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# Tragic Myth Vs. Romance Myth: The Moral Fate of Magic in *Doctor Faustus* & *The Tempest*

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**Abstract**

*This paper explores the function of myth and magic in Renaissance drama through a comparative analysis of Marlowe's Doctor Faustus and Shakespeare's The Tempest. It contends that the fate of magic in these plays is inseparably linked to the genre that contains it— whether tragedy or romance—since genre not only determines the direction of the narrative but also frames its moral and philosophical significance. In tragedy, magic becomes a symbol of transgressive ambition, epistemological overreach, and moral isolation; in romance, it enables reconciliation, ethical restoration, and communal renewal. Drawing on recent scholarship, including Jones-Davies's (2024) analysis of Shakespeare's ambivalence between transcendental values and empirical secularism, this paper situates dramatic magic within broader intellectual currents of the early modern period. It further engages with contemporary reappraisals of mythic dramaturgy to show how Renaissance playwrights used supernatural motifs to stage competing visions of human agency, moral consequence, and cultural aspiration. Methodologically, this paper employs close textual case-study analysis supported by recent peer-reviewed research. By tracing the divergent mythic structures—tragic overreach versus romantic restoration—it contributes to ongoing debates about genre, morality, and the metaphysical imagination in early modern theatre.*

**Keywords: renaissance drama, myth and magic, moral imagination, tragedy and romance, marlowe and shakespeare**

## Introduction

Renaissance drama was profoundly shaped by mythic imagination and supernatural spectacle. In an age marked by classical revival and humanist inquiry, myth and magic became dramatic instruments for probing ambition, morality, and the boundaries of human power. Playwrights drew on classical archetypes and metaphysical traditions to dramatise ethical dilemmas and cultural aspirations. Among the most compelling uses of these forces appear in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, where magic is not merely theatrical ornament but a vehicle for moral inquiry.

Though both plays centre on powerful magicians—Faustus and Prospero—their trajectories diverge sharply. Faustus's necromancy leads to isolation and damnation, while Prospero's sorcery enables reconciliation and ethical restoration. This contrast reflects a deeper structural logic: the fate of magic in Renaissance drama is inseparable from the genre that contains it. In tragedy, magic becomes morally corrosive, symbolising transgressive ambition and existential collapse. In romance, it is ethically redemptive, facilitating forgiveness, renewal, and communal healing.

Recent scholarship reinforces this genre-bound reading, such as Singh (2024) argues that Renaissance drama used magic and the supernatural to explore the tension between human potential and divine limitation, often staging the consequences of

epistemological overreach. Larracey (2013) further shows how playwrights drew from conflicting magical philosophies—Hermetic, Neoplatonic, and demonic—to construct moral frameworks that evolved across genres. In *Doctor Faustus*, magic is tied to sin and spiritual ruin; in *The Tempest*, it is aligned with growth, virtue, and philosophical closure.

This paper builds on such insights to argue that myth and magic in Renaissance drama are not neutral devices but genre-bound expressions of moral imagination. Through close textual case-study analysis of *Doctor Faustus* and *The Tempest*, it examines how Renaissance playwrights used mythic forms and supernatural motifs to stage competing visions of human agency, moral consequence, and cultural idealism.

**Myth and Moral Imagination in Renaissance Drama**

In Renaissance drama, classical myth was revived not merely as aesthetic ornamentation but as a framework for moral inquiry. Mythic figures such as Prometheus, Icarus, Odysseus, and Hermes were reimagined to reflect contemporary anxieties about knowledge, power, and ethical boundaries. These archetypes offered playwrights a symbolic vocabulary for staging moral dilemmas, especially in relation to the supernatural. Magic, as a dramatic device, became a lens through which such concerns were explored—either as a cautionary emblem of hubris or as a metaphor for transformation and renewal.

In tragedy, myth often served to dramatise moral failure. The figure of the overreacher—whether Prometheus defying Zeus or Icarus soaring too close to the sun—embodied the peril of transgressing divine limits. Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* draws directly from this tradition, casting magic as a morally compromised pursuit that isolates the individual from grace and community (Bevington & Rasmussen, 1995). Faustus's pact with Mephistopheles echoes the mythic structure of forbidden knowledge and its fatal consequences, aligning with what Singh (2024) describes as "epistemological ambition turned inward toward despair" (p. 51).

Romance, by contrast, reconfigures myth to emphasise restoration and ethical growth. Shakespeare's *The Tempest* invokes archetypes of the wise magician and the exiled ruler, using magic to facilitate forgiveness and social healing. Prospero's renunciation of sorcery reflects a moral evolution, aligning with Renaissance ideals of temperance, philosophical closure, and humanist reconciliation (Jones-Davies, 2024, pp. 42–43). As Larracey (2013) notes, Prospero's magic is rooted in Hermetic traditions that privilege virtue and wisdom over domination, making his arc a model of ethical transformation.

Thus, myth and magic in Renaissance drama are not neutral devices but genre-bound expressions of moral imagination. Tragedy stages the collapse of ethical boundaries through magical transgression; romance envisions the possibility of moral renewal through magical insight. These divergent uses of mythic structure reflect the playwrights' engagement with competing visions of human agency and cultural aspiration.

