

(Eng. Hons.) Doctor Faustus (2nd Sem.)

Comic and farcical scenes

The comic and farcical scenes do indicate a weakness in the play. According to one critic, there is more than one level of comedy in "Doctor Faustus" and the crude scenes which trickled the groundlings unite with the seemingly fragmented main action to form a subtly ironic tragic design. Critics sometimes complain that "Doctor Faustus" begins with a tragic narrative of Faustus's career, invites us to see him as a tragic hero, and then disappoints us by deviating into the farcical scenes in which Faustus enjoys some coarse fun at the cost of the Pope, the Horse-dealer, and a knight at the court of the Emperor. In the Prologue to "Tamburlaine", Marlowe had contemptuously discarded buffoonery or clownage as being inappropriate for the dignity of tragic drama and yet "Doctor Faustus", which is decidedly a tragic play, contains a number of comic and farcical scenes. So, it may be pointed out that the comic and farcical scenes were written not by Marlowe himself, but by a collaborator. The collaborator has even been identified as Samuel Rowley. It seems to have been written in order to satisfy the taste of the "groundlings". The sophisticated audiences of today will not find these scenes entertaining, but the Elizabethan audiences derived much entertainment from this comedy.

Marlowe's contemporaries mingled kings and clowns in their plays, the chief reason being that an Elizabethan audience expected variety and comedy. The grave-diggers in "Hamlet" and the drunken porter in "Macbeth" are examples of this.

Before we discuss the appropriateness of the comic and farcical scenes in "Doctor Faustus", a brief examination of these scenes is necessary. The first comic scene takes place between Wagner and two scholars. Wagner tries to puzzle the two scholars, by answering — 'corpus naturale' and 'place of execution'. The next comic scene pertains to Wagner and the clown who will give his soul to the devil for a shoulder of mutton. In this scene it is amusing to witness the clown's fear at the appearance of the two devils. The next comic scene is the interrogation of the Seven Deadly Sins by Faustus, in which they describe their respective characters. The comic scenes that follow degenerate into farce — Faustus's harassment of the Pope, ~~the two scholars~~ Robin's performing magic and Ralph's interest to the kitchen-maid. There are have a touch of comedy when Faustus makes a pair of horns on the head of a knight. Lastly, there is the scene of Faustus's dealing with a horse-courser. This is the least satisfactory of all the scenes, in so far as it is sheer foolery, buffoonery and horse-play.

Shakespeare introduced some comic elements into his tragic plays not only to please the audience of the time, but

also to relieve the tension built up by the tragic scenes. The tension in "Doctor Faustus" is built up by the acute mental conflict that the hero undergoes. But in this play we have too many comic scenes which not only relieve the dramatic tension but have the effect of considerably diminishing and diluting the tragic effect. So, it is possible to argue that the comic scenes were meant to emphasize the deterioration in the character of the hero. This Faustus is different from the Faustus of the earlier scenes, who wanted to "wall all Germany with brass", to "make the Rhine circle fairer than Wittenberg", to "chase away the prince of Parma", to make a bridge through the moving air", and so on. But now he reveals in childish pranks such as snatching away dishes from the pope and cheating a horse-courser of money. One other purpose is served by these comic scenes. Wagner and Robin's making use of Faustus's books of magic and parodying the main plot as an underplot and the various comic scenes serve to fill the interval between Faustus's attainment of magical power and the damnation.

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