

ON THE USE OF THE OLD MAN FIGURE IN A MEDIEVAL AND A RENAISSANCE TEXT

In his book, *The Ages of Man*, J.A. Burrow reminds us that the virtues of old age most frequently mentioned in the writings surviving from Anglo-Saxon England are those that homilists and hagiographers call: *maturitas*, *gravitas*, and above all *sapientia* assuming that «true wisdom will come, in the natural course of things, only with advancing years.» (Burrow, 1986: 107)

Possibly the best remembered presentation of this idea in Old English is found at the beginning of a gnomic passage in *The Wanderer* (ll. 62-65), where the speaker reflects on the fact that day by day this world decays and falls away and, for that reason, no man can become wise until he has passed many winters in the kingdom of the earth:

Swam pes middangeard
ealra doþra gehwam dreþoseþ ond fealleþ.
Forþon ne mæg wearþan wi-s wer æm heþ æmge
wintra dæm in woruldriþce.

This connection between old age and true knowledge is a topic repeatedly mentioned by Hrothgar in his so-called sermon to Beowulf (ll. 1700–84), it is found also in *Widsith* as a whole, and in several other Old English texts.¹

But by the time we get to the Renaissance period and to one of Shakespeare's greatest tragedies in particular, we come across a witty character like the Fool in *King Lear*, who seems to know too well that it is perfectly possible to find a man advanced in age and unwise at the same time.

¹ Carlyne Larrington (1993: 211) calls Hrothgar's sermon a 'homily' which constitutes 'the climax of the theme of wisdom in *Beowulf*' and she considers it a vividly personal message, not a sermon of generalized import.

In one of the Fool's first dialogues with his master, this shrewd observer of events remarks:

Fool. If thou wert my Fool, Nuncle, I'd have thee beaten for
being old before thy time.
*Lear...*How's that?
*Fool...*Thou should'st not have been old till thou hadst
been wise. (Act I.v. 38-42)

Having been an absolute monarch always accustomed to getting his own way, Lear is old but certainly not wise, or at least not at the beginning of the play, probably because he has not yet suffered any of those losses that, according to the Old English poet, bring about true wisdom.

Professor Burrow (1986: 165) points out also that Anglo-Saxon writers far from ignoring the physical handicaps of old age, mention the topic of *incomoda senectutis* quite frequently in several of the pre-Conquest texts that have come down to us. But, on the whole, it seems that Old English authors tend to stress the moral and spiritual superiority of the old.

Does this state of affairs change in the late medieval and Renaissance period?¹ To be frank, I cannot really answer this complex question, but would like instead to centre my attention in the following on two well-known literary texts where the figure of an impressive old man appears. These texts are Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale* and Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*

In spite of all the differences between the medieval tale and the Elizabethan play, they both contain a brief but decisive passage where an old man full of spiritual and moral superiority is depicted. He represents, in both narratives, an important Biblical theme: the Christian paradox of moral strength manifesting itself in physical weakness.²

My aim here is simply to analyse and, if possible, to compare the role played by these two exemplary figures in both works. For reasons that will

¹ Alicia K. Nitecki (1982: 76) states that a convention of veneration of age and its wisdom did exist in the Fourteenth Century and Chaucer himself used it in his depiction of Egeus in *The Knight's Tale*.

² See St. Paul's II Corinthians, 12: 9, 10.

become clear, this brief comparative analysis is based on the B-text (1616) of the Marlovian play.

It is a well-known fact that *Doctor Faustus* has been preserved in two early versions, the 1604 A-text —reprinted with a few minor changes in 1609 and 1611— and the 1616 Btext. It is equally well-known that there are important differences between these two versions. According to David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen who are responsible for a fairly recent edition of both texts in modern spelling, the so-called A and B texts are:

...the products of strikingly different conditions of authorship and collaboration, revision and expansion, theatrical management, fashions in taste, religious and political ideology, censorship, and still more.¹

It seems then, that in spite of all the arguments in favour of one text or the other, we must face the fact that the play in its full, original form has probably been lost for ever and that neither version which survives is a faithful transcription of the original² While it is generally accepted that when writing *Doctor Faustus* Marlowe had at least one collaborator, there is no unanimity among scholars as to what exactly is the work of Marlowe's collaborator in each of the extant texts.

