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## Marlowe's "Faustus", the Horse-Courser, and Werewolves

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The story of the Horse-Courser's encounter with Doctor Faustus in Marlowe's *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus* resists easy interpretation.<sup>1</sup> This article will explore the likely folkloric origins of the vignette by examining sources that have yet to be noticed in Faust scholarship or in the sourcebooks.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, it will be argued that a plausible connection can be made between these folk tales and werewolves. The insights gained from this exploration will then be used to examine, briefly, possible interpretations of the horse-courser tale within the play.

The episode itself in Marlowe's play is clearly taken from the *The History of the Damnable life and Deserved Death of Doctor John Faustus* (1592), which is commonly referred to as the *English Faust Book*, a translation of the German *Historia von D. Johann Fausten* published a few years before in 1587.<sup>3</sup> I will give the short text from the *English Faust Book* in full here as it contains the basic elements of the story, which can be used later to point to its possible origins. This source will also be compared later to the adaptations found in the A and B texts of Marlowe's play:

How Doctor Faustus deceived an horse-courser.

Chapter 34

In like manner he served an horse-courser at a fair called Pheiffring, for Doctor Faustus through his cunning had gotten an excellent fair horse, whereupon he rid to the fair, where he had many chapmen that offered him money: lastly he sold him for forty dollars, willing him that bought him, that in any wise he should not ride him over any water, but the horse-courser marveled with himself that Faustus bad him ride over no water. "But," quoth he, "I will prove," and forthwith he rid him into the river. Presently the horse vanished from under him and he sat on a bundle of straw, insomuch that the man was almost drowned. The horse-courser knew well enough where he lay that had sold him his horse, wherefore he went angrily to his inn, where he found Doctor Faustus fast asleep and snorting on a bed, but the horse-courser could no longer forbear him, took him by the leg and began to pull him off the bed, but he pulled him so, that he pulled his leg from his body, insomuch that the horse-courser fell down backwards in the place. Then began Doctor Faustus to cry with an open throat: "He hath murdered me." Hearat the horse-courser was afraid and gave the flight, thinking none other with himself, but that he had pulled his leg from his body; by this means Doctor Faustus kept his money. (quoted in Wootton, 125–6)<sup>4</sup>

The basic elements of this story are that Faustus obtained a horse through some means ("cunning"). He sold the horse with a specific set of instructions which were not obeyed ("ride over no water"). The horse turns to straw. The horse-courser tries to get revenge, but instead believes he has pulled off Faustus's leg, so runs away. Faustus keeps the cash. But what, we might ask, is the nature of Faustus's cunning? And why does the horse turn to hay?

John Dryden, in the play *An Evening's Love* (1671), III, 182–3, says the following, as noted by Bevington and Rasmussen (178, fn): "A witch's horse, you know, when he enters into water, returns into a bottle of hay again." Bevington and Rasmussen comment that Dryden "may have had this episode in mind, but it may also reflect a broader legend" (ibid.). The idea that this scene reflects a broader legend becomes more plausible when reading the *English Faust Book* because there is a virtually identical episode described in Chapter 38 (not included in Marlowe) where Faustus sells five swine for six dollars apiece, with the same instruction not to cross water. The buyer disobeys him and they turn to hay. In this episode he cannot find Faustus, so simply loses his money and the pigs. It seems that the nature of the animals turning into hay, whether horse or swine, is not fixed in this legend. So what might the likely source of the legend be?

I discovered the answer to this question in a footnote in Daniel Ogden's exhaustive and fascinating *The Werewolf in the Ancient World* (106, fn. 110, 111) where versions of the story are cited by two well-known mediaeval authors, which suggests that the story had a wide circulation in mediaeval Europe. William of Malmesbury in his *Gesta Regum Anglorum* (2.171) (before AD 1125) tells the tale of how two old witches who ran a wayside inn had the habit of making single lodgers "take the shape of a horse or hog or some other animal and sell him to the dealers in such things."<sup>5</sup> On one occasion, they turn a young man who made his living as an acrobat into an ass and subsequently sell him to a "rich man," "warning that if he wishes his entertainer [the ass] to last, he must keep him away from water." The ass eventually escapes when his rich owner is drunk, regains his shape by rolling in a pool of water, and then reports his story which eventually comes to the attention of Pope Leo IX. The pope convicts the women when they confess. William of Malmesbury ends by saying that Peter Damiani taught the pope to believe that such things were possible by telling him the story of Simon Magus who caused Faustinianus to take his "own shape and frighten his children."<sup>6</sup> Ogden notes that Malmesbury's story is influenced by Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* (where the protagonist Lucius is famously turned into a donkey), as well as being "clearly a descendent of Augustine's words on Arcadian werewolves but also of his words on Italian landlady-witches" (196, fn. 110). The key elements of the horse-courser tale are contained here: transformation of something or someone into various animals, trickery and deception, and disobedience which leads to dispelling by water.

