

**Goethe in the Theatre and Films: Faust and other Works among
Creative Artists**

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Introduction

Goethe's long life of 82 years covers a critical period in the development of the modern world. Goethe was born into a patrician family in 1749. He is sometimes referred to as the last universal man, well read in the Arts and Letters, Biology, Mining, Economics, Architecture, Horticulture, Optics, Mineralogy, etc. He was the most fully documented creative artist. Following the custom of his age, he published from time to time collected editions of his work which are too numerous to list in a short biography introducing a short paper. The first three volumes of his autobiography – *Aus Meinem Leben., Dichtung and Wahrheit* appeared between 1811 and 1814. The fourth and last volume was delayed until 1832 after his death. He worked on this volume along with the second part of his *Faust* play, and completed work on both not long before his death in 1832. Goethe was an accomplished poet, an artistic giant, the German 'Shakespeare'. His age was the golden age of German literature.

One major focus of this paper is Goethe's *Faust*, but general comments will be made on other works. The paper will also add some few words on an adaptation of one of his dramatic poems to a performance by non-theatre majors of the German language and literature section of Foreign Languages Department at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in 1999 to mark Goethe's 250th birthday. In summary, this paper discusses the reception of Goethe from three perspectives: historical, performance and reading audience perspectives.

***Faust* as Subject Matter**

The myth of *Faust* is one of the authentic myths of the modern era which has occupied many artists from different parts of the world. The myth narrates the story of Dr. Faust who actually lived in Europe in the 16th century (Boyle, 1987: 2ff). Although Goethe adapted his *Faust* from the adherents and successors of the

'Chap book', *Volksbuch: The History of Dr. John Faust. The Far-Famed Magician and Nigromancer*, published by Johann Spiess in 1587, and from Christopher Marlowe's play, *The Tragical History of The Life and Death of Doctor Faustus* written between 1588-90 (Boyle: 2ff), his play is considered a classic, and many national and international adaptations were done from it over the centuries. Goethe's *Faust* is not only an important work in the German literature it is also the most translated text of the German language (Bohnenkamp, 2000:229).

Goethe's *Faust* appears in three separate versions. He first wrote his *Urfaust* in 1790. In 1808 he published his *Faust Part One*. He continued on his *Faust Part Two* until the year of his death and though he finished it, it was published after his death. In *Volksbuch* ("Chap book"), Faust made a pact with the devil, signed in his blood to help him attain insatiable yearnings to become omnipotent, omniscient and to be everywhere he wanted to be at any time. He had twenty-four years to satisfy his longings. At the end of the twenty-four years he was brought to a tragic end. In Marlowe's *Faust* portions of *Volksbuch* were drastically altered for theatrical effect (Boyle, 1987:4). While the *Volksbuch* has as an only motive for Faust's diabolism, a perverse desire for forbidden or inaccessible knowledge, Marlowe's Faust is impelled by a desire for personal power and fulfillment, which is presented as excessive. In Marlowe's tragedy, Faust also made a pact with the devil signed in his own blood, and he also ended tragically when the time was up.

In his *Faust*, Goethe starts the first part by following the traditional myth quite closely, while working into the myth action that introduces other themes that are fully developed in his *Faust Part Two*. Unlike the traditional Faust myth, Goethe's Faust did not sign a pact with the devil in his blood. Rather, he was made to be led towards enlightenment he so much longed for by the Supreme Being. Goethe worked into his *Faust Part One* the Gretchen scenes which we are going to discuss more closely in this paper. The play ends as a tragedy of Gretchen who is ruined by Faust after seduction. Goethe's *Faust* is a play which depicts the just damnation of Faust, not because of a pact with the devil as in the traditional *Faust* sources, but because of what he has done to Gretchen.

Goethe in Films

In the earlier centuries, when *Faust* was more difficult to realize on the stage because of its episodes and action which speak of ghosts and witches, film makers were able to realize *Faust* in films. Thus, as early as 1896/97, the pioneer French film makers Louis Lumière and Georges Méliès, had produced Goethe's *Faust* in films (Goethe Institut & Inter Nations: 29).

