

“Let me have a wife”: The Tragedy of Family in *Doctor Faustus* and *Othello*

I am hard-pressed to come up with tragedies that do not treat family as the primary vehicle for the tragic action of the play. From *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone* to *The Death of a Salesman* and *Death and the King's Horseman*, the tragic plot revolves around the conflict between the family on one hand and the individual and/or society on the other. One of the central ironies that makes tragedy tragic is that the family should be a source of comfort and aid but ends up leading mostly to suffering and death. Think of Lear, who puts his future in the hands of his two rotten daughters and spurns the one who actually turned out alright, or Romeo and Juliet, who, in the midst of earnestly trying to start their own happy family, are hopelessly embroiled in a conflict engendered by the prides and prejudices of their respective family members. This anxiety over the power of the family to harm as much as it helps is one of the defining characteristics of the genre, but there are important and notable exceptions. *Doctor Faustus* and *Othello*, along with *Timon of Athens* and several of Shakespeare's Roman plays, are among only a handful of tragedies in history in which family does not figure as the central motivator of the tragic action. By comparing *Doctor Faustus* to *Othello*, I hope to illuminate the nature of the tragedy in both plays, and move closer to settling the debate on whether *Faustus* is a tragedy.

*Doctor Faustus'* status as a tragedy is not as settled as we might like. It seems as if *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* was conceived, (or perhaps marketed), as a tragedy, although its title and its comedic scenes mark it as a hybrid of tragedy, comedy, history, and morality play. Most of the recent scholarship on *Doctor Faustus* takes for granted that it is a tragedy, but

thinking of the play as a tragedy is problematic.<sup>1</sup> Aside from its hybrid nature, some cite its lack of tragic structure,<sup>2</sup> and the tragedy in *Doctor Faustus* simply does not work very well; it is not very affecting. If Faustus's death must be in some way regrettable, or his damnation seem pitiful, for the play to be tragic, then the play is difficult to class a tragedy. Although Faustus is told that all he needs to do is repent his sins to save himself from damnation,<sup>3</sup> and it appears he does so not once but at least three times,<sup>4</sup> he nevertheless appears to be damned at the end of the play.<sup>5</sup> More bewildering than that is Faustus' decision to renew his agreement with Lucifer after one of those moments of repentance, when Faustus says after his encounter with the Old Man, "I do repent, and yet I do despair." In response to this act of repentance, Mephistopheles calls Faustus a traitor and arrests his soul, and Faustus responds by offering to renew his agreement. The fact that he feels he has to do so would seem to indicate that through his act of repentance he has in fact nullified his previous agreement. That Faustus would then renew his agreement in the face of weak threats from Mephistopheles is simply bizarre; it defies explanation, and it lessens the tragic impact of the play.

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<sup>1</sup> The most recent extended discussion on the subject is by David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen, who conclude that Marlowe was experimenting: "The play's non-Aristotelian blend of comic and tragic, its disregard of all the so-called 'unities' of classical precept, and its indebtedness to a native morality tradition all suggest that we approach Marlowe as an experimenter who, for all his classical training, is formulating a tragic pattern of his own in which a deeply flawed but sympathetic protagonist is perceived to be both ludicrous and noble, petty and heroic," David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen, introduction to *Doctor Faustus: A- and B-texts (1604, 1616)*, by Christopher Marlowe and his collaborators and revisers, *The Revels Plays* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1993), 35.

<sup>2</sup> See Bevington and Rasmussen, 37-8. See also Roma Gill, introduction to *The Complete Works of Christopher Marlowe*, vol. II, *Dr. Faustus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990). Gill notes, "When Macbeth and Lear die the tragedies are ended with a final harmonious chord; the discords of Faustus's last speech cannot be easily resolved" (xxxvii).

