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The Devil at Oxford: Philip Larkin's Jill

The notion that the devil may be abroad in Philip Larkin's novel Jill has never been advanced. But the idea is built up little by little in so many ways in the novel that it seems clear that Larkin intended to suggest it, perhaps as a level of authorial comment upon the realistic surface of the story. The author covers his tracks well in establishing this level; there is no outright magic in the novel, where everything happens about as plausibly as it must in fiction about a world where the devil is dead. But while he has kept them parallels only, Larkin does seem to have furnished the novel with a full set of Faustian parallels in the characters and plot events, borrowing from both Goethe and Marlowe.

If so, how could the Faustian parallels have gone unnoticed for more than forty years? Larkin began Jill during his last term at Oxford when he was only 21. It was published in 1946 and his second novel, A Girl in Winter, in 1947. Then Larkin turned to poetry. The novels were largely ignored until after Larkin had received recognition as a poet. When critics did turn their attention to the novels, Larkin was already associated with the empiricism and realism of the Movement poets and novelists. His

opprobrious use of the term "myth kitty" and his distaste for art "which demands undue academicism for understanding it" (Martin 26) were well known. It is not surprising, then, that critics approached the novels as realism or that the mythic parallels in Jill escaped notice. Who would have thought that when younger, Larkin had had recourse to the myth kitty himself? The Faustian parallels may be the reason that, in his introduction to the 1964 reissue of Jill, he expresses the hope that the novel will "qualify for the indulgence traditionally extended to juvenilia" (19).

When the novels are read as realism, it is no wonder that A Girl in Winter is generally considered the better novel. The usual criticisms of Jill are that it is unrealistic, that Jill's role is somewhat obscure and does not justify the lengthy passages from her narrative and diary, and that some of Kemp's actions are not sufficiently motivated. Critics have persisted in interpreting Jill as a story about a "displaced working-class hero," like John Osborne's play Look Back In Anger. In the 1964 introduction to ^{the reissue of} Jill, Larkin acknowledges that Kemp may be a "displaced working-class hero" but insists that his "hero's background, though an integral part of the story, [is] not what the story [is] about" (11). Recognition of the Faustian parallels in Jill prompts a re-evaluation of the novel because the parallels illuminate Jill's significance

and reveal the youthful Larkin's intention in his Oxford novel, i.e. what the story is about.

The story of John Kemp, the novel's Faust, takes place in the Michaelmas Term at Oxford in 1940, as Larkin informs the reader in a headnote to Jill. The scripture reading for Michaelmas describes the war in heaven, with St. Michael driving out Satan and casting him to earth. The passage ends: "Woe to the inheritors of the earth and of the sea! for the devil is come down unto you, having great wrath, because he knoweth that he hath but a short time" (Rev. 12:12). The war, then in its second year, is remote for much of the novel, but it comes to the fore at a crucial moment: the bombing of Kemp's hometown, a display of evil on a large scale which impresses him with the power of forces against which it is fatuous to struggle.

Kemp is not proud, defiant, grandiose, or overreaching, but rather the opposite of these. As the novel opens, he is a first-year scholarship student at Oxford, a policeman's son who seems to today's reader immature at eighteen. A long flashback takes the reader to his home town, Huddlesford, when Kemp was a grammar school student. A sentence in one of his school essays attracts the attention of Crouch, Kemp's casually exploitative English master, and makes him think Kemp is a likely candidate for his coaching: "Macbeth does not feel remorse, for he does not feel he has done wrong; evil is embodied in the witches, and he is not

like Macbeth
as bad as they are" (Jill 69). The sentence is important since the novel traces the route by which John Kemp comes to feel ^{as Macbeth does} this way about himself and the "witch" characters of the novel, his roommate Christopher Warner and Warner's friends.

