

Whose Face?

by Rebecca Haque

Is there anyone churlish enough not to remember Marlowe's apotheosis of Helen of Troy in his timeless morality play, *Doctor Faustus*? Even after one has sundered all ties to the terrified Faustus at the conclusion of the play, and has relegated him to the abysmal depths of purgatory in the uncompromising clutches of diabolical forces, it is impossible not to come away with the famous lines ringing in one's ears:

Was this the face that launched a thousand ships?

And burnt the topless towers of Il-

However, at this juncture in the age of deconstruction, it is moot that we should look closely and with proper attention at the subtext, at the implication of this panegyric in the context of what it betrays about Marlowe's own assumptions and preconceptions about "Woman."

On one level, these lines obviously recreate the poet-playwright's love-affair with the classic Homeric tales of love and war and the odyssean travails of the Greek men-at-arms. They betray a deep-rooted desire to capture and concretise an enigma which has baffled bards and scops and minstrels for centuries. Of course, in Marlowe's play, Helen is phantom conjured at Faustus's whim and for his manly pleasure by Mephistopheles. Helen is beyond Faustus's reach — she is the lady in the mirror, and unlike Pygmalion who was given the gift of breathing life into his Galatea, Faustus cannot hold Helen or make her paramour.

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In sixteenth-century England — Marlowe's century — the patriarchal law-givers and law-makers had elevated marriage to the status of sacred and sanctified union, and pre-marital chastity among women of the upper and middle classes was gradually being idealised as a necessary condition in order to ensure that only legitimate heirs inherited the vast agrarian wealths of Albion. Women guilty of disobedience or infraction of the rigid patriarchal codes and social mores were swiftly and surely cloistered away in nunneries. (Who among us has not shuddered at the Hamlet-esque imperative, "Get thee to a Nunnery?") What exactly then is Marlowe doing when he is celebrating the absconding wife of red-haired Menelaus?

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Perhaps Marlowe is offering a tribute to passion and the fires of lust which rage within every human breast. Marlowe was no stranger to passion himself; we know that he wrote the erotic narrative poem *Hero and Leander*, that he wrote the pastoral song "Come live with me and be my love," and that he scrupulously translated Ovid's *Amores*. And, from the few historically verifiable incidents from his brief life, we also know him to have had a fiery and passionate temperament. Goethe's

Faust has his love and consummation with the beautiful Margaret, but Doctor Faustus — Marlowe's alter ego? his dopelganger? — has only an insubstantial shadow upon which to fantasize and project the amorous desires of the sixteenth-century male libido:

Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss

Her lips suck forth my soul — see where it flies!

Come, Helen, come, give me my soul again.

Here will I dwell, for heaven is in these lips

And all is dross that is not Helen.

What Marlowe is visualizing here in Helen's phantom form is what Blake has unequivocally described as "lineaments of gratified desire." For brief and fantastic moment, Helen becomes Laura to his Petrarch, Stella to his Astrophel. But, to put it in more immediately contemporary terms, Helen in Marlowe's vocabulary begins to assume the proportions of Elizabeth Regina, Spenser's Gloriana, the Virgin Queen of dynamic, vibrant, sensual England of Renaissance humanism. It is not too far-fetched an idea to see that Marlowe is using a subtle form of transference when he has Faustus woo Queen Helen.

Is Marlowe really wooing Queen Elizabeth?

I will be Paris, and for love of thee Instead of Troy shall Wittenberg be sacked.

And I will combat with weak Menelaus

And wear thy colors on my plumed crest...

Of course, there are noticeable parallels between Elizabeth I and Helen: in the eyes of adoring men, both are goddesses on golden pedestals at whose feet lunatics, lovers, and poets grovel and fawn. At the same time, both Elizabeth and Helen have richly sensual and sexually fulfilling private liaisons with selected noblemen. Historians have carefully documented Elizabeth's predilection for handsome young men (for example, the Earl of Essex) and her notorious habit of being in a carefully contrived state of deshabille so that foreign ambassadors and native courtiers alike could feast their eyes on her amply exposed upper body. And what do we know of Helen's demeanour and mode of dress? Alas, not very much, for blind Homer has not told us what he did not and could not see. Hearsay evidence is not permissible.