<sup>3</sup> 2.3.79: "Never too late, if Faustus can repent." All *Doctor Faustus* citations are from the A-text in Christopher Marlowe and his collaborators and revisers, *Doctor Faustus: A- and B-texts (1604, 1616)*, ed. David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen, *The Revels Plays* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1993), and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>4</sup> 2.3.31-2: "When I behold the heavens, then I repent / And curse thee, wicked Mephistopheles;" 2.3.10-11: "If it [heaven] were made for man, 'twas made for me. / I will renounce this magic and repent;" 2.3.82-3: "Ah, Christ, my Saviour, / Seek to save distressed Faustus' soul!" 5.1.64: "I do repent, and yet I do despair;" 5.2.77-80: "O, I'll leap up to my God! Who pulls me down? / See, see where Christ's blood streams in the firmament! / One drop would save my soul, half a drop. Ah my Christ!"

<sup>5</sup> Parts of this argument are also stated in Bevington and Rasmussen, 29-30.

Although *Othello* is less generically complicated than *Doctor Faustus*, as a tragedy it presents some of the same challenges to common sense as *Doctor Faustus*. Although Desdemona misses a few opportunities to communicate effectively with Othello, once he accuses her of being a strumpet, she denies it as best she can: “If to preserve this vessel for my lord / From any other foul unlawful touch / Be not to be a strumpet, I am none” (4.2.86-8).<sup>6</sup> When he accuses her directly of having an affair with Cassio, she says, quite sensibly, “Send for the man / And ask him” (5.2.52-3). Cassio’s injuries may complicate matters, but I find it hard to accept that Othello wouldn’t have made the effort. Desdemona’s exoneration and salvation are too simple to effect not to try, yet Othello persists in his mistaken assumption and murders her anyway. Compound that with the fact that Desdemona knows that Othello intends to murder her but does nothing to try to escape. After Emilia informs her that she did as instructed and put the wedding sheets on the bed, Desdemona says, “If I do die before thee, prithee shroud me / In one of these same sheets” (4.3.23-4); she then recounts the tale of her mother’s maid, Barbary—poor, doomed Barbary. It simply does not make sense. Desdemona has a kinsman in Cyprus who would have taken her in, no questions asked, yet she stays in harm’s way.

Both plays also neglect to make use of family in the way that most tragedies do. To give an example of how family and tragedy typically work together, consider *Romeo and Juliet*. I can think of no more powerful tribute to the potential positive power of family than Romeo’s refusal to answer Tybalt’s insults in 3.1. Romeo has just married Juliet at the end of Act Two, and as a result is related now to Tybalt, and in the face of his knowledge of Tybalt’s animosity toward his family in general and direct insults against himself, Romeo chooses to respect his kinship with Tybalt over his personal and family grudges. After Tybalt calls him villain, Romeo responds,

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<sup>6</sup> All citations from Shakespeare’s plays are from William Shakespeare, *The Norton Shakespeare*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, and Katharine Eisaman Maus, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2008), and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

“Tybalt, the reason that I have to love thee / Doth much excuse the appertaining rage / To such a greeting. Villain am I none. / Therefore, farewell. I see thou knowest me not” (3.1.57-60).

Within this brief statement Shakespeare gives his audience just a glimpse of how family is supposed to work, and shows us the power it can have and the comfort that we might take in it. Of course, that moment does not last long. Romeo’s bizarre behavior only enrages Tybalt further, and Romeo eventually kills him in revenge for Mercutio’s death. It all makes a certain kind of sense. Romeo makes an effort to respect this familial tie to Tybalt, but in the end, his rage at Mercutio’s death overrides his obligation to Tybalt or his desire for peace between the Montagues and Capulets. This is both the tease that tragedy often dangles in front of its audience and the disappointment that the tragedy must inevitably bring.

There is hardly any mention at all of family in *Doctor Faustus*. The Prologue tells us that Faustus is born to “parents base of stock” (11) and is raised by “kinsmen” (14) in Wittenberg, but they do not appear in the play, nor does Faustus speak of them. Faustus seems unconcerned with starting a family, since his view of marriage seems to be that it is only good for helping him satisfy his lust: “let me have a wife, the fairest maid in Germany, for I am wanton and lascivious and cannot live without a wife” (2.1.143-5). The only extended discussion of family in the play is during the pageant of the seven deadly sins in 2.3, in which, tellingly, all of the sins but Lechery say something about their parents, even if it is only to mention that they do not have any. Gluttony’s presentation is most illustrative of the general view of family that the play seems to promote:

My parents are all dead,  
and the devil a penny they have left me but a bare  
pension, and that is thirty meals a day, and ten bevers—

a small trifle to suffice nature. O, I come of royal  
parentage. My grandfather was a gammon of bacon, my  
grandmother a hogshead of claret wine. My godfathers  
were these: Peter Pickle-herring and Martin Martlemas-  
beef. O, but my godmother, she was a jolly gentlewoman,  
and well beloved in every good town and city; her name  
was Mistress Margery March-beer. Now, Faustus, thou  
hast heard all my progeny, wilt thou bid me to supper? (2.3.140-50)

Needless to say, this presents a debased view of family in the play to which there is no alternative. Parents are only considered for what they leave behind when they die, sins have more detailed lineages than any of the characters in the play, and the very idea of family is treated with irreverence and disdain.

The one family in *Othello* is immediately characterized as dysfunctional in Act One. Profane wretches are airing Brabantio's family problems in the street as Desdemona indicates how much regard she has for her father by eloping with Othello in the middle of the night. In her defense, Brabantio does not seem to know her very well. He is clearly wrong about her when he tells the Duke she is, "A maiden never bold, / Of spirit so still and quiet that her motion / Blushed at herself—and she in spite of nature, / Of years, of country, credit, everything, / To fall in love with what she feared to look on!" (1.3.94-8). What Brabantio is really indicating here is that he has failed to inculcate his prejudices concerning nature, years, country, credit, and everything else in his daughter, which is something that families are supposed to do quite well. This father-daughter conflict might have led to tragedy, but the tragic potential of that situation never materializes.

The couples in *Othello* are childless and do not speak of children. The view of marriage and love expressed by Desdemona and Othello is the opposite of Faustus', but remarkable nonetheless. Desdemona tells the Duke in defense of her marriage, "I saw Othello's visage in his mind, / and to his honours and his valiant parts / did I my soul and fortunes consecrate" (1.3 251-3). There is a decided lack of emphasis on the physical in Desdemona's description of her love, and she describes falling in love with his mind, honours, and valiant parts, but not any aspect of his appearance. Othello picks up on this and takes it a step further, following her speech with an outright denial of physical attraction. In the course of trying to convince the Duke and Senate to allow Desdemona to accompany him to Cyprus, Othello says,

Vouch with me heaven, I therefor beg it not  
To please the palate of my appetite,  
Nor to comply with heat—the young affects  
In me defunct—and proper satisfaction,  
But to be free and bounteous to her mind;  
And heaven defend your good souls that you think  
I will your serious and great business scant  
When she is with me. No, when light-winged toys  
Of feathered Cupid seel with wanton dullness  
My speculative and officed instruments,  
That my disports corrupt and taint my business,  
Let housewives make a skillet of my helm,  
And all indign and base adversities  
Make head against my estimation. (1.3.260-273)

This is certainly more rhetorically fraught than Faustus' statement that he wants a wife because he is lascivious, but even though Othello's motives for saying this might be complicated (he's working against the "lascivious Moor" stereotype, he wants to appear to be a devoted soldier and servant of Venice because he has just threatened the state by stealing away a Senator's daughter, etc.), this view that marriage will *not* involve sex is just as bizarre as Faustus' view that it *only* involves sex. While this more Platonic type of love may seem more admirable, it diminishes the idea of marriage by dissociating it from physical attraction and sex, and hence, reproduction and family.

It seems to me that the question we have to answer is whether and how the tragedy works *in spite* of all of these challenges. To come back to *Romeo and Juliet*, family is one of the important reasons that the play works better as a tragedy than either *Othello* or *Doctor Faustus*. It makes nearly no sense at all that Romeo and Juliet do not tell any of their family members that they are married, especially during Tybalt's aforementioned confrontation with Romeo or when Juliet is informed that she will be marrying Paris. The fact that family is involved encourages the audience to come up with an excuse, or at least not ask questions. With its mess of desires, allegiances, inequities, prejudices and disappointments, the family seems to provide a tragic logic that is powerful and keenly felt in its absence. What fills that vacuum in tragedies that cannot make use of family as a vehicle for tragedy?