Hoping to distinguish himself by producing a scholarship winner, Crouch plants in Kemp the ambition to go to the university and begins to coach him for the examinations. However, he soon becomes bored with the boy, and eager to be rid of him, Crouch insists that he take the scholarship examination a year earlier than planned, using the war as an excuse. Kemp does manage to win a scholarship but arrives at Oxford a year younger than is good for him. Like Macbeth, Kemp is marked for the Faustian contest from the beginning.¹

Kemp is the reverse of "a brave warrior" or "champion," as kemp denotes in dialectical British English. The word means also "contest" and "battlefield," and these do aptly describe Kemp's role throughout the novel. As he tries to come to terms with his new environment and companions at Oxford, the values of his respectable working-class upbringing war in him with other values, values which, Larkin implies with the Faustian parallels, are less benign.

The chief source of the new values is Christopher Warner, Kemp's assigned roommate at Oxford, and Warner's gang of friends from Lamprey, their public school. The

presence of Warner is pervasive; he shares not only Kemp's rooms but his tutorial sessions as well because of a wartime shortage of dons. Arrogant and self-assured, the upper middle-class Warner is more experienced than John--a likely Mephistophiles for Kemp's Faust. At first terrified of his roommate, the shy, impressionable Kemp is soon thrilled to be associated with "that rowdy man Warner" (50) and longs to be accepted into the charmed circle of Lampreians, who congregate in Warner and Kemp's rooms and make study difficult. Reminiscing about public school days around the fire while John listens, Chris and the Lampreians are depicted by Larkin as demonic in Miltonic terms:

 Their stories were lustful and playfully savage. .
 . . [John] could catch here and there a note of
 regret in their voices, a nostalgia even
 as if they were exiles gathered together far from
 their homes. . . . At first ill-treated, they had
 lived to be oppressors whose savagest desire could
 be gratified at once, which was surely the height
 of ambition. . . . All took on a picturesqueness
 in his eyes, as if they were veterans of an old
 war. (57-58)

Like Mephistophiles with Faust, Chris is alternately threatening and seductive toward John. He is soon cribbing from John's essays and spending John's small allotment of pocket money. Moreover, Warner can be vicious and violent,

as is illustrated by the incident of Semple's cupboard. Hungry after a night of drinking, Chris and another Lampreian in search of food raid the nearby college rooms of Semple. Annoyed because they can find so little, Chris overturns Semple's cupboard and smashes his dishes, awakening Semple, who tries to stop him. But Chris breaks his eyeglasses and knocks him down. Semple has the bad judgment to complain to the dean, and Chris is fined three pounds. Chris' retribution is swift: "he and some friends [catch] Semple unawares and 'crucify]' him with croquet hoops over his wrists, ankles and neck on the College lawn. This [causes] a great stir, as Semple [lies] wriggling on the lawn all night and [catches] bronchitis." Semple is ill enough to be sent home, whereas the diabolic Chris, "provably out of College that night," gets off scot-free (127-28). However, as Faust imagines that he commands Mephistophiles, John deludes himself about Chris. He is "thrilled . . . by the fact that he himself [has] nothing to fear from Christopher--or so he [thinks]--being within his circle of friends; the idea of Christopher as a protector [crosses] his mind, Christopher as a large dog that was savage to strangers" (48).

Official Oxford makes only one move in the novel to interfere between the roommates. The boys' tutor, overworked as he is in wartime Oxford, calls John in after the first tutorial session and offers to tutor him

separately. But the offer comes too late, after Kemp has begun to think of Chris as his best friend, and he refuses. The tutor presses him gently, so that Kemp must refuse three times--the magic number--and the tutor does not insist (59).

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in 1964 revision*

Soon Chris and those associated with him begin to awaken John's sexuality. Examining Chris' belongings for "a sign of kinship" (39), John finds four condoms and feels "as alarmed as if he had found a loaded revolver" (38). When Chris' mother visits Oxford, Kemp has tea with her, and Mrs. Warner, like the witch in Goethe who brews the potion for Faust, stirs John's feelings in a new way. He notices girls at his lectures. He buys a bow tie and, unable to tie it himself, is helped by Chris' girl friend Elizabeth, standing so close that John is tempted to kiss her. Noticing the expression on her face, "He [sees] in a second that she [expects] him to do this. . . . A horrible embarrassment [tingles] and [shudders] inside him, that what he imagined to be his most secret feeling [is] almost cynically common. It shocked him deeply" (109).

