

*The Early Date of Marlowe's Doctor Faustus*

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There is no consensus about the origins of Marlowe's *Faustus*, one of the outstanding works of English literature. This work is known today on the basis of printings of 1604 and 1616. Much Marlowe criticism has treated these texts in detail, without being able to establish a clear line of development from their ultimate source, the German Faust Book, which appeared first in Frankfurt on September 4, 1587.

The Faust Book on which Marlowe's *Faustus* was based has been available to scholars only in a second edition, that of 1592; a first edition has not come to light. Although the precise date of the first performances of Marlowe's stage play remains a mystery, there is a plausible bridge that can link the first English Faust Book with the first printing of Marlowe's work. Three texts, the English Faust Book, the earliest printing of Marlowe's stage play, and the *Faustus* ballad share features that help recover facts about the period in which Marlowe discovered the English Faust Book. At the same time, the English Faust Book also became the basis of a ballad that treats *Faustus*' unfortunate fate. I hope to show under what circumstances a significant convergence of *The English Faust Book*, the Faust ballad, and Marlowe's stage play took place.

John Henry Jones with his groundbreaking edition of *The English Faust Book* set the basis for resolving issues these crucial relationships. Unfortunately, because of his focus on English sources, Jones overlooked important research by German scholars.[1]

When the Faust Book was published in Germany, it was an instant best seller. Numerous illegal re-printings followed this unprecedented success. This printing phenomenon undoubtedly inspired a quick translation into English. The title page of this 1592 publication indicates that the original copy that was based on the Faust Book published in Frankfurt was "in convenient places imperfect matter [was] amended." This second edition of the English Faust Book showed *Faustus* having been born near Wittenberg and then studied at the university

there. But in chapter 8 there is still evidence of a mistake. The publisher and printer evidently overlooked that at least in one place the book shows Wirtenberg instead of the correct Wittenberg.

On first glance, that mistake may appear to be simply a printer's error, the mistaken replacement of the letter t with r. If examined more closely, however, the explanation of blaming the printer becomes unconvincing. The maps of those days show, after all, the same spelling: Wirtenberg, and it clearly identifies the duchy or state of Württemberg, as it is known today.[2]

David Wootton, publisher of an edition of the A-text along with the English Faust Book, has identified the same mistake. At the outset of the play Faustus is said to be born in Germany, in a town called Rhodes, but then

Of riper years to Wertenberg he went[3]

What is more, his edition of Marlowe's A-text shows seven references to Wertenberg, reflecting essentially the identical mistake, one that was generally corrected in the second edition of the Faust Book.[4] On the basis of this discovery it is reasonable to suspect that Marlowe really believed that *Wertenberg* (=Württemberg) was the place where Faustus had lived and studied. This fact is strongly supported, furthermore, by the mistake in the A-text that Faustus intends to encircle Wertenberg with the river Rhine

And make swift Rhine circle fair Wertenberg[5]

which would have been unimaginable in the case of Wittenberg. In the case of Wittenberg, the River Elbe might have been considered; instead, Marlowe reasonably imagined the Rhine encircling the area of the bordering area of Württemberg. In other words, it is reasonable to assume that at the time of the writing and staging Marlowe was under the impression that Faustus hailed from Germany's Southwest, and not from Luther's city in eastern Germany.[6]

Wootton's thesis is that the mistake about Wittenberg in the English Faust Book's first edition persisted in the A-text, despite the 1592 correction in the second edition, reflected Marlowe's mistaken understanding when he first composed and staged *Faustus*. The second edition of the English Faust Book, on the other hand, contributed to a more precise B-text, in which Wittenberg replaced the incorrect Wertenberg. This insight becomes more significant when the history of the generally neglected ballad about Faustus is taken into consideration.

