THOMAS HEALY

Doctor Faustus

Enter with Devils, giving crowns and rich apparel to Faustus, and dance and then depart.

Faustus: Speak, Mephistopheles. What means this show?
Mephistopheles: Nothing, Faustus, but to delight thy mind withal
And to show thee what magic can perform.

(DF 2.1.83–5)

From the mid-eighteenth century when interest in Doctor Faustus revived, critical attention on the play has largely focused on what may be termed its metaphysical concerns. Is Marlowe challenging conventional Christian perspectives on hell and heaven, or does his play ultimately conform with them? Is Faustus a tragic hero or a misguided sinner? Though scholarship on Doctor Faustus has increasingly complicated issues surrounding the origin and status of the play’s two main versions, ideas of what may be termed high seriousness have dominated debate about its content. For both readers of a text and spectators at performances, attention is commonly concentrated on those scenes that engage most thoroughly with a tragic dimension. The scenes of farce attract much less attention. But what type of play engaged early spectators? How might Doctor Faustus have been performed in the theatres of Elizabethan England? This chapter seeks to re-examine the modern preoccupation with Faustus as metaphysical tragedy by thinking about it in the cultural milieu from which it first arose. Interestingly, many of the issues raised by the place of the stage in early modern London still seem to resonate strangely within current critical debates about Doctor Faustus.

At the start of the Reformation in England, the new Protestants celebrated players along with printers and preachers as crucial conduits through which the reform movement could spread its ideas. By the 1580s, though, some of the more strident elements within the now dominant Protestant Church of England orchestrated a series of pamphlet attacks on the London theatres as sinful places that directly conflicted with the efforts of the godly to win souls to religion. For the city’s civic and religious authorities, the theatres were now ‘a great offence from the church of God and hindrance to his gospel’. But the court would have none of it; the theatres remained open. Nor did
such attacks appear to affect the conduct of thousands of Londoners who regularly flocked to Southwark on the south bank of the Thames to witness performances in the new commercially run theatres being built there. Indeed, by helping to make theatrical distractions seem a questionable activity, such attacks may have helped to heighten the playhouses’ attractions.4

For the godly, the new commercial theatres of the 1580s had chosen entertainment over edification; they had become places disorderly and unstable. Ideologically, they now exemplified Calvin’s fears about ‘theatres of the world’ where humanity might be stunned, dazzled, and blinded by the world’s allurements that falsely promised grace and sweetness.5 Practically, the playhouse appeared to be in direct competition with the pulpit, with many Londoners choosing the pleasures of the players over the instruction of the preachers. But, for some at least, the stakes were higher than what might simply appear to be a ‘ratings war’ between Church and playhouse vying for audience share. The Corporation of London argued: ‘to play in plague time is to increase the plague by infection; to play out of plague time is to draw the plague by offendings of God, upon occasion of such plays’.6 The city’s ostensible moral health might be directly equated with its physical and commercial health.

Significantly, a number of these contemporary attacks on plays distinguish the drama in textual form from it in performance. While allowing a didactic appropriateness in reading certain plays, when drama was performed it became part of a satanic opposition to the Word of God. Even when a performance might seem to be edifying for its spectators, it was merely the devil’s attempt, ‘perceiving his comedies begin to stink’, to sweeten its moral corruption.7 Countering this, others defended the drama by arguing that theatrical spectacle was effective in helping to restore moral order, claiming instances when those witnessing performances of murders found themselves drawn to confess similar crimes.8 Dramatic spectacle, therefore, could also be perceived as an effective vehicle to root out sin and help preserve the godly English. Despite vocal Puritan criticism, English Protestantism never abandons its interest in the drama as an instrument for reform.9

Was Doctor Faustus originally designed to challenge or subvert such criticisms directed against the stage by deliberately performing the opposite of a traditional morality play, one in which the norms that govern moral certainties about good and evil are displaced and ridiculed?10 Conversely, was it attempting to marry a dramatic morality tradition inherited from the early reformed Church with the new demands for spectacle and variety in the popular commercial theatres: seeking to prove that entertainment and edification could be successfully conjoined? The difficulties inherent in approaching
such questions may be exemplified by considering Doctor Faustus’s opening and closing choruses (effectively the same in both the play’s main existing versions). The play opens:

Not marching now in fields of Trasimene
Where Mars did mate the Carthaginians,
Nor sporting in the dalliance of love
In courts of kings where state is overturned,
Nor in the pomp of proud audacious deeds,
Intends our muse to daunt his heavenly verse.
Only this, gentlemen: we must perform
The form of Faustus’ fortunes good or bad.