Larkin does give John another friend, Whitbread, like John a poor scholarship student, who challenges Warner's influence directly. "A fellow like that does no good to himself or anyone else," he tells John. "Can't you ask the Dean to move you?" (51). Like the scholar in Marlowe who warns Faust against witchcraft or Faust's good angel or the old man tormented by devils in Act V of Faustus, Whitbread

warns John repeatedly about Christopher. He pronounces the incident of Semple's cupboard "just rank hooliganism, that's all" (125). John admires Whitbread's habits of "disciplined study," like his own at home in Huddlesford; under Warner's influence, John does little or no studying.

Since he can have Whitbread's friendship, why does John lose himself in the vain struggle for Chris' regard? Snobbery plays a part: "John [is] probably more at home with them [Whitbread and the other scholarship students] than with anyone else," the novel states, but "he [does] not value their friendship" (124). Though Whitbread is the kindest individual in the novel, Larkin depicts him as unattractive otherwise: "He had a pale stubbly head, queerly like a dormouse, and thick steel-rimmed spectacles; he spoke with a flat Yorkshire accent that made John suppose wrongly that he had a sense of humour" (51). Larkin further loads the dice against Whitbread's influence by giving Chris the uncanny ability to know just when his own influence with John is most threatened. After one visit to Whitbread's rooms, Kemp is resolved "to work steadily all night till bedtime" (54). But before he can carry out his plan, it happens that Chris casually calls him "John" for the first time. Kemp, "repeating again and again to himself that Christopher had called him by his first name" (55), forgets all about study and joins the Lampreians in an evening of

drinking that ends in a brawl. In this novel, the devil has all the best songs.

Jill enters the novel when Kemp makes up out of whole cloth an imaginary sister to interest Warner, a sister who, he says, is away at public school and from whom he pretends to receive letters. He is astonished at the success of his artifice, for with the creation of Jill he seems to have captured Christopher's undivided attention at last. It seems that his "lies" about having an attractive younger sister to whom he is close have "made Christopher envious of him" (118). Kemp immediately sets about furnishing Jill's life with detail in order to be ready to beguile Chris further, finally writing a narrative about her and several pages of a diary for her.

Larkin devotes fifteen nearly-continuous pages to the narrative and diary of the imaginary Jill, which characterize her and flesh out her life at a girls' school called Willow Gables. Critics have questioned the inclusion of the not-inconsiderable Jill passages in an otherwise tightly-plotted novel.² In the Faustian parallels, Jill takes her place as Kemp's special daemon who, despite her potential to be his ministering spirit, becomes the instrument of his ruin. Like Goethe's Margaret, Jill is young--just fifteen--and innocent. Faust meets Margaret on the street, while Kemp encounters a living Jill in an Oxford bookstore in the person of Gillian. Like Margaret-Gretchen,

Jill-Gillian has two names in the novel. Her kiss is like the kiss of Marlowe's Helen of Troy because it completes Kemp's downfall.

Jill is Kemp's anima in the Jungian sense. Her story-within-the-story parallels John's story in many ways, yet is significantly different. Away from home like him, she is lonely and vulnerable, too. However, Jill is more rebellious than Kemp, and she gets into hot water for protesting an unfair school ruling--an act foreign to Kemp's outward nature. Moreover, Jill experiences the death of her father--a pivotal Jungian event. Shortly after returning from her father's funeral, Jill has a moment of mature satisfaction and insight. Asked to supervise a sewing class of little girls, Jill reads them a fairy story and entrances the "babes," who listen openmouthed. She writes in her diary--or Kemp writes for her--that, during the story telling, "I felt a horrid pang for my own lost youth and salad days--but really, I'm not sorry at all. I mean I know that things will get worse and worse, but I don't mind, because they'll get better and better, too. I wouldn't go back, not for millions" (151-52). Jill's moment of power over the "babes" parallels Kemp's moment of power over Chris when Kemp had first told him the "lies" about Jill: "And what were they that they should have thrown a temporary net around even Christopher?" (119).