By the year 1899, when the art of filming was still a new discovery, Goethe's 150th birthday was already being celebrated in about a dozen films on his *Faust* (Goethe Institut and Inter Nations, 1999: 13). Most of the adaptations of *Faust* into films appeared as short sketches and do not near their source of adaptation in

length. The films are however always shrouded in a dark adventure as in the original source. In adapting *Faust*, film makers simply imitate the *matter* and not the *manner* (*Stoff* and not *Form* in German). This is why we find listed as *Faust* adaptation a title named *Seven Games of the Soul*. The said title is described as 'a dark adventure game in which you play as an old black man, Marcellus Faust. In an old theme park, now condemned and abandoned because of numerous disappearances which happened there, you meet Mephistopheles, the Devil himself ...' (<http://www.mobygames.com/game/seven-games-of-the-soul>).

By 1999, when Goethe's 250th birthday was celebrated, Goethe Institut and Inter Nationes captured many of the works by Goethe which were produced in films into a book (1999). Apart from *Faust*, Goethe's novels, poems, other plays and genres have been filmed by Germans and other national film artists. The French are among the first to be attracted by Goethe's artistic talent and the works are at times adapted with different titles. As mentioned earlier, the adapters adapt the *matter* and not the *manner*. Some of Goethe's works filmed are: *Faust*, *Götz Von Berlichingen* (1773 *Gotz of Berlichingen*, drama), *Die Laune des verliebten* (1767/68 in verse and one act), *Clarigo* (1774, drama), *Die Leiden des Jungen Werthers* (*The Sorrows of Young Werther* 1774, Epistolary novel), *Die Schwester* (*The Brethren* 1776, one act drama), *Stella* (1776, drama in five acts), *Iphigenie auf Tauris* (*Iphigenia in Tauris* 1779, tragedy), *Der Erlkönig* (*King of Earls*, 1782, Ballad), *Proserpina* (1787, monodrama), *Egmont* (1788, tragedy), *Urfaust* (1790 play), *Faust Part One* (1808, play), *Faust Part Two* (1832, play), *Torquato Tasso* (1790, drama), *Die Gross-Cophta* (1792, comedy), *Reineke Fuchs* (1794, epic novel), *Unterhaltungen Deutscher Ausgewanderten* (*Conversations of German Emigrants*, 1795, novel) and *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (*Wilhelm Master's Apprenticeship*, 1795, novel).

Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* which has over five hundred pages was realized in about seventeen films, most of which appear under the name of one of the characters (Mignon). Going through the titles of many of the films, it is observed that the artists choose their titles based on their attraction in the original work. This attraction is emphasized more in the action of the film, for the film-time is always shorter than the narrative and at times the stage time of the original work. Goethe's *Die Leiden des Jungen Werthers/ The Sorrows of Young Werther* has the adaptation by Itsenplitz/Plenzdorf as occupying an important position among all other adaptations. Here again, the film adapter borrows the *Stoff* (subject matter) and builds up his own story line around his chosen main character.

Faust in Film: History and Comments

As mentioned earlier, the *Faust* myth has occupied many Western artists for centuries. Of the film realizations, those by Fredrich Wilhelm Murnau (1926) and Gustav Gründgen (1960) are rated high. These are classical adaptations modeled on the play as literature in Germany, England, France, and Italy. Other variations abound in Spain, Denmark, Hungary, Netherlands, Czechoslovakia (currently The Czech Republic and Slovakia), Serbia, Croatia, among others. The myth attracts so much interest that the original tragic theme gets realized in films not

only as tragedy but as comedy, marionettes, symbolic play, opera, and films of animation, and even as pornographic films.

In 1896/97, the French pioneer film artists Louis Lumière and Georges Méliès produced short films on the *Faust* theme (Goethe Institute and Inter Nationes: 29). Between 1897 and 1912, they had already produced about ten variations. Since 1904, versions of *Faust* where pictures and sound synchronize circulate in France and Germany. In America, Thomas Edison produced *Faust* in 1910 for his series of operas.