*(DF Prologue 1–7)*

This seems to propose that the play will meet the expectations of the popular theatre. While indicating that it will not be about famous wars or sex and revenge scandals, it is raising expectations about performing something that will conform to these types of plays (Marlowe still intends to ‘daunt his heavenly verse’). There is ambiguity of course; Marlowe may be being ironically literal, indicating that Doctor Faustus is genuinely not going to be similar to these other types of plays. However, though this chorus proceeds to introduce a standard morality *exemplum*, comparing Faustus with Icarus who flew too close to the sun and consequently drowned, Marlowe employs a language of abundance that promises audience gratification in the excess of what we are about to see performed rather than suggesting controlled moral exposition:

For, falling to a devilish exercise,
And glutted more with learning’s golden gifts,
He surfeits upon cursed necromancy;
Nothing so sweet as magic is to him,
Which he prefers before his chiepest bliss.

*(DF Prologue 24–8)*

In apparent contrast, at the play’s conclusion the final chorus seems to be attempting to extract a more conventional morality summary of its events. What we have beheld is for the audience’s edification:

Faustus is gone. Regard his hellish fall,
Whose fiendful fortune may exhort the wise
Only to wonder at unlawful things,
Whose deepness doth entice such forward wits
To practise more than heavenly power permits.

*(DF Epilogue 4–8)*
The difficulty is that what an audience has witnessed does not generally correspond with conventional morality instruction. Faustus’s rhetorically charged final speech, for instance, is a wonderful piece of theatre that builds to a crescendo of fear and dramatic expectation; it does not provide a sober assessment of his mistaken actions and a reasoned recantation of a mis-spent life. Richard Proudfoot recently describes how, having initially read this speech in a book of verse, he was keen to see its potential released in performance. But several excellent productions later he is still waiting: what lingers for him is the visual images at the end.

In fact, this speech’s dramatic function seems precisely to promote the final spectacle. With increasing energy and pace it helps develop audience suspense around what is going to happen at its conclusion. It collects a series of fragmentary utterances, some or all of which may have religious and philosophical intelligibility for the spectators, but expressed through a rhetoric that is designed to hurry momentum in delivery. In performance, audiences principally respond to the dramatic atmosphere the words enhance, not the speech’s intellectual propositions. Intensifying the theatrical thrill over what we are going to see, Faustus’s language promotes immediate sensation rather than reflective judgement. This helps explain why following this scene with a chorus that supposedly provides a moral summary of what we have witnessed is frequently experienced as somehow inappropriate – particularly in the earlier 1604 version of the play, which advances immediately from this scene to the Epilogue.

This last chorus, too, might easily be argued as further provoking its listeners to illicit desires rather than cautioning them through moral orthodoxy. A proper godly summary would try to emphasize that Faustus’s necromancy was illusionary, a false prop through which Satan catches souls. Here, though, the chorus alluringly proposes that it possesses real force: it does enable a ‘practise’ of more than is permitted by heaven. We are invited to ‘wonder at unlawful things’ that have a deepness that ‘doth entice’, not to exercise reason to dismiss Faustus’s choices. Magic continues to be a source of awe; its depths may be sinister but they continue to tantalize. Claiming to warn the curious, the chorus can easily be imagined as tempting a further pursuit of the very things it counsels against.

Thus, merely examining the choric channels that are ostensibly helping to direct audience understanding, we find that Marlowe employs a language that apparently allows him both moral edification and unconstrained spectacle. We might revel in entertainment with at least a vague sense that the play is fundamentally propounding a conventional morality. Conversely, we may sense that Doctor Faustus remains dramatically confused because it is neither instruction nor amusing diversion. Rather than successfully marrying
the apparent polarities of education and entertainment, Marlowe’s language compromises the demands of both, providing no secure understanding of what the play is attempting to achieve.

The performance of the material these choruses frame will, of course, determine our understanding of their accuracy in interpreting the action. But with *Doctor Faustus* what should be played between them remains a vexed question for students of Marlowe and directs us to the difficult issue of text and performance during the Renaissance. What we debate *Doctor Faustus* is about is largely predicated on an inscribed textual document, the play we read. Marlowe, though, almost certainly conceived *Faustus* for theatrical performance. It is highly unlikely that he – and/or others who worked on the play – would have imagined readers studying a text of it. Among current readers carefully analysing its language, pursuing its allusions and contextualizing its philosophical and theological reflections, Faustus’s final speech, for instance, can appear to be employing its potent poetic images in the interests of emphasizing their content, a process which helps promote critical debate about the ideas expressed. But in performance it is the emotive effects these images confer that take precedence, helping to build dramatic suspense. Textual stability allows moral pedagogy or other critical models about content to dominate considerations of what a play is intellectually trying to express; performance complicates such issues.

It was about midpoint during the first phase of commercial theatre in London (the period c. 1580 to c. 1640) that Ben Jonson published his 1616 *Workes*. Presenting some of his plays alongside his poems and masques in the expensive format of a folio volume with a title that conveyed high cultural esteem, Jonson unambiguously signalled his desire that his drama should be examined with the seriousness accorded other elite forms of writing. It was probably the success of Jonson’s enterprise that prompted Heminge and Condell to edit a folio of Shakespeare’s plays in 1623: *Mr William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories & Tragedies. Published according to the true Originall Copies*.