Although made up to beguile Chris, Jill bewitches Kemp. After the moment of her creation, Chris never shows any further interest in her, but Kemp slips into an isolated, enchanted existence in which he ceases to care so much about Christopher Warner and focuses on Jill, happy for the first time in Oxford. Careful now to keep his fantasy of Jill secret from Chris, Kemp forgets "that Christopher had been the mainspring of the idea of Jill in the first place" (133).

Jill leads Kemp to his doom because, one day, he thinks he meets her in the flesh in a bookstore. On the level of realism, Kemp sees a real girl like Jill, while on the level of myth, the sprite Jill-Gretchen has been made incarnate by Warner-Mephistophiles to further tempt Kemp-Faust. The text supports both readings: "It was not a question of thinking: that girl is something like Jill. There was nothing casual in the resemblance; it was so exact that for a second his mind could not remember who it was, this over-familiar face" (156). The reader is not forced to choose between the interpretations since they are complementary.

Kemp now spends his days roaming the streets of Oxford in hopes of seeing the girl again. He does see her occasionally, and one day he tracks her to his and Chris's Oxford rooms and finds that she is Elizabeth's cousin, a fifteen-year-old named Gillian, who has been brought to tea! Without the mythic level, the reader is entitled to

feel tricked by this further coincidence, but awareness of the Faustian parallels prepares for it. Now that Jill-Gillian is identified with the Lampreians, Kemp struggles to preserve his conception of her as innocent while the Lampreians, noticing his interest, incite him to think of seducing her.

Encouraged by the Lampreians to lure Gillian to his rooms and "get to work--sport the oak" (187), John does invite her to tea in his rooms on a day when he knows Chris will be playing in a football match, and she accepts. But John's anticipation of the occasion is romantic rather than lascivious, and he seems still determined to protect her innocence from the evil-minded Lampreians. At the appointed time, however, Elizabeth instead of Gillian appears at his door to tell Kemp primly that her cousin is too young for such an occasion. Aware that he has been manipulated and bilked once more by the Lampreians, Kemp is crushed: "The memory lay on his mind like an enormous boulder" (203).

The bombing of Huddlesford interrupts Kemp's life at Oxford and perceptibly alters his attitudes. Concerned for his parents, he gets permission to go home. Searching through the Huddlesford streets--some of them leveled--for his own house, John finds himself praying out loud "like a child" for his parents' safety. "Any attempts at a personal life he had made seemed merely a tangle of hypocritical selfishness. . . . Everything would be renounced if only

everything was all right" (214). Almost immediately he finds his own street miraculously intact amid the rubble. Pinned to the Kemps' front door is a note from his father saying where his parents have gone.

However, Kemp forgets his promise to renounce his "selfishness" the very moment his prayer is granted--a very human reaction and one which comes as no surprise in a novel with Faustian parallels. Although the seeming-miracle he prayed for is granted, the bombing of Huddlesford impresses John with the power of evil, not good. He feels as "negligible as a fly crawling over a heap of stones" (218). The destruction says to him, "See how little anything matters. All that anyone has is the life that keeps him going and see how easily that can be patted out. See how appallingly little life is" (219).

Back at Oxford a somewhat coarsened Kemp finds he can think with equanimity of the aborted tea invitation to Jill. Larkin says John "survey[s] the experience with a surprising lack of shame" (225; emphasis added). The author is suggesting that Kemp's motives toward Gillian are shameful, but after the Huddlesford bombing, he does not feel ashamed. Kemp is moving toward Lampreian values even while he believes he is finally armed against Lamprian manipulation.

