

Dr. Faustus

© Mark Mantho

Since I consider *Dr. Faustus* a multidimensional play with many subtle complexities, I'm not sure I can point to one scene in which I "knew what was going on" and one in which I "didn't."

Nonetheless, two scenes:

In Act III, Scene 3, the clowns Robin and Dick decide to have a little fun with a tavern Vintner by stealing a cup. When the Vintner confronts the two and demands they return it, the clowns pass the cup surreptitiously between them, playing a game of "now you see it, now you don't." This suggests an unflattering parallel with the parlor tricks that delight "the great magician" and learned scholar Faustus, who, in the scene directly preceding this one, takes sophomoric pleasure in beating the Pope about the head while invisible. The analogous relationship between Dr. Faustus and the buffoons Robin and Dick -- who are, after all, *clowns* -- becomes more explicit when they conjure up Mephostophilis to scare off the Vintner. In doing so, the clowns harbor no pretense toward grand sorcery or scholarly renown; their only objective is to have a laugh at the Vintner's expense. Yet the fact that it is Mephostophilis, the great Doctor's personal demon, who is summoned to dispose of the Vintner (and that, again, Faustus' farcical encounter with the Pope occurs in Act III, Scene 2) might logically lead an observer to conclude that Marlowe places sophisticated magicians and ignorant knaves on the same footing. There is the equally logical implication that all magic itself is basically so much nonsense. It is interesting to note that when an exasperated Mephostophilis learns why he's been conjured by the clowns, he threatens to turn both into apes ("for apish deeds transformed to an ape"), or, perhaps, dogs. One is left to apply the same admonitions to Faustus, whose "cursed deeds" may, in the end, differ from theirs only by degree.

In Act V, Scene 1, an "Old Man" entreats Faustus to repent and "leave this damnéd art" before it's too late. This older fellow appears seemingly out of nowhere; who is he, and how does he know the good doctor? He speaks as if he sees directly into the heart of Faustus ("Yet, yet, thou hast an amiable soul. If sin by custom grow not into nature.") and at one point addresses the magician as

"gentle son." Is it possible that the Old Man, is, in fact, Faustus' father, or maybe an older, wiser Magus whose warning is somehow born of experience? Even more provocatively, could he be Marlowe's stand-in for the Holy Father Himself? No real details are given, so of course we may never know, but it is significant that the Old Man evidently spies "an angel hover o'er thy head," apparently without benefit of the requisite incantation. Such ability would probably belong either to an exceptionally gifted magician or a being of divine origin. The mysterious nature and allegorical meaning of this anonymous character -- who exits as swiftly as he enters -- provides a rich source of inquiry and debate, precisely because many different interpretations could supply an adequate reason for his presence. *Whatever* Marlowe had in mind, the fun, for me, was in playing with the possibilities.