

THE KNAVISH JESTER

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Goethe's Mephistopheles, the son of chaos, the knavish jester, is the opposite of what is good and right for mankind. He is the negation of the natural order, a liar and a corruptor, yet we love him. He appeals to us because he is the universe's jester; because he lets us witness the effects of excess from a distance, without having to suffer the consequences; and because he helps us appreciate reality by showing us the unreal.

That Mephistopheles is a jester we see from the first scene in *Faust*, when he visits heaven and reduces the nature of God to being "genial (441)." He tickles the reader's fancy by referring to him as the "Old Man (443)," throwing respect for the deity out the window. No human, in the presence of god, would dare to refer to him in so familiar a fashion, but we like to hear Mephistopheles do it. What man would have the audacity to make a bet with God? None, but we relish the story of Mephistopheles' bet with him. Mephistopheles appeals to us because he can get out of awkward situations which we would be unable to escape from.

Mephistopheles' sense of humor is strong throughout the play. Ironically, he first shows himself to Faust as a poodle, which not only amuses us but makes us like him – is not the dog man's best friend? He also appears to be "good" in the scene where a student believes him to be Faust and asks him for advice. Again the irony is strong; "I would not wish to lead you astray (478)," says the Devil. Mephistopheles loves to be seen as something familiar and amusing.

He continues to joke and kid with the other characters throughout the story, telling Faust to "Relax! It's fun – a little play (491)" when Faust is startled by magic. This playful attitude is how he approaches almost everything that occurs, charming the witches rather than frightening them, for the most part, and continually admonishing Faust to relax and let things happen the

way they will happen. When he takes Faust to the Witch, she cannot help but laugh at his antics. “You are a jester as you always were, (490)” she says. The Devil does not change, but continues to be a joker, and because of that, he can get away with anything, and we love him for it.

Mephistopheles tantalizes us by showing us various forms of excess that we ourselves are too conservative, or too wise, to indulge in. With Mephistopheles, though, we can see him toy with drinking, wenching, and theft, and enjoy them vicariously without having to suffer the consequences. Most notably this occurs in Auerbach’s Keller, when we meet the four derelicts, Frosch, Brander, Siebel, and Altmayer. These men exemplify all that is low, all that is useless, and all that is foul in the world. They have no families, and no jobs; they contribute nothing to society. They sit in the keller and drink, morning to night, running up bills they have no way to pay, doing nothing productive. They are the embodied negation of what men should be. Each of us, sometime, has wanted to do as they do – to sit and do nothing, not to work, not to bother with anything but ourselves. Because they appeal to the baser side of human nature, we are curious about them, and Mephistopheles shows us what they are like. He, of course, escapes without harm, true to his knavish nature.

Most appealing of all, Mephistopheles shows us magic and sorcery. He himself says that “novelties alone excite (527),” and what is more novel and strange than magic? Mephistopheles, the master of witches and wizards, throws himself recklessly into their revels, and takes Faust (and us) along with him. Where, without Mephistopheles’ aid, could we find rainbow-colored mice? Where could we dance with witches? Mephistopheles’ nonchalance is appealing, too. Magic is as nothing to him – “those are indeed the witch’s airs (525),” he says, carelessly. *He* is not overwhelmed by the surreal. *He* does not think much of the devilish arts. After all, he invented most of them. As he and Faust ride through the night on black stallions, Faust sees a

witches' guild at work around the Ravenstone. "Go by! Go by! (535)" cries Mephistopheles.

The things which so impress Faust are unimportant to him. Still, while magic is appealing, we are glad to return to the true world. Through showing us the unreal realm, Mephistopheles helps us appreciate reality.

Mephistopheles is one of the greatest characters ever written. He is the perfect knave, the perfect criminal, because he gets away with it. Mephistopheles never pays the price of his crimes; even God is so lenient as to make a bet with him. He loves chaos, and he thrives on the unordinary. We love him because this strangeness appeals to us, to an extent, and we enjoy being able to indulge in it, without paying the consequences, and still being able to return to our normal lives at the end of our jaunt with surreality. Mephistopheles makes us love him by doing the things we dare not, and getting away with them.

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