Because the ballad has survived only in seventeenth-century texts, it has not been taken seriously. In light of the fact, however, that the ballad's earliest text exhibits the identical confusion about Wittenberg and Württemberg, its place in the sequence of events in the early phase of stage play deserves serious consideration. The problem posed by an obvious error is

not unlike the dilemma confronting editors of manuscripts. Since the pioneering work of Karl Lachmann in the nineteenth century the existence of scribal errors has been seen as way to recognize and distinguish families of texts and their relationship to each other. Thus, the first printing of the English Faust Book, the A-text of Faustus, and the Roxburghe-text (ca. 1640) may be seen to belong to the family exhibiting the mistake, whereas the 1592 English Faust Book, the B-text, and the ballad printed after 1674 exhibit the later, corrected texts. The most important evidence for the early existence of the Faustus ballad is that a ballad of this general content was approved for publication with the title *A ballad of the life and death of Faustus the great Cungerer* on February 28, 1589.[7]

The crucial question is whether the much later ballad text can be identified as the one referred to here. The earliest known copy of a Faustus ballad, found in the Roxburghe Collection of the British Museum and assigned the estimated date of 1640.[8] The illustration of Faustus conjuring is identical with the one that appeared with the B-text in 1619, but it is noteworthy that the text does not follow the correction suggested by the text of that edition. This stubborn adherence to a mistake suggests that the ballad simply relied on an older text.[9]

At Wertemburgh, a Town in Germany,

There was I born and bred [ . . . ] [10]

Zarncke concludes such mistakes originated with the first edition of the English Faust Book and then were taken over by the ballad, composed before the date of February 28, 1589.

The sequence of mistakes by the translator had consequences, and today they are helpful today in reconstructing a sequence of events. If the ballad writer had composed the ballad after 1592, it is likely that he could have used a copy of the corrected edition of the Faust Book; then he would have known that Faustus hailed from Wittenberg. But if, as the approval for the printing suggests, he composed the ballad before February 28, 1589, the only Faust Book available for him was the first edition, weighed down by numerous mistakes; that edition would have influenced him to write Wertemburgh instead of Wittenberg.

These three texts, the English Faust Book, the ballad, and Marlowe's play, placed side by side, can show how the radical transformation of the Faust Book into the play and the ballad took place. In comparison with the original German Faust Book and its translation, there is the evidence with the ballad that the fanatical, one-sided, polemical attack on Faustus disappears, not entirely, of course, and in the play to a greater extent than in the ballad. The original German book and its translation are entirely one-sided; the perspective of Faustus is never explored in any depth, except in final lament. Now, on the other hand, the play and the ballad present the story of Faustus, from the beginning, in his own words. There is an effort to

understand him. Faustus has a chance to speak; he has a voice from beginning to end. The story is genuinely his own.

Part of this fascinating history is the mysterious role of Richard Jones, who was responsible for the printing of the ballad.[11] Jones was about to print *Tamburlaine* only a few months after the approval of his ballad by the censors. Could the ballad serve as a vehicle to make the topic of Faustus acceptable? Jones, after all, was propagating the story of Faustus, as a moral lesson, while ignoring the radicalism implied by Marlowe's uncontrollable hero.[12]

Although we cannot be sure which came first, the performance of Marlowe's play or the composition of the ballad, there are good reasons to take the ballad seriously as a contemporary work. The connections among the English Faust Book, the ballad, and Marlowe's *Faustus* are numerous and take us back to the late 1580s or the first months of 1589. The story of Faustus as a work of dramatic literature was evidently born at this particular point in time.

