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Goethe’s View on Logos

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, a world-renowned author, is also interested in scientific experimentation, the study of nature, painting, and learning about politics. This means his works, even his strictly fictitious pieces, like *Faust*, contain aspects of his other intellectual pursuits. While reading *Faust,* one can easily pick up on this emphasis in the merits of logic. Goethe does this by setting up a unique rhetorical strategy, where he discreetly pits the Aristotelian appeal of “logos” against both “pathos”, as seen in Gretchen’s character, and “ethos”, represented by Mephistopheles. Regardless of how Faust feels about logic, Goethe makes a blatant statement about the importance of knowledge and the merit of logos.

The play opens with Mephistopheles, a powerful demonic entity, asking God for permission to “test” Faust. After careful thought, God reassures himself that Faust will eventually find his way back to the path of salvation and permits Mephistopheles to wreak havoc. Mephistopheles takes full advantage of his permission from God by appearing to Faust and convincing him to sell his soul in exchange for worldly wishes. Because Faust is in such a predicament with his life (he is irreversibly fed-up with his studies, and longs for a natural human existence), he is easily convinced, and soon the contract is signed in Faust’s blood. The two embark on their shared adventure and encounter plenty of trouble. Faust meets and falls in love with a young virginal girl, Gretchen, and with aid from the smoke and mirrors of Mephisto, Gretchen returns his affection. Things quickly become complicated, and Faust fails in a vain attempt to save Gretchen from her impending doom. This is possibly the tipping point for his downward spiral. In the end, Faust is essentially a ruler of nothing – his kingdom consisting of a wide spread of empty land. He is utterly empty; the earthly goods produced by Mephisto’s sorcery no longer satisfy him. In the end, Faust is saved by God and is rid of the wrongdoings performed in life, free from the seemingly seamless contract drawn by Mephisto.

In contrast to Goethe’s view of the importance of knowledge, Faust no longer finds his studies to be productive. From the beginning, Faust is portrayed by Goethe as a distraught scholar, tired of musty books and ready to experience life and nature. He realizes that his personal life, aside from his intellect, has been neglected. “Well, that’s Philosophy I’ve read, And Law and Medicine, and I fear Theology too, from A to Z; Hard studies all, that have cost me dear. And so I sit, poor silly man, no wiser now than when I began” (Goethe 2047). Not only does Faust mention that his studies are vast, but he also recognizes that his hard work has not paid off once. Because his books are a constant reminder of this wasted potential, he feels an unnatural animosity for them. The sole comfort that he finds when locked up in his study is the Moon. He addresses this especially when he says, “Oh sad full moon, my friend, why must you see me suffer? Look your last! Here at this desk so many a night I’ve watched and waited for your light To visit me again and shine Over this paper world of mine” (Goethe 2048). Not only does Faust realize that he has a hatred for this written word, formerly of vital importance to him, but he personifies the moon, letting it know that it is his beacon of hope in his desolation. Before we take a look at the implications of this desire, let’s look at some of the possible reasons for this hatred of scholarship.

To begin, Faust, in dialogue with his associate, Wagner, reveals an interesting bit of information that could be vital to the explanation of Faust’s hatred of scholarship. Early in his life, Faust and his father procured medicines to alleviate some of the pains of a rampant sickness. While both of their intentions were wholly pure, they were unable to save those that they treated. In some cases, Faust grapples with the idea that he could have possibly been responsible for their deaths because of his remedy. He states this when saying, “So in these valleys and these villages, With those hell-syrups as our remedies, we, worse than any plague, raged far and wide. I myself poisoned thousands, I saw how They all wasted away and perished…” (Goethe 2058). Because his studies are so important to him, and because the implications of these studies yield to negative outcomes, an animosity begins to bubble up in Faust. Another possible reason for the development of Faust’s hatred of his studies is the unfulfilled desire that is being pursued through those studies. Gabriel R. Ricci spoke on this matter, saying, “… nor do I merely dwell on all the scientific paraphernalia that had promised to open the door onto Nature’s secrets… Faust almost immediately pronounces his frustration with words. To him, they are as useless as so much discarded junk. He envisions, in spite of his despair, the possibility of knowing how the world is held together from within…” (155). Faust himself acknowledges this desire to explore nature through the study of science when he says, “… Oh, take me to the hilltops, there to wander in the sweet moonlit air, by mountain caves, through fields to roam, hovering with spirits in your gloam, Cleansed of the book-learning’s fog and stew and healed by bathing in your dew!” (Goethe 2048). This episode Faust goes through parallels the life of Goethe in his study of nature and yearning to unlock its secrets. Naturally, Goethe would feel a similar frustration at times. Defaulting from knowledge, Faust tries to seek Nature’s truth in the supernatural.

