Old Dogs and New Tricks: Analyzing Learning Within Shakespeare's *12th Night* and Thomas Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*

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Old Dogs and New Tricks: Analyzing Learning Within Shakespeare’s 12th Night and Thomas Marlowe’s Dr. Faustus

by Samantha De Carlo

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A key educational reformer of the early 20th century, philosopher John Dewey, once said of learning that even “failure is instructive. The person who really thinks learns quite as much from his failures as from his successes.” John Dewey’s view of education - that it should create self-sufficiency and come from personal experience - can be used to gain greater insight into Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night and Thomas Marlowe’s Dr. Faustus. While both Twelfth Night and Dr. Faustus emphasize traditional or “classical” learning, both plays put a much greater focus on situational learning as being key to personal epiphanies. For Faustus, it is his failed attempt at glory through necromancy that brings about his final realization concerning good and evil. For the characters of Twelfth Night, Viola’s deception is the catalyst for their individual realizations about gender roles, their society, and the eventual ‘happy ending’ of the romance. Ultimately, in both plays, it is when characters attempt to step outside expected social norms that they have the experiences that bring them to a greater learning.

It is important to note that while learning is dealt with mainly as a matter of experience, both Dr. Faustus and Twelfth Night do make mention and put some emphasis on instances of ‘classical’ and ‘scholarly’ learning. For example, the three scholars act with great deference on approaching and “giv[ing] [Dr. Faustus’] mangled limbs due burial” (“Dr. Faustus” V. iii. 17), not because of the pain and moral anguish he has been put through, but because “he was a scholar once admired/ for wondrous knowledge in our German schools” (V.iii.15-16). Even before his trials with the Devil and Mephostophilis, Marlowe is careful to distinguish Faustus as a scholar above all else, whose original intent to ascend above God is based in his exhaustion of classical subjects, like Philosophy, Medicine, and Science. However, as literary critic Arlene Okerlund notes in her essay The Intellectual Folly of Dr. Faustus, “Faustus abandons the classical methods of…truth and knowledge…and begins to rationalize his way to desire and…logic” (Okerlund 260). Even though Faustus’ background of classical knowledge is, in itself, honorable, Okerlund’s analysis reveals that it is more or less useless to him as he fails to apply his knowledge to any greater cause or purpose outside himself. Classical knowledge is also evident in Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night. The majority of Shakespeare’s characters are either of high birth (Orsino is the count of Illyria, and Olivia is a rich countess of Illyria) or are servants in rich households, culminating in an atmosphere of learned backgrounds. Even Viola can be considered a learned figure; although little detail is given about formal training, Viola consistently proves herself to the play’s drollest figure.

However, it is not the classical, book learning that is the key to either play. Rather, it is the individual experiences of the play’s protagonists (Dr. Faustus and Viola) that prove the greatest source of learning and revelation and reveal the most about the authors’ respective attitudes towards learning. In Dr. Faustus, Faustus must learn through several severely conflicting experiences that expose him to both supreme good and demonic evils, in order to come to his ultimate epiphany at the end of the play that “for vain pleasure of four and twenty years hath Faustus lost eternal joy and felicity” (“Dr. Faustus” V.ii.59-60). Throughout the course of the play, Faustus faces tests that give him both a chance to show off his newfound set of demonic powers, as well as providing opportunities along to potentially repent and return to the way of God. Even Faustus recognizes these pinpoints along his journey as he begins to backslide several times, nearing repentance, “now,
Faustus, must thou needs be damned? And canst thou not be saved?” (I.v.1-2). Despite these small moments of hope for Faustus’ being and soul, he is never able to truly step away from his power trip and the grip of Mephostophilis and come to any real ‘learning’. It is as James Reynolds recognizes in his article *Faustus’ Flawed Learning*, that from the moment Faustus signs his name with his “congealing blood,” he has “no spiritual purpose, that he cannot conceive of true wisdom” and is forever confined to the earth and himself and his greed, failing to conceive of “any power or knowledge greater than what he has achieved” (Reynolds 331-332).