From these powerful instances, a subsequent editorial practice developed that envisages that the period’s dramatists wrote their plays with a sense of them as literary texts, even though the initial printed production of their drama was haphazard in cheap octavo or quarto editions over which they had no control and often seemingly no interest. As the Shakespeare First Folio title proposes, the original copy of the author’s play-text might be salvaged and reconstructed, indicating that (more or less) contemporaries of Shakespeare, who died in 1616, wanted to read his drama as he wrote it. Subsequent editorial practice with all Renaissance drama has largely operated to support a view of authorial recovery: emending corruption and returning us as far
as possible towards a text that reflects what emerged from the dramatist’s hand. It is true that current editors realize that plays of the period often exist in different versions and, thus, that a quest for such an authentic text is never going to be wholly possible; yet the understandable editorial imperative to establish the ‘best possible’ text is still firmly founded on a premise about an ‘authorial’ text. While it is the case that numerous seventeenth-century playwrights appear to have taken care to preserve an authorial copy of their plays with a view to their dramas having some life on the page as well as the stage, this does not appear the case in the 1580s and early 1590s when *Doctor Faustus* was first performed.

*Doctor Faustus* was probably originally produced in 1589 by the Lord Admiral’s Company. It was revived by the same company under the owner of the Rose theatre, Philip Henslowe, between 1594 and early 1597 when at least twenty-four performances were given. It was again revived late in 1597 and there are indications of other performances during this period. In early 1601, Thomas Bushell entered an edition called ‘the plaie of Doctor ffauستus’ for publication, but, if printed, no copy has survived. In late 1602, Henslowe paid William Birde and Samuel Rowley four pounds for ‘ther adicyones in doctor fostes’. In 1604 a quarto called *The Tragicall History of D. Faustus* was issued for Bushell, indicating the play was ‘Written by Ch.Marl.’. In 1616, John Wright, who had purchased the copyright, published a new edition adding 676 lines to the earlier text, dropping 36, and making numerous minor changes. Yet another version appeared in 1663. It has been notably influenced by *The Jew of Malta* and is generally agreed to have no early authority. A further version again was published in 1697 (acted about a decade earlier) called *The Life and Death of Doctor Faustus, made into a farce, by Mr Mountford etc*. Thus, *Doctor Faustus* continued to attract ‘adicyones’ for about a century after its first publication. But if Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* is to be recognized in all these editions as a single play, it is only in the sense of it being a compendium of theatrical possibilities: these seventeenth-century texts illustrate how traditions of performance from the inception of the commercial theatres show no reverence for an author’s original vision.

One of the best recent scholarly editions of *Doctor Faustus*, by Bevington and Rasmussen, prints two different versions of it (the 1604 ‘A’ text and the 1616 ‘B’ text) and proposes the author as ‘Christopher Marlowe and his collaborator and revisers’. Modern editorial debate about *Doctor Faustus* has centred around which of the two early versions of the play more successfully represents Marlowe’s design. The dominant view of the mid-twentieth century was that it was the 1616 edition: most editors of this period follow W. W. Greg’s position that the earlier 1604 quarto was defective. But the prevailing recent view has been to prefer 1604. Bevington and Rasmussen
believe their editorial work has now established that the ‘A’ text was set
‘from an authorial manuscript composed of interleaved scenes written by
two dramatists’: Marlowe and a collaborating playwright (Revels edition,
p. 64). The ‘B’ text represents a revised edition.

While elaborate and cogent arguments are advanced by these editors to
claim that it is possible to see a somewhat ‘rearranged’ 1604 text as emerging
simultaneously from the pens of Marlowe and an independent collaborator,
the rationale behind these claims seems overly dependent on what the ed-
tors assume Doctor Faustus is dramatically trying to achieve. Under the
influence of two centuries of critical tradition, the dominant supposition is
that it was originally designed to accomplish the promises implicit in its ear-
liest (surviving) printed title: The Tragicall History of D. Faustus. Working
on the premise that Marlowe was seeking to emphasize the tragic, most ed-
tors and critics assume that the comic scenes were envisaged as diversions
or interludes between the more serious actions. There is, though, an overall
burlesque-like element to Doctor Faustus, and the play does not seek to sepa-
rate rigidly its moments of comic farce from its moments of high seriousness.
There is no evidence that the title Tragicall History was used before 1604. In
fact, investigating editorial principles for selecting a supposed authorial text
with virtually all the plays ascribed to Christopher Marlowe – Edward II is
the exception – we usually find that they are substantially based on conjec-
ture, often determined by later critical perspectives about what is typically
‘Marlowe’. Attribution to an author – one of the central organizational and
critical categories we operate by – is actually not a particularly useful method
for examining most plays from the Elizabethan period. Unlike Shakespeare
and Jonson, the first collected edition of Marlowe’s work dates from 1826.
It does not claim to be prepared from ‘originall copies’.

