



KNOWLEDGE AND POWER IN RENAISSANCE DRAMA: MARLOWE AND SHAKESPEARE

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Abstract

This article examines the interplay of knowledge and power in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (c. 1592) and William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611). Drawing on New Historicist and Foucauldian frameworks, it argues that both playwrights construct knowledge not merely as intellectual achievement but as a contested site of political authority, social control, and transgression. *Faustus*'s pursuit of forbidden knowledge reflects Elizabethan anxieties about humanism and damnation, while Prospero's mastery of learning consolidates colonial and patriarchal dominion. The analysis reveals how Renaissance drama encodes the ideological tensions of its era.

Keywords: Renaissance drama, knowledge and power, *Doctor Faustus*, *The Tempest*, Christopher Marlowe, William Shakespeare, New Historicism, humanism, colonialism, transgression.

INTRODUCTION

The Renaissance period in England (roughly 1550–1630) witnessed an unprecedented interrogation of the boundaries of human knowledge. As the printing press disseminated classical learning, explorers charted unknown continents, and natural philosophers challenged scholastic orthodoxy, the question of what it meant to know — and who had the right to know — became charged with political, theological, and moral urgency. Nowhere is this tension more dramatically articulated than in the theatrical productions of the period. The stage, as scholars have argued, served simultaneously as a space of ideological display and ideological contestation [1, p. 3].

Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare, the two most celebrated dramatists of the English Renaissance, both made the relationship between knowledge and power a central concern of their dramatic art. Marlowe's *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus* (c. 1592) stages the catastrophic consequences of a scholar's overreaching ambition, while Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611) depicts a philosopher-ruler whose learned mastery of nature and magic underwrites political sovereignty. Together, these plays offer a rich and complex meditation on the ideological meanings of intellectual achievement in early modern England.

This article situates these two works within the intellectual and political context of Elizabethan and Jacobean England and examines how each dramatist deploys the figure of the learned man to interrogate questions of authority, transgression, and social order. It draws on Michel Foucault's theorisation of knowledge-power relations [2, p. 27] and New Historicist readings of Renaissance culture to argue that both playwrights construct knowledge as a site of political contestation — simultaneously empowering and dangerous, liberating and disciplinary.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative, text-analytical methodology grounded in close reading and cultural-historical contextualisation. Primary sources consist of the B-text of Doctor Faustus (1616), edited by David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen [3], and *The Tempest* as established in *The Oxford Shakespeare* [4]. Secondary materials include New Historicist scholarship (Greenblatt, Dollimore), Foucauldian discourse theory, and post-colonial criticism.

Michel Foucault's argument in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and *The Order of Things* (1966) that knowledge and power are inseparable — that systems of knowledge are always already systems of control — provides the primary theoretical lens [2, p. 27]. Stephen Greenblatt's concept of "self-fashioning" [5, p. 9] informs the reading of Faustus as a subject who attempts to construct himself through forbidden learning, only to be destroyed by the very discursive structures that produced his desire. Jonathan Dollimore's *Radical Tragedy* (1984), with its emphasis on the subversive energies encoded within ostensibly orthodox Renaissance dramatic texts [6, p. 14], further grounds the comparative framework.

Post-colonial approaches, particularly Ania Loomba's analysis of Shakespeare's colonial imaginary [7, p. 142], are applied to the reading of Prospero in *The Tempest* to illuminate the racialised and imperialist dimensions of knowledge-as-mastery. The methodology thus triangulates close textual analysis, historicist contextualisation, and theoretical interpretation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Marlowe's *Faustus* opens with one of the most celebrated soliloquies in Renaissance drama, in which the protagonist surveys the entire curriculum of humanist learning — logic, medicine, law, theology — and finds each discipline inadequate to his ambition. "A greater subject fitteth Faustus' wit," he declares, turning to magic as the only pursuit worthy of his intellectual appetite [3, p. 7]. The scene encodes a deep anxiety about the humanist project: the very learning that was supposed to elevate and discipline the individual subject instead produces an insatiable desire that overreaches all sanctioned limits.

As Lisa Hopkins has argued, Faustus's trajectory enacts the Elizabethan culture's ambivalent relationship with the new learning: humanism promised new powers of understanding and self-making but simultaneously threatened to destabilise the theological and political hierarchies upon which social order depended [8, p. 56]. The play's cosmology is explicitly Calvinist in structure: Faustus is a reprobate whose damnation is foretold from the outset, and his pursuit of knowledge is figured as a reenactment of the Adamic fall — the primal transgression of divinely sanctioned limits.

Crucially, however, Faustus's forbidden knowledge does not actually deliver sovereign power. The twenty-four years he purchases from Mephistopheles are spent not in world-shaping political action but in trivial conjuring tricks and academic games. As David Bevington observes, "the disproportion between Faustus's titanic ambition and the petty uses to which he puts his power is one of the play's most searching ironies" [3, p. xxvi]. This ironic gap between knowledge-as-promised-power and knowledge-as-actually-experienced-impotence is central to Marlowe's critique. The play suggests that transgressive knowledge, however spectacular in its ambition, is ultimately recuperated within the very power structures it seeks to exceed — Faustus is destroyed not despite his learning but because of it.