The second iteration of the story makes the link with Augustine plain. It occurs in Chapter 19 ("Prodigies of our Times") of Gerald of Wales' *Topographia Hibernica* (AD 1187). This chapter uses werewolf stories as part of a theological debate on the nature of transformation and shape-shifting. He quotes Augustine's *City of God*, book 18, Chapter 17, as a starting point to the argument, where Augustine recalls the ancient Greek festival of the Lykaia in which young men were said to transform into wolves after swimming across a lake, and then becoming human again nine years later when they crossed the water, if they had not consumed human flesh during that time (46). Gerald of Wales adds the following:

In our times, also, we have seen persons who, by magical arts, turned any substance about them into fat pigs, as they appeared (but they were always red), and sold them in the markets. However, they disappeared as soon as they crossed any water, returning to their real nature. (46)

His (somewhat uneasy) conclusion to the question of the possibility of transformation is that humans and devils can only effect illusory transformation, whereas only God can produce true transformation, such as is evidenced by "the case of Lot's wife" (46).<sup>7</sup>

After Augustine's account of the Lykaian werewolves in Chapter 17 of *City of God*, Chapter 18 considers the issue of illusion and transformation more directly. Here, Augustine claims that he himself has heard, in Italy, "such things about a certain region where the landladies of inns, imbued with these wicked arts, were said to be in the habit of giving to such travellers as they chose, or could manage, something in a piece of cheese, by which they were changed on the spot into beasts of burden." (tr. Marcus Dods). Augustine writes that these asses become men again "when [their] work was done." Augustine cannot accept that this transformation is real. Demons cannot change "real substances," only the appearance of things, he argues. William of Malmesbury and Gerald of Wales are clearly fleshing out Augustine's brief anecdote by providing other instances of the transformation story from a folkloric tradition of some antiquity, itself undergoing a process of transformation. For instance, Augustine does not write about crossing water in relation to the ass transformation tale, but it is plausible that this element has migrated from the previous paragraph in Chapter 17 where the transformation of werewolves back into men is effected by swimming across a pool of water.

The relevant stories in the *English Faust Book* mostly revolve around the transformations of substances (hay and straw) into animals, who revert when they cross water.<sup>8</sup> It is a possibility that these stories reflect mediaeval anxieties about the transformative promises of alchemy, traces of which appear in the story of Rumpelstiltskin, who weaves straw into gold.<sup>9</sup> Educated readers, however, would have known that stories of magical transformation stretch back into antiquity, where the story of the

Lykaia, transmitted to mediaeval readers mostly through Augustine, looms large.<sup>10</sup> In other words, the basic tale that we find in the story of the horse-courser, as transmitted through William of Malmesbury, Gerald of Wales, and Augustine, would remind the educated reader of werewolves as the tradition of the Lykaion festival is associated with the tale of the wicked inn-keepers transforming men into donkeys in Augustine by direct proximity and also by the translocation of the element of water-crossing from the werewolf tale into the inn-keeper story.<sup>11</sup>

## The A- and B- texts

The B- text [IV.iv] stays very close to the text of the *English Faust Book* in terms of structural elements (with a few minor changes, such as dropping the name of the town where the fair occurred), but does make the internal humor of the vignette more explicit. Horse-Courser (like proverbial used-car salesman) had a reputation as incorrigible cheats.<sup>12</sup> Faustus, the original trickster (who has used his “cunning” to create a horse from straw, though we are not told this in the B-Text), asks for fifty dollars for his horse, rather than the forty originally offered by the horse-courser. The horse-courser accepts. The horse-courser is delighted, however, as he thinks he has made an excellent bargain (in other words, cheated Faustus), only to discover that the reverse is true. If jokes about “pulling one’s leg” were circulating in 1616 (though there is no direct evidence of this), then readers would certainly have been amused. A more likely explanation for the leg-pulling occurs in the previous chapter (33) of the *English Faust Book* where Faustus appears to cut off his leg and pawn it to a Jew. The Jew then throws the leg away. When Faustus returns to claim his limb, it cannot be provided, so Faustus demands a limb from the pawnbroker. They eventually agree that Faustus should get double his money back, as a punishment, “and yet Faustus had his leg on, for he had but blinded the Jew” (125). This reinforces the idea that Faustus is a master of illusion, rather than actual transformation.<sup>13</sup> And for educated readers, might there not be an echo of all of those ancient wolf stories where a body part must be removed by witches, and where the story ends with crossing of water?<sup>14</sup> Certainly, as Ogden notes, there is a “strong recurring motif [in the ancient werewolf texts] of the association of were-wolfism with witches and sorcerers” (207).