Another very interesting fact to point out is as soon as Faust decides to shun his scholarly pursuits, he is “possessed” by Mephisto, made to inevitably suffer under his reign and his spellbinding contract. This relates back to a quote from Goethe, in which he comments,

In poetry, especially in that which is unconscious, before which reason and understanding fall short, and which therefore produces effects so far surpassing all conception, there is always something demonic.

So is it with music, in the highest degree, for it stands so high that no understanding can reach it, and an influence flows from it which masters all, and for which none can account. Hence, religious worship cannot dispense with it; it is one of the chief means of working upon men miraculously. Thus the daemonic loves to throw itself into significant individuals, especially when they are in high places, like Frederic and Peter the Great.

This quote encapsulates perfectly what Faust seems to be going through. Much like Frederic and Peter the Great, Faust is in a seemingly “high place”; he has a wealth of knowledge, he is not economically struggling, and he has an acquaintance who looks up to him as a role model. Goethe employs “demonic” to describe the state of man who is unable to comprehend something. Because Faust shunned his studies, and because his understanding of Nature fell short, it is fitting Mephisto enters the picture.

If we take a moment to observe Goethe’s beliefs about learning and the written word, it makes sense that Faust is inclined to dislike his work. One critic suggests, “Goethe feels that inspiration cannot be derived from reading other people’s manuscripts, but must be generated anew, as the artist (with extensional orientation) becomes inspired with actual events – rather than relying on maps, which may be old, outdated, and inaccurate” (Maas 222). I find it interesting that Faust reacts in the same way that Goethe would have – with disgust of the written word, preferring the knowledge gained from experience. This is illustrated in Faust’s growth from feeling stagnant in his study of literature to eventual divine reckoning when he is learning through the experience of Mephistopheles’ antics.

As the audience can see, there are many different variables that can be attributed to Faust’s newfound hatred of everything logical. These instances can often be closely linked with happenings and ideals that Goethe holds as well, but how does Goethe set up the argument for logos? Let us explore the triumph of logos over the other two Aristotelian appeals, ethos and pathos.

Gretchen could be seen as the typical characterization of pathos. It is appropriate, given the era that Goethe is writing in that the women are portrayed as weak and full of fruitless emotion. In this era, “It similarly poses a challenge to the male construct of a stylized female language of social intercourse underpinned by an assumption that women were not required to understand the things they expressed” (Corkhill 1042). From the beginning, there are some preconceived feelings of pathos for a female character simply because of this. Whether the reader is male or female, they recognize that whatever persona the character takes on, they will in some way be pitied. Another point to be made about the rhetoric of women of this time is that their language wasn’t considered to have any intellectual basis, but rather be “language of the heart” (Corkhill 1043). This is the certainly the case with Gretchen – through her rhetoric, we see a simple young woman, pious in nature and meek in attitude. This would have been the acceptable societal norm in Goethe’s time. Women were also painted to be “… high priestesses of simplicity, naturalness, and virtue” (Corkhill 1044). This is also seen as an integral part of Gretchen’s make-up.

