

Faust and Margaret
By Dion Boucicault

Introduction

Dionysius Lardner Boursiquot, better known as Dion Boucicault, was born to write melodramas, a credit to his questionable parentage. Although his Irish Protestant parents Anne Maria Darley and Samuel Smith Boursiquot were married at the time of his birth on 27 December 1820, his mother was also involved with childhood friend Dionysius Lardner. The true paternity has never been proven, although Lardner became the financial guardian for Boucicault when the family moved to London, which suggests he had some interest in him. Moreover, the decision to name Boucicault after Lardner certainly suggests a fondness for him, and reinforces the speculation regarding the playwright's parentage.

Melodrama followed Boucicault, both on and off the stage. Some of his most famous plays—such as “The Corsican Brothers” (1852) and “The Shaughraun” (1874)—adopted the Victorian propensity for melodrama, demonstrating the spectacular on stage. Off stage, Boucicault was involved with several women over the course of his life. He first married the wealthy Anne Guiot in 1845, presumably as a means of solving his financial difficulties. After her death, Boucicault became involved with Charles Kean's ward Agnes Robertson, who was thirteen years his junior. They married in America in 1853. In 1885, Boucicault suddenly left Agnes to marry the young actress Josephine Thorndyke, who was forty-four years his junior. Countering claims of bigamy, Boucicault disavowed his first marriage, leading to rumors regarding the legitimacy of Agnes and his children. The marriage was a scandal on both sides of the Atlantic and remained so until Boucicault's death in 1890 at age sixty-nine.

Boucicault's flight from England to marry Agnes is another example of the melodrama in his life and is a fitting introduction to his play *Faust and Margaret* (1852). The Victorian interest in the *Faust* legend, and particularly Goethe's version, is evident in the numerous adaptations which appeared through the century. Some notable adaptations include H.P. Grattan's *Faust; or, the Demon of the Drachen-Fels* (1842), William Bayle Bernard's *Faust* (1865), W.G. Wills's *Faust* (1885), and of course Dion Boucicault's *Faust and Margaret* (1854). Boucicault's play—which was a revision of Michel Carré's French adaptation of *Faust*—should have joined the ranks of his other successful plays; however, the play was attributed to Charles Kean, the manager of the Princess's Theatre where the play opened on 19 April 1854.

These numerous adaptations of Goethe's *Faust* suggest a Victorian interest in the play, but not in its original form, largely due to a misunderstanding and dislike of the original. Upon the publication of Goethe's ‘Faust, a Fragment’ in 1790, August Wilhelm Schlegel commented that ‘the meaning of this dramatic poem lies too deep, is too far-reaching, and, since the piece is only a fragment, too little developed not to run the risk that a large proportion of readers will overlook it’.¹ This remark rang all too true for Goethe's British audience, who overlooked the ‘Fragment’

¹ August Wilhelm Schlegel, from *Göttingische Anzeige von gelehrten Sachen* (1790), reproduced in *Faust. A Tragedy*, ed. by Cyrus Hamlin and trans. by Walter Arndt (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 2001), pp. 552-53.

and misunderstood *Faust Part I* when it appeared in 1808.² This misinterpretation of Goethe's drama by British audiences was largely due to their expectations based on Marlowe's play; as William Hauhart noted: 'The Faust-saga which the people knew, led them to expect a tragedy of sin and damnation... What they actually found in the "Fragment" was a discontented professor turning libertine, seducing a young girl and bringing upon her ruin and disgrace'.³

