

Audience, actors, and
directors: meta-
theatricality in
shakespeare's the
tempest ...



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A play can have power over its audience, whether it simply captivates them with its plot or makes them question their beliefs with its commentary.

Though while the actors are the ones directly exercising this power over the audience, it is the writer or director that has power over everything.

Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* are meta-theatrical plays in that their characters parallel this power structure of the theater; the plays' main characters can all be classified as either being the audience, an actor, or a director, and it is the character representing the director in each play who has power over the characters which represent the audience, through the characters who the director uses as actors. The plays differ, though, in terms of how the director maintains power over the audience; in *Doctor Faustus*, Mephistopheles is the true director, but convinces Faustus that he is a director to keep him unaware of his role as the audience. On the other hand, Prospero in *The Tempest* flaunts his theatricality and keeps his audience aware that they are an audience viewing a performance, which more closely resembles real theater in which the audience is aware of the fact that they are spectators. These different approaches to power dynamics among characters are indicative of the writers' different approaches to theater itself.

A real audience in a real theater is aware of the fact that they are spectators so are not, therefore, completely susceptible to the power of the play; they are aware that what they are seeing is a performance, so they are capable of resisting the play's influence. So in *Doctor Faustus*, Mephistopheles, through performance, allows Faustus to believe that he is the director so he does not realize he is actually the audience, the one under Mephistopheles' power.

This way, unaware of the performative nature of the demon he believes he controls, Faustus is unable to resist the Mephistopheles' power. Faustus assumes that he is in control right away once he summons the demon. " I charge thee to return and change thy shape / Thou art too ugly to attend on me. / Go, and return an old Franciscan friar; / That holy shape becomes a devil best," Faustus immediately tells Mephistopheles once he appears (Marlowe 1. 3. 24-5). Not only is Faustus assuming that he is in charge and has power over Mephistopheles, but he is also making aesthetic decisions as a director would in a play; he is effectively ordering the demon, as if he is an actor in a play Faustus is putting on, to change costume.

Though Mephistopheles quickly clarifies that he came of his own accord and not because of any power Faustus believes he has, Faustus persists in his delusion of power, which Mephistopheles then begins to exploit. In the next act, when Faustus expresses worry over signing a pact with the demon, Mephistopheles gives an aside, saying " I'll fetch him somewhat to delight his mind" (2. 1. 82). A group of devils enters and dances, to which Faustus responds " What means this show?" Mephistopheles replies " Nothing, Faustus, but to delight thy mind withal / And to show thee what magic can perform" (2. 1. 83-5). Marlowe seems to have deliberately used theatrical imagery through words such as " show" and " perform" to emphasize the connection between theater and the relationship between Faustus and the demon. In this scene, the relationship is reversed; Mephistopheles summons devils, his actors, and directs them to dance. Faustus, here, is the audience. Nonetheless, Mephistopheles explains this to Faustus in a way that keeps Faustus ignorant of this dynamic. By saying this is to show him " what magic

can perform,” the demon connects this performance to the magic power Faustus believes he has. He gives Faustus a taste of what his supposed power can do, which only makes Faustus’ sense of his own power grow. When Faustus asks “ But may I raise up spirits when I please,” the demon responds with “ Ay, Faustus, and do greater things than these,” further implying Faustus’ role as a director here, suggesting Faustus can direct “ greater things” than the spectacle he has just been audience to, while de-emphasizing his own role in directing the previous spectacle (2. 1. 86-7). So every time Faustus orders Mephistopheles to do anything, Faustus assumes he is the director and that the demon is the actor, which increases his belief in his own power, when the truth is that Mephistopheles is putting on this show of obedience with Faustus as his audience to keep Faustus from leaving their pact.

Even by the end of the play, Faustus is unaware of his manipulation at the hands of Mephistopheles, still unaware that he is Mephistopheles’ audience rather than his director. When, for instance, he orders Mephistopheles to summon a likeness of Helen of Troy, he consumes the demon in her likeness like a piece of media rather than controlling its actions like a director. “ Here will I dwell, for heaven be in these lips / And all is dross that is not Helena,” he says, praising her beauty upon beholding her (5. 1. 95-6). He is enjoying yet another spectacle that the demon has produced for him. After being distracted by the demon away from his original goal of gaining knowledge, the way he orders Mephistopheles around seems less like a director controlling an actor in a play, and more like a modern day consumer flipping through TV shows and deciding which one to watch. He is making decisions,

but only in regards to what sort of spectacle he wants to consume, to be an audience for. Mephistopheles tells him before summoning Helen “ Faustus, this, or what else thou shalt desire / Shall be performed in twinkling of an eye” (5. 1. 89-90). Faustus may interpret “ perform” as execution of his will, but Mephistopheles is rather putting on a performance that Faustus’ inability to detect damns him.