One of the most difficult questions surrounding Doctor Faustus is whether
the ‘A’ version of the play offers a demonstrably different understanding of
Faustus’s ‘history’ from the expanded ‘B’ version. Why did Henslowe pay a
substantial fee to enlarge the play? There is some evidence to suggest that the
revival of late 1597 was not financially successful. Did he want a different
type of play or merely a longer one? Was the play performed in the 1590s
the short ‘A’ text (1,485 lines) we possess, or did it exist in a now lost longer
version?15 Crude farce, tragic seriousness, and scenes that might be one or
the other (or possibly both together) are developed in the ‘B’ text. It is not
the case, as is sometimes assumed, that expanding comic high-jinks is the
only impetus to the longer 1616 text. The problem of interpretation, though,
ultimately comes back to performance. It may be that Rowley and Birde
(if it is their ‘adicyones’ in the ‘B’ text) believed that they were expanding
material that sat sympathetically with their understanding of the play in the
light of its theatre history. That is to say, the longer text compared to the shorter might help to give us some idea of how Doctor Faustus was played on the stage.

What little hearsay evidence we possess about early audiences’ responses to Doctor Faustus suggests that theatrical frisson was enjoyed. Thomas Middleton proposed that ‘the old Theatre cracked’ during a performance and ‘frighted the audience’: that is the wooden construction of the Theatre (an early playhouse in London; it burnt down in 1598) must have shifted a little and given off a cracking sound. At a performance in Exeter, an additional devil (i.e., supposedly a real one) was reported discovered on the stage, causing cast and audience to scatter; while William Prynne writing in 1635 claims there was a visible apparition of the devil on the stage of the Belsavage playhouse during a performance. Henslowe’s Diary for 1598 lists among its stage properties a ‘dragon in fostes’ which no doubt helped ‘the scary business that spectators paid for’ (Revels edition, p. 50). Seeing Doctor Faustus on the early modern stage was probably closer to the experience of a current audience going to a comic horror film than a sophisticated encounter with dramatic tragedy, though, as with some horror films, this does not mean features associated with serious drama might not also be present.

These early accounts remind us, however, that the first audiences would have accepted as unquestionably valid the premise that heaven and hell were locked in a contest for gaining souls, that the supernatural readily impinged on the natural, and that traditionally accepted views about Satan and his kingdom – and about God and his – were largely issues of fact rather than opinion. Faustus’s debating proposition to Mephistopheles that ‘I think hell’s a fable’ would have seemed either chillingly naive or comically preposterous (2.1.115–41). Mephistopheles’s response ‘Ay think so still, till experience change they mind’ would have been generally greeted as a prosaic expression of certitude. Faustus’s sophistry during the ‘hell’s a fable’ disputation is intellectually and argumentatively clever but would almost certainly have had no persuasiveness with contemporary audiences. Previously, Mephistopheles has haughtily claimed that he is always in hell because he has seen the face of God and is now eternally deprived of it (1.3.70–87). It is this divine absence that constitutes his continuous torment: a vivid illustration of the negative pride that the satanic traditionally manifests. Faustus counters to suggest that, if this is so, then he will never truly be ‘damned’ because he is content with his present circumstances: he has no memory of such an encounter. He will ‘willingly be damned’ and thus not damned in any respect but a technical one. This allows Faustus to express his own pride: ‘Learn thou of Faustus manly fortitude, / And scorn those joys thou never shall possess’ (1.3.86–7). Yet, such argumentative dextrousness is not really
the point. Witnesses to these exchanges would have no serious doubts about
hell as a dangerous place. Faustus’s confident assertion that ‘Think’st thou
that Faustus is so fond / To imagine that after this life there is any pain?’
(2.1.133–4) would not be part of a rationale shared by the spectators. It is
not simply that his logic is flawed; he is just not recognizing reality as it was
then perceived.

The expanded end-scenes of the 1616 text help emphasize that Faustus is
not some clever ‘Humanist’ or ‘Renaissance’ hero who is undermining old-
fashioned preconceptions about heaven and hell. One addition allows the
good and bad angels to present apparently ‘objective’ views of the heavenly
and hellish. The good angel announces that she is leaving Faustus and shows
him the heavenly throne he has lost: ‘O thou has lost celestial happiness, /
Pleasures unspeakable, bliss without end (5.2.105–6). After this the bad angel
shows him a very conventional hell where she gloats that Faustus ‘shall taste
the smart of all’:

Now, Faustus, let thine eyes with horror stare
Into that vast perpetual torture-house.
These are the furies tossing damned souls
On burning forks; their bodies boil in lead.
(DF ‘B’ text 5.2.115–18)

