Gothic Texts

A Challenge to Orthodox Thinking

James Giles considers *Dr Faustus*, *Wuthering Heights* and *The Bloody Chamber* in the light of the proposition that Gothic literature intends to shock, destabilise and unsettle.

It is the challenge Gothic texts provide to orthodox thinking that gives them their power. This is certainly the case for *Dr Faustus*, *Wuthering Heights* and *The Bloody Chamber*, where religious belief, moral thinking and literary orthodoxies are challenged. In challenging orthodox thinking, Gothic texts dismantle accepted certainties and fixed positions, leaving obscurity, which, for readers, might be terrifying or thrilling or even both.
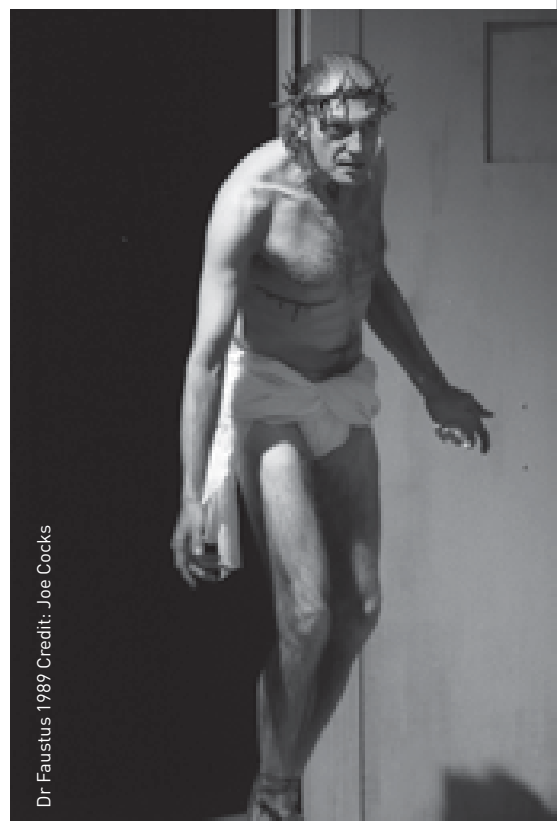
Faustus – Communicating with the Deceased

Marlowe wrote *Dr Faustus* at a time when Renaissance thinking was challenging medieval ideas. He foregrounds this tension right from the beginning, where Faustus rejects his conventional scholarly studies for necromancy, which he finds 'heavenly'. Even the terminology he uses is challenging, as necromancy would seem to suit more hellish adjectives, but Faustus inverts 'correct' and conventional attitudes towards these dark arts with his semantic choices. In this speech he is presented as a Renaissance man who finds the traditional study of divinity, law and medicine a 'drudge' and is eager to explore less conventional, more forbidden knowledge.

Questioning Heaven and Hell

This inversion of lexical meaning links to the greater challenge to orthodox thinking, explored in the text, and that is the conventional views and depictions of heaven and hell. Again, this might simply reflect the emergence of modern Renaissance ideas replacing outdated, medieval notions of hell being geographically located. Hell and, by extension, heaven are constructed in the text as psychological concepts. Mephistopheles suggests that hell, for him, is wherever he is and wherever heaven is not. In themselves, these ideas are challenging and complex, replacing

Dr Faustus 1989 Credit: Joe Cocks

simplistic but possibly comforting beliefs of hell as a burning location, where devils torture the damned, and from which you can be saved by professing belief in God. Gothic texts do not allow for comfort and certainty, which orthodoxy might provide. The greater challenge, however, to orthodox thinking lies in the total inversion of heaven and hell as respectively good and bad, desirable and despicable. Although the framing of the action within a moralising prologue and epilogue, would seem to reassure and reaffirm orthodox religious belief, 'melting heavens conspired his overthrow', this is undermined by the compelling nature of Faustus himself and an audience's attraction to him. Structurally, Marlowe positions Faustus' powerful, excited and thrilling language, 'magic has ravished me', straight after the dull, authoritarian voice of the prologue. The audience, unless entirely without imagination, will pity Faustus' fall and damnation because he has been much the most engaging character on stage (perhaps also voicing some of the sentiments the audience might secretly like to voice). Similarly, we might find heaven and God, who 'conspired' against Faustus, cruel and arbitrary in their judgement. This is further echoed in the canting, moralistic and decrepit old man, the agent of God, who is set in opposition to 'Heavenly Helen'. Heaven is shown to be hellish and hell, heavenly.