Gustaf Gründgen's *Faust* film in 1960 became world famous because it was done from a performance on the stage. Already in 1922, Gründgen as a young man played the role of Mephistopheles in Goethe's *Faust* on the stage at Kiel. He has interpreted this role at performance more than six hundred times; produced the play several times by himself which made him say during his 60th anniversary in 1959 that "he has lived with and for *Faust*" (Goethe Institute and Inter Nationes: 31). His production of *Faust* on the stage at Hamburg (1957) was celebrated as a cultural event of international status and the resonance was prolonged by representations in Moscow and Leningrad (1959), then New York (1961). Gründgen's *Faust* production is credited with representing the cause of modern man. The audience at the time felt that it was a mirror image of the drama of modern man (32). This is why the adaptation of the stage performance in film, and in colour, under the directorship of Gründgen himself, is a historic and artistic event. In the said film realization, with motion pictures, and all the paraphenelia employable in modern film production, something never done before then was created and marked the relationship that can exist between film and theatre. The objective of the said film was to find the just milieu between filmed theatre and pure cinema. In doing the adaptation, the film artist takes liberty to bring into the *Faust* film production those scenes that are not realizable on the stage like the flames that accompany the apparition of Méphistopheles. In the *Faust* film of Gründgen, the best was realized because he combined his talent as a good theatre artist with his expertise as cinematographer in the process.

From the above historical presentation of filming as an art, and *Faust's* productions, we can say that filming is a relatively new creative art compared with literature, theatre, music and other performing arts. Filming as an art is embellished by other arts. Thus, cinematographers are bound to benefit and realize their optimal potential if they can gain experience in other media, especially theatre. Gründgen succeeded in producing a classic among *Faust* films because of his years of experience on the same theme on the stage. The amount of productions of literary works of Goethe and other artists in films also show that literature furnish the film industry with a good percentage of its themes, and drama get the highest part of the said percentage.

The above scenario shows that theatre artists and cinematographers should work together in film productions adapted from dramas, and indeed those from other literary genres, in order to realize the best in the productions. We shall now look at Goethe in the theatre and after that, present comments on the adaptation of Goethe's dramatic poem *Erlkönig* into a performance by non-theatre majors of

the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

Goethe's *Faust* in the Theatre

Faust was difficult to produce on the stage in earlier centuries because of scenes of ghosts and witches that disappear and appear in fractions of seconds into the sky and below sea level, among other super-human feats. But in the 20th century, more performances of the three versions of *Faust* on the stage were recorded (Mahal, 1999: 144H).

Gründgen's classical theatre production in 1957 has already been mentioned, later turned into film in 1960. Suffice it to say that Goethe's *Faust* attracts heavy reception in the twentieth century theatre among the Western audience because of the imbedded themes which are lacking in many other *Faust* adaptations. Those are the themes that point to the personal journey of the protagonist Faust towards some enlightenment. Having been thrown into a state of emotional derangement in the Gretchen tragedy in *Faust Part One*, which we are going to comment on, Faust recovers in part two, with the help of nature.

The Gretchen Tragedy in Goethe's *Faust Part One*

The tragedy opens with the scene "Strasse" (street). In this scene, the protagonist Faust, rejuvenated in body and soul by his helper the devil (Mephisto) meets Margaret (Gretchen) on the way and offers to lead her home. He addresses her as 'my beautiful Miss' (Mein schönes Fräulein), which is an address to a young lady of a noble birth. Gretchen answers that she is neither beautiful nor Miss, and is able to go home unaccompanied (Goethe, 1971: 77). Then she frees herself from Faust and goes off. Gretchen's beauty becomes from this scene an object of sexual lust for Faust, the seducer, for, as Gretchen refuses his offer, he turns to Mephisto (the devil) and requests him to secure him by nightfall this girl, otherwise they (Faust and Mephisto) would fall out.