Because Gretchen is painted as such a virtuous woman from the beginning, when Faust falls in love with her, the audience feels uneasiness about their relationship. This is not only because Faust is a character who is seen as unsure of his virtues, but because he consistently defies God throughout the play. We see this stark contrast of character values in one particular scene, where Gretchen questions Faust’s belief in God. Faust cleverly replies,

My dear, how can Anyone dare to say: I believe in Him? Ask a priest how, ask a learned man, And all their answers merely seem To mock the questioner… Who dares to claim that he believes in God? And whose heart is so dead That he has ever boldly said: No, I do not believe? Holding all things in being, Does He not hold and keep You, me, even Himself… Call it joy, or your heart, or love, or God! I have no name for it (Goethe 2102).

Through this passage, the message is clear – while Gretchen epitomizes everything Christian-like and holy in the world, Faust can’t even fully believe that such a God exists. I would even venture as far as to say he reveres himself as somewhat of a God, not only because he takes the liberties of deflowering Gretchen, but he decides the fates of both her mother and her brother. The audience finds a certain grief in the loss of such a precious thing as innocence and the fact that Gretchen’s punishment for being involved in this tryst is far more severe than the considerably mild punishment Faust receives. Gretchen is brought to insanity, reminiscent of Hamlet’s Ophelia, not only because of the loss of her family (including the child that she bore), but at the loss of her role in society as well as her chastity and piety. Faust tries to rescue her from the cold depths of the prison, but Gretchen fights back, insisting that her fate has been decided.

While Goethe is painting a convincing characterization of a “pathos” character, there are sneaky ways in which Faust, more specifically “logos”, overcomes this. From the beginning, the audience is surrounded by intellectual dialogue, intricate and clever rhetoric spoken by characters such as Faust and Mephistopheles, but Gretchen’s speech pattern is in stark contrast to this. Through her simple, unadorned language, she not only strengthens the pathos aspects of her character, but the audience begins to feel a sort of contempt for the unintelligent girl. One could revere Faust for his intellect and his apparent “power” over a powerful, demonic force. This same principle applies to Mephisto because of his clever rhymes and strength, but Gretchen does not possess anything that makes her extraordinary. She herself even acknowledges this fact when she says, “Yes, out of sight out of mind it will be! And though you talk politely – after all, you’ve many friends, and I’m sure they are all more intellectual than me” (Goethe 2095). Gretchen comes to the realization herself, recognizing Faust has her beaten miserably in the category of intellect. Faust assures her that intellect is often overrated and that he loves her the way she is. He never denies that Gretchen is not of the same intellectual status as he. She allows herself to be undermined, yet again. Another instance where Faust’s logos is triumphant over Gretchen’s pathos (and lack of intellect) is with the slaying of Gretchen’s family. At first, one feels sympathy for the poor girl, losing both her mother and her brother to Faust; however, most of the sympathy for Gretchen’s character is snuffed out. Regardless of her mental abilities, because she did not prevent Faust from killing both her brother and her mother, Gretchen prompts even greater pathos in the audience. She speaks this, after Faust suggests giving her mother the medicine, “I look at you, dear Heinrich, and somehow my will is yours, it’s not my own will now. Already I’ve done so many things for you, there’s – almost nothing left to do” (Goethe 2103). The audience sees that Gretchen does not fully understand the consequences of the action, but she is not going to prevent Faust from administering the potion. Faust’s logos wins over Gretchen’s pathos, check and mate.

Ethos is the next demon Faust’s logos has to face, and he does so beautifully. Mephistopheles stands for everything ethos, from the way in which he interacts with God to his unending degradation of humans. From the beginning, ethos is built up for Mephisto when he is seen trying to strike a deal with God. Because God is so highly revered in almost every society contemporary to Goethe’s time as well as to our own, Mephistopheles is portrayed as someone with much importance. Not only is Mephistopheles so high on the hierarchical structure that he is able to strike bargains with God, but God even admits that he doesn’t dislike Mephisto when he says, “Indeed, you may feel free to come and call. You are a type I never learnt to hate” (Goethe 2047). Mephisto has personal permission from God, the ultimate authority of everything, to try to divert Faust from the path of righteousness.