Just how far Kemp has moved toward Lampreian values and behavior becomes apparent in the final week of the term. Kemp has a visit from Crouch, his grammar school master, who

tells him "Don't become too much of a cloistered monk. . . . It doesn't pay" (228). Kemp goes to see Whitbread, whose rooms he finds empty. However, he notices on Whitbread's desk a scholarship examination which Kemp's own tutor had not even mentioned to him. Angry, Kemp vandalizes Whitbread's rooms, an act reminiscent of Chris' vandalizing Semple's rooms.

Next, Kemp learns by accident that Gillian, on her last evening in Oxford, will be at Eddy Makepeace's party that night. As his actions indicate, he decides to go to the party, to take this last chance to physically contact Gillian, as the Lamprelans have been inciting him to do all along. Here he seems to relinquish his role as Jill's protector. He burns all that he ever wrote about her, first rereading the sentences in her diary which express her feeling of mature power when she had "entranced the babes" with the fairy story: "I know things will get worse and worse, but I don't mind, because they'll get better and better, too. I wouldn't go back, not for millions" (233). By invoking the sentences at this juncture, Larkin suggests the moment when Faust, having weighed everything--or so he imagines, decides to accept the devil's terms. At the party Kemp kisses Gillian and is thrown into the fountain for his pains, ending like Semple in the infirmary, where a succubus-like Jill haunts his delirium.

Crouch had chosen Kemp for the Faustian contest in the beginning, and his visit to Oxford reasserts the notion of a Mephistophelian parallel for Crouch as well as for Christopher. Larkin is very clever in managing the kaleidoscopic effects of his parallels. He appears at first to offer only two possible maturities for Kemp: to improve his lot through pedantry, like Crouch and Whitbread, or to develop the grosser side of his humanity, like Chris. Both possibilities indict the system and deny Kemp what may be his proper future, for clearly Crouch was wrong in thinking Kemp totally lacking in imagination and creativity, as he proves by creating Jill. Whitbread had warned John: "You don't want to be one of those fellows who slacks off as soon as he gets his scholarship" (52), but this is just what John does. However, while he does not achieve academically at Oxford, Kemp does achieve creatively, a point never made explicit in the novel because the narrative point of view is John's and John himself seems hardly aware of his role as Jill's creator. By giving Kemp the ability to create Jill, Larkin compares artistic creation to Faustian enchantment. For a moment Kemp becomes an artist; his damnation is his salvation and Jill his muse, his damsel with a dulcimer. If John had had the awareness he needed, he never would have mistaken Gillian for Jill. But because he had earlier rejected the offer to be tutored separately from Chris, he must do without the guidance which might have been supplied

by an aware tutor, guidance which could have made a difference in the outcome.

The contract scene in Jill is one of the aptest parallels in the novel. In Marlowe Faust twice signs his pact with the devil in blood. Kemp signs his name twice also, and both times his signature is a promise to pay money. He is a poor scholarship student, and the connection between blood and money, like many parallels in the novel, is a part of the comic reduction of the Faust myth to twentieth-century terms. The first time John signs his name, it is because he has had tea alone in a tea shop and finds he has too little change in his pocket. He had just overheard Chris and Elizabeth making fun of him. Devastated by his eavesdropping, John tries to recover the happiness he had felt at tea with Mrs. Warner, Chris's mother, by going to the same tea shop and ritualistically ordering the same tea. When the bill comes and he realizes that he does not have enough money to pay it, the waitress says that since he is an Oxford student he may sign the bill and pay the next day. Larkin says, "He wrote 'John Kemp' with trembling hands on the bill" (114). Kemp returns to his rooms and, finding Chris there, suddenly "conjures up" Jill for the first time, proving the efficacy of the contract. — if

When he signs for the tea bill, Kemp still has enough money in his post office account to cover it. The second time he signs, it is the last week of the term and his

allowance is gone. After vandalizing Whitbread's rooms and learning where he can meet Gillian one last time, Kemp goes to the college commissary and signs for two bottles of expensive sherry in order to have a "passport" to Eddy's party. This signature represents a promise to pay which he knows he cannot keep.