Earlier in the scene, Lucifer, Beelzebub, and Mephistopheles appear indepen-
dent of Faustus to watch his downfall and ‘how he doth demean himself’. Mephistopheles retorts:

How should he, but in desperate lunacy?
Fond worldling, how his heart-blood dries with grief;
His conscience kills it, and his labouring brain
Begets a world of idle fantasies
To overreach the devil. But in vain.
His store of pleasures must be sauced with pain.
(DF ‘B’ text 5.2.11–16)

This scene leads to Faustus’s final speech, his ‘desperate lunacy’. There is no
doubt that Faustus meets a gruesome end in the 1616 version and this text
adds a further scene (5.3) in which the scholars, having heard ‘fearful shrieks’
in the night, find Faustus’s limbs ‘all torn asunder’. The expanded text re-
inforces conventional orthodoxy: Faustus is punished; the satanic operates
in the world specifically to capture humans vain enough or short-sighted
enough to lose sight of the fundamental order that governs the universe.
There may be critical argument over whether the 1616 play questions or sup-
ports the justice of this order, but there is no doubt that it acknowledges it.
In contrast, there is a great deal more potential ambiguity in the 1604 version. Faustus’s final speech stays the same, but what frames it is less directive, making his final cry of ‘Ah, Mephistopheles’ (5.2.115) and what follows less obvious: fulfilment of terror, relief at seeing a recognized face; a conventional or unconventional damnation? Prior to this scene in both the play’s versions we have Faustus’s encounter with the old man who urges repentance and Helen who kisses him – ‘Her lips sucks forth my soul’ (5.1.94). The Christian morality of the scene is straightforward: Faustus is a victim of the sweet allurements that religion warns against. Yet, in all the productions I have seen Helen has been performed as strikingly attractive (the most beautiful was in an all-male production). Even if you agreed with the old man’s endeavours, visually, when placed beside Helen, the emotional and aesthetic sympathy was with her. Was it the same in early modern productions, or was Helen presented as an obvious devil in disguise? Regardless, employing the shorter ‘A’ text it is possible to imagine a spectacle that might leave some feeling that Faustus ‘confounds hell in Elysium’ (1.3.60) because the absolutes of what hell and heaven consist of are less clearly delineated.

In part, the less directive ‘A’ text has gained critical favour because it can be read against the grain of orthodox Christian beliefs about heaven and hell. Challenging convention, the play’s vision can be more easily related to a popular biographical view of Marlowe that celebrates his heterodoxy – was it not claimed the author had said ‘that the beginning of Religioun was only to keep men in awe’? Indeed, for some, Faustus becomes a version of a fatally overreaching Marlowe. But even without the pseudo-biographical link, the ‘A’ text seems potentially to be questioning what is now largely accepted as superstition, and for many this makes its feel like a more proto-modern play-text, not one linked to the Middle Ages.

Yet, the more likely scenario of the ‘B’ text’s additions is that they were principally conceived to expand and clarify what the companies already felt they possessed in the ‘A’ text, not to recast or censor the play (this is assuming the printed texts are close to what was performed before and after 1602 when the additions were commissioned by Henslowe – a big assumption!). There is nothing in the ‘A’ text that dramatically indicates that it needs to be performed differently from the ‘B’ version. The potential ambiguities about Faustus’s end in the ‘A’ text’s last scenes that has caught recent critical and theatrical imaginations, for instance, were probably not seen as ambiguities at all by the companies first acting it. Devils probably rushed on stage at the end, indicating that Faustus was going to be torn asunder in the ‘A’ text as in the ‘B’ version. Helping to intensify expectations about the final fiendish spectacle it was understood the ‘A’ text, too, was leading towards, the ‘B’ text additions in the last scenes were probably felt to be
dramatically sympathetic with the earlier version. On balance, it appears that the ‘B’ text helps clarify how the ‘A’ text was previously performed. It is doubtful the additions were an attempt to restrain a more dangerous ‘Marlowe’ play by redirecting it into more conventional frameworks.

One of the significant expansions in the ‘B’ version of Doctor Faustus is Faustus’s encounter with the Pope (3.1). Although this longer scene in the ‘B’ text ultimately concludes as in the ‘A’ version, in other respects it well illustrates the dilemma about establishing what either version of Doctor Faustus may be trying to accomplish overall. It suggests, too, that for the early revisers this scene’s implications were not clear. In the ‘A’ version, it opens with Faustus recounting the European cities and antiquities that he and Mephistopheles have just visited. They have arrived in Rome and are in the Pope’s chamber. Faustus proposes ‘that I do long to see the monuments / And situation of bright splendent Rome’, rhetorically employing a type of conjuring appeal designed to testify to the strength of his wish (3.1.44–9).