Another aspect in which Mephistopheles makes himself seem to be an authority over things is his constant bullying of the human race and his insults on the rulers of Heaven, especially through animal symbols. One critic noted Mephistopheles as saying that, “Christ, he would have it, is nothing more than an oversized flea who has received inappropriate favors” (Burns 85). Because Mephistopheles feels threatened by Jesus and his high-ranking, he degrades him to a nasty, pestilent creature, and nothing more. This is also done on many occasions in regards to the humans of the play, from the drunkards in the tavern to Faust himself. Burns writes, “Jests, insults, and references to human behavior or parts of the body are done in animal terminology, lust, greed, and uncleanliness are the topics” (85). Even when Faust is dead and the demons are gathered around to try and capture his departing soul, Mephistopheles says, “Spread your claws, they’re good sharp tools; don’t let our fluttering bird give you the slip! It must be tired of its old lodging now, and genius too- that must soar up somehow” (Goethe 2144). Speaking of Faust’s soul like it were a canary, ready to escape its cage is utterly demeaning. In the end, he feels triumphant - he has defeated God, the most powerful being in existence and outsmarted Faust, a superior scholar. After all of this happens, it is revealed to the audience that Faust is saved, fulfilling the prophesy from the beginning of the play. As a result, the audience sees one last, desperate attempt of playing on his ethos by trying to insult the angels that come to bear the news. He says, “You tall boy there, now you I’d not refuse; But why this unbecoming priestly air? Give me a lustful look instead, ah yes! And please, be all a little nakeder!” (Goethe 2147). It is no use – Mephistopheles cannot feel superior this time, no matter how many insults he throws. There are also hints at Mephistopheles’ questionable superiority when it is mentioned that he has to be invited in by Faust - he cannot enter without his permission. A critic replies, “ [Mephistopheles] may not enter anywhere at first, unless there be some one of the household who bid him to come; though afterwards he can come as he please” (McBride 118).

Throughout a substantial portion of his life, Faust abhors the knowledge he accumulates through his studies, but near the end of the play, the audience feels that perhaps Faust is coming to terms with this. As mentioned earlier, Mephistopheles represents a type of “possession” that Faust assumes when he can’t understand why his studies are worth anything. In the final pages of the play, however, he shakes off the “demonic possession”, Mephistopheles’ contract, and is saved by God himself. Through this symbolism it can be assumed that perhaps Faust understands why his knowledge is so vital. He also is fully immersed in nature at the time of his death, digging in the ground and working the land. Because his studies were wholly focused on uncracking the mysteries of Nature, perhaps Faust has found the answer that he has been searching for. Not only this, but Mephistopheles is clearly tricked by God, who outsmarts him after stringing him along for the entirety of Faust’s life. Because Faust is saved after years of being tyrannical, readers see that logos wins out; Gretchen’s life was ended very painfully and abruptly and Mephistopheles didn’t get what he wanted out of the deal.

Literature and knowledge are both integral parts of Goethe’s livelihood, as can be inferred from the above argument that Faust makes. Goethe was not only very well-educated by his father and the tutors they employed, but he always took a particular liking to poetry, and wrote on the topic numerous times. Interestingly enough, Goethe highly disapproves of being lumped into the category of German Romantic writers, feeling that nature and science go hand-in-hand, as opposed to the shunning of scientific advances that the Romantics were famous for doing. As demonstrated through his research and books especially, he finds merit in both avenues, and neither should have to be separate from each other. This is the precise case he makes in *Faust* as well, through his use of the characters to each represent an Aristotelian appeal. While both Gretchen and Mephistopheles have small victories throughout the play, it is Faust who ends up being the triumphant one, the reigning King with his logical appeals. Although he does find victory at the conclusion, one critic poses the statement, “Yet Faust’s erring in the course of his striving results in several deaths. This puts Goethe’s Faust in the middle of an extensive scholarly debate regarding his moral standing” (Fraiman-Morris 338). Interestingly enough, I feel that this is precisely what Goethe was going for – what better way to propel logos than by having the knowledge-stricken character be the center of a hot scholarly debate? There is one thing that the audience can be certain about – Goethe deliberately and persuasively uses Faust in order to make the philosophical argument that logos is vital!