Apparently, in Helen and Elizabeth, the dichotomy between angel and whore is reconciled; it is in this merging and melding of the two aspects of womanhood and maidenhood that much of their allure, their mystery, and their enchantment lies. From the man's point of view, of course, Women generally have not responded favourably or with much sympathy to either Helen or Elizabeth. Better role-models for women have been Clytemnestra mourning for Iphigenia, Hector's wife sharing a tender moment with him on the soon-to-be-topped towers of Ilium, and even Shakespeare's Cleopatra, who seems less hypocritical and more refined in her sensibilities regarding fidelity and passion. Cleopatra did not abandon Mark Antony; Elizabeth, on the other hand, beheaded Essex, and Helen exchanged the aging Menelaus for the mortal Apollo, Paris.

Marlowe's poem is, of course, artistically and aesthetically perfect. It pleases both eye and ear; we can use his words to create an image of Helen clothed in resplendent glory and diaphanous Trojan robe:

O thou art fairer than the evening air Clad in the beauty of a thousand stars!

But, structurally, is it an integral part of the play? Would the poem's exclusion in any way damage the verisimilitude of Faustus's tragic downfall, or destroy in any way the credibility we give to the catastrophic finale? In the ultimate analysis, Marlowe's paean is a marvellous *tour de force*, an expression of his quest for an idealized beauty probably lacking in his own life.

One intriguing question remains unanswered, and will forever remain so: whose face was Marlowe imagining when he penned these passionate and exciting lines. Was it some elusive inamorata, unattainable? or, if attainable, was she also easily swayed by other men's favours? There is an inscrutable, yet palpable, note of melancholy, of regret, of self-pity in these lines which have over the years become the password of every Romeo serenading his Juliet by moonlight. So close, yet so far!

Helen, dost thou smile the Giacinda smile at the follies of lovestruck men? Dost thou also mourn — mourn for the women of Troy, for Priam's widow Hecuba, for Paris's mad sister Cassandra, for Hector's infant son bludgeoned to death against the walls of Ilium? How shall we ever know the answers to these questions? Marlowe sees only the beautiful face and the desirable body. Is there a poet born who can see into Helen's soul?

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essay

Humour in English Literature

By A S M Nurunnabi

In all its many-splendoured varieties, humour can be simply defined as a type of stimulation that leads to the laughter reflex. We find changing concepts of humour from the time of Aristotle to the influence of mass media in the contemporary world. Humour today seems to be dominated by two main factors: the influence of the mass media and the crisis of values affecting a culture in rapid transition. The former tends towards the commercialised manufacture of laughter by popular comedians and gags produced by conveyor-belt methods, the latter towards a sophisticated form of humour, sometimes larded with sick jokes.

In the sophisticated type of joke, the logic is implied and hidden. Satire is an effective tool of humour. It is a verbal caricature that shows a deliberately distorted image of a person, institution, or society. The traditional method of the caricaturist is to exaggerate those features he considers to be characteristic of his victim's personality and to simplify by leaving out everything that is not relevant for his purpose. The satirist uses the same technique, and the features of society he selects for magnification are, of course, those of which he

disapproves. The result is a juxtaposition, in the reader's mind, of his habitual image of the world in which he moves and its absurd reflection in the satirist's distorting mirror. He is made to recognise familiar features in the absurd and absurdity in the familiar. Without this double vision, the satire would be humourless.

A similar effect is achieved if, instead of exaggerating the objectionable features, the satirist projects them by means of an allegory onto a different background, such as an animal society. A succession of writers from the ancient Greek dramatist Aristophanes through Swift to such 20th-century satirists as Anatole France and George Orwell have used this technique to focus attention on deformities of society that, blunted by habit, are taken for granted.