Although Faust appears in this first encounter as a seducer, he already leaves some good impression on Gretchen. In the evening in her room, a shower of emotions runs through her. She keys in a song titled 'The ballad of the King in Thule' ('Die Ballade vom König in Thule'). This ballad, which according to Goethe's own statement in his autobiography *Dichtung und Wahrheit* already existed by the summer 1774, was handed down in two editions. The 'S' version was printed in 1782 and appeared in a publication 'Volks-und andere Lieder'. The second edition 'F' appeared in Goethe's *Faust* fragment (*Urfaust*) in 1790. A third version 'U' was found much later. The edition we are using here is the modernized version of the latest edition (Werner, 1963: 148).

The ballad of six stanzas sung by Gretchen in her room presents the story of this king of Thule. It is a song of faithfulness of a man to his lover. The first three stanzas present the pre-history of the love-victim. He received a golden cup from his dying lover. He could not grant anybody this legacy as inheritance, even at

the point of death. Before he died, he sat at a meal with his dignitaries, drank the last drop of his golden cup and threw the cup into the river and died (Goethe: 2771 f). The king died, and, with him the inheritance from his love. He saw the cup drown, as it 'drank to its fill that it drank no more' ('Er sah ihn stürzen, trinken und sinken, trank nie einen Tropfen mehr'). The last drink of the king and the sinking of the cup was called by Werner Ross 'the Sacrament of Faith' (150).

Gretchen's singing of the ballad here is a confession of her love for Faust. Heinz Hamm's is of the view that the song releases her deep yearning for love of Faust (1981:43). The scene that follows the song supports Hamm's argument, because in the course of the said scene, the ground is prepared for the meeting of Faust and Gretchen. They meet and confess love to one another. The ballad marks the beginning of the tragedy of love.

For the king of Thule, everlasting faithfulness is the most important motif. The motif is however a counter-motif to the one Goethe is portraying in this tragedy. Gretchen's character is recognized in her choosing and singing the ballad. From the beginning, her love for Faust is not hidden. Even in the game with flower, which they play in the scene 'Garten, this feeling of love is expressed. But, it is doubtful whether Faust does not feel the same from that moment, for his expression at that moment shows emotional feelings of attachment to Gretchen. For Faust, 'the handshake is a sign which cannot be expressed in words...' (der Händedruck ein Zeichen für das, was unausprechlich ist ...) (Goethe: 3280f). Without expressing it, Gretchen hoped from the beginning for a life with Faust, but in accordance with her social class and religious beliefs. For these reasons, she inquires from Faust, whether he believes in God and Christian faith. She criticizes Faust's company with Mephisto. She could not understand Faust's company 'with a man who participates publicly in nothing.' Those utterances are proof of her love for Faust. With the hope of a possible marriage, she agrees to a sexual relationship, although she knows that the society frowns at it. For Gretchen, the love for Faust is equated with the love of the king of Thule for his dead lover, and she wishes like the king to remain faithful till the end. Even in the scene 'Am Brünnen' (At the water fountain) she fails to realize her fate. She believes that Faust would marry her, should she become pregnant. But her companion Lieschen understands the situation better. After the discussion with Lieschen by the water well, she hopes for the best for herself and her baby. But Faust abandons her.

In the prison scene, after killing her baby out of feeling of guilt and not out of love, Faust tries to rescue Gretchen. Only in this scene does Gretchen realize that Faust has turned away from her. She tries to get Faust to kiss her but finds him 'cold'. She laments, but in the end accepts her fate. She bears the consequences of her guilt and hopes on forgiveness from above. This is the climactic point of Gretchen's catastrophe.

In the production at Nsukka, the team had tried to present the tragedy of Gretchen from the perspective of the reading audience of the play. Some adaptations of *Faust* have in fact chosen *Gretchen* as their titles. Even in the Home Videos in Nigeria, there are many Gretchen scenes in the non-Gretchen titles.

