

Role of Supporting Characters in Dr. Faustus

The two main characters in Dr. Faustus, the title character and Mephistophilis, have important and clearly defined roles in the story. The supporting characters seem to all play the same role, to emphasize the role that Dr. Faustus has taken on after making a bargain with the devil. The character of the Emperor, the Duke and Duchess and the Pope in the story are all there to show the power that Faustus has gained and is using, albeit foolishly, to play tricks and show up those who hold higher office than him. There are also fools such as the man who buys the horse made out of straw and those who are trying to steal his books and learn the magic that he has worked; he plays simple tricks on these characters as well although he does so with less effort and amusement. The placement of both fools and kings as the subject of Faustus' tricks as well as his respect shows that he holds both physical and mental power over the other humans in the story. Also among the secondary characters is the "chorus." Their role is clear, as almost identical to the choruses of early Greek plays, they are solely part of the narrative aspect of the play. They don't serve as an important contrast to the character of Dr. Faustus and do not interact with him at all. Instead they appear at the beginning and end of the play and a few intermediate scenes and share their lines and leave.

The only secondary character who is unique from these duties and does not seem as awed by Dr. Faustus' power and instead remains to him just what he was before he made the devil's bargain is his servant Wagner. I found the character of Wagner interesting, someone who could be played with the air of a Shakespearian fool, appraised as a simpleton by all, but perhaps wiser than any in the play, but this is just my opinion. There is little direct evidence for this character trait in the text, but the scene between Wagner and the clown where, in a simplified way, he wields power similar to Mephistophilis and the clown acts similar to Faustus, with a desire to learn the tricks, seems to show that he understands more deeply the bargain that Faustus has made with the devil. Wagner is clearly used in a narrative manner at the beginning of scene XIII when he says "I think my master means to die shortly/ For he hath given to me all his goods/ and yet, me thinks that if death were near/ he would not banquet and carouse and swill/ amongst the students, as even now he doth." I may be wrong and Wagner may not be the most intelligent or wise person in the play, but he certainly seems to have the most intuition. It almost seems that in this play there are many who have power but none that certainly have true wisdom. Other than my interpretation of Wagner, the only character that seems to come close (and is supported somewhat in the text) is the devil, the only one that uses more than just power to get what he wants, and the only one who actually ends up with what he wants.

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