Rhetorical Analysis

For this particular paper, I thought it would be especially influential if I could somehow tie in the three Aristotelian appeals of pathos, logos, and ethos to set up the structure for the argument that I believe Goethe is making. Goethe is arguing for the worth of the written word and logic, especially as related to nature. Because of this I focused the Aristotelian appeals, with a particular emphasis on that of “logos”. In order to make this work, I decided to pit each of the appeals against logos (specifically the interaction of the characters). I realized that the interactions could be taken differently by different people, so I tried to be very succinct in my points and made sure to back them up with sufficient evidence, both from the text and from other literary critics, to support my views. As far as the research went, there was relatively little that specifically dealt with the thesis I was working with, so I had to choose carefully from the broadly-written articles. To appear authoritative on the play, I tried to include sufficient quotes from the primary source.

I thought that it would make the most rhetorical sense to start with Gretchen and move my way to Mephistopheles because the characters’ personalities become stronger, and with that they illustrate my point more explicitly. Additionally, the order is chronological, meaning that the quotes are mainly also in order for ease of the reader. To begin with Gretchen and end up with God’s triumph over Mephistopheles seemed to be a straightforward way to set up the structure. I then decided to spend some time looking at the ways in which Faust comes to terms with his “logos”. This was supposed to help the reader feel catharsis at the end of the essay. To summarize it with the highlights of Goethe’s intellectual life was a relevant, concise wrap-up of the essay.

Next, I tried to set up my argument to follow the Classical Model guide. My introduction consisted of my thesis and a snippet of background information about Goethe. Next, the narration set the stage for the rest of the argument to take form. This is where I provided the basic plotline, more fully introduced my characters and what their respective appeals were, and began to shape my argument. The confirmation came with each of the appeals being pitted against one another. A common strategy for this is to rearrange the points from weakest to strongest, which is what I decided to go with. The refutation and concession was integrated in the introductory material, where I looked at the reasons why Faust disapproved of logic. While these were oppositions to my original thesis, I used this at the end to tie all the loose strings of my argument together. The summation comes when I recount Goethe’s life and how it relates to Faust’s struggles. At this point, the argument has been fully developed, and the summation is utilized to bring the case to an end.

One of the special rhetorical strategies that I tried to utilize was that of getting the audience involved by posing relevant questions, like whether or not Faust was to blame morally. Because this essay is fairly lengthy, it is vital to keep the audience captivated and in the text.

Overall, I feel my rhetorical strategies were fairly successful in setting up a convincing argument, from using the Aristotelian appeals to help my case to trying to stick to the Classical model of argumentation. I feel that I fully explained and supported how I felt about the text, and couldn’t be happier with the end result.

Annotated Bibliography

Burns, Marjorie Jean, and Laureen K. Nussbaum. “ ‘Das Flohlied’ in Goethe’s Faust: Mephistopheles’ Parable of the Politics of Heaven”. *Papers on Language & Literature 16.1*. (Jan 2008): 81-89. MLA. EbscoHost. Web 14 November 2012.

This article deals wholly with Mephistopheles’ feelings of inadequacy towards God, and especially the Son of God. The author cites a particular song, sung in the tavern by Mephisto. The author also points out Mephisto’s use of animal references to demean the humans in the tavern, possibly because of his feelings of inadequacy as second-best to Jesus. (This article was used in the essay).

Corkhill, Alan. “Female Language Theory in the age of Goethe: Three Case Studies”. *Modern Language Review 94.4.* (Oct 1999): 1041-1051. MLA EbscoHost. Web. 14 November 2012.

Female voice, particularly in literature, is the main focus of this article. During Goethe’s time, women weren’t thought of as people who were able to write through logic, rather only emotion. Women also stood for purity and sympathy, which really sets up an interesting case for pathos. We see Gretchen as the pathos character in Faust as well, so this seems fitting. (This article was used in the essay).