Examples of Nigerian home movies where the male characters used and dumped their lovers as in Gretchen tragedy include: *Too Late to Claim*, *Eye for Eye*, *Deadly Proposal*, *Bitter Encounter*, *One Bad Apple*, and *Violated*. The production companies and producers behind these Nigerian adaptations of the Gretchen theme are: Prince SS Tyra, Divine Touch Ltd., Be Good Ventures Ltd, P. Collins Productions, Reemy Jes Nigeria Ltd., and Great Futures Productions, among others. It is therefore not surprising that *Faust* enjoys good audience all over the world because of the universality of the theme explored in the play.

Nigerian Appreciation of Goethe through Performances: *Erlkönig* an Opera by Mbajorgu and Troupe

Erlkönig is one of Goethe's dramatic poems. The Goethe Club is the club of the German students of the Department of Languages and Literature of the University of Nigeria at Nsukka. When the Goethe society and friends of Goethe were preparing for the 250th anniversary of Goethe birthday in 1999, we decided to participate, if not for any reason, for the fact that we had chosen *Goethe* as the name for our students' club. This is a sign that we are also friends of Goethe.

Greg Mbajorgu from Theatre Arts Department, also of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, celebrated Goethe's 250 anniversary with us by contributing some musical performances, one of which he titled "We are singing to Goethe, we are singing a new song". This performance was a musical opera. With his troupe, Mbajorgu sang to Goethe. The troupe presented Goethe's contributions to the world summarily in dance and music. Goethe was eulogized in action and words. The students of German language performed the "*Erlkönig*", and were able to move the audience with their improvisations.

The poem is based on a myth from the Netherlands which Goethe got to know about. It tells the story of *Erlkönig* (King of the spirit world) who steals small children in order to increase his population. As a dramatic poem it has the characteristics of a play. It starts with an exposition in the first stanza, building the action, crises and complications with the six middle stanzas, and ending with a denouement in the last and eighth stanza. The setting is an open field from where the father is riding home, holding firmly his sick son in his arm. The small child sees the ghost, and his accompaniments but the father does not, and as such realizes too late the sick child's predicament, when he complains to him what the *Erlkönig* is trying to do to him. There are three speaking characters and other non-speaking characters whose presence are equally affecting the sick child. The dialogues alternate between the *Erlkönig*, and the boy, then between the boy and his father. The climax is reached when the boy, in trying to get the father to realize that the *Erlkönig* is taking him by force, dies before he could get home.

The most impressive element in the students' improvisation was the costume they used for the ghost, a dark silk garment that covered the figure inside it from head to toe, with only the eyes visible. They also were very successful in teasing out and maintaining the rhythm of the poem. The poem was in fact composed with the aid of the lyre, as with many other poems by Goethe. With this

performance, the Department of Language and Literature and the student club had the satisfaction of having participated in Nigeria in celebrating the 250th anniversary of this German literary genius, sometimes referred to as the German 'Shakespeare'. Above all, through the performance the department achieved something special that year as students of German language and culture were able to engage in a practical way with this all round artist of both page and stage.

Conclusion

This paper has tried to look at the reception of the German poet Goethe in theatre and films worldwide. To do, this we have tried to look at the topic from three different perspectives namely: historical perspective on the artist's presence in films and theatres of different countries; secondly the reception of the artist among his reading audience; and finally the performance audience of the artist.

In conclusion, Goethe is found to be a favourite among international audiences, particularly in the film industry where his *Faust* is the most frequently adapted. His other works are also adapted. Filming of literary works is a form of adaptation which has proven to be an essential area in the reception of those works, because it helps the works to reach the widest possible audience. Theatre and film as arts are also shown to benefit from one another. The reception of Goethe's plays by the reading audience who also translate them into other languages for foreign audiences has also fulfilled Goethe's dream expressed in his discussion of the concept of World Literature with Eckermann in 1827 when he says,

I see always more, that poetry is the common property of mankind.... National literature does not have much claim now. World Literature is the thing of the moment (Meyers, 1986: 439).

Goethe has written his plays and other works and he no longer has much claim on them. They have become common property of humankind. The views above are reiterated by critics who posit that after the works have been adapted, little belongs to the author (Goethe Institut and Inter Nationes: 23). This is exactly the situation with the many adaptations of *Faust*.

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