Taking all this into account, it is probably wiser to follow Warren's advice (1981: 129) that each version should be taken on its own merits. This is particularly helpful when studying a passage, such as the Old Man's episode, which has been preserved in both texts. There are remarkable textual differences between these two versions that result in at least two possible readings of the play's ending. It has been argued that in the B-text Faustus is irrevocably damned after this episode whereas in the A-text the possibility of his salvation still exists after it. (Warren, 1981: 136)

The Old Man in *The Pardoner's Tale* has been a matter of debate among Chaucerian scholars for decades, even so he still is, and probably always will be, an enigmatic figure. As far as I know, his role in the tale has not been

¹ D. Bevington and E. Rasmussen (eds.), (1993: ix). All quotations of the text are from this edition. For more information about editions of the play, see pp ix-xiv in particular.

² This is not new, and was already stated by Michael J. Warren in 1981.

compared with that played by the Old Man in *Doctor Faustus*, probably because the latter is a much simpler character.

This and other reasons notwithstanding, my point is that there are similarities in the presentation of both these figures and in the meaning of the spiritual message they convey, a message that in both cases is finally rejected.

The sudden apparition of a mysterious Old Man takes place in the tale, and in the play as well, when the stories are drawing near their respective conclusions. In both cases, this apparition marks the beginning of a crucial passage for the denouement of the plot.¹

The three rioters in Chaucer's tale are not far from their town when they suddenly come across a poor old man who humbly greets them with these words: «Now, lordes, God yow see!» (l. 716). Thus expressing the hope that God will grant them his protection. Instead of a polite answer to his gentle greeting the Old Man gets back two rude questions from one of the youngsters and is forced to answer them to the best of his ability.² Though he has travelled widely, it seems that this mysterious character has been unable to find anyone in the world who «wolde chaunge his youthe for myn age...» (l. 726). This declaration on the part of the Old Man implies, among various other things, that the general opinion about old age and the way of portraying it had probably changed by the late Middle Ages from what seemed to be the dominant convention during the Anglo-Saxon period.³

The experienced Old Man in Chaucer's tale is not talking exclusively about his own life or lamenting his present situation by drawing special attention to it. Though he uses metaphors and quotations from the Bible he is trying to convey a message about the life and death of a Christian in this

¹ In Christopher Dean's words (1968: 47) the Old Man «is responsible for a crucial twist in the direction of the narrative». Though it must be acknowledged that Charles A. Owen (1953) does not situate the crucial passage in *The Pardoner's Tale* here, but rather at the point where the revellers find the pile of gold under the oak tree.

² According to the text, it is the proudest of the rioters who —using the familiar 'thou' instead of the polite 'you'— asks the Old Man these two rude questions: «What, carl, with sory grace!/ Why artow al forwrapped save thy face?! Why lyvestow so longe in so greet age?» (ll. 717-19). See F.N. Robinson (ed.) (1957: 152), all Chaucerian quotations are from this edition.

³ Alicia K. Nitecki (1982: 81) sees the Old Man as a victim of a corrupt world that clings to youth and rejects old age. She also points to the affinity of this passage with the Fourteenth-Century meditative lyrics.

world and about the way he should behave towards others, particularly when they are old and weak.

In Matsuda's words (1992: 315) he «functions as a mirror of self-knowledge to the young and proud rioters.» He is trying to teach them a moral lesson about Charity, one of the theological virtues. But, as we all know, the three arrogant youngsters learn nothing from this meeting with the Old Man and thus waste a precious opportunity. They had already rejected, or at least ignored, the good counsels the inn-keeper and the tavern-boy had tried to give them earlier as, at that point while still in the tavern, the drunken rioters were only interested in creating an unholy brotherhood with the absurd purpose of killing Death.

Before letting the Old Man continue on his way —the one that in spite of all the difficulties will lead him to salvation— the rioters force this Godfearing man to tell them the way that will inevitably lead them to death. Physical death which, in this case, implies eternal damnation as they are already in a state of spiritual death. The Old Man's mission is not to point to the «crooked way» but quite the opposite, in fact the rioters know the path of sin too well. As A. C. Spearing tells us (1994: 37), death for the revellers lies within themselves, in their own *cupiditas* symbolized in the tale by the heap of gold. In contrast with the rioters' love of money, the Old Man's lack of interest in material possessions is evident as he would exchange them all for a simple shroud to wrap himself in.

