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Marking Time in *Doctor Faustus* 5.2

It hardly needs to be noted that 5.2 of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, the scene in which the title character confronts the terror of God's judgment against the auditory background of the striking clock, directs our attention to the matter of time. The central and obvious irony here, of course, is that the twenty-four years of pseudo-divinity that seem like such a long period of time to Faustus at the beginning of the play evaporate in what now seems to him a mere instant when measured against the open-endedness of eternity. The point could hardly be made with more clarity in the scene, particularly given Faustus's repeated references throughout to the passage of time, punctuated by the ostentatious striking of the clock that literally measures in indifferent and uninflected sound the diminishing period of his time on earth. The episode contains, however, some curious thematic and dramaturgical subtleties that to my knowledge previous commentators have not considered.

After Faustus's short conversation with his fellow scholars during which he reveals to them for the first time that for the 'vain pleasure of four-and-twenty years' he has 'lost eternal joy and felicity' (40–1), Marlowe's stage direction indicates that '*The clock strikes eleven*' (64).¹ Faustus then bemoans for thirty lines the shortness of his earthly existence and the inevitability of endless damnation, ending with a wish literally to disappear 'like a foggy mist / Into the entrails of yon labouring cloud' (91–2). At this point '*The watch strikes*' a single time, marking, as Faustus himself observes, that 'half the hour is past' (96). What follows is a twenty-line segment during which Faustus expresses a longing to be turned into 'some brutish beast' so that his soul will 'dissolve' at death rather than live on and hence become subject to damnation (109–112). As Faustus curses his parents, himself, and Lucifer '*The clock striketh twelve*' (115)² and devils drag him off to hell.

This scene masterfully depicts the ironies of time as human beings tend to experience it — i.e., the paradox that time can seem virtually interminable during a period of relatively short duration and, alternatively, often seem to

slip by unnoticed during an interval of much greater length. The twenty-four years (I shall return to the significance of the number twenty-four later) that collapse into the brief period of stage action that comprises the temporal span of *Doctor Faustus* demonstrate this paradox sharply enough, but Marlowe is also at pains throughout 5.2 to embroider the idea with fine dramaturgical subtlety. I have already alluded to the disparity in length between the thirty-line interval that marks the first half hour from eleven to eleven-thirty, and the twenty-line interval that marks the succeeding half hour from eleven-thirty to midnight.³ The dramatic effect here, assuming that the two segments of the speech divided by the single stroke of the clock are spoken at roughly the same pace by an actor, is to make the half-hour interval leading up to the fatal hour of Faustus's demise *literally* transpire faster than its presumably identical counterpart. This occurrence would, obviously, produce exactly the effect that people under the pressure of time so often experience, namely that time seems to move faster at just those moments when we most want it to move slowly. Faustus's hopeless 'Ah, half the hour is past! / 'Twill all be past anon' (96–7)⁴ merely underscores verbally the grim truth about the paradox of time that both he and the audience experience together at this emotionally-charged moment in the play.

With the striking of the clock itself, however, Marlowe most ingeniously explores the paradox of earthly time. At this vital point in *Doctor Faustus* readers of the play must approach the text dramatically. In other words, they must try to recreate for themselves what is inescapable for an audience in the theatre: they must imagine an extended period of time in which absolutely *nothing* occurs on stage and all that is heard are the eleven successive strokes of the clock. A reader of the play can pass over the stage direction '*The clock strikes eleven*' (64) in an instant, but an audience in the theatre must sit and listen for perhaps thirty or forty seconds until the eleven strokes are completed with the appropriate silent pause between them that is typical of a striking clock. As we all know, for example, from any of Samuel Beckett's plays, a short period of silence without speech, especially when we are used to speech or expecting speech, can seem to last much longer than in fact it does. Such is exactly the effect achieved here. But Marlowe, only twenty lines after the single stroke of the clock, and again very much in the manner of Beckett, gives his theatre audience virtually the same experience all over again when the clock strikes twelve. At this point in the scene, and for the second time in only a few seconds, we must again endure the (twelve) successive strokes of the clock. The moment is awkward, uncomfortable, and terrifying.

I would like to suggest that the strange experience of time that we encounter here — where ‘short’ time feels ‘long’ and then, when the seemingly interminable period is over, ‘long’ time is correctly seen for the short time it really is — directly mirrors the experience of Faustus in the play. Faustus takes the seemingly ‘long’ duration of twenty-four years (‘short’ when measured against eternity) as a fit time in which to become a demi-god, to perform feats of magic that he foolishly hopes will immortalize his name and allow him thereby to live forever. Marlowe devastatingly parodies this fatal decision during 5.2 through the simple sounding of the clock. This remarkable stage prop to which our attention is riveted throughout the scene gradually and incrementally mocks Faustus’s bargain. Its remorseless striking — eleven times, one time, twelve times, *twenty-four* strokes in all — numbers with insistent forward movement each succeeding year of Faustus’s bargain even as it collapses the duration of that bargain into a short moment by condensing the twenty-four years (one year for each stroke) into the small space of an hour. The scene thus takes two separate and discrete temporal frames of reference — the twenty-four year ‘long’ space of Faustus’s bargain and the one-hour ‘short’ space that comes at the end of it — and renders them symbolically as a single moment. Long time becomes short. Faustus’s twenty-four years, symbolically enclosed in the sixty-minute space of an hour by the twenty-four strokes of the clock that simultaneously mark out the duration of *both* his long twenty-four year bargain and his short hour of terror, could hardly render his condition with more stark irony. This irony deepens, furthermore, when we consider that the ‘hour’ that Faustus and the audience experience in 5.2 is no hour at all, but merely a brief few minutes of theatrical time that seem in places ‘long’ while they are unfolding, but in fact slip away in a matter of minutes.⁵

The words Faustus uses to describe his torment in the scene acquire a special poignancy when we realize that they serve as a dramatic counterpoint to the twenty-four strokes of the clock. As each of his twenty-four years, one by one, *literally* evaporates into empty sound with each striking of the clock, Faustus, with pathetic urgency, seeks to make short time long:

Stand still, you ever-moving spheres of heaven,
That time may cease and midnight never come!
Fair nature’s eye, rise, rise again, and make
Perpetual day; or let this hour be but
A year, a month, a week, a natural day,

That Faustus may repent and save his soul!
O lente, lente currite noctis equi!
 The stars move still; time runs; the clock will strike;
 The devil will come, and Faustus must be damned. (65–76)

Faustus's last hopeless wish to transmigrate into the body of a beast in order to escape the prospect of endless damnation gets brutally shortened by the intrusion of the last twelve soundings of the clock. At its twenty-fourth sounding, the point of Faustus's earthly terminus, the short time of human life merges at last with the long time of eternity.

Notes

- 1 All citations of *Doctor Faustus* are from *Doctor Faustus: A- and B-Texts (1604, 1616)*, David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen (eds) (Manchester, 1993). I quote from the A-Text, but refer to B-Text readings in the notes when they differ substantially from A-Text readings. Lineation is, of course, different in the two texts.
- 2 B-Text: '*The clock strikes twelve*' (183).
- 3 In the B-Text the intervals are 29 lines and 17 lines respectively.
- 4 B-Text: 'O, half the hour' (167).
- 5 The number twenty-four, incidentally, could also refer ironically to the twenty-four hours of a single day which here, like the twenty-four years of Faustus's bargain, elapse in a matter of moments.