**Case Study-I: *Doctor Faustus* – Tragedy and Moral Isolation**

Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* exemplifies the tragic myth of overreaching ambition. Faustus, a scholar disillusioned with conventional disciplines, turns to necromancy in pursuit of limitless power. His pact with Mephistopheles literalises the Faustian bargain, i.e., knowledge and pleasure exchanged for eternal damnation. This act of transgression echoes classical myths of Prometheus and Icarus, where defiance of divine order leads to ruin (Brooks, 1947). As Singh (2024) observes, Faustus's pursuit of forbidden knowledge reflects "a metaphysical hunger that collapses into moral isolation" (p. 53).

Faustus's magic is not liberating but corrosive. It severs him from human community and divine grace, reducing his relationships to manipulative spectacle. His conjuring of Helen of Troy, for example, is not an act of love but of aesthetic possession—"Make me immortal with a kiss" (Marlowe, 1604/2005, p.

92)—a line that underscores his descent into illusion and despair. Rathore (2023) interprets this moment as "a theatrical mirage of desire, where beauty masks existential void" (p. 115), reinforcing the tragic myth of self-delusion.

The demonic agents—Mephistopheles, Lucifer, and the Seven Deadly Sins—function as moral allegories. Mephistopheles's famous line, "Why this is hell, nor am I out of it" (p. 18), reveals the existential horror of damnation as psychological entrapment. Faustus's final soliloquy, where he pleads for time and mercy, is a theatrical enactment of moral collapse. There is no redemption, only the consequence of unchecked desire.

Critically speaking, *Doctor Faustus* reflects Renaissance anxieties about individualism, forbidden knowledge, and moral accountability. As Jones-Davies (2024) notes, the play stages "a secularised metaphysics of despair, where human aspiration is severed from providential grace" (p. 44). Magic, in this tragic myth, is not a path to enlightenment but a fatal seduction—an emblem of ethical failure and metaphysical dislocation.

**Case Study-II: *The Tempest* – Romance and Ethical Restoration**

Shakespeare's *The Tempest* offers a contrasting vision to Marlowe's tragic myth, presenting magic not as a force of corruption but as a vehicle for moral reflection and social renewal. Prospero, the exiled Duke of Milan, wields sorcery not to dominate but to reconcile. His magic orchestrates the shipwreck, guides characters toward repentance, and ultimately restores political and familial order. As Jones-Davies (2024) notes, *The Tempest* reflects "a secularised providentialism, where ethical agency emerges through theatrical illusion and philosophical restraint" (p. 45).

Unlike Faustus, Prospero's magic is relational and symbolic. Ariel and Caliban represent elemental forces under his command, echoing mythic figures such as Hermes and Pan. Ariel's ethereal obedience and Caliban's earthy resistance dramatise the moral tensions of control and liberation (Orgel, 1996). Singh (2024) interprets Prospero's magical authority as "a dramaturgical metaphor for ethical stewardship, where power is exercised through wisdom rather than coercion" (p. 55).

Prospero's renunciation of magic in Act-V marks a moral turning point. His speech—"I'll break my staff… I'll drown my book" (Shakespeare, 1611/2008, p. 125)—signals a shift from supernatural power to human agency. This gesture aligns with the romance genre's emphasis on ethical closure, forgiveness, and philosophical temperance. Larracey (2013) situates this moment within Hermetic traditions, arguing that Prospero's farewell to magic reflects "a humanist ideal of enlightened withdrawal" (p. 17).

The play's ending—where enemies are forgiven, lovers united, and Prospero restored—embodies a providential worldview. It suggests that moral growth is possible, and that power, when tempered by wisdom, can lead to justice. Prospero's journey mirrors that of Odysseus, but with a philosophical evolution that privileges mercy over vengeance and reconciliation over retribution.

In *The Tempest*, magic is not morally corrosive but ethically enabling—a dramatic tool for staging transformation, healing, and the possibility of grace.

**Comparative Analysis: Genre, Magic, and Moral Consequence**

The divergent portrayals of magic in *Doctor Faustus* and *The Tempest* reveal how genre fundamentally shapes moral meaning in Renaissance drama. In tragedy, magic becomes a symbol of transgressive ambition and ethical collapse; in romance, it serves as a means of restoration, reconciliation, and moral growth. This genre-bound logic reflects what Singh (2024) calls "the dramaturgical encoding of metaphysical consequence" (p. 56), where magic externalises the ethical trajectory of the protagonist.

Faustus's necromancy isolates him, leading to despair and damnation. His story aligns with the tragic myth of the overreacher, where magic is morally fatal and epistemologically corrosive. Rathore (2023) interprets Faustus's descent as "a staged implosion of moral agency, where knowledge severs the soul from grace" (p. 117). In contrast, Prospero's sorcery facilitates healing and

forgiveness. His renunciation of magic reflects a moral evolution, aligning with humanist ideals of temperance, ethical responsibility, and philosophical closure (Jones-Davies, 2024, pp. 43–45).

