

Doctor Faustus: The Play-Text or the Play? (A Reply to Mark Thornton Burnett)

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Mark Thornton Burnett's "*Doctor Faustus* and Intertextuality," which appeared in the second issue of *Connotations* as a response to my article "*Doctor Faustus*: Death of a Bibliophile" and Paul Yachnin's "*Doctor Faustus* and the Literary System," is a welcome addition to the discussion of texts and textuality in the Marlowe play. Burnett succinctly does what neither I nor Yachnin had space to do: offer a comparison of the A- and B-texts of *Faustus* in regard to the question of books and reading. Burnett also documents the shifts in contemporary editorial preference between the two texts and underlines the irony that a play so concerned with the nature of, and response to, text should itself become the site of complex textual speculation. Finally, he concludes with a timely call for a new parallel text edition of the play to replace W. W. Greg's 1950 edition.

While I may have instigated this short exchange on textuality in the play, I would now like to prescribe some limits. The book is a powerful image in *Doctor Faustus* because books were still a powerful cultural artifact in sixteenth century England. Books were closed to the majority of the population.¹ When Faustus enters the play with book in hand he is defined as part of an elite as surely as is Hamlet, Shakespeare's only university-educated tragic protagonist. People were being encouraged towards literacy in the 1590s, but with the specific aim of being able to study the Bible, the last book that Faustus rejects before turning to magic.² The consequences of Faustus' perverse abuse of the privilege of literacy are soon manifest: Faustus submerges himself in the devil's books and is transformed into a monster and damned man. In this play, then, Marlowe is problematizing the book: it is at once a sign of social status and religious obligation, but also

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of the abuse of status and, as Yachnin points out, literary culture's appropriation of the power of words from scripture.³

The contemporary critical tendency is to see texts everywhere, to see nothing but texts, and this tendency shows up in the margins of Burnett's article. Burnett points to the opening chorus of the *Doctor Faustus*:

Not marching now in fields of Thracimene
Where Mars did mate the Carthaginians,
Nor sporting in the dalliance of love
In courts of kings where state is overturn'd,
Nor in the pomp of proud audacious deeds
Intends our muse to vaunt his heavenly verse.
(Prol. 1-6)⁴

He believes that in it "earlier play-texts are rudely dismissed."⁵ Line five of the prologue seems a clear allusion to *Tamburlaine 1 & 2*. Lines three and four of the passage may refer to either *Edward II* or *Dido, Queen of Carthage*. The first two lines might refer to a lost play on Hannibal (there is no evidence, however, that Marlowe ever wrote such a play); it certainly alludes to Livy's *Historiae* XXII.i.8-12.⁶ But clearly, none of these lines dismisses an earlier play-text. What is being dismissed are plays, performed dramas, not books.

That drama was not thought of as text in this period needs little proof; the treatment of dramatic texts by the playwrights and acting companies themselves is clear illustration. Dramatic texts were *not* regularly or necessarily reproduced; this would allow performance by rival production companies. The actors themselves did not receive full copies of the plays. The playwright's foul or fair papers, perhaps annotated into a prompt book, were jealously guarded. They became a bible, a defining centre of authority and dramatic power of which the actors themselves were only granted glimpses, glimpses outlined in the "plot" posted in the tiring house and assembled in production.⁷ The performance, then, with all its wonderful mutability, *was* the text. Plays were seen, but only incidentally read. *Faustus* was only consigned to the print after the death of the author; there it now writhes being dismembered and reassembled by ingenious scholars bent on pinning down the ephemeral.

When plays did become texts, in good, bad, or indifferent quartos, they were substantially mediated.⁸ Until Ben Jonson, no dramatist seems to have been overly concerned with following the production of his play through the printing house, and the role of that printing house in the manufacturing of what *we* call the text must not be discounted. For example, Burnett points to a distinction between the A- and B-texts of *Faustus*: in the A-text Faustus is to "write a deede of gif" while in the B-text he is to "wright a Deed of Gift." Burnett notes "the B-text introduces a note of legality and authority (punning upon "wright" and "right") and capitalizes letters, lending an official tone to Faustus' satanic negotiations."⁹ Burnett also sees significance in the punctuation of Faustus' famous opening monologue.¹⁰ But spelling, capitalization, and punctuation were all notoriously flexible in this period, and the differences that Burnett spots were most likely generated by printing house stylistics and compositor idiosyncrasies, not authorial ingenuity.¹¹ We must also remember that in drama, puns are heard, not read, and capitalization is not seen.

The book-imagery of *Doctor Faustus* touches on the complex cultural exchange that surrounded the printed word in the late sixteenth century, and if we read *Faustus* as a text of a play, rather than imagine it as a play about texts, we lose much of the power that it had for Marlowe's age.

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NOTES

¹For an overview of the rate of illiteracy in the period see David Cressy, *Literacy and Social Order: Reading and writing in Tudor and Stuart England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1980). N.B. the graph on 177 which suggests an illiteracy rate of between 75% and 90% in the late 1500s.

²Cressy 3.

³Paul Yachnin, "Doctor Faustus and the Literary System: A Supplementary Response to Paul Budra," *Connotations* 1.1 (1991): 75.

⁴Cited from *Doctor Faustus: A 1604 Edition*, ed. Michael Keefer (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview, 1991).

⁵Mark Thornton Burnett, "Doctor Faustus and Intertextuality," *Connotations* 1.2 (1991): 173.

⁶Keefer 3.

⁷For examples of "plots," see W. W. Greg, *Dramatic Documents from the Elizabethan Theatre*, vol. 2. (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1931).

⁸And not only plays, as Gary Taylor reminds us in the introduction to *William Shakespeare: A Textual Companion*, eds. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1987) 2.

⁹Burnett 176.

¹⁰Burnett 175.

¹¹For example, spelling was often determined by the necessities of typography. See Randall Mcleod, "Spellbound," *Play-Texts in Old Spelling: Papers from the Glendon Conference*, eds. G. B. Shand and Raymond C. Shady (New York: AMS, 1984) 81-96.