The expectation from British readers was for Faust to face damnation for his actions; however, as this does not occur in the first part, or, arguably, at any point in the drama, the response was that the play was simply immoral. William Taylor's analysis in the *Monthly Review* in 1810 indicated that *Faust* was 'an uncouth though fanciful mixture of farce and tragedy, of profaneness and morality, of vulgarity and beauty, of obscenity and feeling... Who can refrain from grief on receiving such trash from...Goethe?'⁴ In 1814, the *Quarterly Review* defended Taylor's comments, indicating that 'such a drama is, of course, not intended for representation, and, even in the conception of such a character, we are not sure that a degree of immorality is not involved.'⁵ This reaction to *Faust* was indicative of a British distaste for its content and resolution, particularly regarding Faust's salvation instead of damnation. The result of these early criticisms of Goethe's play was that it was absent from the London stage for more than thirty years after its publication, despite numerous versions which appeared in Germany and France. The versions that did appear on the London stage in the nineteenth century were largely adaptations of the drama rather than Goethe's original version; some of these adhered to the original design whilst others were only Faustian in name.

The complexity of the history of Goethe's *Faust* is a fitting parallel to the production history of Boucicault's play. According to Richard Fawkes, the play was originally penned in 1852 whilst Boucicault was still the resident playwright for the Princess's Theatre.⁶ However, Boucicault's involvement with Kean's ward, Agnes Robertson, led to a heated argument between he and Kean, resulting in Boucicault's departure from the Princess's Theatre with Agnes in tow. In his hasty departure, Boucicault left behind two plays, *Faust and Margaret* and *Louis XI*.⁷ Kean, still angry with Boucicault, was reluctant to do anything with the plays; as he later wrote to Sol Smith, Boucicault 'is a gentleman to whom I can never speak again, and indeed any man would lose cast here by being seen in his company'.⁸ Despite his dislike of Boucicault, he finally chose to submit *Faust and Margaret* for licensing on 3 March, 1854; the play opened on 19 April during the Easter season.

However, Kean made a few changes from the manuscript to the production, most notably changing the play's title to *Faust and Marguerite* and leaving off Boucicault's name from the playbill. Instead it was only indicated that the play was adapted from the French, although Kean

² William Frederic Hauhart, *Reception of Goethe's Faust in England in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1909), p. 21.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 21-22.

⁴ William Taylor, *Monthly Review* 1810, reproduced in Hauhart, p. 25.

⁵ Anon., *Quarterly Review* 1814, reproduced in Hauhart, pp. 30-1.

⁶ Richard Fawkes, *Dion Boucicault: A Biography* (London, Melbourne, New York City: Quartet Books, 1979), p.76.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.76.

⁸ Charles Kean, letter to Sol Smith (15 January, 1861), from the Missouri Historical Society collection. Repr. in Fawkes, pp.76-77.

did not specifically name Carré as the original French adapter.⁹ Kean's change in title to the French spelling of Margaret and his emphasis on it being a French adaptation was a means to bypass Boucicault's involvement in the adaptation, thereby writing him out of any involvement in the Princess's Theatre after his departure.

Under the title *Faust and Marguerite*, the play was a great success, running for sixty-nine nights from its opening night to the penultimate night of the season on 8 August, 1854. It was billed second on the playbill to Morris Barnett's *Married Un-Married* for most of the season, followed by a rotation of J.M. Morton's *Away with Melancholy* and William Bayle Bernard's *A Storm in a Teacup*. After a short hiatus, the play returned on 31 October as second on the bill, moving to first by 7 November, where it remained until 19 December, when the pantomime season began. In total, the play enjoyed eighty-two performances over its eight month life in 1854, an incredible feat for the period.

Although the play was financially successful, it did not receive the universal critical acclaim for which Kean would have hoped. The adaptation by Carré (and the uncredited Boucicault) was criticized by one reviewer as having 'taken a great philosophical and religious poem to pieces, and constructed, with its materials, a mere show piece for the theatre'.¹⁰ The focus of this criticism may seem contradictory to the earlier criticism leveled against Goethe's play. However, whilst Boucicault's play ends with the damnation of Faust, this reviewer seems to imply that what Boucicault produces is a simplistic version of Goethe's work. Indeed, the initial temptation of Faust is far briefer than in the original, and the exclusion of the Jobian wager between God and Mephistopheles leads to a more simplistic understanding of man's freewill, although this scene is admittedly absent from most of the Victorian adaptations.