## References

- [1] John Henry Jones, *The English Faust Book* (Cambridge: University Press, 1994). Cf. Günther Venzlaff, *Textüberlieferung und Entstehungsgeschichte von Marlowes „Doctor Faustus“* (Berlin: Emil Ebering, 1909). Cf. Friedrich Zarncke, „Das englische Volksbuch von Doctor Faust,“ in: *Goetheschriften*, Leipzig: E. Avenarius, 1879, 305–307. For a more detailed examination of the present questions see Frank Baron (Der Mythos des faustischen Teufelspakts (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), pp. 251–278 and 287–291.
- [2] Copper engraving by A. Ortelius. First edition: 1579. *Theatro del Mondo di Abrahamo Ortelio* (Antwerp: Plantin Press, 1612).
- [3] *Christopher Marlowe: Doctor Faustus, with the English Faust Book.*, ed. by David Wootton (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 2005), Prologue, p. 2.
- [4] *Marlowe: Doctor Faustus*, ed. by Wootton, xxxii–xxxiv. prologue (p. 2) and II.I (pp. 8–9); II.I, p. 26; IV.I, p. 50; V.i (p. 59); V.ii (p. 61).
- [5] Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*, ed. by Wootton, I.i, 8.
- [6] Jones, *The English Faust Book*, 43–44.
- [7] Arber, *A Transcript of the Registers of the Company of Stationers of London, 1554–1640* (London, 1875–1877, reprint New York 1950), vol. 2, fol. 241b. On August 8, 1586 the censors acknowledged the rights for 126 ballads to Ric Jones, p. 209.
- Cf. John Payne Collier, *The Diary of Philip Henslowe* (London: Shakespeare Society, 1845), p. 38.
- [8] There is reference to a ballad of Doctor Faustus as early as December 14, 1624 in the Stationer Register. It is listed as one of 168 ballads. Leba M. Goldstein, “An Account of the Faustus Ballad,” *The Library. The Transactions of the Bibliographical Society*, 5th series 16 (1961), 176–189. 179–180.
- [9] „In this instance there can be no doubt that the ballad referred to in the sixteenth century was the same as that printed and registered in the seventeenth century.“ M. P. Jackson “Three Old Ballads and the Date of *Doctor Faustus*,” *AUMLA, Journal of the Australasian Universities Languages & Literature Association* 33 (1970), 187–200. pp. 192 and 197.
- [10] “The Just Judgment of GOD shew’d upon Dr. John Faustus,” lines 5–6 of the edited Roxburghe text. I am indebted to Professor Dana Sutton, who alerted me to a stage play by

William Pratt, *Hispanus*, 1597, in which there is a reference to the ballad of Faustus: “Dum ex aedibus exeat, tibicen, incipe vel *Hominem in Desperatione* vel *Doctorem Faustum* vel *Doctorem Lopezium* vel *Labandalashottum*.” Cf. <http://www.philological.bham.ac.uk>

[11] “Entered vnto him for his Copye [ . . . ] of TOMBERLEIN the cithian shepparde.” Arber, *A Transcript of the Registers*, fol. 262b. About Jones see Kirk Melnikoff, “Richard Jones (fl. 1564–1613): Elizabethan Printer, Bookseller and Publisher.” *Analytical & Enumerative Bibliography* 12 (2001): 153–184 and Kirk Melnikoff, “Jones’s Pen and Marlowe’s Socks: Richard Jones, Print Culture, and the Beginnings of English Dramatic Literature.” *Studies in Philology* 102 (2005): 184–209. Cf. David. M. Bergeron, *Textual Patronage in English Drama, 1570–1640* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2006): 34–6.

[12] Jones was also the printer of *A Knack to Know a Knave* (1594), performed in 1592. The play has echoes of Marlowe’s *Faustus*. Cf. Zimansky, 181–187 and Neil Brough, *New Perspectives of Faust. Studies in the Origins and Philosophy of the Faust Theme in the Dramas of Marlowe and Goethe* (Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 1994), 75–76 and 323. Günther Venzlaff provided extensive evidence that narrows the window of time during which *Faustus* was first presented on the London stage. Venzlaff presents several arguments for the early existence of Marlowe’s *Faustus*, both A and B, as early as 1588. In general, he sees the range between the undetermined date of the English Faust Book’s first edition (i.e., some time after September 1587) and before February 28, 1589, when the ballad is listed in the transcript of the stationers. This emphatic placement of the ballad in relationship to the staging justifies reviewing the validity of Venzlaff’s arguments.

Venzlaff shows that *Faustus* in the B-text employed numerous phrases and images that reflected borrowings from his own *Tamburlaine*, part II.[12] He proposes, consequently, the following sequence:

*Tamburlaine I*

*Doctor Faustus* (earliest A and B texts)

*Tamburlaine II*

Additions to *Doctor Faustus*, as reflected in the B text

Venzlaff makes a substantial contribution by retreating from the exclusive attention to the texts published after 1601 and reorienting the focus on the time of composition and performance.