did mount above his reach,
And, melting, heavens did conspire his overthrow. (Marlowe Prologue.13-22)

Before Faustus ever enters the stage the chorus warns the audience what will happen and explains the lesson that they should learn from what they are about to see.

At the beginning of the play, Doctor Faustus is an admirable character. He has achieved his degree and is feeling confident in his learning. Consequently, he does what many university students in the centuries since have done—he contemplates what he should do with all the knowledge that he has gained. It is here where his degeneration begins. Witnessed by the audience, Faustus successively rejects the noble professions of medicine, law, and the church. His rejection of these options is not necessarily a negative issue; but his reasoning shows his selfish conceit and arrogant pride:

The character of Faustus is reasoning and very aware of the moral (or immoral) status of what he is undertaking. His opening speech is devoted to working out logically why he is willing to sacrifice both the road to honest knowledge and his soul in favor of more power . . . He exhibits, in his search for power, anything but animal passion; he indeed exhibits a chilling logic as he talks himself out of the possible delights of heaven. (Larson)

As he reasons aloud about his reasons, he reveals selfishness in rejecting service professions and curiosity rejecting what he considers would be unchallenging professions. As he shows contempt for exercising his wisdom for humanity and in the name of God he creates suspicion in the audience about his wisdom, his humanity and his religion. In order to serve his own gains and his conscience-killing curiosity about the world, Faustus opts to devote himself to magical metaphysics.

While his opening speech showed the audience an open-minded, intelligent, and thoughtful man taking stock of himself and his opportunities, every scene following continues the pattern of degradation. Faustus stubbornly refuses to benefit from the counsel of concerned friends, the eloquent offers from the Good Angel, and the whisperings of his own conscience. All of his nobler reasoning seems to have deserted him. When he chooses to embark on the study of magic and necromantic books, he says that in the twenty-four

years he is allotted, he will do great deeds for his city and the world. Instead, as the acts, and subsequently the years, pass by, all that Faustus has done with his power is to use it up on displays, frivolities, and indulgences. He has interviewed the Seven Deadly Sins, has gone on a chariot ride around the world, has mocked the Pope in Rome, and has conjured spirits for the enjoyment of his guests and the fulfillment of his own sexual lusts. In his most trivial demonstrations, he has grapes fetched in winter for a pregnant duchess, tricks a horse dealer with some hay and a fake leg, and puts horns on the head of a knight who dares to oppose him. In this way the message about negative transformation and its impending consequences is more subtly implied:

Marlowe hides the deep tragedy of Faustus' degeneration and damnation behind the farce, pomp, and excitement of Faustus' life after the deal is signed Faustus has traded his soul for the power to understand the universe and make the world a better place, yet all he received was twenty-four years of superficial pomp and farce; his life and soul were wasted. (Casten)

None of the things he elects to do with his power has any lasting benefit or impact anyone except for Faustus himself. It appears to the audience that he sold his noble ambition when he sold his soul and any remnants that might have remained have been sucked out during his intercourse with the succubae in the form of Helen of Troy (Marlowe V.i.90-109). From beginning to end, Faustus is not the same man, and his transformation takes him down the road of degradation both spiritually and interpersonally.

As those claiming responsibility for maintaining order in their society, the Early Modern British authors crafted texts that mirror the cultural values of the time, especially the values promoted by the church and state. Both church and government employed indoctrination, the powerful combination of fear and wonder as well as the threat and application of brute force to uphold the status quo that structured their society. It is no surprise that these institutions took steps to harness the power of theatre and the popular imagination to influence the population. Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* upholds the need for institutions that arrest change. *Everyman* promotes change but only in conformity with dominant structures of power. Each of these texts uses characters to illustrate with promises of heaven or threats of hell the need for all to stay as it was within established lines. Furthermore, Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* demonstrates that revolt against the norm leads to radical degeneration. With these vibrant presentations depicting the consequences of nonconformity, these authors' creations reflect the dominant social, religious, and cultural values of the times, which emphasizes to the susceptible population that everyman had his place and it was best that he maintain it.

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