Despite the apparent urgency of this request, though, Mephistopheles proposes that they play some games on the Pope and attending clergy. Faustus readily agrees. What follows is a mocking of the papal court with low comic pranks (upsetting food and wine, roughing up the Pope). The clergy attempt to exorcize Faustus and Mephistopheles with the traditional bell, book, and candle but, the stage direction tells us, they: ‘beat the Friars, and fling fireworks among them, and so exeunt’. This is the sum of Faustus’s Roman holiday in the ‘A’ version. In the ‘B’ text, the scene begins the same up to Faustus’s expression of his desire to see Rome. Mephistopheles’s proposal to stay to see the Pope, though, stresses the pomp and glory of the papal pageant, making it one of the ‘splendent’ sights of Rome:

```
I know’d you see the pope
And take some part of holy Peter’s feast,
The which this day with high solemnity
This day is held through Rome and Italy
In honour of the pope’s triumphant victory.
```

What they witness is the exhibition of the captured Saxon ‘Bruno’, a rival Pope who the Holy Roman Emperor attempted to set up. Faustus and Mephistopheles contrive to free Bruno and convey him to Germany. The additions present a more emphatic Protestant context to Faustus’s actions: the papal courts declare Bruno and the Emperor ‘Lollards’ (i.e., of Protestant inclination). The Pope is presented as a largely temporal tyrant interested in his own power. The ‘B’ text, therefore, contrives to offer a different style to this scene from the ‘A’ version. Faustus’s initial desire to see the great
Doctor Faustus

sights of Rome is not immediately abandoned for farce; instead the main preoccupation is with a serious Faustus being anti-papal, pro-German, and favouring Protestantism.

In either version the scene is unique in a post-Reformation English play as the sole instance where the devil acts to chastise the Pope. During the 1580s and 1590s anti-Roman sentiment reached its greatest pitch in England (a combination of the Pope’s excommunication of Elizabeth and offer of pardon to any assassin of her – an issue raised in The Massacre at Paris – and the circumstances around the Spanish Armada, proclaimed by Philip of Spain as a holy crusade). The English Church promoted the view that Roman Catholicism had become the province of the Antichrist: Satan and the Pope were understood as virtually identical. Doctor Faustus is clearly not promoting Catholicism as a desirable or potent religion (the attempt at exorcism shows it has no power, for instance, and the Pope is thoroughly ridiculed), but it is also clearly not associating this religion with the devil. The ‘B’ version attempts to restore some of Roman Catholicism’s sinister temporal power by presenting the Church as anti-Protestant, a negative and corrupted force. It tries to deflect some of the burlesque farce that dominates the scene in the ‘A’ version by introducing more weighty issues.

In the ‘A’ version, however, this scene’s exaggerated comedy illustrates a quality present throughout the whole of Doctor Faustus – one we might term Faustus’s and Mephistopheles’s adolescent tendency. A feature that occurs regularly in Doctor Faustus is that serious issues are suspended or interrupted so that comic spectacle can occur. Some of these instances seem to parallel the more sober actions, such as the antics of Robin and Rafe; others, such as the horse-courser scenes, might be claimed as acting to confer a dramatic sympathy on a mischievous but not evil Faustus – i.e., he doesn’t turn into the depraved potentate that he initially announces he wishes to be (e.g., 1.3.105–212). But with the ‘A’ text’s Roman visit, game playing completely displaces any attempt at serious drama. The Faustus of high learning who introduces the scene is readily abandoned for the Faustus of irreverent antic and cheap spectacle. Similarly, at one of the few moments in the play when Faustus genuinely seems on the verge of repentance, Lucifer appears (2.3.70–82). Faustus assumes he is being threatened and is about to die, but Lucifer assures him he has appeared to remind Faustus of his promises and to show him some ‘pastimes’. He presents the seven deadly sins, and in response to his question about how he likes the show, Faustus replies ‘O this feeds my soul’ (2.3.157). The sins are a wonderful piece of circus-like frivolity that it is difficult to imagine any production playing as sinister let alone as weighty. Faustus’s response seems in an inappropriate register. As with his happy abandonment of either the past or present glories of Rome for
thomas healy
tomfoolery and firework throwing, this scene, too, shows Faustus ready to forsake introspection for pranks and farcical spectacle.