The coarsest type of humour is the practical joke: pulling away the chair from under the dignitary's lowered bottom. The victim is perceived first as a person of consequence, then suddenly as an inert body subject to the laws of physics: authority is debunked by gravity, mind by matter; man is degraded to a mechanism. Goose-stepping soldiers acting automatons, the pedant behaving

like a mechanical robot, the Sergeant Major attacked by diarrhoea, or Hamlet getting the hiccups — all show man's lofty aspirations deflated by his all-too-solid flesh.

In Henry Bergson's theory of laughter, this dualism of subtle mind and inert matter — he calls it 'the mechanical encrusted on the living' — is made to serve as an explanation of all varieties of the comic.

From the 'bisociation' of man and machine, there is only a step to the man-animal hybrid. Walt Disney's creations behave as if they were human without losing their animal appearance. The caricaturist follows the reverse procedure by discovering horsey, mousy, or piggish features in the human face. This leads to the comic devices of imitation, impersonation, and disguise.

Another technique of humour is parody, designed to deflate hollow pretense, to destroy illusion, and to undermine pathos by harping on the weaknesses of the victim. Wigs falling off, speakers forgetting their lines, gestures remaining suspended in the air are among the parodist's favourite points of attack.

The criteria that determine whether a humorous offering will be judged good, bad, or indifferent are partly a matter of period taste and personal preference and partly dependent on the style and technique of the humourist. It would seem that these criteria can be summed up under three headings: originality, emphasis, and economy.

The merits of originality are self-evident; it provides the essential elements of surprise, which cuts across our expectation. Emphasis on local colour and ethnic peculiarities is a further means to channel emotion into humourous expressions. In the higher form of humour, however, emphasis tends to yield to the opposite kind of virtue — economy. Economy, in humour and art, does not mean mechanical brevity but implicit hints instead of explicit statements — the oblique allusion in lieu of the frontal attack. In humour, emphasis and economy are complementary techniques.

In the light of the discussion above, we may refer to situational humour created by some leading contemporary humourist authors like P G Wodehouse and John Mortimer, among others. P G Wodehouse was a legendary master of English light humour. During his lifetime, he wrote over ninety books, and his work won world-wide acclaim. He

said: "I believe there were two ways of writing novels. One is mine, making a sort of musical comedy without music and ignoring real life altogether; the other is going right deep down into life and not caring a damn." As he put it, it was not his business to brood over the cosmos, but he had the good sense and observation of a comedian and through his kindly satire, he exposed the pretentious and the unreal. There were some unique characters in his stories. He created Psmith, his first great comic character, with his stylised diction, his quick eye for the affected and the ridiculous. For many readers, the peak of his achievements are the series of novels and short stories about Bertie Wooster and his valet Jeeves and those about Lord Emsworth and Blandings. Bertie, if he is a nitwit, appeared as an endearing one who constantly plunged into situations of a kind devised to make humanity shudder, but he keeps up steady loyalty to his friend Jeeves, who got him out of difficult situations by an ingenuity of inventions of elaborate designs by which this was brought about. His stories show his profound understanding of human nature. The Blandings stories were woven with a richness of absurdity. When P G Wodehouse died in 1975 at the ripe old age of 94, he became a sort of legend as a writer of humorous stories, which are a source of perennial joy for all, young and old. He was hailed by *Time* as "A comic genius recognised in his lifetime as a classic and an old master of farce."

John Mortimer's favourite stories starring Horace Rumpole are recognised as one of the most immortals of mystery fiction. The corpulent "great defender of muddled and sinful humanity" joins a winning cast which includes his splendid wife, Hilda, his philandering colleague, Claude Erskine Brown, and his old enemy, the pompous and biased judge Bullingham — in the marvellous collection of the bluff barrister's finest moments. The tales, which deftly send up the British legal system, contain some of Rumpole's most hilarious confrontations with the overbearing and misguided gentlemen of the Bench.