I propose a greater understanding of what James Hammersmith calls tragic virtue. Hammersmith believes that since the publication of A. C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy*, too much emphasis has been placed on explaining Renaissance tragedy in terms of *hamartia*, or the tragic flaw, and that Renaissance dramatists often operated under quite a different principle of how to create tragedy. Hammersmith nevertheless credits Bradley with characterizing tragedy as

a waste of good, which Hammersmith terms “tragic virtue.” Hammersmith cites Othello’s trusting nature and Faustus’ pursuit of knowledge as examples of tragic virtue, and it seems appropriate to think of them that way, especially when we consider that many of Shakespeare’s plays, at least, achieve tragedy through a positive trait rather than a flaw. For example, generosity fails in *Timon of Athens*, patriotism in *Titus Andronicus*, *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus*, and filial piety in *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. For *Doctor Faustus* in particular, Hammersmith sees the stakes being fairly high:

If the play is to remain a tragedy, Faustus’ predisposition to seek knowledge can in no sense be regarded as a flaw in his character. If it is so regarded, the play is thrust back into a medieval framework of thought in which man’s depravity is innate and in which the only knowledge worth having is the kind of Knowledge which accompanies Everyman in his play: that which prepares and perfects the soul for the Kingdom of God.<sup>7</sup>

Hammersmith believes that the play cannot be considered a tragedy unless Faustus’ curiosity can be shown to have a positive side, and establishes in “Shakespeare and the Tragic Virtue” that the pursuit of knowledge was admired in the Renaissance. The play itself shows Faustus’ desire for knowledge to something that has the potential for good; his efforts have saved whole cities from the plague (1.1.21), and the Prologue mentions “learning’s golden gifts” (24). There is a steady and persistent emphasis on Faustus’ scientific curiosity that is often dismissed in discussion of the play’s tragedy, and it is by that curiosity as much as by anything else that Lucifer and Mephistopheles manipulate him. Faustus not only asks Mephistopheles for a book of spells and incantations, but for books on astrology and horticulture (2.1.162-179). Faustus also interrogates Mephistopheles on theology and astrology (2.3.32-73). After the pageant of the Seven Deadly

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<sup>7</sup> James Hammersmith, “Shakespeare and the Tragic Virtue,” *Southern Humanities Review* 24 no. 3 (Summer 1990): 252.

Sins, Lucifer presents Faustus with another book on shape-changing, which Faustus vows to “keep as chary as my life” (2.3.175). By the end of the play, Faustus realizes that it is his learning, and his passion for books in particular, that has undone him. He exclaims to his Scholar colleagues, “O, would I had never seen Wittenberg, never read book!” (5.2.20-1). Finally, in a desperate and futile attempt to bargain for his life and soul, Faustus cries, “I’ll burn my books” (5.2.123). That is a shame.

If we approach *Othello* with tragic virtue in mind, Othello’s fury seems more credible in that he must feel that the trust he placed in Desdemona has been violated. Not only that, but his claim that he “loved not wisely but too well” (5.2.353) has more impact by indicating that the play is in some sense designed to point out Othello’s tragic virtue. Desdemona’s fate also comes more into focus as well through her desire to be an obedient wife. At the end of Act Four, before Desdemona indicates to Emilia that she thinks that Othello is going to murder her, Othello tells Desdemona, “Get you to bed on th’ instant. I will be returned forthwith. Dismiss your attendant there. Look’t be done” (4.3.7-8). This stinks, and Desdemona must know it. The stern command and the instruction to dismiss Emilia can only mean that Othello intends to do her harm. Desdemona responds obediently: “I will, my lord” (4.3.9).

The tragic premise of *Doctor Faustus* matches one that Shakespeare was fond of: the excess of good that leads to bad. In *Doctor Faustus*, learning, normally considered good, leads to dark desires in excess. In *Othello*, obedience, trust and love are taken to such extremes that they do more harm than good. In both of these plays, tragic virtue becomes more important due to the relative absence and debasement of family.