



Scene 9: Comic Relief and Thematic Echoes in *Doctor Faustus*

An exploration of Marlowe's use of low comedy and its relationship to the main plot, examining how the Robin and Ralph subplot mirrors and contrasts with Faustus' journey.

The Vintner's Goblet

Robin's Theft

Robin appears with a silver goblet stolen from a vintner, displaying it proudly to Ralph as evidence of his cunning.

1

Magical Deception

Robin denies possession and allows himself to be searched, using trickery to conceal the goblet from the vintner.

3

Vintner's Pursuit

The rightful owner arrives demanding the return of his property, setting up the comic conflict central to the scene.

2

Dangerous Incantations

In a moment of reckless bravado, Robin begins reading from Faustus' book, unwittingly summoning Mephistophilis from Constantinople.

4

This scene functions as a comic inversion of Faustus' own summoning, with the servants blundering into supernatural territory they cannot comprehend, highlighting the dangers of forbidden knowledge in the hands of the uninitiated.

Parallels and Contrasts with Faustus' Journey



Robin and Ralph face supernatural consequences

Thematic Echoes

- Both Faustus and the servants meddle with powers beyond their understanding
- The goblet theft mirrors Faustus' desire for material gain
- Mephistophilis responds to both summonings with irritation and threats
- The punishment (transformation into animals) reflects the bestial nature of sin

Key Differences

- Robin and Ralph remain oblivious to the spiritual danger
- Their potential transformation is viewed as an opportunity for fun and food
- Their transgression is petty theft rather than spiritual rebellion

Whilst Faustus contemplates the profound implications of his damnation, Robin and Ralph remain blissfully unaware of the spiritual consequences, seeing only the immediate potential for pleasure in their transformation—a stark contrast with Faustus' increasing torment.

Textual Controversies and Authorship Questions

- ❏ Scene 9 is one of several comic interludes in *Doctor Faustus* whose authorship remains contested among scholars, with some attributing these scenes to later additions by other playwrights.

Arguments for Marlowe's Authorship

- Thematic coherence with the main plot
- Consistent use of comedic mirroring
- Marlowe's known interest in contrasting high and low characters

Arguments Against Marlowe's Authorship

- Stylistic differences from Marlowe's verified works
- Limited contribution to narrative development
- Possible insertion to appeal to groundlings
- Sequential placement of two Robin/Ralph scenes suggests later editing

Textual Evidence

- Significant differences between the A-text (1604) and B-text (1616)
- Comic scenes more developed in the B-text
- Inconsistencies in character naming across editions

The scholarly debate continues regarding these comic interludes, with recent textual analysis suggesting they may represent collaborative work rather than pure insertion, complicating our understanding of Renaissance dramatic authorship practices.

Functions of Comic Relief in Elizabethan Tragedy

Beyond the authorship question, Scene 9 serves several important dramatic functions within the structure of *Doctor Faustus*, reflecting broader Elizabethan theatrical conventions:

Temporal Pacing

The scene provides necessary time progression within the play's chronology, allowing for Faustus' offstage activities and creating a more comprehensive dramatic timeline spanning his 24-year contract.

Audience Engagement

Comic interludes catered to the diverse Elizabethan audience, particularly appealing to the "groundlings" who stood in the pit and expected varied entertainment. This commercial consideration was essential for theatrical success in Marlowe's time.

Thematic Reinforcement

Despite seeming disconnected, the scene reinforces central themes through contrast and parallel, offering a low-comedy mirror to Faustus' high tragedy and emphasizing the consequences of forbidden knowledge across social classes.

Dramatic Relief

The comic tension provides necessary psychological relief from the intense theological and philosophical questions of the main plot, allowing the audience to process the weightier material through momentary diversion.

Modern productions and adaptations often struggle with these scenes, sometimes cutting them entirely or reimagining them to create stronger connections to the main narrative. However, understanding their original function provides valuable insight into Elizabethan theatrical conventions and audience expectations.