Wuthering Heights, 2012

Wuthering Heights – Unreliable Narrators

Wuthering Heights challenges not only orthodox ethical thinking but also orthodox *literary* thinking. Brontë abandons convention in the construction of her narrative, with the deployment of multiple narrators, the doubling of names and the non-linear plot-line. Abandoning more traditional literary forms creates uncertainty and confusion for the reader, who cannot be entirely happy that they understand what is going on and who is who. We cannot always be sure who is speaking, which character is being depicted and when it is happening, so that, for instance, during Zillah's narrative (framed within Nelly's which is framed within Lockwood's) we may feel only uncertainty and see only obscurity.

Questioning the Savage and Civilised

Through the dismantling of literary orthodoxies, Brontë is able to upset the reader's moral framework. She obscures orthodox moral beliefs in her presentations of the seemingly respectable Lockwood and savage Heathcliff. Their names would even seem to hint at their fixed moral positions within civilised society. And yet, it is the former who is responsible for the most shocking act when 'terror' made him 'cruel' leading him to scrape the child's wrists on the jagged glass, left by the broken window. Brontë foregrounds Lockwood's capacity for uncivilised, savage behaviour by positioning it at the start of the novel, even though it comes later, in chronological terms. Orthodox thinking in relation to civility and respectability breaks down in the world of *Wuthering Heights*. This challenge to conventional thinking is taken even further in her presentation of Heathcliff, in that his most apparently savage, taboo and uncivilised act in digging up Cathy is presented in almost tender, romantic terms. Heathcliff speaks of 'dissolving with her,

Dr Faustus, 2007

Dr Faustus © Stage on Screen

and being more happy still.' It is the reader's capacity to accept this act as a loving one that is most shocking, challenging our own moral framework and suggesting that any certain, orthodox position can quickly be dismantled and inverted.

The Bloody Chamber – Challenging Fixed Positions

Angela Carter also challenges literary orthodoxies in order to destabilise certainty. She makes use of the fairytale, constructing recognisable characters within that genre, exemplified by the sacrificial and virginal girl in the title story, 'The Bloody Chamber'. However, as we follow the arc of these stories, the allotted position for characters is dismantled, to the point where the girl in 'Wolf Alice' 'licks the blood and dirt' from the wolf's forehead. In the first story Carter pairs the innocent victim with the powerful, predatory Marquis. He watches her

with the assessing eye of a connoisseur inspecting horseflesh.

The power distribution in this relationship is orthodox, following the conventions of the fairytale genre. Even at this stage, though, Carter hints at the challenge to fixed positions that is made more apparent later. The passive victim is actually the dominant narrative voice who recognises her 'own potentiality for corruption'. The challenge becomes more obvious further into the collection as we move into 'The Tiger's Bride', where the female actively 'approaches' the beast 'as if offering' herself.

Fixed positions haven't completely broken down because, as the story's title suggests, he still has ownership of her and she is his offering. Fixed positions are much more destabilised in the final story, 'Wolf Alice'. Whereas in 'The Bloody Chamber', the girl's allotted role requires her to be saved, in 'Wolf Alice' the girl 'prowled round the bed growling, snuffing' the werewolf's wound. Ironically, a more harmonious, equal relationship between genders is established in this story, that does not rely on fixed passive and dominant partners and yet, it is this very harmony that is a challenge to accepted positions and orthodox thinking.

Texts Refusing Orthodoxy

Gothic texts refuse to offer security and resist orthodox thinking. Instead they inhabit the world of obscurity, forcing readers to confront and abandon comforting, fixed positions. So Marlowe makes us see God as 'fierce' and Lucifer as 'beautiful', Brontë challenges us to embrace taboos and view Heathcliff's orthodox moral depravity as tenderness, while Carter lets her heroine, Alice, lead us in her pity and care for the predator.

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Nicholas Collet in Third Party Production's Dr Faustus
Credit: Sarah Ainslie