SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE "MARVELLOUS"
OLD WIVES' TALE

THOMAS N. GROVE

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

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 upsetting 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
Maidge 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.

Diecon and Idleness, as Sacrapant, are perversions of the truly marvell-
ous — the Christian mystery. Idleness cannot even exert her superhuman
powers until Wyt is tired of dancing with Honest Recreation and consciou-
sonly decides: “among the dameslies 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,
be 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.

Diecon’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. Diecon
tells Hodge the Devil said something between “cat” and “rat” and finally
blurted out “chat”. Hodge believes Diecon 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 take it. And when Gammar decides to send for Doctor Rat
to bring Chat to justice, Hodge seconds the motion. Diecon also causes two
physical beatings: Chat vs. Gammar and Chat vs. Rat. However, Diecon 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 Diecon 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
Diecon, demonstrates how we may be deceived by immediate appearance in
the world. Idleness’ art is finally instructive — Wyt will learn by Experience.