The A-text (1606) [IV.i], the version most read today, is more detailed especially in terms of comic dialogue, but, like the B-text, preserves the basic structural elements of the tale. Mephistopheles is introduced as an interlocutor, and Faustus is said to have had no sleep for eight days, probably a reference to Chapter 21 of the *English Faust Book* where he tours the world without sleeping for eight days. The most interesting insertion, however, for our purposes, occurs when the horse-courser complains about Faustus when he returns to get his money back: “Doctor Lopus was never such a doctor. H’as given me a purgation, h’as purged me of forty dollars” [IV.i. 146–7]. There is much debate about when this line was written, and who wrote it (see Bevington, 180, note), but it is clear that it refers to the physician of Queen Elizabeth I, Dr Lopez, who was hanged as it was alleged he was involved in a plot to poison her. The claim that Faustus is somehow worse than Doctor Lopus is clearly comic hyperbolic comparison. Faustus, like Lopus, never causes any lasting damage to any of the people upon whom he plays his tricks, but unlike Lopus, he expresses no intent to kill. If the author of these lines, as I believe likely, was aware of the links between this episode and werewolves, then they have added resonance. “Lopus,” or “Lopez,” simply means son of “Lope,” or son of a wolf, the derivation from the Latin “Lupus” being obvious to most educated readers of the time. The line might imply, then (though the horse-courser himself would, ironically, be unaware of this layer of meaning), that even the son of a wolf, or a wolf itself, would not have the power and skill when it comes to transformation that Faustus has, whether real or illusory. Faustus is a powerful sorcerer.

Six years before the *English Faust Book* was published in 1592, titled *The History of the Damnable life and Deserved Death of Doctor John Faustus*, a sensational chapbook echoing the title, *The Damnable Life and Death of one Stubbe Peeter*, by George Bores, saw the light of day. The echoes in the title may be a coincidence, but the story, presented as a factual account of real events, is of a man who takes a girdle from the devil, which transforms him into a werewolf. He commits truly

unspeakable crimes of lust and murder in this form before his execution.<sup>15</sup> The similarity in title may easily have reinforced the connection in contemporary minds between the story of Faustus and werewolves. Doctor Lopez was hanged two years later, in 1594. Finally, best-selling Victorian Author George W.M. Reynolds based an entire (and very readable) novel, *Wagner the Wehr-Wolf* (1847) on the idea that (the revenant of) Faustus gifted the power of new life and the curse of lycanthropy to his servant Wagner (then an old man). Though it is just a scent, the connection between Faustus and werewolves persisted, and this most likely derives from the Horse-Courser scene.

### Some possible interpretations

The most widespread, general interpretation of the comic scenes in Marlowe's *Faustus*, of which the story of the Horse-Courser forms a part, is that Faustus is not actually a bad man, neatly summed up by Andrew Duxfield: "... besides a slap on the pate for the Pope, a joke at the expense of the knight and the sale of some questionable merchandise to the horse-courser, he does nothing to harm anybody other than himself" (69).<sup>16</sup> Certainly, from a mediaeval Christian perspective, Faustus is evil as a man who has traded his soul to become a sorcerer. That is his tragedy. From a secular perspective, however, the tragedy may be that he does nothing particularly useful with his new powers. These readings certainly both have their place. The episode of the horse-courser, however, has a dimension which takes it beyond mere comedy. If a key concern of the play is the anxiety around transformation caused by conflicting religious and secular views, then this episode seems to point to the fact that Faustus has access to ancient magics (such as animal transformation, as do werewolves) as well as the power offered by the new sciences such as astronomy, botany and alchemy/chemistry, knowledge of which is gifted to him by the devil earlier in the play. A further interpretation of this scene might be, therefore, that from a secular perspective, even with this powerful combination of "magics," Faustus is unable to transform himself into the Renaissance man he could have been. The comment about Doctor Lopus, thus, becomes doubly ironic, as both men are examples of men who had knowledge or "cunning," but who ultimately failed. The tragedy of Faustus's failure in this regard, becomes even greater in comparison.