The Walpurgis Night scene is the party at Eddy's rooms.³ Kemp's magic mountain is Eddy's unfamiliar college where Kemp wanders around looking for Eddy's party amid the "unholy row" of all the other end-of-term parties. In this scene Larkin describes John's drunken laughter as a "cackle," a word he has previously reserved for Lampreian laughter: "Eddy's indecent remark about Jill . . . re-entered his mind, and he went off in a cackle of laughter" (236). When he finally encounters Jill he quietly takes her in his arms and kisses her, whereupon Chris knocks him down and throws him into the fountain.

Kemp's eleventh hour finds him in the infirmary with bronchial pneumonia. In his delirium Jill's kiss grows "realer every hour." He had not really been denied Jill, Kemp decides when his fever abates, for he had taken her in his dreams. Confused about "whether she had accepted him or not," John decides there was really no difference, "since the result was the same. . . . Was he not freed, for the rest of his life, from choice? . . . What did it matter which road he took if they both led to the same place?" Here

gillian

Larkin reminds us, "In the distance the clock was chiming eleven o'clock" (240-43).

As with Marlowe's Faust, Kemp's eleventh hour is the last we see of him in the novel. Or is it? Larkin provides one final hint of witchcraft: who is this little white dog on the very last page of the novel, who comes out of the college and, "sniffing with dropped head . . . sidle[s] up" to Chris and Elizabeth where they stand on the pavement waiting for a taxi? He is very like Kemp,⁴ as he shrinks from the porter and growls at Elizabeth, whom he never liked . . .

Most critics have found that in the end, Kemp is a better person for his Oxford experience, better equipped for the future.⁵ The mythic parallels indicate that Larkin was not so sanguine about the future of his scholarship student. The hapless Kemp has "slacked off" on his scholarship and, tempted by Chris, trades his future for the ability to conjure, to create Jill. The momentary creation is all Kemp is allowed. Unaware of his embryonic identity as a writer, Kemp fails to recognize that such an identity is even a possibility for him. The questing soul is punished with the loss of choice, and the story traces the unmaking of the artist. Jill turns on its head the "cult of Oxford" from the Oxford novels of the early part of this century, the belief that "simply to submerge one's self in the

traditions, the dignified culture, and the stimulating friendships of university life [is] to get the best out of . . . Oxford" (Proctor 154).

As Larkin's aesthetic matured, he rejected the "myth kitty," repudiating in his evolution an earlier stage of his own work. The Faustian parallels in Jill are so well-submerged that they have gone unnoticed, making Larkin's development as an artist appear simpler and more direct than in fact it was, at Jill's expense. One wonders if the author was whole-heartedly satisfied with that.

Notes

¹ Crouch's role is Mephistophelian. But Christopher Warner, one of the cast of characters at Oxford, has a better claim to the role of Mephistophiles because his influence on the protagonist is continual throughout the novel.

² In 1963 William Van O'Connor wrote, "Kemp's fantasy about Jill is not very convincing. . . . There is insufficient preparation for his sudden retreat into fantasy" (20). In 1973, David Timms found that the characterization of Kemp "is not consistent. . . . When he becomes involved with the fantasy Jill, he has a perfect command of the idiom appropriate to a girls' boarding school" (45). In 1981, William Domnarski said "Larkin's insistence on making Kemp desperate enough to create Jill weakens the novel" (12).

³ Alan Brownjohn says that Kemp "move[s] through a very curious and compelling Walpurgisnacht of undergraduate revels" on his way to the end-of-term party (112).

⁴ Timms writes, "The dog has repeated John's gesture" (43).

⁵ Bruce Martin says, "Kemp has succeeded in throwing off the pernicious influence of Christopher" (110). Timms writes, "John's outlook is bleak at the end of Jill, but at least he has lost his passivity, at least made an autonomous

gesture" (43). Brownjohn is the most optimistic: "John Kemp is unconsciously transforming himself from the 'stuffed' and colorless being he was . . . into a creative individual who will soon see beyond the . . . world of Christopher and his friends" (112-13).

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Nina Chasteen taught at Louisiana State University at Alexandria from the early 1960s until the late 1980s.

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