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ENGL 2172

29 November 2020

Humanism in Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*, William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, and
John Donne's *The Flea*

The transition from the Medieval literary period to the Early Modern period saw a decline in Scholasticism and a rise in Humanism. Scholastic thinking which was characterized by using the disputation method of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis to reconcile ancient teachings and Christian doctrines faced the opposition of Humanist thinking which emphasized human learning, reason, and understanding while also challenging the teachings of authority figures like the Church. This shift in thinking was highlighted in the plays and poems that occurred after the works of Thomas Wright. Specifically, *Dr. Faustus* by Christopher Marlowe, *Twelfth Night* by William Shakespeare, and *The Flea* by John Donne feature individuals who both challenge religious and societal authority, show new approaches to the thinking behind established institutions, and come to conclusions based on worldly understandings, all of these beings features of Humanism. Therefore, with these ideas in mind, the authors of these works use characterization and satire to focus on prominent Humanist ideals.

First, Marlowe's characterization presents the ideal depiction of Humanist thinking. His play follows a scientist whose human desires drive him to question God and Christianity. In the text, Dr. Faustus is a prideful and intellectually curious individual who is greedy for power and knowledge. Because Faustus wants to know as much as he can he summons the demon

Mephastophilis as early in the play Faustus is dismissive towards the notion of Christianity.

When he first summons Mephastophilis the demon is too ugly for him to look at, he tells him,

“Go and return an old Franciscan friar, that holy shape become a devil best” (Marlowe Scene 3

lines 25-26). There is blatant satire in these lines and shows that Faustus is critical towards the

Church. During the rise of Humanism, new technologies, growing literacy rates, and an increase

in exploration caused many people to realize and understand the Church’s abuse of power and

led to them both questioning the Church and beginning the separation from Roman Catholicism

that later became Protestantism. By having a demon resemble a friar there is a sort of evil and

corruption that is recognized when someone bears when they have the title friar. This corruption

is recognized by Marlowe and his audience which explains why he has Faustus refer to it.

Though the plot of the play takes place in the middle ages, it was written in 1500, so Marlowe is

demonstrating skepticism towards established institutions like the Church. This challenge is a

key component to Humanism. Though again, Faustus wants to come to a greater understanding

of things, he wants to know as much as he can. He rejects studying philosophy, law, and

medicine because he has already overcome them and has learned all he could in the fields. He

rejects theology because he concludes that God and religion are only about sin and the

damnation of man. He is essentially above all these studies, so he turns to Mephastophilis and

questions him. He asks the demon about hell, heaven the moons, all these things Mephastophilis

hints to God being the reasoning behind them. Though as a component of Humanism, Faustus

wants to come to understandings on his own, so he travels the world with the demon’s help and

capitalizes on the power his knowledge grants him. With the introduction of Humanism,

humanist thinkers sought to know the causes and reasons behind things, and they wanted to

observe things and not just accept them. Marlowe’s characterization of Dr. Faustus and the

struggles he experiences exemplify Humanism as he shows Faustus putting his pride over most things and challenging religious and insulting religious authority.

A similar challenge to the priesthood and a worldly understanding of things appear in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* with the characterization of the Fool. The Humanism that appears in Marlowe's and Shakespeare's works is remarkably similar. While Marlowe uses Faustus to demonstrate the humanist qualities of challenging authority and worldly thinking, Shakespeare does the equivalent with his character the Fool. Despite his title, the Fool is one of the wisest characters in *Twelfth Night* and this is because of his humanist approach to learning. The Fool does not have the same background as those who he refers to as smart, but he is wise because he has learned from observing those around him. He compares himself to smart men and refers to the philosopher Quinapalus saying, "Better a witty Fool than a foolish wit" (Shakespeare Act 1 Scene 5 line 34). The Fool calls on this quotation to show how his position as a Fool has put him over those with a more formal education. Smart men think they are witty when really, they are foolish, while fools understand that they are not witty, they understand their position in society, so they are actually smart. Through humanist understanding the Fool has come to learn more, making him incredibly wise. After an encounter with the Fool, Viola even says, "This fellow is wise enough to play the Fool, and to do that well craves a kind of wit. He must observe their mood on whom he jest [...]. This is a practice as full of labor as a wise man's art: For folly that he wisely shows is fit; but wise men, folly-fall'n, quite taint their wit" (Shakespeare Act 3 Scene 1 lines 61-69). Here she says that only clever men can be fools because they must pay attention to social undertones like mood and rank. Because the Fool has mastered his job in a way due to observations, he is smarter at playing the fool while smart men who try just look foolish. Once again because of his humanism the Fool is wiser than anyone else around him, essentially saying

that his role calls for more mental capabilities and attention than that of smarter individuals. The Fool also challenges the Church and the priesthood as he disguises himself as Sir Topas, he says, “Well, I’ll put it on and I will dissemble myself in ’t, and I would I were the first that ever disassembled in such a gown” (Shakespeare Act 4 Scene 2 lines 4-6). In these lines the Fools essentially is saying that he is not the first person to lie while wearing priest robes. Once again, there is irony and satire behind who is disguising themselves as supposedly holy men. Shakespeare has the Fool call members of the priesthood liars as a reference to the Church’s abuses and humanist approach to challenging institutional authority. Like Marlowe, Shakespeare’s use of characterization portrays key humanist qualities that favor man coming to their own understanding of the world and a challenge to the Christianity and religion.