However, as demonstrated by Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, simply being aware of the fact that one is part of an audience is not always enough to understand what is happening, or enough to give the audience any power. Prospero makes no effort to conceal the fact that the shipwrecked noblemen trapped on his island are the audience to a spectacle; this, though, does not lend any clarity to the situation or give them any advantage. For instance, when the nobles are searching the island for Ferdinand, the king’s son who has gone missing, they come across, according to the stage directions, “ several strange Shapes, bringing in a banquet; they dance about it with gentle actions of salutation; and, inviting the King, & c. to eat, they depart” (Shakespeare 3. 3). This vision is reminiscent Mephistopheles’ dancing demons, but the effect on the noblemen is different; while it makes Faustus feel empowered, this makes the lords feel lost and powerless. Sebastian refers to the sight as “ A living drollery,” referring to it as something amusing before focusing on the strange, supernatural nature of what he just saw; this suggests that the spirits were the embodiment or personification of entertainment, or of theater (3. 3). Prospero’s captive spirit Ariel promptly enters in the form of a harpy to threaten the lords, after which the “ Shapes” re-enter to dance again and remove the banquet. King Alonso reacts to these

events by telling his fellows “ The winds did sing it to me, and the thunder, / That deep and dreadful organ-pipe, pronounced / The name of Prosper” (3. 3). He puts everything in context of a performance, to which he is the audience; he listened to the singing and the organ which delivered to him the message that his enemy Prospero is on the island.

Prospero, in fact, tells Ariel “ Bravely the figure of this harpy hast thou / Perform’d, my Ariel,” explicitly confirming the performative nature of his own magic; Prospero is the director while Ariel is the actor, and here the director praises the actor for a show well performed. Prospero says “ My high charms work / And these mine enemies are all knit up / In their distractions; they now are in my power,” meaning that he finds his performance to have been successful; the show he put on distracted his enemies and made them vulnerable to his influence, just as a playwright or director might hope to use a play to have sway over the audience’s thoughts. Prospero does nothing to keep his audience unaware of their role as an audience, unlike Mephistopheles who makes Faustus believe he is the director by appealing to his own sense of power. But while Faustus could have gained power by realizing his true role – he would have been able to realize that the demon was manipulating him and act accordingly – the nobles’ awareness of their position grants them no power, and in fact renders them more powerless through distraction and intimidation.

At the very end of the play, in fact, Prospero directly calls attention to his own role as the plot’s director by asking the play’s audience for applause. “ But release me from my bands / With the help of your good hands,” he says to the audience as part of his final monologue. The final words he speaks are <https://assignbuster.com/audience-actors-and-directors-meta-theatricality-in-shakespeares-the-tempest-and-marlowes-doctor-faustus/>

“ As you from crimes would pardon’d be / Let your indulgence set me free” which, being the end of the play, is the moment right before the audience would applaud anyway (Epilogue). Prospero, then switches from manipulating the figurative audience of the noblemen to breaking the fourth wall between himself and the literal audience watching his character being represented by an actor; he takes advantage of the nature of the theater to seemingly exercise power over the audience to receive the applause he needs; the audience is aware of the fact that they are an audience and as such, applause is customary. Especially at the end of the play, there is no reason for him conceal his nature as the director of the play’s plot; now that he has everything he had been working to achieve, no harm will come from revealing his methods.

The playwrights’ differing approaches to power dynamics in their plays parallels their own views of theater. Marlowe represents Mephistopheles as a crafty and deceptive director figure manipulating an audience unaware of its own role or of what is being done to it; this can represent Marlowe himself, who wrote a deceptively simple play whose complexities the audience may not initially be aware of. Marlowe chose to use a medieval folktale to write a seemingly anachronistic “ morality play” with an apparently Christian message. His play, however, can be interpreted as actually being critical of contemporary theology such as the Calvinist theory of predestination. While not trying to literally damn his audience as Mephistopheles does to Faustus, he does use the deceptively simple nature of his play to prompt his audience into questioning some of their beliefs about religion. Shakespeare, on the other hand, does not seem to have much to hide; by calling more explicit

attention to the nature of performance within his play, commenting on theater itself may have been his original goal. Since this is one of his final plays, he seems to be reflecting on his own role as a playwright before directly saying goodbye to his audience at the end and asking for a final round of applause which will set him free.

Works Cited

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