Are these examples principally supposed to illustrate humanity’s sinful culpability, prepared to abandon godly salvation for cheap diversions, thus confirming the play’s conformity with a morality tradition? Or is *Doctor Faustus* a good illustration of what Mikhail Bakhtin identified as the carnivalesque quality of Renaissance culture, where powerful abstract issues – such as heaven and hell – can be reduced to some form of grotesque material representations, as in the seven deadly sins, allowing them to be laughed at? As Bakhtin argues, the use of carnival de-centres fixed orders, allowing other possibilities and revealing the relativity of established authorities’ claims to know how the world is structured. There are certainly scenes in Faustus that sustain a Bakhtinian analysis, such as those with the clownish ostlers, Rafe and Robin, conjuring (2.2 and 3.2, but originally printed as one scene placed after the popish escapade). These two see the benefits of magic as free drink and sex with the maid Nan Spit. They summon Mephistopheles, an act that comically deflates the high magic of Faustus. Indeed, their nonsense incantation – they are of course illiterate – is the only conjuring within the play that appears to possess actual power. Mephistopheles claims to Faustus that he responded to his conjuring only because he could obtain Faustus’s soul, not through the magic’s inherent power (1.3.45–54). While it is likely that this claim would be mistrusted as the devil traditionally lies, the play also shows that the exorcisms of the Roman Church, too, have no effect on Faustus and Mephistopheles. Mephistopheles is incensed ‘by these villains’ charms’ that have brought him from Constantinople, and he transforms them into a dog and an ape. The ostlers, though, are delighted for they will now be able to get hold of food more easily. Mephistopheles’s punishments are experienced as rewards. The satanic quest to reduce higher beings to lower ones, here turning them to literal beasts, is ridiculed by the condition of the ostlers who imagine themselves below the level of the beasts they serve. The traditional hierarchies of heaven and hell are confronted in the debasement and consequent ridiculing of supernatural powers by these clowns who propose different conditions of life from the ones supposedly present in the more serious playing for souls.

Yet, a Bakhtinian perspective applied to the whole play loses sight of the fact that all the characters, socially elite and socially marginal, seem obsessed with showmanship, both in mounting ‘plays’ and with playing roles within them. Even Lucifer’s dismissal of Faustus’s terror before he launches his ‘production’ of the seven deadly sins seems to indicate the devil’s own
abandonment of satanic gravity because it would interfere with his comic show. The play within a play is a standard device of Renaissance drama, but there can be few instances of dramas so obsessed with constructing plays within plays as *Doctor Faustus*. And, importantly, such play-making is focused around entertainment, with characters wanting to occupy roles that excite spectacle and provide the opportunity for amusement. As Faustus’s ‘history’ develops, the principal use of his powers is to gain a reputation for his conjuring (e.g., the scenes with the Emperor, the Duke of Vanholt, and the students). In the scene with Charles V, despite Faustus’s firm instruction that he is only raising spirits that resemble Alexander and his paramour, the Emperor is completely mesmerized by Faustus’s illusion: ‘Sure these are no spirits, but the true substantial bodies of those two deceased princes’ (4.1.65–6). If Faustus is a victim of illusion, many of the play’s characters, including the Emperor, also prefer Faustus’s illusions to reality. Such a general preoccupation with artifice and fantasy compromises a specific moral warning around Faustus. The Duke of Vanholt’s pregnant wife consuming the grapes of India, or the scholars witnessing the first appearance of Helen, are not played as being at mortal risk for benefiting from Faustus’s organized performances. They celebrate his courtesy, praise and bless his ‘glorious deed’ (5.1.32–3). Faustus comes increasingly to perform what the commercial drama generally was seeking to offer its spectators – that which produces contentment and wonder.

Faustus’s desire for role-playing reaches one of its most accelerated moments in the Helen scene. Responding to her he decides, appropriately, that he will be Paris and play out his version of the Trojan War:

```
I will be Paris, and for love of thee
Instead of Troy shall Wittenberg be sacked
And I will combat with weak Menelau,
And wear thy colours on my plumed crest
Yea, I will wound Achilles in the heel
And then return to Helen for a kiss.
```

*(DF 5.1.197–202)*

But this is insufficient and Faustus changes tack. Helen now is

```
Brighter . . . than flaming Jupiter
When he appeared to hapless Semele
More lovely than the monarch of the sky
In wanton Arethusa’s azured arms.
```

*(DF 5.1.105–8)*
Faustus is ready to change both Helen’s and his own sex (she is the overwhelming Jupiter, he the feminine Semele) and to invite his complete extinction at her hands – Semele insisted on seeing Jupiter in his omnipotence as he appeared to his wife Juno, a guise no mortal can withstand. Faustus seems equally ready to abandon scholarly exactness for inventiveness: Arethusa was transformed to a fountain to protect her chastity from the pursuing Alpheus; she is neither wanton nor a lover of Jupiter in classical mythology. What is revealed in these and the Trojan War images is that Faustus does not want to possess Helen for simple sexual gratification. She stimulates his excitement about role-playing; she feeds his imagination for theatre.

Plays within plays bring attention to a performance as contrived theatre. Aware of ‘an audience’ on stage watching the play within the play, spectators also become aware of themselves watching ‘both’ plays. In Renaissance drama, various devices are employed to remind the audience of its ‘role’ as spectators and, consequently, of their participation in the drama rather than only passively witnessing it. Prologues and epilogues, for example, frame the action within them, but they are also part of the play. As a painting is influenced by what frames it, so the effect of the ‘picture’ overall includes the frame. In the drama such mechanisms contribute to a difficulty in saying where a play begins and where it ends.