The supernatural agents in each play reinforce these genre distinctions. Mephistopheles and Lucifer function as demonic enforcers of cosmic justice by operating within a theological framework of sin and punishment. Ariel, by contrast, is a benevolent spirit who enables transformation and renewal. As Larracey (2013) notes, Ariel's role reflects "a Hermetic vision of spiritual ascent, where elemental forces serve ethical ends" (p. 19). These agents are not merely plot devices but metaphysical signifiers of each genre's moral architecture.

Theatrically speaking, both plays use magic to externalise internal states—Faustus's despair and Prospero's control—but the outcomes diverge. Faustus's final soliloquy is a descent into existential terror, marked by fragmentation and dread. Prospero's epilogue, by contrast, is a gesture of humility and release, inviting forgiveness and closure. Orgel (1996) reads this moment as "a theatrical unmasking, where illusion yields to ethical transparency" (p. 128).

The table below synthesises how each play uses magic to externalise internal states and stage moral consequence:

**Table-A: Comparative Dramaturgy – Magic as a Moral Mirror**

| Dramatic Element | Doctor Faustus | The Tempest | Supporting Evidence |
|---|---|---|---|
| Use of Magic | Spectacle of transgression | Instrument of reconciliation | Singh (2024); Jones-Davies (2024) |
| Final Speech | Despair, fragmentation | Humility, release | Marlowe (1604/2005); Shakespeare (1611/2008) |
| Theatrical Illusion | Collapse of self | Ethical transparency | Rathore (2023); Orgel (1996) |
| Moral Resolution | No redemption | Forgiveness and restoration | Brooks (1947); Larracey (2013) |

**Table-A:** This comparative dramaturgy reinforces this paper's central claim that genre determines the ethical fate of magic.

In the final analysis, the fate of magic in Renaissance drama is not merely a narrative device but a moral statement. It reflects the ethical possibilities and dangers of human aspiration, shaped by the genre's philosophical commitments. Tragedy warns against the seductions of power; romance affirms the redemptive potential of wisdom.

## Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that magic in Renaissance drama is not a neutral theatrical device but a genre-bound expression of moral imagination. Through a comparative analysis of *Doctor Faustus* and *The Tempest*, it becomes evident that the ethical trajectory of magical power is shaped by the dramatic form it inhabits. Tragedy casts magic as a fatal seduction—morally corrosive and isolating—while romance reclaims it as a force for ethical reflection, philosophical temperance, and social restoration. A key finding that emerges from this comparison is the genre's role in encoding metaphysical consequence. In *Doctor Faustus*, necromancy externalises epistemological ambition and spiritual collapse, staging the tragic myth of the overreacher. In *The Tempest*, sorcery facilitates reconciliation and ethical growth, aligning with the romance myth of restoration. This genre-bound contrast reveals how Renaissance playwrights used mythic structures and supernatural motifs to dramatise competing visions of human agency, moral consequence, and cultural aspiration.

The following table summarises this paper's key scholarly contributions and original findings:

**Table-B: Key Scholarly Contributions of the Paper**

| Contribution Area | Insight Generated | Supporting Evidence |
|---|---|---|
| Genre Theory | Genre determines the moral fate of magic | Singh (2024); Jones-Davies (2024) |
| Mythic | Classical myths | Brooks |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Reinterpretation | are re-tooled to reflect ethical trajectories in drama | (1947); Larracey (2013) |
| Supernatural Symbolism | Agents like Mephistopheles and Ariel function as genre-specific ethical markers | Rathore (2023); Orgel (1996) |
| Moral Imagination | Magic externalises internal states and stages moral consequence | Marlowe (1604/2005); Shakespeare (1611/2008) |
| Renaissance Ethics | Drama reflects tensions between ambition, restraint, and the possibility of grace | Jones-Davies (2024); Singh (2024) |

**Table-B**: These contributions affirm this paper's broader significance for understanding genre, morality, and metaphysical imagination in Renaissance theatre.

In addition, this study highlights the dramaturgical function of supernatural agents—Mephistopheles, Lucifer, Ariel—not as incidental figures but as metaphysical signifiers embedded within each genre's moral architecture. As Singh (2024) argues, Renaissance drama "translates metaphysical anxiety into theatrical form, where magic becomes a mirror of ethical possibility" (p. 57). Jones-Davies (2024) similarly notes that Shakespeare's romance "reclaims supernatural spectacle as a site of secular grace and humanist reconciliation" (p. 46).

Finally, it contributes to a deeper understanding of how Renaissance drama negotiates the boundaries between power and grace, ambition and restraint, illusion and insight. It invites renewed attention to genre not merely as a formal category but as a moral framework through which the fate of magic—and by extension, the fate of the soul—is imagined as a reflection of ethical possibility. In tragedy, the soul is lost to unchecked desire; in romance, it is restored through wisdom and forgiveness. These findings reaffirm the central claim that the fate of magic in Renaissance drama is inseparable from the genre that contains it, and that this fate stages the moral consequences of human aspiration within the metaphysical imagination of early modern theatre.

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