### Notes

1. When I refer to Marlowe's "Doctor Faustus," it is understood that the play was written in collaboration with one or more authors, whose identity or identities remain unknown. See Wootton, "Introduction" (vi).
2. Such as those of Palmer and More, and, more recently, Thomas and Tydeman.
3. "Marlowe and his collaborator undoubtedly relied on the *Damnable Life's* free translation than on the German original" (Bevington and Rasmussen, "Introduction") (4).
4. Might there be echoes of the fight between Janekyn and the Wife of Bath here? "That in oure fyr he fil backward adoun," "O! hastow slayn me, fals theef?" "Wife of Bath's Prologue," *Canterbury Tales* (ll. 793, 800).
5. Translations in Mynors, et. al. (293).
6. Is it a mere coincidence that the name "Faust" is embedded in the name of the shape-shifting "Faustinianus"? Palmer and More, as many other critics have done, include Simon Magus as a possible source for the Faust legend. Stories of transforming humans into animals or animals into hay, or animals crossing water do not form part of the Simon Magus legend, however.
7. For further discussion of this, see Summers (101), quoting various sources such as Saint John Chrysostom and Saint Thomas who agree that devils can create illusions but not make essential transformations. "He cannot essentially change the body of a man into an ass." This story is most famously encountered in Apuleius, *Metaphormoses*, and is recounted in Gerald of Wales in the same context mentioned above. Summers' discussion is too complex to enter into here, but it is worth noting that Wolfeshusius, who published a tract on werewolves in Leipzig in 1591, specifically mentions Faust (see Summers (113–144)).
8. A further episode of a horse disappearing when it enters water (Faust uses this trick often, it seems) occurs in Chapter 52 of the *English Faust Book*.
9. Though this story also has ancient roots. Of interest here is Chapter 35 of the *English Faust Book*: "How Doctor Faustus ate a load of hay." Sara Munson Deats explores, from a different angle, how theater itself may be part of this anxiety as both magic and theater "conjure imaginative visions" which can cause people to be "deceived by illusions" (14).

10. Educated Renaissance readers would also have been familiar with the story of Lykaion from Book One of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, where they could read of Lykaion being transformed into a wolf as punishment for trying to trick Zeus into eating human flesh. Ovid does not consider the later festival, however, as does Augustine.
11. Augustine also mentions the famous transformation of a man into an Ass in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* in Chapter 18 of *City of God*. Ogden makes a strong case for the connection between this story and the werewolf tradition in pages 44–47. Besides the fact that the Thessalian witches are called “lupulae” or “she-wolves,” part of their incantation is also the instruction to “cross not over a river!” Apuleius' book is part of Augustine's discussion on werewolves, so these stories become woven together, with transformation being the common theme.
12. A marvelously scurrilous pamphlet about Jockeys, *The Smithfield Jockey* (1675), who are a combination of horse-courses and ostlers, ends with the followings lines: “I mean *Vulpone* Jockey, that shrew'd man,/who will out-reach the Devil if he can./He can convert (he's grown to such a pass),/Horse into mony, Man into an Ass.” These lines retain the religious anxiety about transformation, the idea of the devil and witchcraft, the story of Apuleius, the conversion of horses, and an echo of the fox, if not the wolf, in the name “Vulpone”! The transformational magic in this case, however, is avarice, one of the deadly sins, rather than any occult force.
13. The play stresses on several occasions that Faustus is merely creating illusions, such as the summoning of Alexander the Great, where he admits that he cannot raise “true substantial bodies” (IV.i. 47) of the dead, though the Emperor is convinced that what he has seen are “true substantial bodies” (IV.i. 72).
14. See Ogden (47–52).
15. Faust gains 24 years of power from the Devil, Stubbe Peeter 25. Peeter was gruesomely executed in 1589.
16. There are, of course, other interpretations, such as that of Warren D. Smith, who sees the comic scenes as dwelling on the seven deadly sins but also as making the point that evil is “actually petty in nature” (171).

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