The other mysterious Old Man who appears at the end of *Doctor Faustus* also speaks out of Charity and shows a similar lack of interest in material possessions. This is implicit in the text when he tells Faustus that he does not envy him (Act V.i.48). At the beginning of Act V we discover that Wagner, Faustus's servant, is about to inherit all of his master's property, including the house, the golden plate and «two thousand ducats ready coined», as he says with deep delight.¹ Whereas for the Old Man, the hero's most valuable possession is undoubtedly his immortal soul; he mentions it four times in his

¹ In his excellent article on the opposition between the Old Man and the rioters, John M. Steadman (1964:129) points to the fact that Chaucer also stresses the treasure's visual appeal (*concupiscentia oculorum*) and the revellers fascination with it in the following lines: «But ech of hem so glad was of that sighte, / For that the floryns been so faire and brighte, / That doune they sette hem by this precious hoord.» (ll. 773-75).

relatively short speech, he calls it «amiable soul», that is, worthy to be loved by God, and his final words before leaving the stage are these: «Faustus, I leave thee, but with grief of heart, / Fearing the enemy of thy hapless soul». (Act V.i.63-64)

His fear derives from the fact that he sees Faustus in a state of spiritual death, incapable of repenting and approaching his physical death which is soon going to take place. But Faustus has never been able to accept death as an inescapable part of man's life on this earth. Apparently his disappointment with medicine at the beginning of the play is due to the fact that physicians cannot raise the dead or make men escape the plague and live eternally... (Act I.i.19-24). A life without death in a plague-ravaged country was exactly what the rioters were looking for when they set off in search of Death to kill him: «Deeth shal be deed, if that they may hym hente!» (l. 710). And indeed in the Bible, Christ's victory on the Cross was precisely *mors mortis*, the death of Death, as prophesied in Hosea 13:14, but that was Christ's privilege.

This denial of death or the inability to understand it, is a characteristic Faustus shares with the rioters. Needless to say, the doctor from Wittenberg like any Renaissance tragic hero is meant to be taken as an individual, he is perhaps «the first figure on the English stage who deserves to be called a character» (R. Gill, 1986: xix), whereas the three rioters whose names we never know, tend to be interpreted as simple prototypes of vicious young men. However, in both works a whole way of life is clearly condemned. For that reason, at the end of the play the Chorus warns the audience not to go beyond the boundary of lawful things.¹

There is no need to stress the contrast between Faustus and the Old Man in the B-version of the play. It is similar to the sharp contrast we saw in Chaucer's tale, though here, the Old Man's speech is simple and direct, and the soliciting tone of his kind rebuke — as he calls it — seems to move Faustus at first. However, he is soon dominated by despair and Mephistopheles

¹ Helen Cooper (1989: 275) stresses the homiletic function of the story and the fact that it condemns a whole way of life rather than just three individuals. As regards the final lines of the play, their moralistic tone is so evident that it is difficult not to take them at face value. In Brockbank's words (1962:119) «the epilogue is a due and weighty warning against emulating 'forward wits' who 'practise more than heavenly power permits'»; yet they leave the wise still to wonder at the enticing depth of unlawful things.

seizes this opportunity to give him a dagger in the hope that he will stab himself. The Old Man prevents his suicide and insists on his clear message: «Then call for mercy and avoid despair» (Act V.i. 60). The idea of suicide is always unacceptable for a Christian; this is something the Old Man in Chaucer's tale knows well when he says: «And therefore moot I han myn age stille, / As longe tyme as it is Goddes wille.» (ll. 725-26). This in no way means, as it sometimes has been said, that he cannot die, it simply indicates that for the Old Man as for all those who believe in God, life rests solely in his hands.

Although he has been able to dissuade him from suicide and make him think about his sins for a moment, the Old Man's influence on Faustus is very limited. Once left alone he will return to his previous ideas of despair and will not only renew his bond with Lucifer but he will even ask Mephistopheles to torment the poor Old Man who has been so sympathetic and generous towards him: «Torment, sweet friend, that base and agèd man...» (Act V.i 79). This shows the depth of his degeneracy and moral blindness. The devils have no power over the Old Man's soul as «his faith is great», while Faustus has no faith in God and is dominated by the devils even if he does not realize it.¹ He asks again for «heavenly Helen», as he calls Helen of Troy, and once she is brought into his presence he seems to have no other interest in the world but her. Faustus utters then his famous speech of wonderment over her beauty and seems to forget entirely the existence of the Old Man (who does not reappear in the B-text), just as the rioters in the *Pardoner's Tale* forget the mysterious Old Man they have encountered as soon as they discover the treasure.

