

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE "MARVELLOUS"  
*OLD WIVES' TALE*

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The "marvellous" in English drama begins immediately and strikingly with the first known "play", the *Quem-quaeritis* trope, as the human perception of the Marys is comically juxtaposed to spiritual perception of the angels. Christ becomes the first miracle-worker as he brings a humanly unintelligible event to pass: he comes alive after being dead — the supreme miracle. Only in a romantic frame can the same thing happen again as Jack seems to be resurrected in Sacrapant's world of *The old wives' tale*.

And certainly Jack should recall Christ because both are the real centers of comedy in their particular worlds. Jack, through Eumenides' charity, can come back to life and offer himself *as a servant* to Eumenides, the wandering knight (compare everyman lost and wandering in the world). Sacrapant, a perverter of time and upsetter of the seasons, is quite similar to the Devil. Jack must finally kill this devil by simply taking away his source of power and enchantment — his sword and wreath. Without them, Sacrapant cannot maintain the illusion of youthful April and must die. He then hands the enchanter's sword to Eumenides as the ultimate source of the enchanted world is found (the Devil's creation is more powerful than the Devil himself) by turning the enchanter's own power against itself. The light which Eumenides seeks ironically contrasts with the true Light of the World and is closely associated with Lucifer. Jack, however, is not through. He has redeemed mankind — "all are restored to their former liberty" — but must make one final test of Eumenides in Old Testament form to determine the center of the knight's devotion and to demonstrate visually what is more important, the worldly love of Delia or devotion to the spiritual bond of Jack. As does Abraham with Isaac, Eumenides makes the right choice, and is therefore allowed to keep his worldly possession — having comprehended its proper place.

Eumenides makes the order of importance clear to Delia: "Thanks, gentle madam, but here comes Jack; thank him, for he is the best friend we have". Both Fantastic and Frolic think that "this Jack bore a great sway" and Madge herself recognizes Jack as "a marvellous fellow! he was but a poor man, but very well beloved". So Christ: one faithful comes to bury His body.

Diccon and Idleness, as Sacrapant, are perversions of the truly marvellous — the Christian mystery. Idleness cannot even exert her superhuman powers until Wyt is tired of dancing with Honest Recreation and consciously decides: "among the dameselles now wyl I rest me". And her powers are, like Sacrapant's, finally superficial — Wyt may clean his face and take off Ignorance's cap and gown once he looks in the glass of Reason and decides he doesn't like Idleness' art. However, Lady Idleness does have the power to transform Wyt to a "starke foole". And Wyt is internally affected by Idleness. When he encounters Experience and Science with his besotted face, he immediately and uncouthly demands a kiss of Science; not getting it, he becomes even more surly, finally threatening blows and calling Experience a whore. So Sacrapant may give Delia the potion of forgetfulness so that she cannot recognize her brothers.

Diccon's enchantment in *Gammar Gurton's needle* is less elaborate and extensive than Sacrapant's as it hinges upon Hodge's fear of the Devil. Diccon tells Hodge the Devil said something between "cat" and "rat" and finally blurted out "chat". Hodge believes Diccon so much that he immediately thinks Chat has the needle when Gammar suggests so. Tyb says the cat Gyb has been acting sick and Hodge immediately suspects the "truth" as he grabs the cat to rake it. And when Gammar decides to send for Doctor *Rat* to bring Chat to justice, Hodge seconds the motion. Diccon also causes two physical beatings: Chat vs. Gammar and Chat vs. Rat. However, Diccon is not entirely an immoral force in *Gammar Gurton's needle*. He does reveal the ridiculousness of Gammar's devotion to her needle — certainly a worldly devotion (although we are not urged to condemn her for it). Also Diccon focuses upon our belief in rumor without proof — suspicious nature. Gammar and Chat must be brought before a third power to purge their differences: quite like Clement in *Everyman In*. Finally, Doctor Rat may deserve his desert — he complains about being a priest and having to be on call; he is only interested in the profits, a stray goose or a drink.

The marvellous may then be finally a moral function: Sacrapant, like Diccon, demonstrates how we may be deceived by immediate appearance in the world. Idleness' art is finally instructive — Wyt will learn by Experience.