Despite this initial criticism, the same reviewer goes on to praise the acting ability of everyone in the show, and ends by stating that the play 'was thoroughly successful; and, considered as a spectacle, deserved to be so.'¹¹ The spectacle was significantly enhanced by the talented and famous cast Kean assembled for the production. Of course Kean casted himself in the most memorable role of Mephistopheles, and the critics praised his performance. John William Cole claimed Kean 'has scarcely achieved a more decided triumph as an actor than this singular production.'¹² The cast also included David Fisher III as Faust. Fisher, son of David Fisher II and grandson of David Fisher I, had come from a respected theatre background, but only received mixed reviews regarding his performance. Carlotta Leclercq, however, who was cast as Marguerite, was praised as "delightful" by one critic, and certainly this earlier performance helped to establish her later acting career.¹³

The acting certainly contributed to the success of the play; however, given the theme of the play, its acceptance by the Lord Chamberlain was somewhat surprising. John William Cole explained:

⁹ Kean did the same with the 1854 run of Boucicault's *The Corsican Brothers*, however other playwrights were given credit for their work during this season.

¹⁰ Victoria and Albert Museum, Theatre Collections, Princess's Theatre Press Clipping, 22 April 1854: "Review of *Faust and Marguerite*", in the *Illustrated London News*.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² John William Cole, *The Life and Theatrical Times of Charles Kean, F.S.A...and a Detailed Account of the Management of the Princess's Theatre, from 1850-1859*, 2 vols (London: Richard Bentley, 1859), ii, p.105.

¹³ "Review of *Faust and Marguerite*", in the *Illustrated London News*, 22 April 1854.

There were, and are still, divided opinions as to the moral and religious tendency of this singular drama. Some objectors wondered how it passed the censorship of the Lord Chamberlain, and loudly questioned the orthodoxy of the conclusions; but the public poured in in crowds to see a beautiful and original exhibition.¹⁴

Although Cole does not specifically indicate what these objections were, we can surmise that they were, to some extent, in regard to Mephistopheles and Faust's blasphemies, but primarily against the sexual nature of Faust's seduction of Margaret. Faust paws over Margaret as they wander off together, away from Martha, Margaret's guardian; this unchaperoned rendezvous would have certainly offended Victorian propriety. Far more offensive, however, is Faust's presumptuous act of stealing several passionate kisses from Margaret, which leads the characters in Act III to claim she has been 'conquered' by Faust. This seduction and eventual deflowering of Margaret, whilst true to Goethe's original, would have been risqué for the Victorian stage.

However, there were no documented censorships from the Lord Chamberlain, and the play seemed to have been licensed without incident. However, the manuscript indicates several revisions of *Faust and Margaret* which could have been suggested and implemented by any number of people involved with the play and its production: Boucicault, Kean, the Lord Chamberlain, or even a member of the cast. The manuscript reflects these changes through the different handwriting, the different coloured ink, and the addition of new pages pasted over existing ones.

It is difficult to determine who made these changes; the new additions are not in either Boucicault or Kean's handwriting, but that does not exclude the possibility that either (or both) suggested the changes that were made. However, we can speculate that the suggestion pencilled in at the end of Act II was made by W. B. Donne or one of his underlings. This recommendation to change the play "to remove covert indelicacy" suggests the controversial material within the play, yet the suggestion is quite mild. Despite the sexual connotations of Faust's seduction of Margaret or the immorality of Faust, the play was performed. Whether it was ultimately censored by the Lord Chamberlain or proceeded as written is a source of speculation, due to the irregular recording of censorship during this time period. However, what we have in manuscript form demonstrates a play which embraces the basic elements of Goethe's *Faust* whilst appealing to a mid-Victorian enjoyment of melodrama.

¹⁴ Cole, ii, p.107.