Mortimer has created one of the legendary fictional detectives — a barrister who is as much a detective as Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot. Rumpole, the central figure of his stories, is worthy to join the great gallery of English oddballs ranging from Pickwick to Sherlock Holmes Jeeves and Bertie Wooster.

in memoriam

An Eulogy for a Gentle Giant — Professor Eqbal Ahmad

Professor Eqbal Ahmad was an indefatigable warrior (a giant) in the eyes of his adversary. As always, his adversaries were the "true defender" of the society — the government. In 1970 through 1972 he was fighting with the Nixon administration. He was also very critical of the autocratic military regimes in Pakistan. During Bangladesh crisis in 1971, unlike most Pakistanis he took the side of Bengalis. I personally met him in mid June 1971 outside the UN headquarters where we gathered to protest against the gratuitous killing of Bengalis by marauding Pakistani army.

mid 1970s or in Bosnia during mid 1990s. He was always in solidarity with the oppressed and dispossessed people of the globe — a mark of a true humanist I must say.

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He was there along with his good friend late Professor Feroz Ahmed. I met Feroz Ahmed two years earlier. It was an intense 15

minutes encounter with Professor Eqbal Ahmad. I could hardly imagine the present-day Bengalis would know the role Professor Eqbal Ahmad played to create a public opinion in America in support of independent Bangladesh. It was because of this American public support that Senators Walter Mondale and Frank Church were able to pass a crucial piece of legislation in the senate in early phase of Bangladesh independent movement, which essentially crippled President Nixon's desire to help the army of General Yahya Khan.

Professor Eqbal Ahmad must have rejoiced when he heard on December 16, 1971 that Pakistani army was defeated in erstwhile East Pakistan. After twenty plus years, Professor Ahmad softened his position on the break up of united Pakistan. In one of his later day articles, which I read in a collection of articles in the website of Hampshire College, he hinted that if America would

not have reneged on the promise to send spare military parts, and arms, the geopolitical history of our subcontinent would be different now. Also, a curiosity on my part — I never did find Professor Ahmad questioning the validity of Jinnah's Two Nation Theory on the face bloody birth of Bangladesh. He must have subscribed to the notion of a separate homeland for Indian Muslims. That long and meandering path from Bihar to Punjab must have made a believer out of teenage Eqbal Ahmad.

Apart from his weakness for Allama Iqbal's view on separate cultural identity for Muslims in India. Professor Eqbal Ahmad was truly a secular human being. Late Professor's good friend, Professor Edward Said of Columbia University, had written on this aspect of Eqbal Ahmad's life in a recent Dawn article.

In the spring of 1998 I visited Mrs.

Nadera Ahmad, the widow of Late Professor Feroz Ahmad. Mrs. Nadera Ahmad was a good family friend of Eqbal Ahmad. As I mentioned earlier, both Eqbal Ahmad and Feroz Ahmad had worked together in the 1970s and 80's side by side to cultivate democratic values among Pakistanis. Mrs. Feroz Ahmad told me last year that after retiring from Hampshire College, a liberal college in Massachusetts, Eqbal Ahmad had gone to Islamabad to establish a new university. That was his pet project — an ambitious one, though. But true to his character, he would take 'No' for an answer even though he knew that it would be a pipe dream to establish a free thinking institute in as backward a country as Pakistan. In this regard, fearless Eqbal Ahmad was light years ahead of his compatriots in Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad. Eqbal Ahmad must have seen the glass half-full all through his life otherwise he would not

be writing all these beautifully crafted articles for humanity or be dreaming of opening an "open" university in Pakistan.

Just few days before his death, I read his swan song in which he wrote about the evil design of Nawaz Sharif to cripple the main opposition party in Pakistan. In that article, he correctly predicted that if Nawaz Sharif can neutralize Benazir Bhutto, then Pakistan People's Party will be finished near term. This pernicious thought provoked him to write his swan song while he was literally in his death bed. He published this last piece not in Dawn, but of all places in Indian newspaper. What an irony!

There weren't any dearth of writings eulogizing Eqbal Ahmad. The deluge of all these elegiac writings by his friends must be cathartic; the purpose of which being to release emotional tension that resulted from missing one of us.

Eqbal Ahmad who was endowed with an amiable character will sorely be missed by us all. He was truly an ardent rebel par excellence. I can assure you one thing — there won't be another Eqbal Ahmad in years to come in Indian soil.

By Dr. A.H. Jaffar Ullah