Foucault's analysis of the productive nature of power is illuminating here: the prohibition of certain forms of knowledge (necromancy, natural magic, devil-pacts) does not simply repress

those desires but actively produces them as objects of fascination and transgression [2, p. 94]. Faustus's desire is shaped by the very theological and legal discourses that condemn it. His tragedy is the tragedy of a subject who mistakes the products of power-knowledge for a means of escaping power altogether.

Where Marlowe's Faustus represents knowledge as fatal transgression, Shakespeare's Prospero embodies knowledge as the foundation of legitimate sovereignty. Exiled from his dukedom of Milan after his absorption in "secret studies" left him politically vulnerable [4, p. 1.2.89–90], Prospero has spent twelve years on his island consolidating a dominion grounded entirely in his superior learning. His magic — derived from his library of books, which he values above his dukedom — enables him to control the weather, enslave spirits, and direct the movements of every inhabitant of the island.

Post-colonial critics have been particularly attentive to the ways in which Prospero's knowledge-based authority reproduces the logic of European colonialism. Ania Loomba argues that the play stages "the connection between the acquisition of knowledge and the acquisition of territory" [7, p. 148]: Prospero's claim to rule the island rests not on prior habitation (Caliban was there before him) but on his possession of a superior epistemic technology — literacy, natural philosophy, and the command of supernatural forces. Knowledge, in this reading, is not a neutral intellectual achievement but a colonial instrument, a means by which European civilisation justified its domination of indigenous peoples and territories.

Caliban's famous complaint — "You taught me language, and my profit on't / Is I know how to curse" [4, p. 1.2.366–367] — crystallises the asymmetry of knowledge-as-power relations on the island. The colonised subject is admitted to a portion of the coloniser's knowledge (language, the rudiments of cultivation) but systematically excluded from its most powerful dimensions (books, magic, sovereignty). As Paul Brown has argued, colonial discourse works precisely through this partial incorporation: the colonised is educated enough to serve but never enough to compete [9, p. 48].

Yet Shakespeare's play, unlike Marlowe's, does not straightforwardly endorse its protagonist's knowledge-based authority. Prospero's magic is ultimately relinquished, his books drowned, his spirits freed. Whether this renunciation represents a genuine critique of the colonial enterprise or simply its successful completion — the island colonised, the usurper punished, the marriage alliance secured — remains one of the most contested questions in Shakespeare criticism. Stephen Greenblatt reads the ending as characteristic of Renaissance power's capacity to contain and manage threatening energies while appearing to release them [5, p. 234]. The play opens onto the ambiguity rather than resolving it.

Read comparatively, Doctor Faustus and *The Tempest* reveal a shared cultural logic while dramatising it through opposed generic and ideological frameworks. Both plays centre on a learned male protagonist whose relationship to knowledge is inseparable from his relationship to power; both use the figure of the spirit-servant (Mephistopheles, Ariel) to mediate the protagonist's access to supernatural capabilities; and both conclude with a reckoning in which the protagonist's knowledge-based sovereignty is put in question.

Yet the plays occupy different positions within the ideological landscape of their moment. Marlowe's tragedy, with its subversive questioning of theological authority and its sympathy for the transgressive intellectual, belongs to the culture of Elizabethan dissent that Dollimore identifies as "the radical edge" of Renaissance drama [6, p. 109]. Shakespeare's romance, by

contrast, is more conservative in its ultimate disposition: knowledge is redeemed and reintegrated into legitimate political order, even as the costs of that order are made visible.

Both works, however, share a common Foucauldian insight: that knowledge and power are not opposed but deeply entangled. The pursuit of knowledge does not liberate the subject from power — it reconfigures the subject's relationship to power, producing new forms of authority and new forms of subjection. As New Historicist criticism has consistently shown, Renaissance drama did not simply reflect the power relations of its culture but actively participated in their construction, negotiation, and transformation [1, p. 17].

CONCLUSION

This article has examined how Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare deploy the figure of the knowledge-seeking protagonist to interrogate the relationship between intellectual achievement and political power in the English Renaissance. Doctor Faustus dramatises knowledge as fatal transgression — a Promethean overreaching that the play's Calvinist structure ultimately recuperates within orthodox ideological limits, even as it records the electrifying force of the transgressive desire itself. The Tempest stages knowledge as colonial mastery — a learned sovereignty whose political productivity is real but whose moral legitimacy is persistently shadowed by the excluded, enslaved, and dispossessed.

Both plays demonstrate, in different registers, the insight that Foucault would later theorise: that knowledge is never innocent, never simply the disinterested pursuit of truth, but always embedded in and productive of relations of power. To know, in the Renaissance dramatic imagination, is always already to act upon the social world — to dominate, to transgress, to be contained, or to contain. The enduring critical vitality of these plays lies precisely in their capacity to render these dynamics with an acuity and complexity that continue to speak to readers and audiences across the centuries.

Future scholarship might profitably extend this comparative framework to other Renaissance dramatic texts — Chapman's *Bussy D'Ambois*, Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, Jonson's *The Alchemist* — to map more fully the period's dramatic engagement with the politics of knowledge. The intersection of gender, knowledge, and power, touched on briefly in the discussion of Prospero's patriarchal authority, also warrants fuller treatment. What this study establishes is the centrality of the knowledge-power nexus to the imaginative and ideological work of Renaissance drama as a whole.

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