In his still frequently quoted article, W. W. Greg (1946: 106) argued that, at this point, and due to his sexual relationship with an evil spirit in the form of Helen, Faustus commits the sin of demoniality. As a result of it, the balance between possible salvation and imminent damnation has been upset and he seems to be irrevocably lost. This is the dominant impression one gets from the B-text which is usually considered nearer the morality play.² It has been

¹ The rioters are also dominated by devils throughout the story. According to the text, it is the devil who puts in the youngest reveller's mind the idea of buying poison to kill his two fellows (ll. 844-48).

² See M. Warren (1981:145), D. Bevington and E. Rasmussen (1993: 9-10 and 72-77) where Marlowe's play is also considered close to a number of Calvinist morality plays of the 1560s and 1570s. See also D. M. Bevington, (1962: 152-169); V. Thomas and W. Tydeman (1994: 11) state also that, when composing *Doctor*

noted (Bevington and Rasmussen, 1993: 127) that the presence of devils like Lucifer and Beelzebub right from the start of the final scene (Act V.ii) «lends a determinism to the tragedy not found in the A-text version».

Strictly speaking, Faustus's damnation is due to the fact that he cannot repent and accept God's mercy, as he tells one of the scholars in the final scene of the play: «The serpent that tempted Eve may be saved, but not Faustus» (Act V.ii.45). Thus he rejects the spiritual message and moral advice he is offered by the Old Man, that is, he rejects God's grace, and turns instead to Helen in the hope that she will make him immortal with a kiss: «Here will I dwell, for heaven is in these lips, / And all is dross that is not Helena» (Act V.i.99-100). But far from moving him away from the physical to the ideal, the kiss confirms him on his path to damnation (Brandt, 1985: 119) and becomes a kiss of death, a symbolic suicide (Sachs, 1964: 641).

Faustus centres all his interest in Helen just as the rioters had done with the heap of gold. It could be argued that their sins are different, avarice in one case and lust in the other, but that is irrelevant. My point is that in both stories there is a similar rejection of the spiritual —embodied in the Old Man— in favour of the material.

Even if, as said before, the figure of the Old man depicted by Marlowe or his collaborator is apparently quite simple and undoubtedly less enigmatic than Chaucer's Old Man, it is also a character that admits an allegorical interpretation as the embodiment of God's mercy towards the sinner or the penitent.¹ The essence of his exhortation being that there is still time to amend one's way and repent.

Faustus, Marlowe followed, to some extent, the broad design of the native morality play.

¹ Marlowe's Old Man is not normally interpreted allegorically but seen simply as an old man full of good will, whereas the Old Man in *The Pardoner's Tale* has been variously interpreted throughout the present century and still is the object of much attention. My colleague M. Barbeito(1983) has seen him as partly allegorical and partly realistically conceived, whereas other critics such as W.J.B. Owen(1951) or J.M. Steadman(1964) have favoured a literal interpretation of this character. M. Pittock(1974), on the other hand, viewed him as totally symbolic and not realistically conceived. The Old Man has also been related to St. Paul's *vetus homo* (Romans 5: 12-21) or seen as having affinities with the Wandering Jew and, more recently, has even been interpreted as an evil figure who places temptation in the way of the rioters and then disappears (A. H. Olsen: 1983, 370). These are just a

At least in the B-text of the play it is quite clear that the Old Man represents Faustus's last opportunity to be saved, a precious opportunity that as usual he is going to waste. There is a sense of wasted opportunity throughout the play.

It has been argued (Ornstein, 1968: 1383) that the Protestant God Marlowe presents, in his entirely orthodox work, is more a deity of power than of love. That is not, however, the God the Old Man talks about, but a merciful God who sends Faustus an angel with «a vial full of precious grace.» (Act V.i.58)

In the Pardoner's *exemplum* God's name is frequently taken in vain by the three rioters, who are constant in their use of blasphemous language. In contrast, the Old Man makes several allusions in his message to a loving and protective God (ll. 715, 726 and 748), and even prays to him to save the corrupt youngsters: «God save yow, that boghte agayn mankynde, / And yow amende!» (ll. 766-67)

As regards style, both fragments have a trait in common which also favours a comparison between them, their strong sense of narrative speed. This is probably more obvious in the play, but we should remember that Chaucer's tale has been considered a model of short story with a high proportion of direct speech, and a dialogue in which not a word is wasted (Robinson, 1957: 11).

The medieval tale and the Elizabethan play that we have been looking at, were composed, as we all know, under very different social, political and religious circumstances.¹ Even so, in the use made in both texts of the conventional wise persona motif in the figure of an Old Man, it is possible to find more than simple resemblances. This seems to indicate that the train of

few examples taken from a long list of interpretations that have been put forward in the last forty years.