The Early Modern Period also introduced the next generation of poets, sons of merchant people who used sonnets and satire to expose the failings of both individuals and institutions. John Donne, one of the next generation poets, wrote the poem *The Flea* which includes an interesting take on love. Unlike *Dr. Faustus* and *Twelfth Night*, the humanism in *The Flea* is subtle and offers challenges to societal viewpoints instead of established, concrete institutions. The humanism and satire in *The Flea* comes from Donne being an outsider to his society and the poem reflects an unorthodox approach to thinking about societal norms such as love. The speaker of the poem is a man who along with his love has been bitten by a flea. Because this flea has bitten both the man and the woman, their blood is intermingled within the flea’s body which the speaker refers to heavily has a reason why the two should sleep with one another. Unlike traditional viewpoints of love, the speaker in this poem acts from pure lust. He is not necessarily in love with the woman in this poem, however, he does want to sleep with her and spends the duration of this poem trying to convince her why she should willingly give into him. The

rationale behind this poem is humanist in its approach because as an outsider Donne has not had a very direct experience with having to think about such ideals. This, in a way, is a challenge to society's thoughts about love as the speaker in Donne's poem opposes love in favor of the worldly desire of lust. The poem in general is worldly and simple. It is direct in its intentions and tone, so the meaning of the speaker's seduction is not lost upon readers or the woman he is talking to. While the Donne's approach to love stands out in this poem, he also alludes to unorthodox thinking towards religion. In the second stanza the symbolism of the flea takes a scared approach as the speaker refers to it as their "marriage bed" and "marriage temple" (Donne line 13). In the society Donne writes in, marriage is supposed to be holy. It is ironic and satiric for Donne to refer to a symbol of lust, the flea, as a holy and sacred societal union and offers a strange balance of spiritual and lust which is also humanist. This is not necessarily a challenge to the Church and religion; however, it is a shift from traditional thinking, shifts like this were key to Humanism. The speaker even goes as far as to say that it would be "sacrilege" to kill the flea because not only is it a holy and sacred representation of lust, but it is also a reflection of both the speaker and the woman (Donne line 18). The oddly simplistic nature of this poem shows really a disregard for some strong ideologies surrounding established societal and religious viewpoints because of a different, more humanist approach to thinking. There is strong connotation to the word sacrilege and to the references of marriage, though Donne using for worldly desires is more ironic and satirical adding an element of humanism to the poem.

However, one could argue that these three works also demonstrates a skepticism to humanism itself. A catalyst towards the humanism movement was the introduction of the printing press, rising literacy rates, and the age of exploration. With all these revolutionary advancements, came an increase in learning which Marlowe specifically demonstrates

skepticism towards. There is no limit for Faustus in terms of what he is willing to do to obtain knowledge and the only reason why he wanted knowledge was for selfish purposes. This skepticism Marlowe had towards learning and knowledge can also be applied to Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* as they both demonstrate similar critiques towards institutions like the Church with characters who rely solely on human observation and behavior to obtain understanding.

Although this approach to humanism is not lost upon Donne's *The Flea* either, seeing as his speaker relies on self-observation to draw conclusions about love and lust. While this skepticism towards learning is warranted because there was no limitation to human learning during this time, skepticism and caution towards humanism and humanist learning does not discredit or hinder any of the skepticism demonstrated in these three works as the humanism period resulted in people being skeptical towards many aspects of society.

Ultimately the Early modern Period saw a rise in skepticism as Humanism promoted people to challenge authority and take a different approach to thinking. Humanist qualities are demonstrated in both Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* and William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* as Dr. Faustus and the Fool challenge established institutions like the Church and use more worldly thinking to base conclusions around. Similarly, the speaker in John Donne's *The Flea* challenges traditional societal thinking about love and relies on unorthodox, humanist reasoning to come to an understanding of lust. All three of these authors use characterization and satire to display Humanism and humanist thinking. Thus, provide references to the humanist concerns of self-thought and confronting authorities that had controlled society all the way up to the Early Modern Period.

Works Cited

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