Krobb, Florian. “Priapean Pursuits: Translation, World Literature, and Goethe’s Roman Elegies”. *Orbis Litterarum 65.1.* (Feb 2010): 1-21. MLA EbscoHost. Web. 14 November 2012.

This article is all about Goethe and the language used in his work Roman Elegies. It explores the “author’s connection, not only with his sexual partner, but also with the localization in which the union took place, the symbol of European civilization, and thus with humankind in general”. While this article focuses on a different work by Goethe, I decided that it might be helpful to my study – I decided to throw it out because of its irrelevance. (This article was not used in the final essay).

Maas, David F. “Goethe’s Extensional Orientation”. *A Review of General Semantics 61.2.* (Jul 2004): 219-226. MLA. EbscoHost. Web. 14 November 2012.

This article’s main focus is on the importance of knowledge through experience rather than knowledge through reading. Goethe believed that learning should be done through experience, and that reading written word was simple regurgitation – one would not learn that way. It uses examples from the text to support the argument as well, particularly when Mephistopheles is speaking to the scholar about knowledge. (This article was used in the essay).

McBride, William Thomas. “Dracula and Mephistopheles: Shyster Vampires.” *Literature Film Quarterly 18.2.* (1990): 116-121. 14 Nov. 2012.

This article deals with the similarities between Goethe’s Mephistopheles and cinematography’s Dracula. The author points out similarities like the scholarship of both Faust and Dracula and how this has hand in the evil aspect of the story. (This article was used in the essay).

Oergel, Maike. “The Faustian Gretchen: Overlooked Aspects of a Famous Male Fantasy”. *German Life and Letters 64.1.* (1 January 2011):43-55. MLA. EbscoHost. Web. 14 November 2012.

This article focuses on Gretchen as the epitome of the male fantasy – Gretchen as Madonna, whore/witch, and nature. This is opposed to my theory that Gretchen symbolizes all that is pathos-related, so it will be used as a counter-argument for my argument. (This article was used in the essay).

Paldiel, Mordecai. “Faust and the Human Condition: Duality and the Teaching of the Sages on the Two Spirits”. *Judaism 40.2*. (1991). MLA. EbscoHost. Web. 14 November 2012.

“Faust and the Human Condition” explores the mental and psychological growth that Faust experiences from part one to part two and beyond. Not only does it place special emphasis on his intellect and the role that it plays in the situation, but it also extensively explores how Mephistopheles acts as more of a motivator to Faust’s inner desires rather than the source of the sinning. Numerous examples from Scriptural readings are given as well. (This article was not used in the essay).

Ricci, Gabriel R. “Goethe’s Faust: Poetry and Philosophy at the Crossroads.” *Humanitas 20.1/2.* (2007): 152-174. MLA. EbscoHost. Web. 14 November 2012.

This article’s main focus is the philosophy at work in Goethe’s play. It explores everything from the reproach for learning found in Faust, to his need to be a part of nature, to the implications Mephisto has on his psyche and his moral code. (This article was used in the essay).

Walker, Steven F. “Nabokov’s Lolita and Goethe’s Faust: The Ghost in the Novel”. *Comparative Literature Studies 46.3.* (2009): 512-535. MLA. EbscoHost. Web. 14 November 2012.

This essay is a comparative literature study between two stories that both include young girls being taken sexually advantage of by older men. It explores the psychological harm that can be a result of such sexual relations. The main focus of the article is Lolita though, and Gretchen is only brought in very occasionally with general comments, so this source will be of no use to me, sadly. (This article was not used in the essay).

Fraiman-Morris, Sarah. “Faust, Mephisto, and God in Else Lasker-Schuler’s IchhundIch”. *A Journal of Germanic Studies 43.3*. (Sep 2007): 337-350. MLA. EbscoHost. Web. 14 November 2012.

Instead of the focus being directly on Faust, this article compares it to another German play. There are many points to be made about the characters of Faust and Mephisto. It explores the two characters’ relationship and how Mephisto is a driving force behind Faust’s wrongdoings, but not wholly to blame. It also mentions Mephisto and his relationship with God. (This article is used in the essay).