¹ With the growth of Calvinism in Reformation England the circumstances in which Marlowe composed his play were quite different from those in Chaucer's Catholic England. Nevertheless, if as S.S. Hussey argued, following D. W. Robertson, (1971: 177-78) much of Chaucer and indeed of medieval literature in general, is concerned with demonstrating the Augustinian antithesis between *caritas*, love of God, and *cupiditas*, love of any earthly good for its own sake, could we not find the same train of thought underlying *Doctor Faustus* in general and the Old Man's episode in particular? Though, as already indicated in note 4, the socio-political circumstances were not even the same in 1604 and in 1616 when the A and B versions of the play were printed.

thought behind these two works (Augustinian or Calvinist) might not have been, after all, as different as we might have previously thought.

María Amelia Fraga Fuentes
Universidad de Santiago

REFERENCES

- Barbeito, M. 1983: Dos problemas formales en *The Canterbury Tales*. *Atlantis* 5, 39-53.
- Bevington, D. M. 1968: *From Mankind to Marlowe*. Harvard UP. Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- Bevington, D. and E. Rasmussen eds. 1993: *Doctor Faustus A and B-Texts*. Manchester University Press The Revels Plays, Manchester.
- Brandt, B. E. 1985: Marlowe's Helen and the Soul-in-the-kiss Conceit. *PQ*, 64, 118-121.
- Brockbank, J. 1962: The Damnation of Faustus. In Leech, C. ed. 1964: *Marlowe: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 112-119.
- Burrow, J. A. 1986: *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought*. Clarendon Press. Oxford.
- Cooper, H. 1989: *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales*. OUP. Oxford.
- Dean, C. 1968: Salvation, Damnation and the Role of the Old Man in *The Pardoner's Tale*. *ChauR* 3, 44-49.
- Gill, R. 1986 ed.: *Christopher Marlowe: Doctor Faustus*. A & C Black New Mermaids, London and New York.
- Greg, W. W. 1946: The Damnation of Faustus. Leech, C. ed., 1964, 92-107.
- Hussey, S. S. 1971: *Chaucer: An Introduction*. Methuen. London.

- Krapp, G. P. and Dobbie, E. V. K. 1936 eds.: *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records III*. Columbia UP. New York.
- Larrington, C. 1993: *A Store of Common Sense: Gnostic Theme and Style in Old Icelandic and Old English Wisdom Poetry*. Clarendon Press. Oxford.
- Matsuda, T. 1992: Death, Prudence, and Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale*. *JEGP* 91, 313-324.
- Nitecki, A. K. 1982: The Convention of the Old Man's Lament in The *Pardoner's Tale*. *ChauR* 16, 76-84.
- Olsen, A.H. 1983: They Shul Desiren to Dye, and Deeth shal Flee Fro Hem. *NM* 84, 367-71.
- Ornstein, R. 1968: Marlowe and God: The Tragic Theology of *Doctor Faustus*. *PMLA* 83, 1378-1385.
- Owen, C. A. 1953: The crucial passages in five of the *Canterbury Tales*: a study of irony and symbol. In M. Andrew 1991 ed. *Critical Essays on Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*. 51-66, University of Toronto Press. Toronto and Buffalo.
- Owen, W. J. B. 1951: The Old Man in *The Pardoner's Tale*. *RES* n.s.II. 5, 49-55.
- Pittock, M. 1974: *The Pardoner's Tale* and the Quest for Death. *Essays in Criticism* 24, n.2, 107-123.
- Robinson, F. N. 1957 ed.: *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*. OUP. Oxford.
- Sachs, A. 1964: The Religious Despair of *Doctor Faustus*. *JEGP* 63, 625-647.
- Shippey, T. A. 1976: *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English*. D. S. Brewer, Cambridge.
- Spearing, A. C. 1994 ed.: *The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale*. CUP. Cambridge. Originally published in 1965; the 1994 is a revised edition.
- Steadman, J. M. 1964: Old Age and Contemptus Mundi in *The Pardoner's Tale*, *MÆ* 33 n.2, 121-130.

Thomas, V. and W. Tydeman 1994 eds.: *Cristopher Marlowe: The plays and their sources*. Routledge. London and New York.

Warren, M. J. 1981: *Doctor Faustus: The Old Man and the Text*. *English Literary Renaissance* 11, 111-147.

* † *