In fact, until Faustus accepts the superiority of God seconds before his death, he really serves little purpose other than fulfilling his own greedy wishes; it is only upon his death that he calls out the few words that may save his soul, “Or let this hour be but a year, a month, a week, a natural day, that Faustus may repent and save his soul” (“Dr. Faustus” V.ii.134-136). With these words, Faustus reveals that he has learned for himself the power of God and becomes a symbol- a lesson rather- to Marlowe’s audience, cautioning against the dangers of living such an ‘empty’ existence. Through Faustus, Marlowe presents a critical argument towards the concept of information and learning that separates it from Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*: learning may occur through either books or experience, but all quests for knowledge are useless, detrimental even, if they are meant only for personal glory, or undertaken on without any higher purpose.

Similar to Dr. Faustus, the learning that occurs in *Twelfth Night* comes about mainly through experiences rather than classical ‘book learning’ or traditional schooling. While Dr. Faustus is fueled by self deception, believing that his necromancy will provide him with ultimate happiness, Viola’s stint masquerading as Cesario fuels the learning and personal epiphanies in Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*. Although Viola’s actions provide an exigence, Orsino provides the strongest example of epiphany within the play. As Stephen Gross notes, at the beginning of the play Orsino is “a rather superficial personality- vain, self-obsessed and melancholic” (Gross 205). Gross further notes, that upon meeting Orsino he is “so full of self-love that he is unable to establish a loving and reciprocal relationship with anybody, male or female” (205). In essence Orsino, before meeting Viola, is rather self-absorbed character showing little ability to connect to others. He claims that he has loved Olivia since “[his] eyes did see Olivia first,” but never meets her, and seems to be far more in love with the idea of Olivia, rather than the girl herself (“Twelfth Night” I.i.19). However, after Viola resolves to “conceal [her] what I am” and masquerade to “serve this duke”(I.i.53), her presence and interactions free Orsino. Orsino draws strength from Viola: he is a fine companion and, eventually, breaks his initial coldness and declares his love for Viola, “but when in other habits you are seen, Orsino’s mistress and his fancy’s queen” (V.v.357). In making this declaration, Shakespeare emphasizes the change in Orsino’s character. Even though Orsino is a definitively aristocratic and learned man, his classical learning- much like Dr. Faustus- provides him with very little. It is only after he experiences life with Viola, and experiences true, reciprocated love that he learns what it is truly to be in a human relationship. In this way, Shakespeare’s attitude towards learning is very similar to Marlowe’s; both put emphasis on what is learned through personal involvement, however, while Marlowe put a much more Medieval emphasis on Christianity, Shakespeare takes a more Renaissance-styled stance looking instead at the power of human love.

One final aspect to note about the concept of learning within these two plays is the presence of a comedic guide or foil that helps bring upon and emphasize moments of epiphany. Compared to *Twelfth Night*, Marlowe’s Faustus does arguably have more guides that compete for his soul, namely Mephostophilis, the good angel, the bad angel, even a literal clown. A key character that attempts to guide Faustus by showing the folly of his ways is the Old Man. It is the Old Man who both foils Faustus, himself having a soul that Mephostophilis “cannot touch” (“Dr. Faustus” V.v.82), as well as being one of the final warning signs to Faustus that he is “an accursed…miserable man” (V.v.14). Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* provides a similar ‘guide’ in the character of Feste. While he can be viewed superficially as a fool, he is much more a mirror, reflecting the truth of individual characters.

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In his article *Shakespeare’s Whirligig*, Peter Hyland notes that it is Feste who truly reveals Malvolio to be a “fool” and a “killjoy,” through veiled humor (Hyland 209). However, Feste’s ability to guide the audience towards the characters ultimate self-knowledge continues past Malvolio. While Olivia looks at Feste and is unable to see past his social station of clown and jester- leading to her being subsequently and unknowingly insulted by Feste, “the lady bade take away the fool; therefore I say again, take her away” (I.v.40) - Viola proves herself a much more learned and capable figure, recognizing that Feste is in fact wise enough to play the fool” (“Twelfth Night” III.i.47). In this way, both Marlowe and Shakespeare hint at the reality that learning and intelligence do not always come from classical schooling and that they more often come from life itself, personality and life’s experiences.

Learning is, as Dewey said, a lifelong process meant to improve the individual. While both *Dr. Faustus* and *Twelfth Night* offer a look at both classical and non-conventional learning, through the actions of their respective protagonists and supporting characters, both Shakespeare and Marlowe support the power of learning through experience and for a purpose above all else. Marlowe proves this theory through the final epiphany of Faustus, emphasizing the importance of higher purpose in learning, while Shakespeare emphasizes the importance of human connection through the bonds forged during Viola’s masquerade.

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**Works Cited**