These questions of beginning and ending loom over Doctor Faustus because they profoundly affect an understanding of what occurs. Does Doctor Faustus end in the ‘A’ text with him being dragged off to hell, or in the ‘B’ version with the scholars discovering his dismembered body? Is the final chorus a post-play commentary? What are the implications of the ‘scene’ where the actors reappear on stage – including presumably a ‘restored’ Faustus – to take the applause? The appearance of the cast at Doctor Faustus’s conclusion helps register that the whole play has been about role-playing, a performance that has as its main endeavour the staging of theatrical opportunities. Faustus is reborn to play another day: twenty-four years on stage, a day in the life of the theatre.

Doctor Faustus is a play designed to facilitate theatrical opportunity: but to what end? As noted above, the commercial theatre of the 1580s and 1590s was seen by some as morally dangerous, by others as morally sound, with seemingly little critical middle ground between defenders and detractors. Yet, it was likely that it was such mixed positions that drew crowds to plays: the simultaneous experience of the comic and the horrific, the blending of pathos and farce, the presence of the exaggerated with the familiar, the edifying and the entertaining – the very features we associate with Marlowe’s drama. The play’s success on the stage manifestly demonstrates that the companies
profitably negotiated the various cultural implications of its shows of delight and magic in their productions.

Ruth Lunney argues that Marlowe’s plays break the link between visual signs and traditional perspectives and values. Their signs and characters embrace a ‘rhetoric of contradiction’ that enables audiences to debate the nature of figures and events. The audience is no longer compelled to approve an intrinsically didactic understanding within well-established frameworks. The result is a new relation between spectator and play where, as the Prologue to Tamburlaine, Part One makes clear, we are invited to applaud ‘as we please’, not as we should.

Should we reconsider how Doctor Faustus was contrived? Rather than imagining some authorial ur-manuscript that articulated a precise intellectual vision, might we instead posit that Marlowe and/or his collaborator conceived of Doctor Faustus as a play that would be manipulated in performance? Their design was to create a series of scenes that might be linked in different ways in different performances, ones that reflected on ideas of illusion, role-playing, and theatricality around humanity’s imagined identities in relation with the supernatural and natural worlds. Performing ‘the form of Faustus’s fortunes good and bad’, this drama was envisaged neither as distinct tragedy nor comedy. A presentation of ‘all the world’s a circus’ rather than ‘all the world’s a stage’, the play proposes that the characters and the spectators share a desire for spectacle that does readily exceed edification. This is a drama that seems constantly to defer clarifying its philosophical or metaphysical speculations while it pursues its various self-generated performances.

For early Protestant reformers, the drama was in the service of religion. For the ‘Puritan’-inspired antitheatrical writers from the 1580s, the theatre was ‘the chapel of Satan’, plays ‘the very butchery of Christian souls’. Doctor Faustus refuses to acknowledge the determining agency of either of these perspectives because it celebrates the ascendancy of the theatre’s own prerogative as a place for playing. The play in either version resists offering a coherent intellectual vision on magic and its relation to religion, or on salvation and damnation. While there is no doubt that it is contrived around a more or less traditional morality vision – Faustus is damned – the play’s moral structure is constantly being displaced by comic incident. Faustus’s faking dismemberment in the horse-courser scenes, for instance, confuses and deflects the horror of his possible dismemberment by the devils. The latter becomes potentially as much a parodic burlesque of the former as vice versa. The play’s preoccupations with creating theatre, with organizing performances, may come to seem its ultimate rationale.
NOTES

1. The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus (‘A’ Text) in David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen (eds.), Christopher Marlowe, Doctor Faustus and Other Plays, World’s Classics (Oxford University Press, 1995). In this chapter all citations are to this version of the play and the ‘B’ text in the same edition.


14. See David Ormerod and Christopher Wortham (eds.), Christopher Marlowe, Dr Faustus: The ‘A’ Text (Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 1985);
Doctor Faustus


15. Using the line numbers from the Tucker Brooke edition, Bevington and Rasmussen’s Revels edition proposes that the shortness of the ‘A’ text may be the result of lost manuscript material (p. 65).


20. The claim was made by Richard Baines after Marlowe’s death and is not reliable. See my Christopher Marlowe, Writers and their Work (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1994), esp. pp. 10–21.

21. Greenblatt illustrates how critics come to favour the ‘A’ text on the basis of their own reading of the content (Renaissance Self-Fashioning, pp. 289–90n2). See also Gill, New Mermaids edition, p. xviii.


READING LIST

Barber, C. L. ‘The Form of Faustus’ Fortunes Good and Bad’. TDR 8 (1964), 92–119.


